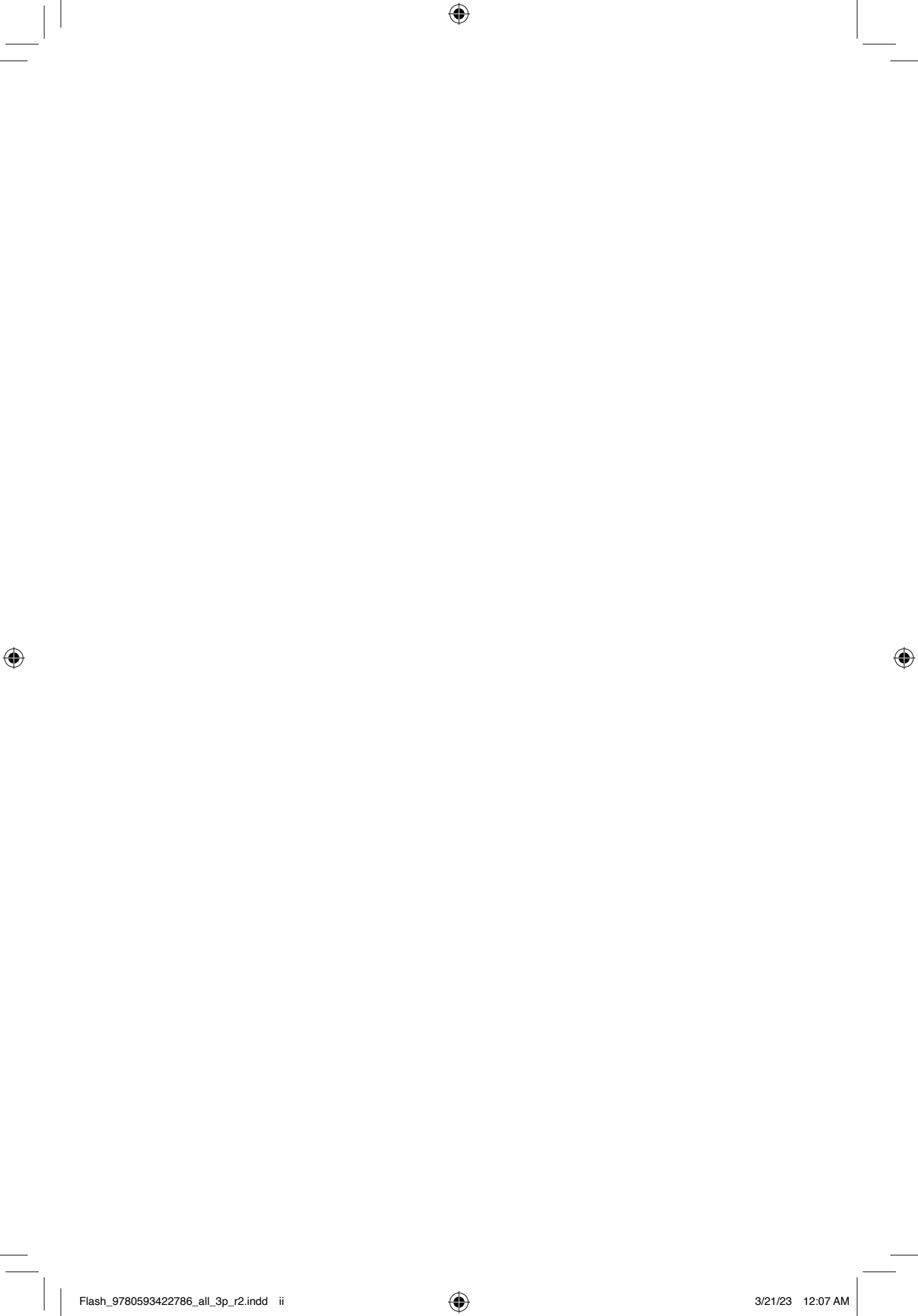


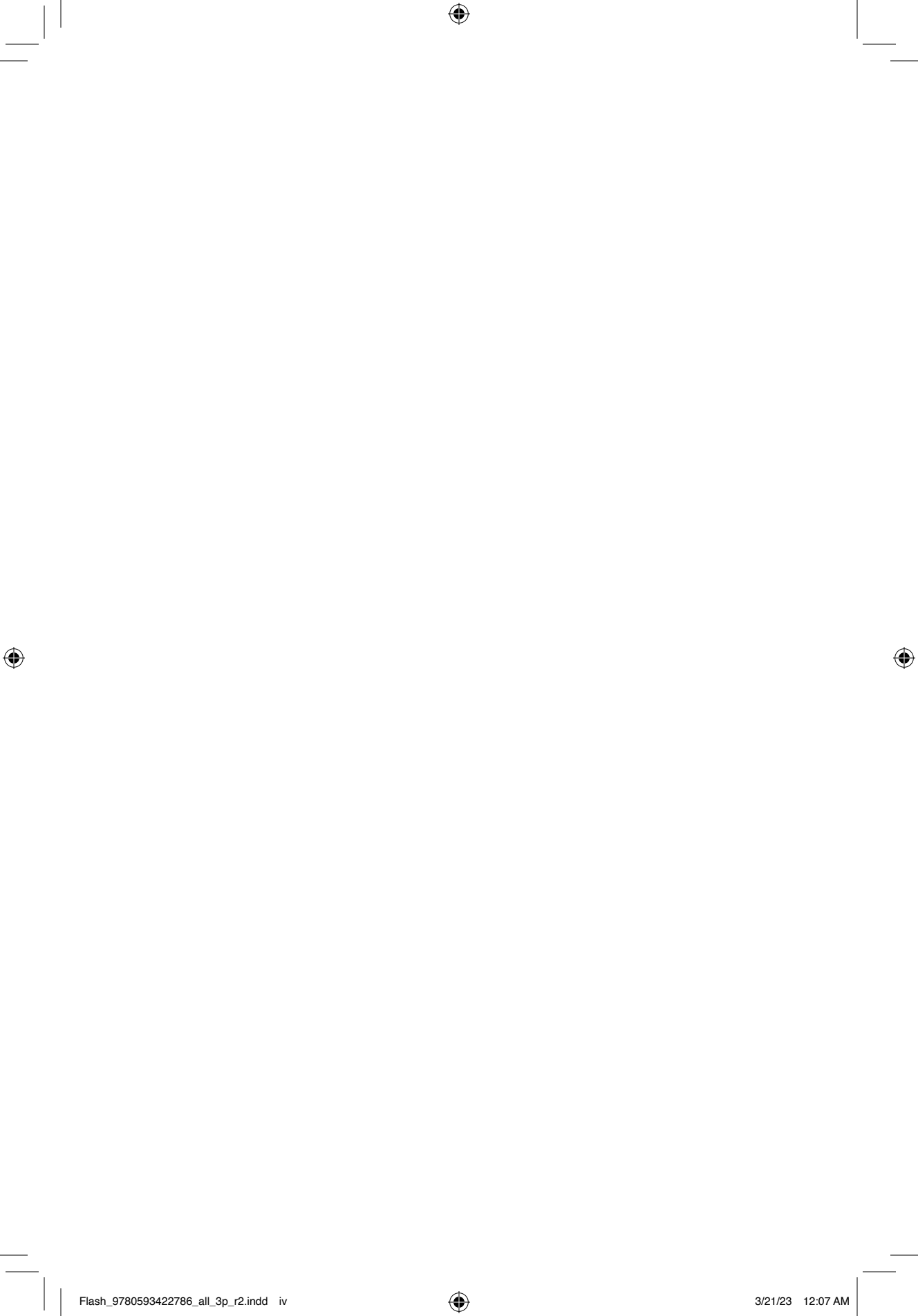
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**G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS
NEW YORK**

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— EST. 1838 —

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

Publishers Since 1838

An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2023933369

Hardcover ISBN: 9780593422786

Ebook ISBN: 9780593422793

Printed in the United States of America

ScoutAutomatedPrintCode

Title page image by Anton Balazh/Shutterstock.com

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PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS

UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT

JACK RYAN: President of the United States

MARY PAT FOLEY: Director of national intelligence

ARNOLD "ARNIE" VAN DAMM: President Ryan's chief of staff

SCOTT ADLER: Secretary of state

ROBERT BURGESS: Secretary of defense

THE CAMPUS

JOHN CLARK: Director of operations

DOMINGO "DING" CHAVEZ: Assistant director of operations

DOMINIC "DOM" CARUSO: Operations officer

GAVIN BIERY: Director of information technology

LISANNE ROBERTSON: Former director of transportation

JACK RYAN, JR.: Operations officer/senior analyst

USS *DELAWARE*

COMMANDER CHRISTINA DIXON: Skipper

SENIOR CHIEF PETTY OFFICER BILL DAVIS: Sonar technician

LIEUTENANT COMMANDER DAN YOUNG: Executive officer

P-8 POSEIDON

LIEUTENANT TOM MCGRATH: Pilot-in-command

LIEUTENANT JUNIOR GRADE JACK STEWART: Copilot

LIEUTENANT COMMANDER VINNIE SHORTS: Naval flight
officer

CHINESE CHARACTERS

FEN LI: Chief executive officer of the HAZ Corporation

AIGUO WU: Member of the Central Committee of the
Communist Party of China

PRESIDENT CHEN: President of the People's Republic of China

OTHER CHARACTERS

DR. CATHY RYAN: First Lady of the United States

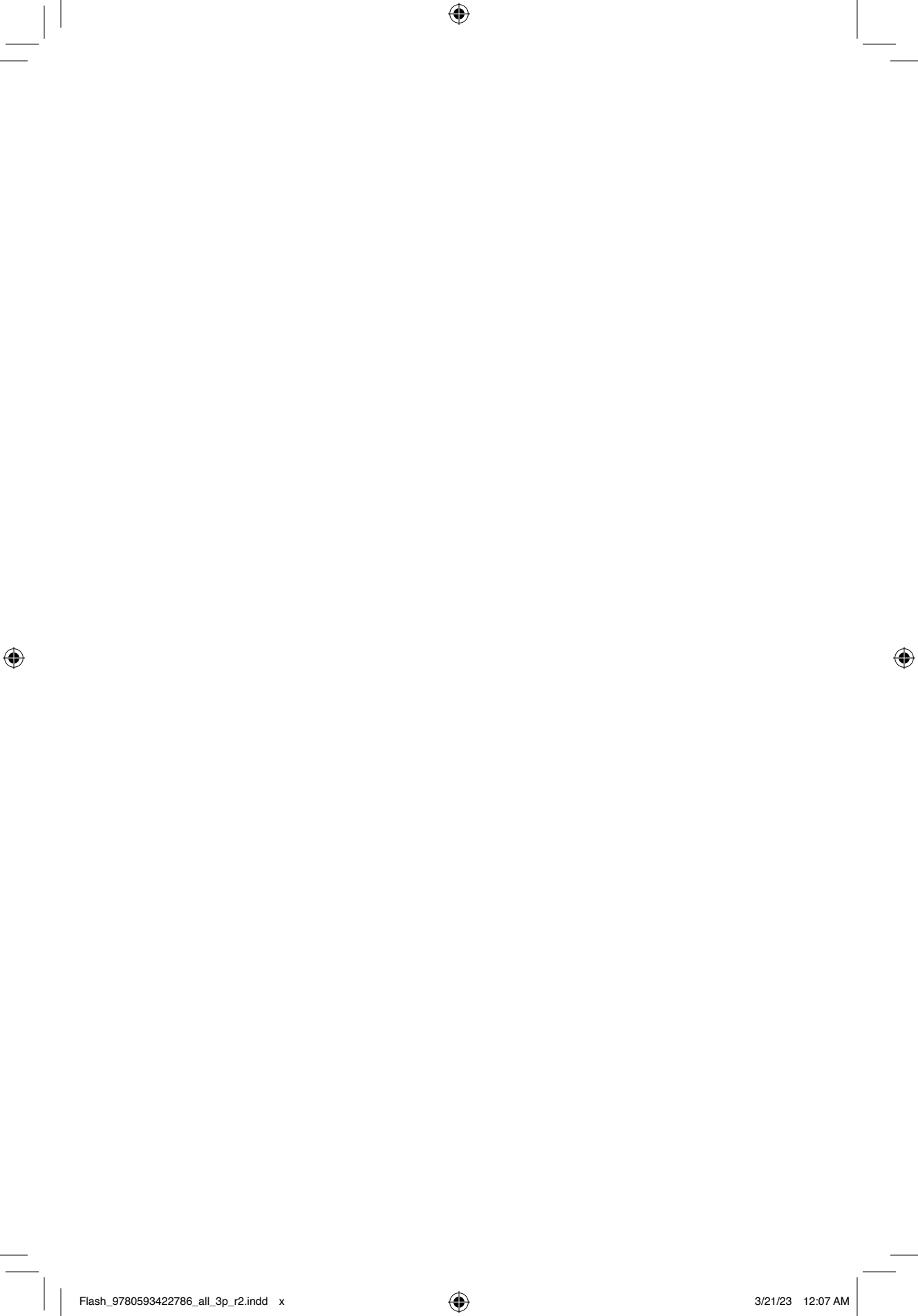
ISABEL YANG: Potential Campus helper

MASTER SERGEANT CARY MARKS: Operational Detachment
Alpha 555

SERGEANT FIRST CLASS JAD MUSTAFA: Operational
Detachment Alpha 555

MARIO REYES: CIA asset

TOM CLANCY
FLASH POINT



PROLOGUE

VICINITY OF PARACEL ISLANDS SOUTH CHINA SEA

LI JIE WATCHED AS A WAVE BROKE OVER THE BOW OF HIS SHIP. THE GREEN FOAM scoured away the paint flecking from the *Dragon's* discolored deck. To Li Jie's seasoned eye, the frothing sea was a harbinger of what was to come. An omen of both the approaching storm and the violence brewing on his vessel.

Keeping his left hand on the wheel, Li Jie used his right to touch a button on the digital display mounted in the dashboard in front of him. A swirl of angry reds and oranges filled the LCD screen as the weather radar rendered the looming storm into abstract art. As predicted, the typhoon was shaping up to be a monster. But while the sea was rough going now, Li Jie planned to have his precious cargo tucked safely back in Zhan-jiang Port before the worst of the storm hit.

The same could not be said of the Vietnamese fishing trawler wallowing through the choppy seas two points off his bow and three hundred meters distant.

"Are you certain the boat is dead in the water?"

The question came from behind Li Jie, but he didn't turn to

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answer. Ostensibly, this was so that he could keep his eyes on the unforgiving waves, but the raging sea was not the only danger Li Jie feared. The slip of a woman with her bone-white hair and voice as quiet as the grave terrified Li Jie in a way that thirty years of plying his trade on stretches of the world's most dangerous oceans did not. The sea might be a fickle mistress, but even at her worst, she could claim the lives of only those who sailed upon her waters. The same could not be said of the woman. A single whisper from that unassuming voice could render Li Jie, and his entire family, ash.

"Yes," Li Jie said, toggling the monitor to yet another display. "This feed is from our passive sonar array. The trawler is not emitting engine noise. Her power plant is completely offline."

Li Jie gestured as he spoke, tracing the nonexistent Doppler returns with his index finger. On the surface, there was no reason why Li Jie's vessel would possess a passive sonar at all, let alone one sensitive enough to detect and classify targets more than one hundred kilometers distant.

But there was more to the *Dragon* than met the eye.

Though the *Dragon* was registered as an ordinary Chinese-flagged cargo ship, she was anything but. Beneath the *Dragon's* purposely rusting exterior was a surprisingly robust power plant capable of sending the vessel knifing through the water at greater than twenty knots and up to almost thirty in a pinch. The massive diesel engines also drove a pair of generators responsible for satisfying the *Dragon's* prodigious electrical requirements. This appetite for power ran the gamut from banks of software-driven receivers designed to suck RF signals from the air to a suite of cleverly disguised electro-optical sensors that could surreptitiously observe and record activities from kilometers away.

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But all of that was just window dressing compared to what the *Dragon* carried in the specially configured compartment deep within her hull. This fifteen-by-fifteen-meter space housed a deep-sea submersible hardened to withstand the steel-crushing water pressure at depths of greater than eight thousand meters. In his five years of captaining the *Dragon*, Li Jie had used the two-man minisub to tap undersea fiber-optic lines, install surveillance devices in enemy ports, monitor undersea weapons tests, and, in one case still discussed in the hushed tones the exploit deserved, beacon an American *Ohio*-class boomer submarine.

Still, as impressive as these exploits might be, they were but footnotes to the mission the minisub had just undertaken. A mission so secretive that for the first time in Li Jie's tenure aboard the *Dragon*, the crew had been joined by a platoon of men commanded by a single woman.

Armed men.

If the hard-looking warriors had hailed from the People's Liberation Army Navy Marine Corps, Li Jie would have still been uneasy, but not terrified. The Marine Corps' Jiaolong Commando Unit, or Sea Dragons, were easily recognizable in their black uniforms and were often tasked to guard Chinese vessels from pirates. But the twenty men now crowding Li Jie's berthing with their assortment of weapons and gear did not hail from any branch of the military. Instead, they were a detachment from a private security company known only by the English initials HAZ.

The men were mercenaries.

Killers for hire.

And while Li Jie and his crew had performed what at first

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blush had been deemed an impossible mission with the ease and professionalism for which they'd become known, the operation was not yet complete. As the woman with the quiet voice had made clear, until the *Dragon* was safely back in harbor and the contents of the ship's vault transferred ashore, Li Jie and his crew were on war footing.

"Have they seen us?" the woman said, her quiet voice the whisper of steel on leather.

Li Jie paused, considering his answer.

While his years of clandestine service had taught him the need for secrecy, at his core, Li Jie was still a sailor and the thought of being caught powerless in a typhoon's path was the stuff of nightmares. And yet, at the end of the day, a nightmare was still just a dream while the woman and her contingent of killers were very much a reality.

"I don't know," Li Jie said as another wave crashed over the *Dragon's* bow. For a moment, the frothing water blurred the windshield, washing away the image of the stricken ship. Then the laboring windshield wipers did their work and the fishing trawler returned. "We're jamming across the electromagnetic spectrum as per your instructions, but we've detected no RF energy emitting from the trawler. If she has a radar, she isn't using it, and her radios seem to be down as well. Could be that she's a ghost ship. Either way, without enough power for steerage, she won't last long in this storm."

The last sentence filled Li Jie with a sense of trepidation, but he added it nonetheless. He was a third-generation sailor and would always be the boy who'd learned about the sea while working alongside his fisherman father. Seeing the lifeless trawler wallowing in the waves clawed at his soul in a way that a non-sailor could never understand. In that moment, the ghost

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vessel wasn't a Vietnamese-flagged ship. Instead, it represented his uncle and father desperately trying to bring the engines on-line before the South China Sea claimed another victim.

The slight woman with the bone-white hair and the power of life and death in her soft voice tapped long, elegant fingers on the faux-wood dashboard. Her emotionless eyes tracked the ailing trawler. She'd begun to speak when a signal light flashed from the trawler's bridge, interrupting her.

ENGINES DISABLED. TAKING ON WATER. NEED ASSISTANCE. URGENT.

As heartbreaking as the plea was, Li Jie didn't bother translating the flashes for the woman. The fishermen had just sealed their fate. Indeed, the slight woman was already speaking into the small radio she kept fastened to her belt. The radio that linked her to the hulking, scar-faced warrior who commanded the mercenary contingent. After a final flurry of words, the woman released the transmit button and returned the radio to her belt.

A moment later, light again split the darkness.

But this time, the light carried something far more lethal than mere words.

A series of flashes rippled across the trawler's waterline as armor-piercing warheads detonated. The crippled vessel listed to the right, her watertight compartments flooding. In less time than it took for Li Jie to breathe a prayer to the ancestors on behalf of the fishermen's souls, the trawler disappeared into the swirling water.

"Survivors?" the slight woman asked.

Li Jie dutifully played the *Dragon's* infrared sensor across the maelstrom, searching for the telltale white thermal signature of a warm human body amid the churning black waves. He thought he'd caught a glimpse of gray during the first sweep, but the sensor's second revealed only the raging sea.

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Satisfied, Li Jie toggled the display back to the weather radar.

“None,” Li Jie said. “The storm is almost upon us. I respectfully suggest that we make for port.”

“Agreed,” the woman said. “And I respectfully suggest you get us home in one piece. More than just our lives depend on your nautical skills.”

Li Jie gave a curt nod as he advanced the twin throttles, sending the *Dragon* lurching forward. But behind his carefully cultivated blank face, Li Jie was shaking. He breathed a second prayer to the ancestors.

This time, the soul he bargained for was his own.

1

UNIVERSITY OF REGENSBURG REGENSBURG, GERMANY

"ENTSCULDIGUNG—WO IST DIE FAKULTÄT FÜR MATHEMATIK?"

Jack Ryan, Jr., did in fact know the way to the mathematics department, but not because he was an aficionado of the Pythagorean theorem. In fact, Jack's last math class had been under the tutelage of Father O'Neil, whose love of equations and variables was rivaled only by his adoration for the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas. Jack had escaped the class with a C-plus, much to the chagrin of his surgeon mother, who took a dim view of any mark less than a B.

Jack's familiarity with the University of Regensburg's quaint campus was not the result of a newfound thirst for knowledge or a desire to right his past collegiate wrongs characterized by too much time on the football field and not enough in the library. Neither had Jack's familiarity come from strolling along the campus's network of pedestrian paths under the azure sky and brilliant German sunshine. No, Jack knew where the math building was for the same reason he was seated at a section of

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tables in the cobblestone-paved common area that formed the university's heart.

Jack was running a surveillance operation.

But he couldn't say this to the cute blonde dressed in a white half-shirt, black Lululemon leggings, and white cross-trainers. While Jack hadn't thought much of college math, there were certainly some aspects of the higher-education experience he'd found enjoyable.

"Sorry," Jack said with a smile. "I'm not a student."

The girl smiled back, and Jack's grin widened.

At six foot two and two hundred twenty pounds, Jack was a big boy. Now that he was closer to forty than twenty, he had to hit the gym harder to maintain his athletic build. But his blue eyes were still bright, his face unwrinkled, and his brown hair thick and curly.

Judging by the coed's reaction, Jack must not be aging too terribly.

He still had it.

"Of course not," the girl said, laughing, as she switched to German-accented English. "You are much too old to be a student. I thought you might be visiting your child for parents' weekend?"

Or perhaps not.

"Nope, no child," Jack said, fighting to keep his grin from withering. "Just here for a conference."

"Oh," the girl said, her face reddening. "Sorry. Could you tell me where the mathematics building is located?"

"Sure," Jack said. "Quickest way is through there." He turned in his chair to point to the doors of the University Student Office behind him. "It'll be the first building you see on the other side."

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“Danke,” the girl said.

She offered Jack a final smile that reeked of pity before heading into the building.

Jack gritted his teeth as he waited for the other shoe to drop. As jolting as it had been to learn that he could no longer pass as a college student, he knew the worst was still to come. As if on cue, a feminine voice echoed from a Bluetooth-equipped combination transmitter/receiver lodged deep in the canal of his right ear.

“Do we have a med kit?”

“Why?” Jack said, instantly alert.

“Thought you might need something for your bruised ego.”

The raspy tone engendered images of raven hair and vanilla-scented olive-toned skin. Unlike Jack, who was seated at a flimsy metal table with a doner kebab wrapped in aluminum foil for company, his coworker and girlfriend, Lianne Robertson, was lounging in the grass on the south side of the University Student Office. In fact, if they’d been the only two operatives on the net, Jack might have broken protocol long enough to tell the Lebanese American woman how he’d accidentally mixed salt into his coffee after seeing her in “college attire.”

Jack didn’t.

This was partly because he was still trying to navigate the pitfalls of working clandestinely with someone who was also a love interest and partly because he and Lianne weren’t alone on the net.

Not by a long shot.

“Don’t sweat it, Jack. We all get old.”

The high-pitched voice belonged to Gavin Biery.

Like Jack and Lianne, Gavin was an employee of The Campus, an off-the-books intelligence agency. Unlike Jack and

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Lisanne, who were paramilitary officers, Gavin was The Campus's director of information technology, and its resident hacker. As such, he was perched in his comfortable chair at The Campus's Alexandria, Virginia, headquarters rather than in Germany.

Since the operation the three operatives were currently running had been billed as surveillance only, Gavin had asked to accompany his teammates. Jack had turned down the portly keyboard warrior. Gavin brought more to the fight ensconced in his climate-controlled IT labyrinth than he would deployed to the field.

Not to mention that he looked far less appealing in summer wear.

"First of all, I'm not old," Jack said. "Second, I need everyone focused on the task at hand. Coffee break is coming up."

"Whatever you say, pops," Lisanne said, her husky voice raising goose bumps across Jack's skin.

Before catching his flight to Munich, Jack had been called in for a sit-down with his boss and The Campus's director of operations, John T. Clark. Clark's operational history was both long and distinguished, beginning with his time as a SOG veteran and Vietnam-era Navy SEAL. In the ensuing years, Clark had worked as a CIA paramilitary officer and served as the original Rainbow Six. He and Jack's father had met in the jungles of Colombia during a CIA-helmed counter-drug operation gone wrong.

Now Jack's father was the President of the United States, and Clark was Jack's boss. When John Clark talked, Jack listened, even on the rare occasions when he didn't agree with what his boss had to say.

This had been one of those times.

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Jack and Lisanne had been honest with their brothers- and sisters-in-arms when their relationship had firmly left platonic territory. While this wasn't a surprise to most of their compatriots, Clark had counseled the pair on what this meant from an operational sense. In short, it changed things. Contrary to the movies, operating with someone with whom you were romantically involved was difficult.

Serving objectively as that person's team leader was nearly impossible.

Jack hadn't disagreed with Clark's assessment. Who was he to argue with someone who'd been hunting his nation's adversaries while Jack had still been in diapers? Still, this was not an operation, per se, as much as a tactical test-drive. A test-drive of Isabel Yang's utility as well as a demonstration for a rather unique bit of software Gavin had been tinkering with for the last several months. It would also serve as a trial run for Jack's ability to operate with Lisanne in the field. As Campus work went, you couldn't get much more vanilla than an academic conference held in the sleepy German town of Regensburg.

Milk run were the exact words Jack had used with Clark.

"I've got movement on Socrates's phone," Gavin said.

Socrates was Isabel Yang's call sign.

Yang was a twenty-six-year-old Ph.D. student who was being groomed as a Campus helper. The Campus's black side numbered less than twelve people, and the flat organizational chart and lack of bureaucracy was one of the organization's selling points. Unlike traditional members of the intelligence community, Campus operatives were not limited by findings, statutes, or authorities. Jack Ryan, Sr., and his friend and Campus founder, Gerry Hendley, were the North Stars when it came to deciding what was in and out of bounds as it pertained to sanctioned

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operations. Though not a history professor like his father, Jack Junior was an adept enough student of the antiquities to know that this arrangement was not a recipe for success.

But that was a problem for another day.

Jack's near-term concern lay with The Campus's manpower, or lack thereof. Nimble organizations were great at the type of missions that required a scalpel, but more and more often, Campus work tended toward the sledgehammer variety. With multiple teams operating simultaneously around the globe, the lack of depth in nonoperational departments like logistics, recruiting, and human resources was beginning to show. Even among the door-kickers, Campus personnel were stretched painfully thin. To make matters worse, the entity had no formal accessions process. This meant The Campus had no standardized way to vet and onboard potential new talent.

Enter Jack's thought on helpers.

The Mossad was a shining example of how to do more with less. As a country of only about nine million people, Israel was constantly required to punch above its weight. The tiny nation's intelligence service was no exception. As a way to even the scales against its much-better-funded and -manned counterparts, the Mossad had developed a network of helpers that spanned the globe. These men and women weren't operatives as much as they were people in unique positions or with unique skill sets who could fill logistical or intelligence gaps for active Mossad operations.

People like Isabel Yang.

In addition to her qualifications as an academic who spoke three languages and could pass for half a dozen nationalities, Isabel was an Army brat. Her Chinese American father had

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been a Green Beret assigned to the 10th Special Forces Group when he'd been killed in Afghanistan. Isabel's patriotism ran deep. Jack had first made her acquaintance during an operation in South Korea, and he'd been impressed with her mettle. Now they were taking the next step in the agent/handler relationship.

Isabel was attending the academic conference hosted by the University of Regensburg at The Campus's behest. A conference also attended by three influential Chinese scientists whose work spanned both military and civilian applications. The conference was now entering its second day, and while Isabel had confirmed the presence of the Chinese scientists, she had yet to meet them.

Jack was hoping this would change today.

"Roger that, Gavin," Jack said. "Can you confirm she's heading toward the break area, over?"

"Stand by," Gavin said.

Geolocating someone with their phone was old news. What once took the power of the NSA's supercomputers could now be done with one of the many publicly available apps. But the utility of this capability vanished once someone was inside a structure.

Until now.

Gavin had been toying with the idea of using the accelerometer in a target's phone to judge the direction and distance of their movement, but he'd struggled with how to baseline the algorithms. Everyone's stride was different, and this made it difficult to judge how fast and far someone was moving once the accelerometer triggered.

Then Gavin had had one of his famous breakthroughs.

Rather than attempting to baseline a target independently, he would use the phones surrounding the target phone to measure

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the distance it covered. He'd developed an app that would allow him to use phones connected to a single Wi-Fi router as a miniature GPS constellation. Code-named PARSEC, the invention worked pretty well in the shakeout exercise Jack had run at a mall near Alexandria.

This was its first operational test.

"Confirmed," Gavin said, sounding like a kid on Christmas morning. "Socrates is moving with the targets toward the break area."

"Roger that," Jack said. "Lisanne, you ready?"

"You bet," Lisanne said. "Video and audio feeds are great."

The tobacco-cessation efforts that were all the rage in America had yet to take hold in much of the rest of the world. The Chinese scientists were no exception. Thus, the common area outside the mathematics building had proven to be a popular hangout for those who preferred nicotine to caffeine for their afternoon pick-me-up. The courtyard offered a breath of fresh air along with the all-important receptacle for cigarette butts.

After watching the targets eschew the conveniently located coffee shop for the smoking area on day one, Jack had adjusted his plan in two ways. One, he'd repositioned Lisanne and her goodies. Two, he'd suggested to Isabel that she take up smoking.

Unsurprisingly, the first directive had been much better received than the second.

Isabel was a fitness fanatic who viewed smoking as only slightly less risky than taking a dip in the cooling reservoir for Chernobyl's reactor. Even so, by the second day of the conference, the scientist had come around to Jack's way of thinking. The trio of Chinese scientists kept to themselves in the auditorium and hadn't attended any of the socials scheduled by the university's faculty for the visiting scholars.

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It was the smoke pit or nothing.

As a backstopped member of academia, Isabel's legend was perfect. She was not an intelligence operative, and nothing in her background would suggest otherwise. As such, her assignment was simple—engage her Chinese counterparts in small talk. Jack hadn't even wanted Isabel to attempt to garner an email address or contact method—that would be too obvious. Instead, he'd told her to be who she was—an accomplished academic at a conference. This strategy was designed to account for Isabel's inexperience and Jack's desire to use a nonthreatening environment to get the scientist's feet wet.

Unless Jack missed his guess, he wasn't the only shark circling the conference. Other intelligence operatives were probably likewise prowling for interesting contacts, and as a bona fide scientist, Isabel was the perfect dangle to identify other intelligence officers and their interests.

But Jack hadn't explained this part of the plan to Isabel.

Though the scientist had acquitted herself well during their first interaction in South Korea, she was a novice operative and Jack wanted her to behave as such. Intelligence officers were adept at spotting people who were something other than what they claimed to be. Isabel would be most effective if she didn't know she was being used.

At least that's what Jack told himself.

"Okay," Lisanne said, breaking into Jack's thoughts. "I've got eyes on three Chinese scientists plus two minders and a couple other members of the tobacco club. Waiting for face shots."

With her outfit, Lisanne should have no trouble enticing the men to look her way. Dressed in what passed for college casual, Lisanne was wearing a cream-colored tank top, cut-off jean shorts, and flip-flops. Though she was almost a decade older

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than most of the college students, Lisanne wore her age well. She'd pulled her raven hair into a ponytail, added oversized aviator sunglasses to mask her face, and mimicked the short shorts, tight tops, and painted toes that seemed to be the university's female uniform.

Jack thought Lisanne beautiful in operator garb, but when she was dressed to impress, his girlfriend truly was a heart-stopper. Today her outfit of choice showcased miles of tan skin, and her long, brown legs looked especially appealing against the white blanket she'd spread across the grass. Normally an operative's job was to vanish in plain sight. To assume the Gray Man persona. For Lisanne, this was impossible. Pretty could be downplayed and attractive figures could be hidden beneath layers of bulky clothes, but Lisanne's most noticeable feature couldn't be masked.

Her missing left arm.

In a Campus operation gone wrong, Lisanne had sustained a grievous gunshot wound that had required the amputation of her arm and almost cost her her life. In any intelligence organization but The Campus, this would have spelled the end of Lisanne's operational career.

But The Campus wasn't just another intelligence apparatus.

Knowing that she needed them far more than The Campus needed her, John Clark had given Lisanne the time and space to flesh out her new role. While her time as a gunfighter was over, she and Jack both believed that there were ways in which she could still contribute.

Today was a good example.

Lisanne would have turned heads with both arms. With one missing, everyone noticed her. Jack intended to use this to the team's advantage. With her iced coffee, laptop, collection of

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books, and notebook, Lisanne looked like any of the other students lounging on the grass. Except that her messenger bag contained a combined camera and parabolic mic wirelessly linked to her laptop. If people were going to look at Lisanne anyway, Jack intended to leverage their curiosity to obtain facial and voice prints of the Chinese team for The Campus's biometric database.

So far, his idea had paid off nicely.

Male scientists stared at Lisanne for obvious reasons. Their female counterparts gave her missing limb a second, and usually sustained, glance.

All the while Lisanne captured valuable intelligence.

Lisanne Robertson took the notion of a *dangle* to the next level.

"Say cheese, boys," Lisanne said.

Jack unwrapped his doner and took a monster bite. He was further removed from the action than he would have liked, but as his earlier encounter with the inquisitive student had proven, Jack did not look as if he belonged. At least not in Lisanne's easy manner. As such, he was running command and control of the operation, not a job he relished. Then again, he was enjoying the sunshine between bites of the world's best doner with a half-empty glass of pilsner to keep him company.

There were certainly worse ways to earn a living.

"Okay," Lisanne said, "I've got high-resolution shots of each target scientist and my mic is capturing the audio. I'm sending you the raw feed, Gavin."

"Confirmed," Gavin said. "I'll run the audio through a translation app I borrowed from a friend at the agency. The software's a beta version, so I'm not sure we'll get anything useful, but it's worth a try."

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As with all conversations with Gavin, Jack found this one insightful, as much for what the keyboard warrior did say as for what he didn't. For instance, Gavin had pointedly left out which agency the software had originated from or how he'd borrowed it. Then again, as Ding had told Jack on multiple occasions, if you know you're not going to like the answer, don't ask the question.

"Lisanne," Gavin said, "I'm showing Socrates heading for the smoke pit. You should see her any minute."

"Tally," Lisanne said. "She just popped out of the building. And look at this girl—she's got a cigarette in her mouth but seems to have forgotten her lighter. Heading over to the Chinese scientists now."

Jack set the remains of the doner on the metal table and dusted off his hands. He envisioned what was happening as he listened to Lisanne's play-by-play. In addition to making the acquaintance of the Chinese, Gavin had pushed for a slight escalation to Isabel's tasking. The hacker extraordinaire had been fiddling with a program he called HOUDINI, which was designed to compromise a user's phone. Currently the app used a device's Bluetooth port to gain entry, as this protocol was often less heavily encrypted than Wi-Fi or cell networks.

The tool had worked pretty well in testing, the only limitation being that the target phones had to be within Bluetooth range. With this in mind, Gavin had asked to try his new creation out on the Chinese scientists' phones with Isabel serving as the delivery vehicle. Jack hadn't seen the harm, since it wouldn't require anything more of the scientist than what she'd already committed to doing. She'd engage in small talk with her fellow researchers while Gavin worked his magic.

Simple.

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Or so Jack hoped.

“Tracking,” Gavin said. “Lemme see what we’ve got here. Okay, I’m showing three Xiaomi 12S Ultra phones. Doesn’t even look like they have standard government encryption. This is gonna be a cinch.”

Jack smothered a smile at Gavin’s response. The IT guru almost sounded offended by the lack of a challenge.

“Let’s just get it done, pal,” Jack said. “Like Ding says, sometimes you just wake up on the right side of the bed.”

Actually, Jack was pretty sure that fellow Campus operative and Rainbow cofounder Domingo “Ding” Chavez had said nothing of the sort, but his mentor was a font of knowledge. Besides, when Jack attributed something wise to Ding, no one on the team pushed back.

Usually.

“On it, Jack,” Gavin said. “Penetration in process.”

Gavin hummed an accompaniment to his clacking keyboard, seemingly oblivious to the awkward silence his pronouncement had just produced. Jack was in the process of keying the transmit button to say something—anything—to move the word *penetration* out of everyone’s head when Lisanne beat him to the punch.

“This is interesting,” Lisanne said, her tone all business. “Two minders have just joined the scientists. Counting Isabel, the group now numbers six.”

Jack fumbled with his cell phone, willing it to display the video from Lisanne’s sensor. Her camera/mic package had the ability to stream its pickup to any number of devices, but Jack decided not to use this feature. Live video and audio required a large data pipe, and Jack hadn’t wanted to spike any SIGINT receivers the Chinese might be employing or, worse yet, allow

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them to potentially compromise the feed. Based on the threat analysis, there was no reason to suspect that the Chinese were employing any such countermeasures, but in the profession of espionage, caution was the word of the day.

“How’s Socrates handling the newcomers?” Jack said.

“Like a champ,” Lisanne said. “After getting a light from Target 1, she hung around to shoot the shit. She didn’t even break stride when the two minders joined the party. This girl’s a natural.”

After spending a hair-raising afternoon with Isabel in Seoul dodging a North Korean kill team, Jack was inclined to agree. Still, it was nice to have his judgment independently verified. The recruitment process really was a courtship of sorts, and becoming blind to your asset’s shortcomings was a pitfall all handlers had to avoid. Though Isabel was something in the gray space between fellow operative and agent, Jack was the one running her. As such, he wanted to make sure he kept both eyes wide open during her evaluation phase. Even so, Jack was confident that if Isabel had the tactical sense to escape a trio of DPRK commandos, she could handle making small talk with Chinese academics.

“Hey, guys, I’m seeing something weird here,” Gavin said. “My spectrum analyzer is picking up fluxes across the entire band. It’s like—”

Gavin’s transmission ceased, mid-sentence.

Jack’s first feeling was one of annoyance. Though the computer ninja was hell on wheels when it came to the digital universe, his situational awareness often suffered when he had to transition from the world of ones and zeros to one populated by flesh and blood. Case in point, it would have been nice if Gavin had led with what exactly he was seeing.

FLASH POINT

With a start, Jack realized what his subconscious was trying to tell him.

Spectrum fluxes.

Electronic interference.

Loss of comms.

Someone was jamming Gavin's transmission.

"Lisanne, this is Jack, do you read me?"

Silence.

"Lisanne, are you there?"

Nothing.

So much for a milk run.