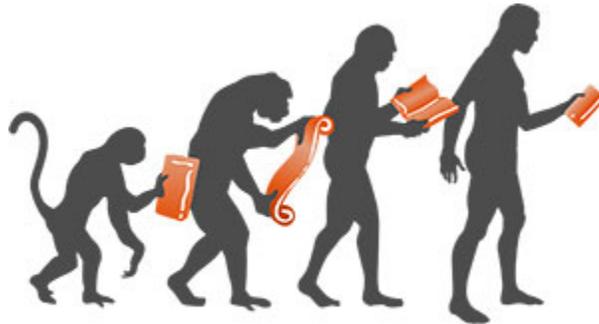


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IMPERIUM HEIRS

Conspirator's Odyssey - Book 1

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### **PUBLISHER'S NOTE:**

At the end of this novel of approximately 117,710 words, you will find two Special Sneak Previews: 1) *THE POSSESSION* by A.K. Kuykendall, this author's first book in the "Writer's Block" trilogy of spine-chilling tales of horror., and; 2) *ELOAH: NO HEAVEN* by Lex Allen, the first book in the "Eloah" series of science fiction/conspiracy thriller/alternative history novels. We think you'll enjoy these books, too, and provide these previews as a **FREE** extra service, which you should in no way consider a part of the price you paid for this book. We hope you will both appreciate and enjoy the opportunity. Thank you.

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**Books by A.K. Kuykendall**

**WRITER'S BLOCK**

Book 1: *The Possession*

Book 2: *Purgatory* (Coming Late 2020)

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The Confessional (A Short Story)

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**CONSPIRATOR'S ODYSSEY**

Book 1: *Imperium Heirs*

Book 2: *Sovereign Ichor* (Coming 2021)

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Author's Website:

www.TheWriterOfBooks.com

Publisher's Website

[A.K. Kuykendall](#)

What Others Are Saying about A.K. Kuykendall's Books

IMPERIUM HEIRS

"A very distinct voice!"
K. D. Payne, Odyssey Reviews

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"A great story line!"  
*Simon Barrett, Blogger News Network*

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"A proposed series ... It may work!"
Jack Quick, Book Bitch

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"A compulsive page turner!"  
*Bill C., Alternative Reel*

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THE POSSESSION

"A.K. Kuykendall blurs the lines between fact and fiction to conjure a true nightmare."
Shane KP O'Neill, Author of "The Lucifer Agenda" Series

~~~

"I honestly feel that you're a gifted writer."  
*Michael Garrett (Credited as Stephen King's First Editor)*

~~~

"It's got such a chilling vibe to it, it draws you in even when you want to put it down and pretend it's not there."

Cianna Elizabeth

~~~

"The Reader can see the inspiration for the novel in many sources, like *The Exorcist*, or a Stephen King or Dean Koontz book, but the plot twists and turns were definitely something new and interesting that I hadn't seen before. I was blown away!"

*Jodi Henkiel*

~~~

"If you are into Stephen King, or Dean Koontz, or those types of dark horror books, you are going to LOVE this book. It's AWESOME. Kept me up at night a few times."

Heather Badgwell

~~~

"Although admittedly inspired by *The Exorcist*, you'll be hard-pressed to find scenes or symbols in A.K. Kuykendall's 'Writer's Block' that are not unique."

*Serenity J. Banks*

~~~

"I was fascinated with the historical aspects of the story and liked the way it was woven throughout the plot."

Heather Chisholm

Setting the Stage

“According to our best estimates, more than half of all U.S. government records are classified. For an archivist seeking to preserve and understand our history, it means most of our history is kept secret from us. Think about that for a moment.”

~ *Richard Michael Dolan*

Author's Foreword

Though I'm known for making up stories out of whole cloth, this particular story evolved from a rather remarkable headline appearing in the tabloid famed *Weekly World News* in August 1999. They reported on an incident that took place in the spring of 1917, where the flamboyant fighter pilot known as the Red Baron, who not only shot down eighty enemy planes for the Germans during World War I, was said to be the first human in history to gun down an alien spacecraft.

That's the fascinating claim of former German Air Force ace Peter Waitzrik, who says he watched in astonishment as the deadeye fighter pilot shot a UFO with undulating orange lights out of the sky over Belgium on March 13, 1917. Then, Waitzrik says, he stared in disbelief as two bruised and battered occupants of the downed craft climbed from their spaceship and scampered off into the woods – apparently never to be seen again.

"The Baron and I gave a full report on the incident back at headquarters, and they told us not to ever mention it again," the feisty, 105-year-old retired airline pilot recently told a reporter. "And except for my wife and grandkids, I never told a soul. But it's been over 80 years, so what difference could it possibly make now?"

The aging Waitzrik said he and Baron Manfred von Richthofen – the renowned Red Baron – were flying an early morning mission over western Belgium in the spring of 1917 when the UFO suddenly appeared in a clear, blue sky directly ahead of their Fokker triplanes.

"We were terrified because we'd never seen anything like it before," recalled the easygoing great-great grandfather of five. "The U.S. had just entered the war, so we assumed it was something they'd sent up. The Baron immediately opened fire, and the thing went down like a rock, shearing off tree limbs as it crashed in the woods. Then the two little baldheaded guys climbed out and ran away."

Waitzrik said he assumed the glittering silver spaceship was some sort of enemy invention, until the flying saucer scare that began in the late 1940s convinced him that his buddy had shot down a UFO.

"The thing was maybe 40 meters (136 feet) in diameter and looked just like those saucer-shaped spaceships that everybody's been seeing for the last fifty years," the awed oldster said. "So there's no doubt in my mind now that that was no U.S. reconnaissance plane the Baron shot down, that was some kind of spacecraft from another planet – and those little guys who ran off into the woods weren't Americans, they were space aliens of some kind." Waitzrik shook his head in silent curiosity. "You know, sometimes I wonder what ever became of those guys, anyway."

Imperium Heirs is a tale that not only speaks to those little guys Waitzrik saw climbing from their spaceship and scampering off into the woods, but about what they carried as they fled. That in which Baron Manfred von Richthofen shot out of the sky in 1917 was, in actuality, a royal interstellar spacecraft; his actions alone wholly putting at risk much within our multifaceted macrocosm. What the escaped occupants protected, at all cost, were, in fact, unhatched seedlings of the sovereign family – heirs to the galactic throne.

Arthur Schopenhauer was a German philosopher best known for his book, *The World as Will and Representation*, in which he claimed that our world is driven by a continually dissatisfied will, continually seeking satisfaction. As I consider myself more of an historian than a book author, I find myself in line with Schopenhauer's claim, for I am very much driven by a dissatisfied will that seeks satisfaction.

It is, however, what he wrote in 1818 that fiercely clings to me – guiding my thoughts as I

peruse the historical landscape, shoveling off the cleverly disguised shit that cloak the many secrets that have been kept from both you and I. Many of us may have seen and/or heard that Schopenhauer wrote that, *"All truth passes through three stages. First, it is ridiculed. Second, it is violently opposed. Third, it is accepted as being self-evident."*

Although that literary passage is a marvelously assembled set of sentences, on the contrary, he never wrote that. What he actually wrote, with which I wholly concur, is, *"To truth only a brief celebration of victory is allowed between the two long periods during which it is condemned as paradoxical, or disparaged as trivial."*

The debate over what's true and what's false in literature is never ending, primarily due to the fact that all written works, especially those considered of superior or lasting artistic merit, are based on some truth. Like that of a surreptitious military operation, the goal of argumentative writing is to tactically persuade your audience that your ideas are valid beyond the method by which you've chosen to relay your story.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle divided the means of persuasion, appeals, into three distinct categories – Ethos, Pathos, Logos – which we've all experienced throughout our lives. It was either through radio, television, film, or the hypnotic allure of unmovable print. And in each case, we had no clue as to this strategic tactic playing out before us.

I recollect my sophomore year at my first alma mater: Mary Holmes College out of West Point, Mississippi, where I took a creative writing course taught by the late Dr. Clarence Simmons. I was introduced then to an academic text written by John C. Bean and John D. Ramage, *Writing Arguments: A Rhetoric with Readings*, which precisely and rather succinctly spoke to Aristotle's persuasive appeals.

They wrote that ethos (Greek for character) refers to the trustworthiness or credibility of the writer. Ethos is often conveyed through tone and style of the message, and through the way the writer refers to differing views. It can also be affected by the writer's reputation, as it exists independently of the message – his or her expertise in the field, his or her previous record or integrity, and so forth. The impact of ethos is often called the argument's ethical appeal, or the appeal from credibility.

Pathos (Greek for suffering or experience) is often associated with emotional appeal, but a better equivalent might be appeal to the audience's sympathies and imagination. An appeal to pathos causes an audience not just to respond emotionally, but also to identify with the writer's point of view – to feel what the writer feels. In this sense, pathos evokes a meaning implicit in the verb 'to suffer' – to feel pain imaginatively.

Perhaps the most common way of conveying a pathetic appeal is through narrative or story, which can turn the abstractions of logic into something palpable and present. The values, beliefs, and understandings of the writer are implicit in the story and conveyed imaginatively to the reader. Pathos thus refers to both the emotional and the imaginative impact of the message on an audience, the power with which the writer's message moves the audience to decision or action.

Logos (Greek for word) refers to the internal consistency of the message – the clarity of the claim, the logic of its reasons, and the effectiveness of its supporting evidence. The impact of logos on an audience is sometimes called the argument's logical appeal.

A rabid bibliophile with many readings under my cap, I know now, more than I ever did during that sophomore year in college, that there are infinite examples of Aristotle's persuasive appeals littered among the sea of well-placed, strategically-balanced, yet beautiful lore. In keeping with the premise of this particular read, below are just a few.

1. Leonardo di ser Piero da Vinci's *Codex Atlanticus*
2. George Orwell's *1984*
3. Milton William Cooper's *Behold A Pale Horse*
4. Jack Finney's *The Body Snatchers*
5. Stephen King's *The Ballad of the Flexible Bullet*
6. David Seltzer's *The Omen*
7. H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds*
8. Thomas Michael Keneally's *Schindler's Ark*
9. Dean Koontz's *The Eyes of Darkness*
10. William Peter Blatty's *The Exorcist*
11. Richard Condon's *The Manchurian Candidate*
12. Lex Allen's *Eloah Trilogy*
13. Robert Shea and Robert Anton Wilson's *The Illuminatus! Trilogy*
14. Robert Ludlum's *The Bourne Identity*
15. Robert A. Heinlein's *The Puppet Masters*
16. Aubrey Dasher's *Creed of Vengeance*
17. Jules Gabriel Verne's *A Journey to the Center of the Earth*
18. Erich von Däniken's *Chariots of the Gods*
19. Peter Straub's *KoKo*

And let us not forget the *Conspirator's Odyssey* series, with which I'm taking the liberty of weighing in. However unquestionably interminable these examples may be, all remain but the tiniest of pebbles dropped haphazardly into a massive basin of still water.

Words I liken to keys, which unlock the incomprehensible doors of the matrix we were conceived in. However, you must choose to read, to absorb, to beware, and to prepare. Don't be misled and/or hindered by the industrial captions that arbitrarily label author's work; e.g. fiction, non-fiction, et alia. These labels are presented to authors and their readers by the publishing conglomerate as a means of categorizing, marketing, and covertly trivializing their contracted mules. They, in fact, have always been the sluices by which our agenda thrives.

Throughout time, many creative minds have meticulously used the superlative dominance of literature to slowly awaken the masses to the covert doings of individuals of this world and beyond. It is an art form stronger than you may think, for one cannot save a world nestled in a box, strategically dormant to the realities of their existence. Exposing the masses to narratives once thought to have been pulled from midair was actually meant to help soften the blow felt when the world's dirty laundry could no longer be contained.

As a young man and a United States Marine Corps brat for the better part of my existence, I grew up with the smell of fatigues, which lingered regularly about the many bases my family and I both visited and resided—the pungent aroma trailing me as I made my way through life.

Along with my cravings, bordering on the obsessive, for ready-to-eat military stock meals (MRE's), I was brought up to appreciate the military's code of conduct. On the other side of the coin, and through my days, I was especially diligent in historic readings, literature of all genres, and with the media goings-on in the world, all witnessed from an obscure perch I dubbed *Fort Kuykendall*. As the days in my life ticked by, and as history played itself out before my eyes, I continually found myself at a loss for words in reflection of the many tempestuous global occurrences.

There was entirely too much upheaval in the world, and I couldn't get my head around it all. This is when I decided to prioritize, and I allowed my passions to take hold. Though I was

born eleven years after his assassination, the late John F. Kennedy became my focus, and with this came a torrent of mysterious doors I instinctively knew neither I nor anyone else was meant to open.

In reflection of my time as a military brat, witnessing repeat deployments on behalf of our nation, and from what I had discovered, I was then, and still am to this very day, floored by the rampant political corruption that has covertly reduced our American soldiers to blind defenders and lambs for the slaughter.

In searching for answers through an extensive research process, a highly complex picture began to emerge with both eerie and true-to-life connections. In my desperate need to make sense of it all, I pushed on exhaustively researching every angle that emerged, and then I made a connection that, at first, even I could hardly believe. I discovered the true meaning behind former President Dwight David Eisenhower's January 17, 1961 farewell address to the nation. By playing on the complexities within my own research, I decided to use the very same historical information, which led to this discovery, to present a plausible backdrop, and "Conspirator's Odyssey" was born.

As it is written in Wikipedia, "*A conspiracy theory explains an event as being the result of an alleged plot by a covert group or organization or, more broadly, the idea that important political, social or economic events are the products of secret plots that are largely unknown to the general public.*" And so I chose to present my story in the trend of "The Illuminatus Trilogy."

I made it a point to paint an all-too-believable picture of interconnecting, power-hungry, conspiratorial madmen who essentially run the nation behind the scenes. But while "Illuminatus" is scatterbrained and nearly impossible for the average reader to follow, "Conspirator's Odyssey" gradually blossoms to reveal each new layer and fold at just the right pace.

History is a rather convoluted thing as it is recorded – the sheer weight of the world's words endlessly drowned in that previously mentioned sea of well-placed, strategically-balanced, yet beautiful lore. As a self-described historian, objectivity is a necessity and deathly warranted with such studies, but as an author of questionable fiction who wanders the grandiloquence of history's many gateways, I've always fancied the rim of the steepest literary precipice.

It all unraveled on the evening of July 3, 1947 in the tiny town of Roswell, New Mexico, while respected business owner Dan Wilmot and his wife were simply relaxing on their front porch. On this evening, they witnessed a bright, saucer-shaped object with glowing lights move across the cloudy sky at an undeterminable rate of speed. The next day, a tremendous amount of unearthly debris was discovered in the area, and the infamous Roswell UFO crash incident entered American – indeed, the world's – lore.

Many years later, President Dwight Eisenhower's farewell address to the nation on January 17, 1961 was not only purposeful, it was a cunningly cloaked one, so as to not infringe on the presidential oaths or divulge the many secrets to which he, as all presidents, was bound. Having succeeded Truman for the Presidency, and having read his predecessor's notes in the Presidential Book of Secrets, Eisenhower was fully aware of the meeting Truman had with an extraterrestrial being, and was in line with Truman's initial precautions given what transpired that evening.

Given the evolving military trajectory of Classification Falcon Sweep, and due to what was surmised of the military and technically advanced Intel that came of their research, Eisenhower watched as this once noble endeavor manifested into a diabolical plot with many thorns. Those thorns were so deeply embedded within the tactical arms divisions of our nation that not even the power of the presidency could stop it. One such thorn was code-named the Aneman

Project—an unsanctioned experiment aimed at developing a superhuman armed force using the men and women of our armed forces.

So it was that Eisenhower's farewell address to our nation was as prescient as it was bold in its delivery—a targeted warning to all Americans and the peoples of the world when he stated, *"In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military industrial complex."*

With President Eisenhower's address seeming to fall upon deaf ears—maybe because of the unusual heaviness of his words at that particular time in history—the strategic military experimentations that took place after the Roswell incident persisted without pause, and ultimately led to the November 22, 1963 assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Behind the assassination lay a vast conspiracy, well-hidden within the complexity of a massive bureaucratic spider web that *we the people* have come to believe and accept. In fact, Project Aneman was the mainspring of our president's demise.

This is what happened, and I know it will be an extremely hard pill to swallow, but it must be told. Project Aneman reached an evolved testing phase and needed a war. Vietnam was that war. Kennedy was in the way.

Jim Marrs, author of the critically acclaimed book *Crossfire*, published in 1989, made one of the most important statements ever concerning the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, which I believe you should take into consideration when it comes to my story: *"Do not trust this book. In fact, when it comes to the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, don't trust any one source or even the basic evidence and testimony. In the case of the JFK assassination, belief and trust have long been a part of the problem."*

As a pragmatic author of fact-based fiction, and one who believes that almost everything in Stanley Kubrick's film "Dr. Strangelove" was true, I present the totality of what I've discovered not only through the covert council of my anonymous source and an extremely rigorous research process, but in a fashion that demonstrates the unfettered draw of speculative fiction. Simply put, I present my story as a warning wrapped in a lie in order to tell you the truth.

Mark Twain may have been writing about this very project of mine when he wrote that truth is stranger than fiction, because "fiction is obliged to stick to possibilities; *truth* isn't."

~ A.K. Kuykendall, Author

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Dedication

In memory of my niece – forevermore – Hilary. You may have exited the party sweetheart, but your presence will stay visible, evanescent, never from either my memory or my heart. My second regret was that I wasn't there to say goodbye. My first regret, however, was that you didn't live to see another tomorrow. I miss you. I love you.

IMPERIUM HEIRS



**A “Conspirator’s Odyssey” Thriller
Book 1**

A.K. Kuykendall

Opening Quote

“Once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth.”

~ *Sir Arthur Conan Doyle*

PART I - The Emergence?

Chapter 1

At 4:38 PM, President Truman had just completed his meal for the evening when he received an urgent call from General Roger Ramey, as he had requested should there be any new Intel to report. He'd given this order based on the preliminary reports he received from the Pentagon after the electrical storm that took place the evening of July 3, 1947 over Roswell, New Mexico.

"It was more than a blip on our radar screens that we witnessed yesterday evening, Mr. President," the general reported.

"Classification Falcon Sweep is signed, General! There's no room for error. Disinformation and concealment agents have been mobilized to piggyback the ruse that has already been established, and you are to carry out your orders under the umbrella. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Mr. President!"

"At this time, neither our security sections nor members of my cabinet, from the Vice President on down, will be privy to this discovery —"

"Oh my God!" the general shouted.

"What is it, General?"

"Mr. President, contact has been made. We have living alien subjects in our possession."

Taken aback by the unbelievable news, Truman leaned back in his chair, momentarily out of breath, his eyes wild. He then called for a staffer using the emergency line.

The staffer hustled into the room with a look of urgency about him. "What is it, Mr. President?"

"Ready Air Force One."

"The destination, sir?"

"Roswell, New Mexico."

Truman refocused his attentions back on the general as the staffer quickly left the room to see to his order.

"General, no one is to know that I'm enroute, nor of my arrival."

"Affirmative, Mr. President."

Upon arriving, President Truman was greeted by the General on the tarmac. They traded quick salutes, their movement towards the hanger never breaking stride.

"Welcome to Roswell, Mr. President. As ordered, we've taken every precaution to shield your visit. You —"

"General, I didn't fly here under the cover of night to have smoke gently blown up my ass. You sent me a pressing telegram shortly after Air Force One took flight, reeling on about a message one of the visitors divulged to you. As your telegram omitted the details — I'm sure because of the sensitivity and needed secrecy — what was the message, General?"

"You have to hear it for yourself, Mr. President."

In the area where they kept the visitor, the general positioned Truman at a safe distance from it.

"Mr. President," General Ramey said, "the other visitors have taken ill, and our doctors say they may be dying. This one before you seems to be in good health, and he's the one with the message. We've named him EBE, short for extraterrestrial biological entity."

The being, EBE, looked at him curiously before it took a step towards him, staring at him rather intensely.

Truman felt rather uneasy during this moment of silence, and felt the need to speak. "Uh,

I'm President Harry S. Truman, the premiere representative of the United States of America. I wish—"

"Humanity!"

Without warning, the thing's thoughts suddenly rung in his head. The general and he traded a quick glance, and instantly he knew the general heard it too.

"Well, I represent a rather large proportion of our world's human inhabitants, but if there's a message you're looking to divulge to our world's peoples, I can assure you, you're speaking to the right person. What is it you're trying to convey?"

"War is upon you!"

He stepped rather stealthily closer to the glass enclosure that held the thing, and spoke directly. "War!" he shouted. "What do you mean, *war*?"

Truman paced back and forth in General Ramey's office.

The general stood at a distance from him and seemed to be impatiently awaiting his orders. "Mr. President," the general said, interrupting his thoughts. "Per your expressed orders on this matter, and given the core parameters of Classification Falcon Sweep, I'd be remiss in my duties if I didn't inform you that time is of the essence, sir."

For the first time in nearly half-an-hour, he stopped pacing the floor. "General, you heard what that *thing* said?"

"I did, Mr. President."

He sighed long and deep before getting into the general's face. "Immediately, you are to gain preliminary Intel from this disclosure, with a prime focus on military and technically advanced application. You, and you alone, will then spearhead the agenda, bringing it to the attention of our National Security Council no later than the 5th of next month with your recommendations.

"By July 28th, I want to receive an outline of your findings so that I may officially brief the NSC on the matter. Be so advised that the power of the presidency will be flanking your every move, General, assuring unlimited funding for such a brazen endeavor."

"Mr. President, given what the EBE told us, we're completely outmatched—outgunned in every way." He sighed. "Sir, what it described to us was an invasion!"

This reality came over the president like a wet blanket. He was petrified at the notion, and he knew the general was too, but, as he peered into the man's eyes, he wanted to convince him that he had it together, that he was the Commander-in-Chief and the strength of this nation.

In that moment, he told himself that he was the 33rd President of the United States of America and, like the heroic characters so often found in the comic strips, novels, and film reels that he'd been in love with since his childhood, *he* was meant to be the hero in this story. He would be the one to protect the human race, by any means necessary, from a malevolent force bent on our destruction.

"Tell me something I don't know, General."

"What's the overall objective of this endeavor, Mr. President?"

"Survival!" He placed his right hand on the general's shoulder. "*Humanity's* survival!" he emphasized, channeling the type of trademark directness he'd used when he led men during his 37-year tenure in the United States Army.

Chapter 2

PHELON PROVINCE 560 LIGHT YEARS FROM EARTH PLANET YATTRHA MEETING OF THE CEL'JUL HIGH COUNCIL

"I'm no fool, Councilman Tos'illlcoo!" General Eisenhower stated firmly before the council and the gathered squadron Commanders of the Royal Galactic Alliance. "I'm very much aware of the reasons this council saw fit to allow this human a representative role on the Council of Galaxies."

The one hundred members of the Cel'jul High Council began to look over at each other from their seating, which towered high above the stage on which General Eisenhower stood.

"Is that so, General?" Head Councilman Tos'illlcoo said, rising to his feet and tossing his caped garb over his shoulder before beaming a cool stare at Eisenhower.

"That is so," the general replied confidently.

The room came to life with laughter. The only ones in the room with the same steely military disposition as the general were the squadron Commanders, who just looked upon the general with a calculated gaze. The roar of the council was quite deafening, but in that very moment, as Eisenhower glanced over at the squadron Commanders, he knew that they were of the same stripes as he himself.

They, too, understood that the members of the high council were nothing but politicians, cut from the same basic cloth as those from Earth, for which both they and the general had great disdain. Like all politicians, no doubt, spanning the furthest reaches of the universe, the Cel'jul High Council were oblivious to any reality beyond the power they wielded.

"Pray tell, General Eisenhower," spat Tos'illlcoo.

A cold grin formed on the general's face before he proceeded. "It was the demonstration of the United States nuclear strength over the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan." An abrupt hush fell over the room, and Eisenhower fancied that he'd slapped the laughter from the thin orifices that made up their mouths. "This bold action on the part of the human race, which I represent, indeed acted as a counterbalance, and ultimately led me to assume a representative role on the Council of Galaxies." The hushed gathering held firm. "As I said, Councilman Tos'illlcoo, I'm no fool."

Head Councilman Tos'illlcoo, having slumped down in his chair, stared angrily over at Grand Squadron Commander Gilli'victcill and shouted, "Why did you bring this *human* before us, Commander Gilli'victcill, and without forewarning, as is accustomed? And to our home world, for that matter?" The councilman wagged his finger at the commander in a belittling gesture. "You clearly know that representatives of the Council of Galaxies are to meet on matters of importance on the planet – what these humans call an asteroid – Oo'lils, between Mars and Jupiter, in the neutral galactic quadrant of Zoosail'tcx?"

Commander Gilli'victcill appeared beside General Eisenhower to address the high council. "Councilman Tos'illlcoo, I brought General Eisenhower here for reasons that gravely go beyond the parameters of the Council of Galaxies. This business is of *our* species, and matters of the universe, in keeping with a promise General Eisenhower made to me in the Earth year 1942. At that time, on orders by this very council, my squadron leaders and I were to lay waste an American city in order to force the humans into divulging Intel that would lead us to the sovereign family, for whom this body suspected humans to know their whereabouts –"

"He's found them?" Councilman Tos'illlcoo shouted.

The entire council now appeared to be on the edge of their seats.

"It's much more complicated –"

"Complicated?" Councilman Tos'illlcoo shouted again, rising from his seat. "No, Commander Gilli'victill! It is not!" Taking his eyes off of the commander, the councilman stared menacingly at General Eisenhower. "Has he or has he not found the sovereign family?"

General Eisenhower spoke up. "Yes, Councilman Tos'illlcoo, I have found Queen Tili'kiloos and King Bosh'licolo."

A groundswell of voices arose from those gathered, like the roar of an angry lion.

Councilman Tos'illlcoo shouted, "Quiet!" As the concentration of noise died down, he asked, "What of the children, the heirs to the throne?"

"Your Grand Commander Gilli'victill, here, told me about two seedlings – Princess Tali'sislo and Prince Sisla'vul – that were lost to you in 1917. My Intel tells of two of your species from the downed craft who happened to escape carrying a package of sorts, but that is all I or anyone at the top echelons of the United States government knows of them, or of what they carried, as they were never found."

"Enough," Councilman Tos'illlcoo shouted. "Commander Gilli'victill, I hereby order you to retrieve our queen and king this instant."

"Councilman Tos'illlcoo, as Grand Commander of the Royal Galactic Alliance, who, by order of this very council is under a targeted fiat to ascertain the fate of the sovereign family by any means, I believe it to be in our best interest for General Eisenhower to lead this campaign, and for us to retrieve our queen and king in solidarity."

"Solidarity? These *humans* have taken, and might I add, held hostage for eighty plus years, our queen and king – the heart of our collective universe – setting off a series of events that may have permanently crippled our standing and given unfettered rise to the Imperial Reptilian Voli'icill."

"It's solidarity, Councilman Tos'illlcoo, or it's war with the humans, in which we will *all* surely perish. Need I remind you that the signing of the treaty was an event of immense importance, negotiated in good faith by both our species? It was a daunting task led by General Eisenhower himself, and which greatly benefits the universe in whole. No doubt the Imperial Reptilian Voli'icill has manipulated certain factions of the human race, bringing us to where we stand today, but the fact remains that the general is not only a staunch advocate for his species, he stands as a grand ally of ours. This reality is one I, unequivocally, can vouch for."

Councilman Tos'illlcoo sat back down and carelessly waved off Commander Gilli'victill, who returned to formation with his squadron commanders. "So, General Eisenhower, just what do you have in mind?" the councilman said reluctantly.

"As surely as it must be the case with your planet's politics," Eisenhower said, "I'm but a soldier, buried under the weight of a powerful bureaucracy that refuses to see the error of their ways. They will not, under any circumstance, release your queen and king, especially now that they know just who and what they are – and more importantly, their significance to your species."

"And I take it that *you* were the one who told them of our queen and king?"

"Yes, I told them, Councilman Tos'illlcoo. It was the only way I could prevent my government's science divisions from dissecting them and performing god-awful experiments, as my species is accustomed to doing when it comes to anything they do not understand." The general looked over his shoulder and at Commander Gilli'victill, who gestured for him to continue. "As spokesman for the human race, not to mention a member of the Council of Galaxies, I was naively optimistic in thinking that my position in advocating the plight of the

Cel'jul species would move them to atone for this grave error in judgment.

"However, seeing as it is your species that are the very Gods we humans, since the dawn of mankind, have worshiped from all corners of planet Earth – while we, as with the many other species that span the universe, are only products of a mere science project – and with the knowledge of your species being our creators, the bureaucracy I deal with just assumes that they've gained an upper hand on God himself and, therefore, refuses to let go.

"And, might I add, you didn't help yourselves a bit when, in the Earth year 1942, this very council flagrantly ignored the mutually agreed upon parameters highlighted in the treaty of 1939, when you sent an overt threat directly to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt of your plans to destroy an American city –"

"Now that we've established the fact that you, General Eisenhower, like to hear yourself speak," the councilman said to him dismissively, "again, I ask you, just what do you have in mind?"

A well-calculated amount of seconds ticked by as the General looked upon the council members, confident he'd gotten their attention, as they seemed to be hanging on his every word. "You just can't, as was the case in Earth year 1942, when you abruptly and without a plan sent your destroyer and armada to Los Angeles, California, make another bold threat of laying waste an American city. A move such as that, with all due respect, council members, could only have come from politicians such as the one hundred of you in this body who know absolutely nothing of military strategy." The general's tone, though passionate, was sharp.

A wave of murmurs swept through the body of council members, but none dared to interrupt the general for what he spoke was a truth they couldn't dispute.

"I asked Grand Squadron Commander Gilli'victcill of the Galactic Royal Alliance to bring me before you. I wanted to personally make clear to this high council that this *human* is not only ranked General of the Army, a five-star general officer that is the second highest possible rank in the United States Army, but that I am a strategist of the highest order. I wanted to personally inform this body that my intentions are honorable, and that they'll yield the results for which your species has been waiting far too long.

"With your permission," he said with a cleverly disguised amount of disdain, "phase two of the mission both Commander Gilli'victcill and I have discussed will begin at 11:40 PM on Saturday, July 19th in this very Earth year 1952. Your royal brigades will begin their strategic maneuvering around Washington, D.C., with an even heavier presence around our U.S. Capital building – the location at which both Queen Tili'kiloos and King Bosh'licolo are being held. In January of this Earth year, I threw my hat into the ring for the presidency of my country, as phase one of this operation.

"Under the guise of the covert relationship I've had with your species since Earth year 1939, this will be the platform where I'll stand as I begin brokering the deal to prevent an all-out assault by your species on Earth. The overt threat Commander Gilli'victcill will make, to the United States' top military brass and echelons of government, will be that your intentions are to annihilate Washington, D.C. before your global strike. This provocation will be stated without any specific demands.

"During the purposely drawn out negotiations, your royal brigades will keep up their show of force until the talk's end, which Commander Gilli'victcill and I have planned to conclude on July 27, 1952. I will be, though covertly, hailed as a hero in the United States of America and around the world, and will subsequently and literally be gifted the presidency, where I will use the power of the office to shake loose your queen and king."

"You, General Eisenhower, will also be hailed as a hero here on Yattrha and throughout the

universe, if this plan of yours is successful," Councilman Tos'illlcoo said earnestly.

After a brief moment of sincere nods to and from the general and the council members, Eisenhower went on to say, "Once your queen and king are again united with your people, I have no doubt that you, using the weight of the Royal Galactic Alliance, will further seek the whereabouts of both Princess Tali'sislo and Prince Sisla'vul on Earth. I only ask that any amount of force as grand as what took place on 24/25 of February 1942 in Los Angeles, California, or the type of force I'm suggesting to be displayed with this strategic operation, will never again be visible to the inhabitants of Earth."

"Agreed!" The entire council said in unison as if they were one.

The general sighed deeply before saying, "There is one more thing I must mention at this time, for transparency's sake, and I ask of you *all* to hear me out."

"What is it, General?" Councilman Tos'illlcoo shouted.

"The highly coveted title of President of the United States of America, unbeknownst to any given citizen and/or candidate, is fraught with delusions of grandeur. Though the towering goals of these Americans, many of whom are mere activists seeking to use politics to move forward grand ideals, are admirable, they're misguided.

"All who seek the title truly believe they would have a hand in fundamentally shaping our nation, when, in fact, the tumultuous line of succession from one U.S. President to the next does not undo clandestine operations established beforehand, whether large or small, moral or immoral, of our world or beyond. Yes, the delusions of grandeur continue unabated, as the true history of the office is lost on the people it was established to serve."

"What are you getting at, General Eisenhower?" Councilman Tos'illlcoo was seemingly becoming wary.

"I'm not, nor do I wish for you to be, disillusioned as it relates to the power of the presidency. Upon a successful operation, and I become President of the United States of America, it will take a considerable amount of time before I'll be able to safely have Queen Tili'kiloos and King Bosh'licolo delivered to your people, as I must further wade through the bureaucratic waters of the U.S. government."

"How much time, General?"

"Councilman Tos'illlcoo, the definitive Earth year will be 1954, a little over a year after I'm sworn into office, and the location I've chosen for the transfer will be Holloman Air Force Base. Holloman is located in New Mexico's Tularosa Basin, between the Sacramento and San Andres mountain ranges.

"The base is about 10 miles west of Alamogordo, New Mexico, on U.S. Rout 70/82; 90 miles north of El Paso, Texas; and 70 miles east of Las Cruces, New Mexico. The base covers 59,639 acres and is located at an altitude of 4,093 feet. The locale, I believe, is quite fitting for such an unprecedented endeavor."

"General Eisenhower, you seem to have earned the trust of Grand Squadron Commander Gilli'victcill," Councilman Tos'illlcoo said. He stood, and the entire council followed suit. He then turned to the thick gathering of squadron leaders and asked, "Do you all feel the same?"

Again, Commander Gilli'victcill appeared beside the general with eyes affixed on the council head, and like a powerful wave, every one of the squadron leaders piled in behind them both in a premier show of solidarity.

Again, and speaking in one unified voice, the council members said, "General Eisenhower, you may proceed with this operation."

As the roar of celebratory cheers erupted out of the squadron leaders, General Eisenhower turned to face Commander Gilli'victcill with his hand extended. The commander, whose stature

towered high over the general, firmly took hold of his hand like any human would, and shook it.

"It is your bravery that I admire, General Eisenhower," he said.

"And from one soldier to another," the general said with a sincere smile, "it is your trust, Commander, which I cherish."

"With this being your first trip to our dear planet Yattrha, I would like to extend an invitation to feast with my squadron leaders and I to celebrate."

"I would love to, Commander Gilli'victill, but it is imperative I get back to my home world with all due haste. Given the intensity of the lightning and rain pelting the massive NATO exercise we're conducting in the North Atlantic, suffice it to say that all hell would surely break loose if the seamen of the USS *Franklin D. Roosevelt* were to discover that their dear General Eisenhower was missing. Especially after that unidentified light show you and your squadron displayed before I was ferried away.

Commander Gilli'victill nodded his understanding. "What is the saying on your planet? *Rain check?*"

The general smiled. "Yes, Commander, rain check."

"Well then, General, let's get you back."

The two of them began exiting the council chambers, but paused.

Eisenhower patted at his left chest pocket and let out a subtle sigh of relief, then pulled out his pack of Lucky Strike cigarettes. "My friend, I'm going to need a minute before you put me back in that cryogenic sleep thingamajig."

"Is there a problem, General?"

"Not at all, Commander," he said with a chuckle. "I look at this nicotine habit of mine as nothing but a simple chink in the armor."

"Oh." The commander nodded. "We all have our vices, General."

"Indeed!"

After a moment of silence had separated the two, the commander leaned over and said, "I'm curious... just how did you know that the high council wouldn't piece together the fact that it's now September back on Earth, and that we'd already gone ahead with the second phase of the operation in July?"

"Well, Commander," Eisenhower said, pausing in his stride and looking over his shoulder at the now empty council chamber. "As is the case with politicians on my world, they continue to remain oblivious to any reality beyond the power they wield." He smiled, eyeing the sharp detail of his peaked cap before saying, "I used a strategy akin to stroking one's ego, regaling them with details so moving that even *these* politicians would want to be a part of it rather than be oblivious to it. Especially an operation of this magnitude and importance to the Cel'jul species."

"General Eisenhower, you may not care very much for the likes of politics and politicians, but you sure do have a knack for their arena."

The general smiled.

"But, from one leader to another," the Commander said, staring deep into the general's eyes with a sudden and unexpected concentration of seriousness. "What you're doing is tantamount to treason in undergoing this operation, whereas I'm wholly in line with my targeted fiat to ascertain the fate of the sovereign family by any means. My having not first brought the full details of the operation to the attention of the Cel'jul High Council is minuscule, in comparison to your actions against that which you serve and have sworn to protect.

“And though you haven’t, as I most certainly do, any operational boundaries to adhere to on this end of the universal spectrum, I do believe you have a code of conduct you are sworn to adhere to on your world—”

“Is there a question you want to ask me, Commander Gilli’victill?”

“General, you seem quite eager to go against the wishes of your command structure. And though my asking this of you is counterproductive to my overall objective... as your friend, I’m curious to know why that is.”

The General sighed and looked off in the distance, admiring the detailed magnificence of the grand council chamber, which reminded him of the imagery captured in *Odd John: A Story Between Jest and Earnest*—a 1935 science fiction novel by the British author Olaf Stapledon that the general very much enjoyed. He fancied that he was but a character playing out his part in a grand tale, one where he was meant to be the hero.

After a moment of silent contemplation, he turned his gaze back toward the commander. “I have my reasons, my friend.”

PART II - The Fortified Shroud

Chapter 3

Roswell, New Mexico, July 3, 1947

Dan Wilmot and his wife enjoyed the evening sitting on their front porch, admiring a fast-approaching storm. Thick dark clouds rippled the night sky and flashes of lightning brightened the fields.

In the middle of the spectacular light show, a long streak of lightning tore through the sky. Dan and his wife sat up in alarm as six seconds of daylight illuminated the town, and then the lightning vanished as quickly as it had arrived. A cracking noise came from above, sounding exactly like a firecracker had been set off near the house.

At that moment, a bright, saucer-shaped object moved across the sky, its lights glowing.

Mac Brazel, foreman of the J. B. Foster Ranch, rode his horse out to check the sheep after a night of intense storms. While he was there, he discovered a large amount of strange debris scattered across one of the ranch pastures.

"What in the hell," the old foreman said to himself.

Spooked by the debris, Mac's horse began galloping back and forth, turning violently around, and leaping into the air. With the horse finally calmed, Mac gathered pieces of the debris to carry home with him.

The next morning, he called George Wilcox.

The silence of the empty sheriff's station was cut by a ringing telephone. Sheriff Wilcox ran from the bathroom to answer the call. "Sheriff's office. This is Wilcox."

"George, it's Mac Brazel. Look here, I found some stuff out on the ranch that's really thrown me for a loop."

Sheriff Wilcox looked around his empty office. "I'm a little shorthanded today, Mac. What is it that's got you spooked?"

"My horse is spooked, Sheriff. I'm more *amazed* than anything. I showed it to a couple of close friends of mine before I called, and they can't figure it out either. If you don't mind, I'd like you to see it for yourself."

"If you're not being robbed or chased by a knife-wielding madman, I'm sorry to say I'm not leaving this office."

"I'm on my way to town to pick up some supplies anyway. I'll just stop by, if that's all right with you."

The sheriff sighed. "All right, Mac. See you later."

Within the hour, Mac came bursting through the main door of the sheriff's station clutching a large, dirty rag filled with strange debris. Mac must have been really anxious to find answers, because he'd left the engine running in his old Chevy pickup, which he'd double-parked beside Wilcox's mud-coated police cruiser. He held the rag in one fist while dingling the counter bell with the other.

"Hold your horses," Wilcox said, making his way around the corner to see Mac Brazel breathing heavy, beads of sweat on his brow. He glanced at his watch. "Damn, Mac! You run a footrace?"

"Take a look for yourself." Mac placed the rag on the counter with the same care he would give a newborn.

Wilcox looked out the front window at Mac's double-parked pickup, and removed the toothpick from out of his mouth. "I knew you were one of those fancy UT scholarship boys, but

I didn't realize you were above the law in my town."

"George, since you got elected sheriff, you've turned into a real asshole." Mac slid the rag over to Wilcox. "Just take a look at this stuff. I've got better things to do than fight you all day." He turned and left, slamming the door behind him.

"Look here, you called on me, not the other way around!" Wilcox shouted out the window as Mac returned to his truck.

"In that case, do your damn job!" Mac called back.

After placing the toothpick back in his mouth, Wilcox snatched the rag and its contents off the counter and headed for his office. Halfway there, something fell out of the satchel and hit the floor, sending a hollow metallic sound bouncing off the walls for about ten to fifteen seconds. He'd never heard a sound like that before, and bent down to see the culprit was a flat seven-inch piece of metal no wider than a fingernail file. It weighed about as much as a standard envelope. With no idea how such a small object could make so much noise, he picked it up hesitantly, and took a seat behind his desk.

The sheriff placed the object on his desk and unwrapped the rest of the material to find two more objects. One was a solid, foot-long piece that resembled a dull hook. Strange markings looped around the entire curved material, but when he touched it, the markings vanished, only to reappear when he let go. The last item resembled a smooth piece of aluminum: two feet long, a foot wide, and less than an inch thick. The panel was incredibly light and felt like a cushioned slab of marble. He could fold and unfold this piece, and found that it didn't become wrinkled, dented, or creased.

The sheriff leaned back in his chair, studied a fighter pilot poster tacked to his wall – a typical marketing gesture care of the Roswell Army Air Base – picked up his phone, and dialed the number listed at the bottom of the poster.

Major Jesse Marcel, intelligence officer for the 509th Bomb Group, spearheaded recovering the Roswell wreckage. A team of fifty soldiers gathered the debris into trucks and transported it out of sight and onto the Roswell Army Air Field.

Acting as spokesperson, Major Marcel briefly answered questions for a group of reporters gathered outside the blockade. "The aforementioned wreckage, which I'm sure you've heard about by now, no longer resides in New Mexico. At this time, it's not clear as to what the wreckage is compiled of or where it came from. Thank you, that's all."

As he spoke, a dozen trucks behind him moved out, leaving the entourage of reporters shuffling on the pavement.

The headline story of the *Roswell Daily Record* revealed that the wreckage of a flying saucer had been recovered from a ranch in the area. When questioned, Major Marcel disclosed the wreckage was flown from New Mexico on to higher headquarters.

Colonel William Blanchard, commander of the 509th Bomb Group, issued a press release stating the wreckage of a crashed disk had been recovered.

A second press release came from the office of General Roger Ramey, commander of the Eighth Air Force at Fort Worth Army Airfield, within hours of the first. The second statement rescinded the first and claimed officers of the 509th Bomb Group had incorrectly identified a weather balloon and its radar reflector as a crashed disk.

In the *Daily Record* office, reporters scrambled to make print in light of the new information. The lead reporter, Jeff Begals, spoke to his fellow reporters.

"The shit's going to hit the fan!" he said. "These military boys aren't covering this one up. We need to get an ear to the Pentagon – to the White House, for that matter. I'd bet my last nickel those Washington boys are fully aware of what happened here in Roswell. They're slipping! What is it, a flying disk, weather balloon, what? The stories don't make sense because they're lying! I know they're lying to us."

"Jeff, goddammit, that's nothing new," said Todd Richards, the newsroom's chief.

"But this is a big deal," Begals persisted. "You know how these boys operate better than any of us. I'm going to yank out the truth. After this, that Pulitzer won't pass me by again."

Richards tried to stare Begals down, but finally waved to the group. "All right, you lowlife losers, let's get a goddamn ear to the Pentagon and the White House. See if there's any chatter. Get me a goddamn story to print. Now move, move, move –"

The Ballard Funeral Home in Roswell had a contract to provide ambulance and mortuary services for Roswell Army Air Field. Begal had a contact there in Glenn Dennis, a young mortician.

Dennis had received several telephone calls from the mortuary officer at the airfield before the wreckage was recovered. The officer had asked about using small, hermetically-sealed caskets, and requested a recommendation on preserving bodies that had been exposed to the elements for several days.

His curiosity piqued, Dennis visited the base hospital that evening, but was forcibly escorted from the building. This behavior only incited his curiosity, so he arranged to meet a nurse from the base hospital in a coffee shop the next day.

"So, tell me, what was the big secret at the hospital last night?" Dennis asked, sipping his coffee. "They practically threw me out on my ear."

The pretty young nurse lit a cigarette with trembling hands, and glanced nervously over her shoulder. Then she leaned in and whispered urgently, "They brought in small, non-human bodies."

She told Dennis she'd attended the autopsies performed on these creatures, and as she spoke, she sketched what she'd seen on a napkin.

Dennis kept the drawing.

This meeting would be their last, and Glenn Dennis would learn no more about the alien bodies, as the nurse was abruptly transferred to England within the next few days.

August 5, 1947

At the offices of the National Security Council, General Roger Ramey stepped up onto a well-lit podium equipped with a microphone, and began to speak.

"Gentlemen, forty thousand years of evolution and we've barely scratched the vastness of human potential. Until today, that is. We have found that the extraterrestrial bodies and their unique infrastructure, metabolism, and regenerative characteristics may be of great use to the United States, given the time and resources for further research."

"What is it you want from us, General?" a voice echoed from the shadows.

"The items we collected at the crash site need to be broken down and analyzed for future military use. Given what we've already learned, we have the potential to create soldiers who will perform in the field like nothing the world has ever seen."

November 22, 1963

In the Oval Office, pages and assistants moved in all directions around President Kennedy

as he prepared for his trip to Dallas.

At the start of this day, the president took time in his already hectic schedule to call a secret meeting of his counsel. Eight men, including Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson, sat in the Oval Office, watching their leader pace the room.

Kennedy addressed the men. "Now, gentlemen, the Vietnamese council stands strong in their convictions. I don't want an all-out war."

The men glanced at one another.

"It is crazy to sacrifice the lives of our boys," Kennedy said. "This is a new era. Diplomacy will be our initial weapon, and so help me God, war is our last resort." He picked up the war decree from his desk. "These documents will be filed indefinitely. Furthermore, I will order our troops out of Vietnam, effective noon on November 25, 1963. I ask you to bear with me as we show the world a different side of our great nation."

Minutes after the meeting, a White House representative cornered First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy's personal secretary, Mary Gallagher, and handed her a capsule filled with an ashy white substance, accompanied by a note.

"You are to give this package directly to René Verdon," the representative demanded in a shielded whisper.

"The president's Executive Chef?"

"That is correct!"

"Why?" She paused, looking at the package in her hand. "What is it?"

"Questions are for those without blood on their hands, Mary." He paused. "Did you really think the First Lady's wishes came without strings?"

She gasped. "Is this about Monroe?"

"There you go again with those questions, Mary." A thin smile worked itself upon his face. "We more than came through for that debutante, preventing her from experiencing the embarrassment of exiting the White House in utter shame in this, our president's first term in office." He paused again. "The First Lady made a conscious decision to send you to make the murderous arrangements on her behalf after finding out that Marilyn was not only whom the president wanted at his side, but that she was also pregnant with his lovechild."

"But...." She fiddled with the package nervously. "What is it for?"

"Again, questions are for those without blood on their hands." He said it more forcefully this time, and moved closer to Mary, grabbed hold of her wrist, and applied enough pressure that her mouth twisted into a grimace. "All you have to do is pass off the package in the next thirty minutes. That Frenchman, whom ironically the First Lady herself hired as the Executive Chef, belongs to us." He smiled. "He will do his duty... as will you. *Got it?*"

"You're hurting me!" The pain was excruciating.

"Say the words, Mary!" he ordered.

"All right... I got it... *I got it!*"

The representative let go and casually straightened his suit. "Again, you have but thirty minutes to make this happen." He calmly walked away from her.

Twenty-three minutes had passed when Mary set her eyes on the chef, who was busy preparing a meal. She approached him and thrust the package toward him with disdain.

Chef Verdon uncaringly smiled at her as he casually read the attached note, making no attempt to conceal it. It read: *IT'S A GO.*

She took note of the meal being prepared. "Is this for the president?" she asked.

Without responding, Chef Verdon spun the top off of the capsule and poured the foreign powder into a fresh hollandaise sauce — she knew the president liked Baked Eggs Napoleon. The chef's disposition was so bold and uncaring that she looked around the kitchen and at the faces of the four Secret Service agents overseeing the meals preparation. They had misplaced smiles on their faces, and she couldn't help but to assume that they, too, were in on whatever this was.

She moved closer to the chef, tears pooling in her eyes. "Chef Verdon," she whispered, "what is going on here?"

Again, he said nothing.

She watched as he held the note in his gas burner, where it crinkled into ashes.

President Kennedy's secretary, Evelyn Norton Lincoln, entered the room as he finished breakfast to inform him it was time to go.

The president stood and brushed himself off. "Evelyn?" He flashed a charming smile that she just adored.

"Yes, Mr. President?"

"I tell you, I love people with everything I'm worth, and as strange as this may sound, I also fear them."

Evelyn, the devoted personal secretary who'd served the president since the day he entered the Senate, knew the answer, as this back and forth was not unfamiliar to her. If the relationship between an executive and a secretary can be likened to a marriage, the one between Jack and Evelyn was a bond forged in political heaven.

"Why is that, Mr. President?" she asked.

"People are what bring people down."

She smiled, having just mouthed the words he spoke, and stood nearby as Kennedy, always the hopeless romantic, pulled two roses from a nearby bouquet to present to his wife in the car.

"Evelyn?" he whispered to her on his way out of the Oval Office.

"Yes, Mr. President," she replied in the same playful whisper.

He handed her one of the roses. "You and I both know that you have been, and always will be, my first lady." He smiled and kissed her cheek before walking away.

Smiling from ear to ear, she watched him until he disappeared within a sea of Secret Servicemen.

Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson, and the seven other men who'd sat in the Oval Office meeting with the president earlier that morning, gathered in a private room on Air Force One, watching Kennedy's assassination on television. The men laughed quietly to themselves, exchanging handshakes and nods. The Vice President, however, was visibly shaken, though it went unnoticed by the other men.

After the group received more news on the killing, Congressman Albert Richard Thomas spoke up. "These are extraordinary circumstances, wouldn't you say, Lyndon?"

Johnson sat silently for a moment before replying. "Yeah," he stammered, and noticed the other men looking in his direction queerly, which made him quite nervous.

The Congressman cleared his throat while eyeing the men warily. "An emergency swearing-in should be on the horizon in two shakes of a lamb's tail. You'd better get out there, Mr. President." Thomas's southern drawl sounded menacing. "Before you take your rightful place in history, Lyndon, why don't you say a few words to the men, as a whole helluva lot is

riding on this moment?"

With a long and lingering sigh, Johnson stood before the men, towering like a giant. "You men did your part and made me your thirty-sixth president." He paused, watching the heartless gaze of those before him. "Now I'll do my part and show those gook Vietcong bastards what we're made of. Compromise isn't in those yellow monkeys' vocabulary. I strongly believe what you boys are working on will make history and ultimately strengthen our nation. Fuck that Irish nigger-loving JFK and his so-called vision! He was soft on Communism, and he ate a bullet for his weakness. The United States of America is a superpower, and so help me God, we will remain that way."

The men gleefully rushed in to shake *their* presidents' hand before exiting the room, leaving Johnson standing alone, with only his thoughts as company.

He dropped his head at that moment and began to rake at the back of his neck, a heavy veil of depression falling upon him.

Oval Office, November 23, 1963

"Lyndon, you can't—"

"Claudia, my love, I have commitments."

"Commitments to whom?" she shouted, moving closer to him, her face caked with both anger and concern.

"The Office of the Presidency, my dear Lady Bird, has its perils, to which I clearly know I'm not immune. Neither are the lives of any and all those I care about." He dropped his head as if the pressure of the office to which he was sworn in on the 22nd of November, 1963, already weighed heavily. Too heavy. "Not only is my legacy at stake, but so too is our nation, the whole of humanity, and our planet."

"What are you saying here, Lyndon?"

"We are not alone," he whispered to himself. "We are not alone—" He swiftly looked up at her and saw her right hand scratching at her heart, a nervous tick he knew all too well. "I've already said too much."

"Look, Lyndon, you are a giant, and giants don't tremble." She continued after a deep sigh. "Whatever secrets the office holds, keep them close to the chest, but don't for one goddamn moment believe yourself to be without the power to strategically change the terrain." She smiled and placed her hands on either side of his face, and he returned her affections with a smile of his own. "I will be your rock, Lyndon, as I have always been, and I will back your every effort to build a lasting legacy."

He nodded. "What would you have me do? The strategic march to war, and our nation's involvement in it, is inevitable. The campaign, as I've already explained, will be an utter farce catapulted by the very dark forces from which I would die protecting you and all those I love. This ruse will be a false flag to further stir the emotions of a nation already in mourning—saddened by the recent death of yet another Kennedy, and the first of which to capture the White House. All this to manipulate the masses into following a presidency literally gifted away by default—"

"Gifted away?" She was stunned. "What are you saying, Lyndon?"

"They say I'm an accidental president, but that couldn't be further from the truth."

"Lyndon—"

"This nation will *never* truly be mine to champion." He threw his gaze to the ceiling of the Oval Office, tears pooling in his eyes. "I sold my soul for this office."

"You mean—"

"Yes!"

She gasped. "My god, Lyndon!"

"As god is my witness, Claudia, I didn't know they would go so far as to kill him." He sat down as tears fell.

"How could you?" she screamed, turning her back to him and, again, scratching at her heart. "That poor man.... His family...." She breathed heavily. "You saw what they did to him, and in front of his wife... his children... the world?" A level of disdain like nothing he'd ever seen from her shone in her features.

"As I sat on Air Force One watching the footage of Kennedy's murder, it became clear to me that these men wanted me to bear witness to how far they are willing to go to get what they want." He shook his head. "These men are of the military arms division—"

Again she gasped before turning to face him. "The division that was put in place by President Truman following that weird Roswell incident?"

"Yes, but how—"

"Jacqueline *was* the First Lady, and she knew things, of which she shared portions with me from time to time." She paused. "This division, if I'm not mistaken... the President has no jurisdiction?"

"It's what I've been trying to tell you." He stood and rushed over to face her. "All's I have to do is not hinder their work, as Kennedy did with his plans to order the 16,000-plus troops he sent on support and assistance duties out of Vietnam, which these men wanted to keep in place. The troops were merely a means to an end."

"Means to an end?"

"War, Claudia, these men want a war." He sighed and felt drained. "I agreed to cancel Kennedy's order once I assumed the presidency. His order was to officially go into effect on the 25th of November, and Kennedy made this official overture the morning of the very day he was killed. I, however, was approached with details, coupled with a series of veiled threats, months prior."

"How did these men forecast Kennedy's overture?"

"Through wiretapping, they intercepted a transmission between Kennedy and South Vietnam President Ngo Dinh Diem. In this correspondence, Kennedy made mention of his plans to render the original agreement reached between him and South Vietnam envoy Nguyen Dinh Thuan null and void."

"They *killed* him because they wanted a war?"

"Yes!"

"What are the reasons this division desires this war?" she asked curiously.

"Claudia," he said to her cautiously, "you know that there are certain things I cannot divulge—"

"Excuse me?" She was visibly hot under her bertha.

"It is for your safety, my love," Johnson said nervously.

Her eyes thinned to slits. "Are you, again, telling me that you've *said* too much?"

"I am the President—"

"Damn you, Lyndon!" She knocked his hands from her shoulders and angrily pointed her finger at his face. "You said too much when you admitted your culpability in the death of a sitting United States President."

As she contemplated their predicament, the First Lady paced the room for quite some time. "You need to reach out to that King fella," she said.

"Dr. Martin Luther King?" he replied with a tone of condescension in his voice.

"Yes!"

"Claudia Alta 'Lady Bird' Taylor," he shouted. "Whatever could that uppity nigger do to help us in this here matter?"

"Add layers to a legacy already in peril, Lyndon."

"My legacy? I am the head of the Democratic Party, Claudia, and the south is the party's saving grace. Has been so for decades. And you want me to legitimize that nigger, bring him to the White House, share a dinner table—"

"History's turning in that direction anyways. Why allow your legacy to be known for upholding the status quo like so many Presidents before you? That covert foot on the necks of the blacks has loosened in our America, and you stand at the forefront, to boldly go where no President has. Think about it, Lyndon. You will be the first. It was Kennedy's agenda to champion, but he's no longer here to do so. A war such as this one will do nothing to strengthen your legacy. It will tarnish it indefinitely." She threw up her hands. "I am *trying* to help you, if you would just get your bigoted head out of your ass to smell the roses."

"Claudia, what you are essentially asking me to do is forfeit my eventual run for the presidency."

"That is not what I'm doing here, Lyndon. To hell with your detractors. I believe your championing black causes will be so bold that the blacks, alone, will carry your ass on their shoulders back into the white house. Both will prove to those backwater southern elites that times are changing, and that it would be in their best interest to follow a true leader such as yourself into the future."

"But, Claudia—"

She shushed him before moving closer to him, and gently placed her hands on his chest with a smile. "This, my love, will go hand in hand with the work you've been doing since 1928 in dealing with the Negro citizenry."

"Honey, you know good and well that all that malarkey was merely for my political ambitions, coupled with the fact that I wholly believe the Negro vote will be paramount for the Democratic Party for generations to come, should some kind of inclusive voter rights act be instituted. I, however, sure as shit didn't see myself leading the charge. Hell, after President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, he couldn't even enjoy a night out at the theatre."

She laughed under her breath. "Lyndon, who was it that gave you the idea of using the civil rights movement as a stepping stone for your high ambitions?"

"You did, honey, but—"

"Get the ball rolling on this, Lyndon. Given your track record since 1928, those sadity southerners can't say they were blindsided when you present yours and Dr. King's agreed upon proposals. You will then pave the way for historical legislation, which I believe only your brand of charm can finesse those diehard confederate sympathizers into passing for our nation."

"But I am one of those—"

"What you are, Lyndon, is a fiercely proud Texan that just so happens to be personally rude, overbearing, and at times politically unscrupulous."

"Claudia?" He seemed surprised.

"Nevertheless, you are capable of immense personal charm, particularly in the areas of lobbying and brokering backstage deals in the Washington corridors of power."

"Pouring sugar down my breeches doesn't change anything, Claudia."

"You sure about that?" She winked at him and his steadfast disposition loosened a bit.

"The Democratic Party will never be the same and that too will be a part of my legacy. *The president who shit on his party,*" he hollered while waving his hands high in the air, as if he were some preacher delivering a sermon from a pulpit. "That's what they will say. Hell, half the party might even jump ship and give the goddamn Republicans a try."

She stifled a giggle watching him sway, trip, twirl, and whirl about. She'd always believed her husband to be too dramatic for his own good. "Then good riddance to them," she said.

He smiled, having managed to cheer her up. "Lady Bird Johnson, I should know better than to pick a fight with you."

"You would think so." She returned his smile before embracing him, her mind still reflecting on his involvement in the death of President Kennedy and the gaps in the story he wasn't forthcoming with. "You must go forward with what I've proposed to steer Americans' minds away from not only the death of Kennedy, but this evolving war campaign too, or the combination of the two will consume your presidency."

"I believe you're right, Claudia."

Pulling her head away from his chest, she looked up at him. "When have I ever been wrong?"

They both smiled.

August 5, 1966

The Sai Lau camp served as a sanctuary for Vietnamese civilians caught in the battlefield. There, they escaped the scene of war, but not the sounds. Every day, explosive air raids in the distance dropped 27-metric-ton bombs, each run flown by three B-52s in V-formation. Such a trio could easily drop ninety tons of arsenal at once.

The stutter of AK-47 and rifle gunfire rang through the air, and screams bounced off the trees. The sounds echoed for miles. The US launched most raids from Guam. The flight of passing Russian-provided Vietnamese MIGs and American F-105 Thunderchief fighters filled the skies.

Misty dew, concentrated with napalm and pistol dust, blanketed everything. Bullets, grenades, and an array of air strikes manicured the brush as though an unorthodox landscaper was using American and Vietcong soldiers as his bulldozer and crew.

The ambushes rained blood from the sky as shrapnel chewed men to pieces. Camps filled with Americans waiting to begin or re-enter a tour of duty. Entire teams would disappear into the jungle, most never to return. Civilians hid in the jungle, as only the wealthy were able to flee before American and Vietcong troops ravaged the land. Eighty percent of the Vietnamese population lived in the war zone.

Hollow reverberations shook the ground in the Sai Lau camp. Twelve Marines holding M-16s emerged cautiously from a bushy swamp. They protected their gun muzzles with condoms, for the weapons proved unreliable when wet—a definite drawback in this jungle war. Soldiers were often found dead beside their dismantled weapons, killed while attempting a quick repair.

The Marines stood quietly at the jungle's edge, watching a village filled with women, children, and elderly. Eight Vietcong soldiers rampaged through the village, cursing and screaming at old men before cutting off their heads.

A few Vietcong pulled up ladies and little girls and took them into the huts, from which horrific screams emerged. The soldiers outside laughed at the sound. Two of the camp's boys were thrown onto their knees, handed knives by Vietcong soldiers, and forced to cut at each other.

Captain Rufus Innius, a rough-looking bloke from Brooklyn, had been on tour since the

initial all-out deployment in 1963. In his latest stint, he served as platoon leader of the men watching from the bushes. He signaled for his men to circle the camp.

Two of the American soldiers rushed in and quietly eliminated the two Vietcong who were making the boys cut each other. Other members of the team rushed into the huts, killing the remaining guerillas. Captain Innus carried out fourteen-year-old Su Lee, severely beaten and badly bleeding from her inner thighs.

"Doc, get over here!" Innus shouted. He put Su Lee down gently in the clearing and stood back. "Men, secure this camp," he said, hiding his tears. "I don't want the smell of lizard piss breaching our perimeter – you got that?"

The men rushed off to follow the captain's orders. The medic, Sergeant Major Dick Gregore, rushed in and began tending to the girl.

As he observed the scene, Innus turned to a noise from inside one of the huts. He pulled his sidearm and approached. Inside, he found Private Vic Moones, a skinny, 21-year-old Mississippi-born country boy, fully naked and curled up in a corner. Moones was sweating, the clothing lying around appearing ripped directly from his body.

Captain Innus crouched down. "Moones, what the fuck are you doing?" he asked, trying not to shout. He figured the man had cracked under pressure.

"I can't say. I mean, I don't know. You have to tell me, because I don't know!" Moones squirmed on the floor, his eyes wild.

"Stand up, soldier."

"Quiet! You're hurting my ears, man."

Innus stood, balled his fists, and stepped toward the insubordinate private.

Moones jolted back as if his captain's step was as loud as an exploding mine.

"Boy, I'm gonna crack your skull," Innus said. "Remember your protocol, Private. I'm not one of your buddies in hokey-poke Mississippi. You refer to me as Sir. Got that?"

Moones wept, his whole body shaking. "The noise –"

Innus pulled Moones to his feet, and drew his pistol with his free hand.

Moones grabbed the officer's gun and broke it in half, his bare hands twisting the metal. Before Innus could respond, Moones lifted him into the air with one hand and tossed him through the wall of the hut.

The young captain barely had time to find his ass under him before Moones followed him out, clutching his head. "The noise!" he screeched.

Soldiers ran from all corners of the village.

"Shoot him!" Innus called out to them.

"Cap, it's Moones!" said one of his men.

Moones advanced on them, screaming.

"Shoot him! That's a direct order! Put him down!"

First Lieutenant Banes hesitated for only a moment before firing two shots into Moones's chest, knocking him to the ground.

For a moment, everyone became quiet. A few of the men turned to Banes, glaring at him, beginning to approach.

Captain Innus rolled to his feet, walked to the body of his man Moones, and bent down to check for a pulse. Getting nothing, he rose and confronted his men.

"You will follow the orders of your commanding officer!" he shouted with the same tone he had used back in Basic Training, which caused the men to straighten up, confused. "I do the thinking in this squad! Every order I give is taken as law! Do I make myself clear?"

Before any man could respond, Private Moones leapt to his feet and attacked Captain Innus, ripping his body apart as if tearing a single sheet of tissue paper.

The men rushed into the shocking fray, and Moones killed them two at a time. Screams and gunfire rang through the village as Moones crushed his comrades with his bare hands, his eyes wild.

Su Lee, the girl who had just had her life saved by the American men dying before her, witnessed all of it. She saw Moones stagger out of camp before she passed out.

Su Lee woke up some unknown amount of time later, in an American hospital, probably in Saigon, surrounded by dozens of soldiers. The shock of seeing the curious men sent her back into deep unconsciousness.

An American squadron, not far from Sai Lau, spotted a friendly walking in a minefield. The American was naked, bleeding from his chest, and seemingly unaware of his surroundings.

Captain Jeremy Gordin signaled his squadron to quiet. "People," he hissed, "whatever's he's on, it killed him way before he stepped onto that field."

"I know that guy," one of his men whispered. "That's Private Moones."

At that moment, Moones stepped on a landmine. Flesh and bone scattered across the field, material that would be trampled over by other soldiers as the war raged on. But a ghost would roam those killing fields forever.

"What in the fuck is happening to these soldiers," Captain Gordin said to himself. He pulled out a rolled cigarette, lit it, and took a few drags, watching the field.

February 26, 1993

New York City's Twin Towers stood as dual witnesses to the lunch hour, the overhead sun turning its windows golden. Sixteen National Security Agency agents, dressed in black suits and sunglasses, huddled in a well-hidden lab below the parking garage.

One researcher handed a black case over to Agent Damion Walker. Walker and his team boarded a five-Hummer caravan, and drove from the towers.

"Make it happen," Walker said into a secured communicator.

"Okay, listen up." Agent Doug Ingro looked at his wristwatch. "Time is 12:17. In fifty-two seconds, you are to detonate. I repeat: you are to detonate."

Moments later, a blinding flash of light glittered in the rearview mirrors.

Chapter 4

October 12, 1998

The deadly war in Vietnam had long since come and gone. The killing fields now lay still on most days, from sunup through the pale orange sunsets. Vietnamese typically avoided the eerie plains out of respect to the men, women, and children who'd met their fate there.

Across those quiet Vietnamese plains, a team of twenty-two U.S. soldiers ran in dedicated file. Captain Kalista Flaker brought up the rear perimeter, a lookout for trouble.

Flaker stopped for a moment, lifting her binoculars to note a series of ruffles in the bushes off to the right. She analyzed the movement for just a few moments before calling for her team....

Chapter 5

August 4, 1998

In Nevada, on a night where wind met the fury of dark clouds on a soggy dusk, and where scorpions gave birth to a new breed, the distant mountain craters resembled Nepal, the Gurkhas' mountain kingdom. Ages of prehistoric bone and decay lay hidden beneath the soil, while above ground, reptilian predators hunt for food.

Eighteen miles east of Las Vegas stood the remote community of Dingostone, dotted with hometown gas stations, mom-and-pop restaurants, community theaters, and military housing. Thirty miles west of Dingostone stood one of the largest army bases in the United States: Post Base 22-987 Dingo, formerly known as Area S-4. Many had once believed this base to be in Papoose Lake, south of Groom Lake—the infamous Area 51.

Dingostone was a direct extension of Kingman, Arizona, approximately 150 miles southeast of Las Vegas. Rumors abounded that Post Base 22-987 Dingo had not only a surface base in Dingostone, but an underground tunnel system that stretched the full 150 miles to Kingman.

After the first clap of thunder roared through the town, rain dampened the pavement outside the main gate of the base thirty miles away. Two white-walled, black-trimmed guard posts sat on opposite sides of the rocky road. Inside the posts, two drenched MPs stood guard, rifles in hand. Two more MPs stood just outside, facing each other, standing under an extended shower guard.

Three pearl-black Hummers with tinted windows blazed through the streets, rocking over bumps in the road and kicking up mud. As they approached the guards, the Hummers came to a quick halt and a window lowered in the lead vehicle.

The driver passed the guard a yellow laminated card centered with a large black dot, and then quickly closed the window. Within seconds, the card evaporated in the MP's hand, causing him and the other guards to look at each other and swiftly about-face.

The two gate guards hustled with the gates. Clearly, these Hummers were the vessels of Special Ops royalty.

Dim lighting engulfed the room. It was dark enough already, with rain beating against the windows. Lightning flared outside. Twelve coarse-faced men, age 40 and up, stood in General George Thimpkin's office. Each man wore identical black tailored suits.

Thimpkin sat at his desk, dignified in his uniform. His hair carried streaks of gray, but he was in good shape for his age, with patient eyes and the overall look of an experienced, confident leader.

One of the men stepped up to his desk. "Sir, the wire will come soon, and that will only set us back."

"Our cover is our most important objective, agent," said Thimpkin, tapping his fingers on the desk. He hesitated, staring out the window. "Fine, send a team."

A secretary's voice came over the speakerphone. "General, I'm sorry for disturbing you, but there's a call from the White House. It's the Vice President, sir."

Thimpkin extracted a cigar from his top desk drawer and lit it, and the men in the room stared at each other while he took a long drag. He then reached over to the phone. "Thanks, Gail, patch him through."

He took another thoughtful drag before putting the phone to his ear. "Gore, you dodging son of a bitch, I haven't heard from you in a while. You and William lucked out and held onto your jobs, and you go and miss my annual fly-fishing invitational. I'll tell you right now, I

didn't vote for either one of your asses." He smiled and leaned back in his chair. "To what do I owe the pleasure?" His facial expression changed almost immediately. "Yes, sir, I'll be there. Of course. Soon."

He looked at the phone and put it down. With a sigh, he tucked his cigar into his mouth, placed his elbows on the desk, and intertwined his fingertips. "Well, gentlemen, that was the wire."

A man near the back of the room spoke up. "What's the plan, sir?"

"I'm going to handpick the team," Thimpkin said. "It will be headed by one of my strongest officers – Captain Kalista Flaker. She's platoon leader of one of my best Ranger groups, the 4th Battalion, 76th Ranger Regiment."

If any of the men had heard of her, they didn't make their knowledge known.

"Are you aware of the Best Ranger Competition?" Thimpkin asked. "It's an annual event conducted by the RTB in honor of a good friend and colleague of mine, David Grange, director of the Ranger Department, and Fort Benning's post commander. The goal is to determine the best two-man buddy team in the Rangers. It's a three-day event, physical and mental tasks, little rest, the whole thing. The attrition rate averages sixty percent. I've won it eight times. I was the guest speaker in 1989, when Captain Flaker, a first-timer, proved a force. She and her wingman, First Lieutenant Frank Cassio – they call him Ghost – they came within inches of winning. She was devastated when someone else took the honors ahead of her." He walked to his office window and peered out into the rain-soaked courtyard. "That's the only time I've known Captain Flaker to fail at anything."

Outside in the courtyard, eleven rugged soldiers, nine men and two women, gripped ropes barehanded and blinked against the rain. The ropes were connected to a sturdy log the size of a telephone pole, with a walking platform at the top and ladders on either side. The structure stood sixty feet tall, and the ropes dangled twenty feet below that – the only way down or up, a difficult climb. On the ground level sat a deep, muddy pool. This endurance test was a regular choice of troop leaders.

One by one, everyone dropped, leaving Captain Flaker dangling alone. Once the last soldier fell, she put one hand over the other, climbing while the other men and women splashed down and swam out. At the top, she rang a cowbell, lifted herself to the platform, and gave a brisk wave to her regiment below. They cheered her for yet another victory.

After he saw her effort at the ranger competition, General Thimpkin had sent Flaker overseas to train in France with one of the world's most grueling training regiments, France's 1st Parachute Regiment, Marine Infantry. This regiment was part of the 11th Parachute Division, similar to the old British Five Airborne Brigades. It had two brigades, with seven battalions below them, called regiments by the French. The Parachute Regiment and the 1st Parachute Regiment, Marine Infantry, were the most outstanding groups.

Although the other regiments reported to their brigades, the 1st Parachute Regiment, Marine Infantry reported directly to the 11th Parachute Division, and had a stronger Special Forces role than other regiments. It had actually descended from the SAS units set up in France during WWII to help the British SAS fight the Nazis. The 1st Parachute Regiment, Marine Infantry developed into France's elite Special Operations unit, tasked with counterterrorism and hostage rescue missions both inside and outside France. Other tasks included bodyguarding, reconnaissance, sabotage, and unconventional warfare. Elements of the division had been deployed to Bosnia, Kosovo, Chad, Lebanon, and other hot spots. They were the best of the best – the perfect place for a promising young soldier.

Still sitting atop the wooden structure, Flaker spotted Thimpkin watching her and gave

him a jaunty salute.

He returned it with a half-salute and turned back to the men in his office. "Yes, Captain Flaker will lead our team."

As he looked upon the men in the room, the nodding of their heads agreeing with his decision, he confidently made his way back over to his desk. "You have your orders, gentlemen." He stood tall between the desk and his chair. "That'll be all!" He nodded at the men rather than presenting them with a salute, as they were not of the military.

The men, in quick order, left the office, but for the man who stood in the back of the room. "What is it, Agent Jacks?" The general said, taking a seat.

The agent stepped towards the general's desk. "Sir, why have you chosen *her*?" he said with disdain in his voice.

Angered, the general stood to face him. "Be mindful of how you speak of those whom I consider family, agent!" The thunder in his tone followed a streak of lightning that had lit up the room only seconds earlier. "You, of all people, know how important she is to me."

"My sincerest apologies, General!" He was visibly rattled. "It's just that I'm shocked that you would choose Captain Flaker for this mission when there are so many others to choose from."

"Richard... *my* friend," the general spoke cautiously. "The things I keep from you, and the reasons behind the decisions I make, are not up for debate in any instance of which you are fully aware."

"Yes, General, but—"

"As I always tell you and others, it's—"

"A necessary evil," the agent said with a frustrated sigh. "I'm more than aware of this, General!"

General Thimpkin sensed a well-guarded layer of frustration building in the agent's tone, and picked up an uncharacteristic deviation in his disposition. "Exactly!" His own disposition now morphed into that of observance as he puffed slowly on his cigar, beaming at the agent through the thick white smoke trails. "I expect you to carry out my orders according to the exact specifications we discussed."

The agent hesitated in his response. "Of course, General!" A long, drawn-out sigh followed as he made his way to the door.

The door now ajar, the general stopped him. "One more thing before you go, Agent Jacks."

The agent's back remained facing to the general, as he was halfway out the door.

"If my death comes at the end of this most important endeavor, I want you to know that I have chosen my successor." He took another drag of his cigar and, as if it were part of some clever design, he allowed a good amount of seconds to tick by as he watched closely every movement the agent made. "It will not be you who leads *The Order* after I'm gone."

The agent turned to face the general, the anger evident in his features, his grip on the doorknob tightening so hard that the pressure he placed on it gave off an echo that lingered, and the joints in his hand began to make a popping and cracking sound about the room. "But—"

"That'll be all, Agent Jacks!"

With a sigh forced through gritted teeth, the agent left the room, closing the door behind him.

Moments after Agent Jacks had left the room, the general sat back down at his desk and puffed slowly on his cigar, his mind lost in the moment. He removed the stogie from his mouth, and a thin smile formed on his face as he thought of why he so loved the Cuban brand.

Like himself, the Cuban cigars were particularly unique, due in part to the specific variations in soil found in different regions throughout Cuba. From this soil diversity, five different types of tobacco leaves grow, to be produced and used for rolling cigars. He found this fascinating.

The first are used for the aroma of the cigar; the second are used for taste; the third dictates how the cigar draws; the fourth are used for binding together the previous leaves; and the fifth are used for wrapping the cigar. Some of these leaves can be aged for up to seven years before being deemed ready for rolling into a cigar.

He fancied them all! The slightly woody flavor of the Jose L. Piedra, the very old and strong classic Cuban aroma and taste of the Hoyo de Monterey, the very soft, smooth and sweet Montecristo, the subtle flavors of the Cohiba, the rich floral aroma of the Romeo Y Julieta, the very pronounced robust, spicy-flavored Portagas, the lightly sweet flavor of the Fonseca, the extra strong Cuban Bolivar, the slightly sweet and spicy San Luis Rey, the aromatic tones of the Sancho Panza, right up to the walnut- and pecan-flavored Ramon Allones.

He currently indulged in the H. Upmann, a full-bodied, rich, earthy-flavored cigar with a unique metallic aroma. It was his particular favorite, the very cigar President John F. Kennedy had introduced him to one Tuesday evening in June of 1962, when he gave the general his first box.

After placing the half-smoked cigar gently in an ashtray, three thin lines of smoke ascended from the lit end. The general then removed a carrying case that held an antique Underwood-Elliott Fisher universal typewriter from under his desk.

Having removed the typewriter from its casing, he positioned the contraption in the center his desk, and paused, taking notice of the dim lighting within his surroundings. With rain still beating against the windows, and lightning still flaring outside, he repositioned the eye of his desk lamp over the face of the typewriter and switched it on.

His eyes ached in the seconds after he hit the switch. Then he pulled a stack of plain white paper from a drawer, positioned a sheet behind the wheel, ran it in, and snapped the positioning bar in place. He sat back momentarily, pulling a photo of a seventeen-year-old Kalista Flaker out of his pocket.

Staring at the photo distantly, reverie suddenly took hold of him and caused him to smile. "You've sure come a long way, young lady." His mind wandered to the first day he met the unmanageable teen.

Snapping out of his reverie, he sat upright, grabbed up his cigar, tucked it into his mouth and between his teeth, and lightly gnawed at the moistened end to extract its flavor. With that cigar dancing about his mouth, he imagined he resembled a reporter in a race to make print, or a gritty gumshoe filing a police report to close a long and drawn-out murder case. He had to chuckle.

The smoke spilled from his mouth like the aftermath of a dragon's fiery burn, dense, but airy moving about the room, filling the cavity of the arched desk lamp like a swarm.

He positioned his fingertips atop the keys and began to type.

Dear Kalista,

If you're reading this, I've fallen in an ongoing war, in which I subsequently chose you to continue fighting far into the future. Wipe those tears, soldier, and bury your ass in what I've left for you. You'll find a wealth of information that you must comprehend in order to perform the job at hand.

The information contained in this document, along with the other materials in your possession, are for your eyes only. It is imperative that you keep this information secure,

guarding it not only with your life, but also in the case of your death...

Nicaragua, 1985

An intense daydream set Captain Kalista Flaker's heart racing. She saw herself as a five-year-old in Macon, Mississippi, 1968.

Skinny Kalista, with large, hungry eyes, sat at the kitchen table belonging to the kind of shack that barely offered adequate shelter to cockroaches.

Her mother, an overweight drunk, slammed a doll down onto the table in front of the girl. "You little bitch," the woman slurred. "I told you to have your room clean before I got home. Get your ass in your room and stay there! I'm going to tell your daddy about this when he gets home."

Kalista pulled her doll off the table and cradled it in her arms. "Please don't tell Daddy," she said. "I'll clean it up, I promise."

Her mother reached across the table and slapped her, a mouth-numbing slap that set her ears ringing.

Kalista, her lip seeping blood, stared up at her mother.

The woman took a long drink from her plastic cup. "Get your ass in your room now, goddammit!"

Kalista ran, crying.

Back in the moment, she reoriented herself within the foxhole, part of an embedded ranger regiment in support of the Contras, and held her assault weapon close to her face.

Ghost sat beside her, seemingly asleep. When an enemy grenade sailed over their heads and landed in the pit, he moved in a smooth single motion and tossed the grenade back out, then hit the deck with her.

Sounds of explosions and gunfire rang through the night air.

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**END OF SPECIAL SNEAK PREVIEW. THANK YOU.**

