

THREE

Pier 86—New York City—United States of America

Kalso pulled the black microfleece hoodie tighter over her head, grimacing into the cold wind sweeping in from the Hudson River, her nerves ringing like struck chimes. She moved like she had purpose, ignoring the urge to look over her shoulder, negotiating the debris and cargo containers placed across the width of the pier in what seemed a casual fashion; in fact, the junk had been arranged to provide bottlenecks to stop anyone from rushing the big ship moored at the 86 from the shore. In the bleak light of the evening, the vessel was a wall of gray steel curving up and over her head, frozen there like a wave cast in metal. Chains of fairy lights hung down from rusting gantries, flapping in the breeze, and while the upper deck was mostly dark, she could hear the sounds of people running around up there, and the occasional crunch of metal on metal. They had a regulation-size basketball court made of scrap iron and chain link on the deck—she'd seen it in the distance as she crossed the bridge over 12th Avenue—and there was a game on, lit by bio-lume sticks and fires burning in oil drums.

Ahead she glimpsed the name of the venerable old vessel. Image patterning software in her Sarif optics picked

out the letters defaced but still standing clear of the go-ganger tags painted over them: *Intrepid*.

Anna kept walking, approaching the covered gantry that extended up into the hull. Once upon a time, this old warship had sailed the world, projecting American sea power in the Pacific, Cuba, and Vietnam; fate and rich men had saved her from becoming a billion razor blades, and for a while the aging aircraft carrier had stood at dock, hosting stories of old wars, even serving her nation once again when the towers came down. But that was almost thirty years dead and gone, and recession and stock crashes had sent the old warhorse into darkness. The relic planes that had once stood on her decks were gone, sold off to collectors, and the ship itself had been left to rust. But like so many things, the people at the fringes of the city had found a use for her.

Anna had paid enough bribes to get the word of the day that let her on board. From the aft of the hangar deck, the sounds of a hammer-speed DJ resonated down the echoing hull. Between here and there, the place they called “the wet market” blossomed like a multicolored fungus, dozens of makeshift stalls selling pirated datasofts, old tech, and recovered cyberware alongside oil-can cook plates crackling with hot fat and pungent foods from India, the Caribbean, or the African Federation. There was no law at the 86, but the New York Police Department tended to let things lie, providing that the residents kept themselves to themselves and made sure that any bodies washed up inside New Jersey’s jurisdiction.

Anna skirted past the marketplace and found a corroded set of ladders that led up to the next level. The corridor she

emerged in was gloomy. It smelled of rust and seawater. Following lines of peeling lume tape, she ascended again and emerged somewhere near the bow. A large section of the forward deck had been cut away and in its place there were a couple of jury-rigged geo-domes made of smart fabric. The sea smell gave way to the faint whiff of ozone and battery acid.

Inside the dome there was a parade of cowboy electronics; server frames modified like hot rods, chugging gasoline generators and fat trunks of cable snaking from fans of solar panels or military-issue satellite antennae. Monitors and holoscreens lit the space with cold blue illumination, and here and there, faces rendered ghost-white glanced up at her from laptops or gamer pits.

“Kel.” She turned sharply at the sound of her cover name and saw Denny walking toward her. So dark-skinned as to seem almost coal-black, he was a short and stocky hacker with a shorn skull and an unkempt soul patch on his narrow chin. He had mirrored Kusanagi optics that gave his eyes the look of steel spheres. Following a few steps behind was a tall, rail-thin woman inside a doublet a size too large for her. She had thumbless spider-hands the color of old terra-cotta.

Anna gave Denny a nod from beneath her hood, watching the woman’s face grow more sour the closer she got. In better light it was difficult to be sure how old the taller woman was. Interface sockets glittered in the half-light, making a line over her right temple.

“This is Kel,” Denny was saying. “She’s in the market for some intelligence.”

He was going to go on, but his companion waved him

into silence. “I am getting a distinct taste of blue in my mouth,” she hissed. “You bring a cop on the boat? Are you an idiot?”

“Widow—”

“What?” Anna gave her a disgusted look, then glared at Denny. “This again? I thought me and you had gone through all that *who-the-fuck-are-you* crap already.” Kelso had targeted Denny through some files she’d skimmed from a contact at the DOJ, and worked him to get under this cover as “Kel,” an out-of-towner looking to buy some information. She turned away. “Forget it. I don’t have time for this.”

“Kel, wait.” Denny turned to Widow and glared at her. “She’s clean. I ran her jacket. Not even a touch of blue.”

Widow folded her thin arms. “Then she’s definitely a cop.”

Anna put on an angry snarl that wasn’t all fake. “Who the hell is this skinny bitch and why am I listening to her talk? Didn’t we have a deal, Denny?”

“You know who I am?” Widow snapped back. “Go-Five, that’s who I am. I’ll rip your life open in ten seconds. Zero everything you ever owned!”

Go-Five meant GO5, also known as the Gang of Five. They were a collective of hacker guns-for-hire well known by the FBI’s cybercrime division, with a lengthy rap sheet packed with all kinds of interesting digital larceny. The other interesting thing about them was that the Gang of Five were all faceless ghosts, which made it easy for someone to wear their name and reputation with little fear of being proven a liar.

“Bullshit,” Anna retorted. “Go-Five are all Koreans, everyone knows that.”

Widow snorted, and it was then that Kelso knew she had her on the line. The hacker community was driven by rep, and any one of them was only as good as their last score. Studying Widow in the actinic glow of the screens, Anna saw a woman trying to hide her age, running hard to keep up and not quite making it. She was maybe twenty if she was a day; old for a keyboard queen. All it would take to turn this around was to apply pressure to her vanity.

“I’m better than any K-towners,” Widow said, doing the job for her. “Better than those Juggernaut dinks and that day-player Windmill.”

Gotcha. “Prove it,” Anna demanded, handing her a data spike. “Denny asked me to come here because he said you people could cut ice for me. Can you do it or not?”

Widow snatched the spike from her hand, pale fingers with red enameled tips flashing. Inside it was every piece of information Kelso had, carefully stripped of any identifying markers that might show its origins from a law enforcement agency database.

“Get her money,” growled Widow at Denny, and stalked over to a desktop setup.

The other hacker blew out a breath. “So we do it like you asked, right? Run the face on the file through the net, see what comes up.”

“I need to know who he is.”

Denny shrugged. “No guarantees, Kel. It’s pay-for-play. Outcome is what it is. I told you that already.”

“I need to *know*,” she said, nerves bunching. Anna felt her mask of self-control slipping and took a moment to center herself. “If she’s as good as you said...” Her mouth went dry and she drifted off for a moment. The jittering in

her hands was coming back again, and she buried her fists inside the pockets of the hoodie. The other tell, that weird chemical taste in the back of her throat, like dry earth, was getting stronger.

Anna resisted the urge to reach for the ampoule pen in the pocket on the arm of the fleece and hunched forward. “Are we doing this or not?” she demanded, off the odd look Denny put her way. “Tick tock,” she added, irritably.

Denny held out his hand. “Cross my palm.”

She fished inside an inner pocket and came back with a credit chip imprinted with the logo of the People’s Republic. The arfid strip in the card had been scrambled—a low-tech approach, to be certain, but enough that it rendered the transaction untraceable. The hacker made it vanish. “How long is this gonna take?” Anna went on, her tone turning brittle.

“Not long,” he offered, eyeing her, catching her manner. “Hey, Kel...If you, like, *need* something, I can speak to some of my people—”

She turned away, walking toward the fabric walls of the dome. The offer tempted her more than she wanted to admit. “You know what I need, Denny,” she said over her shoulder. “I need a name for that face.”

Aerial Transit Corridor—Smolensk Oblast—Russian Federated States

Through the oval window of the pressure door, Saxon could see the morning light crossing the landscape far below, chasing the aircraft as it flew eastward. By the time they reached their destination, the dawn would have

overtaken them, but for now the rising sun was still at their backs, visible in lines of color that illuminated the thin strips of clouds passing beneath. The view tilted as they banked gently, and Saxon put out his right hand to steady himself. He was still being careful with the cybernetic limb; it was a military specification model manufactured by Tai Yong Medical, one of—if not *the*—biggest augmentation conglomerates on the planet. Along with new Hermes legs to replace those he'd damaged in the veetol crash six months ago, the upgraded Samson-series arm and a few other implants were all part of what Namir had called his “welcome bonus” for joining the Tyrants. The arm could be twitchy, though. Twice now, on the first few operations Namir had deployed him on, the Samson had shown a trigger delay. Saxon reckoned he had it tuned well enough by now, though. Still, he resolved to up his neuropozyne dose a little, just in case.

“Thinkin’ about a skydive?” said a voice. “You itchin’ to try out that new high-fall aug?”

He turned. Filling most of the corridor behind him, Lawrence Barrett had Saxon fixed with a wolfish grin. The American was big, and he was ugly. A flat buzz cut framed features that were burn-scarred and bold about it. The only part of the man’s face that was unblemished was the synth-skin along a reconstructed jaw. Saxon understood that Barrett’s looks had been given to him by close proximity to a bomb blast, but he knew little more than that. The big man wore his disfigurement like a badge of honor, highlighting it with a brass bull ring through his nose.

Saxon wasn’t a small guy by any means, but he carried himself differently from Barrett, with this thuggish swagger;

he didn’t feel the need to look threatening every second of every day. But then again, men who looked as tough as they were could be a useful tool in the spec ops game. Saxon was more a student of the subtle approach, though.

“I don’t like flying,” he offered. “Bores the hell out of me, yeah?”

“I hear that.” Barrett nodded, toying with the wrists of his black-and-steel cyberarms. “This is the shittiest airline ever. No damn stewardess and the in-flight movie sucks.” Outwardly, the jet they were aboard resembled any one of a number of conventional private airliners—but under the mimetic fuselage was the mobile operations center for the Tyrants, easily the rival of any military forward air command unit in the world.

Barrett wandered toward the galley and Saxon fell in behind him. He’d been on a couple of sorties with the American—surveillance jobs in Bucharest and Glasgow—and all along he’d felt like he was being watched himself. It wasn’t surprising, Saxon thought. They’d invested time and money in headhunting him from Belltower, so it made sense to have him pass through a few rookie assignments before stepping up to the real thing—but to be honest, he chafed at it. He wasn’t just some grunt in off the street. He knew how to do the job as well as any of them. He was tired of the small-scale, low-threat gigs. Still, the Tyrants paid well, and they had good funding, that was clear—although he’d learned straightaway that asking questions about that side of things was off-limits. Namir had made that very plain.

He’d seen some of the other Tyrant operatives here and there over the past couple of months, usually just

in passing—but this was the first time they'd all been gathered together for a mission. Saxon felt an itchy tingle of anticipation in the palm of his gun hand. The gloves were going to come off when they got to Moscow—he could sense it.

They emerged in the open common area on the aircraft's upper deck. A gleaming steel galley ranged along one wall, and there were chairs and monitors facing it. Barrett pawed through a food locker like a hungry bear and Saxon glanced away, finding another member of the team engrossed in maintenance on a heavy cyberhand.

The German was the other new guy in the Tyrants, although he'd been in a while before Saxon's arrival. Beneath a dark jacket he had the spare, rippled physique of a bodybuilder, a thick neck and natural eyes that still seemed somehow lifeless. A black watch cap was pulled down over his hair. He didn't show many augmentations aside from the hand, but Saxon had seen him moving and was willing to bet the legs were metal. The guy was the youngest of them, somewhere in his twenties.

"You're Saxon," he said. His accent was deep and resonant. "We have not formally met." He nodded at the dismantled mechanism at the end of his arm. "Forgive me if I do not shake your hand. I am Gunther Hermann."

"I know." Namir had mentioned Hermann in passing; from what Saxon had learned, the younger man had been part of Germany's GSG-9 police counter-terror unit until the Tyrants had recruited him. Something in the way that Namir had glossed over that fact made Saxon wonder about the reasons for Hermann's departure from the Bundespolizei.

Hermann put down his tools and took a careful drink from a can of orange soda. "You are the replacement for Wexler, then?"

"I guess so." There had been little said about the operator whose boots Saxon was filling. He hadn't wanted to push the issue. People died in this line of work as a matter of course.

"He was slow," offered Barrett. "Got himself killed 'cause of it."

He decided to venture the question, caution be damned. "What happened?"

"Now, why do you need to know that?" Saxon looked up as a third man entered the common area from the forward compartment. His lips thinned. In any group there was always a place where the dynamic created friction, and it was right here, between Ben Saxon and Scott Hardesty, the team's dedicated sniper.

Hardesty was rangy and tall, so much so that he seemed in danger of scuffing the top of his bald scalp on the ceiling. Saxon never saw him wearing anything other than a combat overall, sometimes with a gear vest or equipment belt. He was long and thin, like the spindly extreme-range rifles he carried on-mission, and augmented across all his limbs. His eyes were high-specification optics of a kind Saxon had never seen before.

At first Saxon had found it difficult to adjust from being a team leader, as he had been with Strike Six, to being a line operator once again—and Hardesty seemed determined to make it harder by being as big a pain in the arse as he possibly could. The man had taken a strong dislike to him, but the reason why wasn't clear.