

2015

Maputo International Airport

Maputo, Mozambique

1 May

The gusting wind battered Troy Pearce's bearded face. He didn't care. It kept the humidity low and the stink of jet fuel at bay while he and Johnny Paloma finished loading up the last of the gear into a rented Toyota Land Cruiser pickup. They had two drone contracts to fulfill this trip.

Johnny hardly said a word. Unusual for the former LAPD detective.

"Something on your mind?" Pearce asked. A pair of dark aviators hid his world-weary blue eyes.

"Been meaning to ask you something."

"So why haven't you?"

"Seems like the last couple of weeks you haven't been yourself."

More like a couple of months, Pearce thought. He didn't think it showed.

Even though Pearce was the CEO of his global contracting firm, he liked getting his hands dirty out in the field. Didn't believe in leading from behind. He slammed the truck gate shut. "So ask."

"How about I run this first training consult by myself?"

Pearce liked Johnny a lot. He was street smart and fearless, a real door buster. Proved his worth last year in the ops they ran against the Mexicans and Iranians. Since then, Johnny had picked up on the basic

technical aspects of drone operations and proved himself a decent small unmanned aerial systems (sUAS) operator.

Pearce Systems specialized in drone operations. Their first gig this week was an sUAS delivery and training consult with Sandra Gallez and the World Wildlife Alliance. Four days from now, they would deliver a security package to the South African special forces training center at Fort Scorpio.

For the first time in a while, Pearce smiled. "You want that Gallez woman all to yourself?"

"She's a friend, that's all. I just think I'm ready to lead the training. Don't need you to wet-nurse me."

Sandra Gallez had flown up to Addis to sign the WWA contract three months before. The two of them obviously hit it off.

"I call bullshit." Pearce saw the way he looked at her when she came into their office.

"We've stayed in touch." Johnny grinned. "By phone, mostly."

Pearce couldn't blame him. The Belgian wildlife conservationist was a real looker, and bright. It was a good match.

"Maybe it is time you took point." Pearce tossed him the truck keys. "No point in wasting that picnic basket, either." He'd seen Johnny sneak it into the pickup that morning. "Unless you packed it for me."

Johnny smiled. "Not exactly."

"I'll secure the Aviocar."

Pearce was glad to let Johnny do the training. Their destination today was the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park, but Lake Massingir bordered the wilderness reserve. Pearce had fished all of his life, all over the world. He thought he wouldn't get a chance to bait a hook this trip, but now Johnny made that possible. Maybe things were looking up after all.

He headed back into the rented hangar. Pearce and Johnny had arrived with Dr. Rao's shipment last night from Addis in the Pearce Systems C-212 Aviocar, a boxy, top-winged, twin-propped STOL cargo plane. Pearce was doing most of his own flying these days now that his personal pilot, Judy Hopper, was gone.

The South African equipment was stowed away in a secret, locked

compartment under the deck. Pearce shut and locked the plane's cargo door, then shut and locked the hangar doors. Determined thieves could still break in, but he hired an armed security service to keep an eye on things while they were in the field.

Pearce climbed into the truck cab on the passenger side. The a/c was blowing good and cold.

Johnny checked the map on his satellite phone. Didn't look at Pearce.

"You see those two jokers in the silver Mercedes G-Class, by the fence?"

"They picked us up back at the hotel an hour ago," Pearce said.

"You could've said something."

"How'd you manage to survive in LA with eyes like yours?"

"High-capacity magazines." Johnny chambered a round into his Glock 19 pistol. "Any idea who they are?"

"SVR. Russian intelligence service."

"What do you think they want?"

"My head." Pearce had killed Ambassador Britnev for masterminding the plot that murdered President Myers's son last year and nearly drew the United States into a shooting war with the Russians.

"I thought you got away clean on that one."

"So did I."

"What do you want to do?"

"They had a clear shot at me. So taking me out isn't the objective."

"An exfil back to the Motherland? They must be really pissed."

"Britnev was a douche bag, but he was their douche bag."

"Two against two. We can take them."

"Too risky."

"Got a better idea?"

"I always liked the G-Class. Reminds me of a Tonka truck." Pearce pulled out his smartphone. "Let's roll."

Johnny pulled away from the hangar and through the fence gate, heading for the road exiting the airport. The boxy German SUV sat tight as Johnny passed by their parking place, just as Pearce instructed.

By the time Johnny cleared the airport, the Mercedes was in his rearview mirror, keeping a discreet distance.

"The driver's good," Johnny said.

Pearce tapped keys on his phone screen. "The SVR only sends the best. They won't try anything until we've cleared the city."

Thirty minutes outside of Maputo, traffic disappeared. The highway was an empty straight line for miles. The silver Mercedes glinted in Johnny's rearview mirror a mile back. Couldn't miss it.

"That G-Class AMG is a sweet ride," Johnny said. "Hundred thirty grand plus, just to drive it off the lot."

"It's an amazing piece of technology. All the latest bells and whistles."

"Ready?" Pearce asked.

Johnny smiled. "Say the word."

"Red-line it," Pearce said.

"God, I love this job." Johnny mashed the gas pedal to the floorboard.

The Toyota rocketed forward, but the straight-six engine was topping out at 180 kph. Not good enough.

Pearce glanced in the side mirror. "He's coming on, fast."

The Mercedes's thundering 5.5-liter turbocharged V-8 was still accelerating. They were just a quarter mile back.

Shooting distance.

Pearce tapped his phone screen, capturing the Mercedes Distronic Plus radar-controlled cruise control. Ran his finger along a slider. Told the radar unit that an object was just one inch away from the Mercedes's front bumper.

The power disc brakes locked. Pads and rotors screamed.

The big Mercedes tumbled end over end on the asphalt, glass flying, steel crunching, doors exploding. On the third rotation, a body flew out, cartwheeling on the asphalt. Four more devastating rotations, and

the crumpled Mercedes finally landed in a shattered heap on the side of the road.

“How’d you manage that?” Johnny asked. He pulled his foot off of the gas pedal, dropping back down to the legal speed limit.

“Pirated his Bluetooth back at the parking lot.”

Johnny chuckled. “Technology’s a bitch.”

Pearce powered down his smartphone. “Let’s go find your girl.”

CIOS Corporate Offices

Rockville, Maryland

1 May

She was there at the beginning, when the U.S. government first weaponized the Internet. In fact, she had loaded some of the first rounds into the cylinder and cocked the hammer.

Jasmine Bath was twenty-four years old when she earned her M.S. in computer science from UC Berkeley, one of the first recruits into the NSA's Office of Tailored Access Operations (TAO) program. They started her at Fort Meade but moved her around, grooming her for bigger things. She was a software specialist but became familiar with hardware operations, too. She helped write some of the first coding for the NSA's pervasive XKEYSCORE surveillance software before moving up into senior development positions within TAO's aggressive counterintelligence ANT program. Her coding fingerprints were all over persistent software implants like JETFLOW (firewall firmware), HEADWATER (software backdoors), and SOMBERKNAVE (wireless Internet traffic rerouting). Those successes earned her multiple commendations and promotions, leading to training and supervisory positions in newly developed TAO sites in Hawaii, Texas, Colorado, and even the Dagger Complex in Germany.

That meant the vast resources of the NSA were entirely at her disposal. She now had access to TAO's shadow networks of servers and

routers, used for covertly hijacking or herding unsuspecting Internet traffic through them. It was the Internet equivalent of the CIA opening up a cell phone store in Abbottabad and secretly selling supposedly untraceable burner phones to al-Qaeda terrorists.

With the help of the CIA, FBI, and other national security agencies, TAO also planted hardware and software bugs and malware in electronic devices manufactured around the globe—including memory chips, hard drives, motherboards and cell phone cameras, to name just a few—to gain access to their data.

TAO also remotely implanted software bugs and malware into network firewalls and security software programs, allowing the NSA to back-door more malware into, and harvest data out of, entire computer networks or individual computers, tablets, and phones. They even had their own manufacturing facilities, producing comprised keyboards, monitors, routers, and connector cables that secretly transmitted user data. The NSA also operated mirrored cell phone base stations that acted like legitimate cell phone towers, secretly capturing entire networks of cell phone users without their knowledge.

In short, nearly every kind of commercially produced electronic device had been compromised, infected, and harnessed to TAO purposes, allowing them to hear, see, or read virtually any data-capable device on the planet without the knowledge of either the users or manufacturers. Best of all, these devices, once installed, remained in place, continuously harvesting data for future NSA use—data that Bath still had access to as well.

But that wasn't all.

The NSA and its sister agencies successfully compromised nearly every social networking site on the planet. They even penetrated the "Dark Web," where criminal and terrorist activity supposedly occurred without public knowledge or government interference.

The NSA also created hundreds of fake jihadist, anarchist, and terrorist websites, blogs, and Twitter accounts in order to gather data from unsuspecting users, identify new suspects, compromise those individuals and organizations, and plant false data into hostile commun-

ities. They operated cybercafés around the world, offering free Internet access to unsuspecting users, not unlike the CIA conduct of fake vaccination campaigns to harvest DNA data on terror suspects. Conservative politicians who supported intrusive surveillance activities never realized that certain security agencies had also created virtual “Honey Pot” websites in order to draw out the most extremist elements within Tea Party, nationalist, constitutionalist, and “prepper” circles.

Jasmine Bath had access to all of these fake portals as well.

With all of these weapons in hand, Jasmine Bath could find out just about anything about anybody, or plant credible false evidence against any person. That gave her the kind of power that state security agencies had sought since the time of the pharaohs but could only dream of.

And that’s when she quit.

Bath’s extensive experience and exposure gave her a big-picture overview of the NSA’s far-reaching capabilities and boundless resources. It also allowed her to secretly pocket a number of keys she would later use to pick her own locks at her former employer, which she would use to form her new company, CIOS. In effect, she used the NSA’s resources against them in order to exploit the NSA as her own spying agency. Who watches the watchers? Jasmine Bath does, she’d joke. She spied on the spies—or, more accurately, spied through the spies—without their even knowing it.

With her top-security clearances, impeccable credentials, and agency contacts, she acquired several legitimate NSA contracts for CIOS just hours after tendering her resignation. But the real money to be made had nothing to do with honest work. She knew her unparalleled ability to find or fake information on virtually anybody, anywhere, would pry open the deepest wallets in Washington.

She felt no guilt. She lost count of the number of “false flag” operations governments around the world—including her own—had used to start wars in the last forty years, or the lies told by politicians, bureaucrats, and advocacy groups to justify radically new domestic policy agendas. Venerable science journals and prestigious research institutions

were plagued with falsified data in the scramble for federal grants and venture-capital investments. Bath just wanted her piece of the pie.

All she lacked was the funding to launch the venture. But she didn't have long to wait. A silent investor approached her and offered her unfettered control of her company. In exchange for no-strings-attached financing came his quid pro quo of no questions asked, and in turn, she was to be available when called upon, which would be both rare and remunerative.

The silent investor's name, she would discover much later after proving herself to him, was startling. One of the true power brokers in Washington. His connections provided her with all the cover she would ever need should her formidable defenses ever fail. Owing to his pre-eminence in her corporate life, she always referred to him as The Angel.

Lake Massingir

Mozambique

1 May

Pearce scratched his beard with his free hand, wild and woolly the way he wore it back in the war, except now it was flecked with gray, just like his long black hair. The crow's-feet around his eyes had deepened.

He reached into the bucket for another bottle of Sagres Preta, a local Portuguese dark lager, and worked the black cap off with a knife edge. He'd been drinking too much for the past few months, and his gut showed it. He never drank at work, only after hours, and never got too drunk. Just numb.

Mostly.

The locals told him bloody chicken livers were the next best thing to live bait if he wanted to catch one of the razor-toothed tiger fish lurking in the deep water, a hundred silvery pounds of thrashing mouth full of vicious teeth as long as sixteen-penny nails. They told him to keep the hooks small unless he wanted to catch one of the really big monsters, but then he'd have the fight of his life on his hands—literally.

He went with the big hooks.

The choppy water chucked against the hull of the small wooden boat. His fishing line hadn't budged in hours in the gray water. Sunset wasn't too far off. If something didn't strike the bait soon, he'd start rowing back. He flexed his blistered hands. In this wind, he was in for a long haul back to shore.

He'd rejoin Johnny tomorrow, back in the park after Johnny finished up his training consultation with Sandra.

Troy took a sip of beer.

He thought about his old man a lot lately, a Vietnam vet killed by the war years after it ended. Wondered if the same fate awaited him.

Growing up, he and his dad had fought their own private little war, scratching out a living in the mountains of Wyoming. The old man would laugh at him now, for sure. Wasn't he becoming all the things he said he hated about him?

Probably for the same reasons, too.

His dad didn't talk much about the war. Didn't have to. Wore it in his brooding face, the scars in his flesh. If he had regrets, he didn't say. He just drank.

Pearce had no regrets. Was proud of his CIA combat service. In SAD/SOG, he engaged the enemy wherever he found them. Righteous kills, each one. But the War on Terror had taken too many of the people he cared about, sacrificed on the altar of political ambition. So he quit. He missed them all.

Especially Annie.

Pearce still loved his country but hated politics. He formed Pearce Systems because he could pick and choose his operations with a certain moral clarity. And it paid well. More important, deploying remotely piloted vehicles kept his friends out of harm's way even when the bullets were flying.

So what was his problem?

He was an angry man. Always had been, bar brawling all the way back in high school. Stanford took some of the edge off. Practically civilized him. Then he joined the CIA. They honed his angry edge into a fine killing blade, but under control.

Maybe he was losing control.

His anger deepened the last few months, for sure. So had the depression. Didn't make sense. His company had never been more prosperous, or done better work.

After last year, he focused Pearce Systems on the commercial uses of

drone technologies. More opportunities, more money. And little chance of his people getting killed. The South African delivery was a favor for an old friend, and probably the last military system he would ever deliver.

But bitter disappointment still ate at him. The United States had cut and run out of Iraq and Afghanistan. Now both were sliding back into chaos and radicalism. Tens of thousands of brave Americans bled and died to free those nations, but the jihadi shits they fought remained, which meant they won.

His government had broken faith; now Pearce felt like he had lost his.

Serving President Myers last year rekindled it briefly. She was the one politician he could believe in, because she put the national interest ahead of her own. He trusted Myers completely. But she resigned, falling on her sword to keep the nation safe.

He and his team proudly fought the Mexican cartels and the Iranian terrorists. He was grateful Myers secured blanket immunity for them all after it was over. But he didn't need a law degree to know that only criminals need immunity.

Heroes got medals, not pardons.

President Greyhill and Vice President Diele were in charge now. Exactly the kind of politicians he loathed.

He was done with it.

Pearce took a long pull on his beer. His line still didn't budge. He hoped Johnny was having more luck than he was in trying to land his own pretty fish.

Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park
Mozambique

Johnny Paloma pretended to stare at the solar-powered drone in Sandra Gallez's hands, but he couldn't take his eyes off of her face, confident and curious.

"Like this?" she asked. The Belgian beauty held the Silent Falcon's carbon-fiber fuselage forward with one hand while the other supported

the tail structure. The six-bladed prop spun almost silently, but the electric motor threw enough torque into the blades even at this low speed to blow her dark, curly hair away from her cheeks. Working undercover in L.A., Johnny encountered plenty of hot women in the clubs and on the beaches. He even worked a few side jobs as a bodyguard for some of the best-looking women in film. But Sandra's natural, unadorned beauty enthralled him.

"Yes, about forty-five degrees. Just like a Raven," Johnny said. He held the Nintendo-style controller in his hands. The auto launch toggle was selected. This would automatically take the Silent Falcon to an altitude of five hundred feet and circle it until it received further commands. Onboard sensors and software avoided obstructions in its flight path or possible collisions with other aircraft.

"Now?"

"Now!" He laughed.

She threw it. Despite its seven-foot wingspan, the lightweight sUAS lifted effortlessly into the bright morning sky.

This portion of the park was mostly flat grassland, populated by a smattering of acacia trees. Perfect for small drone operations, especially landings by rookies. It was elephant country. Rhinos, too.

Sandra jogged back over to Johnny, standing behind the brand-new green Land Rover Defender utility wagon. The famous World Wildlife Alliance white rhino logo was painted on the hood and the rear door. Pearce Systems fitted out the wagon with all of the necessary drone operations gear. The talented young conservationist was in charge of the WWA's most advanced research project.

"Now put the goggles on," Johnny said.

Sandra picked up the wireless Fat Shark Dominator HD video goggles and slipped them over her eyes. They were lightweight but huge, like a telephone handset attached to her face. Of course, she couldn't "see" out of them—they didn't have any lenses. The Fat Shark was a video projection system—a wearable digital theater.

"Now take this." Johnny handed her the flight controller.

"Fantastique!"

“Quite the view, eh?”

“Like a bird. I can see everything.”

Sandra’s entire field of view was filled with a perfect HD first-person video (FPV) image on the screen, which was also simultaneously recorded on a hard drive in the Rover. The forward-looking bird’s-eye POV through the spinning propeller was mesmerizing. She tapped another toggle and a real-time map of Limpopo Park appeared on her video screen. A blue dot indicated the GPS location of the Silent Falcon, and a red dot indicated the position of a recently GPS-tagged rhino, part of the last herd in Mozambique, about five kilometers away.

“Now rotate the camera,” he said. “The god’s-eye view is even cooler.” The Silent Falcon was equipped with a rotating gimbal that housed the optical and infrared cameras, along with a laser pointer.

“This is perfection, Johnny!” Sandra rotated the camera through its entire range of motion, like she’d done on simulated practice sessions before, but this was her first real-time flight with the Silent Falcon.

The WWA recently made arrangements with Mozambique’s Wildlife Department to take over rhino observation-and-research duties. The cash-strapped, ill-equipped bureaucracy had become rather lax in its conservation responsibilities in the last few years, particularly in regard to the endangered rhino population, now perilously small and reduced to just a dozen adults. The sad truth was that some of the poorly paid Mozambican park rangers were known in the past to have colluded with poachers to gather up the rhino horns so prized by wealthy Chinese for their supposed powers as aphrodisiacs and medicinals. But even the honest park police were increasingly tasked with counterterror duties, and wildlife considerations took a backseat to the new security priorities set in Maputo.

The quiet exchange of cash to the appropriate government ministers gave Sandra’s privately funded NGO the chance to get into the GLTP and begin monitoring the rhinos. Fortunately, poachers hadn’t been seen on the Mozambique side of the Limpopo in over a year, so the human threat to those magnificent animals wasn’t her main concern.

Tracking rhino migration patterns and feeding grounds was the

primary focus of Sandra's research. Her dream was to introduce more rhinos into the local population and restore the herds that once roamed freely here.

The joy in her face at that moment was palpable, and Johnny had just handed her the high-tech key to her dream. He had no idea it was possible to be this happy for someone else.

Pearce Systems' research director, Dr. Kirin Rao, selected the solar-powered sUAS because it had a fourteen-hour flight time and a nearly silent propulsion system, both features that made it a perfect platform for wildlife observation. Rao paired up the hand-launched surveillance drone to a control station and a video camera system with an editing suite installed in the cargo area of the oversize Land Rover, but the Silent Falcon could also be easily flown with the handheld controller that Pearce Systems provided. With detachable wings, the Silent Falcon could be quickly disassembled for transport, and just as easily reassembled in the field. Along with spare parts, extra batteries, a charging station, and all the other equipment needed to operate it, the solar-powered drone system was completely contained in the self-sufficient Land Rover. Dr. Rao hoped that this new unit would be the test bed for a whole range of new wildlife applications.

"Oh! Johnny! I see them!"

Johnny glanced into the back of the Land Rover. In the corner he'd stashed a small picnic basket with avocado and tomato sandwiches and a bottle of vintage Portuguese wine, and even a blanket, all courtesy of the hotel concierge. The river wasn't far from here. It was going to be a damn good day. Maybe one of the best days of his life.

China National Petroleum Headquarters

Beijing, China

1 May

Zhou Yi watched the automatic window blinds blot out the smog-choked sky. He sat in a crowded conference room on the top floor of one of the three glass-and-steel monoliths of CNPC headquarters, buildings that were as gray and uninspiring as Beijing's nearly unbreathable atmosphere. His morning runs in the park the last few days had burned his lungs and stung his eyes. Unfortunately, he was in for more of the same in here. The older executives seated around the long mahogany table lit up cigarettes after tea and coffee had been served by the waitstaff, and now the air in the conference room was clogged with acrid smoke.

As the recently appointed vice president of business affairs of the newly formed Sino-Sahara Oil Corporation, Zhou was expected to spend more time in Beijing, which technically was his birthplace but hardly his home. The grandson of an original Politburo Member and the son of a princeling on the ruling Standing Committee, Zhou was as close to royalty as a communist regime would allow. This gave him unprecedented freedoms, powers, and privileges, but equally binding responsibilities both to his family and his nation. Responsibilities that the handsome and athletic forty-year-old took quite seriously despite his famously hedonistic lifestyle.

Zhao believed he could best fulfill those responsibilities by remaining out in the field and Skyping meetings like this one rather than sitting in a sealed conference room. But when Zhao's uncle, the chairman of CNPC, summoned him back to company headquarters, Zhao was compelled to obey both as a dutiful nephew and as an up-and-coming executive in the state-owned enterprise that had made his entire family extremely rich over the last four decades—nearly three billion dollars in total.

But Zhou's meteoric rise was due primarily to his outstanding performance in the field, not his family connections. He'd just outmaneuvered a European energy consortium and brokered a lucrative new oil contract with the Azerbaijani government, still reeling from the Russian invasion nearly two years before. Zhou's latest promotion was just another rung up on the lofty ladder of his ambition. He had already climbed high, and swiftly, but he had much farther to go. He also knew that one false step from this great height would be fatal to his career, if not his life.

Zhou sat bolt upright in his leather chair and wore the standard gray business suit so common among his peers. However, his suit was an elegant English, hand-tailored affair, perfectly cut to his broad shoulders and accented with a stunning light blue Italian silk tie and pocket square. The effect was bold, even brash, but not rebellious. Zhao was completely committed to serving the cause of China, but equally committed to serving it with style.

The analyst presenting today's briefing was a member of the Ministry of State Security. Zhou knew him well. They had risen through the ranks of the MSS together, though Zhou's membership in his nation's foreign intelligence service was itself a closely guarded state secret.

Zhou's government properly understood that economic development was itself a weapon in the war against the West, and resource acquisition was key to furthering China's blistering economic growth. The Western nations still waved the flag of "free enterprise," but its most successful corporations long ago abandoned pure capitalism in exchange for securing favors with their respective ruling classes by

guaranteeing the politicians' perpetual reelection in exchange for favorable tax and regulatory policies that guaranteed the "too big to fail" corporations hegemonic dominance in their markets.

Zhou constantly marveled at America's repudiation of its own past greatness. During his university days, Zhou met more committed communists on the campuses of UCLA and Harvard than he ever had in Beijing. The running joke among the ruling class in China these days was that if you wanted your child to study socialism, send them to an American Ivy League school, but if you wanted them to learn about capitalism, send them to Shanghai. Not only was China a more capitalist nation than the United States these days, it vigorously applied the lessons of American economic development that the Americans themselves had long forgotten. In a short period of time, aggressive, mercantilist trade policies catapulted a newly independent nineteenth-century America into the ranks of the wealthiest nations of Old Europe. Now America ran half-trillion-dollar annual trade deficits, exporting both wealth and jobs as quickly as it was accumulating debt from the same nations with which it ran trade deficits, particularly mercantilist China.

America was in rapid decline, even as its few ruling elites and their "too big to jail" client corporations accumulated ever-more-egregious amounts of wealth and political power. China understood, in fact, that it was because American elites enriched themselves without responsibility to their society that the United States was in an economic and political death spiral. China believed that capitalism should serve the interests of the state. American political elites apparently believed in crony capitalism where the state served the interests of the capitalist masters. The twenty-first century would soon decide which of the two systems was most viable.

The lights dimmed and a 4K HD digital projector lit up a massive screen on the far wall. Images of various African nations, Chinese corporations, and specific industrial enterprises—particularly oil and other natural resources—flashed on the screen as the analyst spoke. No recording devices, tablets, or even paper and pencils were allowed in the room today. Today's meeting was top secret, and the security

services feared the Western intelligence agencies and their vast cyber-surveillance efforts. CNPC was a known target, particularly of the CIA. The purpose of the briefing was for policy orientation only.

“Today, there are over eight hundred Chinese corporations operating in nearly every nation on the African continent,” the analyst began. “Many of them are engaged in resource extraction to meet the growing demand of our rapidly expanding industrial and manufacturing sectors.” Icons matching African resources and Chinese industries flashed in sequence. “Every day, new resource potentials are being discovered and developed across the continent, but none so important as the recent location of new uranium and, amazingly, massive rare-earth-element deposits here in the Saharan desert, in the far reaches of Mali. In fact, Mali may have the world’s single greatest known deposit of lanthanum.”

The screen zoomed in on an image of northeastern Mali to emphasize its importance. The executives gathered around the table whispered excitedly. Lanthanum was critical for the manufacture of batteries. Hybrid cars like the Toyota Prius required more than ten kilograms of the mineral per vehicle, and more hybrids were being brought to the market every day. China itself was now the world’s largest car market, and hybrids were key to the expansion of that market. The startling new REE discovery in Mali was obviously the reason why this top secret emergency meeting had been called.

“As you are all well aware, China is the world’s largest producer of rare earth elements, giving us nearly monopolistic control over their use. This allows us to minimize their costs for ourselves but also deny their use to our biggest competitors.” From an earlier briefing, Zhou knew that the seventeen chemical elements on the periodic table known as REEs weren’t, technically, “rare” so much as widely dispersed throughout the earth’s crust—but seldom in harvestable amounts. Those elements were critical in other key new technological products like wind turbines, lasers, and cell phones. China was the country with the greatest concentration of REE deposits and was currently mining between 80 and 90 percent of all REEs today. That near monopoly provided China

with a significant competitive advantage it had no intention of relinquishing. That competitive advantage was one of the reasons why Los Angeles Metro had purchased its first all-electric buses from the Chinese corporation BYD.

“Fortunately,” the analyst continued, “Mali has recently signed new contracts with the Sino-Sahara Oil Corporation, which includes provisions for all other forms of underground resource acquisition. Unfortunately, Mali, like most other African nations, might soon be tempted to reconsider the terms of the very generous contracts we have signed with them. They also have an indigenous population problem in the area.”

“You mean the Tuaregs,” Zhao said. Prior to his new appointment, Zhao had thrown himself into research into the Sahara region. The vast desert occupied significant portions of Mali, Algeria, Niger, and Libya, which also happened to be the most important resource states in the area. Nomadic Tuareg warrior clans had freely roamed the vast Sahara since the fifth century before Christ.

“The Mali government has already begun operations to nullify the Tuareg problem,” the analyst said. “They are fractured and disorganized.”

“Are you referring to the Africans or the Tuaregs?” one of the executives blurted out. The room exploded with laughter. Even the stoic chairman grinned.

“The Tuaregs have been restless for quite some time,” Zhao interrupted. “Are you confident the government in Bamako is on top of this?”

The analyst smiled. “I believe the term *Tuareg* in Arabic means ‘abandoned by God.’ So, yes, unless God shows up, President Kouyaté should be able to quell them soon enough.”

“You just can’t trust a damn African,” a voice in the dark muttered. It was the vice president of one of the civil engineering firms building new highways in the rapidly expanding northern corridor. Murmurs rumbled around the table as graying heads nodded in agreement. “The Kenyans canceled one of our contracts for the new highway expansion

project between Mombasa and Nairobi last week. They claimed there were environmental concerns, but all they really were concerned about was more money.” The middle-aged executive slowly rubbed his open palm for emphasis.

Zhao knew what the engineer said was true, but it was only a small piece of the picture. China’s decades-old policy of “noninterference” in the domestic affairs of other nations meant his government would gladly do business with the tyrants and despots that the West shunned on humanitarian grounds. Chinese government and business officials also freely issued “soft” development funds and loans—financial transactions unencumbered by human rights provisions or even basic accounting principles. These aid packages were giant pots of money from which greedy, cruel African elites could dip freely for their personal use so long as Chinese interests were also served in the process.

Chinese firms were also quick to provide arms, ammunition, and other contraband items denied to dictatorial regimes by the moralizing Western powers. Security treaties and Chinese military bases soon followed. By such means, China swiftly gained lucrative footholds across the continent.

But the other reality, Zhao knew, was that Chinese firms wreaked terrible environmental damage all over Africa in recent years—just as they had in their own country for decades. Over eight million acres of arable Chinese land were now so polluted they could never be used for food production. Arable land had decreased in China even as industrialization exploded. Africa, on the other hand, possessed the world’s largest supply of arable land and could amply serve as China’s new food basket if exploited properly.

Chinese companies also imported their own labor, even low-skilled positions, and dominated local economies. They were as rapacious and colonizing as the Great Powers had been in the nineteenth century, lacking only the missionary zeal of “the white man’s burden” to justify their efforts. The Chinese government no longer had any vested interest in spreading the gospel of communism, as it once had in the sixties—such quaint sentiments were bad for business. Freshly minted Third

World communist revolutionaries tended to nationalize key industries, and Chinese businessmen held no interest in that. Neither did Zhao. He fully appreciated the Africans' concerns, but he didn't care about them. Like his own government, Zhao was a supreme pragmatist. Economic development always came at a high price, and every great nation had to pay it at one time or another. If Africa wanted to develop with China's help, Zhao reasoned, it should have to do so on China's terms.

The bottom line for African governments, even the despotic ones, was that they were beginning to count the true costs of doing business with a predatory partner like China and found the transactions wanting. They were changing up the rules of the Chinese game with the help of the opportunistic West. It was a worrying proposition for the Politburo. The general secretary himself had visited the African continent on his first official overseas tour abroad to underscore China's interest in the region, and its concerns.

"Thank you for the excellent presentation, Mr. Li," the chairman said as the lights went up. The MSS analyst bowed gratefully and took his seat. The chairman continued. "The Standing Committee has decided to draw a line in the sand in Mali. We want to create a new model of *secure* cooperation and development for our other African partners. The future of China depends upon it. That is why I am calling upon the resolute Mr. Zhao Yi to represent us in the Malian venture." The chairman waved a hand at his nephew, who stood, beaming with confidence. All eyes turned to him.

"Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I won't let China down." He bowed respectfully to his uncle, then the room.

The chairman himself led the others in a round of applause.