
Canyons of Steel
by Tim Holtorf

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Dedication

This book has been a long time coming. It began before I sat down to write *Black Mask & Pale Rider*. But I kept putting it aside. Still, it always sat there, unfinished and incomplete. It was a story wrapped around several stories and several characters.

So it's not without some hesitation that I actually sat down to complete this. By no means is this *Black Mask & Pale Rider*, it's grittier, much more violent, and has characters that might be hard to relate to or even like.

There's a reason why I did complete it, however. That was the same person who kept asking for more with *Black Mask & Pale Rider*. Zodi Heidler.

Thank you for always keeping me going.

Act One
Still Just A Rat In A Cage

Canyons of Steel - A Modern Day Western

Prologue

Washington D.C., 9:43 am., July 15th, 1993

Dejection. Frustration. Loss. These feelings went through Johnathon Tiberius Walker as he stood at ease in the hallway of the small office. He waited for the inevitable as he stood, hands clasped behind him, feet shoulder width apart. His head was held high as though he did not want to disrespect the uniform he wore. Only a few short months before, he had completed a mission in Somalia with his unit. It was a simple mission, that had gone horribly wrong. His commanding officers wanted answers.

As he stood in the hallway, he began to realize that his commanding officers merely wanted a scapegoat.

He snapped to attention and saluted as a woman in a smart looking naval uniform entered the small hallway. They may have

been ready to strip him of his rank, but he would still show the respect of the organization he had served so long in. She returned the salute, and spoke in a soft voice.

“At ease, Colonel Walker,” she stated as Walker returned to his previous position. She moved to stand next to him, allowing the subtle perfume to waft over him. Odd, officers weren’t allowed to wear such things. He took a deep breath as he turned to look her over, and then recognition settled in.

“Been a while, ma’am,” he said quietly. “Ain’t seen you since the Persian Gulf.”

“Yes,” she replied with a nod. “It has been a while. And there have been some things which I have not been completely honest about.” She lowered her head, looking to the floor as she spoke. “Our night in Baghdad, I thought that was all it was. Just a night. But...” She paused for a long moment as Walker waited for her to continue. “At least it gave me my daughter.”

Walker needed to do everything to keep his composure as she spoke her words. Daughter. That meant he was the father. His earlier feelings seemed to have amplified themselves, knowing that he had helped bring

a child into this world, but had not been able to help show the world to that child.

“She is young, only three,” the woman remarked as she placed her hands in front of her uniform. She held a simple purple rose, along with a picture, which she held out to Walker. “I want you to meet her,” she simply stated as he took the picture in one hand, studying it with soft eyes as he gently held onto the rose with his other hand. “I think you would have made a wonderful father.”

Silence filled the room as the woman turned without another word. She didn’t have to. These small actions spoke volumes to Walker. But now, he had to take the next few steps.

Only time would tell where the road would lead him.

Chapter One

Columbus, Ohio, 7:54 am. -August 20, 2002

The office was small, and dark. Only one light hung from the ceiling in an attempt to fill the room with anything at all. But it only succeeded in making the long shadows look more and more menacing. For Johnathon Tiberius Walker, this only made his dark thoughts seem that much more so. But he sat, hunched over in his chair, tired arms propping himself up on the old, metal desk. His hands gingerly holding a picture that he would turn over in his fingers every so often. A gift from an old lover. The reason his thoughts became so heavy as of late.

His daughter, Danielle Walker. She was twelve years old now, but he'd only seen her twice. When she was first born, and again when she had turned five. And both times were fleeting and short, not enough for father and daughter to really connect. Perhaps the

passing of years was what drove his thoughts. But he knew that he wanted this life as a mercenary to end. He wanted to live the rest of his years in a normal life. Just one last job. But he had to send a message to those he answered to. He had to let them know there would be those that would defy them.

As the metal door creaked open, he continued to stare at the photograph. He knew who it was, he needn't hide this worn old photo from him. Malcolm Montgomery Watt merely stood across from the old gunslinger and waited. The news he had could take it's time in the telling. If there was one thing the Aussie learned from this old Texan, it was patience. No need to hurry something if you didn't need to.

Walker let out a deep breath and sat back in the old wooden chair. His eyes drifted up to meet Monty's as he pocketed the photo. A wordless acknowledgment of what was coming. Walker took out a metal tin and flipped it open, taking out a cigarette and carefully lighting it. As he inhaled, he waited for Monty to speak. The Aussie knew when the time to pass information was, and the ritual of the cigarette was almost like a

signal.

The younger of the two men sat heavily in a chair across from the old gun hand. He leaned back, kicking his feet up onto the desk. Had this been anything else, it would have appeared as a very relaxing conversation. But it was anything but that. “Orders ‘ave come in, mate,” Monty informed Walker. “The target is attendin’ Ohio State University. Second year student.”

“Makes him ‘bout eighteen. Maybe twenty at the oldest,” Walker added. Monty noted the emphasis on the age. “So we’re sinkin’ so low as ta kidnap children, I take it.”

“Accordin’ ta the paperwork, the kid’s the son of a Senator with a lotta clout in Congress.” Monty let the information sink in as he took his feet off the desk and leaned forward, resting his frame on his elbows as he leaned on the desk. “They’d like this done quickly as possibly. An’, o’ course, as quietly as possible.”

“In a university,” Walker replied with a slight scoff. “Yeah, they’ll ‘ppreciate that.” The echoes of some of the worst school shootings in history in the United States still

rung in the minds of the people. And it was even worse in this post-9-11 era. “Who’s on the crew?” Walker asked as he kept the memories of the news reels close in his mind. He had to remain focused, and these thoughts would help him keep that.

“Your hand picked,” Monty said with a smile. Hand picked meant Walker’s faithful. The soldiers that would stick by whatever play he needed to make. And the Red Hand couldn’t demand any changes, not with Walker’s record. “Crimson, Indigo, Grey. An’ me. All loyal, an’ all ‘ave been told what ta expect.”

Walker sighed as he took another drag of his cigarette. Slowly he rose to his feet, stretching to get the kinks out of his frame. He looked around the room for a long moment, then turned to his second in command. “The Masters o’ deception,” Walker slowly mused with a smirk. “Well t’day, we try an’ deceive the deceivers.” He watched as Monty rose to his feet, an encouraging smile forming on the Aussie’s lips. “Well boy, t’day has just b’come our first judgment day. Let’s hope that maybe the good Lord’s watchin’ down on us.”

Whitecap Dakota First Nation, Saskatchewan

4:15 pm. - August 20, 2002

The horse came to an easy stop, guided by the skilled hands of the rider who sat on top of him. Maxwell Running Cloud was getting in some relaxation before the start of the new semester at the University of Saskatchewan, and he could find that easily here on the ranch that he called home. But in this world filled with technology, even the serenity of a peaceful ranch wasn't enough to block out the rest of the world. Especially when Maxwell failed to leave his cell phone at home.

He dug through his duster as he calmed the horse so it wouldn't spook from the sounds of the cellular. Maxwell flipped it open carefully so he wouldn't drop it in the tall grass and he spoke in his usual calm and quiet manner, not something one would expect from the large Dakota man. Standing at six feet seven inches tall, and weighing in at 270 pounds, he was a sight indeed. Add to that his smooth demeanor and rugged good looks and he definitely had the attention of many on campus. "Hello," he said into the cell's receiver. "Doctor Filmore, good to hear from

you. I thought you would be getting ready for your final term at Oxford.” He laughed aloud at some joke told by Filmore and calmed the horse as it let out a nervous whinny.

“Convention, you say,” he replied to an obvious explanation. “At Ohio State University. Well, I’d love to attend, even though it is short notice. I’ll contact the dean of the college and let him know. I built up some holiday time. Besides, an opportunity such as this, with a meeting of some of the most impressive minds on anthropology throughout the world... I’d be a fool to miss this.” He chuckled lightly as he listened to the doctor, then his voice grew slightly somber. “I’m sorry, Doctor, but my wife was ... she passed away two years ago.” He held back his feelings as he remembered the night of the fire, holding his dying wife in his arms as he called out to his daughter. It had been two years, and he still didn’t have any evidence to finding her. “No, it’s alright, Doctor, you didn’t know. But yes, I will be more than happy to attend. Thank you very much for the information. Take care now.”

Maxwell clicked the end button on his cellphone and slipped it back into his duster,

leaning back on the horse for a moment. The South Saskatchewan River Valley in late August was beautiful. The leaves were just beginning to turn, and from Maxwell's vantage point he could see forever. God's country. That's what they called it. The Creator's masterpiece. Perhaps he would need this, for a time. He hadn't done anything except work on campus since his wife's death.

Oh, there was his alter ego. But that really wasn't an alter ego when the entire city of Saskatoon knew. The media had dubbed him Hawk's Scream. His feathered wing harness along with the amplification unit he'd managed to piece together was a familiar sight over the city, as he often would assist police in apprehending criminals. It wasn't glamorous, but it was something he could do to give back to his community. And at the same time, maybe he could find Raven.

"Well, Ironside," he said to the horse. "Guess I'll be gone for a few days. You gonna be alright without me?" The horse shook its head and let out a soft chuffle. "You're a big suck, you know that?" Maxwell said with a chuckle. He sighed as he guided the horse back toward the stables, thinking of this

opportunity as he rode calmly through the scrub brush. While the quiet and serenity of the ranch was to his liking, he had needs outside of this small piece of heaven. His horses and his cat Zachary were his only company, really. Aside from his students, he had no one.

And then the idea came to him. He wasn't the only one who shared this existence. His sister shared a sort of longing that he had himself begun to realize. He smiled as he thought about her, and his nephew.

"Ya know," he stated to no one in particular as he guided the horse back toward the stables. "I wonder what Naomi is doing these days."

Ottawa, Ontario, 4:20 pm. - August 20, 2002

Petey Running Cloud Simonson sat on the floor of the two bedroom apartment and watched TV. For this eight year old, he was going to grip onto his summer holidays for all he could. But there was some excitement in his eyes at the concept of school. Especially a new school. But this was so much more of a change than his school in Moose Jaw, and Ottawa was

so much bigger. At least they had a triple A baseball team with the Ottawa Lynx. Maybe, his mom would drive him to Toronto to catch a Blue Jays game sometime.

If she could get past her period of mourning.

Naomi had just begun to let it sink in that her husband was gone. Killed in action as the Canadian Armed Forces assisted the United States Military in the search for Osama Bin Laden during the months that followed September 11th, she returned to Canada not to a hero's welcome, but to say good bye to the love of her life. It was then that Canadian Secret Intelligence Service Paranormal Division contacted her. They had been watching her, and she was invited to join their ranks.

Like a good soldier, she did, though, her new posting was not without its oddities. Her superiors were, to say the least, a rather odd group. As she would learn, Naomi was the first human brought into the ranks of CSIS Paranormal Division. Often she would question herself, and question why she was brought into this organization. Just being there meant everything she grew up knowing,

was so very wrong. But at the same time, it confirmed so much.

Those thoughts were not filling her mind on this day as the phone rang.

She looked up from her comfy chair, mildly annoyed at the interruption, and glanced toward the phone's call display. At least it was her brother, Maxwell. He could at least make her smile when things looked at their worst. Only he and Petey were the two things keeping her anchored. "Hello," she spoke with a soft voice as she picked up the phone.

"How's my favourite sister these days?" Maxwell said with a smile in his voice. He had news, and from the sound of it, good news. That was something she needed to hear. Although, even hearing the sound of her brother's voice was enough to lift her spirits.

"I'm your only sister, Maxie," Naomi chuckled in reply. She set her book down on a side table next to her reading lamp, after bending over the page to mark her place. "You sound like your in a good mood."

"As good as I can be for someone who was just invited to attend one of North

America's most prestigious anthropological conventions," he explained. The joy in his voice could not be contained. He was more than likely as giddy as a school boy on Christmas Eve. "The university is going to give me a little time, seeing how I got most of my work done in June and July."

"Nothing like prep time to give you some stress free time," Naomi replied as she relaxed in her recliner. It was good to have a normal conversation for once. One that didn't involve her work. "Sounds like you've got a chance in a life time."

"Why don't you come along," he suggested. Naomi merely perked an eyebrow at the suggestion. The sudden pause in the conversation was noted by Maxwell, which only allowed him to continue. "The Yankees are playing a series in Cleveland, we can take Petey to see the game. I know a couple of professors at Ohio State that can get me tickets. Plus, we can take him to the zoo." Naomi didn't reply right away, as she considered the offer. But again, there was a pause which Maxwell quickly filled. "I can meet you in Windsor tomorrow and we can drive down to Columbus."

“Drive!” Naomi finally said incredulously. “Okay, but you’re driving from Windsor, buddy. I have to fight traffic through Toronto.” She sighed and shook her head, realizing that without any further discussion or thought, she had just accepted his invitation. Maxwell had a knack for doing that, and sometimes it drove Naomi nuts. “Means we’re gonna have to get going now.”

“You get ready,” Maxwell stated. “I’ll see you tomorrow.” He rang off, leaving Naomi to just shake her head. At least her brother was still such a free spirit, and in some ways, it was almost contagious. As she placed the phone back on its cradle she looked to her son as he watched television. This might be a good trip for him. “Hey squirt,” she said as she leaned forward in the chair. Petey looked back, rolling his eyes as he gave her the mom! look. “Yankees are playing Cleveland this weekend. Your uncle can snag tickets.” Suddenly, her son’s eyes widened as the television was long forgotten. He rose to his feet, excitement in his eyes. “One catch,” she said as she held up her index finger, her son’s attention was fully hanging onto her words.

“We leave in half an hour. Which means we need to get ourselves ready.”

She didn't have to say anything else as Petey raced into his room, scrambling to wash and pack. Naomi just shook her head and laughed. Given the proper motivation, her son could simply amaze her sometimes. She slowly rose to her feet and went to her bedroom, and methodically began packing. She smiled as she did so. It would be a nice little holiday.

Even if she had to contact her director to let them know of her whereabouts. And, of course, see if they could let the proper authorities know she would be on American soil. Vacation or not, it was always best to let the American spooks know, that a Canadian spook would be in their midst.

Columbus, Ohio, 5:09 pm. - August 20, 2002

Malcolm Montgomery Watt kept a close watch as the supplies were loaded onto a black, unmarked truck. While most other soldiers within the organization called the Red Hand depended on computerized inventory marking, Monty trusted something his commanding officer

always used. A simple clip board. If central command didn't like it, they could talk to Walker. Besides, he'd grown used to it. It was much like an old, familiar friend.

The Aussie looked up as he heard the slow, methodical steps of the gunslinger. He knew how Walker moved. A smile crossed his face as he handed the clip board to his commanding officer. "Ev'rythin's in order, mate. Even Indigo's request made it."

Walker looked over the list and chuckled. Monty had everything covered well enough, as he always did. One thing Walker could always admire about the Aussie, his attention to detail and near precise organizational skills. "We got the itinerary o' the convention that's goin' on this weekend?"

"All accounted for, mate," Monty replied with a smile. He turned as more footsteps sounded. Crimson Luna, the black beauty from New Orleans, her ability to trash talk had become legendary in the Red Hand. Indigo Beta, covert ops and intelligence picked up four years before after a run in with the Italian Mafia, she was a quiet one, and that was where she was most dangerous. Grey 6-2-6, weapons specialist and covert

ops. The small framed man from China was equally effective with small arms as he was with his hands. “An’ ‘ere’s the rest o’ the crew.”

Walker moved to face each of them, studying their faces carefully. Each appeared confident, especially Grey. Walker didn’t know another man who could remain as calm in the midst of a storm as Grey could. “Y’all’ve received the orders?” he asked them in his calm and quiet drawl. They merely nodded in reply, indicating that they had indeed received the information. “There’s gonna be a slight change o’ plans. This is it fer me. I ain’t goin’ any further. I ain’t getting’ any younger. An’ I made a shit ton o’ mistakes in my life. Some say ya can’t ever go back, but I b’lieve that my life ain’t so down the drain that I can’t find some sorta redemption b’fore my final reward.” He reached into his pocket and produced the photo one more time, letting go of a heavy sigh before continuing. “We all have somethin’ more important ta think ‘bout than the things we do.”

“Hell, Boss,” Crimson piped up, her familiar smile seeming to brighten the dower mood. “Count on us. We got yo back. Ain’t

nuthin' ta worry 'bout man." Walker chuckled a bit as Crimson spoke her words.

"Ya always were a pistol, Chelsea," Walker said with a smile and looked to Indigo and Grey. He could see it in their eyes, they were ready to back his play. "This here's the most dangerous thing we've ever done. Not b'cause o' the odds, 'r b'cause we're goin' in heavy. But b'cause it's ta defy them that wanna set the course o' the world. Show 'em that everyone deserves their own freedom." He pocketed the picture and held out his hand. One by one, his agents placed their hand on his. Without hesitation. There was something in this world more important than trying to be the top dog. More important than setting the course of politics.

Honour. Family. Integrity. Trust.

And Walker knew, right then and there, a new chapter of his life had just begun. He had people he could count on, without having to worry if they were going to stab him in the back.

Chapter Two

Columbus, Ohio, 3:24 pm. - August 22, 2002

Naomi Running Cloud tilted the seat back as the sound of the road seemed to drone on and on. She hadn't spoken a word since she and her brother Maxwell crossed the border, and the radio didn't help at all. Even the few CD's they had, ran out long ago and now, she was just getting tired. She looked to the back seat of the Bronco and smiled. Her son, Petey, was fast asleep. Naomi wished that she could just nod off quickly in a blissful slumber. "Oh, to be eight again," she muttered with a smile.

Maxwell glanced to his nephew in the rear view mirror and smiled. They'd been driving for some time, since he'd met his sister in Windsor, Ontario. Naomi drove the long trek from Ottawa to Windsor, fighting traffic through Toronto, and feeling a sense of

relief when Maxwell offered to drive the rest of the way. “I think he fell asleep as soon as we entered the city limits.”

Naomi chuckled as she looked to her brother. “City limits. That’s funny, considering this is Columbus, Ohio. It’s not like Saskatoon. There we know where the city limits are. Here, it’s kind of like southern Ontario. Mississauga runs into Toronto, which runs into Hamilton and so on and so forth.”

“It is a different world, that’s for certain,” Maxwell replied with a smile. He checked his mirrors and watched the traffic. They’d been driving for a while now. Ohio State University had invited him to speak to students about Native American history, the affect European settlers had on them, and how many tribes interacted with them. His main goal was always to wipe clean the myth of First Nations tribes being filled with ruthless savages, and bring about the stories of many of the chiefs and elders who were very peace loving. Much like the old chief from his home’s history, Chief Whitecap.

“You never answered my question before, Maxie,” Naomi stated as she settled

back into her seat. “Why didn’t you book a flight?”

“You know why,” Maxwell furrowed his brow as he glanced to his sister. “I hate to fly.”

Naomi laughed a loud, covering her mouth as she looked to her son who was still asleep. Behind her son sat suitcases and other packages. Included in those was a rig that Maxwell had created, one that allowed him to assist the police in Saskatoon. He didn’t consider himself a superhero, but he was dubbed one by the media. “So says the man who wears a pair of wings on his back,” Naomi teased. In truth, Maxwell had flown from Saskatoon to Windsor. Gliding on air currents thanks to his wing harness, carrying a backpack and a duffel bag, but he still did fly.

“Hey now,” Maxwell said with a slight grin. “I’m not the only one in this vehicle with a set of wings on their back.”

Naomi sat back in the chair, a cheshire cat grin on her face. She would often tease her brother. Even though in a way she also admired him. He was an intelligent man, who made his own luck. No wonder he built his

flight rig and sonic amplifier. The media had dubbed him Hawk's Scream, but he didn't fly with a secret identity. The age of costumed heroes was coming again, and costumed vigilantes were cropping up all over the place. Some helped the police openly, others were seen as just as bad as the criminal element they fought. One such figure was seen as worse than criminals, as Vancouver's dark avenger, the Mannequin, would often leave targets hospitalized for months. However, unlike the Mannequin, Maxwell's identity was known. Many would think that would interfere with his position as professor at the University of Saskatchewan, but Maxwell made certain it didn't.

After a decade with the Canadian military, she was brought into the fold of CSIS Paranormal Division. They gave her a rig all her own, but much more streamlined and sleek than Maxwell's. Hers also came with a pair of claws. Her code name was Grey Kestrel, something she thought was a play on her brother's moniker. She also had brought her rig with her. Naomi had contacted CSIS Paranormal Division, informing her of her plans, and the suggestion was made she

take her gear. Both CIA and FBI had been informed she was coming.

Her thoughts seemed to drift a bit as they drove. The adventures she'd had, and the ones she'd read about involving Maxwell. "Ya know," Naomi said with a smile. "I think it'd be nice if the two of us fought side by side."

"We are going to be in another country," Maxwell reminded her, with a roll of his eyes. "I'm not exactly sure how well the United States government would look upon a pair of Canadian superheroes fighting crime on their soil."

"I thought you hated that term," Naomi chuckled lightly, indicating the word superhero.

"Note, I made certain it was sarcastic," Maxwell replied with a smirk.

"Then why do you do it?" Naomi asked genuinely. "I mean, I have my orders. You don't have to, but you do anyway."

Maxwell shrugged, shaking his head. "I just want to help people. Maybe some of the kids I work with can have someone to look up to. Maybe they'll see that if you put your mind to it, anything is possible." He

signaled as he guided the Bronco onto an off ramp. “And now, I am going to assume that thanks to your connections, we don’t have to worry about the government or authority in Columbus.”

“Spook hot line,” Naomi said with a chuckle. “Canadian spook going into U.S. territory. I had to let the American spooks know I was there, just to be polite.” She looked out the window as the buildings zipped past the vehicle, motioning as a large, very luxurious looking building came into view. “I think that’s the hotel.”

Maxwell slowed the vehicle down and sighed in relief. He was going to be happy to get out of the Bronco. “Maybe next, we can take a flight.” The pair of them laughed a loud, which did waken Petey.

“Mom!” the eight year old said with a very tired yawn but with a sense of urgency. “Are we there yet? I gotta go to the bathroom.”

“Just pulling into the parking lot now, sweetie,” Naomi said with a smile. “Not too much adventure here. I think it’s gonna be a quiet convention, so we’ll get a chance to see the sights.”

Maxwell steered the Bronco into the hotel parking lot with a smile. It had been a long trip. It was going to be nice to have a rest before any action, no matter how mundane, took place.

3:36 pm. - August 22, 2002

“...the world will always be changing. Something is coming and we have to be prepared for it. We must stand together, for the betterment of mankind. What we do, is for the common good of all.” Each word from the general was emphasized with a fist pumped into the air. The men and women on the floor of the gathering hall cheered as the speech came to an end. But up in the top level, where the other gunslingers gathered, there was no cheering. They’d heard the flowery speeches before. They knew what life was like for them and the agents under their command. It was always the same for them.

One of them knew only too well what this life in the Red Hand really was like.

Johnathon Walker tossed his cigarette to the ground and crushed it with his boot heel as he moved toward the exit. “They knew

you were smoking, Rose,” one of the other gunslingers said without looking up. “They’d have you killed.”

“Their minds ‘re more concerned with matters o’ politics, m’friend,” Walker replied calmly as he slowly looked back to the speaker. An old friend, one he had met when he was recruit to the ranks of the Red Hand. “An’ those politics don’t include the cleanliness o’ air. ‘Sides, they already choke up the air ‘nough with their rhetoric.”

“Ya keep talkin’ like that, mate an’ ya’ll get y’self shot,” the Aussie next to him drawled. Omega Six. The man had served long enough with Walker in this organization, and had seen more than many of those in the upper hierarchy of the Red Hand. “The word’s lay low an’ keep quiet, innit mate?” quickly changing the topic from a simple cigarette to more pressing matters.

“Only in the field, Six,” Walker replied. He looked back toward the main stage as more speeches were being made to the gathered crowd. A futile effort to bolster courage among an organization dedicated to spreading lies. “C’mon, Six. We don’t need ta hear anymore o’ this bullshit.” He rubbed

the knuckles of his right hand absently as he began walking down the hallway. Today was a bad day, today he actually felt old as his arthritis began to flare up. Not a good thing for a gunslinger to be afflicted with.

Omega Six glanced down to the convention floor before he turned to catch up with Walker. “Things’re changin’, innit, Sir?” Six had discussed the plan with Walker enough times, he knew when the wind had changed direction. And when it was time to get out. Monty had a very good idea of what was about to happen.

“Yeah, Six. They are.” Walker collected his gear in his slow, methodical way as he spoke. “Remember the orders we got fer Ohio?” Six nodded sagely. “Well, I scouted the target out. Kid’s name is Gerald Cleaves. Only son o’ Senator Harold Cleaves, from Florida. Word is Cleaves is the go to man fer legislation on the future o’ oil an’ gas in this country. We’ve been tol’ ta nab the kid, an’ put pressure on Cleaves. If Cleaves don’t sway, then Gerald pays.” Walker paused and sighed as his voice grew quiet. “Know how old the kid is?” His men said nothing, they only waited for some sort of reply.

“Seventeen, maybe eighteen.” He took out another cigarette, lighting it and inhaled from it deeply. Walker closed his eyes, ignoring the disapproving looks from the other gunslingers. “Boys. It’s time I got out.”

A few of the other men began to protest, but a look from Omega Six quickly quieted them. They’d been in the service of the old gunslinger for years, and they knew of his convictions. When he’d made a decision, he would stick to it. “Whaddya want us ta do, mate?”

“Monty,” Walker said with a sigh as he dropped the formalities of rank. Malcolm Montgomery Watt had been his second in command for longer than even the old gun hand could remember. “You know how good we are at fixin’ things. Well, it’s ‘bout time we fix things up real good, an’ make this here group think things went so south, that it were us that bought it.”

“Disappear,” Monty replied quietly. His commanding officer nodded in full agreement. Within a few moments, the decision had been made. No one argued anymore. They’d back his play.

Walker was getting out.

3:47 pm. - August 22, 2002

The door to the suite opened slowly as the bell hop ensured that nothing was damaged. For three people there was a lot of luggage for just a four day convention. The bellhop busied himself with the luggage, removing it from the trolley as Naomi lay Petey down on the bed. It had been a long trip, and the boy was very tired, even if his journey began with excitement lighting up his eyes. Maxwell paid the bellhop a tip and thanked the man, then proceeded to sit heavily in one of the chairs in the room. Naomi had already stretched out on one of the other beds.

“I can’t believe we just drove for thirteen hours,” she said in an exasperated voice. “I don’t think I ever want to see the inside of a car again.”

“We have to drive back,” Maxwell reminded her with a tired chuckle.

“Forget it,” she huffed. “I’ll call up the director of CSIS and see if he can’t get a Hercules to pick us all up.” She chuckled as she made the comment, only making Maxwell laugh harder as well. “What’s the plan for tonight?” Naomi said softly, changing the

subject.

“Dinner with the professors,” Maxwell said as he took out a small brochure. It detailed their weekend and different events and discussions at the conference. “Cocktails at six, and dinner at seven. Guest speaker to follow.”

“Are you speaking at this tonight?” Naomi asked as she draped one arm over her eyes.

“No,” Maxwell replied as he set down the brochure. “I don’t speak until tomorrow morning.”

“Good,” she stated, not moving a muscle. She didn’t want to move. Very odd, considering none of them had moved the entire trip in the car. “Who gets the first crack at the shower?”

“I don’t wanna move,” he replied as he lay his head back on the chair. As the pair of adults remained still, too tired to do anything more than just breathe, Petey woke up from his light sleep. He looked around for a moment as one tired hand wiped the sleep from his eyes, then caught sight of the door to the bathroom, and lazily loped over to it. Soon, after the door had closed, the sound of running water

could be heard. Maxwell looked up for only a moment to gaze toward the bathroom door, then over to Naomi. “He’s having a shower? Isn’t that a cardinal sin for an eight year old?”

“He’s a smart kid,” Naomi replied, the only move she made was to crack a bright smile. She was proud of her son. Even the smallest thing he did was amazing in her eyes. “Dibs after he’s done. Because I’ll have to clean it before you get in.”

“Good,” Maxwell replied as he yawned. “Maybe I’ll get a nap.” He sat in the chair for a moment longer, letting the silence fill the room. And then spoke the most random thing. “I wonder how Zachary’s doing with Ernie.”

Naomi could only chuckle where she lay. “You and that damned cat.”

Chapter Three

Columbus, Ohio, 6:15 pm. - August 22, 2002

The tie was a little tight. The drinks were a little watered down, and the conversation was a little boring. At least Omega Six had the luxury of bird watching while he watched the room. The event was the Ohio State Anthropological Society. Experts in the fields of different cultures were in attendance from all over the world. Most chatted lightly with colleagues. For others, it seemed to Monty as though it were like a high school reunion.

Then, there was the woman. Monty knew she was a single mother, the child never left her side. Even with elegant floor length dress she wore, Monty could tell that there was something else about this dark skinned woman than met the eye. Aboriginal, he assumed, possibly from Western Canada or

the United States. Tribe ancestry he couldn't put his finger on. But nonetheless, she still seemed intriguing to him. Strong and elegant, all at the same time. He smiled as he casually walked toward her.

Fifteen steps away, he heard the gruff voice of the old gunslinger in his ear piece. "Just what 'xactly ya doin', son?"

"Mingling," he replied as he moved to make it appear as though he were taking out a kerchief to cough. "It's what we're s'posed ta do."

"Mingle," Walker repeated. "Not ogle over the first pretty skirt ya see." Monty cursed under his breath, mumbling in wonderment how his commanding officer could do that. "Just keep yerself focused, Six," the gunslinger warned as he cut off the communication. Monty was glad, a good old shindig like this, the old man could end up crampin' his style by interrupting his good view.

The Aussie moved through the crowd toward the woman, examining her carefully. Her son never let go of her hand, dressed in his own smart looking suit. She was obviously engaged in conversation with an

older gentleman, one that Monty recognized. Colonel William Pate, former British army. This alone caused him to wonder about the nature of this woman, if she was conversing with a man such as him. And he drew a little closer.

“...again, my deepest sympathies. I never had the chance to mention that to you before you shipped out,” Pate said with the most polite of gestures.

“I’ve mourned,” came the woman’s reply. “And I’ve learned that he’s still with me. We both knew the risks serving in Afghanistan.”

Monty furrowed his brow. Bloody hell, she’s military. American? He noticed Pate looking his way and he smiled. “Pardon the intrusion,” Monty said as he turned on the charm. “Sometimes movin’ ‘round in these gatherin’s takes ya ta the strangest o’ places.”

“From the sound of it,” Pate chuckled. “I’d say your a long way from your home. Aussie, aren’t you?”

“That’s right, mate,” Monty grinned as he offered Pate his hand in a friendly shake. “An’ pardon if I eavesdropped, but

the three o' us 'ave somethin' in common." Pate accepted the offer as Monty introduced himself. "Corporal Malcom Watt."

"Ah, another from the Royal Service," Pate said with a smile.

Royal service, Monty mused. Must mean the lady's Canadian then. "Served for a few years indeed." He offered his hand to the woman, who accepted it with a smile.

"Naomi Running Cloud," she said with a small bow. Now that Monty stood face to face with her, he realized that she wasn't wearing high heels, and she was still taller than he was.

"A pleasure," Monty replied and looked to the child. "Somebody looks bored." Monty smiled and winked to the small boy. "Bet there's a thousand places you'd rather be, 'ey mate?" He quipped. Petey hid behind his mother's leg, still clutching to her hand, then laughed and smiled. Success, Monty smiled back. The tike's on my side. He returned his gaze back to Naomi. "So, if I might ask, what's someone like you doin' here? I don't mean ta say ya probably don't find this int'restin', but it's odd ta find more 'n one soldier 'round a place like this."

Naomi smirked and nodded. “The same could be said of you,” she replied. “But in all honesty, I’m here with the tall, dark hair guy over there.” She pointed toward Maxwell’, his long hair neatly braided and looking oddly out of place in the tux that he wore.

“Usband?” Monty asked quickly, his ego taking a bit of a hit. Pate laughed aloud and looked to Naomi for a moment, then turned to Monty.

“Oh goodness no, old chap,” Pate said still chuckling. “Maxwell and Naomi are brother and sister.”

Monty nodded with the revelation, his bruised ego taking some solace in this new information. He looked toward Maxwell a moment, and then snapped his fingers. “Say, I think I’ve seen ‘im b’fore.”

“I should say so,” Pate quickly replied. “Professor Running Cloud happens to be one of the most highly regarded experts on First Nation culture.” With the last three words he looked to Naomi and winked. “I told you I wouldn’t have to be prompted.”

Monty simply furrowed his brow, obviously showing some sign of confusion by the statement. Naomi helped fill in the

blanks. “Colonel Pate used to always say Indian. My brother isn’t a fan of the term.” She looked to Pate and returned the wink. “Maxie would be proud of you, Colonel.”

Monty chuckled lightly and shook his head. He looked to his left for a moment, catching sight of a familiar figure. Their eyes met for a moment, and he knew it was time to leave. Besides, Indigo Beta was getting bored in her dress. He smiled to her, making the show look good, and turned back to Naomi and Pate. “If you’ll both excuse me, I see someone I ‘aven’t spoken with in years.” He nodded to them each, and received a handshake from both before turning to meet with Indigo. Their survey of the room was done. They could leave now.

Naomi watched the Aussie for a moment more and let out a slight sigh. “Is something wrong?” Pate asked with concern in his voice.

“I don’t know,” she replied and took a sip of her wine. But I plan on finding out.

11:05 pm. - August 22, 2002

Maxwell watched Naomi as she tucked Petey into bed. She'd been quiet since she left the dinner. He asked if something might be wrong, but she avoided the question rather quickly. But now, it was nagging at him and he could tell there was something bothering her as she went through rather methodical motions. "Somethings got you bugged," he idly commented. "Did something happen at the dinner?"

"You could say that," she replied as she opened a suitcase with her laptop. She hooked it up to the hotel's network and turned it on as she took out her cellphone and began dialing. Naomi waited as it rang, holding her hand up to shush her brother. Maxwell was now completely confused, and frustrated. His sister wasn't saying word one to him, then someone answered the phone and he could tell she had switched to spook mode. She muttered quietly into the receiver and waited again. It was only a few minutes and she spoke in a regular tone again. "Good evening, Amanda. I need some help. I'm going to log into the suspect files and I need an identity

match.” She paused for a moment, obviously Amanda was speaking on the other end of the phone. “Logging in right now,” she spoke as her fingers tapped in the commands on the keyboard. Soon enough, the answer came for Maxwell as the CSIS Paranormal Division logo popped up on her screen. “Amanda, I’m going to put you on speaker. My brother’s with me, and this could end up involving him as well.” Maxwell heard some chatter on the other end, which to him, Naomi seemed to ignore as she hooked the cellphone up to a pair of small speakers.

“...unauthorized personnel, Agent. ...bloody...” The voice paused a moment before the sound of someone clearing their throat could be heard. “Good evening, Professor Running Cloud.”

“Um... evening,” he replied to the cellphone. He was thoroughly confused now. Maxwell leaned against the back of a chair and looked to his sister for help, but received none.

“Amanda, I’m going through the criminal database,” she explained as her fingers flew over the keys. On the screen a series of small files appeared, each with a name and photo.

“The individual I’m looking for is maybe early 30’s, male, Australian, dark hair, about 6 feet tall. He said he was with the military, but that could have been a lie.” She continued typing as she spoke, looking through the database and narrowing down her search. There was matching typing heard over the cellphone.

“This could be an incredibly narrow search, Agent Running Cloud,” Amanda reported after a few moments. “After all, the number of Australian criminals wanted internationally is equal to the number of Canadian criminals wanted internationally.”

“Please don’t tell me that Australia has the same stigma that we do,” Naomi sighed. “Polite, but still wanting to stab you in the back.” Maxwell smirked and there was a small chuckle on the other end of the phone.

“No, I doubt that,” Amanda replied. “I’m going to make an addition to the search and see what I might be able to discover.” Naomi leaned back in her chair. Her gut feeling was there about Malcolm, but the search was turning up not a bloody thing. Maxwell placed a well meaning hand on her shoulder, a show of support. He trusted her judgment, and did not question her feeling

about this man. Naomi smiled to Maxwell just as Amanda cried out in victory. “I think I have something. I had to open up the secured files, but I believe I have something.” A file opened on Naomi’s laptop, displaying a picture and write up. Naomi studied it for a moment before smirking as she nodded.

“Yeah, that’s the guy. I knew it.” She began reading the information off the screen as Amanda read over the cliff notes.

“No serious criminal background, but he is suspected to be involved with an organization called the Red Hand,” Amanda explained. “An extremely militant group that recruits those with police and military background. Many of the recruits are from Russia and the United States. Malcolm Montgomery Watt is an expert weapons specialist, expert in combat medicine and a top notch pilot. He was a member of EMS Services in Australia for several years, then applied to join the police force, then nothing. He resurfaced after RCMP Lieutenant Christa Rayne began gathering information about a gunslinger by the code name Operative Violet Rose. It would seem that Watt, code named Omega Six, is Rose’s second in command.”

“Well, he’s here in Columbus, Amanda,” Naomi explained. “And if these files read correctly, then Rose and the rest of his unit is here as well. Though, for what, I’m not sure.”

“Is there someone who is considered high profile at the convention who would be a target?” Amanda inquired.

“No,” Maxwell offered. “No one of real importance in the field. Well, I shouldn’t say that, each of us is important. Just no one who would attract these to them.”

“What’s the next move, Amanda?” Naomi asked in a hopeful voice. There was a pause on the other end as it sounded as if Amanda were speaking to someone away from the phone.

“I’ll contact the FBI, who should get you in touch with the police,” she replied as Naomi smiled. She hoped this would happen. “Don’t get too excited. These things usually take time. But due to the nature of these individuals, we might be able to push paperwork through for you. Both of you.” Amanda sighed on the other end of the phone. “I hope you two enjoy the paperwork I’m going to have to do because of you. Oh, and

“Yes Assistant Director?” she said, switching back to more formal titles.

“I hope you two packed your wings.”

12:34 am. - August 23, 2002

“We have a problem,” Operative Indigo Beta said as she looked up from the computer terminal. Omega Six stood nearby, having been pacing back and forth as she put in her research. Finally, after several minutes, she had everything she needed. Operative Violet Rose walked over to view her findings, he furrowed his brow as he looked closely. Indigo turned in her chair to gage her commanding officer’s reaction. As always, it was the same thing. Walker took out his cigarette holder, removed a custom rolled Pall Mall and lit it. “She’s a spook, Sir. Former Canadian military, now with CSIS,” she summarized for them all, her Italian accent softened after the years. “Rumour has it, she is in a very black ops division of CSIS. But no one, not even the Red Hand, has information on which branch.”

Walker nodded as he listened to the information, taking a long pull on the cigarette. He remained silent as he looked

to each of his soldiers. Omega Six, Indigo Beta , Grey 626, and Crimson Luna. Each of them had not argued with Walker when he made his decision. They were in, and they'd stay by him. They almost anticipated his next words. "She could be a silver linin' in this here sow's ear we got ourselves inta."

"There is more, Sir," Indigo stated. "She is a guest at the convention. While her background in civilian life is in archeology, her brother is the one who was asked to come. Professor Maxwell Running Cloud, Masters Degree in Native American History from the University of British Columbia, Degree in Natural Sciences, specializing in ornithology. Two years ago, he accepted a position at the University of Saskatchewan's Historical Department."

"An academic?" Walker asked.

Indigo turned to her terminal and tapped in a few keys. A news video began playing, though the sound was muted. "At the time Professor Running Cloud accepted the position in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, reports of a vigilante the media dubbed Hawk's Scream began making appearances. It was later revealed that Hawk's Scream

and Maxwell Running Cloud are one in the same.”

“An’ Lieutenant Runnin’ Cloud?” Walker said as he took another pull on the cigarette. “She got more ‘n just military background?” He watched the screen a moment as he rubbed the knuckles of his left hand. Indigo caught sight of the action, and turned to watched for a moment. All of Walker’s agents were familiar with his condition. Something that crept up upon everyone. Old age. His bones were suffering the affects of Arthritis. Indigo turned back to the keyboard as Walker looked to her. He chuckled slightly. “What I tell ya ‘bout lookin’ at me that way? I’m old, I ain’t dead.” He motioned toward the terminal again. “’Bout Miss Runnin’ Cloud.”

“Mrs. Simonson, actually,” Indigo corrected. “Naomi married a Captain Peter Simonson. They met while on mission in Bosnia. Married not long after her brother was married. As Omega Six observed, and I also witnessed, she has a son.” She paused to tap the keys again, bringing up more information. “Strangely, both brother and sister are also widower and widow.” Indigo tapped her keyboard again, almost as though a moment

of silence was needed. Of all those in the Red Hand, this crew had the greatest respect for life, and knew the internal struggle they dealt with by taking a life. It was probably what made them the most human. “But as you requested, Sir, Lieutenant Running Cloud has a code name known to the Red Hand. Many believe it is a moniker in homage to her brother.” She looked back to Walker, noting his full attention was on her words. “Grey Kestrel.”

Walker snorted a laugh and finished his cigarette, tossing it to the ground and crushing it under his boot heel. “Birds o’ a feather. Maybe they can both help us.”

“Orders, Sir,” Monty stated quickly.

“Our orders,” Walker said to Monty, then turned to face all his agents. “Make it look good. Them kids do not get killed. We get a trail offa them fast, an’ maybe the Red Hand’ll stop chasin’ ‘em.” He looked to each agent for a moment before continuing on. “Anyone here who don’t like this idea, yer free ta walk out now. This here’s my decision.” He was going to wait a moment, but each of his agents quickly piped up their support. All or nothing, they were in and

backing his play. The old gun hand nodded and smiled, the sound in his ears of their conviction outweighed the pain in his bones a thousand fold. With them, he could fight heaven and hell. “Good. Now let’s get ta work.”

Chapter Four

Columbus, Ohio, 8:55 am. - August 23, 2002

Maxwell inspected his papers carefully before looking over to the man who stood behind the podium with him. Professor Oswald Phipps was a dear old friend. Schooled at Oxford in England, Phipps first met Maxwell on a lecture tour at the University of British Columbia where Max was just a second year student. The pair had engaged in a heated discussion about Canada's First Nations. Some might have called the young student hot headed and ignorant, but Phipps saw a great potential in Maxwell. Instead of ignoring the young man, he kept in touch and now, Maxwell was asked to speak. In a way, Phipps was just as proud of Maxwell's accomplishments as the Dakota man was.

Maxwell finally looked up from the table, hands casually in the pockets of his

khaki slacks, and studied the crowd. He took a deep breath as he reached up to adjust his glasses. "Professor Phipps," he said in a very calm voice. His old friend looked up from his papers with a small look of concern. "Should I be worried if I feel I'm about to have a panic attack?"

Phipps laughed heartily as he placed a consoling hand on Maxwell's shoulder. "Why would you say a thing like that? You speak to students every day in lectures." He took off his glasses as Maxwell looked over to him. Phipps was an intelligent man, and quite the orator himself. He knew the words to keep Maxwell on an even keel. "Don't think of these people as anyone different than your students. You are an educator, and this is no different than your classroom."

"I seem to remember that at these events there usually is one person who tries to argue, not just discuss," Maxwell said with a small smile. Phipps laughed again as the memory of that lecture at UBC was brought back.

"I also seem to recall, the person I was having a discussion with turned into quite the educator himself," Phipps replied with a smile. In a way, Maxwell had become

Phipps protégé. The elder professor saw something in Maxwell that was pure genius. “You’ll be fine, Professor Running Cloud. I have complete confidence in you. Besides,” Phipps said with a knowing smile. “If there happen to be any hecklers in the audience, I can head them off at the pass, so to speak.”

Maxwell chuckled slightly at the comment, then turned as the organizer of the lecture motioned the pair to move to their seats. It was going to be a long two hours. Especially when he was one of the focal points of the morning. “Good morning everyone. I would like to welcome you all to this convention and our first pair of speakers,” the organizer stated with a smile as she watched the audience members quickly find their seats and end any whispered conversations. “I am extremely pleased that we have two very well known and very well versed professors in their field. The first, Professor Oswald Phipps. Coming to us from Oxford University in London, Professor Phipps has lectured on the changes in culture and society for forty years. Phipps himself says that as the world moves forward, he is not only an educator, but a student, as he sees the changes in society

each decade. Also joining us this morning is Professor Maxwell Running Cloud from the University of Saskatchewan.”

Maxwell took a sip of water as the organizer spoke, and he wondered how many times she had to practice saying the word Saskatchewan before she got it close. As it was, she had placed a slightly incorrect emphasis on the wrong syllable. Little matter, however. Because he was being called upon. As the organizer motioned toward him, he rose to his feet and moved to the podium. “Good morning everyone. I am very happy to be here. I always find that the aspects of our society, our traditions and culture, seem to interweave themselves with our ever growing technology. I am reminded how I was invited to this convention, because I received a phone call while out riding my horse Ironside along the South Saskatchewan. At the time, I found it odd and at the same time, extremely incredible, how something as simple as horseback riding, much like how these two countries were pioneered over a hundred years ago, can become interrupted by a cell phone call.” The audience laughed lightly at the analogy, and Maxwell seemed to ease his

worries. He looked to Phipps with a smile and continued. “Today, that is just one of the things I want to discuss. How the culture and traditions of different peoples can stay alive with our ever changing technological advances...”

11:15 am. - August 23, 2002

Captain David Schwartz shoved aside one folder on his desk only to replace it with another folder. Arsonists, car jackings, armed robberies. Just another day at the office. He looked up as the door to his office slowly opened. At least it wasn't another case file being delivered. Schwartz leaned back in his chair and sighed as he nodded in silent greeting to Inspector Juan Cortez as the younger man leaned on the door frame. He held his steaming cup of coffee like it was a lifeline.

“You look like you've been at it all night,” Schwartz observed. “Get any sleep last night?”

“Hell no,” Cortez shook his head as he entered the office. He carefully closed the door and took a seat at the desk across from Schwartz. “I was out late goin' over

a homicide, an' came in early ta go over the evidence again. Sucker was a bad one. Pretty gruesome scene."

Schwartz sighed and rubbed his hands over his face. "Just as bad as the nickel an' dime stuff I'm workin' on. Shit's happenin' all over the city. An' half the calls we're gettin' are people rattin' on their neighbours thinkin' they're middle eastern terrorists." Cortez snorted and rolled his eyes in response as Schwartz let out a long sigh. "I hadda quit smokin' this week, too."

"Hey, Cap," Cortez said with a smile. "Isn't that s'posed ta be the step ta a new, healthier life?"

"Yeah, right," he said with a snort as he looked to the pile of paperwork. "Quit smokin' an' get an ulcer over this garbage." He grabbed his coffee cup and took a sip as the two men continued their discussion on the criminal events from the previous night. Several muggings, four armed robberies at convenience stores and the riff raff from the night's drunken revealing. As Schwartz was about to explain one file about a lawyer caught stoned out of his mind outside his apartment building, shouting obscenities

to the doorman, all the while wearing a French Maid outfit, his phone suddenly rang. “Schwartz here. What is it, Amelia?” he said into the phone, knowing it was dispatcher’s direct line. Cortez rose from his chair and raised his coffee cup in salute. Another day on the job.

“Got a call for you, Captain,” Amelia stated quickly. “It’s important. Assistant Director Agent Amanda from CSIS Paranormal Division.”

“CSIS?” Schwartz repeated with some suspicion. “You mean Canadian spooks?” He held up his hand quickly to stop Cortez, motioning him to sit down. Cortez furrowed his brow as he did as he was asked. “Put ‘em through, Amelia. I got Cortez with me, I’ll put it on speaker.”

“Yes Sir,” came Amelia’s quick response. Schwartz exchanged a glance with Cortez as he set the phone down, getting ready to place the call on speaker phone. Why would CSIS be calling his office? The question lingered as the phone rang again.

Schwartz hit the speaker button and rose to his feet. “Schwartz’s office. How can I help you A.D. Amanda?”

“Good morning, Captain Schwartz,” Amanda’s voice was rather chipper and precise as she spoke. “My apologies for this call, but it would seem there is a situation which would require your attention.” She paused for a moment before continuing, as though there was something just a bit off. “Might I also inquire as to why I have been placed on speaker phone?”

“I have Inspector Juan Cortez with me in the office,” Schwartz explained. “Cortez is one of my best investigators. Been with the force for fifteen years.”

“Ah, I see,” Amanda replied, her voice sounding as though she were satisfied with the explanation. “Good morning, Inspector. Down to business, gentlemen. Last night at approximately eleven o’clock one of our agents made a positive identification with a known criminal. Have either of you ever heard of an organization called the Red Hand?”

Schwartz looked across the desk to Cortez, who just shrugged with a blank look on his face. He smirked and shook his head as he replied. “Sorry, ma’am. Can’t say that’s familiar.”

“They are a very military organization who’s main objective is to ensure the status quo in the world remains exactly where it is,” Amanda explained carefully. “Needless to say, they are just as much a terrorist organization as the Taliban. Except, they are not proclaiming some religious jihad. Their motives are much more political.”

“So, one of these Red Hand guys is in Columbus,” Schwartz repeated, breaking down the information to a much simpler tone that Amanda did. “An’ one o’ your agents is in town. That an authorized action?”

“Actually, she was on vacation?”

“Vacation?” Cortez repeated with a slight laugh. “Hate ta see what you guys do for work, then.” Schwartz smirked, but held up a hand attempting to control the jests coming from his top investigator.

“She is actually traveling with her brother, Professor Maxwell Running Cloud,” Amanda detailed. “You may have a detailed itinerary of the convention taking place at the university this weekend. Agent Running Cloud recently had a death in the family, and it was believed her time away from action was better suited. When her brother offered

her to join him, we authorized the okay for time off.

“So, back ta this Red Hand,” Schwartz stated, having more than enough of the vacation plans explained to him. “How bad are they?”

“We have determined they are targeting a Senator’s son,” Amanda explained. Harold Cleaves, Florida Senator. His son, Gerald, is attending classes in Columbus.”

“Any information on what they wanna do?” Schwartz asked as he furrowed his brow. With all the other crap happening in the city, it would have to come to something like this.

“No other information is available, Captain,” Amanda revealed. “Attempting to crack the Red Hand’s database is difficult at best. We only ask one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“We have contacted Washington, and have the go ahead for Agent Running Cloud to become activated for duty on American soil. We would like her to work with you. Also, her brother. He will more than likely join in the hunt.”

“A professor,” Cortez spoke up for the

first time. “Ya gotta be kiddin’ me.”

“Have either of you heard the names Hawk’s Scream or Grey Kestrel?”

Schwartz simply looked across the desk to Cortez. Both men had heard the names before, but only in news casts. And now they were both here. “Ya gotta admit, A.D. Amanda,” he said with some skepticism. “That’s a big coincidence.”

“I like to think of it more as a fortunate series of events,” she retorted. “Do I have your permission, gentlemen? Both are well trained, and both will work closely with you to ensure that the law is maintained.”

Schwartz sighed, considering Amanda’s request. He looked to Cortez, who merely shrugged in reply. “Yeah, no problem,” Schwartz finally answered. “Have them meet us early tomorrow morning. Say, ‘bout eight, nine o’clock. We have some work to go over here. Any information that your agent has, she can share with us. We’ll go from there.”

“Thank you, Captain. I shall inform Agent Running Cloud right away.” The line went dead as Amanda hung up, leaving the two officers to contemplate this new information. What had begun as a long day,

had just become a lot longer.

Rickenbacker International Airport, Ohio

12:20 pm. - August 23, 2002

Passengers, flight attendants, pilots and more mingled in the terminal of the airport. Some arriving, some departing. No one really took much interest in each other, even the guards that were spread throughout the terminal seemed to be a bit more relaxed. Attentive, but still relaxed. They all knew of what happened less than a year ago. Even with such an action on American soil as the hijacking of three airplanes, it was business as usual in America. Something that many of the politicians had hoped would happen. To stop common, everyday activities would show any supposed enemy a weakness. Besides, there wasn't anyone matching descriptions of known terrorists coming through today.

This fact alone aloud the large Russian easy access through the airport.

“Your reason for your trip, Mr. Andropov?” the attendant inquired to the large man.

“Am here for business,” he replied in a slow, but pleasing manner. “There is

convention at Ohio State University, and I am merely sharing information with many of my colleagues.”

“Ah, yes. We’ve had a few international academics passing through here today.” She checked over his passport information and stamped the appropriate pages, sliding it back to him with a smile. “Enjoy your stay in the United States, Mr. Andropov.”

The large man bowed with a kind smile. “Spasibo, tovarich.” It was all too easy. Passing through customs, getting into the country. Even with forged papers. No one in the States was looking at Russians right now. After all, Russia was an ally now, even if considered a temperamental ally. Terrorists didn’t come to America from Russia. At least, not anymore.

Oh, how wrong they all were.

For this was not an academic wishing to share information at a convention. In fact, he was a former KGB agent. And now a member of the Red Hand. His real name was Dimitri Kovalenko. His code name loosely translated into Truth Seeker. An ironic name for an organization dedicated to lies.

He walked slowly and with purpose

through the terminal, politely excusing himself as he met other travelers. They would be left with only the kind smile of the large, heavily bearded man. Perhaps they even might consider him a gentle Russian giant. So much the better.

Dimitri became all business as he reached the bank of phones. One quick call to his associates, words spoken in code. The number was memorized since he received his orders in Moscow. With a gloved hand, he dialed quickly, and waited for his contact to pick up on the other end.

“Hello,” the quiet voice of a woman answered quickly.

“My dear sister,” Dimitri said into the phone with a smile. A show, in case anyone was watching. “It has been so long since I have seen the four of you. I am in Columbus, attending convention here. It would be most wonderful should the four of you come to visit me.”

“Of course,” the woman replied. “It would be most wonderful indeed. We shall meet you in a few hours.”

“Da. I will be looking for you. Dasvidanya.” Dimitri hung up the phone and

went outside to hail down a cab. Everything was working according to plan.

Chapter Five

Shreveport, Louisiana

12:26 pm. - August 23, 2002

The pair of combatants circled each other in the ring, watching each other carefully. One was a seasoned veteran, she had seen many years in the field and was considered extremely valuable. The second, a rookie, but a promising one none the less. Many of the hierarchy of the Sisterhood held each with high regard. The Sisterhood was an old organization. Filled with women, they were trained assassins. Silent and deadly as they were beautiful. Their skill in battle was unmatched. Though knowledge of their existence was not well known. They trained rigorously, perfecting their art. On this day, they used this exercise as a training session for the younger members. All children, all brought into the Sisterhood or born into it.

That included the daughter of one of the combatants.

Danielle Jayden Walker. Her brilliant green eyes were filled with wonder as she watched. She tried to remain seated, tried to remain emotionless as her instructors had taught her, but her mother had filled her head with other things.

Secretly, Sister Jade had taught her daughter. Having earned the respect of the Mistresses, she was able to convince them to allow Danielle to stay with her in her dorm room in Shreveport. It was here that Sister Jade told Danielle as much as she could about her father. Johnathon Tiberius Walker.

Sister Jade was a seasoned veteran. She watched her opponent carefully. Sister White was no slouch, however. Her youthful appearance only masked her ability to learn quickly and adapt. She was also determined. This training session was another step up the ladder for her.

They had circled each other for sometime. It seemed as though neither one would strike out and attack. The Overseer was growing impatient. This was a lesson for the younger members. What kind of lesson would they learn by merely circling. Perhaps that was why Jade and White were in the ring, and not

the Overseer. Those two were accomplished fighters, and they would fight when they were ready.

It came without warning.

Sister White lashed out. There was no cry to initiate the attack, she merely drew closer as they circled and found the proper opening. Jade was ready for it, but White's youth and speed prevailed over Jade's actions. Sister White swung her katana down, only to be met by Jade's. Jade pushed her back, trying to right her stance, but White pressed the attack. She would draw no quarter. Jade did everything she could to defend each incoming attack. She matched speed by blocking each blow with precision. Making White think her moves carefully. With each blow, it allowed Sister White an opportunity to study her opponent more.

Danielle watched closely from the sidelines. Her arms twitched slightly, as she imitated her mother's movements. She seemed to anticipate White's attacks. Worry, however, crept into her mind. White was faster, stronger and seemed more cunning. Danielle could almost anticipate the outcome. It came faster than she had thought it would.

Sister White countered an attack from Jade, and matched it with a powerful blow. Jade barely had the time to block it, but it left an opening. Instead of swinging out again, White slammed her shoulder into Jade's chest, knocking the wind out of her, and causing her to fall to the floor. The session was over. As the rules stated, the first combatant to fall was the loser. This was never a fight to the death.

Although it was a training session, Danielle still watched as though it was life and death, and when her mother fell, she cried out. "Mom!" she shouted as she quickly rose to her feet and rushed to Jade's side. The Overseer was not impressed, and her expression displayed that. Sister White merely stood by and watched. Danielle crouched beside her mother, worry filling her eyes. A simple smile and a consoling hand from her mother seemed to ease Danielle, but the sound of steel on steel as a katana was sheathed made Danielle turn. Her eyes became filled with hate.

She rose to her feet and faced Sister White. White could see the hatred and defiance, but she could also sense trepidation

and some fear. This girl was only twelve years old, and had not fully participated in combat trials. White's own features became hardened as her eyes glared at Danielle, and in a low growl of a voice she whispered. "Not today child. I have no intentions of killing you."

"Enough," a voice shouted from the entryway of the combat hall. The Mistress had made her appearance. Something important was about to take place. The Mistress never watched combat trials, the Overseers always reported their findings later. "I have received a call from the Russian operative. He has touched down in Columbus. He is requesting four of you." Her eyes drifted through the room waiting for volunteers. Quickly, the tall figure of Sister Valhalla stepped forward with a nod, indicating she would go. Then, Sister Eventide stepped forward. Danielle Walker turned as she felt a hand on her shoulder. Her instructor, Sister Tascalusa, walked quickly to join Eventide and Valhalla. Just one more was required.

That last one came as Sister White moved slowly and quietly to join them.

"What is the objective?" Sister Eventide

asked in a curt but formal manner.

“Elimination of a target,” The Mistress informed them. “You will be joining Truth Seeker in Columbus. Once you have done so, you will rendezvous with the other operatives. A strike force lead by Operative Violet Rose.”

Danielle Walker’s eyes seemed to light up. Sister Jade had told her of the code name her father used. Suddenly, the worry she felt before was nothing compared to what she felt now.

Cleveland, Ohio, 4:56 pm. - August 23, 2002

Petey Running Cloud beamed with pride as he stood next to his mother and uncle. He had asked if they could try and talk to one of the baseball players after the game, and right now, he was getting his chance. Rodney Crandell, one of the Yankees top hitters, was coming down the small hallway as the three waited. Petey was decked out in his Yankees jersey and ball cap, an odd sight to see for so many Cleveland fans wandering about. Ever since Petey could walk and talk, he’d always watched baseball games. Often times he would badger his mother to drive to

Toronto to see a Jays game. But now, he was getting something better. A chance to talk to one of the best in baseball.

“Hi there, folks,” Crandell said with a smile as he reached out to shake both Maxwell and Naomi’s hand. “I was told there was someone who had asked to see me.” He looked down to Petey and smiled as he saw the gear he was wearing. “Guess that must mean you were asking, huh? Must be pretty important, then.”

Petey was all nerves as Crandell walked down the hall. But the ball player’s big smile and kind eyes washed any nerves away, and Petey launched into a tirade of questions and topics. Crandell could only laugh as Petey named off five games where the Yankees had near record setting plays, Crandell himself knocking the ball out of the park three times. The big leaguer was impressed. All this coming from an eight year old.

As the pair talked, Naomi’s cell phone rang. She excused herself and stepped to the side to answer it, speaking in hushed tones so as not to interrupt the conversation her son was having. “Hello,” she said in a quiet tone, and looked back to Maxwell as he gave her a

sideways glance.

“Agent Running Cloud,” the voice on the other end stated. “This is Inspector Juan Cortez, Columbus Police Department. We received a call from your office early this morning with instructions and information. We’ve been tipped about a possible terrorist threat at the convention. One that you seemed to alert to CSIS. We’d like to work with you on this, as it seems you’ve done a good deal of leg work already.”

“Yes, Inspector,” she replied with a small smile. Amanda had done her work well, pushed the proper paperwork through in record time. “I had noticed something odd at the convention dinner and contacted my people. I had hoped that we would be able to work together on this one.”

“We would be more than happy to have both of you on this, Agent,” Cortez announced. Naomi smiled and turned to look at Maxwell. Her brother furrowed his brow for a moment as he tried to determine what it was she might be plotting.

“I’ll tell my brother right away,” she said into the receiver. “When shall we meet you.”

“If you could meet us at nine in the morning tomorrow,” Cortez replied without hesitation. “Main station house. Captain Schwartz will be handling the details.”

“Good to hear Inspector. We’ll see you in the morning then.” She quickly rang off and looked again to her brother as she pocketed her cell phone. “Remember the information we dug up last night?” she said to him in a whispered voice.

“Yes,” Maxwell said with as his smile faded slightly, the pieces of the puzzle started to fall into place. “So we’re being asked to assist, I assume.”

“We’ve got until morning to gear up and go meet the Captain,” she informed him. “Guess bringing the wings was a smart idea.”

Maxwell nodded as he crossed his arms. “Well, only one thing left to do.” He looked toward Petey as the boy was getting his jersey autographed by Crandell. Maxwell didn’t have to say anything. Naomi knew that her brother’s look would lead to a question about a baby sitter.

“We can ask your friend,” Naomi suggested. “Professor Phipps. He seemed to

take a shine to Petey when we last met him.”

Maxwell nodded in agreement. “I can give him a call when we get back.” Naomi nodded and took a deep breath. They’d wait until both Petey and Crandell had finished talking before heading back to Columbus. At least the drive would be a leisurely one, and they could prepare in the evening when they returned.

Columbus, Ohio, 6:43 pm. - August 23, 2002

Walker checked his weapons one last time. He hoped he wouldn’t have to use them this time around. The other agents were gearing up in their usual manner, as only Grey 6-2-6 was not present. Always a shadow, Grey was Walker’s eyes and ears when he needed them, and something told the old gun hand now was the time to let one of his foxes patrol. There was a nagging feeling he had that something wasn’t right and he wouldn’t be disappointed. Grey’s voice told him so over the comm.

“Sir,” the Chinese agent said in his usual quiet tone. “We have incoming.”

“How many?” Walker said in a low tone, his voice not hiding the fact he was expecting this news.

“Four, Sir. And I believe we are familiar with one of them.” Grey’s voice held just a hint of disdain. To anyone not familiar with the man, it wouldn’t even register. But Walker had grown to know each habit, nervous twitch and unspoken word that each of his agents had. It took time, but he learned, and it was that reason alone that made his unit so tight. “Искатель правды,” he quickly added, speaking the words that made up the name of the familiar Russian agent. Loosely translated, it meant truth seeker. Walker always found the irony of the man’s code name, as he was known as the one who enforced the keeping of secrets.

“What ‘xactly is he doin’ here?” Walker mused as he inspected his long barrel Colt. He only sighed and looked to the other agents. They knew by the tone of his voice and the movements he made that the visitors were not welcomed. “Get back ta base, Grey. Let’s say hello ta the Russian.” He wouldn’t let the Russian get the drop on him, but then, Dimitri Kovolenko never was very stealthy. As well as keeping secrets a secret, Kovolenko also used fear as a motivator. The Russian’s imposing size and well mannered

attitude was unnerving. Especially when the veil of deception was covering that eerie smile of his.

“Operative Violet Rose,” the expected booming voice of the Russian called out as he and his men entered the room. “Has been a very long time, comrade. You nyet call as much as you used to.”

“Last I checked, Dimitri, I never called you,” Walker shot back in his slow drawl, but even the unobservant could detect his words were dipped in acid. “What’re you doin’ here, Kovolenko?”

“Ah, I see we are on last name basis, Comrade Walker,” the Russian said with a boisterous laugh. “Is good dat our relationship has advanced to such a level.”

“We ain’t got a relationship,” the gunslinger said as he stepped closer to the Russian. Dimitri was a good foot and a half taller than Walker, and by looks alone, could probably take Walker out easily. But that was something about Walker. He was wily, like a coyote. Coupled with Walker’s cool exterior, his brash confidence was something that put the fear of God into most of the other commanders in the Red Hand. “Now answer

my question. What're ya doin' here?"

Dimitri chuckled at first, then his voice boomed into a loud laugh. "Comrade, you are straightforward, da? I was hoping we could partake in a glass of vodka before going over orders from Central Command."

"I drink whiskey," Walker retorted. "Get ta the point."

The Russian nodded, but the smile never left his face, hidden as it was behind the gray flecked beard and mustache. "Is disappointing you nyet wish for drink to celebrate occasion. After all, with this act, we will secure a great deal. I am merely here to ensure dat you are unhindered in your situation. To make certain, dat dis operation is completed in most discreet manner, da?"

"Discreet?" Monty repeated with a scoff. "Tell me 'ow blowin' the shit outta somethin' is discreet."

The Russian looked to Monty and grimaced before returning his gaze to Walker and speaking in a low growl. "Tell your rabid dogs to keep their mouths shut, Comrade Walker."

"My dogs," Walker replied in a very cool, very even tone. "Will do as they please."

Last I checked, I'm in charge o' this operation. An' as doctrine states, any agent who comes into an operation will abide by the orders of the commandin' officer."

"Da, I am familiar with dis, Walker," Dimitri said as he snapped his fingers. "But I am merely bringing insurance dat all will be completed as planned." As the Russian's final words faded, the the electronic sounds could be heard as the cloaking devices were powered down. Walker narrowed his eyes as the four assassins came into view. Sisterhood. Soldiers for hire, but allied to the Red Hand. And very, very deadly. "Operative Violet Rose, I would like very much for you to be meeting four top agents of the Sisterhood." His arm swept wide in a fashion that could almost be called bravado, as though the Russian were gloating over his allies. "Sister White, Sister Eventide, Sister Tascalusa and Sister Valhalla."

Walker took out a cigarette and lit it as he looked over the four women. Trained assassins. This isn't what he wanted. He looked toward Dimitri for a moment. "Ya do understand the word overkill, right Dimitri?"

The Russian merely laughed aloud, his

booming voice sounding like a thunderclap. “Come now, Walker. We are all friends here. We need to complete dis mission. With no mistakes. Sisters are merely here to make certain there are no loose ends, da?” He chuckled lightly as he stepped toward Walker. The gunslinger seemed to sneer as the Russian slapped him on the back, but kept his focus on his men. “Now, he have some time to ... how you say ... kill,” he said with a chuckle. “Please if you would allow. I would be interested in a glass of your American whiskey.”

8:41 am. - August 24, 2002

They dropped the duffel bags on the tar covered rooftop of the hotel. Military credentials can give you amazing things. A hotel security officer stood with them, just watching in wonderment. He had been asked to follow them, and collect their things after they had taken flight. That was the hard part to explain. Naomi simply said, just follow us and you’ll see. The siblings slipped into their uniforms, Maxwell’s much more traditional looking as it carried the bead work of his heritage, though still remained

functional. Naomi's was much more sleek, as hers was crafted by the military agency she belonged to.

The sun had come up over the buildings and washed the area in brilliant morning light. Too bad this was something important they had to attend to, it would have been nice to have an early morning flight around the city. No worries, just gliding.

The security officer blinked a couple of times. Both of them unwrapped a wing harness. Maxwell's was much more natural looking, as it retained its feathered look. He carefully strapped the leather bindings around his chest as he tested the weight of the harness, nodding as he felt the wings were secure on his back. The only really visible piece of technology that he wore was a ventilator mask. A project Maxwell had succeeded in, the mask had a modified mp3 player, USB connectors, and small speakers. Complete with an adjusted volume, this rig was used to echo the cries that hawks, falcons and eagles would make. Only amplified at several decibels.

Naomi strapped her metallic wings to her back and tested them. The security guard

marveled how they seemed to become a part of her as she stretched out her wings. Much more sleek than Maxwell's, her rig was built for speed over power. Not that she didn't have the latter. A pair of gauntlets held small shurikens that she could release with maddening speed. The fingers could unleash claws, similar in style to a Kestrel's.

Naomi looked to her brother as she snapped the last of the straps in place. He gave her the thumbs up and they both walked to the edge of the building. Twenty stories up. A cake walk. "Don't forget our stuff," Naomi called back to the security officer. The officer nodded rather dumbly, with a look on his face that read, Are you really gonna jump? Naomi turned to her brother again. "Clear?"

"Clear," he confirmed. And with that word, they both lept off the roof, their speed increasing as they hurtled toward the ground. The security officer could only look fearfully on. His eyes widened as the pair fell faster earthward. And just when he expected the worst, the pair opened their wings and began to fly. Just as their namesakes, the pair actually could not fly, but used the wing harnesses and the updrafts to glide, just as a

hawk would glide. A small thruster built into the rig would force the wings to flap when they needed to ascend, just as a bird of prey would and so, it gave the illusion of flight.

It became the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. And he finally let go of the breath he'd been holding.

Act Two
Our Solemn Hour

Chapter Six

Columbus, Ohio, 8:45 am. - August 24th, 2002

The early morning hours were often busy. People traveling to meetings, to work, shopping, and some joining others for an early coffee. Just another usual day in the city. For Billy Helm, it was a day away from school. He had a dental appointment at 10:45 that morning. The world was still reeling from the effects of an act of terrorism less than a year before, but slowly America continued her routine. For Billy, this didn't mean much, he was too young to truly understand. He just knew that something catastrophic had happened. All he really understood was that he had a dental appointment.

The sky was clear, the wind was calm. Billy's mother went about her business as she always would on an outing. Having her son in tow wasn't a bother, Billy was a good boy,

and always kept close to her, even if his eyes did often wander in amazement. And this day was not unlike any other for him to look at everything around him. Cars, trucks, taxis, police cruisers, shoppers and shop keepers. It was always the same. But each day filled with new hope that something would change.

“Mama!” he cried in amazement as he tried to get his mother’s attention, tugging on her arm.

“Billy please,” she huffed slightly, annoyed but also partially amused. “Mrs. Garrison and I are talking. Why all the excitement?”

“Look!” he said as he pointed skyward. For a fleeting moment, his mother thought the worst. The questions raced through her head as her head seemed to turn as though stuck in molasses. Why would anyone strike Columbus? But that question was soon dropped when she saw what her son was pointing at.

They tilted and reeled like real birds. But they looked human. Their speed was amazing. And they swooped down so close, she could almost reach out and touch them. A man and a woman, dressed in tight fighting

uniforms, and wearing wings and they were flying. She could only stare in awe, as a new question came to mind. I wonder if my therapist is available this afternoon.

Hawk's Scream and the Grey Kestrel flew through the streets with speed and grace of their namesakes. The great birds of prey that could fly with amazing speed as they hunted down their quarry, or migrated easily from region to region. But these two had a higher purpose than simple hunting or gathering as the *buteo*'s they emulated. They had their target in sight. The steps of the Columbus City Police Department. There, Maxwell could see the figures of Inspector Juan Cortez and three uniformed officers. As they drew closer, one of the officers pointed skyward.

It was always a thrill to see the look on someone's face as they would fly in, and land with ease, as though the wings had always been a part of them. One of the officers tilted his hat up and simply let out a low whistle in amazement. Citizens of Saskatoon and Ottawa had grown used to Hawk's Scream and Grey Kestrel. But for Columbus, this was something completely different. Inspector

Cortez huffed slightly, impressed but not showing it. He didn't want to see the likes of these to become replacements for him. "I take it that you are Lieutenant Running Cloud," he called out toward Naomi as she began her descent.

"That's right, Inspector," she called back, moving herself to land correctly, using the wings like a chute to slow her descent and allow her feet to touch the ground softly. "Code named Grey Kestrel. Pleased to meet you, Inspector," she said as she walked up to Cortez with an outstretched hand. Cortez quickly shook it and watched as Hawk's Scream landed next to his sister. He was tall and well muscled. Not someone you really wanted to mess with.

"I take it you are Professor Running Cloud?"

"That's right, Inspector," Maxwell replied with a nod, his voice sounding tinny through the speakers of the ventilator mask. "Max is just fine, however. I know I don't have military or police credentials..."

"That's fine," Cortez quickly interrupted Maxwell with a wave of his hand. "The more assistance the better." He motioned for the

pair to follow as the uniformed officers took up flanking positions. Cortez explained the situation as they walked. “The FBI called after I gave you the okay, Lieutenant. They gave us more information. Seems a flight came in last night with a suspicious name that was flagged. A Russian by the name of Kovolenko. FBI has had him on the terrorist watch list for years. Highly dangerous. So I’m glad of any help we can get.” As they walked, Naomi caught sight of the other officers that stood on the stairs and overheard quiet whispers from several of them. She suspected this wasn’t exactly an everyday occurrence.

Cortez opened a set of double doors and directed they to enter. Police officers from all departments were sitting down. A morning roll call, one that Naomi had been involved with during a man hunt in Kamloops. Again, the stares came. It didn’t bother her. She suspected a pair of First Nations wearing close to traditional dress and wings wasn’t exactly a usual sight for the officers. Granted, Maxwell’s uniform carried more of the traditional concepts in their culture than her own. She wore a very simple headband with

a pair of eagle feathers tucked tightly inside. But aside from her exterior look, she was all business. And in this room, her military rituals began to come forward.

A gray haired, but well muscled plain clothes officer stepped forward. Right away, Naomi could sense the air of authority that surrounded him. This must be Captain David Schwartz. She gave him a salute as he came closer. He smiled and waved a dismissive hand. “No need for the formalities, Lieutenant. I appreciate the respect, but we’ve got a bigger problem on our hands.” He turned back to the front of the room and tacked seven pictures up onto a metal white board. “Ladies an’ gentlemen, these are the suspects that we are going after. We have a vague idea of why they are here, but both the FBI and CSIS have confirmed they are to be considered dangerous.” He pointed to a surveillance photo of Dimitri Kovolenko. “This one in particular. According to the FBI, he has quite the rap sheet. Lieutenant Running Cloud has more information as well on the other suspects.” He motioned toward Naomi who walked to the front of the room. Her wings seemed to tuck in close to her as

she walked.

“According to the profile that RCMP Lieutenant Christa Rayne put together on Operative Violet Rose,” Naomi said as she pointed to an enhanced photo of the grizzled gunslinger. There were a few snickers at her pronunciation of lieutenant, as it sound very much like the British left-tenant. “He is former U.S. Military. Given a dishonourable discharge in 1993 after events in Somalia, he fled the States, never to be seen again. Rayne believes he can be talked to, due to the fact that her own investigations proved that his discharge was political more than anything he had done in Somalia. Rose was used as a scapegoat. But there is no solid proof either way.” She pointed to the next photo, this one of Monty. “Malcolm Montgomery Watt. Australian, served with Emergency Services and applied for the Sydney Police force. Then his history falls off the face of the Earth. Until Rayne began investigating Rose. Watt is the second in command of this small unit and extremely loyal to Rose. Rayne believed that Rose hand picked his soldiers, for loyalty first. However, it is unknown what this organization’s recruiting process is like.

CSIS and the RCMP have very little outside of those two.”

Cortez stepped forward and pointed to the picture of Kovolenko. “Be careful with this one. He’s former KGB, and Moscow police. According to the Kremlin’s records, Kovolenko was considered a radical. A true believer in the communist doctrine. No clue what he’s doing in this so called Red Hand.” Cortez sighed as he stuck his hands in his pockets. “But that still leaves us with one small detail...”

Maxwell slowly put up his hand and coughed. The sound came out rather metallic. All eyes turned to him. Cortez looked to Schwartz for a moment. The police captain motioned to Running Cloud. And Naomi smiled as her brother stepped forward. The large Dakota man unstrapped the ventilator mask from his face so his words could be heard more clearly. “I managed to make my own investigations, but this around the university itself. Earlier, both Naomi... rather, the Lieutenant,” he smirked as he looked to his sister. “At least maybe I should call you that in this room, huh Sis?” The other officers laughed as Maxwell made

his comment. Naomi just rolled her eyes. Maxwell still had his gift for easing tensions in a room. “Anyway, a few of the professors remember a luncheon several months ago. A very influential Senator had made a rather large donation to a section of the University. But a few of them have heard rumours that he is being leaned on to push through legislation that may be very unpopular. Legislation that he has adamantly been opposed to in the past.” Maxwell let this information sink in for a moment, several of the officers looking toward him quite thoughtfully. “The Senator’s son has recently enrolled in classes at the University. It’s my belief that these men may be after him. His name is Gerald Cleaves. Currently, he’s taking classes in law and economics. The boy himself isn’t a threat, but still he could be used as leverage against the Senator.” Maxwell looked to his sister as he completed his own descriptions. She gave him a thumbs up and smiled. Shoulda joined the military or police force yourself, Maxie, she thought to herself.

“Okay,” Schwartz announced with a clap of his hands. “First detail, check where this kid is. We tail him like glue. I want

uniformed officers in plain sight and snipers in position. Plains clothes will be monitoring things as well.” He turned to Maxwell and Naomi and seemed to smile slightly. “Eyes in the sky?” he asked.

“Already on it, Captain,” Naomi said with a grin and gave him a thumbs up. “We’ll have our comms set to your frequency and keep in touch.”

“Alright people,” Schwartz barked. “Let’s go!”

10:15 a.m. - August 24th, 2002

Indigo’s fingers flew over the keyboard as she downloaded schematics, registrars, cell phone numbers and more. All of it to track one young man. Gerald Cleaves. According to orders, Cleaves was to be taken into “custody” and used as a leverage to force his father to vote in favour of a bill which would allow government agencies the legal right to wire tap, video tap and out right invade homes without any repercussions. No warrant would be needed. No ruling from a judge. The passing of such a bill would turn the United States into a police state, and Canada and Mexico would not be

far behind. But it also meant that agencies that worked globally, such as the Red Hand, would have access to these records. If the bill were allowed to pass, then the days of public records, public freedoms, and human rights would be thrown out the window. This was something that Walker didn't want.

And he volunteered himself and his crew for this detail. Because he had plans of his own. The capture of Cleaves would give him the leverage needed to speak to the Senator, and clear his own name, while at the same time revealing a global conspiracy. After nearly ten years, he'd had enough of the Red Hand. Making lies seem like the truth, 9/11 was the last straw for him. Though Dimitri threw a wrench into his plans. He could no longer move as freely as he would like to. Plans had to change and they had to change fast. It didn't help that Dimitri brought in three of his own men and four assassins from the Sisterhood.

Indigo had her orders. Gather information, make it look good. All the while, searching for a signal that they might be able to reach Grey Kestrel. Warn her somehow. Already Monty was able to make

an anonymous tip to the police, but that action was very, very risky. Walker stood close by, making sure no wandering eyes tried to pry on their business, especially Dimitri's. He'd already given Crimson the go ahead for a weapons check, which she did with a fine tooth comb, even going over the weapons of Dimitri's men, and ordering the Sister's to complete a weapons check with her. Walker smiled as he watch Crimson for a moment. The ballsy woman from New Orleans was incredibly thorough, and she took her time. Enough to keep them off his plans.

Flanking him as he watched Indigo's actions on the keyboard were Omega Six and Grey 6-2-6. They never left his side, tilting their head from time to time to listen to a comment from Walker they knew was directed to them. "We need some equipment. Grey, Six. See what ya can do 'bout commandeerin' an ambulance. Some sorta emergency service vehicle. An' uniforms." Walker didn't have to look to make sure they acknowledged him. The pair had heard, and was mentally taking the tally as they watched Dimitri's agents carefully.

Once in a while, either Six or Grey

would cough, giving a signal that the others attention was away from the terminal. Indigo would bring up the files again on Grey Kestrel and Hawk's Scream. These two were quite possibly their biggest allies in all of this. Even if they didn't realize it. Every so often, Six would clear his throat, a signal that one of the Sisters was getting too close to their activities. Indigo would go back to her previous research. It was all so smooth.

But even the smoothest of things sometimes had a bump every once in a while.

Indigo didn't even hear the woman as she approached. She was going through Grey Kestrel's military history at the time. Sister White found it rather fascinating. Her movements hadn't even been detected, either visually, or audibly. She was that good. "I've heard about her," she said in a low voice as she looked at the view screen with Naomi Running Cloud's picture. Indigo stopped what she was doing very quickly. Like a deer caught in the headlights, her body froze, waiting for word from Walker.

"Ya got a problem, Ma'am?" Walker said nonchalantly as he took out a cigarette

and lit it. He didn't even turn to look at Sister White. But his free hand moved to the Colt at his hip. One move from her, and he would fire. And he could easily pass it off that he had information of a planned betrayal to the Sisterhood.

Sister White turned to study the old gunslinger for a moment. His voice was gruff and determined, but filled with skepticism. He was too honourable of a man to have joined the military of the Red Hand. And that would get the stupid old fool killed. "No problem," she replied in a crisp British accent. Walker cringed slightly as he heard the woman's voice. It was like daggers in his neck. She sounded cold and cruel. He didn't look toward her as she left the terminal. He kept his eyes focused on the work Indigo was pulling down.

"She's not sayin' anythin' ta the others, mate," Omega Six whispered over his shoulder as he watched her. Grey nodded in agreement, but kept his eyes trained on the woman.

"Don't trust the bitch," Walker scowled as he urged Indigo to continue her research. "Only one woman in the Sisterhood worth

‘er salt.” The others didn’t have to ask who. They already knew. Walker spoke of Sister Jade. The pair had met on a mission twelve years before. And as often times during a stressful situation, certain things can happen. Walker was still a member of the US Military at the time, and he had thought he had fallen in love. Jade was kind hearted, he found. When he learned that she was a member of the Sisterhood years later, he couldn’t understand why. They had been assigned to each other after Walker had joined the Red Hand, and it was after three years that he learned their previous encounters had produced a child.

Upon learning that, he began to make plans to get out of the Red Hand. Either escape, or get himself killed. After 9/11, he knew he had to get out. Get out, and possibly take his daughter with him. He pushed those thoughts aside as Indigo brought up the comm frequencies of the police department, somehow he knew that Kestrel and Hawk would be using those. Indigo would record them, and hopefully they could use them to contact the pair.

As Indigo continued her research, Sister White had moved back to her group, silently

looking to her other comrades. She didn't even bother with a backward glance toward Walker. Sister Eventide, the commanding officer of the small group of Sisters, approached her, just as quietly, and spoke in a hushed tone. "What are they doing?"

Sister White looked back to the group, contemplating her answer. She knew what she saw, but something inside her had changed. In all truth, Sister White should have completely honest. There was absolutely nothing redeeming about Walker at all. The timber of his voice belayed a tyrant underneath. But she saw this also as an opportunity of her own. "They are going over schematics of the University," she stated as she looked to Eventide. "They are preparing. It would seem they are extremely thorough."

"And extremely paranoid," Eventide said as she looked to Six and Grey. Grey was looking directly at Eventide, his eyes seemed to bore into her, and she quickly looked away. It made her rather nervous, knowing that someone had that affect on her. But she did note that the pair had never left their positions, casually looking over each of the Sisters. "I doubt they even trust each other."

Sister White arched an eyebrow and turned to study Eventide directly. “They are soldiers in one of the most secret organizations on the planet. They would kill to continue to keep their secrets. Given what they do and who they are, can you blame them for being paranoid?”

Eventide didn’t respond, she just looked to Sister White and clenched her jaw just a bit. But enough to show that White’s words had sunk in. “We move quickly,” she finally said, changing the subject quickly. “We’ll find Cleaves first. He has a girlfriend here and we can take them both. It will be all over in a matter of moments.”

“What are our orders?” Sister White inquired casually, but deep inside, she seemed to know exactly what the answer would be.

“We are the Sisterhood,” Eventide responded with a proud smile. “We do what we are good at. The boy and the girl will not live to see the dawn.” Eventide casually glanced from soldier to soldier, studying those that were faithful to both Dimitri and Walker. “And we will have to deal with all of these. I don’t trust any of them. I believe we will have to leave behind some bodies in order

to ensure the deception is complete. Walker will be easy to kill. Dimitri more difficult. But we will have to kill them as well.”

Sister White didn't bat an eye as she took in the information. Inside, she merely prayed that the information they had on Lieutenant Running Cloud would help them turn the tide and perhaps Eventide would eat her own words.

11:23 am. - August 24th, 2002

Some of the university students noticed something. A few of the more adventurous ones pointed out the higher degree of uniformed police officers that had began to fill the main mezzanine of the campus. Some had seen this before. With recent school shootings, students had become targets. Especially during the beginning of the school year. Each student was ensured that this was all to help with safety, and make certain no one was going to get hurt. But several other students noticed something besides the police officers. In particular when a pair of winged figures were sighted. A small gathering of students just stood and stared as soon as Naomi lighted on the edge

of a building. It wasn't long before Maxwell was sighted across the mezzanine.

Naomi studied the area, taking note of the reactions of the students. She tapped the comm casually, testing it for a moment. "Sector fifteen is clear so far. Anyway sign of Gerald?"

"None yet," one of the officers replied in her comm.

Her eyes narrowed as she watched the area like a hawk. Students mingled together in different groups. Some could be close friends, some could be meeting together for the first time, others could be comparing class listings. "Captain Schwartz, I'm going down for a closer look. And question some of the students. Maybe some of them have seen Gerald."

"Be careful, Lieutenant," the captain cautioned. Naomi gave her affirmation and swooped down to ground level. Many of the students stopped to watch in amazement. Several laughed and clapped, thinking the display was more for show than anything else. Naomi let the wings fan out, helping to slow her decent. A few of the students, obviously engineering students, appeared to be taking

notes as she landed. Cameras flashed. Students began to form a circle around her. “Ask a few of the students if they know or have seen Cleaves,” Schwartz suggested. He knew the tactic Naomi was working. People are hesitant when a police officer is involved. Sad, but true. Naomi, on the other hand, had a slight advantage. While she held the air of authority, she did not have the outward appearance of an officer, police or military. It was an added bonus that she looked like she had just jumped out of a comic book.

One of the students marveled at the rig Naomi wore, his eyes brightly shining as he took a closer look at Naomi’s wings. He, along with a few of his friends, seemed to be taking mental notations of the harness. And a couple took photographs. “That is the most incredible thing I’ve seen. How does it work?” he asked, bold enough to approach Naomi.

She looked him over carefully for a moment, then took out a leather wallet and flashed her badge, clearly displaying the CSIS identification. “Name’s Lieutenant Naomi Running Cloud. And I’ll make you a deal, alright kid?” The student nodded quickly,

waiting for Naomi's next words. "You see that guy," she said, pointing toward Maxwell, perched on the edge of a building. The engineering student nodded with enthusiasm. "He made a similar rig to mine. You answer some questions, any of you answer some questions," she said at first to the student then spoke to all those gathered. "Then I promise, I'll make sure he will give a proper demonstration."

"Wait, you mean that guy made that wing harness?" the student asked with some confusion, looking toward the figure perched on the building's edge.

"My questions first, kiddo," Naomi said with a smirk. "Then we'll deal with yours." The student returned his gaze to Naomi, his eyes still seemed glazed over by the rig she wore, but still excited that he was going to be given an opportunity to see how it worked. "First off, you know a student by the name of Gerald Cleaves?" The young man blinked a couple of times and shook his head slowly. Naomi furrowed her brow. They had to find this kid, and soon. So she posed the question to the rest of the students that stood around her. "Any of you know this kid?"

One girl slowly put up her hand, and Naomi focused her attention on the young woman. “I know him. He’s dating my sister.”

“Where is he?” Naomi asked, maybe a little too forceful. She had to compose her features in order to make her questions not sound so demanding. “It’s okay, honey, he’s not in trouble.” Not yet, at least.

“Well, I got a phone call from my sister. She said Gerry was taking her to a quiet spot, just so, ya know, they could be alone.”

Naomi huffed slightly. Great, this kid’s hormones are gonna get him killed. “Thanks kids. I gotta go,” she announced without stopping to answer more questions. She just leaped into the air and allowed the wings to unfurl and carry her upward, a little trick that Maxwell had created in the rig. Small thrusters to allow the wearer flight from a standing position. Naomi tapped her comm. “You guys hear that?”

“Got it, Lieutenant,” Captain Schwartz stated on the comm. “That’s not a lot of information, though.”

“I know,” Naomi replied as she lighted onto a rooftop. “But at least we know the kid

is going to be in a secluded spot. All because of his hormones.” There was a slight chuckle she heard on the other end as she began to scan the area. And something caught her eye. Near the arts building there appeared to be several heavily armed officers moving slowly. “Captain, did you send men into position near the arts building?”

“No. Why do you ask?” Schwartz was quick to ask, a touch of irritation in his voice.

“Heavily armed men are circling the area,” Naomi replied quickly. “Four of them. They look decidedly out of place down there.”

“I’m on it,” Maxwell announced as he took flight from his perch. Naomi could see him moving quickly and gracefully through the air.

“Watch your six, Maxie,” Naomi warned him.

“Always do,” came the reply. Maxwell seemed to float on the air currents as he closed in on the position. But Naomi couldn’t help but worry. He was her brother, and while he was more than capable in a fight, he still wasn’t a trained police officer or military official.

And these targets were highly trained. What they knew about them may have only been the tip of the iceberg. “Be careful, Maxie,” she whispered onto the winds.

“We’ve got more movement,” an officer announced suddenly over the comms. Naomi held her hand over her ear piece as she listened carefully to the report. “North building. Four targets. Let’s see... four women. Repeat, heavily armed women, black clad, carrying what the hell? Are they carrying swords?” Naomi furrowed her brow. This wasn’t good. If that report was correct, then that meant the Sisterhood had been brought into this and people would die.

“I got this one, Captain,” Naomi announced as she sprinted across the rooftop. “Keep your men safe. Continue looking for Cleaves.” It may have sounded like an order, but even Schwartz could tell it was edged with heavy concern. After Naomi lost her husband early in the Afghan invasion, she had always been mindful of her fellow soldiers. Whether they were police officers or military. It was, in all truth, simple motherly instinct. She pushed herself into the air again as she reached the edge of the rooftop and began to

soar. This was going to be a long day, Naomi mused to herself. And it wasn't going to be easy.

Chapter Seven

12:00 Noon - August 24th, 2002

Birds of prey always used the air currents to their advantage when hunting. It was no different with Hawk's Scream and Grey Kestrel. The pair tilted and whirled on the air currents as they watched the campus below. Both had equipment to easily zoom in on a target if need be, thanks in part to CSIS Paranormal Division.

"I'm flying high, Naomi," Maxwell spoke into his communication link. "Trying to use the sun to hide my presence."

"Got it, Maxie," Naomi replied. They were all connected to the police communication web, and what Naomi said directly to the police, Maxwell could hear. "Captain, we'll be on radio silence as we move into position. If we need you, we'll give you a holler."

"Understood, Lieutenant," Captain

Schwartz replied. “We’ll be here. Just watch your six.”

It didn’t take long for Maxwell to find his targets. Just as Naomi had seen, a group of men crept through the shadows of the building. They weren’t police officers, that much was certain. No identifying marks were visible, but they were heavily armed. Maxwell knew he had to move cautiously. Like a predatory hawk, his wings lifted him into the air as he glided into position, placing his form in the heart of the sun. Just as old World War II dog fighters, he’d come out of the sun at them, and hopefully, take them by surprise. As the small group stopped to check their surroundings, Maxwell went into a dive, tucking the wings close to his body. His outstretched hands at the ready to grab two of the men. This had to be timed carefully. One false move and he could break both his wrists. He had to estimate the weight of the “packages” and alter his ascent again. And manage to maneuver so as to keep the other two confused.

The four didn’t know what hit them. There was hushed cries of surprise as

suddenly, two of the agents were lifted off the ground. But Grey had his suspicions. Walker had already briefed them on what to do in the event any of them came in contact with Hawk's Scream or Grey Kestrel. But Grey found that he couldn't help but watch Maxwell. The beauty, the grace, his ability to fly was a marvel, if not something man made. Grey could only watch as the pair of agents fell earthward, predicting the crunch of bone and cries of pain. Maxwell had flown up into the air high enough to do some damage, but not kill them. And Grey knew it was a quick take down, enough to even the odds a bit more. He looked to the one remaining agent that was standing, as Maxwell dove down again, barraging the injured agents with a flurry of blows. This agent was young, and nervous. He continually held up his rifle, trying to aim, but finding he couldn't get off a good enough shot. Grey knew this agent would not last long in the field.

Maxwell rendered the last of the pair unconscious with a hard blow to the head. His training as a boxer in high school and university helped a lot. But he found his ability to fly added a whole new aspect to his

fighting abilities. Once the two agents were down, he turned his attention to the other pair. One stayed close to the wall, seeming only to observe the scene carefully. The other looked nervous and jittery. He clutched his rifle with a death grip. This agent was probably just as much a danger to Maxwell as he was to himself. And so, Maxwell rushed forward toward the agent.

The agent fired. Out of fear, out of nerves. It didn't matter. But the shot was point blank at Maxwell's chest.

Naomi watched the enclosed spaces carefully. The four figures had been seen traveled toward the science buildings of the campus. Population was generally low in that area at this time of year. Few students, perhaps only a few faculty. And Naomi knew that these women would not reveal themselves by taking a chance at firing upon bystanders. From her research, they were professionals, hired to handle the dirtiest jobs with relative ease.

She knew this area would be a perfect spot for Gerald. Why? Late teens boy. With his girlfriend. His hormones were doing the

thinking for him. In this situation, something that could very well get him killed. But so far, there had been no sounds of a fight. Then again, this was the Sisterhood. Naomi would be prepared for the worst, should it happen.

As she lighted on a rooftop, sprinting to the edge as she prepared to take flight again, she heard a scream. It sounded like someone in a great deal of pain. She quickly adjusted her location, and determined the area the scream came from. It didn't take her long. Gerald stood in front of his girlfriend as four black clad figures advanced on him. Naomi narrowed her eyes as she saw the reason for the scream. Gerald's skin was turning pale white, as though he were afraid, or even worse, from a lose of blood. The latter was more likely. Naomi saw it fully as she began her descent, wings spread to help guide her and break her fall. The boy's hand had been cut off.

Naomi became a protective mother, screaming in closer to her targets. The first of the four was the tallest, a blond Amazon, from all looks of European decent. Even from the height Naomi was racing in from, she could tell the woman was taller than she

was. But height doesn't matter when you have the advantage of flight. Sister Valhalla was taken completely by surprise. It was that one mistake that put her on the ground, but not out. She jumped to her feet quickly, as the other three stepped back in disbelief. For Gerald and his girlfriend, it was like an angel had suddenly come to save them. "Wrap the wound," Naomi screamed to the girl who seemed all too terrified. "If you don't, he'll bleed to death." This last spoken as she faced Valhalla. The towering woman smirked as she advanced on Naomi.

She could see the little toys quite clearly, these Sisters relied on tech to get by. But so did Naomi, and hers became very visible as she activated her gauntlets, creating barbed gloves that doubled as shields. As Valhalla advanced, she remembered her military training. And then decided the only proper training for this was to fight dirty. She lunged forward, using her outstretched wings to cause a moments hesitation from Valhalla. It was enough as she felt her boot embed itself into soft flesh of Valhalla's midsection. The blow knocked the wind out of the woman, and Naomi increased the assault. A clawed hand

came down across her face, matched with her other, giving her criss crossed wounds on her cheek. As Valhalla began to slump back, Naomi jumped into the air just slightly, enough to give her some force as she drove her knee into the woman's jaw. The force rendered her unconscious quickly.

Naomi rose to her feet, watching the other three women carefully. One drew blades, but remained in place, as she stood defensively. Naomi noticed something, perhaps a moment of hesitation? Little matter. One of the others was speaking. "It is time you fell to Sister Tascalusa," she stated as she drew a pair of manufactured tomahawks. Steel, plastic, riveted carefully into place. Naomi snorted, unimpressed with the motion.

"Black Warrior, huh. I'm sure the Creek Nation must be proud," she stated with a laugh. "Well, this Dakota Warrior is gonna kick your ass!" She punctuated this by leaping toward the woman, showing no fear as she gave a war whoop, catching the Sister off guard. Again, enough. Tascalusa, while less surprised than Valhalla, still stepped back. But not far enough, as Naomi grabbed her collar and flew straight up. Then curving

her body and guiding herself, she flew straight down. Tascalusa would become her air bag on impact and it served well.

Tascalusa fell unconscious immediately, the sudden stop of the ground rendering her into a blissful nap, though one she would awake from in extreme pain. This just left the two remaining Sisters. One of them drew a gun. “This ends now!” she shouted, taking careful aim on Naomi.

Grey 6-2-6 watched from the shadows as the agent crept closer to the body of Hawk’s Scream. His rifle was held firm as he studied the man carefully. Grey knew there was something wrong, Hawk’s Scream took a bullet point blank to the chest, but there was no blood. He studied him for a moment, and shook his head when he saw the amour the Dakota man wore. Grey just shook his head. They’d been duped. “There was no blood,” he whispered, loud enough for the agent to hear. The agent turned to look back to Grey for just a moment, but it was a moment long enough.

“You’re new to this game aren’t you?” the agent heard the muffled voice of Hawk’s

Scream say aloud. The agent looked to Maxwell again, eyes wide with slight shock. “That hurt. Good thing I was wearing Kevlar.” He swept his legs and caught the agent by surprise, taking out his legs and dropping him quickly to the ground. His rifle clattered away on the pavement as Maxwell leapt up into the air. “That’ll leave a good sized welt in the morning, but nothing compared to what I’ve got planned for you.”

Grey stayed back in the shadows and watched as the well muscled man began hammering the agent with blow after well calculated blow. He wasn’t a finesse fighter, of that Grey was certain. He was a street fighter, a boxer, who relied on power and speed to fell his foes. It would be an interesting fight, should Grey have to face him. No doubt he would indeed have to. Hawk’s Scream took down the agent with ease. Grey snorted as he thought of Maxwell’s comment. Yes, the agent was green, of that there was no doubt. A true agent of the Red Hand wouldn’t have aimed for the chest, but the head. Little matter now.

Hawk’s Scream had just become an asset for Grey, and his commanding officer,

Operative Violet Rose.

He stepped out of the shadows and set his weapons on the ground, staring intently at Hawk's Scream. Maxwell could feel the burning eyes bore into him, and knew this would not be an easy fight. But he didn't have a choice. Grey positioned himself carefully, the styling of his training well hidden, he didn't want to give anything away to this man. Not like what he learned of Maxwell in so short a time. The only thing he had to worry about was if Maxwell actually got a hold of him, and took to the air. It was obvious this man was adept at fighting mid air.

"No words," Grey simply stated to Hawk's Scream as he held out his hand, middle and index finger together, pointing toward Maxwell.

"Then we shall begin."

Naomi used her wings as shields, covering herself from time to time as bullets bounced off the lightweight steel sheaths. When there was a pause in the shooting, she rushed forward, slamming herself into Sister Eventide, and driving her into the nearest wall. The motion was enough

to knock the wind out of her and knock her out of the fight. That left just the last of the Sisters. She looked to Sister White, and then to Gerald. He had paled a great deal, but his girlfriend was trying to contain the blood flow, and doing an admirable job. She had to act quickly and take White out fast.

Sister White noticed the look of concern in Naomi's eyes, knowing full well that they boy was growing closer and closer to death. This had to be done precisely. She stepped forward, lining herself up against Naomi, blade held in front of her, eyes steeled and ready for battle. Naomi matched the movements, slowly moving in against the Sister. When she was close enough, Sister White said one thing in a hushed tone.

“Just make this look good.”

The comment took Naomi aback for just a moment, but she narrowed her eyes and advanced quickly. Sister White parried blow after blow, moving her steps backward toward the two youngsters. She knew what Naomi was doing. Forcing her into retreat. But she didn't want the woman to get her hands on her.

Naomi just wanted Sister White to back

down, leave the fight and sense the urgency for mercy. As she fought, she managed to turn on her headset comm. “Lieutenant Naomi Running Cloud requesting assistance. Have found the boy, he is in need of immediate medical attention. Currently engaged with final target.”

“Understood, Lieutenant,” Captain Schwartz was heard to say over the comm. Contacting EMS immediately.

Naomi continued her assault against Sister White. Blow for blow, matched with a parry. And then, Naomi saw an opening. Whether created by Sister White or not did not matter. She was going to take it. She lashed out, catching White’s jaw with a balled up fist, driving her left hand into White’s midsection. As Sister White crumpled to the floor, she raced over to the two youngsters. “Hold on,” she instructed them as she looked to Gerald. “You’re not gonna die today, kiddo.” Naomi looped her arms around their waists, the girl clutched to Gerald, helping to hold him in place. “Don’t freak out,” Naomi told her. “We’re going up.”

The girl only gasped slightly, the entire ordeal was still a shock. But with grace and

agility, Naomi crouched down and shot into the air, her wings pushing upward to lift her feet from the earth with her two packages. As she began to soar over the first rooftop, the call came in over her comm.

“Lieutenant Runnin’ Cloud,” the voice seemed to drawl. “EMS is waitin’ at the main entrance ta the University. Can ya make it?”

“You got, Sir. I’ll be there shortly.” She steered herself toward the location given to her, her arms were growing tired, but she held the two packages firm. At least Gerald had a hope now.

He was fast, maybe faster than Maxwell had ever seen before. His fighting skills were incredible. It was everything he had just to be able to parry any incoming blows. Maxwell knew he had to begin an assault of his own. But he also knew his fighting ability was based on raw power, not the finesse that this man had. Which meant he had to keep his wits about him.

Grey 6-2-6 pulled his punches. This man was not a target, nor would he become a casualty. He knew that Walker would need

him, because his raw power could be the edge needed against someone like Dimitri.

The battle was slow, as each combatant studied the other carefully before making an attack. Maxwell had one advantage. His ability to fly. But Grey wasn't allowing him to grab a hold of him. That was the mistake of the other agents. Grey's movements were quick, but they had a purpose. Force his opponent into a situation. The battle would be about positioning, but it would not take very long.

Maxwell landed a few well placed blows, but could tell that Grey was anticipating them, moving his body to better take the blow. It was frustrating him, and even he could tell his own anger was coming forward in his attacks. This was exactly what Grey wanted. He wanted Maxwell's emotion to take control of him, and second guess defenses and it worked.

Grey punched forward with an open hand strike, catching Maxwell off guard as his amplifier came loose, falling helplessly to the ground. A good offensive strike, it didn't do much damage, but it caught Maxwell napping and Grey pushed the attack forward. A low,

leg sweep, knocked Maxwell down, and Grey pushed two fingers quickly to touch nerves on the Dakota man's chest. They weren't deadly, nor painful. However, Maxwell found himself helpless in any attempts to get up.

Grey stood over Maxwell, crouching to speak to him in an even tone. "I could kill you at any moment," he stated as though the two were discussing the weather. "But that is not my purpose. I am not your enemy. The Russian. He should be the one you seek. Operative Violet Rose and his agents have no wish in harming the boy."

Maxwell blinked a couple of times as he struggled. Taking a deep breath, he let his mind calm down, taking in Grey's words. "Why the deception? What is your purpose?"

Grey merely chuckled as he rose to his feet. He reached out and took Maxwell's hand, hauling him up to his feet with ease. Suddenly, Maxwell could feel the muscles in his body reacting again, moving as he wanted them to. Grey took a step away from the large man and only whispered. "Dimitri. He is your target. Dimitri Kovolenko. Take

him down, and the boy will live.” He said not another word as he continued to step backward. Maxwell blinked as it seemed the man simply disappeared into thin air.

He shook his head and snapped back to his senses. Quickly, he retrieved the amplifier and placed it over his nose and mouth, clicking on the comm as he adjusted it carefully. “Captain? I have a lead and a name. Dimitri Kovolenko. Mean anything?”

“Nothing that I’ve heard before,” Schwartz replied over the comm. “But, a Russian?”

“That’s what I’ve got,” Maxwell said as he took a few steps and leapt into the air. “I’m going to see if I can find him.” His wings spread as he rose higher into the air, allowing the anti-gravity device to carry him up. He heard the acknowledgment from Captain Schwartz over the comm, but did not respond. He had a bigger purpose now. He had a life to save.

She used her wings to slow her decent as she saw the ambulance. There were four around it, two men, two women. Naomi knew she had to move quickly, the

boy's life was hanging in the balance. She only hoped that they could get him to the hospital faster on ground than she could in the air. What are you thinking, girl, Naomi mused to herself. There's no way you could fly that fast with two people in tow.

The attendants acted quickly, strapping the boy in and getting him into the back. The girl was shaken up a great deal, and one of the female attendants dealt with her needs. But Naomi sensed something wrong as she watched them work. There was something familiar about two of them.

Bet there's a thousand places you'd rather be, 'ey mate?

The sudden smile, the charm, the twinkle in the eye suddenly came back to Naomi. Her ire rose in volumes. Quickly, she grabbed the Aussie by the collar, nearly screaming as she slammed him against the door of the ambulance. "What do you think you're doing, you sonofabitch?"

Naomi was met quickly with the business end of a revolver. Crimson Luna was quick on the draw, but she had a good teacher. Naomi found herself in a standoff. Monty smirked slightly as he spoke. "Sheila.

Best let go so we can do our business.”

It wasn't Monty's voice that caused Naomi to back off. Nor the barrel of the gun pointed at her head. But the sudden cool drawl that came from behind her accompanied by the calm hand that gently rested itself on top of Crimson's pistol. "Best let us go, Lieutenant Runnin' Cloud," Walker said evenly. "The boy don't have a chance if we keep fightin'."

Naomi looked over to the calming voice of the Texan. She knew that he was wanted by every police agency in the world, but something about the way he spoke. His words seemed to calm without much effort. His eyes, there was a kindness in there and something else, he was tired. "I ride shotgun," she replied as she let go of Monty's collar. Walker nodded slowly to her as his three agents began seeing to the boy. Naomi could tell just from their movements they knew exactly what they were doing. It was a military precision, but still, they worked to save the boy.

Walker moved to the driver's side as Indigo closed the doors of the ambulance. Naomi followed, her wings collapsing into a compact state so she could take a seat in the

ambulance. “You realize after this is over, you have to surrender,” Naomi said in an even tone to Walker as they both took their seats.

The old gunhand simply turned the key and the engine roared to life. He took a deep breath and waited for the signal from the back. As it came, he put the vehicle in gear and began to drive. “Lieutenant,” he finally said as the ambulance screamed down the street. “If I were wantin’ ta give up, I’d let ya take me. But there’s more in the world ‘n just me an’ mine that’ve done wrong. An’ ma’am, no offense, but ya ain’t in the right league ta take ‘em on.”

“We’ll see,” was Naomi’s only reply. She looked out the passenger window as the siren screamed aloud and buildings passed by quickly. She raised her hand to her ear, adjusting her ear piece as Captain Schwartz began his hail. “Lieutenant Running Cloud, Captain. I read you. Yes, the boy is fine. On route to hospital now.” She looked over to Walker as the Texan lazily drifted a gaze toward her. He knew that she had to tell the police who was in the ambulance. He expected it.

But sometimes, he found that the unexpected still existed.

“Operative Violet Rose is nowhere to be found,” Naomi announced. “Members of the terrorist organization known as the Sisterhood were discovered on scene.”

“We’ve had a report from Professor Running Cloud,” Schwartz announced. “He says he’s searching for a Dimitri Kovolenko.”

The comm was loud enough for Walker to hear. And he said in a low voice to Naomi. “Kovolenko is ex-KGB, completely insane, and a cold killer.” Naomi studied the gunslinger for a moment before repeating the words to Schwartz.

“We’ll inform the professor, Lieutenant. Over.”

“Over, Captain,” Naomi replied. “And out.” She looked toward Walker as the emergency ramp of the hospital came into view. “What now?”

Walker looked to her as he brought the ambulance to a stop. In the back, Six, Indigo and Crimson quickly took Gerald into the double doors. Nurses and aids rushed to assist them. And Walker just smiled. “Thank

ya, Lieutenant. But ya best be goin' now.”
Maybe it was the sound of his voice. Perhaps
the sincerity in his words. Naomi didn't
know for certain.

All she did know was this man was no
threat. Not anymore.

Chapter Eight

2:15 pm. - August 24th, 2002

Dimitri Kovolenko stared at the computer screens, his brow furrowed in deeper understanding. Somehow, Operative Violet Rose had contacted an agent of CSIS to intervene. To stop what the Red Hand had set out to do. He took out his communicator and brought up the co-ordinates of his superiors. They would definitely not like this. One of their highly respected soldiers had gone rogue. As he waited, he took out a fine Cuban cigar and lighted it, inhaling deeply. Soon, he connected to his central group. “Da. This is Kovolenko. Rose has... how you say, fallen from grace. He think is better to become hero and stop what need be done.” He paused as he listened to the orders of his superiors, a twisted smirk “Understood, comrade. Will take care of it, immediately.”

He moved slowly as he put away the communicator, an eerie chuckle rising in his throat. He would enjoy this a great deal. But, it would be a long time coming. "I suppose you felt the boy's life wasn't worth anything." Dimitri heard the voice behind him. The professor. Hawk's Scream. His smile darkened as he turned, ready to intimidate his opponent. But he wouldn't get the chance.

As he turned, his face met a very powerful, and fast fist. It was more than surprising, it was painful. Maxwell Running Cloud had decided the time to pull punches was past. It was time to punish this man before the proper authorities could take him away. He drew no quarter, gave no opportunity for a pause. Maxwell kept the offensive up, throwing blow after blow against the Russian.

Dimitri was not a small man. If compared, Maxwell was probably five inches shorter and maybe 75 pounds lighter. Maxwell knew this man could orient himself to put up his own defensive. Dimitri did not disappoint. He replied with a powerful punch of his own. His large meat-hooked hand slammed into Maxwell's face. He'd feel that in the morning, as he felt a small snap.

Maybe even longer. But he pushed back the pain and kept up his assault. This man had to be taken in.

As Dimitri swung out again, hoping to hear the familiar and welcoming sound of breaking bone, Maxwell dropped and swung out his leg. Maxwell aimed carefully, knowing that no matter how big the giant, they all had a weakness. That weakness became evident as Maxwell heard the crushing of bone as his foot slammed into Dimitri's knee. And the giant roared in pain, falling to the floor with a thundering crash.

“Men like you are all the same,” Maxwell said through the pain he felt. “you believe power is all you need to rule a nation. It isn't. Compassion, education. People will follow if you lead them, teach them. Not heard them like sheep, telling them what to believe and how to live.”

Dimitri pushed himself up against the wall. His face twisted into a wince as the pain seared through his knee. But he still found his bravado. “Comrade. There will always be people like me. You can nyet stop us. In time, the people will realize, we are here for their own good.”

“To take away their freedom,” Maxwell quickly added for the Russian. “To rule over them with an iron fist.”

Dimitri laughed as he listened to Maxwell. “You do nyet know, how the world works, comrade. These things, they are inevitable.” He smirked as he looked to Maxwell. “A man such as myself would nyet stop fightink against a man such as me. You have only allowed me to find my strength again.”

“No,” Maxwell replied evenly. “I was just waiting for the others.”

Dimitri’s eyes widened as he realized the ruse that Maxwell had used on him. His fight, while crushing in a way, was not to physically win, but to lull the Russian into a false security. Until the proper authorities arrived and arrive they did.

Behind Maxwell the doors of the small warehouse opened with a thunder. Columbus police officers and riot officers rushed in, rifles aimed at Dimitri when they found target. Colors of red and blue reflected off the walls. Shouting for the Russian to surrender. Dimitri complied, falling back to the floor as he raised his hands, a scowl on his face as he

realized the simple trick the Dakota man had played on him. He sneered as his arms were manhandled by the officers, and he shouted out to Maxwell. “No prison can hold me, comrade. I shall meet you again.”

Maxwell just watched Dimitri as the officers forced him up, weapons still trained on the former KGB agent. The large Dakota man caught sight of Captain Schwartz and nodded in his direction, then looked back to Dimitri. “We shall see,” was all he said in reply.

Sister White slowly rose to her feet, rolling her shoulders to remove the kinks. She watched as her fellow sisters slowly came to, rising slowly. Valhalla was very slow to get up, her knee was giving her problems. Eventide leaned against the wall of the nearby building and tried stretching out her kinks as she took out a cell phone. Sister White was impressed. It wasn't often when one combatant was able to dispatch four highly trained Sisters. This Grey Kestrel could perhaps be a deadly enemy, or an important ally.

Eventide made the call, appraising the

Mistress of their situation. She was very quiet and spoke in low tones as she replied in short sentences. They had failed, to a point, but the operation wasn't a complete failure. They had information about Kestrel and Hawk's Scream, and now they knew Operative Violet Rose had planned all along to betray them.

"We are ordered to rendezvous at the airport," Eventide reported as she slipped the cell phone away. "We'll meet a car to take us to a relatively close safehouse. There we'll pick up our next assignment after we receive medical attention." Eventide studied each woman carefully, noting their injuries. It seemed she and Sister White were the least injured. At least they would be able to pick up the next assignment.

Eventide moved to stand next to Sister White. She leaned close to the woman and whispered. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," White replied in an even tone.

Eventide nodded in reply, but added one thing after some thought. "What did you whisper to Kestrel?" White furrowed her brow and looked directly at Eventide. Eventide smirked slightly as she continued.

“I heard you mutter something, what did you tell Kestrel?”

“I was taunting her,” White again replied. “It obviously didn’t work.”

“Obviously,” Eventide replied with a nod before turning her attention to the other Sisters. “We’d better move quickly. We haven’t much time.” Slowly, they began to crawl back into the shadows. Eventide kept a close eye on Sister White. Her instincts told her something, and she had learned to trust her instincts. She believed Sister White was no longer trustworthy.

They would have to make an example of her on this next assignment.

The ambulance was now classed as evidence. Police poured over it as Naomi watched them. She had to tell the truth that she had recognized Monty. Truth to a point. She said she recognized him, but only after they had arrived at the hospital. Her only concern was making sure Gerald was safe.

Still, she did not feel exactly vindicated with her decision. Rose had escaped. A wanted criminal, gone into the shadows

again. And now, with his betrayal of the Red Hand, even more difficult to find than before. At least Maxie had captured Dimitri. That was some consolation at least.

Naomi let out a sigh as she leaned against one of the pillars in front of the hospital. Why did things like this have to happen to good people? She really didn't know, maybe some day she'd learn this secret of life. But today...

The thought was pushed aside as something caught her eye. Something out of place, hanging from the upper portion of the pillar. She reached up, and caught a hold of it, pulling it down. Naomi smirked as she studied the plushie. A toy kangaroo. A note was attached to it, which she read with a smile.

Sorry, Shiela. Maybe next time. Love the suit, by the way. Love, Monty.

Maybe next time indeed.

Chapter Nine

2:15 pm. - August 24th, 2002

Johnathon Tiberius Walker tapped the keys lightly. It was over, but he had two things to do first. A call to an old “friend”, and then to see his daughter. It was time to make a better life for himself and his little girl. Even if it meant only for a little while. She deserved to have some sort of a normal life. Away from the shadows that the Sisterhood had built up around her. Away from the corruption that dared to infest her life. These thoughts filled his mind as he found the communication rig. He grumbled slightly, muttering that Indigo was so much better at this than he was. Maybe it was his thoughts that distracted him. He wasn’t certain.

But he never even heard Grey Kestrel.

“Tell Malcolm I got his message,” Naomi said in a quiet, calm voice. Walker

turned slowly and his eyes met hers. She was alone, no police, no authorities to lead him away to prison. He expected a woman like Kestrel to bring back up. He was a bit taken aback with just the sight of her, alone. In a way, he was a bit relieved.

“Monty always had a way o’ sayin’ hello,” Walker said with a kind smile. “Means he likes ya.”

Naomi laughed aloud at the thought. “No offense, Malcolm’s not my type. But tell him thanks. The small toy went to my son. Petey will put it to good use.”

Walker nodded slowly. Naomi had a son. Maybe that alone would make her understand. “I got a little girl, m’self. I need ta do alla this, all the deception, ta get her to a safe place. I hope ya understand.”

“I may not like your motives,” Naomi replied with a sigh. “But at least I do understand. And at least you tried to help Gerald. He’ll never have the use of that arm, but at least he’s alive.” Naomi crossed her arms and studied the gunhand for a moment. “The agents of the Sisterhood may have escaped, but at least we captured Dimitri and his agents.”

Walker nodded again as he leaned against the console. “His agents’ll rot in some jail cell fer a long time. But ‘xpect Dimitri ta get out somehow. He’s got friends that like his ... talents. Man’s a monster, an’ sadly, there ain’t no way ta keep a man like that down. Somebody’s always gonna want ‘im ta keep kickin’ ‘round.”

“And what about you?” Naomi said as she stepped forward. “You gonna keep kickin’ ‘round?” She perked an eyebrow with the last two words as she attempted to imitate the drawl of the Texan. Walker just laughed and took out a Pall Mall.

“Oh, I’ll be here an’ there,” he said, pausing to light the cigarette. “Ya can at least count on that.” He took a long drag off the cigarette and exhaled. “Now, Lieutenant. If y’all excuse me, I got someone ta send a message to. I’m gonna ask ya don’t track us. But ya can guarantee that we just might meet again. The world the way it is, our paths’ll cross soon ‘nough.”

Naomi watched the Texan for just a moment before turning to slowly walk out of the building. “Take care of yourself, Walker,” she called back to him. “Keep shootin’

straight.” Walker chuckled as he watched Naomi leave. She and her brother were interesting people. The world needed heroes like them. Maybe, in time, his daughter could grow to be like them. He pushed the thoughts from his mind as he concentrated on the task at hand. It was time to make that call to an old friend.

Wouldn’t Lieutenant Christa Rayne be surprised?

Maxwell winced as the doctor looked over his injuries. Naomi stood in the room, watching carefully as Maxwell sat completely still during the procedure. The doctor hummed and hawed, making comment that the injury wasn’t too bad, but it could have been a lot worse. For the bumps and bruises that both he and Naomi had, at least they were well deserved. The bad guys had been captured. It made the pain worth it.

“I really hope this doesn’t affect my opening comments to the new class,” Maxwell stated through clenched teeth. The doctor just sighed and shook his head. Maxwell looked to the doctor with questioning eyes.

“What?”

The doctor looked to Naomi, speaking with a tired voice. “Can you make sure that he takes a few days off to recuperate. The last thing he needs is to stress the injury more.” He looked back to Maxwell and spoke with a stern warning. “And no crime fighting when you get back home.”

“I think that’ll be simple enough, Doc,” Naomi stated as she leaned against the wall. She looked to her side and smiled as her son leaned against her leg. “Ready to go back home, Squirt.”

“Mom!” Petey whined as she used the tame nickname. “Can we go to Uncle Max’s ranch? I wanna see the horses again.” Naomi smiled at the question and nodded.

“See,” the doctor huffed as he overheard the boy. “Spend time with your family. I’m sure that your employers will understand if you take some time off.” Max shrugged and nodded in reply. He didn’t think he’d get anything less from the doctor save stern warnings.

As the examination continued, Naomi walked her son back into the lobby area. Her mind was filled with questions. Self doubt,

in a way. What if what she was doing wasn't helping? What if it didn't really matter? No matter how hard she and Maxwell tried, the criminals would always come back. Maybe the public didn't care about them.

She huffed as she took a seat in the lobby. Petey crawled up into her lap and she grunted with a laugh. "You're getting to big for this, Petey," she said with a smile as she put her arms around him. Then she saw it, another boy in the lobby playing with his toys.

And it was then that she really noticed it.

The young boy had a pair of action figures, but both had something strapped to their backs. Wings. The boy flew them through the air, making his own game, but at the same time, making Naomi realize something.

"Come on, Billy," a woman called out to the boy. He quickly packed up his toys and rushed over to the woman, perhaps his mother. "Did you have fun?"

"Oh yeah..." the boy cried out excitedly, explaining what he was doing. Stating boldly, that he wanted to be like the two superheroes he saw the other day.

Naomi smiled because she realized that yes, she and her brother do make a difference. One person at a time.

Epilogue

Tunguska, Russia, 8:14 pm. - August 25th, 2002

Elite Red Army soldiers watched as the transport carrier landed on the old runway. They had been informed of the cargo from United States prosecutors. Extradition proceedings went without any intervention. Authorities wanted Dimitri out and they knew the Russians had a long list of charges against him. After all, the man was a psychopath.

“Ensure the prisoner is heavily guarded, comrades,” Commander Lina Gregarin shouted out to the soldiers. “We will nyet be losink such a criminal as this one.” Gregarin knew all to well of Kovolenko’s rap sheet. She had studied his crimes as a cadet before she joined the Moscow police. He was worse than any criminal she had ever arrested. “Dimitri will pay for his transgressions as he freezes in the cold of Siberia.”

Soldiers raced to the cargo hold, weapons held firm as they awaited the prisoner to be brought forth. Gergarin tensed slightly. Something was wrong. The pilots were taking too long. She furrowed her brow and tightened her grip on the rifle. “Comrades, be ready. We are gravely deceived.” With her last word, an explosion rocked the cargo ship, quickly followed by a volley of bullets from the hold of the plane. Soldiers were cut down easily like stalks of wheat. Gregarin cursed the longcoat she wore, making her movement difficult. Racing across the snow, she dropped the rifle, then shed the longcoat. She could bear the cold, there was more important things to worry about than her comfort. She took the pistols she wore from their holsters and scanned the area. Dimitri was covering himself quite well.

“Ah, my old tovarich,” Dimitri finally called out. “Has been a long time since we were together, nyet, comrade.”

Lina clenched her teeth and cursed in her native Ukrainian. This man had to be stopped. “You are a devil, Dimitri. Anything we may have had is long in the past. I bear no feelinks for you now.”

Dimitri laughed aloud at Lina's comment. "Ah, then in that case, for all the times we shared. Spasibo. It is unfortunate that now, I will have to be killink you. My little Tovarich."



Tim Holtorf is a graphic designer working for a weekly newspaper in Outlook, Saskatchewan. Developing characters and story ideas for over two decades, he now has two books to show for a long effort.

Previously, he worked in the field of broadcasting, working as both an on air announcer and as a news reporter. This ten year career took him to many different communities throughout Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

His first book published is The Adventures of Black Mask & Pale Rider.
