

Chapter 1

Harare, Zimbabwe, Africa

On the morning of September 11th, 2004, Kina had ridden the blue line from O'Hare into downtown Chicago. Thinking back to that day, the scene and all its details were remarkably clear in her mind. The morning had been particularly humid – the air heavy, still and stale. Three years to the day since the terrorist attacks in New York, yet if there was any tension from the echo of that tragic day, it was only in her mind. Occasionally her eyes lifted from the newspaper bearing the famous fiery image of the second tower to quickly survey the other passengers in the train. Most of the morning commuters and business travelers were plugged into a portable music device, a laptop, or cell phone or a carefully balanced combination. Kina wondered how it was possible for so many people to be tuned in while simultaneously so oblivious. Since childhood she'd had a penchant for conjuring visual analogies based on the current moment, especially during situations that wouldn't allow for a quick escape.

Looking around at the jacked-in passengers, she concentrated on the picture forming in her mind. Within seconds the image of a gymnasium full of school children flashed into her mind's eye. Her mind surveyed the ethereal scene, slowly panning to and fro. Each of the basketball hoops had been retracted and hung precariously above the floor at odd angles. The room was bare and Spartan. All of the athletic equipment was crammed into the long rectangular room near the main entrance. The children, seated Indian style on the floor, sat facing a massive white screen that had been erected on the stage.

Projected onto the screen were random images depicting the quintessential storybook American lifestyle. Financial wealth, gross materialism and physical beauty were the underlying themes. Faint, random splashes of color flashed across the entranced faces of the children as images of slender runway models, sleek expensive cars and motorized watercraft, tropical beaches and credit cards came and went in rapid succession. Half-shaved men in sleek casual black suits and thick silver watches smiled confidently as they walked hand-in-hand with beautiful women endowed with long flowing, lustrous, commercial-ready hair. Then came the cocktail party aboard the mammoth gray and white yacht, the Cinderella ball and a champagne toast. A sleek black helicopter with dark-tinted windows circled the tallest building in the city. On the roof was a party populated by black and white tuxedos, elegant evening gowns, and sparkling crystal glasses filled with golden wine poured by obedient servants in pressed white coats. Ten-foot tall animal-shaped ice sculptures encircled the soiree. In every direction there were tables piled high with artistically

carved fruits and vegetables, platters of exotic foods from around the globe, and shiny silver fountains filled with dark, liquid chocolate – all being casually consumed by voluptuous women adorned with gold and diamonds and men with the look and commanding presence of James Bond. This was the grand party to end all parties and was being held to celebrate a new world order. Somehow Kina was sure the mesmerized children understood that.

The image of the high-rise party melted away and was replaced with simpler scenes. Graduations with friends and family, smiling faces, birthdays with balloons and clowns, teenagers in a whimsical, light-hearted school play, a rough and tumble hockey game, the winning football team carrying the quarterback on their shoulders, the ROTC. Back to football and hockey. The focus now seemed to be on the hitting, the pushing, the jarring collisions, the lone player running into the end zone, the train wreck of players out of focus in the background. Boxing. Ultimate fighting. Self defense. Martial arts and hand-to-hand combat. American soldiers marching.

Mug shots of unsmiling Arab men in bright orange shirts with numbers stitched on the left breast. Grainy news footage of men with white turbans that covered everything but their eyes as they knelt on one knee and fired automatic weapons. Buildings exploding, the concrete turning to dust. The birthday party again. The clown with something deep and sinister in his eyes, staring earnestly into the camera. There was a menacing message behind those dark eyes that would frighten most adults. And still the children sat unmoving on the hard wood floor, reticent and absorbed, with their mouths hanging half open. Kina could see them clearly in her mind. But there was something she hadn't noticed until now. Every child had a single, white wire hanging from each ear. They were all plugged in. They were listening intently to something, but she could not hear what it was. The screen continued flashing between images of the life of privilege and wealth, to contact sports and war, as if to ask, "To control, or be controlled...that is the question."

Kina remembered taking another look at the other passengers. Something was different on second glance. Of course. Here they were. These were the children from the gymnasium. They'd all grown up. Mortgages, jobs, car payments, credit cards, student loans, doctor's bills, nights spent blindly consuming alcohol, days spent dealing with fear and envy. Yes, they'd grown up. But they were still plugged in. They were still quiet and obedient and striving to fill their lives with the spoils and promises the television had tempted them with their entire lives, only now it came via high-definition flat panel screens as far as the eye could see. Five days a week they made the exodus, consciously ignoring the nagging barrier of reality in hopes of taking just one more step up on the long, arduous climb to the middle. Just one more step.

Most of them sensed the gross inequities in the world. They knew a great many things were wrong, and yet the pursuit was all that mattered now. Every person bouncing around on this train was like a greyhound – forever damned to chase the fake rabbit around and around the track of life, never quite able to

grab hold, but always striving to reach it. The greyhounds never gave up. They never *chose* to accept reality and let the shiny carrot go. Nor did they ever choose to go after real carrots, the kind that could be caught and consumed. The prize was always just one step away.

The screeching, metallic noise of the train's brakes engaging stirred her from the daydream. When she'd looked up again, Kina had made eye contact with a portly man standing thirty feet away at the other end of the train car. He wore a dark gray business suit and a white shirt, both of which needed to be ironed. Though she couldn't recall his face now, she did remember it had been pudgy, round, and unusually pale. One of several chins had been forced outside the tight collar and rested uneasily above the wide Windsor knot of a bright red tie. The skin on his cheeks and jaws bore scattered pockmarks she'd guessed were the remnants of a particularly bad acne problem. His slick, thinning hair had been combed back and looked as though he'd cemented it to his large scalp with a clear epoxy. The large man stood reading the morning paper. His right arm was curled around one of the vertical bars to help maintain balance. He had been staring down at his paper when his eyes shifted and met hers. Kina was used to having men stare at her, but this was different.

For a brief moment she thought the man had read her thoughts – that he'd caught a glimpse of the imagery flashing through her mind, that he understood the despair and pessimism that had consumed her thoughts for the past few years. The look in his eyes seemed to say, "I know where you're going, and I understand why." It was the reassuring and knowing expression a loving father might give his son before he said, "I was young once, too, and I know exactly how you feel."

Kina had held the man's stare for a few moments, her face remaining blank. The corners of her eyes wrinkled slightly as she tried to read his expression. Thinking back now, she realized she had been vaguely hoping for some epiphany, some sign the stranger truly understood. Perhaps he really did know where she was going. Could he know about *The Aenamaia*? She had desperately wanted to tell someone about her decision: the commitment, the oath, the training. Could he have known? Was he one of them, sent to make sure she went through with it?

Social norms had forced her to break the stare. She never knew whether there had been something there or whether he had just been admiring her. Looking back, she suspected it was the latter. Gray, who had been her first contact with *The Aenamaia*, had advised her to always present a public appearance that exploited her good looks, athletic body and long auburn hair. He'd said, "Beautiful women are suspicious on many levels, but none that would ever point to your real agenda or to us. They'll stare at you and imagine you're everything that you are not, and that's the way we want it. You never want your enemies to see beyond the flesh. This can be accomplished consistently with the right kind of armor."

The lesson had stuck with her for the last three-and-a-half years. Even today, sitting on a rickety antiquated bus heading away from Harare International Airport, she still dressed the part. Dark green slacks,

matching pumps, and a white silk blouse had replaced her stylish business suit, along with a pair of rectangular glasses and a thin silver watch. Around her neck hung a circular gold locket engraved with the yin-yang symbol. Gray had given her the necklace on that first day of training in Chicago. He'd said it was the type of thing astronauts took into space and that she should never take it off. It was only after she'd finished her training that he'd shown her the secret to opening it and explained the lethal function of the two white tablets hidden inside.

A half hour after leaving the Harare city limits the outdated old bus passed through a small shanty village. The dirt and gravel road ahead was in a sad state of disrepair and the bus was forced to slow to a crawl. The driver did his best to avoid the large potholes that reminded Kina of miniature meteor craters filled with dirty brown water. Despite the driver's best efforts, the front right tire dipped into a deep hole causing the small bus to lurch from side to side. Instinctively Kina threw her hand up to the overhead rack to prevent the shiny metal briefcase from sliding off. The case was heavy and could injure someone. The last thing she needed was to spend the next day explaining why she was transporting a high-powered rifle, scope and rounds to the small town of Mutare. She pulled the case down and placed it squarely on her lap. "Better safe than imprisoned," she thought.

After a few minutes, the bus reached the end of the village and was back up to cruising speed. A small green sign indicated Mutare was thirty-four kilometers ahead. Kina guessed the driver was averaging around eighty kilometers per hour. Running the calculations in her mind, accounting for a few more small towns, she estimated it would take another thirty minutes or so to reach Mutare. She looked at her watch. It was almost noon. The drive from the airport in Harare had already taken up more of her morning than she'd expected. She had wanted to rent a car, but Gray had advised against it. Just getting her into the country and arranging to have someone meet her outside the airport with the weapon had been risky enough. Putting her assumed name and passport information into another computer was not worth the additional risk. *The Aenamaia* worked diligently to keep their people and activities off the grid as much as possible. They could never afford to forget: *Always watching, always listening, ready to bring violence, ready to forever silence.* It was therefore decided that Ms. Celeste Angela Tullah of Toronto, Canada and her silver rifle case would make use of the antiquated Zimbabwean public transit system.

The heavy, smooth metal case pressed down on Kina's thighs. The pressure was greater than could be attributed to the actual weight of the object and she knew it. The emotional sum of the last three years seemed to be contained within, sitting restlessly next to the dismantled weapon. It was waiting to get out, to accomplish its goal – to spend the currency that had accrued in the account she'd started that afternoon in Chicago. If the assignment went according to plan, if she returned safely to Harare on this same bus, the weight of the case would be reduced by only a few rounds, but Kina knew both she and the case would feel as light as a feather.

Kennebunkport, Maine

“What time was it in Mashhad?” he wondered, staring at the antique clock on the wall. It was just before seven a.m. here. “Eight hours ahead,” he thought. “Three o’clock. The ambitious little prick will be done soon.” TB, the abbreviated nickname his eldest son had given the man, never hung around to socialize after deal-making. Not anymore. The intel thus far showed he always left alone. The word he’d gotten over the last few days from his agents was TB had brokered a dozen lucrative deals while overseas. The further things progressed with these new business ventures, the more complicated the situation would become.

Despite the adroitness TB had demonstrated thus far in avoiding inquiries, both legal and media-driven, in the end, the little opportunist would undoubtedly be forced to testify. Federal prosecutors would offer up the usual little-fish deal: full immunity for all past transgressions and a hands-off attitude on the deals he was brokering right at this moment – or prison. Loyal or not, TB was no fool. The choice would be simple. After that, their world would be consumed by flames fanned by an ungrateful nation of whiners and rubberneckers and the media that never stopped whoring to them. The carnage would be everywhere, caught in high definition audio and video. Clips of interviews with turncoat friends and family would be on every news station. All of his son’s greatest hits would be revived and polished. Internet video would see an unprecedented surge in downloads. His family name, already irrevocably charred over the last decade, would wind up in a dank and dark corner in the annals of history. “No!” he thought. He could not allow this to happen – not on his watch.

He glanced at the clock again. A decision would have to be made – several decisions. He’d been putting off action for over a week now, hoping a better option would emerge. Many sleepless nights had been spent trying to divine a solution. The aggravation was all too familiar, like chronic chest pains that come and go, but are mysteriously incurable. How many times over the years had he found himself in this position? How many messes had he cleaned up to protect the family? How much cumulative pain had wrenched at his being? Though he knew the number was high and the pain great, all of his eldest son’s past transgressions paled in comparison to the current crisis. No one doubted that, except maybe his clueless first-born son.

Over the course of the last year, he’d earnestly hoped it wouldn’t come to this – that the country would just let bygones be bygones and move forward. There were so many more pressing issues to be resolved. Unfortunately, sharks aren’t the only creatures to salivate at the smell of blood in the water. When it had become clear that bad memories outweighed current problems and future hopes, he’d started quietly calling in favors and devising a plan.

He began by imagining himself as the lead prosecutor going after the big enchilada. Who would he need? Who would possess both the relevant knowledge and a flimsy sense of loyalty in the face of perjury

and federal indictment? A short list of names quickly emerged. Originally he'd referred to the list as The Dirty Dozen, but then decided that was too obvious. Were details of what he was planning – even the reconnaissance phase – to ever become public, any title containing a number or quantity could prove damaging. He therefore referred to the potential squealers as The Rat Pack. The list represented a substantial portion of Washington's Who's-Who. Many on the list were linked in more ways than the most obvious.

Should it be necessary to eliminate members of The Rat Pack, each operation would need to be executed with exact timing, coordination and a little insightful creativity. The risks were monumental, no doubt about it. So much would hinge on small details and precise actions that he would have no direct control over. His family's reputation, power, wealth, and legacy would be in the hands of a select team of professional, well-trained and well-paid operatives.

He recalled what Italian President Francesco Cossiga had called such men "*Condotierri*," skilled and efficient thugs whose ironic code of honor made them both reliable and discreet. *Condotierri*. Just thinking of the word made him uneasy. But now was not the time for weakness.

"Sir?" the disembodied voice said over the staticky phone line. The leader of the team – his *Condotierri* – waited anxiously for the decision he could no longer avoid.

"Procrastination would get him nowhere," he thought, irritated with his own reluctance to act. Back when he was in control, he'd have already made a dozen such decisions before his breakfast had been served. Sitting here now, over two decades later, there was no staff to prepare and serve breakfast, no one to test the food for poison and no throng of people pressing for his time – just a very difficult decision to be made.

"How many teams do you have in place?" he asked, already aware of the answer.

"Eight, Sir," the man answered immediately. "Six domestic, two international. Targets are all in place and under constant surveillance."

"Full audio? You're listening and recording?"

"With the exception of The Angler, everyone is covered."

"Windows are open?"

"Yes Sir. Several per target. Extraction timetables are in place for each opportunity."

He thought for a moment then asked, "Has anyone broken the silence or been approached by the press?"

"No one has spoken of anything specific yet," again the answer was crisp and immediate. "Nacho Libre is set to appear for an appeal in two days. He'll be allowed to arrive via private transport. No foot or ankle cuffs, just an escort of prison guards keeping watch. Afterwards he'll be allowed to conduct interviews with the press, though specific case information will not be discussed. Conversations with his attorney indicate he'll again implicate the former President. He claims to have hard-copy proof of direct intervention

and pressure, though he has yet to present it to his attorney or anyone else. When pressed he tells his attorney he'll not reveal this proof until the right moment. Intelligence believes the appeals court will uphold the ruling and send him back to prison. Should he possess evidence implicating the former President, he'll likely use it soon as a bartering tool to win his freedom."

He nodded, but did not reply. The mechanical briefing continued.

"The Spinner will be emerging soon. Our insider tells us he's brokered a lucrative energy deal here. Money will soon change hands. He'll most likely be heading stateside within the next few days."

"No doubt," he thought. "TB has calls to make and hands to shake. Favors to call in. Palms to grease." It was amazing how much easier such deals had become since 9/11 and the war in Iraq. "Never underestimate the power of misdirection in politics." Who had said that to him? His father? The source means nothing as long as the imbued wisdom remains virulent.

"Sir?"

He didn't answer, though he knew what was coming.

"Sir, when The Spinner returns to the states, the press will swarm. Slant and deflection are his specialties. He'll do anything to wash his hands clean of any personal involvement or liability, while also keeping curious eyes off of his current venture. Anything."

"True," he thought. He could see it in his mind. That arrogant, pudgy bastard would get off the plane, waving to the throng of reporters and cameras and posing for pictures like he was a movie star or decorated war hero. Under the right circumstances, attention was like a drug for TB. How badly he'd wanted to be at the top – probably an envy complex that began in childhood and continued today. The GOP had done its best to convince him it could be done. Unfortunately he'd been too much of a chicken shit to actually run. It was hard to imagine a better, more expendable mouthpiece. Even though the family would've had to forego the additional prestige, it would've turned out better all around. Bringing in his son had been a bad idea. The regret was palpable, but he shook it off. The past was untouchable and irrevocable. Reparation was all that mattered now. And TB, whom he'd nicknamed 'The Spinner,' was one of the obstacles that had to be dealt with.

"Has the Red Canary had any interested visitors?"

"A few rising stars hoping to uncover something new to make their name. Nothing new has turned up. He knows who holds the keys to his jail cell."

"He's still leaking like a sieve," he warned. "Is the CIA still squeezing him? Are you privy to what they're learning?"

"Yes, Sir. The Canary is refusing to sing a new tune. Until they can entice him with something more. Those deals are made deep inside the CIA and could emerge at any time. He's a loose cannon, Sir."

"Agreed," he admitted. A few moments passed before the silence was broken.

“Sir,” the man hesitated, “what about The Angler, Sir? Do you want surveillance to re-engage?”

“No,” he said too quickly, “No. Not yet. That one is tricky and dangerous. Besides, the way he’s going, nature might take care of things for us.”

“And the others?”

But he was still thinking of unlucky number seven. “Yes, tricky was right,” he thought, “and too close to home.” As it was, the commonality of those on the list was obvious. Accidents, misfortunes, dirt, and misinformation. In short, a smear campaign of a different flavor. That was the ticket to deflection. A few back doors into the media might have to be gently pried open in order to secure critical insertion points. He was going to need to place a few key people in the field to discredit any sources attempting to link the incidents together. The “conspiracy” label was the best deflection tool out there. “Old Faithful,” it was often called in dark private rooms, amidst thick cigar smoke and the smell of brandy.

It was amazing how much weight and influence a single word could convey. Only within the last fifty years or so had Old Faithful been involuntarily and unconsciously morphed into a powerful weapon. The irony was fantastic, he often thought. Conspiracy was like a lead weight to any theory. Regardless of validity or initial buoyancy, a few strategically placed articles would relegate any connection to the overactive imaginations of idle and evil minds. With the possible exception of global warming, Old Faithful, when backed by the right people, had never failed. Human language was truly remarkable.

He glanced at the unfolded piece of yellow legal paper sitting on his desk. Twelve names. Twelve code names. Twelve minds full of shiny gold bargaining chips. Each one could be slid across a polished oak table in some obscure backroom, exchanged for a clean and quiet exit, the details of the transaction forever hidden from the public’s eyes. Some would be loyal, but only to the point where they themselves would not be in jeopardy. Enough pressure and even the best seal will crack. This he simply could not allow.

“Sir?” the curt voice demanded.

This time he didn’t hesitate. “Nacho Libre, Red Canary, The Spinner, and Speedy are authorized. Acquire, extract, and dispose.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Remember, you are the sole link to this family. No one else is to know. Understood?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Make the remains public, but be careful not to leave any clues that could lead someone back to us. Random. Untraceable.”

“Disposal sites have already been chosen, Sir. The subjects will be clean and interesting.”

“No emotion,” he thought. “None at all. Good survival tactic. Objectivity is always clouded by emotion. Always.”

“What about the others? What is your current intel?”

“Thus far each bottle has remained corked,” the operative said. “But the Justice Department has already started turning stones. It’s only a matter of time.”

“Response?” he asked.

“Teams are in position awaiting your authorization Sir.”

He suddenly felt envious of this man’s readiness and freedom to take action. No hesitation. No reluctance to engage. These men were cold, calculating and proficient. But what motivated them? It wasn’t just the money, of that he was certain. Payment wasn’t enough. There was better money to be made doing less dangerous work and they knew it. No. It was something else entirely. Sometimes, when pondering this conundrum, he could convince himself the drive was loyalty – to commander and country. That was enough to ward off thoughts of their being hired by someone else to target him. Loyalty was a noble ideal, though not usually convincing enough to allow a good night’s sleep. Regardless, most of the time he wasn’t so deluded. What else, then? Part of him liked to think it was good old-fashioned bloodlust, but that wasn’t it either. No. There was something else driving these men. Perhaps they were extreme history enthusiasts who wanted a hand in shaping the course of the future. Admirable, though a bit too simplistic. Patriotism? A sense of honor and duty? Action with no care as to why? Robotic execution of orders? None of these felt right. The truth, he feared, was that they did it because they liked it and they didn’t care who the target was – man, woman, child – good, bad and everything in between. Just so long as there was always another target in sight.

Suddenly, movement outside the window caught his attention. Pivoting in his chair, he saw his eldest son walking casually along the porch outside. He wore jeans, an old Harvard sweatshirt two sizes too big and tan hush puppies. In his hand was an oversized white coffee cup bearing the U.S. Presidential seal, wisps of steam escaping from the top.

“Sir,” the voice demanded. “What are your orders?”

He heard the question, but was preoccupied with the figure outside his window. His son had stopped walking and was leaning on the railing. He watched as he casually turned his head from side to side to see if anyone else was near and then, satisfied that no one was around, pulled a small silver flask from his back pocket, unscrewed the cap, and poured some of the amber liquid into his coffee cup. Anger mixed with frustration welled up as he watched his son quickly slip the flask back into his pocket and cover the bulge with the large sweatshirt.

The younger man turned, sipped the coffee and flashed the grin of a child who thought no one had seen him steal a cookie. That stupid smirk. “He didn’t get it from me,” he thought. Human expressions, even blank ones, can be very telling. An unfortunate fact not lost on the country and media. “The Blank Face of Ineptitude” one headline had proclaimed. “Lost” had been the bold headline in an ultra-liberal paper. A third had gone so far as to print “Nobody Home.” Not long after the now infamous “humans and fish”

quote, one magazine had lamented, “When in history have the citizens of a superpower felt such shame? Years after this harbinger of ignominy vanishes from public office (and vanish he must), America, with head bowed, will have no choice but to beg forgiveness from all. Pride swallowed and tail tucked. We can only hope and pray the rest of the world bears forth the compassion, civility and understanding so noticeably absent in our leader.” In each case, a photo of his eldest son appeared beneath the headline, ever bearing that empty, clueless gaze and the asinine grin. When this was all over...when he’d cleaned up the last of his son’s disasters, he would personally erase that stupid smile.

“Are you there, Sir?”

Returning his focus to the task at hand he said, “Yes, I’m here.”

“Sir?” the man said dryly.

He sensed the distant voice was growing impatient. Was there a question of his authority in that silence – in his ability to make difficult decisions? To decide the fate of people his son might have once called friends? An image of the crisp blue Presidential seal flashed into his mind. But this time it wasn’t on a coffee mug. Instead it was surrounded by a pulsing red light, one that undoubtedly signaled an emergency. The image flashed again. Now the seal was melting. The eagle’s wings were gone. Only the talons clutching the olive branch and the thirteen arrows could be seen. With the disturbing image came pressure, guilt, and acute regret. But there was something else. The eagle in the seal had faced the olive branch instead of the arrows to show a preference of peace over war. But now the eagle’s head was gone.

The choice was now his. “A dozen decisions before breakfast,” he thought again, and on impulse said firmly, “Hold surveillance on Powwow and continue recon. We still don’t know how deep his honor and discretion run. Maintain twenty-four hour eyes and ears and let me know if there is a pattern change. Same goes for Sweetness, P-Nacle, Brother T, Sandscrat and The Leaker.”

“That leaves Black Coffee.”

“Affirmative. Black Coffee is also authorized. Extract all pertinent information. I need facts, not forced confessions. Use any and all means to achieve the mission objectives. Leave no witnesses. When the extraction is complete, finish the job. Clean, fast, and yes, *interesting* as well. As far as anyone knows these quarries are completely unrelated. I want a full report after each deletion. Transmit using standard encryption protocols. Code in with Murphy before sending anything confidential. No residuals and no fuck-ups. Are we clear, soldier?” The last question was thick with challenge and authority.

A full two seconds passed before the reply came. “Understood, Sir,” the voice answered and the line went dead. Slowly he lowered the handset and replaced it in the cradle. Thoughtfully, he clasped his fingers together and considered what had just transpired. He felt certain this man, this *Condotierro*, upon hearing the order, had confirmed his understanding wearing an excited and sadistic smile. The man’s eagerness to interrogate, torture and kill sent a strange tingling sensation through his whole body. The ramifications of

what he'd just set into motion echoed and reverberated in his mind. Swift and decisive action was what the situation demanded, and he'd delivered. Anticipation coursed through his body, filling him with energy and a restored sense of authority and purpose. He bolted upright from his chair, turned and saw his reflection in the large antique civil war mirror. Staring back at him was a man of wealth and power bearing a devilish, malevolent smile. The same smile, he felt certain, was, at this very moment, on the face of the eager mercenary. And nothing, save for the hand of God himself, could stop either of them now.

Mutare, Zimbabwe, Africa

“Damn it!” Kina growled as the bullet shredded the bark on the left side of the tree.

“Nothing to be afraid of here, Little Girl,” the shooter taunted. “I won't hurt you.”

She wiped the sweat from her brow with the sleeve of her sweatshirt. Another shot rang out, this time tearing at the bark on the right side. “This guy is obviously hitting what he's aiming at,” she thought. Her briefing had failed to mention that the farm's owner was a fucking expert marksman! “That would've been useful information,” she grumbled as she spun to take another shot. She squeezed the trigger and channeled the recoil to help quickly spin her back around. The bullet blew off the corner of the stone wall the farmer was crouched behind.

“You can do better than that can't ya, Sugar?” the man yelled playfully.

She crouched to take a low shot. An instant before she pivoted to fire, another shot rang out, this time ripping through the loose bark only inches from where her head would've been. “Fuck!” she hissed. “What? Is this redneck reading my mind?”

The shooter was Merle A. Shephard. Kina recalled the file she'd read on the flight from New York to London. Shephard had moved to Africa in late 2000 after fleeing federal prosecution for trespassing and poaching on federal lands, resisting arrest, possession of a sizeable cache of illegal firearms and other assorted weaponry, failure to appear on his appointed court date, skipping out on his bond, and firing shots at pursuing police officers and federal agents. It was around this time that he popped up on *The Aenamaia's* radar. During the standard file review, he had initially been placed towards the bottom of their list. That was until Gray learned that while the charges were never dropped, the entire investigation and search for Shephard was called off suddenly and without explanation on January 25, 2001, only five days after President Bush was sworn into office. Gray used his D.C. contacts to discover the order had come from on high, though he'd not been able to secure any solid proof. That same day, Shephard's name was moved up and *The Aenamaia's* deep investigation into his background began. In the end, even though *The Aenamaia* was never able to find concrete proof that President Bush himself had ordered the manhunt stopped, the research on Shephard continued.

Then in late 2004, amidst the unusually high volume of heightened terrorist alerts preceding the onslaught of Bush's campaign activities, they got a break. One of their deepest and most secret contacts in the Bush administration managed to get a photocopy of a handwritten thank-you note sent to Bush from one M. Shephard for the "aid" Bush had provided him. The main text of the note was ambiguous. It was the last line that had caught the contact's attention: "P.S. Tell your father to take good care of my old '73 Sharps. She's a beaut." After hours of painstaking research via several of the Presidential libraries, Gray learned that during his first term in office, George H.W. Bush had been given a rare 1873 Sharps Meacham rifle by an anonymous donor. No record of the donor was ever located, but the gun was rumored to be kept at the former President's summer home in Kennebunkport, Maine. Despite the lack of direct evidence of the connection between Shephard and Bush Jr., *The Aenamaia* was pleased to learn that Mr. Shephard had been kind enough to include a return address...in Africa.

Now, hiding behind a tree in Shephard's dusty front yard, Kina sincerely wished George W. was here at this very moment. "A thick, mindless human shield would come in handy right about now," she thought. Cautiously, she peered around the other side of the tree. Twenty feet from the front porch of the large house a man's body lay motionless facing the sky. Despite the dust in the air she could see the dark puddle of blood surrounding what remained of his head. Her first shot had been right on target. Devin Blanche, a wealthy D.C. lawyer famous for his defense of the tobacco companies and the associated lobby, had dropped like a stone. Fifteen feet away from his body was the cage holding the King Cheetah he had paid a hundred grand to personally shoot and kill. The cheetah paced the cage restlessly, always keeping an eager eye on the dead body. He was probably hungry. The scumbags who ran these places were known to keep the animals hungry and agitated so they would appear vicious and dangerous – therefore heightening the thrill of the kill for the weasel pulling the trigger.

Lying only a few feet from Blanche was the body of Mitt Holgren, the primary political lobbyist for the Safari Club International, an organization that advocated for hunter's rights to hunt and kill rare and endangered species. Holgren had helped scuttle an impressive list of legislation designed to limit hunting, add a number of species to the illegal and endangered list, increase gun registration controls, and so on. Holgren who, thanks to a family friend in the White House, had managed to be appointed as Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service under suspicious circumstances, had also been instrumental in helping establish secretive farms like this one where the wealthy could kill just about anything they desired – for a price. There were purported to be hundreds of such places all over the world, but only a select few knew them all. The arrangements were simple. Once funds were transferred, the farm owner would track, capture and cage the desired animal. Next they would tranquilize the animal so it could be safely cleaned and groomed. They would then put the animal back in the cage and keep it healthy until a few days before the paying client arrived. Then the feeding would stop and the taunting would begin.

In many of these cases interested parties would contact Holgren directly. Terms would be negotiated and he would coordinate the details of the trip. Having helped establish most of the farms, he knew which ones could capture and contain which animals. He and his clients also agreed that the fee paid to the farmer would only be around ten percent of the total. Holgren pocketed the rest for his services and his discretion.

Yet despite all the power and wealth he had accumulated over the years, all the profit he'd made helping to kill the world's endangered species, and all the powerful friends in high places, he was now lying dead in the dirt on the plains of Africa. And if Kina succeeded here today, no one would ever see how he'd died. Neither the left ear that had been blown off when he'd turned at the last second nor the second bullet lodged in his left lung would ever be found. Through all the commotion that ensued after the man fell, Kina wasn't a hundred percent sure Holgren was dead. But given where the second shot hit, she was confident he'd choked to death on his own blood.

It was only at the eleventh hour that Gray had somehow managed to learn that Holgren would be accompanying Blanche on this trip – hence the urgency in getting Kina in place quickly for the liquidation. It was only after she arrived in Mutare that their local contact informed her that the president of the Safari Den, Dearden Sanderson, had also come on the trip. At the time, her excitement had been palpable. Two of the people on her future jobs list showing up unexpectedly. “Three birds with one rifle,” she'd thought then. She'd managed to take out two of the birds, but Sanderson, after having been shot square in the back of his leg, managed to escape through the front gate. Kina had sent two rounds in his direction amidst a barrage of shots from Shephard, one of which pierced the fleeing man's shoulder. Even though the man somehow managed to keep running, it really didn't matter. The closest human was at least ten long miles away, with nothing but wild country in between. With any luck Sanderson would meet his end in the teeth and claws of the purest, most poetic natural magistrate of justice imaginable.

Another shot rang out, clipping the side of the tree an instant after Kina whipped back around.

“You're not giving up already are ya, Darlin'?” Shephard yelled from behind the wall. “It wouldn't be as much fun if you just surrendered.”

“This guy is nuts,” she muttered. He's clearly not playing with a full deck. If she managed to kill him she could claim it as a mercy killing. No one this stupid should be allowed to roam free, let alone kill other living things.”

Two more shots clipped the edge of the tree even though she hadn't moved an inch – which meant he was either trying to anticipate her next move or he was trying to make her panic. “Next time, if there ever is a next time, we shoot the owner first,” she hissed quietly, nodding to herself.

As her mind raced about what to do next, she noticed how much of the tree bark lay scattered in two distinct piles to her left and right. She looked up and noticed for the first time that it was a canopy tree, and she recalled reading something on the plane about a family of canopies called acacias. One in particular

called the “Paperbark Acacia” had caught her attention. The name had stuck in her mind because she’d mistakenly thought she’d read “paperback” and had been curious about why it would have such an odd name. The tree had received its name from the thin, paper-like bark that peeled easily from the main trunk. She couldn’t be sure whether or not the tall tree keeping her from being shot was in fact a paperbark, but she promised herself that if she made it through this ordeal alive she would make it a point to find out.

With thoughts of the tree came an odd, sharp pang of remorse. There was so much beauty in this country. So much to see and admire here in the cradle of life. Would she ever get to see more of it – to tell anyone of its wonders? Or would this be the last place she ever saw? Though the dangers of her mission had been carefully explained and covered, she realized she’d never really considered the possibility she might die today. And *here*, no less – fighting for her life, on this redneck egomaniac’s property. Ironic that such a man would choose to live in the midst of such amazing abundance and splendor. Normally such a place would be a good place to die. But not like this. Not by the hand of Joe Bob, the inbred poacher.

Before the fear of death had a chance to take hold of her, she realized that her life wasn’t the only one at stake here. There was purpose and utility in living through this ordeal that went beyond her own survival. If this man beat her, countless other animals would be mercilessly paraded and killed by wealthy, insecure heterosexuals who thrived on dispensing death. Spineless bastards. The rage she’d first felt when given this assignment resurfaced and she remembered why she’d fought and argued her way past Gray’s doubts. Someone had to protect the endangered creatures of the world from the real predators.

Her thoughts shifted back to the caged cheetah as a new rush of determination engulfed her mind. Her eyes narrowed slightly and a cunning grin spread across her lips. “If I get out of this alive, Big Kitty, you’re gonna get one hell of a feast!” Chambering another round, she reversed her grip on the gun and prepared to take a shot from her right side. *The Aenamaia* required all members handling liquidations to demonstrate proficiency firing a weapon from either hand and from multiple angles. During her struggle to overcome the oddness of aiming and shooting with her opposite hand, she had tried to convince Gray that such training would rarely be of any use to her. Why spend so much time and effort perfecting it? “Oh he’s gonna have a field day when he hears about this,” she growled in a low voice. “Kitty eats the bad men, sniper eats her own words,” she added. Returning to the last spot on the tree the farmer had fired at, she pointed the rifle and waited until she saw the barrel of his gun appear – then she fired. The farmer hadn’t been expecting her to fire from the opposite side. She caught a glimpse of the surprise on his face when the bullet grazed his right shoulder. She spun back around, holding the rifle upright and pulling it close to her body.

The moment of glowing satisfaction and triumph was short-lived, though, as reality muscled its way into her mind. Time to face facts. Despite the lucky shot, she knew he was a better marksman and had much better cover. To make matters worse, she was also running out of ammo for the rifle and her sidearm had

only two rounds left. Even if she could somehow maintain the standoff, it was an unusually hot day for Mutare and her water bottle and food were in her backpack – thirty meters away. If Merle didn't manage to kill her on his own, dehydration would lay down a red carpet for him.

“Not too bad for a cute little princess,” Shephard said, his clenched voice awash with sarcasm and petulant anger. “Hell, you must'a taken a little time off from cooking and making babies to learn how to shoot like a south paw. You must be the pride of your knittin' club.”

“What kind of parents still raised these knuckle-dragging rednecks,” she thought. IQ screening and mandatory birth control suddenly sounded like sound practices. Perhaps a little cleansing of the gene pool once in a while could be a healthy thing. She would have to write to her Congressmen – assuming he wasn't on *The Aenamaia's* hit list.

Kina had been silent up until this point, but now she thought perhaps a derisive comment might agitate him enough to create an opportunity. “You know Mr. Sheep-humper,” she started, grinning at her own cleverness, “until I met you, I could never understand why some animal mothers ate their young.”

She started to chamber a round when another shot was fired. She felt a sudden rush of heat on her left calf and then a sharp bolt of pain. Instinctively her left hand cupped her mouth, preventing her scream from escaping her lips. Gritting her teeth and tightly gripping the rifle, she looked down at her pants leg. There was already a slowly spreading red stain seeping through her jeans. Quickly she reached down and carefully touched the wound. The shot had nicked her pretty good. So much for creating an opportunity. Her calf hurt like hell, but she knew it could've been a lot worse. “Idiot, idiot, idiot!” she cursed in a hushed voice. “Why not stick your whole ass out there for him to shoot at!”

“Come on, Sweet Thing. Is this really necessary? Maybe we should just put down our guns and talk about this. After all, I've got a whole bunch of high-falutin' customers lined up for some sport. And once they make a kill, they git' kinda...well...anxious if you know what I mean. Sweet little drink of water like yourself could make a handsome living putting out those kinds of fires. Whattaya say?”

“As a rule I do know it is wrong to enjoy killing someone,” she said to herself, “but like most rules, there are always exceptions.”

Three more shots rang out, each one hitting the same spot on the ground. “This fucker is toying with me,” she thought. I have to think of something and fast. How was she going to get out of this? Her mind was working on maximum overdrive – making it hard to hang on to any single thought for more than a second. “Take it easy, Kina,” she said to herself, “There must be a way.” Breathing deeply she tried to calm her thoughts and think rationally. “Okay. This guy runs an elitist farm for the illegal hunting and killing of endangered species. We know at some point he was a skilled hunter himself. And he's lived here, in the middle of fucking nowhere, for seven years. So he knows the lay of the land and that there won't be anyone coming by because they heard shots fired. So I'm on my own. “Ahhh!” she exclaimed as another bolt of

pain shot up her leg. “Okay, so...this guy was bailed out by the President of the United States. He deals with wealthy, powerful clients. He captures dangerous animals for a living. He probably *is* an egomaniac and obviously a dedicated sexist. Right? Right. And, ouch! Despite being hit himself, he will not believe a woman could best him, right? Right. So, he’s expecting to win,” she paused and added with a nod, “he’s sure he’ll win. Yeah. Okay.”

She surveyed the scene before her. Between her tree and the next one was at least twenty feet of open ground. Even without an injured leg, she’d never make it to cover. Her Land Rover was a half-mile up the dirt road. There was nowhere to run. Risking a quick glance around the tree, she could see Shephard was still hiding behind the wall. He’s patient. Controlled. “That’s a bad thing,” she thought. “And on top of that, his cover is excellent.”

“He’s waiting for me to make a mistake. I’m sure he’s earnestly hoping to have time to gloat over my bleeding corpse before he finishes me,” she thought grimly. More than anything he probably wants to know who I am and how I came to be here. Then it hit her. He’s been toying with me. Thinking back, she realized he probably could’ve gotten her in the head a few times, especially when she’d first fled from her hiding place on the side of his house. Given the sparse cover around the house, it had been the best place to take out Blanche and Holgren. Sanderson had started running as soon as she fired the first shot. She’d only managed to hit him while running for the cover of the tree. Shephard had gotten two rounds off, but had missed. The shots had hit only a foot or so behind her. He must have been going for her legs. Now he was waiting for her to either give up, or give him a chance at a center mass wound. If she wanted to get out of this alive, she would have to pit her brains against his skill.

She let a minute pass. Her mind was circling around the possibilities, but she had already made her decision. Careful to remain concealed behind the tree, she removed her dirty tan sweatshirt. Next, she pulled off her right shoe and stuffed it down into the empty sleeve. Taking a deep breath and clenching her teeth, she carefully pulled the shoe from her left foot. The pain from her calf was acute, but she managed to keep quiet. Lifting the dark brown shoe she noticed the dark-soaked patch behind the heel. Taking another deep breath, she quickly stuffed the second shoe into the sleeve. Holding the sleeve in one hand and the rifle in the other, she moved.

Shephard saw the woman’s faint shadow shift an instant before the barrel of her rifle and her arm came into the view of his crosshairs. “Come to papa, you Wily Bitch,” he muttered and fired. The woman’s scream was louder than he’d expected. The moment the bullet had gone through her arm, the rifle had fallen onto the ground next to the tree.

He’d expected she would get anxious and try something stupid. “Sure, women like this could be taught to shoot, but no training could ever make them into true soldiers. They didn’t have the nerves or the patience. That’s why the front lines still consisted mainly of men. Women just couldn’t hack it. Dumb

broad oughta known better than to try a stunt like this with him,” he thought. “Sure, she’d taken down Holgren and that pompous idiot Blanche, but who cares. He’d already been paid. It was unlikely these men had told many people where they were heading and what they were going to do. Out here, getting rid of their corpses would be easy.”

Shephard took another look in his scope. He hadn’t seen any movement yet and her rifle was still lying on the ground. “Fancy piece of equipment,” he thought. “She must be some kind of ex-military.” The sophistication of the weapon and her tactics thus far drove a thin wedge of doubt in his mind. Perhaps it was best to wait this out. See if she goes for the rifle or tries to run. Just then he heard a noise. He cocked his head slightly and listened. Crying. She was crying! A sly smile spread across his face. “Women need to learn their place in this world,” he thought with satisfaction. “Oh, I’m gonna enjoy this,” he said to himself.

Leveling his gun on the edge of the wall, Shephard took aim and fired. The bullet hit the butt of the woman’s gun and sent the weapon sliding a few feet further from the tree. Then he squeezed off a few more rounds, hitting both sides of the tree and the ground next to where the woman was probably slumped. Then he listened. The crying had gotten louder and now had a panicky edge to it. Shephard laughed and got to his feet, all the while keeping his gun aimed and his eyes on the tree and the rifle. He doubted she would go for it, but he needed to be ready just in case.

Keeping his rifle leveled and aimed, he walked slowly towards the tree. He found himself thinking of all the fun in store for him over the next few hours. The shot wouldn’t kill her for quite some time. If he was lucky, he would have time to apply a tourniquet, which could give him an extra day or two before she bled to death. That would be more than enough time to explore her body from head to toe. Just the thought of her strapped naked to the mattress in the attic, begging to be killed was enough to almost send him over the edge. A quick shake of his head brought him back to the moment. “Get a grip, Merle,” he whispered to himself, “plenty a time for all that.”

As he got closer he could hear the woman crying and babbling to herself. Shephard fired another shot next to the tree and heard the woman shriek in startled terror. “You know I’m coming for you, Sweetheart, don’t ya?” he whispered. The crying got louder as he approached. He could hear her voice clearly now. What was she saying? He paused to listen, his gun still leveled. Her crying and talking at the same time made it difficult for him to make out her words, which irritated him. Stupid women have no honor or dignity when it comes to dying. Then he heard her weak, whimpering voice repeating, “so much blood. So much blood. Oh God, so much blood!”

Shephard lowered his rifle and chuckled out loud. “Quit your cryin’,” he said adding with a wry smile, “tears are for the weak. Besides, Uncle Shephard hasn’t even begun to give you a good enough reason to cry.” He began walking at a leisurely pace towards the tree and the pathetic sobbing. When will women learn that this is, and always has been, a man’s world? He almost wished his hunting buddies in the Safari

Club could be here to witness this. Most of them had hunted more than just animals on at least one occasion, but he felt certain none of the boys had taken down anything so savory as this. He could still see the image of the fit young woman dashing across the yard towards the tree. It would almost be a shame to waste something so tasty. Almost.

With the volume and pitch of a circus master he bellowed, “Welcome to Shephard’s ranch, My Dear. Home of the cage kill. ‘Course you wasn’t caged, but I’m certainly willing to make an exception to the rules.” The anticipation was incredible, but he didn’t rush. Better to savor the moment. Slowly, he rounded the tree on the side where the rifle had fallen, saw the edge of the limp tan sleeve, and stopped to say, “I gotta tell you something, Sweet Thing, I’ve killed thousands of wild animals in my time, but I must say...” he paused. He was breathing heavy and sweating. He took one step closer. Just before he saw the sweatshirt was empty, he bragged, “I never enjoyed hunting this much!”

In one swift motion the barefooted woman stepped directly in front of Shephard, her sidearm pressed firmly against his forehead as she said with a coy smile, “Neither have I,” and pulled the trigger. A split second before the bullet blew a large hole in his skull, a single thought bolted through Merle Shephard’s incredulous mind, “There wasn’t a single tear in her eyes.”