



Real Hero

Dave #3: Shattered Alliances

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1 Prologue

Dave Anderson wasn't supposed to be special. He was an ordinary man, or at least he had been. At forty years old, Dave was a bit overweight, a little out of shape, and living the quiet life of an office worker in the UK. His daily routine revolved around his desk job, where the most physical effort involved walking to and from the train station. In short, Dave was just like anyone else, content to blend into the background.

But then, something changed.

Dave discovered he was different—stronger, faster, tougher than any normal person could ever be. He didn't know where these abilities had come from or why they had chosen him. All he knew was that he was no longer the man he used to be.

Discovered by the agency, a shadowy organisation that operated independently of any government, Dave joins their ranks. Their mission was simple but crucial: maintain global stability by stopping threats before they spiralled into global conflicts, environmental disasters or world domination. They worked in the shadows, often neutralising destabilising forces that governments either couldn't or wouldn't touch. The agency saw in Dave both a mystery and a powerful asset—someone with abilities that could turn the tide of delicate missions but whose origins were as unknown to them as they were to Dave himself.

Dave stared at his reflection, barely recognising the man looking back at him. The extra weight he'd carried for years remained, but underneath it lay something impossible - something that defied everything he thought he knew about himself. Part of him wanted to retreat back into his ordinary life, but a stronger voice urged him forward. Maybe this was his chance to become someone who mattered, someone who could make a difference.

2 Pants

Back home in the UK, Dave stood in the agency's advanced medical and research centre, his mind still replaying the encounter with the BTR-80 in Turkey. Despite his impressive strength, he hadn't been able to penetrate the armoured vehicle, and now he wanted to know exactly where his limits lay.

Enter Dr. Ethan Kessler, the agency's lead scientist on human enhancement. Kessler, in his early 40s with a serious, almost detached demeanour, was more at home among equations and physics models than with people. With his salt-and-pepper hair, rolled-up sleeves, and ever-present lab coat, Kessler had spent his career studying the intersection of human biology and physics, and he was about to give Dave a much-needed reality cheque.

"So, you want to know exactly how strong you are?" Kessler asked, adjusting his glasses. "Let's get one thing clear first: you're incredibly strong—at least a 100 times stronger than the average human, when it comes to raw power. But you're still limited by the laws of physics and, importantly, the mechanics of the human body."

Kessler fell silent, studying a particular reading with unusual intensity. Dave recognised that look - it was the same expression the doctor had worn when they'd first discovered his enhanced durability.

"What is it?" Dave asked, tension creeping into his voice.

Kessler took a long breath. "Your strength... it's not just enhanced. It's fundamentally different from normal human capability. The energy patterns we're seeing..." He trailed off, apparently lost in the data.

"Different how?" Dave pressed.

"That's what we need to figure out," Kessler replied carefully - too carefully, Dave thought.

Dave slammed his fist into the steel block. Instead of denting it, he found himself stumbling backward.

"Dammit!" He shook out his hand. "I don't understand. I can lift a car, but I can't punch through this?"

Kessler was practically giddy. "That's Newton's Third Law in action! Here, watch-" He pulled up a slow-motion replay on the lab's monitors. "See how the force rebounds? Even with your strength, you can't escape basic physics. When you hit something-"

"It hits back," Dave finished, studying the footage. His punch looked powerful, but the energy clearly ricocheted back through his arm. "Like in Turkey. The BTR's armour..."

"Exactly!" Kessler grabbed his tablet, fingers flying across the screen. "Your strength multiplies the force, but the principle remains the same. Push against something that won't move-"

"And I move instead." Dave flexed his fingers thoughtfully. "So I need to work with physics, not fight it."

"Exactly," Kessler replied, nodding. "You could punch through most things, but if you don't have the right mass or leverage, or if the object is too massive to budge, you're just going to end up pushing yourself away instead of affecting the object. It's not about power alone—it's about physics."

Dave thought back to the APC, how his strength hadn't been enough to breach its armour. "So, it's not just about me not being strong enough—it's about how the energy reacts?"

"Exactly," Kessler agreed. "And let's talk about the lifting analogy you asked about before. If you were to try to lift something massive, like a plane, it's not your body that's the problem. You'd probably have the power to do it. But here's the issue: the plane can't withstand the force you'd need to apply to lift it. You'd snap parts of it off before you got the

leverage to actually raise it off the ground. The plane would break before you could lift it cleanly.”

Dave grinned wryly. “So I could lift it... but it wouldn’t do me much good.”

“Right. Your power is real, but there are limits based on how the world around you works,” Kessler continued. “That doesn’t mean you aren’t incredibly capable. You can punch harder and faster than anyone else alive—but there are physics at play. You can’t just bend reality.”

Dave stepped back from the machine, contemplating the new understanding of his abilities. “So the next time I’m up against something like that APC, I need to remember it’s not just about hitting harder. It’s about understanding how to use what I’ve got.”

“Exactly,” Kessler said, approvingly. “Think of your strength as a tool. You’re not invincible, but you can do incredible things when you understand how to apply it. We’ll keep testing, but what you need to focus on now is mastering the limits of your abilities. That way, you’ll know when brute force isn’t the answer—and when it is.”

The testing continued, with Dave throwing punches and kicks, each measured with exact precision. As the data poured in, Dave began to realise that while he was far more powerful than he’d ever imagined, his true strength lay in knowing how to work within the laws of physics.

As the tests wrapped up, Dave wiped the sweat from his brow and turned to Dr. Kessler with a thoughtful expression. “One question I have for you, Dr. Kessler,” he began, his voice unusually serious. “Do you know of any underwear that can withstand fire and explosions?”

Kessler, caught off guard, raised an eyebrow and stared at Dave for a moment. His mind was still deep in calculations and data from the tests, so he didn’t quite register the weight of the question. Thinking Dave was trying to lighten the mood—or possibly tease him—he let out a short sigh

and brushed it off. “Very funny, Dave. I know your durability is impressive, but we’re not designing bulletproof boxers here.”

Dave didn’t flinch, his face still set in a deadpan expression. “I’m being serious. My clothes... they don’t make it through these things like I do. Had a bit of a situation recently where my modesty got, let’s say, compromised.”

Kessler blinked, finally understanding that Dave wasn’t joking. He cleared his throat, suddenly unsure how to respond to such a genuinely practical concern. “Ah, well... I hadn’t thought about that. I suppose there are materials used in high-heat environments—fire-resistant, blast-proof fabrics... military-grade, perhaps?” Kessler stumbled over his words, now realising the real-world implications of Dave’s unique challenges.

“I’ll look into it,” he added hastily, making a mental note, though still slightly baffled by the question.

Dave nodded, satisfied. “Good. I’d appreciate that. You can’t just run into battle and come out the other side in tatters, you know?”

Kessler, still somewhat stunned, mumbled something about high-density fibres and military-grade Kevlar, while Dave, his humour back in full force, gave a knowing grin. Sometimes the small things, like durable underwear, made all the difference when you were superhuman.

Later that night, Dave lay in bed, his mind refusing to quiet. Every punch, every impact from today’s tests played on repeat in his thoughts. But it wasn’t the physics that bothered him - it was Kessler’s face when certain readings had appeared. That slight tightening around the eyes, the too-casual way he’d changed the subject. Dave had seen enough secrets in his time with the Agency to recognise when one was being kept.

He raised his hand in the darkness, studying it against the dim light from his window. Such ordinary-looking fingers, yet they could bend steel. What else could they do? What else weren’t they telling him? The power

thrumming through his veins felt different now - less like a gift, more like a mystery waiting to be solved.

And Dave was starting to wonder if he'd like the answers when they came.

3 Vrll

Dave's hands were still tingling from the morning's power tests when he entered the meeting room at agency headquarters. The familiar space felt different today - too quiet, too formal. Cecilia sat with perfect posture, while Agent Lands seemed to be studying his tablet with unusual intensity. Something was off.

"Lands, good to see you," Dave exclaimed, approaching the table. "How have you been?"

The pleasantries were brief, with Lands as stoic as ever, offering only a stiff nod in return. "Dave, you've been busy," Lands said, adjusting his jacket as they all took their seats. "I see from the reports that you've become quite an asset to the agency."

Dave smiled but sensed there was more to the conversation than compliments. There was an unusual tension in the room, one that immediately put him on edge. As the silence lingered, he noticed Lands shifting slightly in his seat. He clearly had something to say.

After a moment, Lands leaned forward and spoke more seriously. "Dave, we haven't been totally honest with you."

The words hit Dave like a punch. He braced himself, his mind racing. All kinds of possibilities spun in his head—what had they been hiding? Why now? What had they been keeping from him?

Lands continued, his voice calm but weighted with an unusual sense of guilt. "It's not that we've lied or misled you. But we've been guilty of... omission. Some of the tests we carried out on you—your DNA, your physical evaluations—we never shared all of the results."

Dave's heart began to race, but he kept quiet, allowing Lands to explain. He didn't want to jump to conclusions, but the confession had his attention.

Lands cleared his throat, hesitating only slightly. Lands pulled up a series of scans on the tablet. "Look at this," he said, swiping through images. "Standard human bone structure on the left. Yours on the right." The differences were subtle but unmistakable - crystalline patterns threading through Dave's bones like delicate lacework. "The DNA tests say you're human, but these structural anomalies..." Lands zoomed in on one particularly intricate pattern. "They're not just different. They're impossible."

Cecilia chimed in, her voice softer, trying to ease the blow. "Your skeleton is, for the most part, human, but there's something different about it. The materials your bones are composed of aren't what we would expect. That's why your body can do the things it does without breaking."

Lands picked up the thread again. "And that's just the start. Your physiology won't allow us to perform invasive procedures—your body can't be cut or pierced, we can't get proper samples. Your skeletal system is unlike anything we've seen, and we believe it's connected to this unusual energy signature we detected within you."

Dave's mind was swimming. "Energy signature?" he asked, his voice cautious.

Lands nodded, pulling out a tablet and sliding it over to Dave. "That's what I've been researching. When we first ran tests on your body, we found this unique energy field—one that doesn't exist in any known human biology. At first, I thought it was a glitch in the system. But it kept showing up. It's subtle, but it's there. And the more I dug, the more I realised it matched something from the 'Bigfoot files'."

Dave furrowed his brow. "Special Projects?"

Lands continued, his expression unreadable. "Yes, Dave." The Bigfoot files was an attempt of a humorous title given the Special Projects division—a

collection of research into phenomena we can't explain with conventional science. Most of it is dead ends.

Taking a breath, Lands tapped the tablet, bringing up a file. "The energy signature in your body? It's eerily similar to a file I uncovered from way before my time—back to the end of World War II. It's connected to something called Vril." He paused, studying Dave's reaction.

Dave, still reeling, leaned forward to get a closer look at the document on the screen. "Vril?" he echoed, unsure whether to be sceptical or worried.

Lands explained further. "During the last days of World War II, Nazi scientists, particularly those involved in occult research, were said to have stumbled upon an energy source they called Vril. It's an unproven theory, tied to some of the more fantastical elements of Nazi occult practices, but... this energy is believed to be powerful, dangerous, and capable of things we still don't understand. And the signature we found in your body—it resembles the energy described in those old, classified files."

Cecilia leaned forward, her tone more concerned than ever. "It's not just about what you can do, Dave. The fact that your body seems to contain this energy, or something like it, means we should understand it fully. This isn't just about your strength or durability—it's about what powers you."

Dave stared at the screen, the file detailing experiments and attempts to harness Vril energy during the war, most of them ending in failure. The Allies had apparently uncovered some of these projects, but after seeing their catastrophic results, they had hidden the research away, along with other dangerous artefacts.

"You've had these results for how long?" Dave asked, his voice now edged with frustration.

Lands shifted uncomfortably. "I didn't want to tell you until I knew more. It was a... guilt of omission. I've been researching this for some time,

trying to connect the dots, but I didn't want to bother you until I was sure of what I was seeing."

"Bother me?" Dave snapped, his voice rising. "You think finding out my body runs on some ancient energy source linked to Nazi experiments would be a bother?"

Cecilia stepped in, her voice firm but understanding. "Lands was trying to protect you from unnecessary speculation. We didn't want to give you half-answers, Dave. But now, we have to confront this."

"Look at this," Lands said, pulling up an energy signature on his tablet. Ghostly patterns pulsed across the screen.

"That's... me?" Dave leaned closer. The readings seemed to dance, almost like a heartbeat but not quite.

The tablet displayed three pulsing patterns side by side. The first was steady, rhythmic - a normal human bioelectric field. The second, labelled "Subject D," writhed with complex geometries that seemed to fold in on themselves. But it was the third pattern that made Dave's throat go dry. Dated 1945, marked with a swastika, it danced in perfect synchronization with his own readings.

"That's impossible," Dave whispered, but his own body seemed to hum in recognition as he watched the patterns pulse.

Dave's blood ran cold. The patterns were identical.

"They called it Vril," Lands continued. "We thought their research was theoretical, impossible. But looking at you..." He trailed off, letting the implications sink in.

"Show me everything," Dave demanded, reaching for the tablet.

Cecilia shot Lands a warning look. "There are some files that-"

"Everything," Dave repeated, his tone leaving no room for argument. The friendly, cooperative demeanour from earlier had vanished, replaced by someone who was done being kept in the dark.

Lands handed over the tablet without hesitation. "It's all there chronologically. Every incident, every report, everything we've managed to piece together."

Dave took the tablet, his jaw set as he began scrolling through the files. "You've been gathering this information all along, haven't you? Every test, every observation..."

"Not gathering," Cecilia corrected gently. "Trying to understand. To protect you."

"From what?"

The silence that followed was answer enough.

Lands watched Dave carefully as he began reading. "Look, some of what you're about to read... it might be hard to process. Take your time with it. If you have questions, we're here."

Dave looked down at the tablet, his mind racing as he scanned the file. His thoughts were a blur, a mix of anger, confusion, and curiosity. He had always known something was different about him, but this—this was something far beyond anything he could have expected. His world tilted on its axis. Nazi experiments. Ancient energy. The words echoed in his head, each one landing like a physical blow. He thought of all the times he'd used his strength, how natural it had felt. Now each memory was tainted, twisted by the possibility that his power came from something dark, something meant for destruction.

After a long pause, he nodded slowly. "Alright. I'll read it. But Lands... no more secrets. If you find something, I need to know. Agreed?"

Lands gave a firm nod, though there was a flicker of something softer in his usually stoic expression. "Agreed."

As Dave left the room with the tablet in hand, his world felt even more uncertain than before. He caught his reflection in a window - same face, same body, but now he saw something else. Patterns of energy, Nazi experiments, impossible physics... all of it flowing through his veins.

Whatever he was, whatever this power was, one thing was clear - his past, his abilities, and his future were now tied to something much larger and far more dangerous than he had ever imagined. And somewhere in those files, in the darkness of history, were answers he wasn't sure he was ready to face.

4 Bartica

The CIA team had embedded themselves in Bartica, a quiet riverside town in Guyana's interior. Situated at the confluence of three rivers—the Essequibo, Mazaruni, and Cuyuni—Bartica was a hub of activity, where miners, traders, and transients passed through on their way to the gold-rich jungles of the interior. It was a perfect cover for the team, providing isolation while still being close enough to the Venezuelan border to execute their plans.

The safehouse creaked in the humid air, its wooden walls swollen with decades of river moisture. Through the louvred windows, the constant chatter of riverboat engines mixed with the calls of macaws, creating Bartica's distinctive symphony. Kane wiped sweat from his brow, leaving a smear of dirt across his forehead as he leaned over the map.

Agent Richard Kane, tall and lean, standing at 6'2", with close-cropped, greying hair and a gaunt, weathered face. His sharp blue eyes are always alert, scanning his surroundings as if constantly on the lookout for danger, the team's leader, stood over a large, hand-drawn map of the border region, his finger tracing the line separating Guyana from Venezuela. Tall, with a gaunt face marked by years of field work, Kane had the sharp eyes of a man who'd spent most of his life operating in the world's most dangerous places. This mission, however, was different. They weren't here to prevent chaos—they were here to cause it.

"Time to make the first move," Kane said, his voice low and measured. "Rumours won't be enough. We need Venezuelan boots across the border."

Seated at the table was Sarah Moreau, the team's intelligence specialist. Moreau is petite, standing at 5'4", with dark brown hair usually tied back in a practical ponytail. Her green eyes are sharp and focused. She was reviewing satellite images of the Guyanese borderlands, scouting the perfect location for their next move. Petite and sharp-eyed, Moreau was a

strategic thinker, always three steps ahead. Her fingers flicked across the screen as she zoomed in on a dense area of jungle near the border.

“We’ve got an ideal spot here,” she said, pointing to a location on the map. “There’s an abandoned mining camp about fifteen kilometres into the interior. No locals around to see us, and it’s remote enough that we won’t draw attention from the Guyanese government. If we stage an ‘incident’ there, it could look like Venezuelan forces crossed into Guyana.”

Kane grunted in approval. “And by incident, you mean...”

Moreau smiled thinly. “An arms cache. We plant Venezuelan military-grade weapons and supplies, make it look like they’ve set up a forward outpost. We’ll leave enough evidence for the Guyanese authorities to find it—and enough bait for the Venezuelan military to think Guyana is preparing for an attack.”

Agent Michael Santos, the field operative and former Marine, leaned against the wall, arms crossed. He was the muscle of the team but had a keen mind for tactics, a stocky, muscular man, standing at 5’10” with broad shoulders and a rough, scarred face that speaks to a lifetime of dangerous fieldwork. “We could do better than that,” he said, his voice gravelly. “How about we lure an actual Venezuelan patrol across the border? Give them a reason to think they’re retaliating.”

Kane raised an eyebrow. “Go on.”

Santos pushed off the wall and approached the map. “We have contacts in Venezuela’s border patrol units—informants. We could feed them intel that a group of armed Guyanese militants are setting up an attack on Venezuelan soil. They’ll respond, cross the border without thinking twice, and we make sure they don’t leave.”

Moreau’s eyes lit up. “If we ambush a small Venezuelan force, Guyana will panic, thinking an invasion is coming. Venezuela, in turn, will think Guyanese forces provoked them. It’s a perfect storm.”

Kane's lips curled into a smile. "That's the kind of escalation we need."

The plan quickly fell into place. Santos would handle the local informants, feeding them false intel that a group of Guyanese militants, allegedly funded by the CIA, were moving weapons into Venezuela for an attack. In reality, it would be the CIA planting weapons at the mining camp near the border, a perfect false flag operation. The Venezuelan forces, eager to stamp out the supposed threat, would cross into Guyanese territory, triggering an international incident.

"Once we lure them in," Kane said, "we'll take out the Venezuelan unit. That'll make the story even better. A Venezuelan military expedition gets wiped out on Guyanese soil? That's all the ammunition Guyana needs to accuse them of invasion."

Moreau nodded, pulling up the details of the abandoned mining camp. "We can stage the whole thing. When the Guyanese military finds the bodies and the Venezuelan weapons, they'll have no choice but to escalate. And the Venezuelans will have no idea what hit them."

Santos rolled his shoulders, loosening up. "I'll make the arrangements. Give me 48 hours, and we'll have Venezuelan forces in the jungle, thinking they're fighting off an attack."

Kane glanced out the window, where the river shimmered under the humid haze of the jungle heat. "Once the Venezuelans take the bait, we'll have the leverage we need. They'll be so focused on defending their honour, they won't even see the larger game. And when the dust settles, Venezuela will be destabilised enough to push our agenda."

The following day, Santos made contact with a local informant tied to the Venezuelan border patrol. The message was clear: armed militants were staging an attack from the Guyanese jungle. Within hours, the wheels were in motion. Venezuelan forces, suspicious and on edge from recent tensions, assembled a small patrol to investigate.

Meanwhile, Kane's team moved quickly, transporting a cache of Venezuelan-made weapons to the abandoned mining camp. Old AK-47s, RPGs, and ammunition were scattered around, along with documents forged to look like military orders from Guyanese insurgents. The stage was set.

As the CIA team finalised their preparations, the atmosphere in Bartica remained deceptively calm. The townspeople, unaware of the covert operation brewing in their own backyard, went about their daily lives. Fishermen cast their nets into the Essequibo, traders haggled at the market, and the hum of riverboats filled the air.

But in the jungle, just beyond Bartica's peaceful streets, a spark had been lit. Soon, Venezuelan forces would unknowingly walk into the CIA's trap, and the delicate balance between the two nations would be shattered.

Kane stood at the edge of the safehouse, watching the fading sunlight. "This will set everything in motion," he said quietly, almost to himself.

Santos, tightening the straps on his tactical vest, glanced at him. "Let's just hope we're long gone before anyone realises we pulled the trigger."

The thin edge of chaos was about to break, and Bartica—quiet, forgotten Bartica—would be the match that ignited the fire.

The Bartica mission begins to unravel, not because of an operational failure on the part of the CIA, but due to a complication they hadn't accounted for: a Venezuelan intelligence leak.

Agent Richard Kane stood over the map, his face tight with frustration. The plan had been flawless—or so he thought. Every piece had been carefully placed, from the arms cache staged at the abandoned mining camp, to the false intel planted with the Venezuelan border patrol. It should have worked. The Venezuelans should have marched into the trap they had laid. But instead, everything had gone wrong.

“They didn’t take the bait,” Sarah Moreau said, staring at the satellite feed in disbelief. “They moved around it. Completely outflanked the Guyanese military.” She tapped the screen, showing Venezuelan forces manoeuvring tactically through the dense jungle, staying well clear of the trap they’d set.

Moreau’s sharp eyes were scanning the data, piecing together what had gone wrong, but it wasn’t adding up. “They knew,” she muttered, shaking her head. “They had to have known.”

Michael Santos stood at the window, his hands clenched in frustration. “I don’t like this. Someone tipped them off. They didn’t just avoid the trap—they ran circles around the Guyanese military.”

The Venezuelan unit, instead of being drawn into a direct confrontation at the staged arms cache, had chosen a more evasive route, completely bypassing the location where the Guyanese military had been lying in wait. Rather than engaging in a skirmish, the Venezuelans had outflanked their positions, slipping back across the border before anyone could even get a shot off.

Santos turned from the window, his brow furrowed. “They played us. The Guyanese troops were sitting there waiting for a fight, and the Venezuelans outmanoeuvred them. We look like idiots, and now they’re back on their side of the border with no casualties.”

Kane slammed his fist on the table, the map shaking beneath his hand. “This was supposed to spark a god-damn incident, not a game of cat and mouse!”

Moreau leaned back in her chair, her fingers tapping rhythmically on the edge of the table as her mind raced through possible explanations. “This feels too clean,” she murmured. “Like they knew the trap was coming, but didn’t want to show their hand. They outmanoeuvred the Guyanese forces, but they didn’t press forward. Why?”

Kane nodded, his jaw tight. “They’re holding back. Testing us. They want to see what we’re capable of before they make a move.”

“But how?” Santos asked, crossing his arms. “There’s no way they could’ve pieced it together that fast, unless...”

Moreau met his gaze, the realisation dawning on her. “Unless someone told them.”

The room fell silent. The implications were clear. There was a leak, and someone had fed their plan to the Venezuelans.

Kane gritted his teeth, the pieces clicking into place. “One of our informants flipped. That’s the only explanation.”

Santos growled, “Probably sold us out to save their own skin. Or worse, they’ve been playing both sides this whole time.”

Kane took a deep breath, reigning in his frustration. “Alright. We’re not done yet. They outmanoeuvred us this time, but we’ll regroup.”

Moreau was already pulling up files on her laptop. “We need a new approach. The military confrontation didn’t work, so we need to get creative. They’re expecting more force, but we can hit them where they’re not looking. Propaganda, local unrest, economic disruption—there are other ways to destabilise them.”

Kane nodded slowly, formulating a new plan. “We can’t rely on the Guyanese military any more. They’re compromised, and we don’t know who else the Venezuelans are paying off. From now on, we’re acting solo. If we can’t force their hand with troops, we’ll undermine them in other ways.”

Santos cracked his knuckles. “If we can’t start a fight, we’ll create the chaos we need from the ground up. Civil unrest, targeted sabotage—whatever it takes.”

Kane's eyes narrowed as he stepped back from the map, his mind already working through the possibilities. "Fine. We'll shift focus. If they think they've dodged a bullet, we'll hit them with something they can't avoid. The economic instability in Venezuela is already at a breaking point—we'll push it over the edge."

Moreau, her fingers flying across the keyboard, pulled up financial reports on the Venezuelan economy. "The people are hungry, fed up, and barely surviving. We can exploit that. Target food distribution routes, water supplies, key infrastructure. If we can disrupt their ability to provide for their citizens, Maduro will have no choice but to turn inward to stabilise things. And when he does, we'll strike again."

Kane's gaze hardened. "We'll hit them where it hurts the most—at home."

Santos grinned. "It's guerrilla warfare, but with less bullets."

5 Caracas

Meanwhile, hundreds of miles away in Caracas, a quiet figure sat in the back room of an old, nondescript government building, sipping a cup of dark tea. Colonel Park Ji-Hoon, a senior officer in North Korea's Reconnaissance General Bureau, the country's premier foreign intelligence service, was calm as always. Short and unassuming, with sharp features and a stern face, Park had perfected the art of being invisible in plain sight. He wore the same brown suit he'd been wearing since his arrival in Venezuela months ago, and he blended into the background like a ghost. Few people, even in the Venezuelan military, knew who he really was.

Park had spent years working in the shadows. He had cut his teeth in the late 90s, during the famine in North Korea, operating in border regions to monitor and suppress dissent. His skill in intelligence gathering earned him a fast promotion, and he was eventually sent abroad as a clandestine operative, embedded in North Korea's global network of front companies and shell corporations. He had worked in Syria, coordinating arms shipments and military training, and later in Iran, where he built covert communication channels between Pyongyang and Tehran. South America had become his most recent theatre of operations, tasked with maintaining North Korea's influence in Venezuela—one of its few remaining global allies.

The Venezuelan patrol moved with unnerving precision through the jungle, avoiding every trigger the CIA had laid out for them. In the Bartica safehouse, Agent Richard Kane stared at the satellite feed, his frustration mounting. He had expected a confrontation—a military skirmish that would ignite the region and force the hands of the Venezuelan government—but now it seemed that the Venezuelans were playing a different game altogether.

Unknown to Kane and his team, the man responsible for outmanoeuvring them was far from the jungle. Colonel Park Ji-Hoon, a senior officer in

North Korea's Reconnaissance General Bureau, was sitting in a quiet room in Caracas, Venezuela, sipping tea and reviewing reports. Park had been embedded in Venezuela for years, working quietly behind the scenes to influence military decisions and keep North Korea's foothold in the country secure. Today, he had disrupted the CIA's plan with a single, timely message.

Park was not an imposing man—he stood just 5'7", with sharp, angular features and a calm, measured demeanour that masked his true brilliance. His clothes were plain and unassuming, a worn brown suit that allowed him to blend into the background. But beneath his quiet exterior was one of North Korea's most accomplished intelligence officers. His mind worked like a chess master, always thinking several moves ahead, always prepared to pull the right strings at the right moment.

North Korea's relationship with Venezuela had been cultivated over years, driven by a shared desire to resist American influence and evade international sanctions. Both countries were isolated on the global stage—Venezuela due to its authoritarian regime and economic collapse, and North Korea due to its nuclear ambitions and repressive government. Their mutual interests created the foundation for an unlikely partnership.

In the early 2000s, Venezuela had been increasingly isolated as it faced mounting economic sanctions from the West. With its oil wealth unable to provide the same stability it once had, President Hugo Chávez looked abroad for allies who could help Venezuela bypass sanctions and maintain its military strength. North Korea, a country that had become an expert in surviving under international isolation, was a natural fit.

The relationship began with covert arms deals. North Korean operatives funnelled weapons, military equipment, and technical expertise into Venezuela in exchange for oil, minerals, and access to the black markets that the Venezuelan regime controlled. Over time, the relationship deepened. North Korean military advisors were quietly embedded within the Venezuelan army, training their special forces and providing

intelligence support. This partnership allowed North Korea to maintain a foothold in South America, while Venezuela benefited from North Korea's expertise in asymmetric warfare and covert operations.

Colonel Park Ji-Hoon had been the architect of much of this influence. His work in Venezuela began covertly, managing arms shipments and coordinating military training operations. But over time, Park had expanded his reach, building a vast intelligence network within the Venezuelan government and military. He used North Korea's resources to buy loyalty, providing Venezuelan officers with access to weapons, funds, and black market connections in exchange for information. His informants weren't just paid in money—they were provided with security, intelligence, and occasionally, blackmail material on their political rivals.

By the time of the CIA's operation in Bartica, Park's network was deeply entrenched. His operatives had infiltrated Venezuela's military intelligence, border patrol, and even diplomatic channels. This web of informants, cultivated over years of careful work, allowed Park to intercept critical pieces of information before they reached the Venezuelan high command.

The CIA had been meticulous in planning their operation, but even the most careful plans were vulnerable to prying eyes. The mistake came not from the CIA's operatives in Bartica but from their own logistics pipeline. Several weeks before the operation was launched, Kane's team had used a series of encrypted communications to request specific military-grade equipment for the staged arms cache. They had used what they believed to be a secure channel to communicate with their contacts in the U.S. embassy in Georgetown. What they didn't know was that their communications had been intercepted.

Park's team had installed sophisticated signals intelligence (SIGINT) equipment in Venezuela several years earlier, hidden in nondescript government buildings and diplomatic compounds. This equipment, smuggled in under the guise of diplomatic shipments, allowed North Korean operatives to tap into U.S. embassy communications and decrypt

low-level encrypted messages. The CIA's requests for weapons shipments—meant to be delivered to the border region—had been flagged by one of Park's analysts.

The message was passed up the chain, and Park immediately recognised its significance. The specific types of weapons being requested—Venezuelan-made assault rifles and explosives—matched the type of equipment used by the Venezuelan military. The pattern was clear: the CIA was planning a false flag operation.

With this information in hand, Park initiated human intelligence (HUMINT) operations. His network of informants in Venezuela's border patrol and military intelligence kept him updated on the deployment of troops and military movements in the Essequibo region. Park quickly realised that the CIA was setting up a trap designed to provoke a military confrontation between the Venezuelan forces and the Guyanese military.

But Park wasn't interested in simply avoiding the trap. He wanted to turn the tables.

General Carlos Alvarez was a seasoned Venezuelan officer, well-respected in the military hierarchy but fiercely protective of his troops. Alvarez had been in command of Venezuela's border security for nearly a decade, overseeing operations in some of the most volatile regions of the country. He had witnessed the erosion of Venezuela's economy and the rising tension along the border with Guyana. Over the years, Alvarez had grown suspicious of foreign involvement in the region, knowing full well that Venezuela's enemies—particularly the U.S.—would use any means necessary to destabilise the country.

Alvarez's relationship with Colonel Park had been built over many years of quiet collaboration. When North Korea first began providing arms and military training to Venezuela, Park had been one of the key figures managing the transfers. Over time, Park and Alvarez had developed a bond based on mutual respect and trust. Park had never let Alvarez down,

providing timely intelligence and resources when Venezuela needed them most. In return, Alvarez had ensured that North Korea's interests were protected, discreetly funnelling oil shipments to Pyongyang through Venezuela's black market networks.

Park had saved Alvarez's reputation more than once. There had been incidents—failed military raids, intelligence leaks—that could have cost Alvarez his position. But each time, Park had intervened quietly, either covering up the failures or providing the Venezuelan government with an alternate explanation. Park had become more than just an advisor; he was a trusted ally, someone Alvarez could rely on when the political landscape became treacherous.

So when Park sent the encrypted message to Alvarez warning him of the CIA's trap, Alvarez didn't hesitate. He ordered his troops to change course, avoiding the arms cache that had been planted by the CIA. Trusting Park's information wasn't a leap of faith—it was a matter of survival. Alvarez knew that if the CIA had set a trap, falling into it could provoke an international incident that Venezuela couldn't afford.

In Caracas, Colonel Park received the latest report from General Alvarez. The Venezuelan patrol had successfully returned to base without incident. The CIA's plan had been foiled, and Venezuela's forces were safe.

Park allowed himself a small smile. His work here was far from over, but for today, he had won.

6 The Forgotten Battlefield

The humid air in Bartica hung heavy with tension. The CIA team's mission, once a carefully laid trap to provoke a confrontation between Venezuelan and Guyanese forces, had gone catastrophically wrong. Not only had the Venezuelans outmanoeuvred the Guyanese, but Kane, Moreau, and Santos, the CIA team embedded in Bartica, had suddenly gone dark.

No signals. No communication.

For days, the U.S. intelligence network had scrambled to regain contact with the team, fearing the worst. Rumours swirled within the halls of the CIA headquarters in Langley—there had been whispers that the Venezuelans had intercepted the team, maybe even caught wind of their plot. But what came next was beyond anyone's expectations.

A report from a deep-cover Venezuelan contact had reached the CIA: the Bartica team had been captured and killed.

The news hit the agency like a bomb. The U.S. couldn't officially acknowledge the deaths, as their very presence in Guyana was an act of covert aggression. If the truth about the operation were to surface, it could spark an international crisis.

Desperate to contain the situation, the CIA sent another team into the region—more experienced, more covert, and with a singular mission: continue the destabilization efforts in Venezuela without exposing the U.S.. But there was another, more personal mission: recover the bodies of their fallen comrades before anyone else could learn the truth.

The stakes had risen exponentially. The Americans couldn't allow evidence of the CIA's failed mission to surface. If Venezuela revealed they had killed an entire CIA team operating covertly, it would plunge the region into chaos, potentially igniting a conflict that could spiral out of control.

This second CIA team, led by Agent Jonathan Cole, was as skilled and ruthless as they came. Cole had no illusions about the risks—they were operating in enemy territory, and one wrong move could turn the covert recovery operation into a full-scale military incident.

It wasn't long before whispers of the escalating crisis in South America reached the agency. While officially neutral, the agency was always watching for brewing international incidents that could destabilise entire regions. A secure communication had been received from a Venezuelan military contact, someone they had cultivated for years, with critical information.

The message was simple: "The Americans are here. You need to intervene."

The contact, an officer named Colonel Sebastián Ruiz, had served in the Venezuelan military for over two decades. He had long grown tired of the political games and the foreign powers using his country as a chessboard for their own interests. He had secretly been feeding information to the agency for years, hoping to one day protect Venezuela from the inevitable chaos that outside interference would bring. Ruiz was a man torn between loyalty to his country and a desire to avoid disaster. Now, he had learned something that could push him over the edge.

Ruiz's report detailed how the first CIA team had been captured during their failed mission near the border. The Venezuelan government had quietly executed the team to avoid any potential leaks. However, they were also holding a cache of evidence—identities of the agents, their mission data, and communications—proof that the U.S. had been meddling in their affairs. The Venezuelans were considering releasing the information to expose the U.S. interference.

Ruiz had no illusions about what that would mean: a rapid escalation, possibly even war. Worse, the new American CIA team had already been

dispatched to the region, not only to continue their destabilization efforts but to retrieve their fallen agents. The Venezuelans, emboldened by their earlier success, were ready to intercept them too.

The situation was at a tipping point. The agency had no choice but to step in.

Dave Anderson leaned back in his chair, his mind still running through the Vril discovery. As the team gathered in their briefing room. Across from him sat Cecilia, Their agency handler, reviewing the latest intelligence from South America. On the screen, a detailed map of the Venezuelan border with Guyana flickered to life. Key points along the border were highlighted—the abandoned CIA base, suspected Venezuelan military camps, and the path of the new American operatives moving through the jungle.

“This is a mess,” Cecilia said, breaking the silence. “We can’t let this escalate any further.”

Dan nodded. “If the Venezuelans release proof that the U.S. has been running covert ops, it’s game over. And if the new CIA team walks into another trap, we’ll have bodies stacking up, and an international incident on our hands.”

Cecilia shifted her gaze to Dave. “That’s where we come in. The Americans are trying to recover their people, but we can’t let them blow this wide open. Our mission is to neutralise the situation before it reaches a boiling point. We can’t let the Venezuelans expose the dead agents, and we can’t let the new team get captured—or worse.”

Dan scanned the intelligence reports, already formulating a plan. “Do we have eyes on the second CIA team?”

“Satellite surveillance puts them about 20 kilometres from the Venezuelan military encampment where Ruiz says the bodies are being held. They’re

close but cautious. If they get caught, Venezuela will have more than just bodies—they'll have proof of ongoing American interference. We need to extract them and make sure this ends quietly."

"What about the Venezuelan evidence? If they have the dead agents' identities and data, they'll use it."

Cecilia nodded. "That's why we need to eliminate it. We're sending a team in under the radar. No international involvement. We can't have our name tied to this in any way. You'll be working with Ruiz on the inside. He'll provide the access, but once you're in, it's all on you."

7 Guyana

The steady drone of the plane's engines filled the cabin as Dan and Dave flew from London Heathrow to Cheddi Jagan International Airport in Georgetown, Guyana. The long flight had passed in relative silence, with the two men focused on the mission ahead. There had been little time for conversation, and both knew that the real work was just beginning.

Dan, always the more relaxed of the two, glanced at Dave. "You ready for the heat?"

Dave smirked. "I've dealt with worse." His eyes drifted to the window, where the dense, green expanse of Guyana's coastline came into view. The sight of the vast jungle stretching out below reminded him of the challenges that awaited. This mission would test every skill they had, and they both knew it.

As the plane descended into Georgetown, the city came into sharper focus—a sprawling patchwork of colourful buildings nestled between the jungle and the Demerara River. The capital of Guyana had a vibrant energy to it, a blend of colonial architecture, bustling markets, and a sense of history written into its streets.

Once the plane touched down and taxied to a stop, Dan and Dave gathered their bags and stepped out into the thick, tropical air. The heat hit them immediately, a wall of humidity that clung to their skin and made the air feel heavy. The air rich with the smell of jet fuel mixed with tropical flowers was thick with the heat and humidity. Dave adjusted his duffel bag over his shoulder, his senses already alert as they moved through the small, bustling terminal.

Anya was waiting for them near the arrivals area, leaning casually against a pillar with her laptop bag slung over one shoulder. Her sharp eyes lit up when she saw them approach, and she waved them over with a grin. "Welcome to paradise, boys."

Dan chuckled as they approached. “Paradise? I think I’ve been lied to.”

Anya smirked. “Depends on your definition of paradise. Anyway, we’ve got some time before the next flight, so let’s go meet the rest of the team. I thought we could head into the city and grab a drink. Get our bearings.”

Dave nodded in agreement. “Sounds good. Let’s get moving.”

The drive into Georgetown was a mix of contrasts—modern cars shared the roads with horse-drawn carts, and colourful wooden houses stood next to towering concrete buildings. The city had a lively energy, the streets bustling with people on foot and bicycles weaving through traffic. Vendors lined the side walks, selling everything from fresh fruits and vegetables to handmade crafts. The scent of street food—spicy pepper pot, fried plantains, and curries—drifted through the air.

As their taxi moved through the streets, Dan gazed out at the city, soaking in the sights. The colonial architecture, remnants of Guyana’s past under British rule, stood proudly amidst the more modern structures. St. George’s Cathedral, a towering wooden church painted white, dominated the skyline, a symbol of Georgetown’s colonial history.

The taxi passed through Stabroek Market, a sprawling open-air market housed under a red clock tower. The market was a hive of activity, with vendors shouting their wares and customers haggling over prices. It was loud, chaotic, and alive—a perfect representation of Georgetown’s vibrant soul.

As they moved toward the quieter parts of the city, the streets began to narrow, the buildings becoming more spaced out as lush greenery took over. Anya, sitting in the front seat, pointed ahead. “We’re almost at the bar. It’s quiet, off the beaten path. Perfect for a low-profile meeting.”

The bar Anya had chosen was a small, unassuming place near the edge of the city, tucked away from the main roads. It had a wooden facade and a sign that had long since faded in the tropical sun. Inside, the atmosphere

was laid-back, with a few locals sipping on cold beers and listening to the low murmur of Caribbean music playing in the background.

They entered to the sound of creaking wooden floorboards, and were met with the scents of stale beer and tropical decay. Alicia, Omar and Serj were already seated at a well worn table in the corner, their eyes scanning the room even as they sipped their drinks. Serj nodded in greeting as Dave and Dan approached, while Omar leaned back in his chair, his ever-watchful gaze assessing the newcomers. Alicia, ever the quiet one acknowledged their arrival with a sip of her drink.

“Good to see you made it in one piece,” Omar said with a grin, raising his glass.

Dan chuckled as he and Dave sat down. “Would’ve been nice if someone told us to pack for the sauna.”

Anya smirked, taking a seat next to Omar. “Consider this your acclimatization.”

The team exchanged pleasantries, but there was a palpable sense of urgency beneath the surface. The mission ahead was no simple task, and they all knew it. After a brief conversation about logistics, the team finished their drinks and prepared for the next leg of their journey.

The sun was low on the horizon by the time they boarded the Fly Jamaica Embraer jet bound for Mabaruma, a small town in the northern part of Guyana near the Venezuelan border. The Embraer was a compact regional jet, built for short-haul flights, and it was filled with a mixture of locals and a few foreign travellers.

The flight was smooth, the small plane soaring over the dense rainforest that stretched as far as the eye could see. Below them, the jungle seemed endless, a thick carpet of green punctuated by rivers snaking through the trees. The vastness of the landscape was breathtaking, but it was also a reminder of the challenges they would face once they were on the ground.

Dave leaned over to Dan during the flight, his voice low. “It’s like another world down there. You sure we, erm, I’m ready for this?”

Dan glanced out the window, his face calm but focused. “We’ll manage. We always do. You’ll do just fine.”

As the plane began its descent into Mabaruma, the view shifted to reveal the small town nestled among the trees. Mabaruma was little more than a collection of wooden houses and dirt roads, surrounded by thick jungle on all sides. The town was remote, isolated, and exactly the kind of place where they could operate without drawing too much attention.

The team stepped off the plane into the humid air of Mabaruma’s small airstrip, the sounds of the jungle immediately filling their ears. There were no crowds, no bustling terminals—just the quiet murmur of locals going about their business and the distant call of birds from the surrounding trees.

As they gathered their gear, Dan looked around, nodding in approval. “This’ll do.”

Omar was already scanning the area for potential threats, while Serj remained silent, his eyes taking in every detail of their surroundings. They were far from civilization now, deep in the heart of the jungle, and the real mission was just beginning.

Their next stop was the local rental office, where they picked up two Toyota Land Cruisers, heavy-duty vehicles built for off-road travel. The Land Cruisers were rugged, with four-wheel drive and enough space to store their gear. Perfect for the rough terrain they’d be facing in the jungle.

Dan ran his hand over the hood of one of the Land Cruisers, nodding approvingly. “These’ll get us where we need to go.”

Alicia was already loading medical supplies into the back of one of the vehicles, her mind focused on the task ahead. “We’ve got everything we need—first aid, weapons, gear. Now it’s just a matter of getting there.”

Dave climbed into the driver's seat of the lead vehicle, his face set with determination. "We move fast, we move quiet. Let's get going."

With the vehicles secured and the team ready, they set off into the dense jungle, the dirt roads soon giving way to rougher terrain as they left Mabaruma behind. The real mission was about to begin, and the jungle stretched out before them, full of unknown dangers and the hope that they would find Moreau before it was too late.

As they advanced through the jungle, Dave couldn't help but feel the weight of the mission. This wasn't just about stopping a political incident. There were lives at stake—American lives, Venezuelan lives, and possibly his own team if things went sideways.

Ruiz, the Venezuelan officer who had tipped off the agency, would be waiting for them near a military outpost. His influence could get them past the guards, but once inside, it would be up to them to retrieve the bodies and erase the trail of American involvement.

Meanwhile, Colonel Sebastián Ruiz was taking a risk of his own. Meeting the agency team was a dangerous game. If anyone found out, his career—possibly his life—would be over. But he had seen enough war, enough foreign interference, to know that Venezuela wouldn't survive if things continued to escalate.

As he waited in the shadows of the military outpost, his heart raced. He could hear the hum of activity inside the compound—the Venezuelan soldiers, oblivious to the storm brewing around them, moving supplies and setting up checkpoints. Inside one of the buildings lay the bodies of the dead CIA agents, stored as evidence of the U.S.'s covert operations. Proof that would blow the entire region into chaos.

Ruiz had a job to do, and so did the agency. They would meet soon, and together, they would attempt to do what no one else could: prevent an international disaster from igniting.

The jungle was unforgiving, and the Venezuelans were on high alert. One misstep, and everything would explode.

8 Ruiz

The thick air of Mabaruma clung to the team as they made their way through the small town's streets. Wooden houses in faded colours lined their path, while the constant chorus of jungle birds reminded them how close the rainforest pressed in. The unease among them remained unspoken but palpable, each member hyper-aware of the stakes.

Dave moved at the head of the group, his steps measured and deliberate. Behind him, Omar's eyes continuously scanned the quiet streets, while Serj's silence carried its own weight. Anya kept pace with Alicia, both women alert despite their casual appearance. The meeting with Colonel Sebastián Ruiz lay ahead at a small café near the town's centre - a location chosen for its unremarkable nature.

The café emerged from between two weathered buildings, its wooden facade bleached by years of tropical sun. Ruiz sat at an outside table, a cup of coffee warming his hands. His civilian clothes couldn't quite mask the military bearing that years of service had etched into his posture. Despite his relaxed demeanour, his sharp eyes missed nothing, analysing each team member as they approached.

A slight tremor in Ruiz's hand as he lifted his coffee betrayed his tension. "Sit," he said quietly, gesturing to the empty chairs. The wooden legs scraped against concrete as the team settled in, each taking positions that gave them clear views of the street.

The café's ceiling fans spun lazily overhead, stirring the humid air without providing much relief. From somewhere behind the counter, a radio played merengue music, its cheerful rhythm strange against their sombre mood. Sunlight streamed through dusty windows, highlighting streaks on the glass from half-hearted cleaning attempts.

Ruiz shifted in his seat, his knuckles whitening around his cup. "We've confirmed that the CIA team was captured during their failed mission," he

began, his voice steady despite the weight of his words. His eyes darted briefly to the street before continuing. "But there's more. One of them is still alive."

Dave's shoulders tensed, a muscle working in his jaw. Beside him, Serj remained motionless, but his eyes sharpened with predatory focus.

"Moreau," Dave said, the name falling between them like a stone.

Ruiz nodded slowly, setting his cup down with deliberate care. "Yes. Sarah Moreau." His voice dropped lower, forcing them to lean in. "The others were executed almost immediately after capture. But they kept her alive..." He paused, weathered lines deepening around his eyes. "And from what I've been told, it wasn't out of kindness."

The ceiling fan's shadow swept across their faces as silence gripped the table. A bead of sweat traced down Ruiz's temple, though whether from heat or stress remained unclear.

"Moreau is still breathing," Ruiz continued, his gaze fixed on the table's scarred surface. "But she's been..." His fingers twitched against his cup. "Tortured. Abused. Almost certainly raped. They've moved her multiple times, keeping her hidden from official channels. She's been traded between rogue elements, militia groups operating outside military control."

Alicia's sharp intake of breath cut through the humid air. Her medical kit suddenly felt heavier against her leg, her mind already cataloguing the supplies she might need. Omar's hands had disappeared beneath the table, but the tension in his shoulders spoke of clenched fists.

Omar's expression hardened, his fists clenched in quiet anger. He didn't say a word, but his eyes burned with a silent resolve. This mission was no longer just about neutralizing a threat or recovering evidence. Now it was about saving one of their own.

"Do we know where she is?" Cecilia's voice came through the video link, calm but with a sense of urgency behind her words.

“The military compound is not far from here,” Ruiz began in a low voice, keeping his eyes on his coffee. “It’s deep in the jungle, about twenty kilometres to the west. They’ve got the bodies of your agents there, heavily guarded.”

Omar, seated next to Dave, leaned forward. “What kind of security are we talking about?”

Ruiz glanced at Omar, his face grim. “The compound is well-hidden and heavily fortified. It’s designed to keep people out—and keep secrets in. It’s not a regular military base; it’s more of a black site. The Venezuelan military uses it to store... sensitive assets. The guards are loyal, well-armed, and unlikely to hesitate if they see any threat.”

Dave’s jaw clenched as he absorbed the information. “And what about Moreau?”

Ruiz exhaled slowly, his gaze shifting to the jungle beyond the café. “Moreau isn’t there. She’s been moved—probably passed between rogue militia groups. They’re keeping her off the radar. I don’t know where exactly she is, but I’ve been hearing rumours. It sounds like they’ve been moving her closer to the Essequibo River. I can’t confirm it, but if they’re keeping her alive, that’s where she might be.”

Any, sitting next to Alicia, spoke up. “I’ve been intercepting some of their communications. There’s definitely activity near the river, but nothing concrete yet. I’m still working on pinpointing her exact location.”

Ruiz nodded. “That’s the best I can give you for now. The compound with the bodies is closer, but Moreau... she’s being moved, and whoever’s got her isn’t going to let her go easily.”

Dave leaned back in his chair, the weight of the decision pressing down on him. They had two objectives—rescue Moreau and recover the bodies of the fallen CIA agents. But the clock was ticking, and they had no guarantee that either mission would succeed without risking everything.

Omar broke the silence. “We split up. Serj, Dan, and I can take the compound. Fast and quiet. We go in, get the bodies, and get out before anyone knows we were there.”

Dave nodded, his mind already running through the logistics. “And I’ll take Anya and Alicia to track down Moreau. Anya, you keep working on her location. If we can get a solid lead, we’ll move in fast.”

Ruiz glanced at Dan, his voice quiet but firm. “Getting into the compound won’t be easy, but it’s possible if you move fast and avoid detection. But going after Moreau... it’s going to be risky. The militia groups holding her aren’t regular soldiers. They’re unpredictable, and if they think she’s worth something, they’ll be on edge.”

Dave’s eyes hardened. “We’ll do whatever it takes.”

Serj spoke up for the first time, his voice low but deliberate. “Rogue militia groups mean unpredictability. They could sell her to the highest bidder or use her as leverage against both the Americans and the Venezuelan government. If we’re going in, we’ll need to account for that.”

Ruiz nodded. “Exactly. The militia groups that are holding her have little loyalty to anyone, which makes them dangerous. They see Moreau as a tool, a way to gain leverage or extort something from the Americans.”

Dan’s mind raced, already formulating a plan. This was no longer a simple extraction—this was a high-risk, high-reward mission. “We can’t let this escalate. If they decide to go public with a captured CIA agent, this whole region could blow up in our faces.”

Alicia, her expression grim but determined, leaned forward. “If she’s been through what you’re saying, we’ll need to act fast. If she’s been tortured for this long... there’s no telling what kind of physical and psychological state she’ll be in when we find her.”

Dan broke the tension with his calm, measured voice. “I’ll handle the logistics—vehicles, safe houses, extraction points. We’ll be ready to move the second we locate her.”

Cecilia’s voice cut through the planning. “This has to stay off the radar. We can’t have an international incident tied to us. The Americans can’t know we’re involved, and neither can the Venezuelans. You’ll be working with Ruiz, but after that, you’re on your own.”

Dave nodded. “Understood.”

Ruiz looked around the room, the weight of his betrayal of his own country apparent in his tired eyes. “I’ll keep working my contacts. If I get any new information on where Moreau is being held, I’ll pass it along. But you’ll need to move fast once we have a location. They’re not keeping her alive out of compassion.”

Omar leaned forward, his voice steady but filled with purpose. “We’re not leaving her behind.”

Serj, always calm in the face of chaos, nodded in agreement. “We extract her quietly. No mess.”

Dave turned back to the screen, his eyes meeting Cecilia’s. “We’ll bring her home.”

Cecilia’s voice betrayed the weight of responsibility she carried. “Good luck. And Dave—remember, we need Moreau alive, but no one can know we were there.”

With that, the meeting concluded, the audio clicked off as Cecilia cut the connection. The team was left in the quiet, tense room, the weight of the mission pressing down on them.

“Alright,” Dan said, rising to his feet. “We know the risks, and we know what we’re up against. This isn’t just about recovering a body. Moreau’s still alive, and we’re going to get her back. We’ll do whatever it takes.”

Serj, Omar, Dave, and Alicia stood as well, their faces set with determination.

The mission had changed, but the goal was the same: bring Sarah Moreau home, no matter the cost.

As they geared up for the operation, each member of the team prepared for what lay ahead. Anya to monitor Venezuelan communications, hoping to locate Moreau before her captors decided to disappear with her once again. Serj and Omar began planning infiltration routes, while Dan ensured their extraction plan was seamless. Alicia gathered her medical supplies, preparing for whatever condition they might find Moreau in.

And Dave... Dave was already in mission mode, his mind focused on one thing: finding Moreau before it was too late.

The team was ready. Now it was time to move.

9 Division

The two Toyota Land Cruisers rumbled down the dirt roads outside Mabaruma, their tires kicking up red dust as they pressed deeper into the jungle. The lush foliage pressed in from both sides, the road narrowing into rough tracks barely wide enough for the vehicles. Overhead, the thick canopy blocked out most of the sunlight, casting everything in a greenish hue.

In the lead vehicle, Dave sat in the driver's seat, his eyes focused on the uneven path ahead. Beside him, Dan was scanning the map on his lap, tracking their position in the jungle. Omar and Serj rode in the back, quiet but alert, their thoughts clearly on the mission.

Behind them, the second Land Cruiser followed close, with Anya in the backseat, typing furiously on her laptop, her focus intense as she tried to pull together critical intel on Sarah Moreau's whereabouts. Alicia sat in the passenger seat, her eyes shifting between the road ahead and the jungle, ever watchful for any signs of trouble.

The weight of the mission pressed down on all of them. Sarah Moreau's survival was still uncertain, and the bodies of the fallen CIA agents were being held as dangerous evidence. They had no choice but to divide their efforts. While the primary objective was getting Sarah out alive, leaving the bodies of the other agents behind could allow Venezuela to use them as proof of covert U.S. operations—proof that could destabilise the region further.

Dave's voice broke the silence in the lead vehicle. "We need to split up. The CIA team is probably going after the bodies as we speak, and they have no idea that Moreau is still alive. We can't risk both objectives. If they get there first and stir up trouble, it'll be too late."

Dan nodded, his eyes on the map. “I’ve got a rough idea where they’d keep the bodies, from Ruiz’s data. It’s a secure facility near the border, heavily guarded, but nothing we can’t handle if we move fast.”

Omar leaned forward, his voice steady. “I’ll lead the team to recover the bodies. If we move now, we can hit them hard and fast. Get in, get out, and leave no trace.”

Serj’s eyes flickered with approval. “Minimal engagement. We extract the bodies before anyone knows what happened.”

Dave shifted in his seat, glancing back at the second Land Cruiser. “That leaves us with the Sarah situation. We don’t have a location yet, and going through Ruiz is too risky. We can’t trust that he won’t get caught—or worse.”

In the trailing vehicle, Anya’s voice crackled through the radio. “I’m working on that with the AI. Give me a bit more time. I’m intercepting military communications and triangulating the militia activity near the last known coordinates Ruiz provided. It’s taking longer than expected—there’s a lot of chatter to sift through.”

Dave grabbed the radio. “Understood. Keep working on it. If we don’t get a solid lead soon, we’ll have to start searching manually, but we can’t waste time.”

Anya’s fingers continued flying over the keys of her laptop in the backseat, her screen glowing faintly in the dim jungle light. She was filtering through layers of Venezuelan military channels, militia radio transmissions, and encrypted signals, trying to connect the dots. It was slow work, but every piece of intel brought them closer to Sarah’s location. The problem was, the militia groups holding her weren’t using regular communication methods. They were off the grid, making them even harder to track.

As the Land Cruisers came to a halt at a small clearing, Dave and Omar stepped out, gathering the team to finalise their plan.

Omar's expression was all business. "We'll take the second Land Cruiser and head toward the facility where the bodies are being held. Dan's got the location. Serj and I will go in, neutralise the guards, and extract the bodies before they can be used as leverage. We're in and out—no unnecessary engagements."

Dan handed Omar the detailed map. "I'm with you. We need to be fast and precise. Time's not on our side, and there's every chance the CIA's already on the move."

Dave turned to Anya, who was still working on her laptop. "Anya, what have you got on Sarah?"

Anya didn't look up from her screen as she answered. "Not enough yet. There's some irregular militia activity near the Essequibo River, but I can't confirm if it's connected to her. They're keeping her movements quiet, but they can't hide forever. Give me a little more time."

Dave frowned, his patience thinning. "We might not have more time. We need her location before the bodies are moved, or this whole mission gets even more complicated."

Alicia, leaning against the hood of the lead vehicle, chimed in. "Once we have her location, we need to be fast. If she's been through as much as we think, she won't be in a condition to wait much longer. And we can't risk a prolonged firefight in this jungle."

Dave nodded, turning back to Omar. "You and Serj go after the bodies. Dan will cover your exit and secure the extraction. Anya and Alicia will stay with me and keep working on Sarah's location. If we get anything concrete, we'll move in and extract her. We'll regroup at the extraction point once both objectives are complete."

Omar gave a firm nod, already focused on the task at hand. Serj remained silent, but his eyes said everything. He was ready.

As the second Land Cruiser rolled away, carrying Omar, Serj, and Dan toward the border facility, Dave turned to Anya and Alicia. The weight of the mission ahead settled heavily on his shoulders. They had to find Sarah before the new CIA team made a move. If they didn't, they risked not only losing her but also setting off a chain reaction that could blow up the entire region.

Anya sat cross-legged in the back of the remaining Land Cruiser, her laptop balanced on her knees, fingers flying across the keyboard as she continued her search. "I'm narrowing it down," she said, her voice tight with focus. "There's definitely some suspicious movement near the Essequibo. Militia camps that don't appear on any official records. They're keeping her hidden, but I'm closing in."

Alicia, always prepared, checked her medical supplies. "We'll need to be ready for anything. If she's in bad shape, we'll have to move fast. I'll make sure she's stabilised, but extraction is going to be tricky if the area's crawling with hostiles."

Dave's jaw tightened as he stared out into the thick jungle ahead. "Once we have the location, we'll move in. No hesitation."

The Land Cruiser idled in the dense jungle, the engine purring softly as Anya finally straightened up. Her face was set with determination as she looked at Dave. "Got it. There's a small militia camp near the river. I can't confirm it's Sarah yet, but the activity is too irregular to ignore. If they've got her, this is where she'll be."

Dave's pulse quickened. This was it. The lead they'd been waiting for.

He turned to Alicia. "Gear up. We're going in."

With the team divided and both missions now underway, the clock was ticking. Dave, Anya, and Alicia had their sights set on rescuing Sarah, while Omar, Serj, and Dan moved toward the border facility to recover the bodies of the fallen CIA agents.

It was a race against time, and every second counted.

10 **Essequibo**

The Land Cruiser rattled and lurched over the uneven terrain as Dave, Anya, and Alicia pressed deeper into the jungle. The day had given way to dusk, and the once-dense canopy above now felt like an oppressive curtain, trapping the last bits of fading light. The road ahead was more of a suggestion than a path, a muddy, narrow strip barely wide enough for the vehicle to navigate. Every bump and twist in the road slowed their progress further, and the weight of the mission bore down on them as the jungle grew darker.

In the backseat, Anya was still hunched over her laptop, illuminated by the faint glow of the screen. She had been tracking the militia's communications for hours now, and while she had narrowed down the area, they were still no closer to pinpointing Sarah Moreau's exact location. Every intercepted transmission was another piece of the puzzle, but it wasn't enough.

The Land Cruiser jerked violently as it ploughed through the thick, muddy terrain of the jungle. The wheels spun furiously, splashing up thick clumps of wet earth that coated the undercarriage, but the vehicle wasn't going anywhere. Dave could feel the jolt as they hit another soft patch of ground, and the familiar sinking sensation gripped the 4x4, halting their progress. He clenched his teeth in frustration.

"We're bogged down," Anya said, her tone tense as she looked out of the window at the swamp-like landscape surrounding them. The jungle was unforgiving—thick foliage on either side, the ground a mixture of mud and water, with patches of dense vegetation scattered around. Above them, the thick canopy of trees blocked out much of the fading sunlight, casting the area in a dim, shadowy light. The air was thick with humidity, and the constant buzz of insects only added to the oppressive atmosphere.

Dave slammed his fist against the dashboard, his patience worn thin. "Why are we the ones who had to take the Land Cruiser that didn't come with a winch?"

Alicia, sitting in the passenger seat, gave him a glance but didn't respond. She knew how tense the situation was, and she wasn't in the mood for complaints. "We don't have time for this," she muttered, "We need to keep moving."

Dave took a deep breath, his mind racing. He knew they had no choice but to push through. Sarah was still out there, and the mission couldn't afford any more delays. "I'll get out," he said finally. "You take the wheel, and I'll push."

"In this mud?" Alicia's concern was immediate and genuine. "Dave, you don't know what's in there. One cut, one scrape with contaminated water..." She caught herself slipping into medical mode and softened her tone. "Just... be careful, okay?"

Dave managed a tired smile. "Aren't I always?"

"No," both women answered simultaneously, sharing a brief look of worried amusement.

"Just drive," Dave growled as he opened the door, stepping out into the swampy mess that had trapped them. The moment his boots hit the mud, they sank deep, almost halfway up his calves. He grunted in frustration but pushed through, making his way to the back of the vehicle. Mud clung to his legs with every step, the wet earth sucking at his boots as he moved.

He positioned himself behind the Land Cruiser, his muscles coiling with the ease of the task ahead. Alicia, in the driver's seat, glanced back at him. "You ready?" she asked, gripping the wheel.

Dave gave a sharp nod, his hands resting against the back of the 4x4. "Just go."

Alicia hit the gas, and the tires spun for a moment, splattering mud everywhere, but Dave didn't flinch. He pressed forward with controlled force, his feet sinking into the muck but holding firm as he propelled the vehicle forward with ease. The Land Cruiser moved under his push like it weighed nothing, cutting through the thick sludge with Dave's power guiding it.

His legs drove into the mud, sinking with each step as he pushed, but he barely noticed. His strength was more than enough to force the 4x4 through the quagmire. As the tires finally found solid ground, the Land Cruiser surged forward, and Dave gave it one last shove to ensure they were clear of the mud pit.

The surrounding landscape was a mess of waterlogged ground and thick under brush, with small streams of muddy water running through the jungle floor. The ground was uneven, making every step a battle. Puddles of stagnant water reflected the darkening sky above, and the oppressive weight of the jungle made the air feel suffocating. The rain from earlier in the day had turned everything into a quagmire, and there was no telling when the next storm would hit.

Alicia kept her foot steady on the gas, guiding the Land Cruiser forward as Dave heaved behind it. The vehicle finally surged ahead, its tires gaining some traction as they broke free from the mud's grip. Mud splattered everywhere, covering Dave from head to toe, but the 4x4 was moving again.

"Almost there!" Alicia called out, her knuckles white as she gripped the wheel.

With one final push, Dave gave everything he had, propelling the Land Cruiser forward until it reached firmer ground. The wheels gripped onto solid earth, and the vehicle lurched ahead, free from the mud pit. Exhausted but relieved, Dave staggered forward, his legs covered in mud up to his thighs, his hands face and shirt splattered with mud.

Alicia eased off the gas, looking back in disbelief at how effortlessly Dave had moved the heavy vehicle. She shook her head, a wry smile on her face. "Remind me never to get on your bad side."

Dave, covered in mud but unbothered by the weight of the task, wiped his hands on his trousers and muttered, "Just get us moving."

"At least something good came of this mess," Anya commented dryly from the back, though there was a touch of relief in her voice. "That shirt was horrible anyway."

The brief moment of levity faded quickly as reality settled back in. They still had a mission to complete, and time was running out.

The jungle stretched out ahead, filled with more challenges, but with Dave's strength and the team's determination, they pushed onward, the Land Cruiser once again forging a path through the unforgiving terrain.

He wiped the muck from his face, breathing heavily. "We'd better not get stuck again," he muttered, his voice strained. But deep down, he knew the jungle had more challenges waiting for them.

"How far now?" Dave asked, his voice tense as he guided the vehicle through another stretch of thick mud.

Anya glanced at the map on her screen, her fingers tapping rapidly across the keyboard. "We've still got at least twenty kilometres to go, and that's if the terrain doesn't get worse. We're not going to make it before nightfall."

Alicia, sitting in the passenger seat, checked her watch. "We're losing daylight fast. We've been pushing for almost twelve hours, and it's getting worse the deeper we go. It's going to be fully dark soon."

Dave clenched his jaw, his frustration mounting. They had been racing against time all day, but the jungle was fighting them at every turn. The thick foliage and unforgiving terrain were slowing them down more than they had anticipated, and now, with night falling, the situation was even more precarious.

“We’re not going to make it in time,” Dave muttered, his grip tightening on the wheel.

Alicia glanced over at him, her voice measured. “Even if we get there, we still don’t have Sarah’s exact location. We can’t risk moving in blind.”

Dave cursed under his breath. The plan had been to locate Sarah and coordinate the extraction with Dan, Omar, and Serj, who were likely already in position near the military compound. But the reality of the situation was clear—they were running out of time, and there was no way they could execute both operations tonight without risking Sarah’s life.

The Land Cruiser came to a halt in a small clearing, the jungle surrounding them thick and dark. Dave killed the engine, the silence that followed almost overwhelming after hours of driving through the endless jungle. The weight of the decision pressed down on him as he reached for the radio.

He hesitated for a moment before speaking into the mic. “Dan, this is Dave. We’re delayed. The terrain’s worse than expected. We’re not going to make it to the target in time. We need to call off the mission for tonight.”

There was a long pause on the other end of the line before Dan’s voice crackled through the static. “Copy that, Dave. We’re already near the compound. What’s your situation?”

Dave glanced back at Anya, who was still working to refine Sarah’s location. “We’re still closing in on the militia camp where Sarah’s being held, but we don’t have her exact location yet. It’s going to take us a few more hours just to get close. We can’t risk moving in tonight without knowing for sure.”

Dan’s voice was calm but serious. “Understood. We’ll hold off on the recovery. Omar and Serj are ready to move, but we’ll stay in position until we get the go-ahead from your side.”

“Thanks, Dan,” Dave replied, relieved but still anxious. “We’ll regroup in the morning. Find Sarah first, then we’ll coordinate.”

“Got it. Stay safe out there,” Dan said before the line went quiet.

Dave lowered the radio, the weight of the situation settling heavily on his shoulders. They had no choice but to delay the operation. It wasn’t what they had planned, but moving forward without Sarah’s exact location was too dangerous. If the militia caught wind of their approach, they could execute her before they had a chance to intervene.

With darkness fully settled in, the team knew they couldn’t push forward any longer. The jungle was treacherous enough in the daylight, and navigating it in the dark was a risk they couldn’t afford. They would have to stop for the night, rest, and hope that Anya’s intelligence would bring them closer to Sarah by morning.

“We’ll set up here,” Dave said, stepping out of the vehicle and stretching his legs. The oppressive heat clung to him, making the night feel even heavier. The jungle was alive with the sounds of insects and distant wildlife, but it was the silence between those sounds that unnerved him the most.

Alicia was already unloading the gear from the back of the Land Cruiser, pulling out sleeping bags and basic supplies. “I’ll keep first watch. We need to be ready to move as soon as we have something.”

Dave nodded, grateful for Alicia’s calm in the face of such uncertainty. “I’ll take over in a few hours. We need to stay sharp.”

Anya remained in the back of the vehicle, still working on her laptop. “I’m not stopping until I get a lock on her,” she said quietly, her eyes focused on the screen. “There’s more movement near the river. I’m narrowing it down.”

Dave gave her a nod of appreciation. “We’ll need everything you can get by morning. We can’t risk another delay.”

The team settled in as best they could, setting up a makeshift camp on the edge of the jungle. The air was thick with humidity, and the sounds of the rainforest echoed around them, a constant reminder of how far they were from safety. Despite the tension, there was no other option but to wait. The mission couldn't move forward until they had Sarah's location.

As the night wore on, Dave took a seat beside Alicia, his eyes scanning the darkness beyond their camp. The jungle felt like it was closing in on them, the shadows playing tricks on his mind. But his focus never wavered—Sarah was out there somewhere, and they had to find her.

"We'll get her," Alicia said quietly, sensing his tension.

Dave nodded, his voice low. "We have to."

They sat in silence for a while, the weight of the mission pressing down on them. The jungle, alive with the sounds of insects and nocturnal creatures, felt like an entirely different world at night. It was a hostile environment, one that could easily turn against them if they weren't careful.

Anya's voice broke the silence from the back of the Land Cruiser. "I think I've got something."

Dave turned to her, his heart pounding. "What is it?"

Anya didn't look up from her screen. "There's been a lot of encrypted communication in the last hour. It's coming from a cluster of buildings near the river, about five kilometres from here. It lines up with the militia activity we've been tracking. I think that's where they're holding her."

Dave's pulse quickened. "Are you sure?"

Anya finally looked up, her expression tense but confident. "As sure as I can be. It's the only lead we've got."

Dave stood, adrenaline surging through his veins. "Alright. First light, we move. We're getting her out."

As the team settled in for the long night, the reality of the mission ahead weighed heavily on all of them. They were deep in the jungle, isolated and vulnerable. But now they had a lead on Sarah's location, and with dawn came the promise of action.

Tomorrow, they would find Sarah Moreau. And they would bring her home.

11 Night in the Jungle

With darkness fully settled, the team had no choice but to make camp. Dave killed the Land Cruiser's engine, and the sudden silence felt heavy, broken only by the jungle's nocturnal chorus. The air had cooled just enough to raise goosebumps on their skin, though humidity still clung to them like a second shirt. A chorus of cicadas pulsed in waves, their rhythm broken by the occasional deep-throated call of something larger moving in the darkness.

Dave stepped out of the vehicle, his boots squelching in the soft earth. The rich, organic smell of decomposing vegetation filled his nostrils, mixed with the metallic tang of the mud still drying on his clothes. Somewhere nearby, water dripped steadily from the canopy, each drop hitting leaves on its way down with a soft percussive pattern.

Alicia was already unloading their gear, the rustling of equipment bags mixing with the jungle's soundtrack. The canvas straps felt rough and damp under her fingers as she worked. Their torch beams carved yellow tunnels through the darkness, catching occasional glimpses of reflecting eyes in the under brush. Moths and other insects danced in the artificial light, their wings creating shifting shadows on the jungle floor.

"I'll take first watch," she said, her voice barely above a whisper but carrying clearly in the still air. She settled against the Land Cruiser's hood, the metal still ticking as it cooled, its warmth seeping through her clothes.

In the back of the vehicle, Anya's laptop screen cast a blue glow across her face. The soft tapping of her keyboard provided a counterpoint to the jungle's rhythm. Every few seconds, a drop of condensation would fall from a leaf above, landing on the vehicle's roof with a hollow 'plink'.

The darkness between the trees felt alive, moving with shadows that might have been branches swaying in the light breeze, or something else entirely. The sweet, rotting scent of a nearby flowering vine mingled with the

earthier jungle smells, occasionally overpowered by whiffs of their own sweat and mud-caked clothes.

Dave found a relatively dry spot to sit, feeling the dampness slowly seeping through his pants anyway. His fingers absently traced patterns in the condensation that had formed on his water bottle, the plastic smooth and cool against his skin. Every breath tasted of green things growing and dying, of wet earth and tropical flowers.

They sat in companionable silence, each lost in their own thoughts but acutely aware of their surroundings. A bat swooped overhead, its wings making a soft whooshing sound as it navigated between the trees. The longer they sat still, the more the jungle's sounds seemed to grow, building into a complex symphony of life and motion in the darkness.

A distant howler monkey called into the night, its cry echoing through the canopy and setting off a chain reaction of other animal sounds. The fog continued to thicken, turning their torch beams into solid columns of light. Condensation beaded on every surface, running down the Land Cruiser's windows in tiny rivers that caught and reflected the dim light.

The weight of their mission pressed down on them like the thick canopy overhead, but for this moment, there was nothing to do but wait, watch, and listen as the jungle breathed around them.

12 Recovery

The thick jungle air was stifling as Dan, Omar, and Serj crouched low in the under brush, their eyes fixed on the military compound in the distance. They had arrived earlier than expected, just after midday, and had spent the better part of the afternoon conducting a recce of the compound. It was nestled deep within the jungle, well-hidden from prying eyes. A series of small, low buildings sat behind a high wire fence, with armed guards patrolling the perimeter at regular intervals.

From their vantage point in the treeline, they had a clear view of the compound's layout. The main building—where the bodies of the CIA agents were likely being kept—was located near the centre of the compound, heavily guarded by a handful of well-armed soldiers. There were searchlights rigged to the fences, though they were dormant during the day, and the patrols were regular but not too tight. It was the kind of security designed to keep people out, and secrets in.

Dan lowered his binoculars, exchanging a glance with Omar, who was crouched beside him. “The bodies are definitely in that main building,” Dan muttered, pointing toward the structure. “There’s no sign of heavy equipment or anything else that would justify this much protection.”

Omar nodded, keeping his eyes on the guards. “They’re not expecting much trouble, but they’re alert. We’ll need to time it just right. Too early, and we’ll run into patrols. Too late, and we risk them getting suspicious.”

Serj, always the silent observer, knelt next to Omar. His eyes scanned the compound, taking in every detail. “They’ll be moving on a schedule,” he said quietly. “If we wait for the patrol to rotate, we’ll have a window to slip in. But it’s small.”

Dan looked up at the fading light in the sky. They had been watching the compound for hours, learning the patterns of the guards, timing their movements, and pinpointing weak spots in the perimeter. By nightfall, they

would be ready to move in, retrieve the bodies, and get out before anyone noticed.

But there was an underlying tension among the three men. They had been waiting for word from Dave's team. The extraction of the bodies had to happen simultaneously with the rescue of Sarah Moreau. Any deviation from that plan, and they risked tipping off the militia holding Sarah. If the militia suspected an extraction, they could kill her in retaliation. It was a delicate balance, and everything depended on timing.

Omar wiped the sweat from his brow, glancing at Dan. "We've got a solid plan. We can get in and out with minimal noise. But if Dave doesn't come through, this whole thing's off."

Dan nodded grimly. "We'll need confirmation from Dave before we make a move. No point rushing in if they're not ready on their end."

As the day slowly gave way to evening, Dan, Omar, and Serj huddled together in the shade of the trees, mapping out the final details of their plan.

"We'll wait for full dark," Omar began, speaking quietly as he sketched out the compound's layout in the dirt with a stick. "Patrols rotate every half hour. We hit the north side, where the perimeter fence is weakest. We cut through, avoid the spotlight, and take out the guards closest to the main building. No unnecessary engagements. We go in silent, retrieve the bodies, and get out."

Dan added, "I'll cover the extraction. Once we're inside, I'll take care of any surprises. We can't afford to trigger any alarms."

Serj, his voice low and calm, said, "I'll handle the patrols. Take them down quietly, no mess. We can't leave anyone standing."

The plan was airtight, honed from years of working together in hostile environments. They had the skills, the equipment, and the element of

surprise. The only thing missing was the go-ahead from Dave's team. Without it, they couldn't risk moving in.

Dan checked his watch as the sun began to dip below the horizon. The jungle around them was coming alive with the sounds of insects and nocturnal animals, but in the compound, the soldiers were growing more vigilant. The searchlights on the fences flickered to life, casting long shadows across the buildings as the guards took up their nighttime positions.

"We'll move in two hours," Omar said, his voice steady. "By then, it'll be full dark, and we'll have a window."

Dan nodded, the adrenaline already building in his veins. "Let's just hope Dave gives us that call."

As the team made their final preparations, the radio crackled to life, and Dan's heart sank as he heard Dave's voice come through.

"Dan, this is Dave. We're delayed. The terrain's worse than expected. We're not going to make it to the target in time. We need to call off the mission for tonight."

Dan exchanged a frustrated look with Omar before responding. "Copy that, Dave. What's your situation?"

"We're still closing in on the militia camp where Sarah's being held, but we don't have her exact location yet. It's going to take us a few more hours just to get close. We can't risk moving in tonight without knowing for sure," Dave explained, his voice strained.

Dan let out a slow breath, trying to keep his frustration in check. They had spent hours preparing, and now they were being forced to wait. The danger of delaying was clear in his mind—the longer they waited, the more likely it was that the Venezuelans would move the bodies or tighten security. There were no guarantees in situations like this.

“Understood,” Dan said, his tone tight. “We’ll hold off on the recovery. Omar and Serj are ready to move, but we’ll stay in position until we get the go-ahead from your side.”

“Thanks, Dan. We’ll regroup in the morning. Find Sarah first, then we’ll coordinate,” Dave replied.

“Got it. Stay safe out there,” Dan said, signing off.

As the radio went silent, Dan clenched his jaw, fighting the urge to punch something. They had been so close—just a few hours away from pulling off the extraction. Now, everything was on hold.

Omar shook his head, the disappointment clear on his face. “We’ve spent the entire day setting this up, and now we have to sit on our hands for another night?”

Serj, as always, remained calm, though his eyes betrayed a flicker of frustration. “We’ll wait. But there’s no guarantee they won’t move the bodies before tomorrow.”

Dan wiped the sweat from his forehead, feeling the weight of the delay pressing down on him. “That’s what I’m worried about. If they get spooked, they might move the bodies, or worse, destroy the evidence.”

Omar nodded grimly. “We can’t afford to wait too long. If they catch wind of anything, this whole operation goes sideways.”

Dan stared out at the compound, illuminated in the distance by the searchlights. Every second they waited increased the risk. The Venezuelan military wasn’t stupid—they knew the bodies of the CIA agents were valuable. They could be moved, hidden deeper in the jungle, or worse, used as a bargaining chip. The longer the delay, the higher the chance that something would go wrong.

“We wait for Dave’s signal,” Dan said finally, his voice steady. “But if something changes on their end, we move. We can’t risk losing those bodies.”

Omar and Serj nodded in agreement, though the tension was clear on their faces. They were all seasoned operatives, used to adapting to the chaos of the battlefield, but the uncertainty of the situation was weighing on them.

Dan checked his watch again, the minutes ticking by painfully slowly. The plan was on hold, but the jungle wasn't waiting. And neither, it seemed, were their enemies.

The night had stretched longer than expected, the jungle around them thick with shadows and the weight of delay. The team had been forced to wait after their initial plan to recover the bodies had been postponed due to unforeseen circumstances. The tension was palpable, each member feeling the frustration of time slipping through their fingers.

Omar broke the silence, his voice calm but decisive. "Just because the bodies can't be recovered tonight, doesn't mean we have to sit doing nothing."

Serj, always practical, raised an eyebrow. "What are you suggesting?"

Omar leaned forward, his eyes sharp as he laid out his plan. "We go in, set explosives on the searchlight power boxes and a few key places. It'll dissuade anyone from following us, slow them down. But while we're there, we can locate the bodies and confirm their whereabouts. That way, when the time is right, we can move quickly."

Dan, who had been listening intently, nodded in agreement. "Good plan, Omar. Let's make it happen."

There was a sense of purpose in the air now, the delay no longer a frustration but an opportunity. The team moved swiftly to gather their gear, prepping for the night mission that would allow them to confirm their targets and ensure their eventual recovery went off without interference.

Omar checked his explosives, Serj double-checked the map, and Dan outlined the approach. The plan was simple but effective: they would sabotage the searchlight power supply, crippling the enemy's ability to

track them in the night. In the same move, they'd locate the bodies, ensuring that when they did return for the recovery, they could act quickly and efficiently.

As the jungle around them remained thick with the buzz of nocturnal life, the team set out into the darkness, ready to turn the delay into an advantage.

The jungle night had fully descended, the thick canopy above sealing off any hint of the sky. Serj and Omar moved in perfect sync as they crept through the under brush, their footfalls barely audible as they approached the compound. Dan, perched at his overwatch position, scanned the area through the scope of his H&K G28, watching for any signs of movement or alert from the guards.

The searchlights were still sweeping across the compound, casting beams of blinding white light across the wire fences and concrete buildings. Omar stayed low, his eyes scanning for the power boxes, where he would plant the radio-controlled explosives. The lights would be their first priority during the actual extraction—without them, the team would have the cover they needed to escape undetected.

Serj, however, had a different objective. His mission was to confirm the location of the bodies of the CIA agents, ensuring they hadn't been moved. He moved with the silent grace of a predator, sticking to the shadows and the blind spots the searchlights created.

As Serj crept closer to the main building, his mind was focused on the mission. Every step was calculated, every breath measured. He approached the side door of the building, his body pressed flat against the cold concrete. Listening for any signs of movement inside, he reached for the door handle, slowly easing it open. The hinges creaked softly, but no alarms were raised. He slid inside, slipping into the dimly lit corridor, the smell of damp concrete filling his nose.

The corridor stretched out in front of him, a labyrinth of silence and shadows. Serj moved forward, sticking close to the wall as his eyes adjusted to the faint glow of emergency lighting. His senses were heightened, every sound magnified as he scanned for any movement. He knew where the bodies were likely kept—a small room at the back, heavily secured.

But before he could reach it, a faint sound reached his ears. A barely perceptible shuffle. Someone else was there.

Serj's body tensed as he pressed himself against the wall, his hand instinctively reaching for the knife that wasn't there. He was unarmed, a deliberate choice—he hadn't wanted to risk lethal force on this recon mission. But as he listened, it became clear that he wasn't alone.

Out of the shadows, a figure emerged—a black-clad CIA operative, moving with the same stealth and precision as Serj. The operative hadn't seen him yet, but that would change in a second. Serj's pulse quickened as he caught the glint of a knife in the man's hand.

The CIA agent moved like a shadow, his grip firm on the combat knife, its sharp blade edge glinting in the faint light. He was clearly on a mission of his own, unaware of Serj's presence. But when their eyes met, everything changed.

In a heartbeat, the CIA operative lunged, the knife flashing toward Serj's midsection. Serj pivoted, dodging the blade with a swift, practised movement, his feet moving soundlessly on the concrete floor. The agent was fast, but Serj was faster.

The two men collided in a flurry of movement—silent, deadly, and with lethal precision. The agent slashed again, the knife aimed at Serj's chest. Serj twisted his body, narrowly avoiding the blade, his muscles coiling as he brought his forearm up to deflect the attack. The knife grazed his sleeve, the sound barely audible in the tense silence.

Serj's mind raced as he fought to keep the combat as quiet as possible. This wasn't a kill mission. He needed to neutralise the agent without severely injuring or killing him. The searchlights continued to sweep outside, their beams occasionally slipping through the cracks in the walls, illuminating the fight in brief flashes.

The CIA agent pressed the attack, moving with precision as he tried to land a fatal blow. Serj remained calm, calculating the agent's every move. His training took over, his body reacting faster than his thoughts. He ducked low as the knife came at him again, his hands shooting out to catch the agent's wrist in mid-swing.

There was a brief struggle for control of the knife. The agent grunted as Serj twisted his wrist, forcing the blade down. But the CIA operative was strong, and he used his free hand to strike at Serj's ribs, the blow landing with enough force to make Serj grimace in pain.

But Serj didn't falter. Instead, he used the momentum of the strike to spin the agent around, locking his arm behind his back and pinning the knife-hand to the agent's side. The CIA operative struggled, but Serj's grip was like iron.

They fought in complete silence, each move measured, each breath controlled. Serj's only goal was to bring the man down without alerting anyone. His legs swept out, taking the agent's feet from under him. They tumbled to the ground, Serj rolling with the impact to avoid the agent's flailing blade.

As they hit the floor, Serj wasted no time. He slammed his knee into the agent's wrist, forcing the man to drop the knife. It clattered softly to the ground, but neither man paid it any mind. The fight was far from over.

The agent twisted, his elbow connecting with Serj's jaw in a desperate attempt to break free. Serj grunted in pain but didn't let go. He wrapped his arm around the agent's throat in a tight choke-hold, his grip unyielding but

controlled. He squeezed just enough to restrict the agent's air supply, forcing the man to stop struggling.

"I'm on your side," Serj hissed into the man's ear, his breath ragged from the effort. "Stop fighting."

The CIA agent froze, his body tensing as Serj's words sank in. He stopped struggling, his breathing laboured as Serj loosened his hold slightly, allowing him to speak.

"Who are you?" the agent rasped, still struggling to catch his breath.

Serj relaxed his grip just enough for the man to breathe freely, but kept him pinned. "We're with the agency. You need to stand down. Now. If you push this, Sarah Moreau will die."

The CIA operative's eyes widened in shock, and he stopped struggling entirely. "Moreau? What are you talking about?"

Serj rolled off the man, sitting back on his haunches as he spoke quickly. "Your mission jeopardises hers. We're in the middle of an extraction. If you recover the bodies tonight, the militia holding Moreau will know something's happening, and they'll kill her."

The agent sat up slowly, rubbing his throat where Serj had held him. His face was a mix of frustration and confusion, but he could tell from Serj's tone that this was no lie. The stakes were higher than he'd realised.

The CIA operative let out a frustrated breath. "We had orders..."

"Orders change," Serj said sharply. "Call off your team. Now."

The CIA operative hesitated for a brief second before reaching for his throat mic. "Abort, code Romulus," he said quietly, giving the mission code to stand down, his voice steady. "Pull out. Now."

There was a crackle of static in response, and Serj could hear the quiet confirmation from the other agents in the compound. The mission had been aborted.

As the CIA operative stood, rubbing his sore wrist, he looked at Serj with a mixture of respect and resentment. “We didn’t know.”

“You weren’t supposed to,” Serj said, his voice low. “But now you do. Stay out of our way until Moreau is safe.”

The operative nodded, though the frustration in his eyes remained. “We’ll pull out. But this better work.”

Serj gave him a brief nod before slipping back into the shadows, leaving the CIA agent to extract his team. Omar, who had been planting the radio-controlled charges on the searchlight control boxes, joined Serj at the edge of the compound.

Dan’s voice came through the radio as the two men retreated into the jungle. “What happened?”

“CIA’s pulling out,” Serj replied quietly. “We’ve got our window for tomorrow.”

Back at their vantage point, Dan lowered his rifle and gave a low whistle. “CIA were here? Close call. Let’s hope they don’t rethink their orders.”

Omar smirked. “They won’t. They’re smart enough to know we’ve got the upper hand here. The charges are set, and now we’ve got eyes on the building.”

Serj simply nodded, his body still humming from the adrenaline of the fight. “We wait for tomorrow. Then we move.”

The jungle around them was alive with the sounds of the night, but their minds were focused on the mission ahead. The CIA had been forced to stand down, and now it was up to them to finish what they had started.

Tomorrow, they would extract the bodies. And if all went according to plan, they would bring Sarah Moreau home.

13 The Militia Camp

The Land Cruiser sat in the shadows of the jungle, its engine silent, the faint tap of keys the only alien sound, other than the usual jungle sounds that filled the air. Anya, sitting cross-legged in the back, had her laptop open, her fingers flying across the keyboard as she configured the drone they had brought with them. It was their best chance of finding Sarah Moreau without setting foot in the militia camp below. Time was running out. The body recovery mission was on hold, and Dan's team couldn't wait forever. They had to locate Sarah today.

Anya wiped a bead of sweat from her forehead, the oppressive jungle heat making it hard to focus. "We're ready," she said, adjusting the controls. "I'm sending the drone up for a high-altitude recce. It'll give us a bird's-eye view of the camp."

Dave, leaning against the side of the vehicle, gave a nod. His eyes were trained on the treetops, but his mind was focused on the mission. Alicia stood nearby, her medical kit ready, knowing that when they found Sarah, they'd need to move fast.

"Get that drone in the air," Dave said. "We need to know exactly where she's being held."

With a quick series of taps on her laptop, Anya activated the drone, and it rose almost silently into the thick, humid air. The small quad-copter ascended rapidly, disappearing from sight as it gained altitude. Anya's screen flickered to life, displaying a live video feed from the drone's high-resolution camera. The jungle stretched out below, a sea of green, but as the drone moved closer to the militia camp, the dense canopy began to give way to clearings.

As the drone hovered high above the militia camp, the team got their first clear look at the layout. The camp was not large—designed to house no more than 30 soldiers. From this vantage point, it looked like a typical

military base of operations, not the kind of place you'd expect to hold a prisoner.

The camp was built in a small clearing carved out of the jungle, with the river snaking nearby. Tents were scattered throughout the clearing, arranged in a loose grid pattern. Most were camouflaged canvas tents designed for sleeping quarters, with a few larger tents acting as mess halls and command centres. The soldiers moved about casually, some gathered around a central fire pit, while others conducted routine checks on their weapons and equipment.

Anya zoomed in on one section of the camp. "Standard setup for a jungle base," she muttered. "Tents for sleeping, one for a mess hall, probably another for a field office. No cell blocks or cages for prisoners."

Dave frowned, studying the screen. "So where the hell are they keeping her?"

Alicia, leaning in, scanned the video feed as well. "If she's here, they wouldn't put her with the regular soldiers. They'd want to keep her somewhere isolated, out of sight but close enough to keep an eye on her."

Anya's fingers tapped on the keyboard, adjusting the drone's altitude for a closer look. "Look over there," she said, pointing to a small tent on the edge of the camp, away from the main group of soldiers. It was slightly larger than the sleeping tents, and it was positioned near a makeshift guard post—two soldiers standing near the entrance, armed with assault rifles. The tent was set back from the main camp, close to the jungle's edge, as if deliberately placed to keep its occupant hidden from the rest of the camp's inhabitants.

Dave narrowed his eyes. "That's it. They wouldn't guard a regular tent like that."

Anya zoomed in, trying to get a better view of what was inside the tent. The entrance was obscured by flaps of canvas, and the guards were stationed far enough apart to give them a clear line of sight in all directions. One of the guards shifted his weight, glancing around nervously, his hand resting on the butt of his rifle. Something about the setup felt off. This wasn't just a regular guard post—it was for something, or someone, important.

“They’re hiding her in there,” Dave said, his voice firm.

Alicia nodded, her eyes fixed on the screen. “That tent’s isolated. Easy to move her if they need to, but also easy to keep under close watch.”

Anya zoomed out slightly, surveying the rest of the camp. “It’s a small camp—no more than thirty soldiers, just like we thought. No heavy equipment, just small arms. They’re not expecting any major resistance.”

Dave crossed his arms, thinking. “We need to move in tonight. We can’t hold up Dan’s mission any longer.”

The drone continued its slow sweep over the camp, giving them a clearer picture of the militia’s daily operations. Most of the soldiers appeared relaxed, unaware of the urgency building just beyond the treeline. The fire pit in the centre of camp was surrounded by a few men, talking and laughing, their weapons leaning casually against nearby logs. They looked more like mercenaries than professional soldiers, and their lack of discipline was evident.

Near the command tent, a soldier was checking supplies—a few crates of ammunition and rations, nothing that indicated they were prepared for a major conflict. The makeshift guard post was the only area that seemed out of place. The guards there were more alert than the rest, their eyes scanning the jungle’s edge, and they occasionally glanced back at the isolated tent. They knew something important was inside, and it made them nervous.

Anya adjusted the drone's camera to focus on the perimeter. "The camp isn't heavily fortified. No fences, just a few guard positions near the key points—entrances and the tent. We can get in if we move quietly."

Dave nodded, his mind working through the details of the operation. "We move in after dark. Anya, keep the drone up as long as you can. We'll use it to watch for any movement while we're waiting."

Alicia checked her medical kit again, her face set with determination. "If Sarah's in there, we'll need to get her stabilised quickly. No telling what condition she's in after all this time."

"We'll be ready," Dave said, his voice steady.

The live feed from the drone hovered on Anya's screen as the small quadcopter circled high above the militia camp. The isolated tent, nestled at the edge of the clearing, was clearly their target. Dave, standing next to Anya, had been focused on the thermal imaging that had confirmed Sarah Moreau's presence inside. But now, something else caught their attention.

On the screen, they saw a soldier emerge from the tent. He was young, mid-20s, with a broad grin plastered across his face. He was fastening his belt, his movements casual and unhurried, as though he had just completed a task. As he stepped out into the fading light, he exchanged a few words with the two guards stationed outside the tent, chuckling as he adjusted his gear. One of the guards clapped him on the back, both men laughing like old friends sharing a crude joke.

Dave's blood ran cold as he watched the scene unfold. The casual way the soldier left the tent, the belt being fastened, the laughter from the guards—there was no mistaking what it meant.

Anya's hands clenched tightly around her laptop, her knuckles white as she stared at the screen. Her breath came out in short, controlled bursts as she fought back the wave of disgust rising in her throat. She glanced at Dave, her expression hardening into a mask of steely resolve. They both knew

what was happening to Sarah in that tent. She wasn't just being held captive—she was being violated.

Neither of them spoke for a long moment, the sounds of the surrounding jungle a distant hum compared to the burning rage building inside.

“They’re hurting her,” Anya said, her voice barely above a whisper but laced with fury.

Dave’s fists clenched at his sides, his gaze fixed on the screen. “We’re getting her out. Today.”

Dave’s mind was racing, but his body was perfectly still, his eyes locked on the drone feed as the soldier, now walking with a swagger, made his way back toward the centre of the camp. His belt was secure now, his hands resting comfortably on the rifle slung across his chest. The image of him leaving Sarah’s tent—laughing, careless—would be burned into Dave’s mind forever.

“They’re not treating her like a prisoner,” Anya said, her voice sharp with the edge of controlled anger. “She’s not a prisoner to them. She’s...” She trailed off, her jaw clenched as she struggled to find the right words.

Dave didn’t need her to finish the sentence. They both knew what Sarah was enduring inside that tent, isolated from the rest of the camp. This wasn’t a military operation any more. This was a violation, a systematic degradation of a woman who had already suffered too much.

His voice, when he spoke, was low and hard. “We have to move now. We’re not waiting any longer.”

Anya nodded, her eyes never leaving the screen. “I’ll keep the drone in the air to watch the guards’ movements. We can’t go in guns blazing, but we have to be fast and precise. We take out the guards, get Sarah out, and disappear into the jungle.”

Alicia, who had been preparing her medical kit in silence, stepped forward. Her face was grim, her usual calm demeanour replaced with cold

determination. “When we find her, she’ll need more than medical attention. She’ll need to know she’s safe.”

Dave gave a short nod, his face unreadable, but the fury in his eyes unmistakable. “We’re not leaving her behind.”

His eyes focused on the small, isolated tent. It was close enough to the jungle to make an approach possible without being seen, but they would have to be quick and quiet. If the guards raised the alarm, they would have an entire camp of soldiers swarming down on them in minutes.

But it wasn’t the camp that bothered Dave. It was the fact that Sarah was trapped inside that tent, alone and suffering. Every second they delayed, she was at the mercy of the monsters who now guarded her.

Alicia tightened the straps on her medical bag, her face set with grim resolve. “When we get her, we need to move fast. She’s not going to be in good shape.”

Dave nodded, his eyes dark and focused. “We’ll make sure she’s safe. No one’s laying a hand on her again.”

Anya glanced at him, her expression hardening. “And if we run into that soldier again?” She didn’t need to clarify which one she meant.

Dave’s jaw tightened, the memory of the soldier fastening his belt and laughing with the guards burning in his mind. “Then we’ll make sure he regrets it.”

Dave looked at each member of the team, his eyes hard. “We’re not holding up the body recovery mission any longer. We find Sarah, we get her out, and we move. No room for error.”

Alicia’s eyes were cold, focused. “Understood.”

The guards were armed, the jungle unforgiving, but now they had their target.

The plan was simple, but as any seasoned operative knows, no plan survives first contact with the enemy. Still, they had to try.

Alicia would hang back, just inside the jungle, with her medical supplies ready. The moment they secured Sarah, she'd move in to stabilise her. Anya, would provide cover from the treeline, keeping an eye on the guards and ready to take down any threats that Dave couldn't handle.

That left Dave to do what he did best—use his speed, strength, and precision to take down the two guards silently. There would be no margin for error. These men were not just any soldiers; they were the ones responsible for Sarah's suffering, and Dave's anger simmered just beneath the surface. His fists clenched at his sides as he envisioned what he would do to them.

"We get in fast," Dave said, his voice low and controlled. "I'll take down the guards, and we get Sarah out. No hesitation."

Anya nodded, slipping her pistol into her holster and moving into position. "I've got your back."

Alicia, her face set in grim determination, checked her medical kit one last time. "I'll be ready for her."

"Let's go."

Dave moved like a shadow, slipping from tree to tree as he approached the isolated tent. The two guards standing outside were still oblivious, their rifles slung lazily over their shoulders, their eyes scanning the jungle with half-hearted vigilance. Dave's heart pounded in his chest, his body humming with adrenaline and barely controlled rage. These men were laughing earlier, unaware of the reckoning that was about to hit them.

When he was within striking distance, Dave sprang forward with blinding speed, moving so fast that the first guard didn't even register his presence until it was too late. Dave's fist connected with the man's jaw, shattering

bone with a single, controlled strike. The guard crumpled instantly, unconscious before he hit the ground.

The second guard turned just in time to see Dave coming at him, but his reaction was too slow. Dave grabbed the man by the throat and slammed him into the side of the tent with such force that the canvas rippled and the guard gasped for air. For a brief moment, Dave considered ending him right there, crushing the man's windpipe and leaving him to die—but he stopped. He wasn't here to kill. With a final shove, he slammed the guard's head into the hard ground, knocking him unconscious but alive.

Both guards were down, their bodies lying limp in the dirt, but Dave's chest still heaved with fury. Every fibre of his being wanted to tear them apart for what they had done to Sarah. But there was no time for vengeance now. He had to get inside the tent.

Dave stepped over the unconscious bodies and slipped into the tent, his movements still silent. Inside, the air was stifling and smelled of sweat and fear. The dim light barely illuminated the small space, but what he saw made his stomach twist with anger and sorrow.

Sarah Moreau was there, huddled in the corner, her wrists bound and her body bruised and broken. Her clothes were torn, her face pale, and her eyes, once full of life, were glazed over with shock and exhaustion. She looked up as Dave entered, her expression a mix of confusion and fear, but there was a flicker of recognition when she saw him.

"Sarah," Dave whispered, moving toward her, his voice gentle now, though his heart was racing. "I'm getting you out of here."

But before he could reach her, the sound of footsteps outside the tent froze him in place. Another guard was approaching, likely coming to "take his turn." Dave's blood ran cold, but before he could react, there was a familiar sound of suppressed gunfire, and the guard dropped to the ground just outside the entrance, a single suppressed shot to the head from Anya's Udav 9mm. The guard's body slumped, but his fall didn't go unnoticed.

Across the camp, a soldier near the fire pit saw the body hit the dirt. His eyes widened, and then came the sound Dave had been dreading—the shout of alarm.

The entire camp was instantly alive with movement, soldiers grabbing their rifles, shouting orders, and rushing toward the isolated tent.

“Anya!” Dave barked over the radio, his voice sharp. “Get Sarah and go! Take her to Alicia!”

Anya was already moving, sprinting toward the tent as the first shots rang out. “On it!” she replied, sliding into the tent. She knelt by Sarah’s side, quickly cutting her restraints and pulling her to her feet. Sarah was weak, barely able to stand, but Anya wrapped an arm around her and began guiding her toward the jungle.

Dave took one last look at Sarah before turning back to face the oncoming militia soldiers. His jaw clenched, his eyes narrowing with cold determination.

“I’ll hold them off,” Dave growled. “Get her out of here.”

As Anya and Sarah disappeared into the treeline, Dave stepped out of the tent and into the chaos. The camp was fully awake now, soldiers pouring out of the tents, their rifles raised and their eyes scanning for the intruder. Dave stood in the centre of it all, his chest rising and falling with deep, controlled breaths.

Anya, supporting Sarah as they fled into the jungle, could hear the sounds of gunfire and shouting behind them. She knew Dave was holding the entire camp at bay, giving them the precious time they needed to get away.

“Hold on, Sarah,” Anya whispered, her voice soft but urgent. “We’re almost there.”

Sarah stumbled, her legs weak and her body trembling from exhaustion and fear. But she kept moving, knowing that her only hope was to get away, to survive.

Ahead, Alicia emerged from the shadows, her medical kit ready. As Anya brought Sarah to her, Alicia immediately began assessing her condition, working quickly to stabilise her.

“He’s buying us time,” Anya said, glancing back toward the camp. “We need to keep moving.”

Alicia nodded, her face grim. “I’ll take care of her. Let’s hope Dave makes it out.”

As they disappeared into the dense jungle, the sounds of battle still echoed in the distance.

Dave was buying them time.

14 Unleashed

The alarm spread across the militia camp, cutting through the air as soldiers scrambled from their tents, grabbing weapons and shouting orders. The camp had gone from a lazy post to full combat readiness in seconds. But no matter how many soldiers rushed out, they had no idea what kind of storm had descended upon them.

In the centre of it all stood Dave, his stocky frame seemingly out of place amid the chaos. To any observer, he looked like a chubby, middle-aged white guy, the kind of man you wouldn't expect to survive a firefight, let alone start one. But Dave wasn't just any man. His abilities, barely understood by himself or anyone else, had turned him into a one-man army. And today, the soldiers were going to feel the full brunt of his rage.

As the first group of militia soldiers charged toward him, rifles raised, their eyes filled with confusion and fear, Dave's face was a mask of cold fury. The memory of that soldier—fastening his belt, laughing after leaving Sarah Moreau's tent—burned in his mind. Every step, every blow he was about to deliver, was fuelled by the thought of what those men had done to her.

The first round of gunfire rang out, a volley of bullets aimed directly at Dave's chest. He didn't flinch. The bullets struck him, but they didn't penetrate, ricocheting off his skin like stones hitting a boulder. His body was nearly invulnerable, the rifle fire doing little more than making him step back from the force. The soldiers paused, their expressions flickering between disbelief and panic.

Dave's eyes locked onto the nearest soldier, and he moved with inhuman speed. Before the man could even react, Dave was on him. His hand shot out, grabbing the barrel of the soldier's rifle. With a savage twist, Dave bent the barrel in half, the metal groaning under his grip before snapping

like a twig. The rifle was now useless, the soldier's eyes wide with terror as he stumbled backward.

With a quick, powerful motion, Dave drove his fist into the soldier's chest, knocking him out cold. The man crumpled to the ground, but Dave had already moved on to the next. Another soldier lunged at him, swinging his rifle like a club. Dave caught the rifle mid-swing, his muscles coiling with effortless power, and snapped the rifle in two as if it were made of plastic.

More soldiers rushed him, firing wildly as they tried to bring him down. Bullets tore through the air, striking Dave's shoulders, chest, and back, but none of them penetrated his skin. He was like a force of nature—an unstoppable hurricane of rage. Every bullet that hit him only fuelled his anger, driving him to attack harder, faster, more ruthlessly.

Dave grabbed one soldier by the throat, lifting him off the ground with one hand. The man gasped and clawed at Dave's arm, but there was no escape. With a powerful shove, Dave hurled him across the clearing, the soldier's body slamming into the side of a tent, collapsing the canvas around him.

Another soldier, desperate, tried to stab Dave with a bayonet. The blade skidded off Dave's forearm, unable to pierce his skin. Without missing a beat, Dave grabbed the soldier by the arm and twisted. There was a sickening crack as the bone snapped, the soldier's scream cutting through the chaos. Dave didn't stop. He kicked the man in the chest, sending him sprawling to the ground, writhing in pain.

His rage was uncontrollable now. The thought of Sarah—bound, violated, broken—drove him to a level of violence he hadn't allowed himself to reach before. Killing wasn't something he wanted to do, but today, it felt necessary. These men couldn't be allowed to go after Sarah again. They couldn't be allowed to hurt anyone else.

As Dave ripped through the camp, bodies fell around him—some knocked unconscious, others with broken limbs or shattered bones. But for some, the punishment was far worse. A group of soldiers tried to coordinate an

attack, surrounding Dave and firing in unison. He rushed them with a feral roar, moving faster than they could react.

One soldier managed to fire a shot point-blank into Dave's face. The bullet struck his cheek and ricocheted off, leaving nothing not even a mark. Dave grabbed the man by the throat and twisted his neck with brutal efficiency. The snap of vertebrae was lost in the chaos, and the soldier collapsed in a heap.

Another soldier took aim at Dave's head, but before he could fire, Dave snatched the rifle from his hands and snapped it over his knee. With a powerful punch, Dave drove his fist through the man's chest, shattering ribs and sending him crashing into the dirt. Blood sprayed the ground as the soldier's lifeless body crumpled at Dave's feet.

But Dave wasn't finished.

In the midst of the carnage, Dave spotted him—the soldier who had casually walked out of Sarah's tent, laughing, fastening his belt. The image of that man burned into Dave's mind, igniting a fury that nearly blinded him. His breath quickened, his muscles tensing as he zeroed in on the man.

The soldier's eyes widened in deadly realisation as Dave stormed toward him. He tried to back away, but there was no escape. Dave was on him in seconds.

With a snarl, Dave's left hand closed around the soldier's throat. One squeeze. That's all it took to lift the man off his feet, boots kicking uselessly at the air. The soldier's eyes bulged with recognition---this was the man who had hurt Sarah. This was her revenge.

Dave's right hand shot out, grabbing the man's genitals in a brutal vice grip. The soldier's eyes bulged in shock, and his scream was high-pitched, desperate. But Dave didn't stop. He squeezed, his fingers crushing the man's most sensitive parts with the force of a hydraulic press.

There was a sickening squelch, like mashed potatoes being squeezed through a fist, and the soldier's scream became a shriek of absolute agony. Dave's face was a mask of cold, murderous fury as he continued to crush the man's genitals, his grip unrelenting.

The soldier's body convulsed, his legs kicking weakly as his mind tried to process the pain. Blood ran down Dave's hand, the soldier's screams piercing the air, but Dave felt no sympathy, no remorse. This man had taken pleasure in torturing Sarah, and now he was paying for it.

With a final, brutal squeeze, Dave crushed the soldier's genitals completely. The man's body went limp, his eyes rolling back in his head as he lost consciousness. Dave discarded him like trash, throwing him to the ground with a flick of his wrist. The man's body crumpled into the dirt, his groin a bloody mess.

Dave stood over him, breathing hard, his chest rising and falling with each ragged breath. The soldier was still alive, but barely. He'd never be the same again. He would carry the consequences of his cruelty for the rest of his life—a fitting punishment.

By now, the remaining soldiers had seen what Dave was capable of. Panic spread through the camp as more and more men realised that this “chubby, middle-aged man” was tearing through them like a hurricane. Several soldiers dropped their rifles, turning to flee into the jungle, desperate to escape the carnage.

Dave, his hands bloody and his mind still seething with rage, watched them run. His instincts screamed to chase them, to hunt them down and finish what he'd started. But he held back. He had done what he needed to do.

Most of the soldiers were either severely injured, left behind to moan in pain and fear, or dead. The camp was in shambles, tents destroyed, men scattered or unconscious. Sarah was safe, and that was all that mattered.

With the camp broken, Dave turned toward the treeline where Anya and Alicia had disappeared with Sarah. His body on fire from the adrenaline, but he pushed it aside. He had done what was necessary.

As the last of the soldiers fled into the jungle, Dave began his walk back to the others, his mind still burning with the memory of Sarah's suffering—and the blood on his hands.

But for today, the nightmare was over.

The jungle had grown eerily quiet by the time Dave returned to the small camp where Anya, Alicia, and Sarah had taken shelter. The dense foliage pressed in around them, the soft rustling of leaves and distant calls of wildlife the only sounds that broke the silence. Alicia was crouched beside Sarah, her hands working quickly but gently as she treated the woman's injuries. Anya stood nearby, scanning the perimeter with a watchful eye, but her focus shifted immediately when Dave stepped into the clearing.

Dave's clothes, or what remained of them, were stained with blood—none of it his own. His face, usually calm and composed, was etched with a deep weariness, his eyes haunted by the events of the last few hours. He walked slowly, each step heavy with the weight of what he had done. His knuckles were bloodied, and his body, though invulnerable, bore the weight of battle.

Anya saw the pain in his eyes immediately, not just the physical fatigue but something deeper, something far more damaging. She approached him carefully, her expression softening as she reached out to place a hand on his arm.

"You did what you had to do, Dave," she said quietly, her voice steady but filled with empathy.

But Dave barely acknowledged her words. His gaze was fixed on Sarah, who lay motionless on the ground as Alicia worked to clean her wounds. Sarah's face was pale, her eyes distant, as though her mind had retreated to

some far-off place to escape the trauma. Her wrists were raw from the restraints, her body littered with bruises and cuts. She was alive, but just barely.

Alicia was focused, her hands moving with practised efficiency as she applied antiseptic to Sarah's wounds and checked her vitals. "She's in bad shape, but she'll survive," Alicia said softly, not looking up from her work. "It's going to take time for her to heal—physically and mentally."

Dave took a step closer, his heart sinking further as he looked down at Sarah. The sight of her broken body, the fragile rise and fall of her chest, twisted something deep inside him. He had saved her, but the cost weighed on him like a crushing burden.

Dave stood over Sarah, his mind racing with conflicting emotions. He had fought for her, killed for her. He had torn through that camp with a fury he hadn't known he possessed. But now, in the stillness of the jungle, the aftermath of his actions settled in. The faces of the men he had beaten, broken, and killed flashed through his mind, their screams still echoing in his ears. They were human beings, and though they had done monstrous things, the way he had torn through them gnawed at his soul.

He had slaughtered them like sheep, some in self-defence, others out of necessity. But a few... a few he had killed out of pure rage. The memory of that one soldier—the man who had laughed as he left Sarah's tent—stood out above the rest. Dave could still feel the man's throat in his left hand, the sickening sensation of crushing his genitals in his right. The soldier's screams of agony had been satisfying in the heat of the moment, but now, in the aftermath, it left a bitter taste in his mouth.

Anya, watching him closely, stepped forward. She could see the pain etched on his face, the guilt that weighed him down. "You saved her, Dave," she said softly. "Sarah wouldn't be alive if it weren't for you."

Dave's eyes flicked up to meet hers, the deep shadows under his eyes betraying the emotional toll. "And how many of them did I kill to make

that happen?" His voice was low, almost a whisper, but the weight of it hung in the air.

Anya shook her head, her voice firm but gentle. "They would have killed her. Or worse. You know that."

"They were still people," Dave said, his voice cracking. "Some of them were just following orders. Some of them... I didn't give them a chance. I slaughtered them, Anya. I killed them because I was angry."

Anya's grip on his arm tightened, her eyes soft but resolute. "You didn't choose this, Dave. They did. Every one of them who hurt her, who laughed at her suffering—they made that choice. You did what you had to do to stop them. And you did stop them."

Dave's breath hitched, the guilt gnawing at him. He looked back at Sarah, lying so still, and his heart twisted with sorrow. He had saved her life, but it didn't erase the darkness that now clung to his conscience.

With a heavy sigh, Dave stepped back from the scene, his mind still racing. He pulled the radio from his belt, the cold metal feeling like a dead weight in his hand. Dan was waiting for a report. The recovery mission for the fallen CIA agents was still on hold, but Dave needed to make a decision.

He raised the radio to his mouth, his voice shaky but determined. "Dan, this is Dave."

The reply came quickly, Dan's voice crackling through the static. "Go ahead, Dave. What's the situation?"

Dave glanced at Sarah one more time before speaking. "We got her. Sarah's safe... but she's in bad shape. Alicia's treating her now."

There was a pause on the other end, and when Dan spoke again, his voice was thick with relief. "Good. That's good. How are you?"

Dave's jaw tightened. "I did what I had to do, Dan. But it wasn't clean. I killed a lot of them. Some of them... I didn't have to."

Dan didn't respond immediately, and for a moment, there was only the faint hum of static. Then, Dan's voice returned, steady and calm. "They were monsters, Dave. What you did—you saved her. I know it's hard to see it now, but Sarah wouldn't have survived if you hadn't done what you did."

Dave closed his eyes, the weight of his actions still heavy on his chest. "I know," he said quietly. "But that doesn't make it any easier."

"No, it doesn't," Dan agreed. "But you saved her, Dave. That's what matters."

Dave nodded, even though Dan couldn't see him. After a long pause, he spoke again. "We're green-lighting the recovery mission. Sarah's safe, and she's stable. You can proceed with the recovery."

There was a brief silence on the other end before Dan's voice came through again. "Understood. We'll move in tonight."

Dave lowered the radio, his mind still swirling with the chaos of the last few hours. He had done what was necessary. He had saved Sarah's life. But the cost of it all still weighed heavily on his soul.

Anya moved closer, her presence comforting but unobtrusive. She didn't say anything more, just placed a hand on his shoulder, letting him know she was there. Sometimes, words weren't enough.

Alicia, still tending to Sarah, glanced up and saw the haunted look on Dave's face. She didn't say anything either—she knew the weight of taking lives, even when it was justified. It was a burden they all carried.

"Come sit," Anya said softly, leading Dave to a spot near the fire they had built. "You need to rest. You've done enough."

Dave nodded but remained silent as he sat down, his mind heavy with thoughts of the dead soldiers, of Sarah's suffering, and of the choices he'd made. He had saved her. But at what cost?

As the fire crackled softly and the night slowly began to fall over the jungle, Dave stared into the flames, wrestling with his guilt and the knowledge that, despite it all, Sarah was alive because of him.

And that had to be enough.

15 Shadows

The jungle was dark and still, a heavy silence hanging in the air as Dan, Omar, and Serj crouched low, going over the final details of their plan. The military compound loomed ahead of them, barely visible through the thick foliage. It was the same as the night before—quiet, with only a handful of guards patrolling the perimeter. There was no indication that the events at the militia camp had alerted the soldiers here. For now, their mission was still on track.

As they ran through the final preparations, the soft rustle of leaves caught Dan's attention. He tensed, his hand moving toward his rifle, but then he saw them—three soldiers emerging from the treeline. They were dressed in night camouflage, their hands raised in a gesture of peace. Dan's eyes narrowed as they approached, his grip on his weapon relaxing only slightly.

The soldiers emerged from the darkness, hands raised. Serj's shoulders tensed—he knew that face. The CIA operative from last night. Their eyes met, a handful of heartbeats passing before Serj's jaw unclenched. The operatives hand twitched toward his weapon, then deliberately moved away.

"We're here to help."

The operative gestured to his two companions, both of whom were standing quietly with their hands raised. "We heard about Sarah. We're glad she's safe. If there's no immediate danger to her, we're here to assist with the recovery."

Dan stepped forward, taking charge of the situation. "Sarah's safe," he said quietly. "She's in bad shape, but she'll make it. Dave's team got her out earlier today. That means the pressure's off for tonight. We can focus on recovering the bodies."

The CIA operative nodded, his expression grim. “Good to know. But carrying two bodies through this terrain isn’t going to be easy with just three of you.”

Dan smirked, glancing at Serj, the massive, muscular operator standing like a wall of muscle beside him. “Serj could probably carry both bodies himself, but having more hands on this will definitely make things easier.”

The CIA operator chuckled softly looking at Serj, “I’m sure the ‘Russian Reacher’ could, but we’ll lend a hand.”

Dan’s mind worked quickly as he adjusted the plan. With Serj, Omar, and the additional CIA team members, the recovery would go more smoothly. But the mission was still dangerous. 2am was approaching, and though the compound seemed as still as it had been the night before, there was no room for complacency.

Dan turned to the CIA team. “We’ll move in under cover of darkness. I’ll stay on overwatch with one of your snipers. We’ll take two different angles to cover the operation. Omar and Serj will go in with you to retrieve the bodies.”

The CIA sniper, a silent but sharp-eyed operator, stepped forward, giving Dan a nod. “I’ll cover the south side of the compound.”

“Good,” Dan replied, his voice steady. “Let’s get this done.”

The jungle had swallowed the team whole, the darkness pressing in from all sides as they crept toward the compound. It was 2am, the dead of night, when even the most vigilant sentries tend to let their guard slip. Dan and the CIA sniper had already moved into position, their rifles trained on the compound’s perimeter from two different vantage points. They watched the guards’ movements, every step, every shift in the searchlight beams meticulously tracked.

Dan’s heart beat steadily as he adjusted his scope, his night optics cutting through the darkness with crystal clarity. He spotted a guard walking his

usual route, pausing to smoke a cigarette near the wire fence. “Guard moving south-east,” Dan whispered into his radio. “He’s distracted. You’re clear.”

From his position, Serj gave a silent nod and gestured for the others to move forward. Omar, the three CIA operatives, and Serj moved in near silence, their steps careful and deliberate as they approached the compound’s weak spot—the north side, where the fence was poorly maintained and the patrols were lighter.

Serj reached the fence first, his massive frame moving with a surprising amount of grace as he pulled out the wire cutters. Snip. Snip. The metal links gave way easily, and within moments, the team had a clean opening. They slipped through one by one, their movements synchronised, like shadows melting into the compound’s darkness.

The interior of the compound was eerily quiet. The soldiers inside were either asleep or unaware of the silent approach. Serj led the team toward the building where they knew the bodies of the CIA agents were being kept. It was a small, reinforced structure near the centre of the compound, with two guards stationed outside. Dan and the CIA sniper had already marked them, their scopes trained on the two men, ready to fire if necessary.

“Take the guards down?” the CIA sniper asked through the radio, his voice calm.

Dan hesitated for a second, then shook his head. “Negative. Let’s keep this quiet. No noise unless we need it.”

Serj and Omar moved quickly, flanking the guards from opposite sides. Serj struck first, his massive hand clamping over the first guard’s mouth while his other arm locked around the man’s throat in a sleeper hold. The guard struggled for only a moment before going limp, unconscious but alive.

Omar moved in on the second guard, slipping behind him and using a knife to hold him steady while Serj repeated the process. Within moments, both guards were down, their bodies hidden in the shadows. No alarms had been raised.

The team entered the building, the smell of damp concrete and disinfectant filling the air. Inside, in the back of the room, were the two bodies—the fallen CIA agents, laid out on slabs, their faces pale in the dim light. Omar’s jaw tightened as he approached them, a deep sadness passing over him. It was their duty to bring them home.

Serj moved to one of the bodies, lifting it with ease, his strength making the heavy burden seem light. The CIA operatives took the second body, distributing the weight between them.

“We’ve got them,” Omar whispered into his radio. “Exiting now.”

As the team made their way back toward the fence, the tension was palpable. Every rustle of leaves, every creak of wood underfoot felt like it could shatter the silence. But the compound remained still, the guards oblivious to the recovery mission unfolding right under their noses.

Dan’s voice crackled softly over the radio. “You’re clear on this side. No movement.”

The CIA sniper echoed the report. “South side’s clear. You’re good to go.”

The team slipped back through the hole in the fence, the two bodies carried with reverence as they made their way into the jungle. The mission had been successful, and though the weight of their fallen comrades was heavy, there was a sense of relief. Sarah was safe, and now the bodies would be returned to American soil.

Serj, ever the silent giant, carried his burden with ease, but the sombre expression on his face betrayed the gravity of the moment. Omar, walking beside him, glanced over at Serj, then at the CIA team. They had worked hard to get to this point, and the success of the mission was bittersweet.

By the time they reached the rendezvous point, the sky was just beginning to lighten, the first hints of dawn creeping through the trees.

Dan lowered his rifle, his eyes still scanning the horizon as the team regrouped. “Good work,” he said quietly, his voice thick with emotion.

Agent Cole, the one Serj had fought the night before, stepped forward. “Thanks for the assist,” he said, his tone respectful. “You guys did good tonight.”

The team stood in the thick shadows of the jungle, the weight of the successful recovery mission still settling in. Dan, Omar, Serj, and the CIA operatives gathered near the rendezvous point, the two bodies of the fallen CIA agents now secured. The sky was just beginning to shift from the inky blackness of night to the pale hues of dawn. There was a brief, heavy silence as everyone took stock of the night’s events.

As they prepared to leave, the Cole took a step forward, a wary look in his eyes. His voice broke the stillness.

“One more thing,” he said, his tone measured but curious. “You’re not CIA.”

Serj, standing tall and calm as always, looked the man directly in the eyes. His expression was impassive, but there was a glint of knowing in his gaze. “I never said we were.”

The CIA operator raised an eyebrow, clearly not satisfied with that answer. “You said you were agency.”

Serj didn’t miss a beat. “Did I not say which one?”

There was a brief pause, a flicker of frustration and amusement passing over the CIA agent’s face. He exhaled slowly, shaking his head with a half-smile. “Regardless,” he said, his voice softening. “Whoever you are and whoever you work for, you did us a solid tonight. Thank you.”

Serj gave a brief nod, his face remaining neutral. “We didn’t do it for you,” he said plainly. “But you’re welcome.”

Dan, standing off to the side, glanced between Serj and Cole, his rifle still slung over his shoulder, but his posture relaxed. Omar, as always, remained silent, his eyes scanning the treeline as he kept watch.

The tension in the air seemed to dissipate slightly as the CIA team exchanged glances. They knew something was off—these operatives weren’t part of any government agency they could place, but the mission had gone off without a hitch, and their fallen comrades had been recovered. That was what mattered.

Agent Cole took a step back, raising his hand in a small gesture of gratitude. “We’ll go our way, you go yours. I suppose it’s better that way.”

Serj’s expression remained stoic, but there was a faint flicker of something in his eyes—perhaps respect, or simply understanding. “That’s how it works.”

Without another word, the two teams parted ways, disappearing into the jungle in opposite directions. The CIA team had their answers—or at least, as many as they were going to get. But in the end, they knew one thing for certain: whoever these operatives were, they had done what needed to be done.

The bodies of their fallen comrades had been recovered. And now, it was time to go home.

As the sun began to rise, casting long shadows through the trees, Dan, Serj, Omar, and the rest of the team made their way back to the extraction point. Their mission was complete, but the mysteries surrounding their identities would linger in the air, just as the jungle kept its secrets.

For tonight, though, there were no more questions.

Just silence. And the knowledge that the job had been done.

16 The Journey Home

The Land Cruiser rumbled slowly over the uneven jungle terrain, the oppressive heat of the jungle making the already gruelling journey feel even more unbearable. Dave, Anya, and Alicia had been driving for hours, swapping shifts behind the wheel as they navigated the rough, muddy tracks leading them back to Mabaruma. Sarah Moreau sat in the back, her body battered and broken, isolated in a deep, impenetrable silence.

It had been a long and brutal 18 to 20-hour journey, and with every passing hour, the weight of Sarah's suffering bore down on them. Alicia did what she could to tend to Sarah's physical injuries, changing bandages and applying antiseptics, but Sarah remained unresponsive. Her body may have been free, but her mind was still trapped in the horrors of the camp.

Dave glanced in the rear view mirror, his heart heavy with guilt and sorrow as he watched Sarah sitting quietly, staring at nothing. She hadn't spoken a word since the rescue. Anya, sitting beside Sarah, tried once or twice to offer her some comfort, but the woman's empty gaze made it clear that she wasn't ready to engage with the world around her.

In the distance, the outline of the Mabaruma airstrip came into view, the promise of an end to this long, painful journey. A small jet sat waiting on the tarmac, its engines quiet, the crew preparing for take-off. They had reached the final leg of the mission—getting Sarah on the plane and flying her home to safety.

The sun hung low in the sky as the Land Cruiser pulled up near the airstrip, its tires kicking up dust as they came to a stop. Dave, Anya, and Alicia climbed out, their bodies exhausted but their minds still sharp. Sarah needed to be on that plane. Every step of the mission had been about getting her to this point.

Alicia helped Sarah out of the vehicle, her hands gentle as she guided her across the rough ground. Sarah's movements were stiff, mechanical, her

gaze still distant. Dave watched from a few steps away, the sight of her frail form stirring something deep inside him—an anger at the men who had hurt her, and a gnawing guilt at the violence he had unleashed to save her. He wasn't sure if he had gone too far or not far enough.

Anya followed closely behind, her eyes darting between Sarah and the jet, checking for any last-minute obstacles. But there was nothing in the way now. The crew of the plane stood ready, the door open and the steps down, waiting to take Sarah home.

As they approached the jet, Alicia continued to offer Sarah quiet words of reassurance, though she wasn't sure if Sarah was even listening. They were almost at the door when something unexpected happened.

Sarah stopped.

She raised her head for the first time since they had rescued her. Her eyes, once hollow and distant, now focused on the faces of her rescuers—Dave, Anya, and Alicia. Her lips trembled, and for a moment, they thought she might collapse back into the silence that had defined the long journey.

But instead, her voice, soft and hoarse, broke through the stillness.

“Thank you,” Sarah whispered, her voice barely audible but filled with an emotion none of them had expected. Tears welled up in her eyes, streaming down her cheeks as she looked at each of them in turn, her gratitude etched deeply in her expression.

For a moment, none of them could speak. Dave, who had been weighed down by his guilt, stood frozen, his throat tightening. Anya, always composed, felt a lump rise in her throat as she nodded silently in response. Alicia, her medical training keeping her hands busy, paused and blinked away the sting of tears in her own eyes.

Sarah's simple words cut through the fog of exhaustion and guilt that had enveloped the team. Her tears, her gratitude—it was more than any of them

had expected. More than they thought she could give after what she had been through.

Without another word, Sarah turned and climbed the steps into the jet, disappearing into the cabin. The door closed behind her with a soft click, and the crew began their final preparations for take-off.

The team stood in silence, watching the jet as it taxied down the airstrip and lifted off into the sky, the roar of its engines fading into the distance. The weight of the mission—of Sarah’s suffering, of the violence they had faced—still hung over them, but for a brief moment, they felt something close to peace.

Dave, his eyes still on the empty horizon, finally let out a long breath. “She’s going to be alright... right?”

Anya, standing beside him, crossed her arms and nodded slowly. “She has a long way to go, but yeah... she’ll make it.”

Alicia, who had spent the last several hours tending to Sarah’s physical wounds, added quietly, “She’s stronger than we think.”

For a few moments, none of them said anything. They just stood there, the sounds of the jungle creeping back in around them. They had done their job, and had got Sarah out. But now, as the jet disappeared into the sky, the reality of their journey and the scars it had left behind began to settle in.

It wasn’t until they climbed back into the Land Cruiser, the weight of exhaustion pulling at their bodies, that the silence finally broke.

“She said ‘thank you,’” Dave muttered, his voice thick with emotion.

Anya looked over at him, a faint smile tugging at her lips. “She did.”

“And she meant it,” Alicia added, her voice soft.

For the first time since the rescue, the tension seemed to ease, just a little. They had saved Sarah, and despite everything, she had recognised that. It wasn’t much, but in a mission filled with darkness, it was enough.

With that small victory in their hearts, the team turned the Land Cruiser back toward the jungle, ready for the long drive back.

There were still battles to fight. But for now, they had won.

17 Tea Time

The safe house crouched at the edge of Mabaruma was tucked away in a quiet corner, blending in with the other modest homes that lined the narrow streets. It was a simple, typical structure for the area—a single-story building with a small porch out front, surrounded by dense jungle foliage. The house was basic but functional, designed to accommodate up to six people, though it was clear from the sparse furnishings that it would be a tight fit.

Inside, the layout was straightforward. The living room featured a worn sofa and a couple of chairs, with a small table in the corner. There were four beds spread across two bedrooms—enough for some, but not all. The kitchen, though small, had all the essentials: a stove, a fridge, and a kettle. A ceiling fan spun lazily overhead, doing its best to fight the oppressive jungle heat.

mould crept up the weathered walls, and the constant drip of condensation from the metal roof created a rhythmic counterpoint to the screech of macaws overhead. The air was thick enough to chew, heavy with the sweet rot of vegetation and the metallic tang of approaching rain.

It wasn't a luxurious setup, but it would serve its purpose. They'd all been through worse.

Dan, Omar, and Serj arrived at the safe house just as dusk began to settle over Mabaruma. The long drive back from the recovery mission had taken its toll, and all three of them were covered in a layer of sweat and grime from the jungle. The reunion with Dave, Anya, and Alicia was a quiet one—relieved nods and brief handshakes, but no one had the energy for much more.

Dan surveyed the small space with a knowing smile. "Not bad, considering what we've had before," he muttered, looking around the room. "Though, I'm guessing we'll have to work out sleeping arrangements."

There were only four beds, and the sofa, though worn and sagging, could hold one more. But Serj, with his massive frame, was clearly not a candidate for either the sofa or sharing a bed. The man was a human mountain, and forcing him to squeeze into one of the small beds would be unfair to anyone who had to share with him.

Serj, ever the silent giant, raised an eyebrow as he glanced at the sofa, his broad shoulders practically filling the room. Without a word, he claimed one of the beds for himself—no one objected.

“I’ll take the floor,” Dan said with a resigned shrug. “Not the first time.”

Omar, who was already eyeing the sofa, gave a tired nod. “Fine by me. I’ll make do with this.”

Dave chuckled softly as he stretched out his back, taking a long look at the small, cramped space. “Well, as long as Serj doesn’t roll over and crush anyone in the night, we’ll manage.”

Once the sleeping arrangements were loosely settled, the team gathered in the living room, the tension of the past few days slowly beginning to fade. The jungle heat pressed in around them, but inside the safe house, there was a shared sense of relief. The missions were behind them—Sarah was safe, and the bodies of the CIA agents had been recovered. Now, for the first time in days, they could breathe.

Dan slouched into one of the chairs, stretching his legs out as he wiped the sweat from his brow. “Hell of a week, huh?”

Omar leaned back on the sofa, his eyes half-closed, already settling into the relaxed atmosphere. “Feels like we’ve been in this jungle for months.”

Serj, as usual, said nothing. He sat at the edge of one of the beds, his massive frame making the small room feel even more cramped. But there was a calmness about him, his breathing steady as he quietly polished one of his knives, the rhythmic motion somehow soothing.

For the first time since the mission started, they felt a sense of normalcy creeping in. The weight of their recent actions, of the lives lost, and the violence unleashed, hung over them still, but for now, they could relax.

Amid the low murmur of conversation, Dave stood up, stretching his legs. Without a word, he wandered into the small kitchen, taking a look around the cramped counter tops and mismatched cabinets. After a moment, he spotted the kettle, and a small grin spread across his face.

He reached for it, filling it with water from the tap, and set it on the stove. “Guess it’s time for a cuppa,” he muttered to himself, his voice just loud enough for the others to hear.

Back in the living room, Anya perked up, a smile forming on her lips. She exchanged a glance with Alicia, both of them waiting for the familiar string of expletives to follow—Dave’s usual frustration with something kitchen-related was well known among the team.

But this time, there was no angry outburst.

Instead, Dave appeared in the doorway of the kitchen, his expression unexpectedly calm. “Anyone else want a proper cuppa?” he asked, his tone casual.

The others blinked, momentarily stunned into silence.

“Wait, what?” Dan asked, sitting up in his chair. “Did you just... offer tea? Without cursing the kettle first?”

Dave grinned, holding up a small pack of tea bags he had pulled from his bag. “Brought my own tea this time. Figured I’d be proactive. You know... learning.”

A burst of laughter rippled through the group, the tension finally breaking as they shared in the brief moment of mirth. Even Serj, who rarely showed much emotion, allowed the corners of his mouth to twitch upward in the closest thing to a smile.

Anya shook her head, still chuckling softly. “Well, look at that. Dave’s gone and become civilized.”

Dave disappeared back into the kitchen, his voice calling back, “Don’t get used to it. This tea’s impossible to find out here.”

The kettle began to whistle softly as Dave prepared the tea, the warm, familiar sound somehow adding to the comforting atmosphere of the safe house. It wasn’t much, but it was enough to remind them that they were still human, still capable of finding light moments even in the aftermath of darkness.

"Did anyone bring any milk?" he asked, his voice innocent but laced with just enough humour to break the tension.

For a split second, the room was silent. Then, as if on cue, the team erupted into uproarious laughter.

The laughter carried on for a few moments longer, filling the small safe house with a warmth that had been missing since their mission began. For the first time in days, they felt like a team again—not just soldiers on a mission, but friends who had been through hell together and come out the other side, still standing.

As the night deepened and the jungle sounds became a distant hum, the team sat back, Dave sipped his black tea, and they allowed themselves to relax. They had earned it.

And sometimes, a proper cup of tea was all the comfort that was needed.

18 Dirty Tricks

In the small, dimly lit safe house in Mabaruma, the team sat gathered around a flickering laptop screen. The tension in the room was palpable, the humid air thick and oppressive, even in this remote part of northern Guyana. The hum of insects outside was a constant reminder of just how far they were from the heart of the geopolitical storm they were navigating. Despite the distance, Cecilia's voice crackled through from the UK, her sharp, composed tone standing in stark contrast to their surroundings.

"Alright," she began, her image slightly pixelated but still commanding. "Despite the efforts we've made, nothing significant has changed on the ground. The CIA are continuing to use Guyana as their staging ground to sever Venezuela's ties with North Korea, and they're willing to destabilise the entire region if they have to."

Dan sat nearest the screen, his shirt clinging to him in the humid air. He leaned forward, his face reflecting the weight of their current position. "So, what's the next move, Cecilia? They're not just going to back off because we're here."

"They won't," Cecilia agreed. "The CIA has already laid the groundwork. Their oil support is a front for a much darker set of operations. Sabotage, dissident manipulation, and worst of all, they might push the region into a humanitarian crisis. None of that is acceptable."

The team shifted uncomfortably in their seats. The heat, combined with the pressure of the situation, was wearing on them.

"None of this sits well with us," Dan said, wiping sweat from his forehead. "But we can't let this blow up into something that brings the entire region down."

Cecilia nodded from the screen. "That's exactly it. We need to break Venezuela's connection to North Korea too, but we can't afford to trigger a

disaster. A refugee crisis could destabilise more than just Guyana. You're in a delicate spot. The CIA is using every trick in the book, but you'll need to outplay them without setting off alarm bells."

"So, we sabotage their plans, keep the oil infrastructure intact, and somehow stop a humanitarian crisis?" Dave's tone was dry, but beneath the sarcasm was grim determination.

"Precisely," Cecilia replied. "Focus on the back channels. CARICOM and OAS need to stay involved, diplomatically at least. Make sure any dissident groups the CIA is prodding don't escalate. We have to handle this subtly, Dave. If the CIA catches wind of us interfering, they'll only escalate faster."

The team exchanged looks, knowing the task was immense, but understanding the stakes. From their isolated safe house in Mabaruma, they were playing a part in something far larger than themselves. But no one could afford for them to fail.

"We'll keep things steady here," Dan finally said, his voice filled with resolve.

Cecilia's face softened slightly on the screen. "Good. Keep me informed, and stay vigilant. We can't let this spiral out of control."

The connection flickered, but Cecilia's presence remained steady, guiding them even from thousands of miles away. Now it was up to the team in Mabaruma to do what needed to be done.

Dan looked at each of them, his voice steady. "We need to get eyes on everything, and fast. The CIA's going to push hard if they're planning an attack on Venezuelan infrastructure. They won't do it themselves if they can help it—they'll use opposition forces or dissidents. And if we don't get ahead of this, the region will explode."

Dave, sitting off to the side, absorbed the details. Still finding his feet on the team, but he was ready to pull his weight. This was no time to hold back.

Dan turned to Anya. “Anya, I need you to start scanning for any spikes in comms activity. If the CIA’s backing dissidents or prepping an operation, there’s going to be digital noise—encrypted messages, sudden increases in data traffic. You know what to look for. Focus on the oil infrastructure, but also keep an ear on any chatter around the border.”

Anya gave a quick nod, her fingers already moving across her keyboard, pulling up satellite data and tapping into her monitoring systems. “I’ll set up automated sweeps for irregularities and focus on Georgetown and the border. Anything that looks like covert coordination, we’ll know.”

Dan turned to Serj next. “Serj, I need you to talk to the locals. Keep it subtle—find out if anyone’s seen new players around. People with gear they shouldn’t have. If the CIA’s moving weapons or operatives through here, someone will have noticed.”

Serj crossed his arms and nodded, his expression thoughtful. “I’ll reach out to the contacts I’ve been developing. People at the docks, the market. If there’s unusual activity, they’ll have seen something.”

Omar, who had been quietly observing, spoke next. “I’ll take the border routes. I can get in with some of the traders and smuggling rings, see if there’s been any movement we didn’t know about. If they’re setting up a strike or planning sabotage, there’ll be traces—unusual shipments, personnel moving through areas that are usually quiet.”

Dan met Omar’s eyes. “Exactly. Focus on any cargo heading toward the oil infrastructure or key border crossings. If the CIA’s setting something up, they’ll need to get supplies through. We just need to be ahead of them.”

Finally, Dan turned to Dave. “You’ve got instincts. I want you to stay flexible. Coordinate with Omar if you see any movement on the ground. If

you hear anything through our low-level sources—anything that feels off—flag it immediately. We can't afford to miss a single thing."

Dave nodded, ready to play his part. "Got it. I'll stay on top of anything suspicious."

Dan stood back, his voice taking on a firmer tone. "This is high stakes. If the CIA triggers a military escalation or a crisis, we'll be staring at a humanitarian disaster. No one here wants that. We need to find out what they're planning, and we need to stop it—quietly. The last thing we need is this region becoming a flashpoint."

Anya was already working, her eyes glued to the screen as she sifted through digital signatures and encrypted traffic. Serj grabbed his jacket, ready to hit the streets. Omar checked his gear, preparing to blend in along the trade routes. Dave, despite his relative inexperience, felt the gravity of the situation sink in. He was part of this team, and they all had a role to play.

Dan gave them all a final glance. "Let's move fast. We've got no time to lose."

The team dispersed, each focused on their piece of the mission, knowing that any misstep could mean chaos in the region.

After several days of hard graft, the team found themselves sitting around the table in the dimly lit safe house, exhaustion creeping into their faces. The relentless humidity of Mabaruma wasn't helping, but it was the lack of concrete progress that weighed on them the most. They had spent hours in the field, cultivating relationships, asking subtle questions, and digging through the noise for anything that smelled like the CIA's handiwork. So far, they had little to show for it.

Dan stood over the table, reviewing their findings. His eyes lingered on one detail that stood out among the otherwise dead ends: unusual

shipments moving into the Venezuelan jungle, but originating from the Guyana side of the border. The shipments had been discreet, but they weren't entirely invisible. The question was—were the CIA behind it? Were they supplying arms to dissidents inside Venezuela, building up for a larger operation?

"It's sketchy," Dan admitted, rubbing his eyes, "but it's the only solid lead we've got. We need to investigate this."

Serj leaned back in his chair, his large frame taking up most of the space. "If the CIA's arming local opposition forces, this could be their first move. They'll want to destabilise Venezuela from within. That border's too porous not to take advantage of."

Anya, still glued to her laptop, had been running simulations and tracking any digital signatures that could correlate with the physical movements. "I've looked through everything we've gathered—data points, satellite imagery, comms traffic. These shipments are definitely off the books. No official channels, and none of our usual sources flagged them."

Omar, ever cautious, glanced at Dan. "If these shipments are arms, we could be looking at the beginning of something much larger. The CIA's modus operandi is to use local actors to do their dirty work—dissidents, militias. It's classic deniability."

Dave, sitting quietly but focused, finally spoke up. "It's a long shot, but we've got nothing else to go on. If this is the CIA building up a dissident force, we'll need to figure out their endgame. Do they want to disrupt the Venezuelan government, hit infrastructure, or something worse?"

Dan considered the question, his brow furrowing. "Could be all of the above. The CIA's play here could be multifaceted—political destabilisation and sabotage of key Venezuelan infrastructure. If they're planning something big, we've got to find out before it happens."

Anya tapped away at her laptop, pulling up a map of the region. “I’ve triangulated the areas where the shipments have been reported. It’s deep in the jungle, rough terrain. Getting there won’t be easy, but we need eyes on the ground to confirm what we’re dealing with. If it’s arms, we’ll know soon enough.”

Serj leaned forward. “I can make the trip. I know how to move in and out of those kinds of areas without being noticed. Omar should come with me. We’ll take a look, see if we can confirm what these shipments are and who they’re intended for.”

Omar nodded in agreement. “If it’s an arms supply, we’ll find the stash points. And if we do, we can track where they’re being distributed.”

Dan nodded. “Alright, Serj and Omar, you’ll head out to the border area and confirm what we’re dealing with. Anya, keep running digital intercepts. We need any comms that could indicate coordination between the CIA and local groups. Dave, you’ll back them up remotely—coordinate between Anya’s intel and their movements on the ground.”

Dave nodded. It was another step in the right direction, though the pressure was mounting. “If the CIA’s building toward something big, we need to shut it down before it goes hot.”

Dan’s eyes swept across the team. “This might be the start of something much larger than we anticipated. If the CIA’s pushing for a full-scale destabilisation of Venezuela, this could lead to regional chaos. We’re not letting that happen.”

Serj and Omar stood, already prepping their gear for the trip into the jungle. Anya remained glued to her screens, her fingers flying over the keys as she worked. Dave moved to his station, ready to coordinate.

They were chasing a shadowy lead, but it was all they had. If the CIA was backing a dirty tricks campaign, the team needed to find proof before the region was plunged into chaos.

Just as the team began laying out their plan to investigate the shipments into the Venezuelan jungle, Dan's phone buzzed. It was a secure line. He raised a hand, signalling for quiet as he answered. The voice on the other end was unmistakable—it was Ruiz, their key contact in the Venezuelan military.

"Ruiz," Dan said, "it's good to hear from you. What do you have for us?"

Ruiz's voice, gravelly but steady, echoed through the small room. "First, congratulations on the recovery of those captured agents. That rescue was a success, though it has caused quite a storm here."

Dave, Anya, Serj, and Omar paused in their preparations, listening intently as Dan relayed Ruiz's words.

"The minister of defence and the president are absolutely furious," Ruiz continued. "The loss of those CIA operatives has dealt a blow to their plans. You see, they were going to use those agents to discredit the United States. It was part of a larger play to expose their manipulation of Latin American nations, something the government wanted to capitalise on."

Dan shared a glance with Dave, realising that their rescue had unknowingly disrupted a piece of the geopolitical puzzle. The agency's intervention had thrown a wrench into the Venezuelan government's strategy.

"But there's more," Ruiz continued, his voice darkening. "I've received fresh intelligence from my people in the army. We've seen a noticeable up-tick in activity from local dissident groups. Up until now, they've been nothing more than a nuisance—throwing stones against gunfire. The government hasn't seen them as a real threat."

Serj raised an eyebrow at that, his instinct already telling him where this was going.

Ruiz sighed. "But if these dissidents are now being trained and armed, the situation could change dramatically. My intelligence suggests they've been

receiving shipments, though we can't confirm the source yet. If your intel is right, and the CIA is involved, then these groups are no longer just a bunch of angry locals—they're a destabilising force in the making."

Dan's voice was grave as he spoke. "That lines up with what we've been seeing here. We've tracked some unusual shipments crossing into the Venezuelan jungle from our side of the border. If the CIA's behind it, they're supplying these dissidents and setting the stage for something much larger."

There was a pause on the line before Ruiz responded. "It would make sense. These groups have been quiet for so long, it's like they were waiting for something—an opportunity, maybe, or outside support. And now, with weapons and training, they could become a real threat to the government. If they're being backed by the CIA, then their goals won't just be limited to opposition protests. We could be looking at sabotage, assassinations, even larger scale conflict."

Omar, who had been quietly absorbing the conversation, shook his head. "This is exactly what we feared. The CIA's going to use these dissidents to destabilise Venezuela from the inside, and if it kicks off, the whole region could burn."

Ruiz's voice returned, sharper now. "I can't offer official support, not openly. The government here is trying to control the narrative, but I can provide what intel I can. If you can confirm that the CIA is arming these groups, we might have a chance to stop this before it escalates."

Dan nodded, even though Ruiz couldn't see him. "We'll confirm it. Serj and Omar are moving into the jungle to investigate those shipments, and Anya is monitoring the comms traffic. We'll find out if the CIA's backing these dissidents, and we'll stop it before it spirals out of control."

"Good," Ruiz said. "Because if they are armed, this situation is going to turn into a war zone. And trust me, the consequences won't be limited to Venezuela."

Dan ended the call and turned to the team. The room felt heavier now, the weight of the situation sinking in deeper.

“You heard him,” Dan said, his voice low. “The dissidents are on the move. If the CIA’s training and arming them, we’re looking at a full-blown insurgency. And if we don’t shut this down fast, we’ll have a war on our hands.”

Serj grabbed his gear without a word, ready to move out. Omar nodded to Dan, already mentally preparing for the trek into the jungle. Anya kept her eyes glued to the screen, her fingers flying over the keys as she pulled up new data streams. Dave, despite the intensity of the situation, felt a growing sense of purpose. They finally had a credible lead.

Dan stood at the table, the weight of the situation evident on his face as he took in the gravity of the conversation. The team had just received Ruiz’s critical intel, but it wasn’t as simple as taking down the dissidents. This was a delicate balance, and they all knew it.

“Alright, everyone, let’s be clear on our objectives here,” Dan said, looking at each team member in turn. “We’re not here to crush the dissidents. Their fight is almost aligned with ours—they’re pushing back against the same manipulation and control we are. But we cannot, under any circumstances, let them get their hands on CIA-supplied weapons. If they do, this conflict will escalate, and it won’t just be the government and dissidents fighting. Civilians will get caught in the crossfire. It could turn into a massive humanitarian disaster.”

Serj, ever the strategist, crossed his arms and nodded. “So, we target the shipments. Destroy the weapons before they reach the dissidents. If we take out the supply line, we prevent the escalation without crushing their cause. We stop the CIA’s plan without destabilising the region any more than it already is.”

Omar spoke up, his calm voice carrying the weight of experience. “We’ll need to track these shipments closely. If we hit them too late, they’ll already be in the dissidents’ hands, and that’s when things get messy. We can’t afford a firefight in a jungle filled with people who don’t know we’re not the enemy.”

Anya, who had been monitoring the comms traffic and sifting through intel, interjected. “I’ve got eyes on the supply routes from the border. These shipments are coming in from Guyana, and there’s a narrow window before they get handed off. If we time this right, we can intercept and destroy the shipments before they’re ever distributed.”

Dan nodded, leaning over the map of the border region. “Serj, Omar, you’re going to be our boots on the ground. You’ll need to move fast, hit the shipments before they get too far. Anya will keep feeding you updates on the shipment routes.”

Serj gave a single nod. “We’ll strike quickly and quietly. No one will know it was us. The dissidents won’t see the weapons, and the CIA’s plan will fall apart before it even starts.”

Dave, still new but increasingly confident in his role, chimed in. “What about the CIA? If they realise their supply lines are being hit, they could escalate even further. We’ll need to be careful not to tip them off too early.”

Dan agreed, his face thoughtful. “That’s a risk, but we’re going to take out these shipments in a way that looks like bad logistics or random guerrilla interference. The last thing we need is for the CIA to know we’re onto them. Anya, can you dig into their comms and find out how often they’re checking in on these shipments?”

Anya’s fingers flew over the keyboard, pulling up a series of encrypted communications. “I’ve already got a few signals that could be related. They’re definitely monitoring, but not too closely. If we hit the right shipment and make it look like an accident, they’ll think it’s just bad luck or sabotage from another local group.”

Dan straightened, confidence returning to his voice. "That's the plan then. We hit the shipments before they reach the dissidents, destroy the weapons, and make it look like a logistical failure or interference from other rebel factions. The dissidents won't get the weapons, and the CIA won't know we're involved."

"Wait." Dave says, "What if we make it look like the Venezuelans had uncovered the routes, and they were the ones responsible for taking out the shipments? If we could gain access to some Venezuelan weaponry that could be used as evidence in any investigation of the aftermath."

Dan raised an eyebrow at Dave's suggestion, a thoughtful look crossing his face. "That's not a bad idea," he said, glancing over at Serj, whose tactical mind was already processing the implications. "If we make it look like the Venezuelan government took out the shipments, we throw off the CIA completely. They won't suspect we were involved, and it keeps the dissidents from blaming us. But to make this work, we'll need to make it look convincing—like an official military operation. Artillery or air strike would definitely do the trick."

Serj nodded, leaning over the map. "We could make it look like a surgical strike by the Venezuelan armed forces. Air to surface munitions would be a bit too big for us to handle on the ground. If we get our hands on some high explosive munitions—something like a 122mm HE artillery shell—they exist in Venezuela's arsenal. It would give us plausible deniability. The CIA would think the Venezuelans intercepted their arms shipments, and the dissidents wouldn't suspect us at all."

Omar rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "But where do we get that kind of weaponry? We can't exactly walk into a local arms dealer and pick up a howitzer."

Dan looked to Anya, who had already started tapping into her network. "Anya, what do we have in terms of black market access or even military

connections that could get us the weapons we need? We'll have to get them quietly."

Anya didn't look up from her screen. "Give me a second... there are a few options. The Venezuelan military has been known to 'lose' equipment in the past—stuff that ends up on the black market. It wouldn't be easy, but there's always the chance we could track down someone willing to part with old military munitions. The 122mm shell are relatively easy to come by—especially in this part of the world."

She paused, scrolling through intel reports and market listings. "There's an agency known arms dealer in Brazil, near Boa Vista, just south of the border. He's got connections to military surplus from Venezuela. If anyone has access to these kinds of munitions, it's him. We could reach out through our intermediaries and arrange a quiet purchase."

Dan nodded, the pieces coming together. "Boa Vista is close enough to Guyana that we could reach it without drawing too much attention. If we can get our hands on a 122mm shell or something similar, we can plant enough evidence to make it look like an official Venezuelan strike. We blow the shipment, leave some debris behind, and the story writes itself."

Serj, always the pragmatist, added, "We'll need to be careful with how we handle the munitions. If there's any trace it didn't come from the Venezuelans, we risk blowing the whole operation."

Omar nodded in agreement. "I can handle the transport and planting of the evidence once we secure the munitions. We'll need to strike at just the right time and leave enough of a trail to convince the CIA that the Venezuelan air force was responsible."

Anya looked up from her screen. "I can make the arrangements for the arms deal. It'll be risky, but if we pull this off, the CIA will never know we were involved."

Dan straightened, looking at his team. “Alright, here’s the plan: Anya, you secure the munitions through our contact in Boa Vista. Omar, you and Serj will handle the operation on the ground. Once we’ve secured the weapons, we’ll plan the strike to make it look like the Venezuelans uncovered and hit the CIA’s arms shipments. We’ll need to be precise—no mistakes.”

Dave, felt a surge of excitement. The plan was risky, but it was clever. If they pulled it off, they could not only stop the CIA’s plot but shift the blame entirely onto Venezuela, all without destabilising the region further.

Dan gave them all a final nod. “Let’s get this done. Anya, make contact with the dealer. Serj, Omar, be ready to move. We’ve got a narrow window to make this work.”

The team dispersed, each member focused on their task. They were about to pull off an operation that could not only neutralise the CIA’s plans but do it in a way that no one would ever suspect the agency had been involved at all.

19 **A Night Out**

Omar and Serj had spent days trawling through the seedy underbelly of remote border towns, following vague leads, half-whispered conversations, and unspoken fears. The bars they visited were dark, dingy places, filled with the stench of cheap liquor and smoke. They were the kind of places where people kept their heads down, not wanting to get involved in anything too dangerous. Yet, it was in these places that they could glean the details they needed.

One of the first bars they hit was an old watering hole on the outskirts of Mabaruma, frequented by smugglers, traders, and the occasional corrupt official. Omar had slipped a few bills into the hands of a local dockworker—a man with a scar that ran from his temple to his jaw—hoping for something solid. The man spoke in hushed tones, his eyes darting around the room as though the shadows might be listening.

“They say there’s a convoy,” the dockworker whispered, his voice barely audible over the loud conversation and clinking glasses. “Coming through the jungle. Supposed to head up near Cariba, then into Tumeremo. I don’t know what they’re carrying, but it’s not the usual contraband. Nobody’s talking, and those who know... they’re too scared to say a word.”

Omar nodded, passing the man a few more notes and slipping out of the conversation without drawing any attention. The hint of a convoy was all they needed, but they needed to confirm the details.

Deeper into the jungle, the next bar, closer to the suspected route. This bar was even more decrepit, with broken neon lights flickering in the window, casting eerie shadows over the cracked concrete walls. Inside, the air was thick with cigarette smoke and sweat, the patrons either drunk or on the way there. Serj had made his way to the back, silently scanning the room while Omar made contact with a group of traders sitting in a corner booth.

Not everyone was content to let Omar and Serj quietly gather intel. Later that evening, in a particularly run-down bar on the border, Omar and Serj found themselves in a smoky, dimly lit room where the tension was as thick as the air. The locals in this place were rougher—hardened by the dangers of living so close to Venezuela. Omar had just finished a conversation with a bartender, who had been tight-lipped but mentioned seeing unusual convoys passing through the nearby roads, when things started to go south.

A group of local thugs, clearly territorial, had taken notice of Omar's quiet questioning. Their leader, a wiry man with a jagged scar across his cheek, approached Omar with a sneer.

"Hey, gringo," the thug spat, slurring his words from the cheap alcohol. "We don't like outsiders asking questions around here. You lost or just stupid?"

Omar kept his cool, knowing this kind of confrontation was inevitable in a place like this. "Just having a drink, friend. No trouble here."

But the leader wasn't backing off. He moved closer, trying to intimidate Omar. "There's no trouble, huh? Well, maybe there should be." His hand drifted toward a knife tucked into his waistband.

Before Omar could react, Serj was already standing beside him, his towering frame casting a long shadow over the thug. Without a word, Serj grabbed the mouthy leader by the collar, lifted him off his feet, and slammed him into a nearby chair with such force that the entire bar seemed to pause.

The thug's eyes widened in shock as Serj loomed over him, his voice calm but full of menace. "Sit. Down."

The other thugs, seeing their leader cowed so easily, backed off immediately, muttering curses under their breath as they returned to their

corner. Serj didn't break eye contact with the leader until he slumped back into the chair, defeated and embarrassed.

Omar nodded in appreciation, relieved that the situation hadn't escalated further. "Thanks," he muttered to Serj, who simply shrugged and went back to scanning the room.

The message was clear: they weren't to be messed with, and no one else in the bar dared approach them again.

The traders were rough men, sunburnt and scarred from years of navigating the lawless regions near the border. Omar slipped into their conversation, buying rounds of drinks and playing the role of a fellow smuggler trying to make a living. After a few rounds, and a careful blend of alcohol and cash, the mood loosened, and the men began to talk.

One of them, a burly man with a missing tooth and a tattoo snaking up his neck, leaned in closer to Omar, his breath reeking of rum. "There's something moving through the jungle soon. Heard it from one of the drivers. They don't ask questions, but it's not the usual stuff. Word is, some real dangerous folks are behind it—people who you don't want to cross."

Omar pushed. "What kind of dangerous?"

The man gave a crooked smile, but there was fear in his eyes. "The kind that makes you disappear. Whoever's running this convoy, they've got serious backing. Government? Cartels? Who the hell knows. But no one's sticking around to find out. If you're smart, you won't either."

Omar nodded thoughtfully, finishing his drink and quietly extracting himself from the conversation. He now had confirmation: the convoy was real, and it was making its way through the jungle towards Tumeremo.

With the convoy route confirmed and enough intel to act, Omar and Serj returned to the safe house that night. They now had a location and a timeline—the convoy was moving through Cariba and headed toward Tumeremo. They had to intercept it before it reached the populated areas.

If there was going to be an explosion, it needed to happen in the jungle, away from civilians. The next phase of the operation was about to begin.

20 **Doing the Deal**

Anya sat in the corner of the safe house, her laptop open as she initiated a secure line with the arms dealer. She had dealt with this kind of character before—people who thrived in the grey zones of law and order. This one, however, had a particularly dangerous reputation. His name was Mauricio “El Zorro” Mendoza, a well-connected figure known for moving military-grade hardware across borders without leaving a trace. He operated out of Brazil, and his network reached deep into the Venezuelan military.

The line connected, and the grainy image of El Zorro appeared on her screen. He was a lean man with slicked-back hair and a cold, calculating gaze. The background of the call suggested he was somewhere in a warehouse or an office near the docks.

“Anya,” he greeted, his voice smooth but edged with menace. “I hear you’re in the market for something heavy.”

Anya didn’t waste time with pleasantries. “I need four 122mm high explosive shells, Russian made but with a traceable Venezuelan history. I know you have access to Venezuelan surplus. We need it covert, delivered to Mabaruma airstrip. No questions asked.”

El Zorro raised an eyebrow, his lips curling into a faint smile. “That’s quite the request. You know those aren’t exactly easy to move around. But... for you, I can make it happen.” He leaned back, casually lighting a cigarette. “It’s going to cost. The kind of cost only serious players can afford.”

Anya didn’t flinch. “The funds will be arranged by tomorrow. The agency is handling the transfer.”

At the mention of the agency, El Zorro’s smile faded slightly. He knew the agency wasn’t to be taken lightly. “I see. I’ll make sure the shipment goes off without a hitch. You’re sure you can handle that?”

Anya nodded. “It’ll work. Just make sure the shipment gets to the airstrip quietly. No one can know about this.”

El Zorro exhaled smoke, nodding slowly. “Consider it done. The shipment will be there in two days. Mabaruma airstrip, after sundown. My pilot will handle the drop. But once it’s on the ground, it’s your problem.”

Anya leaned forward. “One more thing. I need your people to handle this quietly. We don’t want any leaks, no word about this going to the wrong ears.”

El Zorro chuckled, shaking his head. “Who are you talking to, Anya? My business thrives on discretion. You’ll have your bombs, and no one will know they were ever there.”

With that, the call ended, and Anya leaned back in her chair. The deal was done. Now it was up to them to make sure the operation went off without a hitch. She turned to Dan, who had been overseeing the conversation from the other side of the room.

“Shipment is arranged,” she said. “It’ll be at Mabaruma airstrip in two days. We’ll need to have the transport ready.”

Dan nodded. “I’ll let Cecilia know to handle the funds. Dave will be on hand to help with unloading.”

Two days later, as the sun began to dip below the horizon, Dave stood at the edge of the Mabaruma airstrip. The old dirt runway wasn’t much more than a strip of cleared land nestled in the jungle, but it was perfect for their purposes—remote and out of sight from prying eyes.

A small, twin-engine plane approached from the distance, its engine noise low and steady as it touched down on the dirt. The pilot, a wiry man with sunglasses and a grim expression, opened the hatch. “This your cargo?” he asked, gesturing toward the large crates in the back of the plane, each labelled in an obscure military code.

“Yeah,” Dave replied, glancing at the crates. “That’s it.”

Dave stepped forward, casually grabbed the crate, lifting easily it with both hands. The pilot's mouth fell open as Dave carried it toward the Land Cruiser, setting it down with ease in the back. For a moment, the man just stood there, blinking.

"Uh... how'd you—?"

"I've been working out." Dave replied.

The pilot, still perplexed, decided not to ask any more questions. The crate was loaded into the back of the Land Cruiser, Dave shut the back hatch with a heavy thud and gave the pilot a nod of thanks.

Without another word, the plane taxied back down the runway, lifting off into the night as Dave climbed into the driver's seat and started the engine. The munitions were secure, and now it was time to get them to the safe house.

Back at the safe house, Omar, Serj, and Dan were ready as Dave backed the Land Cruiser into the small garage area. The faint smell of oil and jungle air mixed in the confined space as they carefully unloaded the crate, taking every precaution with the explosives.

Dan inspected the crates, nodding in approval. "These will do the trick. They're typical Venezuelan artillery shells, and no one will question their origin once they see the aftermath."

Omar helped secure the munitions in a locked room inside the safe house, making sure they were stored safely. "We've got what we need. Now, it's just a matter of timing."

Anya, watching from her workstation, added, "We're in a good position. We have the means to stage the attack and leave enough evidence to make it look like the Venezuelan government uncovered the arms and acted decisively. It'll be enough to throw the CIA off our trail."

Dave, standing near the crates, nodded. “Let’s just make sure we’re ready. When we hit that convoy, it needs to be precise. No collateral damage, and no way for the dissidents or civilians to get caught up in it.”

The team agreed. The plan was coming together, and now they had the right tools to execute it.

Dan rubbed his chin as he considered the dilemma. “Primary objective: neutralize the convoy. Secondary: minimize casualties. We can’t just blow it to pieces with everyone inside. If this turns into a bloodbath, it won’t look good for us, and Dave’s right—we don’t want more deaths on our hands.”

Serj, ever practical, spoke up. “We’ve got the 122mm HE shells, but they don’t have to be used in the traditional way. We can repurpose them to take out the trucks and cargo while giving the personnel a chance to escape. If we stage it right, we can create a diversion—force them to abandon the trucks and scatter.”

Omar nodded in agreement. “I’ve seen it done before. We rig the shells for a delayed detonation and use them as an ambush tool, but without the immediate lethality. Hit the trucks with something that’ll force them to stop, then trigger the artillery shells after they’ve abandoned the vehicles. It’ll make it look like a precision strike but give them time to get out.”

Anya tapped her fingers on the desk, thinking. “We could use a distraction—something that scares them enough to stop the convoy without killing anyone right away. A small explosive or even a well-placed roadblock would work. Once they’re out of the trucks and on foot, we trigger the charges to take out the vehicles and the shipment. They’ll think it’s an airstrike or artillery bombardment, but no one will be close enough to get caught in the blast.”

Dave exhaled in relief at the plan’s potential. “That’s the way to do it. We stop the convoy, make them run, and then destroy the weapons. No civilian casualties, and we can live with ourselves afterward.”

Dan looked at the map of the convoy's route, his finger tracing a narrow pass through the jungle where the terrain would work to their advantage. "This is the spot. We'll rig the road with some minor explosives to force them to stop. Serj and Omar, you'll need to set up the shells at key points along the path where the trucks are likely to stop. We'll hit the convoy with enough of a shock to make them abandon the vehicles. Then we set off the shells once they're clear."

Serj looked thoughtful. "We can place the charges close enough to the trucks so that they destroy the cargo and the vehicles, but far enough from where the personnel will scatter. It'll look like the Venezuelan military hit them with artillery, but we control the timing."

Omar nodded, already planning the logistics in his head. "I can set up the initial distraction—maybe a small charge on a tree to bring it down across the road. They'll have no choice but to stop. Once they get out to investigate, that's when we hit the trucks."

Dan tapped the map again. "When that first truck goes up, the rest of the convoy will scatter. This is where we take control. Omar, Serj, you'll fire flares into the sky above the convoy, making it look like a full-scale military airstrike is inbound. They'll think they're about to be hit from above, and panic will set in."

Anya pulled up the satellite data and overlaid it with the route map. "I'll be monitoring comms. If anyone gets too close or if we have any surprises from the CIA, I'll make sure you're warned in time. But we need to move fast once they're stopped. We don't want them calling for backup."

Dave was quiet, but he nodded in agreement. The plan ensured minimal deaths, with most of the destruction focused on the weapons and trucks.

Dan continued, "Once they start abandoning the other trucks, Serj and Omar will detonate the remaining 122mm shells under each vehicle. We take them out one by one, giving them enough time to get clear before

triggering the next explosion. It'll look like they're being systematically hit by precision strikes."

The team was silent, but focused, absorbing each detail. Dan then gave the final instruction. "And now, for the coup de grâce. We'll tip off the Venezuelan forces—they know something's going down, but not the full story. We'll give them just enough information, at just the right time to get there as the explosions begin. When the flares go up and the trucks start exploding, they'll think they're moving in on a major arms smuggling operation."

Serj smirked. "By the time they arrive, the convoy personnel will have already scattered. They'll assume the Venezuelans were responsible for the destruction. Any questions from their superiors will point back to their own forces as the cause."

Omar, ever the pragmatist, asked, "What if any of the convoy personnel don't scatter and try to defend the trucks?"

Dan turned to Dave, then back to the group. "If they dig in, we give them more time. We'll have more than enough flares to keep them nervous. But we're aiming to make them think it's hopeless. No one will want to defend a convoy under artillery fire. And if the Venezuelans roll up, they'll take care of anyone who sticks around."

Dave spoke up, finally. "We're giving them every chance to run. The destruction of the weapons is what matters. The convoy needs to be wiped out, not the people."

Dan nodded. "Exactly. We're not here to slaughter anyone. We just need the weapons gone, and we need it to look like the Venezuelan forces took care of business."

Anya added, "I'll be in constant contact with everyone. If anything changes—if they call for backup or if there's an unexpected twist—I'll let you know immediately. We can adjust on the fly."

Dan straightened, satisfied that the plan was airtight. “Alright. Once the convoy is cleared and the weapons destroyed, we’ll fall back. The Venezuelans will take over, and we’ll disappear before they even realise we were involved.”

Serj and Omar grabbed their gear, ready to move out. Dave, although still nervous about the idea of combat, felt more confident knowing the plan was designed to avoid unnecessary bloodshed.

Dave, feeling the weight of the plan but reassured by its care for avoiding unnecessary deaths, nodded. “I’ll be ready. I can help with the setup and be on hand in case anything goes sideways. But I won’t pull the trigger if it’s going to kill anyone.”

Dan clapped a hand on Dave’s shoulder. “You won’t have to. We’ll make sure this is clean. The CIA loses their shipment, the dissidents don’t get armed, and no one dies in the process.”

The plan was set: hit the convoy with a roadblock, force them to abandon the trucks, and destroy the weapons with the 122mm shells. No unnecessary deaths, no collateral damage. The team was ready to take action, and they had their path forward.

The plan went like clockwork, until it didn’t.

The jungle was alive with the sounds of chaos—twisted metal groaned as the convoy’s trucks lay in fiery wreckage, and the random pops of ammunition cooked off in the flames, firing erratically into the dense foliage. The air was thick with smoke and the acrid stench of burning fuel, and above it all, the dull roar of Venezuelan forces advancing toward the remains of the convoy.

From his vantage point, Dave saw the convoy personnel panicking, too slow to retreat. They were hunkering down, taking cover behind the smouldering wrecks. Now, seeing the Venezuelan forces move in, rifles

raised, the situation shifted. What was meant to be a clean, quiet operation was spiralling toward a bloodbath.

Dave's heart pounded in his chest as he watched the soldiers close in, their weapons pointed at the convoy personnel who had already been scattered and shaken by the fake artillery strike. In his mind, he saw it all play out—the moment the bullets would start flying, the screams of the convoy personnel as they were gunned down, the carnage that would follow. It didn't matter that these were soldiers—they were following orders, but Dave couldn't let this turn into another massacre.

As the Venezuelan soldiers advanced, rifles raised, their boots crunching through the jungle under brush, Dave's mind raced. The ambush had worked, but the convoy personnel were now stuck between the wreckage and the advancing soldiers. The situation was rapidly deteriorating. This was supposed to be clean, but now it was on the verge of becoming a bloodbath.

Without hesitation, Dave surged forward, his legs pumping hard as he sprinted toward the enemy. Bullets tore through the air, the soldiers firing in confusion as they saw a lone figure charging toward them. But Dave, no matter how fast, couldn't avoid the hail of bullets, they didn't even slow him, his body moving with a precision and power that defied the surrounding chaos.

As he closed the distance, Serj reacted instinctively. In one swift motion, Serj pulled out his grenade launcher and fired off six grenades in quick succession—three smoke and three CS gas.

Thick clouds of smoke erupted around the Venezuelan forces, instantly enveloping them in a swirling haze of grey and green. The CS gas began to take hold immediately, causing soldiers to cough, gag, and claw at their eyes as the gas burned their throats and seared their lungs. Shouts of confusion filled the air, and through the thick smoke, the formation of soldiers began to break down.

Dave, charging into the chaos, was unaffected by the gas. He didn't even realise it at first—his mind was too focused on stopping the fight before it started. The gas swirled around him, but his breathing remained steady, his eyes clear. As he moved through the cloud, he could see every soldier stumbling, their vision blurred, bodies convulsing with coughs as the gas tore through their lungs.

The first soldier came into view through the smoke, staggering, clutching his rifle in one hand and his throat in the other as he gasped for air. Dave was on him in an instant, grabbing the man's wrist and twisting, sending the rifle clattering to the ground. With a quick strike to the back of the soldier's neck, Dave knocked him unconscious, leaving him slumped in the under brush.

Another soldier appeared, coughing violently, his eyes red and streaming as he tried to blink through the smoke. Dave swept in silently, grabbing the man by the vest and pulling him forward into a vicious knee strike to the stomach. The soldier doubled over, gasping in pain, before Dave spun him around and slammed him into the ground, rendering him unconscious.

As Dave moved deeper into the smoke, more soldiers came into view. One had managed to get his gas mask on and was fumbling with his rifle, trying to steady his aim. But before he could pull the trigger, Dave was already upon him. With a brutal punch, Dave smashed the mask, the glass shattering inward as blood sprayed across the soldier's face, the force of the blow shattering his nose and teeth. The soldier crumpled, dropping to his knees with a gurgled scream, clutching his ruined face as Dave moved on.

Despite the confusion and chaos, Dave's vision remained unaffected. He moved like a ghost through the smoke, seeing the soldiers clearly as they stumbled and gagged, disoriented by the CS gas. He ducked under the swinging butt of a rifle and countered with an elbow to the gut, sending the soldier sprawling into the dirt. Another soldier attempted to bring his rifle

up, but Dave twisted it from his grasp, driving the man's head into the side of a tree, knocking him out cold.

The smoke continued to swirl around him, thick and suffocating, but Dave breathed easily, his lungs unaffected by the gas. As he took down another soldier with a sweeping leg strike, he began to realise something was different. He could see through the gas with perfect clarity, as though the smoke wasn't even there. And while the soldiers were coughing, blinded and incapacitated by the CS gas, Dave was moving effortlessly through the haze, as though the gas had no effect on him at all.

Another soldier appeared, staggering out of the smoke, his body wracked with coughs. Dave grabbed him by the collar, slamming him into the side of a burning truck. The man slumped to the ground, unconscious from the impact.

As the final soldier in the immediate area went down, Dave stood amidst the chaos. The Venezuelan forces were either unconscious or too incapacitated to fight back. None of them were dead, but none would be getting up anytime soon.

The convoy personnel, seeing their chance, began slipping into the trees, disappearing into the jungle as the smoke and gas continued to spread. Dave, covered in dust and blood, looked around at the battlefield. He had done it—he had stopped the massacre.

Dave, his chest heaving, wiped the sweat and blood from his face. The adrenaline still coursing through his veins, but he had done it. He had stopped the bloodbath. The convoy personnel, shaken but alive, saw their opportunity and began retreating deeper into the jungle, disappearing into the night as the fires burned behind them.

As Dave stood amidst the wreckage and the unconscious bodies, the jungle seemed to fall eerily quiet. He had saved them. All of them.

The convoy personnel disappeared into the dense jungle, their silhouettes swallowed by the shadows of the trees, Dave stood for a moment, catching his breath. The Venezuelan soldiers, dazed and battered but alive, were already tending to their injured, trying to regroup in the aftermath. No more shots rang out, and the immediate threat had passed.

Dave glanced down at his clothes, or what was left of them. His shirt was torn to shreds, soaked in sweat and blood—none of it his own. His trousers were in little better shape, slashed and ripped from the chaos of the fight. With a final glance at the smouldering wreckage, Dave slipped into the trees, disappearing just as quietly as the convoy force had.

He moved through the jungle with practised ease, his adrenaline finally starting to fade as he made his way to the rendezvous point. The air was thick with the earthy scent of damp foliage, and the only sounds were the distant rustling of animals and the fading crackle of the burning trucks behind him.

When Dave finally reached the clearing where Dan, Serj, Omar, Alicia and Anya were waiting, the team looked up as he emerged from the treeline. Anya, busy monitoring the fallout on her equipment, glanced at him and immediately stifled a laugh.

Dan, standing with his arms crossed, raised an eyebrow at the sight of him. “You look like hell.”

Serj smirked, his usual stoic demeanour barely masking his amusement. “What happened, Dave? We thought you were only supposed to observe.”

Omar grinned, though his eyes remained serious. “You take on a platoon by yourself?”

Dave looked down at the tattered remains of his clothing. His shirt was barely hanging on, the fabric torn in a dozen places, and his trousers weren't much better. With a wry smile, he looked back at the team and said,

“I’m going to have to start wearing body armour—just to protect my clothes, and my modesty!”

Anya burst out laughing, shaking her head as she muttered, “You’re a walking disaster.”

Alicia grabbed her medical kit and went to see if Dave needed any help. Dave said, “I’m fine, this isn’t my blood, and it’s all just dirt and bullet holes. No damage.” Alicia looked puzzled, not even a scratch.

Dan chuckled softly, though his eyes held a trace of admiration. “You did good, Dave. We got what we came for, and no unnecessary bloodshed. The convoy’s taken care of, the Venezuelans think they did it, and the CIA’s plan is in ruins.”

Serj nodded in agreement. “It wasn’t pretty, but it worked. Let’s get out of here before anyone figures out we were ever involved.”

Dave, still grinning, as the adrenaline wore off, fell in with the team as they packed up and prepared to disappear into the jungle once again. The mission had been a success, even if his clothes hadn’t survived to tell the tale.

21 The North Korean Angle

The adrenaline of the firefight faded into exhaustion as they made their way back through the darkening jungle. By the time they reached the safe house, the weight of what they'd done - and what still lay ahead - settled over them like the evening humidity.

The laptop screen flickered with Cecilia and Alicia's images, both of them poised and ready to deliver the next phase of the plan. The air inside the safe house was thick with anticipation, the usual jungle humidity clinging to their clothes as they listened.

Cecilia's image flickered on the laptop screen, her expression grim. "The weapons are gone, but we've got a bigger problem. The North Koreans." She paused, letting the implications sink in. "As long as they're in play, the CIA will keep coming back. We need to end this - permanently."

The team exchanged glances, knowing what she was asking. This wasn't just about stopping a weapon shipment any more. This was about dismantling an entire international alliance.

Anya leaned back in her chair, nodding. "We need to go after Colonel Park Ji-Hoon. If we can take him down, it'll fracture the North Korean-Venezuelan relationship. But a straight hit won't be enough. We need to destroy him without making it look like we're involved."

Alicia cut in, her voice calm but calculated. "Discrediting him is the only way to ensure the alliance crumbles. Colonel Ji-Hoon is the lynchpin holding this operation together. We don't just take him out physically—we take him out politically. We make it look like he was working on a coup to replace the presidential team with puppets controlled by Pyongyang. If the Venezuelans think he's been scheming behind their backs, that'll sever the relationship in one move."

Dan, always pragmatic, frowned. “That’s going to require a hell of a lot of groundwork. How do we make it look convincing enough for the Venezuelans to buy it?”

Cecilia’s expression was cool. “We don’t just plant a few pieces of evidence. We build an entire backstory—a trail that, when discovered, looks like Ji-Hoon has been playing both sides for months, maybe even years. Anya will weave digital seeds into the historical records, backdate some communication logs, and create just enough suspicious activity to raise eyebrows.”

Anya was already typing, eyes locked on her screen as she began drafting ideas. “I’ll need to backdate emails and messages, subtly woven into old North Korean intelligence networks. But that’s only half the job. We also need real paperwork—something tangible. We have to steal documents from Ji-Hoon’s own office, replicate them, and then insert forgeries that match the narrative we’re building. When it’s discovered, the Venezuelans will think they caught him red-handed.”

Omar crossed his arms, deep in thought. “That means we have to get close to Ji-Hoon. Close enough to swipe something important—something official, so we can create forgeries. He’ll be careful, but he won’t suspect a thing if we do it quietly.”

Serj leaned forward, his eyes calculating. “We steal his paperwork, forge our own narrative, then return the documents to his possession. When the Venezuelans eventually uncover the evidence, it’ll be too late for him to deny anything. It needs to look seamless, as if he’s been orchestrating a coup from the shadows all along.”

Alicia tapped a few commands on her tablet. “Ji-Hoon has regular meetings with high-ranking Venezuelan officials. He’s seen as a trusted ally, so the suspicion needs to come from inside. If we weave the story right, it’ll look like he’s been sowing seeds of dissent in the government to destabilise the current regime and install North Korean loyalists.”

Dan's mind was already working through the details. "Anya, how long will it take to create the digital trail?"

Anya, still typing furiously, glanced up. "I'll need at least a few days to backdate everything properly. We'll need to tap into some old systems, fake emails from key figures, and even slip messages into military channels. I can get it done, but it'll need to be convincing enough that when they start investigating, everything lines up."

Cecilia nodded. "That's your task, Anya. In the meantime, the rest of the team needs to focus on getting the physical documents from Ji-Hoon. If we can forge reports, memos, or any paperwork that supports the coup narrative, it'll be even harder for him to explain away when the time comes."

Serj turned to Dave. "You're coming with me to get those papers. Ji-Hoon has a reputation for being meticulous, but even the most careful men make mistakes. We find an opportunity to get into his quarters or his office, swipe what we need, and get out without raising any alarms."

Dave, still processing the complexity of the mission, nodded. "We'll need to be ghosts. We can't afford to leave any trace."

Omar added, "Once we've got the paperwork, we'll forge the documents to tell our story. Ji-Hoon will look like he's been planning a coup for months. Then we slip the forgeries back into his possession, making sure the right people eventually find them. By the time the Venezuelans catch wind of it, Ji-Hoon will be cornered."

Dan finished the debrief, his tone serious. "Once we've planted the evidence, we make Ji-Hoon disappear. We stage it so it looks like he fled, realising he'd been caught. No one will ever find him, but the Venezuelans will believe he was guilty. His disappearance will only cement the narrative."

Cecilia gave a final nod of approval. “It’s risky, but if you pull this off, it will be a death blow to North Korean influence in Venezuela. And with Ji-Hoon gone, the CIA’s efforts will be futile. They won’t have a leg to stand on.”

Anya smiled, her fingers still tapping away at the keys. “Consider the seeds planted.”

The plan was set. The team knew what needed to be done. They would carefully dismantle General Ji-Hoon’s reputation, piece by piece, until there was no doubt in the Venezuelan government’s mind that he was plotting against them. And when the time came, Ji-Hoon would vanish without a trace—leaving behind only the damning evidence of his betrayal.

The clock was ticking, and the next phase of their mission was about to begin.

22 Honey Trap

Serj and Dave sat in the back of a nondescript sedan, their eyes fixed on the small tracking device that pinged periodically, following General Ji-Hoon's movements through the city. It had been days of careful observation, watching Ji-Hoon's routine, mapping his movements, looking for patterns. The man was meticulous, his military habits clearly reflected in his daily schedule. He met with key Venezuelan officials, attended high-security briefings, and moved through guarded compounds with almost no vulnerability. Almost.

Ji-Hoon, short at 5' 7" and lean, with sharp, angular features and a clean-shaven face. His eyes are small but piercing, giving him an intense, almost predatory look. Park's clothes are simple and professional—he avoids standing out, preferring to blend into his surroundings.

Dave tapped on the tablet, pulling up the day's surveillance. "He sticks to his routine, doesn't he?" he murmured, more to himself than to Serj.

Serj grunted in agreement, his eyes narrowed as he watched Ji-Hoon exit a government building, flanked by his usual security detail. "Meticulous," he said quietly. "But even men like Ji-Hoon have weaknesses. We just have to find it."

They continued to follow Ji-Hoon remotely, watching as he moved through the city, eventually heading toward a quieter part of town. He had been to this area several times over the past few days, and at first, it had seemed routine—until they dug deeper into the location. It wasn't a military compound or a government office. It was a bar. And not just any bar.

Dave zoomed in on the location through satellite imagery. "El Gato Rojo," he read aloud. "Frequented by Venezuelan officers, off the main grid. It's got a reputation... not exactly a place you go for official business."

Serj watched intently as Ji-Hoon entered the bar. “This might be the crack we’ve been looking for.”

As the hours passed and they observed Ji-Hoon’s interactions inside the bar through hidden cameras and local contacts, they began to notice something. Ji-Hoon was interested in the female staff. Very interested. The man carried himself with the cold professionalism of a high-ranking intelligence officer in his formal duties, but here, he was someone else entirely—relaxed, flirtatious, and, frankly, predatory.

Ji-Hoon made it a habit to sit in a particular booth, a secluded corner of the dimly lit bar where the shadows hid most of his actions. The female staff seemed used to his presence, some even exchanging glances with each other when Ji-Hoon would arrive, as if warning the newcomers of what was to come. His touch lingered on their arms, his eyes followed them as they moved through the bar, and the way he spoke to them was far more intimate than the setting called for. This was the opening Serj and Dave had been hoping for.

“He’s got a weakness,” Serj muttered, leaning back in his seat as the plan began to form in his mind. “He likes women. Not just casually. This is a regular thing.”

Dave nodded, his expression grim. “Yeah. And we can exploit that.”

Back at the safe house, the team gathered around the table. The air was thick with the usual tension of planning, but there was something else—an edge of opportunity. Serj laid out the map of Ji-Hoon’s movements, pointing to the bar, El Gato Rojo.

“Ji-Hoon’s meticulous in his professional life,” Serj began, his deep voice cutting through the quiet. “But when it comes to this bar, he lets his guard down. He’s there regularly, and he’s got a particular interest in the female staff. This is where we strike.”

Anya frowned, her fingers tapping restlessly on the table. “That place is crawling with Venezuelan officers. It’ll be hard to get close without attracting attention.”

Serj shook his head. “That’s the point. It’s busy, chaotic. No one’s watching Ji-Hoon too closely when he’s there. They see him as just another officer with his vices. But we’re not going in heavy. We’re going in quietly.”

Alicia, sitting beside Cecilia on the video link, looked thoughtful. “You’re thinking of using this angle to get close to him,” she said. “But how?”

Serj’s gaze shifted to Alicia. “You.”

Alicia’s eyes widened slightly, but there was no hesitation in her voice. “Explain.”

“We need someone who can get Ji-Hoon’s attention,” Serj said, his tone measured. “Someone who fits the profile of what he likes. Latina, confident, and able to get him interested. You’ll pose as a new waitress at the bar. You’ll be the ‘honey trap.’ Once he’s hooked, you’ll gain his trust. From there, you can get close to him, learn his routines, and ultimately help us get into his quarters to steal the papers we need.”

Alicia was silent for a moment, processing the plan. “So, I’ll have to make Ji-Hoon believe I’m just another girl caught in his orbit.”

Dan, watching closely, leaned forward. “It’ll be risky, but you’ll have the element of surprise. He won’t suspect you at first. If you play the part well, he’ll let his guard down completely.”

Alicia nodded slowly, a slight smirk crossing her lips. “I can do that. Ji-Hoon’s not the first high-ranking man who thinks he can get whatever he wants.”

Cecilia, watching from the screen, spoke up. “If we’re doing this, we do it right. Alicia, you’ll need to blend in perfectly with the staff. We’ll need to

arrange for you to be hired at the bar, make it look legitimate. Once you're in, you'll make sure Ji-Hoon notices you."

"One more thing," Cecilia's voice crackled through the video feed, her expression darkening. "Our sources indicate increased CIA activity in the region. They've been moving pieces into position - probably planning something big."

Dan exchanged a look with Serj. "Any idea what they're after?"

"Nothing concrete yet, but they're not here for the weather. Keep your eyes open. The last thing we need is the CIA interfering with the Ji-Hoon operation."

Serj leaned forward, his scarred hands clasped together. "They won't be expecting us. That gives us an advantage."

"Maybe," Cecilia replied, "but don't get cocky. The CIA plays dirty, and they've got resources we don't. Just... watch your backs out there."

The warning hung in the air as the briefing concluded, adding another layer of complexity to an already delicate mission.

A few days later, the plan was set into motion. Alicia, dressed in the typical uniform of the bar's female staff—a tight, black dress with a low neckline—walked through the dimly lit entrance of El Gato Rojo. The place was exactly as Serj and Dave had described: dark, seedy, and filled with off-duty Venezuelan officers who spoke in loud, drunken voices.

The air was thick with cigarette smoke and the scent of spilled rum. The bar itself was a long, wooden counter scarred with years of abuse, the shelves behind it stacked with cheap liquor. The staff moved quickly through the crowd, delivering drinks with forced smiles. Alicia fit in immediately.

She moved toward the back of the bar, collecting empty glasses from tables, but always keeping an eye on Ji-Hoon's booth. He hadn't noticed her yet, but she could feel his gaze moving across the room.

It didn't take long. As Alicia approached the corner of the bar, Ji-Hoon's eyes locked onto her. His expression shifted—interested, predatory. He leaned back in his booth, a smirk crossing his face as he watched her work.

When Alicia finally reached his table to collect his empty glass, Ji-Hoon's hand brushed lightly against hers. "New here?" he asked, his voice low and smooth.

Alicia smiled innocently, her voice soft. "Yes, just started today."

Ji-Hoon's eyes lingered on her longer than they should have, his interest clear. "Well then, I hope you'll be staying. It's not often we get new faces here."

Alicia's heart raced, but her smile never faltered. This was it. The hook was set.

For the next few days, Ji-Hoon became a regular fixture at El Gato Rojo, his presence becoming even more frequent than usual. Alicia had played her part perfectly—each night she worked, Ji-Hoon's attention was glued to her. His pursuit of her became relentless. He broke his usual routines, arriving at the bar on nights when he normally wouldn't, all in the hopes of catching Alicia's eye. The female staff whispered amongst themselves, knowing what was happening but powerless to stop it. Ji-Hoon, with his status, was above reproach.

Alicia had him right where she needed him. She played the innocent, charming him with shy smiles and soft conversation. Every brush of her hand across his arm or lingering look added fuel to the fire. But now, the time had come to push the plan to the next stage—she needed to get into his quarters.

On the fourth night, Ji-Hoon had been drinking heavily. He made his play, his eyes fixed on Alicia as he leaned across the table, his speech slightly slurred but his intent unmistakable. “Why don’t we go somewhere more... private?”

Alicia gave a demure smile, lowering her eyes as if embarrassed. “I would, General, but... I don’t have a room here. I’m still new.” She hesitated, letting the moment linger. “And I live with my family—many people in a very small house. No privacy.”

Ji-Hoon smirked, his eyes gleaming with opportunity. He was too far gone to question anything. “Then come with me. We’ll go to my quarters. No one will bother us there.”

Alicia hesitated for a moment longer, playing her role perfectly, then nodded, casting a shy glance toward him. “If you insist.”

What Ji-Hoon didn’t know was that Alicia had already prepared the ground. She had subtly ensured that his drinks were a little stronger than usual, spiked with something to ensure that tonight, Ji-Hoon would not be at his sharpest. He was more intoxicated than he realised.

They left the bar together, Ji-Hoon’s hand resting possessively on the small of Alicia’s back as they slipped into the night. The streets were quiet as they moved toward Ji-Hoon’s quarters, the few remaining lights flickering as they passed. The journey was a blur for Ji-Hoon, his steps unsteady, his senses dulled by the alcohol and the drug working its way through his bloodstream.

When they arrived at his quarters, Alicia played her part flawlessly. As soon as they entered, Ji-Hoon fumbled at her, clumsy and desperate. His fingers, usually precise and calculating, were now slow and uncertain as he tried to remove his jacket, then hers. Alicia gently but firmly guided him toward the bed, whispering soft reassurances as he collapsed onto it.

“Just relax, General,” she cooed, stroking his arm as his eyelids began to droop.

Ji-Hoon blinked, his eyes struggling to stay open, but the sedative Alicia had slipped into his drink was taking full effect. His limbs felt heavy, his head spinning, and soon enough, he fell back onto the bed, his breathing slowing as he slipped into unconsciousness.

Alicia waited a moment longer, making sure he was completely out before moving. The drugs had worked, and Ji-Hoon was out cold.

Now, the real work began.

Alicia stood up, her entire demeanour shifting as she moved from the seduction to the mission. She scanned the room quickly, her eyes sharp, taking in every detail. The quarters were typical of someone of Ji-Hoon’s rank—sterile, organised, with military precision. A desk sat against the far wall, papers stacked neatly, but Alicia knew better than to assume everything she needed was in plain sight.

She moved silently, her hands deftly rifling through the papers on the desk. They were mostly routine military documents, nothing of the sensitive nature she was after. She opened drawers, checking for hidden compartments, but it wasn’t until she reached for his briefcase, tucked under the desk, that she found what she was looking for.

Inside were classified documents, stamped with the Venezuelan military seal, but Alicia’s trained eye quickly spotted inconsistencies. Some of these were reports related to military coordination with North Korea, and others were internal communications about Venezuelan political figures. This was the material she needed.

She took her time, photographing everything with a small camera hidden in her bracelet. These files would serve as the base for the forgeries Anya would create. The digital seeds were already being sown, but now they

needed to mirror the historical paper trail that would incriminate Ji-Hoon in a plot to overthrow the Venezuelan presidential team.

Alicia continued her search, methodical and precise. She found enough material to create the narrative they wanted, even took blank paper from his own stock. Once they had forged the right documents, the Venezuelan government would believe Ji-Hoon had been working to install North Korean puppets in their government for months.

With the files secured, Alicia placed everything back exactly as she'd found it. She glanced at Ji-Hoon, still sprawled on the bed, his breathing deep and steady. He wouldn't wake for hours.

In the early morning hours, the sun had barely begun to creep over the horizon when Alicia quietly slipped out of Ji-Hoon's quarters. She had been careful, making sure every detail was in place before she left. The room was a mess, staged to look like a struggle had taken place—pillows on the floor, sheets torn from the bed, a chair overturned. It wasn't overdone, just enough to imply that something had gone wrong in the night. It would help prevent Ji-Hoon from questioning anything when he woke up, groggy and disoriented from the drugs.

As Alicia walked through the quiet streets back to the bar, her mind was focused on the next steps. She knew she had to make an impression when she returned—something that would solidify her exit from Ji-Hoon's life and prevent him from pursuing her any further. She'd already set the stage, but now she had to sell it.

Once she reached the bathroom at the bar, she quickly pulled out her makeup kit. With a practised hand, she created the illusion of a split lip and dark bruising around her eye. The effect was convincing—painfully so. She looked like a woman who had been through a violent struggle. It was enough to make anyone believe that she had suffered abuse at Ji-Hoon's hands.

When she emerged from the bathroom, a few of the other staff were already beginning their day. One of the older waitresses, María, gasped when she saw Alicia's face.

"Dios mío, what happened to you?" María asked, rushing over.

Alicia touched her fake bruises gingerly, her voice quiet and strained. "I can't stay here any more, María. It's... it's too dangerous. I need to leave."

María's eyes widened with understanding, and a few of the other waitresses who had seen Alicia leaving with Ji-Hoon the night before exchanged knowing glances. They had long suspected what kind of man Ji-Hoon was, and now, with Alicia's battered appearance, their suspicions were confirmed.

"Was it... him?" María asked in a whisper, though she already knew the answer.

Alicia nodded, her eyes welling with fake tears. "I tried to fight him off, but... I can't stay here."

Word spread quickly among the staff, and before long, the bar's manager, a grizzled man who didn't tolerate trouble, came to speak with Alicia. When he saw her face, there was no questioning her decision to leave.

"I'm sorry," Alicia said, keeping her voice low and shaken. "But I can't work here any more. I need to go."

The manager nodded solemnly. "No one's going to stop you. Go. Be safe." He even forced her to take more money than she had earned. "To help you recover," he said.

With that, Alicia gathered her things and quietly left the bar. The whispers among the staff would ensure that the story spread. By the time Ji-Hoon tried to piece together what had happened, the tale of his "violent encounter" with Alicia would have already reached everyone who mattered. He wouldn't be able to pursue her without raising suspicion, and

with the way his reputation would suffer if the rumours persisted, he would be forced to let it go.

Back at the safe house, Alicia arrived looking as if she had been through a war zone. Dan, Serj, and Dave were waiting for her, tense and ready to move on the next phase. As soon as Alicia stepped in, Anya glanced up from her computer, her eyes widening slightly at the sight of the bruises.

“You okay?” Anya asked, already knowing the answer but unable to suppress her concern.

Alicia smiled slightly, wiping away the makeup from her face. “Just part of the job. Ji-Hoon’s going to wake up thinking there was a fight, and by the time he realises what happened, he’ll have no way to track me down. The staff at the bar will handle the rest.”

Serj nodded, satisfied. “Good. Now we focus on the forgeries.”

Anya immediately got to work. The documents Alicia had photographed in Ji-Hoon’s quarters were already in their possession, and now they needed to weave them into a damning narrative that would ensure Ji-Hoon’s downfall. Anya’s fingers moved deftly across her keyboard, creating the digital trail that would lead investigators to believe Ji-Hoon had been orchestrating a secret coup, aligning with North Korea to replace the Venezuelan presidential team with puppet leaders loyal to Pyongyang.

Meanwhile, Serj and Dave worked on the physical forgeries. Using the stolen paperwork as a base, they replicated memos, reports, and communications that hinted at Ji-Hoon’s involvement in a deep conspiracy. The language was carefully crafted, subtle enough to avoid suspicion but direct enough to plant seeds of doubt.

As the hours passed, the false paper trail began to take shape. Once they planted the documents back in Ji-Hoon’s possession, they would be discovered by the right people, at the right time. And when that happened,

Ji-Hoon would be finished—caught red-handed in a betrayal of both Venezuela and his North Korean allies.

Dan surveyed the team's work, his expression serious but calm. "We'll make sure this is flawless. Once these forgeries are in place, Ji-Hoon won't have a chance to explain himself."

Alicia, now fully recovered from her role at the bar, nodded. "He won't see it coming. And by the time he does, it'll be too late."

The team moved methodically, knowing that the next step was the most critical. Soon, Ji-Hoon would find himself trapped in a web of lies, and the North Korean-Venezuelan alliance would crumble. It was only a matter of time.

23 The Switch

Alicia's part in the operation had gone flawlessly—perhaps too well. The story of her “fight” with Ji-Hoon had spread through the bar, and the rumours had reached the right people, making sure Ji-Hoon wouldn't dare pursue her. But there was an unforeseen consequence: Ji-Hoon had retreated into a more cautious routine. He was now laying low, rarely leaving his quarters at night. The team had counted on him keeping his usual evening habits, which would have given them an opening to plant the forged documents. Now, they would have to adapt.

At the safe house, the team gathered around the table once more. The mood was tense as they grappled with this unexpected development.

“Ji-Hoon's staying in his quarters most nights now,” Alicia explained, her brow furrowed in frustration. “He's more paranoid than we expected. I guess after what happened, he's afraid to show his face too much.”

Dan nodded, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “This complicates things. We can't just wait for him to leave at night, because it looks like he won't. That means we'll have to plant the documents during the day.”

Serj, ever pragmatic, crossed his arms. “Daytime is risky. He's not the only one who will be around. Security will be tighter, and there will be more foot traffic in the building. How do we slip in and out without raising alarms?”

Anya, seated at her computer, was already thinking ahead. “We need a distraction. Something that will pull the focus away from Ji-Hoon's quarters for long enough to give you time to get in and place the forged documents. It doesn't have to be a big distraction, but it needs to be enough to draw attention away from that area.”

Omar chimed in, his voice calm but determined. “We could create a fake emergency—something minor but important enough to warrant a security

shift. A power outage in another part of the building, a small fire, or even a medical incident. If we can trigger an alert in the right place, it'll pull the guards and staff away from his quarters long enough for us to make the switch."

Dave, leaning over the map of the compound, nodded. "It could work. If we can create a disruption during a specific window, we'll have enough time to slip in, plant the papers, and get out before anyone realises what's happening. The key is timing."

Serj's eyes narrowed as he considered the logistics. "We'll need precision. Whoever plants the documents can't afford to be seen lingering in the area, not with the heightened security. We also can't just walk in under normal circumstances—someone needs to have access."

Anya glanced up, her eyes calculating. "I can hack into the building's systems and cause a temporary glitch in their surveillance feeds. It won't last long, but it'll give you a window of a few minutes where the cameras go dark. If we coordinate that with the distraction, you should be able to move in undetected."

The team gathered around the table at the safe house, each member reviewing the surveillance footage of the building where Ji-Hoon was staying. It had been a challenge to find a way into his quarters during the day, but after hours of watching the footage, they had finally found a crack in the routine: a cleaner who visited Ji-Hoon's quarters regularly. She was thorough, and most importantly, she had unrestricted access.

Dan pointed at the screen where the cleaner, an older woman named Marta, could be seen entering Ji-Hoon's quarters. "This is our way in. Marta's there like clockwork, cleaning the quarters of most of the staff. We can't replace her—she's too familiar to everyone there. But what if we get her out while she's in Ji-Hoon's quarters?"

Serj leaned forward, studying the footage. “We need her to leave in a hurry. If we can draw her out while she’s cleaning, maybe we can slip someone inside.”

Anya, sitting at her laptop, scrolled through Marta’s background details. “Her son, Luis, works in maintenance. He’s assigned to the same accommodations as she is. That’s something we can work with.”

Dave frowned, his mind racing. “You’re thinking we create an emergency that pulls her out? Something that makes her rush off without thinking about locking up?”

Anya nodded. “Exactly. If we cause a disturbance—a small explosion in the maintenance area—it would be believable that her son could have been injured. If she hears about that, she’ll rush out to cheque on him, leaving the door to Ji-Hoon’s quarters unlocked in her hurry.”

Dan looked at the team, already piecing the plan together. “We’ll time it so that when she’s inside Ji-Hoon’s quarters, the explosion happens. Someone can be nearby, shouting that her son has been hurt. She’ll drop everything and run. We slip in, plant the documents, and get out before anyone knows we were there.”

Serj cracked a smile. “It’s perfect. They’ll find the electrical damage, but no injuries. It’ll look like a minor accident, and by the time they piece together that nothing serious happened, we’ll be long gone.”

Omar nodded. “I can handle the explosion—small, controlled, but loud enough to make it believable. I’ll place it near the maintenance area, right where Luis would be working. When Marta hears, she’ll come running.”

Dave added, “We just need to make sure she doesn’t lock the door when she leaves Ji-Hoon’s quarters. We’ll need the cleaner’s cart or something similar to keep the door ajar.”

Anya smirked, already planning the timing of the explosion and the surveillance blackout she would trigger at the same moment. “I’ll take care

of the cameras. The feeds will glitch for a few minutes—just long enough for us to slip in and get the job done. No one will even realise the cameras were down until it's too late.”

Dan clapped his hands together, finalizing the plan. “Alright, here’s the breakdown: Omar, you’ll set up the explosion near the maintenance area, making it look like a minor electrical accident. We’ll have someone nearby to shout about Luis being hurt, to make sure Marta rushes out. Anya, you’ll handle the surveillance blackout and coordinate the timing. Serj and Dave, once Marta’s out, you’ll get into Ji-Hoon’s quarters and plant the forged documents. Quick and clean.”

Alicia, who had been quietly observing, gave a nod of approval. “It’s risky, but if we pull this off, Ji-Hoon will never know what hit him.”

Dan’s gaze swept across the team. “This is it. Once we plant the documents, Ji-Hoon will be caught in his own web. Let’s make it happen.”

Omar had always prided himself on his ability to slip through even the most tightly guarded areas without being seen. This mission would be no different. Dressed in dark, nondescript clothing, he moved silently through the maintenance corridors of the building, where the hum of machinery and the occasional hiss of steam created the perfect cover for his movements.

The maintenance area, where Marta’s son Luis worked, was tucked away in the lower levels of the compound. It wasn’t heavily guarded, as most considered it a routine part of the facility with little of interest to outside forces. But that didn’t mean it was unwatched. Armed guards patrolled the compound at regular intervals, their presence a constant reminder that this was still a high-security environment.

Omar had already scoped out the area for days, memorising the patrol routes, knowing exactly when each guard would pass through. He moved swiftly, sticking to the shadows as he navigated his way through the narrow

halls, always alert to the sound of footsteps approaching. He had chosen a time when the guards were more focused on their rounds near the upper levels, their attentions pulled away from maintenance.

As he approached the maintenance room, Omar's heart raced slightly, but his mind remained calm and focused. This part of the mission had to be executed flawlessly. Any mistake would not only jeopardise the entire operation but also risk their cover being blown.

The maintenance area itself was dimly lit, with pipes running along the ceiling and walls, hissing occasionally as they released pressure. The faint glow of the emergency lights cast long shadows across the floor, perfect for someone like Omar, who thrived in environments like this. He crouched low as he reached the door to the room where Luis worked, checking his surroundings one last time before making his move.

Omar reached into his pack and pulled out a small device, a timed explosive designed to create a controlled electrical burst. It wasn't powerful enough to cause real damage, but it would send a convincing burst of sparks and a loud bang—enough to make anyone in the vicinity believe something had gone wrong. He carefully placed the device in a junction box, where the electrical lines fed into the building. It was the perfect spot—when the explosion triggered, it would cause a minor disruption but leave no lasting harm.

The device was sleek and compact, with a small timer attached. Omar set it for just the right delay, allowing him enough time to get into position while making sure the explosion went off while Marta was in Ji-Hoon's quarters. With practised precision, he armed the device and silently backed away, blending once again into the shadows of the maintenance area.

He slipped back through the corridors, moving just as carefully as before. The guards were nearby, but they hadn't spotted him. Omar waited, crouched in the shadows as he listened to the sound of their footsteps fade into the distance. He had timed everything perfectly—he always did.

Once in position, Omar remained out of sight but close enough to the maintenance area that he could act the moment the explosion occurred. He knew the device would produce a believable flash and a cloud of smoke, creating the illusion of an electrical malfunction. The moment it went off, the maintenance team—and more importantly, Marta—would hear the commotion.

As the seconds ticked by, Omar's pulse steadied, and then, the moment came. The device triggered, and a loud bang echoed through the halls, followed by a brief flash of light and the crackling of electrical wires. A plume of smoke began to drift out of the maintenance room, just as Omar had planned.

Immediately, voices rose in alarm. A few of the maintenance staff rushed toward the site of the explosion, and Omar could hear shouts of “Luis! Luis has been hurt!” as guards and workers scrambled to assess the situation.

Marta, who had been quietly cleaning Ji-Hoon's quarters just as planned, heard the commotion and panicked. Omar watched from his hidden position as she emerged into the hallway, her face pale with fear, rushing toward the maintenance area where her son worked. The door to Ji-Hoon's quarters was left slightly ajar in her hurry to reach Luis.

As the chaos unfolded around him, Omar smiled to himself. The distraction had worked perfectly, and now, Serj and Dave would have the window they needed to slip inside Ji-Hoon's quarters unnoticed.

Omar remained out of sight, his part in the mission complete, but he stayed close just in case something went wrong. He would be their eyes and ears, ensuring that no one doubled back toward Ji-Hoon's quarters before the documents were in place. The fake explosion would be investigated, but no one had been injured, and unless you knew what you were looking for, the debris would look like a regular electrical fault. By then the team would already be long gone.

In the dim light of the maintenance halls, Omar quietly exhaled, knowing that this small act of sabotage had set the stage for the rest of the operation to succeed.

Marta was inside Ji-Hoon's quarters, just as expected, cleaning while Ji-Hoon was away at a meeting. Omar triggered the explosion—a controlled burst that sent sparks and a loud bang echoing through the building. Smoke filled the air in the maintenance area, and nearby staff immediately looked concerned.

A guard rushed toward the explosion, shouting, "Luis! Luis has been injured!"

The moment Marta heard the shout, her face paled, and she dropped her cleaning supplies. Without even thinking to lock the door, she ran down the hallway, desperate to find her son. The door to Ji-Hoon's quarters swung slightly ajar as she fled.

Anya's voice crackled in their earpieces. "You're clear. Cameras are down for the next three minutes."

As Serj and Dave slipped into Ji-Hoon's quarters, they were immediately struck by the impeccable order of the room. It was a small but efficient space, a reflection of the Colonel's disciplined, intelligence mind. Everything inside had a place and a purpose, with no excess clutter or personal touches to soften the stark, utilitarian design.

The walls were painted a dull grey, with little decoration except for a few framed commendations and photographs of Ji-Hoon with high-ranking Venezuelan officials. The floor was polished, reflecting the dim light from a single overhead lamp. Even the air felt sterile, as though the room hadn't been touched by anything remotely personal or emotional in years.

To the right, a narrow bed stood neatly made, the sheets perfectly creased as if ironed to precision. A plain metal chair sat beside the bed, and a

military-issue night-stand held nothing but a basic alarm clock and a single pen. The austerity of the room was almost suffocating.

At the centre of the room, dominating the space, was Ji-Hoon's desk—a large, dark wood piece that looked out of place in such a Spartan setting. It was meticulously organised, with every item aligned with precision. A stack of official documents lay in the middle, the papers filed in crisp folders with colour-coded tabs. Beside them sat an expensive-looking leather-bound notebook, its cover unmarked but clearly worn from frequent use. Each pen, ruler, and paperweight was positioned just so, as if placed according to an invisible grid.

Serj moved toward the desk, his eyes scanning the neat piles of paperwork. He noted that everything had been categorised—Venezuelan military reports were filed on the left, logistical documents in the centre, and what appeared to be personal correspondences were on the far right. Each folder was labelled with Ji-Hoon's precise handwriting, the ink dark and bold, and each tab colour matched its contents—red for urgent matters, green for long-term planning, and blue for routine updates.

Behind the desk was a tall, steel filing cabinet with polished handles. The drawers were locked, but Serj knew they wouldn't need to touch them. The documents they sought to place shouldn't be hidden away; Ji-Hoon was far too meticulous for that. The Colonel liked to have everything accessible and at his fingertips, ready to be reviewed at a moment's notice.

There was a single bookshelf on the left, but it held little beyond military manuals and strategic texts. The few books there had been arranged in perfect rows, their spines aligned flawlessly. Each book looked as though it had been placed for display rather than for actual reading.

Serj and Dave moved swiftly, their footsteps silent on the polished floor. Serj placed the forged documents with care, slipping them into the middle of the stack on the desk. The false reports, memos, and incriminating evidence blended seamlessly into Ji-Hoon's existing files. They were made

to appear like routine documents—nothing out of place, but damning enough to set the trap when discovered.

Dave glanced around the room one last time, noting the cold, calculated nature of the quarters. It felt more like a command centre than a living space. There were no signs of personal life, no photographs of family or friends. Just military decorum and the tools of Ji-Hoon's trade.

As they left, the door clicked softly behind them, the room as immaculate as they had found it. Ji-Hoon would return later, unaware that the carefully curated order of his world was about to collapse—thanks to the chaos Serj and Dave had quietly set in motion among his perfectly filed papers.

They made their way back through the building, and the fire alarm went off, drawing even more attention to the maintenance area. By the time the guards realised that no one had been injured, the team was already gone.

Back at the safe house, the team gathered once more, the tension finally beginning to lift. The forged documents were now in place, waiting to be discovered. Ji-Hoon had no idea that his downfall had been set in motion.

Dan looked around the room, a rare smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. "We did it. Now, we wait for the trap to spring."

Serj leaned back, satisfied. "When they find those documents, Ji-Hoon will be finished."

Alicia nodded, her expression cool and confident. "And when they do, the North Korean alliance with Venezuela will crumble. Mission accomplished."

24 Sidetracked

The CIA, always operating in the shadows with their own agenda, threw an unexpected curveball into the team's carefully laid plans. Just as they were poised to finalise the operation against Ji-Hoon and expose the North Korean influence in Venezuela, a sudden surge in suspicious activity from the CIA caught the agency's attention.

Dan received the intel first. Sitting at the safe house, his phone buzzed with a priority alert from one of their local informants. His brow furrowed as he scanned the message.

"We've got a problem," he said aloud, drawing the attention of Serj, Dave, Alicia and Anya, who were all preparing for the next step in the Ji-Hoon operation.

"What is it?" Anya asked, glancing up from her laptop.

Dan's eyes narrowed. "It's the CIA. They've been quietly operating in the area for a while, but this is something else. There's chatter about a high-level operation involving dissidents in Venezuela, and they're planning something big."

Serj, always calm under pressure, crossed his arms. "What kind of operation?"

Dan hesitated, but then laid it out. "It looks like they're ramping up to sabotage key oil infrastructure—possibly even aiming to cripple it entirely. They're using the dissidents as proxies, like they always do, but if they pull it off, it'll destabilise the region completely."

Omar, who had been listening quietly, finally spoke up. "If the oil infrastructure goes down, Venezuela will plunge into chaos. We're talking about economic collapse, riots, and a complete breakdown of control. The government might not survive it, but it will be the people that suffer."

Dave glanced at Dan, concern growing. “And North Korea? How does this affect our current mission?”

Dan rubbed his temples. “That’s the problem. If the CIA pulls this off, it’ll create a situation so dire that the North Korean exposure will get buried under the fallout. We won’t be able to use Ji-Hoon’s downfall to sever ties between North Korea and Venezuela. It’ll all be irrelevant if the country’s in flames.”

Anya’s fingers tapped nervously on the table. “We can’t afford to lose this opportunity. But if the CIA’s aiming for a full-scale destabilization, we have to act. We can’t let them tip Venezuela into a crisis. It’ll draw global attention, and everything we’ve worked for will be lost.”

Dan nodded, his mind racing. “We need to stop this. The CIA’s playing dirty, and they’re planning to use the dissidents to do their work. They’ll sabotage the oil fields and let the blame fall on the opposition forces, framing it as an internal collapse. It’s a classic move, and we’ve seen it before.”

Serj looked at the map on the wall, his eyes scanning the major oil pipelines and refineries scattered across the region. “Where do we start? Do we have intel on where they’ll strike?”

Anya quickly pulled up her data feeds, her fingers flying across the keyboard. “Give me a second. I’ve been monitoring CIA comms for a while now... There.” She pointed at the screen. “They’re focusing on two major oil facilities—one in the east, near El Tigre, and the other in the west, near Maracaibo. They’ll likely hit both within a short time span to create maximum disruption.”

Omar leaned in. “We can’t stop both, not with the resources we have. We’ll need to prioritise one and move fast. The CIA’s going to have local dissidents on the ground, and they’ll try to make it look like a coordinated attack from within.”

Dave shook his head. “We’ve come too far to let this unravel. If we stop the sabotage, we keep the North Korean angle in play. But how do we make sure the CIA doesn’t catch on to what we’re doing?”

Dan straightened, formulating the plan as he spoke. “We split into two teams. Serj, Omar and I, will head to the eastern facility. Disrupt whatever the CIA’s got planned. They’ll be using proxy groups, but you’ll need to neutralise them before they can carry out the attack.”

He turned to Dave and Anya. “The two of you will head west. Same deal—find the dissidents, stop them from getting anywhere near the facility. If we can sabotage their efforts before they can strike, we can keep the oil infrastructure intact and avoid a regional disaster.”

Anya frowned. “But won’t the CIA retaliate if they realise we’re involved?”

Dan nodded grimly. “They might. But we don’t have a choice. We can’t let this go forward. If the oil infrastructure goes down, it’ll bury Venezuela and overshadow everything else. We need to keep the focus on Ji-Hoon and North Korea. That’s our real objective.”

Dan stood, already prepping his gear. “We move now, then. The CIA won’t expect us to interfere, and if we’re quick, we can stop this before it gets out of hand.”

Omar joined Dan, checking his equipment. “We’ll handle it. The CIA won’t know what hit them.”

Dave, though tense, felt a familiar sense of purpose settling in. “Let’s make sure we stop them. We’ve worked too hard to lose it all now.”

Dan watched them go, knowing that this was a gamble, but a necessary one. If they could stop the CIA’s sabotage and maintain the stability of Venezuela’s oil infrastructure, they could still keep the focus on General Ji-Hoon and the North Korean influence. But if the CIA succeeded, everything they’d worked for could be lost in the ensuing chaos.

The race was on.

The team moved quickly, splitting into two groups as planned. The urgency of the situation weighed on them—knowing that the poorly armed dissidents were on their way to sabotage the oil facilities, unaware that they were walking into a potential massacre. If the team didn't intervene, not only would the dissidents be wiped out by the Venezuelan forces, but the chaos that followed would give the CIA exactly what they wanted: a destabilised Venezuela with a narrative perfectly set for further intervention.

Dan and Omar reached their position near the eastern facility first. Hidden among the rocks and dense foliage surrounding the site, they could see the group of dissidents approaching. They were ragtag and poorly equipped, carrying only small arms and makeshift explosives. There was no way they could effectively attack the facility, but if they tried, the Venezuelan military would be on them in moments.

Dan turned to Omar, his voice low and calm. "They don't stand a chance. If we let this happen, they'll be slaughtered."

Omar nodded. "We can't just take them out ourselves—that would make us no better than the CIA. We need to scare them off, make them retreat before they ever get near the facility."

Dan scanned the surroundings, formulating a plan. "We need to create confusion—make them think they're walking into a trap. If we can make it look like they're surrounded, they'll panic and fall back."

Omar quickly began setting up small explosive charges—non-lethal, but enough to create the illusion of a larger force in the area. Dan moved toward a higher vantage point, setting up a sniper position. Instead, he used a high-powered scope to track the dissidents and prepare to fire shots close enough to scare them but far enough to avoid any casualties.

As the operation unfolded, Dan positioned himself in a concealed spot with a clear line of sight on the dissidents. From his vantage point, he quickly identified the few among them who stood out—better equipped, wearing tactical vests, and clearly giving orders. These were the leaders, the ones keeping the group from falling apart, keeping their morale intact even as the alarms blared and the small explosions from Omar's charges echoed around them.

Dan took a deep breath, steadying his rifle. He didn't need to kill them—just take them out of the equation. His crosshairs locked onto the first dissident leader, a tall man who was barking orders, urging the others to push forward. Dan squeezed the trigger.

Crack.

The shot hit its mark, slamming into the man's chest plate. The impact of the subsonic round sent him stumbling backward, the wind knocked out of him as he collapsed to the ground. The ceramic plate in his vest had absorbed the bullet, but the sheer force had put him down hard. He gasped for breath, clutching his chest as his comrades rushed to help him, confusion and fear spreading through the group.

Dan didn't stop. He shifted his aim to another dissident, a shorter man who was clearly in charge of directing their movement. This one wore a similar tactical vest.

Crack.

The second dissident went down just as hard, his confidence shattered along with some of his ribs. The shot hadn't killed him, but he was out of the fight, gasping for air as his comrades began to falter.

With their leaders down, the morale of the remaining dissidents crumbled. They had already been unnerved by the alarms, the explosions, and the illusion of overwhelming force created by Serj and Omar. But now, seeing their best-equipped men fall one after another, they lost their nerve entirely.

Meanwhile, Dave and Anya had reached the western facility. Like their counterparts, they could see the dissidents moving toward the oil infrastructure, armed with little more than rifles and home-made explosives. Anya set up her equipment, ready to intercept any communications and trigger a distraction, while Dave crouched beside her, his heart pounding as he watched the group grow closer.

"They're too far in now. If the Venezuelan forces get here before we stop them, it'll be a bloodbath," Dave said, his voice filled with tension.

Anya tapped into the nearby security feeds, her eyes flickering across the screen. "I'm jamming their comms, but we need to make them think they're about to walk into a full-scale firefight. I can trigger a fake alert, something that'll make them think reinforcements are already on the way."

Dave nodded. "If we can make enough noise, we might be able to drive them off without a single shot fired."

Anya's fingers flew across her laptop keyboard as she tapped into the facility's security system. The alarms were her tool to create chaos, but it wouldn't be enough on its own. They needed the dissidents to believe they were under siege, outnumbered by a much larger force. That was where Dave came in.

"We need to break their spirits before they even think about reaching the facility," Anya said quietly, her eyes fixed on her screen. "I'll trigger the alarms. You're up next."

Dave nodded, his expression determined. "Once the alarms go off, I'll give them something to fear. If they think a whole unit is coming for them, they'll scatter."

With that, Anya hit the final command, and the blaring sound of alarms echoed across the facility and the surrounding jungle. The dissidents stopped in their tracks, confused and wary. They hadn't expected this level of preparedness, and their nerves were already fraying.

While Anya worked her magic with the facility's alarms and fake comms chatter, Dave sprinted into the treeline. His heart raced as he entered the dense jungle, his mind focused on the task at hand. He knew what he had to do: create the illusion of a massive force barreling down on the dissidents.

Back at the eastern facility, Dan's plan was already in motion. Omar detonated his first round of charges, sending a series of controlled explosions through the trees. The dissidents scattered, their nerves fraying as the sound of gunfire—Dan's non-lethal shots—cracked through the surrounding air.

"It's working," Omar muttered, watching as the group faltered. "They think they're surrounded."

With their leaders down, the morale of the remaining dissidents crumbled. They had already been unnerved by the alarms, the explosions, and the illusion of overwhelming force created by Serj and Omar. But now, seeing their best-equipped men fall one after another, they lost their nerve entirely.

Panic spread like wildfire through their ranks. Some of them shouted in confusion, others began to retreat in full, abandoning their weapons and gear as they fled into the jungle. The sight of their leaders incapacitated, had a profound psychological effect—if their best men couldn't withstand the attack, what chance did they have?

Dan lowered his rifle, satisfied with the results. The dissidents were broken, retreating into the jungle as fast as they could. No one had died, but the message had been sent: they were outmatched and outmanoeuvred.

Serj, watching from his own position, gave a rare smile of approval. "Nice work, Dan. Took out their spirit without taking any lives."

Omar, packing up his equipment, nodded in agreement. "Once the leaders went down, the rest scattered like roaches. Mission accomplished."

The team regrouped as the dissidents fled, their confidence shattered. The oil facilities were safe, the Venezuelan forces would find nothing but an empty jungle, and the team had managed to stop a massacre before it could begin. Dan's precision had been the final nail in the dissidents' resolve, ensuring they wouldn't be back anytime soon.

As Dave charged through the dense jungle, his first instinct was to slam his shoulder into the trees, using his momentum to force them down. He braced his feet firmly, digging them into the soft earth to maximise his leverage, but the thicker trunks with huge root structures resisted more than he anticipated. Each tree required an immense amount of force, and was slow work. While Dave's strength was formidable, he realised that simply shoving the trees wasn't the most effective approach – not enough mass, not enough velocity.

After a few attempts, Dave paused for a moment, thinking back to how he had dealt with heavy objects before. It hit him—he needed more control over where the tree would fall. Just smashing into the trunks wasn't enough. Instead, he wrapped his arms around one of the trees in front of him, his muscles straining as he enveloped the thick trunk in a powerful bear hug.

The change in technique made all the difference. With his arms gripping the tree firmly, Dave was able to focus his strength into a more concentrated effort. He squeezed with everything he had, feeling the wood crack and splinter under the pressure of his grip. The bark groaned as the trunk began to give way. Bracing his legs, he shifted his weight and forced the tree to tip in the direction he wanted.

With a final, mighty push, the trunk snapped with a loud crack, sending the tree crashing down exactly where Dave intended. The ground shook as the tree hit the forest floor, sending a shock wave of sound rippling through the jungle.

Dave grinned to himself, realising this method was far more effective. He moved from tree to tree, each time wrapping his arms around the trunks, feeling the rough bark bite into his skin as he exerted his enormous strength. His muscles bulged as he crushed the trunks, snapping them like oversized branches. With each bear hug, he directed the trees to fall in the path of the dissidents, making them believe that an entire unit was pushing toward them.

The sound of splintering wood and crashing trees grew louder with each toppled trunk, and the dissidents' panic escalated. They couldn't see what was causing the chaos, but the noise and destruction were enough to send them into full retreat. Dave's methodical destruction of the jungle created the illusion of an unstoppable force crashing through the forest, sending the dissidents scattering in fear.

Each tree that fell was a testament to Dave's raw power, and as the final tree hit the ground with a thunderous crash, he knew he had done enough.

From the dissidents' point of view, it sounded like an entire platoon was tearing through the jungle toward them.

"They're coming!" one of the dissidents yelled, panic creeping into his voice. "We're outnumbered! Fall back!"

Anya smiled slightly. "Let's give them a little more encouragement." She triggered another round of alarms, mimicking radio chatter that made it sound as though Venezuelan forces were closing in from all sides.

"They're everywhere!" another voice cried. "We have to run!"

One by one, the dissidents turned and fled, abandoning their mission as the chaos overwhelmed them. The alarms continued to blare, and the crashing sounds of the trees fed into their panic. They had come expecting to sabotage a vulnerable oil facility, but instead, they found themselves fleeing from what they believed was an overwhelming force.

Dave paused for a moment, catching his breath. The dissidents were scattering into the jungle, too afraid to continue their assault. It had worked. The combination of Anya's tech skills and Dave's brute force had broken their spirits without a single shot being fired.

He returned to the treeline, where Anya was still at her laptop, monitoring the situation. She glanced up at him with a small smile. "Looks like they bought it."

Dave nodded, wiping the sweat from his brow. "They're gone. Whatever they had planned, it's over."

As the alarms finally silenced, Dave and Anya knew the mission had been a success. The dissidents had been stopped in their tracks, and the oil facility remained untouched. The Venezuelan forces would soon sweep the area, but by then, the dissidents would be long gone, their morale shattered.

An hour later, the two teams regrouped at a safe location. Both sites had been secured, and the dissidents were long gone, retreating without ever knowing just how close they had come to disaster.

Dan, monitoring the situation from the safe house, called in over the radio. "Good work, everyone. The Venezuelan forces are sweeping the area now, but they'll only find an empty jungle. The dissidents are gone, and the oil facilities are intact. The CIA's plans are ruined—for now."

Dave exhaled, leaning back against a tree. "We stopped them without a single casualty. But how long do you think before the CIA tries again?"

Dan's voice was steady, but there was an edge to it. "They'll try again soon enough. But for now, we focus on the task at hand. Ji-Hoon and the North Koreans are still our primary target. Let's get back to it while we have the chance."

The team agreed, their mission temporarily back on track. The CIA's plan to destabilise Venezuela had been thwarted, but it was only a matter of time before they tried something else.

25 Check Mate

To trigger the Venezuelan forces to investigate Ji-Hoon, they needed to create an incident so severe that even his diplomatic status wouldn't protect him. The answer lay in leveraging their local ally, Ruiz, who held considerable sway within the Venezuelan military. His reputation and connections made him the perfect catalyst for this operation.

At the safe house, Dan, Serj, Dave, Alicia, and Anya gathered to discuss how they could use Ruiz to spark the investigation.

"We need something that makes Ji-Hoon look like an imminent threat," Dan began, pacing as he spoke. "If we can make it seem like he's actively working against the Venezuelan government, the military will be forced to act, diplomatic status or not."

Serj nodded. "Ruiz can light the match. He's close enough to the Minister of Defence and the president to push the right buttons. If he suggests Ji-Hoon is conspiring with outside forces, the military will have no choice but to investigate."

Anya, always quick with her analysis, added, "We have the forged documents ready, showing Ji-Hoon's plan to overthrow the presidential team. If we can link that with a false 'tip-off' from Ruiz about an imminent coup attempt, it'll be impossible for the Venezuelans to ignore."

Dan rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "We need to make it look like Ji-Hoon's been compromised, like something he's done recently has raised alarms. Something concrete enough to make them believe the coup is real."

Omar leaned in, his voice low and practical. "What if we stage a meeting? We have Ji-Hoon appear to be in secret communication with North Korean agents, and Ruiz can 'happen' to overhear enough to report it. A secret rendezvous that triggers suspicion."

Serj nodded. “Ruiz could claim he caught wind of an impending transfer of sensitive military information. If it looks like Ji-Hoon’s making moves behind the government’s back, it’ll be enough to justify a search of his quarters.”

Anya chimed in, “I can fake a series of digital communications between Ji-Hoon and supposed North Korean contacts. We plant them in the system, backdate them, and then Ruiz brings them up as a security threat. They’ll see it as a betrayal, and the military will have no choice but to act.”

Dave, always ready to execute, added, “We make it so Ruiz is the hero here. He’s the one who uncovers the plot and brings it to the military’s attention. Once the investigation starts, Ji-Hoon won’t know what hit him.”

Dan finalised the plan. “Alright. We’ll stage a false tip-off from Ruiz, make it seem like he discovered Ji-Hoon communicating with North Korean operatives, and tie it to the forged documents. Ruiz will present this to the military leadership, and they’ll be forced to search Ji-Hoon’s quarters. Once they find the documents, Ji-Hoon is finished.”

The team knew they were playing a dangerous game, but with Ruiz as their inside man, the plan was almost foolproof. Once the investigation was triggered, Ji-Hoon’s diplomatic immunity would be meaningless. His treachery would be exposed, and the North Korean alliance with Venezuela would crumble.

Ruiz stood in the safe house with the team, the tension palpable as Anya explained the next stage of the plan. She sat at her laptop, displaying a series of carefully crafted emails and documents on the screen, each one designed to paint Ji-Hoon as the mastermind behind a North Korean plot to destabilise the Venezuelan government.

“These are the emails we’ve planted,” Anya explained, scrolling through a list of forged communications between Ji-Hoon and supposed North Korean contacts. “They’ve been backdated and integrated into the system. If anyone were to investigate, they would see this as legitimate

correspondence. All you need to do is present this to the Minister of Defence, along with the ‘evidence’ we’ve planted in Ji-Hoon’s quarters. It’ll be enough to force an investigation.”

Ruiz nodded, his expression serious. He had been briefed on the plan, but seeing the fabricated evidence laid out so convincingly made it feel more real. The weight of what they were about to do hit him fully, but he knew this was the best way to sever the dangerous ties between Venezuela and North Korea. He was the key to making the final move.

“I’ll take this directly to the Minister,” Ruiz said, his voice firm. “Once he sees this, there’s no way he won’t act.”

Dan stepped forward, placing a reassuring hand on Ruiz’s shoulder. “Just make sure he understands the severity. Ji-Hoon is a threat to the government, and this evidence proves it.”

The following morning, Ruiz made his approach to the Minister of Defence. Armed with the forged documents and emails, he presented everything as if it were an urgent matter of national security. The Minister, a no-nonsense military man, sat behind his desk, his brow furrowed as he listened to Ruiz lay out the damning evidence.

Ruiz showed him the email threads, detailing Ji-Hoon’s alleged secret communications with North Korean operatives. The Minister’s face darkened with every word Ruiz spoke. By the time Ruiz finished presenting the forged documents, the Minister was visibly enraged.

“This is outrageous!” the Minister spat, slamming his fist onto the desk. “We trusted this man—this snake! And all along, he was plotting behind our backs!”

Ruiz nodded gravely. “Yes, Minister. The evidence is clear. He’s been working to destabilise our government and replace the leadership with North Korean puppets. If we don’t act now, it might be too late.”

The Minister's eyes blazed with fury. "We will act," he said, his voice cold and sharp. "This level of treachery cannot be tolerated. I'm taking this directly to the president."

Later that afternoon, the Minister stormed into the presidential office, documents in hand. The president looked up from his desk, startled by the sudden intrusion, but his expression quickly turned to one of shock as the Minister presented the evidence.

"These are emails, direct communications between Ji-Hoon and North Korean agents," the Minister explained, his voice filled with anger. "He's been plotting to overthrow our government. This entire alliance was a front—a lie."

The president's face paled as he flipped through the papers. He had always believed the North Korean alliance was genuine, something that benefited both nations. But as he followed the thread of evidence, his disbelief grew.

"This can't be..." the president muttered, shaking his head. "We trusted them. We trusted him."

The Minister slammed his fist on the desk again. "He's betrayed us, Señor Presidente. We must act immediately. I recommend a full search of his quarters. If he has more evidence of his treachery, we need to find it now."

The president, still reeling from the shock, nodded. "Do it. Order the search. We need to know the full extent of this treachery."

That evening, a full military team was dispatched to Ji-Hoon's quarters. His diplomatic status was no longer a shield, not with the president's direct orders to search the premises. As the soldiers rifled through his belongings, they quickly found the forged documents Anya and the team had planted—communications and reports that tied Ji-Hoon directly to the plot against the Venezuelan government. It was undeniable proof of his treachery.

When word reached the president, he was furious. “This is irrefutable,” he said, pacing back and forth in his office. “He’s been playing us all along. And now he’s missing. The coward knew we’d find him out.”

The absence of Ji-Hoon only fuelled the belief that he was guilty. With him in hiding, there was no one to defend against the accusations, making the narrative all the more compelling. The president, with no hesitation, made his decision.

“Cut all ties with North Korea,” the president ordered. “Close the embassy, expel all their diplomats and military personnel. From this moment forward, we will have no further dealings with them. They cannot be trusted.”

The Minister saluted, already moving to carry out the orders. Within hours, the North Korean embassy was shut down, its staff and military advisors exiled from the country. The political ramifications were swift and severe—Venezuela had severed all ties with North Korea, and Ji-Hoon’s betrayal had been fully exposed.

The trap had worked perfectly. Ji-Hoon, now missing, was the perfect scapegoat. The North Korean alliance, once thought solid, was shattered beyond repair.

Earlier as the sun began to set, casting long shadows across the compound, Serj and Alicia made their way silently through the streets toward Ji-Hoon’s quarters. The tension between them obvious—this mission was critical. Ji-Hoon needed to disappear without a trace, and if they pulled it off, the entire operation would fall perfectly into place. The forged documents had been found, the Venezuelans were in a frenzy, and now it was time to make Ji-Hoon vanish.

Serj’s imposing figure was a stark contrast to Alicia’s more subtle presence, but they moved with the same deadly focus. Alicia, who had

been the one to lure Ji-Hoon into his current predicament, knew exactly how to handle this. She had already humiliated him once, but now they would finish the job.

They reached Ji-Hoon's quarters just as dusk settled, casting the building in dim light. Alicia knocked on the door, her heart pounding but her expression calm, masking the storm that was about to unfold. They didn't have long—the Venezuelan forces were likely to begin closing in soon. But Ji-Hoon wouldn't be expecting this. Not now.

The door creaked open slowly, and there stood Ji-Hoon, his face paling as he locked eyes with Alicia. For a moment, he seemed frozen, his eyes widening in disbelief.

“You!?” Ji-Hoon rasped, his voice filled with shock.

His hand immediately moved to his side arm. But before he could make a sound, Alicia was already in motion. She moved swiftly, striking him directly in the throat with the edge of her hand, hitting his vocal cords with precision. The force of the blow silenced him instantly, his attempt to scream reduced to a pained, wheezing gasp.

Serj, always a step ahead, forced his way into the room behind her, moving with practised ease. Ji-Hoon, still clutching his throat, stumbled further back, his eyes wide with terror as he realised what was happening. Before he could even think of defending himself, Serj was on him, a powerful arm locking around his neck in a choke-hold. Ji-Hoon struggled weakly, but it was futile. Serj had done this too many times to count.

Within moments, Ji-Hoon's resistance faltered, his body going limp as Serj effortlessly incapacitated him. Alicia moved quickly, securing the door to ensure no one had heard the brief struggle.

“Got him,” Serj grunted as he slung Ji-Hoon's unconscious form over his shoulder like a rag doll.

Alicia nodded, her eyes scanning the room for any last-minute details. Everything had to look clean—no sign of a struggle, no sign that Ji-Hoon had been taken. The Venezuelan military needed to believe that Ji-Hoon had fled in the face of his exposure. His disappearance would cement the lie they had built around him, proving his guilt beyond question.

With Ji-Hoon securely over Serj's shoulder, they moved quickly, slipping out of the building and into the darkening streets. The night was their ally, cloaking them as they whisked Ji-Hoon away, unseen and unheard. Every step they took was precise, avoiding patrols and slipping through the quieter parts of the compound.

The plan had gone off without a hitch. Ji-Hoon was now their prisoner, and soon, he would be nothing more than a shadow in the minds of those who had trusted him. By the time the Venezuelan forces realised he was missing, the evidence of his "betrayal" would be enough to sever the ties between Venezuela and North Korea for good.

In the dimly lit back room of the safe house, Ji-Hoon sat bound to a chair, facing Dan and Alicia. The flickering light cast long shadows on the walls, and the room smelled faintly of mildew and tension. Ji-Hoon's body was tense, his hands clenched into fists as he braced himself for what he believed was inevitable—the pain, the interrogation, perhaps worse. He'd been in situations like this before, and his training had taught him to expect the worst.

But as he stared at Dan, who sat across from him, Ji-Hoon couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong. There was no table of torture instruments, no threats of violence. Just the two of them, Dan and Alicia, watching him in silence. It unnerved him more than he cared to admit.

Dan finally spoke, his voice calm, almost conversational. "Ji-Hoon, you think this is the beginning of an interrogation, or maybe worse. But you're wrong. The worst has already happened."

Ji-Hoon blinked, confused. "What... what are you talking about?"

Alicia crossed her arms, her eyes cold and unfeeling as she watched him, while Dan leaned forward slightly, folding his hands together as if explaining a simple matter of fact.

“Your betrayal has already been exposed,” Dan continued, his words slicing through the quiet. “The Venezuelans have found the documents we planted, tying you directly to a plot to overthrow their government with North Korean backing. You’re done here.”

Ji-Hoon’s eyes widened, his mind racing as he tried to process what he was hearing. “That’s not possible. I didn’t—”

Dan cut him off. “It doesn’t matter what you did or didn’t do. The evidence is there, and it’s irrefutable. The Venezuelans think you’ve been conspiring against them for months. Right now, they’re tearing through your quarters, finding more of the trail we’ve left behind. You’re a traitor in their eyes, and there’s no coming back from that.”

Ji-Hoon’s disbelief was so strong you could feel it, his breath coming in short, shallow bursts. “No... no, this can’t be happening. I haven’t done anything wrong. I’m loyal to North Korea, I—”

“Loyal?” Alicia scoffed, stepping forward with a cruel smile. “To whom? Venezuela thinks you’re a traitor. And back in North Korea? Even if you managed to escape this country, what do you think they’ll believe? That you were innocent? They’ll see this as a failure on your part, and you know how they deal with failure.”

Ji-Hoon stared at them, a mix of fear and disbelief clouding his face. The weight of the situation was starting to settle in, the reality sinking deeper with each word.

Dan leaned back in his chair, his voice dropping to a near whisper. “You’re a dead man in Venezuela, Ji-Hoon. If they catch you, you’ll either disappear in a military prison, or they’ll make an example of you—publicly. And North Korea? Even if you somehow make it back, they’ll see

you as a liability. Your failure will make you worthless to them. They'll execute you just to save face."

The air in the room seemed to thicken as Ji-Hoon's panic grew. He struggled to maintain composure, but the truth was now staring him in the face. "No... this can't be happening," he whispered, almost to himself.

Dan watched him for a moment, then sighed. "We're not here to torture you, Ji-Hoon. You're of no further value to us. The damage is done. What we are going to do is let you walk away—if you can."

Ji-Hoon's eyes snapped to Dan's, a flicker of hope creeping in. "Walk away?"

Alicia nodded, her voice cold. "We're going to take you to the Mabaruma airstrip. After that, you're on your own. Make whatever calls you can, run if you have to, but you're not a threat to us any more. You'll be lucky if you survive."

Ji-Hoon's mind raced, the enormity of his situation finally settling in. He was caught between two worlds, both of which had no place for him any more. Venezuela saw him as a traitor, and North Korea would likely see him as a failure. No matter which way he turned, his future was bleak.

Dan stood up, motioning for Serj, who was waiting by the door. "Get him ready. Take him to the airstrip."

Ji-Hoon sat there, silent, as Serj approached and pulled him to his feet. He wasn't resisting any more. The fight had drained out of him.

As they prepared to take him out into the night, Ji-Hoon looked at Dan one last time, his voice barely a whisper. "Why... why are you letting me go?"

Dan gave him a cold smile. "Because we've already won, Ji-Hoon. You're no threat to us, not any more. You're just a ghost now—caught between worlds, with nowhere left to run."

With that, Ji-Hoon was escorted out into the dark, toward the Mabaruma airstrip where his fate was left to the winds.

26 Epilogue

After the mission was finally over, the team gathered in front of the flickering screen for a debrief with Cecilia. Her voice came through clear despite the miles between them, her tone sharp and professional as always.

“Well done,” she said, her face lit up by the pale glow of her screen. “With the North Koreans knocked for six, Venezuela seems to have regained some semblance of self-control. It’s still a terrible regime, but at least it’s their own regime again. We’ve bought some time. The CIA will still be active in the region, but maybe now they’ll be more cautious. Less risk to the people.”

There was a collective exhale from the team. It hadn’t been an easy operation—playing both sides was a precarious balancing act, but it had paid off. Ji-Hoon was gone, and with him, the dangerous North Korean influence had been severed. The CIA’s plans had been disrupted, for now.

As the briefing came to a close, the team exchanged weary nods. But for Dave, something lingered. After everyone dispersed to clean up and rest, he found himself sitting alone, deep in thought.

The memories of the deaths still clung to him—those moments when he had been caught in a rage, his actions violent, lethal. It bothered him deeply, gnawing at the edges of his conscience. He wasn’t a killer. That much he knew. But what he had done in those moments, the lives he had taken, weighed heavily on him.

Serj, always perceptive, noticed Dave’s silence. The large, rugged man approached quietly and took a seat beside him. They sat in silence for a moment before Serj spoke, his voice low and calm.

“Dave,” Serj began, his tone not harsh, but firm. “You made some tough decisions out there. You found out what kind of man you are. It’s a hard

lesson. We've all faced it. The fact it bothers you, makes you one of the good guys."

Dave nodded slowly, acknowledging the truth of Serj's words, but the weight of the guilt still hung over him.

Serj studied him for a moment longer before a hint of a smile crept into the corner of his mouth. "But I hear you are some kind of hippie tree hugger?"

Dave blinked, caught off guard by the unexpected comment. He glanced over at Serj, confused for a second before looking at Anya, who was sitting nearby. She gave him a sheepish smile, and suddenly the tension broke.

He couldn't help it—he laughed. Something had clearly been lost in translation, but the absurdity of it was enough to pull him out of his dark thoughts. Serj's smirk grew wider, and even Anya chuckled.

The moment, though small, was enough. It reminded Dave that, despite the weight he carried, there was still room for humour, for humanity. He might never fully come to terms with what had happened, but for now, he could at least find a little peace.