

Prologue

The man looked out of the window of his office on the fourth floor of the main building belonging to The Outfit. He had been involved with this agency since its inception. The Outfit was formed as a new agency to investigate possible terrorist crimes, bring to justice the people committing those crimes, find and expose those organizations behind terrorist acts, and prevent future terrorist acts and their impact through the use of force, both proactive and reactive. The personnel of The Outfit were all superior men and women. Chosen from the cream of different agencies and organizations, each one was invited or sponsored by high-ranking officials of the FBI, CIA, NSA, Interpol, MI5, Moussad, and the military departments of select countries around the world. Though funded as a national agency through several front companies, the influence of The Outfit extended to world matters. The Covert Operations department of The Outfit performed its duties under the guise of local police departments, FBI, CIA, ATF, or whatever agency fit the situation. The man watched the scurry of people between the buildings of the campus-like complex of buildings. He had risen from a simple agent to Commander of Covert Operations in ten short years. Many things had changed in that time. Some for the good and others...well, not all change was good.

Knock. Knock. The sound always made him leery of what event that sound precipitated. A problem? An opportunity? It could be either or both, but almost assuredly on of the two. This time though he was expecting the young man on the other side of that door.

“Come in, Ice,” said General Dark Knight, taking a seat behind the simple desk he had used since becoming a group commander four promotions ago.

“Sir, you sent for me?” asked the dark-haired young man expectantly.

“Yes I did, Ice. I know you have been assigned as part of the team reviewing the last operation against The Cause. Tell me where we stand as of today.”

Ice hesitated only a moment. The General had received the briefs and probably knew as much about what was in them as he did, but he was the Commander and Ice would give him as detailed a report as he wanted.

“Well, sir, the operation had the following objectives: First, stop The Cause from getting away with the hostage scientists that it needs to build a nuclear device and second, to capture as many members of The Cause as possible without endangering the completion of the first objective. The operation was successful on both counts, sir. Two scientists were rescued and the other two were “neutralized” by Element using the powers granted the operation by you. On the second objective, two terrorists were captured, given medical attention, and await interrogation in C-wing.”

“Didn’t several terrorists get away, including the leader Rabbit and his second, Syn?”

“Yes sir, and the third one was, of course, Raven. We lost track of them after they cleared the local air space. Blazer is on Raven’s trail and is very optimistic that he can track him. He is something of an expert on that particular terrorist. Rabbit and Syn have not been seen and we have a team working on finding them.”

“The reports included some information on one of our agents, Sped, that had been captured weeks before the operation and had been brainwashed into believing he was a terrorist recruit with The Cause. How is he doing?”

“Sir, he is recovering nicely. He has remembered more than we hoped and we have been using the information to trace the movements of The Cause before the operation. They were well prepared, sir, and only good timing and excellent teamwork allowed us to be successful. Sped had been implanted with the persona of Mr. Smith, a man who would stop at nothing to kill Jedi, the leader of the Pawns unit. If it had not been for Element’s quick thinking, he might have succeeded.”

“Who is interrogating the two terrorists?”

“Twisted, sir. He is here from the CIA specifically to help with The Cause. Sir, he utilizes some rather unorthodox methods of interrogation. Should we have someone on hand to reign him in?”

“No, I had him brought over myself. These people are much harder to get information from than most terrorists. I do not want him interfered with. Also, I want the twin brother of that terrorist, Jester, brought in to help.”

“Sir?”

“He has a twin brother who is either in this agency or could be. I want him brought in to put pressure on Jester. And, I want them moved to the secondary security level.”

“Sir, that has less security than C-wing.”

“I know that, son. I want them loosened up for Twisted. A little freedom, though no one would call it that, may help him get the information we want. Our secondary security unit is better than any general population prison in the country. I’ll have the orders sent down today. Oh, how did the follow-up team handle our team deaths?”

“Sir, we used a fake ‘helicopter crash during training exercise’ scenario. It was carried by the wire services and didn’t receive too much attention. All personnel involved received a briefing on it and the standard cover stories to spread for their own involvement.”

The General nodded. This method had worked for years and perfected by the information teams to the point that they were no longer viewed as questionable or strange.

“Thank you, Ice. Please continue to stay on top of this and keep me informed. I will have you moved up as one of my assistants. See the personnel officer tomorrow, I will have all the paperwork done by then.”

“Thank you, Sir. You won’t be disappointed.”

“If I am, I will correct the situation. Now, carry on.” The General picked up a folder on his desk and ignored Ice as he left the office. Things had not turned out the way he had planned on that operation. Element had done his job too well and Jedi was still alive. His superiors had praised him on his planning and on his staff, their smiles failing to hide their feelings of superiority. They viewed the Operations arm as a big, dumb weapon to be pointed at a problem and fired. Well, they would learn what happened to those that underestimated him and his resolve to bring the US back to the power position it had once held. Nothing would stop him, nothing at all.

Ice walked away from Dark Knight’s office. The General had now made him an assistant and that would mean having inside information. It also meant the possibility of having to make a decision between the job and his friends in the Pawns. Well, he would handle those problems when they occurred. For now, he had to get all his information together and all the latest intelligence on the terrorists from The Cause. Where were they? Raven had been seen in Central America and then in Africa. Had the others gone with him? He would just have to present the current information and wait for updates from the field.

Meanwhile, in a small town in Guatemala, the heat was bringing the usual business to one of the many drinking establishments.

“Bring me a cold one would you, please?” asked the well-built, dark man of average height. He was sitting at a corner table near an exit in the dimly lit bar. His eyes missed nothing in the room and they never stopped scanning, as if any change or any movement could signal a significant event. This was the terrorist known as White Rabbit, the leader of the military arm of The Cause. The Cause told its members that it represented true capitalism, unfettered by the techno-economics of Japan and the self-righteous Military-Industrial Complex of the United States and the United Kingdom. Its actions were supposed to free the hungry, backward countries of the world to utilize their own natural resources as they saw fit. Actually, only a few people within The Cause knew the real goals of the organization. Rabbit didn’t care. He was paid well to do his job and he was very good at it.

“Do I look like a waitress to you?” answered the beautiful, blond-haired blue-eyed female terrorist known as Syn. Perhaps the deadliest woman on the planet, this small woman could gut three counter-terrorists and never break a sweat, smiling the whole time. Rabbit was actually a little afraid of her, but, then again, so was everyone who had ever met her. Syn brought the cold beer over to the table and sat down opposite the only person she would take orders from. Not really a believer in The Cause either, Syn stayed on for the pay, the vast resources of The Cause, and the opportunity to kill counter-

terrorists. She had been one herself before and now relished every chance to exact some sort of revenge on the same people she had once called friends. A very cold being indeed.

“Tell me again why we are in Guatemala in a two-bit bar and staying in some rented room that only has a ceiling fan to move the hot air around,” says Syn.

“Well,” responds Rabbit, “it is better than being in The Outfit’s little prison waiting to be tortured for information in the name of security.”

“Point taken.”

“Also, we are here to meet up with The Janitor, Red, and Hitman.”

“Red? What do we need with a demolitions expert? And two snipers? I thought Pookie was at our disposal for sniping duties.”

“We have orders from above and I have received some information from Cheshire Cat.”

Cheshire Cat had been instrumental in their escape from that house where most of his team had died and two had been captured. Now, Rabbit trusted him at least a little. If the latest information from him were true, their future plans would need to be modified. Trusting did not come easily to Rabbit. He did not know who Cheshire Cat was, but the evidence pointed to someone on the inside of The Outfit. But a person who turned on his own kind, would also turn on any “new” friends. But, he and Syn were safe for the moment due, in part, to Cheshire Cat’s information. They had made their way through a series of safe houses to finally end up here waiting for the next move. Raven had been with them until a few days ago and had left to keep the heat off of them. One of the agents from The Outfit was making a career out of finding Raven and he didn’t want to jeopardize the next mission.

“What kind of information?” asked Syn.

“We may be making a little trip back to the States.”

“You don’t mean...,”

“Yes, we have some unfinished business with The Outfit and the Pawns. You may get your chance at that TK guy again and you may even get to see that Jester guy you are so sweet on.”

“Hmmmphhh,” grunted Syn. She eyed the man across from here warily. No statement from Rabbit could be taken lightly. He meant what he said and there could only be two reasons that would get them back to the States at this time. One – he had information on where Needles and Jester were being held or were going to be held and they would be getting them back. Two – The Cause was still willing to pay for nuclear scientists and

Rabbit knew where to get them. Either way, it would not be easy and it would most likely be bloody...just the way Syn liked it.

Episode I – Scene I

By Duty Bound

As each day passed, he knew his chances of getting out alive were diminishing. Needles would not kid himself. The Outfit had moved him and Jester to a less secure area of their sprawling campus. Other than a few questions from Jedi, the leader of the Pawns CT group, no one had tried to divulge any information from them at all. Meanwhile, Needles, also known as The Doctor, had been able to ascertain some pertinent information from Jedi and others that had come by to see the two “mad” terrorists. Apparently, Syn, Rabbit, and Raven had all escaped, but without any hostages. Needles knew that The Cause would need more scientists to complete the nuclear weapon they were developing. He also knew that Rabbit would be worried about how much information The Outfit would be able to extract from their two prisoners. So, when two guards had come and taken Jester away from his cell, Needles knew it had begun. Jester knew very little about The Cause’s mission or even about the personnel. That was one ex-Marine who worked only for money and, apparently, to piss off his brother who was a US Federal agent of some kind. That meant they would be coming for him next and very soon. Needles walked to the window at the back of his cell. Very politically correct. A room with a view and a chance to exercise several times a day had made the stay here better, in many ways, than the everyday life of a terrorist on the run.

“Not much of a view is it?” came the question from behind Needles. He turned; a little startled that someone could get that close on the tiled floors without making a sound. He was even more startled at the two men standing outside the bulletproof glass that made up the front of his cell. One man was about six feet tall, blonde, with the build of a prizefighter. The other was shorter, dark-headed, with the stance of man very capable of shifting into a high gear at a moment’s notice.

“Smith! I thought you were dead. What are you doing here?” Needles asked the tall man as he moved closer to the glass partition. Needles, of course, knew that Smith was not dead and had shed that implanted personality to return to his normal self...a counter-terrorist named Sped.

“Cut the crap, ‘Doctor’. You know I’m not Smith. You implanted that persona to turn me into a weapon against my friend Jedi.”

“So, why are you here then? To gloat?”

“No, I just wanted to see you before the CIA interrogator got to you. Do you still believe in The Cause, Doctor? Your friends seem to have forgotten about you and Jester. We’ve even been in contact with some of your members to make a deal and they have refused.”

“Every cause has its casualties, Smith, and ours is a just cause which, in the end, will topple the Western Capitalist Regime and bring true capitalism to all countries. If I can support The Cause through my death or imprisonment, then so be it. If I can do more by killing certain government agents or ‘persuading’ others to do it for us, then that is even better. Turning you against your own friends was a little too easy, don’t you think? Maybe you’re in the wrong profession.”

At this, Sped moved towards the partition as if to come right through it. The other man moved so fast that Needles was not sure if he believed it. The man brought Sped to a halt with a single hand on the larger man’s arm.

"Control yourself, my friend. This one is not worth it," said the man in a calm voice.

"Who is your friend, Smith? One of your old friends?" asked Needles.

The man moved to face Needles through the glass. "I am Element. Yes, I am his friend and I wouldn't provoke him like that. I might not always be here to stop him." Element stood looking directly into Needles' face. "Let's go Sped. We have a meeting to get to and, I believe, so does The Doctor here. I can assure you, Doc, that ours will be much more pleasant than yours. See ya around."

Sped and Element moved down the short hall to the large metal door that was the entrance to this group of four cells. Needles watched them go with a perplexed look on his face. The man called Element had gotten to him, but not like he had planned. The thought of interrogation was not particularly frightening to him, but the look on the CT's face had reminded him of someone. Who? Who? He thought for a minute and then it came to him. The eyes! Those eyes were just like Syn's eyes, cold and dead. Lacking in any compassion whatsoever. He didn't know how he knew it, but he was certain that he would see those eyes again.

Light, then dark, then light, then dark, the alternating change in lighting seemed to go on forever. "Where am I?" the man asked himself. As his eyes adjusted for the next lighted area, he realized that he was not moving of his own volition. He was being pushed in a wheelchair. There was no plastic hospital wristband, but his wrists were secured to the wheelchair by plastic zip ties like the police use now. His feet were not secured and seemed made of lead. His clothing was a light blue jumper of some synthetic blend.

"Have a nice nap, Jester?" came the question from the one pushing him along.

Jester tried to turn to look up and back at the man, but the movement only caused a near blinding pain to shoot through his head. The pain did clear his thoughts a little, though. He could now remember some of what had happened. He had been captured during the raid on the canyon house and brought to The Outfit's headquarters. He had been in a cell until recently and then had been moved, along with Needles, to what he called "The Zoo". The cells were bigger, but had clear, probably bulletproof, glass for a front wall; much like the kind found in animal displays at zoos. After some time there, he had been escorted to another building through a tunnel and then into a room that had one large light hanging from the center of the ceiling. The last thing he remembered was a man entering and introducing himself as his interrogator. "What shall I call you?" he had asked the man. "Call me Twisted," the man replied. Everything after was just a jumble of torn images. Good feelings, bad feelings, sorrow, anger, excitement, pride, horror, and a distinct feeling of pure fear all ran through the memory of that time. The fear was still there, gnawing at the back of his mind, threatening to come screaming to the surface. He decided to ignore the remark by his transporter.

"Well, I guess you're not going to talk. That's all right. You've talked enough already, I'd wager."

Jester's mind cringed at the dig. He could not recall talking at all, but it was likely that he did. Luckily, The Cause did not give its foot soldiers very much information. But what about Needles? He would have much more information to spill and some of it maybe even Rabbit or Syn didn't know about. Needles had been with other groups before this one and had put his brainwashing talents to use more than once. Jester had heard rumors about this ever since Needles had joined with them. Well, Jester was in no condition to do anything about it now. He could barely hang on to the wheelchair as it made its way through the tunnels and up to the floor where his "zoo cell" was located. A guard opened the door into the cell area where he and Needles were being kept. He was wheeled into his cell after some unseen guard keeping watch through a camera high in the hallway unlocked the door.

"Jester! Jester! Are you all right?" asked Needles from his cell.

Jester looked in that direction. The wall had been changed. It had been just a solid wall before with no breaks at all. Now there was a window made from the same glass as the front wall. It was about 2 feet by 2 feet and the center of it was about 6 feet from the floor. He could see Needles looking through it at him. His attendant cut his restraints and helped him to the bed. He seemed as weak as a kitten. He lay with his back to the window, purposely ignoring the question from his cohort. He did not want Needles to see his pain or his embarrassment from the knowledge that he may have given what little information he had to their enemies.

Needles watched as Jester turned away from the viewing window and ignored him. What was wrong with him? He looked like a person recovering from some terrible physical ordeal, unable to even take two steps without assistance. Needles knew all too well the answer to his question. Torture! Not in the way the common man pictured torture, but the kind practiced by government organizations and terrorist organizations alike. The new, improved methods for getting information from those not willing to give it. There were drugs, procedures, mind games, hypnosis, and combinations of some or all of these. He personally had used each type more than once to garner information from a captive. He had used drug therapy and mind conditioning to make himself almost immune to many of the popular drugs and methods. But no one could beat them all; it was only a matter of time until a skilled interrogator would get the information he was looking for or kill his subject trying. The sound of the door to his cell opening caused Needles to turn. The same attendant with the same wheelchair entered.

"Let's go, Doc," he said.

Needles moved to the wheelchair and sat down. His hands and feet were put in restraints attached to the wheelchair frame. As they left the cell and passed through the door exiting the cell area, Needles quipped, 'On Jeeves!'

His caretaker chuckled softly and replied, "I hope you remember to laugh on the way back. I hear the guy you are about to meet can get blood from a stone without breaking a sweat."

The rest of the journey was a silent one. Down an elevator and through a series of tunnels, then up another elevator and into a room with a single light hanging from the ceiling. He was wheeled in and left directly under the light, facing a door in the opposite wall. After a few minutes, the door opened and a man entered. He was of average height, average build, and of an age hard to judge. The man touched what appeared to be a slight indentation on the wall and a pedestal rose about 3 feet from where Needles sat. The man walked over to the pedestal and unrolled what appeared to be an instrument pack on its top. Needles could make out a few of the instruments and recognized them from his work. They were standard surgical instruments and would be frightening to a layman. They inspired a small amount of fear in Needles now. He knew what could be done with such things in skilled hands, and he had no doubts that this man was skilled. The man turned to Needles and looked him straight in the eye.

"Hello, Mr. Needles. I am known as Twisted and I will be asking you some questions today. To facilitate that, I have brought some things that you may recognize. Since we are colleagues, in a sense, I will dispense with the melodrama and get to the point."

"Please do, Twisted," interjected Needles.

"Very well. I intend to try several traditional methods to gather certain information about the organization you know as The Cause and its members. No doubt, you would rather not answer these questions truthfully. To that end, I am prepared to administer certain drugs to ensure that what you divulge is the truth, as you know it. If those do not work, as I suspect you have a tolerance for most of them, I am prepared to use methods that I myself have devised. Why not use those now and save the trouble, you might ask? To be honest, they are quite painful and barbaric and I sometimes lose a subject when employing them."

“Bad for your average, huh?”

“Something like that. I must admit that I have never interrogated another interrogator before. This should be fascinating and educational. If you have any questions about my methods during the process, feel free to pose them.”

“I have one now. What makes you think that a two-bit, no-good, second-rate government stooge like yourself, can get information from a person with my training? You wouldn't know the truth if it came up and bit you on the ass!”

“Hmmm, interesting reaction to the drugs you ingested with your food this morning. They usually cause some belligerence, but you do not exhibit any of the other reactions, drowsiness, slurred speech, glazed look. Interesting.” Twisted looked to his left toward the blank wall and nodded. On Needles left, a panel moved back in the floor and a chair, best described as a dentist's chair from another planet, rose into place. It was all gleaming metal with an attached electronic instrument panel with buttons and lights and computer displays. The door behind Twisted opened and two burley men entered and moved towards Needles. Twisted moved as if to exit through the door, then turned toward Needles.

“I am sorry about the harsh surface of the chair. It is quite uncomfortable, but the stainless steel is so much easier to clean than plastic or leather. These two gentlemen will assist you. I will be back in five minutes. Then we can get started on our journey to the truth.” With that remark, he left the room.

After the two “gentlemen” had moved Needles from the wheelchair into the metal chair, Needles began thinking about what was to come. He had fought off most of the effects of whatever drug they had used in preparation for this. The Asian meditation he had studied allowed him to control certain autonomic responses. But Needles knew that a few mind tricks and some drug tolerances were not going to be enough to get him through this ordeal. This Twisted guy was obviously a professional with a lot of experience. Needles looked toward the door apprehensively. He did not fear giving up information too vital to The Cause. But at this moment, he feared this room might be the last one he would ever see.

Episode I – Scene II

Mirror, Mirror

“Man! What kind of lucky shot was that?” asked Sped. The Pawns were all in the local bar named Charles’ Tavern, but known to everyone at The Outfit as CT’s. The nickname was very descriptive since it was one of the few establishments on the list of allowed hangouts for members. Most of the patrons were from The Outfit and most knew their employer, to keep an eye on them, probably ran it. No one is as paranoid as someone whose job is paranoia.

“Luck had nothing to do with it, my friend. Just watch while I sink the eight ball in that side pocket and take even more of your paycheck, such that it is,” said Skooter. The resident pool shark for the Pawns lined up his shot and neatly sank the black ball for the win. Sped was one of the few Pawns members that would still play against Skooter. It was their friendship and the fact that Skooter usually spent Sped’s lost money on drinks for the two of them, that kept him coming back for more punishment. “Another round for this table, Mary!” shouted Skooter. “This one is too hard-headed to know when to stop playing.” Skooter and Sped laughed loudly.

“Hey, Skoot! Bring that dud and your drinks over here. Fire is trying to do that knife trick again,” called Plo from across the room. A group of mostly Pawns was around a large table watching Firedrake do something with his Outfit issued knife. A spoon was on the right side of the table with his knife balanced on the end of the handle. A square beer coaster was on the left side of the table. Apparently, Fire had been using the spoon to flip the knife into the air and have it land point first into the coaster. From the marks on the table, he had been close several times.

“Ten bucks says I get it this time,” piped Fire.

“You’re on,” responded Plo.

Fire got ready and started his downward motion to hit the spoon. Just as he did this, someone jostled him hard from behind. The force of that along with his attempt sent the knife on a fast low trajectory off the left end of the table. Skooter bumped Jedi out of the way and Mrs. Brutus ducked instinctively. The people outside of the group around the table had no way of knowing a deadly projectile was headed toward them.

“Look out!” someone shouted. A gasp came from the group and at the same time there was a loud thud. There was the knife embedded in one of the wooden columns in the bar. It was less than an inch from the right side of Element’s head. The ever-stoic counter-terrorist blinked once and then removed the weapon from the column. Element took the knife by its blade and with a slight flip sent it point first into the coaster.

“Jedi, you’d better get a leash on your boy there or maybe a lesson or two would be better,” said Element in that cold voice of his. Then the impossible happened. He smiled and winked at Fire.

Firedrake had been about to jump up and teach the mercenary turned Pawn a lesson himself, but he laughed at the smile on Element’s face. It looked almost painful being there, as if the muscles that create a smile had not been used for a long time.

“Good one, El. I got bumped.”

“You still owe me ten bucks, Fire. Pay up!” interjected Plo. The group laughed and most did not notice Element walking over to the bar with Jedi following him. Element turned as Jedi sat down on the stool next to Element’s. Jedi noticed a small cut on Element’s right ear where the knife blade had obviously touched.

"I see you weren't quite fast enough," he said while pointing to the cut.

"It must be old age. A few years ago I would have snatched that blade out of the air with one hand," remarked Element as he wiped the small drop of blood from his ear. "Getting old is no fun, Jedi. I know you didn't come over here to critique my clothes, so spit it out. What's on your mind?"

Jedi looked at the man he now trusted, yet did not fully understand. They had been through things that would have made other men either inseparable or intolerant of each other. They seemed to be neither of these. But, he knew Element missed very little and trusted even fewer people than Jedi.

"I wanted to talk to you about those orders you had to kill the hostages to keep The Cause from getting them," began Jedi.

"We've been all through this, Jedi. I had direct orders from Dark Knight to take whatever steps were necessary to keep those scientists out of the terrorists' hands. I followed my orders and I have been cleared of any wrongdoing in the incident. Get off my back!"

"Whoa, now. I know all that. I'm not knocking what you did. I want to know how Dark Knight presented that order and if you noticed anything strange about it."

"I was contacted through the personals, as usual. I presented myself and was briefed on the situation. The General then handed me the orders you saw and told me to do whatever I had to do to complete the mission."

"Think hard. Was there anything unusual that he said or the way he said it? Anything at all?"

"Well, I didn't give it much thought before the assault. But now that you mention it, he said 'Jedi may cause you some problems. Do what you have to do. No repercussions. If you do this right, I will make you a permanent member of the Pawns and make sure the Pawns leader will accept you.' Yeah, he used your name in one sentence and then that 'leader' thing in the next. I'm no language expert, but that seems strange to me."

"Yeah, that is strange. It almost sounds like he expected me to be replaced..."

"Or to not make it back," finished Element, ominously. The two men looked at each other as the implications of this revelation became apparent to each. For Dark Knight to be that certain of Jedi's death would mean that he was involved with the terrorists or was privy to intelligence that he had not shared with those it would benefit the most.

"This could be big, Jedi. He is responsible for all the team movements and assignments. Sped's training assignment, my contract to fill in for Blazer, the investigation of the mission, and the interrogation of the prisoners. What are we going to do and who can we trust?"

"We can't go off half-cocked with this. We don't know that we are right or, if we are, what Dark Knight's reasons were. We need more information and we need to have somebody on his staff in our pocket. This is not going to be easy and it is not going to be safe for us either. If we are right, we can consider ourselves in real danger on any mission and even during our downtime."

"Do we have anyone that can intercept communications or do some ultra-covert stuff that The Outfit itself would not find out about? It would be pretty easy to paint us as subversives if this is discovered. If this is true, there is probably a history of events that would look very different now."

"Right. We need records from Personnel and Accounting. And maybe some from before we came on board."

"I did some wet work for the CIA years ago. I know Dark Knight was a Director of something then. Maybe you can do a search on my background as a cover to find out more about that time. It is pretty well known that we have a history. And we can play it up some too."

"Maybe that will work. I'll look into it. I would like to bring Plo in on this also."

"He doesn't always trust me, that's for sure. But I agree that he can be trusted not to rat us out. His code of ethics would not allow it. Do we bring in other Pawns or members of other teams? Do you know any of them well enough to do that? We won't answer all of these questions here today, but we had better meet somewhere else. I checked this place as I came in and it is clean. I always thought it was bugged, but maybe it really is a haven from the grind of our jobs."

"Okay, we also have to work all this in between assignments. There's some intelligence on a possible attempt for hostages at some resort in the next few weeks. The boys upstairs are still deciding what to do about it. Keep all of this to yourself and we'll hook up again later. I'm counting on you big time, Element. I may still appear to be riding you hard, so play along. We don't want to bring too much attention to ourselves. Good luck."

"You too, boss. I'm out of here," said Element as he paid for their drinks and made his way out the door.

Jedi watch his friend leave. His head was still swirling with ideas and thoughts concerning the possibility that Dark Knight may have had something to do with the terrorists at that last mission in the canyon. The air cover from Interpol had been pulled at just the right time to allow the escape of Rabbit and his crew. That was one of the biggest mysteries from that day. Inquiries to Interpol had not turned up the identity of the person asking for that to happen. It would take someone with some pull to get that to happen, or someone with dirt on the person with the pull. This was getting complicated already and they hadn't even really started their investigation.

"Hey, Jedi," said a voice behind Jedi. He turned to see Dark Knight's new assistant, Icedrake, with another man. The guy looked familiar to him. Suddenly, he recognized him.

"What is that terrorist doing out of the zoo?" asked Jedi as he came of the barstool and stepped towards the two men.

"Whoa, Jedi, this isn't Jester. This is his twin brother, Raszkal. He's here to help us with his brother."

"Good to meet you, Jedi," said Raszkal. Jedi knew there were probably differences between the twins, but he had not really seen Jester that many times. Still, this man would be mistaken for the terrorist by most of the Pawns, he was sure of it.

"So, grab a seat. What's your story? How are you going to help us with your brother?"

"Well, first of all, I am here on loan from Delta Force, but I am also looking for a position with The Outfit. The General seems to think that I might be able to jar Jester into giving up some information on those terrorists buddies of his."

"How did the two of you end up on opposite sides of this never-ending war we are involved in. He was a pretty tough customer for two of my best men to take down."

"We both went into the Marines and studied demolitions, electronics, and covert ops. I graduated first in our class and he was second. It has always been that way and this seemed to be the last straw. We went on to Delta Force, but Jester left after I had him busted a rank for involvement in a hazing incident. Now, he hates me. He went from one mercenary group to another and now he

is a member of The Cause, as you already know. He is really a good person and I have been waiting for a chance to help him come back to the fold.”

“He has crimes to answer for now: kidnapping, espionage, illegal weapons sales, and murder to name a few. Have you seen him yet? I hear he spilled everything to that CIA interrogator already.”

“We just came from there. The General seems to think Raszkal can get even more information from him, “ piped in Icedrake.

Jedi looked at the young man for a moment. This Icedrake had once practically begged to join the Pawns and now he was in a position to help them with their investigation, if you want to call it that, of Dark Knight.

“That’s right. You are one of his assistants now. How is that going? No, wait, take Raszkal around to the Pawns and introduce him, please. Then, come back here while he mingles and we will have a chat. The Pawns are expanding, you probably know that, and I want to talk to you about it.”

“Sure! Come on, Raszkal, lets go meet the guys that brought Jester in.”

Ice and Raszkal walked over to the table where Firedrake was doing some more tricks. Jedi could see the surprised look on several faces as the terrorist’s twin was introduced. Jedi began ordering his thoughts before Ice came back to talk. He had to determine where the young man’s loyalties lay. If he was willing, he could be a great asset in finding out what was going on in The Outfit’s Operations arm. Ice was making his way back to Jedi. The next few minutes might have Jedi sending this young man into a far more hazardous situation than rescuing a few hostages from some terrorists. Mixing ambition, politics, and deception was a dangerous game. But, it was one Jedi and Element had decided to play. Now, they needed weapons to play the game.

“I’m back, Jedi. What do you want to talk about?”

“Let’s go to a table, Ice. This may take a while,” said Jedi as he led Ice to a table in one corner of the tavern.

Earlier, in a room at The Outfit’s compound...

If they would just let him die in peace, he would be happy. Needles struggled to stay conscious. The last time he had passed out, they had used something quite painful to awaken him. Most of this Twisted’s methods seemed crude on the surface, but Needles knew each one was chosen for the effect it had on the mind, not on his body. He did not know how long he had been in the stainless steel room, but he knew it had been more than a few hours. Certain details had given him some clues to that. His tormentor had left and returned twice and at least once Needles was sure he smelled salami on the man’s breathe. Lunchtime, he supposed. He was too ill to eat even if they had given him something. Needles looked at the IV’s attached to his arms. From the metallic taste in his mouth, he recognized some of the drugs being used. When all of this had started, he had been able to ignore the pain and the questions. His resolve was leaving him now. He knew he would divulge some information soon and he really wanted to live through this. Dying for The Cause may have sounded noble, but he could help the organization more if he lived. The door in the far wall opened again and Twisted entered the room. Needles noticed that the man seemed upset and decided to try to turn the tables again. The professional had largely ignored all of the previous banter.

“What’s up, Doc? Ha! Ha! Ha! Did someone eat your cookie?” This jibe from Needles actually caused Twisted to turn suddenly and stare at him.

"It seems that I have limited time with you today. I am about to have you taken back to your cell. I would like you to think about the questions I have asked you and about how our next session will go. It all depends on you. Your resistance has been remarkable. You should be proud, but I will now have time to research better ways to get what I want. And remember, I always get what I want."

With this remark, Twisted nodded towards a spot past Needles head and he heard a door open behind him. The IV's and other apparatus were removed and the same guard as before began pushing Needles back through the tunnels to his cell. Needles did not say a word. He was trying to notice everything about the route with what little consciousness he had at his disposal. If Twisted knew how close he had been to just blabbering everything, Needles was sure his wheelchair would be turned around and he would be taken to an even higher level of torment. What was the real reason the interrogation had been stopped? Was something happening? Or was this just another mind game to break him down? The fear of something bad happening was often much worse than the reality of the happening itself. Needles remembered the reality of how Jester had looked. That was not fear of the unknown, but fear of a known horror happening again. Rabbit had mentioned what can only be described as a "mole" helping them. Could this "mole" be helping again? The person would have to have some real clout or influence on someone with clout. Needles head was hurting with just trying to figure it all out.

"Here we are. I'm sure your buddy has been missing you," said the guard as he pushed Needles past Jester's cell.

Jester sat up as the door opened and watched as Needles was wheeled past his cell. The man did not look as bad as Jester had felt yesterday. Did this mean he had broken already? Needles probably had information that would be useful to The Outfit in its quest to destroy The Cause. Jester got up and hobbled over to the window between their cells. Needles needed only a little help from the guard to get to his bed.

"Nightie-night, Needles. Don't forget to rest up for your next session with Twisted," taunted the guard. He laughed as he took the wheelchair and left the cell area.

"Needles, are you okay?"

"I'll be all right kid. Just let me rest. That Twisted guy knows his stuff and I'm afraid they are not done with me yet. Rest some yourself. You may have to face him again."

Jester shivered with the thought of that metallic room. "I doubt it. I told them what little I know, I'm sure of it. I just don't remember. But why did they stop now? Is it a trick?"

"I'm not sure. Now, let me sleep. And don't forget...the walls have ears."

With that, Needles turned to face the wall in a way that was unmistakably final. Jester's questions would have to wait. Jester turned as he heard the door open at the end of the cell area again. His jaw dropped. He walked slowly to the clear front of his cell and looked out in amazement.

"Aren't you glad to see me, Jester? Most twins are usually happy to see each other, but, then again, we aren't like most twins, are we?"

"What are you doing here, Raszka? Your Delta Force buddies tell you I was here and you had to come and gloat?"

"No, brother. I came here for only one reason. I came here to save your life."

Jester looked at his twin. It had once been like looking into a mirror. Right now they did not look too much alike. The interrogation had taken its toll on him and he felt frail next to this man in seemingly perfect physical condition. What did he want? Jester did not know whether to be glad to see him or mad. Ever since Raszkal had busted him for a hazing prank, Jester had thought of how he would one day show his brother that he was not going to accept second place any longer. He had been born two minutes before Raszkal, but had been following his twin in everything else since then. He had come up short of Raszkal in sports, girls, school, the Marines, and life in general. Another man stepped through the door near Jester's cell.

"Who's this?"

"I'm an assistant to the Commander here."

"Well, leave me alone. Both of you just leave me alone. I have nothing to say to either of you."

"Well," said the man, "if you ever expect to leave this place alive, I would listen to Raszkal. I believe he is your only hope. And the clock is ticking."

Jester looked at the two men. His twin brother, whom he despised, and this young Outfit stooge with his look of superiority. What he did now might decide his future. And it might decide the future of many other people, both in The Cause and in The Outfit.

Episode II – Scene I

A Dangerous Proposal

“So, what do you want to talk about Jedi?” asked Icedrake, currently serving as an assistant to General Knight, the Director of the Operations of The Outfit. Jedi and Ice were sitting at a dimly lit back table at the back of a bar called Charles’ Tavern, but affectionately known as CT’s to the operatives from The Outfit.

“Well, Ice, I need your help and giving it to me could jeopardize your current position in The Outfit.”

“How do you mean?”

“There have been certain indicators that we have a mole in our organization and I have reason to believe that that person is responsible for the deaths of my teammates and may be planning something else.”

Ice’s mind whirled with the import of Jedi’s statements. Could it be true? He had been involved with the investigation of the Pawns deaths and had thought some of the coincidences were questionable. But, he was new and inexperienced in some of The Outfit’s procedures, so he had only noted them in his report as items of interest.

“You’re talking about the Interpol air cover and the Sped brainwashing, aren’t you?”

“That’s part of it. There’s more dating back to the inception of The Outfit. Blazer’s replacement by Element, Element’s secondary protocol orders, the members of The Cause that were there...”

“What about them?”

“Several members of that group have been associated with the Pawns to varying degrees and, along with the Sped/Smith fiasco, these things point to a Pawns specific agenda on their part. Think about it, Ice! An attempt to kill me, Blazer’s known obsession with Raven, Wicked’s participation, the air cover pull-out with no evidence of who made the call, and the fact that the Pawns were sent in out of duty rotation and with more filler personnel than we have ever used. I would rather draw to an inside straight than bet those events would all happen when they did. Someone is working against The Outfit or at the very least, trying to get rid of the Pawns.”

“It would have to be someone with connections or maybe a group of people. This is big, Jedi. But why are you telling me all of this? Do you want me to get the General in on this? You don’t need me for that. This is significant enough to warrant his attention.”

Here goes nothing, thought Jedi. “No, Ice, I do not want you to take this to General Knight. He either knows about it and is ignoring it or he’s involved in some direct way, or he is being used by the one’s doing this. Going to him will tip someone off or will put the General in grave danger. I am only discussing this with people that I trust. I trust you, Ice. I need you to help me and you are in a position to do so.”

Jedi watched as Ice struggled to keep his composure. Surely, this statement raised others in Ice’s mind. Jedi could only guess at what he was thinking.

Ice fought to remain calm at the request made of him by Jedi. General Knight a mole! Or maybe even more! It was even more ludicrous to believe that he would simply be ignoring such happenings within an organization he had almost built by himself. Ice did not buy Jedi’s allusions to the information being dangerous to General.

“Jedi, you do know what you are asking me to do? Spy on the General and use my position as his assistant to either uncover him as a mole or as incompetent. Not exactly a career move, is it?”

“Maybe he isn’t involved and doesn’t know anything. Still, you will be in a position to rid The Outfit of a mole. To flush out a person or persons who have agendas that are in direct opposition to the edicts of The Outfit. Let me ask you something, Ice. Why did you accept a post with The Outfit?”

“To be with the best and to become the best myself. To protect and serve on a global scale.”

“All of those are quite noble. But, if one man or a small group of men have their own ideas about what is the best way to protect and serve and those ideas are in direct opposition to the values that you hold, what will you do? Will you keep doing your job until something personally happens to change your mind? Or will you take the initiative and find a way to bring those people to justice? Just keep an open eye at first. I believe that you will see something that will convince you to help me. Give it two weeks. If you don’t find out anything by then, I will back off. I give you my word.”

Ice looked at the older man, searching for something that would help him make up his mind. Two weeks was a short time. Jedi must think something was about to happen. Ice made his decision.

“Okay. I will do it. Two weeks with me looking for evidence of a mole or a conspiracy and when I don’t find anything you will drop this like it never happened. Agreed?” Ice held out his hand for Jedi.

“It’s a deal,” said Jedi, shaking Ice’s hand. “We meet here in one week unless you find something sooner. If you do, get a message to me. You’ll find a way.”

“Sure, Jedi, I’ll see you in a week,” responded Ice as he arose to leave the table.

“Wait, there’s one more thing. I need all the information we have on Element. I need to check his background for hiccups.”

“He was cleared on the hostage deaths.”

“I know. But, I have a right to know if I can depend on him and you know we have a history. I cannot let him undermine the Pawns, no matter how well he takes orders.”

“Sure, I can help with that officially. Come on down to my office tomorrow afternoon and I will have it ready for you or at least the beginnings of it. I still have a lot of it out from the investigation. Well, I’d better rescue Raszkal from your team. I think Skooter is getting ready to turn him into his next sucker.”

“Alright, see you tomorrow.” Jedi watched the young man join the Pawns near the pool table. Sure enough, Skooter was handing the Delta Force commando a cue and unfolding a large sheaf of bills. Jedi laughed. Skooter’s current truck was paid for through sharking the newbies at that same table. Element had been able to break even the one time they had played and then had told the whole tavern he would rather jump in a pit of rattlesnakes with a pocket knife than do that again. Jedi looked over his team. Skooter and Firedrake, the southern boys with the dead aim of hunters. Sped, the Navy man with quick humor and a quick gun. The Brutuses were an anomaly, a married team of Counter-Terrorists. Their teamwork and level thinking had served as a steadying influence on the young hotshots on the team. TK was there, the young/old man with wisdom and leadership skills that Jedi had leaned on more than once. Blazer was in town reporting on his tracking of the terrorist Raven. He was the hothead of the group. A man with no fear. His speed was always an asset. And there was Plo, the linguist and tactician with a huge hole in his memory and his past. No wonder he and Element got along so well. Jedi’s thoughts dwelled on Element for a moment. Calling him an enigma would be an understatement. Very military, but with a seldom seen soft side. He could be counted on to do the job. Coldly and as efficiently as possible. He had just started to warm up to the rest of the Pawns. Jedi noticed the newest member to the team, Karbon. He had a past with Raven also. Jedi had read the reports from the psych boys. No real explanation as usual. He had been added as a medic after the bloodbath in the canyon. Jedi noticed some of the “fillers” as he called them. There was Trunks watching the banter around the pool table. He had once been a member of the team and had left to do his own thing. He was on the short list of mercenaries trusted by The Outfit and was called in on missions where his hand-to-hand combat skills would be useful. Bum was there too. He had been trained by Plo and had been helpful on other missions. Then there was Ace. Jedi shook his head. This young man was something else entirely. Fast and fit with a lot of street experience. He had been added to The Outfit through the Humanitarian Urban Recruitment and Training System (HURTS). This program took the kind of young men who usually became terrorists and mercenaries and groomed them to be good counter-terrorism operatives. Only time would tell if this one actually survived.

“Jedi,” said a voice right beside Jedi. It was Element, sneaking up on him again.

“What is it, Ele?”

“The balloon just went up. Looks like action somewhere in the Pacific. Briefing in 15 minutes.”

Jedi watched as Element informed TK and Plo and then left out the back. The Pawns would all be informed in a minute and would disperse in two's and three's to avoid a scene. Jedi watched them for one more moment. There were a good team and he certainly hoped that whatever was about to happen was not another fiasco like the last one. He and Element had to find out who the mole was and Jedi knew Icedrake was the key to unlock that information. He only hoped it would happen in time.

A match flared in the darkness of the office of General Dark Knight. He knew the Pawns would be assembling for a briefing on the latest hot spot of terrorism, the Pacific. The players had moved swiftly this time, but all would still work. By tomorrow morning, the Pawns would be thousands of miles away from here and out of his hair. This was too good an opportunity to waste. Knight reached for his phone and after obtaining a secure line that he knew would not be monitored (there would be no logs of the call either, thanks to having one of his own men in the communications department).

“Yes,” answered the familiar voice on the other end of the call.

“The coop is unguarded. Make it tomorrow night, my time,” said Knight.

“This had better be on the up-and-up. Losing those scientists was not part of the bargain. If I find out you had something to do with that...” The voice let the threat hang between them.

“You listen to me, my furry friend. I call the shots in this relationship. I have more power than you can possibly imagine and you do not want me as an enemy. You have seen that my information to you has been good and I made it possible for you to get away from that canyon. If it were not for me, you would be at the mercy of The Outfit's interrogators right now. If you will do this just as we have planned, you will have what you want and I will have what I want. And as an added bonus, we will both have a personal benefit. The Pawns will be discredited, disbanded, and destroyed. NOW, DO WHAT YOU DO!!!!”

Knight slammed down the phone, his anger immediately gone. If he read the players for this latest play correctly, and he usually did, in less than a week the last obstacle to his plan would be gone and he would be hailed as a hero and a great American and world citizen. And those nuisances, the Pawns, would be no more. Just a small blip on the radar of world politics, easily ignored and barely missed as the next sweep showed only clear space where it had once been.

Ace looked around and realized that only the Pawns were present in the briefing room. Usually, Jedi, TK, and Plo would brief the team after receiving the information themselves and then formulating some plan. Since those three were in seats at the front and not at the podium, Ace surmised that this was a rush job of some kind. Just then, the door at the front of the room opened and General Knight, his assistant Icedrake, and another man that Ace did not know. He watched them take their seats and also noticed a strange look on Jedi's face. Was he nervous about the departure from the norm? Or was there something else bothering him? Ace's instincts were from the street and he trusted them more than most of the psychological training he had received. He glanced over at Element to catch his reactions. As usual, this was a waste of time. The same cold look and emotionless face as always was all that he saw. Just then, Icedrake strode to the podium and Ace settled in to his information-gathering mode. He had also learned that saying nothing allowed others to relinquish the information they had and let him study their body language to gather even more.

Jedi had expected a core briefing first and then the usual planning session before having Plo brief the team. This was unusual to say the least. All the Pawns being briefed at once and the General himself was in attendance. Jedi prepared himself for a very hazardous mission.

"Good evening, Pawns," began Icedrake, "I am Icedrake, assistant to General Knight. We are meeting in this different manner due to time constraints imposed upon us by the circumstances of your next mission." The giant screen above and behind the platform came to life and a map of California was displayed. "A group of unidentified terrorists have taken some bikini models hostage at their sponsor's mansion in Malibu, California. They were doing a photo shoot and the caterers had been replaced at the last minute with another company. That company was a front for some terrorist organization. The specifics of the attack are mostly unknown, but we have people interrogating the people who made it out and others trying to ascertain what group it is. The FBI has negotiators there already and they are hopeful that they can come to a resolution soon. But as each of us knows, there has to be an alternative solution and the Pawns are it." The map was replaced with a layout of the mansion and the grounds. Then the screen split and actual photographs of the locations appeared on the right side. "We are lucky that this mansion is one of the most photographed buildings in the world. You will setup outside the gates to the grounds and send personnel through sewers and rock fissures to a location near the wine cellar of the mansion and to the beach. We will not have time for a wet entry from the ocean and the view from the mansion would preclude that anyway. As you can see in these photos, the gate and hills block easy access to the front of the mansion. The yard has several hedgerows and a frontal assault would be extremely difficult. There is access to the side of mansion from the beach and up to the tennis court. We do have some long-range reconnaissance from a helicopter and a Coast Guard cutter." At this point, the screen went blank and Ice continued. "That is all we have so far. The rest of the planning and team assignments will be done in route to the site. So, all of the Pawns will be flown from here in one hour and will arrive in California in 6 hours. Some of you may end up in a strictly supportive role, but we don't have time for the usual "skills matching" decisions. You are all well trained and capable individuals. Do the jobs you are trained

to do and get those hostages out. And now, General Knight has something to add before you depart.” Icedrake stepped away from the podium as General Knight made his way forward.

General Knight scanned the group quickly. “Pawns, this is a high profile mission that will not have a lot of cover story to hide our part in it. You will go in as a FBI-CIA joint team. All of your identification and gear will be marked as such. We have some help on the communications and eavesdropping side. I know we have our own people, but this help is local and already there and working. I must tell you that a lot of important eyes are on this one. The hands that hold the purse strings are still not comfortable with what happened with our last tangle with The Cause. The two-bit terrorists behind this mission had better not bloody the nose of this organization! We are the dogs at the door. We are last tumblers on the lock of safety between those who believe our ideals are theirs to toy with. **WE WILL NOT BE BYPASSED! WE WILL NOT FAIL!**” The room erupted in cheers as General Knight, Icedrake, and the still unnamed visitor exited the same way they had entered. Jedi stepped up onto the platform and stood behind the podium signaling for silence. The Pawns settled down.

“Well, now that the cheering is over, it’s time to get to work. Plo will lead strategy as usual, TK will lead the beach team and I will take the house team. Recon will be Element’s responsibility and Skooter will lead the sniper team. We will go with overloaded teams until we can flesh our strategies. Team leads will pick personnel in-flight and TK or I will decide any conflicts. Sorry, but there is no time for questions. Veterans, help the rookies. We now have 50 minutes until wheels-up. Let’s go.”