

# **Never A Wasted Crisis**

**James Schubring**

Book 1 of the Green Scale Cycle

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## SUNDAY THE FRIENDS ONE KEEPS

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### *I.*

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Hewes watched the uniformed men stepping into each other as they manhandled some oversized luggage off the jet. One collision between the ungraceful jarred the luggage and Hewes noticed a leak develop from the roll bag, a liquid red and thick that made the imaginary scent of iron punch through his nose.

Blood. Blood he couldn't really smell even if there was a mineral flavor infesting his mouth just now. He was furious, but not surprised, about the case rolling along the paved apron into Client Receiving. His Client Receiving. What the hell had happened now?

First thing, make his apologies to the man standing next to him.

"Best make sure they're not stealing my good silver." Hewes nodded at the jet parked short of his operation. He and his chief competitor had been watching the unloading of people and now possessions while they discussed deal points.

A common-enough occurrence over the years during lulls and quiet moments.

"Here I was, enjoying the hagggle," Owen Sandefur said. His pendulum was just beginning the slow, final swing from hale to hell-bound. He possessed absolute confidence that he could acquire the business operated by the younger man, that he possessed another decade of vigor and good health. Other men might have taken on a young mistress to prove their boasting. Sandefur had eyes only for an expansion of his business, the loveliest thing he had ever courted.

"You're running away because you didn't like my last number."

"You're an old kidder, Owen."

"No, I'm cheap. That's more terrifying than anything."

"Maybe I'll let you see my books."

"As if I read fiction."

"Owen."

"You go take care of the G550. It'll belong to my best client when you decide to accept a fair offer."

"I'm not paying you to take my business. I could run it another fifty years. Become as sour as the man I'm talking with."

"I'm very particular about my sour. Don't think you can copy me."

Sandefur smiled.

"Get over there, young man. High maintenance spells high revenue in your slice of the business."

"I wish it were always so."

Hewes set off at a light jog. His mind was already trying to guess at what he'd find inside Client Receiving, how bad the situation.

"You stop in tomorrow," Sandefur called out.

Hewes didn't turn back to look. He just nodded. Sandefur would have to wait.

He focused on Client Receiving and this crisis he had had no notice of. In his nine years on Dulles Field, he'd stood grim

and calm through four genuine crises, the dead or dying who arrived by jet to his front door. Not one had bothered to give some notice. This bleeding luggage, he supposed, was event five. Hewes enjoyed a year or two or three between these moments of terror, an average of one every two years which was more than enough adventure for him.

“Kid, you listening?”

Hewes turned his head back toward Owen this time. “Sure thing. Tomorrow morning.”

When he turned back to his leased buildings, Hewes had a few seconds to get prepared. He pushed open the door to Client Receiving and narrowly avoided slipping on a length of ill-secured plastic sheeting. Lubed with a slick red substance on top and probably underneath the plastic.

What was the point of the plastic if they didn’t follow through the whole procedure?

Even spies got in a hurry. Got sloppy. By the volume of the blood leading through the room, they also got dead.

Hewes stopped and locked the front door. Now was not the time for Sandefur or anyone else from the field to come looking for a snack from his custom kitchen or a taste of some expensive single malt Hewes stocked for his clients. Friendly moochers, but not today.

Hewes looked at the front windows, but the man standing there, Adler, had already turned the blinds to two-thirds. He could see out somewhat. No one outside could see in.

“Galbary sends his regards,” the pale, thin man said. He wore a suit but had left any outer garments elsewhere. Normally the man swam in the oversized coats he favored, swallowed up enough that he didn’t quite disappear.

Hewes shook his head. He wanted information. He didn’t like acquiescing to Adler each time they met. He didn’t like the words of the formal greeting they were supposed to use. It was playing games in a crisis.

“It’s been eighteen months and you don’t even give me a warning.”

“Galbary sends his regards.”

Like a damned machine.

Another twenty years and such a thing might be possible. Adler the human didn’t look human in any event. The man was still so thin he had to be allergic to muscles. Adler looked younger than he was; a decade younger than Hewes, even though the quiet man was, in fact, a decade older.

“You have safe houses for this kind of thing. I’m pretty sure you have other airfields you can use. Why did you come here with your dripping blood?”

The fierce intelligence in command of a not-too-impressive shell also hadn’t changed. A man who was all eyes and cold voice.

“You’ll have to do some work on the tarmac after dark. Your men left a drizzle on the field. Maybe even inside the Gulfstream.”

A silent man. A dangerous man because he was a brilliant mind. The kind who should have been imprisoned – con games, fraud, perhaps murder after a fall out with a lying partner – had he been born on the wrong side of the tracks.

“It’s not even dark out. There were people watching. Your men were wearing my uniforms. What the hell did you have them hump in here?” Hewes demanded. “Your dead? Their dead? You weren’t supposed to be in a shooting war.”

He meant: I wasn’t supposed to be in a shooting war.

“Galbary sends his regards,” Adler said one more time. He spoke the words slower as if he were dealing with a dim, recalcitrant child.

“No. Not here.”

Adler packed trouble with him the way others might carry a bottle of water on a short hike. Omnipresent and inexpensive.

“You can’t dump this on me.”

Hewes possessed nothing but words to make his case, his protest. Adler wasn’t a man on whom violence, or even the threat, would work.

“Galbary sends his regards.”



Hewes realized he wouldn't get anything out of the man until they completed the ritual.

"I haven't seen Mr. Galbary in years."

Even after the ritual was done, Hewes might get nothing from Adler. It was a risk as was all life.

"He still speaks well of you, Hewes."

A noise deeper into Client Receiving divided Hewes' attention. He'd noted the trail of blood before. Now he paid more attention to the plastic draped everywhere in his building. Not well secured. Couldn't they afford tape with all this blood drip-dropped through the room, like a child knocking over a jar of strawberry syrup during his first attempt at making a banana split, smearing it around with paper towels instead of cleaning it up.

His eyes tracked behind where his ears directed him, deeper into the building. Hewes looked all the way back to his glass-walled kitchen. That was when he noticed plastic taped to the inside of those walls. He saw men moving around. He saw the light illuminating a large pool of red. There was enough of it that even the plastic on the glass couldn't disguise the big red.

Adler shifted his weight from one foot to the other. It was enough movement to regain Hewes in the present.

"Glad he was able to help a gentleman into business," Adler said.

Hewes tried to say his words. He couldn't get a sound out of his collapsed throat. The blood he couldn't see was still doing a thorough purging of his mind. Memory didn't forget pain or blood after all.

"He was glad he was able to help a gentleman into business," Adler said with greater speed, some anger. Do you understand what I require?

"He was kind to offer his help," Hewes managed to garble out.

That completed the ritual. Hewes had acknowledged his temporary support to whatever Adler needed.

“Are you going to be a problem?” Adler asked now that he was off script.

“I was out of here twenty minutes. Tops.” Hewes waved his hand at all the plastic not secured. The slick of blood moving around. The kitchen area now fit only for slaughtering hogs. So much done, so poorly, in so little time. So much damage.

“Twenty-seven. I was watching. I was waiting. Take a seat if you’re going to have a fit.”

“I’m never leaving again.” If that’s what it took to keep an Adler-crisis from arriving. “Look at this slaughterhouse.”

“You’re being dramatic. Yes, one of the bags was leaking. It’s a little bit of blood. Stop waiting for the sky to collapse on you.”

“It’s more than a little.”

Adler looked at the picture on the west wall. Didn’t let the blood-rivers through the building trouble him. Pretended his men weren’t doing what they were doing. That he didn’t have an irate man at his shoulder.

“Are your people safely tucked up?”

Adler wouldn’t be inside if he weren’t assured already. Still, an automaton like him would ask.

“Last client insisted on minimal staffing.”

“He had you folks running ragged.”

Hewes restrained the flinch. He knew, as a concept, that Adler kept an ear on things. Hearing Adler boast about what he knew was something indigestible, a lump of spines tearing at Hewes from inside his gut.

“The rich aren’t like everyone else,” Hewes said, forgiving in tone.

“They forget they were once human and would be human again once their money met up with the outer limits of what medicine could do for them. Dead is dead, even if the crypt drips with marble and stained glass.”

Hewes didn’t agree by gesture although Adler wasn’t wrong. They’d completed the ritual and the small talk. He waited for the man to ask. He would just take it if it were the

building he wanted. There was something he needed that he couldn't just take. Hewes expected he wouldn't like it.

"You conjured a minor miracle with this place. From just a grudging loan, the lease on two awkward buildings, and a handful of customers I drummed up for you. You made it hum." Adler stroked away some dust, or pretended to stroke away some dust, from the picture frame. "Can I count on you today? It's a crisis."

A crisis was seeing a rollerbag dripping blood. The current contents of Client Receiving went beyond the definition of crisis. There was no word adequate to the task.

"Well..."

"Whenever we don't want to do something we appoint a board, a committee, defuse the responsibility, push a decision into the future. We say 'well.' We say 'let me think.' Are you, just you, in this? Now?"

Hewes thought of saying yes. It was more than a bit tedious succeeding at business, the plodding, the showing up every day to unload luggage worth more than the car one drove. Boring, nothing mysterious other than guessing at what sort of tantrum the wealthy clients might throw later in the afternoon.

"No," Hewes said.

"No?"

"No."

Had this been a different day, had Adler been just a touch more human, Hewes might have snapped to the offer. Almost a gift, something dangerous and unknown. Something different, before it was unwrapped, always seemed better than things already known. This offer could have been an enticing gift.

"You have the right to the facility," Hewes said. It was in their contract, the one that had never been committed to paper.

"I need more than just a building."

Hewes was months away from completing his contract, from selling what he'd built. He didn't need blood staining the grout. The kind of danger that hung miasma-strong around Adler. He needn't need a second bullet through his lung.

“That’s the tradeoff, isn’t it?” Hewes asked. “Want to be nimble and secure at the same time. You hired all these men” – Hewes nodded toward where he could see shadows flickering in his converted kitchen space – “but you always need more when the fire burns hot. Should have hired more.”

Adler stared at the picture on the wall. “The CIA has to answer for the people it hires. Those who count in the tallies....”

“You never hired me. Our Mr. Galbary just offered to set me up into business....” Wasn’t that the ritual they recited every time they met?

“Don’t play coy.”

“I’m a longterm freelancer, indentured for ten years. No paycheck from the CIA. No health insurance or pension save for what I set up for myself and my staff. My name’s missing from anything the political caste might ever be forced to copy for the Senate Intelligence Committee.”

It was an answer.

“I’m my own master,” Hewes said, not believing his assertion though wishing it were so. “No.”

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Adler returned to ignoring everything that wasn't him. He took some notice of the picture to the side of the window. He traced his finger around the frame of that picture. "I'm glad he didn't convince you to sell him the picture," Adler said.

He? Hewes was slow to vector in.

"Your pushy client with the rather generic name. Mr. Smith."

"You caught that conversation?"

"You know how these rooms are wired."

"I didn't know you bothered to listen."

"He had that room." Adler pointed to one of the dayrooms. "Him and his assistant. Or mistress. Talked over his trouble with the law. Has plenty of money in accounts he can't use. Decided to try to buy his wife an inexpensive gift. She was angling for a six-figure illuminated manuscript won at auction. As if spending more means he loves the woman more. What did he offer for this painting, a thousand dollars?"

"Four."

"Hmm, there are some dead spots in this room."

"Good."

Hewes had given up a lot for the loans, the leases, this business. The phone in his pocket he assumed was mirrored, sometimes with a real human listening in. His computers, office and home, all fully broken and monitored from time to time. Over the years he'd taken very little from the CIA and paid a good deal: his fullest attention to the business he didn't really control, his privacy, his life lived always with the possibility of someone watching everything he did.

Deals were always asymmetric. Signed in the heat of the seduction; never considered well enough, never the trick clauses ferreted out and expunged. Regretted thereafter for the

full term of contract. Always more expensive than promised; always less rewarding, too.

“Can’t explain about his secret cash, can’t spend it on a lavish gift for his wife. Buying a book at auction would leave a record, it would be noticed eventually. The problems of the billionaire. Stomped on too many laws. Have to make an example of him now. Man has a mouth and can’t stop talking, especially when undercovers are recording him. It all winds up online somehow. A lot of people must hate your ‘Mr. Smith.’”

Hewes thought all these things himself. He’d never uttered one syllable, though. He’d worked hard to get a clientele that could pay. He’d also worked hard to keep from speaking about his clientele, anything good or anything bad. It took a lot of effort to retain the secrets good and ill.

He was done listening. Adler had nothing Hewes wanted. “You’ll lock up?”

Adler turned to his quarry. Disinterested and chatty had soured to desperate.

“What are we supposed to do? Stand on the safe side of the street and hope the dangerous people don’t come up with anything very clever?”

Hewes wondered just how desperate the man was.

“Don’t forget to reset the alarm. My business insurer gets upset when it audits me and discovers how lax I am with the security. Good for the cover. Wouldn’t expect a spy shop to be bad at the basics, right?”

“I’ll burn this place to the ground if you walk out.”

Hewes had never caught Adler in a lie, not once. He had also never found Adler to tell the complete truth, not once. There were layers of truth, like a sick man bundling himself in blanket after blanket against the cold of winter darkness. Adler would proudly hold up a blanket, the outermost layer. The fool, or the unschooled, would accept it as truth. It was merely a portion of the truth.

“I’m pretty sure you had your own key set cut. There aren’t that many doors. Also, the hangar alarm is a separate system.

We keep a pretty extensive liquor cabinet out there and have had problems with the bottles walking out with some of our wide-eyed staffers. Thousand dollar bottles of single malt, that sort of thing.”

Hewes looked around once more and walked for the door.

He expected the hand on his shoulder. He expected to be stopped. Adler didn’t disappoint.

“I apologize. Please stand here and talk with me.”

Hewes didn’t believe the apology. He did stop and turn around. Being on the receiving end of begging felt just fine.

“Only if you explain what has happened and how I can get all of you out of here.”

“We’ve worked together nine years. Well, not worked so much. You did all the work and I dropped in from time to time, added a bit here, caused you a problem there.”

“I don’t need a fresh coat of flattery, Adler.”

The man was gearing up for a speech on duty. Hewes waited for it.

“Yes, you should be a skeptic. That face is just the right one. Anger and impatience. Because I have only caused you problems. I’ll be honest, in all this time, I’ve done nothing for you. Don’t forget that. You use that to extort me. Understand. I’m the pain in the ass whenever I show up. You have never caused me a problem I had to come over to tend. Because of that, you’re in a position to demand quite a lot. I shouldn’t tell you that, but I am.”

“You’re aiming for charm.” Because Hewes could recognize it, it was an obviously failed attempt.

“I don’t bother. I just tell the truth until all doubt is well-polished glass.”

“Trying to indebt me without giving me anything?”

“What do you want?” Adler was genuine. He was desperate. He was going to say more of substance than he’d said in years.

Hewes hadn't said yes to anything, but he also hadn't walked away. "Treat me like I'm a reasonable adult cleared for whatever mess you've had dumped on you."

"You are a reasonable adult. That's the reason you can't leave. You don't cause me problems. In fact, you've preempted a number over the years. My frustration isn't for you."

"Who?"

"They always call me in too late to be of any use."

The most telling thing Adler had ever said to Hewes. They. The venom in his voice. The futility.

Adler was human, somewhere inside that unremarkable, pinched skin.

"I'm always sweeping out cinders, knocking down charred timbers long after the fire has cooled. I'd prefer to build a fireproof room before the fire ever comes," Adler said.

"Over cleaning up the damage."

"Spending a year scrubbing down the residue of an impossible fire, I don't enjoy."

Adler shook his head, a vague smile on his face. Trying for calm in the face of disaster.

"You've done better than I could have imagined. Galbary is, I assure you, very happy. Even your peers approve. Your friend across the way, Owen Sandefur, called his lawyer twenty minutes ago. Drafting up paperwork. He'll make an offer. A real one."

The dynamic had just flipped once more. Hewes knew a threat when he heard it. 'He'll make the offer. Unless I strangle it.'

He'd spent his childhood listening to and evaluating threats. Inside his family, outside. Had to be a listener where he grew up, a cautious evaluator. Nothing had changed in the intervening years to make Hewes a fundamentally different person. Like everyone else who hadn't experienced a catastrophic intervention, Hewes was the same at 39 as he'd been at 16 as he'd be at 65 or 95. Always trying to learn,



always trying to better himself, but basically the same teenager given more years to smooth the harshness off the exterior. Still the same base selfishnesses. Still the same methods of evaluating the world and his place in it. Those fundamentals were hard, if not impossible, to flip.

“He didn’t drop a number. He’s looking for your banking details. Going to run a deep background on you. Keep him out of Provendia, will you?”

Hewes also heard that as a threat. His method of handling threats meant he didn’t respond until he knew precisely what to do. Threats Hewes froze at, always had. Listening, evaluating. Always would. He took too long in some cases. The weariness and damage he’d taken to his body testified to some of his greater mistakes.

“Away from Provendia, yeah.”

“You do your daily business banking elsewhere now?”

“Of course.”

As if he’d keep his secret cover long by banking at an institution started or backed with intelligence community dollars. Not smart.

“We may need to jerry something up if he’s looking for loan details. It’s all paid off, but your friend Sandefur seems a digging sort. Ideas about him?”

Why were they talking business when there was blood in the next room..... How Adler could bifurcate, trifurcate, create a hundred little prisons in his mind. He was back in charge. Hewes had almost slipped away, but freedom was impossible with a man like Adler on the other side of the equation.

“You made me a diploma for a college I never attended,” Hewes said. “How about I picked up an imaginary friend there with imaginary millions who did the loans?”

Adler took his time evaluating. He seemed a cautious sort, but Hewes guessed that Adler had no problem moving quickly when his blood was up. “Good. That works. Less paperwork that way. Individual rather than an institution. Less traceable. Your friend will have to be dead now, of course.”

Hewes had once been amazed at the detail one might need to play pretend. Like how to enflesh a man who never existed and whether he should be alive or dead.

“Fine.”

“You’ve maintained cover for nine years and change. Rare and a fine skill.”

“I keep my hands off the product.”

“We count the tamper. At packaging, here, at the final destination.” A warning voice, a reminder. Hewes had strayed toward something he shouldn’t have. Even a comment in a room controlled by spies.

“I keep my hands out of the infrequent blood. You’ve kept it to five emergencies plus the weekly outbound shipments. A handful of unexpected inbound deliveries. I’ve just cleaned well after each. I keep my questions to myself.”

“I know. We keep track.”

“I don’t think of this as an adventure. I treat it like the business it has become. We’re not in Vientiane in 1959. This isn’t Air America.”

“There’s a future for us together.”

Talking of the future in order to entice Hewes into a bloody present.

“I’m not field personnel. I’m not even real CIA.”

The CIA had never taken him into one of its schools, paired him with one of its mentors. He was a spy who knew little to nothing of spying, the new doctrine Adler had once called it.

“You know more than most of our field personnel, Hewes. It’s nothing to get the paperwork signed.”

Instead of learning to spy, he’d sat in business classes, mostly useless. All he’d learned had come in the last few years. Learning about business by failing at business, wondering about the failure, trying to reverse the failure. It had all come from being beaten harder than any trainee in even a CIA school would ever permit. His life was a real life, not the fiction that Adler could stand to peddle.

“It’s kind of you to offer.”

“A yes?”

“No.”

Adler nodded. Was it true acceptance? “I understand. The doing, doing, doing...weariness. It’s easier carrying around a hundred pound stone than doing exactly the same things from day to day. You’ll recover. You’ve developed quite a talent.”

Bald flattery. Hewes shook his head.

“That’s the reason I love this cycle of pictures. Commissioned it myself. The artist knew nothing about explorers and their faulty maps when I inquired. A favorite topic of mine since childhood, the men who got in ships and went places. Not a one considered there was anything across the sea save for China, India. Not one of them could imagine the landmass that would get in their way, the new world. We wouldn’t be here if they didn’t mistake emptiness for reality, threats for shadows, shadows for opportunities, greed for bravery. We wouldn’t exist. The consequence of laziness, lassitude, inertia. Incalculable. I’d be a peasant in some feudal nation perhaps dying of cholera.”

Adler had vanity about one thing. Not his average body or his physical strength or the volume of assignments he’d successfully handled for his country. His mind. The things stuffed inside of it, the randomness and breadth of what he knew, what he suspected about the world. When he was trying to impress he let his mind wander, he let it shock and confuse.

“The consequence of working with you, your people, is a lot of trouble,” Hewes said.

“Curiosity is our humanity. Wondering about a map, trying to fill it in. Back when there were real blank spots, imaginary continents penciled in, genuine continents still missing.” Adler turned to the painting on the wall. He kept his finger above the surface of the paint, tracing the outlines of the terrifying water-born chimera that some artist had once scribbled onto a fine map, that another artist had borrowed, enlarged, and toned up with gold leaf.

“Do we have anything so absorbing, so terrifying, so essential left to us? It seems to me that ‘about to conquer’ is a much greater thing than ‘conqueror.’ Are we just guards stationed around the perimeter of a golden city that started crumbling even before it was finished? Can we even pretend that all our sweat makes the slightest aid?”

Hewes knew he wasn’t the only person exhausted by his day’s work. He also knew that Adler had no intention of quitting until Hewes acquiesced. No violence. Just talking. Coercion didn’t need rusty nails to be effective. Adler thought of penalties, like spiking the sale of the business. He hinted around the perimeter of the damage he could inflict. He didn’t need to do more than that.

“It’s a question of perspective, Hewes. You view this as an imposition. We’ll call it a retirement party. One last great service.”

“I’ve watched plenty of films about one-last-score. Never ends all that well. I’d have to keep sniffing for the double cross.”

“We’re not handling vast sums of money or stolen paintings. You’re not a criminal. You have nothing I want from you.”

Adler, over the years, seemed unmotivated by money. Didn’t mean Hewes had any reason to trust the man. His danger wasn’t of a clear greed. It was of a nationalism that consumed whatever it touched. A zeal for duty.

“I’m a state-sanctioned smuggler. That’s a criminal with permission.”

Hewes looked out the window at the darkness just now making its final approach.

“Are you still together with that chef?”

Another thing Adler didn’t know. Officially. Hewes said nothing to the ominous question.

“You have a life now. A good one. I understand.”

Adler understood soft coercion. Worked better on a man like Hewes than a hard shove.

“Every time you say you understand I look for a man aiming a gun at me.”

Adler didn't smile. “A couple weeks ago, some colleagues and I stopped in at Omnivore. The co-owner and chef was in the kitchen. Olive Prielle. The food was monstrous in a good way. You've eaten it?”

“Yes.”

“Of course you have. Probably to the point where it's nothing special any longer.”

“It's wonderful every time.”

“A marvel on a plate. A marvel when it came time for the check, as well. A master of economy.”

Hewes had two soft spots. Adler had chosen to dance on both of them tonight. Hewes had only the threat of leaving. He tried it again. “Will you lock up if I leave you here? Will you leave it clean?”

“Zero residue, Hewes.”

Adler pretended it was all settled. Hewes could leave. Of course, he wouldn't.

“I'd like to know just how tightly wound the cables in her mind are. She did something with a pickled oyster, a beet, wild boar cheek, and some damn bit of seaweed. I would have sold my mother for another spoonful. You better marry that girl.”

Advice like that he didn't need from Adler.

“Good night,” Hewes said.

“She scraping even?”

Adler had consented for Hewes to leave, but the man was still running his mental operation. Hewes was still not leaving.

“Yep.”

“Co-owner, that worth anything?”

“I don't know.”

“They gave her a couple percent, enough to say co-owner without cracking a smile. The space is small, you could fit more tables in this room than she has in her whole place. What do they declare as profit? Couple hundred thousand, her part ownership wouldn't be enough to buy a new car.”

That really seemed to irritate Adler. The man had probably read the papers Olive signed.

“You ever set her up in another place, you let me know.”

Surprise betrayed Hewes this time. His plans. Ones he didn’t speak about here, at home, even with Olive. Plans he didn’t commit to his tongue at all. Adler really did read minds.

Hewes expected to take some of his windfall from selling to Sandefur and set Olive up in her own place. A large enough restaurant, a building that she would own. No more landlords.

“She’s happy where she is.” Hewes had no problems lying to Adler.

“She shouldn’t be,” Adler said. “She should want her own place. Right place, enough capital, a lucky break with the reviews, she’s a millionaire. Like her boyfriend.”

His unease was stronger now. The friendly soldiers from the next village seemed to be setting up for a siege. Best to check the well, expel any strangers, and start salting the slaughter. Adler played rough without taking a single step.

“I can get her a long-term lease for a beautiful song, I promise a better location than what Galbary set up for you here. So long as you let me tuck some money in...and I get a reserved table Saturday nights.”

The man was more terrifying when he slipped from his automaton guise. When he aimed for human, he seemed most inhuman. His casual malevolence.

Hewes laughed because he felt the obligation to do so. “I’ll tell her that a past client of mine was going to offer her a restaurant.”

“No. Don’t say it that way. She’d reject us both, claim she doesn’t want to sell herself like that.”

Adler probably knew Olive as well as Hewes did. At least her mental processes.

“Frame the offer better. You know her better than....”

A man cleared his throat behind Adler and Hewes. Hewes startled at the sound. Adler just turned.

“We bring any lumber? Long sticks a few inches thick?” the stranger asked.

“Can’t think we did,” Adler said. “Building a cherry picker?”

“Trying to fake a dam. The liquids...on an uneven floor. They’re moving around.”

“It’s sloped to the drain,” Hewes said.

“Drain’s covered. Stuff’s pulling toward the door.”

“You mind? Your investment,” Adler asked Hewes.

Adler probably had the architectural drawings. Probably left this as plan R in his arsenal.

“I might,” Hewes said. He’d lost the contest of wills.

“Quick. Double quick,” the stranger said. Not concerned, amused.

Hewes nodded and zipped past the kitchen. His mind was already in the tiny pantry he’d partitioned in the last remodel. Trying to think of what might work to dam off blood.

He opened the door and barely slipped inside. It was full of bursting with little room for a man to stand in the center. They kept all the dry goods in here. Snacks in sealed bags that could be loaded onto jets. On the lower shelves, large sacks of flour, sugar, and the like for the kitchen. Fresh breads, fresh cookies, whatever the clients required.

His eyes glided past a hundred glass jars, a few boxes. No spare store of lumber.

“If one can’t drink it, eat it, admire it, clean up a mess with it, or combust it in a jet engine, I don’t fucking have it.” It’d taken him most of a decade to realize what customers he wanted and what they required from him. “Not a lumberyard in my spare time.”

He looked at the shelves. He considered dismantling a shelf to use a section of the chromed metal.

A stupid, desperate idea.

He crouched to look at the lower shelves. In the back, second shelf from the bottom. A box. Commercial food wrap. The cardboard box was six inches tall and three feet wide. He

reached for it. Heavy. Uncrushable even by an uncareful foot moving in haste.

He gave a last look for a better option. Something longer. Three feet was the minimum needed. He looked again. The food wrap was the best thing he could manage without dismantling the shelves.

One step outside the pantry and Hewes was almost sharing the same oxygen molecules with the stranger. The man didn't step back. Hewes did. Another victory for the other side.

The stranger plucked the cardboard box from Hewes.

"This is big enough, heavy enough. Thanks."

The man headed for the draped kitchen. Hewes thought he could smell the blood.

The stranger passed the box through the slit in the plastic sheeting. He didn't go in himself. "Something you need?"

"What do I call you?" Hewes asked. He was forced into helping. He might as well figure out the height and difficulty of the mountain they were about to climb.

"You don't."

"There are a bunch of people here I don't know. I'd like to get that number down."

The man shook his head a moment. "Call me Franson. Just don't expect me to answer to it."

The man pivoted his body and disappeared inside the draped kitchen. Hewes caught the sight of blood, made the mineral smell that had been haunting him very real inside his nasal passages. He slipped three times on the plastic getting back to Adler.

Adler hadn't noticed. His attention had been on his phone. Though his manners were no better. He grunted rather than spoke.

He pocketed the phone a minute later. "When people get bashful, I get nervous. It's going to be a fine shitshow." He nodded at one of the three closed doors on the north wall, one of the dayrooms.

"You're interrogating here?"



“No blood, I promise. Our people responded. The violence in the next room, well, it started elsewhere. We just ended it.”

Hewes found himself no longer in control of his stomach or the muscles in his esophagus. He could smell and taste and feel the contents of what he'd snacked on all afternoon, cookies and some rare roast and a cupcake that hadn't made it to a client's jet, in his mouth.

Damn. Damn!

Nothing left his mouth. Hewes swallowed it all back down.

Adler saw everything. Adler had probably primed it all. Forcing Hewes to know what was happening, asking him to help with their blood problem, seeing and smelling it, now talking about it.

It could be an accident, this revolt inside his body. Hewes doubted Adler left things to the accidental.

“Are you okay?” Adler asked.

Damn. “I'll be fine.”

“Damn. Damn. Well, we should get you out of here.”

A kindness he was offering.

“Do you think you can hangar the jet? The people told me they cleaned up. There shouldn't be...there's no reason.... Could you?”

Adler acted more embarrassed than Hewes felt.

It worked, this fine soup of embarrassment and guilt. This plan X served where its predecessors had all failed.

“Yes,” Hewes said. He agreed to help. He'd signed on for another tour. He didn't even know the details or the role he'd been handed.

“I'm sure the pilot will be done first. He has the least to tell, nothing to own up for other than flying. We can wait on him....”

“I'll do it,” Hewes said. He wasn't going to stand in his own business and let another chance smell or well-lobbed comment splatter his gastric juices on his own wall.

“I'll hangar the Gulfstream, not a problem.”

“Okay. Take your time. I was going to.... Damn. Yeah, take your time.”

Pity, mixed with disgust.

“There’s nothing wrong here at all. We’ll get it all back to rights. I promise. Not even a drop.”

Hewes swallowed hard. He just nodded. He walked as fast as he could to the door. Humiliated by his body, by his acquiescence.

He had failed to remain obdurate, some unthinking rock.

He’d almost kept Adler’s disaster from staining him, organ by organ, cell by cell.

Almost.

It didn’t do to dwell on possibilities. He’d failed. He’d been sentenced. Move the jet was the first punishment. They’d get worse. He knew how Adler worked, how he survived in this world.

What ate at Hewes was how he’d been taken. A weakness in him that manifested at just the wrong moment. He doubted in that much bad luck. Where there was doubt with Adler, there could be no doubt. Adler had set something up, primed Hewes. The thin, clever man didn’t believe in good chance unless he manufactured it for himself.

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3.

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Hewes cut off the last two circuits as the jet engines whined down and went silent. He sat and didn't move for a few minutes. If only the rest of the world were this comfortable, this cocooning. He sat and decided his body was going to behave. Bad enough he'd almost lost it in front of Adler. He had lost it upon entering the blood-bubble that popped over the rear interior of this jet. Vomited all over the hundred-dollar-per-square-foot carpeting.

He lacked gum to chew away the flavor in his mouth. Water or something stronger to wash the taste away, maybe the burn of alcohol to take away the other burn in his throat. Acids and enzymes and some kind of twisted guilt.

"I'm not leaving it this way," Hewes vowed to himself. Vomit and blood in an unscheduled jet perched in his hangar. He didn't need the one problem, let alone the double compounding.

He tapped the button to lower the stairs. He unbuckled himself and stood, slowly, his body hunched forward, the back of his neck almost touching the ceiling. The riot in his mostly empty stomach continued, not helped by his downward facing alignment. He stepped over his biological contribution. He took the stairs slowly. One step, one deep breath of air that didn't smell of the body's inner fluids. Another step, another deep breath.

The motor for the hangar doors engaged. Hewes almost took a tumble for the last two steps.

He looked around for Adler or one of his men in borrowed uniforms. Busy as the thin man was he wasn't too busy to keep an eye on the untrustworthy people he recruited.

"Sorry, Win," a voice called out.

Hewes relaxed at the sound, the careful elongation of the vowels. The expensiveness of the words. Stanislaw Grol, a Pole trained to imitate a British gentleman.

“Didn’t mean to startle you.”

“Think this space is haunted. I’m always jumpy.”

Grol emerged from under the fuselage.

“Thought everyone went home. Or to the bar. The last client was murder.”

Hewes looked at his most valuable employee. Grol was an old man, but age hadn’t pared away the man’s speed or his mind. Grol dropped a remote into his jacket pocket, the control for the hangar doors. Hewes and several other employees had identical models.

“I planned to leave half an hour ago.”

“Oh?” Why did you stay? The question Hewes couldn’t ask, though he wanted to know. Had Grol finally become too curious for his own safety?

“An unscheduled arrival like that. There are three vehicles in the south parking. Just you handling all that. Least I could do.”

“Thank you.”

“I blocked the wheels.”

“Well, let’s call it an evening.”

Stanislaw Grol – his hands relaxed at his side, his white gloves identical to what Hewes wore, his dark suit unwrinkled by the day’s efforts, his half-Windsor still in perfect hang, a name badge affixed to his lapel proclaiming him Andrew so that no would be troubled with pronouncing a potentially unfamiliar, read foreign, name – acted the part of a perfect servant whenever there was a normal client on deck.

Stanislaw wasn’t privy to how Hewes had got his start in this business. His starting capital, his lease, his first customer list. Hewes would handle his own bloody rags. Grol would keep the wealthy coming back.

“Yes. Yes, I think it’s time for a bite.”

Whatever success the company had found in the last four years, Hewes attributed to Stanislaw Grol. Taking classes and studying failure could get one only so far. The rest had come from the gentle, deep voice of Stanislaw Grol offering special experiences to their clients from his fresh-harvested set of contacts, premiere concierge's contacts he pulled together within six months of arriving from London.

Hewes went after new business: mining lists of charter companies, the occasionally receptive flight departments of larger companies, peering into opaque lists of the registered owners of Gulfstreams, Embraers, Dassaults, and Bombardiers. Reverse engineering holding companies into the names of the beneficiaries.

Grol worked his magic so that the customers he and Hewes wanted chose to stay. Even the wealthy wanted and couldn't find an abundance of perfect servants.

"One small problem with the last client."

"Just one?"

"My liquor closet is almost bare."

"Oh?"

"That woman, the....assistant, requisitioned every expensive bottle of single malt I had. Even deigned to take what I managed to get out of Wales, the Penderyn Peated. She had a goddamned list, knew just what we stocked."

"I'm glad you didn't say no. I'm also irritated that she bribed someone here for a list of what we keep." The official list given to clients had a half dozen options. The real closet had closer to forty, at least before someone came around shopping. "How's the damage?"

"I think she carted off ninety thousand dollars worth, my cost, in fifteen minutes."

"Call it five hundred thousand."

"Must plan to serve a bunch of pickled liver for her next party. Please tell me the man will pay his bills."

Five hundred thousand dollars. Half of the previous year's official net profit, before considering under-the-table commissions and rebates.

"The legal problems," Hewes started to say.

"The company gets the bills. Not the man. Will the company pay?"

"I doubt it. Place is full of the cheapest sorts of humanity. The fourth floor all has expensive tastes. The company disallows all of it, forces it back on the provider. Been sued more than I breathe in a day."

"Wealthy men who stay wealthy by paying for nothing."

"Yeah."

"He's off the list."

"Entire company is zapped."

"Good. I won't tell them until they try to arrange another slot. Hopefully they'll pay some of the bill before then."

Hewes nodded. A fresh reason to be unhappy. When he showed his books to Owen Sandefur the man was going to zero in on the huge gap between expected revenues and payments received. Another way for Sandefur to hammer on the price.

"We could make some trouble for Mr. Smith," Grol suggested. "You and I know his name, his troubles. His temporary freedom before his trial requires he not travel."

"It would feel nice." It would attract attention Hewes didn't need. "Of course, the media would eventually leak we did it. Think of the other customers."

Grol already had. He proposed an impossible idea just to make sure they both considered and rejected the option.

"Nothing makes me so angry as a man who takes and won't give in return."

"Is there anything we can learn from him? Anyone else who fits this one's profile?" Hewes asked.

"I'll think about it. Make a few calls."

Grol knew everyone. It hadn't taken him long. It hadn't even been that expensive for him to develop his contacts. He

was such a smiling, happy man. Now Grol had the ability to find out just about anything in northern Virginia or Maryland. Or make anything happen that would normally be a 'no.' Rental properties that never hit a listing sheet. Restaurants closing for private parties on three days' notice. Tours of government facilities that usually required a Senator leaning in and asking a favor.

Wealthy people didn't need to fly their private jets. Especially not to travel to a swamp like D.C. They could sell them or use them less often or head off for beautiful places. Even those that had rented politicians or bought out a lobbying firm could just buy a first class ticket or hire someone whose job it was to fly around running errands, minding the leashed dogs. People like Grol, people with access, made the impossible possible. They created demand. They created experiences that couldn't be got at in any other way than to travel to D.C.

"I know you had issues with 'Smith.'"

"We were both unsure."

"Very charitable to say. I kept him, even with the unconventional payment arrangements, because I thought he might turn into a good, if expensive, source of referrals. The sort of asshole who can't help but brag to his friends. Turns out he's so much of an asshole not even his enemies care to listen to him brag."

"I'll make some calls. See if I can't start replenishing the stores."

"You keep us all in whisky."

"Better than gin."

"I thought you were proud of your adoptive country." The man wasn't British by birth, Hewes knew.

"Juniper should grow in a forest, well away from me. I don't need it attacking me from a bottle."

Hewes considered him an asset and a friend. The man was also something of a mind reader. He had the ability to read

beyond what a person said, even when the person lied, to figure out what he wanted.

What was the experience that would get a person to fly? Grol could satisfy a number of desires, from providing exclusive access to the impossible-to-obtain all the way to the kinds of depravity that Hewes demurred from hearing about. Madams and black books and very discrete hotels. Men with encrypted phones who could deliver high-grade euphoria in pill or powder form. A doctor or five who provided absolute discretion doing procedures merely embarrassing or completely prohibited.

“Do you need any help?” Grol nodded at the jet. “Turn it around. Leaving tomorrow, is it?”

“Yes, I think so. The client is a flake so I didn’t have a reservation. Or a scheduled departure.”

“Well, shall I get my bucket?”

Hewes paused, as if considering the offer. There was no way he could say yes, but he had to make Grol think he did. “I’ve got to keep my hand in. Can’t just be the face on the advertisement.” The polite dismissal.

“We don’t advertise.”

Hewes let the building fall silent. He nodded. He waited for Grol to ask a question, any question. Who had taken over Client Receiving? Why were the cameras down? Grol had to be curious. He had to want to know about the ‘new’ client with the dozen people now invading his domain.

Grol didn’t ask.

Hewes couldn’t volunteer.

“I’m going to call it a night. We have a seven forty arrival on the books tomorrow,” Grol said.

“I remember. I may be somewhat late.”

He hated the soft lies he told.

Until Stanislaw asked a question that Hewes couldn’t answer with the truth, it wasn’t a hard lie, one that stuck. Now he just wiggled his way around the truth. He hated that. He hated himself for it, too.



“She’ll be late. That’s just the announced time. I can handle her.”

Hewes kept as good a mental watch over the reservations as Grol did. “You shouldn’t have to. Redefines rude. Strips paint when she talks.”

“Pays her bills promptly.” Grol nodded toward Client Receiving. “You be careful with them.”

“Oh?”

“The club where I worked in London, a job or two before I came here, it had men like your client.” Not our client. Grol had guessed at a lot. “Charming folk. Until one day vicious is cheaper to display than charming. Can always hire large men who don’t fit well even into bespoke suits. Too large, too violent.”

“He’s an old client. One of the oldest.”

Grol smiled. He hadn’t asked the question, but he still seemed to know the answer. Grol hadn’t gotten ‘spy’ from what he’d seen, just ‘criminal’ or ‘gangster.’ Close enough as far as Hewes was concerned. It all spelled dangerous.

“Helped me make a go of this place.”

“And my first born son kept prattling on about how much he’d enjoy shoving me into care. Had a heart attack two years ago, didn’t kill him though. Late fifties and he needs a wheelchair. Now who needs some care, sir?”

“I’ll be careful.”

“I’ll be in at six.”

“I wish I had a prescription for the energy pills you take.”

“Nothing medical about it. You just have to make an effort to stay out of a box in the ground. That’s all. No pill for that. It’s all in the mind.”

Grol walked to his office, what he’d had labeled as the Butler’s Pantry. Kept the booze locked in the cabinet inside. That and the security system in the hangar knocked the loss ratio right down.

Hewes walked around the jet. Seven, eight years old, he guessed. Well maintained. He made a note of the tail number.

He kept a little journal of tail numbers, a minor hobby he started years ago.

He hadn't grown up airplane-mad as a child. He'd tried to short circuit some of that fervor into his mind, like someone coming late to the incomprehensible statistics of baseball, overdoing things to compensate, a man triple or quadruple the age of a nine-year-old living an order of magnitude above the sugar and ecstasy of that lost age and those unburdened eyes. Pretending to play was serious work.

"Good evening, Win."

"Don't let the drivers out there chew you up."

"I drive better than you do."

Grol smiled when he locked his office and left through the west door. It would dump him into the south lot where Hewes parked. Where, for today, Adler's many cars were giving away something of the game. He wasn't like other clients who vanished into D.C. as soon as they arrived. Adler hung around for hours and hours. Proclaiming he was a client, but acting in every way like an owner or a man with something to hide.

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4.

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Hewes climbed into the jet with garbage bags, towels, and a bucket holding enough brands of surfactant to wash away all the lies he'd ever heard. His body threatened fresh revolt. He paused. He tried mental exercises. He tried pure force of will. Nothing stopped the unconscious gagging sound. The smell made his body react, his mental attempts to clamp down made the potent smell seem even worse, he gagged more, his bodily reaction made his body react more. A vicious circle.

This time he puked in the garbage bag. Warm and disgusting to his fingers underneath the thin plastic.

He wasn't always this way with blood. With these smells and realities. He had to unlearn what his body despised.

He dropped his knees into a clean spot of the carpet. Assessed what he could see. Hewes decided to do a full cleaning, an application to show his seriousness, his qualities, his penance and remorse for his bodily weakness. He would retrain his body now. He wouldn't let this thing with blood exist long at all.

The smell was a fresh assault. He had the puke bag in one hand. He knelt near his older contribution. He attacked it with towels, trying to scoop it away, disappear it. He tried out one bottle of cleaner then another. The third gave him some decent help. It had been a long time, a very long time, since he'd had to clean up puke inside a client's jet. He'd never cleaned up his own.

He pushed the soiled towels into the puke bag. He got that spot clean and rewarded himself by climbing down the steps again. A bit of fresh air. He walked over to his office and locked the garbage bag inside. He didn't want to slip up, forget something minor like that...something minor that might invite questions, could become major.

‘Take no stupid chances.’ The only lesson old man Galbary had ever taught him. Hewes supposed explicating each of those words, with field practice and lectures of past failures, could make an entire curricula at a spy school.

Hewes futzed around with relocking his office. He walked with lead-drawn shoes back to the jet. Slower the closer he got. He knew he was acting the craven asshole, but the knowledge didn’t speed up his steps at all.

He took his time with the steps. The vomit and blood now competed with the three chemicals he’d used, each a variation on impossibly noxious. He grabbed up his materials and made it a few feet further into the passenger cabin. He did a closer inspection of the blood, noted evidence of cleaning. Jets didn’t carry a wide assortment of cleaning products. That showed in their results.

He began testing the chemicals he had brought. He tried five before he found one that did something to one section of the carpet. He paused and waited a bit. Tried to see what the five products would do to the carpet. Bleaching effects?

He looked at the leather sofas facing each other just forward of the lavatory. Blood everywhere there, speckling. What worked on the carpet wasn’t likely to work on the leather.

Hewes doubted he had anything in his bucket that would work on leather. He could make an attempt at the carpet. He glanced back at his test spots on the carpet. He thought two spots were lighter now. He’d do what he could, but Adler was going to have to pay to tear everything out of here. Replace carpet and leather and every other surface.

Hewes popped open the lavatory door. The smell of pooling blood stood up and wrapped its arms around him. Hewes took a step back before he could identify the source. A pair of sodden paper bags pushed into a corner of the small space. Hewes moved one. The blood from the contents had wicked up the paper. Made its mark on the flooring, on one of the walls. Like a great smear of death.

Hewes had to walk away for a few moments that stretched on to a few minutes. When he came back he tried to be fast. He'd opened a fresh garbage bag before he leaned in and pulled one bag up. It made an anguished sucking sound as Hewes got it parted from the floor. He set it aside and got another garbage bag. He snatched up the second grocery bag. How had they forgotten all this? Hewes guessed that Adler forced the people who knew about the mess off the plane as soon as it landed, but still.

He took the garbage bags off the jet and locked them in his office. He might look later if he could stop gagging. He was even slower to return to the jet. He thought he'd worked out all the surprises, but his body wasn't.

He detoured back to the cleaning closet. Hewes wanted to see if there was anything Grol kept in reserve that might work better. He did a slow, careful inventory. The time away from the blood did him no good. There was still all that blood waiting for him.

He found other candidate cleansers and read the labels. He put back the ones he was sure contained bleach. He didn't want to further ruin the carpet, some mocking pattern of desaturated color. He fetched out another roll of paper towels. More garbage bags. He wished he had some of the forensics toys they showed off on television. Sprays and ultraviolet lights to identify blood.

He made the miserable journey back up the stairs. Hewes ignored the lavatory for now. He got down on his knees in the aisle and saw much more than he wanted. Things the cleaning products wouldn't even begin to mask, let alone remove. He took his time. He had a brush with him and he had two different cleansers he was sure enough about. He crawled forward inch by inch. He filled a garbage bag with pinkish waste paper. He tried just water on the sofas and got some of the blood off, but his efforts weren't even surface deep. He gave up and pushed forward to the place that really stank. The blood was thick and pooled on the lavatory floor. He gagged

again every time he reached to sop up the blood. Just gagged, though. His body had given up its fuller protests.

He wiped and sprayed and washed away what he could. He did enough so he couldn't see anything on the faux-tile. He did not do as well on the section of wall. A casual observer standing six feet tall might not notice anything. Someone on hands and knees wouldn't take a moment to recognize the truth.

Hewes felt an annoyed taint of pride. He'd removed his contributions, removed the appearance of blood. Conquered it in a fashion. A decade earlier he'd had no problem with blood at all. Hewes finished what he could. The smell of blood masked with the stink of chemicals. The carpet damp in spots. The leather a bit wet, still bloody if anyone looked, but also undamaged. He'd done little good for the cost of just a little damage.

Hewes left the jet and sealed up the stairway.

He took the additional garbage bags to his office. He stripped off his soiled white gloves, guessed that his suit pants were trashed. He set the gloves aside and realized he couldn't do anything about his other clothing, save for collecting it later on and disposing of it. He didn't have a spare set in the office right now. He pulled on a fresh pair of white gloves and pretended he was clean.

He pulled the chair away from his desk and sat. He pulled the heaviest two garbage bags over. Hewes looked at how he's spent his last...hour. Two? He'd gone slowly, too slowly his knees protested now.

He rubbed his temples and looked at the plastic bags. He opened both of them and started his examination with the paper grocery bags. From a regional chain of stores, but these had an advertisement on one side that suggested east Texas or Louisiana rather than Oklahoma or any of the other options. He took a pencil and pushed open the sodden paper. Clothing in one. Clothing and shoes in the other.

Hewes moved some of it around. He found jagged cuts through the material from a sharp knife inexpertly used rather than scissors. A suit jacket, a fine, devastated shirt, suit pants, t-shirts, jeans, underwear in enough shreds to make three separate pairs. A small leather case. One pair of shoes. Two pairs of boots.

All here in these paper bags. Not with the dead.

Three bodies entered Client Receiving inside luggage. Otherwise unclothed. Maybe wearing socks. Definitely clad in thick coats of their own blood, the kind that had begun dripping from the roller bag. Hewes remembered only two large pieces of luggage coming off the jet. A massive trunk and the roller bag. Two pieces of luggage for three bodies.

Hewes almost lost control of his body.

His concrete floor would have been easier to clean than carpet.

The dead bothered Hewes.

That they were naked, carted around in luggage, that bothered him more.

Bloody, naked bodies.

He guessed it was the disrespect.

People had had changing views of the dead over the millennia, but the wisest cultures seemed to settle on caution, care, respect. Wash the body, leave it clean; lay a marker if at all possible; get the dead away from the living so that decomposition didn't endanger those who survived.

Hewes felt the part of a grave opener, paused a moment to let the unease pass but the notion didn't fade nor the unease. He didn't have much time for respect, Adler would summon him back soon enough, but he offered as much as he could. There were still more distasteful, disrespectful things he needed to do.

Hewes felt for wallets. He found just one. Leather, bulging with the man and the way he lived his life.

The driver's license proclaimed him Howard Langevin. Silver Spring, Maryland. A business card for a law firm, a

lobbying firm, something in that genre, placed him as the head of Langevin & Associates. Six different credit or debit cards. A security card of some sort with the manufacturer's name on it, not the location where it was to be used or the identity of the user. An older system maybe that couldn't make an employee I.D. out of a security pass. Alternately, one that used discretion as its non-technical root level, not giving a thief one drop of added assistance.

That interested Hewes.

The card. Was it for Langevin & Associates? What had a lawyer or lobbyist been doing that had separated his blood from his veins?

Hewes wanted to know. The security card troubled him. He had an inclination to do something foolish, dangerous. He set the security card on his desk. He'd gotten some blood on the white gloves so he changed into another pair. He returned everything else to Howard Langevin's wallet, did his best returning the wallet to the exact pocket where it had waited to be found.

Hewes looked at the brand labels on all the clothes.

It was obvious the jeans went together. The suit that Langevin wore had been from a different world.

He examined the boots. Worn, torn. Not a work environment. Like someone had worn an extra ten pounds of weight while hiking through a desert. The expensive dress shoes were worn, too, but well maintained over the years. Save for a recent coating of dust.

Hewes turned at last to the odd leather case. He unzipped it, and a device inside tipped out onto his desk. It made Hewes think of a large smart phone. But not a phone, the styling was different, the whole device was different somehow from a phone would could buy and use. There was a large screen, a camera. It wasn't a phone. At least that was his impression.

"Mr. Hewes?"

A voice echoed through the hangar.



Hewes zipped the device back into its leather case. He didn't return it to its paper bag. Instead it went into his pocket, along with the security card that probably unlocked the doors at Langevin & Associates.

Hewes took a moment to restore everything as he'd found it. He gathered up all the bags. The heavy ones along with the lighter bags that contained mostly used paper towels. He pushed his chair back under his desk and walked into the hangar.

The man called Franson was inside the hangar. Hewes ignored the man for as long as it took to lock his office door. If Adler wanted in, let him use the key he copied or let him find a lock picker.

"Mr. Hewes, Mr. Adler..."

Hewes started across the concrete floor.

"Mr. Adler will need to dispose of this material."

"I can get that." Franson was a lot more cooperative now. Adler must have had a conversation with his man. For better or worse Hewes was now fully drafted into the effort.

"Thank you." Once he arrived at the door he handed over the bags.

"Did he want to see me?"

"Just in the other building." A very formal invitation, far politer than Hewes would have expected. A fresh round of games. "We've cleaned up. We can replace the plastic wrap you lent us."

Hewes nodded before he made the connection. Plastic wrap for a dam against a river of blood. "I can buy more."

"Everything is very neat." The man was careful not to reference blood.

Hewes pushed out of the hangar. He let Franson out then locked up behind him.

"Lot of blood in there," Hewes said of the bags Franson now held.

"I'll burn all this tonight."

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5.

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“You find him?” Adler asked as Hewes was opening the east door into Client Receiving.

“He did.”

“We’re all clean.”

Hewes walked inside. Adler backed up, but didn’t let Hewes pass through the hall.

“You’re running that old man thin.” Of course Adler noticed who was close at hand. Even someone who looked as harmless as Stanislaw Grol. “He a curious soul?”

“Not tonight.”

“Not ever, right?”

“No.”

Adler nodded. Hewes doubted the man was convinced. Hewes hoped Grol’s helpful (or snooping) disposition hadn’t just doomed him. Hewes would do what he could. Adler didn’t always listen.

“He’ll be upright longer than either of us,” Hewes said.

“Tonight he was exhausted, slow moving. I think he puts on a good show for you.”

Adler moved so that Hewes could move further into the building. Adler swapped positions in the same flurry of movement. He was at the door playing sentry. He pulled the door closed behind Hewes. The lock ran home.

“Let’s have a chat.”

Hewes walked into Client Receiving. The plastic was gone. The blood no longer stood out on the predominantly white tile, white carpeting, white furniture.

Adler sat down on a sofa. He extended his hand, pointing to a specific seat very close at hand.

Hewes sat.

“I’m glad I caught you before you left,” Adler said, as if he hadn’t kept precise tabs.

Hewes looked at his glass-walled kitchen. Pristine from a distance. He'd take another pass after Adler left. "I did a survey inside the jet. A first pass on cleaning. You're going to need to gut it."

"I know."

"There were paper bags full of clothing leaking in the lavatory."

"You gave everything to Franson?"

Hewes paused. It couldn't be the man's real name. How had Adler heard the fake name the man had given Hewes?

"Yes." He pretended he didn't feel the slight weight of the leather case, the phone, and the security card.

"He mentioned you asked for a handle. Franson." The word pleased Adler for some reason.

"I gave him everything. He said he'd burn it."

The lie slipped past his lips without choking Hewes.

"You've done well. I know you weren't expecting us. Or reminders of past duties. I wasn't expecting any of this when I ate a late lunch today. Now everything's smeared, even if we've taken great care to wipe off the worst stains. Can I talk through some of this with you?"

"Me?"

"You have more perspective on this than you think. Baltimore."

Hewes said nothing.

"I'm going to need your help, Hewes."

Hewes fully understood that.

Everything in this business was voluntary, voluntary in a way one couldn't really say no.

That was how an Army grunt who happened not to be a very good soldier got seconded to Baltimore. How a man working out of a half-dozen leaking warehouses in Baltimore found himself another new name, a Bachelor of Science from Ohio State, and all the flight schooling he'd never thought about trying out. They didn't take no.

"It sounds like a young man's game. I realized tonight that things I managed in my twenties...well, they're lost to me."

Hewes had his millions. With the sale of the business to Sandefur he would even have an explanation for where the millions came from, one that would withstand IRS inspection. He had his success. He had his plans firming for the future. A woman who possessed enough unalloyed joy for the pair of them, a plan to invest in a new place for her, a plan to remain Edwin Hewes forever. Damn his old names to oblivion.

"You have plenty of men."

"To talk with? No."

"They've seen the field."

"An unthinking man can survive the field until the day he doesn't. He has no great way to prepare."

"I don't think I'm your thinking man. This was a clean site, highly compartmented."

"You're still angry you didn't draw a government check. Just the loan and your wits. We put together more than just one of these network hubs. Yours is by far the strongest. I think you've learned more here than you could have in a minor field role."

"I doubt I'll give you good advice. I'm tired. My operation here you've just managed to bust. You clean up the blood you dripped outside?"

"We did."

"You need someone trained. Someone young. I'm years out of military discipline. Never a good soldier to start with, now that we're aiming for brutal honesty."

"You weren't a good son, either, I'm told. Rebellious then. Rebellious now."

"A bad brother, a bad friend, a bad student. You had to manufacture me that diploma."

"It's real enough. We had the name stuffed into the student body a long while back. We always have names we can use. Stands up stout. We've been doing this a while."

“Bad student, bad soldier. It shouldn’t be a surprise that I’m a bad spy, too. Good enough at keeping this station running, but not too interested in the depths you’re talking.”

“You’re right. The entire operation was meant to be quiet, run on other people’s jets, using other people’s pilots, transporting our materials into Europe on someone else’s repositioning flights. It wasn’t Air America, it wasn’t bureaucratic fools hiring charters. No traceable paperwork everywhere. The caution evaporated today. We don’t have the luxury of quiet any longer.”

“We’re blown?”

“Yes. But that doesn’t even matter. There’s much worse at work.”

Now Hewes let the anger wash through him. All the caution, all the care he’d observed. ‘Blown.’

“What did you do?”

To me? To the capital that would fund his next life. He hadn’t drawn a government check, just the promise that he could keep whatever he made in the business after the ten years were over.

“I discounted the call I had this afternoon. There was a problem in Texas. I said send it to Miami. They put it on a jet here. Let’s say I was unhappy.”

Hewes waited for the rest. He’d been pulled in even if he kept proclaiming he was apart. He’d better know how badly the bricks would be coming for his skull.

“I pulled in a lot of people, but none senior enough. Muscle, not mind. This wasn’t a small problem that slid out of that aircraft. This was a massive problem, not just to the operation, but to the entire covert division. As people, as intelligence professionals. Also as husbands, fathers, Americans. I need to walk us all out of a nightmare and I need more shoes to stand beside me.”

Here, finally, was the long-awaited speech on duty. As if it worked on people other than Adler.

"I have more tasks than I had men in here tonight. I need a thinker, Hewes. I might have handed you your diploma, but the work you've done since...you should have a business degree no problem. Maybe even a master's. You were muscle who became a mind."

Hewes knew he couldn't say 'no.' He didn't have to say 'yes' without some convincing. He had this one opportunity to tussle over terms.

First, he had to truss up his business, salvage it from danger, notoriety, unsaleability.

Next...something that would hurt Adler. Confession to a spy had to be death. Cracking little clay vaults in the mind, extracting the goods, setting them on a stand as a hawker would, exposing them, pleading for them. For someone else to esteem them as much as the owner.

Adler would pay in information – about this day, how people had known to fly here, about what the implications were for his business, his life. Every damned thing.

"How many people know about this spot on the map?"

"Not many."

"You said send the jet to Miami. They sent it here. How many people did it take to disobey your order?"

"I had thought the official count was small, less than a dozen. No one who came in on that jet tonight was on the list."

"Loose lips." Expensive ones.

"Once this situation is less than a bad smell, we can work something out. The operation in Europe is also blown."

"I'm selling."

"Your choice."

"I am going to sell it."

"Even if it blew up tonight after you leave, you'll still pull a million out of it."

A lot more than that. Hewes welcomed the permission to sell.

Now to make Adler hurt.

“Nine years sending counterfeit weapons and explosives into Europe. Did it do any good?”

“Yes.”

A spy always thought the work he did was valuable. Pin him down and he'd squirm. The spy had hope he'd done something. He almost never had proof that he hadn't made things worse.

“Send in guns we permit others to sell or steal to counter the terrorism.” Hewes had pieced that much together over the years. The people bringing the regular shipments out let slip that much and more.

“Counter-terrorism. A silly term. Made up by silly people. As if terrorism is different from war. Just done with lower resources, fewer people.”

“The tamper,” Hewes said. “Did any of it actually kill a terrorist. Did we blow up a terrorist camp, a safe house, anything?”

“Yes.”

“How much did each death cost?”

“It would have been cheaper to buy a stealth bomber to subtract a hundred feet from the elevation of a valley. But....”

“But?”

“You don't need an army to make war. Never have. Just need to make the other guy's army quit the field. Terrorism is the oldest form of continuous combat we know. The chariot had its day. The phalanx came and went. Same with the legion. However, the little bands doing things against bigger foes, that's an ancient idea. How many cultures stood up against the Romans and defied their strength for at least a little while? The British called us guerrillas during the Revolutionary War, but now they would have called us terrorists. It's all been done before, but now we're the biggest bull in the field and every biting fly is coming our way. Right?”

Hewes followed just fine. If indignantly.

“Slap a new name on an old thing and everyone's memory goes to hell.”

“Life is thinking the present is important because it’s vastly different from the past. Not so. People only get to that idea by forgetting the simple lessons that keep turning up. We blunder every generation into the same fields of danger. Earning anew unhealed wounds so we can relearn these old lessons.”

“A long way of saying I’ve wasted nine years running this station.”

“No. We did kill some. A few important ones. Our vengeful flies find it easier to buy or steal a weapon or a pound of explosives than to master the processes necessary to manufacture it for themselves. My team has spent most of the last decade working out how they do it. Playing catch up on their preferences, the way the core group trains its people to hunt up supplies. Hard won intelligence, some of it from what they tell each other, things we tap. Most of it from what their partners observe and are willing to tell us.”

Nine years and this was the first Hewes had heard much of this. Nine years standing in the dark hoping he did more good than harm.

“We’ve been defending what we know from the idiots who think millions in intelligence should be fed to drone pilots, all the connections blown up with a single missile. As if us killing a single person will stop them. It’s our understanding of what they do, how they do it, that will allow us to sabotage them completely. Sabotage until they collapse from what seems internal problems. Do you understand? It’s not as satisfying as killing this man or that one, it takes longer, but it’s a long-term solution. Disintegrate the military arm of the movement from the inside. Let the theorists keep spewing their bile; they’ll have a hell of a time recruiting people to die stupidly in a training camp. Do it slow enough, long enough, the project will bury all of this violence deep under the sand. Follow?”

“No.”

“You worked Baltimore on the project to distribute tampered handguns domestically. Testing what happens with the different designs. We got enough data from you...and the



other nodes...to settle on a couple key design aspects. That wasn't meant for our criminal populations here. Always meant for overseas, even before 9/11. We've done the work on hand guns, assault rifles, even highly stable explosives. We put our excellent counterfeits where the terrorists or the partners of the terrorists go to steal them.

"We don't have agents attempt to penetrate anyone. It's a stupid waste of life. We take legitimate weapons from caches, very deadly explosives, and we replace it with our own counterfeits. The idea is they kill themselves. A terrorist we kill is a martyr. One dead by our bullets could be used to call up five, ten, twenty replacements. However, if the terrorists begin dying in small, but significant, numbers because of uncleaned weapons, mishandled explosives, preventable stupidity, they're embarrassments, not heroes."

"How many?"

"Enough."

"A dozen?"

"More," Adler said.

"A hundred."

"More."

"A thousand."

"Soon enough."

"Why is it now a crisis?"

"Getting that materiel to the right places at the right times – the intelligence – is beyond complex. We've had to work with partners, people who themselves work with the terrorists. We're not infiltrating people in cells, hoping for early warnings. Instead, we're revealing something of our plans to third parties. A different kind of danger, not to a single agent, but to the whole program. Everything we're doing."

"Why do it?"

"We can tap and listen to everything, but the smart ones, the ones we want to find our counterfeits, pass messages from mouth to ear. Not even on paper, never in any easily monitored

form. So we talk to the people they talk to. One group is a dangerous bunch from CISEN, Mexican intelligence.”

“Al-Qaeda is friends with Mexican intelligence?”

“You know that thing about drug buyers supporting terrorism? It’s true. Heroin dollars buy a lot of training camps, a lot of bullets, the services of a lot of thieves. Mexican cartels help sell that heroin. Mexican cartels spread their profits around to Mexican intelligence. This bunch, I don’t trust them, they front directly for the cartels. Intelligence agents before lunch. Cartel agents after siesta or some damned thing.”

Hewes considered the three dead men. One was a lobbyist in D.C. The others were...Mexican cartel? Mexican intelligence?

“You just flew in dead CISEN?”

“Two of them. Known to us. They worked in Eastern Europe and parts of Asia to bring in the intelligence haul. Other people analyzed it and supplied us with what they knew.”

“These were the ones who rubbed shoulders with terrorists?”

“Maybe. We don’t know why they were in Texas. One was supposed to have been in Pakistan we know.”

Hewes was trying to tally up the mess. Three dead in Texas. Mexican spies who were supposed to be in poppy land. These the people entrusted to supply the CIA with backdoor intelligence.

Adler’s people thought they were paying for a one-way conversation, from the poppies to the spies. Adler hinted that the exchanges were much more democratic. Our enemies studying us as we studied them.

Hewes guessed that everything Adler said was true. “What else?”

“That’s what I know. It’s one centimeter deep into a ten meter pool.”

They’d barely left the surface.

“You claim this risks us all....”

“We were fools to believe the information flowed only to us. I’m angry. I’ve been in charge of our operations in Eastern Europe for years now. I’ve protested our Mexican agreements for as long as I knew about them. Corrupt assets serving at least four masters: CISEN, us, the cartels in Mexico, the poppy juicers in Asia.”

“You shouldn’t have worked under those conditions.”

“I complained, but I worked. Can we cleave the anger from the reason, can we work on this together?”

“Kick it upstairs?”

Adler smiled showing off his perfect little teeth. Perhaps too many for a mouth as small as he had. “Let the rot take over a whole leg? Let it consume a lung? By the time they’re done commissioning studies the patient will be dead.”

“What can you do?” Hewes asked.

“I’m partial to cheating. You’ve got to cheat to win. You like to win?”

Adler was talking about a self-directed mission, about not taking it up the ladder. There was a word for that: treason. “The stakes are a bit high for me.”

“Me, too. My cover is even more valuable, more expensive than yours.”

“Get more men.”

“I would. However, they always call me in too late to be of any use.”

Adler, for all that he wasn’t saying, was genuine in his anger.

“We’re a giant of three hundred million people. We’ve got a tiny, agile enemy. Let’s use our giant’s feet and our massive hands to build a wall, too fast, too sloppy, too expensive, with plenty of convenient gaps in it. Let’s lumber around, all ten thousand million tons, and try to squash the enemy and his handful of friends, let’s make good friends with our enemies’ even better friends, let’s see how easy it is to lose our neck when they bring us falling down to the ground....”

Adler couldn’t even finish his rant.

“So. You have a plan?” Hewes asked.

“I have a plan to have a plan.”

“Not inspiring me to stupid nobility.”

“Everything I did, everything my team did was expected, necessary, effective, and worthless. We built this ten year plan, killed a lot of terrorists, the low-level ones. The smart ones already had the answers to the test.”

“How can you believe the program was both good and worthless?” Hewes asked. “One has got to be true. Not both.”

“It did work. It just didn’t spill the quality of blood we wanted. It was necessary. It was also dead the moment we put it live.”

That was how a man could lie and yet not lie.

“It seems we all stand by the side of a river and throw our worst problems in it, forget them, don’t bother to remember that the people just down the elevation will now have that burden. Some burdens don’t float. Some are wider than dams. Some are heavier than all the water that’s ever flowed in that river.”

Hewes let the now-human man disgorge his anger and begin to think again. The words were spoken; the ritual enacted. Now the man had to wall up the rage and make something coherent. He had proof....

“These dead bodies are proof....”

“We’re consumed with proof. As if anything we do will ever see a courtroom.”

“Galbary will have to wonder over these dead CISEN operatives.”

“We obsess over proof for no reason. We ignore the obvious unless we record a terrorist saying ‘the sky is blue today.’”

“Galbary struck me as a sharp....”

Adler closed his fist so hard it should have drawn blood.

“Galbary set the deal fifteen years ago.”

“Ah.” How do you take a problem to the man who made it?

“Promotion after promotion. Retired and dabbled in things before he was brought back in. Promoted again. Promoted, promoted. Never made the mistake of accepting a permanent political appointment. Thinks a spy telling tales for Congress makes less sense than a thief in charge of the Hope diamond. He thinks he’s never wrong. I’ll admit he isn’t wrong that often, but he’s got a chorus of admiration going. His favorite station on the radio.”

“He’d be eighty now.”

“Eighty three. He’s retired officially. He was retired when he came to court you at your warehouse. Hasn’t changed a thing for him, except freed him from trudging into an office. You should see his phone bills. Busier than the Director of National Intelligence. Gives faster, more coherent guidance, too. Even if it’s wrong.”

That left Hewes without anything to suggest. If the problem started with Galbary, and Hewes was only aware of one person more influential than Adler, namely Galbary, there was nothing he could do to help. Other than listen.

“What will you do?”

The question struck Adler harder than a fist. It knocked him out of his daydream. Forced him to see the minutes flitting and the choices diminishing.

“Kick it upstairs. Cover up the deaths. Let this rot my conscience. Of course, Eastern Europe is over. I won’t even risk our agents now that we have confirmation about the leaks. The poppy lands know just what we’re doing. Damn. It was such a clean idea. Let them blow themselves up. Let the fires smolder, ash up, collapse, die.”

“What would you like to do?”

The daydream reappeared for Adler. It had been a mistake to ask the question.

“Galbary wants proof. I would like to give him such a volume of proof that even he can’t pretend. The friends we make, his biting flies. Let him ignore the stinging welts on his neck and back. His whole body in riot.”

Somehow Hewes had become confessor, moral salve to Adler. He pitied the man, his impossible situation, a decade of suppuration now lay on the floor between them.

Hewes couldn't say 'yes' to the man. Not when the man proposed only madness. Hewes found he wasn't so cold that the word 'no' was easy to pronounce.

Back when he had nothing at risk, just a failing business, no apartment, a car that had five different disconcerting noises it made depending on the weather, no girl, little hope, danger was a passing excitement. Back then Hewes might have thrown in his weight.

Now he had a business worth what he considered a vast fortune. He had a relationship with the strangest woman he'd ever met, one who loved him and yelled at him and made him love her back even as she shoved things down his throat that should never be eaten. He had the success he'd always craved. It was all centered on these two buildings and a very brief client roster. That tied Hewes down to a spot of land. It made him predictable.

It made him findable.

Hurttable.

"We can do this," Adler insisted.

"You still don't know what 'this' might be."

"It's hard, but not impossible, to fashion truth from lies. I can fool them into revealing what they really intend."

"I think they're a jaded bunch, the ones who are still alive."

"You know what war is? It's something impossible, fashioning peace from violence."

"You have the nerve to do this. I don't think you have the spark of an idea."

"I think I can tell a few lies so well, for a day or three, that they're bound to come. The Mexicans, the ones who matter. I can make them lay it all out so even Galbary can't blink."

Left unsaid was that Hewes would help. Making lies into truth. Helping to fashion a delusion into a disaster.

Hewes didn't say 'no.' He thought about why Adler had told him more this evening than in all their years working together. Nine years. Only five crises. The regular shipments, of course, but they were almost invisible these days....

Invisible.

Listening to this unfolding story, Hewes suddenly understood the real story. Hewes had no connections back to Galbary or the other leaders of this CIA division. Hewes couldn't warn anyone about what was coming. What form this insanity might just take. He could do a little good as a helper; he could cause Adler little to no harm. The perfect fool.

"Mind watching my drink at a party?" Adler asked. "Don't care to get spiked this evening."

"A party?"

"Come. You'll understand."

Adler was a different man when he stood up. Refreshed, repurposed. The weight dispersed throughout the air.

Hewes still didn't say 'no.'

He had no reason to help.

He also had no reason to filch the security card from the dead man's clothing or the 'phone' in the leather case.

There was still the smell of adventure. That was still something he couldn't admit he wanted.

Hewes stood, not saying 'no.'

He glanced through the glass into his kitchen, looking once again for red. His eyes almost skipped over the green. They must have missed it before. There were...splotches all over the floor. Green. Not red.

Had Adler been slaughtering some Vulcans?

It had been a long time since Hewes had watched anything Star Trek. He took a step toward the door. He was looking for things other than human bodies now. Damned Roswell aliens or something hiding under the island in the center of the room.

Adler looked as well.

"Damn."

He moved faster than Hewes, got in front of him. Stopped him.

“There was a bunch of this stuff in the roller bag. Went everywhere. Guess Franson didn’t do as well tearing the plastic down as he did putting it up. You have a vacuum?”

Hewes knelt at the door of his kitchen. He poked at one of the flakes. It was dry. It broke apart at his touch. It wasn’t blood, human, alien, or otherwise.

He brought the remnants closer to his eye. There was green embedded in the ridges of his finger. Tiny flecks there. The big flake was made of tiny flakes, it seemed. It didn’t remind Hewes of any leaf or grass he’d ever seen. It was brighter than even a leaf on a healthy tree; so dry it crumbled. The green should be faded, too. Right?

“Vacuum?”

Hewes nodded, confused. He rose off the floor, his eyes still on the material embedded in his finger. He pulled the vacuum and aimed to do the work himself.

Adler took the machine. The first case of management ever doing manual labor in Washington, D.C. It had to be a record. Hewes watched, as if he were the supervisor. Adler worked slow and methodical. His pace assured both of them that he’d gotten every flake of green. By way of apology, atonement. Leaving a mess when the promise had been otherwise.

It made no sense to mop up the blood if leaving some other bit of evidence left them just as guilty in the eyes of the law.

Hewes watched Adler move around the white-tiled kitchen. He watched every chip, every scale disappear. Like a snake disappearing tile by tile.

Adler even dumped the trap into a paper bag. “I’ll get this burned,” he promised.

Hewes returned the vacuum. He returned to the kitchen and took another careful look. Stanislaw Grol couldn’t have done better if he had supervised the work himself. As perfect as a human could manage.

“It’s gruesome to move people around in luggage.”



“Nobody looks twice at a heavy suitcase coming off a private jet. Just think its a prima donna carting around her makeup.” Adler looked at Hewes. “Wash your hands. I don’t know what that scale was. You touched it. Use soap and hot water.”

Hewes noted the green still glinting from the ridges of his finger. He wanted the alien scale off him. Gone.

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6.

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Hewes had never traveled with Adler. The man had always shown up without notice at the field. Disappeared when it suited him. They'd never shared a drink or a meal. It had been a business relationship more formal than a room full of suits each billing at five hundred an hour.

Hewes realized he should have treasured the benevolent neglect.

First, Adler drove ninety and didn't keep his eyes anywhere near the asphalt.

Second, the faster he drove, the more he talked. As if the speed of the vehicle impacted the speed of his metabolism, the speed of his thinking.

"I can give you, let's say, a hammer. A bunch of nails, a few pictures to hang."

Adler pivoted his head and surveyed the world through his rear window. As if his car were the only one unequipped with a rear view mirror. As if he expected someone to be following. As if he were disappointed there was nothing. A symphony in paranoia.

His head snapped back to look at Hewes, rather than the road. "If you do it right, nothing happens to the hammer. It's damned sturdy. There are some fools, I've met them, believe me, can't do anything like this without destroying the nails, the pictures, even the hammer. That's our mainstream intelligence capability right now."

He was treating Hewes as a pupil. The lesson wasn't to the student's taste.

"We spend millions of dollars to figure out the flows, how money keeps going from a number of nodes to central repository K, how messenger 3056 makes weekly trips between this village and that village. We can study up the patterns of drug flows, see where they're disturbed from time

to time. All this sitting and listening is damned effective. Right?"

Hewes pushed himself deeper into his seat. He nodded once it was clear Adler was waiting for a response.

"What do we do? Penetrate the flow, figure out their sources of intelligence, and pour in disinformation three or four steps removed from our actual target? No. That would make too much sense. How about use our knowledge of these flows to sabotage an operation?"

"That's what we do." Sending in tampered weaponry was supposed to sabotage training and operational readiness.

"In a small way. Does the rest of the intelligence community concur? No."

"What do they do?"

"What the brilliant minds have decided: we spend millions to understand the flows around a particular figure, we determine where he'll be at a particular time and place, then we loft a drone and fire a missile. Maybe kill one person we had on a list, twenty others to get to him. Women and children. Make ourselves slaughterers of innocents. We spent months of work, and millions in intelligence collection and analysis, to kill just one important man. To destroy that particular set of information flows. They'll all start up again and we'll have to stumble onto them."

Adler made to turn, even used his blinker. Head craned behind him. Then he didn't turn. Just drove past the intersection, his blinker going full out. Snapped it off halfway down the next block. Head craned once more.

"Every missile we fire from a drone is a waste of millions of intelligence dollars. Every insertion of special operations burns everything we did. Every dead man forces the patterns to change. Other people take over, an organization splinters. Something happens, ripples and ripples for months or years. Hard to get a good measure of the flows when everything's still changing."

“What good is knowing the flows if you do nothing with them?” Hewes asked. Becoming an unwilling participant in the colloquium.

“Nothing? One missile is nothing. I say, let them get comfortable.”

“I’d be more comfortable if you watched the road.”

The comment did nothing for Adler’s driving style.

“Let them think we can’t read what they’re doing. They’ve stopped doing the obvious things, realized emails are billboards for the NSA. We don’t need to know what they’re saying. We need to watch what they’re doing. We master their flows and we own the terrorists. If we’re not blowing up a new one every couple weeks. Things have got to settle. People have got to fix their routines. Even cagey bastards can’t help but make routines.”

“You argue patience to a bunch of politicians?”

Adler grunted. “Here’s the case we make. We ramp up the small project we’ve been doing, you and I and all the others. Make it bigger. Make it work better. When we take over a flow of guns or money, we can get everyone in a camp in one shot if they’re trying to build bombs there. In a way that doesn’t require a missile. In a way that can’t be tracked back to us at all. Poor maintenance of weapons. An embarrassment, not a precious martyrdom. We stop light footing it. We take a couple heavy positions and really do some damage. If it’s done right, we make the people we’re hunting unhappy, not nervous. Their people blowing up their own camps makes them think they’re recruiting stupid people, not that we are feeding them tamper.”

It was a practiced spiel. Evidently unpersuasive in the circles in which he made the case.

“It makes sense.”

Adler laughed. “It does. Which means no politician will ever stand behind it.”

Adler kept his eyes on Hewes even when he yanked the wheel and swerved into a parking spot. He put the car into park and sputtered the engine.

Hewes looked around. He'd long given up trying to place where they'd been moving through the city. All he could see was money. Brick and wrought iron fences and the houses that protruded from behind them and lot sizes that could be measured in fractions of acres rather than square feet.

"Where are we?" Hewes asked.

"A party."

Adler pointed at a house that didn't sprawl quite enough to be a mansion.

"Just hang back. Keep an eye on me. Don't be too chatty. Don't be rude."

"Whose party?"

"Galbary might be here. Unless he comes up to you, you don't recognize him. Alright?"

"I don't want to know whose house this is, do I?"

"Graham Qualls."

"The new Director of National Intelligence. You have an invitation."

"I do."

"Do I?"

"You're my assistant this evening. No one will be talking shop. It'll all be personality assassination. Just keep an eye on me. Alright?"

"For what...."

"I'd give you a weapon, but you're playing shield tonight."

"How?"

"You have a camera in your phone."

"Yes."

"Know how to use it?"

"Yes."

"Anyone who looks at me, anyone you notice. You get a picture. I'm going in here to talk to a couple specific people."

Me talking to one or more of them should get some of the other attendees curious. I want to see who reacts. Alright?"

"Fine."

"People who have dire thoughts in mind don't like being recorded. Make it obvious you're taking pictures of the people looking at me. Right?"

Hewes didn't have a clue. Still, he nodded.

"That's my shield. Not very heavy. Should be good enough in this crowd."

"I don't understand."

"Step out."

Hewes stood up and felt out of place on the quiet street. He could hear the noises of people talking, but it was all muffled. Adler led Hewes down the block. The young man accepting keys was the first clue to the kind of party. With valet service to ensure the street remained quiet.

"There."

Adler pointed at the massive trees anchoring the front of the large house. Pockets of people spilled out to take refuge under the trees or sit on the elaborate benches scattered among the flowers. Adler stood and watched the building and its inmates for a moment.

"Are you looking?" Adler asked.

"Yes."

"Tell me about these people," the professor demanded of his student. As if they were in spy school after so many years of deferral.

"Which ones?"

"Take all of them one by one. What do you see? What impressions do you get?"

"I don't understand...."

"You do this all day, every day. You see ten people climb out of a jet. Who do you greet first? Who is the man, who the assistant, who the tagalong borrowing a ride? Is the tagalong worth knowing, the even richer friend cadging a ride, someone who might become a client in the future?"

Hewes understood. He took a long distance look. Several people migrated back into the house leaving twelve people inside the wrought iron. Three pairs, a group of three, a group of three that acted like it was waiting for more. Soon enough another person, a man, stepped outside. Hewes narrated what he saw, what he guessed. Another woman walked outside and joined the growing group, now of five.

“The pair tucked to the side of the door?”

“Not married, but going home together,” Hewes ventured.

“The pair of men?”

“Boss and wage-slave. Better be getting overtime being out so late.”

“The last pair?”

“Two people who don’t like each other.”

“Still they’re talking.”

“There’s something about the makeup of this party that’s forcing them.”

“Yes. Good. Politicians are they?”

“No. They work with politicians. Lawyers, lobbyists.”

“Right.”

“Now the larger group.”

This was a bigger puzzle. Five of them, three men, two women.

“Husbands and wives, none of whom like each other?”

“Why do you say that?”

That meant Hewes had guessed poorly.

“Long familiarity with each other, even deeper mutual disgust.”

Adler shook his head. “You’re right about them not liking each other. They’re Eyes.”

“Eyes?”

“A play on the letter ‘I.’ Senators who sit together on the Intelligence committee. The ones who get to put up with Qualls. Of course he’d make an effort near the beginning of his term to meet them. They don’t like each other much, but they’re still conferring. Why?”

Hewes took a blind guess. "They want to be seen talking."

"By whom?"

"People inside the house."

"Qualls and his staff. These five don't care for his appointment."

"They're putting Qualls on notice."

"They can cooperate that far, rip strips of flesh from a hated person."

Adler watched them talk. Hewes watched the movement of the groups. The pairs didn't last long outside. Brief conversations before people left or returned to the house.

"Who are you here to meet?"

"None of them." Adler shook his head. "For all his imperfections, Galbary is right about Eyes. Stay dead clear of them. Never be the one forced to tell them a story."

"You haven't asked about the trio near the tree."

"Yes."

"The man is FBI."

"I'd say DEA."

"The woman is an aide?"

"Aide? Is that a question?"

"An aide."

"To whom. The DEA agent?"

"No."

"If memory serves, she works for a crotchety old man called Colfax. The Senator from New Hampshire."

"The old man has a chest full of medals, but it's not our uniform."

"Mexico's. He's got two stars. They've stuffed him in the Embassy here as an attache."

"Embarrassment?"

"No. He's a hero of their drug wars."

"Banishing a hero."

"There's a story there. I don't have it all yet."

"A Mexican general talking to the DEA and a Senator's aide."



“CISEN seems to have arranged his ‘promotion’ back in November. The part of CISEN that’s too close to the cartels.”

“He’s the one you need to talk to?”

“See. I knew you had a mind in there.”

Hewes wanted to walk away from the man who was now acting like an ass.

“I’m going to tell you something that could get you into serious trouble. I’m going to tell you this, we’re going to discuss it, then you’re going to forget it. Understand?”

“Yes.”

“There’s something CISEN wants. A someone. A request they’ve been making since January. Probably because the cartels are paying them to do it.”

“This General?”

“Yes.”

“They banish him to the United States and now they’re trying to steal him back.”

“If he disappears on our soil, their hands appear all the cleaner. They’re intelligence agents but they’re also political. They have some thinkers, too. They want this General, but they don’t want the blame.”

“What are you talking about doing? Giving this man to the Mexicans?”

Adler waved over the fence. He caught the eye of the General. The man stepped away from his trio, had a word with a guard at the street, began walking toward Hewes and Adler.

“Get in the car.”

“You don’t need a shield now?”

“I didn’t expect him to want to talk to me.”

“Oh.”

“I expected he’d only be on good behavior if I pinned him at a public event. Made him act nice in front of the others he needed to impress.” Adler nodded toward his vehicle.

Hewes complied.

He watched while Adler and the General had their conversation on a rich, quiet street. Hewes paid special

attention to the General. He spoke with his hands, the nodding of his head, the way his torso twisted and dipped as he attempted to make his points. There was nothing reserved about the man.

Still, Hewes couldn't hear a wisp of what they said.

He imputed that it was a pleasant conversation. Neither of them became angry. Would Adler even mention the cartels, the kidnapping that had been ordered from Mexico? One spoke, the other agreed. The other spoke and there was warmth between the two men.

Hewes couldn't imagine Adler was giving out any bad news.

Adler meant to use the General in some way. As a large slab of temptation to the cartel that had control of a section of CISEN.

Hewes couldn't have that conversation. To smile at a man and then betray him, that was the reason Hewes was never invited into one of the CIA's formal training facilities. Hewes wasn't born defective. He'd have tried to strangle an instructor on dishonesty.

Hewes glanced back to the party. The population of the front garden was now in the thirties. Too many people to capture with his phone. Still he tried as they moved in and out of shadows or wandered back into the home.

He did as Adler had asked. Only no one could see him playing the shield. The deterrence value was zero.

He went back and snapped second and third photos for some of the faces, the ones that were looking down the street toward the General and Adler.

Which of them would report back to CISEN about the General they'd banished and now planned to snatch back?

A target that one wanted, one watched. The news wouldn't be long getting back to CISEN that Adler was willing to play. Hewes looked around the car-jammed street. He wondered if some of the watchers were on the street. He wondered about security, too, for the DNI. How many people were watching?

## NEVER A WASTED CRISIS

How many understanding what this meeting between a general and spy would mean?

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7.

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Adler slid back behind the wheel. Hewes kept his eyes on the general who looked awkward from the rear, a lump of humanity that fit the front of his uniform but let the second side show his bodily defects. The man ducked back behind the wrought iron.

“That Ugalde never had an Intelligence posting in his career, but he knows more about the subject than any ten Eyes.”

High praise.

“Hasn’t even had the kind of blanks in service that indicate secret postings. I’ve seen his file as it exists in Mexico City. Just a couple long vacations. I think our friend there has done things that even his bosses don’t know he’s done.”

“What did you ask him?” Was there ever a spy who accurately reported the contents of a conversation he had. A shade of this, an omission of that. Hewes would hear a story that bore no resemblance to the words they’d shared.

“We had an opaque conversation about his friends in the south of Mexico.”

“He knows about the kidnapping contract?”

“Long before I mentioned it.”

“You going to dangle him, hope something bites?”

“Call-me-Isidoro would never say yes. No one ever agrees to be kidnapped for a Mexican cartel, especially not one who led Operation Michoacan, tried to launch Operation Oaxaca. Still, he hasn’t said ‘no.’”

A second person this evening who hadn’t said ‘no’ to Adler. Hewes was in dangerous company.

“The right people see you chatting?”

“I’m going to assume.”

“You going to explain this plan to have a plan?”

“They’ll bite or they won’t. I’m not going to make them an offer. Just this few moments of me standing next to their target.”

“Why so oblique?”

“After passing them many messages declining, they wouldn’t believe if I said yes. They’re going to have to come, demand, scream and yell and bluster.”

“You don’t need a shield for that?”

“No.”

“Another party we need to stake out?”

“No. I apologize but I can’t abandon this party now that I’ve arrived. I have to make a real appearance.”

All Hewes had wanted was to be parted from Adler. Now freedom was his. He didn’t even have to take the return journey by Insane Adler Express. He was playing hooky the next day and the day after that, if needed.

“You mind if I call a cab?”

“That’s fine.”

Hewes felt for his phone before he got out of the vehicle.

“I may need you tomorrow. Don’t know if I can come myself. The interrogation codes....”

“Haven’t changed.”

“I’ll send someone you recognize, assuming we need you.”

“I hope this was a one-night shot.”

“Assume we’ll need you.”

Adler looked back to the party. “We’re in a dangerous spot now. Don’t let anything go out of the station again. No tamper, nothing outbound. It’ll take some time to unstring the lights we have out there, but we won’t risk them again.”

Hewes was all in favor of lowering risk.

“I can’t guarantee in-bound packages won’t come. I think a lot more people know about the station than should. Just be ready.”

“I have your permission to sell? Early?”

“Get an exit squared.”

There weren't four words in the English language that felt so soothing to Hewes. Get an exit squared.

"Consider it done."

"Don't let your mind sag. Don't expect your enemy to be an idiot. You're thinking of the money. Other people are still in this for the win."

This was the first time Adler had tapped into his anger and directed it toward Hewes. A withering coldness.

"We've got intelligence agents who double for the millions the cartel pushes. They're greedy, but trained. Some are even quite smart. Smarts go where the money tells them."

Hewes swallowed but said nothing.

Eventually he realized he was dismissed. They both climbed out of the vehicle. Adler headed to the next block. Hewes called the limo service he often used for clients, got a Town Car dispatched his way.

He knew Adler was using him for some purpose. At least the cartel hadn't put out a contract for his kidnapping. Hewes turned over what Adler wanted. How Hewes might fit into the insanity the man was unloading on this town.

He couldn't derive an answer from what he knew. After all, Adler was a master of presenting just first order secrets, reserving the next few dozen elevations for his own purposes. Hewes had enough to impress and baffle, but not enough to get ahead of the man.

Hewes looked at the cars again. Adler had parked his car under the street lights this expensive part of town commanded. Hewes now stood away from the light. He could see his surroundings better. He could see people sitting in cars. Watchers who didn't care they were being obvious.

One, two, three vehicles. At least. Every SUV Hewes could see had people in it. Perhaps they needed large magnetic signs proclaiming 'Official Security Vehicle' if they wanted to be any more obvious.

The following day Hewes was going to be hard to find. Adler couldn't press him into service if he couldn't find Hewes.

The trick was to make sure Hewes was hard to find. He considered yanking the battery from his phone. If he did it too early, someone in Division might notice.

His phone rang. The car was here. It must have been around the corner, the wait had been closer to seconds than minutes. He opened the rear door and slid in before the driver could get out.

"Richard, my man. You're still going? You worked Smith all day."

"Two of the kids. The bodyguards didn't tip."

"You bill me an extra two hundred." Hewes was getting out of the business, but the network of contacts he possessed, or that Stanislaw Grol possessed, was worth as much as their customer list. He wasn't going to cheap out now.

"Thanks."

"Their father was a piece of work. Talked us out of hundreds of thousands in single malt." Hewes knew the score. When bragging about a deal, use the lowest possible dollar figure. When complaining about being robbed, use the greatest.

"Ow. I'll stop bitching. Where are we going?"

"Back to base."

"Yes, sir. Yes, sir."

"I understand you're a favorite of Ms. Shine?"

"I hope not."

"Thought her name was down for a nine o'clock arrival." A complete fabrication.

"I'll pay you two hundred to force her on someone else."

Hewes didn't have to stretch for a genuine laugh. The woman paid her bills, which was the nicest thing one could say. Third generation tobacco money. A woman who had more cataracts than double chins, a large number of each, but a close race. A woman who demanded to be on time; demanded the

car not move so fast. She called out directions that would have made more sense in Charlotte. A loon with cash.

“You keep her and I’ll get you home safe as can be.”

“Nah. You do good work. Take the cash. I always do.”

The driver laughed. Then he asked permission to turn up the radio. They both knew they’d exhausted their patter. They were both tired. Hewes was fine with it.

“Anything but idiots chattering,” Hewes said.

Once the vehicle filled with rollicking bass lines, Hewes pulled the weight out of his pocket, the leather case. He opened the case and extracted the strange device, the phone that wasn’t quite a phone. He fumbled with the buttons on the device as they passed under a brief bit of overhead lighting. Got the thing powered on. Got a menu.

Commanded it to play back its recording.

The damned thing was some kind of dedicated, compact video recorder. Were they still making devices that could only do one thing?

Hewes steeled himself a moment. Knew there might well be three bodies explained by the recording.

From the first frames, Hewes didn’t understand what he was seeing. Certainly wasn’t the blood he expected and feared.

The video was hard watching, not violent. Hard to watch because the camera had been bouncing up and over, left and fro when it had been recording. The thing sat in a shirt pocket, the wearer in a vehicle that possessed no working shocks.

Hewes felt his body getting dizzy just from the watching.

He didn’t bother trying for any audio, not with the driver up front. He let a minute of the nausea-inducing motion play before he figured out the replay controls, particularly fast forward.

The first hour or longer was just bouncing on the terrible road. Hewes figured the recorder had belonged to the vehicle’s passenger. He caught a passing glimpse of the vehicle’s driver, the other CISEN who would likely wind up naked, dead inside luggage.



Hewes tripled the playback speed.

He kept sane by looking at the passing environment. Dusty and dry. Some patches of green, but even the weeds had a parched feel to them. Texas had just had a very dry winter. The areas far from the Interstates must have suffered harder than anything near a town.

The road itself was little better than hardpan dirt that had never seen maintenance. He slowed the playback when the vehicle passed near some structures, sped up again when the vehicle shot past them, traveling faster than any sane man would take such a road surface.

The vehicle veered from the road although the speed seemed to increase. Hewes slowed the recording down. The vehicle slid into an upwelling of the flatness, a poor man's earthen garage, topless against the sky. The two men, neither very large, neither looking much like a spy, got out, collected some bags, and began to walk. The saga of the truck was ended, Hewes hoped.

Hewes sped the video up as the men walked. They moved their heavy bags across flat nothing, a depressingly dry place. A moment later, Hewes understood better. They were in a dry nothing that had oil under foot. The pair moved past oil pumping equipment that wasn't in use. They dumped their bags and walked all around the installation. Then they drug their equipment away, at least a quarter mile through weed plants and short scrub.

Hewes sped the recording again as the men settled in. Only as the day turned to night did things change. They returned to the installation. The taller one, the driver, picked the lock of an outbuilding and ... did something to the equipment. The shorter one who carried the camera checked his reflection in the glass of the trailer. The man could have been born in Portland, Oregon, as easily as Guadalajara. The problem with him was his lack of curiosity. His partner was doing something to the equipment and the cameraman was busy working over his hair. He was stuck in the damned desert.

The corner of the camera just caught the pumpjack surging back into motion.

Hewes rewatched the section trying to get a better idea of what the taller man had done. Nada.

Hewes sped everything up again. The camera recorded through the dark. No special settings or abilities to let it read heat signatures, just a bunch of dark.

At day break the men were in their camp, perched on camp chairs, fixated on the pumping arm.

Hewes returned everything to maximum velocity. Twice that day they ventured back to the installation. The taller one investigated the equipment, whatever he'd done to the installation. The smaller one made repeated use of any bit of unbroken glass he could find. The men ate. They talked, probably spreading lies to each other. Not that Hewes could tell. Hewes couldn't read lips speaking in Spanish. Not that he could in English, but it made him feel less incompetent that they spoke in a foreign language.

Hewes sped through the second moonless night.

The third day started the same as the second. A successful journey to the installation. More fiddling with the equipment while the one controlling the camera paid no attention.

They returned to camp. Ate again. Then they stood up. Hewes slowed the recording down. This was the first time they'd broken their patterns so he was interested in what was happening.

The videographer turned away from the pumpjack. For a long while, minutes, he surveyed the road. There was a dust cloud kicking up behind what could be called hills only if one were predisposed to lying. Time crept forward.

"Good movie?"

Hewes almost threw himself flat on his seat. He did fumble the recorder.

"Sorry," Richard the driver said.

"It's fine."

"Good movie, Win? You were into it."

“Shit for work.”

“Want me to turn down the music?”

Hewes fumbled with the device trying to turn it off until he could

“No. No, it’s just some footage I need to review. Security shit for a customer. Can’t say any more.”

People in D.C., more so than other places, hated and respected security procedures. Seemed like half the city could shut down when visiting dignitaries drove around in limos or the President took his family out for burgers.

“I understand.”

“Music’s good for the soul.”

“Thanks.”

Hewes kept his eyes off the screen for a minute. He looked out the window, tried to gauge where they were. Richard seemed to be taking the long way around. Hewes wasn’t paying by the mile so it was fine. He just wondered if his driver did the same things to his clients. His extremely high maintenance clients.

“Half of Dupont Circle is shut down. Traffic’s like sludge everywhere. I’d rather keep moving and go further than play sit-and-stop.”

“I agree. Thanks.”

“Wouldn’t want you to think I rip off the tourists.”

“Or the distracted?” Hewes added.

“You got it.”

Hewes nodded. He gave his driver a smile. Richard noted it. Everything was square between them.

Hewes looked at the window, but the recorder got heavier in his hand. He pushed another thirty seconds, another minute before he returned to his recording.

There were three vehicles on screen next to the pumpjack. Hewes reversed the recording back to where he’d left off. To the enlarging cloud of dust. Vehicles moving, several of them. Moments later, the convoy arrived (again). Three expensive

vehicles, SUVs, all tan but otherwise unmarked. People poured out. A dozen or more.

A tour commenced at the site. Two or three of the people were trying to determine just why the pumpjack was pumping. The ones in charge knew the location should have been disused.

Two men in dark suits went to the small enclosure where the taller Mexican had done his twice daily adjustments. Hewes watched the larger group cluster around different elements of the camp. Someone began working to unlock the trailer.

The pumpjack slowed. Whatever the men were doing in the outbuilding it was working. Then the screen filled with dust and smoke. Oil flew outward. Flames sparkled, extinguished themselves, and restarted.

Hewes didn't understand.

He stopped the recording. His fingers fumbled to reverse the recording, slow it down. Hewes watched everything backwards.

He couldn't guess with any certainty, but there was a fragment of his mind that thought explosion.

Perhaps from underneath, the pressure of the oil. Perhaps from inside the mechanism itself. Perhaps from CISEN putting a goddamned bomb in place.

Hewes pushed forward again.

As soon as the smoke and oil and chaos hit the air, both of the watchers ran from their camp. They stopped long enough to pick up one of the bags they'd packed in. As they ran, the contents of the bag went into their pockets and hands. They'd brought a bag of weapons.

Hewes had a horrible flash of understanding.

Three bodies had arrived on the G550. Three out of a dozen or more. Most of the bodies destroyed in this event never made it to the plane. Hewes thought he was about to witness a massacre.

The shorter CISEN was the faster runner. The more aggressive gunner. He killed three of the stunned or wounded before the taller CISEN got on scene, added his own violence to the mix.

They proceeded in methodical fashion, slaughtering everyone present. Hewes couldn't bear to watch, but he tried to catch flashes of what was happening. He thought he saw a person covered in green, like the green scale. Could it have been a signature of the bomb material?

The CISEN did a second round putting bullets in the already dead.

Hewes looked away. He looked back when the videographer hit the ground. Then his partner. Hewes watched it again.

There were a dozen dead and then the killers were dead. Hewes didn't understand. He pushed forward. Two men arrived, white men, bland as Adler was.

Hewes rewound this section, watched it twice more through. He'd had no clue that the CISEN watching the pumpjack were being watched.

These bodies, some of them, had come to Adler. Adler had to have had his finger in this somewhere.

He watched this section a third time looking for any explanation. Any bit of clarity. He couldn't find the first clue as to where the final killers kept their watcher's blind. Hewes thought he recognized one of the men who had previously handled a few week's of the outbound tamper shipments. Definitely one of Adler's men. A neck thicker than a power pole couldn't be that common an attribute.

The last time through Hewes counted. He guessed he'd just seen thirteen people murdered. No, fourteen, fifteen. Plus the two CISEN. He looked for other out of frame locations. Perhaps sixteen, seventeen. He stared at the paused screen. Adler and oil wells. What would Mexican intelligence, even Mexican intelligence doubling for cartels, be doing setting up bombs on oil wells in Texas? None of this had ever come up

before, not in years of hauling Adler's equipment out of the country nor the more rare arrivals of returned people, machines, enciphered papers.

The real meat of the story Adler kept to himself. As expected.

Show off the first layer of truth. Keep the rest tightly coiled around one's body.

Hewes sped forward. The two survivors of all the mess, Adler's people, loaded one of the just-arrived vehicles. A bloody Caucasian, still bleeding. Not yet dead. They ripped shirts off the dead to fashion tourniquets for his leg and his arm. The dead Mexicans were dumped in the back of the same vehicle as if they were bags of kibble from a warehouse club.

"We're on field."

Hewes did stop the recording this time. "That wasn't a bad drive. How long you working tonight?"

"I was supposed to clock out an hour ago."

"You took this call just so you could let me know about my client."

"Guilty."

"Like I said, you put in for it. I'll pay it. You did fine work. Can't ditch the shithheads on the side of the road."

"No, sir."

Hewes returned the recorder to its case. The whole package he slipped back into his pocket.

Hewes opened his own door once they stopped at Client Receiving. Richard got out. Hewes shook the man's hand. Said all the right words. His mind was still in dusty Texas.

"You getting out of here now?" Richard asked.

"That's right."

"Remember, don't call me for Ms. Shine. I'll be sick that hour."

"Four screwdrivers for breakfast doesn't qualify as an illness."

"It does if I say it does." Richard got back in his car and reversed his route off the field.

Hewes took a quick look at his business. The doors were locked. The security armed. He unlocked his car and sat down. He had to finish the story.

Hewes sped through an hour, maybe two of bumpy roads. The dead man who carried the recorder was face up in the vehicle. Hewes could see through one of the windows. He could almost feel the motion tugging on his guts. Eventually the sky went from clear to obstructed. Buildings and trees and power lines. Hewes was sure enough when they arrived at a small airport. The vehicle zipped into a hangar. Hewes watched Adler's men tuck three bodies into plastic bags. No, not plastic. Something thicker.

He thought it was over. He almost ended the playback.

Then he remembered two bloody grocery bags of clothing.

The dead went into plastic or rubber bags fully clothed. No, the bags had been cloth. He was sure of that.

He let the recording continue. He couldn't see anything. The camera had only a view of the inside of a sealed black bag.

Eventually that changed. Light protruded into the dark. The bags were opened. Hewes could see very familiar furnishings, two sofas facing each other just forward of the lavatory.

Why did these men open the bags mid-flight? They'd have left no blood anywhere if they'd just kept the bags sealed.

Hewes watched Adler's men strip the bodies of their clothing.

His stomach threatened revolt.

Touching the dead. Violating them in that way. Hewes paused the recording and got out in the cool air for a few minutes.

When he returned to his car, he finished watching the incompetents search the clothes. They left a wallet behind, a leather case containing this recorder. Hewes watched everything dumped into paper sacks.

Hewes had wondered about the blood. Perhaps the men were hauled aboard in a hurry. Not true, they'd been bagged

first. Perhaps the blood splattered everywhere in the process of giving emergency support, trying to save lives. Also not true. Adler's men had just violated the dead without any reason. The question was only why? Hewes couldn't see a reason, didn't mean there wasn't one. Littering death on everything the men touched, binding carpet, wood, leather, themselves together with the violence that had been done, that the two surviving shooters had also done.

Such sloppiness had to be intentional.

Hewes shook his head.

These weren't people in a panic. These were people doing awful things because they'd been told to do awful things. Adler.

Hewes turned off the recorder.

He stuffed it back inside its case.

He had to make a decision. Adler had spun a good tale, but Hewes now had proof – laughable proof, as if Adler would ever see the inside of a courtroom for anything he did or ordered. Adler had told a tale that may once have passed through a room where the truth dwelt. So far removed.

What had Hewes just seen? What should he do, if anything?

The dead were dead.

Hewes had participated in the covering over, not quite so much as if he'd buried the newly dead with the spade in his own hand.

Close enough.

Adler's men responded to CISEN shooting. CISEN had responded to an explosion seen by people who shouldn't have been there. Hewes didn't know what it all meant. He didn't want to know. He just wanted to keep out of it.

Tomorrow he wasn't answering his phone. He wasn't going to work. He wasn't going to his apartment. He wouldn't use his car. He'd spend the whole damned day riding around on the Metro just to keep clear of Adler.

He was done.



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8.

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Easy to say a thing, easy to mean it. Hard to push past the niggling that turned to itching, then a mild throbbing and a hollowness that demanded all his attention to ignore. He was done, he told himself, but when he turned over the engine of his car he found himself driving to Lobbyist Row.

The damned security pass in his pocket weighed half a ton.

He knew he was only interested in the third victim, of seventeen or twenty, because he couldn't drive his car to Mexico City and step inside Mexican Intelligence.

Why had the lawyer or lobbyist been in Texas? What had drawn him to his death. The answer might be enough to satisfy the emptiness and anger inside his mind.

He parked a few blocks away from where he thought Langevin's office would be.

Adler had pitched a fine story, very fine. Hewes still believed it even after watching the video. He appreciated simplicity.

His mind believed and also wanted to prove the damned thing a lie, catch Adler not just sprinkling a little truth on his stories but telling true whoppers.

Hewes had the strong sense he needed armament against Adler, against whatever was really happening. He didn't like walking the mine field. With no true map, Hewes had to draw his own. Even at the cost of blowing off his own feet.

He didn't need to account for everything. He couldn't cope with a universal plan. He needed to get at par with Adler.

Perhaps the third man, Langevin, would tell Hewes about Texas, about the impromptu tour group and the explosion and the blood left everywhere.

Hewes needed a plan to handle Adler, the man who had brought all this to Hewes. Or, at the very least, hadn't prevented it from splattering everything he'd built. Client

Receiving was clean now, true, but all the linkages were blown.

On Sunday night, inching toward midnight, Lobbyist Row was dead, not even a cleaning crew at work. That made what Hewes planned simpler and harder. No one to see him; no one to camouflage him if something went wrong. Hard to blend into a crowd and walk away if there was no crowd at all.

He pulled the security pass from his pocket. He dug a ball cap from his backseat. He pulled it tight over his head, the bill pitched to block some of his face from whatever electronic monitoring these buildings had.

Then he almost laughed out loud. Protect his face, yes. Had he bothered one lick about his license plates? No. Any street surveillance would have him logged already.

He considered leaving, reparking. He considered bagging the whole thing, dumping the card in the storm sewer. Forgetting. He could just say no when Adler came begging. Live with the niggling.

He started down the sidewalk and realized he'd gotten his directions wrong. He hadn't parked several blocks away. He was just across the street. Some buildings in this section of town had their choice of two streets to claim for an address. This building had claimed a more distant street, but it also had an entrance where Hewes had parked.

He wanted to repark. He wanted to not be so damned stupid.

He pushed forward. He waved his hand, cupping the card, at the door. As smooth as he could.

He stepped inside, pivoted, and looked back out the glass. He swore he could feel eyes on him. Adler? Hewes verified that none of the few visible cars held human contents. Verified the shadows. Still, the feeling didn't abate. Someone or something was watching him – that or the sense he'd developed working the Baltimore warehouses a lifetime before was beginning to fail him.

Could it just be the niggling upsetting his usual caution?

He didn't think so.

There was someone out there.

Perhaps not for him. Perhaps from Adler. Watching him, watching everything on the street. Wouldn't it be grand if he'd just walked himself into unrelated surveillance?

Too late, as always, too late.

He looked around the small, dark lobby for a board listing the tenants. Langevin & Associates, third floor. Top floor. Of course.

Hewes worked his way slowly, silently, up the stairs.

The card got him through the locked door at the top. Another swipe got him into reception at Langevin & Associates, one of a half-dozen shops on the third floor.

Hewes took his time looking at the desks and cabinets in the reception area. He also took his time enjoying that the niggling had diminished. He was doing something stupid that his mind found important. He wondered that evolution had saved anything of his species so crossed were the wires of the mind, rewarding danger like this.

Hewes found the video surveillance system a few minutes after arriving. It was an expensive, if older system. Burned discs rather than streamed to some offsite location. Rather than live monitoring. One lucky break.

He ejected the disc. Left the machine hungry.

He wished he'd brought along a flashlight. He tried to remember if he even owned one. Perhaps on the floor of his trunk.

Nothing of what he was doing was well considered.

He started past reception. He arrived in a long hall with closed doors on both sides of the hall stretching a good distance. He popped one open and was surprised that four desks could fit into such a small office. He continued down the hall. He opened another door. Only two desks in that room.

He was getting closer to the good offices.

Finally he arrived at a marked door. Howard Langevin, Managing Director.

An oversized desk inside, a wall that possessed a dedicated lighting system which Hewes turned on. It revealed the men Langevin admired, the men he'd gone to the trouble of standing next to for a picture. Presidents of this country and others, three of the men identified as presidents of Mexico.

Was Langevin swept up in this because of his ties to Mexico? An American lobbying in D.C. for Mexico? Perhaps lobbying for CISEN or doing something more hands-on?

Hewes looked at the pictures just below eye level. Many of them included a second person, identified in one photo as Senator Colfax. Pictures taken when Langevin was a much younger man.

Hadn't that Senator been at the the DNI's party?

Colfax, mentor to Langevin. One of the Eyes. A mentor to a man who'd been murdered by Mexican Intelligence.

Hewes finished his review of the Bragging Wall. Nothing else caught his eye. He turned toward the desk. He settled into the dead man's chair.

Hewes realized he hadn't worn gloves.

He pulled several Kleenex from a box and used them as imperfect gloves.

He started his research with the tallest stack of folders. Langevin hadn't been that old, but he kept with his training. Paper, not digital.

One folder in and Hewes understood the man's business. Langevin worked petroleum as a consultant, a matchmaker.

Five folders in, Hewes had to amend his verdict. The man was a political fixer for the petroleum folks. A man who ate right through regulations and reviews. Knew the right people, got the right politicians to send quiet letters, make unremarked upon phone calls.

That fifth folder told the whole story.

Langevin earned his firm mid-seven figure billings for joining, or rejoining, Royal Iberian Exploration, of Houston, with Caiman Specialty Chemicals, also of Houston. He also earned himself a board seat for Royal Iberian.

There was an agenda for New Board Member Training in the folder. Location: Houston. The dates: one day prior to the massacre through one day after the massacre. That explained why a D.C. lawyer had been in Texas.

Hewes stopped skimming and started reading.

Cash-crunched Royal Iberian had divested itself of its specialty chemical operations in 1987. The division bounced between buyers for a decade before a firm called OneWorld Equity acquired the operation in 1999. From there, it got a new name, new management, new vigor. The company axed a third of its products and focused on the remainder. In short order, no one could seem to produce better greases and lubricants, coatings and slurries for the oil business, the transportation business, heavy equipment used in the construction of massive projects.

No wonder Royal Iberian wanted its step-daughter back. It had sold cheap before the company had become the standard bearer for greases worldwide.

Hewes flipped through the folder a second time.

It explained Langevin's presence at an oil drilling station. In fact it was on the New Board Training agenda. Sunday: Guided tour of experimental oil exploration. The agenda listed the names of the tour leaders, inevitably some of the dead.

Why was Mexican Intelligence interested?

They hadn't known that the company that owned the facility would be using it. It had seemed abandoned so they treated it that way – until it was no longer abandoned.

Langevin wasn't going to answer these questions. The man had just done a huge deal complete with layers and layers of regulatory approval. If the companies involved, Royal Iberian or Caiman, had any ties back to Mexico that might help place Mexican Intelligence there.

Hewes turned on Langevin's computer. Unprotected by a password. Guess he thought everything was safe behind a keycard lock.

He searched for Royal Iberian. He searched for Mexico. Found a list of business locations. Some for Royal Iberian, some for Caiman, most for other companies Langevin had researched. Perhaps clients. Perhaps acquisition possibilities.

One name stood out because Hewes had just read it: OneWorld Equity, the investment fund that had sold Caiman. They had three offices in Mexico.

Hewes looked the company up online.

A professional website. Quiet and cagey, though, instead of the boasting one might expect. Hard to even find a list of its owned businesses.

Hewes turned up references in newspapers to what OneWorld had owned. Generic pharmaceutical manufacturing. Construction firms. At least one utility. Stumbling, bumbling defense contractors. Unsexy businesses.

The papers only noted OneWorld Equity when it bought a public company or sold one of its possessions to a public company. The company was otherwise invisible. Hewes scratched out numbers on junk paper, counted over a hundred billion in proceeds just from the deals that were announced in the media. An unnoticed company suddenly flush with a hundred billion dollars.

Hewes switched to searching for the people involved in Caiman and OneWorld. The OneWorld people at Caiman were all gone. Even the OneWorld people mentioned in articles five years earlier were gone. The name and picture of the current OneWorld chairman was a kid who was younger than Hewes. The entire management of the investment vehicle had turned over.

Hewes was no financial genius. He had a few on his client list, had listened to a few who pretended to financial genius as instructors. Hewes smelled something wrong with all of this. It wasn't an elegant cover like what Hewes had in Virginia Business Jet Services, but it was cover for a much larger endeavor. One very shy of publicity. It could be, might be a front. Perhaps for the U.S. Perhaps for Mexico. Langevin had

walked right inside of it, helping a company buy assets owned by some intelligence service or other.

Apparently the smart spies bought up companies to gather information about the world. Had to be an easier life than what Hewes had done for the last fifteen years.

OneWorld and Caiman were assets of Mexican Intelligence. They had sold, but not really sold. Their spies were staking out the acquirer's testing stations. Modifying the equipment in some way. Perhaps installing explosives or other kinds of traps.

Why?

Hewes shook his head as he cleared his searches from the computer and powered everything down.

The two CISEN had been spies. Killer spies. Langevin could have been a spy as well. Or just an opportunist helping to sell off the assets belonging to intelligence services. Langevin walked into some operation that one oil wealthy nation (Mexico) was running against an even wealthier one (the United States).

Hewes made another effort to wipe away whatever fingerprints he'd left. Using Kleenex as gloves was a waste of effort, but the soft paper could smear the finger oil just fine.

He wiped down what he'd touched in the hall, the door knobs. He spent a few minutes erasing his presence from the reception area. He didn't put a fresh disc into the surveillance recorder. He hoped that they had a minimum wage receptionist with a memory issue.

He took his time on the stairs. He crept through the lobby. He looked out through the glass. Counted cars. Nothing new, nothing out of place.

When he got onto the street, he heard sirens.

Far enough away.

He crossed the street, walked down to his car. He wished again he had parked a few blocks away.

Hewes noted the sirens were louder. Not like they were moving parallel to him. Like they were converging on him.

He countered his impulse to speed. He walked. He even managed to slow himself down. The innocent man doesn't run, right?

He imagined he was crawling across the street to his car. The sirens were louder now, approaching from either side of him. No convenient spots to turn, nothing to do but wait.

He'd had a key card, but he'd missed some security procedure. Something had flagged him to the police. Alright.

What to do?

He was an innocent man, wasn't he? How did a guilty man make himself seem innocent?

He sat in his car, removed his hat, hid the disc under his seat. Feigned sleep against the steering wheel. He really let his weight fall into the wheel. Tried to get a mark to imprint itself on his skin, collateral for his lie.

He'd worked out a simple story. He'd fallen asleep.

Why here?

'A quiet street, officer.'

Go home.

'Well, this is my home.'

Car don't smell lived in.

'I bathe, sir.'

Move on.

'Yes, sir.'

If only.

Hewes felt eyes on him again even as his ears focused on the sirens cutting toward him.

He supposed he hadn't done a thing wrong inside, aside from not trusting his paranoia. He should have walked away. Someone watched him; someone ratted on him?

Had he learned anything in that office that he couldn't have picked up in an Internet cafe? Hewes knew better than to use his office or home computer if he wanted to keep Adler in the dark.

The sound tore through his ears before it blinked off.



Hewes could feel a vehicle to his left. He heard a brief squawk from a microphone, an attempt at his attention. He made his head fly off the steering wheel, looked in puzzlement at the cruiser pulled beside him, blocking him in. The vehicle squawked again.

He found light in his face.

He thought he saw movement in the cruiser. Someone preparing to ask questions. Hewes tried to think of how to stuff his throat with confusion rather than nerves.

The cruiser door opened. A foot hit the asphalt then the other. A man was half out of the vehicle. A wall of glass across the street shattered then. Flames licked out of the small chain coffee shop.

Hewes jumped.

The officer on the road pivoted and his hand went to his side.

The sound was punctuated with a second cruiser stopping short of the fire across the street.

The first cruiser sped forward. The officer on the street glanced at Hewes' car. Took a few steps toward him.

Hewes had his window down before the man could rap.

"See anything?" the officer asked. His head was turned toward the coffee shop.

"No, sir."

"Alarms were going off...."

"Didn't hear anything."

"Silent." The man nodded toward Hewes, assessing. "Something set off a lot of alarms over this way. You saw nothing?"

Hewes just nodded. He guessed he was safe. The officer had seen Hewes in his car when the glass shattered, the flames became visible. He was interesting, but rapidly becoming less relevant to what had happened here.

"DCFD is coming. They're going to need this spot."

"Yes, sir."

“You’re looking rough, son. You go take a nap somewhere else. Go make up with your lady. Alright?”

The officer had just told himself a story wherein Hewes was harmless and not part of the mess he’d been sent to handle.

Hewes nodded. “Yes, sir.”

The man stalked over to the crime he had been looking for.

Hewes rolled up his window. He was saved. The policeman didn’t even write down his tags. He didn’t like how he’d been saved. He didn’t understand.

There was something, perhaps a considerable amount, he wasn’t seeing. Hewes possessed the feeling he’d just been damned and saved simultaneously. He took the warning as intended. He was done. Really done.

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9.

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Hewes parked his car and looked at both sides of the street as far up and down as he could. His blood was still fully up. He tried to get a feeling again. Had the watcher kept up? He waited two minutes, three, four. He felt clean.

He started the car and parked five blocks further away. He waited again. He tried to see if he felt the paranoia return.

He could finally think straight. He sat and tried to shove everything in a clay box in his mind, tried to sear it solid. He looked around at his new parking spot. He checked to make sure he had the right residential parking permit.

He got out and embraced the cold night air. He locked his car and set off at a furious pace back the seven blocks that he'd declared as a safe zone. He was about to go to the one he loved. He didn't want to drag any of his shit with him. There was no one else out. Hardly any of the street lights were working. It was like he was in a city populated by no one.

He turned down an alley and arrived at the correct door, the one with a cracked window that seemed to breathe out the humid fury of a hundred forges in hell. He fumbled at the lock with a key he'd been gifted. He looked into the kitchen, clean and empty. He walked to the hallway that was referred to as the dishwashing area. More like the steam shack.

"You're late," a woman sang at him.

"I don't think I am. You're still scrubbing."

Her pixie face scrunched. "Third dishwasher in a month resigned. I'm offering a wage better than what a few of my line cooks make. For someone to show up on time. What's with this town?"

"You grew up here, you should know."

"I never have. Never will understand it." She set a plate down. "Did you eat?"

Hewes' stomach protested. He didn't even think of lying.

"You've been on the run all day. Let me make you something," Olive said.

He smiled. "Nothing..."

"...fancy," she finished. "How did I fall in love with a man who doesn't like to eat?"

He felt bad about his request. For her, feeding another was loving another. "I eat just fine. I don't know that I love sitting in a formal restaurant."

"It's the guts and nuggets of slime you object to." Olive practiced a version of serving nose-to-tail.

"I've never called it that."

"Read a scathing review two weeks ago. The phrase stuck in my mind."

"Whatever you make will be delicious."

She peeled out of her rubber gloves. "You finish up for me?"

"I think I can handle a plate."

"Try forty. By the way, any you break come out of your wage. And you have to buy your uniform, too."

Hewes laughed. He was already starting to sweat but he could forget the day he'd had in a room like this. "I can see why they keep quitting. You're not paying me a thing. Already you're demanding money from me."

"Right."

"You want me to pay you to work here."

"Right."

"I don't think so," Hewes said, pulling on the yellow gloves.

"Well, I'll double your wage. Twice the quantity of the best food you've ever eaten."

She half-walked, half-danced around him, away from him.

He got his hands wet even with the gloves on. He got his shirt and pants wet. He remembered that he needed to dispose of his suit pants because of the blood hiding in the dark fibers. He probably should have changed before he came here.

In spite of his ineptitude, Hewes managed to get the plates, the silverware, the glasses washed and on their way to dry.

When he emerged from the humid hell-forge, Olive nodded at a table in the corner of her kitchen. He sat. She plunked down a plate of linguine dressed – he leaned over to smell – in butter and pepper. Nothing else.

He ate and ate.

“This is perfect,” Hewes said. He put down his fork for a moment.

“I can do simple.”

“I never knew.”

“Don’t tell anyone. I’ll be drummed out of the Chef Association.”

Hewes picked up his fork and gestured toward his plate.

“I was expecting four colors of beets and half a boiled lamb’s head.”

“I save that for my other man.”

She laughed.

He laughed.

“Other man?”

“The one I keep around just because he likes to eat.”

He twirled a forkful of pasta and offered it to her. She bit and chewed.

He watched a minute before he dug in again. So simple. Nothing missing. Especially not a bunch of vegetative flourishes, little flecks of green everywhere.

Olive understood him. Deep and true understanding.

It was just a damned plate of pasta, but it had come from her seeming ability to read his mind.

“Finish up,” she said.

Hewes took another forkful.

He had forgotten the shit of the day. He had even come to like the excess humidity trapped in this restaurant. Love was too tricky a thing. Frail when it pretended stoutness; slippery when it felt most strong. He was a wreck right now, but he’d never felt more in love.

He was happy, his nerves completely restored. A woman and a damned plate of pasta dressed in butter.

Olive grabbed a fork and snuck a bit off his plate. He poked her with the fork.

“Hey.”

“If you’re hungry,” Hewes said, “I know a great chef.”

“I made this, I can eat some.”

“You steal from all your customers?”

“Maybe.”

She took another swipe at his plate. For her sake, he pretended to grumble.

Eventually the joking ended. He slowed his eating. He just listened while she processed her day into words.

“The landlord. Back again. Making nice. Of course, his eyes were scouring everything in here. The weak spots in the floor, the paint on the walls.”

“What’s he want?”

“Not to fix up the place.”

“Hmm.”

“I had to divert a bunch of cash I was going to spend on top-shelf booze so I could fix a hole in the roof. You’d think he’d want us to keep going. Three more years at an obscene monthly rate. He’s even ten percent owner of the place. Should have all the incentives in the world.”

“Yeah.”

“I think he’s measuring us up to burn us out.”

“Burn?”

“Not a real fire. That would bring in investigators. Maybe break my water pipes.”

“You’d fail. His percentage would be worth nothing.”

“The rent would go unpaid, too. He could throw us out, even cancel the lease. A few strange provisions in that lease. I’ve seen a few in my day.”

“What are you thinking?”

“About him, I don’t know. Impossible. I never assume that my enemy has the same goal I do.”

Hewes took in the words, mulled them. "What's his goal?"  
"Landlord. I'd assume he wants rent. As much as possible while paying out as little as possible."

"But?"

I never assume that my enemy has the same goal I do.

"Perhaps he wants us to fail. He'd cancel the lease that way. Maybe he wants us to try to cancel the lease. There's no subletting. Maybe he wants a big fee to agree to break it. Maybe he's in such a cash crunch now that he'll kill his golden goose."

The golden goose.

"...probably trying to clear the hole building. Trying to sell out a clean building, empty of tenants. Some types of buyers want it empty. Turn the thing into condos or something...."

"Too bad for the goose."

"It's a tough life shitting out gold bullets. One at a time."

Hewes wondered about Adler. The flattery earlier in the evening. His level of success; Hewes had become something of a golden goose, too. He had learned to shit gold bullets.

He suspected his long neck was laid on a block, Adler with his axe at the whetstone. He'd assumed that nine years working a mission would roll over into ten. Then a handshake and an end to the project. Adler wasn't an ally. He was an enemy, wasn't he?

I never assume that my enemy has the same goal I do.

Something had changed. The bodies. The Mexican Intelligence interest in oil wells. There was something Hewes didn't see. Adler was working on his own thing now. After today, he was an enemy to Hewes, ladling lies faster than he could breathe.

"Don't worry about it," Hewes said.

"I'm plenty worried."

"If he decides to let the roof fall so you have to leave, you'll land on your feet."

"I know."

"I'll help you."

"I know you will."

Hewes let Olive have the last bite.

"Let me go wash this," he said.

"Leave it."

"Oh?"

"I haven't had anyone pay me any attention today, mister.  
You willing?"

"I am."



## MONDAY

### THE STORIES ONE TELLS

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#### *10.*

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Hewes woke up in Olive's bed, the first time he'd spent the whole night at her place. He recognized he was alone in the room, still dressed in the now-crumpled clothes he'd worn to her restaurant. He'd expected, and he thought she'd expected, something more.

He tried to remember coming home with her.

He got out of the bed and opened the door. The smell of oil caressing eggs greeted him.

"The suit looks cheap in the daylight," she said, neither pleased nor displeased.

"It wasn't."

"Maybe you should test everything you buy by wearing it to bed."

She didn't sound angry. Still, an apology was never the wrong step. "I'm sorry."

"You should take better care of yourself, Win."

Ah, that was the issue. Not about her; about him. He felt the return of the love he'd found for her last night. "That's not what my apology was for."

"Well, take care of the basics before you look to the extras."

She laughed.

"That's how you train a chef. Apparently, it's also how a woman has to retrain her man. Assuming men are trainable. I've seen no great proof."

"I listen."

She nodded at the table.

"Sit. Eggs."

"I'm sold." Hewes sat.

"I once had a food writer declaim that I could do things with eggs that should be criminal. I took it as a compliment."

Hewes was glad she'd changed the topic.

"Of course, if I ever have to work a brunch service again, I think I'd murder the first person who ordered off-menu. Some damned Eggs Benedict on dry-as-dust English muffins."

She set down two plates then sat at his right elbow. She dug in before Hewes even had a chance to make out the dish.

It smelled like life should smell. Spicy and rich and inviting. He dug in. Hewes smiled. Eggs in a fiery salsa with some sausage. He enjoyed each mouthful.

Hewes found the night's sleep had worked a large volume of magic on him.

The heat was slower to rise than Hewes had expected. In addition to delicious, Hewes would now call the meal excruciating. Still, he ate his alluring punishment in silence.

"More?"

"If you have it."

He wondered how she had spiced her own portion. Was there heat enough to sear his repentance top of mind forever? He half suspected so.

She rose and got him more. Hewes realized the second plate was even hotter than the first, all the better to ram home the lesson. His scalp was the cleanest swamp this side of Foggy Bottom.

"Four pepper sauce," she said, smiling.

"Hot, hotter, hottest? What's the fourth?"

"Styx. I'd name the things after the rivers in Hell."

Hewes finished his plate. No complaints. Lesson learned.

“Busy day?” she asked.

Avoiding Adler as if he were the plague on two legs. “Yes.”

“I’ve got a week’s errands. Just one day off a week. Can we have dinner tonight?”

Hewes knew the answer. He took some time as if he might be otherwise busy. If she was going to try to retrain him, he would do his best to retrain her. “Yes.”

“You can do the dishes later. After you pay me some attention.”

They moved to the sofa, he sat and she leaned against him, on him. The room was so still they could have napped this way, both of them sweating away the peppers of Hell.

Hewes snuck a glance at the watch that had been on his wrist all night. He promised himself to stay away from the office, but he’d made Owen Sandefur a promise to talk. Maybe a call would suffice? Hewes didn’t want to be anywhere Adler was likely to find him.

Olive seemed to fall asleep on his chest.

Hewes sat and sweated and thought. He’d been a fool thinking he needed to honor his agreement with Galbary. The loan Adler arranged had been long paid off. All the other obligation was one-sided, on Hewes. He’d gotten nothing from them. He didn’t even know how to contact Adler directly if something did happen. Hewes took the risks and the others just abused it. It cost them nothing.

Hewes had known that the clock was ticking down on this project. He’d accrued the cash to support himself later in life. He hadn’t thought of someone asking for, then extorting, a favor from him.

He should have been better prepared for everything to sour. Just because the lion had never bitten the performer when he stuck his head into the feline’s mouth didn’t mean the lion couldn’t have a change of opinion.

“You’re thinking too loud,” Olive said.

“Sorry.”

“Less tension, less movement. Sweat with peaceful thoughts. Aids the digestion.”

“I’ll bet everything you like aids digestion.”

Hewes could feel her nodding slowly.

“Considering I took classes in nutrition and the like, and you didn’t, I believe I can make any claim I like.”

Hewes nodded. He let the nervous tension flow from him.

The day looked different with light pouring in through the windows. It looked possible. It looked fresh.

“If you’re going to keep tensing, I’ll crush a tranquilizer and feed it to you. Soft muscles are comfortable muscles.”

“Want me to stop breathing, too. For your comfort?”

“No, just keep it gentle. It’s like listening to the noises of the womb.”

Hewes laughed at the mind of this woman.

He couldn’t imagine how they’d come this far. He’d invited her, along with a dozen other local chefs, to visit Virginia Business Jet Services. He’d been trying to fill out a list of high-end caterers, people who ran good restaurants but would also do some work for his clients, perhaps sending over the food, perhaps preparing it on-site. Seven men and three women actually came for the visit.

He remembered the first time he’d seen her. She’d been in a hurry, unimpressed. Apparently she hadn’t wanted to bother with the ‘interview.’ Her partners in the restaurant insisted. Called it business development.

She let her anger leak into her work in the kitchen that day. Hewes remembered the scathing questions she asked while she prepared three courses. The woman intensified the abrasion as the hour passed. The food was good. He’d said as much. He’d been cautious about trusting her with his clients. Slowly he fed her business. The plates delivered to him, never again cooked on-site, looked good, got raves from the clients.

Six months after she made a bad impression with her attitude and an outstanding one with her dishes, Hewes made a reservation at Omnivore. She hadn’t recognized him. He

thought her ferocious in the kitchen, leading around men older than her, twice her height, three times her weight. He supposed that was when he fell into lust.

She had been a bit harder to persuade. Quality will always out.

“What are you laughing about?” she demanded, her voice almost drowsy.

“The first time you cooked for me. I’d thought to check for poison.”

“I should have. A lot less trouble to poison your man than train him. Now just fall asleep for twenty minutes, will you?”

“Power nap at six thirty?”

Her head began to shake again. “When do you have time to take yours?”

The answer was never. A knock on the door just then ensured he wouldn’t even get this opportunity.

“Ignore it,” Olive said.

The person behind the door didn’t care to be ignored.

The knocking continued, not insistent or demanding, three knocks every twenty or thirty seconds. After several minutes passed with no end, Hewes made to get off the sofa.

“No,” Olive said.

“The fist of fun isn’t leaving.”

“Fine, get rid of the asshole.”

Hewes got off the sofa and listened to Olive’s grumbling. He walked to the door, gearing up to be scathing. “What?”

“Galbary sends his regards.”

The words assaulted him before his mind could even make out the man behind the lips. The one who said his name might be Franson.

“I haven’t seen Mr. Galbary in years.” Automatic. As if his mind weren’t his own.

“He still speaks well of you, Hewes.”

“Glad he was able to help a gentleman into business.”

“Who is it?” Olive asked.

Hewes turned, trying to keep Franson from seeing Olive. Not that it mattered. Adler's man knew where she lived. "Apparently my staff knows about us. It's for me."

"Remind them about the recent invention of the telephone."

Hewes turned back to the unwelcome man at the door. "You heard her. I'll be in the office at nine. Bother me then."

"You weren't hard to find. Third place I looked. Fairly predictable, even though you've never stayed over all night. One might think you were ducking us."

Hewes felt ice congealed in his veins.

"You're not going in today."

He hadn't planned to. "I bet that I am."

"Didn't you listen to me? Galbary helped you into business. You owe."

"I think last night fulfilled each and every promise I made."

Franson shook his head.

"Adler isn't going to save you. He asked me to do this."

"Adler and I agreed to a parting of the ways."

"Maybe those were the words he said. I doubt he meant them. You should, too."

"The cover is over. The route is broken. He's bringing his lights back, extinguishing them."

"His cover arranging lectures here, flying back once a week to teach undergraduates, doesn't change what he is."

"What is he?"

"The one who scoops up messes. Drops them in holes that don't have a bottom. You don't want to become a mess for him."

Hewes shook his head.

"Nor your girl."

Hewes had only two vulnerabilities. His work and his private life. Adler and now Franson had decided to threaten both.

"I understand there's a ring of armed criminals hitting bars and restaurants in this part of town. Tragic what can happen when a fool possesses a weapon?"

Franson stood in the opened doorway and watched Hewes come to the only possible decision.

He turned to Olive. "I have to go in."

"I thought you were going to make the asshole go away?"

"We'll have dinner tonight. Pick a good spot. Somewhere you've always wanted to go."

"Bribing me with good food and lots of wine?"

"Yes."

"I guess men can be trained."

"Yes."

"Don't bitch if I order every scrap of offal on the menu."

"I won't." He wouldn't bitch about anything again.

Love was hard.

Particularly when love was a wound that could kill, that could never heal, that others could see and track and ambush. When love was crushed by the shameless.

"Let's go," Franson demanded. "Andale."

Hewes was already wearing all of his clothes, even his shoes, from the previous day. He had no way to stall.

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*11.*

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Franson indicated a spot at the side of a hangar. "We'll wait there."

"I'm sure we could park around back."

"Here is fine," Franson said.

Hewes parked his personal vehicle, his license plate on display. His neck in full curvature on the block.

"Ever been to this field?"

Hewes shook his head.

"Say it." For a recorder?

"No."

"That's right. You did your training a bit more north."

Hewes expressed no surprise that they had a file on him, which had apparently been read by everyone from the copy repairman to the chief lackey.

"Baltimore."

"That area, yes," Hewes said.

"You ever dig into the people who bought your guns?"

"If we're just sitting here, I'd like a few moments to myself."

"Well, last night, you wanted a name out of me. I blurted out Franson. Now...well, now, I want some more information out of you. We're working together all day."

"I didn't know."

The passenger in the car smiled an ugly smile. "Must have forgotten to mention it."

"Too busy threatening to murder people."

"Just a comment about the crime rates in your fair city. Nothing more."

Hewes never took throwaway comments as unimportant.

"Now, the guns. Did you ever dig into your buyers? I'm curious."



Hewes knew a considerable amount about those weapons he'd 'smuggled' and sold. "No."

Franson wasn't even listening. Could he smell a lie before it was even in the air?

The passenger shook his head. "Of course you did. You strike me as curious. Not the kind of guy who could peddle steel for six years without a thought. You'd have to have an idea behind the program. Because you were untrusted then, they wouldn't have told you. Still, the curiosity would have ate at you. You would have gone for the what and the why, just to make it all palatable."

Hewes didn't try to defend himself against what he'd actually done. "Why are we here?"

"An errand."

Hewes got no value from the answer. Funny how most people asked questions and accepted answers that meant nothing.

What was he going to do, protest? There was just another threat waiting inside Franson's mouth, just inside his lips. Perhaps crueler than what he'd said before.

"I looked into the Baltimore statistics once." Franson paused a moment. "You were never told we brought you out of the Army, were you? Did you think it was Army intelligence?"

"For a time."

"That was how it was supposed to feel. Something ninety percent legit. They got me the same way, much earlier than they fetched you."

Hewes found he had no curiosity once the answers he'd once dreamed about started pouring. He didn't want to know. He didn't want to be responsible for any more of this.

"Baltimore and Detroit, Portland, Houston and St. Louis were early days for the weapon tampering program. Some of them weren't very good copies. About half of the tampered weapons were straight discarded, something off about them, plastic casings were off somehow, others were weighted wrong, some just felt flimsy. Criminals, the ones who have a

chance of surviving, tend to be a paranoid bunch. We learned a lot from people who didn't even use the weapons we created."

That admission did have some value. "I took a gun and tested it with the rounds they left. Reported it sold after it...detonated," Hewes admitted.

"So you knew."

"Eventually."

"How long after you started?"

"A month."

"Your file says it was closer to two. Of course we watched. You were supposed to know something. You were supposed to teach it to yourself."

Question nine, can you know something awful and continue doing the work anyway? "So it was all a job interview? A question on a personality profile?"

"You think people aren't sitting in judgment every time they're sent out watching? You had a couple of recommendations. Then a few higher rungs ventured out."

Franson had done more than glance at Hewes' file. He'd memorized the thing. Perhaps he'd even been involved in the evaluating years earlier.

"They graded you a little curious, not too much, not enough to endanger things. You were saved by the lead tongue you kept in your head."

"Were you there when the first people tried to murder me?"  
The group of three.

"I heard about it."

All that time he'd thought he was alone. The truth was he'd been alone to live or die, while his actions or his death were marked down on a sheet.

"What'd they say?"

"They?"

"The evaluators."

"You passed. You lived."

"Didn't everyone?"

“Baltimore and St. Louis went the full six years. The other test centers closed earlier.”

To spy was to be indifferent to the humans one was charged to protect.

“What did they say?”

“Quick enough, in mind and body. You stayed ahead of the buyers who had no intention of paying in cash. Dirty business grubbing with thieves.”

“That’s all?”

“I don’t remember.” That was the first lie Franson had told, Hewes was sure of it.

“You did enough to tug Galbary up to Baltimore. He watched and blessed you through to the next program.”

All this matched up to one of the more horrific scenarios Hewes had sketched out in his mind. That all the pain had been avoidable. It had all been a test.

Hewes wondered if he’d ever mused these possibilities in front of an observer or a microphone. He wondered if he was being fed a story they knew he was programmed to trust, a story stewed porridge-thick in his own mind.

“You’re not as surprised as I expected.”

“Some.”

“How did you know Baltimore was all tied together with the new program? Be honest,” Franson asked.

“The suggestion, four years into my time in the warehouses of Baltimore, that I take flight training.”

“Ah. Why would a soldier want to get into the air?”

“Right. If I’d thought that way I would have sought out the Air Force recruiter.”

“You loved it.”

“Yes.”

Franson had more questions, but his phone purchased a reprieve for Hewes. Franson answered, listened, said nothing. This period of amusement for him was over.

“I think we’re ready.”

Franson exited the vehicle. Hewes saw no option but to join his captor. Outside, Franson motioned to the sky. A commercial jet, in the livery of one of Mexico's airlines, completed its descent. Awfully large to land at an executive airfield, but the pilot knew his business.

Franson watched, silent, for the long minutes of transiting and repositioning.

Hewes began to wonder about this day's task. Yesterday a Gulfstream had carried in three dead, three of sixteen, three of twenty. How many corpses might fit into a 737?

He wasn't going to find out the answer to that dark question.

A ramp truck mated with the stationary jet, and smiling, laughing women poured out of the doors. Young, most in clothes better suited to beaches than airline seating. Various hues of tan. Various abilities to remain perpendicular to the unwavering ground.

"They empty out a singles cruise? Fly back just the women?" Hewes asked.

"Can you think of a better cover? Any ICE, any FBI would be busy cataloging breasts, let the real haul slip right past," Franson said with more than a touch of admiration.

A consummate spy, always looking for a sharper angle.

Hewes just watched. Buses, four of them, pulled up as the women mingled, waiting. Men in suits, wranglers of the inebriates, descended and began loading the women. No one cared about luggage. No one cared about customs or immigration procedures. Perhaps they were being hauled to where agents stood ready. Hewes doubted it.

Once the ramp was empty and the buses zipping away from the airfield, Franson walked toward the jet. Three men walked out and descended.

Hewes looked at them. An old man carved from a stout oak. Franson shook that man's hands. A man of very dark complexion and indeterminate age. A young man, not even twenty.

Hewes hung back, not knowing why he was here. What his role was to be. He observed what he could, though he spoke no Spanish.

Franson and the three newcomers pretended Hewes wasn't there, save for a brief moment when the youngest man looked hard at Hewes. A careful perusal, the glance a shark accords a fat seal, brief and unnerving.

The oldest of the arrivals switched to accentless English in the middle of a sentence. He spoke faster than a native English speaker would bother with. Wasn't laziness a sign of mastery, speed a sign of striving?

The oldest man asked to be called Massimo for the duration of his stay. Then he introduced his staff. Hewes listened almost as carefully as Franson. Hewes' captor listened for the names he was told and repeated them back. The name for the young man, the one introduced as an assistant, was something of a mess.

Franson uttered it back, earned himself a scowl from the young man.

"That might be how the Spanish would butcher it. There is just one 'l' in the name. Not a pair of them. You don't need the 'y' sound, sir," Massimo instructed.

Franson tried again. The word didn't want to work in Franson's version of Spanish.

"Just call him Kale, like the leaf. Close enough."

Even the pronunciation of a single name was a political act.

Hewes tried to keep a smile off his face. He turned when a car drove onto the tarmac. One of the men who'd been in Client Receiving the night before climbed out. He passed the keys to Franson. Franson handed them to the older man.

"Kale will not be joining us," Massimo said. "He has my shopping list. I make this trip myself too infrequently, but you understand the attractions of coming and the dangers for me. I've already arranged transportation for him. Just Fernando and myself will take the meeting."

"That's fine. I assume Kale will keep a low profile?"

“Very much so. Map?”

Franson reached in his jacket, drug out a sheet of paper.

“Paper can’t be tracked like GPS can. Paper has a simpler kind of memory.”

“Yes, it burns,” Massimo agreed. “What time does the boat leave?”

“Ten, if we’re all ready,” Franson said.

“Yes, that is fine. Just one thing here and a quick thing there. So much to do.”

“We’ll meet you there.”

Once Franson and Hewes were back in the car, Hewes let loose with his questions.

Franson listened. He wasn’t all that charitable now that they were on the clock.

“What are you supposed to do? You don’t get it?” Franson asked. “Your job, your only job, along with everyone else I could round up, is to keep me from getting shot. Get it?”

“No.”

“Massimo isn’t his real name. I won’t bother telling you. He’s the Mexican government’s anti-kidnap-and-ransom czar. Of course, he possesses a longer, more generic title. That’s his role.”

“He walks like a spy.”

“He’s CISEN, too. He’s cartel as well. Very senior in the most dangerous splinter of them. His work for the drug lords is why he’s vaulted up the rungs in CISEN, in the straight government. Fees paid, promises delivered, promotions guaranteed.”

“The most dangerous splinter of the cartels? How can you tell?”

“There are eighty, ninety, a hundred groups. Some trying to do it independently. Some ex-police, ex-military who muscled their way in. Some just very, very hard men who started in drugs and will die in them, too. The compartment Massimo works for, they’ve pushed product a long time but they branched out, provide some services to the other

compartments. Bankers, money launderers, factory builders, logistics, peacekeepers. The bright shining teeth, internal affairs, I guess.”

“People you don’t cross.”

“People who scare even the most rabid, the most greedy.”

Hewes nodded to where the car sat on the tarmac. Massimo was inside with his man, both were studying the map. “Which face is talking today?”

“I don’t know yet. If I knew what they were going to say, how they were going to say it, I’d be less nervous. Mercurial bunch.”

They blew up an oil well, slaughtered fourteen or sixteen people. Now they come striding across the border like they own this place. Dangerous and arrogant.

“What’s this about a boat?”

“We’re not going to talk in the middle of an airstrip.”

“No.”

“It’s easy to put bugs in the walls of a fixed location, one connected with us. Not so easy if we just charter a boat, do a bug sweep, and head out to sea. If we see someone on the horizon we just keep moving until we have the ocean to ourselves. No line of sight, no directional microphones. No recordings. Very secure.”

Hewes nodded. He didn’t think getting on a boat with a man with three faces was safe in the slightest.

“You won’t need to talk. You listen. You watch.”

“Yes.”

“Everything that happens matters. Tone of voice. Posture. The words they say. Massimo may speak from time to time in Spanish. Most of the time he will use his rather perfect English. Listen for what he says. Listen also for the words he doesn’t.”

It sounded like a Zen riddle. “How?”

“They will lie to us. We will lie to them. They will demand and bluster. We will play humble and shocked. You catch everything. There will be ten of us at least on board.”

“Adler, too?”

“Yes.” Franson smiled. “Adler, too.”

“I’ll watch.”

“Everything matters. Everything. Don’t look away for a moment.”



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12.

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Hewes wasn't sure it was fair to call the boat a boat. Might it be a ship? Not large enough. A yacht? Perhaps lacking in the refinements. A goddamned ferry with no scheduled departures or arrivals?

It wasn't a boat.

Still, Franson got on and then Hewes got on.

Over the first five minutes Hewes counted fourteen different faces. It turned out the boat's owner, and the charter captain, were both alumni of the CIA, at least by how they moved, how they accommodated very strange demands.

Massimo and his man Fernando arrived, ripped their map into tiny strips, and threw it into the ocean. They sat on deck and brushed away any conversation. They were obviously waiting for the departure.

Hewes didn't hide his interest in the pair. He watched them sitting and not even talking to each other. As if they were bored tourists waiting for an adventure.

Hewes saw that Franson was busy the entire time. Always with his mouth in someone else's ear.

Hewes still hadn't spotted Adler by the time the boat pushed away from the dock twenty minutes after ten.

Hewes took a walk outside. He watched the passing shore. He watched the people working. Several of the men who'd worked Client Receiving the night before were now filling roles on the boat.

He counted fourteen men again. Why did they need so many men? Intimidation for the CISEN agents on board?

Hewes kept an eye on the pair. They didn't seem to notice anything, save for the waves. They didn't partake of the available alcohol. They didn't accept the offered food laid out on a rectangular table. They were ascetics for the time being.

Adler's men began setting up a large, round table on the open portion of the deck. Hewes guessed this would increase the technical challenges to bugging, the noise of all the people, the noises from the boat moving in the imperfectly calm sea. The effort seemed designed to make the conversation flow more freely, with more vehemence.

Hewes got up and ate from the side table. Ham and cheese sandwiches, pickles, potato chips. Coleslaw that swam in its own ocean of wet. The cartel's men finally joined in for the food, but kept away from the alcohol.

Twenty after twelve Franson began directing certain people to the round table. Hewes took a seat directly across from Fernando.

Massimo was the last to sit. "So, Adler, what are we doing?"

Hewes looked around. Adler wasn't present.

Franson didn't notice. "You are going to tell me a story, Massimo."

"Yes."

"Then I am going to tell you a story. We will keep alternating until we can agree on the story. Alright?"

"I think it would be better to forget the stories."

"No, we start with finding the truth, my friend."

Massimo didn't like the proposal, but he didn't get up from the table. Stomping away would have been a pointless gesture when one was at the mercy of the sea.

What a man, this Massimo, to trust his life to so many spies on a boat, so many square miles of empty water where a dead man could just disappear.

"Stories?"

"Particularly a story about an oil well in Texas. Two men sent out to watch a test station where nothing should have been moving."

Massimo smiled. "I would like a story of why four men, or was it five, were watching an oil well. From two different

camp. Well, two watched the pumpjack and the others watched the watchers. That would be a fine story.”

“You start. Two men and an oil well,” Franson said. “An arsenal of weapons.”

“I would say two arsenals.”

“Let’s start with the pumpjack and the associated equipment. How was it modified? What was the purpose?”

Franson knew as much about the events of the previous day as Hewes did. Hewes had the benefit of lifting a recording of what had happened. Had Adler and his dog Franson gotten the same level of detail from their men on surveillance detail? Had they made their own recording?

“Yes, the oil. We could start there.” Massimo shook his head with the slightest tremor. “I want the bodies first.”

Franson sat back in his chair. He seemed unhappy with the request. “Why?”

“You wish to talk and talk and talk. I made this difficult journey, I arranged a fully acceptable excuse, so that I could be sure that our mistakes could disappear.”

“What was this mistake?”

“Entrepreneurialism is the latest gold rush in your country?”

Hewes didn’t follow.

“Yes.”

“As it is in my country. The men who worked for my agency were bright, capable. Voracious. You understand?”

“Greedy.”

“Yes. We’ve found evidence they were paid to perform some sabotage work.”

“Why? The owner isn’t one of the big exploration companies.”

“Ah. They just purchased a very valuable company. Specialty chemicals. One of the losers in that auction, a Mexican firm, was unhappy.”

The man was an excellent liar. Hewes didn't believe a word of it. Saboteurs wouldn't sit on a target for days before blowing it up.

Franson, however, didn't know enough to go to war.

"You trusted the wrong people?"

"Anyone in my country can go wrong. We didn't keep a close enough watch over their finances to figure out that they'd gone wrong. Mea culpa."

"You intend to dispose of them here?"

"Of course. Is there a better reason for a boat?"

Franson turned his head to the man playing his aide. "Let's have them up here. Get the plastic sheeting out."

The men rushed around as if the real Adler were barking commands.

Massimo acted as though Franson were the man he was here to see.

Hewes didn't know how this playacting succeeded, but people bought it.

"These stories we tell. What good is all this talking?" Massimo asked. He stood up from the table and let Franson's subordinates do their work.

"We talk so we don't have to go to war, Massimo."

"We had an agreement for, what, fifteen years. Now that handshake is unremembered by anyone living. It's not followed. Nor are you extending an apology for murdering my agents."

"You said they were bad."

"Killing them was pointless. Capture the bad ones so we can learn from them. How did they hide their other interests so long? Who approached them? Who else have they worked with...."

Hewes stepped away from the table and ignored Massimo's thoughts. The man was preparing to make himself the injured party. Even after his prior admissions. Franson seemed the sort to let this violation of logic pass.

Hewes walked around the deck. He watched plastic sheeting go down on the teak. He watched Adler's men, or Franson's men, not secure it.

Hewes closed in to where Franson and Massimo were speaking. He looked off in the distance at a patch of white clouds.

"Can you make a new handshake? Make everyone else agree to it?" Massimo demanded.

"Not I."

"No."

Franson / Adler turned toward Hewes. "I brought Galbary."

"Him?"

Massimo injected surprise into his voice although his face bore none. "He's younger than you."

"We pick our leaders by their minds, not their age."

A confirmatory nod toward Hewes.

"Will you agree to a new deal?" Massimo asked Hewes.

Hewes turned back to the sea and the clouds. They couldn't see his surprise, his fear, if they couldn't see his face.

Hewes raced through what had just happened.

Franson played Adler. So he obviously needed a Galbary: Hewes.

They were roles in a play, titles on a chart, not really even fake names for spies. Used internally and externally with even dangerous partners. Galbary, the judge, the leader, the thickest neck at the table.

A damned dirty job for Franson to saddle Hewes with Galbary. Adler and Franson / Adler playing some damned mean tricks. They'd just exposed him to CISEN and the Mexican drug cartels, saddled him with a horrible lie. Made a delivery boy into the head that wore the heavy crown.

"Not so much for commitment, is he?" Massimo asked.

"The old man made decisions fast. Good decisions and bad. Our new Galbary is forty, but he takes his time considering the complex issues."

"Umm."

“Telling us the truth could help convince him.”

“His mind is already set,” Massimo said. “I’ve been watching.”

“His belly was empty. Feed him some of the truth and let him start digesting.”

“Fine. You have brought power onto the boat. We will do as you request.”

“Good.”

“The bodies first, the stories after.”

“If it makes you more comfortable.”

Hewes didn’t acknowledge anything was happening. He was still trying to guess about Adler and his dog, Franson. Cowards and curs both of them.

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13.

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Hewes took a spot that couldn't be observed from where Massimo now waited. He didn't want that man's scheming eyes resting on him.

Franson wandered over. "I'm going to kill you," Hewes said.

"You should aim for your Adler."

"I should aim for my Galbary. None of this can happen without a Galbary to say yes."

"The man you once met as Galbary has different names now, he handed off the Adler Project years ago."

"To whom?"

"Your Adler, Adler 4, is also our Galbary now. Two retirements and a promotion will do that."

"The old man, what do you call him?"

"Names that aren't spoken." Franson looked back to the deck. "Try not to vomit this time. Keep the stoic thing going. You've done well."

"You shouldn't have brought me here."

"That's not the reason you're sour."

"You shouldn't have lied to him."

"Needed a Galbary. Central casting was fresh out."

"I'm going to kill you."

"A man who gets queasy over the blood."

"I wasn't...."

"I know you once did some dirty work in Baltimore. It stained you. Permanent marker stains."

"You've slapped the target on me. Their two dead in Texas, doing god knows what, they'll want some justice for that. Maybe the headman's head?" King until nightfall and the ritual execution.

“Just keep quiet. Ignore me, as if you’ve already briefed me completely, as if I haven’t deviated from your script in one material way.”

“What Adler are you?”

“Thirteen, not a lucky number. A lot of things would have to go wrong for this to get dumped in my lap right now.”

“You’re the main contact for the cartel?”

“Yes, I took it over directly from the man you called Adler. His replacements were too squeamish to work with our friends to the south.”

“They think you’re Adler.”

“They always call me Adler, have for years. I am Adler.”

“I’m done,” Hewes said.

“You should have found a better bunker last night. Anyway, you’re Adler twenty three, not that anyone ever told you. This crew is quite stingy with the secrets.”

“Twenty-three?”

“Quite a promotion to jump twenty slots in seniority, become Galbary for the day.”

“I’m done.”

“I think Adler 4 has plans for you.”

“No.”

“You were almost out. Nine-plus years of a ten-year contract done. About to cash out, a lot of cash I understand. The cartel will have your picture now. They’ll start working out your cover, breaking into the vault where you keep your past. Family, ex-wives....”

“I’ve never been married.”

“Children?”

“No.”

“People who once loved you. People who can be used to hurt you. They exist. We all have them even if it hurts less to forget. The cartel will find them.”

Here was the third threat. The strongest of all. ‘Be one with us so we can protect you from the danger we’ve plunged you into.’



Hewes shook his head.

“On your wits then....”

“Only you can keep the cartel from mauling me? Only you could expose me like that? That man’s angry. That man feigns reasonableness. He’s insane.”

“You have no idea about Massimo.”

“Untie me.”

“I imagine Adler 4 had a reason to bind you tighter to us.”

Another story. Another mountain of lies. Could anything of the truth be mined from the material?

“Is all this guesswork? Or does he confide in you?”

“The man talks for a living. He could spend a day gaining your trust. Everything he said true, as far as objective facts. None of it important to him. He talks. He convinces. He’s a professional. Absolutely cold, perhaps no kernel of belief inside him. Other than repairing the failed mission, tagging the mission complete.”

“Relentless.”

“Shameless past the point even the cartel would blush. Trust me, his successes, as they all are, can smell worse than another’s failure.”

This was the first thing Franson, or Adler 13, had said that Hewes did believe. “You must like him. Admire the asshole?”

“It was a mistake giving him the whole Adler Project. Better he not be tethered to the health of a living organism. Better he makes, and unmakes, his own solutions. Not attempts to ‘help’ all of us. You’ll see.”

“Adler? How big, how wide?” The project, not the title.

“All counter-terrorism falls under Adler. For now.”

The asshole in Client Receiving was an important man. “Not just Europe?”

“Europe, South America, Asia, Africa.”

“How many other transfer nodes?”

“You’ve wondered that a long time.”

“Yes.”

“Seven still running.”

“Down from?”

“Nineteen.”

“Adler’s a butcher.”

“Not all of the men are dead now.”

“Just most?”

“Adler 4 will be stepping to China in the next reorganization. Ten years was a long time to keep things formed up this way. Don’t know if he’ll be espionage or counter-espionage.”

“Counter-terrorism?”

“Don’t know. I think they’re deemphasizing it.”

As if the Eyes in Congress would funnel money elsewhere. Their edifice was a beast that was hungry, that people wanted fed, so that it wouldn’t have a simple time of biting those who strayed near.

Of course, Hewes had just spent a decade-and-a-half playing in a game whose rules he couldn’t comprehend. What did he know about what might or might not happen?

“How did we fall beneath the sheets with the drug cartel’s men?”

“I doubt anything really useful makes it as far as elected politicians. Real information is dirty. It lives in unclean places. Never forget that.”

“Ah.” Franson nodded at the plastic which now had three metal carts resting on it. “Remember. Stoic. No vomit. No words at all.”

Hewes let Franson walk away. He looked at the carts. They made him think of the last time he’d flown commercial. Coffee? Tea? Water? There were no attendants in funny costumes standing near them.

Hewes scrutinized the floor where sheets of plastic covered the deck. The tables were gone. The buffet of sandwiches and salads taken away. The chairs had been collapsed and stowed. The negotiations done over the dead would be performed standing inch deep in blood, Hewes guessed.

Massimo stalked onto the plastic, looking younger than his many years. He knelt in front of one of the food carts, began working the stops to open the cart. One dead man fell out onto the plastic. Others who worked for Franson moved to help. Massimo, his hand already stained with a touch of blood, waved them back. He did the work himself. Two more dead splattered onto the deck. The lone Caucasian, Howard Langevin, looked almost torn in half at his waist. How many bullets had ripped through him?

Massimo stood and circled around the bodies, two darker, the last pale and padded. Massimo waved 'Adler' forward. They began their discussion of the wounds, their exchanging of the tales. Both obviously attempting to spool out lies.

Hewes had no a problem from his body. Even the scent of blood the prior evening had dropped him to his knees. Now he surveyed the dead and discolored. He could smell them and see everything. He was a bone-and-flesh carving rather than a human.

"They killed this man," Franson nodded toward the pale man.

"He's a spy."

"No, I don't think so."

"His name is Howard Langevin," Massimo said. "Lawyer, former Congressional aide, a lobbyist up until yesterday morning. He takes seats on the boards of oil companies in order to spy. How better to know the economic health of Mexico than to sit inside a company that's sold oil equipment to Mexico?"

"The CIA pays him for his information?"

"It flows back to his former boss in the U.S. Senate. One of your leading government figures."

"If that is your definition of a spy, everyone in D.C. is a spy."

"Exactly."

"What did you do with the rest of the dead?"

"Rest?"

“My sources put the number of dead at fourteen.”

“I was unaware of anything but these three.”

Massimo managed to get the lie out without choking. A natural-born sociopath.

“This man has seven bullets in him,” Massimo said. “Seven. I would prefer to know why he did the things he did. Seven bullets prevent me forever.”

My crimes mean nothing because I have your crimes to extort you with.

The conversation dragged forward, dredged the bottom of the muck barrel. They came to the point where the lies were irreducible. Neither willing to crack open a whiff of truth.

Massimo broke the stalemate when he pulled a knife, dropped to his knees, and slit the belly of one of his dead. “They must all be prepared before we bury them.”

The telling of stories had concluded.

“We were going to put them into the carts.” Not even Franson could keep the revulsion from his voice.

“Still, we have learned the right ways. I don’t care if you weight them after.”

Massimo stabbed. Lungs, Hewes thought, unable to look away. He could see blood. In the daylight, in his anger, he didn’t mind it. Then the man went lower on the body. Stomach. Intestines.

Anyplace that was meant to hold a large pocket of air. In the dead, these balloons began storing the gases of putrefaction. They could make a sunk body float. Unless the bubbles couldn’t hold.

Hewes had learned all these lessons before. Not in a classroom, though. From an older man hectoring Hewes in the basement of a warehouse in Baltimore.

It was hard, but not impossible, to slip back into the mental space, the paranoia, he’d once worn as the closest layer to his skin.

In Baltimore, the warehouses, the guns, the clientele who sometimes preferred not to pay as agreed. Attempted to make a

deeper slice into their cost structure. One bullet could make a few new weapons total profit.

Hewes had killed six men, no women, no children. All people who had aimed to take what Hewes had promised to sell them. None returned from their attempted treacheries.

Hewes, or his cover at the time, had never done a burial at sea. That old fixer that one night in Baltimore had talked about several rivers he preferred. Plots of land that would never be sold. He'd identified a few of the tricks of making an unperson. Hewes remembered. He'd never used the knowledge. In Baltimore he called a number three times in his career. Others had come, removed, cleaned. The old man had come alone the first time. The remainder of the troubles had been handled by small groups of younger people.

Perhaps his breakfast of searing peppers had strengthened him even for this. Massimo moved to the next of the dead. A few punctures into that man's stomach and lungs. A lot more attention to the man's intestines.

Massimo looked at the man he regarded as Adler. He nodded at the pale Caucasian and offered his knife. 'Adler' declined. As if one's skin color should dictate who did the funeral dishonors.

Massimo hacked Langevin up in record time.

"Dirty work is best done fast."

He threw the knife overboard.

"Your people will dispose of the bodies?"

"We'll put them back into the carts."

"Fine. I don't care if they're weighted. All to the better."

Massimo smiled. There were just a few spots on his face that weren't covered with gore. He had been somewhat enthusiastic with his knife.

He began stripping his clothes, tossing them overboard, the water pulling at their evidentiary value and corrupting it with brine. The old killer jumped in, too, a refreshment for the living before the dead fouled it.

He swam around the boat twice.

"You should be done with him," Hewes whispered to Franson.

"Done? Dead, you mean. He's not their most dangerous ambassador. We don't want to push this hotter."

By the time the nude Massimo emerged from the sea there were towels for him and fresh clothes. The bodies and the bloody plastic sheets were shoved back into the metal carts.

Massimo shook his head. He had done his work. He cinched up a towel around his waist and waited.

No one wanted to get even one foot closer to the dead.

Massimo pointed at Hewes. Then he made a second gesture with both hands. Teach us.

It was either jump in the ocean and drown himself. Or push the already dead overboard.

Hewes started forward, his face the consistency of untreated deckwood. He unlatched a kind of gate in the rail. He took less than a minute to push the three carts off the side of the vessel.

Hewes stood at attention for the burial at sea. He watched the carts, with extra holes drilled into them, defy their watery fates. They hung at the top of the ocean. Eventually, though, the vessels shifted or the plastic liners inside stopped acting as temporary plugs. They filled with water, one at a time, and dropped below his perception.

"Good. I think it is time we speak. With honesty, with fullness. We have much ground to cover," Massimo said.

The real negotiations were now open. The earlier lies dumped in the sea. Blood the final currency.

Franson's men brought back the table and the chairs, not the food.

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14.

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Hewes, Franson, and Massimo were the only three people who sat down. The rest had disappeared below deck, even Fernando.

Massimo ignored the dry clothes he'd been offered. He remained in his towel, a bronze inscrutable.

"I don't think me apologizing to you and you apologizing to me will do anything for our work together."

Massimo had immediate control of the conversation. Twenty minutes of battering and Franson couldn't keep up. He'd stopped trying.

"What do you want?" Franson asked.

Hewes had to stop himself from interjecting. Giving up wasn't a negotiating tactic.

"A token of esteem."

"Money?"

"A service."

"Of what kind?"

"There is a man, a Mexican man, who now lives in D.C. We would like him to come back, unofficially, for a visit to his beloved mother country."

Just as the real Adler had forecast. All this theater to arrange for a kidnapping. That pudgy two-star general who had stood next to Adler on a quiet, wealthy street.

Franson looked flustered. Perhaps he hadn't been briefed about this particular topic.

"Impossible."

"It is the sole thing that can set our disagreements right. For fifteen years we've worked together on very sensitive projects. We have built you your prototypes. We have found you information when every other nation kept the secrets of these criminals and bombers. We paid every time you asked. Now we ask for partial repayment."

“Full repayment.”

Hewes wanted to throw Franson from the boat. The man had just consented to arrange a kidnapping of a foreign national, a general, a diplomat.

“No,” Hewes said.

If they’d labeled him Galbary he would play Galbary.

Massimo leaned forward. He smiled and licked his lower lip. “No?”

“I’m sorry,” Franson said.

“He and I are talking,” Massimo said to Franson. “Continue.”

“You may have bullshitted my colleague....”

“This you must do to balance the scale.”

“Then you must return the dead to life. You go first.”

Massimo laughed.

“I have been called many things in my career. Never Messiah, though. The dead are dead. We have only the future, right? So how do you and I walk into the future? As friends, I hope. You?”

“I’d hope for a friend, not a man picking my pocket.”

“I was once a thief. I admit this. Today I am no thief. Just the bearer of inconvenient reality.”

“Answer one question.”

“If I can. The cost will be that you, yourself, will help bring this wayward son to us. Will you pay that cost?”

“Adler, I think today was a waste. Let’s get the boat turned around,” Hewes demanded.

He doubted the real head of this debacle would okay that order.

“Hold on. You precipitate Americans. I will answer your question, gratis.”

“Our agents sat watching your watchers for three days. What kind of saboteur sits by his assignment for three days? Doesn’t he have better things to do?”

Massimo laughed once again. He’d been caught in a lie and tried to use good humor to sweep away the truth.



"I had hoped to have a civil discussion. It seems we must both be blunt today."

"Please," Hewes said.

"You need the intelligence we provide."

"Counter-terrorism is less important to us these days." Their wars were over or winding down. There were enough of the discontented residing within their own borders to keep watch over.

"You think you can move assets, outmaneuver China or Russia? I think you'll get a deeper drink at the well if you're selling terrorists. Politicians don't ever need to buddy up to a terrorist to ask a favor. They do need things from the Chinese or the Russians from time to time."

"Five hundred men stranded in the desert versus a couple billion. I think we can make a case for retasking. That leaves you out."

"I doubt it. You are a smart man. But wrong. You will never not need the kind of information we can provide. You still need our expertise building your little gadgets."

"We're getting out of the guns and explosives business."

"You need a partner who can grant you deniability when Senators come for explanations."

"We have many partners who can be blamed when things go wrong."

Massimo stared at Franson. "I like this man considerably." He turned back to Hewes. "I guess I will tell all the truth then. We have fifteen years of misbehavior recorded. Fifteen years you don't want to have public."

"We're down to straight blackmail?"

"I had hoped not. You are bright, but haven't learned civility."

"I should hope not."

"We will help," Franson said, pushing himself back inside from irrelevancy.

Hewes threw himself against the back of his chair. Franson had sabotaged this from the beginning. Hewes was unequipped

to tell tales about what they knew regarding Massimo and CISEN. Hewes figured they were in a stasis of mutually assured destruction. If Franson were willing to dig deep and dirty. Otherwise they were less than ground meat.

They quickly agreed to deal terms. Massimo kept insisting that both Franson and 'Galbary' had to participate.

"I will not," Hewes said.

"I am. You must also," Massimo said.

"I do not...."

"I am a world expert in anti-kidnapping practices. Inversely, I am also a world expert in kidnapping. You needn't worry. Think of yourself as a symbol."

"Symbol?"

"Of our partnership."

What Hewes did allow himself to think was that they should be adding two bodies to the three already contributed to the water. He had no means to accomplish the impulse.

"It's not that I can't. It's not that I'm afraid. I will not participate."

"Then we have no arrangement at all."

"Fine."

"Then let us discuss the lives of the men who shot my people."

"No."

"We already know their names. We know which safe house you've stashed them in. Do I need to make some phone calls? We don't normally keep an assault team in D.C. but we can pull something together, I think."

Franson shook his head.

"That's the choice. The general. Or two of your agents, the ones with blood on their hands, handed over to me on this boat. I have another knife. I'm just as happy gutting the living as the dead."

"It's fine." Franson agreed for both of them.

“You sure? You notice I’m prepared, eager even, to take another plunge in the ocean. The Atlantic is rumored warmer than my beloved Pacific. Perhaps another test?”

Franson would rather offer a kidnapping scheme than oppose this figure of bluster. He had caved too easily as if that was his instruction. The real Adler had made this happen.

“Otherwise, it must be three of your men and three of mine on this project. It must be today. By seven. The jet will taxi away from its resting place at twenty after eight. I will be there. You will be there. The general will be glad to see us. We’ll have many, many things to discuss. Alright?”

Franson, or Adler 13, shook his head. Hewes was forced to relent, the only sane person on-board. That was how the Mexican government, or the Mexican cartel controlling the Mexican government, persuaded the United States government to kidnap a Mexican general.

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15.

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Massimo straightened his five hundred dollar tie that was beneath the second of his five thousand dollar suits. The man had come prepared to lose one. Perhaps he had only journeyed to America in order to jump into the cold April Atlantic.

The boat docked. Massimo was the first one off. Why linger when he had everything he wanted?

The others were slower. Most first reengaged with the outside world through their phones before they debarked.

Franson held Hewes back. He passed the time with his phone. He had a text from Adler, perhaps even the real Adler. "Houston oil firm reports fourteen missing, board of directors training gone wrong north of Houston."

Hewes ignored the other messages from Grol and his other team members. He ignored what Olive had sent him as well.

"Just another minute," Franson said.

Hewes watched Massimo and Fernando get back into their vehicle and depart. They merged into light traffic and disappeared.

"Can we leave?" Hewes asked.

"Adler 4 is in that SUV. He thinks you'll want to chat."

Yes. Hewes took a moment to consider. He shook his head. "I don't think I can tolerate any more lies."

"Not telling all the truth is more effective. He will say, 'you haven't learned to ask all the right questions.'"

Hewes had no use for Franson so he debarked. He let his fury carry him to Adler, Adler 4, whatever the hell he was. He opened the rear door and climbed inside.

"Galbary? You made me Galbary in your farce?"

Adler looked out his window.

"CISEN has my face. My goddamned license plate. Do you hate me enough to want me dead?"

Adler turned his head at the moment he chose, no sooner. "I won't apologize. You wouldn't believe it."

"Yesterday we were talking about when I'd be through, that the lights in Europe are done."

"They are. You did well making Massimo reach for our agreement."

As if this Adler had decreed exactly what would happen.

"How do you know what I said?"

"You think I had any problem bugging the boat?"

"Why go to the all the effort...."

"To give the man pause. Make him think we might have left it clean."

Hewes didn't understand.

"This problem, though, has weighed on me for a while. Now it's far more important. A goddamned mystery. I don't like them."

"I don't like Franson, Adler 13. I don't particularly care for you."

"Well, it's elegant mysteries I don't like. The best spy writers are better at idea formation than some of our best people. However, the reason the good guys win is that authors create fools for enemies. Brilliant fools whose great failures resonate through the whole story, some are damned fine reads. Otherwise, the good guys would always fall flat."

"What's wrong with Smiley bringing Karla in?"

Adler warmed to the subject. "The Russians gave Karla the choicest cuts and he spoiled everything he touched in the end. His mole Gerald. Could have kept that game running for decades, kept the whole thing silent and unknown. Greed, of course. The man used everything he learned, blew every operation. Couldn't have blown five percent, tapped into the rest, poured in disinformation."

"If you were Karla."

"We were talking books. Not me."

"Yes."

“Karla banked up suspicion. He wanted everything, got everything, left a huge wake once enough piled up. Had to swing bigger and bigger, take out the head of the service, had to make his mole sit on the top shelf and not crack up. Greed and desperation. The right way is zero footsteps in the wet sand.”

“You sound like an expert in moles. In this kind of doublecross.”

“The Russians should have shot their own man. He hauled four pails of bitter for every pail of sweet. Ended up blown, a forced defector.”

How Adler must react in a crisis, brutal and cold and unmoving. Hewes already had some sense and hoped never to get a deeper one.

“You ever work for the cartel?”

“I’m not their man. I’m Galbary’s man.”

“I was Galbary today. Explain.”

Adler was ready for the request. He must have intended to explain the entire time. Being forced to do the thing he intended – was that still force?

“They’ve been damned sloppy the last few months. They don’t care. As if they bought off the entire DEA and every member of Congress, every judge from the Supremes down to traffic court in Poughkeepsie.”

“This group isn’t known as sloppy.”

“No, a year ago they’d never massacre civilians. Never do such a strong-arm tactic to get our help on our shore. Those cartel leaders were more disciplined than the Marines I know. Yes, they push drugs, but cross them...the problem disappears. No shoot-outs, no drug-fueled brutality. Bodies just disappear, perhaps as fish food in the Pacific.”

“The discipline is gone.”

“Everything’s changed. They were a multinational. Chemists working for them. Bankers. Process engineers. Now they’re either running around ungoverned or partying like they’ve killed all their rivals. I don’t know which I fear more.”

“They begin using?”

“Doubtful.”

“Sounds that way.”

“Drugs. I don’t give a fuck how people bore out their own brains – I care what it does to the rest of us.”

Adler twisted in his seat, got within inches of Hewes. “A thousand dollars for fun, how much of that winds up in the pocket of the bright men who get this poison here? What other kinds of poisons do they dream about? What do they spend their money on?”

Adler relaxed in his seat. “That worries me. I doubt it all goes to flashy cars. You think a flashy idiot would arrive on a chartered jet stuffed to the ceiling with party girls? A damned fine cover. They masked themselves coming in. I’d bet they were listed as event promoters or something, dropping off the tourists who just had a fine time in Mazatlan.”

“I didn’t need to be here....”

“A keycard. A recorder of some sort. You watched the video of what happened. I know. There were two recorders, each of the men forced to document what he did. I saw the other recording.”

The implications left Hewes breathless a moment.

“You left the other for me.”

“Temptation only affects the tempted.”

“They were looking for me. They expected to see me here.”

Adler had done this. He’d begun setting all this up when the bodies were on the G550 mid-air. The speed with which he’d woven this nightmare. It was built fast, but built strong.

“Yes, the recorder was a continuous transmission. They watched you watching the video, like perverts at the window. You weren’t careful playing with unknown items.”

Hewes might have saved himself if he hadn’t dug into those paper bags.

“How did you know I would bite?”

"Your profile. Your record. You have a significant curiosity. Perhaps now you understand that it's dangerous for a spy?"

"How much do they know about me?"

"We can break some, not all, their communications. You're mostly right. They already have your face out. Trying to crack a name, a birth certificate. All of you."

"I will not kidnap this man."

"Good."

"I expected you to fight me."

"You're right. You won't kidnap Ugalde."

Hewes looked for some tell on Adler's face. The man had to be lying. He'd put so much effort together in convincing the cartel to send a senior leader. Now he changed the storyline?

"Who will?"

"Well, if we do this right, no one."

Hewes shook his head.

"We're going to try to do this. Try. Step almost up to the line, not on it or over it. We're going to see what this Massimo is really after."

"You talked to the General last night. Did he say...."

"Pretends he's just a two star attache in a slot meant for a single star. Resentful, bored, unhappy our DEA won't listen to him. Couldn't care less about making nice with Defense. No interest being an attache. Wants back writing general orders."

"How are we going to try to kidnap a man? Sounds harder than actually doing the work."

"It will be."

"How will it work?"

"Your end? You get a task from Massimo. You do it."

"Sounds like we're going to wind up actually kidnapping your man."

"Make sure you don't handle your task too well or too fast. Take your time. He's in the rush. Not you."

"Right."



This was a briefing crafted by the insane for people who pretended to believe they weren't insane. It made just that much sense.

"You can't be too helpful. He would mistrust a government employee who comes across as too competent. He may not like slow and unsteady, but it's what he will understand."

Even an attempt to kidnap a diplomat was dangerous. Particularly when the cartel's man was already talking about revealing secrets the organization knew. There would be a crater the size of D.C. over this.

"How are we going to survive this?"

"We punch straight through. Hard enough to destroy them all, atomize them."

It was impossible to believe a general who believed he could win on strength alone.

"You're starting a war."

"I'm acknowledging we're already in one, Hewes. We all die unless they all die."

It sounded so simple.

"How do you find all of them? You're spraying gas on a small fire in hope of burning out vermin."

"I think you'll find you're mistaken. They're not vermin. They're much larger, much hungrier than that. This isn't a small fire. I just wish I had enough gasoline."

It wasn't much of a pep talk.

"Will you take a weapon?"

Hewes paused.

"I think I have to."

Adler touched a box with the toe of his shoe. "Pick your poison."

Hewes opened the lid. There were a half dozen options, none of which he liked.

There was something about the smell that slowed Hewes.

"A man owes gratitude in the direction that saved his life. I believe you've used three weapons like these. Three times men came for you."

"I haven't forgotten anything."

His hand plucked the most common model out of the box. He set it beside him on the seat. He took a moment to ponder his ammunition choices. He plucked a box finally.

"Too many people obsessed with proof, Hewes. Otherwise we wouldn't have to offer our carotids to the Division. You just make sure their blood lands on the concrete, not yours. Not mine."

"I don't like it. I don't miss, either."

"These ones aren't looped up on pills and bravery. They aren't stumbling around darkened warehouses you know well. If they want a mount for the wall, they'll just wait until you're looking away."

"I won't look away."

Adler nodded toward the door. Hewes made to leave but the elder officer kept talking.

"I won't gain anything by this – save criticism. What I do today, what you do, may save us all in a decade. We'll test what Galbary thinks."

"What's that?"

"They're peddling and they'll keep peddling. They're happy peddling. They want another billion a week they can't spend."

"You think?"

"I believe he's wrong. So, we shall squeeze and see what they do. These smart ones who've poked their heads up for a few moments."

"Smart ones?"

"They do push poison, but at this level, they have to be smart to keep from dying at the hands of the folks a rung or two lower down. They think. They plot. More often than not, they survive their mistakes."

"I hope I survive this mistake."

"I do, too. I hope we both do."

Adler clapped a hand on Hewes' shoulder. A warning he wanted memorized.

## NEVER A WASTED CRISIS

“We’re nothing without risk. It’s more necessary than water or food. When there’s unquantifiable danger out there, as there always is, rule one: never a wasted crisis. We use everything we have, everything we can guess, everything we have to fake, to get the world turning behind us. Don’t ever forget.”

Hewes left the vehicle. He was lashed to insanity of the most implacable cast. Fully committed, he would do and die.

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16.

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Hewes hadn't learned much in his thirty minutes on assignment. General Ugalde ate well. He talked well, too. The man could take up a seat in a bistro for two hours without a second thought. Someone else had watched the first hour-plus.

Hewes could see impatience on the street near to him. Massimo drove by the bistro again. For the fourth time. The man was a hands-on manager, to be polite. Hewes followed the car with his eyes as it transitioned to his rear-view mirror. It disappeared around the block.

Hewes was sure it would return.

He returned his eyes to the glass of the restaurant. From the angle of the car to the restaurant, he could see the target, the target's car and driver, his lunch companion's car and security personnel, and not much else. He had a constant stream of audio from inside the restaurant, but they rarely paused to translate what they were discussing into English. The Mexican attache and the senior diplomat from the Colombian Embassy. He heard something that sounded like 'narco' many times. Hewes guessed the old war horse was relating his stories about the drug wars...or urging new drug wars.

Knuckles rapped on his window. Hewes dropped the wire and turned his whole body, not an easy feat in the tiny rental car he now used.

Massimo the Determined stood outside. Hewes pointed to the passenger seat. The man walked in front of the car, slowly, proudly. Everything was at risk because of Massimo and his own people, Adler. His work, his love, his life. Hewes dangled in front of people who had no problems murdering for compensation.

Massimo crawled inside the snug interior. "What's this asshole saying?"

Hewes hadn't asked how Massimo knew which restaurant to bug. "Don't speak Spanish."

"Ah." Massimo held out his hand. He popped the bud in his ear.

"They met in the jungles of Colombia. The General, a Major then, needed some blood. His people, no, his own father, the infamous Coronel, sent him off to murder drug farmers and refiners in the jungle."

Right there was plenty of reason for a cartel to hate a particular General.

One reason, not the whole reason.

Everyone around Hewes had a kind of desperation this day. Massimo was desperate for speed. Adler and his ilk were desperate for a mistake they could witness. Some fumble, hopefully irreversible and undeniable, from the Mexicans. Some proof of what they really intended.

"The Colombian may be Deputy Chief of Mission now, but he started as a spy. Not a very good one, by his own words. Counter-revolutionary. Then counter-narcotics. Including the stint where these men met. Apparently they bumbled into something huge when they thought they were being clever. Had to escape and evade for thirty five days with just the clothes on their backs. They're now joking about the brown water and the delicious insects in their jungle."

Massimo pulled the bud. He turned off the receiver.

"Dangerous men, eh?"

Hewes stared ahead.

"See, dangerous men who talk about how dangerous they are, or were, are also fools. People who can hold their tongues." Massimo smiled. "That's worth fifty I.Q. points right there. Discretion, of course."

"Have you settled on when, where?" Hewes asked. The more he knew, the more he could do to keep from dying when this all went down.

"The man's scheduled to return to his rented home by five thirty. Cutting close to the skin, is it not?"

"If you need to be on your jet by seven, yes."

The kidnapper examined the street again, its particular qualities and quirks. "We could do it here," Massimo said.

"Do we have the men?" All Hewes knew was forestalling and objecting.

"You're providing the men."

Of course Massimo would change the agreement at any time he wanted. Hadn't the deal been three CISEN or cartel, three CIA?

"No, I'm sitting here observing," Hewes said. "You want him, you'll be risking your neck for his."

"I have no particular objection."

A different song than the one he's sung earlier in the day. Spies that Hewes knew had some difficulty with constancy lately.

"Isn't it late for lunch?"

"Also early for dinner. A Colombian like this Camara is a busy one, even on a Monday afternoon. He prefers the humbler touch so he has three breakfasts a morning, one for each suitor. Four lunches some days. A half dozen dinners. Doesn't spend all that much time in his embassy yet he remains in firmer control than his predecessor, who never left. We have remarkably complete files on our allies."

"And your enemies?"

"Even thicker. Until they're stamped 'Interest Concluded.'"

Stamped with the steel of a blade or the lead of an impacted bullet or the spade of a shovel that enables a man to become permanently missing. Men who got shit done – publicly lauded or publicly rebuked, the business builders or the major criminals of the world – were equally scary folks. No conscience in a one of them.

"What will you ask this General of yours?" Hewes asked.

"You fear for him?"

"I think I should."

"Well, you should be a discrete man. I am discrete. My questions are for the general alone."

Hewes wanted more than that. "If he dies. If his own people shoot him by accident."

"I will have a long, sad flight back."

"How did you manage not to have passport inspectors this morning?" He, and his people, along with the planeload of returning spring breakers hadn't faced a single question.

"We don't bother buying anyone in your Homeland Security. We do rent some from time to time. Expensive and not all that effective."

"The higher we build the walls, the more cracks and strains at the base."

"Exactly," Massimo said. "Let's call this situation stable. This General bragging to his war buddy. I'm recording all of it. I can listen to it later. We're going to get situated at the General's home. If you care to leave first?"

"Fine."

Massimo handed over a sheet of paper. A map, from this restaurant to the General's address.

"I know the area."

"Don't be late," Massimo said.

Massimo disappeared onto the sidewalk, then vanished altogether around the block.

Hewes could disappear right now. Walk onto the Metro, connect to a train station, head north or south. Get the hell out of this place. He'd be gone before they had his Hewes identity. Before they cracked to his real name. He could access the profits of Virginia Business Jet Services from anywhere. Just lay everyone off. Do a total flake.

He'd be safe.

Would Stanislaw or his neighbor Owen Sandefur? Could it put Olive into danger? How about the first client who did an unannounced arrival and found CISEN infesting Client Receiving?

How many might die if Hewes left now.

Hewes wasn't enough of a bastard to be a spy. He would do this damned thing. Probably pay with some of his blood or perhaps all of it.

There had to be a way to trip up CISEN and emerge unhurt. Why did Massimo want this general? What powered the fear he felt for the General's continued survival? What did this General know that terrified Massimo?

He didn't know. He could try to find out. He pulled his phone, got his car in motion, and made a call to Stanislaw Grol. The man had one of their two seats on a staggeringly expensive private database of the wealthy, the dangerous, the influential.

If the cartel feared this General, the private database would already know plenty about the man. Perhaps it might even provide a map of where to start outsmarting CISEN.

"Virginia Business Jet Services," Grol answered.

"You can guess I'm not going to make it in," Hewes said.

"We've got the hurricane under control."

"Your morning clients weren't that bad?"

Hewes hoped no one had stumbled across an uncaught smear of blood somewhere.

"Worse. I think someone arranged a convention of the neurotic without informing us in advance."

Hewes tried to laugh. To him it sounded forced. Over the phone might play better.

"It's been a strange day for me. Listen, I just met a man in a little Cuban joint. It's possible we might want to court him."

"Yeah, I can run him through. Name?"

"Isidoro Ugalde. Mexican. Mexican Army, in fact. Two stars."

"Ah."

Grol didn't ask how a general could be in need of a fixed base operator. He knew how the world really worked.

"Assigned up here, the Mexican Embassy. Attache of some sort," Hewes continued.

"One second. I'm typing it in now."



A moment later, Grol rattled off the man's statistics. His home in Mexico City, also occupied by his wife.

Apartments across Mexico, some with the names of women attached to his own. A soldier with a woman in every city.

The address in Maryland that Massimo had provided.

Nothing interesting.

"Anything surprise you?"

Hewes slowed for a stop light. He glanced around while he waited.

"We're just through the first tab. Let me see." Grol knew something of the methods Hewes used.

Hewes looked for the unexpected. He looked for a hook into a new client. Was he a drinker? A man with many mistresses? What kind of pitch would convince a man with an Embraer to make a new home base for D.C.?

"Organizations?"

Grol accessed that listing, and racked up a new charge from the database provider, before rattling out a list of the expected. All groups connected to the Mexican Army.

"Partnerships? Corporations? Board seats?"

He didn't often profile military men, not Americans. They had their own bases; they didn't have their own sources of funding, by and large.

Of course, the Mexicans were a more entrepreneurial lot. After all, who could pay better, large defense contractors who answered to shareholders – or cartels who maintained vast budgets for subverting police and military and political figures?

"No," Grol said.

The light changed and Hewes went slowly through it. Too much of his mind was on how to ask Grol questions that might tell Hewes something valuable.

"Tell me about his connections."

Another sub-database, another charge. Not even two minutes into the conversation and Hewes had racked up

hundreds in charges. He wanted one small crumb. That was enough to sate all of this insanity. At least he hoped.

"Lots of connections here, Win. Military types he's worked for. Military types who've worked for him."

"Most frequent?"

"His father. Ah, that's where I recognize the name."

"Okay?"

"The father's deceased."

"Next."

"There's a...hmm, a sergeant. The man and Ugalde have worked together for twenty years."

In dangerous waters one seeks to trust in something. A higher power...or a friend. "Profile him."

Addresses, one current, a dozen past.

Then Grol said something strange. "He's renting a warehouse."

"This sergeant? In Mexico?"

"In Maryland."

Hewes looked for a place to park. He needed to hear this. He dived into a spot.

"He stationed up here? At the Embassy?"

"The database claims he's inducting Mexico's draftees. They have a, what, one year mandatory service?"

"Punishment for his patron falling out?" A guess, some noise to fill the silence.

Hewes patted his pockets for a pen. He didn't have one on him.

"Location in Maryland?"

Grol rattled off the street. Hewes memorized it.

"That's about three miles from the house the General rents."

"That's good."

"Don't tell me you've just made a new afternoon appointment."

“It’s always good to know a person before you let him in your door. I made that mistake with our cheap billionaire, Smith.”

He’d made that mistake with Galbary and Adler, too. All the Adlers.

“Win, please. I don’t think you want to use your usual methods with a cartel-linked general. The database hints around it. The man’s a millionaire. Ten times over. You don’t bank that kind of peso for being a good guy.”

Hewes had already guessed all of this. Desperation drove him from the safer path.

“Afraid for me?”

“He’s a tough one. He was useful to them. Helping them or, at least, not hindering.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“I’m afraid you’ll disappear completely. What would I tell Olive?”

A tale about a boat and a rented man who was good with a knife.

“Nothing. You’d tell her nothing.”

“She’s got a better nose than I’ve capacity to lie,” Grol said.

“It’ll be quick.”

“Just take up skydiving without a chute. Faster and a better guarantee.”

“Thanks, Stanislaw. We can talk more tomorrow.”

“Yeah.”

“I promise. I’ll be by tomorrow morning.”

“In a box? Pine, brass, or steel?”

Hewes ended the call. He’d taken the warning.

Was there anything more ominous than ‘cartel-linked general’?

Hewes merged back into traffic. He turned north. Then east. North and east. Put him into the right part of Maryland. He kept pushing, even at the danger to his life, because he was uncomfortable with what Massimo knew and didn’t say, what

Adler knew and wouldn't say. The kidnapping plan was dangerous for everyone. Snatch a man from D.C., rush him to an executive airfield, spend hours getting him out of the airspace. There was no way this could ever work.

Better to destruct everything before the bullets flew in his direction. What had the cartel terrified? This warehouse might just contain a hint.

Hewes wondered at the falling out between the general and his former patrons? Had the general gone into the drug business for himself? Stole his first batch of product, needed a place to keep it dry? Hewes doubted the man would be the first diplomat to peddle drugs.

Better to know than to die.

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17.

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When Hewes stopped his car, he was at a long smear of flat-roofed ugliness. He counted back the numbers. There, at the end of a four-plex. Before a six-plex on the next block. Ugly, uglier, ugliest. Warehouses built by misanthropes.

He parked three blocks away and walked back, the only person using the sidewalks that day. He cut through an alley. No windows. No rear door.

Hewes patted himself down. He carried no pen, but he had a few picks on him. What did that say about the way his mind was wired? He never carried gloves or a pen or a flashlight, but he did keep lock picks in his wallet.

He walked to the door and made a show of patting his pockets, drawing attention to the keys he withdrew. He fumbled and knelt to pick them up. In a flash, he made slow, careful movements with one hand, picking up the keys and disappearing them into his hand. With practiced motions his other hand inserted the picks and worked out the intricacies of the cheap, worn lock. Faster than he could have found the key, inserted it, and turned the lock over, Hewes was inside the warehouse.

A useful skill he had. He didn't do much to keep it up.

Why?

Some children were entranced by magic.

Hewes had been compelled by other sleights of hand. The harder his father and his older brothers had been, the more Hewes had dug for a kind of freedom. The more the father depended on locks and keys at work, his universal solvent for all problems, the more Hewes aimed at negating the effect of a lock.

Pickpocketing for giggles before he'd started puberty. Lockpicking by the time it ended. Never accused to his face, although perhaps suspected. Never punished directly, although

looked down upon. The father's narrative was that the boy had too much energy, too much anger. Hewes the contrarian didn't appreciate being poured into a mold and frozen for all time. A father who worked in prisons creating two more corrections officers, one police officer, and a daughter who married a sheriff's deputy. Then there'd been Hewes. He'd signed for the Army before he disappeared into a world where there was only chaos, where locks were insufficient to keep out anyone.

Of course Galbary and Adler understood it all before the first approach. One of them had probably even used some ruse to interview the old prison guard, figure out just what kind of an asshole the man was.

Hewes shook off his anger and pocketed his tools. He shut the door behind him, locking it. He tried to get a sense of the warehouse. The space had once possessed a tremendous volume. Now there was a cinderblock and concrete wall to the left. The remaining space had wooden partitions erected. Wood and a gray fiberglass. Stuffed into an interior wall? Hewes thought that stuff was fire rated.

He walked around the wood and insulation partition. It made Hewes think of an apartment built inside a warehouse. There was an extension cord that snaked inside it. It had a sturdy, locked door. Hewes stepped back, far back. He thought he could make out a roof over the apartment. A roof for an apartment located inside a warehouse.

A clean room? The whole interior draped in plastic sheeting?

The fireproof insulation? Something with a risk of catching fire.

He walked to the room within the room. His hand was already pulling out his picks again. When he touched the handle – not wearing gloves, he noted to his anger – he heard something move inside.

Hewes stepped back, startled.

He stood and listened. There was no other noise. No barking. Hewes hated dogs.

Just that bit of movement.

Hewes regained his bravery. His picks took longer with this sturdy lock. He opened the door. The stench of human waste struck Hewes the moment the seal cracked.

He slammed the door shut but the vapors hung.

He had to step away from the smell.

All this effort to build a port-a-potty inside a warehouse.

Hewes looked at the apartment again. It wasn't just a bathroom. He tugged his shirt up so his nose could shelter under it. He opened the door again.

Stench and light flooded out.

Hewes noted the overpowered fluorescents, almost crackling with anger, inside the room. He parted plastic sheeting which did nothing for the stench and stepped up inside.

There was a man standing in the center. Totally pale and unclothed. Pale everywhere, as if perpetually banished from the sun.

The man with a full beard, matted and disgusting, didn't stand because he wanted to. There was some kind of metal stand holding or forcing him upright. The man strained against the bonds that kept him attached to the device. Hewes took a long time to get his eyes off the figure out of some Renaissance painting of torture and depravity.

Finally Hewes noted the source of the smell. The man stood in his own product. Solids and liquids. All sitting, stinking, on top of plastic sheeting. Mingled with food wrappers, Hewes thought. Someone feeding this chained man. Torturing him with light, smell, food, hunger, thirst, body position.

"Who are you?" Hewes asked.

The man looked forward. The chains attached to the metal tree rattled faintly. The man said nothing, but the hatred on his face was enough of an answer.

"How do I get you out of this?"

The man sagged against his bonds. He kept to his silence.

“Can you talk?” Hewes asked.

No answer.

Hewes began to step with care across the thick plastic ‘flooring.’ His shoes trying to select safe zones between the stinking pools. He dared not get close to the man. He just wanted a look at the bindings. Each wrist cuffed, the cuff chain welded to the frame. Each ankle cuffed and its chain welded.

Hewes looked closer at the construction. Pickproof, one might say. The cuffs themselves, or the locks within their steel frames, were disfigured with welds. The only possible keys: a heavy duty power saw or a cutting torch. Either might do more damage to the flesh than to the steel.

The General didn’t want his prisoner going anywhere.

“Do you speak English?”

The prisoner looked up before he dropped his head back to his chest. He hung, still breathing, as a model for some crucifixion scene. The man wasn’t propped on a cross or nailed to it, but that didn’t change the quality of his suffering. Hewes thought he saw something off about the skin. A bit hard to notice what with the smell tearing up his eyes and the general grime obscuring the man’s body.

He did see something. Hewes took a step closer, buried his nose deeper inside his shirt, and examined the captive’s shoulder, chest, neck, his entire torso. Everything not obscured by his beard. The man had been cut, wide cuts. The cuts were intricate, formed a pattern.

The General had flayed the man, curving or looping strips a millimeter wide, an artistic, almost horribly pleasing set of patterns carved into the man, never permitted to heal right.

“What has he done to you?”

Instead of an answer from the man, the warehouse door slammed opened. Wind?

Hewes stepped to the door of the torture room and looked out. He thought he’d locked it. However, the quality of the lock made it possible for even the wind to open the thing.



Hewes took a step down, glancing at his feet on the concrete, before he felt the pain in his skull. Then he was on the concrete, looking at the concrete.

The door to the torture room slammed shut. He heard steps. The door to the warehouse slammed shut.

More steps.

Hewes could see a length of lumber, used as a walking stick, resolve in front of him.

“This is only spruce. I’m told my father was sadistically gifted with a leaf of the agave cactus. Sawed into a man’s scrotum once. So the story goes.” In a lilting, accented English.

Hewes managed a glance upward. The half-rotund general was here, flat at the front of his suit and bulbous from behind.

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18.

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The General wasn't patient. "Sit up," he barked.

"Push yourself to the side of the room. Sit up against the wall please."

Hewes couldn't move. He tried to look up from where he'd been battered to the concrete.

The General walked to a fan and turned it on. The smells began to disappear. The machine had to be clearing a massive amount of air.

"Vents up, you see?" The General pointed out how the device worked.

He moved toward Hewes, applying a bit of motivation with his foot. Tap, tap, tap. Light, light, hard.

Hewes moved, pulling with his arms, pushing with his legs, never quite managing to get up.

The General left his field of vision for a few minutes. Hewes listened to the man's heavy steps as he did a circuit around his torture room. When he returned Hewes had enough sense he was able to sit against the cold block wall.

"Happy?"

"No."

"You've ruined a few months of work on him. Gave him some hope."

"Hope."

"He might just be found by one of his. He might just be rescued. I had taken him to the very edge of hope, where it was like to die."

The General stooped and stuck his face where Hewes couldn't miss it.

"Now...you've placed him at the beginning of the journey. Perhaps I'll drag you into his room and bludgeon you to death while he watches. Will that erase his hope?"

The General had the tone of an explorer debating himself. His voice possessed no menace. The man didn't believe the words he said.

Hewes hoped.

"I should tell V.V. he was sloppy. I spotted him right off."

"V.V.?"

"Victor Vicente, assuming that is his real name. Our expert on kidnapping and anti-kidnapping."

"I was told to call him Massimo."

"Massimo. That asshole would pick such a pretentious nom de guerre. What do you know about kidnapping?"

"Nothing."

"Only one way to become an expert. Kidnap a lot. V.V. got very good at it for the cartels. They thought it great fun for him to take a government post on how not to be kidnapped. Like a murder cop honing the positive skill at work and the negative, more bloody one, in private moments."

"Could you set that board down?" The back of Hewes' head ached like it bore the world up.

"Perhaps. I'm in a good mood. V.V. has come to me. Does he want me whole or just my head?"

"He wants to kidnap you."

The General chopped through the air with one arm. "He wants the prize in the next room. The one I don't understand at all. They've tried four times to take me. Their men, their ways. I've seen it a hundred times when I was in country, my country, our little civil war."

Hewes just listened. Trying to get a sense of the man leaning on his board. Looming and joking at the same time. Unhappy and yet excited by a kidnapping attempt.

"You were in that car. Outside my lunch meeting."

Hewes could lie. "Yes," he said.

He chose to stick with the things already known. Bad to get on the bad side of a man like this. Stupid to step inside his lair really. Hewes had done nothing at all smart in sixteen hours.

"Also I believe I saw you last night."

“Yes.”

“With Dr. Hoyle.”

Not a name familiar to Hewes. “The man you spoke with last night, outside the party?”

“Stanford. Political science professor. Runs their Study on Federal Decision-making from a rather nice house in Georgetown. He was inviting me to a panel next week on drug interdiction.”

An excellent, expensive cover. Even better than what Hewes had crafted for himself. “I call him Adler.”

The General nodded a single time, filing the extraneous name away. “One of those men, with sharpened lies and a smiling face. His lies are better than yours. You sure you haven’t come to kill me?”

“No.”

“So, man on the floor, explain yourself.”

“I’m supposed to help kidnap you.”

The General almost smiled.

“You break into my warehouse. No damage to either lock. You’re not so careful about the silent alarm. Didn’t notice it? My little phone started buzzing like the moon had blown up.”

Hewes shook his head. He thought of his mistakes the night before. Of course, there was no convenient fire this time to save him. He wasn’t under the control of police who had some rules to obey. He was looking at a man who could, and would, strip the skin from a man and let the wounds puff and heal that way permanently.

“How did you find it? How long have you been trailing me? How long have I been sloppy?”

“The address was in a database. Just have to know where to look....”

“It’s not under my name.”

“You keep your friends close. It wasn’t hard to look at them, too.”

The General, no longer amused, took the time to look at Hewes for the first time. Really look. Hewes gathered he'd said something interesting or important.

"How long have you worked for the Patronos?"

"I work for Adler. Your Dr. Hoyle."

"Then you do their work without even knowing. They can hire many men, even ones who should be unbuyable. Fifty billion, a hundred billion, who knows how much they have. Enough to buy every soul they want. Rent all the rest. We all sell ourselves too cheap."

"You?"

Time to see how much truth the General would exchange.

"They rented me for many years. Eventually, the lease expired and I chose not to renew."

"You stopped taking their money and that's why they want to gather you back?"

"Life is risk. An explanation is always a lie."

"Guess."

"I don't know beyond the man in that room."

"The man?" As if Hewes, on the floor, had any leverage to push.

The General, though, wanted to talk. "In the dwindling days of the push against the cartels I raided an underground complex. Not like what my colleagues in the north find. Some underground chemical factory, forty billion pesos in methamphetamine. The compound I entered in Oaxaca, where I had been forbidden to operate, was filled with people, families even. Not a factory, but some place of safety, I guess. I caught many, many people. Brought away papers, computers, file cabinets. The man in the next room is the only one who has never said a word."

Never?

"Interrogating always produces something. Lies at least."

"Neither truth nor lie. He's said nothing. I've had him since November the eighth."

Months. Coming up on six months. No one held up to torture that long. They died or talked.

“Three days later my drug war was all over. Operation Michoacan was dead. I was ordered back to the federal district. Lots of questions, lots of hinting about what I might have found. Why might I have been operating in Oaxaca? My fellow generals, also the high-ranking civilians, were earning their pensions, those paid for by the cartels. I said nothing. I kept a small group of my most trusted men at work on the captives and the documents.”

“Captives? The ones who talked?”

“Yes.”

“You released them?”

“No one else realizes this is a war.”

“Where are they?”

“We fed the fishes.”

Was there so much difference between these cartels and this military? Both of their leaders enjoyed taking the living and the dead out on boats.

Hewes knew then that the General had no intention of letting Hewes live. The man had just confessed to mass murder.

His eyes strained harder looking for a tool, a weapon, anything to change the odds from Hewes being beaten to death with a stick of spruce.

“My decision in Oaxaca will result in my death, I know it. I’ve given as much warning as I can to my children. My wife I’ve told nothing. We’ve come to loathe each other over the years. She made it a point while I was assigned as instructor of the academy for mid-grade officers to fuck all my brother officers passing through, all the ones one or two ranks below me. She could have shut down two brothels in the neighboring town with her exertions. I hope the Patronos take her. I hope they offer me the choice to save her life in exchange for what they want to know. I would enjoy nothing so much as listening to her last breath.”

Hewes leaned hard into the cold concrete. Far away as he could get from this man.

"You worry at my mind. I've become a horrible person, worse than I ever feared. Battle against people who have no limits does tend toward that. Did you notice the man's tattooing?"

"He looked tortured."

"He was. Long before I got him, by his own people. The cutting of the skin, the removal of the strips, the application of some chemical, a chewed up leaf or something to interrupt healing, promote that puffing around the edges. The tattooing, it's grotesque beauty. The pain. Supposedly to be borne in silence."

The General shook his head.

"Machismo of a sort. Pretends to be some Aztec ceremony. Or was it Mayan? They pretend to be the last descendants, some of them take secret Aztec names, practice all kinds of brutality on each other. On their enemies, too, I understand, even worse depravity. They don't drink. They don't use the drugs they sell. The men are expected to be strong in body and mind. It's a tremendous cult operation. They don't even like the money they have pouring in. Easier to control a drug empire if you've got tough, clean people trying to impress some snake-headed god, right? Better than those who just worship at the Neimann Marcus."

Hewes thought back to what he'd seen. A man who could endure that kind of flaying might have the mental strength not to speak for six months.

"I've pulled out the toe nails of my prisoner. He's said nothing. I don't have enough acute pain to break down the memories of that tattooing."

"Who is he?"

"He's the one. At one point before I captured him, he was the leader of the whole thing."

"How do you know?"

“You think a three star general in the Mexican Army betrays his true allegiances for some shit on the second rung of the ladder? These people called in all their favors to find this man.”

“He wasn’t twenty five.”

“I’d say he was twenty or younger. The last few months have been hard on him, aged him.”

“That can’t be right.”

“Rumor, backed up by some of the documents we recovered, holds they’ve created different castes in their society. These Aztec fucks don’t just run an organization, they have a whole society. The drug wars have been hard on their leadership caste. The story I heard was that they’ve gone through forty men in thirty years, six of them in just one year. All unnatural deaths.”

“They want him back?”

“I don’t know if V.V. and his ilk are fighting to free him or fighting to make sure the new ruler doesn’t have to share. Probably both. Free him, then kill him. Fixes a lot of problems for the current leadership, I’d suppose.”

What a brutal people.

“I worry about the money.”

Not so worried he hadn’t taken some of it.

“What the fuck can one man spend a hundred billion on? This one was dressed in shitty cotton spun in Bangladesh. I don’t know he owned a car or a house. So much money? They weren’t spending it on houses and pools and jets. That’s what worries me. They had a caste of scientists. Chemists and biologists. A caste of business operators. Why did they need people fluent in cash flows, money management, investing, money laundering? The reports of those captured told me of a caste of operations experts. People who could build underground factories and produce forty tons of meth a day, perhaps more. Disciplined people, highly disciplined. What are they buying that I don’t expect? Why train all these people? Chemists, bankers? The money, too, where does it go? An



army of their own maybe. They want total control of the country they're just renting? I don't know."

The General sounded starved for attention. He evidently longed to confess all his doubts to a man who would never be able to tell anyone else.

"Can you stand? Have you recovered enough?"

"I'd prefer to be a smaller target."

"You think I'll use this board again? Perhaps. I think the time of running this race alone has ended. I might just need a friend or twelve."

Offering hope. Easily crushed, like a board through the weaker sections of the skull.

Hope was more than certain death, not much more, just enough.

"You mean to try to kidnap me. Why?"

Hewes explained what he understood of what Adler had relayed. Forcing his own organization to react once the terms of the partnership with the cartel were smashed. Converting a cold war into a hot one.

"It's not a plan at all," the General pronounced.

"No."

"Tell me exactly what you saw today. Not what you've been told. What you saw."

Hewes did. The General was very interested in the chartered jet, the girls who flooded off. He asked question after question. Which airline provided the jet? The nationality of the girls? The buses used to ferry them? The scrutiny intensified once Hewes relayed the appearance of Massimo or Victor Vicente.

Finally, the General ended that line. "Who else?"

"A man called Fernando. And another called Cale."

"Cale?"

"Like the leafy vegetable. Kale."

"Cale." The General then pronounced a word that sounded similar but just a bit different from Cale. "Like that?"

"Maybe."

“It’s from one of the minor languages that still hangs in. What we still have of the Aztec language. Nahuatl. Like the tattooing they ‘resurrected.’ Who knows if the dead really ever did that? Their interpretation says yes.”

“Cale is a name?”

“Cale is a title. My prisoner was referred to as Cale, at least in the video my men took of the raid. In a few comments made by the other captives.”

Hewes remembered the man-child called Cale. Proud of his name. Unhappy playing the role his age allowed for him. To be the leader at sixteen and not be allowed to lead.

“He’s sixteen.”

“A hard time for their leadership caste. Victor Vicente, one of the paid lieutenants, and the boy-king himself. Here in D.C. I think we have much to talk about.”

“How so?”

The General let his board fall on the concrete floor. Crack. “I think we’re beyond this now. My finest teacher, my disgraced father, taught me a bit of pain sharpens a man’s mind and his veracity. I practice it. I teach it to my many informal students as well.” He walked to Hewes, extended his hand.

“I think I might just enjoy being kidnapped this afternoon.”

The General helped Hewes up. They would negotiate standing up, Hewes in agony. The pain working more against him than for him.

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19.

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Hewes was ninety minutes late getting into position outside General Ugalde's rented house. Every person who had his phone number seemed intent on reminding him.

Adler was currently attempting to pin Hewes to the roof of his car via the telephone. "Where the hell are you?"

"I'm in position, near the General's rental."

"You weren't twenty minutes ago."

"I stopped, had calls to make."

"Calls?"

"My business doesn't run itself. It's been a long time since I played hooky for the whole day."

If Adler was keeping the real plan a mystery, Hewes felt justified not mentioning his new deal with General Ugalde.

"I'm going to put Franson right next to you."

"Fine. Let him come."

Knuckles rapped on the glass. Hewes waved the man around to the passenger door.

"You're an asshole almost blowing this."

"You need me more than I need to be here. I'm your Galbary."

Hewes put his phone to his ear. Adler was gone. He now had a minder assigned to his wayward pupil.

"The big jet is gone, flew an hour ago."

Hewes considered what CISEN was doing – or were these people now just straight cartel?

"So their plan is changing, too."

"Yes. Massimo met a turboprop at a different airfield about the same time."

"Much slower. Smaller fuel tanks, too."

"I doubt they intend to drag him into Mexico. They'll have a safe spot a couple hundred miles from here." For torture and murder, Franson left unsaid.

“How are we going to interrupt this?”

Franson struggled out of his suit coat. His weapon in his waistband was now on full display.

Hewes disliked it. He'd taken one himself. The same model.

Funny his hatred now. For six years, he had sold weapons just like these....

Exactly like these.

The early models of the tamper they had perfected for export.

These...these weapons were indistinguishable from the early tamper.

Hewes, back under a different cover then, had been told little about the weapons. ‘Just find a buyer. Give us back the weapon if you haven’t sold it in 21 days.’

Sometimes the number was fifteen days. Or thirty-five. There had always been an expiration date. On a weapon.

One piece he recorded as sold early on, a Glock like the one he carried. He paid for it out of his meager earnings. Tested it. He'd been paranoid about the whole setup, rigged up a way to fire the gun without being close. It had been fine. He did the test a week later, well after the expiration date. The damn thing exploded on him. Hewes hadn't kept another back after that. He hadn't come close to violating the expiration dates either.

He eyed the weapon Franson carried. It looked solid. He kicked the gun under his seat out onto the floor. He thought he could see little...perforations...where the plastic might more easily separate.

Tamper?

He thought of the way Franson had asked questions, deep and probing and personal. As if he knew he wouldn't have any more time to ask them. Like an exit interview for a person who didn't know he was departing.

“You're supposed to brief me,” Hewes said.

He'd have to doubt everything Franson said. Let the man talk, figure out what the primary untruths must be.

"The plan's changed about eight times in the last fifteen minutes. I guess the version we're left with is 'wing it.'"

"Is the general on his way?"

"We don't know. We lost him."

"How many guards already here?"

"None."

Hewes and the General had arranged for that. To keep the number of armed low.

"What about our Mexican friends? Massimo?"

"Him we have been watching."

"The others, the young one from this morning?" Cale the Boy-King.

"No."

"What was he busy doing?"

"We were watching Massimo."

"You knew where he'd be most of the day," Hewes said. "What about the one running errands? Really, 'errands?'"

"We didn't watch the other one. The kid."

Hewes began to wonder how much Franson had tucked away for his retirement? And from what source? No one could be that well-intended and incompetent. The man had blown the day because those were his orders.

"We've got a plan for the Mexican two-star. What is their plan?" Hewes asked.

"They claim it's our job."

"You believe them?"

"No."

"I don't either," Hewes said. "So what's the plan?"

"Wing it."

"That's not a plan."

"It is today."

Hewes let loose with hard enough, violent enough language to drive Franson from the car, sputtering.

Hewes got out, too, a moment later. He carefully cupped the tampered weapon Adler had allowed Hewes to select.

"Don't go far," Hewes called out to Franson.

“Go fuck wrought iron.”

Hewes went to open his trunk where they’d stored some materials that they’d need for the event.

Hewes dug in his trunk. Franson eventually returned.

“Get the first aid kit,” Hewes said.

“Why?”

“In case somebody shoots him,” Hewes said. “His guards may be good. They might also be idiots.”

Franson reached in. Hewes shifted his weight a bit. His hip touched Franson’s hip. It was enough to fool Franson’s body into thinking there was no change in weight or pressure even when Hewes swapped out one weapon for the other. He’d gotten rid of a garbage weapon. Now he had either a clean one or another bit of tamper, depending on what Adler was really doing with this dramatic performance.

He wouldn’t be using the weapon. Still, he wanted to do a bad turn to Franson. Hewes was about ninety percent positive the weapon he’d disposed of was dangerous to the user, not the target.

Franson brought up the first aid kit.

“Thank you,” Hewes said.

“You hate every plan I’ve suggested. We don’t have a plan. We won’t need handcuffs or a first aid kit.”

“You’ve been doing this work longer than I have, but I know that rule.”

“Which?”

“Never curse your undertaking before we start. We need every possible advantage. We need not to antagonize bad luck, alright?”

Franson walked back to the car.

Hewes got in behind the wheel.

“I believe in luck,” Franson said. “I believe in making it. We won’t need these supplies.”

“I promise I won’t bother with your wounds then. I’ll tend to everyone else first.”

“Funny guy.”

Franson tried to start rehearsing the plan again. Hewes wasn't accepting any of it. Franson got out and walked back to his vehicle.

Hewes wondered if he'd changed the odds at all just now. He hoped so. He couldn't keep his mind on the present nightmare so he responded to the text messages that had piled up. Work first. From Stanislaw, all heads up items. Out of this, low on that, reordering, can you imagine how much cognac Victoria Lately took onboard her jet? More items from clients – do this for me? Why haven't you responded? Never mind, I asked the real boss, Andrew. None of them knew that Andrew was a convenient cover for Stanislaw.

Then a backlog of questions from Olive. A crushing list of the names of famous or perhaps soon-to-be-famous chefs around D.C. She was asking for tolerance level this evening? "Jose or Marcel?" Two of her favorites. "You pick," the safest response. "Something amazing for eight o'clock."

He hoped he'd not be under arrest or a surgeon's knife at eight. He hoped to join her.

"Security's stepping up at the house," a fresh text read. Franson.

A few seconds passed.

"Confirmed, he's alone in his car."

"Two guards(?) emerging from house," another team member texted.

"In position," Franson sent.

"Hewes drive now."

Hewes started the car and set it all in motion. To his everlasting shame and horror.

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20.

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The scoop was a simple matter. Their un-plan worked. Franson caught the General as he walked from his car to his house. One hand on the man; one hand on the rear door. He shoved Ugalde into the car Hewes drove. The pause in motion lasted seconds.

Franson only pulled his weapon after the stunned General was with them.

Hewes noted the other vehicles on more distant blocks withdrawing, a clean operation. He heard his phone chittering with news. Of course he was driving. He'd just have to assume.

There were shots taken again the vehicle as Hewes turned. Foolish guards to shoot at the kidnapper. Might hit the protectee. Unless that was the point all along.

"Who are you?" Ugalde finally roared.

Franson had the man's hands bound. He made a point of using ties rather than handcuffs.

He worked on gagging the general's mouth. He was wrestling to get a mask on the man's face.

Only Hewes and the General knew why it had gone so smoothly. The General had kept his security out of position, not that a mere attache ranked security, but people of the General's personal, undeclared wealth were better off with them than without. Hewes had kept Franson from complicating the scoop.

"No, no, no turn," Franson shouted.

Ah, here it came.

"Where?"

"Same place we planned. Just stick to surface streets. No more than two miles over the limit."

Hewes did just that. Of course he picked less obvious streets to be on. He was trying to force Franson to intervene,



make the man reveal where they were really supposed to be. Turn by turn, Franson kept his attention on their muffled, masked prisoner.

“Okay, up ahead, no turns for four blocks then left. There’s a small lot, go through, into the alley. We’ll swap vehicles there.”

Hewes nodded. He hoped he was right. He hoped Franson would finally clarify everything.

Hewes followed the instructions to the letter. There was another vehicle ahead of them in the alley.

“You driving?” Hewes asked.

“No, you will.”

A lie.

An explosion came from the backseat. Hewes felt the impact through the seat material. His foot came off the brake; the car lurched into the larger SUV parked in front of them. Hewes managed his shock fast enough. He got the vehicle stopped and parked.

His back roared. His brain shouted that he’d been shot, but it wasn’t the same as when the bullet had gone through his lung. It hurt but it didn’t hurt enough. The wound was wide, over a large patch of his back.

Had he been shot?

Hewes felt the blood hit his neck, perhaps the back of his head. He heard screaming. It took him a moment to know he wasn’t the one screaming. Franson was.

Hewes looked behind. Franson now possessed six fingers. Five normal ones on his healthy hand. A single grated sausage on his otherwise fully mangled weapon hand.

His bloody face was now sans eye. The other eye was now tented by a ragged strip of plastic.

Franson had fired.

He had used the tamper, but the time limit had expired.

The only reason Hewes wasn’t dying of a wound that went all the way through him was...because of his paranoia.

“Who are you working for?” Hewes asked the screaming man.

The cartel? Or had Adler paid for the bullet?

Franson screamed. He clawed at his face making the blood flow faster.

Another hand poked out of the bloody mass, a darker skin. A hand that was no longer secured. Apparently the General also had some facility with sleights of hand.

“Stop asking questions. Just drive.”

Hewes cranked the steering wheel and slammed on the accelerator.

“Get us out of here. You don’t know....”

The bullets entering the hood, aimed at the car’s engine block, did proclaim what Hewes didn’t know.

Ambushes within ambushes.

The engine made a horrifying sound before it seized and perished.

Hewes imagined the gasoline flowed out from the car faster than the hope slipped from inside him.

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21.

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Two hands pulled Hewes from his seat. The impact with the pavement of the alley lessened the pain in Hewes' back a moment. He felt agony simultaneously in both shoulder and back. Two drums thumping and reverberating.

The kick to his exposed wound flopped Hewes over.

"Thank you for the weapon."

Hewes strained to see the man talking at him. Massimo. Victor Vicente.

Hewes watched as the rest of the car was cleared of its solid contents. Two people in various states of health, other weapons, handcuffs, and an impossibly distant first aid kit.

The wounded, insensate Franson hit the pavement.

"A dirty people, you spies. Try to think, think, think. Forget to clean your most basic tool." Vicente laughed. "The man probably didn't even keep his marksmanship up. Myself I prefer to shoot twice a week. Once a year I join a private hunt. Those who steal from the cartels are released in a fenced section of jungle. You know how hard it is to keep up a fence in the jungle? Last year, three men slipped through failures in the wire. The other forty-odd died. I killed three myself. We feed them to the trees, of course, dig holes and bury them. The jungle is always hungry. No trophies, no bragging, the only rules of the hunt."

Hewes watched the General forced into a seating posture against the brick of a building.

"Ah, I guess I did say more than I should. Is it bragging if you tell your secrets to a dead man, Galbary? Are you even a Galbary? Or a double of some sort, like a dictator might requisition a body double to take the fatal shot?"

Vicente walked to the General.

"Isidoro, it's good to meet you under these circumstances."

The General said nothing.

“Cale, join us. He’s yours.”

The young man slipped from a vehicle. He looked furious which made him younger still. Barely a teenager. Already forced into leadership if Ugalde were right. A man who controlled a hundred billion dollars.

The teenager knelt in front of the General. “One question: when did you turn over your captive to the Americans?”

Ugalde said nothing.

“The Idiot from Oaxaca.”

Nothing.

“How long have the Americans had him?”

Even Hewes knew that the man was in America, but unknown to the Americans.

“Vicente, we don’t have the time for that knife of yours. Cutting and healing, cutting and healing. Kick the wounded man in the head.”

The sound of meat pounded against a hard surface added a third pain in Hewes’ head. The sound, the shoulder, the back.

“Again. Harder. I haven’t heard anything snap.”

Finally the sound of bones coming unmated.

“The Americans? How long ago did you sell the Oaxacan to them?”

Ugalde shook his head. “I never did.”

“It’s been months. Six months. We’ve trashed every base of yours. Every group of people who retained their loyalty to you even after your exile. I flayed the skin from your most trusted staff. None of them have him, none of them would value a prisoner more than their own child who lay screaming.”

Ugalde looked shocked. How hadn’t he known that his people were betrayed, hunted, dead?

“Your sources?”

“I didn’t know.”

“Sometimes they take money to keep their mouths shut. All your people are now my people or property of the fishes of the Pacific, Isidoro Ugalde.”

"I will kill you."

"Your ghost might try."

Hewes watched Ugalde reckoning with death. "I have him. Not the Americans."

"I'm surprised. Good. That's very good."

"I would have never sold him."

"Is he alive?"

"He's never said a word."

The boy-king didn't believe that.

"In so many months? I am tougher than he. I do not think I could stand so long. Your reputation for brutality exceeds your father's, Ugalde. Have you gone soft?"

"It's no thing to break a body. To unlock a mind without rusting the cylinders, that is hard, delicate, intricate."

"Yes. Unfortunately, I've never mastered any of it myself. I believe you."

The man looked toward Hewes. He shook his head.

"I don't trust you. How many people know where he is?"

"My sergeant, the one you claim to have killed. Me. That is all."

"Not your wife?"

"Why would you trust your enemy with your best weapon?"

"Yes, she doesn't like you that much. I know. We've spoken. She's half the woman she once was."

That could mean many awful things.

"Did she cry?"

"Yes."

"Scream?"

"Very loud."

"How many men raped her?"

"I didn't stay to watch."

"That is good. At least she died doing the thing she liked."

"I see now that you are your father's son."

Ugalde didn't take the words as the intended insult. "I learned from a master, but I never did apply his lessons all that well."

"Perhaps I will leave your children alone."

"I doubt you'll find them."

"They did up and leave their jobs. None of them have children yet. Could be difficult if they have money."

"They do."

"Shoot this 'boss' first," the boy-king said to Victor Vicente. "This Galbary, counterfeit or not."

Hewes watched Vicente line up the weapon. The weapon that had come off Hewes which Hewes had taken from Franson. He lined up for a throat shot, he pulled the trigger.

Hewes waited for the pain. It didn't come for him.

Vicente lost all five fingers of his weapon hand. He slumped to the ground, screaming.

Adler had handed out two pieces of tamper. Both Franson and Hewes had been sent into battle with failure in their hands.

"The fuckers," Cale said. He got up and circled his screaming lieutenant.

"We made these piece-of-shit copies for the Americans. They played them back against us. We're a bunch of fucking morons."

He stepped away, a bit further down the alley. "Bit, Morocho, find some weapons that won't blow off your fingers or scoop out your eyes."

A third man came along.

"Fernando, back at the car. You get us ready to leave."

The man who had stood behind Vicente earlier in the day looked unhappy but didn't disobey the child's instructions.

The boy-king circled Vicente again, the man on the dirty asphalt bleeding, dying.

"Ava, bring me a camera. I want to get a bit more from this asshole Ugalde before we burn his body."

A woman got out of one the cars that blocked the end of the alley. She arrived at the boy-king before the men called ahead

of her, the ones who were still digging out weapons. She handed over a camera. A camera that looked like a phone. One that might be carried for hours or days in a shirt pocket recording everything it touched.

“We live back to the compound?”

“Yes, Cale.”

“Help Fernando get us ready to leave.”

“Yes, Cale.”

“What I mean is: don’t let him come near this. Shoot him in the head if he tries to leave the vehicle. He was Vicente’s man more than our man. Understand?”

“Yes, Cale.”

“Make sure that we have enough gasoline to burn all this shit. You listening for a police response?”

“There’s been nothing.”

“Even worse than the Federal District in our country.”

He waved Ava away.

He walked back to Ugalde. “God, I love this country. I could buy the whole damn thing, but I prefer to see it and the Spanish burn.” Cale knelt once more. “Where is your Oaxacan captive?”

“A warehouse.”

“The address.”

“You must promise me.”

“I don’t bargain.”

“You will. For this. Something that man knows, something I’ve almost got out of him....”

“If you’d gotten it a few months earlier.... Do you know how many nights I couldn’t sleep wondering if the Americans already knew? Could they counter what we’re doing? Could they detect it already? I must be imagining a fucking ulcer, but now that we’ve talked I think I could eat for a week no problem. Wine and steak I’ll have nothing else. Nothing murders my sleep now.”

“No hunting my children,” Ugalde said.

“You give me the Oaxacan and I’m done.”

“You kill me fast. A bullet administered well. Burn me after, I don’t care. Dead first.”

“Fine.”

The General gave the address.

The boy-king rattled off instructions in a language not English and not Spanish to one of his men. Ugalde looked just as baffled.

Now Hewes wondered why the man spoke English to Ugalde at all. They both spoke Spanish as their first language.

The cracks about the Spanish. Could the man prefer to speak English just because of some deep-seated hatred of a people, a language?

“Okay.” The men scattered. One of the convoy vehicles started and disappeared down the road.

“We wait. If he’s there you get the clean death.”

“You’re going to kill him?” Ugalde asked.

“He’ll be broken and useless to us. So I would call it mercy.”

“Was he a good leader?”

“He had a string of fuck-girls scattered at our different outposts. Common sense said the leadership caste stayed the hell out of operations. He didn’t. Two or three girls at the one you raided. Probably found him half-naked in a hall limping between them. He had a broken machismo living in his soul, raging harder than any devil.”

“You a faggot? Your man Bit bending you over the hood?”

“No.” The boy shook his head. “I’ll have all the cunt I want in a week. No danger to me. I have patience, Isidoro. I survive.”

Cale moved off. He reviewed something on the recorder he’d just used.

Hewes was slow to notice that Cale had come for him. The boy crouched and looked Hewes in the eyes.

“Your own man tried to shoot you. You must have been a bad boss.”



The boy balanced on his toes and the balls of his feet. He was having fun.

"You get the same death I give to Isidoro. You might want to be polite."

"To the man who will murder me?"

"You've helped kill my people. I help kill your people. Spies wouldn't have work at all if it weren't for the danger someone senses. Some must die so the others have work. Ease your mind?"

"No."

"They call you Edwin Hewes. Win, a false name. We're digging already. Could be a day. Could be five. You married?"

"No."

"You have someone to protect? You saw something of what Victor Vicente could do. I won't say I'm worse. If I were thirty, thirty-five years older I could be much worse. Now I just don't have enough imagination. How many ways can you violate the human body? My list hasn't even hit a hundred. Victor might have had a thousand. The Colonel Ugalde, this one's father, was reputed to have sold his soul to the Spanish devil in exchange for a list of ten thousand."

"One is enough."

"Fear, though, and notoriety. If I kill one person in a gruesome way, a method that snaps attention, then I don't need to kill the next twenty people. They'll mind their business without fresh lessons."

"No."

"I wish we were here on a Tuesday. I understand there is a fine restaurant, Omnivore, in this city. An excellent cook, a woman. Petite. Something of a looker."

Hewes was fully sold out; Cale, fully briefed. The who and when and why enraged his mind with possibilities, foul ones.

"Ask what you want."

"I think chefs should be allowed to create. I'm not much for music or looking at paintings, but I could eat all day long now that my stomach has settled. Chefs, the ones who make good

things taste better, are a blessing from all the gods. They must not be harmed. Nor farmers nor beekeepers nor the shepherds. I could kill a few pig farmers if they angered me as I have no great love for pork. Never violence against one who tended chickens. The good ones that run around outside. I also love fish so I protect fishermen, too. Along with those who keep orchards. And the avocado farmer, one of the best things in the world, the avocado.”

The child with all the power his organization handed him was quite insane.

“And the chocolate maker?”

“I’d rather have ripe fruit. I know, it’s a shame. I’m told my mother loved chocolate. I never knew her so it could just be a story.”

“From chocolate makers?”

“Perhaps. I am not well known in my country. For safety we try to hide behind the title, Cale. We hide behind the face and the reputation and the unprecedented violence of a man who held it many years ago. Now he sends out his runners with instructions. He is long dead. The leadership caste is almost exhausted. My successor is just twelve. The other few even younger. We have hit upon the great solution just in time.”

“For you to take charge?”

“For the problems, all problems, to settle.”

Cale stood.

A messenger arrived with a phone. Cale spoke to the man then spoke into the phone with more of his alien words. These neo-Aztecs were even trying to revive a dead language?

He handed back the phone, walked to the General.

“He had been there, Ugalde. They did some rapid testing. Blood typing, I think. It was him. A horrible little room apparently. He’s not there now. You moved him?”

“No.”

“You’ve been dancing with spies. Should we wonder when you pick up their diseases? Lying with the confidence of a truthsayer.”

“I visited him two hours ago.”

“To move him.”

Cale waved at his men. “Burn them both. Then this other man, Adler. Burn V.V. as well. No gasoline for them. Something worse, the powder. The thermite. The Spanish devil wants his char.”

The men who answered to Bit and Morocho walked down the alley with a bright silver can. The teenager, twenty years younger than either of them, pointed at the vehicles.

“We have plenty. Let’s start with their ‘kidnapping’ vehicles. Both of them.”

In short order metallic powders were on and inside the vehicles. The can was empty. The teenager moved far down the alley. “Throw the match and get out of there.”

The two men, each as graceful as anvils plummeting to the earth, did dance out of the way as the fireworks began. The heat was the first thing Hewes felt. Searing at him even ten feet away. It had to be worse for Ugalde who was closer to one of the vehicles.

The teenager knew something about intimidation.

It wasn’t enough to talk about the promised death. He had chosen to show off a bit. This form of bragging came at a cost: people could see the smoke. The boy-king had given away the game. There was apathy and indifference in every town, but no matter how far gone a section of a city might be, people feared fire.

The amount of the metallic powder hadn’t been enough to reduce the cars to slag, but more than enough to destroy any hair or fiber evidence. Enough to terrify a reluctant witness into saying more.

The teenager began down the alley. His two men now carried two of the canisters apiece. Four times the thermite.

Cale had given Ugalde one last chance to earn his good death. After showing the man just what the bad death would be.

Ugalde had lost his token for trade.

Hewes didn't know how...unless Adler had been listening in to when Hewes spoke with Stanislaw Grol. Had Adler swooped in and gotten himself a genuine drug lord?

Was Adler coming now?

Hewes hoped for something other than death.

There were no fire sirens, though, no police moving toward them.

Had no one seen? It was fire.

The teenager spoke to the larger, more dangerous looking of his men. "All this furious worrying, months of it. I should have never bothered with all those tests, especially that damned test well north of Houston. I thought the Americans would be onto us already. I thought they would be trying to counter us. So I was testing every damned cure all our scientists suggested. Could anything be done about the inevitable? Could they filter it out? Kill it somehow, UV or some damned thing."

The well. Hewes realized that Cale wasn't talking about bombing it. A cure all? UV radiation? What had they done to the well?

Filter it? Kill it? Something alive?

Small, very small. A bacteria? Virus?

A biological attack of some sort?

"What do you say, Isidoro? Any idea where the Idiot from Oaxaca is?"

"In the warehouse."

"There was no chair. He let himself out of the filthy room, took the chair with him?"

"He wasn't seated."

"On the floor?"

"No. He was attached to a frame."

“A Christmas tree? You’re copying us now. I guess it was fair, he did like the look of another person affixed to one.” The teenager smiled. “A torture frame, very nice. He was welded into it?”

“Yes.”

The boy laughed.

“Too bad you had different ideas from us. You might be more interesting than Victor Vicente ever was. So, last chance.”

“I told you what I know.”

“Nothing, then. I want to believe you. I want to give you a good death.... Look at Edwin over there. You can see him trying to listen for the firetrucks. He is, isn’t he?”

Hewes felt eyes on him.

“They aren’t coming. They’re all in use elsewhere. You think I’d set this up without ensuring I had some time?”

“How?” Ugalde asked.

“Ten pounds of a plastic explosive, made to look Czech. A hundred pounds of rusty nails. One battered car. The Mexican Embassy here, perhaps the most ugly building in a city that tries for overwhelming marble beauty. Every resource in this town is reserved elsewhere. They aren’t coming.”

UV? The oil well? Small things.

Hewes wished his mind would focus on the present, on survival. Not the damned video of the explosion.

“This town is wired to support its politicians and then its diplomats. I think half the police in Maryland are on their way. More than half of northern Virginia.”

Small. He thought small. Then he thought green for some reason. Hewes thought of the green scale he’d gotten on his finger. His mind nudged him toward the green scale.

“What did you say?” Cale demanded.

“Nothing,” Hewes said. Had he done more than think the word?

“Green scale. It works as a name. Where did you see this green scale?”

“I didn’t.”

The teenager was silent while he considered. “The dead carried it out on their clothes. He’s seen it. Get the burning set up faster.” Cale walked and knelt in front of Hewes. “Who else knows?”

“I don’t know.”

“It’ll take weeks for them to figure it out if even that soon.”

The teenager stood. “We know where these idiots took the bodies before the piece of theater on the boat?”

There was no one speaking now.

“Let them have a sample. We have a guaranteed safety of twenty hours. I’m not looking for the Oaxacan idiot at the cost of our safety. Let them puzzle over the caiman. They won’t understand the green scale even a decade after it swallows them.”

The teenager started down the alley toward his vehicle. He glanced at his men.

“Hit them with the powder and light them.”

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22.

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Bit and Morocho began working the lids off the cans. Then Morocho screamed and his body went up in flames.

Bit dropped his can, so the bullet that struck his chest just killed him.

Unfortunately, there were several cans of thermite now igniting in the alley.

The boy-king ran for safety. Flames separated Hewes from the cartel. He got up and drug Ugalde away from his spot on the wall. Ugalde drug Victor Vicente away from the flames.

“Go around. Go around. Finish them,” the teenager shouted at his people.

Soon men rushed in from behind. Caucasians, but that said nothing given the wealth controlled by the teenager and his people.

“No, sir.” The woman’s voice.

“We can’t leave them alive.”

“We have to go.”

Silence for a moment from across the flames. “I said enough to get them to talk. They don’t know enough to harm us, let alone stop us. We’re gone.”

The teenager let the woman convince him, let her words become his words.

“The kid, the kid, shoot the kid,” Hewes screamed. “Wound him, stop him.”

He knew something. He was behind something.

The cars across the flames spun out of the area.

“Can you stop them?” Hewes asked the unfamiliar face close enough to him.

“No.”

The voice came from behind. It was an older man’s voice. Hewes thought Galbary might have come himself.

He turned.

Not Galbary, but a voice he should have recognized. He'd heard it daily for five years.

Stanislaw Grol.

"What are you...."

"I told you to be careful. Last night. Today you're almost melted into the asphalt."

All their meetings, from the first all the way to the previous evening, flooded back to Hewes. He'd had to work hard, had to pursue the old man out of semi-retirement. Hewes had earned the old butler. Of course, he thought differently now. An old spy – was he British, was he Polish at all, American with a facility for voices? – who'd trained up his butlering skills?

A spy to infiltrate a spy shop.

"Who controls you?" Hewes asked.

"I saved you last night from the police. Think I wanted to set off a fire in a coffee shop?"

"You called them there, too? Set off an alarm?"

Hewes didn't know why that idea occurred to him. General paranoia.

"Tried to teach you a lesson. One that didn't take. I put you into the cauldron, turned up the flame, let you sweat it out before I fished you back out."

"Thanks." He didn't mean anything close to the word he said.

"Think I wanted to break into a lobbying outfit to wipe the video and audio recordings you missed? Smart people there, had a dual system, I think they'd been broken into before. No, no gratitude. You should work on that."

That explained a lot. He needed to understand the old man, the old spy. "Since the first meeting?"

"Yes. I work for the man you call Galbary."

"What do you call him?"

"An old friend, an old enemy, too. We've known each other since Eisenhower was his boss and Macmillan was mine. Now let's see what we can salvage of this. I told your Galbary



he was a fool to trust his people. Now look what they've done."

"Adler wanted a war. He'll get it."

Grol pulled Adler away from his spot. Forced him back to the mouth of the alley.

"Fifteen, sixteen years on the fringes of the intelligence apparatus, Win? Have you learned nothing? All of this will be made to disappear."

Men were already working on the flames and smoke. Not that thermite was possible to stop.

"There will be no war. Not even a private vendetta. They have struck and we will cover it over and diffuse the stench."

"Oh." Adler had been so sure. Hewes had been convinced.

"The bombing of the Embassy...."

"Won't be attributed to the cartels. There's more than one independence movement in the south of Mexico, one or two of them genuine. One of the ones we created and front will take responsibility. Mexico will have a new enemy to attack, one far simpler than the cartels."

"It's not right."

"No, it's not right propping up their corruption like this."

"I meant the cartels."

"As much as they are dangerous, they have also been our partners for decades. Your partners, I should say. I'm retired from my own service, doing all this just as a favor and to keep my fingers wet. An old man with dry, cold fingers is a dead one, you know."

"Our partners? They're going to slit our throats."

"You've been listening to your Adler. They are dangerous. That's why we work with them. Keep them close."

"A sixteen year old...."

"They'd have fallen apart if that kid was all that kept it going. There are hidden hands involved somewhere in there. A chart for how to keep it all together. A long-term plan that the sub-leaders keep in motion."

"You're not worried about this plan?"

"I can go back to Wales. You might be right to worry."

"Their government was wrong to stop the military push...."

"The front government, the names on ballots, barely stick together. The cartels are the real government down there. The top leaders can make an agreement with the cartels about a drug war, cull the idiots out of the organizations, but eventually success in destroying the cartels would destroy the military, the government. No one can commit to that. It's chaos on a good day down there, but you need the organization that kid heads to keep anything together."

Adler had his evidence. Galbary couldn't ignore the death, the smoke, the betrayal. Nothing would change. The spies had to protect themselves. The politicians protect themselves. The cartels protect themselves. Business was business, the gears would be oiled anew and continue onward.

"Let's get you a doctor, Win."

"The others?"

"Four of you. All still alive."

"Even the one called Franson?"

"Franson, what a malformed sense of humor on him? Adler 13 will lose an eye or maybe two. His skull is well-cracked, but he could recover. Never fit for the field again. No loss. The man is a corrupt moron."

"What's the joke about Franson?"

Grol was slow to speak. "In the late 1950s they said you didn't cross Hoover or Allan Dulles. Dangerous people. For a time Dulles got on the wrong side of Eisenhower, then really crossed Kennedy who dismissed him. During one of his rough patches with Eisenhower, the old general had a young kid bumped up as acting deputy director of central intelligence. Twenty-seven years old. Scared the hell out of Dulles. Bright, vicious young man. Paul Franson Waller."

"Who is he?"

"It's a cover name. One of the early ones used by the man you call Galbary. Refused Eisenhower's request to make the

appointment permanent. Your Galbary had no interest in submitting his real identity to the Senate.”

“So many years....”

“He’s trained with the best, then trained four generations of spies. He gave up the politics of intelligence a long time ago, except that he’s in charge of a lot more than people care to admit. Sometimes he’s on his game. Sometimes he just thinks he’s on his game. For someone like this ‘Franson’ to take such a mocking name. Well, you can see what happened to him. Alright. You okay to move?”

“Yes.”

The thermite was now out. The holes in the asphalt were ugly. The two vehicles destroyed in their fires even worse. It would be gone in an hour. All the events would be hauled away, the evidence disappear under fresh tar. Everything except the memory of the sounds. The memory of the fear.

“What are you going to do about his little plane?”

“Nothing.”

“We know where he’s leaving from?”

“Yes.”

“His plan.”

“We had this alley bugged. We heard everything he said. It was bluster.”

“How do you know?”

“We don’t. We just run the odds.”

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23.

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Hewes sat in the second row of the SUV, a driver's side window seat. It felt strange, disastrous to be alive right now. His body was trying to churn out adrenaline, trying to slow down, trying to fight, trying to realize it had survived.

Hewes knew he was in control of his body but felt he'd received an incomplete user's manual. There were controls and features constantly in use that he couldn't access or tweak or vary with intention. He needed to understand more. Too bad no one could write the complete manual, stuff it full of the secret tricks for optimizing all the base decisions the body made. For one, he couldn't think himself calm. He couldn't think away the bits of skin that might have been damaged in the excess heat. He couldn't turn off his pain receptors that kept reporting in the damage he'd suffered.

His head turned toward motion in the alley. He watched men trying to get Ugalde off Victor Vicente. The General had sat still for so long that paramedics had been treating him for shock. He was just preparing.

Hewes watched him pour something into Vicente's ear. He watched the kidnapping specialist, already in tremendous pain, begin to scream. Loud enough and long enough to rip away at his vocal cords.

Four men succeeded in pulling Ugalde off the wounded man.

The interrogation had barely started.

He wondered if Stanislaw had captured Ugalde's captive. Or was it Adler? Where was Adler, had they packaged him up for delivery to an upset Galbary?

The door opposite Hewes opened. The four men forced Ugalde into the seat.

"He say anything?" Hewes asked once they were alone.

“Stop. It hurts. Things like that. For an expert in kidnapping he’s quite useless responding to torture.”

“I think they have your captive.”

“Perhaps they will have better resources to make him talk.” The General made the polite noises, but it was clear he didn’t believe any of it.

“What did these people....”

“Patrones....”

“What did the Patrones do?”

“I don’t know. They seem confident about it.”

“They seem relieved your captive hadn’t broken.”

“I think it’s real. I think your people, you Americans, won’t listen.”

“I’ve already heard as much.”

“The Patrones have always operated at a different level. More intense.”

“Thermite rather than bullets?”

A nod. “This margin of safety. Twenty hours. What happens after twenty hours?” Ugalde asked.

It was the most important question anyone had asked anywhere in the world that day. Too bad the only people with answers weren’t being pursued. Too many secrets, too much past cooperation in an unraveling partnership. This was the sundering of the deal, but it would cost them all.

Grol opened the front passenger door and took a seat. “I just got these pictures.”

He handed a tablet to Hewes. Pictures of Virginia Business Jet Services. The walls as expected. Save.... There were pictures missing. The pictures Adler claimed he’d commissioned for Hewes. Adler knew the deal was sour. He’d snuck inside and taken back his dearest contributions to the venture.

“He expected me to die,” Hewes said.

“A blood offering for his war,” Grol confirmed.

Hewes was no longer in control of his body. He fought off the tears, but the effort to do so was immense. Obvious, also.

"You need that kid."

"We have the General's captive."

"Take both."

"The decision was already made." Not by Grol. He sounded unhappy with the verdict. Or he was a good liar which came along with being an unmurdered spy. It must have been a miracle Hewes survived as long as he did.

The driver's door opened and a man Hewes had never seen before got behind the wheel. The bulk of the people Grol had brought with him remained behind. Cleaning, hiding, repairing.

"Where are we going?"

"A safe place for a long chat."

"I need to get back to my work," Ugalde said.

"You should be grateful, my friend. We saved your life. We don't have to restore it. Your body can be found in a few days in the ruins of the Mexican Embassy, you know. I think your President would prefer it. You ask many inconvenient questions lately."

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24.

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Grol hadn't said anything during the long, uncomfortable drive to the outskirts of Baltimore. Now that they were stopped, he kept his silence. He let three men assigned as greeters do all the persuading necessary.

"Take me back to my house," Ugalde demanded.

Hands yanked him from the vehicle. Drug him up to the house set on a large fenced lot.

Hewes sat and waited for his own rough treatment. His back alternated between heat and waves of pain. He would have to get someone to tell him what was happening. Did he need a little bit of hydrogen peroxide or a surgeon?

"We're not so far from where you used to peddle violence," Grol said in an accusing tone.

As if there were any secrets from a spy. As if it were possible to forget anything in the modern world.

"We need to talk," Hewes said to Grol.

"I would like that. I've become very fond of you, but I don't think we'll meet again, Win. I'm sorry."

"Are they going to kill me?"

Grol didn't answer the too-blunt question for some time. "I think Galbary will promote you. He's lost a big part of his operations team. Several of them are dead. A larger portion went with Adler 4. He'll need to rebuild."

"On a broken foundation."

Hewes was broken. Everyone involved in today was at least as broken. Not so useful to rebuild on that kind of damage.

"This is a nice place," Grol said. "A fenced yard out back. Not so warm today, but you can get some sun. Watch a film. Take advantage of a few minutes of calm."

"I need to be back in D.C. for dinner."

Grol let the amusement drain from his face. "I'll get a message to her, Win. Your time together is over, I think."

Hewes had signed a ten year deal nine years earlier. He hadn't realized just how thin the paper was. Ten years now stretched to forever.

"Get a shower. No surprise you smell like a sulfur devil."

"We're lucky I haven't shit myself."

Grol didn't bother to smile. "Pay attention, Win. Listen. Learn. Your apprentice days are over. I hinted around what I could, but a spy can't learn all that much under the circumstances we found ourselves in. Learn and live. Oh, get someone to look at your back. You've stopped bleeding, but there'll be clothing stuffed into the wounds. You don't want that getting infected."

A man outside the SUV opened Hewes' door. Hewes got out before they dragged him out. Grol and his driver sped away.

The three men eyed Hewes. Was he a man or an asshole? Hewes cooperated.

Once they were inside the building, two men took up residence at the doors. The third stopped Hewes. "You have time for a shower. Dinner is at seven. Your first interview is at seven thirty."

"Thank you."

He had questions. Plenty. He also knew this man didn't have answers or was well enough trained not to share them. Hewes followed his guide up the stairs.

A minute later, he stood in a locked room. A bed, a door to a bathroom, no television or phone or computer.

He looked out the window. He just then realized they trusted him. He supposed Ugalde was in a room downstairs, no window.

He felt comfortable in the locked room. Safe. Of course, it was temporary and the cost would be that the stars would later coalesce and collapse on his shoulders.

He opened the closet and found clothing that was a bit large for him. Serviceable but not tailored. They expected people at this safehouse, but they hadn't expected him. He pulled



clothing off hangers before he went searching for the things that might have been folded. There was a chest of drawers along one wall. Socks, underwear, a razor and deodorant, all waiting for him. No toothbrush, no toothpaste.

He kept looking. In the bottom drawer he found an unpleasant joke.

He found the twin to the 'camera-phone' he'd taken from the belongings of the dead men one night earlier. The camera that communicated its feed to the Patrones.

He picked it up.

It was almost identical. Of course, he knew it wasn't the same device. The one he'd found...where had he stashed it? In his car, he couldn't remember.

Who had left this here? Why?

He turned the device on expecting to view for a second time a scene near an oil well. Three days of waiting before a massacre of more than a dozen people.

There was no desert this time, no men bouncing around in a vehicle. There was just one man talking into a mirror. Adler 4. A recording of the world's greatest asshole.

Hewes watched. Eventually Adler 4 began fiddling with the camera. He began speaking slowly, trying to make Hewes read his lips. Hewes had never figured out the volume control on the device he'd found before. He tried to pause the recording, but found it wouldn't pause. The damn feed was live. Adler was on the other end of this broadcasting now.

Hewes stopped fussing with the buttons. He looked at the screen. Saw Adler pick his version up, hold it at the mirror. He demonstrated where the keys were, how to enable the volume. Hewes copied well.

"I won't apologize," Adler said.

"You left me to die."

"They always call me in too late to be of any use."

"I'd take an apology right now," Hewes said.

"You wouldn't believe it."

"No."

"Whenever there is a choice in this business, there is no choice. I would have offered my own blood...."

"You offered mine. Why did you have Franson, Adler 13, shoot me?"

"I didn't. All my planning was against the Oaxacans."

"He used a weapon on me. It didn't kill me."

"No."

"You knew he...."

"Had been the main contact with the Oaxacans for several years. I thought it possible his loyalties were flexible."

"I could have died."

"You didn't. The tamper saved you. Twice. I watched the whole thing from the cameras the cartel maintains. You were foolish allowing your weapon to fall into an enemy's hand. Most pistols don't explode in a person's hand."

"There was no way your plan could have worked. Not if the people carrying it out were compromised."

"I know."

"What did you really want aside from my blood."

Adler smiled. Perhaps trying to incite Hewes to supply his own answer. Hewes thought about stomping on the stupid camera.

"The cure for poisoning isn't more poison. We can't give them freer reign to do as they will and hope they'll mend their ways. Those are the stories we tell, but they have no truth."

A question answered with a riddle, that goddamned man. His plans didn't make sense unless Hewes wasn't even thinking in the same direction as Adler.

"I care little for philosophy, especially when someone else would use my blood to ignite a cause."

"We jumped whenever something happened. We prepared for an attack that could kill thousands or topple another important symbol of what we believe. We didn't prepare for an attack that could displace millions, disrupt the modern links of transportation. We should have. Because they aren't going to wait for us to catch up."

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m trying to undo the damage I did at my superior’s behest.”

“Galbary.”

“He’s blind to this, you know. He’s blind and it’s going to kill us all.”

“Why tell me?”

“He’s on his way to you now. He’s going to sit and listen to you. You are going to have to convince him. He’s got hours to mount a response. Not the weeks or months he normally works with. Hours, barely countable as days.”

“I don’t know him.”

“Being his grandson hasn’t lent me any special access. You’ve seen what you’ve seen. I’ve also left you some materials for a demonstration.”

Hewes dug in the bottom drawer again. Nothing.

“Where?”

“Bathroom. Three glass jars.”

Hewes walked into the room. He opened the medicine cabinet. There were three glass jars. One had a scattering of green at the bottom. One was empty. The third had a thin black ooze in it. Some grade of motor oil.

“As close as I could find in a hurry to what was inside that oil well. Pour some into the empty jar. Just a bit. Leave some for a second demonstration.”

Hewes did. He recognized the smell, one he disliked and had since he’d been forced to learn how to change the oil in his father’s car. From another jar, he wiggled out a single green scale. It fluttered into the thin pool of brown-black oil. The reaction was instantaneous. The dirty brown was gone and the jar was filled with the green scale.

“They’re hungry. They’re fast. Asexual reproduction whenever they’re in the presence of food.”

“Oil isn’t food.”

"These things disagree. They've been bred to slurp and slurp. Each scale is a couple million bacteria? Yeast? I don't know. They reproduce just that fast."

Fast enough to make it seem like an oil well was exploding?

Hewes poured another thin stream of the viscous oil into the testing jar. As fast as the oil touched the scale, the volume of green increased. Hewes thought it had to be an awful trick. He didn't want to believe.

"The Patrones are going after oil wells?"

"I don't know."

"How? I think people would notice their pumps exploding."

"This is the activated form. I guess it has a dormant form as well. You watched the video of the oil well. It had to be loaded with the dormant. Something activated it."

Hewes remembered that the explosion had been the trigger for the massacre. Something the Oaxacans, the Patrones, hadn't wanted seen.

"That's what we're looking at. When the dormant scale goes active, oil wells blow up."

"That would cripple the world."

"Or the U.S. at least. I think that's the point."

"I don't understand. If there's no oil coming from the earth, there's no driving cars, moving vegetables in trucks, no one flying halfway around the world, no corporate jobs. All the money people pay out for drugs, it's gone. They'd be putting themselves out of business."

A conversation late the night before returned to him. Olive's voice: I never assume that my enemy has the same goal I do.

"What does a man that wealthy need with more wealth?" Adler asked. "Another billion dollars? His people don't spend the money they already have...."

Hewes opened his mouth. He closed it before he could come up with a response. Eventually ‘more money’ failed as a temptation.

“...but they did invest it, didn’t they? We’re thinking oil, but they may have thought much wider,” Adler said. His voice the temperature of ice.

“When will we know?”

Hadn’t the kid said something about that? A safety period of twenty hours.

“A day? Two or three? I don’t know.”

“If it’s already in some of the oil wells....”

“Why stop there? An oil pipeline. Oil refineries. Blow them all up.”

Adler nodded.

“There was the ruler of a city that had its wealthy districts crammed next to slums. This emperor’s enemies said that he once orchestrated fires against all the poor areas built with wood. A single great fire that consumed almost everything. When he rebuilt, he took over the burned-out sections for his own palace, acres after acres. Enough land to put in a private lake, in the middle of a once-densely packed city. We call the man Nero.”

“So?”

“For three decades, four decades, heedless people fed their disposable income or more than their disposable income, everything they could steal, south of the border. To Colombia, to Mexico. Most of the cartel splinters consume what they earn, fancy homes and jets and very short lives. This one group out of Oaxaca, they saved the money. Invested it. Perhaps instead of fire to burn out their neighbors to the north they invested in green scale. Take us back to the pre-industrial revolution. Take away every bit of might we once possessed. Far better than business as usual. They wouldn’t be drug lords in that new world. They’d just be lords. The wealthiest ever to exist and no one to stop them.”

“What can we do?”

"How many years must this have taken? We have days, maybe just hours, to unravel a year of work, maybe a decade."

"It's impossible."

"We have to try."

"How?"

Adler nodded. He looked like an accountant listening to a liar of a client, trying to figure out how to prepare tax documents that wouldn't see him imprisoned. Cagey and focused. "First you need Galbary to believe you."

"I'll do the demonstration."

"If he doesn't believe you, he'll shove you into a prison."

Hewes considered the possibility.

"I predicted which safe house he'd have you taken to. I predicted the room he'd entrust to you. I had no trouble walking inside it and leaving these things for you. I know how he thinks. I just can't make him see what he chooses to ignore. I can't force him to see magnitude. I can't force him to pick up speed."

"I'm already in a prison. This one," Hewes said.

"This is him being polite. If he changes his mind, you're stuck. Unless you prepare now."

Hewes shook his head.

"You're going to trust your life to a man you don't know? A man Kennedy drafted an order to have killed? Never signed it. He meant to do it until calmer words reached him. Galbary got a copy of the order, had it framed, keeps it in his office."

"I don't trust you."

"I didn't think you would. I still need you to help me."

"No."

"I was sure enough of your answer. I would apologize for this, but you wouldn't believe me. This is necessary for you to witness."

Adler knocked the mirror in front of him off a table. Hewes recognized the sight. His business, the Client Receiving building. The one that had a purchase offer forthcoming. There were gallon jugs interspersed through the room.

“I think the only thing you love is here, to be honest. Being successful. Being well-to-do. Helping the wealthy for so long you forget you’re just a servant to them. One they rent by the half-hour.”

Adler propped the camera and left it on the table. He stalked around the room, loosening caps. Splashing liquid on the carpets, the furniture, the tile, the walls.

“No,” Hewes moaned. “Please don’t.”

There was no one listening. The minutes slid past and all that Hewes said went unheard. The gallon jugs emptied their guts.

At last, the room was finished. Adler snatched up the camera, panned around the room, the place where Hewes had spent nine years of his attention and care and love. Where even the night before he’d been concerned that he’d have to pull up carpet and tile to hide the blood Adler’s thugs had lugged in.

“Ready?”

“No.”

Adler lit a match, threw it, strode out of the room. He paused in the narrow gap between the two buildings. He watched the flames retrace the footwork Adler had laid down. Where he’d stepped, where he’d walked, where he’d lavished care in the deconstruction of the room.

Adler pulled the door shut and walked into the hangar where the jugs had been replaced by barrels. It took him a moment to find a perch for the camera. The man flicked on all the lights and proceeded inside. This time he used a long thin knife to punch holes in the plastic barrels. Two or three or four holes per barrel. He started at the far side of the room and worked his way back to the door. He spent an extra few moments with the barrel under the Gulfstream. It wasn’t the very newest thing. Save for the blood that would need to be removed from the finishes, it was in fine shape. Ten million easy. Perhaps fifteen or twenty to the right buyer. Adler lit a second match. The room roared to life.

Adler remained by the door a moment watching. The jet would be destroyed. Virginia Business Jet Services was destroyed.

"After they stick you in their prison, you bust out. Come and get me, Hewes."

Adler disappeared, but he left the device facing into the hangar. The lights all on. The flames turned up to demonic.

Hewes let the device slip from his hand into the bathroom sink. He took a bit of care not to knock over the jars of oil and scale. He watched the fire. He imagined Client Receiving. He imagined the slow, plodding response of the fire suppression team on the field. He imagined the future, a conversation with his insurance broker, the underwriter representatives, the wriggling they would do to slip out of an arson case.

All the success in the world burned in less than a day. Security and a touch of wealth just black smears on scorched concrete.

Hewes didn't hear a knock, but he felt someone enter his room. Or his prison cell.

"Galbary sends his regards," an old man's voice called out.

Hewes took three steps out of the bathroom.

The old man was here. Galbary. The grandfather of the bastard who had caused all this misery. Their misery could make misery universal. Could and would.

"Galbary sends his regards."

Hewes stepped back into the bathroom. He locked the door, but didn't have any faith it would keep anyone out.

He turned on the shower and let the water get warm. He pulled out a towel. The entire time he watched the recorder in the sink. He watched the flames dancing inside his hangar. Dancing up and inside and through the Gulfstream. Consuming his dream. Deadening him mind, body, and soul. He hoped the scars would heal. Heal hard and knotty. He hoped the scars would toughen him. He knew that hell was here, but that the deeper levels were hours and days ahead. A hard descent all the way down.



## FROM THE WRITER

Thank you for reading *Never A Wasted Crisis*. My name is James Schubring and I enjoyed writing this story for you. I've written quite a few novels over the years, such as *Indiscriminate* (2011) and *White Wolf Hunger* (2012), about people thrown into desperate situations, but have only recently started publishing them for readers to find.

Would you mind doing me a favor? If you loved this book, hated it, or had any kind of strong reaction, please take a moment to tell a friend what you thought. Feel free to email me your opinions, too. My email is:

[james@jameseschubring.com](mailto:james@jameseschubring.com).

Your reviews help me with my future writing. They also assist new readers in finding my work.

I'm already at work on more tales in the Green Scale cycle. Keep up with my progress by visiting my website: [JamesSchubring.com](http://JamesSchubring.com). I hope you'll enjoy reading these further stories as much as I look forward to writing them.