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Most of the spectators outside the Key Bridge Marriott had no clue, but others among them knew the truth, and got ready. Either way, many of the onlookers wore overcoats, and they drew them close against a blustery wind. They were visitors from Detroit mostly, in town for an Arab-American convention. Some carried children in their arms, while couples stood with arms around one another. Eyeballing them earlier, the lead Secret Service agent decided they presented no threat and besides, they were far enough away from the main door for him not to get too excited. He told the detail, “Put away the metal detectors. We won’t need to scan ’em.”

All at once a ripple ran through the crowd as America’s second black president appeared in the hotel’s doorway. “Lead from the front, leave by the front,” he’d famously declared. After a pause, President Morgan Melchior stopped to wave at the constituents surging against the rope line, while the agents spoke into their cuffs and scrambled to adjust their protective cone.

The agents were working their way past the onlookers when a seven-year-old boy bolted from his mother’s side and ran to a

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black Suburban parked fifty feet behind the presidential limousine, where he stared with huge eyes at the heavily armed agents of the Counter Assault Team in black BDU clothing.

Seconds later the mother appeared, grabbing his hand and offering the men an apologetic glance as a blast of wind tore at her coat. One of them motioned her away but she leaned down to whisper to the boy, instead. Then from the crowd someone whistled twice and yelled, "Come, Mr. President. I want you!" The woman stood straight. Her eyes widened. She looked from the boy to the armed men, then reached inside her coat and pressed the switch.

The explosives strapped to her body vaporized her and the boy. The blast tore apart three of the four CAT members. The fourth died milliseconds later as the concussion shattered his lungs. The blast continued until it slammed against the face of the Marriott. A split-second later its thunder rolled across the Key Bridge toward Georgetown.

Then the dreadful stutter of assault weapons split the air. They came from every direction, all at once from beneath winter coats—ten men armed with folding-stock AKs and chattering CAR-15s. The nearest agents were gunned down before they could draw their pistols. Other agents with impotent 9mm MP-5 submachine guns fired back, but were ripped apart by heavy, high-velocity AK slugs. A grenade found its way into the open rear door of the president's limousine. Fire and smoke belched out. Then the men lobbed flash-bangs into the crowd. One landed near Melchior. Its blast stunned him.

A dozen bystanders lay dead or dying amid acrid gun smoke. Eight agents and six cops were also killed within seconds. Officers forming a distant outer perimeter were too far away to intervene. The chief executive, still dazed, stood ten feet from a follow-up limo. But there was no one left to protect him.

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Six of the attackers lay dead. But four remained. Their tall, lean and bearded leader strolled forward in full view of the news cameramen—the only people still capable of reflex action—and faced President Melchior.

When Melchior moved toward him with clenched fists, the man raised a 9mm pistol and kneecapped him. Melchior crumpled, the pain so brutal he struggled to breathe. His assailant moved forward. A cameraman leapt in the way to stop him, but the assailant shot him point-blank in the chest and stared defiantly into the other cameras. As they rolled he whipped a small sword from beneath his coat and grabbed the president's hair. Then he placed the razor-sharp blade beneath Melchior's left ear and drew it with one swift stroke across his neck, then sawed through the thin upper vertebrae to decapitate the leader of the free world. Glaring into the cameras, he held the head high and spoke evenly. "To quote Danton, 'the coalesced Kings threaten us, and we hurl at their feet as a gauge of battle the head of a King.'" After a pause he added, "There shall be more." He dropped the head to the pavement and turned on his heel.

LEVI HART MARCHED DOWN the fifth floor hallway of an anonymous office building two days later. With his undercover work behind him, he wore his heavy auburn hair brushed straight back. He was slender and angular, with a lean face, a shy grin and knowing eyes. He was thirty-seven but passed for ten years younger. As he turned a corner three brawny men regarded him, glanced at each other, and gave him a wide berth.

The building was nestled between the Pentagon and the Key Bridge Marriott. It was used when officials needed to meet off the record with particular types of personnel. Levi reached a closed

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door, then waited for Joe Tucker to catch up. Tall and solid, Tucker walked with a long stride. Every bit of his thirty-something years showed on his face, but today his stern expression aged him beyond his years. The two men were colleagues, although Joe Tucker had wanted nothing to do with Mr. Levi Hart at first, not until a night in Baghdad when a bullet had zipped straight toward Tucker's nose.

"Ready?" Levi asked as Tucker drew to a stop.

"Proceed."

Levi rapped twice against the heavy security door, pushed it open with ease and paused in the doorway, silhouetted against the bright hallway. He said from the side of his mouth, "Let's see what this is all about."

The lone occupant of the meeting room sat at the far end of a polished mahogany conference table. He had gray eyes and wore a gray suit and Levi knew him—Harve Parsons, retired FBI assistant director, cold and ruthless. He waited in silence until Levi closed the door and turned its dead-bolt, then said, "Mr. Baker's been summoned to the White House and is unable to attend this meeting. No matter. He's already been briefed." He made a sour face and gestured toward a pair of Aeron chairs alongside the table.

The two men dropped into their seats. Heath Baker's summons to the White House could only mean face time with The Man himself. In this case The Man was former Vice-President Mark Cohen, and the information didn't surprise either of them.

Their host put a briefing folder on the table and opened it. After donning half-moon glasses he read its summary sheet in silence, then closed the cover and regarded the men. "You're here because our government cannot get its hands dirty." Peering over his glasses he rendered the directive. "The president's assassin has been identified. Dragon Team's job is twofold: to assist in the in-

vestigation, and to take him into custody when located. This could include a country hostile to our own interests.”

Joe Tucker’s face remained calm but what rumbled up from his chest spoke of a quickened pulse and a deep resolve. “What if ‘custody’ isn’t an option?”

“You’re the team leader. What the hell do you think?” He flicked his gaze to Levi. “I’ll bet Mr. Hart knows. But of course he’s FBI.” He paused for effect and then smirked. “I’m sorry. I meant to say former FBI, and an assistant special agent in-charge to boot. Isn’t that right—Hart?”

Levi arched an eyebrow. “Yeah, that’s right—Harve.”

“Watch it,” Harve snapped. “Only my friends call me by that name.” Regaining his composure he said in a lower tone, “I always felt you were too young when you were promoted, so your lack of courtesy comes as no surprise.”

Levi let it roll off his shoulders. He knew a few things about Harve—that he had no friends, that he never approved of Levi’s promotion to ASAC after fewer than five years on the job, and that he had voiced his scorn when Levi abruptly left the Bureau. He also knew Harve as the boot-licking lifer that he was, and that he now oversaw black ops for one of the alphabet agencies. Levi stared through him and said nothing.

Tucker cocked his head to one side. “Who’s our target?”

Harve laced his fingers across his belly. “His name is Amahl, aka, The Butcher. He’s intelligent, cunning and elusive.” He settled his eyes on Tucker, then on Levi. “In my opinion he’s far too much for you people to handle. But our country faces economic ruin, and the racial tensions have escalated. So we’re forced to scrape bottom.” He snorted. “At least you’ll be working out of *Fannex* and not here.”

Tucker leaned forward and rested an elbow on the arm of his chair. “You know, you really need more fiber in your diet.” Reaching

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across the table, he grabbed the folder and the men huddled over it until Tucker closed its cover and thumped his finger against it. “This is quite a task. But Dragon Team’s up to it.”

“You’d better be, because if you’re caught on the wrong side of certain borders you’ll face imprisonment in a very undesirable country. And I’m authorized to inform you that our leaders will deny any knowledge of you and your activities.”

A little smile tugged the corners of Tucker’s mouth. “Are we supposed to be shaking in our boots now? Because I’ve gotta tell you Harve, I’m stirred, not shaken.”

Harve pointed to the door. “Please close it on your way out.”

The two men burst out into the hallway. Tucker flicked his eyes in the general direction of the exit. “Let’s head over to Friendship.”

Levi nodded at Tucker’s veiled reference to Baltimore-Washington International airport. Known as Friendship Airport until 1972, BWI was large and its support facilities were situated in a nearby industrial park. But the NSA also maintained a setup there, with a name that lingered from the old days: the Friendship Airport Annex. The acronym was FANX but it would forever be *Fannex*. Levi and Tucker would meet the team within its security-oriented confines and “read them in” to the mission. Levi said, “I’m with you, boss.” His blue eyes narrowed. “This is gonna be a nasty job.”

Tucker studied Levi’s face. “You think so, Pretty Boy?” He drew a deep breath. “Hmm. Glad it shook you too, ’cause it sure did me.”

Levi respected Tucker. Their personalities were a study in contrast but Tucker performed as a disciplined professional. He punched Tucker’s shoulder. “Nothing wrong with healthy fear, *amigo*.” He scoffed. “At least Harve didn’t put any restrictions on us. That makes us free agents, and I have some free-thinking ideas.” He pointed to the exit. “Let’s move.”

Once outside he followed Tucker to a bland Buick rental and they set off. The Key Marriott lay along their route, the property cordoned off while swarms of FBI agents scoured the crime scene. Levi studied the site as the Buick inched among a throng of rubberneckers, while mournful onlookers stood along the roadway.

Tucker broke the stillness. "Guess we needed to see it."

"Yeah. Sure is dismal." Levi grimaced. "Did you hear Cohen's remarks after the swearing-in?"

"About avoiding further civil and racial unrest? Yeah, and I'll bet Amahl figured he'd end up exploiting the racial end." Tucker goosed the accelerator and edged along.

Levi stirred in his seat. He'd faced down some evil players before, but Amahl was different. News footage of the assassination had revealed his ruthlessness of course, but it was Amahl's calm demeanor that troubled Levi. He wondered how he would handle that level of detached and therefore clear-thinking malevolence. Turning to Tucker he asked, "Any new info on how they got away?"

"Nope. At least none that I'm aware of."

Levi knew only what he'd gleaned from the media: the assassins had charged back inside the hotel after beheading Melchior, then burst from the parking garage a minute later in a SUV. After blasting their way through a police roadblock already in place for the event, they raced south through Crystal City's canyons of high-rise office buildings. A police helicopter was broadcasting their direction, but lost the SUV when it turned into a public parking garage three blocks away. The helicopter observer did her best to keep track of the vehicles that were leaving, but she could only watch helplessly as they blended with the traffic before ground units could arrive. Worse still, the garage had only one surveillance camera, and it had been directed at the attendant's booth.

Levi said rapid-fire, "Okay. Here's what we do. The Bureau's gonna review the parking garage video. I'll take it for a spin too,

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fresh pair of eyes and all that. We'll have the team do follow-up interviews." He scowled. "The Bureau's thorough, but some of the agents can be a bit..."

"Stiff?" Tucker snorted. "Unlike our crew."

"Right. We'll also have our people scour the open-source data." Although they'd been given a mandate, the team currently faced an intractable bureaucratic hurdle—they needed credentials to act officially, but couldn't acquire them until the team got qualified with firearms. Levi cursed the niggling detail and turned quiet as they crossed the Key Bridge into Georgetown. His mind was working even as he examined the closed shops, the gray skies, and the defeated-looking pedestrians. Then he saw something. His leather jacket creaked as he gestured out the window. "Check this out."

A squat African-American man in business suit and overcoat was hard on the heels of a tall man with a full white beard, mustache and black turban. The tall man kept glancing over his shoulder as the businessman waved his fists. Levi cracked the window as the black guy yelled, "...killed my president, you Muslim bastard."

The old man said over his shoulder, "I am *Sikh*. Sikh, I tell you." But the businessman still marched after him.

Levi pointed to a beat cop approaching the angry man. "Problem solved."

"Good," Tucker said as the officer confronted the stalker and stared him down. Checking the traffic, he drove past the deserted, high-end Shops at Georgetown, crossed Wisconsin Avenue—then stood on the brakes and spun the wheel hard right. The tires groaned in protest. The Buick shuddered to a stop.

Two white men with shaved heads had a young, dark-skinned woman backed against the front of Miss Saigon's restaurant. The bigger of the guys was a behemoth at six feet four and two-fifty, and had a Swastika tattooed on the center of his forehead. He also held a broken bottle near the woman's neck, while passersby scurried away.

Levi leaped from the car, tore past an elderly man, and wedged himself between the woman and the men.

Swastika snarled, "She's black. She dies. Beat it, or I'll slit your throat too."

Levi replied in a dead-calm voice, "No. You will not."

Tucker's footfalls alerted the thugs. They turned as he skidded to a stop and told them in a clipped but firm voice, "You don't want to take us on. Walk away from this one. Do it now." He said to the woman, "Edge past my friend and come to me."

The assailants stiffened. A nasty grin spread across Swastika's face as he pointed the business end of the bottle at Levi.

Tucker urged the woman toward him with an outstretched arm.

Levi stared at Swastika with a street-fighter's glazed eyes.

Swastika reared back, then lunged at Levi.

Levi captured the man's wrist in a vice grip and jerked him forward. Then he wrapped his arm around the punk's elbow and clamped down. Using the joint as a fulcrum, he yanked the forearm back with brutal force. The elbow snapped with a sharp crack. Swastika screamed, then fell to the ground, writhing in agony.

Tucker grabbed the woman's hand and hurried her toward the car.

The other man, stunned by Levi's ferocity, moved in. That's when Levi went wildcat. The guy rushed. Levi uncoiled a strike. He hit the thug's neck with the knife-edge of his hand. Perfect brachial stun. The guy's legs folded. He collapsed in a heap. Levi ran after Tucker.

He caught up as Tucker half-dragged, half-carried the victim to the Buick, flung her into the front seat and dove behind the wheel. Tucker jammed the gear into drive and floored it. Seconds later they were three blocks away.

Levi took the trembling woman's hand in his until they dropped her at a mall six blocks away. He pressed a fifty dollar bill into her

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palm and said, "Take a cab home." She thanked them with her eyes before blending into the crowd.

Tucker said to Levi as he turned north on New Hampshire Avenue, "What was that you used on them? Krav maga? Dieter?"

"A combination of both."

Tucker asked in a low tone, "Is that what you used in Baghdad that night?"

"The night of the shooter. Yes."

Tucker looked him over. "You're like Israel. Small, but nuclear capable." Then he added before Levi could reply, "But we have a higher priority and that was a problem for the cops. Still, we had no choice."

"Concur. And I'm damn glad we were there." Levi made a fist. "Now let's find Amahl. He could be anywhere. Or nowhere. But we'll find him." He turned pensive. "I'm betting he's already far away, roadblocks be damned."

TRAVEL AROUND THE COUNTRY had been halted in a crisis control attempt to contain the assassins. Those who did get into lines for rigidly vetted international flights, or tried to drive into Mexico or Canada, faced long delays as authorities checked each person through facial recognition programs. Elsewhere, added scrutiny meant trucks and trains could not move, and produce, supplies and gasoline reserves were frozen in place. As commerce ground to a halt, the country's economic depression worsened.

The FBI meanwhile set about trying to locate the assassins, and for the most part other government agencies set aside their rivalries and pooled their resources. There were some exceptions—higher-ups who maintained the belief that information-sharing spelled doom for their agency. But as a whole, the machine rumbled on.

At the same time, Homeland Security had ordered that suspicious activity of any kind be reported to the nearest authority. "If

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you see it, report it.” Americans, while polarized in their views of the president, did not countenance an attack by foreign terrorists on their own turf. Neighbors scrutinized neighbors, and friends turned against friends. But as everyone focused their attention on turning over rocks, the nation’s street cops operated based on their own wisdom: that criminals often hide in plain sight.

AS LEVI AND TUCKER DROVE ON, a Caucasian pilot in a khaki bush jacket and matching trousers eased back on the control wheel of a twin Navajo and touched down at San Diego’s Montgomery Field. The plane had originally taken off from a private landing strip twenty miles from the Key Marriott, three hours post-assassination. The pilot relied on the fact that there are 6,000 general aviation airports in the USA with as many private aircraft in flight at any given time, and monitoring so many airfields and aircraft was as fruitless as a lone state trooper trying to stop every speeder on a rush-hour turnpike. To add to his comfort zone, they departed prior to the declared state of emergency. But to make detection even more difficult, he flew VFR to avoid filing a flight plan and talking to air traffic controllers. For two days he leapfrogged from one small field to another to refuel, while a freshly-shaven, western-attired Amahl remained inside the cabin at all times.

When the props stopped spinning the salt and pepper-haired pilot turned to Amahl. “Okay,” Brent Kruger began, “you’ve rid us of the mongrel president. That was a great touch lopping off his head, by the way.” He looked Amahl in the eye. “Now my people will fulfill our end of the bargain.”

“Yes, Brent. Now you shall kill the Zionist. Or else.”

Kruger stiffened.

Amahl regarded Kruger and said in a cold voice, “Do not think for one moment that you and I are equals. We are not. I am far be-

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yond you, in intelligence as well as in depth.” Kruger opened his mouth but Amahl held up a hand. “It is true that you assisted me when I disposed of my men, but do not fool yourself into thinking that you are more ruthless than I. You are not.”

Brent Kruger held his tongue. Deep inside the dark room of his soul that he dared not open, he knew Amahl was right, and Kruger cursed himself. He had underestimated this man he had known for two decades, and his error was a grave one. Despite this he put up a bold front. If Kruger valued nothing else, he put a premium on bravery. “Don’t push it, Amahl. We’ll uphold our end of the contract.” He uttered a harsh laugh. “And you’re invited to join us when we carry it out. Yes, sir. I’ll be sure to notify you of the exact time and place for *that* particular party.”

“And now? What party do you attend now?”

Kruger considered telling Amahl to attend to his own business, but said, “I’ll refuel and head back to Albuquerque.” He grunted. “To handle some contractual details.”

“Be certain you keep our pact in mind, for although we vowed to bring the world to its knees, we cannot recast it in our favor until you are reminded of one thing. There shall be but one authority, one god. And that god shall be me.”

“Amahl? Once we’re done, you work your damn side of the street and I’ll work mine—beginning with a boom of white babies.”

“You may reconstitute the Caucasian race all you wish. I have not expressed any misgivings. But in due course I will rule whatever realm evolves. That, my friend, shall be my side of the street.” He fixed Kruger with a cold stare, released his seatbelt, then turned toward the plane’s rear door as a bald, tattooed man opened it.

Amahl descended the short set of stairs and stepped into a waiting van. The bald man drove him straight to a marina on Shelter Island

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Drive where a thirty-foot sloop was tied alongside the far end of the pier. The sea smells were pungent. Gulls cried and circled overhead, while cooking smoke from a small weather-beaten eatery promised good chowder inside. To the few passersby, the chap in the Brooks Brothers outfit and wraparound sunglasses was one of many men of means frequenting the marina. Few paid attention as he climbed from the van and boarded the sloop.

A red-haired skipper started the inboard engine and cast off at once. The bow swung south, then picked up speed on the receding tide. Ten minutes after motoring past the imposing hills of Point Loma, the three-man crew hoisted the sails and caught the offshore winds. Inside the sloop there were fishing licenses for each person aboard, as required by the Mexican government. There were also assault rifles and RPGs to deal with any Mexican marine patrol officers who got too curious.

This was the best escape. The U.S. air and sea ports would be on high alert. So would Canada's. Flying out of Mexico was far simpler. But a land crossing into Mexico could be suicidal, given the scrutiny of facial recognition scanners brought about by the border drug wars. Conversely, a pleasure boat day-trip from San Diego would not arouse that much suspicion. Besides, there weren't enough harbor policemen to stop them.

The sloop sailed into a fishing town thirty miles down the Baja coast without incident and tied-up to a lonely pier. Minutes later the most televised man in the world stepped unchallenged from the boat, and a waiting sedan whisked him away.

Amahl checked into the Rosarito Beach Hotel. His expertly forged U.S. passport identified him as Yoni Shochat, and listed Israel as his place of birth. As he walked beneath the lobby's timbered ceiling and signature fresco to the elevator, a Yorkshire terrier with a

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tiny red bow in its forelock leaped from a frail woman's arms and landed with a yelp in Amahl's path. He bent down and held out his hand. "What a noble animal," he said to the woman, while using the opportunity to note all possible escape routes. He gently picked up the dog and cradled it in his arms, then ran his fingers through the animal's silky hair while he scanned the area again. "Very nice." After handing the pet to its mistress, he turned and walked away.

Once inside his room he drew the drapes and lay on the bed. The 9mm Beretta in his waistband pressed against the small of his back but he didn't care. In the darkened room he closed his eyes. All had gone as planned. The men? The woman and her child? They served his purposes and now he was rid of them. As for Melchior? Amahl had not known such pleasure in too long a time. Even now he could feel the grit of the knife against bone, the power he felt as the blade sliced through. He relived the scene again, then once more.

Amahl pushed the thoughts aside and evaluated his plan. He would remain here for three days. Leaving sooner would draw attention. Next, he would travel by car to Mexico City and let the multitudes swallow him up. Then he would return home by a circuitous route and begin the next phase. What would follow, God willing, would make what he had accomplished seem like the doings of foolish children. It was simple. First cut off the head, then butcher the body. And he had a plan in mind.

Heath Baker knew about Amahl and briefly wondered where he was. Then he dropped it. He had a meeting to attend, and afterward he would go to Fannex. His team was already en route, but they would wait for him.

Baker wore multiple layers of flannels, wools and twills permeated with tobacco smoke. He peered at a dismal sky and tapped the spent contents of his favorite pipe—a GBD Tapestry made by the venerable but now defunct British company—into a container at the Treasury Building side entrance. A Secret Service agent standing inside the door led Baker through a short hallway and down a set of steps to the basement, where they encountered a locked steel door guarded by two Secret Service Uniformed Division officers. The officers passed them through and Baker found himself inside a familiar ten foot wide, seven foot tall tunnel. After a brief walk they stepped inside a subbasement beneath the East Wing of the White House. The mansion was closed to tourists while the body of President Melchior lay in state beneath the Capitol Rotunda, so they proceeded through public areas overflowing with staffers. Two minutes later he stood outside the closed door of the Oval Office.

A large man, Baker had a ruined potato sack of a face where every one of his sixty-two years had settled. He had retired from the Army as a colonel soon after his fourth tour in Viet Nam, where time after time he ventured into the mountains to recruit Montag-

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nards in the fight against the Viet Cong. Baker's exploits remained the stuff of legend within the Green Beret four decades later.

He returned to the United States with a Silver Star, a Bronze Star with a V-device for valor, and a Purple Heart with two oak leaf clusters. The medals were colorful but they didn't provide food for his family, so he studied law at Harvard and built a thriving practice in Bethesda, Maryland. But he yearned for the old days, and when additional assets were required in the wake of 9/11, Baker created Vanguard International as a side venture. He organized a dozen eight-person teams similar to Special Forces alpha teams. They often deployed for weeks or even months at a time, then returned to their homes and families across the United States until summoned for another mission.

At first the teams performed surveillance, personal protection, and a variety of other tasks for private clients, but the Iraq and Afghanistan efforts now provided the principal contracts. Although some of Baker's competitors attracted media scrutiny, his outfit remained off the grid. He drafted Joe Tucker from Seal Team Four and put him in charge of Dragon Team. Tucker in turn had recruited Levi Hart as his assistant team leader, after Levi saved his hide outside Baghdad's Green Zone one night.

A moment later the agent ushered Baker into the Oval Office. The off-white room had a new navy blue rug and President Mark Cohen sat at his desk. The clouds parted as if on cue, so that a soft yellow light shone through the large window behind him. He stood and marched forward with outstretched hand. "Heath! How are you, my friend?"

Baker thought the tall, lean man in the dark suit hadn't been this clear-eyed and vital since the death of his son. "Good morning, Mr. President."

Cohen allowed himself a little smile as they shook hands. "You were my mentor in 'Nam and you saved my bacon on any number

of occasions. We won't stand on ceremony." He tightened his grip on Baker's hand, then turned grim. "I'm here by succession, not choice."

"I thought as much, Mr. President. But..."

"But you'll tell me I can handle it?" He released Baker's hand and switched gears. "My schedule's tight so here we go. Our constitutional republic as it currently exists is in dire straits. Economically, socially, militarily. Our troops are barely home from Iraq, and I'm not about to start a new war to go after an assassin. It could only end in disaster." Cohen held his arms akimbo, his old cue that he wanted feedback.

Baker made a fist. "Failing to deal with the assassins would be a greater disaster. We must hit them in a manner that will deter others."

"That's why I signed off on your mission, and now that you work for me believe this—I've got your back." He held a palm against his heart. "I'll brook no criticism of any actions you might be forced to take—the buck truly stops with me." He worried the end of his nose. "Some of what your people will be asked to do could be distasteful, even repugnant. To that end, I ask that you remember your mission." He made eye contact with Baker.

"Thank you for your confidence in us."

The muscles in the president's face relaxed. "We have only a few moments. I also asked you here to thank you once more for all you've done in the past, but most of all for your friendship." He frowned. "It's a terrible world we live in if we choose to see it that way. But I know you. You see problems as I do—as challenges to be resolved. With humanity if possible, but..." He paused. "Sadly, some resolutions require great peril. If it were up to me I'd send a personal communiqué to the brutes that killed Melchior, and confront them with my old Garand. I wish I could."

"I know you would, Mr. President." As the two friends shook hands Baker said, "Your son would be so proud of you." Then he left for Fannex.

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TUCKER TOOK THE EXIT FOR BWI and drove past a string of motels, fast food joints, and office buildings before he found the industrial park. He braked to a stop at Nursery Road and ElkrIDGE Landing, where a vintage M-51 75mm Skysweeper AA gun and a 50's-era radar unit sat in front of a red brick building. A plaque identified the building as an electronic warfare museum, but locals commented that there never seemed to be any tourists. A sign straight ahead read *FANX*, and the low dun-colored buildings beyond it were surrounded by a high chain link fence topped with razor wire. Tucker drove toward a barrier-protected vehicle entrance manned by armed DoD police. After he and Levi identified themselves, the officers passed them through. He parked in front of the largest building and they stepped inside into an anteroom, where a guard had them place their palms on a biometric reader. Once they were approved, he issued "Fully-Cleared Contractor" badges. Each badge posted its bearer's photo in the center of a green field that signified unfettered access to the facility.

They went through a security door, then walked down a colorless hallway lined with posters warning workers not to discuss work beyond the top secret environs. They passed a cafeteria where an electronic message board warned, "*Don't Spill the Beans. No Classified Talk!*" Two men leaving the eatery wore the blue badges of permanent staff, and they overtly examined Levi and Tucker as if to memorize the new faces.

Finally, they arrived at a door with the number "3" on it. A nearby poster bore a tree and a hangman's noose with the caption, "*For Repeated Security Violations.*" Tucker scoffed and opened the door to a conference room. It was richly appointed—dark wood paneling, high-back leather chairs at an elliptical table, and coffee in a steaming service tucked against a far wall. Four men and a woman sat waiting.

One of the men shot up from his chair and went to Levi. Michael Bailey was long, lean and lanky, with thick blond hair and an unlined face. He said, "Hey, little brother. About time you showed." He gripped Levi's outstretched hand.

Levi smiled. "Good to see you, Michael. How're Nadia and the boys?"

"Nadia sends her love, and the boys sure do miss you. Levi's doing great in school. Nicholas? Still a sports nut." He clasped Levi's shoulders. "You look better every time I see you. Been what, almost three years since..."

"Since then." Levi's face turned somber. "I'd rather not...you know."

Michael blinked and said, "Sure."

Levi nudged Michael's ribs with his elbow, then greeted his other teammates. Offering a smile to Monica Mastronardi, he embraced her and kissed her cheek. She had been a Hollywood F/X expert and was a lovely, skillfully sculpted, richly evocative woman of thirty—and Levi hoped never to be on the receiving end of her power punches. After releasing her, he shook hands with William "Wild Bill" Dentz, Albert "Tom" Sawyer and Quentin "Hacksaw" Jones. Angela, the eighth Dragon, had recently accepted a Senate staff position and her slot remained unfilled.

Bill Dentz was a large man. His black hair was flecked with gray and he wore a luxurious mustache. Levi thought he resembled the actor Sam Elliott in appearance as well as attitude. He had been Tucker's boss on SEAL Team Four until he retired, and he now served as Dragon Team's training officer.

The tall, solid forty-six-year-old Tom Sawyer hailed from the Bahamian island of Andros. He had emigrated to the U.S. when he was eighteen, got hired by Metro-Dade police, and retired as a detective with a fearsome reputation earned by working Miami's meanest streets. He still spoke with a pronounced accent, and was

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doing his last two years on the Joint Terrorism Task Force when he came to Levi's attention.

Hacksaw Jones was a tiny man of Congolese descent, and retired from the NCIS after twenty years as a top investigator. His father had been a locksmith and Hack learned the trade, hence the nickname. He spoke in the relaxed rhythms of the Virginia Tidewater region, cadences that belied his master's in English lit and his fluency in Farsi, and only one member of Dragon Team could outshoot him—Levi Hart.

Levi waited while Tucker put down his briefcase and sat at the head of the table, then sat next to him as the others took their places, leaving the chair at the far end empty. He watched Tucker unlock his briefcase and retrieve a royal blue folder with a gold-embossed Vanguard International logo. Tucker dropped it to the table just as a door behind Levi opened. When Levi smelled vestiges of vanilla pipe tobacco, he knew without turning that Heath Baker had entered the room.

Baker handed Tucker a folder and pointed to the red and white document cover: TOP SECRET—THIS IS A COVER SHEET FOR CLASSIFIED INFORMATION. Then he went to the empty chair, and after settling into it said in a deep voice, "Thank you for making it here on such short notice. Your anonymity is paramount and the NSA has been kind enough to provide this facility." He flicked his eyes at Dragon Team's TL.

Tucker checked off an item in his blue folder. "We'll conduct some house-keeping procedures first." He pressed a recessed button on the desk. The lights dimmed. A forty-eight inch flat screen on the wall behind him flickered to life. The image of a nameless official seated behind a steel desk began to speak, delivering the mandatory security lecture. It was clear and concise and designed to reinforce the gravity of the situation: violating the terms of a Sensitive Compartmented Information clearance posed a possible