



DENIZEN

**THE ADVENTURES OF AN AUTISTIC
OUTCAST AND HIS FIGHT AGAINST
AUTHORITARIAN POWERS WORLDWIDE**



***RAINBOW OF
VENGEANCE***

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Denizen: Rainbow of Vengeance

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Part 1: Genesis



Prologue

At the turn of the Millennium, the World plunged into an economic and social collapse, the crime rate rising and escalating out of control. As a consequence of this global downfall, the US Government declared a new policy for Aliens wishing to reside in the USA:

Those of an 'odd' disposition may apply for an immigrant visa, Green Card or US Citizenship at an increased charge – those deviating from the **HSP** (*Homo Sapiens Perfectus*) template will be faced with reduced rights and freedoms.

To further solidify this new regime and to combat the Worldwide Recession along with the increasing crime and Human stupidity, the Armed Forces of the World, encouraged by NATO and the United Nations, are consolidated into a single organisation known as the Sol Federation, divided only by its respective continents. Its goal was simple: To keep the peace in the World.

This marked the genesis of a New Cold War.

Chapter 1

City of New York, New York, USA – 20 December 1996

In the Big Apple, a middle-aged businessman, complete with suit and briefcase, entered a grand-looking building – the HQ of the United Nations – in the heart of Manhattan Island, the Sun shining in the Sky as the Horizon darkened gradually amidst the cold winter weather. The man, who would eventually become President of the Sol Federation, entered a chamber filled with VIPs and other important-looking individuals as the day of reckoning called upon them. The future Federation President took his seat, representing Israel. The UN Chairman spoke up to the audience, his tone of voice being calm and strong at the same time. ‘Gentlemen, I am sure you know as to why we are gathered here today. The economies of the World are beginning to collapse and the crime rate is escalating – the supply is not nearly enough to meet the demand, and our nations’ individual armed forces cannot carry out their tasks effectively enough. We need something stronger, more cohesive. It is proposed that we unite our countries’ military forces into a single organisation – the proposed name is the Sol Federation, led by a President, like any other nation. Please cast your votes as to who YOU think would excel at leading us into the next generation and beyond.’ The Israeli minister had everything sorted out – a plan, an ideology, and a mentality to unleash upon his subordinates. Eventually, the UN Chairman spoke up once more. ‘The votes have been cast. It is decided that the Member for Israel, due to his large monetary resources and political connections, will serve as Federation President.’ There was a round of applause from the other members as the now-acting Federation President took his seat and spoke his first command.

‘First, we shall unite our armed forces as agreed. Next, we shall impose strict policies for immigration, particularly those intending to reside in the United States and United Kingdom. Thirdly, Martial Law will be implemented if deemed necessary to uphold the rights of

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citizens.’ The people applauded as the Federation President smirked to himself – this day marked the birth of the tyrannical Sol Federation.

San Francisco, California, USA – 29 June 2011

Salvatore Pasquale, a college student from Europe, exited his penthouse suite as he prepared to hand in his last assignment and graduate his course. Walking through the city streets, he eventually arrived at the college and began to work on his final paper in silence, accompanied only by his friend, classmate and fellow immigrant – Vladimir Redski – an unpredictable (if extreme) pragmatist. After what felt like an eternity, Salvatore handed in his work. His tutor – Francis Baxter – a man who bore the appearance of a mad scientist complete with matching personality traits and eccentricity scanned the paper meticulously. Salvatore simply remained silent, despite his nonconformist nature. He knew that if he wanted to pass the course, then he had to obey the Federation’s rules.

How much more of this shit do I have to take? He thought to himself. *Can’t be much worse – since it’s the end of my course, I’ll put up with it a little longer.* He chuckled almost inaudibly. Francis simply looked at the assignment and stamped it, smiling at Salvatore.

‘Congratulations, Salvatore – it’s a Pass.’ Salvatore’s face fell at the mention of the grade.

‘A Pass, Sir?’ He asked, worriedly. ‘I completed the Merit and Distinction criteria – do I not get a Distinction for my efforts?’ He asked, his renegade streak showing itself.

‘I can’t give you a Distinction because of the extension, Salvatore. I’m sorry.’ Francis simply put the assignment in a tray marked “PASS”. Salvatore sighed wordlessly. ‘Look at it this way: At least you’ll graduate.’ Salvatore just nodded and left wordlessly.

This is going to be a shitty day. He thought to himself.

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Exiting Francis's office, Salvatore ran into Vladimir, who just nodded wordlessly. Salvatore left the college and headed into the city, showing his ID to a Federation guard, who allowed him to leave, the Aspie student venturing into town alone. Salvatore began to feel ill and he clutched his stomach in pain. He was spotted by a Federation soldier, who picked him up and carried him into a domed structure, which turned out to be a leisure centre with a science fiction-like interior. Troops guarded the entrances to the elevators and stairs, as well as the exits. As he recovered from his anxiety, Salvatore got to his feet and went to look around, looking for someone. Looking around his new environment, he spotted a familiar figure in the distance and walked towards it, being careful as not to distract its attention. He inched closer to the figure, and was suddenly hit in the nose by a door opening outwards – he fell back and clutched his nose, greeted by a big man with dark hair, dressed predominantly in blue – Frank Morris – an Interpol officer from Canada stationed in the United States. Salvatore eyed Frank's clothing carefully.

‘Got a name, cop?’ He asked. Frank's reply was polite and curt at the same time.

‘I'm François Morris, although my friends call me Frank – you are...?’

‘Salvatore Pasquale.’ Salvatore introduced himself in his usual short and sweet manner.

‘Oh, yes. You're friends with Holly, aren't you? My partner is friends with her.’ Frank smiled in an attempt to be friendly towards the autistic denizen.

‘Your partner... Jenna Lane, right?’

‘That's right.’

The two men shook hands. As Frank left, Salvatore looked into the distance absently for a moment, before remembering why he was there. He entered what appeared to be a makeshift dance studio, complete with mats and other assorted equipment.

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‘Hello? Where are you?’ He called out, his voice taking on a more confident tone. Looking around him, Salvatore remained alert as ever as a female voice from behind caught his attention, the kind one would have a Heavenly Angel to have, complete with halo and wings.

He looked at the voice's owner, recognition in his face. He smiled and walked towards a young woman in front of him – it was her – Holly Carson, his best friend – every man’s dream woman. Beautiful, kind, honest and intelligent all in one, she smiled at him as her golden blonde hair fell freely.

‘Salvatore! Hi! How are you?’ She asked, her voice having a Californian Valley Girl inflection to it – naïve and sexy at the same time. Salvatore simply chuckled humourlessly before iterating his response.

‘Get showered and changed, and I’ll tell you.’ He sighed and shook his head as he watched Holly leave, her body hugged by a tight-fitting cyan Lycra catsuit with no sleeves and an open back and neckline.

Chapter 2

Salvatore and Holly walked home together, the Sun having set completely. Salvatore's face was contorted into a look of rage and hatred, while Holly had a look of worry and love on her face. The two friends eventually reached the city outskirts where their residences lie. Holly turned to Salvatore, his teeth gritted from the frustration of his assignment. Before he could speak, he fell to the floor, clutching his stomach again. Holly ran to her close friend's aid, who was cursing to himself in Italian.

'What is it? Salvatore, you have to answer me! Salvatore!' Holly called out to Salvatore, her voice registering panic and concern. She helped Salvatore to his feet, escorting him back to the city. Salvatore tried to speak but could not. He tried to move but could not. All he could emit was a strangled roar of pain. A Federation guard nearby ran to Holly's aid and helped her get Salvatore into the residential area of the city. The autistic denizen was mumbling incoherent words in Italian, the stress from the assignment and his living conditions beginning to get to him.

Is this the Land of the Free or the fucking Soviet Union!? Salvatore thought to himself as he struggled to keep himself conscious. *It was hard enough for me to get into this country, let alone get a fucking Green Card!*

Holly helped Salvatore in his room as the two of them reached his penthouse suite. She looked at him, smiling kindly as she laid him into his bed, taking his hand and squeezing it gently. Salvatore gradually calmed down, his breathing becoming more even and consistent. He grunted/sighed wordlessly, a trademark of his. Holly looked at him worriedly, her blonde hair brushing against Salvatore's hard-edged face for a moment.

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‘I don’t know why you do this to yourself, Salvatore.’ She said simply, a hint of sadness in her voice. Salvatore simply acknowledged her words with a suppressed grunt before resorting to a verbal response.

‘Someone has to worry, Holly... and if not me, then who?’ He laughed at the irony, having left Europe for the United States in order to move on with his life – and here it was, being taken apart like a surgeon operating on a hapless patient. After a while together, Holly checked to see Salvatore’s condition – he was improving somewhat, having fallen asleep. Smiling at her friend, she kissed him on the cheek and stroked his face before leaving his penthouse suite, the door closing quietly with a resonating click.

San Francisco, California, USA – 30 June 2011

Salvatore awoke with a long groan as he checked the time on his phone: 11:00. *Fucking hell!* He thought. *I must have been exhausted when I got here last night.* Sitting up, he put his hand to his face, the memory of Holly kissing him coming back to his mind like a bullet train. He smiled and chuckled slightly as he got up to shave, not even bothering to change his clothes as he left the penthouse suite. He reached the college only to find it deserted except for the odd Federation guard every now and then.

‘Hello?’ Salvatore called out. ‘Is anyone there?’ Looking around him, he could see that the place was oddly quiet, like a mortuary. He just performed his trademark grunt/sigh and headed for his class. The corridor was also strangely empty. ‘Fuck’s sake!’ He called out. Spotting a figure lying on the floor, Salvatore approached it carefully. However, as he came into closer view, he felt his eyes shoot out of their sockets – it was Vladimir! He was covered in blood. Salvatore ran to aid his friend quickly, the stress beginning to get to him once more.

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‘Vladimir, it’s me, Salvatore. Hang on.’ He said with immediate worry as he reached into his pocket. ‘Fucking fuck!’ He exclaimed as his friend sat up slowly. Vladimir laughed at Salvatore’s stunned facial expression.

‘Ha! Had you there, didn’t I?’ He said simply, laughing in an almost psychotic manner as he proceeded to clean himself up, getting to his feet.

‘You bastard!’ Salvatore exclaimed, feeling irritated by his friend’s gesture.

‘That I am!’ Vladimir retorted as he and Salvatore headed for the classroom. Salvatore gripped the door handle, but nothing happened. He twisted it a few times.

‘What the hell...?’ He asked nobody in particular and turned to Vladimir, who had a displeased look on his face.

‘Not only do you get here late, you miss the class!’ He said.

‘Hey, at least I didn’t give my friend a bloody heart attack with my fucking corpse act!’ Salvatore retorted.

Salvatore and Vladimir spent the next ten minutes arguing – their bickering was broken up by the presence of a large and ominous-looking sign on the college department’s notice board, printed in big, bold, black letters. Approaching the sign cautiously, Salvatore read it quickly; his gut sinking as he knew today was going to be another bad day. He then turned to face Vladimir with a look of displeasure and annoyance on his face.

‘The college is closed, Vladimir. Staff development period.’ Vladimir just nodded before speaking, feeling slightly relieved.

‘Hey, at least we’ll graduate, right?’ He offered in an attempt to lighten Salvatore’s mood. The Aspie student just screwed up his face in distaste.

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‘They could have told us about this yesterday!’ Salvatore raised his voice. SLAM! He slammed his fist into the wall, leaving a huge fist-shaped hole. He pulled his fist back slowly, gradually, and held it up to his face. His fingers were bleeding, as well as his wrist. Salvatore looked at his blood-stained hand, transfixed by the realisation of what he had just done.

‘Vladimir... I think I need to go to a hospital.’ He said with a tinge of mild concern and some regret as the blood spurted out of his wounds, dousing his forearm liberally with a coat of red paint. Vladimir just looked stunned as Salvatore clutched his fractured limb in pain while struggling to reach for his smart phone at the same time.

‘Before you say anything – yes. This IS real blood!’ He said simply as he tried to operate the touch screen on his smart phone, but his fingers on his one good hand were slipping through it as every virtual key press was an exhaustive effort for him. Vladimir opened his mouth to speak but was almost immediately silenced by Salvatore.

‘Don't you say a fucking word.’

Vladimir just sighed and accompanied Salvatore to the approaching ambulance. The two of them looked at each other wordlessly before Salvatore just hopped into the medical vehicle, leaving Vladimir alone. With the college closed and with a clear schedule, Vladimir felt like he had no choice but to go home, so he decided to do just that.

Salvatore was taken to a nearby hospital, where he was left to explain his injury to one of the scrubs. His wrist and forearm were stained red with his blood as he shifted around slightly uncomfortably from the pain.

‘So what happened, Mr...?’ The scrub began.

‘Pasquale. Salvatore Pasquale.’ Salvatore introduced himself tersely, being short, sweet and to the point.

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‘OK, Mr Pasquale, what happened?’ The scrub took notes while Salvatore explained himself in his usual unapologetically blunt manner.

‘If you must know, then I struck my fist into a wall after a rather bad day, and the force of the blow left me like this. You’d do it, too, if you spent half your day getting bossed about and yanked around like a dog on a fucking chain.’ He said calmly, irritation present on his face.

‘I see. Please follow me.’ The scrub requested. Salvatore got up and did as he was told, following the scrub into a pristine-looking surgery. Sitting down on a chair, a doctor arrived, looking at the injured soon-to-be graduate.

‘My assistant told me what had happened, Mr Pasquale. You’re lucky – we can repair the damaged limb with some nanomechanical surgery. It’s still experimental, though.’ The doctor said calmly, a hint of warning in his voice.

‘It’s OK, I’ll take the risk. Worst-case scenario, I’ll self-amputate.’ Salvatore said simply in his deadpan tone.

The doctor held up a strange-looking tool and approached Salvatore gradually, almost ominously.

‘Don’t worry, Mr Pasquale... this will be over before you know it.’ He said reassuringly as Salvatore looked at the bizarre instrument. He gulped slightly and turned his head away. He winced slightly as the surgeon's tools made contact with his severed hand. Suddenly, as if struck by a bolt of lightning, he could move and flex and feel his hand again. He smiled in relief, thanking the doctor as he was led outside to meet a concerned-looking Holly. She threw herself at her friend, hugging him tightly.

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‘Come on... let’s go out for a drink.’ She said soothingly. Salvatore simply nodded wordlessly and followed her. Vladimir was outside, waiting beside Holly’s car. He looked at Salvatore with mild concern.

‘Did you get your hand fixed?’ Salvatore nodded as the three of them headed for a drink... but fate had another card to play on poor Salvatore.

Chapter 3

In a local coffee house, Salvatore looked pretty distressed as he drank from his cup of tea quietly, Vladimir looking at him with mild concern. Holly was smiling as always as she ate a jam doughnut. Salvatore raised a solitary eyebrow in a Spock-like manner as he observed his American friend indulge herself in ravished gluttony.

‘Don’t you worry about shit like heart attacks and cholesterol?’ Salvatore spoke up in his soft, mellow voice. Holly simply laughed at his remark as she finished her doughnut, her hands covered in strawberry jam as she wiped herself clean.

‘I need it, remember? I burn it off – dance is my life, Sal.’ She said cheerily as she stared out of the window. Vladimir looked at Salvatore every now and then, the autistic graduate’s face beginning to screw up in distaste and increasing distress. Catching his friend’s gaze, Salvatore just pointed behind him with his thumb – a rather authoritarian-looking father was arguing with his young daughter, with the mother remaining indifferent. After what felt like an eternity, Salvatore locked eyes with Vladimir as something snapped in his mind, the denizen coming to a personal executive decision. He spoke four words:

‘Vlad... fuck. This. Shit.’ Fuelled by rage and anger, Salvatore got to his feet and approached the bad-vibe merchant quietly. Once within range, he brought down his fist and struck the table – HARD. ‘Lighten up, shithead!’ He yelled as he handed the young woman to her mother. He then grabbed the father by the front of his clothes and slammed him into a chair. Salvatore’s voice was harsh and menacing, his whole persona filled with anger and hatred.

‘Who the hell do you think you are, bossing people around and treating them like shit!?’ He yelled, gritting his teeth at his adversary – the epitome of everything he despised. The father was barely intimidated by his outburst. He tried to wriggle free, but Salvatore’s grip was too strong.

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‘She is my daughter... and I will do what I deem fit.’ He said in a deep voice. Salvatore propped him up.

‘How old is she... actually, no, scrap that.’ He said, trying to remain calm as all the eyes in the coffee house were now on this rebel-in-the-making.

‘You’re right... as long as she lives under my roof... she abides by my rules.’ The father said.

‘FUCK YOU!!’ Salvatore roared as he threw the condescending bully into his chair. ‘You can’t just change the rules to suit YOU. People like you who whinge at the first sign of being caught out and resorting to punishment are fucking cowards – rod-sparers like you have SERIOUS personality flaws, if not disorders.’ He spat as he sprayed spittle all over the table. If he had a gun with him right now, then he would not have hesitated to end the life of the piece of shit before him. He paused before continuing. ‘You call yourself a decent human being because you spoil your daughter and at the same time treat her like shit! I assume you do the same to your wife! You don’t control other people’s lives! People like you who don’t stand for shit-talking and corporal punishment, yet you think it’s OK to have it done to those close to you, to those who can’t fend for themselves, to those who have few rights! I piss in your faces – authoritarian psychopaths. Shouting and name-calling doesn’t solve anything, damn you. You heard of something called communication? Perhaps courtesy? Compassion? Compromise? The four C’s? USE them. Oh, wait, no – you can’t, because you’re either too proud to admit to your mistake or don’t have a brain or your heart’s too damn frozen! Sort out your fucking life, you piece of shit!’

The father simply sneered, beginning to feel nervous as Salvatore’s words struck a chord in his punitive mind. ‘I will... not allow...’ Salvatore snapped and finally lost his temper, crossing the Event Horizon.

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‘YOU SON OF A...!’ He drew his fist back, ready to punch him, but looked at the young woman and her mother. Realising he had sunk down to his adversary’s level; Salvatore released his grip on the father and calmed down before letting go of his broken opponent. ‘You’re not fucking worth it.’ He turned to the women and spoke gently. ‘I suggest you two find your own means of living and sustenance. If he does anything like that again, then press charges.’

The mother smiled and nodded. ‘I have to admire you, sir. I’m proud of you. It was about time somebody put my husband in his place.’

Salvatore smiled briefly at the mother and the young woman before focusing back on the defeated bully. ‘You do anything like that again, you’ll be hearing from me again. Remember that!’ He said to the cowering father. Turning around, he saw he had gathered quite an audience from his outburst. ‘I’m SERIOUS. This is the 21st Century – and this kind of behaviour is STILL condoned.’

Holly looked at him with mild confusion, having lived a rather privileged life thanks to a wealthy upbringing. ‘What are you talking about?’

Salvatore retorted with unprecedented passion and unparalleled ferocity, like an actor’s last moments on the stage before the final curtain fell. ‘Name calling! Corporal punishment! A borderline fetish for groundings with unnecessarily lengthy sentences and sending children to their rooms! It’s all fucked up! The British Isles and North America are just as bad as each other... the only places I know of that have a decent balance are Continental Europe and Oceania – well, except for God-fucking Ireland, garlic-chomping France, the hothead bastards in Italy and the propaganda fetishists in Russia. The other countries have NONE of those fucking issues... except for a couple of old-timers, but that’s beside the fucking point.’

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Sounds like neo-Soviet fucking propaganda if you ask me – bullying breeds bullying, power corrupts.’ Little did he know at the time that he was not too far from the truth.

Vladimir spoke up in an attempt to placate Salvatore. ‘Sal, sometimes you have to...’ Salvatore cut off his friend with a sharp and swift retort – he was on a roll, and was beyond restraint.

‘What, Vladimir? “Be cruel to be kind”? “Tough love”? I have two words: BULL SHIT!! That is pro-authoritarian propaganda, and you FUCKING know it!’ He felt tears begin to form in his eyes from the passion and energy delivered from his monologue, the words evoking memories of his own difficult childhood. If he had been an actor, then he surely would have won an Academy Award or a BAFTA for his performance. He calmed down slightly as the sight of a Federation guard caught his eye. ‘I suggest ALL of you here... spread the word and have a long, HARD think about the way you treat your own offspring, disciples, and the rest – if you have any... and if you are planning to have any.’ He paid the man at the counter with an apologetic look on his face, his sensitive side emerging. ‘Here are a few dollars more for my little outburst.’ He turned back to Vladimir and Holly briefly.

‘You’ve lived too much of a sheltered life, Sal – it’s time you came out and saw the World for what it really is.’ Vladimir stated simply in his usual unapologetically blunt manner, a habit Salvatore had picked up.

‘I’ve seen it, Vlad... it’s a cruel, selfish, fascist place.’ With those words, the disillusioned eccentric left the coffee house. Vladimir looked at Salvatore, looking stunned and surprised as Holly simply sighed silently.

Chapter 4

Salvatore exited the coffee house on his own, walking away from the commotion in order to clear his mind. Reaching the edge of the city border, he went for a walk into what appeared to be a forest or a park, fighting his way through some trees until he reached a clearing, spotting a camp surrounded by a basic wooden fence with a Federation symbol on it.

What the hell is this? He thought to himself. His curiosity (and disregard for authority) getting the better of him, Salvatore wandered into the clearing, looking at the Federation camp. It was empty, save for a group of approximately 20 to 30 people inside what appeared to be a makeshift hut. Looking around to make sure nobody saw him, he slipped into the camp by climbing a fence. *Security seems to be lax here. What's the deal?* His mind speculated as he landed and got to his feet, walking around the camp carefully, which looked like the remnants of a Gulag prison camp with its less-than-perfect accommodation and decaying structures. He shivered and winced at the thought of being incarcerated in this God-forsaken hellhole. Approaching the improvised hut full of prisoners, Salvatore whispered quietly to get their attention. One of the prisoners approached him.

‘What is it? What are you doing here? Get out of here!’ The prisoner said. Salvatore replied quietly and calmly.

‘Hold on – I’m not a guard here. Calm down.’ He paused for a moment before looking at the prisoner’s living conditions, who took the offensive side in the argument once more.

‘Then why are you here?’

‘It’s a long story. What are you doing here?’

‘I’m a prisoner – can’t you see that?’ The prisoner snapped at Salvatore.

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‘Who put you here?’ Salvatore enquired, his eyebrows furrowing out of curiosity and concern.

‘Federation troops did. US Government policy for “Imperfects” – people with disabilities, of questionable heritage or intelligence which is deemed a threat are sent to these camps if they enter the country without proper authorisation.’

‘I didn’t hear any of this shit on the news!’ Salvatore spoke up, shocked to his very soul that there was such a Nazi-Fascist mentality still going on in the 21st Century. The prisoner continued speaking.

‘Apparently, we were with a group called ARCUS. We found out that the Government declared Martial Law on purpose to counter the economic crisis. Only true Americans can have full rights here. You’re lucky.’

Salvatore thought about this for a moment – he was already on the Federation’s blacklist because he liked to use his brain, the autistic denizen hiding as a Federation guard approached the hut. Thinking quickly, Salvatore attacked and incapacitated the guard, taking a key from his belt and unlocking the hut’s doors.

‘OK... go. Go! Get out of here any way you can.’ He said simply, helping out the ragged-looking prisoner, who sported a beard and a hippie-style haircut, complete with long hair. The hippie hostage looked at him briefly, smiling slightly.

‘Thank you... just watch your back from now on. You’re on the Federation’s shit list now.’ With those words, the bearded poor man’s Jesus Christ left with his companions, leaving Salvatore looking rather confused as he felt a sense of dread in the pit of his stomach.

What the hell was he on about? I’d better keep my eyes and ears open. His mind surmised. He looked around in disbelief before producing his smart phone and snapping a series of

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incriminating pictures, an ironic smile curling across his face, knowing that he had crossed the line from civilian to wanted man before walking away, breaking into a run.

Reaching the gate which led back into the city, he slipped through as the Sun began to set, and as the gate closed behind him, lights illuminated the dimness. He was surrounded by three Federation soldiers – two troopers and one officer.

They had their weapons – battle rifles with grenade launchers – pointed at him. The officer gave Salvatore a drink, who took it, slightly confused as to what was going on. As he imbibed the beverage, he felt a sense of exhaustion begin to overcome him as he fell to the floor, grunting in an effort to remain awake, fighting the concoction.

‘Damn... water...!’ With those words, Salvatore collapsed and fell unconscious.

Holly was in her apartment, in her bedroom. The beautiful blonde’s thoughts cast over to memories of Salvatore, her closest friend. She picked up her cell phone and dialed Salvatore’s number. Holly took a deep breath as she whispered softly, closing her eyes – all she wanted to do was talk to Salvatore, hug him and soothe him as her emotions struggled to fight for dominance. All she heard was a beep of an answering machine, prompting the young dancer to leave a message for the autistic denizen.

‘Salvatore, it’s me, Holly. I was wondering if you were OK, after that... crazy period you had earlier today. Look, I just want to know if you’re all right, and if I don’t hear from you tonight, then good night.’ The Californian dancer Holly sighed and hung up, opening her eyes. They’d been closed throughout the entire message. She dialed another number. ‘It’s me, Holly. Jenna, I need you to come over to my place quickly. I think Salvatore’s in some kind of trouble.’ With those words, Holly hung up again and lied back on her bed, stroking her blonde hair in an almost sensual manner as she tried to relax.

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I hope Salvatore's OK. She thought to herself, her emotions shedding their light silently. About an hour or so later, Holly heard the doorbell being rung repeatedly. Waking up from her slumber, she straightened herself out slightly as she looked through the peephole of her apartment door – a blonde woman dressed mainly in fuchsia clothing. Holly opened the door to reveal her friend and Australian Interpol officer – Detective Sergeant Jenna Lane. She was strong – both physically and mentally, attractive and intelligent. Jenna and Holly looked at each other with equal concern as the beautiful dancer closed the door behind her.

‘Thank God you’re here, Jenna! Salvatore’s gone! Holly spoke with fear in her voice.

‘I got your call. When did you last see him?’ Jenna replied in her Oceanian accent, remaining calm and collected as ever as Holly sat down before her friend.

‘I last saw him this afternoon, when he flipped out. He ran out of the city, and I haven't seen him since then.’ Holly informed Jenna, her voice shaking as Jenna took notes on her smart phone. She then kneeled before her friend and hugged her gently to soothe her.

‘It's OK. He's going to be fine. Trust me. I'll find him for you and bring him back alive and well.’ Jenna’s words planted a seed of confidence in Holly’s mind as the cop and the athlete looked at each other, exchanging smiles.

‘I just wish he'd call me.’ Holly said sadly as Jenna hugged her once more.

Salvatore awoke in a prison cell, even though it didn’t look like one – it was fairly Spartan, with white walls and a tiled ceiling and floor. Salvatore grunted, sitting up straight on the bed. He noticed a door in front of him, and walked up to it. It didn’t open. He pushed every possible button on a nearby keypad, each one responding with a low-pitched bleep. Performing his trademark groan, Salvatore looked around for a possible exit. He saw none,

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spotting a camera with a microphone watching him above the bed. He gave it his best mean look, and yelled at maximum volume.

‘YOU'VE DONE A FINE JOB!!’ He screamed and cursed in Italian for a full minute and eventually calmed down, getting his head together. Turning his head sharply, Salvatore spotted a ventilation shaft then looked back at the camera as he put 2 and 2 together. Suddenly, the electricity sparkled and eventually went out, the electronically sealed door to the cell sliding open. Salvatore, sensing his cue to escape, got to his feet and peered outside the door – there was nobody present. Knowing that there would be no turning back after this point, he defiantly stepped outside of the cell and walked down the corridor casually, eventually breaking into a run as he headed for the exit.

Salvatore strode through the open road, the Sun gradually rising above the Horizon. He looked slightly tired as he caught his reflection in a nearby window, stubble beginning to show on his face as his eyes were slightly dark and bloodshot. Eventually, he found some cover and lay flat on his face, falling asleep.

Chapter 5

San Francisco, California, USA – 1 July 2011

Holly slung a rucksack over her shoulders and left her apartment, walking out of the city, with a slightly upset and almost worried look on her face. Arriving at the leisure centre with a look of concern and slight confusion, the beautiful blonde quickly changed and observed herself in a mirror, smiling slightly as she struck a few poses. Checking herself out slightly, she smiled and walked out the door, ready to teach her first class of the day. As she waited for her students to arrive, Holly sat down and sighed dreamily as her thoughts went to Salvatore. Jenna entered the leisure centre and walked over to a dance studio, knowing Holly would be present. The two women met once more as Jenna looked at Holly sympathetically, the dancer looking at the cop with worry in her eyes.

‘I didn't want to intrude on your class, but I just wanted to keep you up to date: Salvatore's gone – he's not in the city. He's out in the open road – the country.’ Jenna said simply. Holly's eyes widened slightly at the mention of this as panic deprived her of the power of speech.

‘What? Oh, my God!’ Those words came out of Holly's mouth and hit Jenna like a boxing glove.

‘What is it?’ The Oceanian officer asked with mild trepidation as the American athlete clarified her reasoning.

‘He's in danger!’ Holly explained as sweat began to form on her forehead. She brushed her hand through her hair and doused her face with some cold water, the atmosphere dropping into a sense of alertness. Jenna remained calm as ever.

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‘OK, I’ll send out a unit – a squad – to get him. Don’t worry, I won’t hurt him.’ She said coolly.

‘No! Don’t. He scares easy. He’s going to panic if you do that!’ Holly retorted, trying to get Jenna to understand the delicacy of Salvatore’s psychological wellbeing.

‘Look, do you have any other solutions? I have no choice. It’s my job!’ Jenna expressed extreme reluctance but she knew she had to be objective and professional – this frustrated Holly even further. She looked at her friend with disbelief before watching her leave.

‘Damn it! Shit!’ Holly yelled as she sighed in frustration, running her hand through her blonde hair as Jenna left sadly. She gritted her teeth and yelled wordlessly, dousing her face with cold water to calm down before practicing a few Martial Arts moves.

Salvatore, having recovered, was hiding out with slight stubble on his face. He shaved with his electric razor, pocketing it before brandishing a knife and handgun around his belt, cocking the weapon with utmost confidence. He approached a dilapidated house as the Sun shone in the Sky.

Entering the dilapidated house, Salvatore took great care where he stepped. The floorboards were squeaky and some of them were rotting away, the air was thick with the smell of cigarette smoke and the atmosphere itself was downright horrible with the sensation of ignorant zombies lurking around the corner.

Not happy with infesting the UK, they’ve come over here to spread their brain-cell-killing virus to the fucking Yanks, too! Salvatore’s mind screamed as he approached a man who was slouched in his chair, a television in front of him playing a disgusting talk-show. He tapped the man’s shoulder carefully; his handgun holstered so as not to arouse suspicion.

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‘Hey, I don't want to intrude, but your house is kind of screwed up.’ Salvatore said in a slightly terse but gentle tone of voice as he tried to be friendly to the piece of shit before him. The man failed to answer, prompting Salvatore to raise his voice slightly as he shook the man slightly more vigorously. He was getting impatient. ‘Hey, shit head! Don't play dead!’ He barked. The man still failed to answer. Now getting worried, Salvatore checked the man's pulse, and he felt nothing – a cold feeling of shock and dread crept into his mind as the harsh reality of the situation sank in: The man was dead.

What the fuck...? He thought to himself as he tried to regain his composure. He turned off the television and closed the man's soulless and lifeless eyes before heading out of the dilapidated house quickly and quietly. The Sun was shining brightly in the Sky, the Horizon glowed a bright expanse of blue, stretching out to near-infinite light years as the solitary outcast headed towards a high-tech-looking superstructure. Bursting into the atrium of the edifice, Salvatore looked around him, scanning the environment. *It's like they're fucking inviting me in.* He thought to himself before entering a nearby elevator, which sprang to life. The denizen pushed a button, which sent him deep, DEEP underground, the elevator humming noisily as it descended ominously, eventually reaching its destination with a satisfying PING! Salvatore exited the elevator, and he was in awe of his surroundings: A subterranean metropolis with glowing lights. *Wow! It's like Tokyo in here!* He thought to himself in wonder. Spotting a Federation soldier, Salvatore took the liberty of hiding and remaining silent. He knew better than to cross paths with an armed trooper. When he was sure the soldier had passed by, Salvatore slipped out and drew his side arm silently, arming it as he kept it close to his body, progressing further into the underground city.

Meanwhile, in an underground bunker on the outskirts of the city, a small rebel faction was brewing a deadly stew. Some of its members were relaxing in front of a television set, relying

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on the Outside World to provide them with information about their progress. A news reader appeared on the screen.

‘The Sol Federation is apparently on the search for local graduate Salvatore Pasquale, a European immigrant living in the US. Salvatore is apparently wanted in connection with starting a riot at a coffee house and for espionage after aiding and abetting known felons.’

A young woman with blonde hair and a rather deadly-looking complexion got to her feet as her smart phone rang. RING! RING! Some of the male rebels looked around, trying to ignore the repeated ringing of the portable telephone. RING! RING! The smart phone continued to ring ceaselessly as the young woman calmly drew it from her belt and held it in her hand, toying with it suggestively. RING! RING! The phone rang a few more times before the young woman answered, putting it to her ear.

‘Hello?’ She spoke, her voice calm and strong with a hint of a Scandinavian accent.

‘Is this Miranda Ekerot?’ The voice on the other end was a male bass, electronically distorted and modulated.

‘Yes, this is she.’ Miranda Ekerot, a Swedish assassin and renowned fighter, continued her conversation in her quarters as she looked at her reflection in a mirror, wearing a tight-fitting cyan Lycra catsuit with a turtleneck, zip-back and long sleeves with black boots, fingerless gloves and a yellow Polyester side-release belt with an aluminium buckle. Her blonde hair was tied in a ponytail – she looked deadly and attractive at the same time. ‘Salvatore Pasquale...? No problem. How much, you say? \$10 million? Hmm... doesn’t sound too bad.’ She said unnervingly calmly before calling out to her men in Swedish. Miranda sighed before turning her attention back to the caller.

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‘Hello? Oh... new hit? Good. You want me to do WHAT?! Work with the local cops!? They don't do shit! They scratch their balls all day in front of a computer, and only go out to arrest someone when it's too late! They grow fat on their pension and snack on shit such as doughnuts and kebabs! All right... for \$10 million, I'll do it. Who did you say was in charge of the operation? Jenna... Lane... yes, I remember her.’ She said Jenna’s name with a slight pipet of scorn and contempt as she picked up a few weapons to gear up for the mission at hand – a stainless steel knife and a handgun, attaching a light, holographic sight, laser pointer and a silencer to it. With an air of determination and cold confidence, she holstered her knife and handgun onto her belt and spoke up once more. ‘Very well – I shall see to it myself.’ She hung up. Exiting her quarters, she looked over at a tall, muscular man with fair hair. ‘Let’s go, Tobias.’ She said simply – her friend, pilot Tobias Jonsson – simply nodded and headed out of the base, heading towards a large transport helicopter. Miranda mounted the aircraft with Tobias getting in the pilot’s seat. As the engines whirred into life, Tobias looked at Miranda and spoke up, concern arching over his features.

‘Mir, you OK?’ He asked. Her reply was short and to the point.

‘Perfect, baby... perfect.’ She smiled coldly as Tobias gunned the engine and flew the helicopter into the summer Sky.

At that same time, Jenna was in the police station, discussing the matter with Frank in her office. He was all too willing to contribute. He had been a man of action for quite some time and he knew how to deal with such situations thanks to his military service. The older Interpol officer cursed out loud in French before facing his friend and partner, speaking English once more.

‘Salvatore Pasquale? I can’t say I know him, although I have met him, Jenna.’ He quipped, his tone of voice relaxed and friendly. ‘How’s Holly?’

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‘She’s tired.’ Jenna replied. ‘Tired, not to mention worried as hell.’ She laughed humourlessly as Frank lit a cigarette. A young officer came into Jenna’s office and handed her a document wordlessly before leaving. Thanking the officer, Jenna looked over the document, catching Frank’s interest.

‘What’s that?’ He asked.

‘Salvatore’s personal profile.’ She replied with a slight smirk on her face. Frank simply nodded and opened his mouth to speak, but was interrupted by a harsh rapping on the office’s door. Frank did a double-take before raising an eyebrow. Jenna simply spoke calmly. ‘Come.’ The door opened, revealing Vladimir, Holly and Miranda. Jenna recognised her old friend and got to her feet, eyeing up the Swedish assassin. The two women stared at each other silently, a sense of mutual respect between them – neither hatred nor admiration for one another, neither ally nor adversary; both and neither at the same time. Frank, suspecting immediate hostility, got to his feet and put his hand on Jenna’s shoulder, his tone of voice calm and confident.

‘Come on... let’s get this meeting started.’ He said softly before speaking to himself in French. The five representatives sat down to conduct a meeting that would dictate Salvatore’s ultimate fate with the Sol Federation. Frank picked up Salvatore’s personal profile and read it out loud, his voice a commanding presence in the room as it reverberated slightly.

‘Salvatore Pasquale was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome when he was 16.’ As he spoke these words, a look of understanding crossed Jenna’s features. Holly shot her friend a smirking look which equalled the phrase “I told you so”. ‘I think he might have been intimidated by the fact that he had guns pointed at him. Apparently, he was cornered by Federation troops, and, well... that’s bound to make anyone piss in their pants.’ He chuckled

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humourlessly. Miranda was the first person other than Frank to speak up, her tone of voice similar to that of an increasingly frustrated commanding officer.

‘He's a liability, for Christ's sake. He deviated from the Template and also instigated a riot. Lest we not forget that he aided and abetted fugitives from the Federation?’ She spoke, her act coming across as too convincing, since Jenna locked eyes with her.

‘I say who's harmless... and who's not, Sergeant.’ Miranda and Jenna glared at each other. The assassin and the cop locked eyes, challenging each other. Without warning, Miranda drew her side arm, pressing it into Jenna's gut. At the same time, Jenna drew her own pistol and put it to Miranda's neck. Frank raised his voice in order to stop the two female adversaries.

‘Sergeant, what's wrong? Ease down, come on – you too, Miranda.’ He said calmly and comfortingly, never snapping. Miranda and Jenna sat down, the former glaring while the latter looked at her sadly. Frank cursed in French as Vladimir looked at Miranda, then at Jenna, and then he nodded imperceptibly, the connection establishing itself in his mind. Holly buried her face in her hands, with Jenna consoling her.

‘You really are one cold-hearted bitch, Miranda. You always were.’ Jenna spoke with a tinge of regret in her voice. Miranda simply looked back at Jenna, giving her a slightly cold gaze.

‘I'm doing my job, Jenna.’ She said simply. Frank sighed inaudibly before regaining control of the topic at hand.

‘How do you know Salvatore?’ He asked Holly, his angular, chiselled face and short dark hair accentuating his appearance as a man of authority as he looked at the beautiful dancer with a sympathetic heart. Holly brushed her blonde hair slightly before sighing dreamily.

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‘I met him a year ago... in a night club – they were hosting a pool party.’ She said wistfully. Vladimir took the opportunity to take a verbal jab at her, the two of them being polar opposites but bound together due to their mutual friendship with Salvatore.

‘It was my idea.’ Holly and Vladimir glared at each other coldly, the athlete speaking up.

‘He did a good job, despite his disability.’ Vladimir spoke in a deadpan sardonic tone. ‘I wouldn't let him go home until he'd actually been a little bit more sociable. He seemed easy to manipulate.’ He smiled ironically before Jenna took over.

‘OK... I suggest we go to the Underground City and start to look for him there, then we go through the tunnels... and we shoot only if ABSOLUTELY NECESSARY. Holly, you will go back home and keep your cell phone on. Anything happens, I will call or text you. Vladimir, stay here and don't do anything stupid. Frank, you're with me.’ Jenna spoke confidently as Frank put out a cigarette he had been smoking.

‘No shit.’ He said simply, blowing a ring of smoke into the air as he extinguished his handheld chimney. All but Vladimir got up. Miranda looked at Vladimir coldly, which sent a chill down the Russian sportsman's spine.

Chapter 6

In an underground network of tunnels beneath the subterranean metropolis, Salvatore was beginning to fall asleep. Curling up into a ball in a hiding spot, he removed his spectacles and lied back, closing his eyes in an attempt to get some sleep. About an hour or so later, Salvatore's eyes clicked back open as he heard footsteps and yelling, and he sat up, putting his spectacles back on, breathing heavily. He scrambled up to his feet, and drew his handgun, arming it, his eyes peering into the dimly illuminated lights. He suddenly fell to the floor as he was hit sharply in the back. Turning around, Salvatore saw an angry, bruised man with an assault rifle pointed at him, holding it with one hand, the other hand holding a survival knife. Salvatore recognised the man's face.

‘What you're about to do to me is a damn sight worse than what I did to you. Come on, put the gun down.’ He said calmly, trying to reason with this person of limited intellect. The figure squeezed his finger on the trigger, prompting Salvatore to take action by kicking the man in the groin. He delivered a sharp punch to his adversary’s nose, causing him to drop his weapons and run off nursing his wounded face. Salvatore then picked up both the knife and the assault rifle on the floor, holstering the former while checking the latter. ‘He didn't even take off the safety – fucking cabbage.’ He laughed at the irony as he primed it. Despite his lack of military experience, he seemed to be quite well-versed for a civilian.

Meanwhile, at that very same moment in time, Frank and Jenna were walking with their weapons drawn at the opposite end of the labyrinth, guns ready. The air was thick with a sense of suspense and mild dread.

‘I don't want to shoot him, Sergeant. He's harmless, like you said.’ Frank spoke up, prompting a sympathetic reply from Jenna.

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‘It's not us shooting him I'm worried about.’ The two officers looked at each other, clearly concerned for the fate of their friend.

Salvatore emerged from a corner, assault rifle in hand... right into Miranda's line of fire. He turned and bolted as Miranda fired a bullet at the wall, narrowly missing Salvatore's forearm by a clear centimetre. He hid behind a wall, trying not to panic. Miranda looked around for him, determined to cut him down.

‘Salvatore? Salvatore, where are you? Holly wants to speak to you but you have to come out here.’ Miranda spoke in a slightly deceptive tone of voice, filled with mild guile. Salvatore stayed hidden with his assault rifle slung over his back. ‘Salvatore? Where are you?’ Miranda asked again as she turned around the corner. Salvatore yelled and jumped at her, knocking the gun out of her hand. She slapped him, causing him to fall to the floor. Miranda spotted her gun on the floor. At the same time, Salvatore grabbed his own rifle as Miranda pointed her handgun at Salvatore's head. Salvatore aimed his rifle at Miranda's hand and shot first, knocking Miranda's pistol out of her hand but leaving her unscathed. He slung his assault rifle and turned around, running as fast as his legs would carry him. Salvatore ducked his head as Miranda ran after him, firing a round occasionally, missing each time.

Salvatore spotted a ventilation shaft up ahead, and he ran faster, jumping into the shaft and closing the grating behind him, moving up a ladder. Miranda looked around. She grunted in anger as she had lost her target.

Salvatore climbed out of the ventilation shaft and closed the hatch as he reached the surface once more. He ran onto the road and looked at the city, sneaking into the metropolis undetected as he had one particular goal in mind: To say goodbye to his one true friend. As he reached his former residential district, Salvatore slipped into an apartment block and trod carefully, inadvertently stepping on a squeaky floorboard.

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Holly was in front of her computer. She heard footsteps and the squeaky floorboard, and her attention perked up. Going to her bedside drawer, she opened it and got her handgun, cocking it. Holly took cover behind the doorway and waited quietly. Quickly, both Salvatore and Holly jumped at the same time, the former performing a diving somersault, the latter doing a 180° turn. She cried out wordlessly and lowered her weapon, Salvatore doing the same. Upon recognising that it was her friend, she ran up to him and hugged him tightly, crying tears of joy and fear at the same time. Salvatore remained silent, hugging her to soothe her.

‘Salvatore! I'm so glad you're alive!’ She said through her tears as Salvatore smiled softly, stroking her hair, running his hands through the golden follicles of light that often permeated his dreams. He knew he had to leave his current life behind, even though he loved her. ‘Why didn't you call me?’ Holly stifled a sob as she spoke once more. This time, Salvatore responded.

‘I didn't want to give away my position! I was scared... I still am.’ He said simply, trying to remain calm and collected. ‘I'm really sorry. I didn't mean to scare you.’ As he broke the embrace slightly, he found himself staring deep into the eyes of his angel. He stroked Holly's hair, and held her face gently. Salvatore and Holly leaned in closer, their faces millimetres apart. As Holly slowly closed her eyes, Salvatore kissed her on the cheek as opposed to the lips, pulling back quickly and quietly. Holly found herself falling in love with Salvatore as her heart raced from the sensation of the kiss, enjoying his hands on her body.

‘I can't.’ Salvatore said simply. Holly opened her eyes in mild surprise.

‘I don't understand.’ She said, clearly confused by his change in behaviour.

‘I can't get involved, Holly.’ Salvatore said tersely as Holly looked pitiful and sympathetic.

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‘I know what you went through with those girls... and I understand.’ She said, remaining ever patient and understanding – she was an angel among humans. Holly put her hand on Salvatore’s shoulder. She knew right then and there that she was completely in love with him.

‘I can't get involved again... especially with you. We're practically best friends, you and I... and I don't want to mess that up.’ Salvatore continued, trying to fight back his own tears. He loved Holly far too much to get her involved in something as insidious as a Federation manhunt, of which HE was the target. He finally turned to face her, his expression one of sadness and acceptance of his fate, with hints of reassurance. ‘I don't know when – or if – I'll see you again.’ He climbed out of a window and turned to look at her one last time. Holly looked at him with some tears forming in her eyes. Salvatore simply hugged her one last time and gave her a loving kiss on the cheek before jumping out of the window. He entered a nearby ventilation shaft, resuming his fight against the Federation as he ventured into the underground network of tunnels once more. Holly simply leaned against a wall and breathed heavily, running her hands through her blonde hair, the love for her friend coming suddenly and sharply like an attack of tanks against gunships.

Vladimir was alone in the police station. He took out his cell phone and hesitated briefly before dialling. He put the phone to his ear.

‘Hello?’ He answered slightly apprehensively. The voice on the other end was deep and slightly flat in tone; the unmistakable voice of Salvatore.

‘Hello, Vladimir.’ Salvatore’s low voice resonated through the tinny speaker of Vladimir’s cell phone.

‘Salvatore...?’ Vladimir sounded stunned.

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‘What the hell are you doing, man? Don't you know I'm being hunted down!?’ Salvatore asked with a tinge of panic in his voice as his footsteps were heard, his heavy breathing audible over the speaker.

‘You don't think I don't know that? I have to help these pigs save your ass.’ Vladimir responded slightly scathingly as the atmosphere thickened with shadows of tension. There was a brief silence, a period of auditory respite as if the 7 Seals were ready to open. Vladimir opened his mouth to speak but was quickly intercepted by Salvatore.

‘Look, this might be the last time we speak, you and I. I don't know if I'll make it out of this shit stain with my life, to tell you the truth. I feel like I'm going crazy. Here I am getting my own back on the dip shits who screwed me over, and I'm losing my mind, man. It's bloody hell all over again.’ His voice echoed in Vladimir's head. A LOUD gunshot was heard over the phone line as Salvatore cursed loudly in Italian, followed by the familiar clicking sound accompanied by a dialling tone.

‘What the hell is going on...!? Salvatore? Salvatore!’ Vladimir raised his voice into the disconnected line, but to no avail. Grunting and cursing in Russian, he looked around him, spotting a notepad and a pen. He scribbled a note for Frank and got up, heading out of the police station. Vladimir ran as fast as his legs could carry him, reaching the residential district of the city as he dashed into an apartment building. Reaching Holly's door, he rapped on it loudly. Gradually, it opened, revealing a very curious-looking Holly. She glared at Vladimir for a moment before slamming the door in his face. The Russian sportsman sighed and spoke up in an attempt to reason with the American dancer. ‘Holly, we have to talk. Salvatore's broken contact with me... with us.’

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Holly's voice was heard through the door, reticent to open up to anybody except her close friend with whom she had fallen deeply in love. 'Go away. I don't want to talk to anyone, except Jenna or Salvatore.'

'His life is in danger. I need your help.' Vladimir spoke up, his voice taking on a more despairing tone.

'Why should I help you? So you can cover your own tracks? You've got a lot of nerve coming back here and asking for MY help after YOU basically drove poor Sal to an assisted suicide!' Holly snarled angrily. She did not hate Vladimir but she did not like him either, the dancer and the sportsman inexplicably bound together by their mutual friendship with the graduate fugitive.

'For fuck's sake, I'm sorry, OK!?' Vladimir yelled. He breathed heavily, sobbing silently as he felt a sense of guilt overcome him – he knew he was partially responsible for his friend's defection. The door opened, revealing Holly, compassionate and caring once more as she knelt down beside Vladimir, hugging him gently. As the two reconciled, Holly helped up Vladimir and into her apartment, closing the door behind her.

Frank and Jenna drove back to the police station in an unmarked civilian car. Jenna was at the wheel, calm and composed as ever. Frank was in the front passenger's seat, slightly nervous. The two of them looked at each other. Jenna smiled confidently. Frank tried to return the gesture but he was feeling diffident, which was unusual for him. Finally, Jenna spoke up, neutralising the acidic silence between the two police officers.

'Are you all right, Frank?' Jenna asked with soft concern. Frank looked at Jenna with a slightly stoic look before turning his head away, his dedication to the job remarkable if at the expense of his social and personal life.

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‘I’m fine, thank you very much.’

‘Are you sure? You don’t sound like it.’ Jenna persisted.

Frank sighed – he knew the game was up and he also knew that Jenna would never give up in questioning him unless he succumbed. ‘I’m tired, and worried, too.’ A rare occasion for Frank to show emotion, he simply smiled sadly as the two officers returned to the police station. Jenna entered the building, followed by Frank. He went to a nearby drinking fountain and drank some water, splashing some on his face liberally as well. He looked at himself in a mirror and smiled slightly, showing off his bright, sparkling white teeth. He returned to the table in Jenna’s office, thinking Vladimir is still there.

‘Vladimir, can I ask you a...?’ He stopped in mid-sentence as he noticed the note Vladimir had written. He picked it up and read it out. Frank shook his head and his eyes widened slightly, his mouth forming a swear word as he cursed in French before yelling (quite loudly) in English. ‘FUCK’S SAKE!!’ Jenna entered her office, catching Frank storming out.

‘Where are you going?’ She asked with mild fear and surprise.

‘I’m going to the one place where our snivelling friend may have gone.’ He said simply. Jenna, understanding, went after Frank.

Holly and Vladimir sat on the sofa in Holly’s luxurious apartment as the atmosphere lightened up between the two former adversaries. RIIIIING! The doorbell rang quite vehemently, persistent in its nature. Holly looked at Vladimir, giving him a small smile

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before going to answer the door, opening it. Frank strode in followed by Jenna, who closed the door.

‘What is it?’ Holly asked worriedly.

‘You were supposed to stay at the station, Vladimir!’ Frank snarled, throwing Vladimir’s note in front of him. ‘You could have jeopardised the whole situation! Salvatore could be dead for all we know!’ He continued. Holly spoke up, her voice shaking with mild anxiety.

‘He came to see me earlier.’ Jenna approached Holly with a look of sympathy and seriousness.

‘What? Is this true?’ She asked as her friend nodded.

‘He told me he didn't know when, or if, he'd see me again. I guess he knew his time was limited so he wanted to say good bye to me. When he left... I felt something I'd never felt for him before.’ Holly put her hand to her heart, feeling it beat and pulse at the thought of Salvatore. Jenna nodded understandingly while hugging Holly as Frank looked confused but then understood, realisation sweeping across his features – he could put a Japanese disciplinarian to shame with his devoted and logical personality. Frank looked at Jenna as his eyes widened slightly, a droplet of panic pipetting into his mind as it began to spread his poison. Catching his eyes, Jenna seemingly understood.

‘We have to go! Holly, Vladimir, we need your help, too!’ Jenna called. Holly got her gun and holstered it, Vladimir running in front of Frank and Jenna.

‘Where do you think you're going!?’ Frank called out.

‘I'm going home! I'll be back in a minute!’ Vladimir yelled over his shoulder. Heading over to his house, the Russian sportsman approached a safe in his bedroom, inputting a code at

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near-light speed, each key illuminating as he pressed it, accompanied by a series of short and sharp beeps. Eventually, he heard a longer beep – BEEEEEEEP – followed by a metallic CLICK! Vladimir opened the door to his safe and took out a handgun, arming and holstering it before returning to Holly's apartment, rendezvousing with Frank, Jenna and Holly.

Chapter 7

Salvatore was hiding somewhere within the labyrinthine subterranean city. Miranda walked slowly and quietly, the predator stalking her prey. Feeling quite confident, Salvatore ran blindly through a corner and narrowly avoided being shot by Miranda. He zipped back in a panic, taking cover.

‘Do you know how much you're worth?’ Miranda’s Scandinavian-accented voice reverberated throughout the underground metropolis. Salvatore hesitated briefly before speaking up, his own voice taking on a more gruff tone.

‘You tell me. Why are you doing this?’ He coughed/grunted mainly out of stress.

Miranda followed the sound of his voice. Salvatore looked around frantically – he was running out of places to hide. As Salvatore took cover, he suddenly got a phone call, prompting him to answer. Frank’s voice was heard.

‘Salvatore, it’s me, Frank.’ The French-Canadian Interpol officer’s unmistakable gravelly voice echoed throughout the phone’s tiny speaker.

‘Frank? What do you want? I'm getting my arse shot at here.’ Salvatore said through gritted teeth.

‘I think we can work out something – what do you say I talk to your tutor, Francis – about your current predicament? He told me that you can graduate as long as you come back alive.’ There was a brief silence as Salvatore came to a point of divergence in his life – he knew that his present choice would shape the rest of his life. Eventually, he came to a decision.

‘I’ll think about it.’ Click, dial tone. As Salvatore quite crudely hung up, he holed up in a very tight spot, making him almost invisible in the darkness of the underground tunnels. He

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rolled over on his side and removed his spectacles. He then closed his eyes and fell asleep, hearing Miranda's footsteps fade away into silence.

San Francisco, California, USA – 2 July 2011

Several hours later, Salvatore's eyes clicked open. The lights in the underground network of tunnels illuminated his presence. His face was drenched in sweat, and his stubble was beginning to show again. He put his spectacles back on and sat up. He checked his pockets and pulled out two objects – they looked like hand grenades. He juggled one in each hand; a stun grenade in his left hand, coloured black, and a smoke grenade in his right hand, coloured white.

‘Where did I get these two babies from, then? Ah... never mind.’ He chuckled as he pocketed them, slinging his rifle over his shoulder. He climbed down a ladder, deeper below what he expected, as if he were descending into the Centre of the Earth. Eventually, he reached a facility, his eyes widening in shock as the realisation came to him – it was a top-secret Federation base. Strangely enough, there were no personnel outside. Salvatore entered the base, slipping into an elevator. The doors of the elevator slid shut, and it started descending.

Just how fucking deep does this go? He thought to himself. Any deeper down and I'll reach the 10th Circle of Hell. He laughed humourlessly as the elevator doors opened ominously.

Frank, Jenna, Holly and Vladimir followed Salvatore's trail, trying to think like the autistic denizen as they, too, entered the subterranean metropolis. Jenna thought she saw something, and fired her gun, prompting an alert reaction from Frank, who drew his own weapon. However, she controlled herself in the nick of time, calming down as she lowered her side arm.

‘What is it?’ Frank asked with mild concern.

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‘I think I saw something.’ Jenna replied.

‘Where...?’ Frank enquired. His response came in the form of a pointing finger, indicating a closed ventilation shaft. Vladimir spotted the ventilation shaft’s hinges and proceeded to pull them off with his bare hands, the task seemingly easy with his muscular physique. He then jumped into the shaft, ignoring the ladder nearby, a grunt barely audible from the base of the shaft. Holly, being more careful than Vladimir, knew better than to act out of pure bravado. She climbed the steps and descended down the ladder carefully, aiming her gun into the darkness in case of any “unwelcome guests”. Eventually, she reached Vladimir.

‘You OK?’ She asked with worry. Vladimir nodded before turning his attention to Frank and Jenna, who were staring into the dim abyss before them.

‘Well, don’t just stand there, you dumb son of a bitch! Come down here.’ Vladimir called as Frank and Jenna joined him and Holly into the shaft, the quartet eventually reaching an isolated room, separate from the facility itself.

‘Thanks a lot, Holly – you’ve led us into a fucking dead end!’ Vladimir called. Holly looked apologetic but annoyed simultaneously, the Russian sportsman flashing a brief smirk. ‘Don’t worry – I have just the plan: We can track Salvatore.’ All eyes were on Vladimir. ‘I was able to trace his position. His cell phone has a locator implanted – he doesn’t know this. I planted it on him when he wasn’t looking.’ There was a deafening silence as everyone seemed to shoot Vladimir a venomous look except for Frank, who simply looked slightly disappointed, the cop approaching the sportsman, their eyes locking.

‘You – a dyslexic – have endangered the life of your friend – an autistic man, who is already considered a 2nd-class citizen in this society. You’ve betrayed your own kind, and worst of all...’ His words were cut off by an annoyed-looking Vladimir.

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‘...I know, shut up.’ He said rather tersely. Frank was taken aback by Vladimir’s mild outburst, but chose to say nothing.

Miranda was with a group of approximately 10 Federation troops on the outskirts of the city. She primed her side arm as the soldiers, led by a single officer, began their descent into the sub-basements of the deceptively utopian metropolis. ‘Let’s go!’ She barked. She primed her weapon. Miranda looked pensive, as if she was questioning her profession. Her face and emotions ranged from confident to diffident, then back to confident again. Miranda stood alone outside the gates to the city, fighting with herself morally. Her face showed a split personality: Greed and ambition on one side, and humanity and compassion on the other. The latter prevailed; although she knew deep down inside that the former had conquered. She shook it off and stormed into the tunnels, heading deep into the underground network. Separated from the Federation troops, Miranda spoke into a hidden radio as she descended beneath the city on her own, looking for Salvatore, her motives now clear. ‘We’ll split up. Remember: Don’t kill him. I want that honour.’ Miranda drew her silenced weapon and fired a single shot, hitting nothing but air. She lowered her gun to find out nothing. The Swedish assassin started to calm down and began to remember – and realise – what had driven her to the edge of her sanity.

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San Francisco, California, USA – 20 June 2009

Jenna and Miranda were sitting in front of a television set, both off-duty police officers – one warm and friendly, the other cold and slightly callous.

‘So, Miranda... how’s things with you and what’s his name...?’ Jenna asked, trying to make conversation with Miranda, who replied in her usual short and terse manner.

‘...Vojislav. Just fine, thanks.’ The Swedish fighter looked at her Australian counterpart with cold, steely blue eyes like a deadly assassin in a fighting tournament.

‘Just fine? You sure you don’t want to tell me anything else?’ She asked worryingly.

‘Jenna, I’m sure. This is my personal business.’ Miranda replied slightly more assertively, not wanting to hurt Jenna. The older blonde simply nodded understandingly before sighing sadly.

A few seconds later, the HDTV in the living room barked into life, giving a news report of a hostage crisis.

‘This just in: A group of Eastern European terrorists – members of the anti-Federation organisation “ARCUS” – have taken over the San Francisco State University, taking several students hostage. Police are at the scene of the crime as we speak – these people are dangerous and should be evaded if possible.’ Jenna looked at the news with a stunned expression on her face and got to her feet, gearing up quickly. Miranda looked at her friend with a solitary raised eyebrow.

‘Where are you going, Jenna?’

‘Have a look.’ Jenna indicated the HDTV. Miranda looked at it, then back at her friend. She, too, got up and started to get her weapons.

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‘Vojislav... no!’ Miranda’s tone of voice and facial expression changed to one of pain and disbelief.

‘Come on – they might need us.’ Jenna said sympathetically. Miranda nodded, gritting her teeth as she felt the last of her sanity begin to slip.

‘And I thought today couldn’t get any worse. Fuck it – let’s go for it.’ The two cops headed out of the apartment, going to Jenna’s car. Jenna and Miranda arrived at the college within minutes. A police commander led them to the scene.

‘OK, what the hell happened here?’ Jenna asked, ever ready to take action.

‘Some Slavic nuts took control of the college about an hour or two ago and are holding some of the students hostage. We’ve got a positive ID on the leader, Sergeant.’ The commander showed the two women a picture of a Slavic man with dark hair and a goatee beard with a moustache. Miranda looked shocked, her normally ice-cold demeanour now a shattered visage.

‘No... no, it can’t be!’ She said almost as if clutching onto some form of hope to get her out of the pit of despair. Jenna could do nothing except reason with her friend, soothing her.

‘I’m sorry, Miranda... but we have to get him.’ Jenna said softly. Miranda regained her composure and then came to a personal executive decision.

‘If he doesn’t stop... I’ll kill him myself.’ She said; her voice a low growl. Jenna looked slightly scared at Miranda’s demeanour.

‘Lieutenant, we’re police officers, not mercenaries.’ Miranda wheeled around to face her friend, flashing a deadly ice-cold look that could freeze Mount Vesuvius.

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‘And if we don’t do something, then those students could die! Now I’m going in – if you want to try to stop me... be my guest.’ With those words, she primed her gun and infiltrated the college, leaving Jenna outside with the Commander.

‘OK, Vojislav. Don’t hurt the students. We’ll give you whatever you want.’ The Commander said simply, trying to negotiate a deal with the crazed Slav. In a classroom in the college, Vojislav was present with his men. The captured students – primarily cheerleaders – were being guarded by the terrorists, while Vojislav himself strutted around the room with a submachine gun in his hand.

‘First, we want you out of here... and then I want a chopper. My hostages and I will board the chopper quietly. Anyone tries to stop me – the girls get it.’ Jenna did her best to reason with Vojislav.

‘Vojislav, you don’t want to do this. I know you’re scared but imprisoning helpless civilians isn’t the answer. What do you really want?’ Vojislav’s reply came soon enough.

‘I want to get out of here, and I don’t care how. I’ll blow off their heads if I have to.’ Miranda slipped silently into the college, making her way towards the hostages. She could hear Vojislav’s voice from a few floors above, cursing in Serbian. ‘You have two minutes to decide. I’ll execute the hostages if you do not answer.’ Thinking quickly, the troubled cop slipped into a ventilation shaft. In the meantime, outside the college, Jenna and the Commander looked at each other before turning to face Vojislav again.

‘Don’t worry – just calm down and we’ll pretend this never happened, OK?’ Vojislav’s response was to put his gun to a random cheerleader’s leg and pull the trigger, shooting and injuring her. The girl squealed in pain.

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‘I’m sick of you pigs always pushing me around! You Americans think you’re the greatest country on Earth and we’re sick of your bullshit! I came here of my own volition! I followed all your rules just to STAY here... and now I’ve run out of patience, alien or not!’ As Vojislav finished making his impassioned speech, his accomplices looked around, suspecting something is wrong. Miranda’s mind snapped as she witnessed her own lover hurting the innocent students. Taking action, she burst out from the ventilation shaft, the terrorists going for her. The anti-heroine dispatched them with well-placed head shots, the immigrant radical activists no match for the female Inquisitor. Vojislav slammed into Miranda’s back, knocking her off her feet. Vojislav then shot and severely injures another hostage – a fair-haired man – Miranda’s friend, Tobias. She screamed in Swedish before running to tend to her friend. Holding the injured man, Miranda started crying softly.

‘No, please don’t go... don’t leave me, Tobias.’ She sobbed through gritted teeth as the future pilot grunted in agony before losing consciousness, muttering something in Swedish. Miranda hugged her friend’s body for a few moments. Her sadness turned to rage as she glared at her soon-to-be-dead lover. ‘You’re going to pay for that, you piece of shit!’ She charged at Vojislav and pushed him down to the floor. The dazed immigrant looked at the enraged cop as he was delivered a series of punches. Propping him up against a window, Miranda held Vojislav at gunpoint. ‘This is your final warning. Let. Them. Go!’ Miranda asked almost pleadingly, her eyes registering sadness and fear. Vojislav’s eyes met Miranda’s, his own eyes showing guilt and a cold stoicism that made a German Expressionist look like a little-known Hungarian opening act at a rock concert. He looked at her softly and spoke his last words.

‘Goodbye, Miranda.’ Vojislav put the barrel of his gun into his mouth and pulled the trigger, sending blood splattering over Miranda’s face and hair, his body falling out of the window as

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it collided with the hard concrete below. Miranda exited the building and looked at Jenna coldly, scaring her slightly. The surviving hostages were escorted to safety while Tobias was wheeled into an ambulance, a red patch of blood forming over his abdomen.

‘I’m sorry, Miranda.’ Jenna was only able to say so much as Miranda continued walking away.

‘Don’t be, Jenna... don’t be.’ With those words, Miranda just walked away, disillusioned and hardened by the events. A younger-looking Frank approached Jenna and led her towards her car. Miranda walked into the darkness, Vojislav’s words echoing in her mind. She now knew what she had to do.

She had to take up the mantle and continue where he left off – to lead ARCUS.

Chapter 8

San Francisco, California, USA – 2 July 2011

Back in the present day, Miranda fell to the floor, and started to cry silently. Feeling guilt-ridden, Miranda finally gave into her conscience. She drew her radio. ‘Everyone – stand down. It's over.’ There was no answer, only silence. Miranda spoke up more fervently in an attempt to get SOME attention. ‘I said "stand down". It's finished! Let him go!’ As she holstered her radio, her cell phone rang. RING! RING! Miranda looked at it, grunting silently before answering it. ‘Hello?’

‘Miss Ekerot... is the target dead?’ The voice on the other end of the line was cold and soulless.

‘No, not yet, sir. I can either do it correctly, or rush and make a mistake. The choice is yours.’ Miranda replied in her calm but deadly tone.

‘I expect the job to be done – allow me to send someone to do it for you.’ The voice retorted. Click, dial tone. There was nothing, except a deep, abiding silence. Miranda holstered her phone, knowing she had to reach Salvatore quickly. She turned around and broke into a run.

Salvatore trudged through the subterranean facility, keeping his guard up due to a series of flashing strobe lights in various colours and intensities. Hearing military footsteps nearby, he hid quickly. Reaching into his pocket for his cell phone, Salvatore noticed a faint red glow from the back. He opened the casing that housed the battery and noticed a bright red flashing LED, extracting it carefully. ‘A locator...’ Salvatore realised that only one person could have done this to him. ‘Bastard.’ He snarled. Quickly discarding the locator, he growled as he gritted his teeth. ‘Vladimir, you fuck!’ He spat with enough intensity to scare a Scottish

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barbarian and opened fire on a group of Federation troopers, grinning coldly as he cut them down.

Vladimir and Holly were in another part of the base, having been separated from Frank and Jenna. The Russian sportsman spotted a grating and tried to pry it open.

‘It’s fastened.’ He grunted as Holly stepped forward.

‘Let me try.’ Holly fired two shots and kicked the grating down, dislodging it. She turned to Vladimir with a smirk on her face. ‘It’s loose now.’ Vladimir jumped into the ventilation shaft. There was a brief pause as his voice was heard from within.

‘Do you want to die? Come on!’ He called as Holly jumped in quickly, seeing no ladder.

The unnamed Federation officer in charge of the squad looked around in shock, checking his fallen comrades. He panicked then ran for the exit. Salvatore emerged from his hiding spot. Fighting his way through the base, he eventually reached a HUGE chamber, which was empty. ‘Hello? Is anyone present?’ He called out. He was suddenly slammed in the back by a Federation soldier, causing him to fall to the floor. The trooper was shot dead by Miranda. Salvatore toppled over and fell to the floor in pain – he was weakened through a combination of stress, lack of sleep and a constant adrenaline surge. His stubble was clearly visible as he got up painfully to see Miranda standing in front of him.

‘Relax... I won’t hurt you. Please believe me.’ Miranda spoke softly as Salvatore got up, the Swedish blonde beauty holding up her arms in a pacifying gesture. The Italian outcast was too pissed off to notice as he lunged at her. ‘I’m not going to kill you. I swear! You have to believe me!’ Miranda pleaded as the two of them engaged in a brief hand-to-hand fight, the Scandinavian fighter defeating the Italian renegade with a few special moves and a quick

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punch to the gut. A series of gunshots disturbed their exchange. Salvatore turned around to see a dozen Federation soldiers aiming their weapons at him.

‘You want me? Come and get me! But I’m taking you with me... to HELL.’ As Salvatore spoke, he typed in an access code on a keypad. The reactor core – the heart of the city’s power – opened up. The troops looked at each other before coming to a realisation that Salvatore was serious about destroying the whole city, both underground AND on the surface. ‘One step closer and I’ll blow us all to Kingdom Come!’ He yelled.

‘Salvatore, stop! You don’t know what you’re doing!’ Miranda called out to him.

‘YES, I FUCKING DO!!’ Salvatore screeched in retort. He was beyond caring by this point – he didn’t give a shit if he died. The troops raised their weapons... and they froze for a few seconds before ultimately falling to the floor, dead. A ninja figure dressed in black, wielding a Katana sword and handgun, stood before the two denizens. Salvatore, realising he was in deep shit, attempted to reload his rifle, but the panic and stress was getting to him at a crucial moment. ‘Come on... come on! COME ON!!’ He growled as he tried to insert the magazine into his weapon, missing every time. The ninja figure aimed its pistol and fired, missing Salvatore by a centimetre. ‘Shit! Fuck!’ Salvatore turned and ran around a corner with Miranda, both of them effectively on the same page now. ‘What the hell is that thing?’ Salvatore asked.

‘My replacement.’ Miranda’s reply was short and ominous as she glanced at the approaching figure, the two of them running for cover as the casual Terminator-like killing machine followed them patiently. BANG! Salvatore was shot in the forearm, the bullet tearing into his flesh. Yelling in pain, he dropped his spare magazines onto the floor as he and Miranda were forced to retreat. He looked at his new bullet wound in disbelief before turning his attention to the approaching shadow.

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‘You fuck...!’ He growled quietly as he turned to Miranda. ‘Where do we go?’

‘This way! Follow me!’ Miranda called as she effortlessly accelerated away, Salvatore running as fast as his legs would carry him as he yelled at the ninja in an effort to taunt it into making a mistake.

‘You pus fuck! You fuck! You fucking cyborg twat!’ He yelled. Salvatore followed Miranda while the ninja figure took careful aim... and shot him a second time. BANG! This time the bullet hit Salvatore squarely in the back of the leg, severing a tendon and crippling him. He dropped his assault rifle, his weapon falling to the floor with a dull clunk, leaving him with no choice but to crawl on the floor, dragging his incapacitated limb with great effort. He screamed in a combination of rage and agony as he left a trail of blood. ‘You fucking fuck! You f... Argh!’ He yelled as he struggled to keep the pain to himself. Looking around him, he could hear the advancing ninja figure, its shadow barely visible around the corner. ‘Come on! COME O-O-O-N!!’ He yelled. The doomed fugitive struggled to get to his feet, his crippled leg jiggling around as he tried to prop himself up against a wall. He turned to Miranda. ‘Help me up!’ He called in pain. Miranda obliged, helping up Salvatore as the two of them tried to flee.

Vladimir and Holly looked around them, the Russian sportsman attempting to open a door, but it wouldn’t move.

‘Shit. The door’s locked!’ He snapped.

‘What!?’ Holly asked incredulously.

‘It won’t budge!’ Vladimir replied. Holly looked at him, flashing him a look of pure irritation.

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‘Thank you very fucking much, Vladimir! You’ve led us into a room with no exit.’ Vladimir just sighed/grunted in a manner reminiscent of Salvatore, having picked up some of his habits.

Salvatore, severely crippled, lied on the floor outside the base, away from the Underground City, the Moon shining in the Sky. Miranda was trying to tend to his wounds.

‘The US... is no longer the Land of the Free.’ The tired denizen spoke as he tried to ignore the pain.

‘You’re telling me.’ Miranda said simply as she smiled briefly, Salvatore yelling in agony as the morphine which had suppressed the pain in his body began to wear off.

‘Now do you see what your choice of life has led to? Have you not seen enough death?’ He asked Miranda, knowing that he could die at any moment.

‘If you’d been through what I lived, then you’d understand.’ Miranda’s response simply galvanised Salvatore’s hatred. He raised his head and looked to the Sky, bellowing out at maximum volume the words that sealed his fate.

‘LAND OF THE FREE, MY ARSE!! THIS ISN’T FREEDOM – THIS IS FUCKING NAZI-FASCISM!!’ His voice echoed throughout the open country. The Swedish assassin and the Italian renegade exchanged knowing looks as the doomed antihero had a feeling that his end was near. ‘Miranda, don’t let it end this way. You still can redeem yourself... help me.’ She looked at him, helping him up. BLAM! There was a LOUD gunshot as Salvatore was shot from behind, the ninja figure brandishing an automatic shotgun as the doomed graduate fell to the floor with a HUGE hole in his back and front. Miranda looked at the black reaper as it snapped a military salute and nodded in a gentlemanly fashion before jumping and darting away into the distance.

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‘Salvatore, can you hear me? Salvatore!’ Miranda tried to patch up Salvatore’s fatal injuries. He grunted in pain and took her hand.

‘If you really want to help me... then get me... out... of here.’ Salvatore coughed and eventually ceased to move and breathe. He was dead. Miranda looked around her, having had a change of heart, her bittersweet mission accomplished. A few tears emerging from her eyes, she picked up Salvatore’s body, grunting with effort.

In the base, Jenna produced her cell phone. Her eyes narrowed slightly in confusion as she looked at the display – she was getting a phone call from Miranda. ‘Hello? What is it?’ She asked.

‘Jenna, it’s me. I’ve got Salvatore... he’s dead.’ Miranda spoke calmly, trying to remain composed.

‘You bitch... you killed him!’ Jenna yelled. Miranda remained collected as Jenna began to go out of her mind.

‘No, listen! I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t kill him... so they sent someone else instead.’

‘They? Who’s “They”?’

‘Jenna, you have to believe me. I’m not making this up. I didn’t kill him!’ Before Miranda could explain, Jenna hung up and holstered her phone. Frank, sensing something was wrong, looked at Jenna slightly timidly.

‘Is he...?’ She just nodded. Frank, realising he had to take action for a change, decided to lead the survivors out of the abandoned base, reversing the roles of leader and follower.

‘Let’s get out of here.’ He led the way, his mind addled with confusion and disbelief that Salvatore was dead.

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Vladimir successfully picked the lock and got the door open. He and Holly exited the cell and ran down a corridor, crashing headlong into Frank and Jenna. The four of them got to their feet as Vladimir adjusted his nose, making sure it was in the right shape. ‘Christ, man! Watch where you’re going.’ He said quite tersely as Frank delivered the crushing news.

‘Salvatore’s dead! We’re getting out of here.’ Holly’s face turned to shock and disbelief.

‘What!? Dead?!’ She asked, horrified at the prospect of her friend’s death.

‘Brutally murdered.’ Jenna said through her own tears as Holly sobbed and wept like a baby, throwing herself into Jenna’s arms, the two women embracing each other. Jenna rocked Holly, carrying her sobbing form towards an elevator, while Frank and Vladimir stood back quietly. The four survivors entered the elevator and left solemnly as they returned to the surface.

Chapter 9

Unknown Location – 3 July 2011

In a subterranean science laboratory of some sorts, Salvatore's corpse lay on a platform. A helmet with a visor was attached to his head as a computer recorded his personality and behaviour protocols/mannerisms. Miranda was present, watching over the procedure. 'Make sure he gets the upgrade... and revive him.' She said calmly. A lab technician nodded and complied with her request, his gloved hand holding a jet-injector filled with a glowing cyan liquid, injecting the substance into the carotid artery on Salvatore's neck before injecting a yellow liquid into his heart, reactivating it. Salvatore's wounds began to rapidly close and heal as his metabolism was restored. Eventually, his body healed completely and looked like new as he awoke from his state of limbo. Salvatore grunted and got to his feet, removing the helmet and visor from his head. He looked at himself, stunned that he had been resurrected. Observing his reflection in a mirror, he saw that his dark auburn hair was now a silver/grey colour. Miranda entered the lab to speak to her new ally. 'Salvatore... how do you feel?' Salvatore looked at Miranda briefly before replying, his response one of slight sarcasm and irritation.

'How do you think I feel? I'm dead!' He answered, his voice increasing by several octaves. Miranda simply smiled and laughed slightly.

'Not quite – you WERE dead, but I took the liberty of having you resurrected thanks to nanotech augmentations. We – you and I – are going to be working together.'

'Working together on what?' Salvatore asked as he raised an eyebrow, uncertain of Miranda's allegiances.

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‘We launch a rebellion against the Federation. What do you think?’ Miranda paused for a moment, letting Salvatore take in the news, coupled with his recent resurrection.

‘What about Holly and the others? What about my parents?’ Salvatore inquired, still not entirely convinced.

‘Holly’s fine. I don’t know about your parents.’ She looked at him calmly and compassionately, the assassin with a heart sympathising with the renegade revenant. ‘I’m sorry.’ Salvatore brought his fist down, striking a nearby table HARD.

‘OK... when do we begin?’ He said in a vocal intonation reminiscent of a rugged SAS Commander. He looked at her, his eyes alight with determination.

San Francisco, California, USA – 3 July 2011

Vladimir, Frank, Jenna and Holly were watching a TV news report on Salvatore’s death. Vladimir looked slightly upset while Frank was stoic with a tinge of regret on his face. Jenna looked and felt remorseful as she tried to soothe a weeping Holly, the newsreader on the TV speaking in a faux-excited tone.

‘Renegade college graduate Salvatore Pasquale was gunned down last night by an unknown assailant. Salvatore was a known dissident...’ Vladimir turned off the TV in disgust, cutting off the rest of the news reader’s commentary.

‘He wasn’t a fucking dissident! He never hurt a fly! He didn’t deserve to die that way.’ He buried his head in his hands, weeping silently. Frank looked pensive for a moment before coming to a decision, his face shifting slightly, almost imperceptibly, like a Japanese Samurai.

‘We have to tell his parents.’ He said softly.

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‘It’ll break their hearts, Frank! A son losing a parent is one thing, but the other way around? That’s something no mother or father should have to go through.’ Jenna spoke up, although she knew that Frank was right.

‘He’s dead! What are we supposed to do, just pretend he never existed?’ Frank responded, his words planting a seed of thought into his Australian counterpart’s mind. Holly was staring into Space, remembering her last night with Salvatore. Eventually, she came to her senses and sighed, the beautiful blonde heartbroken over her friend’s death.

‘I’ll miss you – my Bijou.’ Jenna pulled Holly into a compassionate hug while Frank, now the *de facto* leader of the group, tried to console Vladimir. The air was thick with heartbreak, guilt and regret.

Later that evening, the group took a trip to a nearby nightclub – the scene where Salvatore and Holly had first met. Vladimir walked around the empty night club as the Sun set, looking around him and reminiscing about that fateful day with Salvatore – the day he met Holly. He wiped a tear away from his eyes. Jenna sat down at the bar, while Holly stayed outside with Frank, too cut up to enter.

Nightclub – 13 October 2007

Salvatore, younger and greener, was alone at the bar, wearing a T-shirt in stark comparison to his peers, who were mainly geared in nautical wear. While sipping his drink, Salvatore spotted Vladimir having fun with three women – a redhead, a blonde, and a brunette. The Russian sportsman approached the Italian nonconformist.

‘You OK, Salvatore?’ Vladimir asked. Salvatore simply replied in his usual unapologetically blunt manner.

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‘Yes, I’m fine! Vladimir, can I go now?’ He clearly did not like being in such a loud, aggressive environment.

‘Are you kidding me? Salvatore, you’ve only been here for an hour and a half!’ Vladimir laughed, enjoying the company of the women around him.

‘Any longer and I’ll probably go nuts. What kind of place do you call this? You call this music!?’ To emphasise his point, he stopped speaking and indicated the loudspeakers of the nightclub’s PA system – a repeated loop of noise was CLEARLY audible, and he did not like it one bit. ‘It’s a ten-second loop that repeats indefinitely! I wouldn’t even play this shit at Wembley Stadium!’ He called out sardonically as he shifted his attention back to his non-alcoholic beverage. *TWO loud venues in ONE night? First the rock show at the Hollywood Bowl in LA, now this!?* He thought. After what felt like an eternity, Holly eventually approached Salvatore and sat beside him.

‘Hi.’ She said, smiling sweetly. Salvatore turned to face her, and he stared at her, utterly transfixed by her looks. ‘You all right? What’s wrong?’ She asked worriedly.

‘Nothing... I just find these loud places rather... intimidating, you know?’ Salvatore replied timidly, his voice wavering in and out of hearing range.

‘Oh... how come?’ Holly asked. Salvatore looked at her and his face tightened slightly.

‘Two words: Asperger Syndrome.’ He responded in his matter-of-fact signature tone.

‘So why are you here?’ Holly asked.

‘My friend kept going on about this place, so I decided to shut him up by coming with him.’ Salvatore laughed at the irony – he had finally met a girl he liked in a place that he had so vehemently opposed his whole life.

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‘Yes, I can see that.’ Holly chuckled. ‘What’s your name? I’m Holly. Holly Carson.’ She held out her hand.

‘Pasquale. My name is Salvatore Pasquale.’ Salvatore replied as he took, shook and kissed Holly’s hand, making the American dancer blush slightly.

‘Where do you come from with a name like that? "Salvatore Pasquale"? That's like, Italian, or Spanish. It's totally cool, either way.’ Holly said in her strong Californian accent.

‘Got it right first time round – Italian with a tinge of Spanish, and, uh... Greek, Roman and everything else European and Mediterranean. My ancestors, who were Roman legionaries, slept with women from all over the World, you see.’ Salvatore gradually became more confident as he spoke more assertively, his non-specific European accent sticking out like a sore thumb. ‘I take great care when it comes to talking to members of the opposite sex.’ Holly looked at him questioningly. ‘When I was younger, like most young men, I would chase girls, ask them out. Now, 9 times out of 10, they would say yes – but little did I know that I was being used and manipulated. One of the girls went out with me very briefly then ditched me for no reason. Another girl gained and abused my trust by telling me her boyfriend was cheating on her. I took pity on her, and we agreed to meet, and what do you know? The boyfriend came crumbling down, sending me death threats via text messages and emails – even through prank phone calls. It's been the same old story all my life: Gain my trust, stitch me up. Gain my trust, stitch me up. You get the picture – and now thanks to this disability of mine, I’m treated like a serf. Is this supposed to be the Land of the Fucking Free or George Orwell’s fucking wet dream?’ He paused for a moment to catch his breath before continuing. ‘Let's just say that I have a better relationship with computers than with human beings. I can't reason with anyone – everyone I speak to seems to be tied to a system and can't

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think outside of the fucking box. Bullshit – bunch of sycophantic TWATS.’ Salvatore sighed in mild frustration. ‘Sorry, I just get so fucking worked up.’ Holly just smiled.

‘It’s OK.’ She laughed softly and went up to the bar, writing her name and cell phone number on a scrap of paper. She gave it to Salvatore.

‘Here’s my number – call me anytime.’ She smiled and kissed him on the cheek before leaving with Jenna. Salvatore looked at the scrap of paper and pocketed it, smiling contentedly before finishing his beverage and walking out of the building.

San Francisco, California, USA – 3 July 2011

Back in the present day, Vladimir just sighed sadly and drank from what appeared to be a bottle of vodka. He looked wistful; feeling remorseful over his friend’s passing. ‘He’s gone.’ He said with a hint of regret in his voice as he cursed in Russian, getting to his feet. He took one last look at the now-deserted nightclub which once was full of life and vivid energy and then left, the night club’s double doors closing behind him with a resounding slam, echoing and fading into a deafening silence.

Unknown Location – 3 July 2011

The Sun was rising over the Horizon. In a subterranean base, Miranda was with Salvatore, helping him get to grips with his second chance at life and also trying to gain his trust. ‘Salvatore, you have to listen to me.’ Salvatore wheeled around and looked at Miranda with a steely stare.

‘Why should I? You spend the whole day trying to kill me only to be outdone by a reject from a bloody Japanese video game convention, and now you want to help me?’ He tried to calm down as he knew his aggression would not help the situation at hand. Miranda simply remained calm and compassionate before continuing.

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‘I’m not what you think, Salvatore.’

‘Then what are you, apart from a professional life-taker?’

‘Do you think I chose to be an assassin? I only did what I had to do to survive! We’re not so different, you and I – we’re both denizens. We’re rebels with causes but no means to promote them.’ Miranda stated, baring her soul to Salvatore, whose face curved into a look of realisation and disbelief.

‘Is that why you resurrected me, Miranda?’ She looked back and nodded.

‘Look, Sal – I know what I’m doing. I’ve seen things you couldn’t even begin to imagine. I wouldn’t have left you there if I didn’t have a heart.’ She said calmly, having a point.

‘I’m sick of this crap. I don’t know who to trust anymore.’ He said sincerely.

‘Work with me, Salvatore. We can’t make a difference alone, but together, we can do something.’ Salvatore thought about this – after a moment of contemplation, he locked eyes with Miranda.

‘OK... let’s do this.’ He said confidently as Miranda held out her hand. Salvatore stared at it briefly before extending his own, shaking it, the two former adversaries now allies.

‘Welcome to ARCUS, Salvatore.’ Miranda said simply.

‘Thank you. ARCUS... like the Rainbow. I get it. What’s the plan?’ He enquired, with a slight smirk on his face.

Chapter 10

Miranda showed Salvatore around the subterranean hideout, lecturing him on her work since her resignation as a police officer. She showed him some documents gathered over the course of her career as an assassin-cum-undercover rebel leader. Salvatore looked over the documents as he now knew full well that his previously idyllic life was a mere fabrication.

‘So, the Federation was formed to combat the economic crisis? Sounds like history repeating itself to me.’ He let his mind take over as he scanned the documents carefully.

‘Exactly; no jobs, more crime, less education, more stupidity – the bigger the lie, the more likely people will believe it. Look, I’ll be honest and straight with you, Sal. I need your help. We’ve been looking for the Federation’s base of operations for a few years now, gathering – and losing – rebels along the way... but with you, a disabled person, as our figurehead, we can really hit at the heart and go for the jugular.’ Miranda said simply, although she herself had to admit that the irony was slightly more amusing than it was meant to be. Looking at Salvatore, she found herself beginning to like him, leaning forward so her eyes locked with his. ‘What do you say?’ Salvatore looked at her and simply nodded.

‘OK, let’s fucking do this, Mir.’ He smiled confidently. Miranda led Salvatore into her private quarters, where she showed him the brief for his first assignment.

‘Salvatore, the goal is to infiltrate the Federation communications centre on Mount Avala, located on the outskirts of the City of Belgrade. Find out where their headquarters are located.’ She handed him a map and compass, along with some photographs. Salvatore eyed the equipment carefully, the renegade nanotech cyborg revenant assessing the situation.

‘Belgrade... you’re sending me to Serbia – as in Eastern Europe – the former Yugoslavia?’

He enquired, not quite believing what he was hearing. Miranda simply nodded.

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‘Yes, and since it’s a solo mission, you’re going to be on a pretty tight deadline.’ She said, exhuming authority and respect at the same time. Salvatore gave it a few seconds’ thought before coming to a decision.

‘Fuck it. Why not? I’ve got nothing to lose.’ He said, shaking Miranda’s hand. She led him to the armoury and then proceeded to head towards the base’s control room. Salvatore picked out a few weapons – he still had his knife and handgun from earlier. Scanning the armoury, he spotted what appeared to be an assault rifle almost identical to his previous weapon. Picking it up instinctively, he attached a grenade launcher and fire control unit to it, gathering ammunition and high-explosive grenades for his trip as he put on some protective gear, consisting of knee and elbow pads, gloves and boots and a Kevlar vest. Spotting a single, lonely camouflage-coloured boonie hat hanging on top of a disused locker, Salvatore picked it up and examined it for a moment. *This hat seems to be in pristine condition.* He thought to himself as he slipped it onto his head, examining his reflection in a mirror. *Perfect fucking fit.* He smirked. Slinging the rifle over his back, he strode over to the control room, looking and feeling determined. ‘Let’s fucking do this.’ He said. Miranda eyed him up.

Hmm, looking good, Sal. She thought to herself before speaking up. ‘Good. There’s a helicopter outside waiting for you.’ With those words, Salvatore nodded wordlessly and turned to leave, with Miranda following him outside onto the Helipad of the base, the Moon shining brightly in the Sky. ‘You’ve got until daylight to get the hell in and out, so don’t stop to smell the roses, Salvatore. The extraction point is at the summit of Mount Kosmaj.’ Salvatore acted as if he was going to board the helicopter, but instead he paused to look back at Miranda.

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‘In case I don’t make it back, Mir... that was a pretty dangerous game you played with me back then.’ Miranda raised an eyebrow in a Spock-like fashion. ‘The whole assassin routine.’ Salvatore clarified, smiling sadly.

‘Just come back, OK?’ Miranda replied, her voice breaking slightly. Salvatore nodded.

‘Count on it. I’ve already died once, and I can’t die twice.’ He boarded the helicopter without another word as he looked at Tobias the pilot. ‘Let’s get out of here, Tobias.’ He said. Tobias simply responded in the affirmative before complying with Salvatore’s request, the helicopter flying away from the base. Through his radio, Salvatore could hear the voice of the Mission Controller.

‘Departure time! Helicopter Sierra Echo 512, you are cleared for take-off. Good luck.’ The voice – a male countertenor – barked out calmly. Salvatore braced himself as the helicopter ascended and began its flight across the Atlantic Ocean. He looked back over the Horizon, the US gradually disappearing from view as the helicopter headed towards Europe.

Balkan Mountains, Serbia – 4 July 2011

The helicopter landed on a vast plain extending towards the Horizon, located in the mountains overlooking the City of Belgrade. Salvatore exited and flashed a thumbs-up to Tobias the pilot, who then left without another word. Now alone, Salvatore strode towards the Federation base, looking determined. Approaching the perimeter of the base, Salvatore hid behind a column, peering out to take a look. He saw a pair of guards talking to each other in Serbian. Rather than take a shot, he let them pass. When the coast seemed to be clear, he slipped into a sewer, which led directly into the base. ‘I’m inside the base. Everything seems to be in order. Fucking stinks like an Indian prison toilet in the summer, though.’ He spoke into his radio in a lowered tone of voice. He heard Miranda’s calm voice on the other end of the line.

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‘Are you OK?’ He nodded before continuing the conversation.

‘I’m fine. I’m going to try and get to the comms room before daylight – the Sun’s going to rise in about 2 hours.’ Salvatore coughed slightly. *Fuck, these sewers stink! Have they been serving the guards shit in a bowl here?* He thought.

‘Good. Call me when you get there.’ Miranda said simply.

‘No shit – out.’ Salvatore ended the communication. Shaking his head as he coughed, he stretched his ears before pressing on. *This is more dangerous than the infinite falling death bug in Jet Set Fucking Willy!* His mind screamed as he bolted deeper into the sewers, the smell of month-old piss and decomposing shit scouring through his nasal passages. Eventually reaching the communications centre, Salvatore exited the sewers via an unguarded manhole and slipped into the control room – the security was, to say the least, disappointing. He had expected at least half a dozen or so of Federation guards protecting the place. Approaching a computer terminal, Salvatore hacked into it and took out a flash drive from his pocket, plugging it in as he began to transfer vital information onto it. The screen flashed with images and texts of sensitive and controversial natures, the denizen’s eyes widening slightly in disbelief as panic deprived him of the power of speech. He radioed Miranda with a sense of urgency.

‘Miranda... I’m in!’ He said with a suppressed hiss. ‘I’m at the comms room, and I don’t believe what I’m seeing.’ Miranda responded with an inquisitive intonation.

‘What is it?’ She asked. Salvatore continued despite the increasing tension of the atmosphere. He was seated in front of the computer monitor, unable to believe his eyes.

‘The Federation was formed by NATO of all things, under a direct command from the United Nations. Apart from the Worldwide Economic Crisis, the key event that proved to be the

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Federation's genesis was the War on Terror. It's like the Cold War all over again, but with a much bigger and stronger Iron Curtain!' He unplugged his flash drive quickly. 'Have your pilot send me here ASAP, Miranda... I have an errand to run in the meantime.' He cut off the transmission and produced his smart phone, dialling an old friend's number.

San Francisco, California, USA – 4 July 2011

Holly was fast asleep in her bed, having spent the whole day mourning the loss of her departed friend, even attending a memorial service. Her phone rang. She was gradually woken up from her peaceful reverie and reached out for her phone, picking it up. She looked at the display in disbelief, and answered it hesitantly. 'Hello...? Sal...!' She asked in disbelief. Salvatore's voice was audible on the other end of the line, slightly gruffer and volcanic, but still recognisable.

'Hello, Holly.' He half-spoke, half-grunted, the reluctant civilian now gone, replaced by a determined antihero – a social and political heretic.

'What... how... I thought you were dead!' Holly's mouth alternated between open and closed, but very little sound came out as she couldn't believe her ears.

'You and everybody else; not quite – I still have some fight left in me.' Salvatore chuckled humourlessly.

'You're still here! Thank God!' Holly sat up, weeping silently. Salvatore's voice took on a softer, more sympathetic tone. He knew what he had to say was not going to be pleasant, but he knew he had to say it nonetheless.

'I don't have time to explain, so I'll make this quick. I've been doing some investigating... looks like the Federation isn't as benevolent as you think it is.' Holly exclaimed wordlessly before letting Salvatore continue. 'Think about it. The whole of the United States is a

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seeming utopia. Doesn't it sound too good to be true? Sounds like another Warsaw Pact to me.' Holly just sat up, stunned out of her mind as she could not believe what Salvatore was telling her.

'Where are you?' Salvatore's response was secretive but understandable.

'Eastern Europe – do not follow me.' He said simply. At the mention of this statement, Holly could feel her heart break and shatter into millions of pieces.

'Salvatore, please...!' She tried to reason with him. Salvatore spoke up once more, knowing he had to cross the one-way bridge.

'Holly, I know what you're feeling, but I can't take that risk again. Do not attempt to pursue me. I'm sorry.' Holly felt a sense of anger in her that she had never felt before... and she unleashed her newfound rage, like a dragon on the shores of Hell.

'Sorry? You just died yesterday and now you're alive again – and now you have the balls to call me and not tell me where the hell you are?! I've backed you up since the day I met you, and in spite of your eccentricities, I accepted you for whom and what you were – and now I don't know what to think anymore! Like hell I'm not coming!' Salvatore remained silent, letting Holly vent out her frustration towards him. When he was certain that she had finished, he reassumed control of the conversation, his voice so calm it was almost eerie and unsettling. He had never, ever spoken in that manner before.

'The US is not the Land of the Free. It's total fucking bullshit. You should know that as well as I do... and all I know is that I am going to take down the Federation one way or another.' Holly's mood changed from anger to shock horror as she realised what Salvatore meant, instantly regretting her choice of words against him.

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‘Can’t you hear yourself? Don’t you know who you sound like!?’ Salvatore was silent for a few seconds. *Made him think about it... I hope he knows what he’s doing.* Holly thought as Salvatore spoke up once more.

‘I might not be Robin Hood, but I can certainly give them a run for their money. Now you can either continue being the Worm in Paradise, or you can take action for a change.’ His words burned coldly, like comet ice. ‘I’m sorry... I just thought you should know that I’m still around. Now that I’ve done so, I don’t know what to think – but I can’t go yet. I still have a task to accomplish. Goodbye, Holly... If I don’t make it back, then I want you to know that I’m with you in spirit.’ Click, dial tone. Holly heard the all-too-familiar dialling tone before she could get in another word. Realising that Salvatore had not only hung up on her, he had also changed her perspective on living under the Federation’s reign; she sat up and devised a plan to find him. She smirked as a cunning thought came to her mind.

That’s the way you want to play it, Sal? Very well – let’s see how you fare with this plan.

Balkan Mountains, Serbia – 4 July 2011

Salvatore dashed out of the communications room in the Federation base. He ran through a corridor, colliding with a Federation guard. Before the guard could recover, Salvatore propped him up and pressed his weapon into his back. ‘You know a way out of here?’ The guard nodded. ‘OK – lead me out of here; do it now, please.’ Salvatore responded. The guard complied, the heavily-armed nanotech cyborg following him silently. Salvatore and the guard reached the entrance to the Federation base. The guard inputted an access code to open the door, which slid open with an electronic WHOOSH! Salvatore thanked the guard then struck him in the neck, knocking him out. He apologised and then left the base. The denizen ran up the mountains, far away from the base – a speck of light was visible over the Horizon as the Sun began to rise, illuminating the Slavic Skyline. He spoke into his radio as he could hear

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several pairs of footsteps rallying behind him. ‘Miranda; where the blasted heck is the chopper!?’ He asked in his gruff but gentle voice.

‘It’s coming, Salvatore. Have you got the information we need?’ Miranda spoke up to make sure she could be heard.

‘Yes! Hurry – they’re on my tail.’ Salvatore’s voice intensified slightly as he turned back to open fire on approaching Federation troops. ‘Miranda, what kind of augmentations have I got?’ He asked.

‘You have the basic essentials, Salvatore – light, advanced hearing and speed enhancement.’ Miranda’s voice came in through the speaker of the phone as Salvatore spotted an approaching helicopter. He took careful aim, firing at each of the Federation soldiers with extreme precision – something he was unable to do before his ignoble death. Miranda was in the helicopter with Tobias the pilot, flying across the former Yugoslavia. Eventually, she pointed towards a familiar area, spotting Salvatore’s combat-focused form. Tobias nodded and understood as he piloted the aircraft towards the denizen in danger. The Sun was beginning to show itself as it rose over the Horizon. Salvatore spotted the incoming chopper and motioned for it to land. He turned to see Federation soldiers approaching him. Thinking quickly, the nanotech cyborg revenant turned his back to the helicopter and ran as fast as his feet would allow him. Miranda and Tobias looked at Salvatore, both Swedes stunned. Salvatore turned around and planted both feet firmly on the ground. He then charged at the helicopter, eventually picking up speed as he activated a hidden augmentation. At the last possible moment, he jumped and grabbed onto the helicopter’s landing skids.

‘Ascend! GO!!’ He yelled. Tobias complied and began the ascent as Salvatore opened the door and boarded the aircraft, trying to take cover from the gunshots fired at him. With Miranda’s help, he fell into the helicopter and slammed the door shut tightly. Salvatore sat

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back with Miranda as Tobias piloted the helicopter away from the Summit of Mount Kosmaj, leaving Eastern Europe.

‘Did you get it?’ Miranda asked. Salvatore replied in the affirmative by holding up a flash drive. Tobias accidentally swerved as he left European airspace, sending Salvatore onto the floor, Miranda falling and landing on top of him. The nanotech cyborg revenant and the rebel leader looked at each other for a moment – both similar in age and scope and both denizens of society. Salvatore suppressed his emotion as he felt Miranda’s blonde hair brush across his face, his hands on her hips. The two outcasts find themselves falling in love with each other. ‘Salvatore, this is... unprofessional... I can’t...’ Miranda began, but Salvatore intercepted her words and cut her off sharply.

‘Miranda, fuck professionalism and just let your heart rule your head.’ Miranda looked at Salvatore, who looked back silently. After a moment’s consideration, she leaned forward and planted a kiss on his lips, closing her eyes. Salvatore looked stunned for a moment before putting his arms around her gently.

‘Mmm...’ Miranda moaned softly as she felt Salvatore’s arms hold her body, her tight-fitting Lycra catsuit hugging her athletic form. Eventually, their lips parted, and for those few seconds, Miranda and Salvatore were together, in love. ‘I’ve... I haven’t felt this way in a long time.’ The beautiful blonde eventually confessed – she had never, ever fallen in love before. *I shouldn’t be doing this. I was trained to remain cold and objective... I can’t control it.* She thought. Salvatore simply said nothing and sat back up, eventually responding under his breath.

‘Neither have I, for that matter.’ The helicopter flew towards the rising Sun over the Horizon, illuminating the Sky.

Chapter 11

San Francisco, California, USA – 4 July 2011

Holly rushed into the police station, pausing before the receptionist. ‘I need to speak to Sergeant Jenna Lane – is she in?’ She asked with mild irritation. The receptionist looked back, speaking calmly.

‘She’s busy right now – please take a seat.’ He said calmly. Holly looked him up and down and then raised her voice slightly, which was unlike her.

‘I don’t have time; I have to see her NOW!!’ The receptionist did his best to placate her.

‘Madam, if you’ll be patient, then she’ll come to see you!’ The receptionist spoke up, to no avail – Holly burst into Jenna’s office, with a look of epiphany on her face – Jenna was talking with Frank. Both officers turned to see the athlete’s flustered face.

‘He’s alive.’ Holly smiled.

‘Who is?’ Jenna asked with mild confusion, Frank raising an eyebrow.

‘Who do you think? Salvatore – he’s still alive.’ Holly smirked as she sighed dreamily.

‘What, what did he say exactly?’ Frank asked, trying to assess the situation. Holly simply repeated Salvatore’s last words to her.

‘He said he was in Eastern Europe – he didn’t tell me where.’ Jenna nodded as she took a few notes, Frank lighting a cigar.

‘But if he’s dead, then how can he be alive?’ Jenna asked inquisitively.

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‘Nanotechnology.’ Holly replied simply. ‘He told me this over the phone. I guess he wanted me to know he was still alive... how foolish of him.’ She said sadly. Frank and Jenna looked stunned at Holly’s revelation.

‘I thought that technology was banned by the Federation to combat the overpopulation crisis.’ Frank finally spoke up as Jenna picked up her telephone.

‘Let’s put out an APB on Salvatore.’ She said calmly, her suggestion shot down immediately by her older and slightly gruffer partner.

‘Hang on! We don’t know if he really is out there. We need some form of proof that he’s still alive.’ Frank intercepted. Jenna thought for a moment... and an idea comes to her mind.

‘Holly, where did you say he was again – Eastern Europe?’ Holly nodded and her tone of voice took on a more alarmed tone.

‘Yes, I just don’t know WHERE exactly – he didn’t tell me.’ Jenna looked at Holly for a moment and then turned to Frank.

‘If he IS still alive and if I’m right... then he must have... yes.’ She nodded contemplatively with a slight smirk. ‘He’s with HER.’

‘Her? That murdering psycho bitch, who was after him!?’ Holly felt a sense of irritation and borderline anger as she left the office, leaving Frank and Jenna stunned by her change in persona.

Back in her plush apartment, Holly sighed as she lay on her bed, sitting up for a moment as Salvatore’s words echoed in her mind. Torn between her comfortable life and loyalty to her friend, she picked up her handgun and loaded it slowly, looking forwards. ‘It’s time for the

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Worm to leave Paradise.’ She said softly as she gathered some items in her rucksack and left her apartment.

Unknown Location – 4 July 2011

In Miranda’s quarters, Salvatore and Miranda were looking at the acquired data on the stolen flash drive, the former seated in front of a laptop computer while the latter stood behind him, observing. ‘Well done on acquiring this information, Salvatore.’ Miranda complimented Salvatore, and not just out of professional duty. Salvatore turned his head back with a confident smile.

‘Don’t get too cocky, Miranda. One success isn’t always a guaranteed victory.’ He retorted in a mocking manner. He turned his chair fully to face her briefly, the two locking eyes with each other. Miranda gasped silently as she felt her emotions for Salvatore surface, along with her conscience. Salvatore, on the other hand, simply smiled and said nothing before looking back to the monitor. His eyes widened slightly as he spotted something which did not particularly agree with him. ‘Jesus Christ, look at this shit here!’ He exclaimed as he indicates with his hand. Miranda came closer. ‘The Federation – well, the Sol Federation, to give it its complete name – has its headquarters based in the Benelux region. It’s been turning North America into the New Soviet Union, while Europe has fallen under a relaxed form of Martial Law.’ The computer monitor showed a Map of the World – several continents, once green, gradually turned red as they were overtaken and integrated into Federation jurisdiction. Salvatore raised his glasses briefly before lowering them back onto his eyes. Miranda stared at the screen, looking focused.

‘Federation HQ is underneath the Signal de Botrange in the High Fens Mountains, near the city of Eupen – in Belgium.’ Salvatore exclaimed. A solitary tear ran down his nanotech-enhanced face before he wiped it away with his hand, his augmentations dormant for the time

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being. He sighed before turning away from the screen. Miranda noticed his change of behaviour and expressed concern for her newfound lover.

‘What’s the matter?’ She asked worriedly.

‘It’s getting too much.’ Salvatore sighed as he spoke, wiping his spectacles clean.

‘Salvatore, what are you talking about?’ Miranda did her best to be soothing, although having spent several years suppressing her maternal instinct had done little to help her compassion.

‘THIS!! This... fallacy, this LIE – that is America, Miranda. I mean... what the fuck were the United Fucking Nations thinking, letting NATO do this?’ Salvatore got to his feet and put his hands on Miranda’s arms, the Italian antihero locking eyes with the Swedish assassin. ‘I would gladly go to Europe on a suicide mission for this, Miranda – for my friends, my family back home, for all the poor souls who were rejected a decent life because of the illusion – the DECEPTION – that is the “American Dream”.’ Miranda looked at Salvatore, stunned by his sudden burst of courage and confidence.

‘Would you do it for me?’ She asked, her voice almost a whisper of the heart.

‘Yes. I. Would.’ Salvatore replied, punctuating each word separately for maximum emphasis. Miranda looked at him, her cause and compassion fully revived thanks to the unexpected events over the past few days. Without warning, Miranda just pulled Salvatore into a hug. After a moment’s hesitation, he returned the gesture – awkwardly at first; then it became more fluid and natural. As they parted, Salvatore and Miranda looked into each other’s eyes.

San Francisco, California, USA – 4 July 2011

The Sun was setting in the Sky, the blue Horizon changing to orange and pink as Vladimir was watching TV. His face showed sadness and disbelief, greatly missing his friend. However, the show he was watching was interrupted by a news report. ‘Breaking news:

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Renegade college graduate Salvatore Pasquale is still at large. He recently raided a Federation base in Serbia and is believed to be with an underground movement known simply as “ARCUS”. The Sol Federation is offering a reward of \$3 Million for Salvatore’s apprehension.’ Vladimir sat up, stunned at this news. He looked at the TV, transfixed. He shook his head and snapped out of it as he came to a bit of a startling conclusion. He turned off the TV and picked up his telephone.

Jenna was still in her office. Frank was absent, having gone home earlier. She drew out her cell phone and put it to her ear. ‘Hello?’ She listened intently, her eyes widening slightly. ‘He’s WHAT!?’ She nodded before continuing. ‘OK. Thank you. Goodbye.’ She hung up and then dialled a number on her cell phone. ‘Holly, Jenna here – meet me in my office ASAP – I’ve got an idea.’ She hung up and waited. About half an hour or so later, Holly entered the office, looking confident and determined as she sat down.

‘You said you wanted to see me. What’s the news?’ She asked.

‘I’m sorry, but I have bad news: Salvatore’s a terrorist, Holly.’ Jenna replied with compassion and sadness.

‘What? No!’ Holly shook her head in denial at the thought of her friend being a terrorist.

‘He’s with an organisation called “ARCUS”. Presumably, my old friend must have turned him.’ Jenna continued. Holly thought about what Jenna was saying, unsure of who to trust at the moment. Eventually, she leaned forward and spoke up.

‘What do you want me to do?’ She asked half-worriedly, half-calmly.

‘I want you to go undercover – tell me if Salvatore really is one of them, and then we’ll come and take him away.’ Jenna replied, being the stronger of the two women, both physically and psychologically. Holly looked contemplative for a moment.

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‘I don’t know. Sure, he might still be alive... but I can’t imagine him being a terrorist – he’s got too much heart for it.’ Jenna put her hand on Holly’s shoulder – the dancer barely reacted to the gesture.

‘Holly, I understand he’s your friend and I know you’re worried, but he’s getting himself into deeper trouble than he already is. Half the Federation’s on his tail.’ She tried to be rational and logical, like her old partner before she turned. The two women looked at each other – one a concerned citizen, the other a Law Enforcer stuck between a rock and a hard case. ‘What do you say?’ Jenna encouraged. Holly looked concerned but confident at the same time.

Unknown Location – 4 July 2011

Jenna and Holly reached the Plateau, where Salvatore supposedly died. Holly was dressed in a robe, disguising her appearance. ‘You know what you have to do, right?’ Jenna asked as Holly looked at her friend.

‘Yes, Jenna – I’m not a child. I’m doing this because I care about him.’ She responded with mild irritation as Jenna nodded, handing her a drink. Holly drank it without question. Holly began to feel a bit drowsy as she fell into Jenna’s arms, losing consciousness. Thinking quickly, the amoral cop lowered the beautiful dancer’s body in a comfortable position and then left quickly, the Moon beginning to shine through the clouds in the Sky. An ARCUS operative, spotting the action from the safety of a hidden control room, watched through a CCTV camera as he radioed Miranda.

‘Miranda, we’ve got somebody outside... a woman – she looks hurt.’ Miranda’s voice was heard from the other end of the line.

‘OK, bring her in and make her feel comfortable. Try to find out who she is.’ The rebel complied.

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‘OK, will do – out.’ He left his post and headed for the Plateau. Holly was led into the base and laid on a bed so she could recover and awaken. The rebel who brought her in was looking through her possessions, looking for some form of ID, but found none. He sighed in frustration. At that moment, the door to the sleeping quarters opened as Miranda entered.

‘I came as fast as I could. Did you find anything?’ The rebel shook his head.

‘Nothing – I can’t find any form of identification.’ He said. Miranda simply nodded understandingly and smiled slightly.

‘OK. You can go now.’ The rebel got up and left, closing the door behind him. Miranda looked at Holly suspiciously, as if she had seen her before – but she could not quite put her finger on it. At that moment, Holly awoke and sat up slightly.

‘Where am I?’ She asked groggily as Miranda helped her.

‘You’re in my subterranean hideout.’ Holly looked at Miranda in mild surprise.

‘Subterranean... you mean, like underground?’ Miranda nodded at the question.

‘Yes – something like that.’ She held out her hand for Holly to take and shake. ‘My name is Miranda. You are...?’ Holly thought for a moment before extending her own hand.

‘I’m H... Irene. My name’s Irene.’ The two women shook hands. Miranda smiled and helped up the *incognito* Holly, showing her around the base, the former showing the latter her collected and gathered information.

‘Welcome to ARCUS, Irene. We’re always looking for new members. We’ve been trying to find the Federation HQ for God only knows how long. All the rebels that you see here are outcasts who were denied the freedoms of living in the United States – denizens, if you like.’ Holly looked at Miranda softly.

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‘Why not just pack up and go to Europe? The Federation’s more lenient over there and there’s a better system.’ She suggested brightly.

‘Irene, you forget: These people came here of their own free will to pursue their dreams and goals. These people here don’t fit the template of a “Model Citizen” because of their diversity.’ She looked sad as the memory of Vojislav’s words to her came back to haunt her briefly. Holly noticed this.

‘Miranda, are you OK?’ She asked, putting her hand on Miranda’s shoulder, feeling the soft, tight Lycra of her catsuit. *I want to know if you really did steal my Sal from me.* She thought. Miranda nodded as she sighed and regained her composure, looking Holly straight in the eye.

‘I’m fine. Somebody once said to me that America is turning into the New Soviet Union. I wish I’d paid more attention to his words. We’re close to striking the fatal blow, thanks to someone who decided to stand up – someone who saw the Federation for what it really was – and try to help make a difference.’ Her smart phone beeped. ‘Do excuse me – I will be back later.’ Without another word, Miranda left, putting her phone to her ear as she did so. Now alone, Holly contacted Jenna via a hidden radio.

‘Jenna, you’re right. It’s here. He’s here!’ Jenna’s voice was heard on the other end of the line.

‘Good – this proves he’s still alive. Now find out where they’re heading and report back – out.’ The Australian police officer stated.

‘Will do – out.’ The dancer ended the connection and looked around the base, walking freely.

Miranda entered her quarters to find Salvatore in front of a laptop computer, making notes on his smart phone. ‘We’ve got a... what are you doing?’

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‘Taking some notes for the final push – this is the big one, you know.’ Salvatore smiled slightly as he drank from a bottle of what appeared to be vodka.

‘I see. Salvatore, we’ve got a new rebel in the ranks.’ Salvatore looked at Miranda, his face registering mild surprise.

‘A new rebel...? You mean you just pick off anybody from the streets?’ Miranda laughed slightly at his joke.

‘No, we found her unconscious form outside and brought her in.’ Miranda replied as Salvatore sat back and raised an eyebrow in a Spock-like fashion.

‘Her? Who is she?’ He asked inquisitively.

‘Her name is Irene.’ Miranda replied simply. ‘Unique name, don’t you think so?’

‘Yes, quite so – not from here, I must admit.’ Salvatore nodded in agreement. He motioned for Miranda to come over, who complied. ‘I’ve been looking at the area – it’s quite cold, so dress warm. The base is underground and is maximum security, with very little human personnel, so it’s mostly manned by machines.’ Miranda looked at the imagery on the computer screen. Salvatore, without another word, printed out a map and handed it to Miranda as he got to his feet. ‘Give this map to your pilot. We attack after the Sun sets.’ She nodded and turned to leave, but was stopped by Salvatore calling her name. She turned back. ‘It’s not the Federation per se that’s corrupt... it’s more of a case of whoever’s running it.’ Miranda simply nodded and left.

Tobias was drinking from a cup of tea in an attempt to relax – Miranda approached him and handed him the printout. ‘Map of the Federation base, Tobias – thanks to Salvatore.’ He took the map and looked at it carefully, muttering in Swedish for a moment.

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‘When do we leave?’ He asked anxiously.

‘We leave at midnight.’ Miranda replied. Tobias nodded and took a BIG swig of his drink, finishing it.

‘This is what the Federation represents, doesn’t it? The one who controls the past, controls the present and the future and all that crap? All right – let’s do this.’ As he finished speaking, there was a banging sound from outside. ‘What the hell is that?’ He asked with mild alarm.

‘What?’ Miranda countered. The banging intensified, followed by a series of gunshots.

‘That!’ Tobias activated an alarm while Miranda spoke into a microphone.

‘This is Miranda Ekerot! I want everybody to evacuate ASAP – I repeat: everybody must evacuate ASAP. Seal the escape tunnel once everyone is safely outside – Miranda, out.’ She looked at her trusted friend and pilot, motioning with a frantic gesture. ‘Come on!’ The two of them headed out. Miranda and Tobias ran through a corridor, eventually making it outside. It was dark and the Moon was shining over the Horizon. Tobias got into his helicopter. ‘Start it up – I’m going back for our friend!’ Tobias did as he is told while Miranda headed back into the base.

Salvatore perked up as he heard gunfire and screams outside. Going to inspect the noise, he jumped behind a wall as he realised that somebody sold them out. ‘You know what? *Déjà vu*, my arse. I smell a fucking rat.’ He growled gruffly. Thinking quickly and not willing to risk another capture, he locked the door and pointed his handgun at his temple, contemplating suicide while Miranda ran through a dim corridor, alternating between hand-to-hand and armed combat with Federation soldiers. Eventually, she arrived at the door to her quarters – it’s locked.

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‘Open the door!’ She yelled. There was no answer as a Federation soldier approached her from behind quietly. Inputting the access code quickly, the door slid open and she entered her quarters to find Salvatore holding himself at gunpoint, the denizen spotting the Federation soldier behind her as he pointed his handgun at its target. Miranda jumped out of the way in the nick of time. BANG! Salvatore fired his weapon, the bullet hitting the soldier squarely in the head, killing him as the door closed, the two denizens exchanging glances.

‘What the hell’s going on out there? It’s total bedlam!’ Salvatore yelled.

‘No time to explain – we have to leave NOW!’ Miranda said between breaths while regaining her composure.

‘OK, let’s go.’ He put his hand on the door handle. ‘Ready?’

‘Go!’ Miranda called. Salvatore opened the door and burst out of the room, with Miranda behind him. Activating his light augmentation, the Italian insurgent led himself and the Swedish assassin to the exit safely. Eventually, the two denizens reached the helicopter. Salvatore opened the door. Before he could board it, however, he was held at gunpoint – by Jenna.

‘Welcome back from the grave, Salvatore.’ Salvatore held up his hands in surrender.

‘How did you know I was here?’ He asked.

‘Isn’t it obvious?’ The cop countered.

‘No, it... what, hang on.’ He felt the gears in his head turn as he recalled what Miranda told him a day or so earlier – a newcomer. He then turns around to see Holly, *sans* robe.

‘Holly...! Why?’ She looked at him sadly.

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‘I wanted to be sure if you really were alive.’ Holly explained herself, feeling guilty for what she had done.

‘What, taking my word for it wasn’t enough?’ Salvatore asked, confused.

‘I had to see for myself!’ Holly stated, close to tears. She had fought to find the man she had fallen in love with and here he was, alive and seemingly upset.

‘All those people are DEAD, Hol! Who had the bright idea to put you in and risk the lives of countless dozens of people!?’ He took a deep breath and calmed down for a moment, realising he was becoming a hypocrite of his own philosophy. ‘I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to snap. Whose idea was this?’ Holly looked at Jenna, prompting Salvatore to follow her gaze. He turned to face the complicated cop. ‘Because of you, a lot of people are dead.’

‘Oh, really? How about YOU? How many people have died for YOUR cause?’ Jenna retorted mockingly, provoking Salvatore mildly.

‘At least I have a clear conscience as well as a brain, and I know how to use it! The Federation doesn’t WANT people with brains. They just want those who fit their template of perfection here in the States. I don’t know about Europe, but I’m going over there to give them a piece of my fucking mind. I LIKE to think. I LIKE to read. I LIKE to choose for my fucking self – should I eat HIV-positive shit or drink pig piss!? I am going to take down the Federation even if it KILLS ME!!’ Salvatore was about to board the helicopter but was grabbed by Jenna.

‘Then I’ll arrest you and turn you in.’ She said coldly. Holly was beginning to realise what Salvatore meant – she was faced with a difficult decision.

‘Jenna, don’t!’ She pleaded.

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‘Then give up and we’ll pretend this never happened. You can go back to your old life.’

Jenna said calmly, trying to reason with the delusional denizen.

‘And be a mindless zombie? No, thank you.’ He chuckled.

‘You get aboard and I’ll shoot you.’ She warned. Salvatore finally snapped as he screamed at maximum volume.

‘FINE!! SHOOT ME IF YOU HAVE TO!! I’m done being told what I can and can’t do! You know, I thought I had it bad back in Europe, but America makes it look like a fucking utopia!’ He grabbed Jenna’s wrist and pressed her gun into his chest defiantly, looking at her coldly. ‘If you have ANY resemblance of a soul, then you won’t shoot me. If not, then do it. Your friend told me all about you and what happened to her. You’re going down the same path.’ The Italian renegade and the Oceanian law enforcer locked eyes with each other, the latter’s hand shaking. Eventually, Jenna lowered her hand – Frank and Vladimir arrived on the scene, the former aiming his gun at Jenna, only to lower it when he saw everything is fine. The latter, meanwhile, checked on Salvatore.

‘I suspected you might still be around, but I had to make sure. You OK?’ Vladimir asked as Salvatore nodded.

‘I’m fine. I’m going to hit the Federation where it hurts – in Europe. You don’t have to come with me if you don’t want to, because it’s more or less a suicide mission.’ Vladimir thought about it, the Russian college graduate mulling it over for a moment before coming to a decision.

‘I’m coming with you, Sal.’ Salvatore raised an eyebrow at Vladimir, stunned by his friend’s decision and change of heart.

‘You sure, Vlad? That’s not like you – taking on a risky job.’ He asked.

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‘I’m sure. I picked up some bad habits from you, anyway.’ Vladimir countered. The Russian sportsman held out his hand as a gesture of friendship and redemption. Salvatore looked at it for a moment before extending his own. He produced a jet-injector filled with a yellow liquid and put it to his leg, stabilising his dodgy limb as his crippled leg began to wobble and shake, the movement eventually subsiding as the nanotech modules repaired the damaged nerve and muscle tissue. Miranda introduced herself to Vladimir, who returned the gesture. ‘So you’re the woman who’s after my friend.’ Vladimir eyed up Miranda.

‘Well, don’t get too cocky, Vladimir – I might just come after you if I have to.’ Miranda smirked. Salvatore approached Holly and hugged her tightly, the beautiful blonde crying in his arms as she felt safe in his hold once more.

‘I don’t want to be the Worm in Paradise anymore.’ She sobbed. Salvatore, remembering what he had said to Holly, realised that he, too, was partially responsible for the massacre. He just hugged her tightly and looked into her eyes as Holly smiled – she was so madly in love with him, she didn’t want to let him go. ‘If I don’t make it, then I’m with you in spirit.’ He stroked her cheek softly before kissing her on the forehead. He turned to Vladimir. ‘Let’s go.’ Salvatore locked eyes with Frank wordlessly, the cop and the denizen understanding each other. Salvatore, Vladimir and Miranda boarded the chopper, leaving Holly and Jenna standing in the midst of the clearing. Holly reached forward as Jenna walked away.

‘Miranda, wait.’ Miranda turned back to look at Holly, fixing an unsure expression on her face. ‘Look after him.’ Holly pleaded as Miranda smiled, nodding.

‘Don’t worry, I will... Holly.’ The two of them shook hands and Holly left, looking back at Salvatore, who just waved and flashed a thumbs-up. Suppressing a tear, Holly just went home, smiling to herself. Miranda boarded the helicopter and slammed the door shut, the chopper lifting off into the air. Salvatore and Miranda were seated in the helicopter

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comfortably, while Tobias and Vladimir were in the front section, the former flying the aircraft while the latter acted as radioman.

‘OK, Tobias – let’s go.’ Salvatore commanded.

‘Yes, sir.’ Tobias responded as he piloted the chopper and flew away from American airspace, heading towards Europe once more.

‘So, Miranda – how are we going to do this?’ Salvatore asked calmly.

‘Well, the base is underground, Salvatore, so there are only two entrances: A subterranean silo and an elevator. What’s your take on it?’ Miranda responded as the helicopter began to leave US airspace.

‘I figure we split up and take an entrance each – you can sneak in through the silo, while I will take the elevator into the Heart of the Fire.’ Salvatore grinned cockily as the helicopter was now in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, heading towards Europe. Vladimir turned around so he could speak to the two denizen partners.

‘Can I make a suggestion?’ He asked.

‘Go ahead, Vladimir.’ Salvatore nodded.

‘I don’t think you should take the main entrance, Salvatore – remember what happened back at the Underground City?’ Vladimir enquired, smiling slightly. Salvatore thought back for a second or two – his face registered understanding and recognition before he nodded.

‘I understand your concern, Vladimir – but I have to be as cold as ice, and that’s not usually me. Those people that I worked with will have died for damn near nothing if I don’t do this today.’ He looked at Vladimir apologetically then cracked a slight smirk, being the enigmatic eccentric that he was.

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‘You died once already, man – I don’t know what the hell I’d do if you died again.’ Vladimir tried to reason with him.

‘If I die, then you continue where I left off. You said you wanted to help, didn’t you? You said you wanted to give the Federation the same payback that I did.’ Salvatore said in a matter-of-fact tone.

‘I do, yes... but I don’t want to die! I’ve got a life and a future to think about now.’ Vladimir exclaimed. Salvatore, overcome by his emotions, raised his voice slightly.

‘I am not going to give up, and I am not going to die! The Sol Federation is destroying the World, continent by continent. OK, it’s not the Federation *per se*, but more so the people running and supporting it, like NATO and the United Nations. Maybe this will teach them a lesson. Peacekeeping, my spleen.’ He sat back coldly. ‘I’ve got NOTHING to lose. Nothing!’ Miranda looked at Salvatore, stunned by his sudden switch of behaviour.

‘Salvatore, I know you’re upset and I understand how you feel... but you can’t let your emotions drive you – remember when I was hunting you down?’ Salvatore turned to face Miranda, his look unsettling even her, a tough action chick. ‘You continue down this path and you’ll become just like me, like my old partner – like your undercover friend, until one day you’ll wake up and realise that you’ll no longer remember what made you this way... and when you do, it’ll be a BIG shock. Don’t do this. Please.’ Salvatore mulled it over for a second before nodding.

‘OK.’ He said simply as he sat back and tried to relax, when suddenly, the helicopter’s radio sparkled to life like a hospital patient in critical condition. A male voice was heard on the other end of the line.

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‘Attention: Helicopter Sierra Echo 512. You are receiving a call from Federation authority. Please respond.’ Salvatore and Vladimir looked at each other, stunned. ‘If you do not respond, then we shall be forced to disable your electronic system and open fire if necessary.’ BLAM! A LOUD gunshot was heard, scaring Tobias as the helicopter shook briefly before becoming stable again. Miranda spoke up.

‘Respond, Vladimir. Do it before they blast us out of the Sky!’ Without another word, Vladimir equipped his radio and microphone.

‘This is Helicopter Sierra Echo 512. I read you. What is it?’ The voice continued speaking, its tone reminiscent of a stereotypical movie trailer announcer.

‘It is our understanding that you have a denizen on board – someone by the name of Salvatore Pasquale. Please put me through to him.’ Vladimir looked at Salvatore apprehensively before handing over the microphone to his friend.

‘This is Salvatore Pasquale. How can I help you?’ He asked in his gruff but gentle voice.

‘You’re wanted in Federation territory for the following charges: Deviation from the Template, civil unrest, terrorism and first-degree murder of 30 Federation officers. We have your friend – Miss Holly Carson – in custody.’ Salvatore’s eyes darkened at the mention of this knowledge. However, he could do nothing except listen silently. ‘You will direct your aircraft to fly to the United Nations HQ in the City of New York, where you will turn yourself in and be placed under arrest for your crimes.’

‘Not a chance.’ Salvatore gritted his teeth. Miranda stepped forward and covered the microphone.

‘What are you doing?’ She asked in shock.

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‘I’m doing what nobody else will do: I’m fighting back.’ Salvatore retorted.

‘Sal, get your head together! You’re not just playing with your life, you’re playing with mine.’ Miranda tried to knock some sense into Salvatore’s addled mind.

‘Play with this shit!’ Salvatore spoke cockily as he activated the microphone, resuming the communication. ‘I will land on the condition that I am to be deported.’ There was a pause as the voice on the other end of the line considered this proposal.

‘It is our understanding that you are heading towards Federation HQ in Belgium.’ Salvatore struggled to control himself.

‘Who told you?’ He asked coldly.

‘Your athletic friend told us. She’s been quite the talker.’ Salvatore tried to contain his rage.

‘Let. Her. Go.’ He felt his eyes begin to glow red as blood began to seep out of his ears and nose.

‘Are you going to turn yourself in?’ The voice commanded.

‘No. Fucking. Way.’ A Federation soldier shot at the helicopter – a bullet narrowly missed the helicopter’s rotor blades. Tobias kept the helicopter steady as the voice resumed.

‘If you do not turn yourself in, then perhaps an alternative approach may be more appropriate. I wish to speak to your leader.’ Salvatore handed over the microphone to Miranda, his hands stained red with his blood from the stress and anger.

‘This is Miranda Ekerot. Please respond.’ Miranda replied in her trademark calm-but-deadly tone.

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‘Miss Ekerot, since your friend refuses to give himself up, I have no choice but to offer you an alternative deal. Let me explain: The Sol Federation have developed a technological and scientific breakthrough in cryonics and are seeking a test subject.’ The voice explained as Miranda put 2 and 2 together.

‘If I offer myself for use, then you’ll let Salvatore go?’ She asked.

‘Precisely.’ It stated. This time, it was Salvatore’s turn to step up and cover the microphone.

‘Miranda, what the hell are you doing? You know these people can’t be trusted!’ He said harshly.

‘I’m doing this for you, Salvatore – just like you would go to the Heart of the Fire for me.’ Salvatore and Miranda look at each other, the two sharing a tender moment. Salvatore looked at Miranda pleadingly. Just like a young woman cursed into old age had helped the wizard free himself of his curse, she, too, had done the same for him – but neither of them had counted on falling in love with each other.

‘No, come on... there must be some other way.’ Salvatore said as he began to weep.

‘I wish there were... but if my capture and cryogenic incarceration means your freedom, then I’ll do it.’ Miranda spoke softly, this time genuinely out of love and care. Salvatore looked at Miranda softly, stifling a tear.

‘I love you, Miranda.’ Miranda smiled softly and kissed his cheek.

‘I love you too, Salvatore.’ She hugged him tightly. Since the shock was too much for Salvatore to take in, combined with the stress, he collapsed onto the helicopter seat. Vladimir checked him out.

‘He’s unconscious.’ He replied.

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‘Good.’ Miranda said simply. She spoke into the microphone once more. ‘You’ve got yourself a deal – now wipe his record clean.’

‘I look forward to seeing you, Miss Ekerot – out.’ The voice terminated the communication. There was a long burst of radio static followed by silence as Vladimir reassumed his role of radioman.

‘What now?’ He enquired. Miranda looked at him with the same steely, almost psychotic, gaze that she had used when they first met.

‘Onto the Signal de Botrange.’ Tobias piloted the chopper accordingly and headed towards the intended destination.

Chapter 12

Signal de Botrange, High Fens Mountains, Belgium – 5 July 2011

The Moon was shining over the Horizon, illuminating the black Sky as the helicopter landed. Its door opened, revealing Salvatore and Miranda. Tobias spoke up amidst the cold wind. ‘I’m going up. Call me for extraction. If you’re not done by the time the Sun rises again, then you’re likely to have a lousy day.’ He said sarcastically. Salvatore, dressed in winter gear, just closed the door and let the helicopter ascend. He then looked at Miranda.

‘OK, let’s go – it’s Game Over for the Sol Federation.’ He said as Miranda led the way.

‘This way!’ She commanded, Salvatore following. Miranda ran across the High Fens, with Salvatore behind her. They eventually reached the Signal de Botrange, the Moon the full focus of attention over the Belgian Skyline. The two of them split up. ‘Stay in touch via radio.’ Miranda stated.

‘No shit.’ Salvatore retorted. He looked up towards the communication tower briefly before heading downwards into a tunnel. Salvatore entered the silo and looked around him, locating an elevator. He tried to call the elevator, but nothing happened. He pushed the button a few more times and sparks flew out, disabling the circuitry. He spotted a ladder and began his lengthy descent, seeing as he had no choice but to proceed on foot.

Miranda silently entered the subterranean hideout and stealthily sneaked into a ventilation shaft, avoiding the patrolling guards. She sneaked through a ventilation shaft, calm and composed as ever. She stopped and listened in on a pair of Federation soldiers having a conversation in German, a wicked smile creeping across her face. ‘Not for long, my friends.’ She armed her handgun and pointed it at one of the soldiers. After a moment’s hesitation, she lowered her weapon and moved on, eventually reaching the end of the shaft. The grille to the

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shaft was kicked open by a boot, followed by its owner – Miranda. She hid behind a nearby column as a Federation guard moved past, using the shadows to her advantage. Thinking quickly, the Swedish assassin grabbed the guard’s neck and twisted it – a disgusting snapping sound was heard, evidence of the spine cracking. She then fired her gun into the guard’s head to put him out of his misery. Hiding the corpse in a crate, she then continued with her mission. ‘This is too easy.’ She chuckled.

Salvatore reached the communications room but the door was locked. He thought for a moment. Spotting a snoozing Federation guard, he approached him quietly so as not to awaken him, and then slapped him across the face. ‘Wake up, Sunshine!’ He called. The guard groaned in pain before shaking his head – by the time he had done this, Salvatore was holding him at gunpoint, speaking to him in French before switching over to English. ‘Have you got the key to the comms room?’ The guard raised his hands and nodded. ‘Open the door – do it now, please.’ The guard insulted him in French. Salvatore retaliated by pistol-whipping him in the nose. The guard cried out in agony. ‘Open the fucking door NOW, damn you!’ The guard did as he is told, and the door slid open.

Salvatore thanked the guard in French before striking him in the back of the head, knocking him out, delivering a one-liner joke in Italian. He entered the communications room and spotted a control terminal, approaching it. He did his thing and began to hack into it. Miranda’s voice came on over the radio.

‘Where are you, Salvatore?’ Salvatore replied unusually calmly, almost stoically.

‘In the comms room. These chocoholics aren’t that much of a threat. How about you?’

Miranda laughed at his joke before continuing.

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‘I’m right below you – out.’ Salvatore looked at the computer monitor in front of him, which revealed to him information about the Federation’s experimental cryo-project... as well as its formation and history. He sighed, disappointed but not surprised.

‘Fucking warmongers.’ He muttered. Saving the information to his flash drive, he was about to log off when the guard he knocked out earlier began to awaken. He had to decide fast – log off and cover his tracks or dispatch his adversary. Without another word, he pocketed his flash drive and lunged at the guard, the two of them wrestling each other. The two combatants eventually grabbed each other’s throats – literally – and tried to choke each other to death. Eventually, the guard overpowered Salvatore, who screamed in pain. PEW! A silenced gunshot was heard, followed by the guard falling to the floor, dead. Salvatore got to his feet, getting his breath back. ‘Well, now... you certainly took your time getting here.’ He looked up at Miranda.

‘There didn’t seem to be any hurry. I took out a couple of guards on my way here. Not much of a threat, did you say?’ She asked as Salvatore handed her the flash drive.

‘Let’s go.’ He turned back and fired several shots at the control panel, destroying it. ‘More efficient.’ He said simply as he left with Miranda. The two denizens entered an elevator, descending into what could very well have been the Depths of Hell. Salvatore looked at the map of the facility on his smart phone. ‘We’re almost there. This is it – the final push.’

‘I’d love to meet the man who’s caused so much pain and misery.’ Miranda mused darkly.

‘Ready?’ Salvatore asked.

‘Conceived and born ready.’ Miranda quipped. The doors opened and they aimed their weapons into the Abyss, heading into its gaping jaws. This corridor, unlike the others, was

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actually well-lit when compared with the previously dim ones. Salvatore and Miranda reached the end only to be met by a pair of double-doors.

‘Well, now... unless one of us has a key AND an access code, we’re going to be stuck here indefinitely.’ Salvatore sighed.

‘Stand back.’ Miranda ordered. Salvatore did as he was told. Miranda affixed some explosive devices to the double doors and then took cover, as did Salvatore. ‘Ready?’ She asked.

‘Must I really answer?’ Salvatore expressed mild annoyance at being treated like a child. Miranda blasted the doors, which blew apart – wide open – with a resonating BOOM! She and Salvatore burst into the room, which turned out to be the Federation President’s Office. Miranda and Salvatore entered the office, startling the Federation President – a man in a business suit. Despite his bodyguards’ attempts to protect him, Miranda dispatched them with her Martial Arts, while Salvatore took on a few with CQC. Knocking out the anthropomorphic gorillas, the two of them went after the man himself, cornering him. Miranda grabbed the Federation President and threw him into his chair.

‘You piece of filth!’ She growled like an angry lioness. The Federation President was scared out of his wits. He tried to call security for backup but Salvatore intercepted his move, shooting out the control panel.

‘I suggest you tell her the truth. I can’t stop her from killing you.’ He warned compassionately.

‘You’re running the Sol Federation, are you not?’ The terrified leader nodded. ‘Aren’t you the one responsible for those outlandish Laws?’ He nodded again as Salvatore handed him the flash drive.

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‘Play it – please.’ He looked at the man pleadingly, concerned for his life. ‘You’ll have to do as I say if you want to live – I can’t stop this woman from tearing you apart.’ Without a word, the Federation President plugged the flash drive into his laptop computer, while Salvatore held him at gunpoint – Miranda’s hand clasped tightly on the leader’s neck.

‘All those events – those Laws, those charges, those alterations – all came from you, didn’t they? You used your position in NATO to influence the UN?’ She asked leeringly. The Federation President spoke up for the first time.

‘Yes. I thought it would do some good for humanity.’ Salvatore turned to face him.

‘That’s not the first time those words have been spoken this century. You disgust me. I urinate in the face of such petty excuses for human beings.’ He spoke his mind freely, knowing there was little that could be done to prevent him from doing so as he took back his flash drive. ‘I’ll be outside.’ Miranda released the cowering politician before turning to face Salvatore.

‘I’m not coming.’ Salvatore looked at Miranda with confusion.

‘What the hell are you talking about, Miranda?’ He knew, but he did not want to believe it – he refused to know.

‘The cryonics project, Salvatore. I’m going to be used as a test subject in exchange for your freedom, remember?’ She took his hands as he lowered his assault rifle.

‘Miranda, you don’t have to do this – we did it. The Federation’s been crippled.’ He tried to reason with her, even though he knew there was no way out of this terrible fate.

‘I’m doing it for you, Salvatore. Now go – go before something else occurs, and don’t come back for me. Like you said, it’s not the Federation *per se*; it’s the people running it.’

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Salvatore and Miranda looked at each other, the former clearly confused and hurt, while the latter just looked into his eyes lovingly.

‘OK – fine! But take this with you.’ He kissed her on the lips. ‘Goodbye, Miranda... and thank you.’

‘No, Salvatore... I thank YOU.’ Miranda smiled. Salvatore turned to leave, heading towards the elevator. The Federation President coughed, catching Miranda’s attention. ‘No funny business.’ She said simply. He handed her a legal release form and a pen. She signed it immaculately, confirming and verifying her permission to take part in the cold-sleep program. The Federation President arose from his chair and escorted her out of his office.

Outside on the surface, as the first signs of daylight began to permeate the night Sky, Salvatore exited the subterranean base and ran forwards, speaking into his radio. ‘Vladimir, it’s me, Salvatore. Get me out of here.’ Vladimir’s voice was heard over the radio.

‘Got it. On our way. Out.’ Salvatore walked away for a moment before stopping to turn back, so he could look at the Signal de Botrange one more time.

‘Farewell, my dear Miranda.’ He whispered softly as he turned and walked away, eventually breaking into a run.

Miranda, now in a hospital gown, was being led down a corridor by a pair of scientists as they entered a large chamber of sorts. Miranda was led into the centre of the chamber – a high-tech-looking laboratory as the scientists stripped her down and took down her blonde hair, revealing her nude form. A Federation soldier was present as the Chief Scientist stood before her. ‘Miranda Rosa Ekerot, you have agreed to participate in this experimental program of your own volition. As such, you will be placed in sub-zero preservation for an

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indefinite amount of time, during which some of your biological and psychological traits may be altered as a side effect. Do you understand?’ She nodded and muttered silently.

‘Yes, I do.’ She knew that she had consented to participating in the cold-sleep program, so all she could do now was wait and see what she would be subjected to for however long they planned to keep her that way. The Chief Scientist indicated a futuristic-looking table.

‘Please lie down.’ He said simply. Miranda did as she was told, shifting and wiggling on the table due to the uncomfortable exposure in front of strangers. The Chief Scientist lowered a white gelatinous substance onto her feet, which began to gradually cover her body. The substance reached her stomach and chest, covering her hands. The beautiful blonde tried to relax as it kept going. The substance reached the Swedish assassin's neck and engulfed her body. After a few seconds, the substance melted away. In a glass tube, a nude clone – an exact 1:1 copy – of Miranda materialised. It was curled up into a ball, sleeping. The tube filled with green viscous semiliquid goo as the Chief Scientist motioned for the real Miranda to get up. Sitting up, Miranda got off the table slowly and nodded her head wordlessly.

The Chief Scientist led Miranda to a flat upright glass capsule, its door opening. He motioned for her to step inside. She stepped inside the capsule and turned around, its door closing before her. Lying back, she closed her eyes and tried to relax as a faint hissing sound was heard – the capsule filled with sleeping gas while cold water ascended from below, covering her feet and legs as it rose up to her neck. Miranda felt something – a surge of electricity – zap her in the chest as she lost consciousness, the water submerging her defibrillated body completely as her heart stopped, and with it, her breathing. As she was enveloped completely in freezing blankets of water, there was a flash of light as the liquid solidified, turning to ice as she was now preserved in a cryogenic capsule, a bed of ice and frost – the Swedish Sleeping Beauty.

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Salvatore emerged into view as he ran up a Belgian mountain – it was dark and the Sun was beginning to rise. Just as Salvatore reached the Summit of the mountain, Vladimir called out to him as the helicopter landed. Tobias landed the helicopter so Salvatore could mount it. ‘We did it, man. The Federation’s been crippled, and its current President just had his big fat butt kicked... so let’s get out of here.’ He closed the door... and then reopened it, dismounting again.

‘Sal, where are you going?’ Vladimir asked.

‘To save Miranda.’ Salvatore said simply as he loaded a grenade into his grenade launcher.

‘Salvatore, don’t; it’s suicide.’ Tobias tried to reason with him, the pilot feeling sad and upset at his friend’s sacrifice.

‘I don’t care, Tobias. I’m going back there to rescue the woman who made a real difference in my life – the only woman who I’ve ever truly loved. Do not leave this spot –circle around if you have to.’ Salvatore barked, effectively assuming command. Vladimir dismounted and ran up to Salvatore, trying to knock some sense into him. Salvatore simply pushed him away. Vladimir raised his voice.

‘Salvatore, that’s enough – I mean it! Miranda offered herself of her own free will. She did it for you.’ He yelled in a vain attempt to knock some reason into the bloody-minded denizen’s addled brain.

‘I know... but I’m not going to sit here and waste a perfect rescue opportunity. I’m going to return the favour.’ Salvatore cocked his assault rifle.

‘Sal, stop moving!’ Vladimir commanded. He put his hand on his friend’s shoulder. Salvatore turned back and delivered a single punch into Vladimir’s gut, sending him falling to the floor like a sack of potatoes. As Salvatore walked across the Belgian plains, a loud BANG! Noise

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was heard. He fell to the floor as he was shot in the forearm, yelling in agony as he looked at his wound in disbelief.

‘No... no, not again!’ He groaned. Looking over at the source of the shooter, he saw the Federation President hovering above him with a handgun.

‘Your friend did not want to be revived. She joined our project of her own free will.’ Salvatore spat back.

‘I don’t care. I won’t let you use her as a lab rat.’ He grunted from the pain in his wound as the Federation President sneered.

‘I’m sorry that you feel that way... but a deal’s a deal.’ He cocked his handgun – BANG! – The Federation President shot Salvatore in the kneecap before pointing it straight at his head. Salvatore screamed in pain. ‘Goodbye... denizen.’ BLAM! There was another gunshot, catching the Federation President’s attention. Turning around to see the source of the shot, the black ninja assassin who originally killed Salvatore emerged and gradually approached the stunned politician. ‘It’s you... what the... get him!’ The ninja ignored his command and headed straight for the Federation President, fear becoming apparent in his voice. ‘Vojislav! YOU obey ME!! Kill him!’ Something clicked in Salvatore’s mind.

‘Vojislav... Miranda’s ex!’ Thinking quickly, Salvatore fought the pain in his body and charged at the Federation President. Without his beefy and brainless bodyguards to protect him, the politician received a brutal beating from both cyborgs. As the Federation President fell to the floor, badly beaten and bruised, Vojislav turned to Salvatore, recognising him. He spoke, his voice more or less the same as when he was alive, but with some slight modulation/distortion.

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‘Kill him, Salvatore. He deserves it.’ Unable to utilise his rifle, Salvatore resorted to his pistol and cocked it, aiming at the Federation President’s head. His hand was shaking. After a moment’s hesitation, he disarmed his pistol and helped up the Federation President. Holstering his pistol, Salvatore and Vojislav exchanged glances before the denizen turned to face the defeated leader.

‘Nobody deserves this. You don’t matter enough to kill. Now, go – go before I change my mind.’ The Federation President backed off before breaking into a run. Salvatore then focused his attention on Vojislav, the two cyborgs staring each other down. Suddenly, Vojislav charged at Salvatore, who dodged his attack. Salvatore retaliated with a few punches to the face followed by a spin kick. Vojislav got to his feet and punched Salvatore in the stomach, causing him to gasp for air. He coughed before rising, erect once more. Vojislav proceeded to try to knock down Salvatore but failed as the Italian renegade countered with a charge of his own, pinning down the Slavic android and delivering three sharp punches to the face, the third blow administered with BOTH fists simultaneously as he lay on his back, severely wounded. With both fighters down – one incapacitated; the other seemingly immortal – there was a moment of mutual trust and respect as Salvatore struggled to get to his feet, his consciousness phasing in and out. ‘Vojislav, it’s me, Salvatore.’

‘I know... I know who you are.’ Vojislav spoke in a more human tone of voice.

‘You do?’ Salvatore asked.

‘Yes. I killed you.’ Vojislav replied truthfully. He winced at the pain in his forearm and nodded slightly.

‘Yes, but Miranda... she revived me – nanotech augmentations.’ He explained.

‘Miranda... oh, my God.’ Vojislav spoke with a tinge of remorse.

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‘Did they do this to you?’ Salvatore asked sadly. Vojislav nodded as a response.

‘America... is the New Soviet Union. Europe will follow soon... unless you can make a difference.’ The ninja cyborg explained. Salvatore locked eyes with Vojislav, knowing his fate was to take up the mantle as the ARCUS Commander. Vojislav held out his hand. Salvatore slowly extended his own and shook it.

‘Thank you, Vojislav.’

‘No, Salvatore... I thank YOU. You saved us – true to your name. Keep ARCUS alive.’

With these words, Vojislav got to his feet, nodded in a gentlemanly fashion and then dashed away into the distance. Salvatore was lying on the plain, bleeding as he screamed in pain. ‘Vladimir! Tobias! HELP!!’ Struggling to suppress his tears from the pain, Salvatore spotted a figure coming to aid him – it was Vladimir. Recognising his friend, he was taken on board the helicopter as the Sun began to rise over the Horizon. Looking out of the window, a patched up and barely conscious Salvatore saw Vojislav briefly for a moment. He raised his hand as if to wave. Salvatore returned the gesture then flashed a thumbs-up before sitting back. He took another glance, only to find out the mysterious ninja is gone. He shrugged and sat back, tired and exhausted. ‘Tobias, get us out of here.’ He commanded. Looking at an empty seat next to him, he looked mournful as thoughts of Miranda permeated his mind. ‘I’ll come back for you, Miranda, if it’s the last thing that I ever do... I swear with my life.’ His vision wavering and blurring, Salvatore coughed and laughed ironically, smiling a tragic smile before finally losing consciousness as he succumbed to the pain of his injuries. Tobias piloted the helicopter while Vladimir acted as co-pilot and radioman.

‘We’ll need a new base of operations, Vladimir – the old one’s gone.’ Tobias spoke up.

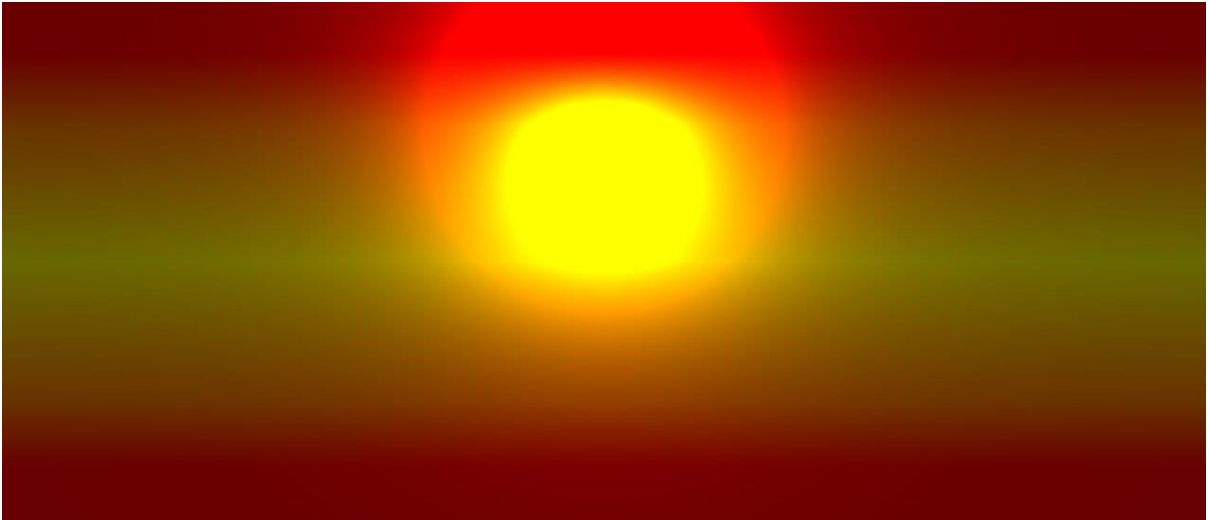
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‘Where do you suggest we go, Tobias?’ Vladimir enquired curiously. He lowered his map as Tobias looked at him with a slight smirk on his face.

‘Don’t worry, my friend – I know just the place.’ He said with a hint of foreshadowing as he pointed at the map, his finger landing on a high point of Europe, presumably Sweden. ‘This is not the end... this is only the beginning.’ Vladimir and Tobias looked at each other knowingly before the Swedish pilot concentrated on his task of flying the helicopter, which flew straight into the Horizon, towards the rising Sun.

The birth of the new ARCUS was upon them.

Part 2: Aftermath



Prologue

“Half a decade ago, those bastards got a run for their money. Time doesn’t necessarily heal all wounds, but it certainly helps the brand fade away. I like to think that all things are in flux and nothing is permanent. This is for the record: We – humans – can be so much more if we can just learn to swallow our pride and humble up. To survive, one needs both brains AND heart. Authoritarianism in any field of life – personal, religious, academic or political – is never a good idea... mark my words. I. Will. End it.”

- Extract from Salvatore Pasquale’s Journal

Chapter 1

Mount Kebnekaise, Sweden – 13 July 2016

A slightly rugged-looking man stood on the Summit of Mount Kebnekaise, sporting a goatee beard and moustache with dark hair, wearing militaristic clothing and a boonie hat as he stood over the top of Mount Kebnekaise in Sweden. This was Salvatore Pasquale – older, wiser and harder than last time, he looked out onto the Horizon, the Sun shining as he adjusted his tactical assault vest, his knees and elbows padded for protection. After a moment of personal contemplation and reflection, he sighed audibly. Two other men were present, the former tall and quiet, the latter muscular and eager to speak his mind, both raw recruits – Vila Volfango, a 2-metre-plus gentle giant, and Otto Handke – an easily excitable fellow with little experience but a lot of confidence. ‘It’s time to let the rainbow shine.’ Salvatore spoke; his voice was slightly gruffer with an air of hoarseness to it, but still recognisable. Turning away from the Horizon, he walked back along the mountains, heading for his base of operations. As he entered the base with Vila and Otto, he saw two men – fair-haired pilot Tobias Jonsson and his old friend Vladimir Redski, complete with reddish-orange hair and moustache – argue and discuss their situation.

‘ARCUS hasn’t had a hot streak for the past five years. We’re running low on resources and manpower here, and all my cadets have either gone missing or died, Vladimir.’ Tobias was the first to speak as he remained calm and confident as ever.

‘How do you think I feel, Tobias? It’s been like this since the Federation fell; and not one oppressive figure to fight against. We’ve had a couple of victories here and there and some armed conflicts every now and then, but nothing seriously epic.’ Vladimir retorted, smoking a cigarette.

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‘That’s a good thing, isn’t it? Shows that we’re being taken seriously – human rights, right? Heard of equality for both children and adults? What about democracy over authoritarianism?’ Tobias reasoned, calm as ever.

‘To a point – sometimes you have to take a painful piss before you can take a soothing one, if you get my drift.’ Vladimir justified.

‘Salvatore...’ Tobias began, his reply cut off by an annoyed Vladimir.

‘...Salvatore is...’ He only made it that far before being interrupted by Salvatore, complete with gruff but gentle voice.

‘...I’m what, Vladimir? Care to finish the sentence?’ Vladimir turned to face Salvatore, the two men locking eyes – their first proper altercation in half a decade.

‘I was going to say that you’re an idealistic hypocrite who just wants to establish his own standard of behaviour.’ Vladimir stared at Salvatore, his eyes glowing with irritation and frustration.

‘I’m a step above those authoritarian fools, Vladimir. I thought you understood this.’ Salvatore retorted, taking away his friend’s cigarette and putting it out on his own boot.

‘What you did half a decade ago is history, Salvatore – you’re living in the past. Face it – ARCUS is a relic.’ Vladimir said simply, mocking Salvatore’s unapologetically blunt, almost insulting, manner of speech.

‘You might think so, but I’ve got nobody. Holly’s gone into TV reporting in addition to her dance work, and Frank and Jenna are now like the Black and White Spies – one’s sodded off back to Canada and the other to Australia.’ Salvatore hit back.

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‘What about Miranda?’ Vladimir asked. Tobias winced at the mention of her old friend’s name, while Salvatore’s eyes widened slightly as he tried to restrain his anger.

‘That woman changed my life... and now she’s a fucking lab rat in a cold-sleep project! I should have rescued her when I had the opportunity.’ Salvatore spat almost vehemently as Vladimir raised his voice slightly.

‘Wake up, Salvatore! You’re a has-been! There’s no action and I’m starting to lose it.’ Vladimir looked at Salvatore briefly, the relationship between the two men strained by their ideological differences.

‘Be careful what you wish for... you might just get it. We’re not terrorists – we’re freedom fighters.’ With those words, Salvatore turned to leave, removing his boonie hat. Vila and Otto sat down, joining Tobias and Vladimir.

‘You guys OK?’ Vila commented as he struggled to make himself comfortable due to his overly large and bulky frame.

‘It could be worse. Been scanning for authoritarian role models in the area, but there aren’t any.’ Tobias replied in his laid-back tone, his voice similar to that of a stoned hippie.

‘Of course not, it’s Sweden – no traditionally authoritarian culture, no corporal punishment, no religious governance, nothing. Like the best part of Europe.’ Otto said brightly as Vladimir felt the need to chip in.

‘Well, except the obvious.’ Vladimir looked pensive for a moment and then sighed as he drank from a bottle of vodka.

Salvatore lay on his bed in his quarters, hanging up his boonie hat. Looking over at a framed picture of himself in his younger days, he chuckled slightly. His face fell to a slightly sad

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look as his eyes shifted over to a photograph of Miranda. Picking it up, he looked at it nostalgically. ‘I miss you, Miranda.’ He said wistfully, holding the photograph to his body briefly as if to embrace it, he then put it back on the wall and lay back on his bed, trying to sleep. ‘Hey, Holly... Happy Birthday.’ He spoke quietly.

Vladimir, Tobias, Vila and Otto were busy listening in on various radio frequencies, looking slightly bored.

Eventually, a signal was picked up. Vila’s eyes widened slightly as he listened in on what was heard. The voice on the other end of the line consisted mainly of incomprehensible yelling in an unknown language, followed by a voice crying. Vila removed his headphones. ‘Vlad, get Sal here, quickly.’ The gentle giant spoke with concern. Vladimir did as he was told, getting to his feet. Vladimir knocked on the door to Salvatore’s quarters. The door opened, revealing Salvatore putting on his boonie hat, looking rather alert.

‘We’ve got an offence in the works – verbal offender coupled with a possibility of corporal punishment and excessive reduction of privileges.’ Vladimir reported.

‘Location?’ Salvatore asked.

‘Swedish-Norwegian border.’ Vladimir stated. With these words, Salvatore ran to the control room in the hideout, following Vladimir. He examined the source of the transmission, listening in on the recorded argument. He looked increasingly disturbed and concerned; his mental state under pressure. Eventually, he shook his head before focusing once more.

‘Got the location fixed?’ He asked.

‘Got it and marked.’ Vila responded.

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‘Perpetrator?’ Salvatore inquired.

‘Ex-Federation officer.’ Otto spoke, looking rather irritated. Salvatore thought for a moment before turning to face Vladimir.

‘OK – Vladimir, you’re coming with me. Vila, you and Otto stay here and monitor our progress. Looks like some so-called role models need to be taught a lesson.’ With those, Salvatore and Vladimir left the control room quickly, the denizen leader determined to serve his own brand of democratic retribution. *What’s the point of having rules and Laws if nobody abides by them?* He thought to himself as he geared up with his favourite weapons.

Chapter 2

Halden, Østfold, Norway – 13 July 2016

It was dark and the Moon was shining in the Sky. Two dark figures – Salvatore and Vladimir – sat outside a bungalow house with their weapons armed and ready. Salvatore used his ENVG goggles to tactically assess the situation while Vladimir backed him up. ‘I can see him... he’s going into the house. Lights are off, let’s go!’ Salvatore commanded as he and Vladimir used their stealth camouflage to their advantage, slipping quietly into the house. Salvatore slipped in through the back while Vladimir headed for the front and marked the exits, keeping in touch via radio. ‘You guys receiving this OK?’ He asked quietly as Vila’s voice was heard over the radio.

‘We’ve got it, Vladimir. Just do what you have to do and get the hell out of there.’ Vladimir chuckled darkly.

‘No shit – Vladimir out.’ He stated bluntly. Vila ended the transmission, leaving Vladimir alone in the darkness, aided by his ENVG goggles. Salvatore infiltrated the perpetrator’s bedroom. Aiming his assault rifle at the authoritarian role model, he kept it pointed straight at his head... and turned on the light. The couple jumped up from their bed to see Salvatore brandishing his weapon.

‘Get up.’ He said; his voice a low growl. There was a moment of silence before Salvatore cocked his weapon, repeating the order in Norwegian in a more ominous tone of voice. He fired a round into a nearby wall before repeating the order in English. ‘I said GET UP!’ He commanded; his body and mind powered by an almost demonic rage as his eyes sparkled with fury. Without another word, the couple get to their feet, Salvatore focusing mainly on the male as he continued his interrogation. ‘You yelled at your son, didn’t you? Made him cry

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on purpose?’ The man nodded – the woman approached Salvatore to defend her partner. ‘And you, you denied him sympathy and compassion? Made him feel even more like shit? Threatened him if he lied?’ She looked shocked that he knew all this, and nodded wordlessly. ‘OK... tomorrow, I want you both to apologise to him and make up – and don’t ever do that again... or I’ll pay you another visit. Clear?’ They both nodded out of fear. ‘OK... but just to make sure, here’s a little reminder.’ With those words, he shot the man in the kneecap and the woman in the forearm. BANG! BANG! Two single shots tore through the room, hitting their marks as Salvatore tipped his boonie hat in a gentlemanly fashion. ‘Good fucking night.’ He said ominously as he left, turning off the light and joining with Vladimir, the two of them escaping. ‘Just like old times, right?’ Salvatore chuckled with mild irony.

‘It’s been a while, and it’s better than nothing.’ Vladimir replied sardonically. He paused to think for a moment as he turned his head back to the illuminated bedroom where Salvatore had been moments earlier. ‘I thought this was meant to be a covert action...?’ Salvatore’s reply was calm, almost eerie.

‘I thought I’d scare the shit out of them a bit.’ Vladimir turned to face Salvatore, his eyes burning with fear and worry.

‘Are you even aware of what you’ve done!? You’ve alerted our presence to the public!’ Vladimir blurted out, spraying spittle over Salvatore’s ARCUS outfit.

‘Good, that means more exposure and we’ll be taken more seriously.’ Salvatore shot back, his face hardening slightly. The two of them headed for the hills as their argument continued, their words fading away.

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San Francisco, California, USA – 14 July 2016

In an auditorium, a small group of approximately five to ten people were seated before a man in a business suit with a somewhat chiselled appearance. This was Rosh Goldman, a media mogul, political activist... and last President of the Sol Federation before its unprecedented dissolution. He was giving a speech on the ARCUS organisation, accompanied by a slide projector. ‘Salvatore Pasquale... a name that strikes fear into the hearts of role models Worldwide – parents, teachers, babysitters... a man who uses terrorist tactics to achieve his goals, thinking the ends justify the means. Who here agrees that he has taken away our power to do what is right for our charges, our disciples?’ There was a clamouring of approval from the audience. ‘This man is a fool – he thinks aggression and tough love are signs of cowardice. Over the past half-decade, he has subverted the remaining traditionalist cultures in the World to succumb to HIS standard of behaviour – religious groups have protested, cultural minorities have expressed their opinions, stating that their authority is undermined by this modern-day Che Guevara.’ He looked at his disciples, having them under his influence. He was more charismatic than a satanic politician, which he was, in a way. ‘Let us join against him and restore our countries – the UK, Russia, France, Italy, China, India, Japan, Ireland, Canada and the US – to their authoritarian glory, when WE, the masters, had the power, not the students. Who is with me?’ The audience cheered. ‘As members of DIVIETO; our goal is to restore the balance of power and to combat the threat called ARCUS – they have been a thorn in the sides of freedom and independence for far too long.’ He smiled and left the podium to raucous applause from his sycophantic audience. Rosh entered his private office suite, looking at his computer. A document was on the screen, with Salvatore’s picture on the front. Looking at the document, he thought for a moment before coming up with a plan. ‘If the cat cannot capture the mouse, then the mouse must be brought to the cat.’ He picked up a telephone, dialling an unknown number.

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Mount Kebnekaise, Sweden – 14 July 2016

In the subterranean base's shooting range, Salvatore was the only one present, indulging in some target practice – the sole activity which kept him sane outside of human rights activism and giving the Grim Reaper a run for his money. Emptying the magazine of his holographic sight-equipped side arm, he lowered the weapon and called forward his target, revealed to be in the shape of an ex-Federation guard. He produced his smart phone and activated a Dictaphone app, speaking into it in his trademark gruff but gentle voice. 'Authority, in reality, doesn't really have a purpose except to push your own ideologies in order to attain your goals. Look at half the Developed World with its hypocritical treatment of children before I intervened... the same can be said for those God-fearing bastards who tried to take away as many babies as they could from unmarried mothers in the UK, Ireland, and Australia... they're probably the worst offenders. Look at a lot of schools, too – uniforms, detention, unfairly settled disputes with bullies, and homework. You can justify it any way you like, but in the end... religion, politics, education – those in power will ultimately use it for their own means, and if I have to go to Hell to prove my point and to ensure that people actually LEARN from their sordid mistakes, then that is the price that I pay for the life that I choose to live. This is Salvatore Pasquale, out.' He sent out another target and loaded a new magazine into his pistol. Without another word, Salvatore continued firing at the target, his shots more accurate this time around as they ripped the target to shreds. He smiled as he admired his handiwork, leaving the shooting range. In the rec room of the base, Vladimir, Tobias, Vila and Otto were present, the former two talking while the latter two were struggling to remain awake.

'I'm telling you, Tobias – Salvatore's going nuts. He's been like this since he graduated, and that was five years ago.' Vladimir blew puffs of cigarette smoke as he spoke.

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‘I don’t blame him, Vladimir. Given the way the World works and how most of us were brought up to believe in stuff which, in all fairness, is a load of crap... I think he has a right to be pissed.’ Tobias countered as he drank from a bottle of vodka.

‘He’s got this idea into his sick fucking head that the whole World’s a shithole.’ Vladimir sighed.

‘Well, isn’t it?’ Tobias raised an eyebrow in a Spock-like manner. Vladimir paused to contemplate this and then nodded in acquiescence. ‘You see?’ Tobias smirked slightly as he downed his vodka, accompanied by a pair of strange-looking pills. By this point, Salvatore had made it to his quarters and was tired. He removed his boonie hat as he scratched his beard, the anger within him seething and boiling. His smart phone rang, prompting him to answer it.

Fuck... I can’t even get a decent night’s sleep here. He thought to himself as he answered politely.

‘Hello?’ The voice on the other end was muffled, slightly distorted.

‘Is this Salvatore Pasquale?’ The voice asked.

‘Yes... who is this?’ Salvatore responded with an air of curiosity and mild suspicion.

‘A tip... an anonymous tip. There’s a disturbance in progress in Gothenburg.’ The voice spoke, its tone electronic and robotic. Jolting up, Salvatore grabbed his boonie hat, putting it on as he ran out of his quarters.

‘Gothenburg, Sweden... I know where it is. I’m on my way!’ He headed for the rec room of the base. Salvatore bolted into the main part of the hideout, his face registering excitement

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and anger at the same time. ‘Vladimir, Tobias, Vila, Otto! We’ve got a disturbance in Gothenburg! Come on – all of you!’ Vila smiled slightly.

‘Well, now – this is worth intervening.’ He chuckled as Otto sat up.

‘You can say that again. I’ve been dying to get some action around here for quite some time.’ He stretched his legs and held up his fists in a classic boxer’s pose briefly before lowering them.

‘Patience, Otto. Experience is invaluable.’ Tobias said calmly.

‘I don’t need experience when I have confidence, Tobias.’ Otto countered, reminding Salvatore of himself when he was younger and fresh out of college. Vila just laughed and responded in the affirmative. The five ARCUS operatives exited the base, gearing up with their weapons and equipment ready.

Gothenburg, Västra Götaland, Sweden – 14 July 2016

The Sun was shining over the Horizon as the members of ARCUS arrived in a helicopter, Vila and Otto disembarking as Salvatore accompanied them for advice. ‘You’ve got less than 20 minutes to disperse the crowd before the Armed Response Unit arrives, so don’t stop to smell the roses, OK? Use force only if necessary.’ He said with a hint of warning and concern in his voice.

‘You got it, Sal.’ Vila said confidently.

‘Don’t worry – we’ll take care of it.’ Otto called cockily.

‘If you run into trouble, then radio us for extraction and we’ll get you out of here. Good luck, gentlemen.’ Salvatore saluted the recruits, who returned the gesture before the ARCUS

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Commander retreated into the helicopter, which flew away. Vila and Otto looked at the scene before them.

‘This doesn’t look too bad, Vila.’ Otto speculated.

‘Let’s follow the source of the noise, Otto... it’s in that building over there.’ Using his dog-like hearing, Vila indicated an abandoned edifice as he and Otto headed towards it, priming and aiming their weapons. Vila and Otto aimed their assault rifles into the dim abyss of the building. Eventually approaching a set of double doors, behind which were noises of yelling and pushing and shoving, Vila counted silently. ‘1... 2... 3! GO!!’ On Vila’s command, Otto opened the door quickly, entering the room in question. There was nobody there... except for a pair of corpses. Vila ran up to them cautiously, checking their pulses. ‘Shit... Otto, come here!’ Otto did as he was told while Vila examined the bodies, muttering a swear word in Hungarian. ‘This guy’s dead.’ He declared.

‘Yes, and so is this one – they’re not just ordinary punters, either.’ Otto grunted as he felt no pulse on the other corpse. Vila looked worried at his friend’s remark.

‘What are you on about?’ He asked, knowing something was wrong.

‘These guys are big politicians – Senators.’ Otto cursed in German as Vila realised they had been had.

‘Fuck! We’ve been set up. OK... let’s radio Salvatore for extraction and get out of here.’ Vila spoke up, trying to remain calm.

‘You said it, man.’ Otto smirked. Before Vila and Otto could react, however, Swedish armed response troopers entered the building, apparently catching the two ARCUS operatives red-handed. The officer in charge spoke to them in Swedish, and a stand-off ensued.

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‘What’s he saying?’ Vila asked; the air thick with tension.

‘He’s telling us to drop our weapons – we’re under arrest.’ Otto translated. The officer started yelling and screaming as the troopers aimed their weapons at the men’s heads. ‘Vila, I’ve got an idea.’ Otto smiled. Remembering a scene from a zombie film in which one of the protagonists got too cocky; he identified with the character in question and aimed his assault rifle into the legion of authority figures.

‘What are you doing?’ Vila asked, now scared.

‘Just work with me, man – we can do this!’ Otto shot back.

‘Otto, for Christ’s sake – come on, man! Get your fucking head together!!’ Despite Vila’s warning, Otto opened fire on the officer, wounding him in the leg. ‘NO!!!’ Vila screamed in disbelief. *Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit!* His mind screeched repeatedly as he and Otto jumped out of a nearby window, the two men landing outside in a rubbish skip. The two men looked at each other, Vila’s face registering mild shock and disbelief while Otto had look of pure glee on his face. ‘Let’s get the hell out of here, man!’ Vila drew his radio while Otto cocked his rifle. ‘Sal, it’s Vila – we need extraction ASAP – it’s all gone FUBAR.’ Salvatore’s voice was heard on the other end of the radio – he sounded slightly displeased but not surprised.

‘OK... head for the drop-off point! We’ll get you there!’ He commanded.

‘Got it. Vila, out.’ Vila got to his feet as he opened fire on Swedish troops out of self-defence, while Otto was picking them off as if he were scoring points in his own private video game. ‘Let’s GO!!’ Vila called as he led Otto away from the confusion, heading for the extraction point. The helicopter landed, Salvatore helping aboard the two rookie operatives.

‘Tobias! Go, go, go – get us out of here *pronto!*’ Salvatore barked.

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‘You got it!’ Tobias did as he was told as the helicopter began its ascent out of the city of Gothenburg.

‘I knew those two were bad news!’ Vladimir quipped. Tobias piloted the helicopter away from the city and back to base. As Tobias flew the aircraft, Salvatore sat before Vila and Otto, looking concerned and almost angry.

‘What the hell happened!?’ He asked calmly.

‘It was a set up.’ Vila said simply.

‘They were dead before we got there.’ Otto added – he looked (and felt) pissed off.

‘What!?! But that tipper said it was an emergency!’ Salvatore stated in disbelief.

‘Wake up, Salvatore! You should know better than to trust an anonymous tip, man! Thanks to that sucker, we’re now wanted men – terrorists of the highest order.’ Vila spoke up, his bass voice resonating throughout the chopper. Otto calmed down a bit.

‘So what do we do?’ The German cadet asked.

‘Only one thing we can do, man. We fight back... right?’ His Hungarian counterpart responded before looking at the Italian graduate-turned-rebel leader. Salvatore looked pensive for a moment before locking eyes with Vila, nodding and responding in the affirmative.

‘Damn right.’ He removed his boonie hat while scratching his beard, grunting audibly.

Montréal, Québec, Canada – 15 July 2016

In a pristine-looking house, a clean-shaven man with dark hair – an older and wiser Frank – was lying on his sofa, looking rather devoid of sleep. Something fell through his letter box,

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prompting the disgruntled Interpol officer to get to his feet in order to pick it up, revealing it to be a briefing dossier. He turned on his television, a news anchor reporting on the situation in French. Not really focusing, Frank switched over the audio to English. ‘ARCUS appear to have risen once more from obscurity as their latest act culminated with the murder of two Swedish Senators in Gothenburg last night. Key operatives include Salvatore Pasquale, Vladimir Redski and Tobias Jonsson. These men are considered to be armed and dangerous – exercise extreme caution.’ Frank turned off the television in disbelief as he remembered he still had the briefing dossier in his hand. Looking at it, he opened it up to see a picture of Salvatore in his militaristic garb, his eyes registering mild annoyance.

‘For God’s sake, Salvatore... what have you done this time? Wasn’t a national manhunt enough for you?’ He sighed and hobbled back to his sofa, cursing to himself in French as he tried to sleep. Eventually, he realised that he was not the type to just “switch off”, and the workaholic cop got to his feet. ‘Oh, fuck it – what the hell?’ He spoke out loud. He opened the dossier and started reading it. “Orders from Interpol: Salvatore Pasquale has returned. Find him and bring him to justice.” He threw the dossier onto the sofa as he scratched his dirty beard. ‘Great. Where do I start?’ He muttered. Eventually, it came to him as if a light bulb had switched itself on and appeared above his head. He picked up his home telephone and dialled a number rapidly, putting the receiver to his ear. ‘Hey, Interpol – get me Jenna Lane... tell her Detective Inspector Frank Morris wants to talk to her.’ The dialogue on the other end of the line consisted of sped-up chipmunk speak. Frank, feeling tired and ill, began to lose his temper. He cursed in French before speaking in a more aggressive tone. ‘Don’t give me that crap! I haven’t slept for the past two days and I’ve just got a new assignment – and there’s only one person who can help me... so help me, God!’ He sighed, rubbing his sleep-deprived eyes.

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Melbourne, Victoria, Australia – 15 July 2016

A blonde police officer – an older and wiser Jenna – was in her office in her home country, having abandoned the US a long time ago. She was on her desk, looking bored. Her phone rang, prompting her to pick it up in a lightning-fast movement. ‘Victoria Police Force – Captain Jenna Lane speaking.’ The dialogue on the other end of the line consisted of sped-up chipmunk speak. ‘Frank... Frank Morris? From Montreal in Canada? Salvatore Pasquale!? No!’ She looked and sounded stunned, not having heard that name in five years. ‘OK, I’m on it.’ She hung up. ‘Now there’s something you don’t hear every day.’ She chuckled to herself and smiled nervously, thinking back to her previous encounter with Salvatore from half a decade earlier. *Salvatore Pasquale... a name I haven’t heard in a long time. He was just a helpless civilian when I met him, like a persecuted minority. What an attitude – refusal to conform, openly vocal about the system... he was asking for it in a way, but by some miracle, he pulled it off, and he pulled it off well... but lightning doesn’t always strike twice.* She thought to herself contentedly.

Chapter 3

San Francisco, California, USA – 16 July 2016

A young woman with blonde hair – an older but still pretty Holly – sat in front of her computer. Older and wiser but still the kind-hearted angel, she looked at the screen, her expression calm and focused. Her eyes spotted a picture of Salvatore, and she smiled sadly. The last time she had seen him in person was on her birthday five years ago. ‘It’s been a long time, Sal... why did you have to leave? You had everything here.’ She said sadly. Shortly afterwards, her cell phone rang, prompting her to pick it up in a swift movement, answering it. She had taken on a second job as a media reporter in addition to dancing until her dance career took off. ‘Hello?’ She asked and listened intently. ‘I’m almost done. Yes, I’m fine, thanks, a little tired, that’s all... OK, thank you. Bye.’ Click, dial tone. ‘Salvatore, my friend... I hope you come back one day.’ She sighed, looking wistful. A slightly taller woman of Asian descent with dark hair entered the apartment – this was Holly’s friend, partner and flatmate – Himika Takara. More assertive and attractive than her Western counterpart, the Eastern beauty approached her as she greeted her friend in Japanese.

‘Hey, Holly – what’s going on?’ For a Japanese immigrant, her English was damn near perfect. Holly turned to her friend, smiling.

‘Not much, Himika – Just a little reminiscence and nostalgia. You know what it’s like.’ Himika just smiled.

‘Yes, I do – only too well.’

‘You miss Japan?’ Holly asked her friend. Himika nodded. Holly approached her friend and hugged her gently. ‘You’ve got me. I’ll look after you.’ Holly smiled, as did Himika.

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‘Why don’t we watch some TV? It’ll do you some good after the day you’ve had.’ Himika suggested. Holly thought about it and then nodded, sitting on the sofa with her friend as she turned on the television. ‘How’s work, by the way?’ Himika tried to make conversation.

‘Tiring – I mean, I love dancing, but I also like working with you – reporting the news.’ Holly looked (and felt) a little tired as Himika just smiled, the television showing the news of ARCUS’s supposed act of terror.

‘Rebel organisation ARCUS has apparently shown its true face after committing an act of unspeakable inhumanity – two bodies were found in an abandoned building in Sweden, with the killing blows apparently delivered by two ARCUS operatives, according to amateur footage.’ The newsreader reported as the amateur footage chronicled Vila and Otto’s “arrest”, concluding with Otto shooting the hidden camera as the newsreader continued. ‘ARCUS, a so-called freedom fighter organisation, has been perpetuating attacks against authoritarian entities for the past five years. Their leader, Salvatore Pasquale, has been in hiding, orchestrating these attacks in an attempt to make the World a democratic and peaceful place. His actions have not gone without controversy, however – religious groups and academic figures have gone on the record stating that Salvatore’s actions subvert their authority. As for Salvatore himself, his present whereabouts are unknown.’ Holly looked at the television in disbelief, while Himika noticed her friend’s behaviour.

‘Holly? Holly, are you OK?’ She asked. Holly apparently acknowledged her friend’s voice as she listened in and turned off the television. ‘Holly? You’re beginning to worry me. What’s wrong?’ Himika asked with fear in her voice as Holly turned to face her friend, slowly and eerily.

‘He’s back.’ Himika raised an eyebrow briefly as she looked at Holly in confusion, her look paving way to realisation almost instantaneously.

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Mount Kebnekaise, Sweden – 16 July 2016

In the hideout, the five rebels were present as ever, evidently worried about their present condition. ‘We didn’t kill him; that much is certain.’ Salvatore said calmly.

‘It wouldn’t surprise me if somebody was trying to discredit us.’ Vladimir speculated.

‘Given our history and track record, it wouldn’t surprise me, either. The simple fact of the matter is that we’re now wanted men and we have to deal with it. We have to clear our names somehow.’ Tobias reasoned. Salvatore paused to think about this for a moment.

‘OK... Vladimir, nobody knows we’re here, right?’ He asked Vladimir.

‘That’s right.’ Vladimir nodded slightly as Salvatore turned to Tobias in mid-sentence.

‘Good... let’s keep it that way. Tobias, how’s the helicopter?’

‘It has a few dents, but it still works. It’ll take about a day to fix.’ Tobias replied, scratching his beard.

‘OK, then – Tobias, I want you to get to it right away – Vladimir, help him. Vila, you and Otto find out just who exactly could have planned such an event like this.’

‘What’s the plan?’ Vila enquired as Salvatore turned to face his men.

‘It’s quite simple. We hit them back – hard and fast.’ He said commandingly through gritted teeth as he felt a mild sense of anger surge into his body.

‘It’s easier said than done. Besides, who’s going to believe us now that the public think we pulled this stunt?’ Otto asked while smoking a cigarette.

‘I think there’s someone out there who might just be able to show the other side of the story.’ Salvatore said as he wheeled around to face Vladimir.

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‘Who...?’

Salvatore raised an eyebrow at Vladimir in a Spock-like fashion, answering the question wordlessly as Vladimir returned the gesture before nodding silently.

San Francisco, California, USA – 17 July 2016

Holly and Himika entered the lobby of a skyscraper, approaching a pretty female receptionist, who looked up at them as she was distracted from her momentary reverie. ‘Hi, can I help you?’ Holly smiled sweetly.

‘Hi, I’m Holly Carson, and this is my partner, Himika Takara.’ The receptionist pressed a button on an intercom system.

‘Sir, Miss Carson and Miss Takara are here.’ A male voice was heard on the other end of the line, a resonating bass.

‘Good. Let them through.’ The receptionist motioned as Holly thanked her before she and Himika proceeded into the building. The two of them eventually made it to the penthouse suite of Rosh Goldman. Rosh was in his office, looking calm and pensive. The two female reporters entered confidently, using their charms to their advantage like a pair of *femme fatales*. He turned around to face them with a confident smile.

‘You are Holly Carson and Himika Takara...?’ They both nodded – Holly shook Rosh’s hand while Himika curtsied. ‘My secretary was quite forthcoming. She did say you two have a quality reputation for your reports and investigations.’ Holly smiled at the compliment, thanking him. Rosh looked up and down, observing Holly and Himika and mentally undressing them at the same time before he continued speaking. ‘Welcome aboard. Let me just say that I have a feeling that you two will do the right thing at the right time. Let me induct you into my group.’ The two women smiled and thanked him. He held out his arm as

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if wrapping a cloak around the beautiful heroines, the intrepid reporters losing consciousness as the room filled with a sleeping gas of sorts.

Unknown Location – 17 July 2016

Holly and Himika awoke in a strange place – the scenery was filled with mock-religious imagery, such as an inverted crucifix and a pentagram, complete with dimly lit candles. At the front of the chamber and on the floor, in the form of a seal, was displayed the DIVIETO logo. They looked at each other and then observed their surroundings more carefully – they were lying on flat marble tables in the centre of a ceremonial chamber of sorts, clothed in white robes. Rosh was present, clad in a black robe complete with hood, obscuring his face – he looked like Death personified as an organist played on a church organ, adding an air of eeriness and atmosphere to the scene. ‘Holly Carson and Himika Takara, do you pledge your allegiance to the organisation?’ He asked in his flat, monotone voice. The two women looked at each other briefly before replying in the affirmative. ‘Good. We now consecrate the bond of obedience. Assume the position.’ Rosh commanded ominously. Holly and Himika held out their hands. Rosh gave each of them a badge with the organisation’s logo on it. ‘Wear them with pride.’ He said simply as Holly and Himika got off the tables and stood before him. The women bowed before Rosh as the organist concluded his melody, ending the ceremony. Holly nodded and smiled.

‘Thank you, Mr Goldman.’ She said softly in her angelic voice. Rosh smiled courteously.

‘Please... call me Rosh. I just hope ARCUS don’t get to you, too. Good luck, ladies.’ Rosh nodded as Himika spoke up, confident and excitable as ever.

‘We can handle them. Thank you and farewell.’ As the two women shook hands with Rosh, they gathered their equipment and left the initiation room, being guided out of the area via a secret escape tunnel which led them back into the main area of the facility, the secret door

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locking itself silently behind them. Holly and Himika walked together in the stone-white corridor of the edifice, conferring amongst each other.

‘Rosh is lying to us, Himika.’ Holly whispered *sotto voce* to her friend.

‘Holly, how can you be so sure?’ Himika countered; her tone of voice just as low. It was then that Holly decided to speak normally, as they were well out of a security camera or microphone’s reach.

‘I know him.’ Himika raised an eyebrow in mild disbelief.

‘You know Rosh Goldman?’ Holly chuckled.

‘No, Himika. I know HIM.’ She emphasised the last word with a sense of urgency and understanding. Himika looked confused for a moment before she realised what her friend was talking about, realisation and disbelief crossing the Asian beauty’s face.

‘You mean...!’ Holly nodded, covering her friend’s mouth quickly. Holly looked around to make sure nobody heard them and then released her hand from Himika’s mouth. She then had an idea, the beautiful blonde eager to get her hands on some news scoops. ‘Let’s investigate.’ Himika suggested. Holly smirked.

‘Great.’ She chuckled.

San Francisco, California, USA – 17 July 2016

The Sun was setting over the Horizon as Holly was typing on her computer frantically in her apartment, as if she were possessed by the Devil himself. Himika, on the other hand, was scanning and reading the documents acquired during their *impromptu* investigation, wearing her reading glasses. ‘Holly, listen to this: Throughout their five years of activity, ARCUS have been single-handedly responsible for bringing about a permanent end to authoritarian

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cultures, including the most traditionally prideful of nations such as Great Britain, the United States and Japan.’ Himika spoke up, showing Holly the documents in question.

‘I know, Himika, and if they are who they say they are, then they’re most likely fighting for a good cause.’ Holly replied while looking at the documents carefully.

‘That’s not all, though: Their tactics have ranged from covert action to borderline acts of terrorism, primarily against individuals of a staunch and traditionalist nature or organisations with a controversial goal such as using human test subjects in laboratory experiments, believing them to be cowards.’ The Japanese journalist continued. Holly’s face registered disbelief and mild shock as she heard this. Her eyes shifted to a framed picture of Salvatore in his civilian days and she said nothing.

Mount Kebnekaise, Sweden – 17 July 2016

Salvatore and his crew were present, all looking tired and devoid of sleep, having spent the past day or so investigating on their own terms. Salvatore was trying to sleep as he sat on a dodgy-looking chair with his legs on the table, his boonie hat covering his face. His laptop computer suddenly beeped, waking him up. Checking his email, Salvatore found a curious-looking email message with an attachment. The message simply read: “USEFUL INFO – A FRIEND.” Looking at the email briefly, Salvatore checked his network protection before opening it. His eyes widened slightly as he smiled, exclaiming in Italian before motioning for the others to come over. ‘Come here – have a look at this!’ The remaining operatives approached Salvatore’s station as he showed them the information. ‘I got this from a rather reliable source; I’m not saying who it is exactly. Get this: There’s a new organisation in town called DIVIETO.’ He continued.

‘DIVIETO – isn’t that a word in your language for prohibition?’ Vladimir questioned.

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‘Spot on. These guys are the polar opposite of us, and that’s not all. They’ve got some real friends in high places – they’re more connected than the Pope.’ Salvatore persisted, eager to get his new briefing out of the way.

‘So that would mean that they must have had something to do with the setup in Sweden.’ Vila speculated, his bass voice instantly recognisable.

‘You got it. That’s not all, though – these guys are hell-bent on undoing all the work we’ve done. Look at these people – ex-Federation officers, religious officials, Members of Parliament, it seems to be quite a tight list. Few known members, so that’s a plus for us.’ The Italian denizen leader chuckled at the irony – no new cases in over five years and now he was being discredited and people were smearing shit over his name like a disused gravestone.

‘So, what’s the deal?’ Otto asked, even though he suspected he knew the answer already.

‘Get out of here quick, and fight fire with fire. Tobias, is the helicopter fixed?’ Salvatore enquired.

‘Yes, and fully fuelled, too.’ The Swedish pilot replied confidently.

‘OK... let’s do this – hard and fast. This means war. First off, we pay one of their officials a visit – Grigori Markóvic. This guy trades pride for money, and he’s an armchair Führer to boot. Plus, he’s politically linked.’ The Italian commander looked at his first adversary’s profile with a combination of scorn and disdain.

‘What’s his location?’ The Hungarian gentle giant asked.

‘Bratislava, Slovakia.’ Salvatore replied simply as the computer monitor blipped off.

Chapter 4

City of Bratislava, Bratislava, Slovakia – 18 July 2016

It was dark. The Moon was shining in the Sky, high above the Slovak Horizon. Salvatore, Vila and Otto emerged from the shadows dressed up in night gear, the former identifiable by his boonie hat, the trio hiding in bushes. Salvatore activated his radio. ‘Tobias, stay out of Slovak airspace and try to circle around in case we need an emergency evacuation. Vladimir, keep in contact – speak to us.’ He said softly as Tobias acknowledged his request before closing the connection. Salvatore looked into the darkness with his ENVG goggles, the combination of thermal/infrared and night vision greatly aiding him in his task. ‘OK, lads – stick with me and everything will be fine.’ He attached a silencer to his assault rifle and handgun. Vila and Otto looked at him, then at each other. ‘I suggest you boys do the same.’ Salvatore chuckled. Vila and Otto did as they were told, and were soon ready for action. Salvatore emerged from his hiding place and quickly dashed towards the entrance to the City of Bratislava, with Vila and Otto following him quickly and quietly. The three men hid in the shadows as the city street was desolate and deserted, except for a few police officers on bicycles. ‘We can’t afford to be spotted, let alone use our weapons in public. I’ll go first – you two follow me on my signal.’ Salvatore scanned the environment before making his move. He ran forwards, reaching an alleyway as he then got into position. ‘OK... go!’ He commanded. Vila and Otto emerged from their locations and took up their respective positions, blending in with the nocturnal scenery. ‘Good. Vila, bring up the electronic map.’ Salvatore commanded as Vila did as he was told, Otto providing cover fire if necessary. ‘We’re here, just inside the city perimeter. Grigori’s house is near the cathedral here.’ Salvatore pointed at the locations marked on the map.

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‘That’s about 5 minutes from here – what’s the best plan?’ Vila asked, trying to keep his voice down as Otto’s trigger finger began to twitch.

‘We’ll stay in the shadows – stealth, speed and silence.’ Salvatore repeated his credo.

‘What if we’re discovered?’ Vila asked out of concern – he wasn’t too sure about the operation but now was not the time to bring up his worries.

‘Then we give them hell and radio Tobias for extraction. Let’s go.’ Salvatore said simply. Vila swapped the electronic map for his assault rifle and patted Otto on the shoulder, who understood. The three men sneaked further into the city. ‘There it is. I’ll take the front entrance – Vila, go round the back. Otto, go in through the upper window.’ Doing as they were told, the two cadets got into position while the master vigilante approached the house. Quietly picking the lock, he slipped inside silently as Vila entered the house through the back entrance, Otto slipping in through an open window on the upper level. Inside the house, Salvatore scanned his whereabouts before rendezvousing with Vila. ‘You OK?’ He asked.

‘I’m fine. Where’s Otto?’ Vila was worried that Otto might try to pull another stunt like in Sweden.

‘He’s upstairs – let’s go.’ Salvatore and Vila headed upstairs to meet Otto, who was standing outside a closed door. ‘Ready?’ Salvatore asked. The two cadets replied in the affirmative as Salvatore kicked the door open. It was pitch black – all that could be heard were sounds of male voices yelling and guns firing, followed by a deafening silence. An hour or so later, a tall man with dark hair was tied to a chair, unconscious. Salvatore slapped the man awake. ‘Wake up, Sunshine.’ He snarled in a voice reminiscent of a rough and ready SAS Commander. The man – Grigori Markóvic – awoke, slightly dazed as he looked up to see the three ARCUS operatives standing before him.

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‘Who are you?’ Grigori asked.

‘I think you know who we are.’ Vila replied calmly, stoic as ever. Grigori spotted a rainbow-shaped badge on Salvatore’s uniform.

‘That rainbow... you’re with ARCUS?’ He asked apprehensively.

‘Judge, jury and executioner – court is now in session. You’re with DIVIETO, aren’t you? You’re one of their main contacts?’ Salvatore interrogated Grigori, even though he knew it was next to futile.

‘Fuck off.’ Grigori spat a mouthful of blood in Salvatore’s face, earning him a rather HARD punch and a flurry of vocal vitriol.

‘Names – I want NAMES!!’ Salvatore yelled while punching Grigori.

‘Go to Hell, Salvatore. You can’t save anybody.’ Grigori laughed psychotically – he knew how to flip Salvatore’s switches due to his chequered past as a Red Army torturer.

‘I’ll save as many as I can, now give me a fucking name!’ He punched the psychological terrorist in the gut. ‘Speak or die!’ He roared. Grigori just laughed his unsettling Joker-like laugh again.

‘Eat my shit and drink my piss, Pasquale.’ Salvatore sighed and turned to Vila – this was clearly not working; he would have to fight fire with fire.

‘Vila, knock some sense into this little cunt.’ Vila complied by punching the bound Grigori, his large fist colliding with the average-looking man’s face. The two argued in Slovak briefly.

‘You’re a fool, Salvatore. DIVIETO is bigger than you think.’ Grigori laughed.

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‘Why is DIVIETO doing this?’ Vila demanded, the large, muscular operative holding Grigori by the scruff of his neck.

‘You people at ARCUS... disturbed the natural order of things.’ Grigori continued.

‘Disturbed...? We brought a permanent end to authoritarian teaching and parenting, and this is the reward we get?!’ Vila asked incredulously.

‘Go to Hell, all of you.’ Grigori said firmly. Vila turned to face Salvatore, shaking his head slightly.

‘OK – I think we’ll need to resort to more drastic measure.’ Salvatore simply nodded and punched Grigori again. About 5 to 10 minutes later, Grigori screamed awake in agony as Salvatore flipped a switch in the garage. The DIVIETO agent was tied to his chair, his bare torso exposed, to which was attached a pair of electrodes connected to a car battery. Otto, being a rookie cadet, grimaced at the sight. The interrogation continued with Vila and Grigori communicating in Slovak.

‘Who runs the show?’ Vila demanded.

‘Stop...! Stop this and I’ll tell you!’ Grigori said, admitting defeat. Vila turned to Salvatore and translated for him, who complied by turning off the power to the battery. ‘Thank you. His name is Rosh... Rosh Goldman...’ He ran out of breath, having been tortured within an inch of his life. Salvatore untied Grigori, thanking him before drawing his handgun. BANG! Salvatore pulled the trigger and shot the DIVIETO operative in the kneecap, injuring him.

‘Let’s get out of here.’ Salvatore commanded. Otto grabbed Salvatore’s arm to stop him.

‘That was totally unnecessary, Salvatore! You could have just let him go.’ Otto expressed his disgust at Salvatore’s action.

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‘Otto, I have nothing but sympathy for what you are feeling right now... but this isn’t a petulant child we’re dealing with – this is a vengeful enemy. That’s just a message telling him not to fuck us about.’ He indicated the squealing Grigori and then primed his assault rifle, leaving. The Sun was beginning to rise over the Horizon as the three ARCUS operatives ran across the city streets, Salvatore drawing his radio. ‘Vladimir, Tobias, Salvatore here. Get us out of here!’

‘No problem, Salvatore – meet us at the drop zone. We’ll evacuate there.’ Tobias called out.

‘You got it – out.’ Ending the transmission, Salvatore ran through a corner with Vila and Otto... running into a police officer. Thinking quickly, Salvatore shot the cop in the forearm, injuring him. He turned to his subordinates. ‘Change of plan! LEG IT!!’ He yelled. The three of them ran through the city streets, the rising Sun becoming more evident as it ascended over the Horizon. The three operatives became embroiled in a hectic gunfight right in the heart of the Slovak capital. Cocking his assault rifle, Salvatore ran through the City of Bratislava as he opened fire on incoming police officers, taking great care to injure them only. Having been separated from Vila and Otto, he headed into an empty district, hiding every now and then in the ever-decreasing shadows as the Sun continued to rise, occasionally drawing his radio to speak to his comrades. ‘Vila, Otto, meet me at the city gates at the back end of town. We’re leaving! Just get to the extraction point – over and fucking out.’ All he could hear was Vila’s distorted voice due to radio static. Opening fire on his unintentional opponents, Salvatore ran as fast as his legs would carry him, the former college graduate-turned-vigilante-cum-mercenary taking cover from enemy fire. As the Sky began to illuminate, Salvatore reached the city gates... only for the floor beneath him to collapse, sending him falling into a building a floor below. Vila and Otto peered into the hole below to make sure he was OK. ‘I’m fine! GO!!’ He commanded. They replied in the affirmative and left, doing

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as they were told, leaving the rogue leader to find his way out. Picking up his assault rifle, he loaded a new magazine into it and primed it, picking up the pace as the authorities were arriving, sirens audible in the distance.

‘Salvatore, can you hear me? It’s me, Vladimir. We can do an emergency evacuation at the top of this building, but you must hurry – you’ve got one minute!’ Vladimir’s voice echoed throughout his radio as Salvatore opened fire carefully.

‘Do it!’ Salvatore yelled. Spotting a staircase before him, the denizen ran like the Road Runner on speed as he dashed up the stairs, eventually reaching the floor above him – the helicopter was several metres away from him.

‘Come on, man! Jump – JUMP!!’ Vila’s voice encouraged him to take the plunge as the rogue leader slung his assault rifle over his back, taking a few steps back before running and jumping, his arms and hands outstretched, screaming. He just barely grabbed hold of the helicopter’s retracting ramp as he was aided by Vila and Otto, falling inside as it closed behind him. Salvatore got to his feet as Tobias piloted the helicopter with ease, the renegade freedom fighters leaving Eastern Europe.

‘Did you get him?’ Vladimir asked.

‘I got him. He gave us a name – Rosh Goldman.’ Salvatore nodded while wiping his boonie hat clean and replacing it on his head.

‘We had some trouble with local law enforcement. We’re definitely wanted men now.’ Vila spoke up, eager to speak his mind.

‘We’re stuck – that’s great. The whole fucking World wants us dead, and we’re up here flying for our lives!’ Otto complained as he kicked a wall in anger.

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‘Have you got a better idea, Otto? Unless we find out who set us up, we’ll never be free of them. We’ll be branded as criminals forever. These guys basically ARE the heart and soul of the Federation.’ Salvatore asserted, remaining calm as ever. ‘Back to base – we’ve got no clues apart from a single name.’ He commanded. Tobias piloted the helicopter, saying nothing.

Chapter 5

Melbourne, Victoria, Australia – 18 July 2016

Jenna was in her office, looking bored as she typed up a report on her computer when a subordinate came in, giving her a document. As the subordinate left, a voice was heard on her intercom. ‘Captain, you have a visitor here – he says he’s your partner from long ago.’ Jenna looked up at the mention of this, her eyes widening slightly as surprise deprived her of the power of speech.

‘OK, stay there – I’m on my way.’ She said. Getting to her feet, Jenna ran out of her office in a dash. Arriving at the reception area, Jenna bolted down a corner and stopped dead in her tracks as she saw her visitor – it was a clean-shaven Frank, wearing a suit, jacket and fedora hat. ‘Oh, my God... Frank?’ Jenna asked incredulously. Frank removed his hat and bowed before Jenna.

‘Detective Inspector Frank Morris at your service, Captain.’ He said humbly as he smiled at her.

‘Is it really you, Frank!?! I remember when you were a rookie cop back in San Francisco.’ Jenna could not believe her eyes and ears.

‘I’ve changed since then – gone back home to Canada and trained extensively... and here I am now, willing to help you again.’ Frank said charismatically – he was older and wiser, but still had the same natural charisma of a friend and leader. Jenna smiled back.

‘I assume you’re here for the ARCUS case?’ Frank nodded.

‘Correct. When I heard he was back, I knew he was up to something, so I’m here to help you find out just what it is that he’s up to.’ The two officers walked through the police station,

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reunited again after half a decade. Entering Jenna's office, the Australian officer handed Frank a document on Salvatore, who rejected it. 'No need, I've read it.'

'So why are you here, Frank?' Jenna asked as she raised an eyebrow.

'I could use your help, Jenna – we'd make an excellent team, just like old times.' Frank replied. Jenna smirked and replied in the affirmative, prompting a rather firm and friendly handshake.

San Francisco, California, USA – 18 July 2016

Holly and Himika were in their shared apartment, watching television together as the Sun shone in the Sky, beginning to set over the Horizon. The newsreader delivered more news on the ARCUS-DIVIETO War. 'ARCUS has struck again, this time committing a bloodbath in Bratislava, Slovakia. At least thirty Slovak police officers were injured trying to apprehend some of ARCUS's key members – fortunately, nobody had been killed. This latest act of cultural subterfuge has now branded Salvatore Pasquale and his associates as wanted men Worldwide.' Holly turned off the TV in frustration, Himika looking pensive. Holly headed off into her bedroom, while Himika put on her reading glasses, the Asian beauty picking up a book.

Mount Kebnekaise, Sweden – 18 July 2016

Vladimir and Tobias were working on repairing the helicopter together, reflecting on their current situation. 'Tobias, do you know anyone who goes by that name – Rosh?' Vladimir asked as he tightened a screw with a wrench, Tobias welding a metal plate into position.

'No, Vladimir, I can't say that I do. I do, however, have some friends that can help us – they'll remain nameless, of course.' Tobias sighed.

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‘We can’t risk involving any more people in this.’ Vladimir was beginning to have doubts about Salvatore’s cause – he had already risked their lives once five years ago and was seemingly willing to do it again. *He’s going insane... I can’t do this.* He thought.

‘Tell that to Salvatore. It’s partly his fault that all this is unravelling right now.’ Tobias said.

‘Salvatore... I just wish he wasn’t so damn stubborn and headstrong.’ Vladimir countered, thoughts of abandoning the cause trailing into his mind.

‘Me, too – he hasn’t been the same since Miranda got herself frozen.’ Tobias mentioned Miranda, Salvatore’s soft spot. Vladimir looked up, a thought coming to his mind as he understood the motives behind Salvatore’s increasingly impulsive and aggressive behaviour.

‘You think we could use her help?’ He speculated. *Miranda... Salvatore...* he thought.

‘Who’s to say she’ll still be the same woman? You know what those human experiments are like – cloning, mind control, personality surgery, and the cold fucking sleep – the works. She might be herself, but she won’t be herself self, if you know what I mean.’ Tobias chuckled semi-humorously.

‘Still, though, we should at least give it a try.’ Vladimir pressed on, a plan forming in his head.

‘We don’t even know if that laboratory is still active now – who’s to say it’s still there? It’s been five years. She’s gone, Vladimir.’ Tobias finished his work, wiping some sweat and dirt from his face as he gets to his feet, throwing his tools to the floor. ‘If there’s anything that Salvatore has taught me, Vladimir – then it is that nothing is over until death comes for us. In his case, it’s come for him and he’s even escaped from its grasp twice. If Miranda is out there, then she’s most likely alive. The question is: Where?’ Tobias got to his feet, leaving the hangar as he headed for the control room of the base. Vila and Otto were on their

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computers, looking up Rosh's name on search engines. Vila's eyes were red and bloodshot from lack of sleep, while Otto's face was pale and ghostly.

'Vila, there's no way we'll be able to find out who did this so quickly. It's just one name – and that's not saying much.' Otto spoke, his voice slightly addled despite half a dozen cups of tea.

'It's a rather unique name, Otto, so it can't be that hard.' Vila spoke back, a bottle of Pálinka beside him. He took a swig before continuing his research, the Hungarian alcoholic beverage raging into his Slavic stomach. 'How long have we been here, by the way?' He asked.

'I'd say around 2, maybe 3 hours. You should get some sleep.' Otto said calmly.

'And you're OK?' Vila asked out of concern for his Germanic friend.

'I'm Germanic – I can go for hours with no sleep, unlike you Slavic folk.' Otto chuckled. Vila laughed and exclaimed in Hungarian before rubbing his eyes. Otto focused on his computer, muttering in German, eating his words instantaneously.

'This is getting nowhere. Save our progress – we'll continue tomorrow.' Vila said simply.

'Yes, that's probably a good idea.' Otto muttered. He complied with Vila's request before turning off the computers. The two men walked away, turning out the lights. They bumped into Tobias on the way to their quarters.

'Sorry.' Vila muttered.

'It's OK – the chopper's fixed.' Tobias smiled. 'Where's Salvatore?'

'He's in his quarters, trying to catch some Zeds.' Vila replied. With those words, the men bid each other a good night and left. Salvatore sat on his bed in his quarters, removing his boonie hat and hanging it up. He removed his boots, grunting from mild fatigue as he slipped into a

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pair of slippers, lying on his bed before removing his spectacles, turning out the light in an attempt to get some sleep.

Chapter 6

Signal de Botrange, High Fens Mountains, Belgium – 19 July 2016

It was snowing at the Signal de Botrange. A few figures in arctic camouflage scoured the site, spotting a disused entrance to an abandoned base. Their leader, identifiable by a pair of sunglasses, proceeded to enter the base followed by his subordinates. The nameless operatives descended into the base, looking around them as they walked through the remains of the former base of operations of the Sol Federation. What once was a lively and vibrant place was now a cold, desolate and lonely museum, home only to ghosts and forgotten memories. The leader reached a pair of double-doors, which opened with ease, the electricity still active despite the lengthy disuse. The squad entered the chamber, some of the operatives visibly shaking from the extreme cold. One of them worked a computer, its monitor sparkling to life as the leader saw a glass capsule before him, covered in ice. The operative at the computer gestured for his leader to approach him, who did so. He pointed at the computer monitor. The leader looked at the monitor wordlessly before removing his sunglasses, revealing his eyes – the man was a slightly older but still experienced Vojislav Brévic. He then looked towards the ice-covered capsule, his eyes widening slightly as he witnessed the unseen sight before him, as if he had uncovered a lost pirate's treasure. The computer read: "DATE OF FACILITY SHUTDOWN: 5 SEPTEMBER 2013." Thinking quickly, Vojislav radioed his superiors, speaking Serbian. Within the hour, they had the cryogenic capsule airlifted via helicopter to a hidden laboratory.

City of Vienna, Vienna, Austria – 19 July 2016

The glass capsule, now reconnected and reactivated, stood upright in a laboratory, manned by a middle-aged scruffy-looking scientist – Doctor Hermann Krumpf. He was accompanied by a few nameless technicians as Vojislav, the leader of the mysterious operatives, left – he was

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neither ARCUS nor DIVIETO, just a neutral rogue mercenary. The icy capsule showed a beautiful blonde, nude and sleeping – Miranda Ekerot. Having been captured and used as a test subject in an ex-Federation cryonics experiment, she now slept a dreamless sleep, her youth and beauty preserved by her sub-zero hell. A tube filled with green viscous semiliquid goo housing Miranda’s clone was visible. The computer monitor readout displayed: “CLONE REVIVAL PROCESS BEGUN – ORIGINAL DNA SUBJECT: EKEROT, MIRANDA R. CLONE CODE NAME: MIRANDA ALPHA.” The green goo enveloping the nude clone glowed slightly, illuminated by the lab lights as the clone slept peacefully, synchronised in time with the computer’s next report: “HEART RESTARTED – HEART BEAT AND PULSE NOMINAL.” The clone’s eyes clicked open as she looked through the tube of goo, her vision green. The goo slowly drained out and her body was washed off with cold water, leaving her wet, naked form inside the container as its door opened. She fell to her knees, revived. Hermann approached the clone – its cryptonym: Miranda Alpha. ‘Miranda Alpha... how are you feeling?’ He asked softly, his voice thick with a ripe Germanic accent. The young clone got to her feet, wiping her wet hair out of her face as she exited her liquefied home.

‘I’m... I feel fine, thank you.’ She smiled. Hermann looked at his new creation, smiling briefly.

‘I’m Doctor Hermann Krumpf – your creator.’ Hermann smiled, the clone looking at him with a bit of a smile on her own face. ‘Would you like some clothes?’ He continued. Miranda Alpha, noticing she was naked, looked at her body then covered herself shyly, blushing slightly. Hermann simply smiled and got her a bag, handing it to her. ‘Here you go.’ Miranda Alpha took the bag, thanking Hermann as she peered inside to look at its contents, a sharp twinge in her neck sending her into a state of unconsciousness and into Hermann’s arms. He

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caught her, taking her away to a test chamber of sorts. Several hours later, Miranda Alpha was still fast asleep, wearing a hospital gown. A sprinkle of water from the ceiling hit her face, gradually waking her up. The sprinkle ceased, and she sat up, clutching her head and shaking it. Multiple CCTV cameras captured Miranda Alpha from various angles – her head, feet, legs, arms, hands, body; the works. As if on cue, a door slid open. Miranda Alpha looked at the door, curious as to what was going to emerge from the other side – eventually; a silver cyborg emerged from the shadows. Its black eyes looked directly at Miranda Alpha. It approached her and raised its arms in a fighting stance.

SHOW US WHAT YOU’VE GOT, MIRANDA ALPHA. A computerised voice spoke up, amplified by the loudspeakers. Miranda Alpha backed up a bit, the young clone recalling her memories inherited from the original Miranda. She took a breath, closed her eyes and it all came back to her. She then opened her eyes and looked at the bot. She smiled a bit and landed a side kick right on its chest followed by a spin kick to the left and a few punches, easily reducing it to a pile of wires and metal. A computer screen was flashing various numbers, indicating the amount of strength for each blow, measured in PSI. The young clone looked at her achievement, smiling smugly before being weakened by some sleeping gas. WELL DONE. The voice spoke up as Hermann entered the chamber, loading Miranda Alpha onto a wheelchair, transporting his creation to a large tank full of water, where he promptly undressed her, revealing her nude form. The young clone blushed slightly as she slowly awoke.

‘This is a test of your endurance in addition to your strength and agility, my dear.’ Hermann said softly as Miranda Alpha changed into a red Lycra racer-back training swimsuit and jumped into the pool, not even bothering to tie her blonde hair. The young clone was swimming almost perfectly as she alternated between going under and surfacing, Hermann timing her while his aide took notes. Miranda Alpha continued to push herself as she swam

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like a dolphin, gliding through the water like a mermaid with superhuman strength and near-light speed. Hermann looked at his stopwatch before exclaiming in German. ‘Yes! Yes! This is very good!’ As the young clone jumped out of the pool, Hermann smiled at her. ‘You’re doing very well, my dear. Come.’ He led the athletic clone towards a ladder with a diving board. ‘Your last trial: Breath holding. If you can make it over 5 minutes, then you will be rewarded.’ Miranda Alpha smiled at the mention of a reward. Nodding happily, the young clone ascended the ladder and stood on the edge of the board. The aide tapped his smart phone, activating a hidden switch in the clone’s body. Miranda Alpha took a breath and dived in flawlessly, her physical capabilities bordering on superhuman. She hit the water head first and lay under, holding her breath calmly. Hermann timed her, the mad scientist looking happy and excited at the same time, muttering in German. ‘Come on, my dear... just a little bit more.’ BEEP-BEEP! BEEP-BEEP! His stopwatch beeped rapidly and he jumped up in the air jubilantly. Miranda Alpha looked up at the surface. Thinking she had beaten the time limit, she surfaced, jumping out of the pool. Hermann hugged her tightly as he smiled at her, taking her away for the final phase of training and conditioning as she was dried off and stripped down once more like a doll, put to sleep for a second time.

Taken back to the DIVIETO laboratory, Miranda Alpha, now in a hospital gown once more, was wheeled to a chair connected to a super computer, with a helmet attached, the young clone put into the chair as the helmet lowered onto her head. One of Hermann’s aides closed a series of restraints around the beautiful blonde’s wrists as the scientist himself activated the computer. The visor on the helmet glowed as Miranda Alpha screamed in agony, her memory being wiped like chalk from a board. Hermann winced, the eccentric scientist crossing himself and praying in German as Rosh observed silently in the safety of his office, smirking evilly. Eventually, after a full minute or so, Miranda Alpha lost consciousness for a third time as Hermann opened the restraints, lowering his surrogate daughter’s body into a suspended

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animation capsule. He looked at her sadly, stroking her cheek and her spread-out hair before kissing her on the forehead affectionately, whispering softly: 'Forgive me.' He typed in an access code at lightning speed – not even Rosh could see what he inputted, and a glass door slid over Miranda Alpha, closing her inside the flat capsule as the ambivalent and ambitious scientist placed his hand on a push-button switch hesitantly for a moment before pushing it, the LED illuminating the switch turning from green to red as the capsule's metal lid closed, sealing the young clone in suspended animation. Hermann sighed and left the laboratory, feeling a combination of guilt and pride at his work.

Innsbruck, Tyrol, Austria – 19 July 2016

Miranda Alpha, now clothed in an identical catsuit to the original Miranda's but in red with a pink belt and white accessories, sat in the same chair inside a black van, while Hermann observed wordlessly, the aide taking notes silently. The visor on the helmet glowed. Miranda Alpha closed her eyes and relaxed as a strange procedure took place, information being transferred from the super computer into her mind, parts of her memory being erased as her original personality was overwritten. There was an electronic humming noise as the procedure began.

LISTEN TO ME, NOBODY ELSE. It was the same eerie voice from earlier as her personality was overwritten like a hard disc drive. The helmet ascended, removing itself from her head as the atmosphere suddenly became uncomfortably grim and sinister. Miranda Alpha's eyes clicked open, her face now cold and deadly as her transformation and brainwashing was now complete. ARISE, MIRANDA ALPHA. Miranda Alpha got to her feet, the cold, dead look still on her face. She got to her feet and looked in a mirror, tying her hair back into a ponytail. She fell back onto the chair, exhausted, and fell fast asleep.

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It was not until several hours later that Miranda Alpha, now conditioned, trained and groomed for combat, was lying on a recliner as she began to wake up in Hermann's office, the human marionette observing her whereabouts. Hermann noticed her awakening and approached her. He held her arms to soothe her. 'Miranda Alpha, you were created and awoken to deal with a delicate issue.' The scientist spoke up as the young clone looked at her father.

'What do you mean by a delicate issue?' She asked calmly, just like her confident mother, who was imprisoned in a frozen cell of water as a guinea pig in a sick experiment.

'The natural balance of power in the World has gone wrong... and I need you to put it right again.' Hermann smiled softly.

'What do you mean?' Miranda Alpha enquired, trying to understand.

'I'm not the best person to talk to about this... but I know someone who does.' The door to Hermann's office opened, revealing a robed figure – in actuality, a disguised Rosh.

'Allow me to explain. You were revived because you are the only one who can help suppress our current threat.' Rosh explained in his usual scheming manner. Miranda Alpha raised an eyebrow before Rosh continued speaking. 'A group of ragtag mercenaries are threatening to subvert freedom of speech and freedom of choice – cultural terrorists, if you like. These people work on a global scale.' Miranda Alpha looked at Rosh, having inherited her donor/mother's personality traits. Rosh handed Miranda Alpha a photo of Salvatore, the young clone looking at it briefly. 'That man – Salvatore Pasquale – he's behind all this... and he betrayed your mother.' Miranda Alpha looked angry. She stared at Rosh coldly.

'I don't work cheap.' She stated.

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‘I know. How does 1 Million Swedish Krona sound?’ Rosh smiled like the Joker as he spoke, putting down Miranda Alpha’s weapons – a knife and handgun with a 2-in-1 light and laser pointer, silencer and holographic sight – on Hermann’s desk. Looking at her weapons, Miranda Alpha considered the opportunity before nodding in acquiescence.

‘OK, I’ll do it.’ She picked up her weapons and holstered them.

‘One more exercise before your mission. Good luck.’ Rosh smirked as Hermann looked confused for a moment.

‘Thanks, but I don’t need luck.’ With those words, she got to her feet and left Hermann’s office, heading outside to a courtyard as she headed for a silver sports car. A DIVIETO guard approached her, the young clone taking him out with a swift punch. A second guard approached and he was knocked out with a punch to the gut and a kick to the face. A third guard approached Miranda Alpha, who punched, kicked and swung him round before finishing him off with a kick to the midsection and a punch to the face. After several minutes, Miranda Alpha stood in the centre of the courtyard, surrounded by approximately 50 or so Federation guards, all incapacitated but still alive. She turned to leave in her car but looked back to see Rosh and Hermann observing her, the former having a wicked smile on his face while the latter just looked stunned. ‘Clean up the trash for me.’ She said as she got in her car, gunning the engine and driving away.

Chapter 7

San Francisco, California, USA – 20 July 2016

Holly and Himika, now sporting the DIVIETO logos on their clothing, were researching information on their target organisation. Holly was quiet and pensive in front of her computer, while Himika, wearing her reading glasses, was reading from a book, singing in Japanese. After a minute or so, she got to her feet and produced her cell phone, going into a room next door. Holly sighed in relief. ‘At last... thank you, God.’ She muttered to herself. In her room, Himika dialled a number on her smart phone, putting it to her ear.

‘Hello, it’s Himika. Can we make the evening edition?’ The dialogue on the other end of the line consisted of sped-up chipmunk speak. Himika smiled broadly. ‘Great – thanks a lot. I owe you one.’ She hung up and went back to the living room. ‘Holly, good news: I’ve got a lead on the ARCUS organisation.’ Himika smiled like a Cheshire cat, while Holly turned to face her friend, a look of worry and concern evident in her eyes.

‘It’s Salvatore, isn’t it?’ Himika looked a bit disappointed at Holly’s question but nodded understandingly.

‘Yes. How’d you know?’ She asked worriedly.

‘I know him – didn’t I tell you?’ Holly retorted. Himika looked pensive for a moment, then her eyes widened slightly as she remembered.

‘You’re friends with Salvatore!?’ She asked incredulously.

‘Correct, although I haven’t heard from him in five years. Now I wish I could see him face to face and give him a piece of my mind.’ Holly said through gritted teeth.

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‘I just put out a call to our editor – he said he can print our article in time for tonight if we’re lucky.’ Himika said softly as she put her hand on Holly’s shoulder, showing her documents and evidence gathered from their research together. ‘Look at these. The saviours are becoming the condemners.’ Holly looked scared, fear and denial showing across her features.

‘No... Salvatore wouldn’t do this. He’s a good soul.’ She shook her head in disbelief, her friend hugging her to soothe her.

‘I’m sorry, Holly.’ Himika said gently, the two women lost in each other’s arms. Holly regained her composure, looking at her friend.

‘So what do we do now?’ Holly asked, even though she knew what she had to do.

‘Only thing we can do... we use our position within DIVIETO to our advantage.’ Himika smiled.

‘Those people are ruining his cause.’ Holly spat with disdain. Himika looked at her friend.

‘How does some corporate espionage sound?’ She asked, a wicked smile playing across her lips. Holly nodded. The two women left the apartment, Holly grabbing her keys as she closed the door behind her, locking it. The two women walked down the corridor together.

‘If we’re going to do this, then we’ve got to do it correctly and properly. Lay low and fly straight. I don’t want to put Salvatore in any further unnecessary danger.’ Holly said assertively as she looked determined.

‘Don’t worry, he’ll be fine – if he is who you say he is, then he’ll be more than capable.’ Holly looked at Himika with a solitary slightly raised eyebrow.

‘I can’t imagine how I’d feel if he had been captured or killed because of my tip. Now... let’s go.’ Holly walked away, leaving a slightly saddened Himika.

‘I’m sorry.’ With those words, she ran after her friend.

Mount Kebnekaise, Sweden – 20 July 2016

In the control room of the underground base, Vila and Otto continued their research after a good night’s sleep, the remaining rebels cross-referencing every name they could find. Eventually, Otto’s computer flashed, the rookie cadet exclaiming in German as he whooped triumphantly. ‘Vila, have a look!’ He exclaimed. Vila did as Otto asked. ‘Rosh Goldman, a politician and media mogul from Israel and a die-hard traditionalist to boot.’ Otto let the computer run a dossier on Rosh as he and Vila looked at it intensely, the rest of the rebels crowding around.

‘What’s his connection to this?’ Vila enquired, drinking from a bottle of Pálinka.

‘He’s essentially our man, Vila. Look at his track record: Film, radio and television acquisition, military service in the Israeli Armed Forces, formerly Prime Minister of Israel and one-time member of the Israeli Revisionist Zionist Party. He’s not squeaky clean, though.’ Otto chuckled.

‘I figured as much. What’s the shit on his shoes?’ Vladimir enquired.

‘Perjury, hate crimes, sexual favours with underage partners, blackmail; the list goes on for at least 5 kilometres. Of course, these allegations have never been actually PROVEN.’ Otto said the last word with mild irritation – he knew it was not going to be easy.

‘They couldn’t do anything even if there were proof – his pockets are virtually bottomless.’ Tobias clarified.

‘Correct – and here’s an interesting one: He was the last President of the Sol Federation.’ Salvatore spoke up, his voice a low, raspy growl, the tone slightly louder than normal.

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‘What did you say about the Federation?’ He asked; a crazy glint in his eyes.

‘Last President – ran it from the genesis of the Worldwide Economic Crisis up until its dissolution – that was 5 years ago.’ Otto elaborated, not noticing Salvatore’s sudden change of persona.

‘I know, I was there... so this guy’s pissed about losing his power. He fears change because he, like a lot of authoritarian bastards, favour the old ways. Sparing the rod... spare this, you cunt. I. Will. Kill you.’ Salvatore’s voice lowered with each sentence as he reached into his pocket, lighting a cigarette.

‘Sal, you’re getting out of order again – focus.’ Vila said softly, taking the cigarette out of Salvatore’s hand, who knew better than to question his friend’s judgement.

‘I AM focused, Vila. This guy’s ruined so many bloody lives it’s unbelievable.’ He replied softly.

‘Look at his contacts, man. We’ve taken care of Grigori, so he shouldn’t be much of a problem right now. Who’s the next suspect on the list?’ Vila asked, the gentle giant forming a plan in his head.

‘Miletto Fresson – a French warlord. He has a habit of using young teenagers as his bodyguards and soldiers. He’s based in the village of Chamonix, near Mont Blanc on the French-Italian border, so I suggest winter AND night gear.’ Otto spoke up.

‘Which reminds me: Why didn’t you kill the aggressive parents on the Norwegian border?’ Vladimir questioned Salvatore, the Russian sportsman growing disillusioned with the Italian graduate’s leadership by the minute.

‘I didn’t want their kid to grow up as an orphan.’ Salvatore said softly.

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‘You’ve got some weird standards.’ Vladimir joked.

‘Let’s just do this, and then we’ll talk.’ Salvatore retorted as he left, adjusting his boonie hat, the computer monitor blipping off.

Mont Blanc Massif, Chamonix, Haute-Savoie, French Alps – 20 July 2016

Salvatore, Vila and Otto armed their weapons, dressed in arctic camouflage. The three ARCUS operatives prepared to make their move. Vladimir’s voice was heard over the radio.

‘You three – be careful out there. We don’t want a repeat of what happened last time.’

‘Don’t worry. I’m in complete control this time – out.’ Salvatore grunted as he ended the transmission, he and his two subordinates trudging through the mountains with their weapons ready. The area was virtually vacant, except for a few skiers and dogs in the distance as the Moon shone in the Sky. The three rebels entered the village, Vila scanning his whereabouts while Salvatore provided cover fire, Otto trying to keep warm. ‘Vila! I want a position and bearing. I want to be on the move in three minutes, maximum.’ Salvatore commanded.

‘I’m on it.’ Vila replied.

‘Otto, you’re on point. Be careful for potential hazards.’ Salvatore barked at Otto.

‘You got it.’ Otto spoke up. The three men trudded further into the village, remaining quiet and undetected. Salvatore fired a silenced shot at a few guards patrolling the area, incapacitating rather than killing them. Eventually, the three men reached a base-like camp, patrolled by adolescent skiers with guns.

‘Otto, on my signal – ready, man?’ Vila asked. Otto simply nodded. ‘Otto, I need a verbal response.’ Otto grunted, the German cadet sounding rather irritated.

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‘All right, yes, I’m ready, God damn it.’ He snapped at his Hungarian friend, who looked sympathetic but chose to say nothing. ‘3... 2... 1... 0!’ He commanded. Vila took the shot, as did Otto. The two men fired their respective weapons at the guards, injuring but not killing them as the three rebels approached a guarded house. Salvatore looked through his ENVG goggles, eventually identifying a middle-aged man in a business suit – Miletto Fresson.

‘There’s Miletto. We capture him and interrogate him... and if he lays a finger on those kids, then I lay a full hand on him. Ready?’ He asked. Vila and Otto replied in the affirmative in unison. ‘Good – Vila, plant the door.’ Vila planted some explosive on the door while Salvatore and Otto stepped back. ‘Breach it!’ Salvatore called. Vila set off the explosives as the door burst open, the three ARCUS operatives charging into the house, the smoke and flashes of gunfire obscuring their vision. When the smoke cleared and dust settled, Otto closed the door and locked it, Vila punching Miletto awake. Salvatore stepped in front of him, slapping him. ‘Wake up, Alpine Vampire!’ Miletto awakened to see the three ARCUS rebels before him. His eyes widened slightly as he realised what was in store for him. ‘You know who we are, and you know what we want.’ Miletto blinked a few times before speaking up.

‘I’m sorry, I don’t think I understand.’ Salvatore approached Miletto, cursing at him in French before speaking English.

‘Rosh Goldman, DIVIETO – you’re one of his insiders, aren’t you?’ He asked.

‘How do you know?’ Miletto hit back. Salvatore grabbed Miletto and held his knife at his throat.

‘We’ve been set up, that’s how! I got set up and now my men and I are wanted terrorists! We know Rosh is behind it because HE was in charge of the Federation when I took it down!’

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Salvatore roared; the blade of his knife cutting into Miletto's skin slightly as he realised what he was doing, lowering the knife slowly with an apologetic look on his face. Miletto coughed, getting his breath back.

'OK... OK, I'll help you. First, you must get me out of here.' The French warlord calmed himself down. Salvatore looked at Vila and Otto, the three rebels conferring wordlessly. He turned to face Miletto again.

'OK, Miletto. We'll get you out of here and you'll give us what you've got.' Salvatore helped up Miletto. 'How do we get out of here?' He asked calmly.

'There are some snowmobiles parked nearby – we can use them to get to the base of the mountain.' Miletto replied; the middle-aged arms dealer and the young renegade looking at each other.

'OK, we'll evacuate from there.' Salvatore decided as he drew his radio. 'Vladimir, Tobias, get us out of here! Change of plan. Our man's going to help us. Meet us at the base of the mountain – out.' He turned to Miletto once more. 'Come on, let's get out of here.' He motioned for his men to follow him, Vila peering through a window.

'We're going to have to move fast, Sal – DIVIETO knows we're here.' Vila spoke up as Salvatore approached the window. Vila indicated some fast approaching figures, Salvatore looking through his binoculars. Vojislav and his neutral operatives were approaching the house carefully, the sunglasses-wearing cyborg ninja getting into position with his men.

'Is there a back door out of here?' Salvatore asked Miletto with a hint of anxiety.

'It is, but it's locked. Besides, it's shorter if we take the main way out.' Salvatore mulled it over, reluctant to get involved in a vicious gunfight. Suddenly, he grabbed Miletto and held him at gunpoint.

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‘Sal, what are you doing?’ Vila asked incredulously, his eyes widening slightly as he pointed his weapon at his friend.

‘It’s called leverage, Vila. They won’t hurt one of their own if we have them in custody.’ Understanding, Vila opened the door as Otto cursed in German. Vojislav and his men stood outside the mountain house as Salvatore exited with Miletto, Vila and Otto on either side of him. Salvatore pressed his side arm into Miletto’s neck. ‘Back off! One false move and the Alpine Vampire here will get his brains splattered all over the snow.’ Vojislav approached Salvatore calmly.

‘Salvatore, it’s me, Vojislav.’ The voice rings a bell in Salvatore’s memory.

‘Vojislav...? The same bastard who killed me five years ago!?’ He pointed his weapon at the cyborg, who tried to pacify the renegade leader.

‘Salvatore, listen to me – put the gun down, come on.’ Vojislav said calmly.

‘Why are you here!?’ Salvatore asked, now scared.

‘Salvatore, I know you’re innocent. I have information you need.’ Before Salvatore and Vojislav could continue their talk, Vila called to the ARCUS Commander.

‘Sal, DIVIETO operatives!’ He opened fire on some approaching troops, prompting the two factions to ally with each other. Salvatore grabbed Miletto and dragged him to a snowmobile quickly, almost frog-marching him.

‘Vila, Otto, come on! Get a snowmobile and scarper!’ Salvatore called to his friends while starting his own snowmobile. ‘Hold on!’ Miletto did as he was told as Salvatore drove the snowmobile away from the mountain house, narrowly avoiding some DIVIETO troops, who

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jumped out of his way. As he gunned the engine and sped away, Vila and Otto got on a snowmobile together and followed suit, leaving Vojislav and his men to pursue them.

‘Wait! Come back!’ Vojislav called. Salvatore, unable to attack with his assault rifle, drew his side arm and opened fire on DIVIETO troops. Salvatore fired his side arm with almost unerring accuracy, operating his weapon with one hand while driving the snowmobile with the other.

‘Targets ahead! Engage! Engage!’ The Italian denizen yelled. He continued to drive his snowmobile down the mountain as Vila and Otto sped by him.

‘I hope I know what you’re doing!’ Vila called.

‘Just hang on!’ Salvatore reassured his friend as he yelled into his radio. ‘Tobias – EXTRACTION. NOW!!’ He yelled, beginning to lose his edge. Tobias’s voice was heard over the radio as Salvatore lowered his hand to reload his weapon.

‘We’re on our way! Hang on in there, my friends.’ Tobias said in his usual cheery voice.

‘We won’t have much to hang on to if you don’t arrive ASAP! Out.’ Salvatore retorted. Ending the transmission, Salvatore switched back to gunning down his adversaries with well-timed (and well-aimed) one-shot kills. Eventually, the three freedom fighters reached the base of the mountain... a metallic CLUNK! Noise was heard as a bullet hit Salvatore’s snowmobile. ‘Oh, God... oh, Jesus!’

‘What?’ Miletto asked. Salvatore holstered his side arm as he realised the gravity of his current situation.

‘The brakes are gone! Shit!’ He tried to steer the snowmobile to the best of his abilities. ‘OK, I’ve got an idea. Hold on to me!’ Miletto did so as Salvatore tried to keep the snowmobile

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steady, Vila and Otto accelerating away before him. ‘OK... 3, 2, 1... 0!’ He jumped off the doomed snowmobile with the DIVIETO official clinging onto his form, the alpine transport vehicle colliding with a tree, effectively ending its useful life. Vila and Otto stopped to take a look. Salvatore brushed off some of the snow from his combat uniform and got to his feet. ‘I’m fine, Vila! Just get to the extraction point! Hurry!’ Helping up Miletto, the ARCUS Commander and the DIVIETO official trudged across the snow, reaching a clearing at the base of the mountain as the Sun began to rise.

Salvatore and Miletto reached the designated extraction point at the centre of the clearing. Tobias’s helicopter landed, its ramp-like door lowering, opening to allow the operatives access. ‘Hurry! Get aboard!’ He called. Salvatore helped Vila and Otto get aboard along with Miletto. Just as he stepped aboard the vehicle, he was grabbed and pulled back off, thrown to the snow with a muffled thud. Salvatore got to his feet quickly to face Vojislav.

‘Salvatore, don’t attack!’ The Slavic cyborg pleaded.

‘Where are your men?’ Salvatore asked.

‘They didn’t make it. I’m the last one.’ Salvatore looked at Vojislav briefly before taking a few deep breaths to relax. He nodded in acknowledgement.

‘OK, Vojislav... what is it?’ He asked. Vojislav handed Salvatore a flash drive. The two men looked at each other briefly before Salvatore finally persuaded himself to trust Vojislav. ‘If you want to help me... then get aboard.’ Vojislav nodded and complied with Salvatore’s request. The two men got aboard. Salvatore turned to Tobias. ‘Tobias, full speed ahead!’ Tobias did as he was told as the helicopter flew away, leaving the French Alps.

Chapter 8

Melbourne, Victoria, Australia – 20 July 2016

Frank and Jenna were present, the former on his cell phone while the latter was in front of her computer. ‘Salvatore has a real habit of driving everyone nuts, Jenna, you know?’ Frank said sardonically – he looked, sounded and acted like a Japanese police officer.

‘I know, but he means well. It’s for a good cause, right?’ Jenna just smiled at Frank sympathetically.

‘I hardly call killing people to promote your own ideals a good cause.’ Frank retorted. A nameless researcher entered the room, handing Jenna a telegram before leaving. Jenna read it silently, her eyes widening slightly as disbelief deprived her of the power of speech.

‘Frank, come and look at this!’ Frank did so, reading it scrupulously, determined to catch Salvatore, like Captain Ahab and his vain attempt to apprehend the white whale that crippled him.

‘The bastard...! He’s struck twice! He tortured a politician in Slovakia and kidnapped an arms dealer in France! He’s gone too far! Too! Fucking! Far!’ Frank yelled, his normally dark auburn hair beginning to turn grey from the stress. Frank drew his cell phone and put it to his ear. ‘Hello, Interpol? Detective Inspector Frank Morris here, representing Canada – I’m currently in Australia with Captain Jenna Lane... the Salvatore Pasquale case... yes...’ Frank suddenly looked angry and irritated as he cursed in French for a moment. ‘I don’t care if it’s against orders! I’m going to find Salvatore because he clearly has lost his mind! OK, I sympathised with him in the beginning, but now he’s going too far with his crusade! I’m going to come down there to Interpol HQ and give them a piece of my mind! Call a meeting!’

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Out.’ He hung up furiously, his face turning red as the veins began to pop up on his forehead.

Jenna noticed this and she approached her friend.

‘Frank, calm down.’ She said soothingly.

‘Fuck calm! Salvatore’s out there with his murderous obsession of a crusade and it’s my task to bring him in! Five years of peace and quiet and now this!?’ Frank gritted his teeth, blood beginning to seep out of his nostrils.

‘Frank, I know you’re upset about the case, but getting angry isn’t going to help! If you want to go to Interpol and present your case with a meeting, then you need to calm down.’ Jenna said calmly. Frank calmed down a bit, his face going back to normal as he realised the reality of the situation, flashing back to his previous encounter with Salvatore five years earlier.

I was a mere Officer back then – nothing special. I thought Salvatore was just a local peanut back then, nobody worth scouring the Earth over. Dear God... was I wrong. Now he’s a fucking terrorist and a mass-murderer, all because he thinks his ideas are better than everyone else’s and he wants to change the World. Frank’s mind narrated mockingly. He shook his head and regained his composure as he saw Jenna looking at him worriedly.

‘Frank? Are you all right?’ Frank turned to face Jenna, nodding wordlessly.

‘I’m fine... I think I am, anyway.’ Looking calm and steely-eyed, Frank exited the office with Jenna in tow.

Interpol HQ, Lyon, Rhône-Alpes, France – 21 July 2016

Frank and Jenna approached the Interpol HQ Building – a pair of French cops saluted Frank, who returned the gesture. Entering the auditorium, Frank and Jenna stood before their superiors, accompanied by all the major representatives of the United Nations. ‘I come before you all to protest a grave injustice: The World-renowned denizen Salvatore Pasquale, as you

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know, has returned after half a decade in hiding. He and his organisation, ARCUS, are causing severe damage in the name of freedom, independence and democracy. He must be brought to justice.’ The Interpol President looked at Frank sympathetically before conferring with a group of Senator-like figures. Frank and Jenna looked at each other worriedly, the former removing his fedora hat. The Interpol President turned to face Frank.

‘Detective Inspector, we have considered your situation and we regret to inform you that the Salvatore case cannot continue...’ Frank’s eyes widened slightly.

‘Can’t continue!? What the hell?! Have you heard the news?’ The Interpol President remained calm and continued speaking.

‘...I understand your concern, but please allow me to complete the picture. The investigation cannot continue due to his controversial conduct. Interpol must remain politically neutral at all times.’ Frank looked angry. He grunted quietly then put on his fedora hat, leaving. Jenna looked around her, unable to speak – for the first time; the competent police officer was silenced by the nature of her organisation. She ran after Frank. Outside the Interpol HQ Building, Frank was walking in a slouched position with his hands in his jacket pockets, his face partially covered by his fedora hat. Jenna ran up to him.

‘Frank, wait!’ Jenna called. Frank stopped moving but did not turn to face Jenna.

‘What?’ His voice was a low growl.

‘We’ll go rogue, just like last time. Find Salvatore on our own terms.’ Frank still did not turn to face Jenna.

‘He’s not a civilian anymore, Jenna.’ He finally turned to lock eyes with her, his angular, rugged face contrasting with her pretty and youthful one.

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‘He’s not a terrorist and you know it.’ Jenna said calmly as Frank turned away.

‘I don’t have to listen to this!’ He yelled.

‘I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to interrupt your quest! Captain Ahab has to go hunt his whale!’

Frank turned to face Jenna again as he winced at the comparison. ‘I don’t understand you. What has Salvatore done to YOU, Frank? I can understand Holly and Vladimir and his family, but what’s he done to you PERSONALLY?’ Jenna asked pleadingly. Frank removed his fedora hat, revealing his slightly receding hairline.

‘Five years ago, Salvatore made me rethink my career as a police officer. He showed me that rules don’t necessarily mean anything unless they’re bound by some kind of logic and sense of consistency to them. The Federation was a mistake, Jenna... but like a fool, I kept working blindly, until he came along. It was only after a lot of soul-searching that I took the training and promotion.’ He paused for a moment. ‘I still remember that stunt you pulled with Holly on Salvatore’s comrades, so you’re not exactly squeaky clean either.’ Jenna approached Frank calmly.

‘It’s quite simple. Salvatore subverted and hurt your pride, and now you want to hurt him back.’ Jenna said as Frank looked at her with a cold, steely gaze.

‘Revenge is for petty-minded sadists, Jenna. I have a more evolved sensibility.’ He said simply.

‘Bullshit! I saw the look on your face when they dismissed you from the case. You were ready to explode.’ Jenna snapped as Frank glared at her, towering over her as he straightened his back.

‘How dare you...!’ Jenna looked back, showing no fear.

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‘Come on, Frank! You’re not the first man I’ve seen to get his pride wounded by someone who’s just that little extra bit more rational and logical! Salvatore hates authoritarian people and you know it.’ Frank roared at Jenna, his anger peaking.

‘TAKE THAT BACK!!’ He roared fiercely like a lion, a vein on his face beginning to pulse.

‘Or what!? You’ll shoot me?! You don’t have the guts, Frank! You’re still the same cop I met five years ago! You just got a shave and a new suit and a fancier title! In the end... you’re still human.’ Jenna said simply, having learned a few lessons of tact from Salvatore. Frank turned his head away, mollified by Jenna’s words. He wiped away a tear from his face before calming down. Putting on his fedora hat again, he turned back to face his one true friend.

‘You’re right... I’m sorry, Jenna.’ He coughed, sobbing for a few seconds before calming down, realising just how close he was to descending to his adversary’s level. ‘If this is how Interpol treat Salvatore’s case, then they can have my resignation... but I can’t do that, not yet.’ He looked at her confidently. ‘Fuck it – let’s do this job ourselves.’ Jenna smiled at him. ‘It might cost us our careers, but it’s a risk I’m prepared to take. Come on.’ He motioned for Jenna to follow him, and the two police officers headed for their car, driving away from Interpol HQ.

Chapter 9

Mont Blanc Massif, Chamonix, Haute-Savoie, French Alps – 21 July 2016

It was nearing Sunset. A female figure walked across the remains of the once-defended camp, scanning for clues – it was Miranda Alpha. Observing her surroundings, the young clone found an injured member of Vojislav’s renegade faction. She approached him and grabbed him by the front of the collar, putting on her best sultry dominatrix-like voice. ‘Where is he?’ She asked. The injured operative mumbled weakly in a Slavic language, Miranda Alpha tightening her grip on the dying man’s clothing. ‘Salvatore. Where. Is. He?’ She asked more aggressively. The man whispered something in the clone’s ear. With those final words, he let out a groan and then sighed as he expired. Miranda Alpha shed a few tears silently for him before getting to her feet, striding away from what was left of the formerly fortified residence. She took the sole remaining functional snowmobile and left the area, heading into town, parking outside a hotel. Miranda Alpha entered the hotel lobby, scanning her surroundings briefly before approaching the reception desk. ‘Hi. I’d like a room for one night only, please.’ She said sweetly to the receptionist, who gave the young clone a key once she had paid for it. Thanking the receptionist, Miranda Alpha spotted a few men looking at her, staring at her frame as they mentally undressed her. ‘Keep looking at me like that and this will happen to you.’ Drawing her knife, the young clone threw it into a nearby wall, hitting its mark perfectly as it landed squarely into the woodwork, a few centimetres away from one of the men, who looked away uncomfortably. Approaching the wall, she removed her knife and left quietly. Entering her hotel room, Miranda Alpha simply lied back on her bed and tried to relax. Eventually, she undressed and closed her eyes, falling asleep.

Mont Blanc Massif, Chamonix, Haute-Savoie, French Alps – 22 July 2016

Miranda Alpha awoke and got dressed the following day, the young clone's smart phone ringing as she exited the shower. Picking it up, she put it to her ear. 'Hello?' She spoke curiously. A slow, slightly distorted voice was heard on the other end of the line.

'Miranda Alpha...?' Miranda Alpha was taken aback by the directness of the speaker but chose to remain polite.

'It depends on who I'm speaking to.' The voice continued as Miranda Alpha sighed.

'We have a fix on your target – Salvatore. He's in the Scandinavian Mountains, in Sweden.'

Miranda Alpha fixes her hair as she gets to her feet, a slightly amused smirk playing across her face.

'Thank you.' She said before hanging up and getting dressed. 'Time for you to justify your existence, Salvatore.' She drew her handgun and aimed it into thin air before twirling it around her fingers like a gunslinger and holstering it impeccably.

Mount Kebnekaise, Sweden – 22 July 2016

Salvatore was with Miletto, the two men looking over a computer. ‘OK, Miletto. What’s DIVIETO all about?’ Salvatore asked calmly as he sat down, watching Miletto’s reaction to his question.

‘DIVIETO represents authoritarianism on a political AND cultural level – the old rod-sparing ways that only few nations and cultures encourage.’ Miletto replied in his thick Parisian accent. Salvatore shrugged and adjusted himself comfortably before he continued speaking, a smoking cigarette in his hand.

‘A 5th Column... I figured as much. You were educated in Marseilles and Paris, no? Those places are the Epicentres of a traditionally authoritarian country.’ Salvatore put out his cigarette on his boot as Miletto shot him an irritated look, the short French arms dealer no match for the tall Italian rebel leader before him.

‘Mr Pasquale, you requested my help. However, I do not appreciate you making such staunch assumptions... but, in this case, you are right.’ Salvatore simply nodded apologetically.

‘I know I’m right.’ He said softly and sighed – it had not been easy for him to recover from losing Miranda, and he was committed to doing what he thought she would have wanted, which was to continue the fight. ‘We apprehended and tortured Grigori Markóvic in Slovakia a few days ago. Who is he really?’ He continued before removing his spectacles and wiping them clean before replacing them.

‘He’s a Slovak politician and a high-ranking DIVIETO official.’ Miletto spoke, his tone of voice honest and calm. He knew Salvatore would do the right thing at the right time – he had seen such people before.

‘What are his ties to DIVIETO?’ Salvatore asked, persisting.

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‘He’s like a Cabinet Minister – he’s close to the DIVIETO Leader.’ Miletto spoke knowledgeably.

‘Where can we find this leader? Grigori gave me a name: Rosh Goldman.’ Salvatore asked, hoping Miletto would have the answer to the \$1 Million Question.

‘His location is unknown – not even I know that.’ Miletto spoke in a rather ambiguous tone of voice. Salvatore sighed as his face fell – he could not tell if Miletto was lying or not, but he did not want to jump to conclusions just yet.

‘Miletto, I need your help – every bit of it. Everything I’ve spent the past five years fighting for will be undone if this joke of a man is allowed to run things his way. I know he was the last President of the Sol Federation, but he’s not untouchable! I. Will. Kill him.’ With those words, Salvatore got to his feet and left.

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San Francisco, California, USA – 22 July 2016

The Sun was setting over the Horizon – two figures, one white with blonde hair, the other Asian with black hair – Holly and Himika – silently approached a ventilation shaft, slipping inside stealthily, both girls wearing night gear. Crawling inside a ventilation shaft, they broke into Rosh's office and started looking through files and documents on the corrupt media mogul's computer. Holly made sure the door was locked and the lights off while Himika scanned the computer, plugging in a flash drive. 'Himika, are you sure about this? If Rosh finds us, then it's going to be Hell on Earth for us.' Holly asked with a tinge of concern in her voice.

'Don't worry, Holly. I used to do this all the time back in Kyoto.' Himika chuckled – she truly was a free-spirited woman despite her submissive culture. Holly raised an eyebrow at Himika briefly before looking through a folder of documents, taking photographs with her smart phone. Himika, on the other hand, hacked into the computer's network for evidence. The two women worked for what felt like an eternity. Eventually, Himika's eyes widened in shock and surprise. 'Come and have a look at this, Holly.' She said gently. Holly put away a folder she was looking through and walked up to Himika. 'You won't believe this. Have a look.' A series of files with the Sol Federation logo appeared on the screen, along with a video. The keyboard was tapped and mouse clicked as Himika accessed the files. 'Look at this record – politics, media acquisition, underage favours, corruption of all sorts... and former President of the Sol Federation.'

'You're fucking joking?!' Holly sounds stunned at this statement, the tone in her voice one of restrained disbelief.

'No, I'm serious – look!' Himika insisted. Several documents appeared on the screen. Thinking quickly, Himika copied and pastes the documents, in addition to the incriminating

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video, to her flash drive and logged off. ‘Let’s get out of here. We’ve seen and heard enough.’ She turned off the computer.

‘You don’t say.’ Holly agreed as the two women quickly and quietly fled the building before they could be noticed, leaving on foot to arouse minimal suspicion. Reaching their apartment, they hid the evidence carefully before looking at each other with apprehensive looks.

They really had crossed the line now.

Mount Kebnekaise, Sweden – 23 July 2016

Salvatore was with Vila and Otto, preparing to move out. The helicopter was ready to fly as the Moon shone in the Sky. ‘If these people think we’re terrorists, then God only knows who’s going to help us because we can’t rely on the public in the same way anymore.’

Salvatore spoke as he loaded some useful crates onto the helicopter, adjusting his boonie hat.

‘But we’re not terrorists, Salvatore – and you know it.’ Otto replied, trying to pacify the tension to the best of his limited abilities.

‘That’s my point exactly, Otto. We’re showing people where they’re going wrong. The prime culprits are people in power – politicians, teachers, parents – people who believe in “toughening up their charges”... authoritarian countries with a consistent cultural history of such behaviour, it’s ingrained into their fucking DNA. Talk about gratitude!’ Salvatore spat as he kicked a crate and drove his fist into a window of the helicopter, the glass reverberating with a vibrating wobble.

‘Sal, we must destroy the base. It’ll buy us some time...’ Vila spoke. He knew what had to be done, being the most rational of the three operatives.

‘No!’ Salvatore turned to face Vila, his mind reeking with denial and horror at the thought of having to do such a thing. Otto looked at Vila briefly, saying nothing. Vila remained calm

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and approaches Salvatore, the 2-metre-plus gentle giant and the ARCUS Commander looking at each other tersely.

‘I must object to this course of action, Salvatore. You’re making things worse!’ Vila tried to reason with Salvatore, although he had an idea that it might not be easy.

‘Your objection is noted, Vila! These people will pay. All these years, we’ve been aiming for the limbs and extremities with small strikes and mostly talk. We need to walk now and hit these bastards in the jugular.’ Salvatore spoke, his tone of voice an acid wave of nuclear waste, forcing Vila and Otto to bathe in its flesh-stripping agony.

‘With all due respect, Salvatore... I believe you’re allowing your personal experiences with such people to influence your judgement.’ Vila replied, remaining calm as he gritted his teeth slightly.

‘Vila’s right, Sal. We destroy the base, we move to another obscure location. Come on.’ Otto spoke softly – he was the most emotional of the bunch and he did his best to mediate between Salvatore and Vila whenever he could, even though he knew he could not do much due to his limited field experience. Salvatore looked at Otto briefly before shifting his attention back to Vila.

‘I didn’t want to tell you this earlier because I know how much this means to you.’ Vila said sympathetically. Faced with a difficult decision, Salvatore sighed audibly and nodded.

‘OK, let’s do it.’ He said. Vila and Otto slung their weapons over the shoulders, Salvatore entering the base followed by his subordinates. In the control room, Salvatore, Vila and Otto stood in front of a computer, preparing to activate the self-destruct sequence. ‘Computer, this is ARCUS Commander Salvatore Pasquale, requesting access.’ The computer’s voice was a masculine baritone, a borderline bass.

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IDENTITY ACKNOWLEDGED – ACCESS GRANTED.

‘Computer, initiate self-destruct sequence – authorisation: Pasquale 46-Sierra-Papa.’

Salvatore spoke authoritatively and confidently – the same confidence which had earned him his supporters and fans around the World.

CONFIRMED. AWAITING TWO MORE CODES FOR ACTIVATION.

Salvatore turned to Vila and nodded, giving him his cue to act. ‘Computer, this is Officer Vila Volfango – authorisation: Volfango 23-Victor-Victor.’

CONFIRMED. AWAITING ONE MORE CODE FOR ACTIVATION.

Vila then indicated Otto, the Germanic renegade understanding solemnly. ‘Computer, this is Cadet Otto Handke – authorisation: Handke 69-Oscar-Hotel.’

CONFIRMED. DESTRUCT SEQUENCE COMPLETED AND ENGAGED. PLEASE SPECIFY TIME LIMIT AND FURTHER OPTIONS.

Salvatore took a deep breath before issuing his final command, knowing that there was no turning back. ‘This is Commander Salvatore Pasquale. Destruct sequence: Type 01. One hour – silent countdown.’ The two cadets looked at their leader, who tried to remain calm and composed, ultimately speaking the venomous words that would seal the fate of their hideout. ‘Enable.’ The computer beeped, and a countdown timer appeared on the computer monitor.

SELF-DESTRUCT SEQUENCE IS ACTIVATED. THERE WILL BE NO FURTHER AUDIO WARNINGS.

Vila and Otto left, the former patting Salvatore on the back as a gesture of friendship and as if to compliment him. Salvatore took one long, last, wistful look at his base of operations as he removed his boonie hat. ‘First the United States... now Sweden. Farewell.’ With those words, he put on his boonie hat and turned to leave, walking out of the control room as the

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door closed behind him with a deafening echo. As the Moon shone over the Horizon, Vila and Otto finally exited the base, running as fast as their legs would carry them. Vila and Otto board the helicopter as Salvatore looked back fondly, snapping a military salute at the base before turning to join his loyal friends. As he boarded the helicopter, however, he was grabbed and pulled back onto high ground, his head hitting the pavement. Salvatore looked up to see Miranda Alpha holding him at gunpoint.

‘Salvatore Pasquale, the man who betrayed my mother.’ Salvatore looked at the clone in disbelief, his voice taking on a more disbelieving tone.

‘Miranda...?’ He asked incredulously. Miranda Alpha shook her head as he propped him up with a wicked smile.

‘Not quite. I’m her clone... her daughter. You can call me Miranda Alpha.’ She then turned to the helicopter, firing off a shot into the vehicle. Tobias crouched in panic as Vila and Otto aimed their weapons at the clone. ‘Drop your guns... all of you.’ The young clone commanded. Vila and Otto aimed their rifles at Miranda Alpha, who held Salvatore at gunpoint. He looked at his men.

‘Do it... she means it.’ He said calmly. Vila dropped his rifle without question. Otto, on the other hand, struggled to come to a decision, his hand shaking.

‘For God’s sake, Otto, drop the gun.’ Vila said, trying to keep calm as he felt his voice increase by an octave.

‘If I drop it, then we all die and you know it.’ Otto spat, his voice a low growl.

‘We all die if you stay here – now drop the weapon!’ Miranda Alpha barked as she cocked her handgun and pressed it into Salvatore’s temple. Otto, out of pure concern and fear for his friend and mentor, dropped his rifle, letting it fall to the floor with a dull CLUNK! ‘I’ve been

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looking forward to meeting you, Salvatore.’ Miranda Alpha sneered. Salvatore raised his hands, remaining calm as his face was obscured by his boonie hat, the young clone keeping her gun pointed at the denizen’s head.

‘You must be quite astute if you found my base of operations.’ He finally spoke.

‘Actually, I had some help from a tip.’ She smirked at him.

‘Who?’ Salvatore asked, hearing a familiar voice – a high-pitched rasp – from behind him.

‘I think you know who, Salvatore.’ Salvatore turned around, his face morphing to extreme shock and disbelief as he saw Vladimir – of all people! – holding him at gunpoint.

‘Vladimir...!’ He half-whispered in denial as he was shocked to his very soul, unable to accept his friend’s betrayal.

‘Sorry, old friend, but I did try to tell you that you’re too much of an idealist – it’s a shame you wouldn’t pay attention.’ Vladimir replied in his raspy voice.

‘I thought we were friends.’ Salvatore spoke, his voice breaking slightly as he felt the pain of the betrayal begin to consume him.

‘Oh, but we are... we’re just on opposing sides of the field.’ Vladimir retorted. Salvatore’s face twitched as he tried to think of a witty retort.

‘You never did believe in the cause, did you? You’re just a pro-authoritarian rod-sparer.’ Vladimir smirked at this comment.

‘It’s the way of all things.’ Vladimir then pistol-whipped his friend, knocking him out cold. He then turned to Miranda Alpha, who shot Vila in the kneecap and Otto in the forearm. Tobias got to his feet to tend to the two injured operatives. Vojislav’s voice came from Salvatore’s radio.

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‘Salvatore, this is Vojislav! There’s an insider in your organisation! Do not trust Vladimir! I say again: DO NOT trust Vladimir! He’s working for Rosh! I didn’t want to tell you this earlier because I had to be sure! I repeat one more time: DO NOT trust Vladimir!’ Miranda Alpha stood before Tobias, looking at the friendly pilot coldly before she delivered a Martial Arts blow to him, hurting him quite badly. Salvatore tried to force his body to get up, but the pain was too great... and the World turned black as he lost consciousness, just barely catching the end of Vojislav’s ill-timed warning.

Chapter 10

London, England, UK – 7 October 2013

Vojislav and his Merry Band of Pissed-Off Rebels were on a covert operation that night, infiltrating the City of London as the Moon shone in the Sky, the Horizon black like a vampire's cape. The cyborg leader slipped into the Houses of Parliament silently as he listened in on a meeting between Rosh and other DIVIETO members, descendants of the Bavarian Illuminati. *More like hack imitators and rip-offs to me.* Vojislav thought as he listened in carefully.

'The ARCUS organisation is expanding. We need a mole who can lead us into the Lion's Den.' A DIVIETO member explained to Rosh, who turned around, showing the speaker the mole in question: Vladimir. Vojislav's eyes widened slightly as his mind screamed.

What the...? Isn't that Salvatore's friend!? The thought of his ally's friend being an insider on the Opposition made his guts lurch, but he knew he could not tell Salvatore about it – despite his turbulent relationship with his successor, he still respected him, and knew that revealing this information would destroy the fabric of the work that he had fought so hard to put together. Instead, Vojislav simply took the photographs he needed and left quietly, missing out on the conversation between Rosh and Vladimir.

'Vladimir Ivan Redski... what brings you here?' Rosh asked calmly as he eyed up Vladimir, the Russian sportsman in his civilian attire.

'You're familiar with the name Salvatore Pasquale?' Vladimir asked, not even thinking twice about selling out his friend. He had tired of Salvatore's increasingly violent tactics toward authoritarian ideologies and was beginning to consider him a hypocrite. Rosh thought for a moment as the memory came flooding back to him from two years earlier – his ignoble defeat

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at the hands of the ARCUS Commander had left him embittered and had only galvanised his authoritarian mentality, his pride too wounded to accept defeat as the Sol Federation was dissolved. Looking at Vladimir, he nodded understandingly.

‘Yes, I think I can help you.’ He said calmly. Vladimir simply smiled.

‘I believe you worked with my father, Mr Goldman? He told me that the two of you co-founded DIVIETO together during the pinnacle of the Cold War, back in 1973... a good 40 years ago?’ Rosh chuckled.

‘Oh, no – it’s much older than you think, Mr Redski.’ Rosh replied cryptically as Vladimir raised a solitary eyebrow before chuckling humourlessly. Vojislav, in the meantime, exited the Houses of Parliament, rendezvousing with his rogue freedom fighters near the London Eye, the cyborg revenant just looking at his men, nodding wordlessly.

‘It is true.’ He said simply. ‘We can’t help ARCUS directly – we can only influence their actions.’ As he spoke, he looked at the illuminated London Eye, sighing sadly as he remembered that fateful day in Belgium, when Salvatore effectively succeeded him as the ARCUS Commander. *Still, it’s not all bad, being neutral.* Vojislav thought as he and his men disappeared towards the nearest airport to continue their covert actions, unknown to all but the most highly privileged of individuals.

Üetliberg Mountain, Albis Plateau, Switzerland – 24 July 2016

Salvatore woke up several hours later in a prison cell – a rather Spartan-looking one, most likely a Federation holdover. He got to his feet, his goatee beard slightly longer. Grunting in pain, he put his hand to his head, wincing at the memory of Vladimir’s pistol striking his head. ‘The bastard...!’ He snarled; his voice a low growl as his face curled into a sneer. He

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shook his head in disbelief. Vila and Otto were beside him, the former with a bandage on his kneecap while the latter was wearing one on his forearm.

‘What is wrong with these people, man? Not content enough with capturing us, they want to undo ALL the work we’ve done just because they’ve got tiny cocks!’ Otto spoke in a fit of delirium. Vila turned to Otto sympathetically, the gentle giant never losing his composure.

‘They’re idiots – that, or they’re a bunch of cowards. Typical excuses for authoritarian personalities. The media exaggerating doesn’t help, either.’ Vila said calmly, simply raising an eyebrow as he sighed patiently. He got to his feet, helping up Otto as well.

‘So it’s just us, then? Vladimir’s stitched us up?’ Otto enquired, beginning to get pissed off.

‘I’m afraid so. I should have suspected he was up to something... but I didn’t want to believe it.’ Salvatore screwed up his face in distaste, his voice taking on a more wounded tone as he was unable to recover from the shock of his close friend’s betrayal. Vila looked at him calmly but seriously.

‘What now?’ Vila asked. Salvatore looked back at Vila, the two men sharing a look of mutual understanding.

‘We bust out of here, that’s what now. Track them, find them... and kill them all.’ As Salvatore finished speaking, the door to his cell was opened. A tall guard approached them.

‘Salvatore Pasquale?’ The guard asked. Salvatore got to his feet and replied in the affirmative. The denizen looked at the guard coldly at the mention of his name, his heart burning with a desire for vengeance and justice. The guard opened the door and helped him out. ‘Come. It’s show time.’ Salvatore’s heart chilled at the mention of those two words as he and Vila locked eyes with each other briefly before he was led away, the guard closing and locking the door to the cell.

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‘We have to get out of here.’ Vila remained calm as ever – he knew he could not help Salvatore at the moment, so he shifted his focus to himself and Otto.

‘Yes, but how? We can’t just bust out of here. They nicked all our gear, Vila.’ Otto replied, coughing slightly – he had not had a cigarette for some time and was beginning to feel withdrawal symptoms.

‘We’re on our own, Otto.’ Vila said softly. He and Otto looked at each other, desperate to come up with a plan. Eventually, Otto cracked from the frustration and kicked the door to the cell in a rage, screaming his lungs out as he cursed in German.

Meanwhile, Salvatore was tied to what appeared to be a revolving table – his bare torso was exposed. His interrogator-cum-torturer was none other than a recovered Grigori, who was wearing a bandage on his kneecap. ‘Salvatore... you should have killed me when you had the opportunity. Why didn’t you?’ Salvatore stared coldly at Grigori – there was not much else he could have done.

‘I disapprove of violence without a reason, but in this situation, I’ll make an exception.’ Grigori smirked as he operated a control panel.

‘We’re going to play a game, Salvatore. I’m going to ask you some questions, and I want you to answer them. Failure to answer will result in you being fried like a chicken.’ Salvatore grunted and spat an insult through gritted teeth.

‘You fucking wankers.’ He knew that pissing off Grigori was the smart thing to do – once Grigori was angered, he would have lost control, giving him time to escape. Instead, the torturer looked at the denizen calmly.

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‘Tell me: Why is ARCUS still fighting for a stupid and meaningless cause when the people you fight for will not listen because of their pride or lack of intelligence?’ Grigori spoke in an eerie, disquieting tone of voice which made Salvatore’s guts lurch.

‘I think we both know the answer to this.’ He responded simply.

‘Your commitment impresses me... but you can’t have everything.’ Grigori simply responded. Salvatore spoke more passionately – if he was going to die, then at least he would die with a clear conscience.

‘You people are monsters. You agree with yelling at defenceless souls, hitting children, abusing your power and the works, changing the rules to suit YOUR side of the power scale... just because your pride is wounded or you lack the capacity for rational thought. You manipulate the media behind the scenes.’ Grigori flipped a switch – a high-voltage electric shock ran through the revolving table, zapping Salvatore with enough power to illuminate Paris for a year. He screamed in a combination of rage and agony.

‘It is a necessary evil, don’t you think?’ Grigori asked mockingly, laughing his Joker-like laugh.

‘Fuck off!’ Salvatore spat. Vladimir entered the room. He looked at Salvatore, eyeing his weakened form before taunting him.

‘Pathetic. I did warn you about your idealistic crusade, Salvatore. You left me no choice.’ He spoke, his tone of voice scathing and acidic. Salvatore looked up at his former friend, gritting his teeth as he tried to restrain his anger.

‘You’re on my shit list, Vladimir. When I bust out of here, I’m going to make you pay for what you’ve done.’ Salvatore looked at Vladimir straight in the eyes with the intention of brutally murdering him in the most painful and gory manner known to man. Vladimir looked

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at Salvatore for a moment. Quickly, almost imperceptibly, he punched his old associate in the gut as the table's restraints release him, sending him falling to the floor.

'Take him back to the cell.' The guard picked up Salvatore's semi-limp form and helped him out of the torture chamber. Vladimir and Grigori exchanged knowing looks.

'What about his associates? What about the pilot?' Grigori enquired.

'Leave them be. They're not worth it.' Vladimir responded calmly as Grigori simply nodded in understanding.

Salvatore was taken back to the cell and thrown inside as the door locked behind him. Vila and Otto helped him up, looking worried. 'Are you OK, man?' Vila asked out of pure concern, the gentle giant's face registering mild sadness as he muttered something in Hungarian. Salvatore simply grunted wordlessly, nodding.

'Just a few shocks... here and there.' He coughed.

'You look like you've been to Hell and back.' Otto speculated, trying to lighten up the atmosphere.

'You're not far off.' He lay down on the floor, the pain in his body fading into a bearable ache as he put his hand to his head. 'Where's Tobias?' He asked anxiously.

'They're using him as their pilot.' Vila replied. Salvatore simply nodded in understanding, coughing a few times.

'I figured as much... he's too valuable to kill.' Lowering his hand, Salvatore tried to think of a plan, his brain deprived of the capacity for rational thought. He sighed audibly.

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San Francisco, California, USA – 24 July 2016

In their apartment, Holly and Himika were now fast at work, the two women looking through the files stolen from Rosh's office in their own leisurely time. Eventually, Holly found something VERY compromising, which shocked her to her very soul. 'Come and take a look at this, Himika.' She motioned for her friend to come over, the Asian beauty putting on her reading glasses.

'Is it...?' Himika began.

'Yes.' Holly nodded. The beautiful blonde turned on the television as she and Himika looked increasingly concerned. A news reporter was present.

'ARCUS, the organisation which single-handedly terminated authoritarian teachings Worldwide in addition to being the subject of cultural terrorism, is now apparently defunct, the remains of their headquarters having been found in the Scandinavian Mountains in Sweden. No bodies were found, and the whereabouts of the ARCUS operatives themselves are unknown. For the time being, they are presumed to be dead.' Holly turned off the television and cried, weeping silently as she believed Salvatore to be dead.

'I loved you.' She wailed and sobbed, tears streaming down her face as Himika pulled her into a hug. Eventually, Holly regained her composure, the beautiful blonde picking up her cell phone and dialling a number before lying back on the sofa.

Melbourne, Victoria, Australia – 24 July 2016

Jenna was in her apartment overlooking the Australian shoreline, trying to sleep after the meeting at Interpol as the Moon shone in the Sky. Her cell phone beeped, getting her attention. She picked it up and read it. A text message read: "RIP ARCUS. H". She looked at the text message before putting 2 and 2 together. Jenna sat up from her bed and scrambles

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over to her computer, typing away as if she was possessed by a madman. She found several articles on the ARCUS situation, one in particular catching her attention. ‘They’re still alive...?’ She asked herself, the Oceanian officer looking at the article in question, which showed a photograph of the ruined mountain base. The headline read: “ARCUS DISAVOWED – WHERE ARE ITS MEMBERS?” Without another word, Jenna picked up her cell phone and sent a text message.

Frank, having accompanied Jenna to Australia, was fast asleep in his car, his fedora hat pulled over his face. His cell phone beeped, resulting in an annoyed grunt from the tired inspector. Mumbling in French, he picked up his phone and looked at it. A text message read: “DESTINATION: SCANDINAVIAN MOUNTAINS. J”. Realising the meaning of the message, Frank jolted up and rubbed his eyes, putting on his fedora hat once more as he started the engine to his car. ‘At last... some progress! Salvatore, let’s see if you really are sitting with the Saints.’ He drove away gleefully; ready to kick some bottom as his car sped away, heading towards a metropolitan city overlooking the Australian coast. No sooner than he had received the text message, Frank arrived in town, parking the car outside the apartment building where Jenna resided. He sounded the horn on his car a few times, calling out to Jenna. ‘Jenna, come on! I got your message!’ Jenna, upon seeing Frank’s car pull up, turned off her computer and got her gear together before heading downstairs and outside, locking the door to her apartment. She exited the building, entering Frank’s car. The two officers looked at each other briefly. Frank and Jenna exchanged knowing glances before the experienced and hardened cop started the car, driving away from the apartment building. ‘I got the message. With any luck, he’s probably still alive and out there somewhere.’ He said with a hint of joy in his voice.

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‘Did you read the news, Frank? No bodies.’ Jenna retorted, trying to bring Frank back down to Earth.

‘That still doesn’t mean that they’re dead. Don’t believe everything you read. The media must have a SERIOUS beef with our renegade friend.’ Frank began to think like and understand Salvatore by this point – whether or not it was against orders to go after him no longer mattered, he was a rogue cop.

‘Holly sent me a text message. She’s been working undercover with an organisation called DIVIETO – an anti-ARCUS group.’ Jenna spoke, showing Frank the text message.

‘Holly? That Valley Girl with a dance fetish?’ Jenna looked at Frank slightly coldly before continuing.

‘Yes, the same woman... and she and I are still friends.’ She calmed down slightly as Frank regained control of the conversation, driving calmly as a vein pulsed on his neck.

‘What’s the deal with DIVIETO, anyway?’ Frank asked, even though he had a fair idea of what the answer would be as he swerved the car, yelling at a driver in French before calming down. ‘Sorry.’ He said gently.

‘Imagine the Bavarian Illuminati, multiplied by 1,000.’ Jenna stated simply, knowing Frank would understand the analogy.

‘Conspirators working on restoring the World to its so-called “natural state”, is that the idea?’ Frank gritted his teeth as he soared through a motorway, struggling to abide by the speed limit.

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‘That’s right, Frank. She’s working with an insider... I just hope they don’t get caught.’

Jenna replied with a hint of worry and fear, whether it was for Holly’s situation or Frank’s increasingly reckless driving was unknown.

‘Don’t be silly, Jenna. If you know her as well as you purport to do, then she’ll have thought of everything, right?’ Frank smirked.

‘You’re right.’ Jenna nodded, her fear quenched for the time being.

‘I don’t agree with any of this authoritarian crap. I don’t care if it’s part of your culture or religion; those people are fucking cowards and bullies – looks like Salvatore does have a point after all, the crazy sod. It’s just a shame that he’s now considered to be the worst piece of scum on Earth.’ Frank said with a hint of sadness and regret as he laughed at the irony of it all. He raised an eyebrow as the car sped away, heading towards the city airport.

Chapter 11

Üetliberg Mountain, Albis Plateau, Switzerland – 25 July 2016

Salvatore was still stuck in the prison cell with Vila and Otto, the three of them getting increasingly concerned over their overall safety. Salvatore was coughing intermittently, raising increasing apprehension from his friends and allies. ‘Sal, are you OK?’ Otto asked as he put his hand on Salvatore’s shoulder.

‘I’m fine, Otto. I’ve had worse.’ Salvatore nodded before sitting back on the floor. He coughed quite violently before calming down, clutching his gut in pain as he keeled over.

‘Stress, isn’t it?’ Vila asked softly, having witnessed the deterioration of Salvatore – both physical and psychological – over the past fortnight or so, which was now reaching its climax.

‘That, and God only knows what else.’ Salvatore sighed.

‘So why don’t you ask Him?’ Otto joked as Salvatore chuckled slightly.

‘It would be a fucking miracle if He could help us figure out a way out of here. Even if we do escape, our reputation’s been destroyed... and we’ve got our work cut out for us if we’re going to repair the damage caused by those self-righteous cunts.’ He ranted, a glimmer of the old, fiery Salvatore revealing itself for a brief moment.

‘We could just attack the guard next time he comes.’ Vila suggested.

‘Don’t be silly, Vila. Not only is he armed, he will also call for backup... unless someone gives us a hand... we are well and truly stuck.’ Salvatore laughed at the thought. At this point, the guard arrived, opening the door to the cell and taking the denizen leader to the

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torture chamber once more. Vila grunted in frustration while Otto looked at Salvatore being led away.

Salvatore was screaming in azure agony as the electricity raged into his body, a pair of electrodes attached to his bare torso, which were connected to a car battery. ‘This is poetic justice, Salvatore. Perhaps next time, you won’t hesitate to kill.’ Grigori spoke with a wicked smile. Salvatore grunted and growled, his anger and frustration rising as he looked at Grigori with a look that could melt the Polar Ice Caps.

‘I’m going to kill you when I get out of here... you, that backstabbing bastard and your leader.’ He regained his breath and looked at Grigori, who approached him calmly. The two men locked eyes with each other momentarily before the torturer punched the rebel leader in the face, giving him a black eye. Salvatore’s spectacles fell to the floor as Grigori lowered his fist, picking up his adversary’s eyewear. Miranda Alpha entered the room, looking at Salvatore coldly.

‘I’ve been waiting for this time to come.’ The young clone spoke in her cold but deadly voice. Salvatore looked up at Miranda Alpha, his vision blurred from the punch and his lack of spectacles as the beautiful but dangerous woman approached him. ‘My mother loved you, and you left her to be captured.’

‘She did it for me.’ Salvatore felt a sense of shame and guilt at the memory of having to abandon Miranda five years earlier.

‘And you let her do it... some hero you are.’ Miranda Alpha scolded venomously. She touched his bare torso teasingly before slapping him.

‘You bitch!’ Salvatore spat. Miranda Alpha drew her knife as she put it to Salvatore’s throat. The two of them locked eyes for a moment before the clone lowered her knife calmly.

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‘Don’t. Tempt. Me.’ Miranda Alpha punctuated each word with such hatred and contempt that even Grigori looked nervous. The clone looked at the denizen, her face a hard stone wall between herself and the World. The restraints on the revolving table released Salvatore as the guard took him back to his cell, Grigori handing Salvatore’s spectacles to the guard.

Salvatore was thrown into the prison cell once more, the door locking behind him. Vila checked on him, seeing the black eye on his friend’s face. ‘We HAVE to get out of here... they’re killing you.’ The Slavic lancer spoke up, his worry giving way to fear over his friend’s health.

‘You don’t say.’ Salvatore’s voice was now a harsh growl, the torture beginning to take its toll on him. Otto looked stunned at the amount of damage his friend and mentor has taken. Salvatore looked somewhat thinner than before. Dead skin was beginning to peel off his forearms and the back of his neck like Sunburn and his face was decorated with cuts and punch marks here and there. ‘We’ll escape... tonight. We bust... out of here. If they kill us... then at least we’ll have tried. Besides... our cause needs a martyr.’ He chuckled at the irony before passing out.

Approximately two hours later, Salvatore was asleep while Vila and Otto were playing Tic-Tac-Toe on the cell walls. Suddenly, the lights went out, leaving the three men in the dark. Vila looked around him, sensing that something was wrong. ‘Salvatore... Sal, wake up!’ Shaking his friend awake, Vila helped him up as Otto remained silent, keeping his eyes and ears open. A humanoid figure in Predator-like camouflage approached the cell, its voice distorted as it called the names of each member of the heroic triumvirate. The camouflage blinked off to reveal Vojislav, wearing his signature sunglasses. ‘Vojislav...? You certainly took your time getting over here.’ Vila asked in disbelief.

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‘There didn’t seem to be any hurry. Sorry for the delay, but I had to wait for the right time. Hold on and I’ll get you out of here.’ Vojislav responded, the cyborg antihero working an electronic tool on the door’s lock.

‘What about the guard?’ Vila enquired as he had no problem supporting Salvatore thanks to his 2-metre-plus height and muscular build.

‘I took care of him. I swigged his tea.’ Vojislav replied. He held up a laxative bottle as a metallic click was heard, the cell door opening. Otto ran out of the cell, followed by Vila helping Salvatore.

‘We need to get our gear back. Salvatore’s OK – just barely.’ Vila stated as he left the shithole in which he had been imprisoned for the past 24 hours.

‘I’ve taken care of that as well.’ Vojislav handed him a large sports bag with the ARCUS logo on it. Inside lay their clothes, guns, equipment and a jet-injector filled with a pink liquid. Vila picked it up and examined it.

‘What’s this?’ He asked curiously.

‘Nanotech ROM modules – a fast-acting 1st-aid kit – it heals the victim almost instantaneously, but you can use it only once.’ Vojislav warned. Vila looked at the substance, then at the injured Salvatore, who looked like he had been involved in the World’s biggest bar-room brawl and come out alive, albeit just barely. Without another word, Vila injected the substance into the carotid artery in Salvatore’s neck, discarding the used jet-injector. Within less than a minute, Salvatore’s wounds had healed thanks to the sub-microscopic computer programs interacting with his body, reprogramming it to full health as he gained a new augmentation: Regeneration. The trio dressed up once more in their ARCUS combat

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uniforms, Salvatore slipping on an eye patch to cover his black eye as he put on his signature boonie hat once more. He looked at Vojislav, smiling genuinely.

‘Now we look like ourselves again. I owe you one, Vojislav. Thank you.’ His tone of voice was gentle and friendly. He had not spoken that way for five long years.

‘We’re even, Salvatore. Now, come on.’ Vojislav led Salvatore and his men out of the subterranean prison, the ARCUS operatives carrying their weapons once more as they prepared to escape. Vojislav scanned the area for guards with his combined thermal and night vision, taking them out silently.

‘What about Tobias? Is he OK?’ Salvatore asked quietly as he aimed his assault rifle into the dimly-illuminated subterranean corridors of the Alpine Gulag.

‘I rescued him before I came to get you guys – he’s at the helicopter, waiting for us. I did some research, too, while I was out there.’ Vojislav replied.

‘What kind of research?’ Salvatore hissed.

‘I’ll tell you later. Let’s just try to focus on getting you guys out of here for now.’ Vojislav replied calmly, assuming leadership for the time being.

‘Damn right, Vojislav.’ Salvatore concluded the quick conversation. The ARCUS operatives worked together to escape the prison. Just when they exited the subterranean dungeon, however, the lights came back on. Grigori and Vladimir stood before them, along with a dozen or so DIVIETO troops.

‘Where do you think you’re going, Vojislav? Take them out.’ Grigori commanded, barking an order in Slovak. Vojislav narrowed his eyes as Salvatore stepped back, sensing a bloody

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fight was about to take place. The cyborg surreptitiously handed the nanotech-enhanced rebel leader a flash drive. Salvatore pocketed it.

‘Shut up!’ Vojislav spat an imaginary ball of flesh-dissolving acid. *I wish I really could spit acid into this fucker’s face.* He thought. Grigori’s face turned from a callous smirk to an expression of shock and disbelief, almost as if he had been hurt personally.

‘I’m sorry... I didn’t get that. Repeat it.’ He said in an uneven tone of voice before regaining his composure. He still could not compute what Vojislav had said TO HIS FACE.

‘I said ‘shut up’, and I apologise for not realising you are deaf and stupid.’ Vojislav repeated, his blood boiling with anger and frustration. Grigori, registering the insult, snapped a finger, prompting the troops to raise their weapons at the escaping rebels, who followed suit – a Mexican standoff took place.

‘Grigori, tell them to back off.’ Salvatore ordered as he kept his finger out of the trigger guard of his assault rifle, not wanting to shoot unless necessary.

‘Are you going to give up your cause?’ Grigori sneered with glee, like a psychotic military officer executing civilians to establish his own personal dictatorship.

‘I think we both know the answer to this.’ Without warning, Salvatore struck one of the soldiers and opened fire on the remaining troops, Vojislav leading the way as the four rebels escaped, leaving Grigori and Vladimir quite stunned.

‘Come on, don’t just stand there, Vladimir – go after them!’ Grigori said with a hint of annoyance and disbelief.

‘You don’t say.’ Vladimir responded with a hint of sarcasm. With these words, he cocked his weapon and strode after his former friends. Vojislav and Salvatore led the way for Vila and

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Otto as they trudged through the base, their minds burned with a single intention: To escape and survive. Eventually reaching the exit to the former Federation hideout, Salvatore spotted a supply room, kicking its door open.

‘Let’s gear up while we can. We need all the shit we can get.’ He said. *I’m back, baby.* He thought to himself as he smiled at his usage of profanity. *God, it feels great to curse again.* His mind smirked.

‘Now you’re talking!’ Otto whooped. The quartet ran out of the base, heading towards a helicopter as Vojislav led the way, Salvatore remaining behind to provide cover fire if necessary. Vojislav, Otto and Vila boarded the helicopter as Salvatore fired several shots at approaching DIVIETO troops.

‘For God’s sake, come on, man! Salvatore, come on!’ Vila called. Salvatore fired a few more shots before boarding the helicopter. Vojislav approached the cockpit, revealing an injured but still able Tobias, sporting a bandage over his head. A sniper rifle was present, lying beside him.

‘Tobias, go! Fly us out of here!’ Vojislav commanded.

‘No problem, my friend.’ Tobias replied as he obeyed without question, flying the helicopter away from the base as remaining DIVIETO troops opened fire in vain. Salvatore shook his head, recovering from the torture he had endured for the past day or so. Remembering something, he jolted his head upright, his eyes locking with Vojislav’s sunglasses.

‘OK, Vojislav – you got us out of here. What’s this info of yours?’ He asked in a relaxed tone of voice.

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‘Flash drive, Salvatore. It’s all on there.’ Vojislav smiled. He indicated Salvatore’s pocket. The rebel leader, seemingly understanding, reached into it and pulled out the object in question, examining it.

‘OK, let’s have a look.’ He said simply. Spotting a nearby laptop computer, Salvatore opened and activated it, connecting the flash drive to the machine as he and Vojislav observed the monitor intently. ‘Vladimir... that backstabbing bastard... I knew I shouldn’t have let him join ARCUS.’ He growled as he remembered his friend’s betrayal.

‘You did what you could, Salvatore – he chose to betray you. Do me a favour and make the son of a whore pay.’ Vojislav said calmly, trying to reason with Salvatore.

‘Oh, I can guarantee that. Where the hell were we?’ Salvatore enquired, an eeriness of calm bliss overcoming him, a tranquil rage like the crater of a volcano quietly leaking liquid-hot Magma into the Outside World.

‘A DIVIETO camp – right on the Üetliberg, located at the Summit of the Albis Plateau in Switzerland.’ Vojislav indicated the electronic map on the computer monitor as Salvatore observed.

‘Who was that woman, Vojislav? She looked just like Miranda... but she didn’t recognise me.’ Salvatore pressed on, needing to know the truth.

‘That was Miranda Alpha, her clone.’ Vojislav replied in his short and to-the-point manner. Salvatore looked at Vojislav in disbelief.

‘What...?’ He asked incredulously.

‘You really are a fool, aren’t you, Salvatore? Remember the Signal de Botrange five years ago?’ Vojislav raised an eyebrow, his cyborg eyes concealed by his sunglasses.

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‘How can I forget?’ Salvatore replied, sounding irritated. In actuality, he did not want to talk about that fateful mission as he still had not recovered from the physical and emotional wounds sustained on that day.

‘Come on, man, use your brain – she let herself be captured for you, so they were free to experiment on her. Some hero you are.’ Vojislav repeated Miranda Alpha’s words as Salvatore gritted his teeth in an attempt to remain calm.

‘I would have gone back for her if that stiff in a suit hadn’t intervened along with you.’ He paused for a moment to calm down. ‘Back to the point – DIVIETO, who or what...?’

‘DIVIETO, my friend, is THE true Federation – an Illuminati-like society of powerful authoritarian figures who pull the strings. The Sol Federation was just for show.’ Vojislav spoke reassuringly as he switched off the computer, the denizen cyborgs looking at each other.

‘How do you know all this?’ Salvatore asked.

‘Unlike you, I’ve been laying low and biding my time.’ Vojislav replied calmly, the Yin to Salvatore’s Yang.

‘I’ve been dealing more damage, though.’ Salvatore countered proudly.

‘Yes, but with questionable effectiveness.’ Vojislav pointed out. ‘In any case, you need my help... and you know it.’ Salvatore and Vojislav exchanged knowing glances. After a full minute of staring and contemplation, the ARCUS Commander simply nodded and grunted.

‘OK, fine – welcome aboard.’ He said with a short, sharp sigh. The two men shook hands, their past differences settled.

‘What now?’ Vila asked, breaking the monotony.

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‘We head for the Signal de Botrange and rescue Miranda.’ Salvatore spoke, sounding confident, his vigour restored.

‘No go. The laboratory there’s been closed and she’s been moved.’ Vojislav spoke up as Salvatore turned to face him.

‘Where...?’ He enquired.

‘She’s in an underground base in the City of Vienna, right in the heart of Austria.’ Vojislav explained. Salvatore mulled it over before coming to a decision.

‘Tobias, set a course for Austria. It’s time to set things right for good.’ Tobias inputted the course in question before replying in the affirmative. He piloted the helicopter through the Sky, the Moon shining over the European Horizon.

Chapter 12

City of Vienna, Vienna, Austria – 26 July 2016

The helicopter landed on a vast plain extending towards the Horizon. Three figures – Salvatore, Vojislav and Otto – dismounted from the helicopter before it took off again. Vila's voice was heard on Salvatore's radio. 'Don't mess around, OK? Find this Miranda bird and then get the hell out of town.'

'No shit – out.' Salvatore activated his ENVG goggles and infiltrated the city. Vojislav led the way while Salvatore and Otto followed quietly, the latter stopping every now and then to catch his breath.

'This isn't a mountain, it's a bloody volcano.' He muttered. Eventually, the three operatives reached level ground, heading into the city centre. Salvatore and Vojislav reached an intersection, Otto providing cover fire in the dead of night, the city streets empty. Vojislav brought up an electronic map, pointing at the intended locations.

'We're here. The underground base is here, on the other side of the city.' He indicated the place in question.

'Why the hell is there a subterranean facility in an urban zone?' Salvatore asked, not caring if anyone heard him or not.

'It's inconspicuous. Plus, it's more accessible and more practical than if it was situated in the mountains.' Vojislav theorised while Otto raised his weapon, muttering in German at imaginary enemies.

'OK, let's go.' Salvatore commanded. He tapped Otto on the shoulder and followed Vojislav, the cyborg's eyes shielded by his sunglasses, disguising his true form. An Austrian police

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officer walked by, failing to notice the three armed insurgents. The heroic triumvirate sneaked out of a shadow, following the cyborg revenant as he led the ARCUS Commander and the overeager cadet to the doors of a seemingly innocuous building.

‘This is it. We go in and we enter a world of shit – there’s no turning back. Do you understand?’ Vojislav asked.

‘Yes, I do.’ Salvatore cocked his assault rifle, gritting his teeth slightly as Otto raised an eyebrow, ready for action as he primed his automatic shotgun.

‘Good. Let’s do this.’ Vojislav fired a shot from his battle rifle, kicking open the doors as he briskly entered the building, Salvatore and Otto following suit. In the atrium of the scientific edifice, Vojislav approached an elevator and activated it while Salvatore and Otto conferred to each other wordlessly, exchanging alternating looks of concern and confidence.

‘Don’t worry, this will be a peanut compared to last time.’ Salvatore quipped as the three of them entered the elevator, which took them deep down into the subterranean depths of what could very well have been Hell. PING! After a full minute, the doors slid open as Vojislav exited the elevator, taking the point as Salvatore got into position, raising his weapon in the event of an enemy encounter, activating his ENVG goggles. The three ARCUS operatives trudged through the underground lab as the air was thick with tension, Salvatore remaining calm and composed like a professional soldier. Vojislav led the way while Otto was at the back, trying to relax. Hearing footsteps approaching, Salvatore tapped Vojislav on the shoulder, pointing in the direction of the noise. Nodding in understanding, Vojislav hid in a shadow with Salvatore and Otto following suit. A pair of DIVIETO troops walked past, failing to notice the three intruders. Something caught Salvatore’s attention – a smart card of sorts. Exchanging glances with Vojislav, the two of them sneaked out of the shadows and

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grabbed the soldiers from behind, Salvatore holding his knife to his target's throat. Otto approached the guard, addressing him in German before switching over to speaking English.

'Key to the lab – give it to me, please.' He said calmly. Unable to turn around to see the source of the voice, the nameless soldier simply removed the smart card from his person and handed it to Salvatore. Thanking him, the ARCUS Commander knocked out the guard, as did Vojislav to his opponent. Quickly hiding the unconscious bodies, the two of them motioned for Otto to emerge from the shadows. Approaching a pair of double-doors, Salvatore looked at the smart card in his hand and inserted it into the lock. BEEP! A red LED turned green accompanied by a single high-pitched beeping noise, the double-doors opening as they headed inside. Entering the cryonics chamber, Salvatore spotted Hermann manning a control panel, operating the upright glass tube housing Miranda's frozen sleeping form. Approaching the scientist, the ARCUS Commander grabbed him by the collar, roughing him up.

'What are you doing to her, Frankenstein?' He snarled. Hermann, taken by surprise, tried to remain calm.

'She is... the test subject... for experimental cryonics... and cloning.' He said, visibly shaking from fear and anxiety as Salvatore let him go.

'Let her go.' He ordered.

'He will kill me if I do.' Hermann pleaded.

'And I will kill you if you don't... besides, I can protect you if you help me. Let her go – do it now, please.' Salvatore was negotiating, something at which he had never really excelled but he was seemingly building a natural talent for it. He kept his assault rifle pointed at Hermann, who quickly operated the control panel. The ice within the capsule began to gradually melt, turning to water as the scientist observed through a computer monitor. The

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readout was: “UNFREEZING PROCESS BEGUN – SUBJECT: EKEROT, MIRANDA R.”

As the ice turned to water, the contents of the capsule were finally revealed – the real Miranda. The computer monitor now read: “HEART RESTARTED – HEART BEAT AND PULSE NOMINAL.” As Miranda’s heart was reactivated, her eyes clicked open as she finally woke up from the cold sleep, her whole body submerged in the water-filled capsule, her vision a bright blue. Looking before her, she scanned her eyeballs around her, realising she was trapped in the tube of water. She opened her mouth to try to speak but no sound came out, instead she ended up blowing bubbles, her blonde hair free and floating. She tried to move but could not. Hermann, on the other hand, looked at Salvatore briefly before continuing his task. The monitor now read: “SUBJECT REVIVED – UNFREEZING PROCESS COMPLETE.” Miranda, now able to move, hit the glass door of the capsule, hoping it would break in time. She kicked her feet and beat her hands on the glass – eventually, the glass cracked. She smiled as she struck the glass harder, causing the door to shatter open as water came gushing and rushing out, the beautiful Swedish blonde falling to the floor. She coughed and gasped for air as she was finally awake and free from her involuntary purgatory. Otto ran up to her as he wrapped a towel around her body to keep her warm, but he was thanked with a kick to the stomach and a punch to the Adam’s apple. Vojislav went to check on Otto while Salvatore and Hermann finished the procedure. Keeping the towel wrapped around her body, Miranda scanned the scene to assess the situation. A look of curiosity came to her face as she spotted a calendar, quietly uttering two words.

‘Five years...?’ She whispered. Salvatore and Hermann looked at the computer monitor in panic. The readout was: “SUBJECT ERROR: MEMORY LOST.” Miranda looked slightly confused as she was clothed in a hospital gown and led out of the laboratory. Vojislav, Salvatore and Otto ran down the same corridor from earlier as they headed for the elevator to

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take them back to the surface, Salvatore falling behind to help Miranda and protect Hermann.

The quintet reached the elevator as Salvatore contacted Tobias via his radio.

‘Tobias, Vila, get us out of here. Extraction point: City outskirts.’ Tobias’s voice was audible on the other end of the line.

‘You got it, Sal – ETA: 5 minutes – out.’ Miranda raised an eyebrow, her memory slightly distorted and fuzzy from the cryogenic sleep, Salvatore loading a new magazine into his weapon and cocking it, gritting his teeth as the elevator ascended to the surface. The Sun was beginning to rise over the Horizon as the elevator doors opened, the quintet exiting the lift only to be met by half a dozen or so DIVIETO troops, Grigori and Vladimir.

‘Sorry, Salvatore – looks like I get to win this time.’ Vladimir smirked while holding his old friend at gunpoint.

‘Take the girl and the scientist. Leave the leader with me.’ Grigori ordered. The troops did as they were told, taking Hermann hostage in addition to apprehending Miranda, who gave her assailant a swift kick, prompting the others to hold her at gunpoint.

‘Vladimir, how the hell did you know I was here!?’ Salvatore asked in shock and disbelief.

‘I know you, Salvatore. You’ll do anything to be a big hero, even at the expense of your friends.’ Vladimir replied, calm as ever.

‘We’re not friends – that partnership ended when you betrayed me – TWICE.’ Grigori held Miranda at gunpoint while Vladimir apprehended Hermann, holding his gun at the scientist’s head.

‘What’s it to be – the girl or the key to victory?’ Vladimir asked his former friend callously. Salvatore panicked and spoke up, looking at Vladimir with eyes of anxiety and fear.

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‘Let them go. Both of them – I’ll hand myself over to you. Spare my crew.’ He pleaded.

‘You truly are a fool.’ Vladimir sneered. The Russian double agent threw Hermann away from him, aiming his rifle at the pleading scientist.

‘Please, you must listen to me! You must listen!’ Hermann begged for his life as his eyes were alight with fear and terror, the psychotic Vladimir clearly enjoying this display.

‘Listen to this.’ He snarled, and opened fire on Hermann, unleashing his entire magazine on the defenceless scientist, who screamed and wailed as each bullet tore into his body like a razor blade biting into flesh. Eventually, Vladimir emptied the magazine of his assault rifle and Hermann’s body fell to the floor, drenched in blood – he was dead. Salvatore closed Hermann’s eyes and then stood up to glare at Vladimir – he was PISSED.

‘You’re going to pay for EVERYTHING you’ve done, you bastard!’ Grigori struck Salvatore in his black eye, visibly injuring him.

‘Get going, all of you – unless you want to join him.’ The Slovak torturer ordered.

‘He didn’t do anything!’ Salvatore yelled in shock as he was close to tears – he had never, ever seen a defenceless civilian die in front of him before, never mind be brutally executed in such a grotesque and callous manner.

‘He was of no further use... he had betrayed the cause – now, get going.’ Grigori remained calm, which was unsettling and disquieting at the same time. Salvatore narrowed his eyes and raised his arms, Vojislav and Otto following suit. The captured operatives exited the building accompanied by their captors. Spotting a helicopter in the distance, Salvatore smiled subtly.

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‘Take cover!’ He yelled as he hit the deck, pulling Otto down with him as Vojislav followed suit with Miranda. BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG! Shots rang out from seemingly nowhere as the DIVIETO troops fell to the floor, dead.

‘Where’s that shooting coming from?’ Otto asked curiously.

‘It’s Tobias and Vila. Come on!’ Salvatore helped up Otto and got to his feet, arming his weapon. His radio crackled to life with Tobias’s voice.

‘We’re at the edge of the city – how are you?’ The Swedish pilot questioned cheerfully.

‘Change of plan, Tobias. Take Vojislav and Miranda – Otto and I are going this alone.’ The Italian denizen ordered as he loaded a grenade into his grenade launcher.

‘Salvatore, what are you talking about?’ Tobias asked worriedly.

‘I have an old score to settle. Just do as I say – out.’ He ended the transmission. ‘Vojislav, I want you to get Miranda out of here!’ Vojislav simply nodded as he and Miranda headed for the extraction point, Salvatore and Otto exchanging knowing glances.

‘Let’s do this.’ Otto quipped.

‘Damn right.’ Salvatore laughed. The two ARCUS operatives pursued the fleeing figures – Vladimir and Grigori – throughout the empty city.

City of Vienna, Vienna, Austria – 27 July 2016

Vojislav escorted Miranda, the Slavic cyborg protecting the Swedish beauty as he turned back to open fire on any remaining DIVIETO soldiers. As they reached the landing zone, Tobias’s helicopter was there to greet them, the ramp opening to reveal Vila and Miletto, who helped them aboard. The Sun was now beginning to rise in the Sky, shining over the Horizon as Tobias piloted the helicopter in an attempt to monitor Salvatore and Otto’s progress.

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‘Are you two OK?’ Vila checked on Vojislav, then Miranda. He shook his head briefly, stunned by her beauty. ‘Are you...?’ She looked at him slightly coldly.

‘Am I? Am I who you think I am? Yes, I am... and if you know what’s good for you, then you’ll forget who I am.’ Vila nodded sympathetically.

‘Sorry.’ He said in his deep, bass voice.

‘It’s OK – she’s just suffering from cryosleep-induced amnesia. I can’t imagine what else they did to her.’ Vojislav explained as he shuddered at the memory. Miranda raised an eyebrow for a moment.

‘Do you know somebody called Salvatore?’ Vila nodded.

‘Yes, he’s out there.’ He pointed outside a window, indicating a speck running through a city with another speck, chasing two figures. ‘Tobias, don’t lose sight of him.’

‘You got it, Vila.’ Tobias piloted the helicopter expertly, following the ARCUS operatives pursuing the DIVIETO agents.

Salvatore and Otto were in hot pursuit of Vladimir and Grigori, gunning down any DIVIETO troops who may have interfered with their progress. ‘Otto, cover me! I’ve got an idea!’ Salvatore called amidst the gunfire.

‘What?’ Otto replied.

‘Trust me – it’s our only shot!’ Salvatore replied, almost yelling. Crouching to reload his weapon, Salvatore loaded a new magazine and cocked his rifle, Otto providing cover fire. He then activated his radio as the two men continued to chase their adversaries. ‘Rosh – Rosh Goldman? This is Salvatore Pasquale. Vladimir and Grigori are running the show and they’ve killed Hermann. Give me what you’ve got on those two and I’ll take care of the rest.’ There

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was a pause as Salvatore fired a few rounds, hitting his targets and KILLING them as opposed to incapacitating them. ‘I know you can hear me on this frequency, Rosh. You and I both know that you won’t last a week.’ Rosh spoke up for the first time, the two opposing leaders engaged in a verbal duel.

‘...and neither will you.’ Rosh’s raspy voice came in through the speaker of the radio.

‘Rosh... are you familiar with the old saying: “The enemy of my enemy is my friend”?’ Salvatore retorted, his gruff but gentle voice echoing amidst the gunfire.

‘Salvatore, one day you will learn that it cuts both ways. Vladimir and Grigori are escaping towards the Austrian-German border via the Vienna West Railway Station. I’ll see you in the fires of Hell.’ Rosh growled.

‘Looking forward to it... give my regards to all the authoritarian role models I took care of if you get there first – out.’ Salvatore half-threatened, half-promised as he terminated the conversation, he and Otto spotting Vladimir and Grigori heading towards the destination in question. Catching up to them, the ARCUS Commander tackled his former friend outside the station while Otto charged at Grigori, knocking him out with a quick pistol-whip to the head – BANG! Otto’s handgun discharged, accidentally shooting Grigori in the skull and killing him, leaving the rookie operative horrified as his combat uniform was stained red with the late Slovak torturer’s blood. Salvatore and Vladimir fought brutally for what felt like an eternity, the Italian leader delivering punch after punch to the Russian traitor’s face until he was overpowered, receiving a slam to the gut.

‘What the FUCK is wrong with you, Salvatore? Why can’t you just let things BE!?! You hate authority; you’re angry all the time – afraid to trust other people with their own techniques. You think you can just change the World with your ideas and your actions when a little

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toughness is a necessary evil? What IS it with you? You have to keep pretending that there is a goal in life! GOD, you make me want to fucking PUKE!!’ Vladimir ranted, letting out all his anger and frustration towards his old friend.

‘That’s... bullshit, Vladimir... and you FUCKING know it!’ Salvatore wheezed through gritted teeth.

‘Rosh showed me that you’re just another terrorist! You had your moment in the Sun five years ago... time to move on – PERMANENTLY.’ Vladimir aimed his gun at Salvatore’s head but Otto intervened, disarming the rogue renegade as the two men fight.

‘You... won’t... kill... my... friend!’ Otto yelled, synchronising each punch with each word. Salvatore got to his feet, clutching his gut in pain as he radioed Tobias.

‘Tobias, find a place to land – quick!’ He spoke up, his breathing more even and consistent.

‘The nearest place we can land is on the outskirts of the city.’ Tobias replied.

‘OK, hurry – out.’ Salvatore commanded. Ending the transmission, the ARCUS Commander witnessed Vladimir beat the crap out of Otto, the Russian traitor knifing the German cadet in the gut. Otto screamed in a combination of rage and agony. Feeling enraged, Salvatore drew his side arm and cocked it, aiming carefully. With Vladimir in his sights, he gritted his teeth and smirked coldly, calling out his former friend’s name. ‘Vladimir!’ Vladimir looked up to see Salvatore holding him at gunpoint. BANG! BANG! BANG! Salvatore shot Vladimir three times, two in the body and one in the head, killing his old friend. Salvatore holstered his pistol and helped up his friend. ‘Otto, it’s me, Salvatore! You’re going to be OK. You’ll be fine.’

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‘Just get me out of here!’ The German ARCUS operative snapped. Salvatore helped up the injured Otto and carried him away from the carnage. The helicopter landed to reveal the whole crew, Vila and Vojislav stepping out to help Otto.

‘Thank God you’re here! Otto needs help, quick!’ Salvatore spoke, indicating Otto’s fresh wound, the blood spewing and seeping freely from the broken flesh.

‘What about Rosh?’ Vila asked as he ran to his friend’s aid.

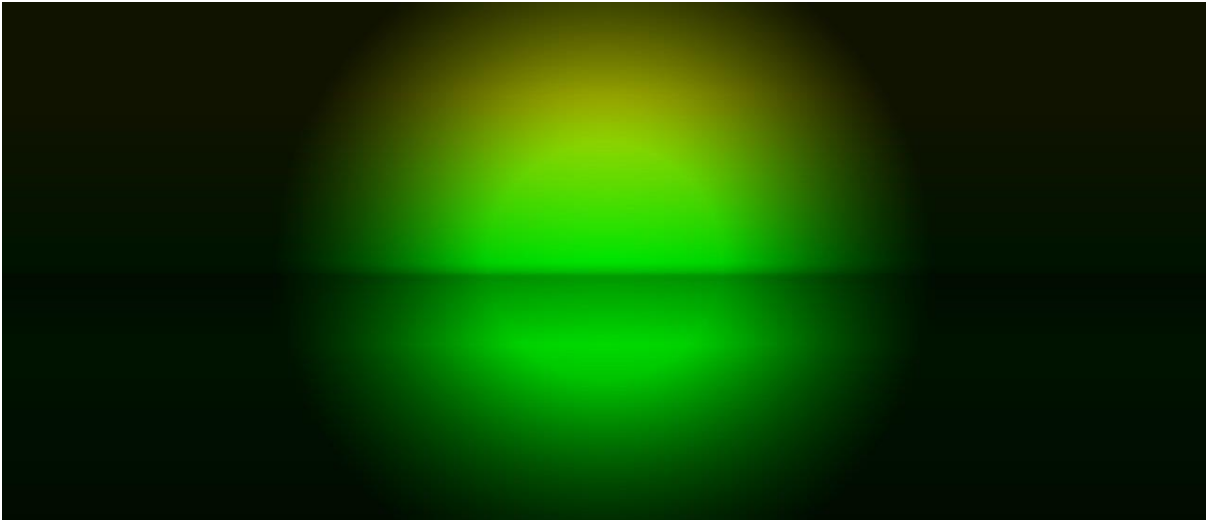
‘Rosh can wait, Vila! At the moment, we need to save our friend’s life!’ Salvatore explained tersely but calmly. Vila helped Otto onto the helicopter while Vojislav approached a worried-looking Salvatore.

‘We can get him patched up within the hour if we leave now, Salvatore. What I want to know is this: What are we going to do after he’s recovered?’ Vojislav asked. Salvatore turned to face his latest ally, looking confident and determined.

‘The answer’s quite simple, Vojislav: We finish the fight and we win this war.’ With those words, Salvatore cocked his rifle and boarded the helicopter with Vojislav.

It was time to end the conflict once and for all.

Part 3: Endgame



Prologue

“War – it’s a funny thing. It doesn’t have to be just physical – it’s not just restricted to guns and killing. It can also be psychological, emotional, often featuring ulterior motives and frequently culminating with detrimental consequences. The big question is: How far are you willing to go in order to fight for what you believe in? Can you find the courage to accept the implications – to know what must be done and to do it, whatever the cost? Heroes and fools are often the same thing... but unlike fools, heroes live and sometimes die for a noble purpose. Cowards believe that they alone are in power over their children, their students, their subordinates... but all it takes to tip the balance is to think outside of the box and act on it.”

- Extract from Salvatore Pasquale’s Journal

Chapter 1

Berchtesgaden, Bavarian Alps, Germany – 28 July 2016

A trio of men accompanied a fourth man on a stretcher, clutching his gut in pain. Racing down a corridor, one of the men helped the injured man off the stretcher as they reached an operating theatre. The four men entered the operating theatre with haste as the injured man was placed on the operating table. The leader, a man with a goatee beard, boonie hat and eye patch – Salvatore Pasquale – observed with worry and concern as the patient – Otto Handke – was tended to by the two remaining men – gentle giant Vila Volfango and sunglasses-clad cyborg Vojislav Brévic. Vila and Vojislav worked furiously to restore Otto to health, his open wound being sealed up. Approximately two hours later, Vila and Vojislav had successfully accomplished their task, the gentle giant injecting a dose of morphine into Otto's neck, the badly injured cadet falling asleep as the dream world overcame him. Salvatore entered the operating theatre and removed his boonie hat as he looked at Vila. 'Is he going to be OK?' He asked, his voice quivering with worry and fear.

'Yes, albeit barely. It was a good thing we got there when we did – you're lucky to be alive yourself, you know.' Vila replied, being calm and rational as ever.

'It's not me I'm worried about, Vila.' Salvatore sighed.

'We won't be able to do much with Otto out of action.' Vila stated as he drank from a bottle of Pálinka, turning to his German friend sadly. He uttered a phrase in Hungarian before turning back to Salvatore.

'He'll be like this for quite some time – he's lost God only knows how much blood, and it's a fucking miracle that he's still alive.' Vojislav examined Otto's condition on a computer before standing up to face the two remaining ARCUS operatives.

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‘What do we do in the meantime?’ Vila enquired, not really wanting to know the answer, but at the same time he knew he had no choice.

‘Only thing we can do: Lay low. We’re the worst pieces of scum on Earth thanks to that authoritarian coward.’ Salvatore responded tersely. He put on his boonie hat and walked out of the operating theatre.

Berchtesgaden, Bavarian Alps, Germany – 29 October 2016

Three months later, Otto gradually awakened from his coma. Sitting up, he put his hand to his head then looked at his midsection, noticing a bandage. He winced at the memory of that near-fatal stabbing from three months earlier. He coughed and sat up a bit more. Spotting Salvatore seated in a position of reverence, Otto called his friend’s name, getting his attention. ‘Salvatore?’ Salvatore looked up to see Otto, his face plastered with a grin of joy that would have made the Joker blush.

‘Otto... holy fucking shit, you’re OK!’ He called, approaching his friend as he exclaimed jubilantly in Italian.

‘Well, now... you certainly took your time getting me to safety.’ Otto chuckled as he sat up fully, cursing in German as he winced at the pain of the wound and memory. Salvatore, upon seeing that Otto was alive and well, just smiled, removing his boonie hat.

‘I’m just glad you’re OK, Otto. You know, for a while there, I thought you wouldn’t make it. It did seem very touch and go for some time.’ He said sympathetically, feeling a sense of relief wash over him as the two men laughed for a moment.

‘Are Vila and Vojislav here?’ Otto asked, even though he knew that his friends would not have abandoned him – he wanted to hear confirmation from his friend and mentor.

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‘Damn right. They’ve been practically living in the hospital, waiting for you to come back.’

Salvatore replied, scratching his beard.

‘How long was I out?’ Otto asked. Salvatore looked at his friend seriously but sympathetically.

‘Three months.’ Otto looked stunned as he took it in, his face stretching and eyes widening slightly.

‘Three bloody months...?’ He spat incredulously. Salvatore simply nodded, trying to calm his friend down.

‘Yes. We’ve been laying low that long.’ Salvatore responded, handing Otto a gift, the German cadet opening it eagerly to reveal a new handgun, identical to Salvatore’s. Otto examined his new weapon in awe before thanking Salvatore.

‘Cheers, Sal... just WHERE are we now?’ He asked, raising an eyebrow.

‘We’re in Germany – a place called Berchtesgaden.’ Salvatore responded as the Sun began to set in the Sky, the Horizon darkening rapidly due to the winter climate. Otto smiled at the mention of the place.

‘A place I like to call home. I was raised in the Bavarian Alps.’ Otto smiled as Salvatore helped him up.

‘You think you can make it, Otto?’ Salvatore asked cautiously, not wanting to hurt his friend or put unnecessary stress on his wound.

‘I don’t think – I KNOW.’ Otto smirked cockily as Salvatore simply nodded with an affirmative response before leading his friend out of the hospital.

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Outside the hospital, on a makeshift Helipad, Vila and Vojislav were present, with two other men – a fair-haired pilot – Tobias Jonsson, and a middle-aged gentleman – former DIVIETO agent and ARCUS defector Miletto Fresson. A woman with blonde hair in a poytail and wearing a Lycra catsuit with accessories – assassin Miranda Ekerot – was practicing some Martial Arts poses and moves on thin air. ‘It’s been a while since Salvatore went to get Otto. I’m going to go find him.’ Vila spoke.

‘Give him a minute. He’ll be here.’ Vojislav countered, sensing that Vila was beginning to lose his composure.

‘I hope so – we’ve been sitting on our balls for the past six months thanks to that spoiled son of a whore.’ The gentle giant mused as he drunk from his Pálinka bottle again.

‘We’ll find him, Vila... it’ll just take time. In six months of research, I’ve only found a single clue: A man named Hayate Takara.’ Vila just nodded wordlessly as Vojislav sat back. Salvatore’s voice was heard as he accompanied Otto onto the helicopter.

‘Hey, guess who is back from the Land of Nod?’ The ARCUS Commander’s gruff but gentle voice reverberated throughout the aircraft. The helicopter’s crew approached Otto, giving him compliments and reassurances.

‘It’s great to be back. Now... what do you say we get down to business?’ The Germanic cadet asked in his trademark cocky but calm manner.

‘I’m glad you asked, because we’ve got a clue.’ Vojislav responded, the cyborg opening up Salvatore’s laptop computer and loading up the information. ‘Hayate Takara – a Japanese scientist, specialising in nanotechnology, robotics, cloning and cryonics – Hermann’s mentor.’

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‘What are his allegiances?’ Salvatore asked suspiciously, even though he knew what the answer may have been.

‘Technically, he’s neutral.’ Vojislav replied.

‘How do you mean?’ Vila enquired, the gentle giant leaning over to get a better view of the screen as the Sun almost disappeared over the Horizon.

‘He’s actually a DIVIETO spy – an informant, but not an official member. He has a daughter living in the US – her name’s Himika.’ Vojislav clarified.

‘What’s his location?’ Otto asked, holstering his new handgun.

‘Fujiyoshida, Japan – it’s North of Mount Fuji. He’s not dangerous, but he’s connected.’ Vojislav brought up the location on an electronic map, Salvatore examining the location and route critically.

‘Does his daughter know of his double life?’ The Italian denizen queried as he held a cigarette in his hand, its tip smoking.

‘No, it seems like she doesn’t know. She now lives in San Francisco, California – working as a news reporter.’ Salvatore looked at the screen before coming to an executive decision.

‘OK, he’s our first real lead in six months. Let’s pay him a visit.’ He put out his half-lit cigarette on the sole of his boot as the computer monitor blipped off. Tobias, sensing a change of situation, took to the controls, piloting the helicopter away from Germany as the ARCUS operatives left Europe, heading towards the Ural Mountains and crossing into Asia.

Chapter 2

Fujiyoshida, Honshu Island, Japan – 30 October 2016

The Sun was shining in the Sky. Mount Fuji was visible over the Horizon as Salvatore disembarked with Vila, Vojislav and Otto. Miranda grabbed Salvatore's arm, preventing him from stepping off the helicopter. Turning around to face her, Salvatore locked eyes with the woman he risked life and limb to rescue. 'Be careful, Salvatore.' Miranda said softly, her old cold persona now a distant memory.

'Don't worry, Miranda.' Salvatore smiled as he hugged her briefly.

'Just make them pay. Don't do it for the Human Race, do it for me.' The Swedish former assassin pleaded. Salvatore had never, ever seen her so vulnerable before. He simply nodded.

'OK – for no-one but you.' He said simply. Miranda smiled as she kissed him on the cheek and tapped his face.

'Thank you... now, go.' She said softly. With those words, Salvatore disembarked from the helicopter.

'Same as usual, right? In, get the info, out?' Salvatore asked as he primed his assault rifle, loading a grenade into his grenade launcher.

'Correct. Otto, I want you to stay at the back – I'll take point. Salvatore, you're with me. Vila, cover us.' Vojislav commanded, the cyborg adjusting his sunglasses as he activated his 6th Sense augmentation.

'You got it.' Vila smiled. Tobias's voice was heard over Salvatore's radio.

'Japan's got pretty strict gun laws, so keep those things hidden, OK?' The Swedish pilot warned cautiously.

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‘Don’t do anything stupid, Salvatore. I can’t imagine how I’d feel if I lost you.’ Miranda interjected over the radio, her tone of voice worried and sad.

‘Miranda, these sick fuckers experimented on you like a plaything and I let them do it... I won’t make that same mistake twice – out.’ Ending the transmission, Salvatore nodded at Vojislav, who led the group on what could very well have been their most dangerous assignment yet: To clear their own names, even at the expense of their own lives. The quartet walked through the city outskirts and into the centre of town. The atmosphere was quiet and the place was surprisingly near-vacant. ‘Not very busy for a Japanese city – I’d have expected at least a couple of thousand people walking through the streets.’

‘This isn’t Tokyo, Kyoto or Osaka, Salvatore.’ Vojislav clarified in his to-the-point manner, which visibly irritated Salvatore.

‘Still, though... I didn’t expect a bloody ghost town.’ Salvatore spat, his frustration rising. The operatives trudged through the city until the sunglasses-wearing cyborg froze in position. Sensing approaching danger, he motioned for the other operatives to hide, who did so. Vojislav activated his Predator-like camouflage.

‘I’ll go ahead and scout the place, Salvatore. In the meantime, I want you to keep the others safe, and don’t do anything stupid or irrational. I know what you’re like.’ Vojislav commanded, his silhouetted form warping the scenery as he walked through the city, barely visible to all but the trained eye.

‘Just do what you have to do, Vojislav.’ The Italian denizen remained calm, controlling his anger as he tried to remain focused.

‘Will you two grow up? You’re not just playing with your lives; you’re playing with ours – like you said, Salvatore: We have to finish the fight and win this war – alive, ideally.’ Vila

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intervened, always playing the role of the mediator between the hot-headed Salvatore and whoever he had a tendency to argue with at the time. Vojislav zipped past and into the shadows. When the figures left, Salvatore got to his feet quietly, with Vila and Otto following suit. The three remaining ARCUS members silently walked through the city until they reached a small house, with a non-camouflaged and now fully visible Vojislav present. Salvatore and Vojislav conferred together while Vila stood back, Otto aiming his rifle into the wilderness.

‘If this guy has the information we need, then it would mean that... HE... is out there.’ Salvatore narrowed his eyes at the thought of Rosh being still alive, causing more havoc.

‘Let’s do this... silently. This is his house.’ Vojislav whispered, reading the Japanese Kanji text on the front door of the house.

‘If this bastard has something we need, then we need to go in here and hit him – hard and fast.’ Salvatore raised his voice, a fusion of an angry hiss and an impatient growl.

‘It’s not all gung-ho action, Salvatore. The life of a rebel is also a patient and harsh one.’ Vojislav replied, the master to Salvatore’s apprentice.

‘OK – let’s fucking do this.’ Salvatore calmed down enough for him to think rationally. Vojislav slid open the window and threw in a flashbang and a smoke grenade, both of which detonated, resulting in a flash of white light and a large cloud of smoke obfuscating the living room of Hayate’s house. This gave the ARCUS operatives their cue to enter the room.

‘Go!’ Vojislav commanded. Salvatore jumped in through the window while Vila and Otto busted in through the front door. When the white light faded, smoke cleared and dust settled; Vojislav entered the house with his battle rifle slung. As the room gradually returned to

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normal, Salvatore apprehended Hayate while Vila guarded the window, Otto watching the door as the two cyborgs interrogated the DIVIETO spy in a good-cop/bad-cop-like manner.

‘You are Hayate Takara, yes?’ Salvatore asked calmly, adjusting his boonie hat as he scratched his beard. Hayate looked at Salvatore, stunned for a moment before realising what he meant.

‘Yes, that is me.’ He spoke perfect English, which visibly surprised Salvatore.

‘We need your help, Hayate. Ever heard of a little cult called DIVIETO?’ The ARCUS Commander spoke calmly, trying to remain placid throughout the interrogation.

‘What if I did? I won’t tell you anything.’ The authoritarian traditionalist spat back.

‘Come on, don’t be a fool – lives are at stake here.’ Salvatore pleaded, trying to use his newfound diplomatic skills to his advantage.

‘Whose lives – yours?’ Hayate retorted mockingly. Sensing that Salvatore was formulating some horrible torture techniques in his mind, Vojislav interjected to placate the situation.

‘Everyone’s lives – people like you are ruining them... bound by honour and hubris – you’re just cowards in the end.’ The Slavic cyborg replied in an eerily calm tone, which made even Salvatore wince and shudder due to its creepiness.

‘Get out of my house before I call the police!’ Hayate called. Salvatore grabbed the authoritarian rod-sparer and threw him across the room, having lost his temper.

‘Why don’t you just ruin Himika’s life while you’re at it? You and Rosh are connected, aren’t you? Fuck you and your flaccid secret fucking society!’ Hayate, now terrified of Salvatore, tried to back away from the ARCUS Commander, who propped him up and punched him in the face.

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‘Salvatore! Salvatore, I have this under control!’ Oblivious to Vojislav’s words, Salvatore drew his side arm and primed it, forcing the barrel into Hayate’s mouth.

‘Ten seconds! We know you employed and trained Hermann Krumpf for DIVIETO, and now he’s dead, along with the two sons of whores who betrayed us! What’s your connection with Rosh Goldman!?’ Vojislav looked increasingly worried. Vila, taking action for a change, ran forwards and pushed Salvatore off Hayate, shoving the increasingly stressed and borderline psychotic rebel leader away from the target. Salvatore turned on Vila like an angry lion. ‘What the fuck is the matter with you, Vila!? Don’t you want to see DIVIETO brought down? No more authoritarian “role models”?’ He yelled harshly. Vila replied calmly and patiently, the gentle giant’s eyes meeting his frustrated friend’s one good eye.

‘Salvatore, I want to see this kind of behaviour become history as well – we all do – but that doesn’t give me the freedom to do what the hell I want. You’re letting this get personal.’ Salvatore and Vila locked eyes with each other, the ARCUS Commander narrowing his eyes slightly as he knew, understood and realised that his rational friend was right. Vojislav approached Hayate and removed his sunglasses, revealing his eyes – they looked like normal human eyes, with the exceptions of glowing irises and purple pupils.

‘These people didn’t just take away my life – they took away my defining features, in addition to the life of a woman I once cared for and my friend over here. If you know something, then you must tell us... for your sake, and your daughter’s protection. We can protect her.’ Hayate looked at Vojislav before nodding in acquiescence, coughing as he caught his breath.

‘Rosh Goldman is a very powerful man, as you may know. I have no direct contact with him – I can only give you a name... Ivan Redski.’ Salvatore turned to face Hayate at the mention of this name, his face registering mild fear and shock horror.

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‘I know that name.’ He whispered with a hint of terror in his voice. Vila and Otto looked at Salvatore, while Vojislav put on his sunglasses as he had Hayate cornered. ‘He’s Vladimir’s father.’ Otto blinked a few times.

‘That’s nice, Sal... hell of a time to break it to us.’ The German cadet blurted out.

‘Otto, it’s not his fault.’ Vila tried to reason with Otto before turning to face Salvatore for confirmation, the ARCUS Commander meeting his cadets’ looks.

‘What do you mean – it’s not my fault, Vila? I killed his only son! If anyone has to answer for our actions over the years, then it’s me!’ He raised his voice, his tone becoming increasingly thick and acidic like a barrel of nuclear waste just begging to be opened and unleashed.

‘You hold your weapon with your left hand, I see... intolerable.’ Hayate spoke calmly once more. Salvatore turned to face Hayate, a venomous look of hatred visible in his face, his eyes sparkling with restrained anger.

‘What did you say about me being left-handed?’ Whether or not he wanted to admit it, Salvatore was beginning to lose the plot. He was becoming a liability to the team, in addition towards steering down the path of hypocrisy, like Che Guevara or Fidel Castro.

‘In certain cultures, such as ours, the left hand is deemed cursed or impolite. The right hand is the proper way.’ Hayate replied in a relaxed tone of voice. Salvatore looked at Hayate briefly, controlling his rage and calming down.

‘Then those cultures are wrong – completely, utterly, totally, stupidly WRONG. I don’t give a shit if it’s part of your religion, creed, philosophy or whatever.’ With those words, he motioned to his group. ‘Let’s go. The further away I am from this wanker, the happier I’ll be.’ Salvatore gathered his gear, Hayate stopping him one last time.

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‘Please... protect my daughter. Himika has a good heart, but she’s a little bit too cocky for her own good.’ He pleaded.

‘Oh, I guarantee that.’ Salvatore replied unnervingly but sincerely. With those words, the ARCUS Commander and his Merry Band of Pissed-Off Rebels exited the house, Otto closing the door behind him apologetically. Exiting the house, Salvatore drew his radio. ‘Tobias, get us out of here – we’ve got a clue.’ Tobias’s voice was heard over Salvatore’s radio.

‘Good, Salvatore – that’s very good. I’ve got an update here: Rosh Goldman has struck again – this time in Italy. Five people were injured in a house assault by DIVIETO troops. Names: Eleonora Serrano, Anna Serrano, Gaetano Serrano, Amilcare Pasquale, Loredana Pasquale.’ Salvatore’s voice takes on a more shocked tone as he felt the last of his sanity begin to slip.

‘I’m sorry... can you repeat the last two names, please?’ He asked, unable or unwilling to accept the reality of the situation.

‘Amilcare and Loredana Pasquale. Is something wrong?’ Tobias replied, but before he could continue speaking, the transmission ended abruptly. Salvatore holstered his radio, his mind beginning to snap as the stress of his position of leadership from the past five years began to take its toll on his tired old psyche.

‘Sal, is everything OK?’ Otto asked, noticing a crazy look in Salvatore’s eyes, the kind one would expect a horror movie villain to have just before closing in on his latest victim. Salvatore turned to face Otto, a look of pure hatred on his face.

‘That bastard... he got my family.’ He primed his assault rifle and activated his grenade launcher, raising his voice. ‘Rosh Goldman, this time it’s FUCKING PERSONAL!!’ His scream echoed throughout the area, reverberating with such force that it shook the Sky itself. Salvatore proceeded to move but Vojislav stopped him, earning the sunglasses-wielding

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cyborg a punch to the gut. Salvatore apologised before regaining his composure, helping up his friend. ‘I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to do that – but we must finish what we started... come on, let’s win this war. If he’s back on the grid, then so are we.’ He headed into the city centre, with the others following him silently. Eventually reaching the extraction point, Tobias’s helicopter landed as Salvatore, Vila, Otto and Vojislav boarded it. Salvatore stopped Vojislav from boarding, the two cyborgs having a heart-to-heart. ‘I just wanted to apologise for my behaviour back there.’

‘I don’t blame you for acting that way... but we can’t lose you yet – we have a task to accomplish.’ Vojislav replied sympathetically. The two friends boarded the helicopter as it took off, flying away from the city as it left Japanese airspace.

Chapter 3

San Francisco, California, USA – 30 October 2016

Two women – Holly Carson and Himika Takara – were fast asleep in their shared studio apartment, the former an American blonde, sleeping on the sofa while the latter, an Asian beauty with dark hair, was lying in an armchair. The light of the Sun poured in from an open window. The television switched itself on, waking up Holly as she turned to face the box. A news report was in progress. ‘Six months after going in hiding, it seems that cultural terrorist group ARCUS has returned, their latest target being Japan.’ Holly looked at the television in disbelief.

‘It can’t be... he’s still alive...?’ She whispered hopefully. Turning off the television, Holly got to her feet as Himika awakened from her slumber, stretching her limbs. ‘He’s alive, Himika. Salvatore Pasquale is still alive.’

‘What? Are you serious?’ Himika asked incredulously.

‘That’s what I thought, too... but apparently, he’s hit another country in his mad quest... Japan.’ Holly indicated the TV. Himika looked at her friend briefly before a look of realisation spread across her face. ‘What is it?’ Holly asked, catching her friend’s expression.

‘I think I know what he’s done.’ Himika said softly, not wanting the situation to escalate.

‘What? What has he done?’ Holly was met with a knowing look from Himika before she registered what her friend meant. Her friend’s look was all the confirmation she needed. ‘The son of a bitch.’ Picking up her cell phone, she headed for the door.

‘Where are you going?’ Himika asked worriedly.

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‘To the studio! If this is true, then we can help Salvatore start fighting back.’ Holly responded; the roles of active and passive reporter reversed. Himika grabbed Holly’s arm.

‘You know what will happen, Holly, if Rosh finds out. He’ll set his dogs on us.’ Himika stated, knowing that it was of little use since Holly was in love with Salvatore.

‘It’s a risk I’m willing to take, Himika. Are you coming or not?’ Himika only needed to think for a nanosecond before getting her phone, following Holly out of the apartment, closing the door. Holly and Himika strode down the corridor, the two women looking determined as they felt confident in doing what could have been their undoing.

‘Let’s do this, Holly. Before I forget...’ Himika took off her DIVIETO badge, dropping it to the floor. Holly followed suit, binning the badges.

‘...now we are free. Once we do this, there’s no turning back.’ Holly had an air of confidence to her that she had never experienced before meeting Salvatore all those years ago.

‘If I’m right, then Salvatore most likely roughed up my dad... he’s quite the authoritarian rod-sparer.’ Himika looked sad and angry at the same time for a moment as she and Holly headed downstairs and towards the front door of their apartment building, taking a taxi to their TV studio. At the television studio, Holly and Himika were present, overseeing the preparations as the two women exchanged brief glances, knowing that they were sealing their own fates. When the preparations were complete, the two of them stepped in front of the cameras as the crew counted down, a director giving the signal to go ahead. Holly spoke first.

‘I have news regarding the so-called terrorist group named ARCUS. I have evidence that proves that they are merely attempting to improve the World by targeting key authoritarian figures who believe in the punitive measures of life. Politicians and influential figures are

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trying to ruin their reputation!’ She held up a folder containing several documents, showing some of them to the camera before Himika chipped in.

‘I can confirm this is true – ARCUS are not innocent, but they are not cold-hearted killers either! I repeat: ARCUS are the ones we are supposed to support! Do not trust DIVIETO! I say again: DO NOT trust DIVIETO!’ The recording ended. Holly and Himika walked out of the studio as they prepared to execute their plan.

‘We can’t stay in that apartment anymore.’ Holly spoke, stating the obvious truth, even though it hurt.

‘You’re right – they’ll be looking for us there.’ Himika complied.

‘They don’t know where we live. We should focus on packing up our stuff and getting out of town.’ Holly began to execute the plan with unerring accuracy, knowing it was crucial to her and her friend’s survival.

‘Where to?’ Himika asked, unsure as to where to go.

‘Sweden. We’ve got more than enough money to stay there for at least a few months.’ Himika nodded as she and Holly reached the exit to the building.

‘OK – let’s do this.’ She held out her hand for Holly to take, who shook it. The two women returned to their apartment for the last time, packing up their belongings. Within the hour, they had finished packing and headed for the city airport, where they boarded a plane to Europe, their destination: Sweden.

City of Stockholm, Stockholm, Sweden – 31 October 2016

The Sun was setting over the Horizon as Holly and Himika entered a taxicab, which drove away from the airport. The two reporters relaxed in the back of the taxicab, the driver remaining silent. A faint, almost inaudible hissing sound was heard. The two women simply lay back, closing their eyes, falling fast asleep, both of them too tired to even speak to each other. As the taxicab sped down a Swedish motorway, a second car was following it. The driver noticed it and gunned the engine, speeding away, prompting the second car to chase it. A police officer in a trench coat and fedora hat – Detective Inspector Frank Morris – was driving his car with a crazy look on his face, as if he were possessed by the Devil himself. His partner – Captain Jenna Lane – looked stunned at his behaviour. ‘Jenna, hold the wheel.’ He said simply.

‘Frank, are you sure about this?’ Jenna was beginning to get increasingly worried about her friend’s behaviour.

‘Do it. Just trust me – I’ve got an idea.’ Jenna did as she was told and grabbed hold of the steering wheel, accelerating so the car got closer to the taxicab carrying the sleeping women. Frank leaned out of the window and drew his side arm, aiming carefully. Looking through the sights of his handgun, Frank took careful aim as he knew he only had one shot at getting it right. ‘Jenna, speed up a little bit!’ Jenna did as she was told as Frank took aim... and fired off a single shot from his pistol. BANG! The bullet pierced the tyre of the taxicab, sending the vehicle off the edge of the motorway. Catching up to the stranded automobile, Frank exited his car and approached the still-conscious driver, hauling him out of the taxicab. ‘Who sent you?’ The driver cursed at Frank in Swedish, prompting the rogue Interpol officer to punch him in the gut before yelling at him in French, repeating his question. ‘Who. Sent. You?’ The driver handed Frank his wallet. Looking at it, the discredited cop looked at it

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briefly before handing it back. As he released the driver, he spotted a glimpse of a DIVIETO badge on the man's clothing. Putting 2 and 2 together, he punched the driver, knocking him out cold, reprimanding his unconscious form. 'Your rights will be read at your funeral.' As Frank brushed off his fedora hat, Jenna opened the taxicab to reveal Holly and Himika's unconscious forms.

'Come and have a look at this, Frank.' Frank did as he was told, his eyes widening slightly upon seeing the two women.

'Bastard!' Frank helped out Himika while Jenna got Holly to her feet, the two officers carrying away the two civilians.

'You do realise what this means, now, do you?' Jenna asked with worry in her eyes as she knew that they had crossed the Event Horizon.

'We're on DIVIETO's shit list.' Frank replied simply. Jenna smiled a bit at the irony as she loaded the women safely into Frank's car, with her partner in the driver's seat. Frank started the car and drove away.

Chapter 4

City of Vienna, Vienna, Austria – 31 October 2016

The Sun was setting over the Horizon – it was almost gone and it was nearing night time, the Moon beginning to show itself in the Sky. A blonde figure in a Lycra catsuit almost identical to Miranda's walked into a building – Miranda Alpha. Observing her whereabouts, she looked around wordlessly before spotting a pool of blood on the floor accompanied by an active computer. Approaching the computer, she worked on it for a few seconds, playing a video. The footage was terrible and almost shocking, even for her – her father and creator, Doctor Hermann Krumpf – was being pumped full of lead by a DIVIETO operative. The video ended as abruptly as it had started. Her face changed to a look of shock and disbelief as she wept silently before letting out a scream of rage and agony, her grief temporarily overwhelming her. Eventually, she regained her composure. Realising that she had been betrayed and deceived, she continued hacking into the computer. Having the information she needed, the young clone walked out of the building and strode away from the city, looking determined to avenge the death of the man who gave her life, glaring into open space as she flashed back to her training/conditioning. She left the city on a train, heading towards the nearest airport as she cursed in Swedish.

City of Stockholm, Stockholm, Sweden – 31 October 2016

Frank and Jenna carried the unconscious Holly and Himika into a penthouse suite, laying the girls down on a sofa to let them recover. The hard-nosed cop and his female counterpart exchanged glances of concern and knowing at the same time. 'Foolish girls...' Frank sighed.

'I don't understand Holly sometimes, Frank. Her undying love for Salvatore is what puzzles me the most.' Jenna countered. With those words, Frank just shrugged and laughed

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humourlessly before leaving the room. Holly was the first one to awaken. Sitting up, she looked up to see Jenna standing before her, her eyes widening slightly.

‘Jenna...?’ She called her friend’s name, who responded with a nod.

‘The same woman, Holly. You can thank Frank you’re still alive and well.’ She replied in a surprised but not disappointed tone of voice.

‘Frank’s here, too?’ Holly asked, her tone of voice one of excitement.

‘Yes, he is. You and your friend over there have gotten yourselves into a seriously complicated plot.’ Jenna replied calmly, sitting down so she was facing her friend.

‘It’s all for the coverage, I can take it.’ Holly justified, earning herself a sympathetic smile from Jenna.

‘Oh, Holly – still naive and eager as ever.’ She took Holly’s hand for a moment.

‘I know what I’ve gotten myself into – it goes with the job: I can accept it.’ Holly sighed, trying to relax. *What the hell have I done?* She thought to herself.

‘Dancing AND reporting? You’re pretty but too noble for your own good.’ Jenna just laughed and looked at her friend, who brushed her hair out of her face. Himika began to awaken, the Asian beauty regaining consciousness as she cursed to herself in Japanese.

‘Aren’t you going to introduce me to your friend and associate here?’ Holly helped up Himika.

‘Jenna, this is my friend Himika – she’s from Japan.’ Himika and Jenna looked at each other, shaking hands briefly but politely. Just then, Frank returned, adjusting his fedora hat.

‘Hey, Jenna... who’s the Eastern beauty?’ He asked, indicating Himika.

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‘I’m Himika. It’s nice to meet you, Detective Inspector... and thank you for saving our lives.’

Himika curtsyed as she eyed up Frank. *So this is the man who saved our lives – my God, he’s handsome.* She thought to herself, chuckling silently.

‘Oh, that – no problem.’ Frank smiled modestly as he joined Jenna, removing his fedora hat and trench coat.

‘I was just reminding these two intrepid heroines just what kind of mess they’ve gotten themselves into.’ The Australian police officer explained to her French-Canadian counterpart.

‘You mean the mess WE’VE gotten ourselves into?’ Frank surmised.

‘Precisely. If we’re going to survive and find out just what the hell Salvatore is up to, then we’re going to need to cooperate.’ Jenna spoke up, her words interrupted by a confident Himika.

‘Sorry, Jenna – but we work alone.’ Holly looked stunned at Himika’s behaviour before chipping in.

‘Himika, they can help us – they’re police officers.’ Himika looks at Holly, her face calm and serious for a change.

‘OK, Holly... they can help us – but if anyone is going to get Salvatore, then it’s going to be me.’ There was a moment of tension before Holly simply nodded in acquiescence, understanding that Himika needed closure more than she did.

‘OK, I understand.’ She said simply.

‘Thank you.’ Himika responded. The reporters turned back to face the Interpol officers. ‘OK, we’re in.’

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‘Good. First order of the day is to rest up. Nobody knows we’re here, so we’re quite safe.’

Frank commanded.

‘I’ve been looking into the ARCUS case too, Holly – with Frank’s help. I saw the improvised report you gave.’ Jenna explained, referring to the controversial TV report which had changed the courses of their lives.

‘I’m glad to know I have a fan base.’ Holly said sarcastically.

‘This isn’t a joke. DIVIETO, as you may know, are powerful and connected.’ Jenna emphasised, trying to remain calm.

‘That taxi cab from the airport was commandeered by a DIVIETO agent. They know you know too much.’ Holly and Himika looked stunned as the reality of the situation kicked in, the realisation of a real and extreme danger beyond their expectations pipetting the poison of fear into their subconscious.

‘So what do we do?’ Holly asked, even though she did not want to know the answer.

‘I hate to do this, Holly... but I’m going to have to place you under house arrest – for your personal protection. I’m sorry – I know you understand.’ Jenna explained apologetically. Holly nodded understandingly, accepting defeat.

‘Yes, only too well.’ She said quietly.

‘Does this include me?’ Himika enquired.

‘I’m afraid so.’ Jenna turned to face the Asian beauty.

‘Let’s get to work.’ Frank rasped as he slipped on his trench coat and fedora hat before examining his side arm, exiting the penthouse suite.

Chapter 5

Zugspitze, Wetterstein Mountains, Germany – 1 November 2016

It was fully dark and the Moon was out, shining brightly in the Sky. Tobias piloted the helicopter, his eyes red and bloodshot from lack of sleep. Otto was fast asleep in the back of the helicopter while Vila was struggling to stay awake. Salvatore removed his spectacles and boonie hat, covering his eyes with it as he tried to get some sleep. Vila eventually spoke up. ‘Tobias, land the whirlybird.’

‘Where...?’ Tobias responded, his voice slurred.

‘Anywhere, man – we ALL need some sleep, including you. You’ve been flying for about three days straight.’ Tobias yawned audibly before setting down the helicopter, landing in the middle of a Steppe in the German Alps. Eventually, the Sun rose, shining over the Horizon as daylight permeated the inky black night Sky. The ARCUS operatives are sleeping soundly, recovering from their latest escapade. There was a deep, abiding silence for what felt like an eternity until a voice was heard coughing. Salvatore’s eyes clicked open as he sat up, scratching his goatee beard before slipping on his boonie hat. Miranda is the next one to awaken, muttering to herself in Swedish as Salvatore takes her hands, helping her up. The two of them look into each other’s eyes, an old spark emanating between the renegade rebel leader and the good-natured assassin.

‘It’s been a while since I had this kind of peace and quiet.’ Salvatore admitted.

‘I’ve had it for five years... I’m eager for some action.’ Miranda spoke truthfully, the memory of the cryogenic sleep still fresh in her mind, her memories of her previous life disrupted by the experiment. While Salvatore had aged and was now 28 years old going on

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29, Miranda had remained 22 going on 23. She sighed and leaned into her lover's arms for a hug.

'Can you remember anything?' Salvatore asked as he held Miranda softly, the two denizens together again, in love once more. He touched her blonde hair.

'I can remember being frozen in a tube of water as I gradually fell asleep. Otto and Vila helped me recover my memory. They told me the scientist had to stop my heart before freezing me, or he would have killed me. I also remember them lowering some... strange white goo onto my body, which covered me... and a clone of me was created.' Miranda replied quietly, enjoying Salvatore's touch.

'What was it like sleeping in that sub-zero purgatory?' Salvatore pressed on. He was determined to hunt down and kill Rosh at any rate. Miranda smiled sadly at the memory of her sub-arctic incarceration.

'It was like being in Heaven. You were all I could think of – you, and my clone, my beautiful daughter. I can't wait to get some action... to kill the bastard who put me through that frozen hell.' She looked up at her lover. Miranda put her hand on Salvatore's face, leaning in to kiss him. Her lips met his, and they parted just as quickly as they met. 'I love you, Salvatore.' She whispered.

He let her go, his hands slowly releasing hers. There was a LOUD knock on the door of the helicopter, waking up the others quite rudely. Miletto got up and went to open it, cursing in French.

'Hello?' He asked. Looking around him, Miletto saw Miranda Alpha standing before him. He blinked a few times before turning back inside the helicopter, seeing Miranda. Putting 2 and 2 together, he turned to face Miranda Alpha.

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‘I want to see Miranda Ekerot... I am her clone... her daughter.’ The young clone spoke up. Miletto looked stunned before realising what Miranda Alpha means. Remembering Hermann’s experiment, he helped her into the helicopter, closing the door. Miranda and Miranda Alpha looked at each other, examining each other for even the slightest or most discernible difference. They both exchanged stunned looks.

‘You’re... you’re me!?’ The real Miranda asked.

‘I am and I’m not. I was cloned from your DNA while you were frozen... which kind of makes you my mother.’ Miranda Alpha responded, her voice trailing off towards the end of her sentence before continuing. ‘I was created to take your place... and as a part of DIVIETO’s plan to create the Ultimate Fighter.’

‘Sounds like a childish excuse out of a Japanese cartoon or a crap video game to me.’ Salvatore retorted; eager as ever to speak his mind – he was not one to give a shit about what others thought of his attitude.

‘Yes, you said it, man.’ Vila laughed, as did Otto. The three ARCUS operatives smiled at each other briefly, earning them some cold stares from both Miranda and Miranda Alpha.

‘This is very real, Salvatore, as I’m sure you know.’ Miranda Alpha replied seriously.

‘So why join us? We’re wanted all over the World – you don’t have to taint yourself with this brush.’ Miranda asked curiously – she did not want any harm to come to her daughter, but she wanted to make sure she was on their side.

‘I know of Vladimir’s betrayal. He also killed Hermann, my creator... my father.’ She wiped away a few tears, prompting Miranda to hug her daughter soothingly. The young clone turned to Salvatore, his eyes narrowing at the memory.

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‘That son of a whore deserved what he got. You have to trust in order to be betrayed, and I never did.’ Vojislav interjected, the *de facto* leader breaking up the tension as he spoke up.

‘I thought you wanted revenge for what they did to your body after you died.’ Salvatore countered, suspicious of Vojislav’s words.

‘I have a more evolved sensibility.’ Vojislav explained calmly.

‘Bullshit!’ Salvatore spat. Otto and Miletto exchanged glances, the two of them refusing to get involved in the discussion at hand.

‘For Christ’s sake, come on, man! Get your heads together, both of you.’ Vila spoke up. Vojislav and Salvatore simply calmed down and apologised to one another, the Italian denizen locking eyes with Miranda Alpha.

‘OK, Miranda Alpha – welcome to the club. Since you appear to be so knowledgeable about DIVIETO, perhaps you’d like to work with our newest defector, Miletto.’ He indicated Miletto, who greeted her in French.

‘I was with them recently... Salvatore forced me to cooperate in return for his protection.’ Miletto explained.

‘Well, now... looks like we’ll be working together quite well.’ Miranda Alpha smiled as she and Miletto left.

‘So that’s another defector. What’s the plan?’ Otto asked as he spoke up for the first time.

‘I’ve got in all in my head. Tobias, set a course for Italy. I have some tributes to pay.’ Salvatore adjusted his boonie hat and sighed audibly, facepalming himself as Tobias did as he was told.

Pianiga, Veneto, Italy – 1 November 2016

A clean-shaven Salvatore approached the hospital entrance, with Vila by his side. ‘It’s been a long time since I’ve been in hospital.’ He said ruefully.

‘Sal, take off your hat.’ Vila said calmly. Salvatore turned to face Vila, raising his eyebrow in confusion.

‘I’m sorry?’ He asked.

‘Take it off – people will know it’s you otherwise.’ Salvatore nodded and removed his boonie hat, slinging it over the back of his head as he and Vila entered the hospital. They were met by a nurse, who led them to a hospital room before leaving. Salvatore placed his hand on the door handle.

‘I don’t know if I can, Vila.’ He hesitated – he was scared, but he would never admit to it.

‘If not now, Salvatore, then when will you?’ Vila asked softly. Salvatore nodded, knowing Vila was right. With a deep breath, he opened the door, stepping inside the hospital room. Salvatore and Vila entered the ward. Scanning his eyeballs, the ARCUS Commander spotted two familiar figures lying on hospital beds in fairly decent condition – his mother Loredana Pasquale and his father Amilcare Pasquale. Approaching his parents, Salvatore sat down between them and wipes away a tear before regaining his composure. ‘Hey.’ His mother was the first to face him. She smiled at him sadly, the two conversing in Italian.

‘Salvatore... I’m glad you made it.’ She said sympathetically.

‘I came as fast as I could, Mother. What happened?’ Salvatore asked.

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‘There was a break-in at your grandmother’s house. There were soldiers dressed in black and red and gold, wearing a prohibition symbol on their uniforms.’ Salvatore nodded, controlling his rage as he continued to question his mother.

‘Is my father OK?’ He asked with a combination of worry and fear in his voice. Loredana simply nodded and tried to sleep. Salvatore turned to face Amilcare, setting the scene for a climactic confrontation between father and son.

‘Father, is there anything you can tell me?’ Salvatore asked compassionately – he may have been tough on the exterior, but on the interior, he was collapsing and disintegrating. Salvatore’s father propped himself up, locking eyes with his son.

‘Find them, Salvatore... find them and make them pay.’ He said.

‘Oh, I can guarantee that. I know who they are, but I have to track them down first.’ Salvatore growled.

‘Where have you been for the past five years?’ Salvatore’s father asked the Berserk Question. Salvatore laughed humourlessly before trying to come up with a convincing answer – he never was good at thinking on his feet.

‘I’ve been hiding – it’s a complicated story.’ He said. It was not the best explanation, but it was an honest one. Amilcare seemingly nodded in understanding as he put 2 and 2 together.

‘So those... troops – are after you. What have you done this time?’ The authoritarian Italian asked his rebellious younger son.

‘Something big – you wouldn’t understand.’ Salvatore was beginning to feel his old self re-emerge.

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‘Understand what? That my own son is a terrorist?’ His father snarled before pausing. ‘Is it true, Salvatore? Did you kill those people? Be careful – you’re going the right way for a slap and pulled hair.’ Salvatore’s face suddenly shifted from friendly to savagely hostile in a flash, his tone of voice reminiscent of a man tired of his life of killing and wanting to start anew.

‘Yes. Is that what you want to hear, Dad? Killing is all I know – fighting for justice is all I know at this point. Is that what you want your own son to tell you?’ Salvatore spat an invisible goblet of acid into his father’s face, the older Pasquale bathing in its flesh-dissolving agony.

‘Please... it’s enough.’ Amilcare said, but Salvatore was beyond restraint, grabbing his father and holding him against the bed.

‘No! It’s NOT enough, Dad!’ He roared before calming down, his mind finally snapping after a lifetime of authoritarian upbringing and education. ‘I killed, yes... but I didn’t just kill rod-sparing mums and dads, I didn’t just kill cane-wielding teachers, I killed perverted priests, nuns who tried to take away babies from unmarried mothers, people who hid behind their power and bent the rules to their advantage – I killed friends, family members... I killed ANYBODY who was an irredeemable, vile CANCEROUS PARASITE... and I excelled at it, as well – and it wasn’t for money or power. I did it because someone HAS to bring balance to the World, not leave it in the shadows. I did some research – the most authoritarian – traditionally and culturally – countries, the ones which get off on slapping, grounding, yelling and hair-pulling... are the United Kingdom, Republic of Ireland, Italy, France, Russian Federation and possibly Turkey and Japan. The Rest of the World, including the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand are in the minority in this respect. You have never, ever apologised to me for when you lost your temper – not even once – because you can’t swallow your pride. You, FATHER, are an authoritarian coward... and my mother –

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I'm sorry to say... is a sycophant.' He paused, calming down slightly, his rant waking up his mother. 'You know as well as I do that I'm not a bully... I fight bullies. I have a brain, heart and stomach – and a conscience.'

'You go to America and leave your family behind for your personal glory? We don't hear from you for five years, thinking you died and now this!? You're just like your brother, Remigio.' Amilcare said, trying to disguise the fear and hurt in his face and voice as his son's words tore into his soul, the usually self-righteous Italian silent for once.

'At least I had the courtesy to come and actually VISIT! You should be grateful! My brother's a spoiled coward! For years I heard "Remigio this", "Remigio that", "Remigio gets married and doesn't even make Salvatore best man", "Remigio having a baby with his wife", and I've had to put up with it while my own life spiralled in random directions... FUCK HIM!! ...and quite frankly, fuck you. You know I have you and Mother to thank for this little crusade of mine!? Is THAT what you want to hear, FATHER!? I'm just glad YOUR father didn't come over. This way, he can't see the authoritarian, self-righteous, cowardly, PUNITIVE FETISHIST OF A HYPOCRITE HIS SON HAS BECOME!!' Salvatore began to cry, tears welling up as he bore his soul, pouring out his heart as he let a lifetime's worth of rage and frustration and helplessness gush out of his being. He concluded his speech by holding back his own tears. 'The answer... is yes. Oh, fucking yes.' Salvatore snapped back before calming down. He put his hand in his face, his tone of voice apologetic. 'I'm sorry. I don't know why I haven't shown up for the past half-decade. I can't give up yet, though... I still have a job to do.' He was crying, his mother and father hugging him softly, both parents touched by his emotional outburst – more than 25 years of frustration released in less than a minute. 'I'm so sorry... I didn't mean to do that.' He sobbed before calming down, locking eyes with both his parents.

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‘Finish what you started. You can do it.’ His mother said. Salvatore nodded, getting to his feet.

‘I will. I’m not saying goodbye... it’s more of a temporary see-you-later.’ With those words, he left with Vila.

Salvatore exited the hospital with Vila as the ARCUS Commander removed his spectacles and buried his face in his hands, grunting, almost screaming, loudly. Sighing audibly, he put on his spectacles and boonie hat once more. Vila’s soft, gentle bass voice caught his attention.

‘It’s not your fault either. You’re fighting for a good cause. You rescued Miranda, saved Otto’s life... think of how many people – young and old – who look up to you. You are a true hero, because not only do you fight for what you believe in, you fight for what you KNOW is right – you fight for all of us.’ Salvatore smiled sadly and nodded.

‘You’re right, Vila. Let’s finish this.’ He drew his radio. ‘Tobias, Salvatore here. Transport to the US for two.’ He holstered his radio and smiled confidently.

Chapter 6

San Francisco, California, USA – 2 November 2016

Tobias's helicopter landed on a helipad as the Moon shone in the Sky. Salvatore, Vila, Otto, Vojislav, Miranda Alpha and the original Miranda dismounted, Miletto opting to remain behind and help Tobias and provide air support. The ground unit made their way into the city of San Francisco, under the cover of darkness. 'OK, Miranda Alpha – what's the plan?' Salvatore asked; his weapons and mind ready.

'We go to an address marked on my phone. It appears to be the residence of two undercover reporters.' Miranda Alpha replied. Salvatore raised an eyebrow, suspecting the worst.

'Do you have any names?' Vojislav enquired, his own suspicions arising.

'What difference is that going to make? They're hardly likely to welcome us with open arms, now, are they?' Otto spoke up, being the voice of reason for a change – but it would not last. He cocked his automatic shotgun and aimed it, muttering something in German. Vila placed his hand on his friend's shoulder to placate him.

'Otto, slow down. Getting worked up will solve nothing, man.' He said soothingly.

'I don't know about that. I want to make these sons of whores pay for not just what they've done to me, but for manipulating US behind the bloody scenes all this time.' Otto retorted – he was on the verge of madness. Otto took a few deep breaths to calm down. Eventually, he regained his composure, wincing as he put his hand to his gut. The six ARCUS operatives entered the city centre, following the clone's lead as they reached an apartment building.

'This is it?' Vila asked, admiring the architecture. It reminded him of his childhood in Hungary.

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‘Yes. According to my phone here, this is the place.’ Miranda Alpha replied, scanning the scenery with her smart phone.

‘You seem to know a lot about these guys.’ Otto goaded.

‘Given my genesis, it’s understandable.’ Miranda Alpha’s comeback seemed to silence the German gun nut with relative ease.

‘Let’s just get the info from these reporters and get the hell out of here.’ Vila spoke up. With those words, Miranda Alpha opened the door to the apartment building. The five operatives walked down a corridor, armed and ready. Salvatore’s radio crackled to life as Miletto spoke up.

‘Salvatore, I’m picking up some signals from nearby.’ The French defector’s voice was full of anxiety.

‘What kind of signals, Miletto?’ Salvatore spoke up, the Italian denizen going into action.

‘I don’t know, but you may want to speed it up a little bit. I have a bad feeling about this.’ Miletto responded.

‘You have ten minutes – out.’ Tobias stated. Salvatore just grunted as he got into position, Vila planting explosives on the door to the apartment.

‘3... 2... 1... 0!’ He called. Vila breached the door open, leading the other operatives into the room. Salvatore stormed the apartment with Vojislav, Vila and Otto securing the place while Miranda and Miranda Alpha observed silently.

‘This side is clear. How about you, Vila?’ Salvatore asked; his mind on full alert.

‘Clear, Sal. Looks like we missed the party.’ Vila responded. A voice was heard from behind, grabbing Miranda Alpha by the scruff of the neck.

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‘No, you’re just in time.’ Salvatore recognised the high-pitched rasp. He and Vojislav turned around to see a hooded figure – Rosh Goldman – hold Miranda Alpha hostage, the real Miranda aiming her gun at the clone and her captor. ‘ARCUS, the fallen heroes.’

‘Cut the crap! Who are you?’ Salvatore yelled.

‘I think you know... Salvatore. I’m the man who changed your life – the figure in the shadows who secretly pulls the strings. The Sol Federation, perhaps? Or do I have to target your family again?’ Rosh mocked. He knew how to flip Salvatore’s switches, the denizen’s eyes widening as he felt the rage resurface. He charged at the robed figure but Vojislav and Vila held him back.

‘He wants you to go off your rocker, man! He’s not worth it right now. Come on, Sal – don’t do this.’ Vila reasoned softly, never losing his temper. Salvatore eventually calmed down and regained his composure.

‘OK.’ He turned to face Rosh. ‘I know who you are – show yourself.’ Rosh unmasked himself, revealing his chiselled, angular face. ‘I thought it would be you: Rosh Goldman – you and your cronies at DIVIETO hiding in the shadows, manipulating events like the Illuminati.’

‘DIVIETO is no different from our Bavarian counterparts. We are merely continuing the work that they began.’ Rosh explained in a charismatic but deadly fashion like a science fiction villain.

‘Yes, well, I have a good mind to end it all.’ Salvatore retorted. He was beyond restraint.

‘Unlikely, as are your chances of leaving the United States alive.’ Rosh approached Miranda Alpha. ‘I must congratulate you, Miranda Alpha, for bringing to me these fugitives.’

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Naturally, I was expecting my latest recruits to be in here, but I have missed them. Perhaps YOU, Salvatore, can tell me where they are.’ Rosh turned to Salvatore.

‘If you’re referring to who I think you are, then fat fucking chance.’ Salvatore sneered. *The man’s a maggot – a fat fucking joke. Just look at his face. He’s a snake from head to fucking toe.* He thought.

‘I thought you’d feel that way. Miranda Alpha, as I promised, 1 Million Swedish Krona have been transferred into your bank account.’ Rosh smirked coldly. He was clearly enjoying this display of human misery. Miranda looked shocked to her very soul upon realising the extent of what the Federation – and DIVIETO – had done to her during her time in the cold-sleep program. Salvatore hugged her briefly before turning back to Rosh.

‘You’ve got what you wanted – you’ve ruined our reputations... what more do you want?’ Salvatore asked, even though he knew that the piece of shit before him would not stop until he was dead.

‘To ruin your lives – you disturbed the life cycle of nature, upset the balance of power... you must be punished. Killing you would be far too easy, and far too lenient.’ Rosh explained, brandishing his Magnum.

‘You flatter yourself.’ Salvatore said calmly. Without another word, Rosh simply cocked his gun and shot Otto in the stomach. BANG! The shock from the bullet caused the Germanic cadet to fire his automatic shotgun erratically with a deafening BLAM! Vojislav hit the deck to avoid the blast. Otto breathed heavily, clutching his gut in pain as he felt the reality of the situation pipet into his mind.

‘You fuck...!’ He growled. Otto charged at Rosh, despite Salvatore’s protests. The DIVIETO leader and puppet master fired a second shot – BANG! – Right into Otto’s chest, reopening

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his old wound as the large-calibre bullet pierced his lung and penetrated his heart. He then pushed a button before leaving. Otto cried out in pain, swearing in German. ‘Bastard! Shithead! Pig-dog! No sense of honour!’ Salvatore ran to help his wounded friend.

‘Not now, Otto! We have to get out of here!’ A beeping noise was heard – slow at first, then it gradually began to speed up. BEEP... BEEP... BEEP-BEEP-BEEP... BEEPBEEPBEEPBEEP!! ‘The windows! Quick!’ Salvatore ordered. He helped the bleeding Otto to his feet while Vojislav and Vila jumped out of the window, the two Mirandas following suit. The Sun was beginning to rise over the Horizon as the six ARCUS operatives took cover – BOOOOOOM!! – A muffled explosion was heard, followed by a few shards of glass falling on Salvatore’s head, his boonie hat protecting him. A section of concrete landed on Otto’s back, costing him a significant amount of blood. ‘Vila! Vojislav! Cover us!’ Salvatore dragged a wounded Otto, who left behind a trail of blood while Vila and Vojislav opened fire on DIVIETO troops within the surrounding area. After a while, Salvatore set down Otto on a bench, his face becoming gaunt and pale.

‘For God’s sake, man! Patch me up... I can make it!’ Otto growled through gritted teeth, even though he knew he was not going to live this time.

‘Not now, Otto! We need to get you to safety! Miranda, help him!’ Salvatore opened fire upon a few DIVIETO troops while Miranda helped Otto. Miranda Alpha drew her radio.

‘Tobias! Miranda Alpha here! We need an emergency evacuation!’ She called. Tobias and Miletto’s voices were heard over the radio, their tones registering worry and anxiety, a stark contrast from the former’s usually calm and cheery attitude and the latter’s sombre and serious demeanour.

‘We’re on our way!’ Tobias responded.

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‘OK – out!’ Miranda Alpha then drew her pistol and joined in the firefight.

‘Vila! Come on – WE ARE LEAVING!!’ Salvatore yelled. He opened fire with his assault rifle one-handed, screaming at the top of his voice as he was too agitated to aim, more concerned with the safety of his friend. Tobias’s helicopter landed on the edge of the city as Salvatore and Vila helped Otto on board, Vojislav and the two Mirandas providing cover fire.

‘Come on, time to go!’ The Italian denizen declared. The others finished off the remaining DIVIETO troops and boarded the helicopter quickly, which departed amidst the commotion. Salvatore helped Otto lie down on a makeshift operating table, the situation getting grimmer and bleaker by the second. ‘No, please, God, not again!’ He felt his voice and face break into a river of tears as he prayed this would not be a repeat of last time. Vila put pressure on Otto’s wounds, using his medical and surgical expertise to remove the bullets.

‘Sal, I can’t do much! He’s losing God knows how much blood!’ Vila raised his voice, beginning to lose his composure for the first time.

‘Just do what you can, Vila!’ Salvatore yelled back. Otto coughed briefly, blood oozing from his mouth.

‘Sal... please...’ He began.

‘Not now, Otto! Rest.’ Salvatore reassured him, even though he knew this time was not going to end well. Otto grunted loudly – he knew his time was limited.

‘Sal, for God’s sake!’ He grabbed Salvatore’s collar and whispered to him his last words. ‘Rosh... knows... Miranda Alpha...’ With those words, Otto’s eyes closed and he sighed as the German operative let go of Salvatore’s clothing, the young cadet passing away as he fell back. He was dead.

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‘No! No! NO!! Otto! Don’t go! OTTO!!’ Salvatore tried to shake Otto awake, his own body trembling with fear and anger. Eventually, he realised that his friend was well and truly dead. He struck his fist down on the table. ‘NO!! NO-O-O-O-O!!!’ He opened fire blindly, emptying his entire magazine. The whole crew took cover as he unleashed his rage, eventually looking at him with shocked expressions. Salvatore eventually calmed down and found himself on the verge of tears. He turned around to face Otto’s corpse and placed a German flag on his dead friend’s body, along with the handgun he had given him as a present. Vila put his hands together in a praying motion and crossed himself, uttering a prayer in Hungarian. ‘I’m sorry.’ Salvatore whispered softly as he turned to face Vojislav. Remembering Otto’s dying words, he then looked up at the two Mirandas. He approached Miranda Alpha and slapped her – HARD – knocking her to the floor. The real Miranda jumped back, crying out in shock over her former partner’s behaviour. Salvatore drew a new magazine from his tactical assault vest and loaded it into his side arm, slamming the magazine fiercely into the pistol. ‘Otto and my squad trusted you. I thought I could too.’ He cocked his handgun angrily and pointed it straight at the clone’s head. ‘So WHY in bloody hell does that piece of crap Rosh KNOW YOU!?’ The real Miranda drew her own gun and pointed it straight at Salvatore’s head.

‘You hurt Miranda Alpha again and I will kill you. I repeat: Hurt my daughter again, you die next.’ She warned coldly. Salvatore, realising Miranda was serious, lowered his gun slowly and helped up Miranda Alpha. The young clone looked at Salvatore calmly as she began her explanation.

‘As you know, I’m an exact 1:1 clone of your friend Miranda – my DNA, my knowledge, all identical to hers. When I was released from the laboratory, my creator... my father... Hermann – he conditioned me and groomed me for combat under DIVIETO orders. I met

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Rosh after the training ended. He said ARCUS is a dangerous organisation and wanted me to bring you to him – he offered me a lot of money. A few days ago, I found a video recording showing my father being executed by one of the DIVIETO troops. I also learned that I was to be the first of a legion of “Perfect Soldiers” with my frozen mother as a template, hence my strange birth name. I had no idea of his true agenda... until he shot and killed your friend.’ Salvatore’s facial features softened; his eyes red and bloodshot.

‘OK, Miranda Alpha... I believe you.’ He looked at the side of her face where he had struck her, a red mark now visible. ‘I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.’ He broke into tears, hugging the clone tightly. Feeling saddened by the loss of another friend and guilt-ridden by her actions, she returned the hug gratefully, sobbing silently as her mother embraced her soothingly.

‘I love you, Miranda Alpha – I always will.’ The original Miranda said softly to her daughter.

‘I love you, too, Mother.’ Miranda Alpha whispered as her mother wiped away her tears.

‘I never want to see your tears, my daughter.’ She said gently. Salvatore was weeping over Otto’s corpse as Vila put his large hand on his friend’s shoulder comfortingly.

Berchtesgaden, Bavarian Alps, Germany – 2 November 2016

Tobias piloted the helicopter to a graveyard in Otto’s hometown, where his body was laid to rest and buried in a biodegradable coffin, complete with a headstone which featured a framed picture of the fallen German cadet. The headstone read: “RIP Otto Frederick Handke, 1989 – 2016”. Salvatore saluted the gravestone as Vila prayed in German. ‘Goodbye, old friend... I shall avenge you. I promise.’ He then looked up to the Heavens. ‘Look after him for me. I’m going to finish this fight and I swear that after this war, I will sin... no more.’ With these words, the surviving ARCUS operatives left the graveyard, the mood mournful, filled with an atmosphere of restrained anger.

City of Stockholm, Stockholm, Sweden – 2 November 2016

Frank was driving his car with Jenna beside him, Holly and Himika absent. Frank was muttering to himself in French. Jenna looked at him calmly. ‘Frank, can you cut that out, please?’ The Oceanian officer asked politely. Frank sighed and did as he was told before apologising.

‘I can’t help it... I don’t know who to trust anymore. Salvatore’s digging his own grave with his Messianic Robin Hood crusade, and I’ve got no backup from Interpol – face it, Jenna, we’re virtually alone.’ He explained, shifting nervously.

‘This is definitely our last case, Frank – we’ve got Holly and Himika to help us out.’ Jenna smiled.

‘You mean those PI wannabes? They should just lay low and let trained professionals handle this.’ Frank snorted.

‘You and I both know that those girls are in too deep – didn’t you hear the news?’ Frank looked stunned as he turned to face Jenna briefly.

‘What news?’ Jenna smirked, amused by his befuddled expression.

‘Turn on the radio.’ Frank looked at her for a moment then focused on the road. He cursed in French before doing as he was told. A news reporter was giving out the news in Swedish. Frank, realising his mistake, flipped a switch, the audio now in English.

‘Terrorist group ARCUS has lost two of its members – Otto Handke, from Berchtesgaden, Germany – was killed in action in San Francisco, California earlier this morning. Mr Handke, aged 27, was shot and left for dead when an apartment building exploded around him. The second member – Vladimir Redski, from Moscow, Russia – was found in Vienna, Austria six months earlier, with multiple bullet holes in his body and one in his head. Mr Redski was 25

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years old at the time of his death. People are now beginning to suspect that ARCUS may be innocent after all, after receiving a shocking report on the backstory of these horrific events.’ The news reporter then transmitted the audio of Holly and Himika’s controversial and compromising report. Frank listened intently, intrigued by the report. His eyes then widened slightly as the report ended, turning off the radio. He slammed his feet on the brakes – HARD. The car screeched to a halt, knocking Jenna forwards in her seat.

‘Jenna... I always knew you had friends in exalted circles, but this takes the fucking piss!’ He said through gritted teeth.

‘What did you expect them to do, Frank? Just sit back and believe those lies?’ Jenna countered. Frank looked at Jenna with a slightly crazy glint in his eye.

‘I’m going to talk to them and give them a piece of my mind... and then when I find Salvatore, I’m going to rip him a new pair of testicles for the shit he’s put us all through this past half-decade!’ He reversed the car and drove back the way he came. Frank and Jenna came rushing in, the former’s voice vibrant with urgency and panic. ‘Holly! Himika!’ The girls were gone. Suspecting that something was wrong, he drew his side arm and cocked it. Looking around the confusion, his cell phone rang. Hesitating for a moment, he picked it up and answered it. ‘Hello?’ Jenna observed her friend’s facial expressions wordlessly. Frank’s face alternated between anger, concern and fear. He gripped his phone tightly, his hand shaking as he hung up unexpectedly, holstering his phone.

‘What was that, Frank?’ She asked. Frank turned to face Jenna, his eyes sparkling with a desire for revenge.

‘They’ve got them. The bastards!’ He sighed.

‘So what now?’ Jenna was at a loss for ideas.

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‘It looks like we’ve got no choice but to contact Salvatore. ARCUS are the only ones who can help us... and the World... now.’ Frank confessed.

‘How do we do that? We don’t have his number.’ Jenna rationalised.

‘We can scan the radio frequencies. We’re police, right?’ Frank smirked. Jenna looked surprised at her friend’s sudden change of behaviour.

‘That’s not your style, Frank.’ She said, sounding stunned.

‘I picked up some bad habits from your little friend.’ Frank countered. He chuckled humourlessly before exiting the penthouse suite, Jenna following behind him. In his car, Frank was manipulating a police scanner while Jenna monitored the frequencies in question, the majority of the radio frequencies being in Swedish. After a moment of trying, Frank turned off the scanner, laying his head back in frustration. Jenna looked at him with concern.

‘Why don’t we try using his old phone number? I mean, yes, it’s been five – nearly six – years, but unless he’s changed it...’ Frank sat up and looked at Jenna. A small smile crept across his lips.

‘...let’s give it a try.’ He drew his cell phone and dialled the number that he remembered. ‘I only hope he’s got it on him and that he still has the same number.’ He put the phone to his ear.

Russian Far East – 3 November 2016

Salvatore and Vila were in the stationary helicopter, trying to get some sleep while Vojislav looked pensive, muttering something in Serbian. Tobias was fast asleep at the front, Miletto next to him. Miranda and Miranda Alpha were sparring quietly. Salvatore’s phone rang. RING! RING! At first, he tried to ignore it but could not. After several seconds, he gave in and put on his boonie hat, cursing in Italian as he picked it up. ‘Hullo? How did you get this

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number?’ Listening intently, Salvatore jolted up as he heard the horrible news of his friend’s capture. ‘He just won’t give up, will he? OK... we’re in Russia right now – we’ll be in Sweden tomorrow evening. I suggest you get some sleep... and then we’ll finish this – for good. OK, be seeing you.’ He hung up.

‘Who was it?’ Vila asked.

‘It was a voice from the past, Vila... with some bad news.’ Salvatore explained. Miletto jolted up at the mention of this.

‘What news?’ The Parisian arms dealer enquired carefully. Salvatore paused for a moment to regain his composure.

‘Holly and her friend, Himika, have been captured by DIVIETO.’ The two Mirandas stopped their sparring and they stared at the ARCUS Commander in shock. Tobias and Miletto were sleeping at the front of the helicopter, the former beginning to grow some stubble, his fair hair frizzy and unkempt. Salvatore approached Tobias quietly and shook him a bit, the Swedish pilot snoring loudly. Salvatore eventually slapped him lightly across the cheek. Tobias’s eyes clicked open as he looked at Salvatore worriedly. ‘We’ve got one more task to do: Rescue an old friend.’ Miletto raised an eyebrow and looked at Salvatore in disbelief, the arms dealer stunned by the concept of the renegade mercenary having a friend.

‘Where to, Salvatore?’ Tobias asked.

‘First stop: Moscow. I have a tribute to pay.’ Salvatore replied. Tobias just nodded and flipped a switch on the control panel of the aircraft, piloting the whirlybird once more.

Chapter 7

City of Moscow, Moskva, Russia – 3 November 2016

Salvatore knocked on the door of a house, with Miranda beside him. He looked at her worriedly. ‘What am I going to tell them?’ Miranda looked back, her eyes sad and sympathetic at the same time.

‘You must tell them the truth... you know what you must do. I’ll be with you, Salvatore.’ She said softly. Salvatore nodded, sighing in mild frustration.

‘I know, I know.’ Squeezing his hand gently, she smiled at him softly, giving him a peck on the cheek. Salvatore rapped on the door – HARDER. The door opened as a voice was heard, cursing in Russian. A man with a chiselled face and slight stubble – Ivan Redski, Vladimir’s father – appeared, seeing Salvatore.

‘Salvatore...? What are you doing here!?! The Federal Security Bureau is out looking for you and your men!’ His voice was a gravelly smoke-burnished rasp, brought on by years of chain-smoking. Salvatore remained calm, knowing what he must do.

‘Mr Redski... I have bad news, may I come in?’ He asked apprehensively. Ivan looked at Salvatore for a moment before nodding.

‘Come.’ He announced. Salvatore and Miranda entered the house as the denizen crossed himself out of fear. Salvatore and Miranda sat down before Ivan and a woman – Krista Harkov-Redski – Vladimir’s mother. Salvatore locked eyes with them, taking a breath before announcing the critical news.

‘Mr and Mrs Redski... I have bad news. Your son, Vladimir, is dead.’ Ivan’s eyes widened in shock as Krista looked crushed and devastated by the news.

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‘Is this a joke?’ Ivan asked as he reached for a cigarette. Salvatore shook his head tersely before continuing.

‘No joke. He... he was corrupted by an unsavoury individual. I had no choice... but to kill him.’ Salvatore tried not to cry, but the memory of killing his old friend was too much for him to suppress. His voice began to crack as he continued speaking. ‘He... betrayed my... my crew. For five years, I trusted him... and he does this – all this time, he was a fucking double agent! I shot him... I killed him!’ He sobbed in Miranda’s arms, the Swedish beauty hugging him. Ivan just looked empty and shocked while Krista shed her own tears silently.

‘You... you took my son’s life?’ Ivan asked incredulously.

‘It’s a long story, Mr Redski... you wouldn’t understand.’ Salvatore calmed down as he spoke. Krista spoke up for the first time.

‘I thought Vladimir would have been up to something, Salvatore... but betrayal? I find that hard to believe.’ She said calmly, trying to ascertain Salvatore’s sincerity.

‘What I find hard to believe is that YOU, his own father, introduced his own son to a life of political corruption and conspiracy!’ Losing his composure, Salvatore pointed an accusing middle finger at Ivan, who was restrained by Krista.

‘Ivan, you know of what he speaks.’ Krista said softly, trying to calm down her prideful husband. Ivan calmed down and nodded apologetically. Salvatore regained his composure before continuing speaking.

‘He must have had his own agenda even during my early career, before my graduation.’ Salvatore locked eyes with Ivan, his own face marked and scarred with dedication and restrained anger. ‘Vladimir always was a shifty character. I don’t know why I trusted him... I suppose it was because we were both outcasts – denizens – thrust into a closed-minded

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society. I refused to conform and spoke up for what many people KNEW to be wrong, and I was branded a criminal. I try to do some good in the World, and my own friend stabs me in the back. Not again. This authoritarian BULLSHIT ends HERE and NOW! This century! Regardless of nation, culture or religion, I'll put an end to it... and I will make every single authority figure PAY for what they've done!' Ivan and Krista looked at Salvatore sympathetically as the renegade mercenary sighed audibly, the ARCUS operative removing his boonie hat as Ivan turned to face Miranda.

'Who are you?' Ivan, now without a son or heir, enquired as his face began to crack – his son was dead and the grief and guilt was destroying him.

'I'm Miranda Ekerot. I'm Salvatore's partner.' She shook Ivan's hand before hugging Krista.

'She introduced me to this life of activism and rebellion.' Salvatore explained.

'I must confess, Salvatore, I hadn't thought of committing acts of terror when I started out.' Miranda countered. Salvatore looked at Vladimir's parents, knowing that he had crossed the invisible barrier.

'I swear to you both, on my soul, that I will find this evil person... and I will make him pay for corrupting your son, for ruining my life, and for countless other atrocities that would have made the Man of Steel look like a small-time crook. When this is over, I'm done.' He got to his feet and put on his boonie hat, turning to leave. Miranda looked at the grieving parents sympathetically.

'Trust him – he'll keep his word.' With those words, she, too, left as the ARCUS couple returned to the patiently waiting helicopter. Tobias, without another word, started the helicopter and flew away from Russia.

Mount Kebnekaise, Sweden – 3 November 2016

The helicopter landed outside the former ARCUS base in the Scandinavian Mountains. The ARCUS operatives dismounted from their vehicle, Miranda and Miranda Alpha looking at the remains of the base. ‘This was ARCUS HQ for five years.’ Salvatore mused quietly, reminiscing at the memories. The two Mirandas looked sad as they observed the rubble where the base once stood.

‘What happened here?’ Salvatore turned to face Miranda Alpha, adjusting his boonie hat.

‘This was home to us for a very long time, until one of our number, who shall remain nameless... VLADIMIR REDSKI... betrayed us.’ Salvatore yelled his late friend’s name into the air, which echoed away into silence.

‘Salvatore, look at it this way – you lost a traitor but gained an insider.’ Miletto reasoned – he of all people knew what he was talking about, and he knew Salvatore understood. Salvatore mulled over Miletto’s words before nodding in acceptance.

‘You’re right, Miletto. We need your help. *I* need your help.’ The ARCUS Commander bore his soul to the former DIVIETO operative. Just then, Salvatore’s radio crackled to life, cutting off his train of thought. He responded to it almost immediately. ‘Who am I speaking to? Identify yourself.’ He could hear a familiar voice on the other end of the line.

‘This is Detective Inspector François Morris. You took your time, Salvatore Pasquale.’ Frank replied as Salvatore looked around, scanning the area.

‘Where are you?’ Salvatore asked as he drew his side arm carefully, the other operatives arming up with their weapons.

‘Very close by.’ Frank responded. Salvatore thought quickly, suspecting that he may have been compromised.

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‘Vila, Vojislav, scan the area!’ He commanded. Miranda and Miranda Alpha joined Vila and Vojislav respectively, while Miletto remained with Salvatore, Tobias remaining at his seat. Frank approached Salvatore from behind.

‘Hello, Salvatore.’ Salvatore wheeled around with his handgun drawn, stunning Frank – the cop and the denizen coming face-to-face for the first time in 5, almost 6, years.

‘Hello, Detective Inspector. How did you know where to find me?’ Salvatore replied in his usual terse manner.

‘I followed clues left by the news – I’m not stupid, unlike some of your friends.’ Frank replied – he and Salvatore could have argued for months and there would still be no decision. Salvatore raised an eyebrow, confused.

‘You mean...?’ Jenna approached Salvatore from his other side, her voice calm and strong, complete with Oceanian dialect.

‘That’s right, Salvatore.’ Salvatore spun round to see Jenna. Miletto looked at the two cops in panic and fear.

‘Who’s this – another addition to your motley crew?’ Frank asked, indicating Miletto.

‘Close – I’m a defector. My name is Miletto Fresson.’ Miletto smirked as he shook Frank’s hand.

‘You picked a pretty rough crew to join, Miletto. Salvatore and his boys aren’t exactly squeaky clean.’ Frank spoke as he cursed in French for a moment.

‘Neither is the piece of shit pulling the strings.’ Salvatore retorted, insulting Frank in Italian. Jenna approached Salvatore, the Australian rogue cop eyeing up the Italian vigilante.

‘You haven’t changed much, have you?’ She asked as she raised an eyebrow.

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‘Old habits die hard.’ Salvatore justified – he knew it was not the best excuse, but it was an honest one. At this point, the remaining ARCUS operatives returned to find Frank and Jenna with Salvatore and Miletto. Vojislav and Vila instinctively raised their weapons but were stopped by Miranda and Miranda Alpha. The two Mirandas approached the Interpol officers, gaining their attention.

‘Hello, Jenna. It’s been a long time.’ Miranda announced her presence as Jenna turned to face her old friend.

‘Miranda... is that you?’ She enquired with a tone of surprise and disbelief. *She hasn’t changed one iota! How does she do it?* Jenna thought to herself. ‘You haven’t changed one iota! How do you do it?’

‘They... used me... as a test subject.’ Miranda spoke hesitantly as she remembered her cryogenic capture and sub-zero incarceration, but very little of her life before that fateful day. Miranda Alpha stepped forward and looked at Jenna, then Frank.

‘I was the result – a clone.’ She said calmly. Frank and Jenna exchanged glances.

‘This is fucked up.’ Frank spoke out loud as Miletto approached him, having had enough of the banter.

‘Detective Inspector, you contacted us because you said some friends were in danger – friends of Salvatore’s. Who are they and why are they at such risk?’ Miletto asked curiously, feeling he could finally be of some actual use to ARCUS.

‘Talk to Jenna.’ Frank replied. Jenna looked away slightly timidly before speaking up.

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‘They were undercover reporters – they got in too deep, and were captured in our absence.’

Salvatore sighed as he thought of a plan, knowing that Holly and Himika’s lives were in danger, and it was up to HIM to save them and put an end to this stupid war once and for all.

‘Miletto... you’ve got the DIVIETO frequency, haven’t you?’ Miletto looked up at Salvatore, stunned by his question.

‘Yes, I do – why?’ Salvatore smiled a sneaky smile, like a snake.

‘I’ve got a plan. You’re going to have to trust me.’ Salvatore laughed.

‘Do you remember what happened last time you had a plan, Sal?’ Vila interjected, his vocal intonation one of a disillusioned military officer, reminding Salvatore of Otto’s fateful accidents, the latter resulting in his friend’s permanent death. Salvatore just nodded before continuing.

‘Miletto can contact the DIVIETO organisation under the guise of having captured us. Vila, Vojislav and myself then use our position from within to find out where Holly and Himika are being held, and the rest should be straightforward.’ He turned to face Miletto.

‘Only I won’t be so quick to stitch you up.’ The French former DIVIETO operative spoke up, eyeing up the ARCUS Commander.

‘I hope not. I don’t want to have to kill two friends.’ Frank’s eyes narrowed as he figured out what Salvatore meant.

‘I know what you did in Austria.’ He growled, earning him a cold stare from Salvatore.

‘It’s no secret. Let’s try to focus on the plan at hand, which is to rescue our journalistic heroines. If this plan fucks up, then we’re all fucked. Let’s get going.’ He walked away with

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Miletto, leaving the other operatives to their own devices as Miranda and Miranda Alpha look at each other.

‘Wait! Sal, I have an idea!’ Miranda spoke up. Salvatore turned to face Miranda, his eyebrow raised in a Spock-like fashion. ‘Let me go – you guys have been captured once already.’

‘Holly’s my friend and I have to rescue her. Sorry, Mir.’ Salvatore turned away but Miranda grabbed his arm, making him face her.

‘Look at what they did to your face, man!’ Salvatore’s face registered realisation and disbelief as he remembered the torture he went through, his good eye locking with Miranda’s pleading eyes. He just nodded. ‘Thank you. This is our fight, too, you know. You don’t need to carry the blame all by yourself.’ Salvatore just shrugged, saying nothing. Miranda turned to face Miletto. ‘Miletto, change of plan: We use me and my clone as bait. Salvatore, you and your crew will disguise yourselves as DIVIETO soldiers.’ Miranda smirked while Miranda Alpha just smiled, nodding as a plan formed in the young clone’s head. Miletto just looked at Salvatore briefly.

‘Mr Pasquale, let’s do this.’ The Parisian enigmatic spoke as the Venetian denizen smiled knowingly, priming his assault rifle in response. The remaining ARCUS operatives gathered round, the Interpol rogue officers observing wordlessly.

‘Take this.’ Vojislav held out his hand in front of Salvatore, who looked confused for a moment before understanding. Handing him the flash drive, Vojislav then gave it to Frank. The Interpol officer held up his handcuffs while Jenna just chuckled. Salvatore looked at Vila, then Vojislav, then the two Mirandas before finally looking at Miletto.

‘I hope this works. Frank, make sure your superiors see what’s on that drive.’ Salvatore pleaded with Frank, knowing that the French-Canadian cop would do the right thing at the

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right time – it would have shamed his policeman’s blood to disobey his conscience. Frank looked at the drive carefully before putting it in his pocket, leaving with Jenna. Miletto cursed aloud in French as he put his cell phone to his ear.

‘Rosh, it’s me, Miletto. I have news for you. I can’t tell you now, it would be dangerous... I will meet you back at base.’ Miletto hung up. Vojislav replayed the conversation on his internal hard drive and then tapped Salvatore’s shoulder.

‘I got his location: DIVIETO HQ is at an undersea ocean laboratory in the Norwegian Sea on the Icelandic-Norwegian border.’ Salvatore looked at Vojislav, stunned.

‘What...!? But that’s all the way at the edge of the Hemisphere – bordering the Pole!’ He sighed in acceptance after a moment of disbelief.

‘How do we get in?’ Miranda asked, eager for a fight.

‘Sea or air, take your pick. The entrance is guarded, so entry and exit needs to be quick.’ Miletto explained as he looked at the ARCUS operatives. Salvatore slowly raised his head with an eerily calm and confident look, as if he were harnessing a tranquil rage with a sense of determination.

‘Let’s... fucking... do this.’ He said slowly and gently as he headed towards the helicopter, with his accomplices in tow.

Chapter 8

DIVIETO Ocean Laboratory, Norwegian Sea – 3 November 2016

The control room was manned by a single occupant – a robed Rosh. RING! RING! His telephone rang he walked around the room contemplatively, curious about the ringer on the other end. Looking through a TV monitor, he eyed up Holly and Himika, the two reporters having been captured and imprisoned in the same cell. Eventually, after what felt like an eternity, he approached his telephone and answered it. ‘Hello?’ His eyes widened slightly in surprise. ‘Is that so? OK, Miletto. Well done. Bring them to me – out.’ He hung up and left the control room.

Holly and Himika were in their prison cell, the former looking slightly worried while the latter remained calm and collected. ‘This is great. I mean, really.’ The beautiful blonde complained.

‘Hey, we knew the risks when we signed on the dotted line.’ Her Asian counterpart spoke up, trying to reason with her American friend.

‘We...? I think this was YOUR idea, if I recall. You’re the one who suggested going undercover and doing all this espionage shit.’ Holly retorted, sounding irritated as Himika winced slightly under her friend’s stare.

‘Why didn’t you say anything?’ Himika asked in disbelief.

‘Because I actually believed it would be worth it – I let my sneaky, nerdy Samurai chick friend talk me into playing secret agent and look at us now! You didn’t just play with your life, you played with mine. Our only hope now is that Salvatore finds us and saves us, otherwise I’m going to hold YOU responsible for endangering ourselves and make you wish you’d never come to the West!’ Himika looked shocked at Holly’s outburst, her face

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registering hurt and sadness. Holly suddenly felt a deadly concoction of guilt and remorse course through her being, instantly regretting lashing out at her friend. Himika turned her head away as she sobbed silently. Holly put her hand on Himika's shoulder, apologising softly. 'I'm so sorry.' The two women hugged each other.

Salvatore, Vila and Vojislav were hiding in a shadow, watching some DIVIETO troops walk past them. On Salvatore's cue, the three ARCUS operatives knocked out the soldiers and dragged their unconscious forms into the shadows. They emerged a few seconds later, wearing the DIVIETO troops' uniforms. 'A bit too small for me – how do these guys cope?' Vila complained, and with good reason – the uniform was too small for his large, muscular 2-metre-plus build.

'It's not that bad once you get used to it, Vila.' Salvatore chuckled.

'Come on – we have a job to do. Remember: Say nothing.' Vojislav spoke up, reassuming control. The three men headed into an elevator, infiltrating the base with Miletto by their side. Miranda and Miranda Alpha emerged from another shadow and quickly headed for a ventilation shaft, the two blondes – mother and daughter – working together for the first time. Miranda and Miranda Alpha crawled through the ventilation shaft, the assassins relying on one another for their own survival.

'You realise what will happen to us if we're found out?' The real Miranda asked worriedly, her time with Salvatore having softened her up somewhat.

'Don't remind me. They know I betrayed them.' The slightly harder Miranda Alpha countered – she knew what she had to do.

'In your defence, they killed the man who made you, who gave you a life.' Miranda Alpha looked sad, her posture slumping slightly. The real Miranda looked at her clone-cum-

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daughter sadly, her maternal instinct kicking in. ‘I’m sorry.’ Miranda Alpha shook her head, wiping away some tears.

‘It’s not your fault.’ Miranda Alpha turned to face the real Miranda briefly.

‘We’ll put an end to this madness – permanently.’ Miranda Alpha spoke confidently.

‘Right – and we need all the help we can get, so let’s continue.’ The real Miranda smiled, the two blondes continuing with their task. The two of them continued crawling through a vent, reaching an opening as they peered through a grate silently.

As the disguised rebels entered the control room, Rosh turned to face the visitors. Recognising Miletto, he smiled and simply approached him, unaware of his defection. ‘Well done, Miletto.’ He congratulated his friend.

‘Nothing more than my duty to the preservation of the balance of power, sir – I’m sorry I couldn’t get Salvatore.’ Miletto half-joked, half-bullshitted, having picked up a few bad habits from Salvatore and his posse.

‘Do not worry about Salvatore, Miletto. I have another fate in store for him.’ Rosh turned on a television as he spoke. There was a news report in progress, featuring a montage of crowds of people in a lot of major cities around the World, alternately praising and deriding ARCUS in time with a reporter’s audio commentary.

‘Terrorist organisation ARCUS, recently risen from obscurity, is now the target of mass controversy. People’s allegiances and opinions to the group are extremely highly polarised – Continental Europe and the Middle East praise their efforts for their anti-authoritarian tactics, while the United States and United Kingdom openly criticise the organisation, stating that their efforts subvert their authority – certain parties in Asia and Oceania prefer to remain neutral, although they admire ARCUS’s work. What is certain now is that there is no gold at

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the end of this rainbow.’ The reporter declared. Salvatore, having seen the montage from his position, shook slightly, almost imperceptibly, with anger. He was just barely able to regain his composure before Rosh noticed.

‘Leave us, please.’ The DIVIETO Ringleader ordered. Salvatore nodded silently and left, with Vila and Vojislav following suit. Miletto remained behind with Rosh, the two friends looking at each other. ‘Miletto, Salvatore’s life is ruined, along with his reputation. He tried to take on the system... and lost. I have friends who will ensure that he will never live this down – to serve as an example.’

‘Rosh, aren’t you taking this far too personally? So many people in power – political, educational, religious, – often have a reason for acting in this manner.’ Miletto asked, countering Rosh’s statement with calm venom.

‘I have a reason, Miletto: Control, tradition, maintaining the balance of power... justice.’ Rosh raised his voice slightly. He clenched his hand into a fist as he looked through his reports and newspaper articles showcasing ARCUS’s efforts.

Miranda and Miranda Alpha looked at each other worriedly, the two assassins remaining silent and stealthy. The original Miranda drew her cell phone while the clone peered into the darkness of the shaft.

Salvatore, Vila and Vojislav entered a lounge within the ocean laboratory – it was empty. Suddenly, the ARCUS Commander’s phone beeped. BEEP-BEEP! Looking at his allies, he slung his weapon before answering it. There was a text message on the screen – it read: “WATCH YOUR BACK. M”. Salvatore read the text message and literally looked around him before pocketing his phone wordlessly. He put his hands to his helmet to remove it but was stopped by Vojislav, who indicated towards a security camera. Shrugging, Salvatore just

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nodded and tweaked his weapon quietly. A few more guards entered the lounge, prompting the disguised operatives to stand up, saluting them. Salvatore slung his rifle over his shoulder as he exited the lounge, leaving Vojislav and Vila behind so he could regain his senses in his own time. He buried his head in his hand and sighed inaudibly, remembering everything that had led up to this point. He muttered Otto's name quietly, having forgotten about Vojislav's previous warning.

Rosh and Miletto were present in the DIVIETO Ringleader's office, the former typing up something on a laptop computer while the latter looked through security monitors wordlessly. Hearing Salvatore's utterance, Miletto simply said nothing as he was now on the ARCUS Commander's side. Looking at his old friend, he smirked wordlessly. Rosh then got to his feet as his laptop computer began to show some rather disturbing graphics. 'Come and take a look at this, Miletto.' He requested politely. Miletto approached the laptop computer as he and Rosh observed the monitor, which detailed a graphic and rather destructive plan. 'DIVIETO's final solution launches today, Miletto.'

'Final solution...?' Miletto asked slightly apprehensively.

'An ultimatum to the World: The rabble in the streets are taking up arms for that troublesome denizen, rod-sparers are beginning to be overrun by those pitiful rebels, and our friend seems to have disappeared from the face of the Earth. It's quite simple: We launch a nuclear MIRV warhead and target selected countries to deter such dissidents, and to bring out ARCUS for good.' Rosh explained. Miletto sounded slightly concerned, fear evident in his voice.

'This is madness, Rosh.' He said, beginning to lose his composure.

'Don't be so naive, Miletto. After all – you did design and supply the weapons used in these missiles. Think about it – the people will be looking for a leader, and we will lead them into a

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new age where the masters are in power and not the students.’ The computer monitor blipped off, leaving Miletto with a rather stunned and shocked expression.

Miranda and Miranda Alpha, having overheard the conversation, looked at each other in shock. ‘So that’s the true purpose of DIVIETO: Control.’ The real Miranda half-whispered, half-hissed to her clone-cum-daughter as she felt the memory of her experimentation return, biting her like a mosquito hungry for blood.

‘These people should have stayed in the Dark Ages.’ Miranda Alpha retorted. Motioning to proceed, Miranda led the way while Miranda Alpha followed silently, the girls crawling silently and stealthily away from the control room as they proceeded further into the facility.

Chapter 9

Interpol HQ – Lyon, Rhône-Alpes, France – 4 November 2016

Frank and Jenna were standing before an audience composed entirely of ambassadors from various nations. A large computer monitor was showing the details of Rosh's plan and the true genesis of DIVIETO. 'As you can see, this is evidence that ARCUS is not responsible for these threatening attacks – it is DIVIETO, who, in an attempt to satiate tradition and preserve history, have begun these scathing strikes against the voice of freedom, independence and democracy. These people are the descendants of the Bavarian Illuminati.' Frank explained, his tone of voice almost pleading as his face showed frustration towards his own superiors – they were politically neutral and tied to the system, whereas he was not. The Interpol President looked at Frank briefly, the flustered cop's face registering a combination of disbelief and seriousness like a disciplined ninja. The Interpol President finally spoke up.

'Detective Inspector, our authority is limited to international crime. We cannot deal with conspiracies. Multiple nations and political parties would be influenced and even embarrassed. I am sorry, but I cannot authorise this mission. I know you understand.' Frank just nodded. *That's it. I've had enough – e-fucking-nough.* He felt his mind scream like a perennially angry political minister.

'Yes... I understand all right. You have my resignation.' He spoke up confidently, in a tone that shocked many of the Interpol ambassadors to their very souls. With those words, Frank turned to leave with Jenna following him.

'You too, Captain? It would be a shame to lose two very capable officers.' The Interpol President spoke up calmly, concerned about the fate of these two rogue officials. Jenna turned

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back to see the Interpol President, the Australian officer looking into her soul for the first time. Eventually, she locked eyes with her superior.

‘I’m sorry, but my loyalty does not lie with politics.’ With those words, she turned and ran after Frank. With Frank and Jenna gone, the audience looked at the computer monitor, the screen detailing the history of DIVIETO and Rosh’s ultimate plan – his final solution to the ARCUS question. Voices began to raise and scream all over the auditorium as arguments broke out, despite the Interpol President’s efforts to keep them in check.

Frank and Jenna walked out of the Interpol HQ building and headed over to Frank’s car, getting in. Frank grunted loudly as he started the car, looking at Jenna, who looked back confidently. ‘Fuck it. I’ve had enough. I knew this would be a waste of time.’ The French-Canadian rogue cop declared.

‘So what do we do, Frank? We’re practically fugitives ourselves.’ His Australian counterpart pointed out. Frank looked certain, a look of conviction and dedication burned on his face.

‘We go help Salvatore, that’s what we do... what we should have done a long time ago.’ His voice registering authority and command, Frank started his car and drove away from the building.

DIVIETO Ocean Laboratory, Norwegian Sea – 4 November 2016

Miranda and Miranda Alpha eventually reached the prison cells of the ocean laboratory. The two blondes opened the ventilation shaft and slipped into the cells, the assassins meeting the intrepid reporters for the first time. Holly looked at the identical-looking women in confusion and disbelief. ‘Miranda... Miranda...?’ The American dancer-cum-reporter asked in an effort to ascertain she was not drunk or hallucinating.

‘It’s a long story.’ Her Swedish counterpart explained simply.

‘What are you doing here?’ Holly asked, clearly stunned but choosing not to press the matter further.

‘We’re saving your bottoms. Frank and Jenna told us everything.’ Miranda Alpha said with a slight smirk on her face.

‘Saving us by handing yourselves over...? Not even Salvatore would think of something like that. We’ve been here for about a day and we still haven’t eaten each other yet.’ Holly laughed. Himika sat up, looking at the three blondes. Feeling out of place, the Asian beauty coughed, getting the two Mirandas’ attention. She introduced herself.

‘I’m Holly’s friend, Himika.’ She shook hands with both Mirandas before the real Miranda spoke up in her trademark calm-but-deadly tone.

‘Well, Himika – looks like you two landed your curious selves in quite a deep hole. You’re quite the fool, Holly – falling in love with a man who left her more than half a decade ago and hasn’t been seen or heard from since then.’ Holly looked at Miranda coldly.

‘I did all this for him.’ She justified herself – she knew she had been quite reckless recently, but only to save the life of the only man she had ever truly loved.

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‘Yes, and look where it got you and me.’ Himika countered followed by a swear word in Japanese.

‘This was YOUR idea, I seem to recall!’ Holly snapped back.

‘Why didn’t you stop me?’ Himika retorted smugly.

‘Because I actually thought you had an idea!’ Holly yelled. Sensing imminent danger, the two Mirandas clasped their mouths over the arguing reporters, silencing them.

‘Holly, Himika... I want you girls to calm down. You’re not just playing with your lives, you’re playing with ours. OK?’ Miranda explained in a reasonable tone of voice. Holly and Himika nodded in unison, followed by a muffled affirmative response, and the blonde assassins removed their hands from the girls’ mouths.

‘How do we get out of here?’ Himika asked. Miranda Alpha pointed up at the open ventilation shaft.

‘Up there... unless one of us can seduce the guard.’ All eyes turned to Holly.

‘Me? No, come on!’ She blushed slightly, not having flirted with men for a long time.

‘Unless you can think of a better way, we’re stuck here. Correction: YOU’RE stuck here.’ Miranda Alpha spoke up in a slightly sardonic manner, using her dry wit to her advantage. Holly looked pensive for a moment before finally deciding on taking action. The two Mirandas headed up for the ventilation shaft while Holly waited for a guard to enter the prison. She whistled at the first guard entering, putting on her best sultry voice.

‘Well, hello, stranger.’ The guard turned to face her wordlessly. He approached her. ‘What do you say I take you out sometime?’ Holly continued, getting better at the act. The guard raised an eyebrow before ultimately nodding slowly, a smile creeping across his face. Holly

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motioned for the guard to come closer, who did so. ‘Why don’t you give me a kiss, baby?’ She whispered sensually. The guard proceeded to do as he was told. At the last moment, however, Holly grabbed the guard’s head and struck him against the door of the cell sharply, knocking him out cold and retrieving the key to the cell door in a single smooth movement. She looked up at the ventilation shaft. ‘It’s OK, I got the key.’ Miranda and Miranda Alpha looked at each other, exchanging looks of surprise and disbelief.

‘Rather feisty girl.’ Miranda Alpha mused.

‘You haven’t seen anything yet, my dear.’ The real Miranda countered as the blondes climbed down from the ventilation shaft and into the cell. Miranda and Miranda Alpha entered the prison cell from the ventilation shaft as Holly handed Miranda the key, who took it. Using it to unlock and open the door, the four women exited the cell. ‘Come on, let’s go.’ Miranda whispered. Leading the way, the four women slipped out of the prison and headed for the upper levels to find Salvatore.

Chapter 10

Ocean Floor – 4 November 2016

Frank and Jenna were in a miniature submarine, the former piloting the midget submersible while the latter acted as co-driver-cum-navigator. The minisub's computer beeped repeatedly, catching Jenna's attention. BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP! 'The ocean laboratory's straight ahead, Frank.' She looked at the electronic map carefully.

'You got it, Jenna.' Following the directions provided by the GPS on the computer, Frank piloted the minisub towards the ocean lab.

DIVIETO Ocean Laboratory, Norwegian Sea – 4 November 2016

The minisub surfaced, coming to a standstill as the engine ceased to function. Frank observed the dock silently, astute as ever, while Jenna drew her cell phone. 'What are you doing?' Frank asked as he took notice.

'Letting our mutual friend know we're here.' Jenna retorted.

'Don't be silly, come on.' Frank countered.

'If Holly really is here, then I'm counting on him to get her out.' Frank rolled his eyes and cursed in French as Jenna tweaked her cell phone.

Salvatore got to his feet, having recovered. His cell phone beeped, prompting him to answer it. He looked at it curiously. A text message read: "WE'RE HERE. GET THE GIRLS AND GET OUT. J". He read the message and pocketed his phone, rendezvousing with Vila and Vojislav, showing them the message. The three rebels drew their weapons and headed for the prison cells, leaving the lounge as they rushed down a corridor and into an elevator. At the exit of the prison floor, the elevator doors opened to reveal the disguised heroes. Miranda and

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Miranda Alpha raised their weapons and struck them rather than shooting them. One of them groaned in pain – it was Salvatore, his gruff but gentle voice instantaneously recognisable as he looked at the quartet of heroines. ‘Don’t just stand there, you potato, help me up!’ Miranda, recognising the familiar vocabulary, helped up Salvatore apologetically.

‘I’m sorry, I didn’t know.’ She apologised.

‘Looks like our disguises worked TOO well, eh? Come on.’ Salvatore chuckled. Holly looked at the speaking figure. Putting 2 and 2 together, she ran up to him.

‘Salvatore... is it you?’ She asked hopefully. Salvatore turned to face Holly and nodded.

‘Yes, it is I.’ He said simply. Holly, without another word, wrapped her arms around Salvatore, hugging him tightly as she cried tears of joy and relief, not wanting to let him go. Salvatore stroked Holly’s hair and smiled softly, the helmet obscuring his face.

‘It’s been a long time... I’ve missed you so much.’ Holly said softly. Salvatore’s hands shook slightly as he tried to suppress his urge of kissing Holly. With some effort, he broke the embrace and looked at her softly.

‘I’ve missed you too... but for now, we must get out of here.’ Leading the girls into the elevator, Salvatore reloaded his assault rifle and primed it viciously as he loaded a grenade into the grenade launcher, the elevator ascending towards the upper level of the ocean lab.

Rosh and Miletto were present in the control room of the ocean lab, the former flipping switches for the security cameras while the latter was looking at the computer monitor in shock, guilt overcoming him. ‘This... is my doing... MY design...’ Miletto cursed to himself in French before getting to his feet. He took a deep breath and reached into his pocket, producing a handgun. He put it to his former friend’s head and cocked it. ‘Don’t move, Rosh.’ Rosh looked stunned as he raised his voice in disbelief.

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‘Miletto? What do you think you’re doing?’ The DIVIETO Ringleader realised then and there that his friend had betrayed him and sided with the opposition.

‘I’m doing what I could never do alone. I’m stopping you and your murderous authoritarian agenda – disciplinarian teachings often fail due to people like you being too high on your own power trip.’ The French rebel spoke through gritted teeth. Rosh looked around and attempted to call security, Miletto simply smirking as the emergency push-button switch did nothing.

‘Security, get in here!’ He cursed in Israeli and Hebrew, realising he was done for.

‘Looking for this, perhaps?’ Miletto held up a microchip before throwing it in the bin, landing perfectly.

‘You traitor...’ Rosh growled, livid at his oldest and closest friend’s betrayal.

‘...oh, that’s rich – coming from the man who seduced and corrupted Salvatore’s friend.’ Miletto spat back.

‘Vladimir was merely a pawn.’ Rosh reasoned calmly, harnessing a tranquil rage like a nuclear warhead. Miletto kept his gun pointed at Rosh’s body.

‘I’ve never deliberately killed anyone in my life – I’m quite proud of that fact.’ He said simply, trying to control his rising anger and frustration. The doors to the control room opened as an *incognito* Salvatore and the ARCUS operatives arrived. Rosh turned to face them, unaware of their true identity.

‘Found more intruders? Throw them in the brig.’ Rosh ordered. Salvatore removed his disguise, revealing to Rosh his face for the first time in its entirety as his helmet fell to the floor with a dull CLUNK!

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‘Recognise me? The Signal de Botrange in Belgium, about half a decade ago?’ He sneered. Rosh looked at Salvatore uncertainly, the Italian leader slipping on his boonie hat. Rosh’s eyes narrowed as he remembered his defeat and humiliation.

‘You fuck...! Now I recall.’ Salvatore looked at Rosh as he primed his rifle.

‘Get fucking going.’ The ARCUS Commander barked as Miletto led Rosh out of the control room.

‘You’ll pay for this. You’ll learn that change is the only constant in life!’ The DIVIETO Ringleader turned to face Salvatore with a smug look on his face.

‘FUCKING MOVE!!’ Salvatore aimed his weapon at Rosh’s head, screaming like an infuriated banshee – he was losing his composure. Miletto pushed Rosh out of the control room and down a corridor, the DIVIETO leader now apprehended by the ARCUS rebels. As the ARCUS rebels led the DIVIETO leader to the dock of the ocean lab, Salvatore ran into the guards from earlier, now wearing casual clothes. There was a brief, scathing silence before the guards recognised their assailants. Salvatore opened fire on one guard while Vila and Vojislav took care of the others, emptying their entire magazines into the defenceless men’s bodies. Rosh took the opportunity to catch Miletto off-guard and shoot him in the gut and chest with his own gun, the redeemed former DIVIETO agent mortally wounded – a gunfight broke out as DIVIETO troops fought against the ARCUS operatives. Salvatore called out Miletto’s name as he ran to aid his friend. ‘Miletto!’ He yelled. ‘Miletto, hang on! Vila, give me a hand!’ Vila looked at Vojislav briefly, the two men taking cover.

‘Vila, go! I’ll cover you!’ Vojislav stated. Nodding, Vila emerged from his hiding spot, the gentle giant gunning down the DIVIETO soldiers with unerring accuracy as he reached Salvatore and the dying Miletto. He crouched down beside the French defector. Salvatore

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tried to patch up the man's wounds while Vila drew his radio, yelling in Hungarian. Salvatore heard a voice coming from his radio – strange yet familiar. It was Frank.

'Sal, it's Frank. I'm with Jenna. We're at the docks of the ocean lab in a yellow minisub. Where are you?' Salvatore and Vila looked at each other, the ARCUS Commander drawing his own radio.

'We're at the docks, getting our balls pinched! We've got a man down!' Salvatore took a peek round a corner, spotting Frank's minisub. He then motioned to Vila.

'Come on –we are leaving!' Vila called, Miletto grabbing the gentle giant's arm.

'No – leave me here.' Miletto spat as he spewed blood from his mouth – he was going to join Otto in the great unknown.

'Miletto, what are you talking about?' Vila asked, trying to remain calm.

'I'm not... going to make it, Vila. Get the girls out of here... and yourselves... while you can.' Vila looked sad. Knowing there was little he could do; he just shook Miletto's hand and picked up his discarded pistol, giving it to him.

'Thank you.' Vila choked.

'No... I thank YOU.' Miletto smiled weakly. The two men shook hands before Vila called Salvatore.

'Sal! Come on! Let's go!' The 2-metre-plus operative called to his friend and mentor.

'No shit!' Salvatore ran for the minisub and a loud and sharp BANG! Hit him from behind as he was shot in the forearm. He crouched, nursing his wounded limb in pain as he screamed in Italian. 'FUCK!!' Unable to do anything with his injured arm, Salvatore opened fire, shooting from the hip as he could not aim, yelling wordlessly before switching stance to fire his

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grenade launcher. BOOM! The blast from the grenade killed approximately half a dozen or so of the super soldiers. The door to the minisub opened, Frank poking his head out carefully.

‘Come on, Sal! Get in!’ Salvatore looked at the minisub as Frank took cover, a bullet going through his fedora hat, narrowly missing his head with an almost inaudible ZIP! Looking back at the carnage, he shrugged. *Fuck this!* He thought before turning away from Frank, heading BACK INTO the gunfight.

‘Salvatore! What are you doing!?’ Frank asked incredulously. *The guy is a fucking nutcase!* His mind screamed. Salvatore refused to answer as Jenna called out to him.

‘Salvatore, come back!’ Salvatore ignored her call and ran over to the two Mirandas.

‘Miranda, Miranda Alpha – get Holly and Himika to the minisub!’ He commanded, patching up his wounded arm with some effort as he removed the bullet with a wet, squelchy PLOP!

‘What about you? We’re in this together.’ Miranda asked calmly, loading her gun coolly.

‘I’ll get Tobias to extract us, now go!’ Miranda looked at Salvatore sadly. The Swedish blonde kissed the Italian renegade on the lips softly before she left with her clone-cum-daughter.

‘Sal, don’t do this! Salvatore, don’t!’ Holly pleaded as Himika helped her friend into the minisub, its doors closing. The women were seated in the minisub with Jenna at the front. Frank was in the pilot’s seat. Himika was trying to soothe Holly, who was crying. Frank started the engine to the minisub. ‘Sal, you fool! Don’t do this! Please!’ Holly screamed, crying hysterically as she put her hands to the glass window of the midget submarine, the aquatic transport vehicle submerging and departing from the ocean laboratory. ‘Sal! NO!!’ Holly fell back and cried, Himika soothing her. Jenna took Holly’s hand and tried not to shed

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her own tears while Frank meditated calmly, looking and feeling guilty and remorseful as the minisub soared through the ocean.

‘I’m sorry, Sal.’ He whispered quietly as the minisub travelled through the Norwegian Sea, the first signs of daylight beginning to shine through the cold, dark water.

Chapter 11

DIVIETO Ocean Laboratory, Norwegian Sea – 5 November 2016

Miletto fired off his remaining rounds at an escaping Rosh, the majority of the DIVIETO soldiers either dead or fleeing. He hit his old friend squarely in the waist. Rosh yelled in pain as he crawled to safety. Miletto smiled and lay back as his eyes closed. He, too, was dead. Salvatore, Vila and Vojislav emerged from their cover spots, the ARCUS Commander covering Miletto's body with a French flag. He looked at his men calmly, gritting his teeth. 'Let's. Get. Him.' With these words, he loaded a new magazine into his rifle and a grenade into his grenade launcher. He primed his weapons and strode into the ocean laboratory once more, looking determined as his friends followed him. Rosh returned to the control room and locked himself inside, beginning to panic. Looking around him, he spotted a rubbish bin – the same bin where Miletto had discarded the microchip. Retrieving the critical integrated circuit, Rosh examined it briefly before connecting it to the motherboard of his super computer. He then spotted Salvatore and his men arriving, approaching the sealed door to the control room. Seeing that the door refused to open, Salvatore raised his weapon but was stopped by Vila.

'Use your head, man! It's probably bulletproof!' The vertically augmented operative called out.

'OK, so how do we get in?' The ARCUS Commander retorted. Vojislav looked pensive for a moment.

'I have an idea.' He turned away in the opposite direction.

'Where are you going?' Salvatore asked as he tried to remain composed, knowing that this was now the climax of all his hard work.

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‘To balance the scales.’ With those words, Vojislav walked away and broke into a run as he dashed behind a corner, leaving Salvatore and Vila stuck outside. A laser beam was fired from a nearby security camera, narrowly missing Salvatore by a few centimetres. He and Vila were at the mercy of this deadly turret as the gentle giant drew his radio.

‘Vojislav, whatever you’re going to do, do it FAST!’ He called. Holstering his radio, he dodged another laser beam. ‘Sal, this way!’ He called as Salvatore followed him, the two remaining operatives running down a corridor with the laser-wielding machine in hot pursuit.

Port of Stockholm, Sweden – 5 November 2016

Frank’s minisub surfaced on the Swedish coastline. He and Jenna exited, helping the two Mirandas lead Holly and Himika away from the ocean and on the shoreline. Holly, at this point, had fallen asleep and was supported by Miranda and Miranda Alpha. Himika approached Frank and Jenna. ‘What will happen to us now?’ The Japanese journalist asked.

‘You and Holly will be taken to the airport and put on a plane back to the United States. Jenna here will accompany you back to my suite, where you will be given an hour to pack your things. It’s in a mess, so I suggest being careful.’ Frank replied as he complimented her in French. He gave Himika two airplane tickets, the Asian beauty taking them.

‘What about you?’ Himika enquired, worried for Frank since she had developed a bit of a crush on him.

‘I’m going back to get that suicidal son of a whore.’ He replied. As Frank turned to leave, he was stopped by Jenna grabbing his forearm.

‘Thank you, Frank... for everything.’ Frank simply smiled and saluted Jenna, who kissed him on the cheek before leaving with Holly and Himika.

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‘Just take the heroines to the airport and come back.’ Jenna smiled and got in Frank’s car with Holly and Himika, driving away from the scene. The two Mirandas looked at each other before looking at Frank.

‘Detective Inspector...’ Miranda began, but was cut off by Frank.

‘...I’m a disavowed cop, Miranda. You can call me Frank.’ He said softly.

‘Frank, sorry... let us come with you. You’ll need us.’ The Swedish beauty reasoned, although, in actuality, she wanted to go back to save Salvatore. *How ironic.* She thought. Frank looked at Miranda and Miranda Alpha briefly before nodding.

‘OK, get in, but change clothes first. If looks could kill, then you’d be serving life sentences.’ Frank chuckled.

‘And where can we change?’ Miranda asked.

‘In there.’ Frank indicated the interior of the minibus. Miranda blushed while Miranda Alpha chuckled slightly. As the girls went to change, Frank looked out to the night Sky, the Moon shining over the Horizon as the Sun continued to rise. He removed his fedora hat contemplatively. ‘You were right, Salvatore... you always were.’ He muttered in his silent reverie. He thought about lighting a cigarette. Looking at the lighter in his hand, he thought for a moment and put it back in his pocket.

Stockholm Airport, Sweden – 5 November 2016

Jenna drove Frank’s car, parking outside the city airport. She looked at Holly and Himika calmly and sympathetically. ‘Your plane’s going to be here soon.’

‘We don’t want to leave.’ Holly said simply.

‘Jenna, we can still help.’ Himika pleaded.

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‘Holly, Himika, I have nothing but sympathy for you... but you’ve done enough – more than enough. You’re the ones who allowed us to help Salvatore and clear his name. You’re the true heroes. I want you to go back to the United States and lay low for a while, OK?’ Holly looked slightly upset. However, knowing that her friend was right, she simply nodded and agreed, while Himika concurred reluctantly, replying in the affirmative in Japanese. Jenna gave her friend a hug before looking at the time on the car’s dashboard.

‘I love you, Jenna.’ Holly said softly.

‘I love you too, Holly... now go. Take Himika with you and go.’ She smiled softly as Holly wiped away some tears from her face.

‘Just bring back Salvatore alive for me.’ Holly locked eyes with Jenna, knowing she would understand and comply.

‘I will.’ Jenna responded, nodding slowly. With those words, the intrepid reporters exited the car and headed for the airport. Jenna cried silently for a few moments before starting the car, leaving the airport.

Port of Stockholm, Sweden – 5 November 2016

Frank walked along the shoreline on his own, looking contemplative as he adjusted his fedora hat. He looked up at the Sky and chuckled humourlessly at the setting Sun. A female voice caught his attention. ‘Hey, Frank.’ Frank turned around to see Jenna, smiling.

‘They got on the plane?’ He asked worriedly.

‘Yes.’ Jenna nodded and sighed.

‘Is my car OK?’ Frank persisted. *Please let my wheels be OK – they’re my pride and joy.* He thought.

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‘Don’t worry, it’s safe.’ Frank nodded and looked at Jenna seriously for a moment.

‘You realise that this could be a one-way trip, right?’ He asked with a hint of warning.

‘Frank, I’ve stuck with you all this time and I’m not going to give up now. We’re in this together.’ Jenna countered as Frank nodded with a slight smirk.

‘You’re right, Jenna. Let’s do this.’ With those words, he re-entered his midget submarine with Jenna, re-joining Miranda and Miranda Alpha. The doors to the minibus closed once more, the miniature submersible submerging once more.

Ocean Floor – 6 November 2016

Frank was piloting the minibus with a determined expression on his face, while Jenna looked stunned at the manic speed her friend and partner pushed. Miranda and Miranda Alpha, having abandoned their Lycra/Spandex catsuits in favour of more combat-based clothing, looked at each other, and then at Jenna. ‘Frank, is it really necessary to go this fast?’ The Australian rogue cop asked her French-Canadian associate.

‘Jenna, I don’t want to miss anything, and I don’t want to arrive and find our mutual friend dead. If I know him as well as I think I do, then he’s probably dug himself a hole.’ He narrowed his eyes as he piloted the minibus calmly but with a controlled sense of darkness and determination, the midget submarine soaring through the ocean.

DIVIETO Ocean Laboratory – 6 November 2016

Frank’s minibus surfaced, its doors opening to reveal Miranda and Miranda Alpha exiting the aquatic vehicle, the two blondes witnessing the corpses before them as they tried to keep their stomach contents to themselves. ‘Frank, Jenna, in case we don’t make it back, take this.’ Miranda spoke, handing Frank a flash drive.

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‘Another one...? What’s on this?’ He enquired. *I’m beginning to build up a collection of these things.* He thought.

‘The history of DIVIETO and its true purpose: Control, conspiracy, government.’ Miranda replied as Miranda Alpha let out a wicked smile at the thought of DIVIETO’s collapse.

‘You be careful out there.’ Jenna said in a Mother Hen-like voice as she and Miranda shook hands with each other.

‘Good luck.’ Miranda replied.

‘Thanks, you too.’ Jenna smiled, settling her differences with her old friend at long last. With those words, Jenna closed the doors to the minisub as Frank piloted the vehicle, submerging and camouflaging itself. Miranda and Miranda Alpha looked at the facility before them.

‘OK, Miranda Alpha... you take the lift, I’ll go in the ventilation shaft.’ Miranda instructed.

‘Yes... Mother.’ She smiles sincerely as the two blondes exchange a knowing look before going to their respective duties. Miranda crawled through the ventilation shaft silently, the beautiful but deadly blonde ready for action as she scanned her environment stealthily. She cursed to herself in Swedish.

‘Salvatore, if I’ve busted my back trying to save your neck or if anything happens to my beautiful daughter, then I’ll never forgive you. I’m not being paid enough for this shit.’ With those words, she jumped down into an opening and knocked out one of the few remaining active guards with a well-placed Martial Arts kick before continuing on into the facility.

Salvatore and Vila ran down a corridor in the ocean laboratory in an attempt to outrun the deadly laser turret-cum-security camera. Closing the door behind him, Salvatore flashed a V-

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sign at the camera with his fingers. He and Vila looked at each other. ‘Jesus Fucking Christ, Vila... I never thought I’d go out like this.’

‘Come on, Salvatore, don’t be so grim.’ Vila chuckled, seeing the humour in the situation.

‘Grim? We’re being chased by a Laser Terminator and you’re telling me not to be so grim!?’

Salvatore’s voice increased by an octave or two. He looked at his weapons. Vila spoke up, intercepting his friend’s thoughts.

‘They won’t work. Projectiles are pretty bloody weak unless they’re explosive.’ He explained.

‘Shit.’ Salvatore spat. He sighed and looked at the equipment before him. He approached it and started to gear up on ammunition and a first aid kit.

‘What are you doing?’ Vila asked worriedly, afraid of Salvatore’s latest hare-brained idea.

‘I am going to lure the bastard out.’ Salvatore said through gritted teeth. He gathered the equipment he needed and opened the door, which slid open with a muted buzzing noise – BZZZ! Salvatore poked his head out, spotting the laser turret behind him. Closing the door quietly behind him, he then loaded his assault rifle and grenade launcher, priming them LOUDLY with a sharp CLICK! This caught the laser turret’s attention. ‘Come on! Come and get me, you fucker!’ He ran towards the laser turret and darted past it, narrowly missing a laser beam to the head. He took cover and drew his radio. ‘Vila! It’s working. Are you OK?’ Vila’s voice was heard on the other end of the radio, his vocal intonation one of shock and disbelief, a clear contrast to his calm and collected persona.

‘I’m fine, Sal! What are you doing, man!?’ Salvatore laughed before responding.

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‘Buying us some time. Vila, can you track Vojislav’s position?’ There was a bit of a silence before Vila replied.

‘I’ll certainly try – out.’ Vila cursed colourfully in Hungarian before ending the communication. Salvatore hid, watching the laser turret zip past him as he then emerged from his hiding spot, running towards the control room.

In the safety of the control room, Rosh looked through his security cameras as Salvatore was seen dashing down a corridor, pursued by the laser turret. ‘You poor fool. Only now, do you see how small your mind really is.’ He sat back and enjoyed the show, lighting a cigar, blowing out a puff of smoke. He loaded up his computer and typed in an access code. The readout was: “DIVIETO NETWORK: SECURITY LOGIN REQUIRED.” Rosh activated a microphone and spoke into it calmly. ‘Computer, this is DIVIETO Commander Rosh Goldman – Authorisation: Goldman 10 Alpha Tango.’ The display changed to: “DIVIETO COMMANDER ROSH GOLDMAN – IDENTITY ACKNOWLEDGED.” Rosh smirked slightly as he looked at the security monitors, Salvatore and Vila seemingly trapped, picking up his gun and typing in a command on his keyboard. A computer voice spoke up:

DESTRUCT SEQUENCE COMPLETED AND ENGAGED – AWAITING FINAL CODE FOR COUNTDOWN.
Rosh grinned evilly.

‘Code: 7-7-Delta... Destruct Type 01, 10 minutes, silent countdown – Enable.’ The computer responded with a BEEP-BEEP! A countdown timer appeared on the screen, accompanied by a voiceover.

SELF-DESTRUCT SEQUENCE IS ACTIVATED. THERE WILL BE NO FURTHER AUDIO WARNINGS.
Rosh confirmed his last command, the door to the control room opening, giving Salvatore his cue to act.

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Salvatore radioed Vila quickly, seeing a series of red warning lights flash around him. ‘Vila, Vojislav, a bit of an update: We might want to think about getting out of here.’

‘You got it, Sal. I’ll call Tobias.’ Vila spoke up, back to his usual calm self.

‘He’s not going to make in time, Vila. We might have to swim our way out of here.’

Salvatore countered, he, too, back to his rational self.

‘It’s 3° Celsius out there!’ Vila protested.

‘Just get to the docks! We’ve got 10 minutes. If I’m not there in 5 minutes, then get out of here! We’ve got the info we need to put these bastards out of commission – out.’ Salvatore got to his feet and ran towards the control room, performing a diving somersault as he bumped into Miranda head-on. He looked at her. ‘Miranda!? What are you doing here?!’

‘Saving your necks... again.’ Miranda replied matter-of-factly as she helped him up.

‘Where’s Miranda Alpha?’ Salvatore asked worriedly.

‘She’s on her way. Why is everything flashing?’ Miranda enquired with greater concern.

‘Self-destruct’s been enabled. I’m giving everyone the orders to leave.’ Salvatore replied as he examined his assault rifle and grenade launcher.

‘You always have to play the hero, don’t you!?’ Miranda protested.

‘Come on!’ The ARCUS Commander beckoned. Salvatore and Miranda ran towards and into the control room of the ocean laboratory, confronting Rosh. Rosh turned around to see both Salvatore and Miranda holding him at gunpoint.

‘I’ve been waiting for you... friends.’ He said in a civil tone.

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‘Cut the crap, Rosh! Do you know what you’re doing!?’ Salvatore asked as he looked through the holographic sight-cum-grenade launcher computer of his assault rifle. Rosh simply chuckled and shot Salvatore in the kneecap, injuring him quite badly. Miranda tended to Salvatore as Rosh began his soliloquy.

‘I’m fully aware of what I’m doing. Can’t you see? I’m preserving the traditions of our disciplinarian cultures. The libertarian nations are too weak to do what we do. The World is in Chaos, and it needs Order... and you know it, Winston Smith.’ He sneered as Salvatore grunted, gritting his teeth in pain.

‘And that justifies pulling the strings... from behind the scenes? Ruining people’s lives!? Fuck you... you fucking O’Brien!’ Miranda glared at Rosh, her eyes sparkling with fury as her memory came back to her entirely.

‘YOU’RE the one who had me frozen and cloned! You erased my memory and ruined my life! I should never have gone into that sick experiment of yours.’ Rosh gave Miranda a psychotic stare and grinned coldly.

‘Who will the people believe? That’s the big question.’ Salvatore shot Rosh in the wrist, injuring him.

‘You die and we live... and OUR truth will be written, and yours lost.’ The ARCUS Commander quipped, earning him a bullet to the gut. He grunted in agony as Vila’s voice was heard on the radio.

‘Sal! Where are you?’ Rosh simply shot out the radio – BANG! – With his one good hand as the radio fizzled away and died. Miranda Alpha exited the elevator and hid behind a wall, listening in on the altercation.

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‘I know you understand.’ Rosh cocked his pistol and aimed it at Salvatore’s head. Miranda Alpha appeared from her hiding spot and shot Rosh, the young clone injuring the DIVIETO Commander, who hobbles away and into an escape tunnel. Miranda looked at her clone-cum-daughter, relieved to have some form of help. Salvatore tried to get up.

‘Rosh! It’s not finished yet!’ He yelled.

‘Sal, be reasonable! We’re going to be blown up!’ Miranda reasoned, trying to make him see sense.

‘I want his blood, Mir! The fucker has to pay for what he’s done!’ Salvatore growled as he bled profusely from every orifice in his body. *No... no fucking way! I’m not going to meet Otto, Vladimir, Grigori and Miletto. Not me!* His mind screamed.

‘Let him go! We can fight him another day.’ Miranda and Miranda Alpha helped up the injured Salvatore, carrying him to safety as they headed for the elevator. The laser turret was there to greet them.

‘Oh, fuck off, grasshopper!’ With those words, Salvatore fired his grenade launcher with his one good hand. The grenade collided with the turret, destroying it – BOOM! ‘Come on!’ He growled, blood seeping out of his wounds as the girls helped him.

Vila was at the dock of the ocean lab, taking cover as he waited impatiently. ‘Hello? Hello!? Fuck!’ He drew his radio but to no avail. After a moment, he dialled Vojislav’s number.

‘Vojislav, where are you?’

Vojislav’s voice was heard on the other end of the radio, his vocal intonation one of urgency.

‘I’m on my way, Vila. Where’s Sal?’

‘I don’t know. He might have gone after that bastard.’ Vila replied exasperatedly.

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‘Just go find him – out.’ Vila tried to remain calm as he looked out at the dock silently. Spotting Frank’s minisub, he approached it cautiously, his battle rifle raised and ready. Vila jumped into the minisub, scaring Jenna and surprising the normally unflappable Frank.

‘Who are you!?’ Jenna asked as she recovered from the shock.

‘My name is Vila... I’m one of Salvatore’s men. You might want to get out of here; this place is going to be blown to Kingdom Come.’ Vila explained calmly as he tried to hide his own anxiety, Vojislav’s voice sparkling to life on his radio.

‘I found Salvatore, Vila. His radio’s damaged and he’s injured, quite badly. He’s taken a shot to the forearm and the kneecap.’ Vila responded uncharacteristically tersely.

‘Just get him here to safety – out!’ He looked around the minisub, a look of frustration sweeping across his facial features. ‘Shit. Fuck!’

‘What!?’ Frank asked urgently.

‘This minisub can’t hold us all.’ Vila got out of the minisub, drawing his radio. ‘Vojislav, we have a problem! The minisub’s come back for us... but there’s a problem. It can’t hold us all.’ There was a pause before Vojislav’s voice registered smugness and relief.

‘Oh, yes – I anticipated that. I called Tobias as an emergency backup.’ He chuckled. Vila’s voice went up by a few octaves.

‘You did... WHEN!?’ He shrieked.

‘When I left you and Sal to deal with the Laser Terminator.’ Vila sighed and grunted exasperatedly, muttering to himself in Hungarian.

Salvatore was weakened, having lost a fair amount of blood. Miranda and Miranda Alpha were struggling to support him, Vojislav being the sole remaining active ARCUS operative

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other than Vila. The door opened as the warning lights flashed more vividly. The Sun was beginning to set as the Moon began to peak out from the Sky amidst the Stars on the Horizon. Salvatore grunted in pain, almost falling to the floor in agony as he yelled from the physical torment surging through his body. ‘JESUS FUCKING CHRIST!! Miranda, for God’s sake, just get out of here and save yourselves!’ She propped him up with a great effort.

‘Come on! You can make it!’ She encouraged. Vila ran forwards to help Miranda, taking Salvatore from her, putting his injured friend into the minisub. Salvatore pointed to the Sky, seeing an approaching helicopter – it was Tobias. Vila signalled for the Swedish pilot to land as close as possible, the helicopter hovering above the surface of the cold water, unable to enter the dock.

‘Tobias, what took you so long?’ Vojislav asked worriedly.

‘There didn’t seem to be any hurry. Come on!’ Tobias replied jokingly. Vila and Vojislav boarded the helicopter while Miranda and Miranda Alpha remained in the minisub to tend to Salvatore. ‘Where’s Salvatore?’ Tobias asked.

‘He’s badly injured. Our friends in that minisub are taking care of him.’ Vojislav sighed with concern – he did not want to lose a third friend. Tobias gunned the engine and flew away from the doomed facility.

‘What about Miletto?’ Tobias enquired.

‘He’s dead.’ Vojislav slung Miletto’s corpse over his shoulder and plopped it on a table in the helicopter, the French flag covering the cadaver. Tobias looked sad as Vila grunted silently, the gentle giant suppressing his tears.

‘That fuck...!’ Gritting his teeth, Tobias piloted the helicopter as fast as the atmosphere would allow him.

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In the yellow minisub, Salvatore was clutching his multiple injuries in pain, his physical strength deteriorating with every second, his wounds bandaged. He struggled to remain awake. He grunted and yelled aggressively, prompting Miranda to restrain him while Miranda Alpha broke open a first aid kit, holding up a jet-injector filled with a pink liquid. ‘What’s that?’ Salvatore asked through the pain.

‘Something that’ll help you relax.’ The young clone injected the liquid into his neck. Salvatore flashed back to his nanotechnological resurrection from five years earlier. He looked at Miranda, then Miranda Alpha, his face curling into a smile.

‘Thank... you.’ He closed his eyes and lost consciousness. Jenna turned to face the girls. Her voice registered concern and sadness.

‘Is he going to be OK? I promised Holly I’d bring him back alive.’ The Australian cop asked.

‘He’ll be fine. It was just a tranquilliser.’ The Swedish assassin smiled. Frank looked at the control panel of the minisub and activated the throttle, going at full speed.

‘Look out, everybody! Here we GO!!’ He piloted the minisub through the ocean waves.

The ocean lab was empty and vacant, deserted – the red warning lights flashed more vividly as the docks were silent and paved with corpses. The lounge was empty – nobody was present as the warning lights eventually began to go out, enshrouding the ocean lab in darkness. The prison cells were also empty – literally, nobody was present as the last of the light began to fade away into pitch black. The control room was equally desolated. The computer monitor, the only source of illumination left, was counting down to destruction, and it eventually reached its target, accompanied by a computer voice.

SELF-DESTRUCT SEQUENCE IN 10... 9... 8... 7... 6... 5... 4... 3... 2... 1... 0! There was a LOUD beeping noise, accompanied by a blinding flash of white light and a deafening crack

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as explosions rocked the whole base, followed by a single large nuclear blast – BOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOM!!! There was a deep, abiding silence for what felt like an eternity. Eventually, the helicopter and minisub appeared amidst the Horizon, the two vehicles feeling successfully to safety.

San Francisco, California, USA – 7 November 2016

Holly and Himika returned to their studio apartment, finding it in a pristine condition. Outside the door was a note. Holly picked it up and examined it carefully, raising an eyebrow. The note read: “Dear Holly and Himika, consider this renovation my personal thanks for your efforts. Do not worry about Salvatore – he is alive and well, and currently recovering in a hospital in Europe. Watch out for yourselves, and good luck. Your friends, Frank and Jenna. X” Holly smiled as she wept tears of joy, opening the door to her refurbished apartment. Himika noticed her friend’s tears and approached her. ‘Are you OK, Holly?’ The Asian beauty asked. Her American counterpart just nodded and handed her the note. Reading it, Himika smiled and put it in a safe place as she sat down in front of her television set, turning it on once more. A news report was in progress, detailing a montage of the ARCUS-DIVIETO War, accompanied by a commentary from a newsreader.

‘Organisation ARCUS was absolved today and cleared of all terrorist charges, including the fabricated murder of two Swedish politicians in Stockholm six months ago, in large part due to the efforts of reporters Holly Carson and Himika Takara, and renegade Interpol officers Frank Morris and Jenna Lane. Secret society DIVIETO was exposed as the true culprit. DIVIETO, a descendant of the Bavarian Illuminati and a pro-authoritarian organisation, was also responsible for the creation of the Sol Federation as a response to the Worldwide Economic Crisis in 2005. The present whereabouts of ARCUS Commander Salvatore Pasquale and DIVIETO Leader Rosh Goldman remain unknown.’ Himika smiled as Holly just looked at a framed picture of Salvatore on her new desk, smiling at it.

‘You did it, Sal. You fucking did it, you son of a bitch.’ She smiled and sighed, her face glowing with happiness as her heart burned with joy and love.

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Pianiga, Veneto, Italy – 7 November 2016

Salvatore's parents were in the hospital, watching the TV report synchronised in Italian. Amilcare looked at the news footage and simply smiled, a solitary tear running down the usually strong man's face as he wiped it away. Loredana wept openly, finally glad that her son had accomplished his goal and, in doing so, succeeded in realising the true meaning of being human and what it meant to be alive. 'I love you, my son.' She said openly as Amilcare simply smiled.

'You did it, Salvatore... you did it.' He smiled tragically.

City of Moscow, Moskva, Russia – 7 November 2016

Ivan and Krista were also watching the newscast, both parents finally smiling. Ivan looked sad and happy at the same time as he looked up at a framed picture of Vladimir hanging above the television, while Krista simply crossed herself and prayed in Russian for a moment before looking up at the TV again. 'Thank you, Salvatore.' She said simply.

The dawn of a new era was upon them.

Chapter 12

City of Budapest, Budapest, Hungary – 7 May 2017

Six months later, Salvatore was lying in a hospital bed, seemingly out cold. He gradually began to awaken, grunting with effort. Eventually, he sat up straight. Looking around him, he saw Vila, the gentle giant's head bowed down in prayer silently. Salvatore sat up, calling his friend's name. 'Hey, Vila...?' He asked out loud, his voice full of strength and power. It took a while for Vila to register that it was Salvatore's unique voice. He looked up to see his friend and leader, awake, alive and fairly well.

'Salvatore! You're OK!' Salvatore nodded and smiled. He felt better than OK.

'Yes, I'm fine, thanks – never felt so fucking groovy in my entire bloody life.' He chuckled. He looked sad for a moment as he remembered being in Vila's situation only six months earlier, fighting to keep Otto alive and ultimately losing him in battle a few days later. 'How long have I been out?'

'Six months, man.' The Slavic soldier said softly.

'Wow. That's a peanut compared to last time.' The Italian denizen muttered softly as he laughed at the irony of the situation. He got to his feet with Vila helping him. He paused for a moment, showing rare humour. 'I missed my parents' anniversary!'

'Vila, I've been speaking to the girls and they say they found Rosh...' Vojislav entered, looking at his smart phone. He looked up to see Salvatore, cutting himself off in mid-sentence. 'Salvatore! You're...'

'...alive? Damn right. Rumours of my death have been...' Salvatore began before Vila finished the sentence for him.

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‘...greatly exaggerated?’ Salvatore smiled and laughed a bit.

‘Slightly exaggerated, although I have been feeling a little bit tired lately.’ He turned to face Vojislav. ‘What did you say about Rosh, Vojislav?’ Vojislav backs up a bit, stunned by his friend’s newly-found vigour.

‘We found him.’ He blurted out.

‘Where the fuck is that son of a fucking whore?’ Salvatore asked, back to his old self once more.

‘He’s hiding at the Burj Khalifa Tower in Dubai.’ Vojislav replied. He, too, was eager to finish this madness.

‘Nice one.’ Salvatore remarked semi-sarcastically as he grunted in pain.

‘Are you sure you’re OK?’ Vila asked out of worry, ready to catch hold of his friend.

‘The son of a bitch must pay, Vila... and I don’t care if I fucking die over it.’ Salvatore spat through gritted teeth, fighting the pain.

‘Miranda would. She loves you.’ Vila reasoned.

‘He’s right, Vila. This has to be done.’ Vojislav spoke up as Salvatore looked at Vila, then at his cyborg counterpart, smirking.

‘Let’s. Fucking. Do this.’ He said calmly and eerily, punctuating each word for emphasis in his gruff but gentle voice. The cyborg led his nanotech-augmented friend out of the hospital, with the gentle giant following suit.

Miranda, Miranda Alpha and Tobias were in the helicopter, looking worried. A voice was heard from behind. ‘What the hell are we waiting for? Let’s go get that son of a bitch!’ The

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voice caught Miranda's attention. She smiled at herself and turned to face its owner – Salvatore. Running up to him, she hugged him tightly.

'Salvatore!! You're alive!' She cried out loud. He hugged her back, Miranda Alpha smiling.

'I've died once already, Miranda... I can't die twice.' He hugged Miranda Alpha and then clasped hands with Tobias the pilot.

'Back from the dead, are we?' Tobias joked.

'I never left. I hear you guys found Rosh after all this time. Let's go get him!' Salvatore spoke up as he picked up an automatic shotgun, attaching a holographic sight to it and slinging it over his shoulder as he gathered some slugs for it.

'Is that...?' Vila enquired.

'Otto's gun? Damn right.' Salvatore smiled. Tobias looked at Salvatore briefly, the Swedish pilot breaking into a smile.

'You son of a bitch, Sal! OK, let's do this.' He starts up the helicopter as Salvatore, Vila and Vojislav arm up for their final mission as the whirlybird flew towards the Horizon, the Sun setting in the Sky. Salvatore reached into his pocket and produced his smart phone, dialling a number provided by Vojislav as he switched on the loudspeaker. RING! RING! He heard the noise on the other end of the line before being picked up.

'Who is this?' Rosh's unmistakable voice, a high-pitched rasp, was audible throughout the aircraft.

'A voice from the past. I'm coming for you, Rosh.' Salvatore spoke in his low, mellow-but-volcanic voice.

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‘Haven’t you heard, Salvatore? The war’s over – you’re free once more.’ The former DIVIETO Ringleader spoke up – he knew his days were numbered.

‘No, my war ends with YOU.’ Salvatore spat back, determined more than ever to kill the piece of shit on the phone with him.

‘Just like it did for Otto, Vladimir, Grigori, Miletto, Hayate... all the men who helped and hindered you? Tell me, Salvatore... how did it feel to kill your oldest and closest friend?’ Rosh laughed callously, clearly getting a kick out of winding up the ARCUS Commander.

‘I will make you PAY for what you did to him.’ Salvatore’s voice lowered a full tone as he growled, not giving a shit about the stress on his vocal cords – it was either that or chain-smoke.

‘I’ve ruined your life and your reputation, Salvatore... and you’ve ruined mine. That makes us even, don’t you think?’ Rosh spoke, knowing that Salvatore would come for him regardless as he stalled for time to form a plan for his desperate last-ditch effort to escape.

‘Far from it. Don’t bother looking for me. I’ll find you, and I don’t have to look too hard – out.’ Salvatore rasped lowly. Click, dial tone, followed by silence. The helicopter flew across Europe and crossed the Ural Mountains into Asia, heading towards the United Arab Emirates or UAE.

Burj Khalifa Tower, Dubai, UAE – 8 May 2017

Tobias’s helicopter landed outside the Burj Khalifa tower, the Sun having set completely – it was dark over the Horizon and the Moon was shining in the Sky, a full one, too. The Stars were shining brightly as Salvatore, Vila, Vojislav, Miranda and Miranda Alpha looked at each other, the former three arming up with light machine guns and clothed in ballistic armour and helmets. The latter two had no desire to risk their lives for the sake of one last

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shot at revenge and redemption, for they had already achieved their goals. ‘Are you sure you want to do this?’ The Swedish assassin asked her Italian lover, who had a crazy glint of vengeance in his eyes.

‘Yes. I. Am.’ He smiled at Miranda softly.

‘Just be careful, OK? We’d miss you.’ Miranda replied, indicating herself and Miranda Alpha.

‘Good luck, Uncle Sal.’ Miranda Alpha hugged him gently before going back to her mother. Salvatore turned to face Vila and Vojislav, looking determined.

‘Let’s do this... for Otto, for Miletto... for Vladimir. Rosh doesn’t leave here alive.’ He paused at the mention of his old friend’s name, feeling the guilt return before taking a deep breath to control himself. He opened the door and exited the helicopter with his friends in tow. Salvatore primed his light machine gun and aimed down the holographic sight. He saw a group of approximately 30 to 40 remaining DIVIETO supporters – some inside, some outside. The DIVIETO troops saw the ARCUS operatives approaching them and opened fire. Salvatore retaliated by unleashing a blistering shower of steel and lead onto the helpless fanatics, gunning them down with his signature unerring accuracy. Picking up the pace, Salvatore eventually breached the interior of the tower. Breaching the atrium of the tower, Salvatore, Vila and Vojislav fought their way up an escalator while taking care of potential snipers. Reaching a higher level, they found it to be empty as an elevator was present. Calling the elevator, Salvatore lowered his weapon briefly to reload it. The doors pinged open and he raised it once more, fully reloaded and primed. Finding the elevator to be empty, the three men entered it as it closed, ascending, revealing a wonderful view of the Skyline.

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‘Sal, are you sure you’re OK?’ Vila asked, seeing that Salvatore was even more angry and deranged than usual.

‘Yes, Vila – I’m fine, thanks.’ Salvatore retorted in his signature growl.

‘We’ve made it this far... and we are not giving up now.’ Vojislav interjected.

‘Too fucking right, Voj. Let’s go – we must finish this once and for all!’ Salvatore barked authoritatively. The three friends exited the elevator as its doors opened. In a Sky Lobby, the three friends fought their way through a wave of DIVIETO troops, the Moon shining brightly in the Sky. Eventually reaching a second elevator, they entered it and headed even further up. Vojislav coughed somewhat violently, prompting concern from both Salvatore and Vila. ‘Voj, you OK?’ Salvatore slung his light machine gun over his shoulder as he tried to help Vojislav.

‘I’m fine, Sal. Bloody nanomachines.’ He coughed, spluttering green blood.

‘What!?’ Vila asked incredulously, the sole human amongst the three operatives.

‘Rosh had poor Vojislav automated and cyborgified after his death.’ Salvatore explained simply.

‘What happened?’ Vila asked, even though he knew the answer was not going to be pleasant.

‘The American Dream... is bullshit. I went a bit nuts, took a college hostage... and Miranda killed me.’ Vojislav spat before uttering something in Serbian.

‘Fuck! That’s horrible!’ Vila exclaimed before cursing in Hungarian.

‘What’s worse? His act of “terror” or this piece of crap playing God?’ Salvatore countered, playing the role of mediator for once.

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‘Hmm... good point.’ Vila contemplated as Salvatore drew his light machine gun once more. Tobias’s voice sparkled to life on Salvatore’s radio.

‘Everything OK?’ The Swedish pilot enquired cheerfully, his jovial mood never changing.

‘Just fine, Tob. We’re almost there. There’s a helipad at the top of the building – meet us there in about 5 minutes.’ Salvatore commanded as he knew he had to make a quick exit after the deed was done.

‘You got it – out.’ Tobias ended the transmission. The elevator doors opened and the three men ran through an empty floor, briefly observing the view from above.

‘Bloody hell!’ Vila exclaimed as he looked at the illuminated city of Dubai from his position.

‘I know. Tall, isn’t it? Makes me dizzy... and sick.’ Vojislav remarked in an off-colour manner.

‘Let’s go before my vertigo kicks in.’ Salvatore spoke up. He did not like heights, but he had no choice if he wanted to kill the piece of shit responsible for the countless chaos that had spread before him like a wildfire.

‘You could have told us that earlier!’ Vila pointed out semi-humorously.

‘What, and miss out on killing the bastard who fucked up millions of lives? No, thanks!’ Salvatore concluded the banter. Approaching a third elevator, they entered it – the ride this time was not as long as before. The doors opened and they were met with only a few troops. Salvatore gunned them down easily, but Vojislav got a bit sloppy, the vertigo kicking in. He was shot in the forearm and kneecap. ‘FUCK!!’ Salvatore yelled as he took cover to help his friend. Vila broke out a medical kit and administered the necessary treatment. The gentle giant looked up at Salvatore.

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‘Go – Sal, get going! Make sure Rosh doesn’t escape!’ He ordered.

‘You got it, Vila.’ Realising that he had no choice but to leave his friends behind and proceed alone, Salvatore simply replied in the affirmative with a hint of concern before gunning down the remaining troops. Having killed ALL of his adversary’s followers, Salvatore ran up to the helipad on the roof of the tower and spotted Rosh about to climb aboard a helicopter. The Sun was rising over the Horizon, the Sky a more vivid colour, going from black to a shade of dark blue. Salvatore aimed his weapon and bellowed out at maximum volume, in his strong, authoritative voice: ‘GET OUT OF THE FUCKING CHOPPER, YOU TERRIBLE CUNT!!’ On the C of “Cunt”, Salvatore fired his light machine gun, injuring Rosh and the pilot, the former falling onto the helipad while the latter was forced to flee without his passenger. Salvatore approached his adversary carefully, only to be met with a punch to the face, which stunned him. Rosh fled, hobbling on one leg as Salvatore dropped his used weapon and switched to his automatic shotgun as he pursued the disgraced politician and media mogul into the spire of the tower. Slinging his weapon over his back, Salvatore grunted with effort as he climbed the ladder in pursuit of his nemesis. Rosh was defenceless as he continued his ascent, eventually reaching the very top of the tower’s spire, the Skyline now a mere bird’s-eye view. Salvatore grunted with effort and finally reached Rosh as the Sky continued to get lighter. ‘It’s... over. It’s over, Rosh!’ He emphasised, trying to reason with his adversary, even though he knew it was next to futile.

‘We’re not so different, you and I.’ Rosh spoke up as Salvatore fired his automatic shotgun, the slug hitting the fallen leader in the shoulder.

‘Spare me the Bond villain crap!’ Salvatore snarled. Rosh ignored the pain in his shoulder and looked at Salvatore with a death glare that could melt the Polar Ice Caps and flood the World.

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‘Drop your weapon, Salvatore... fight fair.’ Salvatore looked at Rosh and briefly considered shooting him again. Instead, he did as he was told, dropping his weapons. The two men looked at each other coldly and briefly. Rosh charged at Salvatore, who dodged his punch, countering with a sharp uppercut and a jab to the face, followed by a straight hook. Rosh, dazed, punched Salvatore squarely in the face, catching the Italian rebel off-guard, who regained his surroundings almost immediately. Rosh tried to force Salvatore off the edge of the spire, but the ARCUS Commander head-butted the DIVIETO Ringleader, the two men falling DOWN the spire of the tower and landing some distance below. Rosh landed in a pool of what appeared to be (and smelled like) oil or fuel, while Salvatore landed on the concrete floor, his helmet saving his life. With his bulletproof armour and helmet now damaged, Salvatore tore off his used protection, slipping on his trademark boonie hat once more as he adjusted his tactical assault vest briefly before pursuing his nemesis back to the helipad. Two leaders fighting for one destiny battled fiercely for a while until the ARCUS Commander gained the upper hand, punching the former DIVIETO Ringleader within an inch of the piece of shit’s life. Just as he was about to deliver the fatal blow, Rosh kicked Salvatore in the gut and punched him squarely in the nose, sending him to the floor. He hovered above his wheezing nemesis, pulling out a large Magnum.

‘Farewell, ARCUS Commander.’ Rosh smirked as he cocked the hand cannon, aiming it squarely at Salvatore’s face as the Italian antihero showed no fear, only defiance. Just then, gunfire was heard – BLAM! BLAM! BLAM! BLAM! – A bullet pierced Rosh’s OTHER shoulder, causing him to drop his hand cannon. Salvatore picked it up and fired two shots – BANG! BANG! – He shot Rosh in the leg and midsection, mortally wounding him. Vila’s voice was heard from behind.

‘Don’t worry about me and Vojislav, Salvatore! Just get Rosh!’ Vila called.

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‘Oh, I guarantee that, Vila.’ Salvatore called back as a helicopter appeared – it was not Tobias. One of the troops, a DIVIETO soldier, aimed a LARGE anti-tank rifle straight at the rebels. BOOM! He pulled the trigger, the round hitting Vojislav squarely in the gut as Vila fired a grenade at the helicopter, destroying it in a fiery explosion. Focusing on the last part of his task, Salvatore punched the dying Rosh in the gut, sending him falling over the edge. In the nick of time, however, the ARCUS Commander grabbed the DIVIETO Ringleader and hoisted him up, locking eyes with him one last time as the two men barely stood in front of one another.

‘Who’s this for, Salvatore? Your friends and family? Your anti-rod-sparing chums?’ Rosh looked at Salvatore with contempt as he spoke his last words. Salvatore glared at Rosh darkly; his eyes narrowing and his voice a low growl as he reached into his tactical assault vest surreptitiously.

‘No, Rosh... for ME.’ He replied simply. Rosh looked at Salvatore in confusion for a moment before realisation dawned on his face. In a single smooth movement, Salvatore drew a cigarette lighter and set Rosh alight, pocketing his incendiary weapon as he watched the doomed psychopath scream and wail in azure agony, running off the edge of the helipad and falling to his fiery death. The flaming corpse hit the concrete below with a resounding CRASH! It left an outline outside the hotel as people began to gather around. Salvatore, now tired, lied back on the edge of the helipad, his mission accomplished for good. Vila and a wounded Vojislav approached Salvatore, the latter bleeding quite badly, his nanomachines damaged from a combination of vertigo and injuries sustained from the final suicide run.

‘Is it over?’ Vila asked uncertainly. Salvatore nodded as he saw Tobias’s helicopter arrive. Vojislav was barely conscious, struggling to stay awake.

‘Yes, it’s over.’ Salvatore responded.

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‘Are we... are we heroes now?’ Vojislav asked in his phasing moments of consciousness – he was bleeding quite badly as Vila did his best to patch him up. Salvatore looked pensive for a moment as he looked back on everything over the past six years which had led up to this point – more than half a decade’s worth of rebellion, activism and violence, the ends finally having justified the means. Eventually, he turned to face his friends.

‘I have no idea.’ He replied from the bottom of his tired old heart. He had had enough of this life of killing and fighting. Tobias’s voice was heard over the helicopter’s new PA Speaker.

‘Hey, guys! I told you I’d make it – and I’m dead on time for a change!’ The Swedish pilot laughed heartily as Salvatore chuckled, too tired to do anything else as he and his friends were helped into the whirlybird. The Sun had almost finished rising over the Horizon, the Sky becoming increasingly light as it wavered into a shade of pink and orange. Miranda hugged Salvatore gently, as did Miranda Alpha. Salvatore looked at Vila and a barely-conscious Vojislav as Tobias piloted the helicopter away, heading towards the rising Sun.

Epilogue

Saying Goodbye

Gernerska Mausoleum, Sigtuna, Sweden – 21 December 2017

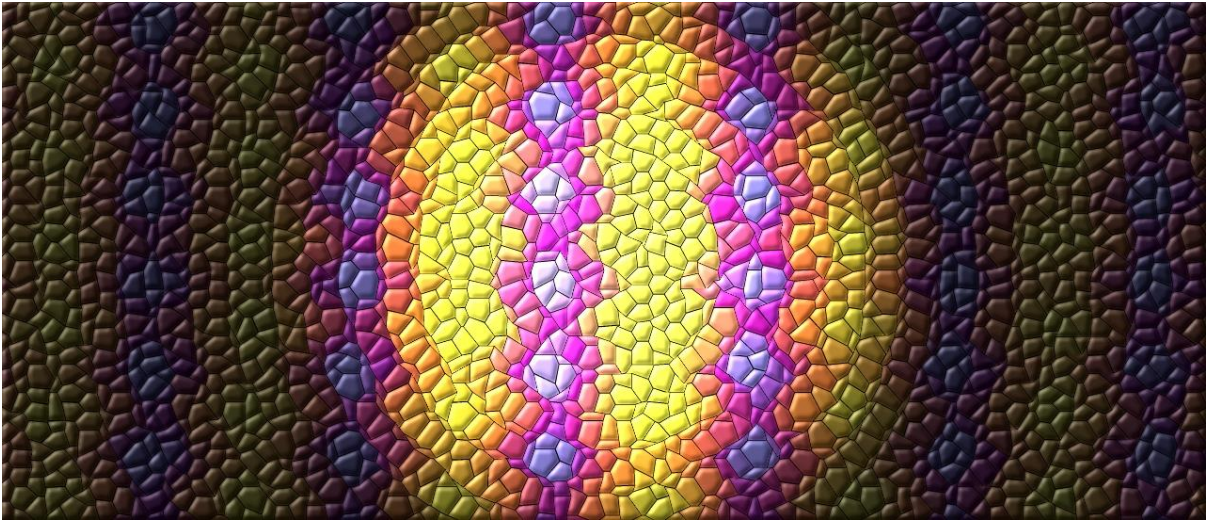
Seven months later, after the final battle in Dubai, ARCUS had officially disbanded and DIVIETO was exposed for its corruption and role in manipulating the masses since the turn of the New Millennium. However, not everyone had moved on. Salvatore, now sporting more civilian attire, stood before several gravestones, each one bearing the names of his old friends who died for his cause. He removed his boonie hat and wiped away a solitary tear, removing his spectacles. He spoke for the last time, his voice a soft, gentle wave of soothing comfort. ‘Those authoritarian and disciplinarian scum buckets are being rounded up and taught a lesson. We did it... I hope you have found peace, my friends.’ With these words, he put on his spectacles and slipped on his boonie hat for the last time. He took one long, last look before snapping a military salute and turning his back, walking away as he smiled slightly hopefully, a new chapter of his life beginning here and now. He left the mausoleum and walked towards a waiting pair of blondes – Miranda and Miranda Alpha. ‘It is finished.’ He said softly, hugging them gently as they walked away towards a rising Sun. He smiled, remembering the heroic efforts of Holly and her Asian friend Himika, who had apparently gotten together with Vila on the night of the gentle giant’s 40th birthday. He had not heard from Vojislav since the Burj Khalifa mission, so he did not know whether he was dead or alive.

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However, what he did know was this:

The World was free from the shackles of authoritarian power-holders and the genesis of a new era for the Human Race was just beginning.

The End



The End