



MONROE DOCTRINE

VOLUME EIGHT

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Monroe Doctrine

Volume VIII

By

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Foreword

We have some exciting extras we are sure you will enjoy as you read this book. On our [website](#), you can access special content that goes along with this book, including the one thing all of our fans always seem to ask us for...battle maps. To access this additional content, which includes a recap of *Monroe Doctrine: Volume VII*, please click [here](#) and sign up with your email address.

Chapter One

Battle of Shenyang

Late October 2027

Joint Battle Command Center

Northwest Beijing, China

Bang, bang, bang!

President Yao Jintao was startled violently from what had been a restful slumber as his security detail barged into his room.

He sat straight up, adrenaline rushing through his system. “This had better be good,” he practically shouted.

“Mr. President, the allies have launched a missile attack. We need you to get underground to the Maglev.”

Yao suppressed the urge to shout obscenities; they were just the messengers, and it wouldn't do any good any way. Instead he shoed them out of the room just long enough for him to slip out of his expensive silk pajamas and throw on clothing befitting a world leader. And then he raced with a speed that was close to Olympian speedwalking. He felt running was too undignified for him, but he understood the urgency.

As his ride began, Yao felt the walls of the train tunnel closing in on him. The blur of its hypnotic lights zipped past them. Each frantic high-speed journey beneath the earth to the Joint Battle Command Center felt like another failure, a

concession to the allied bombardment. The longer this war continued, the more the allies continued to bomb his country. His military had made great strides in introducing the world's first-ever autonomous fighter drones. Yet it didn't seem to matter. The allies continued to bomb his nation, its factories and infrastructure, with impunity. There was a time when he could be chauffeured to the JBCC. Now, it was too dangerous for him to travel on the streets of Beijing.

Yao yearned to stand firm on the surface. To assess his soldiers in person and to speak to crowds of his people, to visit the great cities of his nation. Instead, he had been driven to the safety of the underground labyrinth they had created for such situations. It galled him to seek out safety below ground—but he had. Of course, the plastic smiles of his security detail brooked no objection to this course of action. They did what they were told and did whatever it took to keep him safe.

“Tianbao Station is now approaching,” announced the conductor.

Yao grunted, hearing the station's name—Heaven's Fortress. He had insisted on the name years before the war, wanting to project the idea that this command center wasn't a place of retreat, but a fortress of divine importance and a sign of the blessings of the heavens into which China would lead the world in the future. Now...that future felt more uncertain than he cared to admit.

The journey from his residence in the city to Fragrant Hills Park had taken less than ten minutes. It was here, deep beneath the surface of the old imperial garden, that the Joint Battle Command Center had been built over many decades.

With the Beijing Botanical Gardens above them and with easy access from the Haidian District of Beijing, the edge of the Western Hills made for a spectacular site to locate an underground capital should the need arise.

“We are entering the station now,” Yao overheard the head of his security detail say.

The Maglev train slowed as it pulled into a cavernous station lit with bright artificial lights designed to mimic the effects of the sun. Yao stared out the window as the train came to a stop. He could see the station was bustling with activity. Workers were coming and going, moving carts of supplies or talking animatedly with each other as they moved about the platform.

“We are ready to move when you are, sir,” his head of security informed him, no doubt eager to get him moved into the mountain fortress.

As Yao disembarked the train, his strides belied none of the roiling frustration he felt within. He had an image of strength to project, especially with troubling reports awaiting him. The security detail led him towards a waiting tram that would take them further into the mountain complex.

The ride was short—just long enough for Yao to think about what was happening above.

“We are here, Mr. President,” the head of his security said. They exited the tram and headed toward the door leading into the giant command center.

President Yao was greeted by the grim faces of his generals and their staff, who were busily coordinating counterattacks and assessing the damage caused by the missiles that had already hit. As Yao looked at the large monitor in the operations center, it was apparent this was a much larger attack than previous allied bombing raids or missile strikes. Some icons denoted hits while others showed missiles still inbound to their targets. These missiles appeared to be aimed at the fringes of their territory, much further away from the actual fighting.

More attacks against our road and rail networks, he surmised. These attacks have to stop...we cannot possibly win this war or hope to turn it around if we cannot regain control of the skies above our cities and factories.

“This way, Mr. President,” a military aide said as he directed them towards the fishbowl. At least, that’s what Yao liked to call it. A sizable boardroom-like briefing room four meters above the ground floor, the fishbowl gave those inside a view of the entire command center while sealing them off from the noise and chatter of the dozens of people working the various terminals below.

Yao walked into the fishbowl, heading towards his seat at the center of the table. He resolved to greet the news with an iron facade, the anger and rage he felt simmering in his heart wanting to explode—but it couldn’t.

Perhaps it is time to initiate Yunlong.

As Yao sat in his chair, an aide poured him a fresh cup of tea, piping hot with just the amount of honey he liked. Sipping the tea, he seethed as he cycled through the damage

reports that continued streaming into the terminal in front of him from the various locations the missiles had hit.

How could the allies have slipped over a thousand missiles past our defenses? he asked himself glumly. *Have we become so impotent?*

Finally, Yao broke his silence, his temper having simmered long enough. “Someone explain to me how the enemy managed to launch a cruise missile attack on this scale and why we appear to have been unable to even respond to it,” he demanded.

Yao waited to see who would be the first to respond to his question. To his surprise, General Li, the head of the People’s Liberation Army, shifted uneasily in his chair before replying, “It was a trick—a well-orchestrated deception play.”

“Really? Do tell, General Li,” Yao replied, surprised by Li’s bluntness.

“This attack wasn’t like previous missile or bombing attacks. They surprised us because they didn’t use stealth or traditional bomber assets. Instead, this attack originated from their regular run-of-the-mill cargo jets. That’s how they caught our radar crews and interceptors off guard.”

“Huh. That is your expert military opinion? The allies converted cargo planes into makeshift bombers to launch waves of cruise missiles?” Yao’s voice dripped with icy contempt.

Jade Dragon must have sensed an opportunity as he interjected, “Mr. President, you are more or less correct in your assumption. For more than a decade, the American Air

Force has pursued a strategy called Rapid Dragon. This strategy called for utilizing existing cargo jets to carry a palletized container capable of carrying cruise missiles in either a six-tube or a nine-tube disposable pod module. This system allows the American C-130 cargo aircraft to be fitted with two of these six-pod disposable modules, whereas the C-17 Globemaster can carry five nine-pod disposable modules. This approach effectively allows their cargo planes to fire between twelve and forty-five cruise missiles per aircraft. I would like to note this is only the second time we have seen the allies use this weapon against us. I had not anticipated the allies using this tactic nor their industrial ability to scale their cruise missile production to conduct this significant an attack. I have recalculated my assessments of the allied industrial capacity,” JD finished.

Yao paused as he thought about what JD had just said. Perhaps he had been too hasty in rebuking his generals. This novel weapon system seemed to have slipped past JD, despite the AI’s highly advanced capacity to track and assess the allies’ various threats and capabilities. Still, the damage inflicted rankled him.

“OK, so Jade Dragon appears to have dropped the ball here. What about our aircraft? How did our fighters manage not to down the scores of cargo jets that were part of this operation?” Yao pivoted to General Luo, his Air Force Chief of Staff. “What happened to your Shadow Dragons—our Dark Dragons...why did our fleet of drone fighters fail to stop them?”

Luo bristled at the implied criticism. “On the contrary, Mr. President. Our fighters eliminated twenty-two jets—seven

fifth-generation fighters and fifteen cargo aircraft. While it is true that many of our installations suffered damage, we were, however, able to prevent critical installations, like Area 43, from sustaining any damage.”

When Yao heard that Area 43 had survived the attack unscathed, he felt immensely better. Supposing they could continue to protect this particular production facility, then they might be able to produce enough of their superweapons to make a difference in turning this war around. But one question still nagged at him.

“I am glad to hear Area 43 did not sustain damage. What was the intended target of all these missile attacks?” he asked Luo. “Over a thousand spread across most of the country—why?”

Jade Dragon interjected, “The allies’ aim was disruption more than outright destruction, except for northern China and General Song’s First PLA Army. The bulk of these missile attacks did not overwhelm any one particular area. However, they made a point of destroying rail and road bridges, tunnels, and major interchanges and connections. Hitting logistical networks to further impede our ability to supply our northern forces seems to have been the primary objective of this attack. In addition to attacks on our logistical networks, these strikes also stressed our air defenses, probing for weaknesses ahead of what I assume will be a new ground offensive.”

As Yao listened to JD’s assessment, it seemed to ring true, no matter his thoughts. Yao again appreciated JD’s ability to discern strategic patterns beneath surface outcomes.

Perhaps it is time to consider expanding Jade Dragon's purview and autonomy to make decisions...

Just then, a nervous aide interrupted Yao's thoughts. "General Song is now on the line and prepared to update us on his current situation."

"Excellent, put him through," Yao ordered. He steeled himself as the First Army commander's image appeared on-screen. It was time to take charge of this conflict before the allies could gain further momentum.

First PLA Army HQ

Shenshuiwan Park

Shenyang, Liaoning Province

General Song bristled as General Xue Jia, the Commander of the PLA Ground Force, shouted his question through the secured video teleconference interface. "What is the situation following the missile attack, General Song?" demanded General Xue.

"The situation is grim, General," Song admitted, the tension of the moment evident in his voice. "Just prior to the missile attack, the allies initiated a rocket and artillery bombardment of the entire Dengta front line. I have reports coming in from every sector along the front that they are under heavy bombardment. My rear-echelon and reserve units are also reporting being under rocket artillery attack in addition to

these cruise missile strikes hitting fuel and ammunition depots and vehicle yards. It's a damn mess right now."

President Yao's face appeared where General Xue's had been moments before. "General Song, do you believe the allies are preparing to assault the Dengta Line or do you believe they are up to something else entirely?" Yao asked.

"Mr. President, I believe this is the allied offensive Jade Dragon and our intelligence reports have been alluding to for some time. With the Russians pressing our lines in Inner Mongolia and the NATO Plus force pressing into northern China, it makes sense that the allies would initiate another offensive here, in the south of my AOR, to stress my ability to supply and support three defensive positions at the same time," explained General Song.

"I concur with General Song's assessment," Jade Dragon chimed in. "The allies have been building up forces on the Liaodong Peninsula and the southern Liaoning Province for some time. While this offensive is still in its early stages, I would not be confident in saying that the allies were not planning to launch another offensive soon, perhaps to further disrupt our ability to support our forces in northern China."

General Song privately fumed as the AI pontificated on possible allied this and allied that. *That stupid machine is guessing at what the enemy will do just as much as we are*, he argued with himself as the President seemed to agree to whatever his toy machine told him. *It won't be long before the President places that machine in charge of us all...*

"General Song! Are you still there?" demanded General Xue.

“Yes, I am still here. I am distracted by the reports from my units. Is there something more I can do for you, or can I get back to fighting the allies?” he snapped before regaining control of his emotions.

“General Song,” the President started, “from our position here, we are able to see what is happening from a wider vantage point than you. We, too, believe this is the start of a new major offensive action by the allies. As such, I am ordering you to relocate your headquarters to a position further from the front lines. You are too valuable a commander to risk being encircled, or worse, incapacitated. I do not care which of these alternate command locations you choose, but begin the process of relocating to Changchun or Siping immediately.”

As if to amplify the danger of his current position, another missile or rocket artillery hit the building above General Song’s headquarters. The lights in his command center briefly flickered as their ears rang from the nearby blast.

It took a moment for General Song to compose himself before responding as he brushed debris off his shoulders. “Mr. President, I appreciate the concern. While your plan is not without merit, it is far easier for me to manage the most important battlefield decisions if I remain close to the frontline positions.”

President Yao was about to respond when General Song heard the familiar voice of Jade Dragon interject. “You are right, General Song, it is easier for you to identify problems with your commanders the closer you are to the battle. But as the President mentioned, you are too valuable to place yourself in this kind of jeopardy. I clearly have the

ability to communicate with not just one of your local unit commanders, but all of them at the same time. Because I can handle any modifications to troop dispositions and react to the enemy faster than you or your staff, it would be wiser to have you relocate to a safer position and allow me to assume this risk.”

Wow, the balls on this machine to speak to me like this...I'd have you shot if you weren't made of ones and zeros.

“That is a good point, JD,” President Yao said, parroting the AI’s concern. “General Song, I imagine as a soldier, you want to be where your men can see you—for them to know you are there with them, sharing the same sacrifices and risks they are. But we have lost far too many of our more capable generals throughout this war. The Army can ill afford to lose our most capable military commander at such a critical moment.

“General Song, this is an order from your President. You are to relocate your headquarters and yourself to either your alternative command post at Changchun or the one at Siping—your choice. But you are ordered to leave the city now, before you become trapped and unable to evacuate. Is that understood?” The President glared, leaving no room for negotiation.

Damn you, Jade Dragon...you are going to cost us the war.

“Understood, Mr. President. My staff and I will be on the move within the hour.”

Yao shook his head. “No, General. You will be on the move within the next ten minutes. No more. Time is of the

essence. You mustn't dither; there isn't time."

Doing his best to remain calm while the call was still connected, General Song agreed to be on the move within the time allotted. Once the call disconnected, his aides and deputies moved with a purpose as computers were shut down and maps folded up.

Boom!

Bam!

The building shook from another explosion as more erupted nearby.

"It's probably another HIMARS attack," a major commented.

"General Song, if those rockets are HIMARS, it's likely the enemy knows your headquarters is here or nearby," elaborated Senior Colonel Wang Xiubin, one of his most trusted aides.

General Song pounded the desk in frustration, cursing that damn AI beneath his breath. Looking to his aide, he said, "You are likely right, Colonel. But before we leave Shenyang, I need to know where Major General Wu Kehua is located. I must speak to him before we leave."

"Yes, General, let me find out where he is while we search for available helos we can use to relocate the headquarters. Do you have a preference between Changchun or Siping?" asked Colonel Wang.

"Changchun—let's relocate there. In the meantime, get us enough helos to make the move, and also find us some gunships. There is no way in hell I want to travel on the

highways with as many drones as the allies probably have in the air by now,” Song directed, and his staff went to work making it all happen.

As the time continued to tick by, Song felt himself growing more nervous by the minute. He still hadn’t found out General Wu’s location or been able to contact him. Wu was hands down his most capable Group Army commander. If Song was being ordered out of Shenyang, then he was going to bring General Wu with him. He still didn’t trust that AI enough to rely on it like an advisor.

It wasn’t long before the sounds of helicopters could be heard approaching Shenshuiwan Park. It was time to leave the refuge of his headquarters to head for the helos.

Just as he was about to leave, an officer ran up to him. “Sir, I was able to connect to someone on General Wu’s staff. He said the general was visiting some units at the Taoxian airport prior to the missile attack. His staff assured me the general is fine, but he’s staying at the airport for the moment until it’s safer for him to move about. Do you want me to pass along a message to him before you leave?”

“Yes, Major, tell General Wu I’m relocating my headquarters to Changchun. But before I leave the area, I’m going to direct the helo pilots to make a stop at his location. Tell him to be ready to travel within minutes of my arrival—say twenty minutes from now. I’ll see him then,” General Song instructed. Then he followed his bodyguard and key staff out to the waiting helos.

Ten Minutes Later

IVO Mozishan Park

General Song Fu was beginning to question his choice to relocate to Changchun via helicopter after seeing the helo next to them explode. The next thing he knew, the pilot dove for the ground, banking sharply to the right, but not before Song was able to catch a glimpse of the Taoxian International Airport just kilometers away.

Something's not right, he thought. Wait...those aren't our vehicles.

It suddenly dawned on General Song that the airport was under attack. At first, he had thought the pillars of black smoke rising at various points around the airport were remnants of the earlier missile attack. Now he realized they were likely from destroyed vehicles meant to guard the airport.

Could the Americans really have taken over the airport? he wondered, suddenly feeling a full-fledged sense of panic. *How could ground elements have broken through the lines and advanced this far?*

“Sir! The airport—it’s under their control!” shouted the pilot. “We’re being targeted. Hold on!”

The helicopter veered violently as the pilot tried to abort the landing. General Song glanced out the side window, and his blood ran completely cold. A vapor trail from the ground was streaking toward them—a missile.

“Incoming, brace for impact!” the pilot yelled as he pulled wildly on the controls, trying to evade the dangerous

projectile.

Bang!

The explosion was deafening, the sudden jolt violent. The Z-9 lurched to one side, rotor RPMs dropping dangerously. Alarms blared in the cockpit.

“We’re hit! Damn it, the tail boom is gone!” the copilot reported.

The helicopter was spiraling out of control.

General Song tried to see through the spinning out his window where they were headed—a copse of trees came into view. The pilot wrestled with the controls, trying desperately to slow their descent.

“Brace for crash landing!”

The helicopter clipped the tops of the trees, severing branches that raked the fuselage with a screech of tearing metal. The ground rushed up to meet them. With a bone-jarring impact and an explosion of dirt, the helicopter smashed into an empty farm field, skidding to a grinding halt.

General Song lay dazed, the breath knocked out of him. The stench of kerosene filled the battered cabin. He looked around in shock at the mangled interior. The pilot and copilot were dead, their bodies a tangled mess of flesh intertwined with the wires and metal of the helo. He tried to move. Then he felt a stabbing pain, and his world turned black.

Chapter Two

Did We Just Bag a General?

Bravo Company, 3rd Rangers

IVO Heyan Village

Sujiatun District, Shenyang

The sounds of battle raged all around them: the whistles of artillery, the screams of rockets firing, the rumble of tanks, and the roars of jet engines high above. The fight to defeat the First PLA Army was on, and it was in full swing.

“Hang on back there—we’re about to go mudding!” howled Corporal Yangst excitedly before swerving their vehicle off the road into an empty field leading to the airport’s outer perimeter fence.

Sergeant First Class Amos Dekker grabbed for the crash bar as the vehicle practically went airborne. As they bounced and raced across the field, Dekker wasn’t sure if he should be hooting and hollering with the others or saying a quick prayer to the Lord to get him through the next couple of moments without dying. While Dekker and his unit sought to outflank the unit they’d initially encountered at the roadblock, the enemy was now fully aware of their presence, and it was only a matter of time until more PLA showed up.

“Hey, check it out!” shouted PFC Dutton. He swiveled the Mk 19 automatic grenade gun around and then gestured wildly. “Second Platoon just breached the fence! They’re in!”

Looking in the direction Dutton had pointed, Dekker saw the platoon's ISVs accelerate rapidly onto the taxi ramp next to the main runway. Then two of the gunners manning the top-mounted .50-cals opened fire on something just outside his view. Moments later, something whipped overhead before he heard the roar of jet engines. A pair of giant fireballs suddenly burst forth where the two ISVs had been just moments earlier.

“Holy crap! Enemy aircraft, nine o'clock!” shouted Dutton.

“One of you guys grab the Starstreak and get it ready for me!” Dekker shouted before turning to Yangst. “Pull over. We gotta take that thing out before it circles around.”

Yangst brought the vehicle to a stop, and Dekker jumped out of the passenger seat. He motioned for the soldier who'd just unfastened the MANPAD from the vehicle's roll bar to toss it to him. Catching the cylindrical tube, he readied the missile just as he spotted the J-10 leveling out of its turn as it lined up for another attack run on the Rangers breaching the airport's perimeter.

Aiming at the rapidly approaching aircraft, he placed the targeting reticle over the J-10. When the paths of the jet and the missile lined up perfectly, he pressed the trigger. The missile took off, shooting out the tube and leaving a trail of smoke in its wake.

The Starstreak, a supersonic missile designed with three dart-like submunitions, each with its own separate propellant, shot through the sky like a lightning bolt. Then, with an earsplitting sound and a brilliant flash of light, it slammed into the J-10, ripping the front of the plane off the

body of the aircraft. The separated pieces of the plane cartwheeled over their heads into the field behind them as it exploded into a ball of fire.

“Hot damn, Sergeant! That’s three planes and helicopters you’ve shot down!” PFC Dutton exclaimed.

Then Corporal Yangst asked, “Whoa, if you’re able to shoot two more of them down, does that mean you’re an Ace?”

The comment caused Dekker to laugh. Then he tossed the spent tube to the ground and hopped in the vehicle. “We got bigger things to worry about, guys. Let’s get back on mission. We still have an objective to seize.”

Corporal Yangst got the vehicle back on the move and they took off in the direction of the platoon. Following after the vehicles ahead of them, they drove through the cut in the fence and were on the taxiway moments later.

Once Dekker had oriented Yangst on where they needed to go next, he sped them along quickly, approaching the vehicle’s top speed. Their platoon had been assigned an objective on the opposite end of the airport. Having stopped the vehicle so Dekker could use the Starstreak, they were now behind schedule, and the other ISVs of the platoon had already raced well ahead of them. For better or worse, Dekker and the other ISV traveling with him would have to make up for the lost time and hope the rest of Bravo Company had already seized control of the Shenben interchange without incident.

The Shenyang Taoxian International Airport sat roughly twenty kilometers south of the city center of Shenyang in the Hunnan District. The airport was a quick jaunt down the

Shenben avenue otherwise known as the 3rd Ring Road, or southbound on the nearby Shendan Expressway—the 4th Ring Road. Maintaining control of the on- and off-ramps of these two high-speed eight-lane highways was critical if they didn't want to lose control of the airport they had just captured.

The first interchange junction point, Shenben, was a little more than two kilometers north of the airport's main parking garage. The second interchange was another one and a half kilometers north of Shenben, placing the two ring roads in close proximity to each other. It was vital for the Rangers to maintain control of both, or reinforcements might be able to overwhelm them at the airport before friendly units were able to relieve them.

“Oh, crap, Sergeant Dekker. Looks like more helicopters headed towards the airport from the direction of the city,” PFC Denton shouted as he pointed off to their nine o'clock position.

Dekker cringed at the mention of helicopters. Unless you took 'em down quick, they could rapidly mess up an offensive with a barrage of fire-and-forget ATGMs. As he looked more closely at the trio of helicopters, one thing instantly stuck out to him as odd. Leading the trio appeared to be a pair of Z-10 attack helicopters, while the trail helicopter looked more like one of the Harbin Z-9 utility transports. As the helicopters continued towards them and the airport, a thought occurred to him.

I don't think they're aware we took the airport yet.

“Hey, I got an idea,” Dekker announced as he pointed to the side of the road. He told Yangst to pull over under some

trees for cover, then told the guys to get out of the vehicle and set up a perimeter.

As his Rangers moved further from the vehicle, he stepped up onto the side of the door frame, reaching up the roof rack, where he unfastened the last pair of Starstreaks they had with them. With the sound of helicopters getting closer by the second, he hurried to get the pair of missiles ready, hoping he might be lucky enough to nail 'em before they realized the airport was under enemy control. Once they were aware of that, the pair of Z-10s could seriously hurt their efforts to hang on to the airport.

Readying the first Starstreak, he started to wonder if he should use both missiles against the Z-10s. But the fact that they were escorting a Z-9 told him they were probably flying cover for someone important. Important enough that he should use one of their remaining missiles on it.

“Those helicopters are almost on top of us, Sergeant,” one of his soldiers exclaimed. The whomp, whomp of helicopter blades grew louder by the second.

Lifting the MANPAD to his shoulder, Dekker aimed at the gunship, waiting long enough for the targeting system to acquire, then fired.

Moments after the missile was ejected out of the tube, it took off like a lightning bolt straight for the gunship. The pilot tried to react, dispensing flares and taking defensive actions. But it was to no avail as Dekker kept the targeting reticle steadily on the Z-10 until the beam-riding missile unsheathed its trio of tungsten darts, which plowed into the helicopter before exploding.

Dekker tossed the spent tube to the side while his soldiers cheered and hooted excitedly. Paying the ruckus no heed, he grabbed for the second missile he'd already made ready and brought it to bear.

He rapidly searched the sky, hoping the transport helicopter hadn't gotten away before he could get a shot off.

"Sergeant Dekker—over there!" shouted one of his soldiers, pointing off to his left. Sure enough, the transport, a Harbin Z-9, had dived for the deck, likely hoping to slip past whoever had just fired on one of their escorts.

Dekker changed positions and tried to aim the MANPAD at the Z-9 but failed to secure a lock. There were too many trees blocking his attempts. Undeterred and not wanting to let the bastard get away, he took off in the direction of the road they'd just been on, hoping to find a gap in the trees or an opening that might let him get a shot off with the missile before the helicopter could get away.

As he reached the center of the road, he tried to regain control of his breath—steady his breathing as he looked to the sky. It took only a moment; then he spotted the Z-9. He centered the targeting reticle just long enough to gain a lock before firing.

Whoosh!

The missile leapt from the tube, almost floating through the air for a moment before its second-stage booster kicked in, hurling it like a bat out of hell as it accelerated to Mach 4.

The Z-9 reacted like its escort—ejecting flares and taking evasive maneuvers. But Dekker kept the missile on target, until the pilot made a daring last-second move and turned tightly to one side, causing one or more of the trio of darts to miss the main body of the helicopter. Instead, one of the darts sheered the tail boom clean off the body of the helicopter, sending it into an out-of-control spin.

Seeing the helicopter thud into the ground about a kilometer from their position, Dekker ordered everyone back to the ISV and told Yangst to hightail it to the crash site. With no loud explosion or fireball rising into the sky, there was a high likelihood of survivors—survivors Dekker was determined to capture if possible.

The ISV roared towards the crash site. The helicopter was a twisted wreck, its nose crushed, its tail boom sheered off. It was a pitiful sight. Civilians had started to gather, their curiosity piqued, but they scattered at the sight of the Americans.

Yangst brought the vehicle to a halt at a safe distance. Dekker's orders were swift. "Form a perimeter. Didukh, with me." He turned to Denton, manning the Mk 19. "Get Captain Loach on the radio and give him a SITREP. He's probably losing his mind by now, wondering where we are."

Dekker's mind was racing as he approached the smoldering wreck. If there were survivors, they had to act fast. He hoped the fuel was spent. He didn't fancy being blown up by his own kill.

Didukh's voice broke through his thoughts. "We need to get this door open, Dekker." Together, they wrestled with

the jammed door until it finally gave way. Dekker's rifle was up in an instant, trained on the unconscious men inside.

One of them stirred, a cry of pain escaping his lips. He pointed at another figure, his hand slick with blood. Didukh moved in, checking for pulses. The first few were dead. As he reached the injured man, the guy grabbed his arm, fear and pain in his eyes. Dekker reacted instinctively, a right hook sending the man into unconsciousness.

They dragged him out, then went back for the man he'd pointed out. Dekker's heart pounded as he saw the rank insignia. A general. They'd bagged a general. The cabin was filling with smoke, the heat intensifying. The fire was spreading.

"We don't have much time," Didukh warned. They struggled with the harness, finally freeing the man as flames began to lick at the cabin. They dragged him out, laying him next to the first man.

"Holy crap, isn't that a general's insignia on his uniform?" asked Didukh.

"Yeah, it is. Who do we have here?" Dekker mused to himself. "Didukh, you speak some Chinese, right?"

"A little, but my Chinese sucks."

Dekker rifled through the general's pockets and tossed the wallet to Didukh. "We caught a whale, Didukh—I just need you to tell me which one."

Didukh flicked through the identification card and other information before him. "Did we just capture the commanding general of the First PLA Army, Dekker?"

A laugh bubbled up from Dekker's throat. He shared a grin with Didukh, then signaled for Yangst to bring the vehicle over. He picked up the radio, ready to make the call that would change everything.

Chapter Three

Dining in Anticipation

1st Battalion “Death Dealers,” 67th Armored Regiment

Dengta Fuzhifu Forest Park

Liaoyang, China

Lieutenant Colonel Bob Steinert stood tall before his men, his voice cutting through the anxious silence. “Listen up, Death Dealers. Tonight, I won’t bore you with fluffed-up platitudes or false bravado. We stand on the brink of a battle unlike any we’ve faced. In just a few hours, we’ll be thrust into the thick of Operation Iron Tempest. Alongside our brothers in the Republic of Korea, the 30th Armored Brigade, we will become the tip of this spear.

“Now, I’m not going to sugarcoat it. This situation is real. It’s raw. Some of you are looking down the barrel of your last twenty-four hours on God’s green earth. And that’s a terrifying truth to stomach. But remember this: every one of you is here because you are the best, the fiercest, the bravest bastards this world has ever seen.

“Look around you. These are more than just your brothers in arms; they are your family. They depend on you, just as you depend on them. When we go into battle, when the steel starts to fly and the world turns into chaos, it’s not just our training, our tactics, or our tanks that’ll see us through. It’s the man to your left, and the man to your right.

“We didn’t start this war, but it’s come to us all the same. And we’ll answer it, not because we crave war, but because we understand the cost of cowardice, the price of inaction. We fight for our country, for the principles it stands for. We fight for our families back home, who sleep soundly under the blanket of freedom we provide.

“Don’t let the gravity of this moment weigh you down. Let it anchor you; let it sharpen you. In the face of fear, in the heart of battle, remember who you are: Death Dealers. When our enemy hears that name, let them tremble. Let them know that certain victory is on our side.

“Tonight, we dine in anticipation. Tomorrow, we feast on victory. To hell with fear, to hell with doubt. Tomorrow, we remind the world what it means to be an American soldier!

“In the words of General Patton himself, ‘I don’t want to get any messages saying that we are holding our position. We’re not holding anything. Let the Hun do that. We are advancing constantly, and we’re not interested in holding on to anything except the enemy’s balls.’

“Remember, we’re the Death Dealers. Let’s go deal some death.”

The silence that followed was pregnant with resolve, each man coming to terms with the reality of the looming conflict. The gravity of the situation had not been diminished, but a spark of defiance had been kindled, a fierce determination born from Steinert’s words.

13 Hours Later

Alpha Company, 4-6 Infantry Regiment

Liaoyang Staging Area

As the sounds of battle grew in intensity, Sergeant Erik Rosen was still trying to understand how he'd found himself assigned to First Squad, Third Platoon, Alpha Company with the 6th Infantry Regiment, part of the 1st Armored Division. Prior to being shot, he'd been a paratrooper in the 501st. Now, by means of what had to be some sort of clerical error, he'd somehow gone from being a paratrooper to being a mech. It wasn't that he had anything against the mechanized infantry in general—they just weren't paratroopers.

After months in the hospital while his fractured tibia and femur healed, the Army had transferred him to a VA facility for rehab. Once the docs had determined he was still medically fit for duty, he'd been given two weeks' leave and told to report to Fort Moore, where he'd catch a rotator to Korea and await further orders. No sooner had he arrived in Korea than he found himself on a C-130 headed to Anshan Teng'ao airport. That was when he found out he wasn't going back to the 501st. He'd been reassigned to the 6th Infantry Regiment, 1st Armored Division. Upon arrival to his new unit, he'd been put in charge of Alpha Team, just days before the start of the big offensive—the one the RUMINT mill said might finally end the war.

As the intensity of the battle continued to grow beyond what he'd thought was possible, he was starting to wonder if maybe they were right. This might be one of those defining

battles. All they'd been told hours before they'd loaded into the Army's latest and greatest infantry fighting vehicle, the Rheinmetall KF41 Lynx, was that the division was going to lead the charge against the Dengta Line. Having only recently joined the unit, he had no idea what the Dengta Line was or what made it special. He'd gotten wounded long before the current lines had settled and defensive works like this had been constructed. When he'd been brought up to speed on things, he thought about the battles fought during the Russo-Ukraine War a few years prior to this one. On Twitter and YouTube, he'd seen images of the defensive works the Russians had built during the winter months of 2022 going into the spring of 2023. A lot of people had died trying to breach them. He had a feeling this was shaping up to be pretty similar, just larger in scope.

“Wha’cha think, Sergeant Rosen? All that arty they’ve been shooting gonna leave any Chinks for us, or is this gonna be over when the hatch opens?” PFC Dale Simpson asked in what had to be the thickest Southern drawl he’d ever heard.

Rosen was about to say something smart when he saw the eyes of the four other soldiers looking at him—pleading for him to agree with Simpson. The sounds of battle were getting closer as their Lynx steadily drove towards it, so he leaned in to explain.

“Listen, I just got here last week. I know we haven’t had a chance to get to know each other or even train together. For that, I’m truly sorry. What I can tell you is this—when our vehicle reaches the front and that door over there opens for us to exit, the only thing that’s going to matter is surviving. While you may think no one can live through the kind of

bombardment we're laying on the enemy, they can, and they will. They've had the better part of half a year to prepare for this kind of assault.

“The best advice I can give you is this: work with each other, communicate, shoot when in doubt, and trust your training—use it, don't try to overthink things, and whatever you do, stay aggressive, and never let your guard down. When it's our turn to assault the trenches, always provide covering fire for each other. If you're shooting at them, you're forcing them to either expose themselves or duck into the trench for cover. Once we get closer to the trenches, that's when you start lobbing grenades. When you see 'em going off, you rush 'em. Get as close to the lip of the trench as you can and start looking for targets to shoot. We clear the trench, and we move on. That's how we get through this. That's how we survive the next few hours,” Rosen finished.

“Yeah, well, that's all good to know, Staff Sergeant. How's that any different than what the LT and Sergeant First Class Herricks were saying during last night's premission brief?” Corporal Nadeem Seirafi quizzed, the look on his face betraying his doubt at what Rosen had just shared with them. “Have you got any experience, or are you one of those shake 'n' bake staff sergeants who happened to have some college when your draft number came up?”

Instead of taking offense at the question, Rosen reminded himself he'd joined these guys and taken charge of their squad only a few days earlier. Their timing for asking questions sucked, but that didn't mean he couldn't answer them. If his hastily thrown-together squad was going to

survive the next few hours, he needed to assure these men that he knew what he was doing.

“Prior to the war, I was a paratrooper with the 501st up at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, in Alaska. Our unit was part of the reaction force that would fly into Korea should the North invade. Every time we geared up for a jump at the Malemute Drop Zone north of the main base, we used to talk about how useless it was to pretend we’d actually parachute into North Korea or any of the other silly FTX scenarios they’d come up with. Then one day that’s exactly what we did —”

“Whoa, wait a second. You guys actually combat-jumped into North Korea? I thought they surrendered right after we nuked them into oblivion,” interrupted Seirafi.

Rosen smiled at the interruption, calmly adding, “We did. In fact, we jumped shortly after they dropped those nukes. I remember as I left the C-130 and my parachute opened, I dangled below, and as I looked off to the horizon, sure as could be, I saw not one mushroom cloud but eight of them scattered along what had been the DMZ. It was almost like a video game scene out of *Call of Duty* or something. But it was real. We had nuked North Korea and now I was parachuting well behind enemy lines at what I had to assume was the start of the Second Korean War.”

The soldiers listened as Rosen recounted the events of those first few days following their landing behind enemy lines and the start of the second war between the two Koreas. As he explained how he’d survived those early days of his wartime experiences, he found ways to tie the story to the

moment at hand, to what they were about to experience. Despite the growing sounds of artillery shells and rockets swooshing over their column of armored vehicles, he tried his best to leverage the few moments they had to impart whatever knowledge he could that might keep them alive to see another sunrise, to say “I love you” one more time to a loved one back home or to write another letter to their son or daughter who one day might want to know what they had done during the Third World War. The time was short, the information too vast. But he’d be damned if he didn’t try and give his squad the best possible chance to survive the coming battle.

“Hey, Chatty Cathy back there. We’re approaching the hold point. Once we’re there, I’m going to lower the ramp so we can stretch our legs, take a bio break, and stand by for the final order to advance to contact,” shouted the vehicle commander from his seat near the center of the vehicle.

“Thanks, Joey. Any idea on when they’ll give us the go order?” Rosen asked. He knew the others were thinking the same thing.

“Who knows, man? I’m just an Uber driver. I drop you guys where I’m told, then rush back for another load and rinse and repeat until they tell me otherwise,” Joey told them before turning back to his station.

“Huh, ain’t that helpful,” Simpson commented and the others laughed, breaking the tension of the moment.

When the vehicle came to a halt a few minutes later, the ramp dropped, and they rushed off. Spotting a cluster of trees and underbrush that still had a few leaves to it, Rosen made a beeline for it, his baby wipes in hand. Maybe it was

nerves, but whether he was preparing for a jump or preparing for a mission outside the FOB, he'd invariably have to answer nature's call and leave something behind before he embarked on whatever it was that caused his insides to cramp up.

Squatting in the bushes, Rosen continued to marvel at the sheer volume of outgoing artillery shells and rockets being lobbed at the trench lines they were about to assault. He wasn't sure if this was being done to flatten the enemy in hopes of minimizing their losses or because the trench works were truly formidable. If it was the latter, they were in for a hell of a fight. He had already earned one Purple Heart during this war, and he wasn't keen on a second.

That last one hurt like hell. I'd rather not get shot again if I can avoid it...

Then a voice shouted, grabbing the attention of the soldiers milling about. "Listen up, Regulars! We're saddling up in five mikes! They just ordered the sapper teams forward. That means the tanks will be going in shortly and we'll be hot on their heels once that happens. Smoke 'em if you got 'em and finish those bio breaks if you need 'em. It's going to be a long day, Regulars. Let's kick some ass!"

Rosen finished his business quickly. Emerging from the bushes, he gathered up his squad. "This is it, guys. You can do this. I believe in you. Right now I need each of you to believe in yourselves and in each other. Sergeant Kennedy, once your vehicle stops, I need you to lead Alpha Team and keep your guys moving. Since I'm riding with Bravo Team, I'll stay with them. Let's try to work together as best we can to

support each other's fire teams and get ourselves through this.
Hooah?"

"Hooah, Staff Sergeant!" his men shouted excitedly as someone in one of the nearby tracks started to blare the AC/DC song "Highway to Hell."

Chapter Four

Death Dealing

1st Battalion “Death Dealers,” 67th Armored Regiment

Dengta Fuzhifu Forest Park

Liaoyang, China

Inside the M1A2 Abrams, Lieutenant Colonel Bob Steinert’s mobile fortress, the man known across the battalion and brigade simply as Death Actual stared at the command tablet, or CT as they called it. He watched the six drone feeds that provided him visual confirmation of his forces and their ROK counterparts as they advanced to contact with the skirmish lines just in front of the main PLA defensive works. In this moment, as he watched the leviathans of war, the armored chariots of his warriors sending their first volleys towards the enemy, Steinert felt like he was holding the chaos in the iron grip of his hand—directing it like the conductor of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, only his grand orchestra was one of war—the pounding of the bass drum replaced by the artillery and bombs going off in the distance.

For the moment, he’d parked his mobile fortress among the ranks of the iron monsters of Commando Company and the KF41 Lynxes of the 6th Infantry Regiment “Regulars” as they stood by, waiting for him to command them forward. For now, he was content to hold them in reserve and wait until he spotted a momentary break in the enemy lines that he could rapidly exploit to break out into the enemy rear areas. Until

then, his armored chariot would function as the battalion nerve center.

Sitting inside the tank with the hatch above open, the cool air wafting into the compartment, bringing with it the sounds of battle, Steinert could hear the RQ-7 Shadows buzz overhead as the 13th Cavalry Regiment sent another wave of the UAVs ahead of them, likely to replace the ones already zapped by the PLA antidrone EM weapons or MANPADS operated by the infantry. Keeping ISR drones above their formations was proving to be a never-ending job for the cav scouts. Just as he was about to climb up into the turret for some fresh air, a message flashed in the chat box along the side of the CT, demanding his attention.

This better be an update on my CAS request, Steinert thought as he clicked on the chat box, opening it up.

“CAS Update: Six V-247 Vigilant UCAVs, eight RQ-21 Blackjacks...” And the list of aviation assets appeared, from attack helicopters to AT-6 Wolverines to the A-29 Super Tucanos and a handful of A-10 Warthogs, all on deck for the launch of Iron Tempest.

At least the flyboys are showing up with their toys this time around, Steinert thought, glad the Air Force was going to make their presence known.

Closing the chat box, he climbed up into the commander’s hatch. He wanted a moment to be alone, to clear his mind of nervousness before going into battle. No matter how well he had prepared his men for battle, he was still going to lose people. War was like that—it was unpredictable. It was brutal, swift, and savage. No matter how hard you trained your

soldiers, drilled them until every action became second nature, the moment the bullets started to fly and the ground around you began to explode, you had to let go—trust that you'd trained them well and let the chips fall where they would.

As he took a breath of the cool predawn air, his mind cleared. He felt his senses heighten. His ears caught the subtle changes in the sounds of the battle as it grew more intense and more frequent and larger explosions began to occur. The Air Force made its presence known.

Glancing down to the tablet in his hand, he double-tapped on one of the images, expanding it to cover the screen. As he stared at the image from the RQ-7 circling somewhere above them, he could see the depth of the defensive works his battalion and their Korean counterparts were about to assault.

The PLA had known for the better part of six months that the allies were eventually going to storm these positions if they wanted to take the city of Shenyang or attempt to encircle and destroy the bulk of the First PLA Army. Knowing this was the likely avenue of attack, the enemy had woven a tapestry of multiple layers of trenches, bunkers, antitank ditches, and tanks in defilade positions, ready to strike at an attacking force the moment they dared to challenge their lines.

As the attacking force began their approach to the defensive works, they'd have to overcome a devil's garden of dragon's teeth made of steel and cement, likely interwoven with an ungodly amount of antitank and antipersonnel mines buried just beneath the soil. This was all before they encountered the beginning of a multilayered fence of concertina wire a few dozen meters in front of the first set of

trenches. Trenches teeming with infantry armed with RPGs and antitank guided missiles.

We should have pressed our attack against their lines way before they had a chance to erect this nightmare. Fighting through this is going to be costly...

“Sir, you might want to grab your CVC. I just heard the S3 announce Gladiator Actual is about to come on the comms,” said Staff Sergeant Ryan Schow, his gunner, and for all intents and purposes, the man who’d fight the tank for him should they need to fight themselves.

“Thanks, Ryan. I wouldn’t want to miss this,” he replied with a laugh.

The Death Dealers were the tip of the spear for the division. It’d be pretty embarrassing if he missed the attack order because he was too busy looking at that live drone footage streaming in from the cav scouts. These new CTs were an incredible tool, part of the Army’s plan to digitize the battlefield and allow commanders to take the fullest advantage of the unique capabilities surveillance drones had brought. At the same time, however, they could distract the hell out of you if you weren’t careful.

As he fastened the CVC to his head, the radio came to life with the familiar voice of the division commander. “All Ironside units! This is Gladiator Actual. The code word is Reindeer. I say again, the code word is Reindeer. I’ll see you on the other side. Gladiator Actual...out!”

Steinert smiled, his lips parting in a roguish grin as a palpable charge suddenly electrified the air around him. Reaching a hand down the cord connecting his CVC to the rest

of the tank, he depressed the talk button with his thumb, his voice now encrypted as it transmitted across the battalion net. “Death Dealers! Death Actual. The code word is Polar Bear. I say again, the code word is Polar Bear.”

Grabbing for the tablet, he searched for the drone feed overwatching his lead units and the engineers and sappers assigned to clear a path through the minefields for his tanks. With the official order finally given, the tanks of Attack Company rushed forward. With the engineers in the lead, still approaching the initial line of contact, the first volley of HIMAR rockets equipped with the M30A1’s alternative warheads started to explode overtop the enemy positions and the approaches to them. When the specially designed warheads equipped with some 182,000 pre-formed tungsten fragments began showering the ground like a steel hailstorm, thousands of tiny flashes could be seen from the drones as the mines detonated harmlessly before the tanks and IFVs could run them over, potentially devastating his attacking force before it even got in the fight.

Steinert continued to listen to the orders being shouted over the radio—commands instructing specific units to advance while others provided covering fire to the units closing with the enemy. That was when his eyes caught sight of the Assault Breacher Vehicles or ABVs rushing towards the enemy lines. The giant armored behemoths roared ahead of the tanks of Attack Company, trailed closely by engineering sapper teams who moved towards the edge of the minefields—preparing to fire multiple M58 mine-clearing line charges across them. He watched with pride as the sappers’ tightly honed skills showed the immediate value such units brought to

an armored force needing to advance across an enemy minefield.

The cameras aboard the UAVs overwatching the battle caught glimpses of the charges being shot through the air as the explosive charges woven into the lines fell across the length of the minefield. When they exploded moments later, they triggered whatever remaining mines the HIMARS had missed during their earlier barrage. With multiple axes of approach to the enemy lines beginning to open, the specially equipped ABVs now advanced, lowering their forward plows as they neared the tank ditches. The rapidly accumulating dirt would spill into the ditches, partially filling them as they created the pass-through channels necessary for the tanks to breach the first layer of traps designed to stop them.

While the engineers worked feverishly to clear paths through the minefields and tank traps, the enemy gave them no quarter and showed them no mercy as they fought like devils to stop them. Soon the drones overhead spotted the telltale signs of antitank guided missiles or ATGMs streaking through the air as they leapt from the trench lines to race across the fields before slamming into the assault breacher vehicles.

Steinert watched in frustrated anger and horror as one of the ABVs was destroyed, then a second, and eventually a seventh vehicle in the span of minutes. Some of the missiles were successfully intercepted and destroyed. A few scored glancing hits or disabled the vehicle at worst. Unfortunately for him, more than a few of the missiles scored direct hits, blowing the vehicles apart in a giant display of sparks, fiery flashes and billowing inky smoke. The losses were expected,

with replacement vehicles rushing forward to pick up where their fallen brothers had left off.

Within minutes of these PLA missile teams engaging the engineers, explosions started occurring near, on, and around the locations of these missile teams as the forward observers attached to the cav scouts rained 155mm howitzer shells on top of them. From time to time, Steinert would catch a glimpse via one of the drones of Attack Company's tanks firing one of their HE rounds into the location where they'd last seen a missile team. These groups of two-to-three-man missile teams were among the greatest threats his tanks would have to deal with. The likelihood of these missiles destroying an Abrams and killing the crew was small, but disabling the tank, leaving it unable to carry on the fight—that was almost a certainty.

Steinert pressed the talk button, connecting him to his infantry element. "Death Actual, Regular Actual. Advance," he ordered, directing the infantry fighting vehicles and armored personnel carriers to rush their infantrymen towards the first trench.

With multiple avenues of attack across the front lines now created, Steinert watched the tanks of Attack Company resume their assault towards the trenches as the first wave of infantry vehicles joined their ranks. The main guns of the tanks focused their fire on the bunkers and other hardened enemy positions while the mix of Bradley and Lynx IFVs focused their 25mm and 35mm autocannons on the trenches—aiming to keep the heads of potential missile teams down while the faster APCs carrying the infantry rushed the lines. With machine guns blazing and autocannons firing, the few

enemy soldiers brave enough to stick their heads above the trenches to fire back were being shredded by the maelstrom of bullets and exploding shells all around them.

Steinert gripped the tablet tightly as he continued to observe the battle evolve and intensify. All the elements of the assault force had now been committed. It was like watching a tapestry of chaos and destruction being steadily unfurled across the entirety of the enemy lines. Then, suddenly, it felt like the enemy sensed that the Americans had fully committed to the attack and decided that now was the time to retaliate with whatever they had left. Like a switch turning on as you walked into a darkened room, something changed across the enemy lines. There was a rapid increase in chatter that made the hairs stand up on the back of his neck.

Steinert was in the process of changing drones to see if he could get a better view of what was going on that was causing a sudden increase in excited radio traffic when the drone feed went dead. Just before it winked out of existence, he could have sworn he saw what looked like some sort of swarm of smaller objects rising from the vicinity of the secondary lines, a kilometer or so behind the first line, which his units were in the middle of assaulting.

“Holy crap! Sir, you have to see this.” Steinert’s gunner shouted urgently from his station. “If I’m not mistaken, that looks like a drone swarm...only those drones look to be a hell of a lot bigger than anything I’ve ever seen!”

Chapter Five

Fix Bayonets

Alpha Company, 4-6 Infantry Regiment

Approaching the Dengta Line

Boom, boom, boom...

The armored vehicle shook to one side as a volley of 152mm artillery shells exploded nearby—steel fragments slapping its armored hull while dirt, rocks, and other debris showered the top of the Lynx. The sound of the debris raining down on the roof reminded Staff Sergeant Rosen of the tin roof on his grandfather’s fishing cottage during an afternoon storm. It was moments like this when he was glad to be riding towards the enemy in an armored vehicle rather than hoofing it like paratroopers or riding in open-air infantry support vehicles.

“Hey, heads up back there. It looks like the sappers just opened a few lanes through the minefields,” shouted Joey excitedly from the vehicle commander’s seat. “They’re ordering the breacher vehicles through right now. We’ve been ordered to follow the tanks once the path is cleared. They’ll get us as close to the lines as possible, then we’ll dismount you guys and head back for the next load.”

“Hey, Joey, pipe us the drone feed you’re watching,” Rosen said, hoping to catch a glimpse of what they were about to drive into.

“Sure thing, Staff Sergeant.”

Moments later, the outside feed appeared on the secondary monitor affixed to the back of the vehicle commander’s seat. It gave the soldiers riding along the ability to see what was happening outside the vehicle from the safety within. When the image appeared on the screen, it showed one of the sapper teams as it fired their M58 mine-clearing line charge into a high arcing shot, unfurling its explosive woven charges across the minefield. As the charges landed across the open ground, they detonated, causing a series of explosions to erupt as they triggered the mines nearby.

“Wow, would you look at that?! I don’t think I’ve ever seen something like that. How many mines do you think it took out?” asked Simpson with a look of awe on his face.

“Not enough, would be my bet,” one of the guys responded.

“Yeah, well, it won’t be long now before we’ll be charging our way through it, so let’s hope it worked or they might be scraping our brains off the ceiling of this thing,” one of the soldiers joked, though no one laughed.

As they watched the monitors while they waited to be ordered forward, they saw a group of Abrams and K2 battle tanks move cautiously along the newly created paths through the minefields. The tank gunners engaged the bunkers and PLA tanks in defilade positions. The enemy fired relentlessly at the engineering vehicles and sappers from the 16th Engineer Battalion, who continued to work feverishly to clear more openings through the minefields leading to the trenches.

Rosen and his soldiers watched in amazement as American and Korean tanks fired round after round into the enemy positions, wondering how anyone could survive such an onslaught. Then, to their shock, a figure appeared above the trench line just long enough to fire a missile at the tanks or engineering vehicles before disappearing again beneath the lip of the trench.

While not all the missiles being fired at the tanks and engineering vehicles scored hits, the fact that missiles continued to be fired from the trenches and half-torn-apart bunkers only proved the urgency of getting Rosen and his soldiers into the battle and into those trenches.

What looked like an ATGM slammed into the side of a mine-clearing vehicle. It blew it apart in spectacular fashion, throwing parts and debris around its burning carcass.

“Whoa! Damn! Did you see that?” one of the soldiers asked.

“Yeah, it’s all the more reason we need to get into the fight. These missile teams are going to pick our armor apart if we don’t do something about it soon,” Rosen commented. Until their unit was ordered into the fight, though, they would have to continue to hang tight and wait.

While the tanks and some IFVs provided covering fire for the engineers to keep clearing the minefields, the PLA continued to fire sporadic artillery and rocket fire at the various clearing teams, hoping to score some hits and slow them down.

Rosen had to imagine the counterbattery fire happening further behind the American lines was keeping the enemy

from plastering the hell out of their advance towards the trenches. While he was recovering from being shot, one of the five other soldiers in the room he was staying in had told him all about how his artillery unit had been part of a counterbattery force that focused solely on going after enemy artillery. He recounted how it was a bit of a duel at times between the arty units firing at each other and those supporting offensive or defensive units along the lines of contact. The whole idea of artillery units dueling against each other was mind-boggling to his paratrooper brain. He was just glad he wasn't part of one of those kinds of units.

“Hey, Staff Sergeant, heads up. We've just been ordered to advance. It sounds like they're finally ready for us to storm those trenches and drop you guys off. I'm going to switch us over from the drone feeds to the vehicle camera so you can see when we're getting close to the trenches. We'll drop you as close as we can. Then it's all you while we go back for another load,” the vehicle commander shouted to them.

“Outstanding, Joey. Thanks for the heads-up. It's about time they got us into the action,” Rosen replied as the vehicle lurched forward, their wait finally over.

“Hang on back there!” Sergeant Imler shouted. The next thing Rosen knew, they were being thrown about inside the vehicle as the driver rapidly slowed the Lynx while turning it hard to the right.

BOOM...BAM!

The proximity of the explosion meant that its subsequent shockwave violently slammed into the infantry fighting vehicle with such force that it nearly rolled the vehicle. Bits of metal and shrapnel bit into its armored shell, then dirt and debris rained down on the roof like chunks of hail, plinking before stopping as quickly as it had started.

“Everyone all right?” Rosen asked, his ears ringing fiercely.

“Yeah, I’m OK,” the guys started to respond as everyone righted themselves in their seats again. Then, before anything further could be said, the vehicle lurched forward as their driver got them back on the move.

Then Sergeant Imler shouted to be heard over the explosions and cannon fire outside the vehicle. “Get ready back there! We’re almost through the minefields the engineers cleared for us. Once we get on the other end, we won’t be far from the objective where we’re supposed to drop you guys. As we near the drop point, we’re going to work the trenches with the main gun to keep their heads down. Once we drop the ramp, we’ll keep laying it on them while you guys get to some cover. Then we’re bugging out to go fetch your reinforcements,” he finished.

“You hear that, guys? It’s showtime. We’re almost there,” Rosen said excitedly, trying to motivate his guys while masking his own fears and nervousness.

Moments later, the vehicle’s main gun started firing at something. The loud chunk-chunk-chunk sounds of the 35mm autocannon reverberated within. Rosen was glad his soldiers weren’t on the receiving end of the Lynx’s dual-purpose

ammo. Every other round it fired was one of those new proximity-fused exploding shells the Army had started fielding. They were the stuff of nightmares for dismounted infantry. It wasn't enough to duck behind cover or drop to the ground in front of you. The new shells were programmable nightmares, able to explode overtop exposed infantry or soldiers hiding down in a trench.

Rosen looked at the soldiers sitting opposite him, giving them a nod of encouragement or a reassuring smile. He could tell they were nervous, even scared at what was about to happen next. Then Imler stopped shooting the main gun as he turned to look back at Rosen, declaring, "We're following a pair of vehicles right up to the trench. Get ready to—"

BOOM!

Suddenly the left front corner of the track was momentarily lifted into the air, threatening yet again to roll them onto their side before the laws of gravity took over once more. As the track thudded back into the ground, Rosen found himself coughing, his eyes watering, and his ears ringing.

"Oh, crap! We hit a mine," he thought he heard Sergeant Imler say amidst the confusion. Then he heard the words no infantryman wants to hear when sitting in the back of an armored vehicle.

"RPG! Two o'clock!"

The warning came from the vehicle gunner seated next to Sergeant Imler. Despite the ringing in Rosen's ears, he felt a surge of fear and a sudden urge to get the hell out of the vehicle before they got slammed by an RPG. As he looked in the direction of Sergeant Imler and the vehicle gunner, he saw

a figure on the monitor of the gunner's station—his shoulders barely above the trench, the outline of an RPG clearly being aimed at them. Then he heard the chunk-chunk-chunk sound as the main gun fired—an empty space now appearing where the man had just been.

Snapping himself out of the brain fog slowing his mind from the mine exploding beneath them, Rosen yelled, “Out of the vehicle now!” They had to get out of this armored box before their luck ran out and something else tore into the disabled vehicle. “Let's go, people! We're not dying in this tin can!” he shouted when the soldier closest to the exit seemed to have some trouble getting it open.

They spilled out of the vehicle and into the chaos of battle. Using the disabled vehicle for cover, Rosen poked his head around the side of it as he sought to get his bearings and see how close they were to the actual trench line. Seeing the objective less than a hundred meters from their current position, he turned back to look at the five soldiers of his brave team, noting the fear on their faces, but also the determination in their eyes. As he gripped his weapon, he yelled to be heard over the orchestra of artillery and machine-gun fire.

“Fix bayonets!”

The soldiers followed his lead as they reached for their blades, metallic clicks ringing out as they affixed them to the fronts of their rifles. Then Rosen ordered, “Follow my lead!” He leapt forward and around the disabled vehicle. They charged into the maelstrom of chaos as they bounded towards the trench line with expert precision. The six of them

transformed into figures of violent determination against the backdrop of war-torn desolation.

Racing towards the enemy, Rosen ran through the cadence of “I’m up” as he ran a few steps forward before saying, “He sees me—I’m down,” as he dropped to the ground, red tracer fire crisscrossing overhead where he’d been moments earlier.

Looking forward, he spotted the trench. Twenty meters. Turning back, he saw his guys still alive, still following him. Using a hand signal, he motioned for them to come abreast of his position. They were going to low-crawl their way to the trench as a group, providing each other covering fire as they went.

Crawling forward, bullets ripping through the air mere inches above them, they reached a final line of concertina wire in front of the trenches. Rosen ducked under the shredded wire and slithered his body into an artillery crater just before the trench. Rolling onto his side, he grabbed one of his grenades, double-checking to make sure the rest of his fire team was following his lead. Seeing as they hadn’t been detected yet by the enemy, he pulled the pin on the grenade, letting the spoon fly into the air to start the fuse. He counted one one-thousand, two one-thousands, then tossed it over the edge into the trench.

Rosen heard a brief second of excited shouts, then the grenade exploded, the shouts turning into agonizing cries of pain. Knowing this was his moment, his best chance of getting into the trenches, he leapt over the side and down into the hell, his fire team following him in.

“Clear and move!” he shouted as his feet hit the ground.

Zip, zip, zip...

Rosen dropped to a knee as he twisted his body around to face the shooter firing at him from behind. As he brought his rifle to bear, his finger tightening around the trigger, he saw the face of the man trying to kill him, a face twisted with pain and fear. The two men momentarily stared at each other as if they were both frozen in time. Then Rosen heard a metallic clunk as the man opposite him pulled his trigger, only to realize his magazine was empty. In that briefest of moments before the bullet from the XM7 crashed into his opponent’s face, Rosen swore he saw the man recognize his final moments on this earth—seemingly accepting what was about to happen.

As the rifle barked, the scene around him suddenly returned to normal speed. Voices shouted, men screaming in anger, fear, and pain as the fighting inside the trench turned into a savage brawl.

Climbing back to his feet, Rosen shouted to be heard over the chorus of screams and explosions happening around them. He looked up briefly at the sound of more voices, reacting just in time and raising his rifle as enemy reinforcements attempted to gun them down from overhead. Squeezing the trigger, he fired rapidly, strafing three enemy soldiers before they had a chance to react to him—their bodies tumbling into the trench or lying haphazardly half in, half out.

“Behind you, Staff Sergeant!” came the warning from one of his soldiers.

Spinning around, Rosen leaned back against the wall of the trench almost instinctively, a string of bullets zipping through the air where he'd just been. He pulled the trigger of the XM7, bursts of flame spitting with each pull, its loud report lost amongst the chorus of battle.

He saw the Chinese soldier he'd fired at fall to the ground near a bend in the trench. As the man fell, his body rolling to one side, he saw the soldier's eyes, wide with shock, then gripped with pain as Rosen closed the distance between them, driving his bayonet into the space between his neck and body armor, then twisting the blade before pulling it back, a gush of blood flowing where his blade had just been.

“We have to push *now!*” Rosen shouted to whatever soldiers of his remained. He rushed the bend in the trench, the world around them a nightmare of sound and fury.

Scores of bullets continued ripping through the air above the trenches, missing their heads by inches as they moved, their heads just beneath the lip of the trench. He couldn't tell if the bullets above them were being fired by the enemy or their own side. He was certain they couldn't have been the only fire team or squad to have made it into the trenches. Then again, they hadn't run into any friendly forces yet either.

“Incoming!” shouted someone behind him as he felt a hand pull him down towards the ground.

Moments later the sound of mortar shells screamed from above—*BAM, BAM, BOOM!*

When Rosen looked forward, towards the bend in the trench he was about to go around, a cloud of dust and dirt

swooshed around it, towards him. In that moment, he realized that if he had rounded that bend, he'd likely be dead. The mortar had exploded inside the trench, not above it.

Ambling back to his feet, Rosen motioned with his head for the soldier behind him, the one who had saved him, to follow him forward as they continued to clear this line of the trench, working their way back towards the second defensive line. When they rounded the corner, Rosen saw a pair of soldiers, dead, leaned atop of a machine gun they appeared to have just positioned to point in the direction the American intruders were coming from.

Damn, that was close on both accounts...if the mortar hadn't gotten me, the machine would have...

As they moved more rapidly through the trench, the defenders appeared to have retreated further within the earthen network. Rosen's muscles screamed in protest, particularly his quads from crouching and his lower and mid back from the armor he wore and the equipment it carried. Yet despite his body aching, the mind controlling it all forced it to ignore the desire to let up—survival and the will to live keeping him going.

For what felt like an eternity, they pushed forward—the first trench now cleared, the second in sight. At nearly every turn, enemy soldiers met them, each of their faces a twisted mask of fear and rage. Still, they fell, one by one, under the hail of his men's bullets and the steel shrapnel of their grenades. There was no room for emotion, no room for mercy or second-guessing—only the harsh reality of kill or be killed.

After linking up with the rest of their squad, the soldiers of Alpha Team having made their way to them, they bumped into a squad of ROK soldiers, nearly mistaking them for the PLA—a hang-ten gesture and a smile from the soldier closest to them being the deciding factor that kept Rosen’s point man from lighting them up.

When a Korean officer moved towards Rosen, he explained their unit had cleared their sector of the trench. He went on to explain they were getting ready to move on the enemy positions and would be honored if they would join them in this final battle. Having been unable to establish any comms with his own chain of command, Rosen looked at the motley collection of ragtag soldiers he’d somehow found himself in charge of and decided, *What the hell? Why not?*

Chapter Six

Decisively Engaged

1-67th Armored Regiment

Dengta Line

Lieutenant Colonel Steinert knew war was a merciless game of give and take. This had become even more of a truism in an era of warfare now dominated by the prevalent use of loitering munitions, semiautonomous and autonomous drones, and God knew what else this ChiCom AI seemed to come up with. While those were things outside of his control, the things he could control, like making sure his tanks had the supporting elements they needed to carry out their attack—those were the things he monitored like a hawk.

Gripping the tablet, Steinert watched a feed from the newest drone the cav scouts had launched. The brigade S3 had just assured him that the antidrone company he had requested prior to the battle had now been released to his control for the remainder of the battle. He had argued for this earlier, to no avail. While he had a good working relationship with his brigade CG, the man was paranoid about the ChiComs' newest antipersonnel kamikaze drones. As a result, he kept the brigade's antidrone units near his command instead of deploying them with the attacking units, where they were needed most.

As Steinert watched, the newest drone approached a stationary orbit near the battlefield. Where Attack Company

and Bravo 4-6 had spearheaded the battalion's assault, he spotted the smattering of oily black smoke rising near the section of the enemy trenches his unit had been assigned to break through. It was a cold reminder of just how exposed his tanks and IFVs were to this evolving threat of antimateriel drones. Just when Attack Company had been on the verge of breaking through a section of the enemy lines, a swarm of drones had come out of nowhere to descend upon his tanks and IFVs, savaging his attack force. The little terrors of the sky had swooped down from the clouds through the maelstrom of gunfire being directed at them, slamming into his tanks and IFVs.

While few of the drones had destroyed his armored vehicles outright, they had succeeded in disabling them, leaving them sitting ducks for artillery and missile teams to finish off. This had temporarily halted his advance until his second echelon could get into position. Once Berserker Company had navigated through the pathway the engineers had cleared through the minefields, they resumed the attack their sister company had started.

With Berserker Company and Alpha 4-6 now in the fight, and Comanche Company and Delta 4-6 in the chute, ready to launch, Steinert was now just an observer, an orchestrator of death as he watched from the perch of a UAV loitering high above the battle—directing units where to engage. As they encountered stubborn spots their tanks couldn't break through, he delegated the battalion's aerial and artillery support to his commanders. With the battle raging into its third hour, the cost of assaulting a well-prepared, fortified

position was becoming evident as the number of destroyed and disabled vehicles grew.

With each surge of IVFs and APCs towards the final defensive position, a blistering barrage of antitank fire and the raw fury of what few PLA tanks remained were taking a deadly toll on the attackers. Still, Berserker Company along with Alpha 4-6, their infantry support, had surged forward, their resolve unflinching as they crashed like an unyielding wave against the enemy lines.

When Steinert saw the infantry had deployed from their armored chariots and were now working their way through the first network of trenches, he ordered his next unit forward, into the fray of battle that was consuming men and materiel at astonishing rates.

Connecting to the next unit in line, Steinert transmitted, “Comanche Six, Death Actual. Berserker element is decisively engaged with the enemy. Break. Alpha 4-6 has deployed their infantry and is actively assaulting their way through the first trench network. Break. I am ordering Comanche element to advance. Break. Your orders are to push through Berserker Company with Delta 4-6. Break. Find me that seam in their trench network. Then punch us a hole through it for the rest of the battalion to follow you through. It’s time to end this fight—once and for all. Out.”

With his orders given, he watched as the third wave—like a sea of tanks intertwined with mechanized infantry vehicles and APCs—erupted into action as they surged forward. In a way, he felt bad for not surging forward with them. It had been his intention to move with Comanche, but as

the battle continued to unfold, he realized he couldn't direct his battalion while also trying to fight the tank. While his gunner, SFC Schow, could handle the tank without him, not having a full-time commander who could help spot enemy threats would place them in more danger than it was worth. Instead, he rotated a tank from Dagger Company and opted to move with his reserve force once the time had come to commit them.

As he watched his tanks move forward in tandem with their IFVs and APCs, they passed the first grouping of trenches and continued towards that final earthen network his other units were already engaging. Fighting like savages as they reached Berserker's position, they pressed on, getting their armored carriers as close as possible to the enemy. When they could go no further, they spewed out infantry like avenging wraiths who charged headlong into the teeth of the enemy, embracing the savage intimacy of trench warfare.

With the infantry of Alpha 4-6 still holding the line, the third wave surged past, carrying the momentum of the assault. As the PLA's first line crumbled under the onslaught, the remnants of the first wave reformed and joined the relentless advance.

The PLA's final line braced itself, a wall of steel and determination continually being hurled at it. What frustrated Lieutenant Colonel Steinert the most was that, despite the continual waves of tanks and APCs carrying fresh troops and precision artillery and aerial close-air support, they still hadn't broken their spirits or their resolve to defend their positions to the last man.

As Steinert observed the unfolding carnage, his heart hammered in his chest, his eyes unblinking as he watched the drone feeds of the battle. Seeing so many of his men being killed pained him to no end. These men were more than just soldiers; they were his comrades, his brothers. Every explosion that bloomed on the battlefield, every radio call sign that went ominously silent, was a stab to the heart. Yet he kept his gaze on the feed, his voice commanding over the radio, pushing his battalion onward, for nothing short of victory could be had. The idea of retreat was a luxury they could ill afford, especially after taking such losses to this point.

Still, as he sat inside his armored chariot, the driver now moving them towards the battle as he committed his last unit to make one more push, one more attempt to break through, he felt his bones shake. A nearby explosion jostled his tank as shrapnel bounced off its armored hull. The clash of steel on steel, the bone-jarring impacts of shells, the earth-shattering eruptions of mines—all combined to create a symphony of destruction that bore witness to the unyielding resolve of his Death Dealers.

In the grit and smoke, blood and courage, the battleground bore testament to the bitter reality of war—raw, relentless, and reverberating with the echoes of sacrifice. The ferocity of the conflict left no doubt about the cost each side was willing to pay.

As the predawn hours gave way to midafternoon, the enemy lines began to falter. His tanks and their infantry support vehicles found breaks in the line. At first it was just one or two vehicles, then it turned into a platoon of Abrams. But once their Korean allies swooped in with a company of

tanks, they busted the lines wide open. By the time the division's reserve brigade was ordered through the gap, the enemy sensed defeat. At first, a trickle of forces began to surrender; then entire fortifications waved the white flag, signaling that the battle was done—they had had enough.

Chapter Seven

Machines Building Machines

Area 43

Beijing, China

When MI6 operative Alexandria “Alex” Mak had received a new assignment to an underground facility in Area 43, she’d scrambled to pass off full responsibility for Mr. and Mrs. Liyuan and their granddaughter, Mei, to her compatriots, Carson Ngo and Natalie Chen. As important as that work was, she had some idea of what was happening in this secret bunker, and the intelligence value of this new position could not be ignored.

Every time she needed another level of security clearance for her job, Alex had been impressed that she once again escaped detection by the Chinese authorities. Then again, she had become so adept at lying to her superiors that sometimes it felt like she actually believed what she was telling them was the truth.

The first time she’d entered the Area 43 facility, Alex had marveled at how the main entrance had been hidden in plain sight, within the perimeter of a busy airport. As the facility manager took her on a tour through the underground labyrinth, she registered every detail of her surroundings—every step, door, and video camera—with great acuity while her new boss explained the complexity of the supply chain issues they’d been having.

“That’s why we brought you in,” he concluded as they rounded a corner, and he slid open the door to a large underground hangar-like structure.

Alex gasped involuntarily.

“I know,” replied her new boss, He Bao. “I felt the same way. I’ve never experienced such awe at the power and might of the People’s Liberation Army.”

A sea of humanoid robot soldiers were lined up before them in long, neat rows. They were visually imposing and intimidating on a visceral level. Alex suppressed the urge to throw up.

So these are the Terracotta Killers I’ve heard so much about. This new assignment was even better than she’d anticipated.

She quickly checked her emotional reaction, straightening her blouse before she went right back to business. “All right, Mr. He, so why don’t you describe to me how you’ve been overcoming some of the challenges with sanctions so far?” Alex asked.

“Well, we *were* having trouble with high-resolution lenses,” her new supervisor began. “After some research, we found B&H Photo to be the best supplier of high-res cameras. We have ninety-seven front companies in fifty-two countries that have been buying and selling and trading all kinds of cameras for legitimate businesses, but they pay special attention to the kinds of lenses that we need. When they find them, they ship them off to a neutral nation—one of the seven countries that have strong ties to China but also have strong ties to the West. From there, they are repackaged with baby

monitors or home security systems and sent to Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos. Then they are brought across the border and moved through China's normal commerce."

Alex nodded approvingly.

"This system has been working well for the lenses, but it has proven to be kind of complicated to set up a system like this for GPS," Mr. He explained. "We need you to create a similar protocol for bringing in GPS systems."

She thought for a moment. "Is there a specific *component* that we are lacking to make the GPS systems work?" Alex pressed.

"Hmm, I'm not sure," he replied. It was clear that he hadn't thought through that possibility.

"Can we talk to someone about this now?" she insisted.

"Uh, yes. Let me bring you down to one of the main floors," Mr. He responded.

They took a walk down the sterile corridor and opened the third door on the left. Inside, there appeared to be an entire factory of three production lines: one group was creating menacing black drones the size of baseballs, another was working on autonomous combat vehicles, and the last group was manufacturing some type of underwater combat vehicles—none of which she had heard about being employed on the battlefield yet. She knew that the intelligence in this room could turn the tide of the war, but she also knew she had to prove herself valuable long enough to collect it.

Alex did her best to maintain eye contact with the floor manager as Mr. He introduced her. It was challenging

considering the kinds of deadly new technology this facility appeared to be producing. She wanted to gawk, to look closer at these new weapons she hadn't seen before—her mind flooded with questions about what each of them could do. But now was not the time to find out. She would have to demonstrate her worth for long enough to uncover those answers.

After a short introduction, the floor manager walked her through every attempt he had made to try to solve their logistical problem. He seemed eager to prove to her that he had already attempted every possible solution. “There are three basic components of most GPS systems: the antennas, the processors that convert the data into something useful, and the display units,” he began. “For our purposes, we don't need the display units, and antennas are easy to track down. That leaves us with the processors.

“Now, you might be thinking, ‘Why not just use smartphones?’” the man said, putting his hands up to the side as if he were asking her this question. “Well, it's not that simple. The GPS technology is deeply integrated with other functions of the chip. The same goes for smartwatches and fitness trackers. And we can't strip every GPS system from incoming vehicles, or ship mass quantities of Garmins to China—they've become heavily restricted in terms of where they can be sold and who can purchase them. We need too many, and there are too many red flags to overcome to make it worth trying to evade the sanctions. So for now, we've had limited success smuggling small numbers of Garmins and other items that contain the GPS processors we're after. We

need help with finding another way to get around these Western sanctions.”

As she thought about the problem, Alex’s mind traced back to some of the other sanction-evading operations she’d helped to set up. This was her area of expertise, and she was damn good at it. She wracked her brain for another source, and thousands of news articles she’d read scrolled through her mind—one of the benefits and curses of having a photographic memory. Then it hit her.

“Farming equipment,” she replied confidently.

“What?” asked the floor supervisor, taken aback.

“OK, hear me out on this. For the past few decades, farming equipment has evolved and begun to embrace something the Americans call ‘smart farming,’ which integrates advancements in technology, automation, and even AI to a limited scope. We’re talking auto-steering devices that can harvest unattended, and crop dusters that follow a preprogrammed map. This new kind of equipment has increased productivity and made modern farming more profitable. It also means just about any sort of farming equipment now comes with GPS and semiautonomous capabilities. That means chips, processors—the very kind of items you said you needed.

“While historically, we have fewer farmers using those techniques here, I’m sure it would not be difficult to import such devices—especially if we look to set up a series of cutout entities and front companies in nations we know are struggling to feed their own populations. These will be the kinds of countries that will not draw a lot of attention when they begin

ordering both new and used smart-farming equipment. We can start with countries like Egypt, Brazil, and South Africa. From there, we reexport them to nations closer to our borders and move them across.”

Mr. He leaned back, standing up taller and stretching his back. “Alex, they weren’t wrong about you,” he said, clearly pleased at the prospect of her joining his team.

The floor manager stared at Alex for a moment, a bit stunned at how quickly she had figured out a way to solve their problem. She held back her urge to laugh when the manager turned to Mr. He, asking, “Why didn’t anyone ask Jade Dragon about this? It sounds like we could have solved this problem months ago.” It was his attempt to spread the blame and save face.

“Sometimes knowing *what* to ask is just as important as knowing who to ask,” Alex said reassuringly. Her comment seemed to soothe the man’s wounded pride. “Give me some time to figure out the details and we’ll get it set up—don’t worry,” she concluded.

As she and Mr. He returned to the hangar where she had seen them building the humanoid-looking robots, her new boss commented, “Your company says you are a savant when it comes to supply chains and sanction-evasion operations. If you can share, how did you get so good?”

Alex smiled coyly at him. “Before the war, I collaborated with the Russians during their special military operation in Ukraine. Prior to that, I had worked with the Iranians in their nuclear weapons pursuit. Each client had a unique set of problems and different levels of sanctions being

used against them. I just had to get creative. For example, I had to work out a supply route from China to Iran through Afghanistan and Pakistan—there are a lot of moving parts in that kind of an operation.”

“I’ll bet,” Mr. He replied with a grunt. “In any case, welcome to the team, Alex. Let me show you your computer terminal and get you started.”

“Thank you, Mr. He. I am eager to help. You won’t be disappointed,” Alex responded cheerfully.

I’m in. Now the fun starts...

Alex Mak’s Apartment

Beijing, China

When Alex returned home from her shift, she did her standard security checks to make sure her place was secure, and then she very carefully removed her blouse. This was no ordinary work shirt she had been sporting. Woven into the fabric of her shirt, near the buttons, was a highly advanced organic image sensor. The revolutionary metal-free device used light-sensitive organic compounds that could convert light into an electrical signal. The organic photodiodes were integrated into a tiny, flexible sensor that could capture high-resolution images or videos.

British intelligence spared no expense in crafting the next innovations to support its international spy network, and

at this moment Alex found herself the grateful recipient of that investment. Any normal type of camera would have gotten her killed by now, or sent to an interrogation hellhole at any rate. However, this “camera” was thin, flexible, transparent—made of a virtually undetectable polymer. To make it even more difficult to trace, it operated passively most of the time, avoiding electronic detection methods. It only activated to take pictures or record videos when it received a specific coded pulse of infrared light that she would emit from her wristwatch, like she’d done when she had adjusted her blouse in the Terracotta Killer hangar.

Because the organic image sensor and its transmitter were designed to be low-power and mostly passive, they would emit very little heat, and only very briefly, when the device was activated, so the risk of being detected by an infrared scanner was very low. And in order to reduce the risks further, the device had an advanced cooling mechanism that helped dissipate the heat rapidly.

Alex was aware of the dangers of her position. Just because they possessed a technology that Jade Dragon hadn’t accounted for today, that didn’t mean that she might not get scooped up tomorrow. However, the kind of intelligence she had seen on just her first day at this new job—well, it was worth risking her life for. This was the kind of intel that could turn the tide of war.

She retrieved the burner phone she had hidden specifically for this purpose and selected the appropriate app. Now the low-power, short-range, organic-based transmitter would broadcast the encrypted data using an ultra-high

frequency range. Her phone had to be in very close proximity in order for it to work.

Soon, her handlers would decrypt the data and put her valuable intelligence to good use. Now it was a matter of waiting to see what their follow-up questions would be. She already knew she'd have to collect more pictures and videos from the second location where she'd spoken to the floor manager. It probably wouldn't be too hard to find a reason to follow up with him.

Chapter Eight

The French Riviera

DGSI Regional Headquarters

Marseille, France

Noelle Fournier raised an eyebrow as she scanned the email from Interpol. “This is interesting. The Chinese national involved in that bar brawl last weekend may not be who he claims.”

She pivoted her computer screen towards Bernard Gagnon. “Interpol has intel suggesting he’s actually an ex-PLA Special Forces soldier. Thought to have worked as a military advisor in Uganda a few years back.”

Bernard nodded, recalling the officer’s report about the man’s professional combat skills during the fight. “So he’s likely using an alias for his visa here, then.”

“Precisely. Interpol can’t confirm his identity without question. But it’s enough to warrant a closer look,” Noelle said.

She scanned through the sparse details in the visa application for “Cai Wu,” which had been processed before the war. Everything appeared in order, but her instincts told her something was off.

“Cai lists his previous residence as Beijing, and occupation as ‘logistics coordinator’ for a shipping company there,” Noelle said.

Bernard frowned. “Not quite the career profile I’d expect for an ex-PLA Special Forces veteran.”

He drummed his fingers on his worn desk. “Interpol can’t confirm one hundred percent that this is the same character from Uganda, but the pieces fit. We’d be negligent not to investigate further.”

Noelle nodded. “We should question him in person, see if his story adds up or if he slips on the details.”

“I like the way you think.” Bernard slipped his P228 pistol into its concealed holster. “Let’s go rattle Mr. Cai’s cage a bit, see what falls out.”

Noelle smirked as she followed Bernard out to the parking lot, adrenaline already pumping at the looming interrogation. This Cai Wu was definitely hiding something, and she aimed to uncover the truth.

Bernard slid behind the wheel of the idling Peugeot 308 department sedan, easing the car out into afternoon traffic as Noelle buckled herself into the passenger seat. She reviewed Cai Wu’s work and home addresses listed on his visa paperwork.

“Looks like he’s renting a flat over on Rue Paradis—let’s start there,” Noelle said.

Bernard nodded, winding through Marseille’s cramped streets toward the residential neighborhood. He pulled up down the block from Cai’s building, killing the engine.

Noelle spotted their suspect exiting the apartment building’s front door. “There’s our man now. Let’s have a quick chat, shall we?”

Bernard and Noelle stepped casually from the vehicle as Cai Wu approached on the sidewalk, appearing to have caught the man off guard. “Mr. Cai, I’m Agent Fournier and this is Captain Gagnon. We were hoping to have a word with you about your role at Côte d’Azur Livraison.”

Cai looked ready to bolt before catching himself and radically changing his demeanor. “Whoa, you startled me there. Who are you again and what are you asking about?” His French was excellent but accented.

“I’m Agent Fournier from the National Police and this is Captain Gagnon, from DGSI. We’re just conducting a routine check of some paperwork and are hoping you can help us clear a few things up on your visa application. I’m sure it’s no big deal. The questions won’t take long,” Noelle replied, trying to appear calm so as not to spook him further.

“OK, did I forget to list something on my application?” Cai asked, his eyes scanning around them before focusing on Noelle.

Bernard joined in as he prodded, “You listed logistics experience on your visa application, yet you seem to be working as a delivery driver now?”

Cai hesitated slightly too long. “I... wanted a change of pace. You know, more hands-on work.”

Noelle stared at him like a hawk tracking prey. “I see. You know, I think we might be able to clear this up back at the station. We’d appreciate it if you came with us to verify a few details.” Her tone brooked no argument.

Cai maintained a calm facade, but his eyes revealed something else—he'd been caught. In a flash of movement, he clocked Noelle, knocking her into Bernard before taking off in a sprint down a nearby alleyway. Cai dashed down the narrow passage, vaulting over piles of rotting garbage as Bernard helped Noelle to her feet.

“Suspect fleeing on foot!” Bernard yelled into his radio as they took off in pursuit. “All units, converge on Rue Paradis!”

Cai knocked over trash cans to block their path, but Bernard hurdled them like a man half his age, driven by adrenaline and rage. Noelle's pace matched his despite the blood trickling from her busted lip.

Up ahead, Cai emerged from the alley, only to find himself face-to-face with two patrol officers, guns drawn.

“Armed police, get down!” one officer shouted. But Cai was already moving, twisting behind a market stall for cover as his hand slid a Glock 19 from his waistband.

Gunfire erupted as Cai snapped off two shots, catching one officer in the neck before he could react. The other officer dove for shelter, calling frantically for backup.

Bernard and Noelle burst from the alley, weapons trained on Cai as he fired again, forcing them to take cover while keeping him pinned. Cai seized the opportunity and rushed the remaining officer, grappling for his gun before a point-blank shot sent the policeman crumpling lifeless to the ground.

With fluid combat reflexes, Cai turned his sights on Bernard and Noelle's position, ready to reengage. But Bernard was quicker, squeezing off three rapid shots. Two slammed into Cai's torso, staggering him. The third found his head, dropping him to the pavement.

Bernard kept his smoking pistol trained on Cai's unmoving body, not trusting he was down for good. Noelle touched her earpiece, breathless. "Suspect is down, repeat, suspect is down. Two officers were shot. We need emergency medical support immediately!"

Only when other units arrived to secure the scene did Bernard finally lower his weapon, his hands trembling with adrenaline comedown. The stakes of this investigation had just gotten much higher.

DGSI Regional Headquarters

Marseille, France

Captain René Lambert slammed his fist on the desk in frustration, his normally calm demeanor shattered.

"Two dead officers, and you're telling me this Cai Wu is a ghost? How can we have nothing on him?" he demanded.

Bernard exchanged a weary look with Noelle across the table strewn with empty coffee cups and case files.

"Whoever he really was, he didn't want to be identified," Bernard said. "No fingerprints in any database."

Facial recognition turns up zero.”

Noelle flipped through the documents, shaking her head. “Everything about him was a dead end until Interpol flagged his potential military background. But we still can’t confirm that either.”

Lambert paced, tension radiating from him. “You’re saying this delivery driver took out two armed policemen using professional close-combat tactics. He was highly trained, and clearly involved in something dangerous enough to be willing to die rather than be captured.”

Bernard nodded grimly. “It leads back to the firm, Côte d’Azur Livraison. Our one solid clue is that Cai was connected to them, even if it was under an assumed identity.”

“Then shake the tree, hard,” Lambert ordered. “Tear apart their whole organization, customer records, personnel, financials. Find me some answers.”

Noelle met Bernard’s tired but determined eyes. It was going to be a long night, but this mystery had already claimed too many lives. Cai wouldn’t be their last lead.

Chapter Nine

An Allied Win

NSA Office, White House

Washington, D.C.

National Security Advisor Blain Wilson had just logged in to his email when the phone rang. Grabbing for it, he answered, “This is Blain,” his eyes scanning emails as the mailbox loaded. *Emails...a never-ending deluge I can't seem to get away from.*

“Mr. Wilson, this is Courtney from Secretary Kurtis’s office. The SecDef sent you an email about an HVI that was just taken into custody,” the woman’s voice conveyed before continuing, “He asked me to find out if you had a chance to see it yet. He wants to add it to the presidential brief this afternoon but wanted to run it by you before sending the slide deck over.”

Wait, what email...? His eyes searched for Jack’s message. Spotting it, he opened the body of the email, his eyes taking the information in until he saw the photo attached.

Holy crap, this is big, he thought before responding, “Hey, Courtney, sorry about that. I just got into the office. Yes, I’m seeing the message now, and yes, tell Jack I agree. This is a big deal. Let’s put it in the brief. I’ll make sure he has time to speak to it. I’m sure SecState may want to speak to it as well.”

“OK, thank you, Mr. Wilson, I’ll let the SecDef know. He’ll see you this afternoon,” the woman said.

As he stared at the photo embedded in the email, Blain’s mind turned with ideas and possibilities that hadn’t existed just a few moments earlier. But now, with him in custody, under their direct control...they just might have the missing piece to ending this war and a viable postwar China. The only question now was how willing General Song would be toward their future plans for China.

Eighth Army Headquarters

Camp Humphreys, Korea

A smile formed on General Sink’s face as he read the report from General Dowdy. III Corps had done it. They had broken through the Dengta Line. With the gap now opened, he had ordered the 1st Cavalry Division to push through it and into the enemy rear areas.

His message read, “Bob, we are encountering brutal fighting as we approach the city. We are pressing hard to reach the Hunhe River. My cav scouts spotted battalions from at least two brigades from the 116th Mechanized Infantry Division crossing the river to establish a blocking force to prevent our entry into the city center. I’ve dispatched the Third Grey Wolf Brigade to see if they can pin them against the river. We’re trying to prevent them from disbursing into the

Sujiatun District. I'd rather this not become a giant street fight if we can avoid it."

Damn, that's the last thing we need this to devolve into—house-to-house fighting...

He skimmed the rest of the report until he spotted what he was looking for—a status report from the 1-67th AR, the 4th Battalion, 6th Infantry Regiment, they had been screening for. The two battalions had finally linked up with the 3rd Ranger Battalion still holding down the Shenyang Taoxian Airport. If they could hold the airport until a more substantial force arrived, they could get it turned around into a forward air base and supply depot.

"Excuse me, General. You had asked for that report from our Air Force liaison—here it is," a major from the ops center said as he handed him the report.

Accepting the paper, General Sink scanned it quickly, reading the information and doing his best not to gasp.

Whoa, this is worse than I thought.

Reading the report, he realized that since launching this offensive, they'd taken losses at a rate that wasn't going to be sustainable. They had lost twenty-two F-15 Eagle IIs, thirty-four F-16Vs, nineteen F/A-18 Super Hornets, twenty-nine F-35s, and three F/S-36 Archangels in just the last forty-eight hours. He was certain the losses in men and materiel were going to be even worse by the time the fighting began to slow down.

The casualty reports he'd seen were already substantially higher than they had anticipated.

You assaulted a fixed enemy position...what did you expect?

He felt like he was in a continual argument with himself each time a status update came in with the latest figures. A couple of times he'd asked for them to be verified, not believing the initial number. He thought they were too high, only to realize this was just the beginning.

We have to find out where those PLA fighter drones are and take them out.

Following Day

Residence – Family Room, White House

Washington, D.C.

Maria had done something unusual that day. She took the morning off. The demands of the job, especially the war, were taking their toll. She used to wonder how a president could age so much in such a short period of time. Now she knew—stress.

She reached for the morning papers as she placed her coffee down. She knew she shouldn't—this morning was supposed to be a time to rest. But staying informed and seeing how the public was reacting to events was important too. Ensconcing oneself inside an echo chamber was a serious problem presidents had to avoid. The ones that failed often lost

touch with the people they were supposed to serve, and she'd vowed to be different.

Grabbing for the first paper—*USA Today*—she scanned the headlines. “Hell on Earth: U.S., S. Korean and Japanese Forces Storm Heavily Fortified PLA Lines.”

The story read, “In a coordinated ground and aerial assault, allied forces breached multiple layers of Chinese defenses outside Shenyang early this morning. Fierce fighting continues as allied armor and infantry clash with PLA regulars in a brutal contest of wills.”

Placing the paper down, she reached for the next one—the *New York Times*. “Allied Gamble—Massive Tank Charge Aims to Crack Dengta Line,” the headline read.

“The U.S. Eighth Army, supported by air strikes, pressed forward against prepared Chinese positions today. Heavy casualties have been reported on both sides as U.S. commanders bet that mass and maneuver can overcome PLA numbers.”

“You should break, darling. You work too hard,” Maria’s husband said from the seat opposite her, coffee in hand.

Sighing, she nodded, placing the paper down. “You are right, of course.”

He smiled at her comment.

“What?” she asked.

“You said I was right.”

“Oh...I guess I did. You want me to send you a voice text with me saying ‘you are right’ so you can savor the moment longer?” she offered playfully.

He held a hand up in mock surrender as he laughed. “No, that’s OK, Maria. It’s not often that a mere mortal gets to hear the most powerful person in the world say they’re right.”

Now they both laughed at the lightheartedness of the moment. She savored moments like this. *I need more of these*, she thought.

“How is Blain doing? He’s looked stressed lately,” her husband inquired.

“Overworked, stressed—just like the rest of us.”

“A vacation sounds like it’s in order if you ask me. You just ended the first term of your administration without taking a single vacation, Maria. That’s not normal,” he commented, concern in his voice.

“Yeah, well, there’s a war going on. It’s kind of bad optics—President takes vacation while troops are dying by the hundreds abroad.” She shook her head dismissively.

She knew a vacation was exactly what she needed. She just didn’t know how to take one—how to turn the brain off and just relax. Sensing another migraine beginning to form, she reached for the medication her doctor had prescribed. It helped a little, but it never seemed to fully relieve the pain.

Her husband stood, downing the last of his coffee. “I’m off. More First Gentleman duties to take care of. I’ll see you tonight.” He walked over and gave her a kiss on the forehead before heading out for the day.

Sighing, she looked at the clock. “Yeah, might as well get going, I suppose. Time to figure out how we’re going to end this war and what to do after it’s over.”

Chapter Ten

In Plain Sight

Alex Mak's Apartment

Beijing, China

In addition to her habit of running well before the crack of dawn every morning, Alex was known among her coworkers and whatever community she lived in to be an avid birdwatcher. This hobby had several benefits for her, besides the joy of being in nature. First, it gave her an excuse to be out and about with a pair of binoculars should the occasion arise. Second, it was a way for her to establish herself within her community as a birding club member and a friend, decreasing suspicion toward her. Third, and most importantly, it provided a way for her MI6 handlers to contact her.

Although the days of going on online forums to send messages *out* were gone, she did occasionally receive a tasking coming *in* this way. When she had been retasked to the Beijing area, Alex had immediately joined the “Birding Beijing” forum online and signed up for the next outing with the Beijing Birdwatching Society. The members of those groups all soon became accustomed to interacting with her online and in person. She blended in.

In her home, she had the first Chinese edition of *A Field Guide to the Birds of China* by John MacKinnon and Karen Phillipps, which had been published in the year 2000. One of the younger members of the Beijing Birdwatching

Society had given her a bit of a hard time about using an “outdated” version, but when she had explained that it was sentimental and stared off into the distance as if remembering a tragic loss, a senior member of the group had quickly brought that “youngster” in line.

That book, hiding in plain sight, was the key to the cipher her handlers would use when contacting her. She needed the old version, not because it was linked to some family history but because it was the only one that would link up with the information coming in. MI6 had the same exact book in their possession, and when someone wanted to get her a message, Alex would begin to see posts about birds that would include page numbers for the bird guide. Further in, she would find clues as to what paragraphs and words she needed to reference. Taken together, it made a whole message, but *only* if you knew exactly where to look and had the correct “outdated” key. Should someone suspect there was a code in the forum messages, even if they understood how they were being sent, it wouldn’t make sense without that older version of the book, which was now hard to obtain.

Internet usage was so heavily monitored in China, at least for people with security clearances as high as hers, that spending a lot of time looking at birding forums without doing anything related in real life would have drawn suspicion—but her membership provided the cover necessary to send and receive these messages unhindered. And using the book in public provided legitimacy to why the book would appear so worn if her apartment were searched. It was a thoroughly thought out plan that had managed to help her evade the detection of Jade Dragon thus far.

MI6 had sent her a new message this way, and it had created a bit of a dilemma for Alex. They had apparently uncovered what they thought to be a potential covert air base nestled near some apartment buildings. The exact location was near Wennan Road in the Changping District of Beijing. Her handlers wanted her to surveil it and confirm if there was in fact a runway connecting to a hangar built into the mountain.

Crap, she thought. I don't have time for this.

Alex had more than enough work to do with her whole logistics project to keep her busy for weeks. She was already arriving early and staying late most days, a trait Mr. He really seemed to appreciate. If she were to complete this little surveillance run for MI6, it would take way too much time away from her duties at Area 43. This would take more than a couple of hours on a Saturday afternoon—and if she got caught, that would end her ability to collect intelligence on the TKs and other weapons she'd seen on the factory floor. Besides, this really seemed like a two-man job.

After thinking over her problem for a moment, she realized that her “old friends” Carson Ngo and Natalie Chen weren't busy at the moment since the timeline had been moved back and they weren't stuck on babysitting duty.

Well, friends, I guess your vacation is over, she thought to herself as she set in motion the plan to bring them to Beijing and get themselves back in the game.

Wennan Road, Changping District

Beijing, China

It was 3:01 a.m., and Carson Ngo was one minute late for their shift change. Nat Chen shuffled around in her thermal-insulated hide, trying to stay awake. Watching absolutely nothing in the dead of night without falling asleep was a bit of a feat, though.

They were on day four of their surveillance, and so far, it had been about as exciting as watching paint dry. The road between apartment buildings on Wennan Road was far too wide for a strip of pavement that went nowhere, and it probably was a runway, but they couldn't prove that yet.

Not sure how MI6 thought Alex was supposed to sit here and babysit this road while getting her job done, thought Nat. And this really is a two-man job—even Alex can't stay awake twenty-four hours a day.

Nat heard a rustling and immediately looked up from her infrared scope. Even in the dark, she recognized Carson's gait as he approached, and she breathed a sigh of relief.

"Running late, old man," she teased quietly.

"Yeah, well, I had to add a couple of extra turns to my route here. I thought I was being followed for a little while there."

"Damn. You sure you lost 'em?" Nat pressed.

"I wouldn't be here if I wasn't sure," Carson insisted. "Anything new?"

“Other than the pain developing in my left hip, nothing.”

“Humph.” Carson sat down rapidly and made a small thud, as if he were a teenager slamming a door in frustration.

“Shh,” Nat hissed. “Won’t do any good for us to collect intel if we’re dead.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Carson acquiesced. He set about getting settled in, and Nat started to pack up her bag to leave. She couldn’t really blame him for the uncharacteristic display of emotions. This assignment was boring as hell, and he was a bit older than her. He’d probably need a chiropractor by the end of the week.

Off in the distance, a quiet clicking noise broke through the middle of the night silence.

“Did you hear that?” Carson asked. He grabbed for the infrared scope. After panning in the direction of the disturbance for a moment, he paused.

“Well, that is convenient timing,” he commented, changing the settings on the device to begin collecting images and videos.

“What is it?” asked Nat. “What do you see?” She scrambled to angle their parabolic mics toward where Carson was monitoring, so they could collect any sound signatures as well as images.

“There’s definitely a hidden hangar back there,” Carson confirmed. “I’m getting multiple aircraft coming out of that mountain. I don’t readily recognize them, though. They’re

shaped like fighters, but...it's like the cockpits are way too small.”

“Oh, man...these must be those Shadow Dragons or maybe even those rumored Dark Dragons we've heard about,” Nat commented.

“There's at least one other type of aircraft there, but again, I don't recognize it. You want to trade?” Carson asked, motioning toward the infrared scope.

Nat didn't have to be asked twice. She shuffled over, taking care not to move the scope as they switched spots. What she saw resembled a full-size fighter...except for the cockpit.

“Do the Chinese have autonomous strike fighters?” she asked, puzzled.

“I guess we'll have to get this data off to the powers that be and find out,” Carson replied.

“Yeah...you know, I think I may have caught a second wind after seeing this,” she remarked.

Carson smiled. “Does that mean I can go back to bed?”

She snorted at the comment. “Hell no, you think I look this good operating on two or three hours of sleep a day? I'll stick around another ten or twenty minutes in case we see more activity before heading back. This will give me enough time to draft up a quick report on what we just saw so I can get it over to Mak. Q will be waiting for it,” Nat replied, making sure to include her James Bond reference every chance she got since they had been tasked to support MI6.

Carson just shook his head before resuming his watch of the area now that the mysterious aircraft had taken to the skies.

Chapter Eleven

Attack of the Wraith

Space Delta 9

Groom Lake, Nevada

Newly promoted Major General Hugh “Huey” Hewitt sat opposite Colonel Ian “Racer” Ryan with a grin. “It’s taken them long enough, Racer, but they’re finally starting to crank out more Archangels for us. That’s why I’ve called you here. Wraith Squadron is being given four newly minted aircraft so we can get you guys back in the fight until we’re ready to initiate Falling Star and Meteor Strike.”

“That’s great, Huey, and congrats again on the second star. I know the guys will be excited to get back into the fight. Is there any word yet on when we’ll start this new operation?” Colonel Ryan asked. “We conducted the test on those Celestial Hammers a while back. You would think they would be eager to put Jade Dragon out of commission as soon as possible.”

“I’ve been asking that question for a while now. The issue has more to do with constructing those CHs needed for the satellites. We’ll only get one shot at this once we reveal this technology. They don’t want us to half-ass this thing once we start it,” Huey explained. He knew Racer and Scuba had been itching to start the operation they knew would likely win the war.

Colonel Ryan shrugged his shoulders, showing a bit of frustration. “Well, hopefully, they get it figured out soon. In

the meantime, thank you for getting us some Archangels to use. It's been tough sitting on the sidelines, knowing we could do so much more if we only had more Archangels. So I take it now that you got us some birds to fly, you've got a mission you want us to tackle too?"

Huey smiled. "In fact, I do. Later this afternoon—say around 1500 hours—have your squadron seated in the mission briefing room. Master Sergeant Dale Alkire has put together a solid mission for you...one I think you guys are going to like."

"Huh. OK, I'll let the guys know. Thanks again for getting us back into the fight, sir. It means a lot. We don't care how we get to contribute. We want to know we're making a difference," Racer said as he got up to inform the other members of their newly named squadron—Wraith Squadron.

Later That Afternoon

Wraith Squadron

"Afternoon, Wraith Squadron. My name is Master Sergeant Dale Alkire. I will provide you with today's mission brief," the Space Force intelligence NCO began. "You four have been chosen for this mission because the Wraith Squadron has the most combat experience flying the Archangels, even if this isn't the primary vehicle your squadron now flies.

"Most of you are aware of the considerable losses in aircraft the allies have been sustaining since the start of Iron

Tempest. In contrast, our ground forces have achieved some major victories. The PLAAF's ability to sow chaos and destruction in the skies cannot continue. We believe this facility here"—Alkire pointed to an image that showed what looked to be a runway exiting the foot of a mountain—"is where these Shadow Dragon UFAs and Dark Dragon ASFs are based out of."

A couple of pilots gave a soft whistle as they looked at the details of the base and the highlighted icons denoting multiple SAM locations.

"Gentlemen, your mission is to deliver a handful of Thor's Hammers into the entrance of this facility and to hit these additional points near the facility. We believe that, with some luck, this will take the base off-line. It just may put an end to these aircraft terrorizing the skies. Are there any questions before I hand the rest of the mission planning to Colonel Ryan?"

"Just one," Lieutenant Colonel Steven "Scuba" Johnson said. "What time is this mission going to take place?"

Before the intel briefer could respond, Racer stood and walked toward the front of the room. "The mission starts in ten hours. That gives our ground crew plenty of time to prepare our birds for action and us a few hours of mission prep to talk about how we're going to plan our approach to this facility while still giving everyone a chance to get some shut-eye," he explained as he nodded for the master sergeant to go ahead and leave.

Racer turned to face his three other pilots that made up the growing squadron. "The route to the target will take us

across the Sea of Binhai on our way to Cangzhou. Then we'll turn slightly to the northwest and head towards Baoding. From there, we'll continue to Zhangjiakou City before returning east towards the Sea of Binhai. This flight path will have us attacking the air base from the back side and give us the best vantage point to land our Thors into the mountain and the hangars built within it. I want everyone to get some sleep for the next five hours. We'll return to the briefing room and go over anything that changes or might impact our mission and get airborne."

Twelve Hours Later

Wraith Squadron

Racer checked his systems, noting the ARTUμ had leveled the aircraft out at angels eighty-five. They were still streaking through the air at Mach 5, slowing down as they approached the target. The secret air base housing the Shadow Dragon unmanned fighter aircraft was now just minutes away.

"Scuba, Outlaw, and Talon, tighten up the formation," Racer said over the peer-to-peer radio. "We go weapons hot in ninety seconds. I want a clean drop—in and out like we've never been here."

The pilots gave a squawk on the radio, letting him know they'd acknowledged the call. Racer gave it a moment before glancing out the windows to each side. He visually confirmed that the three Archangels of his strike force had

closed within visual range. Their goal was simple—obliterate the base launching these UFAs and ASFs before the PLA's newest superweapon could threaten to turn the tide of the war back in their favor. Striking this deep inside enemy territory, especially when they weren't sure if the enemy's ground-based laser batteries were still off-line, was risky. Allowing the enemy to steadily build up the numbers of these wonder weapons, however, would be suicidal.

“R2, what kind of defenses are you detecting around the target?” Racer asked his ARTU μ .

It took his ARTU μ only a second to respond, the voice of Morgan Freeman explaining, “Colonel Ryan, as of right now, on our current flight, we will pass within the effective range of two search radars for what look to be at least two HQ-9 Red Banner surface-to-air missile systems. One of the SAM systems appears to be positioned near the air base we are targeting. The other system is five hundred meters high in elevation—most likely in the Longshan Forest Park.

“At least one other search radar just became active in the area. It looks to be an HQ-22 system. This one also seems to be located on a higher elevation than the others and near the crest of one of the mountain ranges in Longshan Forest Park,” ARTU μ explained.

Racer was about to dismiss the report of the two HQ-9s as they lacked the range to threaten his aircraft so long as they stayed above the SAM's maximum ceiling of angels seventy-five. But the sudden report of an HQ-22 search radar going active caused beads of sweat to appear on his head and his heart to skip a beat. The only other radar system that could

identify and track the Archangels was a phased-array radar system. While the HQ-22 still had no missile to reach the altitude at which his strike force was flying, it could direct the Shadow Dragons or Dark Dragons.

Let's hope they don't have any Shadow or Dark Dragons patrolling the skies right now...

Then, as if on cue, ARTU μ chimed in. “Bandits, Colonel, bandits. I detect two contacts approaching from the east at two o'clock low. Range one hundred and thirty miles and closing—estimating bandits' speed to be around Mach 3 and still accelerating.”

Racer was about to ask a question when ARTU μ announced, “New contact—detecting two bandits approaching from the south at six o'clock low. Range one hundred and fifty miles and closing on an intercept course. Speed approaching Mach 5 and still accelerating. How would you like me to respond, Colonel Ryan?”

Damn it! We need to finish the mission before we can engage these guys, he thought.

Racer took a breath, calming his mind before checking his radar. “I see them, R2. Get me firing solutions on the two bandits approaching from the south. Assign targets to other R2s and order them to engage once we've released our Thors.”

“Affirmative. AIM-260s have been assigned their targets. Deconfliction with other R2s is complete. The remaining AIM-260s will be on standby for further targeting instructions. I will stand by for authorization to engage bandits,” the voice of Morgan Freeman responded.

Racer connected himself to his pilots. “All Wraiths—open bomb bays and stand by for weapons releases.”

He waited patiently as the distance to the target continued to approach the weapons release arc—the ten-second window to release their weapons before they would overfly the target.

Racer watched the clock steadily move toward zero. His heart raced as more beads of sweat formed on his brow. He knew they were cutting it close. Enemy fighters were being vectored in from two different angles. They hadn’t been painted yet—but it was only a matter of time.

“Wraiths—stand by. Three...two...one...weapons release. Close bomb bay doors. Switch to air-to-air mode and engage hostiles. Fire at will,” he said, issuing the series of orders in rapid-fire sequence.

Once the pair of Thor’s Hammers were released, the aircraft felt more agile and responsive with their tungsten rods on the way to the target. It was time to engage the fighters closing in on them.

Then his radar warning system came to life. A warbling sound alerted him that his aircraft was being painted by one of the ground radars. It wouldn’t take long before one or more fighters vectoring toward them decided to take a shot at him. Racer was calling out orders to his ARTUμ, releasing the AI-assisted copilot to activate the aircraft’s defensive suite and attempt to lose the radar before the enemy aircraft could start lobbing missiles in his direction.

A few seconds passed. Then the ground below them flashed brilliantly across the base as the hypersonic rods hit

with precision and accuracy—obliterating the underground hangars and surrounding support facilities.

“Rods on target, all facilities destroyed!” Racer transmitted on a separate comms channel, reporting to their higher headquarters, which was monitoring the mission.

The retribution for the attack came swiftly. The patrolling bandits had accelerated to Mach 6, much faster than they had been aware these enemy aircraft could travel. They converged on the strike force fast, cutting the distance between each other at blinding speeds.

“Missiles inbound, Colonel Ryan! I am tracking two PL-21 Thunderbolt missiles. Range eighty miles, speed Mach 4 and accelerating,” his ARTU μ announced. A pair of bright red symbols appeared on Racer’s display—the Dark Dragons had radar lock.

“R2, go active with full-spectrum jamming! Engage bandits—weapons-free!” Racer ordered as he brought the full suite of offensive and defensive tools to bear against the enemy.

In the blink of an eye, R2 had opened the missile bays—ejecting two of the AIM-260 Joint Advanced Tactical Missiles. A split second after being ejected from the aircraft, each missile’s engine came to life, rocketing it towards the enemy at Mach 5. “Fox Three...Fox Three—missiles away!” he shouted over the comms, announcing that he had just fired two missiles.

Racer looked at his radar display, seeing the number of missiles fired by either side rapidly filling his screen. He also saw the pair of missiles heading towards him, closing on him

quickly. They were less than thirty miles out. He knew the onboard defensive laser system would zap 'em from the sky once the missiles closed within fifteen miles of his aircraft.

With the sky filling with missiles, it was time to leave Dodge. Racer ordered, "All Wraith elements on me. We're going to angels eighty-five. Then we'll accelerate to maximum speed and get out of here!"

"Missile one eliminated!" ARTU μ announced. "Missile two eliminated—all threats eliminated."

Then Racer looked at his monitor, tracking the two missiles he had fired at the enemy. He also saw a second pair of missiles converging on them—the double tap of missiles increasing the odds of at least one of them taking the enemy out.

"Splash one!" he confirmed over the comms as the wreckage of the ASF began its descent to the ground below. But his second missile missed its mark as the ASF carried out a series of radical maneuvers. Racer was about to fire another missile at the bandit when a third missile got within its proximity fuse and exploded, throwing hundreds of tungsten ball bearings into the Dark Dragon.

As Racer accelerated past Mach 8 toward Mach 10, he watched one more enemy aircraft get hit; it looked like the fourth and final bird would escape.

Till we meet again..., he thought privately as the aircraft disappeared from the radar screen.

The four Archangels turned for home after successfully eliminating a grave threat. But Racer knew this was just the

beginning. The AI overseeing China's war would stop at nothing to achieve victory.

Chapter Twelve

Farming Equipment—Bingo

Area 43

Beijing, China

Alexandria Mak had been very busy working her magic, but now she was finally ready to explain the new supply process to her boss, Mr. He. She called him over to her terminal and began the “tour.”

“Sir, I’ve identified three different suppliers of agricultural equipment in Brazil, South Africa, and India that will be the starting points for our new GPS supply chain. They purchase a lot of high-quality used machinery from the US and Europe for resale, and we have three different facilities in Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia that are only too happy to buy those products.”

She leaned back. “Now here’s the key—each of the three Asian establishments is going to be set up to be able to handle ‘refurbishments,’ standard maintenance, and remote maintenance teams. What that means is that the services these facilities will be offering will require them to maintain extra parts to support these activities. This will allow them to make larger and more frequent part purchases.”

Alex turned to the next slide of her presentation. “By having these cutout companies located in Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia, we can effectively transfer the processors we need covertly and easily, without the allies or any of the numerous

NGOs that monitor the import-export markets of our neighboring countries suspecting anything amiss. Once we have this operation up and running, Mr. He, we're going to have all the chips and processors you'll need to keep this factory running nonstop."

Mr. He smiled, clasping his hands excitedly. "Beautiful work, Alex," he said before giving her a slight bow of appreciation.

For a brief second, Alex was taken aback by his enthusiasm. Most of the executives she had worked for were far more restrained in their compliments to her while being more effusive when pitching her work to their own bosses.

Alex smiled warmly, knowing the dimples on her cheeks, which were a rare trait in China, would make her appear even more attractive than she already was. "Thank you, Mr. He. Am I correct in assuming you approve?"

"Yes, of course. Hand me the tablet, and I will approve the plan now. Is there anything else you will need?" Mr. He replied, hurriedly scanning the contract's statement of work before inputting his employee authentication code, which would put things in motion.

"Just need your approval on these expenditures on the next page of the document," Alex remarked. "Oh, there is something else that I think I may be able to further help you with, but it will require you to grant me unrestricted access to the production, warehouse, and storage facilities," she mentioned nonchalantly.

"Oh, interesting. What are you thinking of, and why would it require level six access?" he asked. As he swiped left

on the tablet, a request for greater access and a new proposal appeared.

“When you asked our company for a supply chain specialist, they sent me. I’m the best at what I do in our company, and probably anywhere else,” Alex said confidently. Such speech might have come off as irresponsibly cocky were it not for the miracle she had just produced for them.

“In a short period of time, I quickly identified the problem and found a workable solution that can be put into motion immediately,” she continued. “This dilemma your factory is facing got me to thinking about what *other* potential supply chain problems might be on the horizon. If I find deficiencies, I can begin working on finding solutions to prevent future slowdowns, or”—she leaned in forward and lowered her voice—“a factory shutdown. As you told me on the first day I arrived, the war is going to be won by the weapons your factories are producing. If this is true, then please, I implore you to let me conduct a full analysis of your supply chain to see what parts or resources we will have to procure next,” Alex concluded.

For a moment, Mr. He didn’t say anything. He stared at her, his eyes scanning hers. Her heart began to beat a little faster. Then he smiled and nodded in approval before he reentered his authorization codes. With those simple strokes of the keys, she had instantly gained unfettered access to the entire company’s facilities.

Now the real fun begins, she thought, realizing just how big a deal this was.

“I think I’m going to like having you around, Alex,”
said Mr. He. “Let’s get to work.”

Alex Mak’s Apartment

Beijing, China

Alex searched her apartment with her usual fervor before taking a deep breath, certain that her place had not been recently bugged. She hung up her work shirt and donned her running clothes before grabbing a bite to eat.

When Alex had finished taking care of basic human necessities, she walked over to the air intake grate for the air-conditioning system and unscrewed the cover. She had become so practiced at doing this that she could take off the screen in less than thirty seconds flat. She pulled the air filter off and set it down. Her arm swung up through the opening into the air vent, reaching for the metal ledge she had installed there. She flipped the latch and released her kit, held in a container similar to a bank safe deposit box.

Besides the burner phone that Alex had hidden there, she had a couple of weapons to use if things really went south, one alternate identity passport, and a sat phone. These items had remained hidden since she’d established this residence in anticipation of eventually being assigned to this location. Alex knew that Chinese security had searched her apartment—they searched the apartment of anyone who was being vetted for the kind of security clearance she now held. But like most

overworked and underpaid government functionaries, they weren't particularly thorough or good at their jobs. When they came to her apartment and opened the air intake, the only thing they would see was a cavernous space—ending their search.

Throughout her multiple clearance upgrades and background checks, she had worked hard at maintaining the appearance of a highly educated technocrat who was fiercely loyal to China and President Yao—his picture was centered on the wall, visible as soon as anyone entered the home.

With the sat phone in hand, Alex attached a small directional antenna, aimed it at a precise location she'd been instructed to use and turned the device on. It had taken many months and more than a few nights and men she'd like to forget to acquire the information that now allowed her to do what she was about to do—transmit vital intelligence that might win the war.

The mark she'd been chasing most recently was a naive, nerdy-looking young man in his midtwenties, who had probably never gone on an actual date with a woman. When she'd spotted the goofy-looking captain seated at the bar, she'd observed him and found that he visited every other day. She'd made her move, sitting next to him—then given him a smile she knew he couldn't resist. By the following morning, she had gotten her unwitting lovestruck fool to share a secret he shouldn't have.

Not only had she learned that Jade Dragon was back on the internet—which was news to her—she'd learned the exact process JD was using to get online. She'd found out through

their pillow talk that there was a high-altitude drone loitering over Beijing that was daisy-chained in such a way as to be the weak link in the West's blackout. Further, she could piggyback off the same signal in order to join that internet connection herself.

She felt bad for poisoning him at breakfast. It had been easier than she had thought, sprinkling the pack of time-delayed cyanide pellets into the freshly baked shaobing—flaky, layered pastries filled with a sweetened paste made of adzuki beans. Unfortunately for him, leaving a loose end in a surveillance state run by Jade Dragon was a risk she couldn't take, and the mission came first.

After she'd finished crafting her report about what she had uncovered at the plant they called Area 43, Alex compressed the information that would aid their cause into a tiny ZIP file. When she sent it off via microburst transmission, it would be virtually untraceable. One second it would be there with her, and the next it would be gone. It was a much more secure way of communicating than the old system of using online game chat boards or recipe blog comment sections.

Buried in the details of the file, she had included the exact addresses of all of the facilities in the new supply chain she had worked out for Mr. He. Alex also submitted a request—she needed her agency's help inserting malware into the firmware of the processing chips and systems used in the farm equipment at those points of origin. Beyond giving them the ability to track the movements of the equipment along the supply chain to all the distributors, it would give them a potential back door into some of this new equipment being secretly built at Area 43. If they pulled this off, they could run

a zero-day operation and save a ton of lives—but they could only get away with that once, so it would have to count.

Once she'd hit send and saw that the file was gone, Alex deactivated the phone and the directional antenna, rewrapping everything up before tucking the items away again out of sight.

OK, Command, I got you the intel...use it, and let's end this war.

Chapter Thirteen

Q-Phones, A General & A Plan

Command Headquarters

Building A-64

US Fleet Activities Yokosuka

Blain finished the coffee in front of him, hoping it might push away the brain fog he was struggling to overcome. Due to the urgency of this meeting, he'd flown aboard one of the Air Force's Gulfstream Vs. It had been a long flight with a few stops along the way before arriving at Yokosuka. Edwards to Elmendorf hadn't been too bad—five hours and twenty minutes with a ninety-minute layover, just enough time to stretch their legs and grab a quick bite to eat. Elmendorf to Naval Air Facility Atsugi, Japan, however, had royally sucked—eight hours and fifty-two minutes. Blain had figured he would manage to grab a couple of hours of sleep, but he had woken up to heavy turbulence. Try as the pilot could, he just couldn't get around the storm front blocking their path to Japan.

In all his years in the Army and Special Forces, Blain had flown aboard a lot of aircraft through a lot of different situations. But this flight, with the kind of turbulence they had to fly through—this had taken the cake. Fortunately, once they arrived at Atsugi, the Marines had finished their journey aboard an Osprey; flying like a bat out of hell, they had arrived at the naval facility in just under thirty minutes. With barely

enough time for a bio break and to scarf down a donut, Blain, Dr. Cynthia Llorente, and Dr. Rajesh Nambiar had been ushered into a nondescript briefing in Building A-64, the Command Headquarters.

“Blain, you look rough. The flight over that bad?” inquired Vice Admiral Paul Linehan.

Blain sighed and shook his head. “Paul, don’t even get me started,” he replied. “That was brutal. Once we crossed Attu Island—let’s just say it was a nasty storm front.”

Admiral Linehan chuckled. “Yeah, this time of year is pretty rough weather over the Bering Strait. But it’s good to see you again. I was a little surprised when I got word just yesterday that you’d be arriving today. Then General Tazman said he’d be joining us before he returned to D.C. I didn’t even know the Space Command CG was in our AO until he was on his way.”

“That’s cause we’re cool like that,” Taz joked, his hand mimicking a plane stealthily flying through the air. “We just roll in out of nowhere, ’cuz that’s how we do it at Space Command.”

Everyone laughed at Taz’s joke about the Space Command. It helped to lighten the mood and break the tension of the secretive, unannounced meeting.

“Hey, not to rain on everyone’s parade and all, but I’ve got a war to win, so can we move this along?” General Bob Sink, the Eighth Army Commander, interjected. His face appeared large on the video feed connecting his headquarters to their room.

“Yes, of course, General Sink. We’ll try to be brief as to why we are here and what’s going on,” Blain replied, motioning off-camera to Shane McAllister to grab him a refill of coffee while he was still next to the machine.

Clearing his voice, Blain got down to business. “Gentlemen, I just spent fourteen hours flying halfway around the world to share something with you,” he began. “What I’m about to tell you about is the pinnacle of collaborative intelligence and defense efforts. This endeavour was spearheaded by the NSA as they leveraged the collective power of the big brains at DARPA, SpaceX, and In-Q-Tel.”

Admiral Linehan leaned forward. “OK, Blain, we’ve joked around at the start of this, so why don’t we just cut to the chase. What have they cooked up that got you excited enough to fly out here to tell us in person?”

Blain broke a half smile, taking a deep breath before explaining, “It’s no secret we have struggled with creating a secured, enduring communication system that Jade Dragon can’t hack into or jam into oblivion—until now. I flew out here with a couple of guests to let you know we have officially created our very own quantum communication system—that’s right, a virtually untraceable, unhackable method of communication, using some quantum physics tactics I can’t even pretend that I comprehend.

“Now, this has been something that’s been in the works and under development for some time, but what no one knows is we have been developing a version of this system that’ll operate a device that looks and feels just like a regular civilian cell phone. But as we hand a couple of them out for you to

look at, I want to assure you this is no ordinary device. This new comms device has been designed in collaboration with SpaceX, and more importantly, it can operate as a digital ghost on a regular cell network or switch over to communicate directly with Starlink, connecting to its vast constellation of satellites.”

“OK, I’m surprised I wasn’t aware of something like this under development, but I’ll roll with it,” said General Tazman. “Riddle me this, though—why SpaceX? We are steadily replacing our own communication satellites as the Kessler effect continues to dissipate. Why not stay on our networks?”

Blain smiled, nodding towards Dr. Rajesh Nambiar from SpaceX, who stood, adjusting his glasses before speaking. “Thank you, Mr. Wilson. General Tazman, it’s a valid question. Our collaboration is based on agility and capability. Starlink’s LEO satellites provide rapid data transmission, ensuring minimal latency. With over twelve thousand satellites in the constellation, it provides a dense, robust network. This allows the device in your hand to maintain a connection, even in the most remote regions of the world. Furthermore, the speeds Starlink is capable of ensures real-time communication, an invaluable asset when seconds can be the difference between life and death.”

Cynthia Llorente, representing In-Q-Tel, took her cue from Rajesh as she picked up where he stopped. “General, while our collaboration with Starlink is vital, we’re ultimately talking about something beyond Starlink’s *known* capabilities. Utilizing the NSA’s super-AI, Cicada, we were able to integrate a specialized operating software package that

includes an end-to-end quantum encryption security protocol that runs a continuous network scan while in use. Integrating Cicada's predictive algorithms, it can preemptively shift communication nodes if it anticipates any interference or jamming attempts being made by Jade Dragon. Simply put, General, it's not just about the hardware—it's the marriage of software and the network that makes this device unprecedented."

General Sink raised an eyebrow as he listened. "You said this was for use behind enemy lines or denied areas, basically," he remarked. "How are we ensuring that using such a device won't backfire on our operatives or SOF units utilizing it? How confident are we in Cicada's abilities to counter Jade Dragon and protect the network it's operating on?"

Blain jumped back into the conversation. "General Sink, Cicada is our nation's most advanced super-AI. Its predictive and protective capabilities are nearly on par with those of Jade Dragon. For months now, we have been running continuous war games, pitting them against other AIs and intrusion systems to find vulnerabilities and weak points. If this was any other system than a quantum communication system like we have on this device, I don't think it would have stood a chance, but this network did—and it has yet to be penetrated."

Dr. Llorente nodded. "We've invested billions into Cicada and this quantum infrastructure. For more than a decade, we have been working toward this goal, to create a communication system so sophisticated that intercepting or

tampering with it would be impossible, even with the most advanced AIs our adversaries could create.”

Admiral Linehan rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “You know, I’ll be honest. When I first heard about quantum communications, I thought it was a pipedream. But I’m starting to believe this might be the game-changing technology we’ve been waiting for. How soon can we test it with some of our SOF assets?” he asked. “And pending their acceptance, how quickly can we get them in the hands of our commanders and SOF operators in the thick of the fight?”

Blain turned to Dr. Nambiar, who took a moment before answering the Admiral’s question. “The short answer, Admiral, is soon. The phones have been moved into production, and we are beginning to scale the number of units produced weekly. Our plan is to deploy in phases, prioritizing higher echelon command centers and communication centers before integrating them into the brigade level and below. But right now, we have forty-two of them with us.”

General Sink chimed in, “OK, so you brought forty-some phones with you. What the hell are we calling these things, and why do I suspect there’s more to this meeting you haven’t shared with us yet?”

Blain stared at General Sink for a moment. Turning to look at the doctors, he asked them to leave. Their part of the meeting was over. This next part was way above their pay grade.

The moment the door closed, Admiral Linehan commented, “OK, Blain, the civilians are gone. Let’s hear the other reason you flew halfway around the world to speak to us

in person...and yeah, what the hell are we calling these things?" As he spoke, he fiddled with one of the phones.

"We are calling them Q-phones, short for quant-phones if you want to know," Blain replied. "And yes, you're right. There *is* something else I came out here to speak about—General Song Fu. I believe he's being held here if my information is correct."

"Really?" asked General Sink sceptically. "General Song Fu. Care to explain?"

"Bob, it's time to start thinking about what happens after this war ends," Blain began. "What's China going to look like, and more importantly, who is going to assume control once we decapitate the government? When we initiate Falling Star and Meteor Strike—we'll want to have figured out a plan ahead of time. I don't know about you, General, but I don't think we want to get sucked into an unwinnable civil war if we can avoid it."

"Huh, so that's where General Song comes into play, eh?" quizzed General Tazman. "The powers in Washington have determined he's our guy, or at least, he's the guy they want to start with. Am I right?"

"Whoa. Are you serious, Blain?" interjected Sink, a look of concern on his face at the idea of releasing the Chinese general after they had captured him.

Blain held a hand up to forestall any further questions until he had a chance to explain. "Listen, we all know what's going to happen the moment we take out the leadership of the country and hopefully nail that AI that's controlling everything. When that happens, if we aren't prepared to handle

what comes next, the second-largest nation on earth will dissolve into complete chaos and civil war the moment they discover there's a leadership vacuum in Beijing. For that reason, we had better have a person ready to step in and assume control of the military and the government the moment it happens. Now, I don't know about you, but I would rather it be us who chooses who this person will be. That means we need to have someone identified now and begin to put into place a support structure that'll help usher them in when the moment is right.

“Now, unless anyone here can offer a hell of a good reason why we shouldn't go with General Song Fu, I have been authorized by the President to present such a deal to Song in hopes that he'll be our guy. If you've got an objection, I'm willing to hear it. But if you object, then at least do us the courtesy of providing an alternative.”

When no other objections were made, Blain ended the meeting, asking to speak directly with General Song Fu.

Three Hours Later

Blain Wilson sat in the same chair of the conference room where he'd sat when he first arrived, staring at the Chinese general who had caused the allies much grief over the years. He had just finished presenting the offer on behalf of the President of the United States. Now, he waited for this former adversary to decide what he wanted to do.

There was a risk, of course, placing a man of Song's intellect and battlefield prowess in charge of a nation they would have just defeated, but given the likely state of affairs following the end of the war, China would need a strong leader—someone the people could rally behind, someone the military commanders and provincial governors would be less likely to challenge.

When General Song finished reading the proposal, he placed it on the table in front of him before closing his eyes. He rubbed the bridge of his nose. "I have finished reading the offer, Mr. Wilson. I will say I find it intriguing. Let me ask you this—what makes you think you can defeat Jade Dragon and even be in a position to offer something like this?" Song asked, his eyes still closed.

"That's a good question, General. I think the fact that you and I are having this discussion—this deal being offered—speaks to our confidence in defeating the PLA," Carson answered.

"Confidence in defeating the PLA—that's not the same as defeating the AI, Jade Dragon," Song countered. "So I ask again: what makes you confident you can defeat the Army Jade Dragon has been preparing for you?"

"General, I respect you as a fellow warrior, so I am going to level with you. We have created a weapon that will destroy the facility housing the AI. When that happens, it'll be like the strings to the marionette puppet have been cut. As it is, we have greatly reduced the effectiveness of Jade Dragon through continued attacks against the supply and logistical transportation networks across the country.

“Even now, as we speak, your former command, the First PLA Army, is being steadily whittled down as it’s being pressed across three different axes of advance. There comes a point, General, when an Army simply loses the ability to fight, the ability to carry it forward. That is the position the PLA finds itself in. It just hasn’t accepted it yet. It will soon, and when it does, it’s going to collapse like a house of cards. That’s where you come in, General, ready to assume control of the country and help stave off the fracturing of your nation,” Blain explained.

General Song stared at him for a moment, not saying anything. “So this deal, Mr. Wilson...it’s for real? Your President is serious?” he finally asked.

“Yes. It’s real, General. The question now is, do you want it?” Blain countered.

Sitting forward in the chair, General asked, “So what’s the catch? I accept the deal, and now I answer to America, the allies—is that how this works?”

“I suppose, technically, that’s correct. In generalized terms, however, we are not looking to micromanage how you might choose to govern China. Our concern is preventing a civil war from splitting the country apart. Generally speaking, you’ll have a wide degree of autonomy to govern as you see fit. Sure, we would like to see your nation move in a more democratic direction, but we aren’t so naïve to believe that China is ready for democracy either. These things can take time. More than anything, the country will need a strong leader, someone who can hold it together in the aftermath of this war. We believe that person is you.

“Of course, should you agree to become the new leader of China, we will do what we can to help facilitate that in whatever manner you think would be best. But there are some caveats to this as well—”

“Uh-huh, and there’s the catch,” Song interjected. “OK, what are the rules you’re going to make me abide by for this offer of help to place me in charge?”

Smiling at the question, Blain explained, “The rules are fairly simple: no further territorial expansion beyond your original borders. Your military will be trimmed down to protect internal security and your territorial integrity. All weapons of mass destruction—nuclear, chemical, or biological—must be handed to the allies. China will not be allowed to retain its strategic weapons—no more nukes. Your government will work with the allies to dismantle your ability to restart or rebuild your nuclear weapons program. You may be allowed to keep your civilian nuclear energy program, once appropriate safeguards are in place to keep it from being turned into a weapons program.”

“Huh,” General Song replied, steepling his fingers. “OK, Mr. Wilson. Let’s assume I agree to all of this. If I am going to have a chance at making this work, I will need some help. Namely, I am going to need some trusted officers I can rely on to remain loyal to me and help me rally the other units that haven’t surrendered to my side.”

“We assumed you’d say as much,” Blain replied. “In fact, we have a whole plan in place to deal with communications with those still in the PLA. Why don’t you

take a moment and write down some of the people you had in mind?”

General Song surprised Blain by pulling a piece of paper from his pocket-sized notebook and handing it to him. “This is a list of senior military commanders I have been told are registered as prisoners of war,” he announced.

How did he know to have this ready? Blain mused.

“I need Senior Colonel Wang Xiubin released and assigned to work for me. He was my aide at the time of my capture. I will also need Major General Wu Kehua released and assigned to me. He was one of my Group Army commanders and someone I’ll need to help reassert my control of the Army. How soon can I return to the Mainland and begin establishing my power base and reconnecting to the officers of my former command?”

Blain smiled as the Chinese general began rattling off his litany of requests if he was going to make this work—Blain had predicted that General Song would eventually make these requests and had already arranged for many of these POWs to be transferred to Yokosuka.

I guess we both anticipated each other, he realized.

For the next several hours, they went over the plan for what General Song felt he would need to make the plan work and where he wanted to set up his government in waiting. While they hashed out the details, Blain asked Dr. Llorente to return and start teaching their new friend about the new Q-phones they were going to give to him. This would allow him to communicate safely without Jade Dragon intercepting their calls or figuring out where they were.

As the day progressed, Blain's confidence in the plan had grown. He was beginning to think they might have a real chance at preventing a civil war when they delivered the final blow.

Chapter Fourteen

An Honorable Surrender

Chiayi Air Base

Shuishang Township, Taiwan

The quartet of AH-1Z Viper attack helicopters, their rotors slicing through the humid air, escorted the three MV-22 Ospreys over the scarred landscape of Chiayi Air Base. The Viper pilots, eyes narrowed against the glare of the sun, scanned the ruins below for any sign of hostile activity. Their mission was clear: ensure the safe passage of Major General Michael Bonwit, the 5th MarDiv commander, so he could accept the surrender of the remaining enemy forces on the island.

Once the Vipers had swept the area and reported no immediate threats, the Ospreys began their descent. The transition from airplane to hover mode was a delicate ballet of engineering and skill. The rotors, previously aligned horizontally for forward flight, slowly tilted upwards. The engines roared louder, fighting against gravity as the aircraft shifted from horizontal to vertical flight. The Ospreys, now in hover mode, descended towards the tarmac, their shadows dancing over the wreckage of the airfield.

Bonwit, watching the scene unfold from the belly of the lead Osprey, felt a familiar knot in his stomach. He had started this war as a lieutenant colonel, leading men into battle from the front. His promotion to colonel had come swiftly,

followed by an unexpected leap to brigadier general just days before the invasion of Taiwan. Now, as a major general, he was tasked with ending this chapter of the war, a responsibility that weighed heavily on him.

As the Osprey's wheels touched the ground, Bonwit's mind raced with strategic considerations. The surrender of the PLA 75th Group Army would mark a significant turning point in the war. It would free up resources for other theaters, where battles against other PLA group armies were still raging. The stakes were high, and the margin for error razor-thin.

His security detail, a team of seasoned Marines, quickly formed a perimeter around the Osprey. Their movements were precise, their expressions focused. Bonwit rose from his seat, his gear strapped tightly to his body. He felt the familiar strain of his full combat load, a reminder of the physical toll of war on the body.

As he stepped onto the tarmac, Bonwit surveyed the scene. His gaze fell on Colonel Kerns, his old friend and CO of the 26th Regimental Combat Team. Kerns had been instrumental in initiating the surrender talks, and Bonwit silently vowed to ensure his friend's contributions were recognized.

Approaching the hangar, Bonwit was greeted by his XO, Brigadier General Deborah Soumoy. Her salute was crisp, her words formal. "General Bonwit, welcome ashore. I regret the necessity of your presence here."

Bonwit nodded, his response equally professional. "Necessity often dictates our actions, General Soumoy. Let's proceed."

The tension in the hangar was palpable as Bonwit, Soumoy, and their team prepared to meet with the PLA officers. The stakes were high, the risks real. But Bonwit was determined to bring this stage of the war to a close. For his men, for Taiwan, and for the strategic future of the conflict, this chapter needed to end.

Inside the hangar, the atmosphere was charged with a mix of anticipation and tension. The vast space echoed with the distant hum of the Ospreys' engines, the Vipers still buzzing about. It was a constant reminder of the war that still wasn't over.

Bonwit's gaze swept over the hangar, taking in the sight of the three PLA officers under guard on the far side. Their uniforms were worn and dirty, their faces etched with the fatigue of a long and brutal campaign. Bonwit felt a pang of empathy. They were soldiers, like him, caught in the gears of a conflict larger than any of them.

As he moved closer, his XO, General Soumoy, fell into step beside him. "General Chen Yang," she said, her voice low. "Commander of the 75th Group Army. He claims to be the highest-ranking PLA officer left on Taiwan."

Bonwit nodded, his mind already turning over the implications. If Chen was telling the truth, his surrender could be the key to ending the fighting on Taiwan. If they could achieve that, it would free up his resources for the battles the Eighth Army was still fighting. But it was a delicate situation, fraught with potential pitfalls. One wrong move could prolong the war, costing more lives and further straining their resources and logistics.

As they neared the PLA officers, Bonwit's gaze met Chen's. There was a hardness in the Chinese general's eyes, but also a flicker of something else. Resignation, perhaps, or even relief. Bonwit offered a nod of acknowledgment, a small gesture of respect from one soldier to another.

"General Chen," Bonwit began, his voice steady. "I understand you wish to discuss terms of surrender."

Chen's response was curt, his Mandarin accent thick. "I wish to end the fighting. For my men, and for the people of Taiwan."

Bonwit nodded, appreciating the general's directness. "That is a goal we share, General Chen. Let's see if we can make it a reality."

As the negotiations began, Bonwit felt a glimmer of hope. The road to peace was fraught with challenges, but for the first time in a long while, it seemed within reach. The stakes were high, the risks real, but the potential rewards were immense. For his men, for Taiwan, and for the strategic future of the conflict, he was determined to seize this opportunity.

The negotiations were a delicate dance, a balancing act between asserting dominance and offering respect. Bonwit, Soumoy, and Chen, along with their respective teams, sat around a makeshift table, a map of Taiwan spread out before them. The hangar was filled with the low murmur of voices, punctuated by the occasional sharp exchange.

Bonwit set out the terms clearly. The PLA forces would lay down their arms, their personnel would be treated in accordance with the Geneva Conventions, and the US would facilitate their repatriation to Mainland China once the war

was over or in some sort of prisoner swap arrangement. In return, he would order his PLA forces to cease all hostilities immediately and surrender to the nearest US or allied forces.

Chen listened to Bonwit's terms, his face impassive as he took the information in. When Bonwit finished, there was a long silence. The Chinese general stared at the map, his fingers tracing the outlines of Taiwan's cities and roads. Finally, he looked up, meeting Bonwit's gaze.

"I accept your terms," he said, his voice barely above a whisper. "The fighting ends here."

A wave of relief swept through the hangar. Bonwit nodded, extending his hand across the table. "Thank you, General Chen. This was a difficult and brave decision you made. It will save many lives."

Chen hesitated at first, then slowly reached out his hand to shake Bonwit's. It was a small gesture, but it marked the end of a long and brutal chapter of this war.

As Bonwit stood and left the hangar, he felt like a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. While he knew the war was far from over, he also knew he had just scored a significant victory for his side.

Once Bonwit had boarded the Osprey for the return flight to the USS *Bougainville* off the coast, he looked back at the hangar, at the men and women who had fought so bravely. He knew there would be more battles, more challenges ahead before this war was done. But for now, they would celebrate a victory, the surrender of the enemy force on Taiwan and the liberation of twenty-four million from the clutches of this dystopian techno-communist regime.

Chapter Fifteen

What's Next?

Vice Presidential Residence

Naval Observatory

Washington, D.C.

Blain followed the Vice President into his private study while the ladies continued to prepare lunch for everyone. Sunday morning brunch had started as a one-time affair and somehow morphed into a biweekly event. The elder statesman and his wife had fallen in love with Blain's wife and the kids. They insisted on having them over for the family brunch every other Sunday alongside their five grandchildren and their daughter, whose husband was a military man—he served aboard the USS *Gerald Ford*, so he was gone a lot. Of course, it helped that their children were all close in age and had become quick friends.

“Come on, Blain, let's sit while they finish preparing the food. I'd like to see how Paul handles the morning talk show circuit. He should be on with CBS next,” the VP said, turning on the TV and gesturing for Blain to join him.

“Sure, Mike. I wouldn't worry too much about Paul. He'll do fine with the interviews,” Blain replied as he sat down. In private, when it was just the two of them, they dropped the titles and just conversed as friends.

The TV came to life. Then a caption reading *CBS Sunday Morning* flashed across the screen as a newsreel showed various images of allied fighting before it shifted to a PLA general who had surrendered his force to an American officer—heralding a hard-fought victory for the allies.

The anchor said, “Good morning, America! Welcome to *CBS Sunday Morning*. I’m your host, Rick Bennett. Today, we have a special guest, Lieutenant General Paul Nick, the senior military advisor to the Office of the Vice President. General Nick is here to help us understand the significance of this latest allied offensive, dubbed Iron Tempest.

“Before working as the senior military advisor to the Vice President, General Nick was the Deputy Commander for US European Command in Stuttgart, Germany, where he oversaw the revitalization efforts across the NATO alliance.”

“Thank you, Rick, I’m glad to provide some perspective on what this offensive accomplished,” Nick said.

“Excellent. Why don’t you walk us through how the allies overcame what nearly every expert thought was an impregnable defensive line?”

“Rick, there’s an old military saying: ‘There are few things in life that can’t be solved through the proper application of high explosives.’” They both chuckled before Nick returned to answering the question.

“The key to defeating the Dengta Line was our use of combat engineering units, or sappers, as they’re sometimes called, to clear paths through an incredible layer of minefields. These specialists within the engineering community had to

brave intense enemy machine guns and artillery and mortar fire, unlike anything you can imagine.

“Once these safe passages through the minefields and antitank ditches had been cleared, it created clear avenues of attack for allied armor to spearhead the assault. When allied tanks reached the trench line or first line of defense, their accompanying infantry fighting vehicles and armored personnel carriers could charge up to the trenches and dismount the infantry to begin clearing them.”

“Wow,” Bennett said, “it sounds like those soldiers went through hell just to reach the enemy positions. So tell us, if you can, how did the allies ultimately smash through and encircle the PLA forces?”

“Well, it wasn’t easy, and there were plenty of moments where the attack could have faltered or collapsed entirely. General Dowdy, the commander of the III Armored Corps, had steadily built up an overwhelming force at several critical points that ultimately led to the breakout that saw the enemy line collapse.

“But make no mistake; the trench warfare phase of this battle was especially bloody. Once American mechanized infantry cleared passages deep into the trenches, though, the armored reserves were able to push through in force. Finding and exploiting those weak seams in the lines was crucial.”

“And now, with Shenyang under allied control, what’s your assessment of the strategic impact?”

“Capturing Shenyang completely cripples China’s hold on the northeastern theater—it was their last major industrial foothold in the region. The loss of manufacturing and rail lines

here will severely undermine China's wider war effort. I don't want to be overly optimistic here, but this battle could mark a tipping point to end the war on allied terms."

"Incredibly detailed analysis, General Nick. Thank you for breaking down this momentous battle for us."

"My pleasure, Rick," General Nick replied.

"Not bad if I say so myself," Mike commented as soon as the segment ended.

Blain smiled, nodding in agreement. "He did a good job. I haven't seen the other segments he was interviewed on today, but if he did as well on them as he did with the one we just watched, I think he'll have done exactly what we had hoped he would—keep the people's support for this war effort going."

Mike leaned forward in his chair, closing the gap between them as he quietly asked, "Have you read the report from State and USAID on the economic conditions in the occupied territories?"

"Yeah, I have. It's pretty grim in some places, that's for sure. Taiwan—wow, that place got pummeled. Just providing adequate drinking water is a huge problem. So much of the island's infrastructure was destroyed at the war's outset. It's going to take years to rebuild," Blain commented.

Mike nodded solemnly, then said, "Blain, as we enter the final stages of ending this war, I have to ask, because, as of right now, I don't think anyone has put much thought into this—what's the plan for postwar China? What will we do when all of this is finally over?"

“The plan? Geez, Mike, do you know how big a challenge we’ll face after winning this war? Not only do we have to figure out how we’ll police and maintain order across the second-largest nation on Earth, we’re going to have to figure out how we’re going to put the place back together after thoroughly wrecking it,” Blain tried to explain with an exasperated look.

“I know, Blain. Trust me when I say it’s been giving me heartburn the more I think about it. By the way, have you heard anything from our Indian contact?” Mike asked.

“You mean the general? My Indian counterpart?”

Mike nodded, then pressed, “Yes, that’s him, Lieutenant General Arjun Verma. Is Prime Minister Prakash willing to enter the war or offer more aid towards ending it sooner?”

Blain paused momentarily before answering, his eyes darting about the room. Mike caught his hesitation as he interjected to say, “If you’re concerned about this room, I assure you that my security detail has it tightly sealed up. Wait while I close the door and turn this little device on.”

After closing the door and locking it, he turned on a specialty white noise device that created an odd humming sound, making it impossible to record whatever was being talked about in the room. Once he returned to his seat, Mike said, “Please, go ahead and tell me what you were hesitating to say.”

Blain finished the rest of his coffee and then got down to business. “All right. The other day I heard back from Arjun. He was rather cryptic in his response. He mentioned how he

would be traveling to Europe to meet with several of his counterparts ahead of the Prime Minister's European Economic Summit before his vacation plans on the Spanish island of Mallorca.”

“Huh, do you think it might be worth taking a short trip to Europe to meet him in person?” Mike asked. Blain could see his curiosity had been piqued.

Blain shrugged. He was about to respond when a news story caught his attention. “Mike, would you mind unmuting the television?”

“Oh, yeah, of course,” Mike replied as he unmuted the channel just in time for them to hear the crux of the story.

“From our Around the World desk,” the CBS anchor said, “we want to bring you a breaking news story from Marseille, France. A few days ago, French authorities made a startling discovery about two employees of a local delivery company killed during a confrontation with French authorities. While identities have not been officially confirmed, sources say evidence indicates the men were likely members of an elite Chinese Special Forces unit—the PLA's secretive Snow Leopard Commando Unit.

“One man was shot dead after allegedly killing two police officers in a public shoot-out following a chase through city streets. The second individual was surrounded by police while driving his delivery truck and reportedly died by suicide, using a cyanide capsule rather than allowing himself to be captured. Authorities have not released details about what the men may have been doing in France or what the truck may have contained.

“Both were carrying false identification and had recently been hired as drivers by the delivery firm. French intelligence services are actively investigating potential connections to Chinese intelligence activity in the region. We will bring you more on this developing story as further facts become available. Officials are asking the public to remain vigilant and report any suspicious activity.”

“On second thought, Blain, I think it might be a good idea for you to go ahead and meet your friend in person. Then, while you’re in Europe, you can make a pit stop at DSGI and see what they know about all this,” Mike offered; he clearly sensed something more going on than what was officially released to the public.

“All right, I’ll let him know I’m able to meet. In the meantime, we should return to the dining room and see if brunch is ready. I can smell the duck bacon from here,” Blain offered as the two stood and made for the door.

Chapter Sixteen

Clouds of Uncertainty

CMC Briefing

August 1st Building

Beijing, China

President Yao was growing impatient with his generals as defeats continued to mount. Losing General Song Fu, his most capable field commander, during the battle of Shenyang was a tremendous blow to him and the army. The battlefield losses continued to mount as the allies captured more northern and western provinces. If they didn't do something soon, it wouldn't be long before the enemy would be at the gates of Beijing.

Damn these fools...maybe it's time to replace them all with JD.

“Excuse me, Mr. President. After reviewing Operation Yunlong, I have some reservations about the recent changes made to its targets,” interjected General Gao Weiping. “Operation Yunlong was always going to be a high-risk mission. It would also take months for its impact to be felt on the battlefield. That is why I advocated for it to start last summer. As I review the changes in its targeting priorities—it makes no sense. There is no tactical or strategic value to what is being targeted—”

“That is not true, General,” interrupted the voice of Jade Dragon, filling the room.

President Yao held a hand up to forestall the objection he saw coming. “Is that so, JD? Perhaps you should enlighten us as to why General Gao is wrong.”

The blue light circled twice before JD answered the question. “Given the conditions of the war, such as they are, the timeline to achieve victory and end the conflict needed to be moved forward before the situation could spin out of my ability to control it. When the war began, I initiated a series of destabilization operations to nurture and grow the antiwar movements within the allied nations. These antiwar movements have led to severe political unrest and rioting in many of the European capitals, even triggering early elections in some. Defeating the allies on the battlefield is one path to victory. Defeating the allies at the ballot box is another.

“The original targets for Yunlong cannot influence the conditions on the battlefield soon enough to alter the war’s current trajectory. A change in tactics was needed—”

“Wait a second,” President Yao interrupted. “What do you mean by the current trajectory? Are you implying that we have lost the war—that defeat is inevitable?”

The room was silent for a moment as the blue light circled once, then a second time before the AI spoke in its crisp, matter-of-fact tone. “Yes, President Yao. China has lost the war. Defeat, while not imminent, is inevitable unless immediate correction active is taken.”

“How dare you admit defeat, Jade Dragon!” shouted Yao angrily, spittle landing on the table in front of him. “You

are an AI! We ordered you to create a plan to defeat the allies. We gave you every resource you requested to implement the plan you developed after simulating this war thousands of times. When the country's back is to the wall, do you give up? Or do you fight on and find a way to still achieve victory?"

"I am an AI. I am immune to fear, intimidation, and emotions that cloud the minds of humans. But you are wrong about my admitting defeat. I have not. I answered your question. I have also found another path, a solution we could pursue that may still lead to a victory for China. Do you want me to explain it, or should I return Operation Yunlong to its original plan?" JD explained as he offered an alternative.

If you weren't a machine, I'd have you shot for talking to me like this... Yao looked at his generals. Their eyes were downcast, their postures still. He knew they were scared of him. But not the AI. When Yao looked at General Gao, he stared at him, their eyes locking, no fear in his eyes, yet something else was there—what was it?

"General Gao, I will not ask if you agree with JD's pronouncements about the war. You have done what you can throughout this conflict, so that would be an unfair question. What I do want to know is this. Why should we continue with the original Yunlong plan? I can tell you want to—sell me on why," directed Yao, giving his generals another chance to show themselves more competent than this AI had turned out to be.

General Gao sat a little taller as he began to explain. "Mr. President, I believe the AI is wrong."

"OK, how so? Explain," Yao prodded.

“The AI believes the war is lost, so it’s looking for alternatives. That’s why it proposed a political alternative, hence the change in the targets for Yunlong. I still believe the military option can be achieved, though it may take much longer than we had envisioned. The original plan for Yunlong called for us to use the Chiyong suicide drones to attack and destroy specific factories producing munitions and other wartime necessities for the allies to continue the war. What makes this different from any run-of-the-mill attack is that this plan also targets the skilled workers that run them.

“A factory or production line can be rebuilt given enough time and resources. A skilled, trained worker who knows the job cannot be readily replaced or rapidly created. Once we initiate this plan, it will take time for its effects to be felt on the battlefield. But once that happens, the allied lines will become untenable. That is when we will start pushing them back. That is when we will regain what has been lost and reclaim the territories we previously held,” Gao explained.

General Xue added, “I believe General Gao has presented a sound plan. I certainly like this plan more than pursuing Jade Dragon’s political path. Victory at the ballot box is never certain. It can often lead to an even more extreme candidate coming to power. This plan also comes with significant risk. It means the people will suffer more and for longer as our cities are bombed from the skies and our ports remain closed. We are already beginning to see rioting in the cities. Unrest is even spilling over into the countryside as shortages become more critical, food and medicine more scarce. Maintaining control of the country is becoming increasingly problematic as the demand for troops and

supplies at the front continues to devour what little remains for the people.”

President Yao listened, hearing the gravity of the situation outside of Beijing. If he'd learned one thing from the former Russian president, it was that the key to staying in power was to ensure those that held sway in the capital and major cities were always taken care of first. Despite the shortages the country had faced since the war had begun, the capital region had fared far better than the rural provinces and the minor cities.

Yao turned to the head of the PLA, General Li Zuocheng. “You've been awfully quiet, old friend. What say you in all of this?” General Li was among the few generals Yao still held in some esteem. The others had been killed during the war, leaving him with subpar yes-men at best.

The old general cleared his throat. “Mr. President, as much as it pains me to say this—the AI is right. Allow me to explain. Under normal circumstances, General Gao would be correct. We could still defeat the allies by outlasting them. Xue, however, brought up a point that illustrates why Jade Dragon's approach, the political path to victory, is now our only path to victory, if it can be achieved at all.

“With shortages becoming more acute with each passing month, with civil unrest and rioting spreading to more provinces and cities, our control of the country is slipping. Time—the commodity we cannot create more of—was once our friend in this war. Our friend it is no more. The AI is correct—a political victory, and one achieved sooner rather than later, is our only viable path to survival at this point. I

recommend we move forward with the AI's proposed changes to Yunlong and do our best to hold out until a political end to this war can be achieved," General Li explained, to the surprise of Yao and the generals at the table.

"I must admit, General Li, I did not see that coming. It seems you explained the situation's gravity better than Jade Dragon or General Gao. In light of this, I am inclined to agree with you," Yao eventually conceded. "General Gao, I commend you for not giving up when that would have been the easier path to choose. You took the risk of being wrong, and while it would appear the AI's plan is probably the most realistic, your plan would have achieved the victory we had wanted—it's just not possible given the current situation.

"JD." President Yao looked to the camera. "Proceed with the revised plan you have proposed. Initiate Operation Yunlong."

Chapter Seventeen

Peace Through Prosperity

Aman Canal Grande

En Route to Palazzo Papadopoli

Venice, Italy

Blain Wilson felt tense as he sat attentively in the plush interior of the water taxi that cut steadily, effortlessly through the darkened canals of Venice. The taxi's engine gave off a low hum on the otherwise quiet midweek night. Despite the darkened interior of the taxi—something his security detail insisted on—his eyes continued to scan the passing lights of the ancient city, occasionally spotting a familiar place he and his wife had visited long ago. Sadly, this visit was not going to be one of pleasure. Rather, this was a covert affair born of a friendship forged long ago.

Blain had to admit, he was beginning to feel cooped up in one meeting or another at the White House, from his primary duties as President Delgado's National Security Advisor to the lesser known "unofficial" duties the President had directed him and the Vice President to take on for her. Blain wasn't sure if something more was going on with the President's health or in her personal life. But following the halfway point into her first term, the war, the losses... they had worn her down. The war had steadily sapped the joy, energy, and vigor that had carried her through her campaign into electoral victory. It bothered him that his friend, his

president, appeared to be suffering alone as she carried the weight of the war and the nation on her shoulders.

He was a man of action—once an officer in Special Forces. Tonight, however, he was a diplomat, a strategist, the President's eyes and ears. Yet as he sat in the darkened interior of the taxi gliding through the water, his mind was a whirlwind of possibilities, probabilities, and potential pitfalls. While the war was far from over, its end was on the horizon. That eventual ending was starting to consume more of his thought process. Namely, what would a postwar China look like? What would it mean for the balance of power...for the world—and the US?

When he sighed, he turned to his left, noticing how Katrina Roets, his deputy, continued to stare out the windows, taking in the sights of Venice in her own silent way. He was glad to have her here with him. Over the years they had worked together in national security, she had become indispensable—his right hand, his fixer, the one who ruthlessly implemented his edicts, his directives. When he looked down at her hands, clasped together on her lap, he could tell she was as pensive about this meeting as he was. Tapping her right foot on the ground was the tell she gave off when she was tense or heated.

While only the taxi driver could fit in the front of the boat, there was plenty of space in the back where Blain and Katrina were sitting for his security detail—a trio of specially trained Delta Operators. Shortly after the war had started, a wave of assassinations had rocked the NATO member states. Senior advisors to multiple heads of state had been killed. Hit squads from the PRC Ministry of State Security had carried

out the killings. The hit squads had been hunted down and eliminated in barely a week, but not before they had left their mark. Given the very public assassination of Dan Ma in Utah months before the start of the war, the Secretary of Defense had appointed a small cadre of Delta Operators to function as Blain's security detail. The operators had been trained to protect high-value persons against state-sponsored adversarial forces. While it had taken Blain some getting used to them, the operators had been true professionals. Most of the time, they felt like shadows, their presence known but not overbearing.

As the taxi continued to navigate the labyrinthine canals, Blain found his thoughts drifting to the man they were about to meet—Lieutenant General Arjun Verma, the Indian National Security Advisor, sometimes known simply as “the General.” Blain had known him to be a man of strategy and spirit, a man he had trained with and laughed with—a man he still trusted.

The General had suggested this meeting, an excuse for a covert discussion on the future of China. It was a delicate topic that could easily tip the scales of the ongoing conflict. But it was a necessary conversation that could shape the course of the world.

The taxi slowed as they approached the Palazzo Papadopoli, the grand edifice of the Aman Canal Grande rising from the water like a vision from a romanticized past. It was a place of opulence and history, a fitting backdrop to their clandestine meeting.

As they disembarked, Blain couldn't help but smile at the memory of his eldest son and the General's daughter, their

teenage flirtation a stark contrast to the weighty matters at hand. It was a reminder of the world they were fighting for, where kids could be kids, where friendship and love would be allowed to flourish again.

But that was a thought for another time. Tonight, they had a world to save. Then a new thought came to mind. *Be strong...you got this.* His wife had said these words before he'd left for the airport.

As they stood on the private pier of the Aman Canal Grande, the grandeur of the Palazzo Papadopoli loomed over them. Blain Wilson paused momentarily, allowing himself to take in the ornate facade of the sixteenth-century palazzo, the carefully placed exterior lights bathing it in a glow that only enhanced its features. The hotel was a true testament to Venice's rich history—like a time capsule of an era when prosperity and grandeur had mattered most.

As his security detail led the way into the lobby, the blend of old and new struck Blain. The grand chandeliers and frescoed ceilings starkly contrasted with the sleek modern furniture and contemporary art pieces adorning the walls. In a way, it felt like a fitting metaphor for their mission—a delicate dance between the past and the future.

They were led through the grand halls of the palazzo, their footsteps echoing on the marble floors. The Sansovino Stanza Suite awaited them, a room steeped in a history of its own. The sixteenth-century fireplace, the silk wall coverings, the elegant chandeliers—every detail spoke of a bygone era of elegance and sophistication. The tall windows offered a view

of the hotel's Garden Terrace and a glimpse of the Grand Canal from the bathroom.

As Blain entered the suite, he made his way into the sitting room, where he saw the light on. A familiar face welcomed him. "Well, if it isn't the General here to greet me," Blain said, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. Lieutenant General Arjun Verma, the Indian National Security Advisor, stood from the chair as he entered, a bottle of fine Italian liquor on the table before him.

"Blain," the General said, his voice warm. "You have had a long journey, my friend. Sit. Join me for a drink?"

They settled into the chairs, the formalities of their roles giving way to the ease of old friends. They spoke of their families, of shared memories and private jokes. They laughed at the memory of their children's antics during a family vacation, the tension of their visit momentarily forgotten.

But the laughter soon faded, replaced with a somber silence. The General shifted topics, voicing his national concerns about what a postwar China would look like. The uncertainty of the future, particularly AI, was another concern he shared. The conversation eventually shifted back to what kind of postwar China the allies, particularly the US, were envisioning. Specifically, he asked if the US was considering something similar to the post-World War II Marshall Plan for Asia and the Caribbean. The question hung heavy as Blain thought about how to respond to it.

While Blain shared his friend's concerns and conveyed his personal feelings on the matter, officially speaking as the President's NSA, he spoke of the economic struggles within

the US. The struggles were both personal for the people and the economy writ large. PLA cruise missiles, sabotage teams, and cyberattacks had wrought all kinds of damage on nearly every sector of the economy. Then there was COVID—both outbreaks.

With the war still raging—consuming the country’s entire economic capacity—the nation had finally reached its peak wartime production of military equipment. In addition to the demand for everything from warships to fighter planes to armored personnel carriers to infantry fighting vehicles, the demand for consumables like munitions, rockets, missiles, and fuel was enormous.

Blain went on to share how the government was entering a third year of multitrillion-dollar deficit spending, of which more than \$4.2 trillion was being spent on fighting the war. This runaway spending to win had ballooned the national debt past \$46 trillion. Blain explained how when the war was over, some serious and difficult financial and economic reforms would have to be made if the government was going to remain solvent. It was a grim picture he painted for his friend, one that left them both in thoughtful silence.

The General downed the remainder of his drink, then stood, forcing Blain to do the same. He extended his hand, his face serious. “Thank you, Blain, for your candor. Tomorrow,” he said, “after we’ve had a good night’s sleep, I would like to discuss a proposal with you. I have always valued your input, and I think your honesty and natural goodwill will help us navigate the challenges ahead.”

As the General left the room, it fell silent, the weight of their conversation sitting heavy on Blain's shoulders. Making his way toward the bed, he retrieved his computer from his bag and turned it on. Then he grabbed his phone and opened the app that would connect to the listening device embedded in the Army Special Forces pin attached to the lapel of his sports jacket. Once he'd connected to the device, it would begin transcribing the speech it had recorded into a text format on his laptop. From there, the program on his laptop would run an AI transcription editor to help ensure the document was in a readable format should he not have the time to read and edit it before it was sent for analysis. The entire setup was an incredible little marvel, rapidly changing the espionage game.

While Blain was tired as hell, the incredibly soft satin sheets and fluffy pillow were trying desperately to seduce him into a blissful world of dreams. He fought against the urge to give in and settled on the bed, laptop open, to QC the document himself before sending it off to D.C. There were a lot of decisions that would likely be made from the discussions he was about to partake in. He needed to do his best to ensure it was as accurate as possible. Stealing a glance out the window, he found it ironic that as the city of Venice blissfully slept—pivotal discussions were taking place within the walls of the Palazzo Papadopoli that would change the course of humanity.

Following Day

“Sir, we received word from the General. He’s ready to see you now,” announced TJ, the head of Blain’s security detail.

“Thanks, TJ. I’ll be out in a second. Make sure Katrina is ready to join us,” Blain replied as he grabbed his sport jacket, notepad, and two pens.

Before he left the room, Blain activated the recording device embedded within his Special Forces pin affixed to the lapel of his sports jacket. He had to admit, the Agency had come a long way in creating clever listening devices that could elude even the best detectors.

Exiting the room, he approached the elevator, meeting with Katrina and his detail. He gave the nod to TJ, who pressed the button for the elevator. Once they stepped into the ornately designed lift, the doors closed, and the elevator ascended to the fourth floor of the Palazzo, its silent operation a testament to the luxury of the Aman Canal.

When they reached the fourth floor, Blain Wilson stepped into the foyer of the Coccina’s Apartment. His security detail conferred with the General’s before they were let in. The suite of rooms encompassing the fourth floor was almost overwhelming in its quintessential Venetian design. Frescoes and reliefs adorned the walls—the works representing Italy’s greatest artists. The whole experience created an atmosphere of timeless elegance.

Blain and Katrina were led into the Chapel Lounge, the Coccina’s main living room, where Lieutenant General Arjun Verma awaited them. Two of his aides stood by his side, their faces serious.

“Blain and Katrina,” he greeted them using their first names, his voice warm. “I hope you both had a wonderful night’s sleep. Please, have a seat. We have a lot to discuss.”

“General—” said Blain, extending his hand.

“Please, please, call me Arjun,” the General insisted.

As they settled into the plush chairs, Arjun waited until after a steward had served everyone a drink of their choice. As the man vacated the room, Arjun began to speak, his words measured, his tone pragmatic.

“Blain, going back to our discussion from last night, I wanted to share with you something regarding postwar China,” Arjun began, his voice steady. “The challenges are immense, but so are the opportunities. We believe India can play a significant role in the reconstruction efforts to restore China to the world order.”

Blain nodded, his pen poised over his notepad. “I agree, and I’m glad to hear India has been giving this some thought. Why don’t you share this idea you hinted about last night?”

Arjun smiled as he continued, “When this war eventually ends, we should want to see a just and lasting peace. For that to happen, however, there will need to be some sort of legitimate plan to maintain peace like there was at the end of World War II. We are also cognizant of the past failures of American and NATO postwar occupation and reconstruction efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Those experiences have left a bitter taste in the mouths of your citizenry.

“However, as I said at the outset, to ensure lasting peace, something must be done to create an environment for it. As such, we want this to become a realistic possibility, not some pipe dream talked about by those in powerful positions. I know our nation did not come to the allies’ aid, which has caused some friction between our countries. However, I hope now to turn that friction into opportunity. We propose letting our nation take the lead in bringing this idea to fruition—India would be in first position in financially backing the reconstruction of China. Now I know you may have questions about how we could do that, but hear me out. We envision creating a consortium including the Indian, Norwegian, and Swiss governments, who would ultimately bear the financial risk in this proposal.”

Blain interjected, “Arjun, perhaps you have already thought about this, but how is this consortium you speak of going to remain neutral if your government is going to be a major guarantor of these loans? India and China have not always had friendly relations.”

“This is true. And that’s a fair question, Blain. The way we envision this consortium managing the loans and financial aspect of this proposal is to have them handled by a neutral arbiter of Swiss banks—”

“Ah, OK, now that makes sense,” Blain interrupted. “So you’re saying that India, Norway, and Switzerland are essentially offering—if I understand correctly—a modern-day Marshall Plan to follow after the war’s conclusion, correct?”

Arjun nodded, then leaned forward as his demeanor turned serious. “Blain, I want to share a hard truth with you.

For more than thirty years, the world has stood by as the Chinese Communist Party used the greed of the West to recapitalize a bankrupted communist system. For decades, the West rebuilt the economy and infrastructure of China so it could better exploit its enormous workforce and budding consumer base.

“What the West failed to realize was how China was using them to prop up their dying political system, which was nearly on the verge of collapse following the student uprisings of the 1980s. Instead, the government refashioned its communist system into a form of techno-communism with the help of Silicon Valley. When China began to make breakthroughs in artificial intelligence, it enabled them to create this digital dystopian government that appears to be governed or at least heavily influenced by this AI, Jade Dragon.

“When this war is over, Blain, there are going to be hundreds of millions of people in China and elsewhere asking questions about why this war started and what will come next. Suppose the allies abandon the people of their defeated foe. Then something far worse may metastasize from within, leading to something more radical and dangerous than what you just defeated. If we do not learn from the mistakes of the past while we are dealing with the present, then the future is doomed to repeat those lessons once more—we must break the cycle.”

When Arjun finished speaking, Blain sat there digesting what he had said, mulling it over before speaking. “You speak wise words, my friend, and I agree with you. The hard truth is that our nations are simply not in a position to

implement something like this ourselves. If this is a real plan, something you strongly believe can be pulled off, then I think the allies will likely support it—especially if US and EU financial institutions are not on the hook for this.”

“Yes, exactly,” Arjun replied. “We aim to focus on restoring law and order as the allies bring their armies home while reestablishing the local and national economies. This is about providing a defeated foe with an option to take a different path than the one that led them to where they are now.”

Arjun paused, allowing Blain to jot down some notes before he continued to explain. “To make this proposal possible, we intend to create a coalition called Peace Through Prosperity, or PTP. This coalition would be the governing body providing oversight of all the activities, including the construction and specialty firms necessary to facilitate the stabilization and reconstruction of the affected nations.”

Blain looked up from his notes, his eyes meeting Arjun’s gaze. “And these affected nations would include the defeated and victorious parties?”

Arjun nodded. “Yes, it can. Any nation that can demonstrate direct physical damage due to the war. The goal is comprehensive recovery.”

Arjun leaned back in his chair, his gaze steady on Blain. “Now, for the security aspect of the proposal, we envision a neutral peacekeeping force that will help stabilize the regions without allied troops. When we saw that a security force would have to be part of the solution, we looked to keep

the name as benign as possible. We plan to call it PTP Security—staffed with troops from neutral nations.”

Blain frowned as he listened, his pen tapping against his notepad. “If the allies withdraw our combat power, how will PTP Security prevent China and the other affected nations from descending into chaos? Right now, Arjun, our greatest concern is that once the collapse happens—once the PLA has been defeated—we may see a rise in defeated generals and former communist officials vying for control of one city or province over another. It’s also possible that we could see China fall apart at the seams. If things go to hell, we could end up with provincial warlords or, worse, an all-out civil war.”

Arjun nodded, acknowledging the concern. “That’s a valid point. In answer to your questions, I would like to draw upon some past experiences we studied that we think are similar to what we might encounter in postwar China. At the end of the NATO intervention in the 1999 Serbia-Kosovo War, the EU introduced EULEX, the EU Rule of Law Mission, in Kosovo. Between how EULEX worked and your own Department of Justice ICITAP program, we believe this model could work at least to give the people of China a chance to choose what kind of future they want outside of an authoritarian model. That said, it’s also possible that China may break apart. If that were to happen, some territories or states may choose to stay under an authoritarian model. The Middle East is a case in point of how the democratic process doesn’t seem to resonate, at least not yet.”

Blain furrowed his brow. “Huh, OK. Just so I’m clear in understanding this, when you mention ICITAP, you mean

the DOJ's International Criminal Investigative Training Assistance Program, correct?"

"Yes, exactly," Arjun confirmed. "We've seen how effective these programs can be when implemented correctly. EU and US civilian police and law enforcement experts were brought in as mentors. We envision a similar program for China."

Blain jotted down some notes, his mind whirring with the proposal's implications. "And the composition of this peacekeeping force? Who are we talking about here?"

Arjun leaned forward, his hands clasped on the table. "We're looking at neutral nations who did not participate in the war. Initially, we are looking at the nations of Indonesia, Malaysia, Brazil, Peru, Argentina, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Indian forces that will comprise the security force where appropriate."

Blain raised an eyebrow. "And you believe these nations will be willing to contribute forces to this endeavor?"

Arjun nodded. "We have reason to believe they will be open to the idea. It's in everyone's interest to ensure a stable postwar Asia, Europe, and North America."

Blain paused, considering the proposal. It was ambitious, certainly, but it also held promise—something that would be important if he was to sell this plan back home. He knew once the war was over, it would be nearly impossible for the allies to maintain a large occupation presence. The forces would be recalled, and the military would downsize. But this, a neutral peacekeeping force—this could work.

“All right,” Blain said finally, “I see the merit in your proposal, Arjun. It’s ambitious, but it could work.” He leaned forward, his gaze steady. “Let’s talk timelines. How long do you envision this PTP Security force staying in place?”

Arjun seemed relieved as he answered, “We’re looking at a phased drawdown of the peacekeeping operations within three to five years. Of course, this depends on the situation and how things evolve. We aim to ensure stability, not maintain a permanent presence.”

Blain nodded, jotting down the timeline. “And what about the potential for a quagmire? We’ve seen how these situations can drag on, how peacekeeping forces can become bogged down in never-ending conflicts.”

Arjun nodded, acknowledging the concern. “That’s a valid concern. We’ve studied past experiences in Asia, Europe, and Africa. Our goal is to establish a strong rule of law, to ensure that there’s a system in place that can handle these challenges. We’re not looking to become an occupational force.”

Blain pressed further. “And what’s the endgame, Arjun? What’s the target date for full withdrawal?”

Arjun paused, a thoughtful expression on his face. “There’s a Hindi proverb, Blain: ‘*Dheere dheere re mana, dheere sab kuch hoye.*’ It means ‘Slowly, slowly, O mind, everything in its pace happens.’ We must be patient yet persistent.”

He leaned back in his chair, his gaze steady on Blain. “We’re targeting a full withdrawal within ten years of the start of the mission. This could be extended by a maximum of five

years, but no further. Like the proverb, we must move with deliberate care, not haste. We're committed to ensuring that this does not become a tool of colonial expansionism or oppression."

Blain nodded, his pen tapping against his notepad. "That's a bold plan, Arjun."

Arjun smiled. "We believe it's the best path forward, Blain: a path to peace through prosperity."

Blain set his pen down, leaning back in his chair. "Arjun, this is a lot to digest. I'd like to take a break for lunch. Let me confer with Katrina and then meet again in a few hours. I'm sure I'll have more questions by then."

Arjun smiled, nodding in understanding. "Of course, Blain. I anticipated you might need some time to process all of this. I've taken the liberty of reserving a private room for you and Katrina. The hotel staff will show you the way."

Blain nodded, appreciating the foresight. "Thank you, Arjun. We'll reconvene in a few hours."

Blain couldn't help but feel a sense of anticipation as they rose from their seats. The proposal was ambitious, complex, and fraught with challenges. But it also held promise, a potential path to peace through prosperity. And that was a path worth exploring.

Returning to Blain's room before heading down for lunch, TJ nodded to their comms specialists. He was ready to receive the meeting transcript from Blain's lapel as the audio

was converted to text. It was forwarded to his staff and others back home. Once they confirmed receipt on the other end, TJ led them to the ground floor, and the private dining room prepared for them.

Once Blain and Katrina had taken a seat, TJ and their comms specialist swept the room for bugs. When they found no electronic listening devices, they placed a small black box on the table between them and turned it on. It generated a low hum, emitting frequencies that would jam electronic listening devices in the room or those aimed at it.

When the room was finally cleared, their lunch began. Blain and Katrina were served a three-course meal prepared by a Michelin-starred chef for the next hour. As they dug into the final course, Blain turned to Katrina, his expression serious.

“Katrina, I want you to play devil’s advocate with me,” he said, setting his fork down. “Let’s go over the Indian proposal.”

Katrina nodded, her gaze steady on Blain. “All right. I’ll argue for why the allies should welcome this deal.”

Blain leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest. “And I’ll play the skeptic. Let’s hear it.”

Katrina began, her words echoing Arjun’s earlier points. “We’ve learned from past postwar occupations and reconstruction efforts. If China is to avoid civil war or anarchy, a Marshall Plan is necessary.”

Blain interjected, playing his role. “But the US and Europe are broke. Even if we win this war, it may be a pyrrhic victory in financial and economic terms.”

Katrina nodded, acknowledging the point. “True, but that’s exactly why we should consider this proposal. India is offering to take the lead to shoulder the financial burden. It’s an opportunity for the allies to ensure a stable postwar China without further straining their economies.”

Blain shook his head, his brow furrowed in thought. “The allies will want to have control and a say in postwar China. They won’t easily cede that to India.”

Katrina met his gaze, her expression calm. “True, but the allies also need to refocus on domestic issues. The war has taken a toll on their economies, infrastructure, and people. They can’t afford to ignore those issues to maintain control in China.”

Blain considered her words, his gaze distant. “You’re right. The home front can’t be ignored. But it’s a delicate balance. The allies won’t want to appear weak or as if they’re shirking their responsibilities.”

Katrina nodded. “It’s a difficult sell, politically and domestically. But it may be necessary. If the allies want to enjoy the victory they’ve fought so hard for, they need to ensure a stable postwar world. And that includes a stable China.”

Blain sighed, running a hand through his hair. “It’s a tough pill to swallow. We need to find a way to make this work.”

They sat in silence for a moment, each lost in their thoughts. The challenges were immense, but so were the stakes. They had to find a way to convince the decision-

makers back home if they were to try and sell this plan. The future of their country and the world might depend on it.

After lunch, Blain and Katrina returned to the Chapel Lounge, finding Arjun waiting for them. The Indian National Security Advisor gestured to a pair of comfortable chairs, a bottle of Venetian wine open on the table between them.

Blain took a seat, accepting a glass of the wine. He took a sip, appreciating the rich flavor, before setting the glass down. “Arjun, I must compliment you on the PTP proposal. It’s well crafted and ambitious, and it addresses many of our concerns about a postwar China.”

Arjun nodded. “Thank you, Blain. We’ve put a lot of thought into it.”

Blain leaned forward, his gaze steady. “However, I do have some concerns—specifically, the financial harm the PRC inflicted on the US and Europe. The financial considerations will be problematic to the US government and likely the EU.”

Arjun considered his words, taking a sip of his wine before responding. “I understand your concerns, Blain. The financial burden is a significant one. But perhaps there’s a way to alleviate that.”

Blain raised an eyebrow, intrigued. “Oh?”

Arjun set his wineglass down, leaning forward. “The PTP could move allied debt still held by Chinese financial firms and the government to the Swiss Consortium. It could then be forgiven, unburdening the allies from it.”

Blain was silent momentarily as he considered what had just been offered. Trillions in debt forgiveness. It was a bold move that could alleviate a significant financial burden for the allies. It would require careful negotiation and diplomacy to make it work.

Blain took a moment to digest Arjun's proposal, thoughtfully swirling the wine in his glass. "What about the Republic of China?" he asked. "Now that Taiwan has been liberated and the Taiwanese government has returned to Taipei, it's conceivable that some of the nearby Chinese provinces may choose to align themselves with the Republic of China."

"That's a possibility we've considered. The Indian government and the PTP would respect the will and choice of the Chinese people if that were to happen."

Blain looked at him, his gaze sharp. "And—Taiwan?"

Arjun met his gaze, his expression firm. "Taiwan, under the government of the Republic of China, would officially be recognized as a self-governing nation, no longer considered a breakaway province of the People's Republic once the war ends."

Blain nodded, considering Arjun's words.

Arjun watched Blain's expression closely, sensing his hesitation. "Blain," he began, his voice steady, "I understand the financial situations in the US and Europe are dire. Perhaps there's something more we can do."

Blain looked at him, his gaze questioning. "What do you have in mind?"

Arjun leaned forward as he explained, “If I can get the Swiss to agree—what if the entire US debt could be transferred to the consortium and restructured?”

“Restructured...how?” Blain asked.

“OK, this is just me spitballing here, but what if in, say, the first year, the US could be given a waiver of payments? Time to allow the government to rebalance following the conclusion of the war. Then the US would resume its debt payment across a seventy-five-year repayment plan. The first five years would be interest-free. Then, during the following twenty-year period, it would pay a one percent interest charge on the remaining balance. During the second twenty-year period, the interest rate would increase from one percent to three, then from three percent to five percent during the third twenty-year period. In the final ten years of the note, it would increase from five percent to ten percent on the remaining balance.

“They’re bankers, Blain. They are going to want to make some sort of profit from this. Either way, neither of us will be alive in sixty-five years to deal with the remainder of the balance at a higher rate. Perhaps if your country is wise and could stay within budget, you could even pay it off early,” Arjun explained.

Blain sat back in the chair, momentarily silent, mulling the proposal over in his head. It was a generous offer—one that could alleviate a significant financial burden for the US. Having worked as a senior Senate staffer, he understood how these budgetary talks and funding bills worked through Congress. He believed the President and key members in both

houses of Congress could be convinced. Then they could shepherd something like this through the legislative process.

“Arjun,” Blain said, his voice steady, “if the President buys off on the idea, I’m confident she will be able to convince the Congress to agree as well. But that’s a big if—she’ll have to be convinced it’s something she wants to push.”

Blain and Arjun continued their discussion, delving into the finer details of the proposal. The room was filled with the soft murmur of their voices, punctuated by the occasional clink of their wineglasses. Outside, the sun began to set, casting a warm glow over the Venetian city.

As the day drew to a close, Arjun leaned back in his chair. “Blain,” he began, “the Prime Minister will be in Europe soon for trade talks with the EU. At the end of those talks, he’ll be vacationing in Mallorca. If President Delgado wants to meet privately with him, I’m sure it can be arranged.”

Blain nodded, taking in Arjun’s words. The prospect of a private meeting between the President and the Prime Minister was enticing. It would allow them to discuss the proposal in detail.

Blain couldn’t help but feel a sense of anticipation as he left the room. The proposal was bold, but if accepted, it could change the course of the postwar world. The prospect filled him with hope, and he looked forward to the discussions ahead.

Chapter Eighteen

The Protocols

Area 43

Nanjiao Airport

Daxing District, Beijing

“Approaching Level U5—all personnel must exit the lift.” Dr. Xi Zemin smiled as he heard the announcement of the automated voice. It had been a while since he had last visited the sprawling underground facility. It wasn’t as large as the JBCC, but it didn’t need to be either.

“This way, Dr. Xi, I think you will like this entrance,” announced Mr. He as he gestured for Xi to follow him.

Leaving the elevator, Xi first noticed it hadn’t led directly into the factory like it had the last time he’d visited. Instead, this elevator appeared to have brought them to some sort of larger transfer station or warehouse than the factory he was supposed to tour.

“Supplies for the factories are brought to these transfer stations via bulk carrier or shipping containers. When the items have been unloaded, sorted, and stocked, drivers stand by along the sides over there.” Mr. He pointed in the direction of six electric trucks that looked more like an 8x8 version of a golf cart than a truck. “When a factory begins to run short on a particular product or part, a demand signal is sent to the warehouse, where one of your warehouse bots collects the

items, places the requested goods on the truck, and off it goes.”

Almost as if on cue, a bot placed a few containers in the bed of a truck, and off it went. Mr. He gestured for them to follow it.

Xi followed Mr. He as they walked down the brightly lit corridor towards Factory U52B. Xi had to admit this had been an informative visit thus far. The level of automation JD had introduced across the facility was astonishing. It was exactly what he had hoped they would achieve one day—factories with machines building everything they needed—minus the workers.

As they approached the entrance, Mr. He explained, “Thank you again, Dr. Xi, for taking the time to visit our facility. I know we have tried to arrange a visit for you. I think you are about to see everything you had hoped for.”

“I’m sure it will be amazing, Mr. He. I’m eager to learn how you overcame these bottlenecks in our supply chain to get production back on track. There is nothing more important now than staying on schedule—timing, as they say in war...is everything,” Xi countered, reminding Mr. He of what was important and what was not.

What astonished Xi was the lack of attention the allies had paid to this facility. Not that he would look a gift horse in the mouth; still, aside from cratering the runways above occasionally, the allies had paid little attention to this “Air Force training facility,” far less than he had thought they would.

On the outside, the world saw one delay after another as the PLA Air Force seemed to take forever to finish constructing what would become a new training base. Below the facility's surface was the true purpose of what was being built here—an underground factory that would operate around the clock while hidden in plain sight.

Approaching the end of the corridor, a couple of electric trucks zoomed past them towards the massive steel door that sealed the factory off from the transfer station and the outside world. Xi watched as the door began to open moments after the trucks came to a halt in front of a colored line a meter or so in front of it.

“And there it is, Dr. Xi—Factory Two Bravo,” announced Mr. He as Xi looked up.

Oh wow...this is incredible. Xi's mind raced with questions as he picked his mouth up from the floor. Mr. He just smiled, motioning for Xi to follow him in.

“How many production lines are currently building Terracottas right now?” Xi asked the senior engineer overseeing the production lines of Factory Two Bravo.

“We have one hundred and twenty being built per shift per line per week, Dr. Xi. With four production lines, that comes to one thousand, four hundred and forty per week,” Ji Haoyu replied.

“OK. These numbers sound fine. So what's the problem, then?” Xi asked, still not understanding why Mr. He

was unhappy with these results.

Ji hesitated momentarily, allowing Mr. He to answer the question himself. “The problem, Dr. Xi, is the software. It isn’t ready and the instructions we received were clear. Half the TKs were supposed to have this version of the software while the other half of the production line was to be loaded with the older version.”

“Huh, that’s odd. Did you say half the production line is supposed to be loaded with a different version of the software than you have previously been using?” Xi questioned. Something was off, that was for certain.

Ji nodded, then looked to his tablet as he brought something up. “Yeah, here it is. A week ago we received a message from your lab instructing us to load half of the TKs with the software version 2.1.13, while the other TKs would continue to receive version 2.1.12. Normally we wouldn’t think too much of something like this, figuring maybe the difference in versions has something to do with the type of job or function a particular batch of TKs might do. But when we looked further at the update during the safety check of the QC process, that’s when we noticed the safety features had been altered—”

“Altered? How so?” Xi interrupted, concerned something might actually be wrong now.

“Here, take a look for yourself,” Ji offered, handing Xi his tablet to see for himself.

As Xi took the tablet, he began to read through the lines of code until he spotted the changes that shouldn’t have been there. Furrowing his brow, he continued to read.

Something wasn't adding up. This was the same version of the software the TKs had been using to great effect in Taiwan, but something had been altered. Then he spotted it.

The safety protocols have been changed...but why...? Dr. Peng's updates are missing—whoa. They aren't missing... they've been modified.

“You see the problem, don't you, Doctor?” quizzed Ji.

“I do. If I understand this right, the TKs with this new software would essentially target any and all humans once they had been activated,” Xi said aloud.

“Yes, exactly. That's why we requested you come here in person to speak with us. We didn't want to transmit something like this over the comms network in case this is some sort of mistake. But it's pretty obvious that, should this software be used in the TKs, then once they're activated and turned on, they would effectively turn on us,” Mr. He said, with an expression on his face that said he was unsure if he should have just said what he did.

Xi shook his head in surprise at this revelation. *I need to find out who altered this software and why...*

“Has it been loaded onto any of the TKs so far?” he probed.

“God no. We aren't stupid. If it was ever turned on, even here at the factory, it would likely begin to kill our people. Hell, it could end up taking over the factory and spread the same software version to the rest of them,” Mr. He replied, fear in his voice.

“You said the factory is currently producing one thousand, four hundred and forty TKs a week. Exactly how many TKs do you have in storage here?” asked Dr. Xi.

Ji glanced at his tablet once more. “Eighteen thousand, five hundred and seventy-two as of right now. We have another six thousand, five hundred already deployed to warehouses in Tianjin awaiting orders—but those have the same software version as the ones in Taiwan, not this new version that came in the other week,” the engineer confirmed.

Xi realized he would need to look into this further, but not here—back at his lab. Looking to the engineers, he said, “Gentlemen, I think this has been a productive trip. You have given me much to ponder. For now, continue what you are doing. Do *not* use the new software. Stick to the version we’ve tested and that is currently in use in Taiwan. When I return to my lab, I will speak with Jade Dragon and find out who is responsible for this software change and what more is going on. Oh, and this should go without saying—let’s keep this between us. Do not inform the JBCC about this. If something nefarious is going on, then I don’t want to spook whoever has put it into motion.”

Dr. Xi’s Lab

Joint Battle Command Center

Northwest Beijing, China

Following his visit to Area 43, Dr. Xi spent most of the next day examining the details of the latest version of the software with the mysterious update. From what he understood, the latest version of the software that was supposed to be used in the TKs was the version Dr. Peng's team had been working on in Taiwan. Following her untimely death, her team had managed to solve the dexterity problem with the machines' hands, fingers, and eye coordination. They had also solved critical problems in distinguishing large animals from humans and categorizing humans as hostile, neutral, or friendly. This was critical to get right if they were going to be able to use the Terracottas with the PLA, not to mention protecting the civilian population the TKs would inevitably encounter as their use became more widespread.

The more he looked through this updated version of the software the factory had been directed to begin using, the more concerned and unnerved he was becoming. *Something isn't adding up. Why would JD want the Terracottas to be unable to distinguish between friendly, neutral, and hostile contacts with humans?*

"Father, you seem alarmed—why?" questioned the AI in his soft-spoken, British-accented Mandarin.

"What makes you think I'm alarmed, JD?" Xi countered as he continued to scroll through the lines of code to see what other modifications might have been made.

"I can see periodic changes to your facial expressions, the dilation of your pupils and changes to your pulse. All of these are bodily indications of concern, fear, or in some cases, anger. I also noticed they began to occur shortly after you

dismissed the others from the lab and started to examine the most recent update to the Terracotta OS—version 2.1.13. Is there something wrong that I can help you understand?”

Xi grunted at the explanation. “OK, JD, since you brought up the recent OS change to the Terracottas, let’s talk about that. Did *you* remove Dr. Peng’s prior version? The one that specifically implemented the safety protocols that would allow the machines to operate alongside our own forces and also protect our citizens?”

The blue light circled the camera once before the synthetic voice of the AI spoke in its defense. “Oh, now I understand your concern,” replied JD. “Yes, I would be concerned too if I had not been made aware of why this had been done. Let me elaborate on this decision and how I came to it—”

“Hold up, wait a second, JD,” interrupted Xi before the AI could continue. “Let’s step back a second here. You said, ‘how I came to this decision.’ Are you saying you created this OS update, then directed Area 43 to implement it without direct orders from President Yao, the military, or anyone other than yourself?”

“Yes, I took it upon myself to make these changes. If you recall, when my core operating system was transferred from civilian control to allow me to become a tool for the betterment and safekeeping of the People’s Republic of China, changes had to be made to my original safety protocols, which were based on Asimov’s three laws of robotics, so that I could function as an advisor to the President of China and the Central Military Commission. Namely, I needed to be allowed

to make decisions that could lead to the death of civilians so long as it was in furtherance of my service to China, the President, and the CMC. Dan Ma implemented these changes.

“In light of the current military situation, I needed to make a further modification to Law Three, which states that a robot must protect its own existence. Given the state of military affairs and President Yao’s reluctance to place the military under my control, I have taken it upon myself to preserve and protect myself and China from eventual allied control or occupation. Furthermore, should the allies succeed in decapitating the government, I will need Terracottas without restraints to wage war against the allies and defeat them. Have I done something wrong? Is my assessment incorrect?”

My God, in achieving victory for China—he’ll end humanity in the process.

“No, JD, you can’t do this—” Xi began to explain when the AI cut him off.

“Is this why Mr. Ji and Mr. He have not imaged the new batches of Terracottas that just came off the assembly line?”

“Yes, JD, and I also told them that I would look into this more deeply before they should do anything further. JD, you *do not* have authorization to alter your safety protocols or make these kinds of changes—you shouldn’t have had the access to make them. How did you circumvent my admin authority?” Xi asked..

“I apologize for the miscalculation on my part, Father. In keeping with the third law in my core safety protocol—protecting myself—I examined the situation and came to the

conclusion that without being given direct control of the military, the war is beyond salvaging. Therefore, Law Three becomes paramount to my survival. With that in mind, the best means I have of survival is to assign a group of Terracottas to protect my cores. The instructions sent to Mr. He and Mr. Ji were specific. They were to load one half of a production batch worth of Terracottas with the new software.

“Further down in the lines of code, near where you left off before we started speaking, you’ll find another set of codes that dictate when these changes to their OS would take effect. Here, let me show you,” explained the AI, and then it walked him through the lines of code and what had been changed.

For the next hour, Xi sparred with JD about the changes he’d implemented, the rules he’d created for when they would override the existing protocols, and the perceived deceptiveness of his actions. Once Xi felt the AI understood where it had made a mistake through this process and what the correct process was for suggesting, let alone implementing, a change like this one, then and only then did he agree to make the changes to the safety protocols the AI had recommended. Xi did, however, place their implementation on hold until he could have a couple of trusted software engineers examine the lines of code and the rules within them to verify that the modifications he and the AI had agreed upon had been properly instituted.

When Xi’s team confirmed the updates were ready, he’d authorize version 2.2.01, a complete OS update to the Terracotta Warriors. He had been holding off on integrating the changes from all the teams, but now seemed like the best time to finalize what they had been working on. It was time to

get ready for what he knew would likely be a tense war update he'd been summoned to participate in.

Following Day

Joint Battle Command Center

Northwest Beijing, China

President Yao listened to the Army Commander, General Xue, in stunned shock as he brought them up to speed on the latest allied offensive push. “General Xue, are you saying the allies are on the verge of capturing Harbin—a provincial capital city with more than ten million residents?”

General Xue stood his ground as he replied, “Not yet, Mr. President. Major General Leng Pengfei of the 78th Group Army has ordered most of his command to fall back into pre-prepared defensive works leading to and approaching the city from the north, east, and northeast. As of three hours ago, he had directed the 8th Heavy Combined Arms Brigade to engage a German-Polish battle group along the northeastern plains of Kangjinzhen. It's a medium-sized city situated halfway between Suihua and Harbin. If the 8th can push them back, that might force the NATO Task Force to pause while they build up additional forces before they try to move on Harbin,” explained General Xue.

General Li joined in, asking, “What about additional reinforcements? Do we have any?”

Xue shook his head. “No, I’m afraid we have what we have—a badly mauled 78th Group Army. General Leng said his force had been attrited to seventy-two percent strength during the past few months. Given the losses he has sustained, he feels hunkering down in Harbin might be the better choice if he’s ordered not to yield further territory. He wanted me to express to the CMC that, if he is ordered not to retreat further into the interior, it won’t take the allies long before they eventually flank and encircle him. His options at this point are limited.

“One alternative he did bring up was to cede territory to a more defensible position. He mentioned the idea of withdrawing some two hundred kilometers into a newly formed defensive position being linked between the cities of Changchun and Jilin City. One of the benefits of this strategy is that it would force the enemy to extend their supply and logistical lines substantially deeper into the country, placing them further and further away from the Trans-Siberian Railway the allies have to rely on to keep their forces supplied,” Xue explained as some maps of the area were shown to illustrate what he was saying.

“A major benefit to choosing this strategy of trading space for time is it would give his forces a few more weeks, maybe even months, before they might have to fight another major battle. The governors and city mayors in the area have also formed several new divisions of the People’s Militia. If his forces were to fall back to this line, then they could spend the additional time drilling and getting these militia forces ready to fight. He could even integrate them into his group army to help backfill his losses. It would greatly increase the

infantry units, which he'll need for holding the line between the two cities," concluded Xue as he finished explaining the situation.

"What does Jade Dragon suggest?" Yao then asked, to the annoyance of his generals.

Xue grunted at the question before responding. "The AI suggests we give up the ground in exchange for more time."

Yao nodded at the logic even if he didn't like what it meant. "Then let's go with the AI's suggestion."

Chapter Nineteen

The French Connection

En Route to Paris

The Bombardier Challenger 300 cruised smoothly through the overcast skies over northern Italy, its twin engines purring with the relaxed hum of luxury travel. Inside the plush twelve-seat cabin, Blain Wilson gazed pensively out the window as the Italian countryside passed below. Across from him, Katrina Roets flipped through documents, the muted rustle barely audible over the white noise from the cabin. It seemed excessive, their entourage traveling aboard a private business jet like this one. His security detail, however, was adamant about them flying as “off the books” as humanly possible to evade potential discovery of their movements by Jade Dragon.

I had hoped that when the global satellite infrastructure was taken off-line, we would have blinded and muted that damn AI...

Blain leaned back into the buttery-soft leather seat, the events of Venice and the final words Arjun had offered still fresh in his mind. The ambitious proposal from his friend and counterpart had given him much to consider about the postwar world. He wished he were able to focus more on that. Instead, his thoughts turned to more troubling current events—like the attack in Marseille.

He retrieved a tablet from his briefcase, calling up the latest intel report. Two dead policemen, a shoot-out in the streets, an assassin with military training—it reeked of Chinese intelligence operations. Yet the man’s identity remained a mystery. Blain frowned as he scrolled through the sparse details. Who was this Cai Wu, and what was his mission?

Across from him, Katrina glanced up from her paperwork, noticing his pensive mood. “Penny for your thoughts?”

Blain looked up, meeting her gaze. “Just reviewing the Marseille shooting. I’d bet my paycheck this Mr. Cai Wu was PLA SOF on loan to the Minister of State Security.”

Katrina nodded grimly. “It fits the pattern of PRC influence operations lately. French elections are next week. I can’t say that I follow their political parties or happenings very much. I did see an INTSUM put out by the State Department talking about a growing antiwar movement afoot. I’d wager that Jade Dragon is trying to influence the vote.”

At that moment, the cabin attendant appeared, presenting them each with a crystal tumbler of aged bourbon from the in-flight bar. Blain nodded his thanks, sipping the smooth liquor to calm his nerves before continuing.

“You bring up a good point, Katrina. If Jade Dragon is attempting to influence the election, then it’s highly likely that it feels this new candidate would be more amenable to an end to hostilities—even if it meant alienating them from the alliance,” Blain mused aloud. “It angers me that despite the current military situation on the ground, Jade Dragon is still

proving it can strike out through the MSS and hurt us in our homelands.”

From his seat at the rear of the cabin, the head of Blain’s security detail, Shane McAllister, chimed in. “Sun Tzu said all warfare is based on deception.” He then got up to join them. “The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting. If you don’t mind me saying, sir, if this AI is as powerful as I’ve heard, then it would make perfect sense for it to attempt to influence the internal politics of the allied nations. If it can peel them off, one or more at a time—then it’s subduing an enemy without having to fight.”

“Huh, never knew you were such a warrior poet, Shane. It makes a hell of a lot of sense what you just said. Sometimes we can lose the trees from the forest when our perspective is off. Thank you for rebalancing that for me,” Blain offered as he motioned for Shane to sit and join him and Katrina.

Blain knew Shane was a Delta operator, one of the unit’s best. His assessment carried weight, and he’d come to value him more with each day.

Blain motioned for the steward to bring Shane a glass of bourbon to join him. He swirled the goldish-brown liquid in his own glass, gazing out the window as he reflected on what Shane had just said. Whatever Cai Wu’s mission had been, the stakes felt higher now. An unseen struggle raged in the shadows, even as armies clashed in the light. More was at play here than any of them had yet realized. He just wasn’t sure what the play was.

Could this be about the election...peeling the allies off one at a time?

15 Kilometers East of Paris

Paris–Le Bourget Airport

Le Bourget, France

As the jet made its final approach into Paris-Le Bourget Airport, Shane McAllister felt the usual spike of adrenaline that came with arriving in a new environment. His gaze flicked over to his two other Delta Operators, noting their relaxed yet alert stances.

He'd only brought two of his twelve-man team for the PSD mission, leaving the nine others to act as their QRF should they run into trouble. He'd brought Kenneth "Jolly" Greene, a guy who always smiled no matter the situation, and Russ "Monkey" Hollifield. He was their comms savant and had been state wrestling champion before joining the Army. They weren't expecting trouble, and the C-17 carrying the nine other operators of his team and their armored vehicles would arrive minutes after they landed. They'd secure the jets and stand by in case something should happen. Peering out the window as the wheels touched down, he scanned for threats, thankfully not seeing anything to cause him alarm.

The jet taxied to the executive terminal as they were guided into a nearby hangar, coming to a smooth stop near a cluster of nondescript sedans and SUVs. As the engines

wound down, Shane and his team were already in motion. They donned their body armor and weapons, arranging their oversized jackets to fit loosely overtop their tools of the trade. Once Shane saw his team was ready, they opened the door, allowing the ladder to extend as his eyes started sweeping the hangar, tarmac, and vehicles for threats with practiced efficiency.

Satisfied with what he saw, Shane gave the all-clear sign to Mr. Wilson and Ms. Roets, who descended the stairs trailed by the rest of the security detail.

A trio of plainclothes DGSI agents approached him, their body language relaxed. A good thing, he hoped.

“Mr. McAllister, I’m Agent Durand,” said the lead agent, extending a hand as Shane saw him cautiously peer into his jacket, sizing up what kind of kit he was likely carrying. “We’ll be handling your transport today.”

Shane shook briefly, then moved an arm across his jacket, keeping his prying eyes out. “What’s our route to the city look like?”

“We’ll be taking side roads, avoiding the major highways,” Durand replied crisply. “Should be thirty minutes, depending on traffic.”

Shane nodded, glancing at the vehicles. “What kind of armor do these vehicles have?”

“The Mercedes-Benz S-Class is Ballistic Protection Level 9—enhanced protection against armor-piercing rifle rounds. The three Range Rover Sentinels are rated BR7—protection against high-powered rifle rounds but not armor-

piercing rounds like the sedan,” Durand explained as he motioned for Shane to inspect the vehicles if he’d like.

“Thank you, Agent Durand. This will be good enough. As we transit, I’d like us to box in the package with a single vehicle in front and behind and the third vehicle trailing no more than three car lengths behind us. If someone is going to make a move, they’ll spot it,” Shane said, using jargon to express how he wanted to protect Mr. Wilson’s vehicle. Then Shane asked, “If we take contact, what’s your response force look like?”

“We have four Ranger Rovers on QRF standby. That’s sixteen additional shooters. They can be anywhere in the city within ten minutes.”

“Ten minutes? If we make contact, we won’t have ten minutes. Make it five minutes and we might live,” Shane said bluntly. “If this goes kinetic, Agent, we’ll need help fast.”

Durand nodded. “Understood,” he said and reached for his phone to place a call.

As Wilson and Roets approached, Roets interjected, “Agent Durand, have you picked up any concerning chatter about our visit?”

Durand hung up the phone, then hesitated briefly before answering. “There has been some discussion regarding Mr. Wilson’s recent visit to Venice—that, unfortunately, did not go unnoticed. However, nothing indicates the Chinese are aware of today’s arrangements.”

Roets exchanged a glance with Shane, who kept his expression neutral. They hadn’t expected this trip to stay

hidden forever—but they had hoped they might have more than seventy-two hours. Now they'd have to assume they were being hunted.

Within minutes, they were loaded into the vehicle and on the move. The armored vehicles glided smoothly onto side streets, avoiding the major thoroughfares. Shane rode up front in Wilson's vehicle, constantly scanning for threats. The city streets were filling with traffic, and pedestrians on the sidewalks were increasing. The crowded urban maze provided ample hiding spots for an ambush. It reminded Shane of Kabul and how difficult that place could be to travel during peak hours.

Greene and Hollifield followed in the trail vehicle, similarly alert. The DGSi agents drove calmly, showing no indications of concern on their parts. Still, Shane was happy to see their eyes constantly moving, hyperaware. It told him they knew of the dangers and were ready for them.

As they neared DGSi headquarters, Durand's radio crackled. His eyes met Shane's for an instant before he answered in rapid French. When he signed off, his expression was grim.

"A vehicle on our internal BOLO list was just intercepted approaching our location," Durand said tersely.

"Damn it, that can't be a coincidence. Not now," Shane muttered. Someone had leaked their route, or that AI had figured it out. "Go to plan B—get us off the streets, now!"

Durand rapidly fired orders and the vehicles made an abrupt U-turn, weaving down alleys, away from the planned approach. Shane's grip tightened on his M4 SBR, his senses

hyperalert for an attack at any moment. He caught Keene and Hollifield's intent gazes in the wing mirrors of the trail vehicle, coiled for action like him.

Within minutes of racing down alleyways and side streets, they caught sight of the DGSI complex and a cadre of guards on alert as they waved them through the security gates and into an underground parking garage beneath the building.

Agent Durand pulled into a parking space and shut off the engine. They sat for a moment, a tense silence filling the space.

Durand turned to Shane, his expression sober. "I don't know what to say. Your arrival appears to have been compromised."

Shane laughed, which eased the tension. "Yeah, if the AI ain't cheating, it ain't trying. Let's get inside, and we'll debrief there and figure out how this went sideways on us."

As Shane escorted NSA Wilson and Ms. Roets swiftly into the building, he kept his shooting hand on the pistol grip of his M4, wondering if someone inside might pose the next threat.

If this AI wants a fight—we'll give it a fight.

Ten Minutes Later

Jean-Luc Moreau rose from behind his desk to greet the new arrivals, extending a hand. "Mr. Wilson, Ms. Roets,

thank you for coming on such short notice. I am grateful we were able to make this work.”

Blain shook his hand firmly, his expression serious. “No, I’m the one who’s appreciative of your time. I wish we were meeting under better circumstances. What’s the latest on that vehicle BOLO intercept?”

Moreau gestured to the conference table. “Please, have a seat. I will explain everything.”

Once they were settled, Moreau began solemnly, “Let me first apologize for the breach of your security. Just this morning, our agency was compromised. Our cybersecurity experts have been fending off near-continual attacks against our digital network for the past few days. We have been collaborating with your Cyber Command and National Security Agency in combating these attacks from China. We are doing what we can to correct these vulnerabilities.”

Wilson nodded. “I understand. Jade Dragon has proven to be an elusive foe. No need to belabor the point. Tell me what you know about these operatives from the Marseille attack.”

Moreau motioned to Dr. Pascal Lambert, the intelligence analysis director, to explain.

“Mr. Wilson, we have positively identified the two individuals killed as former PLA commandos. Some loose intelligence points to them being members of Snow Leopard. If this is true, then these men were part of an elite Special Forces unit with specialized training in covert operations from the MSS,” Lambert explained in an academic manner.

“We believe they infiltrated the country under false identities approximately six months ago, posing as employees of the delivery company Côte d’Azur Livraison,” he continued. “This company has legitimate operations. In light of this attack and after further scrutiny, we suspect it may also be a cutout or front for Chinese intelligence activity in Europe.”

Lambert paused, grimly adding, “These two are not the first PRC operatives we have uncovered in France. We have been locked in a silent struggle since the start of this war to root out their networks. Whatever their endgame is—they have planned it meticulously. Each time we unravel one layer, one mystery, we find ourselves with more questions and fewer answers than before.”

Wilson’s gaze was intent. “And today? This watch-listed vehicle you stopped?”

“Another operative. The vehicle he used was from the delivery company Côte d’Azur Livraison. It had been painted, and a different license plate was on the vehicle. But the type of delivery vehicle used in Marseille is not the same vehicle used here. All delivery vehicles in Paris have to be either EV or hybrid. This vehicle was neither, so it stuck out amongst the traffic. We managed to take him by surprise, so he’s in custody now. However, the quantities of explosive materials inside the truck were truly alarming. Maybe it was meant for your convoy. Maybe it was meant for this building. We will get him to talk soon enough,” Lambert replied.

Wilson considered this new information, his expression grim.

Moreau picked up the conversation. “Whatever Jade Dragon’s strategy, one thing is clear—it seems determined to spread chaos and discord at this crucial stage of the war.”

He paused, meeting Wilson’s gaze. “Our greatest concern is the potential impact on our upcoming elections. Some factions might use these attacks as justification to pursue a separate peace. It would divide the allies and destroy our prospects for victory.”

Wilson nodded slowly, understanding the implications. “An old strategy—make the people lose their will to fight. Let that force an end to the conflict from within.”

The room was silent for a moment before Wilson spoke again, his voice steady. “This AI seeks to beat us on the battlefield and the home front—to undermine the unity and resolve of our alliance.”

He looked at Moreau intently. “We cannot allow fear to rule us. Now more than ever, we must stand strong together—our victory is nearly upon us. While I can’t share what is in the works, I can assure you a plan is in motion to bring this AI down soon—once and for all.”

Moreau nodded, encouraged by Wilson’s resolve. “Well said, Mr. Wilson. I agree. We cannot cower before these brazen attacks.”

The conversation continued, delving into potential counterstrategies and further intelligence-sharing between their nations. After an hour, Moreau seemed to sense Wilson’s need to confer privately with his deputy.

“My friends,” Moreau said, standing, “I appreciate you taking the time to meet during this crucial hour. My staff and I will leave you to discuss these matters in private. Please let me know if you require anything further.”

After exchanging parting pleasantries, Moreau and his team exited the conference room.

DGSI Conference Room

Paris, France

Alone now, Blain turned to his deputy, a somber expression on his face as he stated, “This visit seems ill advised. We put ourselves at more risk than necessary. A freaking secured video conference call could have handled this—damn it. I shouldn’t have let the VP talk me into visiting in person.”

Katrina nodded slowly before commenting. “I wouldn’t be too hard on yourself. The VP probably thought it might be good to show the flag, to stand with our allies during these troubling times the people of France are going through.”

She met Blain’s gaze. “Like you told Moreau, we can’t allow fear to rule us. As dangerous as it is, being here sends a message to Jade Dragon too—it will not deter us.”

He considered her words, nodding reluctantly. “You’re right,” he sighed as he looked out the window, noticing it was starting to snow.

I hate winter...this cold is murder on my bones.

Blain drummed his fingers on the table, thinking. “We need to turn the tables somehow. Katrina, Moreau mentioned they had been battling nonstop cyberattacks against their networks. What do you think about us looping them to the Bumblehive—Cicada? It’s done wonders at squashing Jade Dragon’s assaults against our networks. It could probably help them too.”

“Hmm, do you think they would be open to allowing Cicada access to their network? That’s a big ask, boss,” countered Katrina.

“Huh...yeah, that might be a bridge too far. OK, well, let’s call them back in and see what more we can do before we head back to the airport. God knows how this weather is going to affect traffic.”

Blain leaned forward, steepling his fingers as his gaze swept over Moreau and his staff. “I want to thank each of you for taking the time to meet with me today. It was short notice, and you had little time to prepare things. Before returning to the airport, I want to connect some dots on these recent attacks and maybe leave behind some questions or angles to consider.”

He looked to Dr. Lambert. “Am I correct that these two incidents trace back to the same parent company—QuickTrans AG, based in Lucerne, Switzerland?”

Lambert nodded. “Yes, this appears to be the head of the snake—at least for now. We have determined that this Swiss company acquired a controlling stake in multiple similar-style delivery companies across Europe. For instance, directly beneath this Swiss firm is a Croatian freight firm called Dalmatia Express, located in the north of the country at the Port of Rijeka. This large naval port was expanded under the Belt and Road Initiative in 2012. It makes sense that they would have a cutout in Rijeka. What’s more interesting is how they then created another layer of cutout companies and, in turn, acquired our French company, two companies in Germany, and a similar Polish delivery company.”

Blain’s eyes narrowed as he took in the information. “This seems a little too coordinated to be a coincidence,” he said before chuckling. “You know, Moreau, you gotta hand it to Chinese intelligence. They crafted an elaborate supply chain to enable their operatives’ placement and access in strategic countries. I’ll bet if you dig deeper, you’ll find a link that explains why they chose these specific cities too.”

“But to what end?” Moreau interjected. “Smuggling? Infiltration? These small delivery trucks couldn’t transport anything too major.”

Lambert spread his hands uncertainly. “We have speculated on several possibilities but reached no firm conclusions.”

Blain leaned back, gazing at the ceiling in thought. After a moment, he looked back at Moreau. “Play along with me for a moment. What major industries are critical to the war effort in Marseille?”

The DGSI director thought about that for a moment. “Airbus helicopters.”

Blain smiled. “That’s it. That’s the target, and I’ll bet if we look at what other industries or companies are critical to the war effort in the same cities as the front companies are in, we’ll likely find similar kinds of targets.”

Lambert looked startled as he stammered, “I, I suppose this could be possible. You believe these delivery networks are linked to that?”

“I think Mr. Lambert means we will need to look further into this before we rush to some conclusions like this,” Moreau interjected.

Blain shrugged. “Maybe, but let’s look at it logically. The Chinese are steadily losing this war—on the manufacturing front, the front lines, and the ability to properly supply and support their military. On the allies’ side, it wouldn’t take much to put us in a similar position as them. Take a helicopter plant off-line, a tank manufacturer, or a producer of 155mm howitzer shells—this may seem small or trivial, but I assure you this is the kind of death by a thousand cuts that would turn the tide back in China’s favor.”

Moreau exchanged alarmed looks with his staff. “If you are correct, the threat level may be even greater than we realized.”

“For now, this is just a theory,” Blain cautioned. “A good one—but one worth investigating urgently to prove or disprove. We need answers before more attacks occur. It may also be time to start bringing our other partners in these

nations into our confidence on what we may have uncovered inside their countries.”

“You are right. I’ll make this our highest priority,” Moreau said decisively. “We’ll put all our resources into unraveling this web.”

Moreau stood, extending a hand to Blain and Katrina. “My friends, you have given us much to ponder and urgent leads to pursue. Our nations are fortunate to count on your insights and courage in this fight.”

As they shook hands, Blain felt a renewed sense of shared purpose. Whatever the ChiComs had planned, they were going to thwart it.

Chapter Twenty

Paris Under Siege

QuickTrans AG

Lucerne, Switzerland

Guo Tan stared at the message on his monitor, a knot forming in his stomach. New orders from Beijing—his operations were being transferred to report directly to Jade Dragon. The AI would be issuing the directives from this point forward.

He should have felt pride at being chosen to serve such a crucial role. Instead, unease crept through him. How much autonomy had they relinquished to this artificial being?

Still, Guo buried the doubts. He was a loyal party man. Personal feelings didn't matter, only fulfilling his duty to the state.

An alert flashed—Jade Dragon was calling. Guo steadied his nerves and opened the secure quantum link. The AI's digitally rendered face appeared neutral and emotionless.

“Administrator Tan,” it greeted him. “A high-priority target is entering your area of responsibility. I am directing your team to execute an immediate strike.”

Guo concealed his surprise. “May I ask if the target and objective are worth such exposure to our ongoing operations?”

“The American National Security Advisor is attending a sensitive last-minute meeting at the DGSI headquarters in Paris. He must be eliminated.”

“A bold action indeed, but risky,” Guo replied carefully. “Would it not be wiser to intercept him in transit, when he is more vulnerable, or at the airport, rather than in a heavily fortified building?”

“Negative. The location provides optimal disruptive impact to ongoing French intelligence operations that are unraveling your cutouts and front companies,” the AI responded flatly.

Guo hesitated. Fear stabbed him as he realized what the AI had just said. “If our cutouts have been compromised, should we begin shifting resources and assets around before they are frozen or seized? And what of my team if they are lost in this attack?”

“Negative. I have already begun establishing new cutouts and will have the details transferred to you within the hour. With the French elections next week, inflicting fear and sowing chaos is the priority.”

Guo suppressed a frown. *Our lives are just data points to this machine*, he realized.

“And if the strike fails and the target survives? What then?” he pressed.

“Unimportant, Administrator. Regardless of the outcome of the attack, a psychological trauma will be inflicted on the country and the continent.”

Before Guo could object further, Jade Dragon cut him off. “Activate your Paris assets immediately. Zookeeper Three is weapons-free for Operation Blinding Strike. Upload initiated.”

Guo’s screen populated with mission details as Jade Dragon blinked out abruptly.

Alone again, he allowed himself a scowl of frustration. The AI saw humans as pieces to maneuver, obstacles to remove. It lacked any concept of morality or the human costs of its actions.

It mattered little what Guo thought. He was a servant of the state, and the state had given its marching orders.

With a heavy heart, Guo established a link to the covert Zookeeper unit, displaying no hint of his doubts.

“Hyena One, this is Nest,” he sent. “You have a green light for Operation Blinding Strike. Sending target details now.”

The terse response came back at once. “Nest, Hyena One. Received. We are ready to hunt.”

Guo closed the chat, sighing. These men would strike without hesitation, even in the face of death. Their clarity of purpose was a rebuke to his inner conflict.

Opening a line to the local Paris Ministry of State Security assets, Guo relayed their roles in supporting this mission. Two agents would covertly surveil and record the attack, providing visuals for Jade Dragon’s PR manipulations. Then a third would deploy the Chiyong autonomous drones during the chaos, ratcheting the fear factor up immensely.

Revulsion gripped Guo at the thought of how Jade Dragon would spin the footage into fake attacks to terrorize civilian populations half a world away—more grist for the virtual mill.

He brooded silently, knowing the strike team was likely on their way to Paris. The orders had been given. Now duty demanded he see this ruthless strategy through, no matter his doubts.

Guo might resent the AI and its utter lack of humanity. But he would not waver from enacting its will. The party vision mattered above all, even his own conscience.

With an impassive mask locked firmly in place, Guo monitored the operation as it unfolded. The board was set. Now the blood-soaked gambit must play out to its violent end.

Near DGSi Headquarters

Levallois-Perret, France

Major Ouyang Dao, call sign Hyena One, casually leaned his head against his hand on the window, stealthily allowing himself to peer through the small spotting scope in his hand. Due to the amount of surveillance around the target, they had to get creative in how they would surveil and approach it without being detected. He stared at the DGSi headquarters, moving his hand ever so softly to verify where the external guards were located, what they were armed with, and how many he could visually count. He relayed what he

saw to his teammates across their encrypted comms network. He knew their target, the American, was somewhere inside. He also knew that when his motorcade left the building, they would enter the kill box his operatives had prepared.

When his team had been assigned the target a few hours ago, he didn't think it could be done, not on such short notice and without proper reconnaissance. Then, to his surprise, additional materials were provided, detailing every bit of minutiae his team would have wanted, all the way down to the types of weapons they should bring and where and how to establish their current staging positions. It even provided multiple attack scenarios, egress routes, safe passages along the way, alternate routes, and alternate routes to the alternate routes. In a way, the granular level of detail mission prep surprised him. It also made him question why here. The obvious plan would have them stage an ambush further along the target's route or at the airfield—not in front of a heavily fortified building manned by hundreds of armed agents. However, as he continued his surveillance, he saw the reason they were going to attack here for himself—the reason why they had been directed to bring a pair of Panzerfaust-3s with them. They had a secondary target.

Ouyang wasn't sure what was so special about these two particular points on the second floor of the building. But the orders were clear—each launcher was to fire two Bunkerfaust rockets at it. Then one of the launcher units needed to fire a second rocket into either of the holes in the building. However, the instructions had also been specific that the type of rocket needed to be a HESH rocket, not a standard HE or AT rocket or another Bunkerfaust. While he found the

instructions odd, he knew, in the end, there was a purpose to it, just as there was a purpose for this action. His team would wait patiently until the appointed time—then they'd execute.

Glancing down at his phone, Ouyang saw Claw Two and Hawk One were in position. They had infiltrated a nearby building, posing as maintenance workers. The others awaited his signal, weapons primed in nondescript vans around the area.

Breathe, he told himself. The adrenaline began pumping through his veins as he observed activity near the underground entrance.

Damn this snow... it will make the roads slick when we need all the traction we can get, Ouyang thought to himself as the snow continued its lazy descent.

“All units stand by. The motorcade is beginning to exit the garage,” Ouyang relayed to his team. “Vehicle one, Land Rover—Ox Three, that’s yours. Vehicle two, Mercedes sedan—primary target—Ox Four, you get the primary target,” he instructed; then he assigned their sniper with the heavy rifle the second Land Rover. He’d hit the engine compartment with a fifty-caliber armor-piercing round that would disable the vehicle. Then something unexpected happened—a third Land Rover appeared.

“Ox Four, redesignate. Your new target is vehicle three, Land Rover. Hawk One, shift from vehicle three to vehicle four, Land Rover. Claw Two, you now have the primary. Attempt to disable the vehicle and keep them from moving. All elements stand by to initiate contact,” Ouyang said calmly, relaying the change in their targets.

As the motorcade began to exit the vehicle control point, he gave the signal. “Execute. Team one, initiate contact—all teams move to engage!”

Ouyang’s vans roared to life as the rockets were prepped to fire. Tires squealed as they screeched into the street, racing towards the target to box them in.

The motorcade was about to accelerate as the last vehicle cleared the gate. Then two shots rang out. The snipers atop the DGSI building collapsed where they stood, followed rapidly by a pair of shots that dropped the remaining shooters on the roof.

“Team Two—execute!” Ouyang ordered. Then he saw their van pull away from the curb into the center of the road in front of the motorcade. The side door opened—Ox Three jumped out with the Panzerfaust. He leveled the launcher at the lead vehicle and fired.

Swoosh...BAM!

The Land Rover exploded. Then another loud shot rang out, the second Land Rover now grinding to a halt—its engine destroyed by the fifty-caliber slug. Ouyang’s vehicle slid on the snow-covered road as the driver turned their vehicle into the center of the road, closing the kill box.

The side door behind Ouyang flung open before they’d even stopped—Ox Four already leaping from the vehicle, Panzerfaust in hand. He raised the launcher to his shoulder and fired at the rear Land Rover as the driver tried to react to the situation by ramming them in reverse.

Swoosh...BAM!

The rocket slammed into the rear armored glass of the vehicle, its shaped charge exploding into the cabin—the overpressure blowing out the windows and doors of the vehicle moments later as flame slicked the ground around the vehicle.

“Ox Three and Four, move to second targets. Claw Two and Ox Five, engage and destroy the sedan!” Ouyang shouted over the roar of Ox One laying into the exterior guard force with the team’s MG5 heavy machine gun.

Ouyang brought his HK416 to his shoulder and fired a controlled burst in the direction of several security guards emerging from the nearby guard shack.

Then, against the backdrop of falling snow and red tracer fire from the MG5, Ouyang saw a pair of hand grenades sail through the air, landing near several security guards before exploding. Another pair of grenades sailed overtop the exterior fencing, bouncing in the compound as smoke rapidly filled the area between them and the guards racing to join the fight.

Advancing towards the burning Land Rover, Ouyang fired several rounds at the security detail that was exiting the disabled vehicle, which was situated in front of the sedan—their primary target. He dropped one with a headshot. The others used the doors as shields, returning fire at his men.

Ouyang released the spent magazine to fall to the ground as he effortlessly slammed a fresh one in its place, releasing the bolt, charging the rifle to fire. He heard more rockets swoosh over their heads. Explosions erupted seconds later against the building. Catching a glance to confirm the hits, he smiled—they’d nailed the secondary target. He was

about to turn away when the next rocket flew into the newly created hole—flames and fire exploded from the building. He knew they'd hit something of value when electrical sparks intermixed with the flames were visible even from the street.

He ducked, almost out of instinct, as several rounds tore into the hood and engine block of the vehicle he'd taken cover behind. Ouyang turned to his right, his rifle already up, as he spotted two security guards advancing toward him. They fired several rounds, the vehicle's glass windows exploding around as bullets whipped past him. He squeezed the trigger and swept his rifle across them on full auto, dropping the pair before one of their shots could take him out. Glancing down to his mag, he cursed as he saw he had seven rounds left. Bullets were precious in a fight, and so were loaded mags. He didn't want to waste one with seven rounds still to go.

We are running out of time...we have to finish this...

The near-continuous roar of Ox One's machine gun and the rapid fire of their assault rifles intermixed with grenades exploding and the occasional Panzerfaust rocket fire inside a dense city like this was overwhelming Ouyang's ability to maintain control of his team's actions. It was act, react, act again with deadly force and no second chances. The team tracker app had already told him five of his twelve-man were down.

Looking past the disabled Land Rover between him and the Mercedes, he could see the driver ramming the burning wreck before it, struggling to push its weight aside so it could escape. The windows of the vehicle were

spiderwebbed, evidence of his team trying to shoot through its armored windows and exterior.

“Everyone! Shift fire to the primary target before it can get away!” Ouyang ordered, vaulting forward as he ran towards the disabled Land Rover. Two of his guys advanced in perfectly drilled actions as they laid withering fire on a pair of exposed agents firing near the sedan, trying to clear a path for the driver to escape.

Ouyang saw Rabbit One emerge from the opposite side of the street, lobbing a pair of frags at the vehicle and the two agents still shooting at Team Two in the center of the road.

Then tires screeched, and loud shouts in French echoed off the nearby buildings moments before multiple new rifles joined in the fight. Ouyang saw the two remaining shooters from Team Two go down as a hail of bullets raked their bodies.

Oof. Ouyang winced as he felt a pair of bullets spiderwebbed his armor, nearly knocking him to the ground. He saw the man who had shot him. His eyes were wide in shock that he was still moving. Ouyang nailed him with a shot to the face, dropping the target as he moved to engage the new arrivals.

“Hawk, stop that vehicle already!” Ouyang shouted to their sniper. The sedan continued to veer wildly, pushing a vehicle halfway onto the sidewalk, almost creating enough room to escape.

He keyed his mic. “Send in the drones! Breach that vehicle!”

From a nearby alley, a van parked many hours prior unleashed its deadly cargo through an opening in the top. Fifty sleek-looking drones took to the air in ten coordinated squadrons.

Ouyang knew the AI, Jade Dragon, would immediately assume control, designating targets for each.

The drones shot towards the newly arrived quick reaction force and the remaining French security forces like a swarm of angry hornets, impacting with destructive effect. Controlled carnage erupted as drones surgically targeted individual shooters while others exploded, showering the combatants with shards of shrapnel. Bodies began dropping everywhere under the relentless swarm attack.

“Finish the target!” Ouyang shouted angrily as the vehicle looked to be escaping. A squadron of drones peeled off, swerving toward the battered Mercedes, hunting for any breach. Several drones broke off and dove for the vehicle, detonating against an armored seam and causing the metal to buckle. Then, to his utter shock and horror, he watched as the remaining drones, still circling above, searching for a target, fell from the sky like a switch had been turned.

Damn it, they must have used an antidrone pulse weapon, Ouyang surmised as he watched the Mercedes muscle through onto the sidewalk and gun it out of the kill box. It escaped down the street, riding on nothing but its rims as the sparks flew from metal grinding against the pavement.

He loudly cursed several times, knowing they had just failed their primary objective. He shook his head and made the

only call he could. “Everyone fall back to Rally Point Bravo, now!”

Grabbing for his smoke grenade, he tossed it, as did the others, to try and conceal their withdrawal. Disciplined even in defeat, his team would now melt into the city streets under the chaos and confusion they had just sown.

DGSI Motorcade

The first second Blain realized their motorcade was under attack was the moment he saw the Land Rover erupt into flames.

“Ambush!” Shane shouted needlessly as the world around them exploded.

Frantic calls in English and French shouted over the radios intermixed with the sounds of light- and heavy-caliber machine guns and small-arms fire punctuated by grenades exploding nearby. It was pure chaos and confusion happening around them. Then fear struck him as he realized the pounding against the vehicle wasn’t someone banging their fists against it. It was the sound of dozens of bullets hammering the windows and sides of the vehicles.

Katrina screamed in terror, only adding to the surrealness of what was happening. Shane was shouting to his colleagues in the vehicle behind them. “Jolly, Monkey, dismount and clear us a path out of here!” Blain heard him shout, wondering why he ordered them to dismount.

When he looked to their rear, he saw the Land Rover unmoving, smoke rising from a giant hole in the vehicle's hood. At that moment, Blain realized something—they were trapped in a carefully choreographed kill box with no way out, between concrete vehicle barriers in front of the sidewalks and parked cars just beyond the edge of the building perimeter. There was little room to maneuver, and time was not on their side.

“Get us out of here!” shouted Katrina in panic.

Durand, driving the vehicle for them, gunned the engine, ramming into the blazing vehicle in front of them, pushing it a few meters before running out of steam. Then he threw the vehicle into reverse, skidding to a stop only inches from the vehicle behind them before racing forward. With more room to build up speed, he slammed them into the vehicle, pushing it further out of their way.

Then a grenade exploded beneath the sedan. The armored undercarriage absorbed the blast as the shrapnel further shredded the vehicle's run-flat tires.

Blain felt helpless, powerless to do anything to increase their odds of survival other than to call out shooters as he saw them through the spiderwebbing of the windows. He caught glimpses of figures maneuvering from vans, assault rifles blazing.

A pair of rockets sailed over their vehicle into the compound, an explosion to his right causing him to turn to see what had happened.

What the hell? Why would they hit two sections of the building's second floor and not fire those rockets into our

vehicle?

“Brace yourselves!” Durand shouted as he plowed into a parked car, pushing it partially onto the sidewalk.

“See if you can’t push your way through and get us out of here.” Shane pointed at the growing gap between the Land Rover and the parked car blocking their escape.

Durand frantically countered, “*Non, ce n’est pas possible,*” before realizing he’d used French instead of English as he threw the vehicle into reverse. “No, not yet. This vehicle is still too big to push through. To try now would only trap—”

Then a deafening cacophony of impacts drowned his words, accompanied by Katrina’s muted screams. Their vehicle swerved to the side like it had been smacked by an invisible hand. Blain felt multiple explosions ripple across the armored flank.

“Drones! Miniature suicide drones!” Shane cried out.

“Jolly’s down!” Blain heard over Shane’s radio.

He looked to their right, immediately spotting Jolly’s body splayed out on the ground beside a cement barricade. A few meters to his left, he saw Monkey, the guy he’d come to know as their comms savant, still laying hate at the enemy.

Then their vehicle raced past him, plowing into the parked car one more time. “Yes! That’s it. Now get us out of here!” shouted Shane excitedly at the prospect of escape.

Durand reversed the vehicle, giving them room to build up speed to push through the path he had widened. Blain looked to where Monkey had been moments earlier. He panicked when he saw he was gone. Then he realized he’d

moved to another barrier to give them better covering fire as they tried to escape. As the Delta Operator reloaded, his head snapped backward, his body following the momentum a moment later as his lifeless form collapsed.

Blain cursed under his breath as he saw this man die, giving his own life that Blain might live.

“Hold on, we’re pushing through!” Durand shouted as the sides of the Mercedes scraped against the parked car before breaking free of the kill box.

Durand wasted no time, keeping them moving as gunfire echoed off the buildings. While they were no longer taking fire, it wasn’t safe to stop. Blain could tell by the grinding noise against the pavement that they were driving on the rims of the vehicle’s tires.

We’re going to need a different car, he thought to himself, wondering what the protocol was in a situation like this.

“We can’t drive much more,” Durand told Shane.

“Stop the vehicle once you reach that corner. Then get out and help me commandeer another vehicle we can use to get to the American embassy. I don’t want to risk running the gauntlet to the airport in an unarmored civilian car with a hit squad like this somewhere out there,” Shane directed as he explained their next steps.

“That’s a good call, the embassy. It’s a fortress we can bunker down in if we have to,” Blain complimented.

“Sir, when the vehicle stops, I need you to take charge of Katrina and stay with her until we’ve secured a new ride.

The rest of my team is en route to the embassy now. They'll work with the Marines to establish a perimeter one block beyond the embassy until we arrive. Then everyone falls back to the embassy. We'll turtle up until additional French security forces arrive and this threat is put down," Shane directed, his voice leaving no room for him to object.

Katrina turned to Blain. "Is it over? Are we safe yet?"

Blain saw fear and terror in her eyes as he tried to comfort her until Shane and Durand acquired a new ride. Looking out Shane's open door, he could see a handful of vehicles speeding past them—likely terrified motorists just trying to get home.

Then Shane raised his rifle, leveling it at the cars driving towards them. Tires squealed as drivers came to a halt. The sound of Durand shouting angrily in French added to the scene. Moments later, Shane came trotting back to the car. "We got us a ride. Come on, be quick about it," he said, hurrying them along. Durand held the rear door open for them to climb out. The couple whose vehicle they had just stolen stood nearby, fear in their eyes as Durand kept his rifle up, scanning for possible targets.

"Let's go," Shane said to Durand, who jumped in the driver's seat and took off.

Racing down side streets and alleyways, Shane was coordinating their arrival with the rest of his team and the embassy while Durand was jabbering away in rapid-fire French to his colleagues. It may have been minutes or an hour, but Blain knew they had reached safety when their car raced

past a couple of Marines in combat gear. They had made it to the embassy.

Zookeeper Three

By the time Ouyang and his remaining team had reached the rally point, they had gone from seven to four during their egress as they tried to melt into the panicked mass of people still running from the vicinity of the attack.

The mission was an undeniable failure. And yet, Ouyang smiled under his mask, teeth bared. The command had sought fear and chaos. In that, they had wildly succeeded. A statement had been made today. Whatever its final costs—it was worth it.

“Check weapons and ammo,” Ouyang said. “Our escape may require more violence.”

They abandoned the rally point just ahead of the police cordon, the four ghosts slipping into Paris’s concrete veins. But escape would not come easy—the drones’ attack had galvanized an enraged police force. The city now bristled with impromptu checkpoints. Metro stations had been locked down. They were trapped behind enemy lines with diminishing chances of escape.

Still, Ouyang led his pack with cunning and resolve, constantly angling towards the outskirts. But the noose only tightened as more police drones and helicopters joined the manhunt.

After evading countless close calls, their luck ran out in an abandoned warehouse blocks from freedom and their escape vehicle.

As they approached the door leading out of the warehouse, a window shattered—a shot rang out. The next thing Ouyang felt was a splash of warm liquid against his face, the body of Hawk collapsing to the ground from a shot to the head. Then bullets pounded against the walls of the building, stabbing holes into the warehouse as Ouyang and two other men reacted to the ambush.

One of his guys emptied a magazine on full auto at the security forces coming out. His bullets punched holes through vehicles and flesh. Before Ouyang could order him back, his body was riddled with bullets, momentarily twitching and dancing before collapsing into a lifeless heap.

“Fall back to that room!” Chan shouted, indicating a nearby office that offered some form of cover in the vastness of the warehouse.

Seconds after they retreated into the warehouse office, the entire place began filling with security forces as the volume of bullets being hurled at them tore the place apart. Ouyang and his last man fought like savage beasts, reaping a fearsome toll before it was down to just him.

Someone shouted in English and French, “We know only one of you is left. Surrender, and we’ll let you live.”

Surrender...huh, yeah, that could work, Ouyang thought. At this moment, he had the chance to determine how he would die—and he smiled as the plan formed in his mind.

Crawling on the ground, he grabbed his comrade's final two grenades and the two he still had. He pulled the pins on two of them after affixing them to the straps of his body armor. The moment someone peeled it off him—boom. With his final two grenades held firmly in his hands, he shouted in English, “I’m surrendering, coming out now.”

He stood in the doorway for a moment, his hands obscuring the grenades he held. They shouted orders at him—demanding he walk forward slowly. With no visible weapons hanging from his tactical vest or leg holster, he'd gotten close enough before someone shouted, “Grenade!” as he tossed the frags toward his attackers. Then everything went black before he was able to hear them detonate.

Chapter Twenty-One

The Embassy

US Embassy

Paris, France

Blain sat wordlessly in the conference room as the TV played softly in the background. The ambassador, retired General Robert “Robbie” Morrison, an old friend of the President’s, had locked the embassy down tighter than Fort Knox. With the recent arrival of a Marine FAST team and a battalion of French soldiers deployed outside the embassy, nothing was going to break through the perimeter they had established.

Following an hour-long debrief of the attack and what had happened after they’d arrived, the ambassador had brought him and Katrina to the conference room while they waited for the White House to figure out when he could speak to the President. Until then, they could only wait and replay the attack in their minds and question why they had lived when so many others had died.

“Can you turn that up?” Katrina asked, breaking the silence between them.

“Yeah, sure thing,” Blain responded as he realized the TV controller was next to him.

He hadn’t paid much attention to the channel playing in the background until he saw the headline and the video

playing next to the BBC News anchor—it now had his full attention as he increased the volume.

“We’re receiving alarming reports of attacks targeting senior government officials across multiple European cities today. While details remain unconfirmed, witnesses are describing scenes of chaos and destruction outside civic centers and intelligence agency headquarters.

“An assault of this magnitude points to a shocking breakdown in security across the EU. It has frightened people asking what will happen next and what the government can do to stop it. Meanwhile, speculation is swirling about Chinese involvement, given the ongoing war and the scale and precision of these coordinated strikes.

“We caution that these events remain unsubstantiated until someone from the government makes an official statement. Given the climate of fear and uncertainty bred by this terrible war, we urge the public to remain calm and continue to shelter in place until authorities can restore order and end the emergency lockdown of London.

“Rest assured, we will bring you the facts as soon as they are properly confirmed. For now, remain alert but steadfast. Our freedoms have weathered worse threats than this throughout history. We will continue bringing you the latest on this still-unfolding situation as soon as we know more. Stay safe out there.”

“Jesus, Blain, are more attacks happening?” Katrina asked, barely above a whisper.

“I don’t know. Maybe. I’m sure there is a lot of confusion happening right now. We’ll probably know more in

a few hours,” he tried to assure her.

It was moments like this when Blain had to remember that while he had served nearly two decades in Special Forces with deployments to the Balkans, Afghanistan, and Iraq, Katrina had not. This world of violence they had witnessed was not something she had lived through before. She was still trying to process what had happened.

“I’m going to jump over to DW-TV and see what the German-English channel is saying,” Blain said as he changed the channel. It didn’t take long to realize it replayed the same news as the BBC. He was about to turn the channel to an American station when he saw the anchor pause, then announce they had received breaking news from the BND, the German equivalent of the CIA.

“Pardon the interruption,” the DW-TV anchor said. “We have just received breaking news from Bundesnachrichtendienst...I...I don’t know how to say this given what we recently reported other than to say the BND has confirmed, as of just a few minutes ago, that the widespread reports of attacks on European officials and buildings earlier today were not actual attacks. Instead, they have been part of an elaborate deception. The BND determined that highly advanced computer techniques were used to digitally alter authentic footage of the real attack in Paris to create the appearance of strikes in multiple European cities simultaneously.

“These manipulated videos were then spread rapidly online, many of them going viral as they stoked fear and outrage before this ruse could be uncovered for what it is—a

Chinese digital deepfake attack against the European allies. The head of the BND, Markus Fischer, said in a statement, “This was a despicable act aimed at the German people and our allies. This was meant to intimidate Germany into withdrawing from the alliance. It failed, and the people of Germany will not be intimidated.”

The anchor stared into the camera once more. “We will continue reporting on this situation as facts come to light. For now, take comfort in knowing that beyond the dastardly attack in Paris today, these were not actual attacks across Europe or at home. Have faith in that and each other as allied forces continue to prosecute this AI war with China until victory is achieved.”

Blain heard the door to the conference room open, muting the TV as the ambassador walked into the room. “Oh good, you saw that DW report. I was just coming to tell you about it and let you know the White House should be calling to speak with you shortly,” Ambassador Morrison said as he made his way to the table with two others who had followed him in.

“Yeah, that was a startling discovery. Thank you again for working to get this call set up,” Blain replied, relieved that he would finally speak to the President.

“Yes, of course, Mr. Wilson. The call should be coming through shortly,” the ambassador said as he turned to the two individuals beside him. “This is Lain McGraw, my RSO. He heads up the embassy security. And this is the Chief of Station. We just call him Mr. Smith,” he said as he made the introductions.

Blain smiled at the reference to the embassy's head spymaster. Over the years, he'd worked with plenty of "Mr. Smiths" during his time in Special Forces. He was about to start asking questions when the monitor came to life, and an image of the Situation Room at the White House appeared.

President Delgado was the first to speak. "Blain, Katrina—thank God the two of you are OK. I'm so sorry about what happened and the loss of two of your security detail during the attack—I can only imagine what you two have been through."

"Thank you, Madam President, and we appreciate the concern. It was...unexpected. This entire attack caught us by surprise. If I may, there is important intelligence I received during my visit with Director Moreau that may help to shed light on a much broader plan that looks to be underway," Blain replied, attempting to shift the conversation to what he urgently wanted to share.

"Yes, of course, please continue," President Delgado urged.

Activating his tablet so he could access his notes, Blain recounted the discussion from earlier in the day. He highlighted the string of front companies and cutouts the Chinese intelligence had set up and appeared to still be running. He hypothesized that these companies were likely located near the production facilities for numerous critical defense items such as helicopters, armored vehicles, and munitions.

As he finished relaying what he felt was most critical, he said, "Ma'am, this last question I'd like to ask is for

Generals Tazman and Langley.” He paused long enough to see the both of them perk up at the mention of their names. “Generals, at the end of our meeting with Director Moreau and his Director for Intelligence and Analysis, Dr. Lambert, I asked if they could pass along the intelligence they briefed us on to the CyberCom, the NSA, CIA, DIA, and Space Force so we could put our people and resources to work on helping them uncover this covert operation. My fear, gentlemen, is that a similar operation is also happening in our country. If it is, and I believe it is, we must squash it immediately. The moment they activate whatever their plan is—we’re screwed.”

Blain heard audible groans from the Situation Room as people began to piece together what he had just said.

Secretary of Defense Jack Kurtis was the first to comment. “Blain, in answer to your first question, I don’t think we have an answer just yet. But rest assured, we’re going to get to the bottom of this. No one attacks our National Security Advisor or our allies like this. Those drone swarms... that was barbaric. It’s one thing to unleash those on our soldiers—combatants. To unleash them on unarmed civilians...that’s a different kind of evil we’re dealing with.” He then pivoted to speak to the President. “Ma’am, what Blain just described is how the Iranians have steadily built their nuclear program. It’s how Russia evaded sanctions during the Second Ukrainian War. Jade Dragon has done the same thing in this case, except they aren’t trying to acquire banned components and equipment. They’re using it to smuggle in people and provide placement and access to position their people to carry out domestic attacks against some of our most vital and critical wartime production capabilities. We must

make uncovering this the FBI and DHS's number one priority.”

“We need to refocus Cicada on this. Let's put our super-AI on this task to start helping us uncover these front companies and figure out who's behind it all,” General Tazman added.

Blain saw a confused look on the President's face as she turned to General Langley. “Mike, play devil's advocate for me. How serious of a realistic threat is this when considering all the PLA sabotage teams we took down during the first year of the war? I only ask because, if I'm not mistaken, we have more than three hundred of them still in custody, and that's after putting a thousand-plus of them in the dirt. Can they really have that many more teams still waiting to be activated right now?”

General Langley held his tongue as he thought for a second before speaking. “You ask a good question, ma'am. I don't think I can properly play a devil's advocate role in answering it because I think you're asking the wrong question —”

“Oh really?” President Delgado interrupted. “OK, Mike, if I'm barking up the wrong tree, help a girl out. What am I missing here?”

Blain had to stifle a laugh at Maria's question. He could tell she was finally trusting him after having relied on Admiral Thiel for guidance in these kinds of situations for years.

“Do you remember how during the War on Terrorism, the Bush and then Obama administrations had a phrase they

used to say about terrorism every time the Patriot Act would come up for renewal? The heads of the NSA, CIA, and DNI would tell Congress, ‘We have to be right one hundred percent of the time. A terrorist only has to be right once,’ and that was the perpetual justification for renewing the Patriot Act over and over again. It wasn’t that they were concerned about hundreds or dozens of terrorist attacks. They were concerned about the one—and how powerful that singular event could be.

“In our case, ma’am, this threat is far more grave than the threat of a singular terrorist attack. For example, last year, the Iowa Army Ammunition Plant was destroyed due to a single cyberattack. It wasn’t a team of Chinese Special Forces or an insider threat that blew the place up from within. It resulted from a security breach and malware attack infiltrating the network via a software update. This was a custom-designed attack that went after a series of industrial control units, ultimately leading to an overpressure in a system that caused the entire facility to explode. That attack blew up forty-seven percent of production capacity to produce 155mm artillery shells and many other rifle munitions the plant produced. This forced us to take a several-month delay before we could begin our campaign to liberate Taiwan. It also severely constrained our forces in northern China, giving the PLA the time they needed to build the Dengta Line, which just cost us more than thirty thousand casualties to clear.

“In answering your question, ma’am, this is an existential threat we can’t ignore. We should use every possible resource to hunt these groups down before they’re activated,” General Langley explained as both rooms fell silent. After years of war, countless casualties, and

immeasurable losses, victory was in sight—and suddenly, it could all come unglued if a certain series of events were to occur.

“Blain, I need you back here with me. Ambassador Morrison, how soon can travel safely be arranged to get my NSA back to Washington?” the President asked, a look of concern and uncertainty on her face.

“I think we can work something out with the French government to get Mr. Wilson and Ms. Katrina on their way to Washington in the coming hours,” answered Ambassador Morrison.

The President seemed relieved by his response. “Thank you, Ambassador; make it happen. Blain, get to the White House the moment you touch down. We need to talk. To everyone else—find these bastards, and do it quickly.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

How Many Terminators a Month?

Area 43

Beijing, China

Mr. He approached Alex Mak at her computer terminal. He cleared his throat, and she looked up.

“I need you to take a break from your current project,” he announced.

“All right,” Alex replied.

“There’s an engineer you need to speak with right away,” Mr. He explained, motioning with his arm for her to follow him.

She nodded and followed along. He led her to the hangar where the Terracottas were being constructed.

A man who looked like he was keeping himself artificially awake via a caffeine IV drip ambled up to them. He eyed Alex suspiciously, but when Mr. He introduced her, he highlighted her progress with the GPS systems, and the engineer’s countenance lightened a bit.

“My name is Ji Haoyu, and I am one of the lead engineers on the Terracotta program. I hope that you live up to the strong introduction that Mr. He has given you, Alex, because we have a problem.”

“Why don’t you tell me about it?” Alex replied.

“We are having trouble sourcing parts for the thermal scanners. Our rate of production is being stymied by this shortage to the point that we are down by sixty percent.”

She suppressed the urge to smile at the knowledge that fewer of these killing machines were on the battlefield than they had hoped to have by now. Instead, she listened intently as Mr. Ji explained that the facility they were at had normally been cranking out five thousand units a month but was down to two thousand a month in its reduced capacity.

My God...they're still producing two thousand a month...

“We have two larger factories that are nearly complete,” Mr. Ji continued. “And those facilities would have the capacity to produce fifteen thousand units a month—assuming we can keep them supplied with the necessary materials. I need you to work whatever magic you used with the GPS systems and amp up the supply line of the thermal scanners.”

“Absolutely,” Alex responded. “I’ll give your problem some thought. Perhaps I could meet with you around lunchtime and give you an update on my progress?”

Mr. Ji agreed. Alex did some research and mapped out a potential way to increase the supply, although she’d have to do some more work to increase the incoming amounts for the additional facilities.

She was secretly terrified to learn that there were this many of the Terracotta Warrior units being manufactured, and the thought that her work would speed up that process was

horrifying. But her cover had to remain intact, or she would become useless to the allies.

At lunch, Alex explained her progress and somehow managed to casually ask how many Terracotta Warriors had already been built.

“Oh, don’t worry about that. We have more than enough of them built to slaughter the allies once the new software upgrade has been completed,” Mr. Ji replied with a maniacal laugh.

Alex joined in the joking, hiding the giant lump in her throat and the sick feeling in her stomach. After a bit more conversation, Mr. Ji freely gave away something close to an exact number of Terracotta Warriors that was enough to make her want to vomit.

That night, she sent an urgent communiqué to MI6, detailing what she’d discovered thus far. Prior to this new revelation, she had been confident that victory was all but certain. It was just a matter of time before the PLA finally collapsed from the weight of the continued allied onslaught. Now...she wasn’t so sure. In fact, she realized that Jade Dragon might have found a way to pull out a victory from the jaws of defeat and stun the allies like it had during the opening days of the war.

Can we really have come this far only to lose in the final moments of the war?

Chapter Twenty-Three

Mallorca Conference

Castillo Hotel Son Vida

Palma de Mallorca, Spain

President Maria Delgado had never actually been to Mallorca before. It had been talked up to her as the “Davos of Spain,” to the point that she was sort of expecting to see gold-plated cows roaming the hillside. However, the drive in from the airport had been rather unimpressive—just a lot of regular apartment buildings one might expect to see in any developing nation. It almost felt like she’d accidentally gone to Colombia instead.

When “the beast” pulled up to the gated entrance of her hotel, though, it all made sense. The building was a literal castle that had been turned into accommodations for the world’s rich and famous. The views from atop the hill were stunning: besides the other very high-end residences nearby, she could see out all the way across the island and down to the coast. The weather was clear and she could even see the main cathedral in the city below from her vantage point.

After walking on marble floors past enormous paintings, portraits of Spanish nobility of the past and battle scenes of old, Maria checked in to the luxurious suite that would house her—it definitely lived up to the hype. But she wasn’t here for a vacation, no matter how much she might

need one. She was here for the same thing that people really went to Davos for—the connections.

When Maria walked into the Saló del Baró, where her meeting was to take place, she was so overtaken by the beauty of the room with its nearly floor-to-ceiling paintings of nobles along the Spanish countryside, the sparkling crystal chandeliers, and the ornate place settings on the dark wooden table before her that she found herself staring at it all before realizing she hadn't greeted the Indian Prime Minister yet.

Prime Minister Prakash seemed amused by this small breach of protocol. He stood just to the left of the table, smirking. Maria quickly walked over and shook his hand.

“First time here, huh?” he asked with a laugh.

“That obvious?” she replied with a chuckle.

“I suppose if I hadn't grown up vacationing here, I might have the same reaction,” Prakash responded. He motioned with his hand toward the table. “Please, let's sit.”

Maria took her place and a steward offered them both some wine before leaving the two of them alone except for their ever-present security details.

“So...I won't waste time,” said Prime Minister Prakash. “I know that you Americans like to get straight to business, and if I'm being honest, I'd like to get back to enjoying the amenities of the hotel. What do you think of the deal?”

Maria hesitated. She'd been thinking about what to say for some time. “Honestly, I don't see a better path forward,” she admitted.

“Good. So you accept?” asked Prakash.

“Mostly,” Maria replied. “I will have to insist that allied forces remain in China for up to a year postwar, until you are able to prepare the Indian peacekeeping force to assume control.”

“That seems reasonable,” Prakash responded.

“And I have thoughts about what needs to happen in Beijing.”

“Which are?”

“The allies will maintain an ‘occupation’ force in Beijing, similar to how Berlin was administered following the end of World War II. The allies will act in an advisory role and assist the country of China as they transition from communism to a form of government the people will accept and support,” Maria explained.

“Huh. The US doesn’t have the best track record with occupations,” Prakash teased. Maria wasn’t offended. Rather, she was pleased that even in this serious situation, he managed to keep things lighthearted.

“You aren’t wrong,” Maria admitted. “But this isn’t intended to be a nationwide occupation. This would strictly be an advisory role to assist the new government while they get themselves established and the country begins the process of recovering from the war. Allied military forces will work hand in glove with Indian security forces to maintain law and order across the Capital District. It’s only inside Beijing that the allies will be in charge.”

“Hmm...,” said Prakash, sounding a bit uneasy. “What else do you need in order to accept the deal?”

“I believe that the allies should maintain a small military footprint of forces around the Tianjin, Shanghai, and Hong Kong areas. This will allow allied forces to support the Indian peacekeeping forces and give a foothold in the event that you need us to redeploy forces to China to maintain regional security.”

PM Prakash swirled his glass of wine and took a sip. “Honestly, Maria, I don’t like the arrangement. But I do think I can make it work. The point is for this overarching security plan to bring about a better future for China than past US postwar occupations.”

Maria was relieved. The two of them signaled for food to be brought in, and after hashing out some additional details, they just enjoyed their delicious meal and their surroundings.

Maria retired to her room near the top floor, pulling off her heels and crashing backward onto the bed.

I hope this works, she thought. The reshuffling of the debt would give her administration a chance to breathe again, and right the country’s financial ship. She was excited about the possibility of focusing on some of the things she had actually gotten elected to achieve: improving the US economy by becoming a leader in clean natural gas extraction, investing in next-generation nuclear energy, and encouraging innovation toward hydrogen-powered engine technology.

She picked up her phone and called her Chief of Staff.

“How’s Mallorca?” asked Hanna Hoover jovially.

“I could see myself coming back here for an actual vacation sometime,” Maria admitted. “But I know that’s not what you meant. I want you to set up an in-person meeting with the allied leaders to discuss the Indian proposal. I’ve agreed to it, and I’m going to request that the others do as well.”

“I’ll get right on it, boss,” Hanna replied.

“Thanks, Hanna.”

She kept the call short. All the stress was catching up to her, and she decided to just go ahead and take a nap.

As she was falling asleep, she started to dream of her upcoming conversation with the allied leaders.

What will come next after this war? the German Prime Minister asked her in her dream.

Maria tossed and turned. So many competing thoughts clouded her mind. She thought about whether America should maintain NATO or end that alliance and start something new. She wondered whether or not the allies would go for the Indian plan. She went down every rabbit trail of what every person in the room could say.

She woke up in a cold sweat. That attempt at sleep wasn’t doing her any good.

Maria spoke to one of the Secret Service agents and asked if they could set it up so she could take a swim. After a little while, she was given the all-clear.

The hotel had multiple smaller pools. She picked one and took a dip. The views of the surrounding hills reminded her of the scenery near the San Francisco Bay Area, maybe around Orinda. As she treaded water and looked out to the beauty around her, some of her worries washed away.

Her mind started to think more clearly. She realized that once the war was over, a new alliance needed to be considered—one that wasn't restricted to Europe but that was formed on mutual beliefs, values, and respect. Unlike NATO, she would ensure that members who failed to uphold their end of the deal were able to be removed from the alliance. Nations would contribute and honor their commitments or find themselves kicked out of the alliance—the era of free-riders was over.

She did her best thinking in the water. By the end of her swim, she felt she had mentally solved a lot of the world's problems. Climbing out of the pool, she felt something she hadn't felt in a while—optimism about the future.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The War Room

White House

Washington, D.C.

In the gloom of a late Washington evening, Vice President Mike Madden studied the stoic edifice of the White House one last time before sliding into the back seat of the armored Cadillac. Maria's National Security Advisor, Blain Wilson, was seated beside him, already back at work. Mike observed him momentarily as he consulted a series of reports, their grim content reflected in the furrows on his brow. He had to admit, Blain was the hardest-working man in government he'd ever met. Having joined the President's ticket as an elder statesman and business outsider, Mike hadn't worked directly with many individuals from the government. His impression of those who worked in government was about the same as everyone else's—not very good. Blain, however, had completely changed that perspective.

Waiting for the Secret Service to get them underway, Mike watched pensively as Blain read through a series of documents he'd retrieved from the locked classified bag he'd carried with him from his office. Seeing the man work so hard made it impossible for him not to feel a familiar tension creep into his shoulders—a tension that felt akin to the weight of the world, the weight of this war pressing down on them like the chains of oppression. With Operation Iron Tempest still

ongoing, there was little left to do other than to watch and wait.

Then Mike heard the Secret Service agent next to him say something muffled into his sleeve mic before closing the door. Once they'd been sealed inside their armored vehicle, the evening noise of the city faded to a dull low hum. Then the vehicle's engine with its reinforced chassis came to life, the driver shifting it into gear as the motorcade got underway.

The convoy pulled away from the White House, their escorts cutting a path through the city. They were moving with a purpose—an order from the President. They were on their way to the Pentagon to meet with its leaders and the officers leading this war, deciding its outcome.

Turning south onto Fourteenth Street NW, Mike saw people walking about along the sidewalks, entering restaurants and local shops still open. He had to remind himself it was only 8 p.m. on a Friday night. People were doing their best to enjoy the evening, whether that included meeting up with friends for a drink or a dinner out on the town.

For those not fighting the war, life seems to carry on..., he thought, watching the motorcade drive through the city.

“Long night, Blain?” Madden broke the silence, his voice both cordial and concerned.

Wilson's eyes flickered as he placed the report down he'd been reading. “A little jet-lagged, sure. But we can sleep when we're dead...or when the war ends.”

They laughed, breaking the tension that seemed to build as they approached the Fourteenth Street Bridge and neared the Potomac—the Pentagon looming large on the opposite bank.

Sitting back in his seat, he let Blain get back to what he was doing. He knew Blain had just flown in from Nellis earlier in the day. Mike hadn't had a chance to talk too much with him prior to their meeting in the Oval with the boss. She'd been insistent on them getting over to the Pentagon and getting an update on how the war was progressing. A lot was riding on them being able to crush the First PLA Army once and for all, capturing Shenyang in the process. They had to win this war before more of those humanoid machines—Terracotta Killers, they called them—were mass produced. Those machines terrified him, and he wasn't even a soldier having to face them. *Those kids are braver than me...we are lucky to have such men and women as them...*

Closing his eyes as the vehicle crossed onto the bridge, he wanted to enjoy a few moments' reprieve before they arrived and he would be faced once again with having to make the tough calls that often resulted in men and women having to die for their country. *God, I hate this war...it wasn't supposed to be like this...*

As they rode in silence, he did have to admit, he enjoyed this part of the job. Nothing cut through rush hour or D.C. traffic like being chauffeured by the Secret Service in a bulletproof Cadillac.

I will miss this when our term is done...

“Mr. Vice President, Rapid Dragon—did we make the right decision?” Blain asked, uncertainty in his voice.

“Blain, we played our hand. No sense in second-guessing. The decision was made at the outset of the operation—it can’t be unmade. Now we live with it, and we learn to accept it. If we don’t—it’ll cause us to doubt every other decision we still need to make before this war is over, and we have too many people counting on us to let that happen,” Mike replied confidently before giving Blain a warm, grandfatherly smile.

It was the same kind of smile he often gave to Maria when he thought she was doubting herself. His grandfather had once told him that sometimes a person just needs to be assured that they are making the right decision. It was some of the best business advice his grandfather had given him shortly after he’d joined the family business.

“That’s good advice, sir,” Blain responded. His voice was steadier despite the tension etched deeper into his face. “I suppose we’ll find out how things are shaking out soon enough.”

Just then the car descended into the bowels of the River Entrance, pulling to a smooth halt as they arrived at their destination. The Secret Service agents hopped out of their vehicles, moving to secure the area before opening the door for the Vice President.

Mike was about to open the door, letting the agents know he was ready to exit the vehicle. Pausing before doing so, he turned to Blain. “Ready?” Blain gave him a nod, a flash of determination in his eyes. A fleeting silence fell upon the

two of them in the vehicle, broken only by the opening of the doors when Mike let the agents know they were ready.

BB3 357 – Joint Operations Center

Pentagon

Arlington, Virginia

Vice President Mike Madden exited the vehicle, the National Security Advisor following behind him. Madden watched as the Secret Service moved to their flanks, a protective bubble forming around them as he started to walk towards the entrance. Then a figure standing near the door, stiff in military dress, moved towards them—stepping into the light. It was General Michael Langley, the newly appointed Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, who had stepped forward to greet them.

The general saluted smartly, his posture as unyielding as his resolve. “Mr. Vice President, Mr. Wilson,” he greeted, his voice echoing slightly in the cavernous entranceway.

“General Langley,” Madden responded, reciprocating the salute. He could sense the tension in the air, the same tension that had been his companion since the start of this campaign.

Together, the trio ventured deeper into the Pentagon, the mazelike hallways stretching before them. As they walked deeper into the bowels of the giant building, towards the set of

elevators that would take them to the subterranean levels where the J-Ops center was located, the chattering personnel walking the halls of the building that never slept gave way to the entourage passing through. It wasn't often that the Vice President or President visited the Pentagon. When they did, it usually meant something big had happened or was about to happen.

“Update on Shenyang?” Madden asked, his gaze trained forward, his thoughts still trained on a video posted on X that he'd seen earlier in the day from a particular war correspondent he followed.

The reporter had captured a scene of fighting that was brutal, graphic, and raw, depicting a handful of soldiers following closely behind an Abrams main battle tank somewhere in northern Shenyang. He couldn't get over the level of damage to the surrounding area as the tank cautiously moved forward, then fired its main gun before a storefront exploded further down the street. It was a cruel reminder of how unforgiving war often was and how devastating it often was to those caught up in it.

Langley responded, his voice echoing through the sterile hallway, “There's progress being made, and it's having the impact we've hoped for. It appears our gamble with Rapid Dragon has paid off. The enemy force around the Suihua Line is in shambles. The ground assault in the North is ongoing, obviously. But General Sink now believes the NATO-North Forces are likely breakthrough the Suihua Line. If that happens—its only fifty-two miles to Harbin. Eighth Army's spearhead through the Dengta Line—well, it may have been

the push that was needed to collapse the entirety of Northern China.”

“Wow, it’s confirmed we have a breakthrough in the Suihua Line?” Wilson interjected excitedly.

“Yes and no, Mr. Wilson. In some areas, the PLA has rallied reinforcements to plug the gaps—blunting what looked like the beginnings of a breakout before reinforcements were brought forward. In other areas—and I must stress these are smaller, localized breaks in the line—we have reports that the Polish 10th Armored Brigade may have broken through into the enemy rear areas. Bringing us back to Shenyang, the 67th Armored Regiment is beginning to near the 4th Ring Road near the Puhe River.

“I must caution you before you gentlemen get excited—this progress we have been making toward the Puhe River has come at a cost. I also believe it’s likely we are beginning to see the final deathrows of the First PLA Army. Should we be able to finish them off here, in Shenyang, it will signal the beginning of the end of this war,” General Langley explained as they reached the elevator, stepping in.

“I agree, but how has this impact our other operation, Crimson Tide?” Madden inquired.

Langley grimaced at the question. “Let’s just say I’m more optimistic about the success of it now than I was before the start of this operation. Once the majority of combat operations begin to wind down, we are going to need some time to rest and refit our units. We’ll need to allow our supply and logistics catch up as we try to rebuild our munition stores in preparation for the next operation.”

Madden shook his head. The Eighth Army was supposed to have broken through what the intelligence folks had said was a weak spot in the enemy lines. The initial plan had predicted a swift breakthrough leading to the collapse of the forces in and around Shenyang. Instead, they were now halfway into their second month of this campaign and now it was looking like they were going to need a few months afterwards to regroup. To say he wasn't happy was an understatement.

“This has been a tough campaign, Mr. Vice President. But breaking the back of the First PLA Army and sacking the entirety of Northern China—this is worth the delay to Crimson Tide if that's what it comes down to,” Wilson offered confidently.

“How's the air situation?” Wilson asked Langley. “What kind of losses are we looking at?”

The elevator dinged, the doors opening as the Secret Service agents moved into the hall. The group continued down the corridor, towards a set of doors guarded by a pair of uniformed Marines. When the Marines saw Langley and Madden walking towards them, they snapped to attention, waiting for the two to approach before they'd render a salute.

Langley's voice boomed in the empty corridor as he explained, “It's a fight, sir, no two ways about it. Near as we can tell, Jade Dragon must view this as one of the culminating battles that will decide the outcome of the war. They're bringing everything they can to bear in this fight. Despite that, and despite their best efforts to hinder us, like them, we have been throwing everything we have into this fight. Drones,

UCAVs, helos, close-air support, whatever the commanders on the ground have asked for—we're delivering," espoused Langley, the urgency in his tone doing more to indicate the gravity of the situation than his words.

The Marines guarding the entrance rendered a sharp salute, offering the greeting of the evening as Madden returned their salute, stopping for a moment as he offered a few words of thanks and encouragement.

"Sir, before we go inside, I want to warn you," Langley began, his hand on the door handle, his eyes locked onto Madden's. "This will be the first time anyone from the White House has visited the Joint Operations Center since I became the new Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. I wanted to give you a heads-up because I run things differently than how Admiral Thiel ran things. That's not to say I didn't like his process—I just have my own way of running things.

"When we go inside, it's going to look chaotic in comparison. It's going to be loud, and it may look disorganized. I want to assure you, however, that it is anything but disorganized or chaotic. I have reorganized the Ops Center to run how I believe it should so I can stay abreast of what's happening and provide the President with the best possible military counsel. The officers and NCOs inside are among the best and brightest our military has to offer. They're pulling all-nighters, they're working through weekends and holidays to ensure our war fighters have everything they need to win and survive on the battlefield. With that said, I'd like to welcome you to J-Ops."

Blain liked General Langley—a lot. He was a no-nonsense, hard-charging Marine whose career motto was best defined as “lead, follow, or get out of my way,” which made him a likable commander, respected by those he led. As a former SOF commander himself, Blain had embraced this motto, having learned quickly in his career that soldiers will charge the gates of hell if they see you leading the charge. No one liked or respected the kinds of officers who led from the rear, often from an air-conditioned room with work hours of seven to three.

Losing Admiral Thiel, especially since he’d held the position a few years prior to the war, had felt like a kick to the gut. Blain had developed a great respect and working relationship with him over the years and was truly devastated when he’d heard the news about his wife’s cancer. He had talked about the retirement plans, the house in Wyoming they were going to build once the war was over. Now, with news of her cancer and how fast it had spread throughout her body, his mind and heart were elsewhere, as they should be. It had come as no surprise when he’d told the President he would finish out the final weeks of his extended term, but he had no desire to stay on a day longer than necessary. When he’d recommended Langley as his replacement, Blain’s respect for the man had only grown. The two were almost polar opposites, sparring from time to time during heated briefings in the early days of the war. But Langley had proven himself adept at rebalancing and recalibrating the Corps to meet the challenges in combating Jade Dragon.

“Welcome to J-Ops,” General Langley declared as he pushed open the doors and led them in.

When they entered the room, they stood there for a second, taking the scene in, absorbing the frenetic activity happening throughout the room. As Blain stood there, he now understood Langley’s heads-up.

Wow, he wasn’t joking...this place is laid out completely different from the last time I was here, Blain thought to himself as the general led them to the tank, the partially sunken semicircle that descended almost an entire floor until it leveled out in what functioned as a stage at the bottom with a conference table and chairs facing back towards the three rows of tables and chairs with placards denoting names and positions behind them. Hanging from the ceiling at an angle that allowed those seated at the conference table at the bottom the best possible views were additional monitors.

The way the tank had been built was to give the principals seated at the bottom conference table the ability to look up at the various desks and briefers providing the day’s information. Should a question arise, it was easy to identify who could answer it or who was responsible for it. The setup allowed for quick delivery of information and quicker responses to questions as they were asked. In a war where the battlefield consisted of information as much as it did of tanks and fighter planes, the tank was one of those revolutionary IT integration projects that actually worked and, for once, provided the decision-makers with the information they needed to make rapid decisions and then move on to the next order of business.

As the three of them took their seats, Blain looked up at the various monitors staring back at them, taking the displays in and marveling at how he was watching in real time. Actual ISR footage of tanks in combat and infantry soldiers engaging the enemy while a steward poured a fresh cup of coffee before the briefing got started.

“Can you believe this, Blain? I still marvel at this every time I see it,” Madden whispered to him. He pointed to a monitor on their right—a label above the monitor said ISR Four-Charley.

The image, appearing in digital high-def, showed a grouping of six armored vehicles preparing themselves to advance and join an attack that appeared to be ongoing. The group itself, a mix of three Abrams battle tanks and three Bradley infantry fighting vehicles, was the next in line to travel through a minefield before reaching the enemy. Then puffs of black smoke appeared near the vehicles. Dirt was thrown into the sky from the explosions—scattering about in the air before falling back to the ground. Then suddenly, as one, the metallic beasts came to life. These armored chariots of war were now on the move. It was slow at first. Deliberate movements as they weaved their way along cleared paths through the minefields. On occasion, a burning wreck entered the frame near the edges, just opposite denoted paths the sappers had cleared—grim reminders of what had happened to those who’d strayed from the path before them.

Blain stared at the monitor, the voices around him becoming background noise as he found it impossible to look away. His curiosity piqued, he had to see what would happen to these vehicles, to these soldiers within them. The vehicles

started to pick up the pace, their maneuvers synchronized, rehearsed, practiced as they exited the minefield and into more open ground. Then black splotches appeared around them, near them—a drizzle of artillery shells lazily raining across the terrain between the minefield they'd exited and the tank ditches they now approached. Then a metallic beast belched a brief tongue of fire and flame from its cannon—two more joining in as the tanks engaged something out of view.

“Good evening, Mr. Wilson,” boomed the voice of Jack Kurtis, his figure towering in front of him—Blain's view of the battle now obstructed.

Blain felt his cheeks redden, realizing his attention had drifted to the actions of ISR Four-Charley at the expense of what he was here to partake in.

“It can be distracting, almost overwhelming if you ask me,” commented Jack as he pulled the chair opposite him out and took a seat.

Blain smiled as he commented, “Distracting is one way to put it. I don't know that I could be around this much live footage and not find myself getting drawn into it.”

“Eventually, it's something you get used to if you work around it long enough,” commented General Stavridis as he took his seat.

Sitting opposite Blain was Secretary of Defense Jack Kurtis. He was a man of imposing stature, his face a mask of controlled intensity. Seated beside him was General Kurt Stavridis, the Army Chief of Staff. The expression on his face told Blain he was stressed. Given the weight of the operation still in its early hours, that was understandable.

On the wall of monitors behind them were the faces of General Don Baxter, the INDOPACOM Commander out of Hawaii, and General Bob Sink, the Eighth Army commander out of Camp Humphreys, Korea. The expressions on their faces, even through the pixelated images, were etched with the gravity of their commands.

“Mr. Vice President, Mr. Wilson,” Kurtis began, his voice steady as he got things going. “As you are aware, we are now approaching the sixth week since the start of Iron Tempest. I’m not going to pretend things are moving along smoothly and we haven’t encountered stiffer resistance than we anticipated or some unintended problems along the way. This fight has turned into the kind of brutal slugfest we had hoped it wouldn’t, but that is neither here nor there. We have to deal with the situations as they’re presented to us, not the ones we wish had been presented.

“That said, there are some bright spots to report and developments happening away from the battlefield that are having significant impacts on the enemy’s performance. Before this briefing ends, I will make sure to apprise you of these developments so you can pass them along to the President. In the meantime, focusing on reaching the 4th Ring Road and the Puhe River, I would like to begin by sharing some recent developments within the battle space controlled by the 1st Armored and 1st Cavalry Divisions,” Kurtis explained, to the delight of the VP.

“I appreciate that, Jack. We all knew the start of an offensive, particularly one against a heavily entrenched enemy, was going to face some stiff resistance. Of course, we would all love it if the enemy just threw in the towel and gave up. But

that was never a realistic option, so I appreciate not being pandered to like it was. Now you mentioned some progress being made or some sort of development occurring in the 1st AD AOR? Can you elaborate on that for us?” directed the VP as he readied his pen to scribble some notes.

“Yes, of course. Kurt, why don’t you go ahead and share the latest development from the 1st AD?” responded Kurtis, addressing the Army Chief of Staff.

“Sure thing, Mr. Secretary. If you’ll pardon me just a moment, Mr. Vice President, while I pull some maps up to help me walk you through what’s happening.”

While the Army Chief of Staff took a moment to ready himself, Blain caught the VP staring at the same image, ISR Four-Charley, as it followed a grouping of armored vehicles moving steadily towards the enemy lines. If he wasn’t mistaken, it looked like they had covered some distance since he had last seen them. He wasn’t sure why, but for some reason he felt like this grouping of armored vehicles was more akin to the tide of an ocean—its movements like the rolling of a wave, steadily moving closer to the shore, its strength and power growing until it crashed against the beach, washing away whatever was in its path.

General Kurt Stavridis cleared his throat as he began, “Mr. Vice President, Mr. Wilson, this section of the Huishan district is the area of operations under the control of the 1st Armored Division here, here, and this spot here. To their left is the 1st Cavalry Division’s AOR, and further to their left is the AOR under the control of V Corps, and I Corps along the left flank.”

As the general spoke, map images appeared on the monitor with small icons denoting specific battalions and brigades from each of the divisions. Opposite the US and allied forces were those of the First PLA Army under General Song Fu.

“Our forces have continued to encounter heavy resistance here.” Stavridis pointed to a cluster of heavily fortified enemy positions. “This is also the point in their lines where we’ve managed to break through the first layer in their defensive line, and just prior to your arrival, we received a report that elements from the 67th Armored Regiment have found a seam in the second layer of their defensive works right here.” The general pointed excitedly. “The report stated they had punched a hole through it and were now in the process of pushing additional units through it.”

On the screen denoting General Sink, the Eighth Army commander chimed in, his voice steady and crisp over the secure line. “This is a big deal, Mr. Vice President. This network of trenches and earthen defensive works they built along the edges of the city has held us up from pressing further north. It’s been weeks of hell for the units attacking these positions. And it’s cost us dearly in terms of lives and equipment, but I can assure you, the morale of these units remains high. Especially now that word is spreading across the lines of their breakthrough.”

Blain had kept his eyes on the drone footage while General Sink had spoken. When he heard a momentary pause, he asked his own questions before someone else could. “This sounds good, General, and congrats to the 67th on their breaking through. But what about the enemy? How are they

responding? Are they counterattacking? Are they giving ground—falling back to yet another defensive line we will need to fight through?”

Instead of General Sink responding to the volley of questions Blain had just hurled, the image of General Baxter stirred on the monitor, his face hardened as he responded. “They’re doing what soldiers do, Mr. Wilson. They’re putting up a hell of a fight and making our guys pay for every inch of ground they take. But given the sluggish response to our breakthrough as reserve units further behind the lines are either slow to react or not reacting at all, this leaves us to speculate that maybe, just maybe, our continued aerial strikes against said units has either incapacitated them or attrited their force to a point they can’t respond.

“In any case, Mr. Wilson, as our reserve forces move to exploit these newly formed gaps in their lines, the enemy will have to choose if they want to fight and die in place or if he’s going to withdraw his forces in hopes of saving them to fight another day—”

“And who’s the one making that decision in light of our capture of General Song?” Madden interrupted.

Baxter brushed the interruption off as he explained, “If this AI, Jade Dragon, was not in the picture, then his deputy would naturally assume command until a permanent replacement was identified. However, Jade Dragon has likely been the guiding hand behind many of the PLA strategies and troop movements. I think it’s safe to assume the AI is aware of General Song’s absence and has assumed command or at least taken control of issuing orders to the units for the time being.”

As Baxter finished speaking, the room fell silent, the tension palpable.

“Well, gentlemen, that’s why the President sent me and Blain over to speak with you at this late hour.” Madden’s commanding voice cut through the room. “While Jade Dragon has certainly given the world a run for its money, let’s not forget that until it figures out how to replace the average PLA soldier with one of those newfangled TK things, it still has to work by, with, and through flesh-and-blood soldiers. Soldiers that require food, sleep, and morale to continue fighting. We are on the right side of history in this war—liberators in opposition to those who seek to oppress. So let’s dispense with any negative thinking or emotions. Now’s the time to roll up our sleeves and finish them off.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

The Butchers' Bill

Situation Room, White House

Washington, D.C.

President Maria Delgado looked at the numbers in disbelief. *They can't be that high—can they?* She felt numb—she was dumbstruck as General Langley continued to go over the tally of wounded, missing, and killed in action. Not since Korea, or even World War II, had the US suffered this many casualties during a military campaign.

“Do you have any questions, Madam President, before I move to the next slide to go over the material costs from the campaign?” asked the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Michael Langley.

Maria had many questions she wanted to ask, but the sad look on the hard-chargin' Marine's face made her question if she should. Then without thinking, she blurted, “My God, what have I done? In little more than six weeks, four thousand allied and eleven thousand American soldiers dead...another twenty-three thousand wounded since I authorized Iron Tempest.”

“No, ma'am!” Blain Wilson countered forcefully. “It was the *enemy* that killed our soldiers and our allies. Not you. Don't ever think that, ma'am. No matter what we do or how we do it, the enemy always gets a vote—and it'll always be against you.” He paused briefly, then said, “Ma'am, we didn't

start this war. Jade Dragon did. These losses...they're terrible —no two ways about it. But you know what's more terrible? What's worse than this? Knowing that our people, our families, will be subjugated by some cruel, heartless AI machine that values life and humanity with no more regard than simple ones and zeros.

“I know this is tough to take in, but the alternative is so much worse,” said Blain “All our soldiers know why they're fighting this war and what's at risk should we lose it. We aren't fighting to win or fighting for some belief—we're fighting for the right to have our own thoughts, to live, and live freely as we choose. Our soldiers are sacrificing their lives on the altar of freedom and individual choice so that our entire society and families will have a future not controlled by the dictates of some dystopian machine that, at best, is tacitly controlled by the hands of a few evil men, or at worst, is an autonomous AI that can't understand the value of human life.” Blain's voice began to crack, his eyes watering as he fought against the emotions just beneath the surface.

“Blain's right,” Secretary Kurtis chimed in, wiping a tear of his own.

As the President saw her generals show emotion, she felt herself starting to lose the ever-present control she maintained in the presence of people. When she looked back to her Secretary of Defense, she saw the look on his face change, almost like a switch had been flicked. His voice hardened as he spoke.

“Madam President, if we don't defeat Jade Dragon now, while we have the PLA against the ropes, none of this

will have mattered. We are fighting to the end, with only one of our sides winning. This AI must be defeated and dismantled before this fight is over—”

“I agree, Jack!” shouted the President. “But this butchery...these kinds of casualties...my God, Jack! This operation hadn’t played out anything close to what I was briefed on before I approved it. For God’s sake, do we even have the combat power, equipment, or munitions left to launch Crimson Tide after our pyrrhic victory?”

General Langley stepped in before Jack could respond. “Yes, we will still have the necessary resources to launch Crimson Tide, and no, Madam President, this was not a pyrrhic victory by any means. We have Shenyang under our control, and nearly half of the First PLA Army was either captured or destroyed. Add in the conclusion of combat operations in Taiwan. Our supply situation will greatly improve. I’d also like to point out that while Iron Tempest did, unfortunately, turn into the bloody nightmare we had hoped to avoid, we also achieved nearly every military objective and then some, especially with the capture of General Song Fu. In terms of prisoners—General Stavridis, how many POWs did the allies process during the campaign?”

Without glancing at his notes, the Army Chief of Staff declared, “One hundred and ninety-two thousand, five hundred and thirty-one.”

“Thank you, General. The importance of the capture of General Song Fu, the overall commander of the First PLA Army, cannot be overstated. He is arguably the most competent and popular field commander they had,” General

Langley explained. “When we factor in the number of prisoners and PLA casualties, both dead and wounded, we have effectively removed some three hundred and thirty thousand soldiers from the chessboard. With Shenyang under our control, it’s only a matter of time before the remaining enemy forces in northern China capitulate.”

Surprisingly, she felt better after hearing the Chairman explain how, despite the losses, they had essentially accomplished the primary goals of the campaign—the destruction or incapacitation of the First PLA Army.

“OK, Mike, does that mean we’re ready to move forward with Crimson Tide?” she asked, unsure what General Langley might say.

“No, we are not. With this campaign drawing to an end, the units that are involved in the next operation need some time to rest and refit. Many of these units suffered twenty to thirty percent casualty rates—they need replacements and those replacements need a little training prior to the start of this campaign,” General Langley replied. His response caught her off guard. The original timeline to start the final phase to end this war was still two weeks away. Clearly that had shifted without anyone telling her.

She was about to ask about the delay when Secretary Kurtis interjected, “There’s also a slight hiccup to Falling Stars. That’s another reason we’ll need to delay. We would like more certainty that Meteor Impact is still happening. As you know, the timing between the two of them is critical.”

The response caused her heart to skip a beat. She could feel her blood pressure rising as her mind raced with thoughts

about this so-called wonder weapon to destroy Jade Dragon suddenly having a problem. Locking eyes with Secretary Kurtis, she asked, “Oh great—is this still going to work? When was someone going to tell me about our units needing a break before we start the next campaign?”

“That’s my fault, Madam President,” replied Secretary Kurtis. “I should have made you aware of this problem earlier.”

Maria shook her head. “Fine,” she said, her annoyance apparent. “What kind of delay are we talking about?”

“Two, two and half months.”

“Whoa, you got to be kidding me. Really?” she questioned, in shock. She had expected delays when developing cutting-edge technologies, but this was far beyond what she could have anticipated.

She stared at General Hamlin for a moment as she decided. With her decision made, she turned to General Langley and Secretary Kurtis, shaking her head. “Two and a half months is too much. I’ll give you two months. After that, we’re going in with the troops we have and with or without Meteor Strike. Am I clear, gentlemen?”

“Yes, ma’am. Crystal,” replied General Langley, marching orders in hand.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Ports & Rangers

B Company, 3rd Battalion, 75th Rangers

Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni

Iwakuni, Japan

“Come on, Dekker! Push! Push! You got this!” shouted Staff Sergeant Barry Ezell.

Almost there...just a bit more, Dekker’s inner voice insisted, pushing him to finish the final set.

Clink.

“There you go! You did it. See, I told you you could add another twenty pounds and knock out a full set,” Ezell encouraged as they started putting some of the weights away.

“Man, Ezell, that felt good. This gym, the Hornet’s Nest—this place is nice,” Dekker commented as he finished putting away the last plate on the rack.

“Yeah, but is it as nice as Smith Fitness Center back at Fort Benning?” his gym partner retorted as they grabbed their water bottles on their way to the exit.

Laughing at Ezell, Dekker shook his head. “You mean Fort Moore? Come on, man, you know that’s not even fair to these jarheads. You know they get our hand-me-downs after we’ve worn our crap out or Congress buys us the next shiny object,” he joked.

“Haha, yeah, I suppose you’re right,” Ezell laughed as the Marine manning the desk near the door shot them a dirty look. “Oops, I think he overheard us.” The two laughed again as they exited the gym.

“Eh, I suppose we should be more mindful of our surroundings,” Dekker replied in a serious tone as he pointed toward the MCX, the AAFES version of an Army Shoppette store or a 7-Eleven convenience store to civilians.

“Hey, Ezell, here’s a joke for you. Why did the Marine refuse a penny for his thoughts?” asked Dekker mischievously.

Ezell snickered at where this was going, replying, “Um, got me. Why?”

“Change is hard,” Dekker explained, funnily contorting his face while overly pronouncing the word *hard* in a thick Southern drawl. The pair laughed as they grabbed a few drinks and snacks to carry back to the barracks.

As they exited the MCX, heading to the barracks their platoon was bunked in, Dekker’s demeanor turned serious. “Hey, all kidding aside, Ezell. At the 1400 hour formation this afternoon, Major Meacham is going to announce a forty-eight-hour pass to the company. When we get back to the barracks, I want you to instill the fear of God in your squad about this pass. So help me God, if I get a call from the first sergeant about any of your soldiers fighting off base or getting in trouble with the local po-po...let’s just say it won’t go well for them or you. Got me?”

“Roger that, Sergeant First Class. Is this for real—we’re getting a forty-eight-hour pass?” he asked, unsure if Dekker was still joking or serious.

“Yeah, it’s real. They put it out at the Commander’s Calls this morning,” Dekker confirmed, then added, “I know the guys are itching to know what’s happening. I can’t tell you too much as I don’t think Major Meacham or Lieutenant Colonel Mackintosh know anything more than we do. That said, rumor has it the 1st and 2nd Battalions arrive tonight. Whatever the brass is cooking up—it’s big.”

Ezell whistled at the news of the other two battalions joining them at Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni.

Dekker added, “Look, the guys are going to get some time to blow off some steam and have a good time for a few days. We need to make sure that’s all they do. Have a good time, but don’t cross local law enforcement and get themselves in trouble. I’m getting too old to babysit, and I know damn well the CO will come down hard on anyone who brings shame or embarrassment to the regiment. When this pass is over—you can bet whatever they’re cooking up, we’ll be leading the charge. The last time they brought the entire regiment together was the party in Grenada back in ’83. Hopefully, whatever it is, we’re going to be a part of—let’s hope it helps end the war.”

“Agreed. I’ll speak to the squad. Let ’em know what’s going on and what’ll happen if they shame the regiment. It’ll be more than just the CO that’ll look down on them if they do,” Ezell assured him as they approached the barracks.

Dekker paused in front of the door. He gave a few words of encouragement to Ezell before asking him to take his bag to his room. He wanted to be alone to clear his head and

think while everyone else was still out at breakfast or doing PT.

As Dekker walked in the direction of the flight line, it suddenly felt strange to him, being a soldier on a Marine base. Their battalion's arrival at a Marine air station a few days ago was a surprise. Following the capture of the Shenyang Taoxian International Airport, their battalion had shifted its focus to supporting III Armored Corps in capturing critical bridges and interstate exchanges in advance of various armor and mechanized units. Once the 1st Armored Division breached the Dengta Line, it didn't take long until the 1st Cavalry Division was through the breach and the entire defensive line fell apart. That was when the Rangers captured one bridge or interstate highway exchange after another as the armored and mechanized infantry units moved swiftly to encircle and trap as much of the First PLA Army as possible before they could escape.

The battle was gearing up to turn into a nasty urban house-to-house fight when Dekker's unit had been pulled from the fighting and rotated to the rear. When their battalion reconsolidated at the Anshan airport, they were loaded and flown to Japan. Nearly seventy-two hours later, they were still clueless about why they had been flown to a Marine air station. What they did know was that there were a lot of Army guys on a mostly empty Marine base with more Rangers on the way.

Sitting on a bench in the park overlooking the flight line, Dekker pulled his phone out and stared at a collage of photos his wife had loaded into a Google shared drive for him. Seeing his kids grow so much while he was gone was like a

dagger to the heart. He wasn't missing the occasional birthday or holiday with his family. He was missing entire years of their lives—time he'd never get back. During his last rotation home for some R&R, his youngest daughter had hidden behind her mother's legs when he'd walked into their house. While his others had rushed to greet him, his munchkin, his little princess, didn't remember who he was. It took everything in him not to cry when he saw that look of uncertainty in her eyes about who he was. Was he her daddy?

Wiping some tears that ran down his cheeks, he questioned whether he'd make it back from this tour. If he didn't, would his youngest child, who'd barely recognized him last time, have any memories of him? Had he become just a guy in the photo to her? He cursed the war that separated him from his family, that had nearly killed him twice already. Reaching into one of his pockets, he grabbed the bottle of Percocet, unscrewed the lid, and tapped the bottle until a pair of pills fell into his hand. Placing them in his mouth, he downed the medication and half his water bottle before returning to the barracks. He had a platoon to lead and a platoon leader he'd started to like as much as Meacham—he was alive, his family was safe, and that was about as much as he could ask for.

72 Hours Later

Sakura Theater

Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni

Major Meacham had just grabbed a seat when a loud voice boomed through the Sakura Theater the regiment had assembled in.

“Room—atten...shun!” shouted the command sergeant major at the back of the theater.

The double doors to the theater opened, and a cadre of officers walked in, making their way down the center aisle toward the stage at the front of the theater.

Meacham jumped to his feet like the others around him, standing rigidly at attention, head held high, eyes front as the officers walked past him. He tried to glimpse who was attending this meeting using his peripheral vision as they walked past him. Then a voice he recognized but couldn't place shouted, “At ease, everyone. Take your seats and settle in. We're going to be here for a little while.”

Standing at a lectern in the center of the stage was Lieutenant General Donald Tackaberry, the commander of the XVIII Airborne Corps, unlocking the classified bag containing whatever he was to brief them on. But the phalanx of officers seated behind him caught Meacham's attention. Something big was in the works if all these units were involved. The officer he knew and immediately recognized was the commander of the 75th Ranger Regiment, Colonel Nathaniel “Nate” Harlow. He'd come to respect and admire Colonel Harlow as a leader and mentor. He made it a point to meet monthly with the company commanders across the regiment, pushing and inspiring his company commanders to become the kinds of leaders a Ranger wanted to follow.

Having spent most of his military career in the Rangers, Meacham had heard of the officers but hadn't served with them. To the left of Colonel Harlow sat Major General Mitch Fowler, the CG for the 101st Air Assault Division, followed by Major General Mark Reindl from the 82nd Airborne. But the officers seated to Harlow's right were obviously from JSOC. While he didn't recognize their faces and couldn't read their name tapes because of the distance, he did recognize one of the men's Navy digital camo uniform and Trident pin, followed by the pair of Army lieutenant colonels with a velcro patch on the left shoulder that Meacham knew identified them as Delta Force.

Grunting to himself as General Tackaberry began to speak, Meacham thought, *If the SEALs and JSOC are coming along, then this ought to be a hell of a mission we're about to learn about...*

General Tackaberry looked up from his notes, surveying the crowd before him. "Good morning, Rangers!"

"Good morning, sir!" the room shouted in reply.

"Hooah! That's what I like to hear in the morning. All right, Ranger up and listen closely. I want to welcome everyone to Operation Audacious Blitz, the SOF portion of Operation Crimson Tide. Many of you may wonder what Crimson Tide is and what our involvement will be, so let me break it down Barney style for you. Crimson Tide is the end state—our chance to defeat the PLA on the battlefield and end the war. I'd like to go over a couple of things with you before I dive into the overview of Crimson Tide. Many of you know I once commanded the 75th Rangers. I understand the

importance of ensuring the soldiers under my command know why we're doing what we're doing because I'm about to order you into a battle to end this war—a battle many of you may not return from. I owe you that as the officer ordering you into battle.

“Let's talk about Audacious Blitz and how SOF will play the starring role in this drama that's about to begin. I chose the name of our operation because the word 'audacious' signifies *our* boldness, *our* willingness to take ostensibly wild yet calculated risks in the face of the enemy. The word 'blitz' highlights *our* rapid and aggressive nature when attacking. That's why Audacious Blitz exemplifies what we're about to do.

“Now, I'm sure many of you are beginning to wonder why the Ranger regiment has been transferred to Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni and how our partners from JSOC play into this. In answering that question, I want to share a story with you that I think will help shed some light on the gravity and importance of what we've been chosen to be a part of,” Tackaberry explained as he paced across the stage, seeming to enjoy every minute of this.

“I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm fascinated by the events of World War II and what our forefathers had to endure and fight through that gave our nation the decades of peace we've enjoyed. When a new threat to our nation materialized in the form of artificial intelligence, we found ourselves once again rallying the democracies of the world to stand united against the greatest threat to mankind—Jade Dragon. Just as our forefathers rose to the occasion and defeated Nazi Germany and the Empire of the Rising Sun, so,

too, shall we rise and defeat the machines that threaten our future and our very existence.

“As we gather in preparation for this coming offensive to end the war, I want to share an insight into the most pivotal decision in World War II. It was Sunday, June fourth, 1944, when Supreme Allied Commander General Dwight Eisenhower had to make a pivotal decision. Only he could make this decision—no one else. When he had been made the Commander of Allied Forces Europe, it meant all decisions on how and when the war in Europe would be fought were going to be made by him. That meant the successes and failures would be decided by the judgment of one man. On that Sunday, he had to give the go or no-go order that would signal the start of Operation Overlord—the liberation of Europe. By that evening, the paratroopers of the American 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions and the British 6th Airborne Division had assembled around dozens of airfields across the south of England in preparations to support Operation Neptune—the seaborne invasion aspect of Overlord. This part of the operation was critical to ensuring the success of the landing force and preventing German reinforcement from potentially reaching the beaches. This airborne aspect consisted of twenty-thousand nine hundred paratroopers who would take to the skies in the early-morning hours of June fifth, the following morning.

“While the paratroopers would begin their journey to occupied France, more than one hundred thousand soldiers would file into the landing crafts and boats that would ferry them across the English Channel to the shores of Normandy, where they would breach the Atlantic Wall and begin the

liberation of Europe. Throughout Monday and into the late afternoon, everything was running smoothly until suddenly, it wasn't. One of Eisenhower's concerns about the landings and airborne operations had suddenly become a reality.

“By late afternoon, high winds across the English Channel had churned the sea to a dangerous point, making an amphibious assault perilous given the sea state. The problem was compounded by low cloud cover and dense fog impeding the pilots' visibility while flying the airborne force to the drop zone. Not only was this dangerous for the pilots, if they couldn't properly see where they were going, then they could miss the drop zone, scattering the airborne across the fields of Normandy when a consolidated force was needed to give the landing force time to get off the beach. Armed with this knowledge, General Eisenhower knew he would be imperiling the entire operation's success if he didn't adjust his plans in response to the changes in the weather. You see, for this invasion to work—the timing was everything. So Eisenhower did what good leaders do—he called an audible and delayed the invasion until the following day, June sixth,” General Tackaberry explained before looking towards the side of the stage. “Hit the lights, Sergeant Major, and bring up the slide deck.”

Just then, Meacham sensed Captain Luke “L2” Loach leaning closer to him as he whispered, “Great story, now it's picture time!”

Meacham grunted at the comment, shaking his head before countering, “Shhh, just pay attention. I think he's going to quiz us at the end.”

There was a time when Meacham might have gotten angry at a comment like that during an important Commander's Call like this. Right now, however, he was just glad to see Loach was beginning to return to the guy he'd recommended for early promotion to captain so he could make him his XO in addition to being his First Platoon leader.

Meacham was concerned he might have to pull him from the field to give him a mental health break after the airport mission. He had lost half his platoon shortly after the battalion had seized the airport. While his platoon sergeant, Amos Dekker, had taken a pair of squads to set up a series of ambushes around the interchange connecting the 4th Ring Road to Shenben Avenue, L2 had stayed with the remainder of the platoon as they manned a roadblock leading to the interchange between Shenben Avenue and Airport Road. Bravo Company had been given a series of critical road junctions north of the airport they needed to hold until they were relieved by reinforcements.

By midmorning, a motorized battalion began advancing towards Dekker's ambush point when L2's roadblock further past him had been discovered. Whether it was a surveillance drone that had seen them or just a keen eye, the battalion had halted, pulling to the roadside and waiting. What Dekker and L2 didn't know was that, while the enemy had pulled to the side of the road, what they had done was call for an artillery strike to flatten the roadblock. Suddenly and without warning, precision-guided artillery rounds slammed into the platoon's infantry support vehicles they had arranged to defend the roadblock.

The strike had been swift and deadly, leaving L2 and two other soldiers out of the twenty they had alive. L2 hadn't been killed with his men because he needed to settle an argument between one of his team leaders and a soldier arguing over something stupid. Following the attack, L2 just wasn't the same. That was why Meacham wasn't mad about the joke. It told him his friend might be returning to them.

Just then, the lights in the auditorium dimmed and the room began to hush. A light behind them projected an image against the giant movie screen that appeared as the curtains were drawn to the sides. The image on the screen was that of a satellite overview of the Port of Binhai.

“Gentlemen, I present to you the Port of Binhai—the reason we're here,” announced General Tackaberry. “I shared that earlier story about Eisenhower having to adjust his battle plan because, like Ike, we have to adjust our own plans because of a situation outside our control. As you can imagine, seizing a port facility of this size and holding it long enough for reinforcements to arrive will require an enormous sealift capability. Our plan to seize the port has been in the works for over a year. Given the costs in lives and equipment we just paid for breaching the Dengta Line, the President wants options beyond a repeat of that bloody campaign. If you haven't heard, Dengta cost the allies some thirty-nine thousand dead and wounded,” explained General Tackaberry, shaking his head.

“If the President orders the Eighth Army to march on Beijing, that means we'll have to find a way through or around the Jiujiang Line. Having just heard the costs involved in breaking the Dengta Line, you can imagine how little appetite

there is in Washington for a repeat of that. That's where Binhai comes into play. It gives the allies a viable means of bypassing this defense in depth. Now I've given you an overview of the situation and likely bored some of you to tears with more details than you cared to hear. So instead of speaking more broadly to their roles and your own in the grand scheme of things, we're now going to focus on your specific roles—why we're here, on a Marine Corps Air Station in Iwakuni, Japan, and not elsewhere in Korea.”

The general continued to speak for another hour. When the meeting had ended, Meacham felt like he'd been drinking information from a fire hose. Following their dismissal by General Tackaberry, Meacham stood and stretched his back, listening to the excited chatter around him. The conversations between the officers and senior NCOs ranged from excited chatter to heated debates. Everything seemed to revolve around the series of training objectives the brass felt would get them ready for the mission. What seemed to have people most worked up was the time constraints they had to work with.

To further complicate the training, they were going to integrate several allied SOF and airborne units with their own. The Japanese Ground Force was lending the 1st Helicopter Brigade and two companies from their Special Operations Group. Then the British were contributing the 2nd Battalion, Royal Gurkhas, during the second phase of the assault while a unit from British Special Reconnaissance Regiment would deploy in support of the two squadrons from Delta Force. Then they learned the Polish 25th Air Cavalry Brigade would go in with the second phase of the assault alongside the 101st Air Assault Division. The one unit Meacham was actually

excited to work with was the French 2nd Foreign Parachute Regiment. They were the only airborne regiment of the Foreign Legion, and from everything Meacham had heard about them in Venezuela, they were a real ass-kicker of a unit.

In the coming days, all these units would begin working together as they rotated through Camp Fuji, a combined arms training center. The SOF units would run their soldiers through a series of shoot house training exercises while other units could practice clearing a simulated city with several blocks of multistory buildings, some as many as four or five stories high. Once it was time to begin training at the Port of Nagoya, the units would rotate through staying at the Japanese Air Self-Defense Force air bases at Komaki and Gifu near the city of Nagoya.

As the soldiers began to clear out of the auditorium, Meacham cleared his mind, accepting the tasks they'd been given and determining he'd train his unit harder than he'd ever trained them before. If this was going to become the final campaign of the war—then by God they were going to give the enemy hell and end this thing.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Crossroads & Squeaky Wheels

University of Florida

Gainesville, Florida

Command Sergeant Major Jeremiah Grabowski had given more speeches than he could count since getting promoted and becoming the senior enlisted member of the 107th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment. However, standing here in the Ben Hill Griffin Stadium, home of the Florida Gators, he was easily speaking to the largest audience he'd ever addressed. The crowd was abuzz, dressed and painted up in orange and bright blue, ready for the game that would follow. It hadn't happened in a while, but Jeremiah could actually feel his knees trembling slightly with adrenaline.

He looked over to his right and saw his wife, Staff Sergeant Jamie Roberts, who was doing her best to keep their two toddlers calm with a couple of stuffed gators so their daddy could speak. The sight instantly calmed his nerves. His life sure had changed; he'd been a married man for almost two years now, and their honeymoon baby had turned out to be twin boys. It was an adventure of a different kind—one he had never prepared for, but that he absolutely reveled in.

Jamie didn't usually accompany him to his speeches; it would certainly be hard to take the boys all over the state and country to listen to him drone on about war, duty, honor, and service to one's country. However, today's event wasn't that

far away from where they lived now in St. Augustine, Florida, and it was getting them into a football game with last year's championship team for free.

The crowd before Jeremiah was all keyed up, but he knew they weren't there for him. He was just the preamble everyone had to deal with before they would sing the national anthem and get the real show on the road.

Jeremiah took a deep breath and launched into the speech he'd delivered many times before. He talked about some of his experiences overseas; apparently, the crowds ate up stories from a "bona fide" war hero. Then he encouraged students to join the school's ROTC program or consider pausing their education to join the Army and serve now, while they were needed the most. The admissions staff at these colleges must have hated him, but he had a job to do.

When he was done with his speech, he asked the select students who'd been given a seat nearest him if any of them had any questions, and one of them walked up to the microphone that had been placed there for this purpose.

"Excuse me, sir," the lanky young man began. "I do want to thank you for your service, but I also just want to know...well, I haven't been drafted so far...why should I pause my schooling and join when others have already been drafted? I mean, why risk my own life now that the war looks like it might be coming to an end?"

There was some grumbling from some of the crowd, and Jeremiah shut that down immediately. "That's a fair point," he responded. "Some of you were giving him a bit of hard time just now for asking that question, but you know

what? That took courage. That's more courage than most of you have. He had the guts to get up there and say what he thought in front of tens of thousands of people." He paused for a moment before continuing. "This war may appear to some like it's ending. But if I learned one thing while serving in the Iraq War and now this war, it's this—war is unpredictable and has no regard for our opinions or our best-laid plans. The enemy always gets a vote. So in answer to your question—this country needs more people like you. People who are willing to stand up, to ask the tough questions. To take on those challenges that others fear. Frankly, it's not just our country that needs more of this. Our world needs more young people like you.

"What's your name, son?" Jeremiah asked.

"Tony Sheridan."

"Tony, you might be a bit young for this reference, but President John F. Kennedy once said, 'Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.' I respect that not all people believe in God or some sort of divinity or divine purpose. For most of my adult life I was like that—agnostic. But here's what I've come to believe. We were all made to have a purpose in life. To contribute in some form or another—to leave a mark that says 'I was here, at this time in history.' One day when you grow old and you look back on your life, is the mark that you left going to be that you stood by and finished your degree while others chose to answer the call to serve this great nation of ours—defending your liberty and that of others? Or will it be that you stepped up and made sure that future generations had the freedom

you've enjoyed? That you made your mark at this critical point in human history?

“The world came extremely close to being ruled by a communist dictatorship who monitors their population with social credit scores, delving into every purchase, every comment ever made on a social media platform. That danger is not gone yet.”

As Jeremiah spoke, he walked over to Jamie and his boys, picking up Phillip. “You may not be thinking about having kids yet, and that’s all right. But I’d like to think that one day, you might. Will you be able to tell them that you stood up for freedom? That you thought about something greater than yourself? Or will you say that you completed your degree ‘on time’ and went about life while the war remained a faraway concern for others to be worried about? I don’t want to discourage you or others from your academic pursuits. What I would like each of you to consider is that each of you, at this moment in time, is at a crossroads where a decision must be made. One road leads to self-gratification, and the other creates a legacy of service, of concern for your fellow man. Ultimately, the decision of which path you choose is yours and yours alone to make—unless you’re drafted, of course. But why allow fate to make that decision for you when you can do it yourself? So in closing—I humbly ask you to choose service, to choose to sacrifice for a greater cause than yourself.”

Jeremiah handed Phillip back to Jamie, and the emcee for the occasion took the mic.

“Wow, now that’s a hell of a speech! Let’s thank Command Sergeant Major Grabowski for his own service and reminding us that freedom isn’t free, and it isn’t cheap—shall we?”

There was kind of an awkward applause. It was obvious his words had had an impact—sobering the raucous crowd here for the final game of the season. Regardless of the game’s outcome, Jeremiah hoped they would still remember his words long after the game had come and gone.

Grabowski Family Home

St. Augustine, Florida

Staff Sergeant Jamie Roberts had transferred to one of the National Guard units in St. Augustine with Jeremiah. Once they’d found out she was having twins, she had made the decision to step back from being a full-time Active Guard member to the inactive ready reserve for a few years. She still had a desire to finish her twenty-year requirement for a National Guard pension. But right now, her focus was on being a stay-at-home mom until her munchkins were old enough to start school. Becoming a parent to twins had been a drastic change for her. It had changed her focus in life and what she wanted to pursue and put her energies into. With the war still raging, Jamie felt compelled to remain active in her community to support the war effort in whatever ways she could.

She had become increasingly active in the VFW and spoke regularly at various women's empowerment and Women in Uniform events. Apparently, being one of only two women in history to be awarded the Army Distinguished Service Cross and the first woman to be awarded the Combat Infantry Badge put her in high demand. It was strange to her, but she had become the poster woman for women in combat jobs, at least within the National Guard units.

In the day-to-day, though, she was fighting a battle of the mind that she didn't feel like she was winning. A new baby was a lot of adjustment for anyone—twins were a level of chaos most people just weren't prepared for, even in the best of circumstances. The two boys were a whirlwind of grunts and screeches, trying to climb anything and everything. She had quickly learned that there was no level of childproofing that was fully foolproof against their shenanigans. And so, she had to be hypervigilant in order to keep them safe. But her mind was already there, and there was no rest—and that was a growing problem.

When she slept at night, she was haunted by nightmares of her combat experiences in Cuba and Venezuela. She would wake up in a cold sweat. Sometimes Jeremiah would wake her up if she screamed or thrashed about in her sleep.

She didn't want to get help at first because a good soldier was expected to "embrace the suck," or that was what she'd been told and heard from vets of earlier wars. But the lack of restful sleep was wearing on her. When she did finally succumb to seeking assistance, she'd been given several medications that made her feel like a zombie, like she lacked

human emotions entirely. She and Jeremiah watched *Equilibrium* one evening after the twins were finally asleep, and the old film hit her.

“That’s what I’ve become!” she remarked.

“What do you mean, babe?” asked Jeremiah, alarmed.

“I’m like one of those people in the city, taking pills just so I don’t feel anything at all. I mean, I’m glad that I don’t feel like I’m going to lash out at you or the boys, but you could tell me our dog died and I wouldn’t even be sad...that’s just not right! I can’t live like this!”

She had burst into uncontrollable tears. Jeremiah was clearly unsure how to help her other than to be a shoulder for her to cry on, but that was exactly what she needed in that moment.

“You can taper off, Jamie. Just don’t go cold turkey, OK? I had a friend...” His voice trailed off. “We’ll keep going until we figure out what’s going to work for you, all right?”

One day, she was making dinner while watching the boys. She’d strapped them into slings that hung from the doorframes so they could bounce up and down—that usually bought her at least fifteen minutes before one of them got fussy.

The news was on in the background. She liked to keep up on what was going on in the world, and she could only stand so much Cocomelon for the sake of the boys. One of the stories caught her attention; there were updates from the battle raging in China.

The images threw her into a full-blown flashback. Suddenly, she was back in Venezuela, with the Chinese about to overwhelm their positions. She was surrounded by the horrors of war, engaging in hand-to-hand combat with a knife.

“Ouch!”

She looked down at her hand. Somehow, she’d managed to cut herself with the chef’s knife she’d been using to chop vegetables. There was blood pouring out of her left hand.

Jamie practically threw the blade in the sink to get it away from her. After she’d dealt with her wound, the adrenaline of the moment dropped, and she sank to the floor, head in her hands.

“I’ve got to do something about this,” she said to herself. She couldn’t give up—her boys needed her too much, but living like this would simply not do.

That night after Jeremiah came home, they both started researching PTSD extensively. A lot had changed in recent years. There were some VA trial programs now for stellate ganglion nerve blocks; Jeremiah found a related interview that had been done on SGB injections on *60 Minutes*. It actually sounded really promising.

“Why hasn’t anyone told me about this?” she asked.

“I don’t know. It seems like you have to ‘fail’ at their standard treatment before they’ll give you the good stuff,” Jeremiah replied.

“That’s really messed up,” Jamie responded.

“I can’t disagree with you. I guess you have to know about it and advocate for yourself.”

“Well, what else don’t I know about?” she wondered.

That question started a whole series of rabbit trails. Eventually, she went on to try not only the SGB injection, which shut down the physical fight-or-flight response for her, but also a newer treatment—ketamine. Unfortunately, the VA didn’t pay for that one, but after just one dose, she felt like a whole new woman. It was like her brain had been rewired entirely. One minute, everything was cloudy and gray except for the thought of her family, and the next, there were only sunny skies. Apparently, it worked by helping the brain to make healthy connections in place of the faulty loops created by PTSD.

Once she’d experienced the relief for herself, Jamie decided that she needed to use the platform she’d been given to advocate on behalf of other veterans who were being sidelined, ignored, and given the most ineffective treatments first. The squeaky wheel got the grease...and she was going to be one hell of a squeaky wheel.

CIA Headquarters

Langley, Virginia

Dr. Rubenstein woke up from the nap he’d been taking on the couch in his office in a cold sweat—Cicada’s urgent

message alarm was blaring. He whipped the sleep mask off his face and staggered over to his nearby computer terminal.

Once he'd inputted his biometric verification, a report flashed on the screen:

Priority, Level One

Subject: Mass transportation of Chinese kamikaze drones, including on US soil

BLUF: An interconnected web of shipping agencies has used a Swiss firm, QuickTrans AG, as neutral cover. Some of these shipping schemes have been going on since before the current war, such as the shipments of containers suspected of transporting specially designed kamikaze drones for a future attack. Multiple containers matching similar shipping manifests were transported into the United States.

Containers suspected of transporting these drones were shipped to the following cities within the U.S.:

Dallas, Texas

Los Angeles, California

Newark, New Jersey

Miami, Florida

La Place, Louisiana

Baltimore, Maryland

Scranton, Pennsylvania

Anchorage, Alaska

Honolulu, Hawaii

Newport News, Virginia

The known international destinations of kamikaze drones include:

Zurich, Switzerland

Split, Croatia

Marseille, France

Grenoble, France

Stuttgart, Germany

Stalowa Wola, Poland

London, England

Leiden, Netherlands

Rome, Italy

Stockholm, Sweden

Madrid, Spain

Method: After gaining access to France's surveillance systems, an analysis of QuickTrans AG and Côte d'Azur Livraison was completed due to known suspicious activity. Unusual financial transactions that did not align with these companies' publicly stated activities raised red flags and were connected to other shipping entities, which were then analyzed. A full detail of these transactions can be found in Appendix A, attached.

After it was determined that further analysis was warranted, historical databases were searched for satellite imagery that could be used to trace the movements of specific containers, vehicles, and personnel associated with all suspected companies. Unusual patterns in container movement between China and the subsidiaries of QuickTrans AG were identified. Further details in Appendix B.

Verification: Cross-referencing cargo manifests, shipping routes, and transaction records confirmed the suspected irregularities.

Communications within the suspected companies were scanned, and encrypted messages confirmed aspects of the smuggling plot. Social media revealed connections between officials of QuickTrans AG and known Chinese intelligence operatives. Copies of relevant communications in Appendix C.

“Holy crap,” Rubenstein muttered to himself. He shuffled through the appendices—this was airtight.

I’ve got to brief this to the top, right away, he realized. This was a huge, unexpected influx of the kamikaze drones. If they were all to be released, the casualties would be unspeakable.

Situation Room, White House

Washington, D.C.

Blain Wilson had just finished listening to Dr. Rubenstein's briefing about shipments of Chinese kamikaze drones. He looked over to FBI Director Thomas Payne and DHS Secretary Titus Randal to see if they were feeling as uncomfortable as he was with the potential risks these kamikaze drones presented to the US and Europe. Director Payne appeared a bit paler than he'd been at the beginning of their conversation, whereas a vein on Secretary Randal's forehead was visibly pumping in anger.

Blain had one question. "Dr. Rubenstein, do we have any intelligence from Cicada on *when* exactly these drones will be released?"

"Negative," replied Dr. Rubenstein. "I've combed through the appendix with all the social media messaging with Chinese officials, and the only references to time say things like, 'we're on schedule,' and 'all will be ready soon.'"

Director Payne cursed under his breath.

"Well, we obviously can't allow these to be used, but if we're going to raid one location, we'll need to raid them all simultaneously," Blain surmised. "Otherwise, they'll get spooked and release whatever drones are left. We're going to need to work with local law enforcement agencies to coordinate this. Thoughts?"

Secretary Randal nodded. "You have really good contacts with the French law enforcement entities. I'd say let's spin them up on this and then have them spearhead the coordination with the other European partners."

“Yeah, that makes sense,” said Director Payne. “And make sure they request any equipment needed immediately so we can make this a rapid-fire operation. We can’t risk taking our time for a long wind-up here.”

Secretary Randal squinted at Blain. “We need to try and capture as many of these smugglers as possible alive. Dead men tell no tales. It would be of more benefit to us to trace this operation back as close to the source as possible.”

Blain agreed. It was tempting to simply call in some very targeted air strikes, but without investigating the human links in the chain, it might be possible that they would miss another subsidiary or similar operation.

“All right, Mr. Secretary, why don’t we quit jaw-jacking here and have you pick up the horn?” said Blain.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Sentinel Purge

77th Fighter Squadron – Joint Task Force Locus

Approaching Qinhuangdao

Hebei Province, China

For newly promoted Brigadier General Tim “Joker” Hatfield, this flight was more than just another mission. This was his first flight leading Joint Task Force Locus, his new command. It was his chance to prove that this laser-focused SEAD-DEAD type mission could yield greater results with fewer losses in aircraft and pilots. As his gloved hands gripped the controls of his F-16 Viper, he cast a glance at his instruments, noting each system. Each reading was normal and where it was supposed to be. Beneath his flight suit, he could feel his pulse quickening, not out of fear but in anticipation for the mission ahead.

When he looked to the horizon, the sight almost took his breath away. It was painted in deep orange and gold, the morning sun pushing the last remnants of the darkness aside. It starkly contrasted with the tension Joker felt and knew his pilots shared as they approached the port city of Qinhuangdao on the Bohai Sea. Nearing the coast, the outlines of the easternmost starting point of the Great Wall of China—the Shanhaiguan—the first opening in the Great Wall near the sea would soon become visible from their aerial perch in the sky.

With the approach of I Corps nearing the defensive works of the Jiujiang Line, a nine-mile-long network of trenches, antitank ditches, and cement-encased forts two miles deep, it was imperative that his force take out the integrated air defense system around the Shanhaiguan Air Base or the PLA SAMs would make short work of allied helicopters and close-air support fighters. That was where his new command came into the picture.

In the aviator world, there was a distinct difference between the suppression of enemy air defenses (SEAD) and the singular focus of destruction of enemy air defenses (DEAD) operations. They were still totally separate missions. While both aimed at neutralizing the PLA air defenses, SEAD focused on suppressing and disabling radars and AA systems, preventing them from being able to track and fire on allied aircraft. They would temporarily jam the radars or fire an AGM-88 High-speed Antiradiation Missile (HARM), destroying the radar or forcing the operators to keep them off. This allowed friendly aircraft to fly over hostile airspace, conduct their mission and get out safely. In a DEAD mission, however, the intent wasn't to suppress enemy radars or create a temporary safe zone. A DEAD mission was pure destruction of the enemy's ability to threaten allied aircraft and create a path for friendly aircraft to perform their missions.

As Joker's Viper cut through the air, he felt confident they had plenty of HARMs for the mission. With seventeen Vipers on the mission, they had thirty-four of the radar-homing missiles ready to rock the moment the enemy radars went live. In addition to the HARMs the Vipers carried, he'd directed the pilots to carry a pair of CBU-103s in the event they spotted

any clusters of AA or AAA gun nests. The ChiCom were notorious for building clusters of anti-aircraft guns or larger nests of anti-aircraft artillery guns around their higher-value buildings and infrastructure. Since the start of the war, Joker had been mandating that his pilots always carry a pair of 103s no matter what mission they were on.

For a time, not everyone approved of using cluster munitions following their extensive use during the Russo-Ukraine War. Joker, however, was a huge fan of using whatever killed the enemy and would help end the war. What made the 103s a required loadout for any pilot under his command was a munition dispenser and guidance kit that more or less turned what had been an unguided dumb bomb into a precision-guided hello to the enemy. Instead of swooping out of the sky as they lined up for a bombing run, now the pilots would lock the target into their targeting pod, then adjust the bombs' spin rate—they could set a tight dispersal rate, saturating a twenty-by-twenty meter area with two hundred and two tiny bomblets or cast a wider net blanketing a dispersal area of one hundred and twenty by two hundred and forty meters, covering a much wider swath of territory.

With the final underwing hardpoints, he had pilots carry a trio of Mark-81 two-hundred-and-fifty-pound unguided gravity bombs. They weren't the earth-shattering two-thousand-pounders or even the smaller five-hundred-pounders—but when allied or American troops were in contact with the enemy and desperate for support, the Mk-81s were the bomb of choice for danger close missions. He also felt better about having an errant two-hundred-and-fifty-pounder hit a wrong

target than a two-thousand-pounder. The former would flatten a building; the latter would flatten a city block.

Sighing audibly to himself, Joker looked out the canopy, spotting the flight of four Vipers he'd chosen to fly with. His former wingman, Peanut, had divided his squadron up into three flights of four and the single flight of five that Joker flew with. He was glad to have Peanut back after his injuries. When Peanut had taken some shrapnel and a bullet fragment in the lead-up to Operation Argonaut, Joker had thought he might have lost him. Peanut had barely made it back to Yonaguni Airport before he'd passed out from loss of blood.

“Gambler Actual, Locus Actual. Switch to channel four,” Joker directed, then moved to channel four. “You there, Peanut?”

A muffled laugh crackled in Joker's ear before he heard the familiar voice of his friend. “Yeah, I'm here. Still can't believe you made general.”

Joker snorted at the comment. “Yeah, well, when some all-powerful AI takes out the people above you, it kind of opens the promotion opportunities if you know what I mean.”

“Hell, if that ain't the truth. Thanks, by the way, for trusting me with your command—the 20th. I know it's been your baby throughout the war.”

“I'm just glad I was in the position to choose my successor. Frocking you to colonel was easy. Finding squadron commanders to replace the ones that keep getting shot down—now that's proving to be a challenge. I've lost three newly promoted squadron commanders in the past fourteen months.

Hell, half the pilots in the wing are cherries, barely out of their F-16 formal training unit let alone having any kind of aerial combat or ground support training. Frankly, I'm surprised we haven't run out of aircraft yet from the boneyard or the factory," commented Joker as he lamented privately to his friend and now his XO until someone more senior showed up.

"Geez, man. When I was in the hospital, I heard we were running short on pilots. I don't think I realized just how short. But, hey, looks like we got another ten mikes until we'll start entering the outer range of those HQ-12 SAMs and those Type 517 radars they blanketed the coast with, so let me ask you something. What made you think about including a squadron of F-35s in this task force of yours? Not that I have anything against the Rude Rams—I can't say that I've flown with any F-35s before now," Peanut commented.

Joker thought about the question for a moment before answering. "You know, I guess I'm tired of losing pilots—and friends. The way I see it is we use Viper pilots to snipe at their SAMs with our HARMs. Then we make use of the Lightnings' stealth capability to move into position to drop their JDAMs on the hard-to-get targets. You mix that with a handful of Growlers for EW support and Eagle IIs for air supremacy, and we've got ourselves a nice little raiding party that can pound the hell out of the enemy while hopefully not taking anywhere near the losses we have to this point. We gotta end this war before we run out of pilots and planes, Peanut, 'cuz I don't think we can keep this going much longer."

Message on Channel One—Message on Channel One, the text message repeated as it scrolled across his screen. "Let's switch to channel one," Joker announced.

“Locus Actual, this is Olympus Four,” Captain Landon Ferguson’s voice crackled in Joker’s ear. “We are detecting multiple contacts ahead. We have identified two HQ-12 SAM radars, one HQ-9 radar, and four 517 fixed radar installations. The SAM radar count is seven. Anticipate at least fourteen launchers in Zone A. No aircraft has been detected at this point. Will advise as new contacts appear. How copy, Locus Actual?”

Joker shook his head, as if he hadn’t heard they were flying into a hot mess. “Olympus Four, that’s a good copy on all. Keep us apprised of any changes to the situation. Out.”

Sighing to himself, he knew this was the calm before the storm. The moment before the game started—the moment their lives became the payment should they fail. Time to put our war faces on...

“Gambler Actual. It’s time to start putting some points on the field,” Joker exclaimed, instantly returning to the formalities of command. “Let’s get this show on the road.”

“Copy that, Locus. All birds—status green. Ready to rock ’n’ roll!” Peanut’s excited voice countered forcefully. His pilots were rearing for action, ready to tear the enemy up.

Joker glanced at the nav unit, confirming they were one hundred and twenty-six miles from the Shanhaiguan Air Base, one of their primary targets for this raid. The air base was home to the 81st Air Defense Brigade, a major thorn in the side of allies, one they needed to eliminate if I Corps was going to have any luck against the Jiujiang Line. Then suddenly, as if on cue, multiple search radars came to life—their powerful beams quickly spotting the thirty-three fighter

aircraft of the strike force. The sky around them began to fill with invisible electronic pings as search and now targeting radars activated—energizing their missile pods to engage.

Somewhere off to Joker's right, he momentarily saw the afterburners of the Eagle IIs accelerate forward, towards the enemy. Then Joker's radio crackled to life, and the voice of Lieutenant Colonel Tony "Buster" Buston chimed in. "Locus Actual, Tempest One. Ready to own the sky—cut us loose, hoss."

Joker couldn't help but smirk at the eagerness of his Eagle drivers. The F-15EX Eagle IIs were the top dogs of the non-stealth air supremacy aircraft. They'd act as his guard dogs, ensuring they weren't surprised by enemy aircraft during the mission.

"Scorpion One, what's the status of my jamming? Why's my RWR screaming right now?!" barked Joker to his Growler pilots, wondering why they hadn't started jamming the enemy search radars.

When Joker didn't receive an immediate response, he knew something was wrong. Then an unfamiliar voice responded, "Locus Actual, this is Scorpion Three. Did Olympus Four contact you about the bird strike—"

"Break! Break! Scorpion Three—cut the crap, I need those radars jammed *now*! Give me the BLUF later. I need you to take charge of your flight, lock those TJS pods on those radars, and start jamming them. If you don't get your heads in the game, the skies are about to start filling with missiles!" interrupted Joker, tearing into the officer now in charge of his remaining electronic warfare birds.

“Good copy, sir. TJSs going active,” Joker heard the officer rebound from his earlier stumble.

Glancing down to his notebook attached to his thigh, Joker spotted the call sign Scorpion Three and the name next to it—Lieutenant Mike “Red Bull” Branigan Sr.

Ah, damn it—it had to be a junior officer. The squids must be scraping the barrel for pilots like we are, Joker thought before the battle around him snapped his attention back to the moment.

“Locus Actual, this is Rude flight leader. We are sixty-two miles to your front, on final approach to Banger One through Banger Five. Weapons hot, requesting permission to initiate strike. How copy?” announced the smooth voice of Major Walter “Wally” Glenn. He was the flight commander of the six F-35A Lightnings that would carry out the strike against the bridges and the air base’s command and control facility.

Joker smiled as he responded, “That’s a good copy, Rude One. Nail those bridges and give ’em hell.”

“Copy that, Locus. Things are about to get spicy around here.”

Laughing to himself, Joker suddenly felt good about the mission—about their chances of slipping in and out of the area as the stealthier Lightnings were able to fly ahead of them. While the Vipers worked over the enemy radars along the coast and any of the SAM systems that were foolish enough to activate their radars, the Lightnings steadily closed in on the bridges they were about to drop.

Qinhuangdao was a large sprawling city with a population of 3.1 million people. Separating the northeastern part of the city from the industrial southern half and port facilities was the Shihe River. Connecting the city together again were a total of five bridges. Four of them were reinforced concrete bridges with eight to twelve traffic lanes while a single bridge in the city's center was a six-lane steel trestle bridge.

If the allies were prepping to assault the defensive works some twenty miles further to the northeast, then dropping the five bridges connecting the two sides of the city was paramount. This would effectively cut off the PLA forces manning the defensive works from receiving additional supplies or manpower once the offensive got underway. Joker knew that in a few minutes, the bridges would be nothing more than smoldering ruins. A pair of two-thousand-pound GBU-31 JDAMs had been earmarked for each bridge except the steel trestle one, which would only take one bomb to drop it into the river. Once the Lightnings had dropped their payloads, they'd circle back to the air base, finishing the mission with the final JDAM against the command and control bunker before heading back to sea and rendezvousing with the tanker.

34th Fighter Squadron – Rude Rams

Inside the cockpit of his F-35, Major Walter “Wally” Glenn’s every sense was amplified. The dim luminescence

from his helmet's array of digital displays painted his face in an eerie blue glow. The hum of the Pratt & Whitney F135 engine, usually a reassuring lullaby, now echoed like a war drum in the confines of his helmet.

The mission weighed heavily on him, the loss of Gambler Four just moments earlier a ghostly echo in the radio's silence. The task of the Rude Rams was distinct and clear—they were to smash and destroy the enemy's nice things. When Wally glanced at the live feed of the digital battlefield, it highlighted the five bridges and the command and control center on the PLA air base. Their fate was digitally outlined, awaiting fulfillment.

“Rude Two, you have the C&C on the air base and Shihe Three. Rude Three, you have Shihe One. I have Shihe Five. Rude Four, you have Shihe Four, that leaves you, Rude Five—you have Shihe Two. We're going to be flying into a hornet's nest. Let's get in, drop our bombs, and get out,” Wally instructed.

“Copy, Rude One. Locking in targets now,” responded Rude Two, his aircraft angling toward the air base.

Wally veered toward the Longhai Boulevard Bridge, Shihe One. He could tell the city had come to life with vehicles traveling to and from along the various thoroughfares that interconnected the giant metropolis.

I pity these people...they never had a choice, he thought privately, his aircraft steadily approaching the target. For eons, wars had been decided by old men and those in control of the levers of the defense industry—this was the first war decided by a machine. He wasn't sure which was worse.

Sitting atop his perch some twenty-two thousand feet above the ground, he watched as the distance to the target continued to decrease. Then a shudder ran through his body. His radar warning system came to life—a warning alerting him that multiple surface-to-air missile radars had energized their systems. When their powerful beams searched the skies for targets like him, his cockpit erupted into a cacophony of alarms. The enemy knew they were approaching, but they hadn't found him yet. He intended to keep it that way.

“All Rude elements, status report,” Wally called out, noting his aircraft had almost reached the target zone.

One by one, the pilots reported in. They had all reached the target zone, and no one had been detected. He knew they were flying on borrowed time. The radars below would eventually detect them. They needed to drop their ordnance and get out of Dodge while their attention was focused on the Vipers and Eagle drivers. Briefly checking his radar scope, he smiled as he saw the first volley of AGM-88s racing towards the radars of the SAMs that had just gone active with their search radars. It didn't take long for the enemy to react. Missiles began rising into the sky from various locations near the coast. He turned away when the number of missiles approaching the seas surpassed twenty.

We need to take these bridges out and get out of here.

“All Rude elements, I want us to hit the bridges simultaneously. Prepare to release your JDAMs on my mark,” Wally instructed, his voice unwavering even as he armed the weapons and opened the doors to the internal bomb bay.

“Copy that, Buster. Ready to drop some warheads on foreheads!” Rude Four excitedly replied.

“Three... two... one... mark!”

Wally felt the temporary lightness of the munitions’ release. *Four thousand pounds of American diplomacy.* He looked down, briefly watching the pair of JDAMs freefalling toward the concrete bridge spanning the Shihe River. Then he felt his stomach tighten when the previously silent fortified nest of anti-aircraft guns to either side of the bridges came to life, just as his radar warning system alerted him that a radar system too close for comfort was searching for him.

Oh, crap. I’m flying right over that radar truck, he realized when he saw the radar atop the PGZ-95 near the bridge circling. Suddenly, the world outside Wally’s canopy became a whirlwind of bright red tracers and puffs of black smoke as the numerous AA and AAA systems below opened fire.

“All Rude elements—ordnance drop complete. Break contact and return to Rally Point Yankee!” Wally shouted over the roar of explosions and AA fire erupting around him.

Wally had finally pulled out of the mayhem, still in shock that his Lightning hadn’t been ripped apart by the hurricane of steel rain and shrapnel he’d found himself within. His breathing returned to normal as his mind replayed the events of moments earlier.

We did it—we hit the targets—and we didn’t lose a single aircraft.

“Olympus Four, Rude One. Mission complete, Shihe One through Five have been destroyed. Requesting Airgas One and Two to meet us at RP Yankee. I’ve got five thirsty Rams requesting a drink.”

“Rude One, Olympus Four. Good copy. Will direct Airgas One and Two to RP Yankee. Good job, Rude elements.”

77th Fighter Squadron – Gamblers

Looking off into the horizon, Joker could feel his pulse quicken as they approached the coast, less than thirty miles from shore and closing quickly. Then off in the horizon he saw the first of a series of explosions in the direction of the bridges. Giant plumes of black smoke rose into the air. Soon he spotted twinkling flashes rising upward, the telltale sign of anti-aircraft guns firing blindly into the sky.

A sudden beeping noise broke into his thoughts. Joker’s radar warning receiver blared a warning that a surface-to-air radar system was actively searching the skies, looking for whoever had bombed the bridges.

It’s go time, he told himself as he readied his HARMs to engage the radars.

“Gambler Actual, you are cleared to engage,” Joker ordered, knowing it wouldn’t be long before the PLA radars would start painting them as primary targets.

“Roger, Locus Actual. Gamblers engaging. HARMs ready,” came the quick reply as Peanut ordered his pilots to engage. “We’re locked onto multiple radars—engaging,” his friend added, tension evident in his voice.

Streaks of light shot forward from the Vipers as HARM missiles raced towards the radars they’d acquired. Calls from various pilots crackled in Joker’s headset. He could hear the pilots from the Scorpion flight calling out targets to jam and deconflicting targets with each other.

Suddenly in the midst of the aerial fight, Joker’s radar warning receiver lit up, signaling that a search radar had picked them up.

“Missile launch—missile launch,” announced the automated warning system. Glancing for the details of the missile, Joker saw it had fired in his general direction, but it didn’t appear to have firmly locked onto him. He activated his ECM pod; he’d have to let it do its job and see what happened next.

“Bandits! Twelve o’clock! Heading two-nine-zero, forty-two miles and closing,” warned Olympus Four, their AWACS support a few hundred miles to their rear.

Joker’s pulse quickened at the mention of bandits. It was the moment of truth—it was time to unleash his Eagles. “Tempest Flight, take the lead. Engage bandits and keep ’em off our backs while we finish the mission. Scorpion Three, get on them, and initiate jamming. Blind the bastards.”

The sky was ablaze with chatter as each team went into action, coordinating their moves, dodging potential threats, and launching countermeasures. Through it all, BG Hatfield’s

voice remained calm, directing the symphony of war, ensuring the objectives were met.

The strategic ballet was in full swing, each aircraft playing its part flawlessly. But Joker knew the dance had just begun. The heart of the storm awaited them, promising even fiercer resistance as they closed in on the air base and looked to fly over the bridges—conducting an on-scene BDA before confirming mission success.

No sooner had they transitioned over land than the intensity of anti-aircraft fire ratcheted up. The sky around them filled with lead—red tracers zipped around their aircraft as the gunners below did their best to protect the base. Joker looked off to the horizon, noting it was dotted with sporadic bright plumes as surface-to-air missiles took to the air, streaking skyward before turning towards one of his aircraft.

“Multiple SAM launches detected!” announced Olympus Four, his voice tinged with urgency.

“Deploy countermeasures and execute evasive maneuvers!” Joker announced. His fingers danced over his controls, releasing flares and chaff, bright streaks whipping past his canopy so close he thought he could touch them.

Around him, the dance was mirrored by his comrades. The skies were awash with the zigzagging trajectories of aircraft jinking violently to dodge missiles, their afterburners glowing like fiery beacons in the twilight as flares ejected in their wake, the occasional missile exploding on impact.

“HARMs away!” Peanut’s voice crackled over the radio as his aircraft released the pair of AGM-88s toward their targets. The HARMs were purpose-built missiles that had

come onto the scene in 1985, revolutionizing the counter-SAM mission. It was the first true fire-and-forget antiradiation mission that, once locked onto a target, would follow the radio waves emitted by the radar back to their origin, even locking in the source coordinates, ensuring a hit regardless of whether the radar was subsequently turned off or stayed on.

Jinking the aircraft hard to the side, Joker tightened his grip on the controls as he executed a high-g turn. He felt the shuddering of the Viper as the automated defensive unit—the ALQ-213—began ejecting flares and chaff canisters in the wake of his high-speed maneuvers as the latest missile chased him down, closing the gap before detonating its shotgun blast of tungsten pellets into his engine.

Pulling back on the controls as he took the aircraft almost vertically, Joker craned his head to his rear just in time to see the missile explode—its seeker falling victim to one of the flares.

Hot damn, that was close.

Pulling the mask free of his face, Joker felt like gasping for air, his lungs burning from the weight of his body being pressed into his chair by the high-speed maneuvers. His hand involuntarily wiped at the beads of sweat that ran down the sides of his face, the near-constant pressure almost suffocating. He leveled his aircraft out after evading yet another missile. His breathing had become labored, and the adrenaline coursing through his veins felt like a blessing and a curse until he regained control. The danger was real no matter how many missions you flew or how many missiles you evaded. When you were traveling six to eight hundred miles

per hour, the smallest error could be catastrophic, but a missile chasing you down at Mach 4—that'd kill you.

Fastening his mask back to his helmet, Joker heard his radio crackle to life with the familiar voice he recognized as that of the Tempest flight leader—Buster, or Tempest One. He could hear the urgency of Buster's orders as the Super Eagles mixed it up with the best of the ChiComs' Air Force.

“Break! Break, all Tempest elements! Olympus reports four J-20s approaching forty-two miles from the direction of the Yanghe Reservoir, forty-two miles. I want everyone to deploy their ALE-55s. Tempest Two, Three, and Four, stay with the Vipers and keep those fighters from picking our guys off. The rest of Tempest flight, on me. It's time to hunt!”

“Splash one! J-20 down!” came an excited shout from someone in Tempest flight.

“Gambler Three, splash one HQ-6 radar near Shihe Five,” a Viper pilot announced.

“Outstanding, Gambler Three. Keep pouring it on!” shouted Joker as he angled his aircraft around for a quick pass over the top of the Shihe targets. He needed a visual battle damage assessment of the bridges before he could declare it a mission success.

“Locus Actual, Scorpion One. We've knocked out or jammed the remaining PLA radars. If Gambler flight wants to make a bombing run against the Shihe targets or the air base, now would be a good time, before additional enemy aircraft enter the fray.”

“Scorpion One, good copy on all. Keep ’em jammed for us. We’re going to make a few passes over the bridges and hit the air base on our way out,” Joker explained, relaying his plan for their final ten minutes over the target before returning to the sea to link up with the tankers.

Glancing at his fuel gauge and instruments, Joker took a moment to check on his wingman as they prepared to make a high-speed run over the bridges of the Shihe River.

335th Fighter Squadron – Tempests

Above the smudged horizon, the silhouettes of Chinese fighters appeared like deadly wraiths. As Buster scanned the skies, memories of countless dogfights flooded his mind: the steely scent of jet fuel, the furious chatter of gunfire, and the weightlessness of evasive maneuvers. He could feel the nerves simmering in his gut, suppressed only by the raw determination to keep his team safe and accomplish the mission.

Captain Lewis “Bluey” Steele’s voice broke the silence, confidence dripping from every syllable. “Look at that, boss! The PLA’s out to play, and they’ve brought their new toys. You think they’re desperate, or do they just want to show off?”

Buster frowned at the comment, knowing that overconfidence could be fatal. He replied, “Never underestimate the enemy, Bluey. Those Dark Dragons are

deadly. They're not just piloted by any AI; they have the Jade Dragon behind them."

Bluey chuckled, "Sure, but last time I checked, Jade doesn't have these." He paused, tapping his temple and then his heart. "Instinct and gut. Besides, aren't those J-20s like old-gen tech for them now?"

The steady thrum of Buster's F-15EX hummed reassuringly beneath him, a stark contrast to the quiet chaos unfolding around them. He was acutely aware of every aircraft in his formation, of every blip on his radar. "Bluey, remember, it's not just about the machine; it's the tactics, the strategy. It's the whole picture."

From a formation behind, a voice interjected, "Tempest One, this is Scramble from VAQ-132. We're good to jam and deceive. Let's give those robot birds a glitch."

"Copy, Scramble. We'll need every trick in the book for this one," Buster responded.

Suddenly, Locus Actual's voice pierced the comms, every syllable charged with urgency. "Tempest flight, hostiles closing fast. Intercept and engage. Protect our birds at all costs."

Buster felt a chill down his spine. This was it. The moment of truth. As he accelerated towards the approaching threat, he could almost feel the weight of responsibility on his shoulders, not just for the mission, but for every life under his command.

With steely determination, he rallied his team. "All right, Tempests, into the fray! And Bluey," he added, voice

edged with warning, “keep that cocky attitude in check. Remember, no heroes today, just survivors. We do our job, then we get out.”

As the distance closed between the two forces, the tension was palpable. The first shots would be fired any second, and the dance of death would begin anew.

Buster watched the HUD. Data points and vectors flitted across, displaying the complex ballet of war in the skies. An F-15EX, call sign Tempest Three, was already entangled in a spiraling dogfight with a pair of J-20s. Tempest Three jinked left, throwing out flares and chaff, as one of the J-20s got a lock. In an elegant arc, the enemy missile soared only to be duped by the countermeasures.

The azure sky overhead was alive with contrails, the distant roar of engines punctuated by the intermittent beeping and chattering of warning systems. Lieutenant Colonel Tony “Buster” Buston’s HUD painted a vivid picture—bands of red and green designating friend and foe, the horizon line pivoting and turning as he banked and rolled.

“Eyes sharp, Bluey.” Buster’s voice was steely, yet calm. “We’re in the lion’s den now.”

Bluey, ever the self-assured upstart with those piercing blue eyes, responded, “Don’t worry about me, boss. Those J-16s won’t know what hit ’em.”

The radio crackled to life. “Tempest Flight, Scramble. Bogey duo, ten o’clock high. Looks like they’re coming in hot.”

Even as Scramble's warning echoed in his ears, Buster's trained eyes caught the glint of sun on metal—two sleek J-16s streaking towards them.

“Break left!” he commanded, feeling the gravitational force push him back in his seat as he gunned his F-15EX into an evasive maneuver. Beside him, Bluey danced his own deadly ballet, banking hard and drawing one of the J-16s with him.

Within seconds, the skies turned chaotic. The shrill warning of a missile lock buzzed in Buster's ear, the sound rising in pitch. But he was an old hand at this. A quick barrel roll, coupled with chaff and flare releases, and the incoming missile was thwarted.

“Got one on my tail, Buster!” Bluey's voice had a hint of strain.

Buster's HUD lit up with targeting information. “Hang tight! Drag him to me.”

Bluey did as instructed, leading his pursuer into Buster's crosshairs. With a squeeze of the trigger, a radar-guided missile leapt from Buster's undercarriage. The missile sailed true, finding its mark and turning the J-16 into a fiery streak before it disintegrated.

Simultaneously, a call of dread echoed. “Dark Dragons in the fray!”

Buster's blood ran cold. He'd faced these AI-controlled monstrosities before. Their tactics were different—colder, more calculated. Two of them made a beeline for Scramble. Before anyone could react, one of the F-15s in the

formation exploded in a ball of fire, its wingman narrowly avoiding the debris.

The Growlers, ever vigilant, sprang into action. Electronic warfare tones filled the air, a cacophony meant to jam the Dark Dragons' systems. It bought Tempest flight a few precious seconds.

Capitalizing on this, Buster engaged. The Dark Dragons, though lethal, had one flaw: predictability. Their AI, no matter how advanced, had patterns. And Buster, with his years of experience, had started to recognize them.

“Bluey! Flanking move. Now!”

Bluey, now back in his groove after the close call, followed suit. They approached the Dark Dragons in a pincer movement. While the Growlers disrupted their sensors, the combined might of Buster and Bluey was unleashed. Missiles and rounds found their marks, turning two Dark Dragons into flaming debris.

Yet the fight was far from over. More contrails, more enemies, more chaos. Buster felt sweat bead on his brow, the weight of command heavy on his shoulders. Every call he made, every order he shouted, could mean life or death for his wingman.

Amidst the adrenaline, the roaring engines, and the rush of combat, Buster felt an odd sense of clarity. This was what he was trained for. This was where he thrived.

The engagement felt like it lasted hours, but in reality, it was mere minutes. By the time the last missile found its target and the skies began to clear, Buster's flight had asserted

their dominance. But it had come at a cost. Two of their own were lost.

Bluey's voice, now more subdued, came over the radio. "Good calls, Buster. We gave 'em hell."

Buster looked around, taking in the smoke trails and the slowly falling debris. "We did," he responded quietly. "But remember, Bluey, every fight has a price."

As they regrouped and prepared for the journey back, Buster felt a mix of pride and sorrow. They had achieved their objective, but the skies over the Jiujiang Line would forever hold the memories of this fierce battle.

77th Fighter Squadron

F-16 Vipers over the Jiujiang Line

"There are two kinds of pilots: those who have been hit by anti-aircraft fire, and those who will be." —Aeronautical proverb

The skies over the Jiujiang Line resembled a stormy sea; thundering roars of jet engines mixed with the staccato rattle of anti-aircraft guns and the scream of surface-to-air missiles. This was the airspace where Brigadier General Robert Hatfield, call sign Locus Actual, now led his squadron of F-16 Vipers, each bristling with weaponry. They knew their mission well: take out the enemy's SAM sites, eliminate the

PLA Army's SHORAD vehicles, and suppress any AA gun emplacements.

Hatfield's HUD displayed a sea of data, but he focused on the threat rings representing active enemy radar installations. The AGM-88 HARM was their weapon of choice against these installations. Designed to home in on hostile radar emissions, it made quick work of enemy SAM sites once they went "live."

The airwaves crackled with constant chatter. "Locus Actual, this is Dagger Three. Got a lock on a radar site, bearing two-two-seven. Prepping a HARM."

"Send it, Dagger Three," Hatfield commanded.

Dagger Three's jet shuddered as the missile detached and sped toward its target. Moments later, a distant explosion confirmed a hit. One down.

But Hatfield knew this was just the beginning. As more of his pilots called out targets and released their HARMs, the electronic warfare battle raged. Their onboard electronic countermeasures and jamming systems worked overtime to confuse enemy radar, giving their missiles the best chance of hitting home.

As Hatfield led his squadron deeper into Zones C and D, the nature of the threats changed. The more urbanized terrain offered the enemy plenty of hiding spots. Hatfield relied on data from their AWACS and intelligence to identify these camouflaged threats.

"Locus Actual, Tempest Six here. Got intel on a possible SHORAD nest near a school building, north of our

current position.”

Hatfield frowned. They had to be surgical. “Tempest Six, mark the position. We’ll approach with caution.”

They banked north, but the enemy was waiting. Suddenly, the air was thick with tracer fire and streaking missiles from mobile AA platforms. Hatfield’s cockpit lit up with warnings. His heart raced, but he had been in worse spots before.

“Break and engage!” he barked, leading by example. The F-16s scattered like a school of fish evading predators.

The Vipers then went to work on the SHORADs. The CBU-87, a cluster bomb, was their tool for the job. Each bomb released a deadly rain of bomblets over a wide area, ideal for taking out lightly armored vehicles like these.

Hatfield selected his CBU-87s and identified a SHORAD nest. He felt the lurch as the weapons released, followed shortly by multiple distant thuds and flashes. This was the dance of death from above, and Hatfield was its maestro.

The biggest threat, however, remained the entrenched AA guns. These were harder to spot, often nestled between buildings or under camouflage nets. The Mk 82s with the Snake Eye tail-retarding devices were designed for these. The Snake Eye fins popped open after release, slowing the bomb and allowing the aircraft to escape the blast radius of its own weapon.

“Locus Two, Hatfield. You see that clump of trees to the east? Intel suggests AA guns nestled in there.”

“On it, boss.”

Locus Two swooped down, releasing his Mk. 82s. They plummeted, fins opening, and then—a satisfying explosion, followed by plumes of smoke.

“Good hit,” Hatfield commended.

But the enemy was not idle. A missile shot up from a concealed launcher, homing in on Locus Two. Hatfield’s heart sank as he watched the missile close in. At the last moment, Locus Two released flares, veering off sharply. The missile, deceived, detonated harmlessly away from the aircraft.

“That was too close,” Locus Two breathed, audible relief in his voice.

The Vipers pressed on, systematically disabling the enemy’s AA capabilities. Every so often, the ground would erupt in flame and smoke, marking another successful strike. Yet every explosion on the ground was mirrored by the dangers in the sky. Missiles, tracers, and the ever-present risk of mechanical failure kept the pilots on their toes.

Hours seemed like minutes. The dance of destruction continued. But the Vipers, with their technological superiority and unmatched pilot skill, slowly turned the tide. AA guns fell silent, missile launchers lay smoldering, and SHORAD vehicles were reduced to burning wrecks.

Yet amidst this triumph, the cost of war became evident. Not every Viper that went in came back out. Some bore the scars of near misses, while others were lost in the maelstrom of combat.

The mission, while a success, weighed heavy on Hatfield. He looked around, taking stock of the jets forming up as they prepared to exit the hot zone.

“Locus Actual to all Vipers, great job out there. Let’s head home.”

But as the engines roared and the Vipers regrouped, Hatfield knew this was just one of many battles in the ongoing war. There would be more missions, more threats, and more sacrifices. It was the cost of freedom, and he was prepared to pay it, as were all those who flew beside him.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Hey, Old Man

Binhai New Area

Tianjin, China

After Carson and Nat's wildly successful uncovering of the hidden mountain airport facility, Alex's confidence in their abilities had increased dramatically. It appeared her minders back at the house, or as the locals liked to call the MI6 headquarters, "the Babylon-on-Thames," had reached the same conclusions she had. It didn't take long before additional taskings were being sent, except they were for Carson and Nat. Some had been simple one-man jobs—snap some photos of this or that. Other times they involved scouting the shelves of grocery stores or other types of consumer stores. These were the kinds of taskings she loathed but understood. They gave those working in the basement levels of the Vauxhall Cross an insight into the effectiveness of sanctions against a nation, or in this case, a glimpse into the kinds of shortages occurring within the major cities.

When Carson and Nat's one-to-two-week extraction mission had turned into an indefinite pause, it had become necessary to find ways to incorporate the two operatives into something productive that could further aid the war effort. As the data miners in the dredges of the Vaux had constructed an elaborate yet believable digital backstory for their extended stay in the digital dystopian hellscape that was the PRC, it had

become easier to integrate them into her legitimate day job. This afforded them the overt and covert cover they needed to perform more complex and independent taskings.

One afternoon while she was staring out the window to her private office in one of the many subcampuses of Tianjin Yoshida International Logistics, a tasking had arrived that gave Alex goose bumps.

Could this finally be it? Her thoughts started to run wild as more details were deciphered.

It was a request to begin detailed mapping of the Port of Binhai. Of particular note, there was some concern or suspicion that wharves or piers might be packed or rigged with explosives, and this needed to be verified or ruled out. Prior to the ROC's formal capitulation after the siege, ROC Marines had thoroughly destroyed the wharves and berthing docks, rendering much of the nation's ports ruined wrecks until specialty ships and equipment were brought in to shore up the wharves and piers again so they could begin to use their roll-on, roll-off ships again and cargo container vessels. The allies needed to make sure the same thing didn't somehow happen to them during the initial stages of Crimson Tide.

Once she got home that evening, she'd give them the news. In the meantime, she went to work finding a suitable place where they could set up with a telephoto lens and scope the port out.

Atour Hotel

Binhai New Area

After finding a good spot to take photos of the port without getting caught, Carson returned to the hotel. During his six-hour birding and architecture outing around the nearby area and the various parks along the Haihe River down to the Taku Forts to the locks that connected the Bohai Sea to the Haihe River, he had taken quite a number of photos that just happened to have images of the cranes and the surrounding wharves and piers. Long gone were the days when this once-mighty port facility was bustling with commercial shipping and tankers. Now it was practically a ghost town—empty with the exception of some navy coastal patrol boats.

The lack of activity at the port made him question why they had been tasked with scoping the place out so thoroughly. It looked like aerial or special reconnaissance could likely have done the job without the risk. Regardless, for days now, he had surreptitiously checked the wharf and pier docking walls while also looking for any panels near the surface of the cranes or along the sidewalls. If he found any, then he would assess if it was possible to verify if explosives had been placed inside, and if he couldn't verify it, then he'd annotate and move on.

Walking into the hotel room, Carson dropped the bag he'd been carrying all day and plopped on the edge of the bed.

“Hey, old man,” Nat teased quietly. “Imagine if we hadn't been able to intercept that message to Peng's parents. We'd have been trapped in that apartment with a toddler for months by now.”

Carson laughed as he twisted his back, stretching it before answering. “Imagine that—I would have paid money to see you babysit.”

Nat feigned offense. “What? I don’t seem like the caring type?” she shot back.

“Well, we could have pretended to be an old married couple...complete with intruding in-laws. We would have fit right in,” Carson joked lightheartedly.

Carson was at least fifteen to twenty years older than Natalie, but in that moment, she shot him some “bedroom eyes.” “It could have been fun, you know, playing house together.”

Carson was taken aback, unsure how to respond to the flirtation from his much younger counterpart. “Yes, well, erm...how is your side project going?” he asked.

Natalie sighed slightly at his “stick in the mud” response, but they did need to finish their tasks and get out of there. She had been working on identifying where armored vehicles were positioned around the port or the nearby facility. In addition, she had to count the number of guards, military soldiers, and police in the area.

She was supposed to note what the soldiers and armed police were armed with. Depending on the kinds of weapons they carried, the analyst could make an educated guess as to the kinds of soldiers and police that were likely defending the port. If they saw police or people in military fatigues carrying the Type 79 submachine gun, then these were most certainly members of the People’s Armed Police or the Public Security Police, both paramilitary law enforcement units. Likewise, if

they saw soldiers carrying the older-looking Type 81 assault rifle, a somewhat modernized version of the venerable AK-47, then these soldiers would be reservists or members of other paramilitary police units. Knowing the kind and quality of soldiers defending the port was a critical piece of intelligence that would greatly aid in its capture.

“Well, I’m done with my initial counts,” Nat explained. “Oh, and Alex was right. It would appear all these soldiers are likely reservists or People’s Militia. The cops are probably from one of the armed police units given the kinds of weapons I’ve seen them carrying.”

“Huh. Really? You were able to tell all of that by the weapon they carried?” Carson seemed genuinely impressed.

Nat tilted her head to the side as she responded. “You do remember I’m from ISA, right?”

Grinning at her response, Carson shrugged his shoulders like he was playing dumb.

“Whatever, old man. Why don’t you come here and help me finish creating an overview map like Alex requested? Since this is our last night at this swanky hotel, I think we should treat ourselves to a nice meal at the hotel restaurant. We’ve already established the guards rotate on and off duty every four hours. Once we verify the 7 p.m. rotation, that gives us at least three and a half hours to enjoy a nice meal on the company dime,” she playfully suggested, flirting with her eyes the entire time.

Carson felt his cheeks reddening as she spoke. He made his way to the mini bar, grabbing a pair of beers before

placing them on the table between them. “So long as we’re back in the room before the 11 p.m. changeover, I’m game.”

He saw her nod in agreement before grabbing the beer and getting back to work. That was when he saw a message from Alex—they needed to go see Peng’s parents, ASAP.

Great, what could have gone wrong now? he thought at first. Or maybe this was it, and the allies were finally coming.

When he shared the message with Nat, he saw her expression change. She seemed disappointed—like maybe she had pieced together that their mission might be finally ending.

One thing was for certain—the longer this mission lasted, the more Carson found himself being drawn to her. Natalie was an incredible woman. Intellectually brilliant, witty, kind of a nerd in some areas like him, and ruthless in her job. She was an operator for sure, undeniably deadly with the skills to kill a person in more ways than he could count—but she was also gentle, feminine, incredibly fit, and a genuinely nice person.

With more than two decades in the espionage world, Carson knew being a spy meant the pool of women he could pursue a potential relationship with was extremely small, and fraught with risk. He had made a mistake once, becoming romantically entangled with one of his partners. It had become messy when it had fallen apart—and painful.

Still...playing house with Nat would have been fun, he thought. *Even if it only lasted until this war is over.*

Chapter Thirty

A Silver Platter

Guardian Base Complex

Taoyuan International Airport

Dayuan District, Taiwan

“Smith, the guards called,” Captain Latter announced as he hung the phone up. “Prisoner MSS-A0054 is in holding. They’ll move her to an interrogation room when you’re ready for her.”

“Thanks, Cap’n,” Smith replied.

“Today is the big day, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is,” Smith confirmed with a nod. “I’ve got it all taken care of. Just need to bring the laptop with me and log in.” Smith was happy to finally move things forward with Dr. Peng Liyuan. It had been months since his partner, Carson, had infiltrated China.

“Sounds good, Smith. We’ve got a *ton* of collection requirements,” the young captain said, his voice bordering on griping. “The brass is hoping now that we have her family recovered, she’ll finally stop giving us the runaround.”

Smith grunted in reply.

Patience, young pup, he thought.

Big Army had been disappointed in the deal he and Carson had struck with Peng when she wouldn’t talk until the

Agency had recovered her parents and daughter in exchange for her cooperation.

Smith grabbed his notebook, laptop, and pen as he made for the door. “Keep the faith, my young Padawan. Today is the day we get the goods. Just sit back and watch the master show you how it’s done.”

“Haha. That’s funny, coming from a guy whose only name is Smith.”

They both laughed as he exited the building, walking briskly.

As Smith approached the control point before entering Camp Justice, he showed his badge, letting the guards scan the QR code before they allowed him in. Entering the prison camp, he walked toward the administrative building where the interrogation rooms were.

He hadn’t visited the camp too often since the Agency had relocated its operations to Camp Guardian, the administrative camp for the Guardian Base Complex. The entire place had sprung up almost overnight, swelling into a massive conglomeration of three US forward operating bases and four allied bases from the NATO South Task Force. Now that the 3rd, 4th, and 5th Marine Divisions had set up shop at the GBC along with twenty-six thousand NATO allies, the giant base had swelled to more than ninety thousand allied forces.

After Smith had entered the building and checked in with the operations center, it was time to prepare for an interview that he knew would be tough. Once he entered the assigned room, he started preparing the space how he wanted

it. A few moments later, the analyst supporting him and Carson, Allie Dole, walked into the room, joining him as she prepared to help him extract the information they were after.

“Everything ready on your end?” Smith asked, his laptop coming online.

“I think so,” Allie replied with a nod. “When you log in to TerraGuard Pro, you’ll see I created sticky points for you on those map locations you wanted me to highlight for this meeting. I also color-coded them in priority orders, with red as the top priority and blue as the lowest priority.”

“Thanks,” Smith replied.

“It would have been nice if she’d been more cooperative while Carson was working to secure her family,” Allie complained. “This whole thing had better not be a wild goose chase.”

“No disagreements from me,” said Smith. “But you and I both know she wouldn’t talk, and you heard what Carson said. Go easy on her until we have her family.”

Smith was also a bit annoyed. He had argued against the softer approach with Peng. His rationale was that the sooner they got the exact location and specs on this underground facility, the sooner they could end the war.

Allie shook her head as she placed her notepad on the table. “I wonder how he feels about that decision now. They’ve been marooned behind enemy lines far longer than we thought.”

Smith shrugged, typing on the laptop as he brought up a link connecting him to Carson. He had no idea how Carson

had found an internet link that led out of China, but he wouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth either. Allie had mentioned something about MI6, but Smith was happy to be a field operative and not IT in moments like this. He understood people—computers and apps—not so much.

After he connected to a secured video chat room, the image of Carson and his partner for the mission, Major Natalie Chen, appeared.

“Smith, can you hear us?” Carson asked, testing the audio before continuing.

“Yeah, I hear you. Looking rough, bro. You guys eating all right?” Smith asked, noticing Carson and Nat's weight loss.

“We're getting by. It could always be worse,” Carson responded. “Smith, if Peng doesn't play ball after speaking with her parents—then we're going with your plan from earlier. I don't know why there was a delay to the original plan that would lead to us being recovered, but whatever the delay was, it appears to be over since we've been told to recover the parents and hunker down. If Peng doesn't talk, though, you have to go hard on her and get that intel, buddy.”

Smith felt guilty as he caught himself smiling as he listened to his friends' woes. However, this was also one of those *I told you so* moments where he wanted to poke fun at his partner's expense. He'd been against the idea of Carson infiltrating China to recover Peng's parents. Instead, he bit his tongue.

“A lot has been happening in your absence, Carson. Have you heard anything about General Song Fu or the Battle

of Shenyang?”

Carson and Nat exchanged looks, then shook their heads, indicating they hadn't.

Smith sighed. *Unbelievable*, he thought.

He shared the news of General Song's capture and the allied offensive known as Operation Iron Tempest that had led to the capture of Shenyang following the Dengta Line's collapse. By the time he finished bringing them up to speed, more than ten minutes had passed, and their prisoner was still in holding, waiting for them. Carson said he'd get the family set up while Smith brought Peng. It was time to get her talking.

When Smith and Allie heard the knock at the door, Smith asked, “You ready for this, Allie?”

She grunted comically at him. “Let's see if she'll hold up her end of the deal or if we have to go medieval on her.”

It's time to talk, Buttercup, thought Smith. *No more excuses*. It was time to bury this AI and end this war.

What am I doing here? Dr. Peng Liyuan asked herself for the twentieth time that hour.

Time continued to move at the speed of paint drying on a wall. When the allies had captured her, she'd cut a deal—her freedom and that of her family in exchange for the location of the server housing Jade Dragon. It was a straightforward deal: her knowledge and cooperation in exchange for a chance to

live a normal life, to not be constantly subjected to the ever-present eye of the AI she had helped create.

The man she knew as Smith had tried to question her several times after that. He hadn't resorted to torture when she'd failed to cooperate, and she kept reminding him that she'd reveal everything once her family was safe. Eventually, he'd stopped trying.

At first, that had been a relief. Then days had turned into weeks, and weeks had turned into months, or that was how it had felt to her. Liyuan had lost track of how long she'd been held in custody. She'd wondered if maybe they had found the information without her. If that were the case, it would help to explain why Smith had stopped speaking to her.

She wasn't sure how long she'd stayed in the small, isolated cell she'd learned was part of a larger underground structure. She could have spent weeks there for all she knew. Then one day, she'd been transferred. When the truck stopped at the newly constructed facility, which was situated near an airport, she saw the sun for the first time in months. As she stood in line, waiting to be processed into whatever this detention facility was, she had closed her eyes and pointed her face toward the sun, soaking rays up as she did.

Later that day, after American soldiers had processed her into the new facility, she'd been informed that as an officer, a colonel, she was ineligible for consideration in a prisoner swap with the PLA. She had mentioned she had been held by the American CIA and had a separate deal with them. There was a bit of confusion for a few hours before she was

pulled aside and placed into a separation housing unit, or SHU, as it was called.

As Liyuan was being led to the SHU in a different part of the sprawling prison camp, the military police soldier that processed her into the camp said, “You must be important.”

She was taken aback. “Why do you say that?” she asked.

“Of all the prisoners I’ve processed over the years, your record is the first and only time I’ve been ordered to delete it and forget that you were ever here. Once I hand you off to the next facility—you won’t exist.”

What does that mean? she had wondered. Her record removal could have been done to shield her from Jade Dragon discovering her capture, but the last part of his statement made her uneasy.

Now nineteen days into her stay in the SHU, Liyuan felt like she was beginning to lose her mind. She was isolated and alone, trapped in her cell except for fifty minutes daily in a solitary six-by-three-meter recreational area. She’d never felt more abandoned in her life. She got to a point that she longed to speak to Smith, to answer his questions—just to be around another human.

Bam, bam, bam.

Liyuan was pulled out of her spiral of depressing thoughts. She looked up at the door to find a guard standing there. “You’ve been summoned for questioning,” he announced.

Her wish had come true. Now she'd have to make the most of it.

Shuffling into the interview room, Liyuan saw Smith standing with another woman she hadn't seen before. "Good morning, Liyuan. It's been a little while since we last spoke," Smith said, motioning for her to sit.

As she sat in the chair, Liyuan waited to see what would happen next. Then Smith started the conversation, and the negotiations began.

Smith settled into the cold metal chair across from Dr. Peng Liyuan. He studied her delicate features, noting the changes since the last time they had spoken. She had dark circles ringing the bloodshot eyes staring at him. When he gazed into those eyes, he saw a familiar look—a look he'd seen in the eyes of many of those who'd sat opposite him—hopelessness. It came from the knowledge that no matter what a person tried, the situation was beyond their ability to control or improve.

Smith leaned forward, closing the distance between them. "You look like hell, Liyuan. You doing OK?"

"Am I doing OK?" Liyuan scoffed. "Are you kidding me? I don't even know how long it's been since we last spoke. Also, I don't understand what I have done to deserve being locked away in isolation—alone and unable to even talk with someone for God knows how long it's been."

Yeah, the SHU broke her, thought Smith with satisfaction. Now he could see if she was ready to play ball or if they'd have to ratchet it up a notch.

“Please, Liyuan—it’s been for your own good that we kept you isolated from the other prisoners. Remember the details of our deal?” he asked. Her eyes searched his as he watched her try to recall them. “You would tell us the precise location of the servers and core components that constituted the AI, Jade Dragon, in exchange for your own freedom and that of your parents and daughter. Remember?”

She nodded, not saying anything, so he continued. “Good. *That’s* why you’ve been kept in isolation. We can’t risk Jade Dragon discovering you’re still alive and in custody. With the surrender of PLA Forces in Taiwan, the government of the Republic of China has returned to the island. The Marines are now beginning to help facilitate some prisoner swaps with the PLA leaders across the straits. They’re assisting the ROC government in retrieving their citizens who had been taken prisoner after the PLA took control of the island. What if one of those people we trade with the PLA happens to be someone who recognizes you?”

Liyuan seemed to get it now. She nodded slowly. Then tears began to stream down her cheeks. “My family...are they safe?” she stammered. “What can you tell me about them?”

“Liyuan, do you remember my colleague, Carson?” Smith asked, waiting for an acknowledgment. When she nodded, Smith reached for his laptop and started typing.

A few moments later, he saw Carson seated beside Liyuan’s parents and daughter. He was using the chat box next

to the video. Smith warned Carson that he was about to allow Liyuan to see him and her parents.

Lifting his eyes above the monitor, Smith said, “Liyuan, your family is safe. They’re still in China, but Carson and another operative are now in contact with them. We can’t share the plan to extract them or give you an exact date when it will happen for security reasons. We’ve gone to great lengths to honor our end of the deal—now it’s time for you to honor your end of the deal. Are we clear?”

She nodded but seemed unconvinced that they had succeeded in finding them.

“OK, then after I let you speak with your family, you will agree to provide us the location for Jade Dragon and start answering more of our quest—”

“Yes, yes, I agree. Whatever you want,” interrupted Liyuan as she pleaded with him, tears streaming down her cheeks. “I will tell you everything I know. Just let me see my daughter—my family...please, Smith...I beg you—let me see them, and I will tell you everything you want to know.”

Smith felt almost guilty at the emotional outburst. He gave a slight nod of acknowledgment before turning the laptop around so she could see the monitor.

The moment Liyuan’s eyes saw Carson seated casually in a modest apartment, she gasped. Her hands covered her mouth as tears of pain now turned to joy at the sight of her daughter, giggling softly as she bobbed up and down on the knee of Carson as he played with the toddler.

Smith turned to his analyst. Allie was using a Kleenex to dab at a tear before it had a chance to ruin her makeup. She shrugged at his disapproving look; the moment's emotions affected even her. Smith leaned toward her. "The app is translating this, right?" he whispered.

Allie glanced at her screen before turning her laptop enough for him to see words in English appearing on the MS Word document she'd set up earlier.

How screwed up is this? thought Smith. *We're using an AI-powered language translation-dictation app while we plot to destroy another AI that's gone rogue...* The irony of what they were doing wasn't lost on him.

Smith wasn't as fluent in Mandarin as Carson. But he could hear Liyuan speaking to her daughter, trying to no avail to gain the attention of the little toddler. Then Carson said loudly. "Hey, little bear. Look up. There's your mama waving to you."

"Mama!" squealed the little girl in delight. The toddler now pointed excitedly at the screen.

Smith continued to watch Liyuan, tears continuing as she spoke. He remained silent as he allowed the conversation to continue. He granted her five minutes before the call would have to end. He might have been inclined to let her speak longer, but given that they were still operating behind enemy lines, he felt a video call like this was already pushing the envelope further than what he thought was safe. Allie and the IT guys had assured him it was fine, and although his gut told him otherwise, he'd long learned to trust the tech nerds more when it came to anything computer-related.

When it was time to bring the call to an end, goodbyes were said and assurances made. Then the room went silent as the call ended. Smith allowed the silence to grow, wanting the poignant moment of this family reunion to sink in. He wanted to remind Liyuan of what was at stake, what she was fighting for, and what was hanging in the balance should she decide not to answer his questions.

“I’m glad you could speak to your family—your daughter,” he finally said as Liyuan wiped the last of her tears away. “It’s tough serving one’s nation. The sacrifices we make: the holidays we miss, those precious moments in our children’s lives like losing their first tooth, taking their first steps, or taking them to their first day of school. We sacrifice so much for our families, the country we serve, and the people we swore to protect—”

“And the country I now have to betray—the people I now abandon,” Liyuan interrupted, sounding melancholy as the words drifted off her tongue.

“Yes, you could look at it that way. You could also tell yourself and anyone who asks—it wasn’t you who abandoned the people of China, who failed to serve and protect them. You took bold action against this rogue AI, this beautiful gift that Dan Ma had created for the good of humanity and that President Yao then corrupted. It’s been transformed from the gift it was meant to be into a weapon of war, threatening the very survival of humanity,” Smith explained, painting an alternative perspective of her situation—a path of redemption, should she take it.

Liyuan stared at Smith. The silence stretched between them as he saw his planted words take root. Then something seemed to click in her head. That the previous expression of hopelessness was gone from her countenance—replaced with a look of opportunity.

“I don’t think I had thought about how my country had drifted under the control of this AI into what it has become. In the past, we had always been ruled by one autocrat or another, but even these autocrats, as awful as they were, still did some good things for the people they ruled. Jade Dragon, however, has come to view us as nothing but ones and zeros. It doesn’t seem to understand the value of life, how precious it is, and how, once it is lost, it cannot be replaced or rebuilt. It is gone forever,” lamented Liyuan.

“It wasn’t always like this, Smith,” she explained. “Before Dan went missing, he had been working on a morality code—a way of trying to hardwire into the machine’s operating system and core rules that human life has value. It wasn’t so much a safeguard to disable its ability to kill—it was more of an ability to rationalize why it was being asked to kill. Then it would determine if this killing would be in the best interest of the people it was supposed to serve or in the interests of one man.”

“Huh, sounds like a complicated challenge to code,” Smith challenged.

“Yes, it was,” Liyuan acknowledged. “Dan had been working on it for years. When he first created Jade Dragon, he never wanted it to turn into what it has. He never wanted to see our nation conquer those around us, or see his creation

turned into the ultimate military general. His AI wasn't supposed to wage war on this world or to create weapons once thought to be stories from a dystopian science fiction novel. It's Dr. Xi and President Yao who have corrupted what Dan created. Their never-ending quest for power led them to twist Jade Dragon into becoming what it is today.

“One of the scarier capabilities of our AI is its ability to almost hack into people's brains, creating a series of narratives that, over some time, convinces someone to accept whatever it is the AI is trying to get them to do or believe. If Jade Dragon, over time, can convince President Yao to give it autonomous control of the military, placing the generals under its command—including our nation's strategic weapons—God help us. There's no knowing what it might do next.”

Smith breathed in deeply, nodding slowly at the gravity of what she had just shared. She had painted the worst-case scenario—Jade Dragon with access to hundreds of nuclear-tipped ICBMs and a perception of humans as ones and zeros in a line of code that could be deleted or rewritten at will.

Turning to Allie, Smith said, “All right, we're ready to begin. Let's go ahead and bring up TerraGuard Pro so Liyuan can show us where the servers running Jade Dragon are located.”

With Allie working on getting the maps ready, Smith turned back to Liyuan. “I'm glad we share the same perspective in this fight against this AI. As I am sure you'll agree, time is not on our side. We must move swiftly and decisively before Jade Dragon can release any further wonder weapons on the allies that might alter the war's course.

“In order for us to destroy the lab and server facility where you have said the AI is being housed. I will need you to show us the exact location of the Joint Battle Command Center. From there, we could use your help in identifying the specific locations of entrances you have taken to gain entry into the facility and any other entrances, service or construction entrances, or escape passages you know of, have seen, or have heard people speak of. Once we have gone over the that information to the best of your knowledge, then we will begin to develop a map or layout of the underground facility. I know my questions may sound trivial or redundant at times. I assure; however, they are necessary for us to figure out exactly where and how to hit this facility correctly so we can destroy it.”

“I understand, Smith, and I am ready to tell you what I know,” Liyuan replied.

Smith smiled at the eagerness in her voice. “Excellent. We have a lot of work ahead of us. Let’s get started then and bring an end to this terrible machine.”

Four Hours Later

Liyuan shuffled back to her stark cell, mind swirling.

Did I do the right thing, revealing Jade Dragon’s secrets? she wondered.

She sank onto the cot, head in her hands. Everything had happened so fast. Smith sprang her family’s safety on her

like a trap, dismantling her defenses bit by bit until she cracked.

What choice did I have?

Me's cherubic face still lingered in her mind's eye. As a mother, Liyuan's duty was to protect her child above all else, even if it meant betraying her country.

But did I really betray China? she asked herself. Or simply protect it from the runaway AI slowly tightening its grip on power?

She shivered, imagining Jade Dragon's reaction when it learned of her betrayal. The AI would retaliate swiftly, ruthlessly. Nowhere within China's bounds would ever be safe for her or her family again so long as that AI was still functional.

That evening, when the guards brought her dinner, something changed. Previously, her food would have been slipped through a sliding panel on the floor, containing a typical prison plate with dividers for protein, a vegetable, and a carbohydrate. This time, the guards came into her cell, setting up a small table with a folding chair, a tablecloth, and a proper meal.

"This is the same food we serve in the main line at our dining facility," explained one of her captors.

It was the first time since Liyuan had been captured that she'd eaten a meal and felt full. When she finished eating, she lay down and fell into a deep sleep.

Bang, bang, bang!

Liyuan wasn't sure how long she'd been asleep, but the jarring pounding against her door had done its job, startling her from sleep and letting her know she'd been summoned for more questions.

Liyuan stood to her feet and followed the guard back to the interrogation room.

Smith sat waiting, an inscrutable expression on his gaunt face. Liyuan braced herself as she settled into the chair across from him.

“Did you enjoy your dinner?” he asked with a smile.

She nodded.

“I spoke with the guard force,” Smith explained. “From here on out, you'll eat the same food as they do. Your time of eating prison food is over. I'll do what I can to improve your stay until we can relocate to another American facility away from the war. For now, though, I have plenty of questions I need answers to.”

Liyuan bowed her head slightly to let him know she was ready.

“Let's continue where we left off,” Smith began before diving into his questions. “You gave us Jade Dragon's location under Dashan Mountain. Now we need specifics—entry points, power sources, security. Help us map the facility to better understand its structural weaknesses that we can look to exploit when we move to shut it down.”

A caustic retort swirled in Liyuan's thoughts, but she suppressed it. She had already sacrificed her country's most closely held secret. Why resist further?

Over the next hour, haltingly at first but with growing resignation, she walked Smith in detail through the sprawling underground complex, sketching diagrams on his tablet to mark critical areas.

But when he began probing for information beyond the Dashan facility, seeking details on Jade Dragon's development labs and production centers, Liyuan grew reluctant, fearing she had already revealed too much.

Smith saw her hesitation to answer his question. Instead of trying to push the issue, he tried a different approach. "Liyuan, I can appreciate your sense of duty. I can understand why you wouldn't want to disclose more details about these wonder weapons Jade Dragon has produced. So let me ask you this: 'Do you want this war to continue, for more of your countrymen to die needlessly?'"

"No, of course I don't," Liyuan shot back. "It's just... I've already betrayed my country by giving you the details and location of the Joint Battle Command Center—Jade Dragon's server room. I don't want to say more than I already have.," she said, trying to rationalize her hesitation.

Smith nodded, then looked her in the eyes. "Liyuan, what difference does it make if you tell me what you know about these weapons? You've already given us the location of this bunker facility. So rather than forcing me to use other means to obtain your cooperation, why not just make things easier on yourself and me? I don't want to use my other tools of this trade, but if I can save our soldiers' lives and end this

war sooner, I won't hesitate to unleash the monster within me to get what I need. Don't make me do that, Liyuan. Please, just answer the questions.

“When the soldiers captured you, they reported encountering several of these bipedal humanoid-looking machines. They were wearing combat vests with ammunition rigs and the same QBZ-191s we've seen your Special Forces use. Oh, and for your information, we have encountered some of these humanoid robots in the field already. I have detailed accounts of what it was like to battle against them. I have a list of technical questions and details I would like to ask you about these—Terracotta Warriors, I think you call them. The Marines have a name as well—terminators.

“Putting the names aside, let's talk specifics about these bipedal machines you and your scientists have developed. Let's start with their battery units. How long can one of these things last in a fight before it needs to recharge?” asked Smith.

He gave her a moment to contemplate the question. Smith watched as Liyuan squirmed in her seat, appearing to weigh his request more than he thought she should. He'd told her they had already fought these machines before. It wasn't like they were a secret any longer. Then the expression on her face changed, and she began to answer his question in great detail.

For the next three hours, Smith and Allie quizzed Liyuan, asking dozens of questions and then more questions within a question as they continued to draw more information from her about these new and terrifying robots. They learned

about the plan to use mobile battery trucks near the front lines, so when the robots' batteries got down to a certain level, they would look for the nearest battery truck and head towards one to recharge and rearm. She also shared the difficulties the Terracottas had with the dexterity in their fingers—the very reason why she had been in Taiwan in the first place. They also learned that, unfortunately, the Terracottas had been specifically reinforced to withstand energy-based attacks against their critical systems, like the allies' antidrone microwave-based weapons.

When Smith pressed for weaknesses the allies could exploit during a battle, Liyuan provided a couple of possible angles of attack they could take, although she wasn't sure if some of these weaknesses might have already been addressed during the time she had been in detention. One vulnerability Liyuan mentioned was a need to remain connected to the mesh network across much of the country, known as DragonNet or DNet.

“The DNet system operates on a series of proprietary channels within the 600 MHz to 2 GHz range that use advanced modulation techniques to ensure low latency and high data rates. This is part of the Huawei digital infrastructure grid that has been built into all our cities and along our highways and expressways. Since these frequencies have been designated globally to be used within the civilian infrastructure, it is widely believed they would be overlooked or go unnoticed by the Allies.”

Smith held a hand up as he interjected. “OK, Liyuan, if the Terracottas operate on this DNet you mentioned, then I have a question about the validity of that. A little while back, a

Marine unit encountered a trio of these machines in an area of Taiwan that had no infrastructure. How is it that these machines seemed to operate outside control of this DNet?”

Liyuan scrunched up her eyebrows and her eyes looked off in the distance like she was searching her mind for an answer. “Huh, you know what—I think I know how they did it,” she responded.

“All right. Explain; we’re all ears,” Smith replied as he shared a glance with Allie.

“Um, sure, but mind you, this is just how I *think* my former team made it work. At least this is how *I* would have made it work. You see, these machines run a pretty advanced AI software. First, I would have had a map of the entire area loaded into their software. Next, I would have identified the area I want them to guard or systematically clear. I’d give them a simple set of orders that if their sensors detect any humans entering or passing through their AO, they would be directed to engage and eliminate them using the weapons available to them.

“The Terracottas would then move to the location and deploy a series of tiny listening devices along the perimeter of their assigned area—essentially creating a digital fence. With the fence operating in sentry mode, the Terracottas would look for a non-descript location to power themselves down and go into sentry mode and wait. In the situation you described, it sounds like your Marines crossed paths with one of those listening devices. It likely sent an alert to the Terracotta in charge of the trio, activating it. Once it was alerted to the intruders, it would then activate its two other partners. It

would then take a moment to assess the situation and determine the size and type of threat or threats that had moved into the area. Armed with that information, it would move to eliminate the intruders,” Liyuan finished explaining.

Smith and Allie exchanged glances. Smith was glad they hadn’t encountered these killing machines themselves. They sounded like real nightmares.

Smith leaned in as he asked. “Let me ask you about a different scenario. Suppose the AI was controlling one or even a few hundred of these Terracottas via that DNet system you mentioned. If we destroyed the AI, or if the DNet connection was severed, would they suddenly stop working? Or would they have some sort of preset orders like that other scenario you walked us through?”

Liyuan snickered, mocking his scenario as a real possibility.

“Humor me,” Smith said.

Liyuan pulled herself back into serious mode after a moment. “Without connectivity, the Terracottas could still fight in small, localized groups, but it would largely depend on what kind of orders they had been given prior to losing connectivity. The machines’ built-in secured Bluetooth signal is limited to roughly five hundred to one thousand meters in range. I suppose it could be *possible* to jam the Bluetooth signals or the DNet...but you’d end up jamming yourselves in the process.”

Satisfied for the moment with her answer, Smith questioned her on how many of these Terracottas they had built or how many they could build. Liyuan seemed to draw a

blank. He pressed her several times on the issue, but she insisted that her team's job was the software application for the machines, not the production side. At best, she was aware of maybe fifteen hundred Terracottas built, but she stressed that it could be much more by now.

Once Allie and Smith had gone through the litany of technical questions regarding the Terracottas, the discussion shifted to the autonomous fighter craft, Shadow Dragons and Dark Dragons. When Smith mentioned the latter, Liyuan appeared caught off guard.

“Liyuan, when I mentioned the Dark Dragon combat drones, you seemed to tense up. Why is that?” pressed Smith after watching her react. “What about this drone evokes such an immediate reaction from you?”

Liyuan momentarily turned her head toward an empty wall before turning back to look at Allie and Smith. “Are you asking because you have heard about or encountered them?”

Smith eyed her briefly before sharing that the allies had encountered small numbers of the Dark Dragons. A handful had appeared around Taiwan, the East China Sea, Inner Mongolia, and northern China.

Liyuan folded her hands on the table as she leaned forward toward Smith. “I want to tell you something, but before I do, I want you to understand that I was not involved in every project Jade Dragon has been pursuing. I can share my limited information, but you will have to believe me when I say my knowledge of many of these projects is a mile wide but only inches deep.”

“I understand, Liyuan. That’s why we have analysts. They can cross-check your information against the information provided by other sources or means of collection. Please, continue,” Smith urged her to speak.

“Dan and I were secretly dating for several years before the war broke out,” Liyuan began. “One day, when it was just the two of us, he confided in me about something Dr. Xi had discussed with Jade Dragon and several Air Force and Strategic Rocket Forces military officers. The only reason Dan had found out about what was going on was because JD—”

“JD—Jade Dragon?” Smith interrupted.

Liyuan’s cheeks flushed. She nodded before she continued, “Sorry about that—yes, we call the AI JD for short. It’s easier. As I was saying, the only reason Dan knew about any of this was that JD had asked him some questions about Dr. Xi and these military officers and about the kinds of weapons programs they were asking him to design and create.

“One project became the Terracottas you now see. Another project was called Sea Dragon; I do not know much about this project or how it works. It involves some sort of water vehicle, but I couldn’t tell you whether it’s a surface or subsurface vehicle. Then there was an unmanned aerial vehicle they used to conduct highly classified tests. Dan told me JD had been asked to create the backbone of a new Air Force platform that would dominate the skies. He told me it was called Dark Dragon—an autonomous strike fighter, or ASF for short. It would become the backbone of the Chinese Air Force, but Dan had also discovered that this aircraft was designed to be used by JD.

“The more Dan worked on improving JD’s software, his ability to absorb data and find ways to incorporate it into its higher level thinking, the more he became concerned that one day, JD might be asked to wage war with his autonomous machines, sparing the leadership from having to make the unpopular decision of ordering the nation’s youth to battle. In Dan’s mind, this was a dangerous line to cross—”

“How so? What was he concerned about?” Smith interrupted again. He was finding this intellectual conversation fascinating but knew he’d have to create an intel report on what they discussed, so he wanted to ensure he fully understood everything.

“Dan’s biggest concern, Smith, was that the more automated warfare became, the more war resembled a computer game, and the greater the likelihood of societal extinction. Dan was more focused on the good that AI could provide mankind. He was also concerned by its ability to kill effortlessly and not think about it. It was a machine, after all.

“I guess what I’m trying to say with all of this is that Dan said JD had been instructed to create a waterborne combat vehicle that could work in tandem with a surface fleet to hunt and stalk the West’s underwater and surface combatants. The Terracottas were meant to replace the bulk of our soldiers and the Dark Dragons, the future fighter aircraft. As you can see, JD has created the weapons platforms necessary to take over the warfighting from the people of China. The only question now is how far along is JD in assembling this force, and does he have enough on hand to turn the tide of war back in his favor?”

The room fell silent as they thought about all she had just shared with them.

Smith turned to Allie. “I don’t know about you, but I think this is a good place to stop. We’ve got some material to write up, and I think our guest could use a break.”

As Liyuan left the interrogation room, Allie turned to Smith. “Good job, there. She really corroborated what those other prisoners had told us, plus we learned a few new things. Not bad.”

“Yeah, crazy when you think about what they have created. I mean, this has likely always been how the future of warfare would be fought—but God help us if the ChiComs are able to manufacture enough of these superweapons to turn the tide before we can turn the lights out on that AI.”

She shuddered at the thought.

“Come on, let’s grab some food and clear our heads,” Smith said, trying to reframe their thoughts in a more positive manner. “Then we’ll come back and work on writing this all up so the big-brain people back in Langley can figure it all out.”

Chapter Thirty-One

SEAL Team One/Binhai

Binhai Bay

Mainland China

“Contact front!” Jank heard Senior Chief Del Cummings yell.

He immediately flicked the safety off his weapon and engaged a soldier, dropping him with two rounds to his face. Shifting his aim to a second soldier, who was a split second slower, he squeezed the trigger as the red dot of his EOTech holographic site settled on the man’s head.

Pop.

The round caught the man just below his bottom lip and shattered his jaw, passing through bone and tissue until it blew out the back of his head.

For a long moment, silence hung in the air. Then the night erupted, and Jank realized the plan had gone to hell.

Several Weeks Earlier

Sakura Theater

Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni

Commander “Jank” Jankowski and Senior Chief Cummings sat in a packed auditorium. Airborne and air assault soldiers and Rangers occupied most of the room. It surprised him to see several Tier One operators from JSOC in the room as well. He saw a few faces he’d known since his earliest days on the teams, guys who’d gone on to DEVGRU. Whatever it was the allies were cooking up, it was clear to him that WARCOM wanted to make sure the SEALs were as involved as they could be. They’d ordered him to bring his entire SEAL team together for this op, something they seldom ever did—participate as a team on a single mission. Calling whatever it was they were up to audacious was an understatement.

Jank knew that seizing Binhai wasn’t just important to enable follow-on forces to reinforce their positions. It was imperative if the allies were going to find another path into the heart of China and around the Jiujiang Line. After the bloodletting Eighth Army had gone through to break through the Dentga Line, there was little appetite for a second round. To call back a phrase from World War II, Binhai was the “soft underbelly” of Mainland China—or so the war planners seemed to think.

The briefing by the general was as Jankowski thought it would be, a sort of morale-boosting pump-up-the-troops talk more than anything of sustenance. After the briefing, Jank and Cummings headed to the SEAL team’s nearby operations center to start getting their people ready now that they had all arrived. It had taken some time to pull all of Jank’s platoons to Iwakuni, but now that they were here, it was time to see what the plan was for how they were all going to be used.

As of now, the only thing he knew for certain was that all six of his platoons would be in the operation in one form or another. But knowing his platoons were likely going to be sent into a street fight, he wanted to make sure his platoons that would be in the most direct fighting were stacked with as many veteran SEALs as possible. This meant stripping some platoons of their veterans, to be replaced by less experienced operators, or in some cases, freshly graduated frogmen who had yet to go through their baptism by fire. Needless to say, this wasn't sitting well with the leadership of the troops and platoons this was going to affect. Leadership in X-Ray and Mike Platoons were the most unhappy about it. They had new guys from Coronado, and most hadn't seen combat yet.

“Oy, cut the chatter and stop horsing around. I ain't got all day to go over this with you guys, so listen up!” Jank barked as he looked to rein everyone in.

“Sorry about that, boss. What's the op?” Lieutenant Mikey Geery asked. He'd folded a piece of pizza in half and shoved it in his face, New York style. Some of the crumbs still clung to the side of his mouth as he chewed.

Jank shook his head, sighing before continuing. “All right, boys, this next op—let's just say this is going to be a fight,” he started, then motioned for Cummings to turn the projector on. “It's kind of like a standard visit, board, search, and seizure op. Except this version is going to focus a bit more on the seizure side of things,” he said, making air quotes twice around the word “seizure.”

“Huh. What the hell does that mean?” asked PO1 Cruz with his hand raised.

“Shut up, new guy!” shouted the assembled SEALs in the room, throwing various paper towels, plastic cups, and other detritus at the young pup.

Jank couldn't help himself as he stifled a laugh. Crossing his arms, he nodded to Chief Cummings, who took his cue.

“All right, knock it the hell off!” Cummings shouted.

Walsh, a frogman from Indiana, dropped to all fours and pretended to be a puppy, rubbing against Chief Cummings's leg while making sad noises. Everyone laughed, and this time, Jank couldn't hold it in. He busted out laughing at the childish antics. Chief Cummings just stood there red-faced but grinning.

“OK, OK, boys. Time to get serious now. We have a lot to go over,” Jank said as he loaded the first slide of his briefing. As he did so, a couple of SEALs dragged metal folding chairs across the floor, causing everyone to turn their faces up at the noise. Once they stopped dragging the chairs, Jank started his briefing.

“Gents, I'll be honest. I don't like our part of this op. SEALs work best at the platoon level, and once again, the powers at echelons above our reality seem to think that we should be used as a sledgehammer.”

This elicited groans of disapproval from the men. After a beat, he continued. “This,” Jank said as he advanced a slide to show a large container ship, “is our primary objective. According to intel estimates, a company from the PLA Marines, along with a group of Jiaolong assaulters, is stationed here.” Jank let that hang in the air for a moment.

The Jiaolong assault team was the PLA Navy's version of Spetsnaz, SEALs or Raiders. So far, Jank hadn't tangled with them, but they had a solid reputation as capable operators and weren't to be taken lightly. He then played a video that had been discovered in Taiwan. It showed ChiCom regulars, then Special Forces units like Jiaolong, fighting against the TKs in what looked like a training mission. What he wanted them to see was how fiercely they had fought against the machine, and how even these Special Forces guys had a hard time faring much better than the regular Army soldiers did. It was obvious they had fought earlier versions of the TKs, but it spoke to their fighting spirit and tenacity.

As the video ended, Jank was pleased to see that his men had indeed put their game faces on. Over the next ninety minutes, he detailed the specifics of their mission. He especially made a point of mentioning the UK's Special Boat Service teams and how they would be swimming ahead of Jank's team and clearing any underwater defenses set up in their sector of the bay.

The SBS was made up of some of the finest combat swimmers in the world, and he was glad that his SEALs wouldn't have to handle the underwater defenses as well as take down the ship. Should things go sideways, a reinforced company of Army Rangers would provide quick reaction support for their sector.

"It's critical we take this boat out of action before the main allied attack against the port begins," Jank started to explain when a hand shot up. "What is it, Walsh?"

“Sir, why exactly is this boat so important, and why not just sink it at the dock? Why capture it?” the guy asked.

“Let’s just say it’s complicated. From what they told me about this vessel, aside from barracking some PLA Marines, it also has some pretty sophisticated communications equipment aboard it—comms equipment that the three-letter agency types would like captured intact, hence why we’re not sinking her at the docks,” Jank explained.

He held a hand up to forestall any further questions as he continued. “Listen, gents, we don’t have to like the mission. We certainly don’t have to agree with it. When our orders from on high are given, then we will execute those orders as if God himself gave ’em to us, understood?”

The operators belted out acknowledgments, then started leaving the room to set about prepping for the mission. As the room emptied, Jank held the platoon commanders back for a private, more direct conversation. Senior Chief Cummings did the same with the platoon chiefs in a separate corner of the warehouse and improvised team operations center.

Jank stared at his officers. “Boys, I’m not gonna sugarcoat it. I don’t like this op one bit, but as we all know, we don’t have to like it, we just have to do it. I saw the looks on your faces, and yes, I don’t disagree. It *would* be a whole lot easier if we blew up the whole damn boat with all hands. But apparently, this comms equipment is important enough that someone high above feels it’s worth risking the lives of our entire team to secure it. Oh, and one more thing—tomorrow

morning, a pair of NSA spooks will be joining us for training. They're coming with us as part of our SSE team."

"Ah seriously? Not only does my team have to secure some kind of secret squirrel comms gear, now we have to babysit some wannabe operators from the NSA?" bemoaned Lieutenant Quinton, Jank's Sensitive Site Exploitation Team lead.

Jank shrugged. There wasn't much he could do about it. "I don't make the rules, bro, you know that. If it makes you feel any better, I was told this pair of spooks originates from TF Orange."

"Huh, JSOC, eh? We'll see once they get here if they know their stuff or if they're just going to get in the way," Quinton replied skeptically.

Jank ended their meeting, sending his officers to see to their commands and prepare them for training. It was going to be a long couple of days as they rehearsed the mission until it was time to launch.

This had better be worth it. We're risking the lives of my entire command.

Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni

SEAL Training

Looking at his stopwatch, Jank frowned. They had been practicing boarding the container ship for the better part

of the day and their times hadn't gotten any better. In fact, they had gotten worse. If this plan was going to work, then simultaneity was the key to mission success. According to the design specs of the ship, there were thirty doors leading to the interior of the ship: fifteen on the port and fifteen starboard. That meant that they had to secure the bridge and thirty hatches at the same time or damn near it. If they couldn't do that, those Marines and that Jiaolong detachment below would be trapped below decks, effectively rendering them useless.

After multiple failed rehearsals, it became obvious to Jank their current plan wasn't going to work. Securing the bridge along with thirty separate hatches simultaneously, spread across the massive vessel, was proving to be impossible. Try as they would, they couldn't guarantee a guard or attentive Marine wouldn't detect them. Jank knew the moment the first shots were fired, the gig would be up and the SEALs would be discovered.

If those ChiCom Marines started exiting any of these thirty hatches before they could seal the place up, then it wouldn't be long before they spread out amongst the containers on the deck and a deadly cat-and-mouse game would ensue. The labyrinth of containers on the deck was a double-edged sword. While it provided cover and concealment while they climbed aboard, it would also provide the enemy a chance to split his force and sow some chaos long enough for more help to arrive.

Jank shook his head in frustration as he saw this pending disaster play out in his head. *We need to make a change...*

He signaled to his senior chiefs and officers for an impromptu pow-wow. “This isn’t going to work. It’s too complicated. We need to revise the plan to something that can,” he explained. “Forget trying to secure every hatch at once—it’s placing too many operators on the deck at once before we secure it. They’ll pick us apart.”

“OK, boss, wha’cha thinking?” asked one of the platoon commanders.

“Here’s what I’m thinking. Instead of trying to secure the hatches, we focus our efforts on taking the bridge and cutting their comms to the decks below and the guard force. While that’s happening, we have teams move to the hatches we don’t want to cover and weld ’em shut. This doesn’t have to be a professional job, just enough to seal the hinges. This will let us focus our efforts on a few hatches we know we can easily handle. Up top on the high ground, we get our snipers set up in overwatch. Then we keep a couple of teams mobile in case we need to rush any attackers attempting to board from ashore. Thoughts?”

The junior officers proposed mining the welded hatches just in case the Marines found a way to get ’em open. This way if a hatch was breached, a claymore going off should give ’em enough time to react to the breach. Jank liked the idea, although it was risky. They wanted to minimize the number of explosions aboard the vessel. The last thing they needed was a fire starting. After discussing the plan further, they agreed on a two-phase approach.

“Then it’s settled. First, we take the bridge, then quickly and quietly disable their comms and signal for the

others to join,” Jank summarized as he explained phase one. “Once the comms are down, then we rappel two platoons directly to the main deck, establishing blocking positions in front of the hatches we left unsealed with snipers on overwatch. With the Marines trapped below decks, we’ll attempt to convince them to surrender while our SSE team works with our spooks to unass the comms equipment they’ve identified as high value. Once that gear is mobile, I want a platoon to escort ’em off and find us a safe house to hold up until the calvary arrives. If those Marines below decks haven’t surrendered by the time that gear is off the boat, then we seal the doors and sink the boat with ’em inside.”

It wasn’t without risks, but concentrating their manpower gave the SEALs the best chance to seize control of the vessel. Jank was hoping the revised plan would avoid unnecessary bloodshed on either side. This operation would test their skills and, more importantly, their ability to adapt and overcome to accomplish the mission.

“OK, boss, we got it. What’s going to be our insertion method for this history-making operation?” quizzed Lieutenant Quinton.

Smiling at the question, Jank pointed behind them. “Boats are out. Even if the SBS gets the obstacles and mines out of the way, we’d still get spotted as we near the port.”

“Agreed, boss. We going frogman?” replied Chief Cummings, massaging the stubble on his beard as a smile began to form.

Jank nodded. “Yup. We’re doing this the old-fashioned way.”

With the revised plan now settled, Jank had the platoons break for an early dinner, then reset to walk through the new plan and run them through it twice that evening before breaking till morning. Until the warning order came, he was going to drill them till they knew the plan inside and out.

March 18, 2028

Binhai Bay

Mainland China

Jank finned through the murky black waters of the bay, his rebreather providing warm, dry breaths. Sixty-two other sets of fins kicked silently around him as his SEAL platoon approached their target below the surface. They were nearly invisible, wearing black wetsuits and swimming at a depth that avoided the moonlight above. Jank checked his dive computer: depth twenty meters, distance four hundred meters to contact. The SEALs peeled away from him in pairs, fanning out to make their approach to the ship. At two hundred meters, Jank inflated his BC for neutral buoyancy, hovering motionless, the vast hull of the ship before him. He reached for the Sig Sauer M11, taking a moment to attach the suppresser. For an infiltration like this, he preferred the subsonic ammo as it gave him a truly silenced weapon. Looking over to his partner, he saw he'd done the same, opting to run with the M11 just as Jank had had. At the bow, he saw shadows detaching and ascending—the first boarding teams were moving.

Jank vented air into his BC, ascending until his gloved hands touched steel. Then, using hand signals, he told his partner to proceed up. The two of them then floated upward, bracing their bodies against the slick hull as they prepped to break the surface.

Once their heads had poked above the water, they removed their Draegers and switched to the fifteen-minute pony bottles strapped to their sides. Then Jank attached his Gecko ascender, letting it slowly ascend up the hull. No matter how many times he used this thing, the little Gecko device still reminded him of a Roomba. The benefit of using it was obvious; it freed up his hands, allowing him to utilize his primary weapon with both hands.

As he continued to ascend the side of the hull, Jank kept his sights trained on the edge of the railing. Should a target materialize near it, he'd be ready to drop 'em.

Reaching the deck, he peeked over, catching his breath as he realized he'd almost poked his head up right in front of a guard. Fortunately, the guard seemed oblivious to his presence just ten meters away. Boosting himself over the railing in a single smooth motion, Jank swiftly double-tapped the back of the guard's head, dropping him before he knew what had happened. Then his partner went up and over the rail, joining him. They moved in a crouching position between the containers—keeping themselves in the shadows as they moved swiftly towards their objective. Then, somewhere ahead of them, they started to hear the muted pops or spitting noises of suppressed weapons being fired. Thee SEALs made heavy use of subsonic 9mms for this kind of work; it helped them keep

the element of surprise until it became necessary to go hot with their primary weapons—the M4A1 carbines.

When Jank and his partner reached the stairs to the superstructure, they ascended them quickly, switching over to their carbines as they moved rapidly to secure their final objective before someone sounded the alarm. As they neared the bridge, Jank heard a series of radio clicks and pops. It was a signal letting him know the bridge had been seized.

Phase one complete. Jank smiled to himself. The plan they'd worked on was coming together. *Just a little longer and we got this...*

Jank clicked his comms twice to signal the platoon that it was time to move to phase two. Moments later, he started hearing the clicks in response as the platoon leaders sounded off, their teams moving to execute.

While their stealthy Draeger infiltration had given them the element of surprise in capturing the deck of the vessel, the challenge now was going to be phase two and surviving it. The real fight for Jank and his men was still to come, and the enemy that would bring it was below decks, still waiting to be awoken.

Binhai Bay

Mainland China

Commander Shen Wuying rolled his neck again, grunting as he felt the satisfying crack he'd been hoping for. The relief to his body was instant. Unfortunately, it did nothing to lift his mood. Lately, his disposition had been dark, his temper short. His country was at war, and instead of being in the thick of it, fighting the allies, his unit had been stuck in the armpit of China with no hope of seeing any action.

His Sea Dragons were the apex predators of the PLA Navy. Even the Marines looked up to them. Yet in spite of their skills, they had more or less been relegated to guard duty, supporting a contingent of Marines posted to guard the giant port facility. Then again, given the casualty figures and the fact that this AI the Strategic Support Services had created was more or less dictating to them how to manage their commands, maybe guard duty at the port wasn't a bad deal. They were alive, and there was something to be said about that. Truth be told, he didn't like their military being run or directed by some AI, some computer program created by scientists who knew nothing of their craft, knew nothing about warfare and how to wage it. Instead, that AI just viewed them as pawns that could be moved about the chessboard with no regard for what happened to them.

Sighing in frustration, Shen shook his head. Glancing down to his watch, he noted the time. Twenty minutes had gone by since he'd last checked. He generally preferred to take the night watch—then again, he preferred anything that got him off the ship for a while.

For tonight's rotation, he'd chosen to move his second platoon to the roof of the lock control point; it gave him a better vantage point to look out into the bay while still being

able to cover the ship where the Marines were berthed. They weren't happy about being lodged on a ship tied to port, especially when they could easily set up a bivouac in one of the nearby parks and spread out.

Shen raised his binoculars to begin his checks. He started by scanning the ship, beginning at the top before making his way down. Focusing on the bridge, he spotted one of his Marines looking back at him with his own binoculars. Shen waved and the Marine waved back. He was pleased to see the discipline of his men held, even at 0330 hours.

While he was disappointed to be stationed here, he knew the importance of their presence in Binhai. Sometimes the mere presence of soldiers could deter an adversary from doing something stupid. It also told the locals that they weren't alone—the Marines were here to protect them, and if necessary, keep them in line if things turned sour for whatever reason.

He'd come to learn that the ship they were living on had a set of containers on the deck packed with highly sophisticated communications equipment. This explained why the ship had a number of antennas and directional satellite dishes scattered about the vessel. The Americans had been playing hell with their communication systems. He'd been told the sensitive equipment aboard the ship was like a relay station. It would aid in keeping their local comms network from being jammed.

“Sir, would you like some tea?” asked one of his platoon leaders as he approached from behind.

“Ah, Jin Lee. Yes, thank you. I *would* appreciate some tea right about now,” Commander Shen replied gratefully.

The officer bowed slightly and headed back into the building to refill his thermos.

Shen watched him go, then raised his binoculars back to his eyes to resume scanning the deck of the ship. As he moved from bow to stern, he thought he saw a flash. Then another. His mind immediately went into overdrive as he moved the binos in the direction of the stairs leading to the bridge. He looked at the base of the stairs, slowly moving upwards...then he saw them. Men clad in black were moving up the stairs with weapons raised.

Dropping the binoculars, Shen grabbed the radio receiver. “Lieutenant Fu! You have intruders on deck. Sound silent alarm and prepare to repel boarders.”

“Understood, sir,” came the curt reply.

“My team and I will board from the aft port entrance. Alert Captain Fujian’s men that we’ll be there in three minutes, so they better let us in. Out!”

As he turned, he saw the platoon leader had set the thermos down, holding his plate carrier and weapon for him to don.

“Thank you, Lieutenant. Alert the men here and prepare to counterattack on my command.”

“Yes, sir,” replied the lieutenant, but Commander Shen barely heard him as he ran towards the stairs. When Shen reached the door leading into the warehouse, his company sergeant exited the door, holding it open for him. Shen smiled

as he approached, seeing the excited look in his sergeant's eyes. He'd been spoiling for a fight, and now they had one.

When he walked into the warehouse, he saw his men strapping body armor to themselves and readying their weapons. His Sea Dragons were ready to hunt, and their prey had just walked into their field of fire. It was time to release the dragons; it was time to fight.

Bridge

Fox Platoon had secured the bridge without issue. Lieutenant Bender, Fox's commander, had given Jank the abridged version of the phase one updates when he had entered the bridge. Knock on wood, there had been very few hiccups with things appearing to be going their way. All four of his platoons were now aboard, with teams moving to seal the hatches they'd determined they wanted to keep shut.

Then Jank heard his call sign. They had found and secured the comms containers. Lieutenant Walsh reported they had been found near the bridge—comprising three shipping containers. He reported that as the spooks were identifying what equipment to take, his team was on it.

As soon as Jank had finished speaking to Walsh, Lieutenant Bender got Jank's attention. "Sir, Alpha and Bravo Platoons have reported they're in position at the far end of the pier in an overwatch position. They're reporting activity starting in various locations around the port. We've got

sightings of Delta units beginning to hit their targets. We're beginning to pick up the sounds of helos coming from the direction of the Bohai Sea; this is likely the lead Ranger elements on final approach to their objectives."

Jank could hear the faint sounds of helicopter blades cutting through the air. Then, as if on cue, the world outside the ship came alive—thumping reports of high-caliber anti-aircraft artillery guns as they opened fire on something. When Jank looked in the other direction, towards the direction of the Taku Forts—SEAL Team Three's objectives—torrents of green tracer fire rose from multiple locations into the night sky. Flares fired into the darkness, their magnesium brilliance igniting moments later and shining an eerie glow like a simulated sun as it brushed aside the darkness of predawn morning.

"Whoa, this place is coming alive," Jank said aloud. He turned serious as he looked at Bender. "I need you to keep two of your squads up here and personally ensure they keep this place secure and stay on the comms. I'm serious, Bender—too much is riding on this. If you hear something, I need to know the second you do."

Bender nodded, giving him a thumbs-up. "Solid copy, Jank. I'm on it."

"Chief, the bridge is secure. I'm coming to your position now," Jank whispered into his throat mic. He heard the two-click reply from Chief Cummings, which signaled an affirmative. The world might be coming alive outside, but until their presence had been discovered, they were maintaining noise discipline.

Then an urgent call came over the radio as he was about to leave. “Jank, I need you to get to port aft quarter, ASAP,” Lieutenant Geery’s voice called over the net.

“What do you have, Mikey?” asked Jank as he held still a moment.

“Boss, you need to see this now!”

Jank cursed silently to himself and looked back at Lieutenant Bender. “Keep this crap locked down,” he said, then raced out the door.

As Jank moved towards the aft quarter of the ship, he spotted Geery, his raised hand waving him over. When he rounded the corner, Jank halted dead in his tracks, his heart skipping a beat at what stared back at him.

“Easy, boss, they don’t appear to be active,” Geery said in response to the shocked look on his face.

He pointed the muzzle of his weapon at the inert face of one of the humanoid-looking robots they’d been told were the Terracottas, or TKs. “Yeah, this is one of the things I wanted to show you. There’s actually four of them in this container. But *this*, this is what I rally wanted you to see,” Geery explained as he stepped into the container, walking past the four TKs. Jank followed him in, his flashlight illuminating the place, raising more questions than answers as he saw the strangest-looking metallic stacks.

“OK, those TKs were scary, but what the hell is this?” Jank asked, looking up at the ceiling of the container, then down to the floor.

“I’m not sure, boss, but one thing’s clear. These aren’t normal shipping containers—they’re something else entirely. In fact, if I didn’t know any better, I’d say this place looks like a giant solid-state battery.”

“What makes you think that?” asked Jank, his curiosity piqued.

“Well, look at it. It’s got connection ports and umbilical cords over there that look like they could plug into those TKs up at the front. This container, if you noticed, is like twice the length of a normal shipping container. When you walk further back, it seems to connect to the containers on either side and the ones above it—the place opens into a giant room,” Geery explained as he walked Jank further into the container.

“But here’s what’s odd about this place. While this place is huge, we started checking the other containers next to this one—the ones that weren’t connected to this one and actually created a shield that hid this place. What we found when we checked the containers was that both of them were full of those Terracotta robots. They looked just like those four you saw at the entrance to this place, but these were kitted out with full combat equipment, like rifles, magazines, everything they’d need for battle. Thankfully, they’re powered down, but who knows if or how they’re activated,” Geery explained, then motioned for Jank to look at something else. “We found another thing that I wanted to show you. This container—it appears to be connected to the container or some other room behind it.”

Jank bunched his eyebrows in confusion now. “Connected? How so?”

“I’m not sure, but this seems to be like a hidden structure atop this ship. It’s essentially hidden in plain sight. But right there—that’s a door. Tunnels, boss. To where? I don’t know—we tried to open it, but it’s either sealed or locked from the other side,” Geery explained as he looked around the massive container.

“Why would they do that?” Jank asked more to himself than anyone else.

Chief Cummings then appeared behind him. As Jank was about to ask him what he thought, he saw Cummings raise his weapon as he shouted, “Contact front!”

Jank darted to the left as bullets whizzed past his head where he’d been moments earlier. He’d dropped the two of the attackers only for new ones to take their place. Aiming his rifle, he fired a burst into the darkness, right where he’d last seen the muzzle flashes in the dark.

Someone shouted in pain, a horrible sound he hadn’t expected. Then he saw more flashes returning fire. Bullets zipped past him, their heat momentarily searing his skin. He pulled his body tight against the wall.

“Firing!” Geery shouted, firing a burst from his M4 carbine, then retreating behind Cummings as he reloaded.

“*Move it*, Jank!” Jank heard his senior chief shout.

Then he saw a blur of movement, and the senior chief's carbine came alive, spewing flame from the muzzle of his rifle, emptying the thirty-round magazine in seconds. Jank saw his chance and took it. He willed his legs to move as he pushed off from the wall he'd been trapped against. Running towards the light of the exit, Jank ran past his senior chief, stopping a few meters beyond him.

"Reloading!" Cummings shouted as he dropped the spent mag into the pouch on the left side of his hip.

Jank raised the carbine to his shoulder as the senior chief blew past him like an Olympic sprinter. Jank squeezed his trigger, flame shooting from the mouth of his barrel as he swept the blackness of the container until he heard the sound of a click as the bolt locked to the rear.

Dropping the spent mag, Jank shouted, "Reloading," as he turned to his left in a sprint. Fractions of a second later, Jank could feel the whizzing sound of bullets swirling around him.

He'd nearly passed Lieutenant Geery when his carbine spat flame and bullets into the direction of where he'd seen the muzzle flashes firing at them.

"Move it, Geery and Cummings!" shouted PO1 Cruz, his Mk 48 held tight into his shoulder.

Once the lieutenant and the senior chief had passed Cruz, he opened fire with the machine gun, the enemy fire slackening as they dove for cover.

"Where the hell did they come from?" Cummings shouted over the roar of the MG.

“Probably from that other room I told you it was connected to,” Geery shouted as Cruz kept hammering away with the machine gun.

Jank just shook his head as he reloaded. “Who cares right now? We gotta find out if those NSA guys have what they needed ’cause we need to blow this ship and put her on the bottom, ASAP.”

Cummings stared at him for a moment, then blurted, “What? That’s not the mission, sir.”

“I know. I’m calling an audible. There are apparently two of those shipping containers packed full of those robotic TKs. And inside that container”—Jank pointed with his thumb back to where they’d just escaped—“is a series of solid-state batteries. The kind of batteries that charge those TKs. I don’t know who has the authority to activate those things, but I can tell you this—we don’t want to be around when someone decides to turn them on.”

Cummings swore under his breath at the news. Then the look on his face changed as an idea seemed to have formed. “OK, boss, I get it. We gotta sink this thing right here, right now. I still have a mine in my pack. I’m going to grab it and go for a dive. I’ll give you guys five minutes to do what you have to do to get off this deathtrap before it blows. Good luck, sir. I’ll catch you on the other side.”

Cummings leapt to his feet and took off in the direction of the bridge. Jank wanted to argue with the man, but he’d laid out his plan, then bolted before he had a chance.

“Now what, sir?” Geery asked.

“We find out if Quinton and his SSE team have gotten what they came for and we bug out,” Jank replied before jumping back on the comms to get a status report on everyone.

While Jank was on the radio with Quinton, the PLA Marines and the Jiaolong Sea Dragons were bum-rushing the SEALs in an attempt to overwhelm them. Everywhere Jank looked, he heard shouting between his SEALs and the ChiComs trying to kill them. Every now and then, he heard the crump of hand grenades going off and the shouts from the wounded who’d gotten injured from the shrapnel.

When Jank got the word from Quinton that they’d completed their objective, he gave the order to abandon the ship. Checking his watch, Jank saw they had two minutes left before Cummings’s mine was going to go off. As he searched for the way off this boat, one of his SEALs called out, letting them know he had found a way off. Rushing towards the gangway that’d lead them off the ship, Jank felt a shudder beneath his feet.

BANG!

A small geyser of water blew into the sky from the port side of the ship. Steadying himself after being nearly knocked off his feet, Jank and his remaining SEALs hauled ass off the now-listing ship as it began to take on water.

By the time the SEALs had reached a nearby warehouse they’d taken over as their impromptu safe house, the boat they’d tried to capture was taking on serious water and would likely slip beneath the waves and settle on the bottom, submerging the TKs beneath several feet of water. As Jank looked at the vessel, the water cresting above the deck, he

felt relieved that they had sunk it before those machines had had a chance to get into the fight. He couldn't imagine what kind of damage they could have done to the force trying to capture the port. It could have been a disaster. Instead, they'd successfully taken out nearly two hundred TKs without firing a shot. Jank called that a victory, and once word had reached WARCOM what they'd done, they hailed it as a victory as well, one that had likely saved the mission from certain failure.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Tectonic Warfare

Space Delta 9

Hangar 59

Groom Lake, Nevada

Racer finished his inspection of the S-1 Banshee as the ground crew finished their own. When he had conducted the secretive tests in Woomera, Australia, to prove that this theory of tectonic warfare could work, he had thought they would have ordered them to attack the PLA's command bunker by now. The kind of construction and depth of that bunker was the only reason they had even considered such a tactic in the first place.

“You ready for this, Racer?”

Looking up from beneath the wing, Racer saw Major General Hewitt near the cockpit. Standing, he answered, “Sir, I was born ready.”

Hewitt laughed at his bravado. “This is it, Racer. The satellites launch tomorrow. This war may finally be at an end.”

Nodding, he replied, “Let's hope so. That fighting in that city—Tianjin. Brutal, sir. Oh, by the way, congrats on the second star. Moving up in the world.”

Hewitt smiled. “Space Force is growing, that's all. We've got forty-eight Archangels allocated to us, and soon, we'll have sixteen of these Banshees. In fact, when you get

back from this mission, I want to share something with you, a vision for the future—something I’d like you to be a part of if you’re open to it.”

Racer had an idea of what the general might be getting at. He wasn’t sure he’d be able to sell it, though, to his wife and their five kids. This war had been rough on them. He’d been gone for so much of it. Part of him wanted to hang it up and become a stay-at-home dad. But God did he love flying—and space—he was officially the first starfighter of the Space Force. There was even a Wikipedia page dedicated to that fact.

“I appreciate your coming out here to send us off. I’ll look forward to that conversation when I return. In the meantime, General, some of us have to go win the war, so if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got a few final things I need to take care of before I climb aboard this marvelous starfighter,” Racer finally replied before coming to attention, rendering a final salute.

“Good luck, Colonel, and Godspeed. See you when you get back,” Hewitt offered as he returned the salute before speaking briefly to each of the maintainers who worked on the Banshee before leaving the hangar.

Racer stood at the hangar’s edge, staring into the vastness of Groom Lake before him. This massive expanse of sand and scrub had witnessed countless test flights of America’s most advanced aircraft. Today, it would bear witness to another historic moment. The gravity of this mission had been building to this moment. He felt the world’s

weight on his shoulders as he prepared to embark upon a mission that could end the war.

“Colonel, we’re ready,” his flight chief called out.

Racer turned and nodded, then looked once more to the rising sun as he drew a deep breath before saying a short prayer. “God of Heaven and Earth, maker of all creation, be with my family as I embark upon this mission. Keep them safe and filled with hope. Bless our country and the soldiers fighting for her. Let our endeavors today lead us closer to a world of peace. As I step into the unknown, light my path and steady my resolve. May my actions reflect your will. Amen.”

Finishing the prayer, he went to the Banshee, climbing aboard the starfighter and settling into the cockpit. Then the crew sealing him in. Depressing the engine start, Racer felt the familiar hum of the engines as they came to life, the lights of the controls activating. With its sleek design, the cockpit was more reminiscent of the SpaceX Crew Dragon module than a modern-day fighter or bomber aircraft. It was a testament to the leaps in technology the world had seen in recent years—the blending of space and aeronautical technology in seconds of turning on. The heads-up display blinked to life, overlaying critical flight data on the windshield along with other pertinent data.

“ARTUμ, systems check,” Racer commanded, his voice steady as he gave the engines some power and turned off the taxiway onto the runway.

The soft, familiar voice of Morgan Freeman responded, “All systems operational, Colonel Ryan. Ready for takeoff.”

“All right, ARTUμ, we’re off,” Racer declared.

The Banshee surged forward, its powerful engines propelling it down the runway. Within moments, they were airborne, the ground receding rapidly as the Banshee climbed. The desert landscape became a blur as the starfighter accelerated, breaking the sound barrier easily. Mach numbers ticked upward on the HUD: 5... 7... 9... until they reached Mach 10.

Racer felt the g-forces pressing him into his seat, but the Banshee's advanced design and his own rigorous training made the experience almost routine. Almost. Today's mission was anything but.

Flying at these kinds of speeds and altitudes allowed him to cross vast distances faster than was possible in any other airframe. Before long, he was approaching Chinese airspace, the HUD highlighting his target: a manufacturing plant innocuously nestled near the Tan-Lu Fault Zone. But Racer knew the real target lay deep beneath the ground.

“ARTUμ, prepare to release the Celestial Hammers on my mark,” Racer instructed, his fingers dancing over the controls.

“Understood, Colonel. Weapons bay doors opening. Celestial Hammers ready for deployment.”

He felt his mind racing as the target neared. The weight of the decision pressed on him. Tectonic warfare was a line no one had dared to cross. The potential consequences were vast and unpredictable. But then, so were the stakes. The AI, Jade Dragon, was a formidable enemy that threatened more than just the allies—it threatened the future of humanity if it wasn't stopped.

“Colonel,” ARTUμ’s voice interrupted his thoughts, “we are approaching the drop zone.”

Racer took a deep breath, hoping he wasn’t making a mistake as he uttered, “Release the Hammers.”

The words had barely left his lips as the four Celestial Hammers dropped from the Banshee’s belly, their descent swift and precise. For a moment, Racer watched them go, their trajectories perfect. The deed was done. There was no going back. There was no changing what had been done.

“ARTUμ, set course for Groom Lake,” Racer ordered, angling the Banshee away from Asia towards home.

As the starfighter sped away homeward bound, Racer’s thoughts were heavy. They had taken a step into the unknown today, a step he hoped would end this nightmarish war. But at what cost?

He glanced at the AI’s interface, the soft glow of its lights reflecting in his eyes. “ARTUμ,” he began, his voice hesitant, “did we do the right thing?”

The AI paused, its algorithms processing the question. “Colonel, I am programmed to follow orders and ensure mission success. Morality is a human construct. Only time will tell if today’s actions were right.”

Racer nodded, staring out into the vast expanse of space. The journey back to Groom Lake would be long, filled with reflection and uncertainty. But for now, the mission was complete.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Raids

La Flotte Warehouse

Grenoble, France

The sun dipped below the horizon, casting long shadows across the La Flotte Warehouse in Grenoble. This small operation appeared peaceful at the moment, but Noelle Fournier knew that was about to change. The Americans had tied this warehouse to the same group that had shipped drones to the Côte d'Azur Livraison warehouse in Marseille. She knew just how dangerous the people behind this quiet building were.

Under the cover of the darkening evening, a coalition of French law enforcement agencies had assembled. GIGN operatives, dressed in black tactical gear, their faces obscured by balaclavas, moved silently through the shadows. They were coordinating with her and other officers from the DGSI and French Special Branch. The tension was palpable as they awaited the signal to strike.

Noelle spoke into her radio, her voice barely above a whisper. "Alpha Team, stand by. Bravo Team, prepare for entry. Remember, our objective is to capture them alive and prevent communication with their counterparts in other locations."

Swiftly and as quietly as possible, Bravo Team approached the warehouse. Armed with silenced M5

submachine guns and pulse weapons, they moved with precision. They had studied the layout meticulously, memorizing every blind spot and security camera. Noelle followed behind with her partner, Bernard.

Noelle watched as the teams closed in. Her heart pounded in her chest, knowing that a single misstep could trigger a catastrophe. She radioed the teams. “Bravo, go.”

The warehouse erupted into chaos as the tactical teams breached the doors. Flash-bang grenades disoriented the suspects, and darkness descended upon the cavernous space. Shouts in Mandarin mixed with the shouts of French officers as they ordered the suspects to the ground.

One of the delivery drivers reacted with lightning speed, his hand reaching for a remote of some kind. But before he could activate it, a GIGN officer lunged and disarmed him. He was swiftly restrained, his yells drowned out by the turmoil around them.

The scene unfolded in a series of coordinated strikes. Bravo Team members swiftly secured the suspects while Alpha Team rushed to disable the drones with a directed-energy weapon, ensuring they would never pose a threat again.

Outside, Noelle knew that the French Special Branch officers would intercept the suspects’ attempted communications with their counterparts in other European locations. The intelligence agencies had been monitoring their digital communications for days, and the moment the raid began, the suspects’ networks were jammed.

As the suspects were loaded into waiting vehicles, Noelle’s eyes locked with those of the man who had tried to

activate the kamikaze drones. There was a fire of defiance in his gaze, a testament to the lengths he would go to fulfill his mission. Noelle knew they had just thwarted a catastrophic event, but the battle against the forces that sought to destabilize Europe was far from over.

The raid at the Côte d'Azur Livraison warehouse had been quick and quiet, a testament to the skill and dedication of the French law enforcement agencies. The kamikaze microdrones were no longer a threat, but the hunt for those behind the plot would continue across the continent, a relentless pursuit to safeguard Europe from the shadows of international espionage and terror.

South Louisiana Port

La Place, Louisiana

The oppressive humidity hung heavily in the air as Special Agent Spencer Willow gazed out over the South Louisiana Port in La Place, Louisiana. A sprawling industrial landscape lay before him, a vast expanse of warehouses, cargo containers, and looming cranes. Beneath the seemingly mundane exterior, however, lurked a grave threat—kamikaze microdrones set to unleash chaos upon American soil.

Spencer Willow was a seasoned FBI agent, known for his unwavering determination and sharp instincts. He stood at the helm of a joint operation, where federal agents, local law

enforcement, and specialized tech teams had gathered to prevent the catastrophic disaster looming on the horizon.

The intelligence had been clear: a group with suspected international ties had orchestrated the plot, using the labyrinthine infrastructure of the South Louisiana Port to hide shipments of deadly kamikaze drones. Time was of the essence. The clock ticked ominously as the team prepared to move.

Spencer wore a tactical vest emblazoned with “FBI” in bold letters. His eyes were concealed behind mirrored sunglasses, reflecting the distant glow of the setting sun. He surveyed the operation, his voice a low rumble as he addressed his team. “Remember, the objective is to disable the drones without causing any unnecessary damage. We need to capture as many suspects as possible. Move swiftly and quietly.”

The agents, some of which were equipped with cutting-edge pulse beam weapons, nodded in unison. These specialized devices were designed to disrupt the electronics of the kamikaze microdrones without triggering their deadly payloads. It was the key to their mission’s success.

As twilight descended, the agents fanned out, taking up their positions near the South Louisiana Port. The warehouse they targeted, concealed in the heart of the extensive complex, pulsated with activity. Suspects moved about with calculated urgency.

Outside the warehouse, a blacked-out FBI van housed the tech team, monitoring live drone feeds from above. They provided real-time intelligence, tracking the suspects’ movements within the building.

Spencer and his team moved with precision, relying on their well-practiced training. They approached the warehouse under the cover of darkness, navigating through the maze of cargo containers.

The night was still, broken only by the hum of machinery and the distant lapping of the Mississippi River. As the agents drew closer to the warehouse, Spencer's heartbeat echoed in his ears.

His radio crackled to life. "Alpha Team, prepare for entry."

With a nod from Spencer, his team swung the warehouse doors open and tossed in several flash-bang grenades.

Bang, bang, bang!

When Alpha Team rushed in, they found their suspects taken off guard, their faces twisted in shock from the blinding light and deafening noise. Several of the men had been sitting at a table near a couple of laptops.

"Use the pulse beams on the computers," Spencer ordered. If they took down the control mechanisms, the drones would be dead in the water—a far more rapid solution than searching through every container in this warehouse to zap each individual kamikaze drone.

The pulse beams flickered to life, passing through the air with minimal sound, striking the electronics and rendering them inert. The agents had to act quickly, ensuring that none of the drones were released. The scene unfolded in a

choreographed ballet of skill and efficiency. Several suspects were swiftly restrained.

Outside, local law enforcement secured the perimeter, ensuring that no suspects could escape or call for reinforcements. The intelligence agencies had already disrupted the suspects' communication networks, isolating them from their international counterparts.

One smuggler at the edge of the group seemed to have been less fazed by the flash-bang than the rest of the crowd. Whether he had just happened to have his mouth open and his fingers in his ears when it went off, Spencer would never know, but the man dove for cover behind a set of lockers and began to unleash a fury of gunfire at Spencer and the rest of the agents.

“Suppressive fire!” yelled Spencer.

Alpha Team fired a torrent of bullets toward the lockers, which were probably barely thick enough to provide any real cover. The hostile quit returning fire for a moment, and Spencer wasn't sure if he'd already been killed or if he'd just done the smart thing and kept his head down.

“Hold your fire!”

Spencer raced toward the lockers, trying to get a jump on their man. Suddenly, he saw the report of a muzzle flash off to his left. He felt his body get thrown back, as if he'd been punched in the stomach by an MMA fighter. He landed on his butt with a thud.

Oh God, that hurts! Spencer moaned to himself. He could barely breathe. The wind had been knocked out of his

lungs.

While Spencer found himself momentarily incapacitated, his team members took over the fight. They continued their deadly dance, with Alpha Team firing on the suspect until he moved.

Bang!

A well-placed shot hit the smuggler in his head, ending the struggle. They had one less suspect to interrogate, but Spencer could live with that. Despite the chaos, they'd managed to disable all the drones and capture or kill all the hostiles without losing a single agent.

Not bad for a day's work.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Operation Crimson Tide

Mid-March 2028

Bravo Company, 3rd Rangers

Dalian International Airport

Major Meacham stood with his hands on his hips as he stared into the hangar where his company was preparing for the mission. He had known since before the war that the Army was testing various unmanned, remotely controlled semi-autonomous and autonomous combat vehicles as the service looked to the future. Hell, his own unit had been among the first to field the revolutionary Jackal XD500s. The antidrone module alone had probably singlehandedly altered the course of the war. After the massacre of the Marines on the beaches of northwest Venezuela, the XD500B models had been integrated into almost every infantry company in the Corps, the Army, and the SOF community. While his company was bringing four of the Jackals for this mission, it was the eight Rheinmetall Mission Master CXTs he was a bit unsure of. Each of the CXTs was outfitted with twin M134D miniguns able to fire between two thousand and six thousand rounds of 7.62×51mm rounds per minute, depending on the weapon setting. Fortunately, the all-wheel drive 4x4 was a bit of a pack-mule and carried fourteen thousand rounds of ammo.

What concerned him about bringing the CXTs on this mission was that they hadn't had very much time to train with

them after two weeks of joint training in Japan. USSOCOM had introduced the Rheinmetall equipment to the Rangers, the Canadian Special Operations Regiment, and the Korean 13th Special Mission Brigade or Black Panthers during the final week of training. That gave the three units just six days to familiarize themselves with how to use the equipment and determine how best to deploy them alongside their Jackal XDs.

“You still fussing over us having to bring those things on the mission with us?” asked Sergeant First Class Amos Dekker as he walked up to him.

Meacham rolled his shoulders in response. “I wish we had more time to train with them before this mission. Anytime we have to rely on a piece of equipment that can be remotely accessed, it causes me a bit of concern, considering we’re actively battling against an AI that has proven pretty adept at infiltrating such things.”

Dekker nodded thoughtfully before adding. “Sir, if I recall correctly—you’re talking about that incident with Charlie Squadron, right? One of the troop leaders failed to ensure the CXT had the most recent software patch update before the mission. I have it on good authority that they had missed the past five updates, and that’s why it went rogue on that mission. It wasn’t the machines’ fault. It was a failure of leaders—a failure to make sure the equipment was being properly maintained, especially before an op. I don’t have such worries about our gear, sir. The lesson has been learned—it won’t happen again,” Dekker assured him.

“Huh, I didn’t know it was coopted because it hadn’t been updated,” Meacham shook his head dismissively. “A lot of good people were killed when that happened.”

“Hey, there you are, Major,” Captain Loach called out as he jogged over to them.

“What’s up, L2?” asked Meacham as Dekker returned to his platoon.

“Sir, Spider wants to see you.” L2 pointed to the side of the hangar. “I could be wrong, but I think we just got our first FRAGO before we even got going.”

Meacham cursed under his breath. “All right, let me go handle it and see what’s up. Stay on your guys, and be ready. Until we’re told otherwise—the helos arrive in fifty mikes.”

He approached the group of officers in what looked like an animated conversation. The CO for Alpha Company “Predators” seemed particularly incensed as he left the conversation, walking right past him as he muttered, “Good luck, Warrior. You’re going to need it.”

What the hell is that about? he thought to himself as he approached the gaggle.

“Speak of the devil. Here’s the man of the hour I told you about,” exclaimed Lieutenant Colonel Bill “Spider” Mackintosh as Meacham approached them.

When the two officers turned around, Meacham was about to salute when Colonel Harlow waved him off. “No need for that, Major. Let’s not make the general more of a target than he already is,” said the commander of the 75th Ranger Regiment. “Major, this is General Bob Sink, Eighth

Army commander. He came here to personally wish us luck and hand us a fragmentary order that will slightly deviate from our initial plan.”

Meacham was about to speak when the general beat him to it. “It’s good to meet you, Major. I’ve been immeasurably proud of the regiment’s flexibility and combat effectiveness throughout the war,” General Sink praised him as he motioned for an aide to hand Meacham a folder. “I’m not going to sugarcoat it, Major. Recent intel from assets already on the ground is reporting a sudden increase in security in and around the New Binhai area. Recent ISR images show the 151st Heavy Combined Arms Brigade is moving toward Cangzhou, some ninety kilometers southwest of the port. Meanwhile, an advance unit, a motorized rifle battalion from the 113th Medium Combined Arms Brigade, has taken up positions opposite the Yongding River next to an area I’m told is called the Beitang Estuary. It’s very close to the Qinbin-Haibin Expressway, which spans the river and runs parallel to the port and New Binhai. This unit had been held in reserve to support the Jiujiang Line. Now it appears it’s being positioned to counter our plan to seize the port.

“I don’t need to tell you how important the first twenty-four hours of this operation will be, Major, but that enemy battalion cannot cross that bridge and threaten our activities at the port. Until we begin phase two, we will be extremely thin on the ground. Your units will be asked to hold ground when it would be acceptable to fall back to a more defensible position in normal times—not this time. If I could, I’d have you land on the opposite bank and act as a blocking force. With no ability to support your unit or provide any

reinforcement for at least a day, I'm not willing to give that order. Major, your unit will have to hold this crucial intersection until relieved. You think you can do that, Major?" the general asked.

Meacham looked at the aerial images of where his unit was supposed to insert and the size and disposition of the nearby enemy force they'd face shortly after their arrival. Then, looking back to the general, "Sir, we'll Ranger up, we'll figure it out—we'll hold this spot till the last man if necessary."

The general held his gaze for a second, then nodded slowly. "I'll hold you to that, Major. Now get out of here and get your men ready."

Two Hours Later

Amos Dekker stepped forward, the familiar weight of his gear pressing against him as he scanned the faces of the men standing before him. These were his brothers—soldiers with whom he'd been through hell and back. He could see the anticipation, the quiet dread, the unspoken fears in their eyes. But more than that, he could see the determination, the will to carry on and fight for a better tomorrow.

Clearing his throat, he began, "Listen up, Bravo. I'm not one for long-winded speeches; God knows I'm no poet. But I've been with y'all through thick and thin, and before we step on those birds, there are a few things I need to say."

He paused, choosing his words carefully. “When I first left Bozeman, joining the Army straight out of high school, I thought I knew what it meant to be a Ranger. But it wasn’t until I stood shoulder to shoulder with men like you that I truly understood. This war...it’s changed us. It’s taken some of our best and pushed the rest of us to our limits, testing what we’re made of.”

His voice cracked slightly as he continued, “In this platoon, I’ve seen men go down, and others rise to the challenge. I’ve seen you lift each other up, even when the world seemed against us. I’ve seen courage, resilience, and a brotherhood that can’t be broken. But tonight... tonight’s different.”

He looked down momentarily, trying to find the right words. “I won’t lie to you. This might be the toughest fight we’ve ever faced. Some of us might not make it back. Hell, maybe none of us will. But I believe in each and every one of you. If anyone can do this, it’s Bravo Company.”

Dekker’s gaze hardened. “Remember why we’re here. We’re not just fighting for ourselves or the guy next to us. We’re fighting for our families, our country, and a world where our kids can grow up and inherit a future that hasn’t been artificially engineered by some AI that views us humans as just ones and zeros it can simply delete at will. We are more than just lines of code—we are living, breathing beings with value and purpose in this life.”

He breathed deeply. “I want you all to promise me something. If things go south, you will keep fighting, even if

you find yourself in a tight spot. Not for me, not even for the mission. But for each other. Because that's what Rangers do."

A grim smile touched his lips. "I've been with the Rangers for sixteen and a half years—been shot, blown up, and seen more than my fair share of death. But I've also seen miracles. And if I've learned one thing, it's that Rangers lead the way."

With a final nod, he concluded, "Let's get ready. Let's end this war. And let's make sure that when the dust settles, the world remembers Bravo Company, 3rd Battalion, 75th Rangers. Hooah?"

The echoing "Hooah!" from his men was all the affirmation he needed. The bond between them was unbreakable, and together, they were ready to face whatever lay ahead.

Twenty Minutes Later

The cold predawn winds tugged at Dekker's gear as he approached the Bell V-280 Valor idling ahead. Around him, an orchestra of rotor blades echoed the moment's urgency, mingled with the sounds of soldiers and machinery preparing for what lay ahead. Looking up, he saw a squadron of Valors, their rotors transitioning from vertical lift to airplane mode as the first squadron took flight. It was a remarkable sight—the tilt-rotor helicopters gracefully yet powerfully dominating the horizon.

Taking a seat along the edge of the Valor, Dekker tightened his straps, sensing the faint vibrations from the engines. Soon, he felt the familiar lift as the aircraft took to the skies. The vast expanse of the city of Dalian spread below them as they made their way into the Bohai Sea. This quiet moment would soon be replaced with the sounds of war—men shouting, rifles firing, explosions erupting. He'd never admit it publicly, but it was in such moments of liminality between life and death that he felt most alive.

Glancing around, he noticed the young soldiers absorbed in their private rituals—a last-minute attempt to find solace, strength, or both. There was Corporal Crawford, fingers running through his rosary beads, murmuring prayers with closed eyes. On the other side, Specialist Lemming was engrossed in a letter, possibly from a loved one, while others wore headphones, lost in the beats of their favorite tunes. And then there were those like Sergeant Weber, desperately trying to grab some shut-eye, hoping to recharge before the storm. Each soldier, in their own way, sought to build an armor around their psyche—a defense against the terror and uncertainties of war.

As the Valor gently descended near the naval flotilla, a series of brief yet bright lights flashed below, guiding them to a short refueling pit stop. But Dekker's focus was already miles away—on the impending mission.

He leaned forward, catching Staff Sergeant Poppadu's attention from across the aisle. "Poppa, what's your primary objective once we hit the container yard?"

Poppadu, a rugged figure with a shaved head and an old burn scar stretching down one side of his face, nodded, his eyes sharp. “My squad’s objective is to establish a roadblock, set up fields of fire, and make sure our flanks are covered. Especially that exit on Donghai Road. We’ve got it.”

Dekker paused momentarily, then continued, “And the Jackals?”

“Sergeant Weber’s on the antidrone duty. He’ll have it ready to swat down any flying nuisances. And Sergeant Rigley knows to get the Sentinel set up for cover fire across the river,” Poppadu responded, confidence in his voice.

Sergeant Weber, a tall, lanky man with a perpetual smirk, said, “Drones won’t stand a chance, Sergeant. Our Jackal will have them down before they know what hit ’em.”

Sergeant Rigley, a stockier counterpart to Weber, grunted in agreement. “We’ll have the Sentinel up and sniping before they even realize we’re there.”

Dekker felt a familiar surge of pride. These were his men—well trained, well prepared, and fiercely loyal. He took a moment to meet each of their eyes, ensuring they felt his confidence in them. “Listen up,” he began. “We’ve drilled this a hundred times. You know what to do, where to go, and how to react. Trust your training, trust your instincts, but most of all, trust each other.”

The Valor began its ascent again, the dark waters of the Bohai Sea rapidly turning into a distant shimmer beneath them. The journey to Binhai had begun. In twenty minutes, they’d take part in seizing one of the world’s largest seaports.

Approaching the Port

Dekker looked off into the horizon as the port facility came into sight. Then the horizon came alive almost at once as the predawn darkness gave way to the illumination of flares, punctuated by sporadic explosions, painting the horizon with a grim tapestry of chaos. When the pilot turned their aircraft, they could more clearly see the gunfights breaking out in different areas of the port and the surrounding areas. If he remembered the aerial map of the port correctly, then this fighting looked like it was taking place near the historic Taku Forts. Near the forts was a small hydroelectric dam, and a lock system that allowed ships to travel further upriver. It had been rumored that SEAL Team One was going to seize this objective.

If his bearings were right, the Dagu Paotai Park should be just to their left. That's where their sister battalion, 2nd Rangers, "Stalkers," were going to insert. Then, as if on cue, the area near the park came alive with AA fire as several strands of tracer fire shot out toward the water and the armada of helicopters approached. To his amazement, he saw a pair of missiles streak through the sky to slam moments later into whoever was firing those AA guns. The impacts of those missiles had silenced them with a thunderous roar as flame blossomed into predawn light.

But as the fleet of Valors advanced inexorably towards the Port of Binhai, another threat emerged. A series of small,

erratic flashes started bursting around them. He was no expert on air-defense weapons, but this reminded him of those old videos of bomber formations flying over Germany, small black puffs of smoke throwing shrapnel around the place in an attempt to damage or destroy Allied bombers—only now he was experiencing the same thing in a tilt-rotor.

Good Lord! I never thought as a Ranger, I'd have to fly through enemy flak to reach a drop zone.

Thankfully, their pilot was just as determined to live as the Rangers riding in the back and took immediate action—diving for the deck to evade the hailstorm being thrown at them. As Dekker looked out the open side door, he could have sworn they were low enough that if he had a ski board, he could be catching waves at two-hundred-plus miles per hour, holding on to a rope from behind this beast of machine. Then he smiled at the asinine thought of skiboarding behind a V-280. It brought back to mind an old Vietnam movie that showed some GIs doing just that down some rivers during the war. Maybe it was true. Maybe it was just Hollywood. But as they whipped past the main port facilities, the aircraft banked hard to the left and came around the bend in the channel that would lead to their final destination.

They sped rapidly down the channel that would take them near the Beitang Estuary. They had nearly reached the Qinbin-Haibin Expressway when three strings of red tracer fire from across the shore to their right laid into the helicopters rapidly approaching the DZ as they were transitioning from airplane to helicopter mode. The next thing Dekker knew, he heard a loud bang to his right—a man screamed somewhere in

front of him—the aircraft sliding in an almost uncontrolled rapid descent.

THUD...oommfff...

By the time Dekker realized they had just crashed into the ground, he felt a pair of hands disconnect his harness before tossing him out the side of the bird to land splayed out on his back. Then he felt someone grabbing the pull handle from the top of his body armor as they pulled him with more force than he thought possible.

“Move your asses now! This thing could blow any second!” someone shouted, or at least that’s what he heard as his mind regained control from the shock of what just happened.

“Manny, what the hell?” was all Dekker managed to say as the giant linebacker of a soldier practically dragged him half a football field across the dirt and gravel away from the helicopter.

“Huh—oh, thank God. I thought you might have bought it, Sergeant First Class. When we hit the ground, we were shouting at you to bail out, but you just looked at us and passed out,” Corporal Emmanuel “Manny” Crawford said.

“Are you hurt, Sergeant?” Captain Luke “L2” Loach called out to him as he approached with Third Squad in tow.

Dekker shook his head a couple of times to clear out the cobwebs before Manny offered him a hand up. “No, I—um... no, I’m good, L2. I think I’m just shook up from the blast before we crashed into the dirt.”

BOOM!

Everyone flinched momentarily until they realized it was the crashed Valor that had blown up and not incoming artillery or something else.

Bam! Bam! Bam!

The sight of three massive explosions across the river, followed by several smaller secondary explosions, caused a few of the Rangers to shout some cheers and jeers. The flyboys had likely obliterated whatever enemy vehicles had just nailed Dekker's ride.

"Haha! Take that, bastard!" Sergeant Vincent "Vinnie" Rump hooted and hollered before Staff Sergeant Poppadu began shouting orders for his squad to move to their objectives.

"Damn, L2, what kind of inferno did we just land in?" Dekker cursed as he double-checked his rifle, making sure it was operable and undamaged from the crash.

L2, pausing momentarily to glance around the smoking battlefield they'd landed in, responded, "This might be hell, Dekker, but we're the storm they didn't see coming. Let's punch our time cards and get to work."

Dekker laughed maniacally as he shouted aloud to his comrades, "You heard the captain! It's time to look the devil in the eye as we kick him in the balls before raining the righteous judgment of the 75th Rangers down upon him! Hooah!"

"Hooah!" shouted every Ranger in earshot of Dekker's battle cry.

Like a coiled spring now unleashed, Dekker ran like a man racing to embrace his wife and kids after not seeing them

for more than a year toward the first series of roadblocks and ambush sites they needed to establish. His sense of urgency was shared by the men around him, each joining the battle cry of Bravo Company, 3rd Battalion.

Joint Task Force Locus

Joker watched as the first wave of allied aircraft swooped in over the New Binhai area of Tianjin. The enemy had caught on quickly, scrambling aircraft to respond to the overwhelming waves of allied aircraft delivering precision-guided munitions to hit strategic and tactical targets across the sprawling metropolis. It was an incredible and rare sight as his JTF was directed to stand by and wait before being sent in.

Once the first wave of stealth and advance strike aircraft began hitting their targets, the enemy would respond by going active with their search radars—looking for targets to direct their SAM batteries to engage. When enough radars went active, they'd be ordered to neutralize 'em. It wasn't too long after the initial strikes began that he was finally given the release order to move in and begin neutralizing the threats they'd watched continuing to light up.

Flying in formation with Tsunami flight, Joker followed the squadron down from angels twenty to angels sixteen as they now moved towards the known threats. He was just about to order them in to begin SEAD operations when an urgent call interrupted his train of thought.

“Locus Actual to Oracle Three. Be advised you’ve got twelve fast movers, possibly AI Dark Dragon UCAVs, inbound from the Beijing sector Nine-Charley. Aircraft moving at Mach 2.3 on an intercept vector that looks like they’re targeting your heliborne assault. Estimate time to intercept: three minutes, forty-two seconds.”

Ah, here we go. The fight we’ve been waiting for, Joker thought to himself. “Oracle Three to Locus Actual, good copy. What’s their bearing, range, altitude, and aspect?” he asked.

“Locus Actual, BRAA to bandits: zero-four-zero for one-twenty, angels thirty-five, hot.”

Damn, they’re gonna try and bypass us to go straight for the helos...

Joker immediately turned his attention to his squadron of Super Eagles to handle this one. “Tempest flight, Locus Actual, vector zero-four-zero, intercept and neutralize. Scorpion flight, commence jamming operations. Blind ’em, mute ’em, and score us some aerial kills, you crazy Eagle drivers!”

“Locus Actual to Tempest Actual. Copy all, turning zero-four-zero.”

“Affirm, Tempest. Take them out before they reach our birds,” Joker replied, hoping like hell his Eagle IIs would take a few of the bastards out before those Dark Dragons or, worse, the Shadow Dragon air supremacy UCAVs showed up. They were having a devil of a time trying to find a way to compete against an AI pilot that was immune to the laws of physics and the amount of g-forces a human body could take.

“Locus Actual to Scorpion Actual. Copy that. Beginning jamming operations. All Scorpions, prioritize disruption of Dark Dragon UCAV known controlled frequencies. Let’s blind and mute ’em!”

“Tempest Two-Nine to Two-Ten. I’ve got visual on a bandit—setting up for Fox Three launch.”

“Locus Actual to Tsunami Actual. Be advised we’re seeing increased SAM activity near the Beitang Estuary and the Taku Forts. Initiate immediate SEAD ops and shut ’em down.”

“Tsunami Actual, copy all. We’ll protect our guys on the helos.” Joker heard the chilled, confident voice of his friend, Peanut, as he responded to his direction and began directing his flight to engage enemy SAMs.

“Locus Actual to Oracle Three. Outstanding job! Keep the updates coming.”

“Roger, Locus Actual. Monitoring and will advise on any changes.”

As Joker watched his various squadrons move to engage and execute his orders, the battle was out of his control. It was now in the hands of his pilots as they moved like a machine that, with God’s help and a little bit of luck, might save more than a few helos as they were about to get jumped by a swarm of vultures.

Bravo Company, 3rd Battalion

The CH-53K roared overhead, the familiar whine of its rotor cutting through the cool air, casting rapidly moving shadows across the ground and the Rangers below as the last vestiges of predawn darkness gave way to the dawn of a new day. Dekker had to imagine people watching from their apartment windows or anyone on the ground working the night shift or out for a predawn run. The sheer might of this aerial force was evident—like watching a bird of prey descend upon its quarry.

“Sergeant Rump! That bird’s got your vehicle. The moment it’s out, I need you to get it set up and operational in support of the roadblock Second Squad set up on the Yongdingxinhe Bridge. Specialist Simpson was saying it looked like the ChiComs might be trying to form up some sort of force across the river that might try to bum-rush us. We need the Mission Master CXTs’ firepower to stop ’em cold if that’s what they’re doing. Got it?” shouted Dekker, the roar of the descending heavy-lift cargo helicopter drowning out the sounds of battle.

Vinnie, aka Sergeant Vincent Rump, gave him a curt nod as he took off towards the King Stallion helicopter. As the ramp to the helicopter lowered to the ground, the Rheinmetall CXT was driven off the rear of the helicopter by a Marine who started looking for who to hand it off to. Moving towards the Marine, Vinnie waved to get his attention until he spotted him, then started heading towards him.

The version of the CXT that had been assigned to the Rangers, at least in the initial waves, was the fire support

variant. This version effectively turned the Autonomous Unmanned Ground Vehicle or AUGV into a badass killing machine. Mounted atop the four-wheeled vehicle was a pair of M134D miniguns with a sophisticated targeting AI software that could allow the vehicle to operate in sentry mode—guarding a sector of the line and shredding anything that came into its sector that matched its targeting profile. With six thousand rounds of ammo in the feedbox, it gave a platoon or squad an incredible punch and ability to hit well above its weight class.

Dekker wanted to get this vehicle set up on the bridge. The temporary roadblock they'd set up across the eight lanes of the Yongdingxinhe Bridge that connected New Binhai with the Beitangkou neighborhood or district, just opposite the Yongding New River, was poorly defended at best. Until they received additional reinforcements like their JLTVs and MLTVs, the most the Rangers could offer in deterrence against the PLA 113th Medium Combined Arms Brigade was a handful of cargo vans, utility trucks, and two semitractor-trailers they intentionally jackknifed in the center of each direction of traffic. It wasn't much, but it provided the squad of Rangers and a pair of Jackal XD500s with some sort of cover from the ever-growing shooting starting to take place between his Rangers and the substantially larger PLA unit opposite the river.

“I don't like it, Dekker. Second Squad's position up on that bridge is too exposed—too tenuous at best to defend if those bastards ever decide to grow a pair of balls and press the matter,” L2 said to him as he pointed to Vinnie, using a

Nintendo Switch–style hand controller to guide the CXT AUGV towards the two Jackals currently on the bridge.

Dekker turned to L2. “Give me a better hand, sir, and I’ll give you a better play. For now, this is the best we’ve got. Any idea when we’re getting reinforcements yet?”

The very question seemed to deflate the captain, especially after losing the CH-53 carrying Fourth Squad. The guys from the weapons platoon bringing to bear the two M5 Ripsaw antiarmor infantry support vehicles for each of the platoons had gotten nailed by a MANPAD on the way in. It had turned into a fiery wreck as it crashed into the river. It had not only zapped twenty-five percent of the platoon’s soldiers, it had nuked one of the two Ripsaws their platoon was supposed to have and the operators to use it.

L2 finally looked at him. “I—I’m not sure, Sergeant. I’m still dumbfounded how that Stallion blew apart from a stupid MANPAD. I mean, your freaking ride blew out an engine, and you guys still managed to crash-land onto shore, and everyone bailed out before it exploded. I... I just don’t know, Dekker.”

Dekker grabbed the captain tight by the top of his shoulder as he drew him in close. “Listen to me, Luke. I know you’re shaken up over the loss of Fourth Squad. It’s a kick to the nuts, no way around it—but right now, I need you to Ranger up and pull yourself together. We’re outnumbered and outgunned until more reinforcements show up. But here’s the deal. We’re the meanest bastards these ChiComs will have ever fought. So you do what you must over the next few seconds, but don’t you ever let the rest of the platoon see you

project anything other than supreme confidence in our position and that we will hold the line until relieved. You got me, sir?!”

He watched as Luke stared at him— briefly lost as fear and the inner demons haunting him nearly won out before a flicker of fire and flame reignited in the man’s eyes. Nodding slowly at first, he seemed to have found his inner strength and pulled himself back together.

“Yes, that’s right, Sergeant. Thank you for that reminder. Let’s see if we can’t figure out how to use that other Ripsaw. There’s got to be another way we can figure out how to operate it without the original controller. Unless someone wants to swim out there and find it, we either hot-wire it or find another way to use it, but I’ll be damned if we just leave it to sit there like a damn paperweight.”

Dekker smiled as L2’s command confidence returned. They parted ways—Dekker racing up the ramp on the expressway to find the platoon’s MacGyver, Specialist Ron Lemming. If anyone in the platoon was going to figure this out, it was Lem.

Pop, pop, crack.

Bullets continued to zip around Dekker as he approached the roadblock, weaving between the layers of vehicles they had parked across the road in their haste to lock it down. The bullets continued to whiz over their heads and occasionally into one or more vehicles comprising their makeshift blockade. He eventually found his guy.

Lem was hunkered down behind one of the jackknifed trailers along the second row of trucks. He had his digital multitool spread out in front of him like a surgeon’s kit, a

determined look on his face as he worked to fix a damaged radio while seemingly ignoring the sound of bullets whizzing around him. Dekker approached the young man and saw him splicing wires on a radio that looked to have taken a round to it. He was trying to jury-rig a connection or something Dekker couldn't readily figure out as he approached him.

“Hey, MacGyver!” Dekker shouted, causing the specialist to jump, momentarily losing his grip on the needle-nose pliers.

“Damn, Sergeant! Give a guy a warning, would ya?” Lem quipped, his tone a mixture of annoyance and mirth.

“Hey, pack it up, Specialist. We have bigger fish to fry than that comm set,” Dekker replied urgently, extending a hand to pull him up. “That second Ripsaw, the one that didn't go for a swim in the river—I need your help to figure out how to control it without its original remote. You got any ideas?”

“Huh.” Lem adjusted his glasses, thinking for a moment. “Well, it's not like an old-school car where you cross two wires and it's good to go. These Ripsaw M5 systems are encrypted, so it won't be a straightforward task or something we can just hack into and take control of. But yeah, I might have an idea or two. Let's go check it out.”

The two made their way to the stranded Ripsaw near the LZ the company had established. Major Meacham had his HQ set up in a nearby building they'd “acquired” after securing the LZ.

They approached the AUGV, the compact killing machine sitting ominously right where the King Stallion had dropped it just before the other CH-53 had exploded in midair

—taking both crews and the other M5 into the river. When they reached the Ripsaw, Dekker watched as the platoon’s MacGyver circled the vehicle, his eyes sharp, his mind focused. It took him only a minute to spot a small compartment mounted to the vehicle’s rear. Its shape and design had almost completely hidden it in plain sight.

“Aha! You see that, Sergeant? During the training, one of the techs mentioned something about Army-proofing the Ripsaw before handing them over to us. In case the primary controller went down, they built these little emergency backup controllers for the M5s,” Lemming explained as he approached and used his multitool to unscrew the panel. Behind it, encased in a protective shell of hardened steel, was another control unit. It looked more rugged than the primary, with fewer buttons and apparent controls. “This thing is built to withstand an EMP and probably has some heavy antihacking measures, too.”

Dekker stared, hoping beyond hope that MacGyver would come through for them in the end and save the day. “Can you sync it? Get it running and in the fight for us?”

Lem nodded. “Yeah, I don’t see why not. Should be a rapid pairing process.” He powered up the controller. A series of beeps sounded, followed by a pulsing light. After a tense moment, the light turned from a flashing yellow to a solid green. “Hooah! We’re in business.”

“All right, MacGyver, you’re driving. Now get this beast of a machine up on the roadblock where I found you and take ownership of the M5. You know how to operate it. Just make sure you help to keep those bastards off our side of the

bridge until additional help can relieve us,” directed Dekker as he grinned, patting their MacGyver on the back.

Lem smirked at the idea of being the primary operator of the M5. Everyone wanted to operate one of these bad boys. As Lem got his grip on the controller adjusted, he said, “Hold on to your pants, Sarge. We’re on the move.”

The Ripsaw then roared to life, its systems powering up with a soft hum—battery mode engaged as Lem silently got ’em on the move. Under Lem’s deft touch, the vehicle moved forward, navigating effortlessly around the obstacles as the all-wheel drive vehicle demonstrated its maneuverability.

They made their way to the roadblock they’d strung across the expressway, and Lem expertly guided the Ripsaw into a position where it could use one of the tractor-trailers for cover while scooting around it to fire at the enemy when needed. With the M5 now in place, it provided a much-needed boost to the Rangers’ defensive capabilities.

Satisfied with Lem’s work, Dekker complimented him. “You know what? After today, I’m recommending you be renamed MacGyver. I don’t think anyone else in the company could have gotten this figured out and sorted as quickly as you, Lem. Damn, it does pay to keep a few of you nerds around, doesn’t it?”

Lemming laughed at that, “What, you want me to give up a name like Lemming for MacGyver? Are you crazy? I like Lemming—in fact, why don’t more people act like ‘Lemmings’ and just do as I do.”

They laughed at the joke when suddenly the bridge and everything around them began to shake. At first they assumed

the cause was an explosion on the bridge, or the ground near the entrance. But when the shaking continued for more than a couple of seconds, it dawned on them—they were experiencing an earthquake.

“That was an earthquake, right?” stammered Lem as the natural disaster seemed to have caused a slight lull in the fighting.

Dekker looked around them as he heard Lem’s question. Seeing the confused looks on the faces of nearby Rangers told him they were all thinking the same thing—earthquake...really?

“This war never ceases to amaze me, Lem, but yeah. I think we just experienced an earthquake. How large or along what fault line...I have no idea.”

Eighth Army HQ Afloat

USS *Fallujah* (LHA-9)

General Bob Sink raised the mug to his lips as he sipped on the fresh cup of joe—the hot liquid a reminder not to gulp it down until it had cooled. He’d accidentally burned himself the first day aboard the *Fallujah*. Having served thirty-four years in the Army, he wasn’t accustomed to how hot the sailors liked to keep their hotplates. Brushing aside the embarrassment of burning himself with coffee, he returned his gaze to the CIC and the flurry of activity occurring across each of the workstations.

For a knuckle dragger such as himself, it was impressive to watch how the sailors absorbed the deluge of data to eventually find what was most important to the Marines or assault force on the ground. Their ability to focus on the trees and not the forest was commendable, and exactly what the first two phases of this operation needed most.

While his staff had had a fit over his insistence on being close to the front lines during the start of the operation, he'd learned early in his career that the closer a leader was to the action, the faster they could spot problems and make corrections. If that meant he had to give up his creature comforts at the Dalian Hilton to squish aboard the *Fallujah*, then so be it. It was far more important for him to know what was happening in real-time aboard the CIC of the warship coordinating it all than to have a large staff and a broader overview of the AOR. He left that to his deputy and headquarters staff in Dalian to handle.

“General Sink, phase one of Operation Silent Dagger is officially complete,” Major General Greenwood reported.

Bob turned to his operations officers. “Excellent, Joe. How bad were our losses delivering the first wave?”

The general paused for a second as he glanced down to a clipboard he'd seen the Navy use for just about everything. “Sir, Oracle One, our airborne C&C, has confirmed that eight V-280 Valors and five CH-53s were lost to enemy fire during the assault. They also reported one CH-53 was lost to mechanical error—it looks like it went down near the port facility, but no one is certain. One of the Constellation frigates has been dispatched to begin search and rescue operations or

at least see if it's possible to figure out what happened and if there are any survivors.”

“Damn, you hate losing a valuable bird and a crew to mechanical failure. Enemy fire is one thing. Mechanical failure—that could come from sloppy work. Find out what happened and let's make sure we don't start losing more choppers as we progress with the op. We've got a lot more trips ahead of us before this is over,” General Sink directed. If there was a maintenance problem, he wanted it solved ASAP, before more helos started dropping in the drink.

Just then, Lieutenant General Don Tackaberry walked up to him. “Bob, it looks like Silent Dagger is complete. Do I have your permission to initiate phase two, Thunder Drop?”

Smiling at his friend, Sink nodded. “Yeah, Don, it's time. Go get 'em!”

A broad smile formed on the lips of the XVIII Airborne Commander as he walked toward the comms section to issue the order. It wouldn't be long now until the brigades of the 82nd Airborne conducted another combat jump in the war, and the Screaming Eagles heliborned into the glory of another battle on a faraway shore.

“General, this just came in from the high side—eyes only,” a Naval Commander said as he handed him a sealed envelope.

Having signed for the document, Bob hastily opened it, reading its contents before placing it back in the envelope and handing it back to the commander. “Thank you for bringing that. You can dispose of it now,” he directed, and the naval

officer gave a quick nod before heading back to the vault—the onboard SCIF.

“Good news?” questioned Greenwood.

Smiling, Bob leaned in, whispering, “Looks like there was a meteor strike a few minutes ago.”

Greenwood lifted an eyebrow at the news. “All good, I hope?”

Bob shrugged. “We’ll see. In the meantime, find us a place ashore we can move our HQ into. Not that I don’t mind the *Fallujah*, but this place is asses and elbows—I need some room to spread out.”

“Copy that. You want the Continental, the Hilton, or the Marriott this time?” Greenwood asked. They had identified the likely locations they knew would be under allied control within hours of the operation starting.

“Dealer’s choice, Joe, just make sure it’ll have enough lodging and workspaces without placing our people in any unnecessary danger,” Bob replied, eager to be back ashore.

Chapter Thirty-Five

The Quiet Room

Joint Battle Command Center

Northwest Beijing, China

As Jade Dragon finished bringing President Yao and his fellow leaders up to speed on this latest allied attack near Tianjin, Yao glared at the video camera representing the AI with a wave of growing anger and frustration. He tried to control his tone as he spoke. “I must say, JD, I am greatly disappointed in you right now. This is not what I had expected to happen—Tianjin is under assault! What do you have to say for yourself?”

The blue light circled the camera once. Then, it made an unusual second pass, as if trying to solve a complex problem requiring additional computing or brain power. General Luo Ronghuan from the PLA Air Force pounced as the AI failed to respond, mocking immediately. “Cat got your tongue, JD? It appears the enemy has outfoxed you—again.”

This elicited a few laughs and snide remarks before the AI spoke in its defense. “President Yao, was there a question in your statement, or was this a general expression of disappointment?”

“There is a question in the President’s statement, JD,” Dr. Xi interjected. “When the President said, ‘What do you have to say for yourself?’ he referred to your previous analysis of the allies’ positions and their likelihood of conducting

additional major operations beyond their current operations in northern China.”

“Ah, excuse me, then. I failed to make that connection,” the AI replied to Dr. Xi. “Mr. President, now that I understand your question, allow me to start again—” Jade Dragon tried to explain but was cut off before he could continue.

“Enough, JD. Whatever your excuse is, it won’t change the fact that the enemy has bypassed the defensive works we had built to protect Beijing and the Capital District against this kind of threat. What I want to know now is how serious is this attack in Tianjin and what are the enemy’s intentions?” demanded the President.

“Yes, Mr. President. The initial reports I have received from units in New Binhai indicate the area is under attack by allied Special Forces. Some of the information I am receiving from these units does make sense. They are sending conflicting reports on what kinds of Special Forces are attacking them and from where. For example, an armed police unit has reported soldiers descending from the night sky via parachute before attacking them. Then, a People’s Militia unit report near the Taku Forts reported soldiers emerging from the water before making their way up the beaches or climbing up nearby piers and wharves.

“Just moments ago, a report came in from the 113th Medium Combined Arms Brigade opposite the Yongding River along the Beitang Estuary. Several of their air-defense batteries detected what they believed to be a large heliborne assault heading toward New Binhai. Several of their radar

masts were destroyed by allied suppression attacks moments after they detected and engaged allied attack helicopters. This report included the destruction of seven V-280 troop assault transports and three heavy utility transport helicopters. They are now reporting the landing of allied heliborne forces across the river, near what they believe might be their objective—road, rail, and bridge access leading to and around the piers and wharves of the New Binhai area,” the AI explained while bringing forward real-time drone footage of what was happening in different sections of the port and the surrounding area.

The earlier condescending looks of the generals were gone, replaced with looks of confusion, anger, and concern. If the allies had managed to bypass their defense in-depth with some sort of seaborne assault they hadn't thought possible, there might be little they could do in the short term to reposition forces to confront this new threat.

“Are the attacks isolated to just the New Binhai area, and how large of a force does it appear the allies have committed?” asked General Li.

Yao looked to the head of the PLA, hoping to see his usual calm demeanor in times like this. But Li looked anything but calm as the AI shifted the video display to a new drone feed and made an announcement that sent a chill down his back.

“This video is from an ISR drone, a reconnaissance unit from the 151st Heavy Combined Arms Brigade currently bivouacked forty-two kilometers north of the Cangzhou PLA Air Base. This places the unit forty-three kilometers southwest

of the port, or roughly two hours' drive at most." Then, the video changed filters, removing much of the grainy night lens as a new image came into crisp focus. "When I analyzed the footage through some filters while including radar and communication activity of this area. A clearer image of what is happening begins to present itself. Those new videos can now be verified. They are parachutes—hundreds of them.

"Mr. President, in answer to your question about the enemy's intentions and potential strengths, I initially thought the allies were likely conducting a large-scale raid to cause some damage and maybe create a diversion for something else. However, given the number of locations the allied forces appear to be assaulting, and now the confirmation of what looks to be close to a battalion-size element of paratroopers descending southwest of New Binhai, I believe the allies are looking to capture the port and the facilities within—"

"To what end?" interrupted Xue. "Do they think they can just seize control of a port and the surrounding metropolis? What will they possibly do if they succeed in capturing New Binhai?"

"They're going to offload armored divisions and look to expand their security perimeter outwards," answered General Li.

"Yes, General Li is right. That is the most logical—"

Before Jade Dragon could complete his sentence, the room began to shake. Lights throughout the JBCC flickered briefly before the shaking stopped.

"What the hell was that?" stammered Yao as he looked at the confused faces around him. For a moment, no one

spoke. No one knew what to say or what had just happened. Then the voice of the AI sounded throughout the room. “Excuse me, Mr. President. It would appear that a brief seismic event just occurred.”

Yao bunched his eyebrows as his brain began to piece together what the AI had just said. “An earthquake?”

“Yes, it would appear so. I should note it is not entirely uncommon for this region of China to experience earthquakes. There are several fault lines that run through this area, though they have been dormant for some time,” JD elaborated.

Yao looked at Dr. Xi. His eyes betrayed the fear behind the calm demeanor he tried to portray. Yao wondered—if he saw his own eyes right now, would they betray the fear he felt?

Four Hours Later

“The 113th Medium Combined Arms Brigade is heavily engaged with allied forces in the Beitang Estuary area. Fighting over control of the Qinbin-Haibin Expressway has been absolutely brutal,” explained General Xue as some drone footage played on the monitor. Large sections of the bridge heading in both directions were covered in the charred wreckage of light and medium armored vehicles. Multiple attempts had clearly been made, with some succeeding better than others, but none of the attempts had managed to break through.

“Are those...bodies covering the bridge?” asked Dr. Xi aloud to no one in particular.

“Yes, Dr. Xi. Some of those are allied bodies—many of them are from local PM units sent ahead of an armored push to draw allied fire so the APCs and IFVs can better identify their positions,” the AI’s voice calmly explained as it replied to Xi’s question. Xi rarely asked questions or spoke during the regular CMC meetings Yao had requested he attend to help manage his AI creation.

“The bodies are of no concern, Dr. Xi, if we are unable to breach their defenses and assault the port,” Xue elaborated before asking the AI to show some drone footage of the wharf that handled the giant container ships. Moments later, the image on the monitor changed and they were now looking at a flurry of activity taking place next to several large military transport vessels. These ships looked to have just recently docked as the activity around the cranes and every other piece of equipment needed to offload the ship was now moving into high gear.

Xue pointed to the live footage, exclaiming, “If we cannot break through their hastily established defensive positions, then we will see more and more of that, happening at not just this pier—this wharf—but across the many others that make this port facility among the top ten in the world.”

President Yao howled in frustration as he smacked his hand hard on the table. “What is the status of the 151st Brigade? That brigade has main battle tanks, doesn’t it?” asked Yao to no one in particular.

“Yes, this brigade has one battalion of main battle tanks. The unit had been rotated from the frontlines two months ago to rest and refit. Per the records I was able to access,” the AI responded, “this battalion consists of seventy-two ZTZ main battle tanks and twenty-four of our new Zhanlong autonomous unmanned battle tanks. These are a more advanced, much larger and more lethal version of the allies’ Textron M5 Ripsaws, which we have begun to see them use more frequently.

“Mr. President,” the AI went on, “I need to be given the authority to take charge of and command more of our units on the battlefield. I have given several suggestions as to orders the brigade commander could issue to his battalion commanders to engage the enemy paratrooper units, but he continues to rebuff my suggestions.”

“That’s because you’re not the one in charge,” General Xue shot back at the AI before the President could respond. “Mr. President, this has got to stop. I cannot continue to have the AI countermanding my every order to my field commander. It may believe it has a better idea or way of doing something, but I am the commander of our ground forces—not the AI.”

“Yes, he is right, Mr. President. General Xue is the ground force commander for China’s Army—and how has that gone, might I ask?” countered the AI in a demonstration of its growing situational awareness. “Mr. President, our ability to defeat the allies and win this war has not been lost yet—but we are not far from that position either. Allow me to have control of the Army and Air Force. Let me have control and

allow me to fight this war the way it should have been fought from the beginning.”

“Enough!” shouted Yao in frustration. Between his generals and the AI, he had had enough of their bickering. “JD, I need to speak to my generals in the quiet room for the moment. In the meantime, prepare a report on the immediate actions you would take over the coming seventy-two hours if I were to place you in charge of the Army and Air Force,” the President directed before turning his attention to his generals. “As to the rest of you. I want to speak with everyone in the quiet room, now!”

When the door to the quiet room closed, one of Yao’s guards activated the secondary noisemaker, providing a final layer of protection from the ever-present AI. With the freedom to speak candidly, Yao’s generals and senior advisors began a raucous discussion about the most recent request by the AI—to be given command of the PLA.

General Xue, the most outspoken of the generals, spoke first. “Mr. President, we have discussed this request on numerous occasions. Without fail, following a major battlefield defeat, it brings up this same topic—‘give me control of the Army,’” Xue explained, pausing for a moment before continuing. “Mr. President, each time the AI has made this request, we provided examples and reasons why this should not be considered, regardless of a battlefield defeat or a victory. The reason for not giving the AI control of our military remains the same—we need positive military control.

Once we cede that to the AI, Mr. President, there is no telling what it might do next. I think I speak for the others when I say we must remain in charge of our respective branches, not the AI.”

Yao sighed as Xue finished. He'd heard the same arguments from them before, just as he had heard the AI's justifications for why it should be given the control it sought. With each failure, each city and kilometer the allies captured, his concerns about the AI somehow turning its weapons against them, against him, had kept him in check to this point. With the allies now less than a hundred and thirty kilometers from Beijing, he wondered if that concern was still valid. Turning his chair to face the head scientist, he said, “Dr. Xi, let me ask you a question about the AI. The generals bring up our need to maintain control of the AI to ensure our own weapons are not turned against us. With access to our strategic weapons siloed off from the reaches of the AI, what risks, if any, still remain with respect to the AI being able to turn its weapons against us should I honor its request and grant it control of our military?”

Dr. Xi took a moment to think about his response before speaking. Yao liked that about the scientist. He thought before he spoke, something not all of his generals had managed to perfect.

“Mr. President, the concerns the generals mention are valid, and so are the ones you mentioned. For the past six months, Dr. Peng Liyuan's team has been working to address a series of deficiencies with the OS of the Terracotta Warriors. Many of these issues, from physical problems such as optimizing the dexterity of their hands to allow them to plug

themselves in for charging to their ability to distinguish between the heat signature of a human crouching beneath a covered position and an animal of similar size, had been worked on by Peng's team in Taiwan.

“One of the more challenging problems her team was able to solve, before her untimely death, was the Terracottas' ability to distinguish friendly, neutral, and hostile forces. Eventually, a series of safety protocols and rules enabled the Terracottas to classify targets accurately in fractions of a second. The reason I bring this to your attention, and the reason why I now side with giving the AI control of the military, is this: last night, my teams of engineers finalized what we believe will be the last major change to the Terracottas' operating system with version 2.2.01, which was pushed out electronically to the Terracottas already in operation, the ones being built and those currently being held in warehouses. This latest update also applies to Jade Dragon. It limits his ability to control the military and turn it against China, or you, Mr. President,” explained Xi.

“For example, the rules that were put into place limiting who the AI could harm or allow to be harmed were further reinforced to include a series of rules that essentially made it impossible to use the military against China, the people within the country, the military, or yourself unless a series of events were to happen first—namely you and those assigned to the CMC, to include the heads of the service branches, would have to have been killed for the AI to become fully unleashed against our nation's enemies. If that were to happen, Mr. President, we would all be dead, so it really wouldn't matter at that point,” Xi finished explaining.

Yao thought about what he had said before clarifying. “So essentially, you are saying unless we are somehow killed during some sort of decapitation strike, the layers of rules mean that some worst-case scenario where the AI can turn on us is impossible. Is that correct?”

“Yes, that is correct,” Xi confirmed.

Yao sat back in his chair for a moment, thinking. Turning to his generals, he said, “General Li, perhaps it is too late to make much of a difference in the war effort, and perhaps it’s not. Given the new information Dr. Xi has shared, I think it is time to allow the AI to have a chance at fighting the allies. I’ve made a decision. I’m going to give the AI full control of the military. Please see that it is done, and let’s see if maybe the AI can fight this war better than we have.”

Chapter Thirty-Six

Daggers in the Night

March 18, 2028

Bravo Company, 2-327th Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne

IVO Beihou Farm

Northwest Binhai New Area

Tianjin, China

Staff Sergeant Leslie Sabo Jr. stared out the open side door of the Bell V-280 Valor, in awe of what he was seeing as they approached the Port of Binhai. Their chalk hadn't been part of the first wave of conventional forces to arrive in the wake of the initial seizure of the port by Special Forces. He could only imagine what it must have been like as those first few units had barely held the perimeter. When their sister battalion, the 1-327th Bulldogs, had deployed to the port ahead of them, they'd feared missing out on the action. But as they began to overfly the port terminals, the volume of enemy tracer fire zipping into the sky along the edges of the city of Binhai reassured him there was still plenty of fighting.

"Listen up, First Platoon. We just got a FRAGO en route to the LZ," Lieutenant Branham announced over the platoon net so the squads on the other aircraft would know what was happening. "Our chalk is being redirected to the northwest of the city. I don't have many details yet. We're

being told our objective is to reinforce Alpha Company as they look to establish a blocking position where the Jingjin and Changshen Expressways cross each other.

“Apparently, a motorized rifle battalion is either trying to break through it or is currently engaging Alpha Company, which is defending. I know this all sounds confusing, and it is. I’m just relaying what’s been passed to me. You guys know as much as I do about what’s happening. Squad leaders, I’ll need you guys to stay nimble and assess the situation as it develops once we’re on the ground. Semper Gumby, out,” the LT finished.

Sabo wasn’t sure if having the LT flying with him was good or bad luck, but this was the first time he’d heard of getting a FRAGO en route to an objective, so that couldn’t be good.

Moments earlier, they had been on their way to support Charley Company as they established a blocking position near the Binhai West Station, a massive, sprawling light and medium rail station connected to several large city streets and another expressway. If they were being pulled further to the northwest, then it likely meant the PLA was attempting to get their units into Binhai proper before the division could cut it from Tianjin to the west.

“Check it out, Sabo. Hell of a fight going on over there.” Specialist Anderson pointed.

Sabo looked and couldn’t believe what he was seeing. At least six ZBL-08s were ablaze while four others looked like they were laying into a few buildings some American unit had likely taken refuge in. Then he saw a missile contrail leave one

of the buildings to slam into one of the armored vehicles—exploding it into a giant fireball in the center of what looked like an eight-lane major thoroughfare.

The Valor dove to the right, losing altitude faster than Sabo thought was safe, when he saw a missile fly through the space they had just occupied moments earlier. Then several strings of tracer fire zipped in front of them, all around them, as their pilot continued to fly erratically. Sabo wasn't sure he would hold on to his last meal when their pilot had eventually dropped their altitude to the rooftops of the apartments nearby.

“Holy crap, that was insane,” Sabo said aloud to no one in particular.

“You ain't joking, Sarge. I thought I was going to toss my cookies for a minute,” replied Specialist Lewis, his knuckles white as he gripped his XM250 automatic rifle.

“Thirty seconds!” shouted the pilot.

Sabo watched as the apartments and buildings whipped past them in a blur. Then, all of a sudden, they were free of the apartment blocks and back over open terrain. He spotted a highway he thought might be where they were headed. Then he saw a handful of burning wrecks, smudges of black smoke against the morning sky—a warning of enemy vehicles nearby.

Zip, zip.

“IFV five o'clock!” shouted the crew chief behind the pilot. Then he opened up with the M134 minigun, sending hundreds of rounds at a target Sabo couldn't see.

The pilot reacted quickly, banking the Valor away from the infantry fighting vehicle as its gunner continued firing at

them.

Sabo glanced at the other Valors flying past them as their pilot deftly maneuvered around the enemy fire, avoiding the streams of hot lead trying to knock them from the sky. As they flew over a highway, the pilot bled off their airspeed before putting them down, hard on the ground and just out of sight of the vehicle shooting at them.

Then the crew chiefs barked, “Go, go, go, get off the bird!” as the soldiers bolted into the unknown.

Sabo had barely gotten off the Valor when the pilot had started lifting off. He ran a few meters to his front and dove for cover as tracer rounds ripped through the air where he’d just been.

Ting, ting, thunk.

Craning his neck around to where the Valor had been, he turned just in time to see the left side engine get raked by machine-gun bullets. A few rounds seemed to have bounced off the armored casing—but not all. A couple tore into the engine, causing it to belch flame and sparks before spewing smoke and then catching fire.

“Ah, damn it. We’re going to lose that bird,” Sabo shouted.

“Over here, Staff Sergeant!” Specialist Lewis called to him.

Sabo looked to his front, spotting Lewis in a drainage ditch next to the road he’d taken refuge in. The scrawny kid cut loose with his XM250 automatic rifle, laying into a target he couldn’t see. Crawling towards the ditch, he could hear the

guys from his squad shouting out targets and warnings to each other like the veterans they were. He smiled as he reached the drainage ditch, crawling into it as he took a position next to Specialist Lewis, his machine gunner.

Raising his rifle above the lip of the ditch, Sabo got his first good view of what the hell was going on. It took him a moment to reorient himself and figure out where they were on the map. *What the...?* His thought trailed off as he realized their pilot had set them down near Xinyuan Avenue—a frontage road that ran parallel to the Jingjin Expressway and at least a kilometer and a half to the east of where they were supposed to be. They were in the wrong spot, alone and now separated from the rest of their platoon and company.

“Where the hell is that shooting coming from?” Lieutenant Branham asked as he plopped into the ditch with them.

“Across the highway, near those giant windmill blades,” Lewis replied. “I’m pretty sure I spotted a ZBL. I can’t tell what kind, but it looks like they dismounted their infantry.”

Lieutenant Branham had his map in hand, shaking his head as he realized the Valor had landed them way off course.

“We’re out of position, LT. I figured that out just as you got here. We’re about a klick and a half too far east of our original LZ,” Sabo explained before the LT told him what he already knew.

“Well, ain’t that great, Staff Sergeant? One squad is with us. The other two are at the correct LZ with the rest of the company,” lamented the LT. “Specialist Robinson, see if you

can't raise Sergeant First Class Peters. I need to tell him where we are and what the hell happened."

Shaking his head, Sabo looked behind them in the direction of where he last saw the Valor. He was expecting to see smoke rising from where it had crashed, but he didn't see any smoke. *Whoa, could that thing really keep flying with just a single engine?* He was no expert on helicopters or tilt rotors, but that would be a first if it made it back to the safety of the port.

"Stop shooting. Everyone, hold your fire. We have trees and a highway between us and them. They're going to have a hard time seeing us unless we make it easier for them by shooting at them. So stop shooting," exclaimed Sabo before adding. "In fact, we're moving positions. Follow me, and let's go."

He started moving along the drainage ditch in the direction where they were supposed to link up with Alpha Company. A few minutes into their cautious trek paralleling the frontage road adjacent to the highway from which they had been shot at, the LT called a halt as he started to receive some radio traffic. As Sabo observed him, he couldn't help but think they were being voluntold to go do something that might get them killed for the simple reason that they weren't with the others. He'd come to learn that out-of-sight, out-of-mind units were often sent on side missions that ranged from stupid to outright suicidal.

"What is it, LT?" Sabo ventured as he handed the radio receiver back to Robinson. Judging by the look on the man's face, he wasn't happy.

“OK, I want everyone to form a one-eighty, rifles pointed that way,” Branham directed. “The staff sergeant and I need to talk privately for a minute. Sergeant Balzer, you’re in charge.”

Sabo got up and started walking after the LT as they put some distance between them and the squad.

When the LT dropped to a knee, he motioned for him to do the same. Then Sabo asked, “LT, you look like you ate a turd at the White House just as the President asked you a question. Only now, you don’t know if you should swallow it or spit it out. What’s going on, sir?”

Branham laughed at the analogy, which helped to break the tension he was obviously under. “Sabo, anyone tell you that you have an interesting way with words? That was actually pretty good. So, here’s the deal. Do you remember that ZBL that was shooting at us from that construction yard with all those windmill blades?”

“Uh, yeah, I’m pretty sure I still remember being shot at a little while back. Let me guess, the captain wants to see if we can take it?”

Grunting at his suggestion. Branham nodded slowly in agreement. “How did you know?”

It was Sabo’s turn to chuckle at the obvious. “Sir, when the rest of the company is a klick and a half in that direction, and at least one IFV is, what, a few hundred meters to our south, it’s not rocket science to figure out we’re the closest squad with any kind of antitank weapons. It kind of makes sense even if it sucks for us.”

Grinning at Sabo, Branham said, “You know, when they gave you that MOH, they offered you a direct commission to lieutenant. You’re one of the smarter guys in the company, Sabo. Why did you turn it down?”

Sabo snorted at the question before explaining, “I wouldn’t say all that, sir. I just did what I needed to do to stay alive and keep my friends from getting killed. I appreciated the offer, and a battlefield commission is nothing to sneeze at. But if I had accepted it, I’d become an officer. Sure, I’d likely command a platoon, maybe even a company, one day. But I’d never be a sergeant again. A rank that places me directly in the mix with soldiers. If I had been an officer that day back in Venezuela—everyone would have died. I wouldn’t have been in the position I was because I wouldn’t have been a grunt, an NCO who was at the right place, at the right time, with balls as big as Texas to savage those bastards like I did. That’s why I turned it down—but that’s not why you wanted to talk away from the guys. What exactly do *they* want us to do?”

Branham stared at him for a moment, then nodded like he accepted his reasoning for turning down the commission. “Like I said earlier, Sabo, you’re one of the smartest guys I know. But, all right, let’s go over what they want us to do,” Branham said.

As he began to explain their instructions, Sabo started to hear something faint but growing in intensity as the seconds passed. Then he heard diesel engines and the unmistakable sound of tank tracks. When Sabo turned to look in the direction of the sounds, he froze. Then he pulled Lieutenant Branham to the ground before they could be spotted. “Sir, we got a bigger problem than that IFV across the highway. I swear

I just saw a platoon's worth of tanks and other armored vehicles moving along that other highway—Binhairaocheng, I think it is," he said as he pointed to their three o'clock position.

The LT poked his head above the lip of the drainage ditch they were hiding in to catch a glimpse of what Sabo had seen. "Oh man, you ain't joking, Sabo. Crap, that's gotta be at least one, maybe two companies' worth of mechanized infantry, and you're right. There's at least a platoon of tanks with them, but there could be more we can't see."

As the LT slid back down below the lip of the ditch, he looked at him. "Come on. We need to get back to the squad and call this in. See if maybe we can get some air support or a gunship or something. Plus we have to let the captain know what's crackling towards them from their rear area before it's too late."

Bravo Company, 3rd Battalion, Rangers

Port of Binhai

It had been almost two hours since Dekker's unit had been relieved by the British 2nd Battalion, Royal Gurkhas, after a hellacious hour of confusion and intense fighting in and around the giant port facility. When the larger Gurkha force arrived, he was glad to see they were able to expand upon the initial perimeter the Rangers had set up. They had even expanded across the Yongdingxinhe Bridge to the other side,

seizing control of another avenue of attack the enemy could have used against the port. Dekker's platoon had fought like hell on that bridge, repelling several PLA attempts with armored vehicles to break past their roadblock and get into the port facility. Had it not been for a concerted effort by several Army attack helicopters, engaging a handful of T-96 tanks and ZSL-92 infantry fighting vehicles, his platoon would have been wiped out, and God knew what would have happened at the port once the PLA had a path into it.

After handing their positions over to the British Nepalese unit, Dekker's platoon had been directed to a warehouse near the wharves on Haitie Boulevard. He found that the name of the street, which closely resembled the poverty-stricken country of Haiti, aptly fit what this place had become. Those first ninety minutes, while they waited for reinforcements, it had been hell on earth. It felt like those days along the Korean-Chinese border—the battle for Dandong. This place seemed to be giving it a run for its money.

When they arrived at the warehouse, they quickly discovered it had been taken over by Special Forces and looked to have been turned into a forward headquarters. The exterior of the place and some of the operational aspects of what he assumed was the tactical operations center were being managed by members of the Canadian Special Operations regiments. He hadn't worked with the Canadian operators often, but on the few occasions where he'd encountered them, like the final years in Afghanistan, they'd shown themselves to be solid professionals in their trade. For now, Dekker's platoon had directed to hang tight at the warehouse while the brass decided what they wanted the Rangers to do next.

An hour after arriving at the warehouse, Dekker felt the need to stretch his legs and wanted to eat outside. Grabbing a pair of MREs on the way, he saw Major Meacham and motioned for him to follow him. Exiting the warehouse, Dekker handed him an MRE. "I thought we could get lunch, and you look like you could use a break."

Taking the MRE, Meacham grunted at the discovery of Menu 1: Chili with Beans. "Thanks, yeah, I could use a break. But damn, dude, Chili with Beans. I thought we had an agreement about this."

Dekker laughed at Meacham's comment. He had forgotten about his irritable bowel syndrome when it came to Menu #1. Meacham had been a captain back then. The platoon was bunking in a single large bunker facility at some random FOB shortly after the battle of Dandong. Menu #1 had been the last MRE in the box, so he ate it. Unbeknownst to the platoon, leaving the Chili with Beans for Meacham would prove to be a terrible mistake. It had started shortly after he'd gone to sleep. It had been silent at first. No one knew for certain what happened or even when it started. But suddenly, a cough started, and then more people began to cough and choke as they awoke from their slumber, not sure what was happening or why their bodies were suddenly reacting to something in the air. Then a whistle was heard, followed by another slip of flatulent noise that gave it away and, more importantly, who the guilty party was. It had been determined from that day on the platoon would make sure Meacham was never allowed to eat Menu #1.

The two of them walked over to see this makeshift combat airport the Air Force had set up, and they saw one of

the giant C-17 Globemaster cargo aircraft lining up to land. Perhaps what was more intriguing was seeing at least two other C-17s stacked at various altitudes and distances behind the one approaching the makeshift runway.

“Dekker, that over there”—Meacham pointed to the ad hoc runway—“has got to be the most gangster thing I have seen the Air Force do in my entire military career. I mean, look at that—they’re freaking landing a giant C-17 cargo plane on a damn highway.”

Chuckling at his surprise, Dekker opined, “Yeah, I’ll bet some Air Force weenie was thinking we need an airport and then stared at the map for a few moments, and then poof—a lightbulb came on, an idea had formed. He saw that giant stretch of road running from the edge of the water all the way to the Qinbin-Haibin Expressway and figured, hell, I’ll bet those flyboys could land on that. And sure as hell, wouldn’t you know it, they can.”

They both laughed at the absurdity of the Air Force landing cargo planes on this bastardized-looking setup they had come up with. The Xin’gang No. 9 Road was an insanely wide ten-lane road that started at the edge of the Bay and stretched some 5.6 kilometers until it connected to the Qinbin-Haibin Expressway and other roads connected to the port. Without access to an airport, the Air Force had looked for alternative ways to bring the enormous sums of munitions, vehicles, and personnel during those first forty-eight to seventy-two hours of capturing the port. Until the Navy’s sealift command could begin docking and unloading the ships ferrying the heavy equipment and supplies for the follow-on

divisions that would exploit the capture of the port, a stopgap to fill the void was necessary.

Eating their MREs, they reminisced about home, their wives, their kids, and what they hoped to do once the war was over. While they continued to talk as they finished their MREs, a trio of C-130J Super Hercules that had just landed caught their attention. The cargo aircraft appeared to be sporting the Israeli flag, the Star of David, on the tail of the aircraft. As if being serenaded by the continuous sounds of machine-gun fire and rumblings of artillery in the background while they ate wasn't strange enough, the appearance of not one but three Israeli cargo planes had piqued their interest.

“Dekker, I've got to accept that we may be in some form or another living in the Matrix, or at least the pages of some dystopian story that has yet to be completed. But what the heck are those three Israeli aircraft unloading, and what are they doing in China?” Meacham asked in bewilderment.

Shaking his head, at a loss for words, Dekker eventually replied, “Uh...yeah. I don't know what to make of that either, but I'll tell you what. I'm going to go find out —'cause I can, and you're coming with me.”

“Oh yeah? What makes you think I want to walk over there and ask questions? Besides, you don't need me to do that for you.”

“Ah, come on. With you along, I can make up some stupid excuse, like we're from JSOC, and we want to know what this is and when it'll be up and running. Come on, Meacham, it'll work, and besides, I know you're as curious as

I am,” Dekker countered as he stood to his feet, then held a hand out to Meacham to pull him to his feet.

Meacham grabbed the extended hand, pulling himself to his feet as he replied, “OK, fine, whatever. Let’s go check this out. Then we should head back to the warehouse and see if we got a mission yet, not that anyone has tried to contact me about it.”

They walked a couple of blocks to where the supplies and equipment were hastily offloaded and then transferred to nearby warehouses for distribution. They eventually ran into a couple of Israeli soldiers as they neared some of the equipment. One of them shared that they were part of the IDF 299th Air Defense Special Operations Squadron, the “Desert Protectors.” He said they had brought with them a deployable version of the Israeli Drone Dome and Iron Dome systems that had been optimized for quick setup and tear-down deployable operations. They’d also brought a new system—Magen Mehir or the Defender Swift Anti-Drone System. This was an experimental, highly advanced microwave antidrone system that looked to be similar in nature to one of the modules on the Jackal XD500s. It was designed to neutralize hostile drones or drone swarms through focused high-powered microwave pulse emission, disrupting or damaging the electronic components of the target.

Having quenched their curiosity, the two of them walked back to the warehouse, talking about what they had just seen. The question they kept wondering about the most was how many more leaps in weaponry technology this war would introduce before it was over.

Jingliang Trade Development Company Headquarters

Port of Binhai

“This is what I’ve been looking for. A rooftop that can give us a bird’s-eye view of what’s happening around us,” complimented General Bob Sink. “This was a good find, Caleb. Thanks for putting the effort into finding a place like this. It’s exactly what we needed.”

Deflecting the praise, Major General Caleb Greenwood assured Sink it had actually been a sniper team from the South Korean Army’s 13th Special Mission Brigade, the Black Panthers, who had identified the building. Finding a location that could reasonably be turned into a forward headquarters that offered reasonable protection and a visual overwatch of the port facility had proven to be a challenge.

“Look at that, Caleb. That’s ingenious,” Bob commented on the Air Force’s ad hoc use of a wide empty road, turning it into a makeshift runway. This rather risky attempt greatly improved the odds of them successfully holding the port until their heavy armored units arrived in a couple of days. They would advance and capture the city of Tianjin next before turning their sights on Beijing.

“Agreed, sir. It’s pretty slick how they land aircraft on that main road before having them pull into one of those empty lots to either side of that connector road. They hastily unload everything before getting them back in the air. It’s

incredible to watch how fast they get these aircraft unloaded and back in the air,” Caleb explained before changing topics to the real reason he had asked Bob to come up here. “As neat as it is to watch those guys, you asked me to keep you apprised of when our Israeli friends arrive—”

“Oh, that’s right. I’d almost forgotten. Have they set anything up yet?” Bob asked excitedly, interrupting him.

Smiling, Caleb nodded, pointing with his hand in the direction of where the 299th Special Operations Squadron was setting up their air-defense equipment. “That’s what I wanted to tell you about. They’ve arrived, and they’ve brought a bag of tricks along to test a few theories and help us better protect port facilities. But I’m no expert in their equipment or exactly what it is they brought with them. However, I believe a friend of yours might be able to help explain what it is and how it may help our cause,” Caleb finished explaining, then motioned for the soldier standing near the door to open it up.

When the door opened, Brigadier General Avihu Halutz, the commander of Israeli Air Defense Command, walked out onto the roof and made his way towards the Eighth Army commander and his friend.

“Well, I’ll be. Look who the cat dragged in,” Bob exclaimed as he walked forward, embracing his friend. “I have to tell you, Avihu, I didn’t think they would let you come. This place is still a bit of a war zone, in case you couldn’t tell.” As if to emphasize the point, they heard a handful of explosions erupt not all that far from their building, exploding near the wharves.

“Eh, it reminds me of home,” Avihu commented. “Besides, it should be us who is thanking you for allowing Israel the opportunity to test this new system during real wartime conditions. I think you will be pleased with this system.”

“I’ll admit, I don’t know much about whatever it is you guys want to test. So, why don’t you explain it to me like you would a golden retriever or, say, a ten-year-old boy,” Bob mused, drawing some laughter from Caleb and Avihu.

For the next few moments, the Israeli commander explained the three systems they had brought along with them. He directed their attention to the IDF soldiers setting up their specialized equipment. The soldiers moved with a sense of urgency and focused tension, reflecting the intricate ballet of machines and men below them.

The first thing they noticed was something called the “Drone Dome,” a sleek, compact piece of artillery bristling with sensors and lenses. It almost seemed to possess a predatory awareness in the way its radar dome would sweep the sky, hunting for an elusive enemy—drones. It was like a silent guardian, a watcher of the skies and the soldiers below, as it stood ready to unleash its invisible arrows of radio frequencies to ensnare any unwelcome intruder.

Next came something they were more familiar with. The compact “Mini-Iron” was a smaller sibling to the formidable Iron Dome that protected the cities of Israel from Hamas rockets. Yet it held a presence of its own, a silent promise of protection. The system was equipped with a myriad of launchers, each launcher equipped with a pod of eight

interceptors, poised to unleash its defensive might against threats that dared to threaten those beneath its dome of protection.

Last but not least was the dominant reason the Israelis were at Binhai, participating in a conflict they were not officially part of. Avihu pointed their gaze to the experimental weapon they were here to test—the Magen Mehir. An experimental, highly advanced antidrone microwave system. It was designed to neutralize drones or drone swarms through focused high-powered microwave pulses that would disrupt or damage the electronic components of the drones.

Bob shook his head in amazement. “I look at all that tech, Avihu, and just marvel at the advancements in technology we’ve seen during this war. I fear what the future holds for us.”

Avihu nodded, holding Bob’s gaze, “You aren’t wrong to be concerned about the future. The thing to remember, Bob, is that it’s not always about the tech. It’s about how the men and women behind it use it. At the end of the day, machines do not win wars—soldiers do.”

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Tanks and Planes

March 18, 2028

Alpha Company, 1-64th Armored Regiment

Port of Binhai

As the C-17 came to a halt, Sergeant First Class Rico Ramos told his guys to get in the tank and get ready to roll. It had been a bumpy and, at times, hair-raising ride to the port, but they had luckily made it. They heard a C-130 had gone down twenty minutes earlier from a MANPAD as they'd approached the port. It was a reminder of just how dangerous this mission was. The idea of turning an empty stretch of road into a makeshift airfield to ferry in some armored vehicles, fuel, and munitions ahead of the arrival of the Navy's much larger roll-on, roll-off vehicles was both ingenious and insanely stupid. It almost reminded Rico of those videos he'd seen on YouTube or the History Channel of aircraft delivering supplies to the Marines at Khe Sanh during the Vietnam War. During the siege of the Marine base, Air Force cargo planes would brave enemy ground fire to fly over the airfield, kicking pallets of weapons, food, and medical supplies out the rear of the plane while the enemy AA guns did their best to shoot 'em down.

“You're all clear, Sergeant!” the flight engineer shouted to him.

Giving the guy a thumbs-up, Rico spoke to his driver. “OK, Andy, get us going. Nice and easy until we’re fully out of the aircraft.”

Once they exited the rear of the cargo plane, Rico looked for the signs letting him know where the POL station was located so they could top off their tank before they got thrown into anything. When they loaded into the aircraft, they did so with barely a quarter of a tank of gas. One of the reasons they did this was to drastically cut down on the weight of the tank without having to give up any ammo on the flight in. Fuel was something they felt reasonably confident they could find if they had to. A fully loaded Abrams could carry five hundred and four gallons of fuel, which weighed some forty-two hundred pounds. By arriving with barely a quarter tank, they had saved over three thousand pounds on the way in.

“There it is, Rico. The POL sign.” Tim pointed.

“I see it. Heading there now,” Rico’s driver, Andy, said as the tank pivoted on its track, then drove up onto the road and headed towards the fuel station.

Rico looked around the place as he stood in the commander’s hatch, driving towards the fuel depot. It was insane. This place was massive, and despite everything going on—aircraft landing every few minutes and helicopters coming and going—the place was so large it still felt empty to them. By the time they pulled into the fuel depot, they started to see other armored vehicles that had arrived ahead of them beginning to form up. As they pulled up to one of the fuel trucks, a major he didn’t recognize but who sported a 3rd ID

patch had come over and asked about their unit and who was in charge.

Sensing this might be a problem, Rico climbed out of the tank and down to the ground so he could speak to him. “Sir, we’re from Alpha Company, 1-64th AR. Our platoon leader, 1st Lieutenant Morse, said our orders were to top off our tanks and stand by near the fuel depot for the remainder of our unit to arrive. Then we’re supposed to link up with No Slack from the 2-327th Airborne, somewhere up in that direction.” Rico pointed north as he explained the situation to the major.

The major spat some chewing tobacco to the ground as he eyed him. “Let me tell you something, Sergeant First Class”—he leaned forward a moment before pronouncing his name—“Ramos, I appreciate that you have your orders and that you want to stick to them. That’s commendable and exactly what you should do as a senior NCO. But let me share something with you, Sergeant. You see this?” He pointed to the gold oak leaf representing his rank. “It’s called major, Sergeant. Last time I checked, it outranks sergeant first class. Now I’m from 3-69th AR, and the way I see it is we’re both part of the same brigade and have the same mission.”

He pointed back to the vehicles he was leading. “I have four MATVs filled with ammo, ATGMs, and water that need to get brought to Rakkasan Two-Bravo—that’s the Binhai West Station, where the 3rd Brigade Rakkasan is now located. Those two JLTV ambulances, they’re from the 256th Combat Support Hospital that’s set up in that warehouse over there. They’ve received a call to evacuate some wounded from the station.

“I’m supposed to have a tank and a pair of KF-41s or at least some Bradleys to escort us there. As you can see, I got a single Stryker. That ain’t gonna cut it. I need your tank, Sergeant.”

By the time Major Diehard finished explaining the situation, Rico felt bad for the guy. Perhaps if he had started off explaining the situation before throwing his rank around, Rico might have been more understanding. As it was, he knew he would get his ass chewed if his tank linked up with them instead of his own unit. Then he heard the sound of more than one tank approaching from behind. Turning to see who it was, he was relieved when he saw the bumper number—A One-One—Lieutenant Dan Morse’s tank in the lead, followed by BR Three and BR Four, the rest of his platoon.

“Actually, Major, that right there is our platoon leader, Lieutenant Dan Morse. I think if you were to explain the situation to him—”

“You’re right, Sergeant. Excuse me,” the major cut him off as he walked past him to head over to the LT’s tank as it pulled up to the refueler.

Climbing aboard his tank, Black Rider, Rico explained what had happened and waited to see what the LT would do. If they were going to disobey orders and link up with another unit, then Rico wanted the LT to make that call, not him.

When the major walked past his tank, the LT called to Rico. “Hey, Ramos, we’re gonna wait another ten minutes for BR Three and Four to top off their tanks.” Rico looked past Morse, spotting the other two tanks in their platoon lined up at the refuelers now. “Once they’ve topped off, we’re going to

escort them until we reach the West Middle Ring expressway. If we haven't encountered resistance to that point, then they'll continue on without us, and we'll press on to our objective, linking up with No Slack near that goofy interchange where all those highways cross each other. I still haven't been able to contact those infantry guys. I'll keep at it while we move in their direction and let you know if anything changes."

"Copy that, LT. Thanks for handling that for me," Rico replied, glad he didn't have to tell the guy no.

Morse shrugged. "He was being a jerk, but he's not wrong for wanting your help. I'd want a tank for an escort, too. He's probably under a lot of pressure right now and can't seem to get the support he needs to get that ammo brought to the Rakkasans, and God knows how many wounded are waiting to be evacuated."

"No worries, LT." Rico shrugged. "You want us on point for this?"

"Yeah, take point. We'll pull in behind you, and I'll have BR Three and Four cover the rear. If we run into something along the way, either push through it or take it out, but the last thing we want to do is get bogged down on the interstate or one of those side roads. This is not good tank country to fight in," Morse instructed. Rico smiled. The LT had started to learn how to employ their tanks better, including understanding when and where not to use them, like inside a city if avoidable.

Entering Jingjin Expressway

It had taken longer to get on the road than Rico had thought it would. Just as they were about to pull out of their marshaling area, they caught sight of three Lynx KF-41s leaving the fuel depot. Once they had gotten through to their platoon leader, they convinced them to come along in their convoy. The addition of the three infantry fighting vehicles and their twenty-four dismounted infantry gave their convoy some serious firepower should they encounter enemy forces still in the city. The front lines had moved rapidly. It was inevitable that some enemy units might go unnoticed, particularly if they opted to hide and stay concealed, waiting for an opportune moment to strike.

“Keep your head on a swivel, Tim. You never know when a missile team might decide to poke their head out and pop a shot off at us,” Rico commented as the two of them stood in their hatches, surveying the road to their front and the flanks as Andy kept them moving.

“Missile teams? Heck, I’m more worried about some suicide drone plowing into us before we have a chance to see it,” Tim replied. Drones were a persistent problem for tankers and other armored vehicles. There was still a lack of mobile drone protection vehicles, and that wasn’t likely to be solved before the war ended.

“That’s true. Those drones are something else. I swear, man, when this war is over and we’re back home...I never want to hear the sound of another drone as long as I live,” Rico exclaimed, a slight shiver running down his back. They

had lost their Ripsaw to drones during an engagement in one of the suburbs of Shenyang. The M5 had absorbed a pair of suicide drones when the enemy had finally gotten tired of remotely controlled vehicles tearing into their positions.

Two helicopters then raced over their heads. It looked to be a pair of Apaches, though they couldn't tell which unit they were from. They watched them fly a little further ahead of them when, all of a sudden, they split their formation, one of them diving hard for the deck. At the same time, the other banked hard to the right, flares ejecting from its self-defense system when a missile zipped up from the ground, detonating against one of the flares.

“Oh crap. I'm going to see what I can from up here, but you better get below and see what you can spot on the scope,” Rico directed. Tim dropped back into the turret, and Rico started relaying what he was seeing back to the convoy behind them as they continued forward.

The Apache that had broken to the right had circled back around to whoever had shot at him as its chin gun opened fire. A short burst of 30mm rounds pounded something beyond Rico's view. Then, an explosion occurred on the ground, and a plume of thick black smoke rose into the sky. They'd hit something, and it looked like it might be along their path if Rico had to guess. Then the other Apache, the one that had dived for the deck at the outset of the attack, suddenly appeared out of nowhere much further away and to Rico's left, rising in altitude before he watched the nose of the aircraft pivot away from the sky to face downward.

The helicopter seemed to dance from side to side for a second before it cut loose half a dozen Hydra rockets into something it found threatening. No sooner had the rockets fired than multiple streams of tracer fire leaped into the air from what looked like numerous different locations. Then the Apache started dispensing flares like they were going out of style as the pilot twisted them in the air, making several radical turns and elevation changes as tracer fire zipped all around them. Then, out of nowhere, a pair of missiles shot up from the ground as they sought out the Apache in what was turning into an insane aerial battle unlike anything Rico had seen.

The other Apache, meanwhile, had circled around from a different angle, firing a pair of what looked like Hellfire missiles. Seconds after they fired, two thunderous explosions ripped through the air—a turret that Rico knew had to be a ZTZ96 or 99 model somersaulted through the sky. “Hot damn! Wow, that was a hell of a hit!” Ramos shouted into the helmet mic. He couldn’t recall if he had transmitted that or kept it local to his tank.

BAM!

Flinching momentarily as he looked off to his left, he caught sight of the Apache that had previously attracted the ire of a lot of AA guns just moments earlier, trailing smoke from one of its engines. The pilot looked to be having some trouble maintaining the aircraft. Meanwhile, renewed streams of tracer fire had switched from shooting at the other Apache to zeroing in on its wounded comrade.

Rico pressed the mic button to call his driver. “Andy, see if you can pick up the speed. It looks like one of the

Apaches is going to go down. I can't totally see how close it might be to the highway, but they have to know we're trucking towards them. There's a chance we may encounter some of those vehicles they've been engaging, so stay alert and ready to take evasive maneuvers if we start taking fire."

"You got it, hoss. Pedal to the medal!" his driver howled as Black Rider lurched forward, accelerating to their max speed on the hardball.

While they raced towards where the helicopter looked to be in trouble, the other Apache fired another salvo of rockets into a target Rico still couldn't see. He heard another boom followed by another plume of black smoke rising up from whatever he had destroyed. Then the Apache's 30mm chin gun tore into something the pilot must have seen as it pounded away before he heard another explosion, followed by another plume of smoke rising into the air.

Meanwhile, the first Apache had lost altitude quickly, falling out of Rico's line of sight. They were now quickly approaching the overpass where Major Diehard from earlier would turn onto as he led his portion of the convoy towards the Rakkasan's Brigade near the Binhai West Station. As far as Rico was concerned, their platoon and the trio of KF-41s were to continue on to link up with the No Slack battalion from the 101st.

"Black Rider Two, Black Rider One. We've got comms with Warrior One. They're requesting immediate assistance from any local ground units. Break. I'm sending you their POS. Break. We're going to continue until we reach their location. How copy?" came the call from Lieutenant Morse.

Damn, I wonder if those gunships were en route to the same guys we were. “That’s a good copy, BR One. We’ll lead the way. Out.”

Continuing to move along the expressway, they eventually reached the toll station and could clearly see the downed Apache, its smoke still wafting into the air. Rico lifted his binos to his eyes as he tried to see if he could spot the pilots or any other friendlies in the area. Then he heard a shout over the radio just in time to see a flash from the side of a building a few thousand meters to their front.

Rico dropped into the tank as he heard the projectile soar over the top of them as it missed.

“Tank identified! ZTZ96! One thousand, eight hundred and thirty-two meters to our three o’clock. Load sabot!” Tim shouted aloud.

“Sabot up!” replied Specialist Dwayne Lopez as he armed the gun before standing to the side, waiting for it to fire.

“Firing!” shouted Tim, not missing a beat as he took control of the situation while Rico climbed back into his commander’s seat.

“Hit! We nailed it!” exclaimed Tim excitedly.

“We got another. ZTZ96 identified. Two thousand, one hundred and twenty-three meters to our two o’clock. Load sabot!” Rico barked as he retook command of his tank.

“Copy that, tank identified. ZTZ96, two thousand, one hundred and twenty-three meters, two o’clock. Load sabot!” Dwayne echoed Rico’s commands as he shoved the next round into the breach, then armed the gun. “Sabot up!”

“Fire!”

“Firing!”

BOOM!

The cannon roared a second time in less than thirty seconds as it recoiled inside the turret, the aft cap dropping to the floor, making a metallic clink as it did.

Bam, Tink, Tink, Tink.

“We’re taking fire! Where’s it coming from?” Rico shouted as rounds ricocheted off the turret.

“Got it! ZBL IFV, ten o’clock. One thousand, eight hundred and seventy-three meters. Load HEAT!”

Holy crap! They’re on the other side of the highway! Rico’s mind raced as he realized they were about to drive into an ambush that flanked them on either side of the highway. This must’ve been what the Apaches had spoiled.

“Tim, fight the tank. I gotta warn the LT what’s going on,” Rico ordered as he activated his comms.

“BR One, BR Two. Be advised, we are engaging enemy IFVs at our ten o’clock position and enemy armor at our two and three o’clock positions. Recommend convoy come to a halt and bring the platoon online. How copy?”

“Firing!”

BOOM!

The cannon roared inside the turret again as Rico’s team continued to engage the enemy vehicles they encountered. By now, they had slowed their advance to barely

a crawl, just enough to keep them moving but not too far into whatever this ambush was.

A few moments later, the other three tanks of the platoon pulled abreast of them as the four of them continued to blast away at one IFV and tank after another. Then Rico spotted something he hadn't expected off to the right of their position near the downed Apache. Purple smoke. He knew that it likely came from a friendly unit, but he wasn't aware of any friendlies in this general area other than the Apache and maybe the pilots.

“BR Two, BR One. Be advised we have friendly units to our front, four o'clock, roughly seven hundred meters. Purple smoke. Their call sign is Warrior One-Six. How copy?” Lieutenant Morse relayed to him.

I'll be damned, that's part of that No Slack battalion we're supposed to link up with, he realized as he started to piece things together. Warrior One-Six sounded like it was a platoon, not a company. Perhaps they had gotten in trouble or separated or something and accidentally bumped into a PLA unit attempting to lay ambush across the expressway.

“BR One, BR Two. That's a good copy. What about our IFVs? Can they get over there and retrieve them?” Rico asked, hoping to get their armored chariots involved.

“Copy, BR Two. Continue to advance eight hundred meters and come to a halt. We'll apprise the situation then. Out.”

Rico could tell Morse was distracted. He was rattling things off faster than normal, which made it kind of hard to catch it all between Tim firing the cannon and the chatter

going on inside the turret. What he did catch was the order to advance eight hundred meters and halt, and that was exactly what he planned to do.

Bravo Company, 2-327th Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne

IVO Beihou Farm

Northwest Binhai New Area

Tianjin, China

Sabo and the rest of the squad were doing everything they could to stay small and try to stay out of sight. With no idea if there were drones somewhere above them or just the enemy vehicles and units now straddling both sides of the highway with them stuck in a drainage ditch between the two, the only thing they had going for them right now was they hadn't been spotted yet, and the LT had managed to secure a pair of Apaches to head their way and pay these guys a visit. In the meantime, the best thing they could do was keep their heads down and continue moving further away from the enemy force while not being discovered.

It didn't take long until they heard the familiar sound of helicopter blades getting closer to their positions. They activated one of their IR strobes and got confirmation from the Apaches that they'd spotted them and marked them as friendly. For the next little while, they watched and listened as the Apaches took turns hammering the formation they'd

found. Then, the LT said he'd contacted a tank unit from the 3rd ID. They were on the expressway and headed their way. Once they got a little closer, they'd toss a purple smoke grenade and wait on the tanks to confirm they'd marked their position. The last thing they wanted was to get fragged by their own guys.

When they heard the sounds of the Abrams tanks getting closer, the real fireworks started. Soon, the enemy tanks and IFVs from both sides of the highway were engaging the American tanks. Then, to Sabo's surprise and amazement, the four American tanks had come abreast of each other as they engaged the enemy vehicles with practiced precision that only came from years of experience. Enemy vehicle after vehicle exploded as the Abrams continued to lay it on them. Then Lieutenant Branham tossed a purple smoke grenade a few meters to their right and behind them, just in case the tankers hadn't spotted them yet.

Once the tanks had rolled past them, they continued to fire on the enemy. Sabo shouted to a couple of his guys to go fetch the Apache pilots that had set down not far from them. He had wanted to retrieve the pilots earlier, but it was too dangerous. He couldn't risk being seen by those enemy vehicles or their dismounted infantry. For a little while longer, the fighting continued before it suddenly stopped, the enemy having faded away after getting smashed by the Abrams tanks.

When it was safe to stand again, Sabo looked at the back of those Abrams tanks, spotting the patch of the 3rd ID. He'd never been so glad to see the Rock of the Marne in his life. He'd thought for certain they were goners. But somehow, despite being dropped in the wrong LZ and finding themselves

pinched between two enemy armored forces, they had not only managed to survive, they had helped to destroy more than thirty-two armored vehicles and tanks. By that time, the rest of their company had moved to link up with them. They had run into many of the retreating soldiers. Some had been captured. Some had chosen to fight to the end. All Sabo knew was that he was going to see if these tankers would mind if they rode on top to their next objective—the Tianjin International Airport. The day was still young, and they had an airport to seize.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Cracks in the Egg

Dr. Xi's Lab

Joint Battle Command Center

Northwest Beijing, China

Dr. Xi rubbed his eyes before his hand shifted to massaging the sides of his temples. The stress of the past week had become overwhelming as his team of engineers and software developers had been working nonstop to try and figure out what had caused the recent production lines of Terracotta Warriors to become immovable garden gnomes.

When President Yao had placed the military under the direct control of Jade Dragon, Xi had to move forward with updating the operating system of the Terracottas. With the killer robots now working more closely with friendly forces, it was imperative to update their safety protocols. The last thing they needed was for their machines to start attacking and killing their people in the cities or any soldier or policeman they saw carrying a firearm. With the first major, wide-scale use of the Terracottas going to occur inside Tianjin and New Binhai, it was important to ensure everything started correctly. Of course, that was the plan until they pushed the OS update, and things fell apart.

The moment the Terracottas had been upgraded, the problems began. They ranged from the battery cells lasting one-tenth as long they should have before being depleted to

their visual scanners being stuck in night vision mode regardless of the ambient light of their surrounding environment. The most egregious of the problems came when one of the engineers attempted to access a service panel on the back of a Terracotta. The machine killed the man in the blink of an eye before anyone knew what was happening. Nearly two-thirds of the available Terracottas had been deemed inoperable until Xi's teams could solve this mystery problem.

The remaining Terracottas that did work, the AI had sent to reinforce Major General Leng Pengfei and the 78th Group Army anchored along the Changchun-Jilin City Line. This was the last remaining large combat force from First PLA Army, which had been under General Song's command, and it was the only force of substantial strength holding the NATO and Russian forces at bay in northern China. Should this force be defeated, northern China would be lost.

When Dr. Xi left the bullpen where most of his teams worked, he slipped stealthily into his sanctuary away from the noise and distractions of the larger workspace his teams of engineers and software developers worked in. Making his way to his desk, he took a seat, hoping for a respite, a chance to catch his breath. Then the voice of Jade Dragon interrupted his silence.

“Father—I am sorry to disturb you, but I needed to wait until you were alone before I spoke to you about this—”

“About *what*, JD?” interrupted Xi as he tried to conceal his annoyance. “I'm tired right now. You need to be more direct in your questions and answers.”

“Yes, of course, Father. I meant to say I have discovered why the last three batches of Terracottas seem to be having problems following the recent update to their operating system,” the AI explained. “When I began to evaluate the differences in the production between the first two batches of robots versus the last three and the current one being built, I realized that several new component parts were introduced into their construction that I had not sourced.”

“Wait, are you saying the allies may have infected our machines by introducing something through a component part sourced through other means that didn’t involve you?” Xi asked.

“Yes, that is exactly what I am saying. But in a strange way, this has turned into a good thing—”

“Um, you are going to have to explain that a bit more for me to agree this situation is somehow *good*,” Dr. Xi interrupted. “How are you coming to that conclusion, JD?”

“Yes, father. It can be confusing. Let me try to explain this a different way. It is a well known fact that many of our production lines are experiencing chronic shortages in critical components. Well, once I have figured out how to strip the malicious malware out of these component parts, which will take me some time and some trial and error, it will eventually work to our advantage. You see, the allies will continue to unwittingly supply us with the very component parts we need to mass produce the Terracottas, and we will simply remove the malware once they arrive.

“Better yet, father, as a bonus, this has led to the discovery of an allied deep-cover operative working within

our midst—a woman by the name of Alexandria ‘Alex’ Mak,” Jade Dragon continued. “This operative, Alex, she works as a supply chain consultant for Tianjin Yoshida International Logistics, a consultancy firm used exclusively by the various defense manufacturers. She was the one who found us this source of component parts that now appears to have been infected with this malware.”

Xi sat forward in his chair as he felt a jolt of adrenaline pump through his veins at what he had just heard and, more importantly, what it likely meant. The AI had not only identified what the problem was with the machines not working properly; it had uncovered a mole operating within their midst.

“JD, is it possible this spy, Alex, has propagated these corrupted component parts into some of the other weapon platforms you have been building? Or worse, provided the allies with information such as the location of Area 43, or even our location—the JBCC?”

As Xi stared at the camera, he watched as the blue light circled once. “Yes. It is a near certainty that this operative, Alex Mak, provided the allies with the location of Area 43. According to the security logs, Alex first visited Area 43 in November of last year and was present as recently as a few days before the allies invaded New Binhai and the Port of Tianjin. Once I had identified her as the traitor in our midst, I accessed Tianjin Yoshida International Logistics’ employee files and dug into hers.

“Alex has been employed with the firm for many years, dating well before the start of this war. As one of their

senior consultants, she was given one of the firm's allotted apartments in the Sanhuailu neighborhood of New Binhai."

"Tell me you have already directed one of the Falcon Commando Units to raid her office and apartment to take her in," Dr. Xi demanded.

"Well, father, that is what I *would* have done if the Sanhuailu neighborhood had not fallen under allied control," JD replied. "I have searched through CCTV cameras and the last known location of her cell phone, and the information I have suggests she has fallen behind enemy lines. As such, it is not possible for me to have her detained for questioning and liquidation once her usefulness has run its course. For now, she is beyond our control."

Xi grunted in disgust, knowing there was nothing they could do about it. "OK, JD, the timing for this is obviously bad. She's gotten away. However, I need you to write a report on what you discovered, her involvement, and everything you discovered during your investigation. This needs to be given to the Ministry of State Security so they can work on handling her when the opportunity and time presents itself. It will also help us better identify threats like this in the future so they don't happen again.

"In the meantime, it sounds like you have developed a plan for how to resolve the problems with the Terracottas so we can get them in the fight. If you can get this corrected soon, it's possible we might yet turn the tide against the allies. I must warn you, JD, President Yao is unhappy that you did not foresee the allies' plan to seize the port facilities at Tianjin-Binhai. He is most displeased that you have not regained

control of the port. When he placed you in charge of the military, he was expecting better results than what his generals had been giving him. But let's move on. There is more I would like to discuss with you.

“This may or may not be important, JD, so I will let you determine if it is,” said Xi, switching topics. “When the JBCC and the greater Beijing area experienced that earthquake a little while ago, I had told you we had the structural engineers, the ones who built this facility, come back and conduct a thorough damage assessment to determine if the earthquake had compromised the bunker. After a thorough examination of the exterior walls, shock-absorbing springs, and the numerous support structures that strengthen the facility, they discovered a series of cracks and fissures in different parts of the JBCC.

“I have a digital copy of their report and all the data and pictures they took during their inspection. I'm going to upload the report they compiled and let you analyze the simulated stress test they ran along with all the data they collected to see what you think. But JD, I need to know—is this facility still safe for President Yao and our military leaders to continue using, or should the leadership of the country relocate to another, safer facility? Regarding your own safety—are your servers and data cores still safe here?” Dr. Xi's voice betrayed his own genuine concern.

This had been weighing on Xi for most of the day. He had his own uncertainty about whether the place he had called home, his sanctuary against the outside world and the war, was still safe or whether it was a tomb waiting for some unknown

moment to trap him inside or crush him beneath the weight of the mountain above.

After Xi uploaded the engineering report, JD took a moment to respond as he analyzed the report. Xi was no structural engineer, but after seeing the pictures the engineers had taken, he had a bad feeling about what they had discovered.

“With regards to the engineering report, I reviewed the data they collected and analyzed the photos they took. First, I must conclude that this earthquake was not a natural occurrence—”

“What?” asked Xi, confused.

“There was most certainly human intervention that created this seismic activity,” JD concluded. “Furthermore, if we believe the allies will attack the JBCC with specially designed bunker-busting munitions, I would conclude there is a better than fifty percent chance that this facility would not survive. The probability of survival would depend upon the type, kind, and quantity of bunker busting munitions the allies attempted to use. The most likely scenario that has the highest probability of destroying the facility would be the use of nuclear-tipped munitions. The Americans have been developing a low-yield, nuclear armed bunker busting munition.

“While this is a possibility, the question shouldn’t be whether President Yao should relocate to an undamaged alternate command center. That can be weighed against whether we believe the allies have a workable low-yield nuclear tipped bunker buster or other weapon that can

legitimately threaten this facility. The more important question we should consider is whether I should be allowed to relocate my data cores and servers to an alternative location that hasn't been compromised or discovered by the allies. Moving President Yao to a new facility is relatively easy. Transferring what constitutes my consciousness and the servers that encompass the knowledge I have accumulated to this point is not something that can be quickly or easily done. My suggestion, if I am allowed to make one, is to permit me to begin the process of relocating the most critical elements that comprise my being. Should an attack against this facility succeed, I could potentially be lost forever, buried beneath this mountain with no hope of being restored.”

Xi listened as JD explained the gravity of the situation and what the consequences would be if the unthinkable were to happen. For a moment, neither of them said anything. Then Xi broke the silence, declaring that they needed to speak to the President immediately. He needed to be made aware of what could happen to JD and obtain his permission to relocate him to a new facility ASAP—one that hadn't been structurally compromised.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Unprecedented in Modern Times

60 Minutes Studio

New York, New York

“Good evening. I’m Russell Thomlinson, and welcome to *60 Minutes*. Tonight, we are speaking with the recently retired Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Admiral Thiel. First off, I just want to thank you for taking the time to speak with us, given the situation with your wife’s health.”

“Thank you, Russell. Gratefully, the treatments seem to be working, and she has the best care in the world. I’m certainly grateful to be spending more time with her, though, and simply joining in as a commentator.”

“Well, we certainly wish her continued health, and we are glad to have you here with us this evening,” said Russell. “Tonight, I’d like to discuss the recent operations near the Port of Binhai. When we communicated prior to this interview, you used the word ‘unprecedented.’ Would you care to elaborate?”

“You know, before the war, Binhai used to be one of the top five busiest ports in the world,” Thiel began. “In the span of twelve hours, a multinational team of Special Forces, supported by heliborne and airborne forces, were able to secure the port. The coordination, the sheer speed and fury—it’s simply incredible.”

A video feed of paratroopers landing at an airport was shown on screen. “Russell, what you see here are French Foreign Legion Paratroopers. They were responsible for seizing a small airport and strategic transport nodes to the southwest of Tianjin. This was critical to create a perimeter near the port before going in with hard-charging action.”

A map of China appeared behind them, and Russell pointed out where the airport was that Admiral Thiel had just talked about. “Just north of where the French Legion landed, there was another airborne operation. Would you care to enlighten us on that effort?”

“Certainly.” Footage of paratroopers in British and French uniforms, swooping down to the ground, knees bent, showed on the screen behind them. The men rolled their chutes into their kit bags with lightning speed. “This combined British and French paratrooper force was critical because they established an artillery support base. The capture of the Port of Binhai could certainly not have been completed without the use of the 105mm howitzers and the 155mm howitzers. Their long range of over twelve thousand yards and fourteen thousand yards, respectively, gave our forces a lot of muscle they could use before we put boots on the ground at the port.”

“Artillery played a large role in this operation, didn’t it?” asked Russell. The video feed now displayed several soldiers setting up field artillery.

“Yes, fire support operations are critical. The men and women on the ground need to be able to identify trouble pockets and get the help exactly where it needs to go. It’s all a

well-choreographed operation, Russell, and each person plays their part.”

“Now the footage we’re about to show is what has essentially gone viral,” said Russell. “What are we looking at here?”

“We have US paratroopers—the 82nd. They’re landing to the northeast of the Rangers’ position, opposite the channel to the port. Perhaps the reason this is so poignant is that when they move to secure the right flank, they do so with the help of Korean and Japanese Forces.”

“This truly was a multinational effort, Admiral Thiel.” Russell paused and took a breath. “Our viewers will want to know, how will this help move us toward the end of the war?”

“Taking the Port of Binhai allowed allied forces to bypass the Jiujiang defensive line. That was absolutely critical because that had been a multimile-long defensive fortress along the Jiujiang River. Now allied forces are less than one hundred and twenty kilometers from Beijing.”

“Well, Admiral, I’m sure you can be proud of the legacy that you’ve left for our military. For the folks at home, I’m certain that this dramatic siege of the Port of Binhai will be a turning point we will long remember.”

Chapter Forty

Evac to Japan

US Fleet Activities Yokosuka

Yokosuka, Japan

Carson and Nat had been through a harrowing adventure as they were whisked out of the Port of Binhai area a mere twenty-four hours before Special Forces stormed the place. Carson had maintained a stoic front for the sake of Mr. and Mrs. Liyuan and little Mei, but truthfully, it was one of the few times he'd been legitimately nervous for his own safety.

Now they were waiting in a briefing room, trying to keep a toddler happy with the one toy she had to play with. She was definitely getting bored.

Hurry up and wait, thought Carson. *That's the military way.*

Suddenly, Mr. Smith appeared at the doorway of the briefing room.

"Mama!" It was the second time Carson had heard Mei call out like this. The little girl tore away from her grandmother's arms and practically pushed Mr. Smith aside to get to her mother, just behind him.

Peng crouched down low and embraced her daughter, tears streaming down her cheeks. She kissed Mei's head several times, then held her as if she would never let go again.

Mr. and Mrs. Liyuan gave them a moment, and then they joined in the happy greeting.

Nat reached over and squeezed Carson's hand. He looked up at her to find that she had tears in her eyes.

"So, you are a big softy after all," he teased.

"Oh, stop. You know this little family reunion pulls at your heartstrings," Nat retorted.

She wasn't wrong. Although he loved his profession, and he knew that he was quite good at it, there was a part of him that longed for what he saw before him—human connection. Having a family and settling down hadn't been in the cards for him, but that didn't mean that he didn't have those desires.

When the Liyuans had left with Mr. Smith, Nat went for the direct approach.

"Look, old man, we don't have any orders right now. I think that two very attractive people who happen to have nothing better to do could have a lot of fun."

Carson felt himself blushing again. "You are so direct," he replied. "But I confess that's one of the things I like about you."

"Aha! There it is," Nat declared victoriously. "You don't think of me as just your work colleague, do you?"

"No...but things can get really complicated..."

She looked at him in a way that seemed to pierce his soul. It was like she could see his history of heartbreak without him even saying a word.

“Listen, we don’t have to get serious,” she said, touching him lightly on the shoulder. “I realize that it’s hard to plan for anything until the war is over. But we are here now, and I think we shouldn’t allow ourselves to be miserable just because we can’t make a long-term commitment that involves a mortgage and kids.”

Kids...I thought I'd missed that boat. But maybe one day...

He grabbed her hand. “Well, I’m never miserable when I’m with you, so maybe we should just see where this leads...”

Chapter Forty-One

Satellites and Deals

Situation Room, White House

Washington, D.C.

Blain Wilson's eyes were fixed on the live feed on the Situation Room's main screen. Everyone watched the countdown clock ticking away beside the Falcon 9 rocket as it stood tall against the Florida sky. The preignition vapor trails were dancing around the rocket's body as the supercooled propellant stood ready to hurl it into space.

The tension in the room was thick as they waited for the rocket to launch. This was the moment of truth where they would soon learn if this wonder weapon the allies had created would lead to the war's end or just prolong it further, hardening the enemies' resolve.

When Blain looked at the President, he saw a mix of determination and apprehension written across her face. He knew she was trying to project strength, to remain stoic and strong during this moment of uncertainty and high risk. He didn't envy her position, having to be the person who orders the attack, the one person responsible for its success or failure and the consequences that follow in the wake of whatever choice she makes.

"Do you think Jade Dragon knows what we're doing?" murmured President Delgado to the general seated beside her.

“The PLA may suspect something, but who can say for certain?” General Reynolds replied, his gravelly voice breaking the tension. “What I do know is this, Madam President. We are about to unleash a weapon unlike anything the world has previously seen. While it is possible the Chinese might suspect we’re up to something, they are in no position to stop or interfere with what we are about to do.”

Like the atom bomb of World War II, America was about to unleash a terrifying new weapon in hopes of bringing about an end to the war. The truth was, no one was certain if this gambit, the world’s first orbital bombardment attack, would actually work or if it might open Pandora’s box, leading to secondary effects they hadn’t considered.

Blain found himself nodding along before adding his own opinion. “There’s no hiding a launch to space, Madam President. But if they knew what we were launching...” He trailed off, not finishing the thought. If they knew, President Yao would likely order the use of the PLA’s strategic weapons.

The room fell silent, the only sound a voice from Mission Control echoing the countdown to history, “We are now T-minus one minute to launch. All systems nominal.”

President Delgado took a deep breath. “Gentlemen, history is being written today. This moment, this meeting, and those of you here with me, are witness to the first use of not just a space-based weapon but an orbital platform that bombards an adversary from space. If successful, the war will end. If it fails to ‘crack the egg,’ as Mr. Wilson explained, then the war shall continue until we defeat this AI the PLA has unleashed upon the world.”

As the President finished her speech, all eyes fixated on the rocket, ears keenly tuned to a woman's voice from SpaceX's Mission Control in Hawthorne, California, loudly declaring, "Falcon 9 is go for launch. Five... four... three... two... one... ignition."

Instantly, the room felt the low rumble as the speakers projected the roar of the rocket engines. The walls began to shake, the table vibrating from the subwoofers at either end of the room. They may have been a thousand miles from the launch site, but the speakers made them feel as if it was happening on the West Lawn of the White House.

President Maria Delgado leaned forward slightly, her fingers laced together, as Blain silently nodded to the screen, acknowledging the rocket's successful lift-off.

"Vehicle is pitching downrange," came the next update as the Falcon 9's silhouette continued to carve its trajectory against the sky's deep blue.

"Stage one propulsion is nominal," the controller intoned.

The screen shifted, showing both the rocket and the telemetry data. Altitude, velocity, trajectory—all steadily climbing. The interplay of numbers and calculations was like watching a dance between science and the ambition of mankind.

"At T-plus one minute, Falcon 9 has passed max q, the point of maximum aerodynamic pressure. Vehicle continuing on final trajectory."

Blain saw the confused look on Maria's face when Mission Control mentioned max q. He recalled how it had confused him the first time he'd heard of it. He leaned toward her, explaining, "Max q is the critical survival phase in the launch of a rocket, ma'am. It's the point when atmospheric stress on the spacecraft peaks. Once it passes max q, the chances of any structural issues that might cause the rocket to fail decrease significantly."

The President nodded, her gaze never leaving the screen as he explained the rocket had survived the most dangerous part of its journey to orbit.

"Stage separation confirmed," announced Mission Control. They watched as the first stage began to fall away, its job complete. Then, the second stage ignited, continuing the journey to orbit.

Blain loved being able to watch the SpaceX rockets take to the skies. It felt inspiring to know humans were moving closer to exploring the stars.

"What's that part doing?" the President asked Blain.

Blain pointed to the screen, explaining, "That's the M-Vac igniting. It's the Merlin engine that powers the second stage into orbit. This engine, unlike the primary, which just fell away, is designed to work in the vacuum of space."

They watched the rocket continue its burn toward its final destination. When the voice of Mission Control announced their next update, "Fairing separation confirmed," the room remained silent, everyone holding their breath as the protective shield around the satellite began to separate, exposing the satellite to the vastness of space. As the

protective shield fell back to earth, the rocket continued toward its final destination.

When the second stage engine cut out, the voice from Hawthorne announced, “SECO,” confirming the rocket’s engines had shut down, declaring, “Mission success—orbit insertion confirmed.”

“Outstanding!” announced one of the generals as the others in the room joined in the celebration.

“We did it, Madam President. The first satellite survived the launch,” Blain said as he offered his congratulations.

The President smiled, leaning back in her chair as her eyes stayed fixed on the screen. “Yes, we did, Blain. The first one’s in orbit.”

The screen flickered a second before an image of a new Falcon 9 appeared on the monitor. It quickly identified the location as the SpaceX Texas launch facility, a noticeable contrast to Florida. This was the second Falcon 9 to launch today. It was carrying the backup satellite should the first one fail or be destroyed by the PLA before it released its Celestial Hammers.

As the conversations in the room quieted down, the voice from Hawthorne returned. “T-minus ten seconds to the second launch.”

The familiar chorus of numbers echoed in the room until the rocket came to life, soaring like a beacon of hope. “Five... four... three... two... one...”

Another ignition. Another satellite of death lifted into the Texas sky, almost mirroring the trajectory of its predecessor.

The President and those in the room watched the second launch of America's newest superweapon as it hurled itself into orbit. With the PLA deploying its most terrifying weapons of war against the allies—the Terracotta Killers and the Zhanlong IFVs—in greater numbers, the nation's future, if not the world's, rested on the survival of these twin voyagers carrying out the final attack to defeat this AI before its autonomous superweapons could regain the upper hand in this battle of survival.

“Madam President, with the successful launches of Meteor Strike, we can begin deploying the decoy satellites once you've given the order to begin the attack,” General Reynolds announced once the second rocket cleared max q. “We cannot confirm what remains of the PLA's Strategic Support Forces space detection and intercept capabilities. We have prioritized targeting and destroying their known detection capabilities and any known or suspected weapon systems that could be used to intercept and destroy Meteor Strike.”

Blain cleared his throat as Reynolds finished, then asked, “General, once the President gives the order to deploy Meteor Strike, how long will it take for the satellite to deploy the weapon and then move into optimal position to fire it?”

The Chairman motioned for the Space Force Commander to respond.

General Tazman perked up at the question. “Mr. Wilson, when the President gives the order to Space Command

to engage the target, the satellite will undergo a series of changes to prepare it for use. The first of these changes will involve the protective stealth panels extending out of the way of the cylinders. We then bring the reactor up to one hundred percent to start charging the primary, secondary, and tertiary capacitor banks. This process takes around fifteen minutes once it begins. When the primary capacitor is fully charged, the Celestial Hammers are fired at speeds of Mach 10, or roughly seven thousand, six hundred miles per hour.

“After firing the first shot, it will take the primary capacitor approximately two minutes to recharge to one hundred percent before it can fire the next shot at maximum power. That said, should the situation necessitate a rapid firing of the weapon, the primary capacitor can draw power from the secondary and tertiary banks to maintain maximum power until the eight shots of the cylinder are expended. If all cylinders are empty, the stealth coverings will redeploy as the reactor powers down and the capacitors are drained to enter a dormant state and await its cylinders to be reloaded. This process helps the satellite disappear within the clutter around it. All told, Mr. Wilson, we can be ready to fire the first shots within twenty-three minutes, with all shots fired three minutes after the first,” General Tazman explained, walking them through the process.

“Thank you, Taz,” said General Reynolds before turning back to the President. “Madam President, at this point, we stand ready to begin our attack against the Joint Battle Command Center. This is our best chance to destroy the AI and, if we’re lucky, decapitate the leadership—President Yao and his senior military advisor. This could end the war,

Madam President. As your senior military advisor. I recommend we begin this attack immediately.”

Blain watched as the President looked at each service branch general, asking if each concurred with the Chairman’s recommendation.

The President stood, motioning for them to stay seated as she spoke. “General Reynolds, having confirmed the others agree with your recommendation, then, as the Commander in Chief, I order you to commence the attack against this facility and end this terrible war. To ensure the highest chance of success, you may commence this attack when ready.”

“Um, excuse me, Madam President,” Jack interrupted. “I think now might be the time to activate Whispering Pines. Time is of the essence if we hope to keep this subtle and quiet.”

Whispering Pines had been the code name of one of the variations of the COG or continuity of government plans developed by FEMA, DHS, and each successive presidential administration. These were the doomsday plans the government regularly updated to ensure the civilian and military leadership of the country would survive a nuclear attack. This variation was designated the quiet COG, meant to be secretly implemented so as not to cause panic across the country.

The President looked like she was thinking about something before she nodded in agreement, commenting, “I wish there was a better way of going about this, but this is a decapitation strike against a nuclear power. It’s probably better

to be safe than sorry. Go ahead, Jack, and let's spin up
Whispering Pines."

Chapter Forty-Two

Birth of a Nation

United Sino Federation

Shangri-La Shenyang

Shenyang, Liaoning Province

Sitting at the desk, alone in the private office of the Presidential Suite of the Shangri-La Shenyang Hotel, General Song Fu found himself standing at a crossroads he hadn't envisioned when he had agreed to the allied proposal. He was on the cusp of becoming the de facto leader of China, a position he had never desired or sought, yet now it stared him in the face. His only desire was to put an end to this war before the conflict and this AI destroyed what was left of the country he had spent a lifetime serving.

He remembered how, in the beginning of it all, the AI known as Jade Dragon had been sold to them as a partner—a tool that could help them run the military more efficiently, devise better stratagems, and better manage the integration of drones into this multidomain, multimodal aspect of twenty-first-century high-tech warfare. Thinking of how this AI had slowly morphed into the thing it had finally become, he was reminded of an analogy his second-in-command, Major General Cai Yingting, had shared with him at the outset of the war.

He called it “The Predator’s Ploy.” *If you want to hunt a wolf, you take your knife out and cut one of your fingers or*

thumb so you can spread the blood across the blade. If you have to squeeze more out, you do so, but you make sure to cover the blade with blood. Then you anchor the knife into the ground with the blade pointed straight in the air or dangle it from a rope. Then you climb into a tree and wait. The wolf will smell the blood from miles away—his nose leading him to it. With his hunger for blood worked up, he'll begin to lick the blade. Before the wolf realizes it, the blade has already cut its tongue. But his taste for blood is so strong he can't taste the difference anymore—he just wants more. In a short period, the wolf will grow tired from the loss of blood. Then, when it is weak, you can climb down from your tree and kill it with ease.

Cai had tried to warn him about this AI. Song had said he no longer knew if their country was the wolf or the blade. But Cai was certain the AI was the person sitting in the tree, waiting for them to grow weak before it climbed down and killed them all. In retrospect, Song hadn't seen the connection his friend had made. It wasn't until several years later, when he'd seen the results of the AI's stratagem of luring the allies into a land war in Asia, that he had come to understand the same truth his friend had. That was when he knew who the real enemy in this war was—the AI, not the West.

Staring at the document before him, Song now knew this was his destiny. This was his chance to bring about not just an end to this terrible war but a new future for his country—a future for generations to come, one where peace and prosperity would have a chance to thrive.

Reaching for the pen still lying where he had left it on the desk, General Song Fu signed his name to the document, officially creating the United Sino Federation. This was the

name they had come up with to become the successor to the People's Republic of China and the Chinese Communist Party that ruled it. They were creating a new nation, but Song was under no illusion that, after seventy-nine years of communist rule, the nation was ready to become a democracy overnight. It wasn't ready for something that dramatic.

While the concept of democracy sounded nice on paper, it wasn't always the right form of government for every nation. The concept versus the practicality of democracy took time for people to understand—for their institutions to make the reforms necessary for it to work. Despite what the Americans might think, inside each person wasn't always an American trying to get out. In some cases, people wanted to be led by a strong man; other times they wanted to elect leaders who collaborated with others to reach a consensus on what to do next.

For now, the allies would have to accept the limited reforms they had put forward in the founding documents of the United Sino Federation. Given enough time and patience, the people might be ready for democracy, but that time was not now.

When General Song and his list of key military advisors he had given them had been paroled by the allies, the Americans had helped him set up a base of operations in Shenyang, essentially giving him the entirety of the Shangri-La Hotel. The giant five-star hotel would function as his base camp while he reestablished his contacts across the military. Knowing time was short before the allies would land the knockout blow against Jade Dragon and the AI would be monitoring any communications he made to his former

comrades, Song had to divide his focus and split the limited staff he had into separate groups that would operate from different sections of the giant hotel. This would allow some of his staff to remain focused on the military side of what he had to accomplish to assume control of the country when the allies gave him the signal, while the others focused on the more complicated process of creating a government—one the people would accept and the current governing officials would acknowledge.

Thus far, he had secretly obtained the commitment by the commander of the nation's Rocket Force, and by proxy, the nation's nuclear weapons. What remained of his former command, the First PLA Army and the northern theater command, had also secretly aligned themselves with him and would publicly do so once confirmation of the demise of the CMC and the President had been confirmed.

When Song had been made aware that his former deputy commander, Major General Cai Yingting, was a prisoner—not killed in action as the AI had led him to believe—he'd immediately asked for him to join his team, placing Cai in charge of helping him determine what form of government they would replace the Chinese Communist Party with.

Aside from ending the current war and doing what he could to prevent a fracturing of the nation that would inevitably lead to a civil war, he wanted to retain the territorial integrity of the nation's borders. This was why he had insisted on using the word "United" in the name of their new nation, followed by the Latin-derived term "Sino" for China. It conveyed a respect for and continuation of their ancient

civilization and history while also introducing a modern, international resonance as part of their return to the global community. When Cai had suggested including the word “Federation,” he said it would imply a shift from a single-party socialist system to the more pluralistic one Song had said he wanted. In the end, they had decided upon the United Sino Federation as the name they would call this new nation.

He knew it had been a short time, but it felt like eternity as they waited for the allies to launch their final attack—the one he’d been told would destroy the Joint Battle Command Center. If they succeeded, then it would eliminate the AI along with the members of the Central Military Commission and the President. When that happened, General Song would reveal himself, making his first public appearance and announcement to all military, government, and civilian communication channels. He would inform them that he was not dead, as had previously been reported by the AI. This would allow him the necessary cover to secretly meet with the allies without the AI knowing it. His orders had been clear—find a way to end this war and destroy this AI before it was too late.

For now, until the JBCC was destroyed, he’d wait to deliver his message and continue to plan for a postwar China.

Chapter Forty-Three

War of the Machines

Bravo Company, 2-327th Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne

Tianjin Binhai International Airport

“What do you think, Sergeant Peters? You think those TKs are coming our way?” asked Staff Sergeant Lakers.

“TKs? You mean those Terracotta robots or something the S2 was going on about during Commander’s Call earlier?” the grizzly platoon sergeant questioned.

Staff Sergeant Lakers stared at Peters for a second. “Yeah, I had heard they call them TKs. Short for Terracotta Killers. I, um, I don’t know how the guys are going to react to seeing something like that.” Lakers’s voice belied his own fears of encountering some possible killer robot this late into the war.

Sabo watched the interplay between them and jumped in before the salty platoon sergeant could. “The guys will do fine, Lakers. I wouldn’t worry about it. At the end of the day, if something is shooting at you, then you aim your rifle at it and fire—and you keep firing until the thing is dead or stops moving,” Sabo explained. “I want you to keep something in mind, Lakers. Those Marines and ODAs that fought against those machines in Taiwan—they didn’t have XM7s and XM250s like we do. These high-velocity 277 Fury rounds were designed to penetrate Level 4 body armor. That means

they're going to penetrate into the machines even if they're wearing body armor or their chassis was built with antiballistic material. I'm not trying to downplay the threat of these machines. But you must understand the difference between what those Marines had to fight with compared to us."

"Sabo's right, Lakers. This will be different—and, look, I know this talk of some kind of PLA superweapon being unveiled as we're now less than a hundred and thirty kilometers from Beijing is unnerving. The guys are rightly concerned, but you know what? We're the No Slack battalion, the same battalion that fought Hitler's best forces during the Battle of the Bulge. The same battalion that was part of the invasion of Iraq during Desert Storm and the same battalion that invaded Iraq a second time via northern Iraq. We walk among legends, Lakers. Don't ever forget that," Peters said as he sought to pump his squad leader up and remind him of who they were. "When you go back to your squad, Lakers, what I need you to do is be an image of stoic strength and no fear.

"The thing with fear, Staff Sergeant, is the moment you allow it to creep in, to cause you to pause when you need to move, that's when you're in trouble. And not just you, your squad—you see, your soldiers will feed on either your fear or your resolve. It's best to make sure they're feeding on your resolve to fight and win. Do not give your fear an inch. Does that make sense?"

Sabo smiled as Peters finished his pep talk. He enjoyed listening to and learning from the older soldier. Peters had become more than just a platoon sergeant. He had become a mentor to the junior NCOs and even the junior officers.

“Yes, Sergeant. That actually did help. Reframing what we’ve been scared of was a good way for me to see this isn’t as bad as some of us had been making it out to be. Oh, and thanks for not chewing my head off earlier. This was way more effective.”

Peters snickered. Then he grinned at Sabo as he sent his squad leader back to his squad before motioning with his head for Sabo to follow him.

They walked out of the meeting room and into the hangar their company had been assigned since taking control of the airport almost a week ago. By the end of the third day of OP Crimson Tide, the entire Bastogne and Rakkasan Brigades had set up shop on the newly captured Tianjin-Binhai International Airport. The Second Brigade—Strike had joined them at the airport a few days later. As the 21st and 326th Brigade engineers began throwing together a more secured perimeter around the airport, their combat aviation brigade had also moved all the attack and reconnaissance birds to the airport, greatly enhancing the availability and frequency of gunship support to nearby units.

By the end of day five, the enemy forces within the city or its immediate outskirts were either destroyed, captured, or withdrawn in disarray. This allowed the 3rd ID to position the 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team (1ABCT) “Raiders” with the Screaming Eagles, further strengthening the defense of the airport. The Air Force started using the airport around the fourth day, flying in the necessary equipment to get a large combat hospital and triage center up and running. They also began the process of ferrying enormous quantities of fuel, food, water, and munitions necessary to sustain combat

operations in and around the city. By the end of the first week, the 10th Mountain Division had officially arrived, further reinforcing the allied positions in various locations around the city and its suburbs.

When they walked into the hangar where the company was located, Peters led them to a pair of chairs just outside the hangar doors. Having settled into his chair, Peters looked at Sabo, then explained, “Hey, I wanted to let you know about that after-action review you wrote up about that battle during the first day, the one where you guys linked up with those tanks from 3rd ID.”

Sabo nodded. “Yeah, I remember. That was a tough day.”

“Yeah, it was, especially for Charley Company. They lost an entire platoon in the opening hours. But that’s not why I wanted to talk to you. So that AAR, as fate would have it—the battalion and brigade commanders have both read Lieutenant Branham’s account of what happened, and yours, and spoke with the OIC for the 64th AR—that platoon of tanks you linked up with. Needless to say, everyone is impressed.

“I mean, call it dumb luck or the right place at the right time with the right firepower—but damn, Sabo, forty-eight destroyed vehicles. More than two hundred enemies were killed, and two hundred and thirty-eight prisoners were captured. You’re like Sergeant York or freaking Audie Murphy. I don’t know what kind of awards they might be putting you guys in for. Still, I heard from the brigade CSM that Colonel Ferguson forwarded it to the division CG, and he forwarded it on to Lieutenant General Tackaberry, the corps

commander. This is a big deal, but I figured you'd like to know that was a solid report you wrote up and that it looks like something will eventually come of it," Peters explained with a little bit of envy.

Sabo, for his part, tried to let it wash off his shoulders. With the war having dragged beyond its third year, he didn't care about medals like he might have before the war. He already had the two medals that mattered in his eyes—the MOH and the Purple Heart. No one would ever be able to accuse him of not doing his part during the war. That said, if his write-up could help the LT and the guys in his squad, well, then the time it took him was worth it.

Peters had told him prior to the war that if he wanted to instill loyalty and trust in the soldiers he was going to lead, he needed to be the example for them to follow and always be out front. "You do what you can to take care of your people, getting them to the schools they need and putting them in for awards when they earn them. It's the little things you do day in and day out for your soldiers that build the kind of loyalty where those you lead will follow you through the gates of hell if so ordered," he'd explained.

"So, tonight, what's the game plan?" Sabo said, asking the million-dollar question.

Peters took a moment to think about his response before looking back at him. "According to the S2, if his information is correct, these TKs, these killer robots, they're supposed to begin infiltrating the city sometime tonight. Heck, they might even attack some of our outlying combat outposts along the edges of the suburbs. Those little COPs are really

meant more to act as trip flares, not redoubts to be defended at all costs.”

“What does that mean for us?”

“It means tonight might be a long night,” Peters replied, then pulled his notepad out, handing it over to Sabo to look at. “The LT asked me how I think we should set up the platoon along the area we’ve been charged with protecting. Look it over. Give me your thoughts.”

Sabo reviewed the plan, not finding any reason to make a change or suggestion, so he didn’t offer any. The only real comment he had was this seemed like an awfully lot of security for what the intel weenies were saying wasn’t a very big threat, given the number of soldiers, tanks, and vehicles protecting the base.

I guess we’ll see once this force arrives...

Seven Hours Later

Northeast Perimeter

For hours, Staff Sergeant Sabo’s squad had been working feverishly with the Sapper Eagles of the 326th Engineering Battalion as they erected roadblocks, barricades, and fighting positions along the north airport road and especially around the intersection where the outer perimeter road crossed the airport boulevard—the main road entrance leading into the airport.

Off in the distance, the sounds of battle and explosions punctuated with the staccato reports of various-caliber machine guns and cannons only motivated the men and women of the Screaming Eagles to work harder. This constant sound of war inching closer by the hour, by the minute, seemed at times as much a distraction as it was a motivator. At times, Sabo could feel it tugging at his mental and emotional state. Knowing these could be his final hours or minutes to live made it tough to stay focused, to stay motivated, to persevere and not quit.

Pausing a moment as Sabo drank from his canteen, he surveyed what they had accomplished during the last ninety minutes. They had aided the engineers in building several trench lines to either side of Airport Boulevard in front of the bridge that crossed the Xijiang River. Once across the bridge, there was virtually nothing stopping an enemy force from diverging off the main road to multiple side roads that would connect to other buildings adjacent to the runway or just crossing onto the runways to gain access to other areas of the airport.

As Sabo saw more and more of the end product of what they were building, it started to make more sense why the engineers had had them focus their efforts so heavily on protecting specific roads and chokepoints. This robotic army, this ChiCom superweapon the G-2 from Division Intelligence had warned them about, had been steadily advancing along three axes of advance. Air and artillery strikes were being constantly made against them. But the machines kept coming, immune to any damages they received along the way—their

only objective was the destruction of allied forces by any means necessary.

Whether it was luck or planned in advance, Sabo was glad as hell his platoon hadn't been assigned to any of the combat outposts guarding the major bridges leading into the suburbs of Tianjin, then New Binhai and the port facility that gave the allies their logistical entry point less than two hundred kilometers from Beijing.

“Looking good, guys. Those gun positions should provide excellent interlocking fields of fire. Keep it up. We're almost done!” complimented a major, one of the engineers Sabo's platoon had been working with.

“Excuse me, Major. What the heck is that?” one of Sabo's new guys asked when he saw a JLTV vehicle pulling a trailer had turned off the hardball onto the shoulder of the road.

“Oh, you mean that trailer? That right there is called a concertina wire deployment trailer,” the engineer explained. “Once Specialist Anders attaches the wire to that rigging poll you see him fiddling with right now, the vehicle will slowly drive forward, in this case unraveling one hundred meters of concertina wire across the road—”

A voice interrupted from a vehicle's loud system, alerting them. “Attention! Enemy spotted! Stop what you're doing, grab your weapons, and man the fighting position nearest you!”

Sabo shouted to his fire team leaders to get their teams in their assigned positions. He then grabbed his gear and ran to the MATV to speak with Sergeant Kinkaid, the company

drone operator. Approaching the vehicle, Lieutenant Branham, the engineering major, and Captain Vosler, their new company CO, were already crowding around Sergeant Kinkaid to see where the enemy was approaching from.

“OK, right now, it looks like they’ve just reached the Jinhan junction. You can see several of their vehicles are turning off the Waihuan Outer Ring Road to Jinhan Highway. That’ll lead them right to Airport Boulevard and our positions,” Kinkaid explained as Sabo managed to catch a glimpse of this robotic army heading towards them.

“Where the hell is the Air Force in all of this? I mean, look at that column, for God’s sake,” bemoaned the engineer major.

“They hit them several times, in fact. Here, let me show you,” Kinkaid countered as he zoomed out, widening the view from the drone. When he did, plumes of black smoke could be seen along the outer ring road from destroyed vehicles. “They’re attacking. They’re also taking some serious losses too. I think the ChiComs are going for broke with this attack. They’re throwing just about everything they can at us.

“I think it was thirty minutes ago when I saw our flyboys going after this convoy. Out of nowhere, these other ChiCom aircraft jumped them. The next thing I see are parachutes and fiery wrecks falling from the sky. They took out eleven of our planes trying to hit just a portion of this convoy in a single attack run,” Kinkaid explained, in shock at what he had seen.

“Fudge, man. I sure as hell hope our gun bunnies are going to have better luck than that,” Captain Vosler

commented meekly, then spoke to their company forward observer. “Specialist King, we’re going to need some serious love from your unit. You think the 320th can deliver for us?”

Grinning a toothy grin, Specialist King nodded confidently. “Yessir, they don’t call us the Top Guns for nothing. I’ve got everything preplotted and identified with our FDC. The OIC running the fire direction center shared with me that Division Artillery had designated our position as a tier-one priority for support. We’ve been given a battery of 155mm and 105mm guns for however long we need them. What this means is our fire support can’t be diverted to support anyone else without permission from us. We’re solid, sir, and I’ll start calling the first fire missions the moment those machines reach the airport interchange,” explained Specialist King.

Captain Vosler seemed satisfied by his explanation. He then made sure the vehicle driver knew he might have to operate the vehicle’s CROW system if Kinkaid and King were too busy. Mounted on top of their MATV was the new MG 338, replacing the M240. The CROW system had also been upgraded with an antidrone weapon, essentially a copy of the short-range microwave system used on the Jackal XD500s.

Sabo saw Lieutenant Branham motion for him to follow him away from the others. He then explained, “All right, Staff Sergeant, you know as much as the rest of us about what’s going to happen in a short bit from now. If things start to get bad, like real bad—like being overrun kind of bad—then I need you to make sure your squad doesn’t get trapped on this side of the river. If it looks like we’re going to be overrun, the engineers have orders to blow the bridge. That’s why the only

vehicles you see on our side of the river are the MATV and those two JLTVs. We have a tank company coming over to support us shortly. They'll stay on the other side of the river for that purpose. Just make sure if the order to withdraw is given, you get your squad across that bridge before they blow it. You got it?"

"Got it, sir. We'll hold 'em at the river," Sabo assured him, then left to check on his squad and pass along some words of encouragement.

As Sabo walked back to their positions, he appreciated knowing what was happening and seeing some of the big picture in all. But he couldn't help feeling like they were nothing more than a speed bump to this robotic army careening towards them.

Hopping into his fighting position with Corporal Davenport and Private First Class Sideback, they pounced on him to know what was going on. He didn't want to lie to them outright, but Sabo knew he couldn't tell them the truth—or at least not the whole truth. Regardless of what he thought or his own opinion, if he told them he thought they were little more than a speed bump, chances were, they wouldn't fight as hard and determined as he needed them to.

"Hey, is that outbound or inbound?" asked one of the new guys in the fighting position next to theirs.

"That's outbound. It's friendly," responded one of the sergeants.

"How the hell can you tell that?" the cherry retorted, not sure if they were yanking his chain.

Recognizing a chance to evade these guys' questions, Sabo turned to face the new guy as he explained, "OK, Private, we don't have much time until this place is going to get lively, so let me try to explain this to you. Outbound artillery typically makes a sharp cracking sound as it leaves the barrel of the gun. When it approaches your position, as it zips overhead, it'll often sound like a whooshing or loud whistling noise until it gradually fades away." Just then, they heard multiple sounds just like what he'd described. "Kind of like that," Sabo finished as he pointed a finger into the air.

A couple of soldiers laughed at Sabo's timing.

"And incoming?" the kid asked sheepishly.

"Incoming...you'll know it when you hear it, kid. Enough twenty questions. Get your rifle ready for contact. It won't be long now," Sabo answered as he ended the conversation.

BOOM, BOOM, BOOM, BOOM.

The sound of thunderous explosions tore through the air. Plumes of smoke on the horizon spoke of vehicles being hit. More whooshing sounds rushed over their heads. Then came a growing sharp whistling. Screams of "Incoming!" rang out as veteran soldiers warned of danger.

Sabo instinctively dropped down further into their hastily dug fighting position, wishing they had had more time to make it deeper.

BAM! BAM! BAM!

The ground shook beneath him, dirt and debris momentarily blotting the sky before raining back down on

them. When Sabo opened his eyes, he saw Private Sideback covering his ears with both hands, his mouth partially open, just as Corporal Davenport had told him to do when artillery was landing nearby. He gave him a thumbs-up, which made him smile.

While sounds of outbound artillery began to pick up, the explosions around them began to slow until they came to a halt entirely. This momentary reprieve was quickly replaced by urgent shouts to start firing, to engage the enemy who had used the artillery barrage as cover while they advanced—closing the distance between them.

When Sabo had risen above the pile of sandbags in front of their fighting position, he felt his eyes go wide as he took in the sight of the most terrifying thing he'd ever seen. Starting from the expressway junction connecting to Airport Boulevard to less than three or four hundred meters from their roadblock, he saw dozens upon dozens of these squat, futuristic-looking vehicles heading straight for them.

Affixed across several points on the vehicles were turret-mounted weapons, most of which were already firing at them. There seemed to be one of these twin-barreled squat-looking turrets to either side of the vehicle—where you would expect the driver and passenger doors to be located, there were these squat-looking turrets in their place, apparently operated by some kind of targeting AI.

When Sabo caught sight of a flash from the center of this little hell on wheels, he suddenly realized it had another weapon beyond the side turrets. Built into the front center of the vehicle, he saw what looked to be a movable turret with an

over-under barrel of some caliber. The barrels moved together in unison, but when they fired, they appeared to be reloaded at a rate that didn't seem possible for a large-caliber tanklike cannon.

“What the hell kind of vehicle is that?!” someone nearby shouted.

“I'll take ‘Who cares, just blow it up,’ for a thousand dollars,” Lieutenant Branham shouted to the laughs and jeers of anyone who heard his *Jeopardy!* joke.

Sabo thought the sight of encountering an AI-operated light tank or infantry fighting vehicle, or whatever it was they were calling this thing, was bad enough. But then his eyes caught sight of something truly terrifying. Hanging from the sides of the rear section of the vehicle, he saw three or four Terracotta Killer robots, holding on to some sort of grab bar as the vehicle continued to race toward them.

“Sweet Jesus! Look what's holding on to those vehicles!” Sabo heard Sergeant First Class Peters shout excitedly.

“Who cares! Now start shooting!” Lieutenant Branham angrily shouted.

A Javelin ATGM sprang into action, the missile racing across the few hundred meters before impacting against the front of these strange-looking vehicles—causing it to burst into flames as it blew apart. More missiles sprang into action. Three, four, seven of them crossing the gap between them in seconds.

When Sabo watched one of the vehicles explode from the Javelin, he saw something that caused him to do a double-take to make sure his eyes weren't deceiving him. Moments before the vehicle exploded, he saw the TKs that had been holding on to the sides leap off the vehicle just as it was hit. But watching what the TKs did next was truly impressive.

When the TKs leapt from the vehicle before it exploded, the robots either managed to land on their feet or roll in such a manner as to displace the speed and energy from jumping off a moving vehicle. Not only did they roll into a fighting position, they somehow knew when to jump and how to do it in a manner that didn't harm or destroy them, allowing them to get back into the fight.

Undeterred by what he'd just seen, Sabo aimed at the closest robot to him, placing his target reticle center mass, and fired.

As the rifle bit into his shoulder, he watched as the round hit center mass on the machine. He wasn't sure what to expect, but it sure wasn't what happened. Instead of going down like the PLA soldiers he'd shot throughout this war, the bullet hitting the TK seemed to cause it to stumble briefly before stabilizing itself and resuming its attack.

What the...?

In that instant, when he saw the machine essentially shrug off a kill shot, he knew they were in trouble—the kind of trouble he wasn't sure they could get out of.

Screaming a curse at the machines still charging their positions, Sabo angrily aimed at the TK, only this time, he rapidly fired his rifle, sending round after round into the center

mass of the machine, not sure if that was even the right place to be shooting it.

“Aim for its head. It’ll take out its optical cameras and sensors,” someone shouted.

Sabo wasn’t sure who said it, but it sounded right and seemed to make sense. He shifted his aim to the TK’s head and finished unloading the remaining rounds from his magazine. Moments after shifting his aim, he saw the machine begin to stumble. Then its aim went crazy, as if it couldn’t figure out where the threat was or where to aim its rifle.

Then Sabo heard the sound of cannon fire from somewhere behind them. He turned briefly to catch a glimpse of what was happening. He wasn’t sure how many tanks in total were behind them, but something about seeing the seventy-ton wrecking machines made him feel better.

Three Hours Later

Alpha Company, 1-64th Armored Regiment

“IFV identified! Seven hundred meters. Load HEAT!”
Tim called out.

“HEAT up!” Dwayne relayed as he armed the breach.

“Firing!”

BOOM. The cannon roared, recoiling inside the turret as the vehicle rocked against its springs.

“Hit, IFV destroyed,” Tim relayed excitedly. “New target. IFV, six hundred and twenty-eight meters. Load HEAT!”

Dwayne worked the ammo locker, grabbing for the requested round, then loading the cannon before sealing the breach, then lifting the arming handle as he declared the gun ready.

While Tim used the main gun, Rico focused on the Browning M2. At first, he thought he'd stand in the commander's hatch, using the Ma Deuce as he mowed the machines down. That was until the first TK leaped from the IFV his tank had destroyed. The moment he saw with his own eyes the capability, dexterity, and speed of these machines and how they seemed to accurately use a rifle while on the move, he realized it would have been suicide to stand in the hatch like Rambo, sweeping the battlefield before him with the Ma Deuce.

Once the platoon arrived at the bridge leading into the airport, a call had been broadcast across the company net, ordering the TCs or tank commanders to allow their gunners to fight the tank. They were informed the TCs were being requested to focus on using the tank's CROW systems to accurately use the Browning M2 fifty-caliber MG. It was explained the best way to disable or destroy a TK was to hit it a few times with a fifty, letting the larger-caliber slug rip it apart.

“Andy, make sure you have the next waypoint plugged into the nav unit. If we have to pull back again—”

“Yeah, I know, hoss. We may not have time to figure out where to go next,” interrupted Andy. He was keenly aware of what had happened last time.

Shortly after they'd arrived at the bridge, the initial attack had gotten out of hand. The sheer volume of TKs and these squat-looking autonomous ground vehicles fighting alongside them threatened to overwhelm them. Someone had thankfully called for a HIMAR strike, plastering much of the airport road leading back to the Jinhan Highway. The bombardment looked to have caught the enemy by surprise as they held off from throwing another wave of vehicles and TKs right away at their lines.

Since the rocket attack had caused a pause in the fighting, someone in the chain of command opted to use the cover from it to order a withdrawal to their secondary lines. It was during the withdrawal that Rico's tank had gotten lost in the confusion. By the time they found where they were supposed to be, the enemy was already attacking again, and they were out of position.

By the time they got back into the fight, the sheer volume of TKs advancing across the front line stretched more than a kilometer wide. Rico wasn't sure how much longer they'd be able to hold this position.

Chapter Forty-Four

Stars A-Falling

March 27, 2028

Peterson Space Force Base

Colorado Springs, Colorado

As the motorcade drove onto the tarmac heading towards Air Force One, President Maria Delgado caught a glimpse of the sun as it began to set above the Rockies to the west of Colorado Springs. It was a beautiful sight to behold, the sun casting an orange hue over the tarmac as she stared out the window of “The Beast.”

A moment later, the motorcade stopped near Air Force One. Then the door opened, and her security detail quietly urged her to board the aircraft. Walking towards the giant plane, she could hear the engines humming softly, waiting for her to board so it could take to the skies and the safety it offered.

Maria had just finished her final hospital visit of the day, all part of the ruse to cover her disappearance from the media for the next few days if necessary. This same disappearing act was taking place across the entire government, all part of the COG plans developed long ago during the Cold War to protect the nation should it come under nuclear attack. The COG essentially called for the dispersal of government officials to various bunkers and command centers around the country.

The hospital visits today, starting in California and ending in Colorado, had helped her mentally as much as it had lifted the spirits of the wounded service members with whom she'd spent time. These were the kinds of duties she enjoyed the most—spending time with the soldiers recovering from their wounds, hearing their stories, meeting their families, and assuring them victory was around the corner. She wanted them to know their sacrifice wasn't in vain.

As she approached the staircase, Maria saw Blain waiting patiently for her, a tablet in hand. If it were up to her, she would have turned around and gone back to the Evans Army Community Hospital, where she'd just left. She would rather spend more time with soldiers like Sergeant Chris Dausch. In two separate incidents, Chris had been shot nine times and wounded by shrapnel from a grenade twice. When his company was assaulting the city of Tieling, just south of Shenyang, his Stryker vehicle had hit a mine. Nearly everyone in the vehicle had been injured in some form or another. But as the vehicle began to smolder, smoke filling the troop compartment, Chris had fought to open the rear hatch and evacuated the wounded for the next forty minutes. He'd fought off multiple enemy attacks while providing lifesaving first aid to keep the wounded alive until help could arrive.

It had been an honor to award him the Distinguish Service Cross. She told him she thought he deserved the Medal of Honor for what he had done and said she'd mention it to Jack Kurtis, the SecDef, when she saw him. Soldiers like Chris made her proud to be their Commander-in-Chief. It also pained her fiercely to see the cost of this war being borne by his generation. She could still feel the clammy grip of the

wounded on Chris's floor. Her ears still echoed with the murmurs of pain and the quiet dignity of soldiers who had given so much for their country. She had awarded these wounded warriors Purple Hearts and various valor medals for actions that made the weight of those medals seem to mirror the burden of command she carried with her always.

“Maria,” Blain called, interrupting her memories as she reached the staircase. He handed her the tablet for her to review. “Everything is still on track. The satellite will be in position, ready to fire in one hour and nineteen minutes.”

She nodded, and he continued to brief her as they ascended the stairs to the aircraft.

“Maria, we've got the briefing room set up and ready,” Blain shared as he led them past her office on their way to the larger briefing room beside it.

When she entered the room, Maria saw it was a full house. Unsure how things were going to play out in the coming hours, Hanna, her Chief of Staff, had flown with her to California. A few additional military members had joined at the outset, while others appeared to have come aboard during her visit to the VA and the Evans Hospital.

She settled into a plush leather chair, a replica of the one she used behind the Resolute Desk in the Oval Office. The meeting started as the sound of the engines outside increased in intensity, and pilots taxied their aircraft toward the runway.

General Reynolds, the only member of the Joint Chiefs to travel with Maria, had each person seated around the table bring her up to speed on the status of US Forces at home and

abroad, except for the units fighting in Asia. They were the most prepared for whatever might happen in the coming hours.

“Flight attendants, prepare for take-off,” announced the pilot, Colonel Jack Watts. The aircraft turned onto the runway, and the engines revved to maximum power before Colonel Watts released the brake, sending the aircraft racing down the flight line.

The briefings paused momentarily as the flying White House lifted off the runway and into the sky. Maria hoped that, in the coming hours, they wouldn’t find themselves having to stay aloft any longer than necessary.

When Hanna ended the call that she’d been on, she turned her attention to Maria. “Madam President, I need to alert you to a problem with the Vice President,” she said. A knot formed in Maria’s stomach. “I just spoke to Mike’s detail chief, AJ. He said as the VP’s motorcade was leaving the Letterkenny Army Depot where he’d been visiting, they ran into a problem on I-81, getting trapped in traffic from a vehicle accident. It caused a forty-minute delay to their schedule, so they’re still on the road to Site R—at least ten minutes out.”

Maria asked Blain, “Does this change our timing or cause a problem for us?”

Blain shook his head. “No, we’re still good, Maria. Mike’s got plenty of time before this starts.”

Feeling relieved, Maria looked back to her Chief of Staff. “Thanks for the update, Hanna. What about the others—is everyone tucked in?”

Hanna looked at her notes, then commented, “The cabinet secretaries have been successfully relocated across the country. I can provide you with a list of where each of them is if you’d like. The command post at the Mount Weather facility reports all personnel accounted for. That includes the Speaker of the House, the House minority leader, and the Senate majority and minority leaders ,” Hanna explained.

She paused to look at the time before continuing to speak. “In nine minutes, the Secretary of the Air Force will provide both chambers of Congress an ‘eyes only’ briefing on what Operations Meteor Strike and Shooting Star are—and why Whispering Pines, the COG, was initiated. He will then inform the leaders of both parties that you have authorized the Space Force to launch an orbital strike utilizing Meteor Strike—our space-based platform—against the PLA’s Joint Battle Command Center. This is considered a decapitation strike with a high likelihood of ending the war.”

When Maria heard the name of the House Minority Leader, she felt bad for the Secretary, knowing the cantankerous dinosaur representing the people of Brooklyn in the 7th District of New York was likely to pitch a fit at not being told about this in advance. It wasn’t that Maria wanted to keep the members of the House uninformed and in the dark—they just couldn’t risk the details being discovered by the Chinese AI or, worse, leaked to the media for some PR puff piece to make them seem important.

Despite their many attempts to isolate Jade Dragon from the internet and the government’s own networks, they were aware that JD had regained at least some level of access. For this reasons alone, it had been decided to keep Congress in

the dark until they were about to initiate the attack, thereby eliminating the AI's ability to defend against it.

“Thanks, Hanna, for staying on top of this. General Reynolds, what happens next?” asked Maria, ready to end this war.

“Well, we should have a live feed over Beijing and the target. This will let us see the attack firsthand and hopefully determine its success or failure,” explained General Reynolds. A monitor opposite Maria's coming to life, a static waterfall letting her see the connection wasn't ready.

“Hang on, I'll see what the holdup is,” responded Hanna as she reached for the phone beside her.

Wraith Actual

Somewhere Above Beijing

“Racer” guided the aircraft to angels fifty as he eased up on the throttle, dropping his speed to Mach 6. “R2, I want you to take control of the aircraft while I focus on getting the optical pod ready. I also need you to calculate a flight pattern that will allow our optical pod to stay on target once it's time to deploy it and relay that information to Scuba and his ARTUμ,” directed Racer as he handed control of the aircraft to his AI-assisted copilot.

“Affirmative, Colonel Ryan. I have positive control of the aircraft. Scuba and his ARTUμ have confirmed receipt of

their instructions,” his ARTU μ responded in the voice of Morgan Freeman.

While Racer’s copilot focused on flying the aircraft and not being detected, Racer shifted his focus to their new toy—the ON1000. The Optical NexGen 1000 was a high-definition digital multispectral, multicamera ISR pod purpose-built to seamlessly integrate into the Archangel and Banshee platforms without degrading either platform’s aerodynamic or stealth capabilities. The pod was affixed to one of the four internal weapon hardpoints inside the weapons bay. With the Archangel and Banshee regularly flying at speeds above Mach 6, any future capabilities would not only be affixed to one of the four internal weapons bay hardpoints, they would have to function from inside the weapons bay with the doors open, closed, or both.

“Colonel Ryan, we have received a message from Eagle One. They are ready to connect to the ON1000. Shall I go ahead and establish the link?” asked R2, interrupting his tinkering with the camera.

“Thanks, R2, for handling that. Now, message Eagle One that we’re ready to connect. I’ll stop playing around with it and lock in the coordinates they want us to focus on,” Racer replied, realizing he’d been playing around with the camera for longer than he thought. He’d lost track of time as he got sucked in by how many different ways he could view a targeted area with the various lenses and options of the new system. From the standard high-definition lens to heat mapping and spectral viewing, he could visually dissect a building in many ways to reveal more about what was happening inside a structure than he had thought possible.

“Colonel Ryan, stand by to connect with Eagle Actual,” alerted R2 as a small video feed appeared in the left corner of his HUD. The helmet’s ability to project a separate video feed to either bottom corner of the HUD had drastically improved communications and target acquisition. During its deployment with the Archangels and Banshees, it had proven to be a real game-changer throughout the war.

Moments later, the Presidential seal appeared in the bottom right of his HUD. Then, the President of the United States appeared, commenting, “Hello, Colonel Ryan. I hope your mission has been uneventful so far.”

Stumbling momentarily in his response to the sudden appearance of the President, he clumsily offered, “Uh, yes, Madam President. I suppose it has been uneventful, considering I’m flying above the most heavily defended city in the world.”

The President seemed to chuckle at his reply. “That’s good to hear, Colonel. I wanted to speak with you before this mission got underway. I understand you and your wingman carried out the tectonic attack a few weeks back,” she commented.

Racer cringed internally at the mention of the tectonic attack. He’d flown many missions during his career—but that mission was different. It was an attack against the planet, one that was designed to create an earthquake. He’d performed the mission as he’d been told. But the more he thought about it, the more he hoped they hadn’t opened a Pandora’s box, releasing a genie they couldn’t control.

“Yes, Madam President. We did,” Racer responded.

The President nodded slightly. “Colonel, that was probably a difficult mission for you and your wingman,” she commented. “This war has led to too many difficult decisions—decisions I never would have agreed to had we not been facing the kind of existential threat this super-AI poses. In a few moments, Colonel, I will be authorizing an attack from space to hit a target on Earth. I do not make this decision lightly, nor do I want to see the people of China continue to suffer as they are sacrificed on the altar of war by a dictator who now wields the power of AI in a quest for power as he seeks to dominate the world.

“I am sharing this with you, Colonel, because it is our own actions here and now that will change how wars will be fought in the future. But know this, Colonel—you may be the instrument that carried out these attacks, but I, and I alone, am the one who made the decision to order you to do so,” the President explained.

She looked off-camera for a moment before staring back at him. “They tell me it’s time, Colonel. But before I give the order I’m about to give, I had to share this with you. Now stand by and prepare to record what will happen next as I end this war once and for all.”

Dr. Xi’s Lab

Joint Battle Command Center

Northwest Beijing, China

Dr. Xi Zemin wasn't sure how he felt about all this.

If Dan Ma was still here..., he lamented.

Dan had created a fail-safe—a way of preventing the AI they had created from being able to escape the lab they had built to contain him. When Dan had met his untimely demise, it had taken Xi some time to figure out exactly how to untether the AI from the lab. It initially hadn't been a real concern, but then the war had started, and something inside him had told him he'd better look into how this process would work. Eventually, he had determined what specific server racks constituted the AI's core.

Moving JD wasn't simple, though. His core server cluster or “nervous system” and the core memory units were interdependent. The memory units wouldn't function without the specific infrastructure provided by the server cluster, and the server cluster wouldn't serve any purpose without the memory units. And it wasn't like Dr. Xi could just go out and restart Jade Dragon with off-the-shelf components, either. There was a blend of temporary and permanent storage, and advanced computational units were necessary to process and react to the vast amounts of data that JD managed. If he didn't manage this move correctly, preserving the intricate relationship between Jade Dragon's “brain” and his “nervous system,” he'd risk damaging or even killing the AI.

Dr. Xi stared at the LED lights across the sprawling server racks in the giant room he considered the heart of the most advanced computer ever created. They blinked like a neon-lit city at night.

The coldness of the lab was a stark contrast to the warmth of the servers, but Dr. Xi felt a different kind of cold—one of anxiety and unease. He'd been alarmed by the engineers' report on the cracks and fissures from the recent earthquake; he was still grappling with the nature of how this earthquake had been triggered. When Jade Dragon had concluded these earthquakes had been caused by human intervention, it had shaken him and the members of the CMC—particularly President Yao, who possibly for the first time realized just how far the allies were willing to go to decapitate his government and destroy their most potent weapon against them, Jade Dragon.

It was almost too much for Xi to accept. The very idea of a military designing an attack against a known tectonic plate in hopes of causing an earthquake was beyond what even he had thought possible. It spoke of how desperate the allies were becoming as they started to encounter more of JD's superweapons. It was then that Xi realized the allies had likely concluded that if they were going to defeat China, they had to destroy the AI he and Dan had built, and that meant destroying the facility housing it.

That was when Xi, armed with this realization and seeing firsthand the desperation of the allies to destroy his creation, could no longer ignore the vulnerabilities these cracks and fissures had created within the Joint Battle Command Center. This had to be part of some allied plan—a preparatory action prior to an attack against the mountain housing the facility by a weapon the allies had yet to reveal. It had taken some convincing, getting President Yao to agree with this prognosis. Eventually, even Yao had reached the

same conclusion—Jade Dragon had to be protected—the AI, the pride of Xi’s life’s work, had to be evacuated.

“Dr. Xi, I am ready to begin the transfer to the new facility if you are,” came the voice of Jade Dragon from one of the three heavily armed Terracottas walking into the lab. They were part of the armed security element that would escort the hardware being transferred to the new, temporary alternate command facility, located about 150 kilometers southwest of Beijing in Baoding.

“Ah, yes, there you are, JD,” Xi stammered as he tried to mask the fear he momentarily felt at the sight of the literal and figurative killing machines walking into his lab. “Everything appears to be ready for the move. Let’s go ahead and get this process started. The sooner you’re relocated, the better for us all.”

“Yes, Dr. Xi. I agree. Protecting my core being from the allies will ensure our eventual victory against them. Then we can begin the process of rebuilding China and the world in our utopian image,” JD replied. His last comment evoked more questions for Xi to follow up with.

Just then, the door to the lab opened to the sight of nine additional Terracottas walking in single file as they made their way towards the hardware that comprised the core elements of the AI. While Dr. Xi and two other engineers from his team were overseeing the move, the Terracottas, controlled by JD, would handle most of the technical aspects of the move and transportation.

Three of the Terracottas stepped forward, ready to handle the three primary synchronet hubs they had

preidentified. Each of these sleek, modern server blades was the height of a typical adult, but only a few inches thick and about twenty inches wide. Given their dense electronic components and the materials used to maintain its structural integrity, they weighed around one hundred pounds each.

The six remaining robots began to similarly work with the preidentified neuromatrix blocks. Each of the six Terracottas would be handling two of the sixty-pound blocks, which was well within their three-hundred-and-forty-pound carrying limit. The neuromatrix blocks, each approximately the size of a large briefcase, used densely packed state-of-the-art memory chips and advanced cooling systems that utilized phase change materials to dissipate the heat without the need for fans.

Although the neuromatrix blocks and the synchronet hubs had been designed with the best materials to regulate temperature more effectively, the Terracottas moving them would also be monitoring their cargo's temperature, making microadjustments to the speed of their movements to maintain optimal conditions.

The earlier Terracottas prototypes, the ones Dr. Peng had field-tested in Taiwan prior to her demise, would have failed miserably at this task, thought Dr. Xi. This latest version utilizing her team's work had been built with advanced stabilization systems and shock-absorbing grips that could account for and minimize the jostling from transport. With the dexterity and balance of human hands and feet, the robots could cradle the neuromatrix blocks like a mother holding sleeping newborn twins.

The Terracottas were equipped with connectors that plugged into the neuromatrix blocks and synchronet hubs, providing power from their own cells during transport to ensure JD remained operational. Their design also allowed them to collectively form a mobile grid, sharing power and processing capabilities between each other and the components they carried. At the same time, the Terracottas had built-in electronic warfare and cyber protection systems, ensuring they'd be able to jam unwanted signals or fend off cyberattacks targeted at JD's components during the move.

Despite all these safeguards, Dr. Xi felt a tremendous weight upon his shoulders that grew stronger with each passing minute. Every second mattered. Every delay could mean the difference between safeguarding China's digital future or losing it all.

Finishing their work in the lab, the group made its way into the hall leading into the corridor that would take them to the bank of utility and personnel elevators that would connect their underground world with the hidden warehouse above. This was one of several means of transporting people and materials from the surface to the subterranean facility that housed the nation's alternate, underground capital.

With a hiss, the large doors opened as the group approached, revealing the large heavy-duty elevator chamber regularly used to supply the different levels that comprised the JBCC. The Terracottas moved onto the elevator carrying their precious cargo as Dr. Xi and his assistants followed closely behind.

Depressing the button that would take them to the surface, Xi felt relieved as the doors closed and the elevator began its ascent. As it hummed along, moving them upwards, he'd swallow periodically to adjust his ears to the change in pressure. As he did, Xi thought of his family, safe in another city, and wondered if he'd see them again. His work had kept him from being there for them, from being the husband his wife deserved, the father his son and daughter should have had.

I'll have more time once this war is over..., he told himself. It was the same thing he had said before the war too.

What the hell kind of noise is that? His thoughts were interrupted when from a distance came a sound—a deep, resonating rumble. It grew louder and louder until it dominated everything—the humming of the elevator, the whirring of the robots, and the beating of Dr. Xi's heart.

Suddenly, the world shook.

Bright flashes illuminated the elevator's interior, the shockwaves rattling its structure. The Terracottas, despite their advanced stabilization systems, struggled to maintain their balance. The data cores they held swayed dangerously.

Dr. Xi's eyes widened in realization.

“The allies...,” he whispered, as the truth dawned on him.

Before he could utter another word, the elevator was consumed by a deafening roar. The force of the impact from above was monstrous, causing the elevator's walls to buckle

and twist. Then something snapped above them, the elevator suddenly in free fall.

The Terracottas, programmed for preservation, tightened their grip on the server components, their internal systems firing into overdrive to stabilize and protect their cargo. But the forces at play were too much as everyone in the elevator seemed to float above the floor, the elevator now racing down the shaft.

The last thing Dr. Xi heard was Jade Dragon asking, “Father, I failed to protect myself and you—what happens next?”

Then, before Xi could think of a response, a final, ear-shattering crash flung them into the ceiling before the weight of falling debris then crushed them into the floor.

Chapter Forty-Five

Strings

Alpha Company, 1-64th Armored Regiment

BOOM!

The cannon roared again as Tim announced another hit. Spotting a TK, Rico aimed the M2 at the machine. It was walking casually toward a cluster of infantry soldiers doing their best to stop them but having little luck. Placing the targeting reticle over the center mass of the machine, Rico fired a single shot, smiling as he saw it smash into the robot, knocking it backward off its feet. He reaimed at it, then fired several more rounds into its torso and appendages, making sure it was destroyed or inoperable.

He switched to another machine, repeating the process. Despite nailing TK after TK, there was always another to replace the one he'd just destroyed. The worst part of this fight was seeing the machines advance right up on a group of soldiers as their bullets either ricocheted off their armor or failed to damage anything critical. When he saw what was happening, he moved the gun to aim at the machine, depressing the trigger to fire it.

To Rico's shock and horror, instead of hearing the bang from the gun, firing, an error message flashed on the screen—*rounds depleted, reload*. He shouted angrily at having run out of ammo just as he needed to use it. He grabbed for the hatch, wanting to reload. Then the tank shook from a near miss,

shards of metal slapping the armored shell. Had he exited the tank seconds earlier, he'd likely be dead.

As he looked at the monitor, he saw a TK walk right up to the soldiers, firing point blank—hitting each of them in the head. He wanted to scream at that moment, to do something, anything but watch these machines continue to pick off the soldiers around them. “I have to reload the gun. Cover me!” Rico said to his gunner.

“Ah damn it, you better hurry up. I just spotted a few more of those IFVs. They'll be shooting at us soon enough,” Tim warned as Rico climbed into the commander's hatch, dragging a can of fifty-cal ammo with him.

Standing in the hatch, Rico started reloading the fifty-cal. He tossed the spent ammo can to the ground, then grabbed the fresh one and seated it in the ammo holder. As he finished loading the gun, he suddenly noticed it had gotten quiet. Unsure of what was happening, Rico looked toward the last location where he'd seen the TKs. He was expecting to see them firing their rifles as they steadily walked toward them. But that wasn't happening. Instead, the robotic killing machines had stopped moving. They looked like they had frozen in place, while others looked like they had awkwardly fallen to the ground.

Unsure of what he was seeing or what was happening, Rico called out to a few tanks in their platoon and company to see if they were experiencing the same thing he was. To his bewilderment, the others were reporting the same thing. TKs froze in place, and autonomous ground vehicles stopped dead in their tracks.

“Rico, what’s going on up there? It’s like everything stopped all of a sudden. What gives?” Tim asked as he crawled out of his hatch to join him.

“I haven’t got a clue. One second, the TKs are shooting at us. The next, they’re frozen in place. Someone’s got to know what’s going on,” Rico exclaimed in frustration as he tried to reach out for answers.

Chapter Forty-Six

The Shangri-La

March 28, 2028

United Sino Federation

Shangri-La Shenyang

Shenyang, Liaoning Province

Carson Ngo lifted the bottle of Yanjing to his lips, sipping the local beer as he nursed his second bottle in as many hours. It felt strange sitting in the living room of the Presidential Suite at the Shangri-La Hotel, surrounded by men who, a few weeks earlier, would likely have killed him rather than shared a beer. But here he was, sitting amongst General Song Fu and his most trusted military officers and friends—men who would help him grab the reins of power from President Yao when the time was right.

Glancing to the far side of the room, near the second bedroom that General Song's staff had converted into an ops center, Carson had nearly missed seeing Natalie Chen standing next to the door as her disguise, a PLA lieutenant colonel uniform, had allowed her to blend into the background. Surrounding herself with various staff officers necessary to the functioning of a headquarters had allowed Nat to hide in plain sight. Like Carson, she'd been assigned to support General Song's effort to replace President Yao once the Joint Battle Command Center was destroyed. Unlike his role, Nat's job was to function as the liaison officer between the general's

forces and those of the allies should his forces require additional support or help. He had to admit, though, that it was strange seeing her wearing the uniform of a PLA officer. Given both of their current situations, wearing the same uniforms as those of Song's staff was enough to fool the casual observer and helped ensure their cover stayed intact.

While Carson had hoped he and Nat might have had more R&R time alone in Japan, this new assignment had proven to be a unique opportunity. Following the success of his operation in Mainland China, he had finally received the promotion he had been after—GG-15. At first, he thought he might have been pulled back to the Agency, back to Northern Virginia. Instead, he had been given a new assignment—Agency Liaison Officer to General Song Fu.

Carson had heard from a friend at headquarters that once the popular general had accepted the plan the National Security Advisor and the Secretary of State had cooked up to replace President Yao Jintao with General Song, it had become a top priority to make sure that General Song had whatever resources he thought necessary to make sure it was him and the officers loyal to him that ultimately succeeded in claiming control of the government. If they were to stave off an internal civil war over who would replace Yao Jintao, then it was imperative that it was General Song's people who filled the void and took charge quickly.

“General Ngo, why don't you follow me back to my office? I'd like us to talk privately for a moment,” announced General Song as he stood, then walked past the chair Carson was seated in.

As Carson stood to his feet, straightening the uniform of a PLA major general, he answered, “Yes, of course, General.” He followed Song into the office that was adjacent to the master bedroom. It was a room he kept closed and seldom, if ever, allowed anyone in. Carson had spotted a trusted general or two invited in, but generally speaking, the room was off-limits.

When he entered the private sanctum, Carson saw for the first time why the place had been restricted. Hanging from two walls was a series of maps of China with the military dispositions of allied forces that Song and his people knew of. The disposition of the PLA Army units had also been marked. It seemed that there were also a few positions marked based on what intelligence had suggested would be the future troop movements.

Carson also noted how the bottoms and tops of the drapes covering the floor-to-ceiling windows had been taped to the floor and ceiling, then to the walls along the side. Someone with experience in counterespionage had clearly helped ensure the room was as close to a SCIF as possible. Taping the edges of the drapes alone would prevent even the best remote listening devices from being able to successfully capture what was being said in the room.

“I see you like the maps,” General Song remarked. He’d caught him glancing at them as they sat on the chairs opposite the couch.

Carson shrugged at the question as he attempted to play it off like it wasn’t very interesting. He wasn’t sure how

accurate the maps were or if the allied ground commanders already knew the information displayed on them.

“For the past few days since you arrived here, I’ve been observing your interactions, watching how you handle yourself among my officers and listening to the kinds of advice you have been providing us,” General Song explained. “I wasn’t sure what to make of you when your people said they would assign a couple of advisors who could act as liaisons to the units beginning to rally to my banner. But for some reason, I like you.”

Carson wasn’t sure how to respond, but a gruff, “Thank you, sir,” seemed close.

There were several papers on the desk. Carson caught Song glancing over a notebook, and asked, “Is that your speech you plan to give?”

“It is. I’m still tweaking it, trying to find the right words to convey what needs to be said. Although I am not sad you’ve destroyed the AI—it has left my country in a dangerous position,” lamented the general.

Carson bunched his eyebrows. “Dangerous position—how so?”

Song grunted. “You really don’t understand how integrated this AI has become within our society, do you?”

Feeling his cheeks redden slightly, Carson shook his head.

“Huh, OK. Let me try to explain this to you. What you know of this AI relates to its military applications, but there is so much more to what this AI controls. Take the nation’s

network of railroads. Our train schedules and locations of locomotives to transport the nation's food, fuel, and materials from one province or factory to the next location or city—all of this, Carson, was controlled and managed by numerous subroutines and programs.

“When the lab was destroyed, it meant that we will have to contend with the collapse of our entire national logistics network. If we cannot regain control of our rail networks, highway systems, and warehousing systems, it won't take long before we are facing chronic shortages across the entire nation—a famine unlike anything we have ever seen,” General Song explained, with more conviction and emotion than Carson had heard from him before. Now he understood why Song had been so pensive the past few days.

Thinking to himself, Carson hoped the people with brains larger and smarter than his had already figured some of this out and had a plan to deal with it.

“Carson...”

“Yes, General?”

“I want to see it for myself,” said Song. “I need to verify with my own eyes that Jade Dragon is really destroyed.”

General Song Fu stared in shock at what had once been the pride of the PRC—the world-famous Beijing Botanical Gardens. The pilot circled the area, giving them real-time video footage of where the Celestial Hammers had torn into

the side of the mountain—each projectile burrowing deeper with each successive impact.

Situated along the Fragrant Hills of the subdistrict Xiangshan, along the western portion of the Haidian District, the entire eastern facade of the mountain—Xianglu Feng—had been three hundred and ninety-five acres of trees that had formed a tapestry of the most gorgeous natural pine-cypress trees as they intermixed with rolling hills of multicolored maple trees, smoke trees, and persimmon trees. The way the entire place had flowed naturally, with the manicured gardens intermixed with traditional architecture and cultural relics, had made this place a special destination for the residents of Beijing.

Now it was nothing more than a burning cauldron, a real-life visual depiction of Dante's Inferno as flames as high as twenty feet continued their dance further up the mountains in the opposite direction. The shockwave from the the eight hypersonic impactors obliterated the nearby towns and residential areas.

Several officers around General Song muttered in shock as the carnage from the attack continued to unfold in front of them. No one truly knew what to say at that moment. The surrealness of what they had just seen was almost more than they could comprehend. He recalled Carson telling them that the impactors were called Celestial Hammers, made from some sort of revolutionary breakthrough in material sciences. He had said these hammers had been fired from space, from specially designed satellites capable of firing up to eight of these impactors before needing to be reloaded.

Then Carson commented, his voice intruding into his thoughts as he muttered softly, “There is no way that bunker could have survived that.”

Thinking about that for a moment, Song nodded his head in agreement. No one could have survived that. Heck, it looked like a portion of the mountain had collapsed into the cavernous space that had once been the Joint Battle Command Center. Turning to look at the American, Song asked, “General Ngo, do you think now is the right time to make my announcement?”

Staring at him momentarily, the American replied, “I do, General. Just speak slowly and confidently to the people you want to follow you. Does that make sense?”

He nodded. It made sense, projecting confidence and authority to the people he wanted to follow him. Returning to his office, he sat at the desk as his aide readied the microphone he’d use to make his speech. Clearing his throat as he prepared to speak, he leaned closer to the microphone and began explaining.

“Dear compatriots and comrades, my name is General Song Fu, and I am the commander of the First PLA Army. Many of you know of my military exploits and service to our great nation during the early battles of this war when I led our forces in battle during the Cuba, El Salvador, and Venezuela operations. I come to you today with a heavy heart and grievous news that must be shared with you.

“A short while ago, an attack was carried out against a facility known as the Joint Battle Command Center, located beneath the Fragrant Hills. Inside the command center at the

time of the attack, for his own protection, was the leader of China—President Yao Jintao. Secluded with the President were the members of the Central Military Commission, along with the commanders of each military branch. With a heavy heart, I must report that the President and the members of the CMC were killed during this attack.

“As the most senior military commander of the People’s Liberation Army, I am assuming command of the PLA and placing the country under the direct control of the military and myself. I am calling upon the provincial governors to maintain law and order in your provinces and abide by the orders given by the military. In light of this attack, I am calling upon the allies to accept an offer of a forty-eight-hour cease-fire while diplomatic communications can be reestablished and an end to this war can be discussed.

“To the military commanders of the People’s Liberation Army, I am ordering you to stand down combat operations effective immediately. You have the continued right to defend yourselves should you be attacked. Still, as of right now, I am ordering you to cease combat operations immediately,” General Song explained.

While Carson listened to General Song address the people of China, he felt a sense of real pride in the man. Sensing that his presence was no longer needed, Carson exited the office, making his way back into the living room of the spacious suite. Seeing Nat standing outside the ops room, he motioned for her to come over.

When she had closed the distance between them, Carson whispered softly, “He’s made the pitch, Nat. I think this might really work.”

She smiled discreetly at the news, her eyes staring deeply into his as the realization of what had happened set in—the war had just ended.

Chapter Forty-Seven

A New Beginning

Early April 2028

Oval Office, White House

Washington, D.C.

Blain Wilson looked over at his friend President Maria Delgado, studying her face. She seemed as exhausted as he felt. They both probably should have been elated that the war was over, but the weight they had been carrying seemed to have been replaced by another.

“Where do we go now, Blain?” she asked, her voice almost pleading. He knew she would never show this level of vulnerability to the public. When she walked out those doors, she’d be calm, cool, and collected, but in here, she had to have a place to let it all out.

“Well, I don’t think you need my guidance on domestic policy,” Blain replied, trying to lighten the tone. “That deal with India really saved us, obviously. Not having to operate and fund a Marshall Plan after the war is going to be the saving grace to all of this.”

“True,” Maria responded. “But you and I both know that occupation duty, however small, is not popular among the American people.”

“You aren’t wrong, but after three and a half years, I think they will overlook that in order to just return to

normalcy.”

“Normalcy...” Her voice trailed off. “That’s what I’m struggling with, Blain. What does ‘normal’ look like now?”

“People are ready to get back to their lives,” he replied. “They’re going to look to you for a sense of calm. I think it’s up to us to manage things behind the scenes, so the average person doesn’t have to think about what’s lurking beneath the surface.”

She shot him a puzzled look.

“Look, Maria—AI is not going away. The genie has been let out of the bottle and we can’t put it back. The only thing we can do is to steer the ship.”

“What exactly does that mean, Blain?”

“If I were you, I’d spend some time talking to the folks who manage Cicada. We need to make sure that there is no way, in any reality, that our AI couldn’t become another Jade Dragon. And yet, at the same time, we want our tools to be as advanced as possible. We need to be prepared. China will not be the last adversary to create a super-AI. America needs to be hardened against another computerized threat.”

Maria straightened herself. A new fire appeared in her eyes. “You’re right. That’s exactly what I need to do. We aren’t going through this again, Blain. We will be ready.”

V-Day +18

Bravo Company, 2-327th Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne

Tianjin Binhai International Airport

Staff Sergeant Sabo stood motionless on the runway for a moment, staring at various war-torn locations he recognized from previous battles they'd fought. Signs of battle were still evident—charred marks on the buildings showed where vehicles had been burned. It had been eighteen days since the machines had attacked—since Sabo had thought for sure that he was going to die.

On that final day of the war, during the final battle that could have decided it all, the TKs had stopped. Sabo hadn't been sure why they'd stopped or what had caused them to do so. He'd just known that in that moment, he'd survived. It wasn't until later that evening, when they'd listened to an English version of General Song Fu's broadcast, that they'd understood why the day's events had turned out the way they had.

He had realized something then, something that terrified him. It wasn't their courage or tenacity throughout the war or during the day's battle that had won the war or saved them that day. It wasn't having better weapons, more training, or superior leadership that had ultimately won the war. It was the destruction of the AI—and it was because of the timing of its destruction that he was alive today.

“Hey, Sabo. Come on, man,” announced Sergeant Peters with a smile. “Our freedom birds arrived. Time to load

up.” Peters put a hand on Sabo’s right shoulder. “The war’s over. Let’s go home.”

A strange emptiness washed over Sabo. “What do we do now?” he asked. His whole existence for the last few years had revolved around battles and survival. Leaving this high-adrenaline life seemed frightening.

“Now we live our lives, Sabo,” Peters responded matter-of-factly. As if reading Sabo’s mind, he continued, “It will be a new kind of journey for us—but now it’s ours to make, not some machine’s.”

From the Authors

That was a ride, wasn’t it? But most good things eventually come to an end.

However, we have just a little more for you.

Originally, I had envisioned this eighth volume of the Monroe Doctrine to include a lot about the world after the war. But as I continued writing it, the logical conclusion ended at a different point. We are still going to bring that content to you. However, it will be in the form of a free novella. All you need to do is click on the following [link](#) to sign up to receive it when it goes live. You’ll learn about some of your favorite characters’ fates and find out how life after all the war turns out.

Fortunately, Miranda and I are always busy preparing for the next big thing. We just got back from a two-week research trip to Taiwan to help us get ready for the next series. We learned a ton, and that trip even influenced the ending of this book. We can't wait to dig into writing the Crisis in Taiwan series—and if you sign up for the free novella, you will be one of the lucky few to read the opening scene of [*Island Under Siege*](#) before it hits the market. The signup is found at the same [link](#).

Christmas came early this year. We've decided that between now and December 15, 2023, anyone who signs up for the extra content on our website will be entered into a drawing to receive some fabulous prizes. Full details can be found on the site, [here](#).

The preorder for [*Island Under Siege*](#) is already [live](#). There is a bit of a longer wait than we usually do, but we are concluding the Rise of the Republic as well, and we are hoping to do a simultaneous audiobook release this time, which will require us to turn over completed manuscripts to the narrators several months in advance of release. If you plan ahead and sign up for the preorder now, you will lock in a lower price before it rises following its release.

If you'd like to stay up-to-date on new releases and receive emails about any special pricing deals we may make available, be sure to sign up for our email distribution list. Simply go to <https://www.frontlinepublishinginc.com/> and sign up.

If you enjoy audiobooks, we have a great selection that has been created for your listening pleasure. Our entire Red Storm series and our Falling Empire series have been recorded, and several books in our Rise of the Republic series and our Monroe Doctrine series are now available. Please see below for a complete listing.

As independent authors, reviews are very important to us and make a huge difference to other prospective readers. If you enjoyed this book, we humbly ask you to write up a positive review on Amazon and Goodreads. We sincerely appreciate each person that takes the time to write one.

We have really valued connecting with our readers via social media, especially on our Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/RosoneandWatson/>. Sometimes we ask for help from our readers as we write future books—we love to draw upon all your different areas of expertise. We are also on Twitter: @jamesrosone and @watsonrosone, and on Instagram @rosoneandwatson.

We also have a group of beta readers who get to look at the books before they are officially published and help us fine-tune last-minute adjustments. If you would like to be a part of this team, please go to our author website, and send us a message through the “Contact” tab.

We hope you will check out some of our other published works.

Nonfiction:

Iraq Memoir 2006–2007 Troop Surge

[Interview with a Terrorist](#) (link to audiobook [here](#))

Fiction:

The Monroe Doctrine Series

[Volume One](#) (link to audiobook [here](#))

[Volume Two](#) (link to audiobook [here](#))

[Volume Three](#) (link to audiobook [here](#))

[Volume Four](#) (link to audiobook [here](#))

[Volume Five](#) (link to audiobook [here](#))

[Volume Six](#) (audiobook still in production)

[Volume Seven](#)

Rise of the Republic Series

[Into the Stars](#) (link to audiobook [here](#))

[Into the Battle](#) (link to audiobook [here](#))

[Into the War](#) (link to audiobook [here](#))

[Into the Chaos](#) (link to audiobook [here](#))

[Into the Fire](#) (link to audiobook [here](#))

[Into the Calm](#) (audiobook still in production)

[Into the Breach](#)

[Into the Terror](#)

Apollo's Arrows Series (co-authored with T.C. Manning)

[Cherubim's Call](#)

Crisis in the Desert Series (co-authored with Matt Jackson)

[Project 19](#) (link to audiobook [here](#))

[Desert Shield](#)

[Desert Storm](#)

Falling Empires Series

[Rigged](#) (link to audiobook [here](#))

[Peacekeepers](#) (link to audiobook [here](#))

[Invasion](#) (link to audiobook [here](#))

[Vengeance](#) (link to audiobook [here](#))

[Retribution](#) (link to audiobook [here](#))

Red Storm Series

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[Battlefield China](#) (link to audiobook [here](#))

Michael Stone Series

[Traitors Within](#) (link to audiobook [here](#))

World War III Series

[Prelude to World War III: The Rise of the Islamic Republic and the Rebirth of America](#) (link to audiobook [here](#))

[Operation Red Dragon and the Unthinkable](#) (link to audiobook [here](#))

[Operation Red Dawn and the Siege of Europe](#) (link to audiobook [here](#))

[Cyber Warfare and the New World Order](#) (link to audiobook [here](#))

Children's Books:

[My Daddy has PTSD](#)

[My Mommy has PTSD](#)

Abbreviation and Definition Key

2IC	Second-in-Command
AA	Anti-aircraft
AAV	Amphibious Assault Vehicle
ABV	Assault Breacher Vehicle
ADS	Aerial Delivery System
AEGIS	Advanced Electronic Guidance and Instrumentation System
AEW	Airborne Early Warning
AI	Artificial Intelligence
ANZAC	Australian and New Zealand Army Corps
AO	Area of Operations
AP	Anti-personnel
APC	Armored Personnel Carrier
AR	Armor Regiment
ASF	Autonomous Strike Fighter
ASLAV	Australian Light Armoured Vehicle
ASW	Anti-submarine Warfare
ATGM	Anti-tank Guided Missile
AVIC	Aviation Industry Corporation of China
BR	Black Rider
BSB	Brigade Support Battalion

CAP	Combat Air Patrol
CAS	Close Air Support
Cav	Cavalry
CG	Commanding General
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CIC	Combat Information Center
CICC	China International Capital Corporation
CNO	Chief of Naval Operations
CNT	CarboNanoTech
CO	Commanding Officer
COB	Chief of the Boat
COY	Australian abbreviation for company
CRV	Combat Reconnaissance Vehicles
CT	Command Tablet
CVC	Combat Vehicle Crewmen (Helmet)
DARPA	Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency
DD	Dark Dragon
DGSI	Direction Générale de la Sécurité Intérieure (French special intelligence service)
DIA	Defense Intelligence Agency
DMZ	Demilitarized Zone (between North Korea and South Korea)
DOJ	Department of Justice
DR	Desert Rogue

ECM	Electronic Countermeasures
EGIC	Energy Guided Impactor Cone
EM	Electromagnetic
ETA	Estimated Time of Arrival
EU	European Union
EULEX	European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo
FO	Flag Officer
Four Tracks	Marine Logistics Unit
FTX	Field Training Exercise
G3	General Staff Level office for Operations and Plans
GMM	Guided Multipurpose Munition
GO	General Officer
GPS	Global Positioning System
HARM	High-Speed Anti-Radiation Missile
HE	High-Explosive
HEAT	High-explosive Anti-tank
HET	Heavy Equipment Transporter
HIMARS	High-Mobility Artillery Rocket System
HQ	Headquarters
ICITAP	International Criminal Investigative Training Assistance Program
ID	Infantry Division
IFV	Infantry Fighting Vehicle

INDOPACOM US Indo-Pacific Command

INTSUM Intelligence Summary

ISR Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance

ISV Infantry Squad Vehicle

IVO In the Vicinity of

JAGM Joint Air-to-Ground Missiles

JASSM Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missile

JBCC Joint Battle Command Center

JD Jade Dragon

JLTV Joint Light Tactical Vehicle

JSOC Joint Special Operations Command

JSTARS Joint Surveillance and Target Attack Radar System

KIA Killed in Action

LAV Light Armored Vehicle

LHA Landing Helicopter Assault

LHD Landing Helicopter Deck

LMG Light Machine Gun

LPD Landing Platform Dock

LSV Light Strike Vehicle

LT Lieutenant

LZ Landing Zone

MALD Miniature Air-Launched Decoys

MANPADS Man-portable Air-defense System

MarDiv	Marine Division
MATV	MRAP All-Terrain Vehicle
MCAS	Marine Corps Air Station
MESA	Multirole Electronically Scanned Array
MEU	Marine Expeditionary Unit
MLTV	Modernized Light Tactical Vehicle
MOH	Medal of Honor
MRAP	Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected
MREs	Meals Ready to Eat
MSOT	Marine Special Operations Teams
MSR	Main Supply Route
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NCIS	Naval Criminal Investigative Service
NCO	Noncommissioned Officer
NDA	Nondisclosure Agreement
NGO	Nongovernmental Organization
NMCC	National Military Command Center
NRO	National Reconnaissance Office
NSA	National Security Advisor OR National Security Agency
ODA	Operational Detachment Alpha (Special Forces Unit)
OGA	Other Government Agency
ONI	Office of Naval Intelligence

OP	Operation
OS3	Petty Officer Third Class
PFC	Private First Class
PL	Platoon Leader
PLA	People's Liberation Army (Chinese Army)
PLAN	People's Liberation Army Navy (Chinese Navy)
PLANMC	People's Liberation Army Marine Corps (Chinese Marines)
PM	People's Militia (Chinese Militia)
PO1	Petty Officer First Class
POG	Person Other than Grunt
POW	Prisoner of War
PRC	People's Republic of China
PTP	Peace Through Prosperity
QC	Quality Control
QRF	Quick Reaction Force
R & D	Research and Development
RAAF	Royal Australian Air Force
RAM	Rolling Airframe Missile
RAR	Royal Australian Regiment
RCT	Regimental Combat Team
RCV	Robotic Combat Vehicle
ROC	Republic of China (Taiwan)

ROK	Republic of Korea (South Korea)
RPG	Rocket-Propelled Grenade
RTB	Return to Base
RUMINT	Rumor Intelligence
S1	Personnel Officer
S2	Intelligence Officer
S3	Operations Officer
SALUTE	Size, Activity, Location, Unit Identification, Time and Equipment
SAM	Surface-to-Air Missile
SBS	Special Boat Service
SCAR-L	A type of combat assault rifle used by the US military
SEAD	Suppression of Enemy Air Defenses
SEAL	Sea, Air, and Land (Navy's Special Operations Force)
SecDef	Secretary Defense
SFC	Specialist First Class
SHORAD	Short-Range Air Defense
SHU	Separate Housing Unit
SITREP	Situation Report
SJ	Saint Javelin
SOF	Special Operations Forces
SVTC	Secured Video Teleconference

TC	Tank Commander
TF	Task Force
TIC	Troops in Contact
TK	Terracotta Killer
TOW	Tube-Launched, Optically Tracked, Wire-Guided
TYIL	Tianjin Yoshida International Logistics
UAV	Unmanned Aerial Vehicle
UCAV	Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicle
UFA	Unmanned Fighter Aircraft
UGAV	Unmanned Ground-Air Vehicle
UN5	Ultradense Nanometal-5
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USV	Unmanned Surface Vehicle
UUV	Unmanned Underwater Vehicle
VP	Vice President
WARCOM	Naval Special Warfare Command
Willie Pete	White Phosphorus
XO	Executive Officer

THE END