



Real Hero

Dave #9: Seeds of Destruction

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1 Prologue: Echoes of the Past

Cecilia stood at her temporary office window, watching construction workers move purposefully through what would eventually become the agency's new courtyard. The old office complex was still a painful memory - the liquid nitrogen attack had left it completely compromised. Still, she mused, perhaps they'd needed the push to upgrade their security. The new facility, once completed, would be significantly more robust.

She could hear the distant sounds of servers being installed two floors below. The tech team was working around the clock to restore their full capabilities, though the temporary systems were holding up well enough. The panic room was still just an empty shell, and the backup power systems weren't fully online, but they were making progress. At least the coffee machine in her office worked - small mercies were important during times of transition.

Taking a sip from her mug, Cecilia's thoughts drifted to Dave. Dexter Lands had been right about him from the start. She could still picture the veteran agent standing in her old office, uncharacteristically animated as he'd made his case. "There's something about him," he'd insisted, those piercing grey eyes of his intense with conviction. "Beyond the obvious abilities. He has an innate understanding of power and responsibility that you can't teach."

She'd trusted Lands' judgment—he'd never brought forward a potential recruit before—but even he couldn't have predicted just how valuable Dave would become to the agency. The quantum computing crisis had proved that beyond any doubt, and now this latest challenge with the extreme cold vulnerability had only reinforced Dave's true strength: his ability to adapt and grow.

Just yesterday, he'd come to her about expanding his martial arts training. The liquid nitrogen attack had shaken him, showing him a genuine

vulnerability he'd never faced before. But instead of letting it defeat him, he was typically Dave about it all - methodically working to find ways to compensate, to be better prepared next time.

"You don't see it, do you?" she'd asked him, her Ghanaian accent warming the words. "How you've turned every challenge into an opportunity to improve?"

He'd given her that characteristic self-deprecating smile, but she'd pressed on. "Before you joined, we had skilled operatives who worked in proximity. Now we have a true team. That's down to you, Dave."

The truth was, Dave's apparent ordinariness was perhaps his greatest strength. In a field of larger-than-life personalities—Anya's cold efficiency, Serj's intimidating presence, Omar's quiet intensity—Dave's unassuming nature had created a bridge between them all. He approached each mission with the same careful consideration he'd likely given to IT problems in his previous life, breaking down seemingly impossible challenges into manageable pieces.

A construction worker's drill whirled to life somewhere nearby, reminding Cecilia of their current state of flux. The agency would emerge stronger from this transition, just as Dave seemed to grow stronger with each new challenge. His latest mission report sat on her desk - impeccably detailed as always, though still two days late. Some things never changed, and she found comfort in that.

Looking out at the half-finished security installations being mounted around the perimeter, Cecilia smiled. They were building something better here, both literally and figuratively. The new facility would be state-of-the-art, with reinforced walls and advanced security systems - but the real strength of the agency had always been its people.

She pulled up the training schedule on her tablet, reviewing Serj's proposals for Dave's expanded martial arts programme. The focus on traditional Japanese disciplines was intensive, but she knew Dave would

throw himself into it with his characteristic determination. It was that same quiet persistence that had turned him from an uncertain IT professional into the cornerstone of their most effective team.

A knock at her door interrupted her thoughts - gentle, almost hesitant. Even after all this time, Dave still knocked as though expecting to be turned away. Through the temporary office's much clearer glass (the proper frosted panels hadn't arrived yet), she could see his familiar silhouette.

"Come in, Dave," she called, her warm laugh colouring the words. "Unless you're here to tell me the next mission report will be late too?"

His sheepish grin as he entered reminded her of why the entire office had taken to him so quickly. Here was a man who could tear through steel with his bare hands, yet still apologized for missing administrative deadlines. The contrast was endearing.

Looking at him now, Cecilia could see past the self-doubt to the hero he was becoming. She knew that in time, he would too. Until then, she would continue to guide him, to help him see his true worth to the team and to their mission. After all, that's what family did, and somewhere along the way, that's exactly what they'd become.

The construction noise outside grew louder, the sound of their new beginning taking shape. Like Dave's training, like their team dynamics, like everything in their line of work - it was a process of continuous improvement. And that, Cecilia reflected, was exactly as it should be.

2 The Blue Solution

In the downtime being back in the UK Dave made another visit to Dr. Kessler at the medical centre. It was a very familiar environment. Dave seemed to be here almost as often as being in the agency offices.

"Ah, back to the clothing situation?" Kessler said, pulling a folded blue garment from a storage case. "I believe I've found a workable solution."

He shook out what appeared to be a form-fitting bodysuit, the material catching the light with an almost latex-like sheen.

"The fabric is a composite weave," he explained, "resistant to extreme temperatures and reinforced against ballistic impact. Not indestructible, mind you, but significantly more durable than standard materials."

Dave eyed the garment sceptically. "Just to be clear, I'm not wearing my underpants over the top of this."

"I assure you, that won't be necessary," Kessler replied, his professional demeanour cracking slightly. "Though the mental image is... intriguing."

With a resigned sigh, Dave retreated behind a privacy screen to change. The suit proved challenging to put on, clinging to his body like a second skin. When he emerged, the effect was exactly as feared – every contour of his middle-aged frame was on prominent display, from his pronounced belly to rather more intimate details.

Studying his reflection in the full-length mirror, Dave grimaced. "I look like Linford Christie's joined the Blue Man Group." He tugged futilely at the material where it hugged his stomach. "I appreciate the effort, Doc, but there's no way I'm wearing this under my clothes on mission. Being caught naked is embarrassing enough – this would be ten times worse."

"Perhaps we could explore alternatives," Kessler offered diplomatically.

"How about we settle on a couple of pairs of boxer shorts made from this material?" Dave suggested. "At least then I'd maintain some dignity when the rest of my clothes get destroyed."

Kessler nodded, already reaching for his blue pen. "A reasonable compromise. Though I must admit, the suit's thermal properties would be more effective as a full-body solution."

"I'll risk the cold," Dave said firmly, already struggling to peel himself out of the garment. "Some things are worse than frostbite."

3 Back to Basics

The familiar scent of sweat and wood polish filled Dave's nostrils as he pushed open the heavy wooden door of Callahan's dojo. Afternoon light streamed through the high windows, casting long shadows across the training mats. Several students were practising forms in the corner, their movements crisp and focused. The old instructor stood watching them, arms crossed, before turning at Dave's entrance. His weathered face broke into that knowing smile Dave remembered so well.

"Knew you'd be back eventually," Callahan said, uncrossing his arms and walking over. His eyes carried none of the judgment Dave had feared, only understanding. "Heard about what happened with the liquid nitrogen. Nasty business."

Dave shifted uncomfortably, the memory of that helpless feeling still fresh. "Yeah. When my speed was gone, I realised just how sloppy I'd become. How much I'd been relying on my abilities rather than actual skill." He gestured at the students. "Back then, I learned the moves, but I never really had to master them. My reflexes and speed meant I could always compensate."

"And now you know better." Callahan's smile widened slightly. "Understanding our limitations is the first step to transcending them. Most students have to fail before they truly start learning. Your powers just delayed that lesson longer than most."

He gestured for Dave to follow him to a private training area separated from the main floor by sliding screens. The space was smaller, more intimate, with worn mats that spoke of countless hours of practise. A weapon rack lined one wall, holding wooden training weapons of various sizes.

"Show me what you remember," Callahan said, taking up a ready stance. "Don't use your enhanced speed. Move as you did when the nitrogen affected you."

Dave nodded, settling into a defensive posture. Without his supernatural speed, the stance felt awkward, almost foreign. He threw a basic combination - jab, cross, hook - moving at normal human speed. The punches felt clumsy, telegraphed.

Callahan didn't bother blocking. He simply wasn't there when the strikes arrived, having moved with an economy of motion that made Dave's attacks look amateurish. "Again," he commanded. "Pay attention to your centre of gravity."

They spent the next hour going through basic forms, Callahan stopping frequently to adjust Dave's positioning. His hands would dart out, shifting an elbow here, repositioning a foot there, each small correction highlighting years of ingrained bad habits.

"Your body remembers the forms," Callahan noted, "but you're still thinking like someone with supernatural speed. Every movement is rushed, anticipating the next before properly finishing the current one. You're sacrificing precision for pace you don't need."

"When I fought without my abilities," Dave admitted, "everything felt uncoordinated. Like my body wasn't doing what my brain was telling it to."

"Because you never learned to truly flow." Callahan demonstrated a simple combination, his movements liquid smooth. "You learned the techniques, but you never internalised the transitions. Combat isn't about individual moves—it's about seamless sequences."

Callahan watched Dave's struggle, recognising in him the same restless potential he'd seen in special forces recruits decades ago. Not raw talent to

be moulded, but a complex system waiting to be recalibrated - each limitation an opportunity for profound transformation.

The rest of the afternoon passed in a gruelling series of drills. Callahan forced Dave to slow down, to feel each movement, to understand how one position flowed into the next. By the end, Dave's shirt was soaked with sweat not from physical exertion - his enhanced stamina meant he could train for days without tiring - but from the mental strain of fighting his instincts.

"Good," Callahan said finally, tossing Dave a towel. "You're starting to understand. But I'm not the one who's going to help you master this."

Dave wiped his face, frowning. "What do you mean?"

"I've arranged for you to train with someone else. Mitsuyo Maeda. He's a master of Japanese Jujitsu, and he'll help you develop what you're lacking." Callahan's expression grew serious. "Fair warning - he's not known for his patience. But he's the best there is at what you need to learn."

Two days later, Dave found himself facing a stern-faced Japanese man in his sixties. Maeda stood ramrod straight in the centre of his private dojo, wearing a pristine white gi. His face was lined with age, but his eyes were sharp and assessing as they ran over Dave.

The evaluation session was brutally direct. Maeda had Dave demonstrate various techniques, watching with an increasingly disapproving expression. After twenty minutes, he held up a hand to stop.

"You fight like a child with a superpower," he said, his accent precise and clipped. "All force, no finesse. Your abilities have made you lazy. We will fix this."

"Your abilities are a crutch," Maeda said, not as criticism but as clinical observation. "Speed without technique is like an unguided missile - powerful, but fundamentally unpredictable."

Dave, sweat tracing lines of effort down his face, managed a wry smile. "So I'm an unguided missile?"

"Precisely," Maeda's lips twitched - almost a smile. "And our job is to give you guidance."

The next few weeks were an exercise in humility. Maeda would demonstrate techniques with fluid grace, then watch as Dave attempted to replicate them. Despite his supernatural reflexes - or perhaps because of them - Dave struggled to capture the same smoothness.

"Stop!" Maeda would bark. "You are still relying on speed. Speed is a crutch. Without proper technique, speed only makes mistakes happen faster."

Dave's frustration mounted with each session. He was used to being effectively untouchable in combat, his speed and strength making him virtually unbeatable. But Maeda seemed unimpressed by his abilities, focusing instead on the flaws in his technique.

Dave's muscles screamed a language of resistance and adaptation. Each failed technique wasn't just a physical mistake, but a neural pathway being systematically rewired. Where supernatural speed had once masked imperfections, now every microscopic adjustment became a lesson in biomechanical precision.

The tatami mats absorbed his repeated falls, each impact a data point in a complex calculation of technique versus instinct. Maeda watched, not with disappointment, but with the clinical interest of a scientist observing a critical experiment.

Everything changed when Maeda introduced the blindfold.

"Your eyes deceive you," he explained, holding up a black cloth. "They make you react rather than anticipate. True mastery comes from feeling the flow of combat." He stepped behind Dave and tied the blindfold tight. "Now, defend yourself."

The first few sessions were humbling. Without sight, Dave's enhanced reflexes became almost useless. He couldn't react to what he couldn't see. Maeda moved around him like water, striking from unexpected angles, always seeming to anticipate Dave's movements.

"Feel the energy," Maeda instructed, helping Dave up after a particularly effective throw. "When I shift my weight here, where must the attack come from? When I create pressure there, what are my possible movements?"

Slowly, painfully, Dave began to understand. Each session left him mentally exhausted, his mind wrestling with concepts his powers had allowed him to ignore. He cycled through training partners - his supernatural endurance meant he could train for hours, but the mental fatigue was unlike anything he'd experienced.

Callahan watched Dave's struggle with clinical detachment, remembering countless students who believed raw power could replace technique. This one was different - beneath the hesitation, a genuine willingness to learn burned bright.

"He's not just learning moves," Callahan murmured to Maeda during a water break. "He's rebuilding his entire approach to combat."

Maeda's eyes never left Dave's form. "Potential is worthless without discipline. We will see if he can truly let go of his reliance on supernatural speed."

The breakthrough came nearly two months into the training. Blindfolded, squared off against three opponents, Dave centred himself and waited. The first attack came from his right - a rush of displaced air, the subtle creak of a gi. Without his enhanced speed, without his sight, Dave had to rely purely on his other senses and his newly developed instincts.

He pivoted slightly, letting the attacker's momentum carry past him while securing their extended arm. A swift manipulation of the wrist and elbow created an instant lock. As the first attacker began to drop, Dave sensed the

second opponent moving in from behind. The pressure against his grip on the first attacker told him exactly where to move.

Dave transitioned the arm lock into a throw, using the first opponent as a barrier against the second's advance. He targeted the cervical plexus - the cluster of nerves at the side of the neck - with precise pressure, ensuring the first attacker would stay down. The throw itself forced the second opponent to adjust their timing, their footstep betraying their new position.

Rather than release the first opponent completely, Dave maintained a grip on their gi, using it as a reference point in the darkness. The second attacker committed to a high strike - Dave felt the whisper of movement above him. He dropped low, sweeping their leg while simultaneously applying pressure to a point behind their knee. The attacker's weight shifted predictably, and Dave guided them into a controlled fall.

The third opponent had been circling, looking for an opening. They chose this moment to strike, likely assuming Dave was vulnerable in his crouched position. But this was exactly what Maeda had trained him for - reading the flow of combat, anticipating rather than reacting. Dave rolled backwards, catching the third attacker's gi as they passed over him. A precise twist of fabric around their throat gave him control.

The second opponent was recovering, trying to regain their feet. Dave used the third attacker's momentum to send them sprawling into the second. As they collided, he moved in swiftly, targeting nerve clusters in their shoulders and necks with surgical precision. The pressure point strikes weren't about power - Maeda had drilled this into him repeatedly - but about accuracy and timing.

Within seconds, all three opponents were incapacitated. Dave stood in the darkness, breathing steadily, maintaining his awareness of their positions. For the first time since donning the blindfold, he wasn't trying to "see" the fight. He was feeling it, moving with it, letting each action flow naturally into the next.

When the blindfold came off, Maeda was almost smiling. "Now you begin to understand," he said. "Power without control is like a river without banks - destructive and wasteful. You are learning to channel your strength with precision."

The training intensified from there. Armed opponents were introduced, forcing Dave to combine his new skills with his existing abilities. He learned to use his invulnerability not as a shield to hide behind, but as another tool in his arsenal.

Dave assessed his opponents in an instant. The assault rifle posed the greatest threat - its range and potential for collateral damage made it the priority target. The handgun came second; even with a shorter range, its manoeuvrability made it dangerous. The knife wielder would be third - lethal in close quarters but limited in reach. The nightstick, while dangerous, posed the least immediate threat to potential bystanders.

The rifle operator had taken up position at the rear of the group, using his teammates as cover while establishing a firing line. Smart, but predictable. Dave moved before the man could properly sight his weapon, not charging straight in, but circling to force the gunman to track his movement. This put the knife wielder between them, disrupting the shooter's line of sight.

The knife wielder reacted, slashing in a practised arc to keep Dave at bay. Instead of retreating, Dave stepped into the attack, using his forward momentum to trap the knife arm while simultaneously pulling the attacker off-balance. The movement placed the knife wielder directly in the rifle's line of fire, forcing the gunman to hold his shot.

Dave didn't waste the advantage. He transitioned the knife arm lock into a swift throw, launching his opponent towards the handgun wielder. The pistol operator had to choose between maintaining his aim and avoiding his falling teammate. He chose to dodge, breaking his firing stance.

The rifle cracked - a blank, but Dave reacted as if it were live ammunition, rolling to put a support column between himself and the shooter. The

nightstick wielder seized the opportunity, rushing in to engage while Dave was seemingly pinned down. It was exactly what Dave had anticipated.

Using the column as a pivot point, Dave redirected the nightstick's momentum, adding his own force to send the wielder stumbling into the rifleman's space. The shooter had to raise his weapon to avoid hitting his teammate, giving Dave the opening he needed.

Three quick steps brought him into the rifle's minimum effective range. Dave's hand shot out, not for the weapon itself, but for the sling, using it to control the rifle's direction while executing a precise strike to the shooter's brachial plexus. The man's arm went numb, the rifle dropping from nerveless fingers.

The handgun wielder had recovered, sighting in on Dave's new position. But Dave was already moving, keeping the disabled rifleman between them as he stripped away the fallen weapon's sling. A quick flick of the wrist sent the sling wrapping around the nightstick as its wielder attempted another attack, yanking the weapon from trained hands.

Dave flowed from the disarm directly into a throw, using the nightstick wielder's own forward momentum to send them careening into the handgun operator. As both went down, Dave was already moving, applying precise joint locks to disarm and disable them before they could recover.

The knife wielder had regained their feet, blade held in a reversed grip as they sought an opening. Dave didn't give them time to find one. He closed the distance with measured steps, not rushing, but moving with deliberate purpose. The knife slashed out once, twice - controlled attacks designed to keep him at bay. Dave slipped inside the third cut, his left hand controlling the knife arm while his right targeted pressure points in the shoulder and neck. The blade clattered to the floor as its wielder slumped, consciousness fleeing.

In less than thirty seconds, all four opponents were disarmed and disabled. No bystanders would have been hit, no stray shots fired into crowds. Dave

stood among his fallen opponents, breathing steadily, centred in the flow of combat that Maeda had taught him to understand.

"Better," Maeda's voice cut through the quiet. "You prioritised threats correctly and maintained awareness of potential collateral damage throughout." He stepped onto the training floor, examining the disabled opponents. "Your integration of techniques is improving. You used their attacks against each other, controlled space effectively." A slight smile crossed his face. "Though perhaps next time, try not to damage quite so many pressure points. They will be quite sore tomorrow."

Dave bowed slightly. "Hard to gauge the exact pressure needed in the moment, Sensei."

"That will come with time," Maeda assured him. "The important thing is that you are thinking tactically while maintaining flow. Your powers enhance your techniques now, rather than replacing them." He gestured to the recovering opponents. "Again. This time, they will not be so predictable in their positioning."

"Good," Callahan commented during his visit, watching Dave smoothly redirect the four armed attackers simultaneously. "Much better. You're not just fighting any more—you're flowing."

Dave felt the difference. Where before he had bludgeoned his way through encounters, now he moved with purpose. His supernatural abilities enhanced his technique rather than replaced it.

"The true test will come when you face another situation like the liquid nitrogen," Maeda said during their final session. "But now you have the foundation to adapt, to fight effectively even when compromised."

Dave bowed deeply to his instructor. "Thank you, Sensei."

Maeda's stern expression softened slightly. "You have learned much, but this is only the beginning. True mastery is a lifelong journey." He paused, then added, "Even for those with extraordinary gifts."

As Dave left the dojo that evening, his body unwearied but his mind exhausted, he reflected on how far he'd come. He had arrived thinking he needed to learn how to fight without his powers. Instead, he had learned something far more valuable—how to integrate his abilities with proper technique, becoming something more effective than either alone.

Callahan's words from their first session echoed in his mind: Understanding our limitations is the first step to transcending them. The next training session awaited. And this time, Dave would be ready to transform limitation into strength.

4 Death in the Heartland

"You're looking for anything out of place," Cecilia's voice came through Dave's earpiece as he pulled up to the farmhouse. "My contact at the Kansas City FBI field office flagged this one. Said something felt wrong about how quick the local police wrapped it up."

Dave stepped out into the Kansas heat, already missing the air conditioning. "What made your contact suspicious?"

"Dr. Santos had a meeting scheduled with the Department of Agriculture next week. Something about concerns over industrial farming practices. She cancelled it three days ago, said she wasn't feeling well. Then turns up dead."

The coroner's office had already removed the body and processed the scene. Natural causes -- a heart attack -- meant minimal investigation. The farmhouse stood quiet now, yellow police tape still stretched across the front door.

"Sending you the coroner's photos," Anya's voice joined the conversation. "Body was found in the home office, slumped over her desk. No signs of struggle, no forced entry."

Dave examined the crime scene photos on his phone. Dr. Julia Santos, fifty-two, found by her cleaning service yesterday morning. The photos showed her face-down on her desk, one arm outstretched toward her keyboard. Something felt off about the scene.

"Cecilia," he said, studying the images carefully, "look at her desk in these shots. Where's all her work materials? No open notebooks, no papers she was reviewing. Not even a pen in sight."

"Good catch," Cecilia replied. "Everything's tucked away in the drawers. Who sits at a desk without anything to work on?"

"According to the cleaning service's statement," Cecilia continued, "they found her at 9:15 AM. Usually arrived at 9:00 but got stuck in traffic. They come every Thursday."

Dave carefully removed the police tape and entered. The house felt cold -- air conditioning running full blast despite the empty rooms. Moving through the living room, his 20/10 vision picked out details that seemed wrong -- books arranged purely by size rather than subject, perfectly symmetrical gaps between volumes, not a single spine out of alignment.

"Something's not right," he said, stopping to examine the bookshelves. "These books... they're arranged by size, not subject or author. Largest to smallest on each shelf."

"So?" Omar's voice came through as he entered from the back of the house.

"Look at her CV," Dave replied. "Three PhDs, dozens of published papers. You don't get that far in research without being methodical about organizing your materials. This isn't how a scientist would arrange their library."

Omar moved through the space, checking sight lines and entry points. "House is clean. Too clean. No prints on any of the obvious surfaces."

Dave entered the home office where Santos had been found. Everything was precisely arranged -- papers in perfect stacks, pens aligned parallel to the desk edge, computer monitors at exact right angles. All the desk drawers were closed, every writing implement tucked away neatly.

"If she was working when she died," Dave said, opening a drawer to reveal perfectly organised supplies, "why is everything put away? Researchers usually have materials spread out, notes they're working on. This looks like someone cleaned up afterward."

The office was dark enough that Dave felt his vision beginning to shift into its special "game mode", the room resolving into a precise grey-scale model. In this mode he could make out subtle scuff patterns on the floor,

partially hidden under the desk -- multiple parallel marks suggesting something heavy had been systematically moved during a search.

"Got scuff patterns here," he reported. "Heavy object was moved recently. Multiple parallel marks. Like someone methodically searched under every piece of furniture."

"Hold on," Anya cut in. "Running Santos's publication history. Last paper was three months ago, standard agricultural journal. But I'm finding gaps in her research timeline. Periods where she published nothing."

Omar had been measuring the exterior walls. "Dave, these dimensions don't add up. Northeast corner of the house -- there's about twelve feet unaccounted for."

Back in the lit hallway, Dave's vision returned to normal, his 20/10 acuity letting him spot the subtle differences in paint ageing that marked recent work. "Got a seam here. Recent work, trying to look old." He ran his fingers along the shelf edge. "Pressure plate mechanism. Professional installation."

The hidden door clicked open smoothly, revealing the laboratory space beyond. Climate-controlled chambers hummed softly, housing neat rows of petri dishes and growth medium.

"Cecilia," Dave said, "we've got a secret research lab here. High-end equipment, active experiments." He examined one of the testing chambers. "All studying some kind of fungi."

"Pulling building permits now," Anya responded. "No record of any renovation. But I'm finding interesting financial patterns. Over the past 3 months, Santos received a payment on the first of each month. Always around \$27,800. The payments a dead end within a chain of shell companies."

Dave moved to the computer station. Like the rest of the house, it was too perfectly arranged. "Someone went through this place very carefully,

looking for something specific. Then cleaned up after themselves, tried to make it look natural." He examined the desk surface more closely, his enhanced vision revealing microscopic details. "Got fungal spores here, distinct pattern. Not random growth."

"Dave," Cecilia's voice turned serious, "my FBI contact just sent over something interesting. Two other agricultural researchers died in the past month. Both ruled natural causes. Both had been working on fungal studies."

"Professional job," Omar added from the doorway. "Entry points are clean – whoever did this knew how to bypass security without leaving traces. This wasn't random."

"Odd," Omar said, examining a stack of Santos's inspection reports. "She was tracking specific FDA batch approvals. Same facility, same inspection protocols, but completely different results when tested independently."

Dave moved to look over his shoulder. The reports showed glaring discrepancies between Santos's lab tests and official FDA documentation.

"Brings shipments in through Kansas City," Omar noted. "Looks like Santos was building a case - tracking which inspectors handled specific containers, documenting irregularities in the approval process."

"A contaminated shipment would need someone on the inside," Serj said. "Can't risk random inspections catching what they're really moving."

Omar carefully bagged the reports as evidence. "Question is: did Santos get too close to figuring out who?"

Dave straightened up, processing everything they'd found. The staged scene, the hidden lab, the pattern of deaths. "Someone wanted Santos's research. The question is: what was she working on that was worth killing for?"

"Pulling surveillance footage from nearby," Anya said. "Got a black SUV with diplomatic plates passing through twice that night. Running the numbers."

"Pack it up," Cecilia ordered. "Containment team is fifteen minutes out. Whatever Santos discovered, someone went to a lot of trouble to cover it up. Let's find out why before anyone else dies."

Dave took one last look at the too-perfect office as they left. Someone had tried very hard to make this death look natural, but they'd been too thorough. In trying to erase their presence, they'd left the biggest clue of all – a crime scene so clean it could only be staged.

The Kansas heat hit him again as they stepped outside. Somewhere in Santos's research was a secret worth killing for. Now they had to figure out what it was before it could be used.

5 Hidden Growth

The hidden laboratory hummed with the soft whirl of climate control systems. Banks of specialised equipment lined the walls, each machine's purpose more mysterious than the last. Under the harsh LED lighting, rows of petri dishes filled three large incubators, their contents ranging from pale white to deep forest green.

"Most of this data is encrypted," Anya said from the computer terminal, her fingers flying across the keyboard as she worked to bypass the security. She plugged in a portable drive. "But what I can access... these aren't normal agricultural samples. The growth rates are off the charts."

"Anything linking back to who funded this?" Dave asked, moving between the incubators. Each was maintained at a different temperature, the digital displays showing precise variations. The sophistication of the setup spoke of serious money behind it.

"Working on it." Anya's reflection in the computer screen showed the tight concentration she reserved for the most challenging systems. "Whoever set this up knew what they're doing. Multiple layers of encryption, rotating keys..."

Dave picked up one of the petri dishes, holding it to the light. The fungal structures formed unnatural hexagonal patterns, spreading with mechanical regularity rather than the chaotic clusters natural growth would form. Each line was geometrically exact, more like engineered circuitry than organic matter.

"These patterns can't be natural," he said, turning the dish to examine it from different angles. Some of the samples seemed to pulse with a life of their own, responding to the movement. "What was Santos working on?"

"Found something," Anya said. "Research notes, partially decrypted. Mentions some kind of Soviet programme, but the details are---"

The flash-bang came without warning, crashing through the small window near the ceiling. The sudden explosion of light and sound filled the confined space. Dave flinched instinctively -- the dish slipped from his fingers, shattering on the floor. A fine cloud of spores plumed up around him as he inhaled in surprise.

Figures in tactical gear breached through multiple entry points simultaneously, moving with practised efficiency. Serj's pistol barked twice in the chaos, taking down the first attacker before they could bring their rifle to bear. Anya had already flipped the heavy steel desk, using it as cover while she returned fire with practised precision.

Dave grabbed the nearest attacker, meaning to throw them across the room with his usual superhuman force. But something was wrong. The world tilted sideways, his strength suddenly feeling distant, disconnected. The man still went flying, but nowhere near as far as Dave intended. Dark spots danced at the edges of his vision.

Another flash-bang detonated, the sound reverberating off the lab's tight confines. In the strobing chaos, Dave saw Anya execute a perfect disarm, redirecting an attacker's rifle before striking his throat with surgical precision. Serj had closed to hand-to-hand range with two others, his movements economical and lethal.

"Status?" Cecilia's voice crackled through their comms.

"Under attack," Anya reported, her voice steady even as she fired two more rounds. "Professional team, at least eight."

Dave tried to focus, to push through whatever was affecting him. His enhanced vision flickered in and out, the world alternating between crystal clarity and blurry shadows. He stumbled against an incubator, sending more petri dishes crashing to the floor. The geometric patterns were appearing on his skin now, fading in and out like living tattoos.

"Got the drive," Anya called. "We need to move!"

Dave pushed himself away from the incubator, forcing his legs to steady. Another attacker was moving to flank Anya's position. He needed to intercept, to protect his teammate, but his body responded like he was moving through thick syrup. The room tilted and swayed around him, reminding him of the one time he'd drunk an entire bottle of Wild Turkey before discovering his metabolism still made getting drunk possible.

Except this was worse. This was his enhanced speed deserting him when he needed it most.

The attacker spotted him, pivoting smoothly to bring his weapon to bear. Dave initiated a disarmament sequence, his system calculating vector trajectories with mathematical precision, transforming a standard technique into a biomechanical algorithm of controlled violence. Lock the wrist, twist, step through. Basic stuff. But his timing was off, his movements sluggish. Instead of the clean technique he intended, he barely managed to knock the rifle aside.

The attacker transitioned to his sidearm with practised efficiency, faster than Dave could compensate for in his current state. Three shots rang out, catching Dave square in the chest. He stumbled backward, more from shock than impact – but then the pain hit. Real pain, not the usual dull poke he felt when bullets bounced off him. No penetration, but it hurt. Actually hurt.

Something was very wrong.

Dave abandoned any attempt at finesse. He stepped in and delivered a brutal chop to the attacker's throat, dropping him instantly. It was messy, inelegant – the kind of crude move he hadn't needed to resort to since retraining. But right now, crude was all he could manage.

He pressed a hand to his chest, feeling the forming bruises – another new and unwelcome sensation. The geometric patterns on his skin were spreading now, pulsing in time with his racing heartbeat.

"Dave?" Serj's voice cut through the haze. The veteran operative took in Dave's condition with a quick glance, noting the stumbling movements and the way Dave was actually showing pain. His expression hardened. "Anya! Dave's compromised. We need to move. Now!"

Dave tried to respond, to say he could still fight, but the words wouldn't come. The room spun violently, and he found himself on one knee without remembering how he got there. Through blurring vision, he saw more attackers moving into the lab, their rifles sweeping the room with professional precision. He tried to stand, to face them, but his strength was fading fast.

The last fragments of his enhanced speed flickered and died, leaving him feeling hollow, diminished. He'd grown so used to his abilities that their absence felt like losing a limb. The confidence that had come with near-invulnerability drained away, replaced by an unfamiliar vulnerability that cut deeper than the physical pain in his chest.

Serj dispatched his last opponent with a brutal knee strike, then turned to cover their retreat. "Dave, can you walk?"

"Think so," Dave managed, though his legs felt increasingly unsteady. The room spun lazily around him, time seeming to stretch and compress unpredictably. He saw more attackers moving through the doorway, their rifles sweeping the room.

Anya appeared at his side, one arm supporting him while she fired her pistol one-handed. Her shots were precise despite the awkward position – two attackers went down clutching their weapon hands. Serj's suppressing fire kept the others in cover as they moved toward the exit.

"Omar, north side," Cecilia commanded through the comms. "Immediate extraction."

They half-carried Dave through the house, his superhuman strength now barely enough to help support his own weight. Behind them, more flash-

bangs detonated, but Dave barely registered them through the fog filling his head. Strange patterns writhed across his forearms, geometric fungi growing and fading on his skin.

A black SUV screeched to a halt as they burst out of the house. Omar was behind the wheel, engine running. They bundled Dave into the back seat as more gunfire erupted from the building. The sound seemed to come from very far away.

"Go!" Serj barked, returning fire through the rear window. Omar floored it, gravel spraying as they accelerated away. Through his fading consciousness, Dave saw tactical vehicles emerging from concealed positions, but Omar's driving soon left them behind.

"Dave?" Anya's voice held rare concern. "Stay with us. Containment team will meet us at the safehouse."

He tried to respond, but the words wouldn't come. The last thing he saw before darkness took him was his own hand, covered in shifting fungal patterns that perfectly matched the samples in Santos's lab. Whatever she had created, it had found a way past his enhanced defences. And somewhere in that encrypted data was the answer to whether this had been the plan all along.

"Cecilia," Anya's voice seemed to float from far away, "we need a biotech team. Something's affecting Dave..."

6 Field Test

The biotech team worked with quiet efficiency in the safehouse's converted garage, their hazmat suits casting strange shadows in the harsh portable lighting. Dave sat on an examination table while Dr. Goulding frowned at her tablet, frustrated by her inability to take blood samples - his invulnerability had returned completely, skin once again impenetrable to needles.

"This is fascinating," she said, adjusting her suit's faceplate. "During the incident, your typically impenetrable dermal layer responded to ballistic impact with actual nociceptive feedback. The bullet strikes triggered genuine pain receptors rather than your usual biomechanical resistance. Did you experience any localised bruising or temporary loss of cellular cohesion at the impact sites?", before adjusting her tone, "Sorry, during the incident, you experienced actual pain from the bullet impacts?"

"Yeah," Dave confirmed, flexing his hand where the geometric patterns had been. "First time since getting my abilities. Bruised too, though that's gone now." His enhanced speed had returned an hour ago, strength following shortly after. Now he felt normal again – or at least, his version of normal.

"And the others?" Goulding turned to where Anya and Serj waited. "Any symptoms? You were all in close proximity when the samples broke."

"Nothing," Anya replied as Goulding drew blood from her arm. "We were right there with Dave when the petri dishes shattered, but only he was affected."

"Could be because he actually inhaled the spores," Serj suggested, rolling up his sleeve for his own blood draw. "Rest of us were already moving for cover."

Anya's voice cut through their speculation. "Got something in Santos's encrypted data. She was monitoring test sites – local farms where she'd been tracking unusual fungal growth. Coordinates for one just outside town."

"Bringing up satellite feed now," Omar reported from his laptop. His fingers flew across the keyboard. "Got it. Wait... that's not right."

The team crowded around his screen. The aerial view showed a perfect circle of dead vegetation, perhaps two hundred metres in diameter. The brown expanse stood in stark contrast to the surrounding green fields.

"Time stamp's from six hours ago," Omar said. He typed rapidly, pulling up another image. "This is from two days ago – field was completely healthy then."

"Their clean-up team," Serj growled. "Making sure nothing was left to find."

Dave studied the image. The pattern was too precise, too controlled to be natural. "They didn't just kill it," he said. "They burned it. Thoroughly and methodically." His enhanced vision picked up details in the satellite photo others might miss. "Look at the burn pattern – started from the centre, worked outward in a spiral. Professional job."

"The question is why," Cecilia's voice came through their comms. "What was Santos investigating that made this field so important?"

"More decrypted notes coming through," Anya reported, eyes scanning rapidly. "Santos was tracking aggressive fungal strains appearing in crop samples. Something about unusual growth patterns and accelerated crop death. She suspected deliberate modification."

"Wait," Dr. Goulding interrupted, looking up from her microscope where she'd been examining the team's blood samples. "None of you are showing any signs of fungal contamination. Whatever affected Dave seems to have been a completely unexpected reaction. His enhanced cellular structure

must have responded differently to the fungal spores than normal human biology."

"An accidental discovery," Dave mused. "They weren't targeting me specifically – I just happened to be vulnerable to whatever they're developing."

"Which makes it even more concerning," Goulding added. "If this fungus can affect Dave's enhanced biology as a side effect, imagine what it's actually designed to do to crops."

"We need to check that field," Dave said, standing. "Before they have time to sanitise it completely."

"Too risky," Serj countered. "They'll be watching it."

"Exactly." Dave met his teammate's gaze. "Which means we might catch them in the act. Find out who's behind this."

"He's right," Cecilia said after a moment. "But we do this carefully. Omar, get us thermal imaging of the area. Anya, keep working on those files – there might be more test sites we need to know about. Dave... you sure you're up for this?"

Dave flexed his hand, feeling the familiar surge of enhanced speed and strength flowing through him. Whatever the fungal agent had done, his system had adapted and overcome it. But the memory of that vulnerability lingered. "Yeah," he said. "I need to know what we're dealing with."

"I'm coming with you," Dr. Goulding said, already packing equipment. "If there are any spores left, we need samples. This could be the first stage of a much larger agricultural attack."

The drive to the test field was tense. Satellite imagery showed no current activity, but everyone knew that could change instantly. They parked half a mile out, using the darkness for cover as they approached on foot. Dave's enhanced vision pierced the gloom, scanning for movement.

The devastation was even more striking up close. The circular burn pattern extended precisely to the field's irrigation lines, stopping as if it had hit an invisible wall. Dave crouched at the edge, examining the soil while Dr. Goulding took samples.

"It's not just burned," he said quietly. "It's completely dead. No trace of organic material left at all. They didn't just destroy the evidence. They sterilized it."

"Movement," Omar's voice crackled through their comms. "Two vehicles approaching from the north. Thermal signatures show eight individuals, heavily armed."

"Time to go," Serj said, already moving to cover their retreat.

They pulled back into the darkness as the vehicles approached. Dave watched through his enhanced vision as figures in tactical gear began a methodical sweep of the field. Their movements were precise, professional – the same training he'd seen in the team that hit Santos's lab.

Back at the safehouse, Dr. Goulding immediately began analysing the soil samples while finishing her examination of the team. Omar had been last to have blood drawn, and she scrutinised each sample carefully.

"All clear," she finally announced. "Whatever this fungus is, it's not currently affecting any of you. Dave's reaction appears to have been unique – and temporary."

"But that's not what it was designed for," Anya said, still working through Santos's files. "These notes... she was investigating something much bigger. Patterns of crop failures, unusual fungal growth appearing in major agricultural regions. She thought someone was testing a delivery system."

"For what?" Cecilia asked over the comms.

"A weapon," Anya replied grimly. "One that could target food supplies on a massive scale. Santos discovered test sites across multiple states, all showing the same geometric growth patterns before total crop death."

Dave looked at the soil samples Dr. Goulding was analysing, remembering how quickly the fungus had affected him. "If they could scale this up..."

"They could destroy entire harvests," Goulding finished. "And my preliminary analysis suggests this strain is engineered to spread rapidly through existing agricultural distribution networks. One contaminated shipment could infect dozens of farms."

"That's why they killed Santos," Serj said quietly. "She figured out what they were planning."

Dave nodded, watching Dr. Goulding work. His temporary vulnerability had been an unintended side effect, but it had helped them stumble onto something far more dangerous. Someone was developing the capability to target food supplies at will, and they'd already proven they were willing to kill to keep it secret.

"Keep digging," Cecilia ordered. "We need to find their other test sites before they can sanitise them too. And Dave... good luck explaining to Maeda why you missed tomorrow's training session."

Despite the gravity of the situation, Dave couldn't help but grimace. Somehow, he suspected his martial arts instructor would be less than sympathetic about agricultural bioweapons as an excuse for tardiness.

7 Morning Ambush

Dawn painted the wheat field gold as Dr. Goulding worked methodically, collecting samples from plants showing the telltale geometric fungal patterns. The morning breeze sent waves through the ripening grain, creating patterns that almost disguised the darker geometry of fungal growth beneath. A lingering ground mist caught the early sunlight, transforming the dips between rows into rivers of liquid gold. The team had spread out in a protective perimeter - Serj watching the north approach, Anya covering the east, Omar stationed by their vehicle to the south. Dave moved between positions, his enhanced vision scanning for threats.

The attack came with the rising sun at their backs.

"Contact!" Serj's voice cut through the morning quiet. "Multiple vehicles approaching fast from the north. Same tactical setup as yesterday."

Dave was already moving toward Goulding's position when the first incendiary devices arced through the air. They struck the field in a precise pattern, flames erupting in a controlled burn that began cutting off escape routes.

"Omar, get Goulding out," Dave ordered, his enhanced vision tracking multiple teams moving through the growing smoke. "Everyone else, defensive positions. We hold until they're clear."

The wheat ignited with frightening speed, the fire spreading in calculated patterns. These people had done this before – they knew exactly how to contain and destroy evidence. Dave fought down a moment of unease as he felt the first hints of sluggishness creeping in. Not as bad as yesterday, but definitely there.

"Samples secured," Goulding reported as Omar led her toward their vehicle. "But they're burning everything – all the evidence will be gone in minutes."

Gunfire erupted from the north. Serj's rifle answered in controlled bursts, forcing the attackers to seek cover in the burning wheat. Dave moved to intercept a flanking team, but his reactions felt off – like moving through water. The fungal spores must be affecting him again, though not as severely as before.

An attacker burst from the flames, rifle raised. Dave's enhanced speed flickered uncertainly as he moved to disarm him. The technique was clean – just as Maeda had drilled into him – but executed at barely twice normal human speed instead of his usual velocity. The attacker compensated faster than Dave expected, rolling with the disarm and drawing a sidearm.

Dave felt the impact of the bullets against his chest. No bruising this time, but he definitely felt them. His invulnerability was holding, but like his speed, it seemed... muted. He pushed through it, using his opponent's momentum against him just as he'd practised. The man went down hard.

"Dave, they're trying to encircle us," Anya reported, her pistol barking twice. "Using the fire to control our movement."

She was right. The flames were being directed expertly, herding them toward prepared kill zones. The heat was intense, but Dave barely noticed it – his resistance to temperature extremes apparently unaffected. The smoke, however, was playing havoc with his enhanced vision, making it harder to track threats.

"Omar, status?" Dave asked, ducking under a wild swing from another attacker and retaliating with a precise strike to the solar plexus.

"Clear of the field," Omar replied. "Goulding's samples are secured. Coming back for—"

"Negative," Dave cut him off. "Keep going. We'll find our own way out."

The flames were chest-high now, the wheat field transformed into a tactical maze of fire and smoke. Dave's movements felt increasingly sluggish – not the dramatic power loss of yesterday, but enough to make him rely more on technique than raw ability. Maeda's training proved its worth as he flowed through defensive sequences, letting his attackers' momentum work against them.

"Ten seconds," Serj called out. "Then fall back by pairs."

Dave caught movement in his peripheral vision – another team trying to flank Anya's position. He started toward them but stumbled as a wave of dizziness hit. The fungal spores were definitely affecting him, though his system seemed to be fighting them better than before.

Anya handled the threat herself, her close-quarters expertise obvious as she dropped two attackers in swift succession. Dave used the moment to reorient himself, forcing his enhanced senses to focus through the growing fog in his mind.

"Fall back," Serj ordered. "Dave, with me."

They began a fighting retreat through the inferno, covering each other's movement. Dave's shirt caught fire at some point, but he barely noticed. His trousers weren't so lucky – the flames caught them as he dove through a particularly intense section of the blaze. He rolled to extinguish them, but the damage was done.

The team finally broke through the edge of the field, smoke-stained and battered but intact. Dave emerged last, his enhanced durability having protected him from the worst of the fire. His trousers, however, had not survived the experience – they hung in charred tatters around his legs, revealing a pair of bright blue boxer shorts underneath.

"Don't," he warned as Anya's eyebrows rose. "Not a word."

They piled into the vehicle where Omar was waiting with the engine running. As they sped away, Dave caught himself in the rear-view mirror –

covered in soot, shirt burned away in places, blue boxers clearly visible through what remained of his trousers. At least his abilities meant no actual burns, though his pride usually took longer to recover.

Back at the safehouse, Goulding immediately began analysing her samples while the team debriefed. Dave had changed into spare clothes, though Anya's occasional glances at his new attire suggested the boxer shorts incident wouldn't be forgotten anytime soon.

"The fungal response was different this time," Dave reported, trying to maintain professional dignity. "Less severe than yesterday. Like my system's already developing resistance."

"They're getting bolder," Serj noted. "Attacking in daylight, willing to engage directly. Whatever timeline they're working on, it's accelerating."

Dave nodded, trying not to notice Anya's continued smirk. "We need to find their next target before—"

"Sorry to interrupt," Cecilia's voice came through their comms, amusement clear in her tone, "but I hear someone needs a new pair of trousers. And possibly some less... eye-catching underwear?"

Dave sighed as the team finally lost their battle with composure. Even Serj cracked a smile. "Can we focus on the biological weapon targeting the world's food supply?"

"Of course," Cecilia replied, still chuckling. "But perhaps we should add more 'flame-retardant clothing' to our equipment requisition. Especially for you, Dave. Blue's not really your colour."

The laughter felt good after the intensity of the morning. But Dave knew it was just a moment's respite. Somewhere out there, someone was preparing to weaponise this fungus on a massive scale. They had to find them first – preferably before he lost any more clothes in the process.

8 Supply Chain

"Wait - you actually got a needle in?" Kessler practically pressed his face against the video screen. "Through his skin? An actual blood draw?"

"See for yourself," Dr. Goulding replied, adjusting the microscope's camera feed. She had rushed Dave straight to the medical bay upon their return from the Kansas field, not wanting to waste a moment of this unprecedented opportunity. "The needle went in cleanly. The nanobots aren't preventing access like they usually do."

Dave sat on the examination table, rolling up his sleeve for yet another sample. The medical bay hummed with quiet activity as technicians processed material from both his blood and the burned field. He watched Goulding prep his arm with an alcohol swab -- a pointlessly routine gesture given his usual imperviousness to infection.

"Ready?" she asked.

Dave nodded. The needle slid in smoothly, drawing another tube of dark red blood. Even after multiple draws, the novelty of feeling the slight pinch hadn't worn off.

"Extraordinary," Kessler breathed, studying the feed from his UK facility. "The nanobots appear to be in some kind of... reorganisation phase. I've never seen them behave like this before. Dave, how are you feeling?"

"Everything feels muted," Dave admitted. "Not gone like in the field, but diminished. Like trying to hear through water."

"We need to take full advantage of this opportunity," Goulding said, preparing additional collection supplies. "Tissue samples, cellular analysis -- everything we couldn't do before."

In the adjacent operations room, Anya's voice cut through their conversation. "Got something. Multiple fertiliser shipments through major

ports -- Singapore, Rotterdam, Long Beach. All from shell companies registered in the past six months."

Dave started to stand, but Goulding pushed him firmly back onto the table. "You're not going anywhere until I've collected everything we need. This may be our only chance."

"The nanobots are already showing signs of adaptation," Kessler noted through the video feed. "See how they're restructuring? We won't have long before they restore their normal protective configurations."

"Omar," Cecilia called through the comm system, "can you access the Singapore port authority systems?"

"Already on it," Omar replied. His fingers flew across his keyboard at the operations centre workstation. "Their documentation shows significant chemical composition changes between origin and destination. These aren't normal fertiliser shipments."

Dave winced as Goulding extracted a tissue sample. On the main display, financial data scrolled past as Anya worked her way through digital paper trails.

"Found their payment structure," she announced. "Multiple shell companies, all less than six months old. Money moves through agricultural investment firms, gets laundered through commodities trading, then..." She paused. "That's interesting."

"What is it?" Cecilia asked.

"Final payments all trace back to accounts opened just after Santos started her research. Someone knew what she'd find before she found it."

"The sample's deteriorating already," Goulding reported, frowning at her microscope. "The nanobots seem unable to maintain stability once removed from Dave's system."

"Expected but frustrating," Kessler replied through the video link. "Still, what we're seeing is revolutionary. The nanobots aren't just adapting to resist the fungal agent -- they're actively evolving their base programming."

Dave tried to focus on the operational discussion while the doctors worked. The sample collection was uncomfortable -- not painful exactly, but he felt every needle stick in a way that was completely foreign to him. The tissue sample site had already healed, not even leaving a mark.

"These shipping manifests are definitely altered," Omar reported, still digging through port records. "They're using modified containers -- hidden compartments with separate environmental controls. The documentation shows standard fertiliser, but what's actually being shipped..."

"Scale?" Dave asked, trying to distract himself from another blood draw.

"Massive," Omar replied. "Enough material to affect multiple major agricultural regions simultaneously. Looking at coordinated deliveries to every major grain-producing area over the next two weeks."

"The nanobot restructuring is accelerating," Kessler announced, studying his video feed. "Look at this pattern, Helen. They're not just becoming resistant -- they're incorporating elements of the fungal biology's rapid adaptation capability."

Goulding leaned in to observe. "Remarkable. Instead of simply fighting it off, they're... learning from it. Evolving."

"If they're targeting all major agricultural regions," Serj noted from his position by the door, "they're not just after profit. This is about control of the global food supply."

Any'a's fingers flew across her keyboard. "Found another connection. The shell companies all have links to a defunct Soviet agricultural research programme. Project designation... my Russian's rusty, but it translates roughly to 'Black Earth.'"

"The Soviet connection explains the sophistication," Serj said. "They had extensive biological weapons programs disguised as agricultural research. I've seen some of their old facilities -- very advanced for the time."

Dave felt a sudden surge of energy course through him, followed by a wave of dizziness. A tingling sensation spread across his skin, like electricity dancing just beneath the surface.

"Blood pressure spike," Goulding announced, checking her monitors. "Heart rate elevated. Something's happening at the cellular level."

"The nanobots are reaching a new equilibrium," Kessler said excitedly through the video feed. "This is beyond anything we thought possible."

"The first major outbound shipment is scheduled from Singapore port in 36 hours," Omar reported, scanning through manifests. "After that, they start arriving at distribution centres worldwide."

Dave felt another powerful surge course through his body. His enhanced vision flickered, then sharpened beyond its usual clarity. "Something's changing," he reported. "My abilities... they're not just recovering, they're..."

"Evolving," Kessler finished through the video link, his excitement clear even through the digital connection. "The nanobots aren't simply fighting off the fungal infection -- they're integrating its adaptive properties into their base programming."

"These market positions," Anya said, highlighting data on the main screen, "they're not just betting on crop failure. The timing... they're positioning to control food distribution networks afterward. This isn't just about profit -- it's about controlling the global food supply."

"There's a pattern to these approvals," Anya said, correlating shipping manifests with inspection records. "Every contaminated container we've traced passed through specific checkpoints. They're controlling the inspection process somehow."

"Santos saw it too," Omar added, pulling up the reports they'd recovered from her lab. "Same inspection protocols, same facility. The containers get diverted there deliberately."

"Can you trace the inspectors?" Carter asked.

"Working on it. But their documentation is too perfect - like someone who knows exactly what a clean inspection should look like."

"Professional," Serj noted. "Someone with both regulatory knowledge and tactical awareness."

Dave watched the microscope feed showing his own blood. The geometric patterns that had first appeared on his skin were now visible at a cellular level, but they were different -- more organised, more controlled. The nanobots weren't just fighting the fungal agent any more; they were mastering it.

"Remarkable," Kessler breathed through the video link. "The nanobots are incorporating fungal traits for rapid adaptation while maintaining core stability. It's like watching guided evolution in real-time."

"I think..." Dave started, then paused as another wave of sensation washed through him. His enhanced speed suddenly snapped back to full strength, then surged beyond it. He moved his hand experimentally, watching it blur with motion faster than even he was used to. "I think my system's done adapting."

Goulding's instruments confirmed it. The wild spikes in his vital signs were stabilising, but at a new baseline significantly higher than his previous normal. "The changes appear to be settling," she reported. "But these readings... your enhanced capabilities may have been permanently altered."

"The tissue samples are already breaking down," Kessler noted with disappointment. "The nanobots can't maintain stability outside your system. But what we've learned in these brief moments... extraordinary."

"We need to move quickly," Cecilia said. "Omar, coordinate with our Singapore team. I want eyes on that shipment before it leaves port. Anya, keep tracing those financial connections -- we need to identify their whole network."

Dave stood, ignoring the doctors' protests. Something in his movement, his presence, had changed. He felt... upgraded. The nanobots had done more than just adapt -- they had evolved, taking his abilities to a new level.

"The fungal agent was never meant to be a weapon against people," Dave said, understanding finally clicking into place. "I was just an accidental test subject. But whatever they created... my nanobots studied it, adapted to it, and made themselves stronger."

Anya's computer chimed. "Last piece of the puzzle. Managed to decrypt more of Santos's files. She was investigating a series of coordinated outbreaks -- test runs using different fungal strains. Each more aggressive than the last."

"Speaking of networks," Omar cut in, still deep in the shipping records. "I've traced these shipments back to their source. They're all being processed through a massive fertiliser facility in Morocco -- Agra-Chem International. Registration links back to the same group of shell companies."

"Morocco makes sense," Serj noted. "Limited oversight, good port access, positioned to distribute globally. Perfect place to modify legitimate fertiliser shipments without drawing attention."

"Two targets then," Cecilia decided. "We'll have our Singapore team monitor the shipment, but the Morocco facility is our best chance to understand how they're processing this agent. Omar, get me everything you can on Agra-Chem's security setup. Dave, once the doctors clear you, I want you and Serj to prep for Morocco. If this is their main processing centre, we need to know exactly what they're doing there."

Dave moved toward the door, his enhanced speed making the motion almost blur. "We need to get ahead of those shipments. If they can distribute this stuff through normal agricultural supply chains..."

"Dave," Cecilia called as he reached the door. "Be careful. We still don't fully understand how your abilities have been affected."

He nodded, feeling the new power coursing through him. "They tried to create something to destroy global food production. Instead, they helped make me strong enough to stop them." He smiled slightly. "Seems like a fair trade."

9 Processing

The heat hit them as soon as they stepped off the plane, the kind of dry intensity that made Dave grateful for his enhanced durability. Tangier's airport buzzed with its usual controlled chaos - tourists mixing with locals, deals being made in multiple languages at once. Their local contact's car waited exactly where promised, its weathered exterior perfectly unmemorable in the sea of similar vehicles.

The drive took them through narrow streets where ancient architecture met modern necessity, past market stalls whose colourful awnings provided strips of blessed shade. The afternoon call to prayer echoed from distant minarets as their driver navigated the maze-like roads with the casual confidence that came from decades of experience. Laundry lines criss-crossed overhead, creating ever-shifting patterns of shadow on the sun-baked walls.

The Tangier safe house looked exactly like what it wasn't supposed to be - a nondescript building on a quiet street, its weathered exterior blending seamlessly with its neighbours. As Dave and Serj approached the heavy wooden door, it opened before they could knock.

"Welcome back," Karim said warmly, though his eyes were already scanning the street behind them. "It has been too long, my friend."

Dave smiled, genuinely pleased to see the safe house's supposed "housekeeper" again. Karim's carefully crafted cover masked one of the agency's most effective intelligence gatherers in North Africa.

"Good to see you too," Dave replied, stepping inside. "Karim, this is Serj. Serj, meet the best 'housekeeper' in Morocco."

The slight pause before "housekeeper" carried shared understanding. Serj nodded respectfully - he'd heard enough about Karim's network of contacts to appreciate the man's capabilities.

"Ah, yes," Karim said, closing and securing the door. "Omar has spoken highly of your work together." His eyes carried that familiar mix of warmth and careful assessment that Dave remembered. "The others arrived safely an hour ago. Please, come. I was about to prepare tea."

Karim's hands moved with practised grace as he prepared the mint tea, his actions carrying the same precise efficiency Dave had noticed in everything the man did. The Tangier safe house hadn't changed since Dave's last visit - still that careful balance between functional and forgettable that marked all of Karim's operations.

"The fertiliser facility employs over three hundred local workers," Karim explained, carefully pouring the tea from height to create the proper foam. "My contacts among them report increased security over the past month. New restricted areas, specialised equipment being installed at night."

Dave accepted the ornate glass, remembering Karim's previous lesson about the ritual's importance in building trust. "Any patterns to the security changes?"

"They've segregated the mixing facility," Karim replied, serving Serj before taking his own seat. "Created what they call a 'quality control' section. Workers report unusual environmental controls, specialised protective equipment required for entry."

Serj studied the facility blueprints spread across the low table. "Main access through the worker entrance here," he indicated. "Loading bays on the east side. But the new section..." he traced a recently added structure, "that's our target."

"My contact in maintenance confirms three security checkpoints," Karim continued. "Biometric scanners, atmospheric monitoring. Far beyond normal fertiliser production requirements."

Dave sipped his tea, noting how Karim watched their reactions with careful attention. The man's role as "housekeeper" was a carefully crafted facade, masking one of the agency's most effective intelligence gatherers.

"We'll need a diversion," Serj said. "Something to thin out security around the mixing facility."

Karim's slight smile carried volumes. "There is a local environmental group concerned about chemical run-off. They have been planning a protest. Perhaps tomorrow night would be an opportune time for them to act."

The team gathered around a detailed plan of the facility Karim had constructed, complete with recent modifications. Small markers indicated guard positions and patrol routes, while red lines traced the new security perimeter.

"The night shift changes at 0200," Karim explained, moving markers with practised precision. "Six guards at the main gate, four handling perimeter patrol. But here..." he indicated the mixing facility, "security has doubled in the past week. Two-man teams, fifteen-minute rotation."

Dave studied the patrol patterns. "These routes seem designed to create overlapping fields of view."

"Indeed," Karim replied. "The head of security is ex-military. Lebanese Special Forces. He understands sight lines, defensive positioning." His fingers traced possible approach vectors. "However, he also understands human nature. The guards closest to the chemical storage area tend to rush their rounds due to the smell. Creates a consistent forty-second gap here." He tapped a spot near the maintenance ladder.

Serj leaned in, examining the building's northwestern corner. "Security cameras?"

"Pan-tilt-zoom units," Karim answered. "But the maintenance system runs a diagnostic cycle every hour. Creates a seven-second blind spot." He

smiled slightly. "Purely coincidental, I'm sure, that the environmental protest will peak during one of these cycles."

Dave watched Karim's precise movements as he walked them through each security detail. The "housekeeper" had assembled a remarkably complete picture of the facility's operations - guard rotations, security protocols, even individual patrol habits. This wasn't just surveillance; it was masterful intelligence work.

"The new restricted area maintains positive air pressure," Karim continued, indicating ventilation systems. "Workers report having to pass through decontamination when entering or leaving. But more interesting is what they're bringing in." He produced several photographs. "These arrived last week. Industrial mixing equipment, but with biological containment modifications."

"You got these from inside the facility?" Serj asked, impressed.

"The workers talk," Karim replied simply. "Especially when their families worry about what they're being exposed to. It is amazing what people will share over properly prepared tea."

The intelligence painted a clear picture: a sophisticated operation hiding behind legitimate fertiliser production. Every detail Karim provided - from guard psychology to equipment deliveries - demonstrated his expertise at gathering and analysing information. His role as "housekeeper" was the perfect cover, allowing him to move invisibly through local social networks while building a comprehensive understanding of the facility's operations.

"The protest will begin here," Karim said, marking the main gate. "Local environmental groups have legitimate concerns about chemical run-off. Their timing, however, might be... advantageous."

Dave nodded, understanding. Karim's subtle orchestration would create their opening, just as his meticulous intelligence work had revealed their

target. The best operations were the ones that looked completely natural to outside observers.

The infiltration went smoothly at first. Karim's "environmental protest" drew much of the facility's security to the main gate, while Dave and Serj accessed the roof through a maintenance ladder that had mysteriously been left unlocked. The night air carried the sharp chemical smell of fertiliser production.

"First checkpoint," Serj whispered as they approached a security door. His lock-defeating device made short work of the electronic controls. Inside, the industrial environment felt oddly sterile - too clean for a fertiliser plant.

They encountered the first guard pair near the second checkpoint. Dave moved to intercept, his enhanced speed making the takedown almost trivial. The air felt different here, heavy with something that made Dave's enhanced senses tingle uncomfortably. When the next security team appeared, his attempt to blur forward fell flat - his speed suddenly unreliable.

Training took over. Dave flowed into the movements Maeda had drilled into him, letting the first guard's aggressive rush work against him. A precise redirection sent the man sprawling while Dave secured his partner in a textbook arm lock. No superhuman speed required - just proper technique.

"You okay?" Serj asked quietly, noting how Dave's movement had changed.

Dave nodded, already feeling his abilities stabilising as the guards' position shifted them away from whatever was affecting him. "The fungal agent's definitely here. Strong enough to impact my abilities."

They found the modified mixing system behind the third checkpoint. The setup was sophisticated - automated controls, sealed processing tanks,

specialised containment protocols. Dave's excellent vision caught the telltale geometric patterns in samples visible through inspection windows.

"This isn't just a production facility," Serj noted, photographing the setup. "It's a refinement operation. They're not just growing the agent - they're weaponising it."

"The payment records confirm it," Anya's voice came through their comms as she worked through the facility's secured data. "They're routing everything through shell companies - all using that same 12.5 million tenge baseline we found in Santos's accounts."

"Same payment structure?" Dave asked, studying the cultivation tanks through the inspection windows.

"Exactly the same. But here's where it gets interesting." Anya's voice carried the focused tension of deep analysis. "The facility isn't just sending payments - they're receiving technical documentation. Regular data packets from a supposedly abandoned facility in Kazakhstan." A pause as she processed more data. "Cross-referencing with satellite imagery... there. Construction patterns matching specialised cultivation equipment. The kind designed for fungal research."

Dave shared a look with Serj. "They're not just moving money through Kazakhstan. They're getting something essential from there."

"The original strains," Serj suggested quietly. "Soviet-designed bioweapons would need specific cultivation protocols. Equipment calibrated to exact specifications."

"Which explains all this," Dave said, gesturing at the facility's sophisticated setup. "This isn't just a distribution centre. It's a test facility for something much bigger."

Movement in the corridor - more guards approaching. Dave felt his abilities fluctuate again as they neared the concentrated fungal material.

But this time he was ready, smoothly transitioning to the defensive techniques he'd practised for exactly this situation.

The first guard came in high with a baton strike. Dave stepped inside the attack, using the man's momentum to unbalance him while simultaneously controlling his weapon arm. The throw was textbook perfect - just as Maeda had taught him. The second guard's punch met empty air as Dave flowed around it, transitioning seamlessly into a joint lock that ended with both attackers efficiently disabled.

"Nice," Serj commented, already moving to access the facility's secure terminal. "Your new training's paying off."

"Had good teachers," Dave replied, zip-tying the unconscious guards. His powers were still unstable this close to the mixing tanks, but he found he didn't mind as much as before. The martial arts gave him options he hadn't had during his first fungal encounter.

The terminal yielded shipping schedules, chemical compositions, and detailed mixing protocols. But the real prize was a sealed sample container in the quality control lab - pure refined agent, ready for distribution.

"Got what we need," Serj said, securing the sample. "Time to go."

They encountered two more security teams during their exit. Dave's abilities continued to fluctuate near the fungal concentrations, but each time his training compensated. Where before he would have simply overwhelmed opponents with superhuman speed, now he flowed through precise combinations of strikes and throws, letting technique replace raw power.

Karim's "protest" was just winding down as they cleared the facility perimeter. His timing, as always, was impeccable. By the time facility security restored normal operations, Dave and Serj were already halfway to the safe house, their evidence secured.

"Tea?" Karim offered upon their return, already heating the water. The ritual felt different now - less about ceremony and more about grounding after the operation.

"The sample confirms it," Serj reported to Cecilia over comms. "They've refined the fungal agent into something that can be distributed through normal fertiliser shipments. Once it hits the soil, it would spread through existing agricultural systems."

"And the effect on Dave's abilities?" Cecilia asked.

"Localised to areas with high concentration," Dave replied, accepting another glass of tea from Karim. "But manageable now. The martial arts training helps compensate when my abilities get unstable."

"They've created something sophisticated," Serj added. "The mixing facility, the containment protocols - this isn't just experiments any more. They're ready for mass production."

"Understood," Cecilia said. "I'll have a containment team collect the sample. Good work, all of you. Karim, please thank your local contacts for their... timely environmental concerns."

Karim's slight smile returned as he poured the last of the tea. "Environmental activism is a powerful force. Who can say what causes people to protest?"

Dave watched the mint leaves settle in his glass, thinking about adaptation. The fungal agent might still affect his abilities, but he'd learned to work around it. Between his evolving abilities and new training, he was becoming something more effective than raw power alone.

"Your mother was right about the tea," he told Karim, remembering their previous conversation about observation and patience.

Karim nodded, pleased that Dave remembered. "The ritual gives us time to think, to process. Sometimes the most important part of an operation happens after, when we consider what we have learned."

And they had learned much. The facility confirmed the scale of what they faced - a sophisticated operation ready to weaponise their agent globally. But they'd also confirmed something else: Dave's vulnerability to the fungal material wasn't the weakness their enemies might think. Sometimes, limitations led to better solutions.

Dave finished his tea, feeling his powers fully stabilised now that they were away from the facility. They had the evidence they needed. Now it was time to act on it.

10 Witness

The Agra-Chem International facility dominated the industrial outskirts of Tangier, its stark white walls rising from the dusty landscape like a modernist fortress. Multiple loading bays lined the eastern face, where tanker trucks waited in precise formation for their chemical payloads. Security towers punctuated each corner, their tinted windows concealing watchful eyes, while razor wire caught the afternoon sun along the perimeter walls. The main gate's heavy steel barrier and reinforced guard station made the facility's priorities clear - this was a place that valued security over appearance.

Hassan Farouk's private office at Agra-Chem International occupied a corner position overlooking the facility's main production area. The facility manager had chosen the location carefully - a testament to his need to maintain constant oversight of operations. Today, that meticulous attention to detail would work against him.

"His brother's gambling debts are becoming quite serious," Karim had told Dave earlier, sharing intelligence over his ritual tea preparation. "Farouk has been quietly covering them to keep it from reaching corporate leadership. He'll take a meeting with anyone claiming to represent the casino owners."

Now, Dave sat across from Farouk's imposing desk, watching the manager's confident expression crumble as he realised this wasn't the discrete financial discussion he'd expected. The folder Dave placed before him contained satellite photos of test fields, chemical analysis reports, and most damning of all, financial traces linking everything back to these shell companies.

"Please," Dave said quietly, "let's talk about what's really being produced in your mixing facility."

"What is this?" Farouk demanded, but his voice wavered slightly. Dave watched the man's eyes dart between the documents, noting how they lingered on certain images. He knew. Maybe not everything, but enough.

"You're running a biological weapons programme disguised as fertiliser production," Dave said quietly. "We have proof of multiple test sites, modified shipping manifests, and financial records that would be very interesting to international authorities."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Farouk started, but Dave cut him off by sliding forward another photo.

"Dr. Julia Santos," Dave said. "Remember her? She found your test sites. And then she had a very convenient heart attack."

The colour drained from Farouk's face. "I had nothing to do with-"

"We know," Dave interrupted. "You're operations, not wetwork. But you knew what happened to her. Just like you know what's really being produced in your mixing facility."

Farouk sank into the chair, the facade crumbling. "You don't understand. Once you're in, there's no getting out. They have ways of ensuring loyalty."

"We can protect you," Dave said. "But we need your testimony. Names, dates, locations - everything you know about the operation."

A noise in the hallway made them all freeze. Through the doors glass panel, Dave saw a figure stop and peer in. He caught the man's features, recognising him from the Kansas attack.

Their eyes met through the glass. Recognition flashed across the man's face.

"Down!" Dave shouted as the door burst open, the attacker's gun already drawn. Dave's enhanced speed let him cross the space instantly, deflecting the weapon before it could target Farouk. The shot went wide, shattering the window behind Karim's desk.

Alarms began blaring throughout the facility. Dave could hear boots pounding on metal walkways - security converging on their position.

Dave grabbed Farouk's arm, practically dragging the terrified manager toward the emergency stairs. Behind them, he heard the attacker shouting into a radio, calling in their position.

They emerged onto the upper level of the grain storage complex - a massive space filled with towering silos and interconnected catwalks. Dave's picked up multiple teams moving to cut off escape routes.

"Stay close," he told Farouk as they moved between the silos. The air was thick with grain dust, and Dave noticed his enhanced vision starting to blur - the fungal contamination in the facility already affecting his abilities.

The first security team appeared ahead, weapons raised. Dave pressed Farouk behind a steel silo, positioning him in a tactical blind spot while seamlessly transitioning to engagement posture. His speed wasn't what it should be, but Maeda's training took over. He flowed around their shots, closing distance before they could adjust. The first guard went down to a precise strike to the solar plexus, while the second found himself disarmed and unconscious before he could register what happened.

"How did you..." Farouk gaped at the efficiency of the takedown.

"Later," Dave said, already moving them toward the loading bay. His abilities were definitely compromised - the familiar surge of enhanced speed feeling distant, unreliable. But his newest training was compensating, letting him maintain effectiveness even as his abilities fluctuated.

They reached the ground level just as another security team spotted them. Dave recognised the leader - the same man who'd coordinated the Kansas attack. The walked forward maintaining perfect spacing as they advanced.

"Don't move," the leader said, weapon trained on Dave. His professional stance and calm demeanour suggested extensive tactical training. "You're good, but you're outnumbered."

Dave shifted stance subtly, positioning himself between the attackers and Farouk. His speed might be affected by the fungal contamination, but they had no way of knowing that. More importantly, they didn't know about his recent training. Sometimes limitations led to better solutions.

The first attacker rushed in, expecting an easy takedown of his target. Instead, he met perfectly executed technique. Dave redirected the man's momentum, using his own force to send him crashing into his teammate. The efficiency of the movement caught them completely off guard.

Sat in the loading bay was a delivery van. All Dave hoped was that the keys were still in it.

"The van," Dave told Farouk, engaging the remaining attackers. Even as his supernatural velocity flickered like an unstable current, Dave's body translated Maeda's teachings into a fluid mathematical equation of motion - each technique a precise algorithmic solution to potential conflict. He caught a glimpse of the security team's confusion as he smoothly countered their attacks despite his obvious power loss.

They reached the van just as more guards poured into the loading bay. Dave got Farouk into the passenger seat as bullets pinged off the vehicle's metal frame. His invulnerability seemed less affected than his speed, but he wasn't taking chances with his witness's safety.

The van's engine roared to life as Dave floored the accelerator. They burst through the partially closed loading bay door in a shower of sparks and torn metal. In the side mirror, Dave saw four figures piling into a black SUV - the same tactical team from Kansas.

"They're not just security," Farouk said, gripping his seat as Dave took a corner at dangerous speed. "They're ex-military. Special forces. They only hire the best."

"I noticed," Dave replied, weaving through traffic. The SUV was gaining on them - the van's superior weight working against their escape. He felt his enhanced reflexes trying to assert themselves, flickering in and out like a failing light bulb. The fungal exposure back in the facility had definitely affected him, but not as severely as before.

The SUV slammed into their rear bumper, the impact sending them fishtailing. Dave fought for control, using every bit of his partially compromised abilities to keep them on the road. Another impact - this one calculated to spin them out.

The van lurched violently as another impact struck their rear quarter panel. The road spun crazily around them as they lost all traction, momentum carrying them into a sickening roll. Dave felt Farouk's terror as the world tumbled, his enhanced senses capturing every excruciating detail of their vehicle rotating through space. Metal screamed and glass shattered as they hit the pavement, sliding thirty metres before finally grinding to a halt on the driver's side. The acrid smell of leaking fuel filled the air as the van's systems died with a series of sharp electrical pops.

"Don't move," Dave told Farouk, already unfastening his belt. The windscreen had spiderwebbed but hadn't shattered completely. Dave braced himself against the driver's seat and drove both feet into the glass. The safety laminate held for a moment before giving way and folding in half before falling from the vehicle.

Dave pulled himself through the opening. He reached back in for Farouk, who was struggling with his own seat belt. "Give me your hand."

The facility manager's eyes were wide with panic as he fumbled with the seat belt release. The mechanism was jammed from the impact, the buckle warped and unyielding. Dave reached back in, gripped the belt between

thumb and forefinger, and snapped the reinforced nylon strap like cotton thread. Before Farouk could process what had happened, Dave hauled him through the windscreen opening with a single smooth motion that made the manager's weight seem inconsequential. They could hear boots on pavement now - the tactical team approaching with practised precision.

"Behind the van," Dave ordered, helping Farouk scramble to cover. The overturned vehicle would provide some protection, at least until they figured out a better option. Dave positioned himself between Farouk and the approaching threat, settling into a defensive stance. His recent training would have to compensate for his current limitations.

Three handguns trained on Dave's position behind the van, their wielders spreading out to eliminate any escape route. The leader kept his distance initially, studying Dave's defensive stance with professional assessment.

"Nowhere to run," he said, satisfaction clear in his voice. "Though I have to admire your technique with my men back at the facility." He took two steps closer, just inside arm's reach. A rookie mistake born of overconfidence.

Dave exploded into motion. He grabbed the leader's tactical vest, spinning him around as a human shield before any of the others could react. The team's hesitation to fire with their commander in the line of fire gave Dave the opening he needed.

He drove the leader into the nearest gunman, sending both sprawling. The second attacker managed to squeeze off two shots, but Dave was already moving, flowing past the bullets to close distance. A precise strike to the man's wrist sent the weapon clattering across pavement. The third attacker's shot went wide as Dave swept his legs, following through with an elbow strike that left him gasping on the ground.

The leader had recovered his footing, transitioning smoothly to his holstered sidearm. But instead of targeting Dave, he aimed at Farouk. "Enough games."

Dave crossed the space between them just as the leader's finger tightened on the trigger. The impact of the round against Dave's chest stung more than he expected - like being hit with a baseball bat instead of the usual tap. But the leader's expression of smug satisfaction transformed into shock when Dave didn't drop.

Before the man could process what he'd seen, Dave trapped his gun arm in a textbook lock, applying precise pressure until the weapon fell from nerveless fingers. The leader tried to counter, but Dave had positioned himself perfectly. A swift manipulation of joints ended with the man face-down, arm hyperextended behind him.

"Keys," Dave said calmly. The leader's free hand twitched toward his pocket. "Slowly."

Thirty seconds later, Dave was behind the wheel of the tactical team's SUV, Farouk securing himself in the passenger seat. He spared a glance in the rear view mirror at the incapacitated team. The leader had managed to push himself to his knees, his expression a mix of pain and disbelief as he watched them drive away.

"He shot you," Farouk said quietly. "I saw it hit you."

"Ceramic plate in the vest," Dave replied smoothly, the practised lie coming easily. "Always wear protection when expecting trouble."

Sirens approached - local law enforcement responding to reports of gunfire. Dave got Farouk into the SUV and drove away, leaving the tactical team behind to deal with the approaching authorities.

Later at the safe house, Karim prepared tea with his usual methodical precision. "My contact at the port authority was quite intrigued by the security team's report," he said, measuring the leaves carefully. "Four highly trained operatives, somehow incapacitated by two unarmed men." His dark eyes studied Dave with careful assessment. "Most unusual."

Dave accepted the offered tea, letting the familiar warmth settle his still-racing thoughts. "Sometimes training beats numbers."

"Indeed." Karim's slight smile carried a hint of satisfaction. "Though I must apologise about my cousin's van. He had only just purchased it last week. Most fortuitous that he parked it in exactly the right place for your meeting, wouldn't you say?"

Dave paused mid-sip, recognising the careful planning behind Karim's seemingly casual observation. The man missed nothing, planned for everything. "Fortuitous," he agreed quietly.

"The clean-up team will handle the vehicle," Karim added, his attention returning to the ritual of tea preparation. "Though perhaps next time, we might arrange matters to require slightly less... improvisation."

Dave smiled, feeling his enhanced speed finally starting to stabilise. They had their witness, and more importantly, proof that his new training made him effective even when compromised. The best powers weren't powers at all, but the skill to fight without them.

11 Kazakhstan Connection

"There," Anya said, manipulating the satellite image on the main display. "Stepnogorsk Research Complex. Built in 1982 as part of the Soviet Biopreparat programme." The thermal overlay showed clear signs of activity within the supposedly abandoned facility. "Activity and power usage spiked three months ago, right when Santos started her research."

Dave studied the complex layout. The facility sprawled across several hectares, most of it underground. Multiple buildings connected by a network of tunnels and corridors that reminded him uncomfortably of a spider's web.

"I know this place," Serj said quietly. His expression was grim as he traced access routes on the display. "Worked an operation nearby in '98. Chemical weapons disposal team found evidence of biological research, but by then everything important had been stripped out."

"Not everything, apparently," Dan Carter's voice came from the doorway. The veteran operative moved into the room with his characteristic economy of motion, eyes already assessing the facility layout. "Some of the original equipment was too big to move. They sealed it in place."

Dave hadn't expected Carter to join them, but he was glad for the support. The man's direct approach and combat experience would be invaluable for what they were planning.

"The Soviets were decades ahead in agricultural bioweapons," Carter continued, zooming in on specific sections of the complex. "Their research focused on destroying enemy food supplies rather than direct military applications. More efficient than conventional weapons for long-term strategic impact."

Anya pulled up another overlay, this one showing thermal patterns across the facility. "They're using the original growth chambers. The building's

construction matches similar designs for specialised fungal cultivation equipment."

"Makes sense," Serj noted. "Why build new facilities when you can reactivate existing ones? The Soviets already solved the major engineering challenges."

Dave watched Carter examine the security layout. The man's tactical eye missed nothing as he traced patrol routes and defensive positions. "They've modernised the perimeter," Carter said, marking key points. "Drone coverage, motion sensors. But the internal security is original Soviet design. They're relying on the maze-like layout for defence in depth."

"Found something else," Anya announced, mouse wheel whirring as she rapidly scrolled through the data. "Cross-referencing financial records from Morocco. The shell companies can now be traced back to a parent corporation - Agrinov International."

"Hold on," Anya said suddenly, her fingers flying across the keyboard. "Santos's bank records showed regular receipts of around \$27,800. I thought the amount was odd, so I ran it through currency conversion algorithms." She highlighted a pattern on her screen. "Look what happens if you work backwards - it converts almost exactly to 12.5 million Kazakhstani tenge."

Dave moved to study her screens. "Why would a Kansas agricultural scientist be dealing in Central Asian currency?"

"She wasn't - not directly." Anya pulled up more financial data. "But look at these consultant payments from the Morocco facility. Same amount, same timing, all processed through shell companies. The original payment orders are in tenge before conversion."

"That's an oddly specific amount to keep repeating," Carter noted, examining the pattern. "And why use Kazakhstani currency as the base?"

"Because that's where the payment structure originated," Anya replied, her programs tracing the money flow. "These shell companies all follow Soviet-era accounting protocols. The kind still used in former Soviet states, especially..."

"Kazakhstan," Dave finished. He watched transaction records scroll past, each showing the same amount in different currencies. "Santos must have found something that connected back to Soviet research. Something worth paying that exact amount to keep quiet about."

"And now we know where to look," Carter said. "Pull everything you can find on Kazakhstan agricultural facilities, especially anything from the Soviet era."

The financial trail created a clear connection - one that would lead them straight to the heart of AgraTech's operation.

"The fungal agent is just phase one," Anya said, pulling up more company records. "Agrinov has been quietly building massive antifungal production facilities. Once their engineered fungus infects the major agricultural regions, farmers will need constant treatment to keep their crops alive. They've already secured patents on the only effective countermeasure."

"Not just profit," Carter added, his expression hardening. "Control. Once the fungus takes hold, it's permanent. Every growing season, every crop, will need their antifungal treatment. They're creating perpetual dependency on a global scale."

The satellite feed updated, showing fresh vehicle tracks leading to a concealed loading bay. "They're ramping up production," Serj observed. "Those are chemical transport trucks. Same type we saw in Morocco."

Dave studied the facility's sublevels, noting the massive cultivation chambers. "How do we shut something this big down?"

"We don't," Carter replied. "Not directly. But those growth chambers are the key. The Soviets designed them to be scientifically precise - perfect temperature, humidity, air composition. Disrupt those conditions..."

"And we destroy their production capability," Serj finished. "But getting inside won't be easy. Even with Dave's abilities, those tunnels are designed to channel intruders into kill zones."

Carter nodded. "That's why we're bringing in backup. Omar's already en route with specialised equipment. We'll need his expertise with the environmental systems."

Anya highlighted a section of the lowest level. "The original control room should still be here. If we can access it, we can trigger a cascading failure in the cultivation chambers."

"The fungal agent makes this complicated," Dave said, remembering how it had affected him in Morocco. "My abilities become unreliable around high concentrations. We need contingencies for if I'm compromised."

Carter studied him for a moment, that tactician's eye assessing. "Heard about your new training. Maeda's good - one of the best. If you can fight effectively without powers, it gives us options."

The compliment carried more weight coming from Carter. The man wasn't known for unnecessary praise.

"Three primary objectives," Carter said, marking points on the display. "First, we breach the perimeter here, using the old maintenance tunnels. Soviets built multiple escape routes - we can use them to get in. Second, we access the control room and initiate system failure. Third, we secure data showing Agrinov's connection to everything. Physical evidence that can't be denied."

"Timeline?" Dave asked.

"Three days," Anya replied. "The first major shipments of treated fertiliser leave Morocco next week. We need to shut down production before they can distribute globally."

Carter began marking defensive positions and patrol routes. His movements were precise, efficient - just like everything else about him. "We'll need specialised gear. The lower levels will be contaminated. Protective equipment, rebreathers, backup comms for when we're underground."

"What about the fungal agent's effect on Dave?" Serj asked. "Those growth chambers will have the highest concentration we've seen."

"That's why we train," Carter replied simply. "Powers are tools. Good to have, but you never want to rely completely on any single advantage." He turned to Dave. "You've learned to fight without them. Now we plan assuming limited or no enhancement, and treat any power use as a tactical bonus."

Dave nodded, appreciating Carter's practical approach. No wasted sympathy, just clear tactical assessment and adaptation.

"I'll coordinate with our Kazakhstan assets," Anya said. "We'll need local support for the operation."

"One more thing," Carter added, zooming in on a section of the upper level. "Research archives should be here. Anything they couldn't move during the initial shutdown. Might give us insight into countering the agent's effects."

The team spent the next hours going over entry plans, contingencies, equipment requirements. Carter's experience with similar facilities proved invaluable as they mapped routes and identified likely challenges.

"The Soviets built these places to contain their own weapons," he explained, highlighting key structural features. "Which means everything

about the design works to prevent things getting out. We can use that same containment against them."

Dave studied the facility plans, committing key details to memory. His enhanced recall would help navigate the maze-like corridors, even if his other abilities were compromised. "How much resistance should we expect?"

"Professional security, just like Morocco," Carter replied. "But underground, in confined spaces. Close-quarter fighting in contaminated environments. This is where your new training will really matter."

The mission was taking shape - a precision strike at the heart of Agrinov's operation. But as Dave looked at the sprawling facility layout, he couldn't shake a feeling of unease. They were preparing to infiltrate one of the most sophisticated biological weapons facilities ever built, while carrying the knowledge that its products could directly affect his abilities.

Carter seemed to read his thoughts. "Uncertainty is part of the job," he said quietly. "We plan for what we can, adapt to what we can't. The rest is just getting it done."

The simplicity of the statement was reassuring. Carter's approach stripped away unnecessary complexity, focused on practical action. They'd infiltrate the facility, destroy the production capability, and expose Agrinov's operation. The details might be complicated, but the mission itself was straightforward.

As the team finalised their plans, Dave caught Carter studying him with that tactician's eye again. The veteran operative gave a slight nod - not quite approval, but acknowledgment. The most effective team members could be the ones who adapted when their primary advantages were neutralised.

The facility's thermal signature pulsed on the main display, a testament to the massive operation hidden within those Soviet-era walls. In three days,

they would breach one of the most secure biological research facilities ever built. The success of the mission - and potentially the world's food supply - would depend on their ability to adapt when things inevitably went wrong.

Dave found himself surprisingly calm about the prospect. Between his enhanced abilities, new training, and the team's capabilities, they had options. And sometimes, as Carter had implied, that was all you really needed - the ability to adapt and keep moving forward, regardless of what you encountered.

The mission would test them all, but they were ready. In three days, they would strike at the heart of Agrinov's operation. And this time, Dave was prepared to fight with or without his abilities. Sometimes the most important capabilities weren't supernatural at all, but the skills and teamwork that let you overcome any obstacle.

12 **Black Earth**

The Ukrainian steppe stretched endlessly before them, what should have been Europe's breadbasket now transformed into a vision of agricultural apocalypse. Waves of dying wheat rustled in the morning breeze, the plants' sickly yellow-brown hue a stark contrast to the rich emerald green that should have dominated the landscape at this time of year. Dave stood at the edge of this ruined bounty, his enhanced vision taking in details invisible to normal sight. The geometric patterns of fungal growth were unmistakable, spreading through the crops in precise, controlled formations like dark fractals consuming the landscape.

The destruction stretched to the horizon in every direction, kilometre after kilometre of dying crops creating a sea of decay under the pale morning sun. These fields had fed nations for generations, their legendary black earth producing grain that had sustained populations through wars and famines. Now that same rich soil carried something else entirely - a engineered plague that turned golden abundance into withered husks with terrifying efficiency.

Up close, the devastation was even more apparent. Plants that should have stood chest-high with heavy heads of ripening grain instead curved toward the earth, their stems blackened and twisted by fungal invasion. The geometric precision of the destruction was almost beautiful in its horror - perfect hexagonal patterns of decay spreading outward from infection sites like dark snowflakes stamped across the landscape. The morning dew caught the rising sun, making the fungal patterns glitter with an almost metallic sheen that emphasised their artificial nature. This was no natural blight, but something engineered with careful purpose.

"Chornozem," Omar said quietly, crouching to examine the rich black soil that gave the region its reputation as Europe's breadbasket. "Some of the most fertile land in the world." He scooped up a handful, letting it sift through his fingers. "Or it was, until this started."

The local agricultural office had reported the first signs three days ago. What began as isolated patches of crop failure had exploded into a devastating die-off affecting thousands of hectares. The timing was too perfect to be coincidence.

"Same pattern as the test fields," Dave noted, watching another section of wheat visibly wither before his eyes. The fungal agent worked with terrifying speed once it took hold. "But this is orders of magnitude larger. They're not testing any more."

Omar moved methodically through the field, his expertise in infiltration now turned to agricultural investigation. He stopped at an irrigation control box, examining it with practised care. "Got something. This isn't standard equipment."

Dave joined him, catching details of recent installation work. The box housed sophisticated monitoring systems far beyond normal irrigation needs. "They're using the water supply for distribution."

"Smart," Omar admitted, carefully opening the housing to reveal complex dispersal mechanisms. "Piggyback on existing infrastructure, let the farmers do the work for you. Once it's in the irrigation system..."

"It spreads everywhere they water," Dave finished. He felt a slight tingling in his enhanced senses - the now-familiar sign of fungal proximity affecting his abilities. But the sensation was different here, more focused. His system was adapting, learning to cope with each new exposure.

A battered truck approached along the dirt access road, pulling to a stop nearby. The farmer who emerged moved with the measured pace of someone who'd worked the land his entire life. His weathered face carried deep concern as he surveyed his dying crops.

"Mikhail Koval," he introduced himself in heavily accented English. "The agricultural office said you were coming." His eyes never left the withering wheat. "Never seen anything like this. Three generations my family has

farmed this land. Even in Soviet times, even after Chernobyl, the crops grew."

"When did you first notice problems?" Omar asked, his quiet competence seeming to put the farmer at ease.

"Two weeks ago. Men came, said they were from a new chemical company. Offered special deal on fertiliser - too good to be true, I thought. But others were buying." Koval gestured toward neighbouring fields. "They installed new equipment, said it would optimise distribution. Next day, this starts."

Dave examined another irrigation box while Omar gathered details from Koval. The dispersal mechanisms were sophisticated - designed to release precise amounts of the fungal agent into the water supply. Someone had put serious thought into the delivery system.

"Did you keep records of the company?" Dave asked. "Contracts, business cards, anything?"

Koval nodded slowly. "Stepan, two farms over. He keeps everything. Good thing too - the men came back yesterday, took all my papers. But Stepan, he has copies hidden."

Dave and Omar exchanged glances. The clean-up crews were already moving, trying to eliminate evidence. They needed to work fast.

Stepan's farmhouse was a study in organised chaos. Every surface held stacks of carefully labelled folders - decades of agricultural records meticulously maintained. The farmer himself was a thin, precise man who approached record-keeping with religious devotion.

"Here," he said, pulling a file from the organised mess. "Everything from their visit. Business cards, contracts, photographs I took of their trucks." His eyes narrowed. "They came yesterday, very aggressive. Wanted all records of our dealings. I did not like their attitude."

The business cards were well-made forgeries, but Dave's excellent eyesight caught subtle irregularities in the printing. The company name - Agrinov Solutions - was prominent, though the contact information led nowhere. More interesting were Stepan's photographs of the installation process.

"These men," Omar said, examining the images. "Two of them were at the Morocco facility. Same tactical team."

Dave studied the photos, confirming Omar's identification. The professional security team was supervising the installation, making sure the dispersal systems were placed correctly. This wasn't just distribution - it was a coordinated attack on the region's agricultural infrastructure.

"More dying fields reported every day," Stepan said, spreading a map across his cluttered desk. Red marks indicated affected areas, spreading outward like a bioengineered cancer. "Pattern follows irrigation networks exactly. Too perfect to be natural."

Dave felt another wave of tingling as his enhanced senses detected increasing fungal saturation. The sensation was strongest near the irrigation lines, confirming their suspicions about the distribution method. But something else caught his attention - a subtle variation in the growth pattern.

"The original Soviet research," he said, the pieces clicking together. "They didn't just reactivate the facility - they're using the original deployment protocols. The Soviets would have tested their weapons here, learned the best distribution methods for this specific region."

Omar nodded grimly. "Why develop new techniques when you can use proven ones? They're following a play book written decades ago."

A sound from outside made them all freeze. Dave's picked up multiple vehicles approaching, engines quietly purring with military precision. His vision pierced the early evening gloom, confirming their worst fears - three black SUVs moving into position around the farmhouse.

"Company," he said quietly. "Same tactical team from the photos. They're here for the records."

Omar was already moving, gathering the most critical documents while Stepan pulled a hidden camera from his desk. "Everything is backed up," the farmer said with grim satisfaction. "Digital copies, stored safely away. Let them take papers - truth is already out."

Dave heard the tactical team deploying with practised efficiency. His enhanced speed was fluctuating from the fungal saturation in the area, but not as severely as before. Either his system was adapting, or they hadn't reached full dispersal concentration yet.

"Back door," he told Omar and Stepan. "I'll keep them busy. Get the evidence out."

The first team breached just as Omar and Stepan slipped away through the kitchen. Dave met them in the main room, using overturned furniture as improvised cover. His enhanced speed came and went unreliably, but Maeda's training filled the gaps. The first attacker found himself disarmed and disabled before his teammates could respond.

The second man moved with professional skill, trying to flank while his partner laid down covering fire. But Dave had positioned himself carefully, using the cluttered room to control engagement distances. When his speed failed, technique took over. Precision strikes and efficient takedowns worked just as well at normal human velocity.

He caught glimpses of Omar leading Stepan to safety through the gathering darkness. The tactical team's focus on the farmhouse gave them the opening they needed. By the time Dave disengaged, following his own planned escape route, the evidence was safely away.

Later, watching satellite imagery of the dying fields spread across the monitor at their temporary operations centre, Dave felt the weight of what

they'd discovered. This wasn't just another weapons test - it was the beginning of a systematic attack on global food production.

"Kazakhstan facility is the source," Omar said, coordinating with Anya over secure comms. "But they're using Soviet-era deployment strategies optimised for each region. The irrigation system attack here will be different from methods they use in other agricultural areas."

Dave nodded, studying the dispersal patterns. The fungal agent travelled through the irrigation networks with terrifying efficiency, following the natural flow of water distribution. Simple, elegant, and devastating in its effectiveness.

"We've got what we need," he said finally. "Time to shut them down at the source."

The dying wheat fields were visible from their operations centre window, a preview of what would happen globally if they failed. But they had the evidence now - proof of Agrinov's involvement, documentation of their methods, and most importantly, confirmation of their base of operations.

In two days they would strike at the Kazakhstan facility. After seeing the devastation here, Dave knew failure wasn't an option. The world's food supply hung in the balance, and they were the only ones who could stop it.

13 Soviet Legacy

The first sign something was wrong came when Dave found the guard post empty. No signs of struggle, no blood - just an abandoned station with coffee still steaming in a chipped mug. Everything was too perfect - chair pushed back at the ideal angle, papers arranged with military precision on the desk. Staged.

"Check-in positions," Carter's voice came through their comms, barely above a whisper. "Something's off."

"East sector clear," Serj reported. "Too clear."

"West access shows normal patrols," Anya added, "but their movements... they're herding, not guarding."

Dave moved silently through the dimly lit corridor, every sense alert. The facility's massive underground complex felt wrong - like a beast holding its breath. He caught glimpses of movement in his peripheral vision - tactical teams taking positions with practised coordination.

"They're waiting for us," he said quietly.

"Agreed," Carter replied. "But we're already committed. Omar, status?"

"Almost through the security system," Omar reported from his position in the maintenance hub. "But these bypasses are too easy. Like-"

"They want us inside," Carter finished. "Change of plan. Omar, fall back to-"

The ambush struck from multiple angles simultaneously. Automated bulkheads slammed down, cutting their team into isolated segments. Flashbangs detonated in coordinated sequence. Dave shielded his eyes instinctively, already moving to engage.

"Contact!" Serj's rifle barked in controlled bursts. "Multiple teams, full tactical gear, not typical rent-a-cop security."

The first attacker came in with textbook special forces efficiency - blade low, firearm high in a standard close-quarters formation. Dave moved between both weapons with supernatural speed, his arm a blur as he simply reached out and plucked the gun from the man's grasp. A casual backhanded strike to the temple dropped the attacker before he could register his weapon was gone.

The second opponent showed more promise. He immediately discarded his rifle - smart enough to know it was useless in close quarters - and moved with fluid grace that spoke of extensive martial arts training. A swift combination of strikes targeted Dave's vital points with professional precision.

Dave let the attacks come, moving just fast enough to make each miss by millimetres. A punch that would have collapsed a normal person's throat brushed past his chin. A knee strike that could have shattered his solar plexus found empty air. He smiled slightly, enjoying the return of his full abilities after the previous days' uncertainty.

The attacker's technique was excellent - economy of motion, no wasted movement, each strike flowing naturally into the next. Against a normal opponent, it would have been devastating. But Dave's enhanced speed made the man appear to move in slow motion, his attacks telegraphed as clearly as if he'd announced them in advance.

Dave decided to make a point. He caught the next punch just before it could retract, holding the fist in place with casual strength. The attacker's eyes widened as he found his arm trapped by fingers that might as well have been steel bands. He tried to compensate with a kick, but Dave was already moving, fast enough to reposition them both before the leg could fully extend.

A precise strike to the quadriceps muscles made the leg go numb. The attacker tried to pull back, but Dave kept hold of the trapped fist, using it

as a pivot point to systematically dismantle the man's defences. Another tap to the shoulder cluster of nerves left the right arm hanging uselessly.

The attacker fought well even with reduced mobility, switching stance to protect his weakened side. But Dave had grown tired of playing. Moving faster than human eyes could follow, he struck three points in rapid succession - knee, hip, and finally throat. Not hard enough to cause permanent damage, but sufficient to end the fight decisively.

As the second attacker crumpled unconscious atop his companion, Dave took a moment to appreciate the return of his full capabilities. Having to rely on pure technique during the fungal exposure had been educational, but there was something deeply satisfying about being able to completely outclass skilled opponents. It was good to remember exactly what he was capable of.

Serj crouched in the shadow of a massive air handling unit, his rifle trained on the facility's main entrance. Three tactical teams had already tried to breach their position - the bodies scattered across the approach told the story of how that had gone. But more would come. They always did.

"Vehicle movement," Anya reported from her elevated position behind a ventilation stack. Her voice carried the same cold efficiency whether discussing the weather or calling out threats. "Two more teams deploying, east and west approaches."

Their position was critical - they were holding the only viable extraction route. The facility's design funnelled all traffic through this junction, making it both perfect for defence and impossible to abandon. If they lost this position, the entire team would be trapped.

Dan's H&K G36C chattered in controlled bursts, the sound echoing off concrete walls as he provided covering fire. Omar moved quickly behind him, crossing the exposed section of corridor before taking up a position at the next junction. Each movement was precisely coordinated - they'd done this dance too many times to waste motion.

"Clear," Omar called, his SIG P226 trained on the approach vector as Dan began his own controlled retreat. The tactical team pursuing them was good - they maintained steady pressure without exposing themselves to clear shots. Every few seconds a probe would come, testing reactions and responses.

Dan's rifle caught an attacker trying to sprint between cover points. The burst caught him centre mass, but his body armour absorbed the worst. Still, it forced the tactical team to slow their advance, buying precious seconds.

"Two magazines left," Dan reported, smoothly reloading as Omar laid down suppressing fire. The P226's report was sharp and precise - each shot placed with surgical accuracy despite the movement.

They reached another intersection. Dan dropped to a knee, rifle trained on the main approach while Omar checked their alternate route. Movement flickered at the edge of their vision - another team trying to get ahead of them, cut off their retreat.

Omar's pistol barked twice. The flanking team pulled back, one man dragging a wounded colleague. But the delay had cost them - the main pursuit group had closed the distance, forcing Dan and Omar to accelerate their withdrawal.

"Running out of real estate," Omar noted calmly. The facility's layout was working against them now - fewer junctions and side passages as they approached the older section. Soon they'd have no choice but to make a stand.

Dan's rifle spoke again, forcing back another probing attack. These weren't simple security forces - their tactics showed clear special operations training. Each advance was coordinated, every movement had purpose.

They reached the junction of two main corridors. The concrete walls were thick here - Cold War era construction built to contain potential

contamination. Not perfect, but defensible. More importantly, their pursuers would have limited angles of attack.

"Hold here?" Omar asked, already knowing the answer. They'd run out of good alternatives - might as well pick the ground for their stand.

Dan nodded, rifle scanning for targets as they moved into position. This was as good as they'd get - solid cover, limited approaches, and just enough space to work with their blades when the ammunition ran out.

Over the radio Dan reported, "We're going nowhere, section C. Pinned down, low on ammo."

Anya's pistol cracked twice. An attacker who'd been setting up a sniper position fell from his perch. The second shot caught his spotter before the man could radio their location. Efficient. Clinical. Exactly what Serj had come to expect from her.

"More vehicles approaching," she noted. "They're setting up a proper containment perimeter."

Serj shifted position slightly, getting a better angle on the western approach. Dan's call for assistance had come through clear enough, but they couldn't abandon this position. Not with the way the security forces were methodically tightening their noose.

"Omar, Carter, pinned down in Section C," Anya reported, her voice tight with tension. "Heavy opposition. They're using Soviet-era defence protocols – channelling them into kill zones."

Through the chaos came Carter's controlled voice: "Physical data in the research wing. Original Soviet documentation. Probably our only chance at proof now."

Another explosion rocked the facility. The security teams were using Soviet tactical doctrine - containing threats in segments, then eliminating them systematically. Dave moved through the complex at supernatural

speed, the fungal presence noticeable but not significantly hampering his abilities.

Dan and Omar had fallen back to a defensible corner where two corridors intersected, using the concrete wall angles for cover. Omar's SIG barked twice - controlled pairs, each shot placed with surgical precision. An attacker dropped, his rifle clattering across the floor.

"Six rounds," Omar reported calmly, ejecting his partially spent magazine and inserting a fresh one in a single smooth motion.

Dan acknowledged with a slight nod, not taking his eyes off his sector. His own pistol had three rounds left, with one spare magazine. The maths was simple and brutal - they were dramatically outgunned.

Movement flickered at the edge of their vision. Dan squeezed off a single shot, forcing an attacker back into cover. These weren't amateurs - the tactical team maintained disciplined fire while steadily advancing their position. The occasional shots weren't meant to hit, just to keep Dan and Omar pinned while they closed the distance.

"Third floor window," Anya called out. "Deploying technical team."

Serj spotted them - facility personnel setting up what looked like signal jamming equipment. If they got that online, team communications would be cut off completely. But shifting fire to engage them would mean leaving the ground approach exposed.

They were being squeezed from multiple angles - forced to choose between equally bad options. Hold position and lose communications, or abandon their defensive point and trap the entire team inside. Sometimes there were no good choices, only degrees of bad ones.

Anya's pistol spoke again, taking down another attacker trying to set up a cross-fire position. They could hear the distant sounds of combat from inside the facility - Dan and Omar's position being pressured. But they couldn't help. Not without sacrificing the only viable escape route.

So they held their ground, each of them doing the job of an entire tactical team. That's what it came down to - holding an impossible position because the alternative was even worse. They'd maintain this defence point or die trying. There wasn't really a third option.

"Getting close," Omar warned, his voice carrying the same professional calm he'd use discussing the weather. His knife had appeared in his off-hand, held in a reverse grip. The blade's dark finish swallowed light rather than reflecting it.

Dan dropped his empty magazine, slapping in his last spare with practised efficiency. The tactical team had split into two elements - one maintaining suppressing fire while the other manoeuvred for a flanking position. Standard special forces doctrine, executed with textbook precision.

A flash-bang bounced off the wall. Omar kicked it back before it could detonate, the explosion's timing disrupting the assault team's planned breach. Dan used the moment of confusion to take down another attacker with a precise double-tap to the chest.

"Two rounds," Dan reported, shifting position slightly to optimise his angle of fire. His own combat knife pressed reassuringly against his ribs, ready for when the ammunition ran dry. They'd make the bastards work for it.

The assault team initiated another coordinated advance. Omar's shot caught the point man in the shoulder, disrupting their momentum. But there were more behind him, moving with professional skill to cover their wounded colleague while maintaining pressure.

An attacker managed to reach a position with a partial firing angle. Dan felt the bullet tug at his sleeve before Omar dropped the threat with his last round. The slide locked back on Omar's empty pistol. He didn't bother trying to reload - the spare magazine would take too long to reach. Instead, his knife shifted to a forward grip as he settled into a modified defensive stance.

Dan fired his final round, forcing back another attempt to rush their position. He smoothly transitioned to his own blade as his pistol ran dry. The knives would give them a chance in close quarters, but only if they could control the engagement distance.

Two more attackers were moving up, using their companions' covering fire for concealment. These carried shock batons along with their rifles - they'd obviously been briefed on the potential for close-quarters fighting. Dan and Omar exchanged glances, a lifetime of tactical experience conveyed in a single look. They'd hold as long as they could, make the enemy pay in blood for every inch.

The assault team was tensing for a final rush. Dan and Omar's position was good but not perfect - eventually the weight of numbers would tell. But they'd been in worse situations, and they weren't dead yet. Their survival meant holding on long enough for circumstances to change.

"Dave!" Anya's voice cut through the chaos. "Research wing is burning. They're destroying everything."

The choice crystallised at that moment: pursue the teams destroying evidence, or save his trapped colleagues. The mission objective or the people who'd become more than just teammates.

It wasn't really a choice at all.

"Clear them a path," he told Anya through the comms. "I'll get them out."

"Research data-" Carter started to object.

"Isn't worth your lives," Dave finished, already moving to create their escape route.

Dave approached the assault team from behind, counting eight operators arranged in a tight combat formation. Their focus was entirely forward, maintaining steady pressure on Dan and Omar's position. The team's rear security was minimal - they hadn't expected a threat from this direction.

The rear guard spotted Dave a moment too late. Dave closed the distance before the man could bring his rifle to bear, deflecting the weapon and driving an elbow into his temple. The guard dropped silently, but the slight scuff of his boots against concrete caught his teammate's attention.

The second operator began to turn, weapon rising. Dave moved faster, catching the rifle's barrel and using it as a lever to throw the man into two of his companions. Their professional composure broke for a moment as they untangled themselves, creating a gap in their formation.

Dave surged through the opening, his enhanced speed making him a blur as he struck precise points on the nearest operators. A punch to the kidney dropped one, while a swift leg sweep took down another. The remaining four responded with practised coordination, trying to create distance for their weapons.

But Dave was already inside their formation. He moved between them with fluid efficiency, never staying still long enough to present a target. A kick sent one operator's rifle clattering across the floor. An arm lock redirected another into his teammate's line of fire. The final two tried to engage hand-to-hand, but Dave's supernatural speed made their expert technique irrelevant.

In seconds, it was over. Eight of the facility's best-trained operators lay unconscious or disabled. Dave pulled his own P226, checking its magazine before moving toward Dan and Omar's position.

He found them at the corridor junction, combat knives ready as their ammunition ran dry. Omar's expression didn't change as Dave approached, but the slight relaxation in his shoulders spoke volumes.

"Looks like you could do more with this than me," Dave said, offering the pistol grip-first to Omar. The weapon was trivial in Dave's hands - he had far more effective tools at his disposal. But in Omar's expert grip, it would be a precision instrument.

Omar accepted the weapon with a slight nod, smoothly checking the magazine and action. No words were needed - they all understood that Dave had prioritised saving his team over pursuing the facility's research data. Some choices were simple like that.

A series of sharp explosions echoed through the facility's corridors, followed by the distinctive whoosh of incendiary devices igniting.

"Multiple vehicles moving out," Anya reported through comms. "Security teams are withdrawing. They must have orders - mission accomplished."

"Confirmed," Serj added. "They're pulling back in organised retreat. Whatever they came to destroy, it's done."

Dave led Omar and Dan through the now-empty corridors toward the research wing, but the heat was already intense. Through gaps in the smoke, he could see the distinctive blue-white flame of thermite charges still burning. The Soviets had built these facilities to contain biological threats - now those same reinforced walls were helping destroy any evidence they might have found.

"Total loss," Carter reported grimly, meeting them at a junction. "They knew exactly what to destroy and how to destroy it. This wasn't improvised - they came prepared."

The security teams were gone by the time they regrouped outside, leaving behind only the smell of thermite and the growing flames. They'd achieved their objective with cold efficiency - eliminate all evidence of the Soviet connection, then withdraw before becoming decisively engaged.

"This wasn't about stopping us," Dave said, watching the fire consume decades of research. "They just needed to delay us long enough to sanitise everything."

Omar nodded grimly. "Professional job. They never intended to hold the facility - just destroy what we came for."

The flames reached something volatile in the research wing, triggering another explosion. The blast briefly illuminated the empty vehicle parks where the security teams had been. They'd come, completed their mission, and withdrawn with tactical precision.

"We lost this round," Carter said quietly. "They suckered us in, kept us busy while they destroyed exactly what we needed."

Dave watched the facility burn, feeling the weight of their failure. They'd walked into a trap, lost their best chance at proving the Soviet connection. But his team was intact - and sometimes, that had to be enough.

"They think they won this fight," he acknowledged. "But they just proved how much they want to hide this connection. Which means we're looking in the right place. I'm not giving up yet."

14 Containment

Flames licked up the facility's eastern wing, consuming decades of research with methodical efficiency. Dave watched the fire's progression through the reinforced windows, his superb vision picking out details through the smoke. The research wing's sealed corridors had become a maze of fire and shadow, but somewhere in that inferno lay their last chance at evidence.

"There might still be something salvageable," he said, studying the fire's pattern. "The Soviets built these places to contain hazardous materials. Some sections should hold longer than others."

"Too risky," Carter objected. "Even with your abilities, that level of heat—"

"Will hurt," Dave finished, "but won't kill me." He gestured at the flames. "We need proof of what they were doing here. Something concrete that survived their clean-up."

Anya's eyes narrowed as she assessed the situation. "Your abilities protect you from fire, but your hair and eyebrows aren't invulnerable. If only you'd accepted Kessler's full bodysuit."

"Don't start," Dave warned, but she was already moving to one of the facility's emergency stations. She returned with a fire blanket and powder extinguisher.

"Strip down," she ordered, her tone purely professional. "The fewer clothes we risk burning, the better."

Dave sighed but complied, removing his tactical gear until he stood in nothing but the experimental blue boxer shorts Kessler had provided. Anya efficiently soaked his jumper in water from a nearby emergency shower.

"What are you—" Dave started to ask.

"Improvised protection," she replied, expertly wrapping the wet garment around his head in a makeshift turban. "It won't last long, but it might buy your hair and eyebrows some time."

The team watched as Dave gathered the fire blanket and extinguisher. "Twenty minutes," Carter said firmly. "Then we have to move, with or without data."

Dave nodded, pushing through the sealed doors into the inferno. The heat was intense - not painful exactly, but he felt it in a way that suggested even his enhanced durability had limits. Smoke filled the corridors, but his vision adapted, rendering the environment in shades of grey that let him navigate effectively.

The research wing's layout was methodical, each laboratory connected by sealed corridors designed to contain potential contamination. Fire suppression systems had activated in some sections, creating surreal pockets where flames and foam fought for dominance. Dave moved quickly, scanning each space for anything that might have survived.

The first two labs were already gone, reduced to ash and twisted equipment. But the third showed promise - its reinforced door had partially protected the interior. Dave forced it open, the metal groaning as he overcame its warped locking mechanism.

Inside, flames were just beginning to breach the containment. Workbenches lined the walls, their surfaces covered in sophisticated testing equipment. Dave moved swiftly, gathering anything that looked promising into the fire blanket - research notebooks, sample containers, hard drives that might still be salvageable.

He caught movement - security teams taking positions in adjacent corridors. They were using the fire as cover, trying to cut off his escape route. Smart, but they'd underestimated his abilities. Even compromised by the fungal presence, he was far from helpless.

The makeshift turban was starting to steam, the water evaporating under the intense heat. Dave worked faster, checking the lab's sealed storage units. Most were empty - the facility's personnel had been thorough in their clean-up. But one yielded a promising find: a sealed case marked with biohazard symbols and Cyrillic text.

The security team chose that moment to make their move. Flash-bangs detonated in coordinated sequence, designed to disorient and confuse. But Dave's enhanced senses adapted instantly, letting him track the attackers through the smoke and chaos.

He didn't bother engaging directly. Instead, he used his environment, dropping a support beam to block their advance while he gathered the last promising materials. The fire blanket was nearly full now, carefully wrapped to protect its contents.

The turban was failing, steam rising from the increasingly dry fabric. Dave could feel the heat on his scalp, warning him that time was running out. He slung the bundle of salvaged materials over his shoulder, gripping the fire extinguisher with his free hand.

The security team had regrouped, setting up a kill-zone at the junction leading back to his team. Dave smiled slightly - they still thought they were dealing with a normal intruder. The extinguisher's contents provided cover as he moved, the powder obscuring their vision while leaving his enhanced senses unaffected.

He burst through their formation at supernatural speed, not bothering to engage. Their shots went wide, disrupted by the powder cloud and their target's impossible velocity. By the time they reoriented, Dave was already gone, moving through the burning facility like a ghost.

He emerged from the inferno to find the team exactly where he'd left them, weapons covering his exit point. The turban was still smoking as Anya helped him unwrap it, revealing surprisingly intact hair underneath.

"Anything useful?" Carter asked as Dave carefully opened the fire blanket.

"Some research materials, hard drives, and this." Dave held up the sealed case. "Biohazard warnings suggest it might be important."

They retreated efficiently, the sounds of approaching security teams adding urgency to their movement. Dave pulled his clothes back on as they moved, the blue boxers disappearing beneath tactical gear.

"The case markings are interesting," Anya noted as they reached their exit point. "Not modern Russian - original Soviet documentation. Probably oversight from the clean-up team."

"Or they didn't have time to be thorough," Carter added. "Sometimes fast clean-up leaves traces."

Dave nodded, thinking about everything they'd seen. The facility's sophisticated security, the professional clean-up operation, the lengths they'd gone to destroy evidence - it all pointed to something bigger than they'd initially suspected.

Later, at their safehouse, Anya carefully examined their salvaged materials. Most of the papers were too damaged to be useful, and the hard drives showed significant heat damage. But the sealed case proved promising.

"Partial treatment documentation," she reported, examining the contents. "Not complete, but enough to prove they were developing countermeasures alongside the weapon."

"Insurance," Carter said grimly. "Create the threat and the solution simultaneously. Standard Soviet bioweapons doctrine."

Dave watched them work, still slightly singed but otherwise unharmed. The mission hadn't given them everything they needed, but they had something concrete now - proof that would help build their case against whoever was behind this.

"They'll have moved the main production setup," he said, thinking about the facility's sophisticated equipment. "Probably had backup locations ready."

Carter nodded. "But now we know what to look for. And more importantly, we know they're vulnerable. They wouldn't have tried so hard to destroy evidence if they weren't worried about exposure."

Dave caught his reflection in a window - hair and eyebrows intact thanks to Anya's quick thinking. Even the smallest details made the difference between success and failure. Just like the partial formula they'd recovered might be enough to start unravelling the entire operation.

They hadn't got everything they came for, but they had something. And in this line of work, sometimes that was enough to build on. The real question was: what would their opponents do now that they knew someone was getting close to their secrets?

15 Paper Trail

Anya's reflection in the monitors showed intense concentration, data streaming across multiple monitors as she traced financial patterns through a maze of shell companies and market positions. The team had converted one of the safehouse's spare rooms into an impromptu operations centre, maps and documentation covering every available surface.

"Got something," she said, highlighting a trading pattern. "Major short positions in wheat futures, all placed through different brokers. But the timing..." She pulled up a timeline, correlating the trades with known fungal outbreaks. "Every position was opened exactly three days before crops started dying."

Dave studied the data over her shoulder, his excellent vision catching details others might miss. The trading patterns were sophisticated, broken up into smaller positions to avoid attention. But when assembled, they painted a clear picture of premeditated market manipulation.

"How much are we talking about?" Carter asked from his position by the evidence board.

"Initial estimate?" Anya's fingers danced across the keys. "Over two billion in potential profits just from the Ukraine outbreak. If they replicate this globally..." She let the implications hang in the air.

Omar joined them, fresh from examining the recovered Soviet documentation. "The treatments will be even more profitable. Once the fungus takes hold, farmers will need constant applications to keep their crops alive."

"Found another connection," Anya announced. Her screen filled with corporate registration documents. "All these trades trace back to subsidiary companies owned by a single parent corporation - AgraTech International."

Dave recognised the name. "Major player in industrial agriculture. They control about thirty percent of global fertiliser production."

"And they've been quietly building new manufacturing facilities," Carter added. "Specialised chemical plants that could easily be converted to produce fungal treatments."

Anya's investigation expanded, following money through an intricate web of front companies and hidden accounts. Each discovery revealed new layers of the conspiracy, all pointing toward careful coordination at the highest levels.

"The key executives are being careful," she noted, bringing up personnel files. "No direct involvement in suspicious trades. But their bonus structures..." She highlighted specific clauses. "They're tied to market performance during specific date ranges - exactly when the outbreaks are planned."

"Smart," Carter commented. "Gives them plausible deniability while ensuring their cooperation. Any idea who's coordinating it all?"

"Working on it." Anya pulled up AgraTech's organizational structure. "The authority has to come from board level, but they've compartmentalised everything. Each executive only sees their piece of the operation."

Dave watched as she mapped connections between key players, building a picture of the conspiracy's structure. "What about the Soviet connection? Any financial links to Kazakhstan?"

"That's where it gets interesting." Anya brought up another screen of data. "AgraTech acquired several defunct Soviet agricultural research facilities in the late 90s. Official records show them being decommissioned, but satellite imagery tells a different story. Power consumption, where there should be none, specialised equipment deliveries - they kept everything running under the radar."

The team gathered around as Anya expanded her investigation, following money through an increasingly complex network of transactions and shell companies. Each discovery added new pieces to the puzzle, revealing the true scope of what they faced.

"Here's the clever part," she said, highlighting a series of trades. "They're using legitimate agricultural investment firms as cover. When crops fail, these firms buy up distressed farmland at pennies on the dollar. Once they control the land..."

"They control who supplies the treatment," Omar finished. "Creating captive markets for their antifungal products."

Carter studied the pattern of acquisitions spreading across major agricultural regions. "They're not just after profit. This is about controlling global food production. Once the fungus is established, everyone will depend on their treatments just to grow crops."

"Found something else," Anya reported. "Regular payments to a security contractor - Black River Solutions. Their personnel records match our tactical teams from Kazakhstan and Morocco."

Dave remembered the professional efficiency of those teams. "They're not just hired guns. Someone's coordinating all this - the research, the market manipulation, the security operations."

"Working on that now." Anya's fingers blurred across the keyboard. "AgraTech's internal communications are heavily encrypted, but there's always a weak point. Just need to... got it."

The screens filled with email correspondence and meeting minutes, carefully sanitised but still revealing patterns of authority. Key decisions always seemed to flow from the same small group of senior executives.

"These five," Anya said, bringing up profiles. "They're the ones with real authority. Everything else is just careful misdirection."

Carter examined the executives' backgrounds. "Former agriculture minister, WHO official, hedge fund manager... they've got the perfect mix of skills and connections to pull this off."

"And they're all meeting next week," Anya added, pulling up travel arrangements. "Singapore. Supposedly for a legitimate board meeting, but the security arrangements suggest something bigger."

Dave studied the executives' profiles, committing their faces to memory. "We need to get to that meeting. Whatever they're planning next, all the key players will be there."

"Already on it," Anya replied. "Their security is good, but they're not perfect. Found a weakness in their building access protocols. We can get someone inside as maintenance contractors."

The screens continued filling with data as Anya's investigation expanded. Trading records, shell companies, security arrangements - all the pieces of a conspiracy designed to seize control of global agriculture through carefully engineered disaster.

"Send everything to Cecilia," Carter ordered. "We need containment teams ready to move as soon as we identify all the players."

Dave watched the evidence accumulate across Anya's screens, each new discovery revealing more of their opponents' ultimate plan. They weren't just dealing with ordinary corporate greed - this was a sophisticated operation years in the making, designed to create perpetual dependency on AgraTech's treatments.

"How long to prep for Singapore?" he asked.

"Three days," Anya replied, already pulling up building schematics. "I'll have infiltration routes and security patterns mapped by then."

The team began preliminary planning, each focusing on their specialities. Omar studied access points and camera coverage, while Carter analysed

potential tactical responses. Dave committed key details to memory, his enhanced recall ensuring nothing would be missed.

They finally had names and faces to target, proof of the conspiracy's structure and scope. The Singapore meeting would bring all the key players together - their best chance to expose everything before AgraTech could implement the next phase of their plan.

The question was: would three days be enough to prepare? Their opponents had spent years building this operation, carefully constructing layers of deniability and protection. Bringing it all down would require perfect execution.

But as Dave watched Anya continue her relentless data mining, he felt cautiously optimistic. They had the evidence now, and more importantly, they knew exactly who to target. Sometimes knowing your enemy was the most important part of defeating them.

The next three days would determine whether they could stop AgraTech's plan before it was too late. The world's food supply hung in the balance, dependent on their ability to expose and disrupt a conspiracy that was years in the making.

"The container traffic doesn't make sense," Omar muttered, frowning at his screen. He'd been tracking AgraTech's shipping patterns since the Singapore raid. "These vessels are making deliberate course changes, burning extra fuel to maintain station in international waters."

"Dead zones," Serj said, recognising the pattern. "We used to see it with arms dealers - holding position where no country's laws apply."

Anya overlaid satellite data on the shipping routes. Multiple vessels clustered at strategic points, far from normal trade lanes. But one ship stood out - the Yuan Xiang, positioned at the intersection of major routes through the South China Sea.

"Their crew manifest is interesting," she noted. "Half the 'engineering staff' are ex-military. Backgrounds in biological containment, hazardous materials handling."

Dave studied the vessel's movements through the past month. The Yuan Xiang never made port, instead conducting mid-sea transfers with smaller vessels that scattered to various harbours across Asia.

"They're using it as a distribution hub," he said. "Smaller ships come out empty, return full. Classic smuggling pattern, just with biological weapons instead of contraband."

"The other ships are important," Carter agreed, "but that one's coordinating everything. Take it down..."

"And we cut off their whole maritime network," Omar finished.

Dave studied the executives' faces one more time. In three days, they would meet these people face to face. And one way or another, AgraTech's carefully constructed operation would begin to unravel.

16 Revelation

The safehouse's main room had transformed into a war room, every surface covered with evidence of AgraTech's operation. Dave studied the updated timeline Anya had constructed, each event carefully cross-referenced with market positions and executive movements.

"The fungal agent is remarkable," Dr. Goulding said, examining test data on her tablet. "They've engineered it specifically to target key agricultural staples - wheat, corn, rice. The rate of crop destruction is unlike anything I've seen."

Serj leaned against the door frame. "Could natural fungicides stop it?"

"No," Goulding replied grimly. "It's resistant to all standard treatments. Which isn't surprising, given its Soviet bioweapons origins. They'd have engineered it to overcome conventional countermeasures."

"And AgraTech has the only effective treatment," Dave added, remembering the dying fields in Ukraine.

"Which they developed alongside the weapon," Carter noted. "Standard Soviet practise - create the problem and the solution simultaneously."

"Got something in their communication protocols," Anya reported, highlighting specific data streams. "All their major operational decisions are being routed through a secured server node in Singapore." She pulled up infrastructure records. "The bandwidth usage, and traffic analysis suggest it's not just a relay point. This is where they're coordinating everything."

"AgraTech's regional headquarters," Carter noted, examining the building schematics Anya had pulled up. "Supposedly just handles their Asian market operations, but these security protocols..." He studied the pattern of defensive systems. "This is military-grade protection. For a corporate office?"

"Because it's not just an office," Dave said, seeing the pattern emerge. "This is their operational control centre. Everything we've found - the Kazakhstan facility, the Morocco operation, the shipping networks - it all leads back to Singapore."

"Found something else in the encrypted communications," Anya announced, screens filling with decoded messages. "They're calling it 'Phase One' - controlled demonstrations to prove the concept. Phase Two is much bigger."

"How much bigger?" Carter asked, though his expression suggested he already knew.

"Global." Anya pulled up a world map marked with target zones. "They're planning simultaneous releases in every major grain-producing region. Wheat, corn, rice - everything hits at once."

Omar studied the distribution pattern. "Using existing fertiliser supply chains for delivery. By the time anyone realises what's happening, it'll be too late."

"The market impact would be catastrophic," Carter noted. "Food prices would skyrocket overnight. And AgraTech just happens to have stockpiles of the only effective treatment."

"Which they're keeping carefully limited," Goulding added, examining more test data. "They're not mass-producing the treatment yet. They want to create maximum desperation before offering the solution."

Dave remembered the dying wheat fields in Ukraine. "Creating artificial scarcity to drive up demand. Classic Soviet economic warfare, just updated for the modern era."

"The Singapore meeting is key," Anya said, bringing up building schematics. "All five senior executives will be there, plus representatives from their major distribution partners. First time they've risked gathering everyone in one place."

"Because they think they're untouchable," Serj observed. "Multiple layers of security, professional tactical teams, perfect deniability built into every level of the operation."

Carter moved to examine the building plans. "What are we looking at for security?"

"Three layers," Omar replied, highlighting sections. "Outer perimeter is Black River Solutions - same tactical teams we faced in Kazakhstan. Inner security is building staff, supposedly legitimate but all ex-military. Then personal protection details for each executive."

"Plus electronic security," Anya added. "Biometric scanners, motion sensors, automated lockdowns. But I found a weakness - they recently upgraded their climate control system. Created maintenance access we can exploit."

Dave studied the security rotations Omar had mapped. "How long is our window?"

"Seventeen minutes," Omar said. "That's how long it takes their patrol pattern to complete a full cycle. We'll need to time everything perfectly."

"The meeting is in the executive boardroom," Anya continued, zooming in on building plans. "Forty-seventh floor, north side. Heavy security, but also their biggest vulnerability. They'll all be together, discussing Phase Two implementation."

"Their Soviet-era documentation will be there too," Carter added. "They'll want to review the original research parameters before launching globally."

Serj moved to examine the tactical overlay. "They'll have counter-surveillance equipment. Top-end stuff."

"Already solved," Anya replied. "They're using ultrasonic noise generators for anti-surveillance - creating interference fields to prevent recording. But their system has regular maintenance windows for calibration. We can slip our own devices in during those gaps."

"What about the fungal agent?" Dave asked. "After Kazakhstan, they may know it affects my abilities."

"They'll definitely have samples on-site," Goulding confirmed. "The executives will want to review the latest test results. And given how it affected you in the research facility, even small amounts could be problematic."

"Which means we need to assume your powers might be compromised," Carter said. "We stick to the previous methods, plan everything based on normal capabilities. Again, anything extra is bonus."

Dave nodded, appreciating the practical approach. His recent training with Maeda would let him operate effectively even if his enhanced abilities were affected.

"Timeline?" Serj asked.

"Meeting starts at 1400 hours," Anya replied. "They'll begin with legitimate business - standard board meeting stuff. But at 1530, they clear all support staff. That's when they'll discuss Phase Two details."

"Our window," Carter confirmed. "We need to be in position before they switch to the classified agenda."

The team spent the next hours refining their plan, each focusing on their specialties. Omar mapped entry routes and fallback positions. Anya worked on penetrating electronic security. Serj and Carter developed tactical responses for likely scenarios.

Dave committed every detail to memory - patrol patterns, security positions, building layout. His enhanced recall would ensure perfect recall even if his other abilities were compromised.

"One last thing," Anya said as they finished. She brought up profiles of the executives' personal security details. "These aren't ordinary bodyguards. They're all ex-Spetsnaz, multiple combat deployments."

"Verified?" Serj asked sharply, moving closer to examine the profiles. His expression hardened as he studied their service records. "Alpha Group. They'll work in coordinated pairs, never leave blind spots. Standard protocol is to control engagement distance - keep threats either very close or very far, nothing in between."

"Can we use that?" Dave asked.

"Yes," Serj replied. "They're good, but predictable. They'll follow doctrine exactly - which means we know exactly how they'll react in any situation. We force them into mid-range engagement, they'll try to either close distance or create space. That gives us our window."

The plan was coming together. They had the layout, the timing, the security patterns. Most importantly, they knew exactly what they were looking for - proof that would expose AgraTech's entire operation.

"Questions?" Carter asked finally.

The team shook their heads. They'd done this dance before - maybe not with stakes quite this high, but the principles remained the same. Get in, gather evidence, get out. Simple in concept, brutally complex in execution.

"We move in thirty-six hours," Carter confirmed. "Get some rest. Tomorrow we do full rehearsal with building mock-up."

As the others filed out, Dave remained studying the evidence board. The scope of what they'd uncovered was staggering - a Soviet-era bioweapon being repurposed for corporate profit through engineered agricultural collapse.

"Thinking about Ukraine?" Anya asked quietly, joining him.

Dave nodded. The image of dying wheat fields was burned into his memory. "They're going to do that everywhere if we don't stop them. And this time, there won't be any small-scale tests. They're going straight for global impact."

"We'll stop them," she replied with quiet certainty. "We have what we need now - their plans, their methods, their security weaknesses. In thirty-six hours, we end this."

Dave hoped she was right. The Singapore meeting was their best chance to expose everything. But their opponents had spent years building this operation, protecting it with layers of security and deniability. Bringing it all down would require perfect execution.

Still, as he took a final look at the evidence board before heading to rest, Dave felt cautiously optimistic. They had the right team, the right plan, and most importantly, the right motivation. Sometimes that was enough to overcome any odds.

In thirty-six hours, they would come face to face with the architects of this conspiracy. One way or another, AgraTech's carefully constructed plan would begin to unravel.

17 **Leverage**

"The video was sent to every major agricultural ministry simultaneously," Anya reported, bringing up the video. The footage played across multiple screens, showing accelerated destruction of test crops. The geometric patterns of fungal growth were unmistakable, spreading through wheat fields with terrifying efficiency.

"Demands?" Carter asked, studying the time-lapse devastation.

"The ransom demands are being coordinated through the same secured servers," Anya confirmed. "Not just processed - actually originated from there. They're not even trying to hide it."

"Because they think they're untouchable," Carter said. "Multiple layers of corporate protection, legitimate business cover..." He paused. "But that confidence might work against them. If we can get into those servers..."

"We get proof of everything," Dave finished. "The whole operation, traced back to its source."

"Five billion euros per country, paid in untraceable cryptocurrency." Anya pulled up the ransom message. "They're positioning it as 'agricultural security consultation fees.' Payment buys immunity for that nation's crops."

Dave studied the cryptocurrency demands, then glanced at Anya. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Mei Lin," Anya replied without hesitation. "Nobody better at tracing digital money."

When the call connected, they weren't surprised to see the Sarah Chen Quantum Lab behind Mei. Of course she'd be there - it had become her primary base of operations since Sarah's death, supporting both the agency's systems and Harrison's ongoing research. The lab hummed with activity even at this late hour.

Mei listened intently as they explained the situation, her expression growing more serious with each detail. "Military-grade blockchain encryption," she said finally, studying the transaction data Anya had sent. "Very sophisticated. This isn't amateur hour." She turned away from the camera. "Harrison? I think we're going to need the quantum systems for this one."

"All of them?" Harrison's voice came from off-screen, sounding both worried and excited.

"If they're using the encryption I think they are, yes." Mei turned back to the team. "This will take time to set up properly. The quantum computers need careful calibration for this kind of targeted analysis. But if we can map their blockchain structure..."

"How long?" Carter asked.

"Two hours to bring the systems fully online and programme the targeted parameters," Mei replied. "After that, maybe another three hours for the initial analysis. Sarah's algorithms are powerful, but they need proper setup time."

"Keep us updated," Carter said. "We'll coordinate transport of any data you need."

After the call ended, the operations centre settled into watch mode. Dave checked his watch - 2100 hours. They had a long night ahead.

The first signs of progress came at 2300. Mei's face appeared on their main screen, Harrison visible working intensely behind her. "Quantum systems are calibrated and beginning analysis phase," she reported. "First results in about three hours."

With Mei and Harrison deep into their quantum calibrations, Carter ordered everyone to take short rest breaks while they could. Dave found a quiet corner of the operations centre, setting an alarm for one hour. His enhanced metabolism meant he didn't strictly need sleep like others did,

but experience had taught him that mental fatigue was just as dangerous as physical exhaustion.

He woke to the gentle buzz of his phone, mind already sharp despite the brief rest. The operations centre's kitchen beckoned - a proper cup of tea would help everyone stay focused through the long night ahead. But a search through the cupboards revealed only boxes of caffeine-free herbal tea, the kind well-meaning health and safety officers stocked in office kitchens. Dave held up a packet labelled "Calming Chamomile" with barely concealed disdain. At this hour, calm was the last thing they needed.

Coffee then. Not the freeze-dried instant variety that littered most agency facilities - proper coffee. He found an old Italian stovetop espresso maker tucked behind boxes of sweetener packets. Someone had at least tried to maintain standards. A quick search produced unopened bags of decent ground coffee, probably left over from day shifts when people had time to brew properly.

Dave cleaned the pot thoroughly before assembling it, making sure the seal was properly seated. The familiar ritual of measuring grounds and heating water helped organise his thoughts about the fungal threat. By the time the coffee's rich aroma filled the kitchen, he'd worked out several new tactical angles they should consider.

He found proper mugs instead of disposable cups - another small detail that made a difference. A quick survey of the room confirmed everyone's preferences from previous operations. Omar took his black, Serj with just a touch of milk. Anya claimed not to care but always seemed to work better with two sugars. Like Dave, Carter would grumble about drinking tea instead, but accept coffee when properly made.

The pot made enough for a full round. Dave distributed the mugs carefully, each prepared to its recipient's unspoken preferences. Small nods of appreciation followed - the kind of wordless thanks that came from years

of working together. Even Carter's usual protest about proper tea was half-hearted, his attention never leaving the tactical displays.

The coffee's warmth and richness helped push back the night's growing fatigue. More importantly, the familiar ritual of sharing it reinforced their team dynamic. Sometimes the smallest gestures meant the most during long operations.

Dave kept the espresso maker clean and ready. Something told him they'd need another round before this was over.

Dave reviewed the ransom video again, catching new details with each viewing. The fungal patterns were hauntingly similar to what he'd seen in Kazakhstan. In the background, Omar coordinated with UN contacts while Carter arranged field teams near AgraTech facilities.

"Look at this," Anya called around midnight, pulling up media coverage. AgraTech's CEO was on CNN, his concern clearly rehearsed. "We stand ready to assist any nation affected by this agricultural crisis," he claimed smoothly. "Our advanced crop protection systems..."

"Bastards," Carter muttered. "Create the crisis, then sell the solution."

The hours crawled by. Serj worked his contacts, tracking Black River Solutions team movements. Multiple tactical units were deploying to agricultural regions - positioning for something big. The UN Security Council's emergency session had devolved into chaos, with Russia and China blocking attempts at collective action.

At 0130, Harrison's voice carried unexpected urgency through their connection to the quantum lab. "Mei! Are you seeing these encryption patterns? They're using modified military-grade quantum protection."

"Similar to Chinese cyber operations," Mei confirmed. "But they never planned for Sarah's algorithms. Two more hours, maximum."

Dave watched the international situation deteriorate. Japan's agriculture minister resigned rather than approve ransom payment. His replacement

immediately began cryptocurrency conversion. Argentina's central bank started liquidating reserves. Even Switzerland abandoned neutrality, preparing payment authorisation.

"Multiple cryptocurrency exchanges reporting unusual volume," Omar said at 0230. "They're positioning to handle massive transactions."

Finally, at 0245, Mei's face appeared on their screen. The exhaustion in her expression was overshadowed by fierce satisfaction. "We've got them," she announced. "Sarah's quantum systems just cracked their entire blockchain network. Harrison's implementing the disruption protocols now."

"Can you block the payments?" Carter asked.

"Better." Mei's focussed on her screen. "Harrison and I can use the quantum computers to create a cascading corruption in their validation chain. Every attempted payment will trigger automatic regulatory flags. By the time they sort it out, we'll have tracked the money back to its source."

Dave watched the complex patterns flow across Mei's screens. "How long?"

"Three hours to map their entire network," Harrison replied. "The quantum systems need time to analyse all possible validation paths. But once we're in..."

"They won't be able to move a single coin without us knowing," Mei finished. "Sarah's work on quantum pattern recognition makes their encryption obsolete. They just don't know it yet."

"Multiple payments now entering their system," Omar reported. "Eight countries preparing transfers."

Mei's expression hardened with determination. "Beginning quantum analysis now. Harrison, transfer primary processing to Chen's original algorithms. We'll need the extra capability."

The team watched as the quantum computers began their work, processing power that would have seemed impossible just a year ago now focused on unravelling AgraTech's financial network. Sarah Chen's final breakthrough, initially designed to protect cryptocurrency markets, was being used to safeguard the world's food supply. There was poetry in that, Dave thought.

"First patterns emerging," Harrison announced after an hour. "Their blockchain security is impressive, but it's no match for quantum processing. We can see their entire transaction history."

Mei highlighted specific data flows. "They're using a distributed network, bouncing payments through multiple exchanges. Smart, but..." She typed rapidly, implementing new attack vectors. "They didn't account for quantum pattern recognition. The algorithms are finding correlations they thought were impossible to detect."

"Time to full compromise?" Carter asked.

"Two hours," Mei replied. "Maybe less. The quantum systems are learning as they process, becoming more efficient at breaking their encryption. Another gift from Sarah - her code evolves."

Dave remembered Sarah Chen's final days, her brilliant mind focused on using quantum computing for protection rather than exploitation. She would have appreciated this moment - her work being used to prevent global catastrophe.

"Multiple security teams mobilising at their primary exchange," Serj reported from his surveillance position. "They know something's wrong with their network."

"Let them try to stop it," Mei said with quiet confidence. "They're fighting against quantum processing they didn't even know existed. Our code is already inside their system, spreading through every transaction channel."

"Payment processing is starting to fail," Harrison reported with satisfaction. "Their validation chains are collapsing. Every attempted transfer is being flagged for regulatory review."

On Mei's screens, the quantum computers continued their relentless analysis, Sarah Chen's revolutionary algorithms tearing through encryption that would have been unbreakable just months ago. The patterns were beautiful in their complexity - a digital legacy that was still protecting people even after its creator's death.

"Confirmation from our UN contacts," Cecilia's voice came through their comms as the quantum systems completed their work. "All ransom payments are frozen. AgraTech's entire cryptocurrency network has been compromised."

"They'll have backup plans," Carter noted. "Other ways to fund the operation."

"Yes," Mei agreed, still monitoring the quantum analysis. "But we've forced them to abandon their primary financial infrastructure. And thanks to Sarah's algorithms, we now have a complete map of their transaction history. Evidence that ties everything back to them."

Dave watched the complex patterns flow across the quantum lab's displays. They'd prevented the immediate threat, but their opponents still had the capability to launch their attack. The question was: what would they do now that their funding was compromised?

"We've hurt them," Carter said, reading Dave's expression. "Made them change plans at a critical moment. Sometimes that's enough to make people sloppy."

Dave nodded, remembering the video of dying crops. They'd bought some time, but the underlying threat remained. Somewhere in Singapore, AgraTech's executives were already planning their next move.

"Sarah would have loved this," Mei said softly, watching her quantum systems continue mapping AgraTech's collapsed network. "Using her work to protect people, to stop others from abusing technology. It's exactly what she designed these algorithms for."

The race wasn't over - but at least they'd kept their opponents from collecting the resources for their larger operation. And thanks to Sarah Chen's legacy, they now had evidence that could help bring down the entire conspiracy.

The best weapons needn't be physical at all, but the brilliant minds who found ways to use technology for protection rather than destruction. Sarah Chen might be gone, but her work was still helping save the world.

18 Corporate Raiders

Dan Carter settled into his observation position, the familiar weight of his H&K G28 reassuring against his shoulder. From the 43rd floor of the adjacent building, he had clear sight lines to AgraTech's eastern facade - a wall of reflecting glass climbing into Singapore's humid air.

"Visual on the target levels," he reported quietly, adjusting his scope. "Thirty-nine through forty-two clear from my position. Server room windows are mirrored. Once you're in there I can't help. But I have good stairwell visibility."

Through his scope, he watched Dave and Serj approach the main entrance, their "security consultant" credentials already uploaded to AgraTech's system thanks to Anya's careful preparation. Their suits were impeccable, exactly matching the corporate style guide she'd pulled from their servers.

"Primary entrance security looking standard," Anya reported through comms. "Two guards, basic weapons. Building's own staff, not contractors." A pause as she worked. "Sending access credentials... now."

Dave felt his agency phone vibrate as the spoofed credentials activated. The lobby guards performed a perfunctory check, more concerned with appearance than actual security. Their practised corporate smiles never wavered as they waved the "consultants" through.

"First checkpoint clear," Serj murmured as they entered the lift. "Anya?"

"Working on lift access now." Making expert manipulation of their security systems. "You've got legitimate credentials up to floor thirty-five. After that, we're improvising."

The lift ride was smooth, almost silent. Dave caught their reflection in the polished steel walls - two more corporate security specialists in an endless parade of consultants. Nothing remarkable. Nothing memorable.

They reached floor thirty-five without incident. The security station was exactly where the plans showed - two guards monitoring a bank of screens. Their weapons were visible but not prominent - PR-friendly security theatre rather than serious protection.

"Gentleman," Serj said smoothly, credentials already displayed. "Annual security audit. We'll need access to the executive levels."

The first guard frowned slightly. "I don't see any audit scheduled-"

"Last minute addition," Dave interrupted, projecting calm authority. "Direct request from Director Hancock's office. Something about Board concerns?"

The implied pressure from above worked exactly as intended. The guards exchanged glances before the senior one nodded. "Of course, sir. Let me just..."

"They're onto us," announced Dave. Anya, a little puzzled, cut in tensely over the comms, "Building security protocols activating. You've got maybe two minutes before-"

"Movement on forty-one," Dan's voice cut through their comms. "Four-man team doing regular patrol. Professional stance - these aren't building security."

Dave and Serj entered the stairwell just as alarms began blaring throughout the building. Somewhere above, the real security teams were mobilising.

The door above them burst open, disgorging four security officers armed with batons and tasers. Their stance was textbook corporate security - trained to handle drunk employees and overly aggressive visitors, not professional infiltrators.

Dave moved first, flowing past a wild baton swing to strike precise nerve clusters in the nearest guard's shoulder and neck. The man dropped without a sound, his weapon clattering uselessly down the stairs. Beside him, Serj had already disabled two others with ruthless efficiency.

The fourth guard managed to trigger his taser, but Dave simply caught the electrodes and squashed them flat as the shocked guard watched the as charge crackled to no effect in Dave's bunched fist. A precise strike to the solar plexus ended the confrontation.

"Four more teams converging on your position," Dan reported. "Standard building security, nothing special. But I'm seeing movement in the server level - different way of moving. These are the professionals."

They cleared two more floors, dealing with increasingly desperate security responses. Dave's enhanced speed made the encounters almost trivial - corporate security simply wasn't prepared for someone who could move faster than human reflex.

"Server room ahead," Anya guided them. "East side of floor forty-two. But you've got company incoming - multiple contractors moving to intercept."

Dave pushed Serj behind a corner just as rounds chewed into the wall where they'd been standing. The first Black River operative had just announced himself with a burst of suppressed submachine gun fire. Serj, raised a surprised eyebrow, and all Dave could do was shrug at this new sensation. These weren't security guards playing soldier - these were professionals who understood violence as a craft.

"I count six," Dan reported. "Two by the server room door, four moving to flank. These boys know what they're doing."

Dave caught a sense of movement - another team trying to manoeuvre for a clear shot. But they'd made a critical mistake, positioning themselves where Dan had clear lines of fire through the building's glass facade.

Two precise shots from the G28 dropped the flanking team before they could properly set up. The remaining contractors immediately shifted position, recognising the new threat axis.

"Server room right ahead," Anya reported. "But security lockdown is in full effect. You'll need to-"

"Got it," Dave interrupted, already moving. His enhanced speed let him cross the space before the contractors could properly track him. The first operative managed to squeeze off two rounds before Dave reached him - good shots that would have dropped a normal opponent. But Dave simply let the bullets strike home as he closed the distance. "Damn it! What is it about this job and clothes? First time in a nice suit and I get bullet holes in it."

The contractor transitioned smoothly to hand-to-hand, showing excellent close-quarters training. But Dave was well-trained for this situation. He flowed around the man's strikes, using his own momentum to send him crashing into his teammate.

Serj engaged the remaining operators with cold precision, his movements economical and lethal. These weren't corporate security to be disabled - these were professionals who needed to be put down hard.

"You've got ninety seconds before their backup arrives," Dan warned. "Better make it quick."

Inside the server room, Anya guided them to the correct terminals. "Primary data node is the black cabinet, third from the left. But the security systems-"

Dave simply grabbed the cabinet doors and pulled, enhanced strength tearing through hardened steel like paper. Serj was already moving, plugging in the data extraction device Anya had prepared.

"Download commencing," she reported.

"Company," Dan's voice was tight with tension. "Full tactical team moving up the east stairwell. These are professionals."

"We're going to need a delay." Said Serj.

They could hear boots on the stairs now - multiple teams moving with coordinated precision.

Dave shouted, "Stick with it." as he rushed to the stairwell. A couple of strategic blows to the hinges took the stairwell door down. Dave grabbed hold of the fallen door as the first tactical team were halfway up the flight of stairs. Using the door like a battering ram he ran the front edge into the approaching team and rushed down the stairs like a wrecking ball. The door battered into the crowded space with brutal efficiency. As Dave's enhanced speed carried him down the stairs and rammed the team into the wall of the lower floor. None of the tactical squad were getting up in a hurry.

Returning to Serj, Dave says, "We have a window, but not long."

"Time to go," Serj said as the download completed.

Dave studied their options. The lift shaft was their best chance - the cars were locked down, but that worked in their favour. He forced open the access panel to the manual door release, metal screaming as it yielded to enhanced strength.

Pulling the manual release, Serj opened the doors easily. The shaft stretched above them toward the building's mechanical levels, lift cables disappearing into darkness. Below, they could hear multiple tactical teams converging on their position.

"Up," he said to Serj, already climbing out to the cables. "The mechanism room will give us options."

They began their ascent, Dave taking point while Serj climbed with the practised efficiency of someone who'd done this before. The shaft's service lights cast everything in harsh shadows, their movements echoing off concrete walls.

"Two teams entering the stairs six floors down," Dan reported through comms. "They're setting up for a vertical assault."

They reached the mechanism level just as the first shots echoed up the shaft. Dave helped Serj onto the maintenance platform, then turned his

attention to the machinery. The massive drive sheave dominated the space, steel cables running over the giant wheel, and through its deep grooves. Next to it, the brake assembly gripped the mechanism like a giant vice.

"The electronic lockdown's total," Anya reported. "I can't override anything - brake system, motors, safety controls... it's all isolated."

"Don't need to," Dave replied, studying the brake assembly. The system was built to be fail-safe, designed to grip tighter under stress. But like everything mechanical, it had limits.

He took hold of the brake housing, enhanced strength tearing through hardened steel. The mechanism shrieked in protest as he physically ripped away the brake pads. With the brakes disabled, the counterweight's extra mass would do much of the work for him.

The elevator car lurched upward immediately, rising through the shaft as physics took over. The counterweight, designed to balance a loaded car plus forty percent capacity, now significantly outweighed the empty lift.

"Get ready," Dave said as the car reached their level. "Once you're in, I'll control the descent from here. Don't stop until you're clear of the assault teams on the stairs."

The first tactical team was nearly level with their position. Dan watched them racing up the stairs, professional gear - night vision, tactical harnesses, specialised weapons. These weren't contractors any more - this was serious hardware.

Dave peeled open the locked panel housing the door release mechanism so he could open the shaft and the elevator cars inner door. "I have a drop key you could have used for that." Said Serj.

Serj entered through the open doors, preparing himself to access the hoistway door release when they reached their target floor. Dave grabbed the counterweight cables and began pulling upward, using his enhanced

strength to lift the massive block. The car began its controlled descent, Serj inside watching the shaft doors zooming by.

"Approaching twentieth," Serj reported. "Hold here whilst I open the doors." He reached through the open car doors to access the hoistway door's release bar. A quick pull, and the outer doors unlocked with a mechanical clunk, and Serj exited onto the twentieth floor covering the exits. "Floor secured. Make your move."

Dave released the counterweight and stepped off the platform. The twenty-story drop would have killed anyone else, but with his enhanced durability... He aimed his fall carefully, angling toward the car's position.

He punched through the elevator's roof like a meteor, the impact leaving a Dave-shaped hole in the elevator cars ceiling and a dent in the car's floor. The lift shuddered but held together, the counterweight already trying to pull the car upwards again. Dave rolled through the closing vertical gap of the elevator car and the ceiling of the twentieth floor. Serj already moving to cover the doors.

"The assault teams on the stairs are still ten floors above you. Still ascending." Dan reported. "Doesn't look like they know you went past them."

Dave smiled slightly as he oriented himself. Without the brake system, the tactical teams couldn't stop the car's ascent, and would probably pursue it to the top.

"You want to drop the next twenty floors, or shall we take the stairs?" Serj said dryly, "Perhaps we take the stairs."

"Where's the fun in that? OK, just for you, we take the stairs." Dave replied, already preparing for their next move. The shaft had bought them time and distance - now they just had to make it count. They raced down the lower twenty floors.

"Clear," Dan reported as they emerged onto their exfiltration route. "No pursuit. They're still trying to figure out how you got off the lift."

19 Formula

"Sorry about not completing the executive floor sweep," Serj said as they regrouped at the safehouse. His expression carried the particular frustration of a mission only partially accomplished. "Those files could have given us direct links to their whole operation."

"We got the electronic data," Dave replied, already thinking about their next move. "Had to trade the physical documents for a clean exit once they made us. Besides," he added with a slight smile, "between the firefight and that lift shaft, I think we made enough of an impression. They know we can reach them anywhere now."

Serj nodded slowly, professional pride warring with tactical necessity. Even a partial victory, was still a victory. The question was: what would their opponents do now that they knew their security could be breached?

The safehouse's operations centre hummed with activity as Anya worked through the captured server data. Multiple screens displayed cascading information - shipping manifests, research notes, personnel files. Dave watched the data flow, his enhanced vision catching details others might miss.

"The live server access was worth the risk," Anya said, data cascaded across her screens. "Everything's completely unencrypted. If we'd pulled the drives or tried remote access, we'd still be waiting for quantum decryption."

"Speaking of risks," Carter interjected from his position by the evidence board, "we need to talk about what happened in there." He turned to Dave. "You knew those guards were coming before they appeared. Before any alarms. How?"

Dave shifted uncomfortably, remembering the strange sensation that had warned him of approaching threats. "It was like... a pressure. Something

new. I could feel them coming, knew exactly where they'd appear." He paused, considering. "And with the shooter - I just knew Serj was in danger before the trigger was pulled."

"Your abilities are still evolving," Carter noted. "Do you think it might have something to do with the fungus?"

"Got something," Anya announced before Dave could respond. "Research files from their Kazakhstan operation. They weren't just developing the fungal agent - they had a parallel programme working on treatments."

The team gathered around her screens as she pulled up technical documentation. Complex chemical formulas scrolled past, alongside testing data and development notes.

"The Soviets designed it this way deliberately," Anya explained. "The fungal weapon and its countermeasure were developed simultaneously. Standard Cold War practise - create both the problem and the solution."

"Makes sense," Serj commented. "Maximum leverage. Once the fungus takes hold, they control both the threat and the cure."

Dave studied the formula specifications. "Can we reproduce it?"

"That's the clever part," Anya replied. "The treatment's based on the fungus itself - using modified strains to create targeted immunity. But the full process is split between multiple facilities. No single location has the complete formula."

"Like a biological encryption key," Carter observed. "Each piece useless without the others."

"Exactly. But these server files give us the missing link - locations of all their research facilities. Including..." Anya highlighted a particular document, "their primary development centre. The place where they're putting it all together."

The screens filled with satellite imagery of a massive agricultural complex in northern China. Multiple buildings sprawled across carefully controlled farmland, all surrounded by sophisticated security.

"Officially it's a agricultural research station," Anya continued. "But look at this, security protocols exceeding stated facility needs. This must be where they're coordinating everything."

"The shipping manifests confirm it," Serj added, examining transportation records. "All their test materials flow through this facility. It's their nerve centre."

Serj studied the facility layout. Something about the security patterns... "They're preparing for something big. These aren't normal rotations - they're staging for major operations."

"He's right," Carter confirmed, his tactical eye catching the same details. "Multiple security teams cycling through, equipment stockpiling. They're building up for coordinated deployment."

Anya's screens suddenly filled with new data showing another layer of files. "Found their implementation timeline. We were right - they're planning simultaneous attacks across all major agricultural regions. Using their legitimate fertiliser distribution network for delivery."

The scale of the operation was staggering. Maps showed planned release points spanning every significant grain-producing area globally. The coordination required was impressive - and terrifying.

"Wait," Dave said, enhanced vision catching something in the data flow. "Go back to that personnel file."

Anya reversed the scroll, revealing the profile of Dr. Victor Kostov - AgraTech's Chief Research Officer. The man's credentials were impeccable - multiple PhDs, decades of agricultural research experience. But something about his expression in the attached photo caught Dave's attention.

"He knows," Dave said quietly. "Look at his eyes - that's not a corporate executive's confidence. That's fear."

Carter studied the image. "Former Soviet bioweapon's researcher. Probably knows better than anyone what they're actually dealing with."

"Got his current location," Anya reported. "He's in Singapore. Executive suite at the Marina Bay Sands."

The team mobilised instantly, years of practise eliminating any wasted motion. Within minutes, they were in motion, racing through Singapore's evening traffic toward the iconic hotel.

They reached the hotel in record time, Dave's enhanced speed letting him blur past normal security while the others dealt with access protocols. The executive floor was eerily quiet when he reached it, the usual bustle of luxury hospitality replaced by tense anticipation.

He found Kostov in the suite's main room, slumped in an expensive leather chair. The empty pill bottle on the side table told part of the story. The handwritten notes scattered across the desk told the rest.

"Clear," Dave reported as the others arrived. "But we're too late."

Carter quickly checked Kostov's vital signs while Serj secured the room. The scientist was still breathing, but barely. Hotel medical staff would be arriving soon, but the outcome was already clear.

"He left this," Dave said, gathering the scattered papers. Most were technical notes - fragments of research data and security protocols. But one page stood out, its hurried handwriting carrying desperate urgency:

"I helped create this. Both times - for the Soviets, then for AgraTech. Thought I could control it. I was wrong. The patterns are spreading faster than predicted. Mutations we never expected. Even the treatment formula might not be enough now. I'm sorry. God help us all."

The team worked quickly, gathering everything before hotel security arrived. Kostov's technical notes would be valuable, but his final message carried darker implications. Even one of the project's architects had been frightened by what they'd created.

Later, back at the safehouse, Anya compiled everything they'd learned. The complete picture was emerging: a Soviet-era bioweapon being repurposed for corporate profit through engineered agricultural collapse. And at the centre of it all, a research facility in China where all the pieces came together.

"Kostov's notes confirm it," she reported. "The Chinese facility is their primary research centre. Everything flows through there - weapon development, treatment production, deployment coordination."

"And now we know their timeline," Carter added. "The simultaneous attacks are scheduled to begin in seventy-two hours. Using their legitimate fertiliser shipments for delivery."

Dave studied the facility's security patterns again, "They'll be expecting us. After Singapore, they'll know we're getting close."

"Good," Carter replied. "Sometimes knowing you're walking into a trap is better than being surprised by one." He turned to the team. "We have seventy-two hours to shut down their operation before they can launch globally. That facility is the key - we take it out, we stop everything."

They had the formula's location, the facility's layout, and most importantly, proof of everything AgraTech was planning. Now they just had to fight their way into one of the most secure research facilities in China and shut it down before the seventy-two-hour deadline expired.

The world's food supply hung in the balance. But first, they needed a plan.

Dave sat thoughtfully, examining the satellite imagery again. The facility's defence layers were impressive - multiple security cordons, automated

systems, professional tactical teams. Getting in would be hard enough. Getting out with the formula and evidence would be even harder.

"Omar," Carter called through their comms. "What's our insertion window looking like?"

"Tight," Omar replied from his position at the operations centre's secondary station. "They're running twenty-four hour security rotations, but there's a slight overlap during shift changes. Might give us a ninety-second window if we time it perfectly."

Anya highlighted specific sections of the facility blueprint. "The formula's development lab has to be here, in the high-security wing. Completely isolated from the main research areas, separate ventilation and power systems."

"Makes sense," Serj noted. "They'd want to protect their most valuable asset."

"And that's where we'll hit them," Carter said. "The formula is everything - their weapon, their treatment, their leverage. We take that, we can shut down their entire operation."

Dave studied the approach vectors, already thinking through tactical options. "Seventy-two hours isn't much time to plan an infiltration this complex."

"No," Carter agreed. "But it's all we've got. The world's food supply is about to be held hostage by corporate terrorists with a Soviet bioweapon. We stop them now, or we don't stop them at all."

The team settled into their roles, beginning the meticulous process of planning their assault. They had three days to infiltrate one of the most secure facilities in China and prevent a global agricultural catastrophe. The odds were stacked against them, but that was nothing new.

The hardest part wasn't the mission itself, but the weight of knowing failure wasn't an option.

20 Global Threat

The operations centre hummed with tension as Anya's screens filled with satellite imagery. Agricultural regions around the world glowed as thermal overlays highlighted suspicious temperature patterns. Dave watched the data flow, his enhanced vision catching details others might miss.

"Another ransom demand just hit," Omar reported, monitoring diplomatic channels. "Brazilian agriculture ministry this time. Same terms as the others - five billion in crypto or their crops die."

"That makes seven major food-producing nations in the last six hours," Carter noted grimly. He stood studying the global threat map, markers indicating each target zone. "Russia, Canada, United States, Argentina, Australia, India, and now Brazil."

"The timing's coordinated," Serj observed. "They're hitting every major grain exporter simultaneously. No one can help their neighbours because they're all under threat."

"Got something in the blockchain analysis," Anya announced, her attention locked on scrolling data. "They're not just using shipping networks for delivery - they're weaponising the entire global supply chain."

Dave moved closer to her screen. "What do you mean?"

"Look at these container tracking patterns." Anya highlighted specific shipping routes. "Normal fertiliser shipments follow predictable paths - manufacturer to distributor to farming regions. But these..." She pulled up several anomalous tracks. "They're making extra stops, deviating from standard routes. And the temperature data from their monitoring systems shows very specific environmental controls."

"Just like the Morocco facility," Dave said, remembering the sophisticated cultivation setup they'd found. "They need exact conditions to maintain the fungal agent during transport."

"Exactly," Anya confirmed. "And here's where it gets concerning - these shipments are already positioned worldwide. They've been moving pieces into place for months." Her AI analysis programs highlighted suspicious patterns in global shipping data, correlating routes with known AgraTech front companies.

"Getting something from our Kazakhstan data analysis," she continued. "The Soviet documentation mentioned specific distribution nodes - prepositioned supply caches hidden across the agricultural belt."

"Cold War planning," Carter explained. "The Soviets built storage facilities near major farming regions, ready to deploy bioweapons if needed. AgraTech's not just using their research - they're using their entire infrastructure."

"Got something in their containerised shipping network data," Anya announced, her programs correlating information streams. "Cross-referencing automated environmental monitoring with satellite thermal imaging. Multiple vessels showing temperature signatures matching fungal cultivation requirements." She highlighted one specific track. "This one's interesting - container ship in the South China Sea, running fully automated environmental systems in its cargo holds."

Dave studied the vessel's route. "That's nowhere near any major ports. Why would a fertiliser shipment be?"

"It wouldn't," Omar interrupted. "Unless it's not really fertiliser." He pulled up maritime tracking data. "Ship's the Yuan Xiang, registered in Panama but operated by a shell company. Same corporate structure we saw with AgraTech's other fronts."

"Their Singapore servers gave us access to their real monitoring systems," Anya added, bringing up the data on her screen. "They're using the same encrypted protocols to manage this vessel's systems that we saw in Morocco. Temperature controls, automated monitoring, crew manifests - it all matches their operational patterns."

Satellite imagery showed the Yuan Xiang holding position in international waters. The pictures showed unusual thermal patterns - specific temperature zones similar to what they'd seen in the Kazakhstan facility's growth chambers.

"It's not just a transport," he realised. "It's a mobile production facility. They're using the ship to cultivate and distribute the agent directly."

"Makes sense," Carter said. "International waters, no oversight, perfect distribution position for hitting multiple agricultural regions. And if anything goes wrong..."

"They scuttle it," Serj finished. "Blame an accident at sea. No evidence."

"Multiple vessels showing similar patterns," Anya reported, highlighting several tracks. "But the Yuan Xiang is different. Looking at the data for their fuel usage suggests a higher power requirement, probably for the larger cultivation chambers, and more sophisticated environmental controls."

"That's our primary target," Dave said with growing certainty. "The other ships are important, but that one's their main distribution hub for the region."

"Agreed," Carter nodded. "But the timing's critical. If we move too soon, they'll just shift production to their backup facilities. Move too late..."

"And they'll have already released the agent," Omar finished. "Making their ransom demands impossible to ignore."

Anya's screens filled with new data as more agricultural ministries reported threats. The pattern was expanding - smaller food-producing nations now receiving demands, carefully calculated to stretch their resources to breaking point.

"International tensions are rising," Omar reported, monitoring diplomatic channels. "China's blaming U.S. agricultural corporations. Russia's

claiming NATO biological weapons research. India and Pakistan are both threatening military action over suspected cross-border contamination."

"Which is exactly what AgraTech wants," Carter said. "Global chaos driving up food prices while countries blame each other instead of looking for the real source."

Dave watched the situation deteriorate across Anya's screens. Agricultural ministries panicking, markets in free-fall, diplomatic channels filled with accusations and threats. But now they had something concrete - a physical target they could strike.

"How long to get a full tactical assessment of the Yuan Xiang?" he asked.

"Give me an hour," Anya replied, her programs already pulling data. "I'm correlating crew manifests, engineering specs, maintenance records - everything that might give us an advantage. The ship's systems are well-protected, but they're using patterns we've seen before."

"We'll need a way onboard," Serj noted. "Security will be professional - probably more Black River Solutions contractors."

"Already found multiple ex-military personnel listed as 'agricultural specialists' in the crew manifest," Anya said. "Definitely not normal cargo vessel staffing."

Dave nodded, plans already forming. "Get me everything on their security setup. And we'll need detailed weather patterns for the region - storm systems, wave conditions, anything that might affect an approach."

"Already compiling," Anya confirmed. "But we need to move fast. These ransom demands have deadlines attached - 72 hours maximum before they start demonstrating their capability."

The screens continued filling with data as more pieces fell into place. Satellite imagery showed other suspicious vessels moving into position near agricultural regions worldwide. But the Yuan Xiang remained their

best target - the key to proving AgraTech's involvement before global food supplies could be compromised.

"We have our next move," Dave said finally. "But we're going to need specialised equipment for a maritime operation. And we'll have to assume they're ready for someone to eventually track them down."

Omar looked up from his terminal. "I might have a solution for getting aboard. Singapore Coast Guard just took delivery of two Willard 43' Interceptors. Latest stealth fit-out, full rough weather capability."

"Those are serious boats," Serj noted. "Used to train on the older models. Deep-V hull design, handles like a dream in rough seas."

"They're still in final fitting," Omar continued. "Not officially deployed yet. Won't even show up in their active fleet roster for another week." He looked at Carter. "Could be exactly what we need."

Anya scrolled through the online data. "Confirming... yes. They're at the Loyang facility. Both vessels complete, just running through final systems checks before deployment." She pulled up the specifications. "Full stealth package - radar absorbent materials, thermal masking, acoustic suppression. Rated for Sea State 5."

"Perfect timing," Omar said. "Storm front moving in will put us right at Sea State 4, maybe pushing 5. Gives us ideal conditions for a covert approach."

Dave studied the vessel specs on Anya's screen. "How long to reach the Yuan Xiang?"

"Four, maybe five hours at cruise speed," Omar replied. "Plenty of range with the twin diesels. Storm conditions will give us natural cover for the approach." He paused. "Of course, we'd need to convince Singapore to loan us one."

"I'll speak to Cecilia," Carter said, already reaching for his phone. "See what diplomatic channels can do."

The next few hours were tense as they waited for Cecilia to work her contacts. When she finally called back, her expression said everything before she spoke.

"No go," she reported grimly. "Singapore's concerned about deniability. They can't risk being officially connected to an operation in disputed waters."

Omar nodded as if he'd expected this. "Well," he said, a slight smile playing at his lips, "looks like we'll have to resort to piracy."

Carter studied him for a moment. "You already have a plan, don't you?"

"Let's just say I know the Loyang facility's security patterns quite well." Omar turned to Anya. "Can you get me their current patrol schedules?"

Dave took a final look at the Yuan Xiang's position, committing every detail to memory. They had their target. Now they just had to figure out how to breach a floating fortress in the middle of the South China Sea.

The world's food supply hung in the balance, with AgraTech's ships positioned to strike agricultural regions simultaneously. But they'd found the linchpin - the vessel that could give them proof of everything. They just had to reach it in time.

21 **Alternative Acquisition**

Omar spread the facility plans across their makeshift planning table, his movements precise and methodical. Dave watched him mark key points with practised efficiency - security positions, camera coverage, patrol routes.

"Loyang's main security focus is water-side," Omar explained. "They're set up to prevent approaches by sea. But from the land side..." He traced a route through the facility. "Three-man patrol teams, fifteen-minute rotations. Cameras are comprehensive but predictable - three-second gaps at handover points."

"Getting in is one thing," Serj noted from his position by the door. "Getting the boat out and away is another."

Omar nodded. "That's why it needs to be fast. Two-person operation - one to handle release and startup, one to deal with any security response." He looked at Dave. "The boat will be fuelled and ready - they're doing final systems checks this week. But we'll have maybe two minutes from first alert to full facility response."

"Walk me through it," Dave said, studying the layout.

"First challenge is the security gate." Omar pointed to the facility entrance. "Normally I'd go with forged credentials, but given the time-frame..." He glanced at Dave. "Think you can handle a twelve-foot fence?"

Dave smiled slightly. "Won't even need a running start."

"Good. Once inside, we follow the maintenance access route here." Omar's finger traced a path between buildings. "Camera coverage is designed for normal movement speeds. If you can move fast enough between these points, their motion detection won't trigger."

"And if it does?"

"They'll probably register it as a false positive, unless you're there to be seen when they check. Otherwise, we move to plan B - very fast and very direct." Omar marked the boat's position. "It's in the final fitting dock here. Covered berth, minimal security because it's considered 'already secured' inside the facility."

"What about startup sequence?" Dave asked. "These boats usually have security lockouts."

"Already handled." Omar pulled out a small device. "Managed to clone the commissioning team's activation codes during their last systems test. Won't last long - they change protocols when the boats go active - but it'll work for now."

The plan was elegant in its simplicity. Omar would handle the boat's release and startup while Dave managed any security response. Quick, clean, and professional. Which meant something was bound to go wrong.

They moved at midnight beneath a sky heavy with approaching weather. The storm front loomed over the facility like a dark tide, its massive clouds illuminated from within by distant lightning. Wind gusted in irregular patterns, driving the first scattered raindrops sideways and setting the security lights swaying to cast uncertain shadows across the grounds. The air carried that peculiar electric tension that preceded serious weather, making Dave's enhanced senses tingle with static charge.

Thunder rolled across the complex as bands of heavier rain began falling in earnest, obscuring the facility's outer cameras and creating curtains of water that reduced visibility to mere meters. The wind intensified, howling around building corners and rattling the chain-link perimeter fence with metallic protest. Dave cleared that fence with a casual leap, then caught Omar as he climbed over, both of them already soaked to the skin. They crossed the initial security zone quickly, Dave's enhanced speed letting him move them both through camera gaps while sheets of rain swept across the facility grounds in waves.

The weather was both ally and enemy - the storm's fury helped mask their approach but also made everything treacherously slick. Lightning strobed across the sky in silent flashes, briefly turning the facility stark white before plunging it back into rain-swept darkness. The storm was building toward something massive, and they needed to be inside before it arrived in full force.

The first complication came at the maintenance access door. Omar's codes should have worked, but the panel stayed stubbornly red.

"They've changed the sequence," Omar muttered, pulling out his backup decoder. "Give me thirty seconds."

Dave heard the patrol before he saw them - boots on wet concrete, approaching their position. His enhanced vision picked out three guards moving with professional purpose, their route bringing them directly toward the door.

"We don't have thirty seconds," he said quietly.

Omar didn't look up from his work. "Handle it."

Dave moved while the guards were still thirty feet out, crossing the space between heartbeats. The first guard registered a blur of motion in the corner of his vision, before Dave's finger found the nerve cluster at the base of his skull. The second managed to half-turn before a precise strike dropped him. The third actually got his hand to his radio, but Dave was already there, catching the man's wrist while simultaneously applying pressure to the carotid artery. All three guards were unconscious before the first one hit the ground.

"Done," Omar announced as the door clicked open. "That was twenty-eight seconds, by the way."

"Show-off," Dave replied, already moving them through the door.

The fitting dock was exactly as Omar had described - a covered berth holding the sleek form of the Willard Interceptor. Even in the dim light,

Dave could appreciate the vessel's lines. The hull seemed to absorb shadows, its stealth coating drinking in what little illumination reached it.

"Security station will have noticed their patrol's missed check-in," Omar said, already moving toward the boat. "Two minutes at most before-"

The facility lights came on with almost painful brightness. Somewhere in the distance, an alarm began to sound.

"Or they could notice right now," Dave observed.

Omar was already aboard the Willard, his movements quick but precise as he worked through the startup sequence. "One minute to ready the moorings. Another thirty seconds for full engine start."

"Make it faster," Dave suggested as multiple security teams began converging on their position. He picked out at least eight armed guards moving to surround the dock.

The first warning shot cracked past their position. "Singapore Coast Guard! Step away from the vessel!"

Dave did some quick maths. Even with his enhanced speed, he couldn't take down all the guards before one of them got a lucky shot at Omar. They needed a distraction.

He found it in the form of the dock's massive loading crane. It currently held a suspended shipping container, likely parts for the ongoing equipment installations. The control booth was unmanned, but the power was still on. Dave covered the distance to the controls in seconds. The crane's panel was simple enough - a few quick adjustments sent both boom and container swinging toward the gathered security teams.

The security teams were forced to backtrack, searching for an alternate route around the obstacle. On the boat, Omar had the engines running, the advanced stealth systems keeping their noise signature remarkably low.

"Final release in ten seconds," Omar called. "Be ready to move!"

The Willard's mooring lines dropped away with pneumatic hisses. Omar's voice carried across the chaos: "Now!"

Dave disengaged from the security teams, practically flying across the space to the boat. He landed on the rear deck just as Omar pushed the throttles forward. The Willard's engines responded instantly, pushing them away from the dock with surprising acceleration.

"Pursuit?" Dave asked, scanning behind them.

"Their ready-response craft are on the other side of the facility," Omar replied, his hands steady on the controls as he guided them into the channel. "By the time they get mounted up, we'll be past their radar horizon. After that..." He patted the helm console. "Nothing in their fleet can catch this boat. Especially not in these conditions."

The storm was building properly now, waves growing as they cleared the harbour. Dave felt the Willard's deep-V hull cutting through the swells with impressive stability. The stealth boat lived up to its reputation, handling the rough conditions with easy confidence.

"Coast Guard's spinning up their response," Anya's voice came through their comms. "But the storm's playing havoc with their radar. Clean getaway."

Omar smiled slightly as he adjusted their course. "Told you it would work. Though next time, try not to play with the crane. Little obvious, don't you think?"

"Says the man who just stole a stealth boat," Dave replied, watching Singapore's lights fade behind them. "What's our timeline to the Yuan Xiang?"

"Rendezvous point is twenty miles up the coast," Omar said, checking his instruments. "The Willard can do 61 knots flat out, but in these conditions, better to take it steady. We'll be there in about thirty minutes." He adjusted their course slightly. "Serj and the others should be in position by then.

Once we have the full team aboard..." He smiled slightly. "Then we get to see what this boat can really do."

The Willard surged forward into the growing storm, its stolen form swallowed by darkness and rain. Behind them, the Coast Guard would soon be mobilising a major search. But by then, they'd be long gone - heading toward a target that wouldn't expect anyone to attempt boarding in these conditions.

22 Sea Trials

The Willard's hull sliced through another massive wave, somehow maintaining stability in conditions that would have paralysed most vessels. Dave watched the Yuan Xiang's bulk emerge from the rain-swept darkness, its running lights barely visible through the storm.

"Their radar won't pick us up in this," Omar said from beside him, checking his tactical gear one final time. "But getting aboard in these conditions..."

"Will be interesting," Dave finished. The cargo vessel rose on another swell, its massive form shifting against the dark sky. Even with his enhanced vision, the rain made distance calculations tricky. "Ready?"

"We'll need to reach the bridge," Anya said, triple-checking her equipment was secured. "I have to be physically at their systems to override the environmental controls. That's where they're managing the fungal cultivation."

Serj's voice came through their comms from the Willard's helm: "You've got maybe twenty minutes before this storm gets worse. After that, extraction becomes impossible, even for Dave."

Dave studied the ship's movement, timing the swells. "I'll get aboard first, then pull you two up. Serj, stay in their lee - we'll need a quick exit."

He waited for the next wave to bring them close, then launched himself upward. Enhanced strength sent him arcing through the rain toward the Yuan Xiang's rail. He landed silently despite the ship's motion, immediately securing their climbing lines.

"Ready," he called through comms, bracing himself against the rail. "Omar first."

The timing was critical. As the Willard rose on a swell, Omar clipped in and Dave pulled. His enhanced strength made the actual lift trivial, but he had to move fast enough to prevent Omar from being smashed against the hull by the waves. A series of smooth rapid movements brought Omar up and over the rail before the next wave could hit.

Anya followed moments later, Dave's supernatural speed making her extraction equally efficient. They kept low on the deck as Serj guided the Willard away to a safer holding position.

"Bridge is four levels up," Anya said, already moving. "I'll need five minutes once I reach their systems."

"Watch for Black River teams," Omar warned. "Ship this size, they'll have multiple security details."

Dave's enhanced vision caught movement - two guards patrolling the forward section. He gestured for Omar to follow him while Anya headed for the bridge access. They needed to find the fungal samples before the storm got worse.

The first security team never saw them coming. Dave moved with supernatural speed, disabling both operators before they could react. His new training made the takedowns efficient and silent - no wasted motion, no unnecessary force.

Anya peered through the bridge access, taking in the scene with practised efficiency. Along with the regular crew, she spotted two Black River operators in tactical gear. Their relaxed postures suggested they weren't expecting trouble - no one would attempt boarding in these conditions.

She entered smoothly, her suppressed Udav pistol already covering the nearest operator. The two men reacted instantly, their training showing as they began stepping apart to split her focus. Professional. But they hadn't counted on the storm.

The Yuan Xiang pitched violently as a massive wave struck the port side. The first operator used the moment to strike, his hand whipping out to knock the Udav aside while his partner moved to flank. Textbook close-quarters coordination.

But Anya had extensive training in close quarters, in impossible conditions. She let the ship's momentum work for her, flowing with the roll to evade their initial attacks. The Udav barked once, the sound barely audible over the storm. The first operator went down hard, clutching his shattered femur.

His partner recovered quickly, transitioning to hand-to-hand with fluid grace. But Anya was already moving, using the ship's next roll to add power to her roundhouse kick. Her boot caught him perfectly in the temple, dropping him instantly.

Movement caught her eye - the captain lunging for a holstered pistol. Before his hand could close on the grip, he felt the Udav's suppressor press against the base of his skull. "I wouldn't," Anya said quietly. The rest of the bridge crew remained frozen, watching as she efficiently disarmed and plasticcuffed both operators.

Only then did she key her radio: "On the bridge. Two hostiles contained. Captain's being... cooperative. Accessing environmental systems now."

"How long until you can open the cultivation chamber?" Omar asked, examining the sealed door before them.

"Working on it," Anya replied. The lock disengaged with a soft click.

The chamber beyond was a sophisticated setup - rows of cultivation tanks maintained at precise temperatures, each marked with technical data in both English and Chinese. Omar moved to examine the nearest container while Dave secured the entrance.

"Got something," Omar reported, studying readouts. "These are definitely Soviet-derived strains. The genetic markers match what we found in Kazakhstan."

A twitch in Dave's senses caused him to turn - another security team was about to enter behind them. He moved to intercept, but not before one of the operators managed to trigger an alarm. The sound echoed through the ship's corridors, guaranteeing they'd have company soon.

"How long to get what we need?" Dave asked, already hearing boots on metal stairs.

"Two minutes," Omar replied, carefully collecting samples. "But-"

The flash-bang arced through the doorway, its trajectory bringing it directly toward one of the cultivation tanks. Dave's enhanced senses registered everything in slow motion - the device spinning end over end, Omar turning toward the sound, the impact against reinforced glass already stressed by the ship's constant movement.

The tank shattered. The flash-bang's detonation created a pressure wave that turned the fungal culture into a fine aerosol mist. Omar was caught in the worst possible position, directly in the path of the expanding cloud. The spores hit him full in the face just as the bang and flash took effect, causing him to involuntarily gasp and inhale deeply.

"Omar!" Dave moved instantly, enhanced speed letting him reach his friend before he could inhale a second breath. But even as he pulled Omar clear of the rapidly dispersing spores, he could see the damage was done. Omar's eyes were already streaming, his breath coming in harsh, wracking coughs that shook his entire frame.

The sound of boots on metal told Dave more security teams were converging on their position. But right now, his only concern was getting his friend clear of the contaminated air. Omar's coughing grew worse with

each passing second, his trained operator's composure cracking as his body fought against the foreign organisms flooding his respiratory system.

"Multiple teams converging on your position!" Anya's voice carried urgency through their comms. "Get out of there!"

Dave practically carried Omar toward the exit, but Black River operators had already blocked their primary route. He counted at least six, spread out in synchronised pairs, weapons covering overlapping sectors. All the hallmarks of experienced combat veterans.

The first operator engaged with textbook close-quarters technique, but Dave's enhanced speed let him flow past the attack. A precise strike to nerve clusters dropped the man instantly. But the others were already moving to flank, using the ship's confined spaces to limit his mobility.

The vessel pitched suddenly, a massive wave throwing everyone off-balance. Dave used the moment to his advantage, transitioning from his usual grappling techniques to the more direct striking style Callahan had originally taught him. In these conditions, with the deck constantly shifting, he needed faster techniques.

His fist blurred past another operator's guard, the impact sending the man sprawling. Two more attacked simultaneously, their coordination showing extensive training. Dave shifted to Wing Chun techniques, his strikes targeting vulnerable points while maintaining perfect balance despite the ship's movement.

"Dave," Omar managed between coughs, "the samples..."

"Forget them," Dave replied, catching a baton strike on his forearm. "We need to get you clear."

More security teams were approaching - he could hear them coordinating through their radios. The ship's corridors had become a maze of potential ambush points. They needed a more direct solution.

More security teams were approaching - he could hear them coordinating through their radios. The ship's corridors had become a maze of potential ambush points. They needed a more direct solution.

"Hold on," Dave told Omar, supporting his friend's weight as they reached the watertight door. The horizontal bulkhead was designed to slide shut under power, sealing off sections of the ship in emergencies. Dave hit the closure control, but the mechanism moved too slowly.

Bracing across the frame, Dave reached across the opening to grip the door's edge. His chest and shoulder muscles tensed as he pulled, enhanced strength letting him drag the massive steel barrier faster than its motors were designed to move. The bulkhead slammed into its housing with enough force to send vibrations through the deck plates.

The automatic dogs clanked as they engaged, but Dave wasn't taking chances. He grabbed the edge of the door where it met the frame and squeezed. Enhanced strength let him compress the metal, effectively welding the door into its sealed position. The security team would need serious cutting equipment to get through, and not enough time to use it.

Through the sealed bulkhead, Dave could hear the Black River team's frustration as they realised they'd have to backtrack and find another route around. But by then, he and Omar would be long gone. He lifted his friend's increasingly unsteady form and moved quickly toward the extraction point, leaving the professionally disabled bulkhead to buy them the time they needed.

"Anya," he called through comms, "time to go!"

She joined them seconds later, looking slightly dishevelled. "Bridge team decided to be heroic," she explained. "Had to be a bit more persuasive than planned."

The storm had worsened, waves now threatening to overwhelm even the Yuan Xiang's massive bulk. But the Willard appeared precisely on

schedule, Serj's expert handling keeping the vessel as steady as he could despite the conditions.

Getting down would be trickier than getting up. They'd be exposed during the descent, and the waves could easily smash them against the hull. But Dave had a plan.

He secured Omar to his back, making sure the line would hold them both. "When we move, it has to be fast," he told Anya. "The waves won't give us much time."

Dave waited for the perfect moment - when the Willard rose on a swell while the Yuan Xiang rolled away. Then he simply stepped off the rail, using his enhanced strength to control their descent. His legs absorbed the impact as they landed on the Willard's deck, immediately moving clear for Anya's descent.

The security teams had made it around, emerging onto the deck just as Anya prepared to follow. Their initial burst of fire went wide, disrupted by the ship's motion, but they were already moving to better positions.

"Go!" Dave shouted. Anya didn't hesitate, letting herself drop as Dave had told her. He caught her before she could hit the deck, his enhanced strength easily handling her momentum.

"Get us clear," he ordered as soon as she was aboard. Serj needed no encouragement, the Willard's engines pushing them away from the Yuan Xiang's bulk. Within minutes, the cargo vessel was swallowed by rain and darkness.

"How is he?" Dave asked, checking Omar's condition.

"Breathing's laboured," Anya reported, already administering first aid from their med kit. "We need to get him proper treatment soon."

Dave nodded, watching their friend's struggle for air. They'd failed to secure samples, but Omar's exposure meant they possibly had something.

As the Willard cut through the waves, Anya pulled a sample collection kit from their medical supplies. Her movements were precise despite the vessel's motion, years of training evident as she swabbed the inside of Omar's mouth and sealed the sample.

"His clothing too," Dave suggested, helping to steady Omar as another wave hit. "The spores will have settled on the fabric."

Anya nodded, already sealing Omar's outer tactical gear in sterile bags. "The concentration should be highest in his respiratory tract, but we'll analyse everything. Between these samples and his blood work..." She secured the last bag. "It's not what we planned to get, but it might do."

Omar managed a weak smile between coughs. "Glad my... unfortunate exposure... has a silver lining."

The samples were carefully stored in a secure container - physical evidence of AgraTech's bioweapon, collected in its active deployment state. At least this failure could be turned into a different kind of success.

The Willard cut through the worsening storm, carrying them toward safety. Behind them, the Yuan Xiang continued its grim work, cultivating biological weapons in the heart of international waters. But they'd confirmed its purpose, and more importantly, they'd survived to fight another day.

23 Chain of Custody

At the safehouse, while medical staff treated Omar's fungal exposure, Anya methodically dissected the data retrieved from the Yuan Xiang's systems.

"These shipping documents reveal an odd pattern," she said, comparing manifest records. "All contaminated containers passed through specific FDA checkpoints. But it's the inspection protocols that stand out."

Dave examined the documentation. "The approval formats are identical. Not just similar - exactly the same structure repeated."

"Standard FDA inspections show natural variation," Anya said, displaying comparison data. "Different inspectors have distinct approaches. But these..." She isolated key sections. "Identical phrasing, matching time stamps relative to submission. One inspector's signature on everything - Monica Wells."

"That violates basic FDA procedure," Carter noted, studying the pattern.

"Her background explains why." Personnel records appeared on the main display. "Former private security operative. Three years with Mimir Tactical before transitioning to FDA. And Mimir became..."

"Black River Solutions," Dave concluded. "They embedded their operative in the regulatory system."

"Perfect infiltration strategy," Serj added. "Someone who understands both security protocols and inspection requirements. She'd know exactly how to make false approvals look legitimate."

Anya's analysis continued correlating connections. "Current assignment: Kansas City facility. Every tainted shipment we've traced passed through her checkpoint."

"Where Santos started her investigation," Dave said. The puzzle pieces aligned - not just a corrupt inspector, but a key node in AgraTech's distribution network.

The revelation changed their target. They had more than just evidence now - they had someone who could expose how deeply the conspiracy penetrated government oversight.

Surveillance photos appeared on Anya's screens. Monica Wells going about her inspection duties, everything appearing perfectly normal on the surface. But Dave caught details others might miss - the way she checked sight lines, her careful attention to security cameras. Not the behaviour of a normal FDA inspector.

"She's accessing the facility after hours too," Anya added, pulling up security logs. "Always on nights when AgraTech shipments are scheduled for inspection the next day. Plenty of time to falsify test results or swap out samples."

"We need those samples," Carter said. "And any documentation she's keeping about the operation. But if she's really ex-Mimir..."

"She'll have panic buttons," Serj agreed. "Direct line to Black River response teams. We go in, we need to be ready for professional opposition."

Dave watched another surveillance photo appear - Wells entering the facility's sample storage area, her movements showing that subtle tension of someone who knew they were involved in something dangerous.

"We need to move fast," Carter said, studying Wells's personnel file. "Once word gets back to AgraTech that we breached their Singapore servers..."

"Already booked," Anya replied. "Private charter from Changi to Kansas City International. Wheels up 9:00AM, should get us in early morning Kansas time."

The flight gave them plenty of time to grab some rest, and plan their approach. Spreadsheets of inspection records and surveillance photos covering their fold-down tables. Dave studied Wells's routines, memorising patterns they could exploit.

"I'm in their security system," Anya announced. "Looks like Wells has been accessing these records after hours for months. Falsifying test results, manipulating inspection reports..."

"She's methodical," Omar noted, examining timestamped security footage. "Same schedule every day. Arrives 7:45, coffee at the corner shop, badge-in by 8:15."

"Looking for threats constantly though," Serj added. "Watch her sight lines when she walks - always checking angles, assessing approaches. That's not normal FDA behaviour."

"Because she knows what she's protecting," Carter said. "And who might come looking for it."

The Kansas City skyline materialised through pre-dawn haze as they made their final approach. The FDA's facility sat in an industrial park, its utilitarian architecture designed to blend in with surrounding businesses. The team established observation points, their vehicles positioned to monitor all approaches while maintaining quick exfiltration routes.

"Multiple security checkpoints," Serj reported through comms, studying the facility through his scope. "Standard government setup - badge readers, cameras, roving patrols. Nothing special."

"Because they don't expect trouble," Omar added from his position covering the loading dock. "It's just a regulatory office as far as anyone knows."

"Wells just arrived," Anya reported, watching through hacked security feeds. "But something's off - she's skipped coffee, and is accessing secure storage she normally avoids at this hour."

"She knows," Dave said, watching her movements through the surveillance feed. "Singapore spooked them. They're cleaning house."

"Time for direct contact," Dave said, studying Wells's movements through the surveillance feed. "We need those samples before Black River can sanitise everything."

"Car park's almost empty," Serj added. "Just Wells's car and two security vehicles. Perfect timing for a quiet conversation."

"Camera feeds looped," Anya confirmed. "Security systems think everything's normal. But we need to move fast."

Dave moved toward the facility's main entrance, tracking the remaining security personnel. Two guards at the front desk, another pair patrolling the upper floors. Basic government security, nothing like the professional operators they'd faced at other AgraTech sites.

"Tactical teams inbound," Omar reported suddenly. "Two SUVs approaching from the north, moving with purpose. Black River's ahead of schedule."

"Time's up," Dave said, already accelerating toward the entrance. "Get ready to extract hot if needed."

He reached the storage area just as Wells began her evidence removal. Through reinforced windows, he could see her methodically selecting specific samples - the ones that could prove everything.

Dave entered quietly, but Wells spun instantly at the sound of the door. Her hand moved toward her jacket - not where a normal inspector would carry credentials.

"We need to talk about AgraTech," Dave said calmly.

Wells's expression flickered with recognition. Not of Dave specifically, but of what he represented - a threat to the operation. Her hand completed its movement, producing a compact pistol with professional smoothness.

"You really don't want to do that," Dave advised.

The sound of boots on concrete reached them both - multiple teams moving with tactical precision. Wells's backup had arrived right on schedule.

"You have no idea what you're dealing with," Wells said, her weapon steady despite the approaching sound. "This is bigger than-"

The flash-bang came through the high window before she could finish. Dave's enhanced senses let him track its arc, already moving to minimise the effect. But Wells was caught completely exposed, the combined flash and concussion dropping her to her knees.

Black River operators breached through both doors simultaneously with the fluid grace that came only from thousands of repetitions. Four-man teams, moving in practised formations - the mark of serious professionals.

Dave grabbed Wells before the tactical teams could reach her, his enhanced speed letting him clear the space between heartbeats. The woman's compact frame was surprisingly dense with muscle as he lifted her. Training definitely showing through the inspector disguise.

"Sample case," Wells managed through the flash-bang's after effects. "Can't... leave it..."

Dave followed her gaze to a reinforced case on the counter. Inside would be proof of AgraTech's contaminated shipments - evidence that could expose the entire operation. The Black River teams were already moving to secure it.

"Hold on," he told Wells, then moved. His enhanced speed let him reach the case just ahead of the nearest operator. The man's expression showed professional surprise as Dave sped off with both inspector and evidence.

"North exit blocked," Serj reported through comms. "Two more teams moving in tactical formation."

"East side clear," Carter responded. "But not for long. They're establishing a perimeter."

Dave carried Wells through the facility's maze-like corridors, the sample case secured under one arm. Behind them, he could hear the tactical teams coordinating their pursuit with practised efficiency. Their radio chatter suggested a methodical sweep - these weren't amateurs chasing blindly.

They reached a junction just as another team appeared ahead. Four operators, already bringing weapons to bear. Dave dropped Wells behind a concrete support pillar, then moved to engage. His recent training showed in his economy of motion - no wasted movement, no flashy techniques.

The first operator managed to squeeze off two rounds before Dave reached him, but Dave simply let them impact while closing distance, ensuring they didn't hit anything behind him. He flowed around the man's follow-up strike, using his own momentum to send him crashing into his teammate.

The remaining two operators switched to hand-to-hand, showing excellent close-quarters training. Dave moved between them with fluid efficiency, never staying still long enough to present a target. A kick sent one operator's weapon clattering across the floor. An arm lock redirected another into his teammate's line of fire.

"Two more teams converging on your position," Anya reported. "They're using the building's layout to channel you."

She was right - the tactical teams were herding them, using the facility's design against them. Dave retrieved Wells and the sample case, already planning their next move.

"The loading dock," Wells said, her voice steadier now. "There's a maintenance passage... leads straight to the auxiliary drainage system. They won't have it covered."

Dave studied her for a moment. Her professional mask had cracked, showing not just fear but determination. He'd seen that look before - someone who'd gone too far down a dark path and desperately wanted out.

"Side passage to the right," Serj cut in through comms. "Should get you there faster."

The sound of approaching boots forced their decision. Dave caught movement at both ends of the corridor - tactical teams setting up crossfire positions. Time to show them why normal containment strategies didn't work against enhanced targets.

"When I move," he told Wells quietly, "stay close."

He waited until the tactical teams were fully committed to their positions, then acted. His enhanced speed, and strength let him tear a water pipe from the wall, the pressurised spray creating instant chaos in the confined space. Through his enhanced vision, he could see the operators struggling to maintain their firing stances as water filled the corridor.

Dave moved through the spraying water, using the chaos to his advantage. Most opponents would be completely blind in these conditions, but his "game mode" vision cut through the spray perfectly. The tactical teams' thermal imaging would be useless - the water disrupting their gear's effectiveness.

"Next left," Wells called, pressed close behind him. Her familiarity with the facility's layout proved genuine as the passage opened into a wider service corridor.

The loading dock stretched ahead, massive roll-up doors still sealed this early in the morning. But Wells led them to a smaller access point - a maintenance hatch set into the concrete floor. The cover was heavy steel, designed to withstand the weight of loaded forklifts.

"Locked from below," Wells said, examining the mechanism. "We'd need-"

Dave simply gripped the edge of the cover and pulled. Enhanced strength let him tear through the locking mechanism like paper, the steel shrieking in protest as he peeled it back.

"Or that works too," Wells muttered, already moving to descend.

The maintenance tunnel was cramped - barely shoulder width, with pipes and conduits reducing the space further. But it was dry, and more importantly, it didn't appear on any of the facility's main blueprints.

"They're sweeping the loading area," Anya reported through comms. "But they haven't found the access point yet."

Dave helped Wells navigate the confined space, the sample case making their movement awkward. Behind them, they could hear the tactical teams coordinating their search patterns.

"Why did you do it?" Dave asked as they moved. "Help them contaminate the food supply?"

"Started small," Wells replied, her voice tight. "Just paperwork 'errors' at first. Look the other way on certain shipments. The money was good, and they knew exactly how to hook someone." She paused at a junction, checking their route. "By the time I realised what they were really doing, they owned me. Made it very clear what happens to people who try to quit."

The tunnel began sloping downward, the air growing thick with moisture. Wells stopped at another junction, this one marked with faded hazard symbols.

"Main drainage intersection ahead," she said. "We follow it north, we come out near-"

The explosion above cut her off, the confined space amplifying the sound. Dust and concrete fragments rained down as the tactical teams breached the loading dock floor.

"Multiple charges," Serj reported. "They're doing a full structural scan - looking for hidden passages."

They had maybe minutes before the teams found the maintenance tunnel. But the drainage junction offered a solution - multiple routes leading in different directions, all eventually connecting to the city's storm water system.

"North is blocked," Anya cut in. "They've got teams at all the mapped exits." A pause as she studied the facility plans. "Wait - there's a storm drain main line running parallel to your position, about two feet through the east wall. If you can breach it..."

Dave studied the concrete surface. No need for fancy structural analysis - sometimes brute force was the simplest solution. He handed the sample case to Wells and squared up to the wall.

The first punch sent cracks spiderwebbing across the aged concrete. The second widened them significantly, chunks beginning to fall away. He could hear water now - a deep rumble behind the weakened barrier.

"Stand back," he warned Wells, then drove his fingers into the largest crack. Enhanced strength let him tear away chunks of concrete and reinforcement bar, widening the breach methodically. Water began spraying through the growing hole, the pressure intense.

"We'll never get through that," Wells said, watching the powerful jets of water shoot across the tunnel.

"Give it a minute," Dave replied, continuing to enlarge the opening. "Storm drains are designed to handle sudden pressure changes. Once the initial surge passes..."

True to his prediction, the violent sprays began to diminish as the water found its new equilibrium. Within moments, the flow had settled into a steady current - fast moving but no longer the impossible barrier it had first appeared.

"Now we can move," Dave said. "But we'll need to be quick. The sound of that breach will have given away our position."

He helped Wells through the opening, then followed with the sample case held high. The storm drain was massive - easily tall enough to stand in - but the footing was treacherous on the worn concrete. At least the current was manageable now that the pressure had equalised.

"Got your position," Anya reported. "Omar's waiting two blocks north. But you'll need to-"

They'd barely gone twenty metres when gunfire erupted behind them - the Black River teams had breached faster than expected. The shots echoed crazily off the curved walls, making it impossible to track their origin.

"Run," Dave ordered Wells. "I'll handle them."

Wells didn't hesitate, pushing through the cascading water into the larger storm drain beyond. Dave followed, the sample case protected from the worst of the flood by its weatherproof design.

Dave turned to face the approaching tactical teams, the confined space of the storm drain actually working to his advantage. They couldn't effectively spread out or maintain their usual coordination. More importantly, the curved walls created blind spots their training wouldn't account for.

The first team emerged from the breach at full tactical stride, night vision gear compensating for the darkness. But they weren't prepared for Dave's enhanced vision, which rendered the environment in perfect clarity regardless of lighting.

He moved before they could properly set up, crossing the space between heartbeats. The lead operator's weapon went flying as Dave struck, the impact sending him stumbling into his teammate. The next two operators tried to create distance, but the drain's curved walls limited their options.

Dave fought with calculated precision, each movement exactly as Maeda had trained him, ruthlessly efficient close-quarters combat. A lateral neck strike dropped one operator. An arm lock redirected another into the drainage channel.

More teams were already pushing through the breach, using their fallen colleagues as cover to set up firing positions. But Dave had achieved his goal - buying Wells enough time to reach the exit point with the sample case.

"Target's clear," Serj reported through comms. "Time to go."

Dave disengaged smoothly, enhanced speed letting him clear the kill zone before the tactical teams could properly track him. Behind him, he heard their frustration as coordinated fire hit nothing but concrete and running water.

He caught up to Wells at the exit point - a maintenance access ladder leading to street level. The sample case was secured across her back as she climbed, her movements showing that professional training once again.

"Omar's in position," Anya updated them. "But you've got vehicles converging from multiple directions. Black River called in everything they had."

They emerged into the brightly lit morning's sunshine. Dave could hear engines approaching - multiple SUVs moving with tactical precision to cut off escape routes.

"This way," he said, guiding Wells toward Omar's position. But movement ahead made him pause - another tactical team had managed to get ahead of them, already deploying from their vehicles.

"Running out of options here," Wells said quietly, clearly calculating their odds.

Dave smiled slightly. "Not quite."

He moved instantly, enhanced speed letting him reach the nearest SUV before its occupants could properly react. His fingers dug into the vehicle's frame, enhanced strength turning hardened steel into putty. With a single smooth motion, he rolled the SUV so it was sideways across the street, creating an instant barricade.

The tactical teams recovered quickly, already moving to flank the obstacle. But Dave wasn't finished. He reached for a fire hydrant, enhanced strength tearing it free from its mounting. The pressurised water erupted upward, creating a curtain of spray that cut visibility to near zero. In a final act of destruction Dave launched the fire hydrant into the engine bay of the other SUV, killing it with a hiss of steam from the shattered radiator, and a clatter of destroyed engine parts.

"Go," he told Wells, already moving them through the chaos. The tactical teams' vision would be worse than useless now - the ruptured hydrants cascading water preventing them from getting a clear target.

They reached Omar's position just as more SUVs appeared behind them. But they were already moving, the vehicle's engine roaring as Omar executed a perfect J-turn to carry them away from the engagement zone.

"Multiple vehicles in pursuit," Serj reported from his overwatch position. "Professional driving, tactical spacing."

"Won't matter," Omar replied calmly, his hands steady on the wheel as he wove through traffic. "Any?"

"Traffic control is ours," Anya confirmed. "Creating a wave of green lights ahead of us... and gridlock behind."

Dave watched through the rear window as their pursuers were slowly swallowed by expertly manipulated traffic patterns. Black River was good, but they couldn't fight an AI that controlled every traffic signal in the city.

"The sample case," he said finally, turning to Wells. "What will it prove?"

"Everything." She opened the case carefully, revealing rows of sealed containers. "Every contaminated shipment they pushed through, complete with time stamps and chemical profiles. Plus all the falsified documentation - inspection reports, handling certifications, customs declarations. Enough to expose their entire distribution network."

Dave nodded slowly. They had their evidence, and more importantly, someone willing to testify about AgraTech's FDA infiltration. The tactical teams' aggressive response had only confirmed the importance of what they'd recovered.

"They'll keep coming," Wells said quietly, watching the city flow past. "Black River doesn't leave loose ends."

"Let them try," Dave replied. Sometimes the best defence was being such an obvious hard target that even professionals thought twice about engaging. And after today's performance, Black River would definitely be reconsidering their tactical options.

The sample case represented more than just evidence - it was proof of how deep AgraTech's infiltration went. They hadn't just corrupted individual inspectors; they'd compromised the entire regulatory system meant to protect the food supply.

But now they had a way to expose it all. Even the biggest conspiracies unravelled not from dramatic revelations, but from the patient accumulation of evidence. One sample case, one corrupted inspector, one piece at a time until the whole rotten structure came crashing down.

24 Port Authority

"These shipping documents reveal an odd pattern," Wells said, spreading port manifests across the operations table. "When I was still working inspection, I noticed water usage anomalies in containers routed through Hamburg. Storage facilities typically maintain stable temperature and humidity, but these showed massive spikes in utility consumption and disposal."

"Confirming the anomaly," Anya added, pulling up data streams. "Port records show water requirements 300% above normal for agricultural storage, along with specialised waste disposal manifests that don't match standard fertiliser handling."

"I flagged it in the system," Wells continued, "but my supervisor - another Black River plant - redirected the investigation. That's when I started documenting everything. Look at their infrastructure specs." She highlighted building details. "Multiple airlocks, sophisticated filtration systems, negative pressure containment throughout. This isn't a warehouse - it's a biological containment facility in disguise."

Dave studied the container specifications, his excellent vision catching every detail. The environmental control units were supposedly for maintaining fertiliser stability, but the specifications, and data sheets suggested these were over sophisticated for that relatively simple job.

"The fungal agent needs precise conditions," Wells continued. "Too cold, it goes dormant. Too hot, it dies completely. That's why they chose Jebel Ali - the port's automated systems let them maintain perfect cultivation temperatures without raising suspicion."

"Got satellite confirmation," Anya announced from her workstation. "Thermal imaging shows four containers matching those exact temperature profiles. They're using the port's own power grid to keep their growth chambers active whilst in port."

Dave watched the massive gantry cranes moving through their pre-programmed routines. Finding four specific containers among thousands of identical units would be challenging, especially after dark when his enhanced vision could help with navigating the stacks, but terrible at reading container numbers.

"Security's heavy," Dan reported. "Port Authority teams, plus private contractors. And there are Black River signatures - equipped with the latest Gen-4 night vision, suppressed MP7s, and tactical comms integrated into their helmets".

"We must assume Wells's access codes won't work," Anya added. "They'd have locked those down immediately after she turned. We'll need to breach the environmental controls manually."

"First we need a distraction," Carter said. "Something significant enough to pull their main response teams."

Omar checked his watch. "That customs inspection on the Al-Rashid should do it. I can get aboard, plant some charges in hold three. When they detonate during the inspection..."

"They'll think it's related to the smuggling investigation," Carter finished. "Good. How long will that hold their attention?"

"Standard response time for suspicious explosion is thirty minutes minimum," Omar replied. "Port security has specific protocols they have to follow."

The plan came together quickly. Omar would handle the distraction while Anya guided them through manual bypasses of the environmental controls. Dan would provide overwatch with his G28, while Serj worked close support with Dave during the container search.

The operation began as dusk settled. Dave and Serj moved through the shadows between containers, waiting for Omar's signal. Above them, the

automated cranes continued their work, massive shapes moving against the darkening sky.

The explosion rocked the Al-Rashid right on schedule. Port security responded immediately, multiple teams converging on the vessel.

"Security focusing on the ship," Dan reported. "Main response teams deploying... now's your window."

Dave moved toward the first thermal signature Anya had identified, Serj covering their flanks. His enhanced vision was starting to kick in as true darkness fell, rendering the maze of containers in perfect clarity.

"Found it," Dave reported, examining the sophisticated environmental control unit. "But these are definitely not standard access panels."

"I see it through your body cam," Anya replied. "You'll need to bypass the security lockout. Look for a maintenance port on the lower right - should have a diagnostic interface."

Dave located the port. "Got it. Now what?"

"Connect my bypass module. I'll try to trick it into thinking this is a routine systems check."

The module's lights flashed as Anya worked. But suddenly alarms began blaring throughout the container stack.

"That's a negative," Anya reported tensely. "They've got better security than expected. You'll have to do this the hard way."

"Meaning?"

"With the bypass module in the diagnostic port," Anya instructed. "I need to disable the intrusion detection first, or we'll trigger the containers vent process."

"Multiple teams responding to movement in this sector," Dan warned. "Professional formation - definitely Black River. Taking position to cover your western approach."

Dave heard boots on metal grating as tactical teams began deploying. Serj moved to a better defensive position, his rifle tracking movement between the containers.

"Intrusion detection's offline," Anya reported. "Now, see that reinforced panel? You'll need to breach it - but carefully. We're not trying to destroy the controls, just expose them."

Dave's enhanced vision caught the outline of the access panel in the darkness. With precise control of his enhanced strength, he peeled back the reinforced steel, exposing the control circuitry beneath.

"Got the internals," he reported. "What am I looking for?"

"There should be a red and black wire connection near the bottom - that's the power supply for the vent release mechanism. Short those together and it'll blow the control fuse. The vents will be locked shut, but the environmental controls will still work."

Dave drew his knife, found the wires peeled off some insulation and connected them. A small spark confirmed the fuse had blown.

"Good," Anya said. "Now for the delicate part. See that control chip? Third pin from the left - that's the temperature feedback connection. You need to carefully scrape through its coating to break the circuit. Don't touch any other pins, or we'll lose control completely."

With his knife, the blade reflecting in his enhanced night vision, and with absolute precision, he used the tip to gently scrape the pin's coating. The environmental controls immediately registered a temperature spike, their automated systems engaging maximum heating to compensate for the false cold reading.

"Perfect," Anya confirmed. "With the control panel deactivated, they can't override the heating sequence. Those spores won't survive the next hour."

"Container secured," he reported. "Moving to--"

Gunfire erupted from multiple positions. Black River teams had arrived in force, each operator taking position to control specific lines of sight. Dave and Serj dove for cover as rounds pinged off container walls.

"Two down," Dan reported calmly, his G28 speaking with precise authority. "But more incoming. They're trying to establish a perimeter."

"Anya," Dave called as he moved between containers, "we need those crane controls."

"Working on it. Their automated systems are sophisticated, but... got it. Creating some chaos now."

The first sign of Anya's intervention came when a massive container swung through the tactical teams' carefully planned firing lanes, forcing them to abandon their positions. More cranes joined the disruption, their programmed precision replaced by calculated chaos.

"I've got three more temperature signatures," Anya reported. "But they're scattered across different stack levels."

"Keep their security busy," Dave told Serj. "I'll move faster alone."

Dave moved through the maze of containers, using his enhanced night vision to navigate efficiently. Black River teams were still trying to establish control zones, but Anya's manipulation of the cranes kept disrupting their positions.

"Watch your three o'clock," Dan reported from his overwatch. "Team moving up to higher ground." His G28 cracked twice. "Correction - team was moving to higher ground."

Dave reached the second container. "Found it," he reported, locating the diagnostic port.

"Connecting bypass module now," Anya said. "Hold position while I disable the intrusion detection."

Serj maintained cover as Dave worked, his rifle tracking movement between the stacks. Black River teams were getting closer, moving with practised efficiency through the container maze.

"Intrusion detection's down," Anya confirmed. "Same process as before - peel back the panel, get to those wires."

Dave's enhanced vision made the panel's outline clear in the darkness. With careful control, he peeled back the reinforced steel to expose the circuitry.

"Got it," he reported, spotting the familiar red and black wires. His knife made quick work of the insulation, and another spark confirmed the successful short circuit. The vents locked shut with a satisfying clunk.

"Control chip next," Anya guided. "Third pin from the left again. Same gentle touch."

"Multiple hostiles approaching from the south," Dan warned from his overwatch position.

Dave's knife reflected in his hybrid night vision as he carefully scraped the pin's coating. The environmental controls responded exactly as before, engaging their heating systems to counter the false cold reading. Within minutes, the temperature would rise beyond what the fungi could survive.

"Two down," he reported, already moving toward the next target. Behind him, another batch of fungal cultures began their inevitable meltdown.

"Two down," he reported. "Moving to-"

"Multiple teams converging on the third signature," Dan cut in. "They've figured out what we're targeting. Setting up serious defensive positions."

Through his enhanced vision, Dave could see them deploying with professional precision. Multiple firing lanes, overlapping fields of coverage. No easy approach vectors.

"Anya, can you give me a direct route?"

"Calculating... okay, there's a gap in their coverage. But you'll need perfect timing with the crane movements. On my mark, move straight up six containers, across three west, then drop four levels."

Dave tensed, watching the cranes swing through their modified patterns. At Anya's signal, he exploded into motion. Enhanced speed let him climb the container stack in seconds. He crossed between moving cranes, the massive steel boxes passing within inches as Anya coordinated his movement.

The tactical teams spotted him just as he dropped to the target level. But their prepared firing positions worked against them - they had to reorient completely to track his new approach vector.

"Dan," Dave called, "how about some discouragement?"

The G28 responded immediately, precise shots forcing the Black River operators to abandon their carefully planned positions. Dave reached the third container just as they began to recover.

"Found the third container," Dave reported, reaching for the bypass module.

"Wait," Anya cut in sharply. "They're actively accessing this one remotely. I'm seeing commands being uploaded... they're trying to trigger emergency venting."

The sound of boots on metal grew closer - multiple tactical teams converging on their position.

"How long until the vents open?" Dave asked, connecting the module.

"Two minutes max. Let me disable their remote access first... got it. Now quick - same process as the others. We need to kill their vent controls before they can upload new commands."

Dave peeled back the access panel, his hybrid vision making the familiar wire configuration clear even in the darkness. He found the red and black wires, as before.

"Remote commands still coming in," Anya warned. "Make that connection now."

Instead of peeling the insulation, Dave let his knife act as the conductor as he sliced into the black and red wires simultaneously. The result was the same: blown fuse, locked vents.

"Now the chip," Anya directed. "Third pin just like before. But hurry - they'll have teams at your position in seconds."

Dan's G28 cracked twice in the darkness. "Multiple targets down, but more incoming. Make it fast."

Dave's knife moved with practised precision, scraping the pin's coating. The environmental controls engaged immediately, heating systems ramping up to combat the false cold reading.

"Three down," he reported, already moving as Black River teams reached his position. Behind him, another batch of fungal cultures began their march toward thermal destruction.

"One more," he reported, heading for the final signature.

"Problem," Dan called. "They're deploying some kind of gas. Looks like CS, trying to flood the container lanes."

"They're getting desperate," Serj noted, falling back to a better position. "Running out of options."

Dave reached the final container just as the gas began filling the lower levels. His enhanced vision cut through the chemical haze, letting him work efficiently despite the deteriorating conditions.

"Same override sequence as the third unit," Anya reported. "But watch for additional..."

Multiple explosions rocked the container stack - Black River creating their own chaos now. But they were too late. Dave had already begun the breach sequence, his movements precise despite the growing disruption.

"Final unit neutralised," he reported as the environmental controls died. "Time to go."

They withdrew smoothly as port security finally began responding to the explosions. Behind them, four dead containers held the evidence of what might have been - a sophisticated biological attack stopped just in time.

But Dave knew this was just one part of a larger operation. AgraTech had other distribution networks, other storage facilities. They'd prevented this release, but the real threat was still out there.

For now though, they'd won this round. Four containers neutralised, a major distribution hub disrupted. And most importantly, more evidence of exactly how far their opponents would go to protect their operation.

The next move would be AgraTech's. But after tonight, they'd know exactly what they were dealing with - an opponent who could breach their most sophisticated security, counter their best tactical teams, and strike anywhere in the world.

They regrouped at the extraction point, leaving behind four neutralised containers and a lot of questions for port security to handle. Through his enhanced vision, Dave watched the Black River teams methodically sweeping the area, their professional efficiency undiminished despite their failure.

"Next time they'll change their security protocols completely," Anya noted, already analysing data from the operation. "No more predictable access points."

"Good," Dave replied, thinking about the sophisticated systems they'd encountered. "Means we're forcing them to adapt. Making their operation harder with every strike."

Carter's voice came through their comms: "Get clear. We've got confirmed movement at their Singapore facility. Whatever they're planning next, it's already in motion."

25 Pressure Point

"Every contaminated shipment that passed through Hamburg had something unusual," Wells said, spreading port manifests across the operations table. "The same water usage anomalies, and waste disposal patterns caught my attention when I was still working inspection. No normal storage facility needs that kind of disposal."

"Let me check the anomaly," Anya added, pulling up data streams on her screens. "The infrastructure specs show above normal water requirements, well beyond standard agricultural storage needs."

"Got the facility location," Omar reported, bringing up satellite imagery. "Industrial complex on the outskirts, officially registered as agricultural processing. But these specs tell a different story." He highlighted building details. "Multiple airlocks, sophisticated filtration systems, negative pressure containment throughout. This isn't a warehouse - it's a biological containment facility in disguise."

Dave studied the data, catching additional details in Omar's satellite feed. "They're not even trying to hide the security measures. Just counting on no one asking the right questions."

"BSL-3 level protocols at minimum," Wells noted, examining the schematics. "See these automated barriers? Each section can seal independently. Trigger the wrong sensor, and you'll be dealing with reinforced containment doors designed to hold against positive pressure from either side."

Serj moved to study the facility layout. "Multiple containment layers. They can isolate any compromised section while maintaining negative pressure throughout the rest of the building. Very sophisticated."

Carter nodded. "Which means this isn't just a storage site - it's a major processing hub. They're producing or modifying the agent here before shipping it out for deployment."

Anya's scrolled through the data as she dug deeper into the facility's systems. "The containment protocols are impressive. Every section has redundant seals, emergency barriers that can drop in seconds. And I'm seeing Black River signatures in their personnel files."

"We need proof linking this to AgraTech," Carter said. "But breaching a facility like this is tricky. One wrong move, and we'd trigger lockdown protocols - end up sealed inside until their containment teams arrive."

"Standard infiltration gear won't work either," Serj added. "We'd need proper biological containment suits just to survive in there. That kind of equipment takes time to source without raising flags."

"Unless..." Dave looked thoughtful. "My enhanced durability means I don't need breathing equipment. I could operate in negative pressure without support."

"Risky," Carter warned. "Even with your abilities, if those containment barriers drop, you'll be dealing with multiple layers of reinforced seals. Each one designed to maintain perfect isolation until properly decontaminated and cleared by safety protocols."

"Have you got facility response procedures?" Dave asked Anya.

Her screens filled with new data. "Multiple containment levels. Minor breaches trigger local seals - just that section closes off. Major breaches initiate full facility lockdown. Every barrier drops, ventilation systems lock into containment mode, all airlocks seal. The whole place becomes a vault until their response teams clear it."

The team spent the next three days conducting careful reconnaissance. Omar established observation points around the facility, documenting

security patterns and shift changes. Anya worked through their systems, mapping containment protocols and barrier locations.

"Found their shift schedule," she reported on day two. "They cycle security teams every eight hours, with a fifteen-minute overlap during handover. That's our window for initial entry."

Serj studied the patrols through his scope. "Black River teams are running standard rotations outside the containment zones. Inside they're using facility specialists - people trained for biological containment environments."

"No lethal weapons inside either," Omar noted, reviewing surveillance footage. "Everything's non-lethal - tasers, shock batons. They can't risk compromising the containment seals with gunfire."

Dave watched another security team cycle through the outer airlock. "How long for full decontamination?"

"Three minutes for the entry cycle," Anya replied. "But I can't override it without risking containment protocols. Those systems have to stay active, or we lose access to most of the facility."

They chose a moonless night for the operation. Serj would provide close support until the first airlock, then maintain overwatch while Dave handled the internal breach. The rest of the team would monitor from their mobile command centre, ready to intervene if everything went wrong.

"Remember," Carter said during the final briefing, "we need proof linking this facility to AgraTech's distribution network. Focus on their processing systems - anything showing what they're preparing to ship out."

"Watch those containment seals," Wells warned, pulling up the facility schematics. "You can't just tear through the barriers, even with your strength - well, you probably could, but you shouldn't. Each airlock and containment door is part of a sophisticated pressure system. Break one seal incorrectly, and you could create positive pressure waves through the

facility - which means everything they're cultivating in there gets blown out into the atmosphere. Once those spores are loose, there's no way to stop them spreading. We'd end up causing exactly what we're trying to prevent."

"She's right," Anya added, studying the pressure system diagrams. "The negative pressure containment isn't just about keeping things in - it's a delicate balance. Breach it wrong and Hamburg's entire agricultural region becomes ground zero for what they're planning to do globally. You'll need to work with the containment systems, not through them."

The approach began at midnight. Dave and Serj moved through the facility's exterior security with practised efficiency, using gaps in the patrol patterns Omar had identified. They reached the maintenance access point exactly as planned, waiting for Anya's signal.

"Patrols are shifting," she reported through comms. "You've got four minutes until the next sweep."

Serj covered their position while Dave dealt with the access panel. His enhanced strength made quick work of the reinforced housing, exposing the control circuits beneath.

"I'm in their security network," Anya announced. "Cycling the outer doors... now."

The maintenance access slid open with a soft hiss. Dave and Serj moved inside quickly, finding themselves in a service corridor leading to the main facility.

"First airlock ahead," Serj reported, checking sight lines. "After this point, it's all containment protocols and negative pressure. You sure about this?"

Dave nodded, already moving toward the airlock's controls. "Just keep their response teams busy if things go wrong."

The airlock cycled open with another hiss of equalising pressure. Dave stepped inside, watching the indicators as the chamber prepared for

decontamination. Behind him, Serj moved to his overwatch position, rifle covering the approaching security patrol's likely routes.

"Beginning containment cycle," Anya reported. "I've mapped the sensor locations, but be careful - those barriers are serious business. They're designed to maintain isolation for weeks if necessary."

The inner door slid open, revealing the facility's main processing area. Dave took a final breath of normal-pressure air, then stepped into the controlled environment beyond. Time to find out exactly what AgraTech was preparing for worldwide deployment.

The Hamburg facility's airlock cycled with a deep hiss as Dave watched the pressure gauges settle. Behind its reinforced windows, two Black River operators maintained professional composure despite their sealed suits. They'd been trained for this environment, knew its dangers intimately.

"Pressure variance in section three," Anya reported through his comms. "They're using the loading bay airlock for entry. Three more teams prepping to follow."

The operators moved smoothly into the negative pressure environment, their gear showing the same sophisticated design he'd seen in Kazakhstan. Not just sealed suits, but integrated rebreathers, reinforced joints, emergency backup systems. These people understood exactly what they were containing.

Dave waited until they'd moved past his position before acting. His enhanced strength let him tear the ventilation grating free with barely a sound. The nearest operator noticed the movement, but Dave was already in motion. His hands found the suit's air supply connection and twisted. The reinforced coupling didn't so much break as separate cleanly - exactly as designed for emergency removal. But without a replacement supply ready, the effect was devastating.

The operator's training showed as he immediately held his breath, trying to reach his emergency backup. But Dave had already moved to the second target, this time simply puncturing the suit's main pressure seal. Both men were unconscious in seconds, their lungs unable to function in the negative pressure environment.

"Two more teams entering through the main airlock," Anya updated. "They're spreading out to secure the control centre. But something's wrong with their pattern... they're being too careful about some sections. Like they're protecting specific routes."

Dave examined the facility's layout through the reinforced observation windows. The central atrium stretched upward three levels, ringed by airlocks and containment chambers. Industrial vacuum systems maintained the negative pressure, their constant drone a reminder of the environment's artificial nature.

"Found something in the building systems," Anya reported. "They've modified the vacuum network, added distribution nodes throughout the loading bays. These aren't just for containment - they're using the negative pressure to feed their dispersal system."

"How?" Dave asked, already moving to intercept the next team.

"The fungal agent needs precise pressure gradients for absorption into standard fertiliser. They're using the facility's vacuum system to create perfect dispersal conditions, then sealing it for transport."

Movement caught Dave's attention - another tactical team approaching, moving with practised coordination despite their sealed suits. Four operators this time, all carrying specialised gear designed for this environment.

Dave spotted the roll of industrial containment plastic propped against the wall, next to some recently completed repairs. The reinforced sheeting was specifically designed to maintain integrity under extreme pressure

differentials - temporary patches for when regular barriers needed maintenance.

The Black River team moved with practised coordination despite their sealed suits, spreading out as they approached his position. Their non-lethal loadout made sense - tasers and shock batons being the only weapons safe to use in negative pressure environments. Unfortunately for them, electrical weapons were particularly useless against Dave's enhanced durability.

The first operator jabbed forward with his shock baton, the weapon crackling harmlessly against Dave's chest. The puzzled pause in the man's stance was almost comical - clearly this wasn't the reaction he'd expected. His teammate tried the taser with similar lack of effect, the barbs bouncing off Dave like rubber bands.

Dave responded by calmly unrolling a length of the industrial plastic, the material unfurling with a heavy flap. The operators watched with evident confusion as he sheared off a roughly four-metre square piece with his enhanced strength.

"Let me demonstrate something interesting about pressure differentials," Dave said conversationally, then suddenly lunged forward with the sheet spread wide.

The nearest operators tried to back pedal but weren't fast enough. Dave simply kept advancing, herding them toward the massive vacuum vent in the corridor wall. The moment the plastic sheet came within range, physics took over with devastating efficiency.

The industrial sheeting snapped taut instantly as the negative pressure grabbed it, the massive surface area creating an irresistible force. Both operators found themselves pinned against the vent, the reinforced plastic conforming to their bodies like shrink-wrap. The harder they struggled, the more securely the distributed pressure held them in place.

"The interesting thing about surface area," Dave explained to his now thoroughly vacuum-packed audience, "is how it multiplies the effective force. Right now you've probably got several hundred kilos of distributed pressure holding you in place. Perfectly safe in those sealed suits, of course. Just... very stuck."

He left them there, flattened against the vent like life-sized action figures on a retail blister pack, and moved deeper into the facility. Behind him, he could hear muffled cursing as the operators discovered exactly how effective simple physics could be when properly applied.

The next team he encountered seemed far more hesitant with their shock batons, having apparently received radio reports about their colleagues' current gift-wrapped status. Dave smiled and reached for another roll of containment plastic he'd spotted. The simplest solutions were usually the most effective.

"More teams converging on the control centre," Anya warned. "They're... wait. Energy spike in the vacuum system. They're initiating some kind of purge sequence."

"Their distribution network," Dave realised, remembering Wells's briefing. "They're trying to trigger mass dispersal before we can shut it down."

He moved faster now, no longer worried about stealth. A wall breach would trigger emergency containment - sealing sections of the facility automatically. But his enhanced strength meant locked airlocks were merely suggestions rather than barriers.

The first sealed barrier crumpled under his hands, enhanced strength tearing through reinforced steel. Warning klaxons blared as the breach triggered emergency protocols, but Dave was already through, moving to the next section.

He found more opposition at the second barrier - a full tactical team setting up defensive positions. Their suits marked them as facility staff rather than

Black River contractors. These people knew the environment's capabilities intimately.

"Careful," Anya cautioned. "They've got control of the local pressure systems. Trying to... there. They're creating pressure spikes to force you back."

Dave felt the pressure waves as localised vacuum systems engaged, trying to create impassable barriers of differential pressure. But his enhanced durability meant physics had to try harder to inconvenience him.

He moved through their carefully created kill zone with methodical efficiency. The first two operators went down to precise strikes, their suits compromised just enough to incapacitate without risking wider containment breach. The third managed to trigger an emergency shutdown, sealing the entire section.

But Dave had been counting on that. As warning lights flashed and barriers slammed down, he used the chaos to breach the final security checkpoint. The control centre stretched before him - banks of sophisticated monitoring equipment maintaining the delicate balance of pressure and containment throughout the facility's distribution network.

"Found it," he reported, examining the central console. "They've linked their vacuum system into the fertiliser processing network. Using negative pressure to create perfect dispersal conditions during mixing."

"Can you shut it down?" Anya asked.

Dave smiled slightly. "I might have a better idea..." His eyes fixed on the row of industrial sacks lining the far wall as he moved quickly to examine the facility's environmental controls.

"Multiple teams converging on your position," Anya warned. "Whatever you're planning, do it fast."

Dave scanned the sacks' labels - "Glucose Powder - Industrial Grade". It made sense - the fungi needed simple sugars for rapid growth, and glucose

powder was the purest form available. The incredibly fine powder would dissolve almost instantly in their cultivation medium. But right now, that wasn't what interested him about its properties.

"Anya, I need you to shut down all fire suppression systems and override the airlock safeties on levels two and four."

"Disabling suppression now," she confirmed. "But you'd better know what you're doing."

Dave studied the facility's vacuum system layout. This next step needed some specific handling to create the right conditions.

First, he located the main vacuum pump exhaust line. With precise application of his enhanced strength, he crushed the steel pipe flat, effectively sealing it. That would prevent the powder from being drawn out of the building.

Moving quickly, he identified the negative pressure line feeding the cultivation chambers. One sharp twist tore the pipe open at a junction point. Now he needed to get the glucose into the system, but timing would be critical.

"Teams breaching outer containment," Anya reported. "Thirty seconds max."

Dave worked methodically despite the urgency. He gathered the industrial sacks of glucose powder, tearing them open and positioning them near his breach point in the vacuum line. His enhanced vision caught sight of a compressed oxygen cylinder in an emergency rebreather station - perfect for creating the positive pressure he'd need.

"Twenty seconds," Anya warned.

He moved to the exterior wall, picking a spot that would create maximum airflow. One punch spiderwebbed the reinforced concrete. A second opened a ragged hole to the outside. The pressure differential was already starting to draw air through the space.

Dave retrieved the oxygen cylinder, checking its pressure gauge - still nearly full. He positioned it carefully, then used his enhanced strength to twist off the valve assembly completely. The sudden release of compressed gas created an intense positive pressure wave, blasting the glucose powder into a perfect suspension throughout the room.

The facility's negative pressure system pulled the suspended powder through his breach point and into the cultivation chambers. Through the observation windows, he could see the fine particles spreading in an ideal mixture with the air and oxygen he'd introduced.

All he needed now was a spark.

Dave watched the glucose powder spreading through the connected chambers in a perfect aerosol suspension. Now he just needed the right ignition source - something that would trigger an initial blast powerful enough to propagate through the vacuum system's connected spaces.

"Ten seconds," Anya warned. "Teams approaching from both access points."

The facility's electrical panel caught his eye. A single high-voltage ignition point would be enough - the vacuum system's connected chambers would do the rest. He moved to the panel, enhanced vision picking out the main power feeds.

"Everyone clear of the outer containment zone?" Dave asked, knowing what was coming.

"Confirmed," Carter replied. "Whatever you're planning, make it quick."

Using precise control of his enhanced strength, Dave peeled back the panel housing, exposing the 480-volt bus bars. He just needed one good spark in the right place - the pressure wave would force the combustion through the connected vacuum system into each cultivation chamber.

The first security team breached the outer door just as Dave grabbed the bus bars. Electricity surged through him, creating a massive arc into the powder-filled air. For a fraction of a second, nothing happened.

Then physics took over.

The initial detonation created a pressure wave that propagated through the vacuum system's connected spaces. Each new chamber it entered contained the perfect fuel-air mixture, turning the facility's own containment network into a path for the expanding firestorm.

Dave had just enough time to think "This might be bigger than expected" before the combined blast picked him up and threw him bodily through the reinforced wall.

The explosion was far more spectacular than he'd anticipated. The pressure wave caught him squarely, launching him through the nearest wall like a battering ram. He crashed through the concrete blocks and landed in a heap of rubble in the next chamber, his clothing in tatters and smoking slightly.

Behind him, the combustion cascade propagated through each connected space with devastating efficiency. The fungal cultivation systems, designed for such carefully controlled conditions, were subjected to a rapidly spreading firestorm.

Dave picked himself up, brushing concrete dust from what remained of his shirt, and started chuckling. "Didn't expect quite that much kick," he admitted to himself.

"Reading massive thermal spikes throughout the network," Anya reported, a mix of concern and amazement in her voice. "What did you just... are you okay? I'm seeing structural damage on your level."

"I'm fine," Dave replied, still grinning despite his partially shredded clothing. "Though I might need another set of clothes."

Through the breach he'd inadvertently created, he could see the beautiful efficiency of his improvised solution - each chamber in sequence being

subjected to intense, rapidly spreading heat that no fungal culture could survive.

"Facility's done," he reported, watching the last chambers ignite. "Along with pretty much everything they were growing here."

Later, safely clear of the secured facility, Carter finally asked: "How did you know that would work?"

Dave looked slightly embarrassed. "I remembered reading about Bird's custard factory in Banbury. Back in '81 they had this explosion..." He shrugged. "Seemed worth a try."

26 Mastermind

"You need to see this," Anya called from her workstation. Her usual calm efficiency carried an edge of discovery as she pulled up personnel files on the main display. "Found something in the Hamburg facility's access logs."

Dave moved to study the screens, his enhanced vision catching details others might miss. The logs showed regular visits from a WHO consultant - Dr. Heinrich Voss, Deputy Director of Agricultural Security. But the timing of his inspections matched perfectly with AgraTech's testing schedule.

"He wasn't investigating," Dave said quietly. "He was coordinating."

Anya's fingers flew across her keyboard, pulling up more records. "His background is interesting. Twenty years with the WHO's bioweapons prevention programme. Specialised in agricultural threats - tracking Soviet-era weapons research, monitoring potential deployment vectors."

"The perfect cover," Carter noted, joining them at the displays. "Who better to hide a bioweapons programme than someone tasked with preventing them?"

Wells studied Voss's profile with growing recognition. "I remember him. He visited the Kansas City facility last year - standard WHO inspection. Seemed more interested in our security protocols than the actual testing procedures."

"Because he was assessing your vulnerabilities," Serj said. "Finding ways to circumvent your safeguards."

Anya expanded her search, correlating data streams from multiple sources. Voss's career history filled the screens - decades of agricultural security work across multiple organisations. But certain patterns emerged under careful scrutiny.

"Look at his inspection records," she said, highlighting specific entries. "Every major agricultural region he visited eventually showed fungal contamination. He wasn't just coordinating - he was identifying optimal targets."

Dave watched more documents cascade across the displays. "How did we miss this?"

"Because he built his cover perfectly," Carter replied. "Who questions the man responsible for preventing bioweapons? He used his position to identify weaknesses, catalogue potential targets, even access classified Soviet research - all while appearing to protect against exactly what he was planning."

"Found his financial records," Anya announced. Her programs had breached layers of careful misdirection, revealing complex networks of hidden accounts. "He's been quietly accumulating positions in agricultural futures markets for years. Small amounts, carefully spread through multiple brokers. Nothing to raise flags individually."

"But combined?" Carter asked.

"Over two billion in leveraged positions," Anya confirmed. "All timed to profit from crop failures in specific regions. He wasn't just planning attacks - he was betting on them."

Wells moved closer to examine the trading patterns. "These positions... they're not just about profit. The timing, the target selection - he's trying to create artificial scarcity. Drive prices up while controlling who can still produce food."

"Population control through agricultural collapse," Serj said grimly. "Destroy food production in targeted regions, then control who gets access to the treatment."

Anya's screens filled with new data as her search expanded. "His WHO credentials gave him access to everything - Soviet weapons archives,

agricultural security protocols, inspection records. He knew exactly where to look for forgotten research."

"And exactly how to weaponise it," Carter added. "The Soviets did the hard work decades ago - he just needed to update their delivery systems for modern agriculture."

Dave studied Voss's official WHO portrait. The man's expression carried that particular intensity he'd seen before - someone who believed absolutely in the righteousness of their cause. "What's his motivation? Just profit?"

"No," Wells said quietly. "I've seen his type before. The money's just a means to an end. He wants control - the power to decide who eats and who starves."

"She's right," Carter agreed. "Look at his early papers." Academic publications filled one screen - theoretical works on agricultural security and population sustainability. "He's written extensively about 'controlled scarcity' as a tool for population management. He genuinely believes he's solving a problem."

"By threatening the global food supply?" Dave's tone carried equal parts disbelief and anger.

"From his perspective, he's creating 'necessary pressure' to force population reduction in specific regions," Carter explained. "The profit from market manipulation just funds the operation. His real goal is reshaping global demographics through controlled famine."

"Found something else," Anya reported. "He's been quietly recruiting private military contractors - ex-special forces, intelligence operators. Building his own private army using profits from early market tests."

Serj studied the personnel files. "Black River Solutions wasn't just hired security - they're his personal force. Trained specifically for this operation."

"Which explains their professionalism," Dave noted. "They're not just mercenaries - they're true believers. Voss has spent years building a core team that shares his vision."

Wells nodded grimly. "That's why their tactical responses were so coordinated. They're not just following orders - they're executing a plan they've trained for specifically."

"His WHO position is the perfect cover for travel too," Carter added. "He can visit agricultural facilities worldwide without raising suspicion. Coordinate operations personally while appearing to investigate threats."

Anya's search continued expanding, uncovering more layers of Voss's operation. "The scope of this... he's been planning it for decades. Building his network, positioning resources, identifying targets. The Soviet research was just the final piece he needed."

"And now he has everything in place," Dave said. "The weapon, the delivery system, the security teams. He's ready to reshape the world according to his vision."

"Not quite everything," Carter corrected. "He still needs the treatment formula. Without that, he can't control who recovers from the attacks. It's not enough to destroy food production - he needs to control who gets to restore it."

"Which is why the Kazakhstan facility is so heavily protected," Serj noted. "It's not just about weapons production - it's where they're perfecting the treatment."

The analysis flagged another pattern in WHO inspection records. Munich stood out - a secure research facility that Voss had visited regularly over the past year. Unlike the production sites they'd discovered, this one maintained an impeccable legitimate research profile.

The Munich facility's a logical target," Carter noted. "Their security protocols suggest they're protecting something more valuable than routine agricultural research.

Dave watched more data flow across Anya's screens - the pieces of Voss's operation finally forming a complete picture. A WHO official, trusted to prevent agricultural weapons, secretly building the most sophisticated bioweapons programme in history. Not for profit or power alone, but to reshape the world according to his twisted vision of necessary population control.

"How do we stop someone who's spent decades preparing for every contingency?" Wells asked quietly.

"By using his preparation against him," Dave replied. "He's built redundancy into everything - multiple facilities, distribution networks, security teams. But that same complexity makes his operation vulnerable. We don't have to destroy everything at once."

"We just need to prove what he's doing," Carter agreed. "His WHO position protects him only as long as he maintains deniability. One solid piece of evidence connecting him to AgraTech's operation..."

"Would destroy everything he's built," Anya finished. "His credentials, his access, his carefully constructed cover - it all depends on appearing to be exactly what he claims to be."

Dave nodded slowly, plans already forming. "So we make him choose - between maintaining his cover and protecting his operation. Force him to act directly, where we can expose him."

"He'll know it's a trap," Serj warned.

"Good," Dave replied. "The best way to catch someone is to let them think they see your plan. While actually leading them into something else entirely."

The screens continued filling with details of Voss's operation - the product of decades of careful planning by someone who believed absolutely in the righteousness of their cause. But even the most carefully constructed plans had vulnerabilities. Sometimes the best way to fight true believers was to use their own conviction against them.

They had their target now. Heinrich Voss - WHO Deputy Director, agricultural security expert, and architect of a plan to reshape the world through controlled famine. A man who'd spent decades building the perfect cover for exactly what he claimed to prevent.

The next move would be his. But for the first time, they understood exactly who they were fighting. Sometimes knowing your enemy's true nature was the first step to defeating them.

27 Zero Hour

Multiple alerts lit up Anya's screens simultaneously as AgraTech's automated systems initiated across four separate facilities. Dave watched warning indicators cascade through industrial control networks - environmental seals engaging, cultivation chambers activating, distribution systems coming online.

"They're starting mass production," Anya reported, her fingers flying across keyboards. "Coordinated activation at all major sites. Hamburg, Rotterdam, Marseille, and Valencia."

"Timeline?" Carter asked through comms.

"Two hours until their mixing processes reach critical mass. After that, the first shipments go out through normal agricultural supply chains." She highlighted shipping manifests. "They're not even trying to hide it any more. Just overwhelming the system with simultaneous releases."

"We'll have to split up," Carter decided. "Omar, you and Dan take Hamburg. Serj, handle Rotterdam. I'll coordinate with our Mediterranean teams for Marseille and Valencia."

"What about the research facility in Toulouse?" Anya asked. "Getting strange readings from their environmental systems."

Dave studied the facility's network traffic on Anya's screens. Unlike the others, Toulouse wasn't a production centre - it was one of AgraTech's legitimate research stations, working on conventional agricultural projects. But the data flows looked wrong - massive automated system updates being pushed through their supposedly quiet research network.

"That's not normal research traffic," he said, recognising patterns similar to what they'd seen in Morocco. "Look at those automated system updates - same protocols their other facilities used. They're turning this place into another cultivation site."

"Multiple Black River teams converging on Toulouse," Anya reported. "They're setting up a perimeter. Whatever's happening there, they're serious about protecting it."

Carter's voice carried grim understanding: "They're sacrificing their legitimate facility to create a diversion. If anything goes wrong, it looks like an industrial accident at a normal research station."

"With thirty-seven civilian staff inside," Anya added. "None of them have any idea what's about to happen."

Omar's cough interrupted the discussion - his lungs still recovering from the Yuan Xiang exposure. "Dave and I can handle Hamburg," he started, but another coughing fit cut him off.

"No," Dave said firmly. "You're still compromised from the spores. Dan, get Omar to Hamburg. Focus on their distribution network - stop those shipments from going out. Serj, hit Rotterdam hard - their automated systems are their weak point. Carter, coordinate with our Mediterranean teams. Anya and I will handle Toulouse."

The team split up quickly, years of practise eliminating wasted motion. Dave caught Omar's frustrated expression as Dan led him toward their transport. Being slowed by injury was hard for any of them, but sometimes adapting to limitations was part of the job.

While Dave headed toward Toulouse with Anya, Serj's voice came through their comms from Rotterdam: "Initial breach successful. Accessing their control systems now." Gunfire echoed in the background. "Though they're not making it easy."

"Hamburg secured," Dan reported tersely. "Omar's working on their distribution network. These shipping manifests are... interesting." Another burst of gunfire interrupted him. "Excuse me a moment."

In Marseilles, Carter coordinated with their Mediterranean team. "South loading bay compromised. Moving to - hold on." The distinctive sound of

his G28 firing three precise shots carried through the comms. "Target neutralised. Moving to secondary containment."

"Multiple access points," Anya reported as they approached Toulouse. "But Black River's got them all covered. Professional three-man teams, overlapping fields of fire."

Dave studied the facility through his enhanced vision. The tactical teams were good - maintaining perfect coverage while appearing casual enough not to alarm the civilian staff. To anyone without his abilities, they'd look like ordinary security guards.

"Getting more data from their systems," Anya said. "They've modified the ventilation network, tied it into some kind of dispersal mechanism. If those seals rupture while the system's active..."

"The whole place becomes a cloud chamber," Dave finished. The facility's sophisticated environmental controls would turn against it, spreading whatever they were cultivating throughout the building. And with Black River controlling the exits...

"We need to shut down their cultivation system," he said. "But first priority is getting those civilians clear."

Movement caught his attention - more tactical teams deploying, these ones carrying specialised equipment. The Black River operators were preparing for something big.

"Dave," Anya's voice carried sudden urgency. "Their environmental seals just activated. They're starting the cultivation sequence early. We've got maybe fifteen minutes before..."

An explosion rocked the facility's east wing. Through his enhanced vision, Dave saw Black River teams breaching into the lower levels, moving with practised coordination. This wasn't a response to their arrival - it was part of the plan.

"They're forcing evacuation," he realised. "Using the chaos to separate the civilian staff, probably trap them in containment zones. Makes it look like an accident when everything goes wrong."

The facility's alarm systems activated, automated warnings directing staff toward emergency exits. But Dave could already see the pattern - Black River teams subtly herding civilians into specific sections, isolating them from actual escape routes.

"How many civilians in the hot zone?" he asked, already moving.

"Twenty-three in the main lab complex," Anya reported. "Another fourteen in auxiliary research spaces. The cultivation system connects to both areas. When it ruptures..."

Dave made his choice. "Get to the control centre. Stop that system from activating. I'll handle the civilians."

"Black River has the control centre locked down," Anya objected. "Multiple teams, professional security. Even with your abilities..."

"Then I'll have to be creative," he replied, already moving toward the first group of civilians. This time the best defence was going to be being completely unpredictable.

Dave moved through the facility's outer security with practised efficiency, using his enhanced vision to track Black River team positions. The tactical operators were focused primarily on controlling choke points - stairwells, main corridors, emergency exits. Professional work, but their careful planning would only work against normal targets.

"First group is in the biochem lab," Anya reported through comms. "Twelve researchers. Black River's herding them toward containment zone three."

"Their system updates are still executing," Dave noted as he passed a network access panel. "Whatever they're uploading is big - probably automated containment protocols like Morocco."

As Dave worked to evacuate the Toulouse researchers, updates kept flowing through their comms:

"Rotterdam containment breached," Serj announced. "But their automated systems are fighting back. Some kind of adaptive security we haven't seen before."

"Same in Hamburg," Omar added, his voice still rough from the spore exposure. "They've locked down the - Dan, on your six!" The sharp crack of Dan's rifle echoed through the channel.

"Marseilles facility showing multiple release points," Carter reported. "Local team is containing, but Valencia's going hot. Need immediate support."

The biochem lab's windows gave him a clear view of the situation. Three Black River operators in casual security uniforms were calmly directing staff toward "safe" evacuation routes. Their professional demeanour kept anyone from questioning why the emergency exit twenty feet away remained unused.

"Two more teams moving to seal that section," Anya warned. "Once those researchers are inside the containment zone..."

Dave didn't wait. He burst through the lab doors at just above normal human speed - fast enough to surprise the operators but not so fast as to panic the civilians. "Fire in the east stairwell," he announced with calm authority. "We need to evacuate through the loading dock immediately."

The lead operator recovered quickly. "Sir, all staff should proceed to designated safe zones-"

Dave cut him off smoothly: "I've got alerts showing electrical fires in three junction boxes. This whole wing could go. Loading dock. Now."

He moved toward the emergency exit with calm purpose, radiating the kind of quiet competence that made people instinctively follow. The researchers, already unsettled by the alarms, readily accepted this new direction.

The Black River team exchanged glances, trying to decide how to handle this disruption without breaking cover. That moment of hesitation was all Dave needed.

"Ma'am," he addressed the nearest researcher, "please lead your colleagues to the loading dock. I'll ensure these gentlemen help coordinate the evacuation." His tone carried iron certainty that brooked no argument.

As the civilians filed out, Dave turned to the operators. "Shall we discuss your actual assignment here?" he asked quietly.

The first punch caught him in the chest - expertly thrown, but utterly ineffective against his enhanced durability. The second operator tried for a leg sweep while his partner drew a concealed stun baton.

"Really?" Dave sighed. "We're doing this now?"

Thirty seconds later, all three operators were efficiently zip-tied with their own restraints. Dave left them in a supply closet and moved to catch up with the researchers.

"First group clear," he reported. "Where's the second team?"

"Upper lab complex," Anya replied tensely. "But we've got a problem. The system updates just finished loading. Their cultivation protocols are activating ahead of schedule."

Through the windows, Dave caught glimpses of more Black River teams moving with increased urgency. They were shifting from subtle containment to active hostile control.

"How long?" he asked, already moving toward the stairs.

"Ten minutes, maybe less. The automated systems are coming online faster than expected. And Dave? They've started flooding the upper labs with inert gas - supposedly for fire suppression, but..."

"Making sure everyone's too dizzy to resist being 'evacuated' to containment," he finished. "On my way."

He took the stairs three at a time, enhanced speed letting him clear multiple flights in seconds. The upper level was already hazy with suppression gas - harmless in theory, but carefully calculated to disorient and confuse.

Through his enhanced vision, he spotted eleven researchers being "guided" by Black River operators. The civilians were stumbling slightly, the gas already affecting their coordination. Two more tactical teams were moving to cut off their actual escape routes.

"Time for subtle is over," he muttered, then simply ran straight through the reinforced security door blocking the main corridor. The metal shrieked as it tore free, the impact echoing through the building.

The Black River teams reacted instantly, weapons appearing as their cover evaporated. But Dave was already moving, flowing through their formation with practised efficiency. His recent training showed as he disabled operators with precise strikes - no wasted motion, no flashy techniques.

"Everyone out. Now!" he commanded the researchers, keeping his voice calm but forceful. "Down the east stairs, straight to the car park."

A tactical team tried to block the stairwell. Dave picked up a convenient equipment cart and threw it - not at the operators, but at the window behind them. The reinforced glass shattered, creating an instant ventilation point that began clearing the suppression gas.

"Sir," one of the researchers managed, still fighting the gas's effects, "the fire system..."

"Is being used against you," Dave finished. "Trust me - you need to get out of this building right now."

More tactical teams were approaching - he could hear them coordinating through their radios. But the researchers were finally moving, helping their more affected colleagues toward the stairs.

"Dave." Anya's voice carried carefully controlled tension. "The cultivation system just hit critical threshold. Automated dispersal starts in two minutes. But I'm reading two more life signs in the containment zone - maintenance staff who didn't evacuate."

He did the mental calculation instantly. Two minutes to either reach the maintenance workers or get to the control centre and stop the system. Not enough time for both.

"Get the researchers clear," he told the most coherent-looking scientist. "Straight to the car park, don't stop for anything."

Then he turned and ran toward the maintenance section, enhanced speed taking him through the facility faster than Black River could track. The choices left to Dave, weren't really choices at all.

"Thirty seconds," Anya reported. "Dave, if that system activates with people inside containment..."

"Then we deal with it," he replied, already seeing the maintenance workers through his enhanced vision. They were trapped behind a sealed airlock, apparently trying to shut down malfunctioning equipment.

The Black River teams had reset their perimeter, trying to channel him into prepared kill zones. But Dave simply ignored their carefully planned containment, enhanced strength letting him tear through walls where necessary.

"Ten seconds," Anya said as Dave reached the airlock. The maintenance workers looked up in surprise as he simply gripped the sealed door and pulled, enhanced strength overwhelming its hydraulic locks.

"Time to go," he told them, already moving them toward safety. Behind them, warning indicators flashed as the cultivation system reached activation threshold.

While Dave raced to save the maintenance workers, the other facilities reached critical points simultaneously:

"Rotterdam systems overridden," Serj announced. "Containment holding."

"Hamburg distribution network neutralised," Omar reported between coughs. "But we've got overflow into secondary storage."

"Valencia contained," Carter's voice carried grim satisfaction. "Marseilles team reports full lockdown achieved."

The coordinated strikes had worked - mostly. But as Dave helped the maintenance workers to safety, Anya's voice carried carefully controlled tension: "We've got active spores in Hamburg's secondary containment. First confirmed exposure outside controlled conditions."

They had prevented the mass release, but not without cost. The war for the world's food supply had just entered a new phase.

"Get our containment teams to Hamburg," Carter ordered. "Everyone else maintain lockdown. This isn't over."

Dave watched Black River teams regrouping through his enhanced vision, knowing similar scenes were playing out across Europe. They'd stopped the coordinated release, but at every facility, the fight was far from finished.

They had failed to stop the system's activation. But Dave had made the choice he could live with. Saving lives had to take priority over stopping machines.

"Anya," he called through comms, "tell me you have a Plan B."

Her smile was audible in her response: "Already implementing it. By the way, you might want to get clear of the west wing. Things are about to get interesting."

"Plan B initiated," Anya announced, mouse clicking a strategic controls. "Dave, I'm going to need you to keep Black River very busy in about two minutes."

"Why's that?"

"Because I'm about to turn their containment wing into the world's largest pressure cooker, and they might object." Multiple windows filled her display as she dug into the facility's sterilisation controls. "Every research facility this size has industrial autoclaves for decontaminating equipment. This one has three - all tied into their central steam system."

"And you're going to... what exactly?"

"Override their safety protocols. Redirect superheated steam from all three autoclaves into the containment zone's ventilation network. The whole zone is already designed for extreme pressure differentials - they use negative pressure for cultivation. That means it can handle positive pressure just as well."

Dave watched Black River teams regrouping through his enhanced vision. "How much pressure exactly?"

"More than enough. Initiating sterilisation sequence... now."

Warning klaxons blared as automated systems detected the unauthorised protocol. Steam began venting into the containment zone, quickly fogging the reinforced windows. But instead of cycling normally, the pressure kept building.

"They're trying to shut it down remotely," Anya reported with grim satisfaction. "But someone seems to have corrupted their safety overrides. Such a shame."

The first pipes began groaning under the increasing pressure. Black River teams rushed to initiate emergency venting, but found every release valve locked out. The containment zone's massive windows vibrated slightly but held - they were designed for far more extreme conditions.

"Approaching 5 bar," Anya announced. "Temperature passing 150°C. Those spores are having a very bad day."

A tactical team finally reached the main steam control room. Dave intercepted them smoothly, enhanced speed letting him disable three

operators before they could properly react. "Steam room's a bit occupied," he told their unconscious forms. "Try again later."

The containment zone's internal sensors were registering catastrophic environmental failures as temperature and pressure continued climbing. Automated systems fought each other - safety protocols trying to vent steam while Anya's corrupted controls kept feeding more in.

"Status?" Dave asked, engaging another Black River team attempting to breach the control room.

"7 bar," Anya replied. "165°C and rising. The cultivation chambers are cooking themselves. Their reinforced containment is actually working against them - keeping all that heat and pressure right where we want it."

Through the fogged windows, Dave could see the cultivation tanks being subjected to temperatures far beyond what any fungal culture could survive. The containment zone's own sophisticated pressure systems - designed to handle everything from near-vacuum to positive pressure - ensured nothing could escape until the sterilisation was complete.

Later, safely clear, Dave had to ask: "How did you know that would work?"

"It might not be custard factory spectacular, but simple IT principles," Anya replied with a slight smile. "The most dangerous failures happen when sophisticated automated systems try to solve the wrong problem really efficiently." She paused. "Also, I might have spent some time studying industrial sterilisation protocols after Morocco. Always good to have a backup plan."

"We should get moving," Dave said, checking his phone. "Carter's reporting Black River mobilising across the city."

"Let them come," Anya replied, already packing her equipment. "I've got a few more safety protocols I'd like to rewrite."

28 **Breaking In**

The secure research facility on Munich's northern outskirts squatted in the pre-dawn darkness, its outer perimeter marked by subtle security measures that team caught easily, obvious to a trained operator - pressure plates disguised as decorative paving, infrared sensors hidden in landscaping, cameras concealed within architectural features.

"Their network security is impressive," Anya said, studying the Bavarian facility's systems through her laptop. "Multiple isolated networks, biometric authentication, real-time surveillance analysis. But look at these traffic patterns - they're routing everything through a central node."

"That seems like poor design for a secure facility," Dave noted, recognising the network topology.

"It's not poor design - it's arrogance," Anya replied. "They're so confident in their outer security layers that they assume no one will ever reach their core systems. Classic enterprise architecture mistake."

She highlighted specific data flows on her screen. "See these periodic sync bursts? Their research data gets consolidated hourly for backup. During those syncs, authentication protocols relax slightly to handle the increased traffic."

"How slightly?"

"Enough that I can slip modified credentials into their buffer. But we'll need a distraction - something to keep their security teams busy while their systems are stressed."

Dave smiled slightly. "Distractions I can handle. How long do you need?"

"Four minutes from the start of a sync cycle. Their next backup starts in..." she checked the network traffic, "twelve minutes."

Dave studied the facility layout. "Show me their sensor coverage again?"

Anya brought up the security overlays she'd mapped. "Pressure plates here and here. Motion sensors covering these approaches. But their camera systems are interesting - they're using AI-based behaviour analysis."

"Meaning?"

"The AI flags unusual movement patterns or suspicious behaviour. But it can be overwhelmed by too many legitimate-looking alerts." She smiled slightly. "Their own safety protocols might be useful there."

Dave watched the facility's rhythms - guard patrols, automated systems, service access. After a few minutes, he nodded. "I have an idea. But I'll need access to their fire alarm protocols."

"Already in their environmental controls," Anya replied. "What are you thinking?"

"Multiple minor anomalies, spread across their sensor network. Nothing that screams 'attack' - just enough unusual events to keep their response teams moving." He gestured at the facility's layout. "If their AI is flagging potential concerns in different zones..."

"They'll have to investigate each one," Anya finished. "By protocol, they can't ignore safety alerts. And with response teams constantly moving..."

"Their behaviour analysis AI will have trouble establishing baseline patterns to check against," Dave confirmed. "See? All those hours you spent explaining network analysis weren't completely wasted on me."

The first anomaly appeared eleven minutes later - a subtle pressure variance in the facility's east wing. Nothing dramatic, just enough to trigger a routine safety check. Two minutes after that, a temperature sensor in the west section registered a slight spike.

"Their teams are starting to move," Anya reported, watching security responses through the facility's own cameras. "Maintaining normal patrol patterns, but having to detour for equipment checks."

More minor alerts appeared at carefully timed intervals - environmental sensors detecting trace gas levels just high enough to require verification, motion detectors registering readings that fell inside normal parameters but formed unusual patterns.

"Sync cycle starting," Anya announced. "Their buffer's filling up... now we just need that final push to keep their security busy."

Dave was already moving. His enhanced speed let him trigger multiple pressure plates in sequence, creating a pattern of alerts that looked like potential mechanical failures rather than intrusion attempts. The security teams, already spread thin checking environmental anomalies, now had to add structural integrity concerns to their growing list of minor but mandatory inspections.

"Network load spiking," Anya reported. "Authentication protocols relaxing to handle backup traffic. Inserting modified credentials... got it. We're in."

She moved quickly through the facility's side entrance, using the credentials Dave's distractions had let her slip into their system. The security teams were too busy chasing sensor ghosts to notice another technician responding to apparent system anomalies.

The central data core hummed with barely contained power, ranks of servers processing the facility's research data. Anya moved to the nearest terminal, her fingers flying across the keyboard as she accessed their storage systems.

"Treatment formula located," she reported through comms. "Initiating transfer... wait." Her hands stilled on the keys. "This isn't right."

"Problem?"

"The formula data is fragmentary. Core sequences missing, key synthesis steps redacted. This isn't their main research database - it's a partial backup."

Dave triggered another set of pressure plates, keeping the security teams moving. "Can you trace the complete data?"

"Working on it. There's a reference to... got it. Secure storage in their Luxembourg facility. This site only gets operational data, not complete research files."

Through his enhanced vision, Dave caught movement - security teams starting to recognise patterns in the sensor alerts. "How much can you get?"

"Enough to prove what they're developing, but not the complete treatment formula. Ten seconds to finish transfer."

Dave created his final distraction, using his enhanced speed to trigger multiple sensor zones simultaneously. The resulting alerts sent security teams rushing to contain apparent system cascades.

"Transfer complete," Anya reported. "Time to go."

They extracted smoothly, using the continued chaos of sensor alerts to cover their exit. By the time the facility's security teams realised they'd been chasing ghosts, Dave and Anya were long gone.

Later, examining the captured data, Anya's expression was grim. "We've got proof of their treatment programme, but not enough to reproduce it. The complete formula is still out there."

"Then we know our next target," Dave replied. Even partial victories pointed the way to the next challenge.

The Luxembourg facility would be harder - this successful infiltration would make AgraTech strengthen their security even further. But they'd proven that even the most sophisticated systems had vulnerabilities, if you knew where to look.

Knowing what you didn't have was just as valuable as knowing what you did.

29 **Betrayal**

The first message came through a booking system for a small Munich coffee shop - a seemingly random reservation that contained encoded metadata matching protocols used by known dissidents. When decoded, it was simple: "Need to talk. Lives at stake."

"Could be legitimate," Anya said, analysing the contact method. "They used authentication patterns from Hamburg. Not many people would know those details."

The team set up the meet carefully - multiple layers of security, careful routes to verify no surveillance. When Dr. Marcus Klein finally arrived at the designated location, a nondescript parking garage, he showed all the signs of genuine fear.

"They're watching us now," Klein said, glancing nervously at shadows. "All the research teams. After what happened to Santos..." He trailed off, hands shaking slightly as he lit a cigarette.

Omar materialised from the darkness behind him. "Hands where we can see them. Slowly." The cigarette dropped as Klein raised his arms, startled but not panicked - a good sign.

"We need to move," Klein said after they'd thoroughly searched him. "I have a regular check-in at my hotel in ninety minutes. If I miss it..."

"Then your handler will assume the worst," Serj finished, studying the scientist's body language. "Convenient timing."

They moved him quickly - efficient bag over the head, circuitous route in their unmarked van. Klein submitted to it all with the resignation of someone who understood operational security.

"I was there when Voss first proposed it," Klein explained once they'd reached the safehouse. "Targeted agricultural manipulation, supposedly to

prevent famines by controlling crop yields. But now..." He shuddered. "He's talking about full global coverage. Reshaping the entire world's food supply at once."

"Why come to us now?" Dan asked, watching Klein's mannerisms carefully. The scientist's fear seemed genuine, but something about his story felt too polished.

"Because it's gone too far." Klein's voice cracked slightly. "The formula we've developed - it's more aggressive than anything we modelled. The adaptation rate is beyond our predictions. If Voss deploys it globally..." He spread his hands helplessly. "I'm a scientist. I wanted to help feed people, not... this."

"The Luxembourg facility," Dan prompted. "That's where they're perfecting the treatment?"

Klein nodded eagerly. "The main research hub. Everything flows through there - development, testing, implementation plans. I can help you get inside. There are gaps in their security if you know where to look."

They spent the next three hours debriefing him, carefully verifying every detail against their existing intelligence. Klein's information matched perfectly - almost too perfectly, Dan thought. Like someone had studied their operations and crafted the ideal defector profile.

"We'll need to keep you close," Dan told him as the team began planning their apparent assault on Luxembourg. "For your own protection."

"Of course," Klein agreed quickly. "I understand. After what happened to the others who tried to leave..." His hands shook slightly as he reached for another cigarette.

It had been three days since Dr. Marcus Klein first approached them, Dan Carter still couldn't shake his unease. The scientist's information was accurate - perfectly accurate. Every detail about the Hamburg facility, every security protocol, matched their existing intelligence exactly.

"The Luxembourg facility's security focuses on the main entrance," Klein explained, spreading building schematics across their planning table. "But there are vulnerable points if you know where to look." His eyes tracked the team's equipment loadout with careful attention that tried to appear casual.

"Makes sense," Serj replied, studying the plans. Dan caught his subtle glance - they'd both noticed how Klein's suggestions perfectly matched assumptions an outsider would make about their tactics.

Now, watching the team prep for their apparent assault on Luxembourg, Dan maintained his position near the operations centre's main entrance. Klein had requested protection during the operation, claiming concern about AgraTech's retaliation. It made perfect sense for him to remain behind with Dan.

A little too perfect.

"The treatment formula documentation," Klein said once they were alone, laying out papers they'd already seen. "There are elements we haven't fully discussed."

Dan watched the scientist's manner shift subtly now that the team appeared committed elsewhere. The careful nervousness was gone, replaced by something more focused. Through the facility's windows, he caught glimpses of movement - professional operators taking positions with practised coordination.

"Like what elements?" Dan kept his tone casual, cataloguing angles and approaches. The facility's layout created multiple blind spots that could work to an attacker's advantage. Or could be used against them by someone who knew they were there.

Klein's hand moved toward his jacket pocket. "The cellular adaptation rate is quite fascinating-"

"Stop." Dan's voice carried quiet authority. "We both know what this is. Though I'm curious - did Voss really think we'd accept your story without verification?"

The scientist's rehearsed demeanour cracked slightly. "You knew?"

"That every piece of intel you provided exactly matched what we already had?" Dan's peripheral vision caught more tactical teams moving into position. "You're good, but not that good."

Klein's expression hardened. "Doesn't matter now. You're already surrounded."

"Probably," Dan agreed. "But you might want to step aside anyway. The next few minutes won't be healthy for anyone in the middle of things."

The flash-bang came through the window before Dan could respond. But the sharp crack of a precision rifle spoke first - Omar's shot dropping the lead operator before he could breach. Dan was already moving, combat experience letting him minimise the flash-bang's effects while drawing his sidearm.

"Secure room compromised," he reported calmly through comms, his first shots forcing the tactical teams to abandon their careful positioning. "Klein's party crashers arrived right on schedule."

Through the operations centre windows, he caught familiar movement patterns - an operator whose approach spoke of extensive professional training. "Mitchell," he called out, recognising the distinctive style. "Still favouring that right shoulder from Helmand?"

The tactical advance paused briefly. "Carter?" A professional voice, carrying equal parts recognition and resignation. "Should have known they'd have you running overwatch."

"Getting slow in my old age," Dan replied, using their brief exchange to track additional team positions. Another sniper shot from Omar disrupted their attempted flanking movement.

"Extraction team two minutes out," Cecilia's voice carried controlled urgency through his comms. Of course she'd had backup staged nearby - Klein's arrival had been too convenient not to plan contingencies.

Mitchell's team adapted quickly, shifting to aggressive close-quarters tactics now that their careful containment was compromised. Multiple operators pushed simultaneously, using volume of fire to offset their disrupted positioning.

Dan's G28 spoke precisely, each shot placed to wound rather than kill. These weren't zealots or terrorists - just professional operators on the wrong contract. No need to make things permanent if containment would serve.

The next flash-bang came from an unexpected angle, its detonation masking the sound of operators pushing through his defensive position. Dan shifted to close-quarters combat, his own training showing as he engaged multiple opponents in the confined space.

The follow-up response came in coordinated fire from multiple angles, forcing him to abandon his position as they pushed to close distance. These weren't standard contractors - their movements showed the smooth efficiency that came from years of working together.

Dan transitioned to his G28, the rifle's familiar weight settling against his shoulder as he established new firing lanes. Two more operators went down to precise shots, their professional armour unable to completely protect against his careful shot placement.

But more teams were inbound - he could hear them coordinating through tactical frequencies, working to establish overlapping fields of fire. They'd studied the facility's layout, knew exactly how to control key approaches.

A burst of suppressed MP7 fire forced him to shift again, tactical teams moving with increasing aggression now that they had him largely

contained. Dan caught glimpses of Klein directing their movements, using his knowledge of the facility to guide their advance.

"Running out of dance floor," Mitchell called from cover. "No shame in a tactical withdrawal."

Dan smiled slightly despite the situation. "Appreciate the professional courtesy. But we both know that's not happening."

His tactical watch displayed an encoded message from Cecilia - team proceeding on mission, reinforcements inbound. Good. Luxembourg had to take priority regardless of his situation.

The first two attackers went down to precise strikes, but more were already moving to contain him. Dan fought with cold efficiency, knowing each engagement had to end quickly to prevent them from properly coordinating.

Mitchell timed his approach perfectly, using his teammates' movements as distraction. Even knowing it might come, Dan couldn't quite avoid the shot - the suppressed round catching him just below his body armour. A professional shot, expertly placed.

"Status update," Cecilia demanded through comms.

"Flesh wound," Dan managed, already triggering the thermite charges that would destroy their sensitive data. "Though I might need a new shirt."

"Medical team inbound," she replied, a hint of relief colouring her professional tone. "Try to avoid any more dramatic gestures before they arrive."

Through blurring vision, Dan saw Klein's expression shift from triumph to frustration as thermite flames consumed the operations centre's data systems. The scientist's careful intelligence gathering had yielded nothing but ash and encrypted drives.

"Should have stayed retired," Mitchell said quietly as Dan slumped against the wall.

"Probably." Dan smiled slightly despite the pain. "But then who'd keep you honest?"

The agency extraction team breached with perfect coordination, their overwhelming force causing the remaining Black River operators to surrender rather than escalate further. Professional courtesy extended both ways – this time the smartest tactical choice was knowing when to stand down.

Omar materialised from his hidden position, efficiently securing Klein while medical teams moved to stabilise Dan. The scientist's expression showed bitter realisation - his perfect trap had been anticipated from the start.

"You could have died," Klein said, watching the agency teams secure the scene.

"Calculated risk," Dan replied as medics worked on his wound. "Sometimes you have to let the enemy think they have you isolated. Right up until they learn what it really means to be surrounded."

The extraction team worked with swift efficiency, collecting prisoners and evidence while ensuring nothing useful survived the thermite's cleansing fire. They'd lost some equipment and data, but gained something far more valuable - proof that their opponents could be outmanoeuvred even at their most confident.

"Next time," Cecilia's voice carried both warmth and exasperation, "try to avoid getting shot as part of the plan?"

"Yes ma'am," Dan replied, allowing himself to relax as the professionals took over. "Though you have to admit, it made for a convincing performance."

Dan pressed a hand against his wound, nodding to Mitchell who sat zip-tied with his team. "Nice shooting."

"You too," Mitchell replied, glancing at his disabled operators. "Though your aim's not what it was."

"Had to give you something to remember me by." Dan winced as he shifted position. "Besides, retirement was getting boring."

30 **Robot Wars**

The automated farming facility stretched across the German countryside, its massive harvesting machines moving with mechanical precision through endless rows of wheat. Dave watched from their concealed position as robotic arms swung through practised patterns, testing and maintaining equipment that would soon be repurposed for a very different kind of harvest.

"Multiple security teams deploying," Serj reported, studying the facility through his scope. "Definitely more Black River contractors."

"They're expanding facility control systems," Anya added, analysing network traffic on her laptop. "Reprogramming agricultural robots for defensive operations. Very sophisticated automation protocols."

Cecilia's face appeared on their tactical tablets, the agency's temporary command centre visible behind her. "Satellite shows increased activity across their automation network. They're preparing for something big."

"How's Dan?" Dave asked, remembering their injured teammate.

"Stable, but out of action," Cecilia replied. Her expression carried both concern and determination. "Medical team's keeping him sedated. Which means you'll have to handle this one without his tactical oversight."

Dave studied the facility's layout through his enhanced vision. Massive agricultural robots patrolled between equipment rows, their movements showing new purpose as security protocols overrode normal farming operations. Black River teams had established defensive positions using the machinery for cover, transforming the industrial space into a mechanised killing ground.

"Found their control centre," Anya reported, screens filling with technical data. "They're running everything through a central hub - security systems,

automation protocols, robotic controls. But getting there means crossing their entire defensive zone."

"The robots' normal programming prevents them from operating near humans," Serj noted. "Safety protocols built into their core systems. But these new security patterns..."

"They've disabled the safety interlocks," Anya confirmed grimly. "Those machines could easily crush someone now. And their targeting systems are already optimised for precision operations."

Dave watched a harvester's massive arms swing through calibration sequences, its movements carrying new menace. "We need that control centre. Everything leads back there - facility operations, security protocols, automated defences. Shut it down, we shut down their whole operation."

"Multiple approach vectors," Cecilia said, examining satellite feeds. "But they've got overlapping fields of fire from both human and robotic elements. This won't be simple."

"It never is," Dave replied, already planning his route. The automated systems actually worked in his favour - their movements might be precise, but they'd be predictable. Machines couldn't adapt like humans could.

The first line of defence activated as soon as they breached the perimeter. Automated harvesters pivoted smoothly on massive treads, their collecting arms sweeping horizontal paths designed to catch intruders. But Dave's enhanced speed let him flow between the mechanical appendages, timing his movements to exploit gaps in their coverage.

"Multiple teams converging on your position," Cecilia reported through comms. "The automated systems are tearing through the building to reach you."

A massive harvesting arm punched through the concrete wall beside them, its metal teeth designed for corn stalks now chewing through reinforced steel and electrical conduits with terrifying efficiency. The Black River

team scrambled back as their prepared defensive position literally crumbled around them. Dave used the chaos to reach the harvester's main control unit, his enhanced strength letting him tear open the access panel and manually trigger its emergency shutdown protocols.

"Had to disable that one," he reported. "Those teeth would go through body armour like paper."

A harvester's arm swept down, forcing the operators to break formation. Dave capitalised instantly, flowing through their disrupted defence with precise strikes. His recent training showed, no flashy techniques. Just ruthlessly efficient close-quarters combat enhanced by supernatural speed.

"More machines activating," Anya warned. "They're bringing additional automation systems online. Watch for..."

The warning came just as massive irrigation booms swung into action, high-pressure water jets cutting through the air where Dave had been standing. His enhanced reflexes let him dodge the initial burst, but more systems were activating - spray nozzles, distribution pipes, chemical dispensers all being repurposed into defensive weapons.

"They're using the facility's systems against us," Serj reported, his rifle speaking precisely to suppress another tactical team. "Converting agricultural equipment into automated defences."

Dave moved through the mechanised chaos with fluid grace, his enhanced speed letting him stay ahead of the coordinated attacks. A fertiliser spreader tried to douse him with caustic chemicals, but he simply accelerated past the spray. Robotic arms swung with lethal force, only to find empty air as he flowed around their attacks.

"The control centre's three levels up," Anya guided him. "But they've locked down the main access routes. You'll need to find another way through their defences."

Dave studied the facility's layout through his enhanced vision, picking out structural weaknesses and potential alternate routes. The automated systems might be formidable, but they were still bound by their basic programming - they could only operate along pre-planned paths optimised for farming operations.

He used that limitation against them, moving through spaces the machines couldn't reach. His enhanced strength let him create his own routes when necessary, tearing through light structural elements to bypass their carefully planned defensive zones.

"Multiple Black River teams establishing containment," Cecilia reported. "They're trying to channel you into prepared kill zones."

"Let them try," Dave replied, already moving to flank their positions. The tactical teams were good, but they were too dependent on their automated support. When Dave disrupted the robotic systems, their careful coordination began to break down.

He reached the upper levels to find more sophisticated defences - automated loading systems repurposed into mobile barriers, robotic maintenance platforms converted to weapons platforms. But here too, the machines' predictability worked against them. Dave's enhanced speed let him exploit gaps in their coverage that human defenders would have instinctively protected.

"Control centre ahead," Anya reported. "But they've sealed it completely. Multiple security layers, automated defences, professional teams in hardened positions."

Dave studied the approaches through his enhanced vision. The Black River operators had established textbook defensive positions, using the automated systems to cover any possible attack vector. A direct assault would be suicide - even with his abilities, the overlapping fields of fire would be nearly impossible to breach.

"Anya," he called through comms, "can you access their automation protocols?"

"Partially," she replied. "The core systems are isolated, but I can still affect some of their equipment controls. Why?"

"Remember what you did with those cranes in Singapore? Think you could do something similar with their robotic platforms?"

Her smile was audible in her response: "Creating some chaos now."

The effect was immediate and devastating. Automated systems began moving in unpredictable patterns, their carefully programmed defensive protocols dissolving into mechanical anarchy.

The Black River team had established a textbook defensive position using heavy agricultural equipment as cover. Steel storage containers, reinforced maintenance platforms, and heavy equipment formed an interlocking barrier that would be suicidal to assault directly. Even Dave would have to be careful approaching that much concentrated firepower.

"Those operators have perfect coverage," Serj reported through comms, studying them through his scope. "Two heavy gunners with belt-fed M240s, plus DMR support. Very professional setup."

"Let's see how they handle something bigger," Anya replied. Her fingers flew across her keyboard. "Accessing harvester control systems... overriding safety protocols... and sending new instructions."

The massive harvesting machine responded instantly. Its primary cutting head - a brutal assembly of hardened steel teeth designed to process whole corn stalks - rotated to full speed with a sound like an industrial sawmill. The Black River team noticed the movement, but their defensive position blocked their best escape routes.

"Target engaged," Anya announced with cold satisfaction. "Executing harvest protocol."

The harvester advanced with implacable mechanical purpose, its cutting head tearing into the steel containers like they were made of cardboard. Hydraulic fluid sprayed as it ripped through the maintenance platforms, the reinforced metal screaming as it was systematically disassembled.

"Jesus Christ," one operator managed before diving clear of the destruction. His companions scattered as their carefully prepared position was literally eaten away around them. The M240s opened up on the harvester, but the heavy rounds just sparked off its reinforced chassis - it had been built to withstand impacts from rocks and debris at high speed.

The cutting head continued its programmed sweep, following the exact patterns it would use to harvest a field of corn. But instead of crops, it was processing their defensive equipment with terrifying efficiency. Chunks of steel containers went flying as the massive teeth found new purchase.

"Target window identified," Serj reported calmly. The Black River team's disciplined retreat had turned into desperate scrambling as the harvester's methodical destruction forced them into the open. His first shot caught the DMR operator centre mass as he tried to reach new cover. The second heavy gunner went down a moment later, the M240 tumbling from lifeless hands.

The remaining operators attempted to establish new firing positions, but the harvester was still advancing, still processing everything in its path according to its simple programmed imperatives. Serj's rifle spoke twice more with surgical precision. The last operator managed three steps before joining his companions.

"Targets neutralised," Serj confirmed, already shifting his attention to the next defensive position. Behind him, the harvester continued its relentless progress through the destroyed barricade, mechanical teeth still spinning as it searched for more material to process.

"Remind me never to get on your bad side," Dave commented to Anya through the comms.

"Please," she replied, fingers dancing across her keyboard as she directed the harvester toward its next target. "This is just a small software update. Wait until you see what I've got planned for their automated fertiliser distribution system."

Another Black River team had taken up position in the facility's eastern wing, using the building's structural columns for cover while establishing interlocking fields of fire. Their tactical formation was perfect - exactly what you'd expect from experienced operators with extensive military training.

"These guys know what they're doing," Dave reported, studying their deployment through his enhanced vision. "Proper spacing, excellent coverage, full protective gear including gas masks. They're ready for anything."

"Almost anything," Anya replied, her voice carrying that particular tone that usually preceded creative problem-solving. "The facility has an automated fertiliser distribution system. Very sophisticated - designed to dilute and spray liquid nutrients with precise chemical balance."

"And?" Dave prompted, recognising her 'I have an evil plan' tone.

"And according to their maintenance logs, they've got about three thousand gallons of concentrated organic slurry in the holding tanks. Currently set to 'maximum dilution' for normal agricultural use." Her keyboard clicked ominously. "Would be a shame if someone changed those mixture settings."

The security team's first warning came as massive pumps engaged overhead. They looked up just as Anya's modified distribution protocols activated, unleashing a torrential deluge of concentrated animal waste that had been carefully "ageing" in storage.

The impact was immediate and devastating. Too late to deploy their gas masks, the overwhelming stench of concentrated hydrogen sulphide hit

them like a physical force. The first operator actually stumbled backwards, retching. His teammates tried to maintain position, but the slurry was already soaking through their equipment, creating an invisible cloud of eye-watering fumes.

"Good lord," Serj commented from his overwatch position, watching through his scope as hardened military professionals began frantically stripping off contaminated tactical gear. "That's actually worse than the CS gas training at Hereford."

The team's disciplined defence dissolved into chaos as they desperately tried to escape the nauseating deluge. Expensive night vision equipment was abandoned, tactical vests shed like burning clothing, even weapons dropped in their haste to retreat from the biochemical onslaught.

"Think I got the mixture ratio a bit strong," Anya mused, watching through the facility's cameras as the operators fled, leaving thousands of dollars of equipment literally marinating behind them. "Probably shouldn't have disabled the dilution protocols completely."

"That stuff is worse than CS gas," Dave observed, keeping well back from the affected area. He could smell the results of Anya's improvised chemical warfare from two corridors away. "Definitely remind me never to get on your bad side."

"The best part?" Anya added with distinct satisfaction. "That particular organic compound bonds really well with tactical fabrics. Their gear is basically never going to stop smelling. Even if they come back for it, they'll probably have to burn everything."

"Military-grade fertiliser," Serj commented dryly. "Now there's a weapons system they didn't cover in special forces training."

Through the facility's cameras, they watched the last Black River operator stumble out of the affected zone, desperately pulling off his contaminated uniform. Behind them, the sophisticated fertiliser distribution system

continued its programmed cycle, ensuring complete coverage of their former defensive position.

"You know," Dave said thoughtfully, "I don't think those guys are coming back. Some things are worse than getting shot at."

"Mission accomplished then," Anya replied cheerfully, already looking for her next target. "Now, let's see what other agricultural systems we can repurpose. Did you know this facility has an automated mushroom composting section?"

Dave moved through the chaos like a ghost, using the disrupted machines as cover while he systematically disabled the facility's defenders. His enhanced speed let him flow between mechanical appendages, timing his movements to exploit gaps in both human and automated defences.

He reached the control centre's sealed doors to find the final line of defence - four Black River operators backed by automated defence turrets that tracked his movement with inhuman precision. These weren't standard security cameras - their targeting systems used advanced computer vision and predictive algorithms that could actually follow his enhanced speed.

The first burst caught him in the chest, the impact actually stinging despite his invulnerability. The turrets were coordinating, using overlapping fields of fire to predict where he'd dodge. Another burst clipped his shoulder as he rolled into cover.

"Their targeting systems are tied directly into the facility's computers," Anya reported. "They're learning from each engagement, adapting their prediction models."

Dave studied the nearest turret through his enhanced vision, noting its sophisticated tracking mechanism. "Then let's give them something new to learn."

He burst from cover at full speed, but this time with purpose. The turrets tracked him perfectly, their targeting computers adjusting for his velocity.

But instead of dodging, he grabbed the nearest turret and physically wrenched it around to face its companions. The automated systems, lacking human judgment, simply followed their targeting protocols - engaging the nearest fast-moving threat. The resulting crossfire transformed three turrets into smoking wreckage as their friend-or-foe recognition struggled to understand the threat.

The Black River team used the destruction to press their attack, moving with the smooth coordination of experienced professionals. "Last chance to walk away," their leader called, weapon trained centre mass.

Dave smiled slightly, still holding the disabled turret. "Appreciate the courtesy. But we both know that's not happening." He hurled the turret with enhanced strength, forcing them to break formation as half a ton of smoking metal crashed through their position.

The team recovered with practised efficiency, smoothly transitioning to close-quarters combat as Dave closed the distance. The first operator came in with textbook Krav Maga strikes - a swift combination targeting throat and knees. Another tried to flank, his movement showing clear special forces training as he manoeuvred for advantage.

Dave flowed between their attacks with fluid precision, letting Maeda's training guide his movements. He caught the first operator's punch and used the man's momentum to send him spinning into his teammate. The third contractor attempted a takedown, but Dave simply redirected his force, adding enough enhanced strength to slam him into the reinforced wall with carefully controlled power - enough to disable without killing.

The leader proved more challenging, his technique showing extensive close-combat experience. He adapted instantly to Dave's supernatural speed, focusing on controlling space rather than landing strikes. A swift combination of blocks and strikes demonstrated expertise in multiple martial arts - clearly someone who trained to fight enhanced opponents.

But Dave had trained for exactly these situations. He recognised the leader's Systema-based defensive style and adjusted accordingly, using the precise joint manipulation Maeda had drilled into him. When the operator attempted to create distance, Dave stayed close, disrupting his preferred fighting range. A precise strike to nerve clusters in the shoulder dropped the man's guard for a crucial moment.

The leader tried to recover, transitioning smoothly to ground fighting as Dave took him down. But even perfect technique couldn't overcome the raw physics of enhanced strength. Dave controlled the grapple with careful precision, applying just enough pressure to specific joints to end the fight without causing permanent damage.

In less than thirty seconds, four highly trained military operators lay disabled around him. Their technique had been flawless - exactly what you'd expect from elite special forces veterans. But Dave's combination of supernatural abilities and recent martial arts training had proved insurmountable.

"Clean takedowns," Anya commented through comms, having watched through the facility's cameras. "Maeda would be proud."

Dave secured the unconscious operators with their own zip ties, taking care to ensure they were positioned safely despite their injuries. Professional courtesy mattered, even in combat. Besides, these men had just been doing their jobs - no need to make their injuries worse than necessary.

The control centre's reinforced door proved a minor inconvenience to his enhanced strength. Inside, banks of sophisticated computers managed the facility's integrated systems - security protocols, automation controls, robotic command and control. Everything they needed to prove AgraTech's involvement.

"I'm in their network," Anya reported as Dave connected her bypass module. "Downloading command logs now. But there's something else... coordinates. Multiple facilities showing similar automation patterns."

"Their distribution network," Cecilia realised. "They're not just using this place for testing - they're preparing to automate their entire deployment system."

Dave watched data flow across the control centre's screens, each new revelation showing the true scope of what they faced. AgraTech wasn't just developing biological weapons - they were building an automated infrastructure to deploy them globally. And now they had proof of exactly how far that network extended.

"Time to go," Cecilia ordered as more security teams began converging on their position. "We've got what we need."

"We shouldn't leave these systems intact," Dave said, watching the robotic harvesters continue their deadly patrol patterns. "Too dangerous to the clean-up teams."

Anya's smile carried through the comms. "Already working on it. Uploading new behavioural protocols now... and done. You might want to watch this."

The facility's robots suddenly turned on each other with mechanical fury. Harvesters charged their former companions, massive cutting arms tearing into reinforced chassis. Automated lifting platforms became battering rams, while irrigation systems fought chemical sprayers in a bizarre mechanised combat arena.

"Did you just turn a multi-million dollar automated farming facility into Robot Wars?" Dave asked, watching a fertiliser spreader desperately fight off a robotic cultivator.

"Seemed appropriate," Anya replied. "They'll tear each other apart within the hour. Much safer than leaving them functional. Besides," her grin was audible, "I always wanted to be Craig Charles."

They'd achieved their objective - proof of AgraTech's automated distribution network, and more importantly, coordinates for their other

facilities. But the scale of what they'd uncovered was sobering. Their opponents weren't just planning isolated attacks - they were building an autonomous system to reshape global agriculture.

The next target would be harder. But they'd proven that even the most sophisticated automated defences could be overcome. In this instance the best way to fight machines was to remember they were still bound by their programming - unlike humans, who could adapt and overcome.

Now they just had to hope they could shut down AgraTech's operation before that automated network came fully online. The world's food supply hung in the balance.

31 **Ground Zero**

Dave studied the satellite imagery of the Kazakhstan mountain facility, his enhanced vision picking out every defensive detail. The Soviet-era complex sprawled across the mountainside, its entrance tunnels burrowing deep into the rock like wounds in the earth. Surface structures were minimal - a few ventilation housings, equipment sheds, power substations. But the real facility lay beneath, a maze of reinforced corridors and sealed chambers that had once housed the USSR's most sophisticated biological weapons programme.

"Look at these supply manifests," Anya reported, cross-referencing shipping records on her screens. "They're importing lab equipment through a dozen different front companies, but the chemical signatures are distinctive - specialised growth medium, concentrated nutrient solutions, purified atmospheric gases. Everything you'd need for mass cultivation."

She highlighted specific supply chains. "Same pattern we saw in Morocco and Hamburg. But the scale here... they're bringing in enough raw materials to support industrial-level production. And their waste disposal records show active biological processes - extremely active."

Omar leaned in to examine the chemical analysis. "Those ratios match what we found in the test sites - exact same growth acceleration compounds. They're not just experimenting any more. This is full-scale manufacturing."

Dr. Goulding studied Dave thoughtfully. "Your reaction to the fungal agent has changed significantly since Kansas. Whatever happened during that first exposure seems to have triggered some kind of adaptation. You're not just resistant now - you're completely unaffected."

"Any theories why?" Dave asked.

"Actually," Goulding said, reaching for her equipment case, "Kessler's been working on something that might help us understand. He modified a near-infrared spectroscopy device to work with your unique biology. Uses precise electrical currents that your body naturally absorbs to make internal imaging possible."

She pulled out what looked like a modified medical scanner. "We've never had a chance to properly test it in the field, but if it works, we might finally be able to see how your nanobots are actually adapting to these fungal exposures."

"But based on what we've observed, I suspect your nanobots studied the fungal biology during that first exposure and evolved some kind of countermeasure. The fact that subsequent exposures had diminishing effects supports that hypothesis."

Serj studied the facility schematic Anya had reconstructed from old Soviet archives, stepping naturally into the tactical planning role with Dan still recovering. "Security's going to be heavy. Black River will have their best teams deployed, plus whatever's left of the original Soviet defensive systems."

"Multiple access tunnels," Omar noted, tracing routes through the underground complex. "But they'll have them all covered. These weren't just research facilities - they were designed to protect state secrets at any cost."

Dave remembered the dying wheat fields in Ukraine, geometric patterns of fungal destruction spreading through the soil. "How long until they're ready for mass deployment?"

"Based on their current chemical consumption rates and waste output?" Anya checked her data. "Seventy-two hours maximum. Once those growth chambers reach critical mass, they'll have enough material to initiate simultaneous releases across all major agricultural regions."

"Their distribution network's already in place," Serj added grimly. "Legitimate fertiliser shipments pre-positioned worldwide, just waiting for the signal. When they trigger release, it'll be everywhere at once."

Dave studied the mountain's geology through archived surveys. The Soviets had chosen this location carefully - natural limestone caves expanded into a labyrinth of sealed chambers and reinforced tunnels. The perfect place to develop weapons that could never see daylight.

"Found something in their supply requisitions," Anya announced. "They're cycling specialised sterilisation equipment between chambers in a specific sequence. Look at these maintenance logs." She highlighted specific entries. "Each chamber goes through a complete atmospheric purge, then reseeded with new growth medium. They're systematically scaling up production."

"Testing mass cultivation protocols," Serj realised. "Making sure each growth chamber can handle industrial-scale development when they go live."

"Which gives us our window," Omar said. "They have to maintain perfect environmental conditions during cultivation. Disrupt those systems at the wrong moment..."

"And we destroy their entire stockpile," Dave finished. "But we'll need to reach their central control room. Everything routes through there - environmental systems, security protocols, distribution controls."

Goulding monitored Dave's vitals on the basic medical equipment that could still interface with his enhanced biology. "Your immunity to the agent gives you an advantage," she said. "But be cautious - we can't know if they've developed new strains with different properties."

"Multiple insertion points," Serj said, marking potential entries on the facility schematic. "But they'll have motion sensors, pressure plates, automated defensive systems. The Soviets didn't believe in subtle security."

"Three primary targets," Serj identified, marking points on the layout. "Control room for their environmental systems. Research archives for proof of everything they're developing. And their communication hub - we need to shut down their ability to trigger remote release."

Dave traced routes through the complex, memorising every junction and sealed barrier. "How many Black River teams?"

"Their shift rotations and supply requisitions suggest at least sixty personnel inside," Anya replied, analysing logistics records. "Staff assignments match ex-Spetsnaz operational patterns. Plus I'm seeing maintenance logs for the original Soviet defensive systems - automated turrets, gas dispensers, reinforced blast doors. They've reactivated everything."

"They'll be expecting us," Omar warned. "After Morocco and Hamburg, they know what we can do. They'll have planned specifically for enhanced targets."

Dave nodded, remembering the sophisticated traps they'd encountered in previous facilities. "Good. Knowing you're walking into a trap is usually better than being surprised by one."

"Found their containment protocols," Anya reported, digging deeper into the facility's systems. "Multiple security layers, automated lockdown sequences. Break the wrong sensor and blast doors drop, sealing entire sections. We'll need perfect timing to reach the control room before they can isolate it."

"What about their research data?" Serj asked. "After Kazakhstan, they'll have everything backed up, protected against destruction."

"Yes and no," Anya replied. "They're using the original Soviet secure storage - physical documentation and isolated systems. No network access, no digital backups. Everything's contained in their sealed archives."

"Makes sense," Omar said. "Can't hack what isn't connected. But it also means they can't move that data quickly if something goes wrong."

Dave studied the entrance security feeds Anya had accessed, watching Black River teams conduct their practised patrol patterns around the surface structures. Their movements were precise, professional - these guys knew exactly what they were protecting.

"We'll need to split up," he said finally. "Hit multiple targets simultaneously before they can lock everything down. Omar, you and Serj take the archives. Anya, you'll need to reach their communication hub, shut down their ability to trigger remote release. I'll handle the control room."

"The control room will be their most heavily defended point," Serj warned. "Even with your abilities..."

"I know," Dave replied. "But someone needs to reach those environmental controls before they can initiate mass production. Better me than anyone else - especially now that I'm immune to what they're growing."

Goulding nodded slowly. "The nanobots' evolution does give you an advantage. Direct exposure might actually make you stronger now, like it did in Morocco. But be careful - they might have developed countermeasures specifically for enhanced targets."

"Timeline?" Serj asked, studying the patrol patterns.

"Their requisition logs show increasing urgency," Anya reported. "They're staging specialised transport containers, preparation for mass distribution. The chemical markers in their waste output suggest they're approaching final cultivation phase."

"Then we go tonight," Dave decided. "Under cover of darkness, while they're cycling environmental systems for the next growth phase. Hit them before they can complete final cultivation sequences."

The team spent the next hours refining their plan, each focusing on their specific objectives. Omar coordinated with their local assets, arranging

equipment and extraction protocols. Anya dug deeper into the facility's systems, mapping every security measure and automated defence. Serj reviewed tactical options, drawing on years of experience to plan for when things inevitably went wrong.

Dave studied everything - patrol patterns, security protocols, facility layout. His enhanced recall would let him navigate the underground maze even if communications were compromised. Sometimes the difference between success and failure came down to memorising one crucial detail.

The sun set behind Kazakhstan's mountains, casting long shadows across the facility's entrance. Soon they would breach one of the most sophisticated biological weapons facilities ever built, facing professional operators and automated defences protecting decades of Soviet weapons research.

But they had no choice. In seventy-two hours, AgraTech would begin worldwide deployment of their agent, using legitimate agricultural supply chains to compromise global food production. Everything they'd fought to prevent would happen at once, unless they could reach that control room in time.

Dave watched the facility's lights gleam against darkening sky, remembering fields of dying wheat stretching to the horizon. Sometimes the hardest part wasn't the mission itself, but the weight of knowing failure wasn't an option. In seventy-two hours, they would either save the world's food supply, or watch it burn.

The next move was theirs. And this time, they couldn't afford to lose.

32 Countdown

"The east entrance looks promising," Omar said, spreading faded Soviet-era blueprints across their planning table. Decades of storage had left the technical drawings fragile, their Cyrillic notations barely legible. "Maintenance tunnel leading to the secondary generator room. If we time it right..."

"Too obvious," Serj interrupted, studying the facility layout. "Those access points were designed to look vulnerable. See these drainage channels?" He traced routes through the underground complex. "Perfect kill zones. They'd funnel any assault team straight into prepared defensive positions."

Dave examined the blueprints through his enhanced vision, taking in every angle. The Soviet engineers had built redundancy into everything - multiple security layers, automated defences, sealed containment zones that could isolate entire sections of the facility.

"The ventilation system?" Anya suggested, overlaying modern satellite data on the original plans. "Three main intake points, all leading to central processing."

"They'll have upgraded those first," Omar replied. "Standard counter-infiltration protocol - armour the vents, add motion sensors, probably sonic deterrents too. After Morocco, they'll be expecting us to try unconventional entry points."

Serj marked potential targets on their tactical overlay. "We need to reach three objectives - control room for their environmental systems, research archives for proof of their operation, and the communication hub to prevent remote activation. Each one heavily defended, minimal access routes."

"The north entrance is closest to the control room," Dave noted. "But they'll have multiple security checkpoints, automated defences, probably Black River's best teams stationed there."

"South approach puts us near the archives," Omar added. "But those tunnels are a maze - we'd need perfect timing to reach the secure storage before they could lock it down."

"And the communication hub is centrally located," Anya said, highlighting their third target. "They're using the original Soviet secure channels - completely isolated from external networks. We'd need physical access to shut it down."

Dave studied the mountain's geology through archived surveys. Natural limestone caves had been expanded into a labyrinth of reinforced chambers, each one designed to contain weapons that could never see daylight. The Soviets had built this facility to protect their darkest secrets - and now AgraTech was using that same security to protect their own operation.

"Multiple insertion teams?" Omar suggested. "Hit all three targets simultaneously, overwhelm their ability to respond?"

"They'll be expecting that too," Serj replied. "These blueprints show synchronised defensive protocols - they can isolate any section instantly. We'd need perfect coordination just to reach our primary targets."

"And we have to assume the layout's changed," Dave added. "Thirty years of modifications, new security systems, modernised defences. These plans give us the basic structure, but..."

"But we're basically going in blind," Serj finished. He stared at the facility schematic for a long moment, then looked up with an expression that made Dave instantly wary. "Maybe we're thinking about this wrong. We're planning a normal assault because they're expecting a normal assault. Maybe we need to go completely off-grid."

"What did you have in mind?" Dave asked, recognising that particular tone. It usually preceded something either brilliant or insane. Often both.

Serj traced a line straight up from the facility. "High-altitude insertion. No parachute, no oxygen system - nothing they'd be watching for. Their radar's calibrated for normal infiltration methods. But a human-sized object in pure ballistic fall..."

"Might register as debris," Omar finished, catching on. "The wind patterns over these mountains create unpredictable air currents. Their targeting systems have to filter out natural objects, and unnatural objects that could not possibly be a threat."

"You're talking about a HALO jump without any equipment," Anya said incredulously. "From what altitude?"

"Forty thousand feet minimum," Serj replied. "Above their primary radar coverage. And we'd need a specific target point..." His finger moved to a thermal signature on their satellite feed. "The waste incineration system. That chimney cuts straight through the mountain to their core facility."

"That's insane," Omar said flatly. "Even with Dave's durability, we're talking about terminal velocity impact followed by dropping into an active furnace. We've never tested his abilities at those extremes."

"No one has," Dave said quietly. "Because no one else could possibly survive it." He studied the thermal reading more carefully. "What's the incinerator temperature?"

"Off the scale," Anya reported, checking sensor data. "They're burning biological waste at maximum temperature to prevent contamination. Normal matter wouldn't even leave ash."

"Good thing I'm not normal matter then." Dave tried for lightness, but his expression was serious as he examined the facility layout again. The incineration chamber would put him directly into the heart of the mountain - if he could survive the combination of impact and intense heat.

"That's your insertion point," Serj said, highlighting the thermal signature. He turned to the rest of the team. "While Dave creates chaos from inside, we hit two surface entrances. Split their response, keep them guessing about our real target."

"You've never done a HALO jump," Omar pointed out. "Even without needing oxygen, the wind shear at that altitude..."

"What about a wingsuit?" Anya suggested. "Give him some control during descent?"

Serj considered this. "Could work. If he deploys it gradually, lets the suit take the strain slowly instead of all at once..."

"That material Dr. Kessler developed for my underwear," Dave said thoughtfully. "The temperature-resistant weave. Could we make a suit from that?"

"The tensile strength would be enough," Goulding agreed. "And it might actually survive the heat longer than standard gear. You'd need to be careful though - deploy too fast and even that material will shred at those speeds."

"Technically it's not really a jump," Dave said. "More like... a strategic fall." His attempt at humour did little to ease the team's concern. "Besides, I have some experience with falling from heights."

"A twenty-story lift shaft is not quite the same as forty thousand feet," Serj noted dryly.

Dr. Goulding joined them, carrying specialised monitoring equipment. "The furnace temperature will destroy any normal gear. But these might survive long enough to give us some data." She attached sensors to Dave's skin. "Try not to incinerate them immediately?"

"No promises," Dave replied, remembering how many sets of clothes he'd lost to fire already. "Though I don't think my eyebrows are going to survive this one."

"Your eyebrows are the least of my concerns," Goulding said. "The thermal shock alone... We've never tested your durability at these extremes."

"First time for everything," Dave said with forced lightness. But his eyes were serious as he studied the facility schematic again. The incineration chamber was their best chance at breaching the mountain's defences - if he could survive the combination of terminal velocity impact and intense heat.

Serj moved to check Dave's tactical gear one final time. Not that equipment would matter much after the furnace, but habits died hard. "You'll be on your own until you reach the primary target," he said quietly. "The rest of us will create diversions at the surface entrances, but..."

"I know," Dave replied. "Get to the control room, shut down their environmental systems before they can start mass production. Simple."

"Simple," Serj echoed with a slight smile. "Just a forty-thousand-foot fall without a parachute, followed by dropping into an active incinerator. Then breach one of the most sophisticated biological weapons facilities ever built. No pressure."

"When you put it that way..." Dave grinned, but his expression sobered quickly. "What about you three? Those surface entrances won't be lightly defended."

"We'll manage," Omar said, checking his weapon loadout. "Black River's good, but they can't cover everything at once. Split their attention enough ways..."

"And something will crack," Anya finished, not looking up from her screens. "I've got their automated systems mapped. Once we initiate breach protocols, they'll have to choose which alarms to respond to first."

The team spent the next hour refining their plan, each focusing on their specific roles. Omar coordinated with their local assets, ensuring extraction routes were prepared. Anya dug deeper into the facility's defence networks,

identifying vulnerabilities they could exploit. Serj reviewed tactical options, planning for when things inevitably went wrong.

Goulding helped Dave into the experimental wingsuit, its blue material catching the light with an almost metallic sheen. "Remember," she said, adjusting the reinforced seams, "gradual deployment. Let your speed bleed off naturally before you try any aggressive manoeuvring."

Dave studied the mountain's topology one final time, committing every detail to memory. The incineration chimney would be barely visible in the darkness - he'd have to rely on his enhanced vision to spot it during the fall. Even with the wingsuit's control surfaces, one small error in trajectory at that speed...

"Two hours until insertion," Serj announced, checking his watch. "Time to gear up."

The team moved with practised efficiency, years of experience eliminating wasted motion. But there was an extra tension now - they all knew the stakes. Get it wrong, and AgraTech would begin worldwide deployment of their agent. Everything they'd fought to prevent would happen at once, unless they could reach that control room in time.

Dave caught Serj studying him with that tactical eye that reminded him so much of Carter. The veteran operative gave a slight nod - not quite approval, but acknowledgment. Usually the most dangerous missions were also the most necessary.

"Try not to die," Serj said quietly as final preparations began. "Incident reports are a nightmare when someone falls from the edge of space."

Dave smiled slightly, remembering similar conversations before previous operations. "I'll do my best. Though I'm not sure how to categorise this one - high-altitude infiltration or impromptu space diving?"

"Let's call it 'unconventional insertion' and leave it at that," Serj replied. "Less paperwork that way."

The night deepened as they moved into final positions. Soon Dave would board the high-altitude insertion aircraft, while the rest of the team staged for their coordinated breach of the facility's surface entrances. Someone had to reach that control room before AgraTech could complete their mass production sequence.

"First thing," Omar said, sketching a crude altitude diagram on their planning board, "is understanding your descent profile. At forty thousand feet, you're dealing with temperatures around minus sixty Celsius and winds that can hit two hundred knots." He glanced at Dave. "The cold's going to be rough - even for you. We know minus fifty is where it starts getting painful."

"I can handle it," Dave said firmly, though they both remembered the Arctic waters. "It's not like I'll be up there long."

"No, but what really scares me is the thin air," Omar replied, tapping the diagram. "At that altitude, there's barely enough air density for normal HALO operations. The wingsuit will be useless until you hit thicker atmosphere."

"What about equipment?" Dave asked. "Normal HALO gear would just get in the way, but I'll need something to protect my eyes at those speeds."

"Already handled," Omar replied, pulling out what looked like a sleek pair of tactical goggles. "Modified high-altitude design. No anti-fog needed since you don't use oxygen, but reinforced against wind shear. The curved lens should work well with your enhanced vision - minimal distortion."

"No helmet though?"

"Would just create drag in the thin air. Besides," Omar grinned, "not like you need to worry about the landing."

"Thanks for that reminder," Dave said dryly.

"Arrow position," Omar demonstrated, standing straight with arms tight to his sides. "Think of yourself as a missile. Arms locked against your sides,

legs together, head tucked, nose straight down. The wingsuit will make this tricky - you'll want to keep it as compressed as possible against your body."

Dave nodded slowly. "And I hold this for how long?"

"Count to one hundred and twenty after exit. That gets you down to about twenty-five thousand feet, where the air's thick enough to actually work with." Omar's expression was deadly serious. "Do not try to look around, do not try to adjust your position, do not do anything except count. In that thin air, the slightest movement will send you tumbling."

"Then the wingsuit?"

"Very gradually extend into flight position. The air density change is dramatic - you'll feel when the suit starts to bite. But move too fast and you'll still tumble." Omar sketched another diagram. "You don't need to hit the chimney exactly - just get close enough. Your durability means anywhere in the vicinity works."

"How much control will I actually have?"

"Once the suit's working? Maybe a few degrees of adjustment. But even that small change, maintained over thousands of feet of descent, gives you significant range for final approach." Omar grinned. "Just try to aim for the mountain rather than the next valley over. Though I suppose with your durability, the crater would be impressive either way."

Dave raised an eyebrow at Omar's attempt at humour.

"Sorry," Omar said, not looking sorry at all. "But seriously - you cannot rush the transition. That first two minutes is critical. Just fall straight, count slowly, and let yourself hit the proper altitude before trying anything else."

"What about spotting the target?"

"Your enhanced vision should let you get oriented during the initial exit. Pick your aim point, then lock into position. After that, it's just trusting the

physics until you hit thicker air." Omar considered for a moment. "The sound will be intense - wind noise at that speed is overwhelming. Most jumpers find it disorienting. Your enhanced senses might actually make that worse."

"Great," Dave muttered. "So I'll be deaf as well as blind for the first two minutes."

"Just focus on maintaining position," Omar said. "Nothing else matters until you get down to thicker air. Then you can worry about actually steering toward something." He paused. "Also... try not to think too much about the fact that you're going to hit the ground at terminal velocity. That part tends to distract people."

"Thanks," Dave said dryly. "That's very helpful."

Omar grinned. "Hey, look at it this way - you're about to set a world record for highest jump without a chute. Shame we can't tell anyone about it."

"Somehow I doubt the Guinness Book of World Records has a category for 'terminal velocity impact into an active incinerator.'"

"Their loss," Omar said cheerfully. Then his expression sobered. "Seriously though - maintain that arrow position. Everything else we can adjust for, but if you start tumbling up there..." He shook his head. "Just count to one hundred and twenty. No matter what."

Dave studied the altitude diagram one final time, committing every detail to memory. His enhanced recall would let him play back Omar's instructions perfectly during the descent. The difference between success and failure came down to remembering one crucial detail.

Like not forgetting to count while falling from the edge of space.

Looking up at the stars, Dave thought about the absurdity of what they were attempting. A HALO jump without oxygen or parachute, aimed at a chimney he'd have to spot from forty thousand feet, ending in an active incinerator. By any reasonable assessment, it was insane.

The night deepened as they moved into final positions. Soon Dave would board the high-altitude insertion aircraft, while the rest of the team staged for their coordinated breach of the facility's surface entrances. Someone had to reach that control room before AgraTech could complete their mass production sequence.

"Ninety seconds," Serj announced, checking his watch one final time. "Omar, you're on overwatch. Anya, time to move."

Dave adjusted the wingsuit's seals, double-checking the reinforced seams. Through his enhanced vision, he could already see the transport aircraft approaching, a darker shape against the star-filled sky.

Time to fall from the edge of space.

33 Unconventional Insertion

Forty thousand feet looked a lot higher from up here. Dave adjusted the experimental goggles, watching stars fade into the pre-dawn darkness as the transport aircraft reached insertion altitude. His enhanced vision cut through the gloom perfectly, the mountain facility a precise geometric pattern far below.

"Remember," Omar's voice crackled through his earpiece, "arrow position until you hit thicker air. Count to one-twenty. No matter what."

Dave gave a thumbs up, not trusting his voice. The cold bit through even his enhanced durability - Omar had been right about that. At this altitude, minus sixty felt personal.

The cabin pressure equalised with a hiss. This was it. One step, forty thousand feet of nothing, then either the most precise landing ever attempted or a very large crater. Dave took a deep breath he didn't technically need, then jumped.

The first sensation was wrongness. His enhanced senses rebelled at the incredible height, every instinct screaming that this was not where human bodies belonged. The thin air offered no real resistance - he might as well have been falling through space.

Count. Focus on the count.

"One... two... three..."

The wind howled past with impossible force. Even with his durability, Dave felt the sheer violence of terminal velocity trying to tear him apart. His enhanced vision caught glimpses of the mountain growing slowly larger, but he forced himself to maintain the arrow position Omar had drilled into him.

"Twenty-eight... twenty-nine... was that thirty?"

The cold was beyond anything he'd experienced. Arctic waters had been uncomfortable - this felt like being flash-frozen. His enhanced durability kept him conscious, but every nerve ending screamed in protest.

Had he counted that last sequence? Better add a few more to be safe.

"Forty-five... forty-six..."

The mountain was definitely closer now. But was that the right angle for the chimney? The urge to adjust his position was almost overwhelming. Trust the physics, Omar had said. The slightest movement up here would send him tumbling out of control.

"Seventy-three... seventy-four..."

The air began to thicken almost imperceptibly. Dave felt the first hints of actual resistance against the wingsuit. Not yet. Keep counting. Keep that arrow position perfect.

"One hundred... one hundred one..."

His enhanced vision caught the facility's thermal signature - the incinerator's heat bloom standing out against the mountain's cooler mass. The angle looked wrong. Everything in him wanted to adjust now.

"One hundred fifteen... one hundred sixteen..."

The air density changed dramatically. Now. With careful precision, Dave began extending the wingsuit's control surfaces. The material caught the thicker atmosphere with shocking force, but he kept the deployment gradual just as Omar had insisted.

The world resolved from abstract patterns into actual terrain. Dave could see the facility's entrance tunnels, protective baffles around the ventilation system, and there - the incinerator chimney marking his target. A slight adjustment of his arms shifted his trajectory by crucial degrees.

More subtle position changes kept him on course as the mountain rushed up with terrifying speed. Dave's enhanced vision caught every detail with

perfect clarity - which somehow made it worse. That was a lot of very solid rock coming at him very quickly.

The chimney's mouth gaped below him now. No time left for course corrections. Dave tucked into a ball, trying to minimise his surface area for impact. His last thought was that this was going to hurt.

The impact was beyond pain - a full-body percussion that turned him into a human pinball. Dave bounced from one rock face to another, enhanced durability keeping him intact as momentum carried him deeper into the mountain's heart. Eventually he skidded to a stop, staring up at stars visible through the twisted path he'd carved.

Everything spun lazily as he lay there. No real injuries - his enhanced durability had handled that. But he felt like he'd been through the world's most violent tumble dryer. Several times.

The incinerator chimney stood a few hundred metres away. Dave pulled off the shredded remains of the wingsuit, his enhanced vision mapping the vertical shaft disappearing into darkness above. The smooth walls offered no real handholds - even with his strength, climbing would be nearly impossible.

Time for the direct approach then.

Dave backed up, calculating angles, then simply ran at the chimney wall. His enhanced strength let him punch straight through the reinforced concrete, before tearing away chunks, creating his own entrance to the vertical shaft. The fall was shorter this time, but ended in something far worse than rock.

The incinerator's heat hit him like a physical blow. His enhanced durability had handled extreme temperatures before, but this was something else entirely. The thermal shock sent his senses spinning as he plunged through roaring flames.

Dave's "game mode" vision pierced the furnace's roaring flames. The heat was overwhelming - even with his enhanced durability, the thermal shock sent his senses spinning. But something was different now. Where the cold of high altitude had bitten deep despite his abilities, here he could feel his enhanced biology actively adapting.

He found the furnace door's outline through the flames, enhanced strength wrenching it open against safety lockouts. The relative cool of the facility's air hit him as he stepped out - unharmed but completely exposed. His experimental underwear hadn't survived the industrial-grade heat.

Still, being naked was a small price to pay for breaching what should have been an impenetrable defence. Dave pulled the facility's layout from his memory, plotting the fastest route to the control room.

The first security team rounded the corner just as Dave stepped fully out of the furnace room. Four operators moving with professional precision, weapons ready - until they processed exactly what they were seeing. Their tactical discipline fractured for a crucial moment as their brains tried to reconcile the impossible scene before them: a naked, middle-aged, distinctly overweight man apparently emerging unharmed from an industrial incinerator.

"What the f-" the lead operator managed before Dave moved.

His enhanced speed carried him into their formation before they could properly react. The first operator's training reasserted itself admirably - he transitioned smoothly to close-quarters combat as his weapon proved useless at this range. But Dave had trained for exactly these situations. He flowed around the man's textbook strikes, using his own momentum to send him crashing into his teammate.

The third operator recovered quickly, professional composure returning as he engaged with precise Systema techniques. His strikes targeted vital points with military efficiency - exactly what you'd expect from ex-Spetsnaz. But Dave's recent training with Maeda showed as he simply

redirected the attacks, letting each combination flow naturally into the next.

"Is he... is he singing?" the fourth operator asked incredulously as Dave systematically dismantled his colleague's defences. The man's voice carried that particular tone of someone whose reality was rapidly departing from everything they'd trained for.

Dave was indeed singing – Come on Baby Light My Fire, if anyone had been calm enough to recognise it. Sometimes the best way to handle absurd situations was to simply embrace them.

The team tried to re-establish tactical spacing, their movement showing extensive close-quarters training. But Dave's enhanced speed let him control the engagement completely, flowing between them with fluid grace that seemed impossible for someone of his build. Each strike was precisely calculated, using their own force against them while minimizing actual damage.

"Command, we have a... situation," the lead operator managed through his radio before Dave's casual tap to specific nerve clusters dropped him into unconsciousness. The others followed in swift succession, each disabled with surgical precision.

Dave regarded the sleeping operators thoughtfully. Their tactical gear would have been useful, but none of them quite matched his build. Besides, explaining why you were wearing another man's clothes was always awkward, even when you hadn't just emerged naked from an industrial furnace.

Dave knelt beside the unconscious operators, identifying their comms equipment in the dim light. The lead operator's headset was still transmitting, facility security trying to raise their unresponsive team. He carefully removed the unit, checking its configuration.

"This is Tiger Four, possible technical issues," he said, mimicking the operator's gruff tone perfectly. Then, breaking protocol deliberately: "Switching to channel ten for better signal."

It was a calculated risk - any professional security force would immediately recognise the breach in procedure. But Dave knew Anya would be monitoring their frequencies, ready to intercept exactly this kind of communication.

"Copy Tiger Four," a voice crackled back as Dave switched channels. "Be advised, command wants-"

The voice cut off as Dave changed to their predetermined alternate frequency. Almost immediately, he heard the subtle click that meant someone else had joined the channel.

"About time," Anya's voice came through as soon as he switched to their predetermined alternate frequency. "I was wondering how long you'd play the strong silent type. Though the security chatter about a naked demon climbing out of their furnace was quite informative."

"Demon seems a bit dramatic," Dave replied, carefully checking another junction. "Though I suppose from their perspective... How are the others doing?"

"Omar and Serj have their hands full at the surface entrances," Anya reported. "Multiple teams responding to their breach. Security's spread thin trying to cover everything at once."

"Good. I'm on my way to the cultivation chamber now. Any updates on their production timeline?"

"Environmental readings are spiking. Whatever they're growing down there, it's reaching critical mass. We need that control room offline in the next ten minutes." A pause. "And since you managed to acquire comms, don't suppose you found any tactical gear that fit?"

"Unfortunately no. Though I'm giving several elite operators a story no one will ever believe."

"Add 'tactical nudity contingency' to the planning checklist," Anya suggested. "Right after 'survive terminal velocity impact' and 'emerge from industrial furnace.'"

Dave's enhanced vision caught movement ahead - more security teams deploying with practised coordination. "Contact. Going dark."

"Sorry about this," he told the security teams unconscious forms as he zip-tied them with their own restraints. "But look at it this way - you'll have a great story for the after-action report. Assuming anyone believes you."

He moved deeper into the facility, leaving behind four elite operators who would spend the next several hours trying to explain how they'd been systematically dismantled by what appeared to be a naked IT professional with a singing habit. Crazily the best weapon was simply being so far outside normal tactical doctrine that no one's training covered it.

Though he did miss pockets. Pockets were useful.

The cultivation chamber stretched impossibly deep into the mountain, row after row of sealed tanks disappearing into darkness. He picked out details that made his breath catch - massive growth systems precisely maintaining environmental conditions, automated distribution networks ready to process industrial quantities of biological material, and most disturbing of all, the geometric patterns of fungal growth spreading across every surface.

The scale was staggering. This wasn't just a research facility - they were definitely set up for mass production. And based on the activity levels in those tanks, they were nearly ready to begin.

Dave moved through the complex with swift purpose, his enhanced speed letting him avoid direct confrontation where possible. The Black River teams were professionals, but their tactical advantages relied heavily on

equipment and coordinated responses. Hard to maintain proper formation when your target could move faster than human reflexes could track.

The control room lay ahead - he could see its reinforced doors through his enhanced vision. The hardest part was the weight of knowing failure wasn't an option.

Time to shut down the most sophisticated biological weapons facility ever built. Before AgraTech could unleash something that would make the Soviets' darkest projects look tame by comparison.

34 Contamination

Dave moved through the facility's massive loading bay, his enhanced vision tracking the constant movement of tanker trucks being filled with the treatment agent. Each vehicle carried enough concentrated formula to protect thousands of acres - or to generate millions in profit once the fungal release created desperate demand.

"Multiple teams at the cultivation chambers," Serj reported through comms, the sound of gunfire punctuating his words. "They're initiating mass release protocols. Omar's trying to reach the control systems, but-" Another burst of gunfire cut him off.

"Status?" Cecilia demanded.

"Holding them back," Omar replied, his voice tight with tension. "But they've already started the release sequence. Ten minutes maximum before-"

"Dave, wait!" Dr. Goulding's voice carried barely controlled panic. "That treatment agent - it's designed to destroy the exact fungal strain you were exposed to in Kansas. The one that's become integrated with your enhanced biology."

Dave froze halfway to the nearest tanker. "You think it could affect me?"

"It's engineered to aggressively destroy that specific fungus," Goulding replied tensely. "And your system has adapted to incorporate elements of it. I have no idea what exposure might do to your enhanced biology."

Through his enhanced vision, Dave watched more trucks being loaded. If even one of those vehicles escaped, AgraTech would maintain control of the only effective treatment. They'd still achieve their goal of agricultural manipulation, just through chaos rather than precision.

"How long until the fungal release?" he asked quietly.

"Eight minutes," Anya reported. "The others are fighting their way to the control room, but-"

"Find me another option," Dave said, already moving. "But don't stop me unless you have one."

The first Black River team spotted him as he approached the loading area. Their formation was perfect - overlapping fields of fire, optimal spacing for close-quarters response. They'd trained specifically for enhanced targets.

Dave moved before they could properly engage, his enhanced speed carrying him through their prepared kill zone. The first operator managed to squeeze off two rounds before Dave reached him. Both shots would have been lethal against a normal opponent, but Dave simply let them impact while closing distance.

The team transitioned smoothly to hand-to-hand, their movements showing extensive special forces training. But Dave had trained extensively in these conditions. He flowed through their formation like water, each strike precisely targeted to disable without killing. A nerve cluster strike dropped one operator. An arm lock redirected another into his teammate. A precise throw sent two more sprawling.

"Treatment tanks at ninety percent," Anya reported. "They're almost ready to move out. But Dave - that much concentrated formula... we have no idea what it would do to you."

"Six minutes to fungal release," Omar added. "We're still fighting through to the cultivation controls. If you can delay the treatment convoy-"

"Working on it." Dave engaged another tactical team, his movements combining supernatural speed with Maeda's training. These operators were even better - their technique showed specialised close-combat experience. But Dave's recent training let him match their expertise while moving faster than human reflexes could track.

The first operator came in with textbook Systema strikes, his partner already moving to flank. Dave caught the punch and simply held it, letting the man's momentum grind to a halt against immovable strength. A precise kick swept his partner's legs before he could properly position.

"Five minutes," Serj called. "They're falling back to defensive positions around the cultivation chamber. Whatever you're going to do-"

A burst of automatic fire caught Dave in the shoulder, spinning him slightly. One of the operators had managed to reach a mounted weapon on their tactical vehicle. The depleted uranium rounds actually stung as they impacted - Black River had come prepared with military-grade anti-armour ammunition. The dense projectiles carried enough kinetic energy to make even Dave notice the hits.

Dave moved to engage, but his enhanced vision caught the real threat - the shooter's burst had punctured one of the treatment tanks. Concentrated formula began spraying across the loading bay.

Time seemed to slow as Dave made his choice. He could retreat, maintain safe distance from the potentially lethal chemical. But that would mean letting the loaded trucks escape. In the chaos of an uncontrolled fungal release, those treatment supplies would be worth more than gold.

"Dave, don't-" Goulding started.

But he was already moving. His enhanced speed carried him through the spraying chemical to reach the loading bay controls. The treatment formula felt like ice against his skin, a deep cold that seemed to penetrate to his bones. But he forced himself to focus, enhanced strength tearing through the reinforced door mechanisms.

Massive steel barriers slammed down, sealing the loaded trucks inside. No matter what happened now, AgraTech wouldn't maintain control of the treatment. Through blurring vision, Dave saw more tactical teams

converging on his position. The cold was spreading through his limbs, a numbness that went beyond physical sensation.

"Three minutes," Omar reported. "We're almost to the cultivation controls, but-"

"The treatment formula's affecting him," Goulding cut in, her voice tight with concern. "Dave, get out of there. We don't know how your system will react-"

Dave engaged the approaching security teams, forcing his increasingly unresponsive body to move. His enhanced speed felt distant, unreliable. But Maeda's training took over, letting him flow through their attacks with pure technique. An arm lock here, a precise throw there. No superhuman abilities required - just perfectly executed martial arts.

"Two minutes! We're breaching the final security barrier now."

The cold had reached Dave's chest, each breath feeling like arctic wind in his lungs. But he maintained his defensive position, preventing anyone from reaching the bay door controls. His enhanced strength was definitely fading - he actually had to work to redirect the next operator's attack.

The tactical teams pressed their advantage, recognising his growing weakness. Dave fought with calculated precision, economising his movement as his abilities fluctuated. A textbook throw sent one attacker sprawling. A precise nerve strike dropped another. But they kept coming, and he could feel his supernatural speed slipping away completely.

"Sixty seconds," Serj called. "We're in the cultivation chamber, but the release sequence is locked. Omar's trying to-"

"Got it!" Anya announced suddenly. "Cultivation controls accessed. Shutting down release protocols now."

Dave smiled slightly despite the bone-deep cold spreading through him. They'd prevented both catastrophes - the fungal agent contained, the

treatment supplies secured. Now he just had to survive whatever the formula was doing to his enhanced biology.

"All teams, fall back," a sharp voice commanded through the facility's speakers. "Initiate Protocol Zero. Repeat: Protocol Zero."

The tactical teams disengaged instantly, demonstrating their professional training as they withdrew in coordinated sequence. Dave watched them go through increasingly blurry vision, his enhanced senses fading in and out like a failing radio signal.

"What's happening to him?" Cecilia demanded.

"Dave, what's happening?" Goulding demanded tensely.

"Cold," Dave managed through chattering teeth. "Deep cold. Like Arctic waters but... worse. Powers are fading. Vision's going dark."

"The fungus enhanced your abilities when you adapted to it," Goulding said urgently. "If this formula is destroying those elements..."

"We need to get him out of there," Cecilia cut in.

"Too late for that," Goulding replied grimly. "All we can do is hope his system finds another way to adapt."

Dave tried to stand, but his legs wouldn't respond properly. The cold had reached everywhere now - a deep, penetrating chill that seemed to be erasing his enhanced capabilities one by one. Even his "game mode" vision was failing, the world fading back to normal human perception.

The last thing he saw clearly was his own reflection in a puddle of treatment formula - his naked form covered in slowly freezing chemical residue. Then everything went dark as his enhanced consciousness finally slipped away.

Behind the sealed loading bay doors, enough treatment agent to save millions of acres sat unused. Above him, the cultivation chambers

remained locked down, their deadly contents contained. None of it mattered as the cold reached his heart, and the world faded to black.

35 **Final Stand**

"Hold this position," Anya told Serj and Omar, already moving toward the exit. "I'm going to find Dave."

"We've got this," Serj replied, his rifle speaking precisely as another Black River team probed their defences. "Just hurry."

Anya moved through the facility with cold purpose, her mind focused entirely on reaching Dave's last known position. A four-man tactical team appeared ahead, their weapons snapping up with professional precision. But she was already moving, her SIG barking twice before they could properly acquire. The first operator dropped, clutching his shattered knee. His partner managed to squeeze off a burst that went wide as Anya closed distance.

She flowed through their formation like water, her movements showing the countless hours of close-quarters training. A precise strike collapsed one operator's throat. An arm lock redirected another into the wall with brutal efficiency. The fourth tried to create distance, but Anya had already stepped inside his guard. Her knife appeared and vanished in a silver arc, leaving him clutching his severed femoral artery.

"Found him," she reported tensely, kneeling beside Dave's motionless form. Her fingers sought a pulse but found nothing. "Goulding... there's no heartbeat. He's ice cold."

"The treatment formula must have shut down his enhanced biology completely," Goulding replied, her voice tight with concern. "Is there a defibrillator anywhere nearby?"

Anya scanned the loading bay desperately. Her gaze caught on the heavy electrical equipment - specifically the three-phase power supply for the overhead cranes. "I have an idea. A really stupid idea."

She dragged Dave's unresponsive form toward the electrical panel, his skin unnaturally cold against hers. The massive breaker switch loomed above them like an executioner's lever. "This is probably going to hurt," she told his unconscious form. "Try not to hold it against me."

Placing his hands on the exposed terminals, Anya took a deep breath and threw the switch. Industrial voltage surged through Dave's body, his muscles locking rigid as electricity sought ground. For a terrifying moment, nothing changed. Then colour began returning to his grey-tinged skin, spreading outward from where the current entered his palms.

Dave's eyes snapped open. He released the cables smoothly, regarding his smoking hands with mild puzzlement. "Did you just jump-start me with industrial power?"

"Here," Anya said, pulling a familiar pair of blue boxers from her tactical vest. "Kessler insisted I carry a spare pair after the Hamburg incident. No time to explain more - Voss activated the facility's self-destruct. We need to reach the control centre."

Dave quickly pulled on the experimental underwear, grateful once again for Kessler's obsession with temperature-resistant materials.

"The fungal agent," Omar's voice came through their comms. "If this place goes up, some spores might survive the blast. We can't risk any escaping."

"We have both components," Serj added. "The weapon and the treatment. Why not use them against each other?"

"The fire suppression system," Anya said, her mind racing ahead. "If we hook a treatment tanker into the sprinkler feed..."

"Do it," Dave ordered, his enhanced speed already returning as his system recovered. "I'll handle Voss."

The control centre's reinforced door presented no obstacle to Dave's restored strength. Inside, Voss stood calmly at the main console, his expression showing no surprise at the intrusion.

Voss stared at the near naked man who had just torn through his reinforced door, his clinical detachment cracking slightly. The security chatter about a demon climbing out of their furnace suddenly felt less like superstitious nonsense.

"So," he said, fighting to maintain his composure, "you're the one they've been whispering about. The operative who won't die. Though I must admit, the reports didn't mention your... casual approach to tactical gear."

"It's over," Dave replied simply. "The fungal agent is contained. The treatment supplies are secured. Your distribution network is compromised."

"Impressive entrance," Voss continued, his hand moving casually toward his desk drawer. "But this facility's destruction will spread enough spores to infect half of Asia. The treatment formula will be destroyed, leaving me as the only source of the cure. Your theatrical arrival changes nothing."

His hand emerged holding a matte black pistol, its barrel unwavering as he aimed centre mass. Scientific precision showed in his stance - perfect grip, proper sight alignment. The first shot caught Dave square in the chest. The second and third followed in rapid succession. Voss's expression shifted from clinical certainty to confusion as his target remained standing, bullets dropping harmlessly to the floor.

The magazine emptied methodically, each round striking with surgical accuracy. Only when the weapon clicked empty did Voss's composure finally crack.

"Time to go," Dave said simply, starting forward.

"No!" Voss's voice rose, hysteria creeping in as his world-view crumbled. "You don't understand what's at stake! The population curves, the resource depletion models - everything points to collapse! Someone has to make the hard choices! The mathematics demands intervention!"

Through his earpiece, Dave heard Anya coordinating the others: "Treatment tanker in position. Connecting to the main suppression feed now."

"We're talking about basic ecological principles!" Voss continued, his scientific certainty transforming into zealous desperation. "Carrying capacity! Malthusian limits! The models all show--"

"Suppression system primed," Anya reported. "Manual activation in three... two... one..."

The facility's sirens blared as treatment formula began flooding through the sprinkler system. Voss watched in helpless rage as his weapon was systematically destroyed by his own cure, turned against itself through the very infrastructure he'd built to protect it. Voss continued his tirade of world ending catastrophe theories, almost frothing at the mouth.

Dave's precise strike to his solar plexus cut off the rant mid-word. A second hit to specific nerve clusters ensured he wouldn't be sharing his theories again anytime soon.

"We need to move," Serj called urgently. "This place is still set to blow."

Dave lifted the unconscious scientist over his shoulder. Now it was making sure your opponent lived to face justice.

"All teams clear," Anya reported as they reached the exit. Behind them, decades of Soviet weapons research and years of AgraTech's planning were being systematically erased by their own treatment formula.

The explosion caught them just outside the main entrance, the mountain shuddering as buried charges detonated in sequence. But they'd done it - contained the threat, secured the evidence, prevented a catastrophe that would have reshaped global agriculture forever.

Dave watched the facility burn, remembering fields of dying wheat stretching to the horizon. The weapon against Voss's doomsday plan was simply refusing to accept that doomsday was inevitable.

Though he could have done without the industrial defibrillation. That was definitely going in the "never again" category, right next to "falling from the edge of space" and "diving into active incinerators."

"I don't suppose anyone has a spare set of clothes?" he asked, tugging at the blue boxers - his sole remaining garment. The team's expressions suggested that tactical gear procurement hadn't been high on their priority list.

At least Kessler would be pleased at least one pair of his experimental underwear had survived another impossible mission. Small victories counted too.

36 Aftermath

Cecilia's temporary office still smelled of fresh paint and new carpet, but she'd already made it her own. Files covered her desk in precise stacks, each one documenting another piece of Voss's dismantled operation. Through the window, construction crews continued their work on the agency's rebuilt facility, the constant activity a reminder that some things had to be torn down before they could be properly rebuilt.

"The treatment formula has been independently verified," she announced, studying the latest reports. "Once Anya's sample was authenticated, our biochem teams had no trouble replicating the full synthesis process. We're already coordinating distribution through legitimate agricultural channels."

"Any signs of surviving fungal strains?" Dave asked. He'd finally found proper clothes that fit, though the agency-issued tactical gear felt stiff compared to his usual attire.

"Nothing viable," Cecilia replied, her Ghanaian accent warming the words. "The Kazakhstan facility's destruction was thorough, and our teams have sanitised every other location Voss used. The WHO's emergency response units are handling final containment, though they're still processing the revelation that one of their senior officials was behind everything."

"And Voss?" Serj asked from his position by the door. Some habits died hard, even in secured facilities.

"Cooperating, after a fashion." Cecilia's expression carried carefully controlled distaste. "He seems to view his interrogation sessions as opportunities to lecture about population dynamics and resource depletion models. Our psychological team says he genuinely believes he was trying to save humanity from itself."

"The road to hell," Omar muttered, absently rubbing his chest where lingering fungal damage still caused occasional discomfort.

"What about Singapore's Willard?" Omar asked, managing a slight smile despite the lingering discomfort in his chest. "I assume they weren't thrilled about our... alternative acquisition methods."

"Ah, that." Cecilia's tone carried amusement despite her attempt at seriousness. "My contact was quite relieved to get it back intact after what they called 'unexpectedly rigorous sea trials.' They're still processing the mysterious fuel consumption and maintenance records, but at least they have their boat back. Though I've been politely asked to provide more advance notice next time we need to borrow their equipment."

"And a little more about biological effects," Dr. Goulding interrupted, entering with an armful of medical readouts, "we've made some fascinating discoveries about Dave's enhanced abilities. The fungal exposure appears to have fundamentally altered how his system processes and distributes Vril energy."

She spread diagrams across Cecilia's desk, each showing complex cellular structures overlaid with glowing patterns. "The fungus has integrated into every cell, creating a mycelial network that's far more efficient than the original nanobot distribution system. The nanobots appear to have adapted to manage this new framework rather than handling Vril directly."

"Which explains why the treatment formula affected me so strongly," Dave said. "It was targeting the very thing that had become part of my enhanced biology."

"Exactly," Goulding agreed. "Though now I suspect Anya's... creative use of industrial power wasn't strictly necessary. The nanobots were already adapting to the formula's effects. The electrical surge just accelerated their response."

"You're welcome, by the way," Anya said without looking up from her laptop. "Though next time you need emergency defibrillation, maybe we can find something less dramatic than three-phase industrial power."

"That's not even the most interesting part," Goulding continued, pulling up more medical data. "The mycelial network appears to be evolving, becoming more sophisticated as it integrates with your existing abilities. Your recovery time after power use has decreased significantly. Strength output is more efficient. Even your enhanced vision seems to be processing data more effectively."

"About that," Cecilia interrupted, studying Dave thoughtfully. "Something's been bothering me since the Kazakhstan mission. How exactly did your hair and eyebrows survive that industrial furnace? Everything else burned away, but..."

Dave reached up self-consciously to touch his completely intact hair. "I... honestly hadn't thought about it. There's been a lot going on."

"Fascinating," Goulding breathed, already reaching for Kessler's near-infrared spectroscopy device. "The fungal integration must have affected your cellular structure at an even deeper level than we realised. We'll need to run more tests..."

"Later," Cecilia said firmly. "Right now, we need to discuss future implications. Voss's network has been dismantled, but there are almost certainly others who had access to his research. The Soviets weren't the only ones developing agricultural bioweapons."

The team sobered at that thought. They'd prevented one catastrophe, but the very fact that it had been possible meant others would try. Somewhere out there, someone else was studying Voss's work, learning from his mistakes, planning something new.

"We'll be ready," Dave said quietly. The others nodded, each remembering their own moments during the mission - Omar's exposure in the ship's hold, Anya's desperate hack of the automation systems, Serj's covering fire as they breached the mountain facility. They'd faced impossible odds before. They'd do it again if necessary.

"On that note," Cecilia said, producing a familiar blue garment, "Dr. Kessler insisted I give you these. Apparently they're a new prototype, rated for even higher temperatures. Though he did suggest trying not to test their limits by diving into any more industrial furnaces."

Dave accepted the experimental underwear with as much dignity as possible. Even the smallest details were important - like having something to wear after your clothes inevitably burned away during impossible missions.

"He also wants to study your hair's new heat resistance properties," Cecilia added with a slight smile. "Something about incorporating it into the next prototype's design matrix."

"Absolutely not," Dave replied firmly. Some lines had to be drawn, even in the name of science.

Through the window, construction crews continued their work, rebuilding what had been destroyed. But they were making it stronger, better prepared for future threats. Sometimes that's what it took - tearing everything down to its foundations before you could build something that would truly last.

The world's food supply was safe, for now. Voss's weapon would never threaten global agriculture. But there would be other threats, other challenges that required impossible solutions. The team would face them together, each bringing their own strengths to whatever came next.

Dave watched his teammates - his friends - already planning for future missions. Omar studying facility schematics, looking for vulnerabilities they'd missed. Anya's fingers rattling her keyboard as she traced digital shadows. Serj maintaining his quiet vigil, ready for whatever came through that door.

They'd saved the world again, through some combination of skill, determination, and sheer unwillingness to accept failure as an option. The cost had been high - Dan was still recovering, the agency was rebuilding,

and they'd all seen things that would haunt their dreams. But they'd done what needed to be done.

And if someone else tried to reshape the world through engineered catastrophe? Well, they'd handle that too. Even if it meant falling from the edge of space, diving into industrial furnaces, or finding increasingly creative ways to destroy their clothes.

Though maybe next time they'd pack spare tactical gear. Just in case.

Cecilia gathered her reports, each one documenting another piece of Voss's dismantled operation. "Get some rest," she told them. "There's still work to be done, but it can wait until tomorrow."

The team filed out, each carrying the weight of what they'd accomplished and what still lay ahead. But they carried it together, and that made all the difference.

Through the window, the sun set behind half-finished walls and construction equipment. Tomorrow they'd continue rebuilding, making everything stronger than before. But for now, they'd won. That had to be enough.

Even if Dave still had to explain to Kessler why testing hair samples for heat resistance was absolutely not happening.

Some victories came with very specific conditions attached.