RED FLAG

THE SPECTER OF COMMUNISM

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Niels van Haren

Red Flag: The Specter of Communism

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Written by Niels van Haren, with help from ChatGPT.

This is a work of fiction. The characters and events are fictional. Existing locations, institutions, and organizations may be used in a fictional context.

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WHEN EVERY CLOCK TICKS RED

Red Flag: The Specter of Communism begins on Saturday, June 5, 2027, at 09:12 local time at the KIST Institute in Seoul, South Korea. At that exact same moment, clocks elsewhere show something different — and in some places it is still Friday, June 4.

Find a city near you. Every time below shows exactly the same moment.

Reference moment: Seoul — 09:12 KST — 00:12 UTC

AMERICAS, EUROPE & AFRICA

Place	Local time	Zone	UTC
Amsterdam	02:12	CEST	+2
Athens	03:12	EEST	+3
Berlin	02:12	CEST	+2
Brussels	02:12	CEST	+2
Buenos Aires	21:12 — Jun 4	ART	−3
Cairo	03:12	EEST	+3
Chicago	19:12 — Jun 4	CDT	−5
Denver	18:12 — Jun 4	MDT	−6
Honolulu	14:12 — Jun 4	HST	−10
Johannesburg	02:12	SAST	+2
London	01:12	BST	+1
Los Angeles	17:12 — Jun 4	PDT	−7
Madrid	02:12	CEST	+2
Mexico City	18:12 — Jun 4	CST	−6
Moscow	03:12	MSK	+3
New York	20:12 — Jun 4	EDT	−4
Ottawa	20:12 — Jun 4	EDT	−4
Paris	02:12	CEST	+2
Rome	02:12	CEST	+2
São Paulo	21:12 — Jun 4	BRT	−3
Toronto	20:12 — Jun 4	EDT	−4
Warsaw	02:12	CEST	+2
Washington, D.C.	20:12 — Jun 4	EDT	−4

Place	Local time	Zone	UTC
Abu Dhabi	04:12	GST	+4
Auckland	12:12	NZST	+12
Bangkok	07:12	ICT	+7
Beijing	08:12	CST	+8
Brisbane	10:12	AEST	+10
Darwin	09:42	ACST	+9:30
Dhaka	06:12	BST	+6
Dubai	04:12	GST	+4
Hong Kong	08:12	HKT	+8

Islamabad	05:12	PKT	+5
Istanbul	03:12	TRT	+3
Jakarta	07:12	WIB	+7
Kuala Lumpur	08:12	MYT	+8
Manila	08:12	PHT	+8
Melbourne	10:12	AEST	+10
New Delhi	05:42	IST	+5:30
Perth	08:12	AWST	+8
Riyadh	03:12	AST	+3
Seoul	09:12	KST	+9
Singapore	08:12	SGT	+8
Sydney	10:12	AEST	+10
Taipei	08:12	CST	+8
Tokyo	09:12	JST	+9
Wellington	12:12	NZST	+12

Note: Where no date is shown, it is Saturday, June 5, 2027.

Reference moment: Seoul — 09:12 KST — 00:12 UTC

Example calculation: Seoul → Amsterdam

Seoul is: KST = UTC+9

So: 09:12 − 9 hours = 00:12 UTC

Amsterdam at that moment is: CEST = UTC+2

So: 00:12 + 2 hours = 02:12 CEST

That gives you: Seoul 09:12 KST → 00:12 UTC → Amsterdam 02:12 CEST

INTRODUCTION

Red Flag: The Specter of Communism

Niels van Haren

Technology has not taken over the world.

The world has simply made itself so dependent on technology that trust has become more important than control. At the Korea Institute of Science and Technology in Seoul, Hana Parker looks at a number on a Saturday morning that should not really be on her screen. 99.73 percent. Not bad. Not impressive. Too good.

A quantum experiment is doing something her models say should not yet be possible. Among modern research papers, Hana finds an old Soviet document. Yellowed pages. Equations from a time when the technology needed to execute them did not yet exist. At the bottom is a damaged name. She does not know it. Why would she? At that exact moment, another screen shows images from the United States. Smoke. Police. Demonstrations.

A society in which fewer and fewer people still know whom or what they can trust. Hana looks from the news to her quantum processor. Two events.

Two different worlds. At least, that is how it seems. On the other side of the planet, Harry Wheeler is in Washington, D.C. A powerful politician. A man with humor, convictions, and a conspicuous fedora.

He stands on the threshold of a political future even he barely dares to predict aloud. What Hana and Wheeler have to do with each other, neither of them knows. Perhaps, at first, nothing at all. Between Seoul and Washington lies a world of governments, financial markets, intelligence services, military command centers, satellites, submarines, and people who all believe they understand what is really happening. In Pyongyang, systems are being built whose existence is known to almost no one outside a small circle. In Dubai, men discuss power as if countries, markets, and populations were chess pieces.

At sea, commanders receive orders that are becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish from manipulation. In banks, data centers, and government buildings, millions of people trust something they almost never see, every second of every day: that a digital system is telling the truth. That is where Red Flag begins. Not with the question of whether technology is dangerous. Technology is a tool. It always has been.

The more interesting question is who is holding the tool.

And perhaps more important still: who thinks they are holding it?

THE SPECTER

The title The Specter of Communism does not refer exclusively to one country, one party, or one political doctrine. The specter haunting this novel is older and harder to grasp. It is about power. About control. About equality and inequality. About systems that promise to bring order. About people who defend freedom for as long as that freedom does not create too much uncertainty.

And about how much freedom people are willing to surrender when security, stability, or progress seem to demand something else. Ideologies rarely disappear completely. They change their names. Their flags. Their language. Sometimes even their technology.

What was controlled by a state yesterday may be controlled by an algorithm tomorrow. What used to be called propaganda can now present itself as information. An order does not always have to sound like an order. And a choice is not necessarily free simply because no one imposed it aloud.

That does not mean Red Flag is trying to be a political prediction.

It is a thriller. A work of fiction. But fiction has one great advantage: it can ask questions before reality decides whether they will ever become relevant.

TECHNOLOGY AND TRUST

Quantum computing plays a major role in this story.

But you do not need to be a quantum physicist to read Red Flag. Hana Parker understands enough for all of us. Where necessary, the technology is explained in terms of what it does and why that matters, not with the expectation that the reader has first studied a physics textbook. The technology itself is never the real subject, either. Its consequences are. An extremely powerful computer is interesting.

A computer capable of analyzing encryption is interesting. A machine that can explore millions of possibilities faster than humans can is impressive.

But the real question only begins after that. What do you allow such a system to do? Where is the boundary? And who decides?

A machine may be able to calculate which choice produces the statistically best outcome. But does that automatically make it the right choice? The same question applies to cyberwarfare. A digital attack does not have to be spectacular. Servers do not have to catch fire. Screens do not have to display a skull. A bank does not even have to go offline. Imagine two computer systems both saying, with absolute certainty, that they are right.

And their answers are different. Which one do you trust? An account balance.

A digital certificate. A military order. An election result.

A satellite position. A news report. Our world functions because thousands of times a day we assume that systems whose workings we do not personally verify are reliable enough. Red Flag plays with the possibility that this assumption itself can become a target. Do not destroy the computer. Damage trust in it. Because once people stop trusting a system, hackers may no longer need to shut it down at all.

People will do that themselves.

THE WORLD IS NOT A CHESSBOARD

Geopolitical thrillers sometimes pretend there is a room somewhere in which a handful of brilliant people divide up the world. Red Flag also begins with people who would like the world to be that simple. But countries are not chess pieces. China has Chinese interests. America has American ones.

Russia has Russian ones. A sheikh in Dubai may think he has an ally while that ally is only moving in the same direction temporarily.

A politician may think he is using an organization while that organization thinks exactly the same about him. A commander may receive a valid order and still wonder whether the person who sent it was really the person who gave it.

And a system may not need to control anyone at all.

Perhaps it is enough to create circumstances in which everyone, for their own reasons, moves roughly in the same direction. That idea is an important undercurrent of this novel. Not: Who controls everyone? But: What if no one needs to be controlled? What if circumstances, interests, fear, and conviction are enough? That creates a far more uncomfortable world. A world in which

people can make entirely voluntary decisions that together form something none of them chose individually.

That is the world Hana, Wheeler, and the other characters enter. None of them can see the entire board.

Perhaps there is not even one complete board.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE OUTSIDE THE STORY

Artificial intelligence does not play a role only inside Red Flag.

It was also part of the creative process through which this novel came into being.

Red Flag: The Specter of Communism was written by Niels van Haren and created in collaboration with ChatGPT. That does not mean an AI agent pressed a button and independently produced this book. The characters, storylines, choices, corrections, and final direction of the novel remained under the author's control. ChatGPT was used as a creative sparring partner. For scenes. Dialogue. Technical questions. Alternatives. Timelines. Continuity.

And sometimes for the simple but surprisingly important question: Does this still match what happened thirty chapters ago? That collaboration fits the subject of the book remarkably well. Because during the writing process, the same question kept returning: What do you let a machine do? And which decision must ultimately remain human? An AI can suggest a possibility.

See a connection. Point out an inconsistency. Develop a scene.

But someone has to say: This stays. This does not. This way. That decision belongs to the author. Just as in Red Flag, what ultimately matters most is not the power of a machine, but the responsibility of the person who decides what it will be used for.

A WORLD IN MOTION

Red Flag moves across continents. Seoul. Washington. Havana. Pyongyang. Dubai. The Atlantic Ocean. And eventually a simple homestead in Australia.

The scale sometimes becomes large. Governments. Armies. Global markets. Satellites. Quantum technology. But beneath those great events, there are still people. A scientist wondering why her calculation is too good.

A sister thousands of kilometers away who wants to know whether her family is safe.

A politician who may discover that achieving his dream is not the same as living with it. A commander who must decide when obedience ceases to be a virtue. People who fall in love while no one has time for it. People who make mistakes.

People who think they are using someone else. People who build something and only later discover what others want to use it for. Perhaps that is ultimately the most important difference between technology and people. A machine does not have to live with guilt. A human does. An algorithm can recalculate a probability. A human cannot always make a choice again.

WHY 2027?

Because 2027 is close enough to feel familiar.

Cars still drive on roads. People drink tea. Journalists look at their phones. Politicians argue. Children draw dragons. Banks open in the morning. Airplanes take off. And yet it is far enough away to move certain technologies and geopolitical developments a few steps forward.

That mattered. Red Flag was not supposed to feel like a distant science-fiction world. The reader had to be able to think: I recognize this. Maybe not the machine. Maybe not the operation. But the dependence. The tension.

The uncertainty. The tendency to trust technology as long as it works.

And the panic when that trust suddenly disappears. The future in this novel is therefore not a world filled with flying cars and incomprehensible machines.

It is our world. Just a few decisions farther on.

THE READER DOES NOT HAVE TO TRUST EVERYTHING

A thriller sometimes asks for technological possibilities that go beyond what is practically available today. Red Flag does that too.

Quantum technology is developing rapidly, but the systems in this novel remain fictional.

Military procedures are simplified where the story requires it.

Organizations and operations are combined or invented. The characters are fictional.

This book is not a technical manual and not a blueprint for geopolitics.

The technology only needs to be convincing enough to make the human question possible. Nothing more. Perhaps even that fits the theme. As a reader, you do not have to automatically believe everything a system tells you. Not even this book.

Feel free to doubt. Ask yourself whether something is possible. Ask yourself whether someone is right.

Above all, ask yourself why someone wants another person to believe something. Almost every important character in Red Flag believes in something. Some in an ideology. Some in technology. Some in their own intelligence.

Some in another person. And almost all of them discover that trust is more fragile than they first thought.

THE FIRST LINE

In a moment, the story begins on a quiet Saturday morning in Seoul.

Hana Parker is sitting alone in a laboratory. Outside, the city is beginning an ordinary day. On the other side of the world, television screens show images of unrest.

An old Soviet name appears on a screen. Two helicopters are on their way.

Nothing has happened yet. No war. No nuclear threat. No global crisis. Only a number. 99.73 percent. Too good to be true. That is how major events often begin. Not with drums. Not with a declaration.

Not with someone saying: From now on, everything changes. Usually, change begins as something small. An anomaly. A decision. A line of code. A document someone almost does not open. An order that arrives a few seconds too late. A system doing exactly what it was built to do. And perhaps that is the thought with which Red Flag should begin. The most dangerous systems are not necessarily the systems that fail. Sometimes they are the systems that work perfectly.

And the most dangerous choices may not be the choices someone imposes on us.

But the choices we are absolutely certain we made ourselves.

Welcome to 2027.

CHAPTER 1: An Unexpected Warm Encounter

Saturday, June 5
KIST Institute / Seoul – South Korea
09:12 KST

'Science begins where the expected answer ends.'
— Hana Parker —

The morning sun slid across the mountains around Seoul and reflected off the glass façade of the Korea Institute of Science and Technology, the KIST complex built high above the city against a mountainside. Inside, Hana Parker noticed little of it.

She had been sitting at the same workstation for more than an hour. A new series of calculations was running on the largest screen in front of her. Green and blue lines moved slowly across a dark background. Beside them were tables of measurements that would have been meaningless to almost anyone else. Not to Hana.

She leaned forward slightly.

TWO-QUBIT FIDELITY: 99.73%
ERROR RATE: BELOW THRESHOLD
PHOTONIC LINK: ACTIVE

That percentage kept bothering her. Not because it was bad. Because it was too good. Hana picked up the cup of green matcha beside her keyboard and took an absent-minded sip. She immediately grimaced. 'Bitter.' She looked at her tea.

The matcha had once tasted smooth and earthy, but after sitting beside her keyboard for more than an hour, there was little of that left. Hana checked her watch.

A little after nine in the morning. She had not even noticed how long she had been staring at the same calculations. Hana set the cup down and looked around.

On a Saturday morning, the laboratory was almost empty.

Only the soft hum of the cooling system and the rhythmic clicking of a relay broke the silence. Hana opened the raw measurement data. The quantum processor her team was working on was still a long way from what newspapers liked to call a quantum computer. The system was too unstable, too small, and too dependent on classical error correction. But every month they got closer.

And sometimes, like this morning, something happened that their models said should not yet be possible. Hana ran the same calculation again.

The same result appeared. 99.73%. She frowned. 'Impossible.'

She changed two parameters. Again. 99.72%. Almost identical.

Hana opened a second window and compared the results with older theoretical simulations from the research archive. A list of dozens of documents appeared.

Japanese studies. American papers. A Dutch study on photonic coupling. And at the very bottom, an old scanned Soviet document, most of which had never been translated. She opened it. The scan was poor. The edges were yellowed, and several lines had been blacked out.

At the top it read: АКАДЕМИЯ НАУК СССР — 1991. Below it was a series of equations.

Hana barely knew any Russian, but mathematics did not need translation.

She leaned closer to the screen. One of the equations looked strikingly similar to the error-correction model her own system had just independently approached. 'How…' She scrolled farther down. At the bottom of the page was a partially damaged reference to the original researcher.

A. M. VOLK—

The rest was missing. Probably one of the thousands of theorists from the final years of the Soviet Union. People who had worked out ideas with paper and pencil for which the technology simply had not existed at the time.

She moved the window aside. Interesting. Nothing more.

Meanwhile, the image changed on a smaller screen to her right. CNN.

She had muted the sound, but the images were clear enough.

Smoke above an American city. Police vehicles. A burning car.

People running through a shopping street. Along the bottom of the screen:
UNREST CONTINUES ACROSS UNITED STATES

Hana looked back at her calculations. Ten seconds later, she looked at CNN again. This time Washington appeared. She picked up her phone. No new messages. She liked that even less.

Mia lived in a suburb of Washington, D.C., and had called her the night before. Her sister had tried to sound casual, but Hana knew her too well. It's a mess here, Hana.

Those had been her exact words. Hana opened WhatsApp.

Their last conversation was still at the top. She typed:
HEY. ARE THE STREETS STILL SAFE?
LET ME KNOW YOU'RE OKAY. LOVE YOU.

Sent. A minute later, her phone vibrated.
HECTIC HERE. DAYTIME IS STILL OKAY.
I'M STAYING IN AT NIGHT. DON'T WORRY. MISS YOU. X

Hana kept looking at the screen for a moment.

Then she put her phone beside the keyboard, but her attention did not return to the numbers. For a while she simply sat still. In front of her, the next simulation continued to run. Outside, Seoul slowly moved into the morning.

Eventually Hana looked back at the old Soviet document. She opened it fully and scrolled down.

A. M. VOLK—

She enlarged the damaged line. The software tried to reconstruct the missing letters.

A. M. VOLKOV

Hana stared at the name for several seconds. The full name did not make the document any more important. Volkov was not a familiar name in the literature, not a celebrated scientist. A ghost from a forgotten archive.

Somewhere outside the laboratory, glass began to vibrate. Barely audible at first. Then again. Hana looked up. The sound was not coming from the building. It was coming from the sky. A heavy thrum filled the air above the complex. Rotor blades.

Hana stood and walked to the window. Two black helicopters skimmed low over the trees and turned toward the landing pad. Black Hawks. The Americans. Subtle as ever. She checked her watch. The Australian R&D team was on board.

Hana slipped her phone into her jacket pocket. As she left the laboratory, she glanced once more at the main screen. The results were still there. 99.73%. The Soviet document had disappeared behind the other windows.

Hana stepped onto the landing pad. Rotor wash struck her face as the first Black Hawk touched down. Dust and small stones skittered across the concrete. KIST staff waited farther back behind the yellow safety line.

A few seconds later, the second helicopter landed beside it. The engines kept running. The side door of the first aircraft slid open. Two men in uniform stepped out, followed by members of the Australian research team. Hana recognized several faces from previous joint projects.

Then the last passenger stepped out. She stopped. Jack Reid.

He ducked beneath the spinning rotor blades and walked toward the safety line with a bag over his shoulder. Even from a distance, Hana recognized that walk. Relaxed. As if being in a hurry was something that happened only to other people.

Jack saw her. He slowed. A smile appeared on his face.

To her annoyance, Hana felt herself smiling too. Tokyo. It had been years, but apparently some memories did not need permission to return. A conference on quantum technology. More sake than had been sensible. Discussions that went on deep into the night. Cherry blossoms drifting through the streets. Jack had tried to convince Hana that artificial intelligence would eventually become more important than the hardware it ran on.

Hana had told him he was wrong. Jack had replied that he was happy to give her twenty years to admit it. After that, their careers had gone in different directions. Until today.

Jack stopped in front of her. ‘Hana Parker.’

‘Jack Reid.’

He studied her. ‘You look exactly the same.’

‘Then you urgently need glasses.’

His smile widened. ‘I missed that.’

‘My insults?’

‘Your scientific precision.’

Behind him, the other Australians were heading toward the building. Hana gestured at the helicopters. ‘You could have just come from the airport like normal people.’

‘And miss this entrance?’

‘Exactly my point.’ She raised an eyebrow. ‘And I’m supposed to believe you had absolutely nothing to do with it?’

Jack spread his hands innocently. ‘Not my choice.’

Hana smiled. ‘That’s what men from intelligence agencies always say.’

Jack grinned. ‘Who says I work for an intelligence agency?’

‘No one.’ Hana turned away. ‘That’s why everyone knows.’

Jack burst out laughing and walked with her. ‘You really haven’t changed at all.’

‘You have.’

He glanced at her from the side. ‘For the better?’

Hana gave him a playful look. ‘I haven’t decided yet.’

They reached the glass doors of the research building. Inside, it suddenly became quiet as the roar of the helicopters faded behind them. Jack looked through the glass at the laboratories. ‘So this is where you’re building the miracle.’

‘There are no miracles.’

‘That sounds disappointing.’

‘Just hardware, mathematics, and researchers who don’t get enough sleep.’

‘That sounds more like the Hana I know.’

They walked on. Jack looked through a window at a cryogenic installation. ‘How far along are you?’

Hana glanced sideways at him. ‘You’ll hear that tomorrow during the briefing.’

Jack grinned. ‘Now you’re using my own answer against me.’

‘Efficiency.’

‘And I thought you were happy to see me.’

Hana stopped at an intersection in the corridor. ‘I am happy to see you.’

Jack said nothing. The playful expression on his face faded just enough to make the silence between them suddenly feel different.

Hana broke eye contact first. ‘Your rooms are in the guesthouse. Give everyone an hour to freshen up.’

‘And after that?’ Jack asked, curious and a little impatient.

‘Food.’

‘Official program?’

‘No.’

‘Better.’

Hana started walking again. Jack followed. ‘Do you remember that little restaurant in Tokyo?’ he asked.

‘The one where you claimed wasabi was barely spicy?’

‘I was right.’

‘You couldn’t speak for twenty minutes.’

‘Jet lag.’

Hana laughed. At the exit to the guesthouse, she stopped. ‘I know a place here that’s better.’

Jack raised an eyebrow. ‘Is that a scientific hypothesis?’

‘A proven fact.’

‘Then I’ll have to inspect the evidence.’

‘Seven thirty.’

‘I’ll be there.’

Hana walked away.

‘Hana?’

She looked back. Jack was still standing by the door. ‘It really is good to see you again.’

This time he was not joking. Hana looked at him for several seconds. ‘You too, Jack.’

She turned and headed toward her laboratory. Jack watched until she disappeared around the corner. A short vibration against his chest. Not his regular phone. His smile vanished.

He waited. Five seconds. Ten.

Then he did not go to the guesthouse. He took a side corridor. By a window, he checked that no one was following him and took a slim phone from the inside pocket of his jacket. Not a personal device. Not an Australian government model. A device without a logo.

He pressed his thumb to the sensor. The screen stayed black.

A second check followed. Then a single line appeared.

SECURE CHANNEL — CANBERRA

Jack looked down the empty corridor. He opened the message.

ARRIVAL CONFIRMED, ADDITIONAL TASKING AUTHORIZED.

A new line appeared.

POSSIBLE SECURITY BREACH — KIST.

Jack read the line again. His presence at KIST had just acquired a second meaning. Another line.

DO NOT DISCLOSE.

Then, at the bottom:

FURTHER INSTRUCTIONS TO FOLLOW.

Jack deleted the message. The screen went black.

In the distance, Hana's laugh carried down the corridor as she ran into a colleague somewhere.

Jack looked in that direction. A few minutes ago, he had genuinely been happy to see her again. That was the problem. He slipped the phone back into his jacket. 'Damn it.' Then he walked toward the guesthouse.

Behind him, in Hana's deserted laboratory, one computer remained active for a few more seconds before the automatic sleep mode engaged.

The old Soviet document appeared once more among the open windows.

A. M. VOLKOV

Below it was a line Hana had not seen.

ARCHIVE REFERENCE: QR-17

Then the screen went black.

CHAPTER 2: Shadows of Havana

Saturday, June 5
Hotel Nacional / Havana
19:30 CDT

'Revolutions are beautiful only to people who watch them from hotels.'
— Yusef Nouri —

The Chevrolet had seen better days.

Harry Wheeler had not. He sank contentedly into the broad leather back seat while the driver guided the old car through Havana. The V8 rumbled heavily, as if every component objected to the journey on its own. Metal rattled beneath the dashboard. With every bump, the leather creaked under Harry's weight.

Harry lit a cigar and let the smoke drift slowly out through the open window. He enjoyed every second of the too-short ride. Warm Cuban evening air flowed inside. Havana slipped past him in colors Washington seemed to have forgotten long ago. Peeling façades in blue, yellow, and pink. American cars from an era when politicians still wore hats. Music from open windows. An old man on a balcony, smoking a cigar.

Harry smiled. A city that had officially been America's enemy for decades and had somehow preserved more American history than America itself. The driver looked at him in the mirror.

'Primera vez en Cuba, señor?'

Harry shook his head. 'Not exactly.'

The driver did not understand him, but nodded as if the answer were perfectly clear. Harry looked outside again.

In Washington, they would probably declare him insane if they knew where he really was this weekend. The Speaker of the House was not supposed to drive incognito through Havana on a Saturday night. Certainly not for a meeting with an Iranian intermediary for Red Flag. And absolutely not with a suitcase whose contents could end his political career within five minutes.

Harry looked at the leather suitcase beside him. He tapped it once.

'Stay quiet.'

The driver looked in his mirror again. Harry smiled pleasantly.

'Not you.'

The Chevrolet turned onto the grounds of Hotel Nacional. The imposing building rose above the coast as if it were still waiting for gangsters, diplomats, and revolutionaries from another century. Palm trees moved slowly in the wind. Music drifted from the garden. On the terrace, tourists drank cocktails as if geopolitics existed only on television.

The car stopped. Harry paid the driver and got out. He tilted his fedora a little farther to one side. Perfect. His mother used to say you could recognize a man by his hat. Harry had later made that into a habit of his own. His fedora was almost always set at a slight angle, as it was tonight.

He picked up his suitcase. His reservation was waiting at reception. Not under Wheeler. Obviously.

'Mr. Harold Wilson?' the receptionist asked.

Harry smiled. 'Until tomorrow morning.'

She looked at him, puzzled. 'Excuse me?'

'Long flight.'

The woman smiled politely and slid the room key toward him. Harry took it and chuckled. He could never resist an easy opening. That was his weakness. Or his talent.

He had never quite decided which. On the way to the elevator, he surveyed the lobby through the mirrored wall opposite the bar. No faces he recognized.

No unusual interest. No men reading the same newspaper just a little too long. The elevator doors closed. Only when he was alone did the smile disappear from his face. His reflection in the old elevator looked back at him questioningly.

Fifty-six years old.

Speaker of the House. Second in the constitutional line of succession to the presidency.

He had always found that last formulation especially interesting. Second.

As if history formed a neat queue.

The elevator stopped. Harry stepped out and made his way down the corridor, looking for his room.

Three floors below, Yusef Nouri sat in the hotel bar. He was not drinking. In front of him stood a glass of vodka in which the ice was slowly melting. His phone lay face down on the table. Beside his right hand lay an old coin.

An Iranian rial.

Worn. Almost worthless.

Yusef made it disappear between his index and middle fingers, brought it back, and rolled it across his knuckles. An old habit. People who knew him did not ask about it. Anyone who did had not known Yusef long enough.

He looked at the clock behind the bar. 19:42. Wheeler had arrived twelve minutes ago. Yusef knew without having seen him. The Chevrolet Harry had taken from José Martí International Airport had been checked twice by one of his people.

No one had followed him.

That did not mean no one knew he was here. It only meant Yusef had not found anyone.

An important distinction.

His phone vibrated once. No sound.

A one-line message.

GUEST IN ROOM. CLEAN ARRIVAL.

Yusef deleted it. Then, at last, he picked up his glass. Harry Wheeler fascinated him. Not because the American was a communist. Yusef had met enough wealthy men in his life who dreamed of systems in which it was mostly other people who had to share their possessions.

But Harry genuinely believed it.

That made him useful. And dangerous.

Idealists were willing to do things ordinary criminals wanted to be paid for first. Yusef took a sip of vodka.

Above him, the third most powerful politician in the United States was getting ready for a night in Havana. Tomorrow that same man would enter the Pentagon.

And if everything went according to plan, America would voluntarily carry one of its best-guarded secrets outside. Yusef smiled, barely visibly.

No explosives. No guns. No commando unit. Just a politician with access rights. Sometimes human vanity was the best malware in the world.

Harry set his suitcase on the bed. He opened the locks. Click. Click. The lid came up. On top lay a bright Hawaiian shirt, two dress shirts, and a toiletry bag. Harry removed them.

Underneath was his real luggage.

A watch.

Matte black.

No brand. No serial number.

At first glance, hardly remarkable. Harry turned the outer ring. An almost invisible light blinked once.

He stopped immediately.

Not here.

Yusef had warned him. The device had been specially modified to detect wireless network interfaces and function as an invisible relay for an external receiver. Tomorrow all he had to do was get close enough to a Pentagon terminal.

Nothing more was required.

Get close. Scan. Connect.

Yusef and his team would do the rest. Harry looked at the watch.

'An entire country trusts me,' he muttered.

He fastened it around his wrist.

'Their first mistake.'

He picked up his fedora from the bed and put it on.

He studied himself briefly in the mirror. A fraction more crooked. Better. The hat belonged in Washington. With committees, cameras, and journalists. With people who called him Mr. Speaker because they needed something from him.

Tonight he was incognito as Harold Wilson, tourist. And Harry liked that. He picked up his small bag, put his phone inside, and left by the side corridor.

Yusef was standing outside by the garden when Harry found him. His reaction consisted of one slowly raised eyebrow. Harry wore a bright Hawaiian shirt, light-colored trousers, and his familiar fedora.

Harry spread his arms. 'Go ahead.'

Yusef looked him over from shoes to hat. 'You look like a tourist.'

Harry grinned. 'That's the idea.'

'Then your disguise is more convincing than I expected.'

'You could have just said I look good.'

'I only lie when the operation requires it.'

Harry burst out laughing. 'That's why I like you.'

Yusef turned and walked toward the edge of the grounds. Harry followed. Yusef took the old coin from his pocket and rolled it between his fingers. Harry looked at it.

'You always carry that with you.'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

'Because.'

Harry waited. Yusef said nothing more. 'You truly are a source of endless warmth.'

'And yet you keep coming back.'

They continued past the palm trees. Below them, dark waves struck the seawall. The wind carried fragments of trumpet music from La Habana Vieja.

‘A beautiful place for a revolution.’

Yusef looked at him. ‘Revolutions are beautiful only to people who watch them from hotels.’

Harry’s smile faded slightly. ‘You sound almost cynical tonight.’

‘Realistic.’

‘That’s cynicism in a better suit.’

For the first time, Yusef genuinely smiled. ‘Maybe.’

They reached a darker part of the garden. Yusef stopped. ‘The watch.’

Harry held out his wrist. Yusef took it and checked the outer ring.

‘Do not activate it again until you’re inside.’

‘I know.’

‘You know many things, Harry. That isn’t the same as acting accordingly.’

‘I’m Speaker of the House.’

‘Exactly my point.’

Harry pulled his arm back. ‘How close?’

‘Depending on the terminal and the shielding: a few meters. Maybe less. As soon as you find a usable network, you’ll feel one pulse.’

Yusef tapped Harry’s wrist with one finger. ‘One.’

‘And then?’

‘Then you turn the ring two clicks to the right. Not three.’

‘What happens at three?’

‘Then I know you can’t count.’

Harry stared at him. Yusef remained completely serious. Then Harry saw the faintest twitch at the corner of his mouth.

‘Damn it, Yusef.’

‘You’re not the only one who can make jokes.’

‘You’re becoming human.’

‘I try to minimize that risk.’

Yusef became businesslike again.

‘Tomorrow I’ll be outside Washington with the receiver. As soon as your watch detects a network interface and establishes the connection, I take over the signal.’

‘And Pentagon security?’

‘Sees you.’

‘That’s not what I meant.’

‘I know.’

Yusef stepped closer.

‘That’s why this works. Their security is looking for an intruder. You are not an intruder.’

He tapped Harry’s chest.

‘You are invited in.’

Harry looked at the black watch. That was the elegance of it. Not breaking the system. Convincing the system there was nothing to break.

‘How long do you need?’

‘A few minutes. Less if everything goes well.’

‘Encouraging.’

‘Do you want a comfortable answer or a correct one?’

Harry looked at him. ‘You’d make a terrible politician.’

‘Thank you.’

‘That wasn’t a compliment.’

‘That’s why.’

Harry laughed. They walked on. A waiter passed with a tray.

Harry took a glass of rum for himself and a glass of vodka for Yusef.

Yusef raised his glass. ‘To you and the revolution.’

Harry lifted his. ‘To tomorrow, then.’

They touched glasses. Yusef rolled the old coin between his fingers.

‘And what are you going to do if all this works?’ he asked. ‘If Red Flag gets what it wants and the old order finally starts to wobble?’

Harry calmly took a sip of rum. ‘Get promoted.’

Yusef looked at him from the side. ‘Promoted?’

‘Absolutely.’ Harry tapped the brim of his fedora. ‘I was thinking president.’

Yusef stared at him for a second, as if Harry had just answered a question no one had ever asked aloud.

‘President Wheeler?’

‘Why not?’

‘Harry, you are a communist drinking with an Iranian spy in Havana tonight while planning to rob the Pentagon tomorrow.’

Harry shrugged. ‘You’re forgetting my political experience.’

‘God help America.’

Harry grinned. ‘Oh, Yusef. You know me. First the Pentagon, then the White House. A man has to be allowed some ambition.’

‘And when is the inauguration scheduled?’

‘Give it time.’

Harry raised his glass as if addressing an imaginary crowd.

‘But President Wheeler doesn’t sound bad at all.’

‘You’re insane.’

‘They always say that about great statesmen.’

Yusef shook his head, laughing. Harry laughed with him.

Then Harry took the brim of his fedora between two fingers. As almost always, the hat sat at a slight angle. Harry slowly straightened it. Perfectly level above his eyes.

Yusef noticed. His laughter faded.

Harry looked at him. ‘And I will be.’

For a beat, there was silence.

Then Harry tilted the fedora again with one movement. The grin returned.

‘Assuming I survive that damned Pentagon tomorrow first.’

Yusef finally took a sip of his drink.

‘That is what I’d worry about for now, Comrade President.’

Harry raised his glass. ‘See? You’re getting used to it already.’

They both laughed. But as they walked on, Yusef glanced once more at the fedora.

Crooked.

As if nothing had happened.

Later, back in his room, Harry carefully placed the matte-black watch on the table.

His phone vibrated on the bedside table. A message from Yusef:

TOMORROW 13:40. NO SECOND CHANCE.

Harry looked at the watch on the table. Then at Washington on his phone’s world clock. Tomorrow he would once again be the respectable Speaker of the House.

Tomorrow generals would open doors for him. Tomorrow security officers would greet him. Tomorrow no one would ask why Harry Wheeler was standing so close to a Pentagon terminal.

He turned off the light.

Outside his window, Havana kept dancing. Somewhere downstairs in the hotel, Yusef Nouri was still awake.

The old coin lay on the table in front of him. Beside his phone. Yusef turned it over once. On the other side was a year almost completely worn away. He rubbed his thumb across it and slipped the coin back into his pocket.

Then he picked up his phone.

WHEELER READY.

Yusef sent the message.

The reply came almost immediately.

PROCEED.

Yusef looked at the screen for several seconds, then deleted the message.

CHAPTER 3: An Unspoken Promise

Saturday, June 5
KIST Institute / Seoul
19:30 KST

'Two worlds met in a smile.
Time held its breath for what was to come.'
— Red Flag —

At seven thirty, Jack was standing by the exit of the guesthouse.

Hana was not there yet. He checked his watch. 19:31. Jack smiled. Apparently some things did change. In Tokyo, she had always been the one who arrived five minutes early.

The glass door behind him slid open.

'Don't say anything.'

Jack turned. Hana came outside wearing dark trousers, a light blouse, and a thin jacket draped loosely over one arm. Her hair, practical and tied back that morning, now fell loose over her shoulders.

Jack made a point of looking at his watch again.

'I said, don't say anything.'

'I didn't say anything.'

'You looked.'

'I'm allowed to look.'

Hana walked past him. 'Come on.'

Jack caught up with her. 'Where are we going?'

'Away.'

'That sounds promising.'

'From KIST.'

'That sounds even better.'

They walked toward the exit of the grounds. Jack pointed at the taxis waiting by the main entrance.

'Taxi?'

'No.'

'Subway?'

'No.'

He looked at her. 'Helicopter?'

Hana gave him a dry look. 'Definitely not a helicopter.'

Jack laughed. 'Then what?'

Hana slipped her hands into her jacket pockets. 'Walk.'

They left the grounds and followed the road down between the wooded hills. The evening air was still warm. Through the trees, Seoul lay below them like a sea of light.

Hana looked at the city. 'Beautiful, isn't it?'

Jack followed her gaze. 'That's still quite a distance.'

Hana looked at him. 'I thought we were making this romantic.'

'Romantic?'

‘A little walking. Clear moon. View over Seoul.’

Hana sighed theatrically. ‘But no. Mr. Jet Lag.’

Jack grinned. ‘I really wasn’t looking for a taxi.’

‘You don’t have to anymore.’

She took out her phone. ‘I’ll order one.’

‘Hana.’

‘Too late.’

‘My walking legs are excellent.’

‘They all say that from inside a taxi.’

Buses moved through broad streets, scooters darted between cars, and Korean neon signs flickered red, blue, and white above the shops. The smell of grilled meat drifted from a side street. Somewhere farther away, music came through an open window.

Jack walked beside Hana without saying anything. She liked that. All day, people had wanted something from her. Measurements. Diagrams. Access rights. Technical answers.

Tomorrow it would start again.

But right now, someone was walking beside her who asked for nothing.

After a few minutes, Jack glanced at her. ‘You still haven’t told me where we’re going.’

‘I don’t know either.’

He almost stopped walking.

Hana looked at him. ‘What?’

‘I’m trying to remember whether you’ve ever said that before.’

‘Probably not.’

‘Definitely not.’

She smiled. ‘I live here, Jack. That doesn’t mean every walk needs a destination.’

‘This sounds suspiciously like relaxation.’

‘Don’t exaggerate.’

They walked on. After a while, the wider roads fell behind them and they entered narrower streets. Low restaurants were squeezed between modern buildings.

Outside a small shop, meat turned over a grill. Two students laughed as they shared a cup of tteokbokki. An old woman arranged fruit in wooden crates.

Jack looked around. ‘I don’t know this Seoul.’

‘That’s because visitors always see the same places.’

‘And you?’

‘I try to avoid the places visitors go.’

‘Welcoming.’

‘Efficient.’

Jack grinned. He remembered that word. He pointed to a restaurant across the street.

‘There?’

Hana barely looked. ‘Reservation.’

‘And?’

‘No.’

‘Fine. There?’

‘Too crowded.’

A few doors farther on, a small sign hung above a staircase. Jack pointed up.

‘That looks quiet.’

Hana looked. ‘Internet café.’

‘A what?’

‘People go there to work.’

Jack stared at her. ‘You really do know every place where people can work.’

‘Occupational hazard.’

He pointed farther down the street. ‘Then what do you want?’

Hana stopped for a moment. For the first time, she seemed to genuinely think about the question.

‘Somewhere I don’t need a badge.’

Jack waited.

‘No laptop,’ she continued.

‘Good.’

‘No reservation.’

‘Excellent.’

‘And no one asking me what our error correction does.’

Jack nodded gravely. ‘That last one significantly limits our options in Seoul.’

Hana gave his arm a light shove. ‘Walk.’

Eventually they found a tiny restaurant with six tables. No English menu. No tourists. No music. Just an older man behind a grill and a woman who greeted Hana as if she knew her.

Jack looked from the woman to Hana. ‘You come here often.’

‘Sometimes.’

‘How often is sometimes?’

‘Enough.’

They sat by the window. Hana ordered without asking him anything.

Jack raised an eyebrow. ‘And what if I wanted something else?’

‘Then you shouldn’t have gone to dinner in Seoul with a Korean woman.’

‘Clear.’

A few minutes later, small dishes appeared on the table, followed by mandu and grilled meat. Jack picked up his chopsticks. Hana looked at his hand.

‘You’ve improved.’

‘At what?’

‘That.’

Jack looked at his chopsticks. ‘I practiced after Tokyo.’

Hana started laughing. ‘I don’t believe you.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because in Tokyo you claimed you were excellent with them.’

‘I was.’

‘You threw half a dumpling at Leni.’

Jack put down his chopsticks. ‘That was a technical incident.’

‘It landed in her hair.’

‘Unforeseen trajectory.’

Hana shook her head, laughing. ‘She called you ‘Dumpling Jack’ for three days.’

‘Three?’

‘At least.’

Jack pointed at her with his chopsticks. ‘And you encouraged her.’

‘Of course.’

He smiled. ‘She was dangerous.’

‘Leni?’

‘Socially dangerous.’

Hana laughed. ‘She still is.’

Jack picked up a dumpling and inspected it with exaggerated care before bringing it to his mouth.

‘Don’t worry. I’ve had training since then.’

‘From Australian intelligence?’

Jack stopped. Hana looked at him innocently. Then he began to laugh.

‘You’re never letting that go, are you?’

‘Never,’ she said teasingly.

‘Good.’

‘Why good?’

‘Because at least I know some things haven’t changed.’

For a moment, Hana held his gaze. Then she looked away with a small smile.

After dinner they kept walking. The city had grown darker, but not quieter. At an intersection, a group of young people waited for the pedestrian light to turn green. A delivery rider on a scooter squeezed between two taxis. An electronic melody drifted from a shop.

Jack stopped at a small stall. ‘Soju-yogurt mix?’

Hana looked at him in surprise. ‘I’m not your project, am I?’

Jack shrugged. ‘I have no idea what you’re talking about.’

Hana raised an eyebrow. ‘Of course not.’

‘I do my homework,’ Jack admitted.

‘On soju?’

‘Apparently.’

Hana looked at him for another second. ‘That’s either thoughtful or disturbing.’

‘I’m going with thoughtful.’

‘Sure.’

‘Soju-yogurt mix?’ Jack asked again, this time playfully.

She held out her hand. ‘Definitely now.’

They continued with paper cups in hand. Jack sampled his drink impatiently.

‘When was the last time you actually took a vacation?’

Hana did not answer.

Jack looked sideways. ‘That long?’

‘I am on vacation.’

‘When?’

‘Now.’

Jack looked around. ‘It’s Saturday night.’
‘Exactly.’
‘That doesn’t count.’
‘Why not?’
‘Because tomorrow morning you’ll be back in a laboratory.’
‘Probably.’
‘So, not a vacation.’
Hana took a sip. ‘And you?’
Jack thought about it. ‘A few days in Tasmania.’
‘When?’
‘Four years ago.’
Now Hana looked at him. ‘And you’re criticizing me?’
‘Absolutely. Hypocrisy does not automatically make an argument wrong.’
‘That sounds like something you say during an interrogation.’
Jack smiled. ‘Maybe.’
They walked several meters in silence.
‘Do you miss Australia?’ Hana asked.
‘A little. Always.’
‘Melbourne?’
‘Victoria. Outside Melbourne.’
‘But you did live on a farm, right?’
‘Homestead.’
‘That’s the same thing.’
‘Absolutely not.’
Hana smiled. ‘What’s the difference?’
‘A farm has work. A homestead has character.’
‘And work.’
‘A lot of work.’
‘So, a farm.’
Jack shook his head. ‘One day I’ll show you.’
The words came naturally. Only afterward did he seem to realize what he had said.
Hana looked at him. Jack calmly took another sip of soju. He did not take the words back.
‘One day,’ Hana repeated.
‘If you ever take a vacation.’
‘That could take a while.’
‘I’m patient.’
There was that silence again. Not awkward. Quite the opposite.
Hana looked ahead. ‘Maybe.’
Jack smiled. For him, that was enough.
They entered a street where several electronics stores were still open. Cameras. Audio equipment. Drones. Optical components.

A large screen above one shop showed a demonstration of a new photonic data link. Light pulses moved through a transparent fiber while Korean text scrolled across the display.

Hana slowed. Jack noticed and turned. Hana looked up.

‘What?’

‘Nothing.’

‘You’re looking.’

‘Am I not allowed?’

‘You said that to me a few hours ago.’

Jack stepped beside her. A cross-section of an optical coupling appeared on the screen.

Hana frowned slightly. ‘Interesting.’

Jack sighed. ‘Here we go.’

‘What?’

‘We were normal people for almost an hour.’

‘I am normal.’

‘You’re staring at a photonic transceiver on your night off.’

Hana pointed at the screen. ‘See that coupling?’

‘No.’

‘Exactly.’

Jack looked at her. ‘That sounds insulting.’

‘The tolerance between the fiber and the modulator is extremely small. If that prototype really does what they claim, they’ve improved the positioning.’

‘Who?’

Hana read the small print at the bottom of the screen.

‘Korean assembly. Japanese precision optics.’

Jack looked at the display again. To him it was mostly a glossy promotional video. Apparently not to Hana.

‘Is that important?’

She shrugged. ‘Maybe.’

‘With you, that usually means yes.’

‘No. It means maybe.’

Jack waited. Hana watched for a few more seconds, then walked on. ‘Come on.’

‘That’s all you’re going to say?’

‘There’s nothing to explain.’

‘You just stared at that screen for twenty seconds as if it had personally offended you.’

‘The alignment is clever.’

‘That still sounds like work.’

Hana took his arm and pulled him along. ‘Which is why we’re walking away now.’

Jack glanced at her hand around his arm. Hana noticed.

She did not let go.

A few streets later, they heard music. Not loud. An old pop song drifted from a small clothing store where a girl behind the counter was singing softly along.

Hana suddenly started laughing.

Jack looked at her. ‘What?’

‘Tokyo.’

He listened. Then he recognized the song. ‘Oh no.’

Hana grinned. ‘Oh yes.’

‘Not that song.’

‘Exactly that song.’

Jack groaned. ‘Leni.’

Hana laughed harder.

Years ago, after a long conference day, Leni Santos had dragged them into a small venue in Tokyo. Not because Jack or Hana wanted to dance. Precisely because they did not.

Leni had simply decided that two people capable of discussing quantum architectures for three hours urgently needed to do something that did not require a whiteboard. She had taken Hana by one hand. Jack by the other. Neither of them had been given a chance to object.

‘We stood there as if we’d been taken hostage,’ Hana said.

‘We had been taken hostage.’

‘By a woman five foot three.’

‘That says nothing about her operational capability.’

Hana burst out laughing.

Jack pointed at her. ‘You’re laughing, but you didn’t want to do it either.’

‘True.’

‘Five minutes later, you were dancing.’

‘So were you.’

‘Because Leni threatened to alter my conference presentation.’

Hana stared at him. ‘She never told me that.’

‘She said she’d put a picture of a kangaroo on every slide.’

Hana stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. ‘You’re kidding.’

‘Completely serious.’

She laughed so loudly that two passersby turned to look.

Jack had eyes only for Hana. He could not remember the last time he had heard her laugh that hard.

Maybe Tokyo.

Maybe that was why he remembered that evening so well. Not because of Leni. Not because of the dancing. But because of the radiant Hana now standing in front of him.

Hana got herself under control again.

‘You should have let her use the kangaroos.’

‘Treason.’

‘Scientific progress.’

‘You’re a terrible person, Parker.’

‘You missed that.’

‘Terribly.’

Hana looked at him. This time, her smile stayed.

They reached a quieter street. The sound of traffic was farther behind them. Jack checked his watch.

‘Almost ten.’

‘Tired?’

‘Insulting.’

‘Jet lag.’

‘Slander.’

Hana smiled.

Across the street, warm light glowed behind the windows of a small hotel bar. No neon. No loud music. Through the window, only a few tables were visible.

Jack looked at it. Then at Hana. ‘Now?’

Hana followed his gaze. ‘One drink.’

‘Of course.’

‘And then home.’

‘You sound like someone trying to convince herself.’

‘Jack.’

‘One drink.’

They crossed the street. Inside, it was quiet enough to hear each other. A pianist played softly in one corner. Behind the bar, dark bottles stood against an illuminated wooden wall.

They chose a small table by the window. Jack ordered whisky. Hana ordered wine.

‘No matcha?’ Jack asked.

‘Even I have limits.’

‘Good to know.’

For a few minutes, neither of them said anything. The silence felt different from outside. Smaller. Closer.

Hana slowly turned her glass between her fingers.

‘It was good,’ Hana said.

Jack looked at her. ‘What?’

‘This.’

She made a small gesture toward the window. ‘Walking.’

Jack nodded. ‘We can do this more often.’

‘I heard that.’

‘Revolutionary concept.’

Hana smiled. Then she grew more serious.

‘I’d forgotten how long ago Tokyo really was.’

‘Seven years.’

‘You know exactly.’

‘Of course.’

‘Why?’

Jack looked at his glass. ‘Good conference.’

Hana raised one eyebrow. ‘Liar.’

Jack smiled. ‘Good people.’

‘Leni?’

‘Among others.’

Hana waited. Eventually Jack looked at her.

‘Mostly you.’

Hana said nothing.

Outside, a taxi passed. Its light briefly swept across the ceiling and disappeared again.

‘Jack…’

‘I’m not expecting anything.’

‘That’s not what I was going to say.’

He waited.

Hana looked at her glass. ‘When you stepped out of that helicopter this morning…’

She stopped. Jack said nothing.

‘…I was happy.’

‘You already said that.’

‘No.’

She looked at him now. ‘Not like that.’

The smile disappeared from his face.

Hana searched for words. She rarely did. With equations, she knew exactly where every variable belonged. With people, that certainty did not exist.

‘I used to think Tokyo was just…’

‘A conference?’

‘Yes.’

Jack nodded slowly. ‘So did I.’

‘And?’

‘That turned out to be incorrect.’

Hana barely smiled. ‘Scientifically established?’

‘Fairly convincing dataset.’

‘How large?’

‘One.’

‘Statistically worthless.’

‘Enough for me.’

Hana looked at him.

Jack moved his hand across the table. Not far. Just enough to place his fingers beside hers. He did not touch her.

Hana looked at his hand.

Then she slid her fingers against his.

Jack slowly exhaled.

Nothing more happened. Nothing more needed to.

After a while, Hana said, ‘On one condition.’

Jack looked at her. ‘Which is?’

‘That we don’t make this too complicated.’

‘My specialty.’

‘I believe that immediately.’

‘And your specialty is making things complicated and then solving them.’

‘Also true.’

Jack turned his hand over. Hana let her fingers slide into his.

‘Then we have a division of labor.’

‘Jack.’

‘No work.’

‘Better.’

They smiled.

When they came outside later, Seoul was still awake. The air had grown cooler. Hana put on her jacket. Jack walked beside her through the quiet street.

The silence between them felt different now.

Their hands brushed once. Then again. The third time, Jack took hers.

Hana let him. She felt herself beginning to blush and quickly looked straight ahead.

‘About that homestead,’ she blurted out.

Jack looked sideways. ‘Yes?’

‘Do you really have kangaroos?’

‘Not on demand.’

‘Disappointing,’ Hana said, amused.

‘But there is eucalyptus, wine, and far too much space.’

‘And no laboratory?’

‘No laboratory.’

‘No badges?’

‘No badges.’

‘No reservation?’

Jack smiled. ‘You can even come without an appointment.’

Hana gave Jack a mischievous look. ‘Maybe I will.’

Jack gently squeezed her hand. He smiled but said nothing.

For one evening, saying nothing was enough.

Jack and Hana continued walking. The warm lights of the hotel were now some distance behind them.

‘Jack?’ Hana asked, suddenly animated.

‘Yes?’

‘I think we’re walking the wrong way.’

Jack looked at their intertwined hands.

‘That depends on where we’re going.’

Hana looked at him. A small smile appeared. ‘Back.’

‘To KIST?’

Hana slowly shook her head. ‘To the hotel.’

Behind them, the city kept moving. Buses drove on. Lights turned green. Restaurants closed their doors while other bars grew busier.

A few streets back, the same demonstration began again on a large electronic screen. A pulse of light shot through a hair-thin optical fiber.

Korean assembly. Japanese precision optics.

No one stopped to look.

For the first time in years, that evening they were not the intelligence officer and the scientist. They were simply Jack and Hana.

Neither of them realized how little time the world would give them for that.

CHAPTER 4: The Dance of the Spies

Saturday, June 5
La Habana Vieja / Havana
22:15 CDT

‘A secret is safe only when no one knows all of it.’
— Yusef Nouri —

Yusef Nouri saw the man for the third time.

That was one time too many.

Yusef stood beneath the awning of a closed tobacco shop at the edge of Habana Vieja and pretended to be interested in a display filled with yellowed cigar boxes. In the glass, he could see the street behind him reflected.

Tourists. A taxi. Two young women came laughing out of a bar. A homeless man sat on the curb with a plastic cup in front of him. And fifty meters away, Yusef saw the same gray linen jacket that had passed Hotel Nacional twenty minutes earlier.

The man was not looking at him. That made him more interesting.

Yusef took the old Iranian rial from his pocket and rolled it between his fingers. The man remained where he was.

Yusef crossed the street. No faster than necessary. On the other side, he entered a small bar where musicians played between the tables. A pianist led the trio, accompanied by trumpet and double bass. He looked as though he had lived through the Cuban Revolution personally and still had not decided what he thought of it.

Yusef sat at the bar. ‘Agua mineral.’

The bartender placed a bottle in front of him. Yusef looked into the mirror behind the bottles.

The entrance remained empty.

Thirty seconds. A minute.

Then the man in the gray jacket walked past. Without looking inside.

Yusef took a sip.

Maybe nothing.

In his line of work, nothing was always something. Experience had taught him that often enough.

His phone vibrated. The trumpet player started a new number. Yusef placed the device beside his glass. No name. No number. Only three lines.

ACCESS WINDOW CONFIRMED.
13:40–13:47 EDT.
SECONDARY ROUTE AVAILABLE.

Yusef read the message once and deleted it.

Seven minutes.

Tomorrow they probably would not have more than that.

He looked into the mirror again.

The door opened.

Harry Wheeler entered as Harold Wilson. His Hawaiian shirt and fedora still made him a convincing tourist. Harry sat beside Yusef at the bar.

‘You were followed,’ Yusef said.

Harry's smile vanished. 'By whom?'

'If I knew that, I wouldn't have said you were followed.'

Harry looked over his shoulder.

'Don't.'

He immediately turned back to Yusef. 'Right.'

'You're a tourist.'

'We established that.'

'Then act like one.'

Harry grinned. 'I am a tourist.'

Yusef looked at him. 'A tourist doesn't look over his shoulder the moment someone says he's being followed.'

'Details.'

'Details keep people alive.'

Harry nodded toward Yusef's mineral water. 'And yet you're sitting here with me.'

Yusef looked at his mineral water. 'Professionals make mistakes too.'

Harry laughed.

The bartender appeared. Harry ordered rum. Yusef waited until he had moved away again.

'The window is confirmed.'

Harry became serious immediately. 'How long?'

'Seven minutes.'

'That's plenty.'

'No.'

'For a politician it is.'

'That's why I normally don't let politicians do this kind of work.'

The rum arrived. Harry took a sip.

'But tomorrow you will.'

Yusef slowly turned his glass between his fingers. 'Tomorrow you don't have to be a spy.'

'Pity.'

'You only have to be Harry Wheeler.'

Harry looked at him.

Yusef leaned forward slightly. 'Every layer of security in the Pentagon is designed to keep out people who don't belong there.'

He tapped the black watch beneath Harry's sleeve.

'You do belong there.'

Harry looked at the watch. 'So I do nothing.'

'Almost.'

'That sounds less reassuring.'

'You walk in. You talk. You make jokes. You ask questions someone in your position is allowed to ask.'

'I'm excellent at that.'

'I know.'

'Was that a compliment?'

‘No.’

Harry smiled.

Yusef continued. ‘When you get close enough to the terminal, you’ll feel one short pulse.’

Harry nodded. ‘Two clicks to the right.’

‘Not three.’

‘You already told me that.’

‘And yet I’m repeating it.’

‘You have very little faith in me.’

Yusef looked him straight in the eye. ‘I have exactly enough faith in you.’

Harry’s smile faded a little. ‘That sounds almost philosophical.’

‘It isn’t.’

‘Then what do you have faith in?’

Yusef looked at the people in the bar. A German couple. Three Cuban students. Two men playing dominoes. A waitress collecting glasses.

No one was watching them.

‘That you like being important.’

Harry raised an eyebrow. ‘That was definitely not a compliment.’

‘But it is reliable.’

Harry took another sip of rum. ‘And if the terminal finds nothing?’

‘Then you walk away.’

‘And if the connection is detected?’

‘Then you walk away.’

‘And if someone asks why I was standing near that terminal?’

‘Then you’re Speaker of the House and you make something up.’

Harry considered that for a second.

‘Finally, a part of the plan where my training is relevant.’

Yusef smiled despite himself.

Then his phone vibrated again.

This time he looked immediately.

A small red square appeared in the corner of the screen.

Yusef’s smile vanished.

Harry saw it. ‘What?’

Yusef stood. ‘Check.’

‘What is it?’

‘Not here.’

He placed money beneath his glass and headed toward the back of the bar. Harry followed.

‘Yusef.’

‘Keep talking.’

‘About what?’

‘Doesn’t matter.’

Harry looked at him. ‘You truly have no idea how difficult that request is for me.’

‘Try.’

They walked down a narrow corridor past the restrooms. At the end was a door to a courtyard. Yusef pushed it open. Warm night air struck them.

A stone staircase led up to another street.

Harry looked back. ‘Are we being followed?’

‘Maybe.’

‘I don’t like that word.’

‘Neither do I.’

They climbed the stairs. At the top, Yusef turned left. Then right. Harry followed him through the narrow street.

‘You could have told me we were going for a walk.’

‘You could have stayed at the hotel.’

‘And miss this adventure?’

‘I didn’t want to expose you to that risk.’

They reached a busy street. Music poured from open doorways. People stood outside with glasses in their hands. An American tourist was unsuccessfully trying to dance salsa with a woman who corrected him, laughing.

Yusef slowed.

Only now did he look back.

No one.

He took out his phone. The red square was still there.

He tapped twice. An encrypted window opened.

PYONGYANG — READY
FINANCIAL CHANNEL — CLEARED
WASHINGTON ACCESS — CONFIRMED

Harry read along. ‘Pyongyang.’

Yusef tilted the screen away. ‘Curiosity is not a security clearance.’

‘You’re using their people?’

‘Their network.’

‘Difference?’

‘A big one.’

Harry looked at him. ‘And the financial channel?’

Yusef put the phone away. ‘Also not your problem.’

‘That sounds very much like it is my problem.’

Yusef stopped. Ahead of them, a street musician played guitar beneath a broken lamp. His open case lay on the ground with a few pesos inside.

‘Listen carefully, Harry.’

The lightness had left his voice.

‘Tomorrow there is no team.’

Harry frowned. ‘What do you mean?’

‘If you’re arrested, you don’t know me.’

‘That was clear.’

‘You know no one in Pyongyang. You know no technicians. No financiers. No intermediaries. No receiver.’

‘And Red Flag?’

Yusef looked at him. ‘Especially not Red Flag.’

Harry was silent.

Yusef rolled the coin between his fingers again.

‘You make one mistake when you think about this.’

‘Which?’

‘You imagine there’s a room somewhere where everyone sits at the same table.’

Harry gave a faint smile. ‘There isn’t?’

‘Not for people like us.’

‘Reassuring.’

‘That’s the idea.’

Harry looked around. At the people. The bars. The taxis. The music. An ordinary Saturday night in Havana.

‘So I don’t even know who’s working with us tomorrow.’

‘Correct.’

‘And they don’t know who I am?’

Yusef looked at him.

Harry started laughing. ‘Right. Stupid question.’

‘Remarkable.’

‘What?’

‘That you realized it yourself.’

Harry shook his head.

Yusef’s phone vibrated again.

ROUTE CLEAN.

He deleted the message. The red square disappeared.

‘And?’ Harry asked.

‘Probably nothing.’

‘You said that just now.’

‘No. I said maybe.’

‘Is that better?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why?’

‘Because someone has checked by now.’

Harry looked at him. ‘Who?’

Yusef put his phone away. ‘Exactly.’

They reached a quieter square. The music sounded farther away here. Across the square, a little girl ran after a ball. Her father called something and ran after her, laughing.

Yusef’s gaze lingered a fraction too long.

Harry noticed. ‘Do you have children?’

The coin stopped for a moment between Yusef’s fingers. ‘Two.’

‘How old?’

‘Six and nine.’

‘Do they know what you do?’

‘They think I work in international trade.’

Harry smiled. ‘Technically not entirely a lie.’

‘That’s why it works.’

‘And your wife?’

Yusef looked back at the girl in the square. ‘She asks better questions.’

He said nothing more.

Harry let it go.

Yusef took out his phone again. ‘One more check for tomorrow.’

He opened a simple diagram. No names. No floor plan. Just three blocks and a timeline.

13:40 — ENTRY
13:43 — CONTACT
13:47 — ABORT

Harry pointed at the final line. ‘Four minutes.’

‘If you don’t have a pulse by 13:43, you do nothing.’

‘And if I get it at 13:46?’

‘You do nothing.’

‘Three minutes is enough.’

Yusef’s gaze hardened. ‘No improvisation.’

‘That’s insulting.’

‘That’s experience.’

‘You have very little sense of adventure.’

‘I’m still alive.’

Harry smiled. ‘Strong argument.’

Yusef closed the diagram and put his phone away.

Harry looked at him for a moment.

‘Pyongyang. Financiers. Technicians. Intermediaries. And tomorrow, the Pentagon.’

‘You’re beginning to understand.’

‘I think I understand less and less.’

For the first time that evening, Harry seemed to truly consider the scale of what stood behind him. Not one cell. Not one country. Not one intelligence service. A chain in which no one could see every link.

‘Who actually came up with this?’ he asked.

‘With what?’

‘All of this.’

He made a small gesture between them.

‘Red Flag.’

Yusef rolled the coin across his knuckles.

‘That’s the wrong question, Harry.’

‘What’s the right one?’

‘Why does it work?’

Harry waited.

Yusef looked toward the city. ‘Because everyone wants something different.’

A taxi passed. For a moment, yellow light washed over his face. Then it was gone.

‘And as long as those things point in the same direction, no one needs the same reason.’

Harry was silent.

‘That doesn’t sound very communist.’

‘That’s because you still think ideology and power are the same thing.’

Harry smiled slowly. ‘And you don’t?’

Yusef looked at him. ‘Go to sleep, Harry.’

‘You’re avoiding my question.’

‘Yes.’

‘Why?’

‘Because.’

Harry started laughing. ‘One day I’ll get an answer out of you.’

‘Then you’ll have to live to a very old age.’

‘That’s the plan.’

‘President?’

Harry stood a little straighter. ‘President.’

Yusef shook his head. ‘Tomorrow first.’

‘Always practical.’

‘Someone has to be.’

Harry smiled. ‘That’s why I have you.’

‘A comforting thought.’

‘For me it is.’

Harry sat on the edge of a low stone fountain.

Yusef looked down the street. He slipped the coin back into his pocket.

‘If it works, no one will remember that crooked fedora.’

He turned away.

‘If it goes wrong, no one will forget the third most powerful politician in America.’

He walked off into the night.

Harry remained alone in the square. His fedora was still tilted.

Somewhere far behind him, Cuban music played.

CHAPTER 5: The Idea Born in the Night

Sunday, June 6
Hotel Namsan / Seoul
10:30 KST

‘A breakthrough rarely begins with an answer.
Usually, it begins with the right question.’
— Hana Parker —

The first thing Hana saw when she opened her eyes was light.

A narrow beam of morning sun slipped between the curtains and drew a golden stripe across the carpet. Outside, Seoul was already awake. Hana was not quite there yet.

Beside her, Jack lay on his side, his face half buried in the pillow.

Hana kept looking at him.

Last night suddenly felt much farther away than a few hours.

‘Huh?’

Jack opened one eye. ‘How long have you been doing that?’

Hana looked innocent. ‘Doing what?’

‘Staring.’

‘I wasn’t staring.’

‘Reassuring.’

Hana smiled. Jack shifted a little closer to her.

‘What time is it?’

Hana looked at the clock. ‘Too early.’

‘That’s not a time.’

‘It is on a Sunday.’

He let his head sink back into the pillow.

‘Finally, something we agree on scientifically.’

Hana laughed softly. ‘You’re annoying in the morning.’

‘You knew what you were getting into.’

‘No,’ Hana said. ‘Actually, I didn’t.’

Jack looked at her.

For a moment neither of them said anything. Hana felt the same shy warmth from the night before return.

‘Good morning,’ Jack said.

‘Good morning.’

A while later Hana stood by the window with a mug of hot chocolate in both hands. Far too sweet, but warm.

Below, the city moved between the buildings. Buses, taxis, cyclists. Farther away, Seoul’s green hills lay under a thin veil of morning mist.

Jack came to stand beside her with a glass of pomegranate juice.

‘Healthy,’ Hana said.

‘I’m trying to impress you.’

‘You’re a little late for that.’

Jack looked at her. ‘So I’ve already succeeded?’

Hana took a sip to hide her smile. ‘I didn’t say that.’

‘You are blushing, though.’

‘Drink your juice, Reid.’

She gave him a gentle shove with her shoulder. Jack stayed beside her.

Hana looked outside.

A sharp reflection flashed across the window.

Her smile slowly faded.

Sunlight against glass. A fraction of a second. Nothing more. Still, her gaze lingered on it.

Jack glanced sideways. ‘You’re doing it again.’

Hana looked at him. ‘What?’

‘Thinking.’

‘I do that fairly often.’

‘Not like that.’

Hana looked back at the window.

Light. Glass. Yesterday’s electronics shop. The demonstration on the screen. Japanese precision optics.

And behind that, a memory reaching farther back.

Tokyo. Leni.

Hana put down her mug. ‘Jack.’

He looked up. ‘That sounds dangerous.’

‘Do you remember what Leni’s demo at that symposium in Tokyo was about?’

Jack thought for a moment.

‘Quantum communication, right? Something about qubits sending information through light.’

Hana turned toward him. ‘Yes. More or less.’

‘That sounded like I just barely passed an exam.’

‘You get a passing grade.’

‘Generous.’

‘Leni’s team was working on a quantum network in which qubits could communicate through an optical interface.’

Jack nodded. ‘I remember that. Not how it worked, but what they were trying to do.’

Hana took her tablet from her bag and opened a blank note.

‘We’ve been trying for months to get more capacity out of a single architecture. More qubits, better error correction, longer coherence. And it isn’t enough.’

She began to type.

‘What if we’re looking at the problem the wrong way? What if one larger processor isn’t the solution?’

Jack looked at her. ‘Then what is?’

‘Several smaller ones.’

‘That sounds like several smaller problems.’

Hana looked up. ‘Listen.’

‘I’m listening.’

‘If we can connect separate quantum processors through Leni’s optical interface, we can distribute the load.’

Jack thought about it. ‘So you have two computers that can talk to each other.’

‘Quantum processors.’

‘Fine. Two quantum processors that can talk to each other.’

Jack took a sip of pomegranate juice.

‘Why do they need to pretend they’re one computer?’

Hana was about to answer.

She didn’t.

Jack saw her expression change.

‘Was that, by any chance, a good question?’

‘Be quiet for a second.’

He smiled.

Hana walked slowly to the window.

Why, indeed?

For months they had been trying to make one system bigger and bigger. One architecture. One quantum core asked to do more and more.

But that was not necessary.

Not if the work could be divided.

Not if the AI could decide which calculation went to which processor.

She turned around.

‘Leni provides the roads. Our AI system controls the traffic.’

Jack raised an eyebrow. ‘That sounds familiar.’

‘Your analogy. Don’t get smug.’

Hana kept typing.

‘The AI decides which calculations go to which processor. Different machines, different tasks, but coordinated as one system.’

Jack nodded slowly. ‘A network.’

‘Exactly.’

He saw the excitement in her face. ‘That’s it, isn’t it?’

‘Maybe.’

Hana continued typing.

Then she stopped.

The smile disappeared.

‘No.’

Jack looked up. ‘That sounded a lot less enthusiastic.’

‘The interface is fast enough. That isn’t the problem.’

‘What is?’

‘Coherence.’

Jack waited.

Hana put down the tablet.

‘The moment you want two processors to actually compute as one system, the link has to be far more stable than it was during Leni’s demo in Tokyo.’

‘How much more stable?’

‘A lot.’

‘Scientific term?’

‘Extremely scientific.’

Jack took another sip.

Hana walked to the window. The idea was still there. She could feel it.

But now she could see the problem as well.

‘The light has to carry information between the systems without disturbing the quantum state too much along the way. Every deviation matters. Temperature. Noise. Loss in the link. Alignment.’

‘So the software can do it.’

‘Probably.’

‘And the hardware can’t.’

Hana looked at him. ‘Maybe.’

‘With you, that means no.’

‘It means I don’t know yet.’

Jack smiled. ‘With you, that definitely means no.’

Hana ignored him.

She looked at her notes again. The architecture made sense. She was almost certain of that.

The problem was not the idea.

It was the world in which that idea had to function: materials, heat, light.

Nature simply refused to obey a whiteboard.

Jack watched her think. ‘Call Leni?’

Hana put the tablet back in her bag. ‘Call Leni.’

‘And there goes our quiet Sunday morning.’

Hana looked at him. ‘That’s what you get for sleeping with a scientist.’

Jack raised an eyebrow. ‘I still don’t hear any regret.’

‘I don’t have any.’ At reception, Hana arranged a rental car.

Half an hour later they drove out of the parking garage. Seoul was fully awake by now.

Jack was behind the wheel. After a brief argument, Hana had handed him the keys.

‘You drive on the wrong side,’ he had said.

‘You’re from Australia.’

‘Exactly. I have experience with wrong sides.’

That argument had made no sense at all.

Still, he drove.

For the first few kilometers, Hana kept talking about the problem, but before long she fell silent.

Jack let her think.

The high-rises grew farther apart. Between the apartment blocks, wooded hills appeared more and more often.

The city did not retreat all at once; it seemed to make room gradually for the landscape beneath it.

Roads curved between the hills. In places, morning mist still hung between the trees like a thin veil.

Jack glanced sideways. ‘You’re quiet.’

‘I’m thinking.’

‘That’s not the same thing.’

Hana looked at him. ‘You’re quiet.’

‘I’m enjoying the view.’

‘You?’

‘I can enjoy things.’

‘I’ll have to verify that.’

Jack smiled.

His right hand briefly left the wheel as he adjusted his jacket across his chest.

That was where the secure phone was.

Hana noticed the movement. ‘What?’

‘Nothing.’

She kept looking at him. ‘You did something.’

‘I straightened my jacket.’

‘Why?’

‘Because it was crooked.’

‘It’s still crooked.’

Jack glanced down. ‘Now that you mention it.’

Hana narrowed her eyes slightly. ‘You’re bad at lying.’

Jack looked back at the road.

‘Professionally, that’s a fairly serious accusation.’

‘Then you need more practice.’

She looked outside again.

He looked at Hana, her head resting against the headrest, her gaze on the wooded slopes.

He could tell her something.

Not everything.

Only that Canberra had indications of a possible leak inside KIST.

But even that was something he was not allowed to tell her.

The words did not come. Not because he didn’t trust her. Precisely because he did.

Hana pointed past the last high-rises. A wooded ridge.

‘When I first started working here, I sometimes drove this way on purpose.’

‘Why?’

‘Because inside the lab you forget the world is bigger than the problem you’re looking at.’

Jack smiled. ‘And did it work?’

‘Sometimes. The other times I came up with a solution on the way and drove straight back.’

‘Of course.’

The tunnel ended. Sunlight filled the car again.

Ahead lay green hills, rooftops among the trees and, farther on, the modern buildings of the research district.

Hana looked outside. ‘Beautiful, isn’t it?’

Jack did not answer immediately. ‘Yes.’

‘You weren’t even looking.’

‘I looked before you asked.’

‘Convenient answer.’

‘Professional habit.’

For a few minutes there was only the soft sound of the tires.

‘Yesterday was good,’ Jack said.

‘Yes. Especially without a badge.’

Hana looked at the mountains.

‘Tokyo always used to feel unfinished. Yesterday, a little less so.’

Jack glanced at her. ‘That’s pretty optimistic for you.’

‘Enjoy it. I’m not repeating it.’

‘Too late. Stored.’

‘Intelligence service?’

‘Excellent memory.’

Hana looked at him. Jack kept his eyes on the road.

The phone was still pressing against his chest.

‘Jack?’

‘Yes?’

She hesitated. ‘Never mind.’

He glanced over. ‘What?’

‘Your mind is somewhere else today.’

His hands stayed steady on the wheel.

‘Maybe I’m trying to understand quantum mechanics.’

‘Quantum communication.’

‘See? Hopeless.’

She laughed.

The moment passed.

Jack did not know whether he was relieved by that.

The KIST grounds appeared between the trees.

At the gate, a guard checked their badges and waved them through. The road climbed farther uphill. Through the branches, the glass façades of the research buildings glittered in the morning sun.

Hana sat up straighter.

Jack saw the shift immediately: the woman who had been looking at the mountains gave way to Dr. Hana Parker, scientist and researcher.

Hana had already released her seat belt before the car stopped.

‘Easy,’ he said.

‘No time.’

‘Ten minutes ago there was more to life than this problem.’

Hana opened the door. ‘That was philosophical Hana.’

‘And now?’

‘Now she solves it.’ She got out.

‘I’ll park,’ Jack called after her.

The door slammed shut.

‘I’ll park,’ he said.

Inside, the air smelled of the sweet citrus of yuja-cha, cooled air and equipment that had no idea it was Sunday.

Most of the floor was empty.

Hana went straight to her workstation. Jack put two cups of green matcha on the table.

‘One for you.’

‘Thank you.’

‘And one for me, because by now I know how this works.’

Hana started her terminal and found the old folder from Tokyo.

TOKYO PHOTONICS SYMPOSIUM
DISTRIBUTED QUBIT INTERFACE — SANTOS ET AL.
PACIFIC QUANTUM PHOTONICS INITIATIVE / PROJECT LUMEN

Schematics, measurements and loss curves appeared.

Jack watched with her. ‘This is the point where you lose me.’

‘You lasted a long time.’

Hana scrolled through two graphs and stopped.

Jack saw her posture change. ‘What?’

‘Here.’

‘That doesn’t help me.’

Hana pointed to a series of data points.

‘Their transfer rate was fast enough.’

‘You said that this morning.’

‘Yes.’

She scrolled farther.

‘But look at the error margin.’

Jack stared at the graph as if enough concentration might force it to become understandable.

‘A lot?’

‘Too much.’

‘For what you want.’

‘Far too much.’

Hana leaned back.

There was the limit.

Not theoretical.

Not hypothetical.

Leni had measured it.

Jack looked at Hana. ‘Call her.’

Hana hesitated. ‘I haven’t spoken to Leni in a while.’

‘You’re friends, aren’t you?’

‘Yes. That doesn’t mean we call each other every week.’

‘When was the last time?’

Hana thought about it. ‘A few months ago. She was back in Manila then.’

Jack saw the doubt on her face.

‘Call her. I can tell you want to.’

Hana looked at Jack questioningly. ‘On a Sunday?’

‘She called me ‘Dumpling Jack’ for three days once. Call her.’

Hana picked up her phone and selected Leni.

The call rang.

No answer.

She tried again.

Busy.

Jack looked at her. ‘Maybe she’s asleep.’

‘In Manila?’

‘People sleep there too.’

‘Leni barely does.’

‘That sounds unhealthy.’

‘Try explaining that to her.’

Hana tried one more time.

This time the call connected.

Leni appeared on the screen. Her hair was loose and she wore a dark sweater. A desk lamp burned behind her.

‘Hana?’

‘Hi, Leni.’

Leni looked at her for a few seconds.

‘We haven’t spoken in months and you call me on a Sunday morning.’

‘I know.’

‘So you have a problem.’

‘Maybe.’

Jack leaned into view.

Leni’s eyes widened. ‘Dumpling Jack.’

Jack closed his eyes for a moment. ‘Seven years.’

‘Good work deserves recognition.’

Hana started laughing. ‘Good. You two haven’t forgotten each other.’

Leni looked back at Hana. ‘Let’s hear it.’

‘That optical interface from the Tokyo demo.’

Leni’s expression changed. ‘What about it?’

‘What if we don’t use it for communication between individual qubits, but between separate quantum processors?’

Leni said nothing. Hana continued.

‘Several smaller processors. Our AI system distributes the calculations. Your interface handles the link. Not one enormous quantum computer, but a distributed architecture.’

Leni remained silent. Hana pointed at the graph on her screen.

‘I know the error margin is too high. I can see that. But if we can stabilize coherence in the physical link—’

‘Wait.’

Hana stopped.

Jack looked from her to the screen.

Leni was fully awake now.

‘Say that last part again.’

‘The coherence?’

‘No. Before that.’

Hana frowned. ‘Multiple processors through your optical interface.’

Silence on the other end.

‘Leni?’

Leni was no longer looking at Hana. She was looking at something beside her screen.

As if something lay there that she had not wanted to see for a long time.

Then she looked back.

‘Hana…’

A pause.

‘We tried that.’

CHAPTER 6: Seven Minutes

Sunday, June 6
Pentagon / Arlington, Virginia – United States
13:38 EDT

'You don't have to get inside to know where the door is.'
— Yusef Nouri —

At 13:38, Harry Wheeler stood at the Pentagon's final security checkpoint. He looked at the clock above the passageway.

Two minutes to go.

'Good afternoon, Mr. Speaker.'

Harry smiled at the security officer.

'That depends on what you people are going to tell me today.'

The man laughed politely.

Harry did not. Not really.

Beneath his shirt, the black watch suddenly felt heavier than it had in Havana. Yusef's voice was still in his head.

13:40 — entry.
13:43 — contact.
13:47 — abort.

No improvising.

Harry had laughed at him in Havana. Now he thought it was excellent advice.

The guard checked his pass and gestured toward the detector. Harry walked through.

Nothing.

No alarm. No voice calling him back.

Only the ordinary hum of a building in which thousands of people worked to protect a country that had no idea what one of its most powerful politicians had really come to do.

A colonel was waiting on the other side.

'Mr. Speaker.'

'Colonel.'

'General Whitmore is expecting you.'

Harry looked at the clock one more time.

13:40.

Exactly.

'Then we shouldn't keep a general waiting.'

They walked on.

Harry knew the Pentagon well enough that it no longer impressed him. He had been here dozens of times for briefings, budget discussions and committee meetings.

Today he looked at the building differently.

Every door. Every camera. Every terminal. Every service member who greeted him.

Normally they were parts of American power.

Today they were obstacles.

‘Quiet weekend, sir?’ the colonel asked.

Harry looked at him.

Havana flashed through his mind. The music. The rum. Yusef. The cigars. His Hawaiian shirt with the fedora perched above it.

He smiled. ‘Exceptionally quiet.’

The colonel nodded. ‘Good to hear.’

Harry could feel the tension rising now.

They turned right.

Behind a glass wall was a small command room. Four people worked at their screens.

They kept going.

Another corridor.

A secure door.

The colonel held his pass to the reader.

Green.

The door opened.

Harry did not look at his watch.

13:41.

A few kilometers away, Yusef Nouri sat alone in a rented room.

The curtains were closed. On the table were a phone, two sealed devices and a glass of pear-and-ginger juice he had not touched.

The old Iranian rial lay beside his right hand.

He rolled the coin slowly across his knuckles.

There was only one line on the screen in front of him.

WAITING

13:41:17.

There was nothing he could do yet.

That was the hardest part.

Harry first had to reach the right place. Only then could Yusef find out whether their plan was really as clever as it had sounded in Havana.

13:41:39.

No signal.

The coin rolled back across his fingers.

13:42:02.

Still nothing.

Yusef looked at his phone.

No message.

Good.

If Harry sent him a message now, Yusef would kill him personally.

13:42:21.

The screen changed.

A small indicator appeared.

Yusef put down the coin.

PROXIMITY DETECTED

A second line.

NO SESSION

He leaned slightly forward.

‘Come on, Harry.’

General Whitmore stood at the door to the briefing room.

Broad shoulders, gray hair, a uniform so perfect that Harry suspected even the creases needed permission.

‘Mr. Speaker.’

‘General.’

They shook hands.

‘Thank you for making time for me on a Sunday.’

Whitmore smiled. ‘You were the one who insisted.’

‘Which makes me appreciate it all the more.’

The general gestured toward the door.

‘You wanted to know how prepared we are for a strategic missile threat.’

‘Mostly I want to know where all that money goes that Congress gives you every year.’

Whitmore laughed.

So did Harry.

He was good at that.

Putting people at ease. Getting them to talk. Making them forget that behind every joke was a man who knew exactly what he wanted.

They went inside.

The room was smaller than Harry had expected. A long table. Three large screens. Two officers.

A workstation stood against the side wall.

Harry felt the pulse.

Short.

Once.

He gave no sign.

‘Should I be disappointed?’

Whitmore looked at him. ‘About what?’

‘I was expecting at least one enormous red button.’

One of the officers laughed.

Whitmore shook his head.

‘We save those for foreign heads of state.’

‘Wise.’

Harry looked at the large screen.

Not at his wrist.

Not at the workstation.

Nothing unusual.

As if his heart had not suddenly begun to beat faster.
The general walked to the main screen.
‘What you are about to see is subject to an elevated classification level.’
Harry looked offended.
‘General, I am the Speaker of the House.’
‘I know.’
‘Even my mother trusts me.’
‘That is a considerably stronger recommendation.’
Harry smiled.
Under the table he brought his right hand to his left wrist.
Two clicks.
Very soft.
Click. Click.
Then he let go.
Yusef’s screen changed.
SESSION REQUEST
HANDSHAKE
A second later:
RELAY ACTIVE
Yusef exhaled slowly.
‘Good.’
The first part worked.
Technical identifiers for the system Harry had connected to appeared on his screen.
No maps. No missile positions. No operational plans.
Yusef’s eyes moved across the information.
Segment number. Authentication layer. Terminal class.
Then:
RESTRICTED GATEWAY
Yusef frowned.
The next attempt was rejected immediately.
ACCESS DENIED
Again.
ACCESS DENIED
He leaned back.
Harry was inside.
But not where he thought he was.
‘Damn it.’
A map of North America appeared on the main screen.
General Whitmore began his explanation.
Harry actually listened.
That mattered.