

The Mask of Raven Prologue

This was bad. Real bad. He'd been hurt before, but not like this. Raven struggled to a sitting position. The leg would have to be set so he could get to his doctor friend and get all the other injuries taken care of. Taking off his shirt, Raven twisted it to reinforce it. He looped it around a sturdy sapling and tied it off. He then hooked it around his left foot. The pain from just that little movement did not make him feel any better about what was about to happen. Clenching his knife between his teeth, Raven reached down with both meaty hands and grabbed his leg just below the knee. "Well, here goes nothing," he thinks. In one swift movement, he pulls back on his leg. Blinding pain shoots through his leg, but he feels the bone ends come together just as he passes out. It's just another day at the office for the big masked mercenary known as Raven.

Episode II Scene I Prologue

It had all started long ago, when he was just leaving high school. His interest in world politics and his distaste for most government agencies led him to major in political science in college. Shortly, after graduating, he enlisted in the Army. Hiding his true feelings, his physical prowess and dedication to duty had garnered him many awards and he was encouraged to volunteer for Basic Airborne School (BAC) at Ft. Benning, Georgia. He was assigned to the 11th Infantry Regiment, 1st Battalion, 507th Infantry. He easily passed his physical and excelled in all aspects of BAC. The 3-week course went quickly and he quickly went to Ft. Bragg, NC to attend Advanced Airborne School (AAS), a 3-week course that would turn a paratrooper into Jumpmaster. Following this, he went to Ft. Campbell, KY to attend Army Air Assault School (AAAS). Learning to maintain loads, sling loads, and perform combat assault from a UH-60 aircraft was not as easy as it sounds. Many of the tasks learned in training were tedious and boring, but necessary. Now he applied through his chain of command for Ranger School. He was accepted and the grueling 58-day course was the toughest days he had ever faced and probably ever would. The days consisted of little or no sleep and one meal, if you were lucky. Hallucinations, body aches, exhaustion, and mental fatigue were commonplace. But, getting to wear that Ranger tab and the burgundy beret was worth it.

After serving for one tour, the young man decided to study law. He was accepted to Stanford Law and excelled as a student and graduated near the top of his class. Everyone expected him to go into practice with a good firm specializing in International Law, his chosen interest. Instead, the CIA recruited him. With his military background and law degree, he was a perfect fit as a covert operative, recruiting and handling mercenary groups all over the world. He was given the codename Raven, because wherever you found him, you were sure to find death nearby. He served with distinction for some time. The CIA became like a family to him. He felt like he was making a difference in the world. Some of his operations helped remove dictators from power, bring powerful

druglords to justice, and ensure the safe transfer of information vital to the national security of the United States. Life was good and Raven felt good. Then, his own “handler” was found dead. Evidence was found at the scene that implicated Raven. He was on assignment by the time the body was found and agreed to come in for questioning. The night before he was to fly to headquarters, something happened. Something that would change Raven forever and would start a chain of events that might someday change the entire world. This is the story of those events and others that would turn a trusted, well-known CIA agent into one of the most feared terrorists on the planet.

Episode III – Scene I

Beginnings

The day started normally enough. Raven got out of bed, did some weights, took a shower, ate some breakfast, and got dressed. He had a meeting scheduled with his handler, Scarecrow, at 1000 hours and then he was to fly to another assignment later in the evening. Raven logged on to the server at Langley using his secure id and time sensitive digital key. No new emails for him. He checked on his reservations and then the group calendar. Although coded to look like any companies shared calendar, the innocuous listing of meetings and lunches really was code for covert operations and even extreme sanctions of designated targets. There seemed to be a lot of activity in his sector, but that was not too unusual. There were several missions going on in the area and two other mercenary handlers like himself were putting together an operation to subvert a small government with authority over the water rights in a significant area. These things were going on all the time, all over the world. Raven logged out and kicked off the process that erased all remnants of the last login from his computer. The act of logging on had installed all he needed to get through the CIA security and to erase itself afterwards. A very neat solution. Anyone finding this computer would only see the necessary software that most people had to connect to the Internet, a few games, and some shopping lists. Raven laughed as he picked up his pistol and put it in his shoulder harness. Some of the items on today’s shopping list could not even be purchased in this part of the world, at least, not from a supermarket.

Raven entered the Catholic church and put some coins in the poor box. He made his way to the last confessional in the row of three on the left side of the building. He entered and sat down. Taking a small device from his pocket, Raven pressed the one button on the face of the instrument. This device would ensure there were no listening devices within earshot and would continue to scan for ones being brought in the area or turned on. The old protocol had been to scan and then go on about your business, but that had changed along with the sophistication of the listening devices available to the “spies” of the world today. The device showed a green light. If the light went to red that meant the conversation was compromised and not another word would be spoken at that point. Raven heard the door to the other half of the booth open and then close.

“What can I do for you, my son?” asked the priest through the screen separating the two occupants.

“Bless me father for I have sinned. It has been two weeks since my last confessional,” replied Raven. This was the signal that there were no bugs and they could speak freely.

“Well, Raven, how did the meeting with O.F.I.O go?” O.F.I.O., or Our Fate Is Ours, was a quasi-terrorist group that Raven was working with on the pretense that they would start a small war with a drug cartel working in the area. The CIA was not worried about the drug traffic from the area,

but was concerned that the leader of the cartel had become something of a politician and now had a following in the government. The area was unstable enough without his influence to further muddy the waters.

"It went all right, Scarecrow. Nikembe now believes that he can reduce the influence that Hostashu has over the local council. He expects help from the "drug lord" that he believes that I represent. I promised him some guns and a few RPG's. We should have the balance of power turned to our advantage within two weeks and then we can round Nikembe's bunch up also. We can kill two birds with one stone, so to speak."

Scarecrow laughed softly. "I have some disturbing news, Raven. I have some friends at HQ that have informed me that he has seen some assignment papers for personnel with our position codes as their new jobs."

"What! But we haven't finished here, I'm leaving for a short assignment in Brazil, and I have had no indication of another assignment after that."

"Well, I have scheduled a meeting with the section chief for this afternoon. He flew in last night for something else and I have persuaded him to visit with me."

"I thought you were the top man in these parts."

"I am the top field man in this sector, but our duty section has a commander. Colonel Knight is his name. He is an admin type, a bureaucrat with political aspirations within The Company. I will meet with him and contact you the usual way. I will find out what is going on. It is probably another change in policy or something like that."

"Well, I hope so. I will be flying out tonight myself. You will contact me before then?"

"Hmmm, come back here to my office at 1700 hours. My meeting with Knight should be over by then. I will have one of the boys leave the rear door unlocked, so you can slip in that way."

"Okay, I will see you then, my friend."

"Go in peace, my son," replied Scarecrow as he left his side of the booth.

Raven waited a few seconds before exiting himself. What could be going on? He was getting that funny feeling on the back of his neck again. Like a crosshairs was trained on it. He usually trusted his gut feelings and if he weren't already scheduled to leave town, he would probably be buying a plane ticket right now to any place else. Raven made his way back to his room a few blocks away. The dirty streets and dirty inhabitants of this important town in Africa were now commonplace to him. He had been assigned to this sector for 6 months now and could walk among the locals as if he had grown up in the area. There were more men of Caucasian decent here than most people realized and word had been spread that the powerful people he represented would not take kindly to anything happened to their employee. This made Raven feel safer, but he was always ready anyway. That's how one stayed alive in this business and in the "fake" business that he was supposed to be in. Raven stopped along the way to eat a bowl of rice and meat with a kind of gravy. A hard roll and a bottle of local beer finished off the meager meal. He left the small café without paying, as was his custom. The proprietor would not ask for the money, out of fear of Raven's "employer". Raven tried not to use that fear too often. He might need genuine help from some of these people in the future. Raven arrived at the "hotel" where he had been living for 6 months. He made his way up the stairs to his room. He stopped dead in his tracks and slowly drew his pistol. Raven always positioned a dust bunny between the door and the frame at the bottom of his door. The dust bunny would stay there until he came home and opened the door and he would kick it behind the small table next to the door inside his room. The dust bunny was not there! No one with the hotel would go in his room. The maid

service was once a week and had been yesterday. Raven eased up the stairs and positioned himself to the side of the door. He tried the knob. It was locked, like he had left it. Darn! Now he would have to unlock the door and be a target as he entered. Raven took his key and unlocked the door slowly. Surprisingly, it made almost no noise. Raven pushed open the door and leaped in rolling to his left where he knew his back would be protected by a wall. Nothing! He looked around. There was no further evidence that anyone had been there, but Raven knew they had. He had not dusted that morning, but the layer of dust normally on his dresser was gone. Cleaning to hide fingerprints had, perhaps, removed it. Raven quickly checked everything, even the computer. Nothing was missing. Raven took out the bug sniffer and turned it on. After a few seconds, it displayed a green light. So there were no bugs or at least none that were currently on. Now he would have to report all this. He would file one after he got to Brazil. First he had to finish packing and then get over to the church to see Scarecrow, or Father O'Donnell as the locals knew him. He used the alias of Mr. Allen in this sector, but was often referred to as the big white man. Raven got his gear together and then logged in to verify his flight reservations again. They were fine. He logged off and noticed that it was close to 1700 hours. He decided not to unpack and left to meet with "Father O'Donnell".

Raven went around to the back of the church as instructed by Scarecrow. He tried the door and found it unlocked as promised. He made his way down the hallway to Scarecrow's office. He knocked gently on the door.

"Come in, Mr. Allen," came Scarecrow's reply from inside the room.

Raven entered. "Okay, did you find out what is up?" he asked as he checked his little bug indicator. It showed safe for now.

"I did meet with Knight earlier. He is a very intense man. Anyway, I told him that the rumor mill was generating all kinds of stories about this sector and about the personnel here specifically."

"What did he say to that?"

"He told me that there were changes coming for all of us. An international organization called The Outfit has been recruiting from within the CIA and other organizations. They are a counter-terrorism group with ties to many governments. I asked him if anyone in this sector was being recruited and he said all such requests were going through him first. He then told me that he was taking a position with them similar to what he does now, except mostly overseeing covert operations and commanding counter-terrorism teams."

"A real up-and-comer isn't he?"

Scarecrow laughs. "I asked if I might know any recruits and he mentioned a couple that I have worked with; Blazer from the German Special Forces and new to the CIA, Black from the FBI, and one or two free-lancers that I have had the occasion to meet. He then got very serious and told me that there was a problem in this sector that had to be handled first. I pushed him for information and he said they would be bringing in some non-agency people to handle it."

"Non-agency?"

"Yes, I said the same thing. He said we might have been compromised. He would give me no more information than that. He left me with as many questions as when he arrived. I think when you get back from Brazil, we will need to revamp here and maybe even pull out."

"Yeah, it sounds like we have a mole in our midst."

"The trouble with mole hunts is that you have to tear up a lot of ground to get even one."

"That's what I'm afraid of. Well, my flight leaves soon and I need to get back to the hotel and get my things. I will not have my secure id working from Brazil, so use the want-ads protocol to get me if you need me."

"Sure, and one other thing Raven, it has been a real pleasure working with you and if they re-assign us I would like to remain your handler if that is all right with you."

"I feel the same way. I will have it officially noted when I get back. I should only be gone for a week, just a few insurgents to incite. Hahaha!"

"Well, be careful. I will leave any news about Nikembe in our personals voice mail using the usual coding. Have a good flight," said Scarecrow as Raven arose to leave.

"Thanks, I will see you in about a week, and be careful yourself. This Knight sounds like he is only concerned with himself and isn't even afraid to show it."

"Right. Godspeed, my son."

"Thank you, Father O'Donnell," said Raven as he leaves to make his way out the back entrance.

As Raven made his way back to the hotel and then to the small airfield to start his journey to Brazil, a well-muscled, gray-haired man sat in a dark booth of a local cantina, drinking a cold beer. Across from him sat a young man with dark hair and a few gray spots himself. Premature grayness aside, the man was the picture of health. He was drinking a local tea blend, but over ice, unlike the way the local citizenry drank it.

"Can we speak here, Colonel Knight," asked the young man.

"Certainly, Blazer, we can speak here. My men have swept this bar for devices and we have set up active interference generators also. The CIA has everything under control."

"That's good to hear. I've only been with the Agency for a short time and I'm not yet familiar with the protocols or the personnel. So, I am here to sanction a drug cartel operative who has infiltrated our organization?"

"Yes, some evidence has come to my attention that gives us the identity of the individual responsible for the failed missions in this sector, but we are going to use an outside sniper for the job. An Air Force sniper with a stellar record."

"Then why am I here?"

"To make sure our sniper does the job. Fail-safe is the operative word here. The sniper has been instructed to remove the target and then leave the rifle at his sniping position."

"That would make me nervous. Doesn't he question what the motives are for such orders?"

"No, he is the perfect soldier. He has always followed his orders to the letter, no matter how distasteful they have been. I'm even looking to offer him a position in The Outfit just as I have you."

"Yes, I am still considering that future. But about this job, what are my specific orders?"

"You will watch the target from another vantage point. If the sniper fails to make the kill, you will finish it. The Air Force sniper knows there is a second sniper and will not be surprised if this happens. When the target is dead, you will take whichever weapon did the job and take it to the room I told you about at the Hotel Supremo. There, you will plant the evidence and then you will

catch a plane back to Langley. Here is a map of the sniping positions, the location where it should happen, and a picture of the target.”

“Why the subterfuge this time? We usually just remove all the evidence and don’t worry about it.”

“The room you are taking the evidence to is the room of another drug-cartel man. And I have some more information that I believe will make this job important to you.”

“What is it?”

“The cartel this man is a part of is the same cartel that had your parents killed.”

Blazer’s eyes narrowed as this bombshell was dropped on him. Finally! Now he could avenge the slaughter of his parents from what seemed like an entire lifetime ago. He looked at the man who had made this possible and decided right then that he would take the job with The Outfit and work for him.

“You don’t know how much this means to me, sir. I accept this responsibility and I also will join you with The Outfit whenever you take a position there.”

“Thank you, Blazer. You won’t regret this decision. We will continue in The Outfit the work we do here, that I promise you. Now, I have to leave to catch my own flight to Langley. I expect a full report when you get there,” said Knight as he made to leave the establishment.

“Wait, sir. What is the Air Force sniper’s codename and will I have contact with him?”

“No, for the security of both of you, you will not meet. You actually should not even see each other and you both are under orders to not attempt to contact each other either. Is that clear?”

“Yes sir, it is. I will brief you upon my return to HQ. Have a nice flight.”

“Thanks and happy hunting.”

Colonel made his way from the cantina to a car around the corner. He gets in the back seat. “To the airfield, Jones,” he tells his driver.

“Certainly, sir. Your plane is waiting to take you to Langley.”

“Did Raven make his flight to Brazil?”

“Yes sir. Spotters have reported him on his way. Also, our man at the church reported that Raven met with Scarecrow just before leaving, just as you predicted.”

“Don’t sound so surprised. I have been doing this a long time and people respond to certain stimuli the same way almost every time. It is the one’s who don’t that one has to worry about. Now, drive on and let’s get out of this hell hole and somewhere where they have some decent bars.”

“Aye-aye, sir.”

Knight sat back in the seat and reviewed the events of the past few hours. All of the pieces had been placed and set in motion. He would soon have personal control of this sector, a loyal new member of The Outfit, a scapegoat for an assassination, and the removal of the last person who could link him to the “failed” missions of the last two years. He only needed to make one more call to finish the deal. The car was equipped with a secure satellite phone and he made use of it now.

"Operations, may I help you?" answered the voice on the other end of the call.
"This is Knight, go secure."

"Going secure...secure now sir. How may I direct your call, Colonel Knight?"

"I need to speak to the Major Bass."

"One moment, sir." There is a pause full of background clicks, and then a voice speaks.

"Bass here," says a man's voice.

"Bass, this is Knight, I need a sweeper and cleanup done at the location I gave you a few days ago."

"The one in Philadelphia?"

"Yes, a full sweep, no crumbs."

"Okay, that's one female and two children. Are you sure about this one?"

"Positive and no links as usual, right?"

"We know our job. It will be done by tonight. Anything else?"

"No, not right now. Thanks. I will want verification by tomorrow."

"You will get it."

"Good," said Knight as he ended the call. Now, all the connections would be severed and his scapegoat would have no way to defend himself. Things just couldn't be going any better.

In another part of town, two men sat at a small table in the kitchen area of rented room. One man was dark haired, about 35 years old. The other was a little older with light colored hair. Both men had military haircuts.

"So, your first Agency job," said the blonde man.

"Yeah, Frost, have you done one for them?" asked the other.

"Yes, I have done a few, usually as a backup shooter, once or twice as the primary. Nothing to worry about, just do the job and follow the post-shot instructions. You should have no problems. You have an almost perfect record and you've been doing this for 10 years."

"Yes, a long time to be killing people. You will be driving the getaway car right?"

"I will. You make the sanction and then come around to the back corner of the building. I will have the car running and we will drive to the airfield and get on a chopper that will take us to another airfield where will we take a C130 out of here."

"The good old Air Force way."

"Right. Did the Agency give you a new codename for the mission or what?" asked Frost as the two men each grabbed tote bags and made their way to the door to begin their mission.

"No, I am using my Air Force codename as usual."

“So, now the CIA will finally have the perfect order-following soldier on their resource list.”

“Yeah, I hope no one else uses the name Element. I would hate to make an enemy in the CIA,” said Element as Frost went to get the car. It was just another day at the office for the man with no questions. A man now caught in events that would one-day cause him to completely rethink his values.

Four men: Element, Blazer, Raven, and Knight; four men whose lives were now inexorably tied together. And only Knight knew each one and his plans would shape the other three’s futures.

Episode III – Scene II **Death, Life, and a Vow**

Scarecrow, known as Father O’Donnell to the locals, was finishing up his paperwork for the parish. His earlier conversations with Colonel Knight and Raven were still at the forefront of his thoughts. Something was going on and he didn’t like it. He had been a handler for many years, using his Father O’Donnell persona as a cover the whole time. Anyone checking on him would find a priest who had taken a post in Africa to spread religion to the people there. His family, a widowed sister and two nephews in Philadelphia, also believed the charade. As was his habit on Fridays, Scarecrow placed a call to his sister. It would be around lunchtime there and Angie would be getting lunch ready for his little nephews. Angie did not work on Fridays and that is why he always called then. After some clicks and delays, Angie answered.

‘Hello?’ she asked.

“Hi, Sis, its me. How are things going?”

“James! I have been waiting for your call.” The sound of the two boys running around the house could be heard in the background.

“Well, you knew I would be calling. Why are you so anxious this time?” Scarecrow could hear pots and pans being moved. He had been right; she was fixing lunch for the boys.

“I wanted to thank you for sending the lovely gift. It is perfect. I’m about to use it now for lunch. I’m making macaroni and cheese for the boys.”

“Angie? What gift? I didn’t send a gift.”

“Oh, stop kidding around. You know I have needed a new gas range and they delivered it and set it up not 30 minutes ago. I’m lighting it now.”

“Angie! No!” shouted Scarecrow into the phone. The delay of trans-Atlantic communications made his pleas useless. By the time the shrill feedback reached him, he knew they were all dead. The phone slipped from his hand and onto the desk. A sob escaped him as he placed his head in his hands. Dead! His only living relatives were dead. There was no doubt in his mind. The scenario was one he had seen used before by the Agency to cleanup loose ends. His training and instincts kicked in. He had to warn Raven and then get out of this sector as fast as possible. Pushing back his grief, Scarecrow dialed the personals mailbox that he and Raven used as a communications medium.

“Mr. Allen, this is O’Donnell. Angie and the boys are dead, a Company job without a doubt. You need to watch your six. I will contact you as soon as I can. Good luck.”

Scarecrow hung up the phone. He reached into the top drawer of his desk and took out a floppy disk. Placing in the disk drive of his computer, he turned on the machine. It would now boot up and then write ones and zeroes to every bit of the hard drive continuously until shut off. Turning to his bookcase of theological texts, Scarecrow removed four books of varying titles. After the last one was removed, a door opens at the bottom of the wall high bookcase. A door to a safe can be seen with one combination dial. Turning the dial several times, Scarecrow then presses a hidden button in the middle of the dial. This procedure releases a chemical into the confines of the safe and every scrap of paper inside would now dissolve. Not a trace would remain to tie Father O’Donnell to any organization other than the Catholic Church. Grabbing his hat, Scarecrow made his way from the office to the rear door. He would have to use non-CIA methods to leave the area. He would use the waterways and call in a few favors owed him by some of the more nomadic tribes in the outlying areas from the city. He would not just wait around like a sitting duck.

The sniper position was a good one. Element prepared himself and his equipment for the job ahead. The Steyr Scout was a good rifle for this range. Basically a hunting rifle, this was a modified version of the standard Steyr rifle. It had a slightly heavier barrel, a rounded bolt knob, and a cheek plate on the stock. He wished it had threading for a silencer, but he had been ordered to use the rifle provided. Since he was supposed to leave the weapon behind, Element was glad he was not using his own custom rifle for this assignment. He prepared the ammo, chambered one round, and set the rifle at his feet using the built-in bipod. He removed the scope and looked over the target area through it. The target should be leaving the structure sometime in the next hour. The briefing Element had received indicated that the target usually left via a door at the rear of the building. Element’s sniper position was a room overlooking a bar about 150 yards from the target area. The backup sniper must be down the street in the other direction from the building. Maybe, on the rooftop of one of the buildings starting about 250 yards from his current position. Element replaced the scope on the rifle and got in firing position. In his experience, the target almost always showed itself early. There! Element detected movement from the back of the building. It had to be the target. Element looked through the scope of the rifle and followed the man as he walked toward the area Element had picked as the right place to make the shot. The man was dressed as

a clergy and was walking swiftly and looking all around. Suddenly he stopped and appeared to look toward where Element believed the backup sniper to be. There was a pole in the way and Element wanted a more sure shot. The target whirled around and looked like he was going to run. Damn! Element squeezed off a hurried shot and chambered another round and fired again.

As Scarecrow made his way around from the back of the building, he looked down the street toward the hotel where Raven usually stayed. Some instinct made him look to the roof of the hotel and he caught the glimpse of someone there. Why would someone be on the roof at this time of the day anyway? Suddenly, it clicked and Scarecrow turned in the other direction. It was surveillance or maybe even a sniper, it had to be! Pain ripped through his left side after his turn, but not from behind him. The impact had been to his front and therefore had come from the other direction. He heard the report of the shot afterwards and almost simultaneously blinding light exploded in his brain and he fell to the ground.

Blazer watched as the cartel man fell to the ground. He had been about to pull the trigger himself. He hesitated only one moment and then packed away his rifle and made his way to the sniper position where the primary was supposed to leave his rifle. Getting the rifle and getting it back to the designated room was easy enough. Blazer felt a true sense of relief. Though he had not killed the man himself, he had been involved with the demise of a man who was part of the drug cartel that had been responsible for his parents' deaths. Now, he would contact Colonel Knight and ask to be on the team following the man now being framed for the assassination that just occurred. His briefing had said that the time of death would be altered to enable the death to be blamed on Raven, the name used by the double agent. He had taken off at 7 pm and the shots had been fired at 8 pm. Even now, other operatives were bribing and/or threatening the appropriate officials to make this happen. His flight would land in Johannesburg in about 4 hours and then Raven would get on a plane to Rio for a 13-hour flight. Now Blazer needed to check in with his designated contact for the mission completion. After making his way back to the same bar where he had spoken with Col Knight, Blazer placed the call.

“Operator. How may I help you?” asked the female voice on the other end of the call.

“Non-secure contact. Call code 1187355,” replied Blazer. This code would only work once and had pertinence only to this mission.

“Connecting you now.” A series of clicks and maybe the sound of a keyboard could be heard.

“Operations. Non-secure. Please give mission code,” asked another pleasant female voice.

Blazer knew this was a trick question to help with security.

“None,” answered Blazer.

“Connecting you to him now.”

After the usual delay, an audible click signaled the final connection. Col Knight’s now familiar voice came on the line. He had to be on a plane somewhere, since he had left only a few hours before the hit.

“Well, how did it go?” asked Knight.

“Home run. No problems. Cleanup going smoothly. Bird lands in 17 hours.”

“Good, good. We will have to have the regional get in contact. We will handle that from here. Why don’t you come see me? I want to continue our talk from earlier. I should be in my office tomorrow morning. I am also going to have our birdie come here.”

“Affirmative. Anything else?”

“No. Out,” said Col Knight as he disconnected.

The line went dead in Blazer’s hand. He had his orders, so to speak, and would change his plans to match them. Raven would have to wait. Maybe Blazer would get to “welcome him” at HQ. That was one man in for a serious surprise when he landed in Rio.

During the flight to Rio, Raven had been going over all the recent happenings for the sector. Several missions had failed with no apparent reason. Missions do fail from time to time, but these had been almost sure things and then had just fallen apart. Key building blocks for the future political structure in the region had not been completed. The ominous inside information that Scarecrow had found concerning their positions there was another puzzle. He would have to check the personals mail box when he landed and see if Scarecrow had found out anything else. Maybe he too could use Scarecrow’s contacts to gain some information. He had very few friends inside the organization and even fewer in the civilian world. He knew a lot of people, but most of them were of the non-trustworthy sort. Working undercover, as a member of a drug cartel or some subversive group trying to overthrow a government, had made him fairly well known in certain circles. Too bad those connections would be no help now. What little information they could provide would have to be bought and might jeopardize his mission or other missions of the CIA. He was a good operative and intended to continue that way. This little problem with assignments would be worked out. Raven settled back in his seat and utilized the pillow he had earlier gotten from the flight attendant. Yes, it would all be settled in the next few days, he was sure of it.

“Captain Lopes, the plane you asked about is arriving now,” said the young officer.

“Good. Thank you,” replied the well-dressed man reading a newspaper while sitting in the kind of seats found in airports all over the world. Captain Lopes was a respected veteran of the Brazilian Police. A career man who had moved up the chain of command

through hard work and luck. He did what he was told and took only small bribes, always paying his superiors their percentage. He was also Badger, a CIA agent and handler for this sector. He had been recruited as a young patrolman and had become a valuable asset to the Company. With his police duties as a cover, he was able to manipulate, coerce, and even eliminate targets within his sector. He had 10 agents working for him, all top-notch and very loyal to him. Well, as loyal as an operative could be. Badger did not kid himself into believing that these men would give up their lives at his whim. So, he had certain “controls” in place to ensure their continued loyalty. He was here today to receive an operative from Africa; Raven was his codename. He had planned to wait until Raven had settled in and then have him come to see him on some small violation or other pretense. Then, he had received urgent orders from HQ to meet Raven and personally inform him to leave as early as possible to HQ. He had sealed orders for Raven that had arrived via courier not more than an hour ago. This was all unusual and there were rumors that something had happened in Africa before Raven had left, but the rumors gave no more information. The passengers were now exiting the aircraft and coming up the causeway. Badger had a brief description of Raven, average height, very muscular, dark hair, and intense eyes. Intense eyes, now that was a new one. Then, Badger saw him. Dressed in lightweight summer clothes, the man was all tan and muscles. How could such a man ever be inconspicuous? Badger signaled to one of his officers to intercept the man and bring him over. Badger watched as the CIA operative answered the officer’s request with a look of disbelief and then indignation. If Badger had not known better, he would easily have believed that his man was accidentally accosting a businessman who was now just upset at having his schedule interrupted. This Raven was good and used his distinctiveness to actually blend in. By calling attention to himself, he apparently was able to make others believe that he was what they expected. Had he tried to be inconspicuous, he would have stood out like a sore thumb. The officer actually looked at his Captain again to be sure he had the right man. Ingenious! Too bad this one was going to HQ, Badger would have liked to watch him work this sector.

Raven had not expected to be contacted so early. If this were not his contact, then he would have to probably bribe his way out of a jail cell or something. His cover as a businessman who was really a drug cartel member was tiring to say the least. And here in Brazil, the drug cartels had more power than possibly anywhere else in the world. Raven followed the officer over to a small man in a tailored suit.

“What is the meaning of this? I am a busy man and you are costing me money every minute you keep me here,” Raven said in perfect Portuguese.

“You honor us with your command of our national language, sir,” answered the Captain in perfect English. “I am Captain Lopes of the Brazilian Police. I do not wish to upset your schedule. But I assure you that I must speak with you for a while. We can do that and process your papers at the same time. Killing two “birds” with one stone, so to speak.”

Raven looked at the man. That was the code sentence the contact was to use to identify himself to Raven. He did not know how many of the men with Lopes were CIA, so he would play the part a little while longer until given the signal by his contact.

“Well, if you insist. But let’s make this as fast as possible.”

“Certainly, if you would just follow me. My men will retrieve your luggage and take it to your hotel. You are staying at the Copacabana, yes?”

“Yes, I am.” So, thought Raven, this man had all the facts and seemed to have his men either well trained or well fooled.

Outside the airport, Raven took a seat next to the Captain in a car that was waiting for them. On the ride to the Captain’s office, Lopes played tour guide and explained the sites of the city as if he did this all the time. Soon, they arrived at the Police headquarters and Raven followed Lopes to his office. Once inside, Lopes held up one hand as he reached into a desk drawer and did something. Raven assumed he was turning on the anti-bugging device and noise generator commonly used by CIA handlers.

“I’m sorry for all the subterfuge, Raven, but the usual precautions must be taken.”

“I understand, Lopes, and I am grateful for your astuteness at going along with my persona.”

“It was a good one and most excellently portrayed I might add. And my codename is Badger. Welcome to the Rio sector. I had planned on giving you a few days to settle in, but I received word from HQ to send you there as soon as possible.”

“What? I just got here. Why do they want me at HQ anyway?”

“I do not know, but I also received these sealed orders to give to you.” Badger slid the sealed manila envelope across his desk to the big operative.

Raven immediately opened the package and extracted a single sheet of paper. They were orders to catch the first plane tomorrow morning to HQ. No explanation, but they were signed by Col. Knight himself. “Well, I guess that makes it official. I will be leaving on the first flight to the States in the morning.”

“I have already informed HQ of your arrival and I have already booked you on the 9am flight out of here.”

“Thank you. If there is nothing else, I have a severe case of jetlag and I will need my rest for the trip. May I go to my hotel now?”

“Certainly, Raven. And I hope to see you when this HQ business is over. I could use a man like you in this sector.”

“I would be glad to return here. I actually have a few contacts among the cartels here already. Will you arrange a cab for me? I would rather not arrive at the hotel in a police car.”

“One is outside for you already. Your luggage and your tickets for tomorrow will be in your room. Sleep well.”

“Thank you.”

Raven entered his room at the Copacabana. He was really tired and needed to get to sleep. His luggage was in the room as promised and his tickets were on the nightstand. He decided to call the personals mailbox to see if Scarecrow had left a message. He dialed the number for the service that he and Scarecrow had been using for 2 years as a way to communicate even over non-secured lines. He entered the box number and the password. Hmmm, one new message waiting according to the recorded voice. He pressed 2 to hear the message.

“Mr. Allen, this is O’Donnell. Angie and the boys are dead, a Company job without a doubt. You need to watch your six. I will contact you as soon as I can. Good luck.”

Raven pressed the appropriate key to listen to the message again. This was not in code at all. Scarecrow would not use his sister’s name and especially to say they were dead. What was going on? Raven knew about Scarecrow’s family from the man himself. Since Scarecrow’s cover included them, it was not a compromise at all. In fact, Scarecrow had given Raven his sister’s phone number in case anything ever happened and she needed to be contacted. Raven dialed the number. He received the “phone is no longer in service” message right away. Raven dialed information for US numbers and then for Philadelphia. He got the number for The Philadelphia Inquirer. He called the number and asked to speak to the obituaries desk.

“Obits, Miller speaking,” said a man’s voice.

“Yes, I was wondering if you could help me. I am out of the country and trying to track down a story about a single mother and her two children dying yesterday there in Philadelphia. A passenger mentioned it to me and to be perfectly honest, I have family there and haven’t been able to get in touch with them. Can you help me?”

“Yeah, real sad, a young woman and her two children blown up in a gas explosion. I can’t give you the names yet. The next of kin hasn’t been notified.”

“Can you tell me the address? You included that in such a sensational story didn’t you? That would not be giving away any new information. Please. I am so worried.”

“Sure it was in the Havertown suburb. It was really a surprise. The neighbors said a new gas stove had just been put in that day; they had seen the service man unloading it from a service truck...”

Raven let the man talk on for a second and then hung up the phone. It was true then. The chances of it not being Scarecrow’s family were slim at best. Scarecrow had said it was a Company job. No other messages were in the mailbox. Raven decided to call the church. The Father’s assistant lived in the back and his phone rang when the church’s number did. Someone might need last rites or even more important, someone Scarecrow handled might need help. Raven dialed the number. After several rings, someone answered.

“This is Nikembe, may I help you.” Nikembe was Father O’Donnell’s assistant.

Raven disguised his voice. “May I speak with Father O’Donnell? It is very important.”

“I am sorry. The Father...The Father...The Father is dead.”

Raven closed his eyes. This could not be happening. “What? How?” asked Raven.

“He was murdered! He was shot by that drug scum he was always trying to help, Mr. Allen. The coward left on a plane right after. The police found the murder weapon in his room and papers too. They will get him and he will burn in Hell for killing a priest. Wait, what did you say your name was?”

Raven hung up the phone. Think! Think! He had to figure this out. He had been framed for the death of his handler and friend. His friend’s family had been killed to make it all very neat and clean. Now no one would be around to question what had happened. He would have to leave. He would have to go into hiding. Raven sat down and began planning where he would go and how he would clear his name. He could not fly to HQ now. This had to be an inside job and it had to be connected to the botched missions and to Col Knight.

Not far away, a Brazilian police officer took off his headset and picked up the phone in the tiny room where he had been recording and listening to Raven’s conversations. He called Captain Lopes. He informed Lopes of the conversations and then played them for him over the phone. He was ordered to continue the surveillance.

Badger thought about this new information. He knew Knight would want the information as soon as possible and Knight was moving up in the world. Lopes had not gotten where he was from missing many opportunities. He contacted HQ through the secure line at his disposal. After the usual security runaround, he was connected to Knight himself.

“What is it, Badger? I thought you could handle this.”

“Yes sir, I can. But I have some information that you need.” Badger relayed all the information he had to Knight. “You did not tell me that he was wanted for murder. He seemed surprised to find that Scarecrow was dead.”

“Listen to me Badger. I am only saying this once. Raven was surprised to find that he had been found out so quickly. He must be about to run and checked back at his old sector to make himself look innocent. He is really a double agent and cannot be trusted. He has been sabotaging missions in that sector and would have gotten away with it if Scarecrow had not figured it out. Now Scarecrow is dead and so is his family. I don’t know how deep this goes, but I need to know that I can count on you to stick with me. I will need men like you in The Outfit. Can I depend on you now?”

Badger hesitated only a second, right or wrong this man was going places and what did Raven mean to him anyway? “You can depend on me, sir. What should I do? He is surely not getting on that flight in the morning.”

“No, send your two best men, Company men, to tell Raven that his flight has been compromised and that Scarecrow is dead and we need him now at HQ to straighten it out. He will need some vindication, so he will be easily fooled. He is third rate anyway. Tell him there is a flight from a hidden airstrip south of town. Take him to the jungle and kill him. We don’t want any trace of the body to be found either.”

“Yes sir. I have two very good men here and one of them once worked with Scarecrow. I hate to say this, but the news of Scarecrow’s death has probably already made it through the grapevine.”

“Yes, I’m sure it has. Do whatever you feel is necessary. His specialty was political handling anyway, so he should be no trouble. He was a Ranger though, so be sure those men are ready.”

“Yes sir. I will do it now. Badger out.”

“I will be in touch with you when I move over to The Outfit. I will need a man in South America.”

“Thank you, sir. You will not regret it. I ...” The phone line went dead in Badger’s hand. Knight was a hard man, but a man that could help him in his future. Badger contacted Dice and Howler, his two best men. He gave his orders and listened as Howler, the one who had worked with Scarecrow, insisted that he be the one to finish Raven. He hung up the phone. This was one problem that would be solved in less than two hours.

A knock came from Raven’s door. Picking up the Desert Eagle he had shipped in his bag’s secret compartment, Raven moved to where he could cover the door and not be an easy target.

“Who is it?”

“We are here from Captain Lopes, sir. We have some information for you. We are not here to “badger” you or anything,” said Dice.

Lopes’ codename! So, these men were Company men. If he didn’t let them in, they would just wait him out. Maybe if he went along he would be able find out more about what was going on and maybe even use them to get away from here.

“What are your codenames?”

Dice and Howler hesitated, this man was a double agent, but they had to get him away from the city to kill him safely. If there was a nest of moles here, they did not want to panic them into flight. They wanted to find them and exterminate them.

“Dice and Howler, we have some information about Scarecrow. He’s been killed. HQ sent word that you may be compromised and in danger. We have a flight waiting for you at one of our airstrips in the jungle. Please, sir, come with us. You are the last link to finding out who did all of this.”

Raven had already decided to go with these men, but now he knew that something was up. The grapevine worked fast, but “all this” must refer to the clean sweep that was made and that meant his phone had been tapped. He knew he could not trust these two, but he had to get out of town. It would be risky, but he would make his move at the plane. He would not be going to HQ until he had more information on who was framing him. Raven opened the door.

“Come with us, Raven. There is not much time,” said the man on the left said. “I’m Dice and this is Howler.” Dice indicated the powerfully built man on Raven’s right.

“Let me get my things.” Raven already had his bags ready and had added a small, but very sharp, blade to the inside of his belt. It was very well hidden and had been missed during pat-downs before.

Raven, Dice, and Howler took the stairs to the outside and got in a black sedan. Dice drove while Howler and Raven sat in the back seat. The three men were silent as they made their way through the city and then headed down a small highway into the jungle. The effort needed to keep the roadway clear from the jungle vegetation was evident all along the route. The road was still in need of repair in many places. Recent rains had washed the shoulders away and some of the pavement itself. Raven decided that he would have to make his move soon, but first he needed to try to get some information from these two. Howler had been glaring at him since the hotel and was not doing a very good job of hiding his dislike for Raven.

“So, how much further to the airstrip?” asked Raven.

“Not far. The plane should be waiting for you. It will fly you to Miami and then you will take another plane to HQ,” replied Dice.

“So, how much do you know about Scarecrow’s death. Who does the Company think did it and for what reason?”

“Some coward who kills good men and their families,” spat Howler through clenched teeth.

“The killer will be taken care of soon. Right Howler?” said Dice.

A gun appeared in Howler’s hand and he pointed at Raven. “Yeah, he’ll be taken care of real soon. Now don’t make any sudden movements, Raven, or whatever your codename is for the enemy. Now hand over that piece strapped under your arm.”

“Hey, man, you have it all wrong,” said Raven easing his pistol out by two fingers and dropping it in the floorboard at Howler’s feet, “I didn’t kill Scarecrow. I’ve been set up. Everyone associated with this thing has been killed and you guys better think hard before you do something you will regret.”

“Shut up, traitor!” yelled Howler. “I will take great pleasure in killing you. In fact, I’m not waiting any longer. We can always ditch the car instead of cleaning it.” Howler extended the gun toward Raven.

“Cut it out, Howler. We have to wait until we get further out and you know it.” Dice said as he turned to see what Howler was doing.

Wham! The car jerked to one side and lifted in the air a little. The road had been washed almost completely away and now Dice struggled to keep the sedan under control. Raven was thrown toward Howler and he took the opportunity to grab the man’s gun hand in his powerful grip. Howler grunted and bones in his wrist were crushed like so many dried leaves. Instinctively, he pulled the trigger. Blam! Now the car careened wildly on the road. Howler’s shot had hit Dice in the head! The car was out of control and it leaped off the road and through the trees. Raven and Howler continued to struggle until the car hit something and started rolling down a steep hill, crashing through the growth. Raven’s door flew open and he was launched from the vehicle. The car continued to roll, coming to rest on its roof next to rapidly flowing river.

Raven pushed himself to his feet. He was badly bruised and maybe had a cracked rib from the pain he felt when he breathed, but he was alive. He looked over at the car. He could see Howler’s arm sticking out from the backdoor window. He still had a grip on the gun. Raven knew he would need a weapon and he made his way to the car. Just as he got there, Howler tried to raise the gun. Raven wrenched it from his hand and backed away from the car.

“Stay there, Howler. It could be days before someone finds you and you had better save your strength.”

“You filthy traitor. So, you can gun down someone who trusts you, but you don’t have the guts to kill a man who knows what you are. The CIA will find you and you will be executed as a traitor.”

“I told you I was set up. I am leaving you here and maybe you will survive.” Raven then noticed the pool of gasoline forming at the rear of the car. The gas tank was ruptured and any minute some spark could set it off. He would have to pull Howler from the car to some safe place.

“Hey, I’m going to pull you from the car. There is a gas…” Raven began. Suddenly, Howler’s other hand crashed through what was left of the window with Raven’s Desert Eagle in it.

“DIE TRAITOR!” shouted Howler, as he leveled the pistol at Raven.

“No! Don’t!” exclaimed Raven. He dove to his right as Howler pulled the trigger and the car exploded in a huge ball of flame. Fire engulfed Raven in midair as he was blown into the river. Searing pain was soon gone as consciousness left him. The car, with its two bodies was blown into the river also and was swept downstream. Raven struggled out of the blackness of being knocked out and tried to swim. His left arm was useless and he couldn’t see very well. He kicked with his legs and managed to move toward the far bank. The river had taken him quite a ways downstream and he had no idea where he was. He struggled onto the bank and collapsed, once more giving in to the darkness.

“Report! Where are Dice and Howler and where is Raven?” demanded Badger from his agents.

“Sir, we have heard nothing. There appears to have been an accident, but the car is gone and the surrounding jungle has been on fire. There are crocodiles in that river and I doubt we will find anything.”

“Well, keep looking.” Badger knew his men were good and he had to believe that if anyone could survive, it would be them. He hated to lose good men. Now, he would have to report to Knight. No need to tell him there was no body. He would soon be invited into the new organization and chances are Raven would be a distant memory in a few months. Badger smiled to himself. Yes, life had a way of bringing good things to him and it looked like it would continue to do so.

Raven opened his eyes slowly. Where was he? He heard the sounds of children playing and he could smell something cooking. Man, it smelled good. He could only see from his right eye. There seemed to be bandages covering his left eye. Raven reached up and felt of his head. The top part of his head was wrapped in bandages, as was most of his face. He didn’t feel any pain and his arm and his ribs seemed okay. The door to the

small room opened and a man stepped in. He looked like a farmer and he smiled when he saw that Raven was sitting up and awake.

“Ah, so you are awake, my friend. I guess you have many questions, as do I. I am Miguel Santos and this is my home.”

“I am John Appleton. It is nice to meet you Miguel. How did I come to be in your home and why am I all bandaged up like this? Is there a doctor here?” said Raven, using a false name. He still did not know how much this simple farmer knew and he did not want any trail leading to him to endanger this man and his family who seemingly had nursed him back to health.

“No, no doctor here. I did what I could to patch you up. I am afraid that my limited skills could do only so much for your injuries. You heal very quickly, though. My children found you near the river about a week ago.”

A week! Raven’s mind raced. He had to get moving. The agents from the Rio sector would be on his trail. Then he remembered. The car had gone into the river also. There was a chance that his whereabouts were unknown. He would leave here and get in touch with some of the mercenary groups who knew him only as man like them. With his skills and knowledge, he would be able to stay underground for some time.

“What about my injuries? May I remove these bandages?” Raven started removing them without waiting for a response. Miguel watch intently.

“Oh my, I am so sorry, John. Truly I am.”

“What? What do you mean?” asked Raven. He raised his hand and felt of his head. Startled, he pulled back his hand.

“Get me a mirror.”

Miguel walked over to a chest of drawers and brought a hand mirror to Raven, then stepped away. Raven raised the mirror and looked at his reflection. His face from the eyes down was the same as always, but his forehead and scalp were another matter. The explosion had sent flaming gasoline or oil across his head and had burned away most of his hair and then into the scalp. Now the top of his head was mostly scar tissue. Some new skin could be seen, pink and soft. But, the rest was strangely discolored and misshapen. Raven laughed as he put the mirror on the small table beside the bed.

“Why do you laugh, John? I did the best I could. I removed the dead skin and used salves and ointments to heal the burns. It could have been much worse. It did not get your eyes or your ears, although the left one was a little infected at first.”

“No, thank you Miguel. I was laughing at the realization that no one would be able to recognize me now. At least, not without ripping their gaze away from my monstrously

grotesque head. I will have to wear a hat or something to go in public or I will scare all the women and children.”

“Wait, I have something for you, John.” Miguel went once more to the chest and brought a folded piece of cloth to Raven.

“This has been in my family for a long time. My great-grandfather wore this during the land wars of this region. He was a great fighter and an honorable man. I have no sons to pass it down to and I want you to have it. I have a feeling about you. Please, wear this.”

Raven took the gift and spread the cloth. The cloth was like silk and very sturdy. There were two slits cut into the cloth and it was obviously worn over the scalp. Raven stood up and wrapped the cloth around his eyes, tying it in the back. He picked up the mirror and gazed once again at his reflection. The cloth covered his forehead and scalp and reached down to his nose. Raven had worn types of clothing to fit the different persona he had used in his job. Now, he would wear this mask to hide what had happened to him. But it would never stop being a reminder that a friend had been killed, he had been framed for that killing, and he had almost been killed. All done in the name of the CIA. Now he would work the other side of the equation. He would find those responsible and make them pay. He would be a thorn in the side of the agency and those like it that had produced the kind of people that had done these things. They would learn to fear the name of Raven. And they would wake from their nightmares with an image of his visage to haunt them. Raven with his black mask. The Mask of Raven.