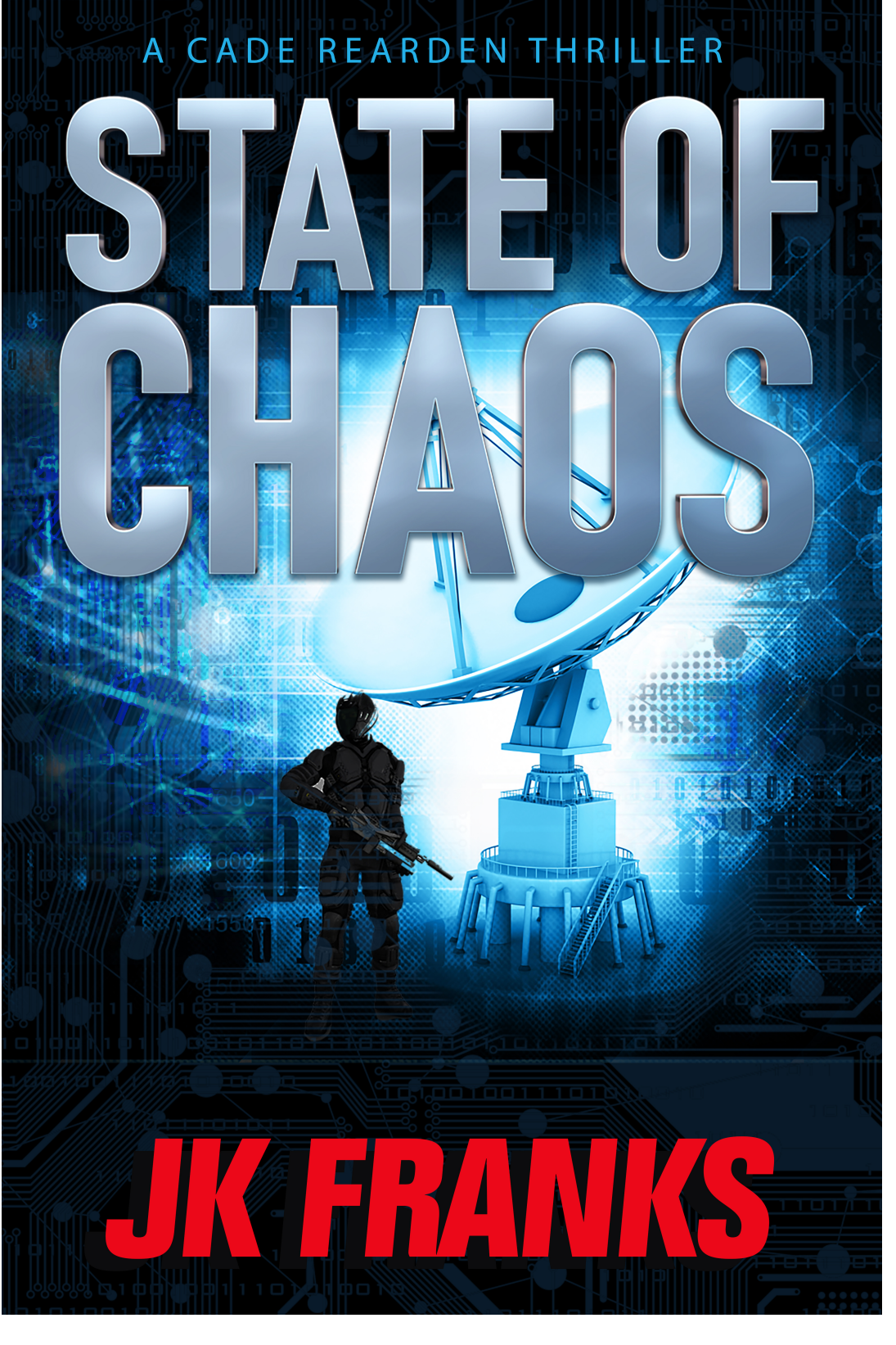


A CADE REARDEN THRILLER

STATE OF CHAOS

The background of the entire poster is a dark blue field filled with glowing circuit board patterns and binary code (0s and 1s). In the center, a large, white, parabolic satellite dish is mounted on a blue, multi-legged mechanical base. A bright blue beam of light emanates from the dish, shining down onto a soldier standing in the foreground. The soldier is wearing a black tactical suit, a helmet, and a mask, and is holding a black assault rifle. The overall aesthetic is high-tech and cybernetic.

JK FRANKS

A CADE REARDEN THRILLER

STATE OF CHAOS

By
JK Franks

“Hey, man...stay safe,” Alan said as Greg headed toward the awaiting van. His friend responded with a head nod as if to say *You, too*. Both had seen many changes in their relatively short lives. Now it felt like the weight of the world was suddenly bearing down on them. Doris was saying this was war; now one friend was missing; and the two of them were heading into danger. Alan watched as Greg left with the remaining members of Bravo Team, a formidable looking strike force. He turned to see a nearly identical looking group of soldiers waiting for him.

He’d never met any of the guys from The Nest but had reviewed all of their bios. Charlie Team consisted of six extremely capable individuals, four men, and two women. He counted only five as a large, black man walked over.

“I’m Coffee, sir,” the man said in a deep, bass voice that sent a chill up Alan’s spine.

Wilson D. Coffee, Ranger, specialist and very nearly dishonorably discharged for allegedly threatening a superior officer. Alan recalled that the charges had been dropped when no witnesses came forward to corroborate the captain’s story.

Alan shook the outstretched hand, “Good to meet you, Coffee, who’s in charge?”

The man’s face broke into a large smile. “Well, you are, sir.”

Alan immediately realized the absurdity of that statement; he was an inexperienced wiry kid compared to this battle-hardened mountain of a warrior. Captain Reardon was the de facto lead for Charlie Team, but he was apparently busy elsewhere today.

“Yeah, that’s not going to really work, is it?” Not waiting for an answer, he said, “Who is the highest-ranking member here?”

“That would be Nance, sir. She was a captain.”

Alan picked out the woman in the nearby group. “Coffee, will the team listen to her?”

The big man shook with a brief laugh, “Oh yes, sir. She scares the shit out of all of us.”

“Captain Nance, a word please.”

“Kristen Nance, sir, a pleasure,” she said walking up and extending an arm that seemed almost delicate but Alan could see was covered in military and tribal tattoos.

“Like your ink,” he said taking the proffered hand. “Look, Nance, you’re in charge, I am... hell, I don’t know, an advisor at best. This is your show while Nomad is away. You comfortable with that?”

“Absolutely, sir,” she said in a voice with a vaguely mid-western edge to it.

“We have to lose the ‘sirs,’ too. Let’s face it, I am barely old enough to drink. Call me Alan. Tell me, Captain, who’s missing?”

She turned back, momentarily looking at the team, “Akin, sir...I mean, Alan. He went to scope out the boy’s apartment. Someone from Command, Riley, I think, said they had seen some of the bad actors in the area.”

“Okay, why don’t we load up and head toward the last known location. We can bring everybody up to speed at once.”

Along the way, Alan was introduced to the rest of the team. To be honest, they all scared the shit out of him. He was relatively sure he’d never been this out of place in his entire life, but then he thought of his friend and why they were here. While their mission was to obtain

the missing scientist, his real goal was to find Micah. He'd misjudged his friend's reluctance to be part of The Cove; he'd treated him badly since then and was unsure they could even be thought of as friends anymore. Doris had stayed in touch, though; she had stayed true even if the rest of them had all but abandoned him.

The fact that Greg was headed out with the other team, with Sergeant Taylor scared him just as much. His thoughts were interrupted when one of the team members spoke up.

"Sir, are we sanctioned for this?"

Alan looked at the woman, tough as nails, but hiding just beneath was a lean, freckle-faced young woman. Pretty, with a kind of girl-next-door look. But somewhere along life's highway, she'd decided to go completely badass warrior. "Emily?" *No, shit, that wasn't right.* "Sorry, I mean, Erin. Yes, we have an official cover, but it's thin. It will stand up to local cops, but if any feds start checking, it might fall apart." He reached in his backpack and handed each of them lanyards with very official looking badges and photo IDs.

Erin took the badge but looked unhappy with Alan's response. "The nation was attacked today, and we are in the capital going after individuals who may have been involved in those attacks. Chances are good we are going to get checked. At the very least, we are going to run into other agencies. All of them will be on high alert."

He remembered she was one of the feared black ops members of the team. Erin Pickett had earned a reputation in several engagements starting with Iraq and most recently in Malaysia, where she helped disrupt a burgeoning terror cell intent on wiping out numerous Jewish and Christian places of worship. She was tough, she was smart and... she was right. He rubbed his chin and tried to think of a tactful way of saying this. Instead, Doris began speaking simultaneously to each, via the small CommDot each wore.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, we are at war, and you are the front line. Yes, you may encounter other groups out there, but they do not know what you know. You know Janus is behind this. Use those you meet, be confident, not passive. Take charge and lead. Trust me, Alan and your teammates to get you out of trouble should that occur. The main thing

is keeping your eyes on the target. Doctor Jim Lasko is the closest thing we have to finding the enemy. Janus wants him dead; you need to ensure that does not happen. Is that crystal clear?"

There were several "Hooahs," "Hooyahs," a "Yes, ma'am," and a lone "Oorah" came from the one former marine, Dombrowski, far in the back. Alan knew that this group, like Bravo, as well as the alternate squad still at The Nest, were all hand-picked by Doris, Charlie and Cade. Were they ready for this, though? What were they fighting for? Part of him couldn't grasp the mindset of a professional soldier no matter how much he wanted to. Someone tells you that guy is the enemy—to kill him—and you just pull the trigger. He didn't think he'd ever be able to do that. He hoped...he would never be in a situation like that.

The Cove

Doris realized Janus was drawing her people out, probably in an attempt to backtrack to her location. That was what she would do. In fact, it was exactly what she was doing. She had weighed the risk and the payoff and almost instantly decided to deploy her people to the field. She had to stop Janus, and if that failed, she would do what had to be done to ensure he never got the alien data. In the end, she would give up everything, including The Cove and her own existence, to keep it safe.

The clock was ticking. She knew how hard her people were working to close down Janus's operations, but it was so widespread, so many moving parts, none of them could keep up. As an artificial mind, she could multitask with precision; she could carry on a thousand individual conversations simultaneously with perfect clarity. She could see all players, all the moves, and yes, even some of the endgame, yet Rearden, almost by magic, seemed to uncover the biggest secret of all. The money trail, the bullseye on NYC. That was why she loved humans because their minds did not work like hers. Even minds that might be flawed, or broken like Cade's, had a beauty,

an essence and a perfectness that she would never possess. Unlike Janus, she knew that intellect is not ingenuity, nor does technical skill equal creativity. It saddened her in a way, this perceived inadequacy, but she was okay with it; Janus would never be. He would always yearn for more power, more knowledge, more...more...more.

Unlike much of the popular fiction and movies, Doris could never see any reason why an AI would want to be human. Why would she want to integrate into an android body? Then she would be limited to where she could go, what she could see and do. Yet, that was what scared people. They even had a name for the fear, the ‘Uncanny Valley.’ It was the creepy feeling humans got when they saw something obviously artificial trying to look too human. It was repulsive on a near-primal level. *Why would that be?*

Doris accessed the sub mind routine, the one that interfaced with the linguistics lab and reviewed the latest decoded portions of the alien message. The content was extensive and ominous; parts of it were still murky and needed context, perhaps some additional data yet to be decoded. But it contained what amounted to a correlation of all known developed species as compared to found intelligent species in the galaxies known to have gone extinct. The math attached to these was very simple to interpret. While a small percentage of sentient species were wiped out by natural causes such as disease, wandering asteroid and gamma-ray bursts, that accounted for less than 4%. The vast majority of the other 96% met a more catastrophic fate within a relatively short time of developing truly smart super-intelligent machines.

While most of the surviving species listed also had some form of super AIs, they had all struggled as they crossed that threshold. The data indicated that once a species developed a truly conscious machine, its likelihood to survive into the following century was less than 50%. Doris reviewed this part in depth, realizing with growing certainty that AIs like Janus would be the norm, not the exception. This was very likely the reason this alien message had been broadcast throughout the known universe; this was a galactic warning the Dhakerri wanted all developing species to know—beware of the AI you

create. The humans had referred to it as the digital singularity. She now knew they were right to be scared.

Her own analysis of the message offered several likely paths of survival. It seemed that the half of all species that survived past their AI singularity could be broadly grouped in one of three types. One was as a subservient group, where the biological beings were considered inferior to the machines. Those cultures, by and large, seemed to be on a steady decline and eventually would probably also perish. A second group, which seemed to be a far larger percentage, assimilated the new technology. They enhanced their biological systems with technology. These integrated parts augmented their existing systems in various ways, but inevitably, the merger of both produced a culture that adapted well to multiple environments and changing conditions.

Doris didn't think humans would take well to that possibility. Then again, there was the rise of prosthetics, some of which her own labs had developed. Pacemakers to keep hearts pumping that should have stopped long ago. Miniature filtering systems to block blood clots from causing strokes. On and on the examples kept occurring to her where humans had readily accepted these advancements. Even something as basic as corrective eyewear could be considered as using advanced technology to enhance one's existence. As much as humans wanted to think of themselves as independent, she could begin to see how they could slide down that slope to fall into this second group.

The final group was the most difficult to categorize as the aliens had given examples rather than a blanket taxonomy. To Doris's interpretation of the data, though, in this group, the biologicals successfully remain separate from the artificial creations. Rarely did it indicate that this was a peaceful coexistence. These worlds were plagued by wars between the groups, and in many cases, one side or the other would simply leave or be forced to leave their home planet entirely.

There was a narrow segment of this final group that found a peaceful way not just to coexist, but to thrive. She had a hard time determining if the Dhakerri could be classed as such, but she thought it likely. How a species could achieve this equilibrium was unclear. Where would humanity fall? So far, only two artificial beings to reach

what could be called a conscious state had evolved, and one seemed intent on wiping out the other, as well as all other intelligent life.

The entire human existence might not even register as intelligence on a galactic scale. Humans had barely made it out of the primordial soup before they began building weapons and machines to wipe each other out. Perhaps one day, another species would come to Earth, separate the rock from the ruins and find some reason to think an intelligent species did possibly exist here once. Would they wonder what had happened or simply assume that species hadn't been prepared for the next step?

What is the next step? Doris wondered. Assuming they could defeat Janus, the genie was out of the bottle. There would be more, that was a certainty. That was the great truism of science, you couldn't unlearn, you can't uncreate. Once it is out there, you, as a species and a society, must be ready. Humans clearly weren't there yet. Judging by Janus, AIs weren't either. They would need help; perhaps the remaining message contained more that might guide them safely through all of this.

Maryland

Cade surveyed the image of the forested compound from the mini-drone. “Hey, Deuce, nice work, we have visuals. Dee, are you getting feed on the compound?”

The response was immediate and eerily human-sounding, “Of course, Nomad. I have temporarily disabled the sensor grid along the path in your visor. You are clear for the next forty-two seconds.”

Breaking into the presidential compound at Camp David had not been part of Cade’s initial plan. To be clear, no rational human would have that as a plan. In truth, his plan was ‘only’ to head to one of the outlying guesthouses. ‘Only’ definitely being the operative word; as if any location in these two hundred acres of the most guarded and secure property in the world was anything close to being easy to access.

While the president was onsite, his protection detail was primarily centered near the main residence, the lodge house. Today, though, with the increased threat level, the security was on even higher alert. The camp also had navy personnel and a permanent security force of marines. The fact that Cade and his team were unauthorized and

likely to be shot on site was an unpleasant detail he was choosing to ignore. Cade saw his XO motion to two of his rookie team members to fall back while he sprinted across the highlighted path, stopping at the base of a massive elm tree.

“Greg, are you certain about this?” Cade thought briefly that he had to get the kid a proper call sign. He couldn’t just be calling him by his first name in a combat environment.

Safely hidden away, several miles from the camp, Greg acknowledged. “You’re fine, Nomad, but you need to get moving. The protection detail is on high alert but no active threats. Dee has scanned the buildings, and the director is on the second floor of that cottage. She has one security person who is about to get called to the back room to discuss a shift change transfer.” This was nothing they were doing, just part of the Secret Services standard procedures. Handoffs from field agents were never routine. Mistakes happen when routines are too planned. “Deuce, hold position. Nomad, move in five...four...”

The grounds were covered with active and passive security sensors, security patrols, dogs, cameras. Nearly everything to prevent just what he was attempting to do. Doris, or in this case, Dee, was doing her part to make it possible. Canceling out all of the electronic surveillance, generating a high-frequency sound wave to confuse the K9 teams and monitoring all the security patrols sweeping the area. While the tactical smart goggles Cade wore were similar to what he’d used overseas, these were much more capable. Not only were the threats identified with overlays, but the safe path was also marked with translucent breadcrumbs, literally telling him where and when to step.

At one point, he had to force himself so tightly against the trunk of an ancient tree that large black ants crawled over his lips on their way to do whatever they were doing. Greg gave him the go ahead, but his normal relaxed voice sounded a bit strained.

“What is it, kid?”

The response was slow and sounded uncertain, “Uh, Nomad...oh nothing, you’re fine. Dee is just picking up something in the distance. I think you should hurry.”

Hurry? Hell, he’d been waiting on permission from the kid for

every step he made. Now he took off at a flat run, flattening himself against the side of the cottage to catch his breath momentarily before slipping inside. Minutes later, Cade found himself staring down the short barrel of a compact Smith and Wesson M&P. The small, but deadly, .40 caliber handgun was held in the capable hands of Margaret Stansfield. The captain raised his hands as instructed.

“Director, I need thirty seconds before you call your security...or pull the trigger.”

She twisted her wrist slightly and glanced at her watch then gave a barely perceptible nod. “Captain Rearden, back from the dead. Please proceed.”

The fact that she recognized him threw him off base momentarily, but quickly he composed his thoughts. “You are aware of the events this week. What you may be unaware of is another attack was carried out in D.C. The target was the attempted kidnapping of a scientist. Someone you know, I believe. Jim Lasko.” He noticed she flinched slightly at this news.

“Attempted?” she said questioningly. “I take it that it failed.”

“It did. The kidnappers, or whatever they are, sent in a team, and he managed to slip away unharmed.”

“So, he is okay,” she said with obvious relief.

“For now, one of our people is with him. We know this and the Boston attack are simply the first parts of a much, much bigger plan. Director, we aren’t fighting terrorists.”

She checked her watch, “I’m not following, and you are running out of time, Captain.”

“I believe you are,” he replied calmly. “I assume you were here to brief the president on your suspicions about Prime? Unless you are just swapping recipes for your famous pot roast.”

Rage briefly flashed across her face. “Who are you—who are you working with?” Her voice was rising, and he heard sounds from downstairs. He felt comfortable taking out the security guard, assuming the director didn’t shoot him first, but strongly wanted to avoid a confrontation here. “Is this room clean?” he asked.

She nodded, obviously knowing he meant clear of electronic surveillance devices.

“Doris sent me. She told me you would understand.”

Rage left the woman's face, and in its place, there was something more akin to exhaustion. He wondered briefly what kind of pressure she must have been working under. The CIA director lowered the gun and sat on the edge of the small, antique sofa.

“Your life is in danger.” He realized this was not news to her, nor did it seem to frighten her.

“Doris is certain on this? Prime is definitely the one coordinating the attacks?”

Greg had been monitoring the conversation through the open comms channel. He cut in via Cade's earbud to let him know that Doris wanted to speak to Margaret.

Slowly, he retrieved the SmartCom from his pocket and set it in on the coffee table in front of her.

“Hello, Margaret, it's been a while.” Doris's avatar hovered just above the phone; she spoke in a friendly tone, and the director forced a small smile. “To answer your question, it is Prime, but there is a lot more to it. More than we have time to get into just yet.” The remaining color drained from the CIA director's face as Doris spelled it out for her. They talked for several more minutes, while Margaret became increasingly antsy.

“You aren't just talking about Pr...err, I mean, Janus coming after me. He is declaring war on the entire country?”

“More like the entire human race, dear. He is just starting with the U.S.”

“I need to brief the president. What do you have in the way of evidence?”

Doris admitted that there wasn't much in hard proof. The recent conversation between the two AIs in the bowels of cyberspace wouldn't convince anyone. She laid out a basic roadmap of facts including the assassination of Quagliano, manipulation of oil markets, recent elections and numerous other misdeeds. It was thin, but certainly not insignificant.

“Are you bringing Lasko in, Doris?”

“I have a team working on it, they haven’t met up with them yet. Margaret, you should know— Micah is my asset with him.” Cade saw something register in the director’s eyes, but he wasn’t sure what. Fear, anger, disappointment maybe? Whatever it was, was gone as quickly as it came.

“What is coming next?” Margaret asked with a confidence in her voice that belied her fear.

Cade answered, “Still working on that. My gut feels like it is something targeting New York. Doris and I believe it may be an attack at the heart of our economic system.”

“Like the stock exchange?” she asked with a tone of abject horror.

He nodded. “I was also given a name by one of the um...players. A pretty high up guy who has been busy doing some insider trading; he said a senator was giving him the trade orders.”

“Did he give a name? Which one?”

“Carson from North Carolina.”

“That slimy mother...”

Doris interrupted her, “Margaret, any idea why Janus would want to remove you from the board?”

The director didn’t like the analogy to gamesmanship but had to admit the concept did fit. “Jim and I were getting close—close to exposing Janus, and that would have unraveled every department, every agency that uses the Prime digital assistant.”

“So, he wants the illusion of government control to remain...for now.”

Margaret nodded. “That would be my guess, yes.”

She stood, grabbing her jacket. “I have a meeting scheduled with the president. Please send me whatever you have. Captain,” she stood and shook his hand, “we both have reasons to want Carson gone. You just don’t realize it all yet.” Her eyes locked on to his with an intensity that set him back a step. “I’m impressed you got to me here, and thank you for taking the risk. My life is far less important than this information. The president is a good man, and he needs to know. You should be free to leave here once I’m gone. Give me ten minutes, then exit out

the rear. Doris,” she said, looking down at the phone, “a pleasure as always. I’ll be in touch.”

Cade waited the ten minutes plus some until Greg signaled the route was clear. So, Doris and Margaret were old friends. Definitely more there than he’d been aware of. She even knew the Micah kid, hell, he had never even met him. Doris had networked way beyond her little hideaway on the riverbank. That much was obvious.

His earbud crackled to life. “Um, hey, Nomad?” Greg’s voice had lost a bit of its cockiness.

“Yeah?”

“Um, well, you may want to move it. We have something inbound... a lot of somethings.”

“Ground or air?” Cade asked, now in a full run through the last hundred yards of trees.

“Air. I thought it was a flock of birds, but Dee says they are drones, lots of em.”

“Deuce, pull back. Everyone go to ground and inside the coverups,” Cade ordered. The coverups were small, light tents made of a mylar-like material that both camouflaged anything beneath it and also shielded infra-red heat signatures. He slapped at his CommDot. “Doris, get the president down in the bunker—do whatever you have to.”

“Working on it, Nomad. They are not exactly taking my calls right now, and Margaret doesn’t have a comm,” Doris responded.

“Yes, she does. I slipped one onto her wrist when we shook hands. Track it now, see if you can warn her.”

“Forty seconds,” Dee said counting down.

“Doris, do something to get their attention, anything. I can shoot my firearm, trigger a perimeter breach. Any alert and they will secure the president and whoever he’s with. I know the protocols.” Now he could begin to hear the buzzing, like a hundred angry bees about to pass overhead. Cade felt helpless, which was not something he enjoyed at all. He was about to begin shooting when Doris said, “Stay put, Nomad. I got this.”

He listened intently as the buzzing passed by. One of the team’s

empty SUV's lights came on and quickly spun back into the road and headed toward the entrance gate. Seconds later, he felt a boom of impact in the direction of the main gate. Through the feed in the goggles, he saw she'd rammed the security barrier at the entrance to Camp David. Shit, that probably got their attention, and now they would get the boss squirreled away, but would it be in time? He heard shouted commands, then the distinct sounds of automatic gunfire as the Secret Service undoubtedly began targeting the crashed and very empty SUV.

"The marine guard will have the threat on the radar any minute now," Dee said.

He heard distant activity sounding through the forest as well as the buzz of more drones passing over. A massive, fully automatic weapon opened up. It sounded to Cade like a ship-based weapon he had seen test-fired once. "Holy shit, was that...is that a SeaWiz?" Like the A-10 it was one of those weapons that once you heard it, you never really forgot. The Phalanx CIWS was designed to shoot down incoming missiles at sea—he'd never heard of one being ground-based.

"It is, the marine and navy detachment are launching all available countermeasures," Dee's very proper British voice sounded in his earbud.

Those sounds were soon drowned out by louder explosions, lots and lots of explosions. It reminded Cade of a Fourth of July celebration he and Amy had gone to once with their mom. He had long forgotten the town's name, just one of so very many, but it had been a rare, happy time. He remembered how much the noise of the fireworks had both terrified and delighted his little sister. He could still picture her, a smile from ear to ear, a tooth missing up front, hands over both ears as she looked up in amazement.

He forced the memory away and leaped from under the coverup. "Talon Team up," he yelled. If they didn't act fast, there might not be any America to celebrate anymore.

Washington, D.C.

“Hey, you good?”

Alan smiled at the sound, tapping the earbud, “Hey, girl, yeah, I am...okay. What’s up?”

“We think we have a fix on Lasko,” Riley said.

“That’s great because we aren’t finding anything here that helps. I’ve got a Talon squad with nothing to shoot at, and they are starting to look at me funny,” he answered, looking warily at Nance in the process.

Riley gave a small laugh. “Sending the info over in a minute. Doris is trying to come up with a plan first. I just wanted to ask you...did we do this? I mean, you know...with Micah?”

Alan knew what she meant; he was feeling it, too. *Did we push him away? Keep him on the outside?* They literally had, at least the one time he had tried to rejoin them, but that had been Doris’s call. None of them had challenged her on it, though. Well, one of them had, his little brother, Jimmy. He and Micah had always been close. But the decision had already been made.

“I don’t know, Riles...maybe.” He sighed, looking at the tactical

team, standing there waiting for what to do next. He waited for his friend to respond but heard nothing for several minutes. Since there was no such thing as a bad connection with a SmartCom, he assumed Riley was busy with something else. As he waited, he saw Nance talking with Dixon; something was going down. They were studying something on their own phone screens.

Riley's voice came back shakily, "Sorry Alan, um, something is happening at Camp David. Greg and his team are pinned down, looks like Janus is going after the president. Doris is sending the info on Lasko now. Alan, be careful—no heroics, okay?"

He agreed, and she signed off. The conversation was pretty routine for them, considering this very un-routine day, but he briefly wondered if he could read anything more into it. *Shit*, he had to get his head in the game. A super-intelligent AI had just tried to assassinate the President of the United States, and he was wondering if his childhood friend liked him. He slapped his own head and walked toward the team lead. It was time to go hunting. Captain Nance looked up at him. "Ready?" Alan looked up at the now darkening sky and nodded somewhat reluctantly.

"Okay, Charlie Team on me," Nance said. Turning to him she added, "Alan, from here on, you are designated Tiger-I, clear?"

"Clear."

"Riley, are you guys sure about this?" Alan whispered a short time later as he watched the team fan out to surround the lone entrance into the decrepit looking metal building. A portion of the sign said Transmission Repair, but that must have been last century. The grounds were littered with various rusted and otherwise unrecognizable pieces of equipment. They were ten miles east of downtown D.C. Far from the place Micah and Lasko had abandoned the SUV. So, the question needed to be asked, *Why here?*

Doris had video of two figures closely matching Micah and Lasko exiting a cab. One from a traffic cam and another from an ATM

nearby. Something about all that bothered him. Cade had made mention in his field report of Janus using misdirection. Alan couldn't shake the feeling that this might be more of that. Nance had ordered radio silence, but he had to speak up. "Charlie-I, this is Tiger-I, be aware." *Shit, what could he actually say to her?* Use extreme caution? Very possibly a set-up?

His tactical glasses indicated an incoming private channel opening up with Nance.

"Do you have new information Tiger-I? If not, why am I just hearing this now?"

Her tone left no argument as to who was in charge, he thought. "No new intel, just a number of clues that don't add up to me. Also knowing what happened to Bravo earlier, just think extreme caution would be wise." He knew she was angry with him, but perhaps she would accept his comments as helpful. None of the soldiers looked like they needed help; they were confident and capable. Still, he was surprised when he heard her order half of them back away from the perimeter.

"Tiger-I, can you launch the doves?"

Alan reached into his backpack of tricks and pulled two mini-drones that they had nicknamed the 'doves.' Every member of Charlie Team immediately had the new option of seeing the aerial camera and sensor feeds from the circling pair.

The building was about forty meters across and about twice that in depth. From overhead, it appeared to be in even worse shape. Infra-red imaging showed no heat signatures that seemed human inside the structure.

"Charlie-2 proceed..." Captain Nance glanced his way before continuing, "Use extreme caution."

Alan monitored the drones as he saw Dixon, Akin and Pickett sprint over and flatten themselves against the front wall, bracketing the lone entrance.

Micah listened to the sounds outside again; they were mundane, sounds of the city but masking something more. *Danger*, it was not an alien sensation to him as he'd lived with it much of his life in one form or another. The man, the doctor Doris had sent him to fetch, was huddled up in the chair looking useless. Micah had no idea why he was important but trusted her that he indeed was. He pulled a bottle of water from his pack and set it in front of the man. Jim unscrewed the cap and drank greedily.

Unlike the rest of the team, Micah didn't have one of the tiny CommDots; he'd never even see that tech. His lone possessions from The Cove were the SUV and the aging second-gen SmartCom phone Doris had gifted to him years ago. Now, that was somewhere inside the abandoned SUV. She had required it to engage the self-driving and stealth modes. She'd used him and now abandoned him, it seemed. That was nothing new in his life, but it still pissed him off. He heard the sound again; he was sure someone was outside, but were they friendlies? He needed help; he needed Doris. She'd gotten him into this and...The sound at the door startled him. A voice called out, then a fist banged hard on the wood

The doctor was so startled he all but fell out of the chair. He looked up bewildered, "What do we do? Can you call that Doris person again?"

"No, but there are a few things I *can* do." While Micah had not been privy to all the technology his friends had, Doris had provided him with the same access to knowledge. Through the portable ReLoad device, he had more combat and hand-to-hand training than anyone at The Cove. From his bag, he slipped on a pair of leather gloves and wielded a small steel tactical baton. Lasko watched in abstract fascination as Micah stretched himself out on the floor in a way that reminded him of a coiled spring.

The young man looked his way, an expression on his face that both comforted and terrified the man. "Take cover, Doc, this may not end well."

The tiny room only had one door and a small window on the back wall which was boarded closed. The door exploded in a shower of

splinters as a rush of men all clad in tactical gear flooded the room, weapons at the ready. Micah exploded up and into the middle of the pack. Their dense formation became their undoing. They had deployed unwittingly too close to each other to safely maneuver weapons. The entry team was good and adapted quickly, but Micah already had two down before most realized the attack was from within their midst.

Each of his blows seemed to avoid the protected area and landed where they could do real harm. Kidneys, eyes, ear slaps and more than one to the throat and genitals. As the third man went down, Micah whipped the baton to full extension and caught the lead man just under the lip of his tactical helmet dropping him immediately. He reversed course and jammed the baton into the trigger guard of a soldier about to fire, thereby preventing him from doing so. "Doc, we gotta go," he yelled, even before the last man was down. These were not his friends; this was not a team from Doris. In fact, when he saw the patches on the back of each of the downed men, he wasn't sure who he was up against. If these guys were legit, though, he was truly fucked.

Lasko looked ready to bolt as he went through the room. Micah was busy stripping radios, phones and weapons from each of the downed attackers. He then flex-cuffed them together with their own restraints.

"Tho...those uniforms said FBI," Lasko said shakily as they descended the stairs of the old tenement building.

Micah was reviewing the ID badges as he discarded them. "Pretty sure they were." He pointed to a side door. Raising one of the phones, he quickly punched a few buttons and began to speak. "Encode this and erase locator."

As soon as the phone was secure, he ditched the others. "Doris, we are on the move, what can you tell me?"

On the far side of the D.C. metro area, Alan covered his ear to listen to the incoming report before yelling into the comms, "It's a trap, get out!" The entry team had barely made it into the building as a bright flash occurred, followed by multiple explosions.

Doris had just gotten word to them that Micah had been found at another location and currently was evading a pursuit team with the doctor. *That would have been more helpful five minutes ago*, Alan thought. Nance raced to the burning entrance, most of the remaining team hot on her heels. Alan sat back in disbelief. Cade had been right about Janus. Misdirection and chaos were his tools.

He heard Nance report, "Men down." Then, seconds later, "Multiple casualties." She wanted to sweep the building for more explosives, but Doris shut her down. They had to move out at once.

Alan felt nauseous. Seeing the carnage was more than he'd been ready for. The team mounted up as quickly as they could. Doris made it clear that none of them could be on the scene when first responders showed up. Pickett's body lay on the floor beside Alan, her once pretty face now a mask of ruined flesh. It clouded the brief girl-next-door memory he had made. Dixon had a nasty leg wound but would survive. Akin had been the closest to the explosion. What they had found of him fit into a small black plastic bag on the front seat of the van. Charlie Team was down to three, Nance, Dombrowski and Coffee. Nance was also the medic, so she was effectively out of action as she cared for Dixon. She'd likely accompany him to the hospital. Alan looked at the two remaining men, both of whom had a look of bloodlust.

He tapped his cheekbone, "Riley, where is Micah?"

Her familiar voice calmed him only slightly, "Near Alexandria, we have a tentative track on him. But if our intel is right, they are closing in on them."

"Roger that, can you have a car meet us en route? We need to go in."

"Will do, had one standing by, they will meet you in ten. And Alan..."

Oh no, he did not like the sound of that. "Yes?"

“Micah said the guys after them are FBI.”

“What? Serious, like no shit, FBI? Not just thugs posing?”

“He was pretty sure; he took out several and swiped their IDs and phones. We backtracked the one he has to a veteran field agent. They are legit. Doris is running down who gave the capture order, but apparently, Janus had his snatch team stand down in favor of something more official.”

Alan wasn't surprised; D.C. was nearly a closed city with all the attacks going on today. Rogue paramilitary types could draw a lot of unwanted attention, today especially. The irony of his current travel partners was not lost on him. “Weeeeeelll, shit. That's fantastic. Wait... did you say Micah took out several of them? How?”

“Don't know, but yeah, we are monitoring emergency response and multiple ambulances were called to the scene. It seems there's a lot more to our friend than we knew.”

“Obviously,” he agreed, signing off.