



The Trials (The Red Trilogy Book 2)

By Linda Nagata

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Editorial Review

Review

"...some of the most action-packed and intelligent military science fiction to be released in years [...] I can confidently say that, if you loved *The Red*, chances are that you'll love *The Trials* too." --Stefan Raets, Tor.com

"Where other books might have been overshadowed by a book as good as *The Red: First Light*, *The Trials* manages to shine." --Anthony Vicino, SF Signal

The Trials aptly continues the terse and involving story begun in *The Red: First Light* [...] Like the best middle installments of trilogies, *The Trials* moves us deeper into the psyches and lives of the characters we have met, while still broadening the threat to the world and setting up a huge payoff. --Sharon Browning, Litstack

"...wonderfully executed [...] A high-stakes thriller, propulsive action sequences, awesome military tech, and a world inhabited by richly developed characters and nasty political scheming, *The Trials* has it all. Nagata takes all of these elements and unflinchingly takes them on their natural progression to craft an immensely satisfying and action-filled story." --Michael Hicks, AudioBook Reviewer

About the Author

Linda Nagata is a Hawaii-based American author of novels, novellas, and short stories. She has been awarded the Nebula Award, and *The Red: First Light* was a 2013 finalist for Best Novel for both the Nebula and John Campbell awards.

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The Trials

“WE ARE BEING ASKED TO crucify Colonel Kendrick.”

My words are directed at my soldiers—the Apocalypse Squad. That’s the name the mediots have given us and it works for me. The seven of us who survived the First Light mission are all here, seated around a cheap oval table in the center of an otherwise bare, white-walled conference room in the federal courthouse in Washington, DC. It’s the first time in the five months since we stepped off the plane at Dulles that we’ve been allowed to discuss our case all together, with no lawyers present.

I need to know we are all still on the same side.

I’m James Shelley. I presently hold the rank of lieutenant in the United States Army, but that will change at the conclusion of our court-martial.

“Our attorneys have decided that since Kendrick is dead, he’s not going to scream and he’s not going to argue when we hammer the nails in. So they want us to testify that the colonel used undue influence to get us to participate in a conspiracy. They want us to claim we were not mentally responsible at the time and therefore it is not our fault.”

Our return to the United States was voluntary and we're widely regarded as heroes. It's a status I've leveraged to get us the privilege of this ten-minute session to confer on our defense strategy. Not a private session—camera buttons are watching from the corners of the room and the ocular overlay I wear like contact lenses in my eyes is always recording—but we're used to that. We're LCS soldiers, and in a linked combat squad you expect to be observed.

“In just a few minutes, each one of you will meet individually with counsel, where you will be advised to pursue an affirmative defense, claiming a lack of mental responsibility.”

Travel and communication have been a challenge ever since Coma Day, when seven improvised nuclear devices were used to destroy data exchanges across the country, shattering the Cloud and collapsing the economy. So an agreement was reached to hold our court-martial in the centrally convenient federal courthouse in DC. We are using the facility but not the staff. The army is conducting our court-martial, with a court composed of army personnel and presided over by a military judge.

Our court-martial hasn't started, and we will not be in court today, so we're all wearing the informal brown camo of combat uniforms. Everyone but me is also wearing their linked combat squad skullcaps.

The caps look like athletic skullcaps, but they're embedded with a mesh of fine wires that interact with the neuromodulating microbeads implanted in the brain tissue of every LCS soldier. Some of those microbeads are chemical sensors that report on our brain state, but others trigger neurochemical production. The skullcap is able to switch them on and off to affect the way we feel.

I don't wear a skullcap anymore because I've moved on to a more permanent setup. I use a skullnet: a mesh of sensor threads implanted on the surface of my skull. Like a cap, it houses a simple artificial intelligence tasked with monitoring and stabilizing the activity in my brain. It could be my get-out-of-jail-free card, if I want to try to use it for that.

I tap my head, where my black hair is trimmed to a short buzz cut. “The attorneys want me to say Kendrick controlled my thoughts, my emotions, my decision-making processes, through my skullnet. They want each one of you to say he hacked your heads through your skullcaps. They want us to argue we were not in our right minds and that we didn't understand what we were doing.”

Specialist Vanessa Harvey speaks up first: “Fuck that, LT.”

She crosses her arms, fixing me with a glare that could stop bullets . . . almost did, at Black Cross, where she was shot in the face. Her visor took the impact of the slug, and she got away with only a broken nose—but no sign of that injury remains in her sharp-featured, bronze-complexioned face.

Specialist Samuel Tuttle expands on Harvey's sentiment. “Fuck them.” The rim of his skullcap enhances his scowl as his brooding brown eyes shift from Harvey to Sergeant Aaron Nolan, who must have been his big brother in some other life.

Nolan is six foot one, broad shouldered, with deep-brown skin. He told me once he was half Navajo, half white. Generally, he's a congenial man, but now he drops his chin and coldly informs me, “Those shit-eaters can go to hell.”

Little Mandy Flynn, with her green eyes and fair skin, is only a private, but she's more eloquent than anyone else. “No way are we pissing on the colonel's grave, sir.”

“Damn straight,” Specialist Jayden Moon agrees. Moon is tall, skinny, and dark eyed, the offspring of Asian and European bloodlines mixed in some complicated formula. He used to have a tan, but our stint in jail has bleached his skin to a pale cream. “LT, this is just bullshit.”

I turn to Sergeant Jaynie Vasquez, who sits, somewhat loyally, at my right hand. Jaynie is the ranking non-com in our squad. She’s got a lean build and moderate height. Her skin is smooth and black. She tends to regard the world with a reserved expression that perfectly reflects her nature: smart, controlled, determined, and not entirely trusting of my judgment. She answers my questioning look with a nod, letting me know she’ll back me up as long as I say the right things.

I return my attention to Moon. “Of course it’s bullshit, Moon. It’s the same bullshit we LCS soldiers get all the time.”

Outside the linked combat squads we are commonly believed to be soulless automatons, emotionless killing machines controlled by our handlers in Guidance. It’s a prejudice our attorneys want to exploit.

“But it’s a bullshit that can be used to buy you a not-guilty verdict and a medical discharge.”

Moon looks confused. His gaze shifts to Jaynie. “I don’t get it. That’s not why we came back.”

He’s looking at Jaynie, but I’m the one who responds. “No, it’s not why we came back. The crucifixion of Colonel Kendrick is an option we are being offered because both trial and defense counsel are under extreme pressure to limit the scope of our court-martial. They do not want to look into the chain of responsibility—”

“Lack of responsibility,” Jaynie interrupts in a low growl.

I concede the point with a nod. “They do not want to look into the layers of corruption that forced us to take the action we did. We are here to expose that corruption, to confront it. That’s why we came back. But this is not a game. We are facing life in prison, very possibly execution. If you want to reconsider your reasons for being here, now is the time. Just know that for the affirmative defense to work, all of you will need to agree to it. If even one of you dissents, that will cast doubt on all the others.”

Harvey’s arms are still crossed, her brow wrinkled in suspicion. “What do you mean, we would have to agree? What about you, LT? I thought we were all in this together.”

“That’s up to you, Harvey. There’s no fucking way I’m going along with it. But the rest of you can claim your commanding officers exploited your sense of loyalty. Let me know if you’d like me to step outside while you discuss it.”

It’s Jaynie who reacts to this first, in her own affectionate way. “Take a pass on the drama, LT. We’ve got nothing to discuss, because I dissent. I’m not participating in a bullshit defense.”

“I’m not either,” Harvey says.

This sentiment is echoed around the table with nods and murmurs. I use my overlay to launch an emotional-analysis tool called FaceValue, letting it study each member of my squad. The app detects no deceit in the faces of my soldiers, no real doubt. Jaynie is frowning—FaceValue confirms the caution I see in her eyes—but her caution doesn’t bother me. She’s always been the most thoughtful among us.

The standard way for a story like this to unfold is for at least one, maybe even two, of my soldiers to prove treacherous, cutting a secret deal with trial counsel that will betray the rest of us, while saving their own asses—but Colonel Kendrick preempted that tired plot device when he hand-selected everyone in the squad for a spectrum of personality traits that includes a compelling sense of justice and a group loyalty strong enough to keep us together through two harrowing missions. As I look around the table, I know that everyone remains loyal to this, our current mission.

“So what the fuck are we going to do?” Harvey demands, her sharp gaze focused on Jaynie because she is addressing her question to my sergeant and not to me.

My fist hits the table with a loud bang, and I regain the attention of every set of eyes in the room.

We don’t have many options. The charges entered against us include conspiracy, multiple counts of murder, aggravated assault, robbery in excess of \$500, and kidnapping, with a general article for abusing the good order and discipline of the armed forces. I get an additional charge of destruction of military property, since I was present when Colonel Kendrick deliberately destroyed an army helicopter.

Moreover, we did in fact commit every act we are accused of during the execution of a rogue mission, code-named First Light, in which we took a United States citizen to face trial in a foreign country for crimes committed within and against the United States. Every moment of that mission, every conversation, was recorded by multiple devices, including my ocular overlay. There is no lack of evidence that can be used to convict us. There is only the question of whether or not circumstances justified what we did.

It’s a question the court is desperate to avoid, which is the only reason we’ve been offered the I’m-not-responsible defense . . . but we’re past that.

“Because this is a death-penalty case, our plea is automatically entered as not guilty. That means the prosecution has to prove the case against us, step by step for the public record. We want that. We want the public to know who we are and what we did, but above all else we want them to know why we did it.”

I know a hell of a lot more about the law now than I did when we started this. I present my strategy with what any competent attorney would surely regard as an amateur’s optimism. “The only valid defense we can make goes to our service oath to support and defend the Constitution against all enemies, foreign and domestic. So what we are going to do is expose those enemies—our domestic enemies—shine a light on them, and examine every link in the chain of command that had a hand in sheltering Thelma Sheridan from prosecution for her part in the Coma Day insurrection. We push the judge on it at every step. We force the scope of the investigation to expand. If it ultimately takes in the president, so be it, I don’t give a damn. If it sets off a revolt against the rotten core of our country, you won’t find me weeping.”

“Burn it all down?” Jaynie asks softly.

I turn to her, wondering at the suspicion in her voice. “No. That’s not what I want.”

She studies me, like she’s trying to see beneath the surface. “Just don’t push it too far, sir. You might not like what’s on the other side.”

• • • •

We’re separated again, each of us scheduled to meet individually with an attorney. I get parked in a small

consultation room inhabited by a table and four uncomfortable chairs, where I'm due to consult with our lead defense counsel, Major Kelso Ogawa, along with our civilian attorney, Brandon Shelley—my uncle, who's assisting in our case pro bono because he's family, but also because he's as furious about the Coma Day cover-up as anyone.

The room is soundproof, so there's no noise from outside, no warning the door is about to open. I jump hard when it does, but it's just my uncle Brandon. He slips in and slams the door behind him, loud enough to let me know he's deeply unhappy. "That was one hell of a performance you put on."

He's an imposing presence: tall, with a middle-aged huskiness camouflaged by his expensive gray business suit. His mixed heritage has combined to give him a heavy brow and an aquiline nose—strong features that instill confidence if he's on your side, and present a sense of threat if he's not. Silver is beginning to encroach on his neatly trimmed black hair.

"The prosecutor—" He catches himself, realizing he's misspoken. "Damn it. I mean trial counsel," he says, substituting the military's term, "is throwing a tantrum, and frankly, she's got legitimate grounds. Jimmy, you agreed to present the mental responsibility defense—"

"Which I did."

"Accompanied by prejudicial framing. The crucifixion of Colonel Kendrick? Seriously?"

"It's a metaphor."

"Jesus, Jimmy! I don't even know who you are anymore. Here." He hands me the tablet he's carrying. I grab it, and immediately tap to wake up the screen, hunching over the display like an addict over his next fix. My uncle tells me, "There's a folder with your name on it."

"I see it." But I don't give a shit about the folder. I want to get out into the Cloud . . . what's left of it.

"Keep yourself busy," my uncle says. "I'm due in the judge's chambers, where I get to listen to trial counsel complain how you prejudiced your codefendants, convincing them to act against their own best interests." He reaches for the doorknob.

"Hold on! The network connection's been shut down on this thing."

"Of course it's shut down. You know you're not allowed an outside link."

I scowl up at him. "I know I'm not allowed an open link from my cell, but Guidance still has access." I tap my head. "They check up on me every day."

He looks worried as he asks me, "What do you mean?"

My overlay is always on. Everything I see is recorded by the lenses in my eyes and what I hear is captured by tiny audio buds implanted in my ears. A gold line tattooed along the curve of my jaw is an antenna that links me to the Cloud when I'm not locked down—and the army gets to keep the record.

I tell my uncle the truth. "At least once a day, Guidance opens a link to my overlay, to upload the feed."

The record gets sent . . . somewhere. I don't know where. Sent to a filmmaker who edits my experiences, blending them with other records to create episodes of a reality show called Linked Combat Squad, which has gotten kind of popular.

"You're not supposed to have any connectivity," my uncle insists. "None. That's my understanding. It's part of the security arrangements because Guidance is worried about a hack . . . oh shit."

We stare at each other, sharing the same thought.

"Don't say anything, Uncle Brandon. Please."

Out in the Cloud, running on a million servers but for the most part unseen and undetectable, is a rogue AI that I've come to call the Red. No one really knows where the Red came from. Speculation says it began as a marketing AI, maybe one equipped with an all-access backdoor pass stealth-developed by an American defense contractor because, given time, the Red can get anywhere, access anything linked to the Cloud. It hacked into my head—and rewrote the plotline of my life. That's why I'm here.

"Jimmy, if the Red—"

"No. It doesn't matter. It's not hurting me. It's not hurting anything."

I should never have mentioned the uploads. So why did I? Why did I bring it up? That's one of the drawbacks of having been infested with the Red. I question my own motives, even when I know it hasn't been active in my head in months. The uploads are just an automated process.

Outwardly I'm calm, but adrenaline is pumping as I scan the ceiling. "No surveillance in here, right?"

"That would be a violation of attorney-client privilege."

"Then don't say anything. If Guidance doesn't know about this, then they aren't going to be looking at the record, not for a while, anyway."

"It needs to be reported—"

"No. If Guidance believes there's been an infiltration, they'll take out my skullnet, and my overlay too."

"You might be better off—"

"I will not be better off."

His gaze is hard. He hates the choices I force on him. "I've got to go. I'm late already. Look at what's in the folder. We'll talk about it when I get back."

Again, he reaches for the door.

I tell him, "Trial counsel is right."

He turns back, furious. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

“She’s right when she says we’re acting against our own best interests, because this isn’t about us. It never has been. It’s about bigger things.”

“You know, Jimmy, I liked you better when you were a cynical kid. This true-believer shit gets old real fast.”

We trade a glare. Then he jerks the door open and steps outside, closing it again with a thud that shakes the frame. I hope he won’t say anything.

Something else occurs to me: If trial counsel hears about an infiltration, she could move to have me declared mentally incompetent because my head has been hacked—a diagnosis that could be extended to my squad, providing an excellent excuse to skip the trial entirely and disappear all of us, forever, into some anonymous psych ward. American gulag. Jesus.

But my uncle has been a criminal attorney for a long time, mostly white-collar crime. He knows how to keep his mouth shut, and even though I’ve made a habit of pissing him off, I trust him to keep my secrets.

I look again at the tablet.

It’s gaze responsive, with a ten-inch screen displaying the date and time in one corner alongside a red X—the icon of network isolation, lockdown, no connections allowed—and, in the center, exactly one folder labeled “Jimmy.” There could be libraries of data hidden behind that almost-empty screen, but I’ll never find my way into them. The tablet knows who’s holding it, and this single folder is all I’m authorized to see.

I blink the folder open. Inside are four videos. Their names identify three as news clips generated by propaganda stations. The fourth is labeled “Linked Combat Squad—Episode 3—First Light.” When I read that, I get another adrenaline rush. Ye olde fight or flight.

I’d choose flight if I could, but I can’t run away from myself.

PTSD rolls in, and my hands shake. I’m worried I’m going to drop the tablet, so I put it down carefully on the table. An icon lights up in the corner of my vision, indicating activity in the skullnet as the embedded AI automatically adjusts the neurochemical balance in my brain, guiding my mood to a quieter place, taking the edge off my emotions.

I do not want to watch the third episode of Linked Combat Squad. I already know what’s going to happen, because I lived it—and I don’t want to see Specialist Matt Ransom’s brains blown out again, or witness Colonel Kendrick’s slow, agonizing death, or hear the terror in my Lissa’s voice in the moments before she is immolated on that infinite night above the Atlantic. I hear Lissa often enough already, in my dreams.

The First Light mission was never in our own best interests. Not even close.

I stand up and pace, giving the skullnet time to work. The sound of my footsteps is a soft click as my robot feet meet the floor. My real legs got blown off. The army replaced them with cutting-edge prosthetics wired into my nervous system. It takes only four short steps to cover the length of the room. Turn around; repeat. After a few laps I sit down again and scan the news clips.

The first one shows a large protest rally on the National Mall, a block away from where I’m sitting. Between rows of trees just beginning to leaf out in the spring are tens of thousands of chanting protesters. I sit up a little straighter, remembering how it felt to be part of a crowd like that—empowering, intoxicating—and how

certain I'd felt that with so many people demanding change, change must happen.

Too bad the world is more complicated than that.

The words being chanted are hard to make out past the voice-over of a mediot telling her viewers what to think, but the luminous banners floating above the crowd make the purpose of the rally clear:

FREE LT. SHELLEY—AMERICAN HERO

FREE THE APOCALYPSE SQUAD

THE PEOPLE STAND WITH THE LION OF BLACK CROSS

The Lion of Black Cross—that's me.

In the hours after the bombs went off on Coma Day, more INDs—improvised nuclear devices—were discovered in metropolitan areas, rigged to blow if disturbed. The only way to disarm them was with codes held by the enemy in an underground, former Cold War facility called Black Cross. My squad was sent to recover those codes. It was fucking hell in a basement, but it worked. Afterward the mediots tagged me the Lion of Black Cross, and if it wasn't that, it was King David, because God is supposed to be on my side.

First Light changed that.

In the months since, the mediots have worked hard to cast us as traitors. It hasn't really worked. A lot of people support what we did, but I had no idea we'd inspired the kind of passion I see in this rally.

The mediot doing the voice-over tries to make it something ugly. Using critical, contemptuous tones, she informs her viewers that responsible people are helping their country by staying at home, doing their jobs, rebuilding their lives, while these protesters have migrated to the capital to make trouble and demand government support.

Many of them are trying to make their demands anonymously. The faces of at least 20 percent are hidden behind masks—and not cheap Halloween leftovers. The masks I see are works of art, like European festival masks except they cover the whole face, and instead of eyeholes, there's a slot that allows them to be worn with farsights. I don't think the disguises can hide anyone's identity, though—not in the face of dedicated surveillance. A good IR scanner should be able to look right through the masks. But maybe that doesn't matter. Even if a government agency logs people's presence here, that will be just one among trillions of bits of data collected today. The real risk for most people in that crowd is being recognized by an employer—and the masks should help protect them from that.

The other two news clips are different versions of the same story. After I view them, I reconsider the icon for episode three. Linked Combat Squad is the product of a skilled filmmaker, one who knows how to tell a compelling, emotional story. Is there some element in episode three that inspired people, that persuaded them to leave their homes and their lives to rally in support of us?

My uncle included the third episode because he believes I need to see what it contains.

I steel myself, and I click the icon open.

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It's later, much later, when the door opens. I tense, but I don't jump this time, and I don't look up. I'm hunched over the tablet, holding it in two hands. Episode three is still playing, and mentally I'm not really in the room. I'm back on the C-17. We've just completed our air refueling. The squad is cheering.

"Broken city," my uncle says grimly. "Quit and lock."

He's talking to the goddamn tablet, which listens to him. The screen goes blank. My grip on the tablet tightens until it's about to snap in two. "Fuck!" I whisper, struggling to keep my temper contained as our lead defense counsel, Major Kelso Ogawa, comes next into the room.

"You don't need to see the rest of that, Jimmy," my uncle says.

He's right. I don't need to see it, because it's playing inside my head. I hear again the radio hail from a mercenary hired by Carl Vanda. The merc tells me to turn on a phone, and I do it. My Lissa calls me, and lets me know the merc has kidnapped her, to gain leverage with me—but that scheme didn't work. Lissa is dead now. So is the merc. I'm still here.

My uncle steps around the table, pulling out the chair next to me. "I just wanted you to see the big policy shift that takes place in this episode," he says as he sits.

I make myself put the tablet down, gently, on the table. I slide it over to him like it's a loaded gun. "When did episode three come out?"

Major Ogawa answers as he takes a chair opposite me. "Two nights ago."

The major is nearly fifty, of mixed Asian and European descent, with a narrow face showing some dignified weathering, and curly brown hair just beginning to gray. He watches me through the translucent band of his farsights, tinted gray, so thin and light they seem to float in front of his eyes. "You look shell-shocked, Lieutenant. Are you going to be okay to talk?"

I take a deep breath, straighten my back, square my shoulders. Lissa is dead and I can't bring her back, but if this trial goes the way I hope, then a lot of people might finally pay for their part in what happened. I hope Carl Vanda is one of them. "What happened with the judge?"

My uncle answers, "Colonel Monteiro expressed sympathy toward the concerns of trial counsel, but she refused to sever your case from the enlisted. She's under orders to conclude these proceedings quickly, and conducting separate trials is not going to satisfy that goal. Besides, trials cost money—and given the ongoing state of emergency, I don't think there's a budget to pay for a separate trial."

"So we move forward?"

"We have a tentative agreement," Ogawa says. "Right now, the court-martial is scheduled for Monday."

Monday.

It comes as a shock. Ogawa warned it might be months, but today is Friday. Only two more days. I'm okay with that.

“A tentative agreement?” I ask him. “What still needs to be worked out?”

“Trial counsel has asked Judge Monteiro to forbid the use of skullcaps while court is in session, on the theory that they interfere with individual self-determination.”

I want to believe he’s joking, but my FaceValue app detects no humor, no subterfuge.

“The skullcaps don’t work that way.”

“Monteiro has taken the request under consideration. She’ll rule before the end of the day. In your professional opinion, as an experienced LCS officer, what will it do to the case if the judge rules against skullcaps—and your skullnet?”

I tap my forehead. “There’s no off switch for my skullnet. Unless she wants to send me into surgery, she can’t rule against it. And if she bans the skullcaps? That’s a deliberate shot at debilitating my squad. It’s a move that will put their mental health in danger. Ask Guidance.”

“I have. They’re preparing a formal response.”

“They used to make us turn in our skullcaps before going on leave. They don’t do that anymore.”

“So you’re saying it would be detrimental to our case if the judge ruled against the use of skullcaps?”

“No. It wouldn’t affect the case at all, because the use of skullcaps has nothing to do with the case.”

“But you think there’s a risk of mental breakdown—”

“No.” I consider it further. “Not right away. My soldiers will testify regardless, but take the skullcaps away and you put every one of them at risk of severe clinical depression.”

“All right. That’s more or less what Guidance said.”

“More or less?”

“There have been incidents of . . . explosive violence in soldiers deprived of their skullcaps.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” I lean forward, studying him. This is the kind of bullshit the mediots like to chatter about.

“It’s an addiction, isn’t it?” Ogawa asks. “The more you use a skullcap, the more you need it. The mind forgets how to regulate itself.”

“What violent incidents?”

“The usual. Murdered families, terrorized neighborhoods, shopping malls shot to pieces. The link to LCS soldiers has been downplayed.”

I stare at the table, wanting to deny what he’s telling me, but the truth is, I find it all too credible. “We’re okay as long as we have the skullcaps.”

“I’ll tell the judge. The army got you addicted. It’s an unfair burden to ask you to function without your emotional prosthetic during an event as critical as your court-martial.”

An emotional prosthetic? The term is new to me, but I can’t argue with it. My skullnet is an intelligent aid that files off the worst extremes of my mood and eases the trauma of my memories, keeping me in peak form for the next round.

“So you think we’re going forward?”

“Absolutely,” Ogawa confirms. “The government wants a verdict before the fallout from episode three has a chance to escalate.”

I look at my uncle, then back to Ogawa. “Why didn’t they just hold it back? It’s been five months since the First Light mission. Why release the episode now?”

“Why release it at all?” my uncle asks. “You can be damn sure the army and the president were both against it, but someone out there is interested in your story, someone who’s on your side.”

He’s needling me, talking around the subject of the Red, because he can’t argue it directly while Major Ogawa is here.

“You should be happy,” he goes on. “You wanted the eyes of the country on this proceeding. I can’t think of a better way to achieve that than to release that propaganda film on the eve of the trial.”

“What’s going on outside right now is just the beginning,” Ogawa assures me. “You’ve engineered a media sensation, all right. I’m impressed.”

“I didn’t set this up.”

Ogawa looks skeptical. “We told that to the judge. You’re isolated in here. There’s no way you could have been involved in the release of First Light.”

“Of course.” I turn to my uncle. “The policy change you wanted me to see. You meant the Red. This time it’s part of the show.”

He acknowledges this with a nod. “It was never mentioned in episode two. It’s never been publicly discussed—until now.”

It’s true. In episode one, we didn’t even know the Red existed. During the events of episode two, we knew about it, we named it, and it was implied to me that other soldiers had been hacked too—but none of that made it into the show. Now, in episode three, the secrecy is gone. Flashbacks detail the Red’s discovery and the speculation on its intent: that it engineers chance and coincidence in the lives of individuals both to derail and to inspire, with none of us immune. Thelma Sheridan speaks of it, Jaynie and I argue over it, and the case is made that the nuclear terrorism of Coma Day was more than insurrection, that it was aimed at destroying the habitation of the Red.

But this is information already revealed to the court. “This isn’t going to change anything, right?” I ask them. “It’s not going to affect the trial proceedings?”

Ogawa questions me in turn. “Is there any reason to think the decisions you’ve made regarding your defense have been influenced, against your will, by the Red, as an outside agent?”

I turn to my uncle, wanting confirmation that he’s kept our secret. He makes a slight sideways gesture with his head: Haven’t said a thing. I look at Ogawa. He’s watching me closely; I’m sure he’s using his farsights to run his own emotional-analysis app, one that’s measuring the truth of everything I say. “My decisions have not been influenced by an outside agent.”

“The history of the earlier incursions was presented to the prosecution during discovery,” Ogawa tells me. “So they can’t use the past influence of the Red against you. Also included in the pretrial documentation was an affidavit from Guidance asserting your skullnet is locked down.”

I nod. I don’t say anything.

“If that’s not the case,” Ogawa goes on, his gaze never wavering from mine, “as your attorney, I advise you to say so.”

“Yes, sir.”

He waits for me to say more. When I don’t, he nods. “Monday, then.”

We all stand up, shake hands, and then I follow them to the door.

My personal security is not entrusted to civilian guards. The army has executed an agreement with the US Marshals office allowing a special detail of military police to stand watch over the Apocalypse Squad. So two of my regular guards—Sergeant Kerry Omer and Specialist Darren Vitali—are waiting for me in the hall outside the tiny consultation room.

It’s presumed we have a lot of enemies, so watching over us is considered hazardous duty. Omer and Vitali are rigged for it, wearing body armor and the titanium bones of an agile exoskeleton, the same model we use in the linked combat squads, where we’ve nicknamed them “dead sisters.” The gray struts run up the outside of their legs and along their arms, with a back frame linking them together. Our guards also wear the same helmets we use, though their visors are kept transparent, so their faces are easy to see. The US Marshals office permits them to carry sidearms but no assault rifles, and no grenades or other explosives.

Both salute as we enter the hall. Major Ogawa and I return the courtesy.

I nod to my uncle, salute the major, and turn to Omer.

“Ready, sir?” she asks.

“Ready, Sergeant.” I hold out my wrists for the cuffs I am required to wear when I transition between the cellblock and the court offices. Quickly and professionally, Omer puts them on me. I try not to think about it.

We step out together, one MP on either side of me. Our route is through a restricted corridor, with the offices of the federal judges on one side, and on the other, the courtrooms—four on this floor alone. Secretaries and assistants step aside for us. One woman ducks into a judge’s office. As I pass the partly open door, I glimpse a tall window on the other side of the room, and beyond it, a vista that looks out across the Capitol Reflecting Pool. To the left, skirted with trees in early-spring green and a pink glaze of cherry blossoms, is the dome-

crowned edifice of the Capitol Building. There is no one on its marble stairs or on the lawn in front of it, and no tourists wandering around the Grant Memorial, because security concerns have made this forbidden ground. But on the other side of the reflecting pool, where the vast lawn of the National Mall begins, I see in real time the packed human mass of protesters that I saw on video just a few minutes ago.

The door swings shut. We walk on to the end of the corridor, where an elevator stands open, waiting for us. We step aboard, about-face the way we were taught in boot, and face the doors. Omer touches the back of her left wrist to a sensor plate that reads an embedded chip. With her identity confirmed, the doors close.

The federal judges and their staffs use this elevator to reach the underground parking garage. We use it to reach the underground passage to the courthouse cellblock.

As the elevator descends, Omer says quietly, “We saw episode three last night, sir. I just wanted to tell you, a lot of us think you did the right thing.”

“Don’t tell your CO that, Sergeant.”

“Yes, sir.”

And hope like hell this conversation doesn’t show up on episode four.

We reach the basement. The doors open.

“Dead zone,” Specialist Vitali reports. “The relay must be out again.”

It’s an ongoing problem. There are supposed to be network nodes throughout the building, but in this corridor the nodes aren’t working at least half the time we come through—and post-Coma Day, no one expects replacement parts anytime soon. A working network would let Omer and Vitali get an all clear from their handlers. Instead, they have to confirm the safety of the corridor on their own.

So I stay in the elevator while Vitali steps out to survey the corridor. This requires more than a quick glance. The space is poorly designed from a security perspective. Square support pillars protrude into the corridor, breaking up the monotony of the walls but providing cover for possible assailants. Omer holds the elevator while Vitali confirms that the staff door to the parking garage is locked, before walking the corridor. We listen to his footsteps recede. After several seconds he calls back to us, “Contact established. All clear.”

I look to Omer. She nods permission to proceed and we follow Vitali into the corridor, passing the staff door and, farther on, the prisoner-intake door. Just beyond that is the first set of gray steel doors that secure the jail. Bolts cycle as we approach. An alert buzzes, the doors swing open, and we walk inside to a secure foyer, and wait. The doors behind us close and lock, and then a second set opens in front of us. On the other side are offices, consultation rooms, and a control room. I’ve been told a side passage leads to a bunk room and a kitchen for the guards. We walk on, to a junction at the end of the corridor where there are three more doors, each opening onto a parallel cellblock.

Generally, only prisoners actually undergoing trial are housed overnight at the courthouse, and given the current state of emergency, most trial proceedings have been postponed. So the inmate population is low, which made it possible for the army to lease cellblock B, the current home of the Apocalypse Squad. The center door buzzes open and we step through into a corridor with glass-fronted cells, six on one side, five on the other. My cell is the first on the right. We stop in front of it. Vitali opens the door.

Across from my cell is the shower, and next to the shower is an empty cell. Sergeant Nolan is housed in the cell next to mine, but the sidewalls are concrete, so I can't see him—not from inside my cell, and not from where I'm standing. I can't see any of my squad. Tuttle and Moon should be in the middle of the cellblock, with the women at the end, but I have no way to tell if they're actually there or not. I'd do a roll call, but sound suppression prevents us from talking to one another. We can converse with someone outside the cell only if they are standing directly in front of the glass wall.

"Sir," Omer says. "Please face the cell door."

I don't move. "Is everybody here?" I ask her.

"All present, sir."

In the oppressive silence, where every faint squeak and groan of the MPs' exoskeletons calls attention to itself, it's easy to believe the opposite. I know that if I don't confirm for myself the presence of my squad, doubt will eat at me all evening. "May I walk the cellblock, Sergeant?"

Omer consults her handler. Then she tells me, "You are not allowed to speak to or otherwise interact with the prisoners, sir."

"Understood."

"You may walk to the end of the cellblock and return."

With my hands still cuffed in front of me, I move past my own cell. Two steps until I can see into the next one. Nolan is there, just like he's supposed to be. He's down on the floor doing push-ups. He looks up, watching me with a tense gaze as I pass. Tuttle is in the next cell, asleep. Directly across the corridor from Tuttle is Moon's cell. He's sitting cross-legged on his bed, reading a paper book. When he notices me, he looks up with a startled expression. The next cells on either side are empty. Then I reach Jaynie. She sees me and gets up from where she is sitting on the bed, stepping right up to the glass partition. I want to tell her we start on Monday, but I can't betray my promise to Omer. Flynn comes to the partition too, and so does Harvey. Harvey tells me, "Nobody changed their mind, sir."

I nod, turn around, and return to my keepers, presenting my wrists to Omer so she can remove the handcuffs. "Sergeant, would you make sure all the prisoners know that the court-martial is scheduled to start on Monday."

"I will do that, sir."

The cuffs come off and I step into my cell. Vitali closes the door behind me. I turn, watching through the glass partition as Omer moves out of sight down the cellblock to deliver my message. When she comes back, she stops in front of my cell and, facing me, she salutes. I return the courtesy and then she and Vitali leave. The steel door closes behind them, and I am alone.

I can see no one, hear no one.

It's going to be one hell of a long weekend.

• • • •

The cell is six by eight feet, with three walls of solid concrete and one of glass. It's furnished with a narrow bed and an aluminum toilet/sink combo in the back corner. Meals are brought to us, and we eat alone. There is no exercise yard, no library, because this is a courthouse jail, meant for stays of a few hours to a few days. We have been here for five months. The MPs do what they can, bringing paper books if we ask for them, and we exercise in our cells.

I have my own unique routine.

An air-conditioning vent is embedded in the center of the concrete ceiling. It's eighteen inches square, a tempered steel honeycomb bolted into place. I imagine the prisoners housed here before me, lying in bed, staring up at that vent and wondering at the possibility of escape through the air ducts. Hell, I've wondered about it myself, but when I jump up and hook my fingers in the steel mesh, I'm not trying to escape.

It hurts like hell to hold on with just my fingertips, so as quickly as I can, I swing my robot feet up to the grille and latch on. The prosthetics hurt too—that's how I know they're there—but the skullnet helps me regulate the level of pain, and keep it at a minimum.

My titanium toes curl in a secure grip around the steel grille. My fingers slip free and, slowly, I let my body uncurl until I'm hanging upside down like a bat, gazing out the glass door at the empty shower facility on the other side of the corridor. Weaving my fingers behind my head, I curl my body up again until my nose almost touches my trouser legs in the vicinity of my mechanical knees. And then, slowly, I let my body uncurl again. Down and up, down and up, in a regimen of suspended sit-ups, followed by work to both sides and to the back.

As always, I'm getting a headache, so I kick loose, execute a half somersault, and land with a thump against the concrete floor. Aerobic sets come next: intense bursts of stationary running, jacks, and push-ups, until I can't do any more, and then I move on to tai chi or yoga, anything I can think of to keep my body—what's left of it—from degenerating. I've issued orders to the squad to work out at least sixty minutes a day, so that's how long I keep going.

I lead by example, even if no one can see me. It's boring as hell, but the skullnet helps me stay focused.

Tomorrow I'll get to take a shower.

At 1900, Vitali brings dinner: a microwaved pasta thing with vegetables on the side. Honestly, it's not bad. It's one of a series of contractor-supplied meals, the same that we consumed at Fort Dassari and at C-FHEIT. A little bit of home.

During my idle time in prison I've worked to improve my cyber-integration. FaceValue is part of the software package for a new overlay I had installed right before First Light. Since then, using the app to get an unbiased read on the emotional state of people around me has become second nature. When there are no people around me, when I'm alone in my cell, I work with my skullnet, training it to better integrate with my overlay.

I use a trained response now, focusing on the word encyclopedia. The skullnet picks up the command and signals my overlay to launch the program, faster than I could trigger it with my gaze. I read for a while, all nonfiction.

I tried reading a novel a couple of months ago, but I crashed on the romantic relationship—just not

something I can handle right now—and in a flash of temper I deleted all the fiction I had stored.

It's hard not to snap sometimes. But my skullnet makes it mostly bearable, and when it gets too hard I just lie down in my bunk and think, Sleep—and my skullnet makes it happen.

I sleep maybe twelve hours a day—an article in the encyclopedia says that's bad for your health—but what the fuck, it's better than banging my head against the concrete wall until I'm bloody.

• • • •

Sunday comes. Visitors' day. We're allowed one visitor each, but I'm usually the only one who gets escorted to a consultation room. My dad lives in Manhattan. Restoring train service between New York and Washington, DC, was a priority after Coma Day, so he's able to ride in Sunday morning and take a cab to the courthouse. He's well off, so it's not a burden for him to handle the post-Coma inflated fares.

It's different for the rest of the squad. Both Jaynie and Flynn are estranged from their families, while Nolan, Tuttle, and Moon are all from the west, their families too far away to stop in for a weekend visit. Harvey's mom has come in twice from Pittsburgh, but today I'm the only one who gets to leave the cellblock.

The senior MP on shift, Sergeant Colton Haffey, presents himself at the glass door of my cell and right away I get a bad feeling. He's not carrying a sidearm and he's not rigged in a dead sister. He doesn't even have a helmet on, just an audio loop. Behind him is Private Dominic Pasco, similarly unrigged.

“What the hell is going on?” I ask Haffey.

“Special circumstances, sir.” My overlay confirms the nervous tension I see in his face. He doesn't like what's going on. He's worried. “Please step to the front of the cell, sir.”

I do it. Haffey unlocks the door. “Present your wrists, sir.”

I do that too, and he cuffs me. “What special circumstances?” I ask, imagining an assassination squad outside the cellblock.

Why not just shoot me inside the cell?

Maybe they want it to look like I went berserk and tried to escape.

“You have a visitor, sir.”

“Not my dad?”

“No, sir.”

The steel door to the cellblock buzzes open. On the other side are two men in dark business suits, opaque farsights hiding their eyes. Another man and a woman, similarly dressed, are stationed farther along the corridor, outside the first consultation room.

“Advance,” Haffey tells me.

One of the suits intervenes. “We search him first.”

Haffey looks at me, apology in his gaze, but he steps away. The shorter suit tells me, “Turn around, Lieutenant. Put your hands against the wall.”

I do it and he frisks me, finding nothing, of course. The other one runs a scanner over me. It picks up my skullnet, my tattooed antenna, my embedded audio buds, the ID chip at my wrist, and my titanium legs.

“Why isn’t he shackled?” the shorter one asks.

Haffey says, “It’s not procedure, and the lieutenant is fully cooperative at all times.”

“Unacceptable. I want shackles on those cyborg legs, or I want the legs off.”

“No, sir!” Haffey snaps. “I will not allow you to abuse the dignity of an army officer.”

“Cuff me to the fucking chair,” I say.

The suit nods, and I am escorted to the consultation room. The table has been removed. There is only one chair, and it’s been placed near a corner, away from the door. “Sit,” the suit tells me.

They make Haffey cuff my ankles to the chair legs, worried, maybe, that if they do it, I’ll try to kick their faces in. Haffey finishes the task, then stands beside me, facing the door. One of the suits takes up a post beside the door; the other positions himself halfway across the room.

We wait in silence for almost three minutes, during which I go over the possibilities in my head. When the door opens to admit the president, I’m not even surprised.

The door closes behind him as he comes a few steps into the room.

Like most successful politicians, he’s a tall man, six three. He’s trim and good looking in a dark business suit, but there’s a lot more silver in his thick, wavy hair than on the day he was elected two and a half years ago.

I met him once before, on the night we were evacuated from Black Cross.

His expression is stern as he stands there, studying me with his dark Hispanic eyes. When he speaks, it’s with the steady, reassuring tone of his signature voice, the one comedians always try to imitate but never get quite right: “I’m told everything you see, everything you hear, is recorded, Lieutenant Shelley.”

“That’s correct, sir.”

His chin drops as quiet fury enters his voice. “Then let this be recorded for posterity. If it were up to me, I would have you hanged. Tonight, Lieutenant Shelley. Your heroism at Black Cross cannot excuse what you’ve done. During a state of emergency like no other this country has ever known, you chose to strike at the heart of our citizens’ faith in government, undermining the effort of countless dedicated individuals who are striving every day to reclaim our future. I would have you hanged, Lieutenant. But I swore an oath to preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States. I respect our American system of justice, and I trust that system to find you guilty, as it must. As it will.”

His outrage is so cold and so real it shocks me. In that moment I know, I absolutely know, that the conspiracy to protect Thelma Sheridan goes all the way to the top. I want to tell him I know he's part of it, that I'm looking forward to seeing him fall, but Colonel Kendrick's ghost is in my head, warning me to keep my smartass mouth in check. So I say nothing.

It doesn't matter though, because the show is over. The president gestures at the suit standing in the middle of the room, and my overlay shuts down. The half-seen icons that float on the periphery of my vision wink out, leaving only a pinpoint red light in the lower left corner to indicate that the overlay exists at all.

From this moment forward, no one outside will ever know what happens in here.

My gaze shifts from that tiny red light to the door. I am sure it will open, admitting the black-ops soldiers who constitute the president's personal army. I wonder if they'll kill Haffey too, and I decide that they will. They'll probably blame him for murdering me. I wait for death, one second and then another, but the door stays shut.

I look again at the president, beginning to understand he plays a more complex game than I'm used to. "Sergeant Haffey," he says.

"Yes, sir!"

"Will you please leave the room?"

I can almost hear Haffey sweat. "Sir, my orders are to stay with the prisoner at all times."

"I am overriding your orders, Sergeant. Get out."

"Yes, sir."

I keep my gaze fixed on the president as Haffey crosses the room. Someone in the corridor opens the door for him. When it closes again, the president speaks. "You have been misled, Lieutenant Shelley. You have been misinformed. I understand you believed you were serving some abstract justice when you helped to kidnap an American citizen. But you did not have all the facts and you do not understand the repercussions. For the good of the country, I want you to stand down."

"That's not possible, sir. This is a capital case. Even if I wanted to, I'm not allowed to enter a guilty plea."

"I am aware of that," he growls, letting me know he's not an idiot. "I am asking you to stand down, to mount no defense. Make your statement if you must—I don't begrudge you that—tell us how you felt compelled to do what you did, and then tell us you were mistaken! Fall on your sword. Accept the charges against you without expanding the scope of the evidence, and when you are found guilty and sentenced, I will issue a pardon—and the country can begin to heal."

Colonel Kendrick once called him a performance artist. It must be true, because I believe him. I believe he's speaking from his heart, that for everything he's done, he's had the best interests of the country in mind, and if I do as he asks, he will keep his word.

"I'm not the only one on trial, sir," I remind him.

His eyes narrow. “Your squad will do what you tell them.”

He’s more confident of that than I am.

It doesn’t matter.

“I cannot accept your offer, sir.”

I don’t want to die. Jaynie thinks that, deep down, I’d put a bullet through my own brain if I could. That’s not what I want, and I don’t want to be a martyr to anyone’s cause—but I’m not going to back down either. Matt Ransom died to see justice done, to see Thelma Sheridan called to account for her involvement in the Coma Day insurrection. Steven Kendrick died for the same thing. And it isn’t over.

“We did what we did, sir, because the republic has been hijacked, because justice is for sale—”

“Don’t play your patriot games with me, Shelley. You and I know it’s a complex world, and eighteenth-century philosophies don’t work anymore.”

“Who is it you serve, sir?”

“Watch yourself, Lieutenant. I am your commander in chief. I hold your life in my hands. Your life, and the lives of your companions. As you were so quick to remind me, this is a capital case. You need to consider very carefully what you’re willing to die for.”

I’ve already spent a lot of time thinking about that. “I’m all in, sir. No way out but forward. How about you?”

He doesn’t answer. He just stares at me for half a minute or more. Then he turns and walks to the door. It opens for him and he steps out without another word. The two suits follow him.

I’m still shackled to the chair. My overlay is still switched off. After a couple of minutes Haffey comes back in, looking scared. “You fucking pissed him off,” he whispers.

I have that effect on people.

Haffey frees my feet. “I’ve got to take you back to your cell, sir.”

“What about my dad? Did he come today?”

“Yes, sir. He checked in upstairs, but orders came down. No visitors.”

“The president must have cleared out by now.”

“Yes, sir.”

“So is something else going on?”

“I’m not at liberty to talk about it, sir. If you’ll come with me.”

I'm escorted back to cellblock B, where Haffey removes my handcuffs.

My overlay is still off as the cell door is closed and locked, but I'm not too worried about it. Sooner or later, the Red is sure to switch me back on.

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There is a network node above the cellblock door. The MPs installed it the day they brought us in. Here, underground, they need the node to ensure their helmets always have connectivity.

I have stood here by the glass wall innumerable times, in the murky darkness of the cellblock at night, gazing at the amber point of the node's indicator light, positioned a few feet above the faint, reflected gleam of the door's tiny, rectangular window. The window just looks into another part of the jail as closed and locked and impenetrable as my cell, but that light is a connection to the outside world. Beyond it are people I care about: my family, my friends, my handlers at Guidance—Delphi, especially.

Soldiers aren't supposed to meet their handlers or know them as anything other than a voice that relays orders and advice through their helmet's audio, but I got to meet Delphi once when Colonel Kendrick included her in a debriefing session. When I first saw her, I had no idea who she was. I admired her: a petite and athletic woman, no older than thirty, blond hair in a ponytail, bright blue eyes. A stranger, until she spoke.

I wish I were linked to Delphi now. I wish she could give me a sitrep, let me know what Intelligence believes is happening outside this cellblock, because I think something out there has gone wrong. For the first time since I've occupied this cell, I cannot see the network node's indicator light. It's been switched off, isolating us in here, and I want to know why.

The night-lights are still on—three-inch round panels in the ceiling that emit a dim red glow from the far end of the visible spectrum—but the only point of light I can see is the red pinpoint in my overlay, telling me I am still shut down. Without the network node, Guidance can't get in to switch me on. The Red can't reach me. What the fuck am I supposed to do without my goddamn overlay?

Sleep.

I should sleep.

But I've already been sleeping for hours; I was asleep long before the lights went out because there is fucking nothing to do in a six-foot-by-eight-foot cage when your overlay goes down. I don't even have a fucking paper book and I have no idea what the fucking time is.

Sometime later—a long time later—I see movement beyond the window in the cellblock door, and then the door opens, admitting a figure rigged in a dead sister, one that advances to stand facing me, just on the other side of the glass door. It's too dark to tell who it is, but then the figure speaks. "You've been awake a long time, Lieutenant."

Master Sergeant Mary Chudhuri.

"The network node is out," I tell her.

“You noticed that?”

“I did. What the hell is going on?”

“Officially? We’re on lockdown. Preemptive action to curtail a suspected security hole in our local network—which means we’re cut off from direct communication with Guidance. I’ve got Phelps stationed down the hall beside a landline, but I’m not feeling very secure. How about you, King David? Any insights? Any particular shit we need to be ready for?”

I shake my head. “God doesn’t talk to me anymore.”

I used to have a sixth sense when it came to impending danger. Matt Ransom wanted to believe it was the voice of God that guided me. It turned out to be God in the form of the Red, but even the Red can’t reach me with the local network shut down. I am the sparrow that has fallen out of God’s sight after all. That doesn’t mean I can’t sometimes figure these things out on my own. “Just as a gut feeling?” I tell the master sergeant. “Fuck yeah, something is up. Court-martial starts tomorrow. If a coalition of dragons wants to shut us up”—if the president wants to shut us up—“the time to slam us is now. With no network access it’ll be easy. No call for help can get out.”

Chudhuri is a silhouette outlined in dull red, but I can see the nod of her helmeted head. “Maybe. Or maybe your dragon strike force found a softer target. The mediots are reporting that Thelma Sheridan is dead. They’re saying she was murdered in her cell.”

I stop breathing. I don’t blink. For three seconds I am utterly still, a trapped animal obeying an instinct that tells me if I don’t move I won’t be noticed and then, maybe, I can hide from the truth—because if it’s true, we’ve lost.

The whole point of our mission, of First Light, was to bring Thelma Sheridan to trial, to expose what she’d done, and to implicate those who had aided her and those who had allowed her to get away with it. The only head of state willing to host that trial was Ahab Matugo, who took custody of Sheridan when our plane landed in Niamey. It was his promise to bring her safely to trial, but if he’s failed, if it’s true Sheridan is dead, First Light will have been for nothing. We will have delivered an American citizen into the hands of an incompetent kangaroo court and no one will give a shit about our reasons why.

I ask, “Has there been any official confirmation? Has Matugo issued a statement?”

“The news just broke.”

I ponder the situation, and because I need some kind of hope to hold on to, I say, “Matugo is a damn good strategist. He might let a rumor like that live for a while, just to cut down the odds of someone else trying to murder her.”

“My concern, Lieutenant, is what a rumor like that will do to the odds of someone trying to murder you.”

I look again toward the node; the light is still out. “What time is it, anyway?”

“Oh four oh seven.”

The trial is scheduled to start at ten hundred. Six more hours.

“I don’t think you have to worry, Master Sergeant. I think hitting us here was always the backup plan. Better to take out Sheridan than us. Hell, she expected it! Eliminate the possibility that she might testify, while turning her into an American hero, murdered in a third-world jail—and we get to be the bad guys who put her there.”

“I’m sorry, Lieutenant.”

“Thank you, Master Sergeant, for letting me know.”

“Yes, sir.” She salutes, then turns smartly and leaves the cellblock.

I continue my vigil, standing by the glass, watching the node, endowing that missing light with more meaning than it deserves. I imagine that if the lockdown is lifted, if the light comes back on, it’ll be because Sheridan’s death is confirmed—and our court-martial will be a short and certain affair.

But the node stays off.

• • • •

At 0930 we assemble in the cellblock corridor, each of us with our hands cuffed. We’re wearing our dress uniforms, except I’m not wearing shoes; I can’t. The shoe inserts I need to make dress shoes fit weren’t delivered, so I’m standing in bare titanium feet, just like I do every day. I hope the judge doesn’t toss me out of court for not being properly attired.

Major Ogawa stopped by the cellblock early to convey last-minute instructions on courtroom procedure. I used the opportunity to inform my squad of yesterday’s encounter with the president and of the reported death of Thelma Sheridan. They understand the implication of these events and they’re angry, but there’s no going back. The only thing we can do is press on, take our case as far as we can, as far as we’re allowed.

I stand at the front of the squad with Jaynie beside me. We form two lines. Master Sergeant Chudhuri has stayed past the end of her shift to ensure we make it into court. She and Sergeant Omer face us, flanking the open cellblock door. They’re rigged in helmets, armor, and bones. Both wear sidearms. Behind the transparent shields of their visors, their expressions are stern.

Chudhuri says, “Our local network remains locked down. So Specialists Vitali and Phelps will precede us, taking up positions by the parking-garage door and the elevator, to ensure the security of the basement corridor. When they signal all clear, we will leave the cellblock and proceed without delay to the stairwell. I’m not feeling inclined to take the elevator this morning. I think we can all do with some exercise.”

She looks at me for agreement—unnecessary because she is currently in command, but I nod my approval anyway. “Thank you, Master Sergeant.”

We march as a unit through the jail, Chudhuri on point, Omer as rear guard. I’m nervous as hell. Maybe it’s just a mistake that the network is down; maybe someone forgot to turn it back on. Or maybe it’s still down for a reason.

We reach the jail’s outer doors. Chudhuri gazes out a tiny window. An alert buzzes and the doors swing open. We step out, and I can see to the end of the long basement corridor. An MP, anonymous in armor and bones, stands guard partway down, with another stationed at the far end. We advance, hard-soled shoes

striking the floor in tight rhythm. I hear the doors close behind us. The bolts slide home with a solid chunk.

Chudhuri passes the prisoner-intake door. Jaynie and I follow a step behind her. That's when my overlay finally comes back on. Familiar icons crowd the baseline of my vision and I hesitate, missing the cadence as I try to figure out whether or not I've got an outside link. No one notices my misstep though because the next moment gets erased by the deafening whump! of an explosion. The concussion breaches the prisoner-intake door, blasting its bolts and hinges away, and slamming my eardrums. I stagger, dazed, into Jaynie while smoke wreathes the steel door.

At first the door refuses to fall. Then a second, lesser concussion sends it toppling inward. I follow Jaynie, scrambling to get out of the way. Chudhuri is screaming, "Get down! Get down!" A flash-bang goes off, so close it feels like the explosion is inside my head. I lose track of things. When awareness pops back I'm on the floor and I can't see shit. My vision is a celestial war of drifting black shadows and dazzling bright flares. And my hearing is trashed. Ears ringing and everything muffled: the screams, the gunfire.

But when a heavy-caliber weapon goes off above my head, I hear it. It's not Chudhuri or Omer because they only have sidearms, which means they're outgunned.

I don't want them dying for me.

Kicking off the wall, I drive my shoulder into half-seen knees.

My shoulder cracks against a titanium strut.

Fuck. A dead sister?

The shooter staggers, but doesn't go down. Logically, the next step should involve putting a bullet in my brain, but that doesn't happen. Instead, a titanium hook closes around my bicep in a crushing grip, and I'm half lifted, half dragged toward the blown-out doorway.

My arm feels like it's about to pop under the pressure of that grip but I can bend it, so I reach back—with both hands because they're still cuffed together—and I grab hold of a strut. Though I can't see to confirm it, I assume the shooter is fully rigged in armor, bones, and helmet, leaving only one vital spot for me to hit: the throat. That's what I target. Using the strut for leverage, I swing my robot feet straight up. All those sit-ups I did while hanging upside down pay off as I point my toes and jam them in the general direction of my assailant's throat.

I score a hit.

The effect is dramatic, more than I expect. Flesh tears and blood surges free, a hot rain that splatters my face. I try to get my feet back on the ground, but the shooter is staggering, backpedaling through the doorway and into the garage. And with the arm hook still engaged, I'm dragged along.

Then the hook releases. I let go of the strut and tumble to the concrete floor. The shooter collapses beside me, dropping some kind of assault rifle in the gushing blood. I roll and grab for it, but someone else gets there first, kicks the weapon out of my reach, and then kicks me in the chest with the toe of a footplate. It feels like my chest caves in. I curl up in agony—only a moment and then I'm grabbed by my armpits and hauled to my knees.

“Don’t fight it!” a man growls in my ear as an arm, braced by struts, squeezes my throat. “We’re going to get you out of here.” His grip tightens and I can’t breathe; I’m down on my knees, so I can’t kick. He’s waiting for me to pass out. “Tango!” he shouts. “Let’s go.”

Tango, wearing the bones of a dead sister, appears on the edge of the rectangle of light that is the blown-out doorway. Details are lost to my addled vision, but I can see enough to make out an assault rifle, held at shoulder level and pointed in my direction. I have a fraction of a second to wonder if anyone in the corridor is still alive, and then the weapon goes off: three fast shots that smack against my captor’s visor, pak-pak-pak! He goes over backward, releasing me on the way down. Three more shots follow. None hit me, but they set off a hell’s chorus of car alarms. I suck in a painful breath between clenched teeth as I scramble behind a concrete pillar. The only thought in my head is, What the fuck is going on?

If I had a link to my handler Delphi, I wouldn’t have to ask. She’d have a situation report ready.

“Shelley!”

My hearing is still muffled and the voice is competing with car alarms, but I swear to God it’s Chudhuri. I’m hit with an ugly suspicion. She stayed past her shift. Is she a partner in this?

“Lieutenant Shelley, are you injured?”

I don’t answer.

“Are you armed?”

Why the hell is Chudhuri still alive?

I don’t answer, holding out for the cavalry. I mean, this is the fucking federal courthouse, the territory of US Marshals. It’s a block away from the Capitol, in a district inhabited by cops from the Secret Service, the FBI, and the goddamn National Park Service. I can’t be alone here for long.

“I’m coming after you, sir,” Chudhuri warns.

“Whose side are you on, Chudhuri?”

Several seconds pass. Then she says, “Fuck you, sir. Lieutenant, if you are not injured, then get on your feet and get out into the open, before I see that you’re charged with attempted escape.”

I lean out to look around the pillar. My vision is good enough that I can see a sprawled figure beside a white van. Crouched beside the body is one of our MPs, holding a handgun while rapidly popping cinches to separate the fallen assailant from his rig.

Another MP stands over this tableau, holding an assault rifle pointed in my general direction. Chudhuri, I assume, though her visor is black and I can’t see her face.

“Why aren’t you dead?” I shout over the car alarms.

She asks me, “Why aren’t you?”

“I don’t fucking know.”

“Are you armed?”

“No.”

“Then get the hell inside.”

I’m awkward with the handcuffs on, but I get my robot feet under me and slowly stand up. “Who’s been hit?”

• • • •

Every one of us is beat up, but the only one who’s dead is the merc . . . the one I killed, the one whose throat I kicked out. I’m standing in the shower, letting her blood wash off me, repulsed by what I did to her. Maybe it was justified, but it wasn’t exactly human.

It feels worse because I’ve since learned that the mercs came at us with a nonlethal assault, using plastic bullets tough enough to knock down even the armored MPs but unlikely to kill. They had only four personnel on their team: three rigged soldiers and a driver waiting in a white van with FBI insignia.

I thought they came to kill us.

When the door blew out, I expected black-ops soldiers sent by the president, or by Carl Vanda, but in hindsight it’s clear to me they were amateurs.

And that they wanted to extract me alive.

Nolan is showering next to me, his skullcap in hand as he rinses his scalp. On his chest, swollen tissue and a deep black bruise mark the impact of a plastic bullet. My chest is bruised too, from the kick I took. It hurts to breathe. And where the merc grabbed my arm there’s a black bruise like some drunk amateur’s tattoo encircling my bicep.

“Who do you think sent ’em?” Nolan asks as he slips his skullcap back on. “You think it was Rawlings?”

“No.” Colonel Rawlings is retired army. On the First Light mission he served as our outside contact. Along the way, he tried to turn my squad against me. “Rawlings wants this trial. But if he did change his mind? He wouldn’t have told the mercs to rescue me and leave the rest of you behind. Hell no. He’d have ordered them to put a bullet in my brain, before they extracted everyone else.”

Nolan considers this, and nods. “Who, then?”

I turn the water off and reach for a towel. Sergeant Haffey is standing watch in the doorway of the narrow shower facility. Technically, he should tell us to shut the fuck up, because we haven’t been debriefed yet and we should not be discussing what happened, but he doesn’t say anything. Like us, the MPs exist at the center of an arena. A spotlight illuminates us, suggests we are central to the action, but in the shadows beyond the reach of that light, dragons contend. The MPs feel the pressure of it just like we do—hell, Haffey had to face the president and no doubt he’s thought about what could have happened if he’d been present for the shoot-out—but the pressure has only made our MPs more determined. They know the job they’ve been handed

isn't to keep us confined, it's to keep us alive, and they've pulled together around us. We've become a cohesive unit, just like any unit under pressure in the field. Haffey doesn't tell us to shut up, because he's on our side.

So far as I'm concerned, he's part of the conversation.

"I don't know who sent the mercs," I admit to Nolan. "Nothing about the operation makes sense to me. Carl Vanda might like to have me alive, but he would have used real bullets, and slammed the rest of you."

Nolan reaches for his towel. "Yeah, it's like whoever it was, they wanted to grab you, without really pissing you off." We frown at each other and I know we're both thinking about the dead merc. "I guess they kind of fucked that one up," Nolan adds.

• • • •

My dress uniform is ruined, and anyway I think the FBI agents investigating the attack bagged it as evidence, so I put on my combat uniform. Then I'm escorted to the same consultation room where I spoke with the president. I get to spend the next ninety minutes with two FBI agents who insist on going over every second of the attack in excruciating detail even though they have video from the helmet cams of all four MPs, along with recordings made by cameras in the parking garage. They don't ask about my overlay and I don't volunteer the news that it switched on just moments before the explosion. My theory is that the fake FBI van was equipped with a relay already hacked by the Red. As I passed the door, it sensed me and automatically restored me as a node on its network—one more surveillance device among millions, made active again.

The FBI agents aren't volunteering anything either. I ask about the attackers: who they were, who they worked for, what they had in mind for me, but I get no answers, and when it's clear we've all decided not to talk, Sergeant Haffey escorts me back to my cell. "The local network's been restored," he tells me. "Guidance cleared it for use, so we're not isolated down here anymore."

I check my overlay. It's still active, but I'm on lockdown as always, with no outside link. "Any confirmation on the status of Thelma Sheridan?"

He raises a ginger eyebrow. "You heard about that? It's not good news for you, is it?"

"It's not. Is it true?"

"The mediots act like it is, but since when do they know anything?"

I ask Major Ogawa the same question when he stops by in the midafternoon. Haffey allows him into the cellblock, but makes him stand outside the glass wall. I'm up on my feet as soon as I see him, facing him from the inside, wanting answers.

"I haven't heard anything official on Sheridan, but that's not your first concern."

I don't agree, but I have other questions. "So what happened this morning? Who the hell staged that fiasco? What were they after?"

He looks me in the eye. "Nothing happened this morning. Nothing you'll ever be able to talk about. The incident has been classified."

Just like the nuclear terrorism on Coma Day. We've got a pattern going here.

"Okay," I say. "Why? Is it being buried because the FBI is embarrassed it ever happened? Or because they know who's behind it?"

He shakes his head. "All I know is they want it hushed up. Colonel Monteiro demanded to know if any of you had the marks of a brawl on your face. If you did, she would have refused to proceed. As it is, it's safer to go forward. The crowd on the Mall was tallied at two hundred twenty thousand today, and the mood got ugly when news broke that the court-martial was postponed. Smells like bullshit, you know? And no one wants a riot. So we're going forward tomorrow. Opening arguments at ten hundred—"

"Assuming we get to the courtroom."

"You'll get there. The army can't wait to put this case away."

Major Ogawa isn't kidding. At 1721, Sergeant Omer brings the news that a fresh set of dress uniforms has been delivered, one for everyone. There's even a set of shoe inserts for me, so my robot feet can be properly attired. It's a miracle of efficiency to speed the hour in which the Apocalypse Squad drops out of the daily cycle of viral news.

• • • •

After lights-out I'm lying in my bunk half asleep when an upload link opens in my overlay. Data streams out into the world. It takes several seconds, and then the link closes again. Just like always. The routine finishes with the deletion of yesterday's video.

It's standard operating procedure to have a security AI monitor traffic on any military network. That AI should be logging the nightly uploads. It should flag them if they aren't authorized by Guidance, but no questions have ever been asked. I have a feeling there won't be any questions about tonight's activity either.

Got to admit: After last night's isolation, it's a relief to be in the Red's network again.

• • • •

The next day we assemble again at the request of Master Sergeant Chudhuri. This time, uniformed soldiers wearing armor and carrying assault rifles are stationed everywhere along our route. Chudhuri says they're on every floor and in the parking garage too. It makes her feel secure enough that she doesn't suggest the stairs, allowing us to take the elevator to the fourth floor. Our handcuffs are removed, and then we wait in a conference room, all of us seated around a table.

I listen with interest as the squad gives me their perspective on yesterday's incident.

"When Chudhuri ordered us to get down, we all dropped," Harvey says. "She needed a clear field for shooting, right? But the mercs knocked her down with their toy ammo."

"They knocked down all the MPs," Tuttle adds. "We thought we were next. Nothing left to lose."

Jaynie shifts, fixing me with a pointed gaze. "Is that what you were thinking when you went after that merc?"

“Something like that.”

Nolan says, “When you took her down, when the blood started, her partner froze. So me and Harvey tackled him, and Vasquez went after the weapon.”

“Stomped his fingers,” Jaynie says. “Broke them, I think. Anyway, he dropped the weapon, but Chudhuri was already up. She got her hands on it before I could.”

“She was so fucking pissed,” Moon says, wide eyed with the memory. “She pumped rounds point-blank into the merc’s chest armor—”

“To calm him down,” Harvey says. “That’s all.” She nods at me. “Then she followed you out the door.”

“It went so fast,” Flynn adds, “we didn’t even know they was shooting plastic till it was over.”

“We got lucky,” I tell her.

Harvey leans back in her chair, giving me a skeptical smile. “I don’t know about lucky, LT, but sure as shit, we’re better off than that merc you took apart. I did not know you could do that.”

Flynn starts to gush her admiration for what I did, but when the door opens, she breaks off in midsentence.

Chudhuri looks in, her expression somber behind the clear shield of her visor. “It’s time.”

• • • •

We enter the courtroom through a side door. I go first, with Jaynie behind me, and the others following in a line. According to Chudhuri’s security assessment, the chamber was hardened a few years ago to prevent transmission of radio and cell communications, leaving it isolated from the Cloud. The upgrade isn’t obvious. Gleaming maple panels line the walls, with the same wood used for all the furnishings.

The judge’s bench, with the witness stand, presides at the front of the room, against the backdrop of a high, curved wall. To the right of the bench sits the still-empty jury box. Close to the box, in front of the bar, is a small table where trial counsel wait: Major Adrienne Fong and Captain Elise Bowen, the two army officers assigned to prosecute our case. On the table in front of them are yellow legal pads and two electronic tablets.

The defendants’ table is on the left side of the room. It’s actually two long tables aligned in an L shape. Major Ogawa and my uncle Brandon Shelley stand at the end of the table closest to the center of the room. Two assistant military attorneys stand at the opposite end of the L, closest to the judge’s bench.

Behind the bar, the spectator seats are full. I see my dad in the first row, right behind the defendants’ table. He’s a handsome man, a few months shy of his fifty-third birthday, who has always been fond of dressing well. These days though, his face is gaunter than it used to be, and his hair is quickly going gray. As I file in, his gaze fixes on me, a haunted look in his eyes as if I’m already a ghost.

Shock hits as I realize who’s sitting with him: Lissa’s parents, Joe and Amy Dalgaard. I don’t want to look at them. I make myself do it anyway. I meet their eyes. I know what they’ve lost. I share the pain I see in both their faces. But they’re innocent. I’m not.

Major Ogawa signals me to stand aside, directing the others to file in behind the long defendants' table. I pull Jaynie out of the line because I want her beside me, so it's Nolan who leads the others to their seats—all but Harvey, who hangs back. With a dark look, she sends Tuttle, Flynn, and Moon ahead of her. Harvey likes to be close to the action, so she takes the seat next to Jaynie. Then it's me, and then our lead attorneys.

I sit down. I don't turn around. I'm not supposed to speak to anyone behind the bar . . . but I hear Mrs. Dalgaard's whisper, "Bring the bastards down, Jimmy. Make them pay for everything they've done, and everything they failed to do. For Lissa."

I turn to look at her, stunned to think she might be on my side. Tears shimmer in her eyes as she nods.

Under his breath, my uncle tells me, "Turn around and face the court."

I do it, just as the bailiff calls, "All rise!"

• • • •

A panel of twelve officers known as the court members files into the jury box. Colonel Susan Monteiro enters next, wearing her judge's robes. Monteiro is Caucasian, in her fifties, with a rosy flush in her cheeks and blond hair trimmed short in a feminine cut. She takes her seat behind the bench. To her right is a large American flag draped around a vertical pole. Mounted on the wall above her is a bronze medallion, three feet across, depicting an American eagle. Judge Monteiro surveys the courtroom with a congenial expression. Then she cocks her head to one side and asks the court members, "Shall we begin?"

When it's agreed we are ready to start, her gaze shifts to the table occupied by trial counsel. "Government, do you have an opening statement to present to the court?"

Major Fong stands. "Yes, Your Honor."

"Then please proceed."

Major Fong steps away from the prosecution's table. She's a woman of moderate height. Her figure reflects the gathering thickness of middle age, giving her a sturdy dignity as she turns in her immaculate Class A's to face the officers seated in the jury box.

The function of the court members is the same as that of a civilian jury: to find a verdict. They are all either majors or captains. Major Fong addresses them with an opening strike that takes me by surprise. "We are in the presence of heroes," she says in a hushed, respectful tone. She half turns, her hand palm-up in a graceful gesture that takes in me and everyone else at the defendants' table. "These seven defendants before us today—Private Mandy Flynn, Specialist Jayden Moon, Specialist Samuel Tuttle, Specialist Vanessa Harvey, Sergeant Aaron Nolan, Sergeant Jayne Vasquez, and Lieutenant James Shelley—are all heroes, rightfully honored by a grateful nation for the extent of their service and for the remarkable actions they undertook on the night of November eleventh, when this country faced a crisis the equal of any we have known in our history. Every one of them is a hero of the action at Black Cross."

She turns away from us, to address directly the panel of officers in the jury box. "It's a tragedy of human nature that heroes can sometimes become larger than life, even in their own eyes. This case does not turn on venal behavior or greed. No, it is a case founded on the arrogance of heroes who came to believe too deeply in their own righteousness.

“This is a case about what happens when good soldiers, acting on limited information, are persuaded to take the law into their own hands. We will show that they conspired together and undertook the brutal abduction and illegal incarceration of Thelma Sheridan, an American citizen neither accused nor convicted of any crime, and we will further show that in the course of this action they murdered four employees of Vanda-Sheridan, and compelled the service of Vanda-Sheridan pilot Ilima LaSalle. This was the so-called First Light mission, which took place from November eighteenth through November twentieth.

“The evidence the government intends to present will show that every one of the defendants knew without doubt the actions they took against Ms. Sheridan and her employees were illegal, that the actions of the First Light mission violated the sovereignty of the United States, and that the defendants expected to face a court-martial for their role.

“The government will also show how the actions of Colonel Steven Kendrick, now deceased, initiated the events that led to this court-martial.

“Primary among the evidence the government will present is the video library compiled by the defendants themselves, documenting the events of November eighteenth through twentieth, and turned over as evidence by defense counsel.

“Another key piece of evidence is a video deposition of Thelma Sheridan, who is prevented from acting as a witness in this court due to her continued incarceration.”

I feel Jaynie tense beside me. I turn to meet her gaze. We’re both wondering the same thing: Did trial counsel just say that Sheridan is still alive? Jaynie raises an eyebrow as if to say, Maybe, maybe, while Major Fong continues to speak:

“The government would like to note two key witnesses we’ll be calling during the proceedings.

“First, Blaise—a.k.a. Blue—Parker, presently in federal custody for his involvement in the nuclear terrorism of November eleventh. Mr. Parker will testify to events occurring at Black Cross that directly influenced the subsequent actions that concern us today.

“And another key witness is Special Agent Eve England, who will testify to discussions she held with Colonel Steven Kendrick following the events at Black Cross.

“We will also be hearing from expert witnesses, among them legal scholars testifying to the meaning and implications of a soldier’s service oath, and the limits of action inherent in that oath.

“The government is confident that after evidence is presented, you, the court members, will find that all seven defendants committed the offenses as charged.”

It is of course a kind of theater, and we are actors in a play whose script we helped to write. The evidence is already logged and reviewed. The witnesses are known, along with the testimonies they will deliver. Nothing is hidden. Nothing held back. It’s only the concluding verdict that’s unknown, and even that is fairly certain.

Major Fong nods to her co-counsel. Both seem satisfied with her presentation. She returns to her seat, while the judge’s attention shifts to Major Ogawa.

“Defense, will you present your opening statement at this time?”

“Yes, Your Honor.” Ogawa stands up, steps away from the table, and turns to the court members, this collection of officers in the jury box. He surveys them slowly. Then he says, “On the day you were inducted into the army, you took this oath: ‘I do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic.’” He turns halfway, to look at us. “Every defendant seated before you today spoke this same oath. We will show that the actions taken by the defendants during the First Light mission were taken in defense of this oath.

“We will show that the nuclear terrorism of November eleventh spawned a criminal cover-up involving both government officials and military command. The defendants, through their heroic efforts at Black Cross, were aware of legitimate evidence strongly implicating Thelma Sheridan as a primary participant in the terrorist conspiracy. Lieutenant Shelley, a dedicated soldier who has time and again risked his life in defense of his country, was left with only one way to defend his oath of office.” Ogawa nods at me, and then he points to each of my soldiers, speaking their names, “Vasquez, Harvey, Moon, Flynn, Tuttle, and Nolan. You’ve all heard of them. All of them are heroes of Black Cross whose oath of enlistment bound them to do what they did during the First Light mission. It was not a task they wanted. It was thrust upon them when individuals in authority, individuals within our government and within our command structure, abandoned their own duty to defend the Constitution of this country. First Light was a desperate attempt to secure the justice promised in our Constitution, a document that makes no allowance for exceptional privilege to the wealthy and the powerful. We will show that corruption in the ranks and in the government forced these loyal patriots to a foreign court to find the justice promised to us, but no longer available, under our constitutional system.”

What he says is true. We were forced to a foreign court, but if that foreign court allowed Thelma Sheridan to be murdered, then we will have failed to deliver her to justice—and after that, what defense do we have left?

Major Ogawa returns to his seat. I scan the panel of officers. A few faces look thoughtful, but most just present stonewall expressions. Everyone here is aware of the cameras recording these proceedings, and these officers know that both the attorneys and the media will be analyzing their facial expressions to weigh the effectiveness of the arguments. So most give away as little as they can.

The media will also be looking at us, the defendants, hunting for signs of fear, outrage, denial, approval—any hint of human emotion. And why not give them what they want? It would be the smart thing. It might get us sympathy from their audience, get the public on our side. But none of us do. It’s not our way. We listen, wearing the same emotionless expression as two-thirds of the jury.

The judge is the only one on this side of the bar who looks at ease. She weaves her fingers together, rests her chin on them, and gazes out at her courtroom. “Well. It’s nearly lunchtime. Shall we break until the afternoon?”

• • • •

Assistant trial counsel Captain Elise Bowen spends the opening hour of the afternoon session reading stipulations into the court record. These documents describe the basic sequence of events that took place during the initial hours of the First Light mission, ending at 0132 on November 19, when our C-17 lifted off from Alaska.

We have all seen the stipulations; we studied them, made our changes, and approved them weeks ago. As Bowen finishes each reading, the judge requires every defendant to stand up and verbally acknowledge that they accept these stipulations as fact, and will not contest them.

It's boring as hell, but at least we won't have to waste time and money arguing over the minutiae of the mission. At the end of it, Captain Bowen gets the bailiff to lower a projection screen from the ceiling. It's positioned behind the court clerk, to Judge Monteiro's right, which puts it at a distance from the jury box, but the screen is big, so it doesn't matter. Bowen projects an outline of the events. Then she expends another fifteen minutes going over it line by line, just to make sure everyone is clear on the sequence of our Alaskan adventurism. She reaches the last line and turns to the court. "Sixteen hours after fleeing Alaska, the C-17 arrived in contested territory on the African continent, setting down at an airport in the city of Niamey, where Thelma Sheridan was transferred into the custody of a provisional government headed by Ahab Matugo—and there she remains."

Captain Bowen really isn't much of a storyteller. She's left out all the exciting parts about our flight to Niamey. I scribble a note—What about the fighters?—and pass it to Ogawa. He looks at me like I'm a slow child who's trying his patience.

"Defense," the judge says, "I believe you have a response?"

Ogawa stands. "Yes, ma'am." He signals the bailiff, and a new chart appears on the screen. This one details the incidents that occurred during our flight. "At twelve fourteen UTC—Coordinated Universal Time—two fighter jets approached the C-17. These planes then accompanied the C-17 for many hours. We will be presenting evidence that these fighters belonged to the United States Air Force. Six and a half hours after they first approached, the pilot of one of the fighters ordered the C-17 to land. When this order was ignored, the fighters began a campaign of intimidation and harassment, endangering the lives of all those aboard the C-17, including the three civilians. The aggressive actions of the fighters culminated at two minutes after midnight, UTC, on November twentieth, when one of the planes fired a missile in what we will show to be an attempt to shoot down the unarmed C-17 along with the defendants and the civilian passengers. When this attempt failed, the air force fighters withdrew and the C-17 continued to Niamey without further incident."

I wait for him to say more, to ask the questions that are critical to our defense: Under whose command were the fighters operating? And who issued the order to shoot us down? But he's done. He returns to his seat, and the judge calls for a half-hour recess.

• • • •

The mood as we wait in the conference room is glum. "We look guilty as hell," Tuttle grumbles. "Shit, I'd convict us."

"We are guilty," Harvey snaps. "If all you're looking at is what we did, well, we fucking did it. But that's not what it's about. It's about why we had to do it."

I add, "And we get a chance to talk about that when the prosecution is done boring us with the facts everyone already knows. So when you go back in there, Tuttle, don't look like you're scared and don't look like you're worried. If we want to pull this off, we've got to believe in what we're doing."

If Matt Ransom were still alive, this little speech would have earned me an enthusiastic Hoo-yah! But the only response I get is a sort-of apology from Tuttle. "You don't have to worry about me, sir. I'll do my part."

• • • •

Back in the courtroom, lead trial counsel Fong takes over. "Your Honor," she says, facing the judge, "I

would like to enter into evidence a video deposition obtained from a witness in this case whose current circumstances do not allow her to be present.”

So our first witness is Thelma Sheridan.

I knew about the deposition, though I haven't seen it yet. I lean over, intending to whisper to Major Ogawa, but he's already on his feet, speaking my concerns. “Your Honor, the government has stated this deposition was recorded seven days ago. I ask that the government read into the court record Thelma Sheridan's current status and condition.”

Monteiro does not look like she approves of this at all. But if Sheridan is dead, it's better if the court members hear about it now, instead of at the end of our defense. “All right,” Monteiro says. She turns to Fong. “Major, are you able to satisfy this request by the defense?”

Fong says, “I'd like to request a short recess before I respond.”

“How long will you need?”

“Fifteen minutes, ma'am.”

“Granted.”

So we file out again, to sit in stony silence around the table in the conference room. When we return, Fong stands again, grim faced. “Your Honor, the government is unable to report on the current status and condition of Thelma Sheridan. We request that we be allowed to proceed with the video deposition, which has been corroborated, and already reviewed by the defense.”

“Granted,” Monteiro says. “Proceed.”

• • • •

Thelma Sheridan hasn't lost any of her ferocity. Dressed in a gray cotton smock and gray pajama pants, she's sitting on a steel chair in a concrete room with stained walls and no windows. The room's light has a yellow cast. Her chin is tucked. She looks up from under her brow line, a fighter, a cornered predator, poised to spring.

“State your name for the record,” a woman's voice says in crisp, accented English. Sheridan's lip curls as if this is something to fight over. But she complies. “Thelma Han Sheridan. I am an American citizen, the victim of a kidnapping, and I am being held illegally—”

“I remind you, Ms. Sheridan, this is a video deposition intended to cover the events of November eighteenth to twentieth. Your recorded testimony will supplement an extensive video record, and will be used in court-martial proceedings in the United States.”

“Yes, ma'am. And I would like to attend those court-martial proceedings, in person. As the victim in this crime, it's my right.”

The interrogator's voice is not British, but it reflects a British education, with every word crisply pronounced as she states in a matter-of-fact tone, “Ma'am, it is not presently possible for you to attend, as you are

engaged in your own separate legal proceeding. But the United States values your testimony. So could you please describe exactly what happened the night of November eighteenth to nineteenth.”

Sheridan’s brows are not so well groomed as they used to be, her hair has lost its shiny, metallic polish, but there is still a staggering sense of power in the way she handles herself. She settles back in her chair, squaring her shoulders, and she speaks. “On the night of November eighteenth to nineteenth, a rogue squad of United States Army soldiers, under the command of US Army lieutenant James Shelley, along with a senior officer now deceased, trespassed on my private property, kidnapped myself and two of my employees, stole a two-hundred-twenty-million-dollar transport plane, and used it to convey me halfway around the world—endangering my life multiple times during the flight—before finally delivering me here, where I have been illegally and inhumanely incarcerated ever since. I demand my immediate release and restoration to my country of origin so that I may pursue this case in person, as is my right as an American citizen.”

“Ms. Sheridan,” the interrogator says in a tone of angelic patience, “you stated ‘a rogue squad of United States Army soldiers.’ How did you arrive at this identification?”

Her smile is thin and hungry. “Lieutenant James Shelley is no stranger to me. We had met and talked before the night of the assault. I knew him by his voice, even when he was still wearing his LCS helmet.”

“LCS?”

“Linked combat squad. Cyborg soldiers. Their wiring ties them together. Where you find one, you find more than one. Lieutenant Shelley had his squad with him. He led them in a criminal enterprise. I believe that’s called undue influence?”

Harvey growls under her breath, “Because the rest of us can’t think for ourselves?”

I swear Jaynie kicks her under the table.

Discipline in my squad is definitely slipping.

• • • •

It’s late afternoon, but the judge is under orders to get this court-martial done with all possible speed, so there’s no talk of adjourning for the day. Instead, Monteiro turns to address trial counsel. “Government, are you ready to call your first witness?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Major Fong replies. “The United States calls Blaise Matthew Parker.”

For a second, I’m thinking, Who? Then I figure it out. Blue Parker, the pretty blond terrorist who blew up America. Thelma Sheridan’s fall guy.

There’s an angry murmur from the spectators as Parker is led in through a side door, a US marshal on either side of him. He’s wearing an off-white collared shirt, slacks, and dress shoes. He could be on his way to the office, except for the leg shackles and wrist cuffs.

It’s the first time I’ve seen him in person. At Black Cross, I only glimpsed him briefly through a video feed when Jaynie and Tuttle pulled him out of his spider hole. He looks different now. His head is shaved to a stubble so pale it looks white. His face is thin, bony. He stares at the floor, his lips parted like he’s

concentrating hard on every shuffling step as he makes his way to the witness stand. To me it looks like he's on his way to God, and I wonder if he's had a stroke. He pleaded guilty to the long list of charges compiled against him and is presently awaiting sentencing in federal court.

One of the marshals assists him to sit down. His blue eyes are not as bright as I remember. He glances at the judge, and then at the defendants' table, as the bailiff chants the oath. "Do you swear that the evidence you shall give in the case now in hearing shall be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?"

Blue Parker turns to the bailiff and nods. "I do, sir. So help me God and Jesus."

He sounds sincere.

Of course, he immolated an estimated ninety-three thousand people, wounded many times that number, and left the entire country in shambles. I imagine he spends a lot of time talking to God about all that.

Major Fong moves in. "For the record, you're Blaise Matthew Parker of Dallas, Texas?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"And you are currently in federal custody awaiting sentencing?"

"Yes. Yes, ma'am, I am."

"And what sentence do you expect to receive?"

"I expect to receive the death penalty, ma'am."

"Have you been offered a lesser sentence for your cooperation in testifying in this court-martial?"

"No, ma'am. I have not."

"Where were you at approximately zero four fifteen—that's four fifteen a.m. on the civilian clock—on November twelfth of this past year?"

He stares down at his hands. "I was at Black Cross, ma'am." He realizes his voice is too soft, and leans back, raising his head, speaking louder. "In the control room."

Major Fong walks back to her table, where she picks up a printed photograph. "Your Honor, the United States would move to enter prosecution exhibit thirty-seven for identification into evidence."

"May I see it, please?"

Fong crosses the floor and hands it to Monteiro, who looks at it briefly and hands it back. Fong then shows it to Blue Parker. "Have you seen this man before?"

Blue flinches back. He squeezes his eyes shut. "Yes, ma'am," he whispers. Then he repeats it louder. "Yes, I've seen him before."

"And where did you see him?"

“At Black Cross. That’s Colonel Kendrick. He was in command.”

“You mean Colonel Steven Kendrick, who was in command of the US Army soldiers who took initial custody of you at Black Cross?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Mr. Parker, did you ever see, speak with, or otherwise communicate with Colonel Kendrick at any time other than the morning of November twelfth?”

“No, ma’am.”

“And on that morning, did Colonel Kendrick question you regarding your co-conspirators in the act of nuclear terrorism to which you have already pleaded guilty?”

“Yes, ma’am. He wanted to know if Vanda-Sheridan was one of us.”

“Are you referring to the corporation Vanda-Sheridan?”

“He wanted to know if Thelma Sheridan and Carl Vanda were part of it.”

“Part of your conspiracy?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And what did you tell him?”

“I told him that . . . that Thelma Sheridan supplied the . . . the nuclear devices, but . . . I only said it because I was afraid. He said he would kill me. And I was afraid.”

FaceValue reports that he’s telling the truth, and I know he was afraid. He was fucking terrified.

Fong asks, “Were you telling the truth when you told Colonel Kendrick that Thelma Sheridan supplied the nuclear devices?”

His mouth is open; his shoulders are visibly rising and falling as he draws in shallow, shuddering breaths. FaceValue redlines him as he says, “No, ma’am. I was not telling the truth.”

“You lied to Colonel Kendrick about Thelma Sheridan’s involvement?”

“Yes, ma’am. I did. Thelma Sheridan did not supply the nuclear devices. She was not involved.”

He’s lying now.

I look at the officers in the jury box. Most of them are looking at Blue like he’s a slug they’d love to step on, but none of them are wearing farsights, and by the terms of a negotiated agreement I know that none are equipped with an overlay. So they’ve got nothing but gut feeling to go on, in deciding if he’s lying now.

“Mr. Parker, what company provided the mercenaries used by you for protection at Black Cross?”

“Uther-Fen Protective Services, ma’am.”

Fong returns to her table, picks up a paper document in a clear plastic sleeve, and returns with it to the bench. “Your Honor, the United States would move to enter prosecution exhibit forty-nine for identification into evidence.”

Exhibit 49 is a document verifying that Uther-Fen is a subsidiary of Vanda-Sheridan. It’s as if Fong is trying to make our case for us, except I know she’s not. “Mr. Parker, when you contracted Uther-Fen Protective Services to provide security at Black Cross, did you know the company was owned by Vanda-Sheridan?”

Blue is calmer this time, but he still gets redlined when he says, “No, ma’am. I did not.”

“Did you inform Uther-Fen that you intended to commit an act of terrorism?”

“No, ma’am. I did not.”

“Did you insinuate or otherwise imply to Uther-Fen that you intended to commit an illegal activity?”

“No. No, I did not. It was in the contract. They would not commit or participate in any act that violated the law.”

Fong enters yet another piece of evidence into the record: an electronic copy of the Uther-Fen contract, digitally signed by Blue Parker. “No further questions, Your Honor.”

“Cross-examination,” the judge says.

Major Ogawa is already on his feet. “Yes, ma’am. Mr. Parker, do you have any relatives who survived the assault on Black Cross?”

Parker looks at Fong. If he’s hoping she’ll object, he’s disappointed. “Yes, sir. I do, sir.”

“Could you tell us who those relatives are?”

“My wife, sir, and my two children.”

“How old are your children?”

“Garrett is four. Josh is two.”

“And where is their mother?”

“In federal prison, sir.”

“And your children? Where are they?”

“They’re with my . . . my wife’s sister.” He turns to the judge. “Do I have to say where they are?”

Monteiro tells him, “Please state what continent they’re on.”

“They’re in Europe, but they’re anonymous. People want to kill them.”

Ogawa nods. This is the testimony he was after. “Mr. Parker, did you agree to lie under oath regarding the confession you made to Colonel Kendrick, in order to protect your family from reprisals?”

Parker’s mouth opens. He looks horrified. “No, sir. I did not.”

Redline.

But hey, the man’s already murdered ninety-three thousand people. A few more lies aren’t going to make his time in Hell any worse.

“No more questions, Your Honor.”

• • • •

“Okay,” Monteiro says. “It’s now seventeen seventeen, or five seventeen p.m. on the civilian clock. Is there anything else we need to address today?”

Fong stands up. “Your Honor, the United States requests a brief eight oh two.”

There’s a whisper of surprise from the spectators behind us. I turn to my uncle. He’s already scrawling on his legal pad: 802 = conference.

“All right,” Monteiro says, though she does not look pleased. “Defense, any objection?”

“No objection, ma’am.”

“Then we will recess until seventeen thirty-five.”

After the judge and court members have left, we are escorted to our usual conference room. I’ve been sitting down all day, so while we wait, I pace back and forth. Flynn is in the bathroom, and Harvey’s waiting to take her turn. Jaynie is standing in a corner, her arms crossed, eyeing the door. Nolan, Tuttle, and Moon are dispersed around the table.

In a low voice, Tuttle says, “I felt the hair on the back of my neck stand up when they brought Parker in. Ninety-three thousand people dead. I was scared somebody in the audience would try to kill him. Set off a bomb or something.”

“Court security screens for weapons and explosives,” I say. “And after yesterday, they’re going to be extra vigilant.”

“Yes, sir.”

I reach the end of the room and start back, passing Jaynie. She’s still looking lean and muscular, despite the months spent cooped up in a tiny cell. My mind flashes back to Fort Dassari. I think about the way she looked fresh after a shower, wearing only panties and a thin T-shirt that didn’t hide much. And then I catch myself. What the fuck is wrong with me?

Flynn steps out of the bathroom. She plops down at the table next to Moon and leans against his shoulder, heaving a dramatic sigh. “I can’t fuckin’ wait to go on leave.”

“Permanent leave, probably,” Moon grumbles. He looks at me. “They’re going to kick us out of the army one way or another, aren’t they, LT? Whether we get found innocent or not?”

I turn around again. “Yes.”

“Fuck,” Flynn whispers, looking scared for the first time. “Even if we’re not guilty? How is that fair?”

It’s not about fair and I don’t bother to answer, but Moon does.

“Hey,” he says softly. “It’ll work out, one way or another.”

I’m eyeing Jaynie again, thinking about what she looks like under her Class A’s. She scowls, and for a second I feel like a kid in trouble. But she’s not looking at me. She’s looking past me, at Flynn.

I turn around to find Flynn cuddled in Moon’s arm, her upturned lips brushing his, like they’re a high school couple.

Jaynie and Nolan explode simultaneously.

“Private Flynn!”

“Specialist Moon!”

“On your feet, now!”

Chair legs screech across the floor. Both Moon and Flynn look shocked as they jump to their feet, coming to attention, their shoulders squared and their gazes fixed straight ahead.

My sergeants are responsible for immediate personnel issues, for which I am grateful because I am not in a good position to handle this one. I put on my standard-issue stonewall expression and hope no one will see through it, while Jaynie takes the floor. She steps around the table until she’s standing right beside Moon and Flynn. “You want to fuck each other?” she shouts. “Because that is some twisted shit. We are brothers- and sisters-in-arms here. Brothers and sisters! And brothers and sisters do not fuck each other! Is that understood?”

Harvey emerges from the bathroom, her lips parted in awe. The door to the hall opens at the same time and Master Sergeant Chudhuri looks in. Meanwhile, Flynn and Moon bark in unison, “Yes, sergeant!”

Moon adds, in a tone of confusion, “It was an accident, sergeant.”

“Accidents don’t happen in my squad, Moon.”

Chudhuri withdraws, closing the door again.

Poor Flynn is horrified. “What the fuck is wrong with me?” she whispers.

“There’s nothing wrong with you,” I growl.

“Lieutenant,” Jaynie snaps.

“It’s not her fault!” I tap my head, but I don’t meet her eye. “It’s all the time we spend alone in our cells.” The skullcaps and my skullnet are always working. No one talks about it much, but one effect is that we start perceiving one another as siblings. Then incest revulsion takes over and there’s not much incentive left to try to get into someone’s bed.

But it works that way only when we’re living together, training together, patrolling as a squad.

“Now that we’re aware of it,” I add, speaking half to myself, “be vigilant, and don’t let it happen again.”

We wait in guilty silence for two minutes, and then Chudhuri comes in again. “Let’s go. They want you back in court.”

“Best face forward,” I warn them. “Don’t give anything away.”

We return to our seats at the defendants’ table. When my uncle sits down next to me, I ask, “So what was the conference about?”

He leans close, as if he intends to whisper something, but he changes his mind and writes it down instead on the corner of his legal pad, in tiny black letters: Carl Vanda.

The judge sweeps in, the bailiff calls, “All rise.” We do it, though I’m still staring at that name as Monteiro takes her seat behind the bench.

As soon as we resume our seats, Jaynie reaches for the pad, dragging it closer until she can read the tiny print. Then she shoves it back like it’s toxic.

“The court is called to order,” Monteiro says brusquely, and I get the impression she’s not happy. “Government, are you ready to call your next witness?”

“Yes, Your Honor,” Major Fong says. “The United States calls Carl Reed Vanda.”

• • • •

It’s the first time I’ve ever seen him in person. He’s tall and gaunt, with buzz-cut gray hair, a scarred face like a man who’s been in knife fights, a crooked nose, and electric blue eyes so bright he has to be wearing contacts or using an artificial pigment in his irises. His shoulders are square, his back too straight—broken and reset maybe, after the plane crash in Africa less than a year ago. He walks with a slight limp, favoring his right hip.

As he takes the witness stand, he looks across the courtroom, and when he IDs me, when those blue eyes meet mine, they make a promise. They tell me they are going to watch while my world burns down around me.

I’m not sure, but I think my glare is promising him the same thing.

My uncle puts a hand on my arm. “Stop it.”

This man murdered my Lissa. Carl Vanda. He caused her death as surely as if he’d put a gun to her head and pulled the trigger himself.

“Jimmy.”

The icon in my overlay indicating activity in my skullnet is glowing in the corner of my vision, and as my skullnet coaxes my brain to pump comforting chemicals into my system, my rage becomes a colder, more patient thing. I look at my uncle.

Okay? he mouths, while Carl Vanda swears to tell the truth.

I nod.

I kidnapped Carl Vanda’s wife. Lissa is dead because of that, because of me, because I dragged her into this mess, because I wanted to slam a dragon.

Major Fong begins: “For the record, your name is Carl Reed Vanda and you are the president and owner of Uther-Fen Protective Services?”

“Yes.”

She asks him to identify and review the contract for services at Black Cross, and to affirm his acquaintance with Blue Parker. “Does the contract name specific employees who were to be assigned to Black Cross?”

“No. There’s no need. All our personnel are fully trained and licensed.”

“Did those Uther-Fen employees who worked at Black Cross speak English?”

“Yes. Not well, maybe, but adequately.”

“Did Blue Parker request that the Uther-Fen personnel assigned to him be foreign nationals with poor English skills?”

“Yes, he did. The little shit—”

“You will express yourself with decorum, Mr. Vanda,” the judge warns, “or be held in contempt.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he answers in drawn-out sarcasm. “Mr. Parker informed me the Black Cross facility was being used to develop proprietary technology and that he wanted to minimize the risk of industrial espionage.”

“Did you find such a nonspecific explanation to be suspicious?” Major Fong asks him.

“I find every one of my clients suspicious. Everyone is playing their own game.”

“But you did as you were asked, and supplied Mr. Parker with non-English speakers—”

Fong breaks off as a low buzz ignites behind me. It's coming from the spectator seats, somewhere to my left. Everyone in the courtroom turns to look, but there's nothing to see.

"Bailiff," the judge says. "Summon security now."

I'm up. I can't help it. I'm an LCS soldier, trained to think on my feet. My squad stands up too as the buzzing gains a companion sound, like the vibration of some high-speed windup toy against a wooden surface.

"What the hell?" a man shouts, cringing back against the woman seated beside him. Several other people cry out and then a mechanical bug with a cylindrical body smaller than my little finger rises on shimmering, buzzing dragonfly wings. Four limbs, needle thin and curved like pincers, hang beneath it. For a second, it hovers above the audience, pivoting to survey the room with a tiny, gleaming glass eye.

I flash on the fact that the courtroom is sealed against radio transmissions. So either the robo-bug is being controlled from within this room or the device is autonomous.

I'm betting autonomous. I'm betting a pattern-recognition program is analyzing input gathered by that glass eye.

My dad and Lissa's parents are an arm's reach away on the other side of the bar. Keeping my gaze fixed on the toy-size drone, I say, "Dad! All of you—down on the floor!"

They drop, while I reach behind me, grabbing the legal pad with Carl Vanda's name printed in the corner.

It's like the little drone was waiting for me to move. It shoots toward me, almost too fast to follow. "Fall back!" Jaynie shouts as I swat hard at it with the yellow legal pad. The pad has a big surface, but I almost miss anyway, because the robo-bug is not coming for me after all. It shoots between me and Jaynie. I barely clip it on one wing, but that's enough to unbalance it. I turn in time to see it spiral into the front of the judge's bench. There's a loud crack as it hits the wood. The buzzing stops, and it clatters against the floor.

Behind the bench, the judge is standing up, her expression furious. "No one leaves this room without my permission!" A squad of MPs pours in. She gestures at their sergeant. "Secure the public door. Assign someone to guard the witness." Then she turns to the officers in the jury box. All of them are on their feet. "Members of the court, you will form a perimeter around the spectators. See that everyone remains in their seat until they can be searched and interviewed." Master Sergeant Chudhuri appears fully rigged at the side entrance, catching the judge's angry eye. "Master Sergeant! You are the prisoner detail?"

"Yes, ma'am!"

"Ensure there is a perimeter guard, and then return the defendants to holding."

So we leave. I catch my dad's eye before we file out. He's furious with the MPs yelling, telling everybody to remain seated, to be quiet—"No talking!"—and to put their hands on their heads. But he nods at me and mouths, Be careful.

Then we're out the back door. Chudhuri doesn't bother with cuffs. Omer, Vitali, and Phelps fall in around us as we walk fast past the judges' offices. We get on the elevator and the doors close.

In a voice low with fury Jaynie says, “Goddamn it, Shelley, that bug was aimed at Carl Vanda.” And with a surreal sense of shock, I know she’s right. “They got Sheridan already, and today they came for Vanda. That bug had to be carrying a poison payload. You just fucking saved his life.”

“Quiet in the ranks, Vasquez,” Chudhuri warns.

But there isn’t anything left to say.

• • • •

Am I too paranoid?

A degree of paranoia is a healthy thing, but ever since we returned from First Light, I’ve expected to be murdered . . . assassinated might be a better word.

On Sunday, I was sure the president’s visit would be followed by a visit from his special-ops soldiers, but it didn’t happen.

On Monday, I never questioned that the mercenaries who came after us had come to kill me, but I was wrong.

Today, I was certain the toy drone was aimed at me because I’ve come to think of what’s going on around me as my story—but there are a lot of stories, there are factions in this drama that I’m not even aware of. One of those factions tried to murder Carl Vanda today. It would have been a public service, but I got in the way.

I wonder that the Red didn’t warn me. It’s not on my side, I know that. And it’s not always present. It’s operating around the world, allocating resources to affect the lives of millions, maybe billions, hooking in at critical moments and then disappearing again.

If the Red had hooked into my head before I reentered the courtroom, if it had given me just a hint, a suggestion to stay the fuck out of the action, then Carl Vanda would be dead now.

But I sensed nothing. It’s been months since the Red was last inside my head, steering me, offering me guidance. All that’s left is the automated nightly upload of my experiences. I’ve been left on my own. I need to accept that it’s going to be that way.

And yeah, when it comes to Carl Vanda, I’m okay with murder. A surviving whisper of conscience tries to make me squirm. It doesn’t work.

• • • •

In the morning, Major Ogawa brings the news that no one was arrested for launching the robo-bug. “No one got into that room without a background check, a full-body scan, and a reason for being there. Afterward, everyone was searched again, and interviewed, but emotional analysis couldn’t pick out a suspect.”

We’re in the cellblock. It’s early, and no one is in their Class A’s yet, but at the major’s request Chudhuri has opened all the cell doors so we can assemble to hear what he has to say.

“So someone planted the device,” I say. “Meaning whoever it was, they knew Vanda would be there, even though he was a last-minute witness.”

Ogawa doesn’t agree with me. “They only had to guess he might be there. A microdrone is like a land mine—a cheap and easy weapon. Even something as complex as the robo-bug couldn’t have cost more than a few thousand dollars in parts. Make it look like a tube of lipstick or an insulin monitor, drop it in someone’s pocket or purse—potentially very effective.”

There’s a derisive snort from Nolan. Harvey chuckles. Jaynie just crosses her arms and glares at me. Sure—the robo-bug might have been effective if I hadn’t gotten in the way.

Moving on to other things, I ask, “Are we on today?”

“Oh nine hundred. Judge Monteiro wants this circus over.”

“And Vanda? Is he going to finish testifying?”

“My guess? We won’t see him again. Fong put him on the stand as a stunt, but it was a mistake. He doesn’t play well with others. But we’ll find out for sure when court’s in session.”

Flynn is still dressed in only shorts and a T-shirt when she stands on her toes to see past Nolan’s shoulder. “When do we get to tell our side?” she asks.

“Friday, if we’re lucky. Otherwise, next week.”

“I fucking want this to be over. I swear I’m going to kill somebody if I don’t get laid.”

• • • •

Ogawa is right. Carl Vanda does not reappear in court, and the judge strikes his prior testimony.

Despite yesterday’s security breach, the spectator seats are full. I don’t see Lissa’s parents, but my dad is there, right behind the defendants’ table. He’s sitting next to a fiftysomething woman who looks like an older, darker-skinned version of Harvey—if Harvey were to put on thirty pounds, grow out her hair, and style it in a neat perm. When Harvey nods to her, I know it’s her mother, come down from Pittsburgh.

The morning discussion turns to skullcaps and the neural enhancements of LCS soldiers. Before the weekend, trial counsel was willing to let us argue that the skullcaps interfered with our mental processes to the extent that we could not be held responsible for our actions. That story has changed. Three expert witnesses do their best to portray us as efficient, rational soldiers, fully responsible for the decisions we make. Ogawa asks a few questions on cross, all aimed at enforcing this conclusion.

So by the end of the morning session on day two, we have conceded that we did what we are accused of doing and that we were responsible for our actions.

This has to be the easiest case Major Fong has ever prosecuted.

• • • •

The afternoon is more interesting.

On the witness stand is General Brittney Ahmet, a two-star in the Pentagon's intelligence hierarchy. She's tall—over six feet—and rail thin, with steel-gray hair, dark eyes, and a grim expression.

Major Fong presents to the judge a paper document in a plastic sleeve. "Your Honor, the United States moves to enter prosecution exhibit fifty-six for identification into evidence."

"Prosecution exhibit fifty-six for identification is admitted."

Fong shows the document to General Ahmet. "Could you tell us what this is?"

"It's a printed facsimile of a classification report."

"Could you explain what that means?"

"Yes. When a document is designated as classified national security information, a report is issued indicating the classification level of that document, the reason for classification, and the duration of that status. The report takes the form of an electronic document, but it can be rendered in hard copy, as in this case."

"And who prepared this classification report?"

"I did."

"And what document does this classification report refer to?"

"I cannot name the document or its author in open court, but in a general sense it's a document describing preliminary findings at Black Cross."

"According to your classification report, you designated this document as top secret, is that correct?"

"Yes."

"Why top secret?"

"As stated in the classification report, the document includes facts and information that already carry a top secret classification. In addition, much of the evidence cited in the document is uncorroborated, and may well have been misinterpreted. As I said, this was a preliminary document, and as such it contained extensive errors. I determined that the release of such sensitive misinformation would create a serious security breach."

"General Ahmet, did you classify this document as top secret to conceal a violation of the law?"

"I did not."

"Did you classify this document as top secret to prevent embarrassment to a person or organization?"

"No, ma'am, I did not. I classified the document as top secret for reasons of national security, and for those reasons alone."

Major Ogawa undertakes his cross-examination, polite as always, but he shows no sign of being intimidated by the rank of the witness. “General Ahmet, what led you to conclude the document contained extensive errors?”

“I am not at liberty to talk about that, Major.”

“Did you arrive at this decision on your own, or were you advised that the document contained errors?”

“Again, Major, I am not at liberty to discuss classified matters.”

Major Ogawa turns to the judge. “Your Honor, the role of the chain of command is material to our defense. With all due respect to General Ahmet, the statement that the document ‘contained extensive errors’ is insufficient without some indication of how that conclusion was reached.”

To her credit, Monteiro accepts this argument with a nod. “General Ahmet, please answer Major Ogawa’s question. Were you advised the document contained errors?”

The general scowls. Maybe she’s thinking she doesn’t want to take this all on her own shoulders, because she concedes to Monteiro’s request. “Yes, Your Honor. I was advised of that fact.”

“Thank you, General.”

Ogawa is too smart to gloat. Keeping his expression carefully neutral, he asks, “Who advised you that the document contained extensive errors?”

“I am not at liberty to reveal that.”

Ogawa turns again to the judge. This time Monteiro punts. “I’m not going to compel an answer at this time. You may call the witness again on defense, and we’ll decide at that time if there is sufficient cause to conduct a closed session.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Ogawa says. “Thank you, General. No more questions.”

• • • •

“The United States calls Special Agent Eve England.”

I know her name from the witness list: the FBI agent who conducted the initial investigation of Black Cross. She looks to be in her early thirties. The business suit she wears—charcoal slacks and coat—is fitted perfectly to her lean, athletic figure. She pauses as she enters, her gaze surveying the courtroom, lingering on those of us occupying the defendants’ table. She looks to be of pure European descent, her fair skin lightly freckled and her dark-red hair smoothed and confined in a short ponytail.

Eve England was Kendrick’s contact in the FBI, the agent who warned him that all evidence pointing to Thelma Sheridan had been locked up in a top secret file.

Kendrick knew her. How? Did he use his network of contacts to get in touch with her? Or did he know her already? Was she—is she—part of the organization, that network of anonymous conspirators who planned and financed the First Light mission carried out by my squad?

Kendrick told me almost nothing about the organization. I don't blame him for that. He knew the Red was inside my head and that no secret was safe with me. I wish like hell he were still with us, though. He knew about a hundred times what I know about people, about how power is distributed, about who gives a shit for their oath of office and who's just playing the power game to climb up over the fallen bodies and get above the blood.

Eve England is a witness for the prosecution. I wonder what Kendrick would have made of that.

• • • •

"Special Agent England," Major Fong says, "could you please describe your role at Black Cross?"

"I was never at Black Cross, ma'am." Her voice is low and smooth, each word crisply pronounced. "Army Intelligence did the initial on-scene investigation at Black Cross. My assignment was to inventory the evidence for the FBI case file."

"And where did you perform this function?"

"At a secure facility outside of San Antonio, ma'am."

"What sort of evidence did you have access to? That is, what form was this evidence in?"

"The evidence included documents, photos, audio recordings, and video, including video interviews of survivors. Fingerprints. Biological samples of the deceased. Air samples. Weapon inventories—"

"Is it fair to say there was an overwhelming amount of potential evidence collected at Black Cross?"

"No, ma'am. A large amount of evidence was collected, but I would not describe it as overwhelming."

"What was your relationship with Colonel Steven Kendrick?"

"Colonel Kendrick visited my work site on November fourteenth. He had full security clearance, and I was told by my supervisor to answer his questions. He wanted to hear my interpretation of the events leading up to the nuclear terrorism of November eleventh, based on the evidence I'd been examining. I provided him with a verbal summary, and on November fifteenth, I used a secure connection to transfer to him a preliminary report packaging key digital evidence, interviews, and my conclusions based on the same."

"Were you aware, Ms. England, that other investigations relating to November eleventh were under way?"

"Yes, ma'am, of course I was aware of this."

"Was this 'preliminary report' you provided to Colonel Kendrick a sufficient explanation of the events leading to November eleventh?"

"Sufficient, ma'am?"

"Sufficient to prove the guilt of the involved parties, Ms. England. Did this report include evidence to prove without doubt the identities and the roles of those who participated in the terrorism of November eleventh, evidence so profound there was no possibility of your conclusions being contraindicated by further evidence

that might have come to light by virtue of any of the hundreds of other ongoing investigations?”

England lowers her chin. She leans forward, just a little. “I felt that to be the case, ma’am.”

Eve England does not rattle easily, a fact that has Fong deeply annoyed. She paces a few steps away, then turns and asks, “What is your current status with the FBI?”

“I’m presently suspended from duty, pending a dismissal hearing.”

“Why is the FBI seeking to dismiss you?”

“My supervisor feels I overstepped my authority when I provided the requested report to Colonel Kendrick.”

When the judge invites a cross-examination, Major Ogawa is so eager he springs up, stalking to the center of the floor. “Ms. England, did you inform your supervisor that Colonel Kendrick had requested this report?”

Her pale lips turn in a slight smile. “Not immediately, sir.”

“Could you explain that?”

“I compiled the evidence package for Colonel Kendrick. I began working on it shortly after he left, and worked overnight. At oh four fifty-two on November fifteenth, I transmitted the report to a secure digital locker that could be accessed only by myself and Colonel Kendrick. I spoke to my supervisor later that morning. That’s when I informed him of the report. He indicated by his reaction that he was furious. He told me he had only just received a warning that much of the evidence gathered at Black Cross had been falsified.”

“Did he say what form this warning came in, or who it came from?”

“No, sir. He refused to provide me any further information.”

“What happened after that?”

“I was immediately suspended, my security credentials were deleted, and I was escorted from the facility.”

“The report, which you left in a ‘secure digital locker.’ What became of it?”

“I do not have direct knowledge of that since I was no longer able to access the user log.”

“But Colonel Kendrick would still have had access to the report?”

“I believe that to be the case, sir.”

“Thank you, Ms. England.”

Her gaze turns again in my direction, though whether she’s angry or just curious, I can’t tell. Emotional analysis indicates it might be both.

Of course, Kendrick did retrieve the evidence package she prepared for him. He sent it to Ahab Matugo, to

be used in the trial of Thelma Sheridan, a trial that it now seems will never happen, making Eve England just another meaningless casualty in a covert war to limit the political fallout of November 11.

• • • •

It's early evening. I'm sitting on the bunk in my cell, thinking about Eve England and what she knows, and hoping no one is gunning for her, when the cell door unlocks, popping a few inches open. I lean down to retrieve from the floor the packaging from my recently completed dinner, expecting that one of the MPs has come to collect it. But it's my uncle who appears on the other side of the glass, still dressed in the suit he wore in court.

He crooks a finger at me to come out, barely pausing as he strides down the cellblock. I leave the trash where it is and go to the door, pushing it wider. All the other doors are open. Nolan, Moon, Tuttle: They all lean cautiously out of their cells to look around. And then, as my uncle beckons them, Harvey, Flynn, and Jaynie emerge as well. He turns around to head back up the cellblock. He's not smiling exactly, but his expression suggests vindication: the look of a warrior who has won a hard-fought victory.

"There's news," he announces. "It doesn't pertain directly to your case and maybe it doesn't mean a thing, but you wanted to arouse people's passions. You wanted to force questions to be asked. You wanted to trigger official inquiries. Well, congratulations, you've had your first victory. Minutes ago, in a joint news conference with the president, the attorney general announced she is looking into the handling of evidence in the Black Cross investigation, to determine whether that evidence was tampered with, falsified, or manipulated to protect the identities of some of the conspirators. Whether it will be an honest and legitimate investigation, only time will tell—but it's a start."

It takes a few seconds to process what he's just said, then I catch Jaynie's eye and we trade a grin. "Hoo-yah!" Flynn shouts, like she's channeling Ransom, and the rest of us echo the cheer, "Hoo-yah!"

Uncle Brandon tells us there's been cheering out on the National Mall too. That around four hundred thousand people are out there, demanding the same thing we're demanding—a full and honest accounting. I imagine the misery they've endured in this protest: the lack of toilets, showers, food, and adequate transportation; the risks to their safety from crime, from terrorism, or from overzealous law enforcement. But they stayed on the Mall, in enough numbers to frighten the president into action. This is their victory.

• • • •

In the courtroom, no one acknowledges the shift in policy.

Day three extends our legal education as Major Fong calls expert witnesses to the stand to lecture the panel of officers in the jury box on the meaning of their sworn duty as members of the United States military, discussing the implication of the oath of office required of every officer, and the oath of enlistment which binds the soldiers under their command.

The last witness is an academic, a bearded professor steeped in political science, dressed in an expensive suit my dad would admire, with gold cuff links because he can. He speaks to the court with the assurance of a man accustomed to being listened to:

"Huge responsibilities are placed on our soldiers. It's their everyday duty to safeguard the deadliest technologies known to humanity. Every day, they have within their reach weapons that could destroy cities,

countries, the very Earth on which all our lives depend—but we trust them with this duty because they are loyal to the chain of command.

“We do not grant to individual soldiers the right to decide when to attack—when tanks should roll through a city, when artillery bombardments should commence, when a nuclear missile should be launched. Such decisions must descend through the chain of command.

“When a soldier steps outside the chain of command to take vigilante action based on limited knowledge, that soldier is in violation of the law. When a soldier colludes with a foreign power to subvert lawful orders issued by superiors, that soldier is in violation of the law, and is guilty of treason besides. There are legal means for soldiers to voice their objection to policies. Vigilante action is not one of those means.”

On cross, Major Ogawa looks thoughtful. “Sir, I believe you’ve served as an expert witness before the United States Senate, where you testified concerning the conflict in Bolivia and recommended that the United States enter into that conflict.”

“Strategic needs demanded it.”

“And I believe you testified later that US military intervention in the Sahel was demanded for humanitarian reasons.”

“That is still the case. This cease-fire will not hold.”

“I believe you occupy an endowed chair at your university. Where does that endowment come from?”

“I don’t know what this has to do with my academic opinion.”

“Please answer the question, sir. Where does the endowment come from?”

“The endowment is provided by Niall and Jenkins.”

“And what business is Niall and Jenkins engaged in?”

“It’s a think tank concerned with defense issues.”

“And is it also a lobbying firm?”

“I am not sufficiently familiar with all of Niall and Jenkins’s business activities to be able to answer that question.”

Ogawa nods. “Thank you. No more questions.”

Major Fong has no more witnesses. The prosecution rests, and we break for lunch. It’s only Thursday, but in the afternoon session, Major Ogawa begins our defense by calling his first witness: me.

• • • •

“Lieutenant Shelley, on November eighteenth through twentieth you participated in the abduction of Thelma Sheridan, delivering her, an American citizen, into the hands of a foreign power. Is that correct?”

“Yes, sir. It is.”

“Why did you believe this course of action necessary?”

“When we stormed Black Cross, we took Blue Parker prisoner. We learned from him that Thelma Sheridan was a central figure in the Coma Day conspiracy and that she had provided the INDs—”

“INDs?” Ogawa asks me.

“The improvised nuclear devices used to immolate and injure—”

“Objection,” Major Fong says as she stands.

I keep speaking. “—hundreds of thousands of people and bring down the communications structure of the United States—”

“Objection!”

The judge just wants to get this over with. “Overruled.”

I continue. “No charges were brought against Thelma Sheridan. She was never detained. She was never officially under suspicion. It was a whitewash. A cover-up by a corrupt command and political structure determined to protect the individual who had long been their patron—”

“Your Honor! This is hearsay. This is gossip. The witness does not have personal knowledge of the relationship between Thelma Sheridan and unnamed elements of the command structure.”

“They’re unnamed,” I counter, “because no one has the guts to name them, or investigate who they are.”

“Your Honor!”

“Major Fong,” the judge says in a tired voice, “the lieutenant is testifying as to his motivations. His beliefs are key to answering this question, whether or not they are based in fact. Please let him continue. There will be time later to dissect the validity of his beliefs—if you should wish to dive deeper into that line of argument.”

The way she says it: like she’s daring Fong to do it, to expand the scope of our case, to compel witnesses to name those who relayed the order for silence, and to trace that order to its source.

I swear Fong looks wistful, like she’s thinking about it, about what it would be like to shine a light into the shadows, about what it would be like to be the knight in shining armor, facing down a dragon. “Yes, ma’am,” she says softly, and she returns to her seat.

I turn again to the jury box and I try to explain to my fellow officers why we did what we did. “We knew the truth. But as the days passed it became clear Thelma Sheridan had used her influence to buy off an investigation, to buy innocence, to buy clean hands. We knew she was guilty of mass murder and insurrection, we had seen the evidence, but no one in authority gave a damn—”

“Lieutenant Shelley,” the judge warns, “you will conduct yourself with decorum when you are inside my

courtroom.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I turn again to the jury box. “Silence is consent. We could have done nothing. We could have cooperated in the silence. But then we would have been just as guilty as those involved in the conspiracy to protect Thelma Sheridan. It was our duty to defend the Constitution of the United States. The only way we could do that was to step outside the chain of command and seek justice where we could, and that is what we did.”

My uncle calls it true-believer shit.

So fuck me. I do believe it.

• • • •

Major Fong isn’t done with me, though. When her turn comes to cross-examine, she is in control.

“Lieutenant Shelley, we have heard testimony from Special Agent Eve England and from General Brittney Ahmet regarding a document that ostensibly links Thelma Sheridan to the nuclear terrorism of November eleventh, but for reasons of national security, this document has not been introduced into evidence. I would ask if you, personally, have seen this document?”

“No. I have not.”

“Were you aware of its existence before you undertook the First Light mission?”

“Yes. Colonel Kendrick told me about it. He said the evidence it contained was incontrovertible.”

“Did he offer you proof of that? Did he share the contents of this document with you?”

“No. I didn’t ask to see it. There wasn’t time.”

“Because you were deploying immediately on the First Light mission?”

I hesitate, realizing what’s coming.

“When did Colonel Kendrick inform you of the existence of this document, Lieutenant Shelley?”

“On November seventeenth, after he picked me up from Kelly Army Medical Center.”

“And what time was this?”

“It was around noon.”

“Your Honor, I would introduce into evidence exhibit sixty-nine, a certification from Kelly AMC showing that the lieutenant checked out at eleven forty-eight.” She turns back to me. “At what time did Colonel Kendrick inform you of this document?”

“A few minutes after he picked me up. We talked in the car.”

“So you had roughly twelve hours from the time you knew of this document’s existence to the time you

deployed, yet you never asked to see the evidence of Thelma Sheridan's guilt for yourself?"

I'm in full stonewall mode and I answer like a robot. "I did not ask to see it, ma'am."

"Was this because, on the night Mr. Parker was taken into custody at Black Cross, you yourself heard his allegations against Thelma Sheridan, and you found his statements a sufficient basis for your actions?"

"That is not the reason, ma'am."

"Lieutenant Shelley, were you even present when Blue Parker made his allegations?"

"No, ma'am."

"So how did you learn of them?"

"Colonel Kendrick told me."

"Lieutenant, what were you doing during the approximately twelve hours that elapsed between the time Colonel Kendrick told you of this document's existence and the time that you deployed with him on the First Light mission?"

"I was with my girlfriend, ma'am. Lissa Dalgaard. I knew I might never see her again, and I was right—"

"Twelve hours, Lieutenant! And not once did you try to verify the evidence against Thelma Sheridan. You wanted to believe her guilty. You didn't ask to see the document because you didn't want to risk even an iota of doubt on your next heroic adventure. Isn't that true, Lieutenant?"

"No, that is not true—"

"Thank you, Lieutenant Shelley. I'm done."

Major Ogawa isn't. On redirect, he says, "Why didn't you ask to see the document, Lieutenant?"

"I didn't need to, sir. Colonel Kendrick was my commanding officer. We went through Black Cross together. I trusted him, and that trust was not misplaced. The evidence contained in that document was sufficient to convince an international court to accept the case. It would have been sufficient to convince any American court to accept the case—but no American court was ever going to be allowed to hear it."

• • • •

Through the afternoon, the court hears the story of each member of the Apocalypse Squad. They discuss the basis for their actions and their motivations. No one shows any doubt or regret for what we did. Flynn goes last, and by the time she's on the stand, the sincerity of her testimony is making my skin crawl. Even to my sympathetic ears, every one of us sounds like a brainwashed robo-soldier in thrall to Kendrick's cult of personality. True believers, all of us.

It doesn't mean we were wrong.

• • • •

On Friday morning we dress for court, but Master Sergeant Chudhuri lets us know there's a delay. We stay in our cells. It's 1113 when we're finally escorted upstairs. We're brought to the conference room, where we take seats around the table. A few minutes later Major Ogawa comes in, closing the door behind him.

"Is there a problem?" I ask him.

"No." He paces the length of the room, a picture of pent-up aggression. "Trial counsel tried to get our next two witnesses removed from the witness list, on the grounds that their testimony was not relevant to the issue being considered, that is, your guilt or innocence. We argued to the contrary, that their participation in the events of November nineteenth and twentieth offers clear proof of collusion between the chain of command and Vanda-Sheridan."

I realize who the next two witnesses must be. "The fighter pilots. The ones who tried to shoot us down . . . on the orders of a mercenary."

Ogawa nods. "The judge denied the motion of trial counsel. We get to talk to them this afternoon."

• • • •

Captain Aaron Gilroy, United States Air Force, is sworn in first. He's midthirties, Caucasian, with a husky build, blond stubble on his scalp. Like most of the officers in the jury box and everyone at the defendants' table, he wears a well-polished stonewall expression.

Major Ogawa asks a few questions to establish Captain Gilroy's identity and credentials. Then he asks, "As November twentieth began you were engaged in an action off the West African coast, is that correct?"

"Yes, Major. The action was part of an ongoing mission. I'd been shadowing a C-17 for many hours, specifically Vanda-Sheridan Globemaster Eight-Seven-Z."

"Who assigned this mission to you, Captain?"

"My commanding officer, sir."

"And what were your orders?"

"My orders were revised several times during the mission. Initially, I was to escort the flight and protect it from foreign aggression. Later, I was to persuade the pilot of the C-17 to land at a secure base."

"Did your persuasion work, Captain?"

"No, sir, it did not."

"At what point did your command issue an order to shoot down the plane?"

"My command did not issue that order, sir. The order came from another combatant. I was told by my command to fire on his order."

"Did you know who this combatant was?"

“I did not. Identification was by code. I assumed he was special ops.”

“What happened when you fired the missile, Captain Gilroy?”

“Interference from a foreign fighter drew the missile away from the C-17. Subsequently, the missile’s guidance system locked on to a civilian jet. The jet was destroyed, and all aboard killed.”

He says it in a voice devoid of emotion, but there is a tightness in his face, a hollow look to his eyes, a hard set to his mouth, that hint at masked emotions: Guilt maybe? Anger? A sense of shame? A sense of betrayal? I want to believe it. Captain Gilroy launched the missile that took Lissa’s life away. I want him to hate that fact. I want him to know he was used.

Later, Major Ogawa uses the video record to establish that the “special ops” soldier was in truth a mercenary hired by Vanda-Sheridan. The skullnet icon glows in my overlay as I listen again to the merc’s mellow, confident voice speaking poison:

“Ah, Lissa. Your Jimmy doesn’t love you as much as we thought. I think it’s the wiring that gives him a stone-cold heart.”

Maybe it is.

Fuck me, anyway.

• • • •

After that there’s a short recess during which the attorneys consult with the judge. Then Monteiro addresses the jury. “If you’re paying attention, you will be asking yourselves who issued the order compelling Captain Gilroy to take instruction from a third party outside the chain of command. That question is beyond the scope of this court-martial and will be taken up in a separate procedure. You need only consider whether the defense has indeed proved that the chain of command directing the actions of Captain Gilroy was compromised, and how that relates to the argument being made by the defense.”

We hear the same story from the second pilot. By then it’s late, and I expect the judge to dismiss us for the weekend—two more days locked up alone in my cell—but I underestimate the fortitude of Judge Monteiro.

“These are unusual times and they call for unusual measures,” she says. “We will meet tomorrow in a Saturday session. Defense, I trust you will be able to complete your presentation within the morning session?”

Ogawa looks startled. “One moment, Your Honor.” He consults his tablet, then gets a worried nod from my uncle. “Yes, Your Honor. That should work.”

“Then we will hear closing arguments in the afternoon. Is that satisfactory?”

The attorneys seem stunned, but they agree. We finish tomorrow.

• • • •

That night I lie awake in my bunk, the dim red glow of the cellblock’s nocturnal illumination limning the

concrete walls and I wonder:

Have we done what we intended? Have we shed a bright enough light on the corruption and the collusion that protected Thelma Sheridan, enough to provoke additional investigations, legitimate investigations that won't get buried?

Maybe.

The attorney general has made promises.

Judge Monteiro has implied there will be an investigation into the origin of Captain Gilroy's orders.

But will anyone ever be called to account? Has anything really changed?

People have to give a shit, or it won't matter.

I'm thinking it won't matter.

If Thelma Sheridan really is dead in a third-world prison the evidence against her will likely never come to light, and the collective memory of this incident will be overwritten by a new scandal or an engineered act of terrorism so that when further investigations go unfunded, no one will notice.

No one will be held accountable.

Same old story.

• • • •

Saturday morning begins with expert testimony filling in details on our case; it ends with legal scholars trying to legitimize what we did.

Honestly, their arguments don't convince even me.

• • • •

Monteiro calls an extended lunch recess. We won't reconvene until 1400. Chudhuri feels more secure with us in the cellblock than on the fourth floor, so after consulting with Guidance, she decides to take us downstairs. Handcuffs go on, and then we form up as always with Chudhuri, Omer, Vitali, and Phelps surrounding us. We march quickly and quietly down the restricted hallway past the judges' offices. I long for one of those office doors to open so I can steal another glance through the tall windows, glimpse the world outside: the Mall, the Capitol Building.

It doesn't happen. We reach the waiting elevator, step aboard, and about-face. The doors are closing when my uncle appears at the opposite end of the hallway. "Master Sergeant Chudhuri!" he calls in an eager undertone as he hurries toward us. "Hold up! Hold the elevator."

Chudhuri puts out an arm to block the doors from closing, but she's on edge. Anything out of the ordinary is cause for suspicion. "Omer. Vitali. Step outside. Cover the corridor."

They do so, flanking the elevator doors. Their sidearms are not drawn, but their hands rest on their pistols. “Mr. Shelley,” Chudhuri says in a cold command voice, “please halt where you are. Do not approach.”

I do not need to end this week by seeing my uncle gunned down in a courthouse hallway. “Master Sergeant! He’s our attorney, not our enemy.”

She ignores me.

Some thirty feet from the elevator my uncle stops, looking confused, then concerned, then annoyed. He’s never been an easy man to intimidate. “Jimmy, we’ve got news. We want everyone back in the conference room. Major Ogawa’s orders.”

“I need to confirm those orders, sir,” Chudhuri says. Then I hear her murmuring to her handler. “What the hell is going on? What happened to procedure? Goddamn, yes, I understand!

“Forward!” she snaps. “We are to return to the conference room.”

• • • •

Major Ogawa is stalking back and forth outside the conference room as he waits for us to file in. “Get those handcuffs off,” he orders Chudhuri.

We take seats. Feeling protective, I sit beside my uncle. “What’s going on?” I whisper to him.

He nods to Ogawa as the major enters. “Good news.”

Ogawa moves to the head of the table. Still standing, he says, “Command has issued an official confirmation: Thelma Sheridan is alive.”

There’s a general sigh of relief; smiles flash around the table. I’m the only one who’s worried. “Is she still in custody? Is she still in Niamey?”

“Roger that.”

It’s my turn to sigh and shake my head, while my uncle claps me on the shoulder. “Take it easy, Jimmy. I told you it’s good news.”

“So what’s the background? What happened?”

Major Ogawa answers. “There was an attempted coup in Niamey. I imagine Command has been aware of it all week but they’ve kept it quiet. The bulletin they finally released today implies there was some local collusion, but the coup was staged primarily with foreign mercenaries, using foreign funding. During the initial stage of the incident there was an assault on the prison where Thelma Sheridan was being held, and the rumor that got out was that she’d been killed. Maybe Command knew differently. We’ll never know. But the loyalists must have been better organized than the mercs anticipated, because the coup was put down and all participants killed or arrested within twelve hours. Since then, Matugo has reassessed his command structure.”

“And Sheridan?” Jaynie asks. “What’s her condition? Is she still going to trial?”

“The bulletin notes that during the prison assault she tried to escape—”

“So the coup was a cover?” Harvey blurts out. “Vanda staged it, didn’t he? To get her out of there?”

Ogawa scowls at the interruption. “I do not have that information, Specialist.” Then he cracks a cold smile. “Though it sounds like plausible speculation to me.”

“What’s her condition?” Jaynie repeats. “Is she wounded?”

“Bruising and indication of some rough handling according to the official bulletin. A French diplomat was allowed to see her and confirms she is alive and fit and able to stand trial. Despite the week’s drama, Matugo is determined to go ahead, and an international panel of judges has agreed to assemble on Monday to begin hearing the case.”

“Hoo-yah!”

The yell goes up with no one coordinating it.

Thelma Sheridan will get her trial after all, and the evidence implicating her will no longer be hidden safely away behind a top secret designation.

• • • •

As soon as Judge Monteiro calls the court back into session, Major Ogawa is on his feet. “Your Honor, additional information has come to light that would answer an inquiry lodged earlier in this proceeding by the defense. We would like to request that the government provide that information now for the court record.”

The lines to be spoken by counsel and by the judge were predetermined in conference. It’s now Judge Monteiro’s turn to speak her part. “Please state for the record the details of your request.”

“Defense requests that the government read into the court record Thelma Sheridan’s current status and condition.”

Fong has the document on her table. Defense and trial counsel affirm they have reviewed and approved this newest piece of evidence; it’s logged into the record. Then Fong reads aloud the bulletin issued by Command, and it’s done.

Closing arguments follow. They are passionate, but the faces of the twelve officers in the jury box give nothing away. By 1450 we have retired to our conference room to await their verdict.

• • • •

For the first half hour it’s all restless motion. Nolan brews coffee that no one drinks. We take turns in the bathroom. I pace, until Jaynie tells me to please sit the fuck down. We all wind up around the table. Harvey tries to crack a few jokes—gallows humor—but it cuts too close to the bone and she gives it up. By the end of the first hour we sit in frozen silence, hollowed out by a fear we’re pretending not to feel.

This waiting is worse than any mission we’ve been on. My skullnet icon flickers faintly. I scowl at it, and

feel a childish pride when it fades away again, pleased I am handling this on my own.

Thirty more minutes creep past. Then the door opens. Chudhuri leans in. “They want you back in the courtroom.”

My heart hammers and I stand up too quickly; the chair legs scrape. I gesture at Chudhuri, palm out. “Give us one minute.”

She nods behind her transparent visor—“One minute, sir”—steps back and closes the door.

I turn to my soldiers, still seated around the table. They’re silent, watching me with anxious eyes. What can I tell them? We’re about to go over a cliff and there’s nothing I can do about it.

I try to find words anyway. I hope they mean something. “I want you all to remember that we came back from Niamey for a reason. We could have stayed there, been granted asylum, made a new life, but we chose to come back, not because we expected to be rewarded, but because it was our duty.

“No matter what happens in that courtroom, no matter what the verdict is, know that we did the right thing when we returned home. Be proud of that, today and afterward, no matter what follows.”

Nolan stands, straightens his uniform. “Roger that, LT,” he says in a somber voice. Tuttle echoes him while the rest of the squad rises to their feet. Moon and Flynn both look scared, but they murmur, “Yes, sir.” And then, to my shock, Harvey steps back from the table, squares her shoulders, and offers a respectful salute. “It’s been an honor, sir.”

I return the courtesy.

Then I notice Jaynie watching me with her thoughtful gaze. “Strange, isn’t it?” she says. “That the Red was never part of this trial, never mentioned in any of the arguments?”

“It’s not so strange. They had Colonel Kendrick to blame. Why complicate things by introducing the Red?”

“So you think it’s still out there?”

“I know it is, Jaynie. It’s not going away.”

“I hope to prove you wrong on that, sir, but however it turns out, we did what we had to do.” She snaps off her own salute. “No regrets.”

In a resigned murmur, the sentiment is repeated by everyone but me: “No regrets.”

No regrets.

I turn and open the door. Chudhuri is standing just outside, her back to the wall, looking invulnerable in her armor and bones, but when she turns her head to look at me, the face behind her visor is wearing an anxious expression.

“Thank you for the time, Master Sergeant. We’re ready to go.”

• • • •

My dad is there in the first row, as he's been every day. Sitting beside him is Harvey's mom from Pittsburgh. We file around the defendants' table and take our seats, only to rise again as the judge comes in, and then the panel of officers charged with bringing in a verdict in our case.

I study their faces as they file into the jury box. I see ambivalence, resentment, a lingering anger. They won't look at one another or at us.

We are allowed to sit, and then Judge Monteiro addresses the officers. "Have the court members reached findings on each charge and specification before them?"

A major, seated in the corner of the jury box closest to the judge, stands up. "We have, Your Honor."

"Are you ready to read your findings to the court?"

"Yes, Your Honor. I am."

"Accused and counsel, please rise."

There is a shuffling sound as we all stand. Otherwise the courtroom is eerily quiet, despite the number of people present.

The major reads from a tablet that he holds in his hands:

"We find that Lieutenant James Shelley did, on November eighteenth through November twentieth, participate in a conspiracy to kidnap Thelma Sheridan, and that this conspiracy was illegal."

A strange, startled chorus of soft exclamations ignites behind me. Some of the voices are triumphant, others are pitched in clichéd despair. All of them annoy me. There is no cause for outcry or surprise. My dad knows this. He remains utterly quiet as the major hammers the nails in:

"The facts of the case having been stipulated by the defendant, we therefore find Lieutenant Shelley guilty under Article Eighty-One, conspiracy; and guilty under Article One oh Eight, destruction of military property; and guilty of four counts of murder under Article One Eighteen, Part Three, an act inherently dangerous to another; and guilty under Article One Twenty-Two of robbery in the presence of the victim, with force or violence, in an amount exceeding two hundred twenty million dollars; and guilty under Article One Twenty-Eight of twelve counts of aggravated assault; and guilty under Article One Thirty-Four, general article, of the kidnapping of Thelma Sheridan and Ilima LaSalle, and of abusing the good order and discipline of the armed forces."

The major pauses. A sheen of sweat glistens on his cheeks. He swallows a few times and then, without lifting his gaze from the tablet in his hands, he continues:

"We find that Sergeant Jayne Vasquez did, on November eighteenth through November twentieth, participate in a conspiracy to kidnap Thelma Sheridan, and that this conspiracy was illegal. . . ."

He goes on to read the same charges, the same findings that he already read for me, leaving out only the destruction of military property. Sergeant Nolan's verdict is read out next, and then Harvey, Tuttle, Moon,

descending through the ranks. Flynn is last. I look at her where she stands across the L of the table from me. She's calm, but her eyes are unfocused. I think she's already checked out.

The major finishes. He finally looks up, but not at us. He looks at the judge. Monteiro gives him a sympathetic nod. "Thank you, Major. Was the verdict unanimous?"

"No, ma'am. It was not."

Another murmur of surprise ignites among the spectators. The judge does not look pleased.

"On your findings of conspiracy, did the court members unanimously agree that the conspiracy was illegal?"

"No, ma'am, that was not the case."

Monteiro gives the panel of officers a dark scowl. "Referring again to your findings of conspiracy, did at least three-quarters of the court members agree that the conspiracy was illegal?"

"Yes, ma'am. That was the case."

"Thank you for your verdict. The defendants may be seated. This court-martial will reconvene Monday morning at ten hundred to consider sentencing. All spectators are asked to remain in their seats until the bailiff dismisses you. Court is now in recess."

"All rise!"

Judge Monteiro abandons the bench, her judicial robes billowing around her legs as she exits the courtroom with an angry stride.

I turn around. My dad is standing behind me. His face is gaunt: He's become an old, exhausted man. Saying nothing, he reaches over the bar with both hands and we embrace.

Then it's time to go.

• • • •

Chudhuri and her squad of MPs are not there to meet us as we exit. They've been replaced by strangers: four men and two women, all with dark suits, farsights, and unreadable faces. They form a gauntlet, with the door of Judge Monteiro's office on the other end. We pile up in a confused knot of prisoners and attorneys as the two closest to us display gold badges, identifying themselves as special agents in the Secret Service.

I wasn't expecting this at all, and I'm not in a mood for surprises. My temper spikes, and I shoulder past Nolan, getting ready for I don't know what. Jaynie comes with me, her fingers a light touch on my arm, though whether she means to caution me or to let me know she'll back me up, I can't tell and there's no chance to find out because Major Ogawa takes over.

"What the hell is going on?" he demands, pushing past me.

The door to Monteiro's office opens; a woman wearing a major's uniform steps out. Her name tag identifies her as Major Perkins. She pushes the door wide. "I want all of you in here now."

“What is this about?” Ogawa insists.

“Attorneys may be present,” she allows. “Now get in here and sit down.”

What’s the alternative? Go back to our cells for the weekend? I decide not to pass on another opportunity to be threatened by the president, so I step past Ogawa and enter the office with Jaynie right behind me.

There are paintings on the walls: startlingly beautiful depictions of flowers and leaves. There are shelves too, probably built to contain books, but holding knickknacks and potted plants. Just inside the door is an oval conference table stained to look like rosewood, and straight ahead a large matching desk at a right angle to the window, so that Monteiro should have a view of the Capitol Building when the blinds are open. They’re closed now. Afternoon sunlight seeps through the pinholes where the strings pass, and glows around the edges. Monteiro is hanging up her robes in a closet behind the desk. She slaps the closet doors closed with a bang and turns to face us.

Her guest is not the president.

In the little sitting area facing the desk, standing beside a wall-mounted monitor, is the secretary of defense. He’s a man of moderate height, lean and well dressed, his gray hair trimmed short and his heavy eyebrows knit in a disapproving scowl as he watches us enter. “Sit down,” he orders. Major Perkins gestures at us to take seats around the table.

I go to the far end, where I can see the monitor. It’s a feed from the White House briefing room. Bloggers and mediots are assembling, but the podium is empty.

I sit down, with Jaynie beside me. My uncle squeezes my shoulder, then takes the seat on my other side, while Judge Monteiro picks up a sheaf of papers from the desk. Actual paper. The secretary of defense looks on in silence as Monteiro says, “Time is of the essence. We have at most ten minutes. So listen carefully, and do not make me repeat anything.”

She crosses the room. Major Perkins meets her halfway and takes the papers.

“The president will grant all of you an immediate pardon, contingent on your acceptance of the terms in the agreements Major Perkins is now distributing.”

Shock and hope collide, producing silence. There is only the rustle of paper as Perkins lays a two-page document on the table in front of me. My uncle picks it up before I can read even the first line. The next one goes to Jaynie. More copies are set in front of Nolan, Tuttle, and Harvey. Major Ogawa hijacks Moon’s document. Flynn gets the last copy. She’s across the table from me, and looks like she doesn’t quite understand what’s going on, but she picks up the papers, frowns, and starts reading.

The secretary of defense steps forward. “Let it be emphasized,” he says in syllables chiseled by anger, “that the president is not granting this pardon for your benefit, and in no way does it imply his approval of what you did. He is acting solely for the good of the country. Read the documents and sign them. As is. There will be no negotiation of terms.” He directs a curt nod at Monteiro—“Colonel”—and departs.

Monteiro watches him go with an irritated grimace. When the door closes behind him, she turns back to us. “The president is acting for the good of the country.” She points a small remote control at the windows, triggering the blinds to rise with a smooth electric hum. I stand up to look outside. On the sidewalks along

Constitution Avenue and beyond, filling Third Street and spilling over to the lawns fronting the reflecting pool, are tens of thousands of people. I can't see farther down the Mall, but I don't doubt I'm seeing only the edge of a far greater gathering. Monteiro confirms it.

"Seven hundred thousand people. Most of them avid supporters of your cause, demonstrating for your release. Crowd biometrics foresees a high potential for violence when your guilty verdict is announced. Should a riot break out, there is a chance that hundreds, maybe thousands, will die. It is your duty to prevent that."

She triggers the blinds to close again. Jaynie nudges my arm and nods at my chair, reminding me to sit down again.

Monteiro continues, "The spectators who attended the proceedings today are presently being held in the courtroom to prevent word of your convictions going public, pending the outcome of this conference. As soon as your signatures are on the agreements, the president will announce the guilty verdict along with the pardon, which should satisfy your supporters. You have seven minutes remaining."

My uncle speaks without looking up from the paperwork. "Are all these documents the same?"

"They are all the same excepting names and ranks of individuals, and Paragraph Nine pertaining to army property, which differs for Mr. Shelley."

Mr. Shelley.

That would be me. Not an officer anymore. I knew it was coming, but it still feels like reality has been casually kicked to the curb . . . and like I've been casually kicked in the gut. I look up, to find Flynn staring at me from across the table, fear in her wide green eyes. "It'll be okay," I whisper. She nods, looking again at the document in front of her. My uncle slides the first page toward me as he goes on to read page two.

That's when suspicion kicks in and I hear Monteiro again in my head: Paragraph Nine pertaining to army property. That has to refer to my legs. They will take my legs.

My gaze skims to the bottom of page one, but Paragraph Nine isn't there. I lean in on my uncle and whisper, "What does it say?"

His head tilts slightly. "A lot, but nothing unfair. Let me finish reading."

"Are they going to take my legs?" I insist.

His mouth curves in a slight, wolfish smile. "That would be bad PR, Jimmy." He's not whispering, not trying to hide anything. "This document is about controlling damage. The president is not interested in making you more of a martyr than you already are."

"He's also not interested in looking weak," Major Ogawa says from the opposite end of the table. He shuffles the order of the pages he's holding. "Here are the terms in summary."

Everyone looks at him to translate what they've already read.

"Upon signing, you will be immediately separated from the army. Your records will show an honorable

discharge. You will be required to attend a debriefing session here in the courthouse, to inform you of the classified status of information you are party to. When that session is done, you will be required to attend a twenty-minute press conference, no doubt to prove to the world that you are still alive and that the government has not caused you to disappear. You will be docked all back pay since November eighteenth. You will be allowed to keep your skullcaps, which have been designated as therapeutic medical devices—”

“And you,” my uncle interrupts, looking at me, “will get to keep any device presently on or part of your person.”

I’m relieved, sure, but it’s like I’m in combat. My brain just clicks over to the next issue. “The army’s going to give up their access to my overlay?”

He nods. “They will be out of your head forever.”

Lissa would have been happy about that.

“And this covers my original offense?” He knows what I mean: my induction contract archived a conviction for an illegal video recording.

“Everything past,” he assures me.

“Three minutes,” Colonel Monteiro notes.

Unperturbed, Ogawa passes the document he’s holding to Moon. “I advise you to sign it.”

I skim the first page of my contract while pens start scratching. I go on, pretending to read page two. After all, I’ve been publicly castigated for not reading documents—but the words don’t make any sense to me. It’s too bad I don’t have my handler Delphi’s crisp voice in my head, to read the order aloud.

My uncle holds out a pen. “Sign it, Jimmy.”

“Do it, Shelley,” Jaynie says. “All you’re giving up is the chance to be a martyr.”

I think Jaynie and I will have to settle a few issues, preferably in a session of hand-to-hand combat.

I take the pen.

Across the table, Flynn is biting her lip as she concentrates to make her signature—she probably hasn’t signed anything since the day she was inducted.

Everyone else is done. They’re all watching me.

I sign my name.

My career in the US Army is over.

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