

INSTINCT

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ALSO BY JEREMY ROBINSON

The Didymus Contingency

Raising the Past

Antarktos Rising

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INSTINCT

A Chess Team Adventure

JEREMY ROBINSON

Thomas Dunne Books St. Martin's Press  New York

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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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*For Mom, even though I know
this one will freak you out.*

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Over the past few years I have come to learn that without a core group of supporters, the job of being an author (and all the self-promotion that goes along with that) would be impossible for me. The time, skills, and knowledge required to pull off big promotions and even bigger stories is immense. So it is with great appreciation that I thank the following folks, my core.

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unceasing excitement about the books and other media projects I dream up is contagious and often keeps me on track when I would normally be in a slump.

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There is no law of progress. Our future is in our own hands, to make or to mar. It will be an uphill fight to the end, and would we have it otherwise? Let no one suppose that evolution will ever exempt us from struggles. "You forget," said the Devil, with a chuckle, "that I have been evolving too."
—William Ralph Inge

Man . . . is a tame or civilized animal; nevertheless, he requires proper instruction and a fortunate nature, and then of all animals he becomes the most divine and most civilized; but if he be insufficiently or ill-educated he is the most savage of earthly creatures.
—Plato

Life is a sexually transmitted disease.
—R. D. Laing

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PROLOGUE

The Annamite Mountains—Vietnam, 1995

THREE MONTHS HAD gone by since Dr. Anthony Weston began his search for the elusive creatures, and now that he'd found them, they were going to kill him.

A cascade of sweat followed a path of crisscrossing wrinkles down his forehead and dripped into his wide eyes. The salty, dirty sweat stung and brought forth a welling of tears, blurring his vision. He couldn't see the creatures clearly, nor the ground on which he ran, but he could hear them all around, calling out to each other.

The sheer volume of their booming hoots and hollers filled him with a kind of primeval dread that quickened his pace and made his heart pound painfully in his chest. He feared a heart attack for a moment, but the crunch of dry leaves all around signaled that his life was fleeting, heart problem or not.

Weston rounded a bend on the overgrown path that wound its way through the jungle and eventually up into the mountains. He picked up speed as the trail straightened out. If not for the assistance of gravity and the steep grade, the beasts would most assuredly have already overtaken him, but as it was, Weston found himself running

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much more quickly than on level ground. Even still, the task of outrunning the savage tribe was taking a grim toll on his body. With each labored breath, his ruddy brown beard and mustache, which had grown long and ungainly during his months in the bush, were sucked in and pushed out of his mouth. His light blue eyes sparkled with wetness, and his hands, which held off approaching tree limbs and bushes, shook violently, smearing the blood drawn from his fresh wounds.

Brush exploded to his right as one of the creatures toppled through it. They were tumbling and tripping as they barreled clumsily in pursuit, focused more on their quarry than their surroundings. They were single-minded hunters. He knew this from watching them take down yellow pigs and the antelope-like saola—even that fine creature's keen horns couldn't fight off the savages when they were hungry.

And they were hungry now.

Weston first knew something was wrong when, that morning, the creatures began sniffing vigorously at the air. He'd been watching them from a distance, higher up on the mountain, for an entire week. He'd observed them hunting, grooming, sleeping, and playing. But it hadn't been enough. Seeing through binoculars and hearing only distant calls could not quench his thirst for discovery. So, the previous night, he'd worked his way carefully, silently, down the mountainside until he was a mere fifty yards above with a clear view of the glade and mountain cave that served as their home. After carefully concealing himself with brush and debris, he waited eagerly for daybreak.

As the morning sun burned off the previous night's fog, the group emerged from their cave, stretching and yawning. Typically, grooming would come next, but a new smell had caught their nose—Weston. As a cool breeze tickled the back of his neck, he realized the winds were rolling down the mountainside from above, and since he was so close, the odor of his unbathed body was fresh in the air.

He'd only just begun debating what he should do next when the group started jumping up and down, slapping the earth. A moment later, each and every one of them, forty-three in all, charged up the mountain. Their brown hair stood on end, bouncing madly as they ascended. For a moment, he sat still, stunned by the display, but as the creatures made eye contact with him and began their wild hoots, he too began to climb. Upon reaching the top, he wasted no

time looking back to see how close they were. He knew them to be excellent climbers. They were no doubt already nipping at his heels.

And now, not two minutes after reaching the mountain's peak and beginning his frantic descent down the other side, they were on top of him.

Weston lost his footing for a moment and screamed. He was surprised by the volume and high pitch of his voice. It sounded as inhuman as the noises made by the unclassified creatures pursuing him. As he sensed the front-runners of the group closing in he searched for any hope of escape. In the movies this was the point where the hero would trip and slide down a perfectly formed mud-covered waterslide and escape. But the forest was an unending assemblage of tall tree trunks, the occasional low-level scrub, and a detritus-coated, downhill-sloped forest floor. There was nowhere to go but down.

And then where? The river was two days out on foot and from there it was a week, at least, to the nearest pocket of civilization. And what weapons did they own that could defeat such a group as this?

None.

Hopelessness settled in and his limbs grew weary. He thought of his wife and only regretted not having been able to tell her how angry he was that she'd left. In the end, she had grown to hate him and taunted his profession; said that being a cryptozoologist was a job far better suited to children or imbeciles prone to flights of fancy. He thought she'd understood him, but he'd been wrong. And he would have never known if not for—

Shaking his head, Weston banished his thought of his wife. She was not the image he wanted to see when he died.

With sure footing beneath him and the slope growing steeper, Weston felt himself moving faster. The pain in his lungs began to subside and the sweat on his forehead evaporated before it reached his eyes. He'd never before experienced a second wind but recognized it, and for a moment, felt some degree of hope.

That's when he saw the flickering shadow surrounding him, as though something above were blocking out the sun that filtered to the forest floor between breaks in the canopy. He glanced up into a pair of red-rimmed, deep yellow eyes. The beast shrieked at him and reached out. Its fingers found his field vest and gripped tightly. A moment later, Weston's feet left the earth and he found himself airborne, propelled through the air with stunning ease.

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As the forest spun, he saw the entire group descending toward him, some charging, some taking to the trees, and some rolling clumsily through the brush. What may have been a ten-foot flight took Weston much farther as the ground continued to drop away. Twenty-five feet later he landed, but the same grade that made his fall farther also minimized the force of his impact. He rolled and slid another fifty feet and came to rest at the foot of a tall, slender *Aquilaria* tree.

Weston knew he was lucky to be alive, but even luckier to not have sustained any broken bones. He hadn't even lost consciousness. He struggled to his hands and knees, acutely aware that the wave of hair-covered flesh roaring down the mountain was almost upon him. He stood on wobbly legs and held the tree for support. It was shaking.

Weston looked up and found the same deep, red-rimmed eyes staring back at him. The creature, suspended upside down on the tree, reached out and backhanded Weston's head. He fell to the ground, stunned and despairing. They had him. Escape was impossible.

He began weeping as the creature climbed down the tree with an agility he'd witnessed all week. In many ways the creatures were more suited to a life in the trees than on the ground. Once on the ground, the beast stood erect, stretching its height to a mediocre five feet. If not for their physical strength, Weston might even have been able to fight his way out. But he remembered how easily he'd been thrown, as though he were but a child.

As the beast stood above him it hollered to the others, who quickly surrounded his prone body. They hooted and slapped the ground in a wild display, the likes of which he had not observed in the last week, even when they were hunting. A few stayed in the trees where they shook branches and shrieked. The one who had caught him, Red Rim, stood above him and looked into his eyes. Red leaned in close and smelled him, moving slowly from his feet to his head, sniffing diligently.

Perhaps they're trying to decide if I'm edible, Weston thought. He tried to think of a way he could make himself less appealing, but that was impossible. Inside his pants, his legs were already coated in shit, and his urine had leaked through the front. He smelled terrible; though, he noted now, not as terrible as the creatures standing guard around him. Their scent was fecal and raw, like moldy egg salad. As Red sniffed Weston's head and blew its breath onto his

face, he could taste the decaying flesh of some previous meal that clung to its two-inch-long canines. While Red sniffed his hair, Weston became aware of a gentle caress upon his chest. He glanced down, past his matted beard, and saw two large hair-covered breasts dangling down onto his body. Red . . . was a female.

Then she was up and hooting again. The cacophony reached an apex and the group descended on Weston like a starved pack of hyenas, yelping and reaching for him. As his clothes were torn and yanked away from his body by tooth and claw, he began to scream and fight. It did little good and only seemed to work the group into more of a craze. Then one was on top of him, straddling his naked waist and pinning him to the ground. The creature's face leaned in close.

Red.

She howled and then bit into the meat of his shoulder.

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DEVOLUTION

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ONE

Annamite Mountains—Vietnam, 2009

THE OPEN SORES covering Phan Giang's feet looked like the craters of the moon. They'd long since stopped oozing, but the dried flaking skin itched relentlessly. Yet he kept walking. Stumbling really. He'd been moving like a machine for the past three days, shuffling through the jungle like a zombie. His bloodshot eyes, half closed, stung and saw the world through a haze. His feverish, parched body was slick with moisture that clung to him yet failed to penetrate his skin. His tattered clothes, those of a peasant villager, hung from his bones in damp tatters, like meat hung to dry. Though he was near death, his heart soared when the jungle broke.

He emerged from the sauna that was the jungle of Vietnam and stepped into an open field. He saw an array of gleaming metal hangars, several parked green helicopters, and groups of men in uniform patrolling the outer fringe of the facility. A military base. *Who better to help*, the man thought.

As the only surviving man in his village, Anh Dung, he had left in search of help. For generations his people had dealt with *cái chết bất thành linh*—the sudden death. Occasionally one of the men in the

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village would fall over dead. Regardless of health or age, the man struck would die suddenly where he stood, sat, or lay. They'd always believed that angry spirits looking for vengeance on the living sometimes targeting men, taking their souls. But the solution had always been to dress and act as a woman. This knowledge had saved the village, as the spirits never claimed more than one man.

But this time . . . the spirits that visited Anh Dung were furious. Regardless of dress or duty, the spirits had slain every man in the village, first striking them with a mild fever and coughing, then death. Whether sleeping, tending the field, or washing clothes, men were struck dead. Some in midsentence. Others in their sleep. The spirits were relentless . . . to the point that the villagers realized it wasn't *spirits* killing the men.

It was a plague.

In a single week twenty-three men, some of them very young, had died.

Seeking to save his own life and possibly bring back help, Giang had fled into the jungle. When his father fell dead he simply turned and ran. He had no food. No clothes. And no idea where he was headed.

But after three days in the dark jungle, he'd emerged like Jesus from the tomb, back into the light of the world, where men, alive and well, stood guard.

He was spotted immediately, rounded up, and brought to the infirmary. The men, well trained as they were, saw Giang's condition and kept their distance. The decision saved their lives.

Hours later, Giang woke from a sound sleep. He'd been fed and hydrated. He was feeling much better despite the sore throat, bouts of sneezes, and severe headache. The room the base had him quarantined in was small, but the cot was comfortable and the food edible. A single bare bulb hanging from the ceiling lit the four white walls.

Giang jumped when a man suddenly appeared in front of the window that looked out into a barren hallway. The man's expression was placid, almost friendly, but his uniform, olive green with a single gold star on the shoulder, revealed his importance. This would be the man who could help him.

Giang stood. An intercom next to the window crackled to life. "I'm Major General Trung. You're feeling better?"

Giang looked at the intercom. He'd never seen anything like it.

The man's voice had come through the wall via the device. He squinted at it, inspecting the speaker and single white button. He tried looking through the plastic slats. There had to be a hole in the wall behind it.

Giang jumped back as the speaker came to life again. "Push the white button to speak, and I will hear you."

Doing as he was told, Giang slowly related his story. The village. The sudden deaths. The fear of plague. Trung listened closely, nodding, but asking no questions. When Giang's tale came to an end Trung pursed his lips. "The doctors who tested you last night found only a flu, which is typically treatable."

A smile crept onto Giang's face. He would survive!

"But . . ." Trung's face turned deadly serious. "We exposed some men to your saliva last night. Two fell dead this morning. Three others are feeling fine, but we believe they will die soon enough, just as you will."

Giang sat on the cot, his mind a swirl of emotions. The military could help. They had special medicines. Surely they could cure him. He stood and pushed the white button. "You must do something!"

"Perhaps," Trung said. "Is there anything you overlooked in your story? Maybe something entered your village a few days before the first man died? Did anything strange happen? If we can locate the source . . ."

Trung paused, watching through the glass as Giang's eyes rolled back in his head. Then the man disappeared below the window, slumping to the floor. Trung peered down at the body. Dead.

Trung rolled his eyes in annoyance.

He exited the small two-room building on the outskirts of his base. As he closed the door behind him, he turned to the four men waiting for him. "Burn it down."

As the four men doused the building with gasoline, Trung advanced across the dirt-covered central quad of the base. Technically, this was a training facility for the Vietnam People's Army, but two years ago it had been acquired by Trung and his elite Death Volunteers. The unit had been formed during the Vietnam War and as an tribute homage to this, they still referred to themselves as part of the Vietnamese People's *Liberation Army*, as a homage to those who came before.

His men were the best Vietnam had to offer and had been since the Vietnam War. They trained in jungle warfare, preparing for

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what they felt was the inevitable invasion by the west . . . again. Trung's own father had been a soldier with the Vietcong and his stories of defeating the superior forces and technology of America had inspired Trung's childhood fantasies. And now he was in a position to defeat them himself, should they be foolish enough to return.

Whatever Giang had brought out of the jungle was new, of that he had no doubt. The symptoms and tests revealed a flu, but the end result was unheard of. What he did know was that, once exposed, his enemies would simply fall over dead before realizing anything was amiss. Entire armies or cities could be wiped out without a shot being fired. It was the perfect weapon. But it could not be used in combat. Not yet. Not until he had the cure.

Twenty men, his best, stood waiting for orders; he issued them without pause, telling the men about the strange virus that infected Giang, and what they needed to do about it.

THEY ENTERED THE jungle and hiked for three days before reaching the Annamite range. A day's hike into the mountains, a mere half mile from where Anh Dung was shown on the map, the man on point called a halt.

He'd heard something.

Trung trusted his men implicitly, and the man on point had ears like a dog's. The sound that came next could have been heard by the deaf. It was a shout. A scream really. But not human. And the source . . . it rose up all around. His men took up positions, forming a circle around him, covering the jungle in all directions.

The sound came in cascades, washing over the men as the trees above them swayed in a fresh breeze.

Then, tearing through the din came a voice. A man. He shouted a single word . . . in English. "Now!"

The jungle exploded. Tree limbs fell from above. Ground cover burst into the air. Stones and branches soared at them from a distance. For a moment Trung believed the attack, primitive and ineffectual as it was, came from the frightened women of Anh Dung. But the male voice—commanding, as though speaking to soldiers . . .

Trung realized too late that the chaos concealed an advancing force. A diversion. His men, trained to hold their fire until acquiring an actual target, had waited calmly for the enemy to appear. A mistake.

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“Open fire!” he shouted.
 The enemy descended.
 From above.

Falling among branches and severed leaves from the canopy, they arrived. Through the debris filling the air, Trung saw figures—their exposed tan flesh and ruddy orange fur. Then a flash of white skin. A long beard. Perhaps glasses. The man appeared and disappeared as the chaos erupted.

Against roars and brute force his men fell one by one. Few shots were fired. Several attempted to fight hand-to-hand, but they lasted mere seconds. In less than half a minute, ten of his best fell to the savage, yet incredibly organized attack. They were severely outmatched. As his remaining men fearlessly engaged the enemy, he slunk down and slipped behind a tree. Sure he hadn’t been seen, he turned and ran.

Four days later he emerged from the jungle, his feet swollen, his body craving water. He looked little better than Giang when they’d first found him stumbling from the jungle. When his men saw him, they kept their distance, fearing he’d been infected. After demanding a water bottle be thrown to him, he drank its contents and related his story. Still fearing Trung might be ill, but fearing his wrath even more, the soldiers helped him to his quarters, where doctors tended to him.

A week later, cleared of the mystery illness and feeling strong, Trung met with some of the nation’s best doctors, scientists, and government officials. The scientists were stumped. The disease confounded their attempts to understand it. Without discovering the source of the infection, they wouldn’t be able to understand it . . . or find a cure. Even with the source they doubted whether they could solve the riddle.

They needed help.

Loath as he was to admit needing assistance, he could think of only one nation with both the scientific and military capabilities that would be required to track down the source and develop a cure—America. He left the meeting having said nothing of the plan brewing in his mind. But he put things in motion that night. The Americans would bring their best military and scientists . . . and *he* would be waiting.

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TWO

Beverly, Massachusetts, 2010

DANIEL BRENTWOOD HAD never fancied himself a family man. To be a family man, in his mind, you first had to be a ladies' man. After all, procreation only happened with a willing partner. And throughout his life, willing partners were not lining up. He'd been a glasses-wearing, pocket-protecting geek in high school. An Apple IIc and a pirated copy of the kung-fu game Karateka had been his best friends. Throughout college he'd been a perpetually mocked virgin and the butt of more than a few shower room pranks, though he'd managed to trade the Apple in for a brand-new PC featuring Windows 3.1 and a pirated copy of Doom. And now, ten years later, he was CEO of Elysian Games, one of the top video game developers in the world, alongside Blizzard, Microsoft, and EA. At thirty years old he'd built an empire and made more money in a year than most people did in their entire lives.

His glasses had gone the way of the Tasmanian tiger, replaced by contacts, and his pocket protector had been displaced by a PDA, but he was still a geek to the core. There was a time when nothing could distract him from the games he created. Then he'd met the proverbial

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“her.” Actually, he’d hired her. Angela O’Neill. A brilliant programmer. He admired her talent. Few women got excited about creating realistic gaming physics, but this one did. But that wasn’t what pulled his eye away from the computer screen. It was her penchant for tight T-shirts that accentuated her chubby love handles. He wasn’t sure why, but those love handles drove him crazy.

As it turned out, she had a thing for PDAs. They’d married a year later—a grand spectacle and perhaps the only event away from the world of computers that half the guests had ever attended. Then, two years ago today, they’d had a child. Ben. A little runt with light blue eyes, pale skin, and jet-black hair. Angie liked to joke that God had turned up the contrast when Ben was formed.

And now that Ben was two, they were tearing themselves away from the business. Away from the computer screen. Away from the chaos. Lynch Park was their destination, a park full of green grassed tall treed with two small beaches, a half-shell theater, a Dick & June’s Ice Cream, and a sea breeze that couldn’t be beat. All they’d brought was a few towels, some toys, and plenty of sunscreen.

Daniel had just returned from a week-long, round-the-world business trip that started with meetings in Tokyo and Hong Kong and finished in Washington, D.C., where his team photographed the Oval Office for a level that would be featured in a new first-person shooter, *Army Ranger: Advanced Strike Force*. Inspired by the current president’s exploits as an Army Ranger, the game featured a look-a-like president, though the character’s name was different. The highlight of the trip had been when he met the president in the Oval Office. They’d been publicizing the meeting for months and it was everything he hoped for and more. Not only did President Duncan welcome him warmly, but he also said he was looking forward to playing the game! The president! Of course, the low point of his visit had been sneezing on the president. He’d picked up a bug while in Hong Kong that stayed with him for the week. Embarrassing as it was, the president shook it off with a joke.

But now, being home again with his family—nothing could beat that. Not the president. Not seeing *Godzilla* in a Tokyo theater. Not the release of any new game. With the cold all but gone, he was free to enjoy the summer weather and time alone with the people he loved most.

They’d just driven by the large Beverly cemetery where Daniel’s grandparents had been buried, when Ben began to serenade them

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with a rousing rendition of “The Wheels on the Bus,” a song to which he had created at least twenty distinct verses. And Daniel knew them all by heart. The sound of his son’s voice, no matter how repetitive, was more magical than the welcome chime on his computer. Ben was his finest creation. Nothing could compare.

Daniel had surprised even himself when he turned out to be an excellent father. Loving. Strident. Fun. He was the kind of dad all kids want. Infinitely trustworthy and endlessly playful. His one flaw was that he was also very busy. Which was why they were getting away, alone, as a family, for Ben’s second birthday.

Daniel steered the black Jag, which he’d bought five years previous as a gift to himself when his first game had sold a million units, onto the steep hill leading down to the park’s wide parking lot. He noted the lot was fairly empty for such a nice summer day. Motion above the lot caught his eye; the trees bending, as though reaching for some invisible desire. It was windy. Perfect day for a kite.

The Jag picked up speed as it rolled down the hill, but before Daniel could lift his foot off the gas and onto the brake, he froze. Eyes glossed over. Jaw slack. Gravity pulled his body forward. His head hit the steering wheel as his foot descended on the gas. The Jag launched forward, held straight by the weight of his head on the wheel.

The kids checking for park stickers jumped from their umbrella-covered lawn chairs just before the car plowed through, destroying the chairs and a cooler full of sodas. It continued across the parking lot.

In the backseat with Ben, Angie screamed and shook Daniel’s shoulder, pleading for him to wake up. She tried to climb over the front seat to get to the brake, but the car hit the curb and launched into the grass. The jolt smashed Angie’s head against the ceiling. She fell back into her seat, head spinning. If the seawall had been straight, the car would have plowed into the Dick & June’s, but angled as it was, the Jag was headed toward a six-foot drop into the ocean. Angie realized this, snapped her seat belt into place, and held Ben’s hand.

The green chain-link fence at the top of the seawall didn’t stand a chance when the car struck. It snapped free from the support poles and rolled over the side with the car. Angie’s quick mind worked through the scenario as they fell upside down. Water would seep in while she unclipped Ben and—

The car struck with a grinding sound of metal on stone that made Angie sick to her stomach. Or maybe that was the seat belt yanking

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on her abdomen? They'd landed upside down on the mass of boulders that surrounded the park, revealed by a low tide. As her mind cleared she became aware of the most dreadful sensation. Silence.

She could see Daniel, who never wore his seat belt, crumpled on the ceiling in the front seat. And next to her, Ben dangled in his car seat.

With shaking hands she unbuckled herself and fell to the car's ceiling. She fumbled to Ben and unclipped him. He fell into her arms. As a whimper escaped her mouth, she checked for a pulse. Nothing. She put her hand in front of his mouth and held her breath. She sighed with relief when she felt her baby's breath on her finger.

The silence was shattered by shouts from above and an acrid smell that told her the same thing: "The car is on fire! Get out!"

She tried her door. It was jammed tight. Deformed by the impact. She tried the door on Ben's side. It too was wedged closed. In fact, the whole roof of the car had crumpled down.

They were trapped.

And as smoke poured in through the heating vents, she realized they'd be suffocated or burned alive.

A loud explosion shook the back of the car and she screamed. But it was followed by a shout. "Take my hand, lady!" She looked back and found two young men. They'd smashed in the window with a large stone. Before she had time to think about how to get Ben out and then go back for Daniel, she was grabbed by the arm and yanked out of the car. She began screaming about Daniel, about how he was still in the car. As she was pulled over the rocks, which skinned her ankles, Ben began to cry. He was okay.

Her senses returned with the cry of her child and she demanded to be put down. Why were they treating her so roughly? Heat and odor brought her eyes back to the car. It was an inferno. Daniel was gone.

Her two rescuers pulled her and Ben over the rocks and into the ocean. When the car exploded they fell under the protective water. They were safe. But Daniel was dead. And no one would ever know what killed him.

The official ruling: fell asleep at the wheel. The cost of all that success. The news covered it for a night, focusing most of their attention on little Ben, now fatherless. Just another death to pad the nighttime headlines while folks waited for their reality TV.

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THREE

Gulf of Aden—Somalia

A **STARK WHITE** motorboat bearing no national symbols, name, or markings of any kind rose up over a wave, catching air for a beat. The motor buzzed as it left the baby blue water before being muffled once more as the boat descended and the blades bit into the sea. The fifteen-foot craft leaped from wave to wave, dancing over the ocean as fast as the old engine could push it, and its five occupants.

The five passengers were dressed in loose clothing and head wraps; only their eyes could be seen. Four sets of eyes were locked onto a single target—the *Volgaeft*, a Russian cargo ship. The only one of the five not looking at the cargo ship sat at the back, guiding the flat-hulled boat through the maze of five-foot swells. The seas were rough for such a small craft to handle but as they closed in on the cargo vessel, none on board thought about the threat of capsizing; their thoughts were on the violence that would soon begin.

The *Volgaeft* was at full speed in a bid to outrun the band of pirates, and had no doubt issued a call for help, but the pirates knew they could catch the sluggish, heavily laden vessel. And, with some newly acquired technology, they would easily board it before help

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arrived. And help would arrive. After a short period of successful pirating that brought in an estimated thirty million dollars, the international community had cracked down. Warships from India, the European Union, the United States, and China patrolled the waters off Somalia, sometimes escorting ships from their various homelands, but always rushing to the aid of any ship in distress. And the *Volgaeft* wouldn't have waited to put out a call.

The pirates' sources put the nearest warship, a Chinese destroyer, roughly thirty minutes away. But with the *Volgaeft* now making a beeline for the destroyer and the destroyer for the *Volgaeft*, that half hour would be cut in half. And it had taken five minutes to pull up alongside the freighter.

Ten minutes left.

Typically, once a cargo vessel was boarded and the crew rounded up, there was nothing a destroyer could do. The ransom would be paid. And after returning to port as hostages, the ship and crew would be free to go. But this was no ordinary pirate raid. They were after something specific, and they needed to be gone by the time the Chinese arrived.

As the freighter crew watched the small pirate ship far below, preparing to cut grappling hook lines, they saw something they'd never seen a pirate do before. All five of the pirates raised what looked like handguns, but were tipped with solid black cylinders. Pirates typically fired warning shots at the crew, forcing them away from the rail while they scaled the side, but these devices weren't weapons at all. All five fired as one. The black cylinders arced up over the rail, trailing thin black wires. They landed atop a large metal container and snapped up into standing positions as their magnetic bases engaged.

One of the Russians armed with a machete tried to cut through the thin black wires, which were already taut with weight, but his blade could do no more to the wire than a plastic knife could. Before the crew could discuss what to do next, the pirates were pulled up and over the rail, landing on their feet and drawing pistols. The stunned crew stared for a moment. Then ran.

Ignoring the fleeing crew, the pirates entered the maze of metal containers covering the deck of the massive ship. They were looking for one container in particular. Its contents were worth more than the bounty received from all previous pirate attacks in the last year combined.

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They wove their way through aisles created by the looming towers of containers, scanning the variety of labels, serial numbers, and I.D. codes. They knew what they were looking for. ID-432 out of Vladivostok.

Three minutes later, they found it.

A pair of bolt cutters emerged from beneath one of the loose robes worn by the pirates. The lock fell to the deck a moment later and the large metal doors opened. Flashlights rose to meet the darkness within, illuminating a single metal carrying case.

“Over there,” one of the large men said, his English perfect, though tinged with a New Hampshire accent.

“I’m on it,” the shortest replied, her voice feminine. The cheap black ski mask she wore covered her face and the black face paint beneath concealed her skin color. The only aberration in her pirate disguise was her indigo eyes.

The man—Stanly Tremblay, call sign: Rook—stepped inside the container, flashlight up, followed by the woman—Zelda Baker, call sign: Queen.

Queen knelt down by the silver case and inspected the area around it. “No traps. Looks clear, King.”

Jack Sigler, call sign: King, stepped around Rook and unwrapped his face mask. His hard jaw was covered in stubble. His eyes glimmered with what his mother called mischief, but what the U.S. military called intensity.

Outside the container, the last two “pirates” kept watch. Erik Somers, call sign: Bishop, brimming with muscles, and the smaller man, Shin Dae-jung, call sign: Knight, kept their silenced pistols aimed down either end of the hallway formed by walls of shipping containers.

King pulled the case free from the bungee cords that held it secure to the back wall of the container. A digital touch screen and ten numbered buttons, zero through nine, were inlaid on the side of the case. Low-tech travel and storage, meet high-tech security. The case could not be opened without the correct code, and though there were no traps guarding the case itself, no one wanted to test a last-recourse defense mechanism by opening the case without the right code. “Deep Blue, you there?”

“Right beside you.” In fact, the Delta team’s handler, Deep Blue, was half a world away, watching them via satellite. Named for the chess-playing supercomputer that trounced world champion Garry

Kasparov in 1997, Deep Blue was the only member of the team whose identity was unknown. The man was an enigma, but he had access to U.S. military resources that were unparalleled, an impressive strategic thought process, and an understanding of military tactics that only someone who had previously seen combat could have. “I can see Bishop and Knight outside the container. Are you in?”

“Affirmative. I’m about to access the locking mechanism,” King said as he used his KA-BAR knife to pry off the touch screen. He plucked the cable free from the back of the screen, removed a small touch screen of his own, and attached it. Once connected the screen lit up, a similar light blue to the ocean outside, and scrolled through a series of numbers. Unlike other mechanisms that tried a myriad of codes, looking for the right one, this device actually rewrote the software so that a new code could be added.

“Once you confirm the contents, you need to bug out,” Deep Blue said. “The Chinese destroyer will be at your doorstep in five minutes and it looks like they’re warming up a chopper.”

King shook his head. It was never easy. “Armed or transport?”

“Gunship.”

“Shit.”

“Bishop, Knight, the crew is getting brave,” Deep Blue added. “Looks like they’re armed.”

“Just let us know where to aim,” Knight said.

Bishop, as usual, remained silent at his post. Watching and waiting. Unlike the others, he had nothing to fear from bullets, not physically anyway. Thanks to an unrefined serum created by Manifold Genetics, Bishop’s body could regenerate from almost any physical injury short of decapitation. The downside was that every injury, from a paper cut to a bullet wound, pushed his mind farther to the brink. The test subjects before him all became what the team called “regens”—mindless killing machines. It was only Bishop’s history of anger management and a regimen of mood-enhancing drugs that kept him stable. It had been almost a year since their run-in with Manifold and the regenerated mythical Hydra, but this mission was Bishop’s return to active duty. He’d been deemed fit for duty only a week ago.

The numbers on the display stopped, and a blank screen with ten empty spaces appeared.

“Ready for the code,” King said.

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"Hey guys, Lew here." The new voice in their ear belonged to Lewis Aleman, their tech-wizard who was not only hardened on the digital battlefield, but also on the physical battlefield as a Delta operator. "The legendary CD Key for Office 97 is the code."

"Lew," King said, "this really isn't a time for—"

"All zeros," Rook said.

"And the winner is . . ."

King didn't hear the rest. He was already typing in the ten zeros. Upon finishing the code, the screen went black. "Uh, Lew . . ."

The locks clicked open. They were in.

"Knight, now would be a good time for a warning shot." Deep Blue's voice was cool, but the speed with which he spoke conveyed urgency. The crew of more than thirty men were closing in on what they believed were five Somali pirates.

Hoping the noise would intimidate, Knight removed his silencer from his .45-caliber Sig Sauer 220 handgun and fired off a round. It pinged off the deck where a crewman's shoe was poking out from behind a container. The man shouted and they heard the sound of feet shuffling away.

"That did it," Deep Blue said. "But they haven't given up. Chinese heli is in the air. ETA, two minutes. The destroyer will be right behind it."

King ignored the time line. It would only make him nervous and slow him down. He opened the case. Steam hissed from inside, rolling over the edge and out across the floor of the roiling hot case. When the steam cleared, twenty small vials were exposed. King removed a small kit from his cargo pants, which were hidden beneath his robe, and opened it. Moving with extreme care, he then untwisted the cap of one of the vials, inserted a Q-tip, and soaked up a small amount of the clear liquid within. He rolled the Q-tip across the white surface of a small device that absorbed and analyzed the liquid. Normally, to identify a mystery liquid would require more processing power and equipment, but they were looking for one specific liquid, or rather, what was contained within the liquid medium. A small light on the device flashed green.

"Confirmed," King said. "We've got ourselves enough Russian-made smallpox to wipe out the populations of ten major cities."

"Great," Rook said. "All headed for our buddies in Iran."

Cases of smallpox could be traced back two thousand years in human history, emerging in China. The virus moved across the Asian

continent to Africa, claiming the lives of thousands, including Pharaoh Ramses V. After arriving in Europe in 720 B.C. it crossed the Atlantic to the New World along with Hernando Cortez and an army of conquistadors. Contrary to popular belief, it was not the brutal tactics of the conquistadors that wiped out the Aztec civilization, it was smallpox. Nearly four million Aztecs died from the virus. The last case of smallpox was recorded, ironically, in Somalia circa 1977. Since then the world has been smallpox free . . . and more susceptible than ever. There is no cure for the virus and though the mortality rate of the infected is ten to thirty percent, ten percent of the population of New York City is eight hundred *thousand* people. In the wrong hands, these small vials could be weaponized and kill millions.

“So much for Putin’s assurance that their smallpox cache was secure,” Queen said.

“I believe that as much as I believe Putin saved a film crew from a Siberian tiger,” Rook said. “If the guy had been born and raised in the U.S. he’d probably be on Broadway by now. What I don’t get is why this is still kicking around.”

“Human nature,” Queen replied. “We’ve been dousing the world in chemical and biowarfare for thousands of years before we even understood what the stuff was. And the U.S. is just as guilty as any other nation. Just because we don’t use chemical and biowarfare now doesn’t mean we never did. It’s only because we have better tech and bigger bombs that we no longer need to fight dirty.”

“Amen to that.” King nodded as he placed the Q-tip and small device on the floor. He took out a long cylinder that had been strapped to his leg, opened it, and doused the Q-tip and device with Thermo-TH3, a ruddy brown powder made from an iron oxide variant of thermite, barium nitrate, sulfur, and PBAN as a binder. The powder would burn at 2500°C, incinerating all traces of the smallpox and melting a hole in the container and a portion of the decks beneath. He closed the case as another shot rang out from outside the container.

“Another warning shot,” Knight said. “No worries. Scratch that. Big worries, incoming.”

The *whup, whup, whup*, of an approaching helicopter rose in volume. The Chinese had arrived. King stood and shook the remaining Thermo onto the open case. Though more than a few science boys in the United States would like to examine the old smallpox plague

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contained in the vials, Deep Blue's orders were clear: destroy it. The world would be a better place without another smallpox strain floating around, even in U.S. hands.

As King wrapped his scarf over his face once more, he headed for the exit with Queen and Rook. He popped a flare and tossed it into the container, then quickly closed and latched the metal doors. The Thermate would quickly suck the oxygen out of the small container space, but the flames would not be smothered. The powdered hell contained its own oxygen source and could burn just as easily at the bottom of the ocean or in the vacuum of space. Once lit, nothing could put it out.

Outside the container, Knight pointed to the sky. A black Zhi-11 gunship was approaching low over the sea, headed straight for them. As bursts of yellow flashed from the helicopter's twin 12.7mm machine guns, King shouted, "Go! Go! Go!"

The Chess Team darted down a side alley, hiding them from view as rounds chewed up the deck where they had stood only moments before. Hidden from the chopper, they ran without fear of being cut down from the sky, but they ran with weapons out in case the crew still lingered about. As they reached the port rail it was clear that the crew had hid with the chopper's arrival. They knew enough to not get caught in the cross fire.

The gunship roared above and out to sea, turning in a tight circle. It would be back in seconds.

The team hitched themselves onto their cables, still tethered to the cargo container, holstered their guns, and slid over the side of the ship, rappelling with large leaps down to the small, white, and defenseless motor boat. Once aboard the craft, they disengaged the magnets, which automatically reeled in. Without looking up, King gunned the engine, which looked old, but was actually top-of-the-line U.S. military. The small boat shot forward just as a line of 12.7mm rounds traced across the waves and ripped into the side of the *Volgaeft*.

King steered the small boat out and away from the cargo ship as the helicopter swung around for another pass. But the helicopter didn't return. It just circled at a distance.

Too easy, King thought.

"King," Deep Blue's voice returned. "Cut hard to starboard."

King glanced to port. Closing in was an ominous Chinese destroyer, its cannons swinging toward them. "They can't be serious."

“The Chinese have been in the Gulf of Aden for a year without any major conflicts,” Deep Blue said. “They’re eager to test their mettle. I think they—”

BOOM!

The ocean in front of the small boat burst skyward as a 100mm cannon round struck the water. The small boat launched off the resulting wave and cut through the mist, landing on the other side. King cut to starboard, but with the *Volgaeft* moving away they were exposed. If not for the boat’s small size and speed they would be an easy target.

“You’re looking good,” Deep Blue said. “Keep your current course for thirty seconds.”

“Easier said than done,” King replied.

BOOM!

The second round struck just behind them, pitching the boat up and forward, bringing the engine out of the water. If not for the quick thinking of Rook and Bishop, the team’s two giants, who threw themselves to the stern deck, knocking the back end back down, the bow would have caught water and flipped them too soon.

“Wait for the next round,” King shouted. “Then—”

BOOM!

The round struck just off the port side. The small boat became lost in a plume of seawater. When it cleared the boat appeared—capsized and immobilized.

Rather than apprehend the pirates involved, the Chinese destroyer tested its aim on a still target.

BOOM!

The small boat shattered and burst as the massive round, powerful enough to sink the multi-hulled *Volgaeft*, struck home.

Thirty feet below the explosion, five bodies descended, unmoving after the shock wave struck. Then a hand flashed up.

Hold position.

A dark shape loomed below. Waiting. Listening.

King gave the crewman monitoring the hydrophone inside the submarine a moment to recover from the impact and explosion above. Then he shouted, expelling the last of his air, “Open the damn door.” The message was garbled by the bubbles escaping King’s mouth, but it was received. The side dry dock of the still-classified HMS *Wolverton* opened. All five swam inside. The doors closed as the small cabin pressurized and filled with air.

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The Chinese searched for the remains of the pirates they'd wiped out, but found only debris of the small boat. Regardless, the front page of China's most popular newspaper, the *Southern Metropolis Daily*, heralded the encounter as a bold Chinese naval victory. And despite the pirates' best efforts, the only losses were minimal damage to the *Volgaefit* and the total destruction of one container destined for Iran, reported full of toys donated by a charitable Russian organization.