

Havoc

Steven F. Freeman

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DEDICATION

To those whose love of reading has made
this enterprise possible

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CHAPTER 1

Brian McFarland took brisk strides through the Silicon Valley campus of Vidulum, Inc. After swiping his magnetic security card at the building's main entrance and then again at the R&D section's heavy door, he wound his way through a maze of cubicles and lab equipment to arrive at the office of Leo Burton, Vidulum's CEO.

Burton, a lean, tall man showing the first signs of graying temples, rose to greet his company's Chief of Security. "So, McFarland, what's so important that we had to meet on a Saturday?"

"We've had a security breach."

"How serious is it?"

"As bad as it gets. Someone copied the complete set of Silverstar files—design specs, production facility schematics, product capabilities—between twelve and twenty-four hours ago."

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Burton sank into his chair. Through white lips, he asked, “Are you sure?”

“Yes, sir. When the archive job ran last night, the backup server kicked out an exception message, saying the day’s batch had already been archived. *We* didn’t copy it, which means someone else did.”

“Do we know the files were actually stolen? Couldn’t the exception message have been triggered by some tech accidentally running the backup job earlier in the day?”

“We asked the same question. No one ran it, and whoever did copy the files suppressed his user name.” McFarland cracked his knuckles, a habit he exhibited during times of stress.

“I didn’t think our systems allowed jobs to be run without a user ID,” said Burton.

“They’re not supposed to,” admitted the security chief, “but somehow this person figured out a way to get around that restriction.”

“What about our file segregation? Don’t we keep our key files on separate servers to make it impossible for someone to crack a single password and access all of the confidential information at once?”

“Yes, sir—we do. This thief was a smooth customer. He—or she—copied the files from all eight servers.”

“It’s an inside job. It has to be.”

“That was my conclusion too, sir.”

“Wait a minute—if this thief is so good, why didn’t

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he prevent the redundant backup message from being generated?” asked Burton. “We would’ve never known about the theft if not for that.”

“I’m the only person who can suppress that warning message. It’s one of the safeguards I put in place when I was first hired on.”

“I see. Thank God you set that up.” Burton paused to reflect. “So, we have a renegade employee in our midst—someone who’s out to make a quick buck at the expense of the very existence of our company.”

“Sir? The existence of our company?”

“We’re a one-trick pony, McFarland. Using the proprietary technology contained in those files to successfully launch the Silverstar project is a make-or-break proposition for Vidulum. We have no failsafe, no alternative strategy if some other company brings this technology to market before us.”

“So you think someone stole the files to resell them?”

“It has to be, don’t you think? Silverstar is miles ahead of everyone else. It could be worth hundreds of millions of dollars on the open market.”

“So just look for the employee that buys an island in a few months.”

“By then, it will be too late. We have to stop this person before they have a chance to sell the files. If they do, we’re all out of a job.” Burton began to pace the floor of his office. “Do you have any suspects?”

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“Not off the top of my head. I’ll have my staff investigate—see if anyone was out sick yesterday or the day before, acting suspicious or angry towards the company, that kind of thing. We’ll have to act quietly, though. Our investigation must be discreet to avoid tipping off the thief that we’re on to him.”

“Good man.” Burton stared McFarland squarely in the eye. “You understand...while it’s important to move quietly, we must also act quickly. It’s not just our company’s existence that’s at stake. If Silverstar is sold to the wrong people, our nation could be at risk, too. You are to employ any measures necessary to reacquire the project files. Are you clear on this? Any...measures...necessary.”

“Crystal clear, sir.”

CHAPTER 2

As the conversation at Vidulum's campus drew to a close, a nervous man in khaki pants and a finely-stitched, white cotton shirt waited in a line at Beijing Capital International Airport, advancing as the line crept forward. After an interminable wait, he reached the counter.

"Identification," snapped the agent.

The man handed over his passport.

"Wu, Feng?" asked the agent.

"That's correct."

"Final destination Rome...staying for seven days?"

"Yes."

"Purpose of trip?"

"Pleasure," replied Wu. No one was to know the true purpose of his travels. Xing Zhǔxí, staunch member of

the Chinese Communist Party and leader of Cúncú Company, had been quite explicit on this point. Too much was at stake to give others the slightest inkling of the true purpose of his mission, prompting Wu to dress the part of a tourist.

The airline employee nodded. She handed back Wu's passport along with a freshly-printed boarding pass. "Next," she announced.

Wu made his way through the sluggish security line and proceeded to the gate. After boarding the plane, he checked his watch. With one layover, he would be in Rome in just over twenty hours.

The flight's duration provided plenty of time for Wu to dwell on the mission to which he had been assigned. Scarcely anyone at Cúncú knew of his humble beginnings in a small agricultural village in Gansu District, and he intended to keep it that way. Through sheer perseverance and a little luck, he had managed to earn an engineering degree at the University of Melbourne and then claw his way into the position of assistant director of the R&D labs at Cúncú, one of China's largest multinational technology companies. His job didn't pay much, but it held out the prospect of future advancement and prosperity.

Wu knew this mission would dictate the future direction of not only his career but, more generally, his life. Being assigned to it indicated Xing Zhǔxí's confidence in Wu's capabilities. If he succeeded, Wu knew his career would rocket up in a favorable trajectory.

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He would be able to lavish Li Na, his recent bride, with the luxuries he yearned to provide but currently lacked. And after having their allotted first child, they might even be permitted to apply for a second.

If he botched the mission, well...the Party had a way of ensuring unsuccessful assignments weren't repeated, at least by the same individual. The thought reminded him of a line used in the American spaceflight movie: "Failure is not an option."

Several hours later, Wu's plane touched down in Rome. Nobody in the city spoke Chinese, but practically everyone knew English, a language Wu had polished to a high gloss while attending college in Melbourne. He made his way through customs without a hitch and took a taxi to the hotel.

Upon arriving at his hotel room, Wu turned on his laptop and connected to the internet. Only after activating the latest encryption software did he send a message back to Xing Zhǔxí: "Have arrived in Rome. Pickup on schedule for 1900 local time day after tomorrow."

He closed his laptop and exhaled. Other than conducting a brief reconnaissance trip, he had nothing to do between now and then except await the planned rendezvous.

CHAPTER 3

As Wu settled into his temporary lodging, a commercial jet streaked across the sky. The seven-hour duration of the transatlantic flight, combined with the aircraft's steady roar, had lulled Mallory Wilson into a light slumber. Alton Blackwell, her boyfriend, studied her athletic form. As Mallory leaned her head against his shoulder, her jet-black locks lay nestled against the bottom of his closely-cropped, chestnut hair and cascaded onto his chest. Alton's lean frame, combined with a height that ran only slightly above average, provided enough space for Mallory to find a comfortable perch on his shoulder.

As a flight attendant began the pre-landing announcement, Mallory's eyes fluttered open, and she raised herself up. After stretching her arms overhead, she asked, "Have I been asleep for long?"

"A couple of hours. We should be in Rome in about fifteen minutes."

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She squeezed his biceps with both hands, a habit she was wont to do in times of excitement. “You and your surprise vacations. I still can’t believe this is happening. You’d better pinch me when we get there.”

“Only if you agree to pinch me back.” As far as Alton was concerned, his girlfriend of just over a year and friend of three years was the perfect woman, inside and out. He had never quite understood how he had scored such a prize as her and at times felt as if he had dreamed up the whole experience.

“Speaking of surreal,” said Mallory, “I have to keep reminding myself that you’re gonna be the top guy in Kruptos’ new Washington office. Not that I didn’t think you could do it,” she hastened to add, “but you hardly ever talk about work. Sometimes I forget how good you are.”

“I just talk up a good story.”

“Ha! Sorry, but I know better. Opening the Washington office was your idea.”

Alton shrugged. A cryptologist by training, he had served for several years as a top manager for Kruptos, Inc., arguably the world’s most advanced data encryption and security firm. Shortly after working a temporary assignment in the Washington, D.C. area two months earlier, Alton had come to recognize the vast, untapped potential business the Federal government represented to his Alpharetta, Georgia firm. After pitching the idea of opening a second Kruptos facility in the Washington metropolitan area, Alton had been surprised to learn that Jake Hines, Kruptos’ CEO, had not only agreed with the

idea but had tapped Alton for the job of running the new facility.

“I’ve been meaning to ask you,” said Mallory, “how did you convince Hines to let you leave on a three-week vacation just as the new office was about to open?”

“Well, I had already paid for the trip. That helped—plus a lot of begging and a promise to ship him a case of Limoncello from Naples. Apparently, that’s his favorite liquor.”

“Bribery. I should have guessed.”

CHAPTER 4

As Brian McFarland, Chief of Security for Vidulum, traversed the chaotic hallways of San Francisco International Airport, a broad-shouldered man watched him from a discreet distance.

The burly observer pulled a cell phone from his pocket and initiated a call.

“Hello?” boomed a deep voice from the other end of the phone.

“Gantt?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s Vega. McFarland and I have both passed through airport security. Have you been able to discover where the Silverstar files are headed?”

“Our best information points to Europe, but frankly we’re not certain. What is McFarland’s destination?”

“I was hoping you could tell me. He hasn’t arrived at his gate yet.”

“Stand by—I’ll check.”

Vega could hear the clacking of computer keys from the other end.

“Okay,” said Gantt, “He’s headed for Seattle.”

“Seattle! What the hell for?”

“We can’t worry about that,” replied Gantt. “We have to keep our focus on tracking down the files.”

“Agreed,” said Vega. “So assuming you’re right about the files being headed to Europe, McFarland is traveling in the wrong direction. I should have known those Keystone Kops masquerading as Vidulum security ‘experts’ would never be able to track down Silverstar.”

“Yeah,” said Gantt. “I was hoping McFarland’s flight would corroborate the expected destination of the files, but he seems to be on a wild goose chase.”

As Vega walked down the terminal’s hallway, an inattentive twenty-something engaged in conversation with his friends collided with Vega’s shoulder. The younger man nearly fell, while Vega, not wanting to alert McFarland to his presence with an angry retort, scarcely broke stride. If the younger man considered launching a recriminating comment, the older man’s sheer size must have silenced him.

“Yeah, there’s no point in following McFarland anymore,” continued Vega, unperturbed. “So, if you think

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the files are possibly on their way to Europe, you must have someone in mind, right?”

Gantt hesitated. “It’s really just a hunch. A Vidulum employee is headed there as we speak. We thought we were on to something, but I hacked his e-mail earlier this morning. He scheduled the vacation three months ago.”

“That doesn’t mean he’s not the thief. Maybe he just plans ahead.”

“True, but Silverstar wasn’t at a particularly useful state back then. Vidulum only cracked the packing problem last month. Without that breakthrough, Silverstar isn’t a lucrative technology.”

“I see your point,” admitted Vega. “But unless we have any other leads, I say we tail your off-to-Europe guy.”

“Let me check out a few other folks first. I don’t want you out of the country if I discover a better lead in our backyard.”

“How long should I wait?”

“Give me twenty-four hours to do a little more research.”

“Twenty-four hours! That’s a hell of a lead you’re giving the thief, don’t you think?”

“Possibly,” replied Gantt, “but we have six other people to investigate. I have to ensure you’re tailing the right person, or he’ll have an even bigger lead. Give me one day. If we don’t find a smoking gun on someone else

by then, I'll debrief you on the guy we have in mind and send you on your way."

"So until we know for sure if I need to go there, you'll be assigning surveillance of this guy to someone in the European theater, right?"

"Yes—Fruehauf."

Vega pondered the choice for a moment. "He's good, but for this assignment, we need someone exceptional. I have a resource there—the kind that doesn't ask too many questions. I'll give him a call."

"One of our guys?" asked Gantt.

"Not really, but we can't afford to be too choosy over that, can we? The key is that he gets the job done, right?"

"Yeah—our priority is recovering the files."

"Okay," said Vega. "I'll engage my European contact to have that base covered. I'd rather be doing this job myself instead of trusting it to someone else. But since I'll be cooling my heels for a while, we don't have a choice. Let me know as soon as you find out exactly where the files are headed."

"I will. You'll hear from me tomorrow."

After ending the call, Vega executed an about face and headed for the airport's exit. As he passed a trashcan, he deposited his airline ticket—purchased for the sole reason of tailing McFarland through airport security—into it. He hoped his next ticket would be more useful.

Returning to his hotel room minutes later, Vega

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placed an international call.

“Hello?” came a voice accompanied by a fair amount of white noise.

“Raven? This is Ernesto Vega. I have a job for you...”

CHAPTER 5

Brian McFarland stepped out of the Seattle airport into a gloomy afternoon drizzle and caught a cab. After providing his destination to the driver and settling into the backseat, he wondered what sort of sales pitch would be needed to bring his contact out of retirement.

Successfully resolving this security breach represented a make-or-break crossroads for McFarland—not just for this job but for the future direction of his life.

McFarland's alcoholic father had insisted Brian would never amount to anything, probably as a way of deflecting attention away from his own squandered years. For the most part, the hardscrabble Bronx neighborhood in which McFarland grew up had provided equally poor preparation for a life of success. But Mrs. Rayborne, his junior-year Information Technologies instructor, had observed a latent talent in McFarland that other teachers had missed and had encouraged him to pursue a degree in software design. It was her belief in his capacity to

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succeed, more than her skills as an instructor, that had lit the fires of McFarland's motivation. He had sailed through a Bachelor's degree with honors and landed a promising job as a designer of electronic security for the east-coast, US headquarters of Janz Bank, a European multinational. In the space of three years, he had risen to lead the electronic-security department.

But McFarland's promising career had nearly imploded after hackers broke through the bank's firewall, stealing thousands of customer records. McFarland had known the root cause of the problem lay with the Bank's archaic domain-protection code, an aging piece of software in dire need of an upgrade. He had repeatedly warned the Board of Directors of this vulnerability but had been denied the upgrade due to an "insufficient IT budget." After the breach, however, the company had needed a scapegoat, and McFarland was promptly served up for slaughter. After that travesty, he had spent fruitless months searching for another job in the IT security industry, eventually taking a bookkeeping position out of desperation to pay the bills.

After months of searching, McFarland had spotted the opening at Vidulum. As a high-tech startup, its management team consisted of engineers, not marketers ignorant of the technical intricacies of their business. For the first time, McFarland could explain the Janz Bank disaster to a hiring manager who spoke his language and understood his lack of culpability. He had gladly accepted the role of Vidulum's Chief of Security, a job which offered a chance to redeem himself with a fresh start in a new location.

Yet McFarland realized a cloud remained over his

head. Doubts would always linger regarding the exact role he had played in the Janz Bank breach. This new Vidulum crisis did little to put those doubts to rest. He knew he had to successfully recover the files, or his career as a firewall security expert would be over for good.

The cab pulled into a nondescript strip mall. After paying the fare, McFarland held a worn briefcase over his head to shield his pale, Scottish features and auburn hair from the rain. He hurried towards Fabrizio's Café, stepped inside, and wiped his feet.

"Table for one, sir?" asked the hostess.

"Thanks, but the person I'm meeting is already here."

McFarland threaded his way to the restaurant's back wall and slid across the red, tattered vinyl covering the booth's empty seat.

"Thanks for meeting me," said McFarland.

"Long time no talk," replied his contact, a man whose boyish charm belied years of experience plying his chosen profession. "I haven't seen you since the Bronx days."

"Yeah, it's been a while, but I've heard about your career."

The contact scowled. "How much have you heard, exactly?"

"Just rumors. You can't expect to build up your kind of expertise without word getting around. Speaking of that...how you'd like a little new work?"

"Sorry—I'm retired now."

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“The money is good.”

“If I was in need of money, I’d still be in the game. The money I already have won’t do me no good if I’m in prison.”

“Look,” said McFarland, “I’ll be honest. My ass is on the line. I’m head of security for a high-tech startup in Silicon Valley. Two days ago, we had a security breach. Some highly-sensitive files were stolen, and if I don’t get them back, my career is over—not just at my current job, but anywhere.”

“I don’t know...”

“I really don’t want to be waiting tables until I’m eighty. You can help me out. I know you can. How about this one last job—for the sake of an old friend?”

The contact remained silent for a full thirty seconds as he stirred his coffee with a dingy teaspoon. “Try the lasagna. It’s delicious. And in the meantime, give me all the details of your break-in.”

McFarland couldn’t suppress a grin of immeasurable relief. “I knew I could count on you. I’ve copied all the information you’ll need onto this flash drive...”

CHAPTER 6

At Rome's Leonardo da Vinci Airport, Alton and Mallory collected their luggage and queued up in the taxi line.

Mallory glanced at the couple in line behind her. "Hi! Weren't you all just on the flight from Washington?"

"Yes," replied the man. "I'm guessing you were, too?"

"Yep," replied the gregarious Mallory. "I noticed you a few rows ahead of us. This is our first time in Rome. How about you?"

"Our second," replied the woman, a pretty blonde. "I'm Anna, by the way. And this is my husband Duncan."

As they exchanged greetings, Alton and Mallory reached the front of the queue.

"What hotel are you all staying at?" asked Alton. "Perhaps we could share a cab."

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Duncan hesitated before answering. “We’re at the Hotel Imperiale.”

“Oh,” said Alton. “We’re at the Pantheon Royal Suite. I don’t know if they’re in the same area or not.”

“Is close,” interjected the cabby. “I take you two to Pantheon, then others to Imperiale.”

The travelers agreed. As they moved their luggage to the back of the cab, Duncan turned to Alton. “Want me to help you with that? It looks like you hurt your leg.”

“Thanks,” replied Alton, “but I’ve got it. This is an old injury.”

After boarding the cab, they set off for the heart of Rome.

Mallory leaned over to Anna. “We’re on vacation. How about you?”

“Yes. Duncan’s been working so hard the past few years, it was all I could do to convince him to take a break. I think the allure of returning to Rome is what finally convinced him to take a couple of weeks off. But I have to admit, I was a little surprised he agreed.”

“So you’ve been here before, huh?” said Alton. “I guess you liked it, or you wouldn’t be back.”

“Absolutely,” replied Duncan from the front seat. “The first time we came was for our honeymoon. And yes, I love Rome. It has an indefinable quality: the people...the history...the juxtaposition of old and new. It just draws you back.”

“Maybe that’s why it’s so romantic,” added Anna. “There’s something magical about this place that’s hard to put into words.”

The comment prompted Alton to check the interior pocket of his jacket for the fourth time since disembarking from the plane. The ring was still there, of course. He knew he was being paranoid but couldn’t help it.

“So this is like a second honeymoon for you?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Anna. “We’re excited to be here. What about you all? You’re not on your honeymoon, are you?”

“No, we’re not married,” said Alton, feeling his face becoming a little warm.

“So, how did you all end up here?” asked Anna.

“Well, Mallory and I served together in the Army in Afghanistan for about a year. Before that, I had been working in the desert near Gazib when an insurgent detonated an IED inside the mobile communications van I commanded.” Alton turned to Duncan. “That’s how I acquired the limp you noticed earlier.”

“Wow—I’m so sorry,” said Anna.

“Well, it had a happy ending,” said Alton. “During my recovery, my commander assigned me to a desk job in Camp Eggers in Kabul. That’s how Mallory and I met. Eventually, we both left the Army and now work in the Washington area. We’ve been dating about a year now and thought a vacation here in Rome would be fun.”

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Alton declined to provide any more details to his new acquaintances. After he and Mallory had befriended one another in Afghanistan, the feelings of both had evolved into love, but neither had been aware of the other's true feelings. Alton had left the Army to work for Kruptos. Half a year later, Mallory had taken a job with the FBI in Washington. Zack Lambert, one of Alton's former soldiers who also worked at Kruptos, had left for a weekend camping trip but died in the woods under unusual circumstances. Alton had called Mallory to ask for her help looking into Zach's mysterious death. At the conclusion of the investigation, they had discovered each other's true feelings and had dated ever since. Between their combat time in Afghanistan, the Zack Lambert investigation, and two additional cases since then, each had saved the life of the other more than once, leading to a deeper personal bond than might have been expected from a dating couple.

"That's a sweet story," said Anna.

"What about you all?" asked Mallory. "How did you meet?"

"I'm afraid our story isn't as interesting," said Anna. "We met in college and hung out with the same circle of friends. After a while, we started dating. One thing led to another, and now here we are, too."

"That's cool," said Mallory. "How long have you been married?"

"Almost eleven years," said Duncan.

"Nice," said Alton. "So, since this is your second trip, do you have any advice for newbies like us? Not that we

don't already have a lot planned, but it's always good to hear from folks with experience."

"Gosh, it's all good, as far as I'm concerned," replied Anna. "Just stay away from the tourist-trap restaurants."

Duncan furrowed his brow in concentration. "You know, one stop I really enjoyed last time was this al fresco dining right near the Colosseum: traditional Italian dinner...a carafe of Chianti...music, all with the illuminated Colosseum in the background. It's a little touristy, but hey, that's what we came here for, right?"

"It sounds divine," said Mallory. "Do you remember the name of the restaurant?"

"Yeah, we're going back during this trip," replied Duncan, tapping his phone. "I have it right here on our itinerary. It's called 'Naumachia.'"

As Mallory typed the name into her phone, the taxi pulled to a stop.

"Is Pantheon Royal Suite," said the driver. "I help you with your luggage."

After bidding adieux to their traveling partners, Alton and Mallory made their way to the check-in line at the hotel's front desk.

"So what do you think?" asked Mallory. "Want to have dinner at Naumachia while we're here?"

"Yeah—it sounds terrific," replied Alton. "We're here to have a nice, fun time together. It doesn't get much better than that."

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“Oh, good. I was hoping you’d say yes.”

Alton and Mallory completed their check-in, then made a beeline for their hotel room. A vase of fresh flowers and a uniform white hue on the walls and minimalist comforters imbued the room with a cheerful air, despite its small dimensions.

On the room’s small work desk rested a tastefully-decorated basket of fruit, a bottle of champagne on ice, and a pair of champagne flutes.

“What’s this?” asked Alton.

“You’re not the only one who can surprise people, you know,” replied Mallory with a grin. “It’s my ‘welcome-to-Italy’ present.”

Alton smiled and wrapped her in a hug. “Thanks, Honey.”

They walked to the window and pulled open the curtains to reveal a breathtaking vista of the historic Piazza della Rotonda, a paved courtyard surrounded by shops, buildings, and al-fresco dining, all fronting the famous Pantheon. A 300-year-old Egyptian obelisk stood almost directly outside their window. All was exactly as Alton had hoped. He laid his arm across Mallory’s shoulders, pulling her close.

“I see you reserved double beds,” observed Mallory.

“Yeah,” said Alton with a shrug and crooked smile.

Not long after he and Mallory had started dating, Alton had countered his biological urgings by suggesting

abstinence, believing it to be the only proper course for a man claiming to be worthy of his companion's love. Mallory had agreed with the arrangement, but they had both struggled to maintain it—Alton certainly had, at least.

In truth, Alton's abstinence was also born of an unspoken anxiety. His combat injury had not only rendered him lame. It had also limited his range of motion and still sent frequent bolts of pain coursing throughout his leg during many physical activities. He remained uncertain how these limitations would affect his carnal performance—and how Mallory would react to those limitations. This fear had also served to hold him in check.

Now, as Alton gazed upon his lovely companion, whose features were rendered even more beautiful by the late-morning sunbeams pouring through the window, he felt thankful this trip would, hopefully, move them closer to the time when their pact would no longer be necessary. The discipline required to maintain it grew more difficult each day.

“You wouldn't have me take advantage of you here, would you?” he countered. “Not when you're a captive audience like this?”

“I don't know, Sweetie. I think you could talk me into just about anything right now.”

He swallowed. “Um...I'm not sure if the shower has hot water, but at this moment, I don't care. I think a cold one is just what I need.”

Mallory threw back her head and laughed. She looped

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her arms around his neck and pressed into a brief kiss, then separated. “Well, speaking of showers, I could use one after that long flight. I won’t be long.” Her feet made no sound as she glided across the bathroom’s marble tiles and shut the door.

I think you could talk me into just about anything right now. Alton wished Mallory wouldn’t make cracks like that. Her allure was difficult enough to resist without the weight of such additional temptation.

Alton’s pulse had accelerated at the remark and continued to race. From the window at the far end of the room, he paced to the room’s entrance and returned, running a hand through his hair.

“Forgot to get a change of clothes,” said Mallory as she emerged from the bathroom, now wearing only a towel. Gathering a few items from her suitcase, she returned to the bathroom, and Alton resumed his pacing.

As he headed to the room’s entrance for the third time, Alton surprised himself by making a sudden turn, pushing open the bathroom door and stepping inside. Through the warm, humid mists rising in billows around the room, he could discern Mallory’s nude body. She seemed a paragon of beauty, the type over which Italy’s Renaissance artists surely would have fought for the right to immortalize.

Mallory had just started to lather herself and looked up. A loofa fell from her hand. Her countenance registered utter astonishment, but she made no movement.

Alton gazed into her bewitching eyes, knowing no

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words were necessary to tell her that which his own eyes revealed. With a determined set in his jaw, he peeled off his shirt, then unfastened his jeans and let them drop to the floor. He could not discern whether his warmth arose from the shower's steam or from the imminent release of desires held so long at bay.

For the first time, Mallory moved, inhaling a deep breath and slowly releasing it. Alton stepped into the shower with her. Pouring body wash onto his hands, he began to run them over her body, sending an erotic shiver up her back. As he slid his hands over her shoulders, he leaned forward to kiss her neck.

“Oh, God. Alton...”

He continued to move his hands around her body, eliciting moans of passion from his impromptu lover as he worked his way downward. As he reached her lower thighs, Mallory laid her hand on his.

“And now you,” she said, picking up the body wash and forming a lather.

She began by making circles on his shoulders. As she made her way down the landscape of his chest, Alton's skin radiated with white-hot electricity. Mallory covered his body with equal thoroughness, lingering in ways designed to confer greater pleasure.

As Mallory finished, Alton gazed into her eyes, the depths of which seemed more impossible to measure than ever before.

“I love you,” he said, “more than I could have ever imagined loving anyone.”

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“And I love you, too,” replied Mallory, draping her arms around his neck, “so much.”

They allowed the shower to rinse the soap from their bodies. Turning off the water, Alton took Mallory in his arms and tenderly carried her from the bathroom, careful to keep her weight—slight though it was—centered in front of him to avoid triggering discomfort in his injured leg. Leaning over to place her on the bed, though, he couldn’t suppress a grimace as the awkward angle sent a bolt of pain shooting down the limb.

“Are you all right?” asked Mallory with a look of concern.

“The best I’ve ever been.”

Alton had no way of knowing if he would soon discover another physical deficiency resulting from the explosion that had rendered him permanently lame. Having no time for rational thought, though, he no longer cared. His entire attention was riveted on the ineffable beauty before him.

Alton lay down beside Mallory. Sweeping her dripping, raven tresses behind her ears, he rested a hand on her cheek and gently kissed her. Grasping her face in both hands, he kissed her again, harder. She returned the passion of his kiss, prompting Alton to shift on top of her. As their bodies joined, time stopped, and Alton felt the thrill of experiencing one of the most exquisite pinnacles this life has to offer.

As waves of desire coursed through his body, Alton felt no pain, only ecstasy. His mind could focus only on the passion of the moment. He had no idea how long

they remained coupled or how many times they climaxed together. Their bodies surged in glorious unison until physical exhaustion began to set in. After a sigh of contentment from Mallory, they finally disentangled.

Alton lay on his back, while Mallory rested beside him, a hand upon his chest and a leg draped over his thigh.

“Oh, my God, Alton,” said Mallory at last. “I thought you had combat injuries.”

“You know I do.”

“You could have fooled me. After that performance, I think you’ll be required to give back your Purple Heart. You don’t seem injured to me.”

Alton grinned and caressed her face. “I’m glad you’re happy.”

“I am,” said Mallory. “But you know, I just can’t believe we’re here...right now...like this.”

“I know. I can’t either. Any regrets?”

“Are you kidding? I’ve been waiting for this for months. You?”

Alton smiled. “No. Perhaps I should, but I don’t. Maybe if I had any doubt of wanting to spend the rest of my life with you, I’d be chastising myself right now. But honestly, I’m in heaven.”

Mallory leaned over onto him a little more. “Me, too.”

After dressing, the couple once again gazed down on

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the Piazza della Rotonda, which had taken on a new radiance in Alton's eyes.

Mallory slipped her hand into Alton's. "I love you," she said.

"And you, too," replied Alton. He leaned his forehead against hers and closed his eyes. "You're amazing, you know that?"

"Alton—," she began, but he pulled her close before she could continue, their lips meeting in a hungry rush.

The warm Italian sunshine continued to bathe the silent couple in its glow, lending them the appearance of a Michelangelo masterpiece come to life. Alton wouldn't have objected to maintaining this pose forever, like a statue, holding the love of his life in an eternal embrace.

CHAPTER 7

The following morning, Ernesto Vega felt anything but statuesque. He paced the floor of his Palo Alto hotel room like an expectant father. Hadn't twenty-four hours already passed? He contemplated calling Gantt but rejected the idea, knowing his supervisor would notify him as soon as he had any solid leads.

Vega threw himself into an uncomfortable Queen Anne chair and sat, brooding. A minute turned into thirty, yet still no word.

The ringing of Vega's cell phone broke his reverie. He snatched it from his pocket.

"Yes?"

"This is Gantt. We have a lead on the files."

"It's about time."

"There were five other Vidulum employees and a

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suspiciously-overqualified contract janitor who all had to be ruled out as suspects.”

“I see. So what about McFarland and the rest of Vidulum’s security team? Do they have any leads you can leverage, or are they still running around with their heads up their collective asses?”

“Are you kidding? They’ve never even figured out we’ve been looking over their shoulders for the past two years. In any case...McFarland booked a return flight from Seattle for tomorrow. Other than that, they don’t seem to be doing much besides reaching the same conclusions we did—only later.”

“Lovely,” muttered Vega. “So that means the guy in Europe is still our man?”

“Yep, although I’m still a little suspicious about the janitor,” replied Gantt. “I mean...an industrial engineer mopping floors? Really? I’m gonna dig into his past a little bit more. But at the end of the day, all the evidence still points to Europe. I’ll e-mail you the background information on that guy as soon as I hang up.”

“Okay. So, am I traveling as me?”

“I don’t think that would be a good idea. We need to keep this manhunt as far under the radar as possible. Interpol knows you and might start wondering why you’re suddenly showing up on their doorstep. If they recognize you, the best-case scenario is they slow you down. We can’t afford even that.”

“I agree. So which alias shall I use? The Chris Jackson one?”

“Yes. You haven’t made any international trips on that one before. It’s the least likely to be noticed. You still have the passport?”

“Yep, and the credit cards,” confirmed Vega. “What about my plane ticket?”

“I’ll take care of that while you’re on the way to the airport. I’ll message you the itinerary en route.”

“Good.”

“Vega,” said Gantt, “find the files before they’re sold. Do what you have to do to recover them. That’s a direct order—from the top.”

“Don’t worry. I know my job.” Vega paced the floor as he walked and ran a hand through his salt-and-pepper hair. “But what kind of tools am I going to have to get the job done once I’m there? The airlines would allow me to pack my Ruger in checked luggage, but that might draw the kind of attention we want to avoid, don’t you think?”

“Agreed. I’ll disassemble a standard kit and express-mail you the components via four separate shipments tonight. You’ll have to perform the usual assembly once you get there. I’ll send you the shipping control numbers for pickup along with the rest of the information on our guy.”

“Perfect,” said Vega.

“Have you heard anything from your contact in Europe?”

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“Yeah—I put him on the trail of our suspect, but I haven’t heard from him today. If I he hasn’t contacted me by the time I land, I’ll reach out to him.”

“Okay. Keep me in the loop.”

“Will do.”

“And Vega—don’t let me down. Our management team is getting more nervous every hour.”

“I’ll find the Silverstar files. You can count on that.”

CHAPTER 8

Upon opening his eyes the next morning, Alton lay perfectly still. He recalled one of many lonely nights in Afghanistan in which he had dreamed of walking arm-in-arm with Mallory. In the dream, an engagement ring had rested on Mallory's hand, and her smiling lips had begun to speak, "Alton, I love—" when reveille had sounded, jerking Alton fully awake. How bitter had been the transition from dreamy perfection to stark, lonely reality!

Surely Alton hadn't dreamed the events of the previous day. Yes, intimacy with Mallory had been on his mind—a lot—but everything that had transpired the day before had seemed so real. Yet Alton feared to turn his head, lest he discover that those events, too, had been only a projection of unrealized yearnings.

"Good morning," said Mallory, rolling over to place her hand on his chest.

Alton exhaled in a rush, prompting Mallory to ask, "What is it? Are you okay?"

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“Yeah...fine.” He reached over and pulled her close. “Good morning to you, too.” *Sweet reality.*

Alton lay with an arm encircling his beloved, wondering how long he could stay there before starvation set in.

“I could lie here all day,” said Mallory, “but I guess we should get going. Knowing you, I’m sure we have a full schedule planned.” She climbed out of bed and padded towards the bathroom.

As he attempted to rise, Alton felt a flame of pain lance up his leg. “Holy jeez!” He fell back, needing a moment to gather his strength. Taking two deep breaths, he pushed himself up to a sitting position using only his arms. Mallory appeared just as he rose to his feet. He placed a hand on her shoulder to steady himself.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“Not entirely. Yesterday was a different kind of exercise than I’m used to. I think I...um...over-exerted myself,” he replied with a grin.

“I’ll say,” said Mallory, trying but failing to suppress a smile of her own. “So, was yesterday’s ‘exercise’ worth the discomfort?”

“Absolutely. You know, I used to think I’d feel so guilty if we slept together. Maybe I should feel that way, but I don’t. In fact, I feel as opposite from guilty as a person can feel. What about you—any regrets now that you’ve had a chance to sleep on it?”

“No, none,” she said, moving closer. “Like you

said—just the opposite.” She observed Alton grimace as he took a couple of steps. “Sweetie, you’ve told me in the past how warming up your leg in the morning usually makes it feel better. Do you think a massage—a light one—would help?”

“I’m not sure, but I’d be willing to subject myself to the experiment if you’re offering.”

“Sure. Let me get some lotion from my cosmetic case. Why don’t you lie on the bed?”

Mallory returned and moistened her hands. “Show me where you’re sore.”

Alton gestured to the upper section of his left thigh. “Gently, please.”

“I’ll work around it,” replied Mallory. She moved her moistened palms with the lightest of touches along the length of his thigh. “How’s that?”

“Good...*really* good. But don’t press any harder—not yet.”

Mallory continued to apply the light massage for another ten minutes, stopping only to replenish the lotion.

At last, Alton spoke up. “I think that’s good. Thanks, Honey. I needed that.”

“Better?”

“Yes—it doesn’t hurt as much when I move it. And it’s not quite so stiff.”

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Thirty minutes later, the couple walked hand in hand toward the hotel's outdoor café, traveling at a slow pace on account of the tenderness in Alton's limb.

"How's it feeling?" asked Mallory. "Any better?"

"Yeah, a little. I was okay yesterday after we finished our...um...session, but as you could tell, it hurt like a mother when I first got out of bed a few minutes ago. I think warming it up helped. Maybe we shouldn't sit at breakfast for too long, though, or it'll cool down again."

The couple reached the hotel's front entrance. Despite his pain, Alton blessed the morning. To him, everything he saw seemed a sharper, clearer version of itself: the morning sun, canvas awnings blowing in a warm breeze, pedestrians scurrying through the streets, shopkeepers and hotel employees bustling to prepare for a new day.

They arrived at the hotel's café and ordered a continental breakfast and coffee.

"So, what's on our agenda for today?" asked Mallory.

"Touring the northern basilicas."

"Oh, yeah—that's right. And what about dinner? Do you want to go to that restaurant the couple in the airport taxi told us about?"

"Naumachia? We could, but we already have reservations at a restaurant right next to one of the largest basilicas. Plus, we'd have to rush to get back here in time for dinner. Maybe we should wait until tomorrow."

“Okay. Let’s do that,” replied Mallory.

As Alton and Mallory departed to visit historic sights, Feng Wu left his own hotel, located miles away on the eastern side of Rome. He walked along the street’s narrow sidewalk for nearly twenty minutes before hailing a cab. The hotel staff had seen his face, but there was no reason to grow the number of people who could place him at the hotel to include taxi drivers, the group most likely to be interviewed should the police somehow become involved. For the same reason, he asked the cabby to drop him off at the Trevi Fountain, several miles from tomorrow’s rendezvous spot.

Wu understood the principal of blending into the Roman crowds. Between his nondescript clothing, baseball cap, and sunglasses, as well as the high-end camera hanging around his neck, he looked the part of the archetypal Asian tourist. No one would give him a second look. Besides, even if they did, most Westerners said Asians “all look alike.” Why not put such lack of perception to his advantage?

After trudging several miles, Wu arrived at his destination. He scanned the area, committing the layout of streets and businesses to memory. This reconnaissance trip demonstrated one reason Xing Zhǔxí had assigned Wu to this mission: a keen ability to retain details to which he had been exposed only briefly.

Wu circled the area, confirming both the optimal and alternate routes of approach and departure he had tentatively identified when studying maps of the location

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prior to the trip. He would leave nothing about this mission to chance. Completing his circuit, he lit a cigarette in satisfaction and began the return journey to his hotel, once again employing a circuitous cab route.

Back in Wu's hotel room, a quick check of the equipment confirmed that everything was ready for the life-changing meeting. He had nothing to do but wait.

CHAPTER 9

Early the next morning, Ernesto Vega breathed a sigh of relief as his red-eye flight touched down, and not simply because he was another step closer to tracking down the thief. He hated flying—with a passion. So, of course, this job had required twelve hours of air travel. He seemed to think better on solid ground.

After working his way through customs and immigration as “Chris Jackson,” Vega picked up a rental car and pulled into the first gas station he could find. He knew he needed to contact Gantt to see what intel—if any—had been gathered during the last twelve hours.

Having worked with Gantt for nearly ten years, Vega had learned to trust the older agent. A shootout with a domestic terrorist had left Gantt too incapacitated for fieldwork, but his mind was as sharp as ever. Shortly after moving into the Control function, Gantt had mentored the newly-arrived Vega, sharing the tricks of the trade and sharpening the younger man into arguably the most

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effective member of his elite squad. After years of working together, the two men operated almost as a single, efficient unit, one often anticipating the other's next statement or actions.

Vega flipped open his phone and initiated a call.

“Gantt here.”

“It's Vega. I've arrived—just got off the plane. Do you have any updates?”

“Nothing definite—except we've pretty well ruled out the janitor at Vidulum. What about you? Have you heard from your European contact?”

“Not yet. I'll be calling him as soon as we get off the phone.”

“Good. Let me know what you discover.”

“Will do. In the meantime, after I pick up the packages and assemble the kit, I'll head to the target's hotel and tail him. If something goes down, I'll be in a position to intercept, I hope.”

“Agreed.”

“I could sure use some better intel, though,” said Vega. “Waiting to see what this guy does and hoping to intervene in time is a lot more risky than lying in wait.”

“I know,” replied Gantt. “I'll see what I can do.”

CHAPTER 10

The next evening, their third in Rome, Alton and Mallory arrived at Naumachia just as the sun began to kiss the horizon. A swath of indigo blue painted the evening sky, and a harmony of brilliant sunset colors lit the upper tiers of the Colosseum.

The couple sat and ordered their meal. As the sun's rays continued to fade, floodlights stationed at each level of the Colosseum switched on, bathing the ancient structure in a soft, radiant glow. The Colosseum's walls towered over their table, which lay only a few dozen yards from the foot of the famous structure.

The restaurant's wine steward approached their table. "Good evening, *signore...signora*. Have you placed your dinner order?"

"Yes," replied Alton. "Pappardelle."

"Ah, a traditional Tuscan meal—excellent choice," said the sommelier. "And would you like a nice wine with

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your dinner?”

“Sure,” replied Alton. “What do you recommend?”

“I think...a two-thousand-six Fontanafredda Bricco-tondo Barbera will be good.”

Alton nodded. “Two glasses, please.”

The sommelier scurried away just as their pasta arrived. He returned within five minutes, uncorking the bottle and filling the bottom third of two large wineglasses. He waved the aroma from one towards his face and inhaled deeply. “There’s something magical about a good wine, don’t you think? It speaks to you of the places the grapes have been.”

“Yes,” said Alton. “I suppose the same could be said of people—good and bad. The past leaves its imprint on the present.”

“So true,” replied the steward. “*Signore, signora*, I wish you a memorable meal. *Grazie!*”

The sommelier departed, and the lovers were left to enjoy their repast in the fading twilight. A candle in the middle of their circular table cast a flickering glow of tranquility.

“What do you think of this place?” asked Alton, sweeping his arm in an arc across the open-air restaurant. “Even better than Mario’s back home, huh?”

“I’ll say,” replied Mallory. “Mario’s certainly can’t compete with this view.” She took a bite of pasta and continued. “I noticed you’re still favoring your leg more

than usual. How's it doing?"

"Still pretty sore, to be honest."

"Do you think more 'physical therapy' would help?" asked Mallory with a knowing smile. "You know, to strengthen it up."

"As much as I'd like that, I should probably rest it a few more days. We have a lot of walking tours planned, and I don't want to ruin our vacation by humping myself into complete incapacity."

Mallory laughed with a snort. "I'm sorry. It's not funny, but it is."

Alton lowered his head and chuckled as well.

"I do understand what you're saying," said Mallory. "And, of course, I don't want you to be in pain. You just tell me when you're ready, Sweetie. But in the meantime, even though we're giving it a rest, don't plan on having the bed all to yourself anymore."

"Don't worry. Your bed has now been officially relegated to suitcase rack."

The waiter returned to their table holding a wicker basket. "Would you like some bread? We have a lovely assortment—"

The chatter of gunfire interrupted the rest of the sentence. As the waiter hit the deck, Alton and Mallory instinctively rose to their feet.

"That's a Glock," exclaimed Mallory, recognizing the sound of the firearm she carried as an FBI Agent.

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“The shots came from inside the Colosseum,” said Alton. “Come on!”

“Alton, wait,” said Mallory. “Should we really go in there? We’re not armed.”

“I don’t see any policeman around here, do you?” asked Alton. “At least we’re combat trained. Someone might be getting robbed or need medical attention, for all we know.”

Mallory nodded in assent. They made their way into the looming structure as quickly as Alton’s disability would allow. Although the Colosseum’s exterior walls remained brightly lit, dark shadows shrouded the interior with an oppressive gloom.

After moving a dozen yards in an arc around a perimeter hallway, the couple rounded a corner and entered a passage leading directly to the Colosseum floor. As they traversed the passage, the moonlight revealed a large man in a black leather jacket holding a pistol in one hand and rifling through the pockets of a prone figure with the other.

The thief apparently heard the scrape of their footsteps and looked up. He hesitated for only a moment before disappearing into the labyrinth of hallways created by a network of stone pillars and walls in the Colosseum pit.

Alton and Mallory headed for the wounded man. As they moved forward and crossed a perpendicular hallway, they heard footsteps receding down its left side.

“There’s another!” shouted Mallory, pointing as a thin

man in a business suit sprinted across a narrow shaft of artificial light illuminating a small section of the passage floor.

“Let’s keep heading towards the guy on the ground,” gasped Alton, whose leg protested the exertion by sending lances of pain up his thigh. “We don’t know how injured he is.”

As he hobbled along, Alton switched on his smartphone’s flashlight app and used it to cast a modicum of light into the midst of the gloom.

After advancing twenty paces past the crossing hallway, the couple swiveled their heads at a new noise. They witnessed a third figure darting across the perpendicular passage in the same direction as the suited man.

“There’s people all over the place in here!” exclaimed Mallory.

“Let’s see to the injured man first,” said Alton. Seconds later, they reached the victim’s still form. Alton crouched over him to check for a pulse but couldn’t find one. As he pulled back the man’s jacket, he encountered a sticky pool of blood. The gunshots had apparently found their mark.

“I’m gonna start CPR,” said Alton. Laying his flashlight-enabled cellphone aside, he turned to the still form before him and began chest compressions.

“What about the assailants?”

“We can’t go after them—we’re outgunned,” said

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Alton.

“Let me see if the local police are already here. They might be able to track down the perps.”

“Okay. Be careful.”

Mallory began to retrace her steps. Scarcely two minutes later, she returned with a pair of local constables.

“We ran into each other—literally,” she explained to Alton. She turned to face the policemen. “When we came in here, we saw three men running away. They may still be in here. One of them, a man in a dark leather jacket, shot this man—at least he was standing over him holding a handgun.”

“Where did you see them go to?” asked a slightly chubby officer who puffed with the exertion of his recent effort.

“The first one, the one we saw over this victim, ran into that passage,” replied Mallory, gesturing to a hallway leading directly away from the restaurant. The chubby officer flipped on a heavy mag light and crept into the gloom, sweeping the flashlight’s beam across the walls and floor.

Mallory turned to the second policeman. “We saw two other guys running down that perimeter hallway over there, the one we passed on our way in.”

“Show me, Miss,” he replied.

Mallory and the policeman jogged to the passage and rounded its corner. The sound of their footsteps died

away within moments. Alton continued to administer CPR in a dwindling hope of bringing the man back from the precipice of death. As he continued the chest compressions, a collage of unpleasant memories swept through his mind, memories of mortally-wounded Army comrades in the desert of Gazib who had met a similar fate.

None of Alton's ministrations seemed to help. He couldn't treat the man's gunshot wounds without discontinuing the CPR. Like the gladiators of old, the dying man's lifeblood seeped out onto the floor of the Colosseum. Fearing the man to be either dying or dead, Alton prayed emergency workers would arrive soon.

After a seeming eternity, Alton heard a cacophony of shouts. A crowd of policemen and medics streamed into the hallway and encircled him within moments. Exhausted, Alton moved aside so they could continue the patient's treatment.

While one of the medics picked up the CPR, another attached monitors to the injured man's chest. The medic flipped on a switch to activate the equipment, which produced an even tone. He shouted something in Italian to his companion and filled a long, hypodermic needle. After jabbing the syringe into the patient's heart and emptying its contents, he stared at the heart monitor, scarcely breathing himself.

The ominous, even tone of the heart monitor never changed. Despite the administration of two more injections, the victim's heart never regained a single beat.

The medics eventually discontinued their efforts and

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slumped to the ground. One of them checked his watch, mentioned “*momemto della morte*” to his comrade, and typed a note into a handheld electronic device.

Alton thought to examine the victim in a little more detail. As he picked his phone off the ground and swept a beam of light onto the victim’s face, he gave a start of surprise. Duncan Wells, Alton’s taxi-ride companion, lay dead at his feet.

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Author Steve Freeman is a former member of the US Army's Signal Corps, a twenty-six year employee of a large American technology company, and an avid traveler who has visited five continents. The novels of *The Blackwell Files* draw from his firsthand knowledge of military service, the tech industry, and the diverse cultures of our world.

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