
THE APOCALYPSE TRIGGER



DOUGLAS MISQUITA

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by
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A Luc Fortesque Adventure Thriller

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For my brother, Dallyn Misquita, for always supporting what I do.

PART I: IN THE BEGINNING

CHAPTER 1

Malacca Straits, June 1947

.. -... ..

The radio officer aboard the Silver Star scrawled quickly. The message sent a shiver down his spine. Even with the porthole open to the sea-breeze, the radio room felt stuffy, five men crammed in tight, staring at him silently. He knew some of them had already translated the Morse code, but he dutifully handed the message to his captain and chewed on the end of his pencil.

"I die," Captain Silas read in a hushed voice. He passed the notepad to his Chief Officer. "What about the earlier message?"

"Gibberish, Captain," the radio officer replied, wiping his brow and looking at the pages near his communication equipment. "Unless it's a coded message, but I haven't attempted to decipher it."

"We'll look at it later, son," the captain said. He turned to the sandy-haired chief officer beside him. "Have a boarding party ready, Andy. We should bear down on the Ourang Medan within the hour."

"Yes, Captain." The chief officer stepped out to make arrangements. Silas said, "Alert us if there's anything else. Send a message to all vessels in the vicinity that we are en route to the Ourang Medan. I have a bad feeling about this but we cannot ignore an SOS."

As the radio officer turned back to his task, his eyes strayed to the first message he had intercepted, before the gibberish – that had compelled the Silver Star to sail to the aid of the Ourang Medan.

The grisly words seemed to come alive. 'captain and officers are dead in the bridge. All crew is also possibly dead. There is no one, I think...'

As his imagination took hold he envisioned horrifying things that lay in wait for them and he hoped the Silver Star was not unfortunate to be the nearest merchant vessel to the distressed Ourang Medan.

The Medan came up on their port bow. There was not a wind to be felt and the waters were eerily calm. As the Silver Star approached, Silas ordered three signalling blasts on the horn. The crew of the Silver Star lined the bulwarks looking out to the silent ship, squinting against the reflection of the sun in the waters.

Silas stepped out onto the bridge wings and raised a bullhorn to his lips. "SS Ourang Medan, this is Captain Silas of the Silver Star. If there is anyone alive, please respond."

A macabre excitement rifled through everyone on the Silver Star when no response was returned by the Medan. Silas tried twice more; then gave up. "All stop!" he ordered and the command was rung down to the engine room. The steady throb of the Silver Star's engines ebbed and died beneath his feet. The Star slowly drifted closer to the Medan. Silas turned to the radio officer who had come into the bridge room to watch. "Anything from the registry? The owners?"

"Not a squeak, sir."

"Fair enough," Silas said convinced that his next action and destiny was to send a boarding crew. He said to the helmsman, "Keep a safe distance," then nodded to Chief Officer Andrew Foley, giving him the go-ahead. "No unnecessary risks, Andy."

"I don't intend spending any more time aboard than is necessary."

Ten minutes later, one of the Silver Star's lifeboats was lowered and made its way across the channel separating the two ships. As they neared the rust-stained hull of the Ourang Medan, Foley fingered the safety of the pistol that was holstered around his waist. A wisp of smoke emanated from her smokestack; the ship was idling in the currents. He noted ominously that there were no clouds and the silence was oppressive. He glanced back at the Silver Star as the lifeboat rode a wave crest and he saw the glint of sunlight reflecting off the lens of a pair of binoculars. Captain Silas was watching closely.

"Gas masks on," Foley ordered and the six-man boarding team donned their gear, adjusting faceplates and breathing apparatus. Now, hearing only the sound of his breathing in his ears, Foley put out a hand as they came alongside the hull. His fingers scraped against the rust streaks. It was like touching a tomb, he thought. Foley gestured and a rope ladder with hooks at the other end went sailing into the air and caught on the Medan's bulwarks. Foley and four of the crew climbed up leaving two men in the lifeboat. Foley's boot touched the deck of the Ourang Medan and he froze for a moment, one leg still in the rope ladder. A chill coursed through him as he assimilated what his eyes beheld.

CHAPTER 2

A body lay twisted on the deck, ten feet away. It was as if the sailor had been crawling toward the bulwark intending to jump overboard. The dead fingers clawed at the deck, and the face was contorted: a mask of agony and desperation.

Foley's eyes never left the corpse as he stepped aside for the others to climb aboard. Everybody started at the sight of the dead man and they exchanged frightened looks. Some crossed themselves. Foley wished they were better armed as he cautiously stepped toward the corpse as if expecting the dead man to suddenly come alive and lunge at him.

Fearing a contagion, Foley did not want to touch the body. He used the tip of his boot and nudged the corpse. Rigour mortis had not set in and so with a quick-mouthed apology for his disrespect of the dead, Foley overturned the body with his foot. The corpse rolled onto its back, one lifeless hand fell *splat* against the deck. Foley crouched close to the body, his breath going deeper instinctively. He peered at the face, the clenched hands and then down to the buckled knees looking for any signs of injury. But there were none. Whatever killed this man had left no mark.

Foley was thankful they wore gas masks. Toward the end of the War, there was much research into nerve agents and a ship adrift in these Straits raised red flags. He stood and using hand signals split up the boarding team. Two would check the forward section of the ship and the rest would accompany him. With a final parting glance for luck, Foley and his team jogged down the deck toward an open doorway. Silent derricks rose above them like grim crosses. He held

his gun in front of him and stepped out of the sunlit deck into the darkness of a corridor, into the superstructure of the Ourang Medan. Almost immediately a moan rang out from somewhere in the ship. It almost sounded like a —

'Dog', one of the crew mouthed.

Foley nodded and led them up a stairwell toward the bridge. Their shoes and boots clanged on the metal stairs. The moan rang out again and they stopped to get a bearing on its source but the hoods of their breathing gear made it difficult. They continued up and at one point had to shimmy along the walls as they came upon two corpses lying at angles across the steps. The same contorted expressions on the faces and the same desperate frozen postures. Everyone clawing their way to an escape.

Around a corner was the radio room. Foley stepped inside and saw a sailor slumped over the communication desk, one bony fingertip resting on the transmitter key. This was the man who had sent the distress call and his final words, 'I die.' The sailor's eyes were wide in shock; mouth open in a silent scream.

A shuffling sound behind made the boarding party spin around. A pitiable sight greeted them. The ship's dog, a black German shepherd stumbled into the radio room. It swayed unsteadily on its trembling legs and looked at them through mournful eyes. The dog opened its mouth and they saw the muscles in the chest tense as if to bark but all that came out was a whimper. Spittle foamed at its jaws and the dog collapsed onto the floor and began bucking, its stomach and chest puffing like a billow. Its legs extended in a final spasm, its claws splayed out and the tail thumped weakly against

the door jam. Then the dog was still, only its eyes moved, regarding them pleadingly; then... nothing.

The bridge room was a scene of death. They found the captain and other officers fallen by the helm of the ship, even clutching the wheel in a death grip or slumped over the navigation table in the chart room.

Death had caught them unawares in their routine duties.

But, Foley thought, if death had been sudden, who had set the engine to All Stop. He dismissed the idea of the radio officer carrying out that task because the Morse messages they had received had been panicked and at one point, incoherent. He would not have the presence of mind to stop the diesels. And even if he did, had there been someone alive down in the engine room to respond?

On Foley's signal, they quickly began searching the ship's documents and logbook. One of the crew put their finds into a cloth bag they had brought along. Foley motioned to him, took a pen and wrote on one of the charts: *Get back to the Star and let's get towing lines across. I will reconnoitre the lower decks in the meantime.*

The crewman set off, glad to be away from the Ourang Medan.

Foley stepped to the bridge and watched the lifeboat pull away from the Medan. The other two men who had been dispatched to the forward section were returning to the rally point. Foley signalled to them to hold their position (they could help with setting up the tow-lines) and then he and the other two men descended from the bridge below decks.

When the lifeboat returned, Silas immediately set about organizing for the Ourang Medan to be towed behind the Silver Star to Jakarta. He bade the crewmen who had returned to hold their tongues — he didn't want superstitions or rumours running amok aboard his ship. Yes, the report from the Ourang Medan was disturbing but if he was apprehensive of sending a salvage crew aboard to steer her to the nearest port, he wasn't going to let those poor souls drift. They deserved a proper burial.

On his command, the Star began closing the gap separating the two ships and fat coils of rope were ready to be tossed over to the boarding party on the Medan. Watching the operation from the bridge wings, Silas didn't like it one bit that Foley had gambled and sent the lifeboat back leaving the boarding party almost stranded on the ship. Then again, Foley was an experienced sailor; he knew what he was doing.

Silas could not have been more wrong.

CHAPTER 3

Andrew Foley gagged.

The passageways were littered with bodies of the crew of the Ourang Medan. He had never seen so much death piled in so close. What had killed these people, he wondered. He looked at the men behind him and their wide eyes told him they were thinking the same thing. They were also questioning him: *Why are we staying here?*

If there was a nerve agent on the Ourang Medan, Foley had put everyone's life at risk by venturing deep into the crew's quarters. He needed to get topside and call-off the salvage operation which he was sure was well underway. He put up a hand to signal they were returning when something caught his eye.

At the far end of the passageway beneath a weak yellow overhead light, a door rested flush open. Propped against the door was a man carrying a Japanese Type 99 bolt-action rifle. There was another man lying across the threshold and a rifle had fallen from his limp hands. Foley started toward the fallen men, sidestepping the other dead bodies. He noticed now as he carefully placed his toes, that some of them carried pistols but had apparently not had a chance to use them – one man's hand rested on the button of his holster.

"Easy! Easy!" Captain Silas cautioned as the gap closed to fifteen feet and then to less than ten feet. "Hold it! Steady!"

The two ships were now abreast and the Silver Star inched forward. Silas watched as his crew – all protected by gas masks – tossed

heavy towing lines across to the boarding party on the other ship, the thick coils undulating in the air like flying snakes before landing with fat *thumps* on the deck of the Medan.

He had some of the crew keeping a close eye on the dead ship; he didn't want the Medan ploughing into his ship. Though at such a close distance the chances of serious damage were low, he was still cautious. He had only a requisite number of the crew above decks. The message that had gone out to all hands was that there had possibly been a gas leak on the Medan and hence the precautionary measures. The crew bought the story even though it had no factual basis, it was plausible enough.

Foley stepped over the body and into the cabin. In a corner of his mind, he noted that the dead men with rifles wore the dress of the Japanese Imperial Army. And they were guarding —

The cabin was ransacked — literally torn apart: floorboards pulled up, the bunk standing on its side. It looked like whoever it was, had found what they were looking for: built into the bulkhead was a locker. It had been hidden by the cupboard which now lay tossed carelessly to one side. The locker's solid iron door hung crumpled and warped, from one twisted hinge. In the gentle bobbing of the Ourang Medan, the battered door creaked as it swung.

Oh, my God, Foley thought as the implications of what he was seeing reached home. Someone had killed everyone aboard the Ourang Medan to get at whatever was in this cabin.

He pivoted to warn the others to get off the ship when there was a deep boom from within the ship. The Ourang Medan shuddered.

Foley and the crewman flailed for support, knocked off-balance. The

sound of the explosion reverberated through the corridors of the dead ship and the lights flickered and then went out, plunging everything into darkness.

“What the hell!” Silas shouted.

He had heard the explosion from the Ourang Medan followed by an expulsion of thick smoke from the forward hatches. The Medan shivered and listed to starboard. Silas watched in mounting trepidation as the derricks near the explosion creaked and swayed. Then with a ringing snap, one of the derrick’s guy-lines snapped. Time seemed to slow down as the cable whiplashed and Silas saw a spray of blood as one of the boarding crew was severed in half. His torso went into the air as his lifeless legs crumpled grotesquely to the deck. Then with a groan, the derrick boom began to fall and swing.

Silas came out of his stupor shouting, “Pull clear! Pull clear! Get down!” as more smoke engulfed the forward section of the Ourang Medan.

The helmsman swung the wheel frantically opening the gap between the ships as commands were rung down to the engine room. The Silver Star rumbled to life but she would not get out in time! The Medan’s derrick boom came crashing down across the narrow channel between the ships with a resounding bang amidships the Silver Star and then began scraping in an arc across her deck like a scathe.

"We need to get out of here! Now!" Foley shouted. He picked himself up and stumbled toward the door. Everything was tilting crazily and they tripped over the dead bodies in the passageway as they dashed for the stairs.

There was a hissing sound and one of the sailors screamed as an overhead pipe burst and engulfed him in scalding steam. The man went down clutching his blistering neck. One of the others stopped to help him. Foley pulled him back, shaking his head emphatically. But the sailor shook him off angrily and rushed back to help... just as another explosion shook the Ourang Medan and the overhead pipe completely gave way. A jet of superheated steam billowed out and Foley heard the pair screaming as they were lost in the cloud. He turned and ran up.

CHAPTER 4

On the Ourang Medan, sailors jumped out of the way as the relative movement of the two ships caused the boom to plough across the Silver Star's deck. Silas watched as one man was cornered and picked up by the boom and slammed sickeningly into the hatch covers. He fell out of sight.

Silas glanced at the helmsman. The man's eyes were wide as he willed the Silver Star to turn.

Then a second explosion sounded from the Ourang Medan and the ship began to list even further. She would come crashing against the Silver Star if they didn't steer away.

Then Silas saw Foley and two sailors come rushing out onto the deck and look about, disoriented. Silas hailed them with the bullhorn and shouted, "Jump off! We'll pick you up! Get off the ship! Jump!"

Foley urged his team over the bulwarks. One of them leapt off and landed with a splash. The other hesitated. He shook his head and Foley saw his mouth move: *I can't swim.*

No time, Foley shook his head and mimed that he would be right behind. They stepped to the edge.

"Good Lord!" Silas said, unaware he still had the bullhorn to his lips. He watched as one of the towing lines that had already been

fastened went taut as the two ships moved apart. If the Ourang Medan went down she would pull the Silver Star with her! "The towing lines!"

Foley looked in the direction his captain was pointing to. And immediately realised the danger.

"Come on!" he shouted to the crewman. The two of them ran on the canting deck, arms spread out for balance. They ducked beneath the swinging boom, mere inches above their heads. Foley was the first to reach the smit bracket and looked around wildly for something to attack the tow line with. But the only thing he kept seeing was the quivering line as it picked up the strain of the two ships.

Foley jumped on the bracket in a mad attempt to unloop the thick rope. He pounded at it, grabbed at it, pulled with all his strength. And then the unthinkable happened: his hand caught in the rope and before he knew it, the heavy-duty rope crushed his hand to a pulp. Foley screamed in agony. The other sailor was beside him. The man had found an axe and Foley knew what had to be done.

Foley undid his belt with his free hand and the two of them cinched a tourniquet on his upper arm. The sailor picked up the axe and Foley nodded and put his other arm into his mouth to steel himself against the pain.

The axe blade fell, severing his hand off at the wrist. Foley fell back to the deck beholding the bloody stump. His eyes went wide and he was slipping into shock. He screamed like an animal, venting his pain. The sailor was hacking at the tow line with the bloody blade. Foley saw the strands parting.

“Come on! Come on!” Silas pleaded as he took in the drama near the smit bracket. He saw Foley pulling off his shirt so that it hung over his amputated hand and then wrap it tightly, like a bandage. With a final swing of the axe, the tow line parted and the two ships were free of each other. Silas steadied himself against the helm as the Silver Star rocked with the released tension. The tow line slithered off the Ourang Medan and splashed into the sea. He saw Foley get shakily to his feet and run into the sailor with the axe, barreling the two of them off the side of the ship.

“Get a boat lowered!” he roared. “Get them back! Quick!” The lifeboat that was used earlier to board the Medan was once again lowered from its davits where it had hung halfway all this time. Two seamen rowed powerfully picking up the other sailor who had jumped before continuing toward Foley and his companion.

Foley was in hell. His arm was numb and he was drowning... faster because the sailor clutching his neck couldn't swim. He pulled off his mask and sucked in water and sank beneath the waves. He kicked and rose above the waves and gasped for breath, taking in more water before sinking again. His lungs burned, his vision narrowed and sound was a dull sensation. He felt the grip on his neck loosen and he didn't have the strength to protest or hang on. Then something grabbed at his hair and shirt and he was rising. The dullness in his ears cleared and he could hear voices as he was pulled out of the water – sucking in copious amounts of air while simultaneously sputtering sea water – and manhandled over the

gunwales of a lifeboat, and flopped exhausted in a puddle across the footings.

"Hang on," someone said, "You're almost home!"

And then everything went black.

Captain Silas wiped the sweat of his brow as they put distance from the dead ship. Granted he had lost men but it could have been worse, he thought.

And then it was as if the world ended.

There was a brilliant flash of orange and red and Silas had a brief impression of the Ourang Medan being *lifted* out of the water in an enormous spray. He was thrown off his feet, back into the bridge room. The flash was followed by a thunderous explosion that deafened him and shattered all the glass in the windows and portholes on the port side of the Silver Star. It was as if a giant fist had rammed into his ship and she began to list to starboard. Everything was falling and rolling. They were surely going to tip over. The deck tilted and tilted. People were screaming but he could only hear faint cries past the ringing in his ears.

Then gradually, willed by the prayers and pleas of her crew, the Silver Star began to right herself. As they rolled back to port, Silas's jaw dropped as he beheld the smouldering remains of the Ourang Medan, sinking into the sea. She went down quickly, her bow rising at a forty-five-degree angle as she slipped to her watery grave.

CHAPTER 5

Ghost Ship

The observer lowered his binoculars as the Ourang Medan disappeared beneath the waves. He turned to the Japanese soldier beside him, the traitor who had made the hijacking possible.

"They got away," he said with a tinge of accusation.

The Japanese shrugged and said, "I played my part. It is not my fault that someone managed to get a mayday out."

The observer snorted dismissively and looked at his communications officer. "Get me a secure line." He wanted to kill the Japanese soldier right then and there; the man's impudence was irritating. The communications officer handed him a headset with an attached microphone. He took it and spoke quickly and softly while the others watched him expectantly. They didn't have the firepower to sink the Silver Star nor could they jam any outgoing radio chatter from the ship as it sped away, frightened by the sinking of the Ourang Medan.

On the other end of the secure line, a voice rasped after nearly a minute of silence, "There must be no trace of the Ourang Medan for our cover up to work. It must be as if she or her crew never existed — a ghost ship. Do you understand? *No trace.*"

"Yes, sir," he replied. "I understand."

"Good." The line went dead. The observer turned to face his men.

"We proceed as planned." Then he drew his pistol and nonchalantly shot the Japanese traitor in the head. "Toss him overboard."

CHAPTER 6

America, 1948

Alexander Tremblay was struck across his back.

The impact pushed him against the polished bar counter top and sent the amber contents of his beer tumbler spilling out in a rapidly spreading puddle that dripped over the edge.

He turned to see a man in a checkered shirt getting to his feet from where he had fallen at the foot of Tremblay's barstool. Across the room in the centre, two burly men — Checkered-Shirt's friends — were manhandling a struggling and resisting man in a leather jacket onto one of the tables, shoving him onto his back, spread-eagled. While other customers fanned away the bartender was shouting, "Take it outside! Outside!" while reaching for the telephone.

But the police would take too long to get here... and Tremblay had business with the man in the leather jacket. He shook his head at the way of the world: there were far greater conflicts and battles to be won — and power to be gained from events that were yet to unfold. Did these three think they were even worthy to thwart those grand-scale events? This fist-fight would be just another of the numerous bar-room squabbles they had gotten into whereas Tremblay's fight was destined for far-reaching ramifications. History would turn on his actions.

Checkered-Shirt strode toward the table where his friends had pinned Leather-Jacket down. One of them looked back at Checkered-Shirt and cracked a rotten-teeth grin.

Leather-Jacket broke out in a fresh spate of struggling. Rotten-Teeth snarled and looked back at his captive. His back to Tremblay, Checkered-Shirt growled, "I'm going to break your face!" and clenched his fist.

Tremblay swung hard smashing a bottle of Jack Daniels like a club against Checkered-Shirt's skull. The bottle shattered and the bully went down bleeding from a gash behind his ear. Before Checkered-Shirt could hit the floor, Tremblay was reaching for Rotten-Teeth, who, busy keeping Leather-Jacket pinned, was oblivious to what had happened to his companion.

Tremblay tapped Rotten-Teeth's shoulder. The man turned his big square pockmarked face to Tremblay. His face momentarily registered surprise and then Tremblay brutally gouged Rotten-Teeth's face with the jagged end of the bottle. Rotten-Teeth put his hands to his lacerated flesh screaming in agony. Tremblay doubled him over with a punch to the gut, and finished him off with a knee to the chin, cracking the man's neck backwards.

The third guy began to react, but Leather-Jacket took advantage of the distraction and punched him hard in the face. Tremblay heard Leather-Jacket's knuckles crack as the final assailant spun away.

Tremblay looked at Leather-Jacket who was clutching his broken fist, "I have a car outside. We have to talk!"

"What?"

Tremblay pulled Leather-Jacket off the table and pointed to the deep blue insignia on the man's jacket sleeve: a star inside a cloud with a jagged lightning bolt: the insignia for the Manhattan Engineer District.

Adopted a few months ago and otherwise known as the Manhattan Project.

They heard approaching police sirens.

Tremblay spoke quickly, softly and firmly. "Dr Steve Eigel, Clinton Engineering Works, I don't think you want to be here when the police arrive."

Eigel glanced nervously outside and then back to the stern-faced man who had helped him. The threat in the man's words was clear: once he was in police custody some people were going to get very anxious... anxious enough to arrange a fatal accident for Eigel. His eyes quickly strip-searched Tremblay looking for the tell-tale signs of concealed weapons.

Tremblay spread the flaps of his coat wide to show he carried no weapons. "I'm not armed."

Eigel nodded. "Lead the way, I'll hear you out."

Tremblay's Studebaker Commander peeled away from the sidewalk and zipped past the approaching police vehicles. Eigel looked over his shoulder out the rear windows as the police squad converged at the bar and uniformed police officers stepped out. Then they were lost in a cloud of dust as Tremblay floored the accelerator and spun around a turn.

"Who are you?"

"Alexander Tremblay. I'm a head-hunter."

"You fight nasty for a head-hunter."

"As do you, for a physicist."

The two exchanged glances. The car bounced over a rut in the road.

"I'll get to the point," Tremblay said as he overtook a silver camper,

"We know you're feeding information to the Soviets."

Eigel was silent for a moment, considering what this man was saying. "We?"

"My employers, Dr Eigel," Tremblay explained. "And they are willing to pay you more to work for them." His eyes flicked into the rearview to see if the police were on their tail. He only saw the silver camper fading rapidly into the distance. "Let's face it: weapons of intimidation and monopoly of an efficient fuel source will become the most profitable and strategic assets anyone can hold. You read the Oak Ridge report."

Eigel knew the report Tremblay was referring to. Eigel had also contributed to the 'eyes-only' paper while at Oak Ridge. It essentially stated that nuclear energy and other such new energy sources would outlast fossil fuels and, at some point in the future, given projections of energy consumption, if you owned enough of the stockpile you owned the world.

"I see the power and the benefit of being on the winning side of a long-term investment," Tremblay continued. "My employers are well on their way to securing their position in the weapons race. But that is one face of the coin. You are the face on the other side of the coin; a critical asset to my employers in the energy race." Tremblay looked across at him. "So what's it going to be?"

Eigel realized if he said 'no' to Tremblay's offer, it would be the last decision he made. He decided to buy time. "I only have your word to go on. How do I know you're not setting me up?"

"Why would I bruise my knuckles for you? I'd simply have called the FBI on you a long time ago."

"And you think I can stop working for the Soviets just like that?"

"You'll disappear; we're good at what we do."

"They will find me."

Tremblay shook his head and in a quick motion reached into the glove compartment. A Colt M1911 materialized in Tremblay's hand,

the business-end pointed at Eigel. "I was hoping you would see the point without much bickering."

Eigel cringed from the weapon.

The driver's window shattered in a shower of glass and Tremblay's head exploded in a splatter of gore and brain-matter. A splash of blood painted the windshield. The car careened out of control and Eigel shouted in alarm as he grabbed for the wheel. The car skidded, left the road and crashed through a line of low shrubs along the embankment. The front fender hit the gutter at the edge of the embankment and the momentum of the car lifted the rear end over in a somersault. The car landed on its roof in a cloud of brown dust and mud, its wheels spinning.

Eigel drifted out and into consciousness as he lay at an odd angle in the car. The weight of his body was on his neck. He struggled to unlock the door, found the pin and popped it. The door swung open and he tumbled out, crawled away from the wreckage and slumped to the ground, his chest heaving.

He became aware of an approaching motorbike. It stopped somewhere on the road and the engine was turned off. Silence. Whoever was out there was coming to check for survivors. He didn't know how much of a fight he could put up. A weapon...

"Hello."

Eigel's slowly looked around to see a smiling American in a beige jacket and trousers. The man wore a sky-blue tie against a white shirt and doffed his hat in mock greeting and sat on his haunches on a slight rise which put him at an attacker's advantage over Eigel.

He peered into the upside-down car and grunted. "Guess Alexander won't be joining us, huh."

Eigel just looked at the dapper American trying to figure out what was coming next. The man smiled again and with an apologetic look

extended his hand, "I'm sorry, Dr Eigel. I'm Christian Black." When Eigel didn't take his hand, the man put on the look of someone who has asked a cripple to run the marathon. "Oh, I didn't notice your hand was injured. That must've been the punch you threw at the bar."

Eigel had enough. "What do you want, Christian — if that is even your name!"

Black nodded at Tremblay's body. "I'm a head-hunter like him. Only, I work for the competition and whatever he told you, the Chinese aren't as good as my employers — the French. Did he make you an offer? We'll double it." Black stood up and straightened his cuffs. He reached into his coat and withdrew a silenced High Standard semi-automatic pistol and calmly pointed it at Eigel. "And while Tremblay would have killed only you, I will hunt and kill every member of your family if you say no. The Oak report fired up a hell of a power race, Dr Eigel. Today's blood is the irrigation for future surety and you'll find that the French are more reasonable than the Chinese communists."

He pointed the gun at Eigel under the blue sky. And for the second time that morning, Eigel was asked the question. "So what's it going to be?"

CHAPTER 7

Vatican City, 1950

In the dead of the night, the young priest moved quickly and purposefully along the perimeter of St. Peter's Square. His path took him directly to the Apostolic Palace — the residence of the Pope. He moved out of the white moonbeam and into the shadows of the colonnade, glancing over his shoulder.

The Vatican had remained controversially neutral during the War, but it had been and still was a hotbed for spies and political manoeuvres. As cities struggled to rise once again from the debris of the War there were unseen forces that had learned from the failures of imposing ideologies by force. These forces supported a patient and insidious route of corruption, by infiltrating the organizations that the world now looked upon to lead it into some normalcy. And the Catholic Church, one of the largest and strongly-rooted organizations was a perfect target for their activities.

At one point, he thought he heard footsteps falling after him and hastened his pace.

Ahead he saw the entrance to the Palace bathed in overhead lamps. The Swiss Guard at the door tensed when they saw the rushing hunched figure. He put up a hand and announced his name and flashed his identification. Though they visibly calmed down when they recognized his familiar face, they searched him thoroughly and the satchel he carried. Satisfied, they waved him through.

He climbed the silent and dark stairs two-at-a-time until he reached the Papal office. A figure rose from behind a desk outside the door to the office. The Pope's nuncio.

"He is waiting for you," the nuncio said opening the door.

The priest breezed through and entered the enveloping silence of the Papal office. The windows were closed and a single table lamp cast illumination on Pope Pius XII's gaunt features.

"Holy Father," the priest said by way of greeting and bowed. No more courtesies were exchanged.

The pope gestured for the priest to take a seat. "You must be tired." He was, but he didn't admit it. "The meeting was rewarding," he replied instead.

He placed his satchel on the table, extracted a manila folder and passed it to the pope who opened it and began reading intently, pushing his wireframe glasses up on his nose. He held the pages to the table lamp. The priest watched, forcing himself to be patient. After twenty minutes of unbearable silence broken only by the rustle of pages, the pope looked up and asked, "This information is authentic?"

"It is," the priest confirmed. "If we get this man, we cut off a large percentage of the Communist financing to the infiltrators and can weaken their activities."

The pope sighed. The man in question was a wealthy Swiss industrialist, a supporter of several humanitarian and anti-Nazi movements. But the pages of the report indicated that the same man was a Communist sympathizer and was using his financial resources to sponsor Communism within the Catholic Church. "It will be difficult to uproot him."

"I agree," the priest said. "He is well connected with the allies and their current business of extinguishing any Nazi sleeper cells. He has also made several investments which render him untouchable."

"We need to seek counsel. And pray that we are guided properly by God."

The priest shook his head subtly. He was religious no doubt, but he was also a man of action. The last few months as the Vatican's foot soldier had taught him to think on his feet and not leave too much to God. Nonetheless, he was still faithful to the Church as the singular organization that could influence so much. And he was not going to give up that power, especially now that he had the blessings and grace of the Supreme Leader of the Catholic People.

Pope Pius XII smiled wryly. "You do not agree with my line of thinking?"

"I agree that we can seek counsel but perhaps, Holy Father, there is another way out."

The pope leaned closer. "By all means..."

"Have you heard of the Vesuvius Group?"

"No."

"Okay." And the priest proceeded to enlighten the pope.

One hour later when he had finished, Pope Pius XII bore a troubled look, worried for the man the young priest had become. Was the world so bad out there, he thought naively. But he couldn't argue that it was the easiest and least-incriminating way in which their problem could be solved. "There must be no bloodshed," He conceded.

"There will not be any," the priest lied. While he had not yet come around to taking a life himself, he had no qualms about others taking that measure. "They will only take over his financial empire and we can influence where the money goes."

The pope ruminated over this for a few minutes with his eyes closed. It looked as if he was praying. When his eyes opened, he said, "Then you will start out at first light."

"Thank you for your faith in me," the priest beamed. He almost began to dream of the wonders he could do in the years to come.

"Good night," the pope said dismissing him and indicating that the meeting was at an end. "And may God bless you."

"Good night, Father." The priest closed the door on the way out and didn't hear the pope's whisper.

Or maybe it was a prayer.

"I only hope I have not created a demon. Do not stray from the path of the Lord."

CHAPTER 8

Sorrento, Naples, 1950

The thirteen men and women were known as the Vesuvius Group. The blood of generations of rich and powerful families ran through their veins. The cabal, like the Illuminati and Freemasons, had shaped history. The members met physically only for administrative or emergency matters to keep their alliance as secret as possible. The world was their playground and like every game, there were rules. Only, the game they played was deadly and its rules were strict and unforgiving.

Today's gathering was hosted by Giovanni Ferruccio. The Vesuvius Group had started with a Ferruccio. Well, nearly.

The name Augustus Ferruccio was not unknown in ancient Rome. In addition to being a successful merchant, Ferruccio was renowned for his *ludus* – gladiator school – which produced some of the best fighters to ever entertain the Colosseum. It came to pass in October of the year 79 AD, that Ferruccio was in Pompeii. He was accompanied by a trio of his finest gladiators. A spate of minor earthquakes did nothing to dampen the prospect of a spectacle at Pompeii's Odeon. The citizens were accustomed to the neighbouring stratovolcano's rumblings and Ferruccio was eager to settle a challenge presented by the governor. The contest between Ferruccio and the governor was destined to go undecided, interrupted by a far greater spectacle – the eruption of Vesuvius.

With an explosive force equivalent to a 100,000 times Hiroshima-Nagasaki, the AD 79 eruption of Mount Vesuvius remains the volcano's most destructive. The ejected ash, lava, and rock buried Pompeii and three other coastal cities. Augustus Ferruccio would have died when a volcanic projectile caved-in the VIP *tribunalia* at the Odeon had it not been for one of his gladiators who pulled him from the rubble. A grateful Augustus freed his gladiator of his bond and bestowed upon him the name 'Ferruccio'.

That was more than eighteen centuries ago, when Giovanni Ferruccio's ancestor's bravery won him the Ferruccio inheritance. Since then, the adopted bloodline expanded the Ferruccio empire. What it could not take in a gentlemanly manner, it acquired by force – a ruthless combination of Augustus's business acumen and his gladiator's *kill-or-be-killed* disposition.

Casa del Ferruccio sat amid the green folding slopes of a mountain overlooking the Bay of Naples, above the picturesque coastal Via Sorrento. Ensnared in white perimeter walls, the estate consisted of a family house separated from an outhouse by landscaped gardens. Ornate waterfalls poured into a man-made lake and a menagerie boasted exotic animals — some smuggled from endangered species reserves around the world. The outhouse was roofed by a heliport and was connected to the main house by a tunnel. In a bunker beneath the outhouse was the vast Ferruccio art collection, most of it stolen or purchased off the black markets and believed to be lost for eternity. The super-sleek Ferruccio yacht tugged at its moorings at a private pier in the bay.

Across the bay, the caldera of Vesuvius was visible as an ominous dark-blue hump. It loomed over the lights of the city, encircling its base like a glittering tiara. A city that was rebuilding itself – again – from the eruption of 1944.

A cool breeze ruffled Qin Zhou's premature grey-white hair. The CEO of a Chinese weapons research company, he smoothed a stubborn strand of hair from his face, inhaled deeply as his slit-eyes took in the beautiful panorama spread out before him. He raised the hand-crafted wine glass to his lips, savouring its ruby contents. He admired the glass and wondered from where his host had pillaged it. "Beautiful, isn't it?"

Zhou turned. He hadn't heard the floor-to-ceiling doors open nor the footsteps behind him.

"Ah, Monsieur Laurent," Zhou said in clipped English that hid his irritation well. He spread his hands in appreciation. "Beautiful, yet deadly." Zhou turned back to the evening vista.

The Frenchman stood beside him. Silence, until Zhou broke the silence, "I know an evening by the sea with me is not your idea of time well spent, Laurent. Speak your mind."

"Always direct, Zhou," Laurent smiled tightly; there was no love lost between them. He cocked an eyebrow. "The Ourang Medan..." Zhou feigned ignorance and Laurent shook his head with a mirthless smile. "Your lack of reaction is enough, Zhou. You were behind the disappearance of the Medan, weren't you?"

Zhou drained his glass and set it down on the marble. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"What did you find aboard the ship?" He leaned closer like a hound on a trail. "What are you up to, Zhou?"

Zhou smiled and countered with, "And how is Dr Eigel?"

"I'll find out," Laurent said, frustration evident, "I *will* find out."

"Be my guest," the Chinese replied in a challenging tone. "You are prejudiced, Laurent. It will be your undoing... and the undoing of your family."

Laurent was about to retort, when a voice cold as steel said, "If you are done bickering..."

Zhou and Laurent turned to see Giovanni Ferruccio standing on the balcony dressed immaculately in white. The two fell to silence, deferring to the master of the house.

"Good," Ferruccio said. "Now let's step inside and toast Herr Mauer."

He indicated that they follow him into the house where the other members of the Vesuvius Group were gathered in a loose circle. Each member was allowed a bodyguard inside the house and these big men stood around the room, trying to appear inconspicuous, their hands folded in front of them, their attentive eyes darting this way and that, alert to even the slightest indication of danger. In the centre of the gathering stood a German, built like an ox — the focus of the evening. He had a contented baby-smile on his ruddy complexion that was oddly disparate with his physical appearance.

Ferruccio addressed the gathering. "Ladies and gentlemen, when the world went to War, we laid a wager on the number of Jews who would not come out alive. We could argue that Herr Mauer was well-informed and able to influence the outcome, but our rules allow us that privilege. His prediction was close to the official tally as of this week.

"The Vesuvius Group declares the wager closed. Herr Mauer, step forward please." The German took an expectant step forward. "The amount wagered is U.S. dollars five million."

At a signal, an attendant came into the room holding a large metal briefcase. The case was placed on a table and the locks snapped open to reveal gold bullion. Ferruccio clapped the German on the

shoulder. "I wonder how many of the deaths were arranged by your SS unit to bring the toll closer to your wagered figure, my friend. But, congratulations!"

Mauer was without remorse. "We merely turn the world to our needs." He nodded to his bodyguard who stepped forward carrying a rugged metal box. Mauer took the box and set it upon a table, flicking the locks open. There was a *hiss* of escaping coolant gas as he opened the box and turned to the gathering saying, "A gift for all of you." Cushioned inside the box were thirteen vials of a pale green liquid. "The Elixir of Life. Developed for the Reich and kept from its enemies, this is the only surviving casement. Each vial contains a solution that decelerates the body's ageing process!" His eyes shone.

"Then, the rumours are true," a woman whispered in awe.

"No more a rumour," Mauer said proudly. The others eyed him suspiciously. "You believe I wish to poison you," Mauer laughed. He broke open one of the vials and swallowed its contents in a single gulp. "Come. Live."

One by one, the twelve men and women stepped up and drank the contents of a vial. The liquid was tasteless and cool.

When they were done, and the casement held thirteen empty vials, Ferruccio declared. "And now my friends, there is a matter we must tend too." He wrinkled his nose as if detecting an odour. "One that is not so pleasant."

Another signal and two suited guards materialized and took up positions near Nicolas Klausman, firmly gripping his arms. The Swiss investment banker tried to shake them off. "What is the meaning of this, Giovanni?" Even as he spoke, his bodyguard took a step forward, one hand reaching for his holstered sidearm. But another

of Ferruccio's guards put a gun to his head, the cold steel of the barrel freezing the bodyguard.

CHAPTER 9

Ferruccio stated, "Irrefutable evidence has made its way to me that you have made several attempts to undermine this group and expose us to the Allies."

The accused Klausman was aghast. "What!"

Ferruccio shook his head. "Denial and histrionics. Nicolas Klausman, I hereby banish you from the Vesuvius Group. Your assets will be taken over and be turned to businesses profitable to the Group."

"Wait! What is this, Giovanni? I demand to review this evidence."

The guards began to propel him out of the room. Klausman struggled more and began shouting for Ferruccio to hear him out. Ignoring his pleas, Ferruccio addressed Klausman's bodyguard, "Your employer will not be requiring your services anymore. You can find employment here." The message was clear: choose well and live to see another day."

Ferruccio regarded the others. "Come. Let this be a lesson to all. This way, please." He led them through a doorway down a spiral stone stairway as nonchalantly as he would if leading them to his wine cellar. Though there was a cooling waft of concealed ventilation, a musky odour was apparent. They were inside the mountain now and the stairwell opened to a large room. Nicolas Klausman was already there, his hands bound behind his back and his eyes wide with terror of the unknown. His clothes were rumpled probably from a scuffle and his otherwise neatly parted hair was in complete disarray.

In the centre of the room stood an iron inverted 'U'. At the top of the brace, holding the two sides of the 'U' together was a tension

screw which at this moment was loosened so that the brace was wide open.

"The Scavenger's Daughter," Ferruccio explained. "It is said that people subjected to the device bleed from the nose and ears as they are crushed to death within its grasp. Today we shall see."

Nicolas Klausman's terror was extreme. His voice was high-pitched as he pleaded for his execution to be stayed, "Giovanni! Stop this madness! I beg you!"

Ferruccio's voice was cold and uncaring. "You knew the rules Klausman when you were admitted to the Vesuvius Group. Now you and all shall know that there is no mercy for traitors." He nodded at the executioners. "Proceed!"

They pushed and pulled Klausman toward the Scavenger's Daughter. He put up a resistance bred out of the primal instinct for survival. The other members of the Vesuvius Group stared in stunned silence. These hardened men and women would not hesitate to take a life when necessary. But to witness it first-hand, especially one of their own being led to slaughter – was incapacitating.

Klausman bit one of the guards in the neck. But he was quickly subdued by a blow to the head. He was dragged on his knees to the brace and squeezed in so that his chest was pressed against his thighs, his legs beneath his body, and his bound hands behind his back. His head hung heavily, his jaw almost touching the base of the torture device. The fight had gone out of him, replaced by shivering that built up as one of the executioners began turning the tension screw. It squeaked as it began drawing the braces inward.

For a minute, it appeared that nothing was happening except a reddening of Klausman's face. The executioner began to grunt as he turned the screw against its limits.

Crack!

Klausman screamed in agony as his ribs buckled under pressure. His breathing came in ragged gasps. Then a bubble of blood appeared at his nostrils and was followed by a *drip-drip* of blood like a faucet had been turned on. He choked and hacked up a wad of blood. A gasp went up from everyone except Ferruccio. The sound of Klausman's arms popping out of his sockets as his shoulder blades were squeezed excruciatingly was lost in an animal cry of pain that was gagged by more blood that filled the Swiss investment banker's mouth. He looked desperately at the circle of unmoving men as his vision began to blur and fade. The vein on his forehead was bulging now. With a *splat*, an eyeball popped from its socket and dangled grotesquely on his cheek. Blood began trickling from Klausman's ears as his internal organs were squeezed beyond their pressure points. His breathing became raspy and plaintive.

The Scavenger's Daughter worked on the principle of building up levels of lactic acid in the muscles to a point where it became toxic enough to poison the prisoner. But today, Klausman's agony was not to be endured for such a long time.

At one point, he lost consciousness and was spared any further sensation when his life was claimed by a cardiac arrest.

The Vesuvius Group watched for a few moments. Then Ferruccio said to the others, "I shall join you upstairs. You may freshen up while you wait. My servants will see to your every need."

When they had all shuffled out, Ferruccio went to a spot in the stone walls, pushed against a stone and a concealed door slid open. Father Luigi Vincente stepped out looking rather pale.

"I wonder what His Holiness would have to say, Father, if he knew you had a part in this man's death," Ferruccio taunted.

"It is not for him to know," Pope Pius XII's foot soldier replied. "It is for the greater good and even the Holy Father in all his wisdom is incapable of comprehending all that must be done to ensure the Church's position in the future."

Ferruccio nodded. "Our agreement is effective immediately, Father. My men will see you to your quarters where we will convene when I finish my business with the Vesuvius Group."

"Very well," Vincente replied. "The Church thanks you for your work."

Ferruccio laughed. "Not the Church, Father. *You* thank me for what I have done."

And with that, he was gone.

CHAPTER 10

April 1985

They broke down the door at two in the morning and stormed into the small house. There were twenty of them, their faces hidden by masks and they carried a motley arsenal of clubs, pitchforks, shovels, even revolvers and knives.

The woman heard glass being smashed in the dining room and she woke her husband in fear. They heard furniture being vandalized downstairs and then footsteps pounding up the stairs.

Shoes shuffled outside the bedroom door and they heard low voices. Silence.

Then the door burst open and the woman screamed. The mob crowded the bedroom and grabbed the man and woman roughly and began raining blows on them, mercilessly. The beating lasted a minute during which other members of the band tossed the house looking for evidence of the black arts. Some of the men had their way with the woman while her husband lay in a battered heap, unable to stop them.

When they were spent, they dragged the bloodied couple from the bedroom, down the stairs, their bodies banging on the risers. Through a puffed eye, the woman could only moan when she saw they also had her only son. The boy was unharmed, but his eyes were wide with fear and he was crying.

They tossed the family into a station wagon and drove for an hour until they reached the woods. There, they were hauled into the woods.

By the time they reached a small clearing, the man and woman were barely alive. Their exposed bodies were torn open by the coarse and unforgiving journey through the woods. They were stripped of their tattered clothes and sat shivering, naked and helpless – resigned to their doom.

The leader of the band gestured, and his men dragged them to two stakes in the earth. A pyre had been set up around the stakes. Sticks and twigs and brambles embedded in their flesh, but they were beyond pain.

They were bound to the stakes.

And then the men stepped back to watch their handiwork.

“Children of Satan!” the leader proclaimed loudly. “You stand accused of practicing witchcraft in our town. There is no place for you here in this life. I condemn you to the Fires of Hell.” And with a flourish, they lit their torches and closed in on the pyre. The man and woman found the strength to plead.

Soon, their pleas turned to screams.

The leader set the pyre ablaze with a mighty shout and his men followed suit.

The mother wailed and as the flames consumed her flesh, she saw the little form of her son watching. They were forcing him to watch.

“Please,” she whimpered. “We are not evil.”

But the crackle of the flames drowned her voice out. And blackness mercifully swept her away.

Struggling against his captor, the little boy cried bitterly until he was exhausted. As the fire raged, churning a column of black smoke into

the early morning sky, he saw the leader turn from the flame and walk toward him.

And he saw the glint of the medallion around the man's neck. It would be burned in his memory. It was all he knew of the faceless men who brutally murdered his family.

He was still there, on his knees, sobbing when the flames eventually died.

Nothing remained of his mother and father.

No one came.

He was all alone. Except for his hatred and anger.

PART II: PAWNS

CHAPTER 11

Sleet rain streaked across the windscreen of the Airbus C160 as it flew through black clouds in the worst storm over coastal British Columbia. Visibility was almost zero and when lightning cleaved the sky, the electric glare momentarily turned black to a disorienting grey. Winds buffeted the civilian version of the French/ German transport aeroplane. Sitting in the pilot's seat, Cyril Dubois struggled with the controls. A warning light flicked on and off on the console and he felt a shudder from the turboprop on the starboard wing. Then the warning light went silent. He shared a relieved look with Jacques André, his co-pilot.

Another flash of jagged lightning threw the cabin into stark flickering illumination and was followed by the rumble of thunder. The aircraft trembled and the warning light flashed again. This time it didn't go out. The controls began to shudder in their hands.

Dubois looked out the windows but it was too dark to see anything. The gauges told them that power in the starboard engine was dropping. The C160 was becoming sluggish in his hands. Lightning flashed again and in that instant, he saw the starboard turboprop spin to a stop!

The plane lurched to starboard and an alarm began blaring incessantly. The plane could run on one engine; it was just this damn storm would put too much strain on the surviving turboprop. The two men were experienced enough to work as a team without verbal communication. But when the next bolt of lightning struck the airframe and sizzled around the C160, plunging the instrument panel into darkness, they broke that professional silence.

"Damn!" André mouthed.

Dubois pursed his lips and willed the instruments to power up but nothing happened. A gust of wind pushed the plane laterally and he yanked at the control column to right the C160 but the plane did not respond easily. Sweat broke on his brow and he imagined he could hear the scream of the remaining turboprop as it was strained beyond its capacity. Flying blind in the gusts of wind and rain, he fixed a reference altitude and heading, and could only hope that the approximations didn't push them over the Pacific or plunge them into the maze of islands along the coast.

All those hopes were suddenly moot when the port turboprop sputtered a puff of black smoke and died.

There was a moment when the C160 just hung in the air and then it began an uncontrolled hurtle toward earth. The two men in the cabin pulled every trick they knew about flying, based on all the theory, experience and instinct garnered during the years they had flown air-drops over the Middle Eastern and the Northern-African civil unrest situations. They adapted to the plane, pleading with it, cajoling it as it bucked and fought them all the way down. Flashes of lightning were their only grim illumination. Then abruptly in another flash they were out of the clouds and saw the vast expanse of the forest below.

"Come on, come on!" Dubois mouthed in prayer as his mind zipped through a mental altimeter.

André screamed. He was just married and with a baby on the way; the prospect of dying in an air crash was too much to bear.

"Hang on! We'll be okay!" Dubois shouted in French.

The plane smashed head-on into a giant tree. The starboard wing caught on a heavy moss-covered trunk and wrapped around it. The plane pivoted with the impact shearing off the damaged wing in a burst of sparks and squeal of wrenched aluminium.

The nose dipped and was flattened inward when it hit another sturdy bark, the windscreen imploded as boughs and stout branches slapped and smashed at the glass. Rain immediately drenched the cabin. The two men shielded their faces and ducked beneath the dashboard as the C160 ploughed through more trees. Everything was a blur of bone-jarring jolts and tumbling and spinning. At one point the port propeller was taken cleanly off its mount and sent spinning into the forest, shearing off leaves and pine bristles and chips of bark in its path. Then with a final gut-wrenching slam, the C160 came to a halt, caught in the dense interlacing of rainforest tree branches and vines, nose pointing straight down, thirty feet to the moss-carpeted forest floor.

The plane groaned and swayed in the bough. Rain splattered and drummed on the battered airframe. Through the jagged rim of the windscreen, in the flashes of lightning, they could see the glistening forest floor. Dubois looked at his companion and carefully unsnapped his harness, bracing himself against the control console so that he didn't fall through the non-existent windscreen out of the plane.

André groaned. A shard of glass was embedded just at the hairline; his face was pasted in blood.

"We can't just sit here," Dubois whispered and André's eyes widened in realization: They would die horribly if their highly unstable cargo had been compromised in the crash-landing.

"I will try and climb out onto that branch," Dubois said, pointing to a thick wet branch just above the cabin. Cautiously, he put one shoe on the control console, steadied himself and pulled up so that he was now crouched on the dashboard. He waited to see if the C160's bough-cradle held with the shift in weight. It did. Encouraged, he

shuffled slowly to the edge of the windscreen. If he slipped he would fall right through, bouncing off the trees, thirty feet to his death.

He quickly wound his handkerchief around his left hand and then gripped the frame of the windscreen. With his right hand, he reached out, straining to touch the branch. He leaned out more, gritting his teeth with the effort. Glass embedded itself in his other hand through the handkerchief and blood smeared the cloth.

"Cyril..." André cautioned as he felt the C160 moving in the cradle.

Crack!

One of the branches snapped and the C160 dropped suddenly. Perched precariously on the control console, Dubois was thrown out. He slipped and tumbled through the open windscreen and flailed frantically as, for one slowed-down moment, he was suspended in the air between the nose of the plane and the frustratingly just-out-of-reach branch. But the push gave him the required momentum and he was catapulted onto the branch. He grabbed at it and wrapped an arm around it clutching it to his chest feeling the dampness soak through his shirt. As he hung there the C160 fell ten feet before coming to a halt. Leaves fluttered.

"Jacques! Are you okay?" Dubois called in alarm.

No response.

"Jacques, talk to me!" Out of the corner of his eye, Dubois saw another branch in the bough bending and straining under the weight of the C160. It would not hold much longer.

Then he heard André shout out from below. "Cyril! Help!"

Spurred into action, Dubois began climbing down. The branches formed a closely spaced network which made it easy. He had to be careful not to lose his footing on the slippery moss. He was soon level with the cockpit again and peered in.

"Jacques, come quickly, give me your hand!!"

Inside the plane, André unsnapped his harness and began climbing onto the control console. Dubois glanced at the ever-bending bough. André's hand popped out of the windscreen and Dubois reached and grabbed it, noting with some concern that their grip was slick with rain. Not good, he thought. But it should be —

"Wait, wait, I'm stuck!" André said. His foot had gotten snagged in the dangling harness of the co-pilot's seat.

Craacck!

The bough broke completely. André screamed to Dubois to save him. Dubois tried to pull him out, cursing with the exertion. Their grip slipped with a *squishing* sound.

"Noooo!" Dubois couldn't tell if it was he or André who had screamed.

The C160 fell away like a juggernaut through the trees, denuding bark as it fell. From his perch, Dubois watched in horror as André — now free of the harness — was tossed out — or jumped out in desperation. The co-pilot's body was knocked aside by the 65-thousand-pound transport plane like a rag doll and bounced sickeningly off the branches and then was lost from sight as the wreck of the C160 blocked his view. The C160 landed with an earth-shaking rumble on the forest floor on its nose, stood upright — its tail pointing upward at the path of destruction it had cleaved, and then with a loud groan of protesting metal framework, it crashed on to its roof.

"Mon Dieu!" Dubois whispered as he blinked away rainwater from his eyes.

CHAPTER 12

Dubois' wet clothes clung to his body like a translucent sheen. He shivered as the cold rain continued unabated. His stocking feet sank to his ankles in the moss. He had knocked off his shoes on the climb down the tree because they offered no grip. He pushed aside the foliage and stared.

The Airbus C160 looked positively enormous and incongruous amid the towering trees. It had lost the other wing too in the fall from the trees. The white hull was battered, torn, charred and streaked.

He crouched under the nose and then crept cautiously on his hands and knees through the broken windscreen into the upside-down cockpit. He stood and looked around and spotted the emergency locker recessed into the bulkhead. He yanked it open, fished inside for the satellite phone, GPS tracker and emergency kit. There were a few rations too, he knew, but that could wait until he had made the call. He sat down and turned on the GPS unit, but was unable to get a satellite signal. He strapped it around his shoulder and tried turning on the phone. It turned on immediately and he quickly dialed a pre-programmed number but once again the signal was too weak. He'd have to try later when the storm cleared. Comforted that, at least, his GPS and phone were working and all he needed was a line of sight to the sky to call for help and find his way out of the forest, Dubois turned his attention to the next item on his mental checklist: the integrity of the cargo.

With the introduction of the Airbus A400 as an upgrade to the C160, countries that had owned and operated the C160 were ready to dispose of these military workhorses. It was under these financial circumstances that Future Energy Group of France, a global pioneer

in renewable energy sources and a frontrunner of solutions to the growing energy demands of an insatiable human race, had purchased three C160 aircraft at a bargain from the French military and had modified the aircraft from the conventional military transport variant to hold a cargo of a very specific nature.

On this run, Dubois and André had been ferrying Future Energy's latest B-Energy Cell prototypes. The 'B' stood simply for blue because the energy cells glowed with a blue luminescence. As handlers of Future Energy Group's prototypes, company policy required that Dubois, André and the two security men in the cargo hold were aware of precautionary measures to be taken while handling the B-Energy Cells, and emergency-response protocol to be followed in the 'highly improbable' scenario wherein the B-Energy Cell containers were compromised.

As he pushed open the access hatch that led from the control cabin into the heavily insulated cavernous cargo bay, Dubois wondered what had become of the security guards. Jacques and he had been so intent on their own survival, they'd completely forgotten about the guards. Standing on the threshold, as his eyes adjusted to the darkness, Dubois searched for signs of movement. Above his head, a small ladder rose, to the floor of the cargo bay. He jumped off the threshold onto the roof of the plane. Puddles had formed from the rainwater that was dripping inside from numerous punctures in the fabric of the hull. The interior was a mangled mess: cables and swathes of insulation hung like vines all over, fixtures had come loose and —

He swallowed as he took in the sight of one of the security guards impaled on a strut ten feet above. The man's hands and feet hung lifeless and his head was bowed. Water — and perhaps blood —

dripped off the man's chin and from the spear-like tip of the strut that jutted out from his chest.

Dubois navigated amid the wreckage toward the aft partition that had been installed to hold the B-Energy Cells. The hatch in the partition wall hung open above him and he looked about for the easiest way to access it. He had to climb up along the inside curvature of the fuselage and then shimmy toward it using loose cabling strung along the partition wall, and dangling wreckage for grip. In some time, heaving and panting, he was leaning out to grab for the access hatch. His fingers curled around the upper edge of the hatch and he carefully eased his weight off the cabling taking care not to swing the hatch shut with his weight. If it did, he would lose his fingers in the doorjamb. He peered inside the hold.

Squinting in the lightning flashes, he saw the twenty-foot-long silver canisters that held the B-Energy Cells strewn all over. Even in the darkness in-between the flashes, he could make out the glow of the leaking contents forming a spreading sludge on the inside of the hold.

Dubois closed his eyes. His breathing began to constrict and he remembered the vapours of the cells could cause acute respiratory problems. He stepped off the doorjamb quickly onto the cabling again and slammed the hatch shut. He lost his balance and slipped, crashing to the fuselage below, hitting his head. His vision began to narrow but the pain in his chest spurred him on. Struggling against unconsciousness, Dubois began slithering in the dark, marking off obstacles in the intermittent flashes of lightning. He had to get out of the aircraft and call in the situation before it was too late.

Something snagged his shirt, opening a gash in his side from which blood oozed out. Wheezing, he clutched at the wound trying to staunch the bleeding. He gagged. Damn it, he thought, what the

hell was in the Cells? Trembling now, more from the fear and adrenaline, he dragged his body, ignoring the wrenching pain in his side. He reached the cockpit cabin hatch, hauled himself upright and tumbled into the cockpit, pulling the door closed behind him.

He fumbled around for the GPS unit and sat-phone from where he had left it and the emergency kit. Half crawling, half crouching, he put as much distance as he could from the C160 before collapsing to the ground. He propped himself up against a tree, snapped open the emergency kit, biting his lip against the sting, applied an antiseptic to his laceration. Then he taped a bandage over the wound and rummaged for the emergency rations. He chewed on a power bar as he clumsily checked for the GPS signal. He began to breathe almost normally and regain his strength.

But still no satellite signal. With a grunt, Dubois stumbled to his feet and set off into the forest with the hope of finding a clearing in which he could get a signal.

CHAPTER 13

British Columbia

Wrested out of mankind's destructive ways by pro-environmental groups in the 1990s, the Great Bear Rainforest covers an area of 25,000 square miles and stretches 250 miles along the coast of British Columbia. Together with the Russian and Brazilian rainforests, the Great Bear makes up for 70% of the remaining rainforests on the planet. It encompasses a patchwork of thousands of islands, is home to thousand-year-old Western Red Cedar and hundred-foot Sitka Spruce, Douglas fir, western hemlock, crab apple trees, as well as grizzlies, black bear, wolves and the almost indigenous white spirit bear. The labyrinth of waterways interspersing the islands teems with salmon. Humpback whales and orcas play along the mist-shrouded coasts while snow-capped mountain peaks look down upon the rolling terrain. The Great Bear Rainforest is one of the few reminders of paradise on Earth and is under constant threat of 'human civilization'.

Conservation has always been a tough issue, negotiated, hammered and fought between the Canadian government, loggers, conversationalists, and the aboriginal First Nation People. The costs of preservation run into hundreds of million Canadian dollars annually.

In recent months, the protests had intensified. The hotly opposed Northern Gateway oil pipeline and the soon-to-be-opened *Orb* – the world's most opulent floating hotel situated in the northern reaches

of the Rainforest – threatened to bring large crude carriers and pleasure cruises to these waters. Protesters chained themselves to the pipeline and held round-the-clock flotilla demonstrations around the Orb. In March of 2006, a ferry, Queen of the North had sunk in fourteen hundred feet of water and was still leaking fuel-oil into the channel.

Fears of a similar environmental disaster overshadowed promises from the government and the pro-pipeline groups that the crude carriers, the oil depot at Kitimat port and the Orb would be powered by a revolutionary environment-friendly and biodegradable technology developed by the Future Energy Group of France.

Twelve-year-old Shawn Bradford of the Klemtu Nation tribe thumbed the throttle and goosed the small white boat at an easy pace. A gentle wash fell away as he angled the boat toward Laredo Fjord, a geographical cut that bisected nearly the entire southern part of Princess Royal Island, the largest island in the Rainforest.

Sitting in the bow, his breath fogging in the early morning cold, his best friend, Marven Jameson pointed to a frothing on the otherwise placid water surface near the tree-line, a little way north and on the other side of the fjord. "See that?"

"I see it."

"Let's check it out."

Shawn looked anxiously at the entrance to the fjord then at his watch, wiping condensate off the dial. "Okay, but I don't want to be out here much longer."

Marven snickered. "Scared of your old man?"

Shawn knew his father would be *upset* when he found out the boys had 'borrowed' his boat to search for an aircraft. Low visibility on the waterways could easily spell disaster because all manner of boats – from outboards to cruise ships – sailed these waters.

"Keep an eye out for traffic," Shawn cautioned as he turned the rudder. Soon the mouth of the fjord was lost from sight behind a finger of land and they were chugging along the opposite shoreline. Marven was peering over the bow, leaning precariously from the boat.

"Marven, don't —"

"Will you *look at this!*"

Shawn left the tiller, clambered over beside his friend and stared into the frothing water. A school of salmon was writhing and convulsing at the mouth of a small stream that emptied into the channel. The salmon appeared to be twisting individually in a body-racking grotesque dance, their mouths opening and closing in spasms. Marven reached out to touch one of the fish but Shawn swatted his hand away. "Don't do that. We don't know what happened to them. It could be in the water!"

A trace of hesitation flashed across Marven's bold features. Shawn reached into a small locker in the bow and withdrew a fishing-net. He scooped two of the ailing salmon out of the water and *plunked* the net onto the floor of the outboard. The fish jumped pitifully, their stomachs bloating and puffing as they suffocated. The two boys watched in silence for a moment until the fish stopped moving. Then Marven spotted something floating on the water in the middle of the channel. They hadn't spotted it earlier because of the blanket of mist but now with the advancing day, the mist was lifting.

Shawn piloted the boat away from the frenzied salmon and soon they were bobbing alongside the half-submerged remains of an aircraft tail-fin. The two boys stared at each other. The fin was as broad as their little outboard. They reached out to touch the ravaged metal framework that had once fixed the fin to the fuselage.

"It's a *big* plane!" Marven said excitedly.

They had forgotten about the fish. This was the first time both had come so close to wreckage this big sticking out of the water and they were filled with thoughts of adventure and discovery. "But where is the plane?"

Marven contemplated this for a second. "Could be under here." He pointed emphatically into the water. As he said it his features fell. There was no way they could dive into the deep channel on their own. Even his daring had reasonable limits.

Shawn snapped his fingers. "There would be other pieces of wreckage on the island!"

The other boy caught on. "Possibly."

To boys who were intent on finding something, it was enough to turn their heads toward the island looming behind them. As they stared at the mist-shrouded shores, another thought ran through Shawn's head. "Do you think the plane killed the fish?"

"You mean like, was it carrying poison?" Marven's eyes lit up.

Shawn nodded.

"Only one way to find out," Marven said rushing over to take the tiller, rocking the boat dangerously. "We follow the stream!"

CHAPTER 14

Cyril Dubois came to.

His eyelids fluttered and his vision swam. He was in a quiet, warm room on a soft bed with a thick quilt over his dry clothes. Wait. Not his clothes; his tattered, stained pilot's uniform was draped across a wooden chair. He pulled the quilt away, sat up and winced as pain shot through his side. He lifted the edge of his shirt and saw that his wound had been freshly tended to. He twisted off the bed and padded across the room on his bare feet. He could hear soft voices coming from the other side of a curtain.

Dubois pulled back the curtain. The two men and a woman who were conversing in the other room looked at him. One of them smiled good-naturedly and stood up.

"Ah, Mr Dubois!"

"Uh, hello."

"How are you feeling?" the smiling man asked.

"Disoriented."

"Who wouldn't be," the man replied. "You walked a great distance in one of the worse storms we've had this year. You were near the end of your strength when I found you."

Dubois comprehended what the man was saying. "Thank you, sir"

"Billy Bradford," the man introduced himself, "And no need for thanks, please. I was cursing my luck for getting caught in the storm on Princess Island. Looks like God had a plan after all. But come, come, sit down, rest yourself. You are in our village now. We are Klemtu people." He gestured to the woman, "My wife, Olivia nursed you back to the living from hypothermia and exposure."

The woman smiled at him now and thrust a bowl of steaming broth at him and indicated that he should eat.

"It's a family recipe, Mr Dubois. It'll make you feel as good as new." Dubois inhaled the aroma, tasted the broth tentatively and found that he liked it; it seared his throat washing the grogginess away. The Klemtu watched as he wolfed it down. When he was finished, Billy said, "Your plane crashed in the storm..."

Dubois looked up, surprised.

Bradford explained, "We heard a plane flying very low last night. That and your clothes... tourists or backpackers do not dress like that. We were planning a search party when the conditions improved."

Dubois mind quickly snapped to attention: the B-Energy Cells aboard the C160. He forced himself to recall the incidents of the last night. His memory was vivid but fragmented. "There are no survivors, I'm afraid. "I was trying to get a signal so I wandered out in the storm and got lost." That was a half-truth. "My sat phone and GPS unit...do you have it?"

"Yes," the other man said. Bradford introduced the man as Morrel Jameson. Jameson reached over to a mantle above the hearth and handed Dubois the sat phone and GPS unit.

Dubois powered up the phone and checked the call history. He was silently relieved when he saw a number in the listing. He had succeeded in making a call. That meant Future Energy Group would send a team to clean up the mess. He looked at the time on the phone's display. Good. If he had any indication of the way FEG worked, a team would already be on en-route, especially with high stakes in British Columbia.

Until then, he had to keep these people away from the crash site.

CHAPTER 15

Shawn and Marven panted as they ran uphill following the trickling stream. They dodged around trees that grew near the streambed and jumped over knobby rocks that dotted the path. Shawn trailed behind the older boy who would stop to wait for him and urge him on impatiently. Morning dew glistened on the grass and there was a fresh tinge to the air. Surprisingly, the two boys did not hear the morning calls of any birds. The vegetation grew denser until only slim rays of sunlight cut through the dispersing fog. The forest grew quieter if that was possible. They could feel the weight and the closeness of the giant trees as they stepped over roots always keeping the stream in sight to their left. The ground rose and then levelled out.

Ahead, Marven spotted something in the distance between the green leaves and picked up the pace.

"Wait!" Shawn called after him but Marven was already pushing through the trees. Shawn raced after his friend. Branches and leaves slapped at him, and he was soon soaked and shivering with cold.

And then he stumbled out into the crash site.

Shawn was unaware of Marven standing beside him, chest heaving with exertion. They stared open-mouthed at the white cigar-shaped aircraft. The boys were accustomed to seeing amphibious taxis and small service aircraft flying between the islands of British Columbia. But this... was something else. It was enormous, lying belly-up like a beached whale. The force of last night's storm had strewn leaves and branches all over the wreckage.

“Look at this!” Marven was standing beside a giant wheel. He leapt, grabbed and pulled himself up onto the tire and looked down at Shawn. “Woo-hoo!” He jumped up and down enjoying the springiness of the wheel.

“Air smells funny here,” Shawn said sniffing the air. There was a pungent tinge to it.

“Will you get a life!” Marven chastised him as he jumped off the wheel shaking his head. He clapped Shawn on his shoulder. “Let’s see inside!” Without waiting for a reply, he had gone closer to a huge gash in the hull of the C160. Shawn heard a splash and saw his friend stepping through water that had accumulated at the mouth of the gash. Shawn’s eyes widened when he realized that the stream they had followed flowed under the C160. The boy’s mind whirred as he thought back to their original motivation for locating the aircraft: to find the source of the poison that had killed the fish. Before he could warn his friend, Marven had disappeared inside the hull. Shawn could hear him rummaging around for a moment and then there was silence.

“Marven! Wait up! Don’t —”

He heard a low growl from the forest behind him and spun around, lost his balance and fell into the stream. It was shallow and so he didn’t sink completely but he scrambled to climb out, splashing water loudly, backing away to the opposite bank of the stream.

The forest parted and a white spirit bear reared up. It growled – a low guttural sound and sniffed the air. *It smells it too*, Shawn thought. The bear ambled out of cover. Its shaggy vanilla fur coat undulated as it circled. Not taking his eyes off the bear, Shawn felt around the damp earth until his fingers closed on a stout branch. He tested its weight and held it in front of him like a club. It looked puny; the bear could easily swipe it away with a paw. But he only

intended to hold it off until he could make an escape. Maybe if he made enough noise, the bear would leave him alone.

"Marven!" he croaked in a trembling voice. No reply. The bear took a step forward. Shawn lunged forward brandishing the branch and mustered his energy into a wild cry to scare it off. The spirit bear snorted, surprised at the show of offence from the small creature on the other side of the stream. Then it reared up again looming tall and roared. Shawn pissed his pants and turned to run.

The bear bounded after him through the stream in great loping strides and cut off his retreat. The bear pressed inward and Shawn backed up slowly against a stump of wet bark.

"Help!" Shawn shouted as loud as he could. "Help me! Please!" His chest began to constrict. He was having trouble breathing. He opened his mouth thinking it would help him breathe easier but it only made the constriction worse. Fear broke over him in waves. He could hear the rasping of the bear's breath, its stomach swelled with each breath. The bear snorted irritably and the rasping turned to laboured wheezing. The bear reared up and spread its massive paws. A paw swung in an arc and Shawn put the branch out, gripping it with both hands. The impact tossed the branch spinning into the air and Shawn was thrown back. He felt a burning sensation in his forearm where the bear's claws had broken the skin drawing red welts that quickly oozed blood. Shawn's bracelet was torn from his wrist. With a roar, the bear lunged forward for the kill, stomping the bracelet into the wet earth. Shawn leapt aside and the bear's shoulder struck him in the chest. The impact flung him five feet away. The bear wheeled and bounded over, jaws open wide.

Just at that moment, a pair of Cougar EC 725 transport helicopters thundered from above, whipping the tree-tops into a frenzy with

their rotor downdraft. They hovered above the crash site, flattening the grass.

CHAPTER 16

Sitting in the doorway of the helicopter and peering through the scope on his FA-FR2 sniper rifle, the Future Energy Group security contractor said over his radio, "I have the bear in my sights."

A severe-looking man with close-cropped white hair and a scar that ran across his forehead and right temple put a hand on the sniper's shoulder and looked. Luc Fortesque clicked the radio with a sardonic smile and said, "Take the shot." Then he spoke to the pilot rapidly.

But down in the forest, the spirit bear took one look at the aerial intruder and then turned and ran, disappearing into the forest, before the sniper could shoot. Twenty feet above the crash site, zip lines came coiling out of the lead helicopter and a ten-man team shimmied down, followed by Fortesque. They all wore Level-A hazmat suits with self-contained breathing apparatus. Once on the ground the team fanned out and set up a security perimeter around the crash site. Their compact FAMAS assault rifles were mounted with thermal sights. The Cougar rose to a holding pattern above the treetops, providing cover and ready for an emergency evacuation. Fortesque radioed two of his men to go after the bear. "It can't have gotten too far," he said looking at the forest. "The vapours from the ruptured B-Cells will bring it down."

"What do we do when we find it?"

Fortesque's hard eyes were hidden by the reflection on his hazmat faceplate. "Take the incinerator canisters. Contain it; we don't want a forest fire." The two men nodded. One of them walked over to a silver case that had been unpacked in the centre of the perimeter for easy access by all the team. Resting inside in foam casing were twenty fist-sized silver canisters with a 'flammable' logo and an

integrated timer. These were incendiary devices developed by the French for contained yet effective erasure of sensitive assets. He plucked two of the canisters though one would be more than enough and strapped them onto his belt-webbing and the two men entered the forest in search of the spirit bear.

Fortesque looked over to where one of his men was crouched beside the wounded boy. He walked over while at the same time radioed an all-clear to the pilot of the second Cougar. The second helicopter appeared above the tree line and settled into the clearing.

The modified bay doors slid open, an emergency response team from FEG streamed out with their equipment and made their way quickly to the C160. Fortesque spoke into his radio, "Dr Eduard, we have thirty minutes on the ground. I want to be out of here by 0900 hours."

"Okay, Fortesque."

Fortesque reached the native boy. "How is he?" The boy's eyes were glazed over and his breathing was shallow. Blood smeared one side of his chest. He looked hopefully at the two men, trying to discern their intent from behind their faceplates.

"Not good," Fortesque's man replied. "Two minutes tops."

Fortesque said. "Find out how he got here. There might be a boat. Cut it lose, scuttle it."

Eduard's voice came over the radio. "Fortesque, we got another kid inside the cargo bay."

Fortesque grunted. A bear and two native kids. It was still manageable, he thought. It would be construed as a boating accident by the local authorities. The B-Energy Cell prototypes that were being transported to the Kitimat facility and Orb hotel were a major improvement over earlier more-unstable designs. If an earlier version of the cell had ruptured, the toxic fumes would literally sear

the boy's respiratory system, cooking him from inside, an agonizing death. FEG's researchers had managed to reduce and contain the toxic effects of ruptured cells. Remove the source and within 12 hours, all trace-toxicity would be almost undetectable. 24 hours and everything would be back to normal. Still, if there was a source, the toxicity was lethal enough to kill within ten minutes. The R and D teams were confident that within a month they would develop a version of the Cells that was entirely harmless, save for a bout of nausea. It was just a matter of time, but since the grand opening of the Orb could not be held up, FEG had voted to go-live with what they had. Three months later they would upgrade – free of charge. Fortesque's mission was simple and FEG was capable of handling such an incident: remove the undamaged cells, incinerate the ruptured cells, and keep a skeletal team onsite for 30 hours to ward off pesky investigators. After that, nobody would be the wiser and FEG would be safe.

"Okay," he said into the radio. "I'm sending someone in there to pick up the boy. We have another here."

"What will you do with the bodies?" Eduard asked.

Fortesque said, "Doctor, you have twenty minutes. Let me worry about the bodies."

From the forest, they heard a loud *whump*. Then the radio crackled: "Found the bear."

"Good! Alright, everyone! To work!"

He rubbed his gloved hands; things were going smoothly.

CHAPTER 17

The atmosphere in Billy Bradford's living room had turned agitated. Dubois had tried to hold off their inquisitiveness but only succeeded in raising Jameson's suspicions. Bradford was trying to calm everyone down.

"Mr Bradford," Dubois said, "I'm sorry if I have offended you, but I am bound by contractual obligations. You must understand: I cannot talk about my charter."

"There's nothing to stop us from going to Royal Princess Island," Jameson interjected. "I say we take a small party and see what has come down in our land. Damn pollutants!"

"Cyril," Bradford said, "Morrel is right. We can roam these lands freely. The only reason why you would not want us to investigate the crash site is if there is...um... sensitive cargo aboard."

Bradford was clearly the more rational man. Dubois conceded, "Yes, the cargo is sensitive and I have confirmation that it will be airlifted before noon and you won't have to worry about it anymore."

"Will your presence here bring danger to our village?" Bradford asked looking at him intently. Even Jameson stared. He had not considered that line of thinking.

"No," Dubois said confidently. Future Energy Group would not resort to violence to keep the secret of the toxicity of the B-Energy Cells from these people. They had already bribed politicians with visions of economic prosperity and fat bonuses.

"Okay, that is good then." Bradford looked at his watch. It was almost nine o'clock. "But as Morrel said, we are concerned about pollution, so if there is no danger to our people, then we would like

to satisfy ourselves if the cargo poses a danger to the ecology of the rain forest. Is there?"

Dubois was thinking up an answer when the heavy drape across the front door was pushed aside and a stout woman came bustling in, worry and concern etched on her face. Jameson stood when he saw her. Dubois guessed she was his wife.

"I cannot find Marvin," she fretted. "Is he with Shawn?"

Bradford nodded. "Yes, Shawn said he was going to meet Marvin."

"Where is Shawn? Do you know?"

"I'm sure they are fine," Jameson said.

She would have none of it. "I thought they might go to look for the air crash." She glanced angrily at Dubois. "So I went down to the dock..."

"They shouldn't go there," Dubois found himself saying before he caught his tongue.

Jameson misunderstood the inadvertent warning. "You stay out of this!"

Bradford glanced at Dubois and got to his feet. "I'll go look for them. They must be nearby..."

"Your boat is not at the dock, Billy!" the woman completed plaintively. "It's gone!"

Bradford and Jameson ran out of the house with the two women in tow. Dubois grabbed the sat phone and GPS unit and followed them outside. He blinked in the sunlight and quickly saw that the Klemtu village was neatly organized on a knoll. Off to his right, the two men were rushing down a path that ran between rows of houses. He noticed Bradford ran with a slight limp. Then the two men and women were lost from sight as more people joined them, leaving their early morning chores. Not wanting to be left alone, Dubois took off after them. As he ran he redialed on the sat phone.

The call was answered almost immediately.

"This is Cyril," he panted as he ran. "I'm at a native village near the crash site. The villagers are mobilizing a search party because two of the village children have gone in search of the plane."

The voice at the other end was cold as ice. "Thank you for the update. Can you delay the search party?"

"No."

The line was silent for a moment. Dubois could hear his heart beating in his head as he bounded down the path. "The site is being sanitized as we speak. Do not arouse their suspicions further. The field team will handle the natives."

"Did the children find the crash site?" Dubois persisted. Even with all his contractual obligations, he wasn't stone-hearted. He would never forgive himself if two innocent children stumbled on the crash site and died from exposure. "Did you hear from the evacuation team if the children reached the site?"

"No, there is no such report from the evac team."

Dubois felt a knot in his stomach. Though there was nothing revealing in the voice at the other end of the line, his instinct told him it was a lie.

The cold voice continued. "When you reach the crash site, you are to join the evacuation team. You will be airlifted to Kitimat."

The line clicked off and he shoved the phone into his pocket. Should he tell the villagers? He finally resolved to wait until the right moment. The small group reached the dock and bounded down the wooden pier that jutted into the waters. Jameson's boat bobbed nearby.

"This is Marvin's idea!" Bradford's wife scolded. The Jamesons didn't retort; they knew their son well enough. "Doesn't he know the dangers of the channel?!"

"We'll take two boats," Bradford said ignoring his wife and focusing on the task at hand. He slipped the moorings off Jameson's boat.

"We'll find them. Someone get that pilot!"

"I'm here," Dubois said pushing through the crowd.

"Get in," Jameson growled. "You're taking us to the crash site."

Bradford cranked up the boat's motor and expertly backed it out of its parking slot. He swung the boat in an arc and pointed the bow toward the centre of the channel. Behind them, two other Klemtu men and, to Dubois' surprise, a woman jumped into another boat. They carried hunting rifles. Then Bradford rammed the throttle to its stops and the boat leapt in the water, throwing up white rooster tails. Dubois lost his balance and fell flat on his back. Bradford looked at him and held his gaze as if peering into his soul. Dubois squirmed uncomfortably, got to his feet.

"If there's something you need to tell us," Bradford said over the roar of the outboard, "Now's a good time."

"I —"

Jameson snarled and grabbed him roughly by the collar. "Listen: We saved your miserable life. Doesn't that mean anything to you?!"

"We may appear to be simple folk, Cyril," Bradford called out. "But don't let that fool you. I served with the Canadian special forces."

He looked back at Dubois. "Your behaviour tells me something bad has happened. I'd suggest you tell me what we need to know or I may just lose my patience with you."

Dubois bit his lip, closed his eyes. Then he said, "If your boys find the crash site, they will die."

Jameson's eyes widened in shock and his grip loosened. Then he quickly recovered and angrily grabbed Dubois even more roughly.

"You damn son of a bitch! What have you brought to our land?!"

“Morrel, be quiet. We need to get as much information from the man. Cyril: elaborate.”

The boats sped down the channel as Cyril told them everything.

CHAPTER 18

Fortesque received word that the Klemtu were coming. He watched a pair of his men seal two body bags that held the Klemtu boys. "Make it look like they drowned," he ordered, putting the company's interests at the fore.

The two men set off into the forest with the bags slung over their shoulders. Fortesque turned back to the activity by the Cougar. Eduard's team was carefully sliding silver holding cases into the helicopter's bay. Each case could hold five B-Energy Cells. He clicked the radio. "Eduard, how much more time?"

"Ten minutes, give or take a few."

"Make that five minutes."

"Fortesque —"

"Five minutes, Eduard," Fortesque repeated, sternly, "or I'll blow the charges with you inside!"

Eduard complained incoherently but Fortesque knew the man would comply. Eduard knew Fortesque had absolute power on this operation.

Two minutes later, Fortesque's radio clicked. "Fortesque, we found a boat. It looks like the boys came in it."

"Good. Scuttle it and get here in three minutes."

Fortesque's men unzipped the body bags and dumped the boys into the boat. They noticed a small net with dead fish in it lying in the boat. One of the men brandished a fireman's pickaxe and relentlessly attacked the prow. After a few blows, it appeared that the bow of the boat had shattered upon impact with a rock. Satisfied, they powered up the outboard and pushed the boat out

into the channel. The two men watched as the unmanned boat S-curved toward the deeper part of the channel and began sinking as water inundated the ravaged hull. Within seconds there was only an angry frothing of bubbles on the water's surface. The bodies of the two boys came to the surface, face-down and spiralled in the eddy, drifted further away.

With no witnesses, it was impossible to believe that such a dastardly act had been carried out against the backdrop of such natural beauty.

The Cougar's turbines whined and the rotors began spinning faster. Most of Eduard's team was aboard save for Eduard and two others. They would comprise the skeleton team to ensure trace toxicity dropped to safe levels and there was no evidence that would lead back to Future Energy. The Cougar lifted off, rose above the tree line, banked north and disappeared.

Fortesque spoke into his radio, "Commence incineration."

His team set the timers on the incinerators and took cover behind a stand of trees. Sixty seconds later there was a brilliant flash of light and a muffled *boom* inside the C160 as a surge of super-heat consumed its cargo bay. The heat wave blew outward and the shockwave swayed the forest. It was followed by a sucking *whoosh* as surrounding high pressure filled the vacuum at the epicentre of the blast. Fortesque waited ten seconds before hailing the pilot of the first Cougar. "Vulture One, you're clear to land."

"Did you hear that?" Jameson said looking out to Royal Princess Island. Thick columns of smoke rose into the air above the forest.

Bradford pulled back on the throttle and the second boat came alongside. The two boats bobbed silently in the water.

"Sounded like an explosion," said one of the men from the other boat.

"I thought I heard a helicopter," Bradford said. He looked to the sky, shielding his eyes from the sun. A rhythmic *whump-whump* grew louder and they saw a helicopter come in from the clouds. The glare of the sun made it hard to discern any markings. The helicopter descended into the tall trees.

"Let's check it out." Bradford opened the throttle and angled the boat toward the shore of the island.

Unknown to the men in the boats, their movements were tracked by one of Fortesque's scouts. He clicked his radio and said, "Fortesque, the natives are coming in."

"Eduard," Fortesque said urgently. "What's the status?" He did not want the Klemtu seeing them in the hazmat suits.

Eduard was walking around the crash site with a toxicity meter held out in front of him like a wand. Nearby the Cougar — Vulture One — waited with its rotors idling.

"Eduard?"

"Give me a damn minute," the scientist snapped finally losing his patience to Fortesque's continuous prodding.

"We don't have a minute!"

“Then go ahead, get out of your suit. We’ll see what happens to you!” Since the radios were set to open channel, everyone heard the reply and eyes turned toward to see what would happen.

Fortesque barked an order into his radio, “All non-essential personnel get aboard the chopper. We’re about to be visited by local inhabitants, I don’t want any more people than necessary here.”

Leaving one man to guard the boats and to raise an alarm in case they didn’t return within an hour, Bradford led Jameson — who was now armed with a borrowed rifle — Dubois and the two other Klemtu uphill in the direction of the smoke signal. They could hear the helicopter through the trees and navigated toward it. The Klemtu were surefooted; darting through the forest and Dubois struggled to keep up. Where they leapt over roots, he stumbled. Where they ducked through fir tree branches, he was scratched and grazed.

The whine of the helicopter rotors increased in pitch. Bradford stopped for a moment to listen and put up a fisted hand to halt the party. “They’re leaving! Come on!” He ran faster through the forest.

“Marven!” Jameson began shouting. “Marven! Can you hear me!”

“I doubt anyone can hear you over that noise,” Bradford called as he ducked under a stout branch and vanished into a tangle of green.

“Conserve your energy.”

But Jameson wouldn’t listen and called even louder for his son.

The roar of the helicopter vibrated in their chests. Almost oppressive, it seemed to flatten them to the earth as it thundered overhead. They looked up and caught glimpses of the grey underbelly through gaps in the trees.

"What do we do?" Jameson panted, hands on his knees.

"We can't see anything from here. Let's hope Tom can identify it from the shoreline," one of the men said. But a moment later the sound of the helicopter changed.

"They've banked north," Bradford deduced listening carefully. "Tom may not see them. Come on, we're not far!" He looked at Dubois.

"Is the air safe now?"

"If that was the extraction team, then yes. But we should be cautious."

Bradford said, "Anyone wants to stay back, we won't force you. I think Jameson and I can handle this." But the other two Klemtu shook their heads; they were coming along.

"Okay." Bradford nodded at his friends. They continued their dash and after fifty yards stumbled out into the crash site.

CHAPTER 19

The four natives stared at the smoking ruin of the C160. Dubois recovered quicker and his gaze fell on the six men in the clearing; three carrying assault rifles, a necessity when protecting proprietary technology — there had been incidents in the past. One of the men approached their group. He had a livid scar across his forehead and put up a palm in a universal gesture of *'stop where you are'* and said in a loud, clear voice, "This is a restricted site."

Dubois noted that the men in the clearing did not wear protective suits which indicated the site was sanitized. He whispered to Bradford. "It's safe now."

"We're looking for two boys," Bradford countered in an equally loud voice as he pressed forward. They were on a slight rise, with the crash site in the bowl of the forest.

The man who had spoken earlier replied, "No boys here, I'm afraid. I'm going to have to ask you to turn around, sir."

Jameson was seething. His fists balled and the rifle trembled in his hands. "Like hell, we're taking orders from you!"

Bradford interrupted, "I'm Bill Bradford and this is Morrel Jameson." He gestured to Cyril Dubois. "This man is the pilot of the C160. We rescued him last night and believe our children may have set out to search for the wreck out of curiosity."

"Cyril Dubois, will you join us, please. We are to take you with us. Come now. Mr Bradford, you can search this site later, but I assure you your boys are not here."

"I think I have a problem with waiting till later," Bradford said.

"Mr Bradford, you don't want to create problems for your people now, do you?"

"Then I think we'll both have problems once we reveal this plane was carrying toxic material. That won't go down too well with Future Energy."

The scarred man glared at Dubois who shrunk away from his gaze.

"There's no toxic pollution here, Mr Bradford. Mr Dubois, I have been ordered to airlift you to Kitimat. Come over *now!*"

"The hell with this!" Jameson said and he took a step into the clearing raising his rifle. Immediately two assault rifles swung up at him. In response, the other Klemtu natives brought their rifles up, gripping the stocks, fingers curled around triggers.

"Morrel!" Bradford warned. They didn't have the advantage at this time. He realized the Future Energy task force could cut them down in seconds. To Bradford's eye, the men he was facing were hardened soldiers. He put out a hand to calm the Klemtu. Jameson simmered, hissed angrily, but obeyed. Fortesque similarly ordered his men to stand down. Bradford turned to the Klemtu woman. "Natasha, circle the site. Look for tracks."

Without a word, she backed away into the forest. Fighting worry, Bradford plopped himself on a boulder. Dubois involuntarily shivered at the cold resolve exuding from the man. Bradford unzipped his tan leather jacket and Dubois caught a glimpse of a weapon holstered to his chest. Nearby Jameson lit a thin cigarette, puffed blue smoke into the air. One of the unarmed FEG men stepped over to Fortesque and they conferred silently. Dubois guessed this was the lead technician on the recovery team.

The minutes passed agonizingly. Fortesque kept looking around anxiously. Suddenly the Klemtu tracker stepped out of the forest into the clearing. She was standing next to a shallow stream that snaked across the clearing and under the wreck. Everyone turned to look at her and at that moment, taking advantage of the distraction,

with a silent command from Bradford, the other Klemtu native raised his rifle and aimed it point blank at Fortesque, framing the centre of his scarred forehead in the crosshairs of his hunting rifle scope. Jameson quickly scoped in on another of the armed men. Bradford whipped out a SIG Sauer P226 and aimed it with both hands in classic stance at the men in the clearing.

Bradford said, "You will allow us to complete our search or Randall here will put a bullet through your head." He nodded at the Klemtu with the rifle. "He is an excellent marksman."

Caught off guard, Fortesque and the other men turned to see weapons levelled at them. One of the security men began to raise his FAMAS assault rifle but a shot rang out and a plume of earth exploded near Fortesque's boot. He instinctively took a step back.

"Tell your men to stand down," Bradford threatened. Beside him, Randall expertly racked the bolt ejecting the spent round and chambering another. "Or the next shot goes through you. I swear it!"

"You're making a big mistake," Fortesque hissed.

Bradford ignored the threat. "Now all I ask is that you allow us to complete our investigation. We're not going near your aircraft. *That* may be restricted... unless our boys are inside. Drop your weapons. Now!"

The two men stared each other down. Then Fortesque said, "Do as he says," and un-shouldered his assault rifle.

"Slowly," Jameson growled.

One by one, weapons were laid down.

"Take a step back," Bradford ordered. He didn't let up his stance. "Hands where we can see them." As the FEG men stepped back, he nodded at the Klemtu tracker. Keeping an eye warily on the nearest of the security force, Natasha entered the clearing, following the

stream. She peered keenly at the earth, her nose almost touching the grass. Her shiny hair cascaded. At points, she would touch the earth gingerly, as if probing it. Then she would crabwalk to another spot studying it intently. She moved quickly, zigzagging around the clearing, circling the jagged stump of a tree that rose at an angle.

Fortesque's eyes never left Bradford. Even from a distance, Dubois could see the daggers in his hard gaze. It was clear Fortesque was not going to let Bradford leave unscathed.

Natasha began scooping at the earth, digging. Then she stood silently and held something up in the morning light. It looked like a bracelet.

Bradford confirmed it, "That's Shawn's!"

Natasha nodded solemnly. "The boys were here. Their tracks lead upstream from shore. One of them went into the wreck." She pointed to the ragged tear in the hull of the C160. Smoke still billowed out from the tear. "There are bear tracks too; maybe they were attacked by a bear. The bear tracks lead away into the forest."

"Did you find the boat?" Bradford's voice cracked at the edges.

"Yes, there are marks where they beached the boat. Their tracks don't lead back to the boat; there are larger boot prints: theirs, I presume." She nodded to Fortesque.

"We have to search the plane!" Jameson said, glancing at Bradford for approval.

Dubois couldn't tell if Jameson had simply not put two-and-two together or was refusing to accept what the woman had just said.

Bradford's voice trembled. "Didn't you hear? They didn't go back to the boat, but the boat isn't where it should be. I don't think we'll find Shawn or Marven here, Morrel."

Morrel faltered. "W-What?" In shock, he lowered his rifle.

"They're dead, Morrel," Bradford stated bitterly.

“What! What did you say?! I’m... I’m gonna kill all of them!”

Jameson made to raise his gun again.

Randall looked over briefly...giving Fortesque the opportunity he had been seeking. Fortesque dropped to the earth and in one fluid motion swept up his assault rifle just as the Klemtu marksman recovered and pulled the trigger in haste. The bullet whizzed harmlessly over Fortesque’s head and then Fortesque was pulling his trigger.

CHAPTER 20

"Take cover!" Bradford shouted as he dived to the left into Jameson, pushing him out of the line of fire. Bullets peppered the ground all around them. As Bradford rolled over, he saw Dubois' body shudder with bullet impacts. Just as Dubois crumpled to the ground, Randall was hit, his rifle spun away and he was knocked sideways with the impact. Natasha had meanwhile leapt across the narrow stream and head-butted a FEG security guard. The two collapsed in a tangle of arms and legs and rolled as each tried to get the better of the other. Bradford pulled off five shots in Fortesque's direction buying them some time. Jameson grabbed for his rifle, aimed quickly and fired sending the third FEG guard ducking for cover behind a boulder. His shot ricocheted off the stone. Bradford was on his feet, one arm extended pulling off shots one after the other, keeping Fortesque pinned down. Then Fortesque chanced a withering volley of gunfire and Bradford dived to the ground, landing beside Randall who had one hand against his right shoulder. Blood stained the front of his shirt and seeped through his fingers.

"We're going to have to run out of here. You up to it?" He heard Jameson fire another shot.

Randall nodded. "I'll survive," he said through gritted teeth.

"Billy!" Jameson called between shots. "We can't hold them much longer."

Bradford looked around and shouted. "Natasha! We're getting out of here!" Then he took a deep breath and grabbed Randall by the collar of his shirt. "Ready?"

"My rifle..."

"Leave it..."

"We need cover fire." They both ducked as a fresh volley of fire raked the earth. Bradford realized Randall was right: they needed every bit of covering fire to escape. He spied the fallen rifle a few feet away in the grass and lunged for it, grabbed it and retreated into hiding. He shoved the rifle at Randall. With a grunt, the man adjusted the weight in his hands and racked the bolt.

"Okay, let's go!" he muttered, squinting through the scope with an effort.

"Natasha!" Bradford called.

Natasha's small stature belied her surprising strength and tenacity. She fought the FEG guard hard, never allowing him to get a suppressing move. She heard Billy shouting for her. They were getting ready to leave and if she didn't free herself quickly they would be forced to leave her, or allow the FEG team's superior firepower to pick them off. Her assailant grabbed her hair pulling hard. Natasha screamed as fiery pain raged in her scalp. She jabbed with the side of her palm at the man's throat and he gagged. She followed that with a wild swing that cracked her knuckles and broke his nose in a spray of blood. He let go of her hair and, ignoring the pain in her fist, Natasha slammed another fist into his side and finished him off with a knee to the groin. The FEG guard went fetal and Natasha rolled aside. She grabbed the fallen FAMAS assault rifle. Her fingers went to work as she came up on one knee and opened fire from inside the enemy ranks sending the FEG team diving for cover. She even hit one man and saw pink mist puff into the air.

“Go! Go!” she screamed as Fortesque turned on her, his face burning with hatred. She sprinted for the tree line as bullets followed closely at her heels. A round nicked her heel and she stumbled, recovered and dived into the forest.

Taking advantage of the cover fire, Bradford dragged Randall under the armpits into the forest leaving furrows in the damp earth. One of the FEG guards stood and aimed his rifle, but Randall sent him scurrying back with a warning shot. Then they were in the forest. Bradford heard running feet breaking through the foliage and swung around, gun raised just as Jameson came barreling into him, rifle raised.

“Damn, I almost shot you!”

“Let’s get out of here,” Jameson panted.

They helped Randall to his feet; he teetered for a moment and then took support on Jameson’s shoulder. “Where’s Natasha?” he asked, gasping with each breath.

“Saw her running into the forest. She’ll be heading for the boats.”

“And Cyril?”

Bradford shook his head. “Didn’t make it.”

They heard shouts in French; the enemy was approaching. The Klemtu natives turned and ran toward the boats with Bradford bringing up the rear.

Fortesque and his two men crashed through the forest, in hot pursuit, weapons hot. Fortesque figured they should just head straight and would come out onto the shore where they would kill everyone and he would kill Bradford himself.

But the straight path wasn't the easiest: the terrain undulated and the moss carpet was treacherously slippery. At times their path was blocked by thick stands of trees that were so tightly packed they couldn't squeeze through. But with Fortesque enraged and on the blood-hunt, there was no stopping. At points, he simply blasted his way through tangles of branches, shredding the bark to bits. Then he would slam a new magazine into his assault rifle with another profanity and continue on. The ground began to slope downward continuously and the trees grew spaced apart. They were nearing the shore.

The FEG team emerged in the sunlight and looked around for their prey.

"Over there!" Fortesque said pointing to the right at a pair of boats and a huddle of figures near the boats.

Bradford turned to see three figures rushing toward them. He saw flames spout and earth-plumes exploded nearby and *pinged* off the hull of the speedboats.

"Everybody into the boats!" he shouted. They manhandled Randall into the boat and set him down in the space in front of the central console. Randall collapsed there, exhausted, breathing hard, his face scrounged in pain.

Jameson fired a shot that sent the FEG men splitting up. Now he had to choose between three targets. Bradford aimed the other rifle as Tom, the Klemtu native whom they had left guarding the boats, revved the engines.

"Go!" Bradford ordered him. "We'll wait for Natasha and hold them off. Randall needs medical attention." He took a shot, sending

Fortesque ducking for cover. Beside him, Jameson fired. Then a hail of return fire sent them scampering for cover behind Jameson's boat. Meanwhile, Tom's boat backed into the channel and began turning. Fortesque turned his sights on the fleeing boat while shouting at his team to take care of Bradford and Jameson.

He reached into his combat webbing and pulled a grenade, popping the pin and tossed it out toward the boat. At that moment, Jameson fired at him and he took cover, the bullet narrowly missing. The grenade glinted in the sun as it sailed in an arc.

Jameson shouted, "Grenade!" The grenade began its descent just as Tom pulled the throttle close. The bow of the boat dug into the water as forward momentum dropped; the grenade splashed into the water in front of the boat. Had the boat been moving, it would have landed *smack* on target.

The grenade detonated sending a huge geyser of water into the air, rocking the boat precariously, the shockwave spinning it around. Under the spray of water, the boat's engines roared, the stern bit down and it leapt forward. Tom banked sharply and sped out of range of the attack from the shore.

"We have to get out of here!" Jameson shouted, relieved to see that the boat had escaped.

Bradford nodded grimly; they couldn't wait for Natasha. "Start 'er up! I'll try and hold them off." He swung around, resting his rifle on the gunwales of the boat, aimed carefully, tracking his target and pulled the trigger. A man went down, hit in the leg. There was a moment of calm during which Jameson leapt into the boat and keyed the ignition. The motor coughed and sputtered. He swore and tried again.

Another trail of bullets smashed into the boat, ripping into the helm, shattering the windscreen and tearing gashes in the awning over

the central console. Jameson cried out as a bullet ploughed into his bicep, spinning him against the dashboard. Bradford remained hunkered down waiting for the bullet-storm to abate. Around him, glass rained and flecks of hull splattered about. He heard the rounds punching into the hull. If the fuel tank ruptured...

Then a figure came running out of the tree line, spitting return fire.

“Natasha!”

The woman kept her trigger-finger depressed as she unleashed cover fire while running diagonally for the boat. Taking advantage of the respite in the assault, Bradford jumped into the boat, stepped into the ravaged helm and keyed the ignition. Lying in a heap, holding his injured arm, Jameson moaned.

“Hang on, buddy!” Bradford slammed a fist into the helm. “Come on!” He keyed the ignition again and it came to life. He revved the engines feeding the fuel mixture, spun the wheel. Natasha came running up to the boat and jumped cleanly aboard just as her gun ran dry. She tossed it aside and picked up a rifle.

“Go!” she said gruffly.

“Watch out for grenades,” Bradford warned as the boat reversed out into the deeper section of the channel. Natasha pulled a shot but now that their return fire was sporadic, Fortesque and his men began advancing again. Bradford engaged forward thrust and the starboard side of the boat dug deep into the channel — so deep that the water almost swamped over the gunwales. Then the boat righted herself and sped away.

Fortesque was purple in the face, the veins on his neck stood out. The scar on this forehead seemed to pulse with life. He paced up-

and-down the shore like an animal, swearing. His men kept their distance; one of them limping from a flesh wound, the other gingerly touched his broken nose. Fortesque suddenly lunged at the man with the broken nose and punched him hard in the gut venting his frustration. The man crumpled, groaning. Fortesque was breathing hard. "A woman did this to you!" he screamed. His voice carried across the channel.

CHAPTER 21

Over the Indian Ocean

The news of the FEG incident in British Columbia was played across the global news networks in detail with great fervour. In an era when breaking-news *had* to be frequent enough for news networks, bloggers and hordes of spin doctors and opinion-makers to stay in business, the alleged toxic pollution of the Great Bear Rainforest because of FEG's hitherto eco-friendly patented B-Energy Cells was lapped up eagerly.

Proponents of the technology and those who had vested interests in FEG came out in various levels of guarded support which gave them room to wiggle back across the blurred line between support and condemnation should the investigations go negative.

The camp of the opponents consisted of environmentalists and, traditional fuel companies who stood to lose financially should the B-Energy Cell be realized as a viable option to traditional sources of power.

There was a separate spinoff which hinted at the possibility that the opposing parties were backed by the Middle East and China.

Twelve hours later FEG released an official statement, apologized for the 'minor' accident, assured everyone that an investigation was underway, and then made the world aware of how quickly and efficiently they had responded to the situation to ensure that damage to the rain forest was negligible. As a further show of commitment and corporate responsibility, FEG pledged to facilitate

and fund a joint task force with environmentalists and First Nation People to monitor any deterioration of the sensitive ecosystem, and fund any corrective measures that were needed because of the accident. The official statement ended with the beautiful French FEG spokeswoman looking sexily into the cameras and categorically restating FEG's confidence in the safety and potential of the energy technology.

Then news broke of the alleged murder of two First Nation children at the hands of the FEG clean-up and extraction team, and of a gun battle with a Klemtu search party. The Internet went into a tizzy with conspiracy theories popping up by the dozen. FEG refrained from commenting as the company worked feverishly with Canadian authorities and the representatives of the First Nation Tribes. By next morning FEG's CEO, Henri Laurent asked the news channels to refrain from any further presumptions until the French and Canadian authorities arrived at a conclusion from their investigations into this new set of incredible allegations that, he was sure, were fabricated to besmirch FEG.

The truth would prevail, he promised loudly and earnestly enough for everyone to believe him.

Officials and investigators worked the scene of the C160 accident alongside an FEG supervisory team that had arrived from France. Meanwhile, the channels of the Great Bear Rainforest teemed with protestors who zipped up and down in their boats shouting slogans and swearing at the investigators. In pockets around the world, people protested outside embassies and debated online and in the newspapers and television.

Sitting in a padded armchair in his private jet, returning from a meeting in Mumbai City, the man's face was thrown into alternate light and dark by the television mounted across from him. He scoffed as he saw the latest images from outside the French embassy in Canada and shook his head as CNN re-ran amateur video from one of the Green Peace boats in the channel off Princess Royal Island.

That boat was polluting the waters more, he thought, as it mindlessly weaved between other boats, blasted its horn and then returned for another run. And what was the point of the images? They showed nothing but a backdrop of pristine forested slopes.

There's too much at stake, he thought. The investigation would be shrewdly dragged out and debated over and over until it was a hopeless muddle to the public, who would, in sheer frustration of repeated inconclusive news, lose interest and move on. In fact, he wouldn't be surprised if FEG fabricated a distraction elsewhere in the world to divert people's attention.

It had been done before. And worked.

This was a world of many parallels; there were shadowy figures and organizations at work that controlled and influenced the thoughts, opinions and actions of the public more than anybody was willing to admit.

CNN took a commercial break and when they returned, he was surprised to see a view over Vatican City. St. Peter's Square. The bold ticker running across the bottom announced: "NEW POPE TO BE ELECTED". Off-screen, the anchorwoman said that the Holy Father's health had deteriorated further and though Roman Catholics the world over were praying for his recovery, doctors had given him a few days. Already, crowds were gathering in St. Peter's

Square, holding candles under an overcast sky. It was so gloomy, it looked as if the heavens were mourning.

He leaned forward as the anchorwoman raced through some of the more noteworthy reforms the last pope had brought about in the Church: his landmark visits to the Middle East and his policies to reinvigorate the European Church and endear the institution to the gay and lesbian community. She then switched to the subtle preparations that were underway to elect a new pope and speculated on the potential candidates. As her image dissolved off-screen, it was replaced by an image of an older, hawk-faced wiry man with keen, piercing eyes filled the screen. The man smiled intelligently into the camera, his red skull cap sitting at an angle on his balding head above wisps of grey hair. The name beneath the picture read, '*Cardinal Luigi Vincente*'.

The man watching the news did not hear what the anchorwoman said about the good work done by Cardinal Vincente for the Church and rehabilitation of war-displaced people in the Middle East. His heart beat faster and he could only hear the blood rushing in his ears as his vision tunnelled. With total disregard to whatever good the pope-elect may have done in the world over the last decade, the man watching the news only felt an immense rage build up inside him. Nothing could cleanse the blood on Vincente's hands.

Even when Vincente's picture was replaced by the next candidate, he tuned out the commentary and continued to stare intently at the television screen. After a few more sound bytes, the images on CNN returned to the crowds in St. Peter's Square and the dark skies.

Not mourning, he thought... an ill omen.

He picked up a handset from the armrest of his chair and pushed a button that dialled a pre-programmed number. The line was encrypted and so there was a slight delay before he heard a ring.

The line clicked and a gravelly voice said, "Yes."

"It is time," he replied simply.

"I will send the package immediately," the voice replied.

"Good." The man disconnected and sat back with a sigh.

After all these years, all his planning, the time was right. And he could feel the excitement and nervous energy bubbling in his veins.

CHAPTER 22

FEG headquarters, France

The Future Energy Group headquarters in France was landmarked by a gigantic wireframe globe that rotated on wind energy around a luminous electric bolt. Beneath the globe, two-foot high letters proclaimed: *Planet Earth, powered by Future Energy Group.*

The SUV that had transported Luc Fortesque from Charles de Gaulle Airport was waved through the gates without a security check. It raced down a broad driveway, with manicured lawns folding away on either side. The lawns were not all-natural: if one paid careful attention, the landscapers tended to only certain sections of the green expanse. The other sections were a new prototype of artificial grass developed by FEG. Each blade of artificial grass was a nano-factory that harnessed sunlight and wind energy and kinetic energy from falling rain to generate electricity. Beneath the lawn, a complex system supplied electricity to FEG headquarters. Off to one side of the lawns just beyond the woods, mist rose above the trees from an artificial waterfall. Another of FEG's prototypes, the perpetual self-sustaining hydro-electric system could meet the power needs of a cluster of French households for a year.

Up ahead were the solar-panelled walls of the FEG building. Like the artificial grass, these solar panels also utilized nanotechnology to harness wind and rain energy. The SUV rounded an ornate fountain and slipped onto a tiled pathway that led to the façade of the building.

Fortesque stepped into the heavy silence of the lobby area. The receptionist smiled at him, her cheeks turning a shade of red as she recalled their passionate lovemaking a week ago. He winked at her and made for the elevator bank. He would probably need her again, he thought, to help him get over the unpleasantness of the botched operation in British Columbia.

The executive level at FEG was bustling with activity. There were people walking everywhere, phones ringing continuously, and groups of people talking loudly. Henri Laurent, CEO of Future Energy Group had a strict policy about maintaining phones on silent mode during office hours but the policy was forfeit while the company dealt with the fallout from the incident in British Columbia. A few people glanced at Fortesque as he walked past but then turned quickly back to their work. While they knew he had Laurent's ear, they didn't know exactly what Fortesque did for FEG. They obviously also knew he was responsible for whatever had happened in BC.

Fortesque passed the large glass-walled 'war' room. There were several people inside sitting across a large mahogany table. A sixty-inch flat panel screen that was flush against one wall of the room was alive with a video conference with the Minister of Natural Resources from Canada. At times, one half or quarter of the screen would display information that was being shared by both parties. Fortesque caught sight of Henri Laurent staring at him, lines of worry and anxiety etched across his aged face. But behind that, Fortesque could sense the anger waiting to be unleashed.

A moment later, a clear voice said behind him, "About time, Luc. Come on." Fortesque turned to look at Laurent's right-hand man:

Christian Black. Black looked as ancient as a medieval knight with his flowing white hair and a heavy, groomed French-beard to match. His watery green eyes shimmered. Fortesque shivered involuntarily as those eyes locked onto his. While he could snap Christian Black's back in two without much effort, Fortesque had respect for the influence and power that he wielded. Christian Black, though American, was Fortesque's idol, a man who could get almost anything done with just a word.

Fortesque followed the older man into his office. The door closed behind them and Black went over to a mini-bar. He didn't offer Fortesque a drink. The meaning was clear: there would be no praises today. Black poured the amber liquid into a glass and then made his way over to his desk. He sat down with a sigh and motioned for Fortesque to be seated.

"So," Black said, making a steeple with his fingers, "From the beginning." Fortesque took a breath, but Black held up a hand that trembled slightly with age. "If we have to salvage this mess, it's important that you come clean."

Fortesque nodded, "The truth."

"Good. Henri will join us soon." Black was one of the few who addressed Laurent by his first name. "Let's begin." Black reached for a slender audio recorder on his desk and pushed *record*.

One and a half hour later, the conversation was at an end. It had been a long-drawn process, with Black cross-questioning Fortesque, validating what he said, asking for more details and descriptions, positions of the Klemtu party and the FEG personnel at the crash site, the exact words exchanged at the standoff. He asked Fortesque to describe the firefights as best as he could and closed his eyes, imagining the scene of the action.

Finally, Black sat back in his armchair and sipped his whiskey. "So, you were delayed on the site because Eduard needed to be sure?"

"Yes."

"And, the Klemtu opened fire first."

"Yes."

Black leaned forward, his eyes hardening. "But then there's the war you unleashed on them at the shore. Grenades! Blasting away at their boats!"

Fortesque shrunk away from his gaze. Black nodded. To his mind there were three issues that could turn against FEG: first, the lack of evidence that the Klemtu boys had returned to their boat; second, Fortesque's rash chase of the Klemtu natives down to the firefight at the shore. And last but not least, the grenade attack. He sighed away a rising bout of frustration. That had always been Fortesque's problem: ego and vengeful thinking. The first issue could be easily twisted by FEG's lawyers and well-placed bribes could handle the second problem. But it was the third problem that would be hardest to tackle because they didn't have possession of the boats. He almost sarcastically asked Fortesque why he hadn't called in the EC725's and blasted the boats out of the water with an aerial attack. No matter how he thought it up, someone's head needed to roll to prevent further damage to FEG. But would Henri be willing to sacrifice Fortesque? Fortesque knew too much of their operations; of their security systems. Yet, he was brutally effective, too. He'd have to work it out. That's what he was paid for... among other things.

His thoughts were interrupted when the door to his office swung open and Henri barged in followed closely by his son, Charles. Fortesque jumped to his feet; Black remained seated.

"Sit!" Henri barked at Fortesque. Then his tone changed to one of politeness as he addressed Black. "Well?" He slipped into the empty chair beside Fortesque. His tie hung loosely around his neck and he was exhausted from the hours of video conference calls and negotiations with the authorities. Even so, he listened intently as Black put forth a crisp summary of Fortesque's narrative and rounded it up with his assessment. A moment of silence hung in the room and then Henri asked. "Whose head should roll?"

Black replied, "I need to figure that out. I also recommend that Fortesque be given some time off."

Fortesque snapped to attention, but Black's expression was stone.

Henri immediately complied. "I agree. Effective immediately!"

Fortesque opened his mouth to protest, but Henri put up a hand silencing him. "It's better than my earlier suggestion to Christian." But he didn't elaborate further. Instead, he said, "You will leave for Switzerland."

Where you will be under surveillance, Fortesque completed, balling his fists.

"What about the reporter who's running the story on the Klemtu boys?" Henri asked.

Christian said, "Already on it. We've spoken to her newspaper – and worked out an arrangement with them. The story will be squashed."

"Good. Let me know when it is done."

"Of course," Christian replied.

"And the pilot? He obviously talked to the Klemtu didn't he?" He looked at Fortesque. "At least one thing went right with executing the pilot."

"He was caught in the crossfire," Fortesque said.

Both men cast doubtful looks upon him.

Christian said, "We can spin that around with a little concocted evidence. Disgruntled employee, wanted to create problems for FEG."

Henri looked at his watch. "I have a call with the Canadian Prime Minister followed by dinner with our President. Christian, I would like you to accompany me to dinner."

"Yes."

Henri looked at his son who had been standing silently, forgotten in a corner of the office. "Charles, you will ensure that Fortesque is on a plane to Switzerland and remains there. Understood?"

Charles didn't look too pleased to be a babysitter but nodded.

Henri stormed out of the room. Before he left, Fortesque said to Christian, "What was the earlier suggestion about me?"

Christian drained his whiskey and simply said, "Do you know the extent of damage because of your actions?"

"They opened fire first; it all quickly went to hell after that."

"You're a trained professional, goddammit. You didn't have to start a war!" Christian shook his head. "You will need to rework yourself into his graces. Now, please leave. There is much to be done. Stay out of trouble."

As they walked down the carpeted corridor past the situation room where Henri was dialling into his video call, Charles said, "Messed up, isn't it?"

Fortesque eyed the young man, unsure what to say. It was quite well known that Henri did not see much in his son – something that irked Charles beyond measure. Putting Fortesque under his son's

vigilance was almost to keep the boy out of the father's hair... a menial task, indicative of where the boy stood in the father's eyes.

"To be relegated to the fringes," Charles elaborated.

Fortesque nodded. What was the harm in agreeing to the obvious?

"But this finds us both in the unique position of having to work together into *grace*." He emphasized the last word with heavy contempt.

"What do you mean?" Fortesque questioned in a low voice.

"I will show you," Charles said leading him into a smaller office.

CHAPTER 23

Fortesque had never needed to be in Charles Fortesque's office and found it cramped and cluttered. Charles locked the door and quickly stepped to his desk. As he tapped at his computer screen, he dialled the travel desk on his phone and asked that one of the FEG jets be readied to take them to Switzerland. That done, he motioned that Fortesque take a seat. Charles pushed a button on his desk and the wood panelling in the wall slid back to reveal his own private bar. Charles poured out two glasses and handed one to Fortesque.

"This is good, calming," he said proffering the drink. "Now let me explain." He shuffled some papers on his desk, found what he was looking for and kept it aside. He leaned forward. "Have you heard of the ghost ship, Ourang Medan?"

Fortesque shook his head, no.

"She was allegedly lost in the Malacca Straits in 1947. All records of her existence were erased and her disappearance is rife with rumours ranging from aliens to a calamity, caused by leaking toxic materials she was transporting from a secret Japanese installation." He tapped a file folder on his desk. "It's all in here. You can read on the flight over to Switzerland."

"What does this have to do with me?"

"Us," Charles corrected. He pushed the folder toward Fortesque. "My father has long suspected that the ship was hijacked and sabotaged in an elaborate operation carried out by the Chinese. He suspects a long-time rival was behind the operation: Qin Zhou."

"Qin Zhou is a weapons manufacturer in China," Fortesque said. "How is he a rival to FEG?"

"After the devastation laid upon Hiroshima and Nagasaki, there was a race toward nuclear armament and nuclear energy — technology that would dictate the balance of power in the future. The French, Soviets, Chinese, Japanese, and Germans were all in the race. Everyone involved in the Manhattan Project or at Los Alamos was a potential target. While Christian Black successfully managed to bring over an asset from the Manhattan Project, we failed to catch up on the weapons technology." He paused to sip his drink before continuing. "The disappearance of the Ourang Medan has always been a thorn in my father's side. He had learned from intelligence reports that the ship *was* carrying weapons technology. But Qin Zhou beat him to it. Anyone who can produce the secret of the Ourang Medan can redeem himself in my father's eyes."

"If your father has been trying for so many years to find out, what makes you think we can be successful?"

"Once I realized how important the Ourang Medan technology was to my father, I began my own investigation. While my father has grown more and more involved and occupied in his B-energy projects, I have devoted time and resources to finding out what happened to the Ourang Medan and its cargo. A few days ago, one of my informants struck pay dirt." The two men looked at each other. Fortesque guessed what was coming next. Charles said, "I want you to help me acquire the technology that was on the Ourang Medan."

"If your father already suspects Qin Zhou, an efficient approach would be to turn someone on the inside."

Charles gave him a look that said, *you think we didn't try?* "Two of our informants died in *accidents*. This new information is the closest we can ever get. My informant has the location of Qin Zhou's facility, where the technology was taken."

"What if this is all a bust?"

"Then we're back at square one. You won't be the worse for it; you'll just have to find another way to work yourself back into my father's grace."

"Okay," Fortesque conceded. "When do we start?"

Charles said. "My informant will only divulge this information in a face-to-face meet and exchange of money. That is why this *situation* is so opportune. I have already arranged a meeting in Switzerland."

"I see," Fortesque said. "There is a matter of money."

"I will cover your expenses," Charles said dismissively. His phone buzzed and he answered, listened for a moment and then hung up.

"Our flight is ready. Come, we too have much to do and little time."

CHAPTER 24

In the 1970s, a chemist, James Lovelock hypothesized that all organic and inorganic constituents of a planet interact to produce an optimum life-sustaining condition. His Gaia theory promulgated a philosophy which involves a positive *interference* or *intervention* to rectify an undesired imbalance in this complex interaction. Several environment conservation non-profits derive their manifesto from the Gaia philosophy. Gaia even integrates with religion, like Wicca. Otherwise known as witchcraft.

Contrary to contemporary impressions and beliefs, witchcraft literally means 'craft of the wise'. Witches were healers with a deep knowledge of herbal medicine, physiology and psychology. They worship nature and invoke *magick* to manipulate omnipresent positive energy. Wiccans believe in a female deity signifying the creative force in nature, and her male consort, a Horned Lord, representing the animal facet of nature. The Horned Lord predates Satanism. The Wiccan creed '*And it harms no one; do what ye will*' is bastardized by Satanists to, 'Do what ye will.'

Wiccans believe they are an integral part of nature. They foster a reciprocal relation with nature. This paganism has set them at odds with monotheistic religions, which focus on the creator rather than the creation.

Through history, there are religious, political, cultural and social forces responsible for routing paganism — even a fledgling medical industry of male physicians who saw it advantageous to brand witches as evil. However, recent years have seen a resurgence in Wiccan practices. Today, Wicca coexists with other faiths and

sciences, driven by the need to understand life and nature and the mysteries of the universe.

In the light of the full moon, the coven formed a loose circle in the clearing, facing a central stone altar. The thirteen witches wore black robes fastened at the waists with cords. On the altar reposed idols of the Goddess and the God. A low mist clung to the earth and reflected the silvery moonlight making it hard to discern the ritual.

The coven bowed their hooded heads and started to chant. The witches swayed to phrases, invoking the Guardians – Earth, Air, Water, Fire and the Spirit – consecrating the circle. The chant subsided to a low moan. The High Priestess and the Priest stepped to the altar, their lips moving in prayer. As the chant resumed, rising to a crescendo, the witches disrobed, their nakedness censored by the mist.

Sebastian Laporte's eyes gleamed as he approached the gyrating body of his High Priestess. The woman's eyes were closed, her mouth open, her long raven-black hair cascading.

As his fingers caressed her, he was no longer Sebastian Laporte. He was Sebastian Gardner, descendant of Gerald Gardner, who, in 1951, after the repeal of the British anti-Witchcraft law, was the first self-proclaimed witch.

The Priestess spread her hands. There was a *poof!* and a cloud of pale green smoke filled the circle. A chalice containing an intoxicating concoction was passed around. As its effects took hold, the witches touched the altar and trembled. The smoke rose in ghostly tendrils as the Priestess and Priest became one.

Sebastian Laporte's family had been burned at the stake for their Wiccan practices. Only a child at the time, Laporte was forced to watch in horror as their executers condemned them, passed judgment and kindled the pyre. He still heard their screams of agony and pleas for mercy in his nightmares. Also, he remembered the glint of a crucifix, around the neck of the leader of the murderers.

Lost, angry and easily impressionable, he fell in with radical Gaian philosophy, obsessed with avenging the cruelties subjected upon witches through the ages. His hatred for the institution represented by the crucifix festered. When the elders of the Gaians condemned his extremism, he left and formed his own rogue coven.

To traditional covens, his interpretation of the Great Rite, as it unfolded in the forest, was blasphemy.

When the chants died, Sebastian Laporte was panting from his exertions. There was silence. Nothing stirred in the forest for minutes. The mist dissolved to reveal that the coven was clothed again.

The High Priestess proclaimed, "A spell of protection has been cast on us! We will make the enemies of the Mother Goddess pay for their disrespect and plunder."

CHAPTER 25

They were gathered in Bradford's house in counsel.

Bradford's expression was pained as he pleaded with his friend. "Morrel, you must calm down. This is how it works." Their village was overrun with government investigators, especially near the pier where the two battered boats were moored. "Some of them will stonewall; some will really investigate. But we will work it out."

Jameson bunched his shoulders and leaned closer, his alcohol-laced breath in Bradford's face. "The bastards who killed our boys will go free!"

"He's right," Akira Chenoke interjected, from where she sat, primly, one leg crossed over the other.

Bradford glared at the petite news reporter. "Please keep out of this, Ms Chenoke."

Akira seethed, "They pulled my story because it raised uncomfortable questions. I agree with Mr Jameson: Henri Laurent has already turned the investigation in his favour."

Bradford ignored her. "Listen, Morrel, I lost my son, too. Look at me when I'm talking to you." The two men regarded each other. "I want them as bad as you, but we can't go half-cocked out there on our own." He snapped his fingers. "All I'm asking for is a few days while I work things out."

Jameson would hear none of it. "A few days!" He stormed out of the house, angled toward the pier, cursed when he saw the officials there, turned and stormed off the other way. He paced one end of the village, fumbling in his pockets for a cigarette. He had raised one to his lips when a voice behind him startled him. He dropped the cigarette.

"You're right: you cannot wait for a few days to see if Mr Bradford's plan amounts to anything."

Akira's breath misted the air. Seeing her standing there, with her hands in her jacket pockets, Jameson realized that she was beautiful. *What the hell, does that matter?*

"What do you want?" he muttered as he retrieved the cigarette, chewed on it. He clicked his lighter open and close. *Click-click, click-click...*

She drew nearer, placed a hand on his, calming his tic. He was tired; struggled to focus on something other than her perfume. The reporter looked around, ensuring they were alone. Then she looked deep into his eyes. "I want my story and you want to see them burn."

CHAPTER 26

Fribourg, Switzerland

The scenic town of Fribourg is situated on the Sarine River. Henri Laurent's vacation home was nestled among the densely packed houses in the Old City on a rocky escarpment that overlooked a valley. Nearby, the gothic spires of the Cathedral of St. Nicholas reached for the sky.

Fortesque stared at the two-storied house topped off with brown roof tiles as a caretaker hurried servants to collect their luggage from the limousine. The white BMW 7 Series limousine they had arrived in barely fit in the narrow street.

Not good if they had to make a quick getaway.

Oblivious to Fortesque's concerns, Charles Laurent said, "We have a lunch appointment with our informant and then we must make plans."

The 7 Series drove away.

"Where will the car park?" Fortesque asked. He had his heart set on a small Peugeot parked nearby if he had to make a hasty exit off the escarpment.

"There's parking space nearby. One call and the car will be back."

"How long will it take to return?"

"Never checked," Charles said with a shrug.

Fortesque made his irritation apparent. "Start believing we are playing a dangerous game." He brushed past Laurent into the house.

His room faced away from the road, with a view across the valley. Below, the river flowed, the waters green. His wristwatch had a dual time zone feature. He tapped the touch screen, setting one of the displays to local time. He unzipped his carry bag, pulled out a black case and set it on the bedside table. The case was designed to fool airport security. Inside, the parts of a disassembled Glock nestled in a series of cut-outs. His movements were precise, and in twenty seconds he had the gun assembled, loaded with a full magazine. He looked through the barrel sights, tested the balance. Satisfied, he put the gun on the table, knocked off his shoes and sank into the soft bed with a sigh.

The BMW rumbled over the Pont de Milieu across the Sarine. The road forked and the car turned left, stopping eventually, outside the Restaurant du Schlid. They stepped under the coat of arms and into the homely restaurant. There was a table laid for three near the windows with a view across to the Church and Headquarters of the Knights of St. John Hospitaller.

A portly man with Oriental features occupied the table, savoring a glass of wine. Laurent and Fortesque joined the man at the table. The man had a pencil-thin moustache and a razor-sharp parting split his shiny hair down the middle.

"Monsieur Laurent," he said in greeting. His voice was thin.

Laurent made introductions. "Xu Hua, Luc Fortesque, my associate." Xu Hua smiled insincerely at Fortesque.

The proprietor of the restaurant appeared. He made perfunctory talk with Charles. When he inquired about Henri Laurent, Charles' countenance darkened. He promised the proprietor a handsome tip to not mention the meeting to his father. The proprietor bowed obsequiously. Charles asked for one last indulgence. The proprietor saw to this himself. He turned the sign in the front door to '*Fermé*'

They waited until wine was served and their lunch orders were taken. Then Charles cut right to the point, "Tell us."

Xu Hua raised an eyebrow and gave them a smug look. Charles reached into his jacket, extracted a brown envelope and pushed it across to Hua. He peeked at the wad of Euros inside, slipped it into his jacket. He sipped at his wine, dabbed at his lips with a napkin. "I located the daughter of the captain of the boat that hijacked the Ourang Medan," he revealed. "Her father's expertise on the Japanese patrol routes around China made him invaluable to the hijackers as they navigated the Malacca Straits toward the mainland. A few days before his boat reached safe waters, he learnt that the hijackers intended to eliminate his crew. He and a few others planned their escape and one night, under cover of the darkness near the drop-off point, they commandeered a lifeboat and made their getaway. When they reached the mainland, the escapees parted ways. The captain made a brave decision to return to the drop-off point and follow the hijacker's caravan."

"What was the cargo?" Fortesque asked.

"An engineered bacterium, nicknamed *Apocalypse*."

CHAPTER 27

"Apocalypse?" Charles repeated. "Then, this had nothing to do with nuclear weapons?"

"No. This is far worse," Hua said arranging his wineglass on the table. He eyed them. Then elaborated, "Before Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Japanese military ran an enviable biowarfare program. With Japan's surrender, the program was halted... or, so it was thought. Military commanders plotted to smuggle the bacterium to a secret facility in the Indian ocean." He paused. "The name, *Apocalypse* is telling. As in *zombie apocalypse*."

Fortesque scoffed.

Hua ignored him. "Bovine spongiform encephalopathy, commonly known as zombie deer disease. Typical symptoms are drooling, stumbling, emaciation and aggressiveness. It is widely believed that BSE is caused by prions and, like prion diseases, is incurable. Spongiform encephalopathies have jumped from animals to humans before; there have been warnings to prepare for BSE to make the jump. "Exacerbate the symptoms, infect humans and you have..." He raised an eyebrow.

"A zombie apocalypse," Charles whispered, imagining the symptoms in humans.

"*Apocalypse* is BSE in humans."

"BSE is a prion disease," Fortesque pointed out, "you said *Apocalypse* is bacterial."

"Some years ago, an American biologist produced evidence suggesting BSE is caused by spiroplasma bacteria and prions are only evidence of infection. His claims are hotly disputed." A pause. "Apocalypse substantiates his theory. The Japanese figured it out

long before. Had it come to fruition,” — Hua shook his head —
“America might be a zombie wasteland.”

They were served their lunch and breathed in the aroma. Hua helped himself, filling his plate, patting his girth in anticipation. Fortesque and Laurent had lost their appetite.

“The captain followed the caravan into China, east along the Yangtze and then into the northern mountain ranges. His daughter found hand-drawn maps after he passed. She presented me with a copy of the map.” He paused, reached into his jacket and withdrew a manila envelope and taunted Charles. “Here, I will demand an *extra*. A man of your means shouldn’t find it too expensive. Considering...”

“Considering what?”

“The time and finances your family has poured into finding the Ourang Medan in the last six decades.”

“How much do you want for it?”

They returned to the Old City by a circuitous route. Charles and Fortesque studied the map. Laurent made travel arrangements. When the BMW pulled up, Fortesque said, “I’m going for a walk to the cathedral.”

“Didn’t think you were religious.”

“I’m not.” Fortesque tapped the roof the limousine. “See you later.”

Laurent shrugged. He returned his attention to his phone. A moment later he called at Fortesque’s departing figure. “Arrangements are made: we leave for Dubai tomorrow.” Fortesque raised a hand in acknowledgement.

Fortesque cut through a narrow alley and emerged across the cathedral. He paused for a moment taking in the imposing building, craning his neck, shielding his eyes to look up at the spires that topped the belfry...

And out of the corner of his eye, he grimly noted the man who had been tailing him.

CHAPTER 28

It was the Peugeot Fortesque had contemplated stealing earlier. He had registered it following them from Restaurant du Schlid. The 'stroll to the cathedral' was his attempt to determine its occupants' intentions. One of the men had followed him on foot, while the other remained in the car for a getaway or chase. Their behavior did not sit well with Fortesque.

He made for the façade of the cathedral.

In another life, Fortesque might have majored in art and history. His dreams were destroyed over a violent incident of rivalry over a girl. In a vindictive fit, the influential family of the other student had Fortesque expelled and blacklisted in other colleges. Indignant and seeking revenge against the student's father, who was a prolific art collector, Fortesque began working the art black-market. He got involved with dealers who brokered antiquities to fund insurgency in south-east Asia and Africa. It was there that Fortesque discovered he had a natural talent with weapons. His dealings caught the eye of a private military contractor (PMC), who saw benefits to having Fortesque in his outfit. This was especially because the PMC was deploying to Iraq and Afghanistan — a treasure trove of ancient history. *How life turned out!* The unit worked the opium routes and smuggled historic artefacts until the odds turned against them. On one such theft in Iraq, Fortesque barely escaped with his life. While he was recovering in an Iraqi village Christian Black approached him, offered him a clean record and an obscene salary to take care of FEG's security. Fortesque had accepted readily.

Today, as much as he desired, he could not pause to appreciate the grand ornamentation of the façade. He had a fleeting glimpse of the

scarlet-robed statue of St. Nicolas flanked by reliefs of the Last Judgment and The Annunciation in the archway. He went through the oak doors, stepping quickly into the nave and pushed past a dwindling stream of tourists. Evening sunlight streamed through the stained-glass windows. As he passed beneath the balustrade that housed the cathedral's grand pipe organ, he glanced over his shoulder to see his tail entering the building. Fortesque hurried past darker chapels ensconced between the buttresses on either side of the nave. He was abreast of the baptism fonts when a tour guide accosted him.

"The cathedral is closed to tourists now."

Fortesque snarled, "I must light a candle."

The guide retreated from the rude Frenchman. "Hurry!"

Turning short of the choir beneath a crucifix, Fortesque came upon the altar that was partially obscured by restoration scaffolding. Save for a praying elderly woman, this part of the cathedral was empty. Fortesque slipped into the shadows to wait.

The woman was so absorbed in prayer she didn't hear the scuffle as Fortesque ambushed the man from the Peugeot. As they fought, they fell against the pews. The woman turned at the commotion, irritated at being interrupted from her communiqué with God. Her eyes widened when she witnessed the men locked in combat. There was a *BANG!* It reverberated in the cathedral. The woman started. Then she screamed at the top of her lungs.

The man who had followed Fortesque clung to his shirt as he slid to the floor. Fortesque became aware of a gun in his hand. It was his assailant's weapon. The man had tried to bring it to bear, and, in the struggle, it had gone off, killing its owner. Fortesque looked up. Alerted by the woman's screams, the tour guide and some other

people had come running. They beheld the scene in shocked silence. Some had phones in their hands. *If they shoot video...*

Covering his face with one arm, Fortesque brandished his weapon and they parted before him, diving amid the pews, hiding behind the Easter candle holder, while most ran for the exit. Fortesque ran down the aisle, eventually blending with the panicked tourists.

The cathedral's heavy masonry masked the sound but a to a trained ear, it was apparent a shot had been fired. The man in the Peugeot sat up in alarm. Then a knot of people streamed from the cathedral. He went to call his accomplice when he spied Fortesque stumbling out, amid the stampede.

CHAPTER 29

Fortesque turned and ran the other way. The man in the Citroen hesitated for a moment and then leapt out of the car. He chased after Fortesque who had vanished in another alleyway behind the cathedral. Palming his gun, Citroen-Man cautiously approached the edge of the escarpment on which the Old City rested, sticking to the walls of the State Chancery and stepped out of the alleyway.

Fortesque had been lying in wait around the corner and barreled into him. They went down in a tangle of hands and legs.

Fortesque threw a roundhouse punch that sent the other man flailing over the edge. In desperation, he grabbed Fortesque's jacket and with a cry both men rolled down the hillside, banging against the dense foliage... toward a straight drop to the valley floor and the Sarine River. Down and down they went, with Fortesque cursing his second bout with branches, roots and leaves.

They slammed into a large tree and were knocked free of each other, tumbling independently down a steeper inclination. Both tried to control their slide, reaching out to grab for handholds or digging their shoes into the earth. Citroen-Man recovered first, stumbled to his feet and translated his momentum into an awkward unbalanced run after Fortesque who was still tumbling wildly.

As the trees and sky and earth spun in circles, Fortesque was vaguely aware that his pursuer was coming after him. He put out his palms, grazing them badly but slowing his slide, enough to buck his knees and get into a half-crouch. He was about to turn around when he heard a cry behind him, a heavy weight slammed into his back and an arm encircled his neck while a palm clamped around his jaw.

He felt his head being turned to the side... in an attempt to snap his neck.

The two men had come to a halt at the edge of the escarpment with Fortesque on his knees struggling to free himself of the stranglehold. He tried to tear the man's arms away as darkness began to cloud his vision.

A bird called overhead.

What a way to die, he thought, in beautiful Fribourg, on a hillside amid swaying trees with a bird singing. He heard police sirens.

Fortesque reached inside his torn and ripped jacket and fumbled for his gun, but he had lost it in the fall. He should have just shot the man in the alleyway when he had the chance. His fingers closed around the spare magazine.

He could feel the man's hot breath on his left ear, panting from the exertion. Fortesque palmed the magazine and swung upward with all his might, smashing the open end of the magazine into his attacker's face, driving it into his eye. There was a cry of pain and the choke-hold let up. Sucking in a lungful of air, Fortesque slammed his elbow into the man's gut and swung around with a high kick to the man's throat. His assailant staggered, still clutching his eye, and swayed unsteadily.

No questions this time. These guys were out to kill him. Period.

Fortesque grabbed him by his shirt and swung him around... off the escarpment. The man's damaged larynx could emit no scream as he plunged into the Sarine River.

"What the hell!" Charles Laurent exclaimed as he beheld Fortesque standing in the doorway, dirt smeared all over his face, his clothes

in tatters, his nose caked in blood, and a multitude of cuts and bruises on his forearms. Fortesque had spent the better part of the evening evading the police, hiding until nightfall, before making his way back to the house.

"Your *papa* tried to kill me."

"How did you get in?"

"The locks on your windows are crap."

"Are you going to kill me?" Laurent asked looking for a weapon if Fortesque said 'yes'.

"Aside from the fact that even in my weakened state I could snap you in two," Fortesque said, "the answer is 'no'."

He ambled over to the mini bar in the room and poured himself a straight whiskey and downed it in one swallow gritting his teeth as the liquid burned his throat. "Ahhh, that's better."

"You can have it all after you tell me what happened. And close the door; I don't want the hired help seeing you like this."

Fortesque shut the door and recounted what happened concisely.

"So, you weren't able to question either of them?"

"Didn't give me a chance." He took another swig of whiskey directly from the bottle and wiped his lips with the back of his hand.

"Yet you think my father is behind this."

"He wanted me dead ever since British Columbia." He pointed at Laurent. "I'm going after him. If you try to stop me, I will kill you."

"No, I won't stop you. I'm only going to ask you to defer until we finish the job in China." Laurent put up a hand. "Hear me out. Father won't have a clue where we've gone to. All he'll think is that his contract killers failed and you've disappeared, probably taken me hostage. They'll wait for you to make your move. Meantime we move under the radar, get into China, find Zhou's facility, steal

Apocalypse and then you and I can slap him in the face before you kill him.”

Fortesque’s eyes narrowed. “Hmmm, bet you didn’t spend money on Father’s Day cards, huh.”

“Not after I crossed fifteen.”

CHAPTER 30

He was waiting for the call from his operative in Fribourg. He had paid a king's ransom to attain the level of communication and intelligence sophistication, and operational secrecy that his quest demanded. His Command Center had been designed and constructed by a contracted team who under draconian non-disclosure agreements had been disallowed from leaving the premises of his mansion until the work was complete and all the systems tested and verified as functional. No one heard from them ever after; the bus transporting them to the city met with an accident that claimed all lives. He had graciously compensated their families and set up a fund for their children. That was enough, he thought. There would be no ghosts to haunt this room; it would be the room from where he haunted the lives of those who had brought his family to ruin. It would be the room from where he plotted and executed their destruction.

Already, the wheels were in motion and he felt excited. He glanced at the photographs of the men and women he intended to destroy. In high-resolution black-and-white, they were unaware that their pictures had been taken. They appeared as everyday people involved in everyday activities.

But he knew better: Each of them belonged to a cabal that exerted tremendous influence over the world. Over the centuries their families had carefully and insidiously inserted themselves into the powerhouses of world economics and politics and even had governments eating out of their hands.

The Vesuvius Group.

Yes, he thought, for what he was about to do, the lives of a few contractors were well worth the blanket of anonymity. There was a beeping sound and he tapped at the touch screen recessed into his desk. A quick trace was performed on the call, confirming that the line was secure and that the call was originating from his operative's mobile phone. He tapped again and opened the audio channels.

"You're late, Wei."

"Something happened here in Fribourg," the man known as Xu Hua to Charles Laurent and Luc Fortesque, replied. "There was a shootout at the St. Nicolas Cathedral. Two unidentified men are dead."

"How does that concern you or me?"

"I believe they were sent to kill the man who accompanied Charles Laurent to the rendezvous."

"Charles Laurent brought someone to the meeting?"

"Luc Fortesque."

"Interesting. Laurent's chief security officer for special projects," the man murmured as he swiped his fingers across the touch screen, calling up a dossier on Luc Fortesque on one of the screens. "Go on."

Wei Ling briefed him on the meeting. When he was done, the man said, "You met them, what, six hours ago?"

"Yes."

"Good, good, let's see if the nano-trackers are working."

"Nano-trackers?"

But the man didn't reply; he was tapping at the touch screen console. After a while, he had a topographical map of Switzerland laid out on his primary screen and overlaid on the map were three blinking dots — one in Fribourg and two moving toward Bern. He smiled to himself.

The copy of the map that Wei had handed over to Laurent had been specially treated — coated with a traceless solution of nano-machines. When Charles and Fortesque had held the map, the nano-machines had crossed over the epidermal layer of their skin and embedded themselves in their fingertips. The nano-machines drew their power from the electric impulses of the nervous system and once they were charged sufficiently, formed a network that transmitted a homing beacon. He had paid a small fortune for the technology and was very pleased to see it working in its first field application.

“Yes, nano-trackers,” he said and quickly explained it to Wei. Then he sighed. “Yes, Wei it looks like you couldn’t keep your fingers out of the envelope. But don’t worry: as long as you do not betray me, you needn’t be afraid.” He muttered to himself, “They will need a team to break into Qin’s research facility... and Fortesque has just proven to be the windfall we need. Charles will ask him to recruit the team and lead them into China. And Fortesque will go to one place to hire that team.”

“Where is that?” Wei asked.

“Let me worry about that. You must return to China. I will contact you soon.”

With the call ended, the man stepped around to the image of the map. He zoomed out and scrolled northward into Russia and then panned east, finally tapping on an area in the map. The image zoomed in, rapidly filling in with terrain details until he was staring down from an altitude of three miles at a cluster of low buildings in the mountain ranges of Kazakhstan near Lake Balkhash.

“You’re going home, aren’t you, Luc?” he said to himself.

CHAPTER 31

British Columbia, 5 days later

The chartered DHC Series 400 Otter lurched in an air pocket as it flew on a south-westerly course leaving Prince Rupert Island behind. Henri Laurent looked across at Christian Black who was staring ahead vacantly, his face expressionless.

Poker face, Laurent thought. The team he had hired to eliminate Fortesque had bungled and now his son and Fortesque are absconding. Black had trembled with rage when he learned that Laurent had not taken him into confidence and Laurent was reminded yet again how much he depended on Black and had not retorted in any way.

"Just find Charles," Laurent had said in a soft voice.

"God damn it, Henri, yes we will find him. But for now, just forget about it. You need to put on your damn best poker face."

Laurent's contingent had hopped over to Prince Rupert Island, crossing over from Digby to the island proper. From there, a charter out of Seal Cove Water Aerodrome was ferrying them to the grand opening of the Orb.

Dedicated to the memory of Charles Melville Hays, founder of Prince Rupert Island, whose plans for turning the island into a major tourist hotspot perished with him on the RMS Titanic, the Orb represented the latest and most-advanced in hospitality innovation, green-building, engineering and, of course, the most lavish in luxury.

Opening night was set to attract the glitterati of the world, even royalty. Also, on the guest list were prominent critiques from the travel industry who had been sufficiently pampered to ensure their reviews would sing praises. They would rub shoulders with environmentalists, conversationalists and eco-philanthropy barons.

FEG's clean energy solutions powered the Orb. And Henri Laurent was here to make a statement, especially after the incident in the Great Bear Rainforest. The Orb would set a precedent for future ventures and contracts for FEG. He broke out of his pondering and said, "Christian." His right-hand man looked across at him. "Everything is in order, right?"

"Yes, we have our best engineers on this show. The systems work like a charm. Not to worry; when this day is over, the Klemtu incident will be a memory."

Laurent added darkly, "Unless Fortesque does something stupid." A flicker of worry passed over his face.

"It's been nearly four days, Henri. Whatever he has up his sleeve... he's waiting. He knows that any revelation made by him will implicate him in the incident and he also knows we can turn it around on him. All we can do is hope we catch him before he makes his move."

The intercom clicked and the pilot interrupted their discussion.

"We're nearly there. Seat belts, please."

As the Otter banked and came in for its landing, Henri saw the Orb. The luxury hotel-amphitheatre was exactly that — a pearl-white sphere in the waters of the Inside Channel. The floatplane was dwarfed by the architectural spectacle as it circled the Orb once.

From his window, Henri had a view straight down to the amphitheatre with its scalloped seating area nestled at the very top of the sphere under a transparent canopy of reinforced solar panels. Aisle markers radiated out from the stage in the centre. At night, the amphitheatre would resemble the lens of an iris. The canopy could be retracted, opening the amphitheatre to the sky above. At such times, the amphitheatre's pyrotechnic system could put on an extravagant fireworks and laser display.

As they settled lower, his attention was drawn to the flotilla of protestors surrounding the hotel. The floatplane's pontoons whizzed over the boats setting off a fresh wave of shouts, boos and chants as the protestors pumped their placards higher into the air.

"I did not think there would be so many," Laurent remarked of the flotilla.

The pontoons kissed the water, throwing up rooster tails and the floatplane's turboprops shut down. The pilot swung around and expertly lined up with a dock built into the Orb. The Otter passed out of the sun's glare and into the cool shade of the receiving dock. The cavernous space was large enough to hold five super-sized yachts. Two berthing spaces were occupied. Two bellhops in white sailor outfits deftly moored the floatplane. The Orb's general manager waited to welcome them. Laurent stepped onto the dock, followed by the rest of his staff and personal guard. Black followed last because no one paid much attention to the person at the end of the line and that was the way he liked it. They were guided off the dock through a manicured lawn replete with sprinkling fountains and beautiful flower beds toward the grand entrance of the hotel.

The Future Energy Group contingent was booked into the third level of the upper hemisphere. The general manager escorted Laurent to his suite. He indicated a pale rectangle beside the door jamb.

“Please place your thumb on the scanner. The lock will be paired to your thumbprint for the duration of your stay.”

Laurent did as he was told; there was a soft beep, the rectangle flashed green and the doors unlocked. He stepped into a huge stateroom. It was beautifully decorated and with the luxurious trappings, it was hard for Laurent to believe he was in a hotel room... and Laurent had stayed at other multi-starred hotels across the world. Straight across, the other end of the room provided a panoramic view of the Channel. He stepped across the soft carpets to the floor-to-ceiling curved glass walls. There was a soft hiss as one of the glass panels slid open as he approached and the wind from outside gusted into the room ruffling the curtains. Laurent stepped through the doorway onto a wraparound balcony.

His view of the Channel was un-obscured; a perfect blue stretched as far as he could see, bordered off by the faint outline of the mainland far away. He felt a presence at his shoulder and the general manager said, “Enjoy your stay, Mr Laurent.” He proffered a glass of wine; the bottle in his other hand was angled so that Laurent could read the label and appreciate its antiquity. “There’s a light welcome snack set up in the living room.”

“Thank you,” Laurent said taking the glass. “And good luck with the opening this evening.”

Bowing slightly, the manager left him standing on the balcony lost in his thoughts, with the wind whistling in his ears and the ruby contents of the wine trickling down his throat. Something caught his eye and he stared. A pod of orcas was clustered together, swimming about half a mile away. He watched in fascination as one of the whales leapt clear of the water, silvery spray streaming off its glistening black body exposing its white underbelly for a second

before disappearing beneath the waves of the Channel in a massive splash.

CHAPTER 32

Billy Bradford strode purposefully across the village centre to Jameson's abode. As he approached the door, he heard raised voices from within. He hesitated for a moment before rapping at the door. The argument ceased and Morrel shouted, "Who is it?"

"Billy."

A curse. Finally, "Come on in."

Bradford pushed the door open and stepped in brushing past Jameson's wife as she hurried outside, her face buried in her hands. A sob escaped her lips as she went. "Alice?" he called after her, but she shook her head and darted away.

"Close the damn door."

"What's going on?" Bradford asked his friend. The inside of the Jameson house was dark and in the gathering night, everything was shadowy.

"What do you mean, '*what's going on?*' in a tone that says you've come to sort things out! Have you come here to lecture me?"

"No, I just want to know what is going on between you and that Chenoque woman."

Jameson snorted and stabbed the air with a finger. "You want in now?"

"Come on Morrel; we're friends. Tell me what you're doing."

Jameson poured himself a drink and didn't offer one to Bradford.

"Where were you, Billy, these past three days?"

"Ottawa. I told you —"

Jameson interjected loudly. "*You* really think the legal way is going to sort this out for us?"

"We need to know what we're up against," Bradford replied calmly.

"Do you know that Future Energy Group is vital to Canada's economy? Do you know how many people have a stake in FEG?"

"Do *you*" — Jameson jabbed a finger at Bradford's chest — "Really believe the courts or the newspapers will listen to a bunch of natives?" He glared. "They took our boys, Billy," he screamed. For a moment, it seemed, that in the aftermath of Jameson's outburst, the village had gone deathly silent.

Bradford pushed Jameson's finger aside and said, "I believe it is an option we have to explore before we consider anything else."

"Hah!" Jameson threw his hands up and splashed whiskey. He slammed the glass down. "It is an *option*," he muttered sarcastically. He leaned in close. In a forced whisper that quivered with emotion, he said, "They took our boys! And the government is not going to do anything about it. His breath reeked of alcohol. Then he said, "Tell me what happened at Joint Task Force, Billy."

"Why? What has that got to do with anything?"

"It has everything to do with anything! You returned from Joint Task Force a changed man."

"The special forces change people," was the soft reply.

"No, no, no, my friend, the special forces turned you into this." He looked with scorn at his friend. "Before you joined JFT, people thought twice before they said anything to you."

"I was younger then. Brash."

"But when you returned, limping off that helicopter, you had changed. You didn't jump to action. You thought and thought and thought and spoke in that damn calm voice of yours. It's irritating me. I don't need anyone to talk to me calmly and tell me to relax. I need someone to tell me we're gonna get the bastards who killed our boys. My son!"

"We will get them; it just needs a plan."

"What happened in Iraq that changed you?"

"I told you it was a training accident."

"Training accidents don't make a man a soft. They frustrate him."

Finally, tired of Bradford's evasiveness, Jameson said, "Fine! Have it your way. But don't think you're the only one who has a plan. Because I'm tired of waiting for your plan to come to anything."

"This has come at a bad time, Morrel," Bradford said in his even tone. "And this woman, I don't know what game she's playing. You need to be careful."

"And I'm tired of your concern too. Keep it to yourself."

"What are you planning?"

His friend sneered. "Something you won't approve. But it will wipe the smirk off all the assholes who think they can't be touched."

"I hope you haven't put us all at risk. Put the village at risk."

Jameson abruptly swung at Bradford who easily stepped back and ducked another swing. Jameson snarled in embarrassment and settled for a tackle, barreling into Bradford, knocking the wind out of him. The two men staggered backwards and crashed through the door, splintering the wood, and spilt out into the village, Jameson straddling Bradford. "You think you're the only one who can solve this? Who can handle our problems? Huh?"

People had come out of their houses. Someone shouted. Bradford heard running feet and then people were pulling Jameson off his chest and helping him to his feet. While he stood and looked sadly at his friend, people were restraining Jameson. Finally, he calmed down and they let him go. The two men glared at each other.

"You think I don't care about this village?" Jameson shouted. "You think I don't know what to do? Who the hell do you think you are?"

Bradford turned his back on his friend and walked away slowly.

“Don’t turn your back on me.”

He kept walking.

“Billy!”

CHAPTER 33

All through the day and well into the evening, yachts and floatplanes sailed into the docking area of the Orb disgorging their elite passengers. As night drew in and the grand opening was just hours away, the flotilla of protestors had moved in closer to the hotel to disrupt the celebrations and ensure that they made the evening news across the world. It was a standoff in the Channel between the motley assortment of protestor boats and the rigid-hulled inflatables of the Orb's security. Boats rallied an imaginary line separating the two groups. There was a possibility that the Canadian Coast Guard would be called in to broker a truce.

Floodlight beams of blue, red, green, white from the amphitheatre crisscrossed in the sky and pyrotechnics were set off grandly as a rock act took to the stage to welcome the guests. The Orb shone against the black waters and indigo skyline.

Nobody noticed a solitary cabin cruiser from Save the Whales anchored at the fringe of illumination from the Orb's harsh exterior lights. Under cover of the dark, the activity on the stern deck was hard to discern. Six divers strapped on grey Inspiration rebreathers, adjusted their weight harnesses and slipped into the water. Rebreathers did not emit air-bubbles and once the divers submerged, they were invisible.

Sebastian Laporte looked at the luminous dial on his wristwatch and clicked a count-down timer. He glanced at the Orb as the guitarist playing at the opening night swept into a screaming solo. A long time ago, Laporte played the guitar at university, drawing screams of appreciation and adoration from the students.

Today, he would draw screams of terror and fear from an unwilling audience.

The evening was coming along nicely, Henri Laurent thought, as he fielded enthusiastic questions on FEG technology and on possible applications, which then branched into potential business opportunities. A couple of Hollywood stars were keen on converting their swanky mansions and gas-guzzling vehicles to the FEG solutions. And then there were the politicians who wanted to endear themselves to the environmentalist vote bank. At one point, he was accosted by an aide from the Canadian Prime Minister's office. While the Prime Minister himself was unable to make it to the grand opening, the aide was privy to Canada's investments in FEG's solution. The young aide also bore a message from the Prime Minister. To that end, he suggested that they speak privately in one of the conference rooms on the lower levels.

The aide cleared his throat. "One of the Klemtu natives involved in the incident served with the Canadian Special Forces. He visited Joint Task Force 2 headquarters at Dwyer Hill. His inquiries are a point of concern because soon the Canadian Special Forces Command will become involved. The government wants to be clear on how FEG handles the situation on the ground."

Laurent leaned forward. "And I want to be assured that the Canadian government will continue to honour the promises made to my company. Our position on the Klemtu is unchanged: the boys

were not at the crash site when our team arrived. However, the Klemtu threatened my team and they were forced to defend themselves. My pilot was killed in the crossfire.”

CHAPTER 34

The divers approached the hotel from the side opposite to the protestor flotilla. No one would be probing these waters. Even sea-life, they noted, had abandoned the vicinity of the Orb. Though they had diving lights they had not switched them on. The powerful illumination from the Orb was enough for them to work by. Additionally, the lights reflected harshly in the waters of the channel, making it impossible to spot them from the surface.

Flippers kicking gently, they hung suspended beside the massive damping system of the Orb. Enclosed within a cylindrical concrete housing anchored deep in the bedrock, the damping system was topped off by a lattice framework that resembled a spider's web. The Orb rested inside the lattice which absorbed the energy of the currents of the Channel. Without the damping system, the Orb would be in a continuous roll, pitch and bob. FEG engineers had tapped into the gargantuan shock-absorber and could use the absorbed energy as an auxiliary power system in the hotel.

Sebastian Laporte planned to blow away the damping system. This would cause the Orb to flounder and destabilize. Concussive depth charges would then be used to pulverize the windows nearest to the water level to flood the Orb and further destroy buoyancy. But that would not be enough to cause sufficient terror. The Orb was held in place by four heavy-duty anchor lines. These two-foot diameter anchor lines spread out from the cardinal points of the Orb and were cramped into the bedrock within heavy concrete bollards. He planned to sever two of the anchor lines. Assisted by the collapsed damping system and primary support, the weight of the Orb would

put immense strain on the remaining anchor-lines which would snap under tension and roll the Orb into the Channel like a giant ball.

Laporte had smiled when he imagined the outcome of his plan. He would go down the annals of eco-terrorism as the greatest.

When seen from up close, the towering concrete column was an awesome sight, like an alien tower rising – ominously lacking features – out of the bed of the Channel. They craned their necks and saw the lattice framework thirty feet above. At a signal from the lead diver, the team broke up. Two divers flicked on their dive lights and swam away into the gloom to set their explosives to the anchor-lines, while four divers swam up the face of the concrete tower. They rigged a timed explosive chain around the circumference of the concrete tower. Once done, they vented their buoyancy compensators and rose to the join between the lattice and the column.

01:50:45

Two divers began clamping explosives on the struts of the framework. They moved from one strut to another, arming each explosive. Soon a pattern of red lights blinked back at them.

01:20:03

The divers rose between the lattice struts. They were now at the lower curvature of the Orb, the section that was attached to the damping system. They heard low-frequency rumbles as the damping system compensated for the currents of the Channel and the weight of the hotel. Using the smooth surface of the Orb to guide them along the curvature, they rose to within a foot of the surface of the water.

00:60:00

At this level, they began setting multiple concussive charges.

00:40:36

Their mission complete, the dive leader signalled his team; they hit their buoyancy compensators and sank through the lattice framework to the depths of the Channel. Then they struck out for their mother ship.

00:40:30

00:40:29

00:40:28

“Sebastian, we’ve got company!” The helmsman looked at his radar scope waiting for the green hand to sweep around again. When it did, he pointed to a blip on the screen near the larger reading of the Orb.

00:20:14

“Coast guard?” Laporte asked anxiously coming over to look.

“No, it’s too small to be the coast guard. Looks like one of the hotel’s security boats.”

“She’s holding position,” Laporte observed.

“Guess they can see us on their radar but they’re trying to figure out what to do,” the helmsman said. “They can’t see us without our running lights.”

Then the blip moved. “Keep an eye on them,” Laporte warned. “If they come too close let me know.” He left the helm and bounded down the ladder to the diving deck to where the rest of his team was huddled. “Any sign from the dive team?”

“No,” one of them replied.

Laporte looked at his watch. “They should be surfacing any moment.” He looked at two of his men. “You two go up front but don’t do anything without my signal.” The two men left the group

silently, while the others looked at him. "We may have been spotted. Nothing we can't handle of course. The idea is to act innocent. We will fake engine trouble. Meanwhile, get the divers aboard and out of sight."

CHAPTER 35

The rigid-hulled inflatable switched on its bow-mounted searchlight as it skimmed over the water toward the darkened cabin-cruiser. The Orb had contracted its security detail to a private security consultant that specialized in maritime security. The inflatable carried six grim-looking men armed with M4 assault rifles. The dancing circle of the searchlight settled on the cabin-cruiser's wheelhouse and the security squad captain steadied himself and brought a bullhorn to his lips. "Unidentified vessel, this is Abraham Davis, Orb Security. Identify yourself."

00:09:56

The inflatable veered and began circling at a safe distance while the searchlight stayed on the cruiser. Davis repeated his order again but elicited no response from the cruiser. He gave a signal and the inflatable's prow fell into the waters and they began to close in, approaching the stern of the cruiser. By the searchlight, Davis could see figures moving in the cruiser. The engine covers had been raised masking any activity taking place in the stern

"Proceed cautiously," Davis muttered to his helmsman as he stepped over to the searchlight and swivelled it to point at the raised engine covers. Then he saw a man hailing at him from the wheelhouse.

The distance between the two boats diminished rapidly and soon the inflatable was abreast of the bigger cruiser. The men in the two boats appraised each other. Davis called across to the man who had hailed him and who he assumed was the captain of the boat, "Engine trouble?"

Laporte had a clear view of the inflatable from his raised wheelhouse and eyed the security team, noting the professional way in which they held their weapons at the ready. This was going to be tight. "Damn engines! Been trying to fix them for nearly an hour." He glanced at the stern deck. With the relative motion of the boats, at any moment the patrol boat would be able to see past the raised engine covers.

"Whom am I speaking to?"

"Captain Gerald Gardner."

"Captain Gardner, we're going to hang around, make sure you fix your engines and leave," Davis replied.

"Pity, you're missing the party on our account."

Davis shrugged. "What we're paid for." Beside him, one of the security team was speaking into a headset.

Laporte guessed they were running a trace on his boat... and would soon find it was not registered with Save the Whales. Nor did Captain Gardner exist. "Ah! An idealist! I like that!" He slapped his thigh and called out to his crew. "Boys, we have an idealist here!" A few of the men on Laporte's boat guffawed. Laporte glanced at his watch. In the inflatable, Davis was conferring with his team.

00:02:30

Davis said, "Tell your crew to show themselves, hands where we can see them."

As he spoke, the inflatable moved away from the cruiser yet keeping in range of their assault weapons which, Laporte noted, were now pointing at his boat. "What's the problem?" he called feigning surprise and alarm.

"Tell your crew to step into the open or we open fire!" Davis barked over the bullhorn. "Now!"

Laporte's helmsman whispered. "Activity at the Orb: more boats."

Davis had called for backup. They were running out of time; Laporte was going to have to play this carefully. "Okay, okay," he shouted. "Boys, step out of there! Let's show Mr Davis we're harmless." "Slowly!" Davis barked. "No sudden moves or the first bullet hits you."

One-by-one Laporte's crew revealed themselves. Among them were the divers who had just resurfaced and had stripped from their dive suits behind the engine covers. Seeing no immediate threat from the gathered men on the cabin cruiser, Davis' edginess climbed down a notch, but his men still held their weapons pointed at the cruiser, fingers curled around the triggers.

00:01:01

"What now, Mr Davis, you gonna strip search us?"

"We're going to escort you back to Prince Rupert Island where you will be questioned."

"We don't have our engines, remember?"

"You will anchor *your* boat here," Davis made clear, indicating they were on to Laporte but unaware of the terror that was about to be unleashed on their watch.

"I'm not leaving my boat here, Mr Davis."

"It isn't your boat! Now shut up and do as I tell you to."

"You're very rude."

Davis could hardly believe his ears. "What? Rude?" His lips curled in a half-smile.

00:00:08

"You know what happens to rude people?"

"Do tell," Davis said, falling for the ruse.

"Bad things!"

On Laporte's signal, his helmsman slammed the cabin cruiser into full throttle and swung hard starboard. At the same time, his crew

grabbed their suppressed Chinese-manufactured QCW-05 submachine guns from where they had been lying out of sight and opened fire at the inflatable.

Davis screamed as the first rounds tore into him and he pitched overboard even as the helmsman tried to get out of the way of the turning cruiser. But it was too late: the prow of the cruiser punched into the inflatable and pushed the smaller boat under knocking the security team into the water. A few of them returned fire before they were thrown into the Channel. Bullets punched holes in the cruiser, but their rounds were wild.

"Get us out of here," Laporte ordered.

00:00:00

CHAPTER 36

Huge geysers of water erupted around the Orb, shooting fifty feet into the air as the primary explosive detonated. There was a terrifying groan as the entire structure wobbled and swayed. Hidden from view beneath the surface of the Channel, the concrete cylinder crumpled in on itself as an entire section was torn away playing havoc with its structural integrity and load-bearing capacity. More geysers shot up churning the Channel into froth and chaos as the lattice framework collapsed and was wrenched away from the Orb, falling away into the depths. Even from this distance, Laporte and his crew could hear the screams and shouts of people in the amphitheatre. The Orb was beginning to rock precariously as its supports failed. The protestor boats scurried away as huge waves threatened to inundate the flotilla. On the radar scope in the cabin cruiser, everything was a crazy spattering of green. The Orb settled into the water in a giant wave that radiated outward and chased the flotilla overturning most of the boats and pushing others outward. Then the concussion charges on the lower levels detonated and the water around the Orb was whipped into a renewed frenzy. There were more explosions inside the Orb, yellow flashes of light as fires broke out and flames began spouting out of the hotel, racing around the circumference and along the spherical walls. The Orb settled lower into the water, the lights in the lower levels blinking out as the Channel flooded the hotel.

There was an ominous *zing* as the anchor lines on the far side of the Orb were severed. Suddenly free from tension, the anchor lines whiplashed out of the water high into the air. Laporte watched, his mouth open in awe as the concrete underwater bollard to which an

anchor line was attached was catapulted hundreds of feet into the air. Freed of the bollard's weight, the anchor line snapped straight and fell back right over the Orb knifing down several levels through the walls before coming to rest wrapped around the hotel like a giant tentacle.

"Go! Go! Go!" Laporte screamed as the bollard came whistling down like a missile and crashed into the Channel behind the speeding cruiser sending a shower of spray over the boat.

Then abruptly, everything was plunged into an unearthly darkness as the power in the Orb failed and all the lights went out leaving only the flickering fires and the screams of the terrified wafting across the Channel.

CHAPTER 37

When the first explosive detonated, sending great shivers through the very structure of the orb, Christian Black had yanked Henri Laurent bodily out of the plush chair and dragged him toward the door. The floor listed at an angle under their feet, knocking them off balance. They fell flat on their faces. The lights flickered, plunged them into darkness that was punctuated by cries of alarm and terror. The aide from the Prime Minister's office was shouting for help. When the lights came back on weakly, Black saw that the aide was pinned beneath the heavy conference table, his papers and files all over him.

"Help me," he pleaded, gasping painfully for breath.

Another explosion rumbled through the Orb and there was a fresh wave of screams and shouts as panic and pandemonium spread through the guests. The overhead sprinklers came on and the lights flickered again and then blinked out.

Black shook his head clearing it, pulled himself to his feet and kicked open the door to be greeted by the shocked and confused expressions of people running helter-skelter down the corridor. There was water everywhere; the carpet was soaked from the sprinklers. Ornamental paintings that hung in gilded frames along the corridor crashed to the ground. Emergency lights had come on and there was thick smoke all over the floor, curling and swirling around the running legs.

A large man materialized – one of the security personnel for the Prime Minister's aide. He pushed past roughly into the conference room. "Come on!" Black urged his boss, leading him in the direction opposite from the fleeing people. As he turned to go, he saw the

security man heave the conference table off the aide with a mighty throw and help the aide to his feet. They stepped out of the conference room after Black and Laurent with the aide struggling to stand upright.

"Which way?" the big man shouted, hefting the aide's weight. A groan escaped the aide's lips followed by a dribble of blood.

Laurent mumbled faintly, "Take them. It will look good."

"This way, follow me."

As they ran, the floor suddenly lurched sickeningly and seemed to fall away from their feet and everyone fell in a tangle of arms and legs as the Orb settled into the Channel. Black's stomach leapt into his throat. "What the hell is happening?" He cursed. Potted plants collapsed all around them and someone shouted as overhead chandeliers came crashing to the carpets and pulverized glass showered everyone. There were more screams as a live cable hit a mass of people and electrocuted them where they lay huddled before thrashing away into a corner in a burst of sparks. People scrambled away, pushing and shoving, stampeding to get away from the writhing cable. Sparks hissed and whizzed angrily. They leapt over cowering bodies and pushed past the surge of humanity. It was like fighting against a tide.

"Why are we going this way?" the big bodyguard said, suddenly realizing they were, heading toward the amphitheatre.

"The power chutes — it's the fastest way down to the life rafts!"

"How do you know?"

"We built the power system!"

Without waiting for a reply, Black turned on his heel. The aide's bodyguard hesitated for a moment and then swept the dazed aide into a fireman's carry and followed.

The Orb was now floating in the Channel. The lattice framework had just been demolished and, as each strut gave way, the Orb lurched and shook and rocked to an accompaniment of stressed girders and ominous groans.

They heard a series of explosions that knocked everything about and spilt them out into the amphitheatre. The rock band's guitarist ran past him, carrying his precious Gibson. Sirens blared. The sky was alight with flares streaking red and white tails high above their heads.

There was another explosion, and a heatwave seared the air. The circular pyrotechnic rig surrounding the stage had burst into flames that quickly raced into the scalloped seating rings. The lighting truss over the stage swayed dangerously and, with a succession of cracks, gave way. Spotlights went flying in all directions. An elderly woman was crushed under one.

They took cover behind the seating area. "We need to get across!" Black shrugged out of his jacket and wrapped it around his face, covering his mouth and nose. Laurent followed suit. The bodyguard simply put the flap of the aide's dinner jacket over his mouth and nose and the three men charged *into* the ring of fire running past a boy who was screaming wildly, his hands flailing, his hair on fire.

They zigzagged through the intense heat, aware of singes and burns as flames touched and licked their skin. The smoke stung their eyes to the point where they could barely see where they were going. But Black had a mental snapshot of their destination, and he confidently followed that path in his mind's eye. As they ran, they were aware of dark shapes of survivors rushing past them. The air was rife with sounds of people choking and coughing and pleading for help. They tripped over bodies sprawled in the amphitheatre. Then they were through the ring of fire and collapsed to the wet floor gasping in air.

The bodyguard came crashing through the fire with the aide, whose jacket was on aflame.

“Help me!”

Black helped strip the jacket off the aide and tossed it away into the inferno. He heard an odd *whooshing* and felt the rain. Looking up, blinking against the falling droplets he saw —

CHAPTER 38

“Get down!” he shouted and pushed Laurent to the floor as the severed anchor lines came whiplashing down on the hotel. There was a mighty rending of metal as struts and framework were sliced apart under the tension of the anchor line. Shrapnel and large sections of the hotel were blasted outward. The entire amphitheatre rocked with the impact and then shivered as the anchor line began snaking back outwards, snagging on parts of the hotel and then tearing free.

They beheld a rift, cutting diagonally across the floor of the amphitheatre. Black surveyed the destruction in disbelief, stepping nearer to the edge of the rift and peering down cautiously. The anchor line was caught firm inside the hotel several levels below him. All along its length were the mangled remains of the luxury staterooms. Even as he watched, tables, furniture, fixtures, and even people were falling into the rift. Fires burned everywhere. Something exploded one level beneath him, and a fireball mushroomed out into the rift; the shockwave threw him backwards. Then, suddenly the emergency power failed. In the light of the fires, they spotted the service chute off to the left, across the rift. He turned and saw Laurent and the bodyguard staring at him. With so much destruction it wasn't difficult to find a suitable section of the lighting truss lying nearby. Black and the bodyguard, whose name was Theodore, hefted the truss across the rift like a ladder laid on its side. Black went across first, followed by Laurent. They tread carefully on the slick surface. Then Theodore came across with the aide draped across his shoulders.

“Is he even alive?” Laurent asked.

"Yes," Theodore replied gruffly.

Black tried the doors; they were jammed. Cursing, he wedged a strut into the gap between the doors and tried to pry them open in vain. Theodore set the aide down gently and offered to have a go at the doors. The bigger man grunted with the effort and, just when it looked like the strut would bend, with a *squeak*, the doors parted revealing a dark chute beyond.

"There's a ladder on the side," Black explained. "We climb down three levels to the staterooms and then make our way to the lifeboats on that level." He gestured to the aide. "You'll have to find a way to secure him so that he does not fall during the climb down." They climbed down slowly, wary of their footing. In the maintenance chute, the creaks, groans and protests of the stricken hotel were amplified. The bottom of the chute was lost in darkness.

Looking up, in the light streaming in from the pried open doors, Black could make out Theodore with the aide. They had fashioned a harness from their jackets for the aide but if the knots in the fabric came apart, Theodore and the aide could fall right on top of them plunging them all to their deaths.

"We should have taken the certified escape routes," Theodore called from above.

"The explosions will have sealed the dock area," Black's voice echoed back. "No one's getting out that way."

A rumbling sound roared up toward them from the abyss and the chute trembled. All three men gripped the rungs of the ladder tighter and waited for the tremors to subside. The chute jolted and swayed as another shockwave ran through the Orb. Black nearly lost his grip and swung on one hand. Laurent hugged the ladder, feeling the wet steel against his cheek. Theodore's shoulder

slammed into the walls of the chute and the knots in the jackets slipped with the sudden shift in weight.

The jolt shook the aide awake. In his disorientation, he began choking Theodore. The big man gasped for air as he tried to form words to tell his charge to reach for the ladder inches away from their faces.

Black craned his neck and saw Theodore struggling. If the aide lost his grip and fell, he would knock Black into the abyss. Then he saw Theodore reach back and under the aide's butt and prop him up, his arm straining as he pushed upward. Relieved, Black swung again and grabbed hold of the ladder. The three men rested, panting with the exertion. Then they resumed climbing down, moving quickly, now fearful of another explosion.

"Stop!" Black shouted when he drew abreast of the chute exit on the staterooms level. Wrapping an elbow around the rung, he reached out with his other hand to pop the emergency catch in the door, hoping it wasn't jammed. The door opened as it was designed to, and Black stepped out of the chute, followed quickly by the others.

They made their way across the devastation and could hear the cries and moans of people buried under the rubble. At one point, they had to double back because their path was blocked by the buckled upper level. They forced themselves into the nearest stateroom and took the wraparound balcony. As they stepped out onto the balcony the night breeze momentarily soothed them, a welcome relief from the claustrophobic chute and the trapped feeling in the destroyed Orb. Then they stared because the Channel was littered with flotsam and wreckage. Nearby they could see capsized boats, their keels bobbing in the water, propeller blades still spinning. They could make out survivors swimming frantically.

The water was aglow with fading pinpoints of lights from sinking boats plummeting to their watery graves. In the distance, they could see the approaching lights of rescue planes and helicopters. Tearing themselves away from the despair below, they hastened around the curve of the balcony and then broke into another stateroom. They kicked the door of the stateroom open and found they had bypassed the blockade in the corridor. They also saw why the blockade existed: the rift created by the severed anchor line yawned a few feet from the doorway. They could see ten feet across the tear to the ripped and buckled opposite side. They tread carefully, testing the integrity of the narrow ledge before putting their full weight on it. There was a continuous hissing from somewhere as gas or steam escaped from ruptured pipelines. The aide, although conscious, needed support to stay upright. Theodore grunted from the continuous effort of bearing his weight.

Another *boom* rocked the Orb and they hugged the wall for support. The *hissing* grew louder and then fizzled out. They arrived at a spot where the walls of the tear were closer because of a tongue-like projection from the other side. Black took a long step across and beckoned for the others to do the same. They made their way through a series of corridors.

Abruptly they reached an open deck in the hotel. There was one sea-worthy life raft hanging on its davits, ready to be deployed. The other raft was damaged. Laurent quickly made his way to the boat and climbed in. They helped the aide settle into the boat. While Black and Theodore worked the davits, Laurent leaned into the aide's ear, "Remember, we saved you. Make sure the Prime Minister knows that."

CHAPTER 39

Morrel Jameson stared at the bright flashes of light in the Channel. A moment earlier the Orb had been shining brilliantly and in the next, in a series of fireballs and loud explosions, it had ceased to exist.

He goosed the throttle of his boat and looked at Akira Chenoke. She was scared. The silence that had followed the disaster was now pierced with cries for help from the survivors in the inky blackness ahead. He felt the weight of the revolver in his pocket and was reminded of his earlier purpose. Now, it all seemed moot. Maybe Henri Laurent had been killed in the explosions.

"We have to help those people," he said, as thoughts of revenge slipped away. Without waiting for an answer, he opened the throttle; the little boat leapt forward.

Sebastian Laporte looked over his shoulder; they weren't being pursued. They were drawing close to the numerous canals that cut through the rainforest. "Turn on the lights!" he barked. They needed to see where they were going or they would end up against the rocks.

The running lights and headlamps came on... illuminating a small boat right in their path!

"Shit!" Jameson cried as a cabin cruiser materialized from the darkness, looming over his boat, its bright lights blinding him. He barreled into Akira and pushed her overboard, diving in after her.

The cabin cruiser hit the smaller boat, lifting its starboard side out of the water. The keel of the speedboat bumped against the length of the hull of the cabin cruiser before it turned the remaining 180 degrees and splashed upside down, spinning away.

Jameson and Akira surfaced a short distance away, sputtering water.

The cruiser slowed down, its wake falling away and an aft-mounted searchlight probed the water and found them. Squinting in the lights, Jameson waved his hands, thinking the men in the cruiser would fish them out. He heard orders being screamed and then his eyes widened as the men gathered on the diving board of the cruiser and levelled what looked like guns.

"Deep breath!" he screamed and gulped in a lungful of air. Before Akira could comprehend what was happening, he pushed her underwater again just as the men on the boat unleashed a volley of gunfire.

Jameson kicked strongly, pulling Akira beside him. Bubbles of air streamed from her nostrils and mouth. The surface of the water broke with bullets that trailed after them. A bullet nicked Akira and another punched into Jameson's back, lodging in a rib. A cloud of their blood mixed with the water. He grit his teeth but she screamed sucking in water. She started drowning. Jameson pulled her to his chest and clamped his mouth over hers, and ignoring the fire in his body, breathed into her. His eyes caught hers and he shook his head. *Get a hold of yourself or we both die.*

She calmed a bit. He nodded and they swam deeper and away from the scene of the collision.

"Did you get them?" Laporte called to his men.

"Hard to tell! I think so." One of his men sprayed the water with gunfire... to be certain. "Who were they?"

The helmsman warned, "We must get out of here now! The radios are going crazy now."

Laporte cursed. He would have preferred to silence the occupants of the boat; it would buy him some time. But they couldn't wait any longer. "Let's go! Let's go!"

The helmsman opened the throttle, and the cruiser began to move again.

In the underwater darkness, Jameson put his finger to his lips and then pointed upward. Suspended close beside him, Akira nodded. He propelled her upward and her head broke the surface of the water. Jameson surfaced near her and looked around. It was difficult to discern anything in the darkness but they could hear the throb of the cruiser's diesels... fading. The boat was sailing away. He exhaled in relief. But Akira and he were beginning to shiver uncontrollably in the cold water.

"Make for the shore," he whispered and began swimming, tugging her along.

CHAPTER 40

Western shores of Lake Balkhash, Kazakhstan, 1 day after the attack on the Orb

Located in the deepest part of the Balkash-Alakol depression in south-east Kazakhstan, the crescent-shaped Lake Balkhash is the twelfth largest continental lake in the world.

Luc Fortesque and Charles Laurent chartered a derelict fishing boat from Balkhash to take them through the Uzynaral Strait, crossing around the Saryesik Peninsula that divided the lake into two hydrographically distinct parts, to their destination at the north-eastern curve of the lake. The journey had been uneventful, save for a brief spell of bad weather. The next day, the fishing boat, spewing black smoke into a blue cloud-filled sky, rounded Kentubek Peninsula and anchored in a desolate cove. A lifeboat had taken them ashore where Laurent paid the captain the balance of the agreed charter.

Laurent noticed a stout wooden block protruding from the gravel on the shore. A little distance away was a coil of rope and a shredded truck tire. He pointed this out to Fortesque who said, "The landing pier was destroyed to make it difficult to locate this spot."

"But you found it."

"I once called this place home." Fortesque looked up at the darkening sky. "Come on, let's move out of the open; the night can get quite chilly. I know a cave where we can shelter."

"A cave!" Laurent exclaimed, aghast. For someone accustomed to only the most comfortable beds, spending a night in a cave was a horrible thought. "How much further to the camp?"

"We should reach tomorrow afternoon," Fortesque replied shrugging his backpack and starting off away from the water line. Laurent took one last look at the thin line of white surf on the low breaking waves and then followed. Fortesque was staring fixedly at the ground as he walked.

"What are you looking for?" Laurent finally asked in an exasperated tone after fifteen minutes of silence.

"The trail."

"Any trail would be blown over."

"We didn't leave it entirely to nature, Charles." Fortesque pointed a little distance away and walked over to a smooth-faced boulder. He traced his finger over the stone and Laurent saw that he had traced a crude, well-camouflaged arrow pointing —

Fortesque consulted his compass, made a bearing in the direction of the arrow and said, "Come on. With luck, we'll find the cave soon."

During the night, Laurent had twisted and turned fitfully, tried resting his head on joined hands, sleeping on his back, sleeping on his shoulder, curling into a fetal position — all in vain. When dawn broke, his body was a mass of pain and he welcomed the morning in a foul mood. Eager to set off quickly, he threw off his blanket and sat up, blinking. His eyes adjusted, and he realized that he was alone in the cave with the dying embers of their campfire. His rising panic subsided when he saw Fortesque's backpack in a corner of the cave. He splashed water from his canteen on his face. Refreshed, he

cracked open a tin of biscuits and munched on them, stepping out of the cave.

Now that it was light outside, he saw there was a path that led from the mouth of the cave down to a shallow valley that twisted on itself until it opened out to the shores of Lake Balkash. He could just make out the lake cloaked in mist. The rocky path continued past the mouth of the cave further up into the mountains that reared over him, formidable and forbidding. He craned his neck to look, shielding his eyes against the sun. Last night he had only made out vague silhouettes of the mountains but now he stared in awe at their rugged shoulders and craggy peaks, thrust hundreds of feet high by violent upheavals in the earth's crust.

He didn't hear the footsteps behind him until a gruff voice said, "Turn around! Slowly!"

Startled, Laurent spun around and found he was looking at the business end of an M4 assault rifle... and at a bearded face that stared back at him through expressionless eyes.

"I said, *'slowly'*," the bearded man growled. "Lucky my trigger finger isn't itchy!"

"Who are you?" Charles muttered, wondering where Fortesque was.

The bearded man shook his head, "Who are *you*?" His assault rifle still pointed at Laurent's chest. "And what are you doing here?"

"M-my name is Charles Laurent." The bearded man showed no sign of recognition. "And I'm headed toward the mercenary outpost in these mountains –"

"Mercenary outpost?" said another voice from above him. Another man sat on the rocks above, crouched on his haunches. He guffawed. "See, I figure you for a city boy. A city boy like you doesn't just go searching for mercenaries on your own. You must have company."

In the glare of the sun, Laurent could not make out the man's features. Shielding his eyes, he said, "I'm here with Luc Fortesque." The man perched above said, "That name supposed to mean anything to us?" He waved dismissively. "Frankie, I say we send him home, huh?"

But the bearded man said, "Luc Fortesque you say?" The gun had lowered slightly but came up again. "Fortesque is here?"

Laurent wondered if he'd made a mistake mentioning Fortesque's name. But Fortesque had said he'd worked with these mercenaries during the wars. He found himself nodding, while the man above said, "You know who he's talking about?"

But Frankie didn't answer directly. "Where is Fortesque?"

"I have no idea; I —"

"You have sixty seconds to tell me before I pull the trigger!"

"I'm telling you I don't know," Laurent shouted, losing his patience. "That's why I'm standing out here looking for him!"

Taken aback by this sudden outburst, Frankie raised an eyebrow. Above them, they could hear the other man moving, presumably un-slinging his weapon... when suddenly, his body came crashing down in the space between Laurent and Frankie in an untidy heap and rolled onto its back, hands spread wide.

Before they could react, there was a blur of motion and something landed heavily on Frankie slamming him to the ground. Laurent scrambled out of the way and saw Fortesque straddling Frankie, his fists flying. Frankie was struggling under Fortesque — who swung again, relieving Frankie of the M4 and then swinging the butt of the rifle against Frankie's jaw with a *crack*.

"Easy now," Fortesque cautioned in a low voice, keeping the rifle trained on the stunned man. Frankie groaned, rubbing his jaw. "I

assume Hotstuff and Dragon told you I died in that warehouse in Iraq?"

"What warehouse in Iraq?" Laurent interjected.

Frankie slurred through the pain in his mouth. "She told us that you were shot in the head; they barely made it out."

"And she's been in charge since." Fortesque sighed, "Take me to her. Time to set the record straight, don't you think."

"Have you returned to take charge of the unit?"

Fortesque ignored the question "Let's get going; where are you parked?" He stood aside and Frank groggily got to his feet, kicked the other mercenary in the ribs lightly to bring him around.

Laurent nudged Fortesque. "Where did you go earlier?"

"I decided to reconnoitre."

Frankie gave his comrade another kick.

"You could have woken me," Laurent complained.

Fortesque shrugged. "Worked out pretty okay, didn't it?"

CHAPTER 41

Everything was bouncing. Charles held onto the roll bar for dear life as the Spider Light Strike Vehicle raced across the rocky terrain. There was dust and mud everywhere and it went into his eyes, blinding him; and mouth, leaving a chalky, dry sensation. The engine growled and revved as Frankie hit a steep rise and urged the LSV over the top, into a gulley that was slightly wider than the LSV. Frankie rammed the accelerator, and the Spider took off, streaking through the gulley.

Walls of the black rock zoomed past in a blur. The sound of the engine was amplified in the close confines and Laurent wondered how Fortesque who was sitting in the passenger seat could be so unperturbed. He closed his eyes because he didn't want to be looking when they lost control and slammed into the rock.

But Frankie never lost control: he kept the Spider on course, adjusting instinctively to changes in the terrain. And sitting beside him, Fortesque kept the M4 trained on Frankie no matter how high the Spider jumped, how low they plunged or how much they rocked from side to side. The gulley opened out and the Spider locked into a tight left turn around the lip, skidding. Frankie shifted gears and they burst ahead again. This time the ride wasn't so bumpy and Charles was pleasantly surprised to see that they were speeding over a ribbon of flatland that was bordered by towering mountains on either side. They were in a dried-up riverbed. Looking back, he could see the narrow mouth of the gulley quickly receding from view. The wind screamed in his ears and brought tears to his eyes. They turned into a deep ravine which blotted out the sun. Then the LSV bounced out into a small box canyon.

Frankie braked hard and turned off the ignition.

"We're here," he said.

Laurent looked around, tasting dust on his lips. He saw black openings in the rock-face all around and realized were crude doors and windows cut three levels high into the rock. Mountain dwellings! He heard a clattering sound and spun around.

Fortesque had tossed his M4 to the ground, unbuckled his seat-harness and was stepping out of the Spider, his hands raised above his head.

"What are you doing?"

"Get out of the car, do likewise!"

"What?!"

"If you don't want to get shot," Fortesque whispered back. He was now standing some distance from the Spider, looking at the caves. The canyon walls were scalloped, and a narrow pathway connected all the cave entrances; steps hewn in the rock led between levels. Charles unstrapped himself and climbed out. He stumbled as his cramped legs faltered, but he quickly recovered and raised his hands.

"Luc, I —"

"Quiet," Fortesque hissed and jerked his head. Laurent started: a man pointing an assault rifle at them had materialized on a ledge above them. He heard a cascade of pebbles behind them and spun around again to see another man step out behind them, also holding a rifle pointed at them. Slowly, like wraiths, more armed men stepped out, until the LSV was surrounded. There were two standing by the ravine too so that their escape was cut off.

"I want to meet Hotstuff!" Fortesque said loudly. The bowl of the box-canyon amplified his voice.

"Who's asking?"

"Luc Fortesque."

At that introduction, there were loud *clicks* all around as weapons were cocked. Laurent thought they were dead. But no bullet ripped into his chest. Instead, silence descended like a heavy blanket on the clearing.

"I'm not here to contest leadership," Fortesque continued, "Or get even with her for leaving me to die in an inferno. This is a business trip."

Still silence. Laurent's arms were growing weary. In the LSV, the mercenary whom Fortesque had knocked out stirred. Then there was movement from the mountain-dwelling off to their right and Laurent stared.

A woman had stepped out. She was tall, shapely and her features were chiselled beauty. Her hair was tied in a tight bun that accentuated her high cheekbones and long neck. As she walked toward them, hips swaying, he couldn't help but think, incongruously, that she put the models he had watched sashaying down ramps in Paris to shame. As she drew nearer, he caught a whiff of her perfume and his jaw dropped. She glanced at him and quickly disregarded him. All her attention was on Fortesque. She stopped at arm's distance; she was as tall as Fortesque. How someone living in the mountains could be so beautiful was beyond Laurent. His tired arms sagged and began to drop.

Quick as a flash, she had a Desert Eagle pistol in her hand pointed at his face, while she continued to stare at Fortesque. Laurent's hands jerked back into their upraised position.

Fortesque said, "You haven't changed."

"After all these years: Luc Fortesque! Back from the dead."

"Hell couldn't keep me," Fortesque retorted. He pointed to his scar, "Severe trauma to the brain, selective amnesia. I don't recall

anything that happened in the warehouse. Other than that, I'm fine."

"What's your business here?" She raised a fine eyebrow, questioningly and looked at Laurent. "Him?"

"That's right."

"So let's hear it before you lose my attention." The Desert Eagle was still levelled at Laurent's nose.

"You don't want to keep the gun pointed at his face. He's the man who's going to be paying us."

CHAPTER 42

"There's no intelligence on where this weapon - *Apocalypse* - is inside the facility?" Hotstuff asked, tilting her chair backwards. They were sitting around a table in one of the larger mountain abodes — the mercenaries' situation room — where Fortesque had briefed them on the job. The table was strewn with maps over which lay the hand-drawn map that Xu Hua had given them in Fribourg. Nearby, Hotstuff's comms-tech tapped at a tablet pulling up satellite imagery and projecting it onto a larger screen for all of them to see. Laurent had quietly ogled at her from time to time which he was sure had not gone unnoticed.

"No intelligence."

"So, we need a prisoner when we get there," said a burly mercenary with a tattoo of a dragon on his shaved pate. His call sign was Dragon and he looked like he could crush a man in his beefy hands.

"Of course," Fortesque said, "It's the only way to find out where the weapon is secured."

Hotstuff pondered this for a minute. No one interrupted her and Laurent was impressed with how she held sway over this band of outlaws. The implication was not at all attractive: for all her beauty, Hotstuff was surely the most ruthless among any of these mercenaries to be in command of them.

"Okay," Hotstuff decided suddenly looking penetratingly in his direction. "We'll do it."

Fortesque spoke, "How long are we talking?"

"Five days."

"Reasonable."

"Of course, it is," Dragon growled. "Or you wouldn't be here."

"I was speaking for Charles' benefit."

Hotstuff leaned forward, accentuating her cleavage. Laurent found it hard to look away. Fortesque kicked him under the table and his eyes met hers.

"Three million US dollars each."

"How many soldiers?" Fortesque asked.

Hotstuff's green eyes didn't leave Laurent. "Cat caught your tongue?"

"He isn't used to negotiating with soldiers of fortune, Evangeline."

Her name is Evangeline, Laurent thought, still mesmerized by her green eyes.

"Five soldiers," she replied. "Fifteen million US dollars for this operation."

The sum of money quoted brought Laurent out of his hypnosis and the businessman in him reared. "What are our chances of success?"

"We will acquire *Apocalypse* for you," Hotstuff said confidently.

Laurent nodded. "Fifteen million: a quarter up front, a quarter when Fortesque tells me you have the weapon, the remaining when you hand over the weapon and we are given safe passage out of here."

His voice was stronger, focused on a business venture now, not distracted by her charms.

Hotstuff raised an eyebrow again. It seemed to be her signature reaction. "Really?" she smiled for the first time.

"Yes, really. No other way."

"It's a fair deal," Fortesque concurred. He had discussed this with Laurent on the boat ride over. As a final protective measure, he would booby-trap the weapon system until they were safely out of reach of the mercenaries. That way if she changed her mind about letting them go after final payment, they all went to Zombieland together.

"What's to stop you from making the final payment?"

"What's to stop you from blowing us out of the water if we don't?"

Fortesque countered. "I'm sure you have a Stinger system here. No. We get the weapon, leave, make payment and all ends well."

"You don't trust me?"

"No. I have one good reason not to."

She slipped into silence again. After a minute, she said. "Deal," and put out her hand to Laurent who took it; it was surprisingly rough. She shook Fortesque's hand, didn't let go. She frowned. "I have a feeling you were involved in the British Columbia incident with FEG." Fortesque didn't comment. He didn't want to divulge anything that wasn't public domain knowledge.

Evangeline prodded further. "I'm surprised you didn't kill the Klemtu."

"What Klemtu?" Fortesque looked at her darkly.

"The one who stumbled upon your botched operation in British Columbia." She smiled. "You were there. The anger in your eyes at having your ass whipped by a native says it all."

"He got lucky," Fortesque replied.

"You really don't remember?" She sounded amused.

"What are you talking about?"

Dragon spoke in his guttural voice. "He's the guy who screwed our operation in Iraq, Luc. He's ex-JTF2. Captain William Bradford."

A shocked expression spread across Fortesque's face. Hotstuff laughed wryly. "Really, Luc, all of us would've given anything to put a bullet through the bastard's head for all the pain he brought us and as fate would have it, he encounters *you* — who doesn't recognize him." While Fortesque was assimilating what she'd told him, Hotstuff looked at Laurent. "One stroke of bad luck after the other for FEG, huh?"

Laurent looked at her uncomprehendingly.

"You haven't heard?"

"We've been off the grid for a few days," Laurent explained.

"Eco-terrorists blew up the Orb hotel at the grand opening. Devastation as we've never seen before. Governments and surviving relatives of the rich and famous who died in the attack are clamouring for blood. Henri Laurent and Christian Black survived and even managed a footnote about how safe FEG technology is even in the face of such a catastrophe." She trailed off, shaking her head. Both men were staring at her. "You guys need to catch up on the news while we plan our assault; security along the Chinese borders has been stepped up."

Fortesque clenched his fists in growing anger at the revelations that had just been made about Bradford. "Tell me everything that happened at the warehouse," he growled.¹

¹ Read Know thy Enemy available as a free download from dougasmisquita.com

CHAPTER 43

The attack on the Orb made the front page of newspapers all over the world and around-the-clock television news coverage. Canada and the United States of America were the first to seal off their national borders and raise the security threat levels. Europe and Asia followed next. Across the world, thousands were stranded at airports as flights were grounded and border checkpoints were temporarily closed. All sea-going traffic was also ordered to hold position. The Canadian Prime Minister was immediately evacuated to a secure location from where he tried to make sense of the devastation that had struck his country. The fact that several rich, influential guests were victims ensured that coverage was grander (if such a term could be used) and that retaliation and retribution would be swift and severe.

The waterways in British Columbia were cleared to make way for the search and rescue operations. The once serene landscape was now interrupted by helicopters that thundered overhead and floatplanes that swooped in discharging Coast Guard dive teams and firefighters into the rapidly sinking hotel. The waters around the ruins of the Orb were churned to a froth by all manner of boats both public and private that were combing the immediate area for survivors. Submarine demolition teams had also been called in and a short distance away in the barge that had been converted into a floating Operations Center, engineers were working against time to devise methods to hold up the Orb long enough to conduct a thorough search.

The first fingers of blame pointed to radical Islamic groups but in the hours after the attack, none came forward to take responsibility

for the terror strike. Then came the revelation that the people who had carried out this atrocity were not Islamic fundamentalists and were with high probability, still inside Canada. Had the perpetrators of the terror attack been located elsewhere in the world, there would be no time lost in deploying ground troops under cover of classic shock-and-awe blitz air-strikes. No, since this was much closer to home — ‘and since’, as one arrogant politician put it, ‘this wasn’t the Central Asian wasteland’ (the politician was asked to resign for that tactless statement) — any military excursion was required to be handled with clean, surgical precision.

A day after the news first broke, investigating agencies released evidence that an Orb security patrol boat had accosted a cabin cruiser illegally operating under the ‘Save the Whales’ banner minutes before the attack, and had been about to arrest the crew when all contact with the patrol boat had been lost. Environmental and conversationalist organizations were besieged with picketers and calls for stricter regulation and control over their recruits and supporters. The offices of Save the Whales were mobbed and ransacked. It wasn’t long before someone latched onto the name ‘Gerald Gardner’ in the evidence, and soon, blogs were talking about conspiracies involving ‘Wiccan extremist Sebastian Laporte’. That was followed a couple of hours later by unconfirmed reports of brutal stake-burnings of a family that allegedly practised witchcraft. While rational minds called for calm, opportunists and the misinformed turned the situation into a modern-day witch-hunt. Wiccans went into hiding or began retaliating in self-defence (in groups which began to be associated with covens), and religious fundamentalists jumped into the fray with dire warnings and a call-to-arms against black magic and the occult. The news media

shuffled headlines around to grab the world's attention and outdo each other in a macabre panic-spreading game of words.

Sitting in his command centre thousands of miles away, the man marvelled at the press images of Henri Laurent deplaning at Charles de-Gaulle airport, his arm in a cast and sling, putting on a very good impression of a wounded old man who had escaped death by a breath. Following him was Christian Black. The man's eyes quickly moved over to another screen where two red dots continued to blink near Lake Balkash. He smiled to himself, satisfied that his prediction on Fortesque had been accurate.

One of his screens flashed an alert and he brought up the blog that had been flagged by his web-crawler software. A conspiracy theorist was claiming that the attack on the Orb was orchestrated by FEG to draw attention away from the murder of the Klemtu boys and the investigations into the C160 crash. Fantastic, he thought, Henri Laurent would certainly be summoned to the headquarters of the Vesuvius Group.

He quickly placed a call to his field agents who were watching Henri Laurent.

CHAPTER 44

Sorrento, Naples

The Eurocopter EC225 flew over the Bay of Naples, headed for Casa del Ferruccio. The summons had come early the previous evening and Henri Laurent had been surprised to hear that even Christian Black was summoned. Non-members (barring each member's personal bodyguard) had never been summoned to a meeting with Giovanni Ferruccio.

The helicopter swung in a small circle and then began its descent. Looking out the windows, Black saw the flashing landing lights at the corners of the grey helipad. The wheels touched down softly and they stepped out, ducking beneath the rotors, Laurent cradling his arm. The wind whipped Black's hair and flapped his overcoat about his knees. He had a quick glimpse of the surrounding vista, and the hump of Mount Vesuvius rising from the Bay before they were ushered to a security check post. At Laurent's insistence, Black had left his sidearm in the helicopter. Then they were led through a doorway down into the mansion.

"My dear Henri!"

"Giovanni," Laurent replied with forced graciousness.

In the sunlight streaming into the hall from high encircling windows, Black saw a withered old man in a sophisticated wheelchair smiling lopsidedly at them. His gnarled fingers clutched the armrests of his wheelchair, and his legs were shrivelled. With a flick of his fingers, the old man swiped at touch-sensitive controls built into the armrest

and the wheelchair moved forward. Another quick tap and the wheelchair stopped inches from them. Black could hear him wheezing, but when he spoke, his voice was clear, "Christian Black. Finally, we meet. Unfortunately, you see me as a paraplegic." He laughed cruelly as if it were a joke and broke into a coughing fit. When it subsided, he continued, "Welcome to Casa del Ferruccio. I am Giovanni Ferruccio." He put out a gnarled hand.

Black took his hand, feeling the age and bones.

"What would you like to drink? Oh, why am I asking? I have recently come into possession of a most exquisite wine." He looked at his guests. "Today is a good day to sample it." He raised a hand and immediately an aide appeared by his side and leaned in low as Giovanni whispered instructions. With a nod, the aide vanished.

"Surely you have guessed the reason for my summons?" Ferruccio cocked an eyebrow.

Laurent said, "The C160 incident in British Columbia." And Black immediately knew it was the wrong answer. Ferruccio snorted irritably and in a flash four men surrounded them. Black's arms were immediately pinned to his back and two others grabbed hold of Laurent.

"What is this?!" Laurent screamed.

Ferruccio nodded and a wicked knife appeared at Laurent's throat. Powerless to break the vice-like grip that held him, Black watched as Laurent was dragged to a stone pedestal in the centre of the hall.

"That pedestal was unearthed from a house in Pompeii," Ferruccio explained, following in his wheelchair. "Presumably it was a scourging block." He looked at one of the men and nodded. "Proceed."

Before anyone could blink, the man had Laurent's cast-arm in his grip and pulled it across the surface of the pedestal. Laurent was

screaming in pure terror now, his eyes wide. A mallet materialized in the man's other hand and with a mighty swing he brought it down on the cast.

CHAPTER 45

The acoustics of the hall amplified Laurent's cries. He crumpled to his knees, held up by the other man's grip around his waist. The man holding the mallet quickly tore away the remnants of the cast. Laurent's exposed fingers were trembling. The man quickly probed Laurent's forearm and spoke rapidly in Italian to his boss telling Ferruccio that the cast was a ruse.

"I'm not talking about your wrecked C160, Henri." Another nod from and the mallet crashed down again and they heard a distinct *crack* as Laurent's forearm was broken – this time for real. The man holding him up let go and Laurent slid to the carpet, clutching his broken forearm to his chest and sobbing in agony and shame.

"So again," Ferruccio said in a voice bereft of any emotion. "Do you know why you are here?" His voice was cold as ice and Black realized they were completely at the old man's mercy within these walls.

Between racking sobs, Laurent said, "We did not orchestrate the attack on the Orb."

"But the stories are burgeoning. Tell me everything and then we shall tend to your arm." He turned his cold eyes upon Black. "And you can fill in where required. And please do not lie."

Half an hour later, the hall was silent. Laurent was going into shock. He required immediate medical attention.

Ferruccio broke the palpable silence. "You do realize that this devastation is... how else can I put it ... *incredulous?*"

"The world is clamouring for Sebastian Laporte's head," Black said softly. "He took on more than he can handle. There's bound to be a paper trail with the kind of operation he orchestrated."

"Do you realize Laporte can claim he was acting on FEG's orders to draw attention from the C160 incident and to showcase how safe the B-Energy Cells are?"

"That's preposterous!"

"Christian, do not counter me again. What started as one blog is now going viral. We – the members of this cabal – have always operated out of the limelight. If there is an investigation, this time we will be unable to contain what they will find; no bribe will be sufficient. Every secret investment we have made in governments and organizations to ensure FEG's technology is adopted will be out in the open. And it won't stop there: Pandora's Box will be open and we will be destroyed. What are you doing to ensure that the trail does not lead to the Vesuvius Group?"

"There is no trail leading back to the Group," Laurent whimpered.

Giovanni drove his wheelchair over, stopping only when his footrest nudged Henri's knee. He leaned forward, his hooked nose inches from Henri's. "Find Laporte before he gets smart. Get him to publicly confess that he acted on his own."

Black intervened, "We are already keeping a close watch on the investigations. The minute anyone has a lead, we will be ready to move in."

Ferruccio sat upright. "Good." He nodded at his henchmen. "Get the doctor to look at Henri's injury." When the man left, he turned on Laurent with a happy gleam in his eyes and said, "Ah, Henri. As you may recall, I wagered that Father Luigi Vincente would be elected pope. If you've been watching the opinion polls, it appears that I

have a very good chance of winning that wager. It is indeed a good day to sample my vintage.”

Black stared in disbelief; Ferruccio sounded like he had done nothing more to Laurent than invite him over to relay the good news.

CHAPTER 46

Sitting beside Fortesque, checking his primary weapon, a Herstal P90 submachine gun, Dragon looked up as Hotstuff leaned over. She smelled fragrant as ever.

"We've entered Chinese airspace," she announced, "Half an hour to the drop zone."

Fortesque finished attaching the grenade launcher to his SCAR-H automatic rifle and said, "Welcoming party?"

"None yet, but be prepared for a bumpy ride. We're going over the mountains; the weather is choppy."

"Fun," Dragon growled. Then on a more serious note, "I'll tell the others." He rested his P90 against the bulkhead and bending to keep from hitting his head on the cabin roof walked over to where the three other mercenaries were huddled over their weapons.

Hotstuff saw Fortesque looking at a stacking of inverted V-shape swept-back wings secured to the cabin floor aft of the passenger section. She tapped him on the shoulder, "That's the fun stuff. It's exhilarating."

"Look forward to it."

The intercom clicked and the pilot said. "We're beginning our descent."

The Sukhoi Su-80 TD angled its nose downward. Developed jointly by the Sukhoi Company and Komsomolsk-on-Amur Aircraft Company the Su-80 is a twin-engine STOL transport aircraft capable of all-weather operation. This particular aircraft had been acquired by the mercenaries a year earlier and since then had been used for most of their airborne operations.

"Dragon," Hotstuff called. "Get the jet-wings ready too."

“Roger that.”

“Fortesque wants to help too.” She cocked a smile at Fortesque and Dragon eyeballed Fortesque as if sizing up the competition. “But you’re still my man.”

Dragon blew her a kiss. Fortesque rolled his eyes. “Let’s get this started, huh?”

The Chinese J8 interceptor fighter jet streaked over the mountains of north-west China. Ground tracking stations had registered a blip crossing over the border and a reconnoitre jet armed with air-to-air missiles had been scrambled to investigate. Flying only with his avionics — visibility nearly zero in the pitch-dark sky, rugged terrain sweeping past beneath with intermittent blotches of white snow-streaks — the lone pilot watched as the gap to the intrusive blip gradually narrowed.

In the Su-80, everyone except Dragon and another mercenary who went by the call sign Sharp because of his shooting skills had zipped up into wing-suits. Sharp had two Micro-Uzis strapped around his chest like a gunslinger. Despite what Hotstuff had said, there wasn’t much that Dragon allowed Fortesque to do with the jet-wings, explaining that Sharp and he were more experienced with the equipment. Fortesque didn’t protest; he didn’t want the jet-wings to malfunction on his account. He watched as Dragon unboxed ten silver canisters about a foot-and-a-half long.

"Propulsion units," Sharp explained. "Wanna guess who makes these, Fortesque?" Sharp handled the canisters expertly, sliding them into grooves on the jet-wings and locking them in with a satisfying *clack*.

Fortesque noted the familiar blue-glow emanating from the canisters. "I did not know FEG built these."

"En route to the Pakistanis, we got wind of it." Sharp laughed, hefted up one of the jet-wing packs and came over to Fortesque. "Hands out!"

Fortesque spread his hands. The wing-suit fabric spread out under his arms like a flying squirrel's web of skin. He could hear Sharp behind him as he strapped the jet-wings to his back. "Hold this here." Then Sharp came around and secured the harness around Fortesque's chest. "There we are." He stood back to admire his handiwork. Fortesque tried moving and found that the jet-wing unit was surprisingly light. "Okay, now, let me explain how this works. Pay attention!"

The J8 dropped like a bird of prey, descending from its cruising altitude, spearing through the clouds. Looking out of his canopy, the pilot saw the Su-80 lumbering beneath his port wing. He quickly intimated his command base that he was in position and then waited for the order that would tell him what to do.

A second later he hailed the Su-80 over the radio.

"How far are we from the drop zone?" Dragon shouted over the blaring alarm in the Su-80. Fortesque was peering out the windows and could barely make out the lights of the J8 winking back at him. All he heard Hotstuff say was, "... maybe a few seconds before they attack..." The other mercenaries were strapping on their helmets and running last-minute checks of their wing-suits and jet-wing packs. Sharp was zipping up his wing-suit. Their eyes met and he winked back before slipping on his helmet.

"Dragon, you aren't ready!" Hotstuff shouted and snapped on her helmet. She began walking over to Dragon when the Su-80 banked sharply. The floor tilted, she lost balance and fell to the deck. Fortesque grabbed a handhold and saw one of the B-Energy Cell propulsion units rolling across the floor. Dragon saw it too and cursed. Fortesque saw that Dragon's jet-wing set had only one propulsion unit attached. Everyone held their breath, struggling to keep their balance as staccato *thuds* sounded off the fuselage of the aircraft. The bulkhead shuddered with the impacts. It seemed that the Su-80 would not come out of its steep bank and that they would spiral to their deaths. The propulsion unit bounced loudly off the bulkheads and continued in a zigzag roll until it came to a halt near the rear-loading ramp. Then ever so slowly the Su-80 straightened out but the pilot's voice was shouting over the radio, "You have to jump now before that mother blows us out of the sky!"

"Fortesque! Your helmet! Dragon..."

"I'm on it," Dragon shouted back at her and bounded across the deck, lugging his jet-wings, the harness buckles flapping in the wind.

Fortesque fumbled for his helmet, found it, slipped it over his head and everything went silent. All around him, people were shouting, but he only saw their mouths open and close and could only hear his

amplified breathing. His eyes strayed to Sharp who was gesturing to his helmet and shouting something. But Fortesque couldn't hear a word of —

Someone bumped against him; he saw Hotstuff suddenly by his side, reaching under his helmet, felt her fingers on the underside of his jaw, fumbling around and then suddenly Sharp's voice exploded in his ears: "...turn on the radio!" Hotstuff glared at him.

An over-head light began flashing washes of red all over them and suddenly a chill swept into the cabin. Fortesque was thrown back a few steps as the wind whipped over the lowering ramp and caught in the fabric of his wing-suit.

"Go, go, go!" Sharp was shouting. "Dragon! The propulsion —"

"I see it! I see it!" Dragon replied. He had strapped on his jet wings and was donning his helmet.

Hotstuff noticed it too. "Dragon! No! What are you thinking!" she screamed.

The pilot shouted over the intercom. "He's coming in hot! You must go! Now!"

The ramp was halfway open and the pilot was fighting the winds while keeping an eye on the incoming J8. He knew they had no chance against a superior fighter jet. His flight panel was a Christmas tree of lights and swirling dials and piercing alarms. He turned to the co-pilot who was wiping sweat out of his eyes. "The Stinger rockets! They're our only chance!"

The co-pilot nodded grimly, unstrapped himself and stepped out into the chaos of the passenger deck. The wind was screaming. Arrayed around the deck was the drop team. Dragon was running toward the ramp and he could see the look of fear on Hotstuff's face. The ramp reached its stop and the co-pilot caught sight of a propulsion unit as it bounced once and disappeared off the edge of the ramp. The next

instant Dragon had leapt out after it. One-by-one the other mercenaries took to the ramp and dived off. The Su-80 banked again and the co-pilot was slammed into the bulkhead where they stowed the Stinger system. He hefted it and walked unsteadily down the cargo bay, keeping his balance. The wind pushed back at him but he bent over and fought against it, pushing forward until he was ten feet from the ramp. He saw the new guy, Fortesque, jump out into the night and then only Hotstuff was left silhouetted on the ramp in flashes of red light, against the dark sky. Beyond her, he could see the winking lights of the J8 as it circled in for the kill. The co-pilot got to one knee and steadied himself, raised the Stinger to his shoulder and looked through the sights. Everything was shaking so badly he feared he wouldn't get a lock. He wondered if the Stinger was designed for this. Hotstuff ran down the ramp, spread her wings and leapt out of sight.

The Stinger system whined sharply.

The co-pilot pulled the trigger. There was a *whoosh* and he was knocked back as the rocket *shoomed* out of the Su-80 through the open ramp.

CHAPTER 47

The Chinese fighter pilot was furious that his easy prey had outmanoeuvred him. Pure luck, he cursed. He didn't linger on the embarrassing fact that he had expected them to play sitting ducks and accept their fate. He had attempted to rip the wings off the Su-80 in a burst from his 23-mm twin-barreled canon, but the pilot had peeled away and his rounds had merely stitched jagged holes along the fuselage. No matter, he thought as he armed his missiles and circled in after the falling Su-80, closing in for the kill. He would finish them off with one shot now. As the J8 went into a copy spiral after the Su-80, he saw the other aircraft lowering its ramp. He had almost come around, looking at the Su-80 from a crazy angle as the J8 cut through its spiral when the first of the figures began leaping out of the open ramp. He should have called it in, but he didn't for fear that he would be taken to task for botching up an easy job. As it was his commanding officer kept screaming for updates in his ear. The man wanted to hear that the Su-80 had been shot down and that was what the pilot was going to tell him. And nothing more. After he blew the Su-80 out of the sky he would gun down the parachutists if he could. The Interceptor came, like a hawk, ready for a strike. His onboard systems fixed the Su-80 dead in his sights and his thumb hovered over the trigger, anxiously waiting for the avionics to confirm a lock. He could see straight into the Su-80 and its red-and-black flashing interior. His missile would go right into the bastards, he thought. A split second later, he had missile lock. Something flashed in the open ramp. He did not register it because he was already lowering his thumb. The Su-80 did a small jig, its wings dipping and rising and then suddenly pulled up and banked

again in what would have subjected its fuselage to undersigned-for stresses. Then he saw the Stinger missile coming at him and shouted a curse and pushed the fire button to its stop.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his PL-5 SRAAM missile lower, hang momentarily under the wing of the J8 and then scream away to its target.

The Stinger missile smashed right through the canopy glass, its pointed warhead punching him right in the mouth. The canopy exploded in a fireball, vapourising the pilot before he could feel anything.

Dragon plummeted to the Earth, his arms by his side, making his body as aerodynamic as he could to slice down through the cold air. He could hear the chatter in his helmet but he paid it no heed. His vision zeroed on the silver propulsion unit falling away. He clenched his fist and arched his body increasing his rate of descent. The canister was now just a few feet away. Dragon would have to come abreast of the falling canister and then reach for it. But the moment he did that, the wing-suit would start doing what it was designed to do: improve the aerodynamic contour of his body and start adding forward lift — while the canister continued to fall without any lift — and consequently he would be carried off-course, unable to make another attempt at catching the propulsion unit.

He wouldn't die, he knew. He had a parachute. But he would be so far off their target that he would put their entire operation in jeopardy. And Dragon was determined not to jeopardize their operation the way Luc Fortesque had years ago.

He readied himself. He was drawing in nearer to the canister, aware of the rising terrain beneath, aware of a flash of light above him that momentarily turned the night to day. He heard the explosion — no explosions — above him and knew the Su-80 had exploded. He did not have time to guess at the other explosion. He adjusted his body and began extending his right hand outward. The canister was abreast with him, its bluish glow reflecting in his visor. His hand was fully extended and he began to feel the wing inflate and felt his right-side gain lift.

His fingers touched the cold canister, closed on it.

His wrist-altimeter told him he was a thousand feet above the earth. He quickly transferred the canister to his left hand, reached over his right shoulder and, working from feel slid the propulsion unit into its rack on the starboard wing and twisted. Over the howl of the wing, he didn't hear the locking *clack*. He tested the propulsion unit quickly, edging it this way and that to confirm it was locked and then he wasted no time in spreading his hands out.

Whump!

His wingsuit filled with air and immediately Dragon was swooping upward as his fall was arrested.

"Yee-haaa!" he shouted into his radio as he circled around like a bird that had just learned to fly, savouring the thrill of flight, riding on the waves of air currents.

Fortesque had barely cleared the ramp when Hotstuff had dived off after him, so close that she nearly collided into him. At the last moment, she rolled in the air away from him. Then the shockwave of the explosion that obliterated the Su-80 pummeled into his back

like a giant fist and pushed him downward, sending him somersaulting until he managed to stabilize. He moved out of the epicentre of the explosion, out of the rain of debris. That had been one hell of a primer on wingsuits!

He kept his eyes on the other jumpers, and on his wrist compass and altimeter. He quickly got accustomed to the wingsuit and the sensation of gliding on the wind, felt the wind flowing through the intake vents in his suit, and soon grew more confident with manoeuvring to keep up with the other jumpers.

Dragon's yelp of joy came through his earpiece. He realized he disliked Dragon. He brought one arm close to his torso and he banked to the right following the spread-eagled gliding bodies of the other jumpers.

"Dragon!" Hotstuff's voice came over the radio. "We lost the Bird Brothers," she said referring to the pilots, "and we're not out of the woods by a long shot." There was silence over the radios. Then: "Everyone, follow Dragon's lead!"

Sharp's voice came over the radio, "How do we evac?" Their plan had involved being picked up by the STOL from the mountains east of Qin Zhou's research facility.

"We'll worry about that when the time comes," Dragon replied.

"Qin Zhou ought to have air transport," Hotstuff reasoned.

"We ought to up the price. For our aircraft," Dragon said.

"Fortesque?"

"I'm not the one making the payment, Dragon."

"Just running the idea past you."

"Uh-huh." Fortesque banked again around a jagged mountain peak. Flying in the dark, the rocky face looked like a behemoth rising out of the dark. The wingsuit buffeted. Tufts of snow blew outward as they soared past.

"But," Dragon continued conversationally, "What would you say if you were making payment?"

"I'd argue that you knew the risks when you quoted your price."

"Hmmm..." Dragon pondered.

Fortesque continued, "That plane was *stolen* and the two pilots were covered in the quotation. Each of you now is richer."

Sharp's voice broke in jovially over their conversation. "Let's just keep the aircraft that we steal from Qin Zhou, huh?"

"Sounds good to me," Dragon agreed.

"Okay guys," Hotstuff interrupted, ever focused, "Wings out in T-minus ten."

Nine seconds later, the jet-wings activated. The jet wings could be manually deployed or programmed to automatically deploy at a predefined altitude. The folded wings swung outward from their V-shaped storage position and Fortesque felt a definite increase in lift. All around him the wings on the other mercenaries were snapping outward into position at the same time and altitude. As one, all five mercenaries and Fortesque rose into the air from their gradual downward glide.

No longer requiring the lift from his wing-suit, Fortesque quickly unlocked and unzipped the wing fabric to restore full freedom of movement to his arms. The wing-fabric fluttered uselessly against his torso. He undid the Velcro strips holding the throttle and aerofoil controls of the jet-wings and extended the controls into position, his fingers closing around the ergonomic grips. Twisting the grips opened the throttle and squeezing the brake-like levers on each grip operated the flaps allowing him to turn. He goosed the throttle, the propulsion units came to life and he shot ahead of Sharp. The B-Energy Cells did not leave an exhaust trail but he wondered if the bluish-glow of the cells could be spotted from below.

"Easy now," Sharp said with a snicker.

"Going down," Dragon called.

Fortesque bent at the waist and began descending. They flew single-file through a ravine and then banked east, adjusting continuously to the swirling wind currents. He looked at his altimeter; the luminous dial read seventy feet.

"Landing-strip ahead," Dragon intoned. "Throttle down on my mark."

When Dragon gave the signal, Fortesque squeezed the throttles shut and entered a descending glide, the wind whistling about him. The landscape blurred past.

"Deploy parachutes."

The black ribbed rectangular sail unfurled behind him and then billowed out as it filled with air. After all the acrobatics in the air with the wingsuit and the jet wings, his body was jerked into a familiar upright position. He tugged on the steering lines and guided his descent toward a cliff-top. He saw Dragon land smoothly followed by two other mercenaries.

The updrafts were stronger near the cliff top. The earth rushed up to greet him, brown and white rock streaking under. He landed smoothly and came to an awkward stop because of the jet wings and immediately began reeling in his parasail as Sharp and Hotstuff landed after him. He fumbled for a minute with the jet-wings until it came loose and then he carried the gear over to where the other mercenaries had hidden theirs.

Fortesque raised binoculars to his eyes and toggled the focus. He panned and then stopped. In the amber hue of the viewfinder, he saw the smooth fortress-like walls of Qin Zhou's research facility. The building rose as an extension of the sheer rock-face on which it stood. The rock face was one side of a gorge, formed when a

hydroelectric project dammed a river in the north-west. Hundreds of feet below Zhou's facility, a narrow river, but a shade of its former self, snaked its course.

The range finder put the distance at a little less than a mile.

CHAPTER 48

Christian Black had not rested since the meeting at Casa del Ferruccio. Henri Laurent had been livid: *"Whatever it takes. You have a free hand! Find Sebastian Laporte — Gardner, whoever he is! And then find Luc Fortesque and my idiot son and kill Fortesque! Finish it off, Christian, before it comes back to haunt us!"*

It had taken him the better part of eight hours to weed out a reliable source within the investigating agencies on-site in BC, and then another four hours to bribe high-ranking officials. With this, he was confident that if anyone made a move on Laporte, he would know about it and would also be given a forty-five-minute window in which he could take care of business.

He had scouts keeping a close watch on the Klemtu village. When the time was right, he would order them in to take care of Bradford and Jameson.

Then, his mole in Joint Task Force 2 called in.

Sebastian Laporte's hideout had been located on one of the numerous islands in the Great Bear Rainforest and a strike team was being mobilized to assault the hideout within the hour.

"You have a forty-five-minute window," the mole told him, "as agreed."

"The money will be wired within fifteen minutes," Black replied.

He made two calls. One to his mercenaries and another to his scouts. *Time to move in.*

But Black wasn't the first person to receive the information. Unknown to him, the same contact within JTF2 had called a number

in Switzerland. A satisfied smile spread across the face of the recipient of that call.

Even though the official Canadian Joint Task Force 2 tactical team would be on-site forty-five minutes after Black's team, a rogue 5-man JTF2 unit was already en-route to kidnap Sebastian Laporte before Black's team could reach him.

Adrian Klausman, who had seen his family legacy and financial empire destroyed after the sudden disappearance of his father, Nicolas Klausman, allowed himself a congratulatory toast of the finest Scotch.

Bradford sat up in bed abruptly; the early morning sunlight was streaming in through the diaphanous curtains in their bedroom. He *knew* where to look for Jameson. After their altercation, Jameson had gone missing with Akira Chenoke. When they saw Henri Laurent on the news after the attack on the Orb, the village had taken search parties out on a hunch that Jameson had possibly gone to exact revenge on Laurent on opening night. But the massive investigation effort by the authorities had hindered their search. They were told they would be informed as bodies were recovered and were compelled to abandon their search at ground-zero.

But there was one place Bradford was certain nobody had considered. He swung out of bed, slipping into his shirt, jeans and shoes, running out of the house to where the boats were tied.

He heard a shout behind him and glanced over his shoulder. One of the Canadian Royal Mounted Police officers stationed at the village was hailing him.

"Damn!" Bradford muttered and crouched by the bollards, quickly un-looping the ropes that tied his bullet-ridden boat. As he rushed with the ropes, he stole another glance over his shoulder and saw Natasha running over the crest of the slope after the Mountie. In her hand, she held her hunting rifle. He tossed the ropes into the boat and jumped in just as the officer reached the pier.

"Stop, in the name of the law!"

"I have to!" Bradford shouted back. He turned the ignition and the boat's engines revved to life on the first attempt. Neither he nor the Mountie heard the roar of another boat heading toward the village until Natasha shouted out a warning.

"Billy! Watch out!"

CHAPTER 49

Both men turned to look in the direction she was pointing. A speedboat was racing toward the pier on a collision course, white rooster tails fanned out in both directions. Crouched in his boat, Bradford didn't present much of a target; Natasha was out of the line of fire. The only person without any cover standing right in the middle of the pier was the Canadian Mountie. They heard the submachine gun, saw the Mountie's body do a grotesque death-dance as round-after-round punched into him. The speedboat cut a sharp turn, narrowly missing the pier but throwing a great wash all over the docked boats. Bradford sputtered as the deluge washed over him. He heard a rifle shot and saw Natasha on one knee, the sights of her Remington 700 hunting rifle to her eye. She pulled off another two shots at the circling speedboat and then sprinted toward Bradford, leaping over the body of the dead Mountie and jumping into the boat, rocking it.

They stared at each other. From the village, they heard cries of alarm.

And then the roar of the speedboat as it came in for a second attack.

"Are we going, or what?" Natasha snapped at him, steadying the barrel of her rifle on the gunwales, squeezing one eye shut as she aimed through the sights and racked the bolt.

Bradford didn't argue with her nor tell her to get off the boat. He needed firepower; his gun had been confiscated by the investigators. He slammed the throttle open and the boat leapt out into the centre of the Channel.

"When I tell you to duck...!" Natasha shouted, still squinting through her scope waiting for the right shot. "*Duck!*"

He ducked. A hail of gunfire blew whatever was remaining of his windscreen to oblivion. He heard a rifle shot and Natasha swore.

"Go! Go!" she shouted, "Zigzag! Zig —" She yelped in surprise and the rifle went off as he began zigzagging the boat to dodge the gunfire. He looked back in alarm, thinking she had tumbled overboard. She glared back at him. "At least warn me next time?!"

"You said —"

But she had turned her back on him and was steadying her rifle again. "When I tell you to hold course, you do that, okay?" She jammed her hand into her jacket pocket and brought out a handful of shells, pushed them into the magazine and chambered a round.

"Okay!" he shouted back, bracing himself as the boat danced this-way-and-that on the water. Gunfire threw up plumes of water in their wake.

"Hold!" Natasha bellowed and he gripped the wheel tight. This last manoeuvre had brought them perpendicular to the direction of the pursuing speedboat, giving Natasha a clear broadside shot. She fired once, twice, thrice in rapid succession, spent cartridges flying into the air, and he hoped she had done some damage because they were now heading straight at the opposite shoreline.

"Did you get them?" he shouted as the tree-lined shores rushed toward them.

"I think so," She turned to face him. Her eyes widened as she saw the shoreline dangerously close. "Good God, Billy! Turn! Now!"

He spun the wheel hard to port and the boat tipped almost onto its side away from the bank. He righted the boat and aimed north. Behind them, the speedboat appeared to have stopped; they could

make out a figure moving about. Natasha's shots had taken out at least one of the assailants.

She confirmed it a moment later when she lowered her scope.

"Yea," she said triumphantly. "I got one of them!"

"Good!"

"Who were they? And where are we going?"

"I don't know who they are," Bradford told her as the boat bounced over the Channel. "We're going to the abandoned village to find Morrel."

"Wait," she snapped, "You know *where* Morrel is?"

"That's one place we didn't search."

"And you didn't tell anyone? For Christ's sake, Billy, his wife's a wreck."

"I don't want to give her false hopes."

"If he's alive why hasn't he come home? It's been days now."

"I don't know, maybe he's injured?" His eyes widened and she turned to look. The speedboat was coming after them again.

They both dived for cover as bullets chewed at the boat. As he ducked, he suddenly had an idea and pushed Natasha to the floor with one hand and pulled back on the throttle slowing his boat down suddenly. The hail of gunfire intensified as the distance between the two boats suddenly shrunk.

Then Bradford swung the wheel hard port right *in the way* of the oncoming speedboat.

The assailant in the speedboat screamed and frantically swung his wheel to avoid a collision. Pushed into a sudden turn at that speed, the speedboat was knocked off its centre of gravity and its prow dug underwater. Bradford and Natasha watched open-mouthed as the speedboat cart-wheeled on the Channel five times. On the fourth spin both its passengers were thrown into the air, their bodies

flailing. Finally, the boat splashed down with its keel in the air, its twin propellers spinning.

“Wow!” Natasha whispered. Then, “But you couldn’t have known that would work.” She gave him a sly look.

He shrugged with a wry smile. “No, I didn’t think it would be that spectacular.”

She was still looking at him. “Uh-huh...let’s go.”

He opened the throttle and with a pitiable coughing sound and a belch of black smoke, his damaged boat limped forward.

CHAPTER 50

The village was quiet. Nothing stirred. No birds called from the trees overhead and no insects droned in the thickets. It was as if the forest was holding its breath for something. A light wind rustled the leaves and then even the wind let up.

And then, very silently, like wraiths, five heavily armed, camouflaged men stepped out of the foliage. Their faces were masked in black balaclavas, revealing only furtive eyes. Their Heckler & Koch MP5 submachine guns were held at the ready, the combined selector/ safety switch in the single-round position. Their secondary weapons consisted of SIG Sauer P228's and a wicked-looking knife. Spare ammo was strapped in their combat webbing.

Adrian Klausman's team.

The official rosters would show that this JTF2 team was covering another part of British Columbia and the records would be corroborated by the faithful signals from their GPS transponders that had been deposited at that location. Their mission was to kidnap Sebastian Laporte. The entire operation was estimated at five minutes.

The five men quickly fanned out in a crouch-walk. Though their reconnaissance of the village from the forest had not raised any red flags, they were not taking any chances. They methodically searched each of the huts. Soon, they were gathered in the clearing. Two men stood watch, facing outward from the huddle where their captain conferred with the others.

"Suggestions?" the captain asked looking at his men, then at the countdown timer on his watch.

"There's one place we could search," one of the soldiers said.

The captain raised an eyebrow. "Go on."

"Klemtu buddy of mine back in the day when we were posted in Iraq was always talking about the numerous places to hide among these islands. He mentioned an *abandoned village* on one of these islands. Seems like a good place for Laporte to lay low."

The captain pulled out a topographical map of the Great Bear Rainforest, unfolded it. "Show me." It would have been easier to use a GPS-enabled tablet computing unit that JTF2 navigators were equipped with, but they wanted to stay off the grid. As the soldier traced his finger across the map, one of the lookouts caught their attention with a low whistle.

Someone was coming.

Instantly the map was tucked away, weapons came up into position and the men dispersed, taking cover in the shadows of the huts.

Morrel Jameson awoke bathed in sweat and running a temperature. The exertion of the last few days coupled with the loss of blood had weakened him terribly. He knew he was too weak to make the journey home; he would have to let Akira try. If she returned with help in time, then good, otherwise...

In her dream, someone was reaching for Akira. The face was hooded and not knowing who was coming for her scared her. She backed away, to the edge of a cliff. A raging river flowed through the gorge hundreds of feet below. Loose rocks cascaded into the frothing river. The figure in her dreams touched her. She flinched

with a scream... and she awoke, gasping for breath. She was being strangled. Her eyes widened and she shook her head, groped for the hands around her neck.

"Akira!" A fierce whisper. "Akira! It's me, Morrel! Be quiet!"

Recognition flashed in her eyes, and she calmed down instantly. He nodded at her, cast a wary glance to one side and then slowly his hand came away from her mouth. When he looked back she caught the fear in his eyes. She raised her eyebrows questioningly. He put his finger to his lips and said, "We have company."

The log cabin they had sheltered in had succumbed to years of neglect and the onslaught of nature's vagaries. It was wet from the rain of the last few days and stank of decay, but they didn't have the luxury of being picky. She was on her feet immediately and at the window. Jameson eased himself up, and together they peered through the stained, broken windowpane.

Outside, dappled sunlight filtered through the tree canopy. Her cheek touched the window. Silhouetted against the light was a group of people coming up the overgrown path that led to the village. They were armed. She sucked in a breath and ducked below the window, slid down to the leaf-strewn floor.

"Who are they?"

"I can't tell for sure," he said in a hoarse voice. "They might be the men from the boat."

Her eyes widened. They had put two and two together the previous night and figured that the men who had tried to kill them were also responsible for the attack on the Orb. "We have to hide!"

"You have to get help."

"Not without you."

"I can't make it. I'm too weak. You go; someone needs to know where they are."

"There's only one door. They will see me."

"Go out the back windows."

"They'll hear the sound!" She was scared.

"Then give me an alternative!" he growled, irritated.

She nodded. "The back windows it is." She grabbed his hand. "Wait! How do we even know it's them?"

A moment later they heard Sebastian Laporte calling out, "Set up a perimeter here!"

They saw a few of the men spreading out into the village. One lingered exchanging words with Laporte and gesturing wildly. The next moment the man was doubled over clutching his midriff. Akira gasped as Laporte pushed the man away and withdrew a blade from his belly.

"Any other bright ideas?" Laporte shouted looking around the circle of his followers, challenging them. No one said anything. "Good! Then get to work!" And he began walking away from the writhing man...

Right toward the cabin they were hiding in!

Jameson and Akira quickly crawled away from the window, in a mad dash toward the back of the cabin.

Christian Black's team stepped into the clearing. They carried an assortment of weapons and after quickly ascertaining that the camp was deserted gathered around to confer.

Hidden in the shadows, the commanding officer of Klausman's JTF2 unit glanced at his watch. They had a few minutes before their air-support arrived. He mouthed signals to his men and put up an index

finger. One minute and then they would cut them down if they didn't leave.

One of the newcomers examined the grass in the clearing, whispered something to the others and instantly their weapons were up at the ready. They'd seen the JTF2 team's footprints.

It was time to finish this before they lost the advantage, Klausman's JTF2 commanding officer thought. He simply opened fire into the centre of the camp. The rest of his team followed suit, firing their suppressed weapons from the shadows.

Black's mercenaries were cut down instantly. Some of them went down firing blindly into the forest, the blasts from their unsuppressed weapons rending the morning quiet. Some of them tried to get to cover, but they were shot in the back.

When it was over the JTF2 unit stepped out of concealment. One of the mercenaries was still alive. He was quickly flipped onto his back and held down by a callous boot to a bullet wound in his stomach. He spat blood and looked at the suppressor pointing at his face.

"Who sent you?" the JTF2 commander asked.

The dying man coughed. He raised his neck and mustered his waning strength, "Rot in hell!"

In reply, a single *pop*, and his head snapped back, a bloody hole in the centre of his forehead.

CHAPTER 51

When Bradford left to find Jameson, he hadn't counted on being fired upon by two gunmen in a boat and hadn't counted on crossing paths with the most wanted man in Canada. He was oblivious to the spider scurrying across his forearm as he sized up the two men guarding Laporte's boats, complaining softly among themselves about how Laporte was going to get them all killed. One of the guards lit a cigarette and suggested that they surrender as soon as the authorities arrived. The other considered it seriously. This was way over their heads.

Bradford had a plan: he looked over at Natasha and using signs outlined it. He would overpower the guards, strip them of their weapons, find Jameson, and then hightail it back under cover of Natasha's rifle fire. She nodded back. Now he needed both the men to be looking away to buy them an additional advantage. He had just begun chanting, "Look away, look away, look away..." when a scream echoed across the village.

Both the men looked toward the village.

Uncaring about the distraction, Bradford lunged out of hiding, burst out of the foliage and crash-tackled the nearest guard. Even as they were falling to the ground, he felt something flying above his head.

The stone that Natasha had expertly thrown made contact with the other guard's face. The guard stumbled, blood streaming from his forehead and Natasha was upon him, swinging the butt of her Remington 700 *smack* at his head, knocking him unconscious.

Bradford knocked his opponent out with a vicious chop to the jaw. He relieved the guards of his assault rifle and headed toward the village.

Natasha thought about disabling all but one of Laporte's boats but realized she didn't know how much time she had until Bradford and the others came running out of the village. Bradford was depending on her cover fire and she needed to be ready to provide it so she melted into the shadows, took up a vantage position and waited.

Akira Chenoke's scream caught in her throat. Her plan to escape had gone horribly wrong: she had been spotted by Laporte's scouts as she climbed out the window. Now she and Jameson were his prisoners. The High Priestess of Sebastian Laporte's rogue coven stamped down on her neck, forcing her face flat on the floor of the cabin. She shut her eyes as Laporte kicked Jameson in the gut one more time. He stepped back and two of his men roughly hoisted Jameson upright. Jameson's knees buckled but they held him up as Laporte spun around with a wicked blow to the face.

Akira heard the *slaps* of Laporte's fists on Jameson's face. When she opened her eyes Jameson's face had been battered to a pulp. Laporte was throttling him, leaning in close, snarling something that only he and Jameson could hear. The man was a psychopath.

"Please," she whimpered.

His immediate rage spent, Laporte let go of Jameson and shouted, "Take them both outside. We'll finish them off and leave them for the scavengers!" There was a *zing* and a sickle appeared in his hand.

The pressure on Akira's neck let up suddenly Laporte was in front of her. She could see the insanity in her captor's eyes and gasped as her hair was yanked back exposing her neck. Tears fell freely as the cold blade of the sickle traced an arc across her neck. At the edge of

her vision, she had a blurred impression of Jameson being dragged out of the cabin leaving a bloody smear.

“Please, I beg you...”

Laporte flicked his eyes at the High Priestess. “Outside!”

CHAPTER 52

Crouched behind a tree, Bradford watched with mounting anxiety as Jameson was brought out of one of the cabins and thrown to the ground. His friend made a pathetic attempt to crawl away but a kick to the ribs put an end to it and he was flipped over onto his back.

Bradford clutched his 'borrowed' QCW-05 rifle at the ready and darted out of cover just as Akira Chenoke was pushed out of the cabin by a tall woman. The woman saw Bradford and screamed a warning. He pulled the trigger and the two men standing over Jameson fell where they stood. The others dived out of the way and began laying down return fire, cutting off his approach.

Then Jameson rose from where he lay and tackled the nearest gunman. In his hand, he held a rock and despite his injuries, repeatedly smashed it into the gunman's face, relieving the man of his weapon. A bullet hit him, and he went down, out of sight, in the high grass.

"Morrel!"

Akira had used the distraction to kick the taller woman in the shin. The two women wrestled.

Another of Laporte's men went down. Jameson had shot him and opened a gap in the cover fire. Bradford zigzagged, fired again taking another man down. He saw Akira push the woman to the ground and begin strangling her.

And then Laporte stepped out of hiding. Sunlight glinted off his sickle. In two steps, he reached Akira and hooked the curve of the sickle around her neck.

Jameson screamed, "Nooooo!" as Akira was yanked off the Priestess, gurgling on her own blood, dying even before she hit the ground.

Laporte scrambled for the cabin as Jameson unleashed a burst of fire in his direction. The bullets disintegrated the Priestess' head into nothingness.

"Morrel! Get out of there!" Bradford shouted as he lay down more cover fire. He saw Jameson retreating on his butt, pushing with the heels while firing short bursts at Laporte's men. Then he got to his feet unsteadily, and limp-ran toward Bradford. Bradford looped an arm under Jameson's armpit. Jameson was frothing at the mouth and his legs were giving out. It took all of Bradford's strength to hold them both up. Jameson stumbled and the two men went down. Bradford's assault rifle slipped from his grasp, and he barely held onto the strap.

"Leave me," Jameson gasped in his ear as Bradford tried to pick him up. They looked up and saw Laporte's men bearing down on them and, bringing up the rear, armed with an assault rifle, Laporte himself. Bradford jerked the QCW-05 on its strap so that it flipped into his palm, swung it around and fired right into the oncoming charge. At the same time, he tried again to pull Jameson to his feet but the older man was too heavy.

There was a *crack* and one of their pursuers went down. Natasha! *Crack!* Another man went down into the tall grass.

Now or never, Bradford thought. He tossed the assault rifle to the ground, grabbed Jameson with both hands and heaved. With better leverage, he could get Jameson to his feet and drag him toward the boats.

Natasha was out of hiding and pulled the trigger a third time. Her round wounded another of the pursuers but didn't drop the man.

She racked the bolt and the spent cartridge was ejected, the casing glinting in the sunlight. She was already tracking her next target. Laporte came into her sights and she pulled the trigger just as another head bobbed into her sights. The head exploded in a spray of red and she saw Laporte ducking as the body of the man who had inadvertently taken the bullet for him collapsed.

Then Bradford and a near-death Jameson were huffing and puffing past her.

"Which one?" Bradford called as he ran past.

"Any of them," she called over her shoulder. "Didn't have time to sabotage the boats when all that firing started."

Bradford helped Jameson settle into the boat and heard him mumble, "Not been the best of days, huh." He coughed up blood-laced spittle.

"Natasha! Come on!"

She was leaping into the boat the next instant, squeezing off another shot. "Go! Go!"

Bradford leapt at the console and turned the ignition key. The boat roared to life and he spun the wheel.

Bullets ripped the foliage at the shoreline. Three pursuers jumped into another boat. Bradford cut for the centre of the Channel and heard Natasha fire. He didn't see that she had expertly put two bullets into the outboard engine of the boat that was closest to them effectively disabling it. But then in the time it took for her to load her rifle, another boat was speeding after them, Laporte at the helm.

"Get down!" she shouted as Laporte stepped onto the bow of his boat, braced himself, feet apart, and opened fire.

All three of them ducked as bullets flew overhead. Keeping one hand on the wheel Bradford recoiled as another bullet sent wood

splinters at him. Thus, he was momentarily in the line of fire and took a round in the shoulder. He merely grunted, clutched his shoulder and spun the boat out of the line of fire with his other hand.

“Hey!” Natasha cried in alarm as the bullets she was loading spilt all over the boat. She fumbled blindly for the rolling bullets, clawed her fingers around two bullets. The others had rolled out of reach. No time. She pushed the bullets into the magazine, chambered a round and brought the rifle up over the gunwale... just as Laporte’s boat rammed into them, its prow cutting into their boat. The two boats spun in a small circle, locked.

Natasha was knocked backwards; Bradford was slammed into the console; Jameson who was lying on his back stared helplessly as Laporte — who had fallen flat on his face on the bow of his boat— got to his feet, brought his weapon up and pulled the trigger.

The bullets blasted into Jameson, raking his body. Jameson’s body jumped with each impact and his hands fell limp by his sides.

Laporte was realigning his gun at Natasha. Expecting the inevitable, Natasha covered.

CHAPTER 53

But the bullets went in an arc over her head because Bradford had leapt at Laporte, smashing into him, and they fell back against the windscreen of Laporte's speedboat. Spider webs snaked out across the windscreen as the two men wrestled for the gun.

Natasha came out of her fetal position as Laporte's boat began backing out of the tear in her boat's hull. Water was already pouring in through the gash and sloshing around her feet. She picked her rifle out of the water, hoped it was working, and fired at point-blank range at the man who had stood up in the other boat. Her round took him in the chest. Now there was only the helmsman who was struggling to free the boat before it was dragged underwater along with her sinking boat.

Then suddenly an unmarked CH-146 Griffen helicopter thundered low over the Channel and hovered above the two boats like an insect. An M134D minigun pointed out of its open bay doors.

Aimed down at them.

The Gatling cannon sprung to life. A withering 2000 rounds per minute shredded the two boats instantly but spared Bradford and Laporte who were locked in mortal combat.

"Cease fire!" The rogue JTF2 commanding officer raised his palm.

The M134D operator released the trigger and the cannons whirred to a stop. As the Griffen hovered over the sinking boats, the commanding officer brought a bullhorn to his lips. "Sebastian

Laporte put down your weapon and come with us if you want to live.”

Laporte tossed his gun aside and slowly got to his feet.

Lying prone on the bow of Laporte’s boat, Bradford hesitatingly looked around for Natasha in the other boat, but she was nowhere to be seen. Through the shattered windscreen he saw the other boats from Laporte’s fleet racing away rather than face the minigun. Groaning in pain, he squinted against the sun at the helicopter looming above him. The downdraft whipped spray into his face. They had come for Sebastian; he had been spared because the minigun couldn’t get a clear shot at him without hitting Sebastian. He realized he was very close to the water and could roll overboard, swim under the keel of the boat and then try making it to shore. He was about to put his plan into action when the bullhorn clicked again: “Mr Bradford, you too will come with us. If you refuse, we will kill you. You have five seconds to comply.”

Five minutes later, both men were sitting in the Griffen as it headed east. Their hands were cuffed behind their backs. One of the masked men had inspected Bradford’s wound and declared it wasn’t life-threatening. The minigun retracted and the bay door was pulled shut.

Bradford watched as their captors put a black sackcloth over Laporte’s head. Laporte put up a resistance but he was subdued by

a sedative that was injected into his neck. Then they turned their attention on Bradford.

"Why me?" he muttered as the sackcloth came nearer.

In response one of the men pulled off his balaclava and Bradford sucked in a breath.

"It was the best I could do, Billy: buy you some more time."

"Couldn't have me killed on your watch, huh?" Billy retorted angrily as he recognized one of the men from the rogue JTF2 unit, the guy who had led Klausman's team to the island. They had served together in Iraq.

The man looked sheepish but resigned to the decision he had made.

"You watched our backs in Iraq..." He trailed off and held up the sackcloth. "We won't sedate you."

One of the other masked men growled. "No survivors. That was our order."

"Anyone touches him has to deal with me."

"It's on your head."

As the sackcloth came over his head, Bradford felt something cold and metallic being pressed against his palms. A knife, he thought. And then it was shoved into his back pocket and he felt an inconspicuous reassuring tap on his shoulder as the sackcloth was cinched around his neck.

CHAPTER 54

The mercenaries bivouacked on the opposite side of the gorge, in the mountains, maintaining round-the-clock surveillance on the cube-like fortress.

Cold winds swept down on them continuously and the landscape was a monotonous, depressing grey. On the first day, they had observed a Mil Mi-17 transport helicopter descend into a concealed heliport in the upper levels of the research facility. They decided to commandeer the Mi-17 for their getaway. But first, Fortesque reminded them, they had to get into the facility. After that one incident, there had been no movement into or out of the facility. The seemingly impregnable walls stared back at them with defiance. In the evening of the second day, Fortesque lay prone on the narrow ledge outside his bivouac peering through high-power binoculars. A light wind rustled the fur lining of his parka and he worked a kink in his knees. The movement caused the binoculars to shift and he spotted something. He quickly focused the image and his lips curled in triumph.

“Sharp!”

He heard movement and Sharp was beside him. “What is it?”

Fortesque handed Sharp the binoculars. “North-west corner... where the walls meet the mountain.”

Sharp looked. Framed in the viewfinder’s image, a Chinese security guard smoked a cigarette near an open ventilation shaft. The cigarette winked a glowing orange-red. The iron grate that sealed the shaft hung open on hinges. The guard smoked for a full five minutes, savouring each drag, taking time to stretch, kick stones off the mountain in boredom, obviously making the most of his freedom

from the confines of the facility. When he was done, he flicked the cigarette butt over the side of the mountain, craned his neck to watch it fall hundreds of feet. Then he took one last look around and climbed back into the ventilation shaft, pulling the grating closed behind him.

"See it?"

"Looks like a way in." He patted Fortesque on the shoulder. "I'll go tell the others."

Over the next sixteen hours, they kept watch over the ventilation shaft and spied guards stealing smoke-breaks on the small precipice. They concluded that there were three different guards and their patrol took them past the ventilation shaft, where they snuck out for a little R&R. Fortesque suggested that the section of the research facility that gained access to the ventilation shaft must be bereft of video surveillance for the guards to chance it.

On the afternoon of the third day, Hotstuff decided to move in. Her plan was to overpower the guard who took the next smoke break.

And so, it was that when the ventilation grate creaked open and the guard stepped out taping his cigarette case in the palm of his gloved hand to free a smoke, he found himself staring down the snub-nosed barrel of Dragon's P90 rifle. Eyes hidden by a visor and wrapped in layers of cold-weather gear, Dragon was ferociously intimidating. He threatened the smaller-built guard via a series of hand gestures that translated into, 'Make one sound and I'll toss you off the mountain!' Already fearful of the consequences of his blunder, the guard complied. Dragon took a quick look down the ventilation shaft and he could just about make out a circle of light at

the far end. He whistled softly and the guard's eyes widened as a pair of gloved hands appeared at the edge of the precipice and another mercenary climbed up beside Dragon.

The second mercenary — Clay (short for Claymore) — shoved the guard against the cold rock, disarmed him, and deftly flex-cuffed him.

"Make it quick, Clay. The others will be on pins!"

Clay smacked the guard in the face to get his attention. Then he began interrogating the guard in fluent Chinese. To Dragon it appeared that the guard was quite cooperative. After a few minutes, Clay was done.

"What are we looking at?"

"Fortesque guessed right: the shaft leads to a section of corridor that is currently not monitored; camera went bust. A corridor leads to an elevator that goes up to the weapons research laboratories. Central Control is another level up. A single catwalk leads to/ from the elevator to the control room. The heliport is another level up with access from the Control level. The guards are armed like him with heavy duty Tasers and this." Clay held up the Ukrainian Fort 14TP silenced pistol they had taken from the guard. "Some guards are armed with JS9s. All access is controlled via biometrics, and he's low level... restricted access. We'll need to find us a thumb and eyeball that can open the doors we need."

"Or get into Central Control." Dragon looked at the Chinese guard who had now started to shiver a bit. "Think he's telling the truth?"

"I threatened to stuff his mouth with a grenade and pull the pin if he didn't tell us what we needed. So yes, he isn't lying"

Dragon whistled twice.

Suspended in the air from the underside of the precipice on their tactical ascenders Fortesque, Hotstuff, Sharp and another

mercenary Dash — his call sign an allusion to his skills at quick getaways in any type of vehicle over sea, land or air — waited for the signal from Dragon.

Hotstuff heard it first and activated the winch attached to her harness. She was reeled upward and using the ridges in the rock as handholds, she climbed over the lip of the precipice and jettisoned her ascender.

When Fortesque climbed up, he saw Dragon and Hotstuff stripping out of their insulated clothing. Sharp was unpacking full-body jumpsuits from his rucksack but there was something weird about — “Are you serious?!” Fortesque mouthed in awe as Hotstuff began slipping into her jumpsuit. He watched in amazement as right before his eyes, her legs disappeared and then her thighs and midriff. As she shrugged her arms into the sleeves of the suit, her arms disappeared and when she zipped up completely, her head appeared to be floating in the air. Then she must have pulled on a cowl because even her head vanished from sight. Fortesque found that only if he peered very hard from an angle could he make out a ghostly outline, a slight ripple when Hotstuff moved.

But for all practical purposes, Hotstuff had just turned invisible!

“Cool, huh?” Hotstuff said. She laughed, a disembodied laugh, seemingly emanating out of the ether. Then her floating head reappeared and she shook her hair free. She had pulled off the cowl. “But not built for cold-weather yet; we have to get indoors quickly!”

Fortesque couldn't restrain himself. “*Awesome!*” He had heard of research into cloaking techniques using the birefringence properties of calcites — metamorphic materials that bent light at just the right angle to eliminate light diffusion — the phenomenon that made anything visible; and even experiments with dielectrics sewn into

fabric. A few years ago, researchers had manufactured a postage-stamp-size nano-mesh that could manipulate light waves and was flexible enough to be used in garments. But there had always been issues with the size of macroscopic objects that could be cloaked, the wavelength of light that could be manipulated, and problems with visible distortion around the object being cloaked. There had been much talk about bringing invisibility cloaks out of the realm of fantasy and fiction into everyday life. But he hadn't expected *this*. Dragon was holding out a jumpsuit to him. He took it with a wide grin.

CHAPTER 55

The uppermost level of Qin Zhou's research facility — the level directly beneath the heliport — housed the offices and living quarters for the staff and security personnel replete with a gymnasium. The Central Control room with its wraparound windows was suspended dead centre of this level. A single retractable catwalk led from the main elevator bank to the control room. A short distance away was a secondary elevator that led to/ from the heliport. This elevator opened directly to the reception rooms below the Central Control room. In the event of unauthorized access, the reception rooms could be sealed off until the intruders inside were either gassed or — if they made it out — hunted down in the research facility.

"There he is!"

The chief-of-the-watch stepped away from the windows and went over the screens that relayed surveillance video from all over the facility. One of the technicians tapped the screen with a pen and in an accusatory tone said, "They are loafing in that corridor now that the camera is non-functional." On screen, the guard who had gone missing for ten minutes had just turned a corner and was walking alone toward the main elevators.

"Damn fools," the chief-of-the-watch agreed, "would have gotten us into trouble for triggering a false alarm. When will that camera get fixed anyway?"

"It will happen before Wei Ling arrives tomorrow."

"Okay. In the meantime, have the corridor checked and I want to meet those three guards."

It looked like Qin Zhou had restored and converted an ancient fortress into his research facility. They were walking down stone corridors which were still interspersed with iron hoops for sconces and boarded-up doors which Fortesque guessed, led into the very mountain. To the dungeons, he imagined.

The jumpsuits worked like a charm; no alarms were raised. The only trouble was they could not see each other. The reason: Dash had forgotten to pack the monocle that was equipped with a thermal sensor thus allowing the wearer to lock onto the heat signature of people around. They had improvised by walking in formation so that no one bumped into the other and so far, they were managing okay. Their prisoner led them to the main elevator bank. A fingerprint scanner stood on a pedestal near the elevator doors. The guard placed his palm on the scanner and pushed the button to call the elevator.

It arrived and they all stepped in, bumping against each other. The elevator doors closed silently and the car began to rise. At the second level, Fortesque, Hotstuff and Dragon stepped out. The elevator continued up to Central Control.

The technician leaned forward again, peering at the in-elevator video feed. He mumbled under his breath.

"What is it?" his colleague enquired softly.

"The elevator stopped at the second level but the guard did not exit; he is now heading toward the catwalk access chamber. Was he summoned?"

"Not until he gets off duty."

"Warn the guards in the access chamber."

They toggled the camera zoom while at the same time alerting the two guards manning the access chamber to the catwalk. "No, nothing suspicious." It did not strike either of them that the guard was not armed... not even with his standard-issue taser and pistol!

What happened next confounded them and lost them precious seconds: one moment the two guards were conversing with the new arrival in the access chamber and the next moment one of them was writhing in agony, falling to his knees, his face contorted in pain while the other guard was propelled by an unseen force across the small chamber *smack* into the wall with stunning force. The security guard who had been taken prisoner was gesticulating wildly. But soon he too was convulsing on the floor in a fetal position.

"What the hell!" the technician watching the monitors said in a raised voice. The chief-of-the-watch came over in time to see one of the stunned guards, bent at the waist, dragged by an invisible force over to the biometric scanners, stumbling like a drunk.

"What is happening? What? Look!" The chief-of-the-watch grabbed the camera controls and panned and zoomed in to a partially obscured taser floating in the air. "Someone tell me what that is!" The other cameras now showed the guard's hand being forced onto the scanner and his head being yanked up, level with the retinal scanner.

Everyone had now gathered around, leaving their positions. Some were looking out across the length of the catwalk to the access chamber. A soft voice announced in Chinese, "Access granted."

It was the voice that brought them out of their stupor. Some invisible force had just overpowered three guards and was now heading out across the catwalk. On screen, the guard fell forward, his jaw hit the scanner, and he bounced off, his body slumping to the floor.

"Turn on the lights! All of them!"

Whump! Whump! Whump!

Brilliant floodlights came on, bathing the level in blinding light. But there was nothing to see.

"There's nothing here, sir!"

"Everyone to their stations! Now!"

People scurried back to their posts. The chief-of-the-watch ran to the windows and peered outside.

"Open fire on the catwalk!" he ordered his guards in desperation.

There was a narrow verandah that ran around the Central Control room. Two guards stepped out onto the verandah, JS9s in hand and aimed down the catwalk.

Sharp, Clay and Dash ran full-out, footfalls echoing off the metal catwalk. There were no safety rails; it was straight twelve feet down. Not dangerous, but then they couldn't afford a fall.

"Clay," Sharp called over his shoulder, "Ready?"

"Ready as ever!"

Up ahead, two security guards had their guns pointed down the catwalk. Sharp unzipped the front of his jumpsuit pulling out his micro-Uzis, one in each hand and squeezed the triggers simultaneously.

The chief-of-the-watch stared in horror as his men were gunned down by two floating micro-Uzis, their bodies thrown back into the windows of the control room.

"Retract the catwalk!"

There was a clanking sound. Sharp and Clay stumbled in mid-run but kept their balance. Dash regained his footing quickly. The catwalk was sliding backwards, retracting into the wall opposite from the control room. Sharp jumped and landed on the verandah wrapped around the control station. Clay barely made it, teetering on the edge. His flailing hands found Sharp's shoulder and he pulled himself to safety. They looked back for some sign of Dash and saw the end of the receding catwalk, now fifteen feet away. Dash wouldn't be able to make the jump.

Dash screeched to a stop just in time. He looked back. If he didn't get off the catwalk he would be slammed into the wall behind. With no other option, Dash took a breath and jumped off the catwalk shouting, "I'll catch up with you guys!"

"He'll make it!" Sharp said and ducked for cover as Clay attached a block of Semtex plastic explosive to the door of the control room.

The explosion blew the door in. Two flash-bangs sailed through the ravaged doorway. Twin flashes of blinding light followed by ear-pounding explosions incapacitated the people inside. Two canisters followed, bouncing into the room, spinning in circles and rolling under the tables spewing an odourless gas.

The chief-of-the-watch was wrenched to his feet; something was clamped over his mouth and nose and instantly his breathing improved. His sight cleared and he began to regain his senses. He

sucked in the life-giving air as all around his staff succumbed to the gas. A gun was pressed into his neck. He felt searing heat in the side of his head and blotches of red blossomed on the surveillance monitors. His eyes widened in horror and he screamed, clutching his ravaged flesh, blood seeping through his fingers. His ear had been shot off!

Sharp yanked him back to his feet. Clay's face, visible now behind a gas mask, was inches from his. "Do as I say or die. Unlock the research laboratory now!"

CHAPTER 56

"Merry Christmas!" Hotstuff said with a smile as the doors to the laboratory opened wide. She pulled off her cowl, unzipped her jumpsuit and pulled out a Heckler and Koch UMP, unfolded the buttstock and led the way into the laboratories. "Breathers on!" Dragon tossed a canister high into the air sending it right across the room. Fortesque threw one underarm rolling it across the floor of the laboratory.

Researchers and engineers in white lab-coats stared at them as they moved among the workstations, fanning out, using the lab equipment as a shield. Their eyes were alert, looking for any signs of —

A head popped up, hands extended in front holding a Fort 14TP pistol and Dragon's P90 buzzed. The man collapsed between the workstations. Another tried to ambush them from the right, but he was foiled by Fortesque who clipped his kneecaps. Hotstuff spotted several older men and women huddled silently in a glass-walled conference room to her right and she made for it. Out of the corner of her eye, she sensed movement and ducked just as a computer exploded. She swung the UMP around unleashing a volley of fire taking out an entire workstation. Acrid smoke rose into the air. But no return fire came her way. She stormed purposefully toward the conference room. The people inside backed away from the door which they had locked in a feeble attempt to stop her. She gave them a wry smile, blew the lock away and kicked the door in.

"Surely one of you can help me," she said, knowing she had just seconds before the gas seeped into this room. She held out a breather teasingly. "I'm looking for *Apocalypse*."

They stared at her, panic and fear etched across their wrinkled faces as outside, people collapsed to the floor; the sounds of their choking and gasping, and the crash of falling equipment muffled by the glass walls.

“Well?” Hotstuff said, cocking an eyebrow. They were torn with indecision and so she put a bullet into the shoulder of the woman nearest to her to help them with their decision.

The attack on the facility was so sudden and unexpected, and the security so complacent from years of isolation and inactivity that their response was laboured, incoherent and marred by the pandemonium that erupted among the facility staff when Clay’s explosives took out the security room.

Crouching in the shadows beneath the security room after his leap from the catwalk, Dash put a bullet into the first guard to step out of the reception rooms to investigate the attack. The man fell back pushing the door wide open and Dash charged across the floor darting among the few civilians who were running for shelter. His finger jammed down on the trigger and two more guards who were in the doorway did the death-dance. He paused for cover just outside the reception room before swinging in around the doorjamb, going in low. He rolled into the room and came up on one knee, panning his gun.

“All clear!” he said into his radio.

Sharp acknowledged Dash and said, "Hotstuff, we're ready." Just a few seconds ago, Sharp and Clay had severed communications with the outside world. If things went per plan, they would evac within thirty minutes tops. They would be long gone by the time any help arrived at the facility.

"Dash, secure the chopper; Clay is coming over to you."

Clay nodded and stepped out of the security room, rappelled to the ground below and bounded over to the reception area.

Dash took the elevator to the heliport. Sharp had briefed him on the situation as he saw it on the surveillance feed: two unarmed pilots, three guards, one JS9, two 14Ts. Manageable.

The elevator *dinged* and the doors opened. The two JS9s came up, itching to blow any threat to shreds. But the elevator was empty. Cautiously one of the guards approached the elevator while his buddies covered him. He peeked inside, and called, "There's nothing here!" and turned around... to see his buddies and the two pilots slumped dead near the landing gear of the helicopter.

A silenced H&K Mark 23 pistol danced in mid-air and he caught a flash of its laser sight before he was propelled into the elevator, two bloody holes blossoming in his chest.

Concealed in his Invisibility Jumpsuit, Dash clicked his radio, "All clear!"

The Chinese scientist who had volunteered to take them to the *Apocalypse* weapon system led them into a tunnel system bored

into the mountains. The tunnel sloped downward for a hundred yards before spilling out into a small chamber that fronted a vaulted bunker. Here a red warning light still winked back at them. This inner vault was not run off the main power grid for security purposes. "I cannot open the prototype vault on my own; it requires Qin Zhou's access credentials and —"

Hotstuff levelled her gun at him. "You're not bluffing?"

"No, I swear! I can show you..." He reached for the touch-panel near the vault, but Dragon grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and shook his head, no. "If what he says is true, any unauthorized access attempt may trigger a fail-safe." He noted the flicker in the scientist's eyes and said, "I believe that was his plan all along!" He raised his gun to the man's forehead. "No wonder he was so eager to *help*."

"Wait," Hotstuff said staying the execution, "we may still need him." She caressed the domed surface of the vault door like a lover. Then she shrugged out of her jumpsuit and un-shouldered her backpack saying, "This vault has deadbolts all along its circumference. We can't disable all of them, but —" She palmed a compact plasma cutter and connected it to a compact power unit. "FEG has made power sources so much less bulky and when you have the latest in military-grade plasma cutters..." She switched on the plasma cutter and attacked one section of the vault. The plasma jet burned brilliantly melting through the steel of the door. Five minutes later she had cut three cubby holes into an arc-section of the vault near the wall. On cue, Dragon handed her three disc-like packages.

"Potent jam-shots," she explained, "concocted by Clay." She pushed the discs into the cubby holes and connected the blasting caps. "Take cover," she cautioned, backing away into the tunnel with the

detonator. When they were thirty yards away from the vault, Hotstuff detonated the blasting caps.

The explosion shook the tunnel and a thick cloud of dust billowed at them. Ears ringing, they made their way back to the bunker amid an intermittent shower of rock and stone. The jam-shots had blasted a ragged opening right through a section of the vault door and had taken away a part of the wall too. They stepped into the silence of the vault.

“And a Happy New Year!” Dragon exclaimed.

There were ten unmarked doors on either side with a keypad lock mounted by each door. At their prodding, their hostage led them to the third door on the right just as Sharp’s voice came over the radio, “Patrol of six headed your way.”

“Roger that,” Dragon said. He exchanged a glance with Hotstuff; she nodded almost imperceptibly, and Dragon turned and walked back to the main laboratories.

CHAPTER 57

"Guys," Dash said, "How's it going?" as he ran through his pre-lift-off mental checklist in the helicopter.

"Just fine and dandy!" Clay replied. In the background, Dash could hear gunfire.

"Yea, you're missing out on all the fun!" Sharp hissed as he pitched into the gun-battle Clay was fighting with the security guards. "Clay, one just got past me... you see him?"

"Yea, I do." Gunshot. "Got him."

Dragon's voice cut in, "Don't get too cocky; won't be long before they throw caution into the winds and start tossing grenades. Sharp? How far is the patrol?"

"They're rallying outside the laboratory. They have gas masks. You might want to move a little to the right; give you a clear shot as they come through."

"Much obliged," Dragon said and then they heard his P90 buzzing followed by a loud explosion and a grunt, and then more gunfire and curses. Then silence.

"What happened?" Dash asked, hand on the cyclic pitch selector.

"Can't see anything... that explosion... too much smoke... Dragon, come in..."

Apocalypse didn't look like anything Fortesque had imagined — a series of seven thick silver cylinders mounted on a circular rack. The cylinders were connected to a central sphere emblazoned with a yellow-with-black-stripes hazardous material warning. Nestled inside

the sphere were hundreds of tiny spheres. The entire assembly was mounted on a retractable spindly bracing and looked almost delicate. It was small enough to be carried in a haversack.

There were three such weapons systems stored in recesses in the room.

"Anybody knows how to work this?" Hotstuff said as she traced a finger on the sphere. "It's cold to the touch."

"More importantly," Fortesque said slowly, "Are these viable systems." He looked threateningly at the scientist. Hotstuff stepped away from the system and jammed her gun at the scientist's head.

"Are they?" Fortesque asked.

"Yes, yes," replied the terrified man. "These are the latest versions, I swear. A demonstration of their destructive power was recently planted into espionage circles to gain international leverage for the Republic."

Fortesque spied a computer console at one end of the room and gestured with his rifle. "We need the research too."

"Please..." The man was near tears. "Please," he stammered. "Take me with you. Qin Zhou will not forgive me."

Fortesque realized that they were this man's only ticket out of the research facility and he was pleading to be freed. "You know how to arm the weapon?"

He nodded.

"Right, you're coming with us. But I still need the research."

Fortesque shoved a high-capacity storage drive into the scientist's hands and pointed to the computer console with his gun. "Get it! No tricks! And disable any tracking systems built into *Apocalypse!*"

Sharp spoke into his radio. "Clay, Dash. We're leaving!"

"What about Dragon?"

"Hotstuff is checking on him." Sharp turned and rammed the butt of his rifle into the chief-of-the-watch, knocking the man out cold. Then he ran out of the control room onto the balcony and looked out. The battle had ceased for the moment, but he was sure a few security guards were still lurking around, waiting. Time to flush them out before Hotstuff and the others came through, or before they got desperate enough to switch to more deadly force. His fears were confirmed when he spotted movement between the personnel quarters. "Three bogeys with a rocket launcher heading your way, Clay."

"You gonna do something about that?"

"Yea, I think so," Sharp said and raised his Uzis. "Hotstuff, where are you?"

Her voice snapped in his earpiece. "Dragon didn't make it."

"What?!" Dash and Clay said together.

"Just let's get the hell out of here!"

Hotstuff, Fortesque and the scientist ran toward Level 1. She hadn't spoken a word since she had closed Dragon's glazed eyes in the laboratories.

They rounded a corner and the battle was joined. Sharp was shouting directions over the radio as he lay down cover fire from the suspended control room. They kept the scientist between them as they barreled toward the secondary elevator. The man was huffing and puffing as he struggled to keep up, pushing a specially designed industrial trolley on which sat three *Apocalypse* weapons systems –

the entire stock! On either side of him, guns went off as Fortesque and Hotstuff took out Qin Zhou's security force. Since they were wearing their Invisible Jumpsuits, it looked like the scientist was running with two blazing guns flying alongside him. Then Zhou's security got lucky. Bullets clipped the trolley, disabling it. It listed, and the weapons swayed. The scientist grabbed for them but couldn't save two. They tumbled to the floor, rolled away. Hotstuff and Fortesque thought briefly about retrieving the weapons but concentrated gunfire tossed that idea.

Grabbing the single *Apocalypse* off the trolley underarm, Fortesque dashed for the elevator. Hotstuff and the scientist were close on his heels. They rushed into the reception room and Hotstuff shouted, "Take the weapon up! Go! I'll wait for Sharp."

Fortesque and Clay herded the scientist into the elevator and as the doors closed Fortesque caught a glimpse of Hotstuff's UMP hovering by the doors.

Sharp jumped off the balcony, firing as he went, clipping two of Qin Zhou's security in the legs. They fell flat on their faces, their guns skittering across the floor. He ducked on Hotstuff's cry and another guard spun to the ground behind him. Sharp dived into the reception room and Hotstuff slammed the door shut. Bullets *pinged* into the doors and they backed away into the elevator. They unzipped the front of their jumpsuits and reloaded their weapons from their ammo webbing.

At the heliport, they were greeted by the roar of the Mil-17's spinning rotors. Dash was at the controls, urging them on, as he hovered the chopper above the yellow 'H' in the floor. They ran

around the back to where the clamshell doors were still open and hopped up into the cargo bay.

Hotstuff looked at Fortesque her eyes blazing with anger — it was clear she held him responsible for Dragon’s death. “Get us out of here!” she called to Dash. The Mil-17 began to rise; the clamshell doors began to close. Fortesque was about to go up front into the passenger area when he felt a hand settle on his shoulder and he was spun around. He caught a blur of motion as Hotstuff kicked him in the jaw, knocking him to his knees.

“Wait...” he began but her fist smashed into his face again and he saw stars. Hotstuff fished for the portable hard-drive in his combat webbing and then Sharp manhandled him to his feet. “Wait! What are you doing!?”

“Goodbye Luc,” Hotstuff said. She pocketed the portable drive as Sharp propelled him toward the clamshell doors and tossed him out of the bay.

He fell fifteen feet, to the heliport. He twisted in the air, trying to right his balance but landed hard on his left hand snapping it at the wrist. He rolled in pain and looked up to see the black underbelly of the Mil-17 as it dipped its nose toward the west. Then it was lost from view over the walls of the heliport. He heard running feet and craned his neck to see gun-toting security personnel fan out from the elevator and form a circle around him and level their guns at him.

CHAPTER 58

Switzerland

The black sackcloth was pulled off and Bradford squeezed his eyes shut against the blinding light. He gasped in mouthfuls of sparkling air savouring the contrast to the nauseating odour inside the sack. He opened his eyes slowly and beheld pristine snow undulating for as far as he could see touching a clear blue sky in the horizon.

His hands were bound behind his back he was sitting on a portico. He heard a clinking sound nearby and turned to see a giant of a man standing behind him by a small table. The man put down a silver stirring spoon and smiled.

"Good morning, Mr Bradford," he said as he raised a tiny cup to his lips and relished its contents. "Would you like some tea?"

"Where am I?"

The giant gestured to the rolling snow. "Beautiful, isn't it?" The sun glared off the carpet of white. "Desolate and pure. I've always loved this view."

"Where am I?"

The giant ignored him. "Tell me, would you share this moment with anyone?" He set a cup of steaming tea before Bradford and then unsheathed a knife from his waistcoat. He brought the blade toward Bradford who cringed. Sunlight glinted wickedly off the blade. The knife came closer, and closer. "Hold still... this won't take a moment."

With a deft stroke, the giant cleanly severed the bonds that held Bradford's wrists, returned the knife to its sheath, and buttoned his waistcoat.

"I trust you won't try anything reckless. You can't overpower me and you wouldn't last very long out in the mountains. So, tell me: who would you share this with?"

"It seems that the question should not go unanswered."

In reply, the giant sipped his tea and shook his head. "It will help you understand." He nodded at the tea laid out before Bradford.

Bradford sighed, his eyes took on a distant look and he spoke. "I would love to be here with my family. My son. My wife." His eyes glistened. "If my son was alive..." He took a sip of the tea and felt the hot beverage coursing through him; it revived him.

"My father would often bring me here on vacation. We would sit here for hours imagining shapes in the snow, the clouds, and the mountains. Then we'd go skiing. The slope is not as treacherous as it looks." He sighed. "If my father was alive..."

"What happened to him?"

"He was branded a traitor and killed using a medieval instrument of torture called the Scavenger's Daughter. You understand loss, don't you Mr Bradford."

"I understand what it is to never see a son again and struggle to find clues to what happened."

"In the end, it comes down to 'loss'. So, you understand the lengths to which a father would go to find out what happened to his boy and what he would do to ensure justice?"

"I do."

"And then you would understand the lengths to which a son would go to find out what happened to his father. Because that's what this is about, Mr Bradford. My father Nicolas Klausman got on the wrong

side of a very powerful and influential cabal called The Vesuvius Group. They condemned him on false evidence and executed him without a chance to prove his innocence.”

“Was he innocent?”

“It is, as we agreed, Mr Bradford, about ‘loss’,” the giant said. “And what sudden loss can do to those who are left behind.”

Bradford eyed the giant over the rim of the teacup.

“The financial empire that my father built was taken over and distributed among The Vesuvius Group. My mother tried to fight for our family legacy, but she was quickly silenced. The rogues who were sent to kill her decided to instead enjoy themselves before carrying out their orders. I found her naked and battered body in the fields an inch from death. She survived but never regained her sanity. I was left alone among the wolves... I had to find the truth. I dedicated my life to my quest, building my influence and wealth in any manner I saw fit.

“And now, at long last the time is ripe. The man who framed my father was recently elevated to a position from which his fall will be fatal, the man who abetted him within the Vesuvius Group, Giovanni Ferruccio is at his weakest — confined to a wheelchair — and the others of the cabal who stood by and watched without protest as my father was murdered... well, they are collateral damage.”

“I still don’t understand where I fit in.”

“Your son was killed by technology developed by Future Energy Group of France and the evidence was destroyed by Luc Fortesque. The orders to contain the truth about the toxicity of FEG’s B-Energy Cells at any cost came directly from Laurent’s office. Henri Laurent belongs to the Vesuvius Group.”

“You want me to do your dirty work? Kill Henri Laurent?”

The giant scoffed. "I am offering you ringside view when I destroy the people who are responsible for our loss. I have no other use for you, really. If you agree, it will be good – cathartic for you. If not, I will kill you and your body will never be found."

"What happened to Sebastian Laporte?"

"Mr Laporte is at his moment, manacled in the cellar. A dog deserves no better. I am giving him an opportunity I'm quite certain he will accept. His hatred of the Catholic Church is a potent motivator."

"I don't even know your name."

"Oh, I'm sorry." The giant extended his hand. "Adrian Klausman."
Bradford didn't take his hand.

"That is very impolite, Mr Bradford." Klausman drained his tea, set the cup down. His eyes had hardened. "I have little patience with impudence. You will give me your answer tonight. Until then... you are my prisoner."

He brushed past Bradford on his way out, stepping past the French windows into the house, disappearing behind the heavy drapes.

CHAPTER 59

Sebastian Laporte diverted his eyes as the lights came on. He was in a wine cellar; empty bottle racks stretched before him. He looked down at his manacled wrists. The chains ran through an iron hoop in the table at which he was seated. The table was bolted to the stone floor. Laporte grasped the chain and gave it a mighty tug but the hoop did not budge. The chain was brand new with no sign of weakness. He wasn't going anywhere until his captors decided otherwise.

He heard voices approaching and the light in the arched passageway was blocked by a hulking figure. The giant walked gracefully in a manner that indicated good breeding. The giant settled into a chair opposite Laporte and rested his elbows on the table, forming a steeple with his fingers. His greying hair was parted neatly down the centre. The eyes that stared at Laporte were intense and calculating.

"Good afternoon, Mr Laporte." The voice was deep, confident.

"What is this?" Laporte indicated his manacles.

"Just a precaution... after all, you *are* the most wanted man in the world. Not to mention a certified psychopath."

"Don't think I'm much of a threat here."

"I'll decide that after we've had a little chat."

"Who are you? And where am I?"

"Who I am is not important. Neither is your location. But what I want of you is."

Laporte spat.

"You should be a little more gracious, Mr Laporte. I can offer you a claim to immortality in the history of our world."

“What do you mean?”

Theatrically, Klausman reached into his pocket and brought out a crucifix on a heavy chain. He allowed the symbol to dangle before Laporte.

“An opportunity to strike at the enemy you hold responsible for the murder of your mother and father.”

Laporte leaned forward with interest, the chains clinking. He bared his teeth at the crucifix.

Klausman nodded. “I will soon possess the means to bring Hell into the very heart of the institution.” He leaned forward so that his aquiline nose was inches from Laporte’s hook-nose. “Are you interested?”

CHAPTER 60

His arm in a fresh cast, Henri Laurent walked quickly to his office. Christian Black was at his heels.

"Did he say what he wants?"

"No."

"What do you think, Christian?"

"Qin Zhou does not make social calls, Henri. Whatever it is, it's not good."

Laurent took a seat and pushed a button. On the opposite wall, a giant screen came to life. As they waited for the video call to connect, Laurent glanced idly at the newspaper on his desk, the headlines announcing that the Holy Father was no more. Then the image onscreen resolved, and he gasped, "My God!"

They were looking down upon a small holding cell. Lying on a cot in the cell in a fetal position, stripped off his clothes, his body covered in welts and bruises, face caked with dried blood, was Luc Fortesque.

"Is he dead?"

"No," Qin Zhou's voice answered over the integrated speaker system, "He is sleeping off his latest interrogation, aided by painkillers from our kind doctor who would not have it any other way."

"Explain yourself, Qin."

Qin Zhou's oriental features came into focus. He was sitting in an opulent office that was a shrine to Chinese heritage and art. Zhou put a thin cigarette into an ashtray in the shape of a dragon's head. Smoke wafted out of the dragon's bared jaws. "Henri, I do not have time for games. You sent a team to steal from me."

"Steal from you?" Laurent was genuinely surprised but if Zhou noticed, he didn't buy it.

Zhou trembled with rage. When he spoke, his voice dripped with unconcealed anger. "Come now, Henri. You have twenty-four hours to return what you stole from me. After that it gets ugly."

"Qin, I have no idea what you are talking about."

"You have been warned, Henri. I will destroy you." And the screen went black.

Laurent spun on Black. "What the hell was that all about?" Before Black could reply, Laurent continued, "Find Charles! Now! I'll kill that boy myself if he's involved in this!" Then after a moment's pause: "Now, Christian! What are you waiting for?!"

"Henri Laurent has disowned his faithful dog," Qin Zhou muttered. He puffed on his cigarette and looked at Wei Ling through the blue smoke trails.

"But he may still be of use to us," Wei replied smoothly. "A betrayed man will be eager for revenge."

"You propose that we let him loose on Henri and Charles Laurent?" Zhou asked his trusted advisor.

"And be rid of this age-old feud once and for all. This is the only way forward."

"The Vesuvius Group meets in two weeks," Zhou said with finality. "Finish it before then and retrieve the weapon."

"Yes."

"Everyone must pay. And leave no trails back to us. Is that understood?" Zhou crushed his cigarette. "Be rid of the dog before it turns on us."

"As you wish."

PART III: THE APOCALYPSE TRIGGER

CHAPTER 61

Five days later

Luc Fortesque's features were gaunt, and his body bore the scars of his torture. His eyes were hollow like a man robbed of his convictions. Qin Zhou's doctors had nursed him back to health, supplementing and accelerating his recovery with a host of drugs and procedures developed at Zhou's research facility.

Ever since the day Mauer had proffered the Elixir of Life to the members of the Vesuvius Group, Zhou's scientists had been attempting to replicate and enhance the serum. Zhou had drawn his own blood that same evening and had it immediately frozen and dispatched to China for study. While unable to produce a longevity drug, the Chinese had accomplished other wonders along the way. Fortesque was a living experiment – a guinea pig in a field trial. Qin Zhou had seen it as the perfect opportunity to test the potency and viability of his drugs in building the perfect front-line super-soldier for the People's Republic of China.

A version of their concoction now ran through Fortesque's bloodstream. With the latest advances in synthetic biomechanics, Zhou's engineers had fashioned a glove for Fortesque that allowed full freedom of movement while cocooning, strengthening, and protecting his still-healing wrist and hand.

Fortesque had not protested; all he wanted was revenge. To his mind, he had been betrayed by Henri and Charles Laurent. He had been betrayed by Hotstuff, Sharp, Dash and Clay. There was no

greater sin than leaving a soldier in the field. He had wondered briefly if Christian Black had been privy to these dastardly plans and swiftly decided that we would kill him too.

The Mil-17 banked, and the pilot's voice clicked over the intercom. "Fifteen minutes to the drop zone."

In his mind, he replayed the events of the last airdrop: strapping on the jet wings, soaring out of the Sukhoi under enemy fire. Why had they kept him alive so long instead of just killing him before they assaulted Qin Zhou's facility? That was the one question he didn't have a satisfactory answer to. But he filed it away...there would be plenty of time to think it over after he had killed them all.

Fortesque lay on his belly at the lip of the canyon, looking right down into the mercenaries' hideout, through his night vision goggles. His all-terrain vehicle lay parked a hundred yards away in the shadow of a cave. Though the terrain was uneven, and he was hefting a lot of gear — abseiling equipment, body armour, flash-bangs, tear-gas, and incendiary grenades, an AK5 assault rifle, a SIG Sauer P228 and a wicked K-bar — the drugs pumping through his system were working marvellously. He wasn't even out of breath.

He waited patiently for an hour; the voices of the night guards wafted up to him and when the night was darkest, one of the guards left his watch disappearing into one of the dwellings in the canyon. Fortesque sprang into action. He had set up a portable winch-system above the hideout. He dived over the edge plunging downward headfirst. The line unspooled silently and as he fell, he unsheathed a K-bar.

CHAPTER 62

The lone guard on duty didn't hear him descending: a hand clamped over his mouth and jaw, jerking upward, exposing his neck and the cold steel of the K-bar severed his carotid.

Fortesque righted himself and gently laid the man down. He crouched for a few seconds ensuring he had not been spotted or heard. Satisfied, he unbuckled the harness and moved toward the first of the crude doorways in the rock-face.

The second guard stepped out of the doorway whistling merrily and Fortesque's enhanced senses reacted faster than ever. He drove the K-bar up to the hilt into the guard's chest with a solid blow that propelled both through the opening in the rock-face and into the dwelling... to see Clay standing bare-chested behind a wooden cot, his pants undone about his thighs.

Clay saw his lover gurgling blood bubbles and took a fraction of a second to recognize the intruder.

"You!" His voice constricted in shock. He reached for something on the cot.

Fortesque had no words for Clay. He yanked the knife out of the guard with a spurt of blood and leapt across the small space onto Clay over the cot. The rickety cot toppled over and its legs snapped under their weight. Clay grabbed Fortesque's knife-brandishing hand, trying to stop the blade from its downward plunge. The two men crashed onto the floor, knocking into a crate that overturned spilling out grenades. The metal pineapples lobbed about. Nearby, Clay's lover lay gasping for life, his body convulsing, as he tried to stem the blood that was leaking out of him. The two men rolled amid the grenades, sending them skittering all over. Then suddenly

Clay had Fortesque pinned underneath and began strangling him with one hand, the other still locked around his knife-wrist. Fortesque glared at Clay and with his free hand groped for the spilt grenades. Working entirely by feel he palmed one, squeezed and pulled the pin with his thumb and smashed the grenade into the side of Clay's head, gouging out his eye with the grenade's safety lever. Clay screamed horribly and Fortesque pushed him aside easily but not before jamming the armed grenade into his open mouth. Fortesque knew that the dwellings were connected via a system of trapdoors and tunnels that made it easy for the mercenaries to move undetected from one cave dwelling to another. Fortesque dived behind the overturned cot to where he had spied the trapdoor to the lower-level dwellings. He pulled it open and jumped through just as the grenade exploded. He landed hard, K-bar in one hand and an AK5 assault rifle in the other, in an explosion of rock-dust and quaking earth. He had selected the AK5 from Zhou's arsenal because it was originally designed to be operated with gloved hands. A secondary quake followed on the heels of the grenade explosion accompanied by a shower of stones and a billowing cloud of debris from the open trapdoor, and he was thrown off balance momentarily. In the silence that followed he heard a cough originate to his left and spinning around, he spotted a hazy figure stumbling to its feet in the dust. The time for stealth was over. He was on the mercenary in a flash, K-bar at the dazed man's neck in a stranglehold. Using the mercenary as a human shield he pushed to the mouth of the cave-dwelling, AK5 pointing outward at the ready. The man was so stunned he didn't protest or resist. They emerged out of the chalky cloud onto the narrow pathway that circled the box-canyon and Fortesque spotted mercenaries running

out of the caves on the other side of the canyon. He fired and sent one of them tumbling to the ravine-floor, dead. The other dived into a dwelling and returned fire. Bullets slugged his human-shield.

Confusion reigned. Someone shouted, "Cease fire! Cease fire!"

"We're under attack!"

"He fell! Cease —"

He dragged the dead mercenary sideways, sweeping his AK5 in cautious arcs. A head popped up and he let loose a volley. The head disappeared in a puff of red mist.

"What was that?!"

"Sharp! Where are you?" He recognized Hotstuff's voice, directly beneath him. "Sharp?"

Fortesque drunk-walked with the human dead-weight to the end of the ledge and then fired a cover burst across the canyon before tossing the body over the ledge and running down the crude steps hewn into the rock-face. He landed on the first level, sheathed his knife and tossed a flash-bang into the yawning mouth of one of the dwellings and another high into the air. In the same fluid motion, he lobbed an incendiary toward the Spider LSV parked in the centre of the canyon just as Sharp appeared at the entrance to one of the caves on the opposite side of the canyon.

He heard a cry of alarm as the flash-bang landed inside the cave. The stark light of the flash-bangs was painfully bright and lit up the canyon like day. It was followed by sharp ear-splitting *bangs* just milliseconds from each other. Sharp who was drawing a bead on Fortesque recoiled from the flash of light and his shots went wild.

Just then the incendiary detonated and the LSV went up in flames, shooting a tongue of fire as high as the canyon walls. A searing heat wave shot out from the epicentre of the blast.

Fortesque had protective earmuffs on and had squeezed his eyes shut when the flash-bangs exploded. Now he stepped into the cave, took stalk of the two cowering mercenaries on their knees, clutching their ears, and put a bullet into each. He ran down to the next cave... just as Hotstuff dived low firing her Desert Eagle up at him. Her bullets knocked his AK5 away and peppered the rock face behind him. Hotstuff landed on her shoulder and Fortesque threw the knife at her. The blade sliced opened the back of her hand and she dropped the pistol.

Fortesque launched himself at her. She buckled her knees and her heels caught him flat in the chest. She tried to use his momentum and throw him overhead, but he grabbed her ankles and fell by her side. Her hand sliced edge-on for his neck and connected. He gagged and punched her in the side. Both sprang to their feet, circled, and lunged at each other grabbing, parrying, kicking, throwing punches in the flickering light of the burning LSV. Their shadows danced on the walls of the canyon.

Sharp blinked his eyes; his ears were ringing. As the spots before his eyes faded he saw Fortesque and Hotstuff fighting below. He reached for his fallen rifle, raised the sights to his eyes and tried to set the crosshairs on Fortesque.

All the while, Fortesque was mindful that he had to stay close to Hotstuff or else Sharp would nail him from above. She was a skilled hand-to-hand combatant and it took all his concentration to stay within her circle of reach, absorb her blows and not be thrown too far away. She landed a kick to his kidney. He reached back and grabbed her around the thigh and turned on his heel and fell on his backside, attempting to break her leg under his weight. She quickly compensated, locking her other leg around his waist in mid-air so

that when he landed, she was straddling him. Her hands closed around his neck and their eyes met.

"Sharp! Take the shot!" she screamed as she held him down, head exposed.

Sharp's finger touched the trigger. In the rifle's sights, Fortesque smashed both his fists into Hotstuff's face. She released her grip on him. Sharp pulled the trigger just as Fortesque brought his torso up head-butting Hotstuff in the jaw. Blood exploded from her mouth as she bit her tongue. Sharp's round ploughed harmlessly into the ground kicking up a plume of mud. Even as he realigned to Fortesque's broad back aiming to sever his vertebra, Fortesque had pushed Hotstuff onto her back, somersaulted over her, landed in a crouch by her head, grabbed her around the neck and armpits and pulled her in front of him crab-crawling behind the wall of fire. As he dragged her, he spotted his AK5 lying a few feet away and stretched for it.

"Leave her and I'll let you live, Fortesque!" Sharp shouted over the roar of the flames.

Fortesque knew that Sharp would not take a blind shot through the flames. His outstretched fingers grabbed the barrel of the AK5 and he pulled it closer. Hotstuff struggled weakly in his choke-hold and he whispered, "Let's go take care of something." He gripped the AK5 firmly and in a burst of strength yanked her to her feet and stepped around the flames depressing the trigger, aiming up at Sharp's last position. Caught by surprise, Sharp reacted too slowly and bullets pummeled his thighs and legs and he collapsed outside the cave. Fortesque calmly tossed Hotstuff to the mud and palmed another incendiary grenade from his combat webbing.

"Sharp? You okay, buddy?" he taunted. Hotstuff was making a pathetic attempt to drag herself over to where her Desert Eagle lay

in the mud. Fortesque sneered as he armed the incendiary and tossed it over-arm to where Sharp had fallen. Hotstuff had almost reached her pistol; in two strides, he crossed over to her and stepped on her hand with his boot. He kicked the pistol away and shook his head. "You and I have a lot to talk about." Above them, the incendiary exploded. Fiery globules of rock and stone rained down on them.

CHAPTER 63

Her vision kept blacking out; she willed herself to stay conscious. She was sitting in a chair, hands tied behind her back, ankles tied to the legs of the chair. She blew a wisp of hair from her face and watched with detached curiosity as Fortesque laid out a small medical pouch on the table and extracted a syringe filled with amber liquid. He injected himself with the liquid and sat back, eyes closed, breathing shallowly. The syringe fell to the ground as a shudder rushed through his body.

"What is that?" she asked noting the manic gleam in his eyes. He came over; his movements were quick, accelerated.

"I'm a lab experiment, Evangeline," he replied in a grating voice, "Thanks to you and that bastard, Henri." He thrust his face closer. "But really, I don't care. It enables me to do all *this*." He gestured around and outside.

She laughed bitterly. "Henri is dead."

A flicker of confusion vanished as suddenly as it appeared. "What do you mean?"

"Part of the deal was that we kill the Frenchman when we got the weapon. He's buried outside this canyon if you want to check." She spat blood in his face. "We were to kill you too, but I played it differently."

He grabbed her slender neck. "What deal? Why did you not kill me? Who were you dealing with?"

She grimaced, rolled her wounded tongue. "The money was good, Luc. You and I, we're as corrupt but we started out as soldiers... on the same team. Damned if I was going to put that bullet into you."

He let go of her neck. "You condemned me anyway. The only reason Zhou allowed me to live is that I can be used."

Evangeline shook her head. "We had so many opportunities to kill you before we breached the facility, but he wanted you dead *at Qin Zhou's facility only*. I figured he was trying to send a message across to Zhou."

Someone wanted Zhou to think Laurent was behind the attacks.

"I need a name."

"Adler. That's what he called himself. He used a sophisticated encryption system that eliminated accent and speech inflexions, preventing us from making him." She licked her lips. "Can I have some water?"

"You have pictures of Adler?"

"He was at the drop-off point on Lake Balkash. We managed a few pictures." She nodded at the laptop computer on the table. Fortesque booted it up; typed in the password she gave him. While the OS loaded, he uncapped a bottle of water and put it to her lips, tilted it. She gasped as the liquid stung her wounded tongue; then she steeled herself and drank. Water and blood trickled down the sides of her mouth.

"Any leads on Adler?" He capped the bottle.

She shook her head. "No, but there is one man who may know... and I think you know who I'm talking about."

He did: Christian Black. "Where are the pictures?"

She told him. The hi-res black-and-white photographs showed a dapper looking man with a very serious face. He wore a Panama hat and Fortesque could make out the glint of a handgun in a chest holster beneath his white jacket.

"On the helicopter, before you tossed me out, you took the portable drive. I presume again, you have a copy."

She nodded at the laptop. "Yes, it's in there."

"I have buyers already lined up," she said. "Let me go and we can be rich."

Fortesque copied everything that he needed from the laptop onto a portable drive. It took fifteen minutes, and in that time, he did not speak at all.

"Luc," she pressed. "Think about it: Rich beyond our wildest dreams."

He ignored her, keeping her guessing about what he would do when he had all the information. Then he shut the laptop, stood, shouldered his AK5... and whipped out his SIG, pointed it at her face. "Though you may have spared my life at Zhou's facility, you still wanted Sharp to *'take the shot'*."

"It was in the moment."

"Fair is fair, Evangeline. I won that fight."

And he pulled the trigger.

Fortesque fired a single flare – the pre-arranged signal – and within ten minutes, the Mil-17 had returned. One of his handlers dialled a number on a mobile phone, spoke rapidly and then handed the phone to him.

Fortesque took the phone, glanced at the in-call number. "Yes?"

A voice at the other end asked, "Is the research data out in the open?"

"It is secure," Fortesque lied. No reason why he shouldn't get out of this rich. "Your men have the laptop."

"Where is the third *Apocalypse*?"

"I will find it. I need to go to France."

There was a moment's silence. Then, "You have this number. Call me from this phone when you have it."

"Who are you?"

Wei Ling, Qin Zhou's right-hand man disconnected without answering.

CHAPTER 64

Adrian Klausman led Sebastian Laporte into a large wood-panelled study. A massive bookshelf filled with heavy tomes lined two walls and over by the open windows was a polished mahogany table upon which rested an antique globe. Gusts of cool wind swept into the study.

Floating in mid-air was an immense hologram of St. Peter's Basilica fronted by St. Peter's Square. The detailing in the hologram was impressive, from the statues of the apostles surmounting the balustrade over the façade and massive ovoid dome down to the red stone that marked the assassination attempt on Pope John Paul II. Klausman swiped at the hologram and the arcing colonnades swung slowly so that they were looking at the façade head-on past the Obelisk and the fountains.

Laporte put out a hand and the hologram shimmered around his fingers. A smile passed across his face. He was a marked man; he had no friends with the impressive bounty on his head. Until a few days ago, the death penalty was his only exit from this life. But Klausman had offered him an alternative. It was a suicide mission, but the consequences of his actions would have a profound impact on the history of mankind. He would outdo history's greatest villains.

"The Bronze Doors that lead to the Apostolic Palace are over here," Klausman said pointing to a doorway at the facing end of the Constantine colonnade. He looked at Laporte. "*Apocalypse* must detonate at this point."

"What does it matter? The weapon is powerful enough to infect all of the Vatican."

"It must detonate at this point," Klausman insisted. "It is symbolic to me." His fingers flicked at the screen of a tablet computer that controlled the hologram simulation. He pulled Laporte back a few steps. The condemned man needed motivation and what better than, "Come see what havoc you will wreak."

The software generating the simulation had been developed by Qin Zhou for demonstrations to the People's Republic Army. While the weapon was being smuggled to Vatican City, the digital files stolen from Zhou's facility were uploaded to Klausman's secure cloud storage. Obtaining the necessary hologram projector had been a matter of a few phone calls.

The hologram shrunk so that other buildings and gardens began filling in the rendering space and soon they were looking at the roughly triangular Vatican City. "There will be no escape for the pope-elect," Klausman was referring to the Passetto, the 800m escape route from the Vatican to Castel Sant Angelo, outside Vatican City. "What you are about to see is developed from simulation data." He tapped at the controls.

A tiny representation of *Apocalypse* materialized near the Bronze Doors. It began flashing in rapid succession and then it vanished in a blinding flash of light. A hundred spheres were ejected from the epicentre on the shockwave, rose high above the obelisk's pyramidal cap, spreading out umbrella-like over the city. And then they vanished, to be replaced by a simulation of the infected radius. A circle of black formed, enveloping the Vatican, expanding past the city walls, covering surrounding Rome, polluting the Tiber, onward, onward until nearly the entire city was dark. Then a digital clock started counting in days, and lighter shades of the infection grew from the black circle, as the disease vector spread over the boot-shaped country.

Finally, as the devastation petered out, Klausman released the breath he had been holding. "Revenge will be sweet. Hordes will be gathered in St Peter's Square for the Papal Conclave." He paused as he comprehended the enormity of the devastation and the millions of lives that would be lost. Of course, China would step in with a cure — if one even existed. But, "Within days, Italy will declare a crisis and will be quarantined! You will truly be the Antichrist."

"Where will you be when doomsday strikes?"

Klausman's eyes narrowed. "I will be taking care of other business." The hologram blinked out and the lights in the study flickered on. He walked over to his desk and handed a thick envelope to Laporte who opened it and fingered the documents inside. "You leave for Milan on Friday accompanied by one of my men where you will rendezvous with Mr Adler. He will give you further instructions. Any questions?"

After a moment's silence Klausman clasped his hands behind his back and said, "Good. Then you will be escorted back to your room."

The doors opened revealing two guards waiting for Laporte.

When the doors had closed behind Laporte, Klausman said, "Lock," and a deadbolt rammed home. Blinds automatically fell across the windows casting the study into dim light. He moved quickly to the bookshelf and stood before the shelf holding his collector's edition facsimile copies of the famous Adventures of Tintin series by Belgian cartoonist Hergé. He tugged gently at the first, fifth, tenth and twentieth volumes releasing a combination lock. A section of the bookshelf slid back revealing a stairway that descended into his command centre.

Klausman dialled a secure number. "Adler, Laporte will leave for Milan as scheduled."

"I will be waiting."

"Good. You will call me if there is any problem."

"Ja."

Klausman hung up and was about to settle into a contented smile when he noticed a flashing alert on one of his monitors. He summoned up the responsible program. A red tracker dot blinked at him from France.

"Luc Fortesque," he mouthed. "Back from the dead, I see."

He reached for the phone again. This was a problem.

CHAPTER 65

Christian Black's Citroen C6 raced down D922 on the outskirts of Paris, cupping around Etang de l'Épine. Then it turned onto a narrow private road and pulled up before the wrought iron gates that fronted his villa property. A radio signal unlocked the gates and the car rolled in.

An engine revved and suddenly the interior of the car was illuminated from behind by blinding headlamps. The C6 was rear-ended violently with the screech of rending metal. Glass shattered. Black was thrown off the seat, landing clumsily in between the front seats as the C6 slid in an arc drawing twin tire trails in the gravel. His chauffeur was whiplashed against the seatbelt. Black groaned, looked up... just as his chauffeur was shot in the head through the driver's window. Blood and brain matter splattered all over. He saw a shadow move outside the windows and covered his face with his hands as the driver's window imploded. A hand reached through the jagged hole in the window and unlocked the door, pulling it open.

A face peered inside.

"Luc," he mumbled staring at the SIG in Fortesque's gloved hand.

"Get out of the car, Christian," Fortesque gestured with the gun. "No tricks."

The older man stumbled out into a fine spray of water issuing from the punctured radiator of the van that Fortesque had rammed into the C6. Fortesque spun him around, wrung his arm in a lock-grip. He jammed the SIG against the Black's head and propelled him toward the house. "How many people are at home?" The lights were on in some rooms on the ground floor. The upper floor was in darkness.

"Only the butler."

"I remember him," Fortesque rasped, "Handy with a throwing knife."

As they drew near the French windows, Fortesque crab-walked, using Black as a human shield.

"Are you going to kill me?"

"Not immediately."

"Ah." Black almost sounded sad. "Anyway, better you than them."

They were climbing up the wide marble stairs to the front porch.

"You have the keys?"

"Yes."

"Unlock the doors."

Black fished the keys out of his pocket and unlocked the door. "Who is 'them'?" Fortesque kicked the door wide in and they entered... and froze.

The butler stood at the other end of the hall in a tuxedo, aiming a WWII M1 Garand rifle back at them. Fortesque eyed him past Black's ear. "Tell him to drop his rifle and I won't kill him. *Tell him!*"

"Easy... I'll tell him." Then in a raised voice: "Olivier put down the rifle." The butler stood still, the Garand still aimed at them. "Olivier, it's okay. Put down the rifle and leave us." The rifle began to lower.

"That's good. Now please leave —"

The SIG coughed at Christian's ear and the butler was thrown backwards. He tried to raise the M1 again but Fortesque's next shot threw him into the wall. The rifle fell from his grasp as his body slumped to the floor, leaving a bloody smear on the wall.

"Was that necessary?" Black's voice was without emotion. He had overseen too much death to be disturbed by this act of violence in his own house.

In reply, Fortesque pushed him into a couch and covered him with the SIG. "Who is 'them'?"

Black massaged his wrist. "I don't know how you got out of Qin Zhou's clutches, but it wasn't Henri or me who put you there."

"You've still not answered my question."

"Was that the question you originally intended to ask?"

"I'm running out of patience..." The SIG rose fractionally.

"Okay, okay." Black let out an exhausted sigh. "They call themselves the Vesuvius Group, a very powerful and influential cabal that goes back centuries. The Laurent family is one of the members of this group. Giovanni Ferruccio, one of the founders of the Group fears an exposé from the recent attention that FEG has attracted. Henri was summoned to the group headquarters in Sorrento and handed an ultimatum to get rid of all the loose ends before it was too late." He looked at Fortesque. "That included you and Sebastian Laporte. But you had vanished by then and Laporte escaped from our clutches. Now Henri is absconding – no doubt courtesy The Vesuvius Group. I was expecting *them* to come calling soon." He shook his head. "I'm an old man, Luc. Old and tired. Done a lot in my time and now it's catching up with me. If they come to get me, I'm not going to hide. It's quicker than the killer inside me."

"What killer?"

The older man snickered. "Cancer."

Fortesque lowered the gun, holstered it. He was unaware that Black was dying of cancer. They sat in silence for a while and then Fortesque tossed a set of six-by-four glossies onto the coffee table.

"I want to know who that man is. He calls himself Mr Adler."

Black flipped through the pictures, his eyes narrowing. After a minute, he handed Fortesque one of the pictures.

"See that small tattoo on his hand?"

Fortesque looked and nodded. "I noticed it earlier: DA23. What about it?"

"This man is an agent of *Die Adler* or *The Eagles* as they were known during World War II. A little-known resistance movement that specialized in sensitive courier services across enemy lines. After the fall of the Third Reich, Die Adler was suddenly without clients and entered the open market, offering their services to anyone who would pay. The agents were known only by serial numbers — no names, the profession handed down through the family line."

"This is agent 23 then. And he's working for someone?"

"Yes."

"He's picked up Qin Zhou's *Apocalypse* for someone." Fortesque tapped at the photograph. "I find Adler and he will lead me to the mastermind."

Black furrowed his brow remembering something. "The Allied Nations nurtured Die Adler during the War. But post-War, they feared that Die Adler's knowledge of Allied communications methodologies and networks could be used subversively against them. When some members were executed as pro-Communist supporters, Die Adler was disbanded.

"In the 1960s a freelance reporter tried running a story on Die Adler. Her information was amassed from research and information acquired by her father who had been with resistance movements. She wanted to showcase the efficiency of Die Adler and their contribution toward the resistance. But the people who were using Die Adler post-war for illegal or secret activities did not want the story to be told. The doors were shut on her and her career was squashed.

"My point is this reporter's research lists the names of families who used Die Adler. We find that list, compare it with people who knew about *Apocalypse* and we have a hit list."

"We?"

"Yes, you are not capable of doing this on your own. You never had the brains for it."

"I thought you wanted to wait for them to come to kill you."

Before Black could answer the nearest window blew inward in a spray of glass shards and a canister lobbed into the foyer of the villa, bounced against a porcelain vase, knocking it off its perch.

CHAPTER 66

As the vase fell to pieces, Fortesque lunged for Black and pulled him out of the armchair, at the same time upending the armchair as a shield, its stubby legs poking into the air. They hunkered behind the armchair just as the grenade exploded. Small fires leapt to life all around and the foyer was filled with dense smoke. Fortesque kicked the burning armchair aside.

"Keep low! Keep —"

Gunfire erupted from the driveway. *Pew-pew-pew-pew!!!*

The two men crawled toward the back of the house. Flakes of plaster rained down on them and the vases and statuettes above the hearth were blown apart. Feathers and down from the cushion padding in the upholstery puffed into the air. Huge holes materialized in the walls tracing the arc of gunfire. Fortesque snatched up the M1 Garand as he crawled past the dead butler. The gunfire let up and silence descended. Acrid smoke stung their lungs.

"Do you have a car in the garage out back?"

"Yes. But it's past the swimming pool. They'll have that covered."

"With luck, we'll make it out. Lead the way." He handed the Garand to Black. "You know the drill." Fortesque glanced back and saw a figure kick the windows open and step inside, cradling an assault rifle at the ready. The Garand fired very close to his ear and Fortesque recoiled instinctively. The figure framed in the French windows was thrown back outside.

Black smiled apologetically. "Sorry about that." He gestured for Fortesque to follow him down a corridor that led to the backdoor.

"Come on."

Out of the corner of his eye, Fortesque saw a muzzle flash and another grenade was launched into the villa. The blast threw them into the backdoor and shored-up the corridor with debris. Coughing and deafened, the two men pushed the door open. Christian's M1 fired twice and there was a cry of pain. A figure fell and Fortesque raised his SIG at the second assailant who had been waiting by the door and took him out with a headshot. They raced out across the patio bordering the heated swimming pool. There were shouts behind them as the main assault team realized their targets were getting away.

The Vesuvius Group kill team's leader peered around the corner of the villa and spotted two bodies lying in pools of blood by the backdoor. Looking through his night vision he surveyed the patio: it was deserted and the disarrayed pool-chairs indicated that the two targets had gone that way. Silently, the three remaining hitmen crouch-ran onto the patio, following a trail of bloody shoe-prints to the far side of the pool where the garage stood.

The silence was broken by the throaty roar of a turbocharged engine. The garage door was smashed open. A large wedge-shaped piece sailed into the air and hit one of the men squarely in the chest, throwing him into the swimming pool with a splash. Headlights flared their night vision painfully as Christian Black's Bugatti Veyron Sang Noir screamed out of its parking bay and ran over another assailant. The squad leader dived aside and let loose a volley of gunfire. Bullets pinged and sparked off the flanks of the car. Unharmred, it screeched around the pool spewing gravel before racing down the drive beyond the line of fire, grazing past the

crashed vehicles near the gate and disappearing out the wrought iron gates.

Christian Black grinned as the Veyron crossed 220 kmph. Dried leaves swirled in the car's slipstream and insects splattered against the windscreen as it raced toward Charles de Gaulle airport where Henri Laurent's modified Gulfstream G650 was being readied to take them to Frankfurt. Developed as a JV with Gulfstream, the aircraft was powered entirely by B-Energy Cells, a prototype into cleaner and efficient aerospace power engineering.

Adrian Klausman watched as the red tracking dot traced away from Paris. At this point, he couldn't tell exactly where Luc Fortesque was heading but he had some ideas. He decided to activate his assets in each of those countries.

CHAPTER 67

As the Gulfstream soared through the night Christian Black used the time to track down the journalist. He reached into his network of informants, and skillfully juggled and pieced together scraps of information. In time the pages of his notepad were a jumble of scrawled names, places, boxes, circles, interconnecting lines, and loops and emphasized, underlined words. At one point during the flight, Black watched as Fortesque injected a drug into his forearm and wondered when the drug would manifest side-effects. As far as Black could remember, super-soldier experiments had always been plagued by failure in fact and fiction.

He went over to Fortesque. The steward poured him another whiskey and then disappeared. Black said, "Okay, her name was Yasmin Cohen. She was found hanging in her bedroom shortly after her story on Die Adler was crushed. The investigations revealed it was suicide, but my sources believe she was murdered and the culprits tried to find her research." He looked at Fortesque. "They didn't. *If* she had any research, it was well hidden and after a while when no papers surfaced, she was written off as a fraud."

"So, it's a dead-end?" Fortesque's eyes were bright and alive with adrenaline.

Black broke into a coughing fit that lasted a minute. Fortesque watched without emotion as the older man put a handkerchief to his mouth and it came away stained with blood. Black dabbed his lips, drained his whiskey, and reclined in his chair, his chest heaving with exertion. The two men stared at each other in silence.

"Those drugs will kill you, you know," Black said.

"Maybe. I don't care."

"Ever wish life was different to us?" The Gulfstream banked. The intercom clicked and the pilot announced they were landing in Frankfurt.

"I don't think so. We lived the life we were given."

"Philosophical."

"How else do you want me to answer a rhetorical question?"

Fortesque nodded out the oval windows at the glittering lights of Frankfurt airport below them. "Why are we still landing?"

"Yasmin Cohen left a daughter, who married and moved to India on a humanitarian whim. She has a daughter. We should talk to her to make sure there really is no trail."

"I suppose I should not question your doggedness."

"Don't." He fastened his seatbelt as the plane began its descent.

"I've been doing this all my life."

Fortesque watched as a heavysset balding man walked into the hangar and shook Black's hand. The informant had a boxer's nose and he seemed uneasy in the tight-fitting overcoat as he handed a white envelope to Black who extracted a pen-drive from inside. The two men shook hands and parted.

When Black came aboard, he said, "The grand-daughter lives in Bonn. Her name is Arella Isaac and she's a journalist. We will pay her a visit." The Gulfstream began to roll out of the private hangar onto the tarmac, awaiting ATC clearance for take-off. "She'll be more forthcoming to an old man than someone who's been a guest of Qin Zhou and Wei Ling." Black was referring to Fortesque's bruised countenance.

"Wei Ling?"

Black described the man and Fortesque started, recalling the informant whom Charles Laurent and he had met in Fribourg. "Ling is ex-PLA and was discharged after a nasty incident in 2011 when his unit went berserk and raided a small village on the Indo-China border that almost led to war. The Indian government demanded Ling's head. On the official records, Ling faced the firing squad. But the reality is that Zhou pulled strings and got Ling out while the Chinese government looked the other way. Ling underwent facial reconstruction and is like a shadow in Zhou's organization. Whatever Zhou did to you in China, had Wei's approval. Zhou doesn't take a piss without Wei's approval."

"It was Wei Ling who gave away the location of Qin Zhou's research facility to Charles and me in Fribourg."

Now it was Black's turn to be startled. "What?"

Fortesque leaned forward. "I want to know everything about the Vesuvius Group. Now!"

CHAPTER 68

The Gulfstream landed at Köln airport. A car was waiting to take them across the Rhine into Bonn. Following the directions given by the informant, Fortesque soon turned the Mercedes CLS coupé onto Bornheimer Street and double-parked outside a beige brick-walled building. Flowerpots hung outside the windows on the first-floor apartment where Arella lived. Red creepers decoratively framed the corners of the building. Black climbed out of the car and rang the intercom. His breath fogged in the chill morning air as he announced himself. He smiled tightly at Fortesque who was waiting in the car, clutching the wheel with gloved hands.

The windows on the first floor opened and Fortesque had a glimpse of blonde tresses beneath a tam o'shanter as a woman's head popped out. Arella Isaac, he thought. Sure enough, a few seconds later the door opened, and Black disappeared into the building.

She was a beautiful young woman and loved cats — there were three of them purring and bristling all around her. One rubbed against Black's trousers.

"You must be brief," she said as she downed a cup of coffee and swept a plate of scrambled eggs off the kitchen counter, "or I will be late to work." She reached out and grabbed a grey tabby that was sniffing at the dishes in the sink, turned on the hot water faucet as she gently shooed the tabby away. She slipped a cloth sling-bag over her shoulder, adjusting the books and a notebook computer inside.

"I will come right to the point then," Black said. "I am a collector of sorts and am interested in certain research papers that may have been bequeathed to you by your grand-mother Yasmin Cohen."

She stopped bustling around and looked at him with interest. She ignored the tabby which had jumped back up onto the kitchen counter and was staring in dismay at the running water. "After all these years." Then she caught herself and said, "Everybody tried to find her papers. There are none."

"Are you sure, Arella?" Black began to reach into his coat, and she backed away warily. Black put up a calming hand and withdrew a wad of crisp Euro notes. "I am not here to harm you. I am here to buy Yasmin's research. Thirty thousand euros, no questions asked. It will do you good."

Her eyes widened thinking of what the money could bring her. Curiosity got the better of her, "Why do you want this?"

Black sighed heavily as if he was about to reveal a deep secret. "There is mention of my family in Yasmin's research. She casts us in, how shall I put it, unflattering light? I wish that this never becomes public."

"If such research existed, don't you think it would have come to light by now?"

"Your mother feared for her life after Yasmin's passing. That is why she fled the country and while she wouldn't risk having anything to do with Yasmin's work, she did not destroy it. She figured correctly that it could fetch a good price someday. Like today." He looked around the apartment, his eyes settling on various possible hiding places.

Arella twiddled her thumbs and Black tipped her decision by gently saying, "You must be getting late; so, if the papers do not exist, I shall simply take your leave." And he made as if to leave.

“Wait!” Arella cried.

“They are leaving with a woman,” the watcher said into his phone. He was standing outside an apothecary and turned as the Mercedes pulled away from Arella’s apartment and its left-indicator lights flashed.

“Follow them,” Adrian Klausman instructed. “Find out what the woman knows and kill them all.”

“The price is more for three.”

“Get me what I want and do not underestimate Luc Fortesque.” The line went dead.

Arella directed them to the Sparkasse Bonn, a savings bank on Köln Bonn Strasse. Black waited in the foyer while she identified herself and asked to visit her safe deposit locker in the bank’s vault. A banker accompanied them to the basement vault and stood a little distance away, hands folded, trying to appear inconspicuous.

Outside, Fortesque’s eyes drifted to the rearview mirror, and he spotted the black Volkswagen Phaeton that had been tailing them since they left Arella’s apartment. He gripped the wheel tightly, touched his SIG for reassurance and urged Black to hurry up.

Arella reached into the safe deposit box and extracted a thick bundle of yellowing envelopes bound together in an elastic band. She raised an eyebrow at Black.

“Oh,” he said, looking around before handing her the money.

She put the envelopes into his open palm. “Upon her death, my mother’s lawyer contacted me in India. She had left *this* in his care. When I returned to Bonn, I kept it here.”

“Why didn’t you publish it?”

“I read the research; there’s not much of a story in there, Herr Black, if you don’t know how to string it along. The story was in her head, not mine and who would be interested in *Die Adler* today?” She put the money into her inner pocket, patted it. “Worked out better this way, hmm?”

“For both of us,” Black concurred.

The doors below the red Sparkess logo opened and Arella and Black stepped onto the sidewalk... just as the passenger door of the Volkswagen Phaeton opened and a man stepped out and walked purposefully toward them.

Fortesque’s eyes flicked from Black to the reflection of the man — hands stuffed into his pockets, hat pulled low over his eyes — in the mirror and he knew he didn’t have time to warn Black and Arella. The man began to draw his hands out of his pockets and Fortesque caught a glimpse of a gun.

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Fortesque shifted the Mercedes into reverse and stomped on the accelerator, spinning the wheel away from the sidewalk. The car screeched backwards amid stunned looks from passersby and drove right at the man with the gun. The rear windscreen cracked in a spider web as a bullet hit it — over the roar of the engine Fortesque had not heard the shot — and people began screaming. He felt the car hit the man and saw the body thrown against a parked van just as his rearview mirror was torn off against the van. He shouted for Black to get into the car.

The Phaeton rammed the Mercedes and pushed it into the centre of the road. Fortesque shook his head clear and looked out the window. More shouts and screams and people were pointing with horrified expressions on their faces. Fortesque had a brief impression of something huge coming at him.

The tram operating on Köln Bonn Strasse hit the boot of the Mercedes and the world shook crazily. The seatbelt bit into his chest as the car was spun one-eighty degrees so that it was now stuck between the Phaeton and the tram, facing the Phaeton and being dragged backwards, locked onto the tram. Fortesque unclipped the seatbelt ignoring the screeching and rending metal and the *fizzing* sparks outside his window and levelled his SIG. At that moment, the Mercedes came loose from the tram and came to a standstill, rocking on its suspension, smoke issuing from under the hood. Fortesque had a clear line of sight straight down to the Phaeton. He squeezed off three shots in rapid succession; holes appeared in the windscreen and then the Phaeton's horn blared incessantly as the driver's dead body slumped against the horn. The Phaeton rolled

toward the Mercedes. Fortesque put the Mercedes into reverse and backed out of the path of the runaway Phaeton. He heard gunshots. The first assailant was leaning against the side of the van and limping forward. Blood streaked the side of his face. He fired again. But not at Fortesque. Black crumpled to the sidewalk. Arella screamed and retreated into the bank. The streets cleared as people took cover, fell flat to the sidewalk or road. Sirens wailed in the distance.

“Hey!” Fortesque yelled getting the man’s attention. Both guns lined up at the same time, but Fortesque was a better shot. He took the man straight in the chest and then leapt out of the car for Black. Christian Black was lying in a spreading pool of blood. It dribbled from his mouth as Fortesque gently, but firmly, sat him up. “I’m going to leave you here for the paramedics. Where is the —” Christian grabbed at his coat lapel with surprising strength cutting him off.

“No hospital... No time... take me with you.”

Fortesque didn’t argue. He hoisted the older man onto his shoulder and ran to the Mercedes. People were now calling for him to stop. He eased Black into the Mercedes and ran around to the other side, climbed in and gunned the engine. Horns blared, cars screamed to skidding halts, curses sang out as the Mercedes ran signals and zoomed off.

It was a mad dash to the airport. Black was losing a lot of blood and kept slipping out and into consciousness. Fortesque called ahead to ready the jet for an emergency take-off.

“Get the jet onto the tarmac and ready to leave the moment we arrive. We’re almost there!”

He knew he couldn’t use the main gates. He skirted around the north-east side of the airport, following the curve of the road and the perimeter fencing. “Hang on!” He swerved hard right; the Mercedes bounded over a rut and landed hard; he put out a restraining hand to hold Black from whiplashing against the dash. Fortesque gunned every rpm out of the engine. The spinning tires kicked plumes of mud, found purchase, and the hood of the car smashed through the barbwire-topped fence. A section of fence was torn away, landed across the windscreen in a shower of sparks bouncing, dragged alongside by a strand of barbwire. Then it tore free and cart-wheeled away. Alarms blared across the airport. He spotted the Gulfstream turning onto the runway, the glow of the B-Energy Cell-powered jets bathing the fuselage in a luminous electric-blue halo. In the distance to his right, he saw the flashing lights of airport police vehicles. A voice called over a bullhorn in English and German ordering him to stop. Fortesque aimed the Mercedes at the Gulfstream. A phone rang and Fortesque looked around for the source.

Black fumbled in his jacket and pulled out a small mobile phone, put it to his ear.

The startled voice of the steward could be heard clearly over the speaker, “Sir, is that you?”

“Yes... get us out of here!” Black mumbled and the phone slipped from his grip as Fortesque swung the car to a halt and jumped out. He yanked the passenger door open, and helped Black out, looked over his shoulder as they staggered toward the boarding ramp.

The sirens were nearer. A phalanx of six vehicles was speeding toward them to stop the plane from taking off.

They climbed aboard and Fortesque handed Black over to the steward who gasped at the sight of blood. Black collapsed in the man's arms. Fortesque pulled in the ramp. "Go! Go! Go! Get us out of here!" The whine of the jets rose but the aircraft wasn't moving. "Goddamn it!" Fortesque yelled and stormed into the cockpit, brandishing his gun. "Get us out of here, *now!*" He jammed his gun to the pilot's head and pushed the throttle to its stop. "Go!"

Afraid of the gun, the pilot released the break. The Gulfstream began to pick up speed. The vehicles didn't veer off the runway.

"Keep going!" Fortesque leaned forward, peering through the windscreen as the jet and the vehicles raced to a collision. ATC was calling for the pilots to abort take-off but Fortesque only snarled, "Ignore them!" and held the throttle stubbornly at its stop. The flashing lights of the vehicles washed all over the cockpit; they were so near!

Then at the last minute, the two lead vehicles swerved crazily out of the way of the Gulfstream. The other vehicles followed suit drawing thick skid marks, burning rubber. Bullets pinged harmlessly off the fuselage. The Gulfstream's nose-wheels left the tarmac and it rose into the mid-morning sky over Köln, its underbelly sweeping mere feet above the flashing light bars.

"Keep below radar," Fortesque ordered and returned to the main cabin.

Black's face was glistening with sweat and his hands were trembling uncontrollably. His breath was coming in ragged gasps, and he was going into shock. He saw Fortesque and said, "Did we make it?"

"Yes, we did..."

Black reached into his jacket and thrust Yasmin's research at Fortesque. "Take it. Use it well."

"You're going to make it." Black coughed blood. "How did they find us?"

Fortesque heard a whine and turned around to see the steward readying a portable defibrillator, rubbing the paddles together. He had a strange look on his face.

"Sub-dermal homing beacon," Black said and nodded at the steward who slapped the paddles against Fortesque's chest. Fortesque had a split second of incomprehension before the electric jolt lifted him bodily off his feet and sent him crashing into an armchair, cracking his head against the bulkhead, knocked-out.

Black was breathing shallowly, clutching at his chest. In a feeble voice, he said, "He has a mission, I expect that you give him your full support when he comes around."

"I will."

"That's good... ah... very good..." Christian Black breathed his last.

CHAPTER 70

Billy Bradford used the heel of his palm to rub away the condensate on the circular window. They had imprisoned him in an attic in Klausman's chalet. He pressed his nose to the cold glass and looked down to see a snow-white BMW X7 pull up outside the porch that wrapped around the chalet. They were getting ready to move. He had to try and stop Klausman from carrying out his act of terror with Laporte, or he had to warn someone.

Just then he heard the jangling of keys, and the deadbolt was drawn back. The door opened and two of Klausman's beefy henchmen came in. They carried guns beneath their jackets.

One of them beckoned and uttered a single heavily accented word: "Come!"

Bradford's mind raced. He couldn't take these two chunks-of-beef out face-to-face. He was already stepping into line between them, stepping out the door and... a plan formed. Now it was all about execution. A polished-wood staircase descended two levels to the grand hall. As they took the top step, Bradford angled himself away from the balusters.

Second step... third step... He eyed the ornate chandelier that hung from the roof. The candles that once flickered in its concentric framework were now replaced by electric lamps. Fourth step.

Bradford sprang into action. In one swift motion, he palmed the tiny knife that had been put into his pocket in the helicopter, sprung the blade open and thrust it up to the hilt into the shoulder of the man in front of him, slamming him into the wall. In the same motion, he spun around and lunged at the man behind him, shoulder and elbow into the man's gut and pushed toward handrail, leaning over,

putting them off-balance. The two men teetered before they lost balance and went over the side, plummeting to the ground, Bradford clinging to the man's chest.

He screamed in Bradford's ear. Bradford had an impression of the chandelier shooting past as they fell. He was already wrenching the man's gun. Flailing hands hit the chandelier, swaying it like a pendulum, knocking some lamps loose. The other guard was shouting from the top of the stairs, struggling to dislodge the knife. The henchman's body took the brunt of the impact — slamming hard into the floor, tearing up the floorboards — while cushioning Bradford's fall. Lamps shattered around them. Bradford rolled off the unconscious guard, gun in hand, woozy from the fall. The front doors to the chalet burst open and Adrian Klausman was framed in the doorpost, surrounded by other men. One of them charged into the hall, drawing his gun. Bradford caught sight of Sebastian Laporte climbing into the BMW, sneering at him. A bullet whizzed past his ear and Bradford returned fire, turned, and ran into a corridor deeper into the house.

Doors stood on either side of the corridor in-between large gilt-framed oil paintings. He tried the doorknobs, rattling the doors. He glanced over his shoulder and saw another of Klausman's henchmen raise his gun. Bradford was faster — he put three bullets into the man's broad chest. Bradford tried another door — it opened — he ducked in... and stepped into a darkened room.

A bookshelf spanned one entire wall, there was a window across the room, and, off to his right, a stout desk stood before another window. The drapes were drawn, blotting out the morning light.

The door was kicked in, catching him in the back. He stumbled and the gun flew from his grasp. He recovered and backpedalled into the door. His assailant's wrist caught in the doorjamb and Bradford hit

against the door again making him drop his gun. The man on the other side pushed mightily and the edge of the door cut Bradford on the cheek, opening a gash. He stormed into the room and swung at Bradford, catching him in the jaw, throwing him flat against the wall. He lunged, Bradford rolled along the wall; the man's fist punched through the wooden wall, and he cried in agony, clutching broken knuckles. Bradford wrenched a sconce off the wall, swung around and smashed it against the man's face. The man shook his head and, with a grunt grabbed Bradford's neck and clamped his bruised hand around the lamp-holder. Teeth bared with the strain, their grips trembled as they fought for the upper hand. Bradford's feet slid back on the floor, his strength ebbing.

The sconce inched closer to Bradford's eye.

CHAPTER 71

Bradford suddenly gave in and swung underneath, swirling his assailant around and pushing forward, driving the man right into the window. For a fraction of a second, they were caught in the heavy drapes, then the drapes tore from the fasteners and the window shattered with the impact, spilling them outside, into the snow.

Disorienting darkness enveloped them, as they fought entangled in the drapes, their blows weakened by the drag of the thick cloth. Both men frantically tried to get the drapes off as they tossed and tumbled in the snow. Then Bradford's head popped free, and he crawled out leaving the struggling form still entangled in the drapes. Shouts drew his attention. Two more of Klausman's henchmen were coming around the front of the chalet. He caught a glimpse of the BMW X7 driving away from the chalet down a path that had been cleared of snow.

Bradford got to his feet and quickly looked around. If he remembered correctly, from the wrap-around balcony, Klausman had shown him the valleys that spread out on the other side of the chalet. With nowhere to hide, Bradford sprinted — his boots sank into the snow — toward the large shed that stood some distance from the chalet on a low hump of terrain. If nothing else, he would slide down the mountain into the valley under cover of the shed.

His breath fogged and his chest heaved with the effort of trudging through the snow. The only consolation was his pursuers were also experiencing similar exertions. A gunshot rang out and a plume of snow sprayed nearby. Consolation vanished, he doubled over to make himself a smaller target and set his sights grimly on the rectangular doorway of the shed.

Bradford reached the shed and slipped inside as another bullet splintered the wood above his head. Parked inside the shed were two Arctic Cat snowmobiles. His eyes raced around the interior of the shed, and he realized he might just make it out of here. He went over to a storage rack behind the snowmobiles and grabbed for a case emblazoned with bright red crosses. He unzipped the emergency kit feverishly and shouted, "Yes!" and extracted a flare gun from within. He quickly loaded the flare gun, tucked a spare flare into his waistband and then reached for a rag of cloth on the shelf and a fuel can standing near the rack. He doused the cloth in fuel, unscrewed the fuel-tank cap on the nearest snowmobile and shoved the cloth inside leaving a tail sticking out. Fuel dripped from the end of the cloth, and he splashed the remaining fuel all over the snowmobile and tossed the can aside. Bradford jumped astride the second snowmobile, pressed the starter button, and twisted the accelerator grips.

The snowmobile burst out of the shed smashing through the door. The two henchmen jumped clear. As the Arctic Cat cleared the door, Bradford twisted in his seat — out of the corner of his eye he saw them raising their guns at him — and fired the flare gun at the parked snowmobile. The flare *shoomed* brilliantly into the shed and ignited the fuel-soaked cloth and a moment later the fuel tank exploded. An orange fireball blossomed out of the shed sending timber and shrapnel in all directions. The shockwave of the blast pummeled Klausman's henchmen to the snow. A cloud of black smoke mushroomed over the destroyed roof of the shed.

Bradford pointed the Arctic Cat after the BMW. He hunched over the handlebar as the skis bit into the snow.

He heard a buzzing sound rise in intensity and suddenly a white helicopter thundered behind him, its nose pointed down, and gave chase.

CHAPTER 72

The snowmobile zigzagged down the mountain slope dodging the trail of rifle-fire from the pursuing helicopter. It took all of Bradford's focus to remain seated as he bounced over the rocky terrain. He had to keep out-thinking the gunner in the chopper and keep throwing the Cat around unpredictably. He dived into narrow gullies, over ridges, behind snow-laced boulders. All thoughts of catching up with the BMW were pushed from his mind. His only thought was to stay alive and get to the authorities. The Cat hit a rise and leapt into the air. Bradford saw a wide expressway running perpendicular to his path less than a hundred yards away and closing fast. Suspended in the Cat's trajectory for too long, he could almost imagine the gunner centering the crosshairs of his scope on his back. Then the Cat landed hard, and he was nearly knocked from the seat. It fishtailed in the snow and began to tip over. He clenched his teeth and pulled to the right to balance out the centre of gravity and to stop from hitting the road. He twisted the handlebars and felt the Cat begin to turn and stabilize and then he was racing along an embankment above and parallel to the road.

The helicopter banked over the centre of the road and began to draw abreast of him. Cars zipped by on the road. Bradford thought about taking the Cat back up the slope away from the road, but the ascent would be slower giving the gunner a better shot.

Then he spotted the wide rear-end of the white BMW X7 on the expressway and opened the throttle. He looked across and saw the gunner in the helicopter staring back at him through the open door calling out instructions to the pilot over a radio headset. The pilot smiled wolfishly and brought the helicopter into position. Bradford

realized they were going to decapitate him with the spinning blades! With mere seconds to act, he momentarily released the handlebars and jerked the flare gun's chamber open. With his other hand, he fished the remaining flare out of his waistband and loaded the flare gun. He jerked the chamber shut, grabbed the handlebar, and pointed the gun back at the helicopter cabin.

The sniper screamed into the radio headset while at the same time attempting to squeeze off a shot.

Bradford fired. The flare snaked out across distance between the Cat and the helicopter and hit the sniper square in the chest, throwing him back into the helicopter. The chopper pulled out of range ablaze in thick red smoke that billowed out of the cabin. Bradford tossed the flare gun away and angled the Cat toward the lip of the embankment... and launched the Arctic Cat off the embankment out over the road.

At the zenith of its jump, as the Cat passed over the X7, Bradford leapt off the seat onto the wide roof. He slid along the top of the roof, his fingers and shoes clawing for purchase.

The Cat plunged to the road its skis hit the expressway and were torn away. The sudden impact sent it cart-wheeling crazily end-on-end right across the breadth of the road. Cars swerved, horns blared, brakes squealed as vehicles tried to avoid the careening snowmobile. The Cat rose into the air again and somersaulted off the road over the ravine and was lost from sight over the edge of the expressway.

Bradford rolled off the BMW's roof onto the hood and only just managed to reach out and grab the protruding rearview mirror on

the driver's side of the car. With his other hand, he grabbed onto the windscreen wipers. His feet dangled over the front fender. He looked up to see the shocked expressions of the men inside the BMW.

Then Sebastian Laporte who was sitting in the backseat, reached over the shoulder of the driver, and yanking the wheel to the right and then left. The BMW veered and Bradford felt the windscreen wiper pivot and he lost his grip, tumbled off the hood. Now holding on only to the rearview mirror he was dragged along with the car, his heels scraping and bouncing on the road. He hooked his arm around the mirror and tried to get better leverage to pull himself up. The driver's window rolled down and he found himself staring into the snub barrel of a Sphinx AT2000 pistol.

Bradford let go of the mirror.

The gun fired.

He hit the road on his butt, skidded ten feet and felt searing heat on his back as his shirt was ripped open. He had angled his neck upward when he let go and had clasped his hands around the back of his head. His knuckles were skinned raw as they kissed the road. His body began to spin as he slowed down.

Cars whizzed past. He could feel the *whoosh* of tires inches from his body. Horns blared. One horn grew in intensity, loud and deafening, something big bearing down on him. He heard the protest of air brakes, the roar of a heavy-duty engine. His body came to a stop, battered, and bruised and he could feel the vibration of the road. Unable to move, Bradford craned his neck and watched with detached peace as a large trailer-rig rumbled toward him. A shadow fell over him and he knew he was going to be crushed under the thick wheels.

CHAPTER 73

Billy Bradford stirred to the chimes of church bells. His eyelids fluttered open; the smell of antiseptics hit his nose. The bells continued to ring, their peals interspersed with beautiful silence. After a few moments of disorientation, he realized he was in a cosy room, in a bed, a blanket draped over his body. Cool breeze gusted in through an open window. The bells ceased ringing and he looked around. An IV line ran from one arm, rising into a clear plastic baggie. He became aware of a monitor near the bed, beeping continuously and showing the squiggle of his heartrate. His eyes came to rest on a wall clock. It was seven in the morning.

He was in a hospital room.

He lay motionless, just aware that he was alive. The last thing he remembered was the truck rolling toward him. Was he paralyzed? He wiggled his toes and his fingers. Everything seemed normal. But his breathing was constricted. He gingerly felt bandages wrapped around his chest which explained the constriction. He tried to move, and a sharp pain shot up his neck and brought tears to his eyes. He sank back into the bed, breathing heavily, blinking back tears. He tried to move again, slowly, this time and found that with very measured, careful movements he was okay. There was only one angle which — the pain shot through him again and he collapsed back.

In pain, his fingers distinctly *clicked* down on something. He looked and saw that he had a buzzer in his hand.

A grand-motherly woman swept into the room. She spoke slowly, looking at him, her eyes wide with concern behind her spectacles.

She was easing the buzzer from his fingers. He began to comprehend a few words.

"Monsieur, do not move too much."

"Where... where am I?"

She smiled and he felt comforted. "The police brought you here yesterday, unconscious. You were involved in a serious accident... it is only God's grace that you escaped with broken ribs and a dislocated shoulder." She touched her nape. "And abrasions on your neck and back. The doctor stitched you up as good as new."

"Where am I?" he repeated.

"Susten." She pulled the bedcovers over him again and fiddled with a small canister, popping a few pills into a creased palm. He heard her pouring water for him and she offered him the pills and the glass. "For the pain."

She helped him down the painkillers. Water dribbled from his mouth.

"Bien?"

He nodded, though he didn't feel any different yet. "Where is Susten?"

"You are in Switzerland. The police are outside, waiting to question you. You are American?"

"Canadian."

"You have no identification." She sighed as if this was a grave issue.

"The accident... it was horrible. But I will tell them you are not to be disturbed today, okay?" She patted his hand and winked at him.

"No, I would like to talk to them, please."

A shadow of discontent flashed across her features clearly disappointed that he was not going along with her. "You need rest; they can wait."

"It is very important. Lives are in danger." But his eyelids were sagging. Her voice was slurring. He slipped into unconsciousness.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon. He heard a car somewhere. Otherwise, it was as silent as it had been earlier.

"Hello."

He looked at the gendarmerie sitting in a chair at the foot of the bed, reading a newspaper. His tone was pleasant, but his greeting was not accompanied by a smile.

"I am Gregory Ulrich."

"Billy Bradford."

"From Canada?"

"Yes, British Columbia."

Bradford felt a headache come over him and felt around the bed near his hip for the buzzer.

The gendarmerie leaned forward, folded his newspaper away.

"When we could not find any identification on you, we contacted Fedpol... and you are very famous in the JTF." The Federal Police was Interpol's National Central Bureau in Switzerland, headquartered at Berne.

"I was kidnapped and brought here to Switzerland, a prisoner of Adrian Klausman."

"I am not aware of the name."

"Gregory, many lives are at stake. I cannot stay here; I must speak to Interpol immediately. Do you have a number to call?"

Taken aback by Bradford's demand, Ulrich spluttered. He had clearly not expected to be thrust into action so quickly; his peaceful routine disrupted by a foreigner. Bradford immediately guessed that the

gendarmerie was out of his depth and said, "Gregory, where is the nearest Interpol office? Can you drive me there?"

"Fedpol is sending someone here to Susten."

"When?"

"I have no —"

"Look," Bradford carefully sat up clenching his teeth in anticipation of the pain, but it didn't strike. "Call your commanding officer and tell him I must speak to Interpol and patch me through. This cannot wait." He began to pull out the IV line.

"Okay, okay, I will call... wait!" Ulrich fished out his phone and dialled and began jabbering rapidly, his voice agitated, his free hand gesturing wildly. After a minute, he handed the phone to Bradford. As if on cue the nurse reappeared, took one look at Bradford sitting up in bed, the IV-line hanging loose, and began chastising Ulrich. Bradford put one hand over his ear to drown out their argument, quickly framed his thoughts and began speaking to Ulrich's commanding officer, giving him a clear, concise briefing on the events of the past few days. "We must talk to the Swiss Guard immediately," He concluded.

"Monsieur Bradford, please, I cannot go around putting Vatican City on a terrorist alert without proper assessments of the facts and higher authorization."

"Every moment we spend on the phone, we're closer to a disaster. Let me talk to Fedpol. Can you connect me?"

A moment of silence passed. Bradford said, "Look here, how far is Susten from where the accident occurred?"

"Not too far, you were found on the A11 highway. Why?"

"If you take me to the spot, I can find my way back to Adrian Klausman's chalet and we'll find your proof there."

More silence. Bradford nearly screamed. The nurse was reaching for the phone, trying to pry it away, intent that he get his rest. He firmly pushed her hand away, partly as payback for feeding him sleeping pills without informing him, and all the grand-motherliness left her. She mumbled under her breath, cursing him most likely.

“Inspector, what do you say? I’m not making this up; think about it: you’ll be rewarded for your actions. Gregory can drive me to the chalet, I’ll meet you there and —”

“Wait! Stop talking! Gregory will bring you to me and then we will go. I will talk to the hospital.”

While he waited, Bradford tried calling home. On the fifth attempt, he reached his wife who broke down on the phone in relief. Bradford quickly apprised her of the situation and what he planned to do. As expected, she hovered between pleading with him to stay put and flaring up at his ‘stupidity’, but he dismissed her concern: “I love you and will return home soon. I promise. I am with the police; nothing will happen to me now.”

The hospital made him sign a waiver and within an hour he was ready to move. A male nurse loaned him a set of clothes since his were in tatters. He apologized to the grand-motherly nurse who shoved a bottle of painkillers at him as a parting gift. He clarified with her that they were not sedatives and put them into his pocket. He followed Ulrich outside and climbed into a white Skoda police car with an orange band running around. They pulled out of the parking lot.

The roads were almost deserted; they passed two cars going in the opposite direction. They passed cottages and quaint houses nestled

amid the rolling terrain. Bradford lowered the windows and breathed in the sparkling air, felt rejuvenated. They drove past a round-about and he saw a group of mountaineers in bright colourful jackets loading gear into a pickup truck.

A car overtook them from the right, zipping past. Ulrich shook his fist at the driver. And a moment later the car — a Volvo XC90 — fishtailed, ostensibly out-of-control, and skidded broadside across the narrow two-lane road and came to a halt.

“You cursed him,” Bradford said in a moment of lightness.

“What?”

“Never mind.” The driver of the Volvo climbed out of the car, raised his hands in frustration. He kicked the wheels and then turned to face them, hailing them to stop. “Damn.” More time wasted.

Ulrich slowed down. With the engine off, silence descended like a heavy blanket. Bradford noticed that they were alone on the road; there was not a person or vehicle in sight. The driver of the Volvo XC90 was already calling out to Ulrich asking him for assistance to push the car to one side of the road. Ulrich got out of the car and went over, exchanged a few words with the man and then suddenly crumpled to the road, rendered unconscious by a blow to the head with the silenced gun held by the man.

CHAPTER 74

Bradford started. As his mind raced to make sense of what had just happened, he recognized the driver of the Volvo: Luc Fortesque!

Fortesque gestured with the gun. "We meet again. Get out of the car. I know you're unarmed and injured. Don't make this any worse than it should be. Get out now!"

With nothing else he could do, Bradford stepped out.

"Come on over!"

The two men sized each other up, iciness staring out of Fortesque's eyes, anger burning in Bradford's eyes. "You going to finish what you started in the forest?"

"I'll ask the questions," Fortesque countered. "What are you doing here?"

Again, with no reason to lie, Bradford said, "I'm trying to stop Adrian Klausman from blowing up the Vatican."

Fortesque's eyes narrowed. "What do you know about Adrian Klausman?"

After he had been resuscitated, Fortesque landed a single blow at the steward sending the man tumbling across the aisle bleeding from a split lip. He had closed in for the second blow when the steward cowered and screamed, "They had a bug implanted in you! Mr Black said the defibrillator would fry the electronics." Fortesque looked over to where the steward was pointing and for the first time saw Christian Black's body slouched in the chair, a dark blotch across the front of his white shirt. Dead.

They wrapped the body in bed sheets and Fortesque instructed the pilots to descend to an altitude from which it was convenient to dump the body out of the Gulfstream. That callous burial complete, he sat down to make sense out of Yasmin's research.

He hit pay dirt within twenty minutes in a section that listed names of families and people who had retained services of Die Adler agents. Elated, he flipped through the pages, jotting down names against Agent 23, wondering how old this mysterious courier was. Or perhaps it's an inherited code. Everything about this business seemed to be an ancient inheritance, after all. One name resolved into focus while the other names on the legal pad blurred: Klausman, Lucerne, Switzerland. He recalled that Black had told him that Nicolas Klausman had been executed by the Vesuvius Group for treachery.

But if Klausman was dead...

He thought about the different teams that had attacked them in Paris and Bonn. One was an organized strike team while the later was a two-man team. From this, and their modus-operandi he deduced they were working for different employers.

The team that had assaulted Christian Black's mansion had been sent by the Vesuvius Group. Qin Zhou had no need to send a strike team; he believed Fortesque was on the job and, whoever was using Adler had no motive to kill Black then. Black too, believed the Vesuvius Group had kidnapped or killed Laurent; it made sense they would also come after Black. No loose ends.

The team that had attacked them in Bonn had gone first for Black and Arella – they knew about Yasmin's research. They could only have been sent by the shadowy figure using Adler's services.

And Wei Ling... had betrayed the location of Qin Zhou's facility to Charles Laurent and Luc Fortesque at the behest of the same person

who had turned the mercenaries against Luc and Charles and had Adler retrieve Apocalypse from Lake Balkash.

But to what end?

It came to him a moment later: Someone was seeking vengeance for Klausman's execution. A son or daughter! It made sense!

The hit on Qin Zhou framed Henri Laurent and intensified the feud between Zhou and Laurent to the tipping point. The Group's Code of Conduct, allowed Zhou to call for redress of his grievance, which in turn required all the Group's members to mandatorily come together. Fortesque was now quite certain Laurent had been kidnapped by the Vesuvius Group.

And when the whole Vesuvius Group was assembled, it presented the perfect opportunity for Klausman's son or daughter to avenge his death.

Fortesque sat back in his chair and tapped the pen against the collapsible desk, thinking: Giovanni Ferruccio wasn't going anywhere; he was an invalid living on borrowed time; the Vesuvius Group would take care of Henri Laurent.

Which left one formidable target for Fortesque: Klausman's heir.

He called the pilot and set a course for Switzerland.

They made an unlikely duo: there was none of the banter or camaraderie that two-man teams of Hollywood exude onscreen. It was only a sudden sense of reason that had prevented both soldiers from killing each other in the Susten road.

"Killing you isn't going to bring my boy back."

"That's right, it isn't." Fortesque had lowered his weapon.

"It was you who fired the first shot in the forest; if I wanted you dead I would have killed you the moment we had you disarmed."

"We have a history, do you know?"

When Bradford didn't answer, Fortesque went on to explain.

"We picked our destinies, Fortesque," was Bradford's only answer when Fortesque had finished. "You want to hold a grudge, be my guest. Put a bullet in me right now if it makes you happy. It isn't going to change the past. The only thing I want now is to stop Sebastian Laporte. So, if you don't pull that trigger, you can finish this with one good act and save millions of lives."

"When this is over, you leave me alone, alright?"

"Did you kill my boy?"

They locked eyes. Fortesque sighed. "No, he was dead before we touched down. The toxic poisoning had already done its job."

They continued to stare at each other. Finally, Bradford decided he believed Fortesque. "Okay, then." And he had climbed into the Volvo.

Bradford grimaced as the movement of the car sent stabs of pain through his injuries.

"How did you find me?"

"I was in Lucerne to track down Adrian Klausman. His office believes he is vacationing in the mountains, but I checked: he isn't home. Then you showed up on the local news. Reports say you jumped onto the roof of a car from a snowmobile." He sneered at Bradford. "Didn't gain you much." He crammed the car into a lower gear as they hit a steeper incline and mashed the accelerator. "The location of the accident is not far from Klausman's chalet. So, I thought I'd

find out from you... and here we are." They drove in silence for a while. Then Fortesque said, "Klausman is going to use a weapon system of unimaginable devastation."

"How do you know?"

"I stole the weapon he will use." He pounded the wheel. "Didn't know I was being played." And he told Bradford about the *Apocalypse* weapon.

Bradford was horrified at what he heard. "Klausman mentioned he had something in store for the Catholic Church..."

"The pope passed last evening," Fortesque said.

Bradford's eyes widened with shocked realisation. "The papal conclave will draw hordes to the Vatican... but why the Church?"

Fortesque supplied the last piece of the puzzle, "Fr Luigi Vincente, one of the strong contenders for the Papal office was responsible for bringing charges against Klausman's father to the Vesuvius Group."

"It seems the perfect day to destroy the Vatican. If Klausman has left Switzerland, he is surely planning on carrying out his attack on the Vesuvius Group while Laporte destroys the Vatican and almost all of Rome."

Fortesque said. "Then my hunt ends in Sorrento tomorrow."

"I have to warn the Vatican."

"I cannot stop at the Vatican."

"I'm not asking you to." Bradford smiled sheepishly. "I have a propensity for jumps."

CHAPTER 75

On the drive from Susten to Lucerne, Bradford convinced Fortesque there was no need to involve the flight crew anymore. The Gulfstream G650 was marketed as the most technologically advanced executive jet with several revolutionary innovations to pilot-assistance. As a testament to the uneasy truce between the two men, Fortesque relieved the flight crew and the steward of their duty at the airfield and in the early hours of dawn, Bradford and he readied the jet for takeoff.

Compared to the utilitarian cockpits that both were used to, the PlaneView-format cockpit of the G650 was alien in its comfort and setup. It took them less than thirty minutes to appreciate the functionality and customization that the HUD and four LCD screens offered. With the trademarked Synthetic Vision and Enhanced Vision guiding them, the G650 taxied down the runway and lifted into the air and banked south on a heading for Italy.

They had just crossed into Italy when Fortesque said, "You will need help."

"Who do we call?" Bradford's response dripped with sarcasm. He was nervous about the task that lay ahead. Especially in his debilitated state.

Fortesque unstrapped his seat-harness and disappeared into the main cabin. He returned with a silver case, snapped it open to reveal two ampoules of amber-coloured liquid. "Powerful

concoction," he explained. "I've been running on this for near a week now. Enhances reflexes and stamina, dulls pain signals."

"Side-effects?"

Fortesque shrugged. Bradford considered this for a moment and then reached for an ampoule.

"You'll need a gun," Fortesque said. He held out his SIG P228 and extra ammo clips. "Good luck."

Bradford adjusted the shoulder straps of his parachute and snapped the waist-belt in place. The Gulfstream was descending steadily to jump altitude. He could already feel the effects of the steroids; he had become less aware of the pain in his chest and every *click* in the cabin was amplified. The intercom clicked: "Three minutes."

Fortesque set the plane on autopilot and joined Bradford. "When I open the door, the autopilot will compensate." Fortesque secured them with a safety line and clasped the door-release lever.

Bradford nodded and grabbed the safety-line with both hands. Fortesque yanked down on the lever. The door opened and the cabin depressurized. Alarms went off in the jet, and the wind howled and whistled and tugged at both men. The autopilot kicked in and the nose plummeted earth-ward. Bradford and Fortesque flattened their backs to the bulkhead away from the main suction zone. The safety line trembled with strain. Bradford reached across Fortesque for the doorjamb and then unhooked himself from the safety line.

He was sucked right to the edge of the door. The wind pummeled his face like a hammer, whipping his hair across his face and he had to shut his eyes. He was aware of the whine of the jets mounted on the aft section of the fuselage. When he jumped, he had to be

careful he wasn't sucked into the turbofans. Looking down he could see the lights of a city spread out and twinkling yellow and white. And the snaking Tiber River. Rome.

"Go now!" Fortesque shouted over the sound of the wind.

Bradford let go and pushed with his legs.

He had a sensation of whooshing past the fuselage of the jet — the roar of the B-Cell powered Rolls Royce engines deafened him as he passed dangerously near — and then he was whipped along in the slipstream before gravity took hold and he began to fall so fast, the jet was immediately a speck in the distance.

Although Bradford had had air-drop training, he felt a multitude of anxiety attacks assail his senses. He pushed them away, clearing his mind, convincing himself that there was nothing to it. There were millions of jumpers, and the chances of an accident were rare. But given the series of events over the last weeks of his life, rare had a higher probability of occurrence.

The lights of the Vatican rushed up to greet him. How far had he fallen?

Whump!

Bradford's body was jerked upright as the canopy unfolded above him, arresting his rate of descent. A mild wind gusted at him as his hands found the steering toggles where they were expected to be. The lights of St. Peter's Basilica beckoned to him. He tugged at the lines with a sense of familiarity and began to change direction.

The sky was turning indigo, as the deepest part of the night gave way to the dawn. The wind currents were taking him right at the massive cupola of the basilica. It loomed in front of him, so large

and immobile that he felt positively puny and began pulling on the guy-lines to avoid being splattered against the ovoid edifice. Another gust of wind caught in the canopy of his parachute, and he was yanked sideways away from the dome. His feet scraped against the stone and to compensate for the pull of the parachute, Bradford had to run *on* the dome a few feet, leap over a rib. But before his feet could touch the dome again, the wind pulled him further away, toward the gardens behind the basilica.

He began to lose lift rapidly and the canopy began to crumple above him. He braced himself for the landing as the tops of trees whisked past underfoot. He glided over a fountain heading straight toward the woods beyond. Bradford put his hands up to shield his face. Branches and leaves grazed and slapped at him and then abruptly he came to a halt, the canopy caught in the boughs of the trees. He swayed on the lines and looked down. He released the harness and fell ten feet to the ground, landing on the soft grass, absorbing the impact, stumbling a bit before regaining his balance. Not too bad for someone pushing the late forties, he thought as he dusted himself and spat out bits of leaf and bark. Or perhaps it was the steroids.

Bradford unzipped his jacket, unpacked the SIG, and shoved it into his jeans. He took off at an easy run, exiting the woods. He had hardly gone a few yards when shadowy figures emerged from hiding, encircling him, and shouting at him in Italian, English, French and German, commanding him to stop, put his hands up and get down on his knees. Powerful lights illuminated the spot where he stood. Slowly, Bradford complied. He looked around and saw that some of the figures carried assault rifles, others, automatic pistols.

As he knelt, two men approached him. They had their guns trained at his head. They fanned out and he felt someone reach for his hands and twist them painfully behind his back and flex-cuff him. He

was frisked thoroughly and relieved of the SIG. Then he was pulled to his feet.

One of his captors was young, mid-twenties, with close-cropped hair, and spectacles, but moved like a soldier. He holstered his weapon and said, "Who are you?"

"Are you the Swiss Guard?" Bradford countered.

"I am captain of the Guard. Now —"

"I want to talk to your commanding officer, captain!"

CHAPTER 76

With Papal Conclave starting that morning, Colonel Philipp Toulmin of the Swiss Guard had worked without sleep for over two days. He had retired to his quarters for a much-needed power-nap with a request that he only be disturbed in an extreme emergency. So, when he heard the knocking on his door, he was wide-awake at once, fearing the worst. He looked at the luminous digits of the bedside clock: 03:00 a.m. The knocking continued, insistent and firm. Toulmin tossed the bedcovers aside and padded over to the door.

A young halberdier stood in the doorway, his features taut and anxious at being assigned the task of waking the CO.

"What is it?" Toulmin asked in a gravelly voice, laced with anxiety.

Toulmin hailed from St. Gallen canton in Switzerland and had joined the Swiss Guard at 23-years-old. After his two years of service, he enlisted with the Swiss Army where he rose to the rank of captain. He had returned as Oberst or Colonel of the Swiss Guard. He was a strict but fair commander with a very logical, fact-based approach to situations.

"We captured an intruder who parachuted into the city, sir. He is in the holding room and insists on talking only to you on a matter of greatest urgency."

"He won't talk to anyone else?"

"No, sir." The halberdier paused as if considering if he should be repetitive. "And it is of utmost urgency."

There was a moment's pause then Toulmin said, "Lead the way!"

When Toulmin entered the room, everyone noticed his pajamas but said nothing. On the other side of the two-way mirror, he saw the prisoner sitting at a table, his hands cuffed behind his back, staring right at the mirror with intense eyes. Toulmin put out his hand and the captain of the Guard placed a slim file-folder in his palm. He slipped on his reading glasses and scanned the dossier on William Bradford.

"His credentials check out, sir," the captain said. "Ex-Joint Task Force II, decorated warrior in the Middle East, lost his son in the controversial incident in British Columbia a few weeks ago, was reported missing and popped up in Switzerland where he nearly died in a high-speed chase on the A11, and is now on the Fedpol wanted list in connection with the shooting of a police officer Gregory Ulrich... and a threat against the Vatican."

Toulmin had heard of the incidents in BC. "Yes, I now remember the father's face from the reports. This is surely interesting. Let's meet him."

Bradford heard the lock click open and a man in pajamas walked into the interrogation room followed by the young captain.

"Mr Bradford, I am Colonel Philipp Toulmin. You wished to speak with me."

Bradford nodded at the captain. "You trust the captain to be in on this conversation?"

"Yes."

"Alright." And Bradford briefed them on the situation and *Apocalypse*. When he was finished, Toulmin sat back assessing what he had heard.

"If what you say is true, it is terrible. And with Papal Conclave..." He looked at his watch. "It is a quarter to four now. We can have a strategy in place, extra lookouts, alert the police, too."

"Not too obvious or Laporte will be frightened into detonating the weapon. Then all is lost. We must be as inconspicuous as possible and take him out before he can pull the trigger."

"I agree," Toulmin said.

"What about the Cardinals?" the captain inquired.

"We must plan for a secret evacuation in the event that we fail."

"It is going to be very close. Millions will lose their lives if we fail."

"That," Toulmin said with a heavy voice, "is something we won't have to live with." He stared at Bradford and the captain. "We'll be dead too."

CHAPTER 77

Qin Zhou had a smug look upon his face as he stepped onto the scenic balcony. The rising sun bathed the green mountain slopes of Sorrento in a soft halo. It was a beauty that only Nature could conceive.

He breathed in deeply while savouring the breeze blowing in from the Tyrrhenian Sea. He felt a sense of pride well up within. So much had changed in the world since World War II but the omnipresent influence and control that the Vesuvius Group wielded had only grown more deep-rooted and powerful. He had experienced the heady rush of that absolute power on many occasions, watched it evolve and penetrate even the staunchest of resistance and the noblest of institutions; he had been there at the start and would live to see it longer than the two other oldest surviving members of the group: Giovanni Ferruccio and the pathetic Frenchman, Henri Laurent. Ferruccio was at death's door with several health complications while Laurent... well, after today, Laurent would be no more, and Zhou would manipulate the younger members — heirs of corrupted bloodlines who were naïve about the workings and machinations of the cabal — to his advantage. By early next week, Zhou would have control of Laurent's energy empire and a decades-old feud would finally be won!

He heard a whirring and turned to see Giovanni roll out onto the balcony in his electric wheelchair. Several tubes dispensed medicine into the withered old man from an apparatus mounted on the back of the wheelchair. A faint blue glow emanating from near the wheels of the chair indicated, ironically, that the wheelchair was powered by FEG technology.

"Good morning, Qin," Giovanni rasped. The wheelchair drew up near the edge of the balcony and gently braked.

"Good morning."

Giovanni's voice was tinged with intent. "I will say that the timing of this conclave could not be more appropriate. The younger generation of the Group must have a demonstration of the severity of our laws if they are to fully comprehend the foundation of power that they partake in, by virtue of their bloodlines... and the consequences of going against the Oath of Allegiance."

"Yes," Zhou agreed with a simpering smile. "An example must be made. It is unfortunate that an example must be made of Henrí."

"You do not fool me, Qin. This could not please you more."

Zhou bowed but did not say anything.

"We will renew our vows today after the execution."

"Should the Oath be... uh... updated to keep with the times?"

Giovanni's rasp grew dangerous, and Zhou immediately backed down. "Times have changed but the Oath does not. It transcends time and is not polluted by the values and ideals of this world."

Zhou's smugness deserted him because he was reminded that as long as Giovanni lived, control of the Vesuvius Group was but a dream. The man was a picture of frailty and decay but still commanded the power to destroy Qin Zhou. His thoughts were interrupted by Giovanni's next words.

"The strike team that was sent to eliminate Christian Black was defeated because he had help." Giovanni's eyes settled on Zhou.

"Do you know anything about this?"

Zhou was surprised at this news. Luc Fortesque was supposed to eliminate Christian. He made a mental note to talk to Wei Ling at the earliest.

CHAPTER 78

After air-dropping Bradford, Fortesque set a path directly for Naples and took up a holding pattern far out over the Tyrrhenian Sea. He had long-since marked off Giovanni's villa on the navigation systems and the B-Energy Fuel Cells powering the Gulfstream would allow him to maintain his watch-pattern almost indefinitely. The only constraint was being shot down by the Italian Air Force if they got suspicious. It was now nearing eleven o'clock local time and he hadn't been threatened.

He descended and circled in closer beneath the sparse cloud cover, keeping an eye out for Klausman. He could make out the wakes of boats moving around the islands in the sea and along the curving coastline. On the flight from Lucerne, Bradford and he had agreed that given Ferruccio's manor's proximity and orientation to the coast, an assault from off the coast of Sorrento had the highest probability of success and would give Klausman time to make a clean getaway.

Fortesque didn't have a plan of attack yet; he'd improvise based on when and how Klausman attacked.

Standing in the helm room of an offshore support vessel, Adrian Klausman peered through high-power binoculars at the Ferruccio manor. The ship's white sloping superstructure was one with the red hull and rose to a hexagonal bridge topped off by her navigation and communication masts. She was capable of supporting dive and salvage operations with her 12-man portable saturation dive

system, ROV unit, and main and aux cranes. She rode high in the water, the top of her bulbous-bow visible. An amorphous shape sat atop a helipad on the bow, covered in a heavy-duty protective cloth. Klausman picked up the bridge-phone, pushed a button and said, "It is time... prep the Panther."

He stepped closer to the tinted bridge windows and watched as men scurried about in a flurry of activity on the helipad, pulling off the cover from a Dauphin AS565 combat helicopter, a.k.a. Panther. They efficiently folded the rotor blades open and locked them into position. The pod-mounted rocket launchers were readied. The pilots climbed in, and the rotors spun into action.

Klausman left the bridge and strode across the helipad. He passed a few crewmen who nodded respectfully. It had been easy for Klausman to source this crew and make them an offer they could not refuse. None of them knew his real name; only that he was paying them enough to close their single-ship offshore support business, give up sailing, and retire to a tropical island-paradise for the rest of their lives... with their families.

He ducked beneath the spinning rotors, climbed into the cabin, and donned a headset. The doors were pulled shut and the Panther rose a few feet off the deck, dipped its nose in the direction of the Ferruccio manor.

Bradford turned in a small circle as he scanned the crowd pouring into St. Peter's Square. A swirl of faces greeted him — a multitude of nationalities and features, people of all races and faiths, and perhaps even atheists and agnostics. At the fringe of the crowd were the news crews with their vans, satellite dishes pointing to the

heavens. A cacophony of languages hit him, punctuated by interspersed prayers, applause, shouts of support for the Cardinals. Placards and posters pumped the air. He pressed his radio deeper into his ear as he tried to keep up with the chatter among the Swiss Guard. Occasionally he would hear Toulmin's voice ordering the Guard around, strategizing, and directing them. Toulmin was in the security control room, watching the Piazza over closed-circuit television.

Someone bumped against Bradford and apologized hastily before aiming a camera with a telephoto lens at the façade. Over to his right, beyond Carlo Maderno's fountain, people were gathering outside the Bronze Doors. Bradford looked at his watch: 11:22 AM. Would Laporte wear a disguise?

A man in the overcoat... his gait...

Bradford squeezed past people, pushing them aside without apology. Toulmin was talking in his ear: "Bradford, what do you see? Talk to me." Then he was speaking rapidly in French, to his snipers in position among the statues atop the Charlemagne and Constantine Colonnades. Bradford could sense them following his zigzag run, the crosshairs of their rifles on his back, then moving around as they tried to draw a bead on whoever he might be after.

A roar went up from the crowd as a group of people thought they saw smoke rising from the Sistine Chapel. The crowd pressed nearer, and Bradford had to fight to keep his balance. He reached for the suspect's shoulder just as the man turned to look in the direction of the chimney atop the Sistine Chapel and looked him in the eye. Bradford lowered his hand, stepped back. "Sorry, I thought you were someone else. Sorry." The man shook his head at him, spun a finger near his temple: crazy.

"Bradford, who was that?"

"Nobody," he panted, searching the crowds. "You see anything? Backpackers?"

"Couple in the queue by the Bronze Door."

"He wouldn't risk the security; he doesn't need to be inside the Apostolic Palace," Bradford snapped.

"We're doing our best," Toulmin replied curtly followed by an expletive.

Bradford circled the Fountain; the water gurgled and bubbled. He spotted two backpackers, tried to discern a shape within their packs. One of the backpackers was female; he shifted attention to the other.

A baby bawled somewhere in the crowd. A child laughed. He heard whispers of prayers being rapidly recited. A woman raised her eyes to the heavens.

And the backpacker turned, looking around, looked right at Bradford. He had on a cap and a thick beard, bushy eyebrows. And his lip curled in a slight sneer. He began to shrug off his backpack, swinging it around, reaching for the zipper.

CHAPTER 79

The members of the Vesuvius Group were assembled in a spacious hall, one end of which opened onto a patio that looked out to sea. Zhou stood by Ferruccio's side in the middle of the gathering. Besides the two of them, the other members – all descendants of the original Group – had never met in person. This was one club that did not organize get-togethers as frequently as the other exclusive clubs they belonged to or owned. They had been made aware of the machinations of the Vesuvius Club by their mothers, fathers or guardians when they had come of age, and been gradually assimilated into the shadowy decision making and strategizing that the Vesuvius Group conducted. A heavy awkwardness hung in the air as they sized each other up, making small talk, reassessing impressions and character profiles that were, hitherto, based on what each member said – and by implication, thought – on lengthy video-conference calls. There was also a current of nervous anticipation: the coded invite had hinted at a reorganization of the Vesuvius Group. They all knew the history: a member had been executed on grounds of treachery the last time the Group had reorganized.

The murmur of subdued conversation settled as Giovanni raised a silencing hand and dramatically commanded, "Bring the accused forward."

The far-end doors were pushed open, and Henri Laurent was ushered into the hall by two of Giovanni's security personnel. He walked slowly but held his head high. He wore a loose white shirt, and cotton trousers; his hair was neatly combed. His eyes settled on Zhou who returned his stare.

"Henrí," Giovanni began, "I do not need to remind you of the laws."

"No, you do not."

"You have been accused of open assault on the property of Qin Zhou."

"The accusations are false."

"Do you have proof?"

"It is this: I would be foolish to engage Zhou openly. There are other ways —"

"Which were not working out as you expected," Zhou interrupted.

"And so, you resigned to brute force."

"Luc Fortesque was suspended after the incident in British Columbia, you idiot. I even tried to kill him in Fribourg." At this blatant confession, there were murmurs which Giovanni silenced yet again.

"A cover story."

"My son has been missing for two weeks. Find the person who has him or has killed him and you will have your man. Putting Fortesque into your hands was a ploy to cast suspicion away from the real culprit and you fell for it like the idiot you always were. I counter your accusation, Qin. It is you who are trying to turn the Group against me so that you can rise to power and assume control over the others in the Group."

At Giovanni's next words a flicker of concern flashed across Qin's face. "It is true that you did not dispose of Luc Fortesque but deployed him against Laurent. Yet, something changed Fortesque's mind, and he did not kill Christian. Have you given this thought?"

"You only mentioned it to me a few minutes ago," Qin stammered.

"No, I have not given it thought."

"Idiot," Laurent murmured again.

"So, this case is not cut-and-dried." He turned in his wheelchair to face the other men and women of the group. "What do you say?"

But they didn't say anything because just at that instant a grey helicopter buzzed deafeningly into view outside the manor and hovered menacingly beside the mountain slopes. The rockets in the two launch-pods on either side of the helicopter were aimed directly inside the manor.

Adrian Klausman flashed a triumphant grin as the pilot kept the Panther pointed at the cabal inside the manor. He could see the expressions of shock, surprise, incomprehension on their faces. And he could see the old man, Giovanni Ferruccio sitting helplessly in his electric wheelchair.

He clicked the PA system. "Nowhere to run! Consider Nicolas Klausman avenged," he shouted and then lowered his voice to a stern command, "Fire!"

The pilot depressed the firing switch and two rockets *shoomed* out with smoking trails, right through the arches in the manor walls — one through the arch on the left and one through the arch on the right — and into the manor and exploded. The white walls of the manor blew outward in a shower of stone and bricks. With the supporting arches disintegrated, the balcony on the upper floor of the manor came crashing down, debris avalanched down the mountainside. A fireball mushroomed outward from the manor.

Even before the fireball could suck in on itself, Klausman commanded again, "Fire!"

The pilot hovered sideways at the still-standing section of the manor and depressed the fire-button a second time.

Bradford broke into a run, leaping over the bawling baby in the perambulator. The mother shrieked.

"Toulmin! I see him!" Bradford shouted, knocking aside the laughing child, reaching for his SIG. "Toulmin?!"

He didn't hear Toulmin's reply because he crashed headfirst into a young couple, and they went down in a tangle of hands and legs. The gun skittered from his grasp and people began screaming and pointing at him, backing away from the SIG. Bradford rolled off the woman; the man was shouting at him, tried to take a swing at him. Bradford instinctively ducked, the man's fist *whooshed* over his head; he felt the rush of air. Someone grabbed his shoulders, pinning him down.

Laporte was reaching into the backpack; Bradford could almost imagine his fingers probing for the trigger switch.

Bradford struggled to get to his feet, trying to see through the pandemonium. Time seemed to slow down; he wasn't moving fast enough. The gun was just beyond his reach.

Luc Fortesque maintained a death-grip on the controls. A few minutes earlier he had locked onto the Panther when it rose off the deck of the red boat and sped toward the manor. He immediately brought the Gulfstream out of its circling pattern and swooped down from the skies on the Panther's tail.

He had watched without any emotion as the Panther pulverized the white manor, reducing it to rubble with rocket-after-rocket until there was nothing left but a smoke cloud that wafted over the debris.

And then Fortesque pulled his goggles over his eyes, unbuckled his harness, and blew away the windscreen of the jet with a burst from his AK5. The wind screamed and whipped into the cockpit, hammering at him with such force that he was momentarily pressed back into his seat. Alarms began blaring and warning lights threw the cockpit into flashes of light and dark.

He pushed the throttle wide open and aimed the nose of the jet at the Panther.

Then Luc Fortesque climbed up on the control console against the force of the wind, grabbed at the windscreen frame for leverage and *stepped out of the cockpit onto the nose* of the Gulfstream.

CHAPTER 80

Laporte's head exploded. Though it happened in a fraction of a second, time seemed to slow. The head jerking back, the plume of blood and brain matter, the shattering of the cranium, the ejection, in all directions, of Laporte's skull fragments. People standing nearby recoiled as they were sprayed with gore.

Toulmin's voice was calm and measured in Bradford's earpiece. "We got him; it's okay."

Time speeded up again, and Bradford shook himself free. He walked over to Laporte's body, crouched beside the terrorist's backpack, reached in, and carefully withdrew Laporte's lifeless hand. For a scant moment, he had a glimpse of the cylindrical metal object within the backpack. *Apocalypse*. He shut the backpack, He looked around ignoring the camera phones pointed at him and glanced up at the roofs of the Constantine colonnade and saw the sniper still looking down his rifle scope.

Suddenly there were excited cries and shouts from everyone. People were pointing upward. A roar of applause thundered all over St. Peter's Square. Bradford looked in the direction they were pointing. White smoke was emanating from the Sistine Chapel.

Adrian Klausman felt a deep sense of satisfaction as the last wall of the Ferruccio manor came crumbling down. More so because he had seen the look on Ferruccio's face: the look of a man who recognized death and knew there was no escape. Did Ferruccio recognize him, he wondered. Should he have been more theatrical? He pushed all

thoughts from his mind and settled back to gloat. He had wiped out the entire Vesuvius Group and with holdings in all their businesses through several front companies, Klausman was on his way to becoming the single most powerful individual on the planet.

He patted the shoulders of the pilot and co-pilot. But they were looking off to the right, not heeding his gesture.

Klausman turned to look.

Fortesque let go of the windscreen frame, closed his eyes, and leapt off the nose, jumping as far as he possibly could.

The Gulfstream collided mid-air with the Panther. The jet's nose ran the helicopter through-and-through. The rotors of the helicopter buckled against the fuselage of the Gulfstream and were torn off their mounts spinning away crazily. The greater forward momentum of the Gulfstream carried the two fused aircraft forward before the deadweight of the impaled Panther pulled the Gulfstream downward at a sharp incline.

Fortesque tugged at the deployment lines and heard the rustle as his parachute deployed.

And then the helicopter's ruptured fuel tanks ignited and a mighty orange ball of fire obliterated both aircraft. Flaming globs of metal and burning fuel rained down.

The shockwave pummeled the unfurling canopy crumpling it, robbing it of its lift. Fortesque was knocked about and his body went into a death spin, fouling in the parachute. He tried to disentangle himself. Too late.

He sucked in a split-second of air and then went underwater, kicking furiously trying to free himself. The canopy settled around him like a

shroud, squeezing him in as he sank to the depths, trailing air bubbles.

Bradford turned to see Toulmin and his Swiss Guard and a contingent of Vatican police approaching, ordering people away. They moved in very quickly and bundled Laporte's body and the backpack away, ignoring the camera flashes. Within a minute they had dissolved back into the crowds.

Bradford stood, alone for a moment over the red porphyry stone in the pavement that marked the assassination attempt on Pope John Paul II.

EPILOGUE

Billy Bradford closed his eyes. The cool caress of the wind upon his face. He breathed deeply. The familiar scent of the land he called home.

Bradford, Colonel Toulmin, and the captain of the Swiss Guard agreed that the world did not need to know about *Apocalypse*. Bradford looked the other way while Toulmin and the captain sequestered the weapon, where it would remain until it could be dismantled.

Bradford had spent the better part of the week shuttling between hospitals and interrogation rooms in Italy and The Vatican where he was debriefed by several government agencies with enough acronyms to last him a lifetime. The information he gave them was enough to trigger a mammoth worldwide investigation into The Vesuvius Group. He learned that Luc Fortesque's body had not been recovered, but it was likely he had killed Adrian Klausman after the later had murdered the members of The Vesuvius Group. Dive teams were still working the waters of the bay near the destroyed Ferruccio mansion.

As a closing note to his involvement in the whole affair, Bradford also learned that Fr. Luigi Vincente had not been elected Pope. A Jesuit Cardinal from Mumbai, India had been elected instead.

The boat bounced lightly in the Channel, and he felt the prow lower and the speed dropping off. Bradford opened his eyes and saw they were circling around toward a wooden pier. It seemed a lifetime ago that he had stood on this very same pier under fire from two gunsels in a motorboat.

The Mountie piloting the boat skillfully brought them alongside the pier and killed the engine, cast the moorings, and leapt out. He helped Bradford out.

Bradford was filled with anticipation as he crested the low rise and stood for a moment, looking down on the circle of thatched roofs. Ghostly tendrils of blue-grey smoke rose from the smokestacks. A small group of people were huddled in the village centre. Bradford began to walk down the slope.

One of the villagers spotted the approaching figure, pointed, and called out to the others.

"Billy!"

It was Natasha, smiling broadly at him. Her hand was in a cast but otherwise, she looked just fine. She came running toward him and hugged him. A gasp of pain escaped his lips as she upset his wounds. But he held her firmly, thankful that she was alive.

"Thought you didn't make it," he whispered.

Natasha pulled back. "That makes two of us," she said with a smile. Bradford didn't return her smile. He was looking at a point over her shoulder. Natasha let go of her embrace and turned to look. A woman had stepped out of one of the houses. Bradford's eyes welled as the woman hitched up her skirts and ran toward him. Bradford limped down the slope clumsily, keeping his balance.

His wife met him halfway and they paused, just appreciating each other's presence, before slowly closing the few feet that separated them.

And embraced affectionately.

The indigenous villagers gave the stranger a wide berth. The angry scar that besmirched his face did nothing to endear him to them. They let him alone and he did not interfere with them.

He visited the beach every day, sat alone in the shade of the trees. He carried a small waterproof pouch with him that led them to conclude the contents of the pouch were precious to him.

Two local ruffians decided to find out what was in the pouch. One evening, they accosted the stranger on the lonely road from the beach. Both were found the next morning, their hands, feet, and jaws broken. Nothing was pinned on the stranger; the locals would not press charges and there had been no witnesses.

A day later the stranger had a visitor. They spoke for ten minutes, and the stranger gave his visitor a mobile phone from the pouch, and they parted ways. By the end of the week, they met again, and a manila envelope exchanged hands. No words were spoken.

Luc Fortesque stretched out under the trees lining the beach and extracted a mobile phone – the one he had been given to apprise Wei Ling on the progress of his mission – and a sheaf of papers from the envelope. The trail on the last dialled number was cold, but Fortesque knew with time he could work it out. He was adept at tracking down people.

Unless – he extracted the portable hard drive with the *Apocalypse* research from the pouch – he wanted to get rich and disappear.

Fortesque contemplated his choice, tapping the drive and the mobile phone absentmindedly.

Surf broke against the breakers lining the shore. The sun was at its highest point in the sky. A cool breeze rustled through the trees.

He made his decision.

He could get rich later.

THE END

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As always, I thank my parents, Audree and Douglas, Sr. and my brother, Dallyn for encouraging this hobby of writing.

Thank you to Dallyn, for the cover design – I hope one day you make a living out of graphic design and art – and putting up with my last-minute changes.

This book comes more than a year after *Secret of the Scribe*. I finished the draft in 2012 but wasn't sure if it would see the light of day – I had lost inspiration and creativity to continue. But that flame was rekindled by Shonna Mascarenhas. Thank you, Shonna, for helping me to find the spark and for all the edits, suggestions and interest.

To Vivek Pereira – who introduced me to pothi.com – and the folks at pothi.com, thank you for making this platform available to authors like me.

There are numerous people all over the world contributing selflessly to articles on the Internet. These articles are a source of information and inspiration to me.

And to all my readers, present and future... thank you for the encouragement.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

First, a few words on the revisions. I wrote *The Apocalypse Trigger* in 2014. Since then there's been another Luc Fortesque story and I have plans for a trilogy. Of the book, I felt the Apocalypse weapon was not convincing enough. I've always wanted to rewrite it, and now with ideas for Luc Fortesque #3, I decided to do just that. I don't expect you to buy a copy again (though I'd love it). I'll find a way to update you in book #3.

There are references in *The Apocalypse Trigger* to the history between Billy Bradford and Luc Fortesque. You can read about it in the free eBook *Know Thy Enemy* available from www.douglasmisquita.com.

This book is a work of fiction. The idea was born when I read an article in *National Geographic* about people who wager on events that shape world history. I found it macabre and was fascinated by their audacity – I used it as a base for the Vesuvius Group.

I have tried to remain true to the various geographies and places described in the book right down to the restaurant in Fribourg. At times, I was so fascinated by Fribourg, that I had to restrain myself from writing a travel guide.

All the weapons (except *Apocalypse*), vehicles – and even the Invisible Suits – are founded in fact and technology. However, bovine spongiform encephalopathy — zombie deer disease — (<http://bit.ly/2O26tce>) is real.

The various military contractor groups described in the story have their founding in real PMCs. These PMCs have played and continue to play a role in armed conflicts around the world and provide security services to corporations.

There is a ghost ship, *Ourang Medan*; there was a shootout in Ottawa involving a lone gunman.

Some content may come across as controversial, but this story does not endorse my beliefs in any way. I found the details of Wiccan practices interesting and in complete contrast to many of my preconceptions.

In the end, I just want to tell a good story and entertain you from the pages of a book for a few hours.

- Douglas Misquita, 2019

