

The Congo Conspiracy

Paul Green



Real Hero

The Congo Conspiracy

Book 1

Author: Paul Green

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Synopsis

Real Hero - Book 1: The Congo Conspiracy, follows the story of Dave, an unassuming man thrust into the high-stakes world of international espionage after discovering his unique abilities. As a new recruit to a secret agency, he is quickly caught up in a mission that takes him from the heart of Europe to some of the world's most dangerous places. Alongside a team of skilled operatives, Dave must navigate through political intrigue, corporate corruption, and covert operations, all while coming to terms with his newfound powers.

The agency assigns Dave and his team to investigate Kazadi, a powerful businessman with ties to criminal networks and questionable government deals. As they dig deeper, they uncover a complex conspiracy involving global players, arms deals, and secretive banking systems designed to protect the ultra-wealthy. Dave's role in the

mission grows more critical as the stakes escalate, and he finds himself relying not only on his raw strength but also his intelligence and adaptability.

As the plot unfolds, Dave begins to bond with his teammates, especially the savvy tech expert Anya and the hardened but skilled Serj. Their teamwork is tested repeatedly, with each mission forcing them to rely on one another in more dangerous and unpredictable ways. The group's dynamic adds depth to the tense and action-packed narrative, showcasing their personal challenges alongside their professional duties.

In the midst of the action, Dave grapples with the moral complexities of his role. His powers make him capable of extraordinary feats, but they also force him to confront darker aspects of his nature. As the mission intensifies, Dave must find a balance between using his abilities responsibly and staying true to the person he wants to be. This internal struggle adds a rich layer of character development that sets him apart from other action heroes.

Ultimately, *The Congo Conspiracy* is a fast-paced, character-driven thriller that blends espionage, action, and personal discovery. It introduces readers to a protagonist who is both relatable and exceptional, with a plot full of twists and high-stakes situations. The story offers a glimpse into the complexities of power, loyalty, and identity, all wrapped up in a gripping narrative that leaves room for even greater challenges in the books to come.

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The Gym

Dave Anderson stood at the entrance of the gym, feeling a mixture of determination and dread. He was 40 years old, carrying more weight around his middle than he'd like, and he was painfully aware of his sedentary lifestyle. His daily routine involved sitting at a desk, staring at a screen, and the most exercise he got was the short walk to and from the train station for his commute. Occasionally, if he had the time, he'd walk to pick up lunch, but even that was becoming less frequent.

He knew it was time to make a change. The mirror had been unkind lately, and the spare tyre around his waist had started to feel more like a permanent fixture than something that would eventually go away. The idea of signing up for a gym membership had crossed his mind several times, but he'd always dismissed it. He'd heard the stories—people full of good intentions, paying monthly for a year, and managing to drag themselves to the gym only three or four times before life got in the way. Dave was determined not to be one of those people.

When he arrived at the gym, he was instantly overwhelmed by the sea of toned bodies and the cacophony of clanging weights. The free weights area looked like a territory reserved for the young, fit, and fearless—a place where testosterone and ego collided in a sweaty display of strength. Dave had no intention of stepping foot in that part of the gym. He knew he didn't belong there, at least not yet.

Instead, he opted for the safety of the machines, figuring they were

a good place to start. They were straightforward, offered some guidance with their diagrams and instructions, and, most importantly, they were less intimidating.

As he walked towards the machines, a bubbly gym staff member intercepted him. She was all smiles and enthusiasm, offering a personal training session, a guided tour, and a slew of other services he didn't want or need. Dave politely declined, explaining that he just wanted to get a feel for the place, maybe spend an hour or so on the machines, and then relax with a sauna and a swim.

The gym bunny gave him a knowing smile, probably used to seeing newbies like him—eager but hesitant, ready to make a change but unsure where to start. She wished him luck and let him be, which was exactly what Dave wanted.

He looked down at his new trainers—nothing fancy, just functional—and adjusted his slightly too tight T-shirt and baggy shorts. He took a deep breath and approached the first machine he recognised from a YouTube video he'd watched the night before.

This was it. The first step towards a healthier Dave.

Dave stepped onto the treadmill, feeling a mix of nervousness and resolve. He figured he'd start off with something familiar—a brisk walk. It was simple, low-impact, and would get his heart pumping just enough to ease him into the workout. The machine's interface was straightforward, and with a few taps on the screen, Dave was off, walking at a steady pace. The rhythm of his steps matched the soft whir of the treadmill beneath him, and he quickly settled into a comfortable stride.

After a few minutes, Dave decided to up the ante. He pressed the button to increase the incline, thinking it would add a bit of resistance and get his heart rate up. The treadmill responded smoothly, and soon he was walking uphill, but still, it felt too easy. His breathing was steady, his heart rate hardly seemed to increase, and he wasn't even close to breaking a sweat.

“Maybe I’m fitter than I thought,” Dave mused, though he knew better. A little doubtful, he pressed the button to speed up the pace. The treadmill obeyed, and now he was jogging, but still, it was no challenge. His feet moved effortlessly, the machine’s belt gliding smoothly beneath him. His lungs were still comfortably filled with air, and his muscles felt as fresh as they had at the start. It was almost like the treadmill wasn’t giving him the workout he expected.

Confused, but not deterred, Dave decided to push himself a bit further. He increased the speed again, now approaching a full sprint. His legs were moving faster than they had in years, but there was no strain, no burning sensation in his muscles, and his breath came easily. For a moment, he wondered if something was wrong with the machine, but the display showed everything working as it should.

Ten minutes in, Dave decided that was enough. He didn’t want to overdo it on his first day, after all. Maybe the treadmill just wasn’t the right machine to get him sweating. He stepped off, still feeling fresh, and made his way over to the stationary bikes. If the treadmill wasn’t going to challenge him, maybe the bike would.

As he walked towards the next machine, Dave couldn’t shake the feeling that something was different about this workout. He couldn’t quite put his finger on it, but he was sure he’d find out soon enough.

Dave approached the stationary bike, feeling a bit more confident after his treadmill experience. The bike looked like something straight out of an arcade, complete with a large screen displaying a scenic road winding through picturesque fields. It even had a digital companion for him to follow, a cartoonish cyclist pedalling smoothly ahead. The bike practically guided him through the setup, and before he knew it, he was pedalling along, the road stretching out before him on the screen.

He chose the novice mode, figuring it would ease him into the workout. The goal was simple: keep up with the guy in front. As he started pedalling, he quickly found his rhythm, his legs moving in smooth circles. The machine was responsive, and the road on the

screen adjusted to his pace. The digital cyclist ahead seemed to glide effortlessly, and Dave was right there with him, matching him pedal for pedal. After a few minutes, the machine chimed in, suggesting he step up a level since he was easily keeping pace.

Feeling a small surge of pride, Dave agreed and moved up to the next level. The fields on the screen became more varied, with gentle hills rolling beneath the tires of his digital bike. His on-screen companion picked up the pace, and Dave followed suit, his legs pumping faster. The bike's resistance increased, but it still didn't feel like much of a challenge. Another mile or so went by, and once again, the machine pushed him for an upgrade.

Dave hesitated for a second but decided to go for it. The scenery changed, the fields giving way to steeper hills, and his digital leader shifted gears, urging him to keep up. Dave pushed harder, his legs a blur of motion as the inclines grew steeper. He expected the burn to start, for his muscles to protest, but it never came. The bike's resistance didn't seem to phase him, and he sped up to match the ever-faster leader.

After fifteen minutes of this increasingly intense ride, Dave finally surrendered. He hopped off the bike, a bit perplexed. His legs should have been jelly by now, but they felt fine, strong even. The bike seemed determined to challenge him more and more, like it was rigged to make him feel invincible on his first day.

"Must be some clever trick to hook newbies," he thought, wiping his brow, though there wasn't much sweat to clear. The bike had been fun, almost too fun, but he wanted something that didn't involve screens or digital encouragement. It was time to see what he could do on his own, with nothing but iron and gravity to push against.

He made his way to the bench press, ready to test his strength the old-fashioned way. No screens, no fancy graphics—just him, the bench, and the weights. This was where the real work would begin.

Dave stood by the multi-gym, eyeing the weight stack with a mixture of uncertainty and determination. He wasn't exactly sure how much

weight he could handle—after all, it had been years since he'd done anything like this. He decided to play it safe and set the pin at the fifth step down the column of weights. It seemed like a reasonable start. If it turned out to be too much, he'd just smile awkwardly and hope no one was watching too closely.

He lay back on the bench, adjusted his grip on the press bar, and took a deep breath. With a steady push, he completed his first set of ten reps. But something was off. The weight felt... light. Really light. He glanced at the stack and saw the weights moving, but it didn't seem like much of a challenge at all.

Confused, Dave decided to increase the load. He moved the pin down to the tenth level, hoping for more resistance. He could always drop it back down to seven if ten proved too difficult. Lying back down, he gripped the bar and pushed again. The bar moved effortlessly, just like before. He checked the pin, jiggling it to make sure it was secure. It was in the right spot, but the result was the same—no extra resistance.

Puzzled and not wanting to draw attention to himself, Dave kept moving the pin lower, expecting that eventually, he'd hit a point where the weight would be challenging. He didn't want to embarrass himself by asking for help or looking like he didn't know what he was doing, so he just kept going.

Finally, the pin reached the bottom of the column—the maximum weight the machine could offer. Dave lay back, took a deep breath, and pushed. The bar went up smoothly, without the slightest strain. He lifted the entire stack of weights like it was nothing, the metal plates clanging softly as they moved up and down.

His heart raced, but not from exertion. What was going on? He double-checked the instructions on the machine. They were simple enough—nothing he hadn't seen before. He was doing everything right, yet here he was, lifting the maximum weight without breaking a sweat.

Dave sat up, staring at the stack of weights in disbelief. How could he,

a guy who hadn't exercised seriously in years, suddenly be lifting this much without any effort? He looked around the gym, half-expecting someone to come over and tell him he was doing it all wrong, but no one seemed to notice.

A strange realisation began to dawn on him. Something was different, and it wasn't just the gym equipment. Dave wasn't sure what was happening, but he knew one thing for certain—this wasn't your average first day at the gym.

Dave moved around the multi-gym, trying out different stations, hoping one of them would provide the challenge he was looking for. But whether it was the leg press, bicep curls, or anything else he tried, nothing seemed to stand in his way. Every station, every exercise, every set of weights felt absurdly easy. The leg press, which should have made his thighs burn, was like pushing air. The bicep curls, even with the heaviest setting, felt like he was curling a feather.

The most embarrassing moment came when he decided to try the shoulder press. He set the weight higher than he probably should have, just to see if it would finally push his limits. As he pulled down on the shoulder bar, he felt an odd sensation—his body lifted off the seat slightly as he pulled down with ease, the weight clearly exceeding his own body weight. He quickly adjusted his stance, planting his calves under the bars to hold himself down, and tried again. Even then, he managed to pull all the weight the machine could offer without breaking a sweat.

By now, forty-five minutes had passed, and Dave's confusion was only growing. He knew he wasn't in shape—his reflection in the mirror and the extra weight around his middle were proof of that. And yet, here he was, breezing through exercises that should have been well beyond his current ability.

Deciding he'd had enough for one day, Dave figured he'd earned a reward. He left the multi-gym area and headed for the sauna. Ten minutes of relaxation in the heat sounded perfect after his workout. Maybe the steam would clear his head, and he could make sense of

what just happened.

After the sauna, Dave took a leisurely swim, gliding through the water with an ease that matched everything else he'd done that day. Even swimming, which he hadn't done in years, felt like second nature.

As he floated in the pool, his mind raced with possibilities. Was it adrenaline? A fluke? Or was something else going on? He wasn't sure, but one thing was certain—his first day back at the gym was unlike anything he could have imagined. As he dried off and got dressed, Dave couldn't help but wonder what tomorrow would bring.

Lycra Challenge

The next morning, Dave woke up feeling strangely energised, as if the previous day's effortless gym session had left him with a surplus of vitality. Instead of his usual routine of taking the bus from the train station to the office, he decided to put his new trainers to the test and run the three miles up the gradual slope to work. His office had a shower and locker room, a convenience mostly used by the “middle-aged men in Lycra” brigade who cycled or jogged in. Dave had no intention of joining their ranks—the idea of squeezing his still-plump form into tight Lycra was mortifying. His trusty baggy shorts and T-shirt would do just fine.

As he boarded the train, Dave spotted James, one of those Lycra enthusiasts, already dressed in his snug jogging shorts that seemed to defy the laws of comfort, and garish day glow trainers with soles so thick they looked like they could float. The *pièce de résistance* was the numbered running vest—a self-congratulatory nod to some recent marathon or 10K, no doubt. James worked in the same office block as Dave, but they were worlds apart socially. James, with his fit physique and smug attitude, seemed to view Dave as invisible—or worse, beneath notice.

James was already in his element, doing exaggerated stretches on the train, clearly showing off. He glanced at Dave with a disdainful sneer, as if sizing up the competition and finding it laughable. Dave tried to ignore him, but a spark of competitive spirit flared up. He thought back to the cycle machine from the day before, where he'd followed the digital leader with ease. Maybe today, he could play the

same game with James.

When they both got off the train, James shot Dave a condescending look before setting off at a brisk pace. Dave followed, keeping a steady rhythm as they headed up the slope. At first, James didn't notice, but as they continued, he began to glance over his shoulder. Each time James looked back, clearly expecting to see Dave lagging behind, his eyes widened in disbelief when he saw Dave right there with him, stride for stride.

James, now visibly irritated, picked up the pace. He was determined to leave Dave in the dust, but no matter how much he sped up, Dave effortlessly kept pace, his breath calm and steady. The gap James hoped to widen never materialised. Instead, Dave stayed close, his baggy shorts flapping in the breeze, contrasting with James' overly serious running gear.

As they neared the office, James was sweating and pushing himself hard, while Dave felt like he could keep running for miles. With one final burst, James tried to outpace him, but Dave matched him with ease. They arrived at the locker room together, James red-faced and gasping for air, while Dave hadn't even broken a sweat.

With a grin, Dave turned to James and said, "Thanks for the spirited workout, mate!" He chuckled, enjoying the look of utter astonishment on James' face. For once, Dave wasn't the one feeling out of place. As he walked into the locker room, he felt a surge of confidence. Something was definitely changing, and whatever it was, Dave was ready to embrace it.

Factory Testing

With Thursday off work, Dave was eager to test the limits of his newfound energy and strength. The past few days had left him with more questions than answers, and he was determined to see just how far this strange new power could go. He decided to head to an old industrial estate on the outskirts of town, a sprawling, long-abandoned complex of corrugated metal buildings. These structures, once bustling with activity, were now skeletal remnants, their roofs long removed to avoid council levies. The area had remained untouched, free from squatters or illegal activities, making it the perfect secluded spot for Dave's experiment.

Dressed in his usual baggy shorts and trainers, Dave arrived at the estate, feeling an odd mixture of anticipation and disbelief. He hadn't felt so much as a twinge from his recent workouts, no soreness, no fatigue—nothing that would suggest he'd been pushing his body at all. Still, he did a quick warm-up, going through the motions of stretches and lunges, more out of habit than necessity.

Alongside one of the massive, roofless units was a long stretch of road, likely once used for lorry access to loading bays at the rear. The building itself was enormous, easily stretching 300 yards, or so Dave estimated. It seemed like a good spot to see what he could do. He checked his digital watch and clicked on the stopwatch feature, deciding to see how fast he could cover the distance.

With a laugh at how ridiculous he felt, Dave crouched down as if he were in the starting blocks of a race. He clicked the stopwatch and

launched himself forward. The world seemed to blur around him as his legs pumped furiously, his feet pounding the asphalt with a force that sent small pebbles skittering away.

Click. He stopped the timer and looked at his watch: 5.38 seconds. Dave's heart skipped a beat. That couldn't be right. He knew enough about athletics to know that even Olympic sprinters cover 100 metres (about 109 yards) in around 10 seconds. He had just run nearly three times that distance in nearly half the time. There had to be a mistake. Maybe the building wasn't as long as he thought.

Determined to make sense of it, Dave paced out the length of the building, counting his steps. One step, two steps... 285 steps later, he reached the end of the road. By his calculations, that was close to 300 yards. He couldn't shake the disbelief gnawing at him. To cover that distance in under 6 seconds was beyond extraordinary; it was impossible.

He decided to try again, hoping to correct whatever fluke had occurred. Dave reset the stopwatch, crouched down, and sprinted once more. The wind rushed past him, the ground seemingly disappearing beneath his feet. Click. This time, the watch read closer to 6 seconds—still unbelievable, but at least it was slightly slower.

Dave stood there, catching his breath—though even that felt unnecessary, as he wasn't winded at all. His mind raced, trying to grasp what was happening. These speeds weren't just good—they were superhuman. He hadn't just become fitter; he had somehow become capable of feats far beyond the reach of ordinary people.

The old industrial estate, with its eerie stillness and abandoned grandeur, suddenly felt like the perfect place to hide something extraordinary. Dave stared down the long, empty road, his heart pounding not from exertion, but from the dawning realisation that his life had just taken a turn into the extraordinary.

Intrigued by his newfound strength and the strange feats he'd accomplished so far, Dave's eyes drifted toward a couple of rusty, long-forgotten cars and vans at the rear of the building. These vehicles,

with their deflated tires and broken windows, had clearly been abandoned for years. Their rusty frames and missing glass gave them an air of dereliction, but to Dave, they were perfect for the next test.

He approached an old, rusty Ford, its paint long faded and its metal eaten away by years of neglect. The thought crossed his mind—how much could he lift? He stood beside the car, assessing where to grab. Deciding on the front wing, he crouched down and slipped his right hand under it, intending to lift the vehicle as high as he could.

With a confident pull, Dave yanked upward. But instead of lifting the car, he was surprised as the rusty wing buckled under his grip, tearing off the vehicle with a loud screech of metal. He stumbled back, holding the crumpled piece of metal in his hand, astonished by his own strength and how easily the car had given way. It took a moment for him to realise his mistake—the wing was never designed to support the weight of the car. It wasn't a structural part; it was just thin, rusted metal, and he'd grabbed it without thinking.

Shaking his head at his own oversight, Dave tossed the twisted metal aside. If he was going to do this right, he needed to grab something that could actually bear the car's weight. The wheels, he figured, were a better choice—they were meant to support the entire vehicle.

Dave crouched again, this time grasping the rusty rim of the front wheel with his right hand. He took a deep breath, bracing himself, and lifted.

To his utter shock, the car didn't just lift off the ground—it flipped. The force of his lift was so great that the entire vehicle tipped over onto its side, then continued to roll until it landed with a crash on its roof. The sound of the impact echoed across the empty industrial estate, metal crunching and glass shattering as the car settled upside down.

Dave stood there, staring at the overturned car, his hand still gripping the rusty rim he'd used to flip it. His mind raced, trying to process what he'd just done. He hadn't just lifted the car—he'd thrown it. The sheer force required to flip a vehicle like that, with

just one hand, was beyond anything he could have imagined.

Breathing heavily, not from exertion but from the adrenaline and disbelief, Dave let go of the rim and stepped back. The overturned car was a stark reminder that something extraordinary was happening to him. His strength, his speed—everything about him had changed in ways he couldn't begin to understand.

He looked around the abandoned estate, its eerie silence only amplifying the surreal nature of the situation. What had started as a simple test of his abilities had turned into something far more profound. The realisation was settling in—Dave wasn't just stronger or faster. He was something else entirely, capable of something beyond human. And whatever had caused this transformation, he knew his life would never be the same again.

Stepping into the cavernous, skeletal remains of the unit, Dave's eyes were drawn to the criss-crossing I-beams overhead. These steel girders, once essential to the structure's integrity, now stretched across the open roof like the ribs of a giant beast. A wild thought crossed his mind: could he bend one of those girders? It seemed impossible, but then again, so had everything else he'd done recently.

The beams were high up, but that didn't deter him. If he could run like a cheetah, why not see if he could jump like one? He squatted briefly, gathering power in his legs, and then launched himself into the air with explosive force.

CLANG!

Dave's head collided with one of the beams with a resounding metallic thud, sending a shock wave through the structure. He dropped back to the factory floor, landing hard on his backside. For a moment, he sat there, dazed, more from the surprise than any actual pain. Instinctively, he reached up to rub his head, expecting a bump or a bruise—something to indicate that he'd just rammed into solid steel. But there was nothing. No pain, no dizziness, not even the slightest twinge in his skull. His backside, too, felt fine despite the ungraceful fall.

“What the hell...?” Dave muttered to himself, staring up at the beam he’d just headbutted.

This wasn’t just about being strong or fast any more. It was as if his body was invulnerable, impervious to injury in ways that defied all logic. By any normal measure, smashing head first into a steel girder should have at least left him with a headache. Instead, he felt perfectly fine, as though nothing had happened.

Cautiously, Dave tried again, this time with a bit more control. He bent his knees, but this time, instead of rocketing upwards, he aimed for a more measured jump. With a powerful but controlled leap, he launched himself into the air and grabbed onto the beam with both hands. His fingers wrapped around the cold metal like a vice, gripping it with surprising ease.

Dangling there, suspended in mid-air, Dave looked at the beam and then at his hands. The steel felt solid, unyielding, as it should. He braced himself and tried to bend the beam, pulling with all his might. But of course, nothing happened. The beam remained straight and rigid, unmoved by his efforts. For a moment, he felt foolish—what had he expected? After all, he was just holding onto it; he wasn’t in a position to apply the kind of force needed to bend steel.

But the fact that he could hang from the beam, gripping it with such strength, was still astonishing. He swung there for a moment, marveling at how natural it felt, as if his body was now perfectly attuned to this kind of physical exertion. He dropped back to the ground, landing lightly on his feet this time, with a newfound understanding.

His strength, his speed, his invulnerability—they were all connected, but they didn’t make him a superhuman comic book character. There were still limits to what he could do, grounded in the physics of the real world. But those limits were far beyond anything he’d ever imagined for himself.

Dave looked around the empty, decaying factory, his mind racing. Whatever had happened to him, it was changing everything. He wasn’t just getting stronger—he was becoming something entirely

different. And as he stood there in the stillness, the only sound his own steady breathing, Dave realised that this was only the beginning.

As Dave made his way out of the factory building, something caught his eye—a girder extending out over the lorry bay. It was an old, rusted guide beam, likely once used to glide heavy products out of the factory and onto waiting trucks below. Unlike the beams inside, this one was more exposed to the elements, but it was still made of the same solid steel, built to bear substantial weight.

A wild idea sparked in Dave's mind. This girder was similar to the ones inside, but here, he had more leverage and space to test his strength. Without hesitating, he crouched down and jumped, landing lightly on top of the beam. Standing there, balanced on the narrow surface, Dave looked down at the factory floor far below. The height didn't bother him—he'd already proven that falls didn't hurt him any more.

Bending down, Dave grabbed the end of the girder with both hands, bracing his feet firmly against the metal. He took a deep breath and pulled. At first, the girder resisted, the rusted surface flaking away as he strained against it. But then, with a groan of metal under stress, the end of the girder began to move.

To Dave's amazement, the thick steel started to bend. It wasn't just a slight curve—he was bending it upward, forcing it past a 45-degree angle, as if it were made of something far softer than steel. The metal, though weathered on the outside, was still structurally sound, yet here he was, twisting it with his bare hands.

The sight was surreal. The girder, designed to support tons of weight, was yielding to him as though it were nothing more than a piece of soft cheese. Dave marvelled at the sight, the twisted metal a tangible symbol of his transformation.

With a satisfied grin, he swung from the bent end of the girder, dropping gracefully to the factory floor below. His landing was light, almost cat-like, and as he stood there, looking up at the distorted steel beam, a mix of emotions washed over him—bewilderment, ex-

hilaration, and a growing sense of power.

It was time to go home and think about what all this meant. The implications of his newfound abilities were staggering, and he knew he needed to figure out what had happened to him—and why.

Dave walked out of the factory, still in awe of what he'd done, and got into his car. As he drove home, his mind raced with possibilities. He had no idea what was happening to him, but one thing was clear: his life had changed in ways he could never have imagined. The world, which had once seemed so ordinary, now felt full of potential and mystery.

And as Dave pulled into his driveway, he couldn't help but smile, still bewildered, but more ecstatic than he had ever been. Whatever this was, it was just the beginning, and he was ready to see where it would take him.

Conspiracy Theories

As Dave sat on his couch, pondering the implications of his newfound powers, the reality of the situation began to sink in. The idea of becoming a superhero, something straight out of comic books, seemed thrilling at first. But the more he thought about it, the more he realised how impractical it was. The world wasn't like the movies—one man, no matter how powerful, couldn't solve all the problems out there. Sure, he could take down a few criminals, maybe even stop a robbery or two, but what good would it do in the grand scheme of things?

The idea of donning Lycra and wearing his underpants on the outside was enough to make him cringe. And while the thought of roughing up local criminals sounded satisfying on a surface level, the reality was much more complicated. The legal system was a maze, full of loopholes and technicalities. Even if he caught someone red-handed, there was no guarantee they'd stay behind bars. The idea of putting himself out there, only to have his efforts undone by bureaucracy, felt like a colossal waste of time and energy.

But what was the alternative? The notion of becoming a super-villain was equally ridiculous. Dave wasn't some evil genius plotting world domination. He didn't have a desire to sow chaos or accumulate wealth through nefarious means. The idea of robbing banks, while it might have crossed his mind, wasn't who he was. Even if he could easily escape capture, it just wasn't in his nature to cause harm for personal gain.

So, what was he supposed to do? He had these incredible abilities—strength, speed, resilience—but no clear direction on how to use them. He could help people, sure, but on a scale that actually mattered, it seemed almost impossible.

Maybe the answer wasn't in grand gestures or world-changing feats. Maybe it was about using his powers in a way that made a difference, even if it was in small, quiet ways. He didn't need to be a superhero in the traditional sense, nor did he need to conform to the expectations of what someone with his abilities should do.

He could start small—helping out in his community, lending a hand where it was needed, even if it meant staying in the shadows. He could prevent accidents, save lives discreetly, and offer his strength where it could make a real impact without drawing too much attention. There was a certain appeal in that—making a difference without the need for recognition or praise.

And who knew? Maybe, over time, he'd find a larger purpose, something that suited his abilities without the need for a costume or a catchy name. Dave realised that he didn't have to have all the answers right away. For now, it was enough to know that he had these powers and that he could use them to do good in the world, even if it was on his own terms.

The possibilities were endless, and as he leaned back, letting the thoughts wash over him, Dave felt a sense of calm. He didn't have to figure it all out today. The important thing was that he had the power to make a difference, and he would, in his own way, on his own timeline.

The world might not need another superhero, but it could always use more people willing to help. And maybe that was exactly what he was meant to do.

Sitting at his desk, Dave's fingers hovered over the keyboard, but his mind was miles away, lost in a swirl of daydreams. He imagined himself swooping in to rescue kittens from trees, saving damsels in distress, and pulling off daring heroics that would make headlines—

if only he weren't so keen on staying under the radar. But today's productivity was near zero. The spreadsheet on his screen had been open for hours, barely touched, as his thoughts kept circling back to his newfound powers.

As the day dragged on, a different line of thinking started to take hold. What if he wasn't the only one with these abilities? The idea of being part of something bigger, of others like him existing out there, began to fascinate him. If he had these powers, surely others did too. But where were they? Were they hidden away by some shadowy government agency? Perhaps there was a global conspiracy, where nations had their own super-powered individuals, kept secret like nuclear weapons as a deterrent for "mutually assured destruction."

A super soldier programme? That seemed plausible. After all, governments had long histories of experimenting with ways to create the perfect soldier. Maybe he was somehow the unintended result of one of these experiments? But if there was a secret programme, how could he find it? The thought of reaching out to the government crossed his mind, but it wasn't like you could just call up Downing Street and ask if they were harbouring super-humans.

The idea of a secret agency, one that might have a role for someone like him, was tantalizing. But where would he even start? The internet wouldn't help—not with something this classified. Even the best search engines wouldn't lead him to a hidden government programme. The very nature of such a thing meant it would be buried under layers of secrecy, hidden from public view.

Dave leaned back in his chair, staring up at the ceiling as he pondered his next move. He could start by looking into rumours and conspiracy theories—sometimes there were grains of truth buried in the more outlandish stories. Forums, deep web threads, or even obscure books on secret societies might offer clues. There might be whispers of strange occurrences, unexplained events, or people disappearing under mysterious circumstances. These could be breadcrumbs leading to something real.

Another approach might be to test his limits in a way that would attract attention from the right people—performing a series of public “miracles” that couldn’t be ignored. But that was risky. The last thing he wanted was to be captured or studied like a lab rat.

Maybe the best way forward was a hybrid approach: discreetly researching while also pushing his abilities in ways that might get noticed by someone who knew more about this world than he did. He could start small, searching for patterns in unusual events, and see if he could find any connections.

As the workday ticked on, Dave decided that tonight he’d dig into the world of conspiracy theories and secret programs. He’d keep his eyes open for anything unusual, anything that might suggest there were others like him out there. He wouldn’t rush into it, but slowly and carefully, he’d peel back the layers of this mystery.

Who knew what he might find? The thought was both exhilarating and terrifying. But one thing was certain: Dave couldn’t go back to his old life. He had to find out the truth, and he had to find a purpose for his abilities, even if it led him down a path he could never have imagined.

Dave leaned back in his chair, rubbing his tired eyes as the glow of his monitor dimmed in the early morning light. He had spent the entire night diving into the shadowy corners of the internet, hoping to uncover some clue, some thread that might lead him to others like him—or at least to someone who knew more about what he was going through. Instead, he was left with a frazzled brain, a collection of bizarre stories, and a growing sense of frustration.

The sheer volume of conspiracy theories he had waded through was staggering. From tales of secret Nazi experiments to supposed Ukrainian super soldiers fuelled by mysterious drugs, the internet was awash with wild claims and questionable sources. There were stories of men lifting cars, surviving impossible situations, and even reports of supernatural abilities, but none of it was credible. Each thread he pulled at led him deeper into a maze of speculation and

hearsay, with nothing concrete to show for it.

Dave couldn't help but chuckle at some of the more outlandish theories. The idea that world governments were secretly breeding superhumans in underground labs or that ancient relics could bestow incredible powers seemed straight out of a bad sci-fi movie. Yet, despite the amusement, there was also a sense of disbelief—how could people buy into these stories with such conviction?

As the hours ticked by, it became increasingly clear that this was a dead end. No matter how deep he dug, all he found were tall tales, dead ends, and more questions than answers. There were no leads to follow, no names or locations he could pursue. It was as if the very thing he was searching for—the truth about his abilities—was buried under layers of myth and misinformation, hidden from anyone who dared to look.

Exhausted and more than a little disappointed, Dave finally shut down his computer. The internet had proven to be a vast, chaotic jungle of half-truths and fantasies, with no clear path to the answers he sought. It was a total waste of time, and he felt no closer to understanding what had happened to him than when he started.

But even in his frustration, Dave knew he couldn't give up. The internet might have been a bust, but that didn't mean there weren't other avenues to explore. Maybe the truth wouldn't be found online—perhaps it was out there in the real world, hidden in plain sight.

As he dragged himself to bed, Dave resolved to take a different approach. He would keep his eyes and ears open, look for anything out of the ordinary in his daily life, and maybe—just maybe—he'd stumble across something real. He wasn't about to give up on finding a purpose for his abilities, but it was clear that the path forward wouldn't be as simple as typing a few search queries.

Tomorrow was a new day, and with it, new possibilities. He just had to be patient, keep an open mind, and trust that eventually, the answers would come. For now, though, sleep was the only thing on his mind.

Taking Wing

Dave splashed into the cold, murky water of the canal, the sudden chill a sharp contrast to the adrenaline-fuelled heat that had filled him just moments before. For a second, he just lay there, submerged, blinking up at the distorted sunlight filtering through the surface, his mind catching up to what had just happened. So much for flying, he thought wryly. The test flight had turned into a crash landing in spectacular fashion.

He surfaced, sputtering and wiping the water from his eyes, looking around to get his bearings. The garden shed he'd obliterated was a good hundred yards away, its roof now a splintered mess, the fence beside it shattered where his body had crashed through. The embankment he'd tumbled down was a tangle of bushes and debris, a testament to the uncontrolled descent he'd experienced. Fortunately, it seemed like no one had been around to witness his less-than-graceful landing.

Hauling himself out of the canal, Dave stood dripping on the towpath, taking stock of the situation. His baggy shorts and trainers were soaked, and he could feel the weight of the water clinging to him. Despite the chaotic fall, he wasn't hurt—not even a scratch. It was another reminder of his apparent invulnerability, but also a clear sign that flight was not going to be as simple as jumping and hoping for the best.

The excitement of leaping into the air had been undeniable—an exhilarating rush of speed and power—but it was also terrifying. Once

he'd left the ground, he had no control, no way to steer or slow down. Gravity had been his only guide, and it had brought him crashing back to earth in the most undignified manner possible.

Dave wrung out his t-shirt and began the slow walk back up the embankment, mentally reviewing the experience. He had discovered that he could leap incredible distances, which was a revelation in itself, but flying? That seemed like a different beast altogether. It wasn't something he could just will into existence; there had to be more to it. Maybe it required more than just raw power—perhaps some kind of finesse or technique that he hadn't figured out yet.

As he made his way back to the abandoned industrial estate, Dave realised that he had a lot more to learn about his abilities. His strength, speed, and durability were beyond anything he had ever imagined, but they came with limitations he hadn't fully grasped. He needed to explore these powers carefully, to understand what he could and couldn't do before he tried anything as bold as flying again.

Once back at the estate, Dave took a moment to calm himself, breathing deeply and letting the adrenaline subside. He couldn't help but laugh at the absurdity of it all—here he was, standing in a desolate industrial zone, soaked to the bone, having just plummeted from the sky after a failed attempt to fly. The whole situation was surreal, like something out of a comic book, yet it was happening to him.

“Okay, Dave,” he muttered to himself, “lesson learned. Let's not try that again without a bit more planning.”

With that, he decided to head home, dry off, and think things through. He knew he was on the brink of something incredible, but he also knew he had to be careful. This wasn't just about discovering what he could do—it was about figuring out how to do it safely, without crashing through any more sheds or ending up in canals. There would be more tests, more experiments, but for now, he needed to regroup and reconsider his approach. After all, if he was going to be a hero—or whatever he was meant to be—he couldn't afford to keep making mistakes like this.

Coming Out

Dave sat at his kitchen table, pondering his next move. His attempts to find any government agency or secret organisation that dealt with super-powered humans had turned up nothing but wild theories and dead ends. If they were out there, they weren't advertising their services, and Dave's internet sleuthing had only led him to more questions. So, if he couldn't find them, maybe he could make them come to him.

The idea of getting noticed was risky. The last thing Dave wanted was to end up on some news report or viral video, exposing his abilities to the entire world. But there had to be a way to demonstrate his powers subtly enough that the right people would take notice—people who already knew such abilities existed but kept that knowledge hidden from the public.

His first thought was small, controlled displays of his abilities—nothing too flashy, but enough to catch the eye of anyone who might be monitoring unusual events. He needed to find situations where his actions would be noticeable, but not traceable back to him. Ideally, no one would know who he was, just that something remarkable had happened.

Dave had taken to spending his evenings in different parts of town, hoping to find some sign of others like him or perhaps catch the attention of whatever agency might be monitoring people with special abilities. His enhanced senses meant he could observe from a distance while appearing to be just another person absorbed in their

phone.

It started on Tuesday. He noticed a man in a hi-vis jacket standing across from the Blackman Construction site, apparently on his phone. Something about the way he held it seemed off—the screen was dark, but he kept pointing it at different sections of the scaffolding, movements too deliberate for someone simply having a chat.

Dave maintained his distance but kept watching. The man spent nearly twenty minutes photographing the structure, paying particular attention to the support joints and anchor points. When a real construction worker emerged from the site, the man quickly pocketed his phone and walked away with the practised casualness of someone trying not to draw attention.

The next day, purely by chance, Dave spotted the same man again. This time he was sitting in the window of Costa Coffee, no hi-vis jacket in sight, meeting with another man. What caught Dave's attention was the construction worker they were talking to - someone who actually worked on the site, based on his worn boots and paint-splattered clothes. Money changed hands under the table, and the worker spent several minutes drawing something on a scrap of paper.

Dave found a spot outside where he could watch while pretending to enjoy his own coffee. The worker seemed nervous, constantly looking around as he pointed at different parts of his sketch. After about fifteen minutes, he left quickly, leaving the two men to talk in low voices.

As they left, Dave managed to catch fragments of their conversation. "...insurance won't cover... if it looks like negligence..." and "...perfect timing when the schedule..." The words themselves seemed innocent enough, but their tone carried an undercurrent of something darker.

His suspicions grew when he returned to the construction site that evening. The worker schedules were posted in a plastic sleeve by the site entrance—standard practise for large projects. The first man was there again, this time wearing a hard hat, taking photos of the roster with his phone. He seemed particularly interested in when the

concrete pours were scheduled.

Dave watched him walk around the scaffolding, following the route the construction worker had sketched. He wasn't examining the structure in detail - just marking specific points on a crude diagram. It was like watching puzzle pieces fall into place. Each individual action could be explained away, but together they painted a disturbing picture. These men were planning something at the construction site, something that would put workers at risk, and they were paying for inside knowledge to make it look like an accident.

It was like watching puzzle pieces fall into place. Each individual action could be explained away, but together they painted a disturbing picture. Someone was planning something at that construction site, something that would put workers at risk, and they wanted it to look like an accident.

The question was: what could he do about it? He had no proof, just a series of observations that sounded paranoid when strung together. But he couldn't shake the feeling that if he didn't act, people were going to get hurt.

That night, Dave sat at his kitchen table, staring at his laptop. Maybe there was still time to prevent whatever was being planned through official channels. He just had to figure out how to explain his suspicions without revealing how he'd gathered the information.

Dave spent that night debating what to do. The smart move seemed to be alerting the police anonymously. He used a burner email address to send a detailed tip about suspicious activity around the construction site, including descriptions of the men and their behaviour. The automated response was less than encouraging: "Thank you for your report. Due to the volume of tips received, we cannot respond to each individually..."

After 24 hours with no visible police presence at the site, Dave made an anonymous call from a public phone. The dispatcher listened politely but seemed sceptical. "Without specific evidence of a crime in progress, sir, we can only log this as a general concern. If you

witness any actual criminal activity...”

Dave hung up, frustrated but not surprised. The police needed concrete evidence, and all he had were suspicions and fragments of overheard conversations. By the time they gathered enough proof to act, it would be too late. If he wanted to prevent whatever was being planned, he'd have to do it himself.

By morning, Dave had a plan. He'd show up at the site early, blend in, and keep an eye on things. When the scaffolding was rigged to fall, he'd be there to make sure it didn't. And if things went south, he could stop the collapse and ensure the blackmailers were caught in the act.

Construction Chaos

The next morning, Dave arrived at the construction site just after dawn, wearing dark glasses, a Covid mask, and a nondescript hoodie. He found a spot where he could watch the scaffolding without drawing attention.

Workers were already arriving, preparing for the scheduled concrete pour. Dave spotted the two men from the pub, wearing borrowed hi-vis jackets and hard hats, blending in with the regular site workers. They kept checking their phones, waiting for something.

Then he saw it. While one man distracted a group of workers with questions about the pour schedule, the other slipped behind the scaffolding. Moving quickly, he removed several key locking pins and loosened crucial support bolts. Dave's saw exactly what they'd done - the scaffolding looked secure, but under the weight and vibration of the concrete pour, those compromised sections would catastrophically fail.

The concrete pump trucks arrived, and workers began taking their positions. Dave moved closer, knowing he had to time this perfectly. The pumps started up, their vibrations immediately causing the weakened scaffolding to shudder ominously.

One of the site foremen noticed something wrong. "Hold the pour!" he shouted, but it was too late. With a deafening groan, the scaffolding began to buckle.

Dave didn't hesitate. Moving faster than anyone could follow, he

reached the failing section and braced himself under the twisting metal. His hands gripped the main support beams, muscles straining as he held tons of steel in place. Workers above froze, staring down at the man who had appeared from nowhere to prevent disaster.

“The supports!” Dave shouted, his voice muffled by his mask. “Lock them down!”

The site crew sprang into action. While Dave held the structure steady, they rushed to secure the loosened sections, replacing pins and tightening bolts. It took several minutes of intense work, but finally, the scaffolding was properly braced again.

As soon as the crew gave the all-clear, Dave stepped back and disappeared into the maze of construction materials, moving too quickly for anyone to follow. From a safe distance, he watched the aftermath. The site manager was already calling for a full safety check, while security detained the two suspicious men trying to slip away.

That evening, Dave sat at home, nursing a beer as he watched the local news. They ran a short story about a “near-miss” at a construction site, with witnesses describing a mysterious figure who prevented a potentially deadly collapse. But more importantly, he knew he’d stopped the criminals without revealing too much about himself.

He hadn’t needed an elaborate plan or special equipment - just the right moment to use his abilities to save lives. It wasn’t about being a comic book superhero; it was about being in the right place at the right time, with the power to help.

Underworld Fury

Released without charge due to lack of evidence, the two thugs slink back to their employer—a shadowy figure known only as “Ralph,” who ran extortion rackets and various underworld schemes from behind the scenes. They walked into the dingy office with their heads hung low, eyes avoiding Ralph’s cold stare as he sat behind his cluttered desk, drumming his fingers in annoyance.

“What the hell happened?” Ralph barked. His voice was sharp, like the crack of a whip. “You were supposed to make it look like an accident, shake the company down for a nice payout, and now you’re back here empty-handed, after getting the police involved. How does that happen?”

One of the thugs, Steve, cleared his throat nervously. “It— it wasn’t our fault, boss. We had everything set up perfectly. Then, out of nowhere, this guy—some guy—just... stopped it.”

Ralph’s face twisted into a scowl. “A **guy** stopped it? One guy? What, did he call the cops? You’re telling me one random do-gooder managed to wreck the whole plan?”

The other thug, Mick, interjected, “No, boss. He didn’t call anyone. We didn’t even see him coming. He just... appeared. Stopped the scaffolding like it was nothing. We couldn’t explain it. One second, it was going down, and the next—he was there, holding it up.”

Ralph’s eyes narrowed. He leaned back in his chair, his irritation palpable. “You’re telling me one man stopped a ton of steel from col-

lapsing?” His voice dripped with disbelief. “You think I’m stupid?”

Both men stood silently, unsure how to explain the bizarre occurrence without sounding completely incompetent.

“I don’t care what kind of mystery hero you ran into,” Ralph growled, “but you two are going to fix this. I want this guy found. He stuck his nose where it didn’t belong, and now he’s gonna pay for it. You understand?”

Steve and Mick nodded furiously, both feeling the weight of Ralph’s barely-contained rage. Failure in Ralph’s world was not taken lightly, and it was clear they were on thin ice.

“If you don’t find him,” Ralph continued, his tone cold and menacing, “you can consider yourselves done. Permanently. Now get the hell out of my sight.”

The two thugs left Ralph’s office, their heads still low, but this time weighed down with a mix of fear and shame. As they trudged out into the dark alley, Mick grumbled, “How the hell are we supposed to find this guy? We don’t know anything about him.”

Steve shook his head, “We’ve got to start somewhere. Someone had to see something. We’ll ask around.”

For the next week, Steve and Mick scoured their criminal circles, speaking with shady contacts, informants, and fellow thugs in the murky underbelly of the city. They trawled through back-alley pubs, gambling dens, and dingy hideouts, but no one had any useful information. None of their contacts had encountered anyone out of the ordinary—no vigilante, no local hero, no one who had stood out in any way.

They even questioned some of the workers from the construction site, slipping them bribes in exchange for information, but all they got were vague descriptions of a “man in a mask” who had vanished as quickly as he appeared. No one had seen his face or even recognised him.

“Damn it,” Steve muttered as they sat in yet another dimly lit bar, nursing their drinks in frustration. “No one knows a thing. It’s like this guy was a ghost.”

Mick’s brow furrowed. “What if it wasn’t just luck? What if this guy’s got a whole network, you know, like those vigilante types you hear about? Someone protecting him, helping him stay in the shadows.”

Steve scoffed. “Vigilante? Network? You’ve been watching too many movies, Mick. He’s probably just some wannabe hero, got lucky this time. But we can’t let this go.”

Mick shook his head, unsettled. “Still, we can’t explain how he stopped all that scaffolding. No one’s that strong. It doesn’t make sense.”

Steve clenched his jaw. “Doesn’t matter. Ralph wants him found, and we’re not gonna get out of this mess until we do.”

They went back to their search, but the more people they asked, the clearer it became that they were chasing a ghost. Whoever had stopped the scaffolding collapse had left no trace, no reputation, no leads. For a while, the two thugs started to feel the pressure building. They could only hope Ralph wouldn’t lose patience before they found a way to cover their tracks.

As the days passed and their frustration mounted, the thugs began to dread every phone call, every knock on the door, worried that Ralph would come calling to collect his dues. The mysterious figure had not only ruined their extortion plot—he had put them in the cross-hairs of a dangerous man, and they were running out of time.

The Hanged Man

Dave sat quietly in his usual corner of The Hanged Man, his untouched pint of Guinness providing cover while he observed the pub's patrons. He'd been doing a tour of the local pub's and The Hanged Man had a kind of reputation, a reputation for attracting a certain class of criminal. Tonight, though, he wasn't just listening—he was hunting for specific information about the two thugs he'd stopped that day.

A burst of raucous laughter drew his attention to a group of regulars near the bar. One of them, a weathered man with nicotine-stained fingers, was holding court.

“—and then Mick Halstead comes storming in, right? Face like thunder. Steve's trailing behind him looking proper spooked. Something rattled them on that scaffolding job.”

Dave's ears pricked up. Finally, names to match the faces: Mick Halstead and Steve.

“Heard they got their arses handed to them,” another patron chimed in, voice slightly slurred. “Ralph ain't happy about it either. Lost a good earner there.”

Ralph. A new name. Dave committed it to memory, carefully maintaining his casual pose while his mind raced. A hierarchy was forming—Halstead and Turner as muscle, with this Ralph apparently calling the shots.

Dave noticed how the other patrons reacted whenever Halstead's

name came up. There was a tension in their voices, a cautious respect born of fear. Even in his absence, Halstead's reputation carried weight. Turner's name, by contrast, was almost an afterthought, mentioned only in connection with Halstead, like a shadow following its owner.

As the night wore on, the pub grew rowdier. A group of construction workers stumbled in, fresh from their shift. One of them caught Dave's attention—he was nervous, constantly checking his phone. After his fourth trip to the bathroom, Dave followed, timing his entrance to catch the tail end of a hushed phone conversation.

“—swear I'm not lying, Mick. They're desperate to find him. The mask guy, yeah? But listen, I got something else. Something big coming up...”

The worker nearly jumped out of his skin when he turned to find Dave washing his hands. Dave kept his eyes down, playing the part of an oblivious drunk as the man hurried out, his jacket catching on the door frame in his haste.

Back in the pub, Dave noticed the worker huddled with his mates, speaking urgently. Their conversation was too quiet to hear over the general noise, but their body language screamed anxiety. Whatever was coming up had them spooked.

Dave finished his beer and left, mind churning with possibilities. Halstead and Turner were looking for him, which meant they were planning something big enough to risk crossing paths with him again. He needed to find out what, but more importantly, he needed to understand who Ralph was. Anyone who could make Halstead—a man whose mere name made people nervous—answer to them was worth investigating.

The cool night air hit him as he stepped outside. He had names now, and the beginnings of a network to unravel. Somewhere in this web of connections was a thread that would lead him to whatever Halstead and Turner were planning next. All he had to do was keep pulling until something unravelled.

Time to start watching them more closely. After all, everyone makes mistakes—and Dave would be there when they did.

Following Leads

Over the next few days, Dave made The Hanged Man his evening headquarters. He'd arrive early, claim his corner spot, and watch the ebb and flow of the pub's criminal element. Every night brought new snippets of information about Mick Halstead's operations, but it was the pattern of movement that interested Dave most.

Halstead's crew seemed to operate on a schedule. They'd gather at The Hanged Man around nine, huddle in intense discussion for an hour or two, then split up to handle whatever business was on for the night. Dave noticed they were getting sloppier as pressure mounted—their conversations grew louder, more heated, especially when discussing the masked man who'd ruined their scaffolding job.

One night, Dave overheard a heated exchange between Halstead and a scarred man he'd learned was Jimmy "The Lock" Matthews, known for his skill at breaking into anything secured.

"Need this done proper, Jimmy," Halstead growled, his leather jacket creaking as he leaned forward. "Ralph's getting impatient. We need a big score to make up for that scaffolding mess."

Jimmy knocked back his whiskey. "Already checked it out. Security's basic at best. Old CCTV, one night watchman who does his rounds like clockwork. The cars, though..." He whistled. "Premium stuff. Germans mostly. Couple of Italian jobs too."

Dave's interest peaked. A car theft ring would explain the regular meetings with Jimmy. But they hadn't mentioned where yet.

He got his answer two nights later when Steve came bursting into the pub, face flushed with excitement. “Mick! Just drove past Ostlers. They got three new AMGs in today. Pristine. Ralph’s buyer would—”

“Shut it!” Halstead snapped, glancing around the pub. But the damage was done. Dave had his target.

The next day, Dave drove past Ostlers Cars during business hours. The dealership sat on the edge of an industrial estate, its high-end inventory gleaming behind weathered fencing. He counted the cameras—old models, like Jimmy had said—and spotted the guard booth by the main gate. The place looked exactly as described: valuable inventory, minimal security.

That evening back at The Hanged Man, Dave picked up the final piece. Steve was complaining about Ralph’s timeline.

“Sunday night? That’s too soon, Mick. We haven’t even—”

“It’s not up for debate,” Halstead cut him off. “Ralph wants those cars before they move the new stock on Monday. End of discussion.”

Dave nursed his Guinness, mind already mapping out possibilities. Sunday night. He’d be ready. This time, he wouldn’t just stumble upon their scheme—he’d be there waiting when it all went down.

As he left the pub that night, Dave couldn’t help but smile. Halstead and his crew had no idea they’d just invited their worst nightmare to their heist. Sunday couldn’t come soon enough.

Car Lot

At night, Ostlers Cars had an eerie, industrial feel. The car dealership, tucked away on the edge of a dimly lit industrial estate, sat behind tall, weathered fencing topped with rusty barbed wire. The lot was packed with rows of high-end new, and second-hand cars, their gleaming paint and chrome catching the dim glow of the overhead lights. The occasional gleam from a polished bonnet or hubcap reflected the sparse security lighting, casting distorted shadows on the cracked concrete below. It was a place that felt forgotten, even in the stillness of the night.

The fencing that surrounded Ostlers Cars was a mix of old corrugated metal and chain-link, patched together haphazardly where time and the elements had taken their toll. Signs warning of CCTV coverage and guard dogs were fixed at regular intervals, though the equipment, like the lot itself, looked as though it had seen better days. The gate, thick box section steel arm on heavy hinges, chained shut with a padlock, giving an illusion of impenetrability. Behind the fence, the lot was a maze of tightly packed vehicles, their orderly rows broken by the odd gap where a sale had been made.

The security lighting was sparse and uneven, casting long, distorted shadows across the lot. A few high-mounted floodlights bathed sections of the yard in a harsh, cold white light, leaving other areas in near-total darkness. The lights flickered occasionally, suggesting an ageing electrical system on the verge of failure. The darkness between the cars made the place feel more dangerous, as though something might be lurking just out of sight, hidden by the patch-

work of light and shadow. The lot's atmosphere was quiet, almost stifling, with only the hum of distant traffic and the occasional clink of metal breaking the silence.

The cool, quiet Sunday night shattered as the van pulled up to Ostlers Cars, its headlights cutting through the gloom like blades. Dave watched from the shadows, hidden behind the worn fencing that lined the lot. His heart pounded, not from fear, but from the weight of what he was about to witness—and what he might have to do. The van's doors swung open, and two men stepped out, heavy-set thugs with the look of seasoned criminals. They moved with purpose, making a beeline for the lone security guard stationed near the entrance.

The guard never stood a chance. One of the thugs blind sided him, a swift punch to the gut doubling him over, while the other cracked him over the head. Within seconds, the guard was crumpled on the ground, barely conscious as they dragged him to a nearby saloon. They popped the boot and shoved him inside, slamming it shut like he was just another piece of cargo. Dave clenched his fists, fighting the urge to intervene. He could've stopped them—taken them out before they even knew what hit them. But that wasn't the plan. Not yet. He had to wait, even though every second gnawed at his conscience.

Once the security guard was dealt with, the two thugs waved to the others still in the van. They emerged, a gang of five more men, all dressed in dark clothing, their faces barely visible under the dim, flickering street lights. Two of them went straight to work on the steel barrier that blocked the exit to the lot. With a large set of bolt croppers, they snapped the lock and chain as though they were made of paper, tossing the heavy links aside. The creak of the barrier echoed through the night as they swung it open, clearing the path for their heist. Dave watched them, his jaw tight. Was he really going to let this happen? The answer weighed heavily on him as he stepped out from his hiding spot, his feet carrying him slowly toward the now-open barrier.

Every step Dave took was measured, his mind a whirlwind of doubt and resolve. He questioned his next move. What was he doing? He could easily dismantle this entire operation in seconds—break bones, stop hearts, leave them in the dirt. But the aftermath? That was the real battle. He walked toward the chaos, calm but conflicted, ready to face the consequences of whatever came next.

After they'd opened the security gate and made their way inside the dealership's glass-walled office, a sledgehammer made quick work of the door. They easily got their hands on the flimsy key safe. Dave could only watch as they each chose a high-end car, like kids picking out candy.

Mick stood before a sleek, metallic black Mercedes-AMG GT C, its bodywork gleaming under the faint glow of the security lights. The car was a beast, all sharp lines and raw power, the kind of machine that would turn heads anywhere it went. Mick ran his hand along the smooth, polished surface, his fingers tracing the emblem with a hint of regret. This car would fetch a tidy sum for the gang, no doubt about it. The overseas buyers were already lined up, eager to receive the shipment of high-end vehicles, all hidden away in shipping containers bound for foreign shores.

It was a shame, really. Mick couldn't help but wish he could keep it for himself—feel the raw power of the V8 engine as it roared to life beneath him, take it for a spin and leave everyone else in the dust. But that wasn't how the game worked. The cars, including this beauty, were destined to disappear into the shadows of the black market, shipped out to countries where no one would ask questions.

But now, they had to drive through him.

As Mick revved the V8 Mercedes and caught sight of Dave standing defiantly in front of the gate, his blood boiled. "This guy again?" Mick muttered, cursing under his breath. "Run him down."

The roar of the engine filled the air as Mick gunned the car directly at Dave. The impact was brutal, even for someone like Dave. The physics behind a high-speed collision couldn't be denied, and the

sheer force sent him flying backwards, tumbling into the road behind. The Mercedes was left crumpled at the front, missing a headlight and the front grille, its bonnet and wing bent horribly out of shape.

But Dave wasn't hurt. He got to his feet almost immediately, dusting himself off, a grim determination in his eyes.

He needed to stop the rest of them, and quickly.

Spotting the long box section steel of the security gate, an idea struck him. He grabbed it, feeling its weight, and in one powerful thrust, drove it deep into the ground at an angle. The bar, now embedded at about 30 degrees, formed an effective barrier at the exit. Dave barely had time to position himself again before the next car, another high-end vehicle, sped toward the gate, hoping to crash through.

But the steel bar held fast.

With a sickening crunch, the car slammed into the bar, which tore through the engine bay, smashing its way through the engine block and forcing the vehicle to nearly fold in half. The driver was knocked unconscious, slumped against the airbag that likely saved his life. The wreckage blocked the exit, ensuring none of the other vehicles could leave.

For a moment, silence settled over the scene.

Mick, still in his battered Mercedes, glanced back in disbelief. His knuckles whitened on the steering wheel as he stared at the carnage. Who the hell was this guy? How could one man wreak so much havoc on his operation? Ralph was going to have his head for this disaster.

"To hell with this," Mick spat, and floored the gas. The V8 roared once again, its tires screeching as he sped away from the lot, making a beeline for the main road.

But Dave wasn't done yet.

The sound of approaching sirens was growing louder, but Dave wasn't letting Mick escape. Not this time. He sprinted after the Mercedes, his legs pumping faster than seemed humanly possible. In Mick's

rear-view mirror, the impossible sight of Dave catching up to his car made his stomach drop. His foot pressed the gas harder, but it didn't matter.

Dave was running alongside the speeding car within moments, matching its speed with ease. In a panic, Mick swerved, sideswiping Dave into a parked car. The impact was hard enough to dent the parked vehicle and send Dave rolling, but he quickly regained his footing, unhurt, and kept after Mick.

The Mercedes was fast, but Dave was faster. He knew he couldn't let Mick slip away—not now, not when he was this close to putting an end to the chaos Mick and his crew had caused. The sirens were drawing closer, the police on their way. But this wasn't a job for them. This was personal now.

As Mick raced down the road, his pulse quickened. For the first time in a long time, he was afraid. What kind of man was he dealing with?

Dave surged forward, pushing his body to its limits, and leapt toward the speeding car, it was his turn to body slam the rear quarter of the speeding Mercedes spinning it out of control and into a jangled wreckage that used to be parked cars. Mick's eyes widened as the car came to a sudden, jarring stop.

Panicked, shaken and more than a little bruised, Mick threw the door open and scrambled to get out, but it was too late. Dave was already there.

"I think it's time you took a break, Mick," Dave said, his voice calm but laced with finality.

With Mick subdued and the police just around the corner, Dave stepped back. He'd done enough for now. Let the authorities clean up the rest. But as he watched the flashing lights approach, he couldn't help but wonder how long it would be before people started asking the right questions. Before they started to wonder just who or what was really keeping the streets safe.

For now, though, he'd remain in the shadows—waiting for the next time he was needed.

Searching

The usual hum of chatter in The Hanged Man was thicker than normal, a buzz of intrigue and tension crackling in the air. Dave sat in what was becoming his usual corner, nursing a pint of Guinness, as familiar faces whispered and speculated about Mick's botched heist. It seemed everyone had an opinion on the bizarre account Mick was peddling to avoid Ralph's wrath. A "superhero" had stopped the job? That kind of talk didn't float easily in this crowd—criminals weren't prone to flights of fancy.

Dave shifted uncomfortably as he heard snippets of conversation about the "masked man." The Covid mask had been practical at first, but now it served a far more crucial purpose. If these criminals put a name to his face, his life would effectively be over. One whispered word in the wrong ear, one photo passed to the wrong person, and he'd never have a moment's peace. His family, his job, everything would be at risk. It would be like taking Spider-Man's mask off and posting Peter Parker's address online.

But now, there were new faces among the regulars, stirring the pot, and these interested him far more than the local thugs.

The journalists were easy to spot, asking questions in that overtly interested way, leaning in with their notepads and recorders ready. Dave had expected them—local news couldn't resist a mystery vigilante story. But they weren't what caught his attention.

It was the other two who interested him.

They weren't asking loud, obvious questions, nor did they have notepads or recorders in hand. Their approach was quieter, more methodical. They moved around the pub with ease, buying drinks for some of the rougher patrons, engaging them in seemingly casual conversation. But Dave could see the pattern. They were listening more than they were talking, subtly drawing out information, never overstepping, never prying too hard. No credentials flashed, no names given.

These two weren't reporters—they were something else entirely. And that, Dave realised with a mixture of anticipation and apprehension, was exactly what he'd been hoping for.

From his corner, Dave observed them closely. One of the men, tall and clean-cut in a nondescript jacket, leaned against the bar, his eyes sharp and calculating, but his demeanour relaxed. The other, shorter and stockier, sat at a nearby table, engaging a couple of regulars in hushed conversation. Both had an air of professionalism that stood out to Dave—too composed, too careful.

This was the kind of attention he'd been counting on. Let the criminals chase their masked vigilante through the underworld's gossip mill. The real game was attracting notice from people who dealt with the unexplained, the ones with resources to investigate phenomena they couldn't easily dismiss. Unlike the local thugs, these types would approach the situation scientifically, methodically—and most importantly, discretely.

The tall one caught Dave's eye for a brief second. It was quick, a fleeting glance, but enough to confirm Dave's suspicions. This guy was scanning the room, assessing everyone, sizing up potential threats or leads. And now, Dave was on his radar.

The two operators worked the room efficiently, never staying too long in one spot, never drawing attention to themselves. But Dave could see the undercurrent of their questions, the way they probed without making it seem like they were prying. They weren't interested in Mick's failure—they were looking for the person responsible for it.

Me, Dave thought, and felt a small thrill of satisfaction. This was the dance he'd been preparing for.

He wondered how long it would be before they tried to corner him. If they were really as professional as they seemed, they'd play the long game. They wouldn't rush their approach, not in a place like this. They'd want to gather as much intel as possible before making a move.

Dave needed to stay sharp. He couldn't afford to be reckless, especially not now that he was starting to attract serious attention. He wasn't sure who these guys were working for, but it was clear that they had a vested interest in whoever—or whatever—was responsible for the recent disruption.

The tall man nodded slightly to his companion, and the two of them casually made their way to the exit. They didn't leave together; they exited separately, maintaining the same nonchalant air they had throughout their stay.

Dave watched them go, a small knot forming in his gut. This was only the beginning. These men would be back, or worse, send others who were even more discreet and dangerous. And if they weren't journalists or local tough guys, then they were likely part of something bigger—something that might help him understand what he'd become.

As the door to the pub swung shut behind them, Dave drained his pint, his mind whirring with possibilities. He needed a plan. The time for staying completely in the shadows was coming to an end. But he'd have to be careful—very careful—about who he let get close to the truth.

The real game was about to begin.

Spotted

The two agents, now seated in a quiet booth of a nondescript café miles from The Hanged Man, sifted through the evidence they'd gathered. Their conversation was low, almost a whisper, as they exchanged observations and conclusions. The CCTV footage from the Ostlers job was laid out on one of their tablets, paused at the frame that showed Dave—in his Covid mask—tearing after Mick's car at what, to anyone else, would seem like a glitch in the video.

“We double-checked everything,” the taller of the two said, tapping the screen. “No glitches, no digital tampering. That guy was running at least 60 mph. The police aren't equipped to handle anything like this, so they dismissed it. But it's real.”

His stockier partner leaned back, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “Yeah, I'm inclined to agree. This isn't just some thug with a clever setup. We've got something unusual here—someone with real abilities.”

The agents had spent days poring over local reports, cross-referencing witness statements, reviewing CCTV footage from the car lot and nearby streets, and, of course, considering Mick's own outlandish claims. The police had written Mick's story off as a criminal's desperate attempt to deflect blame. They'd brushed off the idea of a “super-powered vigilante” as the ramblings of a low-level crook trying to avoid a lengthy prison sentence. But to the agents, the pieces fit too well.

“First the scaffolding incident,” the taller agent continued, “then this.

Mick's description of the guy matches up with what we saw on the CCTV. Dark clothes, moving too fast for any normal person. The part about the car wreck at the gate post? The force required to drive that pole into the ground—it's not something you'd see in a typical car crash."

The shorter agent frowned. "And the gate... The police explanation that it somehow reacted under pressure is weak. They don't know what they're looking at, but we do. We're talking about someone who bent a steel gate with enough precision to stop a car cold."

"Exactly," his partner agreed. "And Mick's story about the 'masked guy' from the scaffolding job? That was brushed off too, but now it's starting to make sense. This isn't a one-off event."

They paused, reflecting on the implications. Whoever this was, they weren't just some urban legend or vigilante wannabe. The consistency in the reports, the speed at which Dave moved, his ability to interact with heavy objects like the security gate—it all pointed to something extraordinary.

"The real issue," the taller agent said after a moment, "is finding him. No direct leads, no name. All we know is that he's in this area, and he's probably keeping a low profile. We need to flush him out."

His partner smirked. "We could set a trap. Something that requires him to intervene. He's shown a pattern already—both times, he stepped in when things got rough. Scaffolding collapse, the car heist... seems like he has a moral compass."

The taller agent nodded. "We just need to design the right bait."

They both fell silent, deep in thought. It was clear that the person they were tracking was something new, something dangerous, but also potentially valuable. Their agency dealt with threats that operated beyond the boundaries of normal human capability, and this figure—whoever he was—fit that description perfectly. If they could find him, bring him in, they could harness his abilities. And if he was unwilling? Well, there were ways to handle that too.

“Let’s start by upping surveillance in the area,” the stockier agent suggested. “He’s probably been keeping his head down, but if he gets wind that someone’s on his trail, he might slip up. We’ll keep digging—someone like him has to leave a footprint somewhere.”

His partner nodded. “Agreed. But we need to be careful. If he’s as powerful as we think, approaching him too soon or too directly could be a mistake. Let’s take our time and figure out what we’re dealing with first.”

With their plan set, the agents prepared to leave the diner. They were patient, methodical, and they knew how to operate under the radar. Whoever this man was, they were going to find him—and they would do whatever was necessary to bring him under control.

As they exited the diner, their thoughts were already on the next step. Dave, still unaware of the storm coming his way, had no idea he was now being hunted by professionals. It was only a matter of time before their paths crossed.

Bait

Tony Miller's auto repair shop sat at the edge of the industrial estate, a small but legitimate business that had been in his family for two generations. The fluorescent lights still buzzed inside despite the late hour, casting a harsh glow over the half-dismantled BMW on the lift. Tony was elbow-deep in the engine when he heard the door chime.

"We're closed," he called out without looking up. When no one responded, he finally turned around. Two men in plain clothes stood just inside the doorway, their posture casual but alert.

"Anthony Miller?" The taller one asked, though it wasn't really a question. "We need to talk about some of the paperwork you've been processing lately."

Tony's hands went still on the wrench. He'd known this day might come, had seen the pattern forming in the jobs Halstead kept bringing him. What had started as occasional repair work on cars with suspicious documentation had evolved into something he couldn't ignore any more. But he had employees to pay, a mortgage underwater since the recession, and a daughter in university. Each compromise had seemed small at the time.

"I run a legitimate business here," Tony said, wiping his hands on a shop rag. The grease wouldn't come off. It never did these days.

The shorter agent smiled thinly. "Is that what you call processing paperwork for Mick Halstead's stolen vehicles? Legitimate?"

"I just do repairs," Tony muttered, but his voice lacked conviction.

They all knew better.

The taller agent moved closer, examining the BMW. “Nice work you do here. Would be a shame if the Vehicle and Operator Services Agency had to do a full audit. Or if someone were to inform Halstead about all those interesting conversations you’ve been having with Detective Roberts.”

Tony’s stomach dropped. He’d been careful with those meetings, or thought he had been. Just enough information passed along to keep the police satisfied without revealing anything that would get him killed. A delicate balance that was now crumbling.

“What do you want?”

“We need you to help set up something special. A certain shipping container arriving at the freight terminal. The kind of score Halstead and Ralph can’t resist.”

“They’ll kill me if they find out.”

“They’ll kill you anyway, eventually,” the shorter agent said matter-of-factly. “People like Halstead, they don’t let loose ends dangle forever. But help us, and we can offer you a fresh start. New identity, new location, clean slate.”

Tony looked around his shop, at the walls covered in faded photos of cars his father had restored. At the workbench where he’d taught his daughter to change oil when she was twelve. All of it mortgaged to the hilt, slowly drowning him in debt that made Halstead’s offers harder to refuse each time.

“My daughter...”

“Will be taken care of. Full scholarship, anywhere she wants to study. But first, we need your help.”

Tony closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them, there was resignation but also relief in his face. “What exactly do you need me to do?”

The agents exchanged glances. They had him.

“Just do what you do best, Tony. Process some paperwork. Make a shipping container full of high-end electronics look legitimate on paper. Then make sure word reaches the right ears. We’ll handle the rest.”

As the agents laid out their plan, Tony felt the weight of years of compromise pressing down on him. But for the first time in a long time, he could see a way out. Even if it meant one final betrayal.

With Tony now working as their accomplice, the agents set the wheels in motion. The “container” was nothing more than a decoy filled with scrap electronics and worthless trinkets, but they were stacked in such a way that made it look like a fortune in stolen luxury goods. Word was fed into the underworld through Tony, who whispered to Ralph’s crew about the perfect score waiting to be snatched.

Ralph, notorious for always having his ear to the ground, quickly took the bait. It was exactly the kind of high-risk, high-reward job that would appeal to him—hit the terminal at night, bypass the light security, and drive away with goods. Ralph trusted Tony just enough to believe the intel.

The agents watched it unfold from the shadows. As Ralph’s men made their move, they set up surveillance around the terminal, ensuring every step of the heist would go according to plan—until it didn’t. They were counting on the mysterious vigilante, to appear and disrupt things, just as he had at Ostlers Cars and the scaffolding setup.

They were ready for him. Snipers positioned on rooftops, camera traps and sensors were all in place. This time, when the masked hero showed up to save the day, he wouldn’t just walk away and disappear. They’d capture hard evidence, and maybe even track him down.

But for now, all they had to do was wait for Ralph’s crew to fall into their trap—and hope the hero would, too.

Contact

The night of the heist, the rail freight terminal was alive with activity. Container trucks roared down the lanes, cranes swung overhead, and workers bustled back and forth, moving cargo with the practised efficiency of a 24/7 operation. Ralph's crew, disguised as workers in high-visibility vests and hard hats, blended in seamlessly. Their container truck, unknowingly borrowed from a distant haulage firm, was parked in a blind spot near a row of container stacks, out of sight from most of the cameras and personnel.

Getting past the terminal's security had been easier than expected, thanks to Ralph's network of contacts. One of his associates had cultivated a relationship with a desperate security guard drowning in gambling debts. For a hefty sum, the guard had provided them with legitimate security passes—complete with their photos and forged credentials that would pass any routine check. These passes gave them access to most areas of the terminal and, more importantly, made them virtually invisible to the other workers. In a place this size, with multiple shifts and hundreds of employees, no one questioned workers with valid credentials.

The guard had also provided them with detailed information about the CCTV blind spots and the timing of security patrols. The terminal's sophisticated security system had been designed to prevent external threats, but like many such systems, it was vulnerable to insider knowledge. Steve had memorised the patrol schedules and camera positions, planning their route through the facility's few surveillance gaps.

Steve sighed in frustration, rubbing his temples as he glanced at Raj, who was adjusting the absurdly small hard hat perched on his massive head. Raj looked out of place—his hi-vis vest stretched tight over his bulk like it was about to tear, the reflective tape barely clinging on. How Mick had ended up in custody and left him stuck with Raj was beyond him.

“You look like a bloody circus act,” Steve muttered under his breath, shaking his head.

Raj grunted, not even acknowledging the insult as he glanced around the busy terminal. He wasn’t the type to care about blending in, or even the stakes of the job. To Raj, everything was about brute force, and finesse wasn’t in his vocabulary.

The last time Steve had worked with him, Raj had punched their mark so hard he’d broken his jaw and knocked him unconscious. Rendering him incapable of giving them the necessary safe code, or the key!

This time at the freight terminal, there was a need to blend in. Too many people loading and unloading, but Raj looked ridiculous in the tiny hard hat and tightly stretched hi-viz waistcoat.

Their task was simple enough: pose as workers, load up a shipment, and walk away with a few crates of expensive electronics. In a place as chaotic as the freight terminal, the constant flow of trucks and workers should’ve provided the perfect cover. But with Raj’s lumbering presence, they drew unwanted attention almost immediately.

Steve noticed it first—one of the loaders on the other side of the yard had spotted them, his eyes narrowing suspiciously at Raj. He pointed them out to a nearby security guard, who began making his way over, his gaze fixed on the pair.

“Shit,” Steve hissed. “We’ve been made.”

Raj’s response was, of course, to clench his fists, already preparing to escalate the situation. Steve stopped him, ushered Raj out of sight behind a stack of crates and waited. As the guard rounded the

corner, Raj swung a massive fist, connecting squarely with the man's face. The sickening crunch of bone followed by the guard collapsing onto the ground in a heap told Steve that Raj had gone and done it again—another mark unconscious, fortunately this time they didn't need him for a code.

“Great,” Steve groaned, looking around. They had to move fast now. If anyone else noticed the missing guard, things would spiral out of control. “Help me get him in here,” he barked, motioning toward an open container that was being loaded with goods destined for overseas.

Raj, ever the muscle, grabbed the guard's limp body and unceremoniously shoved him inside, wedging him between a few crates marked “FRAGILE.” The man was still breathing—barely—but his bloodied face made it clear he wouldn't be sounding the alarm anytime soon.

Steve wiped a bead of sweat from his forehead and adjusted his own hard hat. “Alright, now let's keep it quiet. We need to finish this up and get out of here before anyone else comes sniffing around.”

Raj shrugged, not particularly concerned. “Whatever, just point me where you need me.” He cracked his knuckles, looking for the next problem to smash.

Steve couldn't shake the feeling that their luck was running thin. Raj might have bought them a few minutes, but they'd already drawn more attention than they could afford. And with the police cracking down on every little thing after the recent heists, it wouldn't be long before someone started asking the wrong questions.

As they resumed their operation, Steve couldn't help but think about Mick, sitting in some cell, probably already plotting his next move. Steve hated to admit it, but he missed Mick's cunning. The brute strength approach only got them so far, and Raj was already proving to be more of a liability than an asset.

Dave had been watching the rail terminal for hours from a concealed position atop one of the old storage buildings that lined the perimeter.

His makeshift disguise—a dark hoodie, mask, and gloves—helped him blend into the night.

As the first container was opened, Dave dropped silently from his perch and began to make his way toward the yard. His heart was racing, not from fear but from anticipation. He wasn't sure what the limits of his powers were yet, but he was about to find out.

Dave had been tailing Steve and Raj for some time, watching as they picked their target container. It wasn't difficult to track them—Steve, wiry and shifty, and Raj, an unmistakable mountain of a man, stood out in the bustling freight terminal. Dave knew Steve from the Ostlers car heist, and Raj? Well, Raj was impossible to miss.

As Dave crept closer, Steve noticed the movement behind them. His eyes widened, and he instinctively backed away, raising his hands in surrender. “Not my fight,” he muttered, leaving Raj to handle the situation.

Raj, ever the brute, swung his massive fist downward with full force, aiming squarely for Dave's nose. The blow carried tremendous power, enough to crush bone. But when Raj's fist connected, Dave barely moved—rocked back on his heels slightly. For Raj, however, it was like hitting a steel wall. The sheer force of his own punch, combined with Dave's invulnerable skin, shattered Raj's knuckles on impact.

All the while, the agents watched from a hidden vantage point, recording the entire scene. One of them spoke quietly into the radio, “Snipers, hold your fire. We need to see more.”

Raj's eyes bulged as the pain hit him. A bellow of agony echoed through the terminal, and he collapsed to the floor, cradling his mangled hand. His tough-guy demeanour vanished instantly, replaced by the raw pain of his self-inflicted injury. His partner, Steve, however, wasted no time. While Raj was writhing on the ground, Steve bolted, sprinting toward the getaway truck.

Dave had no intention of letting him escape. In an instant, he was sprinting after Steve. Despite Steve's head start, Dave's enhanced

speed closed the gap effortlessly. By the time Steve reached the truck, fumbling to close the door, Dave was right behind him.

With a single, effortless motion, Dave ripped the truck door clean off its hinges and tossed it aside. Steve, wide-eyed and terrified, barely had time to react before Dave grabbed him by the collar and yanked him out of the vehicle, like he was pulling a rag-doll from its packaging.

The agents were still gathering evidence, studying Dave's abilities—his invulnerability, speed, and strength were now undeniable. Dave might not have known it, but his every move was being monitored. Steve, however, didn't have time to think about secret agents. As Dave held him in a grip of steel, kicking and squirming, his only thought was that he'd never faced anyone like this before.

As Dave stood, gripping Steve by the collar, a quiet voice crackled over the radio: "OK, we've seen enough. Sniper one, send it."

The rifle's silenced shot barely made a sound, and yet Dave felt the impact—a small, sudden force in the centre of his back. It didn't hurt, but the sensation was undeniable. He spun around, eyes scanning the area as he dropped Steve like a sack of potatoes. Someone was shooting at him from an elevated position.

He didn't know what kind of weapon was being used, but the fact that it had hit him without leaving so much as a scratch was astonishing. Was he bulletproof? He had tested his strength, speed, even his resilience against punches, but a sniper bullet? That was something else entirely. The thought both unnerved and exhilarated him. He hadn't even felt a sting—just a strange acknowledgement of being hit.

Forget Steve. He wasn't a real threat. Dave scanned the dark, industrial landscape for the sniper, but couldn't pinpoint the exact location. Whoever it was had chosen their perch well. He had to move fast.

Without hesitation, Dave sprinted into the shadows, vanishing into

the labyrinth of containers and loading bays. He darted through narrow alleys between the freight cars, zigzagging to avoid any further shots. He didn't know how many more snipers might be out there, but he wasn't sticking around to find out. Whoever they were, they were serious.

He took a convoluted route back to his car, making sure to lose any potential trackers. His mind raced just as fast as his feet. The bullet hadn't caused any damage, but the fact that someone had fired it meant he was being watched, maybe even targeted. This wasn't Ralph's style. Ralph was all brute force, street-level intimidation. A sniper meant precision, planning—someone who knew how to deal with people like Dave.

By the time he reached home, it was well past midnight. He shut the door behind him, still panting from the escape. His mind buzzed with unanswered questions. Ralph wouldn't have had the resources for this. It had to be someone else, someone who had been watching him for a while, who had tracked him to the freight terminal and had the means to bring in professional shooters.

Who else knew about his powers?

Sitting on his couch, Dave replayed the night's events in his mind. The sniper bullet hadn't even slowed him down. Whoever these people were, they weren't ordinary criminals. Was there a shadowy government agency involved? Was it some kind of secret organisation trying to study him, or worse—capture him?

The only sure thing was that Dave's hoodie and t-shirt showed the evidence of the bullet. A hole in both, but not a mark on his skin could be seen in the mirror.

Dave knew one thing for sure: someone had just escalated the game.

Found

When the agents first visited Dave at home, they were met with an environment that seemed to echo his solitary life. The house, more of a reflection of function than comfort, lacked any personal touches. The hallway was bare, its walls plain, devoid of pictures or decorations that might offer a glimpse into his personality. It was clear that Dave hadn't felt the need to embellish his space with the usual warmth of soft furnishings or family memorabilia.

As they moved into the living room, it was much the same—simple, no-nonsense, with the bare essentials to make life comfortable enough. A matching two-seater sofa and a plain chair were the only seating options, both made of unpatterned fabric, neutral in tone. The chair looked well-used, more so than the sofa, with a deep dent in the cushion that hinted at hours spent lounging in it, likely while facing the massive flat-screen TV mounted on the wall.

The TV setup spoke more to Dave's passions. It was connected to a gaming console and a streaming service, an unmistakable sign of his escape from reality. The agents had already known, thanks to their thorough background checks, that Dave didn't even have a TV licence, a fact that amused them more than it shocked. The centrepiece of the room, however, was not the TV or sofa but the PC setup. A large desk occupied one corner, its dual monitors glowing slightly in sleep mode, and the ergonomic keyboard and mouse sat neatly on top. But it was the chair that drew attention—a high-end gaming chair, black with subtle grey accents, clearly designed for long hours of sitting. This chair, likely more expensive than both

the sofa and armchair combined, suggested that while Dave might not care about the decor, he cared about his comfort when it came to gaming or working at his computer.

The coffee table in front of the sofa appeared to serve more than just a decorative function. It likely doubled as a dining surface, its surface a little worn from casual meals eaten while watching TV or gaming. There was a certain practicality to everything—the arrangement, the items, the lack of clutter. Dave’s world had been one of routine, perhaps monotonous, until now.

Dave sat on the edge of his worn chair, staring at the two visitors in his living room. He’d seen them before at the Hanged Man, subtle operators asking questions but blending in better than the journalists. Now, they were sitting right in front of him, one perched on the sofa, the other standing near the door, exuding quiet authority. He wasn’t sure whether to feel cornered or relieved.

“Mr. Anderson,” the sitting agent began, his voice calm and composed. “We’ve been looking for you for some time. At first, we weren’t sure if we were chasing rumours or just following trails of misinformation. But after last night’s events, it became clear. You’re the one we’ve been hearing about.”

Dave’s mind raced. How had they found him? He’d been cautious after the freight terminal incident, covering his tracks, taking back roads home. But clearly, it hadn’t been enough.

The agent continued, “You were shot last night. The bullet wasn’t meant to harm you.”

Dave stiffened at the mention of the sniper. Not meant to harm him? That seemed like a strange claim for someone who had taken a shot at him.

“It wasn’t a typical projectile,” the agent clarified, sensing Dave’s confusion. “It was a tracking device, a highly advanced, exotic, and expensive one at that. The goal wasn’t to kill you but to attach itself and monitor your location.”

The other agent, still standing, folded his arms, eyes steady on Dave. “It didn’t quite work as intended. Your, let’s say, unique physiology didn’t allow the device to penetrate your skin, remain undetected, or at least difficult to remove until found. But you had enough fragments of the tracking material embedded in your clothing—your T-shirt and hoodie, if you’d have disposed of them, we may never have located you.”

Dave stared at them in disbelief. They’d tracked him using his own clothes?

There was no use denying anything. The agent next to him pulled out a tablet and tapped the screen. Footage from the freight terminal appeared—sharp professional images, clear enough to show Dave running after Steve’s getaway truck at an unbelievable speed. They’d captured his sprint in slow motion, highlighting his inhuman pace and agility.

“These readings,” the agent said, tapping the screen, “indicate you were moving at nearly 60 miles per hour. The sensors we had on-site picked up enough to confirm what we suspected. You’re not exactly an ordinary man, are you?”

Dave’s mouth went dry. They had everything—visual proof, sensor readings, and now they were sitting in his living room, calling him out.

The standing agent stepped closer, speaking with more intensity now. “We’re not here to threaten you, Mr. Anderson. But you’ve caught our attention, and frankly, we’re impressed. You could be an asset.”

“An asset?” Dave echoed, feeling his throat tighten. He had no idea what kind of “asset” these people had in mind, but it didn’t sound good.

“We work for an organisation that handles situations...” the seated agent explained, leaning forward slightly.

Dave’s pulse quickened. Was this what he had been searching for? The secret government agency or shadowy organisation he had theo-

rised about?

“So, what do you want from me?” Dave finally asked, his voice calm but tense.

The standing agent exchanged a glance with his partner. “Right now, we just want to talk. Understand your situation. Figure out how we can help each other. You’ve been operating under the radar so far, but as last night showed, it’s only a matter of time before more people notice.”

The seated agent leaned back, crossing his arms. “It’s your choice, Mr. Anderson. You can go on as you are—hiding in the shadows, trying to do good where you can. Or you can work with us. Use your abilities in a more structured, meaningful way. We’re not asking for an answer now. Just... think about it.”

Dave’s mind swirled with possibilities. They knew about him, and they didn’t seem interested in locking him away or exposing him. But what exactly were they offering?

Examination

Dave sat on the sterile examination table in the medical centre, watching as the doctors and technicians buzzed around him. He wasn't particularly nervous—just wary. He still didn't know if he could trust these people. For all he knew, this could be a ploy by some foreign agency, trying to recruit him for their own ends. But what choice did he have? He needed answers, and this was the first step towards finding out what he was capable of—and who these people really were.

The medical centre where Dave currently sat was far from the sterile, clinical spaces typically associated with hospitals or laboratories. It was a place that radiated wealth and discretion, more akin to a private residence for the rich and famous than a place of medicine. From the outside, it looked like a series of luxurious apartments, with none of the overt signage or glaring indicators that might draw unwanted attention. This was a place where privacy came at a premium, and clients were ensured that their visits would remain discreet.

Inside, the atmosphere was inviting and understated. The walls were not the stark, whitewashed surfaces found in hospitals but instead were a soft, warm shade, designed to be calming and almost home-like. The lighting, too, was different—not the harsh, bright lights of an operating room but soft, ambient lighting that illuminated the space without creating discomfort. It was clear that every detail was meticulously designed to avoid the typical sterility of medical environments, while still maintaining hygiene and functionality.

The floors were not cold linoleum but sleek, polished wood or high-end tiling, with soft rugs scattered in certain areas to add warmth. Everything was easy to clean, of course, but it didn't scream "medical facility." There was no scent of disinfectant in the air, none of that cold, bleach-soaked smell that often clings to hospitals. Instead, the air was lightly fragranced, possibly with some kind of essential oil, giving it an almost spa-like feel.

Each examination room resembled a well-furnished private study or sitting room. The medical equipment was discreetly tucked away, only brought into sight when necessary. There were comfortable chairs, fine furniture, and perhaps even art on the walls. A private bathroom was attached to each room, maintaining the sense of privacy and luxury. The staff moved efficiently, but with a quiet, unobtrusive manner, making it clear they were used to dealing with clients who valued their privacy and comfort.

Despite the outward appearance of ease and luxury, it was evident to anyone with a discerning eye that this was a state-of-the-art medical facility. The examination devices, when revealed, were cutting-edge, seamlessly integrated into the surroundings. The technology used was top-tier, designed to perform extensive tests while keeping the patient at ease. This was a place where medicine met luxury, where the highest levels of care were delivered without the clinical edge. It reflected the kind of service available only to those with significant resources or, in Dave's case, those with agency backing.

One of the doctors, wearing a white lab coat and thin glasses, approached him with a syringe. "We need to take a blood sample," she said calmly, already preparing the needle. Dave watched as she found a vein in his arm and tried to insert the needle.

It didn't even break the skin.

The doctor frowned, switching to a larger, sturdier needle. But again, when she tried to pierce Dave's arm, the needle simply bent. A third attempt, with even more force, yielded the same result. By now, the room had gone quiet, and the staff exchanged nervous glances.

Dave looked down at his unbroken skin, perplexed. He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen his own blood. Did he even bleed?

"This is... unusual," the doctor muttered, her professional façade slipping just a little. "We'll have to skip the blood test."

They resorted to taking a simple swab from the inside of his cheek for DNA testing. But as Dave went through a battery of other tests, it became clear that his body functioned in ways no one had anticipated.

They placed him on a treadmill, hooking him up to monitors and sensors. At first, it was a typical stress test—heart rate, oxygen levels, muscle performance. But when Dave started running, the data on the screens became bizarre. His heart rate barely rose, staying just above resting levels even as his speed picked up. His breathing was calm and even, no sign of strain, no heavy panting. Meanwhile, the treadmill's speedometer was quickly pushed to its limits.

As the treadmill hummed loudly, struggling to keep up, Dave felt a strange sensation. It wasn't that he was running faster—it was as if everything around him was moving slower. The world seemed to stretch and lag behind as his body zipped forward, effortlessly, while the machine beneath him struggled to match his pace.

The technicians watched in stunned silence, taking notes, but offering little in the way of explanation. Dave stopped, the treadmill slowing down to a stop as the silence in the room grew louder. They were all watching him—like he was some kind of lab specimen.

"So, what now?" Dave asked, his voice cutting through the tension in the room. "What exactly is this all for? I still don't know who you people are."

The standing agent from the night before stepped forward, finally speaking after observing quietly. "This is just the first step, Dave. We need to understand what you're capable of—both for your safety and ours. The more we know about you, the better we can utilise your talents."

Dave narrowed his eyes. “Utilise? For what exactly? And how do I know I’m not working for some rogue agency—or worse, a foreign government?”

The agent smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “We understand your concern. But for now, let’s just say we represent interests that are global. We ensure the safety and stability of a world that, quite frankly, isn’t ready for someone like you.”

“That’s not an answer,” Dave replied.

“Maybe not,” the agent said. “But it’s the only one you’re getting right now. Trust comes with time.”

Dave wasn’t sure how to feel. He had half a mind to walk out, but something kept him rooted there. He needed to know more—about himself and about them. And this seemed like his only way forward, for now.

“So what happens next?” Dave asked.

“We’ll need more tests, and we’ll share what we can. But for now, go home. Think about what you want to do. You’re not a prisoner here, Dave. But understand—things are already in motion. People are aware of your existence. The world is watching, even if you don’t realise it.”

As Dave left the facility, the wind cool on his face, he felt the weight of what they had said settle in. He had wanted to be noticed—now he was. But the more attention he attracted, the more questions arose. Was this agency really here to help him? Or was he just another pawn in a much larger game?

One thing was certain: there was no turning back now.

The Real Deal

Agent Dexter Lands sat in his dimly lit office, the soft hum of electronics the only sound breaking the silence. His eyes flicked over the test results and video evidence on his screen for what felt like the hundredth time. Dave Anderson was real. The evidence was undeniable. It had taken years of chasing leads, debunking rumours, and walking away from dead ends, but now they had someone with genuine superhuman abilities on their hands.

Taking a deep breath, he pulled up the secure messaging app on his computer and began typing to his superior, Director Harker.

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To: Director Harker

Subject: Subject Anderson Test Results - Critical Development

Director,

I'm forwarding you the results from our assessment of Dave Anderson. He's the real deal. The footage we captured during the incident at the rail freight terminal shows him running at a speed of 60 mph, and the impact of a high calibre sniper round barely registered. His biometric data confirms that his physiology is entirely different from anything we've ever seen. His heart rate remained steady during high levels of exertion, and traditional blood sampling methods were ineffective. This guy isn't just enhanced; he's operating on a different level altogether.

Here's the thing: we've been searching for someone like this for so long, I'm not sure what we do now that we've actually found him. We've always operated in the shadows, pulling strings, making sure the world doesn't destroy itself through greed, war, or exploitation. Now we have someone who could shift the balance of power entirely.

I need your guidance on next steps. Do we recruit him, monitor him, or... contain him? We've kept governments in check from behind the scenes, making sure no one nation gains the upper hand over the others. But this is different. If anyone else finds out about him, we could be looking at a global arms race like nothing we've ever seen. Super soldiers, or at least the myth of them, have always been used as a bluff—an unproven deterrent. Anderson changes the game.

We've always operated without borders, without allegiance to any state or nation. The agency was designed to protect mankind as a whole, not to play politics or allow one country to exploit another. That's why we monitor governments so closely, why we disrupt operations that cross the line, and why we've kept our existence secret for so long. But with Anderson, we're in uncharted territory.

No government can be trusted with someone like him in their ranks. They'd use him to pursue their own interests—military or otherwise. But how do we handle someone with his abilities without tipping the scales ourselves? We don't know if he'll cooperate, and he's clearly aware of how powerful he is. His trust in us is tenuous at best.

I'll wait for your direction, but I have a bad feeling we've just opened Pandora's box.

-Dexter

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Lands hit send, and leaned back in his chair. He had spent years in the agency, orchestrating covert missions to prevent global conflicts and sabotage dangerous political agendas, but this was something else entirely. Dave wasn't just another puzzle piece in the agency's shadow war—he was a potential game-changer.

The agency, a global entity that operated above nations, prided itself on its neutrality. Free from red tape, it worked to prevent exploitation, disasters, and wars that could destabilise the world. Governments, no matter how powerful or wealthy, couldn't be trusted. Dexter had seen first-hand how nations only cared about their own interests—whether it was hoarding resources, exploiting natural disasters for financial gain, or pushing military agendas. The agency stepped in where governments wouldn't, or couldn't, all without anyone knowing they were there.

Dave could tip the delicate balance the agency had spent years maintaining. If one nation got a hold of him, the rest would follow suit, forcing the agency into a war they never wanted to be a part of. Dexter didn't even want to think about the kind of chaos that could come from that.

But the problem was... Dave wasn't a tool to be controlled. He wasn't a weapon, or a piece of technology. He was a person, with his own mind and agenda. And if they pushed him too hard, if they tried to force him into their plans, there was no telling how he would react—or what damage he might do.

Dexter sighed, rubbing his temples. Whatever the next steps were, they needed to tread carefully. Because now, with Dave in the picture, the agency wasn't just playing in the shadows any more—they were stepping into the light of a world that was dangerously close to falling apart.

All they had to do was make sure no one else noticed.

Taxes

Dave realised that his transition from regular life to this secretive world wasn't as simple as disappearing. Real-life responsibilities still lingered. How would he leave his job without raising questions? What would happen to his digital footprint, especially with agencies like the DWP tracking every detail? And what if he didn't like the agency's work? What if he wanted to return to his old life?

As he sat across from Agent Lands, these concerns flooded his mind.

Lands, however, seemed unfazed. "Don't worry," he said in his usual calm demeanour. "We've got protocols for this."

Dave raised an eyebrow. "Protocols? I can't just vanish without people asking questions—especially at work. My boss is going to want an explanation, and I still have bills to pay."

Lands shifted slightly in his chair. "It's... complicated. We can arrange long-term sick leave initially, but there are limitations. Your employer might require medical documentation, regular updates. We can provide those, but it needs to be watertight. One slip, one inconsistency in the paperwork, and it could raise red flags."

"And what about the digital trail? DWP? Taxes? Mortgage? I can't have my digital existence just... vanish."

"The agency will handle most of it," Lands said, choosing his words carefully. "But I won't lie to you—it's not perfect. We'll set up a shell company for your income, but tax authorities are getting better at spotting suspicious patterns. We'll need to maintain a convincing

paper trail, which means you'll have to file tax returns, keep records, maybe even attend occasional video calls with 'clients' to maintain the contractor cover story."

Dave leaned forward. "What about my mortgage? The bank's going to notice if my income pattern suddenly changes."

"That's one of our bigger challenges," Lands admitted. "We can cover the payments, but modern banking algorithms flag unusual activity. We'll need to gradually transition your income source over several months. You might need to maintain some legitimate freelance work on the side, at least on paper. And your credit score—" he grimaced slightly, "—it might take a hit during the transition period. Banks don't look kindly on sudden career changes."

"And if I want to go back to my old life?"

"Your job will technically be there, but..." Lands paused. "Be realistic. Extended absences leave gaps. Your skills might become outdated. Colleagues will move on. And explaining away a long absence to future employers? That's another challenge entirely. We can help, but we can't guarantee everything will snap back to normal."

The reality of what Lands was saying sank in. The agency's support wasn't a magic wand—it was more like a complex juggling act, requiring constant maintenance and attention to detail. One dropped ball could unravel everything.

"There's something else," Lands added, his expression growing serious. "The more we do to cover your tracks, the more... involved you become with us. Each layer of protection is another thread tying you to the agency. Some of our operatives have found that... challenging."

Dave sat back, processing the implications. The promise of support was still there, but now he saw the strings attached—countless invisible threads that would bind him to the agency's world. It wasn't just about financial security any more; it was about committing to a life of constant vigilance, of maintaining covers and stories, of living with the knowledge that one small mistake could compromise everything.

Yet, despite the complications—or perhaps because of them—it felt more real now. This wasn't a fantasy of easily disappearing into a new life. This was the reality of walking away from the world he knew, with all the messy, complicated consequences that came with it.

Would you accept these limitations and complications to do something meaningful with your newfound abilities? The question hung in the air, unanswered.

Answers

When Dave was first invited to visit the agency offices, he wasn't sure what to expect. He imagined something grand, imposing, maybe even hidden behind layers of security like in the movies. But what he found was a far cry from that—subtle, discreet, almost indistinguishable from any other small office rental in the business district.

The office space itself was tucked away in a shared complex, a series of unassuming buildings arranged around a quadrangle. The complex housed a mix of companies: small consultancies, legal firms, and local businesses. There was nothing remarkable about it. It wasn't some sleek, glass-walled skyscraper with high-end tech startups, nor was it a windowless government bunker. It felt ordinary, blending into the background. If you weren't looking for it, you could easily walk past without a second glance.

The quadrangle itself was practical and functional, with limited parking spaces reserved for senior staff and a rotating line-up of food trucks that made their rounds during lunchtime. Sandwiches, deli wraps, and pizza—everything you'd expect for the typical office crowd. The rest of the staff had to rely on permit-based parking in the surrounding streets, another mundane detail that added to the low-profile nature of the place.

The agency, it seemed, wasn't concerned with appearances. It was about staying under the radar, keeping things normal. And so, they had arranged for a car and driver to pick Dave up—not flashy, just a quiet nod to the seriousness of the matter at hand. The car was

sleek but not too luxurious, clean but not ostentatious. There were no decals on the door, no corporate insignia or registration number visible on the back. It was a nondescript black saloon, the kind that could have been ferrying a mid-level executive to a meeting across town, not something that screamed “special ops.”

As Dave was driven through the city, he appreciated the subtlety. It wasn’t a huge step up from a cab ride, but it was personal enough to show they were paying attention. It wasn’t some impersonal, prepaid travel voucher for a train ride to a job interview. They wanted him to feel comfortable, valued even, but also to understand that they were careful with how they handled things. Nothing about this was done by accident.

When the car pulled up in front of the office building, Dave took in the scene. There was no grand entrance, no security detail waiting to escort him inside. It was just an ordinary office space—people going about their business, grabbing lunch, and making small talk as they walked in and out of the surrounding offices. The driver opened the door for him and nodded. “You’re expected. Just head inside. They’ll be waiting.”

Dave made his way inside, where a small but efficient reception area awaited. The receptionist—friendly but professional—greeted him and directed him to the agency’s specific office within the complex. Again, nothing over the top. A standard elevator ride up a few floors, and he found himself in a clean, modern office, with frosted glass windows providing some privacy without drawing too much attention.

The office itself was functional—just a few desks, computers, and minimal decor. No grand displays of power, no rows of plaques or accolades on the walls. Just a workspace where people got things done. Yet, as understated as it was, there was an air of quiet professionalism. The staff moved efficiently, with purpose. There was no wasted motion, no idle chatter. It was clear that, behind the mundane appearance, this was a place where important work happened—quietly, methodically, and without any need for show.

As Dave was led to a small conference room, he realised this was the agency's way of operating: blending into the background, never drawing unnecessary attention. And in a strange way, that felt more reassuring than any grandiose display of power ever could.

Pleasantries aside, tea or coffee offered, and politely declined, this was the moment he had been waiting for—answers. In the frosted glass walled conference room Dave sat across from Agent Lands, the bright lighting of the meeting room, and the day light streaming from outside, sat Agent Lands – there were no dark corners to hide in, or poor lighting to disguise or hide any body language. This was a place for truths to be told. He had spent weeks trying to piece together fragments of what this mysterious agency was, but now, he would get the full picture.

Lands leaned back in his chair, his tone calm but serious. “Harker gave me the green light to tell you what you need to know. So, here's the deal, Dave. The agency, as we call it, doesn't really have a name. Not one that matters, anyway. The people on the outside, the ones trying to figure out who we are—they assume we're CIA, MI5, FBI, Mossad. Whatever agency fits the narrative in their heads. We let them think what they want, but we're none of those things.”

Dave nodded, his curiosity piqued. He'd encountered rumours, conspiracy theories, but nothing solid until now.

“The truth is,” Lands continued, “we were founded by a wealthy philanthropist. I can't give you his name, or tell you exactly how he amassed his fortune—that information would expose too much. But he saw what most people never do: the leaders of his country—of any country—aren't always looking out for the world's best interests. They can't. They don't have the perspective or the willpower to think beyond their borders.”

Lands' eyes narrowed slightly, as if recalling the origins of this vast network. “This philanthropist moved in circles with the rich and powerful. We're talking multi-billionaires, old money, new money, some of them self-made, others with family legacies. A few of them

thought the same way he did—that something more needed to be done, something outside the influence of governments and borders.”

“So, they formed this agency?” Dave asked, trying to wrap his head around the scope of it.

“Exactly. It started small, just a handful of people, but it grew. Quietly. You’d be surprised how many of the world’s wealthy elites don’t trust their own governments. The agency has backers from everywhere—the UK, USA, Germany, China, India, Africa, Australia. These people contribute, but they don’t make the decisions. They’re not tied to policies or operations. It’s like a secret club, but without the perks of influence.”

Dave raised an eyebrow. “And no one knows about this?”

Lands smirked. “You’d be amazed at what a creative accountant can do. Keeping the money moving, keeping it untraceable—it’s not something I understand. I’m not an accountant, I’m just one of the guys on the ground. But I know enough to tell you that the agency’s funding is airtight. No paper trail, no accountability to anyone but the people running the show.”

Dave leaned forward, still processing. “So, what’s your role in all of this?”

“That’s where it gets interesting,” Lands replied, his voice lowering slightly. “I’m part of a division called Special Projects. We’re the agency’s version of Area 51. We investigate claims and rumours—anything weird, anything that could shift the balance. You name it, we’ve looked into it. Aliens? Sure. Bigfoot? Why not. Super soldiers, government experiments? Absolutely. We’ve got files full of reports, but up until now, it was all dead ends. No real proof. Nothing... until we found you.”

Dave’s eyes widened. “So, you’re saying...”

Lands held up a hand. “I’m saying you’re the first. The only verified case of someone who can do what you do. You’re not a rumour, Dave. You’re the real deal. We’ve been waiting for this moment for years.”

The weight of Lands' words hung in the air. Dave knew he was different, but hearing it confirmed from a group that spent their lives chasing myths gave it a new level of significance.

Lands continued, his tone more serious now. "You're the kind of thing we've been chasing for decades. What you can do—your speed, strength, invulnerability—it's the kind of power governments would kill to have in their ranks. But the thing is, we don't play that game. We don't want to turn you into a weapon. That's not what this is about."

"So, what is it about?" Dave asked, his mind racing.

"We want to understand you. To figure out what makes you tick. And then, maybe, we can find a way to make sure you use what you have for the right reasons. Because, Dave, the last thing we need is someone like you getting co-opted by a nation, a corporation, or any other power hungry group. That's why we're here—to keep the world from tearing itself apart."

Dave sat back, absorbing everything. He had been trying to figure out his place in the world since he discovered his powers, and now, it felt like the puzzle was starting to come together. But it also raised new questions.

"So, what now?" he asked.

"That's up to you," Lands said. "We'll continue to help you understand your abilities, run more tests if you're willing. But we're not going to force you into anything. The agency doesn't work that way. We keep governments in check, stop global disasters before they happen, but we don't take orders from anyone. And if you're on board with that, we could use someone like you. But no pressure."

Dave stared at Lands, considering his options. He had always been wary of becoming someone else's weapon, but the agency's vision of a higher purpose, one beyond borders and politics, resonated with him.

"I'll think about it," Dave said finally.

“That’s all we ask,” Lands replied, standing up and offering his hand.
“When you’re ready, we’ll be here.”

History

Dave sat quietly, absorbing the gravity of Agent Lands' words. His life, which had always felt grounded in normalcy, was suddenly filled with mystery. He had never questioned his past, never felt the need to dig deeper. His adoptive family was all he ever needed, and their love had been enough. But now, Lands was telling him that there were gaps—unexplained absences in his history that didn't add up.

Lands leaned forward, his tone sympathetic but matter-of-fact. "We looked into your past, Dave. We had to, given everything that's been happening. And what we found... well, it's strange. There are no official adoption records for you."

Dave frowned, confused. "What do you mean? I was adopted when I was about six. My parents never kept it a secret. They were honest with me."

"I believe that," Lands said. "But the problem is, we can't find any documentation of it. There's no record of your birth parents, no legal documents showing the adoption process. It's like you just appeared in their lives."

Dave thought of the shoebox in his closet at home - filled with birthday cards from his parents, his high school diploma, the last Father's Day card he'd given his dad before the cancer. Those papers told the story of who he was. But now Lands was telling him there was another story, one written in blank spaces and missing files.

He shifted uncomfortably. "Couldn't that just be down to bad record-

keeping? It was a long time ago, and things were different back then.”

Lands nodded. “True. It was the late ‘80s, and things weren’t as tight back then. But even still, there should be something—a birth certificate, an adoption file, some kind of trace. We’ve combed through everything, and there’s nothing before you started school. It’s almost like you didn’t exist before that.”

Dave stared at him, trying to process what that meant. He had never once questioned where he came from. His parents were his parents. They raised him, loved him, and to him, that was all that mattered. But this... this was different.

“You’re saying I might not be... who I think I am?” Dave asked cautiously.

Dave’s throat tightened as he listened to Lands, his fingers unconsciously tracing the edge of the table. He had his mother’s habit of doing that when anxious - or at least, he’d always thought he’d picked it up from her. Now even that small connection felt uncertain.

Lands sighed. “I’m saying you’re unique, Dave. And I don’t mean that in a figurative sense. You don’t have any identifiable biological relatives, at least none that we can trace. Your DNA doesn’t match anyone in any global database, which is... rare. Everyone’s DNA usually connects to something, somewhere. Family trees are almost always traceable.”

“But mine isn’t?” Dave asked, his voice quieter now.

Lands shook his head. “No. It’s not. And that’s part of what makes this so strange. Your DNA is human, but it doesn’t tie you to any known lineage. We’ve run it through every database we have access to, and there’s nothing.”

Dave sat back in his chair, feeling a sudden wave of disorientation. His entire life, he had believed himself to be just an ordinary guy, albeit with extraordinary abilities he had only recently discovered. But now Lands was telling him that he might not even have a past, that his very existence was somehow... anomalous.

“I never cared about my biological parents,” Dave muttered, almost to himself. “I had a family. A good one. My mum and dad, they loved me. That’s all that mattered.”

Lands nodded. “I get that. But this changes things. If you’re comfortable with it, we can dig deeper. Try to figure out where you came from, how you got these abilities. There’s something about your origins that doesn’t fit the standard narrative.”

Dave stayed silent for a moment, thinking about his adoptive parents. His mother, who had worked tirelessly as a nurse, and his father, with his “boring” desk job that Dave had never really questioned. The thought of his dad’s illness and eventual death flickered in his mind, followed by the image of his mother, wasting away in grief shortly after. He missed them both. And now, to think that even his past with them might be shrouded in mystery—it was almost too much to handle.

“Could it be some kind of mistake?” Dave asked. “Like maybe the records just got lost over the years?”

Lands shrugged. “Maybe. But given what we know about you—what you can do—it seems like there’s more to it than just a clerical error. We don’t know how you got your powers, but they didn’t come out of nowhere. And without a traceable family history, it’s possible that your origins are... different from what anyone expected.”

Dave felt a chill run through him. “What are you saying? That I’m not... human?”

Lands shook his head quickly. “No, nothing like that. Your DNA is human, there’s no doubt about that. But there’s something else. Something we haven’t figured out yet. You’re a mystery, Dave, and the more we learn, the more questions we have.”

Dave sighed, rubbing his temples as he tried to make sense of it all. “So what do I do now?”

Lands leaned forward again, his voice steady. “You don’t have to do anything. But if you’re willing, we can keep looking into your past.

Maybe there's an explanation out there. Or maybe your powers are the result of something no one's ever seen before. Either way, you're not alone in this. We'll help you figure it out."

Dave nodded slowly, still processing the enormity of what Lands had told him. His past, his very identity, was just a mystery.

Induction

Dave sat in a comfortable room of the medical centre, a glass of water rested untouched on the table in front of him, its surface slightly rippling as the air conditioning kicked on. He'd spent the last two hours going through another series of tests—speed trials, strength measurements, and reaction time exercises. The numbers were off the charts, but that didn't surprise him any more. What did surprise him was the growing curiosity gnawing at his mind.

"You're an enigma," Agent Dexter Lands had said just a week ago. "No records, no biological history, nothing to trace you back to anything we've ever seen before."

Dave had never really thought much about his origins. To him, his adoptive family was everything. They had taken him in when he was about six, given him a home, and raised him with love and care. His father, a quiet man in a suit and tie, always described his job as boring—just a desk job, nothing worth mentioning. His mother had been a nurse, working gruelling night shifts to support the family. She was a sturdy woman with warm hands, but Dave remembered how she had slowly withered after his father passed away. Cancer had claimed him fast, and soon after, his mother followed, grief-stricken and lost.

His older siblings were still around, but they'd drifted apart after their parents' deaths. His sister, once like a second mother, had her own family now. His brother, once his best friend, had moved to the other side of the country, busy with his own life. They still exchanged

holiday greetings and occasional calls, but it wasn't the same. The warmth of their shared childhood had dissipated, leaving behind a nostalgic ache in Dave's heart.

But all of that had seemed normal. Everyone had their own struggles, their own drifting relationships. He had never once thought to look deeper into his adoption. It was just part of life. His adoptive parents had never hidden it from him, but they'd never gone into detail either. Dave had always been content with that. What did it matter where he came from, when he had a family who loved him?

Yet, now, as the agency began peeling back the layers of his existence, the question hung in the air like a dark cloud: **Who am I, really?**

Lands, persistent and methodical, had dug deep. He'd combed through every digital record, every paper archive, trying to find some thread that might lead back to Dave's biological roots. Yet, there was nothing—no adoption papers, no hospital records, no birth certificate. It was as though Dave had appeared out of thin air.

"This doesn't make sense," Lands had said, running a hand through his thinning hair as they sat in a sterile office together. "Even back then, adoptions left a paper trail. Missing kids get registered. Even closed adoptions have some record."

Dave had shrugged, not knowing what to say. He'd never thought to ask about those things. His parents had just been his parents.

Then, there was the blood test. They'd tried to take a sample to run DNA tests, but the needle couldn't even pierce his skin. No matter how sharp or how strong the tool, it was as if his flesh repelled any attempt. The nurse had stared at him in disbelief, her hands trembling as she tried over and over again.

"I've never seen anything like it," she muttered, finally giving up. They took a swab instead, carefully scraping the inside of his cheek for DNA.

When the results came back, they were equally puzzling. His DNA

didn't show any abnormalities—it was just like any other human's—but there was no match in any database. No familial connections, no ancestry to trace. He was a ghost.

In the meantime, the agency continued his training. At first, Dave had balked at the idea of being moulded into some sort of secret weapon. He wasn't comfortable with violence. The thought of hurting or killing someone made his stomach turn. But as they worked with him, they focused less on combat and more on control. They taught him how to use his strength and speed with precision, how to neutralise threats without breaking bones or causing unnecessary harm.

One of the trainers, a former special forces operative named Callahan, had explained it best: “Think of it like learning to drive a high-powered sports car. You have all this horsepower, but if you don't know how to handle it, you're just a danger to everyone around you.”

They trained him in self-defence, trade craft, and surveillance. He learned how to blend in, how to follow someone without being noticed, how to use dead drops and communicate covertly. It was all part of the agency's arsenal, skills that would help him stay under the radar.

Dave spent his mornings in the agency's dojo, where his supernatural abilities proved both a blessing and a challenge. Unlike the action heroes in movies, Dave hadn't mysteriously acquired martial arts expertise along with his powers. Instead, his superhuman speed and reflexes made him an unusual student - one who could see attacks coming but didn't always know the best way to respond.

“Again,” Instructor Chen would say, circling Dave with the patience of a master teaching a beginner. Even as Chen launched a complex combination attack, Dave saw it all happening in slow motion - the initial feint, the follow-up strike, the sweep. But seeing wasn't the same as knowing how to react. Dave would dodge awkwardly or block with too much force, making his supernatural grace look almost comical.

“You’re thinking too much,” Chen observed one morning, after Dave had avoided a throw by practically dancing away from it. “Your body is capable of incredible things, but your mind is still catching up. You need to learn to trust your instincts.”

It was true. No matter how clumsy his responses might be, Dave’s enhanced abilities made him nearly impossible to hit. The best martial artists in the agency would launch their most challenging attacks, only for Dave to see them unfolding like a slow-motion film, giving him plenty of time to move out of the way. He might not look elegant doing it, but he was undeniably effective. As Callahan put it, “It’s like watching a master boxer with the grace of a drunken giraffe - but hey, if it works, it works.”

The afternoons brought a different kind of training, one that surprised Dave by becoming his favourite part of the day. In the indoor shooting range, surrounded by the sharp crack of gunfire and the smell of cordite, Dave found an unexpected passion. The firearms training appealed to his analytical mind - each weapon was a complex mechanism to be understood, mastered, and respected.

“You’re not trying to be Rambo,” Firearms Instructor Sarah Martinez would remind him. “You’re learning a tool. Treat it like you would treat a complex piece of software - understand its functions, its limitations, its proper use.”

That framework clicked with Dave immediately. He approached each weapon like a new programming language to be learned, breaking down the mechanics of operation, the principles of accuracy, the importance of maintenance. He wasn’t a natural marksman - his shots didn’t magically find their targets like in the movies - but his steady improvement brought its own satisfaction.

The combat simulations combined everything he was learning - movement, awareness, weapon handling - into complex scenarios that felt more like intense puzzle-solving than violence. Dave found himself enjoying the challenge of working through each situation, finding the optimal solution that minimised risk and harm.

“Most people come in wanting to be James Bond,” Martinez noted one day, watching Dave methodically break down and clean his weapon after a particularly challenging simulation. “You’re the first one I’ve seen who approaches it like an engineer solving a problem. Keep that mindset - it’ll serve you well.”

These practical skills balanced against his other training - the languages, the trade craft, the surveillance techniques. Each piece was building toward something larger, though Dave wasn’t yet sure what that something might be. But as the weeks passed, he found himself settling into a rhythm, his initial reluctance giving way to a growing sense of purpose.

The fighting might still look awkward, and his marksmanship might still need work, but Dave was becoming something unique - not a traditional agent, but something entirely new. As Lands had observed while watching one of Dave’s training sessions, “We’re not trying to turn him into something he’s not. We’re helping him become what he already is.”

But the most unexpected part of the training was the language lessons. Dave found himself fascinated by them. Unlike the computer languages he was used to, these were fluid, living, breathing ways of communication. His first language was German, simply because the tutor had been available at the time, but it sparked something in him. He realised that learning languages was like unlocking doors into different worlds, different cultures. It wasn’t just about words—it was about understanding people on a deeper level.

Yet, while he was busy mastering new skills and diving into linguistic studies, Lands was still chasing ghosts. Weeks had passed, and the search for Dave’s origins had come up empty. The early computer databases were useless, and now Lands had resorted to sifting through dusty, old paper records. Boxes upon boxes of history, some scanned electronically, but most of it dry, crispy paper that had aged into near illegibility. Lands had even uncovered some mildewed archives that crumbled at the slightest touch.

Dave's entire existence, his entire past, was a blank slate.

The agency still didn't have a name for him, didn't know where he came from, and couldn't find a single clue that tied him to any family, any heritage, or any history. Lands had mentioned it one evening, almost as an afterthought: "You don't even bleed."

It was true. Dave couldn't remember ever seeing his own blood. Not in childhood scrapes, not in accidents, not in anything. His body was something otherworldly—strong, fast, and invulnerable, but also inexplicably disconnected from the normal frailties of human life.

Sitting in the agency's office, surrounded by blank files and unanswered questions, Dave wondered, and not for the first time: **Am I even human?**

But as Lands continued his search, one thing became clear: Whoever—or whatever—Dave was, the world had never seen anything like him before. And now, the agency was faced with a new question. They had found him, their first and only superhuman. But what were they going to do with him?

Dave looked at Lands, who sat across from him, pouring over the files. "What now?" Dave asked quietly.

Lands sighed, glancing up from the papers. "That's the question, isn't it? We've been searching for someone like you for years. We just never thought about what we'd do once we found you."

They were both silent for a moment, the weight of the unknown settling over them like a thick fog. Dave didn't have an answer, and neither did Lands.

But one thing was certain: Dave's past might be a mystery, but his future was about to be written in a way neither of them could have ever imagined.

First Day

The Seine flowed gently under the bridge, its dark waters reflecting the lights of the Parisian skyline. Dave stood by the riverbank, shrouded in the shadows of an alley. His senses were heightened, and his muscles were tense under the dark jacket he wore to blend in with the quiet, urban surroundings. It was surreal for him—a man who had spent his life solving IT problems, now playing the role of a covert agent at the heart of a terrorist exchange.

Agent Lands' voice echoed in his mind from their last briefing.

“Dave, you’re ready. This isn’t combat in the traditional sense, and no, we don’t expect you to be James Bond overnight. You’ve got gifts, and we need those abilities. But remember—your mission is clear. Retrieve the data and disable the cell.”

Dave had spent months training, practising trade craft, learning German, even training in hand-to-hand combat. But this moment was different. No more simulations or hypothetical scenarios. This was real, and he felt the weight of it. The terrorist cell was attempting to sell nuclear secrets from a volatile eastern nation, unaware they’d been dealing with the agency the entire time. If Dave succeeded, he could disrupt a major terrorist organisation’s finances and, by extension, their entire operation.

The quiet rumble of a boat’s engine signalled their arrival. The boat, sleek and dark, glided silently through the water before docking. Two men climbed out. They were big, well-built Middle Eastern thugs, their faces stern and focused. One of them carried a silver metal

briefcase.

As they approached, Dave remained calm, adjusting his position and stepping out just as the two men reached the drop-off point.

The tall one carried himself with military precision, each movement economical and purposeful. ‘You have the cash?’ he asked, his voice carrying a hint of formality even in its gruffness.

His partner was more fluid in his movements, constantly shifting position in a way that seemed casual but kept him at optimal distance for either attack or defence.

Dave raised an eyebrow, keeping his expression neutral. It was a strange question for a data deal. He played along.

“Of course not,” he replied, shaking his head slightly. “Who carries that kind of money at night, alone? Payment’s already set, as we agreed—electronic transfer. Do you have the information?”

The thugs exchanged glances, briefly confirming that this was the man they had been dealing with. The tall one grunted and tapped the case with his knuckles. “Make the transfer, the information is here.”

Dave tilted his head slightly and muttered into the air, “Make the transfer.”

Though he was physically alone, a team was listening in, ready to act. Within moments, the thug’s phone buzzed in his pocket. He checked the screen and nodded, confirming that the payment had gone through. The transaction was complete.

The atmosphere shifted suddenly. The thugs’ body language changed as they turned to face Dave. Without warning, the case popped open, and in a flash, they each drew silenced pistols from within.

The tall one fired immediately, a single shot aimed directly at Dave’s forehead, his shot placement speaking of years of real combat experience.. The bullet struck home, but instead of going down, Dave felt the impact like a hard flick. The thug’s eyes widened as he stared

at his gun in disbelief, muttering something under his breath. The second thug followed, firing two more rounds into Dave's chest. But the result was the same—Dave stood, unfazed.

Their expressions morphed from confusion to panic. The first thug, quicker to react, leapt back toward the boat, ready to flee. But Dave was already moving. His body was faster than his mind could fully comprehend. In one swift motion, he launched himself at the second man, driving his fist hard into the thug's temple. The man crumpled instantly, collapsing like a marionette whose strings had been cut.

Dave's focus snapped back to the boat as it roared away, leaving a trail of white foam in its wake. To his minders he said "I've got one down here. Come pick him up."

Without waiting for confirmation, Dave turned and sprinted along the riverbank, his mind narrowing in on the boat. His surroundings seemed to slow, a familiar sensation kicking in as his enhanced body began to operate at full capacity. Each step carried him forward with speed beyond human limits.

He could see the boat now, only a few metres away from the middle of the Seine. With a deep breath and a push of his legs, he leapt into the air, clearing the space between the bank and the boat. His boots landed on the deck with a dull thud, startling the man at the controls.

Before the boatman could react, Dave grabbed him by the collar, yanking him from the controls and throwing him into the back of the boat. The vessel slowed to a crawl as it drifted with the current. The man groaned in pain, clutching his ribs, but Dave wasn't finished. Grabbing the man's phone, he tossed it into the river, watching as it sank beneath the water.

"You're done," Dave muttered, standing over him, making sure the thug wouldn't be getting up anytime soon.

The sound of approaching police sirens filled the night air as the agency moved in to clean up. Dave stood there for a moment, catch-

ing his breath as he looked out over the calm waters of the Seine.

Back at the agency's safehouse, Agent Lands was reviewing the footage from the night's operation. As he watched Dave handle the situation with more composure than anyone had expected, Lands leaned back in his chair, smiling to himself.

Dave stood by the window of the dimly lit office, arms crossed, reflecting on the previous night's events. Agent Lands sat casually behind the desk, flipping through some files, as if this was just another routine debriefing. But for Dave, this was far from routine. His mind still reeled from the fact that he had been shot—multiple times—and walked away unscathed.

The door opened suddenly, and two Middle Eastern men stepped in. Instinctively, Dave tensed, his body ready for action. His eyes darted to Lands, who simply raised a hand, signalling for calm.

"I'd like you to meet Ibrahim and Jamal," Lands said smoothly, leaning back in his chair. "Both agency members."

Dave's eyes widened in recognition. These were the same men from last night. The thugs. The same men who had shot him. Before he could speak, Lands continued, "Last night was a test, Dave. We needed to see how you'd handle the pressure in a real-world situation."

Dave's jaw clenched, and he turned fully toward Lands, his voice low but controlled. "But they were using live rounds! What if I wasn't—" He stopped himself, knowing he **was** bulletproof, but still grappling with the recklessness of it.

"Of course they were using live rounds," Lands replied, his tone calm and matter-of-fact. "But they were just as unaware of your abilities as you were of them. It had to be convincing—for both sides."

Dave shook his head in disbelief. This wasn't just some field test; it could have gone horribly wrong.

Jamal, one of the shooters, stepped forward, offering a slightly sheep-

ish grin. “Sorry about the head-shot, mate. Didn’t know we’d be dealing with Superman.”

Ibrahim shook his head slowly, still processing what he’d witnessed. “I’ve been in combat for fifteen years,” he said, his professional demeanour now mixed with genuine wonder. “Never seen Jamal miss a kill shot. Until you.”

Jamal let out a short laugh, tension still evident in his shoulders. “Technically, I didn’t miss. When Lands pulled us in after and told us we’d been shooting at our own agent...” He whistled low. “I thought he’d lost his mind. Then he showed us the footage.”

“The agency does love its compartmentalisation,” Ibrahim added dryly. “Even from its own people.”

Dave cracked a wry smile and met Ibrahim’s gaze. “How’s the headache?”

The room was silent for a moment before Jamal chuckled. “Fair play,” he said, rubbing his own jaw as if reliving the moment Dave had knocked out one of his men.

Lands leaned forward, resting his elbows on the desk. “This was the real deal, Dave. We needed to know if you could handle yourself in a high-stakes environment, under pressure. And from what we saw, you more than exceeded expectations.”

Dave let the words sink in. He had proved himself, not just to the agency, but to himself. He wasn’t just an anomaly any more—he was an asset. And the agency was ready to take full advantage of that.

“Welcome to the agency, Dave,” Lands said, standing up and extending his hand.

Dave hesitated for only a second before shaking it. “I guess I’m in.”

Cobalt

Dave, being briefed on this new assignment, realises the gravity of the situation. A multinational corporation trying to manipulate a nation's resources for profit could have devastating consequences for the region and its people. With cobalt playing such a crucial role in the rapidly growing electric vehicle market, controlling its supply would mean controlling a key piece of the global economy.

Agent Lands explains the intricacies of the operation. “We’ve been investigating this for over a year now. The corporate executives have been careful to conceal their activities, using layers of intermediaries and shell companies to make the bribery and coercion harder to trace. But we’re closing in. Your role would be to assist our team in gathering evidence, identifying those involved, and neutralising the threats—quietly.”

Dave contemplates his involvement. Though he remains uneasy with anything combative, this mission isn’t about hurting people. It’s about protecting the future of a country, and maybe even preventing a global crisis. His unique abilities would help tip the balance without unnecessary violence. For Dave, it feels like a chance to make a real difference.

“What’s the plan?” he asks.

Lands continues, “There are multiple fronts to this operation. We’ll need you to assist in gathering intel on the ground. Some of our agents are embedded in Kinshasa and Lubumbashi, working with local officials and contacts. You’ll be helping them, running surveil-

lance on key players. You'll also have the opportunity to be the silent force preventing violence when things get too heated."

For the first time in a while, Dave feels like he's ready for the challenge. This was no longer just about his abilities, but using them in a way that would protect and uplift. He was about to step into the shadows, but for a purpose that could change the course of events on a global scale.

Dave sat silently, listening to Agent Lands outline the mission. The situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo was far more volatile than he'd anticipated. This wasn't just a corporate plot to destabilise a nation—it had spiralled into something far darker, with local militias playing a critical role.

"We have intel on a militia leader operating out of the southern region near Kolwezi," Lands began, showing Dave a satellite image of a compound. "His name is Colonel Sefu Kazadi. He's a former army officer who broke off to form his own militia, controlling a significant portion of the cobalt-rich mining areas. Officially, Kazadi presents himself as a protector of the local population, fighting to keep foreign corporations and government corruption at bay. Unofficially, he's been accepting huge financial contributions from the same corporation we're after. In exchange, his militia harasses or eliminates any local officials who refuse to play ball."

Dave studied the image of the compound, realising that this wasn't just a simple surveillance mission any more. Kazadi's militia had become a well-armed and well-funded operation, essentially an independent army that ruled through intimidation. It was clear the militia was deeply intertwined in the corporation's plans to gain control of the cobalt supply, acting as their enforcers on the ground. Corrupt officials who fell in line were rewarded, while those who resisted either disappeared or were blackmailed into submission.

"Kazadi is the key to breaking the corporation's hold," Lands continued. "His forces are responsible for the blackmail, and they've even been linked to several deaths of government officials. We've identi-

fied at least three local officials who were executed after refusing to approve illegal mining permits.”

Dave’s heart sank at the thought. This wasn’t some abstract game of political manoeuvring—lives were being lost in the fight for control over the region’s cobalt reserves. The corporation’s greed, coupled with Kazadi’s thirst for power and wealth, was threatening to plunge the area into chaos.

Lands pulled up another image, this time of a convoy of trucks carrying arms. “Kazadi’s been stockpiling weapons, and with the money flowing in, he’s been able to expand his militia. He’s not just a local warlord any more; he’s becoming a real threat to regional stability. If we can expose the link between Kazadi and the corporation, we might be able to cut off the flow of arms and money. But that’s not going to be easy.”

“Are we going to take him out?” Dave asked cautiously, unsure of how far the agency was willing to go.

Lands shook his head. “Not directly. We’re not in the business of assassinations. The goal is to break his power without creating a martyr. If we go in guns blazing, it’ll just create more chaos. No, we need to dismantle his operation, sever the ties to the corporation, and bring him down from within. That’s where you come in.”

Dave nodded, understanding the delicate balance required. His mission was to operate in the shadows, using his unique abilities to disarm the situation without drawing attention to himself or the agency. The goal was to prevent violence, but he’d have to navigate a dangerous web of corruption, armed militias, and corporate espionage.

“You’ll be working with a small team on the ground,” Lands explained. “They’ve been embedded in the region for months, gathering intelligence and making contact with local officials who oppose Kazadi. But the situation is deteriorating quickly. Kazadi’s men are everywhere, and they’re not afraid to use violence to get what they want. We believe Kazadi is planning to escalate, forcing a takeover of

more mining sites, which would give him full control over the region's cobalt production."

Dave looked at the map again, tracing the routes of Kazadi's supply lines and the locations of the key mining sites. "What's our first move?"

"We need to cut off his funding and weapons supply," Lands said. "Without those, Kazadi's militia will crumble. But to do that, we need to gather hard evidence linking the corporation to Kazadi. Your role is to infiltrate the militia's operations—without being detected. We'll set up opportunities for you to gather intel and sabotage their supply lines."

Dave took a deep breath, realising the enormity of the task. He would be heading into a dangerous, unpredictable environment where he couldn't afford to make a single mistake. The corporation was ruthless, and Kazadi's militia even more so. They wouldn't hesitate to kill anyone who got in their way.

"We're not just fighting a corporate takeover," Lands said, his voice heavy with the weight of the mission. "We're trying to prevent a war, Dave. If Kazadi gains complete control of the cobalt mines, not only will the corporation profit, but Kazadi's influence will grow. He'll destabilise the entire region, and countless lives will be at risk."

Dave knew he was ready. He had been training for this moment, learning how to use his extraordinary strength and speed without causing unnecessary harm. Now, it wasn't just about stopping a militia leader or a corporation. It was about preserving the future of a nation—and perhaps even saving countless lives.

Lands gave him a final nod. "We've been preparing for this for a long time. It's time to see if we can tip the scales."

Dave stood up, knowing that when he set foot in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, it would be to face a militia leader, a corporate empire, and the weight of a nation's future resting on his shoulders.

Congo

Dave's arrival in the Democratic Republic of the Congo was deliberately low-key. Flying into Lubumbashi, the heart of the southern mining region, under the guise of a German engineer visiting for "consulting work" kept him out of any serious scrutiny. The agency had gone through the trouble of creating a convincing backstory, complete with a crash course in French and the flawless German that matched his forged passport. The agency had outfitted him well, not just with language skills but also with the knowledge of how to navigate the bribes and under-the-table dealings that were standard practise in the DRC.

The choice of a German identity was practical. Dave's German language skills far outstripped his French at this stage, and the agency had crafted Herr Müller as a mining consultant working for an unnamed German investor – someone supposedly conducting a quiet feasibility study before their employer committed to the cobalt mines. It was a common enough scenario in the DRC, where foreign investors often sent in consultants to test the waters before making their presence known. The cover provided Dave with a natural reason to ask questions about mining operations while maintaining a low profile, and German business interests in African mining were widespread enough that his presence wouldn't raise immediate suspicions.

He entered the airport like any other weary traveller. Dressed in understated but professional clothes, he blended in easily with other foreigners travelling on business. The customs officer eyed him suspiciously for a moment, but a thick envelope placed discreetly in the

officer's hand allowed him to pass through unchallenged. The DRC wasn't a place where questions were asked if the right palms were greased.

Outside, the sweltering heat hit him like a wall. Lubumbashi was chaotic—hustling crowds, loud voices, and the unmistakable scent of diesel fumes mixed with dust. A pair of agency contacts were waiting for him, dressed like locals, blending into the city's background noise. They approached him casually, shaking his hand and welcoming him in French. Dave responded with his newly acquired linguistic skills, though still stumbling through the formalities.

“Bienvenue à Lubumbashi, Herr Müller,” one of them said, addressing him by his alias. “This way, please. We've got a lot to catch you up on.”

As they drove through the city's congested streets, Dave could see the layers of tension that blanketed the city. Political banners fluttered in the wind, while armed police officers patrolled intersections, giving everyone a hard, mistrustful glare. The two agents, Pierre and Nadine, briefed him in the car.

“The situation with Kazadi is deteriorating fast,” Pierre began. “He's growing bolder by the day, and it's starting to feel like the entire city is under his thumb. Corruption runs deep, and the police are in his pocket. There's talk of another push to seize more mining sites, and the officials who won't cooperate are either disappearing or paying through the nose to stay alive.”

They pulled into a quiet, unassuming street. A small compound, hidden behind tall walls and guarded by locals loyal to the agency, served as the safe house.

The safe house wasn't much to look at, but it had everything the team needed. Tucked away in a nondescript corner of the city, it was a place where no one would think to look. As Dave stepped inside, the dim lighting and the smell of slightly stale air greeted him. The layout was simple: a small living area with a worn-out couch, a tiny kitchen with just enough counter space for two people to stand side

by side, and a dining table that looked like it had seen better days.

“Make yourself at home,” Nadine said, nodding toward a narrow hallway. She was already heading toward the shower, which Dave would quickly learn was always her domain in the mornings.

Each agent had their own room, albeit just big enough for the basics. Dave’s room had tired, faded walls, a bed with a sagging mattress, and a wardrobe where he could hang his clothes. A threadbare carpet covered the floor, adding to the room’s well-worn feel, but it was functional, and that’s all that mattered here.

The first night was informal. The small refrigerator in the kitchen couldn’t hold much, so there was no ice for drinks, but cold beers were enough to take the edge off the humid air. Anya, already immersed in her laptop, briefly looked up as Dave was introduced, her eyes flickering with curiosity before she returned to whatever data she was sifting through. Serj was out on an operation but would be back later. For now, the room buzzed with quiet anticipation and the muted sound of traffic outside.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, Serj finally returned, his boots heavy on the wooden floor. “This is the new guy, eh?” Serj’s eyes twinkled as he extended a hand to Dave. “Welcome to the grind.”

A small meal was prepared, and they gathered around the table. The conversation started light, as they cracked open a few cold beers and shared stories from previous missions. Dave listened as Nadine and Serj told tales of their years with the agency. Anya, more reserved, chimed in occasionally but remained focused on her work.

As the beers flowed and the evening wore on, Dave started to get a sense of the team he’d be working with. Despite their professional demeanour on missions, in this moment, they were just people with stories to tell.

Nadine was the first to open up. Leaning back in her chair, she ran a hand through her short blonde hair, her eyes distant as she recalled her past.

“Believe it or not, I used to be a teacher,” she said with a soft laugh, shaking her head as if even she couldn’t quite believe it any more. “History. Secondary school back in France. I spent years trying to get kids to care about things that happened centuries ago. Didn’t have much luck.”

Dave raised an eyebrow. “How do you go from teaching kids about Napoleon to doing...this?” he asked, gesturing vaguely around the room, referring to the life of espionage and operations they now lived.

Nadine shrugged, her expression darkening slightly. “You spend enough time watching governments turn a blind eye to injustice, you start to wonder if there’s a more direct way to make a difference. Teaching felt... passive. I wanted to get involved.” She paused, her voice growing quieter. “I had a student once—bright kid, passionate about changing things. He left school and last I heard, he had joined a right wing movement. I never saw him again. I guess that was the moment I knew I needed to do something more active.”

Pierre, sitting across from her, nodded in agreement. The two had been a team for years, their partnership forged in countless missions across the globe. Where Nadine was sharp and strategic, Pierre was practical and grounded. His dark eyes had a calmness to them, a kind of quiet confidence that came from years of handling dangerous situations.

“Pierre here used to fix cars,” Nadine said, glancing over at him with a smirk. “A mechanic, can you believe it? Now he fixes just about anything.”

Pierre chuckled, his hands, still rough from years of manual labour, resting on the table. “Cars, trucks, planes, weapons. You name it, I can probably get it working again,” he said in his soft Belgian accent. “I had a garage in Brussels, used to work with my dad. But business wasn’t great, and I ended up doing some jobs on the side—smuggling, mostly. Parts, tools, whatever people needed. I learned how to get around the rules. That’s when the agency found me.”

“They recruit a lot of teachers and mechanics?” Dave asked, half-

joking.

“Not exactly,” Pierre replied. “But I knew how to get things done without drawing attention. That’s what they were looking for. The agency doesn’t care much about your past, as long as you’ve got the skills they need.”

Anya, who had been mostly silent, tapped away at her laptop in the corner. She looked up, adjusting her glasses and offering a rare contribution. “I was an accountant,” she said flatly, as if that explained everything. She didn’t elaborate, just returned to her work.

Dave blinked, glancing between the others for some clarification, but Nadine just laughed. “Anya doesn’t talk much about her past,” she said with a grin. “But let’s just say she was a very thorough accountant. Found things in financial records that most people wouldn’t even think to look for. Now she uses those skills to track money through international networks. If someone’s hiding something, Anya will find it.”

Serj finally returned from his operation, his heavy boots thudding as he entered the room. He dropped into a chair, his tall, muscular frame barely fitting into the small space. “What’d I miss?” he asked, grabbing a beer from the table.

“We’re talking about past lives,” Nadine said. “What did you do before all this?”

Serj grinned. “I was a soldier,” he said simply. “Russian military, Spetsnaz.” He didn’t need to say more. His presence spoke volumes—tough, disciplined, and always ready for a fight.

“Figures,” Dave muttered with a half-smile.

As the conversation continued, Dave realised that despite their varied backgrounds, they all had something in common: a need for action. They had each left behind the ordinary for something much more dangerous, something that gave them purpose.

The talk was mostly personal at first—Serj joking about the lack of

space in the safe house, Nadine lamenting the eternally broken coffee machine—but it always circled back to the task at hand. Soon, they were discussing the mission, sharing plans in between sips of beer.

When the conversation finally died down, and the crew dispersed for the night, Dave lay on his bed, staring up at the cracked ceiling. Tomorrow, the real work would begin.

Taken

Dave, woke at what he thought was early. Clearly he'd slept in as the other were already up and about. He stepped into the kitchen and Nadine was trying to wrangle a cup of coffee from the ever failing coffee machine.

"Where's the rest of our team?" Dave asked.

"Things have got tricky," Nadine explained. "Anya and Serj were caught up in a protest near one of the mines, early this morning. A crowd was marching against the use of what they're calling 'slave labour' in the mines. The reality is worse than what the protestors even know—there are child workers and locals being coerced to work under unbearable conditions, but that's not all. The protest turned violent, and our agents—completely by accident—were scooped up by the police, taken in with the others."

"Kazadi's police," Dave said, piecing it together.

"Exactly," Pierre nodded. "Kazadi's men control the police, and anyone arrested is either locked up indefinitely or extorted for outrageous sums. Our people are being held at a secure facility. The price for their release will be high, and the longer they're in there, the more leverage Kazadi's men have."

Dave absorbed the information quietly. The complexity of the situation had just ramped up. Not only did he need to focus on the mission at hand—undermining Kazadi's control of the cobalt mines—but now, he had to navigate a rescue mission for his teammates who

had been compromised.

Pierre glanced at him. “We were going to extract them through negotiations, but if you’ve got other ideas, now would be the time to speak up.”

Dave’s focus firmly on the two agents currently locked up in the police facility. Kazadi’s influence had spread everywhere, and it was likely their capture was more than just bad luck. The more he thought about it, the more it made sense: Kazadi’s militia had eyes everywhere, and the corporation was paying big money to keep things under their control. The capture of the agents could be more than just a coincidental mistake. Kazadi could suspect that other parties may have agendas that conflicted with his own, and have their own assets on the ground.

“We’ll have to get them out without paying off Kazadi,” Dave said, standing up. His voice carried a quiet resolve. “If we pay, we’ll just empower him further. We need to send a message.”

Nadine raised an eyebrow. “And how do you suggest we do that? The place is a fortress, and the police are heavily armed.”

Dave’s expression was unreadable, but there was a calm intensity to him. “Leave that to me.”

It was time to apply what the agency had been training him for. His unique abilities would allow him to move fast, to neutralise threats quickly and efficiently—without anyone knowing he was there. They didn’t need a frontal assault or a dramatic rescue. They needed someone who could move through the shadows, unseen, and get the agents out without a single shot fired.

The next morning, under the cover of dawn, Dave slipped out of the safe house, his mind singularly focused on the mission ahead. The police facility where Serj and Anya were being held was no easy target. Surrounded by towering concrete walls topped with rusted barbed wire, it was a grim, fortress-like structure, designed to keep people out just as much as it was to keep them in. Heavy metal gates secured the

entrance, with uniformed guards posted at strategic points around the compound. Security cameras rotated methodically, casting their cold, sweeping gaze across the perimeter, while the crackle of radio communication buzzed intermittently in the still morning air.

The facility was a maze of narrow, windowless corridors and reinforced steel doors. Inside, the air was damp, heavy with the lingering scent of bleach and metal. Cells lined the lower levels, barred cages that housed the occasional unlucky criminal or political prisoner. The place wasn't built for comfort—it was built for control.

Dave, however, wasn't concerned. His abilities gave him an edge no one in this facility could anticipate. Moving through the streets surrounding the police station, he blended seamlessly into the early-morning haze, his movements unnaturally smooth, calculated. His senses were heightened, processing the security measures and guard rotations with almost inhuman precision.

The guards at the gate were relaxed, unaware of the storm approaching. Dave waited until one of them took a cigarette break, the thin stream of smoke curling lazily in the air, before making his move. The cameras turned in their programmed arcs, but in the brief seconds where they weren't looking, Dave slipped past the guards, his movements a blur. To anyone watching, it would have seemed like he vanished into thin air, only to reappear deeper within the compound.

Inside the facility, Dave navigated the dimly lit hallways with ease. The patrols were light this early in the morning—two guards stationed at the main corridors, both distracted and sluggish. Dave incapacitated them effortlessly, striking with precision before they even knew what hit them. He moved deeper into the facility, making his way toward the holding cells where Serj and Anya were being kept.

The cell block was cold, the smell of rust and mildew hanging in the air. The thick metal bars of the cells gleamed under the dim lights, intimidating in their strength. Serj and Anya were inside, seated on the floor, their faces drawn with fatigue but alert enough to notice

Dave's approach.

"Dave?" Serj said, surprise flickering across his face.

Dave didn't respond. His focus was on the thick cell door. The lock looked heavy, industrial—built to withstand serious force. But Dave wasn't going to approach this the conventional way. He reached for the door, his hand gripping the metal where the hinges met the frame. With a careful twist, the lock groaned. Serj and Anya exchanged puzzled glances, watching as the door shuddered slightly.

To them, it looked as though Dave was simply applying pressure, pulling at the door in a way that might have jostled the mechanisms inside. But what they didn't see was the immense strength behind his seemingly casual movements. Dave gave a final tug, and with a soft snap, the lock gave way, the door swinging open.

Serj stood, his brow furrowing in confusion. "How did you—?"

"The lock must've been weak," Dave said calmly, cutting him off before the question could linger. "Come on, we don't have time."

Serj glanced at the door again, his expression unreadable. Anya looked between Dave and the twisted remains of the lock, a flash of curiosity crossing her face, but she said nothing.

The three of them moved quickly through the compound, with Dave silently incapacitating the remaining guards as they made their way to the exit. To Serj and Anya, it seemed as though the guards simply dropped without warning—Dave's movements were fast, calculated, each strike precise enough to knock them out cold. They exchanged another look, trying to comprehend the speed with which he was moving, but Dave kept the pace brisk, leaving them no time to process what they'd witnessed.

By the time they reached the outer walls, Dave had cleared their path without making a sound. The sun was just beginning to rise, casting a soft glow over the compound as the three agents slipped into the shadows and made their escape.

Back at the safe house, the tension in the room was palpable. Serj and Anya sat at the briefing table, still trying to process what had happened.

“It was... impossible,” Serj said, shaking his head. “The door—it just fell apart. I don’t know how Dave did it, but one minute we were locked in, the next minute, the door was wide open.”

Anya nodded, her mind still racing. “The guards too. He took them out so fast... I didn’t even see most of it. One second they were there, the next they were on the ground.”

The other agents around the table exchanged sceptical glances. “You’re saying he ripped a cell door off its hinges?” Pierre asked, incredulous.

Serj looked at the twisted metal of the door in his memory, still trying to make sense of it. “It didn’t make any sense. The lock was solid, but Dave just... pulled it apart.”

Dave, seated quietly in the corner, let their confusion linger. He wasn’t ready to reveal the full extent of his abilities just yet. For now, it was better to let them believe it had been a fluke, a stroke of luck. He had other priorities—Kazadi’s militia was still a threat, and the corporate takeover of the cobalt mines loomed larger with each passing day.

Anya leaned forward, her gaze steady. “Whatever you did, Dave, you got us out of there. I don’t know how, but thank you.”

Dave gave her a small nod, his expression calm and unreadable. They had the upper hand for now, but the mission was far from over. Kazadi had no idea how close he was to losing everything, and the agency was ready to strike again.

Later that night, after Dave had retired to his room, Serj and Anya sat in the kitchen, the events of their escape weighing heavily on their minds. The dim light cast shadows across their faces as they spoke in hushed tones.

“You saw it too, right?” Serj asked, his voice barely above a whisper. He was cleaning his gun—a habit that helped him think. “The way he moved, how he broke that lock...”

Anya nodded slowly, her fingers drumming against her laptop. “The guards never saw him coming. It was like...” she paused, searching for the right words, “like he was there and not there at the same time. The speed wasn’t human.”

“And the door,” Serj continued, setting down his weapon. “I’ve seen reinforced cell doors before. You don’t just pull them open like that. It’s not possible.”

“Maybe the lock was faulty?” Anya suggested, but her tone made it clear she didn’t believe it.

Serj shook his head. “No. I checked while we were leaving. The metal was twisted, like it had been crushed by some kind of machine. But he did it with his bare hands.”

They fell silent as footsteps passed by—Pierre heading to his room. When they were sure they were alone again, Anya spoke.

“Should we report it?”

“To who?” Serj replied. “The agency sent him to us. They must know what he can do.”

Anya considered this. “Do you think that’s why he’s here? For whatever this mission really is?”

“Has to be. They don’t send someone like that just for a simple operation.” Serj picked up his gun again, resuming his cleaning. “Question is, do we let him know we noticed?”

“No,” Anya said firmly. “If the agency hasn’t told us, there must be a reason. For now, we do our jobs and keep our observations to ourselves. But...” she glanced toward Dave’s room, “we watch and we document. Just in case.”

Serj nodded in agreement. They’d both been in the field long enough

to know when to ask questions and when to keep quiet. But as they sat there in the dim kitchen, they couldn't shake the feeling that their mission had just become something far more complex than they'd initially believed.

"One thing's for sure," Serj muttered, "I'm glad he's on our side."

Anya closed her laptop with a soft click. "For now," she added quietly, before heading to her room.

Business as Usual

The morning sun cast long shadows across the mining compound as Dave, in his role as Herr Müller, adjusted his hard hat and safety glasses. He'd been invited to tour one of the "legitimate" cobalt mining operations—a perfect opportunity to establish his cover while gathering intelligence on Kazadi's activities in the region.

"Herr Müller, welcome to the Katanga site," said Marcel Tshisekedi, the mine's operations manager. He was a well-dressed man in his fifties, clearly comfortable dealing with foreign investors. "I understand your employer is interested in our extraction capabilities?"

Dave nodded, pulling out a leather-bound notebook. "Ja, genau," he replied, then switched to French. "We're particularly interested in your processing facilities. My employer wants to understand the complete operational pipeline before considering any investment."

The tour group was small—just Dave, Tshisekedi, and two other foreign consultants: a South African representing a mining conglomerate and a Chinese investor who remained mostly silent, taking photos with his phone. Dave noticed how Tshisekedi's attention kept returning to him, perhaps wondering about the unnamed German interests he represented.

"Our primary shaft extends three hundred metres," Tshisekedi explained as they approached the main extraction site. "We've recently upgraded our ventilation systems—"

Dave interrupted with a technical question about methane detection

systems, one that the agency had prepared him to ask. Tshisekedi's eyes lit up, clearly pleased to be dealing with someone knowledgeable.

The tour continued through the processing plant, where raw ore was being prepared for transport. Dave took careful notes, maintaining his cover while his enhanced senses picked up details the others would miss. He noticed how some workers glanced nervously at the security personnel. The guards' weapons were too new, too sophisticated for a standard mining operation.

During a break for water—the African sun was merciless even in the morning—the South African consultant approached him.

“First time in the DRC?” he asked in English, offering Dave a cigarette.

Dave declined the cigarette with a practised gesture. “Third visit,” he replied, the lie coming easily. “But first time in Lubumbashi. The mineral potential here is... impressive.” He allowed his German accent to colour his English slightly.

“Ja,” the South African replied with a knowing smile, attempting to connect through the Germanic language link. “Though these days, it's not just the minerals you need to understand, eh? It's the... political landscape.”

Dave made a non-committal noise, noting how the man's eyes darted toward the armed guards. There was an invitation for information exchange there, but Herr Müller wouldn't be that indiscreet. Instead, he steered the conversation toward extraction efficiency rates.

The afternoon concluded with a meeting in Tshisekedi's office, its air conditioning a welcome relief from the heat. Dave sat with his notebook, asking detailed questions about worker safety protocols and environmental impact assessments. His cover identity needed to show appropriate concern for corporate responsibility.

“And what about the local militia presence?” Dave asked carefully. “My employer would need assurances about security.”

Tshisekedi's smile tightened slightly. "We have excellent relationships with local authorities," he said smoothly. "Our operation runs without interference."

Dave noted the careful phrasing. No mention of Kazadi, but the implication of protection payments was clear.

That evening, Dave found himself at Le Boucher Argenté, an upscale restaurant favoured by Lubumbashi's business elite. Tshisekedi had invited the consultants for dinner—a common practise in the industry. The conversation flowed as freely as the wine, mostly centred around mineral prices and processing technologies.

Dave maintained his cover perfectly, discussing German engineering standards and dropping occasional comments about similar operations he'd "consulted on" in South America. He picked up fragments of more interesting conversations from nearby tables—local officials discussing shipment routes, mining executives complaining about protection payments.

As he walked back to his hotel later that night, Dave sensed he was being watched. Nothing obvious, just the prickle on the back of his neck that his enhanced senses had learned to trust. He took a slightly longer route, appearing to window-shop while checking the reflections for followers.

There—a man in a blue shirt had been maintaining the same distance for the past ten minutes. Another figure lurked near the corner ahead. Kazadi's people were taking an interest in the German consultant.

In his hotel room, Dave prepared his "consultant's report" with meticulous care. The document had to be detailed enough to maintain his cover but vague enough to avoid revealing anything significant. He noted down standard industry observations about extraction rates and processing capabilities, adding appropriate concerns about worker safety and environmental impact.

The real intelligence—his observations about guard movements, suspicious supply shipments, and overheard conversations—would be

encoded differently, transmitted to his agency colleagues through secure channels. But for now, Herr Müller had to appear as nothing more than what he claimed to be: a diligent German consultant doing his job.

As he worked, Dave reflected on how the Herr Müller identity was serving him well. The role of a foreign consultant provided the perfect blend of access and anonymity. People expected him to ask questions, to be curious about operations, while simultaneously understanding his discretion about his employer.

Tough Questions

Dave's capture in the city had been a misstep—one that he hadn't planned on, but also couldn't entirely avoid. He'd been instructed to keep a low profile, to stay out of the public eye as much as possible, but in a place like Lubumbashi, staying invisible was harder than it seemed. There were always eyes watching, and Kazadi's network of spies was everywhere.

That day, Dave had ventured into the city under the guise of being an independent contractor—Herr Müller, the fake German identity the agency had crafted for him. His cover story was simple: a consultant in mining operations, supposedly visiting to survey the region for foreign investors. It wasn't unusual for white faces to be seen in these parts, especially given the international interest in cobalt. But what made Dave stand out wasn't just his unfamiliar face—it was the timing. A new foreigner in town just as tensions were rising around Kazadi's operations didn't go unnoticed.

Walking through the bustling streets of Lubumbashi, Dave had been careful. He stuck to the crowds, blending in as best he could while taking in the city's atmosphere. He wasn't looking for trouble, just scouting the area, making mental notes of the militia's movements and the general lay of the land. It was critical reconnaissance for the team's mission. The noise of the market buzzed around him—street vendors calling out their wares, children playing in the dusty streets, and the distant hum of motorcycle taxis.

But something felt off. There was a prickle at the back of his neck,

a sense that he was being watched. He kept moving, though, not wanting to tip off anyone who might be trailing him. It wasn't long before his suspicions were confirmed. Out of the corner of his eye, Dave spotted a group of local men loitering near a stall selling phone accessories. They weren't interested in the merchandise—they were watching him.

He cursed under his breath.

His pace quickened as he turned down a side street, hoping to shake them. He had almost made it to a quieter part of town when a police truck suddenly swerved in front of him, blocking his path.

Kazadi's spies were everywhere in the city, their eyes watching every street corner and market stall, tracking the comings and goings of anyone new. A white face appearing in the heart of Lubumbashi didn't take long to stir interest.

A burly man in a police uniform stood in front of him, his arms crossed, eyes cold and calculating. Two other men flanked him, one holding a clipboard and the other smoking a cigarette. They weren't here to follow any legal process; they were here to question him.

"You're a long way from home, Herr Müller," the leader said in heavily accented English, his voice dripping with suspicion. "What brings a man like you to Lubumbashi?"

They bundled him into the back of the truck, a hood thrown over his head, the muffled hum of the engine rising as they sped through the winding streets. He could feel the truck bouncing over the uneven roads, his mind racing but outwardly, he remained calm. He couldn't afford to let his captors sense anything unusual about him. Whoever they were, they were working for Kazadi, and this was clearly an interrogation.

After what felt like an hour, the truck stopped. Rough hands grabbed him, dragging him from the vehicle and into a building where the air smelled of damp and rusted metal. Dave's hood was yanked off, and he found himself in a dimly lit room, the walls bare concrete, a single

lightbulb hanging from the ceiling. A metal chair stood in the centre of the room, and he was thrown into it, his wrists handcuffed behind him.

Two men stood in front of him—lean, mean-looking types with weathered faces. Behind them, a third figure lingered in the shadows, watching silently.

“Why are you here, Karl Müller?” the first man asked, his voice a harsh rasp.

Dave blinked, forcing himself to breathe heavily, playing the part of the disoriented foreigner. “I told you,” he said, his voice steady but with a hint of nervousness. “I’m a contractor. I’m here on business, to secure mineral rights for my company.”

A slap cracked across his face, sharp and deliberate. Dave’s head snapped to the side, but he barely felt it. His skin was practically impenetrable, but he had to make it look real. He groaned softly, playing into the role, his acting skills suddenly more important than ever.

“Don’t lie to us,” the second man growled, stepping closer, his breath hot and acrid. “Who sent you? What are you really here for?”

Dave coughed, blinking as if dazed. “I’m just here for cobalt contracts,” he repeated, his voice shaking slightly. “I’m trying to secure deals for electric vehicle manufacturing. That’s it.”

The men exchanged glances, clearly unimpressed with his answers. The second man stepped behind him, and Dave felt a fist slam into his ribs. He grunted, making it sound like it hurt, though he could barely feel the blow.

“You think we’re stupid?” the first man spat, leaning in close. “You think you can just walk into our city, sniff around Kazadi’s business, and we won’t notice?”

Dave stayed quiet, knowing anything he said would be twisted against him. He had to play this just right. Let them believe he was just some

unlucky contractor who'd wandered into the wrong part of town.

The first man stood up straight and motioned to the shadows. The third figure stepped forward, carrying a bucket of water and a towel. Dave's heart sank. This was about to get serious.

They were going to waterboard him.

"Last chance, Herr Müller," the man said, his tone casual now. "Tell us the truth, or we'll make you wish you had."

Dave's mind raced. He had never experienced anything like this before, and the idea of waterboarding unnerved him. His body was invulnerable to knives, bullets—even fists—but could he drown? He didn't know the answer, but he was about to find out.

They draped the towel over his face, the coarse fabric smothering him. He heard the sound of the bucket being lifted, the water sloshing around, and then came the torrent—ice-cold water gushing over the towel, soaking it instantly.

For a moment, Dave panicked. His body fought the sensation, instinctively trying to gulp for air, but the water blocked everything out. Then, something unexpected happened. His mind calmed. His body wasn't reacting the way he feared. He realised that he didn't need as much oxygen as he thought. He wasn't drowning. It was uncomfortable, terrifying even, but he was fine. He could get through this.

But he couldn't let them know that.

Dave thrashed in the chair, his breathing exaggerated, muffled cries escaping from beneath the towel. He coughed, sputtered, pretending like the water was doing its job. The men above him grinned, certain they had broken him.

After several agonising minutes, they pulled the towel off, and Dave slumped in the chair, gasping dramatically. His chest heaved as if he was struggling for breath, and he fixed them with a weak, desperate gaze.

“I told you,” he rasped, barely audible. “I’m just a contractor. I’m not here to cause trouble.”

The men seemed to hesitate. No one could withstand that kind of treatment and lie, they reasoned. If this man were a spy, he would have cracked by now. They exchanged glances, unsure of what to do next.

The interrogators, satisfied that Dave had cracked under their interrogation, dragged him from the makeshift room and led him down a narrow hallway. His hands were bound, and the back of his head still stung from the earlier blows, but his mind remained sharp. They took him deeper into the facility, past rusted doors and flickering lights, before stopping at a small, grimy cell at the end of the corridor.

The cell was a concrete box, barely large enough to stand in. A rusty iron bed frame with a stained mattress lay against one wall, while a bucket in the corner served as a toilet. The smell of damp mildew clung to everything, mixing with the stench of sweat and urine that had seeped into the stone floor. Faint scratching sounds echoed from somewhere—perhaps rats, or maybe just the endless drip of water from a crack in the ceiling. The air was thick with a stagnant, metallic taste, and the single overhead light buzzed faintly, casting a sickly yellow glow over the claustrophobic space.

The door slammed shut behind him with a heavy clank, leaving Dave alone in the cold silence. The long hours began to stretch out in front of him, each second more suffocating than the last. The sounds of the facility—muffled footsteps, distant laughter, and the occasional shout—drifted through the cracks in the door. But mostly, there was silence. Oppressive, heavy silence.

Time passed slowly, the walls seeming to close in on him. Dave sat on the edge of the bed, staring at the rough-hewn walls, his thoughts spinning. He had endured the worst of the interrogation, but now the solitude was its own kind of torture. He wasn’t concerned about his own wellbeing—he knew he could endure whatever they threw at him. What gnawed at him was the thought of the team. What were

Serj and Anya doing right now? Did they know he'd been taken? Was Kazadi's militia closing in on the others while he sat here? He had to get back. The operation couldn't afford any missteps, and his absence could jeopardise everything.

The hours dragged on, with Dave's mind cycling between the mission and the endless monotony of the cell. Every small noise from the corridor made his heart race for a split second before the reality set in—no one was coming for him. Not tonight, at least. He thought about Serj, likely waiting for intel, and Anya, who was probably piecing together their next steps without him. The thought of the team trying to move forward without his input frustrated him. He trusted them, but he knew his absence might slow their momentum. He had to return.

As dawn broke, Dave was unceremoniously yanked from the cell by the same men who had questioned him the night before. They muttered among themselves, clearly unsure of what to make of him. His story had held, and they seemed convinced he was nothing more than a contractor who had wandered too far into dangerous territory. They shoved him into the back of a truck, the cold metal floor digging into his back as they drove him miles away from the facility. When they finally stopped, they tossed him out like garbage, the vehicle roaring off into the early morning light, leaving Dave alone on the dirt road.

He stood up slowly, shaking the dust from his clothes. His body ached, but not from the interrogation. The walk back to the safe house would be long, but at least he was free. His thoughts raced as he started the trek. He could feel the sun creeping up behind him, casting long shadows over the deserted landscape. His focus shifted entirely to the team—he needed to get back to them, and quickly.

Eventually, the leader nodded. "Get him out of here," he muttered.

They unshackled Dave, and two men dragged him back to the truck, still pretending to be dazed and weak. They threw him in the back and drove him several miles out of town before dumping him on the

side of the road.

As the truck roared away, Dave lay there for a moment, listening to the sound of the engine fading into the distance. Then, slowly, he got to his feet, brushing off the dust from his clothes. He was fine, unharmed. But now he knew.

Kazadi's men were more ruthless than he had expected. And this operation was going to be more dangerous than he had thought.

Hours later, Dave reached the safe house. The door creaked open, and the moment he stepped inside, Serj and Anya shot up from their chairs. Their expressions shifted from worry to relief in an instant. Anya's face softened, the tension she had been carrying melting away, while Serj gave a subtle nod, his usual stoicism masking his concern.

"Dave!" Anya exclaimed, her voice a mix of relief and exasperation. "We thought something had happened. You were gone all night."

Dave waved her off, his exhaustion evident but his resolve unshaken. "I'm fine," he said, his voice steady. "Ran into some trouble with Kazadi's men, but they didn't get anything from me."

Serj crossed his arms, studying Dave closely. "We heard reports, thought you might've been compromised." Nadine and Pierre, are out trying to find out where you are, or where, and Anya's been working through the night listening for any communications.

Dave shook his head. "It's OK. They believed the contractor story. I was kept overnight, but they let me go when they couldn't get anything other than the cover story. The operation's still intact."

The team relaxed, the tension finally breaking. Anya sighed, running a hand through her hair. "Glad you're back. We've got work to do."

Dave nodded, knowing he had just dodged a bullet. But the danger was far from over. Kazadi's men were getting closer to the truth, and time was running out. The mission was still on, and now, more than ever, Dave knew they couldn't afford another setback.

Regrouping

Dave sat at the kitchen table of the safe house, his hands wrapped around a cup of coffee that had long since gone cold. His “interrogation” by Kazadi’s men had shaken something loose in his mind—not fear, exactly, but a dawning realisation of just how deeply corruption had seeped into every aspect of life here.

“You should get some rest,” Nadine said, settling into the chair across from him. Her eyes were sharp, studying him with the careful attention of someone used to reading people.

“I’m fine,” Dave replied automatically, then caught himself. “But you’re right. I just need to process what I learned.”

Serj emerged from the back room where he’d been cleaning weapons—a habit that seemed to help him think. “What exactly did you learn? Besides the fact that Kazadi’s men are fond of waterboarding.”

Dave noticed the slight edge in Serj’s voice, the lingering questions about how he’d survived that ordeal so easily. He chose his words carefully. “They’re more organised than we thought. The interrogation wasn’t random. They’ve been watching me—watching all of us, probably.”

“Of course they have,” Anya called from her workstation, surrounded by monitors showing various data streams. “But that’s not what’s bothering you, is it?”

Dave stood up, pacing the small kitchen. “No. It’s the way they operate. The whole system here... it’s not just about controlling the

mines. Kazadi's built something bigger. The corporations, the local government, the police—they're all connected. Taking him out won't be enough."

"What do you mean?" Pierre asked, looking up from a stack of financial documents.

"If we just eliminate Kazadi, someone else steps in. The system continues." Dave stopped pacing, his expression hardening. "We need to break the whole thing apart."

Nadine nodded slowly. "You're talking about dismantling his entire operation, not just removing him."

"Exactly." Dave pulled out a chair and sat back down, his movements deliberate. "While they had me, I heard things. Conversations they didn't think I could hear. Guard shifts, payment schedules, names of officials on the payroll. But more importantly, I heard the fear in their voices when they talked about Kazadi. He rules through fear and money, but mostly fear."

"And fear can be turned against him," Serj said, understanding dawning in his eyes.

Anya swivelled in her chair to face the group. "I've been tracking his financial movements. There are... irregularities. Places where money goes in but doesn't come out the way it should."

"He's skimming from his own operation," Pierre added, tapping the documents in front of him. "Taking more than his share."

Dave felt the pieces starting to come together. His capture, as unpleasant as it had been, had given them something valuable: insight into the cracks in Kazadi's empire.

"We need to plan this carefully," he said, standing again. The exhaustion he'd been feeling was replaced by a surge of focused energy. "Not just the tactical side—we need to think about what happens after. The power vacuum, the reorganisation of the mining operations, all of it."

The team exchanged glances, reading the shift in Dave's demeanour. This wasn't just about completing a mission any more. It was about fundamental change.

"I'll need everything you've got on his financial operations," Dave said to Anya. "And Pierre, those documents about his corporate connections—bring them all together. Nadine, can you reach out to your contacts in the local community? We need to know who might step up when Kazadi falls."

"And me?" Serj asked, though his slight smile suggested he already knew.

"We're going to need exit routes, fallback positions, and a lot of contingency plans," Dave replied. "Nobody knows the tactical side better than you."

The energy in the room had shifted. The team had moved past the immediate crisis of Dave's capture and interrogation, focusing now on the larger mission. They had seen the enemy up close, felt its strength, and found its weaknesses.

"Get some sleep first," Nadine insisted, her tone making it clear this wasn't a suggestion. "We'll start fresh in the morning. All of us," she added, looking pointedly at Anya, who was already turning back to her screens.

Dave nodded, heading to his room. The waterboarding had left him physically unharmed, but mentally, he was processing everything he'd learned. Kazadi's operation wasn't invincible. Like any structure built on fear and greed, it had weak points. Finding them would take time and patience, but they would find them.

Tomorrow, they would begin planning Kazadi's downfall. Not just as an individual, but as the head of a system that had brought suffering to too many for too long.

Head of the Snake

Taking down Kazadi, the militia leader, required a strategy that went beyond simply removing him from the equation. If Kazadi were taken out in a conventional way—whether through an assassination or a direct confrontation—the militia would simply appoint another leader, potentially more dangerous or cunning. Dave and the team needed to destabilise the militia from within and discredit Kazadi in a way that his entire operation would collapse, leaving no room for a successor.

Kazadi's power stemmed not only from his financial backers but also from the perception among his men that he was invincible and untouchable. He controlled them through fear, loyalty bought with money, and promises of power. The first step was to sow doubt within the militia ranks. To do that, the team needed intelligence on Kazadi's dealings that could be used to fracture the trust his inner circle had in him.

They would gather evidence of Kazadi's greed and exploitation—specifically, how he had been skimming money from his own militia's funds and pocketing the larger share of the bribes he received from the corporate interests. If they could prove to the rank-and-file members that Kazadi wasn't the benevolent leader he portrayed himself to be, his control would weaken. Dave's task would be to infiltrate Kazadi's operations and gather proof of these dealings—whether it be through surveillance, intercepting communications, or hacking financial records.

Once Kazadi's leadership was publicly discredited, the militia would be left leaderless and demoralised. Without Kazadi's financial backing or his intimidating presence, many of the rank-and-file members would no longer have the incentive to remain loyal. The agency would use local intermediaries and trusted leaders to offer reintegration into legitimate forces or local governance. They would offer amnesty to those willing to lay down arms and reintegrate into society, with the promise of opportunities for those who cooperated.

With Kazadi neutralised, the militia fragmented, and the corporation forced out of the DRC, the operation would successfully prevent the destabilisation of the cobalt mining regions. It would also send a message to other militias and corrupt officials that those who sought to exploit the country for personal gain could be taken down, not just through brute force but through the erosion of trust and the manipulation of their own ambitions.

The plan was risky, but it was the best way to ensure that no one stepped into Kazadi's place, that the militia wouldn't rally behind another leader, and that the corporate interests wouldn't simply switch their allegiances. Dave, with his unique abilities, would be the unseen force that ensured each step of the operation unfolded as planned.

Evidence

Pierre and Nadine had been tasked with one of the most challenging parts of the mission: proving the cash transactions that the corporation funnelled into Kazadi's hands and linking them to the militia's bribes and arms deals. The agency's electronic surveillance had already given them access to the digital side of the corporation's operations—wire transfers, offshore bank accounts, and shell companies. But as soon as the money was converted to cash, the trail went cold. The key to bringing down Kazadi lay in linking that corporate money to the suitcases of cash being exchanged under the table in the DRC.

Through her camera's telephoto lens, Nadine watched the exchange happening in the shadow of an abandoned warehouse. The businessman—their suspected cash courier—stood nervously beside his Mercedes, a sleek black S-Class that screamed money in a city where most people walked. Two of Kazadi's men approached, one carrying a metal briefcase.

Nadine's finger pressed the shutter button, the camera silent. Perfect. The courier was handing over documents—probably transfer records. Another shot. The briefcase changing hands. Another—

A door creaked behind her.

Nadine froze. She was three stories up in an empty office building, supposedly alone. The footsteps were slow, deliberate. A security guard making rounds? Or someone who knew she was here?

She carefully lowered the camera, sliding it into her bag. The footsteps grew closer. Nadine moved silently toward the emergency exit she'd scouted earlier, keeping low. The door behind her opened just as she slipped around the corner of a cubicle wall.

"Hello?" A guard's voice, uncertain. "Is someone here?"

Nadine held her breath, listening as the guard moved through the office space. When his footsteps faded toward the other side of the floor, she made her silent exit down the emergency stairs, the precious photos secure.

Back at the safe house, Pierre hunched over his laptop, examining Nadine's photos alongside financial records. "Look at this," he said, pointing to a series of transactions. "The timing matches perfectly. Every time our courier friend makes a delivery, there's a corresponding withdrawal from this account in Geneva."

He pulled up another window showing bank transfers. "But here's where it gets interesting. The amount that leaves Geneva is always larger than what shows up in the militia's accounts. Kazadi's skimming off the top, and not subtly."

"How much are we talking about?" Nadine asked, still catching her breath from her close call.

"Millions. Over the past year alone, he's diverted enough to buy a small island." Pierre's fingers flew across the keyboard. "And I can prove where it's going."

The corporation had cleverly layered their money transfers through offshore accounts in financial havens like the Cayman Islands and the British Virgin Islands. Pierre had managed to crack into these layers, thanks to the agency's world-class forensic accountants. They identified regular transactions from the corporation's subsidiaries to shell companies registered under fake names. From there, the money was split into smaller amounts and withdrawn in cash from multiple locations across Europe and the Middle East, then transported into the DRC.

Pierre's first breakthrough came when Anya traced a suspicious transaction pattern. One of the shell companies was linked to a private security firm operating out of South Africa. This firm was contracted to deliver "supplies" to various militia groups in Central Africa, including Kazadi's forces. The company's shipping manifests, however, never matched the physical cargo, indicating that large amounts of cash were being smuggled in these supply runs.

The market was crowded, which was both good and bad. Good for staying hidden, bad for spotting potential threats. Nadine sat at a small café, pretending to enjoy her coffee while watching the crowd. The lieutenant was late.

She'd chosen this spot carefully—public enough to discourage violence, busy enough to mask conversation, with three possible escape routes. A man fitting the lieutenant's description appeared at the entrance of the market, looking nervous.

Nadine caught his eye briefly, then looked down at her coffee. He made his way over, sitting heavily in the chair across from her.

"You're taking a big risk," she said quietly in French.

"We all are," he replied, his voice barely audible over the market's noise. "Kazadi's men—they're everywhere. But what he's doing... it can't continue."

A group of armed men in civilian clothes entered the market. The lieutenant tensed.

"Keep talking normally," Nadine said, casually raising her coffee cup. "Tell me about the payments."

The lieutenant spoke quickly, softly, detailing dates, amounts, names. Nadine recorded everything with an app on her phone, all while watching the armed men move through the crowd.

"My boys haven't been paid in months," the lieutenant continued, "while Kazadi builds himself a palace. Shows up in new cars, sends his family to Europe for shopping trips—"

One of the armed men was getting closer. Nadine cut him off. “Stand up slowly. Walk toward the spice stall. Don’t look back.”

The lieutenant did as instructed, disappearing into the crowd just as the armed man reached their section of the market. Nadine stayed seated, calmly finishing her coffee, her heart pounding but her face composed.

Using the lieutenant’s testimony and the financial data Pierre had gathered, they began connecting the dots. Kazadi’s phone records showed regular communication with a specific Swiss banker, known for helping corrupt leaders launder money. Pierre pieced together the evidence: Kazadi was funnelling millions into these personal accounts, money that was supposed to go toward paying his soldiers and purchasing weapons.

The militia leader wasn’t just using the money for bribes—he was also amassing a personal arsenal. Nadine’s contact within the local arms trade provided her with records of illegal weapons purchases, all paid for in cash. Through careful investigation, she identified the middleman who brokered these deals, and through him, got hold of receipts for weapons shipments, which matched the amounts of money withdrawn from Kazadi’s personal accounts.

The final piece came when Pierre decrypted an encrypted communication between Kazadi and a European arms dealer. The message contained details of a payment that matched one of the cash shipments Nadine had photographed. This connected Kazadi directly to the illicit arms purchases that had been used to strengthen his militia.

With the evidence in hand, Pierre and Nadine could now tie the corporate cash to Kazadi’s illicit deals. They had traced the money from the corporation’s offshore accounts to Kazadi’s militia, proven that Kazadi had been skimming off the top for personal gain, and gathered evidence of his illegal arms purchases.

The agency would use this information strategically, leaking the evidence not only to local militia leaders but also to international

journalists. The story of corruption, arms dealing, and financial greed would undermine Kazadi's standing, both with his backers and within his own ranks. His soldiers, realising they had been cheated, would turn on him. His corporate backers, now facing international scrutiny, would cut their ties, leaving Kazadi exposed and isolated.

The evidence was building. Now they just had to live long enough to use it.

Breached

The team first got a lead suspecting that Kazadi's must have a safe, through their surveillance efforts. Anya, a key member of the team with exceptional hacking skills, had been monitoring Kazadi's mobile conversations via his burner phones and intercepting satellite phone traffic from when he was out in the field. She had hacked into the phone masts directly, listening in on all mobile phone traffic within the region, using the agency's decryption tools and advanced voice recognition software to track every conversation Kazadi had.

Anya's hacking of the phone masts had been a meticulously planned operation, but one that required ground-level work to ensure success. While she could access much of the mobile traffic through remote hacking, there were some layers of security, especially in Kazadi's network, that required physical intervention. That's where Serj came in.

Serj, the team's tech-savvy field operative, was an expert in covert operations and electronics. His task was to physically install specialised interception devices on key phone masts in the region, devices that would allow Anya to bypass encryption protocols and directly monitor all calls within the area. This would give the team a wide-ranging access to phone traffic, including burner phones Kazadi's militia regularly used.

The first few masts had gone smoothly. Anya guided Serj remotely, feeding him instructions from her laptop as he climbed the towers at night, avoiding detection from local authorities. These devices, the

size of small hard drives, were attached to critical relay points on the masts. Once activated, they would clone and relay all transmitted data back to Anya's console in real-time.

But their luck ran out on one of the masts located near a militia checkpoint on the outskirts of the city.

It was nearing dawn when Serj arrived at the base of the last mast. This one was more heavily guarded, being closer to Kazadi's influence. Anya had warned him that it would be risky, but Serj was determined to get the job done. He knew that without tapping this final mast, the team would miss out on critical conversations Kazadi's men were having in the area.

Serj scaled the tower under the cover of darkness, moving quickly but cautiously. He reached the top and began installing the device, listening to Anya's instructions through his earpiece. Sweat dripped from his forehead as he hurried, knowing time was not on his side.

Halfway through the installation, disaster struck. As Serj finished connecting the device to the mast's relay, his foot slipped on one of the metal rungs. He scrambled to regain his balance, but it was too late. His foot banged loudly against the structure, echoing in the still morning air. Below, militia guards heard the noise and started moving toward the tower.

"Serj, you need to move, now!" Anya's voice came through his earpiece, her tone urgent.

Serj glanced down and saw flash lights sweeping the ground beneath him. The guards were getting closer, and he could hear their shouts in the distance. His heart pounded as he hurriedly tightened the last screw on the device, securing it in place. But before he could begin his descent, a gunshot rang out.

A sharp pain exploded in Serj's leg, and he gritted his teeth to keep from crying out. One of the guards had spotted him and fired, the bullet grazing his thigh. Blood started to seep through his pants, and he realised he had to move fast if he wanted to get out of this

alive.

As Serj clung to the tower, blood seeping from his leg, he heard the approaching footsteps of the militia. His body trembled with pain and fear, knowing he had to move, but his injury made the descent agonizingly slow. He reached the ground, his leg buckling beneath him, just as one of the guards spotted him.

The guard raised his rifle, taking aim at Serj.

In that instant, from the shadows, Dave appeared—silent and fast, almost a blur in the dim light. Before the guard could squeeze the trigger, Dave stepped in front of Serj, shielding him from the incoming barrage. The bullets slammed into Dave's back with a muted thud, but he didn't flinch. His expression was unreadable, focused, and calm, as if he hadn't been shot at all.

Serj looked up in disbelief, struggling to comprehend what he was seeing. The guard fired again, but the bullets continued to have no effect. Panic flashed in the guard's eyes as he realised something was terribly wrong.

Without a word, Dave moved with terrifying speed. In one fluid motion, he closed the distance between him and the guard, disarming him effortlessly. The guard barely had time to react before Dave delivered a precise, non-lethal strike to his neck, rendering him unconscious before his body hit the ground.

Dave turned back to Serj, who was still lying on the ground, his leg bleeding and his breath shaky. Dave crouched down and scooped Serj up like he weighed nothing.

"Hold on," Dave said quietly, his voice steady, almost casual.

Before Serj could process what was happening, Dave took off into the night, running faster than seemed possible. The world around them blurred as Dave sprinted through the dense foliage, his steps so quiet it was as though they barely touched the ground. Serj could hear the distant shouts of the other guards behind them, but they were fading quickly. Dave's speed was unlike anything Serj had ever

experienced. It felt as though time had slowed down for everyone else but them.

As they weaved through the trees, Serj's mind struggled to make sense of it all. How had Dave withstood the gunfire? How was he running so fast, carrying him without even showing signs of effort?

In mere minutes, Dave had put a vast distance between them and the guards. He finally slowed to a stop in a small clearing, gently setting Serj down behind a thick tree.

"Stay here," Dave said, his voice calm as ever. "I'll deal with the rest."

Before Serj could protest, Dave was gone again, disappearing into the shadows as if he had never been there. Serj's heart pounded in his chest, but he was safe, alive—and he owed that to Dave. Moments later, the extraction vehicle arrived, and Serj was pulled into the back by the team, his mind still spinning from what had just happened.

Back at the safe house, as Serj's leg was being treated, he recounted the events to Anya and the others.

"I was done for," Serj said, shaking his head in disbelief. "The guard had his gun aimed right at me. Then Dave... he just stepped in front of me. Took the bullets like they were nothing. And then... he ran with me. It was like... I don't know. Like he was in two places at once, he was that fast."

Anya looked at Serj, wide-eyed but silent. She had heard stories, whispers about Dave's abilities, but hearing it first-hand like this made it all the more surreal.

"And the guard?" one of the other agents asked.

Serj smirked, leaning back in his chair. "Let's just say he's not going to be shooting at anyone for a while."

The room fell quiet as the team absorbed Serj's story. Whatever Dave was, he wasn't just an ordinary operative. And whatever power he

had, it was clear that it made him more than capable of handling the dangers ahead.

Anya turned back to her console, her mind racing. They had the phone mast interception devices installed, and now, thanks to Dave's intervention, Serj was safe. But they all knew that Kazadi's forces wouldn't stop hunting them. As incredible as Dave's abilities were, they couldn't rely on him alone.

The mission to dismantle Kazadi's operation was far from over. But now, with the phone taps in place, Anya had a critical advantage. And with Dave on their side, they had a weapon unlike any they'd ever seen before.

From that point forward, Anya had the ability to intercept all phone conversations across Kazadi's operations, giving the team a significant advantage. But the team also knew how dangerous this mission was becoming. Serj's near-death experience had rattled them all, and the stakes were only getting higher.

The satellite traffic had been trickier to access, but not impossible. Thanks to investments by the agency's wealthy backers, Anya had access to sophisticated technologies, bypassing even government encryption systems. Through these efforts, she captured keyword voice codes that Kazadi used for his banking, but the missing piece was his encryption tokens—physical devices that held the keys to unlock his accounts.

It was a breakthrough when Anya intercepted a conversation between Kazadi and one of his key aides. They discussed transferring a large sum of money and referenced the "codes and tokens" needed for access. The mention of those tokens had first led the team to believe that Kazadi kept them secured somewhere in his office compound, likely in a safe.

The team began planning a strategy. They would need to find the exact location of the safe, determine how to access it, and retrieve the tokens without alerting Kazadi's militia. Using various contacts in the city, the team arranged for surveillance on Kazadi's compound,

confirming through security footage and the layout of the building that his office was well-guarded and the likely place where the safe would be kept.

The challenge now was retrieving the contents of the safe without triggering alarms or getting caught in the act, but with Dave's unique abilities, the team knew it was possible. The next phase of the mission was clear—find and prove the safe existed.

Incursion

Serj flexed his injured leg, testing its strength before tonight's mission. The bullet wound from the phone mast operation was still fresh enough to remind him of his mortality. Fresh enough to remember Dave taking those shots without flinching.

"It'll hold," Anya said, finishing her check of his comm gear. "The question is, will you?"

He caught her watching his leg, concern poorly hidden behind professional distance. They'd worked together for three years—long enough for her to know his tells.

"I've had worse." He managed a grin, though they both knew it was bravado. "Besides, someone needs to place your surveillance toys."

"They're not toys." But she smiled slightly. "And you're not expendable. No matter what that hero complex of yours thinks."

Serj nodded, not mentioning how he still heard gunfire in his dreams, or how Dave's impossible rescue had shaken his understanding of what was possible. Some fears were better left unspoken.

Despite the injury to his leg only a few days ago, and thanks to Anya's expert bandage work, Serj moved like a shadow through the undergrowth. His movements were silent, calculated, each step placed with precision. Years of Spetsnaz training had ingrained discipline and efficiency into his every action, and tonight was no different. The stakes, however, felt personal. The team needed to get closer to Kazadi, and Serj had been tasked with the dangerous job of surveilling the war-

lord's compound without being detected. The mission was clear: he could not be seen, and there could be no incidents.

From the treeline, the compound loomed ahead like a fortress in the jungle. High, reinforced walls surrounded the estate, topped with rolls of barbed wire that glinted ominously in the moonlight. The floodlights swept the grounds in slow, predictable arcs, casting long, moving shadows along the perimeter. Armed guards patrolled methodically, their silhouettes occasionally breaking the uniform sweep of the lights. The central building dominated the landscape with its brutal, angular design—a symbol of Kazadi's power.

Serj had spent hours watching, studying every pattern, every vulnerability. The guards were complacent, their patrols lazy, their focus drifting as the night wore on. One of them was stationed near the north wall, sitting under a floodlight and absent-mindedly checking his phone. Serj knew he had about five minutes before the next rotation of guards. It was all he needed.

With a burst of silent speed, Serj slipped through the tall grass, moving like liquid shadow. His steps were perfectly timed with the movements of the guards and the swaying of the floodlights. He reached the wall and found the spot he had marked earlier—a section where the barbed wire had loosened from years of neglect and weather damage. Scaling the wall was effortless, and Serj landed softly on the other side, crouching in the shadows as he scanned the area. He couldn't afford to make a sound.

The tension in the air was palpable. Every sound was amplified in the stillness—the hum of generators, the distant clatter of equipment, and the quiet murmur of guards' voices. But Serj moved with the same precision he always had. There would be no mistakes tonight. As he edged closer to the central building, the sharp angles of the compound became clearer, each one casting harsh shadows in the moonlight.

He passed an open door where two guards were chatting lazily, talking about a recent arms shipment. Serj crouched low, pressing him-

self against the cold stone of the building, waiting for the moment their voices trailed off. He could feel the cool night air brushing against his face as he moved swiftly past, his presence unnoticed.

A window on the second floor caught his attention. It was slightly ajar, and Serj's instincts told him it likely led to Kazadi's office. But just as he prepared to advance, the faint crunch of gravel under boots stopped him in his tracks. He wasn't alone.

Serj melted into the shadows, his body pressing flat against the wall, his breath shallow and controlled. The guard, rifle slung casually over his shoulder, strolled past without a second glance, oblivious to the man hidden in the darkness just a few feet away. Serj didn't move—he couldn't risk even the smallest noise. The guard lingered for a moment, taking in the quiet of the compound before finally turning and continuing on his patrol.

Serj exhaled softly, his heartbeat steady. He hadn't been seen, and there was no need to engage. He waited a few moments longer, ensuring the guard was gone, before slipping out from his hiding spot. Every second was crucial.

Stepping into the office was like walking into a space designed to exude power and control. A thick, handwoven rug covered the floor, muffling Serj's movements as he advanced. The walls were lined with dark wood panelling, lending the room a sense of authority. A large wooden desk, made of solid oak with brass inlays, sat at the centre, flanked by heavy filing cabinets. The scent of cigars lingered in the air, mixing with leather and a faint trace of gun oil. On the desk, a silver platter held a bottle of expensive liquor and two large balloon glasses, their polished surfaces catching the dim, warm lighting. The room was filled with Kazadi's presence—military paraphernalia, medals, swords, and plaques displayed with deliberate precision, all telling the story of a man accustomed to wealth and violence.

And in the far corner of the room, bolted to the floor, was the safe. Not hidden behind a painting or concealed by any clever design, but

tucked into the corner with an air of authority. It wasn't quite in plain sight, but to anyone who knew what to look for, its shape was unmistakable—a heavy, square box of reinforced steel, large enough to store whatever secrets Kazadi valued most.

Serj approached it, kneeling down to inspect the thick bolts that anchored it into the concrete. The safe was as impenetrable as he'd expected—its combination lock and biometric scanner made it clear this wasn't something to be easily bypassed. He couldn't open it tonight; that wasn't part of the plan. For now they knew exactly where it was, and that was critical information.

He took a step back, his mind already working through how they could break into it. As he turned to leave, Serj heard voices approaching from the hallway. His exit wasn't as clear as he had hoped. Without wasting a second, he climbed back out the window, descending the drainpipe as swiftly as he had come up.

The compound remained still as Serj retraced his steps, moving silently along the shadows. He reached the outer wall, scaled it, and dropped down on the other side, disappearing into the treeline.

Back at the safe house, Serj sat with the others, detailing his reconnaissance with calm precision. His face remained composed, though the intensity of his observations showed in his eyes. He laid out the key details—the high, reinforced walls, the predictable rotation of the guards, and the gaps in the security system that could be exploited. His voice was steady as he described the placement of the floodlights, the timing of the patrols, and the vulnerable windows where the guards' attention waned.

He highlighted the layout of the compound—the central building with Kazadi's office, surrounded by smaller structures used as barracks and storage. The guards were complacent, their patrols sluggish, and Serj made it clear how their laziness could be used to the team's advantage in future incursions. "There's about a five-minute gap between rotations," Serj explained. "It's not long, but if we time it right, it's enough."

His focus then shifted to the key discovery: the location of the safe. “It’s bolted into the floor in the corner of Kazadi’s office,” he said, showing the team where the safe was likely to be accessed through a biometric scanner and combination lock. “It’s not hidden—he doesn’t expect anyone to get that far in.” Serj’s tone was factual, but it was clear how important this information was. Now that they had the layout, the mission could move forward with a level of precision that would make all the difference.

The mission was about preparation, and Serj had given them what they needed to plan their next moves.

Arms Trade

“Kazadi’s not just running a militia—he’s becoming a regional arms dealer,” Pierre said, spreading surveillance photos across the table. “These shipments have been growing. Multiple groups, expanding influence. But we can’t trace the source.”

Dave studied the photos, his jaw tightening. “Then we follow the weapons. Cut off his supply chain, and his whole operation crumbles.”

Any, who had been listening in the corner, spoke up. “We’ve been monitoring Kazadi’s communications. His men are careful, but we’ve intercepted a few calls mentioning shipments arriving through a private port on the river. The problem is, they don’t specify the exact location. It could be anywhere along that stretch of water.”

Dave stood up, feeling a surge of determination. “Then we find it. If we can intercept one of those shipments, we can trace it back to its source.”

Pierre considered the idea. “It’s risky. The moment they see us coming, they’ll move the operation or tighten their defences. We can’t afford a misstep.”

Dave shrugged. “Then we make sure they don’t see us coming. We find the port, intercept the shipment, and trace it back without tipping them off.”

Dave leaned against the wall, thinking. “Do we know who’s supplying the weapons?”

“Not yet,” Anya replied. “But from the intercepted calls, we know that it’s an international operation. Kazadi’s militia is just one of many customers. Whoever’s behind this has connections across multiple regions, not just the DRC.”

Dave’s mind raced. They needed to cut off the head of the arms supply. Taking out Kazadi was one thing, but if the supplier continued, another warlord would just step in. They had to find the supplier, shut down the entire network.

“Let’s start with the deal,” Dave said. “We’ll hit them during the next shipment. Anya, can you track the movements of their trucks or boats?”

Anya smiled. “Already on it. I’ve tapped into their satellite calls. They don’t know we’re listening. I can pinpoint when and where the shipment is moving.”

Pierre stood up, crossing his arms. “Alright, then. We need a team in place. Anya, keep monitoring. Dave, you’ll go in with me and Nadine. Find the arms dealer, but we don’t engage unless absolutely necessary. This needs to stay clean until we know more about their operation.”

Dave nodded, a cold determination in his eyes. “Consider it done.”

A few nights later, under the cover of darkness, Dave and the team moved quietly along the riverbank. The sound of the water rushing past was the only noise in the still night. Anya’s surveillance had confirmed a shipment was coming in. The militia’s arms were being funnelled through this private port—one that wasn’t on any official map.

From his position behind some crates, Dave watched as a boat pulled up to the dock. Armed men unloaded crates—heavy, metal boxes that screamed military-grade weaponry.

Pierre whispered through the earpiece. “Looks like this is the shipment.”

Dave's eyes scanned the scene, counting the guards, the movement patterns, the locations of the crates. "We wait. Let's see where it's going."

The team watched as a truck pulled up to the dock, its flatbed ready to carry the crates away. Dave motioned to Pierre and Nadine, signalling that it was time to move.

As the militia loaded the last of the crates onto the truck, Dave silently made his way closer, using the darkness and his enhanced abilities to slip through the shadows unnoticed. He circled around the dock, keeping his eye on the guards, each step deliberate and calculated.

The truck's engine started, and it began to pull away from the dock. Pierre and Nadine followed from a distance in a van. Dave trailed the truck on foot, his speed allowing him to keep up effortlessly, staying in the shadows.

After about an hour of travel, the truck pulled into a heavily fortified compound on the outskirts of the city. The gates opened, and the truck disappeared inside.

Dave crouched behind a low building on the outskirts of the compound, his eyes scanning the perimeter. The compound was bathed in harsh floodlights mounted on tall poles, casting long, stark shadows across the grounds. The beams swept in slow, methodical arcs, illuminating the weathered walls of the structures and the dusty paths that snaked between them. The air hummed with the low buzz of generators, and the occasional crackle of a radio broke the silence. Guards patrolled the compound, their silhouettes outlined by the glow of the lights, each one cradling an automatic rifle. They moved in pairs, their movements purposeful but with an air of routine—guards accustomed to their duties, but not expecting any real threat.

The compound itself was well-organised. Several buildings were scattered around a central courtyard, each one serving a distinct purpose. To Dave's left was a large, corrugated metal warehouse—likely where most of the weapons were being stored. On the far side of the com-

pound, a barracks stood, its windows dark and silent, but Dave knew it was filled with soldiers who could be roused at a moment's notice. Between the two structures sat a smaller, unassuming building that looked like an office, its single light casting a dim glow from inside.

"Anya," Dave whispered into his comms, keeping his voice low as he watched the activity unfold. "I'm at the compound. This looks like where the arms are being distributed."

Anya's voice crackled softly in his ear. "Good. We'll trace the transactions from here. But you need to get inside and find any documentation or clues about their supplier. We need names, dates, anything that ties this to the larger network."

Dave's eyes followed the movement of a truck as it rumbled through the gates. The vehicle's headlights were dimmed, but he could see the driver inside, speaking briefly with the guards before being waved through. The truck stopped near the warehouse, and a group of men emerged from the shadows, moving quickly to unload the cargo. They worked in near silence, the muted clatter of crates and the low murmur of voices the only sounds cutting through the still night air.

"Roger that," Dave whispered, his gaze following the guards as they moved out of sight, heading toward the opposite end of the compound. Now was his chance.

He waited for the floodlights to sweep past before accessing the fence. A controlled application of his strength easily created a narrow gap, his movements fluid and silent. His footsteps were barely audible as he crossed the gravel, sticking to the shadows that pooled between the buildings. As he neared the main building, he spotted two guards standing idly near the entrance, smoking and chatting in hushed tones. In one swift motion, Dave moved behind them, disabling both with precise strikes to the base of their necks. They dropped silently, and Dave dragged their bodies into the shadows, ensuring they wouldn't be discovered for hours.

Staying low, Dave skirted around the side of the warehouse, careful to keep out of the lights' path. The building was a hulking mass of

metal and concrete, its walls adorned with rust and grime. Every step Dave took was calculated, each movement deliberate as he navigated the compound's edges. He slipped past a smaller building, likely the office, and noted the faint glow of a light inside. The windows were barred, but the door looked unsecured—a possible entry point for later. For now, he needed to reach the heart of the operation—the weapons cache.

Reaching the loading area, Dave ducked behind a stack of crates, peering out from the shadows. The truck was parked just a few metres away, its back doors wide open. Inside, more crates were being unloaded—rifles, grenades, and what looked like military-grade equipment. The men worked with grim efficiency, checking off items on a clipboard as they hauled the weapons into the warehouse. Dave's eyes darted to the desk near the entrance, where a stack of papers lay haphazardly beside a laptop.

This was it.

Dave crept forward, moving with the precision of a predator stalking its prey. He reached the desk without a sound and began flipping through the papers, his eyes scanning for anything that could tie this operation to the supplier. The paperwork was official—each document stamped with the letterhead of a major arms supplier. Serial numbers, dates, and shipment details were clearly listed, and Dave's mind raced as he processed the information. These weren't black market weapons; they were sourced through legitimate channels, carefully funnelled into the hands of Kazadi's militia.

The serial numbers on the crates matched those listed on the papers. Each one could be traced back through the supply chain, from the manufacturer to the distributor, and finally, to the compound. This wasn't just a simple arms deal—it was part of a larger, more intricate network that spanned continents. With this information, they could trace the weapons back to their origin, revealing the entire supply chain that had armed Kazadi's forces.

Dave quickly stuffed the papers into his jacket and unplugged the

laptop, sliding it under his arm. He had what he came for.

“Got it,” he whispered into his comms. “I’m heading out.”

Slipping back into the shadows, Dave retraced his steps, moving just as silently as before. He skirted around the office building, ducking behind a stack of crates as another guard passed by. His heart pounded in his chest, but his movements remained steady. He crossed the yard, keeping low as the floodlights swept overhead, and reached the gap in the fence. Within moments, he was back on the other side, disappearing into the darkness of the surrounding jungle.

As he made his way back to the extraction point, Dave could hear the compound coming to life behind him—the guards still unaware they had just been infiltrated. He smiled grimly. They had no idea what was coming.

Back at the safe house, Dave handed the laptop and documents over to Anya and Pierre. They pored over the details, their expressions growing more serious by the second.

“This is it,” Dave said, his voice low but resolute. “We know where the weapons are coming from.”

Anya nodded, her eyes scanning the serial numbers. “We can trace these shipments back to the source. Once we do, we’ll be able to shut down Kazadi’s entire operation.”

Now, with the supplier in their sights, the team had everything they needed to dismantle Kazadi’s empire piece by piece. The real work was just beginning.

Watching

Stopping the arms supply to Kazadi's militia was going to be far more difficult than Dave or the team anticipated. The data on the laptop revealed a stunning connection: the arms were being funnelled to the DRC by a foreign state-sponsored agency—a shadowy government operation from a powerful nation. This wasn't just about a rogue dealer; it was part of a larger, covert international operation. Shutting it down would require more than just intercepting shipments.

The agency couldn't afford a direct confrontation with a foreign power; that would be messy and potentially lead to diplomatic fallout. They needed to cripple the supply chain without firing a single shot. The only option left was to make the supplier's operation so toxic, so publicly embarrassing, that even the foreign government would be forced to cut ties to avoid international condemnation.

Dave sat in the safe house, the team gathered around the table as they discussed options. The room was dimly lit, but the tension was palpable.

"We can't stop every shipment," Pierre said, pacing. "They've got too many routes, too many ways of getting arms into the country. And with a foreign state backing them, it's a massive network. We take down one shipment, they'll reroute through another channel."

Pierre, arms crossed, added, "And every time we hit one of their shipments, it's a small dent. They've got more resources than we can track."

Dave was deep in thought. He understood the magnitude of the operation, but he also knew that going toe-to-toe with a national power on its own turf was a losing game. But what if they could expose it? Make it so public, so controversial, that the state-sponsored agency behind the supply chain would have no choice but to shut it down?

“Stop the shipments?” Dave’s laugh was hollow. “That’s like cutting a hydra’s head.” He pulled up satellite footage on his tablet. “But this—” He zoomed in on militia members unloading crates stamped with foreign markings. “This is their neck.”

Anya studied the footage, her expression sceptical. “They’ll deny everything. Call it fake news.”

“Let them.” Dave’s eyes hardened. “Hard to deny dead villagers holding their weapons. We just need one story that bleeds enough to make the evening news.”

“Christ,” Pierre muttered. “You want to wait until they actually kill someone?”

“They’re already killing people.” Dave’s voice was ice. “We’re just going to make sure the world watches.”

Pierre stopped pacing, considering the idea. “So, we don’t just expose the shipments. We expose their connection to the human rights abuses. Kazadi’s militia isn’t just buying weapons; they’re using them to terrorise civilians, enslave workers in the mines, and silence any dissent. If we link the foreign state’s weapons supply directly to these atrocities, we could create enough international pressure that they’re forced to cut Kazadi loose.”

Serj raised an eyebrow. “And how do we do that? The media won’t care about an arms deal without something flashy to grab their attention.”

“We give them something they can’t ignore,” Anya said, her voice sharp. “Kazadi’s militia has been involved in some horrific acts—forced labour, mass killings, child soldiers. If we can get footage of them using these foreign-supplied weapons in those acts, the story

becomes impossible to bury.”

Dave nodded. “And if we leak that information to key international media outlets, human rights organisations, and activists, we’ll have a scandal that blows wide open.”

“Even better,” Anya added, “We tie it to the cobalt mining operations. Electric vehicle companies are heavily scrutinised for their supply chains. If we can show that their cobalt is being extracted by slave labour, and the militia protecting those mines is armed by this foreign state, it’ll cause an uproar. Corporations will have to distance themselves from the militia to avoid backlash. No one wants blood cobalt.”

Pierre smirked. “This could work. Corporations can’t afford bad PR. If the media runs with the story, and we give them the hard evidence, it’ll snowball. Once the world knows that a foreign government is complicit in this, they’ll back off to save face.”

“But how do we get the footage?” Serj asked.

“We create it,” Dave replied. “Kazadi’s militia is gearing up for another attack on a rival group. Anya, if you can track their movements, we’ll be able to get there ahead of time. We set up cameras, drones—whatever we need to record the militia in action, using those weapons. We get close enough to capture the violence, but far enough to stay safe. Then we leak it to the right people.”

Pierre nodded. “We’ll need to be fast. Once they realise they’ve been exposed, they’ll try to cover it up.”

Anya was already pulling up satellite feeds, tracking the movements of Kazadi’s forces. “I’ve got eyes on them. They’re moving south, toward a mining village. If they’re going to hit it, it’ll be in the next 24 hours.”

Dave stood up, his face set with determination. “Then we get there first. We record everything. And once we have the footage, we blow this operation wide open.”

From the ridge, Dave counted the militia vehicles rolling into the village—one, two, three trucks packed with armed men. The foreign-supplied weapons gleamed in the morning sun.

“Drone Two’s having interference issues,” Anya’s voice crackled in his earpiece. “We might lose the north-west angle.”

“We can’t,” Dave hissed, watching the first villagers being dragged from their homes. “That’s where they store the weapons. Pierre?”

“On it.” Pierre was already moving through the brush, repositioning the backup cameras. Below, a child’s scream pierced the air.

The militia began firing their weapons, threatening anyone who resisted. It was exactly what they needed. The cameras captured everything—the faces of the soldiers, the unmistakable foreign weapons in their hands, and the horror of the villagers.

As Dave crouched on the ridge overlooking the mining village, every instinct in his body screamed at him to act. He watched, jaw clenched, as Kazadi’s militia began terrorising the villagers below. Armed men shouted orders, forcing the locals into lines, dragging some away to work in the mines, while others were struck for the slightest hesitation. The brutality was too much for Dave. His hands curled into fists, eyes narrowing as the militia barked orders and fired into the air.

Dave’s picked up every detail below—a mother clutching her child, an old man being struck with a rifle butt, young men forced to their knees. Each image burned into his memory with perfect clarity.

“Two minutes until we have enough footage,” Pierre murmured.

Dave’s muscles tensed as another villager fell. These people didn’t know he existed, would never know why he watched their suffering. The mission was clear: document, don’t intervene. Build a case that would bring down the entire operation.

But logic didn’t stop the bile rising in his throat.

“Sometimes I wonder,” Dave said softly, “if having the power to help

and choosing not to makes us worse than the ones pulling the triggers.”

Pierre kept filming. “You know why we’re here.”

“Yeah.” Dave’s fingers dug into the earth. “Doesn’t make it right.”

Dave’s knuckles whitened around his binoculars. Below, a militia member struck an elderly villager. “Give me one reason not to end this right now.”

“I’ll give you twelve thousand,” Pierre said quietly, not lowering his camera. “That’s how many people live in the next village. And the next. And the next.”

“So we just watch?” The binoculars creaked under Dave’s grip.

“We watch. We record. Then we make them pay.” Pierre’s finger never stopped clicking the shutter. “For all of it.”

Dave’s gut twisted with rage. He had been trained to endure, to fight when necessary, and to stay in the shadows. But this... watching the village suffer while they sat on the sidelines—it was unbearable. His mind flashed with images of innocent people being herded like cattle, the cruelty of the militia, the helplessness in the eyes of the villagers. It wasn’t right.

The sound of gunfire echoed through the valley as one of the militia members dragged a young man from the crowd, pushing him toward the mines. Dave ground his teeth. The mission was to get footage of the militia using foreign-supplied weapons, but the longer he watched, the more the anger bubbled to the surface. Was it really worth the price? Was getting that evidence worth letting these people suffer?

A decision clicked in his mind. He couldn’t sit idle.

“I can’t just watch,” Dave whispered to himself, rising slightly from his crouch.

Pierre glanced at him, his voice stern. “What are you doing?”

“I’m staying out of sight, just like you said,” Dave replied, his eyes

focused on the militia men scattered throughout the village. “But that doesn’t mean I can’t help.”

Without waiting for permission, Dave slipped down the ridge. Moving swiftly, silently, he melted into the shadows, circling around the village’s outskirts. His team might be focused on getting the footage, but he could operate in the periphery, thinning out the militia’s numbers without drawing attention. The more soldiers he took out, the less damage they could do.

The first target was a lone gunman standing watch near the edge of the village. He was separated from the rest, an easy mark. Dave crept up behind him, his footsteps light as air. In an instant, he reached out, gripping the man’s neck in a choke hold and dragging him into the bushes. The soldier struggled for a moment, but Dave’s enhanced strength subdued him effortlessly.

With the man unconscious, Dave removed the rifle and stashed the body out of sight. One down.

Dave moved like a ghost through the village outskirts. One guard disappeared into the shadows—then another. A third turned just in time to see Dave’s fist, but never made a sound.

On the ridge, Pierre frowned at his monitor. “Something’s wrong. Their perimeter patrol is missing.”

“What do you mean, missing?” Anya asked, eyes fixed on her drone feed.

“Just... gone.” Pierre zoomed in on the empty guard posts. Below, another militia member vanished into the darkness, leaving only an abandoned rifle in the dust.

The next target was a gunman near the rear of the village, casually standing near a makeshift weapons cache. Dave approached from behind, using the cover of an old wooden building. He lunged, grabbing the man and slamming him into the wall with enough force to knock him out cold. Dave quickly disabled the nearby weapons, making sure they wouldn’t be used against the villagers.

As he moved deeper into the village, Dave could feel the impact of his actions. The chaos was lessening. The militia's hold on the villagers was weakening. One by one, their forces were dwindling, and they didn't even know it yet.

He continued to pick them off, reducing their ability to cause harm while staying out of sight. Every time he felt his rage bubble up, he funnelled it into precision—taking out his frustration on the men who had inflicted so much suffering.

Eventually, Dave reached the centre of the village, where the militia leader barked orders to his remaining men. They were growing frustrated, realising that their force wasn't as intimidating as it had been moments ago. The leader ordered a few gunmen to spread out, but they didn't know Dave had already cleared the areas they were headed to.

The militia leader's voice grew hoarse from shouting orders, his composure cracking. "Where is everyone? Report in!" His radio crackled with silence. No response from the perimeter guards, no word from his sentries. His hand tightened on his weapon as understanding dawned—somehow, his force of thirty had been whittled down to barely a dozen men, all without a single shot fired or alarm raised.

"Sir," one of his remaining men approached hesitantly. "We can't find Ahmed's team. Or Marcus. Or—"

"I know they're missing!" the leader snapped, eyes darting between shadows. Fear crept into his voice as he keyed his radio again. "All units, fall back. Fall back now!" But even as he gave the order, he knew many of those units would never respond.

From his vantage point in the shadows, Dave watched. The villagers still huddled in fear, but the immediate danger had lessened. And all the while, Anya's drones captured footage of the militia using their foreign-supplied weapons, unaware that their numbers were being cut down by an invisible hand.

Once Dave was satisfied that he had done enough, he slipped back

into the forest, retreating to the ridge where the rest of the team was stationed.

Pierre, noticing his return, raised an eyebrow. “Where have you been?”

Dave didn’t answer right away, breathing heavily from the exertion. “Just making sure they didn’t hurt anyone else. You got your footage?”

Pierre nodded slowly, looking at him with a mix of suspicion and understanding. “Yeah. We got it.”

Dave turned his gaze back to the village, where the militia leader was shouting at his remaining men, trying to make sense of the situation. They had no idea what had just happened. And by the time they discovered the missing soldiers, Dave would be long gone.

It wasn’t much, but at least some of the villagers had been spared the worst of the violence. And the evidence was in the hands of the team, ready to expose Kazadi’s operations to the world.

Dave looked at Pierre, a grim determination in his eyes. “Sometimes, watching isn’t enough.”

Pierre simply nodded. “I know.”

After what felt like hours, the militia moved on, leaving the village in ruins. Dave’s team collected the footage, carefully extracting the drones and cameras.

Pierre found Dave alone on the compound roof, still watching the village long after the militia had gone. The footage was secured—their mission technically complete. But success felt hollow tonight.

“You’re not responsible for every person we can’t save,” Pierre said, settling beside him.

“Aren’t we?” Dave didn’t look at him. “Isn’t that why I was recruited? Why you agreed to run this entire operation?”

“We’re responsible for doing what we can,” Pierre said carefully. “Without starting a war we can’t finish.”

“And if doing what we can isn’t enough?”

Pierre had no answer for that. Leaders were supposed to have answers, but sometimes friendship meant sitting with the questions instead.

Back at the safe house, Anya quickly pieced together the video, highlighting the connections between the militia’s violence, the foreign-supplied weapons, and the mining operations. The footage was undeniable.

Pierre smiled as he looked at the final product. “This is going to blow the lid off.”

They sent the footage to several major media outlets, human rights organisations, and activists. Within hours, the story was spreading like wildfire. Headlines screamed about the foreign government’s involvement in the atrocities, the exploitation of cobalt miners, and the use of state-sponsored weapons to terrorise civilians.

International outrage followed. Corporations distanced themselves from Kazadi’s militia, and pressure mounted on the foreign state to cut its ties to the arms supply. The scandal was too big to ignore.

Dave watched the news reports roll in. They had done it. Kazadi’s militia would no longer have the backing it needed. The arms supply was effectively crippled, and the foreign government’s involvement was now a global embarrassment.

It wasn’t just a victory—it was the beginning of the end for Kazadi’s reign of terror.

A Dry Well

Without the steady stream of weapons, Kazadi's once formidable militia was starting to fall apart. The arms that had empowered them to terrorise villages and enforce Kazadi's will were no longer flowing. Kazadi had built his reputation on being the man who could deliver power—guns, ammo, supplies—but without that lifeline, his influence was crumbling.

Kazadi slammed the phone down. "What do you mean, 'temporarily suspended'?" he shouted at the empty room. "We had a contract!"

His aide flinched in the doorway. "Sir, about the shipment schedule—"

"Get out." When the aide hesitated, Kazadi hurled the phone across the room. "OUT!"

The door clicked shut. Kazadi's phone buzzed with a message: 'Current climate unfavourable for business relationship. Will contact when situation improves.'

"Cowards," he whispered, staring at the screen. "Fucking cowards."

The sound of arguing echoed through the compound as Kazadi approached his office. Two of his officers fell silent, stepping aside with barely a nod. Inside, three more waited—men who used to snap to attention at his presence. Now they lounged against his walls, their postures a silent challenge.

"Where are the weapons?" Lieutenant Mbale asked without pream-

ble.

Kazadi's phone buzzed—another supplier's rejection. He let it ring.

His men were becoming disgruntled, their loyalty wavering. Kazadi had noticed the murmurs, the side conversations that stopped whenever he entered a room. He was no longer the untouchable leader; now, he was just a man desperately trying to hold on to power. He knew that once the money stopped, so too would the loyalty of his men.

Kazadi stood at his office window, watching his men below. They no longer snapped to attention when he passed. No longer averted their eyes in respect—or fear. Now they watched him, measuring his weakness like hyenas circling a wounded lion.

He touched the scar on his neck—a reminder of his first kill, decades ago. He'd been nothing then, a boy with a rusty knife. But he'd had conviction, hunger, the absolute certainty that he deserved more than life had given him.

His phone buzzed: another supplier refusing his calls. On his desk, the latest intelligence report showed his influence crumbling, territory shrinking. Everything he'd built, all the blood and brutality that had elevated him from that desperate boy to a man who controlled armies—it was slipping away.

"Sir," his aide hesitated at the door. "The men are asking about payment. Again."

Kazadi didn't turn. "Tell them it's coming."

But they all knew it wasn't. The boy with the rusty knife would have known it too. Would have seen the lie for what it was—the last gasp of a dying king.

Kazadi's frustration mounted. He needed to secure another arms shipment, but the suppliers weren't returning his calls. The corporation that had funded his rise was losing patience. They had invested heavily in him, trusting him to destabilise the region and clear the

way for their operations. But without results, they had cut off his funding, unwilling to throw more money at a failing operation.

The final call had come days ago. The voice on the other end was calm but firm: “Deliver results, or you’re on your own.”

Despite having a large bank account from skimming the corporate cash cow, Kazadi had nothing to show for the months of work. No control over the Cobalt mines, no strategic victories, just a militia growing more restless by the day. And now, with no arms to supply to his customers, he couldn’t even generate income to keep his men loyal. His only option was to keep draining his personal funds, but even that had limits.

Maybe it was time to retire? He had more than enough cash squirreled away in a foreign bank to support him in a life of luxury.

He looked out the window, his hands clenched into fists. Everything he had built was slipping through his fingers. The once invincible leader, now teetering on the edge of collapse, and no amount of anger or desperation could turn the tide. He had to find a solution, or risk being torn apart by his own men.

Kazadi knew that his militia was like a hungry beast—if it wasn’t fed, it would eat him instead.

All the Pieces

Under the cover of night, Dave approached Kazadi's heavily guarded compound with an ease that belied the intensity of the mission. Serj's detailed description and meticulous planning clearly paved the way. The intel had mapped out the guard rotations, the layout of the estate, and the location of the safe that held the banking token. However, what they couldn't predict was how Dave would handle what came next—something he had yet to fully understand himself.

Moving like a shadow, Dave slid through the first perimeter, avoiding the security cameras with pinpoint precision. His senses were heightened, the faint hum of the compound's generators providing a rhythmic backdrop as he advanced through the dimly lit grounds. Every step was calculated; every breath controlled.

Two guards, armed with rifles, stood at the entrance of the estate's main building. With an almost invisible flicker of movement, Dave was behind them. In one smooth motion, he disarmed the first guard, rendering him unconscious with a precise strike to the side of his head. The second guard, now aware, barely had time to react before Dave's hand clamped over his mouth, and with a swift blow to the back of his neck, he too slumped to the ground. Dave dragged their bodies into the bushes, ensuring they wouldn't be discovered until morning.

Inside the building, the atmosphere changed. The corridor was wide and silent, with high ceilings that made even the faintest whisper of wind echo faintly. The polished marble floors reflected the low lighting, creating an almost sterile feel to the place. Ornate vases

and statues lined the hallway, each piece more ostentatious than the last. It was a shrine to Kazadi's ego, a display of wealth that belied the ruthless militia leader's true nature.

Dave moved swiftly, his soft-soled shoes making no sound as he advanced toward Kazadi's private office at the far end of the corridor. The door was a heavy mahogany slab, adorned with carvings that depicted a history long forgotten—except by Kazadi, who fancied himself the successor of such forgotten empires.

He paused at the door, listening carefully. There was only silence behind it. The guards outside had been the last obstacle.

Entering the office was like stepping into another world. Thick, hand-woven carpets covered the cold marble, muting even Dave's measured footsteps. The walls were lined with dark wood panelling, and every shelf was filled with expensive liquor bottles, rare books, and trinkets from Kazadi's conquests. The dim lighting was warm, casting long shadows over the large desk that dominated the room, a desk made of solid oak with brass inlays, designed to project power. A large portrait of Kazadi, draped in military garb, loomed over the desk.

The smell of cigars and leather hung in the air, blending with a faint hint of gun oil, reminders of both decadence and danger. The office was a meticulously curated reflection of Kazadi's life—wealth, violence, and control, all displayed with an air of untouchability. On the far wall, next to the portrait, a large glass cabinet displayed ceremonial weapons and medals, though Dave knew they were likely gifts from the warlords Kazadi had dealt with over the years.

He crossed the room, his eyes scanning every corner. The safe, bolted into the concrete floor, was small and compact, but heavily fortified with reinforced steel. It sat inconspicuously behind the desk, partially hidden by the shadows cast by the dim lamps.

Kneeling before the safe, Dave placed his hands on the cold metal surface. He could feel the weight of the strong locking bolts inside, the thick hinges designed to withstand any kind of assault. But those were human concerns, and Dave was no ordinary man. Slowly, with

deliberate force, he applied pressure to the door. At first, nothing happened, but then, with a groan of metal under duress, the locking bolts began to bend, the hinges creaking in protest.

Dave continued, careful not to rush, bending the steel in complete silence. After what felt like an eternity, the door gave way with a soft pop, the bolts snapping and folding like they were made of plastic. The safe door swung open.

The contents of the safe lay before him—a series of hard drives stacked neatly on one side, several folders filled with documents, and bundles of cash. But his heart sank as he quickly rifled through everything. The multi-factor token, the key to accessing Kazadi's accounts, was missing. Without it, their mission was compromised. And worse, the twisted, mangled wreckage of the safe was undeniable evidence that someone had been here. There was no way to cover up the break-in.

He cursed under his breath. Kazadi would know someone was searching for something, and the destruction of the safe would make it clear. But if Dave made it look like the intruder got what they were after, perhaps Kazadi would be chasing shadows.

Without hesitation, Dave grabbed the hard drives, slipping them into his pack. The documents followed, each one adding to the illusion of a successful theft. With everything of value packed up, Dave took a final glance at the wreckage. They were no closer to their goal, but at least now, Kazadi might believe someone had found what they were looking for.

Dave left the twisted remains of the door next to the broken safe. With the contents of the safe now in his possession, Dave retraced his steps, exiting the compound just as silently as he had entered.

By the time the guards changed shifts and the theft was discovered, Dave was long gone, already miles away from the compound. The first sign of trouble would come when Kazadi or his men attempted to access the safe, only to find the bent bolts and empty interior. By then, it would be too late.

Paranoia

Kazadi stared at the broken safe, its mangled metal door hanging open like a taunt. His chest tightened with rage, his hands trembling as he clenched them into fists. How had this happened? The impenetrable fortress he had built, his very empire, breached—violated. He could barely contain the fury that surged through him. The contents of the safe were not just valuable; they were essential. Documents, hard drives—everything he had meticulously gathered over the years, his lifeblood of leverage, now gone. Whoever had broken into his office had stolen more than just papers; they had taken his power.

His mind spiralled into paranoia, each second fuelling his suspicions. How could someone get past his security? He had trusted his men—hand-picked soldiers and mercenaries who had sworn loyalty. But now, doubt seeped into his thoughts like poison. Could one of them have turned? Could they have been bribed? Had they been compromised by someone he had blackmailed, someone with deep pockets and a burning desire for revenge? The more Kazadi thought about it, the more plausible it seemed. No one outside his circle knew about the safe, and the exact details of what it held—unless one of his own had betrayed him.

Kazadi began questioning everyone in his head. Even his most trusted lieutenants, men he had known for years, were not above suspicion. Paranoia tightened its grip on him like a vice. He imagined them conspiring behind his back, plotting to destroy him. Why wouldn't they? Some of them had as much to lose as he did if the blackmail materials fell into the wrong hands. The idea festered,

gnawing at his sense of control. He began to see shadows in every interaction, doubting every word, every gesture. Was that slight hesitation when they saluted him a sign of guilt?

What bothered him most was how perfectly the break-in had been executed. His compound was supposed to be a fortress, his office secured by layers of guards, surveillance, and redundancy. No one should have been able to get in unnoticed. Yet, here he was, standing in the aftermath of a professional heist. It was as though whoever had orchestrated it knew every weakness in his security—every blind spot. Kazadi gritted his teeth. Had someone been watching him all this time? The thought that his every move could have been observed, even studied, sent a fresh wave of anger coursing through his veins.

He couldn't afford to trust anyone now. His suspicion extended beyond the men guarding the safe that night. It slithered upward through the ranks, reaching the highest echelons of his organisation. Could one of his own inner circle have set this up? It was unthinkable, but then again, so was the idea of someone breaking into his office. Nothing was off the table now. Kazadi was convinced: if he didn't root out the traitor, he would never sleep soundly again.

His thoughts turned back to the stolen materials. The hard drive contained sensitive information, including blackmail that could ruin careers, topple businesses, even destabilise governments. It was his leverage—his protection. Without it, Kazadi was vulnerable. He cursed under his breath, smashing his fist into his desk. Whoever had it now held power over him, and that was something he could not tolerate. He needed answers, and he needed them fast.

Kazadi stormed out of his office and summoned his security chief. He demanded a full review of the compound's security protocols and patrol schedules for the night of the break-in. He wanted to know who had been on duty, where they had been, and why they had failed. His voice was sharp and unforgiving as he ordered an immediate ****change in the security patterns****. Random rotations, tighter monitoring of blind spots, and more frequent checks of high-risk ar-

eas. His compound would become a prison to anyone who thought about defying him again.

The men who had been responsible for guarding the office that night were dragged before him, trembling with fear. Kazadi's wrath was palpable as he interrogated them, demanding to know how they had allowed the breach to happen. No excuse would suffice. He had trusted them to protect his empire, and they had failed him miserably. His anger boiled over, and in a fit of rage, he punished them harshly—demoting some, imprisoning others. His need for control, his paranoia, demanded that an example be made. No one would dare betray him again.

But deep down, Kazadi knew that punishment alone wouldn't stop the creeping sense of vulnerability. His mind continued to spin with doubt. Had he been too lenient? Too trusting? The loss of his leverage had shaken him to his core. The breach had revealed cracks in his seemingly impenetrable power. As he looked over his decimated security team, he realised that from now on, no one—absolutely no one—was above suspicion.

Access Denied

The safe house felt colder than usual. The adrenaline from the failed burglary had faded, leaving only frustration in its wake. Dave sat by the window, staring blankly at the rain trickling down the glass. Serj leaned against the wall, his arms crossed, brooding in silence. Omar busied himself with cleaning his gear, his movements mechanical, almost angry. The team had spent weeks preparing, risking everything to break into Kazadi's office, only to come up empty-handed. The weight of failure hung in the room like a thick fog.

"Damn it," Dave muttered, breaking the silence. "We were so close. And now... we've got nothing."

Anya, sitting at the table with her laptop in front of her, was uncharacteristically quiet, her eyes scanning the screen as she tapped a pen against her lip. She hated moments like this—the deflation after a failed mission, the uncertainty of what to do next. They had the banks Kazadi used, they had the safe's location, but none of it mattered without the key to his accounts. That security token.

"There's got to be something we missed," Serj finally spoke, his voice tight with frustration. "It's on him. It has to be."

Serj grunted in agreement but didn't say a word, his focus still on his equipment.

Anya finally spoke up, her tone measured but with an edge of determination. "If it's something he keeps on him, we need to figure out what it is. We know the banks he uses. Let's dig deeper. Find out

what additional security tokens they require. If we know what we're looking for, maybe then we'll have a chance."

Dave raised an eyebrow. "You think we missed something? Like what?"

Anya stood, pulling her hair back as she moved to the whiteboard on the wall. "Look, it could be anything—a thumb drive, a keypad, a smart card. But even if we figure that out, the challenge is getting it off him without him knowing, at least not immediately."

The team watched her, their frustration slowly giving way to hope, a glimmer of a new plan. "Give me some time," Anya said, already pulling out her phone. "I'm going to find out more about the banks' security systems. But this is going to require some... finesse."

With a sigh, she sat back down and started her task. She'd have to pose as an interested customer, talking to the banks about their services, and subtly steering the conversation towards the security measures they used. It wasn't an easy play—especially when all she really cared about was the details of their customer protection systems.

The first few calls were tedious, dragging on as the bank representatives launched into scripted spiels about their financial offerings. She played the part of an eager, affluent businesswoman, listening to endless talk of investment accounts, high-net-worth packages, and the prestige of their wealth management services. It was all wasted time.

"Yes, that sounds very appealing," Anya said for the hundredth time, suppressing an eye roll as the representative went on about low-interest loans and portfolio management. "But what about account security? You know, for someone with sensitive assets? What kind of protection do you offer?"

On the other end of the line, the response was always similar. A little hesitation, followed by a vague explanation. "Well, we have a variety of measures. For our older accounts, we still use keypads or

one-time codes, but we've upgraded many clients to more modern systems..."

It was the same story with the next bank. More talk about their prestige and asset management, more wasted time discussing the services available for high-net-worth individuals, until she could finally steer the conversation back to security.

"... and in terms of security?" Anya would push, her patience wearing thin. "What about access tokens?"

Finally, after what felt like hours of the same routine, a pattern began to emerge. Most of the older accounts used outdated methods—keypads or physical tokens—but that wasn't what Kazadi would be using. The real breakthrough came when she connected the dots: all the banks had started transitioning to smart cards. And not just any smart cards.

"These aren't your typical chip-and-PIN cards," one representative finally revealed. "For our most sensitive accounts, we've adopted biometric smart cards. Clients need the card itself, but it's also tied to their fingerprint."

Anya hung up after that final call, leaning back in her chair with a triumphant look. "It's a biometric smart card," she announced to the room. "That's what he's using. It's not just about getting the card—we'll need his fingerprint too."

The air in the room shifted. Dave stood up, crossing his arms as a plan started to form. "Alright, so we know what to look for. Now we just have to figure out how to get it off him."

"But without him realising," Serj added. "At least, not right away."

Anya nodded, her mind already racing. It was one thing to figure out what they needed; it was another to take it from a warlord like Kazadi. But at least now, they had a lead—a concrete step toward cracking open his accounts. The frustration of earlier had faded, replaced with a sense of renewed purpose. They weren't done yet.

Serj, who had been quietly listening, finally broke the silence. “So we can’t just cut off his thumb and steal the card because he’d notice?” His deadpan delivery caused a brief pause in the room, as though they weren’t sure whether he was joking or serious.

Dave raised an eyebrow. “Yeah, he might.”

Anya smirked but shook her head. “We need to get close, but not that close. The last thing we need is for him to figure out we’ve stolen something right away. We need time, enough to get what we need before he raises the alarm.”

Serj shrugged. “Fine, no thumbs.” He gave a half-grin, though the edge in his voice betrayed how serious the mission had become.

As the team mulled over their next steps, Dave leaned against the wall, arms crossed. “You know,” he started, “I can use my phone for banking. It uses a fingerprint too.”

Anya, barely looking up from her screen, replied, “What’s your point?”

“Well,” Dave continued, “it works simply for just accessing the account and seeing my balance. Even for making hands-free payments.”

Anya glanced up, her brow furrowed. “Yes, where is this going?”

“But for anything more,” Dave said, “like transferring funds to someone new, I also need a PIN.”

Anya stopped typing, her eyes narrowing as she thought through what he’d said. “Of course,” she muttered, the realisation dawning on her. “If we’re not careful, we could end up with a card, a thumb...” she shot a glance at Serj, who just shrugged, “... and still have no ability to use the account.”

Serj grinned. “I was just joking about the thumb, after all, you’d need all ten fingers to be sure you got the right one.”

Dave chuckled, but the mood remained tense.

“Right,” Dave nodded. “We need everything together—the card, the fingerprint, and whatever else Kazadi uses to secure his funds.”

Anya’s gaze sharpened. “And we need to get it all covertly, without raising any suspicion. If we miss just one piece of the puzzle, we’re back to square one.”

Creating the decoy card had been surprisingly straightforward once they’d identified Kazadi’s bank. It was a private Swiss institution that catered to wealthy clients who valued discretion above all else—they deliberately issued plain black cards without logos or markings, playing into their clients’ desire for sophistication while conveniently making the cards harder to trace. Anya had managed to source several blank smart cards through agency contacts who specialised in financial infiltration. Programming them was trivial; they didn’t need to perfectly replicate the card’s security features since it was meant to fail anyway. The key was simply matching the minimalist design: the same matte black finish, the same subtle chip placement, even the same weight and feel. When placed in a wallet alongside high-end credit cards, it looked like just another status symbol for the wealthy elite—exactly what someone like Kazadi would carry.

Anya sat at her laptop, her fingers dancing across the keyboard as she crafted the email. Spear-phishing wasn’t just about sending any link—it had to be believable, something that would catch Kazadi’s attention and compel him to click. It needed to look like a message from someone he trusted, someone who could pique his interest or tap into his arrogance.

She knew enough about Kazadi’s operations to know his weak spots. He craved power, but more importantly, he wanted to be seen as legitimate in the international community. Anya smiled to herself as she found the perfect angle: an invitation from a well-known African business organisation, a summit on economic growth and military strategy in the region. Something a man like Kazadi, with his aspirations, would find irresistible.

The email subject was enticing: “Exclusive Invitation: Economic

Summit on Military & Infrastructure Investment in Africa”. She attached a well-designed invitation letter, with logos of prestigious organisations and details of a high-level meeting Kazadi would not want to miss. Inside the email was a link to the “official website” where Kazadi could register and download event materials.

Of course, the website was fake, and the download package included a seemingly useful document on military infrastructure, while in the background, it triggered the installation of a keylogger. Anya had woven the malware in so deeply that even someone more security-conscious than Kazadi would have missed it. The keylogger would send every keystroke to a remote server she controlled, recording everything he typed.

When Anya hit send, she leaned back in her chair, a sly grin forming. Now it was a waiting game.

A few hours later, a notification appeared on Anya’s screen. Kazadi had clicked the link.

“Bingo,” she muttered under her breath.

As expected, Kazadi hadn’t hesitated. His vanity and ambition had led him straight into the trap. The keylogger installed itself seamlessly on his device, and just like that, Anya had access to everything he typed. Over the next few days, she monitored his activity, filtering through an overwhelming stream of data—emails, passwords, casual messages, and account access.

It became painfully clear that Kazadi didn’t take cybersecurity seriously. There were no firewalls, no malware detection. It was almost too easy. She began sifting through the data, flagging anything that looked like sensitive information. In particular, she focused on any sequences of numbers that could be a PIN. She logged every one of them, categorising them into potential candidates.

Kazadi’s negligent approach to cybersecurity didn’t surprise Anya. Like most warlords of his generation, his understanding of power was rooted in the physical world—guns, guards, and reinforced gates.

He obsessed over military-grade security systems for his compound, spent fortunes on armed personnel, even had a vault with a door thick enough to withstand explosives. But digital threats? Those were invisible, intangible. They didn't match his image of what danger looked like. She'd seen it before in men like him: they'd spend millions on armoured vehicles and mercenaries, then use the same password for every account. Their passwords would be obvious too—birthdates, military campaigns, years of significance to them. It was a blind spot born from a lifetime of equating power with physical force.

“It's almost poetic,” she mused, scrolling through the keylogger data. “All that muscle, all those guns, and he never thought to install a decent firewall. He probably sees cybersecurity as something for banks and tech companies, not real men of power.” She pulled up another stream of captured keystrokes. “Look at this—he's got retinal scanners on his garage doors but uses his birthday as a password. Classic warlord mentality.”

Over the next few days, the keylogger delivered a series of promising hits. Five specific patterns emerged—four-digit combinations that appeared frequently in his interactions. Some were probably for lesser things, but there were several instances where Kazadi accessed financial data. It didn't take long for Anya to narrow down the possibilities.

She leaned back in her chair one evening, satisfied with the results. “We've got five PINs,” she announced to the team as they gathered around. “It's not perfect, but these are the best candidates based on the data.”

Dave peered over her shoulder. “And if none of them are the banking PIN?”

“We'll have to hope they give us five attempts,” she said grimly. “Because that's all we've got.”

Serj grunted. “Let's just hope we don't lock ourselves out on the first try.”

Anya didn't respond, but a part of her hoped that was true. Now, all they needed was the biometric card and Kazadi's fingerprint. With the PINs in hand, they had a shot at finally cracking open his accounts.

The Meeting

Anya leaned against the table, her gaze steady as the team gathered around. “Where are we with the plan to steal the smart card and fingerprints?” she asked, her tone sharp and focused.

Serj shook his head, the frustration clear in his voice. “It’s not going well. He’s rarely alone, and he’d notice if any of us got too close. Kazadi’s always surrounded by people—guards, advisors. We’ve got no clean shot at him.”

Dave, who had been listening quietly, leaned forward. “I’m not sure about the card... but for the fingerprints, what if we lifted them from a glass?”

Anya looked at him, intrigued. “Go on.”

Dave continued, “We stage a meeting under the guise of ‘Herr Müller’—my alias. Müller’s interested in mineral rights, but more importantly, he’s looking to secure a good relationship with Kazadi’s militia once he gets those rights. The real topic of the meeting? How much it’s going to cost for Kazadi’s ‘security or protection’—otherwise known as extortion.”

Anya considered it, the plan taking shape in her mind. “So Müller wants to talk business—paying Kazadi’s militia to keep things secure once he starts extracting minerals. That’s a conversation Kazadi would be eager to have.”

“Exactly,” Dave continued. “Kazadi loves being in control. A meeting about money, power, and protection? He’ll show up, play the

part of the big man, and probably crack open that fancy Cognac to impress me.”

Serj grinned. “And when he does, we get the glass, lift his prints, and walk out before he knows what happened.”

“Good,” Anya said, the tension in the room finally easing. “We’ll need to set everything up—the invitation, the cover story, the timing. If we get this right, we’ll have his fingerprints before he even knows we’re after them.”

Anya sat surrounded by folders and laptops in the safe house, piecing together Kazadi’s business history like a puzzle. Scattered across her screens were surveillance photos, financial records, and fragments of intercepted communications. She’d been tracking his dealings for some time, but now she was looking for something specific: patterns in how he conducted business meetings.

“Look at this,” she said, turning one of the laptops toward Dave. “Three months ago, Kazadi met with a Vietnamese rare earth minerals supplier. The supplier showed up with a full technical presentation, market projections, the works. Kazadi walked out after ten minutes.”

Dave leaned in, studying the surveillance photos. “Not interested in details?”

“No,” Anya shook her head, pulling up another file. “But here—this Greek arms dealer. Came in with expensive whiskey, talked about hunting trips in Zimbabwe, showed off his Patek Philippe watch. Kazadi spent two hours with him, signed a major deal.”

“So he responds to status symbols,” Dave mused. “What else?”

Anya clicked through more files. “Every successful meeting follows the same pattern. The ones who get deals? They all treat him like he’s already legitimate. Like he’s not just another warlord, but a real business leader.” She paused on a particular photo—Kazadi at a restaurant, dining with a Chinese mining executive. “Look how they always let him control the space. They sit where he can watch

the door. They bring gifts but present them casually, like equals exchanging pleasantries.”

Serj, who had been listening quietly, spoke up. “The ones who fail?”

“They try too hard,” Anya replied. “They bring too many people, show too much deference, or worse—they try to intimidate him.” She pulled up another photo, this one showing Kazadi’s face twisted in barely contained rage. “This Brazilian tried to pressure him with threats of military contracts going to rival militias. Kazadi had him thrown out.”

Dave nodded slowly, absorbing the information. “So Müller needs to be confident but not arrogant. Wealthy but not flashy.”

“Exactly,” Anya confirmed. “And look at this pattern—” she spread out meeting transcripts across the table. “He tests people. Makes them wait, watches how they react. The ones who get angry or nervous? They never get a second meeting. But the ones who stay calm, act like their time is equally valuable? Those are the ones he respects.”

She pulled up one final document, a psychological profile compiled from months of surveillance. “Most importantly, he hates being treated like a small-time player. Every failed deal has one thing in common—they approached him like he was just another militia leader. The successful ones? They treated him like he was already the powerful figure he imagines himself to be.”

Dave stood up, straightening his jacket as he internalized the role. “So Herr Müller doesn’t need Kazadi—he’s doing Kazadi a favour by offering him a piece of a legitimate operation. We’re not buying protection; we’re offering him a partnership.”

“When we were in his office, I noticed the drinks’ platter on his desk—expensive-looking Cognac and those big, bowl-type glasses. Kazadi’s got the whole cigar-and-brandy thing going. He probably fancies himself a connoisseur. Props, meant to show his sophistication.”

Serj nodded, catching on. “Right. He sees himself as a brandy man,

which means we could get him to use the glass at a meeting.”

“But Müller actually knows his cigars and cognac,” Dave finished the thought. “That’ll get under his skin—someone who genuinely has the sophistication he’s trying to project.”

“Exactly,” Anya nodded. “You’ll need to demonstrate that casual expertise. Not showing off, just... naturally knowledgeable. It’ll drive him crazy, make him want to prove he’s on your level.”

Serj grunted in approval. “And that’s when he’ll let his guard down.”

“One thing though,” Anya added, pulling up more surveillance photos. “He’s not completely reckless. The last six months of successful meetings? All at high-end hotels or restaurants. Public places, but with private rooms. Places where he feels safe but important.”

“Which is why the Hotel Pullman Grand Karavia is perfect,” Dave concluded. “Upscale enough to appeal to his ego, public enough to feel safe, but private enough for business.”

Anya closed her laptop with a satisfied nod. “Just remember—you’re not trying to impress him. Herr Müller is already impressive, and he knows it. You’re simply giving Kazadi a chance to prove he belongs in your world.”

Dave smiled, already settling into character. “Well then, I believe Herr Müller has some cigars to select.”

Kazadi arrived at the Hotel Pullman Grand Karavia with a calculated air of arrogance. He was dressed in a well-tailored grey suit, the kind that hinted at power and influence but still retained a rough edge that matched his militia roots. The jacket, slightly unbuttoned, revealed a crisp white shirt beneath, its collar open enough to show he wasn’t one to follow rules too strictly. Around his neck, a thin gold chain glinted in the soft light, and on his wrist, a luxury watch—probably a gift from a deal gone well—completed the image of a man who blended wealth with violence.

Flanking him were two of his minders, men who looked like they’d

been born in military fatigues. They were large, intimidating figures, both wearing the dark uniforms of Kazadi's militia, complete with combat boots and holstered sidearms. Their eyes darted across the hotel grounds, ever watchful, while Kazadi sauntered ahead, projecting confidence.

The Hotel Pullman Grand Karavia exuded a quiet luxury, its grounds meticulously maintained. Lush green gardens lined the pathways leading to the grand entrance, with soft lighting illuminating the polished marble steps. Inside, the lobby was all understated opulence, with high ceilings, chandeliers casting a warm glow, and walls lined with modern art that whispered affluence. The reception desk, a sleek slab of dark wood, was manned by staff in immaculate uniforms who greeted Kazadi and his men with practised politeness.

The receptionist, a young woman with a calm professionalism, smiled and gestured toward the rear of the lobby. "Mr. Müller is expecting you. The conference room is just through the lobby and down the corridor to the left."

Kazadi gave a curt nod, barely acknowledging her as he walked past, his minders trailing close behind. The soft murmur of other guests filled the lobby as they passed by plush leather seating and glass coffee tables adorned with fresh flowers. The corridor she directed them toward was lined with framed photos of distinguished visitors, the lighting growing dimmer as they approached the private conference rooms.

In one of the larger rooms, Dave—under the alias of Herr Müller—waited. He was dressed sharply in a tailored suit, charcoal grey with a subtle sheen that projected wealth without being ostentatious. He sat comfortably at the head of the table, his hands resting on the surface, exuding an air of calm control. Behind him stood Serj, dressed in black from head to toe, his stance solid but non-threatening. Serj had perfected the art of looking like security without drawing too much attention—just enough presence to suggest he could handle trouble, but not enough to seem overly aggressive.

The door opened, and Kazadi entered, his eyes scanning the room before settling on Müller. The two men exchanged measured glances, sizing each other up as Serj stepped aside to allow them space. Kazadi's minders hovered in the doorway, but with a wave of his hand, Kazadi dismissed them.

The guards backed out reluctantly, taking positions on either side of the door. Through the frosted glass panels, their silhouettes remained visible—dark, hulking shapes that shifted occasionally as they scanned the corridor. Their presence added an unspoken urgency to the meeting. Serj kept one eye on them as he moved about the room, knowing they'd have no more than forty-five minutes before protocol would demand they check on their boss. Standard protection doctrine: never leave a high-value target alone for too long, no matter what they ordered. It was something they'd learned from their surveillance—Kazadi's security team had standing orders to intervene if he spent too long in any meeting, a safeguard against potential kidnapping attempts. The team would need to execute their plan perfectly within that window, or everything would fall apart.

Müller stood and extended his hand. "Kazadi, I presume. Herr Müller, a pleasure to meet you."

Kazadi shook his hand firmly, his eyes betraying nothing. "Likewise."

They sat down, the heavy chairs creaking slightly under Kazadi's weight. He leaned back, his eyes shifting around the room for a moment before turning his attention back to Müller. The meeting began with the usual pleasantries, but Kazadi's mind was already working, judging how much wealth Müller might have access to, calculating just how much he could fleece this foreign investor for.

Müller leaned forward, speaking smoothly. "I understand that securing mineral rights in this region comes with... certain challenges. Naturally, I want to ensure the operation runs smoothly once things are in place. I imagine your militia would be key in maintaining security."

Kazadi's lips curved into a thin smile. He'd heard this kind of talk

before. “Security is something we handle very well. Of course, it comes at a cost.”

Müller nodded, as if expecting this. “Naturally. I’d like to discuss what that cost might be.”

The conversation drifted into negotiations, both men playing their parts—the foreign investor with wealth to spend, and the warlord looking to extract as much as possible. After a while, Müller leaned back, seemingly satisfied with the flow of the conversation.

“How about we continue over a drink?” Müller offered casually. “What would you like? I’ll have it brought in. And perhaps... we could enjoy a Cohiba Behike 56 Cuban cigar while we talk further?” He reached into his jacket and produced two elegant tubes, each containing a premium cigar.

Kazadi couldn’t resist. His eyes gleamed at the sight of the cigars, and he reached forward, accepting one. “Cuban, you say?” He chuckled, impressed. “You have good taste, Herr Müller.”

“To match it, I think I’ll have an Hennessy Paradis Imperial Cognac,” Kazadi added, a note of indulgence in his voice. “It would be a shame to waste such a fine cigar without the proper drink.”

Müller smiled and nodded. “I’ll join you in that.”

Serj stepped forward silently, his movements professional and efficient, as if he had done this a thousand times. “I’ll take care of it,” he said, and slipped out of the room.

A few moments later, Serj returned with a tray, setting it down in front of them. On the tray were two large balloon glasses—the kind perfectly suited for Cognac—along with a bottle of the finest available. Serj had even brought a box of matches and an ashtray, completing the experience.

Müller poured the Cognac into both glasses, the rich amber liquid catching the light as it swirled in the bowl. He handed one glass to Kazadi, who took it with an appreciative nod.

“To a prosperous partnership,” Müller said, raising his glass.

Kazadi clinked his glass against Müller’s, then took a long sip, the strong liquor warming him as he settled back in his chair. The room filled with the aromatic scent of the cigars as they lit up, the smoke curling lazily toward the ceiling.

The meeting continued, and Kazadi’s mood grew increasingly relaxed, the combination of fine liquor and the smooth taste of Cuban tobacco putting him at ease. Unbeknownst to him, the glass in his hand was more valuable to Müller than any deal they might discuss.

The meeting had gone as smoothly as Dave—posing as Herr Müller—could have hoped. Kazadi, now relaxed and slightly tipsy from the expensive Cognac, stood up with a smirk, satisfied that he had a new deal in the works. He extended his hand toward Müller, and they shook once more, solidifying the facade of a prosperous partnership.

Just as Kazadi turned to leave the conference room, Anya—disguised as bar staff—entered the hallway, balancing a tray of brightly coloured cocktails. The drinks swirled with fruit juices, their vibrant colours glittering in the dim light. She was careful not to make eye contact as she approached the door, timing her move perfectly.

With a well-practised clumsiness, she collided with Kazadi just as he stepped into the corridor. The tray tipped, and in an instant, a rainbow of liquid splashed all over Kazadi’s pristine grey suit. The rich, fruity smell of the cocktails filled the air as his jacket and trousers were soaked in a mix of vibrant orange, red, and blue.

Kazadi’s face twisted with immediate frustration, his lips pulling back in a snarl as he glanced down at his ruined suit. His two minders stiffened, their hands instinctively moving toward their weapons, but Kazadi held up a hand, stopping them.

“What the hell is this?!” Kazadi growled, his voice thick with rage. His dark eyes locked onto Anya, who had dropped the tray and was already stammering her apology.

“I—I’m so sorry, sir!” Anya’s eyes widened with practised horror, and she quickly knelt down, picking up the empty glasses. “It was an accident, I didn’t see you—please, let me help!”

Kazadi’s nostrils flared, his hands balling into fists as he took a step forward. “You idiot! Do you have any idea how much this suit costs?!”

“Sir, please,” Anya said, her voice shaking just the right amount, “we can take care of it. The hotel has dry cleaning services here on site. We can get it cleaned immediately—it’s the best way to prevent staining. You’ll have your suit back as good as new in no time!”

Kazadi’s frustration was evident, but he paused, wiping the splatter of cocktail from his lapel. His pride had been wounded more than his clothing.

Müller, stepping out of the conference room, saw the tension and seized the moment. “Kazadi, there’s no need to worry,” he said smoothly, offering a calming smile. “I was just about to head to the sauna. Why don’t you join me? We can continue with another drink and a cigar while the staff handles your suit. It’s a small inconvenience.”

Kazadi’s glare softened at Müller’s words. The suggestion of more Cognac and cigars—and the chance to keep control of the situation—appealed to him. “Fine,” he said gruffly. “But I want the suit done immediately. If there’s any stain left, I’ll have someone to answer to.”

Anya, still playing the part of the apologetic server, nodded eagerly. “Yes, sir, of course. I’ll make sure it’s done right away.”

With a flick of his wrist, Kazadi removed his jacket, handing it over to Anya. His shirt, still stained with splashes of the cocktails, was next. Anya took them quickly, bowing slightly as she backed away, already heading toward the hotel’s dry cleaning services. She gave a quick, subtle nod to Serj as she passed him in the hallway, signalling that the plan was in motion.

Meanwhile, Müller led Kazadi toward the hotel's luxurious spa area. The Pullman Grand Karavia spared no expense when it came to comfort. The sauna was beautifully appointed with plush towels, sleek wooden benches, and soft, dim lighting that created an atmosphere of calm. Within moments, Kazadi and Müller were wrapped in the hotel's finest towelling robes, embroidered with the hotel's logo in golden thread, settling into the warm steam.

Serj, playing the part of a diligent bodyguard, had gone to the bar, returning with two fresh glasses and the Cognac on a tray. As the heat of the sauna enveloped them, Kazadi began to unwind once more, the earlier tension melting away with each sip of brandy and the rich scent of Cuban cigars.

Back in the service area, Anya moved with swift efficiency. Kazadi's suit, shirt, and even his underwear had been sent for dry cleaning, but the team had another task. While the clothes were being laundered, Serj had already slipped the new plain black smart card into Kazadi's wallet. The swap was seamless, undetectable. The decoy card was identical to the one Kazadi always carried, except this one would not allow to his accounts even paired with his biometric data and PIN.

By the time the dry cleaning was complete, Kazadi emerged from the spa refreshed, slightly wobbly from the brandy but in high spirits. The staff returned his freshly pressed suit with a bow, assuring him that every stain had been expertly removed. Kazadi inspected it with a satisfied grunt, slipping the clean jacket over his shoulders and feeling a sense of triumph as he straightened the lapels.

"Good as new," Müller remarked with a grin, handing Kazadi his wallet and keys. "A small setback, but at least we made the most of it."

Kazadi smirked, slipping the wallet back into his jacket. "Indeed, Herr Müller. I believe we can do business."

As Kazadi exited the hotel, his wallet now contained the new smart card. The team watched from a distance, the hard part now behind them. Kazadi didn't know it yet, but he had just handed them

everything they needed.

Broken

That evening, the safe house was quiet except for the low murmur of Pierre and Nadine's voices as they worked at the table. Dave, on the other hand, was slumped in a chair, his head spinning from the effects of far too much Cognac. He'd played his part perfectly as Herr Müller, but it had come at a price. His vision blurred as he rested his head in his hands, feeling the unpleasant churn of nausea creeping up.

"I think I'm gonna throw up," Dave muttered, leaning back in the chair.

Serj chuckled from across the room, not without sympathy. "You drank enough for both of you and Kazadi."

"He got the job done," Anya said, her focus on Pierre and Nadine as they carefully examined the glass that had held Kazadi's drink. She glanced at Dave, who waved her off weakly. "Sit down, Dave. We'll take it from here."

Pierre and Nadine were deep into the process of extracting the fingerprints from the glass. Kazadi's prints were smudged in places, but there were a few clean impressions that they could work with. Nadine meticulously applied the silicone, letting it set as she compared the prints on the glass with her silicone models. It was painstaking work, but they had no room for error.

After what felt like hours, Pierre handed Anya two silicone models. "Thumb and forefinger, both right hand. These are the best we've

got.”

Anya took the models carefully. “Let’s hope one of them works.”

Serj looked over at her. “There’s a lot riding on this. If Kazadi tries to use that decoy card tomorrow and it doesn’t work...”

“We know,” Anya said firmly. “We’ll lose everything.”

The pressure was immense. They had to act tonight. Kazadi was hopefully passed out drunk by now, much like Dave, which gave them a narrow window to pull off the operation before Kazadi even thought to check his accounts.

Anya sat down at the table, borrowing Dave’s agency phone. It had a fingerprint scanner, perfect for simulating what Kazadi’s bank used for access. She opened the bank’s login page, using the account number and credentials they’d obtained from the meeting. The screen prompted her for a fingerprint.

She carefully placed the silicone thumb over the sensor, her breath held in anticipation. Nothing. No match.

“Damn,” she muttered, switching to the forefinger. Still no match.

Serj frowned, leaning over her shoulder. “Maybe he’s left-handed?”

Anya shook her head, more focused now. She returned to the thumb, adjusting it slightly on the scanner. This time, the screen blinked—and then, success. The system had accepted the fingerprint.

She was in.

The bank account dashboard loaded, displaying a balance that caused Anya to blink in surprise. “Jesus,” she whispered. “There’s a lot of money in here.”

She clicked through the tabs, scrolling past significant credits and relatively few debits. Kazadi had been stockpiling funds for a while, and the amounts were staggering. Anya quickly downloaded every available statement, making sure to capture the source and destination account numbers. The agency could definitely make use of that

data later.

Now came the real test. Anya clicked on the option to add a new account for transfers and was prompted for the PIN. She had already listed the five possible PINs they had collected from the keylogger. Now, it was time to see if any of them would work.

“Alright,” she muttered to herself, selecting the most likely option. She keyed in the four digits, her fingers trembling slightly as she hit ‘enter.’

The screen blinked once, then changed. Success.

Anya let out a breath she hadn’t realised she was holding. “Got it.”

She entered the details for the untraceable agency account, watching as the confirmation window popped up, allowing her to complete the process. She quickly set up the credentials and PIN for the new account, giving the agency full control over Kazadi’s finances. The final confirmation arrived, and she leaned back, satisfied.

“We’re in,” she said with a grin, looking at Serj. “It’s done. The agency accountants can handle the rest from here.”

Serj clapped her on the shoulder. “Nice work.”

Anya glanced over at Dave, who was now dozing lightly in his chair. “At least one of us is getting some rest.”

With Kazadi’s funds now in their control, the team could finally relax—if only for a moment. The operation wasn’t over yet, but they had won this round.

The next day, Kazadi sat in his office, the morning sun filtering through the blinds. The previous night’s indulgence lingered in his system, his head still foggy from the Cognac, but today was meant to be a productive day. He reached into his jacket, pulling out his wallet and retrieving the sleek, plain black smart card he always used to access his bank accounts. He wasn’t concerned—everything had been going smoothly. He entered the card into the reader attached to his laptop, waiting for the usual prompt to appear.

But instead of the familiar welcome screen, an error message flashed in front of him.

“Access Denied. Please Try Again.”

Kazadi frowned. He tried again, carefully placing the card into the reader, his fingers pressing the familiar sequence of keys. The same message appeared, almost mocking him.

“Access Denied. Please Try Again.”

“What the hell?” he muttered under his breath. A prickle of unease began to crawl up his spine. He re-entered his credentials, slower this time, making sure every letter, every number was perfect.

Still, nothing.

Kazadi’s frustration mounted as he clicked through the options, trying every variation of login he could think of. His fingers were growing more aggressive on the keyboard, his breath coming quicker with each failed attempt.

“Access Denied.”

“Damn it!” Kazadi growled, pushing back from the desk. Sweat was beginning to bead on his forehead. This wasn’t just a glitch. Something was wrong—very wrong.

He leaned forward again, now trying the online account reset option. He entered his backup PIN and credentials, his hands shaking slightly. The process felt slower, the seconds stretching as the system processed his input.

But then another error appeared:

“Invalid PIN or Credentials. Please Contact Your Bank.”

Kazadi stared at the screen, his mind racing. The backup wasn’t working either. He wiped the sweat from his brow, his heart pounding faster now. This wasn’t just about not being able to log in—this was his lifeline. His entire network of operations was tied to those accounts, and without access, he was exposed. Vulnerable.

He felt a knot of panic begin to form in his gut. It wasn't as if he could simply call the bank and ask for a reset. The accounts were held in foreign nations with strict protocols—places where even Kazadi, with all his power, had to tread carefully. There were limits to how much control he could exert over these institutions.

A visit to the bank? That would take time—days, maybe longer. And time was something Kazadi didn't have. Every minute the account was locked was another step closer to ruin. He needed those funds, not just to maintain his operations, but to pay off key players, bribe officials, and keep his militia loyal. Without money, everything he had built would start to unravel.

The realisation hit him like a punch to the gut. Someone had compromised his accounts. His mind raced, trying to piece together how this had happened. But no matter how he tried to reason it out, the truth stared him in the face. He was locked out, and there was nothing he could do at this moment to fix it.

Kazadi slammed his fist on the desk, the sudden noise echoing through the room. His world was crumbling, and he had no way to stop it.

He slammed his fist onto the desk, sending papers and trinkets scattering. His trusted lieutenants looked on, unsure of what to say. They had never seen Kazadi like this. A quiet, calculated man, he was now a ticking time bomb, one whose network of bribes and control was rapidly unravelling.

Meanwhile, across the world, the agency's finest were already at work, their world-class accountants and digital operatives dissecting Kazadi's financial empire. The stolen account credentials provided them with everything they needed—not just to drain his accounts, but to do so in a way that would leave devastating ripples through the financial ecosystems of Kazadi's powerful allies.

This was no ordinary bank heist. The agency wasn't looking to just rob Kazadi; they were about to weaponise his wealth. The account and transaction details they now possessed allowed them to move

through his network of shadow accounts undetected, each transfer meticulously planned like pieces on a chessboard.

Kazadi's stolen funds wouldn't just disappear into a void—they would be laundered through a web of accounts, leaving behind dirty fingerprints in the financial records of corrupt politicians, corporate titans, and the very elites who had supported Kazadi's rise to power. The agency had been preparing these traps for months, setting up shell companies, dummy corporations, and fake financial audits that would eventually lead to some of the most powerful figures in the region.

As the transactions flowed through these accounts, the trails left behind would be unexplainable during audits. Politicians who had taken bribes in the past would find their names tied to Kazadi's illicit funds. Businessmen who had quietly supported his militia would have no way to account for the sudden influx of money in their off-shore holdings. Even arms dealers, those who had supplied Kazadi with the weapons he used to control his militia, would now find themselves under scrutiny, their financial dealings under investigation.

Kazadi's vast network of wealth was about to turn on itself. The greedy business tycoons and corrupt officials who had once benefited from his control over the cobalt trade would now be exposed as complicit in his schemes. And once the first few names were revealed, it would only be a matter of time before panic spread among the elites, each of them fearing they were next on the agency's list.

The brilliance of the agency's plan was that Kazadi's militia would now turn on him. Without his wealth, Kazadi couldn't maintain the lavish payments he had promised his soldiers. He had always kept them loyal by ensuring they were paid more than other militias in the region. But now, with his account drained and his soldiers unaware of the full scale of his greed, the truth would inevitably come out.

Kazadi had skimmed from the top, siphoning off far more than his soldiers had ever suspected. His foreign bank account was stacked with more money than even his most loyal commanders knew about.

Once the agency started leaking just enough evidence of these secret accounts, his militia would realise that Kazadi had been using them—pocketing millions while they risked their lives for his ambitions.

The agency didn't need to eliminate Kazadi directly. His own soldiers, feeling betrayed, would do the job for them. And with Kazadi discredited, the corporation backing him would be forced to cut ties. They couldn't afford to be associated with a failed warlord who had lost control of his own forces. The disruption would be enough to delay or even halt their plans to take over the cobalt mines, giving the DRC and the agency time to stabilise the region.

As the agency's accountants pulled the final strings, the draining of Kazadi's accounts was completed in only minutes. By the time Kazadi had discovered the decoy card, it was already too late. His wealth was gone, siphoned off through a labyrinth of transactions that couldn't be traced back to the agency. He was left with nothing but a crumbling empire and an army of angry, unpaid soldiers who had just learned of his treachery.

In a final stroke of irony, the money was not only gone—it was now being used for purposes Kazadi would never have foreseen. Much of it was redirected into humanitarian efforts, funding infrastructure projects, medical aid, and educational programs in the very regions his militia had terrorised. The rest? Well, the agency had a few more "Robin Hood" schemes up its sleeve.

Kazadi's once-feared militia was leaderless, fractured by the knowledge that their leader had betrayed them. Without his wealth, they had no reason to stay loyal. The corporation that had once used Kazadi as a pawn was forced to retreat, its plans for the cobalt mines indefinitely delayed.

And somewhere, in a secure room at the agency's headquarters, Dave and his team watched as one of the most dangerous men in the DRC was brought to his knees—not by force, but by his own greed.

Epilogue

Returning home after the DRC adventure, Dave catches up with Agent Lands for a debriefing session. It was good to be back home.

“Good to see you in one piece,” Lands said, gesturing for Dave to sit. He leaned forward, hands clasped on the table. “Tell me everything.”

Dave recounted the events calmly—in particular how Kazadi’s men had picked him up, the interrogation, the slaps, punches, and, most importantly, the waterboarding. When he described the sensation, the strange realisation that he hadn’t needed oxygen the same way others might, Lands sat up straighter, eyes narrowing with curiosity.

“I didn’t drown,” Dave said, rubbing the back of his neck. “I mean, it was uncomfortable, terrifying even... but after the first few moments, I realised something. I could get through it. It felt like I didn’t need air, or at least not as much as I should’ve.”

Lands leaned back in his chair, processing the information. “Waterboarding is... no joke. Most people break under that kind of pressure. But you didn’t. Which begs the question—can anything harm you?”

Dave shrugged, the uncertainty evident on his face. “That’s what worries me. I’ve been shot, beaten, and now this. But what if there’s something out there that can actually hurt me? I don’t know what my limits are.” He paused, thinking. “Maybe we should test more. Push boundaries a little. See what I can survive—and what I can’t.”

Lands raised an eyebrow. “You want to experiment on yourself?”

“Not exactly excited about it, but yeah,” Dave replied. “I need to know. These abilities—they have to come from somewhere. And if I’m going to keep doing missions like this, we need to understand them better.”

There was a silence as Lands considered the idea. The agency had already been conducting discreet tests on Dave, seeing what he could endure. But waterboarding was new territory. If Dave’s body truly had no need for air, that opened up a range of possibilities—and dangers.

“We’ll take it one step at a time,” Lands finally said. “We don’t want to push too far and end up in uncharted territory. But you’re right—we need to know your limits. It could be the difference between success and... well, failure.”

Dave nodded, but Lands could see the lingering unease in his eyes. There was more to discuss, and the shift in conversation came swiftly.

“Speaking of uncharted territory...” Lands said, his tone softening. “I’ve been digging deeper into your past, as you asked. But, Dave, I’ve hit a wall. No records, no biological ties... nothing. It’s like you didn’t exist until your adoptive parents brought you home. I’ve combed through archives, old records, even stuff not technically accessible. But I’ve come up empty.”

Dave had half expected this. It wasn’t the first time he’d heard of a dead-end when it came to his past. But hearing it from Lands now, after everything, was still a blow. He had hoped, somewhere deep down, that maybe there was more to discover. That maybe his origins were out there, waiting to be found.

“So... what now?” Dave asked, frowning. “Where do we go from here?”

Lands leaned back, letting out a tired sigh. “Honestly, unless you’ve got any suggestions, there’s not much more I can do. I’ve explored every avenue I know of. If I don’t make progress soon, I might have to go back to chasing wild leads. Big Foot, UFOs, government

experiments gone wrong—that kind of thing.” He gave a half-smile, but it was laced with genuine frustration. “You’re the only case I’ve had that’s come even close to those anomalies. But without more to go on... I’m running out of threads to pull.”

Dave rubbed his forehead, thinking hard. His memories of childhood were normal—at least, as far as he could remember. Nothing ever struck him as strange. No hints that his adoptive family knew more than they let on. No signs that he was anything but an ordinary kid... until now.

But if he really was so unique, where did he come from? Why did no records exist of his adoption? His thoughts spiralled in search of answers.

“I wish I had something,” Dave admitted. “My adoptive family was... my family. That’s all I ever knew.”

Lands drummed his fingers on the table, deep in thought. “There has to be something. Some clue. People don’t just appear out of thin air.”

“Maybe they do in my case,” Dave said with a hint of a smile.

Lands didn’t return it. He stood, pacing slowly. “Look, I’ll keep searching, but Special Projects is always pulling me in strange directions. If we don’t make headway soon...”

Dave raised an eyebrow. “Big Foot, huh?”

Lands chuckled. “You’d be surprised at the kinds of things we look into. Compared to some of that, your case is downright normal. But let’s stay focused. If you come up with anything—any memory, any idea—tell me.”

“I will,” Dave promised. “And if you do find Big Foot, let me know. That might explain a few things.”

Lands gave a final chuckle and stood, clapping a hand on Dave’s shoulder. “Well, whatever you are, you’re one hell of an asset, Dave. Job well done today. We’ll keep pushing forward—on all fronts.”

As Lands left the room, Dave remained seated, staring at the ceiling. The questions about his past weren't going away, but neither were his abilities. Whatever he was, he could use these powers to help people—to make a difference. Maybe that's what mattered most.

For now, he'd focus on what he could control: testing his limits, honing his skills, preparing for whatever came next. The truth about his origins would come eventually. And when it did, he'd be ready.