

DAY ONE



BEHIND THE EIGHT BALL

JULY 24, 4:34 A.M.
FREDERICK, MARYLAND

THE SABOTEUR had arrived.

Grayson Pierce edged his motorcycle between the dark buildings that made up the heart of Fort Detrick. He kept the bike idling. Its electric engine purred no louder than a refrigerator's motor. The black gloves he wore matched the bike's paint, a nickel-phosphorous compound called NPL Super Black. It absorbed more visible light, making ordinary black seem positively shiny. His cloth body suit and rigid helmet were equally shaded.

Hunched over the bike, he neared the end of the alley. A courtyard opened ahead, a dark chasm framed by the brick-and-mortar buildings that composed the National Cancer Institute, an adjunct to USAMRIID, the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases. Here the country's war on bioterrorism was waged across sixty thousand square feet of maximum-containment labs.

Gray cut the engine but stayed seated. His left knee rested against the satchel. It held the seventy thousand dollars. He remained in the alley, avoiding the open courtyard. He preferred the dark. The moon had long set, and the sun would not rise for another twenty-two minutes. Even the stars remained clouded by the shredding tail of last night's summer storm.

Would his ruse hold?

He subvocalized into his throat mike. "Mule to Eagle, I've reached the rendezvous. Proceeding on foot."

"Roger that. We've got you on satellite."

Gray resisted the urge to look up and wave. He hated to be watched, scrutinized, but the deal here was too big. He did manage to gain a concession: to take the meeting alone. His contact was skittish. It had taken six months to groom this contact, brokering connections in Libya and the Sudan. It hadn't been easy. Money did not buy much trust. Especially in this business.

He reached down to the satchel and shouldered the money bag. Wary, he walked his bike over to a shadowed alcove, parked it, and hooked a leg over the seat.

He crossed down the alley.

There were few eyes awake at this hour, and most of those were only electronic. All of his identification had passed inspection at the Old Farm Gate, the service entrance to the base. And now he had to trust that his subterfuge held out long enough to evade electronic surveillance.

He glanced to the glowing dial on his Breitling diver's watch: 4:45. The meeting was set for fifteen minutes from now. So much depended on his success here.

Gray reached his destination. Building 470. It was deserted at this hour, due for demolition next month. Poorly secured, the building was perfect for the rendezvous, yet the choice of venue was also oddly ironic. In the sixties, spores of anthrax had been brewed inside the building, in giant vats and

tanks, fermenting strains of bacterial death, until the toxic brewery had been decommissioned back in 1971. Since then, the building had been left fallow, becoming a giant storage closet for the National Cancer Institute.

But once again, the business of anthrax would be conducted under this roof. He glanced up. The windows were all dark. He was to meet the seller on the fourth floor.

Reaching the side door, he swiped the lock with an electronic keycard supplied by his contact at the base. He carried the second half of the man's payment over his shoulder, having wired the first half a month before. Gray also bore a foot-long plastic, carbonized dagger in a concealed wrist sheath.

His only weapon.

He couldn't risk bringing anything else through the security gate.

Gray closed the door and crossed to the stairwell on the right. The only light on the stairs came from the red EXIT sign. He reached to his motorcycle helmet and toggled on the night-vision mode. The world brightened in tones of green and silver. He mounted the stairs and climbed quickly to the fourth floor.

At the top, he pushed through the landing's door.

He had no idea where he was supposed to meet his contact. Only that he was to await the man's signal. He paused for a breath at the door, surveying the space before him. He didn't like it.

The stairwell opened at the corner of the building. One corridor stretched straight ahead; the other ran to the left. Frosted glass office doors lined the inner walls; windows slitted the other. He proceeded directly ahead at a slow pace, alert for any sign of movement.

A flood of light swept through one of the windows, washing over him.

Dazzled through his night-vision, he rolled against one wall, back into darkness. Had he been spotted? The sweep of light pierced the other windows, one after the other, passing down the hall ahead of him.

Leaning out, he peered through one of the windows. It faced the wide courtyard that fronted the building. Across the way, he watched a Humvee trundle slowly down the street. Its searchlight swept through the courtyard.

A patrol.

Would the attention spook his contact?

Cursing silently, Gray waited for the truck to finish its round. The patrol vanished momentarily, crossing behind a hulking structure that rose from the middle of the courtyard below. It looked like some rusting spaceship, but was in fact a million-liter steel containment sphere, three stories tall, mounted on a dozen pedestal legs. Ladders and scaffolding surrounded the structure as it underwent a renovation, an attempt to return it to its former glory when it was a Cold War research facility. Even the steel catwalk that had once circumnavigated the globe's equator had been replaced.

Gray knew the giant globe's nickname at the base.

The Eight Ball.

A humorless smile creased his lips as he realized his unlucky position.

Trapped behind the eight ball...

The patrol finally reappeared beyond the structure, slowly crossed the front of the courtyard, and rolled away.

Satisfied, Gray continued to the end of the corridor. A set of swinging double doors blocked the

passage, but their narrow windows revealed a larger room beyond. He spotted a few tall, slender metal and glass tanks. One of the old labs. Windowless and dark.

His approach must have been noted.

A new light flared inside, incandescent, bright enough to require Gray to flick off his night-vision. A flashlight. It blinked three times.

A signal.

He stepped to the door and used a toe to push open one of the swinging sides. He slid through the narrow opening.

“Over here,” a voice said calmly. It was the first time Gray had heard his contact’s voice. Prior to this moment, it had always been electronically muffled, a paranoid level of anonymity.

It was a *woman’s* voice. The revelation piqued his wariness. He didn’t like surprises.

He followed through a maze of tables with chairs stacked on top. She sat at one of the tables. Its other chairs were still stacked atop it. Except for one. On the opposite side of the table. It shifted as she kicked one of the legs.

“Sit.”

Gray had expected to find a nervous scientist, someone out for an extra paycheck. Treason for hire was becoming more and more commonplace among the top research facilities.

USAMRIID was no exception...only a thousandfold more deadly. Each vial for sale had the capability, if properly aerosolized in a subway or bus station, to kill thousands.

And she was selling fifteen of them.

He settled into his seat, placing the satchel of money on the table.

The woman was Asian...no, *Eurasian*. Her eyes were more open, her skin deeply tanned to a handsome bronze. She wore a black turtlenecked bodysuit, not unlike the one he wore, hugging a slim, lithe frame. A silver pendant dangled from her neck, bright against her suit, bearing a tiny curled-dragon charm. Gray studied her. The Dragon Lady’s features, rather than taut and wary like his own, appeared bored.

Of course, the 9mm Sig Sauer pointed at his chest and equipped with a silencer might be the source of her confidence. But it was her next words that truly iced his blood.

“Good evening, Commander Pierce.”

He was startled to hear his name.

If she knew that...

He was already moving...and already too late.

The gun fired at near-point-blank range.

The impact kicked his body backward, taking the chair with him. He landed on his back, tangled in the chair legs. Pain flattened his chest, making it impossible to breathe. He tasted blood on his tongue.

Betrayed...

She stepped around the table and leaned over his sprawled form, gun still pointing, taking no chances. The silver dragon pendant dangled and flashed brightly. “I suspect you’re recording all this through your helmet, Commander Pierce. Perhaps even transmitting to Washington...to Sigma. You won’t mind if I borrow a little airtime, will you?”

He was in no position to object.

The woman leaned closer over him. “In the next ten minutes, the Guild will shut down all of Fort

Detrick. Contaminate the entire base with anthrax. Payback for Sigma's interference with our operation in Oman. But I owe your director, Painter Crowe, something more. Something personal. This is for my sister in the field, Cassandra Sanchez."

The gun shifted to his faceplate.

"Blood for blood."

She pulled the trigger.

5:02 A.M.

WASHINGTON, D.C.

FORTY-TWO MILES away, the satellite feed went dead.

"Where's his backup?" Painter Crowe kept his voice firm, biting back a litany of curses. Panic would not serve them.

"Still ten minutes out."

"Can you re-establish the link?"

The technician shook his head. "We've lost main feed from his helmet cam. But we still have the bird's-eye of the base from the NRO sat." The young man indicated another monitor. It showed a black-and-white overshoot of Fort Detrick, centered on a courtyard of buildings.

Painter paced before the array of monitors. It had all been a trap, one directed at Sigma and aimed at him personally. "Alert Fort Detrick's security."

"Sir?" The question rose from his second-in-command, Logan Gregory.

Painter understood Logan's hesitation. Only a handful of those in power knew of Sigma and the agents it employed: the President, the Joint Chiefs, and his immediate supervisors over at DARPA. After last year's shake-up among the top brass, the organization was under intense scrutiny.

Mistakes would not be tolerated.

"I won't risk an agent," Painter said. "Call them in."

"Yes, sir." Logan crossed to a phone. The man appeared more a California surfer than a leading strategist: blond hair, tanned, fit but going a bit soft in the belly. Painter was his darker shadow, half Native American, black hair, blue eyes. But he had no tan. He didn't know the last time he had seen the sun.

Painter wanted to sit down, lower his head to his knees. He had assumed control of the organization only eight months ago. And most of that time had been spent restructuring and shoring up security after the infiltration of the group by an international cartel known as the Guild. There had been no telling what information had been gleaned, sold, or spread during this time, so everything had to be purged and rebuilt from scratch. Even their central command had been pulled out of Arlington and moved to a subterranean warren here in Washington.

In fact, Painter had come in early this morning to unpack boxes in his new office when he had received the emergency call from satellite recon.

He studied the monitor from the NRO satellite.

A trap.

He knew what the Guild was doing. Four weeks ago, Painter had begun to put operatives into the field again, the first in more than a year. It was a tentative test. Two teams. One over in Los Alamos investigating the loss of a nuclear database...and the other in his own backyard, over at Fort Detrick,

only one hour from Washington.

The Guild's attack sought to shake Sigma and its leader. To prove that the Guild still had knowledge to undermine Sigma. It was a feint to force Sigma to pull back again, to regroup, possibly to disband. As long as Painter's group was out of commission, the Guild had a greater chance to operate with impunity.

That must not happen.

Painter stopped his pacing and turned to his second, the question plain on his face.

"I keep getting cut off," Logan said, nodding to the earpiece. "They're having intermittent communication blackouts throughout the base."

Certainly the handiwork of the Guild too...

Frustrated, Painter leaned on the console and stared at the mission's dossier. Imprinted atop the manila file was a single Greek letter.

Σ

In mathematics, the letter, *sigma* represented "the sum of all parts," the unification of disparate sets into a whole. It was also emblematic of the organization Painter directed: Sigma Force.

Operating under the auspices of DARPA—the Department of Defense's research and development wing—Sigma served as the agency's covert arm out in the world, sent forth to safeguard, acquire, or neutralize technologies vital to U.S. security. Its team members were an ultrasecret cadre of ex-Special Forces soldiers who had been handpicked and placed into rigorous fast-track doctoral programs, covering a wide range of scientific disciplines, forming a militarized team of technically trained operatives.

Or in plainer language, killer scientists.

Painter opened the dossier before him. The team leader's file fronted the record.

Dr. and Commander Grayson Pierce.

The agent's photograph stared up at him from the upper right corner. It was the man's mug shot from his year of incarceration at Leavenworth. Dark hair shaved to a stubble, blue eyes still angry. His Welsh heritage was evident in the sharp cheekbones, wide eyes, and strong jaw. But his ruddy complexion was all Texan, burnt by the sun over the dry hills of Brown County.

Painter didn't bother glancing over the inch-thick file. He knew the details. Gray Pierce had joined the Army at eighteen, the Rangers at twenty-one, and served to distinction off and on the field. Then, at twenty-three, he was court-martialed for striking a superior officer. Painter knew the details and the back history of the two in Bosnia. And considering the events, Painter might have done the same. Still, rules were codified in granite among the armed forces. The decorated soldier spent one year in Leavenworth.

But Gray Pierce was too valuable to be cast aside forever.

His training and skill could not be wasted.

Sigma had recruited him three years ago, right out of prison.

Now Gray was a pawn between the Guild and Sigma.

One about to be crushed.

"I've got base security!" Logan said, relief ringing in his voice.

"Get them over—"

"Sir!" The technician leapt to his feet, still tethered to his console by the headset's cord. He

glanced to Painter. “Director Crowe, I’m picking up a trace audio feed.”

“What—?” Painter stepped closer to the technician. He raised a hand to hold off Logan.

The technician turned up the feed on the speakers.

A tinny voice reached them though the video feed remained fritzed.

One word formed.

“*Goddamnmotherfuckingpieceofshit...*”

5:07 A.M.

FREDERICK, MARYLAND

GRAY KICKED out a heel, catching the woman in the midriff. He felt a satisfying thud of flesh, but heard nothing. His ears rang from the concussion of the slug against his Kevlar helmet. The shot had spider-webbed his faceshield. His left ear burned as the electronic bay shorted with a burst of static.

He ignored it all.

Rolling to his feet, he slipped the carbonized dagger from its wrist sheath and dove under a neighboring row of tables. Another shot, sounding like a loud cough, penetrated the ring of his ears. Wood splintered from the edge of the table.

He cleared the far side and kept a wary crouch while searching the room. His kick had caused the woman to drop her flashlight, which rolled on the floor, skittering shadows everywhere. He fingered his chest. The body blow of the assassin’s first shot still burned and ached.

But no blood.

The woman called to him from the shadows. “Liquid body armor.”

Gray dropped lower, attempting to pinpoint the woman’s location. The dive under the table had jarred his helmet’s internal heads-up display. Its holographic images flickered incoherently across the inside of his faceshield, interfering with his sightlines, but he dared not abandon the helmet. It offered the best protection against the weapon still in the woman’s hand.

That and his body suit.

The assassin was right. *Liquid body armor*. Developed by U.S. Army Research Laboratory in 2003. The fabric of his body suit had been soaked with a shear-thickening fluid—hard microparticles of silica suspended in a polyethylene glycol solution. During normal movement, it acted like a liquid, but once a bullet struck, the material solidified into a rigid shield, preventing penetration. The suit had just saved his life.

At least for now.

The woman spoke again, coldly calm, as she slowly circled toward the door. “I rigged the building with C4 and TNT. Easy enough since the structure’s already scheduled for demolition. The Army was nice enough to have it all prewired. It just took a minor detonator modification to change the building’s implosion to one that will cause an explosive *updraft*.”

Gray pictured the resulting plume of smoke and debris riding high into the early morning sky. “The vials of anthrax...” he mumbled, but it was loud enough to be heard.

“It seemed fitting to use the base’s own demolition as a toxic delivery system.”

Christ, she had turned the entire building into a biological bomb.

With the strong winds, it was not only the base at risk, but the entire town of nearby Frederick.

Gray moved. She had to be stopped. But where was she?

He edged toward the door himself now, wary of her gun, but he couldn't let that stop him. Too much was at stake. He tried flicking on his night-vision mode, but all he earned was another snap of flame by his ear. The heads-up display continued its erratic flashing, dazzling and confusing to the eye.

Screw it.

He thumbed the catch and yanked the helmet off.

The fresh wash of air smelled moldy and antiseptic at the same time. Staying low, he carried the helmet in one hand, the dagger in the other. He reached the back wall and hurried toward the door. He could see well enough to tell the swinging door hadn't moved. The assassin was still in the room.

But where?

And what could he do to stop her? He squeezed the handle of his knife. Gun against dagger. Not good odds.

With his helmet off, he spotted a shift of shadows near the door. He stopped, going dead still. She was crouched three feet from the door, shielded by a table.

Watery light filtered from the hallway, glowing through the windows of the swinging doors. Dawn neared, brightening the passage beyond. The assassin would have to expose herself to make her escape. For the moment, she clung to the shadows of the windowless lab, unsure if her opponent was armed or not.

Gray had to stop playing this Dragon Lady's game.

With a roundhouse swing, he threw his helmet toward the opposite side of the lab. It landed with a crash and tinkle of glass, shattering one of the old tanks.

He ran toward her position. He only had seconds.

She popped from her hiding place, swiveling to lay down fire in the direction of the noise. At the same time, she leaped gracefully toward the door, seeming to use the recoil from her gun to propel her.

Gray could not help but be impressed—but not enough to slow him.

With his arm already cocked, he whipped his dagger through the air. Weighted and balanced to perfection, the carbonized blade flew with unerring accuracy.

It struck the woman square in the hollow of her throat.

Gray continued his headlong rush.

Only then did he realize his mistake.

The dagger bounced harmlessly away and clattered to the floor.

Liquid body armor.

No wonder the Dragon Lady knew about his body suit. She was wearing the same.

The attack, though, threw off her leap. She landed in a half crash, plainly turning a knee. But even the skilled assassin, she never lost sight of her target.

From a step away, she aimed the Sig Sauer at Gray's face.

And this time, he had no helmet.

5:09 A.M.

WASHINGTON, D.C.

WE'VE LOST all contact again," the technician said needlessly.

Painter had heard the loud crash a moment before, then all went deadly silent on the satellite feed. “I still have base security,” his second said by the phone.

Painter tried to piece together the cacophony he had heard over the line. “He tossed his helmet.” The other two men stared at him.

Painter studied the open dossier in front of him. Grayson Pierce was no fool. Besides his military expertise, the man had first come to Sigma’s attention because of his aptitude and intelligence tests. He was certainly above the norm, well above, but there were soldiers with even higher scores. What had been the final factor in the decision to recruit him had been his odd behavior while incarcerated at Leavenworth. Despite the hard labor of the camp, Grayson had taken up a rigorous regimen of study: in both advanced chemistry *and* Taoism. This disparity in his choice of study had intrigued Painter and Sigma’s former director, Dr. Sean McKnight.

In many ways, he proved to be a walking contradiction: a Welshman living in Texas, a student of Taoism who still carried a rosary, a soldier who studied chemistry in prison. It was this very uniqueness of his mind that had won him membership into Sigma.

But such distinctiveness came with a price.

Grayson Pierce did not play well with others. He had a profound distaste for working with a team.

Like now. Going in alone. Against protocol.

“Sir?” his second persisted.

Painter took a deep breath. “Two more minutes.”

5:10 A.M.

FREDERICK, MARYLAND

THE FIRST shot whistled past his ear.

Gray was lucky. The assassin had shot too fast, before being properly set. Gray, still in motion from his lunge, just managed to duck out of the way. A head shot was not as easy as the movies made it seem.

He tackled the woman and pinned her gun between them. Even if she fired, he would still have a good chance of surviving.

Only it would hurt like hell.

She fired, proving this last point.

The slug slammed into his left thigh. It felt like a hammer blow, bruising to the marrow. He screamed. And why the hell not? It stung like a motherfucker. But he didn’t let go. He used his anger to slam an elbow into her throat. But her body armor stiffened, protecting her.

Damn it.

She pulled the trigger again. He outweighed her, outmuscled her, but she didn’t need the strength of fist and knee. She had the might of modern artillery at her disposal. The slug sucker-punched into his gut. Pounded all the way to his spine, his breath blew out of him. She was slowly maneuvering her gun upward.

The Sig Sauer had a fifteen-round magazine. How many shots had she fired? Surely she still had enough to pound him into a pulp.

He needed to end this.

He lifted his head back and slammed his forehead into her face. But she was no novice to brawling. She turned her head, taking the blow to the side of her skull. Still, it bought him enough time to kick out at a cord trailing from the nearby table. The library lamp attached to it came crashing to the floor. Its green glass shade shattered.

Bear-hugging the woman, he rolled her over the lamp. It was too much to hope that the glass would penetrate her body suit. But that wasn't his goal.

He heard the pop of the lamp's bulb under their combined weight.

Good enough.

Frogging his legs under him, Gray leaped outward. It was a gamble. He flew toward the light switch beside the swinging door.

A cough of a pistol accompanied a slam into his lower back.

His neck whiplashed. His body struck the wall. As he bounded off, his hand palmed the electrical box and flipped the switch. Lights flickered across the lab, unsteady. Bad wiring.

He fell back toward the assassin.

He couldn't hope to electrocute his nemesis. That only happened in the movies, too. That wasn't his goal. Instead, he hoped whoever had last used the desk had left the lamp switched *on*.

Keeping his feet, he pivoted around.

The Dragon Lady sat atop the broken lamp, arm outstretched toward him, gun pointing. She pulled the trigger, but her aim was off. One of the windows in the swinging door shattered.

Gray stepped around to the side, moving farther out of range. The woman could not track him. She was frozen rigidly in place, unable to move.

"Liquid body armor," he said, repeating her earlier words. "The *liquid* does make for a flexible suit, but it also has a disadvantage." He stalked up to her side and relieved her of her gun. "Propylene glycol is an alcohol, a good conductor of electricity. Even a small charge, like from a broken lightbulb, will flow over a suit in seconds. And as with any assault, the suit reacts."

He kicked her in the shin. The suit was as hard as a rock.

"Goes rigid on you."

Her own suit had become her prison.

He searched her rapidly as she strained to move. With effort, she could make slow progress, but no more than the rusted Tin Man from *The Wizard of Oz*.

She gave up. Her face reddened from her strain. "You won't find any detonator. It's all on a timer. Set for—" Her eyes glanced down to a wristwatch. "Two minutes from now. You'll never deactivate all the charges."

Gray noted the number on her watch drop below 02:00.

Her life was tied to that number, too. He saw the flicker of fear in her eyes—assassin or not, she was still human, afraid of her own mortality—but the rest of her face only hardened to match her rigid suit.

"Where did you stash the vials?"

He knew she wouldn't tell him. But he watched her eyes. For a moment, the pupils shifted slightly up, then centered on him.

The roof.

It made sense. He needed no other confirmation. Anthrax—*Bacillus anthracis*—was sensitive to

heat. If she wanted the bloom of toxic spores to spread outward from the blast, the vials would have to be up high, caught in the initial concussive blast and jettisoned skyward. She couldn't risk the heat of the explosion incinerating the weaponized bacterium.

Before he could move, she spat at him, hitting him on the cheek.

He didn't bother wiping it off.

He didn't have the time.

01:48.

He straightened and ran for the door.

"You'll never make it!" she called after him. Somehow she knew he was going for the bio-bomb, not fleeing for his own life. And for some reason, that pissed him off. Like she knew him well enough to make that assumption.

He ran down the outer corridor and skidded into the stairwell. He pounded up the two flights to reach the roof door. The exit had been modified to meet OSHA standards. A panic bar gated the door, made for quick evacuation in case of a fire.

Panic pretty much defined this moment.

He struck the bar, initiating an alarm Klaxon, and pushed out into the dark gray of early dawn. The roof was tar and paper. Sand crunched underfoot. He scanned the area. There were too many places to hide the vials: air vents, exhaust pipes, satellite dishes.

Where?

He was running out of time.

5:13 A.M.

WASHINGTON, D.C.

HE'S ON the roof!" the technician said, jabbing a finger at the monitor from the NRO satellite.

Painter leaned closer and spotted a tiny figure stepping into view. What was Grayson doing on the roof? Painter searched the immediate area. "Any sign of pursuit?"

"None that I can detect, sir."

Logan spoke from the phone. "Base security reports a fire alarm going off in Building 470."

"Must've tripped the exit alarm," the tech interjected.

"Can you get us any closer?" Painter asked.

The technician nodded and toggled a switch. The image zoomed down atop Grayson Pierce. His helmet was gone. His left ear appeared stained, bloody. He continued to stand by the doorway.

"What is he doing?" the tech asked.

"Base security is responding," Logan reported.

Painter shook his head, but a cold certainty iced through him. "Tell base security to stay away. Have them evacuate anyone near that building."

"Sir?"

"Do it."

5:14 A.M.

FREDERICK, MARYLAND

GRAY SCANNED the roof one more time. The emergency Klaxon continued to wail. He ignored it, drawing inward. He had to think like his quarry.

He crouched low. It had rained last night. He imagined the woman had only planted the vials recently, after the downpour. He looked carefully and noted where the sand washed smooth by the rain had been disturbed. It wasn't too difficult, as he knew she had to have passed through this door. It was the only roof access.

He trailed her steps.

They led across the roof to a hooded exhaust vent.

Of course.

The exhaust flume would serve as the perfect chimney to expel the spores as the lower levels of the building imploded, creating a toxic blowgun.

Kneeling, he spotted where she had tampered with the hood, disturbing an old layer of rust. He didn't have the time to check for booby traps. He yanked the vent off with a grunt.

The bomb rested inside the duct. The fifteen glass vials were arrayed in a starburst around a central pellet of C4, just enough to shatter the containers. He stared at the white powder filling each tube. Biting his lower lip, he reached down and carefully lifted the bomb out of the duct's throat. A timer counted down.

00:54.

00:53.

00:52.

Free of the ductwork, Gray straightened. He did a fast check of the bomb. It was rigged against tampering. He had no time to decipher the wires and electronics. The bomb was going to go off. He had to get it away from the building, away from the blast zone, preferably away from him.

00:41.

Only one chance.

He tucked the bomb into a nylon ditty pouch over one shoulder and stalked to the front of the building. Headlights aimed toward the building, drawn by the alarm. Base security would never reach here in time.

He had no choice.

He had to get clear...no matter his own life.

Retreating several steps from roof's edge, he took a deep breath, then sprinted back toward the front of the building. Reaching the roof's edge, he bounded up and leaped over the brick parapet.

He sailed out over the six-story drop.

5:15 A.M.

WASHINGTON, D.C.

CHRIST ALMIGHTY!" Logan exclaimed as Grayson made the leap off the roof.

"He's numb-nuts crazy," the tech appended, jerking to his feet.

Painter simply watched the man's suicidal ploy. "He's doing what he must."

5:15 A.M.

FREDERICK, MARYLAND

GRAY KEPT his legs under him, arms out for balance. He plummeted earthward. He prayed the laws of physics, velocity, trajectory, and vector analysis didn't betray him.

He readied for the impact.

Two stories below and twenty yards out, the spherical roof of the Eight Ball rose up to meet him. The million-liter steel containment globe glistened with morning dew.

He twisted in midair, struggling to keep his plunge feet-first.

Then time sped up. Or he did.

His booted feet hit the surface of the sphere. The liquid body armor cemented around his ankles, protecting against a break. Momentum slammed him forward, facedown, spread-eagled. But he had not reached the center of the sphere's roof, only the curved shell closest to Building 470.

Fingers scrabbled, but there was no grip, no traction.

His body slid down the dew-slick steel, twisting slightly askew. He spread his legs, toes dragging for friction. Then he was past the point of no return, free-falling down the sheer side.

With his cheek pressed to the steel, he didn't see the catwalk until he struck it. His left leg hit, then his body tumbled after it. He landed on hands and knees atop the metal scaffolding that had been built around the equator of the steel globe. He shoved to his feet, legs wobbling from the strain and the terror.

He couldn't believe he was still alive.

He searched the curve of the sphere while freeing the bio-bomb from his ditty bag. The surface of the containment globe was pocked with portholes, once used by scientists to observe their biological experiments inside. In all the years of its regular use, no pathogen had ever escaped.

Gray prayed the same held true this morning.

He glanced to the bomb in his hand: 00:18.

With no time to curse, he ran along the exterior catwalk, searching for an entry hatch. He found it half a hemisphere away. A steel door with a porthole. He sprinted to it, grabbed the handle, and tugged.

It refused to budge.

Locked.

5:15 A.M.

WASHINGTON, D.C.

PAINTER WATCHED Grayson tug at the hatch on the giant sphere. He noted the frantic strain, recognized and understood the urgency. Painter had seen the explosive device retrieved from the exhaust duct. He knew the mission objective of Grayson's team: to lure out a suspected trafficker in weaponized pathogens.

Painter had no doubt what form of death lay inside the bomb.

Anthrax.

Plainly, Grayson could not defuse the device and sought to safely dispose of it.

He was having no luck.

How much time did he have?

5:15 A.M.

FREDERICK, MARYLAND

00:18

Grayson ran again. Maybe there was another hatch. He clomped around the catwalk. He felt like he was running in ski boots, his ankles still cemented in his body suit.

He circled another half a hemisphere.

Another hatch appeared ahead.

“YOU! HOLD RIGHT THERE!”

Base security.

The fierceness and boom of the bullhorn almost made him obey.

Almost.

He kept running. A spotlight splayed over him.

“STOP OR WE’LL FIRE!”

He had no time to negotiate.

A deafening rattle of gunfire pelted the side of the sphere, a few rounds pinging off the catwalk. None were near. Warning shots.

He reached the second hatch, grabbed the handle, twisted, and tugged.

It stuck for a breath, then popped open. A sob of relief escaped him.

He pitched the device into the hollow interior of the sphere, slammed the door secure, and leaned his back against it. He slumped to his seat.

“YOU THERE! STAY WHERE YOU ARE!”

He had no intention of going anywhere. He was happy right where he was. He felt a small jolt on his back. The sphere rang like a struck bell. The device had blown inside, safely contained.

But it was only the primer cord of greater things to come.

Like the clash of titanic gods, a series of jarring explosions rocked the ground.

Boom...boom...boom...

Sequential, timed, engineered.

It was the wired demolitions of Building 470.

Even insulated on the far side of the sphere, Gray felt the slight suck of air, then a mighty whoosh of displacement as the building took its last deep breath and expelled it. A dense wall of dust and debris washed outward as the building collapsed. Gray glanced up in time to see a mighty plume of smoke and dust bloom upward, seeding high and spreading out with the wind.

But no death rode this breeze.

A final explosion thundered from the dying building. A rumble of brick and rock sounded, a stony avalanche. The ground bumped under him—then he heard a new sound.

The screech of metal.

Shoved by the explosion, its foundations shaken, two of the Eight Ball’s support legs popped and bent, as if the sphere were attempting to kneel. The whole structure tilted away from the building, toward the street.

More legs popped.

And once started, there was no stopping it.

The million-liter containment sphere toppled toward the line of security trucks.

With Gray directly under it.

He shoved up and scabbled along the tilting catwalk, struggling to get clear of the impact. He ran several steps, but the way quickly grew too steep as the sphere continued its plummet. Catwalk became ladder. He dug his fingers into the metal framework, kicked his legs at the support struts of the railings. He fought to get out from beneath the shadow of the crushing weight of the globe.

He made one final desperate lunge, grabbing a handhold and digging in his toes.

The Eight Ball struck the front lawn of the courtyard and pounded into the rain-soaked loam. The impact traveled up the catwalk, slamming Gray from his perch. He flew several yards and landed on his back on the soft lawn. He had only been a few yards from the ground.

Sitting up, he leaned on one elbow.

The line of security trucks had retreated as the ball fell toward them.

But they would not stay gone. And he must not get caught.

Gray gained his feet with a groan and stumbled back into the pall of smoke from the collapsed building. Only now did he hear the alarms ringing throughout the base. He shed out of his body suit as he moved, transferring his identification tags to his civilian clothes beneath. He hurried to the far side of the courtyard, to the next building, to where he had left his motorcycle.

He found it intact.

Throwing a leg over the seat, he keyed the ignition. The engine purred happily to life. He reached for the throttle, then paused. Something had been hooked around his handlebar. He freed it, stared at it for a moment, then shoved it in a pocket.

Damn...

He throttled up and edged his bike to a neighboring alleyway. The path appeared clear for the moment. He hunched down, gunned the engine, and shot between the dark buildings. Reaching Porter Street, he made a sharp left turn, coming around fast, leaning out his left knee for balance. Only a couple cars shared the street. None of them appeared to be MP vehicles.

He zigzagged around them and sped off toward the more rural section of the base that surrounded Nallin Pond, a parkland region of gently rolling hills and patches of hardwood forest.

He would wait out the worst of the commotion, then slip away. For now, he was safe. Still, he felt the weight of the object in his pocket, left as decoration on his bike.

A silver chain...with a dangling dragon pendant.

5:48 A.M.

WASHINGTON, D.C.

PAINTER STEPPED back from the satellite console. The technician had caught Grayson's escape by motorcycle as he appeared out of the cloud of smoke and dust. Logan was still on the phone, passing information down a series of covert channels, sounding the all-clear. Whitewashed from on high, the trouble at the base would be blamed on miscommunication, faulty wiring, decomposing munitions.

Sigma Force would never be mentioned.

The satellite tech held his earpiece in place. "Sir, I have a telephone call from the director of DARPA." "Switch it over here." Painter plucked up another receiver. He listened as the scrambled

communication was routed.

The tech nodded to him as the dead air over the line seemed to breathe to life. Though no one spoke, Painter could almost sense his mentor and commander. "Director McKnight?" he said, suspecting the man was calling to get a mission debrief.

His suspicion proved wrong.

He heard the stress in the other's voice. "Painter, I just received some intel out of Germany. Strange deaths at a cathedral. We need a team on the ground there by nightfall."

"So soon?"

"Details will follow within the quarter hour. But we're going to need your best agent to head this team."

Painter stared over at the satellite monitor. He watched the motorcycle skim through the hills, flickering through the sparse canopy of trees.

"I may have just the man. But may I ask what the urgency is?"

"A call came in early this morning, requesting Sigma to investigate the matter in Germany. Your group has been specifically summoned."

"Summoned? By whom?"

To have Dr. McKnight this rattled, it had to be someone as high up as the President. But once again, Painter's supposition proved wrong.

The director explained, "By the Vatican."