



Real Hero

Dave #2: Breaking the Line

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1 Prologue

After months spent navigating the murky waters of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, bringing down Kazadi and disrupting the militia's control over the cobalt mines, Dave thought he'd finally have some time to breathe. His team had successfully exposed Kazadi's corruption, cut off his arms supply, and dismantled his operations—leaving him powerless and discredited in the eyes of both his militia and the corporate interests he served. For now, the cobalt-hungry conglomerates were licking their wounds, and the militia was left leaderless, scrambling for resources and trust. Dave's time with the team in the DRC had come to a close, but there was no time to get too comfortable.

As Dave boarded the flight home, he couldn't shake the lingering uncertainty about his past and the unknown limits of his abilities. Each mission brought more questions, more puzzles he wasn't sure he could solve alone. His return to the relative calm of his life back home wasn't the end—it was just a brief pause before the next storm.

The agency had new plans for him, and Dave knew that with each step, he was being drawn deeper into a world he barely understood, where shadows and whispers carried more weight than any truth. Whatever was coming next, Dave knew it would be bigger, more dangerous, and that there would be no going back.

But first, home. For a while, at least.

2 Burning Man

Dave arrived at the Agency's medical centre, his steps echoing in the sterile, high-tech hallways. He was meeting Agent Dexter Lands, a man whose very presence commanded respect. Lands cut a sharp and almost timeless figure, a perfect image of a covert operative. His slim, precise frame and carefully curated appearance gave off an air of authority, his dark suit immaculate, and his no-nonsense tie knotted just right. His piercing grey eyes scanned the room with the intensity of someone who missed nothing, every detail meticulously absorbed. Lands' mind was as sharp as his appearance, and his ability to stay composed in even the most chaotic situations made him a formidable presence. There was an elegance to him, yet also an unyielding competence that suggested he'd been hardened by countless covert operations.

"Agent Anderson, good to see you again," Lands greeted, his voice smooth, but carrying the weight of a lifetime spent navigating dangerous waters.

Dave returned the greeting, giving a nod of acknowledgement.

"Come on in," Lands gestured, leading him to a nearby lab. "I'd like to introduce you to Cecilia."

Inside, Cecilia Dawkins stood, a striking figure in her own right. In her mid-thirties, she exuded a warmth that was at odds with the precision of her job. Her dark complexion gleamed under the harsh lab lights, and her "sing-song" Ghanaian accent added a surprising levity to the otherwise serious atmosphere. Standing at 5'6", Cecilia had a fuller, commanding presence—her wide hips, large chest, and strong thighs giving her an undeniable sense of authority.

"Agent Anderson, it's a pleasure," she greeted him with a genuine smile, her tone professional but warm.

“This is Cecilia,” Lands said, his tone softer now. “She’ll be taking over your operational development. I’m moving back to Special Projects—” He paused, smirking slightly. “—or as you’ve so eloquently named it, ‘Bigfoot Patrol.’”

Dave smiled back at him, though the mention of Special Projects stirred up a vague unease. He nodded at Cecilia, who returned the gesture with an eager look.

Studying Lands' familiar sharp figure, Dave recalled their first encounter at the rail freight terminal. It felt like a lifetime ago - Lands setting the perfect trap, exposing Dave's abilities before tagging him with a tracker. That mix of cunning and directness had become Lands' trademark. What had started as an elaborate recruitment had evolved into something closer to mentorship, with Lands helping Dave navigate his transition from vigilante to agent. Now, watching Lands introduce Cecilia, Dave sensed another shift coming. The man who had brought him into the agency was moving on, but his relentless pursuit of answers about Dave's origins would continue through Special Projects.

“Lands has already filled me in on what you’re capable of,” Cecilia said, folding her arms with a thoughtful expression. “I must admit, some of it’s hard to believe. But I’ll be fascinated to see it first-hand.”

Dave felt a slight shift in the air, as if she was sizing him up, but her smile remained disarming.

“I understand you want to push the limits of your abilities,” she continued. “After... everything that’s happened, you don’t want to be caught in the field with any surprises. I can respect that.”

Dave hesitated for a moment, the memory of his last mission—his violent outburst during the waterboarding incident—still fresh in his mind. He had to know just how far his powers stretched, especially if they were to be used in such high-stakes situations.

“Right,” he said finally, clearing his throat. “I need to know what I can really handle. I don’t want to be caught in the field, only to realise I can’t control it.”

Cecilia nodded. “Today, we’ll start with heat. How much can you withstand? Can you feel the pain of burning? Or are you truly impervious to fire?”

She motioned to the lab tech, who stepped forward, bringing a tray of candles. The soft flickering flames looked harmless enough, but Dave knew this was just the beginning.

He extended his hand, slowly approaching the candle’s flame. At first, the warmth was noticeable, but not painful. As he got closer, he felt the heat intensifying, yet still no pain. His fingers hovered over the flame, but there was no sign of burning, no blisters, no reddening of the skin. Just a faint soot that clung to his palm.

He tested it on other parts of his body, first his forearm, then his bicep, then the soles of his feet. The heat was undeniable, but his skin remained unscathed. He knew it could withstand impact, it was as if his skin had become a kind of barrier—a non-Newtonian fluid that resisted impact the harder it was pressed, and apparently, the same applied to heat.

A lab tech, looking slightly nervous, stepped forward with a blowtorch. The small, blue flame roared with intensity, burning much hotter than the candle’s flicker. The tech hesitated, clearly uncomfortable with the prospect of intentionally burning someone.

In the end, he handed it to Dave.

“I’ll let you take it from here,” the technician muttered, his voice shaky.

Dave’s heart rate picked up slightly, but his face remained impassive. He took the blowtorch in hand and slowly positioned his palm in front of the blue flame. Immediately, the heat hit him—a far more intense sensation

than the candles—but it wasn't painful. It didn't burn. It didn't blister. It just *was*.

He could feel his body's natural reflex to pull away, but he fought it, focusing on his control. He kept his hand in place, the heat radiating around it, yet not a hint of discomfort.

"It's... intense, but I can handle it," he said, glancing over to Cecilia. "I can feel the heat, but no pain. Not even close."

Cecilia nodded approvingly, her eyes glinting with curiosity. "Fascinating," she muttered, more to herself than to him.

"You're lucky," the tech said quietly, stepping back. "I don't know how you're doing it, but I'm glad it's you and not me."

Dave chuckled dryly. "I don't think I'd be doing it if I didn't have to."

Cecilia took a step closer, her gaze focused on Dave with a new level of respect. "You're a unique case, Agent Anderson. But we're going to make sure that if you ever face a situation that tests your limits, you'll be ready."

"Dave, please. Call me Dave."

"Of course, thank you, Dave." replied Cecilia.

He felt a sense of relief, but also unease. He wasn't sure what his limits were, but at least now he knew where he stood with the heat. The rest of his abilities were still a mystery, but he would find them all—one test at a time.

Cecilia's eyes glinted with curiosity as she studied Dave's reaction, her tone serious but not unkind. "Dave, how would you feel about walking through fire?"

Dave paused, considering the question. In his line of work, he'd learned that anything could be possible. You didn't always know what kind of danger you'd face or what you'd need to do to help someone in a crisis.

Being able to walk through fire, or at least withstand it, could be an invaluable skill, especially if he ever found himself in a rescue situation.

He looked her in the eye. “In the field, you never know what you’ll face. I can’t say I’ve thought about it, but yeah... I suppose it could be a realistic possibility. If I could help someone in a fire, that would be valuable.”

Cecilia nodded, her expression thoughtful. “Exactly. That’s the kind of adaptability we need, and knowing how far your abilities stretch will only help us prepare you for situations like that.”

The lab tech, who had been hovering nearby, perked up at the mention of fire. “I can set up an environment outside for that,” he said, wiping his brow, clearly eager to get started. “If you’d like, I can go fetch the equipment and get things ready.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Dave replied, glancing at Cecilia. “Let’s do it.”

The three of them made their way to the exit, stepping outside into the crisp air. As they waited, Cecilia and Dave exchanged a few pleasantries, each revealing more about the other. Cecilia spoke of her background, of her work in covert operations, and how her career had led her to this point. Dave, in turn, shared a little about his time at the Agency, keeping things vague, but enough to offer some insight into his experiences.

The lab tech returned a few minutes later, now dressed in a shiny silver foil fireproof suit that made him look like a character straight out of a science fiction movie. He wheeled out a large barrier, the kind used to protect onlookers from dangerous environments. The top part of the barrier had a clear window viewing panel, while the lower half was made of metal and flame-retardant material. It was designed to ensure that Cecilia could observe the test from a safe distance.

“Here we go,” the lab tech said, setting the barrier into place with careful precision. “Cecilia, you’ll be safe behind this. I’ll have a good view, too, so I can monitor everything. You ready for this, Dave?”

Dave gave a quick nod, feeling the weight of the moment settle over him. "Ready."

The lab tech moved to a nearby cart and brought out the final pieces of the equipment: a 5-litre can of fuel and a propane gas canister with a long tube leading to a torch. Dave recognised it instantly—used for melting pitch and tar on roads and roofs. This was no small test.

As the lab tech connected the propane canister to the torch, he looked over at Dave. "This should be intense. The flame doesn't burn as hot as the blowtorch did, but it is all encompassing. But from what we've seen so far, you should be fine."

Dave didn't flinch at the lab tech's words. He was far from overconfident, but he was curious about his limits, and this test—though daunting—felt like the next logical step. He stepped into position, facing the set-up, aware that all eyes were on him, even if the shielded barrier stood between them.

The lab tech twisted the valve on the gas canister, and a steady, roar of flame sprang to life, sizzling with intensity. It roared, threatening to leap from the confines of the torch.

Dave stood tall, his breathing steady. He wasn't sure what to expect, but one thing was clear: this was going to be the true test of his resilience.

The lab tech, his face partially obscured by the reflective visor of his fireproof suit, aimed the propane torch directly at Dave's hand. The flame flickered and roared with heat, but as before, Dave felt nothing more than warmth. No burning, no blisters—his hand remained unscathed. The tech extinguished the torch, satisfied with the results.

"Impressive," he muttered, stepping back. Then, without missing a beat, he set about pouring the contents of the five-litre fuel can around Dave's feet. The liquid spread quickly, forming a close puddle of fuel. The pungent scent of petrol filled the air as the tech carefully spread the last drops.

"Are you ready?" he asked, his voice a little strained with the intensity of what he was about to do.

Dave glanced down at the puddle, then back up, his expression unreadable. "Go for it."

With a swift motion, the lab tech flicked the flame back on, igniting the fuel. The puddle immediately exploded into an inferno, a wall of fire that surrounded Dave from all sides. It was an instant bonfire, the flames roaring high, licking the air with scorching intensity.

For a brief moment, both Cecilia and the lab tech took a step back, their faces a mixture of awe and fear. From behind the metal barrier, Cecilia watched in tense silence, while the tech stood frozen, unable to look away.

Inside the flames, Dave stood stock still. The fire raged around him, yet he didn't flinch. He didn't even blink. Instead, he simply watched, almost fascinated, as the inferno encircled him. It was surreal—like something out of a movie. The heat didn't reach him; he was untouched by the violent, crackling flames. His expression remained calm, almost detached, as if this was just another test.

As the seconds ticked by, the flames from the fuel began to die down, the puddle consumed. But the fire still surrounded him, a corona of heat and light. It was then that Dave became aware of the true consequence of being fireproof—the fire wasn't burning his skin, but his clothes were definitely not immune to the flames.

His t-shirt and cargo pants had caught fire, the fabric hissing and crackling as it melted away in front of his eyes. Dave raised an eyebrow, unfazed but aware that things were rapidly shifting. His clothes—now smouldering, singed remnants—clung desperately to his body, nothing more than rags. The waistband of his pants hung by a thread, and the heat from the fire still shimmered around him.

Without a hint of panic, he began swatting at the flames on his clothes, brushing at the remnants of his singed shirt. It wasn't out of pain—he didn't feel anything—but more out of a quiet practicality. They hadn't considered his clothes.

The lab tech, his initial shock giving way to panic, immediately dashed for the building. "I'm sorry! I should have thought about the extinguisher before we started!"

Cecilia watched, wide-eyed, as Dave continued to stand there, now mostly exposed, his clothes burnt away. She could hardly contain her amusement, the tension of the test slowly melting away into something unexpected. The lab tech returned moments later with a CO2 fire extinguisher, and he began to spray Dave down, the cold mist quickly extinguishing the last remaining flames.

As the smoke dissipated, Dave looked down at himself. His clothes were little more than blackened scraps of fabric, clinging to his body like something out of a war zone. His t-shirt and cargo pants had almost completely disappeared, reduced to charred remnants. The fabric around his waist, what was left of his trousers, barely held together. But through it all, Dave's skin was flawless, unmarked by the flames.

Still covered in a haze of smoke, Dave stood there, blinking, his expression neutral. He looked almost as if nothing had happened.

Cecilia, once on edge, now stood staring at Dave with an expression that quickly shifted from concern to disbelief. She let out a small chuckle, then another, before her laughter bubbled over. "Oh, I'm so sorry, Dave," she gasped between fits of laughter. "I didn't realise you weren't... completely fireproof."

Dave, confused, reached up to run his hand over his head, only to realise what had caused her to crack up. His once neatly kept hair had completely burned away. There was no sign of a hairline left—just smooth, charred

skin where his hair had been. He rubbed his scalp, brushing away the carbon remnants with a touch of self-deprecation.

"Well," Dave said, his voice dry but with a hint of amusement, "I guess I'm fireproof. But ... my hair isn't."

Cecilia's laughter grew louder, tears now welling in her eyes. "Oh, Dave. You should see your face. You look—you look like a baby!. Bald as an egg!"

Dave shrugged, not quite sure how to respond to her outburst. "Could've been worse," he said, eyeing his singed remains. "At least I'm still in one piece."

Cecilia wiped away her tears, trying to regain composure. "I think we've learned enough for today," she said, still laughing. "You can't burn, but your hair's definitely a different story."

Dave gave a wry smile, standing amidst the wreckage of his clothes, his bald head catching the sunlight. "Next time," he said with a mock frown, "remind me to bring a hat."

Dave glances down at himself and can't help but crack a smile. "Of course," he thinks, "the baldness should have been anticipated." He reflects on how lucky he was that his hair wasn't invulnerable too. If it had been, he'd have discovered his abilities much sooner—he wouldn't have been able to cut it, shave, or groom in any normal way. He'd be walking around with a wild mane, looking like some kind of caveman.

"Well," Dave says, shaking his head, "I guess if my hair had been invulnerable, you'd have found me living in a cave somewhere by now."

Cecilia wipes tears from her eyes, still laughing as she notes down the unexpected side effect. "Oh Dave, I don't know what's more remarkable—your invulnerability or the fact that we didn't think of the hair situation."

The lab technician, trying to maintain his professionalism, can't hide his smirk. The scene of Dave, standing in the aftermath of an inferno,

completely bald with singed clothes, has turned a serious test into an unexpectedly light-hearted moment. Dave shrugs it off, inwardly thankful that while his skin could handle anything, his hair clearly still needed the occasional trim – if it grows back.

Showered and changed, Dave stands in front of the mirror, inspecting his new, bizarre appearance. His face stares back at him, hairless and smooth, his shiny bald head catching the light. It's not the baldness that throws him off—he could cope with that—but the missing eyebrows. That's what really unsettles him. It gives his face a strange, almost alien look. He tries raising his brows out of habit, but without them, his expression looks comically blank.

He chuckles to himself. "Well, this is... something."

Running a hand over his bare scalp, he smirks at the smoothness. The idea of walking around like this in public makes him shake his head. He can't go out looking like this. The thought of the stares he'd get makes him grimace. This has to be addressed.

Cecilia had already assured him they'd bring in a hair and makeup expert to sort him out, at least temporarily, until everything grew back—assuming it would. "Just hang tight," she'd said, barely containing her laughter. "They'll make you look presentable again. You won't be walking around bald faced for long."

He considers the situation for a moment and realises there might be a silver lining in all this. With his face wiped clean of any distinctive features, he could easily change his look—every day if he wanted to. A blank canvas. If they gave him a proper wig, some eyebrows, and maybe a little facial hair, he could become a completely different person with ease. He wouldn't even recognise himself.

The possibilities start to amuse him, "Undercover Dave", he thinks. He could be anyone now. "At least being bald gives me an advantage in

disguises now. Though I have to say, drawing on eyebrows every morning is a skill they never covered in basic training."

Cecilia's voice was steady, but there was an underlying note of curiosity as she spoke. "The fire test was just the beginning, and it raised some interesting questions. You can't drown, and you were able to survive in the middle of an inferno. So how do you breathe?"

Dave shifted slightly in his chair, his expression turning more serious. He had thought about it, but the strange nature of his abilities still baffled him. "I don't understand my oxygen requirements," he admitted, his tone quieter now. "First with the waterboarding, and now with the flames, I've noticed something strange. Even when my body was deprived of oxygen, it didn't feel... critical. I wasn't harmed. It was like my breathing just stalled to protect my lungs, and I didn't need the air."

Cecilia's brow furrowed as she listened intently, clearly processing his words. "Exactly," she said, leaning in slightly. "We've been discussing that. Your lungs are still functioning, but you don't seem to be affected by the lack of oxygen. We need to figure out what that means, and whether it's something you can consciously control or if it's automatic."

Dave leaned back in the chair, a hand running over his smooth, bald scalp, a gesture that had become automatic in recent minutes. He mulled over her words. "Does that mean I don't actually need to breathe?"

Cecilia hesitated before answering, choosing her words carefully. "We're not exactly sure. Your lungs definitely work. It's just that the usual limits don't seem to apply in the same way. We need to figure out how your body is adapting. It could be something like extreme efficiency, where your body uses minimal oxygen, or maybe you're capable of surviving without it for longer periods than a normal human."

The implications of her words settled into Dave's mind, making him more contemplative. "So I could, in theory, go without air for longer than a normal person would?"

Cecilia nodded. "That's what we need to test. But we're not going to rush into it. It's still a bit of a mystery."

Dave nodded in agreement, his brow furrowed with determination. "We need to come up with a way to test my oxygen requirements, but in a safer, more thought-out way. I'm not keen on losing more than just my hair next time."

Cecilia's grin was more playful now, a sign that her nerves were easing. "Agreed. A vacuum wouldn't be a good idea—that's too risky. But we could simulate different low-oxygen environments, maybe gradually reduce the oxygen levels in a controlled space, and monitor your response. It's a step-by-step process, and you'd be in control the whole time."

Dave appreciated the thoughtfulness behind her suggestion. It made sense—this wasn't about reckless experimentation. "Yeah, that makes sense. It's my life we're playing with here. I want to know my limits, but I don't want to stumble into them by accident."

"We'll take our time and be methodical," Cecilia reassured him, her voice calm and confident. "And before we do anything else, we'll plan it thoroughly. No more surprises, like your sudden hairless look."

Dave allowed himself a smile at her joke, the light-heartedness breaking the tension that had built up over the course of the test. "Thanks, Cecilia. I feel better about this. It's not just about what I can do—it's about knowing exactly what I can do, when it matters."

Cecilia's smile softened. "You're in good hands, Dave. We'll figure this out together."

As Dave left the lab, he felt a sense of control that hadn't been there before. It wasn't just the experiments—it was the careful, considerate approach that Cecilia was taking with his safety, making sure each step was thought through. This wasn't about recklessly testing his limits. It was about discovering them with precision and care. And with her guiding him,

he was beginning to trust that, together, they would find answers—without unnecessary risks.

3 **A Quiet Pint**

Dave sat alone at his usual spot in The Hanged Man, cradling his pint of Guinness. The pub had a reputation—one built on discretion and its darker underbelly. It wasn't the kind of place where people asked too many questions; after all, most of the patrons had secrets of their own. The muted hum of conversation surrounded him, but it all faded into the background as Dave focused on his pint. First-rate Guinness, he thought. They must go through a lot of it here. The pipes are clean, the pour is perfect. Little things like that mattered to him, keeping the chaos in his head at bay.

Dave was lost in the creamy head of his Guinness, the world outside the pub a distant blur. The clink of glasses and murmurs of conversation were a soft backdrop as he savoured the perfect pint. As he was about to take another sip, the door swung open. Steve. The moment their eyes locked, Dave could feel the fear. It radiated off Steve like the stench of sweat after a bad deal gone wrong. Steve—a thug from a previous encounter—knew better than to try anything. He also knew that if Dave wanted to, he could end whatever confrontation Steve might imagine in the blink of an eye.

With a wiry build, Steve exudes nervous energy, constantly scanning his surroundings with a wide-eyed, uneasy expression as though the world is conspiring against him.

The moment their eyes locked, Dave remembered their last encounter - back when he was deliberately drawing attention to his abilities, hoping to flush out any government agencies tracking people like him. Steve and his partner Mick had been running their car theft racket, and Dave had made sure they got a good look at what he could do. Too good a look, apparently, given the fear now radiating off Steve. Mick was safely behind bars, but Steve had walked free, carrying with him memories he probably wished he could forget. The kind of memories that made a man question his own sanity - had he really seen someone move that fast, hit that hard? Steve's wide-eyed expression suggested those doubts were still eating at him.

Steve hesitated for a moment before walking to the bar. He got a pint and, as if driven by some magnetic pull, found himself standing at Dave's table. "What do you want?" Steve asked, trying to sound casual, but the nervous edge in his voice betrayed him.

Steve's eyes wandered over Dave's current appearance, taking in the wig and carefully chosen clothes. There was something incongruous about the whole look, something that Steve couldn't quite place but made him uncomfortable. "You know," Steve said, a hint of sarcasm in his voice, "that wig isn't fooling anyone. What's with the getup?"

Dave's lips curled into a faint smile. He took a leisurely sip of his pint before responding. "Ah, you caught me. I'm undercover," he said, his tone light and teasing. "But definitely off duty. Just here to enjoy a pint."

Steve's eyes widened slightly. "Undercover? Really?" he asked, scepticism thick in his voice.

Dave chuckled, the sound low and rumbling. "I'm really just here to blend in, have a quiet drink, and not cause any trouble. You're not even on my radar, Steve," he said, taking a slow sip of his pint. "I'm just having a quiet drink."

Steve glanced around the pub, as though looking for a way out, then sat down across from Dave. He couldn't shake the memory of what he'd seen Dave do before—things that didn't make sense, that went beyond anything Steve could understand. No one should be able to move that fast. No one should be that strong.

"What are you?" Steve asked, his voice dropping low. He leaned in slightly, his fear palpable. "I've seen what you can do, and it doesn't make sense."

Dave took a long pause before answering, looking down at his pint. The deep, black liquid seemed to absorb the pub's dim light. When he finally spoke, his voice was calm, controlled. "Doesn't really matter what I am,

Steve,” he said quietly, “but whatever it is, you don’t need to worry. I’ve moved on.”

Steve shifted uneasily in his seat. He didn’t trust Dave—not really. “Yeah, but I know what you can do. How do I know you're not here for me?”

Dave's gaze lifted, his eyes locking onto Steve’s with a cold, unreadable intensity. “Stay out of my way,” he said, his voice firm but not threatening. “And you’ll stay off my radar.”

For a moment, silence hung between them. Then Steve exhaled, relieved but still shaken. He nodded, took a sip from his pint, and rose from the table, backing away as if he couldn’t get out of Dave’s orbit fast enough. He didn’t look back as he left.

Dave watched him go, the soft hum of the pub returning to his senses. He returned his focus to his Guinness. Whatever people thought they knew about him, whatever stories they'd heard—none of that mattered. Not to him, anyway.

All that mattered was that pint. And the peace, however fleeting, that came with it.

4 The Call

Dave's new phone was unlike anything he'd ever used. The level of encryption and the sheer technological capability made it more than just a communication tool—it was a lifeline. It could tap into Wi-Fi networks, piggyback on them, and guarantee a connection anywhere. And though he suspected it was tracking his every move, he accepted that as part of his new reality.

As Dave stared out the car window, his thoughts drifted back to the earliest days of his recruitment. It wasn't long after the agency found him that Lands had begun digging into his background—trying to unravel the mystery of Dave's origins. They had pieced together what little there was from his childhood, growing up in foster care, with no known relatives. His foster parents had cared for him, but they were never able to answer the most pressing questions: Who were his biological parents? Why had they given him up? And perhaps most importantly, how had he become...different?

Lands had used every resource at his disposal, pulling on threads that Dave didn't even know existed—accessing old adoption records, contacting obscure orphanages, tracking down anyone who might have had even a whisper of information. But the search had come up empty. His biological parents were never identified, and no one seemed to have any record of his birth. It was as if he'd simply appeared one day.

The investigation led Lands to explore more unconventional avenues. He wasn't just looking for records now; he was searching for anomalies. He had started digging into strange occurrences, legends, and urban myths, following every lead, no matter how bizarre. Dave had jokingly referred to it as "Bigfoot patrol"—but even Lands had started to refer to it that way. There was no stone left unturned, but all of it had led to dead ends.

The mystery of Dave's invulnerability had only deepened when they first began testing his abilities. From waterboarding to fire, he had survived everything they'd thrown at him without so much as a scratch. But the origin of those abilities—whether they were natural, engineered, or something far more complicated—remained an enigma. And without any more leads to follow, Lands had reached the frustrating conclusion that there might be nothing left to discover.

That thought gnawed at Dave as the car sped towards the agency's office. Who was he really? What made him this way? And why couldn't anyone, even the agency with all its resources, figure it out?

His parents, or whoever they were, had vanished without a trace. The last real hope of uncovering the truth seemed to have gone with them.

The agency was starting to feel like home, but his past still tugged at him, an unanswered question looming over his new existence. And now, with another mission on the horizon, there was little time to dwell on it. The mysteries of his origin would have to wait. For now, there was work to be done.

As Dave entered the brightly lit conference room, the usual feeling of anticipation settled over him. Sitting across the table, Cecilia Dawkins nodded in greeting. Beside her were two new faces he hadn't seen before.

"Dave," Cecilia began, gesturing to the men. "This is Deckard and Robson. They've been working in the background and discovered this situation."

The two men gave short nods of acknowledgment. Deckard was a stern-looking man in his early fifties, his face weathered with experience, while Robson, younger but no less intense, scanned Dave with a brief but sharp look of assessment.

"Let's get to the point," Deckard said, his voice deep and no-nonsense. "We need your assistance dealing with a situation that's escalating quickly."

There's a terrorist cell targeting critical energy supplies for Europe, and we've already seen two major attacks."

Dawkins nodded. "The first attack hit the Maghreb pipeline. Mostly unsuccessful but deadly—many lives lost, and the pipeline disabled temporarily. The attackers left no clues, no identities, no trace of affiliation with any known organization."

Deckard took over. "Then came the second attack. This time, they went for Medgaz, a major pipeline that supplies gas to Southern Spain. It was much more devastating. The terrorists learned from their first attempt or maybe they just got lucky, but the result was catastrophic. Medgaz is now in ruins, likely to be offline for a very long time, and the energy shortage is already driving prices up across Europe. This part, though, remains mostly under the radar. The public doesn't know the full extent of the damage."

"Well, that would explain the price of my latest gas bill."

Dave leaned forward, taking in the gravity of the situation. Europe was struggling to maintain its energy supplies, and these attacks threatened to plunge parts of the continent into a deeper crisis.

Robson added, "What's unusual is the lack of the typical terrorist markers. No warnings, no credible claims of responsibility. We've had several organizations step forward to take the blame, but none of them add up. These attacks were far more sophisticated than your average terrorist cell. We're looking at something bigger—better funded, better organised, and extremely dangerous."

Cecilia leaned in, her voice softer now but no less urgent. "We need you, Dave. You'll be joining a team of agents already on the ground in Morocco. That's where the trail leads for now, but we expect it to shift rapidly. You'll fly out tomorrow morning to meet them."

Dave sat back in his chair, processing the information. Two pipelines down, with Europe's energy grid in peril. It wasn't just about the cost of

fuel or gas any more—this was about a continent's infrastructure, and by extension, its security. Whoever these people were, they were playing a dangerous game with global consequences.

"So, what's the plan?" Dave asked, his tone serious.

Deckard crossed his arms. "We don't have much to go on at the moment, but we're following up leads. Your role will be both reconnaissance and direct action. We need to know who's behind these attacks and, more importantly, stop the next one. We expect them to hit another target soon."

"Intel is spotty," Robson admitted. "But we've got eyes and ears on the ground in Morocco, and it's a place where we suspect they've been operating. You'll be working alongside some of our best agents."

Dave nodded, his mind already preparing for the mission ahead. "Alright. I'll be ready."

Cecilia gave him a reassuring smile. "I know you will, Dave. This is important, not just for the agency but for a lot of people who are depending on those energy supplies. We're counting on you."

The meeting wrapped up, Dave knew this would be another step into the unknown. The stakes were high, and there were no guarantees of success. But this is what he had signed up for. With his enhanced abilities, the agency was relying on him to help turn the tide.

And as always, there were more questions than answers. Who were these people behind the attacks? Why were they targeting Europe's energy supply? And how far would they go? Dave had a feeling he was about to find out.

5 Stepping Up

After Deckard and Robson left the room, Dave lingered behind, his thoughts still racing about the mission ahead. He turned to Cecilia, who was gathering her notes. “Cecilia, can we talk for a minute?”

She looked up, smiling warmly. “Of course, Dave. What’s on your mind?”

Dave sighed, running a hand through his hair—or rather, over the hair he’d adopted. “I’ve been thinking... My French has improved a lot, thanks to all the immersion, but my Arabic? It’s rudimentary at best – more akin to speaking loudly and using hand gestures. I’m not sure how well I’ll fit into this mission.”

Cecilia’s eyes sparkled with amusement. “Dave, your language skills are impressive, especially considering how quickly you’ve picked them up. You’re practically fluent in French now. You should give yourself more credit.”

Dave shrugged, still unsure. “Yeah, I guess I’ve surprised myself with that, but even so... I’m not a spy, or some covert intelligence officer. This—this is a big mission. What if my trade craft isn’t up to scratch? I don’t want to be the weak link.”

Cecilia leaned back in her chair, studying him thoughtfully. “Look, Dave. No one’s expecting you to be James Bond or an undercover operative. That’s not why you’re here. You have a unique skill set that we need, and you’ve proven that you can adapt quickly.” She smiled gently. “We haven’t exactly encountered a supervillain to pit you against yet, have we?”

Dave chuckled lightly, though the tension in his shoulders remained. “Not yet.”

Cecilia’s tone grew more serious. “This job isn’t about saving the world overnight, Dave. It’s about staying vigilant. The agency’s role is often a game of cat and mouse, reacting to threats as they arise, putting out fires

before they spread. We deal with an endless stream of problems, often from shadows we barely see.”

She paused, looking him straight in the eye. “The price of freedom is eternal vigilance. That’s what we do—we stay vigilant. We keep watch, and we step in when necessary. It’s not always glamorous, and most of the time, it’s messy. But the bad guys aren’t some singular evil genius running the whole show. More often than not, it’s a hydra we’re fighting. Cut off one head, and another one grows back.”

Dave frowned, the weight of her words sinking in. “So it’s a never-ending battle?”

Cecilia nodded. “Pretty much. Our work in the Congo, for example... As impactful as it was, it’s likely already being undone by others. There’s always someone waiting in the wings to pick up where the last villain left off. But that’s the job. We can’t stop every threat permanently. What we do is make it harder for them, push back, and keep fighting. As long as we’re vigilant, we have a chance.”

Dave leaned forward, elbows resting on the table, still processing. “I guess I just... I’m worried I’ll mess up. That I’ll get in the way, or miss something important.”

Cecilia shook her head firmly. “You won’t. You’re more capable than you realise. Your invulnerability alone makes you a valuable asset, but it’s more than that. You’re quick on your feet, and you’ve already proven that you can handle more than you think.” She smiled again. “Trust me, you wouldn’t be here if we didn’t think you were ready.”

Dave sat back, taking in her words. It was hard to argue with her logic. He had been through a lot since joining the agency, and while he still had doubts, it was clear that they saw something in him—something more than just his abilities.

"So all we have to do is track down invisible terrorists, protect massive infrastructure, and prevent an energy crisis. And here I was worried this might be challenging. Alright," Dave finally said. "I'll give it my best shot. I just don't want to let anyone down."

Cecilia's smile softened. "You won't. And remember, you're not alone in this. You've got a team—Deckard, Robson, and others. We're all in this together."

She stood, gathering her things as she prepared to leave. "Get some rest tonight, Dave. Tomorrow, we move forward."

As she left the room, Dave sat quietly for a moment, reflecting on everything. He wasn't a superhero, or a spy. But maybe that wasn't the point. Maybe, as Cecilia said, it wasn't about saving the world in one grand sweep—it was about staying vigilant, fighting back, one step at a time.

6 Tangier

As the aeroplane descends, Dave catches glimpses of the vast, blue expanse of the Atlantic meeting the Mediterranean, an inviting sight. Upon disembarking, the airport is calm, not too crowded or noisy, with a modern, minimalist design. It is obvious of the blend of cultures that defines Tangier.

At Tangier Ibn Battouta Airport, the air feels warm but not stifling. The weather is comfortable, thanks to Tangier's coastal Mediterranean climate. Stepping outside, the air smells faintly of salt, carried by the ocean breeze, with a hint of dry earth and spices lingering in the distance. There's the occasional hum of motorbikes and cars, though it's relatively quiet compared to bustling metropolises. The noise picks up as you make your way along the main roads into the city, with the occasional honking of taxis and buses.

Travelling from the airport towards the city centre, the first structures passed are low-rise and unremarkable: a mix of residential buildings and small commercial centres that gradually give way to older, more distinct architecture. The outskirts of Tangier are more functional than aesthetic, but as you approach the city itself, you start to notice the beautiful mix of old and new. Whitewashed buildings with flat roofs dominate the skyline, occasionally interrupted by grander, French-influenced structures with wrought-iron balconies and intricate tile work. The closer you get to the Kasbah and the Medina, the more you notice the winding, narrow streets typical of older Moroccan cities.

The smells grew stronger: rich spices, fresh bread baking in street-side ovens, and the smoky scent of grilled meats wafted from small restaurants and homes. There was a distinct aroma of leather and fabrics from the nearby souks. The air felt a little denser here, mixed with the energy of the city, though still refreshed by the ocean breeze.

As soon as Dave crossed the threshold of the safe house, a man stepped out from the kitchen to greet him. "You must be Dave," he said in a smooth, low voice. "I'm Karim, the housekeeper." There was a subtle pause before he said "housekeeper," as if the title was merely a formality that concealed his true role.

Karim was of average height, with a lean, athletic build. His short, dark hair was neatly trimmed, and his piercing brown eyes, while friendly, held a quiet intensity that immediately suggested he was far more than a simple housekeeper. His movements were smooth and deliberate, and Dave knew instinctively that this was someone who was used to blending into the background while taking note of every detail around him.

"Welcome to your temporary home," Karim said, gesturing around the entrance hall. To the left, a heavy wooden archway led into a modest living room, sparsely furnished with low, cushioned seating along the walls and a small table in the centre. Heavy, drawn curtains covered a narrow window. To the right, through a slightly open door, Dave glimpsed the kitchen with its tiled counter-tops and small, functional cooking area.

The worn tiles and plain walls spoke of practicality rather than comfort. Through an open window, Dave could hear children playing in the street, their voices mixing with a radio's tinny music. A cat yowled somewhere outside, and the smell of someone's cooking drifted in on the breeze.

"Not exactly five-star accommodations," Karim added with a knowing smile.

"It's perfect," Dave replied.

Karim nodded approvingly. "Most agents expect something more... dramatic. But here, we're just another household in a quiet neighbourhood. The tourists stick to the Medina, and the locals mind their own business." He gestured to Dave's holdall. "You can leave that in the hallway. Come, take a seat," he said, waving to the comfortable but simple couch. "Would you like some tea?"

Dave nodded. "Nice to meet you, Karim. So, I'm the first to arrive?"

"Yes, other than myself, of course. The others will be coming on later flights. We're expecting four more."

Dave's mind started to turn over the details. Four more agents—he hadn't been briefed on all of them, but he assumed they'd all bring their own expertise to the table.

"Tea?" Karim asked, already moving toward the kitchen.

Dave smiled, a touch of his usual easygoing nature slipping through. "I'd love one. Can't beat a good cuppa."

Karim arched an eyebrow, an amused expression crossing his face. "I'm guessing you mean the more English style—tea with milk—rather than mint and sugar?"

Dave blinked, momentarily forgetting where he was. "Yeah, mate, sorry. Should've thought about that. But honestly, either would be fine."

He followed Karim into the kitchen, watching as the man went through the ritual of tea preparation with practised ease. His movements were precise, almost meditative.

"My mother taught me," Karim said, noticing Dave's interest. "She always said you can learn everything about a person by how they take their tea." He smiled faintly. "In my line of work, she wasn't entirely wrong."

"What does my preference for English tea say about me then?" Dave asked.

Karim's eyes crinkled with amusement. "That you're far from home, but trying to adapt. Not a bad quality for this job." He prepared two cups: one English-style with milk for Dave, and a traditional mint tea with sugar for himself. He added a small plate of dates to the tray.

Back in the living room, Karim gestured for Dave to help himself to the dates. The atmosphere was calm, but Dave could feel the quiet

undercurrent of observation between them. They were both sizing each other up, though it was unspoken.

Dave picked up a date, biting into its sweet, rich flavour. He'd never had much of a taste for them, but after a day of travel, it was surprisingly pleasant. He could sense Karim's sharp mind behind the casual conversation, a man who observed everything but spoke only when necessary. Dave appreciated that. It was clear they were going to get along just fine.

They chatted lightly, making small talk. Dave learned that Karim had been stationed here for a while, though the details of how long or what exactly he did remained vague. Karim, on the other hand, asked just enough questions to get a feel for Dave without prying too much into sensitive details. There was an unspoken understanding that they were both professionals, bound by the discretion of their work.

As they finished their tea, Karim stood up. "You've had a long trip. You should get some rest. Feel free to choose whichever bedroom you like. I'll let you know when the others arrive."

Dave thanked him, feeling a bit of the travel weariness catching up to him now that the immediate introductions were over. He grabbed his holdall from the hallway and headed down the corridor, glancing into the various bedrooms. They were all simple, practical—beds made up neatly, with just the essentials. He picked one at random and set his bag down at the foot of the bed.

Everything feels worn but well-maintained, designed more for practicality than comfort. It's clear this place is meant to go unnoticed—quiet, inconspicuous, and easily forgotten by anyone passing by. Yet, inside, it has just enough space and separation to comfortably house a small team, with the privacy and security needed for a safe house.

As he lay back, staring at the ceiling, he felt a sense of calm settle over him. This was only the start of the mission, but something about the house

and Karim's quiet efficiency reassured him. He knew things would pick up once the rest of the team arrived, but for now, he could relax—if only for a short while.

Dave's eyes began to close, his mind already turning to the tasks that lay ahead. Tomorrow, the real work would begin.

7 **Special Brew**

As the evening deepened, the safe house gradually filled with the presence of the remaining team members, each arriving in staggered waves from different flights. The quiet hum of activity settled into the air as Dave caught glimpses of his new colleagues.

The first to arrive was Anya Petrova, a striking figure with sharp, focused eyes that missed nothing. Born in Moscow, her upbringing in a family closely tied to the Russian government was evident in her composed demeanour. She had an air of confidence, but it wasn't just her appearance—it was the way she moved. Every step was calculated, every glance, deliberate. As they exchanged pleasantries, Dave noticed her flawless English and a slight French accent when she spoke. He knew from her file that her expertise lay in hacking, surveillance, and combat. This was a woman who could work in the shadows and vanish without a trace.

As Anya settled in, the door opened once again, and Omar Al-Ghazadi made his entrance. His military bearing was unmistakable—broad shoulders, a calm, focused look, and the ease with which he carried himself spoke of a man who had seen more than his share of action. Omar, a former member of the Moroccan Royal Armed Forces, offered Dave a firm handshake and a nod, his quiet intensity making him immediately memorable. Fluent in Arabic, French, and English, Omar's skills in martial arts, weapons, and tactics would make him an invaluable asset in the field. His eyes had the distant, hardened gaze of someone who had seen conflict first-hand.

Later in the evening, Mei Lin arrived, seemingly unassuming, but with an aura of sharp intelligence. Mei was a cybersecurity expert, renowned in her field, and though her soft-spoken nature contrasted with some of the others, Dave knew that her mind was her deadliest weapon. Graduating from Tsinghua University, her career had taken her through high-stakes government agencies and private companies alike. Fluent in Mandarin,

Cantonese, and English, she was a master at navigating the complex world of cybersecurity and digital forensics. She greeted the team with a polite smile, her small frame almost camouflaging the power of her intellect.

The last to arrive, shortly before midnight, was Daniel Carter. Dan was all business, his military background in the British Army apparent in his direct approach. He wasted no time in pleasantries, though he did offer a quick, professional greeting to Dave. With years of experience in MI6, Dan had worked on counter-terrorism and espionage missions across the globe. He was a seasoned veteran, fluent in both English and French, and an expert in covert operations and human intelligence gathering. Despite his quiet demeanour, Dave could sense the wealth of knowledge and experience Dan brought to the table.

By morning, the safe house was no longer just a quiet outpost but a hub of quiet readiness. Each member of the team had found their space, and the dynamic of the group began to form, even if most of it was still unspoken.

At breakfast, Dave took a moment to observe the group around the table, sipping his tea as Karim served a light meal. Anya, ever the silent observer, was engrossed in something on her laptop, probably running one of her infamous surveillance programs. Omar, already up before dawn, had clearly completed his morning workout and was relaxed, but alert. Mei, quietly tapping away on her tablet, was undoubtedly checking cybersecurity protocols or analysing the latest intelligence feeds. Dan remained the steady professional, reviewing mission briefs in his typical no-nonsense manner.

Though they came from different worlds, with different specialities, there was an unspoken understanding between them. Each had been selected for this mission for a reason, and soon, they would find out exactly what their roles would be.

Dave, taking another sip of his tea, wondered about his own place within this carefully assembled team. His doubts about his trade craft still

lingered, but if the agency believed in him, he would do his part. One way or another, they would face whatever challenges awaited them together.

Dan, ever eager to break the ice, was taking it upon himself to learn more about his new colleagues. He was the type who couldn't sit still for long without getting to know people, especially those he would be working alongside. His directness wasn't lost on anyone, and he quickly steered the conversation to Anya.

"Alright, Anya," he said, leaning forward with a grin, "You've been around the agency for a while, right? What's your role exactly? I mean, I know you're good with computers and comms, but what else do you bring to the table?"

Anya, always composed, didn't hesitate. She leaned back slightly in her chair, her piercing grey eyes meeting Dan's with a cool, calm confidence. "I've been with the agency for several years, yes. My role focuses on technical operations—cybersecurity, communications, and intel gathering. But I'm not just a desk jockey," she added with a faint smile, her tone turning serious. "I'm highly skilled in mixed martial arts, too. A little backup when things go south."

Dan raised an eyebrow, impressed by the breadth of her expertise. "Impressive," he said, nodding.

Omar, sitting across from Dan, joined the conversation next. "I haven't been with the agency long," he said, his voice steady but carrying an underlying confidence. "But it's pretty much in line with the roles I've had in the past. I specialize in infiltration, getting in unnoticed, and when it comes to demolitions, I know how to make things go boom. You know, the fun stuff."

Dan chuckled, clearly enjoying the banter. "Boom, huh? Sounds like you'd be a great guy to have around when things get explosive."

Omar smirked but didn't comment further, turning his attention to his breakfast.

Dan, always keen to keep things moving, now found his gaze landing on Mei Lin, who had been listening quietly up until this point. "Mei Lin," he said, his tone casual, but with a slight tilt of his head, as if he were sizing her up. "You've got some serious IT skills, too, right? Seems like we've got a real tech-heavy team on our hands."

Mei Lin gave a small nod, her expression thoughtful. "I'm a systems analyst, primarily focused on network security, data encryption, and counter-intelligence," she said, her voice calm, but there was a sharpness to it that suggested a mind always working. "I've also been trained in field operations when needed, but my main contribution is the technical side of things."

"Yeah, definitely a lot of brainpower in this room," Dan said, looking around at the group, clearly intrigued. But as his eyes landed on Dave, his demeanour shifted slightly, as though he were trying to figure out something that wasn't immediately apparent.

Dave had been silent throughout the conversation, his posture relaxed but reserved. There was something about him that Dan couldn't quite put his finger on, a stillness that suggested there was more to him than met the eye. Dan, who was always quick to assess people, couldn't shake the feeling that Dave was intentionally keeping a low profile, perhaps hiding something.

"So, Dave," Dan said, his voice light but with a hint of challenge, "you've been a little quiet. Not so forthcoming with the group. Where do you fit in? Master assassin? Combat pilot? Kung fu expert?" He gave a small, knowing smile, obviously underestimating Dave based on his unassuming appearance. The words were meant to be playful, but the underlying assumption was clear: Dave wasn't someone to be taken seriously based on the surface.

Dave felt the weight of Dan's eyes on him, the veteran's straightforward question hanging in the air. The others around the table had all been busy with their own tasks, but now they turned their attention to him as well. Anya's sharp gaze, Omar's silent curiosity, Mei's analytical look—all of them waited for his response. He took a deep breath, feeling the heat rise in his chest. How was he supposed to explain this?

"Well," Dave began, trying to buy himself a second to figure it out, "I'm, uh... I'm not exactly sure how to put this." His voice wavered slightly, but he managed to steady it. "I'm not a spy, not a soldier like the rest of you."

Dan leaned back, folding his arms. "So what are you, then?"

Dave could feel the tension in the room rise slightly. He cleared his throat and decided to just lay it out as honestly as he could.

"I used to work in IT. Regular office job, nine-to-five. Then... well, I got recruited by the agency. I'm still figuring out exactly why. I guess the best way to put it is—I have some abilities. I don't really get injured like normal people. Fire, bullets... they don't do much to me. I'm... invulnerable, in a way."

Omar raised an eyebrow. "Invulnerable?" he echoed, the scepticism clear in his voice.

"Yeah," Dave said with a nod, though he still felt awkward talking about it. "I don't have all the answers myself, but the agency's been testing me. Fire can't burn me. I don't need as much oxygen as most people. And, well, I've survived a lot of things that should've killed me."

Dan's expression shifted slightly, from scepticism to curiosity. "So, you're bulletproof?"

"Pretty much, yeah," Dave replied, shifting in his seat. "But I don't really know the limits yet. That's part of why I'm here, I guess. I'm still figuring it out."

Anya, who had been quiet until now, leaned forward, her eyes narrowing as she studied him. “And how did the agency discover you?”

Dave hesitated. He didn’t want to get into all the details of his murky past, but he also knew they deserved some kind of explanation. “It’s... complicated. I was adopted, never knew my real parents, and things about my past are still a mystery. The agency found me after some incidents—they think I might have been... engineered, somehow. I don’t know for sure.”

The room was quiet for a moment, the weight of his words settling in. Mei was the first to break the silence, her voice calm and analytical. “So, you’re still a work in progress,” she said thoughtfully, her eyes scanning him as if he were a puzzle to solve. “That’s interesting.”

Dave chuckled nervously. “Yeah, you could say that.”

Omar, still with a sceptical look, asked, “But how does this help with our mission? What can you do that we can’t?”

Dave didn’t have a clear answer, but he shrugged, trying to project some confidence. “I guess I’m here to help where I can. I might not be the best at trade craft or combat like you guys, but if things get dangerous, I can take a hit—maybe buy us time. And I’m learning. The agency trusts me enough to put me here, so I guess that counts for something.”

Dan, who had been silently processing Dave’s words, finally leaned forward again, his tone less accusatory and more curious. “Well, you’re here for a reason. We’ve all got our roles. I just hope you’re up for it, mate.”

Dave nodded. “I hope so too.”

The team seemed to absorb that for a moment, before Dan gave a half-smile. “Guess we’ll find out soon enough.”

The tension eased slightly, and the conversation shifted back to the mission details. Dave, still feeling a bit out of place, he had a lot to prove, not just to the team, but to himself.

The room went silent in an instant as the sharp crack of Dan's 9mm echoed off the walls. The bullet struck Dave square in the forehead, and the others around the table recoiled, some of them instinctively reaching for their own weapons or ducking for cover. Dave, on the other hand, didn't flinch. His eyes widened in surprise, but his body stayed perfectly still, almost as if nothing had happened.

A brief second passed before he raised a hand to his head, feeling the spot where the bullet had made impact. There was no blood, no damage, just a flattened bullet that had fallen harmlessly to the floor. His heart pounded in his chest, but the rest of him was fine—completely unharmed.

Dan, still holding the smoking gun, blinked in shock at what he had just done. His face quickly shifted from focused intensity to an apologetic grin as he holstered his weapon. "I guess that answers the question," he said casually, as if he hadn't just shot someone point-blank in the middle of a briefing.

The rest of the team was still frozen, eyes wide, processing what had just happened. Anya's jaw had dropped slightly, her steely composure momentarily cracked. Omar, normally calm under pressure, let out a low whistle, and Mei's analytical mind seemed to short-circuit as she struggled to make sense of it.

Anya, standing at the back of the room, sighed and rolled her eyes. "Dan, seriously? You couldn't have warned us first?"

Dave slowly lowered his hand, staring at Dan. He knew the veteran was testing him, but the suddenness of the attack caught him completely off guard. He felt a mixture of adrenaline and annoyance surge through him, but the shock wore off quickly. After all, this was exactly what he had told

them—he was nearly invulnerable. He just didn't expect to be tested so soon, or so abruptly.

"Well," Dave said, his voice steady but with an edge of irritation, "that was... dramatic."

Dan shrugged, looking a little sheepish now. "Sorry, mate. Thought it'd be quicker than waiting for some long explanation. You don't get many chances to see something like that."

The others were still recovering from the shock. Anya, shaking her head in disbelief, muttered, "What the hell..."

Omar finally found his voice. "You weren't kidding," he said to Dave, his tone a mix of awe and respect. "That bullet should've killed you."

Mei, ever the analytical one, immediately began to calculate. "That's... remarkable. The force of impact alone should've caused some kind of trauma. But you're completely fine."

Dave shrugged, feeling oddly calm now that the initial shock had passed. "Yeah, I guess I'm built differently."

Dan, looking more serious now, approached Dave. "Look, I didn't mean to freak everyone out, but it's good to know for sure. You said you were invulnerable. I just needed to see it for myself." He paused, then added with a smirk, "Next time, I'll aim somewhere less obvious."

Anya shook her head again, stepping forward to intervene. "Alright, enough with the shooting. Dave's not a test dummy, and we don't need any more surprises like that."

Dave finally let out a nervous laugh, shaking his head. "Thanks for the heads-up, Dan. Really appreciate it."

Dan clapped him on the shoulder, his grin returning. "You'll be alright, mate. Tougher than you look."

The tension in the room began to ease, the others slowly returning to their seats and resuming the mission briefing. But the mood had shifted—Dave’s abilities weren’t just theoretical any more. They had all seen it first-hand, and while it was still hard for them to wrap their heads around, it was clear now that Dave was not just an ordinary team member.

As the conversation shifted back to logistics and strategy, Dave couldn’t help but replay the moment in his mind. He’d been shot, almost point-blank, and walked away without a scratch. It was terrifying, in a way, but also exhilarating. He was still figuring out what he was, but moments like this reminded him just how different he was from everyone else.

Still, he’d make a mental note to keep his guard up around Dan from now on.

8 Ground Work

Following the destruction of the pipeline, the team gathered in the Tangier safe house charted out their strategies. Each agent was assigned to leverage their unique skills in an effort to uncover who was responsible and prevent future attacks. The agency already had some forensic and witness evidence on file from the initial attack, but they were determined to leave no stone unturned. The stakes were too high.

Mei Lin, with her expertise in cybersecurity and data analysis, was tasked with monitoring social media chatter. Her job was to sift through endless posts, videos, and forums to find anything suspicious—any hint of planning, involvement, or extremist rhetoric tied to the attack. These platforms often held vital clues, either through indirect bragging or careless slips from those involved. Using her custom algorithms, Mei set up filters that would catch certain phrases, images, or connections to radical groups, then dig deeper into online profiles and their networks.

"There's always a digital footprint," she had said with quiet confidence. "They might think they're being careful, but they're not."

While Mei dug through the virtual noise, Anya Petrova was handling the intelligence analysis. Drawing on her background with the FSB, she was responsible for combing through both local and foreign intelligence reports. She had access to satellite data, intercepted communications, and the raw surveillance footage gathered by various agencies. Anya's job was to cross-reference everything, looking for inconsistencies, hidden patterns, and any connections that might tie the attacks to known terrorist cells or rogue groups.

"This isn't an isolated event," she muttered as she scanned through intercepted conversations in Arabic and French. "There's a bigger picture here, but the pieces aren't all in place yet."

Meanwhile, Karim had taken on the most dangerous and delicate task: gathering information from the local community. With his background and familiarity with the region, he was the most adept at blending in and extracting information without raising suspicion. Karim's contacts in the streets, cafes, and markets of Tangier and beyond were invaluable. He tapped into the whispers of the community, those who might have seen something suspicious or heard rumours in the aftermath of the attack.

"I'll work the locals," Karim had said before heading out. "People talk. They always talk, especially if you know how to ask the right questions."

His job was crucial because the agency needed boots on the ground intelligence—something that only came from people who lived and worked in the area. His charm and ability to blend in made him perfect for the task, even though it came with the risk of discovery.

As the rest of the team focused on their tasks, Dave couldn't help but feel a little out of place. His invulnerability was impressive, sure, but this was intelligence work, and the others were operating on levels he wasn't sure he could match. Still, he reminded himself that he was here for a reason, and there was something about this mission that would undoubtedly require his particular skills.

The team had their hands full. The pipeline was only the first target, and intelligence suggested that more attacks were imminent. The key was finding out who was responsible before they could strike again. They knew the terrorists were sophisticated, well-funded, and elusive. Time was not on their side.

"We need to stop them before this escalates," Anya had said grimly during their last meeting. "Whatever they're planning, it's bigger than just a couple of gas pipelines."

Each member of the team knew their role. Mei had the digital world locked down. Anya was analysing the data from every available source. Karim was in the field gathering local intel. And Dave—well, he was still figuring

out exactly how he fit in. But one thing was clear: they needed to work fast, and they needed to work together.

Dave's feelings of inadequacy were gnawing at him. As he watched Anya and Mei effortlessly glide through complex hacking protocols and analyse intelligence, he couldn't help but feel like a bystander. His background in IT, with all its infrastructure, networking, and cloud expertise, suddenly seemed insufficient.

The speed at which Mei dissected network breaches and Anya seamlessly infiltrated encrypted data was astounding. Dave had always thought he was tech-savvy, but now he realised there was a whole other level to cyber warfare—one he wasn't prepared for. It was as though his previous experiences were from a different world entirely, and his skill set, while still valuable, didn't seem to match the demands of this high-stakes mission.

He felt the weight of not only needing to prove his place on the team but also the pressure of quickly adapting to new skills. Watching them, he knew this wasn't something he could just pick up overnight. The gap between his background and the agency's demands was immense. But maybe, just maybe, his unique invulnerability might offer something that no technical skills could replace.

9 Grabbed

The team's first lead was to investigate the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group (GICM), an Islamist militant group with a history of operations both in Morocco and Western Europe. While it seemed unlikely that the group had the sophistication or funding for the pipeline attacks, their strong ties to Al-Qaeda couldn't be ignored. The agency had to cover all its bases, and Karim, always connected to the local undercurrents, had picked up whispers of renewed activity from within the group.

Karim shared the details with the team as they gathered in the safe house. "I've got a contact in the region who says there's been unusual movement at a compound deeper in Morocco, not far from Marrakech," he began. "It could just be training exercises, but I think it's worth checking out. We're hearing about gatherings of key figures within the GICM."

Mei was already tapping into satellite feeds, fingers moving rapidly across her keyboard as she accessed intelligence and surveillance networks. Within moments, she had secured satellite and drone footage of the location. "I've got visuals," she said. "It's a compound about 50 kilometres east of Marrakech. Security is light, but there are regular patrols. According to other agency data, over the past few weeks, there's been an increase in activity—more vehicles coming in and out, and some suspected higher-ranking members on-site."

The room fell quiet as everyone studied the drone images displayed on the monitor. The layout was clear: a central building surrounded by several smaller structures, guards at key entrances, and what appeared to be an armoury on the southern edge of the compound.

Omar and Dan exchanged a glance. They knew the mission ahead was straightforward: identify, capture, and interrogate a high-ranking member of the GICM to extract any information related to the pipeline attacks. The

problem was, these types of groups were notoriously secretive, and it wouldn't be easy to determine who had real intel and who was a dead end.

"We're looking for someone higher up," Dan said, leaning forward. "Someone with access to the group's operations. Maybe a logistics officer or a commander who might have knowledge about the attacks or even outside connections."

"Agreed," Omar nodded. "We'll take the lead on this. The rest of you will provide backup. If we can grab someone and extract what they know, it could save us a lot of time."

Anya chimed in. "Just be careful. The GICM might not be behind the attacks, but they're still dangerous. If they suspect anything, they could tip off others—maybe even lead us into a trap."

The compound lay nestled in a dry, rocky valley, its buildings haphazardly arranged within a low perimeter wall. From the satellite and drone reconnaissance Mei had gathered earlier, the team had identified the building most likely to house their target: a two-story structure near the centre of the compound, distinct only for its larger footprint and the faint glow of flickering lights from within. There was little in terms of modern infrastructure—just a small, ageing generator tucked into the corner of the compound that seemed to power little more than the external lighting. At night, the compound became a patchwork of shadows, some of the buildings dimly lit by flames, others entirely dark or intermittently illuminated by torchlight.

Omar and Dan prepared for the mission as the sun dipped behind the hills. Dan, having drawn the short straw for overwatch, made his way to the nearest elevated position—a low hill about 400 meters away, its summit barely giving him a view over the compound's low walls. The wall itself, more symbolic than functional, seemed designed to keep livestock in rather than intruders out. It was crudely fortified with barbed wire and, in places,

broken glass embedded in crumbling cement, but otherwise, it was an easy obstacle for someone with Omar's skills.

Through the scope of the H&K G28 rifle, Dan watched as Omar began his approach, picking his way across the open ground in a crouch, using the shallow ditches and low shrubs for cover. The dimming light made the operation tricky, but the Leopold scope with illuminated reticle, and night vision were perfect for low-light operations like this. The compound's exterior lights hung low, casting pools of yellowish light, and their glow would make Omar an easy target once he got too close.

Omar paused at the edge of a ditch and raised his hand in a silent signal. Dan responded by taking aim at two of the peripheral lights. A pair of muffled cracks from the suppressed rifle, as Dan lets off a subsonic round, and the lights popped and died, plunging that section of the compound into deeper shadow. Omar used the cover of darkness to scale the wall quickly and silently.

Slipping between the buildings, Omar moved with practised precision, his form merging with the shadows cast by the uneven glow of fires around the compound. Nearby, a group of GICM soldiers sat in a loose circle, laughing loudly as they shared stories and smoked. Their careless banter was loud enough to cover any noise Omar might make, and they clearly weren't expecting trouble this far out.

Omar approached the building where their target was believed to be. The faint light of flames flickered through the cracks of the door ahead, and muffled voices drifted from within. As he reached the door, he froze, sensing movement. The door to his left creaked open, and a soldier stepped out, adjusting his belt, his eyes focused on the ground as he walked.

Omar's reaction was immediate. In one smooth motion, he punched the soldier in the throat, cutting off any chance of a cry for help. The man's eyes bulged in shock, but before he could react further, Omar's Gerber StrongArm blade flashed in the dim light, driving upward under the man's

chin and into his brain. The soldier's body went limp as Omar lowered him silently to the floor.

He moved toward the room with the flickering light, its door half open. As he neared, he could see inside—his target, Youssef Al-Naimi, a mid-level commander in the GICM, stood with his back to the door, deep in conversation with another soldier facing him. Al-Naimi was a wiry man in his mid-forties, with sharp features and a neatly trimmed beard. He was wearing a simple desert combat uniform, his voice calm as he discussed something with his subordinate. His dark, intelligent eyes conveyed a sense of authority despite his unassuming appearance.

Omar pressed himself against the wall and waited for the right moment. The soldier in front of Al-Naimi shifted slightly, and in a flash, Omar moved. His blade shot forward, sinking into the soldier's right eye with deadly accuracy. The man's head rolled back as he slumped to the floor, the hilt of Omar's knife protruding grotesquely from his skull.

Al-Naimi froze, his face contorting in shock as he turned to see what had happened. He barely had time to register the scene before he found himself staring down the barrel of a SureFire suppressor attached to a SIG P320 pistol, held steady in Omar's hand.

"Be silent," Omar said in Arabic, his voice low and dangerous. "Or you'll meet your virgins sooner than you'd like."

Al-Naimi's eyes flickered with a mix of fear and defiance, but he didn't speak. He wasn't ready to die just yet. Omar motioned with the gun for him to kneel, and Al-Naimi complied, slowly sinking to the floor with his hands raised.

Omar moved swiftly, securing the man's hands with plastic cuffs before whispering into his comms for Dan to prepare for extraction. The rest of the compound remained blissfully unaware of what had just occurred. The sound of laughter and the crackling of fires continued outside, oblivious to the fact that one of their commanders had just been taken.

With Al-Naimi subdued and bound, Omar prepared to leave, retrieving and cleaning his Gerber on the soldiers shirt, his mind already racing through the next steps. He just had to get out without anyone noticing the bodies left behind.

The capture itself had gone smoothly. Omar's military training and Dan's MI6 experience worked in perfect synchronization, and they subdued the high-ranking officer with minimal resistance. Within an hour, they had him back at a secure location for questioning.

The interrogation revealed a frustrating truth. The officer, while loyal to the GICM, had no involvement in the pipeline attacks. His intelligence network within the group was limited, and as the questioning continued, it became increasingly clear that the GICM simply didn't have the resources or expertise to pull off such a large-scale operation.

"This isn't their style," Dan said, stepping out of the interrogation room. "They're small-time, focused on local attacks and low-level operations. They don't have the capability to bomb something like a European gas pipeline."

Karim sighed, clearly disappointed but not surprised. "I thought it was a long shot, but we had to follow the lead."

Mei closed her laptop, her expression thoughtful. "If it's not the GICM, then we're dealing with something bigger. Someone who's staying hidden, using more sophisticated methods."

Dan, leaning back against the wall with a frustrated sigh, looked over at Omar and Dave. "So, what do we do with Al-Naimi now? We can't just let him go."

Al-Naimi sat bound in a corner, his face a mix of fear and defiance, though his confidence had dwindled over the course of the interrogation. He wasn't going to be much more use to them.

Karim, who had been quietly observing from the doorway, stepped forward with a knowing look. “The local authorities will no doubt be very interested in gathering further information from him,” he said calmly. “They’ve been keeping an eye on groups like his for some time. I can arrange to have him collected.”

Dan raised an eyebrow, glancing at Omar. “You sure that’s the right move? He could talk, and that might not be in our favour.”

Karim shook his head with a smile. “I’m certain he does not even know who we are. The authorities will handle him discreetly, and he’ll be far more useful to them. His network can be dismantled from the inside without drawing too much attention.” His tone was confident, as if he had been through similar scenarios many times before. “Besides, it keeps our hands clean.”

Dan nodded, the tension in his shoulders easing slightly. “Fair enough. He’s not our problem any more, then.”

Omar glanced at Al-Naimi, who was now visibly sweating as the weight of his situation became more apparent. “He’ll wish we’d finished him ourselves once the authorities get their hands on him,” Omar muttered darkly.

Karim made a quick call, speaking in rapid Arabic to someone on the other end of the line. A few minutes later, he hung up and turned back to the group. “It’s done. They’ll be here within the hour to take him into custody.”

As they prepared to leave, Karim reassured the team, “This will help us in the long run. The authorities will clean up the mess here, and we can focus on the bigger picture.” He gave Al-Naimi a last glance. “He’s just one small piece of a much larger puzzle.”

Back at the safe house, Dave, had been quietly processing the whole encounter, couldn’t help but feel uneasy. This world of covert operations

and manipulation was still new to him, and hearing of someone's fate be decided so coldly was unsettling. But he knew there was little choice. Al-Naimi had nothing of value to offer them, and the mission needed to move forward.

10 **Darkness**

Dave observed Mei and Anya tirelessly at work, their eyes glued to the screens, fingers dancing over keyboards, while the occasional furrow of a brow indicated their thoughts running through the maze of data. The sheer volume of information they sifted through was staggering. AI was a powerful tool, designed to speed up processes that would take human minds years, joining dots between obscure connections, and revealing patterns buried under layers of noise. Yet, even with these advanced tools, they seemed to be hitting a wall.

Mei paused for a moment, frowning at her monitor. "There's unusual chatter about the explosions," she said, her voice tinged with frustration. "A lot of the known terrorist-linked accounts are hyping up the attacks, but there's no direct link to the usual suspects. It's all praise and speculation, but none of them seem connected to the actual event. It's like they're just observers—fans almost, rather than participants."

Dave could see the gears turning in Mei's head. She was brilliant, able to filter out the noise of the digital world, but even she seemed stumped by the lack of hard evidence. Her results, while intriguing, weren't revealing the masterminds behind the attack. Whoever orchestrated these bombings wasn't part of the typical jihadi profile. They weren't making amateur mistakes or leaving traces of chatter before the attack.

Anya, on the other hand, was equally frustrated, digging into intelligence reports and surveillance feeds. She was tasked with sifting through electronic surveillance from various agencies, hoping to find something that connected the dots. But like Mei, her findings were more about negatives than positives. "This is turning into a game of elimination," she said, shaking her head. "We've crossed off most of the known terrorist organisations, at least the ones we expected. There's no chatter before the bombings, no claims from credible groups. Whoever did this, they're staying below the radar."

Dave could sense the pressure building. The silence surrounding the attacks was deafening. How do you track an enemy that leaves no trace, that doesn't fit into any of the familiar moulds? Without connections to any known cells, the investigation was veering into dead ends. It wasn't just frustrating—it was unsettling.

Mei tapped her screen, her brows knit together. "We're looking at a more sophisticated group here, maybe a rogue cell or one that has cut ties with the usual networks. But if they're not connected to the regular extremist circuits, who are they? What do they want?"

Dave looked at the streams of data flowing across the screens. They were faced with an invisible adversary, one that didn't leave breadcrumbs like the usual groups. It was one thing to stop an attack when you knew who you were up against, but going after a ghost? That was an entirely different challenge.

The team needed a lead—anything that could give them a sense of direction. Otherwise, it felt like they were groping in the dark, with no clues to guide them.

The situation left the team at a crossroads. With no clear leads and a small group to work with, Dave realised they had limited options. The attacks on Maghreb and Medgaz pipelines had been devastating, and with several other key pipelines supplying Europe's gas needs, the next move seemed obvious—monitor the remaining lines. But there was one major problem: resources. The team was small, and while Dave had no idea just how expansive the agency's reach was, it seemed unlikely that they could cover every vulnerable point on their own.

Sitting in the briefing room, Dave voiced his concern. "There are too many pipelines, and we can't possibly monitor them all. Do we know if other teams are out there? Maybe they could cover the ones we can't?"

Cecilia on the video link, her face calm but thoughtful. "The agency has other operations going on, but I can't speak to their specific deployment

right now. We're not alone in this, but coordinating across multiple lines and countries can take time. Resources are tight, especially when threats like this are global."

Dave frowned, staring at the map laid out on the table. Major gas pipelines criss-crossed the landscape, running from Russia, Norway, North Africa, and the Middle East into Europe. Each one was a critical lifeline to the continent's energy supply. "So, how do we choose?" he asked. "Do we just pick one and hope for the best?"

Anya, always focused and sharp, leaned forward. "We don't have to guess. We can use the data we have—apply AI to it. It can analyse patterns, predict the most likely target based on multiple factors. We can look at the operational capabilities of these groups, past attacks, geographical vulnerabilities, and even political and economic factors to narrow down the most likely target."

"AI is great for this," Mei said, then cursed as her screen flickered. She smacked the side of the monitor. "When the equipment cooperates."

"Here." Dave reached over and adjusted something at the back. The screen stabilized. "Old IT habits die hard."

"Thanks." Mei pulled up a map dotted with red markers. "Each attack point feeds us data – timing, location, methods used." She tapped keys rapidly, and the markers began pulsing. "Weather patterns, security gaps—"

"Political unrest," Anya cut in, dropping a thick file on the desk. "Latest intel from my contacts. The AI can cross-reference it with—"

The lights suddenly cut out, plunging them into darkness.

"Perfect timing," Dan's voice came from somewhere near the door. "Mei, tell me you backed up that analysis."

"Please," she scoffed. "I'm not an amateur." Her screen's glow illuminated their faces as she continued working. "As I was saying, ranking likely targets..."

Dave perked up. It made sense—use the AI's strength to process massive amounts of information and provide insights that no human could calculate fast enough. "And if we get that list, we could focus our efforts on one or two key locations, right?"

Mei's fingers flew across the keyboard, her face bathed in the blue glow of multiple screens. "Exactly. We can't be everywhere, but—" She broke off, frowning at a sudden alert.

"What is it?" Dave leaned forward, nearly knocking over Anya's coffee.

"Sorry," he mumbled, steadying the cup. The liquid inside was stone-cold – how long had they been at this?

Anya smiled faintly, pushing the cup aside. "This is why I prefer vodka." She moved to peer over Mei's shoulder. "There – that pattern. It's similar to what we saw in the Maghreb data."

"Good catch," Mei said, her fingers already adjusting the algorithm. "If other teams are seeing the same thing..."

Dave watched them work, fascinated by their shorthand communication – a gesture here, a pointed finger there. It was like watching a well-rehearsed dance, and he was still learning the steps.

Cecilia gave a small nod of approval. "Good. We don't need to wait for an attack; we need to be proactive. Let's see what the AI tells us and prepare to mobilise. Timing will be critical."

Minutes passed in silence as everyone waited for Mei's analysis. Dave couldn't help but feel that they were on the cusp of something important. The answers were out there—they just needed to connect the dots.

Cecilia's voice was firm as she shared the news. "Another team is handling the trans-Mediterranean and Greenstream pipelines. They're just as strained, facing the same challenge—protecting the pipelines and figuring out who's behind these attacks." She glanced at the shared on-screen map, showing the intricate web of pipelines across Europe. "We're narrowing

our focus based on the AI's analysis, and it's pointing us north, towards Norway."

The team leaned in, knowing this was a critical juncture. Norway's pipelines were a crucial source of energy for Europe, particularly as tensions in other regions were escalating. But the AI had not yet singled out a specific pipeline, leaving them with a tough decision: should they position themselves on European soil, monitoring the recipient ends of the pipelines?

Anya spoke first, practical as always. "The recipient ends in Europe do make sense. There are fewer entry points to monitor, and any attack there would have maximum impact. Plus, it gives us more direct access to European infrastructure, which might make it easier to respond quickly."

Mei nodded in agreement, running her fingers across the keyboard as she pulled up data on the recipient sites. "The pipelines coming from Norway are key. We have the Nord Stream lines, Langeled, and Europipe, all of which deliver to various parts of Europe—Germany, the UK, and even the Netherlands. These are huge targets, but the AI is still processing which one might be at greatest risk."

Cecilia folded her arms, deep in thought. "AI is good, but it's not infallible. We have to think tactically. An attack on the recipient side makes sense for an organization looking to cause chaos, but the pipelines themselves are just as vulnerable along the route. Sabotaging a line mid-sea or in the Scandinavian regions would cut the flow of gas long before it reaches Europe."

Omar spoke up next, bringing a military perspective. "It depends on the goal. If the attackers want to disrupt the gas supply, hitting the lines at sea or further up in Norway would cause massive delays. But if they want to create fear and panic in Europe, hitting the recipient end—somewhere densely populated—would send a more public message."

Dan, always practical, chimed in. "If we're going to be on the ground, we need to be somewhere with easy access to both the pipelines and the main centres of coordination. Germany and the UK are top contenders for that. Plus, if things go sideways, we'd have quicker access to reinforcements."

Mei's AI system beeped, indicating it had finished processing the latest data. She quickly scanned the results. "It's narrowing down to the Europipe system, which delivers gas to Germany and the Netherlands. Based on the attack patterns and recent geopolitical tensions, this seems the most likely target. Europipe has a major terminal near Emden, Germany."

Cecilia nodded, making the call. "Germany it is. The Europipe terminal at Emden is critical. It's close enough to several key urban centres, and it's where we can best monitor the flow and defend against an attack."

Dave, still absorbing the technical discussions around him, was beginning to understand the gravity of the situation. He wasn't an intelligence officer, but even he could see the logic. Germany was a hub—hit that, and the ripple effects would be felt across the continent.

"We'll coordinate with the other teams," Cecilia continued. "They'll be covering the southern pipelines, but our job is to focus on Europipe. The attackers have been clever so far, but if we stay vigilant, we might be able to catch them before they strike again."

The decision was made. The team would head to Germany, where they would monitor the Europipe system and be on the ground, ready to respond to any threats. It was a calculated move, but with the AI's guidance and their collective expertise, they had a real shot at stopping the next disaster before it happened.

11 Emden

Dave stood at the edge of the Tangier safe house, taking a deep breath of the crisp Moroccan air as he said goodbye to Karim. The “housekeeper” had been more than helpful, offering insights and a warm welcome. Now, with the mission shifting to a new location, Dave and the team prepared for their journey.

The flight from Tangier to Amsterdam Schiphol Airport was uneventful. The team boarded the aircraft with their gear in tow, settling into their seats as the plane took off. The flight was smooth, a 2-hour and 30-minute journey covering approximately 2,000 kilometres. As they touched down in Amsterdam, they went through customs, retrieving their equipment and preparing for the next leg of their journey.

From Amsterdam, they travelled by rented minibus, a Mercedes-Benz Sprinter, the kind of vehicle equipped to handle all their gear. The minibus was large, black, with tinted windows and a discreet, professional appearance. It rumbled along the roads as they made their way towards Germany.

The route from Amsterdam to Emden was straightforward. The team headed east on the A1 motorway, passing through the Dutch countryside. The flat landscape was punctuated by fields of crops, wind turbines, and the occasional village. The border crossing near Bad Nieuweschans was smooth, thanks to their diplomatic clearance, courtesy of the agency.

As they crossed into Germany, they continued on the A30 motorway, which took them straight towards Emden. The landscape changed from rural to suburban as they approached the city. Emden’s charm began to emerge, with its blend of modern and historical architecture visible from the road. The mix of brick buildings and industrial areas provided a contrast that captured the city’s dual nature.

A thin, cold drizzle fell as they drove into Emden, the kind of rain that seemed to get under collars and seep through jackets no matter how well-protected you were. The Mercedes' wipers swept across the windscreen in a hypnotic rhythm, pushing aside water that reflected the grey northern German sky. This close to the North Sea, the air carried a sharp salt tang, heavy with moisture even when it wasn't raining.

They pulled up to their rented block of accommodation. The building was a modern, multi-unit structure located on the city's outskirts, offering both privacy and security. It was well-suited for short-term stays and equipped with the amenities they needed. The surrounding residential area was quiet, providing a good base for their operations.

The architecture of Emden itself was a blend of old and new. The historic old town featured narrow streets lined with quaint shops and historic landmarks like the Emden Town Hall and Martin Luther Church. The city's maritime influence was evident along the River Ems, where large docks and shipyards stood in contrast to the more historical parts of town.

Dave and the team unloaded their equipment from the minibus and began setting up their operational base. It amazed Dave just how much equipment there was. All the computer, networking and communications equipment, consisting of a couple of Dell XPS laptops, a Xeon powered HPE ProLiant server with Tesla GPU's to handle the AI, machine learning and deep learning applications – this at least was more within Dave's comfort zone.

The accommodation had secure storage for their gear, and they worked efficiently to ensure everything was in place. They'd brought in hard cases with the sidearms and ammunition, a long case for Dan's Heckler and Koch G28, and its ancillaries. Mei and Anya had been busy with data analysis and intelligence gathering, but now it was time to shift focus to the field.

In the quiet of their new base, Dave couldn't help but reflect on the journey. From the vibrant, sunlit streets of Tangier to the industrious

cityscape of Emden, the mission was taking them into new territories. The team was well-prepared, but they needed to stay sharp. Emden's pipelines were the next target, and the stakes were high. Their task was to prevent further attacks and protect Europe's energy supplies.

With their base set and their plans in motion, the team was ready for the next phase. The real challenge was about to begin, and Dave knew they needed to be vigilant. The path ahead was uncertain, but with each step, they could be closer to uncovering the truth and stopping those responsible for the attacks.

The rented accommodation was a block of modern apartments on the outskirts of Emden. The building was typical of mid-20th century German architecture—functional and straightforward, with a clean facade of whitewashed concrete and large, square windows. The block was well-maintained, with neat landscaping around the edges and a few trees providing shade.

Inside, the apartments were minimalist but comfortable. Each unit featured a small living area with a compact sofa, a coffee table, and a flat-screen TV mounted on the wall. The decor was simple, with neutral tones and practical furniture. The bedrooms had twin beds, basic wardrobes, and small desks, making the spaces functional for the team's needs.

The communal kitchen in the apartment was small but well-equipped for its size. It had a modest range of appliances and a basic setup. The counter tops were a sleek, dark granite, and the cabinets were white, complementing the clean lines of the space. There was a four-burner electric stove, a small electric oven, microwave and a refrigerator with a small freezer compartment.

The kitchen was functional, but the real issue lay with the coffee machine.

Dave entered the kitchen with a hopeful expression, expecting to find some sort of relief in the form of a coffee machine. He approached the counter where the coffee machine sat there like an unresponsive relic. The

machine, a basic drip coffee maker, looked promising at first glance but had clearly seen better days.

He plugged it in, but the machine made no sign of life. The digital display remained blank, and despite a few attempts to press buttons and fiddle with the settings, it refused to power up. Dave muttered to himself, “What is it with these places never having working coffee machines?”

The lack of tea and milk only compounded the problem. The absence of any coffee seemed to be a cruel twist of fate given the long hours ahead. Dave sighed and mentally noted that a trip to the local store was inevitable. As he looked around the kitchen, he realised it was also a good opportunity to restock on some other essentials.

With a list of items he needed to buy—coffee beans, tea, milk, and some basic groceries, the shampoo on the list making Dave chuckle about his current bald head—He headed out. He hoped to test his German skills and stock up on supplies to make the team's stay more comfortable. It was a small task but an important one, as good coffee and some quality downtime could make a significant difference in morale.

Upon his return, with groceries in hand, Dave was greeted by the aroma of freshly brewed coffee coming from the working machine in the communal kitchen. It seemed that while he was out, someone had managed to get it fixed or replaced. The smell was a welcome relief, and Dave felt a little more at ease knowing that the team's mornings would now start off on a better note.

12 The Norpipe Pipeline

The Emden gas pipeline facility was a sprawling industrial complex situated on the northern outskirts of the city, close to the coastline. It was the entry point for gas flowing from offshore pipelines, where natural gas was received, processed, and distributed to various parts of Europe. The facility itself was modern, built with efficiency and security in mind, but it had the typical utilitarian feel of large industrial operations.

Tall metal fencing, reinforced with razor wire along the top, surrounded the entire complex. The fences were equipped with motion sensors and CCTV cameras mounted at regular intervals, providing a comprehensive view of the perimeter. Large signs in both German and English warned of restricted access, with heavy penalties for trespassing. Beyond the fencing, the facility was divided into several key areas.

The weather worked in their favour. A persistent sea fog had rolled in overnight, thick enough to provide cover but not so dense as to blind their observation. It clung to the ground in patches, creating ghostly shapes around the facility's floodlights. The moisture in the air dampened sounds, making their movements quieter but also requiring extra vigilance - a guard's footsteps could be nearly silent in these conditions.

Dave and Dan took a slow, deliberate approach to their reconnaissance mission. Dressed in casual clothing that blended with the local workers and residents, they parked their black rental minibus a few streets away and made their way on foot toward the facility.

The pipeline facility loomed in the distance as they approached. From their vantage point on a small rise, they could see the sprawling layout of the site. Tall chimneys and large gas storage tanks were visible from afar, rising above the surrounding landscape. The complex was massive, stretching for several hundred meters in all directions, with pipelines snaking in from offshore and connecting to the processing plants.

Dan used a pair of Swarovski EL binoculars to survey the area while Dave quietly took mental notes about the layout.

The main entrance was guarded by a small security post, where uniformed guards, armed with MP5's, checked vehicles entering and leaving the facility. There were electronic barriers and retractable bollards at the entrance, suggesting that security was tight for any vehicles coming through the main gates.

Beyond the fence, Dave could see several security checkpoints, each manned by a small squad of guards, fully armed and standing behind reinforced barriers. Every vehicle entering the facility was thoroughly checked, the guards using mirrors to inspect the undersides of trucks while others opened the hoods and trunks to search for hidden explosives or devices.

"Standard procedure these days," Dan commented as he watched a truck roll through the gate, its driver barely hiding his frustration as the guards meticulously inspected every inch of the vehicle.

Armed guards patrolled the perimeter, rifles slung across their shoulders. He recognised the weapons immediately—Heckler & Koch G36 assault rifles, standard issue for German security forces. These weren't just rent-a-cops. They were well-equipped and alert, scanning their surroundings for any sign of trouble. The patrols, walking in pairs along a narrow track between the fence and the outer walls of the buildings. They were methodical, and every 10 minutes or so, they saw guards stopping to check electronic consoles that appeared to register their patrol progress. The fencing itself was sturdy, a combination of high chain-link with the razor wire above, as well as sections of solid metal sheets near sensitive areas.

Dan noted a few weak spots where the fencing wasn't as well maintained, mostly along the northern side, where it ran alongside a dense line of trees and brush, providing potential cover for anyone trying to approach

unnoticed. A row of shipping containers was stacked nearby, likely used for storage, but they also created blind spots in the facility's surveillance.

As they continued their reconnaissance, Dave pointed out the key areas they needed to keep in mind:

The large Processing Units, imposing structures made of steel and concrete. This was where the gas was processed and distributed. The units were surrounded by a network of thick pipes that ran across the facility, carrying gas to various points. The hum of machinery was constant, even from a distance.

A low, bunker-like building near the centre of the facility, the control room was likely the brain of the operation. It had reinforced windows and a large satellite dish mounted on the roof, indicating communication systems that could be linked to external operations. This building was heavily guarded, with at least four guards visibly stationed around its perimeter.

"That's the heart of the operation," Dan said. "If anyone wanted to sabotage this place, that's where they'd hit."

A series of massive cylindrical Gas Storage Tanks dominated the western side of the complex. These were crucial to the facility's operation, and any threat to them could cause catastrophic damage. The tanks were spaced apart, with reinforced concrete barriers between them to prevent any potential chain reaction in case of an accident or attack.

Toward the rear of the facility, there was a maintenance area with several outbuildings, which housed equipment and vehicles. There was less visible security here, though the area was still fenced off. A few workers could be seen moving between buildings, but this area seemed more relaxed compared to the main processing area.

Dan pointed out a small building on the south side of the complex, which had several power lines running into it from the street. It looked like a substation, and from its location, they guessed it was responsible for the

facility's external power supply. Nearby, a tall communications tower stretched into the sky, likely relaying data from the control room to other parts of Europe.

Around the facility, there was little in terms of residential housing. The area was mostly industrial, with a few small businesses and workshops scattered nearby. To the north, the coastline was visible, with docks and warehouses further in the distance. To the south, the land sloped gently downward, leading into a mix of farmland and open fields.

While the facility itself was secure, the surrounding area provided a number of possible approach routes. Dense patches of forest and shrubbery flanked the western side of the facility, offering potential cover for anyone wanting to get closer without being spotted.

Dan lowered his binoculars and considered the options. "We'll need to find a weak point, somewhere they're not paying as much attention. But it's going to be risky no matter how we do it. With the recent attacks, they'll have backup plans for any breach."

Dave nodded, but his mind was racing. The guards, the security measures, the cameras—they were all formidable obstacles. But something else gnawed at him. With all the defences in place, why target this facility? It wasn't the easiest target, and from everything they'd gathered, these terrorists weren't amateurs. They knew what they were doing, and they'd likely have a plan to circumvent all these safeguards.

"Why here?" Dave muttered, almost to himself.

Dan raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, why target this place?" Dave clarified. "With all the security, there have to be easier pipelines to go after. Why put all the effort into hitting one of the most heavily guarded locations?"

Dan frowned, the thought settling over him like a cold fog. "Good question. Maybe that's what we need to figure out."

They spent the next few hours watching the movements of the guards and mapping out the compound. There was little room for error. The guards were armed and ready, making it clear that any misstep could turn lethal.

As Dave handed the binoculars back to Dan, his eyes narrowed, watching the drone hover in the distance. It was small, barely visible against the sky, but the faint buzzing sound had cut through the noise of the facility and traffic, catching his attention. It was too discreet, too purposeful, to be a random hobbyist's device.

"Dan," Dave said, his voice steady, "do you think that could be part of the plant's security?"

Dan raised the binoculars to his eyes again, adjusting the focus as he scanned the sky in the direction Dave had pointed. After a moment, he shook his head. "Probably not. These places don't usually rely on drones for surveillance—certainly not one that looks like that. If it were part of their system, they'd have much bigger hardware with infrared and more serious optics. This looks civilian-grade."

Dave frowned. "So someone else is watching."

Without wasting time, he pulled out his encrypted phone and called Anya. Her voice came through after a brief pause, calm as ever.

"What's up, Dave?" she asked.

"We're seeing something odd out here," Dave said, glancing up at the sky where the drone still circled lazily, almost as if it were casually surveying the area. "There's a drone, small, discreet. Dan thinks it's not part of the plant security. Could be someone else keeping an eye on things. Do we have any way of trailing it, finding out who's controlling it?"

There was silence on the other end for a moment, the gears clearly turning in Anya's head. "Tracing a drone? Not directly. We don't have anything on hand that can retask a satellite fast enough to track it visually from the sky.

But... there might be an option. If it's a consumer-grade drone, it's probably using a common radio frequency to communicate with the controller."

"Can we track that?" Dave asked, a flicker of hope in his voice.

"Possibly," Anya replied. "If we can pick up the drone's signal, we might be able to trace the frequency and figure out where the controller is. But we'll need equipment for that—a portable RF analyser or something similar."

Dave's agency-issued mobile phone was state-of-the-art, equipped with features that went beyond regular consumer technology. As he thought about what Anya had said about tracking the drone's radio signal, an idea struck him. The phone wasn't just an encrypted communication device; it was packed with tools designed for missions like these.

After ending the call with Anya, Dave stared down at his phone for a moment. If it could hack into networks, piggyback on Wi-Fi signals, and ensure secure connections anywhere in the world, surely there was something he could use to track the drone.

"Wait a second," Dave muttered to himself, scrolling through the phone's capabilities. One feature stood out: a frequency analyser app, buried deep in the phone's system. The agency had clearly installed it for special operations—something that could listen in on various radio frequencies, allowing them to monitor signals in the field. This could potentially work for tracking the drone's radio frequency.

Dave quickly activated the app. A clean interface appeared, with a real-time spectrum analyser showing the electromagnetic frequencies in the area. The trick would be identifying the drone's signal among the noise of all the nearby devices.

Dan raised an eyebrow when he noticed what Dave was doing. "What's that?"

Dave grinned. "This thing might just be able to trace the drone's radio frequency. If we can pick out the right one, we could track the signal back to its operator."

Dan looked impressed but cautious. "You think that'll work?"

"It's worth a try. These drones usually operate on a specific band between 2.4 GHz and 5.8 GHz. If it's a consumer-grade one, we should be able to isolate it."

Dave stood still, focusing on the spectrum display as it cycled through a wave of frequencies. There was a lot of chatter from nearby sources—cell towers, Wi-Fi routers, even the facility's own communications—but then, just as Dave adjusted the filter to narrow down the search, he saw a spike. A distinct signal hovering in the 5.8 GHz band, moving slightly as the drone drifted overhead.

"Got it," Dave said quietly, locking onto the frequency.

"Now what?" Dan asked, watching the screen.

"The signal's gotta lead back to the controller," Dave replied. "If I can follow it, we might be able to trace it to whoever's operating the drone."

Piggybacking other antennas, the phone's app was able to triangulate the signal strength, and as Dave moved, the phone adjusted, pointing him in a general direction. The signal was coming from the north-east, beyond the facility.

"We can follow this," Dave said, showing Dan the phone's readout. "Let's move, see if we can get closer to the source."

Dan nodded, slinging the rifle across his shoulder. "Lead the way."

They moved swiftly but cautiously, keeping their eyes on the horizon and staying out of sight as much as possible. As they followed the direction indicated by the phone, the signal grew stronger, confirming they were heading in the right direction.

Dave arrives just as he sees two men loading the drone into a people carrier, in a mostly empty car park. Dan only just behind him, his jaw nearly dropped as he saw Dave break into a sprint after the people carrier. It wasn't just a regular run—Dave was moving with an inhuman speed. For a moment, Dan stood frozen, watching Dave rapidly close the distance to the vehicle, his legs pumping with a force that belied his regular-guy appearance.

The real shock came when Dave reached the edge of the street. Without hesitation, he vaulted onto a parked car, using the momentum to leap toward the roof of a building, catching a fire escape ladder with one hand and propelling himself upward.

Within moments, Dave was on the roof, running full tilt across the tiles, moving from one rooftop to the next with effortless precision. It was as if gravity didn't apply to him.

"Jesus..." Dan muttered under his breath, eyes wide. This was not the same guy he had pegged as the IT nerd—the one who had seemed uncertain about his role in the team. "Damn, this guy's got skills."

From Dan's vantage point, he could barely keep up with the sight of Dave darting from roof to roof, keeping perfect pace with the vehicle below. Dave was practically invisible to anyone on the ground, his footfalls light and deliberate. The sheer speed and agility Dave displayed left Dan stunned. It was a side of Dave that none of them had seen before—an ability far beyond what any normal person could possess.

Still standing, Dan shook his head in disbelief. "Where the hell did that come from?" he thought, suddenly realising there was a lot more to Dave than met the eye.

Emden's streets were a mix of old and new, with modern office buildings nestled next to centuries-old structures. The canals winding through the city glistened under the street lights, and the shipyards in the distance gave off a faint metallic scent that drifted with the cool evening air. The people

carrier turned down quieter streets as it moved away from the central part of town. Dave picked up speed, his agility keeping him unseen, moving like a shadow in the night.

The wind had picked up by late afternoon, driving sheets of rain sideways and rattling the windows of the surrounding buildings. Dave barely noticed the weather as he pursued the drone, though the gusts threatened to throw him off balance with each rooftop leap. The slate tiles were treacherous, slick with rain and sea spray, but his enhanced abilities kept him sure-footed despite the conditions.

Dan was left behind, watching in astonishment as Dave jumped over chimneys and scurried across gables with ease, disappearing from sight. The roads below grew narrower, transitioning from residential areas to more industrial zones. Warehouses, storage units, and old factories loomed up ahead. The people carrier slowed and eventually turned into a large industrial complex. Dave halted on the rooftop of an old warehouse, watching carefully. The complex was enclosed by a high chain-link fence topped with barbed wire. Beyond the fence, large hangar-like structures stood silent, their windows darkened.

Dave crouched low, observing the vehicle as it rolled toward a large set of metal doors at one of the hangars. With a mechanical groan, the doors opened just enough to allow the vehicle to enter. It slipped inside, and the doors clanged shut behind it.

The industrial complex sprawled across several acres, a maze of warehouses and hangar-like structures that cast long shadows in the fading light. The buildings themselves were a study in utilitarian decay - weathered concrete walls stained with decades of industrial grime, corrugated metal roofs dulled to a lifeless grey. High sodium lights cast sickly yellow pools at regular intervals, their glow catching occasional wisps of steam that escaped from ancient ventilation systems.

The perimeter fence rattled softly in the coastal breeze, its chain-link frame topped with spirals of razor wire that glinted like frozen lightning against the darkening sky. Behind it, the hangars loomed, their metal walls reverberating with hollow echoes whenever the wind picked up. The largest building, where the people carrier had disappeared, bore the ghosts of old company logos, now just faded patches where paint had worn away more slowly.

The whole facility carried the metallic tang of rust and salt air from the nearby coast, mingled with the sharper notes of industrial lubricants and diesel fumes. Puddles of uncertain depth dotted the cracked concrete of the yard, their surfaces occasionally rippling with reflected light from the security cameras that swept across the compound.

Between the buildings, narrow service alleys created channels of deeper shadow, where the sounds of the city became strangely muffled. The occasional drip of condensation from overhead pipes provided an irregular rhythm to the ambient hum of distant machinery. Even at night, the complex never fully slept - there was always some mechanical system cycling, some distant fan spinning, some unseen process continuing in the darkness.

At the far end of the complex, a row of electrical transformers emitted a constant low buzz, their steel cases filmed with a fine layer of industrial dust. The whole scene was occasionally punctuated by the distant sound of ships' horns from the harbour, a reminder of the facility's connection to Emden's maritime heritage.

The warehouse was well-maintained but discreet, with no visible company logos or signage. There were few other vehicles in the vicinity, just a handful of parked cars and some utility trucks. From the rooftop, Dave could see a security camera perched at the corner of one building, its lens slowly sweeping the area. He knew he needed to be careful if he was going to get any closer.

He tapped into his agency-issued mobile, dialling Anya.

"Anya, the people carrier just entered some industrial complex. Can you help trace this place?"

"On it," Anya replied. "Sending you a map of the area. Stay low until we figure out who owns that facility."

Mei and Anya wasted no time digging into the facility's background. What should have been a straightforward search for property records quickly turned into something much more complex.

Mei's fingers danced over her keyboard, rapidly accessing databases and cross-referencing rental information. "This place is rented through a shell company," she murmured, eyes narrowing at the screen. "Actually, make that multiple shell companies. Each one leads to another, in a different country."

Anya, seated beside her, glanced over. "That's not normal for an industrial unit," she commented, already pulling up satellite images of the area. "Most places like this wouldn't bother with that level of obfuscation."

Mei nodded, continuing to trace the ownership. "We're talking about a web of shadowy businesses, all leading to nothing substantial. A holding company in the Cayman Islands, another in Cyprus. I can't even get to a real person behind this."

"Exactly. Why would a simple storage unit or warehouse need to go to these lengths to hide its true ownership?" Anya asked aloud, though the question was rhetorical. The more they uncovered, the more obvious it became—this wasn't just any random industrial facility.

Mei pulled up a company profile on her screen. "Whoever's behind this wanted it hidden, and they've gone to a lot of trouble to do so. There are too many layers for it to be accidental or even business-related tax avoidance. This reeks of something covert."

Anya, meanwhile, was tapping into the local security footage, trying to backtrack the people carrier from the car park to its origins. "If this facility is as shady as it looks, then whatever's going on inside isn't just standard industrial work."

She glanced at Mei, who was now pulling up additional financial records, tracking payments from accounts that were equally concealed through proxy services. The shell companies were designed to make it impossible to identify the real owners or operators. It was an operation intended to disappear into the cracks of the system.

"We're dealing with something bigger here," Mei said finally, her voice flat. "No regular business needs to hide like this. Not unless they're doing something they don't want anyone—especially the authorities—to know about."

Anya nodded in agreement, her mind already racing with the possibilities. The level of secrecy surrounding the facility meant they were either dealing with something illegal or something that involved very powerful entities who didn't want to be seen. The question was—who, or what, were they hiding?

"Looks like we've found a real target," Anya said grimly. "Time to dig deeper."

13 Surveillance

The next 48 hours were a blur of cautious surveillance, gathering intel, and piecing together what was unfolding inside the industrial unit. The team took turns keeping a close eye on the facility, working in shifts to ensure no movement went unnoticed. The men entering and exiting the compound all had the same telltale signs: military precision, clean-shaven faces, disciplined movements, and the unmistakable stride of men trained in combat.

Night brought a break in the rain but left behind a heavy, oppressive air that seemed to trap the sodium lights' glow in a yellow haze. The temperature dropped sharply after sunset, creating a fine mist as warm air from the facility's ventilation systems met the cold night. Dan's breath formed small clouds as he maintained his observation post, the cold seeping through his layers despite his training.

Occasional gusts of wind from the sea carried the metallic sounds of distant ship horns, mixed with the industrial complex's mechanical drone. The weather forecast promised worse to come - a proper North Sea storm system moving in that would test their surveillance capabilities and potentially force the terrorists' hand.

Dan stood behind a stack of crates, watching through binoculars. He didn't need long to recognise the type of hard cases being carried in and out of the people carrier. Weapons—likely advanced, possibly military-grade. "No doubt about it, those are mercenaries," Dan whispered to Dave, who stood nearby.

"Ex-military, for sure," Dave replied, echoing Dan's sentiment. "But who are they working for?"

While Dan maintained his position with the binoculars, Omar moved silently through the shadows near the industrial complex's perimeter. His movements were fluid and practised, each step placed with deliberate care.

He paused occasionally, his sharp features frozen in concentration as he studied the guards' patrol patterns.

"Two teams of two," Omar reported through his comms, his voice barely above a whisper. "Rotating every thirty minutes. They're well-trained, but their routes are predictable." He went silent for a moment, watching. "There's a three-minute window between shifts where the south-east corner has no direct line of sight."

Dave noted how Omar's calm, methodical assessment contrasted with his own anxious energy. While Dave had been focused on the technical aspects of tracking the drone, Omar was already thinking several steps ahead, mapping out potential infiltration points and escape routes with the precision that came from years of experience in the field.

As the team watched, they noticed more men arriving, each carrying different equipment—some bulky bags, others wheeled cases, all of them moving with a purpose. Every new arrival brought more clarity to what was happening inside. These weren't just casual contractors; they were a professional, organised group, operating with precision.

Meanwhile, Anya had been busy setting up the listening post. Using the latest in agency technology, she directed the device at the windows high in the factory doors. The equipment used the vibrations of the glass to pick up conversations inside the facility. It wasn't perfect, but it was enough to catch snippets of dialogue. The team had a clear picture of what was happening now.

Anya adjusted her headphones and listened carefully, filtering out background noise to focus on the voices inside. "There's a lot of chatter," she said quietly, as the others gathered around her makeshift command station. "Mostly typical banter between soldiers, all different accents—South African, Middle Eastern... and Russian."

"Russian?" Dan asked, his eyes narrowing.

"Yeah," Anya confirmed, turning a dial to clarify the audio. "Definitely Russian. One guy stands out, seems to be giving orders. Sounds like he's in charge of coordinating this operation."

The others fell silent as Anya continued to listen, the Russian-accented voice becoming clearer. It was a calm, authoritative tone, describing a highly detailed plan. Anya's face darkened as the pieces fell into place.

"He's outlining the mission," she said, her voice steady but laced with tension. "They're going to disable the guards by surprise, shut down the electrical and security systems, and infiltrate the control centre. They plan to plant explosives in key locations, not just to disable the pipeline, but to cause as much destruction as possible."

The room went cold. They had known this group was dangerous, but this was confirmation that these mercenaries were behind the recent pipeline attacks. And worse, they had the detailed plans of their next target. The Russian commander wasn't just a contractor. He was orchestrating this entire operation, leading the mercenary team in what could be a devastating attack on European energy infrastructure.

"Do we know when they're planning to strike?" Dan asked, his voice low and urgent.

Anya shook her head, her fingers still working over the controls. "Not yet. But we've got the target details. Now we just need to figure out when."

Dan stepped away, visibly frustrated, but still in control. "We need to get this information to Cecilia and find a way to stop this before they carry out the attack. The clock is ticking."

Dave looked at the industrial unit through his binoculars, the activity inside now tinged with a grim sense of purpose. Whoever these men were, they were preparing for something big—and they had to be stopped before it was too late.

14 From Russia with Love

In the dimly lit operations room, Cecilia's face was illuminated by the glow of multiple screens. Her eyes, sharp and focused, were locked onto the video link where Mei, Anya, and the rest of the team were gathered. The tension in the room was palpable as the gravity of their findings sank in.

"Mei," Cecilia began, her voice carrying an edge of urgency, "can you update the AI with all the surveillance data? I'm particularly interested in the Russian angle."

Mei nodded, already at her workstation, fingers flying over the keyboard. "On it," she responded, her eyes darting between the screens displaying live data and the AI interface. She began uploading the audio and video recordings from their surveillance, feeding the system with every piece of intel they had gathered about the facility and its occupants.

As the data streamed into the AI, Mei's screen filled with a cascade of numbers and patterns. The AI's algorithms started to sift through the massive amounts of information, analysing speech patterns, detecting anomalies, and cross-referencing the data with known databases.

Cecilia watched intently, her mind racing. The recent attacks on European pipelines, combined with the involvement of Russian-accented operatives, sparked a new line of thinking. She leaned forward, her fingers tapping rhythmically on the desk. "What if this isn't just a terrorist plot?" she pondered aloud, her voice reflecting the dawning realisation. "What if this is a state-sponsored action? Could this be part of a larger strategy to undermine European energy security?"

Anya, still listening through her earpiece, raised an eyebrow. "Are you suggesting this might be a deliberate move by a nation-state, rather than an independent terrorist group?"

“Exactly,” Cecilia replied, nodding. “State-sponsored terrorism or sabotage often involves more complex objectives. It’s not just about creating chaos; it’s about achieving specific geopolitical goals. If we’re dealing with a state-backed operation, it could explain the level of coordination and the high-profile nature of the attack.”

Dave, who had been listening in, exchanged worried glances with Dan. The thought that their current mission might be part of a larger, more dangerous scheme was unsettling.

Mei’s screen flashed as the AI began presenting preliminary findings. “I’m seeing some patterns here,” she announced. “The Russian links are more pronounced than we initially thought. The language used in the intercepted conversations, combined with the level of operational detail, suggests a level of professionalism and state support.”

Cecilia’s eyes narrowed as she reviewed the data. “We need to consider the possibility that this is part of a coordinated effort to disrupt European energy supplies, potentially to shift political dynamics or economic power. If that’s the case, our mission just got a lot more complicated.”

Anya, now fully engaged, adjusted her settings to enhance the audio from the surveillance recordings. “We should also look into any recent Russian activities or interests in the region that might align with this operation. There might be other pieces to this puzzle we haven’t considered yet.”

Cecilia nodded. “Agreed. I want a full analysis of any Russian state interests or connections to this operation. And let’s prepare for a potential escalation. If this is a state-sponsored action, we need to be ready for anything.”

The team rallied around their tasks, the urgency of the situation now clear. The notion that their mission might be entangled with geopolitical manoeuvring added a new layer of complexity to their work. The stakes were higher than ever, and the team knew that their next moves would be

crucial in preventing a potentially devastating attack on European infrastructure.

The morning sun filtered through the curtains of the rented accommodation, casting a soft, golden hue over the dining area. The team gathered around a long, wooden table, plates of breakfast spread out in front of them. The room was filled with the comforting aroma of freshly brewed coffee and the clinking of cutlery against ceramic plates. Despite the importance of their mission, there was a relaxed, almost normal feeling to the breakfast, a brief respite from the high-stakes tension of their work.

Dan, with his usual early-morning enthusiasm, was chatting about a recent news article he'd read, while Omar listened with mild interest, occasionally nodding. Dave, who had been quiet and thoughtful, sipped his coffee with a distracted expression, his mind still preoccupied with the complexities of their mission. Karim, always the gracious host, was making sure everyone had enough to eat and a fresh cup of coffee.

Mei's absence was noticeable, but her dedication to the mission was respected. She had been working tirelessly overnight, feeding the AI with data and analysing the results. As she entered the room, her eyes were tired but focused, and she had a sense of urgency about her.

"We need to get Cecilia back on the line," Mei announced, her voice brisk and commanding. She quickly set up her laptop and established a video link with Cecilia, who appeared on the screen, her expression serious and expectant.

"Morning, everyone," Cecilia greeted them. "What's the update?"

Mei took a deep breath and began to relay her findings. "The Russian gas supply disruption to Europe, particularly Germany, is a significant consequence of the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine. It's primarily driven by political factors. Russia has been using gas as a tool of leverage, especially after the West imposed severe sanctions on Russia's energy sector."

She continued, “The sanctions have made it difficult for Russia to sell its gas to Europe, particularly through Nord Stream 2. In response, European countries have been diversifying their energy sources, increasing imports from other countries, and accelerating the transition to renewable energy.”

Cecilia listened intently, her expression a mix of concern and curiosity. “So, what does this mean for our situation?”

Mei explained, “Russia’s ability to re-establish itself as a major gas supplier to Europe faces significant challenges. The long-term demand for gas is declining as European countries reduce their reliance on Russian energy. This disruption might be Russia’s way of creating a window of opportunity for itself.”

Dan raised an eyebrow. “You’re suggesting that Russia might be behind these attacks to cripple European gas supplies and force Europe back into a position where it has to rely on Russian gas again?”

“Exactly,” Mei confirmed. “If Europe becomes dependent on Russian gas again, it could potentially lead to sanctions being lifted or eased without significant concessions from Russia. The sanctions might need to be reconsidered if Russia manages to become a key supplier once more.”

Cecilia processed this information, her mind working through the implications. “This adds a new layer to our mission. If this is a state-sponsored strategy by Russia, we need to consider the broader geopolitical ramifications. It’s not just about preventing attacks; it’s about understanding the larger picture and the motivations behind these actions.”

The team exchanged glances, the weight of their mission now feeling heavier than before. They were not just dealing with isolated incidents but potentially part of a larger, more complex geopolitical strategy.

Cecilia addressed the team directly. “Keep monitoring the situation at the industrial complex and continue with your surveillance. We need to understand if this is indeed part of a broader Russian strategy. And stay

alert for any further developments. This could be a high-stakes game, and we need to be prepared for anything.”

With that, the team refocused their efforts, the urgency of their task clear. They were no longer just preventing a potential disaster; they were now uncovering a crucial piece of a larger geopolitical puzzle.

15 Diversity

As Anya returned with the digital photos of the key players at the industrial unit, the team eagerly gathered around her laptop to review and analyse the images. The results from the facial recognition scan revealed a mix of familiar and surprising identities among the mercenaries. Many of them were ex-military personnel with solid credentials, as expected, but there were three individuals who stood out as anomalies. They were from Middle Eastern countries, with a background in their respective national forces, but their profiles were less impressive compared to the others.

Sergeant Ahmed Al-Farsi, Saudi Arabia, stocky man in his early 40s, with a rugged face and a distinctive scar on his left cheek. He served in the Saudi Arabian National Guard, where his role primarily involved logistics and support rather than direct combat.

Corporal Jamal Rafiq, Egypt, a tall, lean man in his late 30s, with a neatly trimmed beard and piercing brown eyes. He served in the Egyptian Army's engineering corps, specializing in construction and demolition rather than combat operations. While he had some experience in handling explosives, his role was largely confined to non-combat engineering tasks.

PFC Hassan Asad, Jordan, a young man in his mid-20s, with a clean-shaven face and a wiry build. He served in the Jordanian Army, where he was assigned to a support unit with a focus on administrative and supply duties. His military experience was relatively limited, and he lacked significant combat exposure.

The team found these entries intriguing. The inclusion of these individuals seemed to serve more than just operational purposes. It could suggest a possible attempt to diversify the team for various reasons, including political or strategic considerations. Their presence among the more experienced mercenaries raised questions about their role and the motivations behind their inclusion.

Dan, looking at the profiles, commented, “These guys don’t seem to match up with the level of professionalism we’re seeing from the others. They might be here for reasons other than their skills.”

Anya nodded in agreement. “Their background doesn’t suggest high-level operational capabilities. It’s possible they were included to fulfil certain quotas or for political reasons. We should keep an eye on their activities and see if they reveal any useful information.”

Among the mercenaries at the industrial unit, three South African professionals stood out due to their evident camaraderie and higher level of skill. They were clearly seasoned operatives who had worked together before. Their interactions were characterised by loud banter and a brash demeanour, indicating a close-knit and experienced team.

Liam van der Merwe, Major, a rugged man in his early 40s, with a stocky build and a neatly trimmed beard. He served with the South African Special Forces, known as the "Recces" (Reconnaissance Commandos), where he specialised in counter-terrorism and high-risk operations. Liam’s experience includes multiple deployments in conflict zones across Africa, where he earned a reputation for his leadership and tactical expertise.

Thabo Mokoena, Captain, an athletic man in his mid-30s, with a clean-shaven head and a commanding presence. He was a member of the South African Special Forces and is known for his expertise in close-quarters combat and intelligence gathering. Thabo’s background includes numerous covert operations and direct action missions, particularly in high-stress environments.

Jabulani Ndlovu, Sergeant Major, a wiry, agile man in his late 30s, with a chiselled face and a ready smile. He served with the South African Special Forces, focusing on reconnaissance and survival tactics. Jabulani’s service record includes several high-risk operations where he demonstrated exceptional stealth and tactical proficiency.

This trio of South African mercenaries is known for their close-knit teamwork and high level of operational skill. Their backgrounds in the South African Special Forces have honed their abilities in combat, reconnaissance, and tactical planning, making them a formidable and experienced group within the larger team.

As Dave considered the formidable skills of his colleagues and the mercenaries they faced, he felt a deepening sense of insignificance. His IT background, though valuable, seemed a world apart from the high-stakes operations and specialised skills of the team. The weight of their mission and the expertise required to carry it out began to feel overwhelming. The knot in his stomach tightens as Anya details the Russians in the group.

The presence of four formidable Russians in the group added a layer of complexity to the situation. Each of them had an impressive and fearsome combat history, making them a significant threat.

Aleksandr Volkov, Colonel, a burly man in his early 50s with a rugged face and a commanding presence. He served in the Russian Spetsnaz, where he specialised in counter-terrorism operations and high-value target extraction. Known for his brutal efficiency and strategic mind, Aleksandr was involved in several high-profile missions during his service.

Dmitry Orlov, Major, in his late 40s, is lean and wiry with sharp features and a tactical demeanour. He was a part of the Russian GRU (Main Intelligence Directorate), focusing on reconnaissance and intelligence operations. Dmitry's expertise in surveillance and covert operations has made him a skilled operator in both urban and rural environments.

Yevgeny Zolotov, Lieutenant Colonel, a tall, muscular man in his early 40s, known for his prowess in combat and tactics. He served in the Russian VDV (Airborne Troops), where he excelled in airborne assaults and special operations. Ivan's experience with high-intensity combat situations and his leadership skills were highly regarded within his unit. His reputation as a

fierce and reliable fighter adds considerable weight to the team's capabilities.

Anya paused and said, "This last one, leading the mission is where things get weird."

Grigory Ivanovich, Lieutenant Colonel, in his late 50s, with a distinguished but weathered appearance. His presence is imposing, with a steely gaze and a calm, authoritative manner. What is most alarming about Grigory is that his service records indicated he had died seven years ago. He was reportedly killed in a failed operation in Chechnya, where he was involved in a high-stakes mission targeting separatist leaders.

Anya continues with, "I dug into the mission file and learned that Grigory was leading a specialised team tasked with neutralizing a group of separatist leaders in a remote village. The mission was highly classified and involved an assault on a fortified compound. During the operation, Grigory's team encountered unexpected resistance and was ambushed by heavily armed insurgents. Despite initial successes, the team was eventually overwhelmed. Grigory was reported to have been killed in the ensuing firefight, and his body was never recovered. The official reports detailed his heroic last stand and subsequent death."

The revelation of Grigory's presence was unsettling. It suggested a deeper and more sinister layer to the operation, one that involved not just experienced mercenaries but possibly state-sponsored support or a highly clandestine network. His apparent return from the dead cast a long shadow over the team's mission and underscored the high stakes they were facing.

16 **Game Night**

The team had gathered for a quick strategy meeting. The information from Anya had confirmed their fears—this wasn't just any attack but a coordinated effort involving highly trained mercenaries, with the Russian involvement making it a dangerous and high-stakes mission. With the details in place and the Russian team's plan clear, the team knew they had a limited window to act.

They had no warning about when, none of the surveillance hard fielded that information. It was only the continued monitoring with the listening station that picked up the change in the state of activity in the factory unit. They were in a state of readiness, weapons being checked, radios tested, and a more serious tone to the conversations. It must be tonight.

The industrial complex in Emden was the focal point for the Russian attack. With the mission underway and the attackers deploying explosives, Dave and the team needed to move quickly.

The Russian mission to take over and destroy the pipeline was meticulously planned to be executed with precision. The operation aimed not only to disable the pipeline but to create a significant disruption in European gas supplies, aligning with the broader strategic goals of leveraging energy as a political tool.

Two highly skilled Russian snipers were deployed on overwatch, each positioned to cover the facility from different angles.

The first sniper took up position on a nearby high-rise building, offering a clear view of the western side of the facility. From this vantage point, the sniper could monitor and cover the main entrance and any personnel movements around the control room area.

A second sniper was stationed on a distant ridge overlooking the eastern side of the facility. This sniper's role was to provide cover for any activities

on the far side of the complex, including the loading docks and secondary entrances.

Russian snipers posed a significant danger. Dan knew that their ability to control the situation would hinge on eliminating these sharpshooters. He'd identified the positions of the two Russian snipers using the facility's perimeter surveillance and his own observations. The snipers were strategically positioned on rooftops overlooking the facility, providing them with a clear line of sight to any movement within and around the complex.

To reduce the threat to the team and the facility, Dan needed to take out the snipers quickly, and silently.

Approaching the first sniper from behind, his movements precise and deliberate. Dan, no stranger to ranged conflict, knows that in his position there would be countermeasures deployed to prevent someone like Dan sneaking up from behind. Sure enough, and just in the places where Dan would have placed them himself, were pressure sensors. If he were to step on one the sniper would know instantly of his presence. Avoidance rather than attempting to disable them was the best method. With a quick, silent manoeuvre, Dan incapacitated the sniper. Using a combination of hand-to-hand combat techniques and a silenced pistol, he neutralised the sniper without alerting anyone to his presence.

The fallen sniper's rifle—a bolt action ASVK-M more suited to anti-materiel, but effective as anti-personnel too—was now in Dan's hands, providing him with the firepower needed for the next phase of the operation.

Using the newly acquired rifle, Dan took a steady aim at the second sniper. The sniper was focused on his surveillance, unaware of the threat approaching him from a different angle. With a steady hand and precise aim, Dan eliminated the second sniper. The shot was clean, taking out the sniper before he could react. The impact was lessened by the sound-

dampening features of the rifle, ensuring that the remaining mercenaries were not alerted.

With both snipers neutralised, Dan alerted the rest of the team to about the situation. The threat from the high vantage points had been effectively removed, reducing the risk to the team and the facility.

Omar, stationed at the facility gates, crouched behind a makeshift cover, watched as the Middle Eastern soldiers—Jamal, Ahmed, and their colleague, Hassan—initiated their ill-conceived distraction. The tension was palpable as the chaos unfolded.

The three Middle Eastern soldiers, clad in mismatched gear that barely blended with their surroundings, set off a small explosion and ignited a fire near the gates. The hope was to draw the attention of the guards and create a diversion. However, their execution was anything but subtle.

The explosion was louder than anticipated, but the fire barely spread beyond a small area. The soldiers, with their shaky aim and panicked movements, began to fire wildly in the direction of the guards, their shots going astray. It was a far cry from the precision needed for a coordinated distraction.

The guards at the facility, trained to handle emergencies and threats, were quick to react. They immediately took cover and returned fire, their MP5 submachine guns providing a steady stream of accurate, controlled bursts. Their experience in handling such situations was evident.

Hassan fell in a short burst from the guards MP5. His face planting into the dust, hand gun flying, was dead before he hit the ground.

As the guards continued to deal with the disorganised assault, Jamal and Ahmed attempted to escalate the situation. They carried a backpack filled with explosives, hoping to make a dramatic impact. However, the device detonated prematurely, engulfing both Jamal and Ahmed in a fiery

explosion. The blast sent shrapnel and smoke into the air, further adding to the confusion but not in a controlled or beneficial way.

There was little Omar could do but watch the chaotic scene unfold before him. This wasn't a credible attack strategy, it was an awful attempt at distraction. But what if the distraction wasn't about distracting the guards?

Omar reasoned, the Russians had anticipated, or set up the Middle Eastern soldiers would not be able to effectively execute the distraction. The plan was to use these soldiers as a cover to make the attack look like an act of terrorism. By doing so, they aimed to create a narrative that would mislead investigations and focus attention away from their true objectives.

Dave, equipped with his exceptional speed, strength, and near-invulnerability, was tasked with intercepting the South African team heading for the control room. Using his abilities, Dave would bypass conventional security and direct confrontations to reach and neutralise the mercenaries swiftly.

Using his agility to bypass the outer defences, by leaping clean over them he avoided detection. His enhanced speed allowed him to cover the distance between buildings in mere moments.

As Dave moved closer to the control room, he observed the South African team's movements. These three men—Ndlovu, van der Merwe, and Mokoena—were making their way through the facility, armed and focused on their mission. They had already made short work of the control room guards.

From the rooftop, Dave positioned himself strategically above the doors leading to the control room. Dropping into the South African group as they approached. These were savvy operators, enough distance between them to make a difficult group target.

Ndlovu acted instinctively and with his FN Herstal in hand, rapidly puts three rounds into Dave's chest. Dave didn't even slow down, disarming him with a single swipe and rendering him unconscious with a swift strike.

van der Merwe, seeing how ineffectual chest shots had been, knew better than to aim for the body armour. Instead, he fires straight at the head. Incredulous at his apparent shots missing at this range, it's too late to react, with a powerful lunge, Dave knocked the gun from Pieter's hand and delivered a crushing blow to his midsection, incapacitating him instantly.

The last mercenary, Thabo, tried to flee but was quickly caught by Dave. In a display of raw strength, Dave pinned Thabo against the wall and subdued him with a series of precise, non-lethal strikes.

Anya was on clean up duty. She had followed the South Africans as they'd set explosives at key locations on their way to the control room. Located at critical points along the pipeline, the compressor stations were rigged with high-explosive charges to ensure maximum disruption to the gas flow. The pumping stations, responsible for maintaining the pressure in the pipeline, were also targeted to cause severe damage to the infrastructure. Her objective to locate and disable the explosive devices.

Tailing the South Africans, Anya stays in the shadows and watches closely where they place the shaped charges. As they move on she steps up and simply pulls the detonators and disconnects the timers. No big red glowing LED countdown, beeping each second like in the movies, but a small LCD display, now appears inactive since set. It ticks down silently and invisibly. There are no tricky booby traps, these are plain and simple devices to explode on demand. Pull the detonator, disconnect the timer, and leave the shaped charge in place. A clean up crew can safely come in and dispose of the charge now that its mechanism for detonation has been removed.

This left two unaccounted for. The Russians, Aleksandr, and Grigory.

17 Promises

Grigory slammed his fist into the dashboard of the van, cracking the plastic, his cold eyes burning with fury. His mind played over the events of the last hours like a never-ending loop—a cacophony of missed opportunities, tactical missteps, and the infuriating success of the agency team. His team, his carefully trained and well-armed soldiers, had been systematically taken down, and that infuriated him.

“How could they...” Grigory growled, spitting the words. He was a man who had survived impossible odds, known for leading missions that were thought to be suicide. To be bested like this, by some unknown team, was beyond intolerable.

“Aleksandr,” he barked, his voice like venom. “We are not done. Not by a long shot.”

Aleksandr turned his gaze slightly but remained silent, knowing full well what was coming next. Grigory was not the type to let this slide. Revenge wasn’t just a concept for him; it was a driving force. The Russian operative, who had supposedly died seven years ago, was already planning his next move, his mind swirling with thoughts of retribution.

“We will hunt them down. One by one if we have to. They will pay for this humiliation with their blood,” Grigory said, his voice low and dangerous.

Grigory wasn’t one to react impulsively, even in his fury. His mind, though enraged, was still calculating. He knew the agency team wouldn’t just disappear. They’d be in Emden for some time, possibly regrouping or awaiting further orders. They likely thought they had stopped the worst of the attack, but Grigory had no intention of allowing them to feel victorious for long.

“We’ll need to gather resources,” Aleksandr said cautiously, breaking his silence. “We don’t know who they are exactly, but they were efficient. They knew how to stop us.”

Grigory’s face twisted into a grimace. “I don’t care who they are. We’ll learn everything soon enough. They may have stopped this operation, but they don’t know what’s coming.”

He paused, letting the silence settle for a moment, the van’s engine the only sound. Then, with deadly certainty, he continued, “First, we isolate them. Then, we destroy them. They’ll never see it coming.”

18 Vengeance

Grigory Ivanovich sat in the dim light of the warehouse operations centre, surveillance feeds flickering across multiple screens. He watched his decoy team going through their rehearsed movements around Erzurum's pipeline facilities.

"Status report," he demanded.

Aleksandr consulted his tablet. "The mercenaries are in position around Erzurum. They're maintaining convincing patterns of activity - exactly what surveillance would expect to see before an operation."

"And the other deployment?"

"Moving as planned. Our second team passed through Ankara yesterday. They're taking the long route through smaller cities to avoid attention."

Grigory nodded, studying a map of Turkey's pipeline network. His finger traced the TANAP line westward from Erzurum, pausing at various points. "The agency will have their eyes fixed on the compressor station. They'll expect us to strike at the source, where the damage would be most obvious."

"Like Emden," Aleksandr agreed.

"Like Emden." A cold smile. "Make sure our transport manifests show the explosives arriving in Erzurum. Let them find those breadcrumbs."

"And the actual shipment?"

"Route it through Konya. More traffic there, easier to hide among legitimate cargo. Have it arrive during the business rush - lots of trucks on the road at that hour." He turned to another screen showing traffic patterns. "Their monitoring systems will be overwhelmed with data."

One of their operatives entered with a fresh intelligence report. "Sir, we've confirmed the agency team has landed in Erzurum."

"Good. Keep feeding them exactly what they expect to see." Grigory turned to the pipeline network map again. "The mountains make excellent theatre, don't they? Everyone looking up, no one looking down."

His finger moved across the map once more, tapping thoughtfully at different urban centres along the pipeline's path.

"Have our second team maintain radio silence once they pass Kırıkkale. I want them invisible until they're in position." He studied the population densities marked on the map. "How many simultaneous alarms do you think their monitoring systems can handle?"

Aleksandr caught his meaning. "We could trigger alerts at multiple stations. Make them chase ghosts while we-"

"Precisely." Grigory's smile widened. "Sometimes the best place to hide is in plain sight. Among all those ordinary people, going about their ordinary lives."

He stood, addressing his gathered officers. "Maintain the Erzurum deception. I want every eye in Turkey looking east. Meanwhile, I'll be taking a little trip. Some cities are lovely this time of year."

19 Tea

Mei was already reviewing data by the time the team gathered for breakfast. Anya had spent the night combing through intercepted communications, and something was beginning to emerge—a pattern.

Mei looked up from her laptop, her face thoughtful. “I think we’ve got something. There’s chatter indicating movement toward Erzurum. It’s subtle, but the same network we were tracking after Emden is lighting up again. They’re getting ready for something.”

Dave furrowed his brow. “Erzurum? It’s remote, but it makes sense. Take out the compressor station there, and it’ll cripple gas flow at the beginning of the line. They’d have the cover of the mountains too.”

Dan nodded in agreement, sipping his coffee. “It’s a good play. They’d have us running around in rough terrain, no easy exits. We’d be isolated.”

Cecilia appeared on the video link. “What’s your assessment? Erzurum seems logical, but something feels off.”

Mei glanced at the others. “It checks out—everything we’ve intercepted points to it. But you’re right, Cecilia. It’s almost too obvious. Still, it’s a major station, and it’s vulnerable.”

Dave, still mulling it over, finally spoke. “If it’s a trap, we won’t know until we’re there. But we can’t ignore the possibility they’ll hit Erzurum. We’ll have to go.”

Dan agreed. “We don’t have much of a choice. If we sit back, and they do hit the compressor station, the damage will be catastrophic.”

Cecilia nodded. “Then Erzurum it is. Prepare for the worst.”

The agency team’s journey to Erzurum began at dawn. With their mission rapidly unfolding, they had little time to waste. From the bustling airport of Frankfurt, they took a commercial flight to Istanbul, blending in with the

throng of travellers. After a quick layover, the final leg of the journey required something more discreet—a private plane that would ferry them to the remote region of Erzurum without raising suspicion.

They boarded the sleek, matte-black Gulfstream G280, its engines purring as they taxied for take-off. The interior was quiet, modern, and utilitarian, with none of the luxury that such planes were known for. The cabin was fitted with a communications hub, allowing Mei and Anya to continue monitoring their surveillance feeds and preparing for the operation.

Dave sat by the window, staring out as the sprawling urban landscape of Istanbul gave way to the rolling hills of Anatolia. Dan was across the aisle, reviewing tactical maps, while Mei and Anya huddled together over laptops, continuing to track digital breadcrumbs pointing toward Erzurum. An air of focus and quiet tension hung in the cabin.

The Gulfstream made quick work of the distance, and after a couple of hours, the terrain beneath them became increasingly rugged. The mountains of Eastern Turkey loomed ahead, their snow-dusted peaks stark against the otherwise arid landscape. The Gulfstream began its descent, cutting through clear skies toward the private airfield near Erzurum.

As the plane touched down, Dave noted the isolation of the area. The small, barely-maintained runway was nestled in a wide valley, surrounded by low, barren hills and scrubland. A few scattered buildings made up the airfield's operations, none of them remarkable—just enough to service private planes like theirs. The nearest road was a single, unpaved path leading off into the hills, disappearing into the horizon.

They disembarked quickly, the brisk mountain air biting at their skin as they gathered their bags and equipment. The only vehicle waiting for them was a nondescript SUV, rented under one of the agency's shell corporations. Dan took the keys and loaded their gear into the back.

“Welcome to Erzurum,” Dan muttered under his breath as he glanced around the desolate airfield. “Not exactly a warm welcome.”

Dave, pulling on a jacket to ward off the chill, nodded in agreement. "We'll need to find a place to stay. Something quiet, off the radar."

As their SUV wound through Erzurum's streets, the contrasts of the ancient city revealed themselves. The modern highway that had brought them from the airport gave way to narrow cobblestone streets dating back to the Silk Road era. They passed the grand Çifte Minareli Medrese, its twin minarets stretching skyward, the intricate Seljuk stonework a reminder of the city's position as a historical crossroads of civilizations.

"Three million tourists last year," Mei noted, eyes on her tablet. "Most heading to Palandöken for skiing. Easy to disappear in the winter crowds."

The heart of the city was a blend of old and new – traditional kebab restaurants next to modern cafés, the smell of grilled lamb and pitta bread mixing with exhaust from passing vehicles. Street vendors called out in rapid-fire Turkish, selling simit bread rings crusted with sesame seeds. Outside a lokanta, workers on lunch break sat drinking red çay from tulip-shaped glasses and playing tavla, the rapid click-clack of backgammon pieces barely audible over the urban noise.

But as Dan steered them toward the outskirts, the urban bustle fell away dramatically. Within minutes, they were in a different world. The paved roads turned to gravel, then dirt. Adobe houses with satellite dishes dotted the rugged hillsides. Shepherds tended flocks in the distance, the sheep looking like white dots against the brown mountains.

"City ends abruptly here," Dan observed, navigating a particularly rough section of road. "No suburbs, no gradual transition. Just city, then wilderness."

"Elevation's part of it," Anya replied, checking their position. "We're at 1,900 meters already. City can't easily expand up the mountainsides."

Their guest-house sat in this transition zone, where the last fingers of civilization reached into the rugged landscape. The building itself reflected

this duality – traditional stone construction with modern security cameras discreetly mounted under the eaves. A satellite dish was half-hidden behind a classic Ottoman-style wooden balcony.

Inside, the elderly owner, Fatma Hanım, greeted them with the formal Turkish hospitality that was second nature in Anatolia. She insisted they remove their shoes, providing traditional wool slippers, then ushered them into a sitting room decorated with both family photos and verses from the Quran in elegant calligraphy.

"Hoş geldiniz," she said warmly, then switched to accented English. "Welcome. You must be tired from your journey. Please, sit. I'll bring çay."

The room itself was a testament to Erzurum's heritage – handwoven carpets from local artisans covered the floors, while modern radiators kept the mountain chill at bay. Through the window, they could see the last rays of sun hitting the distant peaks of the Palandöken Mountains, casting long shadows across the valley.

"Perfect location," Dave murmured, noting how the house's position offered clear sight lines in all directions. "We can see anyone approaching from the city or the mountains."

Fatma Hanım returned with a tray of traditional Turkish tea service – delicate, tulip-shaped glasses on ornate saucers, sugar cubes on the side. Steam rose from the deep red liquid as she poured with practised grace. The ritual of serving tea was clearly second nature to her, a cornerstone of Turkish hospitality that remained unchanged whether serving family or strangers.

Dave, having learned a few key Turkish phrases, asked politely, "Bir kahve, lütfen" (a coffee, please). As he knew the tea wouldn't be anything like the traditional English cuppa he missed, but he could at least hope for a decent caffeine boost with coffee.

Before she could answer, a chuckle rippled through the group as Dan, Mei, and Anya exchanged amused glances. The woman smiled apologetically, and despite the differences in the local dialect, said, "I'm sorry, but the coffee machine is out of service at the moment."

The others couldn't help but laugh out loud, and even Dave, who had been craving coffee all day, had to grin. "Of course it is," he said with a sigh, shaking his head in mock surrender. "Alright, tea it is then."

The team's laughter filled the room, a brief but welcome release of tension after the long journey and the mounting pressure of the mission ahead.

"Should have known," Dan chuckled, leaning back in his chair. "You and coffee, Dave. It's like a running joke now."

Dave grinned. "I'll take what I can get."

"The mountains, they can be dangerous in winter," Fatma Hamm remarked casually as she served. "Many people come for skiing, but not all respect the weather. Smart travellers watch the sky and listen to local wisdom. In particular, make sure you wrap up warm at night. The temperature can drop dramatically at night."

The double meaning wasn't lost on the team. In Erzurum, natural threats and human dangers were often intertwined, and survival depended on understanding both.

The rooms were basic but clean, with heavy wooden furniture and thick blankets to ward off the cold mountain nights. Each member of the team claimed a room, quickly stowing their gear.

Once they were settled, the team gathered in the small, communal lounge of the guest house. A wood-burning stove crackled in the corner, casting flickering light over their faces as they went over the final stages of their plan. Mei was already scanning the local network traffic, looking for any further confirmation that Erzurum was their target, while Anya continued monitoring intercepted communications.

“We need to be ready for anything,” Mei said, her tone serious as she tapped away on her laptop. “Grigory knows we’ll follow him. If this is a trap, we’ll know soon enough.”

Dan nodded. “We’ll get the lay of the land tomorrow. Scout the pipeline, and the surrounding area. If Grigory’s forces are here, we’ll find them.”

Dave, still feeling the weight of the mission on his shoulders, remained quiet. He stared out the window at the darkening mountains, knowing that the real challenge was just beginning. They had been led to Erzurum, but whether this was the true target or just another step in Grigory’s plan remained to be seen. For now, all they could do was prepare.

With their accommodations secured and their mission clear, the agency team settled in for the night, knowing that tomorrow would bring them one step closer to uncovering Grigory’s next move—and whatever else lay in store in the mountains of Erzurum.

After securing their gear, the team made their way downstairs, gathering in the cosy, dimly lit lounge of the guest house. Anya had already set up the more critical mission equipment in her room—laptops, encrypted phones, and surveillance devices all locked securely away. The lounge had a rustic charm, with heavy wooden furniture and woven rugs scattered across the stone floor. A wood-burning stove provided a flickering warmth that contrasted with the chilly mountain air outside.

As they settled in, the sound of footsteps approached. The elderly Turkish woman who had greeted them earlier appeared, her smile polite and welcoming. “Would you like some refreshment after your journey?” she asked in Turkish, her voice soft and hospitable. “Perhaps some tea?”

The woman disappeared briefly into the back kitchen, returning with a tray of glasses filled with steaming Turkish tea. Dave accepted his cup with a smile, accepting that he would have to wait for his coffee fix a little longer.

As they sipped their tea, the team began to chat casually, enjoying the warmth and brief respite.

Anya, seated closest to the window, gazed out into the darkening sky. “Tomorrow, we’ll start scouting the pipeline,” she said, her tone shifting back to business. “We need to confirm if Grigory is leading us into a trap.”

Mei nodded in agreement, still hunched over her laptop, scanning for any new data. “I’ll keep monitoring the network. Any trace of chatter about the pipeline, I’ll pick it up.”

From her laptop Mei’s ran multiple analysis threads: pattern-matching algorithms scanning encrypted radio traffic, deep packet inspection of local network data, and automated cross-referencing of intercepted communications against known FSB protocols. The system flagged suspicious patterns - bursts of encrypted data that matched Russian military communication signatures.

The conversation flowed smoothly, a mix of mission talk and casual banter. The atmosphere was calm, but everyone knew that the real test would begin the next day.

As the evening wore on and the tea cups emptied, the team fell into a thoughtful silence. Dave, though trying to remain composed, still felt a familiar pang of self-doubt creeping in. Surrounded by professionals with years of combat and covert experience, he couldn’t help but wonder how he fit into all this. Even with his enhanced abilities, it was hard not to feel like the odd one out.

But for now, the tea had warmed him, and the laughter had eased the tension. Tomorrow would bring new challenges, and he would need every ounce of focus to face them. For tonight, at least, he could enjoy the brief peace, even if it came without coffee.

Dave found Mei still at her computer at 3AM, the blue screen light reflecting off her glasses. He set a fresh cup of coffee beside her.

"You don't have to stay up," she said, not looking away from her screen.

"Can't sleep anyway." Dave pulled up a chair. "Back in IT, I used to work late shifts. Something peaceful about it."

Mei's typing slowed. "I know what you mean. In Beijing, I practically lived in the cybersecurity lab. My colleagues used to joke that I'd marry my computer."

"What made you leave?"

She paused, finally turning to look at him. "Sometimes you discover things you can't unsee. Things that make you choose sides." She picked up the coffee. "What about you? Before all this... invulnerability stuff?"

It was the first time any of them had asked about his past so directly. Dave shifted in his chair, wrapping his hands around his coffee mug.

"There's not really much to tell. Before 'Super Dave' I was just an IT consultant. Nowhere near yours or Anya's skills, offering delivery and configuration of business systems." He gave a self-deprecating smile. "Pretty mundane stuff. Now, the agency gives me an application of my abilities that is good intentioned, and practical."

Mei studied him for a moment. "You say that like it's simple. Going from IT consultant to..." she gestured vaguely at him, "this."

Dave stared into his coffee. "Sometimes I think about my old clients. Wonder what they'd say if they knew their systems guy turned out to be bulletproof." He chuckled softly. "Probably ask if it would help with their server maintenance."

"Do you miss it?" Mei asked quietly. "The normal life?"

Dave considered this, remembering endless office meetings, casual lunches with colleagues, routine maintenance calls. A world where his biggest worry was meeting project deadlines. "Sometimes," he admitted. "But then

I think about what I can do now, how I can actually help protect people. Even if I'm still figuring out exactly how."

Mei nodded, turning back to her screen. But there was a new understanding between them – they'd both left normal lives behind, chosen paths that set them apart from the world they once knew.

20 Memory Games

While the others settled into their rooms at the guest house, Anya stood at her window, her grey eyes scanning the darkening streets of Erzurum. Something about the city's layout triggered old memories – another mountain town, another operation that had gone sideways.

She unconsciously touched the scar along her collarbone, remembering Grozny. The similarities were uncomfortable: the narrow streets, the mix of old stone buildings and modern additions, the way the mountains loomed over everything. Back then, she'd been on the other side, running point for Spetsnaz on what should have been a simple extraction.

Her fingers moved swiftly over her laptop keyboard, checking surveillance feeds. Local traffic cameras, security systems, even personal devices – each one a potential window into Grigory's operation. She worked methodically, her movements precise, just as she'd been trained. But something kept pulling her attention back to the window, to those familiar shadows.

"You see something?" Dave asked from the doorway, his bulky frame nearly filling it.

Anya didn't turn. "Patterns," she replied, her voice clipped. "Grigory's FSB-trained. He'll use old protocols, even if he doesn't realise it. The way his men move, where they position their surveillance – it's like reading a book I helped write."

She finally faced Dave, her expression hardening. "In Grozny, I lost two team members because I missed these patterns. I was young, eager to prove myself. By the time I realised we were walking into a trap, it was too late."

"And now?" Dave pressed, sensing there was more.

"Now I see them everywhere," Anya admitted, her usual cold professionalism cracking slightly. "The way that shopkeeper across the

street keeps adjusting his awning – it's a signal. The cable repair van that's been parked two blocks away since we arrived – it's a mobile surveillance unit. Grigory wants us to know we're being watched."

She turned back to her laptop, her fingers flying over the keys with renewed intensity. "But he forgets – I helped design these protocols. And this time, I won't miss anything."

Dave studied her for a moment. "You're sure it's not just memories making you see ghosts?"

Anya's lips curved into a hard smile. "The ghosts I see are very real, Dave. They taught me everything I know about staying alive." She pulled up a series of surveillance images. "And right now, they're telling me Grigory's men are exactly where I would have put them – which means they're exactly where we need them to be."

21 Into the Web

Grigory Ivanovich watched the dim screen in front of him, his face illuminated by the faint glow of surveillance footage from the team that had landed at the private airport. His cold eyes darted between the images of the team moving through Erzurum. They had arrived just as he had expected, lured into the trap he had carefully set. It had been easy, really—just a few breadcrumbs planted here and there, some well-placed whispers in the right networks. They had followed the trail like sheep to the slaughter.

But something about the team wasn't adding up.

Grigory's surveillance centre utilized an array of networked systems: a bank of monitors displaying real-time feeds from distributed micro-cameras, a signals intelligence platform intercepting local cellular and radio traffic, and advanced facial recognition software cross-referencing against multiple intelligence databases. The system flagged inconsistencies in the team members' digital footprints.

The intel pouring in from his facial recognition network was strangely fragmented. It was as if these people were working for multiple agencies simultaneously, their records inconsistent, conflicting even. One moment, an operative appeared tied to the CIA; the next, MI6. Some were linked to entirely different organizations in ways that made no sense. This kind of disjointed detail was concerning—was this team running multiple identities, a cross agency unit, or was something else at play?

Grigory paused the surveillance footage, studying the scene from Emden frame by frame. The overweight man in the ridiculous wig had done something impossible – taken direct hits from trained mercenaries without flinching. The bullets should have dropped him, even with body armour.

"Play it again," he commanded, leaning forward.

The footage showed three of his best South African operators engaging the target. First, Ndlovu's precise chest shots that seemed to have no effect. Then van der Merwe's clean headshot that somehow... missed? No, Grigory's eyes narrowed – not missed. The man's head had moved faster than humanly possible, dodging bullets at point-blank range.

The database searches showing no records were secondary now – a curious detail rather than the main concern. What mattered was what he'd seen: superhuman speed, apparent invulnerability, strength that could incapacitate elite operators with single strikes.

"Who the hell is this?" he muttered to himself. The man's appearance was almost comically ordinary – overweight, middle-aged, that absurd wig. Was it all carefully crafted misdirection? Or something else entirely?

One of his men entered the room. "They've settled into a guest house in the city," the man reported.

Grigory nodded, his mind working through the puzzle. "Good. Keep eyes on them. But that one," he pointed to the freeze-frame of Dave, "I want every detail. How he moves, what he can do. He's the key to understanding what we're really dealing with."

The man saluted and left, leaving Grigory alone with his thoughts. He turned back to the screen, his cold eyes fixating on the overweight man in the ridiculous wig. There was something off, something hidden beneath that ordinary exterior, and Grigory intended to find out what it was.

As he stared at the screen, the picture of the team members became clearer. They weren't just here for reconnaissance or intel gathering. They had come for him and were hunting him down, just as he had hoped. But he wasn't going to be the prey in this game. He was the predator, and soon enough, he would have them right where he wanted them—isolated, without support, and vulnerable.

Grigory grinned darkly. The remote location of Erzurum made it all too easy to track new arrivals. A team coming in by private plane didn't exactly blend into the background here. His spies had eyes on them from the moment they touched down, and he had arrived days before, using the time to set everything in motion. They were walking straight into his trap, thinking they were still on the hunt.

The puzzle pieces were coming together, but one piece—the ordinary, overweight ghost—didn't quite fit. Grigory's eyes narrowed again. That was the one who would give him answers, even if he didn't know it yet.

He leaned forward, his fingers drumming on the desk. "Soon," he whispered, "very soon."

Grigory's voice cut through the dimly lit room like a knife, commanding attention from his gathered team. The men, seasoned operatives with hard faces and colder eyes, listened intently as he laid out the plan. Failure was not an option; they knew the consequences.

"I want each of you to trail a member of this team," Grigory began, his tone leaving no room for misinterpretation. "Stay invisible. No mistakes. No slip-ups. If any of you are seen, heard, or detected, there will be severe consequences." His icy glare scanned the room, locking eyes with each operative. The message was clear—failure meant retribution, and it wouldn't be swift, but it would be deadly.

He stepped forward, his boots echoing off the concrete floor as he approached the screen displaying images of the agency team in Erzurum. Grigory's eyes lingered on the overweight man in the wig. "This one," he pointed, his finger hovering over the ghostly figure on the monitor. "I'm particularly interested in him."

The operatives exchanged glances, puzzled but too disciplined to question their leader. Grigory continued, his voice dropping to a deadly whisper. "He doesn't fit. And I don't like things that don't fit. If you find him alone,

lift him covertly and bring him to me. No noise, no mess. I want him alive, and able to talk."

Grigory turned sharply, his expression hardening. "We may be able to use him against the others. He could have valuable intel we can exploit. But if he knows nothing..." His words trailed off, but the implication was clear. They all knew what happened to useless assets.

One of the operatives, a tall, wiry man with a scar running down his cheek, stepped forward. "What if he's with the others?"

Grigory's lips curled into a cold smile. "If he's with the others, follow him. I don't care how long it takes. We need to understand his role and why the agency brought someone like him into the field. But remember—if you fail, don't come back."

The room fell silent as the gravity of the mission sank in. These were not men who feared much, but the threat in Grigory's words made even them uneasy. They had seen what happened to those who disappointed him.

Grigory stood tall, his piercing gaze sweeping over the operatives. "Get to work. I want updates regularly. And remember—the ghost with the wig is mine."

With that, the men dispersed, each heading into the shadows, preparing to trail their targets with the kind of precision that only highly trained operatives could muster. Grigory watched them leave, his mind already working through the next steps. If this ghost could give him any leverage over the agency team, Grigory would exploit it mercilessly.

He glanced once more at the screen, his eyes narrowing. Soon, the pieces would fall into place. And when they did, it would be his enemies who would fall.

Grigory had played this game before. The formula was simple but effective. He set up a decoy team just outside of Erzurum, mirroring the same setup from the failed Emden operation—a competent group of

mercenaries, none the wiser that they were pawns in a much larger scheme. Their target was, once again, the pipeline. Every detail was laid out with precision, from the recon missions to the false intel suggesting a planned strike. The men had their orders, and they believed in them completely.

The decoy team carried the latest in Russian surveillance gear: thermal imaging cameras disguised as maintenance equipment, distributed sensor networks masked as utility boxes, and covert mesh networks for secure communication. Each operative was equipped with modified smartphones running custom software for real-time intelligence sharing and target tracking.

This time, however, the strike would never come.

Grigory, ever the master tactician, managed the team from a distance, watching them move through the motions. They prepared their surveillance, ran their reconnaissance, and discussed infiltration strategies—everything an authentic team would do in the lead-up to a high-stakes operation. The decoys were professional, their commitment unquestionable. They truly believed they were set to cripple the TANAP pipeline, one of Europe's vital gas arteries, just as they had been briefed.

Grigory had even gone so far as to hand-pick the “Muslim scapegoats” for the operation, just like he had done in Emden. These men were supposed to play the part of fanatical terrorists, their involvement designed to sell the idea to the authorities and media alike once the plot was discovered—or rather, when it was discovered. Everything about the decoy mission was meant to look real.

But Grigory had no intention of ever ordering the attack. This time, the game was different.

The agents would no doubt find out about this decoy team—he was counting on it. They would pick up the surveillance activity, intercept communications, perhaps even spot the group making reconnaissance missions. They would begin to track the mercenaries, convinced that this

was another imminent pipeline attack like the one they had foiled in Emden. The agents would focus their efforts on monitoring, investigating, and preparing for a strike that would never happen.

All the while, Grigory's true plan would unfold elsewhere. The decoy was just that—a ruse, a clever distraction meant to draw the agency's attention away from the real threat.

Grigory smiled at the thought. The bait was there, perfectly placed. The agents would have no choice but to take it. And while they were busy untangling the false threads of the pipeline plot, he would be setting his trap.

He would strike them where they least expected it, with devastating precision. The decoys had their part to play, but the real target had never been the pipeline.

It was the agents themselves.

22 The First Casualty

Mei moved through the quiet streets of Erzurum, her mind focused on the task at hand. The Wi-Fi signal at their accommodation was terrible, barely enough for basic connectivity, let alone the critical reconnaissance work the team needed to do. But Mei was prepared. She had her signal repeaters with her—devices that could piggyback off other networks, mesh them together, and create a high-performance connection stable enough for their needs.

Normally, she wouldn't venture out alone for this kind of work, but Omar, her designated backup for the night, was out of commission after some dodgy food left him feeling under the weather. Confident in her abilities, Mei decided to go on her own, telling herself it would be a quick trip.

Crossing the street, she scanned the area casually. She knew the risks of being in the open, but her tech-focused mind was more occupied with finding a suitable spot to test the network signals. She glanced down at her phone, noting the signal strength fluctuating between weak and unusable. She sighed. Just a little further.

Then, without warning, everything went black.

She didn't even register the hit. In one swift, expertly coordinated motion, she was struck from behind, unconscious before she could make a sound. Two men, dressed in dark, nondescript clothing, moved with precision, bundling Mei into a waiting van. The entire operation took less than thirty seconds—no noise, no witnesses. They had planned this meticulously, knowing that if they could get Mei out of sight, the agency team would be left scrambling.

As the van sped away, one of the men took Mei's mobile phone, turning it over in his hand. He opened the window slightly and tossed it out, watching as it skittered across the pavement. No signal would be traceable

now. They had cut off the one lifeline that could have helped the team track her.

Inside the van, Mei lay still, unconscious and unaware of what had just happened. Grigory's plan had begun to take shape. He had struck, and the agency team didn't even know they had already lost one of their own.

Mei's head throbbed as she slowly came to. The first thing she noticed was the dull, grey light filtering through gaps between the rough wooden boards over the windows. Her mind scrambled to make sense of her surroundings. She was lying on a bed — if it could be called that — a battered wooden frame barely holding together and a mattress that seemed as though it had been discarded in a landfill. She recoiled at the smell of the duvet, stained and musty, the scent of damp and sweat assaulting her nose.

Sitting up, the room seemed to tilt for a moment. She blinked, trying to clear the fog in her head. That's when she felt it — a cold, heavy weight around her ankle. Her heart sank as she glanced down to see a thick chain attached to her left leg. She instinctively tugged at it, but the chain held fast, rattling against the wooden floor with a dull metallic clank.

Following the chain, her eyes landed on a large metal eyelet screwed into the floor, another padlock securing it firmly. There was no way she was getting free from that without help, or without the key. Panic surged for a moment, her heart racing, but she took a deep breath, forcing herself to stay calm. She was trained for situations like this.

Her mind started working through the possibilities. Where was she? How long had she been out? And who had captured her? The Russians, it had to be. This was part of Grigory's revenge.

Mei's eyes scanned the small, dingy room. There were no immediate tools or objects she could use to pick the lock. Her captors had been thorough. But if there were gaps in the boards on the windows, maybe she could find a way to send a signal out. She shuffled forward, the chain scraping noisily

on the floor, to get a better look at the light filtering through the window. Even with the dim light, Mei's sharp eyes studied every inch of her surroundings, plotting her next move.

She wasn't going to wait to be rescued. If she could figure out a way to get out of this, she would.

Mei sat up straighter on the edge of the bed, her ankle still shackled, her heart beating steadily despite the tension in the air. Grigory Ivanovich, the ghost of a man once thought dead, now sat across from her in an old wooden chair, staring at her with the intensity of a predator. His steely blue eyes locked onto hers as he spoke, recounting her service record as though reading from a script he'd memorised. Aleksandr stood at the door like a silent sentinel, his presence adding weight to the already suffocating atmosphere.

Grigory's voice was measured, calm, almost casual. "Good morning, Mei Lin," he said, his lips curling slightly at the edges. "My name is Grigory Ivanovich, and I would like you to answer some questions."

Mei remained silent, her face an impassive mask. Her mind raced through possible responses, escape plans, and scenarios, but for now, she let him talk.

Grigory leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, never breaking eye contact. "Tell me, Mei," Grigory spoke as he examined the chain around her ankle, his attention seemingly focused on the lock. "Do you know why most intelligence operations fail?" He didn't wait for her answer. "It's not poor planning or bad luck. It's imagination." His fingers tested the chain's tension with practised familiarity. "Everyone becomes so focused on protecting their secrets, they forget to ask the interesting questions." He looked up then, his eyes sharp with genuine curiosity. "Like why a network specialist of your calibre would be running basic surveillance in Turkey. Unless, of course, that's not why you're here at all."

There it was. The crux of the interrogation.

He let the silence hang in the air for a moment, as if daring her to break it. "I'm not a man of idle threats, Mei. I don't have to explain what happens to people who don't cooperate with me, but I'd advise you to think very carefully about how you answer my next question."

Grigory leaned back in his chair, folding his arms. His expression darkened as he spoke, the cold, calculated menace in his voice unmistakable. "Who do you work for? And what are you doing here?"

Mei's mind flashed through options. Every word mattered. Every detail had to be weighed carefully. She knew that showing fear or cracking under the pressure would only give Grigory more power. He was skilled in reading people, and she needed to keep her cards close.

But silence wasn't an option either. Not yet.

"Nice to meet you, Grigory," Mei said, keeping her voice steady and calm. "It seems you know a lot about me, but I'm afraid I'm not at liberty to answer your questions."

She could see the flicker of impatience behind his eyes, but he was controlled, too controlled.

"You see, the problem with situations like this is that I have no guarantees. I tell you what you want to know, and what happens? You let me go? Hardly. You might as well make it worth my while."

Grigory's smile faded, and the room seemed to grow colder. He leaned forward again, his voice lowering, carrying a dangerous edge. "That was not the answer I wanted, Mei. But no matter. You'll tell me what I need to know. You may think you're strong, that you can endure, but everyone breaks eventually. Everyone."

He glanced over at Aleksandr, who stepped forward slightly, the threat implied but unspoken.

Mei's pulse quickened, but she didn't let it show. Grigory wasn't bluffing, and she knew it. The game had begun, and the stakes were her life. But she wasn't out of moves yet. Not by a long shot.

She just had to stay one step ahead.

Mei gasped for air, struggling to get a breath back as she crumpled on the bed, her body trembling with pain. The initial punch to the stomach had taken everything out of her, leaving her vulnerable to what followed. The two Russian enforcers showed no mercy, each hit calculated to inflict maximum damage without crossing the line into killing her outright. She could barely defend herself—her arms, once her only protection, now limp and weak as her body absorbed every brutal blow.

The first strike had been the worst, a hard punch to her gut that sent shock waves of agony through her body, leaving her disoriented. Then came the unrelenting assault. Fists, boots—whatever they could use, they did, with precision and force. Her ribs cracked under the repeated strikes, the sound muffled by her own screams and gasps for air. Her face, now swollen and bruised, felt like it was on fire with every impact, her jaw shattered from a particularly vicious punch.

They weren't asking questions. This wasn't about information any more. This was punishment. Reprisal for her defiance, and a prelude to whatever was next.

She tried to hold onto consciousness, tried to think through the pain, but it was a futile effort. Every part of her body was screaming, and her mind was clouded with pain. Her kidneys throbbed from brutal kidney punches, and she could feel the internal damage—the searing fire in her abdomen told her that her liver had taken more than it could handle. Blood filled her mouth, and when she spat, it mixed with shattered pieces of her teeth. Her tongue felt heavy, swollen, her lips split and bleeding.

Hours passed, or maybe it was minutes. Time had become irrelevant. She was in a world of agony, broken and bleeding, her slight frame unable to

bear the weight of the assault. When they finally left, it was with the same cold indifference with which they'd entered. The door closed behind them, the lock clicking into place, leaving her battered and alone.

Mei lay on the bed, her body twisted in pain, barely able to move. She couldn't even cry; her face was too swollen. She could taste the blood on her lips, feel the sharp sting of every breath in her bruised lungs.

With the last bit of strength she had, she tried to turn over, her vision swimming through the small gaps in her swollen eyes. But she was too weak. The last thing she remembered was the darkness closing in as unconsciousness claimed her.

23 **Fury Unleashed**

That morning, the team gathered for breakfast as usual, the air thick with the smell of strong Turkish tea and the subdued murmur of early conversation. But there was a glaring absence—Mei. Her empty seat didn't go unnoticed.

"Has anyone seen Mei?" Dave adjusted his glasses nervously, his tech-guy awkwardness showing through even in crisis. "The network diagnostics she was running should've been done hours ago."

Dan's jaw tightened - the ex-military man always tensed before trouble. "Omar was supposed to have her back," he said, each word clipped and precise. "What happened out there?"

Omar slumped forward, his usual easy charm replaced by misery as he massaged his temples. "Man, that köfte from the street vendor destroyed me. Mei insisted she'd be fine - you know how she gets, all 'I've done this solo a hundred times, stop being dramatic.'" He attempted to mimic Mei's matter-of-fact tone, but guilt made his voice crack.

The moment of silence that followed was thick with tension. It was uncharacteristic of Mei to disappear without a word. The team knew she was perfectly capable of handling solo missions, but something about this didn't sit right.

Cecilia was quickly looped into the call, her voice over the secure line as tight and clipped as the mood in the room. "Track her phone. Now."

Anya was already working, her fingers flying over the keyboard as she accessed their systems. Within minutes, she had a lock on Mei's phone signal. "It's pinging from a location about a kilometre from here, so close by."

Dan and Dave exchanged glances, then both stood up simultaneously, as if propelled by the same thought. "We'll check it out," Dan said grimly. "Stay on comms."

The streets were eerily quiet as Dan and Dave reached the location where Mei's phone signal had led them. It was an old street with closed shops at this time of day—a perfect place to take someone without drawing attention late at night. As they approached cautiously, Dan's instincts screamed that something was wrong.

Dave spotted it first, lying on the floor near a pile of debris. "Dan," he called, pointing to the phone—a faint light blinking from the screen as it sat, eerily out of place.

Dan approached cautiously, picking it up and turning it over in his hand. "Mei's phone," he muttered. "But no sign of her."

"They dumped it," Dave said, his voice tight. "They've taken her."

Dan nodded, his face set in grim determination. "This is Grigory's doing. He must've been tracking us the whole time."

"But how?" Dave asked, his frustration rising. "We've been careful, right? So how did they get to her?"

Dan stared into the distance, jaw clenched. "We've underestimated them. Grigory's smart—he left breadcrumbs, but he's been ahead of us the whole time." He turned to Dave, his voice firm. "We need to figure out how he's found us, and fast. He won't kill her right away, not if he wants information. But we don't have long."

Back at their base, Anya and Cecilia were already working through surveillance data, looking for any signs of how Grigory had managed to trail them.

"Anya," Dan spoke over the comms. "Run all the facial recognition on the people we've interacted with since we got here. Check for anything suspicious. Anyone out of place. We need a lead, now."

"On it," Anya replied, her tone focused and determined. "I'll see if I can pull any hidden surveillance data from nearby cameras, too. If they've been watching us, we'll find them."

Dave clenched his fists, pacing restlessly. "We can't wait long. Grigory won't waste time."

Dan placed a steady hand on his shoulder, his voice calm but resolute. "We'll find her, Dave. But we have to be smart about this. Grigory is expecting us to panic and make mistakes. We need to be methodical."

Dave nodded, but inside he could feel the tension gnawing at him. Mei was in danger, and every minute counted.

Omar's frustration was palpable as he paced behind Anya, his mind racing with guilt. He knew it was his fault that Mei had gone out alone. He should have been with her, despite feeling unwell, and now he was desperate to fix the situation.

Anya remained calm, her fingers flying over the keyboard as she sifted through what limited local CCTV systems she could access. The old, outdated infrastructure didn't make things easier, but she was persistent. Eventually, she managed to tap into a system that covered a street a little away from where they had found Mei's phone.

The feed wasn't perfect, and the streets weren't busy. It took a while to scan the footage, but finally, something stood out: a light-coloured van, speeding past the camera. Omar, watching intently, pointed to the screen. "There! That's got to be it. It's not like the other cars—most of them are just regular pickups. But this van, it looks... out of place."

Anya nodded in agreement. "It's moving faster than the other traffic, too. Definitely seems like the driver has a purpose." She began scanning for other nearby cameras, trying to follow the van's path, but no luck. The next cameras didn't have the right angles or were just outside of range.

Omar, frustrated but thinking quickly, spoke up again. "It was going fast, right? Could it have been speeding?"

Anya's eyes widened as she realised what he meant. "Police cameras. Of course!" Speed cameras and licence plate recognition systems could be their golden ticket. "We might not even need to hack the central system. If we can pull data from the traffic enforcement cameras around the area, we might be able to narrow it down."

She immediately set to work, her fingers dancing over the keys as she tapped into the regional traffic cameras. The police enforcement cameras were perfect, capturing images for speeders and automatically recording licence plates. Anya tasked the AI system to filter all images of light-coloured vans from the time period in question, and then further refined the search to match any vans that had triggered speed cameras.

The minutes dragged on as they waited for the data to process. Omar hovered anxiously behind Anya, his foot tapping nervously against the floor.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, the AI came back with results.

"We've got a hit," Anya said, her eyes lighting up. "Actually, three hits. Three possible vans with matching descriptions, all within the timeframe we're looking for."

Omar straightened up, his focus sharp. "Which one do we follow first?"

Anya pulled up the routes based on the ANPR (Automatic Number Plate Recognition) data and began overlaying the information on the map. "We can follow them all, but this one..." she pointed to the screen. "It takes a path out of town, toward a more isolated area. My guess is they'd want to avoid the city, especially if they're holding her somewhere."

Omar nodded, his face set in determination. "Then that's the one we go after first."

The team quickly mobilised, ready to follow the van's trail. Every second counted, and they were one step closer to finding Mei. The weight of Omar's guilt pushed him to move faster, determined to fix the mistake that had put Mei in danger in the first place. This time, they wouldn't let Grigory stay ahead.

"Wait!" Dave said, his voice cutting through the flurry of activity as the team prepared to head out. "We can't just go after the one van that feels right. I know it makes sense that one is the likely candidate, but what if we're wrong? Our time is limited."

Anya, who was already gathering her gear, paused and nodded. "Dave's right. We're assuming a lot here. We need to split up and cover all the possibilities."

Splitting up wasn't ideal. They were in a hostile environment with limited backup, and going solo made them vulnerable. But with no other options and time slipping away, the team agreed. Omar, still guilt-ridden, volunteered to go with Anya and cover van three. Dan took responsibility for van two, leaving Dave to follow van one—the most likely lead.

"I know I'm not a skilled operator or intelligence agent," Dave said, glancing at the others, "but I'll take the most likely candidate. I'm alone, and if they spot me, they'll underestimate me. We know I can't be hurt, so the risk is low. I'll also keep my mic open on the phone, and I suggest we all do the same. If I turn up anything, I'll call you all in."

Omar looked at Dave, concern flickering across his face, but he nodded in agreement. "Just stay safe. We don't know how far they'll go to cover their tracks."

The plan was in motion. The ANPR traces had only provided partial routes; the vans had disappeared from the system at different points, meaning the team would have to manually search the areas near the final known locations. It wasn't a perfect plan, but with Mei's life on the line, they had no choice.

The team gathered their gear, quickly checked their comms, and split up, each heading toward their designated search area. Dave felt the familiar weight of tension settle over him as he headed out on his own. His heart was pounding, but his mind was focused. For all his doubts about not being a trained field operative, this was the one moment where he had a key advantage—he was the last person Grigory and his men would expect to be capable of fighting back.

As he approached the van's last known location, Dave could feel the anticipation building. The quiet streets were unsettling, and every shadow seemed to hold a threat. His senses were on high alert, and the open mic on his phone made him feel slightly more connected to the others, even though they were miles away.

"If I'm wrong about this..." Dave muttered to himself, shaking off the creeping doubt. He couldn't afford to second-guess. He scanned the area, his sharp eyes taking in every detail. His phone was in his hand, ready to give the signal if he found anything.

Meanwhile, Anya and Omar were working through their own section of town, carefully moving through the narrow streets and alleys. Anya was focused, scanning every detail, while Omar's guilt-fuelled determination kept him moving. They didn't have much time to spare, and the tension was rising as they checked each potential hiding spot.

Dan was moving through a more rural area, the quiet countryside making his mission both easier and harder. There were fewer places for the van to hide, but if it was in one of the many isolated barns or houses, finding it would be like searching for a needle in a haystack.

The team was spread thin, but each of them was determined to find Mei. Grigory might think he had the upper hand, but he had underestimated one thing: Dave's resilience and the team's unwavering loyalty to each other.

Now, it was a race against time.

Dave crouched behind a row of abandoned cars, eyes locked on the pale van parked across the street. His heart raced, but he forced himself to remain calm. He was certain this was the one—the van that had taken Mei. It was parked outside a nondescript building, an old brick structure with a faded sign that had long lost its meaning. To most, it would look like just another run-down building in this forgotten part of town, but to Dave, it screamed of something more sinister.

"Found it," he whispered into the phone, keeping his voice low as he surveyed the area. The others, Anya, Dan, and Omar, were still checking their own leads, but Dave knew—this was the place.

Across the street, a dark pickup truck sat next to the van. Its windows were tinted, and the engine was idling. Dave's gut twisted. Something was happening. Just then, the front door of the building creaked open, and two figures stepped out into the street.

Grigory and Aleksandr.

Even from his position, Dave could make out the cold, calculated expressions on their faces as they made their way to the truck. They were calm, like men who believed their work was already done. Dave's stomach turned with dread. Grigory was leaving, which could only mean one thing: whatever they'd wanted from Mei, they'd gotten—or worse, they were done with her.

"Grigory just left," Dave hissed into the phone, watching the two men climb into the truck and drive away. His mind raced. Was she still alive? There was no time to wait for backup. If they had finished with Mei, they might have left her to die in that building—or worse, they could still be inside, preparing to do just that.

"I'm going in," Dave said, not waiting for a response from the team.

He scanned the building quickly. The front door wasn't an option; they could have left someone inside as a lookout. But as he moved around the

side of the building, something caught his eye—boarded-up windows on the second floor. Every other window was normal, unblocked. Why board those up, specifically? That had to be where they were holding her.

Dave moved with a sense of urgency, his heart pounding in his chest as he circled the building. He couldn't risk going through the front or the back door; too many unknowns, and time was running out. His eyes fell again on the boarded-up windows on the second floor. That had to be where Mei was.

Without hesitation, he bent his knees and leapt straight up onto the roof, his abilities propelling him higher than any normal man could manage. He landed lightly on the flat section of the roof above the boarded windows, the old wood creaking under his weight. He took a moment to steady himself, peering through the gaps between the slats. Inside, he could just make out Mei's battered form, her body limp on the bed, chained to the floor. Fury welled up inside him at the sight of her, beaten and left in that pitiful state.

Dave wasn't going to be subtle. He crouched low, then with a burst of power, ripped away the roof slates and smashed through the ceiling. The noise was deafening, wood and dust splintering as he tore his way inside. He landed in the room below with a heavy thud, right between the bed where Mei lay and the door.

The handle twisted, and before he had time to react, a hulking Russian stepped through, his massive frame filling the doorway. The man's eyes locked onto Dave with confusion—this small, nerdy-looking guy wasn't what he'd expected to find. But before he could process it, Dave was moving.

Fuelled by a surge of rage, Dave waited as the Russian charged at him, his heavy fists swinging toward Dave's face. Time seemed to slow. Dave's left hand shot up, catching the giant fist in mid-air. The Russian's expression

changed from surprise to fear as his momentum came to a sudden, brutal stop.

With a swift, calculated movement, Dave's right arm swung down in a devastating arc, the blade of his hand smashing into the Russian's forearm. The sickening crunch of bone shattering echoed through the room. The man howled in pain, his arm now bent at an unnatural angle, the broken bones piercing through his skin like jagged spears.

But Dave wasn't finished. As the Russian staggered, his mouth open in shock, Dave brought his right hand back and swung again—this time a backhanded blow to the face. The force of the hit was like a sledgehammer. The man's cheekbone shattered, his jaw snapping with a loud crack as blood and teeth flew from his mouth. The Russian collapsed to the floor, his body limp, his face unrecognizable from the brutal impact.

Before Dave could catch his breath, a second Russian stormed into the room. This one was quicker, but it didn't matter. Dave's rage made him faster. He took a single step forward and delivered a vicious punch to the man's stomach. The air left the Russian's lungs in an instant, his body folding in half as he gasped for breath, his eyes wide with shock.

Without giving him a chance to recover, Dave brought his knee up into the man's face with savage precision. The man's nose exploded in a spray of blood, his front teeth snapping off and lodging into the back of his throat. The Russian stumbled backward, choking on his own blood, before collapsing to the ground, unconscious.

Dave stood over them, his chest heaving, his mind still buzzing with the remnants of fury. These two men—so large and intimidating moments before—were now nothing but broken heaps on the floor. His hands, trembling with adrenaline, clenched into fists as he turned his attention back to Mei.

Seeing her like this only fuelled his anger. But now wasn't the time for rage. He had to get her out. He had to make sure she survived.

Stood amidst the aftermath of the one sided fight, Dave's chest heaving with the adrenaline still surging through him. Two Russian giants lay motionless on the floor, out cold, and broken by his unexpected ferocity. But all of that faded as his gaze landed on Mei.

She lay on the bed, unconscious, her face swollen and bruised beyond recognition. Blood stained the sheets, and her breathing was laboured, every shallow rise and fall of her chest making him wince. Her ribs were likely broken, her body battered from the brutal beating.

"Mei..." he whispered, dropping to his knees beside the bed. His fingers trembled as he reached for her wrist, checking for a pulse. Relief washed over him when he felt the faint but steady thrum of her heartbeat.

He quickly pulled out his phone, speaking into the open mic. "Team, I found Mei. She's hurt—badly. The Russians are down, but I need backup here. Now."

Anya's voice crackled back over the comms, filled with concern. "We're on our way. Hold tight, Dave."

Omar's voice chimed in too, the guilt still weighing on him. "I'll bring the med kit. We'll be there as fast as we can."

Dave took a deep breath, trying to calm his own racing heart. They'd be here soon, but seeing Mei like this... It made something boil inside him. The rage from the fight hadn't fully subsided, and the sight of her bruised, broken body brought it back to the surface. But now wasn't the time for anger.

He focused on Mei, gently adjusting her position on the bed to make her more comfortable. She groaned softly in pain, her eyes fluttering slightly but not opening. "It's okay," he whispered, though he wasn't sure if she could hear him. "We're going to get you out of here."

Dave stood up and glanced around the room. There was no need to rush out—the building was empty, and the two Russians lay incapacitated. He

quickly checked the door and windows, ensuring there were no more surprises waiting for them. It seemed Grigory and Aleksandr had truly left, and for now, they were in the clear.

The minutes ticked by slowly as he stayed by Mei's side, listening for any sounds of trouble, but all was quiet. Finally, he heard the faint rumble of vehicles approaching, and a few moments later, Omar, Anya, and Dan arrived, their faces a mixture of relief and grim determination.

Omar rushed to Mei's side, his face pale with guilt and worry as he knelt down with the med kit. "How bad is it?" he asked, already assessing her injuries.

"Bad," Dave replied, his voice low. "Broken ribs, maybe internal damage. She needs proper medical attention."

Anya moved quickly to secure the area while Dan stood guard at the door, scanning for any signs of approaching threats. Omar worked with precision, checking Mei's vitals and carefully bandaging what he could for the moment.

"We need to move her," Omar said, his voice steady despite the tension in the air. "But we have to be careful—she's in no shape for a rough ride."

Dave nodded. "We'll take it slow. Let's get her on a stretcher and out of here. We'll figure out the rest once we're somewhere safe."

They worked together to lift Mei gently, placing her on the stretcher Omar had brought. Despite her injuries, she groaned again, her body reacting to the movement, but they had no choice. Every second they stayed here was a risk.

With Mei securely strapped to the stretcher, Dave led the way out of the building, scanning the streets as they moved. The town was eerily quiet, but they all knew it wouldn't stay that way for long. Grigory had left, but he wouldn't stay gone. Not for long.

As they loaded Mei into the vehicle, Dave glanced back at the building, his jaw tight with frustration and anger. This wasn't over. Grigory might have gotten away this time, but he'd pay for what he did to Mei.

Dave stood, his fists clenched at his sides. Grigory had left her to die, but Dave had arrived just in time. And now, it was only a matter of time before they tracked him down too.

Grigory wasn't going to get away with this.

24 **Aftermath**

The medical evacuation team worked with practised efficiency, loading Mei's stretcher into the waiting ambulance. Dave stood in the pre-dawn darkness, his hands still trembling slightly. Blood - Mei's blood - had dried on his shirt cuffs. He couldn't seem to take his eyes off it.

"Hey." Omar appeared at his side, offering a fresh shirt. "You should change before we head back."

Dave nodded but didn't move. "Did you see her face? What they did to her..."

"I saw." Omar's voice was tight. He'd been checking Mei's vitals during the drive, cataloguing each injury with growing horror. "But she's alive. Because of you."

The ambulance doors closed with a soft thud. Dave watched as it pulled away, its lights cutting through the darkness without sirens. Even now, they had to maintain operational security. The thought made him feel sick.

Back at their temporary base, the team gathered in silence. Nobody touched the coffee Omar had made. The empty chair where Mei usually sat seemed to draw everyone's gaze. Her laptop still lay open on the table, screen dark, waiting for her return.

Dan finally broke the silence. "Cecilia's arranged medical transport. Private flight, full security detail. She'll be wheels up in thirty minutes."

"She shouldn't have been out there alone," Omar said, his voice rough. "I should have-"

"Stop." Anya cut him off, looking up from her tablet. Dark circles under her eyes suggested she hadn't slept. "Grigory planned this. The food poisoning wasn't an accident." She turned her tablet around, showing

surveillance footage from the street vendor. "Look at this timestamp. They watched us, waited for an opportunity."

Dave pushed himself away from the wall he'd been leaning against. The movement made everyone turn - they'd almost forgotten he was there, he'd been so quiet since the rescue.

"Before we start planning..." He looked around the room, meeting each person's eyes. "What I did to those men..." He flexed his fingers, remembering the feeling of bones crushing under his grip. "I didn't know I was capable of that kind of violence."

The room fell silent again. Omar spoke first, his usual joking manner nowhere in sight. "You did what you had to do. What any of us would have done if we could."

"But that's just it," Dave said quietly. "None of you could have done what I did. And I'm not sure how I feel about that."

Dan stood up, his chair scraping against the floor. "We can deal with the philosophical implications later. Right now, we need to focus on stopping whatever Grigory has planned. Because I guarantee you - this was just the opening move."

Dave clenched his fists, anger simmering beneath the surface. "Then let's make them regret it. We know they're planning something bigger. Mei was just the first move."

There was a shift in the room. It wasn't hope, but something close to it—determination. They had been through hell, but shared purpose lit a fire in them. Anya sat up straighter, her fingers flying across her tablet with renewed focus. Dan's jaw tightened, military instincts kicking in. Omar exhaled, releasing some of the weight he'd been carrying.

The team leaned in as Anya began laying out her analysis, but there was a new tension in the room. They'd crossed a line - all of them - and there was

no going back. The question was: how much further would they have to go before this was over?

Dave, however, was left shaken. He had never been in a real fight, never been a confrontational person. But the violence he unleashed on the Russians surprised even him. The rage had consumed him in the heat of the moment, and the damage he caused with his brute strength left them broken, though alive. The fact that they weren't dead was something that haunted him—not because he regretted stopping them, but because he knew that if he had fully let loose, they wouldn't be breathing at all. That was a terrifying thought.

It was more than just physical power—it was the sudden, uncontrollable rage that frightened Dave. He'd always been the calm one, the logical one, but in that room, seeing Mei in that state, something inside him snapped. He spoke with Cecilia later, sharing his concerns about what his abilities could do to him. He feared becoming someone else, someone capable of killing without restraint, of losing himself in that strength and anger.

Cecilia was calm and reassuring. She listened as Dave voiced his guilt, his uncertainty about what he had become in those moments.

“Dave, think about this,” she said gently, her voice steady. “If you were so out of control, how did you hold back? You could have killed them, but you didn’t. You stopped yourself. That tells me you're still very much in control.”

Dave frowned, still unsure. “But I never used to be like this. I was never capable of that kind of violence before.”

“You were protecting Mei. You’re a good person, Dave. You know where the line is. The fact that this is bothering you so much proves it. What you’re feeling right now—this guilt, this worry about becoming something else—that’s what separates you from people like Grigory and his thugs. They wouldn’t think twice about what they did. But you do. That’s what makes you different.”

He wanted to believe her. He wanted to trust that he wouldn't lose himself in this new strength. But the memory of his fist smashing into bone, the sound of bodies hitting the floor—it was hard to shake. He nodded, though, appreciating Cecilia's words.

"I guess... I guess I just need to be careful," he said quietly.

"You'll be fine," Cecilia replied. "You're already thinking ahead, already concerned about the consequences. You won't let it take over. And if you ever feel like it's too much, you know you've got people here to help."

Dave smiled weakly at Cecilia's reassurance. He didn't feel fine, not yet. But her words gave him something to hold onto. The memory of his fist smashing into bone, the sound of bodies hitting the floor—it was hard to shake. Yet she was right about one thing: he had stopped himself. Maybe that was enough for now.

Dave smiled weakly at Cecilia's reassurance. He didn't feel fine, not yet. But her words gave him something to hold onto. Maybe that was enough for now.

Dave smiled weakly at Cecilia's reassurance. He didn't feel fine, not yet. But her words gave him something to hold onto. Maybe that was enough for now.

"Wait," Anya's voice cut through the video call. She'd been quietly working on her tablet during Dave's conversation with Cecilia. "When we found Mei's phone, I set up pattern recognition for similar signal disruptions in the area. Most phones emit some kind of signature, even when turned off."

Dan leaned in. "And?"

"I've got clusters. Three locations where signals just... vanish. Like dead zones." Her fingers flew across the screen. "But here's the interesting part - one of these zones is mobile. It's been moving between two points over the past week."

Dave adjusted his glasses, gravitating toward the familiar territory of technical analysis. "Some kind of signal jammer?"

"Military grade," Anya confirmed. "The kind you'd use if you were planning something big and didn't want to be detected. And look at the pattern - it's centred around this industrial district."

Omar, who had been unusually quiet, spoke up. "That vendor who sold me the dodgy food - he was set up on a street with line of sight to three cell towers, wasn't he?"

"Yeah," Anya's eyes widened as she pulled up a map. "Perfect position to monitor our communications, track our movements. They weren't just watching us. They were herding us."

Dave felt his fists clench. "So when Mei went out alone to boost the Wi-Fi..."

"They knew exactly where she'd need to go to get the best signal," Dan finished grimly. "Grigory's been playing us from the start."

"If they're using military-grade jammers," Dave said, "they're planning something bigger than just grabbing Mei. This was preparation for something else."

Cecilia's voice came through clear on the video feed. "We need to track those signal dead zones. Find out what they're trying to hide. But be careful - if they realize we're onto their communication patterns..."

"They might change tactics," Dan nodded. "Or accelerate their timeline."

The team dispersed with purpose, the weight of earlier events temporarily pushed aside by the urgency of their discovery. But Dave lingered for a moment, looking at Mei's empty chair. Whatever Grigory was planning, they were going to stop it.

The pieces were falling into place, but time was running out. And somewhere in the city, a signal jammer was on the move again.

25 **Rebound**

Grigory's emotions swung wildly, from sheer incredulity to a seething fury. He stormed into the room where Aleksandr waited, his face twisted with rage. The two Russians—Mikhail and Yuri—lay in separate hospital beds, their faces swollen and bruised beyond recognition, recounting the same impossible story between broken teeth and split lips. They had been Spetsnaz, elite soldiers, trained for the harshest combat environments, and yet they had been taken out by a single man—a middle-aged, overweight office worker, of all people!

Grigory stood at the window, his voice quiet but precise as he addressed the injured men. "Tell me again. Each detail." His calm was more unnerving than any rage could be. "A civilian contractor managed this?" He gestured to their injuries with clinical detachment.

Yuri winced as he spoke, his voice muffled by his injuries. "He wasn't normal, Grigory... the strength, the speed. He crushed my arm... shattered it. It was like being hit by a truck."

Mikhail, his jaw wired shut, could only nod, the humiliation visible in his eyes. The two men faced extensive surgeries and long recoveries, leaving them useless for the mission ahead. Dismissed, beaten both physically and in spirit.

Grigory paced back and forth in front of Aleksandr, his voice rising with each step. "Why don't we know who this guy is?!" he bellowed, his hands clenched into fists. "He came in, took our edge away on his own! How is that even possible?"

Aleksandr remained quiet, as he always did when Grigory raged. There was nothing to say that would ease the storm, but he knew better than to interrupt. Grigory's mind churned with anger, disbelief, and the bitter taste of failure.

"Interesting." Grigory's finger traced the condensation on the window. "We had intelligence on every member of their team. Capabilities. Psychological profiles. Risk assessments." He turned, studying the broken men with the same analytical gaze he'd given the window. "Which means either our intelligence was flawed, or..." A slight smile touched his lips. "Or we've stumbled onto something far more valuable than expected."

Aleksandr offered a small nod, finally breaking his silence, "We'll find out."

Grigory exhaled sharply, his eyes narrowing with resolve. "We have to. He's not the only problem. The whole plan is in jeopardy now. The kidnapping—it was fortunate, yes, but it wasn't supposed to happen. It distracted them for a while, but we need to regain control. Continue the pipeline ruse."

Aleksandr listened as Grigory's fury turned to cold calculation. Grigory studied the map spread across his desk, tracing the route from Erzurum to Eskişehir with one finger. "Aleksandr," he said quietly, "what's the most elegant solution to a compromised operation?" He answered his own question, still focused on the map. "You don't eliminate the threat. You redirect it." His finger stopped at Erzurum. "Let them think they're clever. Let them think they've seen through our deception." A ghost of a smile. "Sometimes the best trap is the one they think they've already discovered."

Aleksandr nodded again, knowing what came next. The pipeline was never the true goal—it had always been a smokescreen, a decoy designed to keep the agents busy while Grigory orchestrated the real operation behind the scenes. Now, with one of their own nearly broken and the others reeling from the sudden attack, they still had the upper hand.

But Grigory couldn't shake the image of Dave—the man with the unassuming face and nonchalant demeanour—standing over the wreckage of two elite soldiers. There was more to him than met the eye. They had underestimated this team once, but they wouldn't make that mistake again.

"Find out who this man is," Grigory growled, his voice low and dangerous.
"Before he takes us apart, piece by piece."

26 Counter

On the video link, Cecilia's face was lit by the glow of her screen, her tone urgent and thoughtful. "We know the target is the Erzurum pipeline facility," she began, her eyes scanning the team as they listened intently. "But Grigory must also know we're onto him. Surely, he'd be crazy to continue with the mission, knowing we'll be there to stop him?"

A murmur of agreement rippled through the room, but it was Dan who spoke up, leaning forward with a frown. "So, what are you saying, Cecilia?"

She paused, choosing her words carefully. "What if the target isn't Erzurum? What if it never was?"

An uneasy silence filled the room. Omar, still blaming himself for Mei's situation, glanced over at Anya, who had been running potential scenarios on her tablet.

"Yes, Erzurum is a valid target," Cecilia continued, "and if struck, it would serve their purpose well. Disruption of energy supplies, economic chaos—it all makes sense. But what if that's not their only endgame? What if the real target was us—the agency team?"

Dan narrowed his eyes, processing the thought. "You're saying this has all been a setup?"

Cecilia nodded. "Think about it. The kidnapping of Mei wasn't just a move to throw us off. It was a provocation, a way to test our response. Grigory knows how we operate. He knew we'd focus on the pipeline once we connected the dots. He's a strategist—he doesn't just move pieces on a board; he sets traps. What if Erzurum is the bait? And we are the ones walking into it."

Anya's fingers danced across her screen, pulling up satellite images and intel reports. "It's plausible," she muttered, half to herself. "A facility like

Erzurum is a big deal, but it could be a distraction. A classic feint to draw our resources away from something else.”

Omar shook his head, still struggling with the weight of responsibility. “But why? What would they gain from targeting us directly?”

Cecilia leaned in closer to the camera, her voice dropping. “You have been a thorn in their side, the team derailed his plans in Germany. Grigory and his network—whoever is behind him—know that as long as we’re operational, we’ll keep hunting them down, stopping their operations. But if they can cripple the agency, even for a little while, they’ll have free rein to execute their plans elsewhere.”

The realisation began to sink in, tension mounting in the room. Dave, standing by the wall with his arms crossed, spoke for the first time. “If that’s the case, they’re not just looking to win this round. They’re looking to take us out for good.”

Cecilia nodded gravely. “Exactly. This mission isn’t just about sabotage or economic disruption any more. It’s about survival—for them, and for us. If we walk into that trap, they could dismantle the entire team, maybe even the whole agency.”

Dan exhaled sharply, the weight of the situation hitting him hard. “So, what’s the play? We can’t just sit here.”

Cecilia’s gaze sharpened. “We prepare for both. We secure Erzurum, but we stay one step ahead. Grigory won’t expect us to suspect anything beyond the pipeline. We need to start thinking like him, anticipate the trap, and set one of our own.”

A slow, determined smile crossed Dave’s face. “Then let’s give them what they want—a fight.”

The team huddled together in the common area, a sense of urgency driving the discussion. After Cecilia’s warning, they knew they couldn’t ignore the

Erzurum pipeline as a potential target, but they also couldn't blindly walk into Grigory's trap. Dan started to pace, his mind racing.

"We maintain eyes on the pipeline." Dan paced the room with military precision, each turn exactly three steps. "But we do it smart. Keep our real focus hidden." The seasoned operative in him hated showing any cards, even false ones.

Anya didn't look up from her tablet, her fingers dancing across multiple screens as she spoke in her characteristic rapid-fire tech-speak. "Running probability matrices now. We're at 47% operational capacity if we split forces, but..." She paused, squinting at new data. "Wait. If we amplify our digital footprint around Erzurum - you know, deliberately sloppy surveillance, obvious data packets - we can make it look like we're committing everything there. Classic misdirection through data overflow."

Omar, still seething with guilt but determined, leaned forward. "What if we feed him false intel? Make it look like we're all-in on Erzurum."

Cecilia, still on the video link, nodded. "Yes, disinformation could work. Plant enough chatter to make it look like we're focusing everything on the pipeline. We can use some of our external assets to ramp up activity around the facility, maybe leak it through a few compromised channels. Grigory's team will think they've got us exactly where they want us."

"But how do we figure out the real target?" Dave asked, concern etched across his face.

Anya swiped across her screen, pulling up satellite images of the surrounding region. "We need to start with the question: what would Grigory gain from hitting Erzurum? If it's a trap, what's so valuable that they'd risk luring us in?"

Dan folded his arms, thinking aloud. "The Erzurum pipeline is crucial, but it's not the only key infrastructure around here. There are several other

critical facilities—energy hubs, logistics centres. If they can disable one, they might cripple others.”

Anya suddenly stopped scrolling, eyes narrowing as she zeroed in on a new location on the map: Eskişehir.

“Wait. Look at this, we considered it before,” she said, pointing at the map. “Eskişehir—just a few hundred kilometres west of Erzurum. It’s a major logistics hub, one of the key nodes for both the Turkish energy grid and NATO’s regional supply lines.”

Omar leaned closer, catching on. “If they hit Eskişehir, they could cause chaos across a huge swath of Europe and the Middle East. That would be a much bigger disruption than just the pipeline.”

Dave’s brow furrowed. “But why would they go through all the trouble of setting up the trap in Erzurum if Eskişehir was the real target all along?”

Anya smiled faintly, impressed with the logic. “Because Erzurum is the bait. It’s a plausible target that would distract us, while they quietly prepare to hit Eskişehir. It’s also remote enough to make exposing us easier. By the time we’d have figured it out, they’d have already succeeded.”

Dan snapped his fingers. “So they use Erzurum to make us think it’s the endgame, when it’s really just the distraction.”

Cecilia interjected, her voice calm but firm. “Anya, can you confirm any unusual activity in Eskişehir? Movement of personnel, supply chain disruptions, anything?”

Anya quickly accessed a series of satellite and surveillance databases, her fingers flying over the keyboard. After a few tense minutes, her face lit up. “Got it. There’s been regular encrypted communications in and around Eskişehir—until recently, in fact if anything it’s become quieter. They’re prepping something, alright. Let’s run it into AI to be sure, I have some historic data I can source from fellow agencies – without their knowledge of course”

Omar shook his head, a hint of awe in his voice. “They were going to make us chase ghosts while they took out one of the most critical hubs in the region.”

Dave, nodding grimly, said, “OK, so let’s say we now know. But how do we make sure they don’t suspect we’ve figured it out?”

Cecilia’s voice cut through the tension. “You need to make it look like we’re walking straight into the trap. Maintain the illusion. Keep everything focused on Erzurum—leak the fake intel, step up surveillance, even get some boots on the ground near the pipeline. But in the meantime, quietly prepare a second team to go to Eskişehir. We hit them where they least expect it.”

Dan grinned. “Let’s make sure they never see us coming.”

The team quickly set to work, splitting their efforts between maintaining the ruse at Erzurum and gathering intel on Eskişehir. They funnelled false information into channels they knew Grigory’s team would intercept—fake surveillance reports, coded messages suggesting the agency was moving resources toward Erzurum. At the same time, Anya worked in the background, assembling a smaller, covert team to quietly infiltrate Eskişehir, gathering intel and preparing to strike back if necessary.

With every detail meticulously planned, Dave and the others felt the tension rise. They knew they were walking a tightrope—one wrong move, and Grigory would realise they were onto him. But for now, they had the upper hand. Grigory thought the agency was falling right into his trap. Little did he know, the real trap was about to be sprung on him.

Anya leaned over the table, eyes scanning a map of the pipeline as she spoke, “I need to get some surveillance equipment onto the pipeline, make it look like we’re taking this seriously.” She looked up at Omar, who had been quiet since the briefing. “But I’m not going out there alone. I need some cover, just in case they try something again. And we can’t be too subtle about it.”

Omar frowned, unsure. “So, you want them to know we’re watching?”

Anya nodded. “Exactly. We need to make it clumsy, noticeable enough that they feel confident we’re focusing all our efforts on Erzurum. If they think we’re getting sloppy, they’ll stay the course. But I can’t pull off that kind of distraction on my own.”

She smiled faintly. “You up for some bad acting, Omar? Play the clueless security detail?”

Omar’s face broke into a small grin, the first since Mei’s kidnapping. “I guess I can manage that. So we make a bit of noise, leave enough breadcrumbs to keep them convinced?”

“Exactly,” Anya replied, tapping her tablet. “We’ll plant surveillance gear, but we’ll make sure it’s visible. They’ll think we’re trying too hard, which is perfect for them underestimating us. But I need you there for backup. Just in case.”

Dan chimed in from across the room. “Make sure it’s messy, like you’re nervous and fumbling. If they see you being overly careful, they’ll get suspicious.”

Omar nodded, the tension easing slightly from his shoulders. “Alright, I’m in. Let’s make this thing look believable.”

“Good,” Anya said, satisfied. “Let’s keep Grigory thinking we’re playing right into his hands.” She glanced over at Dave. “We’ll need you on standby in case they send anyone to snoop on us while we’re setting up.”

Dave agreed, but with a lingering uncertainty about what was ahead. For now, the mission was to sell the ruse, and for that, Omar would need to put on his best clumsy act.

Dan and Dave exchanged a knowing look, settling into their roles for this part of the game. They were going to take a different approach: less covert, more obvious, and meant to make Grigory’s team think they were closing in on something.

"Listen up," Dan barked, his military background showing in his clipped tone. "We need to sell this hunt. Make them think we're running down every half-baked lead on their attack force." He automatically checked his sidearm - old habits died hard.

Dave, speaking faster as his analytical mind kicked in. "Actually, if we apply pattern recognition from their previous ops - specifically the German facility incident - they show a statistical preference for abandoned industrial zones. You know, maximum square footage, minimal civilian interaction?" He caught Dan's raised eyebrow and added sheepishly, "Sorry, got a bit technical there. But basically: empty factories equal bad guys."

Dan agreed. "Exactly. And this time, we want to be seen. Let's go about this as loud as possible. We'll circle a few spots, slow down near the more obvious locations, and make it look like we're searching for their hideout."

As they pulled out, Dave punched the address into the GPS for some industrial estates on the outskirts of town. They didn't need to be subtle this time—driving slowly past rundown factories, occasionally stopping to inspect an empty car park, or even stepping out and surveying a building would sell the act.

"We need to look like we're clueless but determined," Dan said, leaning back. "They'll be watching for movements like this, especially since we haven't been shy about our presence in the area. They'll assume we're getting desperate to find them."

Dave steered the SUV onto the highway, heading toward the first industrial park. "And when we get close enough to one of these spots, we'll pause long enough for them to notice us. I'll leave the engine running and the door open like we're in a hurry."

The drive took them through a stretch of abandoned warehouses and factories, each one as derelict as the next. They slowed down near a couple

of them, making a show of scanning the area like they were on the verge of discovering something.

They stopped near a particularly rundown factory, stepping out to look around. Dave leaned on the hood, squinting as if studying the building, while Dan walked around the back, kicking at the dirt and glancing into the broken windows.

It was all part of the act.

Dan rejoined Dave after a few minutes. “We’ve made enough of a show here. Let’s hit another spot. They’ll get the idea that we’re looking in the wrong places.”

“Let’s just hope they’re watching,” Dave said, as they got back into the SUV.

“They will be,” Dan replied, with a grin. “And they’ll be thinking they’re one step ahead of us.”

As they drove off to the next location, the real challenge was staying in character—making it look like they were searching while knowing they had to be one step ahead of Grigory’s real plan.

As they pulled up into the expansive concrete car park, Dave lifted his binoculars, scanning the area around the industrial units. He tried to play the part of a hunter, deliberately making his movements exaggerated, like he was genuinely looking for something suspicious.

Dan stepped in close, his voice low but urgent. “Dave, we don’t want to be too obvious here, mate.”

Lowering the binoculars, Dave looked at him, confused. “What’s up?”

Dan kept his tone casual, but his eyes told a different story. “We’re supposed to be playing clueless, right? Well... it looks like we just stumbled on their wannabe pipeline attackers by accident.”

Dave blinked in surprise. “Wait, what?”

Dan leaned in, his back to the industrial building. “Every vehicle parked in front of that unit? They’re all rentals. No company vans or workers’ cars. Out of all the places we could’ve stopped, we pulled up outside the one that screams ‘temporary operation.’”

Dave’s heart raced, but he kept his face neutral, handing the binoculars back to Dan. “Alright, let’s make this look good. I’ll walk around a bit more, and we’ll make it seem like we’re still searching for nothing.”

They exchanged a glance—silent agreement on how to play this. Dave made a show of pacing the area, snapping a couple of photos on his phone, while Dan subtly checked the vehicles, nodding toward Dave as if everything was normal.

After a few minutes, they casually got back into the truck, the same cool composure masking their awareness of what they’d really found. As Dave started the engine, Dan leaned in and muttered, “Let’s not stay any longer than we have to. Play it like we’re moving on.”

Dave’s hands tightened on the wheel. “So, we really found them.”

Dan nodded. “By pure luck. We weren’t even looking for the right target, but now we know where their attackers are. We need to keep this low-key for now, play our part like we didn’t notice anything too suspicious.”

“Right,” Dave said, his mind racing. “We need to get this back to Anya and Omar. We can’t spook them, or they’ll move the operation.”

Dan’s smirk returned. “Exactly. Let’s get far enough away to regroup, then we figure out how to handle this without tipping our hand.”

As they drove off, the sheer coincidence of stumbling across the target gnawed at Dave’s thoughts. But in this game, sometimes luck was all it took to turn the tables.

27 Double Down

Grigory's spies had caught the activity at the pipeline and read the report how the two agents were trying to plant their surveillance equipment to cover the site. It was almost too good to be true, they'd taken the bait and now would be trying to discover the scale of the plan, and its timeline.

The immediate move would be to double down on the pipeline as a decoy. He'd stage more activity at the Erzurum pipeline facility, making sure the agents felt their suspicions were justified. Grigory would send in the fake operatives—mercenaries hired for a throwaway job—armed with just enough firepower to look like a credible threat but ultimately disposable. These men wouldn't have any direct connection to him, ensuring no loose ends if they were captured.

Now, using their own surveillance tools to drop word of the upcoming date of the attack, and the attackers movements to access the facility. The agents would seek to contain the attackers, but be unaware of the threat closing in on them from outside.

While the agents were distracted with surveillance and counter-intelligence on the Erzurum facility, Grigory would shift his focus to Eskişehir—the real target. He'd already planted sleeper agents near the Eskişehir facility, using the cover of legitimate business operations. Now, he'd activate those assets to quietly prepare for the attack, ensuring they moved under the radar while the agents were looking elsewhere.

He would instruct his team to begin subtle preparations: stockpiling equipment, creating contingency plans, and laying groundwork for the attack, all while staying invisible to both the agents and any local authorities.

Once he felt the pipeline attack decoy had served its purpose, Grigory would escalate the situation. He'd intentionally allow the agents to disrupt

the Erzurum plot, staging a dramatic failure that would leave them convinced they'd won a major victory.

But by the time they realised something was off, it would be too late. His team at Eskişehir would be in place, ready to execute the real mission.

Grigory, cold and calculating as always, would be waiting for the right moment to strike the agency when they were least expecting it—blind-sided by their success in preventing the attack on Erzurum, they wouldn't see Eskişehir coming until it was too late.

Grigory's specialist team was a cut above the mercenaries he had sent as the decoy operatives. These were hand-picked veterans of Russia's elite special forces, former Spetsnaz and GRU agents who now operated in the shadows, unofficial and completely deniable by the Russian government. Each member had undergone years of specialised training, ranging from advanced combat tactics to covert infiltration, and they had the singular focus of eliminating high-value targets like the agents pursuing Grigory's plan.

They were cold professionals who understood that in this mission, they were ghosts—Russia couldn't be tied to their actions, and failure was not an option. These ex-military operatives were no strangers to deniable missions and had been deployed in hostile operations across the globe where official presence would have been an international scandal.

Grigory had deployed them as a silent shadow to the fake pipeline attack team, with one clear directive: take out the agents while they were focused on neutralizing the decoy threat. The ex-military team would be poised for ambush, using advanced tracking and surveillance gear to stay just one step behind the agents. They had been tailing Dave, Dan, Anya, and Omar ever since the team had started snooping around the industrial area.

While the agents focused on the "wannabe" pipeline attackers—mercenaries meant to look like a real threat but ultimately disposable—the ex-military team would strike from behind. Their goal wasn't just to

incapacitate but to eliminate the agents in a manner that would appear like a professional hit. If done correctly, the agents' deaths would look like they were taken down by terrorists or even local criminal elements, further obscuring any Russian involvement.

The Russian ex-military team had been observing the agents closely, studying their patterns. They knew the moment the agents moved in on the pipeline decoy team, they would be fully engaged. That's when the specialists would strike, leveraging surprise, precision, and overwhelming force.

They would use the cover of the industrial complex to remain undetected until the perfect moment. Armed with silenced rifles, explosives, and hand-to-hand combat expertise, the ambush would be brutal and fast.

The ex-military operatives would take high-ground positions and strategic cover inside the industrial complex, using the maze of machinery and buildings to their advantage. As soon as the agents made contact with the pipeline attackers, a well-timed explosion or gunfire would divert their attention. The specialists would use this opportunity to strike from behind, aiming for lethal shots and disabling manoeuvrers. The team would split into groups, aiming to isolate each agent. Anya and Omar, who were often paired together, would be separated from Dave and Dan to prevent any coordinated defence. If any agent managed to escape the initial sniper fire, the ex-military operatives were ready for close-quarters combat. These men were trained in silent takedowns and swift, efficient kills using knives and silenced pistols.

Grigory's trust in this team was absolute. He knew they were capable of executing this ambush flawlessly. If they succeeded, the agency's best field agents would be wiped out, and Grigory's larger plan would go unchecked. However, if the agents somehow evaded this trap, it would be a significant blow to his operation—and that wasn't something Grigory would allow.

The Russian operatives were well aware of their disavowed status. Should they be captured or killed, there would be no rescue, no acknowledgment. This was the price of their mission, but these were men who had long accepted that reality. They knew the risks and the rewards—failure meant death or worse, but success would mean the continued destabilization of key strategic targets in the region, and perhaps more lucrative opportunities in the future.

Grigory watched from the shadows, confident in his team's ability to deal with the agents. He was ready to let this ambush play out, knowing that even if the agents made it out, they'd never see the real plan in Eskişehir until it was too late.

28 **End Game**

Cecilia's strategic foresight had paid off. While the agency team played their part as the clueless operators, stumbling around Erzurum to keep Grigory's eyes on them, she had already placed a much bigger piece on the board: IRIS, the European Union's intelligence and security force, along with the Turkish authorities. Both were now in position, fully equipped, and with jurisdiction on their side.

Grigory's focus had been on Dave, Dan, Anya, and Omar—expecting them to charge in and deal with the decoy pipeline attackers. The agency knew better than to get caught up in this obvious ploy, though. Instead, IRIS and Turkish authorities, with their full force and numbers, moved into position under the guise of local anti-terrorism units.

IRIS, alerted by the intelligence Cecilia had dropped, had brought their own heavy hitters into the game. They were professional, methodical, and highly visible. Their arrival was a spectacle meant to draw Grigory's gaze and confidence away from the real threat: the agency team.

As IRIS stormed the industrial facility, moving swiftly to neutralise the fake pipeline attack force, the agency team pulled back to a safe distance, silently watching from the shadows. IRIS made quick work of the "wannabe" attackers—mercenaries Grigory had planted to stage an attack. The takedown was clean and efficient. Grigory's specialists, watching the scene from a distance, expected the agents to be among those moving in, but instead, it was IRIS doing all the heavy lifting.

The wannabe attackers went down easily—outgunned and outnumbered by IRIS. Turkish anti-terrorism units were on-site, providing additional firepower and ensuring that the entire facility was locked down. It was a chaotic scene designed to sell the illusion to Grigory and his men that the agency had walked into his trap, leaving them unsuspecting of what was really happening behind the scenes.

With Grigory's specialists waiting for the right moment to ambush the agents, the real trap was closing in on them instead. While they expected the agency to be drawn into the firefight, Cecilia had deployed the team into the shadows, positioning them like ghosts, with one goal: take out the ex-military hit squad.

Dave, Omar, Anya, and Dan moved with precision, using their own clandestine skills to flank the specialists who were too focused on IRIS's flashy takedown of the mercenaries. Grigory's specialists were good—highly trained and dangerous—but the agency team was prepared, and they had the element of surprise.

The agency moved in waves, silently cutting off the Russian specialists from one another, isolating them.

Anya had always been one of the more agile and precise members of the team, preferring silent takedowns to loud firefights. As she positioned herself beneath the scaffolding of an old, derelict warehouse, she knew that taking out the sniper would be critical to neutralizing Grigory's specialist team.

She crept through the shadows, her senses heightened. The sniper, a seasoned Spetsnaz, had chosen a perfect vantage point on the second floor. From there, he could see anyone approaching the industrial site, but he hadn't accounted for someone like Anya, who was more like a shadow than a person in moments like this.

Climbing the rusted ladder silently, Anya kept her eyes on the sniper's position. He lay prone, his rifle aimed at the chaos below where IRIS and the Turkish authorities were taking down the fake pipeline attackers. He was focused, steady, and motionless. She moved like a predator, each step measured, her breath controlled.

Reaching the platform behind him, she made no sound as she took her position. The sniper was oblivious to her presence until it was too late.

In one fluid motion, Anya sprang forward, her arm looping around the sniper's neck, dragging him backward off his rifle. He reacted instantly, reaching for the combat knife strapped to his chest, but Anya was faster.

The two of them tumbled to the ground, the sniper's larger frame rolling on top of her. He swung his elbow backward, aiming for her head, but she ducked, pushing him off with a sharp knee to his ribs. His knife slashed the air, barely missing her face as she dodged, the blade catching a few strands of her hair.

They grappled, locked in a deadly dance of force and skill. The sniper used his weight advantage to pin her momentarily, his hand reaching for her throat. His grip was iron-like, squeezing her windpipe, but Anya wasn't panicking. She jammed her fingers into his eyes, forcing a grunt of pain as his grip faltered.

The sniper, enraged by the attack to his eyes, slashed wildly with his knife again, catching Anya's arm. She hissed in pain but ignored the wound, capitalising on his momentary distraction. She shifted her body weight and trapped his knife hand under her knee, forcing it to the ground.

With a swift motion, she disarmed him, kicking the knife away. The sniper snarled, attempting to punch her with his free hand, but Anya was already one step ahead. She caught his wrist mid-swing, twisting it brutally, and heard a satisfying pop as the joint dislocated.

The sniper roared in agony but still tried to use his good arm to fight her off. Anya swung her elbow up, striking him hard in the jaw, snapping his head to the side. Blood flew from his mouth, but he stubbornly refused to go down. He was a trained killer, after all.

The sniper tried one last desperate lunge, trying to overpower her with sheer force, but Anya was done playing. She drove her knee into his solar

plexus with a force that knocked the wind from his lungs. As he gasped for air, his body crumpling, she shifted behind him, wrapping her arm around his neck once more—this time with intent.

Using a rear naked choke, she tightened her grip, cutting off his air supply and blood flow to his brain. The sniper struggled, flailing weakly, but it was no use. His strength ebbed away as she held firm, her breathing steady as his movements slowed.

Finally, his body went limp, unconscious from the lack of oxygen. Anya released the choke, rolling the sniper off her, ensuring he was out cold.

Breathing heavily, she wiped the blood from her arm and checked the wound—superficial, but enough to sting. She glanced down at the sniper's prone form, his rifle still lying in the dirt where he'd dropped it. He wasn't going to be a problem any more.

Anya radioed in, her voice calm despite the intensity of the situation, "Sniper's down. Position secure."

Omar was lying in wait, his heart beating steadily despite the chaos of the situation. He had positioned himself behind a stack of metal shipping containers, just out of sight, watching as the two Russian specialists approached his location. These weren't ordinary thugs—Grigory's men were elite, highly trained, ex-military operatives who had spent years in the brutal world of special operations. Omar had to stay sharp and silent if he was going to survive the next few minutes.

The night air was still, the sounds of the firefight with the fake pipeline attackers echoing in the distance. Omar's mission was different. He wasn't in the thick of the fighting with IRIS and Turkish authorities. Instead, his focus was on these two shadows slipping through the complex. They were hunting him, or at least trying to flank his position.

He moved silently, inching along the containers, his suppressed pistol raised, the cold metal comfortable in his hand. He wasn't as experienced as Dan or Anya in hand-to-hand combat, but he had learned fast over the past few months. Tonight would be a test of all those skills.

As the two specialists rounded the corner, moving with the precision of hunters, Omar waited, blending into the darkness. He let the first one pass by him, unnoticed. The second was more alert, scanning the area carefully, his suppressed pistol held close to his chest.

Omar's instincts took over. He stepped out just as the second specialist passed, his silenced pistol snapping up. The specialist heard the faintest shift of movement, but it was too late. Omar pulled the trigger twice, quick and smooth, the suppressed gun loud between the containers.

The specialist's body jerked violently as the 9mm rounds punched through his back, one hitting his spine, the other tearing through his lung. His mouth opened in shock, but no sound came. He collapsed to the ground, his eyes wide and lifeless before he even hit the dirt.

The first Russian was just far enough ahead to miss the caught the unmistakable suppressed shots. He spun around, his pistol raised, but Omar was already moving. He dropped to one knee, firing two more rounds.

The shots rang out in the dark, but the specialist was quick. He dove to the side, rolling behind a crate, the shots missing by inches. Now the game was on.

The specialist was good—fast, tactical. He fired back, forcing Omar to duck behind a container. Suppressed rounds pinged off the metal, sparking in the night. Omar kept low, circling around, trying to get a better angle.

Suddenly, the firefight stopped. The specialist, realising his disadvantage in a gunfight, changed tactics. Omar heard the metallic clink of the enemy's knife being drawn. This was going to get up close and personal.

Omar holstered his pistol and unsheathed his own combat knife. His grip tightened on the handle, and his heart raced as he moved quietly through the maze of containers. He could hear the Russian moving, his footsteps soft but detectable.

It happened in a flash. The specialist leaped from behind a crate, slashing wildly with his knife, aiming for Omar's throat. Omar barely sidestepped in time, the blade whistling past his neck, close enough to feel the air shift.

He reacted instinctively, bringing his forearm up to deflect the next strike. Metal clanged against metal as their blades met. The specialist was bigger, stronger, but Omar was faster. He spun, ducking low, and slashed at the man's thigh. The blade bit deep, cutting through fabric and flesh, blood spraying from the wound.

The specialist grunted in pain, but it only seemed to fuel his rage. He lunged again, his knife thrusting toward Omar's midsection. Omar twisted his body, catching the specialist's wrist and forcing the blade off course. The Russian tried to pull back, but Omar wasn't letting go.

They were locked in a deadly embrace, both struggling for control of their knives. The specialist shoved Omar back into a container, trying to drive the air from his lungs. The impact was brutal, but Omar held firm, gritting his teeth through the pain.

With a sharp twist, Omar disarmed the specialist, wrenching the knife from his hand and sending it skittering across the ground. But the Russian wasn't done. He threw a punch, his fist crashing into Omar's jaw, sending him reeling.

Omar tasted blood, but he didn't fall. Instead, he used the momentum to spin away, regaining his balance just as the specialist lunged again, this time with his bare hands, aiming to strangle him.

Dropping low, Omar caught the specialist off guard. He drove his knife upward, the blade piercing the Russian's side, sliding between his ribs with

deadly precision. The specialist gasped, his eyes wide in shock as he staggered back, clutching at the wound.

But Omar didn't stop. He stepped forward, grabbing the man by the collar and driving the knife deeper, twisting it viciously. The specialist's legs gave out, his body collapsing to the ground with a thud. Blood pooled beneath him, his breathing shallow and ragged.

Omar stood over him, panting, wiping the blood from his face. He'd won, but just barely.

Dan had been tracking the Russian specialist for several minutes, a deadly game of cat and mouse unfolding in the shadows of the industrial complex. This wasn't Dan's first encounter with men like this—hardened, ex-military operatives, experts in close-quarters combat. The Russian moved with precision, almost silently, but Dan had been around too long to be fooled by the subtlety of an expert.

He moved through the dimly lit maze of storage containers, keeping his distance but never letting the specialist slip out of his sight. Dan knew that the man was trying to flank him, perhaps planning to catch him unaware. But Dan had a plan of his own. He wasn't the type to engage directly unless he had the upper hand, and he was about to get it.

The Russian paused near a large stack of crates, scanning his surroundings, his suppressed pistol raised and ready. Dan crept closer, sticking to the shadows. He could see the tension in the man's body, the twitch of muscles ready to react at the first hint of a threat. Dan knew that a straight firefight could be a gamble, and that wasn't his style tonight. He wanted to end this quickly and efficiently.

He continued circling the containers, moving in closer. Timing was everything. Dan waited until the Russian turned his back, then made his move. Like a predator, he closed the distance in an instant, his footfalls

silent. The specialist was fast, though—he heard the shift in the air and spun around, gun raised.

But Dan was faster.

Before the man could fire, Dan slammed into him with the force of a sledgehammer, his shoulder driving into the specialist's chest. The Russian grunted in pain, his gun hand knocked aside. The suppressed pistol clattered to the ground as the impact sent him staggering back into the wall of a container.

Without hesitation, Dan followed up with a quick, devastating punch to the specialist's ribs. His fist drove into the side of the man's torso, the force of the blow cracking bone. The Russian gasped, doubling over from the impact, his body momentarily stunned by the sharp, precise hit. Dan didn't let him recover.

Grabbing the man by the collar, Dan yanked him forward, slamming his knee into the Russian's gut with brutal precision. The air left the man's lungs in a ragged gasp, and he folded like a sheet of paper, clutching his stomach. Dan was relentless, his eyes cold and focused, a predator delivering the kill.

With one fluid motion, Dan brought his elbow crashing down onto the back of the Russian's neck, sending him sprawling to the ground, face first. The specialist barely had time to react before Dan was on him again, dragging him up by his jacket. The man's legs barely supported him now, his body trembling from the pain coursing through him.

The Russian specialist tried to fight back, swinging a fist at Dan's head, but it was a desperate, weak attempt. Dan easily caught the punch in his hand and twisted the specialist's arm behind his back, forcing the man to his knees with a sharp twist that threatened to dislocate his shoulder.

The Russian growled in pain, his face twisted in fury, but Dan wasn't done. In one smooth motion, Dan released the arm and spun the man around,

delivering a swift, savage punch to his jaw. The crack of bone was audible, teeth rattling loose from the impact. Blood sprayed from the specialist's mouth as his head snapped back, the force of the hit so strong that it knocked him off his feet and sent him crashing onto the cold concrete.

The Russian lay on the ground, dazed and barely conscious, struggling to even comprehend what had just happened. Dan stepped over him, his breath steady, fists still clenched, ready for more if the man dared to get up.

But there was no fight left in the specialist. His face was a bloody mess, his jaw shattered, blood pouring from his broken nose and split lips. His chest rose and fell in shallow, laboured breaths, each one a struggle.

Dan knelt down beside the man, grabbing him by the front of his jacket, pulling him up just enough so their faces were inches apart. The specialist's eyes were glazed, unfocused, but Dan made sure his next words sank in.

"You never had a chance," Dan muttered coldly, his voice a low growl.

With that, Dan slammed the man's head back onto the concrete with a thud, the impact rendering him unconscious. The fight was over in less than a minute—quick, brutal, and efficient.

Dan stood up, looking down at the crumpled form of the Russian. There was no satisfaction in the violence, just a cold efficiency. He wiped the blood from his knuckles on his pants and turned away, ready to rejoin the others.

Dave had been keeping his distance, watching as the team dismantled Grigory's operation piece by piece. He was used to being in the background, the guy who was always two steps behind. But tonight, something had shifted. The rage simmering under the surface was now focused, cold, and precise. It wasn't anger any more—it was purpose.

The last Russian specialist had been circling the perimeter, searching for a weak point to exploit, unaware that Dave was tracking his every move.

This man was dangerous, as dangerous as any Dave had faced. He moved like a predator, constantly scanning for threats, ready to kill without hesitation. But Dave wasn't going to give him that chance.

He was done holding back.

Dave watched as the specialist slid into a shadowed alleyway between two buildings, checking his surroundings one last time. Perfect. Dave waited for just the right moment, a breath of silence hanging in the air before he sprang into action.

In a blur of movement, Dave closed the distance in an instant, his body moving faster than the specialist could even register. Before the Russian could react, Dave's hand shot out like a viper, gripping the man by the back of his jacket and spinning him around with bone-jarring force.

The Russian's eyes went wide in surprise, but he barely had time to register what was happening before Dave's fist slammed into his stomach with terrifying precision. The blow was so fast, so calculated, that it knocked the air out of him in one brutal strike, leaving him gasping for breath, his legs momentarily buckling under the sheer force.

Dave didn't stop. In one fluid motion, he pulled the man forward, lifting him off his feet slightly with unnatural strength before driving his knee into the Russian's ribs. The impact was brutal, but controlled—enough to crack a rib but not shatter it. The specialist let out a strangled grunt of pain, his body twitching involuntarily as the pain wracked his nerves.

Before the Russian could recover, Dave brought his elbow down like a hammer, striking the man's shoulder with cold precision. The joint popped, dislocating with a sickening crunch, but Dave had calculated the angle perfectly—no permanent damage, just enough pain to leave the man incapacitated. The specialist's pistol clattered to the ground, useless now that his arm hung limply at his side.

Dave's movements were eerily efficient, almost mechanical. There was no hesitation, no wasted effort. His mind was a laser, coldly calculating the most effective ways to neutralise the threat without causing lasting harm. It wasn't about revenge or anger—it was about control.

The Russian, now stumbling and gasping for air, tried to throw a wild punch with his good arm, a last-ditch effort to regain some control of the situation. But Dave's reflexes were too fast. He caught the punch in mid-air, gripping the man's wrist with iron strength and twisting it just enough to force the man to his knees, immobilizing him completely.

The specialist struggled for a moment, his body tense with pain and desperation, but Dave held him there, his grip like a vice. The Russian's eyes were wide with fear now, realising he was up against something far beyond human. Dave, calm and composed, crouched down in front of him, his face expressionless.

"You're done," Dave said quietly, his voice cold and measured.

With that, Dave released the man's wrist, pushing him back onto the ground. The Russian lay there, groaning in pain, clutching his dislocated shoulder and bruised ribs. He was defeated, but alive. Dave had made sure of that. There would be no permanent injuries, no unnecessary suffering. Just incapacitation.

Dave stood over the fallen man, his breath steady, his heart calm. The eruption of violence had lasted only seconds, but in that short time, he had taken complete control of the situation. He looked down at his hands, bloodless and steady. There was no shaking, no fear. Just a cold, calculated efficiency.

He glanced back at the specialist, who was now groaning in pain but otherwise conscious. Dave didn't feel any satisfaction in what he had done—just a sense of inevitability. It was a job, and he had completed it. Nothing more.

He left the man where he lay, incapacitated but alive, and walked away into the shadows, his mind already shifting to the next step of the mission.

Grigory, unaware of the trap closing in on his specialists, was still under the assumption that his decoy had succeeded. But as his men failed to check in one by one, the reality began to dawn on him. His specialist team—those he trusted to eliminate the agents—was now either captured or incapacitated.

Back at his base of operations, Aleksandr sensed Grigory's growing fury. The meticulous plan that had been weeks, if not months, in the making, was unravelling before their eyes. What was worse—Grigory still didn't know the full extent of the agency's real target.

As Grigory's men were being systematically taken down, the final piece of the puzzle fell into place for Cecilia and her team. While IRIS and the Turkish authorities dealt with the decoy, the agency had been pulling in intelligence on Grigory's true objective: Eskişehir.

Through intercepted communications and Grigory's patterns, it became clear that the Erzurum pipeline attack had never been the real goal. The pipeline was a perfect distraction, but the true target was in Eskişehir—an energy hub far more critical to the region's infrastructure than anyone had first realised. Taking it down would cripple energy supplies and cause an economic ripple effect that could destabilise entire regions.

Cecilia's gamble had worked. By making Grigory believe they were focusing all their efforts on the pipeline attack, they had successfully hidden their own pursuit of the true target, keeping the agency a step ahead of the game.

Now, with Grigory's team in disarray and the IRIS forces having neutralised his decoys, the final stage of the operation was set: the agency

would move on Eskişehir, aiming to stop Grigory's real strike before it ever began.

29 Seething

Grigory's fist left a dent in the metal table, the pain barely registering through his fury. Perfect plans weren't supposed to unravel like this. His Russian masters wouldn't accept failure - and neither would he. Eskişehir would burn, and those agents with it.

The two Spetsnaz veterans he'd sent after them were broken and useless, humiliated by an office worker, of all people! His hired specialists had been taken down one by one, in the shadows, where they were supposed to be the predators. His pipeline decoy was crumbling. Now, even the wannabe attackers had been rounded up, rendered ineffective. He had underestimated them, and it had cost him dearly.

His fury only intensified as he thought of the consequences. Failure wasn't an option, not when it came to this operation. His Russian masters had made that clear—this mission was everything, a high-stakes gambit with no room for error. The aim had always been destabilization, chaos, violence, but Eskişehir was supposed to be a precision strike. Now? Now it had to be absolute destruction.

He slammed his fist down on the table, making the scattered papers and maps jump. His thoughts spiralled. He needed something bigger, something that would drown these agents and their meddling in blood. A brutal message not just to them, but to anyone who dared interfere with Russia's ambitions. Eskişehir wouldn't just be a strike—it would be a slaughter.

Grigory seethed, pacing faster. His mind raced through options. More explosives. Civilian casualties be damned. If the agents wanted a war, he'd bring it to them in the ugliest, most unforgiving way possible. This wouldn't be a clean hit. This would be a massacre.

His mind buzzed with dangerous thoughts of retribution, each idea more ruthless than the last. He imagined the smouldering ruins of Eskişehir, the

chaos it would unleash. The message it would send to the world: you do not cross Russia and survive.

But beneath the rage, a gnawing fear tugged at him. If he failed, if Eskişehir fell through like Erzurum, his punishment back home would be severe. The people who had entrusted him with this mission had no tolerance for weakness or failure. They'd sought him out because he had been ruthless, methodical, and driven. If he couldn't deliver on this, then they would turn their brutality inward—on him. His failure would be his end.

No. He couldn't afford to fail. Not now. Not after everything.

His eyes flickered to the map of Eskişehir pinned to the wall, tracing the contours of the city. He would regroup, find new allies, deploy every asset he had left. This would be scorched earth. He would leave nothing but destruction in his wake.

Grigory's lips curled into a twisted smile. He would take everything from these agents, everything they had protected. And when they came for him, they would find only fire and ruin.

His revenge would be total.

Heart pounding in his chest Grigory, watched the scene in Erzurum unfold. Foreign law enforcement and government agents swarmed the streets, investigating every alley, combing through industrial buildings, and scrutinising every vehicle. His operation had unravelled faster than he could have imagined, and now, escaping was his only priority. With the commercial airport under strict surveillance, there was no way he could slip through standard channels unnoticed.

Grigory remained calm. Panic was a weakness he couldn't afford, not now. He knew the terrain well enough, had contingency plans for this very scenario, and immediately began putting them into motion.

The first thing he did was change his appearance. Inside a hidden safe house on the outskirts of Erzurum, he quickly shaved his head, dyed what little hair remained, and donned a set of fake glasses and a neatly trimmed moustache from his kit. He switched out of his tactical clothing into a simple set of worker's clothes — old jeans, a fraying jacket, and heavy boots. He now looked like a local labourer or perhaps a delivery driver, someone who would blend into the background amid the chaos of the city.

Grigory's experience in clandestine operations meant he knew how to move without raising suspicion. He stayed away from the main streets where police checkpoints had been established, carefully threading his way through side alleys and taking advantage of smaller, less monitored streets. His intimate knowledge of Erzurum's layout gave him an edge.

He picked up an old motorbike from a garage he had used to store emergency supplies. The bike was slow and inconspicuous, much better suited for slipping through checkpoints than any sleek getaway car. Grigory avoided highways and major roads, opting for a network of rural backroads that led out of the city in a quiet, almost imperceptible manner. This kept him away from the main routes law enforcement would expect, as they focused on bigger exits.

Getting out of Erzurum wasn't enough; Grigory needed to slip past the watchful eyes of the authorities stationed at every city and provincial checkpoint. The first line of escape was through the Palandöken Mountains. He had used this route before for smuggling goods and weapons; it was familiar, remote, and well-guarded by loyalists.

Leaving the motorbike with a trusted contact on the edge of the city and began hiking through the foothills of Palandöken. The dense forests and winding mountain paths offered natural cover. His contact gave Grigory details of an old mountain pass that would take him through the heart of the range, far away from patrolling officers or drones monitoring the roads.

With the help of his contact, Grigory traversed the rugged terrain, using mule tracks and forgotten footpaths to avoid any suspicion. After hours of climbing, he descended toward a rural village nestled between the mountains, a place where no one would care to ask questions. Here, he had arranged his next mode of transportation — an old cargo van.

The van was an ancient, rusting piece of machinery, perfect for disappearing into the back roads of eastern Turkey. The inside was filthy and smelled of oil, but it was fitted with enough fuel to get him to his next destination. Grigory drove slowly and cautiously through rural roads, never pushing the speed limit, making sure to avoid any unnecessary attention.

The road was long and winding, but every mile brought him closer to safety. He had instructed his men to bribe local militia groups who could man smaller checkpoints on back country routes. Any potential roadblocks were paid off in advance, allowing him to pass without issue. Grigory chose not to carry any weapons, just in case an unexpected search was conducted, relying instead on his quick wits and charm to talk his way through if needed.

Ever the tactician, Grigory had prepared for this escape long ago. The final leg of his journey was to a private airstrip, hidden away on the outskirts of a small farming village south of Erzurum. The strip was a relic from Cold War days, now used occasionally for illegal arms transfers and smuggling. His ally in the region had arranged for a small, single-engine plane to be fuelled and waiting.

As Grigory pulled the van into the dirt road leading to the airstrip, he checked his surroundings carefully. No police, no surveillance — it seemed the authorities hadn't caught wind of his escape route. The plane was old but functional, piloted by another Russian ex-military man signed on to the cause.

Within minutes, they was airborne, leaving behind the chaos of Erzurum and heading west. His destination: Istanbul. Exhausted from hours of travelling, Grigory allows himself a brief moment of sleep, to recharge before the final act.

Landing in Istanbul's outskirts, Grigory quickly melted into the city's teeming crowds. Istanbul, with its sprawling population and myriad connections, was the perfect place to disappear. Using a new Ukrainian identity, he checked into a small, nondescript hotel under the name of an ordinary businessman, where he reconnected with Aleksandr. Aleksandr had taken a different route, but arrived safely. From here, they would finalise their plan to strike again, this time focusing on Eskişehir, where they would execute their final, devastating act of sabotage.

Their escape was complete. But the clock was ticking for his next move, and failure was not an option this time.

Grigory's time in Istanbul wasn't just about regrouping—it was about securing the final pieces of his plan. Istanbul offered him a crucial hub for logistics, giving him access to smuggled equipment, transportation networks, and local operatives who would help move the materials needed for the impending destruction in Eskişehir. But beyond mere logistics, Istanbul was the place where he sought final authorization from his Russian backers, the men pulling the strings behind the scenes. These higher-ups were critical in ensuring that local cooperation went smoothly and that every aspect of his plot was in place.

During a tense conversation with his Russian contact, Grigory is given a harsh warning: *"Failure is not an option."* The implications are clear—should this plan falter, the punishment would be brutal. In the world Grigory operates in, failure doesn't just result in demotion or exile; it means severe consequences.

The Russian contact emphasises that this operation in Eskişehir isn't just about achieving a tactical goal; it's about revenge, sending a message, and

ensuring that the agents who disrupted his previous plans are obliterated. *"There will be no second chance, Grigory. If you fail, you'll wish we'd killed you before we sent you on this mission."* The weight of this statement hits Grigory hard, driving him even more ruthlessly to ensure that not only does the plan succeed, but the agents who foiled him suffer for their interference.

With his back against the wall and his life hanging in the balance, Grigory vows to make the final leg of the operation—overseeing the carnage in Eskişehir—at the last possible moment, ensuring everything is in place for maximum destruction.

30 The Last Mile

The team arrived in Eskişehir, weary but determined. Their mission had already brought them face-to-face with danger, and now they were preparing for the next phase. Cecilia had arranged a long-term rental that was large enough to accommodate up to eight people, a space that could serve as both a temporary base and an operational centre. It wasn't a safe house, but it would more than suffice for their purposes. Budget was no concern; the agency could take the hit on a 12-month lease without blinking, as long as the place provided the necessary privacy and security.

The house was surrounded by a tall, solid fence, giving them the seclusion they needed. It offered plenty of parking for their vehicles, allowing them to move in and out unnoticed. The rooms inside were spacious, with enough room for everyone to operate and sleep comfortably. The atmosphere was tense but focused, with the group knowing they were now in the critical stage of their mission. Grigory had proven to be a dangerous adversary, and now they had to stay one step ahead.

After unpacking their gear, the team immediately began setting up their equipment. Anya was in the living area, linking up surveillance and communication devices, checking encrypted traffic, and setting up remote monitoring systems. Omar and Dan were reviewing maps and tactical plans at the dining table, outlining potential hotspots around Eskişehir where Grigory could strike next. With the Turkish authorities and IRIS no longer involved, the team was on their own, but they knew they had to keep pressing forward.

In the kitchen, Dave took charge of unpacking the supplies they had picked up along the way. He moved through the kitchen, putting items in cupboards and the fridge, appreciating the relative normalcy of the task in contrast to their usual covert operations. Then, his eyes lit up when he spotted the coffee machine on the counter. Finally, a working coffee machine after all their previous missions of improvising with bad,

lukewarm brews. His excitement, however, was short-lived. As he reached for the bag of coffee beans, he realised with frustration that the machine didn't grind beans.

"Just bloody typical!" Dave said with a chuckle, waving the bag of coffee beans in the air. "We've got the coffee, we've got the machine, but no bloody grinder."

His laughter lightened the mood briefly, and some of the others, hearing him from the living room, smiled despite the gravity of the situation. Even in moments of stress, Dave had a way of cutting through the tension. He tossed the beans back into the bag and made a mental note to pick up ground coffee later.

As they finished setting up, the team gathered in the common area to discuss the next steps. The house wasn't just a place to crash—it was a staging ground for what could be their most dangerous confrontation yet. With Grigory's operation inching closer to its deadly conclusion, every detail mattered. They knew they had to play this carefully, especially with the revelation that the enemy didn't expect Serj to be part of their ranks. His presence was an advantage they hadn't counted on, and they would need every edge they could get.

This place would serve them well, and as they prepared to face Grigory, they understood they were in the calm before the storm.

Cecilia's voice crackled through the team's secure line, carrying a tone of pride and relief. "Congratulations on securing Erzurum, team. You did an outstanding job." But the team wasn't about to take all the credit. They immediately turned it back on her.

"We couldn't have done it without you," Dan said, his voice reflecting the group's collective gratitude. "Bringing IRIS into the fold was a master-stroke." Anya and Omar nodded in agreement.

Cecilia smiled on the other end, though her expression soon turned serious. "Well, we may not get that kind of support again. IRIS believes the threat is gone. The authorities think the operation was isolated, and without any new evidence of another imminent attack, they're pulling out of the region." There was a pause, as the weight of her next words set in. "They won't be providing backup for this one."

Dave glanced around the room at his teammates, their expressions growing sombre. No backup. It meant they were alone.

"Wait, so we're completely on our own now?" Omar asked, already knowing the answer. Cecilia nodded.

"Exactly. IRIS thinks the danger has passed, and they have no reason to stay involved. Since the source of our intelligence is... let's say, not officially recognised, we can't make the agency's role known. That means no outside help for Eskişehir. It's just us."

Dave felt a pit form in his stomach. The team had grown used to working in the shadows, but this time the stakes were even higher. They had barely made it through the last operation with the support of IRIS. Now, they had to navigate this labyrinth on their own.

"We know Grigory won't waste time," Dan said grimly. "He'll want to move fast, especially after what we just pulled in Erzurum."

Anya leaned back in her chair, a look of fierce determination crossing her face. "And we don't know when he'll strike. We know where, but not when. Grigory isn't going to sit around. He's going to push forward with his plan as soon as he can."

Cecilia nodded. "Exactly. Which means we need to figure out his next steps and fast. He's cornered, and that makes him dangerous. You need to wade through every piece of intelligence you have and start connecting the dots. Anything that helps you get one step ahead of him could be the difference between success and catastrophe."

Dave knew it wouldn't be easy, but they had no choice. They had to dig deep, scrutinise everything, and prepare for a confrontation on Grigory's terms, not theirs. Time was slipping away, and the clock was ticking faster than ever.

Anya's voice broke the heavy silence that had settled over the team. "One more thing," she asked, her usual confidence softened by concern. "How's Mei?"

Cecilia's expression shifted, the corners of her mouth tightening. "Mei's stable," she said gently. "She was taken directly to a medical facility. The doctors have done everything they can for her, but..." Her voice trailed off briefly. "The injuries were severe. It's going to be a long road to recovery."

Anya's jaw clenched, her fingers drumming against the table. Dave could see the frustration and sadness in her eyes. Mei had been part of their team, and now she was sidelined indefinitely.

"She's tough," Cecilia added, trying to offer some reassurance. "If anyone can come back from this, it's Mei. But she's going to be out of action for a while."

Anya nodded, though it was clear the answer wasn't enough to ease the tension. Omar shifted in his seat, his face unreadable, but the weight of Mei's absence was palpable among them.

"Thank you," Anya finally said, her voice steady. "She deserves to be with us. We'll get this done for her." The determination in her tone was unmistakable.

Anya's words sliced through the room, pulling everyone's attention back to the looming threat. "OK," she said, her voice calm but sharp with focus. "We know where. And the AI's seen a change in encrypted traffic. We know Grigory will also be desperate to take us down too. How do we use that to our advantage?"

Dan leaned back, thinking for a moment. "Desperation makes people reckless," he mused. "He'll try to strike fast, maybe before he's fully prepared. We can use that."

Omar nodded in agreement. "He's expecting us to come after the pipeline, but now he's got another objective—us. We could play into that. Make ourselves the bait."

Anya looked to Cecilia through the video link, her eyes narrowing. "But not in a way that's too obvious. We need to make him think he's one step ahead."

Cecilia leaned forward on the screen, considering the options. "We need to give Grigory just enough to believe he's still in control, that his plan is working," she said. "If we let him think he's boxed us in, he might reveal his real play."

Dave, listening quietly, finally chimed in. "We also know how he operates. He'll use misdirection, just like with Erzurum. He'll try to keep us focused on the obvious while something else is brewing. We need to fake like we're stretched thin."

Omar added, "We can set up some dummy surveillance, make it seem like we're trying to cover too many angles. Let him think we're spread out, vulnerable."

"And while we're 'vulnerable,'" Anya interjected, "we track his real movements. He's desperate, but still careful. He won't commit his full resources to the fake attack. If we can force him into a corner, we might uncover where the real target is."

Cecilia nodded thoughtfully. "It's risky, but it might just work. Grigory's need for revenge will blind him. We feed him enough information to think he's ahead, but the entire time, we're laying our own trap."

The room went silent again, the weight of the plan settling over them. Anya broke the quiet with one final statement: "It's a gamble. But it's one we need to take."

Cecilia smiled through the video link, a glint of satisfaction in her eyes. "I have one more surprise for you all."

As she spoke, the door to the safe house creaked open. Dave turned, already sensing who it might be. In walked a familiar figure: Serj, his tall frame and steady demeanour instantly recognisable. Dave's face lit up, a rare moment of relief breaking through the tension.

"Serj, it's good to see you," Dave said, stepping forward to shake his hand. Serj grinned, giving a firm handshake in return, his presence instantly reassuring. The rest of the team rose from their seats, welcoming him into the fold.

Cecilia's voice came back through the link. "Good call, we could use the extra hands," Dave said, turning back to her, nodding his approval.

Serj Romanov a tall, imposing figure with a calm intensity and a strong, disciplined presence. Born in a war-torn part of Eastern Europe, he grew up fast, shaped by the chaos around him. Recruited into a covert military group at a young age, Serj excelled in high-risk, classified missions. Known for his sharp mind and tactical skill, he's spent years leading operations behind enemy lines, specialising in stealth, combat, and survival. Though serious and focused, Serj has a protective side, often mentoring younger recruits with a firm but fair hand.

Despite his rugged appearance and scarred body, Serj moves with surprising grace, using both his strength and strategic thinking to outmanoeuvre opponents. With countless missions under his belt, he has become a trusted leader, though the weight of his past can sometimes show in his quiet moments. Now, in the next chapter of his life, Serj finds

himself balancing the roles of a seasoned warrior and a thoughtful mentor, always ready for the challenges ahead.

Anya, Omar, and Dan each greeted Serj in turn, their expressions showing a mix of relief and gratitude. He wasn't just an extra pair of hands—he was experienced, reliable, and, perhaps most importantly, a face Grigory and his team wouldn't recognise.

"It's good to be here," Serj said, his calm voice cutting through the room's tension. "Sounds like things have gotten pretty intense."

Dan clapped him on the shoulder. "You could say that. But with you on board, things are looking up."

Omar chimed in. "And the fact that Grigory's team doesn't know you—that could be valuable. We can use that to our advantage."

Dave nodded in agreement. Serj's addition was more than just a numbers game—it was another layer of unpredictability they could leverage.

Anya, ever strategic, was already thinking ahead. "We'll need to make sure Serj stays off the radar until the right moment. Let Grigory think he's got us figured out."

The atmosphere in the room shifted. With Serj's arrival, the team had gained not just another operative, but a tactical edge. The stakes were as high as ever, but now they had something Grigory wouldn't see coming.

Dan and Omar move through the city like locals, slipping into backroom cafes and shadowy alleys where quiet deals and whispered conversations hold the real power. They know who to talk to—people with connections that aren't in any official directory. Omar, with his casual demeanour, knows how to talk to local authorities without raising suspicion, framing his inquiries in a way that sounds like curiosity rather than investigation. Dan, more direct, dives into the underground, meeting black market operatives who trade in everything from counterfeit documents to

weaponry. Their conversations are veiled but pointed, a delicate dance of favours and mutual interests. A well-placed question here, a discreet bribe there. They learn about unusual vehicle traffic on routes that usually don't see much activity, and talk of unfamiliar faces lurking around supply hubs. In one particularly tense meeting, a black market dealer hints at someone stockpiling demolition equipment—far more than what's typically needed for local jobs.

The AI, meanwhile, has its hands full. Anya's orders are precise: find any recent property transactions tied to known patterns of suspicious shipments or goods, especially explosives or demolition tools. But what should have been a straightforward task quickly grows complicated. The financial data is a tangled mess of unusual activity—transactions from shell companies, goods purchased with untraceable cryptocurrencies, and properties rented under false names. The sheer volume of strange financial movements forces the AI to dig deeper, analysing patterns that don't just suggest criminal activity, but something far more organised. A string of seemingly small transactions, when put together, starts to paint a much bigger picture—one that hints at preparations for something dangerous. The AI must sift through countless dead ends and false leads, compiling a growing list of suspects and potential hideouts.

While Dan and Omar gather intelligence from the streets and Anya's AI crunches data, Serj is on the ground, physically scouting the pipeline area. His experience in covert operations serves him well as he moves through the area with precision. Using binoculars from a distance, he studies the landscape, noting the position of every access road, security checkpoint, and possible approach. He checks for anything out of place—fresh tyre tracks in the mud, newly installed cameras that shouldn't be there, or signs of tampering along the pipeline itself. Serj's trained eyes miss nothing. He even spots an area of disturbed earth near the foot of the concrete supported fenced section of the pipeline, indicating that something—maybe a surveillance device or explosives—may have been planted. His instincts tell him it's not just paranoia; something about the area feels off.

He takes note, planning to return under the cover of night for a closer inspection.

While conducting his surveillance of the pipeline, Serj's keen eyes picked up on some nearby construction work. It wasn't far from the facility, maybe a few hundred meters off, where the skeletal beginnings of a structure lay waiting for its next phase. The foundation had been set, but it was still incomplete—rebar sticking out of the earth, piles of bricks and concrete blocks scattered across the site, waiting for the final stages of the build. The telltale signs of an unfinished construction project: heavy machinery, stacks of steel bars meant for reinforcing concrete, and mounds of materials.

Serj scanned the area more thoroughly. The site was too low to be strategically valuable for any serious offensive. His first thought was that it might offer a sniper's nest or a decent position to set up a rocket launcher if the elevation were high enough. But it wasn't. The structure was still in the early stages of construction—no height advantage, no solid cover. It simply didn't have the altitude or tactical value required to overlook the pipeline facility effectively. In fact, it appeared to be nothing more than a standard worksite, the kind that didn't warrant much attention.

Still, something about it bothered him. Serj knew that a seemingly insignificant detail could make all the difference in situations like these, so he filed the location away in his mind. The scattered construction materials might offer a last-minute resource if needed—heavy rebar, bricks, and concrete blocks could always be used to block paths or create barriers in a pinch. But for now, it was simply a place to watch. There was nothing obviously suspicious about the work itself, but the fact that it was so close to the pipeline raised a small flag in his mind.

Serj moved on, continuing to scan the perimeter of the pipeline. He knew Grigory was coming, and every little detail counted.

Dave's hand trembled slightly as he poured another round of coffee, the bitter smell a poor substitute for adrenaline. Through the doorway, he could hear the team planning their next move - his team, running an op without him. The coffee pot clattered a bit too loudly as he set it down.

31 **A Chink in the Armour**

It wasn't the lead they had been expecting, but Serj's instincts had once again proven invaluable. Under the cover of darkness, he had returned to the site of the disturbed earth near the fencing, moving with the practised stealth of a man who had lived in the shadows for decades. The disturbed earth yielded its secret under Serj's careful hands. His breath caught as the moonlight glinted off familiar wiring - breaching charges, and not the kind meant for quiet work. These were designed to tear open the fence like tissue paper, leaving a gap wide enough for... His mind raced. What the hell were they planning to bring through?

Carefully disarming the charges, Serj left the electronics in place. It was a masterful bit of sabotage—anyone monitoring the setup would still receive all the right signals, indicating everything was functioning as planned. But the explosives were dead, neutralised before they could tear open a gaping hole in the defences. This was their first concrete clue about the nature of the attack. The size of the breach suggested that whatever was coming wasn't going to be subtle. This wasn't a surgical strike with small teams slipping through unnoticed. No, this was meant for something big—too big to risk getting tangled in the fencing. Serj's mind raced with possibilities. A breach this wide wasn't meant for people, who would typically move in smaller, more strategic attack groups. No, this was meant to let something else in. Something large, something that needed a clear path into the complex, and something that spelled a far more significant threat than a simple attack force.

When Serj returned to the team with the news, the atmosphere shifted. They had been expecting sabotage, covert strikes, maybe even a raid. But this? This was different. Now they knew they were facing a direct, heavy assault, and their enemy wasn't planning to be subtle. Dan, Omar, and Anya listened intently as Serj explained the setup, the charges, and his deductions about the scale of the attack. Even Dave, who had been

frustrated with his role on the sidelines, felt the gravity of the situation sink in. The pieces were coming together, and they were all glad Serj had been there to make the critical discovery.

Serj's actions gave them a small but crucial advantage. The enemy still believed everything was in place, and the team now had time to prepare for what was coming. The question lingered in the back of everyone's mind—what was so big, so powerful, that it needed such a massive breach to enter the complex? Whatever it was, they had to be ready. This wasn't just about stopping an infiltration any more; it was about preparing for a direct confrontation with something far more dangerous than they had anticipated.

The discovery of the breaching charges to allow access to something big, jolted Dan and Omar's memory, leading them to connect the dots with a conversation they'd had with a contact just days earlier. During a routine meeting with one of their more reliable informants, there had been a cryptic mention of a large rail shipment that arrived recently in Eskişehir. The odd part was that the shipment wasn't unloaded at the usual goods terminal. It had been discreetly offloaded at a more remote, unmonitored location, far from the prying eyes of local authorities and curious civilians. At the time, their contact couldn't—or wouldn't—elaborate further. Whatever was unloaded from that train, no one seemed to know what it was, and the workers who handled the offload had been unusually tight-lipped.

The silence around the shipment was deafening. The payments to the black market workers involved must have been substantial enough to buy their silence, or the job itself was terrifying enough that no one wanted to risk talking about it. This wasn't normal. In a city where loose lips were common currency, the fact that no one would speak up hinted at something far bigger than a routine smuggling operation. Whatever arrived in Eskişehir was long gone now, but it had left its shadow. The sheer size of the shipment had to correspond with something that would need a vast

amount of space to store it—something massive and powerful, which now appeared to be in play with the breaching charges Serj discovered.

Dan and Omar shared their findings with the rest of the team, the realisation sinking in. This wasn't just about explosives or sabotage any more. They were dealing with something larger—both in scale and in threat. Whatever had been unloaded was now out there, possibly prepped and ready for deployment. Serj's discovery at the pipeline had only confirmed their worst fears: the enemy wasn't planning to slip in unnoticed; they were preparing for a large-scale operation, and whatever had been smuggled in by rail was likely the key to it. Now, all they had to do was figure out what it was and how soon it was going to be unleashed.

The next piece of the puzzle fell to Anya and the AI. With the newfound clue that they were dealing with something large—potentially massive enough to breach the pipeline fencing—Anya sharpened the AI's search parameters. Now, they weren't just looking for suspicious transactions or odd shipments; they were looking for properties large enough to store something of that scale, something hidden from public view but still close enough to the pipeline to move it into position without drawing too much attention.

Anya sat in front of her console, her fingers flying across the keyboard as she input new commands into the AI system. The AI had already been combing through recent property rentals and leases, scanning for unusual activity, but this time the search was more focused. The criteria narrowed: large, remote storage locations, with minimal oversight and a low public profile. The challenge was significant—there were dozens of properties in the region that fit the bill, many of them owned by shell companies or private entities that made tracing them difficult.

The AI worked tirelessly, cross-referencing the locations with known traffic patterns, areas with low civilian visibility, and proximity to the pipeline. It sifted through endless data streams—recent rentals, leases signed under false identities, payments made through untraceable accounts.

The task was daunting. The AI had its work cut out for it; the number of unusual transactions in the area was far higher than anticipated, thanks to a web of shadowy operations that had sprung up in the region. But Anya was relentless, tweaking the search to filter out irrelevant noise and hone in on the most promising leads.

Finally, the AI produced a shortlist: a handful of warehouses, old factory lots, and disused industrial buildings, all recently leased under mysterious circumstances. Some had seen minimal human activity, while others had sporadic shipments, but none raised major red flags—until now. The most likely candidates were clustered in the outer edges of the city, areas where security was lax and oversight minimal. These locations were all within a reasonable distance from the pipeline, allowing whatever had been unloaded from the train to be stored and moved without attracting too much attention.

Anya relayed the findings to the team, piecing together a clearer picture of what they might be dealing with. Whatever had been brought into Eskişehir was likely being stored in one of these locations, hidden away until the time came for it to be moved into place. Now, with the AI's data in hand, they had actionable leads. It wasn't much, but it was enough for Serj, Dan, and Omar to work with. They had narrowed down the possibilities, and soon, they'd be able to pinpoint exactly where the next phase of the enemy's plan would unfold.

The team knew they had to scout the shortlisted locations without tipping off whoever had rented them. Direct surveillance was too risky—too many eyes could easily catch on to someone snooping around. That's where their high-tech drones came into play. They had two units at their disposal, small enough to avoid detection but far more advanced than anything a civilian would recognise. These weren't the hobby drones you'd see buzzing around a park. These were state-of-the-art, military-grade drones, larger and built to carry a suite of advanced surveillance equipment.

The drones were military-grade machines, their advanced imaging systems capable of detecting the smallest anomaly. As they lifted into the night sky, their near-silent rotors barely disturbing the air, Anya monitored their feeds with growing anticipation. If there was anything to find in those warehouses, these machines would spot it.

Despite their impressive capabilities, the drones were built for versatility. They had enough power to carry armaments if necessary, though for now, the team had opted for a surveillance load out. Stealth and subtlety were the priorities. The extra weight of their cutting-edge imaging systems meant they needed long-life batteries to stay in the air for extended periods, but these drones were designed with just that in mind. The battery packs contributed to the size and heft of the drones, but they ensured the units could stay airborne long enough to thoroughly survey the target areas without needing to return for a recharge.

As the team prepared for the mission, Anya set the drones for deployment, programming them to follow their flight paths. The drones would fly low enough to avoid radar detection but high enough to remain unnoticed by anyone on the ground. They'd scan each of the suspicious warehouses, factories, and industrial lots identified by the AI, running night sweeps to avoid drawing attention.

With the drones loaded and ready, the team watched from their secure location as the machines lifted into the air, their rotors humming softly as they cut through the night sky. From their command centre, Dan and Omar monitored the live feeds, while Anya fine-tuned the drones' movements as needed. Serj, as always, was watching closely, his keen eyes scanning the data for anything that might hint at trouble. The drones would soon give them a clearer view of what they were dealing with, inching them closer to unravelling the mystery of the massive breach and the looming attack on the pipeline.

As the drones soared toward the first target, their sensors picked up the faint heat signatures of vehicles left idling near one of the warehouses.

Something was happening, and whatever it was, they were about to get a front-row view.

32 Leviathan

The deafening roar of the BTR-80's 260 horsepower engine reverberated through the warehouse, drowning out all other sound. Its diesel growl was an ominous prelude to the violence it was about to unleash. The bulky, armoured vehicle stood like a beast in waiting, fully armed and ready to tear through whatever stood in its path. The crew inside made final adjustments, their movements precise and efficient, well aware of the destruction they were about to cause.

The 7.62mm PKM machine gun, mounted and fully loaded, was just one part of the assault. Its rapid-fire capability would rain bullets at a terrifying rate, but the real threat was the Soviet-designed AGS-17 Plamya. The automatic grenade launcher was ready to launch a barrage of 30mm grenades, designed not just to kill but to obliterate anything that got in the way—infantry, equipment, infrastructure, it didn't matter. The Plamya had one job: total devastation. Key components of the pipeline facility were marked for destruction, and there would be nothing subtle about it.

Grigory stood near the entrance, watching with cold satisfaction as his team made the final preparations. This wasn't a surgical strike or a quiet infiltration—this was a rampage, a brutal show of force meant to send a clear message. The BTR-80 was going to tear through the facility, a storm of machine-gun fire and grenades exploding everything in its path. The plan was simple but effective: overwhelm and destroy, leaving nothing but chaos in its wake.

Grigory's presence, a tall and brooding figure, added weight to the moment. He had orchestrated this assault with care, pulling together the weapons, the firepower, and the right men for the job. Now, as the BTR rumbled to life, he knew it was ready. The pipeline facility wouldn't stand a chance. Grigory nodded to his men, signalling the time had come. The rampage was about to begin.

The BTR-80 was an ageing relic, manufactured decades ago, a testament to Soviet engineering still rugged enough to serve on the front lines of conflicts around the world. This particular unit, though, had seen many hands. It wasn't fresh from a Russian factory; it had been sourced through a complex and deliberately traceable Middle Eastern supply chain. Grigory had ensured that detail was no coincidence. The origin of the vehicle was essential to the larger plan.

Despite its Russian design, this BTR had a trail that would lead back to foreign suppliers, ones far removed from Moscow's influence. The narrative it supported was crucial—this was to be an act of terrorism with roots that pointed elsewhere. Grigory wanted no threads linking this back to Russia. The BTR-80, with its battered frame and foreign origins, would fit perfectly into the chaos he was about to unleash. When the attack was over and questions were asked, the evidence left behind would suggest that this destructive operation had been carried out by external forces, diverting attention and sowing confusion about who was truly responsible.

In Grigory's hands, the weapon was more than a blunt instrument of war—it was a carefully chosen tool in a broader game of deception. The West would see the BTR's foreign trail and draw the wrong conclusions. Meanwhile, the real architects of the attack would remain hidden in the shadows, continuing their plans unscathed. For now, the BTR was primed and ready, a key piece in the narrative Grigory had constructed, soon to be set in motion.

"What the f...! is that a tank?" Dave exclaimed, his eyes wide as the drone feed displayed the hulking figure of the BTR-80. The others, more militarily savvy, quickly corrected him—this wasn't a tank, it was an APC, an armoured personnel carrier. But to the untrained eye, it was no less terrifying. The drone's high-resolution camera zoomed in on the ageing but still formidable piece of Russian hardware. Its massive frame, outfitted

with a 7.62mm machine gun and a grenade launcher, stood ready for its rampage.

“Grigory’s going to launch the attack, right now,” Dan muttered, disbelief creeping into his voice. The drone feed confirmed their worst fears—the BTR-80 was prepped, fully armed, and ready to move. They’d been caught flat-footed, watching it all unfold in real-time, but without the means to stop it. They knew that nothing they currently had in their arsenal could deal with this level of firepower.

Serj, ever calm under pressure, grimly assessed the situation. “Small arms won’t even scratch it,” he said, voice steady but urgent. “We need large-calibre weapons, anti-tank, or high explosives. Small arms will just bounce off the armour.”

The realisation hit the team hard. They had planned for sabotage, for infantry-level engagements—but not for something like this. The BTR-80’s thick armour was built to withstand most conventional attacks. It would roll through small arms fire like it wasn’t even there, and once its 7.62mm machine gun and grenade launcher opened up, the pipeline facility and anyone in its path would be shredded.

Anya quickly scanned their options, her mind racing. “We need to call in support or find heavy weapons. That thing will level the place if we don’t stop it.”

Dave, though rattled, tried to steady himself. “So what do we have that can even touch it?” he asked, knowing they were working against the clock.

Serj glanced at the feed again, noting the BTR’s position. “We need to improvise. Either we slow it down long enough to get something heavier, or we find a way to disable it before it can get through the fence.” His mind was already working through the possibilities—anything they could use to disrupt the BTR’s progress, buy them time, or take it out before it unleashed hell on the facility.

They didn't have much time. Grigory was moving, and the BTR-80 was rumbling to life. The attack had begun.

The BTR-80 is a Soviet-designed, eight-wheeled armoured personnel carrier (APC) built for transporting infantry into battle while providing protection and fire support. The BTR-80's design emphasises mobility and durability, featuring a rugged chassis that can withstand small arms fire and shrapnel. Its sloped armour provides protection against light explosives, while its all-wheel-drive system allows it to traverse difficult terrain, making it versatile in both urban and battlefield environments.

Dan recognised this one - armed with a 7.62mm PKM machine gun mounted in a rotating turret, a 30mm automatic grenade launcher, the AGS-17 Plamya, capable of firing high-explosive rounds designed to devastate enemy positions. Its design, though ageing, remains effective, and formidable.

"Serj, you know a little about what I can do. We don't have anything high calibre, but is there something with enough mass, that is hard enough, that I could use as a projectile to pierce that armour?"

Serj's eyes flicked to Dave, narrowing slightly as he processed the question. He knew Dave wasn't just asking out of desperation—he was hinting at something more, something that hadn't fully come to light yet. Serj had seen flashes of Dave's newfound strength, but they hadn't put it to the test in a situation like this.

"You want to use yourself as the weapon?" Serj asked, half-incredulous, half-impressed. Dave gave him a quick nod, eyes full of determination. "We don't have high-calibre rounds, but if I can throw something heavy enough, something dense—maybe, just maybe—it could punch through."

Serj scanned the area, his mind racing through what they had on hand. It would take something dense, a real mass of steel or iron, to have any hope of penetrating the BTR-80's armour. His thoughts went to heavy-duty steel rods, meant for construction, rebars, and he knew just where to find them.

“What about rebars? thick and solid, with maybe enough weight?”

Dave followed Serj’s plan and nodded slowly, assessing the potential. “That’ll do. If I can throw one hard enough, fast enough, it might be able to pierce the armour, or at least disable something critical.”

Serj’s mind worked through the physics of it. It was insane, but then again, so was everything they’d seen Dave do in the past few days. “If you can get the angle right and hit the engine block or the wheels, it might be enough to stop it. It won’t be easy—the BTR’s built for durability. But if anyone can make that shot, it’s you.”

“Then I guess it’s time to see what I’m really capable of,” Dave replied, already moving.

Serj grabbed him by the shoulder before he could go. “Listen, you only get one shot at this. Once that thing’s moving, you’ll have to hit it while it’s in range but before it gets to the pipeline. You miss, or it keeps going, and we’re out of options.”

Dave gave a sharp nod, the weight of the moment settling on him. The team didn’t have high-calibre weapons, but they had something else: him. And if he could channel his strength the way he hoped, he just might be able to stop a war machine with nothing but raw power and a piece of steel.

“We’re never going to make it on time to stop it rolling out,” Dan muttered, glancing at the drone feed showing the BTR-80 preparing to move. The sense of urgency gripped the team as they watched Grigory’s men finalise their assault preparations.

But Dave had other ideas. “I’m not going to stop it from getting to the pipeline,” he said, determination in his voice. “I’m going to stop it ‘at’ the pipeline.”

It was a crazy plan, but in the chaos of the moment, it was the only one that made sense. They didn’t have the firepower to take down the BTR before it arrived, but Dave’s strength might just be their wild card. He knew the

breaching charges were intended to clear a path, which meant the vehicle had vulnerabilities—ones he could exploit.

"Help Serj gather the rebars and get them into the truck," Dave instructed, locking eyes with Serj and Dan. "I'll meet you there." Before anyone could argue, Dave was off, sprinting with such speed that it left everyone dumbfounded. Even with all they'd seen him do, his superhuman abilities were still hard to believe.

Serj, Omar, and Dan quickly grabbed their weapons and worked together. Arriving at the construction site they began piling as many of the heavy steel rebars into the truck as they could find. It wasn't the perfect solution, but they needed every tool they could muster. With the load secured, they sped off, heading toward the pipeline, trying to catch up with Dave, who had already disappeared over the horizon.

Meanwhile, Dave's mind raced with his plan. The BTR-80's breaching charges were designed to clear the fencing—if they were necessary, then the vehicle had to be vulnerable when it came to scaling the concrete foundations beneath the fences. That was its weak point. If he could create enough obstacles in its path, maybe he could slow it down, delay the attack long enough for the team to catch up and give them a fighting chance.

With speed and agility that defied his appearance, Dave arrived at the pipeline facility, easily leaping over the fortifications as though they were nothing. He moved with purpose, scanning the area for something—anything—that could act as a roadblock against the APC. That's when he spotted them: the concrete anti-vehicle blocks at the front gates. These massive barriers were designed specifically to prevent vehicles from smashing through, though they were typically used at entrances to stop regular vehicles. The unarmed security personnel, standing at their post, froze as they saw Dave—a seemingly overweight, middle-aged man—stride toward the barriers.

Before they could react, Dave gripped one of the massive concrete blocks with both hands and, with little effort, lifted it clean off the ground. His muscles surged with power as he carried the block toward the fence and, in one swift motion, hurled it over, sending it crashing down on the other side. The security guards watched in disbelief, unable to comprehend what they were witnessing.

But Dave wasn't done. He returned to the front gates and grabbed another block, then another, moving with lightning speed. Over and over, he lifted and threw the concrete blocks beyond the perimeter, creating an impromptu fortress of obstacles beyond the fence where the BTR-80 would soon attempt its breach. Sweat ran down his face, but his strength never waned.

By the time Serj, Dan, and Omar arrived with the rebars, Dave had already cleared the front gates of every anti-vehicle block, creating a veritable minefield of obstacles in the APC's expected path. The team could only stare, breathless from their own efforts and stunned by what Dave had accomplished.

"That'll slow them down," Dave panted, grinning despite the craziness of what he'd just done. He wasn't done yet, though. With the rebars on hand, they had one last chance to set the trap that might just save the pipeline from destruction.

Now, all they had to do was wait for Grigory's armoured beast to come barrelling straight into Dave's improvised blockade.

Dave stood at the edge of the pipeline facility, the tension clear in his voice as he spoke to the team. "You all need to make yourselves scarce. Stay out of range," he ordered, his eyes fixed on the horizon where the BTR-80 would soon be bearing down on them. The seriousness in his tone made it clear there would be no argument. "That machine gun and grenade launcher will make mincemeat of anyone who gets too close. I can handle it, but I don't know how long."

Serj, Dan, and Omar exchanged uneasy glances. They knew the power of the BTR-80's 7.62mm machine gun and its high cyclic fire rate. If any of them were caught in its line of sight, there wouldn't be time to react before they were torn apart. And the AGS-17 grenade launcher? It was designed to decimate infantry and equipment alike. Just one misstep, and they'd be ripped to shreds by its explosive rounds.

Serj stepped forward, his usual calm demeanour holding steady, but there was a flicker of concern in his eyes. "Dave, even if you can take bullets, you've never faced anything like this. Those grenades... they're not something you can just shrug off. The shrapnel alone—"

"I know," Dave interrupted, his voice firmer than usual. "I haven't tested myself against heavy fire like this, or explosives. But it's our only shot. You know that if any of you are out there when they open fire, you won't stand a chance."

The reality hung in the air. They were armed, sure—but not with anything that could take on the sheer firepower of an armoured personnel carrier. Even Serj, with all his experience, understood the impossibility of fighting an APC head-on with the weapons they had on hand. The BTR would chew them up before they could even land a hit.

Reluctantly, the team began to pull back, retreating to the outer perimeter of the facility, where they'd be safely out of range of the BTR's heavy weaponry. Dan grabbed the binoculars, planning to monitor the situation from a distance, while Omar prepared their backup plan—if Dave couldn't stop the APC, they'd need to regroup and figure out how to take it down with what they had left.

"You'll be out of sight," Serj confirmed, his voice low as he looked back at Dave. "But we won't be far. We'll have eyes on you."

Dave gave a nod, but he didn't respond. His focus was already on what was coming. He knew he might be bulletproof, but high cyclic machine gun fire could be relentless, and grenades were a whole different story.

This wouldn't be a walk in the park. The BTR was a beast, and Dave was walking straight into its path.

As the team slipped out of view, leaving Dave to face the incoming onslaught alone, he couldn't shake the weight of what he was about to do. There was no turning back. He clenched his fists, feeling the tension in his body as he steeled himself for the fight. It was time to see just how much punishment he could really take.

The crew of the BTR-80 slowed as they approached the random scattering of heavy concrete blocks, the obstacles that Dave had painstakingly arranged in their path. The blocks were far too large and numerous to plough through without risk, and steering around them was a delicate, frustrating task. The crew, cursing under their breath, radioed in to Grigory.

"Commander, we've hit an obstruction—looks like scattered concrete barriers. They weren't here during the last pass!"

Grigory's voice crackled over the radio, and the fury in it was unmistakable. "Nooooo! How did they have time to do this?!" His disbelief quickly turned to white-hot rage. The obstructions hadn't been there only an hour ago when their final surveillance pass had confirmed a clear path. It didn't make sense. It was impossible.

Aleksandr, sitting nearby, had never seen Grigory like this. His usually cold, calculating demeanour was gone, replaced by pure frustration. Grigory's fist slammed down onto the desk, rattling everything around him. "Just get the job done, you idiots!" he barked into the radio, his anger only amplifying the tension in the BTR crew.

The vehicle's driver gritted his teeth and started weaving the BTR around the concrete blocks, the heavy armoured vehicle grinding over the obstacles, its suspension groaning with the effort. The crew struggled to

find the clearest path through the chaotic mess Dave had left behind. Slowly but surely, they were making progress.

As they manoeuvred the BTR through the cluster of blocks, they reached the breach point near the pipeline. Now, all they needed was for the breaching charges to be detonated, and they'd have their opening.

The commander inside the BTR radioed back. "We're in position. Ready for breach. Trigger the charges."

Grigory, still fuming, quickly flipped the safety off the detonator and flicked the trigger, expecting the satisfying roar of the explosions clearing the fence.

Nothing.

The silence on the other end was deafening.

"Commander, no detonation. Repeat, no detonation," the BTR crew reported, their tone tense as the situation escalated.

Grigory's face twisted into something close to madness. His eyes bulged as his hand shook, gripping the detonator. "No explosion?" His voice, barely a whisper at first, quickly rose to a bellow. "How is this possible?!"

He smashed the radio handset against the wall in a blind fit of rage, sending plastic and metal fragments showering across the room. Aleksandr instinctively took a step back as Grigory stormed around, inconsolable, fists clenched and breathing hard. Everything had been meticulously planned—every detail accounted for, or so he thought.

But now, the detonators had been neutralised, the breaching charges dead, and the BTR-80 was stuck in the middle of a mess of concrete blocks with no way forward. Grigory's control over the situation was unravelling once again, and his fury was palpable. His mind raced, desperate for a way to salvage the operation, but the obstacles in front of them—and the mysterious sabotage—were grinding his plan to a halt.

Dave grabbed the rebar and hurled it at the BTR-80, his arm surging with strength as the steel rod flew toward the armoured vehicle. It struck with a heavy thud, the impact ringing out through the air as it clanged off the side of the APC. The noise was deafening, and the hit left a sizeable dent in the vehicle's outer shielding, but it didn't pierce the armour. The rebar had no chance of breaking through the thick steel; even with Dave's strength, he couldn't generate enough velocity to penetrate the heavy plating. His frustration grew, but he wasn't finished.

Boom! The BTR-80 rocked violently as a massive impact slammed into its side. The operators inside were rattled in their seats, struggling to keep their composure as they were thrown against the armoured walls. The vehicle's heavy armour groaned under the force, and for a moment, panic set in. The radio crackled to life as one of the crew shouted, "We're taking fire! We're taking fire!"

Grigory, still fuming in his command centre, froze. His mind struggled to make sense of the situation. What could possibly be hitting them with enough force to rattle a BTR? There was no sign of another vehicle with the kind of firepower that could challenge them—no anti-tank weapons, no artillery. But the panicked tone of the crew's voices was undeniable.

"Impossible," Grigory muttered to himself. "No one could've brought in heavy weapons without us noticing." His heart pounded, confusion and anger mixing into a volatile cocktail.

Inside the BTR, the situation was rapidly deteriorating. The operators struggled to regain control as the impacts continued, one after another. "They're... they're **throwing spears** at us!" one of the crewmen yelled into the radio, his voice high-pitched with fear. "Taking **damage*!*"

Grigory's grip tightened on what was left of his radio, his mind spinning out of control. **Spears?** His first instinct was to believe the crew had lost their minds, but the cracks and thuds ringing through the radio told him

otherwise. This wasn't a joke. Something was out there—a man, throwing projectiles strong enough to pierce armour. He couldn't wrap his head around it. "How... how is this happening?!" he raged, his voice hoarse with disbelief. "A man with spears is taking down an armoured vehicle?!" His voice cracked, slipping into near-madness.

Dave aimed lower, targeting the massive tires. With another powerful throw, the rebar speared into one of the wheels. It made contact, puncturing the rubber, but to Dave's dismay, the tires were designed to take this kind of punishment. Even with air leaking out, the BTR was still functional, rolling forward with barely any noticeable loss of control.

But Dave had gained the crew's attention. Inside the BTR, the panic had turned into action as the operators realised someone was attacking their vehicle. Confusion turned into shock as they watched the man, clearly not armed with any heavy weapons, hurling steel rods like spears. It was enough to make them nervous, and the turret of the BTR swung around, locking onto Dave's position.

The 7.62mm machine gun opened fire with a deafening roar. A hail of bullets tore through the air, striking Dave square in the chest and shoulders. The sheer force of the gunfire was like being hit by a fire hose; the impacts knocked him off his feet, sending him sprawling backward across the ground. For a moment, everything went quiet as Dave lay still, staring up at the sky.

Taking stock, Dave realised something incredible. *He wasn't hurt.* The machine gun rounds hadn't penetrated his skin—he had felt the force, the concussive blast of each hit, but there was no pain, no injury. The bullets had done nothing more than throw him back. As the realisation hit him, he slowly climbed to his feet, dusting off his shoulders. The BTR crew stared in disbelief as Dave rose, unharmed by their weaponry.

One of the operators, his nerves steadying, switched to the grenade launcher. With a quick adjustment, the AGS-17 fired, sending a salvo of

five grenades directly at Dave's position. The explosions rocked the ground, the force of the blasts sending Dave flying through the air as dirt and debris erupted around him. The landscape was torn apart, craters forming where the grenades had hit. Dave was tossed like a rag-doll, thrown back by the repeated blasts, but once again, the shrapnel couldn't break his skin.

He moved faster now, his body reacting to the threat as he sought cover behind one of the concrete blocks he had earlier tossed into the APC's path. Inside the BTR, the crew was losing their composure, unable to comprehend what they were seeing. *How is he still moving?* they thought, watching as Dave seemed to disappear behind the block.

But Dave wasn't just taking cover—he was lifting the block.

With a roar of effort, he hefted the massive concrete barrier into the air, muscles straining as he lined up his shot. Then, with a tremendous throw, he hurled it directly at the BTR's turret. The block flew through the air like a wrecking ball, and when it struck, the effect was catastrophic. The impact completely destroyed the turret, smashing the machine gun and grenade launcher into a mangled heap of metal. The APC's once-formidable weapons were rendered totally useless.

Inside the BTR, panic set in. "We've lost all weapons!" the crewman radioed, his voice shaky as he reported the damage. Grigory's enraged screams came through the radio in response, but the crew had bigger problems.

With their weaponry destroyed and their vehicle under attack by something they couldn't comprehend, the operators made a desperate attempt to escape. The BTR lurched forward, aiming to plough through the fence and into the compound, hoping to salvage what was left of the mission.

The BTR crew, was rapidly losing its nerve. With no coherent orders coming from Grigory, they made a desperate call. "We're breaching the fence—without the charges!" the radio operator called in, knowing full

well it was a risky, possibly fatal move. But sitting there, under assault from some mysterious force, wasn't an option. The driver hit the accelerator, and the BTR lurched forward toward the fence.

Grigory's voice broke over the radio again, but now it was nothing more than a scream of frustration, rage, and disbelief. He was losing control, his plan falling apart before his eyes, and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

As the APC crashed into the top of the fence, the metallic sections bent and folded under the weight of the vehicle, while the concrete base remained unmoving. The front end of the BTR ground to a halt, beached atop the concrete foundation.

The realisation hit them all at once—the vehicle was stuck. Unarmed, immobile, and unable to move forward or back, the crew inside the APC was trapped. The mission had become a total failure, and Grigory's plans, once so meticulously prepared, had crumbled. The beast that was the BTR-80 lay defeated, powerless to continue its rampage.

From their vantage point, the rest of the team—Serj, Dan, Omar, and Anya—watched in stunned silence as the BTR's turret swung around, locking onto Dave. They knew this was the moment of truth. They had made themselves scarce, as Dave had instructed, knowing full well that the machine gun and grenade launcher could tear them apart in an instant. But none of them could look away as Dave stood there, facing down the armoured beast alone.

The staccato roar of the BTR's 7.62mm machine gun filled the air, and in an instant, Dave was hammered by the full force of the firepower. His body jerked backward, the hail of bullets driving him off his feet and slamming him into the dirt. The sheer violence of the assault left everyone frozen.

Dan's breath caught in his throat. "No way," he muttered under his breath. "He's... he's down."

Omar's eyes were wide, his usually calm demeanour faltering. "That's more firepower than any of us could survive. He can't—" He trailed off, disbelief creeping into his voice. They had all seen Dave do incredible things, but this? This was different.

Serj, ever the professional, stayed focused but couldn't shake the tight knot forming in his chest. His sharp gaze was fixed on the cloud of dust where Dave had fallen. The brutal force of the machine gun had been like a battering ram. Even for someone like Dave, it seemed impossible to withstand that kind of attack. "Stay ready," Serj ordered the team, though his voice was quieter than usual. He couldn't look away.

Then came the grenades.

The first explosion ripped through the earth, sending shock waves through the air. Dirt and debris flew up in massive plumes, followed by four more thunderous blasts. Each explosion seemed louder, more violent than the last, shaking the ground beneath them. The team instinctively ducked, hearts pounding as they watched the terrain where Dave had been. The repeated blasts had torn the area apart—huge craters now pockmarked the ground.

Anya couldn't tear her eyes away from the chaos. "He's got to be gone... no one could survive that," she whispered, her voice breaking slightly as the final grenade detonated.

But then, through the smoke, they saw movement.

Dan blinked, not trusting his own eyes at first. "Is that...?" He trailed off, unable to finish the thought.

Serj straightened, his eyes narrowing. "No way."

Out of the smoke and debris, Dave began to rise. His body moved slowly at first, but then he stood to his full height, covered in dust and dirt but

unharméd. The team stared in disbelief as Dave shook himself off, seemingly impervious to the devastation that had just been unleashed upon him.

“He’s still standing,” Omar muttered, a mix of awe and confusion in his voice.

But the most shocking moment came next. The team watched as Dave, instead of taking cover or retreating, moved toward one of the massive concrete blocks he had thrown earlier. “What is he doing?” Dan asked, his voice filled with astonishment.

Dave crouched low, grabbed the concrete block, and with a grunt of effort, lifted the massive barrier over his head. The team watched in stunned silence as Dave took aim at the BTR’s turret and launched the block with a strength none of them had ever witnessed. The block flew through the air like a missile, crashing into the BTR’s weapon systems with a deafening impact.

The turret crumpled under the force, the machine gun and grenade launcher twisting and breaking apart in a heap of mangled metal. The BTR, once an unstoppable war machine, was rendered toothless in an instant.

Serj’s lips twitched in the closest thing to a smile the team had seen from him. “That’ll do it,” he murmured, respect clear in his voice.

The team exhaled, collectively stunned by what they had just witnessed. Omar shook his head in disbelief. “I don’t know how he’s still alive, but... he just took down a BTR with a concrete block.”

Dan, still staring at the wreckage of the BTR, let out a low whistle. “Forget the rebar... we should’ve just had him throwing rocks from the start.”

Anya finally let out a shaky laugh, her tension easing for the first time since the fight had started. “He really is the real deal,” she said, a mixture of awe and relief in her voice.

But Serj's eyes stayed locked on Dave, who stood tall among the ruins of the BTR. There was no celebration, no boasting—just a quiet strength in the way he carried himself. The rest of the team had thought Dave might be out of his depth, but Serj had known all along: Dave had something that couldn't be taught.

The battle wasn't over, but the tide had certainly turned. The BTR was down, beached and toothless, and the crew inside was scrambling to escape. The mission had been a failure for Grigory. But for the team? They had just witnessed something extraordinary.

33 Modesty

The attack had been decisively foiled, the BTR-80 lying beached and crippled on the concrete foundation. Its crew, disarmed and subdued, sat on the ground, wrists bound in plastic cuffs as the agency team moved swiftly to clean up the aftermath. Serj had been first to move in, directing Dan and Omar as they secured the remaining operators, none of whom had the will to resist after witnessing what Dave had done.

Omar, shaking his head in disbelief, turned to Dave, who stood off to the side, catching his breath. “What you did was amazing,” Omar said, his voice filled with admiration. “We were all taken aback when you went down. We thought...” He trailed off, clearly still trying to process the events.

Dave gave a small nod, rubbing the back of his neck. “Yeah, so did I for a second there,” he replied, a wry grin creeping across his face. He was still trying to wrap his head around the fact that not only had he survived the onslaught, but he had somehow come out on top.

Serj walked over, surveying the scene. “We’ve got them locked down, but Grigory’s still out there. We need to move fast before he slips away,” he said, his voice all business. The team knew that Grigory was the real target. The BTR crew were pawns; taking him down was the real prize.

Any, who had been going over the radio logs, looked up and shook her head with a grin. “Yeah, but maybe we should deal with that a bit later. I think there’s a more pressing matter we need to address first.” She nodded toward Dave, her lips twitching in amusement.

Dave frowned, confused, before glancing down at himself. That’s when he realised: the machine gun fire and grenade blasts may not have hurt him, but they had completely shredded his clothing. His shirt and pants were in tatters, barely clinging to his body, leaving him fully exposed except for the few remnants of his boots still hanging onto his feet.

Omar, noticing Dave's predicament, burst out laughing, slapping Dan on the shoulder as he doubled over. Dan, barely able to hold it together, joined in, while even Serj allowed a rare chuckle to escape. Anya tried to stifle her laughter, but it was no use. The entire team was roaring, the tension of the battle breaking in a wave of humour.

Dave, red-faced but laughing along with them, raised his arms in mock surrender. "Alright, alright, I get it!" he said, grinning as he made his way toward the truck. "Maybe I should get some new clothes before we go after Grigory."

Omar shook his head, still chuckling. "Yeah, probably for the best, mate. Wouldn't want to scare the locals more than necessary."

As Dave climbed into the truck, the team's laughter echoed through the wreckage of the BTR and the scattered concrete blocks. The mission was over, but Grigory was still out there. For now, they allowed themselves a moment of levity. After all, seeing Dave take down an armoured vehicle while ending up stark naked was a sight none of them would forget anytime soon.

The team returned to their temporary accommodation, the tension of the day still lingering as they settled in for a debrief with Cecilia over a secure video link. The adrenaline from the battle had worn off, replaced by the heavy weight of what came next. By the time they had reached the factory unit where they believed Grigory was holed up, he had long since fled. It was no surprise—Grigory was a man who understood the consequences of failure, and now, with the mission in shambles, he was on the run.

Cecilia's face appeared on the screen, her expression calm but sharp as she addressed the team. "Grigory is no longer a threat. His failure has sealed his fate," she said with certainty. "There's not a chance his Russian masters will tolerate his incompetence. He'll be hunted, not just by us, but by his own people. He knows the punishment for a botched operation like this. Grigory is as good as dead—whether we find him first or his former

employers do, he'll be in hiding from both sides." The weight of her words settled over the team. Though the mission had left unfinished business, Grigory's escape didn't feel like a loss. The man had no future left.

"He's going to ground," Cecilia explained during the debrief, "but that makes him more dangerous, not less. A man like Grigory, with his connections and knowledge... he'll resurface when we least expect it."

"And his Russian masters?" Serj asked.

"They'll hunt him, yes. But that just means he has nothing left to lose. And a man with nothing to lose, with Grigory's resources..." She left the thought unfinished.

Dave felt a chill despite himself. He'd stopped Grigory's plan, but somehow this felt less like an ending and more like the beginning of something larger.

As the team sat around, reviewing the final details of the mission with Cecilia, it became clear just how damaging the fallout would be for Russia. The evidence they had gathered—the BTR-80 with its traceable Middle Eastern supply chain, the sabotage attempts on the pipeline, and the meticulous linking of these actions back to Russian interests—was now in the hands of the world's government agencies. The weight of the information they had uncovered would send shock waves through diplomatic channels.

"This is going to hurt Russia badly," Cecilia remarked. "Diplomatically, they're facing a firestorm. The sanctions, already severe, will only tighten further. Their ambitions to strong-arm Europe into renegotiating over Russian gas are now completely ruined." The team knew the stakes had been high from the start, but now, seeing the geopolitical fallout take shape, the significance of their actions sank in. Russia's covert attempts to blackmail Europe through energy sabotage had been exposed, and there was no walking back from the diplomatic disaster that was about to unfold.

As they settled into their seats, going over the key moments, it became clear that Dave's shredded clothing wasn't the only casualty of the day.

Dave, now sitting in a fresh set of clothes, scratched his stubbly head and let out a small chuckle. "You know," he began, "one thing I definitely don't miss is the wig."

Dan looked over, caught off guard by the comment. "Mate, I didn't want to say anything about that," he said, a sheepish grin spreading across his face. "Thought it might be a bit of a sensitive issue."

Dave shook his head, grinning. "Not at all. It was a bit of temporary cover after an incident playing with fire... literally. Figured I'd wear it until the hair grew back, but I guess that's out the window now."

Anya, always straightforward, leaned forward with a smirk. "Phew! Glad that's out of the way. I didn't want to say it, but that thing was ridiculous. You're much better without it."

The room erupted in laughter, the tension from the mission breaking into a lighter, more relaxed atmosphere. Dave, laughing along with them, rubbed his hand over the short, stubbly hairs beginning to grow back. "Yeah, I suppose I'll be sticking with this look from now on."

Serj, who had remained silent during the banter, allowed a rare smile to flicker across his face. "I'd say it suits you better, anyway. More... honest."

The teasing and laughter continued for a few more moments, filling the space with warmth that hadn't been there during the intensity of the mission. The team had always respected Dave, but now, seeing him fully drop the persona—even if it was just a wig—only strengthened the bond between them.

34 Epilogue

A few weeks had passed since the team foiled the pipeline attack. Life had returned to a semblance of normalcy for the agency operatives, who had now scattered back to their homes or local offices. The mission, once fraught with danger, was now behind them, and the weight of the geopolitical fallout rested with the world's governments. Though the team stayed in touch through occasional phone calls and video links, the urgency that had once bound them together had eased, replaced by the slow rhythm of their everyday lives.

Dave, however, hadn't forgotten about Mei. She had been injured during the mission, and while her physical recovery was going well, he felt it was important to visit her in person. One evening, after a particularly quiet call with the team, Dave arranged a trip to see Mei. He asked Anya to join him, knowing Mei would appreciate the company. Dave also extended an invitation to Omar and Dan, but their responses were less straightforward.

Omar, burdened by guilt, declined the invitation. "I should go visit her on my own," he admitted to Dave over the phone. "I need to apologise... personally. I should have been there. It's my fault she got hurt." Despite Dave's reassurances, Omar's sense of responsibility weighed too heavily on him to join the group. He needed to make amends, but it would be on his own terms.

Dan, on the other hand, declined with his usual wit. "I'll visit her later," he said with a grin over the video call. "Don't want to overwhelm her with all of us at once. Besides, this way she'll have something to look forward to." His light-hearted approach masked the respect he held for Mei, knowing that a more thoughtful, staggered visit would likely be better for her recovery.

Dave caught his reflection in the hospital window as he visited Mei. His stubbly scalp was no longer something to hide - it was a reminder of who

he'd become. The wig hadn't just been about covering burned hair; it had been about clinging to his old self. Now, looking at his reflection, he saw someone who had stopped pretending to be normal and learned to embrace being extraordinary.

As for Mei, despite her injuries, she remained as driven and stubborn as ever. Recovering well, but never one to completely leave work behind, Mei was forever glued to her laptop, even from her hospital bed. She insisted on assisting the agency with her own projects, often working late into the night. Her enthusiasm for her work was unshakeable, and she constantly volunteered her help, even when she should have been resting.

Though life had moved on from the intense heat of their last mission, the bonds between the team remained strong. Their lives had taken them back to different corners of the world, but in moments like these, the connection they shared—one forged through trust, danger, and triumph—remained. And for now, as Mei typed away on her laptop, preparing for her next challenge, the future felt hopeful.

Grigory stood in the shadows of his safe house, watching the news coverage of the failed pipeline attack. His hands, usually steady, trembled slightly as he packed essential documents into a small case. The phone on his desk buzzed - another call from Moscow he wouldn't answer. Not yet.

He paused at a security feed showing the aftermath of the BTR attack. The image froze on Dave, standing amid the wreckage. Grigory's jaw tightened as he studied the figure who had single-handedly destroyed his operation.

"Enjoy your victory," he muttered, committing Dave's face to memory. "You've made this personal now."

As police sirens wailed in the distance, Grigory shouldered his bag and moved toward the back exit. He might be running today, but he'd learned

something valuable: there were forces in play he hadn't accounted for. Next time, he'd be better prepared.