

# **BETTER OFFED**

**DUANE LAIRD**



# Chapter 1

“Ok, ok, a little quiet, please. I know you’re anxious to get on reading break, but we still have a few minutes left.” Mr. Stevens was standing at the front of the classroom dodging paper airplanes and trying to get the attention of the students in the Grade Eleven class at Eric Hamber Senior Secondary school. “HEY!” he raised his voice and the hubbub instantly stopped. He was well liked as a teacher, but prone to spitting invective and kicking garbage cans when he got pushed too far. The kids were antsy, the sun was shining and they were ready for a break. He glowered at the students and dropped the pencil he had in his hand into the skull shaped cup on his desk. “Better.” His voice controlled.

“So, you’re assignment for the break...” groans from the class “your assignment is a thousand words on ‘Making the World a Better Place’ and no, Terrance, Cancelling Socials 11 is not an appropriate subject.” The class jeered and hooted, a couple snorts of laughter. “The assignment is open - have fun with it. Double spaced, blah blah blah, you know the drill. On my desk 9:00 a.m. first day back.” The

buzzer went and the principle came on to wish everyone a good break, but no one heard her or cared what she was blathering on about, as they blasted out the doors into the sunshine.

“Juney, hang up your coat.” Spencer Chan Junior, Juney to his dad, Spencer Senior, dropped his coat on the pile of shoes, kicked off his Vans and bowled his backpack down the hallway to his room.

“How did you know I didn’t hang it up?”

“Because I’ve been picking up your shit since I was literally picking up your shit.” Juney walked into the kitchen and his dad grabbed him in a bear hug.

“Choking. Not breathing.”

“How was your strenuous half day at the salt mine?” Spencer was at the stove tending to some pot stickers for lunch.

“Same as always. More nonsense, boring. Oh, and Stevens gave us an assignment in the last three minutes of class!” Juney pulled up a stool next to the counter and watched his dad make some miso soup. A clicking sound from the back of the house. Grandfather with his cane.

“What are you doing home so early? Did you get fired?”

“Yeye, you can’t get fired from high school. It was early dismissal for reading break.” Yau Ming, Juney’s grandfather

had been living with them since grandmother had passed away a couple years before. Juney's mom had left around the same time, so it was a house full of men. Fortunately Yeye had been a cook in the merchant marine, and Spencer Sr. had worked in a restaurant through university so the food was always good.

“You're going to burn the woteep.”

“Dad, I've been making these since I was ten.”

Grandfather shuffled into the living room.

“Should have learned by now.”

Spencer shook his head and rolled his eyes. Juney laughed.

“Do you want any? Dad? Ayeyea, he didn't hear. Juney, go see if Yeye wants any lunch.”

Grandfather was in his recliner in front of the TV, one hand grasping the remote, the other with a rolled up TV guide in the other.

“Yeye, did you want some lunch?”

“Sure, sure, Yowchung<sup>1</sup>, just some soup. Get your dad to drop a couple woteeps in if he hasn't burnt them. Wait.” Grandfather pressed a quarter into Juney's hand. “Tip for good service!” Juney knew better than to fight with Yeye

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<sup>1</sup> Larvae in Cantonese

over his generosity. He smiled and bowed quickly, and went back to the kitchen.

“Yeye give you some money?”

“Just a quarter.”

“In the jar, you know the drill. College isn’t free.”

Spencer dished up the soup and woteep, took a bowl in for grandfather and sat down with Juney. “So what’s the assignment? What does Stevens teach? I can never remember.”

“Socials. The assignment is a thousand words on making the world a better place.” Juney could barely be understood between mouthfuls of lunch. Spencer had made a chili sauce to go with the potstickers, but it was never the same heat twice. Juney’s eyes filled with tears.

“Should be easy. Pollution, pandas, poverty reduction, planting trees. You should be able to knock it out before bedtime and have the rest of the week free.” Spencer looked hard at Juney. “Or you can wait until 8:00 p.m. next Sunday, break down in tears, run around the house, and then cobble together some horrible C+ crap and forget to put your name on it.” The glare.

“Yeah, I think I’ll do the second one. Thanks for the choice Dad!”

“Aeeya! You’re never going to get into the commerce program with C+”

“Geez, Dad. I don’t want to be an accountant. That’s so stereotypical! A Chinese accountant. Gag. Besides, with A.I. there won’t be any accounting jobs in a couple years.” They ate in silence, letting the issue drop. This wasn’t the first time they’d come to an impasse about Juney’s future, and wouldn’t be the last. The doorbell rang.

“That’s probably Daniel. I’m going to the park to shoot some hoops, if that’s okay.”

“Yeah, sure. Home by six for dinner.” Juney slurped down the last dumpling, jumped up from the table and bolted towards the door.

“See you later, Yeye. Heading to the park.” Juney called as the door slammed behind him and he and Daniel bounded towards the court at Douglas Park. Grandfather walked back into the kitchen, balancing his teacup and soup bowl, and navigating with his cane, almost dropping all of them on the way to the sink.

“Have you talked to your brother lately?” Spencer’s brother was 5 years older and had been born in Hong Kong before grandfather moved to Vancouver and had Spencer. Jing Bae was multi-lingual, fluent in Cantonese, Mandarin,

English and German and worked at the United Nations in New York as a translator.

“We’ve got a call set up for Sunday on FaceTime. You can talk to him then.”

“Ahh. I hate that computer thing. I look so old on the screen. Jing Bae will think I’m dead.”

“I’ll get you a paper bag to wear.”

“You think you’re so funneeee. You gonna look like me when you get old, then who’ll be laughing then!?”

“Well, me, I guess. Because you’ll be with Ama in an urn on the mantle and still not paying rent.” Grandfather grabbed his cane and raised a hand like he was going to slap Spencer.

“I’m going to move out of here.”

“I’ll get your suitcase, old man.”

Grandfather had been jokingly threatening to move out since his wife had died four years ago. He was still living in his original house he had purchased when he had moved here forty seven years ago, back when a person with a decent job could afford a house in Vancouver. It was nothing fancy, but it was in a good neighbourhood. In the same year that Ama had died, Spencer’s wife, Millicent, had ‘found herself’ and had moved to Montreal. The divorce took longer than it should have, and they had to sell their



modest house to be able to split the assets. It seemed a good solution to have Spencer and Juney move in. Three generations under one roof was traditional in Chinese culture and worked well for everyone.

Spencer prepared dinner under Grandfather's watchful eye, a constant stream of 'I would have done it differently' and 'too much soy, oh, you've ruined it' comments coming from the other side of the kitchen island where Grandfather had set up camp to read the Sing Tao News and drink weak green tea.

After dinner the three of them went to watch the news.

"Juney, get your feet off the couch, I need a place to sit too." Juney was on his phone playing a game and only half listening to the news of the day. Something something, some country, something bombing. Juney lifted up his feet and draped them over the back of the couch, still intent on his game. Spencer sat down and smacked Juney in the thigh. Spencer worried that he would never be able to civilize the boy enough to get a girlfriend or a job. Oh well, the thought. There was always the army.

Juney started paying attention when the voices in the room started getting louder. Dad and Grandfather had locked horns over some news item and the conversation had risen in volume.

“Dad you can’t just start killing all of the people that you don’t like on the news.”

“Aeeya, All I said was the world would be a better place without that Mohammed Faez guy. He’s corrupt. He voted himself ruler for life. He’s ruined a country. Committed war crimes. Invaded countries. Sponsored terrorism. Tell me how the world would be worse without him?”

“It’s more complicated than they tell you on the news. He took over from an absolute monarch who kept slaves. He brought in education for women, free health care, got industry going. Sure. Not a perfect guy. But you get rid of him, and then what? You think better people are going to replace him?”

Juney loved watching these debates. They’d both raise their voices, reach an impasse and then one of them would leave to go for a walk. In the summertime, it was Yeye that would leave. In winter, his Dad. It was spring, so a bit of a toss up who would stomp out of the house.

“I’m going to make some tea.” Spencer got up and left the living room. Grandfather looked over at Juney and smiled a conspiratorial grin, rubbing his grizzled chin. He winked.

“Does that mean I won?” They both laughed and Juney went back to his game.

“Don’t you always?”

“True, true. What do you think? Do you think the world would be better off without this guy, Mohammed Faez?”

“Don’t really know, Yeye, but you’ve given me an idea for the essay I have to write. Thanks”

# Chapter 2

The more Juney researched, the less sure he was of anything. He took all 195 countries and started building a spreadsheet. One column for country, a column for the leader, a column for how long the leader had been in power, then columns for democracy rating, corruption, standard of living, income disparity, a column for women's rights, a column for LGBTQ+ rights. Spencer Sr. was a bit of a geek, and that gene had passed down, so the spreadsheet grew quickly. It was a deep rabbit hole, and when his dad came into his room at 11p.m. Juney was still hard at it.

“Juney, time for bed, buddy.” Juney looked at the clock on the toolbar.

“Holy cow. Where did the night go?”

“Playing Minecraft tends to eat up time...”

“Wasn't playing. The argument . . . “

“Spirited discussion, you mean...”

“Right the ‘discussion’ you and Yeye had gave me an idea for the essay I need to write. I started doing research, and then built this spreadsheet. I guess I lost track of time.” Spencer looked over his shoulder, then took the laptop and sat down on Juney's bed.

“So you’re creating a graded hitlist?”

“Ha ha, no. I just wanted to see how all the countries stacked up. There are some real awful people running things in some of the countries. Yeye was right about war criminals. I’m going to do some research on what has happened in countries where a leader was assassinated, like that guy in Libya, Gaddafi, I know he was killed in the Arab Spring, so I’m going to use that as an example of what happens. There’s probably a bunch of other examples.”

“So your thesis is....?”

“Okay, how about Yeye’s thesis that there are some countries that would be better off with anyone BUT the guy currently running things? Then I can either prove it or disprove it?”

“Yeah, that works. But tomorrow, okay? Pack it in, and don’t forget to brush your teeth.” Spencer tousled Juney’s hair and gave him a quick hug. “Pancakes and bacon tomorrow if you can manage to get up on time. Goodnight.”

Spencer walked back through the kitchen just as Grandfather was heading to his room.

“What’s going on tomorrow, Dad?”

“Ah, ya. I’m going to the community center all morning. I’ll be home after lunch. Taking a computer course.” He grinned. Finally, thought Spencer. There were only so many

times that he could explain what the little ‘X’ in the corner of the screen meant. Granted, his father had been born a year after they figured out how to sell sliced bread, but still, he should have picked up some skills by now.

On Sunday Jing Bae set up his iPad for the FaceTime visit with his father and brother. At exactly 5:00 p.m. eastern time he pressed dial and waited. The chime, and three smiling faces appeared.

“Uncle Jing! How are you? Where are you?”

“Junebug! Good to see you, buddy! Still in New York. I’m going to be translating some trade talks soon. Should be interesting”

“Can you get me an autograph?”

“Of who? The Secretary of Commerce? Weird request, but probably not. He’s, well, he’s not very friendly. And he’s very busy. I’m mostly just a fly on the wall in those meetings. I’ll see what I can do, though. Hey Dad, how are you feeling these days?”

“When are you coming home? Are you married yet?”

“Ha, geez Dad, New York is my home. I’m hoping to get to Vancouver this summer though. Depends on work. And no, not married. There are no nice girls here. I thought you were going to bring one over from the old country for me?”

“That’s dangerous, JB, you know he’s just crazy enough to do something like that.” interjected Spencer.

“Nooo. Lots of nice girls in Vancouver. You come home. We find you one. What about Wai Ling Wong? I think she’s still single.” There was a twinkle in Grandfather’s eye. Wai Ling had been Jing Bae’s girlfriend in third grade. The Wong’s lived across the park, and Grandfather played Mahjong with Mr. Wong every Monday afternoon.

“Dad, I’ll make sure I call Wai Ling when I come up this summer. You guys have any plans?”

“I think we’re going to go camping for a couple weeks right after school ends, but the rest of the summer is just hanging around. I’m probably going to demolish the garage, so if you want to come up and do some real work...” Jing Bae had never wanted to get his hands dirty, and Spencer knew it. They were brothers, but very different in their skill sets. Jing Bae was book smart, Spencer was more hands-on. He knew Jing Bae hated the idea of dirt and sawdust and cobwebs.

“Yeah, sure. Just let me know what week you want to do the demo, and I’ll come the week after! Hey Junebug, speaking of school, what are you working on?”

“Aw, we got an assignment in the last three minutes of class! Lame. I’m writing an essay on which world leaders we should kill.”

“What? You’ll get kicked out of school for sure! You can’t write that sort of stuff!” Jing Bae was sensitive to that kind of language working at the United Nations.

“Whatever. Juney likes to lead with a headline, the essay is more about what happens when bad leaders are assassinated, like, what happens to the economy, and does it solve anything.” Spencer interjected. He looked at Juney and pushed him out of the camera field. “Kids these days.” Grandfather wandered off as well, so it was just Spencer left.

“So you okay there with Dad?” Jing Bae had always thought that the arrangement wasn’t going to last, but it had been a few years, and seemed to be stable.

“Oh, yeah. And it’s great for Juney. He was pretty upset when Millicent left, so it was nice having Yeye around. He’s been teaching Juney mahjong and chess. He’s there when Juney gets home from school if I’m at work. And Dad can’t do the stairs anymore, so if I need a break, I just go up to my office, your old bedroom, and close the door and scream into a pillow.”



“That’s good. I wish I was around more. I’m glad you’re there to take care of things. How’s his health?”

“For a guy that smoked most of his life and worked as hard as he did, he’s in pretty good shape. The doctors are talking about getting him a pacemaker -- he’s got some irregular rhythms but nothing serious. He’s not on the roof yet.”

“Ha ha. Roof. Yeah. . That’s good. Hey I’ve got to go. Talk to you in a couple weeks.”

“Yup. Good.” The brothers pushed End Call at the same time and the screen went dark. Jing Bae walked to the window and looked over the city. Spring hadn’t yet come to New York. Still cold. Dark early as well. He checked the scope sights and made a small adjustment. He pressed the trigger.

On a wall two blocks away a small red dot appeared on the wall just above the couch. Allison Boudreaux looked up and smiled.

“Booty call.”

# Chapter 3

Allison Boudreaux Olsen was a CIA analyst specializing in Sub Saharan Africa. She'd graduated top of her class at Bryn Mawr in anthropology and was scooped up by the Agency. Her understanding of tribal culture had allowed her to presage several key events in Chad, and the agency had a couple wins as a result. She had met Jing Bae at a briefing on China's Silk Road and Rail initiative and sparks flew.

She picked up her keys, ditched her wallet and phone, and headed out. Two blocks away Jing was going through the same ritual. No electronics. No RFC cards. No earbuds. No fobs. Nothing that could be electronically traced. He picked up a ball cap, pulled it low over his eyes and headed out.

The apartment was small even for New York standards. A single room, with a small bathroom. In the years that the building was constructed, it would have been designed for a single working maid. All the other units in the building had been renovated and joined into normal sized units. This little one was left over. No real kitchen - a small fridge, a sink barely big enough for two wine glasses, all in a

stainless steel self-contained kitchen unit that wouldn't have been out of place in a 1950's Airstream Camper. The bathroom was a conversation piece as well, with the sink and toilet both built into the shower stall. Efficient and weird. None of that mattered. Jing Bae and Allison didn't entertain guests. This was their private space.

Allison arrived first. Working for the Agency had given Allison a tainted view of their methods. She knew the work was important, but she also knew that they didn't always colour inside the lines. When she and Jing Bae had hooked up at the briefing she made it clear to him that there wasn't going to be an electronic trail for anyone to follow. No emails, no calls, no cute pics on Instagram. That was a given. They couldn't meet at either his or her apartment. Renting a third apartment under a false name was the best and safest option. She had had a special lock installed on the door, had set the pins herself, and had hand cut the keys so there were no extra keys in existence. The windows were covered with two layers of blackout curtains, not for the light, but to stop laser based vibration detection eavesdropping technology from being used. Not that there was a lot of talking. A quiet knock on the door. Allison opened it. Their eyes met. Then so did everything else.

Later.

“Everything okay?” Allison Boudreaux sat at the end of the bed, her feet up, a glass of cold water pressed against her forehead. Jing Bae leaned against the cool wall opposite her and wiped the sweat off his face and smiled. He thought she was stunning. Even in a city like New York, Allison stood out. Her mother was a black creole, her father was a Norwegian sailor that had jumped ship in New Orleans and never went back to his village north of the Arctic Circle. Their children, all four of them, were handsome, and all so different. The lottery that is genetics meant the four couldn’t have been more diverse. Allison had kinked black hair and blue eyes and fair skin, her brother Jørgen was on the other end of the spectrum; dark eyes, dark skin and blonde straight hair. The twins in the middle were identical except for their eye colours, their skin a mocha shade of perfection.

“Sorry, my brain hasn’t re-entered my body yet. What was the question?” Jing Bae smiled.

“You’re an idiot.” Allison smiled and downed some water.

“Takes one to know one!” Jing Bae stuck out his tongue. Allison laughed and spat the last of her mouthful of water at him.

Ding. Round two.

Later, much later, the sky just beginning to lighten, Allison nestled beside Jing Bae, her fingers running over his chest.

“I gotta go. I’m due in Langley this morning. I think I’m giving someone a briefing. I still need to finalize my notes. Thank god for helicopters.”

“Or Sikorsky...”

“Ya know? No one likes a smart ass.” Allison sat up, and met his gaze. “But I do like your smart ass. Saturday?”

“Perfect.”

Allison dressed and left in two minutes. Jing Bae wasn’t due anywhere today. It was a work from home day, which mostly meant listening to Chinese newscasts and reading intercepted documents, most of which were intentionally leaked red herrings. He could listen to the news on his run around Central Park, and then go over the docs later. He stared at the ceiling and revelled in the quiet and lack of digital. No one could call him. Or find him. If he was at home he’d already have scrolled the news, and listened to a podcast while in the shower. Here, there was nothing but silence.

The call with Spencer came to mind, how Juney had casually talked about killing world leaders. Even just thinking about it made him anxious. The world was

dangerous enough without people playing assassin. He  
breathed slowly, calming himself, and fell back asleep,  
tumbling through dreams until nothing.

# Chapter 4

Ambassador Gwen Larson sat on a white leather stool at the end of the bar in the Magno Suites Hotel a few blocks from the embassy. Antonio, the barman, waited, patiently for her to decide if she was going to have a third scotch or keep it to two. Gwen was not his first ambassador. Antonio had been working at the bar for six years, and this was his third. The first was Christopher ‘Chip’ Clyborne the Third. He only lasted a year. He was a social climber whose father had purchased him an ambassadorship in the hopes that a change of scenery would let the media storm about the call girls die down. Dad’s plan was to have him run for senate when he got a touch of grey and a bit of respectability. Chip found it very easy to not be respectable in Bamatouga, as there were plenty of girls that would take his American dollars in exchange for whatever he wanted. There were also foreign agents with cameras, and when one of the girls was found murdered, and the evidence pointed to Chip, the Home Office feared that he might be turned by the Russians. The amount of top secret information that he had access to was minuscule, but the CIA decided that it might be best for all concerned if Chip drove drunk into a pole

one late night. Antonio was a suspect as there was talk that Chip might have been drugged, but no evidence ever materialized and he kept working at the bar. It took him a month to work off the tab Chip had stuck him with, so he vowed never to get stuck with an unpaid bar bill again.

The second ambassador, Aliyah White, was an educated, distinguished diplomat that could trace her heritage back to the slave ships that left Porto Novo in the 1800's. Bamatouga was a placeholder assignment until the State Department could use her to fill a high profile position in a more important country. Fortunately for her, but not so much for the then ambassador for South Africa who was shot and killed by bandits, a more prestigious post opened up.

And now, here was Gwen. She stared at her scotch glass as if it was a crystal ball, a vessel that could augur the series of events that had led a very pale Minnesotan divorcee to be stuck in a country that the President had described in less than diplomatic terms. Antonio had tried to be friendly with the new ambassador as he had with the last two, but she had brought a hard prairie chill with her all the way from Granite Falls. Their relationship was formal, and didn't extend to banter about the weather or the local football matches. He was used to friendlier people, but she



paid her bill, tipped well, and in the end, that was what mattered.

Gwen decided that a third scotch wasn't going to make the world a better or worse place, so why not have it. She tapped the edge of her glass twice just as her phone buzzed. Her heart sank. In the two years she had been stuck in Marabono she had never received a phone call where some shit wasn't hitting some fan somewhere. She put her palm on the top of the glass, glanced up at Antonio, and answered the phone. Antonio paused with a scotch bottle in hand, waiting.

“Uh huh. Shit. Okay. Fine. I'll come back to the office.” She hung up, dropped the phone back in the pocket of her sensible polyester pantsuit. She overpaid for the two drinks, swivelled off the stool, steadied herself, and headed for the door. She didn't think to thank Antonio.

The air outside hit her like she was walking into a high school locker room. Muggy, fragrant and thick with the scent of tropical flowers and gasoline. She didn't understand how air could be thick. It was never like this in Minnesota. It was September, but it didn't feel any different from July or May. She missed the crisp fall weather, the clean air, the smell of smoke from people burning leaves in the surrounding farms. She missed picking apples from the

tree in the backyard of her father's house. She missed driving the two hours through empty fields to Minneapolis to watch the Minnesota Gophers play football. And she really missed feeling clean. In less than a block her blouse was clinging to her like the waifs in the fetid slums in the city.

Her assistant, Rosemary Gonzales, met her at the door.

"The Agency is on the line. They said it was urgent and for your eyes only. Sorry to call you back to work."

"Whatever. Sorry. Thanks, Rosemary. Long day. I'll take the call in my apartment. Can you transfer it there?"

"Sure, sure, Ms. Larson. It'll just take a second."

Rosemary turned to go into the suite of offices, Gwen climbed the stairs to her apartment. After two scotches gravity was not her ally, and it took a while for her to ascend the stairs that curved up from the lobby of the embassy to the suites on the second floor. Inside her suite, she shed her suit jacket, kicked off her shoes, and slumped onto her couch. The phone buzzed. She looked at it accusingly.

"This is Ambassador Larson." she said in a voice that she hoped didn't give away the fact she was two drinks in.

"With whom am I speaking?"

“Ambassador, this is Allison Boudreaux Olsen, I’m an analyst with the Agency. I’ll be as brief as possible. In the last three weeks we have been picking up some intel that the current leader of Bamatouga has a price on his head. It’s not unusual that there would be talk of uprising, given the way he treats the country as his own personal bank account, but the threat isn’t from a known group. Rather it seems as though there is a bitcoin price on his head. If he is assassinated we believe that your embassy may be the focus of some pent up but misdirected resentment from the locals. I’ve had a team of marines stationed close by and we will be monitoring the situation.” Allison paused, waiting for a response. “Ambassador? Do you understand the seriousness of the situation?”

“Yes. You’re talking about a coup. Blood in the streets. Long festering scores between tribal factions settled with machetes. Not that much different from most days here, actually.” Her voice betrayed a weary disgust for the little country that she’d been assigned to. She’d been hoping for Belgium or Norway. Someplace where she could walk the streets and not draw attention. Where she could get a decent meal. Someplace where pork sausages actually had pork in them, and not some mixture of forest animals. “Do

you have any idea who is causing this situation? Surely it can't be too difficult for the Agency to figure out?"

Allison didn't like her tone. Ambassador Larson came across with all the boorishness of someone who raised with privilege in a small midwestern town. She knew this because Gwen's personnel file was open on the computer that Allison was staring at while on the call. She was also a bit of a racist, according to internal briefing memos at the Agency.

"The details are fuzzy at this point, ma'am, but we are doing our best to mitigate the situation. Do you have your evacuation protocols set? Documents, computers, personnel?"

"Why don't we just close the embassy now? I mean, if there's a threat and the United States of America doesn't have the ability to address that threat, then let's leave now. Why do we bother with little shithole countries like this anyways? Why not just let them do their own flipping thing. We can always come in later and buy the whole place for a buck and a half and then kick all of these ungrateful savages out."

"I understand that your situation is tense ma'am, but we are monitoring the situation and taking all reasonable precautions." If this whole thing does go down, thought

Allison, the call to the marines is going to be twenty minutes late.

“Yeah, well you’re sitting in some nice cozy office in Langley, and I’m out here on the flipping edge of the flipping universe in a shithole country dying of the heat. Normally I don’t swear, but that’s what our President called them, and he was not wrong. God bless that man. There’s no reason for us to even care. Flip!” She slammed the phone down, crossed her arms, and started to cry.

# Chapter 5

“Vnimanaye! Officer present!” The guard snapped to attention. General Pluskinov strode into the main room of the Russian Main Intelligence Directorate Special Operatives Division. He was used to soldiers snapping to attention and quaking as he stood nose to nose with them, breathing his kerosene breath in their faces, belittling them for their incompetence. He missed it. He used to enjoy it. But this group of soldiers sat at computers, wearing t-shirts and smoking and drinking energy drinks, and talking in code. Arguably they had done more damage to the Great Satan than a thousand tank divisions could have done back in the good old days when steel and courage were the hallmarks of a true military. But still. Was it too much to ask for a proper greeting?

Instead of alert attention, he was greeted with a few of the unshaven coders, languidly swinging around in their 40,000 ruble Aeron chairs, and staring at him.

“What?” Alexey Manoff popped a sucker out of his mouth and pointed it at the General. In the old days the General would have slashed him across his face with his riding crop for the lack of respect and marched him to a

gulag. But the good old days were gone, he told himself. He must adapt with the times.

“I was told you had something to show me. Some video?”

“Ah, ya. Ya, ya, ya.” Alexey swung back around to his workstation. Three monitors, two with coding on, one with Korean music videos playing. “There. Look up to the big screen.” The general looked up to a screen hung from the ceiling. He didn’t understand why they needed it, or why it cost a year’s salary. He was assured by Alexey that it was required for their work, and their work was important. No? The screen lit up.

“What am I looking at?” The filming was jerky. There was no sound. A masked man held up a piece of paper in front of his chest. The paper had a series of numbers on it. The camera swung around. The effect, especially on the big screen was jarring and the General thought he might lose his borscht. The video showed a room that was small and dimly lit. It looked like it might be an unfinished construction site, but it was hard to tell. There was a table with a sniper rifle with a large complicated looking scope setup. The video wheeled around, then went black. Then there was an image of a parade. “What is going on? Why am I watching a parade?”

“Just watch.” The crosshairs scanned the scene. Panned across the marching band. Lingered on a car. Moved quickly to the next car. Then the next. A man standing up in the open car was waving to the crowds. Then his head exploded, his body thrown back into the car. The screen went black. “And just like that, dear General, President Verimuhamedov of Urgastan is dead. There is no official report yet. It’s not on the news. We confirmed that there was a major event in the square at that exact time from our satellites. The video that you just watched is all over the dark web. We don’t know what the numbers mean. We don’t know who killed him, or why. We were wondering if one of the other Russian special task forces were involved....?” Alexey was talking to the back of the General’s head as he quick-stepped out of the room. The rest of the programmers laughed and gave each other fist bumps then swung around to their computers. Alexey turned the big screen to his favourite cooking show, Basics with Babushka.



# Chapter 6

“Yeye, there’s a delivery guy at the door.”

“Look, kid, you can sign for it. It’s no big deal.” Alan was in a bit of a rush. It was late, and he still had 10 deliveries to do. He was hot, and the polyester uniform was starting to itch. Alan didn’t like brown clothing, but here he was, dressed, all in brown, one of the invisible cogs in the great on-line retail machine. Life hadn’t exactly worked out the way he’d planned. His band had won the Battle of the Bands, and he was sure they were on track for big things. Then Joey the drummer died in a car accident, and Barney the lead singer found God, and that was that. He tried pulling another band together, but nothing gelled and now, well, now he was a delivery boy. When the company asked what he wanted on his embroidered name tag he couldn’t even bear to use his real name. ‘Let’s go with Greg.’

Grandfather hobbled to the door.

“What have you got for me?” He pulled his glasses out of his shirt pocket. They were smeared and streaked with something, and Juney wasn’t sure that they did any good at all.

“No idea sir. Just sign here, sir.” Alan really wanted to get going. “Please. Right here. Yes, that’s it. Thanks, have a good day.” Down the stairs and back to his truck.

“What did you get Yeye? Did you order some more ‘As Seen on TV’ junk. You know Dad’s going to find out! Remember when you got that Egg Cooker?”

“Ha, ha, yeah. Your Dad wanted to cancel cable when that came! No, this is not junk. This is very special tea from China. I got it from a cousin that lives in my old village. I still have some, so I’ll keep this in my room. Can you take it there for me?”

“Yeah sure, Yeye. Just on your bed okay?”

“Fine, fine. I’ll put it away later. I don’t want anyone to steal it.”

Grandfather was getting old, and paranoid. For a while he was sure that the new next door neighbours were stealing his paper. It turned out that he’d forgotten to pay and the paper had cut him off. For his age he was doing well, but Juney knew that his time was running out. Grandfather wandered back to the living room to watch TV. Juney headed to the kitchen for his sixth snack of the day.

“Yowchung! Come quick!” The call was urgent, and Juney ran into the living room, thinking Grandfather had fallen or there was a fire. Or both, like last time. “Look. On

the tv!” Juney turned from Grandfather, who was safely ensconced in his favourite chair and watched as a news anchor described the day's events in Urgastan.

“President Verimuhamedov of Urgastan is dead. He was assassinated by an unknown gunman during the Parade of the Glorious Revolution, held every year. Here is some footage of the event.” A cell phone video played of the panic in the aftermath of the shooting. Lots of shouting and running around. “This has precipitated a constitutional crisis in the country, as both the Prime Minister and a Vice President have claimed legal right to the leadership. More now from our correspondent, Hala Ghonaim, in the capital of Garshguz.” Grandfather turned to Juney.

“Where was this Veriwhatever on your list?”

“Yeah sure. He was a general in the army, and he made himself President after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. He’s been in power ever since. Tyrant. Kleptomaniac. Killed lots of dissidents.”

“Well, you’ll get a chance to see if your ideas about what happens after a despised leader is killed. Maybe you can write a followup essay for Socials 12. You’ve already done most of the work.” Grandfather laughed and Juney ruefully shook his head.

To say that his Grade 11 essay had sparked some discussion in the school would be an understatement. Stevens thought the essay was interesting and thought provoking, so he had it copied and distributed to the class so they could have a debate around the premise. Juney's classmates were either a) pissed off because their essay didn't get picked, or b) relieved that their essay didn't get picked but pissed that they had to have a debate. The debate had been heated, and Juney ended up with the sobriquet of 'Hitman' for the rest of the year. One of the classmates, Tiffany Spandler took the essay home and showed her parents and then the faeces hit the air accelerator. Juney got called to the office to explain himself, Stevens stood up to the principal on principle, and Spencer Senior was called in as well. It was pointed out that Juney hadn't said that killing people was okay, he'd merely asked the question. The principal hated being in the middle of these sorts of things. In a weak-kneed effort to placate the Spandlers he suspended Juney for two days. Stevens was told to fail the essay for exceeding common decency. He refused at first, but as a temporary replacement, bent to the threats from the principal.

“Sorry, Spence. I thought the essay was really good, and I think the debate opened up some real issues about democracy and what makes good leadership for a country.”

“So Juney, uh, Spence, is still going to get an ‘F’ on this essay? That’s bullshit.” Spencer Senior wasn’t happy with this turn of events, or being called from work to deal with it.

“Look, the principal is an idiot, and is just playing politics. I’ll make sure that this ‘F’ doesn’t affect his grade in any way. I’ll just pad the grades on some of the other assignments. Spence is a good student, and I enjoy his take on things. Deal?”

Spencer and Juney looked at each other, then at Stevens and agreed.

“So what are you going to do with your two extra days?”

“Can I come to your work and hang out?” Juney liked going to the workshop with his father, sometimes picking up small jobs to do.

“Actually, that would be great. We’re building a model for a big high rise in Burnaby, and I’m sure there are some miniature trees to build. You go home and see Yeye today. I’ve got to head back down to Granville Island. You can start work tomorrow.”

“Do I get paid?” Juney was hoping to make a couple dollars on his off days.

“Sure. Why not.” Always on the take, that boy, thought Spencer Senior.

# Chapter 7

Urgastan was eerily calm after the assassination. The vice President, Gaşit Geredow and the Prime Minister, Vülşat Märowa had appeared on state television and swore that their solemn duty was to bury Verimuhamedov with the honour and reverence the father of the country deserved. Arrangements were made for a state funeral that would be remembered and it was to be magnificent. Statues were commissioned. The parade route was repaved and bedecked with flowers. As complicated as the logistics for the greatest event ever staged in the short history of Urgastan, neither man was so busy that they weren't spending most of their time shoring up support, courting the other members of the House of Representatives, and pressing their rights to ascension with the courts and the United Nations. To complicate things further, Geredow and Märowa were from traditionally warring ethnic groups. Verimuhamedov had appointed them both as a way to balance the resentment and counteract unequal treatment, with the hopes that he could turn his country from a war torn backwoods with a thousand years of blood feuds into a modern country. There was always ethnic violence, but he

had been brutal in crushing both sides equally. The head of the military, Geldi Amov, was from a third, minor ethnic group, and had managed to keep from favouring either side.

While Geredow and Märrowa played checkers, Amov was playing chess. When the President had been killed he rounded up the leaders of the secret police and had a quiet conversation with them. Mostly quiet. There was some screaming when he chainsawed off a hand, but he wanted to make sure that the assassination wasn't a secret plot by these horses asses to take over the country. He had them shot and buried far off the beaten path. Miraculously, none of the rest of the secret police showed up for work the next day. While the two parliamentarians were picking out wall paper and deciding on stationary, Amov was drinking chalf-fermented camel's milk, with his brother-in-law the head of the capitol police, and explaining how he imagined that with a little finesse, both of their houses would be blessed.

The day of the funeral was glorious, bright and sunny, with a chill in the air. Geredow and Märrowa were resplendent in their brightly coloured sashes, standing on the balcony of the capital, watching the procession of a thousand soldiers marching slowly, saluting as they passed. The casket, closed for obvious reasons, was on a caisson



pulled by four white horses, and followed by the President's dog. A small girl, dressed in traditional clothing ran under the barricade ropes and held out a single lily to a passing soldier. At exactly noon, a formation of fighter jets flew over. Geredow and Märrowa made speeches, glorifying their dead brother in arms, and pointing the way to a new and glorious future for Urgastan. There was crying and wailing from the assembled throngs. A hard looking war veteran spontaneously started singing the national anthem over the droning speeches, and the crowd linked arms and joined in. The casket was placed in a glassed wall display in the central square, with the idea that it would have a permanent mausoleum built in the same spot in the coming months.

Geredow and Märrowa shook hands. Pleased with the event, and in what could only be seen as a major break with their troubled and adversarial past, decided that they would guide their beloved country forward together. If they could work so well in the common cause of burying their leader, surely they could bring consensus to the parliament. They strolled down the long hallways of the capitol building. They saluted the guards, all dressed in their parade uniforms, standing like statues along the hallway. They walked into the President's office together,

their arms linked, chatting amiably. They were greeted by General Amov.

“General! What a wonderful display of the army today. Very smart, very smart indeed. Thank you for that. I think it all went splendidly. Will you join us for a drink? To celebrate our great dead leader?” The general smiled.

“Perhaps just one. Thank you.” Three glasses were filled with vodka, the one good thing the Russians brought to their country. Glasses clinked.

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“This is Hala Ghonaim in the capital of Urgastan. We’ve just watched the state funeral for their assassinated leader President Verimuhamedov. It’s expected that the vice President, Gaşit Geredow and the prime minister, Vülşat Märrowa will work out a power sharing agreement in the coming days as the country struggles to come to terms with the death of the only President that they’ve known here in this small nation. World leaders, including Prime Minister Trudeau have been sending condolences and offers of support. Back to you Lori.” The camera cut to Lori McLean leaning over and talking to someone off screen. She swung back around.

“The situation in Urgastan seems to be very fluid at the moment. We’ve just received an official release from General Amov, head of the armed forces, stating that the Geredow and Märrowa have been arrested in connection with the assassination, and the military has enacted marshal law, effectively placing Amov as sole leader of the country. Hala, what is the situation around you now?”

The image of Hala was frozen on the screen.

“We seemed to have lost transmission from Urgastan. We’ll keep following this story as it develops.”

# Chapter 8

“Ok folks. We’re following the situation in Urgastan, but it’s gotten more complicated because they just turned off the internet. Fortunately we’ve got a couple people on the ground with StarLink accounts and we are getting some information in. In the meanwhile I want you all to take a look at this video, and if anyone has any info on what they’re seeing, I want to see a hand.” Senior Agent Filbert clicked the remote and the wall behind him turned on. The image was frozen. Filbert pressed the button again, this time with some barely disguised agitation. Why isn’t this thing playing? Celeste, why the fuck isn’t this thing working.” Filbert was cracking. He’d been working at the Agency since he was 25, and was two years from retirement. He’d been pulled off field duty after losing track of an asset in Guatemala that resulted in a shitstorm. He hated tech, and he hated being humiliated in front of the staff. Celeste, one of the technology operatives appeared at his side, took the remote, pressed the play button, and walked to her seat, thinking all the way back that when the CIA handpicked her out of the advanced robotics lab at MIT

she was sure doing AV support for Filbert wasn't what they had promised.

The video played at half speed. A hand was raised in the back. It was one of the Mikes. Mike and Mike were two field operatives that both prided themselves as weapons experts.

“Yeah, that looks like a MRAD M2010. That baby will run you \$14k without a scope.” Mike One bumped knuckles with Mike Two. Mike Two chimed in.

“At that range he'd need to be shooting a .338 Lapua Magnum round. Too far for a Winnie.”

“You're assuming it's a he...” Allison piped up.

“Well, duh. Everyone knows women can't shoot worth shit!” Laughter through the meeting room. The women in the room collectively rolled their eyes, because they were all certified marksmen. Markswomen. Markspeople. Shooters.

“The camera adapter is probably from Amazon, pretty hard to trace. Looks like an Olympus camera. Older. No GPS.” Mike Two again.

“So what about tracing the Barrett? It's not like they sell that model down at the Walmart? Valdez, reach out to our friends at Barrett and see if they sold any in that neck of the woods.” Filbert knew those guns went ‘missing’ off of

foreign military bases all the time. They were worth double on the black market. Maybe they'd get lucky, but he wasn't holding his breath. "What about that number that he," pause, a glance at Allison, "or she films before the shot?"

"It's a bounce code." Celeste, sitting back in her chair, one Dr.Maarten kicked up on the empty chair in front of her, one finger curling a strand of black dyed hair. She sat motionless.

"Care to expand on that?" Like pulling teeth with her, thought Filbert. Celeste got up like it was an imposition on her morning and walked to the front of the group. Mike Two instinctively massaged his baby finger - the one she had broken when he tried to kiss her one night at the bar after work. Not one of his best nights.

"Ok." Celeste wondered how dumbed down she needed to make this. "When you use your bank account to transfer money to a person that lent you money for a taxi when you were too drunk to drive and had lost your wallet and your gun, your bank transfers the money electronically to the person that covered your ass and didn't tell your girlfriend and your boss about it, with a transfer code." She paused, took out her phone, looked at it, and smiled. "About time, asshole." Laughs and confused looks in the group from everyone except one sheepish agent in the back row.

“Anyway. What you see is an amount disappear from your account, and the other person sees it show up in their account. What you don’t see is the amount of data that goes along to make that happen. The transfer requires a time stamp, and a verification stamp, and a received stamp, etc. A bunch of handshaking from the two systems to ensure that people can’t steal, change, or mess up the transfer.” She paused. Snapped her gum. Looked for any really confused faces. Just Filbert. Sigh.

“The number that our girl is holding up is a bounce code. In the world of crypto payments, all transfers are tracked and verified, but they can be made anonymously to accounts using a bounce code. It’s an extra layer of coding that acts like a safe. We can figure out how much crypto went into the safe, but we don’t know where the origin is, and we don’t know who has the key to open the safe and took out the crypto.”

“So presumably the bounce code is where she wanted to have the money for the hit directed. But it must have been an open contract if she went to all the trouble to verify with film that the hit had been carried out.”

“Quit saying ‘she’. Fuck, it’s obviously a guy!”

“Yes, Allison, you’re right.” Celeste ignored the comment from Mike Two and the accompanying laughs. “It

looks like an open contract, and one that was publicly available to view. If that's the case, we can presume that we should be able to find some chatter on the dark web and get a sense of who and why." Celeste looked over at Filbert, made a mic dropping action that made no sense to him, and walked back to her seat.

"Ok." Filbert wanted it to seem as though he had followed up on the explanation."I'm going to give the file to Celeste and her team to see if they can source out any of the stuff about the code stuff. Dismissed. Celeste, my office."

Celeste walked across the hall and sat next to Allison, who was trying to fit large things into a small shoulder bag.

"Thanks for helping me out. It's Allison, right? Africa stuff?"

"Yeah, all sub Saharan. Miguel Hernandez works on the north stuff, Morocco and that end."

"If there's a spot open on this project do you want in? Could always use another brain."

"Fuck yeah. Tag me in on this. I'd love to get a look at TechOps. Filbert?"

"Leave him to me. He's so scared about losing his pension that he'll agree to anything I suggest as long keeps



him a mile away from #metoo. Why do you think we're the only department with a pingpong table and a kegerator?"

"Would not want to cross you, girl."

"Damn straight. I'll let you know."

# Chapter 9

Two weeks later Allison's pingpong was a lot stronger, and her understanding of the dark web had improved too. It was 9:00 p.m. on Thursday that the two of them put the whole thing together, and it scared the hell out of them.

"So Verimuhamedov was just the start." Allison and Celeste were sitting cross legged on the floor bouncing a ping pong ball between them. "I guess we'll drop the bomb tomorrow. That should be fun..." Celeste nodded.

"We could tag team this for the presentation if you want. Happy to give you some credit. Too bad we can't film their reaction for the outtakes reel at the Christmas party." Allison tried to put a smile on Celeste's face, but this was no laughing matter. "See you tomorrow, bright and early."

They walked out to the parking lot together.

"Hey, you want to grab a beer at Malone's?"

"Oh, yeah, sure. That'd be great." Allison was flying back to New York to see Jing Bae after work Friday, so this was going to be her last chance to socialize with Celeste, as it seemed that her part of the tech project was over for now.

Malone's was small and dark, but there was a pingpong table in the back. They challenged the bar champs to a

doubles match and to make it interesting Celeste put a hundred dollars on the table. They lost the first game, doubled down, and hustled the bar champs and walked away with four hundred bucks. They bought a round for the bar, and sat at a table laughing and drinking until closing, ignoring the stink eye from the defeated champs. One beer turned into multiple tequilas, and the morning found them naked together in Celeste's bed.

“Um..... Well.... I.... Shit.” Allison was hung over, in need of a coffee and a shower, and not just a little surprised that the evening had ended the way it did. Celeste stood up and smiled. Took her hand and led her to the shower.

“We're all stardust. We are golden. We are billion year old carbon.” And somehow, knowing what only they had learned about the new way the world worked, that seemed to make sense.

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Filbert stood at the podium and checked his watch. It was just after 9:00. No sign of Celeste for the meeting she'd asked for. Agents milled about with coffees, glad that they had a chance to relax before the meeting. Filbert didn't drink coffee. Didn't eat donuts, and definitely didn't relax. Especially with Director Dunlop sitting in the front row, looking at Filbert and taping his watch.

Celeste walked in and straight to the podium. Allison drifted into the back of the room like she'd always been there. Nothing to see here folks, especially not some confusingly satisfying girl on girl stuff. Celeste shook hands with Filbert, an odd thing to do he thought, and then made it obvious that he wasn't needed at the podium. He, turned, hesitated, thought about introducing her, thought better of it, and then shuffled to a chair. Dunlop sighed. How long until retirement he wondered?

“Okay. Sit down. I'm about to ruin your morning.” Celeste flicked on the screen behind her, plugged her thumb drive in, and picked up the clicker.

“Over the last two weeks, my team, with the help of Allison from the Sub Saharan group have figured out a major clusterfuck in the making. It's called WØrldchanger5.onion, a site on the dark web. Think of it as a kickstarter for assassinations. It's a list of all the world leaders, and some of their hangers-on and generals, with complete lists of UN sanctions and World Court charges against these folks. The next column” she paused for dramatic effect and stared at Dunlop, then clicked once more, “is the current accumulated crypto amounts. The funding for this is the same as Kickstarter, anyone can contribute, except anonymously, and in crypto. That

number you see beside Verimuhamedov's name is the amount paid out to our hitter, minus, as far as we can tell, about 10% that goes to the creator of this mad enterprise. The crypto they are using for this is Moebius, one of the new ones. Not regulated. Not traceable." She paused to sip her coffee and surreptitiously eat a couple Advil for her pounding head.

"So our shooter offed the President of Urgastan for \$37 bucks?" Mike Two asked, confused.

"No. 37.843 Moebius. Currently trading at.." click, next screen, dramatic pause, "\$47,300 per. Which brings the hit to roughly \$1.8 million US bucks." There were some low whistles from the crowd.

"I'm in the wrong business." said Mike One under his breath. Director Dunlop stood up and looked at directly at him.

"My office, after this briefing." Fuck, thought Mike One. Serves you right, thought Allison.

"So here's how it works. The shooter gets a generated code. This is so there aren't competing claims. If they fail, they don't get to try again. The assassin has to film the entire event from start to finish, and publish it up on a Wikileaks site along with that bounce number we saw in the original video. Once confirmation has been received, then

the Moebius is transferred. The main site has been programmed using standard tools, but the programmer has covered their trail with an Indian rice chessboard methodology.”

“Sorry, Miss....?”

“Just Celeste, sir, Director, sir, Dunlop.” Stuck the landing on that one, thought Celeste.

“Rice? Chess? Can you explain that? I mean for the others here....” Dunlop smiled to ease the tension. Polite laughs from the rest. Celeste coughed a little and started to explain.

“In order to disguise how the site was created, the programmer developed a way of hopping between VPNs, and IP addresses randomly as the code created, so each bit of data has one of a thousand possible origins. We can’t track who did this, or why, or where. The best metaphor for how complicated this is, is the story of the chess playing Indian king. The one where he agreed to the bet that the wandering sage suggested, should the king lose.”

“Ah, one grain on the first square... two on the second. I see now.” Dunlop nodded. Most of the others were still perplexed.

“Right. By the time you reach the 64th square you’ve got enough rice to cover all of India 3 feet deep. That’s the

problem we face. Even if we used all of the supercomputer power in the States, it would take us more time than there is left before the heat death of the universe. And we still wouldn't know exactly who. And we'd all be long dead." Celeste unplugged her USB drive and sat down.

Dunlop walked slowly to the podium, head bent down, his hands pressed together as if he was in prayer. He was bouncing his index fingers against his lips. He stopped at the podium, hesitated, and walked off, in the direction of his office. He slowed his pace, turned back, pointed at Celeste, and crooked his finger at her.

The assembled agents looked at each other, their eyes asking the question what the hell just happened. They were expecting marching orders. Something. Filbert got up and walked to the podium.

"I guess... well, I guess we'll pick this up later. Dismissed." As Celeste gathered her stuff, Allison appeared at her side.

"Looks like you're going to be busy. I've got to go catch the commuter back to New York." It seemed awkward, but she held out her hand to shake Celeste's.

"What? A handshake? Fuck that. Come here, you!" She held out her arms and they came together for a hug. Just two colleagues hugging. Nothing to see here. But it lingered

just a half second longer than was prescribed in some human relations manual, and as they came unstuck, Celeste copped a stealthy feel of Allison's breast. Allison felt the blood surge to her face. Celeste pirouetted away, turned back with a saucy grin.

“Ha. See you later, gator! Gotta go save the world!”



# Chapter 10

“Professor Chomsky, you said if the Nuremberg Trial principles were applied, every post war President would be indictable. Can we run down them real fast? What did Eisenhower do?” Bill Zimmerman asked Noam Chomsky in a 2003 interview. The professor proceeds to list invasions, coups, torture, war, interference, black sites, black flag operations, kidnapping, illegal sanctions, arms dealing, embargoes, ethnic cleansing, environmental destruction, seizure of territory, and basically the sticking of America’s nose into places it just doesn’t belong. The current President was no better. Not as photogenic as some of the past office holders, but equally callous, venal and despicable. And equally indictable.

“Marcia. MARCIA!” President Humphries jabbed the intercom button. “Goddammit, where is that woman? I’m gonna have to get me a new secretary. I tell you it gets harder everyday. And I’m not talkin’ about my dick.” The Vice President looked up from his briefing notes and barked a laugh. Marcia half ran into the oval office.

“Marcia, honey, would it be too much fucking trouble to get some goddamn coffee that’s actually hot. Jesus Christ

woman, I didn't ask for lukewarm coffee, I asked for goddamn hot coffee."

"Yes, sir, of course sir," she said quietly, backing out of the room. Marcia hated that man. Her father had gotten her the job as a side deal on a political contribution. She had thought, at first, that working for the Fucking President of the United States of America would be a boost for her career, but a year and a half in, she was getting the feeling that anyone even remotely associated with the Pariah In Chief was going to be a looking long and hard for their next job. When she had started, she modified her LinkedIn to say that she was the secretary for the President, and had her photo taken with him for her profile. As time had gone on, she had replaced the photo, and listed her current work status as 'Administrator' for a non-disclosed branch of the federal government. And the coffee? It had been piping hot when she brought it to his office 2 hours ago. She wasn't sure what universe he lived in where coffee remained hot indefinitely.

"Marcia, is he in? What's his mood?"

"Senator Applebaum, I didn't hear you. How are you today, sir?" She was taken aback. He was as silent as a fox in wet grass.

“Good, good. Just need a few minutes with him. Does he have any time?”

“He’s got about 15 minutes before the China briefing, I can see....”

“Great, thanks Marcia.” Herschel Applebaum hadn’t gotten to be the youngest senator for the great state of Delaware by waiting in line for his turn. He did a weird half shudder step and waltzed around Marcia before she had a chance to block the path through the door.

“President Humphries, how the hell are you today. Vice President, good to see you. Marcia said you had 15 minutes before your next meeting and I wanted to talk to you about getting that appropriations bill through for the new navy base at Taylor’s Rock. Now the way I see it ....” the door swung closed and Marcia slumped down at her desk. She knew that as soon as Senator Applebaum left she was going to get ripped for letting him past. She pulled her letter of resignation up on her computer, and adjusted the date. Again.

She looked up and startled. Congresswoman Georgina Bittenhouse Berringer sat in the client chair across the desk from Marcia.

“Marcia?” The words oozed and Georgina raised an eyebrow. There were few people on Capitol Hill that truly

terrified Marcia, and Ms. Berringer was one of them. Predatorily slim, dyed blonde hair cut in a stylish but severe wedge, her knife-edged cheekbones pulling her skin taut, she was fearsome to behold. The rumours around her weren't substantiated but there was talk that she had amassed a fortune by marrying well and sick. When her husband miraculously recovered, and was looking to die of old age many, many, years in the future, she suggested a skydiving adventure holiday for the two of them to celebrate. She picked a resort just outside Lake Tequesquitengo, Mexico, and they spent days training and doing tandem drops with the instructors. On the last day they prepared for the culmination of their training, their first solo jump. They both landed in the target area. He just happened to land two full minutes before she did. At terminal velocity.

“Yes ma'am?”

“I'm guessing that my 2:00 p.m. appointment to see that fat bastard is still on?”

“Yes, ma'am. Senator Applebaum just snuck in for a quick chat, but I'll let the President know you're here.”

Marcia moved to the door and the Congresswoman was on her heels, and pushed by her as soon as she opened the door.

“President Humphries, your 2:00 appointment with ...”

“He knows who I am, honey. Seriously Humphries, we had an appointment and I won’t be pushed aside by this little dog turd from Delaware.”

“Pleasure to see you too, Georgina.”

“Goddammit Marcia.!” the President yelled. “For fucks sake, I hired you because your daddy said you were a go-getter. All I’m seeing today is a bunch of people coming into my office whenever the fuck they want. You’re supposed to be like a Cerebus, and a mean one at that. You gotta stop these brown-nosing, money-sucking, scrotum-necked, cocksucking shithead congressmen and senators from barging in here. Fuck.” he paused for a breath, he looked over at the Vice President and back to Marcia. “Bark.”

“Excuse me, sir?”

“You heard me. Bark.”

“Sir, I apologize for letting in the senator, but...”

“Goddammit. Bark! Now!” she felt her face flush. It was bad enough that she had to listen to his demands, but to be publicly humiliated like this.

“Ruff.”

“You call that a bark. That’s why these fucking morons keep showing up in my goddam office. Now BARK!”

“Woof!”

“Louder!”

“WOOF!”

Everyone in the room started laughing out loud. Marcia fled in tears.

“Ha wee ah.” The President sat down, wheezing and wiping the tears from his eyes. “That’s one stupid dog. I think I’ll shoot it and get me another.”

“So about the base in Delaware.”

“Goddammit Herschel. Get a brief together and put it in front of the military appropriations board. There’s not a lot of room in the budget for new bases.”

“Okay. I get it. It’s a bipartisan thing. Well, we’ll see how Delaware votes when you want to get your wall built.” Senator Applebaum brushed past Berringer on his way out the door.

“Bitch.”

“Jew.”

He walked past Marcia’s desk. She was nowhere to be seen. Gretchen, another clerk, sat at her computer.

“What happened to Marcia?”

“Oh her? She took the rest of the day. I think she has rabies?” They both laughed.

# Chapter 11

President Mamadou, known as Big Mama on Instagram, had embraced the lifestyle of a living god. After ousting his father, the then President, he had assumed the presidency of Bamatouga, but only after he was sure he had all the passwords to the overseas accounts where his father had siphoned most of the royalties from the oil fields. When Big Mama took over he really thought that he would try and better the lives of all of the poor for his country, but soon realized that since the elections were just for show, there was no point in helping those that couldn't help him.

He had learned other lessons from his father. He played the military off against the police, the tribes against one another, the Russians against the Americans and the Chinese, and kept the bankers in line. The country was in ruins, but his life was killing it on the 'Gram.

“President. Your car has just arrived!” Mobodo, his majordomo, poked his head into the home office of Big Mama. “They're unloading it from the container now.”

“Excellent, excellent. Don't let anyone start it but me. No one drives it but me!” It was hard to retain the Presidential cool when a new Bugatti Chiron was being

dropped off in his driveway. He leapt up from his desk, grabbed his aviators, knocked over his coffee, swore, then, marshalling all the cool swagger he could summon, started towards the door.

“Mobodo!”

“Yes, your Excellency?”

“Is your camera ready?”

“Yes, your Excellency. Shall I start filming now?”

“No, no. You go outside, and I’ll come through the doors. Do I look okay?”

“I think you spilled some coffee on your pants, Excellency.” Big Mama rolled his eyes.

“Fuck. Okay, I’ll be back downstairs in a couple minutes. You get things set up outside. Is there a reveal sheet on the car? Are the girls in bikinis ready?”

“Yes, yes. All prepared, your Excellency.” Mobodo knew the drill, he also knew that if the President had to change pants, he had at least twenty minutes. He went outside, lit a smoke, and told the assembled to take five.

Fifty miles away, deep in the rainforest, Captain Alpha Diallo lay on his cot listening to the afternoon rain on his tent. It rained every afternoon around 2:00 p.m., and the activities of the camp came to a standstill. The women



cooked, the boy soldiers played video games on their phones, and the men took a nap. It was hard work being a freedom fighter, but most days were spent planning raids, finding resources, and staying away from the army.

Most of the men in his outfit were deserters from the army and had absconded with as much hardware as they could carry. While the President tried to engender loyalty with violence, the Golden Dawn Resistance built loyalty with a dream of an egalitarian country where the money from the oil resource was used to better the lives of everyone.

As he lay there, brushing flies away from his face, he dreamed of sitting on the Presidential throne, looking out the windows over a new and modern Bamatouga, skyscrapers glistening in the distance, his people all fat and well educated and his 13 wives all sitting before him smiling invitingly.

It was a good dream.

“Alpha! Get yourself up, you lazy bastard. It’s dinnertime! You’ve been lying there dreaming all afternoon!”

“That’s Captain Alpha, to you.”

“Ayeeee. You think I care for your made up title, husband? Get up. Show some initiative. Show the men you deserve the title you gave yourself!”

“Woman, you’re worse than a landmine! Just remember you’re my first wife, not my last!” He stood up and glowered towards her. Kadija stood her ground, one hand on her hip, the other stopping his advance with her wooden spoon. They stared hard at each other. A tense second passed. Alpha was a head taller, 50 kilograms heavier and a powerful fighter. His muscles rippled under his glistening charcoal black skin. In an eyeblink he brushed away the spoon, and took her head in his massive hands. A quick flick and he could break her neck like that guard a week ago.

He bent close to her, kissed her tenderly on the lips, their noses pressed together. He rested his forehead on hers.

“What’s for dinner, love?”

“We’re lucky tonight. One of the traps caught a young boar. Roast pig and sweet potatoes.”

“Truly a blessed day.” Alpha put his arm around his wife, and they walked together to the mess tent. The smell of the roast pork and the laughing and chatter of his

fighters filled the tent. He sat down next to his younger brother, Betta.

“Blessings, brother.”

“And to you. When you’re finished dinner, I need to show you something on the computer.”

“Betta, you and your computers. Guns win wars, not computers. Let’s eat.” Dinner was served on palm leaves, and they ate with their fingers. One of the boy soldiers had cached the beer in a makeshift cooler of his own design and brought two for the brothers.

“Thankyou, Ngono. How is your foot healing?”

“Almost better, Captain. I’ll be ready to fight soon.”

“Good, good, we need your keen eyes and steady hands.” The boy couldn’t have been more than twelve, and already wounded in battle. And proud of it, too.

The mess tent cleared out. Some of the soldiers moved to the end of one of the tables away from the brothers and played cards and smoked hand rolled cigarettes, others drifted off to the campfire to play guitar and sing.

“So what is it you want to show me, Little One.” Alpha put his hand on the nape of Betta’s neck. The ‘Little One’ nickname was ironic. Betta was ten centimeters taller than Alpha and hadn’t lost an arm wrestle with Alpha since he

turned 16. Betta opened his computer, and played the video of Verimuhamedov being assassinated.

“I’d heard that. So what?”

“Yes, it was on the news. Very big deal. What they didn’t talk about was this...” Betta switched screens to the WØrldchanger5.onion site. “This is why he was killed. Someone put a cryptocurrency bounty on his head. All the world leaders are included, including Big Mama. The site has a short listing of how good or bad each of the leaders are, and it lets people anonymously contribute to a fund paid to the person that kills that leader.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“It’s real. I’ve been on some of the chat sites, and it’s taken off. Do-gooder people all over the world are looking at the despots of the world and deciding who they want to contribute to ending. It’s the first time where everyone feels as though there is a way to change the world, to wrest it away from the Big Mama’s of the world. There’s even a gift registry, so you can put money on someone for a friend, and they get a ‘Thank You For your Gift’ email! And look here...T-shirts!”

# Chapter 12

Dunlop's office was a zen oasis. The other director's offices were all screens and computers and windows and fluorescent lights and clutter, but Dunlop's had been transformed. Instead of a desk, there was a round teak table. Instead of a power chair and uncomfortable chairs for minions, there were four equally comfortable white swivel chairs. At the end of the office there was a reading lamp next to a white leather couch, where the Director sat to read reports. A small table held a glass of water and a matching water pitcher. There were no windows. The walls were a pale grey sound absorbing fabric. No one could see in.

Celeste pressed a button by the door, heard a faint click, and the door slid open. The room was cool and mostly dark. The air smelled different from the rest of the office. More... alive? She stepped inside and the door closed behind her. It had disappeared into the wall. There was no doorknob.

So this is how it ends, she thought to herself. They won't even find my body. I'll just disappear.

“Celeste, thank you for joining me. Come. Sit.” The Director motioned to a chair across the table from where he sat. He was barefoot.

“Thank you, sir. You wanted to see me? I guess about the dark web stuff?” Celeste could feel herself starting to blather. She took a breath. Dunlop looked at her. Placid, thought Celeste, that’s how I’d describe him.

“Tea? I have it imported from a small farm in Sri Lanka. I worked there when I was an operative, and grew quite fond of it’s floral undertones.”

“Thank you, sir. Tea would be lovely.” Dunlop poured two small bowls of tea. The bowls were exquisite, with dark opalescent glazes on the outside, greens and blacks swirling around each other. The insides were pure white. He sat back slowly, the tea cup balanced in his fingers, and closed his eyes. For a scene that exuded calm, Celeste could not remember feeling any more anxious than she was right now. She stared at the tea cup, watching wisps of steam, and concentrated on her breathing. She had been warned to leave all electronic devices - phones, watches, computers, cameras - on her desk. Without the constant ping of her digital world, she had no idea how much time was passing.

She waited.

Dunlop took a sip. A small smile touched his lips.

She waited.

“Your discovery is troubling,” he began, “as it marks the end of the civilized world and a descent into chaos, war, famine, tribalism.” He took another sip and opened his eyes. “You must find a way to stop it. If you don’t, all the good in the world will end.”

“I.. I.. don’t follow you sir.”

“If this kickstarter for assassination is allowed to continue, then eventually every world leader will have a large enough price on his head to make it worthwhile for someone to kill them. If you’re the leader of Country A, and you want to disrupt your neighbour in Country B, all you need to do is put some crypto in an account, and someone, not even a trained soldier, or even someone that can be blamed as an operative, will decide to take it upon themselves and shift the balance of power. But the President of Country B isn’t sitting idly by. No! He’s funding his own crypto hitman. No leader is safe. No country is safe. Tell me. Is there a price already on General Amov’s head?”

“I haven’t looked, sir.”

“You should have. I expect better. Is there a price on President Humphries’s head? Surely you looked at that before you came in?”

“Two million and change, sir.”

“FUCK!” Dunlop banged the table with the palm of his hand. The tea cups jumped. So much for a sea of tranquility.



# Chapter 13

Marcia knew she was being monitored. It was standard procedure for the Secret Service to actively assess possible threats towards the President. She made sure that she never spoke ill of the President on the phone or in emails, keeping her dark thoughts to herself. She was a Bryn Mawr girl, raised in money and used to having staff, rather than being staff. Her job with the President was a favour to her father, Charles “Clunker” Devereaux, an automobile parts manufacturer and staunch opponent of gays, electric vehicles, universal medicare, or anything that smacked of leftwing pinko commie bullshit, as he put it, and a major contributor to the President’s election push. Privilege meant that she had spent her summers riding horses, learning to sail, and shooting skeet. Her father’s hunting cabin near Gilberts Corner was an hour away from Washington in the hills of Virginia, and she often spent the weekends there, tending her demons in the dark quiet of the forest.

The field behind the cabin was where she’d learned to shoot. It didn’t come naturally to her, it had taken a whole summer before she could pin three skeets in a row, but by

the time she was 15 she could best her father in their weekly competitions during the August break. He was very proud of her, and thought she might go on to the Olympics. On her 16th birthday, when she'd been expecting a BMW, like all the other girls, her father had given her a Caesar Guerini Custom, a 12 gauge shotgun of her own, engraved, gold inlay, and easily the price of a 3 Series Beemer. She remembered him telling her that she was special, and that he loved her. She cried and hugged him, because she really wanted a BMW, but having been bred with manners, she never told him. Besides, she could always use one of the three cars in the garage.

She pulled the trap catapult out of the shed, plugged it in, and went looking for clay pigeons to shoot. There was only a half box left, and she was much angrier than that, so she drove to the hardware store in Stone Ridge.

“Marcia Devereaux, why I haven't seen you since you was this high and scruffing around after your daddy. You remember me, honey?”

“Mr. Willets, good to see you sir. Glad to see you're still manning the counter here.” Bob Willets had been working the hardware store for forty years. He didn't own the shop, but ran it like he did. He never married, and lived a monks' life in the apartment above the store. But he was content

with his little world, and had never travelled much beyond Stone Ridge.

“How’s your daddy, hon? He doing okay?”

“Yes sir. He’s spending most of his time at the plants in Mexico and Puerto Rico, so I don’t see him much.”

“Well, that’s your old man. Always business. What can I do you for today, there, Miss Devereaux?”

“I’m out of skeets and shells. Thought I’d do a little shooting to take my mind off work. Can I get a couple boxes of the pigeons, and, oh, give me three boxes of shells.”

“Why, sure thing. You just hold on there a second, and I’ll round them up.” Marcia stood in front of the glass counter that housed Bob’s collection of hand carved duck decoys. His 1973 ‘Best in Show’ ribbon for the merganser was proudly displayed there as well. Looking around, the threads of time pulled her back twenty years to when she would come here with her father. He and Bob would trade stories and catch up on the goings on of the area. Clunker had an easy way with people, and even though he and Bob were miles apart in their financial standing, he treated him as an equal. As long as you’re gainfully employed and don’t have your hand out, I’ll respect you as an equal, he always said. Odd, then, that Clunker didn’t see the irony when he spent so much of his time with his hand out to various

levels of government looking for tax handouts to build his plants in their jurisdictions.

“Here you go, Missy. I’ll just put that on your daddy’s tab, if you like.”

“Thank you Mr. Willet. I appreciate that. I’ll be sure to tell Daddy that I ran into you today.”

“You give that old buck my best, you hear.”

Back at the cabin, Marcia retrieved her gun from the safe, gave it a methodical clean, and set up the trap. She’d forgotten her ear protection in her bedroom and went to retrieve it. Her desk was cluttered, and she snapped the drawers open and shut in quick succession looking for the ear buds. She found them in the bottom drawer, next to a roll of Vote Humphries stickers from the last rally. She grimaced at his lizard-like face smiling out from the center of the sticker.

“I’m going to dump you in the garbage, you racist, narcissistic, fuck.” She grabbed them and walked through the kitchen to the porch, pausing to dump the stickers in the garbage. She stood, hovering the roll over the bin, when an idea sprung to mind.

She spent the next 20 minutes carefully affixing the stickers to the center of the bright orange clay pigeons. This was going to be therapeutic, she thought.

# Chapter 14

Dunlop sat alone in his quiet office, an unread report sitting on the couch beside him. He was not in a good mood. This thing. This assassination bureau was exactly the sort of thing he had feared ever since reading William Gibson thirty years ago. Most people, when they imagine the future envisage hoverboards and flying cars. His experience with the world, with people, with bad people, had him thinking about all the ways that the future was going to be much, much worse than before. The doorbell chimed. An image of Senior Director Gray was projected on the wall opposite. He sighed and pressed the remote.

“Alphonse! I hear we’ve got some excitement brewing.” Dunlop hated his first name. No one aside from Senior Director Gray would dare to address him by anything other than Director Dunlop.

“Wayne.”

“So what’s this all about. I started to read your report, but got bogged down in some of the technical mumbo jumbo your girl, um, what’s her name, uh Celeste? was on about. Break it down for me.”

Dunlop explained the overarching aspects ignoring some of the more obtuse technical parts. It took him a few minutes to fully make Director Gray understand the full scope of the issue. Gray paced back and forth across the office while Dunlop explained.

“So what you’re saying ... is anyone with some of this Moebius crypto stuff can donate to a hitman, and no one will ever know who they are? You’re saying that we can’t trace it, and neither can the Russians or the Chinese.”

“Correct. It’s the most dangerous...”

“You mean goldmine! How long have we been trying to manipulate the way the world works without getting our hands dirty. How many times has that come back to bite us in the ass? This just made our lives so much easier. We can play both sides of the game. Shock and outrage at a leader's demise, while at the same time, bumping the reward without anyone ever being the wiser.” Gray beamed at Dunlop, genuinely excited at the prospect. Dunlop wondered how someone with such a limited view of the world was put in charge of the CIA.

# Chapter 15

“Brother, if we’re going to pull this off, we’re going to need some supplies. Do you want to reach into both pockets?”

“Hmm. Probably best. You call Boris, and I’ll call Peters. Same as last time. Make sure it’s for lunch. You take Boris to the goat restaurant, I’ll meet Peter across town at the kebab shop.” Betta nodded, walked away and dialled up the Russian.

“Boris, my good friend. I was thinking we hadn’t had lunch in a while. Do you want to meet me at Manyaga? They have delicious goat stew there.” He listened for a second then looked back to Alpha and gave him the thumbs up. Alpha dialled.

“Peters, how are you, my friend. Has that nasty rash cleared up.” A pause, Alpha looked over to Betta and quacked his hand like a duck. “Uh, huh. Really” Eye roll. Betta smiled. His brother was better with the Americans than he was. They had the habit of telling you how to build a clock when you asked for the time. “I was thinking we could meet for kebabs tomorrow?” He held the phone away from his ear, and shook his head. “That’s great. Yes,

the one near the corner of the market. Excellent Mr. Peters, I look forward to seeing you.”

Bamatouga was a small country and due to cutbacks with both the CIA and KGB, there was only one operative from both in their area, mostly for intelligence gathering. The brothers knew that with a little intel trading they could count on both countries to contribute to their cause. And this was a small ask, a top up of their AliExpress accounts. Each agent had a preset limit before they had to ask the home office for permission, and Alpha and Betta knew this and had mastered the art of the ask. They also knew that things were smoother when each agent wasn't running surveillance on the other, hence the coincidental meetings.

The brothers met after their respective lunches.

“Success?” The bar was cool and the beer was cold. The brothers sat at a table in the back, always wary.

“Probably better than you! Mr. Peter was trying to use up some quarterly budget and was more than happy to contribute \$20,000 to the cause. How was Boris?”

“A little stingy, but he did promise some Semtex, you can't get that from AliExpress!” Alpha smiled. This plan was shaping up.

In three weeks the brothers returned to the shipping depot in town and picked up thirty boxes and returned to



camp. All the men and the boys gathered around and helped with the unloading.

“Brothers. We will choose the best warriors to carry out this mission. Training begins tomorrow.” Alpha was certain that his plan would work. He just needed to find the right men to carry it out.

The morning broke cool, the sun barely making it through the low fog that blanketed the rainforest. Alpha and Betta stood behind the table, and the men lined up according to experience and rank. The child soldiers stood off to the side, taunting the older soldiers. There was an air of anticipation and joking camaraderie.

“Okay, listen up. This is the Archangel 1800 long range drone. It has a V-shaped wing, and will carry 300 grams of Semtex, plus batteries, cameras, and GPS. We are going to fly ten of these, loaded with explosive and lead shot, into the capital and take out Big Mama, and as many of his toadies as we can. We will wait outside the city, and when the explosions stop, we will go in, take over the radio station and the internet, and let the people know of the revolution. Of Golden Dawn Resistance.”

“GOLDEN DAWN!” shouted the men, raising their fists in the air.

The course was laid out. Down to the end of the clearing, around the big tree, between the two flags, and back. The soldiers were trained on the controls and then put the first person view headsets on. The training took two hours, then Binto, the master sergeant took his turn. He was clearly tense. Alpha launched the drone. Binto froze, the flying wing pitched up, and slipped backwards before the auto stabilizers kicked in. Through the FPV headset Binto saw the tree looming and instead of turning the plane, he jumped out of the way, his body landing with a thump on the ground and the wing smacking into the tree. He took off the headset and ran to the bushes and puked. The rest of the men looked on. The boy soldiers sat on their haunches off to the side under the big tree and laughed and made puking faces. Alpha glared at them.

“Sorry, Captain” they murmured, but kept snickering amongst themselves. The rest of the crew wasn’t any better. They broke two of the drones, and by the time the afternoon rains came, they had had little success. Alpha and Betta went to the mess tent to discuss the mornings’ failure, and the rest of the men went to their tents to tend to their wounded pride.

“The plan is not working out as we expected, brother.”

“It will. It will. We have the best fighters in all of west Africa. Tough. Resourceful. This is just another training hurdle for them. I’m sure it will be better tomorrow.” Alpha wasn’t so sure. He looked down the tent at the group of boys, huddled around one playing on his iPhone. They were still laughing and miming Bintos’s puking in the bushes. The brothers sat in silence, drinking coffee, and listening to the rain. “I so very much want to see our country live up to its potential. Cast out all the foreigners who think they can have our oil for free, and our women for a dollar. I long for us to be a real force in west Africa. Show all the people how much more prosperous and powerful we can be with a real democracy.”

“Me too, Alpha, me too.”

The brothers sat in silence. The rain slowed, then stopped, and then it was just the drops from the trees. The forest came back to life, birds singing, monkeys calling from tree to tree, the sounds of the insects on the prowl for the next bit of nectar.. Ngomo limped up to Alpha.

“Captain? I was wondering....”

“Ngomo, what boy? You know you can always ask me a question. Come, would you like some coffee with Betta and I?”

“No sir. I was wondering...” Ngomo took a breath and then rushed out the words, “I was wondering if perhaps I could try to fly the plane.” Alpha looked straight at him, shot up, towering over him. Ngomo stepped back, thinking that he was going to get a beating for even suggesting it. Betta stood up and looked at Alpha. Alpha swung his big hand around and caught Betta smack on the forehead. Betta laughed and returned the favour. They laughed and hugged and Ngomo stood there very confused, until they hugged him as well.

“Ngomo, you and your crew might just be what we are looking for. Assemble your men by the table in ten minutes.” Ngomo snapped to attention and saluted and then ran to round up the rest of the boy conscripts.

The boys ran excitedly to the table, pushing and shoving to be first. Ngomo was older, and it was his idea, so the boys agreed that he should go first. The men stood behind, curious to see how the little rats would do.

“Did you want to sit down, Ngomo, would that be easier for your leg?” asked his younger brother.

“No, Tomo, I think standing will be better.” He pulled the headset down over his eyes, and it drooped past his nose immediately. The boys laughed, and Tomo stepped up

behind him and adjusted the headband tighter for his brother.

“Your head’s too small, Ngomo!” yelled a boy from the back

“That’s not what his mother said!” yelled one of the soldiers to a chorus of laughs from the other men.

“Ok, Captain. All set.”

Alpha took the V-wing plane and held it in launch position. Ngomo hit the throttle and Alpha flicked it into the air. The plane rose and leveled out and peeled towards the tree at the end of the clearing a hundred meters away, sloped into a tight banking turn and sped towards the flags, doing a barrel roll through them before slowing and stalling three meters from the table.

“My turn, my turn!” An excited throng of boys pushed forward to congratulate Ngomo on his flight and prove their own skills flying the plane.

“I think we’ve found our pilots,” said Betta, walking back to the mess tent. The rest of the afternoon the hardened men of the Golden Dawn resistance helped the boys prepare for the mission that would change the fate of their country.

# Chapter 16

The commuter flight from Washington arrived late. The downpour that slowed things at the airport turned the taxi ride back into Manhattan into a crawl.

“Sorry, honey. Not a damn thing I can do. We’ll get there when we get there.” Emilio, the taxi driver, had adopted a zen philosophy early in his cabbie career. He started each morning with 30 minutes of yoga, ate a sensible diet, and had come to terms with the capricious nature of traffic. He pulled out a novel from his lunch bag, and opened it.

“What are you reading? Anything good?”

“Yeah, I’m not sure. It’s called 50% Luck by, uh, Duane Laird, seems to be a science fiction sort of thing, but I’m only a couple pages in.” (Editor’s Note: Shameless Plug.)

“Amazon?” asked Allison. The driver nodded. “Well, let me know, looks like we’re going to be stuck here for a while.” Allison pulled out her phone. She wanted to call Jing Bae, but that wasn’t the deal. She tried to think of another way to contact him on the down low. She dialed. “Hi, yeah, is the Chez Allison on 82nd? Yeah, great, I’d like to get a delivery, please.” Jing Bae was a smart boy. He’d figure it out.

After what seemed like forever she arrived in front of her apartment. She brushed her teeth, and changed out of her travel clothes infused with Eau du Airplane and walked over to the mini apartment. She knocked quietly on the door, paused, then dug into her purse for her key. The door swung open and Jing Bae handed her a glass of Prosecco.

“Hi.”

Dinner was better than any of the meals that Allison had had in her weeks away. She was glad that Jing Bae had thought to bring more than one bottle of wine. The tension that she'd been holding in her neck ever since she and Celeste had figured out the dark web kill list was finally melting away. They ate sitting cross legged on the floor, takeout containers between them.

“Can we not talk about work, tonight?”

“Yeah, sure. I'm happy not to talk at all...” Jing Bae winked at her. “Also, I picked up some bagels, lox and cream cheese from H&H. For breakfast. I was sort of hoping we could spend the day together tomorrow? Do the park, catch some galleries?” Most of the time Allison was too obsessed with work to take weekends off.

“Yeah, I'd really like that.”

“Really? Great.”

They cleaned up their impromptu dinner, and washed up the wine glasses. Jing took out an old school cassette player.

“Hey, we said no electronics. You know the rules Jing Bae.” Allison reached for it, Jing Bae held it out of reach.

“Before you get crazy, it’s an old one. No GPS, no wifi, full analogue, and it doesn’t transmit. It just plays tapes.” Allison frowned. She was conflicted and curious at the same time.

“Why did you bring it, anyway?” When you knew it was going to piss me off, she thought to herself. Jing Bae placed it on the floor, and pressed play. A couple seconds of tape hiss, and then Nora Jones started singing Come Away with Me. Jing Bae held out his hand. She hadn’t danced for years. Jing Bae pulled her close, and they slow danced.

Later, she nestled into him, his arm folded around her, his leg between hers. She felt his even breaths on her shoulder. She couldn’t sleep, thinking about the threat to the world, thinking about her time with Celeste, her mind spinning. She closed her eyes, and breathed. Finally the long day, the flight, the food, the wine, and the sex caught her and she fell into darkness.

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“Hey, you.”



“Shit, I was dead to the world. What time is it?”

“Doesn’t matter. Coffee?”

“I would taste awful right now. I’m going to go home and get some walking shoes. I’ll meet you at Cleopatra’s Needle in an hour.”

“You know I know that you shit, right?” Jing Bae cocked his head and stroked his chin looking at Allison. “You can go here.”

“I am not shitting in that, that weird shower thing. No way. No sir. My momma raised me better. I have standards.”

“And yet here you are with me....”

“Everyone has one bad habit they can’t shake. Just be happy you’re mine. I’ll see you in an hour.”

Jing Bae went home to change and picked up two coffees on the way back to the needle. Sitting in the sun on the west side of the octagon waiting. The morning sun was warm and he closed his eyes and tilted his head back. He listened to the inane chatter around him, heard the dogs, the birds.

“Hey, you asleep?”

“Nah, just enjoying my other senses, feeling the sun.”

“Which coffee is mine?”

“The one that says Al’s Son. Mine says John Boy. Seriously I gotta get a Starbucks name, something people can hear clearly and can’t mess up.”

“I don’t know. I kinda like John Boy. Was that from Little House on the Prairie?”

“The Walton’s I think.”

“Oh, shit. Yes. ‘Goodnight, John Boy’” Allison laughed, thinking of the afternoons after school she spent watching reruns with the twins, a lifetime ago.

“Walk?”

“Yup.” They headed north, towards the reservoir and the baseball fields. “So how was CIA head office?” Jing Bae was expecting the usual, a vague description with a couple highlights about some new person in the office. Instead he got a forty five minute dissertation on the two weeks that Allison spent at Langley, including the dark web, the bounce codes, and her new proficiency with ping pong. Minus the drunken night with Celeste.

“Holy shit. So it’s already started with Verimuhamedov? And you and Celeste, who sounds like a fascinating person, by the way, if she’s ever in town we should do dinner, figured this all out?”

“Yeah, it scares the fuck out of me. We’re going to see a lot of chaos in the next six months.” Allison pulled herself closer to Jing Bae as they walked on in silence.

“You know, it’s funny. My nephew, Spencer Junior, Juney, wrote an essay for his grade 11 Socials class last year, that was sort of on the same subject. He looked at what happened when people like Gaddafi were removed from power - I mean it was a horrible place with Gaddafi - people thought things were going to be better after he was assassinated. And look what happened. I talked to my brother, and he said the teacher had handed out the essay to the class as a discussion topic, and some parent pulled a Karen. Anyways. The essay caused a stink at school, and I think Juney was suspended for a couple days. Crazy.” Allison stopped. Jing Bae walked a step further, turned and looked at her. “What?” Allison looked worried.”Oh, no, wait, that’s a crazy thought. You don’t think Juney set up...” he leaned close to her and whispered “ a fucking hit squad?”

“No, that’s crazy. I’m sure he didn’t. From what you’ve told me he’s not that kind of person. Plus the coding was super high level. We couldn’t figure out anything about where it was made. But you said that the essay went home with all the students? What if one of them had a parent that

was a coding wizard that read the essay and decided to put it into motion? Fuck. I have to call Celeste. You may get your chance to meet her sooner than you thought.”

# Chapter 17

“My name is Captain Alpha Diallo of the Golden Dawn Resistance. Today, we take back our country from the despots, thieves and criminals that have raped our country for the last forty years. I, we, umm. SHIT!”

“Cut! Ha ha ha. Alpha, why can’t you just read the script like we wrote it? Take two.”

“Okay. Again.” Alpha jumped in place, squiggling his face and making noises like a motorboat to loosen up. He interlaced his fingers, turned them away from his chest and cracked them. A few neck swivels, then looked at the film crew and nodded and stared fiercely at the camera.

“My name is Captain Alpha Diallo of the Golden Dawn Resistance. Today, we take back our country from the despots, thieves and criminals that have raped our country for the last forty years. Too long have our children been cut down by the scythe of disease and poverty before they had a chance to grow and blossom. Too long have our resources been stolen from us by the multinationals, leaving us with crumbs. Too long have we fought among ourselves, tribe against tribe, at the urging of Big Mama and his cabal of dacoits. That ends today. Today is a Golden Dawn!”

A bounce number flashed on the screen and the camera kept rolling as it was loaded into the last of the winged drones.

“Is it still on? Remember it has to be one continuous shot.” Alpha fussed around as the boy soldiers organized the launch sequence.

“All cool, Captain.” Ngomo smiled. He was happy to have a place in this adventure, to be part of the Golden Dawn. Nine boys sat in a circle, their faces covered by FPV displays. On the makeshift command center few computers were set up to monitor and record the attack. Each of the drones was packed with a detonator, 250 grams of Semtex high explosive that had been studded with lead shot, and, of course a camera.

“When you’re ready, Ngomo. Take your men up.”

“YES SIR!” The boys had practiced the sequential launch. They needed to make sure that the flying bombs they were flying didn’t crash into one another, as that would spell disaster. The plan was for each boy to pilot his drone to a prearranged grid and circle until all the drones were airborne, then they would head to their targets in a line. The last plane, being flown by Ngomo, was fitted with three cameras and no explosive. He had complained to the captain that he wanted to be the one to kill Big Mama, but

the captain explained that his job was more important. The explosions would last for nanoseconds. The film of the attack would live on the internet forever.

They were 20 kilometres from the capital. The drones flew at 85 kilometres an hour. The revolution would be televised, and would be over in fifteen minutes. As the drones were launched, the men clambered into their Toyota Hilux trucks and headed out, other cells of Golden Dawn had their instructions to take over the state broadcaster, radio stations, and the internet.

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“Ten seconds to Youtube LiveStream. Everybody in their places.” Mobodo started the camera and checked the mixer. He moved in front of the camera.

“Welcome to Big Mama’s House. Hello! Hello! And here he is..... President Mamadou, AKA Big Mama!” The music from the sound system thumped and the Chiron drifted into the courtyard, smoke from the spinning tires spewing out, the roar of the quad-turbocharged 16 cylinder engine drowning out the blasting rhythms, and the noise of the five drones that were a three hundred meters overhead. The car stopped and the door swung open. Big Mama emerged, sunglasses and gold chains glinting in the sun,

and stood, smiling for the camera, his arms spread out waiting for the applause from his assembled entourage.

Halfway around the world, Nathan and Percy were preparing to livestream comment on someone else's livestream, something new for their three million subscribers.

“GDay ya big beautiful bastards, this is me face. We’re in Africa today and somebody just got a new toy. Well, here’s a right wanker. Just look at the gold bling around his neck, you could choke a bloody wallaby with that, or maybe he keeps it if he ever needs to help out a mate and tow a car. You don’t know. Maybe he’s a good samaritan. And what’s with the driving? Fuck me, yeah nah, that is a piss poor use of a driveway. He obviously knows that his sheila is away getting a mani pedi down at the spa or he’d never have parked that way. Not keeping between the lines, that’s for true. The music is a bit loud too, for my taste. I mean it’s all good fun to play your stereo, but you’ve got to be considerate of your fucking neighbours, yeah, if you don’t want them pissing in your garden late at night. All right. Oh fuck me. Let’s see what’s happening now. Yeah, look at the special effects, hoo hoo, he’s like a bloody god, there’s fireworks and explosions and... shit.”

“Oh shit.”



“Oh.”

“Shit. Fuck me.” The Australian vlogger hit the stop casting button, and rolled his chair back from his computer. “Did you see that Percy? Fuck, I think he just got blown to bits. Is the live feed still rolling?”

“Yeah, mate. It’s still rolling. There’s people running and screaming and his bloody car just took a direct hit. Nah, wait, somebody just knocked over the tripod so all we can see is the sky.” Percy came into the sound booth and they rewatched the assassination together, frame by frame. Nathan dialled his phone.

“Mabel! How’s me favourite sheila? Uh huh. Yeah good, good. Listen, I’ve got a bit of a scoop if you want some news besides dodgy kangaroo attacks on the show tonight. Yeah, well me and Percy were doing a livestream commentary of some wanker President in Africa that wanted to show off his new car. Didn’t get a chance though, because he was fucked by a drone! What? Nah, yeah, nah, not a military drone like fucking Mission Impossible, this looked like he was hit with a RC model airplane. You’ll have to put a ‘The following contains bloody disturbing images’ warning on it though. It’s pretty gruesome. Yeah? You want it? I’ll send you the link. Do ya think you can use my commentary of it? Bring some extra subs for the old channel? Ah, brilliant

Mabel. Cheers. I'll get Percy to send the link over straight away."

# Chapter 18

Allison steamed back into her office and slammed the door. What a clusterfuck. It was only 9:00 a.m. on Monday morning and she'd already been reamed a new asshole by the Director for African Affairs. She grabbed the phone and dialed.

“Peters! What the fuck is going on there? The President just got assassinated! No, stupid. Not our President, President Mamadou. It's all over the news. You're supposed to be on top of this kind of shit. Who did it? Golden who? Fucking tell me you didn't have anything to do with this. You what? How much? Yeah, I know that's within your spending limits. You didn't think... shut up.... you didn't think to send me a report on this? Busy? Doing what? Uh huh. What? Should you leave? Fuck no! We need eyes on the situation there. You can evac when the fuck I tell you you can.”

Allison slammed the phone down. She opened her laptop and found the videos of the assassination and the video from Captain Alpha.

Her phone rang.

“Hey honey, miss me?”

“Shit, Celeste, you saw?”

“Oh yeah. Dunlop is apoplectic. It wasn’t even anonymous, that Alpha guy just put it out there. There’s other videos on the dark web on a few other people getting shredded too, generals, and the head of a couple ministries. The internet is down over there, and the TV broadcast is on a loop. You noticed the bounce code?”

“Yeah, saw the code. Nice to know the freedom fighters don’t fight for free. How much was the take on that?”

“Not huge, just over a million. It’s an out-of-the-way country, but it’s a signal for other groups around the world. Alpha has scheduled a news conference for tomorrow. I’ll say one thing, these guys are media savvy.”

“This video is sponsored by SquareSpace...”

“Hahaha, lolz. Exactly. Who’s the ambassador over there?”

“Ambassador Gwen Larson, a racist politico appointee from Minnesota. Not super enthusiastic, not super bright, but her daddy donated heavily to Humphries’s campaign, so you know how it goes.”

“Yup. We... we didn’t have anything to do with this? Did we? Tell me we’re clean? I’ve got to report to Dunlop in twenty minutes.”

“Define ‘clean’?”

“Fuck, seriously?”

“So, the agent on the ground is Brian Peters, did you ever meet him? Turns out he bought some intel from this Captain Alpha guy about a month ago. Alpha said they wanted to buy drones to be able to communicate between the cells of Golden Dawn without being surveilled on-line. It wasn’t a big ask, and he had some room in his budget. We didn’t supply the explosive, though, that probably came from the Russians.”

“Amazing they did all this with off-the-shelf drones. What are you going to do with Larson?”

“Not sure. She’s my next call. Give me a call after you shine some sunlight on Dunlop’s day. I have a thought I want to share.”

“Okay, chat in an hour.”

Allison was not looking forward to her next call. She dealt with 30 embassies and consulates in sub Saharan Africa, and for the most part the ambassadors were seasoned veterans of the State Department that were committed to building alliances and providing accurate information for the US. Gwen wasn’t one of those. She stared at the phone for a few seconds, sighed, and dialed.

“Hello, this is the American Embassy?”

“This is Allison Boudreaux Olsen from the Agency. Is Ambassador Larson available?”

“Umm, well, not really...”

“With whom am I speaking?”

“This is Rosemary Gonzales, I’m the senior staff member here... Ms. Larson... has, um, stepped out?”

“Rosemary, I’m sure you’ve heard that Mamadou has been assassinated. It’s critical that I speak with the Ambassador about the situation.”

“I understand that, yes ma’am, I do, it’s just that...”

“Rosemary, before you make up some bullshit to protect your boss, remember who I am. And who I work for.”

“Yes, ma’am. Sorry. I was just... Ok, well. The truth of the matter is the Ambassador has recently become involved with General Chukwunye, the Minister of Defence. She left yesterday to spend the evening with him, and she hasn’t been back....”

“Involved?”

“Yes, ma’am, you know, INVOLVED.”

“I see.” Allison hit the mute button. “Fuuuuuck!” Trying to remain calm and professional she continued “I’ll call you back. Do not, under any circumstances leave the embassy. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, ma’am. Crystal.”

Allison gently put the phone down and put her elbows on her desk, and buried her face in her hands. Join the CIA, they said. See the world, they said. Watch the world burn in a clusterfuck, they said. None of this, not the assassination, not the peccadillos of the Ambassador, not the kill for hire darkweb, none of this was her fault. Her door opened. No knock, just swung open.

“What the FUCK do you want?” She swung around in her chair to be greeted by the brooding face of the Director of African Affairs.

“A word, please.”

So this is why everyone hates Mondays.

# Chapter 19

“Secretary-General Simon Stålenhag, Esteemed members of the United Nations, my name is Captain Alpha Diallo, leader of the Golden Dawn Resistance. For many years we have worked to oust the kleptocrat President Mamadou and his band of thieves from the halls of power of our great country, Bamatouga. Today we have taken the first step.

In the coming days we will begin the process of returning control of the country to our citizens, and would invite the Canadian and Norwegian electoral agencies to aid us in running a true and fair democratic election in two years.

In those two years we will repatriate the billions of dollars stolen from our country, and will take control of the oilfields. For too long, multinational companies have bribed their way into deals that have left Bamatouga as one of the poorest countries in Africa. We hope that we can correct the mistakes of the past forty years under the rule of President Mamadou and his father before him, and come to fair and balanced arrangements with our international partners.



Please be patient with our new country. We see many challenges ahead, and we will meet them. A revolution is a struggle to the death between the future and the past. We have buried the past. The future awaits.”

The transmission was met with polite applause from the English speaking members of the Assembly, and a few seconds later, when Jing Bae and the rest of the interpreter corps had rendered the speech into the six official languages of the United Nations, the rest of the Assembly. When Jing Bae had finished he quickly began searching the web for any news of the assassination in Bamatouga. There were hundreds of videos - the original ones, including a high angle view from a surveillance drone, and then news reports from Al Jazeera, RT, China Daily, and All Africa, then punditry from vloggers all over the world. Some focused on the political ramifications, but most were enthralled with the violence and carnage. Some more searching found the call to arms by Alpha Diallo, complete with the bounce number. Google polluted his feed with ads for radio controlled drones.

“Oh Juney. I hope this isn’t your fault.”

# Chapter 20

“Carter, what did I just see on Fox News?” There were few people with direct access to the President, but Charles Devereaux was one of them. As chairman of the Super PAC that bulldozed President Humphries into office, he knew that Humphries would take his call. It didn’t hurt that his daughter was the gatekeeper to the President.

“Clunker, buddy. How are things? Are you still in Puerto Rico?”

“Don’t fucking small talk me, Carter. We’ve got a situation here.”

“What are you talking about? Puerto Rico is working for you. Preferential tax zones, cheap labour.”

“I’m talking about Bamatouga.”

“Where?” Charles gripped the telephone tighter, and banged it against his forehead. He constantly questioned the choice his group had made in supporting Humphries.

“Bamatouga. In fucking Africa, you goddamn moron.”

“You watch it Clunker. I AM the President.”

“Bought and paid for by me and the boys. Now you listen up. We’ve got a bunch of oil assets that are being taken over by some upstart Captain over there. You need to

do something about it. Start a coup, take him out. We've got billions invested over there and I don't want to see a bunch of freedom fighters spoil the deals we've worked on for decades. Already the spot price of oil is up five dollars a barrel over the uncertainty."

"Ok, ok, simmer down. I've got a briefing in twenty minutes about something going on over there. Let me get some facts, and I'll see what I can do."

"You are replaceable, just remember that." Clunker growled and slammed down the phone.

President Humphries hung up the phone and leaned back in his chair. So are you, you pompous fuck, so are you.

# Chapter 21

The Chevy Suburban had been modified for the Director's use. A plexiglass panel sealed off the driver from the rest of the vehicle, and the middle row of seats had been removed. The rear area had been modified with the second row reversed so that the two rows of seats faced one another. He often used it for off-site meetings and as a mobile command center. Allison sat facing the Director.

“Have you met Humphries before?”

“No sir. I've only met the Vice President.”

“Ok, well, between you and I, he's a moron. Not as bad as some of the ones in the past, but certainly not competent. Spends most of his time raising money for his next run, and travelling around warm countries on 'business', mostly playing golf with other world leaders, and stepping in front of cameras. He's also a solipsistic, venal, racist philanderer with a history of sleeping with the wrong sorts of people, i.e., not his wife.”

“The media portrays him sooo differently.”

“Yeah, I guess none of that information is new. God I miss President Calloway. He was a nefarious bastard, but at least we didn't have to spend time cleaning up after his

hookers.” The Director looked out the window, crossed his legs and paused. “Look, I’m bringing you because you’ve got a direct handle on two aspects of this affair - the Africa side, and the whole kill list thing. Have you spoken with the Ambassador there?”

“I had just hung up the phone when you requested that I join you for this briefing. I spoke only to her assistant, Rosemary Gonzales, and she said Larson had started a secret sexual relationship with the General that heads up the army there, and didn’t come home last night. We have one man on the ground over there, but he wasn’t aware of the developments when I spoke to him this morning. There is a garrison of Marines over there, but they haven’t been tagged with evac protocols yet.”

“Was the General one of the other people targeted in the attack?”

“We think so, but this Captain Alpha has done an excellent job of controlling the communication in and out of the country. If he’s successful, and if he can marshal the other factions, his entire coup will have killed less than 20 people. We have satellites pulling back images, but there is no way yet to confirm whether the General had been killed as well.”

“We’re here, sir.” The Director pushed the intercom button.

“Take a lap, Davies, I need a few more minutes.”

“Yes, sir.” The driver turned off ‘E’ Street onto 17th Avenue and headed south. Davies had worked out a route that added exactly five extra minutes, usually the amount of time the Director needed.

“Ok, so we’ll run through the situation with the President. What I normally do after giving him a truncated version of the facts, is suggest three things, not four, as that confuses him, and not two, because he thinks it’s an ultimatum, just three. Two of the options are wildly inappropriate, and one is doable. The goal here is to get him up to speed, but not to give him too much to chew on. He’ll probably ask you a couple questions to give the illusion that he gives a flying fig. Answer them. If the veep is there, he’ll want to be a part of the conversation as well.” Both Allison’s and the Director’s phone buzzed simultaneously.

“Shit. Suriname. President Miserre was just assassinated with a car bomb.”

“This day just keeps getting better. Find out if it’s connected to the kill list, oh, and find out how much. While you’re there, see what the price on the Humphries is. And

Chernyshevsky. He's weirdly competitive." Allison pulled out her laptop.

"There's no video yet, just the news reports. I checked Worldchangers and Miserre was on the list, looks like for two million."

"What about Humphries?"

"He's up to fourteen million, sir. Chernyshevsky is at sixteen million. Patel is at twenty million."

"This is going to be an interesting meeting. Okay Davies, take us in."

# Chapter 22

Juney pulled his bike into a drift skid, stopping just in front of Daniel and Emily.

“You almost hit us!”

“Nice drift, bro. New bike?”

“Yeah, I’ve been saving up my red envelope money. I found this on Craigslist. I’m going to paint it, though, not crazy about the colour.” Juney dismounted and they walked as a group up the sidewalk towards his house. A delivery van pulled out, just as his father came home.

“Pretty lucky, Dad.”

“You mean because I’ve got you as a son? Sure, most days I think that, but some days you’re a hot mess and I sincerely regret not leaving you on the church steps where we found you. Hey Daniel, Emily.”

“Geez Dad, I meant the parking spot.”

“Haha, I know. Have you been home yet?”

“Nope, we’re just getting back from Hamber. I’m going to drop off the bike, and then shoot some hoops.”

“Okay. Dinner at 6:00 p.m. Kung pao chicken. Don’t be late.”



# Chapter 23

“Marcia, I believe President Humphries is expecting us?”

“Yes, Director. Please have a seat and I’ll let him know you’re here. He’s just on the phone.” The Director and Allison sat in the stylish but uncomfortable chairs that sat in the waiting area. The first lady, like those before her, had tried her hand at decorating the Whitehouse. Her first instinct was to paint the exterior some other colour. “Too bland!” she said. Some things are better left to the professionals.

“He’s off the phone. He’ll see you now, Sir.” Marcia led the Director and Allison into the Oval office, but the President wasn’t there. A secret service agent pointed out the doors to the West Colonnade. They walked out the door to find the President with his back to them, peeing in a rose bush. He finished, and turned around fumbling with his zipper and muttering under his breath.

“Ah, Director. Didn’t think I was going to make it down the hall. It was a long phone call.” The Director, used to his boorish behaviour, didn’t miss a beat and started in on the briefing.

“Did you want to do it out here, sir, or in your office?”

“Nah, it’s a nice day. I’ll hit a few balls and you can fill me in. What’s your secretary’s name?”

“This is Special Agent Allison Olsen, she’s lead on the affairs in sub Saharan Africa.” you moron, the Director thought to himself. The president teed up a ball and took out a nine iron.

“Well? Go ahead. I’m due for a game in 15 minutes at Potomac Falls. The chopper is spinning up as we speak. You’ve got five minutes.”

“Mr. President, this may take more than five minutes...”

“No, it won’t. And you just wasted fifteen seconds. Pitter patter.” Allison looked at the Director, then back at the President.

“Yes sir. Bamatouga is a small oil rich country on the West African coast. Until yesterday it was run as a kleptocracy by a sometime ally of ours, President Mamadou. He was killed in an improvised drone strike by a freedom fighter, rebel, terrorist, depending on who you talk to. Captain Alpha Diallo has taken over and intends to nationalize the oilfields.”

“So some uppity nigger thinks he can just waltz in, take stuff that isn’t his, and stir shit up?” Allison had been warned that the President was prone to racist slurs but it still shocked that the head of her country was so

derogatory about Africans and flippant about an emerging problem. The fact that he had the nuclear football gave her pause as well.

“There’s more sir. We have recently become aware of a dark web crypto crowdfunded hitlist for most of the world’s leaders and several upper level functionaries. There was a price on Mamadou’s head. We’ve just learned on the way here that the President of Suriname, President Miserre has just been assassinated. Last week, President Verimuhamedov of Uragastan was shot and killed as well. We know that one was a result of the hitlist.”

“Huh, three in a week. Am I on that list?”

“Unfortunately, yes, sir.” Humphries had been in office for three years, but had been involved in several international adventures, none of which had turned out the way he hoped, and all of which could be argued were war crimes.

“Am I on the top of the list?” Allison thought that the President was clearly misunderstanding the seriousness of the situation.

“No sir. That would be Prime Minister Patel in India.”

“Huh. Oh well. ‘We’re number two, we try harder!’” he chuckled, recalling an old rental car ad.

“Actually sir, President Chernyshevsky is number two.”

“Seriously?” The President took a last swing, and dropped the iron back into the bag. “Look, seems simple to me. Just shut down the dark web, and the problem goes away. Let me know how that goes. We can talk about Wakanda in a couple days. Gotta run.”

Allison and the Director watched the President of the United Space do a shuffle step, hike up his pants, spit into the roses, and walk off towards Marine One trailed by two secret service agents.

“Did he just...?”

“Yes. Yes he did.” The Director examined the shine on his shoes, then looked up as the helicopter lifted off, shielding his eyes from the sun. The President looked out the round window and waved back. “What a fucking moron. Oh, and see to that shutting down the internet thing, would you?”

“I’ll get my alternate reality time machine up and running.”

“Excuse me? Agent, The President made a direct order.” the Director’s voice hardened.

“I’m, I’m sorry sir, I thought...” Allison stammered.

“Just messing with you, Agent.” They walked out of the oval office past Marcia. “The man’s a great mind. Clearly ahead of his time. A real inspiration to us all.” The Director

was using his stage voice, so that the people in the hallway would be sure to comment back to the President. Davies was standing outside the vehicle chatting with a couple of the secret service agents. “Wheels up, Davies.”

# Chapter 24

President Chernyshevsky sat at his desk and watched as General Pluskinov and Alexey Manoff were escorted into the working office in the presidential wing of the old senate building. The room was twice as large as the Oval office in the Whitehouse, and had been decorated once, when the building was constructed in the 1700's. No President's wife had thought it her job to 'brighten things up.' Dark wood panelling lined the walls, and the vaulted ceiling glowed from the light of the chandelier, a gift from the Prussians, from when there was still a Prussia. Plushkinov walked stiffly, Manoff sauntered a half step behind, pirouetting and taking in the space.

“General? What was so important, and why have you brought this street urchin into my office.?”

“Sir, this is Alexey Manoff, uh, Captain Alexey Manoff, of the Main Intelligence Directorate Special Operatives Division... he has uncovered a plot against you and most of the other world leaders.”

“This is a soldier?” Chernyshevsky tilted his head back and sneered. “He looks homeless.”

“The division has looser dressing guidelines because of the nature of their work. It’s, um, mostly computing science doctorates, and hackers. They’re the ones that got all of Hilary’s emails, and stole several of the surveillance tools right out from under the nose of the National Security Agency. They’re also responsible for getting Humphries elected.”

“Ha, ha. Humphries. Whenever I want a laugh I watch videos of him trying to explain nuclear energy to that Grade 6 class. What a glupec. Okay. Tell me about these people that want to kill me. I will eat their hearts while they watch.”

“Manoff. Go ahead.” Manoff was staring at the ceiling.

“Huh? Okay. Ya, ya. It’s not a ‘somebody’. It’s an ‘anybody’. The dark web site has a list of all the world leaders, and anyone with a crypto account can contribute to the bounty. When it gets high enough, somebody, a professional, or an idealist, or a nobody gets a gun and tries to take out a president or whomever. It also lists all of the war crimes and violations of human rights attributed to each leader. The president of Urgastan was assassinated for just over 151 million rubles. President Mamadou in Bamatouga was about half that, and it precipitated a coup.

Urgastan looks like it was just for money. No one has claimed responsibility.”

“I take it we’ve tried to disable the website? I’m also guessing that we don’t know who, or why it was set up. I’m just wondering if we could use it to our advantage...Who has the highest bounty on their heads?”

“As of this morning sir, it was Patel in India, then yourself, then Humphries.”

“What about Kovalenko in Ukraine? He pisses me off all the time. I’d love to see him ‘retired’ and replaced with somebody we like better.”

“He’s quite far down the list, about twentieth place, sir. I’m not sure of the exact amount.”

“Ladnya. Let’s boost him up a bit. I’ll authorize 50 million rubles. Just make sure it comes from accounts outside Russia. By the way, what was the amount for killing me?”

“Over a billion rubles, sir.” Chernyshevsky furrowed his brow.

“Hmmm. That’s a lot of motivation, isn’t it?”



# Chapter 25

President Humphries stood at the 12th tee chatting with two senators and a congressman. He liked these informal meetings, he found them more productive than sitting in an office. The first few holes were always a bit stiff, but by the time they got onto the back nine, after a beer and quiet stroll along the manicured fairways, people tended to relax. He'd pushed a couple bills through the partisan lines by just swaying the right people. A congressman headed for retirement, or a senator that needed an appropriation bill to swing in his favour. Every single sitting representative was driven, not by the needs of his constituents, but by their need to get re-elected. Humphries was no different.

“Bob, I think you're up.”

“Thanks, Mr. President.”

“For fucks sake, Bob, when we're out on the course just call me Carter.”

“Hard to get used to, sir.”

“Well, these two saggy assholes seem to have gotten the hang of it.” The president looked back and had a laugh with the two senators that were off to the side of the tee. “Now, you haven't played this course before. Twelve is tricky,

you've got water to the right, and sand to the left. If you're not Tiger Woods, best to just get over the water and then use a five iron to the green. Oh, yeah, the water extends behind the green, so it's pretty easy to lose a ball or two."

"Gotcha, Carter."

"That's my boy." The president clapped him on the shoulder and wandered over to stand with the two senators. "Watch him drop his first ball in the drink." The congressman lined up and dropped his shot just on the near bank of the fairway above the hazard. The ball rolled back into the water. The senators laughed and made some sarcastic remarks. "Well, you've got the range now. Don't be shy. Drop another ball and push it a bit." He turned back to the senators. "Speaking of pushing, we need to push a couple things through the senate and as I see it, you both could use a little help with some of your pet projects."

"You're up, chief."

"Okay, yeah. Just a sec." Carter called over his shoulder, then pinned his gaze back to the senators. "We all know how this works. You gotta get along to get ahead." he bowed his head and pointed his finger at the two. "Looks like a gentle three wood." The president lined up, and shanked the ball into the rough under some sycamores. "Goddammit. I was sure that was going to be a good one."

Oh well. Alejandro, let's go on a hunt. You boys carry on, I'll meet you on the green."

The president and his caddy marched off through the taller grass to the copse of trees on the right side of the fairway. There was no need to rush, when the president played, no one else was allowed on the course.

"Al, do you have your phone on you?"

"Si, Mr. President."

"Good, good. Pass me the phone. Don't let those other folks see it, I don't want them thinking I'm out here doing work, breaking my own 'no phone rule' on the course." Alejandro passed him the phone, and wandered off to look for the lost ball. The president dialed, a twenty second call, then pulled the sim and broke the phone in two. The president dropped a new ball. "FOUND IT!"

# Chapter 26

“The death at the hands of the New Orleans police of an unarmed black man, Johnson Boudreaux, has sparked days of violent protests and looting in the Lower Ninth Ward. Boudreaux was shot eleven times outside a convenience store where he had been working. The police had been responding to a holdup at a store three blocks away, but had arrived at the Pressburg Street location in error. The police commissioner had promised quick and decisive action, but noted that Boudreaux was known to police. The following exchange is from a news conference held earlier today.”

“Our condolences go out to the friends and family of Mr. Boudreaux. Clearly this was a horrible mistake made by our officers responding to a call of a hold up at another shop three blocks away from the store where Mr. Boudreaux worked stocking shelves. While it is our aim to serve and protect everyone in the great city of New Orleans, sometimes mistakes happen.” Commissioner Dale Broussard was happy speaking with the press, but on days like today, he wished he could pawn this off on his communications director. Every time one of these things

boiled over, he felt his chances of one day becoming the mayor of New Orleans slip a little farther out of his grasp.

“Commissioner? Mary Thibodeaux, The Times-Picayune. This is the fourth shooting of an unarmed innocent black man in New Orleans, in your city, by your police, in the last year. It seems like the only crime any of these people have committed was walking down the street in a city where white police officers can shoot black people and get away with it. Have you arrested the two police officers that shot Boudreaux?”

“As per our internal policies, the two officers have been placed on paid leave until the review board has a chance to evaluate the circumstances of the alleged shooting.”

“A man is dead. That’s not alleged. That is a fact. The police were at the wrong address. That is not alleged. That is a fact. The city is consuming itself in a fire tornado of rioting and violence. That is a fact. Giving your two murderers a ‘time-out’ is clearly a mishandling of the situation. In fact, that has been your response to the other murders of black men in our city since you became police commissioner.”

Jing Bae muted the broadcast and turned to Allison.

“I know it’s a pretty common name in the delta, but was he a relative of yours?”

“Yeah, he was a shirt-tail cousin. His grandfather and mine were cousins, so you do the math.”

“That’s got to be upsetting... having a family member shot by the police. I’m really sorry.”

“Well, the whole story is a little more complicated. Johnson got into some pretty scary stuff about five years ago. Word on the street was he had killed a cop. I’m not sure if was him building his own rep, or if it really happened, but it followed him around. When I talked to Mom last, she said that he had cleaned up his act some and was working in a shop. I don’t know what turned him around. Maybe he found god, or a girl. We weren’t close, I think I met him once or twice at a family barbecue. I don’t think anyone in the family saw him dying of old age.”

“Oh, okay. You seem a little ... I don’t know, blasé about it?”

Allison had no illusions about the world. It was a shitty place. When she joined the Agency, she believed in what the United States did, and was proud to be a part of it, even if some of the things the Agency did weren’t strictly legal. They were fighting the enemies of the United States, and that made what they were doing right. Reading the hit list, somehow it shifted everything, and made her realize that every country had their own version of the truth, and that

made all truth subject to scrutiny. Reading the list with Celeste had opened her eyes to the fact that most of the leaders in the world were horrible people, and she began to question why she was working for the CIA, propping up one of the biggest assholes on the planet. It also made her realize that having Jing Bae in her life was something she wanted, something more than the occasional booty call. She had given up the love nest. For the first time they were sitting together on her couch, in her apartment, drinking wine, watching TV, and planning a trip together.

“Like I said. I didn’t know him. Am I pissed that I live in a country where innocent unarmed black people are shot by police? Absolutely. I worry about my brother all the time. I keep on telling him to get out of New Orleans, but he tells me it’s the same everywhere. White cops killing black people. And then I get to meet the President, and he turns out to be as stupid and racist as the press portrays him I think that the whole thing needs to be torn down. Down to the fucking ground.” Jing Bae put his arm around her and they sat in silence. The late afternoon sun glinted gold off the building across the street, and her apartment filled with a soft yellow light. Another assassination reported in the scrolling chyron at the bottom of the TV screen. Bolivia this time. Allison took the remote and turned off the TV.

“So. Vacation. How much time can you take?”

**“I covered for one of the other translators last year, so I’ve got six weeks built up. You?”**

“Not that long. I’m sure I can get away for a couple easily, but if you wanted to go to sub Saharan Africa, I could tell the office that I was touring the outposts and we could do six weeks or longer.”

“Sure, that would be great. Which countries are currently not in revolution, civil war, or having bombings in the markets?”

“Well, if I thought you were going to be picky about that kind of stuff...”

“The only explosions I want to hear are fireworks and champagne corks. We could always go to Vancouver, and visit my family.” Jing Bae pitched high and inside. Allison backed off the plate.

“I think I’d be more comfortable with the bombs in the suq...”

“I just thought I’d throw it out there. You could see what it’s like to visit a city where they actually report on each



murder that happens in the city. I think last year there were 14.”

“You mean, like in a week?”

“Year. There’s also Whistler. Big mountains, excellent hotels, and hiking. Or, we could drive up to Halifax, then drop in and see Anne of Green Gables, eat some potatoes, end up in Quebec city, eat some poutine, then drive back?”

“Or, we could drive down to Nawlins, and eat some crawdads, hang out in the French Quarter, eat some beignets, catch some jazz, eat some étouffée, find some voodoo, eat some jambalaya...”

“Explain to me how you’re not 500 pounds?”

“And you could meet my folks....” Balls in your court, she thought.

“That...” Jing Bae paused to think about it for a second, “that would actually be great. I’d love to meet your family. And I’ve never been to New Orleans.” Allison watched the calculations go on in his head, something was brewing, she could feel it. “I’ve wanted to see their NOMA sculpture garden for years. I’ve read all the Anne Rice books. And the Cabildo. That place is supposed to be spectacular! I can take a cooking class. Ok. Yeah. Let’s do it.”

“Seriously?”

“All in. Book it, Dano.”

“Hey, we’re supposed to meet Celeste at Jack and Fanny’s in an hour.”

“Shit. Right. Okay, I’ll nip home for a shower and meet you there.”

“You could shower here.... I need a shower too, we could save some water...”

“Well, water conservation is important.”

“We can’t be late though. That’d be rude.” Allison smiled and took Jing Bae by the hand and led him to the bathroom.

They were late.

# Chapter 27

Marcia was at the cabin when she got the call. She and her mom talked most days, so when she answered the call, she thought it would just be her mom complaining about the cleaning staff, or gossiping about the girls in her bridge club. She didn't expect to have her mom sobbing on the other end of the line.

“Geez, Mom. What’s wrong?”

“It’s your father. He’s been killed in Puerto Rico. They say it was a carjacking gone wrong.”

“What? That’s crazy. Are you sure? How...?”

“We got a call from the Embassy in San Juan. They confirmed it was him. He and his driver were both shot. They... they don’t expect that they’ll catch who did it. No surveillance, no cameras, no witnesses.”

“Oh my god.” Marcia sat down on the floor with her back against the wall and started to cry. Her mother was on the other end talking but not making any sense. After a few minutes there was no sound from either of them. They sat together, not saying anything. Marcia dried her eyes and blew her nose. Breathe. Marcia went into planning mode.

“Mom, listen. You’ve got to talk to McSweeney’s about funeral arrangements. I’m going to book a flight to Puerto Rico and make arrangements to bring Dad back to the States. I’ll call you when I get there, just hang on a sec, let me check when the flights are. Ok. I can fly out of here first thing tomorrow. I’ll make some phone calls to the Embassy and to the office to let them know I’m taking some time. We’ll get through this. I promise.”

“You’re so strong. Just like your father. He was so proud of you. Call me as soon as you land.”

Marcia sat on the floor in the kitchen of the cabin. This had been her and her fathers’ place. Mother didn’t like coming up to the woods, didn’t like the guns, didn’t like being away from the city. She looked up to stop the tears.

“Fuck.” It didn’t seem real. It didn’t seem like this was supposed to happen. The cabin closed in around her, holding her with all the memories of her and her father. The time spent. The mornings over coffee. Him teaching her to shoot. She sat, hugging her knees, her head resting.

Marcia spent the next hour making arrangements for the flights, booked time off work, talked to the embassy, ordered a taxi for the next day. Now what? She had hours and hours before the morning. Hours alone with her thoughts. She went to the gun safe, spun the dial and took

out her Ruger LCP and a box of .380 shells. The gun was small, barely bigger than her hand. Her father had joked that the LCP didn't stand for Light Compact Pistol, but rather for Labour Compliance Program. 'I've got the gun, so you'll damn well dig that ditch!' He had a macabre sense of humour. She shot targets until her hand hurt and darkness fell. When the gun cooled, she sat at the kitchen table, disassembled it, and cleaned each piece. She practiced putting it together with her eyes closed. When her father had given it to her as a stocking gift, much to the chagrin of Mother, it was just a box of parts. 'If you can put it together, it's yours.' He'd thrown in six extra parts just to make it challenging. She had it figured out by Christmas lunch. 'That's my girl.'

Standing in line at the airport the next morning Marcia made a hotel reservation in San Juan, and organized a car to pick her up at the airport. She was on her phone as she got up to the security arch.

"Look, I'm going through security. I'll have to call you in a bit." She tossed the phone in the plastic tub and walked through, setting off the alarm.

"Step over here ma'am". The TSA agent passed the wand over her body, and it lit up when he got to her right leg.

“It’s a metal plate. Skiing accident.” Every airport, every time. “Look, I’ll show you the scar.” She reached down and the agent unholstered his gun and jumped back, dropping the wand.

“PUT YOUR HANDS UP.” God, she hated the amateurs. There was always one guy on the crew that couldn’t figure out that a 5 foot 3 inch white woman wasn’t a likely hijacker or assassin. She turned to the agent.

“If I put my hands up, I can’t show you the scar on my leg from the skiing accident. First week on the job. I get it. You’re hyped up. Thinking that what you’re doing is important, and not some piece of ‘safety theatre’. But here’s the thing. You’ve pulled your service pistol, and now you’ll have to spend eight hours explaining to your supervisor why you pulled a gun on the personal secretary to the President of the United States. There will be forms to fill in, and I’m guessing you’ll be spending your next hundred shifts or so in the baggage area looking for smuggled baby lemurs.” Another agent hustled over.

“Geez, Bruce. Put the gun away. Sorry ma’am, Bruce is new. Would you mind stepping over here? Now, you’re saying you’ve got a plate in your shin? That must have been some accident.” Marcia lifted her pant leg to reveal a 8 inch scar. The second agent ran the wand over it, and it lit up.

“Yup. Must’ve hurt. Have a good flight.” Marcia dropped her pant leg, glared at Bruce, scooped up her belongings and walked to her gate.

This wasn’t a holiday. She knew that, but this was the first time in three years that she’d had any time off. The first flight in years where she’d been on her own, not crammed in the back of Air Force One with the other administration and support staff for the President. The three hour flight was the perfect amount of time. Not long enough to get bored, but long enough so that you knew you were someplace else. The aircraft made a wide arc to come in leeward on the island runways, affording a view of the city and the beaches. She hadn’t flown into Luis Muñoz Marín International Airport since the renovations had been completed. They’d done an okay job. Flying with her father had always been an adventure, but she’d become a bit of snob regarding airport design. A uniformed driver stood waiting at the gate, her name misspelled on a cardboard shoe box lid.

“Miss Devereaux, I am your driver, Miguel. May I take your bag?”

“No, it’s fine Miguel. Let’s get going.” Miguel bowed quickly and led the way to the waiting car, a black Ford Explorer. Probably has some parts that Daddy made, she

mused. “First stop the Condado Vanderbilt. You can pick me up there at 10:00a.m. tomorrow. I’m going to make a few phone calls. I’ll have addresses for the next stops for tomorrow. I’ll send them to your phone later tonight.”

“Very good, Miss Devereaux.”

She had chosen a view suite in the tower. She’d stayed in the pool side suites in the past, but found them too noisy. She dropped her bag on the bed, and stripped off her travelling clothes. Washing her face, she paused to look in the mirror, something she didn’t do often. What was she going to do? And why? With her father murdered, it was difficult to find the cardinal points to the north. Everything was broken. Enough, she told herself. There are things to do. Tomorrow. She dressed in indigo blue baggy linen trousers, a white linen men’s shirt and tied her hair back in a severe ponytail. A large pair of Balenciaga Swift sunglasses in black. She headed to the bar.



# Chapter 28

“Celeste!”

“Sweetie!” The two women hugged. Again, just a second too long.

“Celeste, this is Jing Bae.”

“Ah ha. So schön dich zu treffen. Ich glaube, Sie waren spät dran, weil Sie den Zug im Tunnel gefahren sind.<sup>2</sup>”

“You’re German is excellent. Wir sind nicht mit der U-Bahn gefahren, wir sind gelaufen. Ah, warte, ich verstehe es jetzt. Ja. Es ist eher so, als würde man sie von hinten vor den Spiegel nehmen und dann schnell duschen.<sup>3</sup>” Celeste high-fived Jing Bae and laughed.

“Wait, you’ve already got a secret code language. No fair.”

“Come on, I’ve got us a booth at the back. I’ve booked us a slot at the indoor bocce pit in an hour. I am stoked! Did Ally tell you about the \$400 bucks we took off those guys at

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<sup>2</sup> So nice to meet you. I think you were late because you were driving the train in the tunnel.

<sup>3</sup> We didn't take the subway, we walked. Ah, wait I get it now. Yes. More like taking her from behind in front of the mirror and then having a quick shower.

the ping pong bar? Fuck, that was brilliant. I'm thinking we can do a repeat on bocce.”

The bar wasn't busy yet, so the booths next to them were empty. Celeste leaned in.

“Ok, so we took a tour around Spencer Senior and Junior's computer. Zero evidence of any skullduggery. We have the class list, and have gone through people's files, but it looks like it might be a dead end. We'll spread out to the admin staff at the school and check there. There were overlaps on the language that was used in Junior's essay and on the website, but most of that was a straight pull from wikipedia, so not a smoking gun. We're not making any progress on the site, but so far it's still a dark web thing. If it ever gets reported on the general news, then you'll see this turn into the largest dog turd in the world. Most leaders aren't beloved by their subjects, and even the ones that are held in respect are still subject to some hate by the fringe groups. Look at Merkel - brilliant leader, has handled refugees, the financial crash, pushed a green agenda, but she has a couple million in bounty right now. There's getting to be more chatter on some of the boards, and the price of Moebius is going up because of all the attention, which of course, boosts the bounty without anyone even putting any more money in. So far it's been

Bolivia, Urganistan, Bamatouga, and Suriname. That's in a week."

"I'm glad Juney is off the hook. I'd hate to think that my nephew had caused the end of the world."

"Actually, we just ran out of The End of the World, but if you're looking for a dark beer we do have Shadowy Figures, and Guinness." The waitress had magically appeared to take their order. They ordered drinks, some plates to share and flatbreads with toppings. With business out of the way, the talk turned to the trip to New Orleans.

"Really? I love that town. When I was young my dad played in a jazz band at Fritzels, sometimes at the Spotted Cat. My folks were split up, so I lived with my mom during school, then would bus down to spend the summer with my dad. He was playing so much that I basically had the summer off to hangout with friends and get into... mischief? Sure, that's a good word."

"I grew up there. I've been all over the world, and never thought about any other place being home. I'm looking forward to eating real food again. Jing Bae just wants to go to the museums. He was listing off a bunch before we came over, and honestly, I'd never been to any of them."

"Well aren't you Mister Culture Vulture? Look at you..."

“When one lives abroad, as one does, one’s palate develops a taste for cultural amusements. In fact, it wouldn’t be an exaggeration to state categorically, that I, without a doubt, a man of refinement.” Jing Bae was putting on his best English posh accent. “I’m an alien. I’m a legal alien. I’m a Canadian, in New York.”

“Oh-oh, I’m an alien, I’m a legal alien  
I’m an Ca..na..dian in New York  
Oh-oh, I’m an alien, I’m a legal alien  
I’m an Ca..na..dian in New York”

Celeste and Allison looked at each other in shock, but without missing a beat joined in for one more chorus. The waitress appeared with the drinks.

“Umm, if you’re looking for the show tunes bar, it’s a couple blocks over,” her voice going up at the end of the sentence. If she knew how fragile her very existence was she’d have joined in, thought Allison.

# Chapter 29

“I’m sorry for your loss Miss Devereaux, if you’ll follow me you can officially identify the body then I can release it. I understand that you’ve made arrangements to have your father sent back to the United States for burial?” The mortician was a heavy set woman in her late fifties. She wore scrubs and bright pink crocs, and had her hair pulled up in an extravagant African patterned head wrap. She spoke slowly and moved with ease, spinning to push open the doors of the morgue to keep her hands clean, and held it with her foot for Marcia to walk through. The doctor snapped on some gloves and ran her finger down the docket for the locker number for Mr. Devereaux. She had done this a thousand times in her twenty-three years. Too many. Pulling out the sled, she looked at Marcia.”You ready, honey?”

Marcia nodded. No, she wasn’t fucking ready. She was expecting to be doing this in about thirty years. The doctor pulled the sheet back. It was her father. There was no mistake. Two bullet holes in center mass. A small consolation, she thought, at least it was quick. And professional.

“It’s him. I knew some of Dad’s employee’s. Can I see the driver as well?”

“Well, that’s not standard, miss, but suppose it couldn’t hurt anything.” The doctor checked the docket again and pulled out another tray. Same thing. Two shots. Center mass.

“This is going to seem like a weird question, but can you tell from your examination if they were shot with the hands raised up?”

“Are you a policewoman, honey?”

“No, I spent a semester thinking I wanted to be a forensic examiner, before I switched to business. I think there were too many CSI shows...”

“Honey, you wouldn’t believe how those education programs filled up when those shows came out. And all the girls are so pretty! People realized that it wasn’t anywhere near as glamorous as those girls made it look. But to answer your question, they didn’t have their hands up. And the bullets came from two separate guns, so there were two people that jumped them.”

“After we sign the papers, I’d like to contact the OIC of the case. If you have that information?”

“Oh, yeah. It’s on the admit form in the office. Did you want some more time here, honey?”

“No, no I’m good, thank you. That’s not my dad, it’s just his body.”

They walked back to the too small office in silence. The doctor turned sideways to skirt between her desk and the wall, and motioned to Marcia to sit in the chair opposite. When they finished the paperwork, and the doctor had retrieved the name and phone number of the detective on the case, she got up and the two women shook hands.

“Oh my, I almost forgot. Let me get you the box of his effects. It’s in the store room. I won’t be a sec.” Marcia followed her out of the office, and stood in the hallway. The doctor returned with a bankers box, and passed it to Marcia. “I’m truly sorry for your loss, Miss.” Marcia walked into the parking lot.

“Where to, Miss?”

“I’m hungry. I’d love a bowl of pollo guisado and rice.”

“My cousin runs the best restaurant on the island! I’ll take you there.”

“I was counting on that.” Marcia smiled and settled back in her seat. Every driver she had ever hired always had a cousin with a restaurant. She made a few more phone calls to sort out final details for shipping the body home. It was no longer her father. Just a body she needed to take care of. One last call to Detective Jesus Sanchez.

“Detective Sanchez, my name is Marcia Devereaux. You were the officer in charge of my father’s murder investigation?”

“Si, yes.”

“I have some questions, if you have some time. I’m just going for lunch, but I’ll be available to meet afterwards.”

“Sorry, my afternoon is already booked up. I could meet you for lunch though, if that’s okay?”

“Um, sure. Just hang on a second. Miguel, where are we going for lunch? Santaella? On Calle Canals? Ok, do you know it?”

“Know it? It’s my cousin’s place!”

Marcia made a call home to her mother to update her on the arrangement for transferring the body to the funeral home and to let her know when she would be flying in. She hung up as they pulled into the parking lot for the restaurant. The detective was leaning on his car, smoking.

“Jesus?”

“Yes, ma’am, Hey, bro, good to see you.” The two cousins did a quick shoulder bump. “How’s Carlita doing? She must be due any day now?”

“Do you want to talk out here, or should we get lunch?”

“Oh, yes, sorry Miss Devereaux, and sorry for your loss. P.R. can be a dangerous place.”



“Did you want to join us, Miguel?”

“Um, I’m just your driver, ma’am.”

“Yes, and I don’t want to fainting from hunger when you’re driving me. Come on.”

Jesus had phoned ahead and explained the situation to his uncle, so they were seated in a private area of the deck, away from the other customers.

“I’m sorry for your loss, ma’am. Jesus told me before you came. Here are some complimentary appetizers to get you started, and Maria will be along in a few minutes to take your order.”

“Thanks, uncle.”

“Yes, thank you, sir.” Marcia turned to face Jesus. She wanted to see if he was the type to lie, if he was mixed up in this in any way. She wasn’t buying the random carjacking story. “So, Detective. Where have you gotten on the case? Start at the beginning.”

“There’s not much to tell, ma’am. A local found the bodies on the side of the road and called it in. We found the vehicle the next day burnt out on a backroad across the island.”

“And you thought this was a botched carjacking?”

“Yes, yes. It happens all the time here, unfortunately. People are poor, and sometimes they see rich people and decide to take what they can.”

“What normally happens to the cars that they hijack?”

“Sometimes they strip them for parts, sometimes they put them in containers and sell them to the Middle East or Africa.”

“How much would they get for a burnt out wreck?”

“Well, nothing of course.”

“So, it wasn’t a carjacking. It was just a murder.”

“I... I don’t have any reason to think it was anything but a carjacking.”

“Where did you find the bodies? What about the car?”

“Look, I think you’ve been watching too many cop shows on your TV. Most of the time, it’s just something that happens. People get shot.”

“Excuse me?”

“You Americans come down here and you think we’re just a bunch of stupid Latinos that you can pay shit wages to. You think you can do my job better than me because you’ve watched some TV shows. That’s not the way it works in reality. Puerto Rico is a dangerous place. People get killed here all the time. We catch the killers when there are witnesses or cameras.”

“How many people killed my father?”

“One.”

“Interesting, the coroner said there were two distinct calibers used in the killings. That means there were two people. You really haven’t done even the basics here, have you? Did you check any of the highway cameras? Where was my father’s car coming from? Where was it going? Did he have any appointments booked? Did you talk to his secretary?”

“Look, lady...”

“Don’t you fucking ‘look, lady’ me. My father is dead. You haven’t done one tenth of your job to find out who killed him or why.” The detective stood up.

“I’m sorry your father was killed. Really. But there isn’t anything that I can do to change that. There were no witnesses, there were no cameras around the area that we found the bodies or where the car was found. Case closed. Miguel, give my best to Carlita.” Jesus pushed back his chair and walked out of the restaurant.

“Fucking useless.” Marcia wasn’t sure, now, exactly what she expected. If there were bad actors to apprehend, they would have done it by now. Just another rich gringo killed. No one here was going to care. She and Miguel at lunch in

silence. “Miguel, one last stop at the hotel, then you can drop me at the airport.”

“Si, Miss Devereaux.”

Back at the hotel Marcia closed the door to her room and stopped. She was empty. It was all over. There was nothing she could do to bring back her father, and nothing she could do to find out who killed him or why. The box of her fathers belongings still sat on the end of the bed. Shit. Forgot about that, she thought. There was no point in bringing home a box of bloody clothes. She opened the box, and went through all the pockets. Empty. In the bottom of the box was a ziplock bag with his wallet, ring, phone, and a keychain she had made him for Christmas when she was 12. The wallet was empty of money and cards. The cards were just one more loose end for her to tie up. The murderers, if they were locals, would have sold them off for a few dollars. The phone was destroyed, one of the bullets went through it on the way to his heart. She looked at the phone again.

Weird. The only time her father kept his phone in his shirt pocket was when he was using it for dictation. He had never learned to type and had always had a secretary. When he discovered the voice-to-text option in Google docs

he gave Mildred a pay raise, and took typing off the things he expected her to do. I wonder, thought Marcia...

She opened her computer, and logged into his Google account. The last file was date stamped the time of the murders.

# Chapter 30

“Right, right, right!”

“Where?”

“Right!. Too late! Man down. Ha ha ha. Fuck, you suck at this game.”

“It’s only my tenth time playing. I don’t sit at work playing whenever the big bosses leave the room. Some of us have real jobs.”

“I hardly play at work at all. Too busy messing up things for you over there.”

“Don’t miss the resupply. It’s in the blue container on the docks.”

“So you have played this game... sniper on the building. Shit. I’m taking fire.”

“Got him.”

“Thanks. Shit. Bastards! I’ve got three on my left.”

“How’s Mom?”

“Ya, ya, she’s good. I got her a bigger apartment with central heat, close to the square. Fuck! There’s four behind you! Those assholes must be using a hack. I’ll have to trace them down later and fry their fucking computer! She complained that it was too big, and there were too many

windows to clean. I'm out." Alexey and Sergey were both knocked out of the game and waiting for the next round.

"Ha. Always glass half empty with her. Doesn't she have a cleaning lady?"

"Of course. I pay for it. You still owe me, by the way."

"Yeah, yeah. Anything new?"

"Oh shit, yeah. There's a site on the dark web offering bounties on world leaders. Worldchangers, spelled weirdly."

"Is that why all those presidents were shot last week?"

"Yeah. It's big money for some of the less popular leaders. Patel's at thirty million."

"What about our dear leader?"

"Second place. A billion rubles."

"Fuuuuuck me. That's a lot of motivation."

"Ha, when I met him to explain the problem, that's exactly what he said."

"You met him? Cool. Hey. Ok. we're back on. Hey hey hey, there's a jeep. Grab it!"

"Sweet ride. Any skins for it?"

"I don't care what it looks like, lets go kill some stuff."

"It's got an upgrade! A Barret M95 sniper rifle mounted on a Talon stabilizer!"

"I think we've got this round, brother."

“Let’s go fuck up some newbies.”



# Chapter 31

“Welcome to Democracy Now, Democracy dot Org. I’m Amy Goodman. The racially charged riots in New Orleans are intensifying after the death of the unarmed black man Johnson Boudreaux in a botched police raid. The police commissioner has refused to charge the officers involved in the shooting, claiming that it was a mistake, but indicating that Mister Boudreaux was known to the police and was on probation. He was shot outside a store that had employed him as part of a rehabilitation project run by the probation authority in New Orleans. Commissioner Dale Broussard of the New Orleans police department did not defend the shooting, referring to it as a ‘mistake’, and noted that the officers had been pulled off active duty. We go first to Renée Feltz live in New Orleans.”

“Thank you Amy. As you can see behind me the scene is mostly peaceful. The protesters have taken over the roads around Xavier University and are being pushed back by local police in riot gear. The protesters are holding up signs and singing, but there doesn’t seem to be any violence. It’s more a vigil to mark the death of the unarmed black man, Johnson Boudreaux”

“Thank you Renée. We go now to a press conference at the Whitehouse where President Carter is answering questions.”

Marcia was sitting on the bed, only half listening to the news. She was scrolling through her father’s last file upload. He made it like a long conversation with Mildred, addressing her by name as he moved through the items on his list. ‘Mildred, send this first one to Bill Worthington over at General Parts...’ and ‘Mildred, can you check on the last shipment to our plant in Mexico.’ She could hear his voice playing in her head as she read down the file. Skipping to the bottom. ‘Mildred, this next one goes to Tommy at the plant in Taiwan. Tommy, I understand there are some problems with the schematics for the... shit Carlos, why are we stopping. A roadblock, what? God, what now? I can see they’ve got guns, Carlos. Yeah, yeah, we’re getting out. Go on, take the truck. Yeah, here’s my wallet. Shit, you assholes. Why did you shoot Carlos? What? That fucking... what, uppity? That bastard car...’

Marcia stared at the screen. That’s all there was. A hit by another car parts manufacturer? It was definitely not just a carjacking.

“Look, if some uppity negroes think that they can take over the biggest port on the south coast, they’ve got

another think coming. I've authorized a deployment of the National Guard to New Orleans to restore peace. Like I've always said, 'when the looting starts, the shooting starts' I'm not going to let that city boil over. We're going to clamp down the lid hard."

"President Carter Humphries then left the dais and refused to answer any further questions. We reached out to his office, and to his press secretary, Meagan Doyle, but she has not responded to our request for an interview. I'm joined now by..."

Marcia distractedly packed the wallet, ring, and the keyring and threw the rest of the clothes and the destroyed phone in the garbage, took a last sweep through the hotel room, turned off the TV that was still talking about the President. She was going to quit. That was it. With her father dead, there was no reason to stay working for him. What a fucking bastard.

Miguel was waiting downstairs in the car. They rode to the airport in silence. Marcia was anxious to get home, to bury her father, and to bury this whole experience in the past.

"Thank you for being by driver, Miguel. I'll be sure to give you five stars. And here's a little something for your new baby."

“Two hundred dollars!?! I can’t accept this, ma’am. The car service has already been paid for.”

“I know. It’s not for you. It’s for your baby. A gift for some clothes, or whatever you need.”

“Thank you, again, thank you. Carlita will be so grateful.”

# Chapter 32

The plane was mostly full. Marcia had an aisle seat and was lucky that the middle seat was empty so she didn't have to share an armrest. She put on her noise cancelling headphones and closed her eyes to grab a bit of sleep before heading into the maelstrom of the funeral planning. Her mother was prone to over planning, and given her father's standing in the community, she was certain that was going to be a larger event than was really required. She took a calming breath and forced herself to clear her mind, cancelling out the two days in Puerto Rico. A light tap on her shoulder.

"I'm so sorry, Miss, you'll have to keep your headphones off while the preflight announcements and safety demonstration are playing."

"Oh, right. Sorry."

"Not a problem, Miss. It won't be long."

Marcia looked out the window. The passenger behind her bumped her seat and apologized. He has a big man, having trouble finding a place to keep his knees.

"Yeah, so that went smooth. Two for the price of one."

“No muss, no fuss. Can’t wait to get back. Did you check your account yet?”

“Yeah, all good. Just goes to show you it doesn’t pay to get uppity with the boss.”

“Ha ha, no, it does not. Not one bit. What are you going to do with yours?”

“There’s a second hand Boston whaler I’ve been looking at. Spend some time on the water this year. Catch a few. You?”

“Retirement fund. If I want to fish, I’ll just come to your place.” No one was paying attention to the pilot’s speech or the safety announcements. When they were finished the steward smiled at Marcia and gave her a thumbs up. Marcia put her headphones back on and zoned out.

Why would her father be murdered? He was a fierce businessman, and probably had pissed off most of his competitors, but at the end of the day, they all had to swim in the same pool. He wasn’t the type to have an affair, so it wasn’t a jealous boyfriend, at least she didn’t think that fit, but who knows. The last email he was dictating was weird as well. He never used the word ‘uppity’. As rich as he was, he always preached the idea that man should strive for better, no matter what the colour of his skin. Most of his factory workers were black or latino and he consistently

promoted competent people, whatever their skin tone. Too much thinking. She opened her laptop and scanned her emails to distract herself. Most of her news feeds had already picked up the President's remarks about the demonstration in New Orleans. The headline from Huffpost caught her eye.

'President Humphries lambasted over "Uppity Negro" comment.' Fuck. Her chest tightened. The tumblers aligned. She started to hyperventilate. It was him. That bastard killed him. And the two guys behind her were the hitmen. She pulled the sickbag out of the seat back, and held it to her mouth, the bile rising in her throat. She breathed, trying to hold it back, but it was no use. She puked, the fiery acid burning her throat. She teared up. The steward was at her side in an instant with a disposable washcloth.

"It'll be okay, miss, just a bit of turbulence. Can I get you anything? Some ginger ale?"

"Yes, yes, that would be great. I'm just going to use the facilities to wash my face, but a ginger ale with ice would be lovely."

# Chapter 33

“Marcia. Get Lloyd on the horn for me.”

“Marcia is on bereavement leave, sir. Her father?” Oh, shit. Right. I forgot, thought Humphries.

“Well, somebody do it!”

“Yes sir.”

Humphries reclined in his chair and put his feet up on the corner of the desk. I bet all the other Presidents that sat here did exactly the same thing. Ah, history.

“The Secretary of Defence is on the line, sir.”

“Lloyd, you old fart. How are you?”

“Good, Mr. President. How can I help?”

“So what’s the situation in Wakanda?”

“Excuse me, Carter?”

“Oh, fuck, what’s the name of that country that just had the coup?”

“Bamatouga, sir.”

“Yeah, right. Listen. Turns out we have some US assets over there that are being nationalized by some nigger with a gun. It sets a bad precedent, and I don’t want other shithole countries thinking that the goddamn US of A is just going to roll over and get fucked in the ass.”



“I understand that he’d already entered into rebalancing negotiations with the companies involved. He’s done a good job of marshalling world opinion to his cause. I don’t think that it’s prudent to interfere at this stage. These things usually go south pretty quickly.”

“I don’t fucking care! I’ve got a bunch of folks in my Super PAC grinding my nuts about this. I need us to do something. Take him out. Make it look like some factional thing. That happens all the time over there.”

“The only assets we have in the region is a forward base with drones in Sierra Leone.”

“Who’s in charge of the unit?”

“Colonel Shatner, sir.”

“Well, get him on the phone for me!”

# Chapter 34

Sergey Manoff loved America. In Russia it was difficult to get a gun. In America, anyone with a charge card could get as much military grade artillery as they wanted. He stared into the improvised makeup mirror and applied the silicon rubber pieces around his eyes, and adjusted the prosthetic on his nose. The wispy red and grey beard and wig completed the disguise.

“McTarty O'hannigan at your service” he said in his best fiddly dee faith and begorra Irish accent. Not perfect, but it would have to do. The rental car was packed with his gear and the reservation at the Intercontinental Hotel had been confirmed.

The drive to the hotel had been the most nerve-wracking of his life. If he was stopped by the police it would be pretty hard to explain the contents of his trunk. He walked to the check in counter with just a rolling carry-on. He'd bring the rest up later, when the hotel was quieter. Now he wanted the clerks to be in a rush, so they wouldn't stare at his fake passport too closely.

“Hello, and welcome to the Intercontinental.”

“Howyarbe, missy. I’ve got a reservation here. Last name, Gemillco.”

“Let me check, ah, yes, I have it here, Mister, Liam Gemillco? Did I pronounce that correctly? We’ll need a photocopy of your passport, if that’s okay.”

“Aye, ya did fine, lassie, but everyone just calls me by me initials, L.C. At least my friends do.” Sergey passed over his passport and did his imitation of an old Irish person laughing and leering playfully at the clerk. “I think you can call me L.C. too.” He knew enough about human nature to know that he was being just irritating enough to have the transaction proceed quickly. The clerk smiled her best professional smile, and handed over the keys.

“Here you go, Mr. Gemillco, please enjoy your stay.”

“Righty do, missy.”

His room was on the top floor on the corner of the hotel. It had a razor thin view of the Oval Office, but that’s all he needed. The room service girl was just finishing with his room as he approached.

“Missy. Howyarbe? Look, I’ve just flown here on the longest flight of me life. I’m going to pass out for a good long dosser, and don’t want anyone a-knocking on me door.” He handed her a \$50 bill. “Can you make sure that I’ve got peace and quiet until at least 5:00 p.m. tomorrow?”

There's a good lass." He faked a yawn and turned to his room. As soon as the door closed behind him he set to work.

He'd packed the sight and the base unit of the Talon Stabilization Unit in his bag, along with some quickset plaster and epoxy. He pulled back the carpet, and built a ring shaped dam from the quickset plaster and mixed the epoxy while he waited. The base unit for the Talon unit would normally be drilled and screwed to the floor, but he couldn't risk the noise.

When he'd ordered the unit from Paradigm Inc. in North Brantly Houston, they were curious about his use case. He told them he was going to mount it to his helicopter so he could take out all the feral hogs that had been digging up his ranch. He promised to send them video of their product in action. The salesman was tickled. 'Always good to see our product promoted on the interwebs. Ya'll have a good time killing pigs.'

By two in the morning the unit was up and running. The active gyroscopic gimbal meant that with each shot the sniper rifle would return automatically to the target. The accessory remote control he'd ordered used 5G technology, so he wouldn't have to worry about dodgy hotel WIFI. He took out a fat black Sharpie pen and wrote his bounce code

on the wall over the bed, then checked to make sure the gun could swing freely around. Tomorrow was going to be a big day, he thought, best get a little sleep.

# Chapter 35

Marcia parked down the street from the motel. She had no plan. She was operating on adrenalin and Aderal, and trying to figure out a way to sneak up on two trained killers. She was going to need to get in, control the situation and get the information she needed. A Domino's pizza truck roared into the parking lot.

“Hi, pizza guy?”

“Well, duh.”

“Hi, is that for room 202?”

“Yeah, is that you?”

“It's my boyfriend's room. I flew in a day early to surprise him. I was wondering if I could buy your hat and vest for, let's say, two hundred dollars? He's always wanted to roleplay the sexy pizza delivery girl porn stuff. I figured I'd give him a thrill!” Marcia opened the top couple buttons of her blouse and smiled.

“Whatever, lady. Here's my stuff. Knock yourself out.” He pocketed the cash, slid back into his truck and drove off. “Fucking weird rich people.”

# Chapter 36

Wanouski had stripped off his shirt and was lounging on his bed in his wife beater t-shirt and sweats. Tussaud sat on the side of his bed reading briefing notes.

Marcia knocked on the door, her head down, her hair poking out from the sides of the hat.

“Pizza’s here!” Wanouski got up to answer the door. Marcia held out the two pizzas, and he took them from her. The first shot caught him just above the knee and he stumbled back into the room. The next two shots caught Tussaud in the chest, in a close grouping the way her father had taught her. The taser completed the task. She kicked the door closed behind her, keeping her silenced Ruger levelled on the two men.

Wanouski woke up in a chair with his hands and legs plasticuffed to the chair. He’d been trained to break these, but the killer had tightened four on each arm and leg. She knew what she was doing. He wasn’t going to break out of this with force. His wound had been bandaged. Maybe there was hope that he was going to get out of this alive.

“You’ve bought yourself a world of trouble, bitch. Cut me out of these things and I’ll fuck you up!”

“Well, then, there’s not much incentive for me to let you out of them, is there.... Mister Wanouski?”

There was no way she should know his name. All of his ID was faked up. This was bad. He’d been compromised, but by who?

“Who sent you, bitch?” Marcia wasn’t ready to give her side of the story.

“I don’t really like being called a bitch. So tell me, why was the CIA in Puerto Rico killing this ... Devereaux?”

“The CIA wasn’t.”

“You’re CIA, you were in P.R. You and Tussaud killed Devereaux and his driver. What am I missing? Help me out here. What beef did the CIA have?” How could she possibly know everything? Wanouski’s mind began to churn. Who had turned? Who was this agent? Who did she work for?

“It wasn’t a CIA job.”

“Who sent you?”

“Humphries.”

“Who is this Humphries? Some lowlife scum gangster?”

“No, you fucking idiot!, the fucking President of the United States.”

“So, it was a personal favour for the President?”

“No, he paid us. Twenty five thousand. Each.” Wanouski thought if he could keep her talking, build a bridge or two,



he might be able to get out of this, and then track her down and kill her. Slowly.

“A little off-the-book payout. Do you know why?”

“Not really. He never told us why. He didn’t want there to be a reason.”

“It sounds like it wasn’t the first one?”

“I’m not telling you anything else.”

“Really?” Marcia jammed the taser into his crotch and hit the play button. Wanouski thrashed.

“I’ve brought extra batteries. See?” Marcia smiled, shaking a Costco package of backups. Wanouski was working out how he was going to kill her, and thought telling her more was just going to buy himself more time. It didn’t matter what she knew, she was never going to tell anyone else. He needed her to believe him.

“Not the first.” Marcia didn’t plan on finding this out. She just wanted to get a confession about her father. This... this was so much bigger.

“How many?”

“Twenty five, twenty six.”

“You shot twenty five people for the President?”

“Nah, most of them were made to look like accidents. Devereaux was supposed to be a botched carjacking.”

“Who else?” Wanouski had a good memory. For the next half hour he recounted names, dates, types and locations of all the murders. Burial sites for the still missing. Poisoned labour leaders that were organizing in key ridings, drug overdoses for journalists that were exposing the President’s misdeeds, car accident for a talk show host, a suicide of a pimp, some community organizers in the Black Lives Matter movement. A few prostitutes. Two congressmen. At the same time he was planning his escape. Maybe he could break the chair and get free. Marcia sat and ate pizza, thinking to herself that the bastard had organized all of this while she worked for him. “Why? Why were you doing this for the President?”

“What do you mean, why? The President hand picked us to do the work. We met him when we were providing intelligence on one of his trips. He saw we were true patriots, not paper pushers. He saw we were people that loved our country more than anything and believed what he was trying to accomplish. He knew that the system was flawed and he was trying his best to get around a Deep State Conspiracy that was stopping him, stopping our country from greatness. We were honoured to be chosen.”

Who knew the President of the United States had his own private kill squad.

“Did you ever think that what you were doing was wrong? That maybe, just maybe, you were being used to do the dirty work for a lowlife thug?”

“I mean, sometimes we questioned it. But we were working for the President. He was always doing it for the best reasons.”

“The man in Puerto Rico. Do you know why he was killed?”

“Humphries said he was getting uppity. Not respecting the office of the President, and threatening his ability to be re-elected to carry on his great work.”

“That man,” her voice took on a sudden coldness that Wanouski could feel, “that man was my father. He was a businessman that owned factories that employed 25,000 Americans, and more around the world. He was the chairman of a Super PAC that got Humphries elected the first time. He had threatened to cut ties with Humphries because Humphries was demeaning the office of the President and embarrassing America on the world stage. You know, hookers, Russians, golfing, that sort of thing.”

“I didn’t know. I’m sorry.” Marcia looked at Wanouski and softened. Maybe he was worth saving. Maybe he could tell the whole world about the things he’d done for the

President. He sensed her softening. “Maybe you’re right. This was all wrong. The President shouldn’t have hired us.”

“I’m sorry about your partner. I’ve never killed anyone before.”

“It eats away at you, the killing I mean. I don’t sleep much anymore. When I do, there’s nightmares.” If he could just string her along enough to get her to release him. There was a pause in the conversation.

“Do you like superhero movies?” Wanouski was confused. Maybe this was it. Maybe he’d broken through. Keep her talking.

“Yeah. I collected comics when I was a kid, and I love the new Marvel Universe stuff.”

“Me too! Did you have a favourite?”

“I guess Batman? He’s DC, but at least he was real. No super powers, just a guy with some ideals. And cool toys.”

“When I was little, I liked Batman too. My father had people in his workshops make me batarangs and grappling hooks. I even had a little Batman Utility belt. I was such a geek.”

“No, no, that’s cool that your dad did all that for you.”

“Yeah, it was. Father didn’t like Batman though. I remember watching a movie with him. It was early in the movie, and Batman has the chance to kill the Joker on his

motorbike thing. The Joker has just killed a bunch of people, is clearly the villain, but Batman dumps his motorbike to avoid killing Joker, and the movie goes on for another hour, and the Joker kills more people before Batman finally gets him.” Marcia got up, moved to the dresser where her iPhone was propped up and stopped the video recording. “He always said, don’t Batman. Funny. He tried to make it a verb. It never stuck. I’d be playing chess with my younger cousin, and he’d walk by, look at my position and lean down and whisper in my ear ‘Don’t Batman.’” She put her coat back on, and picked up her bag and walked to the door. She put her hand on the door handle. Wanouski smiled. He was going to get out of here alive and find this bitch and kill her and the rest of her family. She turned back. “I can almost hear him whispering to me now.”

Two shots. Center mass.

# Chapter 37

“This is Nala Ayed with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. I’m here in the West African country of Bamatouga where there has been an attack on the Kitwanga Home for Orphans of War, a hospital and rehabilitation center for the children orphaned by years of war here in Bamatouga. First reports say that the casualty rate is high, with as many as 50 children killed in the attack, as well as doctors and nurses. With me is Captain Alpha Diallo, the leader of the Golden Dawn resistance force that successfully overthrew the 40 year dictatorship of President Mamadou and his father before. Captain Diallo, do you know who would want to do such a thing?”

“We are very used to atrocities here in Africa, but this is beyond belief. I was coming here to officially open the center, so the timing is very suspicious. I had invited several of the Ambassadors and other dignitaries to join me to open the center, including Ambassador Gwen Larson from the United States of America. I’ve received reports that she was early to the event, and is among the casualties.”

“Do you know how the attack was launched?”

“Our little country does not have the most advanced air defence systems, but we were lucky. We brought down the Reaper UAV with US Navy markings on it. Why would the Americans want to kill orphans? It makes no sense. I am appealing to the American public. What kind of monster have you allowed to lead your country? I am asking the world why would the Americans want to kill orphans? I am asking the United Nations to sanction the United States of America and to charge President Humphries with this callous war crime.” Several children ran up to Diallo, some bleeding, all of them crying. They hugged the Captain. Overwhelmed, Diallo looked up to the camera. “Why?”

# Chapter 38

Jing Bae looked at his phone. Area code 504. Probably a scam. Dismissed. It rang again immediately. Man these guys were annoying. Dismissed. Jing Bae went back to pressing his shirt. Another phone call. Fuck, these people. He answered the call.

“I don’t want to buy a timeshare, or get a mortgage. Stop phoning me!”

“Jing Bae! It’s me.”

“Allison? Wait, what’s going on? Where are you?”

“Just...just shut up. My Mom has been killed by the National Guard. I found out this morning and flew down. She was sitting vigil with the rest of the protesters when the National Guard just started firing. The President told them to clear the streets, so they killed people... hundreds of people.”

“Are you somewhere safe now? The whole city is going to explode! You’ve got to get out of there.”

“I’ve got to bury my Mom.”

“I’ll come down...”

“No, please don’t. I know you want to help, and I love you for that. But don’t. I’ll be fine. Dad’s broken up, and my



sibs are in hiding. I'll be okay. Remember, the President said they could only shoot unarmed black people here. I don't look like I'm black."

"Shit. Ok. If there's anything I can do on my end, let me know. Please come home safe."

For the first time in a long while, Jing Bae wondered why he was here. Why anyone with an ounce of sense stayed in a country that killed innocent people, that had a police force with tanks. This whole place is going to boil over and Jing Bae didn't want to be the complacent frog in the pot. At some point, it was going to go from a nice warm bath to frog soup. Being Asian meant that he was just another shade of brown to these people.

# Chapter 39

“The service was nice. Lots of Father’s friends came.”

“Yes dear. Some of his rivals too. I saw Bill Hawkings from Microforge. He came over to extend his condolences, but I think he really just wanted to make sure your father was dead.”

“Mom!”

“They hated each other. I don’t doubt that the board will be getting a buyout bid from him, and a couple others. Your father worked so hard to build that company, to build a legacy, and now it’s all just going to slip away.” Marcia and her mother sat in the back of the chauffeured black town car, holding hands, and staring out the windows as they rode back from the gravesite to the funeral home. “Are you taking any time off?”

“Mom, you know how the Whitehouse is. I’m so busy at work... I can’t. I’ll take Monday off, though.”

“I’m so proud of you. Working for the President. Such an honour.”

# Chapter 40

“Okay, a quick huddle to run down the day's events.” Gretchen Morrison had stepped in to replace Marcia. She wanted Marcia's job and taking control while she was out for her father's funeral was going to be her chance. The rest of the President's administration staff gathered in the center of the office. “We've got a couple committee meetings for POTUS, then a briefing from the Secretary of Defence about the situation in Africa. Debbie, I'm going to need you to make sure we have those little cookies that General Lloyd likes. Then Gwen Larson's father is coming in to shake hands and get a medal for his daughter's service. The President's photographer will come in for that as well. We've got a bunch of Chinese dignitaries coming in later to talk trade policy with the President. That wraps up the morning. The afternoon is some meetings out of the office.”

“You mean golfing?”

“Oh. Marcia. I'm sorry, I didn't think you were coming in today. I just ran down the meetings for the rest of the staff.”

“Gretchen, I'm glad you stepped up. I was late. Hard to walk in this thing.”

“OMG, what happened?” Trying to make her voice seem as though she cared.

“I went for a walk in the woods after the funeral and sprained my ankle. It’s the same leg as my skiing accident. It’s always been a bit dodgy. I should have known better. The doctor said I need to keep this walking cast on for a couple weeks.”

# Chapter 41

“Jing Bae? Hey, I’m Agent Smith with the Secret Service. I’ll be wiring you up.”

“I think there’s been some mistake. I was called in to do some translation for a meeting with a Chinese delegation.”

“Yeah, there’s been a change of plan. They’ve brought their own government translator. The President wants to make sure that what he’s saying is accurate, and not ‘adjusted’ to match the Chinese government’s directives. They also want you to listen to all the chatter between the delegates to see what they are saying. Our regular guy is out sick, so you were brought in from New York. You look like a forty tall? Yeah? Good. Put this on. You and the regular agent will be in the room before the Chinese get there. Just put these sunglasses on and try and mimic the body language of the other agent.”

# Chapter 42

“Major Larson, it’s an honour sir.” The security guard at the Whitehouse snapped to attention. Larson instinctively returned the salute.

“Do I know you, son?”

“I served under you in Afghanistan for two tours in the early 2000’s. We never met, sir, but you were the base commander at Shindand Airbase. I was one of the drone mechanics.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, soldier.”

“We’ve got to scan you, sir. Just a formality.”

“I understand completely. You can never be too careful.”

“That’s a wonderful walking stick, sir. Did you get that in Afghanistan?”

“Yes, you remember that village, Sar-Olom, that we liberated from the Taliban? The mayor of the town Mohammed Abdul-Ghafar, I think his name was if memory serves, gave me this. It was his father’s. The head is silver and there is silver inlay all down the shaft. He told me what the script said, something like our expression ‘spare the rod, spoil the child’.”

“It’s beautiful sir. One of the pages will take you to the Oval Office. I’m sorry about what happened to your daughter sir.”

“Me too, soldier, me too.”

# Chapter 43

Marcia hobbled off to the bathroom. Even with most of the foam cut out of her walking cast the Ruger pressed uncomfortably into her calf. She took a pair of flats out of her bag and put them on. Was she really prepared to do this? She knew this was a suicide mission, but with her father gone.... She thought about her father and the other 25 people that had been killed on the President's order. About the orphans in Bamatouga. About all the other horrible things the President had done. Things that she had been a part of. Things she hadn't questioned. The video, set to be released in a week, wouldn't be enough to stop him. The Senators had kissed the ring and would never do anything to stand up to this bully. She was the only one. She needed to save America. It was her duty to her country, to the Constitution that she'd sworn to protect.

She walked back to her desk, picked up some briefing folders and walked into the Oval Office. She knew her marks, controlled her breathing, and pulled her gun.

The first shot took down the Secret Service agent.

She wasn't expecting a second agent. Second shot. Not as clean.



In two steps she was at the President's desk. Colonel Olsen had unsheathed his walking stick sword and was lunging for the President.

Third shot to the chest.

Fourth shot to the head.

She turned and pointed at the Vice President.

Fifth shot.

Sixth shot.

Allison Boudreaux Olsen burst into the office, gun raised, and saw the President had been shot. The Colonel splayed across the desk. A woman on the floor. Turned to see a Secret Service agent with his gun pointed at the President.

“Stop! Stop! For God's sake. Don't shoot!”

More Secret Service flanked Allison with their guns drawn.

“Stop!”

The Agent that had shot dropped his weapon and stood with his hands held up. The Vice President yelled again. “For fucks sake. Stand down. All of you! That's an order! That agent saved my life!”

The Vice President pushed forward and stood by the agent. “You can put your hands down now, son.” He turned to the other agents. “Well, don't just stand there. Get the

doctors. Secure the area. See what can be done for the other two.” Allison walked over to the Vice President.

“Vice President Murchie. We’ve met before, I’m...”

“Olsen. Africa right?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Agent, what’s your name?”

# Chapter 44

“Magnus, don’t bother the nice gentleman.”

“Mom. I’m just watching. He’s got this cool game.”

“It’s okay, lady. Not bothering.”

“First Class and Business Class passengers for Lufthansa Flight 106 to Malta may now board at gate 27.”

“That’s my flight. See you, kid.”

“Hey mister, what’s the name of that game?”

“Worldchangers. It’s just out.”

# Chapter 45

The explosion rocked the hotel and set off all the alarms. Firefighters streamed into the building, fighting against the tide of hotel guests panicking out of the building. The FBI were on the scene, as well. “Goddammit, I told you guys to stop! Don’t breach the door, it’s probably wired to explode. Or he’s in there with a gun.”

“We don’t want to wait around for the place to burn down. We’re going in.”

“Just give my bomb guys a couple minutes with the snake cam.”

“You’ve got one minute.”

Field Agent Mike Ruiz and his team set to work, the snake went under the door and the video popped up.

“Ok, look. There’s no fire. The sprinklers kicked in. So can everyone just please calm the fuck down and make sure that everyone has been evacuated safely? Thank you.”

“Mike, there’s no bomb attached to the door, but he did figure out a pretty clever series of devices to keep us from getting in there too quickly. You okay with us just cutting the door in half?”

“Oh, do you think they’ll notice the extra damage? Do you think they’re just going to give it a paint job and call it done? Fuck. Cut the door. Somebody turn off the sprinklers before all the evidence is washed out into the street.”

Another agent pushed through the crowd.

“Here’s a copy of the guy’s passport, Mike.”

“Let me see it.” Mike studied the photocopy and smiled.

“We’ll put out a BOLO right now.”

“Don’t bother.”

“What? We have to! ”

“Look at his name. Lliam Connor (L.C.) Gemillco, from Ireland?”

“Yeah. We’ll catch that bastard.”

“L.C. stands for Lucky Charms. Gemillco is a concatenation of General Mills Corporation. They’re magically delicious. We are looking for an Irish leprechaun.”

They stood in the middle of the room, everything shattered by the explosion, and stared at a soggy jigsaw puzzle with a couple of pieces missing.

# Chapter 46

Jing Bae took off his sunglasses.

“Jing Bae?!?”

“You know this man, Agent Olsen?”

“Ah, yes, he’s an ummm, friend and a translator for the United Nations. What..?”

“Yeah, so, funny story.” Jing Bae smiled and looked at Allison and the Vice President and began to fill in the gaps. Out of the corner of his eye he spotted a red dot moving along the wall behind Allison. “GET DOWN!” Without thinking he grabbed Allison and the Vice President and dived for the floor.

Bullet proof glass isn’t an accurate label. At best it can be bullet resistant. And when faced with depleted uranium tipped .50 caliber bullets fired from a sniper rifle, the resistant part was short lived. The first bullet crumpled the glass, the second blew it apart, and then what seemed like a never ending stream of destruction tore into the President’s chair. They ripped through his body, blew the Resolute desk to kindling, killed the official photographer and the press secretary. Secret Service agents dived for safety. The bullets ricocheted off the concrete floor and seared through the

wall opposite and killed an aide two rooms away. It seemed like forever, but the rifle had delivered fifty rounds in less than two seconds.

A second of silence. Then an explosion from outside.

# Chapter 47

Jing Bae came out of the fog and looked at the doctor.

“What happened? What’s going on?”

“Ah, our hero is awake. You don’t remember? You were shot. Nothing too serious. We’ve cleaned up the wound, and stitched you up. You’ll be out of here as soon as you feel up to walking. The nurse will get you a sling for your arm. The bullet went through your deltoid muscle, and barely nicked the humerus. You’ll need some rehab, but you’ll be just fine. I’ll be back in a couple minutes. I’ve got a few more people to check in on. Quite the shitshow.”

Jing Bae sat up in the hospital bed and winced. He was just a translator, getting shot wasn’t in his job description. He doubted that being shot ever leaves one ‘just fine’.

“Jing Bae, are you okay? Oh my god. I almost shot you! What were you doing there?”

“Allison? I’m confused. What, what happened? Why are you here?”



# Chapter 48

“I owe you, son. You saved my life. Twice. And I understand that you’re not even Secret Service?”

“Vice President Murchie? Sorry, I’m still in a bit of an anesthetic fog.”

“It’s actually President Murchie now, as of about five minutes ago. The king is dead, long live the king and all that. As my first official act I’m awarding you the Presidential Medal of Freedom, and including a disability pension. Given that you only worked for the Whitehouse for about 15 minutes, it’s a pretty good deal. We do need to talk in private about what happened, though. There are some, how do I put this, some sensitive issues we want to control.”

“Yes, sir, Mr. President.”

“Anyways, I’ll let you and your wife have a few minutes. I’ll be back in an hour to sort things. We’ll bring in a photographer, document the award.”

“Thank you, sir, but...”

“Thankyou, Mr. President.”

“Ms. Olsen, take care of this hero for me, would you?”

The newly minted President left the medical unit firing off commands to the slew of staff that scrambled behind him.

“Your wife. Ha. Like that would ever happen!”

“Stranger things...”

“Jing Bae, are you asking me to marry you?”

# Chapter 49

Vancouver, two weeks later.

“How old was your Dad?”

“That’s not easy to answer. In the village he was born in they didn’t keep super accurate records. He was either 90 or 92, best guess. Plus, he celebrated his birthday according to the Chinese Lunar Calendar, so some years he didn’t have a birthday and some years he had two.”

“I’m confused, I think.”

“We just figured it was easiest to let him tell us when his birthday was. Often it coincided with king crab season... go figure.”

“Sounds like a mischievous guy. I would have loved to meet him.”

“Yeah, he would have liked you too. Thanks for coming up to Vancouver, just too bad it was for a funeral.”

“How are your brother and Juney doing? They seem pretty tight.”

“They’re ok. They knew Dad was mortal, and he was lucky, he kept his marbles till the very end. Smart as a whip, as they say. He was out for his morning

constitutional, sitting over there, on that bench under the tree. It had the best view of the park, he said. Heart attack.”

Allison and Jing Bae walked through the canopy of trees, just starting to turn colour, back to the house. They stopped at the rise and looked back at the North Shore Mountains, frosted white with an early fall of snow. Spencer had just pulled up. He closed the car trunk and grabbed a handful of moving boxes.

“Hey, perfect timing. I’m going to start boxing up Dad’s clothes and stuff for the Salvation Army. You want to pitch in?”

“Yeah ok. Sure. It’s got to be done.”

“I’m due at the airport in an hour, to pick up Celeste. I’ll leave you boys to it.”

“Celeste?”

“Another CIA agent. She called last night, said she had quit the Agency and was coming to Vancouver. All very mysterious.. Jing Bae’s met her. She’s... a lot of fun? Is that the right word?”

“Yeah. Doesn’t really capture her essence though.”

Standing in their father’s bedroom, the brothers looked around at the sum of a person’s life. Some pictures of family, Juney’s elementary grad picture. A few books in Chinese. A clock radio.

“Wow. Not really much here, I mean to account for a whole life.”

“Well, you can’t take it with you. And he didn’t have much. We should check his pockets for money and lottery tickets. You never know, he might have struck it rich.”

“That would be ironic, wouldn’t it.”

“I’ve got a box marked garbage for underwear and bedding. No one wants that kind of stuff.”

“I’ve found a half roll of mints. Jackpot.”

“Ha. Who knows what decade they’re from. I’d say garbage, unless you’re feeling lucky.”

“Garbage it is.” Spencer and Jing Bae methodically cleaned out the closet. Taking their time. Remembering their Dad wearing this or that. A pair of shorts he wore in the garden that showed off his bowed legs, rickets from malnutrition as a child in China. He had a special shirt he wore for every birthday. He called it his birthday suit, and pretended not to know what that meant in English.

“Man, look at all this tea he’s squirrelled away. There must be 50 boxes of it. Long Life Golden Dragon. Huh. I guess we can compost it?”

“Yeah. Hey look. There’s a letter on top addressed to you and me.”

# Chapter 50

The envelope was large. Inside there was a smaller envelope.

“Spencer and Jing Bae. For your Eyes Only. Not Juney.”  
The brothers looked at each other and smiled.

“So what do you think. Do we finally find out if you were adopted, like I always said?”

“Ha ha. God. Remember that? I packed my suitcase and was ready to leave home.”

“You were six.”

“Yeah, but a mature six.” This was the first time since the funeral that the brothers shared a laugh. It was a good relief. The doorbell rang.

“Ok. Don’t open it till I get back.”

Spencer walked down the hallway from his father’s room to the door.

“Yeah, got a delivery here? Is your father here? It’s more of his tea. I wanted to thank him for the restaurant recommendation.”

“I’m sorry. My father died last week. Heart attack.”

“Ah, shit I’m really sorry. I liked your Dad. He’d always give me a glass of water, or a cookie. Lovely man. Sorry for your loss.”

“Thanks. You can just leave the packages here. We’ll figure out what he was planning to do with all this tea.

“He said he was planning on selling it. Farmers Market. There’s quite a bit this time. About 50 kilos. I’ll bring the rest up in a sec.”

“Yeah, just bring it in, thanks.”

Spencer propped the door open and walked back down the hallway. His father’s room had originally been the dining room, but when stairs became an issue, Spencer and Juney had walled it off. The floor creaked just outside the bedroom door. Spencer always knew when his father was up in the morning by that squeak. The room was nothing special but it had a nice view of the backyard, and the garden that his father grew each spring; herbs for cooking mostly. Some bitter Chinese greens.

“Ok, you ready to find out if you’re adopted?”

“Rip it off like a bandaid.”

# Chapter 51

Dear Sons,

When I was born in China times were very hard. My parents had to make a choice of which children to feed and two sisters starved to death as a result of the famine in 1942. The leaders were very bad. I was very young and couldn't do anything. I cried every night. My grandfather committed suicide so he wouldn't eat food for the rest of the family. When Juney did his essay last year, it brought all that sadness back. I was very sad for days. I couldn't eat. I had eaten while my sisters starved to death and the memory was too painful. When you asked what was wrong, I said I had a bit of heartburn.

I don't know if you remember, but I was taking some computer courses for seniors down at the Recreation Center. I learned a lot. I studied very hard. It took many months, but I learned enough to launch WØrldchanger5.onion. You haven't heard of it. It's on the dark web.

“Holy Shit.”

“What? You've heard about this?”

“Keep reading.”



I wanted to make the world a better place before I left. I didn't think it would catch on. It turns out that many people, the world over, realize that their leaders are all criminals. I used the research that Juney did to point out the war crimes, and embezzlement, and human rights abuses. Many horrible people have been killed as a result. I hope I have left the world a better place.

Dad.

PS. It's not tea.

PS. You're not adopted. I only told people you were when you did stupid things.

PS. Pull this tab for the password.

“Password to what?”

“This is insane. Pull the tab.” In a flash, the paper ignited and disappeared.

“The fuck?” Spencer dropped the burning paper just as it reached his finger tips. “Ow, ow, ow. Fuck. What was that?” Jing Bae laughed and put his hand on his brother's shoulder.

“That, little brother, was a magician's flash paper, and the only evidence that connected Dad to the deaths of 20 world leaders. What a cagey old bastard.”

“You can't be serious?”

“I’ll tell you all about it later. At least what I know. Right now, I think we should have some tea.”

# Chapter 52

Jing Bae and Spencer sat on the floor looking at 60 kilograms of gold bullion. They had opened each of the boxes and found identical ingots in each.

“Hey Siri, how much is a kilogram of gold worth?”

“This is what I found on the website Canadagold dot com. A kilogram of gold is worth 70,151.32 Canadian dollars.”

“So, that’s what? Four point two million dollars?”

“We’ve got to turn it in!”

“Spence, to who? It was a kickstarter campaign. Thousands of people donated. At least twenty scummy world leaders, including Humphries, the guy that gave the order to kill all those people in New Orleans, including Allison’s mother, were eliminated. If we give it to the police ... hell, if we tell anyone, the CIA will take you and me and Juney and stick us in Guantanamo Bay and no one will ever see us again. Do you want Juney to end up in a prison? Besides. Dad did this for us.”

“No. Fuck. I don’t want to go to prison. What do we do with it?”

“Hey, we’re back!”

“Shit. It’s Allison. We’ll figure it out later. Just close the closet.”

“Crap! There’s another 50 kilos of tea by the front door! Fuck!”

Allison and Celeste stood in the front entry hanging up their coats. Celeste dropped her bag on the boxes of tea.

“Celeste, Wie war Ihr Flug?<sup>4</sup>”

“J.B., glatt wie eine frisch rasierte Muschi!<sup>5</sup> And who’s this?”

“Celeste, this is my little brother Spencer.”

“Hmmm, he looks like a good looking version of you. Like if your parents took a second shot at it and got it right.”

“Don’t listen to her Jing Bae.”

“No it’s true. I got the brains, he got the looks.”

“What’s that smell?”

“Spence made cinnamon buns. He’s pretty, but he can cook.”

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<sup>4</sup> How was the flight?

<sup>5</sup> Smooth as a freshly shaved pussy!

# Chapter 53

Allison and Jing Bae lay close together in bed in his old room, staring out the skylight at the moonlit clouds drifting overhead, their breathing in sync, the covers kicked off.

“And that’s how we do it up here in Canada. Yee haw!”

Allison laughed and poked Jing Bae in the stomach. He grunted like he’d been really punched, and laughed. Allison sat up on one arm, the soft light from the street lights silhouetting her.

“Pass me the water, please.” Jing Bae sat up, winced, two weeks on, his arm healing but still sore.

“Here. You know, I’ve been wondering. Why were you there?” She took a long draw of water, reached over Jing Bae to put the glass back on the nightstand, her warm skin brushing across his.

“Where?”

“In the Oval Office? When you almost shot me?”

“Aren’t you glad I didn’t? And you got a cool scar, and a medal, and a pension. It all worked out pretty well.”

Jing Bae just waited and looked at her. She lowered her voice.

“I was going to kill him.” They stared at each other.

“Shit. Wow. Well, you weren’t the only one with that idea that day. I still can’t believe that happened. I wonder who collected the bounty?”

“Yeah, who?” Allison smiled. “You’re not upset?”

“Look, if the situation had been reversed. If it was my mother and Spencer that had been killed, I’d’ve done it too. I’m glad you didn’t get a chance. I love you Allison. I’d hate to do this without you.”

“You mean sex?”

“No, asshole. Life. The universe. Everything.”

“I love you too. Good night John Boy.”

# Meanwhile, somewhere in Malta

“What do you mean there’s no money?”

“I checked the account! There’s nothing.”

“But you sent in your video? With the bounce code?”

“Yes, yes, of course.”

“Fuck! Then who got the bounty?!?”

The brothers sat in silence.

“What now?”

Alexey smiled, poured his brother another glass of vodka.

“There’s still a hundred and forty people on the list. Lots of opportunity to make some money.”

“Ha ha, you’re right. We should look at the glass as half full. Obnazhi mechi, ugetenny narod Rossii, yest' zmei, kotorykh nado ubit’.<sup>6</sup>”

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<sup>6</sup> Draw your swords, peasants of Russia, there are snakes to kill.

# Author's Note

The internet is filled with weird and wonderful things. All of the technologies that I've used in this book exist right now - the drones, the remote controlled guns, the dark web, the crypto currencies. The story is made up, but the possibility is real.



# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Duane Laird is a Vancouver based writer and professional gymnast. Okay, that last bit is a lie. But seriously, what do you expect from a fiction writer. In these post-truth times, it's easy to forget that there are facts and alternate facts. And if you think I was talking about you in this book, you were wrong. It's all made up.