

Chapter 1

8 am

Scotland

March 2065

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Queue the uplifting music...or maybe not

Professor Frank Alexander sat quietly in the chapel at Faslane Naval Base saying his prayers. He had been a stout catholic all his life and that had kept him strong through the past years of utter anarchy and apocalyptic turmoil after losing his wife and young boy in the events that followed the loss of electricity for ninety per cent of the planet.

Faslane is the heart of the UK's nuclear deterrent at HMNB Clyde in Scotland. The base now housed a thorough mix of the army and navy but only a handful of the air force plus a population of eight hundred civilians. The UK still has a monarchy and decent military but long gone are the days of Britain patrolling the seas engaged in helping her allies. Since the CME decimated most of the planet Britain's military was solely on the defensive. And despite the recent chaos, most of the UK still has power thanks to the mini modular nuclear reactors and tidal turbines that were offline just before the CME hit, and the quick-thinking boffins stationed across the nation.

Frank rose from his pew, thanked the priest on the way out and walked back to HQ through the morning mist to see if he had any messages.

His usual Sunday ritual, church followed by a sail across Gare Loch, was his only solace in a world rebuilding itself from ruins. Everyone worked six days a week now, and these hours of peace were a blessed reprieve.

Stepping quietly through the morning mist along flagstone paths he walked past the old university and into the reception area of the mixed military HQ. He recognised Corporal Max Chambers, a soldier from the Yorkshire regiment, sitting behind the desk while reading a book.

'Morning Max, anything for me?' he called out in his deep, booming voice while striding through the reception area, stroking his thick brown beard.

'Good morning professor, I did receive a telex for you this morning.'

Frank took the chitty from him and his heart sank. 'Oh, good God, it's from my grandfather in Florida. We're not due our monthly call until next week.' He thanked the corporal and walked

down the corridor toward his office. *Is this good news or not*, he thought. *George has always been succinct in communications in the past*, he mused. *This message looks a bit short for him*.

Once inside he opened the chitty and read:

Frankie my boy, can I book a call with you later today? Say ten o'clock your time? I have news.

'Blimey, what can it be?' he said aloud.

Placing the telex on his desk he walked to the window to look at the harbour and saw his catamaran named *Apis*, nestled among many other yachts and smaller boats. Looking at the harbour, he felt a familiar pull toward the horizon, '*Apis*,' he murmured to himself, 'we may be bound for America again.'

His grandfather, George, was a professor of zoology and botany and a naval reservist the same as himself, and the only family he had left on the planet. George had raised him after his mother died in childbirth and his father was never around. Frank had loyally followed in Georges' footsteps under his masterful tutelage to become a botanist and expert in Hymenoptera as well as playing rugby for Glasgow Warriors. Today, George resides in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, following his service as a submariner just before the CME hit and was rescued by the US Navy when the submarine he was serving on had sent out an SOS due to a propeller fault. The CME had not affected any submersed submarine due to the water's disruptive effect so the savvy technicians in Florida had used two nuclear-powered subs to power the city. It was a stroke of genius since most nuclear power stations above ground ran out of coolant and backup power, eventually imploding. Hence the global fallout. Florida and Scotland were the luckiest in that respect. They had kept their people warm and fed, helping to mitigate the horrors of the outside world.

They had both been fortunate enough to be biology consultants and naval reservists when the CME hit so were, in many ways, valuable and therefore protected.

God, I hope it's not bad news. Perhaps he's got married again, found a new oasis zone, got promoted, or found a new way to save humanity.

He glanced around his office briefly and saw a stack of students scribbled reports and exam papers. He gently tucked them into his leather satchel making sure he had all of them for marking later while concerns of his grandfather mounted in his mind.

Passing through the reception area once more he asked Max to book a private room for the call. All telephony was highly monitored since bandwidth was abysmal, to say the least. Long gone were the days of ultra-fast internet coming to your home. The world was still rebuilding. Telex was the main form of communication but just occasionally you could book a slot on the clunky internet or telephone exchange for a long-distance call or even a video call – for a price – but only when *Pentagon*

had their two dozen satellites fly over your country allowing their daily two-hour slots for what remained of humanity and those who could afford it.

He had time to spare before 10 pm since it was his day off work, so wandered to the dock to check on his hives and perhaps a chance conversation with his colleagues and students. He had many farming allotments and ponds around the barracks to help the community, but his newest pet project resided inside his catamaran. He had the transom converted a little while ago so that it could accommodate his beloved white-tailed bumble bees.

Approaching *Apis*, he could hear the queen bee's thoughts; *I've fed well and all around me are working hard. Seven more hours until sunset then I can rest.* He held out his hand. As if on instinct. Half a dozen worker bees came out to brush his hand in a friendly manner. It was his calling since the day he was stung by a bee on a family picnic twenty years ago. It humbled him every time he did it.

He spent his few remaining spare hours tidying up plant cuttings from the dining table in the cockpit and playing with his cat, Wallace while marking the student's essays and exam papers.

The hour for the family call soon arrived so Frank closed his notepad, poured himself a coffee and headed across the base to the reception area and his pre-booked booth.

It was exactly 10 pm when the phone rang.

'I have bad news, sonny,' said George in his thick Scottish accent.

Frank inhaled sharply. Usually, George opened with hearty, enthusiastic pleasantries. The words he uttered unsettled him. He waited patiently for the next words.

George sighed before continuing, 'I have cancer.'

'Oh shite.' He hung his head, the handset feeling clammy in his palm. 'So, what's the plan?'

'They say I have a year left. Personally, I feel great, but the doctors say otherwise. I've known about it for over a year now but didn't want to let you know, perhaps for selfish reasons or perhaps to protect you. So... I'd like to ask a wee favour.'

'Anything. Name it.'

'I'd like to visit the grave of my wife Tala in the Philippines. You know she's buried on Batas Island. However, I can't afford to fly. It'd take me ten years to be able to afford a ticket, so I was wondering if —'

'I think I'm up for this but let it out. Tell me what you wish for.'

'This might sound selfish, but I fancy one final blowout holiday. You know, just you and me on our catamaran. She still floats am I right? I do miss sailing her.'

Frank stuttered in his thoughts and words. George's voice had slowly become more jovial in the past minute, yet the fact had yet to sink in. He took a sip of his coffee. 'I don't see a problem in any of that. I —'

‘Fantastic my boy,’ George boomed down the phone. ‘How soon can you be in Florida?’

‘Within a month I guess. Maybe a bit longer? I’m at the mercy of the wind and need to check the radiation charts. Plus, I have to say goodbye to everyone here.’

‘Good lad. I’ll be doing the same.’

Frank knew everyone at the base had to work for their food and comfort but also knew he had not taken a day’s holiday or sick leave for two years. He was due a vacation and his understudies at the base could easily cover for him.

‘Give me a couple of weeks to get my affairs in order and stock up *Apis*. She’s very seaworthy since my last upgrades and I want to try a new experiment while at sea.’

‘With your bees?’

‘Aye. I’m going to bring a small nest with me. They live in a converted transom on the starboard bow. They’re white tailers so only make a small amount of workers. Plus, I have loads of plants aboard for their pollen and nectar. I’ve encouraged them rather well. They live on the ship and know their home. I’ll tell you more on the next call or when I see you... this call must be expensive for you.’

George seemed ecstatic at the news of this new project and let his vocabulary slip into Scots Gaelic for a brief second as he congratulated him. Frank understood it well enough (only when spoken by George) and often wondered if the military used it in radio conversations to confuse foreign spies.

‘Anyway,’ Frank concluded, ‘it’s a shock to hear about your illness but I’ll be there. I’ll charge up the walkie-talkies, stock up on the food and bring you a pressie. Call me this time tomorrow and we’ll swap radio frequency data for when I’m a few miles from your warm and welcoming shore. If I can’t get a berth I’ll anchor off shore and come in via the tender. God bless you, George.’

‘And you too, sonny. I’ll call you again this time tomorrow.’

Frank hung his head in sorrow as he gently placed the phone back into its cradle. The conversation was light and jovial for the majority but the gut-wrenching horror that he might be the only member of his family left in a year was beyond belief.

Boarding *Apis* the voice of the queen bloomed in his thoughts; *It’ll be okay. There are no happy endings... but there are happy bonds. My life is so much shorter than yours. But I’ll be around for a while longer and promise to protect you and your friends if you protect me.*

‘You know I will, my beloved queen,’ he replied.

Entering the aft cockpit, he heard a familiar meowing and trilling coming from behind the saloon doors. ‘Hello, boy,’ he replied, picking up Wallace.

Wallace, his enormous Maine Coon cat nuzzled his head against his neck, trilling some more. Frank brushed him gently saying, ‘Fancy some foreign cuisine? We’re going overseas again soon.’

Wallace had been his pet since he was a kitten, and Frank had accustomed him at an early age to life aboard. Wallace even enjoyed swimming in calm waters and tended to follow him everywhere.

‘I think we need to see if your life jacket harness still fits.’

Wallace trilled some more as they headed to the galley to cook their evening meal before settling in for the night.

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Next morning

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Frank knocked on the door of Commodore Burton Avery, the commander of Faslane Naval Base. He liked and respected him. Burton, at sixty-five years old, possessed a commanding presence, with a rugged, weathered face that reflected both the harshness of the world and the warmth of his character.

‘Enter,’ Burton called out.

‘Have I caught you at a good time, sir?’ Frank said, stepping inside the office where he stood to attention and saluted.

Burton rose to greet him from behind his desk and saluted back. His steel-grey hair was cropped short as usual and his piercing blue eyes, always alert and thoughtful, were softened by the deep laugh lines at their corners. ‘At ease. Take a seat.’

‘For you, sir,’ Frank said, handing him his holiday request form and shaking his hand. He then sat patiently as Burton began to read.

Burton looked up at Frank occasionally as he read and rose from his chair to casually perch himself on Frank’s side of his well-worn oak table that was his desk. ‘It’s rather late in the day to deliver such news, Frank,’ his Scottish brogue both comforting and authoritative, ‘but I understand your desire to help fellow family members. And I also know you haven’t taken a day sick or other holiday for ages. Are things in place for your journey?’

‘Almost, sir. As you know, I’ve sailed to Florida and back three times over the years to see George but this one’s a biggie. I just need to stock up *Apis*. I’ll also need a first mate again since collision avoidance systems are only as good as the fifteen-year-old software on them. I’ll need two weeks to prepare.’

Frank hoped Burton’s sense of family among the naval base’s inhabitants would extend once more to him.

‘And what of your work here?’ His eyes briefly met Frank’s with a twinkle of understanding.

‘My students are fully capable of maintaining my apiary’s and the allotments. They know the schedules and –’

‘Three months off, eh?’ His voice carried a tone of both amusement and approval. ‘I think you’ve earned it. Go on, enjoy yourself. We’ll manage without you for a while. Just two formalities to deal with.’

Frank knew them well. Anyone leaving their homes for an extended period, or permanently, had to raffle off their home to other less fortunate members of the community and the second was that twenty random people had to donate one item that would aid the traveller. It could be clothes, food, tools, survival equipment, bartering items or even a more personal gift. It was common practice in many countries when a family member received word of relatives in far-off lands that they wished to reunite with. The names of the donors were picked at random. Not by pulling names out of a hat since that would be a waste of paper. Instead, the commander would throw two darts at a dartboard and multiply one by the other. It sort of made sense since there were four hundred civilian and military homes at the base and the two highest numbers on the board could make a multiple of three hundred and eighty. The commander would pick the rest at random.

‘People love you here, Frank. I’m sure you’ll be missed. I’ll interview a few sailors to be your first mate. I’ll let you know in a week.’

‘Thank you. As you know Wallace and I pretty much live on my catamaran so there’s very little to move from my home and any gifts will save me a bit of money. My office has nothing personal in it so my students can continue to use it.’ Frank rose to leave, shaking his hand, saluting once more, ‘Thank you again, sir.’

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The following night George called Frank again.

‘Well, Frankie, my boy,’ George began. His voice was full of joy, ‘I hope you’re ready to set sail since my house is going to be raffled off to the next family that needs a home. I’ve started to auction off my possessions and I’m going to pack three huge duffel bags. I’ve also got you a present.’

‘Thanks, George. Can you tell me more about your charity when we meet? I only get sporadic filter feeds of news about anything other than important stuff.’

‘Aye, sonny.’

‘Oh, by the way, the commodore here is arranging a first mate to accompany me on the trip to you. I have no idea who he or she is, but it’ll be a naval cadet to help on the journey. I told the commodore I’ll drop them off at your port so we can travel together to visit Tala’s grave.’

‘Good job, laddie, you can’t rely on autopilot and anti-collision crap to keep you safe. You need a proper sailor.’

‘I’ll have one other companion coming with me —’

‘You’re married again?’

‘Ha! No, my cat. You remember Wallace, right?’

‘Oh, jeez, that massive Maine Coon. Aye, I remember the pictures. How old is he now?’

‘Four. But he weighs a ton and loves living aboard *Apis*. He’ll love to sink his claws into any fish that lands on deck or that I catch. Oh, and I’ll let you plot the route from Florida to Batas Island, I’m sure we’ll need plenty of stops on the way.’

‘Yep, I think it’ll take us a few weeks, but with you, Wallace, and the bees for company the time should fly by. Just remember to stock up on loo roll, fishing line and booze.’

‘Waaay ahead of you.’

* * *

Over the following week, Frank and George exchanged many messages via telex. Both were looking forward to a reunion, albeit a final one. Frank had also been introduced to his first mate, Hamish Campbell. He was twenty-five years old and had plenty of hours of sailing experience but had never ventured overseas. He had sailed around the entire British coast as part of his naval training and was excited about the thought of travelling to Florida. At just under six foot tall, with a mop of brown hair and solid seaman-like muscles, he was almost a younger version of himself, but with more tattoos. The most striking of which were two seven-inch daggers on his forearms, one with Mum and Dad in the centre and the other with Nan.

‘What do those represent?’ Frank calmly asked as they walked toward *Apis* with Wallace faithfully following behind them.

‘They are reminders for me, to fight for my family.’

‘That’s a relief. Do you like Wallace and do you mind living with a bee hive aboard?’

‘Neither is a problem for me, sir.’

‘Good because they’re coming with us.’

Hamish shrugged his shoulders, ‘I like Wallace. He reminds me of many highland wild cats we still have here. As for the bees, I’ll accommodate anything for this chance at adventure, sir. Plus, I’m only going as far as Florida.’

Frank glared at him kindly, then spoke softly, 'Laddie you're right but I'll show you my talents regarding the bees soon. Then you'll know why I brought them with me. You've never been past the British coast —'

'I have a wife and three kids to come home to. I'll hopefully earn a passage back on the next mail boat to Scotland or anywhere in the UK.'

'We'll the ocean we are going across, the Atlantic... well, I've done it a few times since Wallace was a kitten. He'll be less afraid of the ocean than you.'

Hamish was affable and full of questions about spearfishing in lagoons and seeing new lands. Frank thought Burton had made the right decision.

As they stocked up the fridges and freezer with enough food to accommodate both their tastes as well as all the usual necessities for sailing Frank said, 'You'll notice the plants on deck have plastic bin bags around their tubs. That's to keep salt water away from their soil. Just water them through the holes at the tops. Oh, and another thing, you're allowed two luxury items aboard, if you wish. You don't have to decide now though and —'

'My guitar?'

Frank was not too keen but allowed it, 'Okay. And the other?'

'My bow and arrows?'

'Go on,' Frank replied slowly. Intrigued by such a choice.

'We can use it for bow fishing in lagoons or shallow waters. Or even on land for game. It's a take-down bow and won't take up as much room as my guitar.'

'Okay, sure. It kind of makes sense. I've plotted our route from here to the coast of Portugal then the Azores then onto Bermuda and finally Fort Lauderdale in Florida. It'll be about twenty-five to thirty days including the two stops to stretch our legs and possibly get any supplies we need. Sound good?'

'Aye, Captain.'

'One last thing. I have a lucky deck of cards. It's missing a few notable cards, like an ace or a king and the three of clubs but we play for chores not money. It's my lucky deck so I'll see how ye fair.'

'Playing for chores? Sounds like fun.'

'It is and it isn't. Especially If you get hull duty.'

Hamish chuckled, 'I'll dream up a few chores or tasks of my own to gamble with ye, captain.'

Within a week Hamish was confident around *Apis*, even working with the bees ever present, and soon and it was finally time for their send-off as the first signs of spring were just peeking through.

Commodore Burton Avery addressed a crowd of fifty residents, most of which Frank and Hamish knew. The gifts they were given by the residents were a mixture of practical items such as fishing line and cordage, but Frank was nearly brought to tears when he received frozen cat food, an unused donut-style bed and blanket and a few toys for Wallace.

Burton gave them a bottle of fifteen-year-old whisky saying, 'It says fifteen years old on the label, but I think it's nearer twenty-five now.'

'It won't see twenty-six,' Frank smirked at Hamish, adding a wink.

Burton then handed them a packet of rolling tobacco and papers, 'I know you two don't smoke but perhaps these can be used for bartering if you're in a fix.'

'Thank you, sir,' both replied.

'One last thing,' Burton said, pulling Frank to one side, 'I know Hamish will be coming back from Florida, and I know you've sailed there a few times but once through the Panama Canal you're venturing into *Pentagon* territory. We've, well, the top brass, heard some places are fine. Still pristine oasis zones but,' he hung his head momentarily, 'Others are worse than cannibalistic war zones. Starvation beyond belief and the wildlife decimated.'

'Thank you for the intel, sir,' Frank replied as a fist-sized pouch was placed in his left hand. He looked up quizzically.

'It's forty extra rounds for your rifle. Just in case.' Burton's countenance then changed back to one of hope and joy, turning around he roused the crowd into one more heart-felt cheer of farewell.

After more hugs to friends and family, Frank and Hamish stepped aboard *Apis*. Frank held Wallace in his arms, holding a paw up to wave to the crowd. Soon after they motored off into open waters setting the sails to catch the morning easterly breeze just as the sun began to rise.

* * *

A New Horizon

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The cold mist of dawn clung to the Scottish coast as Frank and Hamish set sail. The grey clouds hung low, reflected within the choppy waters of Gare Loch and then later the Firth of Clyde. They both waved at herds of sheep, horned goats and cows on the craggy islands and coastline and ducked as numerous geese came in for a landing on the waves to starboard.

Wallace sat on the deck with an air of feline indifference, as if he were simply waiting for his breakfast rather than embarking on his third transatlantic voyage.

'Say goodbye to Scotland for now. We've got quite the journey ahead,' said Frank waving once more to the distant homes on the shoreline.

Hamish chuckled as he tickled Wallace behind his ears, 'This will be a grand adventure, no doubt. Let's hope the weather stays friendly.'

Frank nodded, adjusting his black woollen cap against the chill, 'We'll take it as it comes. As you know I've plotted a safe route, and we'll dodge the worst of the radiation. Twenty-five-ish days if all goes well.'

As *Apis* slipped silently through the swell at a steady ten knots, Hamish took his place at the helm while preparing more fishing lines while Frank trimmed the sails. Both knew the boat's well-stocked provisions would support them through the long days ahead, but they were both alert as they approached the Irish Sea. Wallace, content to observe, found a sunny spot on the deck to lounge as the wind ruffled his fur.

The mist and chill of Scotland was becoming a distant memory as the day progressed, revealing the vast expanse of water stretching out before them. *Apis* cut through the waves with steady progress, and both yelped in delight as the sails caught the Atlantic breeze, expanding to full stretch with a *whoomp*.

They both settled into a routine, checking the maps, adjusting the sails, and keeping watch for any other ships or long-lost shipping containers since they both kept a keen ear tuned to the anti-collision device's speaker. As they ventured further from the shores of Ireland, they spotted their first of many sea creatures. Dolphins danced alongside the boat, leaping and playing in the waves. Wallace watched them with curious eyes, his tail flicking in time with the dolphins' playful splashes.

'Look at that,' Frank said, pointing toward the dolphins. 'They seem to be welcoming us to the open ocean.'

'Aye,' Hamish replied with a grin, 'they know a good crew when they see one. It's the third time I've ever seen them.'

'Hamish, I know where you've sailed... so you're in for a real treat. You're gonna see whales, laddie.' Frank caught the expression across Hamish's face. It was a mixture of horror and joy. He smiled back before giving him orders to open the bee's transom hatches and trim the sails to catch every ounce of speed they could.

'The transom, Captain?'

'Aye, the little buggers won't mind the breeze, and they can keep up easily if they fall behind. That purple pole on the sugar step is their homing beacon, remember.'

The remainder of the day was filled with easy conversation and laughter, the chores of sailing punctuated by tales of sailing adventures and plans. As night fell, the moon emerged, casting a shimmering reflection across the ripples as they finished cooking a light dinner of fresh fish, caught

from their stern lines earlier in the day with a scattering of salad and potatoes. They sat in the saloon as Wallace enjoyed a small raw fish of his own, savouring his share of the catch.

They slept in shifts: three hours on then three hours off. It kept them on their toes mentally and physically.

The next morning the first sign of trouble came as dark clouds gathered on the horizon to the west. The wind picked up, and the gentle sway of the boat turned into a steady roll. Waves crashed against the hull with increasing force.

‘Looks like we’re in for some rough weather,’ Frank said, tightening his grip on the rail as he raced up to the helm. ‘We should batten down the hatches and make everything secured. Get your rain gear on and bring me mine. Then reef the sails. I’ll do my bit with the winches from here to give you a hand.’

Hamish nodded, already moving to stow some loose gear, ‘Aye, but it’s nothing we can’t handle.’

As the storm approached, the rain began to fall in heavy sheets. The wind howled, and the waves grew taller, tossing *Apis* about like a toy in a bathtub yet they worked together, adjusting the sails even more and keeping *Apis* steady through the turbulence. Despite the storm’s ferocity, there was a certain thrill to the experience for both. Wallace, unfazed by the conditions, curled up on one of his many blankets on a shelf, occasionally peeking out to watch the rain through a porthole window.

By evening, the storm had settled into a steady downpour, with occasional gusts of wind shaking *Apis* and pumping the trimmed sails once more. Frank and Hamish took turns at the helm to rest, while navigating through the tempest with careful determination.

* * *

‘Captain, wake up,’ Hamish hollered.

Frank sat up blearily. ‘Wow, what a dream.’ He rubbed his eyes and saw the storm had subsided. Stepping up into the saloon he saw the morning’s brilliant sunrise painting the clouds in hues of pink and gold. He dressed for fair weather and headed up to the helm only stopping on the way to feed Wallace and to listen to the Queen.

I’ll let your workers out again in a few minutes, he said.

Joining Hamish at the helm they heaved a sigh of relief leaving behind a sea of dark water and frothy crests.

‘Hamish...’ he said handing his binoculars over. ‘Thank you for waking me up to see this.’

'I saw it about half an hour ago and slightly steered *Apis* toward it, Captain. I hope that's okay?'

After a brief look once more he handed the binoculars back to Hamish and turned the helm further to port.

Hamish had spied an overturned boat that now served as a resting place for seagulls. 'Look at that,' he said, pointing at a dilapidated, barnacle-encrusted black hull with a group of seagulls lounging on it, 'nature's taking back what's hers.' Hamish squinted at the wreckage. 'Shall we check it out? Might find something useful.'

'Too small,' Frank replied. 'It's only a tiny sailing boat. Recreational, maybe. Probably about twenty foot long. And we don't have diving equipment. Trust me. I've sailed to Florida a few times and you hardly ever see new wreckage.'

Frank instinctively knew the boat had capsized long ago and had drifted out here on the currents. No one was stupid enough to venture into the Atlantic on such a small vessel. Unless it was a life raft. 'Whatever it was, it sank long ago, and any survivors will have perished by now.' 'We're on time from our first port in the Azores in a few days so let's keep up the pace.'

Four hours later they saw a very different boat. A huge white yacht gleamed in the sunlight yet showed no signs of life aboard. Not even navigation lights. They hailed it via radio, but no reply arrived.

'Now that I'd really like to see,' said Hamish.

Frank agreed and they steered *Apis* closer to the abandoned boat. It was an eighty-foot luxury yacht, now battered and forsaken. It had clearly been adrift for years judging by the rust, dents and bullet holes along its port side.

After hailing it numerous times they felt sure it truly was abandoned. They prepared to board it, with only their knives on their belts, headlamps and torches but the excitement of exploration overshadowing the ominous feeling that crept over them. They tethered *Apis* to a mooring cleat then carefully stepped aboard via the transom, their boots echoing on the deck, onward into the eerie silence. The interior was a mess, but there were still some items worth salvaging. Going room to room they rummaged through the debris, finding a few cans of food, blankets, life jackets, a fire extinguisher, and some useful tools. Hamish even found some gold jewellery – a necklace and a diamond ring – under a bed. They took what they could use, grateful for the unexpected provisions and barter items.

'Seems like this has been adrift for a while,' Hamish said, examining the state of the dining room. 'Whoever owned it didn't fare so well, but they sure had a lot of money... once.'

'Looks that way,' Frank agreed, handing a wrench and blanket to Hamish. 'Thankfully no skeletons. Let's finish up and head back. We'll no doubt see more like this on our way.'

As they returned to *Apis* with two bin bags full of supplies, Frank cast one last glance at the abandoned yacht. The storm was not the only thing that had left its mark. Bullet holes were evident upon its hull. *Poor bastards*, he thought.

With the storm behind them, the fourth day of their journey was filled with smooth sailing and clear skies. The sun shone brightly, and the gentle breeze guided them steadily toward the Azores. They resumed their routine, fishing and chatting, their spirits high after weathering the storm and knowing they had fared better than many other sailors over the past few years.

As they sailed along, they spotted another pod of dolphins in the distance, a welcome sign of the sea's bounty. Wallace, now more comfortable with the rolling waves, sat perched on the deck, watching them with keen interest.

'Here's to a smooth rest of the voyage,' Frank toasted, handing Hamish a mug of coffee. 'May the wind be at our backs and the sea kind to us.'

Hamish raised his mug in agreement, 'To smooth sailing and new horizons.'

They sailed on, their hearts buoyed by the promise of adventure and the hope of what lay ahead as they enjoyed the lulling symphony of lapping waves.

'Captain?'

'Yes,' Frank replied with a warm fuzzy feeling as he added a dash of whisky to their coffees.

'Seeing that ghost ship just now makes me wonder, erm, now you know all sailors are superstitious, right?'

'Aye.'

'So, you did plot a course missing the Bermuda Triangle, didn't you.'

'Aww shite.' He paused for effect with a look of horror on his face.

Hamish and Wallace both looked at him, sensing his tense dread.

'I'm just joshing with you, laddie. You don't think I'm that stupid do you?' He then realised something that he really had forgotten. 'Ohhh crap, there is one thing I screwed up... I forgot to put the bins out.'

Chapter 2

6 am

Northern tip of Borneo

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Unseen Chains

Faith Mya woke to the combined sounds of rhythmic dappling of rain and the horrible bells of her clockwork alarm clock. Today was going to be her third assignment as an Acolyte of *Pentagon*. She was one of fifty new recruits entrusted with being the polite, welcoming face of the company. She had fought hard for this opportunity. The opportunity to hire more hapless souls to work for *Pentagon*. To their faces and on official documents they were referred to as *Recruits*. Unofficially they were given the derogative term *Hands*, thus dehumanising them since they were being brought in to serve a purpose and kept at arm's length in status and treatment. Today, as on her previous assignments to untapped lands, she had to shine.

Rubbing away the deep sleep and stretching, her thoughts drifted back to her younger days in Burma when survival had no guarantee, where each dawn felt like a bargain made at the edge of a knife. Now, those memories served as fuel for her career. Every recruit marked another step further from that brutal past. She glanced at the ledger she hoped to fill. The numbers in the left-hand column next to the blank spaces reminded her that her life was more important, and honesty was a luxury she only gave to those she loved or who paid her wages.

Time to get paid, she thought.

Sitting up in bed she glanced out of the rain-dappled window to see a dozen men and women at the dock wearing rain proof overcoats, loading supplies onto a ferry. Today it would take her to Balabac Island to the north, on the southern tip of the Palawan province of the Philippines. It was the first stop of many this week and her heart thrilled at the thought of getting closer to this month's quota target. *Pentagon* trusted her to deliver, and she knew she could, having been selected by the Regional Overseers, also known as RO's, the human and A.I. owners of the business. There were nine in total, each overseeing vast swathes of the Asian Pacific. One day she hope to be one and thus far she was on the right path. There were always nine since it was an odd number so any

Daiyu, her mentor and sponsor, was the female CEO of Palawan province in the Philippines and had assured her this was an easy job and one day she would rise through the corporate ranks to take her place as CEO of Palawan when she retired in about a year. From that position she could be selected.

Before heading to the bathroom Faith switched on her clockwork radio and heard the usual company messages and propaganda, and they occasionally played music. But mostly it was all corporate information about profits, losses, new business ventures and speeches from their illustrious leaders.

After a brief shower, she sat in a blue flannel bath robe re-reading her assignment. The fabric itched against her skin, so she guessed this outpost was low on detergent supplies or the *Hands* here were incompetent. Thankfully her uniform was *Pentagon* property and handled by loyal employees.

Her Tagalog, the language of the Filipino's, was improving since she studied an hour every night, so this week was a good chance to practice. She was to be taken by ship to ten different towns this week, one in Balabac, some in Borneo, others further afield, where *Pentagon* expected her to convince, or persuade, at least fifty people to commit to joining the company. She was not the only person on this kind of mission. Other Acolytes were doing the same as her: enticing recruits. She knew the plan was to send out a dozen ferries, like the one she was to travel on today, to multiple untouched townships across the region, get people to sign up and be collected a week or two later. She did not care about them. They would be underling employees, junior recruits into the service industries, perhaps skilled workers, but mainly grunts.

She glanced at her pristine uniform. It was a grey tailored trouser suit. She did not have to wear it today, but perception was key in her role.

I'll wear it to board and disembark, she thought. *Just to remind the others aboard of who I am.* She gave herself a brief chuckle in the mirror and reached for the door handle.

The announcer on the radio cut off her thoughts.

'A special announcement for all employees. Effective immediately, Cedric Dedric will be taking over as CEO of Palawan Province. We expect a new era of innovation and expansion under his leadership. Stay tuned for further updates.'

Her breath caught in her throat. Dedric. The name echoed in her mind like a warning bell. She had never heard of him, yet the gravity of his position weighed heavily in the air. The radio continued to crackle with chatter, but she felt a pulse of unease.

What the hell has happened to Daiyu, she thought. *This isn't just a change in management; it's a shift in my chances. God, I hope Daiyu is alright and Dedric is as kind as her.*

She could almost feel the eyes of her colleagues boring into her, assessing how she would respond to the news. She needed to project confidence, to maintain her standing as a respected Acolyte. But beneath the surface, a current of uncertainty rippled through her.

‘What does this mean for me?’ she murmured to herself, the words swallowed by the dark room as she stuffed her itinerary and briefing notes into her satchel.

I’ve carved out a niche for myself, she continued thinking, climbing the ranks with determination and cunning. Will this new CEO be an ally or an obstacle?

She pictured the corporate hierarchy like a game of chess, and suddenly, a new player had entered the board. One she knew nothing about.

Daiyu was only contactable via telex three days a week and today was not one of them. She rubbed her hands and began pacing the small room, her mind racing. Then she caught sight of her reflection, what stood out most was her silver and black Acolyte badge on the left lapel of her suit and rank insignia atop her epaulettes. She filled her lungs with a hefty breath and then smiled back at her reflection.

Daiyu, would not waver in her confidence of me, she thought. Dedric’s reputation could precede him, or he could be a wild card. Either way, I’ll need to adapt. I can’t afford to show weakness, especially not now. I have targets to hit and a future to secure.

The rain picked up outside, drowning out the radio’s continued updates as she put on her rain gear. Glancing at the stormy horizon, she felt a surge of determination. *Whatever challenges this new CEO might bring, I’ll face them head-on. After all, I’m a fucking Acolyte, and hey, Daiyu, thanks for the sponsorship and mentoring but you taught me to thrive on the unexpected. It’s all about me now.*

With a final glance at the radio, she made a mental note to gather more information about Dedric. Knowledge was power, and she would not be caught off guard. She returned to her notes, her resolve solidifying as she packed all her belongings into a hefty suitcase. Tomorrow, she would reach out to her contacts and dig deeper into this new development. The game was still on, and she intended to play it better than ever.

Ten hours later the rain had ceased, and the captain of the ferry spoke over the tannoy stating that they would be on Balabac island in half an hour, but she had already guessed that since she had been on deck in her civilian clothing gazing at the island for the past hour. The goose bumps on her arms and knots in her stomach let her know the hour was approaching to get back to work. She dashed to her cabin to adorn her business attire once more.

* * *

The humid air of Balabac Island clung to her face and neck as she stepped off the rickety ferry. The salty breeze was thick, mingling with the scent of sweat and diesel fumes. She adjusted her blazer, the Acolyte insignia glinting sharply in the low sun. Immediately, the locals’ chatter quieted. Eyes

followed her—a mix of curiosity, suspicion, and a hint of fear. She had seen this before so walked with deliberate slowness, her short stature making each step appear calculated as if she was measuring the distance between herself and every gaze fixed on her. There was no *Pentagon* contact here. There never was at any of the places she visited.

A young man approached, barely out of his teens, with a wary smile and a machete strapped to his side. ‘Ma’am,’ he greeted, the word dripping with forced respect. ‘We weren’t expecting visitors from the mainland today.’

She smiled, but it was a smile that did not reach her eyes, ‘The best opportunities often come unannounced,’ she replied without offering a hand to shake since the man only had one. The young man’s gaze flickered to her *Pentagon* insignia. *Ahh, recognition*, she thought.

His posture stiffened as he stepped back, opening a path for her. She nodded, satisfied, and continued toward the makeshift marketplace, where her true work would begin. She scanned the crowd, searching for potential recruits. Families haggled over dried fish and plucked chickens. Children played barefoot in the dirt, and men lounged with cigarettes dangling from their lips. They looked ripe for the taking.

At a small stall, an older woman sold hand-carved trinkets and pendants shaped like the sun, the kind that perhaps once held meaning before the world had fallen apart. She approached, picking up a pendant and running her thumb over its rough edges. ‘These are beautiful,’ she said, her voice smooth, almost musical. ‘Did you make them yourself?’

The woman nodded, cautiously, ‘I’ve made them my whole life. Who are you in your fancy clothes coming here?’

‘They must take a lot of skill,’ Faith replied, deflecting the question. ‘Patience, too. Imagine what you could create with the proper tools. Proper materials. Imagine what you could provide for your family.’ She paused, giving a smile, letting her words sink in.

The woman’s eyes narrowed, ‘And what would you take in return?’

‘Just your time,’ she said, setting the pendant back down gently, ‘and a chance to be part of something bigger. Your work would be respected and seen by people who can truly appreciate it. I work for *Pentagon*. Have you heard of us?’

‘We all have. Some good respect. Some bad, almost evil. We’ve seen your stupid logo and slogan on other boats and people before.’

‘If you wish for a new life. A change of pace. I can arrange transportation, housing, a salary that will make this...’ she gestured to the dusty stall, ‘seem like a distant memory.’ She saw the woman hesitate. *Perhaps her life is woven into this island*, she thought, *each thread keeping her here*. But Faith detected the hint of understanding in her eyes. The glimmer of a dream long buried but never

quite forgotten. 'Think about it,' she added, pressing a sleek card with the company's logo into the woman's weathered hand. 'We're always looking for people with your... talents. I'm here to recruit and the collection ferry will be here in two weeks. Plenty of time for you to consider. Now, can you direct me to the town hall?'

'Up that street,' the woman replied, gesturing with a thumb over her shoulder, hardly taking her eyes off the card.

'Tell your friends. I'd like to address a big crowd in your town hall. *Pentagon* awaits.' As she turned away, she saw the woman still admiring the card, running her fingers over the golden embossed text. The hook was set. She did not need to look back again. She knew the woman would be on the next ferry with her bags packed and eyes fixed on the mainland, wondering if this stranger in the suit was offering a true lifeline.

Faith moved on, her job far from finished. Each step she took was one closer to her target, her prize, and the satisfaction of knowing she could bend anyone to her will. One whispered promise at a time.

A few hours later after speaking to many people and eventually the leaders of the town she had bartered the use of the town hall for a recruitment drive. It was dimly lit, the air full of anticipation and uncertainty emanating from the mixture of young and old before her. The Mayor of the town, a young but portly man was not keen to have people leave his island, but she had perfectly persuaded him of the monetary reimbursement that would eventually return in their place, to their families and the island.

The hall was full of eager murmurs. She stood poised, every detail of her pitch rehearsed to perfection. She stepped onto the stage, her eyes sweeping the crowd, weighing their hopes and fears like a predator sensing opportunity. The mayor lingered nearby, visibly uneasy, but she knew she had him tethered to the promise of prosperity.

'This isn't just an opportunity,' she began, her voice steady and commanding, 'it's a lifeline to a future beyond your wildest dreams.' The room grew silent, every gaze fixed on her as she unravelled her carefully crafted vision, the first seeds of her plan taking root in their hearts.

She stood at the front, her small but commanding figure draped in her blazer, the Acolyte insignia gleaming like a beacon against the greasy light coming through the windows. A crowd of natives had gathered, their faces a mix of curiosity and scepticism as they murmured among themselves.

'Thank you all for coming,' she continued, her voice smooth and confident, echoing off the wooden walls. 'I know many of you have concerns about what I'm going to share, but I assure you, this is an incredible opportunity.' She paused, scanning the faces before her. Young, old, hopeful, and

wary. She needed to pull them in, to weave a story they would believe. 'Working for *Pentagon* means you'll be part of something larger than yourselves,' she continued, letting her words flow like honey. 'In just two weeks, the ferry will return, and you'll have the chance to join us. All you need to do is pack your bags and get ready for an adventure.' A murmur rippled through the crowd, and she pressed on, quickening her pace. 'You'll be assigned jobs depending on your area of skill or expertise and receive a small chip implanted in your hand, a simple measure to keep you connected back home. Imagine being able to call your family whenever you wish. For those who join, we'll install routers in your homes here on Balabac Island so you can make calls to your loved ones.'

She smiled, the corners of her mouth curving upward in an inviting manner. 'Just think about it, a way to stay connected in far-off lands. A chance to help your families in ways you've never dreamed of. You'll be able to say, "*Hi, this place is great, and I'm having so much fun. I'll be able to mail money or other items home,*" before you get back to work. Just think of the joy it will bring.'

The crowd was captivated now, their scepticism beginning to melt away under the warmth of her voice. She could see the hope glimmering in their eyes, the desperation for a better life pulling them closer to her words.

'What's important is that you act quickly,' she urged, sensing the momentum shifting in her favour. 'This opportunity won't last forever. We need workers like you. Dedicated and strong. I know you can be that for us and your families and friends.'

Her heart raced with the thrill of manipulation, but her expression remained serene. She leaned slightly closer, lowering her voice as if sharing a secret, 'We're offering you a chance to change your lives. Don't let fear hold you back.' As the room buzzed with whispered conversations, she straightened up, confidence radiating from her, 'So, who's ready to step into a new future? Who's ready to join *Pentagon*?'

Hands began to rise hesitantly, a few voices speaking up, and she felt a swell of triumph. She was planting the seeds of compliance, convincing them that the ferry would bring more than just a new job, it would bring connection, adventure, and hope. At that moment, she felt invincible, knowing that soon enough, the islanders would be bound to her. With her web of lies spun tight around their dreams.

After answering a few questions, she walked through the crowd toward the entrance. 'I'll leave my clipboard by the door, and I'll return in a few hours. Don't worry if you don't sign today. You have two weeks to decide.'