



TOM CLANCY'S

SPLINTER: CELL
BLACKLIST™

AFTERMATH

WRITTEN BY PETER TELEP
FIRST TIME IN PRINT



“Holy shit.”

That expletive had come from the SMI table, where Grim was bringing up Keyhole satellite surveillance footage, along with imagery captured by the U.S. Army’s latest Vertical Take-Off and Landing Unmanned Aerial System dubbed the “Hummingbird.”

Fisher reached the table and scanned the schematics of the drone, displayed on a data bar to his right.

Equipped with the ARGUS array composed of several cameras and a host of other sensor systems, the Hummingbird and her systems were capable of capturing 1.8 gigapixel high-resolution mosaic images and video, making it one of the most capable surveillance drones on the planet.

At the moment, the UAV had her cameras and sensors directed at a rugged, snowcapped mountainside with a long pennon of black smoke rising from it.

“What?” asked Fisher.

“That’s Dykh-Tau,” said Grim. “It means ‘jagged mount’ in Russian. It’s about five klicks north of the Georgia border, and it’s the second-highest peak in the Caucasus Mountains.”

“That’s a pretty big fire down there.”

“That’s not just a fire. Kasperov’s plane just crashed.”

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RED STORM RISING

PATRIOT GAMES

THE CARDINAL OF THE KREMLIN

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WITHOUT REMORSE

DEBT OF HONOR

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THE BEAR AND THE DRAGON

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***SPLINTER
CELL***[®]

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BOLIVIA'S North Yungas Road is known by the locals as El Camino de la Muerte, the Road of Death. It was constructed by Paraguayan prisoners of war back in the 1930s and is one of just a few routes through the mountainous rainforest that connects the country's seat of government, La Paz, with the northern regions some sixty-nine kilometers away. The road is barely wide enough for two cars abreast, with dozens of sheer vertical drop-offs lacking any form of guardrails. There is no margin for error. When it rains, rocks and earth grow loose from the towering hillsides above and tumble down along the switchbacks. As drivers round a hairpin turn, they're confronted by a mudslide or a wall of crumbling boulders that forces them off the ledge to plummet more than six hundred meters to the valley below, where the Coroico River rushes to join the Amazon. Even when nothing blocks the mostly unpaved path, dense fog often descends along the vine-covered cliffs, reducing visibility to zero. Numerous crosses and stone cairns mark the locations where, for two to three hundred loved ones each year, the journey ended and they became part of North Yungas's dark legend. Though some say it's cursed, clutched forever in the hands of the Devil, others have simply declared it the world's most dangerous road.

Sam Fisher knew all about North Yungas, and he knew the man he was chasing had deliberately led him up there to turn him into another statistic. The son of a bitch had no idea that he'd awakened America's newest and most formidable beast, a blacker-than-black special ops and counterterrorism unit known as Fourth Echelon, commanded by Fisher and free to sink its sharpened talons into men like him. Free to do whatever it took with impunity.

Fisher squeezed the stolen motorcycle's clutch lever, geared up, and accelerated. He gritted his teeth and cut hard around the next bend, the old Yamaha fishtailing and sending a bolt of anxiety up his spine. As he came out of the turn, the bike's rusting fenders rattled, and the faded sticker of Jesus affixed to the gas tank began peeling back. At once the headlight flickered through the gloom and heavy rain, and he found his prey just a few meters ahead, rooster tails of mud rising from the man's own bike. Fisher was out of gears, wailing now at full throttle.

The man known to intelligence sources as Hamed Rahmani, and with the known alias of Abu Jafar Harawi, saw something ahead and cut his wheel sharply, weaving around two pieces of rock appropriately shaped like coffins, one lying across the other. Fisher did likewise, his shoulder brushing along the wet stone. The bike's engine began to cough and sputter as they climbed toward nearly five kilometers above sea level. They sped by a wider section used for passing, then crossed onto a single-lane stretch running along at least a kilometer of cliffs whose ledges sent streams of water into the darkness.

Fisher's arms tensed, his triceps already sore from keeping a white-knuckled grip on the handlebars. He shifted gears again as Rahmani whipped around the next bend and vanished momentarily, only to reappear—his headlight sweeping along the wall to his right.

Seeing that Rahmani was widening the gap, Fisher leaned into the bike and accelerated, tucking his elbows, trying to make himself a little more aerodynamic to bleed every bit of speed out of the machine.

Suddenly, he was thrown to the right, the front wheel having connected with a piece of rock that served as a ramp, and as both wheels left the road, he thought the chase was over and that he should've stopped like most locals did to pour libations of beer into the earth and ask the goddess Pachamama

for safe passage—because in three seconds it might all end here.

As both tires slammed back onto the dirt, the impact reverberating up his spine, he gasped and recovered control, cutting the wheel to the left to avoid another section of larger gravel and by necessity taking the bike to within a tire's width of the ledge. He groaned and leaned to his right, guiding the motorcycle past the gravel, then back, closer to the wall. Yes, he'd earned himself a break now.

What little he could see of the next ravine gave him pause, and he thought of the gear pack he'd left in La Paz, bulging with the rest of his weapons, along with his surveillance and comm equipment. He'd gone into the bar completely undercover, plainclothes. Somehow, somehow, the bastard had been tipped off and had bolted. There'd been no time, no opportunity to get on Rahmani's wheel armed for bear. For the time being it was just the two of them, mano a mano, motorcycle to motorcycle. Fisher's custom FN Five-seveN semiautomatic pistol with integrated suppressor was tucked into a concealed holster at his hip, and he had to assume that Rahmani was packing at least one or more small arms.

Fisher checked the fuel gauge: about half a tank. If he couldn't overtake Rahmani, then maybe the thug would run out of gas first. Or maybe Fisher would. There was no way to tell, so . . . he would *have* to catch up and take this man alive. Rahmani was an army major and intel officer with MOI, Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security. That alone made him valuable. However, he liked the moonlight as a thief who along with a select group of friends had gotten their hands on one hundred pounds of highly enriched uranium, or HEU, from Mayak, one of the largest nuclear facilities in the Russian Federation. After the theft he'd been spotted in Baghdad, then had vanished for a while until he popped up in Bolivia with some drug smuggling associates. He'd thought he was safe. Of course, he had no idea who he was dealing with now.

Blinking wind and water from his eyes, Fisher riveted his gaze on that dim light ahead, trying to follow Rahmani's trail in the mud, letting him have the more difficult job of picking the lines through the mud around, and across the debris washing onto the roadway.

After a relatively lazy turn to the right, with a curtain of vines extending three meters from the cliff wall to provide a few seconds of solace from the rain, Fisher's jaw dropped, and a curse burst from his lips.

A refrigerated shipping truck blocked most of the road. There was only a half-meter-wide track to the left of the vehicle, running along the broken ledge. The driver had, as many did, pulled over and parked to wait out the storm, fearful that the road ahead might be too dangerous and he'd have better judgment in the morning. These assumptions were borne out as the obese driver, a ball cap perched on his head, leaned out from his cab and shouted in Spanish for Fisher to stop and seek cover.

But there, off to the left, was Rahmani, one hand on his handlebars, the other sliding along the truck's side for balance as he finally reached the front bumper, gunned his engine, and was off again.

As Fisher slowed and carefully—breathlessly—guided his motorcycle around the back of the truck coming alongside it, he reminded himself to keep his gaze on where he wanted to go. Don't look down. Damn, the temptation was too great, and as he coasted forward, he flicked his glance to the left. Through chutes of rain and the swirling gloom, he saw how the edge of the cliff was just a hairsbreadth away and dropped off into nothingness. Just then, his front tire shoved through some loose rocks that tumbled over the side. Fisher's heart was squarely in his throat.

Rahmani's engine whined as he once again raced along the wall, creating a sizable gap. Tensing, Fisher pushed off the truck, reached the front bumper, then geared up and took off, popping a small

and unintended wheelie as he did so. They were nearing La Cumbre Pass, the highest point along the road, which was followed by a breakneck descent all the way to Coroico.

After a final push at full throttle that brought Fisher within an estimated fifty meters of Rahman, the road veered left, then pitched forward, and abruptly they were barreling toward the next set of hairpin turns.

Wanting to check his speed but fearful of averting his gaze for even a second, Fisher clutched the handlebars a little tighter but maintained speed. A pile of rocks off to his left sent him hard toward the wall once more, but he'd gone too far and was heading for the rock when he turned back and overcorrected. He was about to lose control but jerked once more and came out of the turn while dragging one boot along the ground.

Rahmani was weaving around the debris like a professional stuntman, his long black hair flailing in the wind. They dropped farther, swinging around as though on a roulette wheel until the road straightened out. Fisher thought he'd have a moment to speed up, but from a series of ledges above came torrents of heavy rain blasting down like a half dozen fire hoses running wide open.

Fisher wove around the first two columns of water, but the next one was falling far too close to the wall, driving him back to the outside and along the ledge once more. Here the ground was much more unstable; his back wheel felt mushy, and rocks tumbled into the ravine behind him. As he cleared the gauntlet, he swore aloud—because another lay before him:

A pair of waterfalls about three meters apart were raging down the cliff now, washing hard over the road and eating hungrily at the ledge. Rahmani, that suicidal maniac, muscled his bike right through the flow, getting kicked off to the side and nearly washed over before he slammed his wheel to the right and managed at the very last second to leap free with a high-pitched whine of his engine and a sputter from his tires.

With a renewed resolve and drawing on a long career of taking risks that would leave most men weak-kneed and clutching their throats, Fisher rolled his wrist and blasted into the waterfall at top speed, assuring himself that his forward momentum was a greater force than the water but realizing the last second that his assurances were bullshit. If he didn't steer for the wall, he was dead.

For the span of three full heartbeats, he saw only the water, haloed in gloom and washing over him until abruptly he broke free, smiled—and the bike slid out from beneath him. That he got his foot down before dumping was a small miracle, and he was able to kick up and right himself—just as his handlebar began dragging along the wall, a few sparks flickering. He leaned into his next turn and reached a stretch of more level ground.

Rahmani was far below now, having already negotiated the next hairpin, his headlight like a firefly, tiny against the colossal skyscrapers of rock.

But just ahead of him, lumbering downhill like a tortoise, was another pair of lights, and for just a moment the vehicle's silhouette appeared: a sedan, probably a taxi, whose driver was either carrying a very high-paying fare or was desperate to get home despite the weather. At any rate, that driver was suddenly Fisher's best buddy. If the road remained as narrow as it presently was, Rahmani would either lose time trying to pass the taxi or find himself stuck behind it—with Fisher roaring up behind him.

Riding a new rush of adrenaline, Fisher set about taking the hairpin turn as swiftly and violently as he could, letting his left foot drag as he flung himself into the curve, wishing he had a dedicated ra-

bike so he could brush his knee along the mud. He spun out again, nearly lost it, then drifted his way to a straight course and began sewing up the gap.

One of the road's few surviving signs—most of them had been struck by drivers and flattened or smashed off the cliff—indicated another sharp turn ahead. Fisher took a deep breath and held it. Bringing himself as close to the wall as he dared and locking his gaze on his headlight's meager beam, he soared around the turn, losing a bit of traction before easing up and letting the bike guide him in the corner. The old Yamaha was a true piece of crap, but she was growing on him now, his gear shifts a little more intuitive, the sounds of the motor communicating speed much more clearly.

Rahmani drew up fast on the taxi, and a second glance there showed he was trapped behind it. Fisher gritted his teeth and remained tight to the wall, his speed nearly twice that of Rahmani's. The cabdriver had to be confronting his own mortality, and for a moment, Rahmani looked back, his face cast in the pallid glow of Fisher's light. His eyes bugged out as he realized he'd failed to lose Fisher and was seconds away from being caught.

A faint thrumming of rotors sent Fisher's gaze skyward. Then another sound erupted, a large diesel engine, an engine much louder than the taxi's.

They were nearing another sharp turn to the right, and abruptly it was there: an old Volvo F-series delivery truck from the 1970s, its daredevil of a driver taking up the entire road and rumbling head-on toward the taxi.

The truck driver locked up his brakes, as did the cabdriver, but their tires had little traction across the sheets of rain and mud.

"Sam, we're back online, target locked on with FLIR, and Briggs is inbound," came a familiar voice through the nickel-sized subdermal embedded behind his ear.

Fisher wasn't wearing the subvocal transceiver, or SVT, patch on his throat, so he couldn't respond, but that hardly mattered.

The truck and taxi collided in a thundering, screeching explosion of twisting metal and fiberglass and shattering glass that stole his breath and sent debris hurtling toward him.

The taxi's front end crushed as though it were made of papier-mâché, and the truck kept coming, plowing the taxi back with the front wheels rising off the dirt.

Rahmani had no time to react. He screamed and struck the sedan's rear bumper. His front wheel folded like a taco as the bike slid sideways, and in the next second he caromed off the rear window and vanished beneath the vehicle—

Into the meat grinder.

The squealing and gurgling and crunching of metal grew to a crescendo as Fisher cursed and steered for the barest of openings on the left side, trying to skirt around the bulldozing truck. He swore again because the taxicab with Rahmani beneath began sliding toward the ledge, cutting him off. He crashed into the taxi and flew headfirst over the handlebars, went tumbling across the cab's trunk, and then the force of the Volvo's momentum sent him rolling off the side of the sedan.

A stretch of rocks and earth about eight inches wide saved Fisher's life.

He struck that patch shoulder-first, realized where he was—about to plunge over the ledge—and reflexively reached out with both hands, clutching some heavy weeds and grasses that sprouted along the cliffside.

His legs came whipping around, the force driving the grass through his fingers, his grip no tentative at best. He dug the tips of his boots into the mountainside, but there was no good purchase on the wet rock and mud, and his legs dangled. He groaned with exertion, his arms literally trembling under the load. Something flashed to his left, and there it was, the sticker of Jesus that had been peeling off his motorcycle's gas tank; it fluttered on a rock for a few seconds, then blew away.

Above Fisher, off to his right, the truck's rear wheels gave out, and the lumbering vehicle began sliding tailfirst toward the edge. The driver tried to steer out of the slide, but it was too late.

The entire ledge quaked as the Volvo's rear wheels hung in midair while the undercarriage slammed down and was dragged along the stone. Finally, the front wheels left the road, even as the driver, a lean, bearded man in coveralls, tried to bail out, but the truck was already airborne. Fisher watched with an eerie fascination as the driver wailed and the vehicle's headlights shone straight up into the rain, then wiped across Fisher before the truck tumbled away, twin beams flashing and dancing, growing fainter, fainter . . . until a distant impact and whoosh of flames resounded from somewhere below.

The helicopter was overhead now, the rotor wash whipping through the storm. That would be a Mi-24 Russian-made helicopter gunship, one of a small fleet the government of Bolivia had purchased from the Russians to combat the drug trade. Fisher had sent Briggs to link up with the pilot and weapons system operator the moment their target had bolted.

A spotlight shone on Fisher, then the nylon fast rope dropped at his shoulder, within arm's reach. He reached out for the rope even as, from above, an African-American man dressed in full Kevlar-weave tactical operation suit and wearing trifocal sonar goggles came sliding down, looking for all the world like Fisher himself.

Clutching the rope, Fisher managed to climb back up and onto the road, then he guided the rope toward the wall so that the man, Isaac Briggs, could hop onto the mud.

Briggs was a kid, really, just twenty-seven, former U.S. Army intel officer, former paramilitary operator with the CIA, current member of Fourth Echelon—which he liked to call 4E because he hailed from a world of e-books and theories and military history, a world dominated by acronyms and PowerPoints that, in the world according to Fisher, didn't mean jack when you were in the field. Briggs was a good guy, handpicked by Fisher, and he was just now escaping from the clutches of theory and learning to trust his instincts. No more company man for him. He worked for Fourth Echelon now.

"Got here as soon as we could," Briggs cried, tugging up the goggles and lifting his voice over the sound of the chopper.

Fisher shrugged. "Doesn't matter. This thing's gone to shit."

Ignoring the needling pain that seemed to come from every part of his body, Fisher led Briggs back toward the taxi, which was now hanging partially off the ledge. The stench of leaking gasoline and oil still rose through the rain as they drew near.

"Damn," Briggs gasped.

The taxi's engine was somewhere in the backseat. The driver's head—just his head—was lying on the rear dashboard, his severed left arm jutting from a rear window.

Fisher frowned at Briggs. "You're not gonna be sick, are you?"

“I was already sick of chasing this bastard around the world.”

“Well, you got your wish. It ends here. And not well for us.” Fisher glared at the chopper. “Call the bird. Tell him to bug out for a few minutes till we’re ready for him.”

Briggs nodded and barked orders into his radio.

Tensing, Fisher dropped to all fours, called for Briggs to hand him a flashlight, and let the beam play under the wreckage. He spotted one of Rahmani’s legs, IDed by the color of the man’s pants, shoved up into the cab’s transmission, but the rest of him was missing.

Releasing another string of curses, Fisher sprang to his feet and directed the light across the road, the beam slowly exposing a trail of body parts near the wall, one they’d missed walking over because it was hidden in the shadows. They found the torso with the head still attached; it was lying among some rocks, the blood washing off in the rain.

Fisher was ready to strangle someone, and Briggs sensed that. He kept his distance, and without a word, they began a meticulous search of the body and scoured the rest of the road for anything Rahmani might have been carrying. Fisher found a small pistol, a beat-up old Makarov, but nothing else. Briggs snapped as many photos as he could before they gathered up the body parts in a “glorified bag” and sent them up to the chopper when it returned.

Rahmani had been the best lead they’d had in locating that stolen uranium. That his group had pulled off the robbery was nothing short of miraculous, which had the world’s intelligence communities assuming that it was an inside job. The general public had no idea what was happening and the Russians were thus far tight-lipped about the entire affair. Sorry, nyet, this is state secret information.

The Mayak facility was two hours south of Ekaterinburg, at the end of unmarked back roads, near a forested plateau of lakes and small rivers. It was protected by chain-link barbed-wire fences and a deforested strip of land that provided no cover. The facility had just been updated with a new electronic surveillance system provided by the United States and a radiation monitoring system that was well-nigh impossible to defeat—unless your name was Sam Fisher. The rest of its defenses were classified, but it was not reckless to assume that the Russians had a keen interest in guarding the nuclear material—especially when they’d been backed by the U.S. Congress to the tune of 350 million dollars to build a heavily fortified warehouse or “Plutonium Palace” to store approximately 40 percent of their military’s excess fissile material.

Nevertheless, Rahmani and his unidentified cronies had not only broken into the facility but had managed to escape from it with their pockets glowing green. Their smuggling route was still a point of conjecture. Kazakhstan was only a four-hour drive to the south, but that course would’ve taken them through Chelyabinsk and many border checkpoints. They had more likely gone southwest, traveling some 1,200 miles or more to the Caspian Sea, with the goal of smuggling the uranium through Azerbaijan and into Turkey.

What’s more, it took the Russian government more than three days to officially report the incident, giving the thieves ample time to escape the country. Whether the Russians were doing their own damage control or the theft was entirely unnoticed by their staff at the facility was a second point of conjecture.

A tip from the National Intelligence Organization of Turkey—**Teşkilatı Milli İstihbarat**—led to a raid on a small machine shop in an industrial sector of Istanbul situated near slum

where the noise of constructing a nuclear weapon was easily masked. And yes, Fisher had learned long ago that the process of nuclear bomb making was, in fact, quite loud, which seemed rather fitting given the nature of the device.

Their raid—a joint effort between the United States and Russia’s own foreign intelligence service Sluzhba Vneshney Razvedki, or SVR—had turned up little. Rahmani’s group had already pulled up stakes before they’d fully moved in and begun constructing their weapon. The SVR agent operating with them was a sour-faced mute who offered little more than shrugs between playing on his smartphone. Fisher had suggested that Istanbul was merely a diversionary stop along their route. The SVR agent had agreed. Then shrugged. Then agreed again.

Bottom line: Rahmani had known where to find the uranium. And if he hadn’t, he would’ve at least known the players who could point Fisher and his team in the right direction.

For now, though, all Fisher could do was stare through the rain as he was hoisted up to the chopper.

The mountainside seemed darker and even emptier now. El Camino de la Muerte had claimed three more victims, and Fisher should have been grateful that he hadn’t been the fourth, but he wasn’t. He felt only anger—knots of anger—tightening in his gut.

“MONEY is like alcohol,” Igor Kasperov was telling the reporters from the *Wall Street Journal* as they toured his Moscow headquarters. “It’s good to have enough, but it’s not target. I’m here to be global police and peacekeeper. I’m here to do charity work everywhere. I’m here, I guess, to save our world.” He tossed a hand into the air and unleashed one of his trademark smiles that had been featured on the cover of *Time* magazine. The two gray-haired, bespectacled reporters beamed back at him.

Kasperov was no stranger to entertaining the press in the old factory that was now the headquarters of Kasperov Labs, one of the most successful computer antivirus corporations on the planet. That was no boast. According to *Forbes*, between 2009 and 2012 retail sales of his software increased 17 percent, reaching almost 5.5 million a year—nearly as much as his rivals Symantec and McAfee combined. Worldwide, he had over 60 million users of his security network, users who sent data to his headquarters every time they downloaded an application to their desktops. The cloud-based system automatically checked the code against a “green base” of 300 million software objects it knew to be trustworthy, as well as a “red base” of 94 million known malicious objects. Kasperov’s code was also embedded in Microsoft, Cisco, and Juniper Networks products, effectively giving the company 40 million users. His critics often quibbled over the accuracy of those numbers. He’d send them cases of vodka with notes that instructed them to relax and simply watch as Kasperov Labs became *the* world’s leading provider of antivirus software.

To that end, Kasperov took enormous pleasure in employing hundreds of software engineers, coders, and designers barely out of college. This motley crew of pierced-and-tattooed warriors created a magnificent dorm room atmosphere that was, no pun intended, infected with their enthusiasm. They’d seen pictures of the playful Google offices in Mountain View, California, and had become, in a word, inspired. These reporters could sense that, and Kasperov played it up for them, joking around with the staff, high-fiving them like a six-foot-five rock star with unkempt sandy blond hair that he constantly tossed out of his face. His daily glasses of vodka had turned his cheeks ruddy, and last year he’d begun wearing bifocals, but he was still young enough for an American girlfriend barely thirty-two who’d modeled for Victoria’s Secret among others. Surrounded by his youthful staff and his lover, he would defy time and live forever because life was good. Life was fun.

Without question, these uptight American journalists would refer to him as an oligarch in their reports, a continent-hopping mogul who’d made his fortune after the fall of the Soviet Union. They say he was a wild man who had the president’s ear and was, like the country’s other oligarchs, heavily influencing the government because of his connections and wealth. He would dismiss those shopworn claims and give them something more impressive to write about that would enthrall their readers. To begin, he would discuss the ambitious nature of his new offices in Peru and the great work he was going to do there.

They stood now on a balcony overlooking the hundreds of individually decorated cubicles and walls of classic arcade games. Banks of enormous windows brought in the snowscape and frozen Moskva River beyond. “It is wonderful, is it not?” he asked.

The reporters nodded, issued perfunctory grins, then launched quite suddenly and aggressively into their questions, as though the sheen of his celebrity and success had suddenly worn thin.

“What do you think about social media websites like Facebook, Instagram, and others?”

Kasperov refilled their vodka glasses as he spoke. “Freedom is good thing. We all know this. But too much freedom allows bad guys to do bad things, right?”

“So you don’t like Facebook.”

“I’m *suspicious* of these websites. We have VK here, right? It’s like Facebook clone, very popular even my daughter who’s in college has account. But these websites can be used by wrong people to send wrong messages.”

“You said freedom is a good thing. But exactly how much freedom do *you* have?”

“What do mean? I have much freedom!” He gestured with his drink toward the work floor. “And so do they.”

Kasperov knew exactly what they were getting at, but he preferred not to discuss it.

In Russia, high-tech firms like his had to cooperate with the *siloviki*—the network of military security, law enforcement, and KGB veterans at the core of President Treskayev’s regime. Kasperov worked intimately with the SVR and other agencies to hunt down, expose, and capture cybercriminals who’d already unleashed attacks on the banking systems in the United States and Europe. In turn, the Kremlin had given him enough freedom to become the successful entrepreneur he was, but the arrangement was their business—not fodder for American journalism.

“You work very closely with the intelligence community here, don’t you?”

“What is it they say in *Top Gun* movie? I could tell you, but then I must kill you, right?” He broke out in raucous laughter that wasn’t quite mimicked by the reporters.

“Mr. Kasperov, there have been some allegations linking you to the VK blackout during the elections. Some say you helped the government bring down the social media website to help quell the opposition. After all, they *had* struck a rallying cry on social media.”

“I’ve already commented on that. I had nothing to do with this. Nothing at all. We detected no attacks on VK. None at all. We don’t know what happened.”

“And you don’t find that—to use your word—*suspicious*?”

“Of course I do, but it’s all been investigated and put to sleep. Don’t you have any more questions? If not, I have some stories to tell you.”

The journalists frowned at each other, then the taller one spoke up again: “Your company is valuable to the Kremlin, so do you think you can ever really be independent of it?”

Kasperov tried to quell his frustration. He had been told this would be an interview, not an interrogation. “There’s no problem here. We work together the same way other companies work with the American government. Executive orders by your past presidents provide exchange of data between the private sector and government. Your Homeland Security regulates critical infrastructure, same as we do. We’re very happy in this marriage.”

He took a long pull on his vodka, then tipped his head and led them across the balcony to his office door. He ushered them inside, and they gasped over the mementoes of his past and world travels: a taxidermy African lion mount from one of his safaris; thousands of rare artifacts and gem stones meticulously arranged in glass cases; walls of software boxes written in German and Chinese; Persian rugs splayed across the floor; a basketball jersey from the New Jersey Nets in a glass case, the NBA team owned by a Russian billionaire friend; photos of himself with celebrities and world dignitaries, including

American President Patricia Caldwell and the pope; and finally, his dark green dress jacket from his tenure as an intelligence officer with the Soviet Army. His desk, which was loosely copied from the one located in the reception area of the British House of Commons building and cost more than a three-bedroom house in Liverpool, had an opaque glass top and a limestone front. On it sat a picture of himself with his parents before their house, a meager shack on the outskirts of St. Petersburg.

He gestured toward a sprawling leather sofa that, when the reporters sank deeply into the cushions, made them look like dwarves. Kasperov gesticulated more wildly now as he spoke: “Welcome to my life. A poor boy from St. Petersburg. I got lucky. But you know story, right?”

One of the reporters glanced at his notes. “At sixteen you were accepted into a five-year program at the KGB-backed Institute of Cryptography, Telecommunications, and Computer Science. After graduation, you were commissioned as an intelligence officer in the Soviet Army.”

“Yes, but reason I’m here is because one day, I’m like on my computer, and it’s virus there. This is a long time ago, 1989. Every time I find new virus, I get more curious. I spend hundreds of hours thinking about them, working on them. This is how I made name for myself in Soviet Army.” Kasperov glanced to the doorway, where, in the shadows, a man appeared, a familiar man whose presence suddenly dampened his mood.

“Mr. Kasperov, you’ve been touted around the world as a generous and remarkable businessman, but you have to admit, you’re surrounded by others in your country who might not be quite as honest as you are. Oligarchs, mafia . . . How do you keep yourself above all the corruption?”

Kasperov glanced once more at the doorway and tried to keep a happy face. “I keep pictures of my family close to my heart. I keep pictures of children all over the world I’ve helped close to my heart. I know they need me and believe in me. I know this company can help me do great things because they believe in it.”

“Do you think your company can help foster better relations between our nations?”

“Oh, I think it already has.”

“I can see why you say that . . . Your girlfriend’s an American. Any talk of marriage?”

He blushed. “No marriage yet. Now, gentlemen, you’ll have to excuse me, I have another visitor. You’ll go downstairs, one of my best managers, Patrik Ruggov—we call him Kannonball—will show you exactly how we work with customer.”

The journalists rose and Kasperov escorted them to the spiral staircase, then he returned to the man who’d been waiting for him in the shadows.

“Hello, Chern,” Kasperov grunted in Russian.

“Igor, I see you are massaging your ego again.”

Kasperov ignored the remark and stormed back into his office. Chern followed.

“Shut the door,” Kasperov ordered him.

Chern smirked and complied.

Kasperov knew this man only by his nickname, “Chernobyl,” aka “Chern.” Leonine, with a prominent gray widow’s peak and fiery blue eyes, Chern contaminated everything he touched and was often the bearer of bad news. While officially he was a member of the SBP, the Presidential Security Service, he served unofficially as President Treskayev’s personal strong arm and courier.

“How is your daughter doing?” Chern asked.

“Very well.”

“She’s away at school, yes?”

“She just flew home for a short visit.”

Chern grinned over that, then moved to the window at the far end of the office. He spent a long moment staring at the snow through the frosted glass, then lifted his voice. “There’s someone else who needs to go home.”

“And who’s that?”

“Calamity Jane.”

Kasperov nearly spit out his vodka. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me.”

“That can’t be possible.”

Chern’s eyes widened. “Are you that naïve?”

“I was told from the beginning that it was a deterrent, a deterrent that would *never* be used.”

“Then you *are* that naïve.”

Calamity Jane, named after the famous American frontierswoman, was created by Kasperov and a few of his lead programmers, most notably his man Kannonball. It was, in their estimation, the most malicious computer virus in the world; it not only would bring down the American banking system but would also render the country’s GPS system useless by exploiting a systemic problem with the cryptographic keying scheme. The virus would take advantage of this weakness before Raytheon delivered to the U.S. Air Force its Next Generation Operational Control System, or OCX, with the GPS III, third generation, satellites. With banks and GPS offline, the virus would move on to major utilities. Of course, he and his team were the best people to construct such a piece of horrific code because as antivirus champions, they knew the enemy better than anyone.

“I need to think about this,” said Kasperov.

Chern snorted. “There’s nothing to think about. You’re a brilliant man, Igor. You follow the news and world events. You understand the pressure. You know why it’s come to this. All the other elements are falling into place.”

Kasperov closed his eyes. Every time he consulted one of his news websites, there was a new threat to the motherland’s interests.

The merging of local European missile systems into a NATO defense system now put each country’s weapons under NATO command and standardized the command and control, along with local radar access and tactical communication systems. This gave NATO HQ the ability to launch each country’s missiles. The system was coming fully online, and the Kremlin feared it would interfere with Russia’s ability to launch their own preemptive strikes. The military had been threatening to attack the European sites for months . . .

The U.S. Navy’s decision to home port many of its Aegis missile system–equipped ships through key Mediterranean ports served as a bold parry to Russia’s opposition to American land-based missile defense installations in the region.

And then, of course, there was the recent surge of American natural gas being exported and sold to European nations at less than half the cost of the Russian natural gas those nations had been buying.

However, there was an even larger economic threat, one Kasperov himself had noted to the Kremlin:

European nations were aggressively developing thorium reactors, the so-called green reactors with their low levels of radiation, minimal waste materials, and outstanding safety features. Thorium, a white radioactive metal with nonfertile isotopes, was proving a viable substitute for nuclear fuel in reactors, and its demand was ever-increasing. In fact, the United States had just struck a deal to sell its current stockpiles of thorium, which were stored in Nevada, to European nations. These stockpiles would be used to bring hundreds of liquid fluoride thorium reactors—FLTR, pronounced *flitter*—online throughout Europe, ultimately making Europe fossil fuel independent and destroying Russia's customer base there.

Finally, recent U.S. sanctions against countries like Syria and Iran, where Russia had strong economic interests, continued to tax the motherland's ability to sustain herself.

If this was a new cold war, it was one of economics under the umbrella of MAD—mutually assured destruction. There had to be a better way to address these problems.

Kasperov locked gazes with Chern. "This doesn't come from Treskayev. It comes from the men controlling him. They've forced him into this. They don't think he'll stand up to the Americans."

"And they're probably right. But that doesn't matter. We have our orders. We do our duty."

"I want to speak to the president."

Chern smiled weakly. "He won't take your call now. Igor, you've danced your little dance for long enough. And, from what I understand, you'll be able to walk away from this. The virus hides our involvement. We blame it all on the hackers you love to put in jail, the Estonian hackers and others. Sure, your company will suffer a blow, but you'll survive."

Kasperov averted his gaze, his stomach growing sour.

Suddenly, Chern was clutching his arms. "Igor, we must all make our sacrifices for the motherland."

"You're not asking me to guarantee an election here. You're asking me to cripple the economy of a nation that has been very good to me."

"No one's *asking*. You know what to do."

A chill began at the base of Kasperov's spine and wove its way upward, into his chest. "I'm sorry . . . sorry for my reluctance. I was thinking of my employees and of all the families that would be affected by this."

"They will be okay. Will you?"

Kasperov steeled his voice. "You don't need to threaten me. We've come from the same place. We have the same heart. Do we have a timetable?"

"Yes, I'll be communicating that to you directly. I would expect sometime tomorrow. Now, it was good seeing you. I have a plane to catch."

Chern reached the door, hesitated, then glanced back at Kasperov. "We're trusting you, Igor." He

nodded, opened the door, and left.

Kasperov fired his empty vodka glass across the room, spun around, then bit his fist, trying to hold in the scream boiling at the back of his throat.

Last week he was in Cancun, Mexico, speaking at a convention. He had Bill Gates to his left and former President Clinton to his right. Colleagues.

Two weeks ago he and his girlfriend, Jessica North, were in South Beach at a fashion show and enjoying cocktails.

Three weeks ago, he was having lunch in San Francisco with Virgin empire mogul Richard Branson and discussing his ticket aboard one of Branson's spacecraft.

The fairy-tale life would end today. No more rock star.

He began to lose his breath, eyes burning with tears. He glowered at his old Soviet uniform, then looked to the picture on his desk, the little boy there, the innocent little boy who would grow up and destroy the world.

They were asking too much. Their plan would not work. The truth would emerge and the motherland would become the pariah of the global community.

But if he failed to obey now, they would systematically tear apart his life. They would start with those he loved, then move on to the causes he loved, undermine and destroy the humanitarian work, punish him until he was a broken, bleeding, and bitter old man who'd "disappeared" but was, in truth, lying in a gulag and hunting roaches for dinner.

Again, this was not coming from the president. Kasperov knew this in his heart of hearts. Yet Treskayev was a nationalist like his father, but he was also a pragmatist, spending much of his administration mending fences with the United States and Europe, earning him the ire of the imperialists. He wanted to call the man, beg him to stop this, but Treskayev might not even know what was going on. This could be bigger than all of them.

Kasperov backhanded the tears from his cheeks. If he did not comply, he, like the malicious object identified by his own software, would be quarantined . . . then erased.

THE C147-B, call sign Paladin, had become Fourth Echelon's mobile headquarters and was cruising over the Atlantic at thirty thousand feet, traveling at a speed of Mach 0.74, or 563 mph. She was fully customized C-17 Globemaster III with special composite matte gray fuselage that functioned as a Faraday cage, shielding her cutting-edge components from electromagnetic pulses. Her interior was TEMPEST certified up to and including NATO SDIP-27 Level A standards. Her avionics/computer circuits met RED/BLACK separation standards, and her computers were shielded against electromagnetic eavesdropping techniques called Van Eck phreaking. These countermeasures had been phased in after the jet's flight controls had been hacked, and Fisher had made damned sure they would never happen again.

With a length of 174 feet and wingspan just shy of 170 feet, Paladin was originally designed for heavy lift military cargo and troop transport and was powered by four fully reversible Pratt & Whitney F117-PW-100 turbofan engines similar to those used on commercial Boeing 757s. Her original cargo compartment was 88 feet long by 18 feet wide, with a ceiling height of over 12 feet, but now much of that open space had been converted into living quarters, a galley, a fully stocked armory with more than a thousand pieces of ordnance, an infirmary with complete surgical center, and a holding cell.

Located at the bay's core was Fourth Echelon's control center—a cocoon of flat-screen computer monitor stations, along with giant displays affixed to either side of the hatch leading to the infirmary. Cables lay like piles of spaghetti beneath the flickering glow of computer stations, and dim starlight filtered in through the circular portholes above them. The desktops of several junior analysts were piled with hard-copy files and seemingly every portable electronic device known to mankind: Kindle eReaders, iPads, iPods, and tablets of varying sizes, colors, and shapes. Heavily padded computer chairs sat on tracks bolted to the deck, and you could tell where Charlie Cole was working based upon the coordinates of a jar of extra-crunchy peanut butter with a fork jutting from it. The kid said Skipper helped him think.

Positioned at the center of this technological nest was a rectangular-shaped table about nine feet long and six feet wide constructed of magnesium and titanium to support a glass touchscreen surface. This table with its linked processors was Fourth Echelon's Strategic Mission Interface, or SMI, an advanced prototype analytics engine capable of news and Internet data mining, predictive analytics, and photo and video forensics. The SMI enabled them to have backdoors into foreign electronic intelligence, or ELINT, systems, as well as facial recognition integration from the CIA, NSA, DHS, and FBI. They were linked directly to the National Counterterrorism Center and to the watch team inside the White House Situation Room. In the blink of an eye they could pull up surveillance video from a hundred different locations simultaneously, analyze those videos, and issue a report.

Opposite the SMI, Sam Fisher leaned back in one of the computer chairs, pillowed his head in his hands, and reflected on his new life. Talk about a reboot. A breath ago he'd quit Third Echelon—once a top secret sub-branch within the National Security Agency—but then he'd been caught up in a 30-year conspiracy that had resulted in the entire covert ops organization being grounded and gutted and dismantled forever. Fisher assumed he'd never again be a Splinter Cell. He was done.

But then President Caldwell had come to him with an operation that required a man not only with his skill set but one with the internal fortitude to get the job done:

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