



 TOM CLANCY'S

SPLINTER CELL

FIREWALL

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JAMES SWALLOW

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BY JAMES SWALLOW

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And if you like the sample, you'll love the book...

Legendary agent Sam Fisher teams up with a new NSA recruit – his own daughter – to save the world in this gripping new thriller from the renowned Tom Clancy’s Splinter Cell® videogame universe.

Veteran Fourth Echelon agent Sam Fisher has a new mission recruiting and training the next generation of Splinter Cell operatives for the NSA’s covert action division, including his daughter Sarah. But when a lethal assassin from Fisher’s past returns from the dead on a mission of murder, father and daughter are thrust into a race against time as a sinister threat to global security is revealed. A dangerous cyberwarfare technology known as Gordian Sword – capable of crashing airliners, destroying computer networks and plunging entire cities into darkness – is being auctioned off to whichever rogue state makes the highest bid. Sam and Sarah must call on their very singular set of skills to neutralize Gordian Sword and stop the weapon falling into the wrong hands – at any cost...

ONE

Gunterfabrik – Kreuzberg – Berlin

It took four days for them to narrow the search.

Four cold days on the streets of a stone-gray city where the spring seemed unable to take hold, the season still warring with the last overcast remains of a winter unwilling to give ground.

They got close to the target on the second night, tracking a hand-off in the U-Bahn at Alexanderplatz, but a wild scramble that saw them changing trains and sprinting down rain-slick platforms netted nothing but irritation. Their quarry – designated with the codename *Treble* – avoided the team with an ease that bordered on insulting.

Later, Lynx had earned hard looks when she suggested that the target had deliberately drawn them in to get the measure of the operatives sent to capture him.

Her companions reacted predictably. Gator, the stocky corn-fed ex-Ranger, took it as a personal failure on his part and spent hours staring into his coffee and squaring away

his kit to hide his frustration. Buzzard, the wiry New Yorker forever pent up with nervous energy, played with his knife and pored over a map of the city. Neither man seemed to sleep that much, both always awake when Lynx rose each morning, in their dingy safe house off Karl-Marx-Strasse.

She wasn't like them. Of average build, with dark brown shoulder-length hair, she could have blended into any crowd of tourists without making a ripple. But if you gave her a second look, meeting those sharp green eyes, you might have sensed something of the hard focus she kept hidden.

The others had been career military before their recruitment, although Buzzard was circumspect about what branch. Lynx guessed Navy, but he wouldn't confirm or deny, and when he posed the question to her, she was equally tight-lipped. Gator decided she was former police, and she allowed him to believe that. The truth was more complex.

The secrecy – even from each other – was part of the program. Sometimes active missions meant working with people you knew next to nothing about, finding a way to mesh together into an operable unit at short notice. Hence the codenames and the lack of personal small talk. The people in charge wanted this op to be about the takedown, not a team-building exercise for agents in the field.

Lynx was fine with that. Having seen Gator and Buzzard out in the world over the past few days, she had her doubts that either man had the right mindset for collaboration.

Still, they managed to track Treble to his staging area, a victory of sorts. Lynx studied the derelict building across the street, through the windshield of their rented VW Golf, the brutalist five-story block of concrete and graffiti-covered glass

rising behind a corrugated metal fence.

Against the whirl of fine rain falling from a low night sky, the place had an unlovely look to it, the typical silhouette of utilitarian East German architecture. The sign over the entrance was still visible despite decades of decay. The place had been a textile factory turning out sports kits for kids playing soccer inside the Deutsche Demokratische Republik, but that had been before the fall of the Berlin Wall and *Die Wende*, what the Germans called *the turning point*.

Lynx looked around, checking her sector for traffic, finding nothing. This whole area on the bank of the river Spree had been just inside the wall in the bad old days of the Cold War, and you could see the legacy of it in the buildings. Like a lot of Berlin's riverside real estate, the fate of the factory would be to get gobbled up by some property developer, then razed to the ground so some new modernist construction could rise in its place. Or maybe they would keep the exterior intact, playing on its Communist-era retro chic. She wondered what the DDR stalwarts of the past would make of that. For her, those people and that time were ancient history, something that only existed in movies and documentaries.

"No visual," drawled Gator, down low in the passenger seat with a pair of low-light goggles held to his face. He peered at the factory's lightless windows. "Treble could be masking his signature."

"He's smart," offered Buzzard, leaning forward in the VW's backseat. He carefully screwed a long sound suppressor into the barrel of a Glock 17 pistol, before loading it with a magazine of blue-tipped bullets.

"More than you know," noted Lynx. "He practically wrote

the book on this.”

“You a fan?” Gator gave a derisive snort and a pointed look, then went on. “There’s only one of him. All you gotta do is make sure you don’t repeat the screw-up at the subway.”

“Don’t put that on me,” she said. “You’re the one that spooked him.”

“And you’re the one supposed to mark him.” Gator checked his own weapon, before stuffing it into his overcoat.

“He got past us all,” Lynx snapped. “Like I said, he’s top tier.”

Buzzard drummed his fingers on the doorframe. “So, we do this different,” he said. “The mistake was leaving him a way out at the station. This time, we split up, cut off his escape routes.”

Lynx shook her head. “Wrong. We need to come at Treble in force. It’s the only shot we have at taking him down. Remember the briefing.” The thin document that operational command had given them talked in no uncertain terms about their target’s superlative skillset, easily the equal of the best the Spetsnaz, SAS, or SEALs had to offer.

“I got my force multiplier right here.” Gator smirked and patted his gun.

Lynx pulled a face, but clearly the other two had already made up their minds, and she knew it would be a waste of her time trying to bring them around. Buzzard elected to go up the drainpipe on the west side of the factory and work his way down from the roof, while Gator would go in from the riverside. That left Lynx with the front entrance. Her scowl deepened.

Buzzard pulled up the sleeve of his jacket to reveal a

device that resembled a smartphone clipped to the inside of his forearm. The screen blinked on, and he tapped it experimentally. “All right. Synchronize OPSATs.”

“Copy.” Lynx and Gator had identical tech of their own, part of a clandestine network that gave near-instantaneous communication to the chair-warmers back at command. The Operational Satellite Uplink, to give it its full name, could be slaved to a strategic mission interface for real-time tactical data exchange, but for the duration of this action, most of those functions were inactive.

The three operatives keyed in their identity codes, and their OPSATs vibrated against their skin. Next, Buzzard handed out the last items of their gear: flexible ballistic cloth facemasks and low-light monocles that fitted over one eye. Suitably equipped, with hoods pulled up over their heads, the trio became faceless.

Lynx checked her pistol one last time as Gator slipped into the rain, then she followed him out, taking care to close the door quietly. Buzzard was a step behind, a gray shape in the steady downpour.

“*Comms check.*” Gator’s gruff tones sounded in Lynx’s ear, relayed through a tiny radio bead inside her earlobe.

“Lynx,” she replied, her voice picked up by a dermal microphone taped to her throat.

“*Buzzard.*” The other man followed protocol, and from the corner of her eye, Lynx saw him dash across the empty street and vanish around a wall.

“*Good copy.*” At the other end of the block, Gator hesitated and threw a look in Lynx’s direction. Illuminated by the dull glow of a streetlight, he gave her the sketch of a salute and

melted into the shadows.

Lynx got to the front entrance in quick steps, taking care to avoid the deep puddles where the rain collected. Drawing her weapon, she squeezed through a narrow gap in two sheets of metal fencing. A truck rumbled past, headlights briefly throwing a wash of white over the building's tumbledown façade, and she froze, letting it pass before moving on.

She checked the edges of the door and found no sign of sensors or booby-traps. That meant Treble had either neglected to place any – unlikely, given what she knew about him – or that he'd placed them so well she couldn't see them on the first pass.

Lynx flicked down her low-light monocle and examined the entryway more closely. As she did, she heard a grunt from Buzzard.

"Ascending."

"Copy," replied Gator. *"At the rear door. Tripwire. Made safe."*

As he spoke, Lynx caught sight of the same thing. A nearly invisible length of line at ankle height had been placed inside the entrance vestibule, and she followed it to a primed nine-banger stun grenade, cleverly hidden under some debris.

"Same here," she whispered. Lynx chose to leave the trap in place and stepped over it with a gymnast's ease.

She moved slowly, steadily, spreading her weight with each footfall. A narrow and tall atrium, the entrance had a central staircase choked with rubble and broken furniture. High above, a cracked skylight allowed runnels of rain to fall the distance and spatter against the tiled floor.

Lynx stayed low, moving from cover to cover, pausing every few moments to survey her surroundings. The view through

the monocle cast everything in fuzzy shades of sea-green and corpse-white, as if she was at the bottom of a lake.

She held her breath. In the distance, somewhere in the direction of Engelbecken Park, police sirens wailed, then grew faint.

In short order, Lynx moved from room to room, looking for anything that indicated Treble's presence, coming up empty. "Ground floor, no contact," she announced.

"Basement, no contact," said Gator. "Proceeding to first floor."

"Roof, no contact." Buzzard seemed out of breath, then he corrected himself. "I mean, I found a spotter perch up here but no spotter." He sighed. "Descending to fifth."

"Copy." Lynx considered that for a moment. Had Treble been up there, watching them before they made entry? She sucked in a breath of musty air, and then set off, making for the stairwell at the end of the corridor. "Proceeding to second floor."

•••

Buzzard climbed into the building through a gap that had once held a skylight. The swollen and cracked wood took his weight, and he dropped into a cat-footed landing on damp, mold-blackened carpet. The office space he descended into was empty, everything not nailed down long gone, leaving only bare walls covered in dirt and graffiti tags layers deep. The concrete floor beneath the rancid carpet meant no creaking floorboards to betray his movements. The only sound was the rain.

Or was it?

Buzzard turned his head in the direction of a ghost of a noise. He caught an electronic mutter, like the sound of static

from a poorly tuned radio. It was frustratingly indistinct, but he didn't dare ignore it. The noise was a sign of life, and that meant they were right about Treble hiding out here.

Keeping to the shadows, Buzzard crept forward, out of the office and on to a long landing. More ruined flooring squeaked under his boots, the edges of the mildewed carpet tiles curling up like decayed flower petals. He fixed his sights on the source of the sound, bringing up his pistol, resting his finger on the trigger.

Through his low-light monocle, he spotted a knife edge of illumination emerging from beneath a half-closed door a few meters away. The sound came again, clearer this time. The burble of a voice on the other end of a phone.

So Treble was in there, talking to someone. That meant he would be distracted. Vulnerable.

Buzzard hesitated, tapping his throat mike three times, the code for *target sighted*.

"Can you confirm?" Lynx whispered in his earpiece.

He frowned. The only way he could do that was to kick open the door and put a round in Treble's chest. Buzzard didn't reply. He had to be quick and quiet, or the element of surprise would be lost.

He was within arm's reach of the half-open door when his movement triggered the proximity sensor of a device hidden under a fold of rotted carpet. In a fizzing burst, the concealed shocker released the full stun charge stored in its dense battery core, hitting the operative with punishing force.

Buzzard's muscles locked in agony, and he toppled forward like a felled tree. His body sang with pain, as if he had been dipped in fire. His shuddering hands clutched at the air and

his mouth locked open.

He heard Gator in his ear, calling for an update, but all Buzzard could do was lie in a trembling heap and scream silently as electricity shot through him.

•••

“Buzzard, respond?” Gator hesitated at the edge of the first-floor atrium, waiting for a reply that didn’t come. “Buzzard, key your mike if you can.”

“*You think Treble got him?*” Lynx ventured the question on both of their minds.

“Maybe.” Gator released a breath. “I’ll draw him out.”

“*Bad idea.*”

“Didn’t ask your opinion.” He brought the Glock close to his chest and picked a direction, moving down the corridor to his right.

The floor opened up into a grid of office cubicles with tumbledown wooden partitions. The space had high ceilings deep with shadows and Gator scanned for movement among the hanging pipework and broken ducting. Opportunistic thieves had been through here in the past, ripping up the walls and the flooring for the building’s copper wiring. The drifts of debris everywhere made it hard to move without making noise, and Gator strained to listen over the constant ticking of the rain on the grime-coated windows.

He would have been hard pressed to put it into words, but Gator had *an inkling*. Some sixth sense trained into him by his drill instructors at Ranger School, warning him he wasn’t alone. Treble was in here with him, he could *feel* it, like an itch between his shoulders.

And that meant a trap, waiting for him to put the wrong

foot forward. His lip curled. That had to be what Buzzard had run into, some fake-out set by their target to thin the ranks of his hunters.

A voice in the back of Gator's head asked him if maybe Lynx had been right all along. If Treble wanted to pick them off one by one, they had given the man exactly what he wanted.

Re-evaluating his situation, Gator started a slow retreat, moving back the way he had come, as another truck raced past down on the street. The vehicle's headlights threw a fan of light through the windows, and for a moment the jumping shadows took on the shape of a man.

Gator fired without thinking, putting two rounds up into the dark figure. The Glock's stifled cough echoed through the open space, and spent brass pinged off the wooden partitions, but he hit nothing.

The shadow was just that, a hazy black form that melted away as the truck carried on its journey. Gator cursed inwardly, angry at himself for letting his eagerness get in the way.

His patience waned, and he decided to even the odds. The Ranger felt for the cylindrical shape of a flashbang grenade clipped to the inside of his jacket. If Treble *was* in the room, it was the best way to force him into the open.

He fumbled for the grenade as a low whistle sounded from above him. Gator twisted, spinning around to bring up the gun, and he had the impression of a figure suspended in the gloom, dangling from one of the pipes.

Before he could get off a shot, the man was on him, gravity bringing them together with enough force to put the thickset Ranger down on the floor.

Gator fought to keep control of his pistol, but his assailant

snaked a wiry, muscular arm around his neck and pulled him in close. Unable to call out a warning to Lynx, his air choked off, Gator's vision began to fog as the sleeper hold took effect.

He jerked the Glock's trigger and the shot went wild, pinging off the floor. He had the dim impression of a black-clad stalker, of rasping breath sounding near his ear. In a last-ditch attempt to break free, Gator kicked and punched, feeling his blows hit body armor.

Blood roaring in his ears, Gator desperately tried to fight back as the color bled out of his world and the shadows closed in. He pulled the flashbang's pin in a last act of defiance – but as the cylinder rolled away from him across the floor, he had already lost consciousness.

•••

Lynx heard the stun grenade go off on the floor below her, and saw the brief flash of oxide-white light through cracks in the concrete.

In the wake of the sound-shock, she caught the crunch of booted feet moving away, and burst into motion, tracking them.

He took down Gator.

She didn't question the thought, overlooking the sharp realization that she was now the last hunter standing. Her target was heading to the northeast corner of the building, in the direction of the river. There was a bridge that way, she remembered, and if he could get outside and across to the other bank, Treble would vanish. The city turned into a warren over there, and alone, she had no chance of tagging him.

If she didn't stop him here inside the factory, he'd be as good as gone.

A few meters away, a rough-edged hole in the floor where part of the structure had collapsed formed a pool of blackness leading down to the level below. Lynx made her choice without hesitating, dropping into a sliding motion that took her over the edge and into the dark.

It was a risky ploy, dropping into the unknown, but she took the chance that she wouldn't fall feet-first on to a pile of rusted rebar or another booby-trap. The drop was longer than she expected, and Lynx landed off-kilter, stumbling as she tried to recover her balance.

In the pitch dark she fumbled to adjust her low-light monocle. Everything through her right eye's vision showed green and white. Every support pillar or fallen wall stood out, complicating her sight picture.

Treble could not have missed her entrance, and from somewhere across the open space, Lynx heard a faint click and then a high-pitched whine, like a camera flash charging.

She fired in the direction of the noise, not so much to score a hit, but more to force a reaction. Bullets sparked off the wall, and a piece of the shadows broke off and dove behind cover.

There!

Finding her momentum again, Lynx pulled herself over one of the low partitions, half-rolling, half-diving, gun close in and ready. She landed sure-footed this time, firing another two rounds into the space where Treble had gone. But he'd faded away.

She pivoted on her heel, instinct screaming at her to watch her back.

Treble had set up the three operatives to draw them close at Alexanderplatz and he had done it again. The target intuited

how the team's dynamic operated and turned that against them. *Isolate and neutralize.* Good tactics.

Lynx evaded the short, hard punch that came straight at her, flinching away, but not fast enough to get off cleanly. Treble's gloved knuckles kissed her cheekbone with a glancing hit that took her monocle with it, ripping the device from her masked face.

She ducked low, bringing up her gun, but Treble slammed the heel of his hand into her solar plexus, blowing the air out of her lungs in a pained rush. Lynx staggered back a step, and Treble's shadowy form kept coming, out of the dark and into the half-light. He reached out and snagged her wrist, bending it the wrong way. She hissed in pain and lost her grip on the Glock.

The gun fell at her feet, but Lynx had no time to think about it. Treble moved on her, firing rapid blows out of the gloom that she deflected more by the sound than by seeing them.

She tried to extend the distance, but he wouldn't let her, keeping up the pressure, forcing her to dance to his tune.

Anger flared, and Lynx used it to fuel her, feinting right, avoiding a chopping blow aimed at her throat. She pushed in closer, moving inside Treble's guard, and landed return blows on his belly, chest, and throat.

Her attacker growled and lost a step as he soaked up the hits, passing through a shaft of moonlight from a broken window. Lynx glimpsed a craggy, unshaven face hidden behind insect-like night-vision goggles, and a loose coat over matte black tactical gear.

She kept up the momentum, using her edge in speed and

agility. Treble was easily twice her mass, and one well-placed blow from him could put her down hard. But each hit she sent his way was guesswork and instinct. Fighting in the dimness was like boxing smoke, and she couldn't be sure if she could hold her own.

“Lynx...?” Buzzard’s voice echoed behind her, and she looked without thinking, snared by the distraction. “You there?”

The wiry young man stood in the passage, groggy and slow, supporting himself with one hand up on the doorjamb. In the weak light, he looked pale and unsteady. Whatever Treble had used to put him down, he felt the effects of it.

The target made a *tsk* noise under his breath and moved like lightning. He snatched the seam of Lynx’s hoodie and yanked her off balance, pulling her to him. Pressing her back to his chest, he put one arm at her throat and started the slow business of choking her out.

Part of Lynx realized that Treble had been taking his time with her in the exchange of blows, playing it out. At the same time, he had drawn a gun with his other hand, bringing it to bear on Buzzard.

Lynx tried to shout a warning, but a strangled gasp emerged from her lips.

Treble’s silenced pistol chugged, and a blue spark burst on Buzzard’s chest. He gave a cry and fell out of sight.

The instinctive action for Lynx would have been to wrestle the man’s hand away from her neck, to take a desperate gulp of air before she blacked out – but she fought down the animal panic rising inside her and felt for her only remaining weapon.

Her fingers found the black polymer combat knife tucked

into a sheath-pocket at her thigh and pulled it free, twisting it around in her grip. Her blood thundering in her ears, Lynx put her energy into forcing the blade up and back, until the point pushed into the soft flesh of Treble's throat.

She applied steady pressure against his Adam's apple, and felt her opponent stiffen. The slightest motion of her hand would open his throat to the air.

Treble's grip slackened and Lynx fought the urge to stumble away and suck in air. She kept the knife in place, making it clear where the balance of this fight now lay.

Treble slowly put away his gun and spoke in a low voice full of rough edges.

"OK," he allowed, then pressed a microphone tab at his neck and repeated the same word three times. "*Endex. Endex. Endex.*"

TWO

Gunterfabrik – Kreuzberg – Berlin

“All right, you heard the man. This training exercise is concluded.”

Anna Grímsdóttir removed the wireless headset she had been using to monitor the radio channel, stepping back from the bank of surveillance monitors inside the rear of the unmarked Renault truck. Her gaze raked over the gang of field technicians waiting for her word, each one carrying gear with which to sanitize the site. None of them would move without her order.

Grim – as most of her colleagues knew her – instilled that sort of obedience in her subordinates. Firm, no-nonsense and pragmatic, the tall, henna-haired woman’s official title was “technical operations officer”, a deliberately vague euphemism that could cover a multitude of clandestine works. In the real world, that translated into mission command for one of the best kept secrets on the planet – Fourth Echelon, a covert anti-terror and counter-intelligence unit that lived in the deep black.

“I want this location cleaned up inside of fifteen minutes,” Grim told the techs. “Move.”

The team – each one dressed in deliberately nondescript street clothing – scrambled to obey. Emerging from the rear of the truck, they made their way to the derelict Gunterfabrik building, while Grim followed on behind at a more leisurely pace, checking up and down the street with a clinical, experienced eye.

No police, no watchers. All clear... For now.

She didn't need to tell the techs that they were operating in-country without the blessing of the German government or their intelligence services. If the Bundesnachrichtendienst – the BND – knew that a Fourth Echelon Splinter Cell deployment was happening right in their backyard, their reaction would be, to put it mildly, *unpleasant*. Thus, it was vital to pick up after themselves and leave no traces that they were ever here. The Splinter Cells were shadows, the knife in the dark that no one saw coming.

That's practically the 4E motto, Grim thought, with a rare smile.

This hunt-and-trap mission was part evaluation, part live-fire exercise. The added wrinkle of working in a non-permissive environment was one more test for Grim's latest batch of recruits from the Farm, the training facility for the Central Intelligence Agency and other elements of America's covert apparatus.

Gator, Lynx, and Buzzard were the only three potentials who had made the cut for Fourth Echelon's punishing training regimen, and all three were potentially looking at a failing grade.

...

Grim entered the factory through the front door, passing one of the techs at work making a tripwire safe, and found the night's senior instructor waiting for her in the atrium. He rubbed at a sore spot on his throat, his expression thoughtful.

"Sam." She gave him a nod.

"Grim." Sam Fisher returned the gesture, removing the distinctive tri-focal vision goggles from atop his forehead and stowing them in his coat. "Enjoy the show?"

"You know me," she replied. "I'm always watching."

Grim nodded to where another tech recovered one of dozens of wireless camera pods that had been secreted inside the Gunterfabrik building for the purpose of monitoring the night's events.

"No doubt," allowed Fisher, the briefest flicker of a wry smile crossing his face, then vanishing.

Tall, but not overly so, beneath the big coat Fisher had a spare, lean build that men half his age would have killed for. With a closely cut beard and short hair turning from black to gunmetal, he could have been anything from fifty to sixty years old. Hard eyes and the lines around them told the tale of a life lived in the fight, and a will to keep up the contest until the bitter end.

A former Navy SEAL before he became a CIA paramilitary officer, Fisher had been one of the first recruits in the early Aughts to what would eventually become Fourth Echelon. In that time, he had forged a reputation that few knew of, but all who did respected. In many ways, Grim reflected, he set the benchmark for every Splinter Cell operative who had followed in his wake. It was a testament to Fisher's tenacity

and resilience that the work hadn't yet put him in the ground.

"So?" She made a circling gesture with one hand. "Do you have any good news for me?"

"I'm always a ray of sunshine, Grim."

"Right." She drew out the word. As one of the most experienced operators in the field, Fisher's evaluation of the trainees could make or break them. A single word from him would see a recruit out, and he had failed more potential new agents than any other instructor.

But high standards were what made Fourth Echelon an exemplary unit. Existing beyond oversight of all but the President of the United States, the group drew intelligence and resources from the top tier of the National Security Agency, operating in the espionage world's most rarified air. It might have been a cliché, but the Splinter Cells really were the best of the best at what they did.

"The skinny kid," began Fisher, nodding toward Buzzard, who was being helped to his feet by a medic. "Showed some grit, shaking off a shocker like that. But he still needs some seasoning."

Grim sighed and called out to the younger man. "Rybicki, you're a fail for this evaluation." Buzzard couldn't manage any more response than a shaky nod of the head, almost grateful for the excuse. The shock-tipped training round Fisher had put in his chest had robbed him of his voice.

Gator – whose real name was Michaels – passed them by as two more techs carried out his unconscious form between them. Grim didn't have to ask about that one. When the moment came, his hesitation had cost him dearly. The Ranger would join Rybicki on the next transport back to the States.

Fisher gave a shrug and said nothing.

The two young men would never know exactly who or what they had been auditioning for. The terms “Fourth Echelon” and “Splinter Cell” had not been uttered in the presence of those trainees. They’d rotate back to their units with a story they could never tell, about a shady recruiter who had pulled them off the line one day for a training mission in Germany that nobody could explain.

The only member of the trio still able to stand under their own power was Lynx, but even so she limped visibly as she came into the atrium, one hand pressed to her masked face, and dark hair spilling out over her neck. The blade she’d managed to put to Fisher’s throat was nowhere to be seen.

“What about her?” Grim eyed him. “She almost cut you a new smile, Sam.”

“Quick,” admitted Fisher. “Good instincts. Definitely the best of the three.” He sighed. “Green light.”

Grim raised an eyebrow. “You’re passing her?”

“You think I’m wrong?”

“No. In fact, I’m in full agreement with you, it’s just rare to see it.” Grim folded her arms. “Two fails, one pass. Not getting soft in your old age, are you?”

“You know better than that.”

Grim frowned. “I do. But it’s important I make sure your evaluation is on point. Especially in this case.” She raised her hand and beckoned Lynx over to them.

Fisher’s eyes narrowed. “What’s that supposed to mean?” He knew Grim well enough to sense when she was hiding something.

“Don’t get mad,” she said. “And believe me when I tell you,

I'm doing this for the best of the agency." As Lynx warily approached, Grim gestured at the younger woman's face. "Take off your mask, please."

Lynx reluctantly peeled away the covering, revealing herself in full for the first time. She managed an awkward smile in Fisher's direction.

"Hey, Dad," she said.

"Sarah." Fisher froze, and his gaze turned flinty. There was a new contusion on his daughter's face that he had given her only moments ago, unaware of the fact that the woman who came closest to killing him in the mock engagement was his only child. "What the hell is this?"

"This is Trainee Lynx, aka Sarah Burns, aka Sarah Fisher." Grim stood her ground, waiting for the storm she knew would come. "Now you know why I insisted on anonymizing the recruit data for this exercise."

"Clear the room." Fisher addressed the order to the techs who were still at work in the atrium, and when they hesitated, looking to Grim for confirmation, he let out a growl. "Did I stutter?"

The techs departed in short order without stopping to pick up their gear, leaving Grim, Sam, and Sarah in the echoing, rain-damp space. Fisher's daughter sighed and drew a breath. "Dad, will you let me explain?"

"Wait your turn." Fisher turned on Grim. "You put her in a live-fire exercise. You kept this from me? What were you thinking?" He didn't raise his voice. His cold and stony annoyance was enough.

"I can't allow good potential to go to waste, Sam," replied Grim.

“Thought those fight moves looked familiar,” Fisher muttered, shooting Sarah another look. “I taught you that, after...” He trailed off.

After she was kidnapped, Grim thought, twice in as many years. Despite her father’s attempts to isolate Sarah from the harsh realities of his clandestine career, her life had been marred by incidents when his dark world impinged on her civilian existence.

Fisher reframed his thoughts. “When I agreed Sarah could take a role with Fourth Echelon, I wanted her to be an *analyst*.” He put hard emphasis on the word.

“You might have agreed to that,” Sarah said quietly. “I didn’t. I make my own choices.” Before her father could respond, she continued. “Kicks and punches aren’t the only thing you taught me, Dad. I learned responsibility. I learned about duty. You taught me to see things as they are, and not to be afraid of them.”

Fisher scowled. “I wanted to keep you safe!”

“Like I said, my choice.” Sarah met her father’s gaze.

Fisher turned back to Grim. “If I had known she—”

“If you had known Lynx was Sarah, you wouldn’t have treated her impartially,” Grim spoke over him, her voice like a whip-crack. “I concealed her identity from you so you would test her like Michaels and Rybicki, and push her as hard as she needed to go.” She opened her hands. “And you did just give her a passing grade.”

“He did?” Despite her fatigue, Sarah’s eyes lit up.

“Rescinded,” said Fisher. “Red light.”

“Too late for that,” Grim said firmly. “Sarah’s in the top percentile of our evaluation. She’s excelled in all areas.”

“In simulations,” he insisted.

Grim allowed that. “True. But she was the only one of the trainees who came close enough to put a mark on you. Tell me, Sam, how many times has that happened?”

Fisher said nothing, his lips compressing into a thin line.

Grim relented. “I’m sorry I didn’t give you the whole picture. But Sarah has the skills we need. And I defy you to tell me otherwise.”

Fisher’s silence lengthened. He had no response to Grim’s statement because he knew it was true. Sarah wasn’t a callow, bookish student anymore, she was a capable young woman, and she clearly had the innate instincts perfect for a covert operative. Finally, he spoke again. “You sure about this, kid?”

“I want to do more,” Sarah saw an opening and pounced on it. “Like you and Uncle Vic did. I can make a difference.”

“We’re not like Vic’s organization,” Fisher told her. Sam’s old friend and Sarah’s ersatz “Uncle” Victor Coste ran Paladin Nine Security, a private military contractor that handled everything from high-end bodyguard duties to kidnap and recovery operations. “What we do makes that PNC stuff look like the bush league.”

Sarah hesitated, and for a second Grim thought she saw her wavering. Then Fisher’s daughter straightened. “Your instinct is to protect me, and I love you for that. You’re not sure I can do this, I get it. But there’s only one way to find out.”

Fisher gave a shake of the head and cast a glance in Grim’s direction. “You like being right, don’t you?”

“No doubt,” she admitted.

“Then don’t make me regret this.” It was as close to an admission of acceptance as Sam Fisher would ever give, and

Grim decided not to push it any further.

He would come around. And if he didn't... He'd have to live with it. Grim's directive was to keep Fourth Echelon running at maximum efficiency, not to keep Sam Fisher happy.

Drew, one of the techs, came back into the atrium brandishing an encrypted satellite-comm handset. "Call from the bird," he explained. "It's urgent."

Grim took the handset and pressed it to her ear. "Go for Grímsdóttir."

"Ma'am, this is Kade. What's your status there?" Lea Kade served as one of the operational crew aboard the C-147B Paladin, Fourth Echelon's mobile airborne mission hub. Currently, the black jet was parked in a secluded hangar, several kilometers away at Ramstein Air Force Base. The Paladin's crew were looped in on the exercise, along with Grim and her cadre of technicians.

"We're wrapping up. Is there a problem?"

"We need you and Treble back here ASAP," Kade replied. *"We have a priority, eyes-only communicate for the attention of you both."*

Grim frowned, and Fisher caught the look in her eye. He knew it of old: something was up.

"Origin?" Grim asked the question, but she already knew the answer.

"The Black Box," said Kade, and left it at that. The nickname had only one meaning in this context – the priority message had come directly from the NSA's headquarters at Fort Meade in Maryland.

THREE

GreenSea Incorporated – Canary Wharf – London

The pen spun around in Charlie Cole's fingers, gaining speed until it became a silver blur.

"You know the problem with me, Jan," he said to the air, as he typed one-handed on the illuminated keyboard in front of him. "There's too much gray hat in me. I can't stay in my lane."

The pen reached escape velocity and flew out of his grip, clattering across his desk and into the shadows, but Charlie paid it no heed. In the darkened office, the only light came from the skyline of glassy skyscrapers surrounding the building and the soft glow of a computer screen. On the display, endless lines of blue-on-black text scrolled past as Charlie ventured deeper and deeper into layers of secured data.

He leaned in, both hands on the keyboard, and kept talking. "Would I have even spotted this if you hadn't brought it to me? Yeah, probably. I mean, I'm always sticking my nose where it doesn't belong." He drummed out another command string without taking a breath. "I'm the kid who keeps pestering the

magician to explain the tricks, right? Peek behind the curtain, look in the box. That's always my instinct."

Charlie turned in his chair, toward a smartphone sitting on pile of books nearby, its screen blinking to show an open line. Jan had still not picked up, and that wasn't like her, not at all. Three rings and she answered, every single call. This was the first time that Charlie had ever spoken to her voicemail, and he found it hard to stop.

"Listen," he said, his tone turning serious. "I think this is something bad, even worse than you said. There's more here than some routing errors and weird email trails. I have to take this up the line to Borden." He threw up his hands as if Jan stood in the room with him, anticipating her reaction. "I know, I know, like you always say, the guy's a *knob-head*." He chuckled. Jan's favorite description of the company's senior security executive sounded strange when uttered in Charlie's East Coast American accent; something about Jan's cut-glass English delivery of the insult always made it land perfectly. "But I gotta. I gotta," he said. "Can't sit on this. I mean, that's what they hired us for, right?" He paused, his brow furrowed with worry. Still no pickup. He didn't want to admit how much it bothered him. "OK, so you call me back the moment you get this. Right? *Right*."

Charlie leaned over and tapped the END CALL tab, and the phone went dark. In the moment of quiet that followed, he drew in a long breath, then raised his head to look out of the window.

Most of the other office buildings in this quadrant of London's Docklands development were empty this late into the evening, with a few floors working as the international

trade and banking concerns continued to do business with Moscow, Mumbai, Tokyo, and Beijing. GreenSea's offices were always carefully lit at low levels, as part of the company's ecologically-aware mission dedicated to conservation, energy efficiency, and renewable power sources. In the dark mirror of the windows, Charlie saw himself reflected, along with the other staff in their glass-walled workspaces.

His youthful face – still boyish into his thirties – was marred by his concern for his friend. An itching, crawling sensation gathered at the small of his back, a sure sign of his fear index ramping up.

The last time I felt like this...

Charlie killed the thought before it could fully form. He did not want to dwell on those days, getting bombed and shot at. They were part of a life he had left behind.

Jan Freling had been headhunted by GreenSea's recruiters around the same time as Charlie, she from a major banking conglomerate in Dubai and he at the end of his contract with a certain three-letter-acronym division of the US government. As he understood it, Jan was the errant daughter of some ultra-rich British bluebloods, who had discovered an aptitude for computer mischief at boarding school and parlayed that into a career in information security. Charlie's upbringing mirrored the whole "computer mischief" bit, but his origin story came from the broken cogs of the American social services system, and a childhood of adoption with families who never quite got him. Few people did, but Jan was one of them.

She described their working relationship as *the crass Yank and the slick Brit*, and together they made an excellent team working to keep GreenSea's networks digitally secure. One of

the world's top three eco-technology corporations, GreenSea specialized in building hyper-efficient windmills and wave-farms. Their patents were worth billions of dollars. Company CEO Edward Morant wanted that intellectual property protected, and paid Cole and Freling very well to bring their expertise to his security department. For Jan, the job had been a way to prove herself; for Charlie, it was a way out of the clandestine world and back to something grounded. Something *safer*.

He blew out a breath and sent the data he had gathered to a secure tablet, rising to stand as the progress bar filled. Charlie looked up, in the direction of the corridor that led straight to Gary Borden's massive corner office. Once he did this, there would be no turning back. People would be angry. People would lose their jobs. People would go to jail.

Charlie knew this because of what Jan had discovered on a sweep through the company network infrastructure. Someone inside the GreenSea Corporation had been secretly transferring money and assets to another company and doing it for quite a while. They were hiding it from the sight of the board members and the external financial regulators alike. Millions of virtual dollars, vanishing unseen into the digital ether. The transactions were buried so deep that only someone with the singular focus of an obsessive – say, like a pair of high-functioning tech geeks – would be able to track them.

The tablet pinged, signaling completion of the data transfer. Charlie stood straight and plucked the device from its charging cradle, tucking it under his arm as he marched down the corridor toward Borden's office.

•••

Along the way, Charlie became aware that the floor seemed busier than usual. Faces from the other departments were around, hushed conversations were happening. Something important was going on, and it dawned on him that he was out of the loop. He wondered what he had missed.

He rapped on Borden's door, peering through the frosted glass to catch sight of his boss perched on the edge of his desk. Borden had a Bluetooth headset looped over one of the misshapen ears that sat low on the man's head, and his lips curled when he saw Charlie's face. He held up a single finger, in a *just one minute* gesture, and Charlie had to work not to shake his head.

Borden always made the people he considered his inferiors wait. Charlie guessed he thought it was some kind of power move, but all it really did was show off what an irritating person he was.

Eventually, Borden finished his call and granted Charlie entry. "Cole," he began, setting the terms of the conversation before the other man could even speak. "I don't have a lot of time, it's all hands on deck here. What do you want?" His voice had a nasal register that made everything he said sound dismissive.

Charlie held up the tablet computer. "I have something you should look at."

"Can it wait?" Borden waved in the direction of a monitor on his desk, which showed a live feed from the conference room in the main atrium. In the middle of the screen, the lectern on the dais in front of the GreenSea logo stood vacant. From the camera angle, Charlie could see the room filling

with people wearing visitor lanyards, patiently waiting for something to happen.

“Is there a press event?” For a moment, Charlie lost focus on his reason for being there.

Borden rolled his eyes. “Do you ever actually read the memos you’re sent, Cole? Or do you sit back there having a wank and playing videogames all day?” He nodded in the direction of Charlie’s workspace. “For crying out loud, you need to pay attention to the outside world!”

“Rude,” managed Charlie.

“Where’s your pal Freling, eh?” Borden looked up, surveying the corridor. “Usually when you come in here bothering me, she’s along for backup.”

“I don’t know,” Charlie admitted. “She didn’t come in today. I don’t know where she is.”

“Better not be throwing a sickie,” said the other man. He sighed. “Look, write up a memo and send it to my inbox, I’ll read it tomorrow.”

Charlie shook his head. “This really can’t wait.”

Borden scowled at him. He had made no secret of the fact that he hadn’t wanted Morant to bring on Cole and Freling to bolster GreenSea’s IT security. He viewed them as dilettantes, little better than the hackers they fought to keep off the network. Even though they had been in place for over a year and done great things, the man refused to change his mind.

“Spit it out, then.” Borden folded his arms across his chest, taking on a haughty air. “I’ll give you one minute.” He looked at his wristwatch. “Tick-tock.”

Charlie sucked in a breath and launched in. “Jan conducted

a security review of our redundant servers and she found something off.”

“I didn’t authorize any reviews,” Borden snapped. “That sort of thing has to go through me first.”

“Kind of the point,” Charlie retorted. “You authorize it, it gets logged in the system, and if any outsider has software implants in our system, they know about it too. This was totally on the D-L.”

Borden said nothing, reluctantly accepting the logic of that, and made a *keep going* motion.

“So, the sweep detected an anomaly in the redundant memory of the company financial database.” Charlie gestured with the tablet computer in his hand. “Jan brought it to me, and we dug into it. We found a bunch of transaction trails that had been erased after the fact, but there was partial data in the headers. Enough for us to reconstruct them.”

“What, you’re telling me someone’s stealing our money?” Borden snorted with derision.

“Not just money. Hardware and a bunch of other stuff, even some land deeds, all being diverted off-grid.”

“No chance. This network is airtight.”

“Nothing’s airtight,” Charlie said firmly, with the certainty of hard-won experience behind the words. “Believe me.”

Borden snatched the tablet out of his hand and swiped across the pages it displayed, barely reading what was written there. “If someone hijacked GreenSea assets, we’d have spotted it by now...”

“Not if they made it look like nothing was missing,” insisted Charlie. “Faked the entries.”

Borden made a disinterested noise and looked past

Charlie, watching some of their colleagues through his office window. The tempo around whatever was going on tonight had peaked, and he saw movement on the monitor screen. Down in the conference space, Edward Morant had taken the lectern, speaking animatedly to members of the press.

“You know what your problem is?” Borden continued.

Charlie straightened. “I’m sure you’re gonna tell me.”

“You like finding complications where there aren’t any. It’s conspiracy theory thinking, adding two and two and getting... a unicorn!” Borden waggled his finger. “This isn’t spook country, Cole. You don’t work for the CIA anymore, there’s no Reds under the bed.”

“NSA,” he muttered, “I never worked for the CIA.” But Borden wasn’t listening.

“If you’re so certain there’s an issue here, then riddle me this.” The other man discarded Charlie’s tablet on his desk and fixed him with a look. “Who’s behind it? If there’s malfeasance afoot, it means sod all without any attribution.”

Charlie fell silent. This was the question he’d been dreading, not just because the answer he had was sketchy, but because of the wider implications if it turned out to be correct.

According to the data Charlie and Jan had scraped together, the illicit transfers had flowed through a web of shell companies and blind servers, ultimately leading toward a single locus; another corporate entity on the far side of the world, known as much for its bleeding-edge technology as for its unwillingness to follow convention.

“*Teague*.” Charlie said the name. The Teague Technical Group – more commonly known as T-Tec – were the biggest of the new beasts in the world of next-gen technology and

computing, currently engaged in consuming most of their competition on the way toward global dominance of the social media datasphere. If the threads of half-deleted files Jan had discovered were authentic, it meant that T-Tec were not just engaged in their usual raft of dirty business tricks, they were actively engaging in criminality.

“And there he is,” said Borden, with a smirk. He pointed at the monitor as a fresh-faced, well-tanned young man in a designer jacket stepped into view.

Brody Teague. The founder-CEO-wunderkind master of T-Tec, the man running the company stealing from GreenSea, and he was *right there*, on the screen. In the building, in fact, five floors down from where they currently stood.

Charlie gaped, and for a second it was like his world inverted itself. How was it possible for him to say Teague’s name, and then have him appear, like a summoned monster?

Borden threw Charlie a sneering look. “What’s the matter with you, Cole? You look like you’re having a stroke!”

“What...?” Charlie forced himself to concentrate. “What’s going on?”

“Like I said, you need to read the bloody memos!” Borden tapped a button on the side of his monitor and the volume came up.

“—*such an amazing development for GreenSea!*” Edward Morant was in mid-flow, gesturing with both hands, smiling tightly. “*As of today, our company’s new partnership with the Teague Technical Group represents the next step in its evolution, the start of a synergy that will take our vision for Earth-friendly technology to a whole new level.*” He seemed to be reading the words off an autocue, and the stiff smile didn’t reach his eyes.

“Partnership?” Charlie echoed the word suspiciously. Suddenly, the reason behind the frenzied activity in the office became abundantly clear. He really *had* been way behind the curve on this, so lost in the investigation with Jan that news of it had never reached him.

“More like *takeover*,” Borden said, with a snort. “Teague Technical swallows up competitors like a shark going after chum, *chum*.” He followed that up with a shrug. “Morant’s trying to save face, make it look like it’s amicable, but it’s a forced buy-out, pure and simple. I don’t care, though. My shares are going to triple in value.”

On the screen, Brody Teague had decided to take the spotlight, and he came up to the lectern, into a storm of camera flashes, gently sidelining Morant before the other man was aware of it. In his ten thousand dollar suit, Teague was the epitome of the alpha geek, the kind of slick smartass guy that Charlie contemptuously thought of as a “*brogrammer*” . Athletic and trim, aggressively intelligent, and totally unhindered by any moral compass, he was what you would get if you spliced a Silicon Valley tech dude with a Hollywood-handsome frat boy.

“*What a great day*,” Teague said, with a glib smile, beginning with the words that had become his signature catchphrase. “*A great day for GreenSea, a great day for our shareholders.*”

The insincerity oozing from Teague’s voice was like nails drawn down a blackboard for Charlie, and he hit the mute button, ignoring Borden’s scowl as his mind raced to assimilate this alarming new development. “Listen to me, we have a problem.”

“Another? Still waiting for you to explain the first one.”

Borden's attention went to the corridor as the elevator arrived in the nearby reception area, and a group of new arrivals emerged.

Charlie looked in the same direction and saw two dark-suited bodyguards wearing augmented reality-enhanced glasses and radio earpieces. The pair flanked a harried-looking Indian executive, while another man in dark clothes, impossible to see clearly from this angle, hung back by the elevator.

Borden made for the door, but Charlie blocked his exit. "Gary, for crying out loud, have you not been listening?" He made a point of using Borden's first name to emphasize his seriousness.

"To be honest, I don't pay much attention to what comes out of your mouth," retorted the other man.

"The security breach," insisted Charlie. "It has T-Tec's stink all over it! Something is not right—"

Borden shook his head, cutting him off. "The company that just bought out GreenSea is also stealing from it? Do you hear yourself? Does that make any sense? As of now, Brody Teague owns all this, from staplers to servers!" He gestured at the building around them. "You really want to make waves with the new boss *ten seconds* after he takes over?" He didn't wait for a reply, and pushed past Charlie, out into the corridor.

Lost for words, Charlie snatched up his tablet and followed him, moving woodenly. "What just happened?" He asked himself the question, his hands finding one another as he tried to keep hold of the unfolding events.

"Hello, hello!" He heard Borden's voice take on an uncharacteristically cheery tone as the other man greeted the

new arrivals. “Gary Borden, GreenSea systems security senior executive. A pleasure to meet you!”

“Samir Patel,” said the Indian man, without accepting Borden’s offer of a handshake. His tone was brisk and distracted. “You can consider me Brody’s second-in-command. I want a tour of your setup, Gary. It’s imperative we ensure that everything is adequate while Brody is on site.”

“Of course!” Borden led Patel away in the opposite direction. “Shall we start with our operations center?”

“I suppose so.” Patel’s voice echoed down the corridor as they moved away, sounding equally terse and indifferent. Charlie saw him turn toward the man lurking by the elevator. “Mr Stone, if you could join us?”

The man called Stone moved out into the atrium, and Charlie felt an odd chill run through him as he caught sight of his face. Narrow and gaunt, with a hawkish nose and cold eyes, the final member of Patel’s entourage was tall and intimidating. He wore a dark coat better suited to a chilly climate, and with every step he took, he seemed to be evaluating everything around him.

When the man looked in Charlie’s direction, he couldn’t help but turn away, suddenly fearful of making eye contact. The reaction was strange, almost primal. He’d felt the same thing when he was a kid, trying to avoid the gaze of a neighborhood bully, and again much later, when men with guns had held his life in their hands.

There was something else familiar about Stone, not just a face that rang a distant bell of memory in Charlie’s thoughts, but in the way the man carried himself. He moved like a predator stalking prey.

Only one other person Charlie Cole knew had that same aura about them, that razor edge hiding in plain sight; but it had been a long time since he had seen Sam Fisher.

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