



Real Hero

Dave #5: Tides of Vengeance

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1 Prologue

Six months ago, Dave Anderson would have laughed if someone told him he'd be extracting CIA operatives from South American jungles or racing across Europe to prevent terrorist attacks on gas pipelines. Back then, his greatest adventure had been deciding whether to take the stairs or the lift to his IT department on the third floor.

That was before the gym changed everything.

He remembered that first day with perfect clarity: standing awkwardly in his baggy shorts and slightly-too-tight t-shirt, trying to blend in among the regulars. He'd started with the treadmill, expecting to wheeze through a light jog. Instead, he'd found himself running at speeds that should have been impossible, barely breaking a sweat. When he'd moved to the weights, he'd lifted the entire stack like it was made of cardboard, checking and double-checking that he wasn't somehow doing it wrong.

He wasn't.

The Agency had found him shortly after – an organization that operated in the shadows between nations, monitoring threats that governments couldn't or wouldn't handle. They'd shown him a world he never knew existed, one where his inexplicable abilities could make a difference.

Now, fresh from the Arctic Circle where they'd prevented EarthWise Geoscience from triggering an environmental catastrophe, Dave found himself reflecting on how far he'd come. He'd helped rescue Sarah Moreau from militia-controlled territory in Venezuela, raced against time to stop attacks on European energy infrastructure, and discovered new abilities in the freezing darkness of the polar night.

Through it all, his appearance hadn't changed – he was still the same overweight IT professional who looked like he spent more time with computers than in combat zones. But appearances were deceiving. Anya

Petrova had taught him that, her lethal capabilities hidden behind cold professionalism. Serj Romanov and Omar Haddad had shown him how strength came in many forms, their years of special forces experience complementing his raw power.

Dave still didn't understand why he'd been chosen, why an ordinary man had been given such extraordinary abilities. But after everything he'd seen – from the jungles of South America to the ice fields of the Arctic – he knew one thing: sometimes the most unlikely people made the best heroes.

He had become the hero no one expected him to be.

2 Water

The crowd surged against the water control station's gates, their shouts echoing off rusted pipes and crumbling concrete. What had once been the region's engineering pride now stood as a decrepit monument to neglect, its vital machinery groaning under the weight of desperate need. A mother thrust her child forward, the infant's cracked lips telling a story no words could capture.

Behind the gates, guards shifted nervously, hands tight on their weapons. They knew what was coming. Everyone did. When water runs out, civilization crumbles one desperate act at a time.

Around the base of the station, pools of stagnant water had formed where old leaks went unfixed. The small reservoirs of brownish, foul-smelling liquid collected in the depressions, attracting buzzing clouds of flies. The ground beneath the station was dry and cracked in sharp patterns, the once fertile soil now turned to hardened clay from months of relentless sun and no rain. Footfalls crunched as people moved across the earth, the brittle soil giving way under the weight of their steps, releasing faint puffs of dust with every movement.

The heat in the air was palpable, oppressive even, as it radiated down from a sky that was a relentless, cloudless blue. The sun hung high, an angry ball of fire that sucked the moisture from everything it touched. The rusty pipes that lay exposed to the elements gleamed faintly in the sun's harsh light, while the surrounding ground shimmered, the heatwaves rising in an undulating haze. The dryness had permeated everything. The sparse tufts of grass that had once grown near the station were yellowed and brittle, crunching underfoot like dead leaves. Even the thin, scraggly trees nearby stood lifeless, their bark cracked, their leaves long since withered and fallen away.

Inside the control room of the station, the scene was no better. The air was stifling and thick with dust, as though it hadn't been ventilated properly in years. The control panels were ancient, their buttons worn smooth by the hands of operators who no longer came. Flickering, dim lights illuminated the grimy screens that monitored the flow of water, but they were more for show than function now—many of the indicators remained static, pointing to numbers that hadn't changed in weeks or months. The dials were caked with dirt, while the wires underneath the panels hung loose, some frayed and sparking occasionally when a breeze blew through the cracked windows.

The entire system, once the heartbeat of the region, was in its final death throes. The few functioning parts groaned and sputtered, as if struggling to carry the weight of the entire region's dwindling water supply on their fragile, rust-covered backs. From the main pumps to the auxiliary valves, everything seemed ready to collapse at the slightest provocation. The sound of dripping water echoed faintly through the space—an ominous reminder that even this last thread of lifeline was on the verge of being severed.

Outside, the air seemed to grow hotter by the minute, with no wind to provide even the smallest relief. The crowd gathered at the gates felt the oppressive heat pressing down on them, their faces streaked with sweat and dust. The surrounding land, once green and teeming with life, had become a barren wasteland. The Indus River, once a wide and proud watercourse, was now a narrow, sluggish trickle far in the distance, barely visible between the banks of cracked, crumbling earth. The station, meant to harness and distribute the river's lifeblood, was now the only thing standing between life and death for the people of the region. But its dilapidated state spoke volumes—without immediate attention, it would soon fail entirely.

Everywhere, the signs of drought were visible. The parched soil, where nothing could grow. The thin air, sucked dry of humidity. And the rusting,

neglected infrastructure of the station that had once been a symbol of hope, now little more than a monument to desperation and decay.

The station's iron gates, tall and imposing, stood firm against the mass of humanity pressing closer, the guards inside watching with unease. Beyond those gates, the machinery of the water control system hummed faintly, the lifeline for this entire region, controlling the flow of water to millions of people. But for weeks, the water had been scarce, and the river, once a proud force of life, was now a thin, sluggish thread winding through the dusty plains.

A low rumble grew from behind the crowd as military trucks arrived, tires kicking up clouds of dust. Soldiers poured out, rifles slung across their chests, their boots stomping across the dirt as they formed a line, shields raised, batons at the ready. The air thickened with tension, the shouts from the crowd now filled with anger and fear.

"We just want water!" a farmer near the front yelled, shaking his fist at the soldiers. "Our crops are dying! Our children are thirsty!"

The soldiers remained silent, their eyes hard behind their visors, their orders clear—disperse the crowd, maintain control.

A sleek black motorcade approached the water control station, the hum of its engines in stark contrast to the grim reality that surrounded it. At the centre of the convoy was a luxury SUV, its tinted windows concealing the high-ranking politician within. Flanked by bodyguards and bureaucrats, the politician, a man in his late fifties with greying hair and an air of cold authority, stepped out of the vehicle. His expensive suit seemed out of place against the rusted, deteriorating infrastructure of the facility. Around him, the heat of the day swirled with dust, and the cries of the crowd surged forward, their voices now hoarse with a mixture of anger and hope.

"Minister! Minister!" came the collective shout from the gathered masses, their desperation palpable. "Do something about the water! Our crops are dying! We are dying!"

The politician, unfazed by the outpouring of emotion, took a slow look around, eyes briefly flicking to the water station behind him. The facility, once a marvel of engineering decades ago, was now a crumbling relic. Rust streaked the towering pipes that snaked through the ground like dying veins, their once-steady pulse of water now reduced to sporadic drips. Control panels stood exposed to the elements, corroded wires twisting out of broken casings, the entire system teetering on the edge of collapse.

A thin sheen of dust clung to the neglected machinery, and as the Minister's entourage shuffled through the compound, their polished shoes left prints in the thick layer of filth that blanketed the ground. The pipes groaned faintly, as if straining under the weight of their decay, and the occasional burst of water from old, cracked valves only served as a reminder of how fragile this lifeline had become.

"This is what you've left us with!" a voice from the crowd shouted, louder than the rest. "Look at this place! We're being left to die!"

For a moment, the Minister raised a hand, as if to acknowledge the protests. His dark eyes swept across the scene, but there was little recognition of the human suffering in them, only an air of indifference. One of his aides leaned in, whispering something in his ear, prompting a slight nod. He stepped toward the gate, flanked by his guards, offering a rehearsed statement about how the government was 'monitoring the situation' and would 'take the necessary steps to address the water crisis in due course.'

But the crowd was not mollified. The cries grew louder, the shoving and pushing more frenzied. Mothers thrust their children forward, their faces gaunt with thirst, pleading for action. Farmers, their skin leathery from years of toil in the sun, shouted curses and demands for the Minister to see their suffering up close.

Without engaging further, the Minister turned on his heel, his entourage closing in around him like a protective wall. Soldiers, with batons raised,

cleared a path through the desperate throng, the blunt force of authority pushing back the crowd. The air was thick with dust and discontent as the group retreated toward their waiting convoy. With a final glance at the decaying station, the politician climbed into his vehicle, and the doors slammed shut with a resounding thud.

The convoy rumbled to life, kicking up a cloud of dust so thick it swallowed the protestors' voices. The motorcade sped away, disappearing down the dirt road, leaving behind the choking residue of the drought that had gripped the region for months. The sun baked the earth beneath, and in their wake, the frustration of the crowd boiled over, simmering just under the surface.

The earth beneath the water control station trembled as the central valve buckled and exploded. A deafening crack tore through the air, followed by an even louder roar as water, under immense pressure, surged through the rusted pipes. For a moment, there was an eerie pause, the crowd frozen in shock, before a massive geyser erupted into the sky. It blasted upward in a powerful column, like a fountain gone wild, spraying water and debris in every direction. The sun caught the spray, creating momentary rainbows in the chaos, but there was nothing beautiful about this torrent. The water came with the force of an unrestrained flood, years of pressure suddenly released with catastrophic violence.

The surge hit the crowd like a tidal wave. Soldiers and civilians alike were knocked off their feet, their bodies swept away by the sheer force of the water. Some were thrown into the air, crashing down into the mud or against the broken infrastructure. Others were swallowed by the flood, dragged through the cracked earth as the water carved new channels through the dry, brittle soil. Shouts of fear and panic filled the air, quickly drowned out by the thunderous roar of the rushing water. Soldiers who had been holding their ground with batons and shields were now scrambling to stay upright, their formations shattered as they were swept along with the crowd.

The ground around the station, once parched and cracked, quickly transformed into a churning sea of mud and debris. Chunks of concrete from the facility were torn free, floating in the flood and crashing into those unfortunate enough to be caught in the water's path. A mother, who moments earlier had clutched her child to her chest, was now fighting to stay above the rising water, her child slipping from her arms as the current dragged them in different directions. Farmers who had come to plead for water were now struggling to escape its wrath, clawing at the earth, trying to find something solid to hold onto as the water continued its assault.

The pipes, unable to withstand the pressure of the initial rupture, gave way in a chain reaction. Each new explosion sent another torrent of water gushing into the already flooded station. Massive plumes of water erupted from the cracked metalwork, the sound of each burst like a thunderclap. Entire sections of the station were torn apart as the water forced its way through every weak point in the system, transforming the once decrepit facility into a war zone of metal, mud, and broken bodies. The sky, previously an unrelenting blue, now seemed darkened by the mist of water, the chaos below hidden beneath the thick veil of spray and dust.

The soldiers, struggling to regain control, were swept along with the civilians. The cries for help became indistinguishable from the roars of the rushing water. The very ground seemed to shake as the water forced its way through the soil, breaking apart the fragile earth and leaving deep scars in its wake. Some soldiers tried to regroup, dragging civilians to higher ground, but for every person they saved, another was lost in the relentless torrent. A few managed to find safety atop the crumbling remains of the control station, but even that high ground seemed precarious as the water began to erode the foundations beneath them.

For those in the crowd who hadn't been knocked down, the sight was both terrifying and awe-inspiring. The water, which they had so desperately prayed for, had arrived in the form of destruction. It was as if the very force they had sought to save them had turned against them, punishing

them for their pleas. Some, wiser or luckier, ran in the opposite direction, their legs pumping through the thick mud, slipping and falling as they tried to flee the oncoming flood.

Above it all, the figure in the shadows observed, calm amidst the storm. The chaos unfolding below had been meticulously orchestrated, and now, as the water control station collapsed, the destruction was total. Sabotage had never been more effective. As the sun began to sink behind the horizon, casting long shadows over the disaster, the figure vanished into the gathering darkness, knowing that the seeds of catastrophe had been well and truly sown. The drought-stricken people were left with nothing but devastation—and an unshakeable truth that there would be no relief from the powers that had failed them.

3 Flapjacks

The kitchen clock ticked away another quiet morning as Dave wrapped his hands around a mug of breakfast tea. Autumn light crept through the window, turning his small kitchen golden. After weeks of explosions and gunfire, the simple comfort of brewing tea felt almost surreal. It was a stark contrast to the world he'd been living in lately, the one where things exploded and missions twisted his gut into knots. But not here. Not at home.

He slumped in his chair, letting out a slow breath. The agency seemed like a lifetime away. Here, in his small, semi-detached house, Dave was just a regular bloke. The chaos of covert missions and life-threatening decisions felt like they belonged to someone else. His phone sat face down on the table, silent for now, though he knew it wouldn't stay that way forever.

The postman had arrived, his usual morning clatter as he shoved letters through the slot. Dave walked over and scooped up the bundle. Bills, bills, and—ah, a flyer from the local pub – The Dog and Whistle. "Quiz night this Friday!" it announced in big, bold letters. His mate Harry had been nagging him to come along for weeks, always going on about how they needed Dave's 'useless knowledge of weird stuff' to clinch victory.

"Maybe this time," Dave thought, stuffing the flyer into his back pocket. There was something comforting about the mundane routine of it all—bills, pub quizzes, Saturday mornings spent with a bacon butty and the weekend paper. It was so far removed from the endless stream of covert operations, hidden threats, and global conspiracies he'd been neck-deep in since joining the agency.

His gaze drifted out the window to the garden. The hedge along the back fence had grown wild, and the lawn, though manageable, was due a good trim. He grimaced. It was nothing compared to the challenges he'd faced out in the Arctic, but this kind of thing had its own demands. He'd

neglected it for weeks—between missions and debriefs, there hadn't been time to deal with normal life. Maybe today was the day to tackle it.

With a sigh, he pushed himself up and wandered into the living room. The telly sat in the corner, collecting dust. His old PlayStation was on the shelf beneath it, untouched for months. He smiled at the thought of firing it up, losing himself in a game of Assassin's Creed for a couple of hours, just like the old days. Before all this. But then, he spotted the pile of laundry draped over the arm of the sofa, and the thought of chores pulled him back to reality.

He wasn't Dave the agent here. He was Dave with the endless list of small, everyday tasks: mowing the lawn, fixing the bird feeder, folding laundry. The thought brought a strange comfort. There was no urgency, no life-or-death decisions. Just the simple rhythm of a quiet day at home.

His phone buzzed, breaking the stillness. Dave glanced at it but didn't pick it up. He knew who it would be—probably someone from the agency with an update, or a reminder of what was coming next. But right now, he wasn't ready to dive back into that world. He took another sip of his tea instead, enjoying the warmth that spread through him. The world could wait.

A knock at the door startled him from his thoughts. He opened it to find Mrs. Tamsin from next door, holding a tray of flapjacks with a cheery smile on her face.

"Morning, Dave! Made too many again," she said, holding the tray out. "Thought you might want some."

Dave grinned, taking the tray. "Thanks, Mrs. Tamsin. You're a star."

"Oh, it's no trouble, dear," she said, glancing over his shoulder. "You've been keeping quiet lately. Everything alright?"

"Yeah, just been busy," he said with a shrug, keeping it vague. There was no way to explain the world he'd been living in without sounding mad. "You know, work and all that."

"Well, don't work too hard, dear," she said, giving him a knowing look. "Take care of yourself. And don't forget, quiz night at the pub on Friday!"

Dave chuckled. "I'll be there."

With a wave, Mrs. Tamsin toddled off, leaving Dave standing in the doorway, flapjacks in hand. He couldn't help but laugh at the contrast. Just days ago, he'd been dealing with saboteurs and deadly cold. Now, he was accepting flapjacks from his neighbour and getting invited to a quiz night. It felt almost surreal.

Later that afternoon, Dave found himself standing in the garden, hands on his hips, staring down the overgrown hedge. The clippers in his hand felt awkward compared to the weapons and gear he was more accustomed to, but there was something oddly satisfying about tackling the simple task. The smell of cut grass and earth rose around him as he worked, a reminder of normal life, of a time before everything got so complicated.

His thoughts wandered as he hacked away at the hedge, trimming it back into shape. He thought of the Arctic mission, the tension, the stakes—so high, it still made his heart race. But here, in the stillness of his garden, that world felt distant, like a dream.

As the sun began to dip lower, casting long shadows over the lawn, Dave stood back and admired his work. The hedge was neat again, the garden looking a little more under control. He wiped the sweat from his brow and smiled. There was still a lot to do, but for today, he'd won this battle.

He carried the clippers back inside, placing them by the back door. His phone buzzed again on the kitchen counter, but this time he ignored it completely. Tomorrow, he'd be pulled back into that other life. But today?

Today, he was just Dave, the bloke with the hedge to trim, a cup of tea to finish, and maybe a cheeky game of Assassins Creed to play.

The Hanged Man was not the kind of pub that invited newcomers. It wasn't the sort of place where you'd go to catch up with mates or have a family meal. The dim lighting, sticky floors, and the faint smell of old beer soaked into the wooden beams gave it an air of neglect. Its patrons were the sort that kept their heads down, nursing their drinks in silence, lost in their own thoughts or troubles. Conversations, when they did happen, were in low murmurs, just loud enough to be heard by those intended, but never more.

For Dave, it was perfect.

The Dog and Whistle, his local, was always bustling with life. Children running around, couples chatting over their Sunday roasts, and the smell of freshly pulled pints filled the air. But on nights like this, when the weight of his life bore down on him and he needed space to think, that wasn't the place for him. He needed solitude, not the well-meaning company of the locals. So he came here, to The Hanged Man, where no one bothered you, and you could drink in peace.

The Guinness at the Hanged Man was, despite all expectations, extraordinary. Creamy and smooth, with the perfect head, it slipped down effortlessly, a small comfort amidst the chaos of his thoughts. Dave sat in his usual spot, a small table in the corner, his pint already half-drained. He liked this spot. It had a good view of the room, but it was tucked away enough that no one could creep up behind him. Old habits, he guessed. He wasn't even sure where he'd picked them up. The agency maybe, or perhaps they were there long before.

Leaning back, staring at the swirling patterns in his pint, his mind wandering to questions that had been gnawing at him for months now. Ever since that day—the day everything changed—he couldn't stop thinking about it. What was he? Where had these abilities come from?

He tried to piece it together, but it was like staring into fog. There were no childhood memories of miraculous strength or speed, no stories of lifting cars or dodging bullets as a teenager. He'd had a pretty normal life, all things considered. He hadn't been in fights, hadn't needed to outrun danger or do anything extraordinary. He was just... Dave. A regular bloke who liked a pint, a game of footy, and a quiet life.

So where had these abilities come from? And why now, at 40? It wasn't like he'd woken up one day feeling different. Or had he? He tried to think back—when was the first time he'd realised he was... different? Was it gradual, or had it all come crashing down on him in one instant?

He sipped his pint, his brow furrowing in thought. He couldn't remember ever feeling stronger or faster before. He hadn't tested himself like that when he was younger because he'd never had to. No one goes around lifting cars or breaking down doors just to see if they can. But now, looking back, it felt almost absurd that he wouldn't have noticed something so massive about himself before.

But then, what if it wasn't always there? What if something had changed? Some hidden switch flipped, some genetic quirk or outside force that made him what he was today. The thought made him uncomfortable. He liked having control, and the idea that something had happened to him without him realising it gnawed at him. Was it in his DNA, lying dormant all these years? Or had something else triggered it?

He swirled the last bit of Guinness in his glass and set it down on the table with a soft thud. So many unanswered questions. Questions that circled his mind like gnats, always there but never offering any real answers.

The bar was quiet tonight, just the soft clinking of glasses and the low hum of conversation in the background. Dave watched a couple of regulars sit hunched over the bar, lost in their own worlds. No one here cared who he was or what he could do. He could sit and be just another face in the crowd, another bloke nursing a pint with too much on his mind.

Maybe it didn't matter, in the end. Maybe all these questions would drive him mad if he kept chasing them. He wasn't the kind of person who spent his life overthinking things—he was more a doer than a thinker. And yet, he couldn't shake the feeling that he needed answers, that there was something important just out of reach, something that would explain it all.

But that was a problem for another time. Right now, there was only one question that mattered, and it was one he could answer.

Am I thirsty?

He stared at the empty glass in front of him, lips twitching into a slight smile.

"Yes," he muttered under his breath. "Let's have another pint then."

With a quiet chuckle, Dave rose from his chair, walked to the bar, and ordered another Guinness. For tonight, at least, the world could wait.

4 The Fish Tank

"This is going to be a political tightrope," Cecilia explained, her voice calm but edged with the weight of the situation. She sat at the head of the long glass table in the agency's boardroom, the bright overhead lights gleaming off its polished surface. Sunlight streamed through the large windows, flooding the room with an artificial sense of calm that felt at odds with the storm brewing outside these walls. The glass walls surrounding them gave the room a fish-tank feel, as though they were on display, trapped in their world of strategy and covert manoeuvres while the world outside watched with anticipation.

Dave turned toward the city skyline, the glass walls making him feel exposed. Something in Cecilia's voice set his instincts on edge - this mission was different. His gaze swept back to the table, where Cecilia continued outlining the rapidly escalating situation in Pakistan. The recent political and military sabre-rattling between Pakistan and India had set off alarms, and the agency was in the thick of it once again.

Cecilia pulled up a satellite image on the screens surrounding them. The Indus River snaked through the landscape like a blue vein, its tributaries branching into both India and Pakistan. As she spoke, red markers began appearing along its length.

"Each of these points represents a violation of the Indus Waters Treaty in the past month alone," she said, her fingers tracing the pattern. "For decades, this agreement kept the peace. Now..." She zoomed in on a cluster of markers near the border. "Now we're seeing unauthorized dams, deliberate flooding, military movements disguised as irrigation projects. This isn't just about water any more. It's about power."

Anya shifted forward, her eyes narrow. "And nuclear-armed nations fighting over power rarely ends well."

Dave grunted in acknowledgment. He'd heard about the treaty before. It was one of the few agreements that had actually worked, keeping two nuclear-armed neighbours from tipping over into outright war over water. But that peace was fragile, and lately, something had begun to fray the edges.

Cecilia's expression hardened as she moved on to the more recent developments. "But now, tensions are rising again. Both sides are accusing each other of violating the terms of the treaty. Dam projects on both sides of the border are causing havoc. Pakistan claims India's new dams are restricting their water supply, leading to severe shortages. On the Indian side, there are accusations that Pakistan is deliberately flooding border areas, destroying crops and infrastructure. Blood has already been spilt on both sides, and there are whispers of retaliation."

Dave shifted in his seat. He could already see where this was heading. The agency's role was becoming clear, and it wasn't a task anyone would take lightly. India and Pakistan were volatile, and the agency couldn't afford to let them slide into conflict—especially not when both had nuclear weapons sitting just under the surface, waiting for the right spark to set them off.

Cecilia's gaze swept across the room, meeting each team member's eyes. "We're not here to solve decades of geopolitical tension. But we need to understand what's driving this sudden escalation. Something's changed, and we need to find out what. There's too much at stake to let this spiral out of control."

The table was silent as Cecilia paused, letting the gravity of the mission settle over them. Dave's mind raced. He'd been on a few missions, seen danger and death up close, but this was a different kind of threat. This was about the balance of power, about keeping two nations from tearing each other apart over a resource as essential as water. And they were stepping right into the middle of it.

"The team will go to Pakistan first," Cecilia continued, "to get a feel for what's happening on the ground. We need intel—local sources, political tensions, anything that gives us a clearer picture of who's pushing these events forward. Something's driving this escalation, and we need to figure out if it's just the usual tensions or if there's something else at play."

Dave could feel the weight of the mission settling on his shoulders. This wasn't just another covert operation. This was about preventing a potential conflict that could ripple across the region and beyond. The stakes couldn't be higher.

Cecilia, eyes sharp. "This isn't going to be easy. There are political forces in play that we don't fully understand yet. You'll be navigating between intelligence services, local operatives, and possibly hostile factions. Stay sharp, keep your heads down, and don't let anyone know what you're really after. This is a volatile situation, and we can't afford to be the spark."

The meeting began to wind down, but Dave remained seated for a moment, his mind already working through the details. The mission ahead would be more than dangerous—it would be delicate. Navigating the political landscape of Pakistan was one thing, but doing so with India watching from the sidelines was another. Both countries had deep-rooted suspicions, and any misstep could set them off.

As the team stood to leave, Dave caught Cecilia's eye. She gave him a slight nod, as if to say, I know you can handle this. He wasn't so sure, but he knew one thing—whatever was causing this sudden instability had to be stopped before it spiralled into something far worse.

As the others filed out of the glass-walled room, Dave lingered by his seat, watching them leave before turning his gaze to Cecilia. She was still seated at the head of the table, scanning a few final documents, but she glanced up, noticing him. "Got a minute?" Dave's voice barely carried across the room.

Cecilia set her papers aside with a practised motion. "What's on your mind?"

The words caught in his throat as he searched for a way to voice his doubts. "It's about... well, my role here. I don't want to sound whiny or needy, but I've been feeling uncertain. I'm not sure if I'm up to the tasks being set. If it weren't for my abilities, I really don't know what I'd be doing here."

Cecilia didn't let him finish. "Let's stop this right here and now, Dave." Her voice was firm, cutting through the air with the precision of a scalpel. She leaned forward, fixing him with a direct stare. "If you weren't good enough to be on the team, you wouldn't be here. Period."

Dave blinked, surprised by the sudden intensity of her response, but Cecilia didn't stop.

"You've learned a hell of a lot since you've joined us, and you've applied those skills like any other member of this team. The fact that you've got abilities? Sure, it's a bonus. But if you didn't have the brains, the instincts, or the determination to back them up, you'd be of no use to us—and you certainly wouldn't still be here. So..." she paused, her expression softening just slightly, but her tone was still no-nonsense. "Suck it up, buttercup. No more self-doubt. You belong here. Now get out there and get the job done."

Dave was taken aback by her bluntness, but it was exactly what he needed. He found himself smiling, a genuine grin that spread across his face as her words sank in. There was no sugar-coating, no gentle coddling—just the cold, hard truth. And that was precisely why he respected Cecilia. She didn't dance around the issue; she hit it head-on.

He stood up, straightening his shoulders. "Thanks, Cecilia. I appreciate the honesty. Message received and understood."

Cecilia gave him a slight nod, the hint of a smile playing on her lips. "Good. Now go do what you do best."

With a newfound sense of confidence, Dave turned and left the room, feeling lighter than he had in weeks. There were still questions he couldn't answer—about his abilities, about his place in the world—but right now, none of that mattered. He had a job to do, and he knew he was more than capable of doing it.

5 The Squeeze

The Ministry of Water Resources rose before him, modern glass and traditional stonework merging in a display of understated power. The midday sun cast sharp shadows across the steps as the tall, well-built man approached, seemingly immune to the oppressive heat that had everyone else seeking shelter.

He walked with purpose, each step firm yet smooth, his head slightly lowered as though already calculating his next move. The doors of the Ministry opened with a soft hiss, welcoming him into the cool, air-conditioned lobby. Inside, the stark contrast to the outside heat was palpable. The temperature was cool enough to send a slight shiver down your spine after walking in from the blazing sun, but the man seemed unaffected, his stride never faltering.

The interior of the building was as formal as its exterior, with polished marble floors gleaming under the bright overhead lights. The high ceiling amplified the sounds of footsteps and the quiet murmur of conversations that bounced around the expansive space. A faint hum from the air conditioning filled the gaps, giving the room an artificial serenity. Large banners and photographs adorned the walls, showcasing Pakistan's vast waterways, its dams, and hydroelectric projects—monuments to the country's lifeblood, the Indus River.

He approached the reception desk with the same quiet confidence that marked every movement. The woman behind the desk barely had time to glance up before his deep, commanding voice filled the space between them.

"I'm here to see Amir Qureshi," he said, his tone calm but carrying an unspoken weight.

The receptionist's fingers froze over her keyboard as she looked up. The man's presence commanded attention - not just from his imposing build,

but from an authority that seemed to fill the surrounding space. Her training crumbled under his piercing gaze. He wasn't here to be questioned.

"Do you have an appointment?" she asked, her voice more subdued now, almost instinctively deferential.

"No," he replied simply, his gaze locked on hers. "But he'll want to see me."

There was a moment of uncertainty on the receptionist's face. She knew enough to recognise when someone wasn't here to wait. Her fingers tapped hurriedly on the keyboard, checking schedules that suddenly seemed irrelevant. After a few tense seconds, she picked up the phone, murmuring into it in low tones.

As the receptionist made the call, the man turned slightly, his eyes surveying the room without much interest. His movements were deliberate, calculated, as though he could assess a space and its people with just a glance. A few others sat in the waiting area—quiet, nondescript figures leafing through old magazines—but no one dared make eye contact with him. There was a subtle but unmistakable feeling of power emanating from him, the kind that made people instinctively keep their distance.

His eyes drifted over the digital display behind the reception, which listed the offices and officials of the Ministry. He didn't need to check the names; he already knew where he was headed. The woman at the desk put down the phone and looked up, her expression more formal now.

"Mr. Qureshi's office is on the fourth floor," she said, her voice carefully controlled. "He's expecting you."

The man offered the faintest nod of acknowledgement, nothing more. He turned toward the lifts at the far end of the lobby, his long strides eating up the distance with ease. The sound of his footsteps echoed briefly before being swallowed by the hum of the building's air conditioning. When he

reached the lift, the doors slid open almost immediately, and he stepped inside, vanishing as the doors closed with a soft chime.

There was an unsettling stillness left in his wake, as though the room itself held its breath. To those watching, he was just another powerful figure moving through the corridors of influence. But to those who knew, he was far more than that—though, for now, his true purpose remained shrouded.

The lift doors slid open with a soft chime, and the tall man stepped out onto the fourth floor. The air here was even cooler than in the lobby, with the faint hum of fluorescent lights and the smell of polished wood and paper filling the corridor. His footsteps were deliberate but unhurried as he moved down the long hallway, each step echoing slightly against the marble-tiled floor. Along the walls hung framed photos of Pakistan's rivers, lush valleys, and various government dignitaries shaking hands. They were the kind of decorations meant to impress but not distract, serving as a backdrop to the business conducted here.

The man passed a few office doors, each marked with the names of various officials. At the end of the hall, he reached a large, ornately carved wooden door with a brass plaque reading: Amir Qureshi, Director of Water Resources. A smaller desk stood just outside the door, manned by a neatly dressed woman—Qureshi's PA, it seemed. She was focused on her computer screen, typing something quickly but glanced up as the man approached.

"Good morning," she greeted, her voice professional but polite. "You must be here to see Mr. Qureshi. May I offer you something to drink while you wait?"

The tall man gave a slight shake of his head, his eyes cold and unreadable. "No need."

Without waiting for her to direct him further, he gestured toward the office door. There was a certain weight in his voice when he spoke. "Is he expecting me?"

The PA seemed slightly flustered by the casual authority of the man, but she quickly composed herself. "Yes, sir. Please, go right in."

With that, she pressed a button on her desk, and the wooden doors quietly parted to reveal Amir Qureshi's office. The tall man entered, the scent of leather and polished wood meeting him as he crossed the threshold.

Qureshi's office was large and stately, with floor-to-ceiling windows that allowed daylight to pour in, brightening the dark mahogany furniture. Behind the desk, which was covered in neat stacks of papers, sat Amir Qureshi, a middle-aged man in a grey suit, his salt-and-pepper hair neatly combed back. The office was tastefully decorated—shelves lined with books on hydrology and international relations, a large map of the Indus River Basin on the wall, and a framed photograph of Qureshi shaking hands with various government dignitaries. A glass cabinet displayed awards, likely for his work in water management, adding to the air of authority that filled the room.

As the tall man entered, Qureshi stood and extended his hand, a polite but somewhat wary smile on his face.

"Good morning," Qureshi said warmly, though his eyes showed a flicker of uncertainty. "I wasn't sure who to expect, but it seems my assistant already knows." He gestured toward the chair opposite his desk. "Please, have a seat."

The tall man didn't immediately take the offered seat, standing just inside the office for a moment, his presence almost unnerving in its quiet dominance. Finally, he stepped forward and settled into the chair, his movements smooth and controlled. Qureshi sat down, leaning slightly forward with a curious expression, clearly expecting more from his guest.

"I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name, Mr...?" Qureshi prompted, his voice trailing off.

The question hung in the air, the tall man making no immediate move to answer. Instead, he let the silence stretch just long enough to make Qureshi shift uncomfortably in his seat. When the man finally spoke, there was a faint trace of an accent—something indeterminate, an odd mix of European and something else, though Qureshi couldn't quite place it.

"I didn't give my name," the man replied calmly, his voice low and deliberate. He didn't elaborate, letting the weight of his words settle.

Qureshi raised an eyebrow but remained composed, adjusting his tie slightly. "I see. Well," he paused, his tone growing more cautious, "perhaps we should speak in private. I gather from your manner that what you've come to discuss is quite delicate."

The tall man's eyes flickered with the faintest glimmer of approval at Qureshi's quick understanding. He moved slightly back in his chair, his posture relaxed but radiating control.

"Yes," the stranger replied softly, his gaze locking onto Qureshi's. "It would be best if we kept this conversation between us."

"I'll speak plainly, Mr. Qureshi." The stranger's voice cut through the silence with a calm, measured tone that belied the weight of his words. His eyes locking onto Qureshi's with a predatory focus. "What I want is for you to know that from today, you work for me."

Qureshi's eyes widened, shock rippling through him like a sudden, frigid wind. His lips parted to speak, to protest perhaps, but no words came. His mind raced, trying to process what was happening, but before he could muster a response, the man continued, his voice steady, his presence filling the room like a creeping shadow.

"Some time ago," the stranger said, his words precise, "you were involved in securing private agricultural interests relating to your family's business—considerable, large-scale farms throughout Pakistan's Punjab region."

Qureshi's heart pounded in his chest. How could this man know about that? His fingers clenched the armrests of his chair, knuckles white, as the room seemed to close in around him.

The stranger's eyes, cold and unreadable, never left Qureshi's. "The negotiation with India for personal profit is at odds with your current position, Mr. Qureshi. And should it become public knowledge..." The man let the sentence hang, just long enough for its meaning to sink in. "It would ruin you. Ruin your family. Especially in the current climate."

Qureshi felt a wave of nausea wash over him, his stomach twisting painfully as the implications hit home. His mind scrambled for a defence, an explanation, but there was none. The man had all the cards, and Qureshi was trapped, a deer frozen in the headlights of an oncoming car. The blood drained from his face, and his breath came in shallow, uneasy bursts. His bowels churned in fear, a sickening reminder of the powerlessness that had gripped him.

He tried to speak, but his throat was dry, and no sound escaped his lips. The weight of the man's words hung in the air like a guillotine, the blade poised above his career, his reputation, his very life.

The stranger stood slowly, his movements deliberate, as though the meeting had already concluded. He adjusted his jacket, casting one final look down at Qureshi, who sat there, utterly defeated, his world crumbling beneath him without a single word of protest.

"We will speak again when I have use for you," the man said, his voice as calm as it had been from the beginning. He walked toward the door, his steps echoing softly in the office, leaving Qureshi frozen in place, drowning in the silent terror of what had just unfolded.

As the door clicked shut behind him, Qureshi remained motionless, his mind struggling to grasp what had just transpired. Never had he experienced such a meeting—one in which no words were traded beyond those of his adversary, and yet the outcome was so terrifyingly clear. His

career, his family, his life as he knew it, now hung in the balance of that stranger's whims. He stared blankly at the spot where the man had stood, feeling the cold sweat beading on his forehead.

For the first time in his life, Amir Qureshi felt utterly powerless.

6 Lahore

The flight into Lahore had been long but uneventful. It was a little over eight hours from London, though it felt like more with the layover and the stopover fatigue that always came with these missions. The team—Dave, Anya, Serj, and Omar—sat in comfortable silence for most of the trip, each lost in their own thoughts, mentally preparing for what awaited them on the ground.

The hum of the plane's engines droned in the background as they descended toward Allama Iqbal International Airport. Out the window, the vast sprawl of Lahore appeared beneath them, a city of dust and life, with its labyrinth of streets and rooftops glowing amber under the fading evening sun. The haze that lingered over the city, a mix of dust, pollution, and the lingering heat of the day, was unmistakable. The landscape below was an expanse of green patches interspersed with dense clusters of old buildings and newer developments creeping outward from the city's heart.

As the plane touched down with a soft bump, the team felt a subtle shift in the air—the atmosphere of a place steeped in history but brimming with the intensity of modern life. The airport was bustling, its runways flanked by planes from all over the world, but there was an organised chaos to it, the kind that felt routine in such a vibrant, ever-busy city.

Disembarking from the plane, the first thing that hit them was the heat. Though the sun had dipped lower in the sky, the air was still thick with warmth, a humid embrace that carried the smells of the city. It was a mix of diesel fumes, spices, and something earthy, almost sweet, that lingered in the air. The distant hum of traffic and the chatter of airport workers mingled with the sound of the ground crew as they unloaded luggage from the plane.

Dave led the way down the jet bridge, Anya walking quietly beside him. Serj and Omar followed, their eyes already scanning their surroundings

with the practised calm of experienced operatives. Cecilia had ensured their arrival would be smooth, and sure enough, as they passed through immigration and into the arrival hall, a driver holding a discreet sign with just "Dave" written on it was waiting, which gave the team a chuckle. The man, dressed smartly but casually in dark trousers and a white shirt, motioning toward the private transport parked just outside the terminal.

The team followed him out into the warm night air, where a black minibus sat idling at the curb. The city's noise was already a background hum—honking cars, the distant cry of a street vendor, and the low rumble of motorcycles weaving through the evening traffic. As they approached the van, the driver opened the side door and helped with their bags, loading them into the back with swift efficiency.

"Welcome to Lahore," the driver said with a small smile. His English was accented but clear. "We will take you directly to your accommodation in Bhaman. It is secure and private, as requested."

The team climbed into the minibus, grateful for the air conditioning inside. The cool blast of air was a relief after the stifling heat outside. Dave sat up front next to the driver, while the others settled into the back. The roads leading away from the airport were crowded, packed with traffic even at this hour. Horns blared as cars jostled for position, and rickshaws darted through impossibly small gaps between the larger vehicles. The streets were alive with people—pedestrians walking along the roadside, vendors selling food from stalls, and families gathered in small clusters outside local shops.

The minibus rumbled steadily away from the bustling core of Lahore, the sights and sounds of the city gradually fading into the background. The further they drove, the more the landscape changed. The urban sprawl gave way to stretches of open land, the chaos of the city replaced by the quiet calm of agricultural fields. The night sky above was a deep indigo, dotted with stars, the air thick with the earthy scent of farmland.

Bhaman was far removed from the noise and congestion of Lahore. Here, the horizon was wide and open, the roads narrower and less travelled. Fields of wheat, sugarcane, and rice stretched out on either side, the silhouettes of tractors and water pumps barely visible in the dim light. The properties they passed were simple but practical, spaced well apart and surrounded by acres of land—ideal for the team's need for privacy. The occasional farm animal could be seen wandering the edges of the properties, their soft sounds carried on the light breeze.

As they stepped off the plane back in Lahore, the air had been thick with humidity and the smells of a city alive with activity, but now, as they approached Bhaman, the air was fresher, laced with the distinct scent of earth and growing crops. It was quieter here, with only the distant hum of insects and the occasional bark of a dog breaking the stillness of the night.

The minibus made its way down a bumpy dirt road, kicking up dust behind it. Dave watched the fields roll by through the window, the isolation of this place sinking in. There was a calm to the landscape, but also a tension.

After about thirty minutes of driving through the farmland, they pulled up to their accommodation—a small, sturdy farmhouse set back from the road, shielded by tall trees and rows of crops. The building itself was simple, made of brick and mortar, with a low roof and a broad veranda that ran along the front. The air was cooler here, a slight breeze blowing through the open fields, rustling the leaves of the nearby trees.

The driver parked the minibus and stepped out to help with the bags. The team unloaded their gear quickly, their boots crunching softly on the gravel driveway. Dave glanced around, taking in the space. The house was small, but it was secure, and the surrounding fields provided more than enough isolation. There were no close neighbours, no curious eyes to watch them.

Anya stood quietly to the side, her eyes scanning the darkened landscape, already mapping the area in her mind. Serj and Omar moved efficiently, checking the perimeter with a professional calm, while Dave made his way

to the front door, the key left for them in a small metal box near the entrance.

Inside, the farmhouse was spartan but functional. A few basic pieces of furniture—a wooden table, some chairs, and a couple of beds in the back rooms—were all they had. The air smelled faintly of dust and dried wood, and the only sound was the soft creaking of the floorboards beneath their boots. It was far from luxurious, but it would serve their purpose.

Dave set his bag down near the door and stretched, his body still stiff from the long flight and drive. He walked over to the window, peering out into the darkness of the fields. The isolation of this place was exactly what they needed—far from prying eyes, close enough to the action, but hidden in the wide, open farmland.

"We're well placed here," Dave said, turning back to the team. "This should give us the space and cover we need."

Omar nodded in agreement, dropping his duffel bag onto the floor. "No one's coming out here unless they've got a reason to. We'll have plenty of warning if anyone's sniffing around."

Serj cracked his knuckles, walking toward the back room. "I'll check the rear, make sure everything's secure."

As the team settled into the farmhouse, Dave felt a strange calm settle over him. The silence, the space, the distance from the chaos of the city—it was a welcome change, but it was also a reminder that the real work was just beginning. They'd flown in under the radar, and now, it was time to dig in and figure out what was really going on in this volatile region.

The early morning sun hung low on the horizon, casting a soft, golden light across the fields surrounding the farmhouse. Inside, the team had gathered in the small kitchen for a simple breakfast. The smell of strong coffee mingled with the earthy scent of the countryside that drifted in through the

open windows. Plates of scrambled eggs and bread sat on the table, the team quietly eating and planning their day ahead.

Anya sat near the window, absently scrolling through her tablet, already scanning local reports for anything that might point them in the right direction. Omar was focused on his coffee, his eyes distant, likely running through different tactical scenarios in his mind. Dave, leaning against the counter, sipped from his own mug, mentally preparing himself for the work ahead.

The rumble of engines outside broke the quiet rhythm of the morning. Serj was the first to react, his sharp instincts kicking in as he stood up and peered out through the kitchen window. Two black 4x4s were pulling into the gravel driveway—a Toyota Land Cruiser and a Hilux double cab pickup. Both vehicles were clean, well-maintained, and equipped for the rougher terrain they were likely to face.

Serj opened the front door, stepping out into the warm morning air as the two drivers exited the vehicles. Both men were dressed plainly, blending into the background of their environment. Without much conversation, they handed over the keys to Serj and offered a polite nod before making their way back to the gate on foot, leaving the team with their new transportation.

Serj turned the keys over in his hand, watching the drivers leave, then gave a low whistle. "Looks like we've got all the tools we need," he said, turning back toward the house. "Now we just have to figure out where to start."

Dave joined him outside, squinting in the sunlight as he surveyed the vehicles. The Toyota Land Cruiser was built like a tank—rugged, reliable, perfect for any terrain they might face in the field. The Hilux was equally sturdy, its double cab offering extra room for gear or any additional passengers they might need to transport. Both vehicles had seen their fair share of rough roads, but they were in perfect working order.

"Solid choices," Dave commented, running a hand along the side of the Land Cruiser. "Should get us wherever we need to go."

Omar stepped out, finishing off the last of his coffee, nodding in agreement. "We're ready, then. Just need to figure out where to hit first."

Anya finally emerged, pulling her hair back into a ponytail as she walked over to inspect the vehicles. She glanced at Dave. "I've been going over some local reports," she said. "There's been unusual movement around some of the smaller dam sites on the outskirts of Punjab. Might be a good place to start asking questions."

Omar tossed the keys to Serj, who caught them easily. "You drive the Land Cruiser. I'll take the Hilux. Let's pack our gear and move out once we've finalised the plan."

As the team set about loading their equipment into the back of the vehicles, the atmosphere shifted. The quiet, almost peaceful morning was now filled with the tension of the mission ahead. They had their gear, their transport, and their location. Now, it was time to put it all into action.

With the vehicles ready and the team set, the real work was about to begin.

7 NGO

Omar and Dave set off in the Hilux, leaving the quiet of Bhaman behind them as they rumbled toward the heart of Lahore. The roads were already alive with the familiar chaos of the city—rickshaws weaving between buses, vendors setting up their stalls, and the steady hum of people moving through their daily lives. But beneath the surface, there was an unmistakable undercurrent of tension. The city, like the land around it, was feeling the strain of the ongoing water crisis.

Their first stop was a small NGO office located near the old part of the city. The building was modest, with faded signage indicating its purpose. Inside, the air was thick with the smell of paperwork and sweat, the kind of heat that only comes from bodies packed into a space too small for the job at hand. Volunteers worked tirelessly, answering phones, shuffling documents, and coordinating relief efforts.

Dave and Omar spoke with a coordinator, a man in his late thirties with tired eyes and a deep sense of urgency in his voice. He explained how many villages across the Punjab region were on the verge of collapse. Farms that once fed entire communities were now desolate, the soil cracked and dry, crops withered before they could even grow. The river, once a life-giver, was now a symbol of despair for many.

"We're doing everything we can," the coordinator said, his voice strained but resolute. "But there's only so much we can do with the resources we have. Water deliveries are barely meeting basic needs, and we're hearing more and more about families that have been forced to relocate. And for those who can't..." His voice trailed off, but the unspoken reality was clear: starvation and thirst were becoming grim companions to these people.

Omar asked about the impact on local communities, and the coordinator's answer was as bleak as they had feared. "Farms that have been in families for generations are drying up. People are losing everything—livelihoods,

homes. They're selling what little they have left just to survive another week."

The weight of the crisis was heavy, and as Dave and Omar moved on to the next NGO, the pattern of devastation became clearer. Everywhere they went, the story was the same. The water crisis was grinding the life out of communities that had once thrived. The next office was a little more modern, but the mood was no less grim. Here, they spoke with a young woman who had been coordinating aid for displaced families. She explained how the crisis had a ripple effect—when the farms died, so did the economy of entire towns.

"People are leaving in droves," she explained, her voice filled with frustration. "But where do they go? The cities are already overwhelmed. And for those who can't leave—well, it's not just about water any more. It's about food, medicine, shelter. The kind of basic human needs that are slipping further out of reach."

As they drove from one NGO to the next, Dave and Omar found it hard not to be moved by the stories they were hearing. In each office, people were working tirelessly, but it was clear that they were fighting a losing battle. The scale of the crisis was overwhelming, and the resources available were a drop in the ocean compared to the needs of the people.

In one of the smaller NGOs, they met an older man, his face lined with years of hard work in the field. He had seen the crisis unfold first-hand, watching as villages withered away, one by one. "It's not just a drought any more," he said quietly, his voice heavy with the weight of experience. "It's a death sentence for these communities. And the worst part is, this didn't have to happen. But politics, greed—they're strangling us as surely as the land is dying."

Omar remained silent for a moment, taking in the man's words. Dave felt a knot form in his stomach. It wasn't just nature that was to blame here—it was human decisions, human indifference. He'd been on enough missions

to know that sometimes the greatest enemies weren't armed with guns, but with policies and neglect.

By the time they finished their tour of the NGO offices, the sun was beginning to set, casting a dusty orange hue over the streets of Lahore. As they made their way back to Bhaman, the weight of what they had heard hung heavy in the cab of the Hilux. Neither of them spoke for a while, each lost in thought.

"Hard not to be moved by all that," Dave finally said, breaking the silence. "It's one thing to know there's a crisis. It's another to see the human cost up close."

Omar, his eyes fixed on the road ahead. "These people are stuck in the middle of something they can't control. And from what we've seen, they're not getting the help they need, at least not fast enough."

"Politics and greed," Dave echoed the words of the old man they'd met. "It's like they're playing chess with people's lives."

Omar let out a slow breath. "Yeah. And now we're stepping into the middle of it."

As they pulled up to the farmhouse in Bhaman, the engine of the Hilux growling softly before cutting off, they both knew that the mission was no longer just about finding answers. It was about understanding the scope of a crisis that was tearing people apart, and trying to figure out how to prevent it from getting worse. And with every new piece of information they gathered, the urgency of their task only grew.

Serj and Anya loaded their gear into the back of the Toyota Land Cruiser just as the early morning sun began to rise over the fields surrounding their temporary base in Bhaman. The Land Cruiser's diesel engine roared to life with a low, throaty growl, and Serj adjusted the seat, settling in behind the

wheel. The air was already thick with heat, though it was only morning, and they both knew the day ahead would be long.

The Ravi River, one of the five rivers of the Punjab region, was their destination. Their goal: to check out several of the water control sites that had become flashpoints in the escalating crisis. Reports of erratic water releases and failed infrastructure had begun circulating, and the agency needed eyes on the ground to assess the situation.

As they drove north, leaving the farmlands behind, the environment changed. The quiet hum of the rural landscape gave way to the sound of distant traffic, mixed with the occasional honk of a horn or the cry of street vendors as they neared more populated areas. Lahore's chaotic streets briefly enveloped them, but Serj expertly navigated the throng, cutting through the city's bustle before turning onto the quieter roadways leading toward the river.

The air was heavy with dust and the scent of diesel fumes, but soon that faded as they pushed further north. The landscape opened up again, revealing stretches of dry, cracked earth where crops once thrived, interspersed with patches of greenery struggling to survive. The Ravi River, once a proud and life-giving force, had shrunk in many places to a thin, sluggish flow. Along its banks, they passed small villages, the homes simple and worn, with people going about their day in the oppressive heat, many of them carrying containers of water—reminders of the scarcity gripping the region.

Anya sat quietly in the passenger seat, her eyes fixed on the map displayed on her tablet, tracing their route and marking the water control sites they would visit. "We should be hitting the first one soon," she said, her voice calm but with an underlying focus. "It's one of the smaller sites, but it's been flagged for irregular releases over the last month."

Serj, keeping his eyes on the road. "Any signs of sabotage?"

"Nothing confirmed," Anya replied, glancing up from her tablet. "But with the way things have been going, it wouldn't surprise me if someone's been tampering with the infrastructure. Too many things going wrong at once to be a coincidence."

The first water control site came into view as they crested a hill. It was a modest facility, sitting on the banks of the Ravi, its once-sturdy gates now rusted and weathered from years of neglect. A small control building stood nearby, its walls faded and peeling, and the surrounding area was eerily quiet, save for the soft gurgle of the river's flow. There were no workers in sight, and the few vehicles parked nearby looked abandoned.

Serj pulled the Land Cruiser up to the edge of the facility, turning off the engine. They both stepped out into the heat, the air feeling thick and stagnant, the faint scent of algae and river water mixing with the ever-present dust.

"Looks like nobody's home," Serj muttered, scanning the area.

Anya stepped forward, her boots crunching softly against the dry ground as she moved toward the control gates. She crouched down, inspecting the rusted metal, noting how parts of the mechanism seemed worn and corroded—likely from years of neglect but possibly from something more deliberate.

"The equipment's old, but this kind of wear doesn't happen overnight," she said, running her hand along the corroded edge of the gate. "It's like no one's bothered to maintain any of this in years."

Serj moved toward the control building, checking the doors and windows, which were all locked. He returned to Anya, shaking his head. "Place is a ghost town. Whoever was working here either left in a hurry or hasn't shown up in days."

Anya glanced back toward the river, her brow furrowed. "Whatever's going on, the water levels are off. This flow isn't right for this time of year. The

releases are supposed to be carefully controlled, but it looks like no one's been monitoring it."

They spent the next hour checking over the site, taking note of the condition of the equipment and logging irregularities in the water flow. Serj climbed atop one of the older gates to get a better view, watching as the thin, brownish water moved sluggishly downstream.

"This whole place feels like it's been forgotten," he said as he jumped back down. "And if this is one of the smaller sites, I can't imagine what's going on at the bigger ones."

They piled back into the Land Cruiser and continued north, hitting two more water control sites along the Ravi. Each one told the same story—neglected infrastructure, erratic water releases, and an absence of workers. At the second site, they met an old man sitting near the control building, his face lined with the marks of hard years. He spoke briefly with Anya, confirming what they already suspected: the staff had abandoned their posts weeks ago, frustrated with the lack of government support and the impossible conditions they were working in.

"People are scared," he told her. "No water means no life here. The farms, the villages—they're all dying, and nobody's doing anything about it."

By the time they reached the third site, the sun was beginning to lower in the sky, casting long shadows across the riverbanks. Serj parked the Land Cruiser near the edge of the facility, and they both stepped out again, the heat finally starting to ease as the evening approached.

"Same story everywhere we go," Serj said, leaning against the vehicle and wiping the sweat from his brow. "Infrastructure's falling apart, no one's around to maintain it, and the people are left to fend for themselves."

Anya, her face thoughtful as she looked out over the river. "If these sites keep failing, it's only going to get worse. The political tensions are bad enough, but when people start starving and the land dies, it'll be chaos."

Serj crossed his arms, his eyes narrowing as he surveyed the desolate landscape. "We need to get this intel back to the team. There's more going on here than just failing equipment."

Anya nodded in agreement, her mind already working through the next steps. "This isn't just about water shortages. Someone's either letting this happen on purpose, or they're causing it."

As they loaded back into the Land Cruiser and began the drive south, heading back to Bhaman, the tension between the crumbling infrastructure and the looming political disaster felt more real than ever. Whatever forces were at play, it was clear the region was teetering on the edge, and the clock was ticking.

Dave and Omar were already seated around the rough-hewn wooden table in the farmhouse when Serj and Anya returned. The sun had dipped low, casting a soft orange glow over the fields outside, the last vestiges of daylight retreating as the shadows lengthened. Inside, the air was cooler now, the thick heat of the day giving way to the cooler evening breeze that drifted through the open windows.

Serj tossed the Land Cruiser's keys onto the table as he sat down heavily, Anya following behind and pulling out her chair. Both of them wore the same look of exhaustion and frustration that Dave and Omar had felt earlier after their tour of the NGO offices.

"Well, looks like we weren't the only ones with a rough day," Dave said, glancing between the two. "What did you see out there?"

Serj ran a hand through his hair, sighing. "The water control sites we checked along the Ravi were deserted—empty buildings, gates rusting, no staff anywhere. It's like they've just abandoned them. No maintenance, no oversight. The water's barely flowing, and the places look like they haven't been touched in years."

Anya pulled out her tablet and setting it on the table. "It's strange, though. These control sites should be monitored, even if water levels are low. It's not just neglect—something feels off. The infrastructure's falling apart, but no one's even trying to fix it. And we're hearing the same story from locals—no support, no direction."

Omar shifted his elbows on the table. "Sounds like what we heard in the city. The NGOs are all overwhelmed, trying to keep people fed and hydrated, but they're fighting a losing battle. Farmers are abandoning their land, families are being forced out of their homes, and those who can't leave are on the brink of starvation."

Dave shook his head, leaning back in his chair. "This isn't just about drought. There's a sense that something's deliberately letting this happen—or worse, causing it."

There was a moment of silence, the weight of the day settling over the team as they considered the bleakness of the situation. They had seen the personal toll this crisis was taking, but now they were beginning to piece together something much larger, and far more deliberate.

Anya pulled out her phone and connected the call to Cecilia, who was back in the UK, monitoring their progress from afar. Her face appeared on the screen as the team gathered around the table, the soft glow of the device the only light in the room apart from the dim bulbs overhead.

"Good evening," Cecilia said, her voice crisp and clear. "I trust you've all had a productive day?"

Serj, speaking first. "We've got some concerning findings. The water control sites along the Ravi River are unmanned, infrastructure is falling apart, and the water levels are all over the place. We didn't see a single person maintaining the systems at any of the sites we visited."

Cecilia's brow furrowed. "Unmanned? That's unusual, even with the drought. There should at least be skeleton crews at those stations."

"Exactly," Anya said, tapping a few notes on her tablet. "And it's not just neglect. The equipment is in bad shape—decades of rust and wear, but no effort to fix any of it. Locals we spoke to say the staff left weeks ago and never came back."

Dave chimed in next. "Omar and I hit up a few NGO offices. The situation on the ground is bad. Families are being forced off their land, and those who can't leave are on the verge of starvation. The NGOs are doing their best, but they're stretched thin. The crisis is spiralling, and it's worse than we expected."

Cecilia sat back in her chair, processing the information. "So we've got abandoned control stations, erratic water releases, and a humanitarian disaster in the making. There's clearly something more going on here."

"That's our feeling," Dave added. "There's no logic to what's happening on the surface. The control stations being left unmanned doesn't make sense unless someone wants them that way. And the water—what little of it there is—seems to be going in the wrong directions, or just not going where it's needed."

Omar, "The only logical pattern is to follow the course of the water—or rather, the course it should be taking. There are sites further upriver we haven't checked yet, and those might give us a clearer picture of what's going on. But whatever's happening, it's being kept quiet."

Cecilia's face grew more serious. "If the water isn't going where it's supposed to, then we could be dealing with deliberate interference. We've already seen reports of political tensions escalating over water rights. This could be someone trying to exploit that. But without concrete proof, we're just speculating."

Serj folded his arms, his expression dark. "We don't need proof yet. We just need to keep digging."

Cecilia, "Agreed. Your next move should be to continue following the river north. Check the upstream control stations—those are crucial to regulating the flow throughout the entire region. If we're going to find a deliberate hand in this crisis, it's likely to be there."

Anya was already pulling up maps of the upper reaches of the Ravi. "There are a few critical stations north of here. If someone's tampering with the water supply, we'll find the evidence there."

"Be careful," Cecilia warned. "If someone is behind this, they'll know you're getting close. Don't take any unnecessary risks until we have more information."

The sense of urgency in the room sharpening. They had been gathering pieces of the puzzle all day, and now they had a direction—a course to follow.

As the call ended, the farmhouse fell into silence once again. Serj stood up, stretching his arms above his head. "We move out at first light."

Dave, pushing his chair back from the table. "We'll follow the water. Let's see where it takes us."

The team began to break off, each preparing for the next leg of their mission, but there was an unspoken understanding in the room. This crisis was bigger than any of them had anticipated, and now they were stepping into something deeper—something that, once uncovered, might change the entire balance of the region.

As the evening wore on, the team gathered around the farmhouse's dining table, a map of the Punjab region spread out in front of them, marked with their progress so far. The dim light from the single overhead bulb cast long shadows on the faces of the four operatives, their expressions focused as they discussed their next steps.

"We've only just scratched the surface," Dave said, tracing a finger along the meandering line of the Ravi River. "If we want to get to the bottom of

this, we're going to have to head much further north, deeper into the Punjab region, and possibly beyond."

Anya sat beside him, her tablet in hand, cross-referencing the map with satellite imagery. "We've already seen that the control stations in this area are unmanned and falling apart. The key infrastructure sites are upstream, but if things are really being tampered with, we're going to need to consider the possibility that the problem extends beyond Pakistan's borders."

Serj looked over the map, his face serious as he studied the route. "That means India. The Ravi crosses into Indian territory before coming back into Pakistan. If someone's diverting or withholding water, it could be happening on the other side. Getting close to those areas could be dangerous, but we can't rule it out."

Omar, sitting across from Serj, said thoughtfully, "If we cross into India, we'll need to be cautious. Relations between the two countries are tense enough as it is. We need to avoid drawing attention, especially if this crisis is being manipulated for political reasons. But if we can figure out what's happening on the Indian side, it might give us a clearer picture."

They all fell silent for a moment, considering the potential risk of crossing the border. The political landscape between India and Pakistan was fraught with tension, and even a minor misstep could turn their investigation into an international incident. But the mission had to move forward.

"We'll take both vehicles," Dave said finally. "That way, we can split up if necessary. Serj, you and Anya can stick to the sites on this side of the border, while Omar and I try to get a feel for what's happening near the crossing points."

Anya glanced up from her tablet, her mind already calculating the logistics. "We can triangulate our positions and stay in communication via secure channels. If anything happens, we regroup quickly. But we'll need to be discreet—no overt movement near the border until we have a solid lead."

Serj gave a sharp nod, his mind already focused on the tactical side of things. "We'll need to gather as much intel as we can before making any decisions about crossing into India. If the diversion of water is happening on the Indian side, we can't let it escalate into something that could blow back politically. But if we split up and cover more ground, we might find something that makes the picture clearer."

Omar studied the northernmost point of their route on the map. "There's a lot of sensitive ground up there. We'll need to keep a low profile, avoid any official border posts or patrols. If we're lucky, we might be able to find something on this side that points to where the real manipulation is happening."

The team continued to plot their course for the next hour, marking key sites along the Ravi where they would stop and investigate further. They discussed contingency plans for what to do if they encountered resistance—either from locals or border authorities—and how they would handle any unexpected developments.

As the night deepened, they made the decision to move out at first light. The plan was simple but flexible: follow the river further north, tracing its flow and investigating any signs of deliberate water diversion or tampering. They would keep an eye on both sides of the border, ready to split up and go deeper into Indian territory if necessary.

"Let's stay sharp," Dave said, pushing back from the table. "We're going into a delicate area, and the last thing we need is to get caught up in something bigger than water control. If anyone starts sniffing around, we back off."

Serj stood, crossing his arms as he looked down at the map one last time. "We'll get what we need. This is bigger than just a crisis—someone's playing with the balance of power, and it's going to get ugly if we don't stop it."

The tension in the room was palpable, but so was the resolve. They had all faced dangerous missions before, but this felt different. The stakes were higher, and the consequences of failure far-reaching.

The plan was set. In the morning, they would follow the Ravi, heading north. Whatever lay ahead—whether in Pakistan or across the border in India—would soon reveal itself.

As they all retired for the night, there was an unspoken understanding among them: the mission was entering its most critical phase, and there was no turning back.

8 Ravi

The team drove north, the Hilux and Land Cruiser rumbling steadily along the dusty roads that snaked beside the Ravi River. The further they travelled, the more the landscape revealed the depths of the crisis gripping the region. The once fertile farmlands, known for their lush green fields and vibrant crops, were now dry and desolate. Brown fields stretched out on either side of the river, where crops should have been thriving, now lay cracked and barren. It was clear the lifeblood of the land—the water—was no longer reaching those who needed it.

As they passed through small villages, the desperation was palpable. They saw women and children walking miles with containers in hand, their faces lined with exhaustion, gathering what little water they could find. Farm animals, emaciated from thirst and hunger, wandered aimlessly through fields that could no longer sustain them. Each stop along the way painted a picture of a region on the edge of collapse.

The more contact the team had with the local farmers and residents, the clearer the story became. Every water control station they stopped at told the same tale—rusted gates, abandoned buildings, and broken equipment. And every person they spoke to repeated the same complaint: no one from the government had been out to fix anything in months, if not years. The locals were angry, feeling abandoned by their own leaders. The dam infrastructure, once a symbol of progress and security, had become a source of resentment and bitterness.

"It's the same everywhere," Serj muttered, leaning against the Hilux as he wiped the sweat from his brow. "No maintenance, no oversight, no water. They're angry, and they have every right to be."

Anya, scanning the horizon where the river should have been wider, fuller. Instead, it was a mere trickle. "This isn't just neglect. It's something else. But the problem is bigger than just poor management."

Omar crouched down by the riverbank, dipping his fingers into the shallow water. The stream that was supposed to nourish this region barely covered the tips of his fingers. "This is all wrong," he said quietly. "The Ravi should be flowing at a much higher level, even with the drought conditions."

Dave stood a few feet away, his arms crossed as he surveyed the landscape. "We've travelled nearly the full length of the river on this side, and it's the same story. There's no water because there's no oversight. The stations are empty, the equipment is shot, and the people are on the brink of collapse."

They all knew what came next—the realisation they had been edging toward since they first set out. The problem wasn't just on the Pakistani side of the border. The team needed to figure out what was happening upstream, and that meant looking beyond Pakistan's borders.

By the time they reached the Indian border, the scene hadn't improved. The river at this crossing point was nothing more than a thin, sluggish stream, barely flowing at all. The same desperation filled the air, the same anger on the faces of those they passed. Entire communities were suffering—villages abandoned, fields starved of water, and lives being upended by forces outside their control.

Serj stepped out of the Land Cruiser, staring at the small trickle of water that wound its way through the cracked earth. He let out a long breath. "This is it. The water's being diverted, and the problem lies further upstream."

"Which means India," Omar said, standing beside him, his eyes scanning the horizon where the other side of the border loomed just out of reach.

Dave joined them, his face set in a grim line. "We're now facing a political constraint. We're sitting between two countries that already have a volatile history with one another. If the issue is on the Indian side, getting across and investigating is going to be a diplomatic nightmare."

Anya was standing nearby, her tablet in hand, trying to pull up satellite images of the upper reaches of the river. "There's definitely something happening up there. The water should be flowing back into Pakistan by now. Whatever's stopping it is on the other side, but crossing into India, even covertly, is risky."

The team fell silent for a moment, each of them aware of the delicate balance they were walking. India and Pakistan had a long and troubled history, especially when it came to territorial disputes and water rights. Any wrong move, and they could easily find themselves caught in the middle of something far bigger than just a water crisis.

Serj broke the silence, his voice low and serious. "We need to figure out what's happening, but we can't just march into India without a plan. If someone on their side is deliberately diverting the water, then this could escalate fast."

Dave crossed his arms, nodding slowly. "If we're going to do this, we need to tread lightly. This isn't just about water any more. This could trigger political fallout between two nuclear powers if we're not careful."

Omar straightened, looking at the team with a determined expression. "We've come this far. We know the problem's on the Indian side of the border. But we need to gather intel before we make any moves. We need to know who's behind this and why."

Anya glanced up from her tablet. "I'll keep scanning for activity on the Indian side. We need to know if there are any signs of military involvement, or if this is something else—maybe corporate interests or a local operation. But we'll have to be subtle."

Dave, feeling the weight of the next step in their mission settle over them. "We've got two countries, both suffering because of this water crisis. If we make the wrong move, we'll have more than just political tension on our hands."

The team gathered around the vehicles, knowing the next phase of their mission was going to require more than just investigative work—it would need diplomacy, caution, and precision. The water crisis was no longer just an environmental disaster. It was becoming a geopolitical nightmare, and they were right in the middle of it.

Serj spoke, his voice quiet but firm. "Whatever's happening on the Indian side, we need to figure it out before it's too late. If this keeps going, people on both sides of the border are going to suffer even more."

Each of them feeling the weight of responsibility. Their mission had become much more than just following the course of the river. Now, they were walking a tightrope between two nations, with lives hanging in the balance.

9 **Salal Dam**

The sirens blared like a scream across the landscape, their urgent wail cutting through the stillness of the late afternoon air. High above the Salal Dam, red warning lights flashed in sequence, reflecting off the cold steel and concrete as flood warning systems echoed throughout the surrounding towns and villages. The sound was unmistakable, a signal of imminent danger, and panic swept through the valley in an instant.

In the villages downstream, people scrambled to grab whatever belongings they could, a mad rush to save their lives and livelihoods. Children were lifted onto carts, bags hastily thrown together with whatever essentials could be carried. The bleating of livestock joined the cacophony, with goats, sheep, and cattle hurriedly prodded along dirt paths as farmers urged them toward higher ground. Old men shouted in panic, mothers held their children close, and families moved as fast as they could, glancing nervously back toward the river.

It started as a low, distant hiss that seemed to vibrate in the very air, a strange sound that travelled far, growing louder with each passing second. The sky above remained clear, the sun still hanging in the sky, oblivious to the disaster below. But then, the roar came—a sound so deafening and primal that it silenced everything else, even the panic. The wall of water was visible now, dark and enormous, rushing down the dry bed of the Chenab River with terrifying speed.

The dam had given way, releasing millions of cubic meters of water, which had built up behind the structure like a giant hand pressing down on a trapped world. The water, desperate to escape, surged forward with unstoppable fury. The parched, cracked riverbed, dry for so long, barely had time to register the change before it was swallowed whole. What had once been a thin, lifeless trickle was now a thundering torrent.

The wave hit the dry riverbed with the force of a hammer, turning dust and rocks into swirling, churning chaos. The first few seconds were a horrifying transformation—a wide, empty stretch of earth becoming a raging, unstoppable monster. Trees along the banks snapped like twigs, pulled from their roots as the water rushed past. The brown, thirsty earth that had once stretched for miles was now a dark, frothing mass of water.

The flood raced forward, following the natural curves of the Chenab River, but it was far too much for the riverbanks to contain. Villages along the river that had endured months of drought now faced the exact opposite nightmare. The water came fast, crashing over the banks, spilling into fields and streets, sweeping away everything in its path.

In one small town, the water hit with no mercy. The first to go were the hastily constructed huts nearest to the river, their wooden frames shattering like matchsticks as the flood roared through. Entire homes were lifted from their foundations and swept downstream, pieces of corrugated metal, broken wood, and personal belongings tumbling in the foaming current. The streets turned into rivers themselves, carrying along debris, livestock, and the occasional overturned vehicle.

People screamed and clung to whatever they could find—trees, rooftops, the remains of their homes—trying to escape the terrifying rush of water. Mothers clutched their children as they waded through the rising waters, the current threatening to pull them under with every step. The animals, once so carefully guided by their herders, were now caught in the flood, their panicked cries lost beneath the thunderous roar of the river. Cattle floated aimlessly, some dragged down by the torrent, while others somehow managed to swim to higher ground.

Further downstream, the situation was no better. The flood followed the natural course of the river, but with every village and town it reached, it overwhelmed the banks, surging into streets and homes. Fields that had been cracked and brown for months were instantly submerged, and while the arrival of water might have been a dream in another world, in this one

it was a nightmare. The river swelled beyond recognition, its banks bursting as the floodwater spilled out, carrying destruction with it.

In Pakistan, where the Ravi and Chenab rivers joined, the flood compounded an already fragile situation. Dams and control stations, long neglected and crumbling, stood no chance against the force of the water. Entire towns were engulfed in the flood, the water tearing through everything in its path. Fields once starved of irrigation were now covered in a deluge that drowned everything, turning the landscape into a sea of mud, debris, and swirling water.

Villages that had endured the drought were now under siege by the very thing they had prayed for—water. The floodwaters spilled into homes, markets, and mosques, sweeping away the lives of the people who had called these places home. Families rushed to higher ground, but many were caught by the rising waters, their belongings lost, their livelihoods swept away in an instant.

The flood rushed onward, moving deeper into Pakistan, where the effects of the drought had already crippled the region. Fields that had once been dry and desolate were now submerged, and though the water brought life, it also brought chaos. The banks of the river, long dry and cracked, crumbled under the pressure, turning the flow into an uncontrollable torrent that stretched far beyond its natural path.

The impact of the flood was felt everywhere it touched. People watched in horror as their homes, their land, and their futures disappeared beneath the dark, swirling water. And even as the flood continued to rage, sweeping through town after town, the devastation left in its wake was only the beginning. The Ravi and Chenab rivers, once the source of life for millions, had now become the harbingers of disaster.

And as the water surged further south, it was clear that the consequences of this disaster would be felt for a long time to come.

In the dimly lit control centre of the dam, tension hung in the air, thick and palpable. The low hum of machinery and the distant rumble of water filled the room, but all eyes were on the tall, imposing man who stood at the centre of the chaos, his presence commanding and unwavering. He was dressed in dark military combat gear, the kind designed for stealth and efficiency. His strong jawline and sharp features, framed by his close-cropped grey hair, gave him the appearance of a man accustomed to authority and precision. This was his theatre of operations, and here, he was in his element.

The Pakistani officer standing before him delivered the report with the stiff posture of a man who knew the weight of his words. His voice was steady, but there was an edge to it, as if he understood the enormity of the operation they had just set into motion.

"The detonation went exactly as the engineers had designed," the officer reported, his eyes flicking nervously to the control monitors that showed the roaring flood of water surging down the river. "The water is being released as planned."

The tall man, who had yet to move from his position in the centre of the room, stared intently at the screens. His face was unreadable, eyes cold as they tracked the progress of the flood. The soldiers and engineers in the room kept their distance, sensing the quiet power in the man's presence. He had the air of someone who was always in control, always several steps ahead.

The officer continued, his voice growing quieter. "Further down the Chenab on the Indian side, their flood defences seem to be holding. It's minimising the damage on their side, but it's directing the majority of the flow into Pakistan."

For a moment, the room fell silent, the only sound the relentless roar of water crashing through the dam's now-empty gates. The air was thick with the understanding of what had just been set in motion. The deliberate

release of water was no accident. This was an act of precision—calculated and brutal.

The tall man, still watching the screens, finally spoke. His voice was deep, steady, and carried a quiet authority. "You've done well."

The officer, standing at attention, nodded sharply, relief flickering across his face. "Thank you, sir."

Without turning his gaze from the screens, the man added, "Gather your men for extraction."

"Yes, sir," the officer replied immediately, snapping into action. He turned on his heel, already moving to carry out the order.

As the officer left, the stranger remained in place, his gaze never wavering from the flood unfolding before him. The water was doing exactly what it had been engineered to do—unleashing devastation. On the Indian side, the flood defences had held, as predicted. But on the Pakistani side, where they had allowed neglect and weakness to fester, the damage would be immense. Entire towns and villages would be underwater, lives would be destroyed, and chaos would reign.

This was his theatre. The destruction, the chaos, the carefully orchestrated flood—it was all part of a greater plan, one that he controlled. Dressed in combat gear, he looked every bit the military tactician he was. But even in a suit, he was just as dangerous, his presence just as commanding. Here, though, amidst the noise and the chaos, was where he thrived.

The mission was unfolding perfectly. Now it was time for the next move.

The AW139 helicopter ascended into the sky with a steady roar, its rotors cutting through the air as it carried the Pakistani demolition force away from the dam. Inside, the soldiers sat in silence, their mission complete, the weight of their actions still fresh in their minds. The valley below seemed

peaceful from this height, but they knew the destruction they had left in their wake.

On the ground, the tall stranger stood motionless for a moment, watching the helicopter climb higher. The whirl of the rotors became faint as it moved further into the distance. Without a word, he reached into the back of his dark SUV and pulled out the heavy Igla-S, a shoulder-mounted man-portable air defence system. The weapon was smooth and familiar in his hands as he brought it up to his shoulder.

He knelt slightly, adjusting his position, his cold, calculating eyes locked on the helicopter's path. The Igla-S, with its laser guidance system, hummed quietly as he lined up his shot. He exhaled slowly, his movements deliberate and precise, before squeezing the trigger.

The missile shot from the tube with a deafening roar, tearing through the air at blistering speed. Its guidance system locked onto the helicopter's heat signature, following its path with deadly accuracy. There was no escape.

The projectile streaked toward the AW139, slicing through the sky in a blur. The soldiers inside the helicopter had no time to react before the missile made contact. The explosion ripped through the aircraft with a thunderous blast, sending flaming wreckage spiralling through the air. Metal fragments and debris scattered across the sky as the burning remains of the AW139 plummeted toward the ground.

The fiery wreckage crashed down in scattered pieces, a twisted mass of flaming metal and smoke marking the end of the Pakistani demolition force. The valley that had been filled with the sound of rushing water and the hum of rotors was now silent, save for the crackling of fire far below.

The tall stranger lowered the now-empty tube, his face impassive as he watched the aftermath. There was no emotion in his eyes, no sign of satisfaction or remorse. This was just another task, another loose end tied up.

Without a second glance at the wreckage, he discarded the empty launch tube on the ground, its purpose served. He walked with the same cold, deliberate steps to his dark SUV parked nearby. The door clicked shut as he climbed inside, the vehicle starting up with a low rumble.

As he drove off, the tail lights of the SUV fading into the distance, the sky behind him was marked by a plume of thick black smoke—a final reminder of the destruction he had orchestrated, and the ruthless precision with which he operated.

10 Wrong Place

Dave slammed his fist onto the table, the force rattling the cups and papers strewn about. "We were in the wrong place!" His voice was sharp with frustration, his mind still racing through the events of the last few days. He couldn't shake the sense that they had missed something crucial, that all the signs were right there, but they had focused on the wrong target.

Cecilia's face on the video call remained composed, though her eyes carried the same intensity that gripped the team in the farmhouse. "The situation is grim," she said, her voice steady despite the gravity of the briefing. "Pakistan is going from drought to flood, and it's happening while we're on the ground. The official reports are already coming in, and they're blaming a rogue Pakistani military operation attempting to restore water to the region."

Serj leaned back in his chair, arms crossed, his brow furrowed in thought. "That seems highly unlikely," he said, his voice low but firm. "This looks like an orchestrated series of events. The drought, the starvation along the Ravi—it all seems like a misdirection. The real target is the Chenab."

Cecilia, picking up from where Serj left off. "You're right, Serj. But the cover-up is solid. Official sources are pushing the narrative hard. There's clear evidence: Pakistani troops in the area, the helicopter wreckage, orders found among the remains, and records of the flight taking off from a military base. It's all there, and it points directly at Pakistan."

Anya, who had been quietly tapping away at her tablet, suddenly looked up. "Whoever's behind this knows how to play the game," she said, her voice sharp. "They're covering their tracks perfectly. All the pieces fit, but they fit too well. It's like it's been staged, the narrative handed to the media on a silver platter."

Cecilia's expression darkened. "Exactly. The mismanaged water control systems we've been chasing were only part of the plan—to control the

story and distract us. This has all the hallmarks of a 'false flag' operation. The misdirection, the perfectly planted evidence, the convenient loose ends all leading to one conclusion. But the real culprit? Nowhere to be found."

There was a pause, the weight of her words sinking in. The room in the farmhouse fell silent as the team processed the complexity of the situation. Whoever had orchestrated this had pulled off something truly insidious—creating a crisis that seemed natural, almost inevitable, and using it to manipulate the geopolitical landscape.

"So what's our next move?" Cecilia asked, her voice cutting through the silence.

Dave leaned over the table, his eyes scanning the map of the region spread out in front of them. His mind raced through possibilities, but the answer seemed just out of reach.

Anya spoke up first. "We need to follow the money. This scale of operation, the technology, the precision—all of it requires resources. Whoever orchestrated this false flag isn't doing it for free."

Serj, his voice calm but with an edge of determination. "It's not just about water. The flood's been engineered, but the motive—someone stands to gain from this chaos. If they're destabilising the region, it's about power and control. We need to trace whoever's benefiting from the fallout, not just the disaster."

Cecilia's face flickered for a moment as she considered the team's suggestions. "That makes sense. There's something bigger at play here—someone is pushing this region toward a larger conflict, maybe even trying to ignite tensions between India and Pakistan."

Omar, who had been quietly thinking, finally spoke. "If this is about more than just the water, then we need to consider the broader picture. It's not just about where the flood's headed—it's about who stands to benefit from

the devastation on both sides of the border. And if this is a false flag, then whoever orchestrated it will try to profit from the chaos."

Cecilia, her expression sharpening. "Then let's follow the trail. We need to gather intel on anyone—corporations, politicians, or even military figures—who could stand to gain from destabilising this region. Someone has their hand in this, and we're going to find out who."

Dave exhaled, the frustration easing slightly as the path ahead became clearer. "Agreed. We've been playing catch-up so far, but now we know the game. We'll split up—Anya can dig into financials and communications traffic, Omar and I will keep investigating the flood impacts and talk to people in the region. Serj, you should see if you can track any potential contractors or military groups who could have been involved in setting this up."

Serj, his expression hardening. "If this was orchestrated, someone on the ground had to facilitate it. I'll find out who."

Cecilia's voice cut through with a final note of urgency. "Time is critical. Every second we lose, the narrative gets further out of control. I'll keep pressure on our contacts, but you need to move fast. Whoever's behind this won't stop here."

The video call ended, and the farmhouse returned to silence. The team exchanged glances, the enormity of the task ahead pressing down on them. They were no longer just chasing a water crisis—they were racing against a carefully orchestrated plan to plunge the region into chaos.

Dave clenched his fists, his frustration channelled into a renewed sense of purpose. "Alright," he said, his voice steady now. "We've need a target. Then we take this operation apart, piece by piece."

The stakes were higher than ever, but they were ready to meet the challenge head-on. The truth was out there, and they were going to find it—no matter what it took.

11 BlueWave Systems

Anya settled onto the worn couch in the farmhouse, the faint hum of her laptop filling the otherwise quiet room. The glow of the screen reflected off her face as she dove into the digital abyss, fingers flying over the keyboard as she searched for the one thread that could unravel the entire situation. The task before her was monumental—finding out who stood to gain the most from this disaster, from the drought to the flood, and everything in between. It was like looking for a needle in a pile of needles, but Anya was used to that. This was her battlefield.

As the hours passed, her search began to reveal the usual suspects—corporations, government agencies, and opportunistic middlemen who capitalised on misery and disaster. The first wave of vultures came into view easily enough. Organisations swooping in to buy up drowned properties and farmlands for next to nothing, waiting for the day the waters would recede so they could flip the land for a profit. It was predictable. These companies were always ready to exploit tragedy for a quick buck.

But Anya knew this wasn't just about land speculation. That was too small. What they were facing was something bigger, something deeper. She continued scrolling through records, financial reports, property acquisitions, and board member lists, cross-referencing names, dates, and patterns. Her brow furrowed as she worked, pushing deeper into the labyrinth of data.

Her instincts kicked in—there was always a bigger player in the shadows. The corporations she'd found were vultures, yes, but there was something else at play here. These weren't just land grabs. They were too coordinated, too widespread.

The further she dug, the clearer it became. Massive corporate entities, some with innocuous names and others with histories of playing both sides of political conflicts, had begun to surface. Anya cross-checked names she

was familiar with—companies involved in infrastructure development, energy, and global water projects. They all had one thing in common: their ability to profit from long-term instability. The corporations stepping in now were waiting for the dust to settle—once the damage was done, they could rebuild everything... for a price.

But that still wasn't enough. Sure, these companies profited from the misery, from the inevitable reconstruction. But who profited the most? Anya's fingers hesitated over the keyboard. This disaster was unfolding on both sides of the border between India and Pakistan, two nations with an already strained relationship. And the flood was affecting more than just local farmers or regional businesses.

She started pulling records on water rights, irrigation projects, and—crucially—defence contractors. As she delved deeper into these reports, a chilling pattern emerged. Companies that supplied infrastructure also supplied military-grade equipment. Firms that focused on irrigation technologies were somehow linked to arms dealers with contracts spanning multiple continents.

The needle in the pile of needles suddenly sharpened.

The companies benefitting most from this situation weren't just buying up land—they were connected to entities that profited from war and political instability. Anya's stomach churned as she realised what she was looking at. These companies weren't just in it for the land or the water. They were profiting from both sides being pushed closer to the brink of conflict. If tensions between India and Pakistan escalated—if skirmishes turned into war—these companies would make billions, both from the sale of weapons and from the contracts to rebuild the devastated regions afterward.

She pulled up a new set of files, tracing funds from these entities to political figures and regional power brokers. The money moved in predictable ways, funding both political campaigns and covert operations, greasing the wheels of local governments and military leaders alike. The

deeper she went, the more names popped up—offshore accounts, shadow companies, and even government officials who stood to gain personally from the chaos.

Anya's fingers hovered over the keyboard as she sifted through a vast network of organisations, searching for something more subtle than the massive corporate players. Her instincts told her this false flag operation wasn't being orchestrated openly; the real culprits would be hidden behind layers of subsidiary companies and seemingly legitimate operations. She narrowed her focus, concentrating on the construction sector—an industry that thrives on disaster, where devastation is simply another opportunity for profit.

It wasn't long before she found something—an Indian-based construction firm, BlueWave Systems, prominent in large-scale civil engineering projects. On the surface, BlueWave Systems appeared to be an ordinary company, specialising in rebuilding flood defences, roadways, and infrastructure damaged by natural disasters. "Look at this," Anya highlighted a series of transactions. "Three shell companies in the Cayman Islands - Watermark Holdings, Blue Horizon Limited, and Crown Infrastructure Partners - each contributed exactly \$50 million to BlueWave on March 15th. The same day, BlueWave secured a \$150 million contract for the Ravi flood defence system. The numbers are too neat, too coordinated."

BlueWave Systems, a subsidiary of the multinational Sovereign Infrastructure Group, had built its reputation on disaster recovery. They were always first on the scene after a crisis, rebuilding essential infrastructure - and making a fortune in the process. Their connections to international development banks gave them unprecedented access to lucrative government contracts.

What immediately caught her attention was BlueWave's recent expansion into northern India, particularly along the Ravi and Chenab rivers, where they had secured lucrative government contracts to bolster flood defences

and reinforce dam structures. These projects were publicly framed as preventive measures, a way for India to protect its water resources in the face of climate change and increasing droughts. But Anya's gut told her there was more at play.

BlueWave had acquired four major flood defence contracts worth \$2.3 billion in the past eight months alone. They'd outbid established contractors by impossible margins - sometimes 40% below market rate. Their latest acquisition, the Chenab River Protection Project, had been fast-tracked through regulatory approval in just six days - a process that typically took six months. Their contracts were fast-tracked, suspiciously so, and they were working on both sides of the Indian border near where the water from the Ravi and Chenab rivers flowed into Pakistan. The fact that BlueWave had such a significant presence in a sensitive area, where control of the water flow could directly affect both nations, set off alarm bells.

BlueWave's involvement in Indian flood defence construction seemed innocent at first, but the more Anya pieced it together, the more she realised they stood to gain the most from this disaster—particularly if the chaos spread to Pakistan. Their contracts had ballooned in recent months, with substantial bonuses tied to "emergency provisions" if any flooding occurred. This meant that, with the flood now unleashed, they would be one of the primary beneficiaries, especially since the Ravi and Chenab rivers were critical to both sides of the border. The more damage the flood caused in Pakistan, the more lucrative BlueWave's reconstruction efforts would become.

"They're positioning themselves perfectly." Anya highlighted a series of transaction dates. "Look at this pattern. Flood defences in India, reconstruction in Pakistan... they're playing both sides of this."

Dave, seated across from her, moving slightly forward. "Who's pulling the strings?" Dave demanded, immediately suspicious of the digital trail.

"BlueWave Systems," Anya replied, she'd seen this pattern before in her intelligence work. They're prominent in flood defence and reconstruction work, and they've already secured major contracts along the Ravi and Chenab rivers. BlueWave are making a fortune off these flood defences in India, but here's the kicker—if the flood hits Pakistan harder, they're lined up to rebuild everything that gets destroyed. They profit from both sides."

Serj studied the files, his military training recognising the tactical pattern. "So, while the flood devastates one country, they're bolstering the defences in the other. And when the waters recede, they move in and make a killing on the reconstruction."

Anya confirmed, "Exactly. They've positioned themselves to profit no matter how bad things get. And what's worse, their involvement in these flood defences makes it look like they're part of the solution. But in reality, they've got every incentive to ensure that the devastation continues—because the worse it gets, the more they profit."

Omar, who had been quietly listening, spoke up. "This doesn't sound like a coincidence. If they've been planting themselves in these areas, taking over contracts, and securing deals this quickly, they must have known something was coming."

Calling Cecilia back in to appraise her of the developments, she asks, "Anya, are there any direct ties between BlueWave Systems and the recent dam explosion?"

Anya tapped a few keys, scanning the files. "Nothing that blatant yet. They've kept their hands clean publicly, but given the scope of their involvement, it's hard to believe they didn't anticipate something like this. The contracts for the flood defences were fast-tracked right before this happened. Whoever's pulling the strings, BlueWave Systems is clearly benefiting the most."

Cecilia moved towards the screen. "Then that's where we start. Follow BlueWave Systems and see if we can link them to any other operations in

the region. They might not have directly caused the flood, but they're certainly cashing in on it."

Dave clenched his jaw. "So this is bigger than just water shortages and mismanagement. It's about controlling the recovery, too."

Anya, already diving back into the digital trail. "BlueWave is just the start. There's a bigger web here, and I'm going to pull every string until we find out who's really behind this."

Cecilia added firmly, "This may be the first domino. Keep digging. We need more than speculation to act, but we're getting closer."

As Anya continued her search, the team began to see the larger picture forming. BlueWave was a player in this game, but there were bigger forces behind them, manipulating the situation from the shadows. The flood, the drought, the chaos—it was all part of a calculated plan, and they were only just beginning to uncover its full scope.

Anya's fingers danced over the keyboard, her eyes fixed on the screen as lines of data scrolled past. The farmhouse was quiet, the team gathered around, waiting for the next piece of the puzzle to fall into place. She furrowed her brow, deep in concentration, as she peeled back the layers of BlueWave's corporate structure.

"This isn't your usual construction-based shell company." Anya's fingers stilled on the keyboard. "The corporate structure is too perfect. Whoever is behind this knows how to bury their roots deep. As far as I can trace, it looks like a legitimate construction business—contracts, funding, everything in order. International backing from a string of businesses, mostly clean."

Dave, standing by the window with his arms crossed, glanced over at her. "But?"

Anya leaned back, rubbing her temples. "But there are traces I can't follow. Gaps. Dead ends. And that's odd. Everything I've dug into so far is clean on

the surface—clean enough to pass audits, clean enough to fool anyone not paying attention. But when I try to go further—into their funding sources, offshore accounts, or some of their subcontractors—I hit walls."

Serj shifted closer, his shadow falling across the screen. "What do you mean by walls? You're not one to get stopped by something as simple as a corporate structure."

Anya shook her head, clearly frustrated. "That's exactly the problem. The walls aren't simple—they're intentional. It's like someone has gone out of their way to hide the true ownership behind this company. It's too clean, too well-organised. There are layers of intermediaries, foreign bank accounts routed through low-tax countries, and shell companies funding BlueWave. Whoever built this web is good. Really good."

Omar straightened in his chair, his experience with regional politics setting off warning bells. "So you're saying there's more to this company than meets the eye? It's more than just a construction firm."

Anya, her fingers tapping on the desk. "Definitely. The company is real—contracts, infrastructure projects, flood defences—but it's what's behind it that doesn't add up. For one, they've been getting huge international funding from companies that don't seem connected on paper. They're not your typical investors. Some are small holding firms based in places like the Cayman Islands or Luxembourg, but every time I try to trace them further, the trail goes cold."

Cecilia, listening in on the video call, interjected. "Do you think it's a front? A legitimate operation on the surface, but covering up something else?"

"That's what it's starting to look like." Anya pulled up another window of financial data. "These transactions are too clean. It's a construction business, sure. But they're too connected. No normal construction company, even a big one, has these kinds of financial layers—especially not one that's taken over major projects in such a short time. And these

gaps in their records? It feels deliberate, like someone's intentionally covering their tracks."

Dave straightened, his mind racing. "They've been securing flood defence contracts, building up infrastructure... Could they be orchestrating the disaster on both sides, just to profit from the aftermath? If they're playing both sides, the more damage there is, the more they stand to gain."

Anya's fingers flew over the keyboard again. "It's more than that. They're poised to step in after the flood for major reconstruction efforts. But the strange part is, their funding increased significantly in the months leading up to the flood. It's like someone knew this was coming. They had everything in place—contracts lined up, financing secured—before the crisis even hit. They've been preparing for this."

Serj narrowed his eyes. "It's a classic misdirection play. The Ravi drought was just the distraction, and the real action was always going to be with the Chenab. They've put themselves in the perfect position to rebuild everything that gets destroyed."

Anya kept her focus on the screen, her jaw tightening. "Exactly. And here's the kicker—there are traces of larger interests pulling the strings, but whoever's behind this is hiding in plain sight. They've used a combination of legitimate business and clever obfuscation to make sure no one asks the wrong questions. The company's clean enough that no one would suspect a thing unless they were really digging."

Analysing the pattern, Serj interjected. "They're establishing forward positions - securing key infrastructure points before the main operation. Classic preparation for territory control."

With regional experience Omar said, "These contract locations - they're all at critical water junction points between the two countries. They're creating pressure points they can exploit later."

Dave connected it to their field observations. "That explains the abandoned water stations we saw. They weren't just neglected - they were deliberately left vulnerable."

Anya glanced up, her eyes narrowing. "I'm going to keep digging, but it's not going to be easy. Whatever this is, it's big. They've buried themselves deep, and they've covered their tracks well. But if I can trace even one of these financial links back to its source, we'll know who's really behind all this."

Cecilia's voice was firm. "Good. Keep following the money. Whoever's pulling the strings, they've gone to great lengths to hide their involvement. But we need to expose them before they can do more damage. Time's running out, and the region is already destabilising."

Dave slammed his fist onto the table, but this time with a sense of purpose. "We're close. Too close for them to keep hiding. Let's rip the mask off."

Anya, determination in her eyes. "I'll find them. Whoever they are, they won't be hiding for long."

With that, she dove back into the digital underworld, determined to unravel the layers of deception behind BlueWave Systems. The trail was cold now, but she was certain it would lead her to something bigger. Something far more dangerous than a simple construction firm.

12 Lodhi Garden

Arvind Rajan, a man in his mid-50s, held the powerful position of Union Minister of Water Resources, a role that placed him at the heart of India's critical water management policies. Known for his sharp intellect and political savvy, Arvind had risen through the ranks with a combination of charm, pragmatism, and an ability to forge strategic alliances. His reputation as a man who got things done, even if it meant bending the rules, had earned him both admiration and resentment within the government. With India's water crisis deepening, his decisions carried weight far beyond the halls of power.

As India's Union Minister, Arvind's responsibilities extended over the vital rivers and water systems that sustained the country's agricultural and industrial sectors. His signature was required on every major deal involving water infrastructure, from dam projects to international negotiations over shared water resources. It was a job that made him indispensable—and vulnerable. The political and economic pressures were immense, and it had made him a prime target for corporations and foreign interests looking to exploit the country's need for better infrastructure.

Dawn at Lodhi Garden brought the scent of jasmine and damp earth. Ancient tombs rose between well-kept flowerbeds, their weathered stones a reminder of power's impermanence.

Arvind Rajan sat on a bench beneath the shade of a large tree, the leaves providing a natural canopy from the growing heat of the day. He had come to Lodhi Garden many times before, usually for moments like this, when he needed to clear his head. As a young man, he would walk these same paths with his friends, debating the politics of the day or discussing their ambitions. On weekends, he had brought his family here for picnics, his children laughing as they chased each other through the manicured lawns. Those were happier times—simple and carefree, when the world seemed full of promise.

But today was different. Today, Arvind had come here for a far more serious purpose. His eyes scanned the park, making sure there were no followers. He had been careful on his way over, changing cars twice and taking a route through the crowded streets of New Delhi to lose anyone who might have been tailing him. The journey had been long, both physically and mentally, from the clean, air-conditioned offices of his world to the hot, messy streets that now felt suffocating. He felt the weight of his decisions pressing down on him as he sat, his heart heavy with doubt.

The park was peaceful, as always, but Arvind's mind was far from it. He could see the ancient tomb of Sikander Lodi in the distance, a reminder of how history has a way of repeating itself. People passed by in the distance—joggers, elderly couples on morning walks, and a few stray tourists taking photos of the monuments. They were oblivious to the weight of the meeting about to take place.

Suddenly, a tall figure emerged from the shade of the trees, moving toward him with the kind of deliberate calm that put Arvind instantly on edge. The stranger was impeccably dressed, casual but with an undeniable air of wealth. His clothes were light and perfectly suited to the weather, the fabrics looking expensive even in their simplicity. Arvind felt a nervous knot tighten in his stomach as the man approached.

The tall stranger came to a stop in front of him, a shadow cast over Arvind's seated form. "Shall we walk?" the stranger asked smoothly, his voice calm but authoritative.

Arvind hesitated but stood up, wiping his palms on his trousers to rid himself of the sudden moisture. They began to walk slowly along the path, the sounds of the park fading into the background as Arvind's thoughts raced. He could feel his heart pounding in his chest, his mind replaying the past few weeks. Before he could stop himself, the words tumbled out.

"The scale of the disaster is much bigger than was expected," Arvind blurted, his voice shaky. "We should not have done this."

The stranger didn't miss a beat, his voice as smooth and calm as before. "But you did."

They continued walking, the gravel crunching softly underfoot. The stranger turned his head slightly, casting Arvind a brief, unreadable glance. "Your concerns now," he continued, "are how to address the situation. You should ensure the narrative sticks—that it was all the fault of Pakistani actions. Then you should continue with the plans to redevelop and repair the damage. Salal will be bigger than before, and no more concerns about efficiency. Your country will benefit greatly."

Arvind swallowed hard. The stranger made it sound so simple, but he couldn't shake the images of devastation he had seen on the news—the flooded villages, the ruined lives. "But not as much as your construction contracts for handling the works," Arvind countered, his voice tinged with bitterness.

The stranger's lips curled into a faint smile. "But we will create jobs and income for local workers for many years to come. What you have done here is applaudable."

Arvind felt a wave of nausea at the word applaudable. How could this be considered a success when so many had lost everything? "But the cost of all those ruined lives!" he burst out. "Was it worth it?"

The stranger's expression remained calm, almost amused. "Your bank balance should adequately counter the weight of your conscience. But, let's not get too emotional."

Arvind's hands trembled slightly, though he tried to hide it. The stranger's cold indifference chilled him to the core. He had known from the beginning that this deal was dangerous, but he had convinced himself it was a necessary evil. Now, standing here, he wasn't so sure.

"I need you to start moving on signing off the contracts," the stranger continued, his tone growing firmer. "Move this forward immediately."

Arvind nodded mechanically, though his mind was still reeling. He could feel the stranger's eyes on him, and the weight of his words pressed down on him like a vice. There was no turning back now, no way to undo what had been set in motion.

As they walked on through the quiet beauty of the garden, Arvind couldn't help but wonder how he had let it come to this.

The disaster with the Salal Dam had thrown Arvind into a moral crisis. On the one hand, he had the power to shape the future of India's water security, but on the other, he was being manipulated by forces he could barely control. The deal he had made, one that promised wealth and stability for India's water systems, now felt like a betrayal of the very people he had sworn to serve.

13 Guwahati

Omar pushed away from the laptop, rubbing his eyes. The fan overhead barely stirred the humid air of their temporary command post. "Something's not right here," he muttered, returning to the shipping manifest glowing on the screen. "BlueWave organised this weeks before the disaster. They knew something was coming."

Through the open window, a passing rickshaw's horn pierced the night, making Anya flinch as she leaned over his shoulder. Her finger traced the circuitous route on the map. "Myanmar?" A frown creased her forehead. "Why risk those borders when Mumbai's right there?"

"Exactly." Omar pulled up another window, cross-referencing port documentation. The street below erupted in rapid-fire Hindi as two vendors argued over territory. "Yangon to North-East India... it's like they're trying to make this as complicated as possible."

"Or as untraceable as possible," Anya added. She straightened, pacing the small room. The wooden floorboards creaked beneath her feet as she thought it through. "Myanmar's ports have a reputation. The right bribes, the right connections..."

"And suddenly paperwork becomes very flexible." Omar's voice was grim. The manifest claimed industrial supplies—piping, machinery. But the route told a different story.

Serj, who had been silently watching from the shadows by the window, finally spoke. "You don't snake through mountain passes and dodge customs unless you're hiding something." His eyes followed a military convoy rumbling past on the street below, the contrast between official and unofficial movements not lost on him. "Myanmar's perfect if you don't want questions asked."

Omar, "That's what's troubling me. This isn't just a shady shipment of machinery. It's a massive convoy—trucks, and even a small military escort, according to the paperwork. This kind of movement would be hard to conceal, even in remote areas. But it makes you wonder what they're really moving. If BlueWave is involved, they might be using the cover of this disaster to smuggle something far more dangerous."

Anya pulled up a map of military checkpoints and known smuggling routes in the region. "If they're bringing something into India that needs a military escort, it's more than just pipes and tools. This could be heavy weaponry, or worse, something that could destabilise the region even further. And considering the timing—right after the disaster at Salal—it's clear that this isn't a coincidence. The convoy's route and the type of cargo make it too suspicious to ignore."

Serj crossed his arms, his voice low but firm. "We need to get eyes on this convoy. If they're bringing something across the border that's as dangerous as it sounds, we can't let it slip through. The question is, how do we intercept it without tipping them off? And more importantly, what's the real destination for this shipment? Siliguri might just be a stop on the way to something bigger."

Omar was relentless, working through the night, digging deeper into the web of social connections. Using old-fashioned social engineering, he made call after call, patiently chasing down every lead. He spoke with local traders, former border patrols, and truck stop regulars, all trying to gather scraps of information about the convoy. Most of the leads went nowhere—dead ends that left him frustrated—but then, almost by chance, he caught a break. A driver's brother-in-law knew a guy, who happened to live in the same village as the aunt of one of the border workers. And while it sounded more like a rumour than fact, Omar's instincts told him this was the lead he had been waiting for.

After several more conversations, Omar pieced together the critical detail: the convoy was due to stop in Guwahati within the next five days. The

large convoy, carrying suspicious cargo under the guise of BlueWave manufacturing supplies, would need to rest up there before continuing its journey deeper into India. It was the kind of information the team needed to act on quickly.

They gathered around the table at the farmhouse, briefing Cecilia over video call. "It's our best lead yet," Omar said, leaning forward. "The convoy's moving fast, but they're scheduled to hit Guwahati soon. If we move now, we can be there before they arrive."

Cecilia's face set in determination. "I'll arrange a private flight from Lahore. You'll have diplomatic passes, so you can carry as much gear as you need—just make sure it's concealed. We'll cover you on this end."

Within hours, everything was in motion. The team boarded a private jet from Lahore, flying under diplomatic credentials that allowed them to bypass most of the usual headaches with customs and security. The plane was quiet as they flew across the night sky, each team member focused on the mission ahead. The hum of the engines provided a steady backdrop as they sat with their thoughts. Dave and Serj were checking their concealed weaponry, ensuring everything was packed carefully and ready for the moment they touched down.

Anya was on her tablet, reviewing satellite images and maps of Guwahati, while Omar rested with his eyes closed, mentally running through the next steps. Guwahati was a sprawling city on the banks of the Brahmaputra River, a major hub for trade and transport, but also a place where large convoys like the one they were tracking could easily go unnoticed in the chaos of daily traffic.

As the plane descended toward Lokpriya Gopinath Bordoloi International Airport, the city lights of Guwahati twinkled below, a stark contrast to the quiet landscape of Lahore they had left behind. The team's gear had been packed carefully—everything from surveillance equipment to their

personal weapons stashed in diplomatic crates to ensure they wouldn't raise any alarms.

Upon landing, the team moved efficiently, clearing customs with little more than a nod thanks to their diplomatic passes. They had arranged for a local contact to provide discreet transportation, and within minutes of stepping off the plane, they were in a nondescript van, heading toward the city.

Guwahati was buzzing with life, even at this late hour. The air was thick and humid, carrying the distinct smells of street food and petrol fumes. Rickshaws honked their way through narrow streets, while market stalls still bustled with activity. The city seemed alive in a way that felt both energising and disorienting after their long flight.

"We need to find a place to stay and stash our gear," Dave said, his eyes scanning the streets. "Somewhere off the radar but close enough to the city centre that we can move quickly."

The search for accommodation took them deeper into Guwahati's maze-like streets. Their van crawled past endless rows of shops closing for the night, metal shutters clanging down one by one. The air was thick with the competing aromas of street food—sizzling momos from a corner stall, the sharp tang of chilli and garlic from a late-night dhaba.

Omar spotted what they needed: a grimy three-story hotel set back from the main road, its neon sign flickering half-heartedly in the darkness. "There," he said, nodding toward the building. The kind of place that saw everything and remembered nothing.

Dave pulled the van into a narrow alley beside the hotel, killing the engine. "Perfect," he muttered, eyeing the mix of labourers and shifty-looking businessmen in the lobby through the dusty windows. "No cameras, back entrance, and enough traffic to mask our movements."

The night clerk barely looked up from his dog-eared newspaper as they checked in, just the way they wanted it. The room keys were heavy brass, worn smooth by countless hands. As they climbed the creaking stairs, the sounds of the city filtered through the thin walls—distant temple bells, the persistent honking of traffic, a Bollywood song floating up from somewhere nearby.

Their rooms were basic but workable: peeling paint, ceiling fans that groaned with each rotation, and windows that overlooked the controlled chaos of the street below. Perfect for their needs—anonymous, forgotten, and with clear sight lines in every direction.

"We've got a few hours before we start scouting," Serj said, checking his watch. "Let's get some rest. Tomorrow, we'll find where that convoy is setting up, and then we'll see what they're really carrying."

After their gear was stashed in the small, nondescript hotel they'd chosen, Serj left the others to settle in while he set off to secure a vehicle. Navigating the streets of Guwahati was second nature to someone like Serj, who was used to blending in, moving unnoticed. He knew what they needed—something with enough power to handle rougher roads but also blend into the urban and rural landscape without drawing too much attention. A sturdy 4x4 would be ideal.

He wandered through a few rental yards and backstreet agencies, the kinds of places where paperwork wasn't exactly a priority and the right amount of cash could get you what you needed—no questions asked. After a few conversations in broken Hindi and English, Serj found what he was looking for: a rugged Mahindra Scorpio. It was the kind of vehicle that wouldn't stand out in a place like Guwahati, where 4x4s were common, but it had the horsepower they needed for the terrain ahead.

Serj inspected the Scorpio carefully, checking under the hood and testing the tyres. The vehicle had clearly seen its fair share of rough roads, but it was exactly what they needed—reliable, tough, and discreet. After some

haggling with the owner, Serj handed over the cash and secured the rental. No paperwork, just a handshake and a set of keys.

He climbed into the driver's seat, revving the engine, satisfied with the growl of power beneath the bonnet. This would do the job. As he drove back through the busy streets, dodging rickshaws and overloaded trucks, Serj couldn't help but think about the task ahead. The convoy was on its way, and they needed to be ready.

By the time he returned to the hotel, the team was prepped and ready to move. "Got us a Scorpio," Serj said with a smirk, tossing the keys to Dave. "She's not pretty, but she'll get us where we need to go."

Anya looked up from her laptop, nodding. "Perfect. Let's get ready. We've got work to do."

With their transport secured, the team was ready to move when the time came, knowing they would need every advantage they could get.

The tension in the room was palpable. They were in position, ready to track the convoy, but the real work was just beginning.

It didn't take long to figure out where the convoy was headed. Guwahati, bustling as it was, had no shortage of people willing to take cash for answers, especially truck stop workers and hotel staff who saw everything. Omar worked his usual magic, slipping small bribes here and there to loosen tongues and gain vital information. Each stop, each casual conversation, brought them a little closer to the truth. The trickiest part wasn't finding out where the convoy would park up—it was verifying the answers they'd paid for, ensuring the information was consistent across the board.

Omar's inquiries painted a clear picture: truckers sleeping in their cabs in a secluded lot, while their military escorts took rooms in an upscale hotel nearby. The contrast was telling—keep the cargo handlers out of sight, but position the armed men where they could maintain a visible presence.

Classic counter-surveillance tactics, but it gave the team exactly what they needed: a pattern to exploit.

The most crucial detail they still needed was the exact date of the convoy's arrival.

The hotel worker's eyes lit up at the sight of the crisp bills, but it was the slight tremor in his hands that caught Omar's attention. Two days. The timeline clicked into place in his mind, each hour a precious commodity. He'd seen enough corrupt officials and nervous informants to recognise genuine fear. Whatever was coming wasn't just another shipment—it was something that made even the lowest-ranking workers jumpy. As he walked away from the hotel, Omar's mind raced through the implications. Two days to map every alley, every escape route, every potential ambush point. Two days to prepare for whatever had these people so scared.

14 Convoy

True to plan, two days later in the early evening, the convoy rolled into Guwahati. The evening air hung thick with diesel fumes as the first rumble of engines echoed down the street. Omar shifted on the weathered bench, its peeling paint catching at his clothes. A street vendor's cart rattled past, the smell of frying samosas momentarily overwhelming the industrial stench. Then came the convoy—a dark serpent of machinery cutting through the chaos of Guwahati's traffic. The lead Land Cruiser's tinted windows caught the setting sun, transforming the vehicle into a black mirror that reflected the city's fading light. The vehicles exuded a sense of quiet authority—not military in the strict sense, but unmistakably professional. The men inside were ex-military, now working as private security, and from the way they moved, they weren't taking any chances.

The trucks themselves were heavy-duty, their large frames towering over the surrounding buildings as they slowly pulled into the lot. Omar noted the precision with which they parked, the drivers executing their movements like they had done this a hundred times before. The private security personnel exited the Land Cruisers, scanning the area methodically. Omar kept his eyes on them, making sure to stay out of sight behind the soft glow of street lights and passing crowds. He'd seen this type of operation before: efficient, quiet, and careful not to attract too much attention.

The ex-military guards moved quickly, directing the trucks into place and ensuring they were aligned at the far end of the lot, away from the main road. The convoy was positioned perfectly—an isolated pocket in the middle of a bustling city, where they could go unnoticed by most, but not by Omar. His focus narrowed in on the guards as they began to disembark, their behaviour calm but disciplined, each man knowing his role.

Omar shifted slightly, lowering the brim of his cap as he continued to observe. He glanced at his phone briefly to check in with the rest of the

team, readying for the next phase of the operation. They would need to act soon—before these men settled in and locked everything down for the night.

Omar, seated across the road, watched carefully as the convoy settled in. There was no need for flashy gestures or visible communication devices. Speaking quietly into the mic concealed under his shirt, he relayed the details of the truck's arrival to the rest of the team, who were positioned in various spots nearby. Everything was going as expected. The private security team milled around for a bit, their presence more relaxed now that the convoy had arrived safely. The truckers climbed wearily out of their cabs, stretching their stiff limbs and clapping each other on the shoulders, exchanging easy banter that echoed across the lot. They looked tired but relieved, their long journey finally over.

Omar noted how quickly the security detail split up, with only two men left on watch while the rest sauntered off in the direction of the hotel. He knew they'd likely take turns throughout the night, periodically relieving one another to keep a light but constant guard on the convoy. These men weren't careless, but they also weren't expecting any real trouble. They didn't seem particularly worried—just cautious enough to keep up appearances.

Meanwhile, the truckers moved with the practised rhythm of men who had done this a hundred times before. They quickly pulled together a few folding tables and chairs from the backs of the trucks, setting them up in the middle of the lot with a kind of methodical ease. Coolers full of beer appeared almost immediately, and within moments, the evening's entertainment began—drinks and card games, the kind of routine that came with long hours on the road.

The truckers settled into predefined patterns, like a time-honoured tradition. Each man seemed to have his spot, his role, and the rota of passing tins of beer and dealing cards flowed smoothly. Laughter and low chatter filled the air, mixing with the distant hum of the city. To anyone

watching, it looked like a simple night of camaraderie among drivers after a long haul. But Omar knew better. This was the calm before the storm.

As the evening deepened, the lot became a patchwork of shadows. The truckers, now well into their card games, had set up a few lamps to brighten the tables, the soft glow casting long shadows across the asphalt. The lot itself was poorly lit—its minimal lighting clearly intended to prevent accidents rather than provide any real visibility. Beyond the reach of the lamps, the darkness hung thick and heavy, swallowing the edges of the area into a hazy gloom. The security detail, pacing around the perimeter, looked almost ghostly in the dim light.

Four hours had passed, and the routine was well-established. The replacement guards, as expected, arrived to relieve the two on duty. They exchanged brief words, not rushing but moving with the casual air of men who knew their night ahead would be quiet. Their tasks were simple—mostly walking the perimeter, keeping an eye out for anything suspicious, though nothing seemed to register as out of the ordinary.

Back at the tables, the truckers laughed and cursed at their card games, beers passed around as casually as the cards. But not all of them stayed in the lamp's warm glow. A few wandered into the darkness, stepping away from the group and heading back to their trucks. Omar's eyes narrowed as he observed the pattern, wondering if something was amiss. His question was answered when a couple of women were escorted past the security guards, warmly welcomed by the waiting arms of the truckers.

The banter at the tables shifted slightly, the truckers tossing out a few suggestive comments and laughter as the women climbed into the cabs of the trucks. The guards didn't seem to care, their eyes scanning the perimeter lazily as if this was just part of the routine. Omar, observing from his shadowed vantage point, knew this was a distraction of sorts, the truckers indulging in the comforts of the road while letting their guard down. But he wasn't distracted. This was the perfect opportunity for the team to get closer and gather the intel they needed.

Anya sat at the small desk in their makeshift command centre, eyes fixed on her laptop screen. The high-resolution images from the low-light surveillance optics were coming in crystal clear, capturing every detail of the vehicle lot below. The team had positioned the cameras carefully, mounting them on the lighting poles and trees surrounding the truck stop. The feed gave her a full view of the trucks, the security guards, and the truckers, who were still huddled around their tables, engrossed in their nightly card game.

Dave, Serj, and Omar were already in position, hidden in the shadows, waiting for the right moment to make their move. They had spent hours preparing for this, but the waiting—always the waiting—was unbearable. Time seemed to crawl by, every minute stretched thin as the truckers continued their games, showing no signs of calling it a night. Anya glanced at the clock, her fingers tapping impatiently on the edge of the laptop. She checked the live feed again. Nothing. No change.

Suddenly, one of the truckers threw down his cards in frustration, his voice carrying across the lot as he cursed loudly. Clearly, he was a poor loser. In a fit of irritation, he backhanded his beer off the table, sending it clattering to the ground, and stomped off towards his truck, leaving the others to laugh at his outburst. Anya, watching closely. With one player short, the others seemed less enthusiastic about continuing. After exchanging a few words and counting their winnings, they began to pack up their cards, signalling the end of the night's entertainment.

Anya's heart quickened. The truckers, a little richer and a little drunker, began to disperse, heading towards their vehicles or walking off into the shadows. "Not long now," she muttered to herself, adjusting the zoom on one of the cameras. The guards were still patrolling lazily, but the energy of the lot was winding down. Within an hour or two, the place would be silent, and that would be the team's window.

She keyed her mic, speaking softly. "Dave, Serj, Omar—looks like it's happening. Give it another hour. We move in once they're down for the night."

The team's response came back quietly, confirming they were in place and ready. Now, it was just a matter of patience—waiting for the cover of night to give them the perfect opportunity to inspect the cargo. They needed to know what these trucks were carrying, and tonight would be their only chance to find out.

Under the cover of darkness, Dave, Serj, and Omar moved like shadows across the lot, each heading toward their pre-selected target vehicles. Anya's voice came through quietly in their earpieces, keeping them updated on the security patrol's movements. She watched the live feed from her laptop, her eyes never leaving the screen, making sure the team only moved when the guards were far enough away. Timing was everything—one misstep, and the entire operation would go sideways.

Omar reached his target first, a curtain-sided trailer that looked no different from the others. The security seemed lax, probably because they had the ex-military escort and weren't expecting any trouble. As Omar approached the rear doors, he noted the absence of a locking mechanism. It was a simple latch, nothing more. Easy to get into, which suited him just fine. Silently, he unlatched the handle and pulled the door open just enough to slip inside, then carefully closed it behind him, hoping the guards wouldn't notice the change.

Once inside, Omar found himself standing in near-total darkness, the musty air inside the trailer thick and stale. He reached for a small flash light from his pocket, flicking it on with a faint red glow to avoid drawing attention. The light revealed rows of pallets stacked high, strapped down and secured for transport. But it wasn't construction equipment or pipeline components like the manifest claimed. No, what Omar saw was far more concerning.

Stacked floor to ceiling were military weapons cases, all marked with stencilled lettering. Omar ran his hand across the top of one case, his fingers tracing the words RF KBM 9M336 and 9P58-2. The rest of the lettering was indecipherable Cyrillic, but one thing was clear to him—these were Russian designations. The cases were olive green, military-grade, and judging by their size and shape, they were built to hold something serious. Missiles? Rockets? He couldn't be sure, but the fact that the entire trailer was packed with these cases meant they were dealing with far more than just smuggled guns.

Omar's heart pounded in his chest as he moved deeper into the trailer, taking note of the quantity. There were too many for this to be a small arms shipment; this was a significant arsenal, enough to arm a sizeable force. He quickly keyed his mic. "Omar here. These aren't pipeline components. We're looking at military weapons cases, Russian, stacked to the roof. Something big is going down."

Anya's voice crackled in response, calm but tense. "Copy that. Stay sharp. Dave, Serj, what's your status?"

Omar continued his silent inspection, carefully stepping around the pallets as he tried to gather as much intel as possible without making any noise. The stencilled codes on the cases stayed with him—Russian-made, that much was obvious, but the implications were staggering. Whoever was behind this convoy wasn't just moving supplies; they were moving firepower, and it wasn't meant to stay hidden for long.

Dave slipped inside the trailer, careful to remain silent as he began his inspection. Like Omar, he saw the crates stacked high and secured tightly to the pallets. The faint light from his flash light revealed the familiar military green cases, and though he couldn't immediately tell what was inside, the stencilled markings on the crates confirmed his suspicions: this was military-grade equipment. His eyes scanned one of the crates, and he noted the numbers stencilled onto the side: RF 9M133.

He wasn't sure what those numbers meant, but that wasn't his concern right now. It was enough to know that whatever they were transporting, it was serious. Dave took out the small tracking device from his pocket, kneeling beside the pallet. He needed to attach it securely in a place where it wouldn't be easily spotted, but also where it wouldn't be knocked loose during the inevitable unloading process. He found a strap securing the pallet and slid the device underneath, pressing it firmly into place.

Satisfied, Dave activated the tracker and quickly checked his surroundings. The security patrol hadn't noticed anything, and he was still alone. He keyed his mic, speaking softly. "Dave here. Got eyes on the crates. Marked RF 9M133. Tracker's in place. I'm moving out."

Anya's voice came through his earpiece. "Copy that, Dave. 9M133... I'll check what that is. Stay sharp."

With the tracker secured and his task complete, Dave began to make his way out of the trailer, his mind racing with the implications. Whatever these numbers meant, it was clear they were dealing with something much bigger than they initially thought. Now, all they had to do was wait and follow the trail.

Serj moved with the same quiet precision as Dave and Omar, slipping into his designated trailer without a sound. Once inside, his keen eyes quickly adjusted to the dim light, and like the others, he was greeted with stacks of military-style crates. Unlike Dave and Omar, however, Serj had no trouble reading the stencilled Cyrillic markings on the sides of the crates.

His gaze fixed on the first row of cases. SR-3MP and VSSM Vintorez were clearly marked, and Serj felt a knot tighten in his gut. He knew these weapons well. The SR-3MP was a compact Russian submachine gun, highly favoured by special forces for its firepower in close-quarters combat. The Vintorez, a suppressed sniper rifle, was another favourite among elite units, known for its lethal silence in covert operations. The presence of these weapons indicated something serious.

Squeezing his bulk further into the trailer, Serj spotted more crates, their markings revealing even more troubling cargo. AK-103 and SVDM, the modern Kalashnikov assault rifles and Dragunov sniper rifles. Both weapons were rugged, reliable, and lethal in the hands of trained soldiers. This wasn't just a random arms shipment—it was a well-stocked arsenal, likely intended for highly organised forces.

Serj's mind raced as he processed the contents of the trailer. He knew they were dealing with something big, but this confirmed it. He tapped his mic, his voice low and controlled. "Serj here. I've got SR-3MPs, Vintorez rifles, AK-103s, and Dragunovs. Whoever's getting this shipment is arming up for something serious. I'm moving out now."

With his message sent, Serj carefully navigated back through the crates, his bulk making it a tight fit, but he moved with practised ease. This operation was quickly escalating, and now they had solid proof of just how dangerous the situation had become.

With their first trailers secured and the trackers in place, Dave, Serj, and Omar repeated the process with their secondary targets. Each trailer revealed much the same—stacks of military-grade hardware, crates filled with weapons designed for war. The equipment was new, and there was no mistaking the scale of what they had uncovered. Whoever was behind this shipment was moving enough firepower to outfit a small army.

The team moved with methodical precision, working silently and efficiently under the cover of darkness. Once the tracking devices were attached to the pallets in the second set of trailers, they quietly slipped out, melting back into the shadows. The security guards remained oblivious, their casual patrols offering no real challenge to the team's stealthy approach. Everything had gone according to plan, but the knowledge of what they had uncovered weighed heavily on their minds.

Returning to their lodgings, they found Anya already waiting, the dim glow of her laptop casting shadows across the room. The moment they stepped

inside, Anya turned her attention to them, her face a mix of curiosity and concern. The team quickly debriefed her, detailing the contents of the trailers. Anya, her fingers tapping rapidly on the keyboard as she pulled up data to cross-check the numbers they had reported.

"The trackers are live," Anya confirmed after a moment. "We can follow them as far as they go. But this is much bigger than we thought."

The seriousness of the situation sinking in. Dave said, "We're sitting on a major arms shipment. Whoever's behind this isn't just moving supplies—they're preparing for something big. We need to figure out who's at the end of this line."

Serj crossed his arms, his face set in grim determination. "We've got the tracking devices in place. Now we wait and follow the trail."

Omar, let out a quiet sigh. "We'll be ready when they make their move."

The team settled in, knowing that the real work had just begun. They had uncovered a crucial piece of the puzzle, but the bigger picture was still out there, waiting for them to find it.

The morning sun crept through the gaps in the curtains as the team moved swiftly, finalising their preparations. The Scorpio was packed with their gear—everything from surveillance equipment to the concealed weaponry they'd brought with them. Anya sat in the corner of the small hotel room, her laptop open and the live feed from the truck lot streaming across her screen. The team knew that the real work was about to begin.

"They're moving," Anya called out quietly, her eyes focused on the shifting activity on the screen. The security team had returned from the hotel, and the drivers were packing away the tables and chairs from the previous night's card games. Within minutes, the trucks were rumbling to life, engines roaring as they lined up, ready to hit the road.

Dave, Serj, and Omar moved efficiently, stashing the last of their supplies before climbing into the rented Scorpio. There was no need to rush; the

trackers they'd placed on the trucks were doing their job. Their plan was simple: follow at a safe distance, keep a low profile, and let the convoy lead them to its final destination. No matter where it was going, they would be ready.

Serj, behind the wheel, drove them to the main road that ran parallel to the lot. The Scorpio blended in with the morning traffic—just another vehicle on the busy streets of Guwahati. They waited, eyes sharp, knowing that the convoy wouldn't take long to pass. Anya's calm updates guided them as she monitored the trucks' every movement.

"Here they come," Anya said softly, eyes never leaving the screen. The lead black Land Cruiser rolled past the junction where the team waited, followed by the heavy trucks and finally the trailing Land Cruiser, the armoured vehicles bookending the convoy. Serj watched them pass, his focus steady. He didn't move until the last vehicle disappeared down the road.

"Three minutes," Serj muttered to the others, keeping his hands firm on the steering wheel. He waited, ensuring they had enough of a gap before pulling out onto the road. The Scorpio eased into the flow of traffic, falling in line far enough behind the convoy to stay unnoticed, but close enough for Anya's trackers to keep working.

"There they are," Dave said, spotting the convoy up ahead through the morning haze.

Serj drove the Scorpio, blending in with the other vehicles as they continued down the road. There was no rush now. They would find out exactly where this shipment was heading, and when the time came, they would be ready to act.

15 Siliguri

The convoy rumbled steadily through the winding roads, the team in the Scorpio following at a safe distance the entire way. From Guwahati to Siliguri, the road seemed endless, but they never lost sight of their target. Anya kept a constant eye on the electronic tracker, guiding Serj with every turn, every slowdown, as they stayed just far enough behind the convoy to avoid suspicion.

As they neared Siliguri, the convoy took the eastern bypass, skirting the edge of the city's industrial zones. The digital map on Anya's laptop blinked, indicating a change. "They're slowing down," she said, her voice sharp with focus. The gap between the Scorpio and the convoy was narrowing. "Looks like they're pulling into some kind of industrial site."

Serj, keeping the Scorpio steady as they followed the tracker's signal. Soon enough, the convoy made a final turn, disappearing through a set of large gates covered with rusting corrugated steel. "There," Dave pointed out as they slowed down. Two of the private security guards from the convoy were now stationed outside the gates, rifles slung across their shoulders, keeping watch as the gates closed behind the trucks.

The team parked the Scorpio a short distance away, tucked out of sight, and immediately assessed the situation. "We need to get eyes on what's happening inside that compound," Serj said, his voice calm but with a sense of urgency.

Serj and Omar exited the vehicle, keeping low as they moved along the perimeter of the compound. The industrial location looked worn-down, its fencing and gates long past their prime, with gaps between the rusting panels of corrugated steel. The air was thick with the smell of oil and metal, the kind of place where heavy machinery would have once been a constant hum. Now, though, it seemed mostly abandoned except for the convoy.

The two men moved cautiously, keeping out of sight from the guards at the gate. Serj's eyes scanned the fence line, searching for any potential access points, while Omar looked for a vantage point where they could get a better view inside. They crept along the side of the compound, careful not to draw attention. Eventually, they found a spot where the rusted fence gave way, a small gap just wide enough for them to see through.

Omar's eyes traced the compound's vulnerabilities like reading a familiar book. The security cameras were new—Series 7 Axis models with infrared capability—but their placement was amateur hour. Fifteen-degree blind spot at the north-east corner. The perimeter lighting created more shadows than illumination, and the guard rotations left the loading bay exposed for thirty seconds every shift change.

"Three ways in," he murmured, more to himself than the others. His fingers sketched invisible lines across the condensation on the windscreen. "They're expecting trouble from the front, but they've left their flanks exposed. Classic merc mistake—all show, no substance."

Omar gestured to Serj, who knelt beside him to get a better look. Inside the compound, the convoy had parked in a large open area surrounded by warehouses. The truckers were moving about, unloading some of the crates they had been transporting, while the rest of the security detail had fanned out, watching the perimeter. It was a well-coordinated operation, the kind that suggested this location had been prepped for their arrival.

Eyes scanning the surroundings. Omar said, "Let's check the other side. There might be another weak point in the fence. We'll need to stay low."

They moved quietly, determined to find a way in or a better vantage point. What the team needed now was intel, and whatever was happening inside that compound could be the key to unlocking the entire operation.

For the next hour, the team watched in silence as the convoy unloaded the pallets of military-grade weapons from the trucks. Omar and Serj kept their positions near the weak point in the fence, observing the operation unfold.

The truckers worked efficiently, moving the heavy crates into the nearby warehouse, clearly preparing to conceal the cargo from any prying eyes. Once the trucks were empty, the drivers returned to their cabs, engines rumbling to life as they began to pull out, one by one.

As the last truck passed through the rusting gates, the private security detail remained behind, keeping watch over the compound. The once bustling convoy was reduced to a quiet, guarded location, its purpose now unmistakably clear—this was a transfer point, but to whom?

Back at the Scorpio, Dave keyed his mic, speaking quietly. "The convoy's gone. Security stayed behind. Looks like they're leaving the cargo here for someone else."

Omar responded through his mic from his position at the fence. "They unloaded everything into that warehouse. Whatever's in there, it's not moving until someone else shows up to claim it. This has to be a drop-off for whoever's buying the weapons."

Anya, still monitoring from the van, chimed in. "I'm with you on that. There's no reason to leave all this firepower sitting in an abandoned warehouse unless someone's coming to collect. We should stick around and see who it is."

Dave left Anya at the wheel of the Scorpio, making a quick decision to get a better vantage point over the compound. He scanned the area, spotting the high roof of a nearby building that offered a perfect overlook of the warehouse and the surrounding grounds. He just needed to get up there without drawing any attention.

Moving quickly and quietly, Dave skirted around the back of the building, keeping well out of sight from the compound's security. He found a quiet, secluded spot behind a cluster of trees, where the rustling of leaves masked the sound of his movements. Bending his knees, Dave launched himself into the air with one smooth, powerful leap, landing almost soundlessly on

the tin roof. His agility and strength made the feat seem effortless, the tin roof groaning slightly under his weight.

From there, he climbed quickly and carefully to the apex of the roof, lying flat as he scanned the scene below. From this vantage point, he had a clear view into the compound and even down into the warehouse through its open doors. The security team, now grouped near the pallets of weapons, seemed relaxed, taking a smoke break. They chatted casually, their body language loose, unaware of the unseen observer perched above them.

Serj's eyes narrowed as he scanned the compound one more time. "This isn't just a random stash. Whoever's coming to pick this up has serious backing. We need to keep eyes on that warehouse."

In agreement Dave said, "We'll hold position and wait it out. This might give us the lead we need on the buyers."

From his rooftop perch, Dave tracked the guards' patrol patterns through his scope. Third cigarette break in two hours—clockwork. Below, Serj huddled in the shadow of a dumpster, counting the seconds between radio checks. Twenty minutes. Sloppy.

In the van, Anya's fingers danced across her keyboard, each keystroke matching the rhythm of her racing thoughts. The security team's comms weren't military-grade—somewhere between professional and amateur. Mercenaries then, not state-sponsored. She glanced at the thermal imaging feed: four heat signatures by the main gate, two more in the guard house. All stationary, confident. Too confident.

Omar's voice crackled through their earpieces, barely a whisper: "Movement at the south entrance. New vehicle approaching." The team tensed as one, muscles coiled like springs. The real show was about to begin. They just needed to be patient and let the trap spring itself.

Dave didn't have to wait long. The rusting steel gates slid open with a metallic groan, and a sleek black Range Rover rolled into the compound,

cutting a stark contrast against the dilapidated surroundings. The security team's behaviour changed instantly—cigarettes were stubbed out, and they snapped to attention, standing straighter and more alert. Whoever had arrived was important, and their body language said it all.

The Range Rover came to a smooth stop inside the warehouse, the security detail now on high alert. Dave's heart rate quickened as the gates were slid closed behind the vehicle. Whoever was inside this luxury SUV had the influence to command immediate respect, and it was clear that this moment marked the beginning of the hand-off. Dave activated his comms.

"Dave here. Eyes on. Black Range Rover just pulled in—seems like we've got someone important. Security just snapped into professional mode. Gates are closed again. We'll know soon enough who's taking these weapons."

Anya's voice crackled back softly through the earpiece. "Copy that, Dave. Stay in position."

Dave stayed low, his eyes fixed on the activity below, waiting to see who emerged from the vehicle and how this hand-off would unfold. The real players were finally arriving, and with them, the next crucial piece of the puzzle.

Dave froze for a moment, his breath catching as he stared down at the figure emerging from the driver's seat of the sleek black Range Rover. He couldn't believe what he was seeing. His mind raced, replaying the encounter he'd had with this man, etched into his memory. There was no mistaking him—the tall, rugged frame, the cold, calculating air about him. It was Grigory Ivanovich.

16 Lazarus

Incredulous, Dave keyed his radio, speaking softly but urgently into the mic. "This is Dave. You're not going to believe this, but I've got eyes on Grigory Ivanovich. He's the one stepping out of the Range Rover. I repeat—Grigory Ivanovich is here."

On the other end, there was a brief silence as the team processed what Dave had just said. Grigory Ivanovich, a man they had all believed to be either dead or long out of the game, was standing right below them, orchestrating whatever shadowy deal was going down in the compound. This changed everything.

Grigory moved with the confidence of someone who knew he was in control. The security team fell into line, snapping to attention, their casual postures now rigid as they awaited his next move. From his high vantage point, Dave could see it all, the pieces falling into place. This was no ordinary transfer—this was the hand-off, and Grigory was the puppet master behind it all.

It didn't add up. Dave relayed his thoughts quietly over the radio. "Last time we saw Grigory, it was in Turkey. His plans to destroy the European gas pipelines were a disaster. There's no way he could still be backed by the Russian state after that failure. So what the hell is he doing here?"

Grigory should have been a dead man or rotting in a Siberian cell. Yet here he was, standing before them, clearly in control of this operation.

The team listened in silence as Dave continued. "These supplies—they're Russian, sure. But there's no chance Grigory still has state support. His failure would've been his death sentence. If he's controlling this operation, he's doing it alone, or with some serious private backing."

Anyas voice crackled back softly. "If Grigory's gone rogue, that makes him even more dangerous. He'll be working with his own agenda now,

without the constraints of the state. We need to figure out who's funding him and why."

Dave's concentration focussed on Grigory below. The man was no longer a mere pawn of the Russian government. He was working for himself now, and that made the entire situation far more unpredictable—and far more dangerous.

Dave's stomach churned as bile rose in his throat, his fists clenching involuntarily as he stared down at Grigory. The sight of him stirred memories Dave had buried deep, memories of Mei Lin—the brutalisation she had suffered at Grigory's command. The rage Dave felt was raw, a mix of guilt and fury. In Turkey, they had let Grigory escape, believing the Russian state would punish him harshly for his failure. They had assumed his days were numbered, that he'd face the brutal consequences of his masters.

But now, here Grigory stood, alive, free, and clearly thriving, orchestrating yet another deadly operation. The realisation hit Dave hard: Grigory had escaped justice. He had slipped through their fingers once, and in doing so, had avoided the fate he so rightly deserved.

Dave swallowed hard, the taste of bile bitter on his tongue. He wouldn't let it happen again. This time, it would be different. Grigory wouldn't walk away. Dave's eyes burned with determination as he keyed his mic, speaking low but resolute. "We let him go once, thinking the Russians would deal with him. That was a mistake. This time, we take him off the board. Permanently."

17 The Hand-Over

Dave dropped silently from the roof, landing with barely a sound in the shadows below. Dave's mind processed the situation with practised efficiency, weighing their options against the risks. Getting eyes on the operation wasn't enough - they needed more concrete intelligence about Grigory's plans. His enhanced abilities gave them advantages, but experience had taught him the importance of solid intel—they needed to hear what was being said. Moving quickly but quietly, he circled around the perimeter, meeting up with Omar and Serj behind one of the rusting storage sheds that lined the compound.

"How are we going to get in there?" Dave asked, his voice low but urgent. "We need to hear what's going on."

Serj, always the tactician, had been watching the security team's movements with sharp focus. "There's a blind spot in the rear quarter of the building," he pointed out, nodding toward the far end of the compound. "From what I've seen, the security team doesn't patrol that area as much. It's partially blocked off by some old machinery. One of us could slip through there and get across to the warehouse without being seen. But it has to be quick."

Dave didn't hesitate. "It'll have to be me. I can get over the fence and to the warehouse fast."

Omar's brow furrowed, but he agreed. "If anyone can do it, it's you. Just make sure you stay low and move fast."

Serj handed Dave a small, compact listening device. "You'll need this if you get close enough. Get it inside or near them, and we'll be able to pick up the audio from here."

Dave took the device and tucked it into his pocket. His pulse was steady, his resolve unwavering. He scanned the compound one last time, locking

in the positions of the security team before nodding to the others. "I'll be back before they even know I'm there."

With that, he moved toward the blind spot Serj had identified, his body low and his movements precise. His heart pounded with adrenaline, but his mind was clear. Grigory was in there, and this time, Dave would make sure he didn't escape unnoticed.

Taking a deep breath, Dave leapt over the fence, landing silently on the other side before sprinting toward the warehouse. The security detail was still oblivious, focused on the entrance and the pallets of weapons inside. Pressing himself against the wall, Dave scanned the structure for a way in, his eyes locking onto a large opening high in the eaves, likely used for ventilation. It was his way inside.

Without wasting a second, he crouched low and sprang upward, his hands catching the edge of the opening. With a smooth, powerful movement, he swung himself up into the warehouse, landing silently on the rafters above the pallets of weapons. The steel beams criss-crossed the ceiling, providing an ideal vantage point, but Dave quickly realised the surface of the beams was covered in a thick layer of filthy, black dust.

As he crawled along, his weight caused the dust to shift and fall in small clumps to the floor below. Heart pounding, Dave froze, realising that any more movement like this could blow his cover. He needed another approach—one that wouldn't alert the guards below.

Carefully, he raised himself up onto his toes and stretched his arms to grip the sides of the steel beam. Instead of crawling along his stomach, he balanced on the balls of his feet and the tips of his fingers, gripping the beam tightly as he moved. The physical strain was minimal - his enhanced strength made that irrelevant - but the precision required for such controlled movements demanded his complete focus. One wrong move, one slip in concentration, and the mission would be compromised.

Each step was measured, slow, and deliberate as Dave inched his way along the beam. He could see Grigory down below, speaking with the security team, and he knew he was getting closer to hearing their conversation. All he needed was to get the listening device in place without being detected. His arms ached, but he pushed through, his focus unyielding. This was a dangerous gamble, but one he had to take.

Dave crouched on the beam, his body tense as he looked down at Grigory, who was deep in conversation with his men below. The temptation to end it all here and now, to drop down on him and make sure he never walked away again, was overwhelming. Dave's fists tightened as he contemplated the action, his body ready to move, but he knew better. Ending Grigory now would give them no answers—no understanding of the larger operation or who else was involved. They needed the full picture, and Grigory was their best link to it.

With a deep breath, Dave pushed aside the urge, refocusing on the mission. He carefully pulled the small listening device from his pocket and attached it to the underside of the steel beam, securing it in place where it would go unnoticed. Once satisfied, he tapped his radio twice, sending two faint clicks through the channel—his signal to the team that he was in position.

A moment later, Anya's voice came softly through his earpiece. "Copy that, Dave. We're receiving the feed. Stay tight."

The low hum of voices below began to fill Dave's ear, now clearer than ever. He adjusted his position slightly, careful not to disturb the dust, as he listened intently to what was being discussed. Grigory and the others were talking logistics, and though Dave couldn't catch every word from above, the device would relay everything to the team.

He stayed perfectly still, poised in the rafters, knowing that for now, Grigory had to be left alone. But it wouldn't be for long.

Back at the Scorpio, Dave slid into the passenger seat next to Anya, breathing a little heavier than usual from the tension of the mission. He

was still coming down from the adrenaline rush, his mind focused on the next steps. Anya glanced over at him, and despite the seriousness of the situation, she couldn't help but stifle a chuckle. The sight of him was a mess—his nose, chin, and forehead were smeared with thick black dust from the warehouse roof, and his clothes were equally filthy.

"You're gonna need a shower and fresh clothes later," she remarked, her lips twitching into a smile.

Dave, noticing her amusement, frowned and looked at his hands, now grimy with soot and dirt. "Yeah, I figured as much," he muttered, wiping a bit off his nose with the back of his hand.

"Here," Anya said, handing him a few wet wipes from her bag. "At least get the worst of it off."

Dave grumbled good-naturedly as he took the wipes, cleaning his hands and face as best he could. The black dust smeared but eventually lifted, though his clothes were beyond saving without a proper wash. "It's like I rolled in coal dust," he joked, the tension lightening for a brief moment as he cleaned off what he could.

Anya chuckled softly. "You look the part, though. Perfect infiltration look."

Dave shot her a wry smile, feeling a little less grim now. The mission was far from over, but at least they had something to laugh about—however brief.

As the sun dipped low on the horizon, the fading light cast long shadows across the compound. Inside the warehouse, the atmosphere remained tense but controlled. Grigory stood near the pallets of weapons, his presence commanding respect from the guards and the security team alike. Suddenly, his phone buzzed in his pocket. He didn't bother speaking into it—just listened for a moment before hanging up.

"They're here," he said calmly to the security staff. His words prompted immediate action. The guards at the gate were radioed, and within minutes,

a sleek black Mercedes A-Class saloon glided through the rusting steel gates and into the compound. The tension heightened as the vehicle rolled up to the warehouse, and the security detail moved into position.

The driver, a clean-cut man dressed in a suit, stepped out and circled to the rear door. With a practised motion, he opened it for a stocky man in Indian military uniform. The officer emerged with the air of someone who knew he was in control. His posture was rigid, and his eyes scanned the warehouse with the precision of a man used to handling sensitive operations. He walked directly to Grigory, his hand extended.

Grigory greeted him with a firm handshake, his expression neutral but pleased. "As you can see, we have delivered on our promise," Grigory said, gesturing toward the pallets of weapons stacked neatly behind him. "Now for you to finalise your payment. Feel free to inspect the goods."

The Indian officer nodded curtly and moved toward the pallets. Grigory, ever the gracious host, signalled to one of the security team to unstrap and open any of the cases the officer requested. The soldier, with a critical eye, inspected several of the weapons cases. He opened one containing AK-103 rifles and another with SR-3MP submachine guns, his fingers running over the smooth, deadly metal. After several minutes of silent appraisal, he turned back to Grigory with a smile of approval.

"Impressive," the officer said, nodding as he headed back to the Mercedes. He retrieved a small black case from the rear seat and took out a sleek mobile phone. With the air of someone finalising a high-stakes deal, he made a brief call, his words in Hindi quick and decisive. After a moment, he turned to Grigory. "You should find the funds have been released from escrow, and your boss is now even richer."

Grigory's phone vibrated in his pocket. He pulled it out, his eyes flicking over the screen. A small smile tugged at his lips as the message confirmed that the transfer had gone through. The deal was done.

With a subtle signal from Grigory, the security team began gathering their gear and heading for their vehicles. The stocky Indian officer stepped back, satisfied with the transaction. Grigory took one last look around the warehouse, satisfied with the smoothness of the operation. Without a word, he climbed back into his Range Rover, his face unreadable.

As the vehicles prepared to leave, the two guards at the gate were collected, and the entire security detail sped off into the twilight, their mission complete. The compound, now empty of the weaponry that had filled it just hours before, was left silent in the gathering dusk, the deal successfully closed.

Dave clenched his fists, watching Grigory's Range Rover disappear into the twilight. "Are we just going to let him leave?" he asked, his frustration barely contained. His eyes flicked toward Anya, who sat in the driver's seat, her laptop open as she monitored the situation.

Anya sighed, clearly torn. "I don't know what else you want us to do, Dave. We've got eyes on the weapons, but we still don't know who's buying them or where they're headed. We need more information before we make a move." Her voice was steady, but the tension in her tone was obvious.

As if on cue, the low rumble of engines grew louder. The roar of another convoy of trucks filled the air, their headlights illuminating the dusty lot as they tore past the Scorpio and turned into the compound. The team exchanged glances, recognising the precision of the timing. It was like clockwork—meticulously planned, right down to the minute. Typical Grigory.

The Indian officer, who had moments ago finalised his deal with Grigory, barked a few sharp orders to the men emerging from the newly arrived trucks. Without wasting time, the loading operation began, the weapons being hauled back onto the trucks with military efficiency. Dave's eyes narrowed as he watched the crates being stacked inside the vehicles.

"If this was a legitimate deal between Russia and India," Dave asked, "then why all the cloak and dagger? Why the need for secrecy? And more importantly, why the hell is Grigory involved?" Shifting in his seat, his mind racing. "This doesn't add up. Grigory's failure in Turkey should have taken him out of the game. Who's backing him now? Who's his boss?"

Anya shook her head, her fingers tapping on her laptop, trying to piece it together. "I don't know, but we're missing a major piece of the puzzle here. If this was legitimate, they wouldn't be sneaking around like this. The whole operation reeks of something bigger. We need to find out who's pulling the strings."

The trucks continued to load the weapons, the rhythmic clang of metal echoing in the night. The team knew they were close to something major, but without knowing where these weapons were headed or who had bought them, they were still in the dark. Grigory might have slipped through their fingers for now, but this wasn't over. Not by a long shot.

With Serj and Omar back in the Scorpio, the tension in the vehicle was palpable. Anya quickly swapped seats with Serj, sliding into the back where she could spread out her laptop and begin her work. She tapped furiously on the keys, trying to cross-reference the Indian officer's face with any known military databases she could access.

"Let's see who this guy is," she muttered, her brow furrowed in concentration. Her fingers danced across the keyboard, pulling up facial recognition software and military registries, hoping to identify the officer who had just sealed a shady deal with Grigory.

As the convoy of trucks began to pull out of the compound, Dave gave a quick hand signal toward Serj, who took the wheel. The team had been here before—another follow-the-leader situation, carefully trailing their target while relying on the tracking devices they had planted. The Scorpio rolled smoothly onto the road, falling in line at a safe distance behind the

convoy, ensuring they stayed just close enough to monitor the trucks without being detected.

Omar, his eyes scanning the convoy. "What do you think, Dave? Military buyers? Or something deeper?"

Dave glanced at the convoy ahead, his jaw tight. "Feels too slick for a normal military deal. Whatever this is, it's buried deep. And Grigory—he wouldn't be here if it wasn't serious. There's more going on than we've uncovered."

In the back, Anya let out a small grunt of frustration. "No matches yet on the officer. He's not showing up in any of the usual places. He might be high-level, or someone off the books." Her eyes flicked between the data on her screen and the convoy ahead. "I'll keep digging, but I'm not liking this. Whoever he is, he's staying out of the limelight for a reason."

Serj kept his focus on the road, his driving smooth and steady as they tailed the convoy into the growing night. "We'll stay on them," he said quietly. "See where these trucks lead. And then we'll figure out what to do next."

The team fell silent, the hum of the engine and the distant rumble of the convoy their only soundtrack as they prepared for whatever came next.

18 Ambush

The convoy rolled steadily through the dark, barren landscape, and the Scorpio followed at a safe distance, headlights off. The night was silent, save for the rumbling engines of the trucks. But then, as they approached a stretch of desolate road, a military roadblock came into view, its figures lit by the dim glow of headlights from the convoy. Serj squinted as he pulled the Scorpio to a halt, keeping the vehicle hidden in the shadows.

"This is strange," Serj muttered, his eyes narrowing. "A military roadblock stopping military vehicles?"

The team watched in tense silence as the driver of the black Mercedes, the same vehicle that had met Grigory earlier, stepped out and approached the soldiers at the barrier. The exchange was quick and heated, the voices raised in frustration, and then—BANG—a single gunshot shattered the stillness of the night. The driver's body jerked, falling backwards in a lifeless heap, blood splattering the dusty road as he hit the ground, dead before he could react.

"Shit," Omar whispered, his eyes wide. "What the hell is going on?"

From the shadows at the sides of the road, more soldiers emerged, their rifles raised, the metallic clicks of safeties being disengaged piercing the quiet air. They moved with precision, surrounding the trucks, yanking the drivers from their cabs and forcing them to line up along the side of the road, hands raised above their heads. It was clear now—this wasn't a simple military stop. It was a heist.

"They're stealing the weapons!" Dave said through gritted teeth, eyes locked on the soldiers as they began to replace the truck drivers with their own men. "Not only that, it looks like they're going to execute the drivers!"

Before anyone could react, Dave was out of the Scorpio, sprinting toward the execution squad with deadly intent. Serj, Omar, and Anya barely had

time to register what was happening before they piled out of the car after him, drawing their handguns as they chased after Dave.

The execution squad, three soldiers with assault rifles, were already in position, standing in front of the terrified drivers. Dave didn't hesitate, barrelling into them with raw force. He tackled the nearest soldier, sending him sprawling into the dirt, his rifle clattering to the ground. The other two turned, startled by the sudden attack, but before they could fire, Dave had disarmed the second soldier with a swift punch to the throat, sending him to the ground gasping for air.

Serj and Omar were right behind him, guns raised. Serj fired two quick shots, taking down one of the soldiers at the roadblock before he could raise his rifle. Omar was at his side, covering Dave as he tore into the third member of the execution squad, a brutal elbow strike knocking the man out cold.

Anya, moving with calculated precision, kept her gun trained on the remaining soldiers, forcing them to hesitate as they realised they were no longer in control of the situation. The drivers, still lined up, looked on in disbelief as the team neutralised the execution squad with terrifying efficiency.

"Clear!" Omar shouted, scanning the area, his handgun still raised.

Dave stood over the unconscious soldiers, chest heaving, eyes wild. "Nobody else is dying tonight," he growled, turning to the now-disarmed drivers. "Get down, stay low. We're not finished yet."

The team regrouped quickly, knowing that more soldiers could arrive at any moment. They had just thrown a wrench into a carefully planned heist, and the situation was far from over.

Dave and Serj moved with precision along one side of the road, while Anya and Omar swept the other, advancing toward the front of the convoy. Guns raised, they were up against soldiers armed with assault rifles, but

despite only having handguns, their surprise attack had thrown the troops into disarray. The attacking forces had retreated, off balance and unsure of what was happening. But just as they were gaining ground, the true reason for the trucks stopping became clear.

At the front of the convoy, parked like an immovable sentinel, was a TATA Kestrel Armoured Personnel Carrier (APC). Its imposing frame was equipped with a 30mm cannon and a 7.62mm machine gun, both bristling with firepower. Dave froze for a split second as he took in the sight, his heart sinking. "Damn it! Why does it have to be an APC?"

Before he could react further, a burst of 7.62mm rounds sprayed their location. Serj grabbed Dave by the shoulder, pulling him into cover as bullets ricocheted off the ground, sending sparks flying. They both knew they couldn't hold their position for long against that kind of firepower.

Dave's mind raced. His last encounter with an APC had taught him hard lessons—there were limits to his abilities. But now, armed with better knowledge and experience, he could make smarter choices. He wasn't infallible, but he was still their best shot at neutralising the APC.

Dave assessed the APC with practised efficiency, his understanding of his capabilities now instinctive rather than theoretical. He launched himself skyward, his movements precise and controlled - no hesitation, no uncertainty, just the measured application of power he'd learned to master. The soldiers around the APC turned their attention to him, rifles raised, opening fire in a desperate attempt to bring him down. The bullets struck with familiar futility, each impact registering in Dave's mind even as his body ignored them. Three years of combat experience had taught him to process these moments - the visual chaos of incoming fire contrasting sharply with the total absence of pain.

"I can't deal with the armour directly," Dave muttered to himself, feeling the intense vibrations from the firing weapons, "but I can take away its teeth."

He reached down and grabbed the 30mm cannon in both hands. With a grunt of effort, he wrenched it upward, twisting the barrel with brute strength until it folded like tin, rendered completely useless. The soldiers below watched in disbelief as Dave then stomped on the machine gun, reducing it to twisted wreckage under the weight of his blows. The APC, once a symbol of power and domination, was now nothing more than a hunk of armoured metal—disarmed and helpless.

Seeing the destruction and realising the futility of their gunfire, the remaining soldiers began to falter. One by one, they ceased fire, fear gripping them as they watched Dave dismantle their prized vehicle. Some attempted to melt into the darkness, disappearing into the night, hoping to escape unnoticed.

But Dave wasn't done. He leapt down from the APC, landing directly in the midst of the remaining troops. One soldier, too terrified to think clearly, raised his rifle and fired a burst at point-blank range, the rounds slamming into Dave's chest with no effect. Almost casually, Dave reached out, flicking the rifle aside with a simple motion before the soldier broke, dropping his weapon and fleeing into the darkness.

The battle had shifted in an instant. The APC was neutralised, the remaining soldiers scattered, and the team had regained control. Dave turned back to Serj, Anya, and Omar, his chest rising and falling steadily as the last of the adrenaline coursed through him.

"Well," Dave said, dusting off his hands, "that was one way to end a convoy."

Dave strode toward the black Mercedes with purposeful steps, Serj falling in beside him. The adrenaline was still surging through his veins, but his focus was razor-sharp. Anya and Omar flanked the other side of the car, their guns drawn but pointed low, ready for whatever came next.

Without a word, Dave slammed his fist into the rear door glass, shattering it instantly. The sound of splintering glass filled the air as Dave reached inside and grabbed hold of the door frame. With a powerful wrench, he ripped the door clean off its hinges, tossing the mangled piece of metal aside like it was nothing.

Inside the car, the Indian officer sat frozen in shock, his hands instinctively shooting up in surrender. His wide eyes darted between the hulking figure of Dave and the rest of the team, clearly disbelieving what he had just witnessed. The man, moments ago in control of a deadly convoy, now looked like a trapped animal, cornered with no way out.

"You're coming with us," Dave said, his voice cold and steady. The officer's hands trembled slightly, but he didn't dare argue. He had seen enough to know that resisting would be futile. This wasn't how he had expected the night to end, and he clearly understood the gravity of the situation.

As the team closed in around the car, they knew they finally had a chance to get some answers—answers that could unlock the entire web of deceit Grigory and his shadowy allies had woven. The Indian officer was no longer in control. Now, he was their key to uncovering the truth.

The team stood around the scattered remnants of the convoy, the disarmed APC looming in the background. The road was littered with debris from the firefight, and the captured weapons remained a serious problem—they couldn't just leave them there for anyone to find. There was only one person who could handle this kind of situation: Cecilia.

Anya, still catching her breath, quickly pulled out her phone and dialed Cecilia. As the call connected, she wasted no time in delivering a rapid-fire update on the night's events. "Cecilia, we've got a situation. Grigory's gone, but we've taken control of the convoy. Weapons everywhere. We need a clean-up crew, and we've also got Major General Vikram Sethi in our custody."

Cecilia's voice was calm but firm on the other end. "Vikram Sethi? A major general? That's a name the Indian government will be very interested in. He'll need to answer a few questions before we hand him over, but he won't be getting out of this easily."

"Exactly," Anya replied, glancing at the bound and subdued general in the back of the Mercedes. "We'll hold onto him for now. There are questions we need answered, but we're not going to keep him for long."

"Good," Cecilia said. "In the meantime, I'll arrange for the real Indian authorities to attend to the weapons, along with some UN advisors as witnesses. We can't afford to let this mess spiral out of control, not with Grigory still on the loose."

Anya nodded, even though Cecilia couldn't see her. "Understood. We'll keep things secure here until the clean-up team arrives."

As the call ended, Anya turned to the rest of the team. "Cecilia's sending the real Indian military and some UN advisors to take care of the weapons. They'll be here soon. Until then, we make sure nothing leaves this road."

Dave glanced back at Major General Sethi, his eyes narrowing. "And we get some answers from him."

Major General Vikram Sethi, sitting rigid in the back of the mangled Mercedes, couldn't suppress the tremble in his voice as he asked, "Who are you people?"

Anya, her eyes cold, her tone sharper than before. "You're not the one asking questions, Major General. We need answers, and you're going to give them to us." Her words hung in the air, a reminder of how dire his situation had become.

Vikram's gaze shifted to Dave, the seemingly ordinary man who had just torn the door off the car with his bare hands and shrugged off bullets at point-blank range like they were nothing more than pebbles. Dave, aware

of the scrutiny, looked down at himself, confused by the officer's wide-eyed stare.

He sighed inwardly as he took in the state of his clothes. His shirt was in tatters again, large gaps exposing his chest where bullets had torn through the fabric, along with various bullet holes peppering the rest of his attire. Despite the chaos, at least this time, after facing an APC, his modesty was intact—barely.

"Always with the shirts," Dave muttered under his breath, half in frustration, half in bemusement. The absurdity of his situation, the look on Vikram's face—it all felt surreal for a moment. But now wasn't the time for jokes. He glanced back at the Major General, the confused and terrified man trying to process what he had just witnessed.

Dave gave a slight shrug, as if to say, Yeah, I don't get it either, before stepping aside, letting Anya continue her interrogation. There was no time for disbelief. They needed answers—and quickly.

19 Failure

Grigory's face was a mask of cold fury, his voice low and dangerous as he addressed the Pakistani special forces officer in front of him. "What do you mean, you failed to retrieve the weapons?" There was a deadly calm in his tone, teetering on the edge of outright rage.

The officer swallowed hard, trying to maintain his composure. "There was a private military force that we did not expect. They attacked us as we were taking down the convoy—"

Before the officer could finish his explanation, Grigory's pistol appeared in his hand in a blur of motion, and with a cold precision, he pulled the trigger. The bullet struck the officer through the throat, silencing him instantly. The man collapsed, gasping and gurgling, his hands clawing at his neck as blood pooled around him. The other soldiers standing nearby froze, their faces pale with fear, watching their comrade die in front of them.

Grigory stepped calmly to the next soldier, his expression unchanging. "Before you elaborate," he said in a voice like ice, "you should realise that I don't take failure lightly."

The soldier trembled visibly, his voice shaking as he tried to explain. "We were ambushed... they came out of the dark. There were too many of them, and we were forced to retreat," he stammered, avoiding any mention of the overwhelming power that had actually thwarted them. There was no way he would admit that one man had destroyed their plan.

Grigory's steely gaze shifted to the next soldier in line. "Is this true?" he asked, his tone as calm as before, though the air was thick with tension.

The third soldier, his face drenched in sweat, shook his head slowly, fear gripping him so tightly he could barely breathe. Grigory's expression didn't change as he turned back to the previous soldier, who stood helplessly,

terror etched across his face. Without a second glance, Grigory pulled the trigger again. The bullet hit the man square in the chest, and he crumpled to the ground, coughing up blood, writhing in agony as his life drained away.

"I also detest liars," Grigory remarked coldly, his eyes fixed on the remaining soldiers, who stood frozen in terror. His ruthless display of power left no doubt—failure would not be tolerated.

The soldier, his voice broken and shaky, managed to stammer, "It was a small group, but one of them... one of them was different."

Grigory narrowed his eyes, his hand tightening around the pistol. "Different, how?"

The soldier swallowed hard, his throat dry and his voice barely more than a whisper. "He... he... he smashed the APC, and he couldn't be killed." The words tumbled out in a flood of terror, the memory of what he had seen etched into his mind. Despite his years of brave service, this man—the one who had torn through their ranks like they were nothing—had broken something inside him. He was no longer a soldier in this moment, just a man confronted by something beyond understanding. He couldn't stop the tears from spilling over, a stark contrast to the hardened exterior he had once carried.

Grigory's face darkened, and in an instant, he raised the gun, aiming it squarely at the soldier's head. The man flinched, his fear overwhelming, his entire body trembling. In all his years of service, facing death on countless occasions, he had never been this afraid of anyone. But Grigory was different—Grigory could end his life with a mere flick of his finger.

"Say that again," Grigory growled, his voice dangerously low.

The soldier swallowed thickly, his voice barely audible. "He smashed the APC like a toy... and bullets didn't stop him." He forced the words out, each one feeling like a death sentence.

Grigory's eyes narrowed as the words hit him. The pistol remained trained on the man for a few agonising moments before slowly lowering. His mind raced, the impossible claim echoing in his thoughts. In Turkey, he'd received strange reports from his men—stories of a man with super strength and invulnerability. He had dismissed it at the time, thinking his soldiers had exaggerated their failure to cover their own incompetence. It had been impossible then, and it still seemed impossible now.

But could this be the same man?

Grigory's lips tightened into a thin line as he holstered his pistol. He dismissed the shaken soldiers with a flick of his hand, too deep in thought to deal with them any longer. As they hurried out of the room, grateful to have survived, Grigory's mind swirled with the impossibility of what he was facing. Could this mysterious figure be the same man responsible for his failure in Turkey? Was it possible that someone like that truly existed?

His fury boiled over. The loss of the weapons, his carefully orchestrated sale to the Pakistanis—it was all slipping through his fingers because of this... man. He slammed his fists into the desk with such force that the wood cracked under the impact, a furious roar escaping him as he struggled to comprehend the situation. The impossibility of it only made it worse. This time, he swore, he wouldn't let it slip away again. Whoever this man was, Grigory would find him. And when he did, there would be no escaping his wrath.

20 **Decompressing**

The team had settled into a quiet corner of Siliguri, a house just spacious enough to accommodate them after the intense few days they had endured. The four-bedroom place was relatively expensive by local standards, though compared to the prices they were used to in larger cities, it was still a bargain. The house sat on a small, slightly elevated plot, with a narrow driveway leading to a shaded carport where their Scorpio sat, tucked discreetly out of view from the main road. The lot was surrounded by tall bushes, providing a sense of privacy, something they appreciated after the chaos they'd recently faced.

Inside, the house was comfortable, if somewhat basic. The furnishings were simple but functional. The living area featured a low wooden table and a worn but welcoming sofa set, where they could finally sit and relax. The kitchen, just off to the side, was small but came fully equipped, complete with local amenities—an ancient gas stove and a modest fridge that hummed loudly in the otherwise quiet space. A small patio out back had just enough room for them to stretch out or get some air.

The bedrooms were small but tidy, each with a single bed, a wooden wardrobe, and enough space for their gear. The two bathrooms were shared between them, both functional with standing showers and a small basin. The team didn't need luxury—just somewhere to decompress and plan their next move. The house gave them just that—a modest refuge, tucked away from prying eyes, yet near enough to the main roads for a quick escape if needed.

Dave had been insistent on being the first to use the shower. That black dust from the warehouse seemed to cling to everything—his clothes, his skin, even his hair. It felt like no matter how much he wiped it off, it still clung to him, a gritty reminder of their operation. The hot water cascaded over him washing away the warehouse grime, Dave found himself thinking about Turkey. Even the few short years of field experience had changed

how he saw things - where once he'd seen only Grigory's chaos, now he recognised the calculated precision behind each move, the careful orchestration of seemingly random events.

It was Grigory's nature to work this way—never straightforward, always drawing them into complex webs that left them scrambling to untangle his true motives. The Salal dam disaster had been no different, Dave realised. The chaos, the mix of droughts and floods, had been meticulously orchestrated, a master-stroke of distraction. But the real question gnawing at him was Grigory's involvement with BlueWave and the arms deal with India. How deep was Grigory in this, and more importantly, what was his ultimate goal?

The steam from the shower swirled around Dave as his thoughts churned. Grigory never did anything without purpose. Every move, every betrayal, had always served a larger plan. But how did this arms deal fit into his larger strategy? And why had Grigory gone through such lengths to keep his dealings with BlueWave under the radar, using the weapons for a future clash between India and Pakistan? It was clear that Grigory had a hand in every part of the operation, but the full picture was still out of reach.

Towelling off and getting a fresh change of clothes made Dave feel lighter, both physically and mentally. He pulled on a simple T-shirt and jeans, shaking off the last remnants of the warehouse grime. As he stepped out of the bathroom, the steam lingering behind him, he felt a renewed sense of focus. The questions still haunted him, but they were starting to take shape—pieces of the puzzle he could eventually solve. He made his way into the common area where the others were gathered, feeling ready to tackle whatever came next.

As they settled in, the conversation turned to what they had learned from Major General Vikram Sethi before his release. It had been enlightening, if not entirely conclusive. BlueWave had orchestrated the weapons deal, keeping everything under the table to avoid any traceable manifest or paper trail. The intent was to ensure future prices from the Russian state

remained stable, and the weapons were to be used against potential Pakistani incursions—like the one at the Salal Dam.

The Major General had little to offer about the Russian supplier, though. Whoever it was, he had to be very wealthy and well-protected to orchestrate such a large-scale deal behind the back of the state. But one thing had become clear: Grigory had coordinated every aspect of the deal with the Russians, making him the critical link. Yet the heist remained a mystery—the Major General had no clue who had orchestrated it, as the trade was known to only a select few. It wasn't on any official government purchase order, and it had been a personal operation between the Major General, his close staff, and the Russians.

The pieces of the puzzle were starting to come together, but there were still too many gaps. Grigory was at the centre of it all, but they needed to figure out who was pulling the strings.

21 Leak

Anya, hunched over her laptop, suddenly straightened as an alert popped up on her screen. The AI she'd programmed to monitor activities around the Indus Waters Treaty and water-related affairs in the region had flagged something unusual. A Pakistani water minister, Amir Qureshi, had reached out to a journalist and an environmentalist, suggesting a conversation they should have in private. The tone and secrecy of the message raised immediate red flags for Anya.

Without wasting a moment, Anya hacked into the journalist's mailbox and sidetracked all communication between Qureshi and the journalist to her own covert mailbox. From there, she could control the situation and act as the journalist, ensuring no unwanted eyes would be on this conversation. Her fingers moved deftly across the keyboard as she crafted a response to Qureshi, pretending to be the journalist.

"Minister Qureshi," the message read, "I agree, we should meet in person to discuss this matter privately. I suggest we meet at a quiet location to avoid any unwanted attention. How about the coffee shop on the outskirts of Islamabad, near Rawal Lake, tomorrow at 2 PM?"

She hit send, her mind racing with possibilities. Whatever Qureshi had on his mind could provide the team with crucial information about the broader conspiracy they were investigating. And by controlling the narrative, Anya could lead the conversation exactly where they needed it to go.

The next morning, the team arrived in Islamabad, their minds focused on the task ahead. They'd arranged transport—a large Mercedes Sprinter delivery van, unassuming and practical. With its sliding side door, the van provided a discreet option if they needed to take Qureshi for questioning. The plan was set, and now they needed to blend into their surroundings at Lake View Park, a large, open green space overlooking Rawal Lake.

Lake View Park sprawled across the landscape, a mix of grassy fields, tree-lined paths, and the shimmering blue water of the lake itself. The park was busy enough to provide cover but quiet enough in the more secluded areas for a private meeting. A perfect place for Anya to meet Qureshi without drawing too much attention. Small hills and clusters of trees broke up the otherwise open field, giving the team plenty of vantage points to keep Anya in sight without being too obvious.

Anya had positioned herself in a shaded area under a large tree near the lake. The wide expanse of grass sloped gently down to the water, providing a clear line of sight to anyone approaching from the main path. Dressed in a modest outfit, with a scarf draped over her head, she blended in perfectly with the park's usual visitors. Her appearance was carefully planned—if Qureshi had ever seen the real journalist, she needed to avoid drawing any suspicion. The scarf obscured just enough of her face to give her an edge of anonymity.

The rest of the team had spread out strategically. Dave had taken up position on a small rise further back, sitting on a bench with a newspaper in hand, his eyes discreetly scanning the park from behind the pages. Omar, casually leaning against a tree near the park's main entrance, had a perfect view of anyone coming or going. Serj, always more comfortable in action than subtlety, had opted to sit in a parked car near the van, watching from a distance with a clear view of the lake and Anya's position. Each of them had their radios set to a private channel, their earpieces discreet, ready to move if anything went wrong.

Anya's vantage point was ideal, giving her a panoramic view of the park while maintaining her anonymity. From her spot, she could see the main pathway leading toward her, the sparkling water reflecting sunlight off the lake, and the occasional boat drifting lazily by. Couples strolled by, children played near the water, and families picnicked on the grass—all of them unaware of the tense operation happening among them.

The team waited, each in their own position, distant enough not to draw attention but close enough to react at a moment's notice. Anya checked her watch, her heart rate steady as she waited for Qureshi. If all went according to plan, this meeting would provide the answers they needed. If not, they were ready for whatever came next.

As Qureshi approached the meeting spot, his cautious movements betrayed his fear. His eyes darted around the park, scanning for any signs of danger or surveillance, his nervousness palpable. He hesitated a few feet away from Anya, his posture tense, as though he were constantly on the verge of bolting. Dressed in a simple but neat suit, Qureshi looked more like a man running from something than someone attending a casual meeting.

Anya remained calm, sitting beneath the tree with her scarf loosely draped over her head, watching him approach. When he finally reached her, he barely made eye contact, his hands fidgeting with the lapels of his jacket. "You're the journalist?" His voice was shaky, more an accusation than a question. He glanced around nervously again, clearly uncomfortable.

Anya, her voice steady but warm, trying to ease his tension. "Yes, I am. I'm here to talk, as you requested. I understand you have something important to share, and I'm here to listen."

Qureshi still looked unsure. Leaning in slightly, his eyes narrowing, as if trying to determine if she was who she said she was. "Prove it. What was my last message to you about?"

Anya didn't miss a beat. She had prepared for this moment, her voice even as she replied, "You mentioned that we needed to speak in private about something crucial, something you couldn't risk saying openly. You were concerned about someone watching you—about consequences if it got out."

That seemed to relax Qureshi, if only slightly. He still seemed on edge, his gaze constantly shifting as if expecting someone to jump out from behind

the trees at any moment. He sat down next to Anya, but not too close, keeping a nervous distance.

"I don't want to be here," Qureshi admitted, his voice barely above a whisper. "But I can't... I can't just do nothing. What happened at Salal... it was more than just a disaster. It was planned. And what's worse—there's more coming. I couldn't live with myself if I didn't try to stop it."

He paused, rubbing his hands together as if trying to warm himself, though the day was mild. "But if I go public, the stranger will ruin me. He'll destroy my career, my family... everything. And after what happened at the dam, I know exactly how far he's willing to go. He won't hesitate to kill me or my family. I've seen what he's capable of."

Anya's expression remained neutral, though her mind was racing. She knew exactly who this "stranger" was—Grigory. His reach was long, and his methods ruthless. The fear in Qureshi's eyes wasn't just paranoia; it was the knowledge of having seen Grigory's handiwork up close.

"What exactly do you know?" Anya asked gently. "We can help, but you need to tell us everything. What's coming next?"

Qureshi swallowed hard, visibly torn between fear and his conscience. "There are other projects, ones that could destabilise the entire region if they go unchecked. And this stranger... he has people in every corner, pulling strings. It's all connected to water—control of the rivers, control of the land. And he won't stop until he has it all."

Anya considered his words slowly, letting the gravity of his words sink in. Whatever was coming, it was bigger than they had realised, and Qureshi was at the centre of it all, a man trapped between his fear and the weight of his conscience. But this was the lead they needed, and they weren't going to let it slip through their fingers.

Qureshi, his voice trembling as he outlined the gravity of the situation. "This weekend, they plan on damaging the works on the Tarbela Dam. It's

all set up to look like contractor negligence, designed to sow distrust in the government and make it seem like they've been using substandard contractors—cutting corners, hiring cheap labour, and using inferior materials. The idea is to cause a major scandal, enough that the public will demand a change in how construction projects are handled. They want to take over the contracts throughout the country, gain control of the infrastructure—and the power that comes with it."

Anya's eyes remained locked on him, her mind racing. Tarbela Dam, one of Pakistan's key assets, was now in the crosshairs of this orchestrated sabotage. If what Qureshi said was true, the implications were immense—not just for Pakistan, but for the region. The attack would destabilise the country, cause widespread panic, and give the shadowy forces behind the plot the leverage they needed.

Qureshi's desperation was clear as he continued, "I need you to publish something. If the world knows what's planned, surely it can be stopped, right? If the media sheds light on this, then they won't be able to move forward."

Anya considered his request carefully. "I understand, but I can't just publish without evidence. If it's just from an anonymous source, it'll be dismissed as speculation, or worse, a conspiracy theory. We need something concrete—proof of the sabotage plans."

"Proof? Of course not!" Qureshi snapped, panic seeping into his voice. "This isn't the kind of operation that leaves a paper trail! It's all off the books. There are no contracts or memos to show you. Everything is word of mouth, deep in the shadows. If they knew I was even telling you this much, I'd be dead already. Is there anything you can do to investigate further? But you have to keep my name out of it—my family, my life depend on it."

Anya took a deep breath, weighing the options. "We'll look into it," she said, her voice steady, trying to offer him a sliver of reassurance. "But we

need to approach this carefully. You're right—without proof, it's going to be difficult to stop this just by making it public. But we have three days. We can investigate, dig deeper, and see if we can find evidence. But we need to move quickly."

Qureshi, visibly relieved but still consumed by fear. "Three days," he echoed quietly. "I hope it's enough."

Anya, glancing around the park, sensing that their time here was coming to an end. "We'll keep your name out of this," she assured him. "You've done the right thing by coming forward. We'll take it from here."

Qureshi stood abruptly, his nerves fraying as he prepared to leave. "I just... I can't be seen here any more," he muttered, glancing over his shoulder. "Please, stop them."

Anya watched as Qureshi hurried off, disappearing into the park's winding paths. She quickly signalled to the rest of the team over her comms. "We've got our lead. It's big. We need to regroup and figure out our next move."

From the cover of dense trees, Grigory stood motionless, his cold eyes fixed on the meeting unfolding in the park. Through his directional microphone, he listened intently as Qureshi nervously gave his rehearsed story to the "journalist" sitting in front of him. He could sense the fear in Qureshi's voice, every word laced with tension, but the man had followed the script exactly as Grigory had instructed. For now, Qureshi was still useful.

Grigory's attention shifted to Anya. She had arrived earlier, scanning the park with subtle precision, though she hadn't been subtle enough. He had seen the rest of the team take up positions, and now, watching them from the shadows, a smirk tugged at the corner of his mouth. "So, this is who I'm up against," he thought. "Now I know who I'm dealing with."

He didn't need to engage just yet. This was a game of strategy, and he had the advantage of knowing their every move. Qureshi had played his part,

and the team believed they were chasing valuable information. Let them run in circles—it would keep them distracted while Grigory executed his real plans.

As the team began to leave, Grigory stepped back into the deeper shadows of the trees, his movements fluid and calculated. He moved silently, slipping through the woods like a predator retreating after studying its prey. Once clear of the park's open spaces, he reached his car—a nondescript black sedan tucked in a quiet corner. He got in, glanced once more toward the park, and drove off into the fading light, knowing full well that the team had no idea how closely he had been watching. The real game was just beginning.

22 **Bani Gala**

The villa rose from the Bani Gala hillside like a watchtower, its windows reflecting the afternoon sun across Rawal Lake. Dave found himself automatically scanning the surroundings, mapping every approach vector, every potential vulnerability in their temporary sanctuary. The location was remote enough to provide privacy but not so far from the city that it would be a logistical headache. Surrounded by lush greenery and tall trees, the villa sat behind high walls with a discreet but formidable security setup. CCTV cameras covered the perimeter, feeding into a control room inside the house, and motion sensors lined the gates and entry points. It was the perfect place for the team to regroup and plan without fear of being watched.

Inside, the villa was spacious and modern, with floor-to-ceiling windows that let in the warm glow of the setting sun, casting a serene atmosphere over the open living space. The villa had multiple bedrooms, each with its own en-suite bathroom, and a large, well-equipped kitchen where the team had already begun stockpiling supplies. The back of the house opened onto a patio, complete with comfortable seating and a pool that overlooked the valley. From here, the view stretched far and wide, the landscape a blend of urban sprawl and untouched nature.

Despite the beauty and tranquillity of the villa, the mood inside was anything but relaxed. The team had gathered around the long wooden table in the living room, a map of the Tarbela Dam and surrounding areas spread across the surface. Anya's laptop hummed softly as she cross-referenced data, while Dave, Serj, and Omar reviewed intel on the dam's infrastructure.

"Grigory's plot against Tarbela Dam is bigger than just sabotage," Anya began, her voice steady but urgent. "If they damage the dam, they're not just destroying a critical piece of infrastructure—they're setting Pakistan's power production back by decades. It'll be a financial and environmental

disaster, not to mention the potential for catastrophic flooding downstream."

Dave, tapping a spot on the map. "The dam provides around 20% of the country's electricity through hydropower. If it's taken offline, it's not just power—they'll lose water control, which will mean massive flooding in the lowlands. We're talking billions of dollars in damages, displaced populations, and chaos. That's exactly what Grigory wants."

Omar, frowning, added, "This isn't just about Pakistan, either. If Tarbela goes down, the entire region will feel it. Grigory's not just creating a disaster—he's destabilizing the whole area, and who knows what kind of political fallout that's going to trigger."

Serj crossed his arms, his face grim. "We have three days. We need to figure out where exactly they plan to strike and how they're going to do it. Sabotaging the dam won't be easy—it's a massive structure with serious security, and there are fail-safes in place. But Grigory's smart, and he'll have a plan. We need to find out what that is, and we need to stop him before the damage is done."

The room was tense, but focused. The mission was clear: they had to stop Grigory before his plot against Tarbela Dam could wreak havoc on Pakistan and beyond. The team began formulating their next steps—reconnaissance of the dam, identifying key vulnerabilities, and figuring out how Grigory's men planned to bypass the dam's defences. It was a race against time, and failure was not an option.

Serj settled back in his chair, arms crossed, deep in thought. "If Grigory is going after a dam inside Pakistan, it's likely going to be another false flag operation. He'll want to make it look like Indian forces are retaliating against the attack on Salal Dam, even though most of the devastation hit Pakistan. That way, he stirs the pot between the two countries, pushing them closer to a full-blown conflict."

Omar, adding, "Exactly. If Grigory wants to escalate tensions, he's going to need Indian military uniforms, equipment, maybe even vehicles to make it look convincing. If it's going to be a false flag, he'll need the whole setup—gear that could pass as Indian military hardware."

Anya, already thinking ahead, frowned slightly as she tapped on her laptop. "I can try to track down any unusual thefts or black-market dealings of Indian military hardware," she said, "but unless it's something big, like a tank or helicopter, I doubt we'll find anything obvious. Things like boots, uniforms, and small arms tend to disappear from military bases all the time. It's par for the course in any nation's armed forces, and they rarely make a fuss about it. If Grigory's smart, he won't need to steal anything high profile—just enough to make the operation look legit."

Serj, "Then we need to focus on tracing the smaller, less obvious things. Fake insignias, stolen fatigues, maybe even vehicles that can be disguised as Indian. We need to monitor any channels where these things could show up. If we can find out how he's acquiring this gear, we might get ahead of his plan."

Anya typed away on her keyboard, already running searches through her vast network of resources. "I'll pull up black-market channels, underground dealers, and any reports of missing or stolen military hardware in the region. We might not get anything huge, but if there's been an up-tick in smaller items, we could start building a picture."

Omar added thoughtfully, "We should also look for signs of anyone crossing borders, particularly smugglers or arms dealers with connections to both sides. Grigory's likely using intermediaries, people who can source this gear without raising alarms."

Dave, listening intently, chimed in. "We've only got three days. We'll need to work fast. Once we find out where Grigory's getting his supplies, we'll be able to predict where and how he'll make his move."

Anya glanced up from her screen. "I'll keep digging. If Grigory's planning a false flag, he'll leave breadcrumbs somewhere. We just need to find them."

The room fell silent as Dave's words hung in the air. Everyone had been focused on the roads, on defending the dam from a land-based attack, but now he'd thrown in another possibility—one that could shift the entire dynamic of their plan.

"Wait, this is Grigory we're dealing with," Dave repeated, his mind clearly racing. "If there's one thing we know about him, it's that we have to expect the unexpected."

Anya raised an eyebrow, intrigued. "Go on."

Dave took a breath, gathering his thoughts. "What if he already knows we're going to be there? What if he's already accounting for our presence in his plan? He's always two steps ahead. Even if he doesn't know for sure, you can bet he's planned for the possibility."

Omar frowned. "How would he know we'd be there? We've been careful not to leave a trace."

Dave shook his head. "That's not the point. He might not know we're coming, but he'll have planned for the possibility that someone could interfere. So what would he do if we're already at the dam when he makes his move?"

Serj was the first to respond, pacing as he considered the angles. "The roads up to the dam are narrow and windy. Any convoy approaching would be spotted from a distance. It'd be risky for him to come that way."

Dave asks, "So what if he doesn't use the roads?"

Anya's eyes widened slightly, her mind catching up. "You're thinking an attack helicopter? Something quick, in and out?"

"Maybe," Dave said, "but we're missing something here—something common to all dams. The water."

Serj's eyes sharpened as the pieces fell into place. "A boat," he said. "But how would he do that? An approach from downstream would be impossible—there are other works across the river, and the flow wouldn't allow it. If he's using the water, it'd have to come upstream, from the north."

Dave's mind was racing now, thinking about how this could play out. "Exactly. We've been focusing on the roads and the land, but what if his real approach is by water? If he comes from upstream, he could slip in unnoticed, plant explosives, or launch a different kind of sabotage entirely."

Anya's fingers were already flying over her laptop as she brought up satellite maps and aerial shots of the area around Tarbela Dam. "Okay, that's a valid theory," she said. "But how do we defend against that? We're already spread thin just trying to cover the land. If we shift everything to defend the water, we're leaving ourselves open to an attack by road or air."

Dave clenched his jaw, realising the complexity of the situation. "That's the problem. Grigory's smart. He'll know we'll be forced to spread our resources thin. If we focus on the water, he could come from the air or land and vice versa. He's counting on us having to make a tough call."

Serj crossed his arms, thinking. "We can't be everywhere at once, but we don't need to be. We need surveillance. We position ourselves in the middle—on the dam itself, like we originally planned—and use drones or cameras to monitor the key approaches: the roads, the air, and the water. That way, we can respond no matter which direction the attack comes from."

Anya, already shifting to her next task. "I can get surveillance equipment ready—thermal optics, drones for night vision coverage. We'll have eyes on every possible approach. But it's going to take some time to set up."

Dave agreed. "Let's make sure we cover every angle. If Grigory's plan is as complex as we think, he could hit us from multiple fronts. We have to be ready for anything."

Omar added, "We'll need to coordinate shifts. If this is a three-day operation, we can't afford to wear ourselves out by trying to cover everything at once."

Serj firmly stated, "We hold the middle, we watch the approaches, and we stay mobile. Grigory might have a plan, but we're going to be ready for him this time."

The team began to finalise their strategy. The dam itself would be their base, their central point of control. From there, they would monitor every possible approach, ensuring that no matter how Grigory decided to strike—whether by land, air, or water—they would be ready to stop him.

Anya's eyes suddenly lit up as an idea struck her. "Wait a second. When we stopped the weapons shipment, do you remember the designation of some of the systems in the trailers?"

Dave and Omar exchanged a glance, both shaking their heads. "Not really," Dave said. "There were AK assault rifles, that much I remember, but the rest? It was just numbers and letters to me."

Anya, her fingers flying across the keys of her laptop. "There was one in particular—RF 9M133. I looked it up earlier, and it's a Russian Federation Anti-Tank Guided Missile. But get this—it's also effective against boats."

Serj raised an eyebrow, catching on to her train of thought. "You're right," he said, his voice steady. "If Grigory is planning a waterborne assault, we could use that weapon against him. We stopped his shipment; maybe we can get our hands on one of those missiles."

Dave couldn't help but grin. "Oh, the irony of using his own weapons against him. We could really turn the tables."

Anya smiled. "We'd need Cecilia's help to secure one, but it's possible. We just need to get in touch with her and explain the situation."

Serj, "I'll get on that. We don't have much time, but if anyone can pull this off, it's Cecilia."

The team exchanged a knowing look. They had a new tool in their arsenal, one that could give them the edge they desperately needed. Grigory might have the element of surprise, but now they had a plan—and, if everything went well, the means to neutralise whatever he threw at them.

Omar, the gears in his mind turning. "Dave, remember back in Turkey when you caused all those roadblocks? You disrupted Grigory's entire operation for a while. Do you think we could do something similar here? Cause enough of an obstruction to slow things down, at least for a little while?"

Dave grinned at the memory. "Sure, it worked well back then. We just need to figure out what to block the roads with this time. Something big enough to create chaos, but we'd have to make it look natural—like an accident or an unavoidable obstacle. And we'll need to set it up at the last minute so we don't draw attention to it beforehand."

Omar, "Right. We could use something like trucks or construction equipment from a nearby site. Plenty of construction projects happening around here. If we get it right, Grigory's forces will be stuck dealing with an unexpected blockade instead of heading straight for the dam."

Serj added, "We could also use the terrain to our advantage. The roads leading up to the dam are winding and narrow—perfect spots for a strategically placed 'accident' to cause major delays. Once we've slowed them down, we'll have more time to act or even take control."

Anya chipped in, "I can monitor traffic patterns and find the best places to set up the blockages without raising suspicion. If we time it right, Grigory's men will have no choice but to slow down and deal with the mess."

Dave slid forward, excitement building. "Alright, let's make this happen. We'll need heavy machinery or a few large vehicles. Something we can either hijack or 'borrow' last minute. We create chaos, we buy ourselves time, and maybe—just maybe—we force Grigory into making a mistake."

23 Tarbela Dam

The day of the attack had finally arrived, and the tension was palpable as Omar and Dave moved swiftly, focused on setting up the necessary roadblocks to slow down Grigory's forces. Their first task was to find a suitably large vehicle to block the western road leading toward the dam. They scouted the area around the dam's construction site and soon spotted the perfect candidate—a long flatbed articulated lorry. It was heavy, cumbersome, and ideal for the job.

Omar took the lead, stealing the truck and navigating it toward the chosen location near the power house. The road here was flanked by steep hills and dense trees, providing natural barriers that would prevent anyone from simply driving off-road to bypass the blockade. It was the perfect spot, a natural choke point.

Omar skilfully manoeuvred the truck into position, parking it across the road. He turned the wheel sharply to make it look as though the truck had jack-knifed. It was convincing, but Omar knew it wouldn't be enough. If Grigory's men had access to heavy machinery, they could potentially move the truck out of the way. That's where Dave came in.

Dave, following behind in the Hilux, pulled up next to the truck. He looked around to make sure the coast was clear before crouching beneath the trailer. Omar watched in amazement, still not entirely used to Dave's incredible abilities. Dave gripped the trailer, the metal yielding to his strength like cardboard. The massive structure groaned as he redirected its weight, tons of steel pivoting through the air before crashing onto its side. The heavy flatbed now lay across the road, completely blocking any vehicles from passing.

Not done yet, Dave moved to the cab of the truck, crouching down once more. Omar stood back, shaking his head with a mixture of awe and disbelief as Dave repeated the process, lifting the front cab and flipping it

over onto its side. The large vehicle was now a hulking obstacle, immovable and blocking the entire road. No one would be getting through there anytime soon.

Dave dusted his hands off and looked at Omar with a grin. "That should slow them down."

Omar chuckled, still amazed by what he'd just witnessed. "You think? No one's getting through that mess without a crane."

With the western side secured, the two of them jumped back into the Hilux and sped off. They still had the eastern road to deal with, and they didn't have much time. The clock was ticking, and Grigory's forces would be approaching soon. They needed to find something just as big and cumbersome to block the other side.

As they sped across the road that stretched over the dam, Omar's eyes lit up as he spotted the perfect roadblock. Just off the main road sat a huge, bright yellow Liebherr Osprey crane, its eight axles firmly planted on the ground. It was massive, slow-moving, and immensely heavy—an ideal obstruction that not only blocked the road but would also prevent anyone from using it to clear the path.

"That's it!" Omar exclaimed, pointing at the crane. "With that beast, no one's going to be able to move it, and they won't have anything left to unblock the road."

Without hesitation, Omar jumped out of the Hilux and scrambled up into the cab of the crane. After a few moments, the engine rumbled to life, and the enormous vehicle began slowly trundling down the road. Dave followed along behind in the Hilux, his eyes scanning the surroundings as they moved toward the ideal choke point.

Once they arrived at the location Omar had in mind—a narrow stretch of road with steep hills on either side—Omar parked the crane sideways, completely blocking the road. But they needed more than just the crane's

bulk to seal the deal. Omar grinned as he pulled out the remote control for the crane's outriggers.

"Here you go, Dave," Omar said, extending one of the crane's heavy-duty outriggers from the side. "A handy lever for you to lift it with. And just to make things extra difficult..." He raised the crane's arm high into the air using the remote, shifting the vehicle's centre of gravity dangerously off balance.

Dave understood exactly what Omar had in mind. He moved under the extended outrigger, crouching low. With a deep breath, Dave braced himself and began to lift. The crane groaned under its own weight, but Dave's strength was more than a match for the behemoth. Walking his hands toward the middle of the vehicle, he shifted its weight, and soon the entire crane began to tip. With one final push, the massive vehicle rolled onto its side with a deafening crash, its giant axles now pointed skyward, completely blocking the road.

Omar, still marvelling at Dave's unbelievable strength, quickly used the remote to retract the outrigger and then smashed the remote against a rock to destroy it. "Now no one's moving that thing," he said, satisfied with their work.

Breathing hard, but with a grin on his face, Dave wiped the sweat from his brow. "That should buy us enough time."

Omar, still shaking his head in disbelief. "I don't think I'll ever get used to that."

With their roadblocks in place, the two climbed back into the Hilux and headed toward the dam, knowing that Grigory's forces would have a serious challenge ahead of them. The team's preparations were nearly complete. Now, it was a matter of waiting for the attack to come.

From his vantage point high in the hills above the eastern side of the dam, Grigory watched, fascinated. Below him, Dave flipped the massive crane onto its side like a child's toy, sealing off the road. If Grigory hadn't seen it with his own eyes, he wouldn't have believed it. The sheer power Dave displayed was beyond anything Grigory had planned for, but it didn't matter. This was not a critical failure in his operation—just a minor setback.

Grigory calmly pulled out his phone and made a call to his men stationed nearby. "The road assault is compromised," he informed them, his voice cold and steady. "But continue the operation. Deploy the Cobras to harass and divert their forces. Keep them occupied."

The Otokar Cobras were fast-moving, light assault vehicles, highly mobile with excellent off-road capability. Each was armed with an NSV 12.7mm heavy machine gun, powerful enough to punch through light armour and wreak havoc on their opposition. Grigory was confident that his men would be able to navigate around the roadblock. The Cobras weren't intended to break through the dam's defences directly—they were there to create confusion and chaos, to keep the team scrambling and unable to focus on the real threat.

Once the first call was made, Grigory dialled again, this time summoning the key piece of his plan. "Send in the Raptor," he ordered. The boat had been positioned upstream, waiting for the signal. It was a sleek, fast vessel, retrofitted with Metis-M ATGM launchers designed for devastating anti-tank purposes. On the water, those launchers would be aimed at the dam, primed to cause catastrophic damage.

Grigory allowed himself a small, cold smile as he watched the scene below unfold. The roadblock had been nothing more than a temporary frustration, a small inconvenience in the grand scheme of things. His assault would continue, and soon, the Raptor would deliver the destruction he intended for the dam. There was nothing his enemies could do to stop it now—or so he believed.

Grigory's eyes glinted with dark anticipation as he watched the pieces begin to move. He knew his enemies would be scrambling to keep up. Dave's raw strength might have impressed him, but it wouldn't be enough. Not this time. This time, Grigory was going to show them just how far he was willing to go.

"Let's see how your strength fares against cold steel and fire," he murmured to himself.

Serj was the first to spot them, the two fast-moving Otokar Cobras tearing along the road toward the dam. He squinted as they briefly disappeared from view, turning left off the main road and heading into the open quarry works at the base of the dam. The vehicles were built for rough terrain, agile enough to bypass the roadblock they had set up, and they were coming fast, with firepower that could rip through anything the team had to offer. It was clear their intent was to reach the dam and unleash havoc once they gained the high ground again.

Dave's instincts kicked in immediately. "Serj, Omar—stay on the dam! Be ready for the water assault, it's coming. I'll deal with these guys!" His voice carried over the wind as he sprinted toward the edge of the dam's roadway, his legs pumping with the kind of force only he could muster. Without hesitating, Dave leapt from the section after the slipway, launching himself down the steep slope of the dam. His body tumbled into the trees below, rolling through the undergrowth before he regained his footing and bolted forward, his mind set on intercepting the Cobras.

From high in the hills, Grigory watched the unfolding chaos through his binoculars. He calmly relayed Dave's position to the Cobra drivers, his voice filled with cold authority. "Take him down. Engage at will." The drivers acknowledged, and the roof hatches of both vehicles opened with mechanical precision. The soldiers manning the NSV heavy machine guns racked the weapons, locking in their ammunition belts with practised ease.

Dust clouds kicked up behind the Cobras as they surged forward, their engines roaring like beasts ready to pounce. The first Cobra opened fire, the deafening chatter of the NSV machine gun cutting through the air. The 12.7mm rounds tore toward Dave at 700 rounds per minute, a hail of lethal projectiles.

But something shifted for Dave. As the bullets spat from the barrel, time slowed, the sound of the machine guns warping in his mind, each shot dragging through the air like slow, deliberate cracks. His enhanced abilities kicked in, sharpening his senses, his muscles, his reactions. Dave could see the rounds streaking toward him, cutting through the dust and trees like glowing embers. He dodged to the side in a blur of motion, the first volley of rounds smashing into the ground where he had stood moments before, the force of the impacts ripping apart the dirt and rocks.

Dave charged toward the first Cobra, weaving between the incoming fire. The second vehicle swung around, its gunner taking aim, but Dave was already moving faster than they could track. He closed the distance, his powerful legs carrying him at an almost impossible speed, his eyes locked on the approaching vehicles.

In the back of his mind, Dave knew he had to take them out before they reached the dam. His team was counting on him, and he couldn't let these Cobras tear through Serj and Omar's defences. His mind raced with the possibilities. But first, he had to stop the onslaught of heavy machine gun fire.

As the Cobras drew closer, Dave clenched his fists, ready to make his move. The next few seconds would determine everything.

With a powerful leap, Dave launched himself headlong into the first Otokar Cobra, his body hurtling through the air like a missile. In any other setting, it would have looked like a reckless tackle—something that would get him sent off in a rugby match—but here, it was devastatingly effective. His shoulder smashed into the roof-mounted NSV machine gun with a force

that crumpled the weapon like tin foil. The impact sent shock waves through the vehicle, causing it to veer violently off course.

The Cobra slewed sideways, its tires screeching as they lost traction. The momentum from Dave's hit sent the entire vehicle into a chaotic roll, flipping over and over as the heavy armoured frame crashed through the dirt and debris, leaving a path of destruction in its wake. Metal screeched against rock as the Cobra tumbled, parts scattering across the quarry like shrapnel.

Dave was thrown clear by the force of the impact, tumbling through the air amidst the flying debris. His enhanced body absorbed the fall as he hit the ground, rolling with the motion before springing back to his feet. His senses were still sharp, every movement hyper-focused as the dust settled around him.

The second Cobra had closed the distance, its NSV heavy machine gun roaring to life again, sending another barrage of bullets in Dave's direction. Time slowed once more, and he darted to the side, dodging the rounds with an almost inhuman grace. His mind was already calculating his next move. The first Cobra was out of commission, but the second was still a threat, and he had to act fast.

Standing in the middle of the quarry, the hulking mass of the Cobra bearing down on him, Dave squared his shoulders. His eyes narrowed as he faced the oncoming threat, ready for the next attack. The team was counting on him, and there was no way he was going to let these Cobras reach the dam.

Grigory stood high in the hills, his cold eyes fixated on the unfolding chaos below. This was exactly what he had planned. Dave, the brute with unimaginable strength, had been drawn away from his team, lured into defending them against the fast-moving Cobras. It was a classic distraction tactic, one Grigory had perfected over the years. But as he watched in

shocked fascination, he realised that even his meticulous planning hadn't accounted for what was happening now.

Down below, the scene seemed impossible—a middle-aged, overweight man, facing down two fully armed Otokar Cobras. Grigory had seen Dave's capabilities before, but witnessing this raw power, this disregard for physics and human limitations, was something else entirely. The first Cobra had been torn apart like a toy, its roof-mounted machine gun obliterated by a single hit, the vehicle itself flipped and destroyed. And now, Dave was standing there, facing the second assault vehicle, bullets flying past him as though they were moving in slow motion.

Grigory's pulse quickened, his usually emotionless expression betraying a flicker of something new—uncertainty. What he was watching shouldn't have been possible, not even for a man of Dave's apparent power. Grigory had studied him, knew his capabilities were beyond the norm, but this... this was something else. The ease with which Dave had handled the first Cobra, the way he dodged the hail of machine-gun fire—it was beyond anything Grigory had anticipated.

But Grigory was not one to panic, nor was he easily dissuaded. He knew the Cobras were never the real threat—they were only a means to keep Dave occupied, to pull him away from the dam and his team. The real attack was already in motion, happening right now, unseen by Dave and the others. The Raptor, with its retrofitted anti-tank missile launchers, was silently making its approach on the water. Grigory's men were ready to strike the dam from the one place Dave couldn't protect—the water.

Grigory's lips curled into a thin, calculating smile as he murmured to himself, "Let him have his victory here. He doesn't know he's already lost."

As Dave faced down the second Cobra, unaware of the danger coming from the water, Grigory watched with a dark satisfaction. This distraction was working perfectly. Soon, the dam would be in ruins, and there was nothing Dave's brute strength could do to stop it.

The Raptor tore across the surface of the water, its sleek frame cutting through the waves like a knife. A massive rooster tail trailed behind it, the wake spreading wide as it approached the dam at breakneck speed. The boat, recently deployed from a Mil Mi-26 heavy lift helicopter, had been hidden just around the headland, out of sight. Now it surged forward, armed with deadly intent—its guided missiles locked and loaded, ready to unleash devastation on the dam's slipway. If it succeeded in firing, the entire dam would be compromised, and billions of dollars, not to mention countless lives, would be lost.

Up on the dam, the team shifted their focus away from Dave's battle with the Cobras. Their real threat—the one they had prepared for—was now barrelling towards them at 50 knots. The Raptor was fast, incredibly fast, and armed with the firepower to tear the dam apart.

Serj, crouched near the hastily set-up missile launcher, tightened his grip on the 9M133. The anti-tank missile was mounted in its launch tube, resting on the stand they had managed to rig in place. The missile was designed to destroy armoured vehicles, but now it had to do the impossible—hit a speeding boat before it could fire its own missiles. The problem was, at 50 knots, hitting a target moving that fast across the water was near impossible.

Serj's eyes narrowed as he tracked the Raptor's approach, heart pounding in his chest. He and the others knew they had one shot—just one. If they missed, the Raptor would get within firing range, and once it launched its missiles, there would be no stopping the devastation. The weight of that reality sat heavy on all of them, but none more so than Serj, who stood ready, missile in hand, finger trembling over the trigger.

"Hold," Omar whispered from his position, eyes glued to the Raptor through binoculars. The boat hurtled toward them, the roar of its engines growing louder by the second, but it hadn't slowed down yet. "Hold..."

Serj's hands gripped the missile launcher tightly, waiting for the signal. The boat was closing in, but they knew it would need to slow down in order to aim and fire its guided missiles accurately. That would be their moment—the brief window when the Raptor would be vulnerable.

"Steady..." Omar's voice was taut with tension. The Raptor was nearing the slipway now, still moving too fast for a clear shot. Serj's heart raced. He could feel the weight of the moment pressing down on him, knowing that if he missed, they'd all be finished.

And then, as if on cue, the Raptor began to decelerate. It was lining up its shot, preparing to fire its own missiles at the dam's structure.

"Now!" Omar barked.

Serj didn't hesitate. He squeezed the trigger, the missile launching with a deafening roar. The 9M133 streaked toward the target, trailing smoke as it raced across the water. The Raptor, still slowing, was now locked in its sights.

The entire world seemed to hold its breath as the missile streaked through the air, closing in on the boat. The Raptor's crew, realising the danger, scrambled to react, but it was too late. The missile slammed into the Raptor's side with a violent explosion, the blast ripping through the sleek boat, sending debris and flames shooting into the sky.

For a brief moment, there was silence, and then the sound of the Raptor's remains crashing into the water filled the air. The boat, once a lethal weapon poised to destroy the dam, was now a smoking wreck sinking beneath the surface.

Serj let out a long breath, his hands still shaking. They had done it. They had fired first, and they had hit their target. The dam was safe—for now.

Omar clapped Serj on the shoulder, a mixture of relief and triumph in his eyes. "Nice shot."

His eyes still locked on the water, where the wreckage of the Raptor continued to burn. "That was too close," breathed Serj.

Grigory stood in stunned silence, his eyes locked on the smoking wreckage of the Raptor as it sank beneath the water. His mind raced, trying to process what had just happened. His perfectly calculated plan, the attack that should have devastated the dam, had been foiled—again. This team, whoever they were, had managed to counter him at every turn. They had destroyed his weapons, taken down his forces, and now, they had eliminated his ace: the Raptor.

But what really took Grigory's breath away was the sight of Dave, defying everything he knew about human limitations. Below, on the quarry floor, the second Cobra, still firing, was now being outmanoeuvred by one man. Grigory watched in disbelief as Dave, having dodged the relentless gunfire from the Cobra's heavy machine gun, ran alongside the fast-moving vehicle with ease. The sheer audacity of it—no man should be able to outrun an assault vehicle. And yet, there Dave was, keeping pace with it, his muscles straining but his determination unwavering.

Then, with a burst of inhuman strength, Dave grabbed the Cobra's side rail and, in one fluid motion, propelled himself onto the roof of the vehicle. The gunner, caught completely off-guard, had no time to react. Before he could aim his weapon, Dave's hand shot out, grabbing him by the collar. In a single, effortless move, Dave hurled the gunner from the vehicle. The unfortunate man crashed onto the gravel below, rolling and tumbling, unconscious before he even knew what hit him.

Grigory's shock deepened as he saw what happened next. Dave dropped down into the Cobra, slipping through the opening left by the now-vacant gunner's post. For a brief moment, there was a flurry of gunfire from inside the vehicle, but it was over almost as quickly as it began. The Cobra, once

roaring with deadly intent, rapidly came to a halt, its engine sputtering as Dave neutralised the remaining threats.

The driver, in a desperate panic, kicked open his door and tumbled out onto the ground. But before he could get his bearings, he felt himself being lifted—propelled, almost—by some invisible force. He hit the gravel with a thud, skidding to a stop as Dave stepped out of the Cobra behind him, calm and collected, his eyes locked on the fleeing man.

The driver, now realising just how far out of his depth he was, scrambled to his feet and bolted, sprinting toward the safety of the quarry, desperate to escape the unstoppable force that was Dave.

Grigory's hands clenched into fists as he watched the scene unfold. His mind was clouded with disbelief, anger, and a growing sense of fear. This wasn't just any team he was up against. Whoever Dave was, he was something more—something Grigory hadn't accounted for. And now, for the first time in years, Grigory felt the icy grip of doubt creeping up his spine.

Dave had made his presence known, and now, Grigory understood: this was no longer a battle he could win through sheer force. He needed something more. Something beyond muscle and weapons. As he turned to leave his observation post, Grigory knew one thing for sure—he had underestimated his opponent. But he wouldn't make that mistake again.

With the dust settling and the sounds of the conflict fading, Dave's mind was still racing. His eyes narrowed as he scanned the quarry, and a determined thought crossed his mind: There's no way Grigory is getting away this time. The man had slipped through their fingers too many times before, but not now, not here.

His gaze fell on the Cobra driver, still running, desperate to escape the scene. The driver's terror was palpable as he stumbled over rocks and

debris, barely keeping his footing in his mad dash for freedom. But Dave was already moving, his decision made. He set off after the man with a speed that defied logic, closing the gap with effortless strides.

The driver, glancing over his shoulder, saw Dave gaining on him, eyes wide with disbelief. He couldn't comprehend how this man—this force of nature—could move so fast. Panic surged through him as his legs gave way beneath him, sending him sprawling into the dirt. Scrambling on hands and knees, he clawed at the ground, still trying to crawl away, but it was useless.

Dave reached him in seconds, standing over the man like a shadow cast by a force too great to understand. The driver's breathing was ragged, his body shaking as he looked up into Dave's calm but relentless eyes. "We need some answers," Dave said, his voice steady and cold.

Without a second thought, Dave reached down and grabbed the man by the collar, lifting him off the ground with ease. The driver struggled, his hands trembling as he tried to reach for his sidearm, but Dave was faster. In one swift motion, Dave disarmed him and tossed the weapon aside, rendering the man defenceless.

With a firm grip on the driver's shoulder, Dave began marching him back toward the rest of the team. The man, still in shock, stumbled as Dave dragged him along, too terrified to resist. His mind was racing, but all he could think was that no one could possibly survive this encounter. And yet, here he was, face to face with a man who had overturned vehicles, dodged gunfire, and now effortlessly captured him.

As they approached the others, Dave's mind was clear. They had a prisoner, and with him, they might finally get the answers they needed—about Grigory's plans, about the attacks, and about what their next move should be. There was no way Grigory would escape justice this time.

Serj stood before the captured driver, arms crossed and eyes cold. "You need to tell us what you know," he said, his voice carrying the weight of a man who wasn't asking for cooperation but demanding it.

The driver was drenched in sweat, his breath ragged as fear gripped him. His mind was spinning, torn between two horrifying choices. On one hand, he had Grigory—a man who ruled with an iron fist, a cold and brutal warrior who wouldn't think twice about slaughtering his own men for failure. Returning to him now, after the disaster that had unfolded, would almost certainly mean death.

But then there was Dave. The man who had single-handedly overturned vehicles, run down the Cobra at impossible speed, and taken him captive with ease. There was something terrifying in Dave's raw, unexplainable power, but so far, he hadn't shown brutality. He had simply been relentless, like a force of nature. The driver was stuck between two choices, neither of them good—but one of them, at least, offered a sliver of hope.

He swallowed hard, his throat dry, and stammered, "I'll talk—but only if you can guarantee my safety."

Serj glanced at Dave, then back at the driver, his expression unreadable. He understood the fear in the man's eyes. Grigory wasn't just a leader—he was a terror. And yet, the driver was looking at Dave with an equal measure of dread, unsure which fate would be worse.

"You're in no position to bargain," Serj said, his voice level but dangerous. "But if you give us what we need, we can ensure you don't end up in Grigory's hands again. Talk now, and we'll do what we can. Hold back, and we'll leave you to face him. Your choice."

The driver's heart pounded in his chest, weighing his options. Betray Grigory and live, or say nothing and face certain death. He licked his lips nervously. "Alright," he said, voice trembling. "I'll talk. Just... just keep me out of Grigory's reach."

The driver's hands shook as he spoke, his voice still uneven but starting to steady as he shared what little he knew. "I don't know Grigory's full plans," he admitted, glancing nervously between Serj and Dave. "I was only involved in parts of the operation, but breaking the Tarbela dam... that was meant to be the spark. It was supposed to push the Pakistani government into a corner, forcing them to move the construction contracts to BlueWave."

Serj, absorbing the information, his eyes narrowed in concentration. The driver continued, "If they took over that contract, they'd probably end up with others—related projects, infrastructure, even energy. The instability caused by the Salal dam disaster? That set the stage for all of this."

"The weapons deal with India," the driver went on, his words coming quicker now, "was a response to the instability. It was under-the-table, and Pakistan was going to escalate things further by stealing those weapons. That was the plan all along, to make it look like Pakistan was boosting their offensive position after the dam attack. Grigory had a hand in making both sides more volatile, promising larger and larger weapons deals."

Serj's jaw tightened as the scale of Grigory's manipulation became clear. It wasn't just about dams and weapons—it was about controlling both sides of a conflict, profiting off instability, and pulling the strings from behind the scenes.

But then the driver offered up something more. "There's one thing... Grigory's bases of operation. I don't know them all, but I know a couple. He uses these locations to plan and coordinate the attacks. If you move fast... you might be able to catch him before he makes his next move."

Serj's eyes locked with Dave's, a silent understanding passing between them. This was the break they needed. They'd been chasing Grigory through a web of lies and misdirection, but now they had a real lead—a chance to hit him before he disappeared again.

Serj, placing a firm hand on the driver's shoulder. "You've just bought yourself some time. Now tell us where these bases are. We're going after him."

The driver quickly rattled off the locations he knew—remote compounds, warehouses, and one high-level meeting point Grigory frequented. It wasn't everything, but it was enough to give the team a head start.

Serj turned to the rest of the team, already in mission mode. "We need to move, now. If Grigory's setting up his next attack, this might be our only chance to stop him for good."

Serj turned the driver around roughly and gave him a hard shove, pushing him away from the group. The man stumbled forward, panic flaring in his eyes. "Wait, you promised you'd keep me safe!" he shouted, his voice rising in desperation as he looked back at Serj, hoping for some reassurance.

Serj's expression was cold and unflinching. "No," he replied evenly, "we said we'd keep you out of Grigory's hands." He crossed his arms, standing tall, the weight of the moment settling in. "If we catch up with him, then you stand a chance. But if you want to run or disappear now, that's your choice. No one's stopping you."

The driver's eyes darted between the team, fear and uncertainty playing across his face. He knew what Serj meant. Running meant hiding from the wrath Grigory would surely unleash for his betrayal, but only if Grigory was still at large. With the team after Grigory, he'd given himself some chance to escape, and stay alive.

Serj's gaze remained locked on the driver, his voice stern. "You made your choice when you talked. Now live with it. We've got our mission to handle."

The driver swallowed hard, fear evident in his expression. He had no choice now but to stay close and hope the team succeeded.

Anya was already hunched over her laptop, her fingers flying across the keys as she pulled up maps and intel on the locations the driver had given them. "The closest one is likely where Grigory would head next," she muttered, her focus intense. "It's remote, but accessible enough for a quick retreat. If we move fast, we might intercept him before he can regroup."

Dave, standing nearby, pointed toward the abandoned Cobra they had taken down earlier. The armoured vehicle was still operable, despite the chaos it had just been through. "Looks like we've got ourselves some new wheels—and firepower," he said with a grin. "That thing will get us past the roadblock and straight to Grigory's hideout. Plus, it'll give us a fighting chance if we run into trouble along the way."

The team wasted no time. They quickly gathered their gear from the Hilux and Land Cruiser, tossing it into the back of the Cobra. The vehicle's mounted machine gun was an added bonus, providing extra firepower in case they encountered any more resistance.

As Serj slid into the driver's seat, Dave climbed up to man the gun, while Anya took her place with her laptop, continuing to monitor the situation in real-time. Omar secured the rest of their supplies in the back, his eyes scanning the horizon, always vigilant.

With the Cobra rumbling to life, they set off, the heavy vehicle rolling over rough terrain with ease. Dust kicked up behind them as they pushed toward their destination, the tension thick in the air. Grigory wouldn't expect them to come in hot with his own vehicle, and that gave them the element of surprise.

As the Cobra sped along, Dave gripped the mounted gun, eyes narrowed in determination. "This time, we're not letting him slip away," he muttered.

24 Showdown

The team sped through the dusty landscape, heading straight for the abandoned textile mill in Lawrencepur. The Cobra rumbled over uneven roads, its heavy tires kicking up dirt and debris. The mill had been dormant for years, a forgotten remnant of a bygone era, but its strategic location made it the perfect hideout for someone like Grigory. Remote and isolated, yet close enough to major roadways to facilitate a quick escape if needed.

Anya's estimates put them at around 90 minutes to reach their destination, but Serj wasn't one for delays. He pushed the Cobra harder, shaving precious time off their journey. As they tore down the empty road, the air inside the vehicle buzzed with tension.

"What's the plan once we get there?" Omar asked, his voice cutting through the hum of the engine.

Serj, his eyes locked on the road, answered without hesitation. "We're not going in guns blazing. Even though this thing," he gestured at the Cobra's heavy machine gun, "could tear through most things."

Anya grinned from the driver's seat. "Except Dave," she added with a playful smirk.

Omar, thinking tactically, spoke up. "Once we're close, two of us should stay in the Cobra—one to drive and the other to man the gun. The other two will scout the area, figure out what we're up against."

Serj, formulating the plan as they drove. "Anya, you drive. Dave's on the gun. Omar and I will scout the area. We'll take different routes—I'll circle to the north, and Omar can take the eastern side, avoiding the main road."

There were no objections. The plan was solid, and everyone knew their role. As they neared their destination, Serj guided the Cobra off the main road and into a dense patch of trees near the facility. The vehicle came to a

stop under the thick canopy, which offered enough cover to keep them out of sight.

The area was overgrown with wild vegetation, thick with tall grass and spindly trees that had been left to grow unchecked for years. The ground was uneven, littered with broken bricks, rusting metal, and the remnants of old factory equipment long abandoned. The air smelled faintly of dust and decay, with a dry breeze sweeping through the branches, rustling the leaves in a rhythmic murmur. Birds occasionally flitted overhead, disturbed by the sudden presence of the armoured vehicle.

From this vantage point, they could see the sprawling silhouette of the textile mill in the distance. The massive structure was crumbling in parts, its once-proud facade marred by years of neglect. Tall smokestacks loomed above the rest of the building, now silent and dark. Rusted chain-link fences surrounded the perimeter, though many sections had been damaged or left to rot away. In the stillness, the mill seemed almost abandoned, but they knew better. This was Grigory's chosen ground, and he was likely already preparing for something big.

Serj turned to Omar. "You head east, avoid the road. I'll go north and take the long route around the building. We'll report back once we've scouted the area."

"Got it," Omar replied, his face set with determination.

Anya and Dave remained behind, positioning the Cobra in a concealed spot between the trees. The plan was clear: if anything went sideways, they would roar in through the southern entrance, unleashing hell with the Cobra's mounted machine gun. Dave kept his hand on the grip, his eyes scanning the horizon for any movement.

Serj and Omar slipped away into the undergrowth, moving silently and efficiently. They had one chance to get this right. Grigory had made it personal, and now they were closing in on him. The only question was

whether they could outmanoeuvre him before he had a chance to escape or strike again.

Serj moved stealthily around the perimeter of the textile mill, keeping low, careful not to make any noise that might give away his position. As he reached a vantage point, he crouched down, scanning the area. What he saw made his pulse quicken. "Looks like someone poured oil into an ant's nest," he radioed back to the team, his voice low and urgent. The entire place was buzzing with activity. Men in military gear were hurrying in all directions, preparing for something big. Weapons were being loaded into trucks, and groups of soldiers were huddled together, clearly receiving orders. "They're mobilising for something."

From the east, Omar's voice crackled through the radio. "Same here. Crossing the road was tricky—had to lie low as a convoy of military 4x4s came speeding past into the main entrance. Counted eight vehicles. No sign of the target, though."

Serj took another look around. "Clear on this side, too. No sign of Grigory."

Dave, still in position with Anya, responded firmly, "We wait. I want eyes on him before we make a move. No point rushing in blind."

Minutes passed with tense silence. Then, Omar's voice broke through again. "Heads up. Vehicle entering the main gate. Looks important by the state of the soldiers around it."

Through the trees, Omar watched as a dusty black Range Rover screeched to a halt in a cloud of dirt. Soldiers snapped to attention, lining up with precision as the vehicle came to a stop. The doors swung open, and from inside stepped a figure he recognised.

Grigory.

Omar radioed in, "Target on site."

Dave's grip tightened on the mounted machine gun. There he was, finally within reach, the man who had orchestrated so much destruction and chaos. Grigory's calm, imposing figure moved through the gathered soldiers with an air of authority, issuing commands with curt nods and gestures. His presence sent a ripple of activity through the men, who moved with a heightened sense of urgency.

Serj radioed in again, voice steady but loaded with intent. "Confirmed, target's here. It's him."

"Good," Dave responded. "Now we just need to wait for the right moment. This ends today."

As the dust settled around the Range Rover, the team prepared to move. Every second felt like an eternity as they waited, knowing that the time to strike was drawing closer with each passing moment.

The plan went into action like clockwork. Omar had already radioed in, confirming the movement of the four loaded 4x4s, leaving Grigory and a handful of soldiers still at the textile mill. "Four on the move, target still on site," Omar's voice came through the radio. Serj, always focused on the tactical situation, quickly analysed the odds. "Confirmed. Target still on site. That leaves at most sixteen tangos, seventeen including Grigory. Seems like a fair fight—four each."

Omar chuckled, "I can lay down some fire on most from this angle. They'll scramble for cover as soon as it starts."

Serj was already moving into position. "Once they're in cover, I'll hammer them from the flanks. They won't know what hit them."

Dave, gripping the mounted machine gun, replied with anticipation. "We'll tear through the main gate, open up a can-o-whupass, disable the vehicles, and really create some havoc."

Serj's voice was calm but resolute. "Let's do it. On your shout, Dave."

The moment hung in the air, and then Dave barked into the radio, "Go!" Anya gunned the Cobra's engine, and the vehicle roared to life, tearing down the dirt path toward the mill's gates just as Omar opened fire. His rounds rained into the courtyard, sending soldiers ducking and scrambling for cover.

As predicted, Omar's suppressive fire created chaos. The soldiers scrambled behind trucks and concrete barriers, anything to shield themselves from the relentless rain of bullets. That was when Serj made his move, picking off the soldiers one by one from his flanking position, each shot precise and deadly.

Anya brought the Cobra crashing through the mill's main gates in a storm of metal and dust. She slammed on the brakes, bringing the vehicle to a screeching halt right in the entrance, effectively blocking the way out. The soldiers caught in the courtyard were pinned down, trapped between Omar's fire and the roaring machine that had just arrived. Without hesitation, Dave hit the smoke grenades, filling the air with a dense veil of swirling grey clouds.

From inside the Cobra, Anya sat tight, the sound of bullets pinging off the armoured plating filling her ears as soldiers fired blindly into the smoke. But Dave saw everything. His vision shifted into "game mode," as he liked to call it—a heightened state where everything slowed, and he could see the movement of men in the fog as clear as day. Their outlines and shapes glowed against the haze, unaware of how exposed they really were.

To the soldiers, it was a terrifying scene—a thick cloud of smoke spewing lead, as Dave opened up with the Cobra's machine gun. The gun roared to life, shredding through the remaining vehicles parked in the courtyard, exploding tires and smashing through metal, reducing their cover to twisted wreckage. Twice in one day, the team had turned Grigory's own weapons against him, and the effect was devastating.

The soldiers huddled behind the ruined vehicles had nowhere left to hide. As Dave's gunfire ripped through their cover, they were forced into the open, making them easy targets for Serj and Omar. One by one, they fell, overwhelmed by the relentless assault from all sides.

Inside the Cobra, Anya's heart raced as she listened to the chaos outside, trusting Dave's instinct and skill to hold the line. From the rear, Serj picked off the remaining tangeros, his shots echoing through the smoke. Omar continued laying down fire, keeping any survivors pinned down.

Grigory's forces, once confident and organised, were now reduced to a panicked, scattered group, their vehicles destroyed, their cover obliterated. This wasn't just a fight; it was a rout.

And still, Grigory was somewhere in the chaos. Dave's mind focused—this was far from over.

As the smoke swirled in the air and the echoes of gunfire faded, Dave's voice crackled over the radio. "They've broken. Surrendering, cease fire, unless fired on." Through the fog, he could see soldiers laying their weapons down, hands raised in defeat. The fight had gone out of them, their desperation now replaced by submission.

"Roger that," came Serj's reply, his tone sharp but cautious. Omar followed with a similar acknowledgment. Both of them kept a vigilant eye on the surrendering force, but the question on everyone's mind was clear: Where's Grigory?

Dave scanned the courtyard. Bodies littered the ground, but there was no sign of the man who had orchestrated so much destruction. "Any sign of the target?" he radioed.

"Negative," came Serj's reply.

Omar's voice followed shortly after. "No sign of him here either."

Dave's gut told him Grigory wouldn't have gone down so easily. The man was a master of deception, a shadow who always seemed to slip through

their grasp at the last moment. Stepping out of the Cobra, Dave called into the fog, his voice carrying across the still air, "Grigory! It's over. Come on out here!"

Silence.

Dave called again, his tone harsher this time, demanding. But still, no reply came. The only sound was the faint rustling of the wind through the debris and the distant murmur of the defeated soldiers.

Anya stepped out from the Cobra, her pistol raised and ready, sweeping her aim across the kneeling soldiers, ensuring none of them were about to make a foolish move. Serj's voice came through once again. "Looks like we've got a game of hide and seek to play."

Omar entered the courtyard cautiously, covering the now disarmed soldiers as Anya moved through them, making sure they weren't hiding any last-ditch weapons. "What do we do with them?" she asked, glancing at Dave.

"Let them go," Dave said without hesitation. "It's the head of the snake we want. We don't have the resources to deal with them."

Omar and Anya drove the six remaining soldiers to their feet and pointed them toward the gates. None of them were foolish enough to question their good fortune. Heads down, they hurried away, disappearing down the road with quick, stumbling steps, thankful to escape with their lives.

Serj appeared from one of the nearby buildings, his silenced rifle sweeping his surroundings as he moved with practised precision. He looked to Dave, eyes sharp. "We going to sweep him out?"

Dave shook his head, his expression grim. "No, it's too risky. I'm going in after him, alone. You guys cover the exits. He's still in there somewhere, but this ends with me."

Omar and Serj exchanged glances. They trusted Dave, even if the plan made them uneasy. They knew Grigory was slippery, and going in alone wasn't without danger. But Dave had made up his mind.

As Omar and Anya guided the last of the soldiers out of the gates, Dave turned back toward the mill. He shouted into the building, his voice cutting through the eerie quiet, "I'm coming in, and I'm unarmed!"

There was no reply. Just the looming darkness of the mill, and the echo of his own voice as it bounced off the walls inside.

Dave took a deep breath. This was it. Grigory was cornered, and the time for games was over. Dave would face him, alone, and one way or another, this would be the end of their long pursuit.

Serj, Omar, and Anya held their positions, ready for anything as Dave disappeared into the shadows of the mill, determined to end it once and for all.

Grigory crouched in the shadows of the abandoned textile mill, breathing heavily, blood pouring down his face from the deep gashes left by the exploding timbers and shattered glass. His right arm hung limp at his side, useless from the bullets that had torn through it when the Cobra's gunfire had ripped into the building. Pain shot through his body with every movement, but fury—pure, seething fury—kept him moving. He was too stubborn, too vengeful, to die here like a trapped animal.

With his left hand, he clutched his pistol, his only remaining defence. The weight of it felt both comforting and final. This wasn't how he'd imagined it—his intricate plans undone, his men scattered, and his enemies closing in. But Grigory wasn't the type to exit quietly. If he was going down, it would be in a blaze of violence. He'd take as many of them with him as he could.

He made the call, his voice low and rasping, "Aleksandr... I need help. Emergency exfil."

His words were laboured, but the urgency was clear. Aleksandr was his only hope now, his last chance for an escape. The skirmish outside had bought him some time—time to arrange an extraction, time to think. But

his window was closing fast. Grigory's mind raced with the possibilities. A retreat wasn't something he had planned, but it was his only option now.

The building around him creaked under the weight of the destruction, dust and debris still settling. The air was thick with the smell of gunpowder and blood. Grigory wiped the blood from his eyes, snarling at the pain that shot through his arm with even the slightest movement. His face was a mess, torn apart by the chaos of the gunfire. It didn't matter. His appearance meant nothing now. Survival was all that mattered.

He wasn't going to die on his knees. He had a pistol in one hand, but in his heart, he still had the will to fight. Whether Aleksandr got to him in time or not, Grigory had no intention of surrendering. He wasn't the type to put a bullet in his own head. If this was his end, it would be a loud, violent one. He would make sure of that.

As he waited for any sign of rescue, Grigory's eyes scanned the room, calculating. There were exits, weak points, and shadows he could use. But even with his tactical mind racing, he knew one thing with certainty: Dave and his team were closing in, and there was no running from them now. He would meet them head-on, bloodied but defiant.

Grigory stood in the shadows, listening as Dave's voice echoed through the empty, crumbling mill. "I'm coming in, unarmed," Dave had said, his tone calm, almost disarming. Grigory didn't respond. There was no way he was stepping outside to surrender. He waited, his breath heavy, watching as Dave's shadow appeared in the doorway, daylight streaming through the dust-choked air.

"It's over, Grigory. I can see you," Dave called out, his figure framed in the light. Grigory, bloodied and broken, stepped out of the shadows into a slightly brighter part of the mill. His right arm hung uselessly at his side, but his pistol was still clenched tightly in his left hand.

"Who are you?" Grigory's voice was ragged, filled with pain and fury.

Dave felt the weight of the question - not just who, but what he had become. Three years ago, he would have given his job title, rattled off his IT credentials. Now... "I'm Dave," he said simply, letting the truth of that complexity hang in the air between them.

Grigory stared at him for a moment, his eyes filled with confusion and anger. "What are you?" he asked, almost spitting the words.

Dave took a step forward, his expression softening as he looked at the wreck of a man before him. "Truth be told," Dave said, "I don't really know."

For a moment, there was silence between them. Dave could see the destruction that had been wrought upon Grigory—the blood, the torn flesh, the shattered remnants of a once formidable warrior. He took a deep breath and offered something he hadn't expected himself to say. "Come with me. We'll get you sorted out."

Grigory's eyes flared with rage. Sorted out? He couldn't believe the audacity of the suggestion. His grip tightened on the pistol. The idea of surrender, of accepting help, was an insult he couldn't bear. With a snarl, he raised the gun, aiming directly at Dave.

Before he could pull the trigger, Serj's voice crackled through Dave's earpiece. "Dave, incoming chopper."

The distinct whup, whup, whup of helicopter blades filled the air, growing louder with each passing second. Grigory's eyes flicked toward the sound, and in that moment, everything changed. The roar of an auto-cannon tore through the mill, shells exploding around Dave, sending shards of brick and metal flying in all directions. The building shook violently under the barrage.

In the split second it took Dave to glance toward the helicopter, Grigory was already moving. The moment the chopper had arrived, he'd made his

move, slipping through the back door in a flash. As fast as Dave was, that brief distraction had been enough for Grigory to vanish.

The auto-cannon fire ripped through the ageing structure of the mill, tearing it apart with deafening force. The already decrepit building gave way under the assault, collapsing with a thunderous crash of metal and brick. Beams cracked, walls crumbled, and the roof came down, raining debris all around Dave.

Dust filled the air, and the sound of the collapse was overwhelming. Dave, caught in the middle of the destruction, was buried under a cascade of rubble as the building gave way.

For a moment, everything went still. The mill, once Grigory's hiding place, now lay in ruins, reduced to nothing but a heap of debris. But Dave, somewhere beneath it all, was still there—alive, buried, but far from defeated.

"Dave!" Anya's voice cracked through the radio, panic rising as the team watched the textile mill collapse into a pile of dust and rubble. Grigory and the helicopter had all but been forgotten, their desperate escape a distant afterthought. The roar of the chopper's blades filled the air as it ascended, but the team's focus was entirely on the wreckage, where Dave had been swallowed by the destruction.

Without hesitation, they moved, scrambling over the debris, searching for any sign of their friend beneath the ruins. The dust was thick, the air filled with the acrid smell of crumbled concrete and wood. Each step was a challenge, every piece of rubble an obstacle in the frantic search.

Then, the pile began to shift.

"Look!" Omar shouted, pointing to a section of the collapsed building that was slowly starting to move.

A hand emerged from the rubble, followed by an arm, as Dave clawed his way through the wreckage, shoving aside huge sections of brickwork and

timber with an almost casual strength. His clothes were torn, his face smeared with dust, and he coughed heavily, trying to clear his lungs. But as he emerged from the ruins, there was no mistaking the words he said, voice hoarse but steady: "I'm okay."

Relief washed over the team as they rushed to him, Serj and Omar grabbing his arms, helping him climb the last few feet out of the rubble. Anya clapped him hard on the shoulder, her face a mixture of worry and exasperation. "You've got to stop doing this, Dave," she said with a half-smile, though her relief was obvious.

Dave chuckled, brushing dust off his shoulders as best he could. "What, getting buried alive? Yeah, not exactly fun." He coughed again, trying to shake off the experience.

The team gathered around him, clapping him on the back, shaking their heads in disbelief. It was nothing short of a miracle—again. He had made it through, just like every other time, leaving them wondering how long his luck would hold. But for now, they were just glad he was still standing, alive, and in one piece.

"Grigory?" Dave asked, wiping his forehead with the back of his hand, looking out toward the sky where the helicopter had disappeared.

"Gone," Serj replied, his eyes still scanning the horizon. "But this isn't over. We'll get him."

Dave, his jaw clenched. "Next time, we finish this."

25 Epilogue

Back in the UK, the team sat around a polished table in the agency's debriefing room, the sleek, modern surroundings a stark contrast to the dust and chaos of the mission they'd just returned from. Daylight streamed through the tall windows, casting long shadows as Dave, Anya, Serj, and Omar recounted their mission's events to Cecilia. She sat at the head of the table, listening intently, her fingers tapping lightly on her tablet as they filled her in on every detail of what had gone down in India and Pakistan.

"Grigory escaped us again," Dave said, his frustration barely concealed. "Even after everything, after being wounded and cornered, he slipped through our fingers at the last moment."

Cecilia's expression didn't change, though her eyes sharpened with focus. "It's not the first time he's done that, but we'll catch him. He's getting desperate, and desperate men make mistakes."

Serj, agreement, his voice calm. "The Pakistani authorities weren't exactly thrilled with the clean-up required at the Tarbela dam, but they were grateful it was still standing. Could've been much worse. The destruction Grigory planned would've been catastrophic."

Cecilia continued, "Our diplomatic teams are already smoothing over the situation. Both Pakistan and India are realising they were being played. Their focus is shifting away from each other and more toward BlueWave, and whoever's really behind them."

Cecilia shifted in her seat slightly, her eyes narrowing as she processed the information. "So the IWT remains intact. A small victory, I suppose. But this corporation, BlueWave—they've been exposed. Grigory's games have brought them into the spotlight. They tried to profit from the chaos, and now their name is dirt."

Anya chimed in, her voice thoughtful. "It's not the end, though. Some corporation, somewhere, is going to profit from this situation. That's the nature of things. But it won't be BlueWave. They've been too badly burned."

Cecilia, "Agreed. The IWT is still contested, as it always has been, but at least this incident didn't push things over the edge."

Dave arched back in his chair, rubbing the bridge of his nose, the exhaustion of the mission finally starting to settle in. "But Grigory... I'm not sure if he can come back from this. He's hurt, and whoever he worked for can't be happy. Surely, he must be running out of sponsors by now?"

"We'll deal with him," Cecilia assured him, her voice resolute. "For now, take some time. We've got diplomatic teams working on stabilising the region. We'll continue tracking Grigory. If there is a next time, there won't be any escape."

As the debriefing wound down, the team exchanged glances. They had survived another mission, prevented a disaster, and exposed a corrupt corporation, but Grigory was still out there, scheming. For now, though, the IWT and the fragile peace between India and Pakistan had been preserved. It wasn't the victory they had hoped for, but it was enough to keep them in the game—until the next move.

Dave, his brow furrowed in thought. "It makes me wonder how much mess we leave behind," he said, his voice tinged with guilt. "I've just thought about the hire cars we leave scattered around, the scenes of destruction with weapons lying around, and... other messes to clean up."

Cecilia offered a small smile, her tone reassuring. "You're not the only team we have, Dave. You guys are operational. We have a whole network of supporting members—accountants, drivers, diplomats, and yes... cleaners—who follow in your wake to deal with the aftermath. You focus on the mission, and leave the rest to them."

Anya chuckled, glancing at Dave with a teasing grin. "With Dave, that's a full-time job for a big team."

The group shared a brief moment of levity, and even Dave cracked a smile. But there was truth in it. His missions, especially with his abilities, often left chaos in their wake. He hadn't thought about the behind-the-scenes people who had to swoop in and clean up after them—silent, unseen, ensuring their messes didn't leave more problems behind.

Cecilia's expression softened. "It's all part of the bigger picture, Dave. We have entire teams for support. You're not alone in this, and we all play our part."

Dave, feeling a little lighter. It was a strange thing to think about, but knowing there was a whole operation behind them, quietly smoothing over the destruction they left behind, made it easier to focus on what he did best. "Good to know someone's got our backs," he said, looking around at his team.

Anya, with a wink, added, "Especially when you're the one flipping trucks and taking out buildings."

Dave shrugged, his grin widening. "What can I say? I've got a knack for making an impact."