

TOM CLANCY

SHADOW STATE

*Mine honor is my life; both grow in one;
Take honor from me, and my life is done.*

--William Shakespeare, Julius Caesar

PROLOGUE

Andersen Air Force Base, Guam

Monday, September 30

Lieutenant Colonel “Magic” Mike Holbrook gripped the throttles of his specially modified F-15 Strike Eagle.

“Raider One, doors open,” crackled a voice through his headset.

“Roger doors,” he replied into his oxygen mask.

Other than a red-lensed flashlight here and there, the cavernous hangar at Guam’s Andersen Air Force Base was dark. So dark, in fact, that Magic couldn’t see the hulking doors to either side. But as a test pilot, he’d learned to trust in the highly trained ground crew who’d flown out here with him from California. If they said the hangar doors were open, then, by God, they were.

The pilot lifted his boot soles from the rudder brakes. He felt the familiar dip in the hydraulic nose-wheel strut as the plane moved. Bulked up with extra fuel and experimental electronics, the powerful old fighter surged forward.

Behind an enhanced reality visor, Magic’s eyes swept the dim instrument panel. “Exhaust gas temp good. Visual systems green,” he reported. He pushed the button that activated the nose-wheel steering and twisted the stick into a rolling turn. “Proceeding to three alpha.”

Piece of cake, he thought as the jet thundered along the taxiway. Though this was no ordinary Eagle, maneuvering it around the airfield was as familiar to Magic as driving his F-150 around his neighborhood—even without headlights.

Before serving as an Edwards test pilot, Magic had commanded an Eagle squadron up in Kadena AFB, Okinawa, Japan. Later, installed at the storied test-pilot proving grounds on the

high Mojave, he'd flown the exotic birds designed for the Air Force by Quantum Atomics, the Defense Department's largest, most sophisticated weapons supplier.

The F-15 he maneuvered tonight across Guam's airfield was a modified Quantum Atomics variant—one that few, outside of a handful of engineers and Magic himself, knew a damn thing about. Though Magic had strapped himself into dozens of experimental aircraft, he found it grimly amusing that his most dangerous mission to date should be in this familiar, old F-15 Strike Eagle.

“Raider One, this is Shotgun. Follow-me truck's to your right. Got it?”

Magic cranked his head around. Though the Humvee had its lights extinguished, the enhanced reality visor on his flight helmet made it visible. “Tally truck. Got him on infrared.”

He twisted the stick into a sharp, following turn and bumped along at about thirty miles per hour to the end of the runway.

“Raider, Shotgun. Viper Flight's at your nine. See 'em?”

Magic twisted his head hard to the left.

Though the enhanced reality goggles were an amazing piece of DARPA tech, The Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency still required the pilot to turn his head into unnatural positions to aim the sensors.

“Roger, Shotgun. Tally Viper Flight.”

Viper Flight consisted of two F-22 Raptors. They were running parallel to Magic's F-15 on a second taxiway, their anti-collision lights blinking as normal. Beyond them, Magic could make out a dozen B-52 and B-1 bomber tails rising in the dark like shark fins.

He waited for the planes of Viper to move ahead, then goosed his throttles to fall in behind them. “Shotgun, Raider One. In trail with Viper, headed to runway one-six. Will do runups and system checks at the hold-short.”

“Good copy, Raider.”

Shotgun's head engineer was monitoring Magic's every move back at the top-secret Quantum airfield in Palmdale California, better known as "Skunk Works."

Magic checked his watch. It was one o'clock on Thursday morning in Guam. Back at Skunk Works, it was a lazy eight a.m. on Wednesday. He stifled a yawn and quietly envied the engineers' full night's sleep. No matter how fancy the plane or exotic the mission, jet lag was always a bitch.

"Raider One, looking good. On standby until the hold-short."

Magic's F-15 gained the edge of the runway behind the two regular Air Force fighters. He moved the throttles to idle and pumped the brakes, jerking to a stop. "Shotgun, I'm at the hold-short."

"Roger that, Raider. Initiate sequence alpha."

Magic double-keyed his mic in acknowledgment. With the fine movements of a pianist, he toggled each of the customized switches on the right side of his instrument panel. Normally, the F-15 Strike Eagle would have a weapons systems officer in the back seat doing this kind of thing. But Magic's back seat was a solid mass of electronics.

"Shotgun, we're good here," he radioed, noting the various green lights on the panel and the digital metrics spewing down the right side of his visor. "Am I a go to power up the special mission pod?"

That, Magic knew, was the big question—the one that would require permission from the geniuses on the Potomac.

The special mission pod, codenamed UMBRA, was a long tube of electronics in the Eagle's weapons bay. *Everything* in this F-15 had been modified to optimize UMBRA's performance. The Skunk Works engineers had coated the Eagle in black, radar-absorbent paint. They'd machined small changes in the wing strakes and control surfaces. They'd dusted the canopy with a transparent, reflective epoxy. And, of course, they'd replaced Magic's co-pilot with a stack of UMBRA system electronics.

Receiving no response, Magic wondered if Washington had gotten cold feet for this flight. He keyed the sat link again. “Shotgun, am I good to cycle the special mission pod to standby?”

He could picture the civilians in short-sleeve button-downs in California and the anxious Air Force generals leaning over their shoulders. He’d heard this mission had interest all the way up to the White House. He’d dismissed that as the typical military rumor—but part of him thought it plausible.

Now he was getting annoyed. “Shotgun, Raider. Looking for an update out here. We still a go?”

“Yeah, Shotgun, we hear you. Wait one. We’re working the problem.”

Problem.

Magic sighed and looked directly up at the night sky, through the clear canopy. Though he could see the white pinpricks of stars in his other-worldly digital goggles, he had the urge to pull the damned things off and look at the stars the old-fashioned way, like he used to do on his parents’ cattle ranch in eastern Oregon.

Just like on those nights, Magic was looking at a pleasant, clear sky out here in the middle of the Pacific. He listened to his breath through the oxygen mask, and, still staring straight up, thought about his wife, then his boys.

The twin twelve-year-olds had just started peewee football at the Edwards middle-school. A second-string tight end for the Air Force Academy a million years ago, Magic had stepped up to be the assistant coach of the boys’ team, grateful to show them a few things. Their first game was this weekend. With any luck at all, he’d make it back in time.

“Still waiting for final clearance back here,” said Shotgun. “Apologies for the delay, Magic.”

He sighed into his mask and double-keyed his mic.

Classic hurry-up and—

The speakers in his helmet startled him. “Just got an update, Raider. Good news. We have clearance up and down the chain... like *way* up. Mission’s a go—so long as we get through the full flight-test telemetry package.”

“Roger that. On to flight telemetry,” responded Magic, dropping back into complete mission focus.

Like a sprinter limbering up before a race, Magic waggled his stick around and shoved his rudder pedals in and out. Back at Palmdale, the Quantum engineers followed along, narrating his every move. “Raider, we see full aft stick now...full forward stick now ...left rudder...right rudder. Flight control checks look good. Put special mission payload on standby.”

Magic lowered his thumb to power up the secret pod in the weapons bay, UMBRA. He scanned the cascade of numbers that was now running down the edge of his visor. “Shotgun... special mission payload is on stand-by. Lights are green, metrics in range. Decibels negative fifteen.”

“Roger that, Raider. We copy all. You are cleared for takeoff. Follow Viper Flight to Marshal Point Alpha.”

Magic heard Andersen Tower give Viper Flight the go-ahead call. For secrecy, the tower had been ordered not to even acknowledge his F-15. The Viper fighters raced down the runway, then shot skyward, anti-collision lights blinking. Magic waited for the jet-wash to dissipate, then told the Palmdale engineers he was ready to go.

“Shotgun, leaving hot-mic on via telemetry. Contact me on button 7 if needed. Otherwise, I’ll get back on the net after departure.”

He shoved the levers to the stops—*balls to the wall*, as the old saying went. Forty-three seconds later, he was aloft, racing through the clear dark sky at 650 knots, hurrying to catch up with Viper, following the digital positional data in his visor glass.

At ten thousand feet, he leveled and slowed. He fell into formation behind the two F-22s, shadowing them in secret, his lights off. They knew he was there, of course, but the

mission's operational security protocol dictated they say nothing to him. Magic's eyes swept his gauges, preparing for the command from Shotgun he knew would be coming his way.

And then it came.

"Okay, Magic, we want you to activate special mission payload. Take it out of stand-by."

"Activating." Magic toggled the switch. The multiple lights of UMBRA glowed green in his visor.

"How we looking?" he asked Palmdale.

"Couldn't be better, Raider One. You just fell off the AWACS scopes," came the answer.

Magic smiled beneath his mask. Even the Pacific Air Force's own Airborne Warning Aircraft, AWACS, had lost him.

This is one special F-15, he thought. Just for the hell of it, he did a snap roll in the dark.

Two hours later, somewhere between Guam and the Philippines, the three aircraft rendezvoused with a KC-10 tanker at twenty-thousand feet. As instructed in the highly classified Air Tasking Order, none of the fuel-boom operators in the back of the tanker acknowledged the existence of the black Strike Eagle that sucked down thousands of pounds of aviation gas.

Twenty minutes after the air-to-air refueling chore, while flying five hundred feet below and a quarter mile behind the F-22s, Magic's UMBRA lights went yellow, then red. For good measure, his seat vibrated, making sure he was paying attention.

Per procedure, he killed the alarms and focused on the UMBRA readings in his visor. "Shotgun," he broadcast over the link. "Be advised I've got targeting radars lighting me up. Special mission pod activated and functioning."

"Roger, Raider. We see that. Stay steady on course and speed. Put another mile between yourself and Viper."

Magic acknowledged the order and dropped back. The UMBRA sensors were blinking, the telemetry data spewing. Shotgun contacted him again. "Raider, can you give us a detailed read on those radars painting you?"

“Roger, Shotgun. Special payload identifies the radar as *USS Benfold*, Block Four Standard surface-to-air missile bearing three-zero-zero, sixty-one nautical miles.”

“Strong copy, Raider. Standby.” Magic knew they would check in with the Pentagon again. It took them forty-five seconds. “Raider, you are still Charlie Mike.”

Continue Mission, thought Magic. *UMBRA lives*.

The special payload had successfully detected *Benfold's* fire control radar and created cloaking return waves as an echo. Coupled with the radar absorbent coating on the Strike Eagle, UMBRA had nullified *Benfold's* radar energy the same way noise-canceling headphones negate sound waves. Evidently, well enough that the brass was confident in moving forward to the next phase.

Magic turned northwest, straight over the friendly, ship-borne SAMs that were targeting him. He could hear Viper responding to *Benfold's* fire-control radars now, communicating with the naval officers down in the ship's combat information center. While the Air Force and Navy officers chattered through the “blue-on-blue” exercise, Magic's F-15 flew on, undetected, cloaked by UMBRA, completely unacknowledged by *Benfold*.

Now for the hard part.

“We still a go for the neutral?” Magic asked Shotgun.

It took them about a minute to respond. “Roger. Stay with Viper. Mission is cleared to Point Bravo, test neutral.”

Point Bravo, thought Magic, settling in behind the stick, his bladder pinching him. From Alpha to Bravo would be the longest leg of the flight. After refueling from the KC-10, his Eagle certainly had the gas for it—his body was another matter. He put the Strike Eagle on autopilot, loosened his straps, rotated onto a butt cheek, and unzipped the crotch of his flight suit.

How many times, he asked himself, *have I pissed into one of these little plastic relief tubes?*

That unpleasant business done, he sat back, scanned gauges, and waited. During the remaining transit, he thought of several ways to improve his boys' receiver routes. Though it was just peewee football, Magic still hated to lose.

A tone in his helmet warbled. He'd made it to Point Bravo—over the Leyte Gulf, the notch of water between the big Philippine islands of Luzon and Mindanao. The UMBRA lights were flashing, his seat vibrating.

“Hey Shotgun, I've got the PAF lighting me up with an early warning radar. We still good?”

“Roger that, Raider, still good. Philippine Air Force is seeing the F-22s, communicating on Guard freq. They're not seeing you. Commence separation exercise.”

Magic pulled the stick back and ascended, putting more distance between himself and the F-22s. He went to 35,000 feet, becoming a big, fat, juicy target for the PAF's air defense operators up and down the archipelago. This would be the very first test of a truly foreign air defense system, the real thing—but at least it was a neutral country.

He put his radios in scan mode and listened for the reaction from the Filipinos.

There wasn't one.

“Raider, we are still Charlie Mike.” The pocket protectors were clearly jubilant. Magic could hear some celebrating in the background of the transmission. “Proceed to point Charlie, Raider, hostile test approved. You've made us propeller-heads very happy back here.”

Magic acknowledged the call, tilted his stick to steady up on course two-seven-zero, and left Viper Flight behind.

He was alone now, headed over Palawan, a long candy-bar-shaped Philippine island. It lay just east of Mischief Reef, a heavily fortified man-made outpost built by the Chinese to illegally take control of South China Sea.

Magic's F-15 would soon fly right over it.

That's when he would know whether UMBRA *really* worked.

*

His hair buzzed short, his skin tawny, his fatigues unmarked by insignia, Colonel Cai Qi stood next to a missile defense sergeant in a buried bunker on China's Mischief Reef.

Braced by the muscled shoulders and sinewy arms of the Muay Thai fighter he was, Cai leaned on the metal tabletop and studied the flow of real-time information coming in from the air defense radars. Heterochromia, a quirk in the genetic roll of the dice, had given him one brown and one blue eye, both of which squinted at the small digital symbols that represented aircraft over the South China Sea.

"What's that, there?" he asked the radar operator, pointing at a yellow contact on one of the flat-screen monitors.

"That's a Filipino cargo plane, sir. Took off from Cebu, destination Manila."

"Was it scheduled?"

"Yes, sir. And its IFF system checks as normal."

As a Laos-based non-official-cover officer in China's Ministry of State Security, MSS, Cai was certainly no expert on air defense systems. But it wasn't hard to follow what was happening on the screens.

Looking at another monitor, he could see an Air India 787 making its way to Mumbai, a Philippine Air triple-7 departing Manila, and an EVA 747 on its way to Taipei from San Francisco. He could also see the blips that represented the two J-20 fighter jets of the cumbersomely titled People's Liberation Army Air Force, PLAAF, as they flew in a tight racetrack position ten thousand meters over the reef, just in case the missiles failed.

This manmade island, Mischief Reef, was shaped like a boomerang. Down one peninsula, was the airfield and the underground surface-to-air missile control battery, in which

Cai stood now. Down the other peninsula were the surface-to-surface missiles, designed to sink ships, should they encroach within fifty miles of the reef.

Standing upright and rotating his head on his stiff neck, Cai checked his watch. Zero-one-thirty—they were entering the mission window. He inhaled deeply and closed his eyes. The bunker's piped-in air smelled faintly of vinegar.

The man standing next to him was an MSS Science and Technology engineer in civilian clothes. Cai's handler—who he knew only as "Control"—had sent the engineer to accompany him on this rare, direct-action mission. The engineer touched Cai's thick shoulder.

"Zero-one-thirty," whispered the S&T man. He was gray at the temples, a little pudgy.

Cai nodded. "Right. Should you do another software check?"

The S&T man squeezed between the operators at the monitors and typed several lines of code into an administrative console. When done, he turned to the sergeant in charge. "Run another systems check."

The noncommissioned officer standing watch at this battery on this night, didn't know these men. But they'd shown him the proper security credentials and a set of classified orders from the command base up at Hainan Island. Out here at Mischief Reef, where the PLAAF often tested experimental air defense systems, the sergeant wasn't all that surprised to have these visitors.

After punching some buttons, the sergeant wheeled away from his monitor so the S&T man could inspect his work.

"Good," the S&T man said. Out of view of the sergeant, the engineer looked at Cai and nodded once.

Cai waited for the sergeant to replace his headset and resume his station. "You're sure?" he asked the Beijing-based engineer in a low voice.

"I'm sure. The code is operating perfectly."

"And the bunker comms are disabled? You guarantee that?"

You guarantee that?

Among the officers of the MSS, that question was a code. Should the subordinate violate the guarantee, retribution would be swift.

After a pause, the S&T man nodded. "I guarantee it, Colonel."

"Then leave."

The engineer turned his thick body sideways to make his way to the heavy bunker door.

For another three minutes, Cai watched the sergeants processing benign air contacts. Then, at zero one-thirty-six, Cai opened the bunker door and climbed the metal stairs to the grated roof. By the time he got there, the S&T major was gone, walking back to the airfield. Ling and Twei, Cai's men from Laos, were by themselves, leaning against a railing on their elbows, looking out to sea. Cai could hear the crash of surf on the reef. The water was invisible.

He looked at his men. In the same bland khakis Cai wore, their shoulder-length hair tied into ponytails made them look more like prison convicts than the radar technicians that the lanyards around their necks claimed them to be. Not that it would matter all that much.

"Hey," Cai called to them. He pointed toward the heavy fuel cans at their feet. Control had arranged for those cans. They'd been waiting for them at the landing pad where Cai's helicopter had touched down a few hundred meters away.

"Now," said Cai. He turned back toward the bunker stairs. Ling and Twei followed, carrying the cans. They left them outside the door before entering with Cai.

"Any new contacts worth noting?" Cai asked the sergeant.

"Negative, sir. There were some American F-22s over the Philippines, but they turned north. Looks like they're headed to their base in Okinawa. They came from Guam."

Cai nodded, then moved to the right, making room for Ling and Twei. The three Laotian visitors got in position behind the three air defense sergeants, as planned. They waited.

A full minute passed before the commanding sergeant spat, "Hostile contact profile! American F-15, incoming!"

He then barked a dozen target indicators into his lip-mic, believing he was passing the information up the chain to his leadership on Hainan Island. He ticked off the F-15's speed, bearing, altitude, electronic signature, and radar gain. His hands flew over the controls of the missile system, pulling up the hinged plastic guards that prevented an accidental launch.

"Master arm!" he shouted. The other two sergeants performed similar functions.

"Target acquired!" announced the man at the center scope.

A shrill electronic warning sounded. The lead sergeant put his hand near the SAM launch controllers. Over and over, he tried to make contact with headquarters. He couldn't raise them.

"Ready missiles one and four!" the sergeant barked.

The protocol when there was no response from Hainan, was to fire on any foreign military aircraft that pierced the self-declared air-defense zone around Mischief Reef. They would launch them in salvos of two, wait, then launch again.

"Sir—I'm going to have to fire on it. Are you aware of any other orders?"

Cai moved closer to the commanding sergeant on the left, his eyes fixed on the scope. "Show me the contact."

"Right there, sir. Ten thousand meters, bearing zero-eight-seven. Radar has positively identified it as an F-15 Eagle, Mach point seven, closing fast. No IFF. Mission profile hostile." He tried once more to raise Hainan. No response. To the operator, none of this made any sense. He turned to Cai with wide eyes, "Could it be the software you installed?"

"Keep tracking the target, Sergeant but don't fire," answered Cai. "I'll go up top and get the engineer."

That was the signal.

Ling and Twei were looking at him, waiting for it.

Cai withdrew the knife tucked on the inside of his belt. It was a folding *karambit*, with a curved blade and a finger loop that acted like a brass knuckle.

“*Bai-ee*,” he said in his native Laotian, raising his voice to be heard over the sergeants.

The MSS colonel stepped briskly forward, seized the chin of the man at the leftmost scope, and sliced the *karambit* across the base of his neck. After the cut, he locked his forearms around the operator’s head and twisted violently, cracking a bone. He could hear Ling and Twei following the same procedure to his right.

Then he heard something else.

Ling’s man, the early warning radar sergeant at the center console, had fallen out of his swivel chair, making an ungodly mess as he collapsed on the floor. In the dim light of the bunker, the blood puddle was black, spreading quickly.

Twei was on the other side of Ling, making light of the mess, grinning. In a Laotian dialect, he noted that Ling had pulled way too hard on the man’s chin—a rookie move if ever there was one.

Cai wiped his blade on the clean shoulder of the dead man in front of him, refolded the *karambit*, and stowed it in his waistband. He punched in the security code at the bunker door that Control had given him while alarms blinked and buzzed at the now vacant radar consoles.

The diesel cans were on the grated door stoop, right where Ling and Twei had left them. Cai stepped past them and hurried up the metal steps, his feet echoing in the quiet night. His two men would take care of the burn-out.

Over the normal hiss of the surf at the bunker roof, Cai could hear the helicopter spinning up on the pad a hundred meters away.

Ling and Twei had made quick work of the burn. Cai could smell the fumes from the exhaust ports before they floated off on the sea breeze. He saw a sooty, black curl of smoke reaching up from below.

Accidents happened often out here on Mischief Reef. The island’s fire marshal would conclude that the bunker’s emergency generator had gone haywire. Cai didn’t need to worry about the cover story. Control had said he’d take care of everything.

Ling and Twei joined him on the roof. Together, they descended the short stairs to the sand and sprinted toward the idling helicopter. The three Laotians strapped in next to the S&T man who'd been waiting for them. Cai noticed how the engineer never once made eye contact with him. With his unmatching eyes, Cai had found long ago that he could have that effect on people.

He took one last look at the bunker's square concrete roof, barely visible in the spare light of pre-dawn as the helo gained altitude. As a committed Taoist, he didn't mourn the spirits of the sergeants who'd given their lives in sacrifice. He believed they'd served their inevitable role, as ordained by the Tao.

And, in thinking of that Quantum Atomics F-15 flying on somewhere overhead, Cai thought he'd performed his inevitable role too.

Chapter ONE

Kowloon, Hong Kong

Tuesday, October 1

Jack Ryan, Jr., stood a foot taller than most of the passengers exiting Hong Kong's Star Ferry. With his tropical-weight suit jacket slung over a shoulder, his shirt sleeves rolled, and his tie askew, the American shortened his stride so he wouldn't bump into the people in front of him.

From behind his wayfarer sunglasses, he scanned the commuters knotted at the ferry's prow, waiting to get off. He was in a hurry—desperate to get one more glimpse of the woman before she disappeared into this city of seven and a half million.

He dropped his eyes low, scanning briefcases, purses, and computer bags. She'd been carrying a string-handled, white shopping bag, he remembered.

He felt elbows, shoulders, and knees pressing against him as the crowd packed together, ahead of the ferry's docking. The sing-song Cantonese around him rose in pitch, the voices as indecipherable to Jack as squawking birds.

He kept searching, hoping to pick the woman out from the crowd. He etched what she'd looked like into his memory—shopping bag, surgical mask, sunglasses, long black hair, a fashionable charcoal skirt-suit.

Jesus, he thought, scanning intently. More than half the women on this ferry looked like that. Provided the shopping bag *hadn't* been a figment of his imagination, it would be the only feature that distinguished her.

The ferry door opened. The first of the riders surged through it. Jack was swept onto the gangway with the crowd, over the pier, through the turnstile, and past the last security checkpoint.

He wondered if the woman might be behind him. He forced his way to the edge of the throng and stood still. Commuters flowed around him like rapids around a rock. He cleared

enough space to put his computer bag at his feet and throw his jacket on. He reached into the jacket's lower right pocket. His fingers touched the note the woman had passed him.

Knowing he was under surveillance, Jack only touched the note. It wouldn't be safe to read it until he spotted his MSS minders again.

It took six minutes for the crowd to leave him behind. Before the onrushing set of passengers mobbed the ferry again, Jack strode down the open quay. Dying autumn sunlight warmed his shoulders. A stew of cigarettes, fish, diesel exhaust, and salt air burned his nose. He heard the buzz that opened the gate for the new set of passengers headed from this side, Kowloon, to the island, Hong Kong.

Jack turned and walked toward the ferry's bow, staying away from the rush that surged over the gangplank. He watched dockworkers loosen thick halyards from massive cleats bolted to the pier. He heard the ferry's engine rev.

Facing the harbor, he watched the ferry depart. Beyond it, at the far shore, he noted the tall buildings of Hong Kong's central business district. He turned around and looked up and down the quay. With his MSS surveillants at least a few hundred yards away, he chanced a last look at the note the woman had slipped him, making sure he had it right: *Temple Street Night Market. Heirloom Watches, 22:00.*

He balled the paper in his fist and tossed it in the harbor.

He knew his MSS minders would be somewhere up the quay, waiting for him. Delaying the inevitable, Jack stood at the water's edge. It was a pleasure to see the ferry thread between freighters and junks and admire the glassy skyscrapers on the distant island shore, shining gold in the sunset.

Jack was happy to be across the harbor from those buildings. He'd spent the day trapped in one of them on the thirtieth floor, going blind as he worked over spreadsheets. He could see that very building now, the HSBC Tower, right in the center.

Jack thought of Howard Brennan, the Hendley man who'd traveled with him to Hong Kong. Howard was Hendley's Chief Investment Officer, the man who directed the firm's capital strategy.

He and Jack had come to Hong Kong to line up the financing for an acquisition. Gerry Hendley was making a bid for GeoTech, an acknowledged leader in the refinement of rare earth magnets, an incipient power player in the green energy revolution. Hendley was old friends with the company's CEO. The deal, they all thought, was a good one.

To pull it off, however, would require \$300M in borrowed capital. It was Howard's job to negotiate the terms for the loan with HSBC.

Jack could picture Howard up near the top of that tall building now, schmoozing the bankers, skillfully arguing to shave a point of interest here, add a few months of bond maturity there. Jack felt his phone buzz in his pants pocket. It was a text from Howard, right on cue, as though the banker had been reading his mind.

We're working through dinner to get the financing terms closed. You coming back?

Jack typed his response. *No. Going to run the risk profile numbers in my room tonight. Will catch you in the morning and—*

He paused. He knew MSS would be monitoring his communications. Before hitting send, he evaluated how they might read this note to Howard. After a moment's reflection, he decided it would fit with his plan. He sent it.

A fishy gust came in off the harbor. The sea air was gaining a raw edge in this first week of October. Glad of the suit jacket now, Jack closed one button. He hurried up the quay with his sunglasses still on, even though it was getting dark.

There.

He caught sight of his first MSS minder. It was the same man Jack had spotted that morning, the one in the blue suit jacket and gray trousers. Jack had mentally named him Blue.

Blue was standing by a bench on the wide promenade that abutted the harbor. He was trying to look natural, one foot up on the bench, a cell phone pressed to his ear. He was deliberately looking away from Jack.

Well, thought Jack, if Blue is looking away, then Brown must be around here somewhere. *There.*

Jack spotted him at the far end of the quay, near the street. He wore a leather jacket and blue jeans. He had unkempt hair. He was younger and more athletic than Blue. Jack figured that Blue was the leader and Brown was the muscle.

Jack strode over the promenade and ascended the steps to the Peninsula Hotel, knowing they would follow.

Along the way, he wondered about his duty to report the contact with the woman on the ferry to Clark. Though on a purely “white-side” assignment for Hendley, Jack could at least let Clark know he’d been approached by an unknown contact with a request for a meet. That seemed to be something he *should* do.

If he’d been on a “black-side” assignment, the decision would be easy. Hendley’s black-side was The Campus, an embedded national security team that took direction from the President in operations that prized speed, discretion, and deniability above all else. Hendley’s white-side private equity business was legitimate. It also happened to serve as both funding source and cover for The Campus.

As Jack rode the hotel elevator up, he visualized how the conversation with Clark might go. Mr. C had pointedly sent Jack on this all-business white-side assignment to Hong Kong. He’d emphasized the importance of GeoTech, telling Jack the acquisition was more strategic than The Campus op going down right now in the Philippines, where Cary, Jad, and Lisanne were tracking a known terrorist. He’d also given Jack’s fiancé Lisanne her dream role, promoting her from logistics coordinator to a full-blown field intelligence operative.

As Jack saw it, the repercussions of Clark's decisions were twofold. One, he was missing out on the real action, stuck here on a city pier wearing a suit that felt like a straitjacket. Two, with his betrothed hopscotching the eastern hemisphere on a black-side op, there was no one left at home to look after Emily, Lisanne's niece, who was now living with them.

Lisanne had found a solution, naturally, arranging for the fifteen-year-old to stay with her grandfather for the week—but not before Jack had made a fool of himself, telling Lisanne she'd be putting herself in harm's way without him there to protect her. That crack had opened an old wound—and earned him a cold cheek when he'd gone to kiss her goodbye.

He'd taken his concerns to Clark, who'd been respectful but unyielding. Mr. C was adamant that Jack accompany Howard Brennan to Hong Kong to close this deal. The old SEAL had said it would be good for Jack to take part in a more strategic initiative for the firm—while also learning to let the team operate without him.

And—as if that weren't enough—Clark had said that since Jack would be working in Hong Kong, a special administrative region of the People's Republic of China, he was absolutely forbidden to stay in touch with the team in the Philippines. Operational security was the name of the game, Clark had said.

Jack swiped his key and paused just inside the room. He put his phone up to his eyes to unlock it and opened the room-scanning app Gavin Biery, Hendley's infotech specialist, had created for The Campus. Per the app's instructions, Jack took a picture, then let the AI program compare it with the room photo from that morning.

The app returned three red dots on the new photo—three depressions in the carpet, likely from a man's Oxford shoe, size nine Sendas, a Chinese brand. Jack had put a do-not-disturb sign on the door that morning, and since the room was still a mess, he could only assume Brown and Blue's helpers had searched it.

So be it. On this Hendley white-side assignment, he had nothing to hide.

He dropped his bag on the desk, kicked off his shoes, and sat at the edge of his bed. He opened another Gavin-Campus app on his phone, the secure communications portal, hoping to see a message from Campus ops that might redirect him to the real action in the Philippines.

If he was honest with himself, he'd admit that he also hoped to see a message from Lisanne, given the way they'd left things with each other.

A disappointed sigh escaped his pursed lips. His shoulders slumped.

The in-box was empty.

*

By eight-thirty that evening, Jack had eaten a mediocre room-service club sandwich and traded a dozen messages with Howard, who was still across the harbor, hammering away on the terms with the British bankers at HSBC. Jack sat at his hotel room desk, running the terms through the risk analysis tool he'd built for Hendley Associates.

He took the work seriously. Gerry Hendley, a former senator with deep ties in the energy industry, believed that within a year or two they could flip GeoTech for nearly three billion—the firm's biggest strike to date. But if Jack's analysis got any of the underlying numbers wrong, then the company could just as easily go bankrupt trying to repay the HSBC loan.

After analyzing GeoTech's disclosed financial statements and inputting the relevant figures, Jack updated his model with Howard's new terms. However Howard had managed to drive his latest bargain with the bankers across the harbor, he'd done a fine job. Jack's model showed the deal working well, the risk profile within acceptable limits. In his final email of the evening, he congratulated Howard on a job well done.

There, he thought. He'd done his white-side work, the equivalent of eating his vegetables. Now on to more flavorful fare.

The digital clock in the upper corner of his laptop showed eight-forty-five. There was still time to make it up to the *Temple Street Night Market* and meet the woman who'd passed him the note.

And why shouldn't he? he asked himself. That woman might well be a disaffected citizen chafing under PRC rule, highly placed, a future asset. A year earlier, Jack and Lisanne had recruited just such a woman in Seoul, a defecting North Korean scientist who'd since paid big dividends to the American intelligence establishment.

So why shouldn't he? he asked himself again.

For starters, his mind answered, Mr. C had warned him that MSS would be all over him in Hong Kong—Brown and Blue were certainly proof of that. Moreover, Clark had counseled him that MSS could play dirty, that they might even do something to entrap Jack. Especially since he was the son of the sitting President of the United States.

Then again, thought Jack, Mr. C had also counseled him to trust his gut, to never forsake his duty, to look for every opportunity to gain the upper hand over his adversaries. As Mr. C had said time and again, *debate can be fatal. You must think, decide, act.*

Ensuring he was connected to the internet via Gavin's node-hopping, encrypted virtual private network, Jack alt-tabbed from his risk analysis spreadsheet over to Google. He looked up the *Temple Night Street Market*.

Condé Nast described the wet market as *not to be missed*. The travel writer harkened it to Hong Kong's roots as an exotic trading port, full of the sights, sounds, and smells of Asia. A deeper dive into Google located *Heirloom Watches*, smack in the middle of the market.

Jack finished the remains of his room-service ice water and rattled the old Rolex on his wrist. The watch had been a gift from his parents fifteen-ish years ago, back when he'd graduated Georgetown with a major in finance for his own passions and a minor in history for his father's. *Heirloom Watches* indeed.

What the hell, he thought finally, checking his phone once more to see that Lisanne hadn't messaged. It was a nice night to do some sightseeing, wasn't it? And besides, he had ways to prepare for a contact meeting. Though Mr. C had told him not to deviate from his white-side assignment, he'd given Jack the business card of a friendly local resource to be used *in case of emergency*, as the old SEAL had put it.

There was still an hour before the woman would be there, waiting for him. Time enough. Jack rifled through his bag and dug out the business card. Clark had said the man on the card was a hell of a tailor—and that MSS knew nothing of his black-market weapons business. According to Google, the tailor shop was on the way to the *Temple Street Night Market*.

He looked at his old watch again. His father, Jack Ryan Sr. would never have ignored a contact bump like the woman on the ferry, right under MSS's nose.

And besides, Jack asked himself, who was he to disregard Condé Nast?