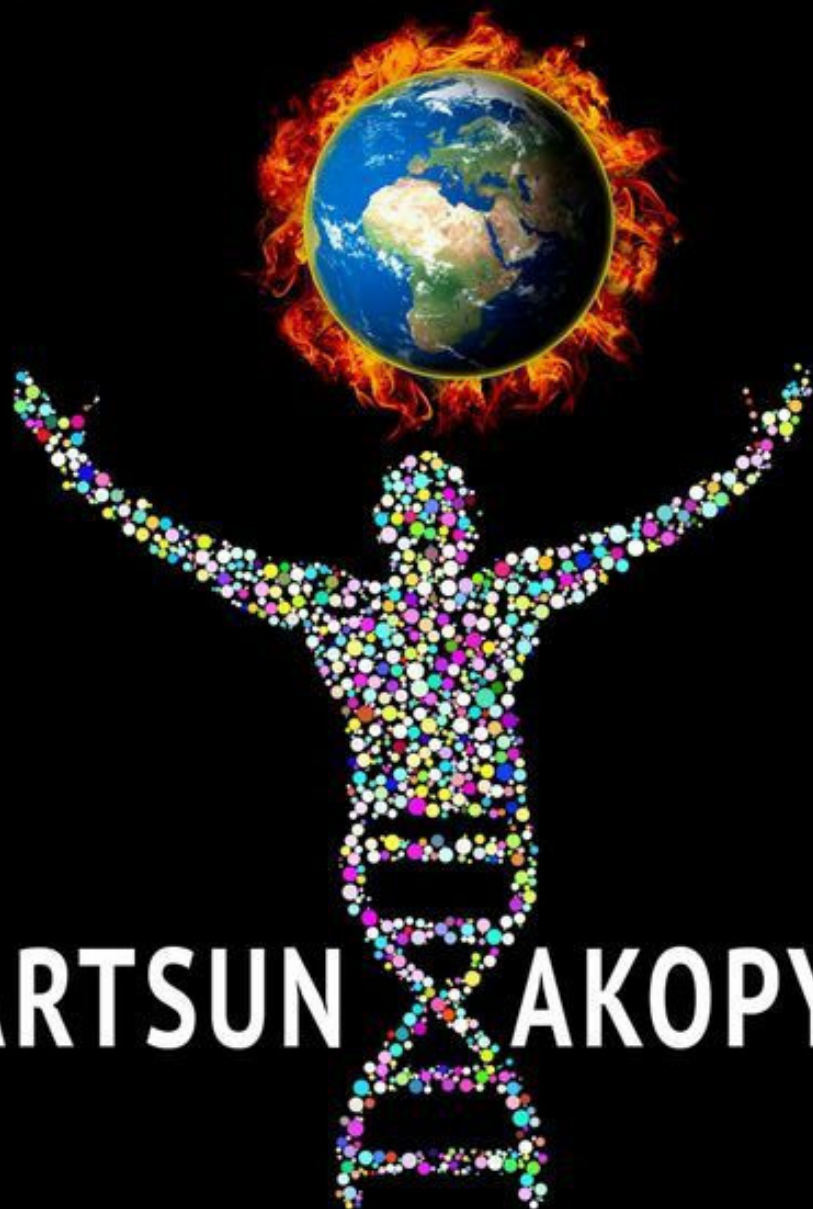


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# SURVIVAL GENE

*Science Fiction Novel*



ARTSUN AKOPYAN

Artsun Akopyan

**Survival Gene. Science Fiction Novel**

«Издательские решения»

**Акopyан А.**

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«Survival Gene» is a fast-moving science fiction action and adventure novel about the possible future of the human race in a devastated environment. The story idea is derived from the documentary «When the Earth Stops Spinning» (National Geographic). What would happen to us if life conditions changed for the worse drastically in the near future? Will the humanity become extinct like the dinosaurs? The answer is «No», if we keep fighting for life. But what will the price be? And what about love?

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# **Survival Gene**

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**Artsun Akopyan**

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## About the Book

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*The science fiction novel “Survival Gene” was first published by Double Dragon Publishing in Canada in 2015.*

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## **About the Author**

Artsun Akopyan is a writer and freelance translator based in Russia. He worked at a high school teaching Russian and at a university teaching English. His publications include books for English language learners, short stories and novels, translations of fiction and nonfiction books from English into Russian.

## Chapter 1

Lieutenant Andrew Barkov ran down a dark staircase to the basement of the food warehouse holding a pistol in his hand. A heavy metal door blocked his way with a red light on the magnetic card reader mounted on the wall next to it. The lieutenant took a universal police card out of his bullet-proof vest and placed it on the device. The red light changed to green. Having thrust the card back into the pocket, Barkov gripped the handle, his gun firm in his other hand, and pulled it.

In front of him there was a miraculous garden lit by myriads of light-emitting diode lamps. Bright, juicy peaches, apples, pineapples, bananas, melons, grapes – all of that growing on dwarf trees with dense crowns and thick trunks planted in holes in the concrete floor. The strong tang of sewage struck Andrew's nose.

There was no need for a laboratory analysis to see that these were genetically modified organisms. GMO. Direct evidence of criminal offense. Cultivation of such plants was prohibited by the World Government on all continents. The trees apparently were nourished by Miami feces supplied via the network of pipes under the ground. Use of sewage instead of soil was an aggravating circumstance. Mister Housman, the “product warehouse” owner, would do long time in prison for that in a high-security institution in the Colorado Desert or maybe in the north of Alaska. Those were the right places for such people. It remained only to find him.

*Where are you, bastard?*

Andrew moved forward slowly, his gun leading the way. The area was like half of a soccer field. There were hundreds of trees standing in an orderly manner. The criminal could have climbed any of them to hide in the crown. Andrew had no doubt that the man was nearby. Housman had slipped out of his office to the stairs as soon as the task force stormed into the warehouse. Andrew noticed him at the last moment and rushed after him.

The transmitter pinned onto the breast pocket of his vest squeaked.

“Lieutenant Barkov, where the hell are you?”

It was Captain Palmer. At the wrong time, as always.

“I'm downstairs,” Andrew answered in a low voice as he brought the transmitter closer to his lips. “I'm following the suspect.”

“I didn't give orders to go downstairs. Come back and receive my orders!”

*Palmer, you are an idiot.* Sometimes Andrew wanted to shout these words right in the captain's face. But such a pleasure would cost him the job. Palmer had no special sympathy for Andrew and would start hating him if insulted. Andrew had been thinking of quitting job for a long time, but what would he do after that? Catching criminals was the only thing he could do in his life. Nevertheless, he dreamed of a totally different career...

“Captain, I don't get you. Too much noise!”

Barkov turned off the transmitter and strained his ears. From childhood, he had had an ability to sense danger. And a quick reaction, which had helped him to avoid being beaten by anyone at school or under other circumstances later in his life. This time, according to his senses, there was no danger. Moving on, he reached the first row of trees. And stopped.

All of a sudden he went hot and cold all over. A terrifying vision appeared in his mind: his chest exploded, parts of his body flew in different directions, slapping against walls and hanging on branches...

Housman was going to discharge a rifle-attached under-barrel grenade launcher at him. The man was sitting in the tree in the last right row, and the barrel was already projecting from the foliage. Barkov was looking the other way, but he could see the criminal so clearly in his mind it was as if he had gotten into the man's brain. He even felt the cold of the trigger with his forefinger. Five more millimeters – and he would be dead.

Andrew's heart started beating like a sledge hammer. Muscles of his whole body strengthened as if struck by electric current. As soon as they relaxed, a shiver went up his back and neck. Arms and legs became light, almost weightless, and were filled with extraordinary strength. A fat fly floated before his eyes as it flapped its wings unhurriedly, as if it was a slow-motion movie. There was no time to admire it. Bending down, Andrew darted to the side.

The vision turned out to be true. A shot resounded. A grenade exploded on the spot where Barkov had just been standing. A hail of grenade splinters drummed on the wall, the floor and the nearest tree trunks. They didn't reach Andrew as he had already left the effective zone heading for Housman. This took him a second – or a second and a half at most. Stopping under the tree in which Housman was sitting, he drew the branches apart. Before the shooter knew that he had missed and the target was already standing next to him, Andrew delivered a blow to his stomach. Housman breathed out sharply, bent forward, dropped his weapon, and fell from the branch.

Andrew kicked away the rifle with his foot and pointed his gun at the small plump man with a bald spot who had rolled himself up into a ball on the floor.

“Lie on your stomach! Hands forward!”

Housman raised his head slowly as he rolled out. His grimace of pain slowly turned into the expression of astonishment.

“That's impossible. How did you do that?”

“I can run fast. Hands forward!”

The criminal lay on his stomach and stretched his arms. “Don't be so proud. You'll be finished soon anyway. All of us will be finished!”

Making sure that Housman didn't have other weapons, Barkov took handcuffs off his belt and slapped them on the criminal's wrists, and turned Housman around to face him.

“You're mistaken, Mister Housman. We'll live long and happy lives without your GMO.”

Suddenly a kind and likable smile appeared on Housman's round face. “Now it's the year 2060. Didn't you hear about the prophecy of the greatest scientist Isaac Newton? He scrutinized the Bible and estimated that the world would end in 2060!”

“You're mistaken again. For Newton, it would be the beginning of a new era. Don't try to frighten me – I don't believe in prophecies.”

“Don't you listen to the news? An asteroid is already flying toward the Earth! You will die, and me, and the whole of humankind too! Why don't you let me free and have fun in the last days? I'll give you three hundred thousand credits! In cash!”

“The asteroid will fly past us. And as for the bribery attempt, that just adds to the charges against you,” Andrew answered as he stepped back to the wall.

His heartbeat slowed down, his muscles relaxed. Legs and arms grew heavy and sluggish. He had a desire to sit down or even to lie down for a while. Probably his body was just trying to regain strength after an adrenaline rush.

He measured the distance he had just overcome by eye. Really, it was surprisingly long. He had never run thirty meters in a second and a half before. The reason was, of course, the stress level. It was the first time in his life that someone had pointed a grenade launcher at him!

“You're right, three hundred thousand is barely sufficient,” Housman smiled even wider as he rose to his feet. “I'll give you five hundred! Done?”

The pistol in Andrew's hand was becoming heavy as lead, his legs started trembling with strain. He felt as tired as if he had carried sacks full of sand all day long. He didn't dare collapse on the floor and drop the gun. No doubt the criminal would take advantage of it at once!

Sound of hurried footsteps came from the staircase. A few policemen barged into the premise. Lining up along the wall, they took aim at Housman. Captain Palmer was the last one to come in.

“I can see the suspect!” he announced with triumph pointing with his forefinger at Housman. “Officers, arrest this man!”

*He's already arrested, you fool,* Barkov thought.

However, he was glad to see the captain – for the first time in all the years he'd worked for him. Palmer looked at Barkov.

“Lieutenant, what are you doing here? You didn't hear my orders? That's a serious problem.” It seemed he was about to reprimand Barkov but suddenly he cocked his head and scowled. “We'll take the suspect and you go to the doctor to check your ear. Move!”

## Chapter 2

Andrew parked his Ford at a two-storied house buried in overgrown bushes and looked at the rear-view mirror. There was no “tail”. It meant that Palmer hadn’t sent people after him to check that he’d followed his order as he sometimes did. So much the better. They shouldn’t know where Andrew actually went – or why.

Barkov left the car. Instead of his police uniform, he now wore a light gray suit – trousers and a shirt with short sleeves made of pure linen. Off duty, he always wore civilian clothes.

Barkov looked around once again and headed to the house.

A few months ago he read an announcement in the Internet about services provided at this address. He decided to give it a try. The result had satisfied him. Since then, he came there every Friday, which helped him to relieve stress after a workweek. Andrew kept his new hobby a secret from everybody, even from his own mother. Otherwise, she would surely be upset and tell him something like, “Sonny, you should better get married instead of cherishing illusions! You’re thirty-three already, it’s time to have children!”

Already sensing the delightful aroma of jasmine, Barkov pushed the metal gate. He walked on a path paved with colored tiles to the entrance door and knocked three times. The lock clicked almost at once. The door opened. Before him stood a dark-haired blue-eyed girl with a slim figure in a close-fitting white suit. Andrew had never seen her before.

“Hello.” He was confused. “Who are you?”

She smiled. “Come in, Andrew. I’m waiting for you.”

She stepped back to let him in.

*A pretty girl*, Barkov thought as he entered a small foyer with black tiles on the floor and light-beige walls. *Is she the home owner’s relative?*

But it was tactless to ask such a question aloud. Dan Mortimer would introduce her himself if he wanted to.

Barkov stopped before the escalator. “Is Dan upstairs?”

“No, he had to leave for an urgent matter,” the girl answered as she locked the front door.

“Why? He doesn’t hold classes at the conservatory, does he? We agreed by mindphone... What’s happened?”

“Nothing, it’s no big deal, but he won’t be back for at least two hours. I’ll teach you today.”

At first, Andrew thought she was joking. “Are you a singing master?”

“Naturally. My name is Emily.”

Her facial expression was quite serious now. *She isn’t joking*. Obviously, she was Mister Mortimer’s colleague. It was strange that he hadn’t warned Andrew about the replacement.

“Nice to meet you. My name’s Andrew.”

“I know. Follow me.”

The girl pronounced words quickly and, as it seemed to Barkov, was a little nervous. *An inexperienced teacher, probably*.

Not turning onto the escalator, she began to go up the steps slowly, moving her hips from side to side with an unnaturally large swing. *Did she work as a model before this?*

On the second floor, in the biggest room, there was an ancient black piano and a brown leather sofa. The room had two windows, both of which were soundproof.

Usually Andrew rehearsed standing between the sofa and a window. Mortimer didn’t allow him to sit because “lungs work badly in such a position.”

“Sit down, please,” Emily offered, pointing at the sofa, and opened the piano cover as she curved her back with affected grace. “Let’s begin with a scale: do, re, mi, fa, sol.” She sat down on a swivel chair and started to poke her finger abruptly into keys starting for some reason with note

“la’ of the contra octave. Reaching “re’ of the small octave, she stopped and turned to Andrew. “You know what? Let’s become better acquainted with each other for a start. Are you married?”

The behavior of this damsel was strange at the very least. Did she like him so much that she lost the sense of propriety?

“No. I’m single.” A sudden thud was heard in Dan’s bedroom adjoining the study. “Who is there?”

“No one. A cat, I think. My God, it’s so hot in here!” She rose and unbuttoned her jacket, revealing her thin top fitting close to her round breasts with protruding nipples. “Why don’t we go down to the kitchen and drink some coffee?”

*What is going on?* he thought. Perhaps the girl was nutty. If so, why had Mortimer invited her? And since when did Mortimer have a cat?

“No, thank you. I’m tired. Think I’ll go home.”

The thud in the bedroom repeated, but this time it was louder.

Suddenly Barkov felt tingling in his stomach. It was a signal that a blow was going to be struck in that place. The threat emanated from Emily. Andrew felt it as clearly as the aroma of jasmine in the street a few minutes ago or the softness of the sofa he was sitting on. Muscles of his body strained involuntarily.

Wasn’t his sixth sense mistaken this time? There was not a hint of aggression in the girl’s facial expression.

Emily stood up slowly and went behind the piano as she threw off her jacket. Did she decide to undress completely?

Going around the instrument, she suddenly rushed towards Barkov. She had a pointed crowbar in her hands, which was targeted at Andrew’s stomach. It was easy for him to dodge. The bar ripped the upholstery open and stuck into the sofa back.

“Are you crazy?” he asked as he jumped two steps aside.

The girl pulled the weapon out from the back and pointed it at Andrew’s breast. “I will not let you lock my father up! Die!”

She made another attack.

Barkov bent his trunk to the right side letting the bar go past him. He snatched the weapon out of her hand and pushed her so that the girl flew over the back of the sofa and fell down on the floor with a crash.

“Who is your father?” he demanded as she was getting up.

“Eddy Housman,” the “teacher’ forced herself to speak holding her hip with her hand and grimacing with pain.

Andrew started to understand what was going on. “So Eddy Housman is your father?”

“Yes.” Her lips began to quiver, and tears welled into her eyes. “I beg you to testify that he’s innocent. That it wasn’t him who fired a shot at you. Except for you, there were no witnesses.”

“No. He will be put into prison – not only for the attempted murder, but also for cultivation and sales of GMO.”

“What’s the proof? Maybe he didn’t know what was going on in the cellar! Help us, please. He mustn’t go to prison – he’s suffering from radiculitis!”

Barkov bit his lower lip. He saw now this slight bit of a woman shuddered with not just pain from him tossing her but from an inner desperation. Her face had the pale anguish of worry over events beyond her control.

“Sorry,” he said, “I hope you’ve got good health. Because you will have to do time, too!”

“I’m not worried for myself. Release my father, please!”

“I’ll give you some advice. Next time, before asking something from someone, don’t try to thrust a crowbar into him.”

Rubbing tears on her cheeks, she started to sob loudly. “I tried to make friends with you, I even flirted with you, but you’re wooden. And I don’t have time. My father’s behind bars already. He must not be there!”

“Even if I stated that your father was innocent, the court wouldn’t believe me. Genetically modified organisms grow in his cellar. How could he be ignorant of that? Nonsense! And who fired a shot at me if not him?”

“Another man! Then he ran away out the emergency exit. Couldn’t you say that?”

“I couldn’t. That’s not true.” A thud resounded in the adjacent room. “Who is in the bedroom? My teacher?”

She nodded and hid her face in her palms. Her shoulders started to shudder.

He jumped over the sofa, grasped Emily’s hand and pulled her after himself. She didn’t resist.

Reaching the bedroom door, he opened it. Andrew saw his teacher, Dan Mortimer, an elderly thin man with the sparse gray hair, dressed in a housecoat and barefooted, lying on the floor near the bed. His arms and feet were tied, his mouth secured with an adhesive tape, and his neck was strapped up with a belt wound around a bed leg.

Seeing Andrew and Emily, the teacher rounded his eyes. “Hm-m-m!”

He banged on the floor with his feet. There was fear in his eyes. *Poor old man. He suffered because of me.*

“I’ll set you free, don’t worry,” Andrew said and pushed Emily forward so that she couldn’t escape while he untied the teacher.

All of a sudden he felt that his whole body became heavier. The bar slipped from his hand and fell on the parquet floor with rattle. It didn’t bounce but stuck to the parquet as if drawn up by a magnet. For a couple of seconds Andrew tried to keep his balance. Then he released Emily’s hand and dropped down on his knees. How could even a small stress like avoiding her attack and tossing her cause such a shameful weakness in him?! That hadn’t ever been the case before. *Am I good for nothing anymore?*

Instead of running away, Emily, too, fell on her side clumsily on the floor. Looking at Barkov with her tear-stained and horror-struck eyes, she croaked, “What’s wrong with me? Help!”

Unable to keep a vertical position even on his knees, Andrew propped up on his arms. His limbs, trunk, head – everything became too heavy. Muscles trembled from tension. Seeing that resistance was useless, he fell on his stomach.

Emily kept lying nearby. She was groaning as she tried to raise her arms alternately and dropping them at once. At last, she rolled over on her back and started to breathe through her open mouth noisily.

“Give me air! Air!”

Obviously, it was not a sham. Andrew had a feeling of suffocation, too. An unknown force squeezed his ribs so that they could hardly move apart for breathing. *My weakness from my exertion isn’t the problem. What is it then?*

The teacher bellowed again. “Hm-m-m!” His face had turned white and Andrew worried the man was about to suffocate between the unseen pressure around them and the tape over his mouth.

Barkov tried to crawl forward on his stomach. Making incredible efforts, he moved forward his right leg and left arm one by one. Then he dragged himself for a distance of a few centimeters and felt totally exhausted. His body was getting even heavier – as if it was covered with a heap of sand that was increasing quickly.

“Our numbers... are up,” Emily forced herself to speak making pauses to take breath. “Asteroid... I did not believe in it... Father did.”

In the distance a deep and echoing explosion sounded. The glass of the only window in the bedroom vibrated. It was impossible to understand what exploded – Andrew could only see the blue sky in the window from the floor.

“What did you not believe in?” Andrew asked. He heard only one version of the asteroid’s approach in the news: a large space object would fly by the planet not causing any harm.

“He said that the asteroid... will increase gravitation... and brake the Earth’s spin. I don’t wanna... die!”

Andrew had never paid attention to predictions of various insane scientists, astrologers and clairvoyants. They had already predicted death of mankind a million times. However, it might well be true that gravitation increase was the cause of what was happening to him, Mortimer and this girl now. What if the same force was affecting the whole city or even the whole world?

Suddenly the heavy weight was gone – the invisible sand that had covered him vanished into thin air. All three of them gulped huge intakes of air simultaneously. Barkov raised his head. Then he lifted his body leaning on his elbows. At last, he squatted.

Emily started to rise, too, wiping tears with her palms.

Pushing the crowbar with his foot to a corner of the room, Andrew jumped up and ran to the window. From there, he could see the neighbor’s house. Behind it, approximately a kilometer away, a column of dense black smoke was rising to the sky.

“Hm-m-m!”

Turning round, Barkov hurried to the teacher to untie him.

## Chapter 3

“She’s not a masseuse!” Dan Mortimer squealed as soon as Andrew took the tape off his mouth. “I did not call for her!”

Helping him to rise from the floor, Barkov looked at the girl. She was sitting on the floor looking at the window absent-mindedly.

“Why did you let her in then?” Andrew asked.

Dan set his housecoat straight and smoothed his thin hair with both hands. Then, casting his eyes down, he answered, “I even let her tie me up, old fool... She told me they had an advertising campaign – one hour of erotic massage for free. Liar!”

Emily didn’t react in any way to his words.

“Don’t worry, Dan,” Andrew said, keeping a smile from showing. “Now I’m going to take her to the police department. She won’t disturb you again. As for our lesson, we’ll schedule it for next week.”

Emily shifted her gaze to the men and said in a quiet but distinct voice, “There’s no point in scheduling. In a week you won’t exist anymore. Me either.”

“You’ll be behind bars,” Barkov promised. “Let’s go to the car. And don’t try to escape. You’ll fail!”

“I know. You’ve got outstanding responsiveness.” She looked at him, her eyes suspicious. “Were you born with it?”

“No. Many years of training.”

“Ahem! I don’t think so. I’ve heard something about the people like you... Anyway, it doesn’t matter anymore. I’m sorry for trying to kill you.” She turned to Mortimer. “Forgive me for deceiving you and tying you up.”

Mortimer asked, looking at Andrew, “Why does she say that we won’t exist in a week?”

“Her father told her that the asteroid would slow down the Earth.”

The teacher smirked. “Rubbish!” Then he cocked his head to Andrew. “Isn’t it?”

“Absolutely.” Barkov looked at the girl. “Move!”

She stood up in a defeated silence and went to the exit. This time her walk was even, without swaying her hips, her head high.

Barkov made her sit on the back seat of the vehicle, lifted a transparent partition and snapped locks on her doors so the girl couldn’t jump out on the road. Starting the engine, he drove smoothly from the empty street to the avenue crossing it.

He had to brake there at once. The road was blocked by a truck that had rammed into a small vehicle. The passenger car was crippled so much that it was impossible to determine its model. A pool of blood spread from under the heap of metal. There was nobody in the cab of the truck that was damaged just a little bit. Probably the truck driver ran away.

“Oh my God!” Emily exclaimed.

He glanced at the rearview mirror. The girl was looking at the deformed car with wide-open eyes, her hands touching her cheeks. Was she sorry for the unfortunate passengers of the small car? That was strange. She had just tried to kill a human herself!

Andrew turned on a handheld transceiver. “Dispatcher!”

A female voice answered, “Listening.”

“This is lieutenant Barkov, the northeast area. There is a car crash at the corner of the Seventy Fourth Street and the Eighth Avenue. Two vehicles. Probably there are victims. Send some officers here.”

“Lieutenant, are you joking?” the dispatcher uttered quickly. “A few officers because of only two vehicles in a collision? Tomorrow evening, not before. I’ve got thousands of calls. By the way, where have you been?”

“Don’t you know? You’ve got coordinates of all the police cars!”

“No. The satellite system has gone mad. According to the map you are now in the ocean, twenty kilometers from the coast.”

“No, I’m on land, here at the accident.”

“Naturally. Captain wants you to respond to a fight on the Forty Eighth Street – ”

Andrew interrupted her. “I’ve got a dangerous criminal in custody. I’m taking her to the central department.”

“Okay. Let me know when you’re done.”

Barkov leaped out of the car and went around the crashed car trying to peep inside. In vain. The metal was pressed so hard that it was impossible to see the car’s interior.

Andrew got back to his place at the steering wheel. He drove the car around the truck on the sidewalk with care and accelerated. *Thousands of calls. What’s happened in the city?*

The answer to this question became obvious as soon as his car got to Dixie Highway where there had always been busy traffic. Crooked, smoking vehicles were standing here and there along the highway. People scurried about between vehicles; many of them were stained with blood. Policemen, firefighters and medical officers were assisting lightly wounded people; seriously injured people were being stretchered off to ambulances. Sobbing and shouts were heard from everywhere.

*Gravitation. That’s the reason why the transport went out of control.*

Andrew slowed down as he maneuvered carefully between people and cars. A stadium appeared to the right at a distance of about two hundred meters from the highway. It was wrapped in a cloud of dust. People were running out all the three entrances and dispersing on the square before the stadium. Andrew had to stop again at the turn to the stadium to let a few ambulances pass by. At that moment two teenagers with faces covered with white and blue painted stripes – fans of a football team – came to the crossroads.

Looking out of the car window, Barkov shouted, “Hey, boys! What’s happened there?”

One of the guys, a short fellow with tousled hair, stopped on “zebra” in front of Andrew’s car and laughed hysterically, his eyes wide, looking right through Andrew. “A piece of the roof crashed down. Half of the players died. The referee was killed, too! It serves him right, because he denied a goal!”

The other teenager returned to his fellow fan, seized his hand and pulled the trembling and wild-eyed friend along.

*The guy is in a state of shock. He doesn’t understand what he’s saying.*

There was dense smoke on the road ahead – probably the smoke that could be seen from Mortimer’s bedroom. At first, it seemed to Andrew that a metro station located high above the earth on concrete supports was burning. Having come closer, he discerned that the source of the smoke was closer to the highway. A number of shops – or rather what remained of them – was on fire. The first three buildings were unroofed, the next five or six were destroyed almost to the foundation, and on the place of the last two, a fuselage of an airplane without wings was burning. On the cockpit, there was inscription “Boeing H-17”. Some fire-fighting crews stood along the highway, flooding the fire with foam.

Barkov had seen a report on this newest passenger liner just a few days ago. The apparatus was designed for three hundred passengers and was actuated by four hydrogen engines. He even remembered an enthusiastic phrase of the reporter: “Before your eyes, there is a non-polluting and absolutely safe wonder of engineering. Probability of an accident is equal to zero!”

*They had no chance. The plane fell from its own weight when the gravity increased.*

A ringing signal sounded.

“Listening,” Barkov said.

A laser screen flashed up over the dashboard. In it, there was a face of a woman of about sixty with short curly chestnut hair and big, kind gray eyes.

“Hi, little boy!” she said in a quiet voice. “How are you? Did you get hurt in the catastrophe?”

Andrew felt guilty. He should have called her first, right after the asteroid flew by. “No, Mom. How are you?”

“Everything is okay, don’t worry. Tell me, please, do they have you very busy?”

“Yes, they have. I’m at work now. Why?”

Nellie Barkov hesitated. Andrew noticed that she was in the cellar of her garage – there was a shelf with tools in the background.

“Could you come around... when you have some free time?”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, sonny. I am alive and kicking.”

“Mother, speak up! Why are you down there? And why are you whispering?”

“Well, I’ve just gone down. There are strangers up in the house. It seems, robbers. Don’t worry, I’ve locked myself up. They don’t even know that I’m here.”

“I’ll be there right away.”

It was just like his tactful mother to not want to give him trouble. Barkov instantly imagined big, strong rogues rushing into the cellar and beating her to find out where cash is hidden, even though she had none. She had some savings, but they were small and in a bank account. Would the bandits believe it? She had a good house in a prestigious area. Caches of diamonds are usually hidden in such places and somewhere behind a wardrobe there is a safe full of money – or so the robbers would assume.

*I must hurry up.*

Barkov made a U-turn and drove the car back. The tires squealed as he drove around obstacles making zigzags.

Emily knocked on the partition fiercely.

“It’s one-way traffic here! We’ll get smashed up!”

Andrew switched on the flashing lights and the audio alarm. The whole surface of the hood, roof and trunk began to sparkle like a New Year’s garland. Howling sounds floated from the loudspeakers.

The car careened about one and a half kilometers through the oncoming traffic lane. At the nearest intersection, Barkov turned to the road leading to the Pinecrest area where his mother lived.

Twenty-five minutes drive seemed to be like eternity. Terrible images flickered in his head. His mom pummeled mercilessly... covered with blood... dying trying to crawl out of the house...

At the turn to Montgomery Street, he switched off the alarm system. Robbers should be caught unawares instead of being warned about police arrival. Making two more turns, he saw the three coconut palm trees growing before his mother’s house. To the right and to the left of them, a narrow asphalted road formed a semicircle. As Andrew’s car approached one side, an old dark blue Cadillac turned out from the other side. It overturned a garbage can near the road, some black bags of garbage and a couple empty bottles of Coke fell out, and the car sped down the street.

Barkov made a mental snapshot of its number plate – “USW 116 F” – and turned to the house.

Nellie Barkov had a one-storied beautiful house with big windows, decorative columns on the facade and a tile roof. The garage adjoined the house at the left. Its door was closed, and before it, as always, there was a potted cactus. It meant that robbers had not opened the garage. However, the house’s front door was wide open. Having stopped the car at the door, Andrew rushed inside. “Mom!”

The house was in complete disorder: wardrobes and cabinets were open, the floor was covered with clothes, books, papers and broken vases. The unusual and unpleasant stink of beer and cigarettes filled the air. And dead silence.

Peeping in all the rooms, he ran through the living room and flung open the door leading to the garage. There were no changes in it. Mother’s white double mini-electromobile was in the center. Its rear bumper hung over a wooden hatch of the cellar. The hatch was shut tight.

Knocking on it with his knuckles, Andrew said loudly in Russian, “Mom! Are you there?”

The answer in the same language came from below, “Yes, sonny!”

The lock clicked. The cover started to open slowly.

Andrew helped Nellie up and embraced her.

“Thank God.” He shifted back to English. “How are you, Mom?”

“I’m OK. I heard such awful noises and clatter. They must have turned the house upside down, haven’t they?”

“Yes, they have. Don’t worry, I’ll find them. Did you see the faces?”

“Yes, I did. Fearful ones. At first they broke into the neighbor’s house; I saw them out my window. I tried to call the police, but couldn’t get through. Then they headed here. I hid and called you. I hope they didn’t break the vase your father had presented me for my birthday!”

Andrew had only a vague memory of his father. George Barkov was killed in a battle against separatists in the north of Russia when Andrew was five years old. But he knew very well what vase mother was worried about. It was an elegant Chinese porcelain with a high narrow neck that had always stood on a shelf in her bedroom.

She hurried to the bedroom and stared at fragments of the vase scattered on the floor. “They broke it!”

Andrew tried to soothe her. “Mom, we’ll glue it together.”

Nellie objected, “No. To glue porcelain is a bad sign.” She looked round. “And where’s my wooden box?”

Andrew walked around and examined the room. “They must have taken it. Was there anything valuable in it?”

“Nothing but your father’s signet ring.”

Andrew remembered this ring. It was a stylish thing made of platinum and decorated with the Capricorn image – his father’s zodiacal sign.

“Mom, don’t be upset, I’ll do my best to find those swines and get the ring back. I know how important it is to you. All the memories it brings...”

“The memories of him are here,” she touched her forehead with her finger. “Losing the vase and the ring is not the worst thing. Before the robbers came, I was watching the e-vision. There was terrible news from all over the world. Did you see?” As she talked, they walked toward the living room; the e-vision was still on, just as she’d left it. An ancient holographic video emitter with big old-fashioned loudspeakers hung on a wall, safe and sound. Apparently it had not gained the burglars interest – it cost no more than five credits at a flea market. The sound was down but semitransparent images of destruction floated in front of the emitter.

“No. But I saw what has happened in our city. Car crashes on roads. The stadium roof broke down. And an airplane fell on a residential neighborhood.”

Nellie lowered her voice. “All airplanes fell that had been in the air. Ships sank... Whole fleets did... And even satellites fell from the near-earth orbit, two of them with astronauts on board! Nothing like that has happened before. In a few minutes, they are guessing that more people were killed than in the Unification War... Thank God distant satellites remained, otherwise I wouldn’t be able to contact you!”

Her eyes filled with tears. Andrew touched her shoulder. “But we are alive. And we will live!”

“The main thing is that *you* are alive. As for me, it’s high time...”

“Don’t talk bosh, mother!”

“Never mind.” Her eyes went to the e-vision image as a news bulletin flashed a message. “Look! Now the President is going to make a statement. Shall we listen together? But,” she looked at him with worried eyes, “you must be in a hurry?”

Barkov could turn on the e-vision in his car, but he didn't want to leave his mother alone right after the burglary. He knew every police officer was needed on duty right now, but this was his mother and she came first to him. *I must make sure that she's OK.*

He looked at the window. His car was still standing near the house. Emily was sitting on the back seat. She had no chance to escape from there. The locks could only be opened by the electronics from the driver's seat that she couldn't reach because of the durable partition. It wasn't possible to open the car from the outside either. The doors would not "listen" to anybody except the owner – Andrew had setup the system so that it was convenient for him to transport arrestees.

"I'll stay. Let's listen to what the President has to say. Besides, I'll help you do the rooms."

Nellie turned up the volume by force of her brain, but there was no voice, just interim music. The text "Special Statement of the President of the World" appeared in the air. There was a countdown timer under the text.

"Two minutes before the speech!" Nellie exclaimed as she sat down on the sofa wiping her tears. The images became a little more rich and natural – she must have increased opacity and contrast to the maximum level that the emitter could support.

Her son started to put the scattered things back into cabinets.

"Don't do it, son, sit down, take a rest," she urged. "I'll do it later by myself. Half of the junk should be thrown away. Thanks to burglars – without them, I wouldn't do it in a hundred years!"

*She's trying to joke. That's good.*

"As you wish."

He sat down beside her.

A gray-haired person with slanting eyes and prominent cheekbones appeared in the air. It was CHENG Wenming, the second President of the United States of the World. Contrary to his usual habit, there was not a shadow of a smile on his face.

"Dear friends," he started slowly in a dull voice. "I have bad news for you today. The asteroid that had been considered harmless, brought a disaster. Flying past the Earth, it multiplied the gravitation of our planet. It is estimated that about thirty million people were killed within just a few minutes around the world. We mourn the dead. It's our common pain." Lowering his head, the president froze for a few seconds and then looked at the camera again. "But the trials and tribulations have not finished yet. The asteroid caused deceleration of the planet. Its rotation on its axis has started to slow down. As a result, the earth day has already become five minutes longer. And, although the asteroid stopped exerting influence on the planet, the deceleration process continues. Most likely, the cause is the Earth's core. According to scientists from the International Academy of Science, the metal core of the Earth is rotating slower than the mantle and the crust. It is an abnormal phenomenon. There is friction in the bowels of the Earth. It has become a cause of earthquakes and volcanic explosions in different parts of the world already. Seismic activity does not cease, but, on the contrary, increases. Scientists prognosticate that this process will last for some more days – until the rotation speed of the core, the mantle and the crust are synchronized again. I'll tell you the truth: we'll have to go through difficult times. It is possible that it will be more dreadful than all the world wars taken together. In such circumstances I am compelled to declare the state of world-wide emergency. All strategic objects will be under protection. All those in need will get help. Relevant instructions have been delivered to the World Government. Take courage – nobody will be left alone to fight against the elements. Together we will overcome these difficulties. I promise!"

The President pronounced the last words with confidence, raising his voice.

An image of the rotating planet appeared with the inscription: "Current earthday: 24 hours 05 minutes 28 seconds". In a short time digit "28" was replaced by "29", then by "30", "31"...

Designation of the time scaled down and moved to the right top corner, and the rest of the image was occupied by a mountain scenery with a magnificent waterfall and birds flitting over it. Flute sounds were heard, the media's obvious attempt to placate the frightened masses.

“That’s terrible,” Nellie Barkov whispered.

Andrew took her by the hand and repeated CHENG Wenming’s words, “Together we will overcome difficulties. I promise!”

Unexpectedly Emily’s voice came from behind, “In what way, I wonder?”

## Chapter 4

Andrew jumped up. Emily was standing in the doorway.

“Forgive me for the intrusion; I’m not armed.” She lifted her arms and turned, hands in the air, spreading fingers wide apart.

“Is she your girlfriend?” Nellie Barkov asked as she rose from the sofa with a smile. “What’s your name, darling?”

“Mom, she’s a criminal I’ve arrested,” Andrew stated.

“That’s a pity. She’s pretty!”

*If only you knew what this ‘pretty’ person tried to do!*

He headed to Emily slowly. “How could you open the car?”

The girl smiled. “I have extraordinary abilities too. I can feel electronics.”

“Genetic transformation?”

“Yeah.”

“No wonder, considering who your father is. It means that’s one more charge that will be laid against him and you – concealment of genetic deviations. You should have a special mark on your nose bridge. Get back into the car!”

She held up her palms. “Just a minute! Your nose bridge is clear, too. Why don’t you have the mark?”

“I don’t need it. I am a Normal.” Andrew glared at her, his pulse racing. Only Deviants required the mark.

“Really? When was your DNA tested?”

“In my childhood, just like everybody’s.”

“In that case, I’d say somebody substituted the results. Am I right?” The girl looked at his mother.

Nellie frowned. “Why do you think, young lady, that my son has genetic deviations?”

“His reflexes are fast. Too fast. Probably he hasn’t gotten a single wound in all the years of police service, has he?”

“You’ve guessed right,” Andrew answered. “But deviations are not the reason. I’ve been training since my childhood.”

*Dammit, why am I making excuses?*

Emily looked at him. “In my opinion, you feel threats in advance, and training has nothing to do with it.” She shifted her gaze to Nellie. “Your son should know the truth because his life will depend on it. President CHENG Wenming is lying when he says nobody will be left alone to fight the elements! The government officials are preparing a secret asylum for themselves because they know no one will survive on the surface.”

“How do you know?”

“I’ve just overheard a conversation between the Director of the Secret Service Novak and a general. I’m sure the President is aware of what’s going on!”

*Is she crazy?*

Barkov grasped the girl’s arm. “Go to the car!”

“Andrew, wait!” his mother exclaimed suddenly in a harsh tone.

He turned his head to her in bewilderment. “What’s the matter?”

Nellie asked the girl, “What’s your name?”

“Emily.”

“And your surname?”

“Housman.”

His mother's eyes widened. "I see. And how could you overhear the conversation between the Director and the general?"

"I've told you, I have special abilities. I can tune to any electromagnetic waves. E-vision, mindphones, the Internet... This time the sound reached me from above. I think that the general flew over our city by plane, that's why I could hear them so well."

"What a load of bull!" Andrew said.

"No," Nellie retorted. "Scientists from BioTech had made successful experiments with rats for them to react to electromagnetic signals."

Emily nodded. "That's how I knew about my father's fate. I heard the transmissions between you and your captain. Then I read your appointment calendar on your mindphone and went to your lesson ahead of time so I could find some way to make you release my father."

Nellie made a gesture to her son. "Let's talk in private. I want to tell you something."

After a short hesitation, Andrew released the girl's hand. "Wait here."

He followed his mother. She approached the farthest window and stared at a bush of roses growing in front of the house. At last, she took Andrew's hand and said quietly, "This girl might not be lying. I don't want to see my son dying. I'll tell you everything."

"What do you mean, Mom?"

"I took part in the BioTech Corporation tests. My genetic code was changed."

Andrew could scarcely believe his ears. For several years, he had been searching for criminals using BioTech technologies while his mother had participated in the corporation program! That was impossible!

As if reading his thoughts, she whispered, "I did it before I met your father. I was young and silly. They promised that when I got married and delivered a baby, it would be better fitted to life... And they paid good money for that. The harm of BioTech products was not well known then. The Corporation boasted its charity. It helped orphans, built schools, hospitals... I didn't know it would lead to problems or that GMO people would be shunned, marked as outcasts!"

She stopped talking as she stared at the roses again. He was keeping silence, too, trying to digest the information. Nellie gave a deep sigh and continued even quieter – so that he could barely make out the words with difficulty. "Son, I am a GMO. A genetically modified organism. You are a GMO, too. Later on, I thought that I'd made a mistake. So when your DNA was tested, I swapped the results. But now... I'm not sure that it was a mistake. It has kept you safe all these years as a policeman."

Barkov was shocked with her confession more than with the news about the next "end of the world". He had always considered himself to be an ordinary guy – a Normal. There seemed to be nothing special in his good reaction – it was like an ability of other people to waggle their ears or to reach the tip of their nose with their tongue. He'd just been grateful to be fast enough to evade harm in a job that was dangerous every day. He'd thought it was luck and training, but now... *Is my mother a criminal? Does this mean I should not have children? That I can't work in the police? That I'm a Deviant and a criminal myself? No! She has to be wrong.*

"It's not possible to swap the test results. Every lab has a protection system."

"It was not so good then. I was lucky."

"Why didn't you tell me before?"

"I wanted you to lead a normal life, not in a reservation for freaks. Will you forgive me?"

Nellie looked at her son with pleading eyes. His heart withered.

Yes, she was a criminal. She delivered a son knowing about her genetic deviations. For that, she could be sentenced to 20-year imprisonment. And substitution of the test results could yield imprisonment for life.

*I must not allow that.*

Andrew embraced her, trying to look calm. "Mom, don't worry. I don't blame you."

“Thank God! Prison is not the worst thing. I was afraid that you wouldn’t forgive me. Let others condemn me, but not you! Don’t tell anybody anything, son. If the disaster doesn’t happen, you can keep working in the police just as before.”

Andrew still didn’t believe in the near doomsday, but his career was *already* finished. How could he catch lawbreakers knowing that he was an offender himself? *It’s high time for me to change professions anyway.* Suddenly a thought crossed his mind, even though it seemed far-fetched: *I’ll try to get a job as a singer at a restaurant!*

Barkov had loved music from his childhood. He remembered from his mother’s stories that he had inherited it from his father. George used to sing Russian folk songs often, especially in a local group that played at festivities. But that was just a hobby. Neither he nor his son had outstanding voice qualities.

“I’ll quit anyway. And I’ll find another job.”

At that moment, Barkov realized he’d pronounced the last phrase too loudly. But it was too late.

“Another job?” Emily asked. “So, am I right? You’ve got modified genes?”

Andrew turned to the girl. She was looking at him with a provocative smile, her head up. Of course, he was not obliged to answer her. She was under arrest and he was still a policeman. But what if Emily started to ask the same questions during the court proceedings? What if the judge scheduled an expert examination?

“It’s none of your business,” he gave a brusque answer.

The smile disappeared from her face. “Really? The charge against my father has been put forward based on your words. There are no more witnesses. Maybe it was not him who fired a shot at you from the grenade launcher but someone else who you failed to catch!”

Nellie Barkov moaned in terror. “Grenade launcher?”

Emily continued. “Our attorney will claim that you accused an innocent man! Your oath will be void because you are a GMO.”

There was nothing to say against that. As soon as the court had the expert results, Andrew would turn from a policeman to a suspect himself and a criminal as well. Besides, expert examination of his mother’s DNA would be scheduled for sure, which he could never allow.

“What do you want?” he asked gloomily.

“You must free my father immediately,” Emily answered quickly.

“That’s impossible. He’s already at the pre-trial prison. I don’t have a right to take him out of there.”

“To the devil with the right! You have *speed!*”

“It’s easier to kill you,” he growled. “When there’s no person, there’s no problem.”

The girl turned pale and stepped back.

Suddenly Andrew realized that her blackmail threat had really been a great risk on Emily’s part. If he was a bad man at heart, he could send her into eternity without a second thought. It was a convenient moment; with so many people killed by the current disasters there would be no thorough investigation, if any at all.

“Don’t be scared, I’m joking. Let’s sit down and talk.”

The girl headed to the sofa glancing at Andrew with caution.

Her footsteps made the floor shake. Barkov was surprised. She seemed to be a slender girl. How could she tramp like a hippopotamus?

She stopped. The floor began to shake even harder. Hollow rumbles came from everywhere. Finally Andrew guessed what was happening.

“Earthquake!” he exclaimed. “Out, quickly!”

Emily turned around and rushed to the door. Taking his mother’s arm, Barkov followed the girl.

They crossed the front yard and stopped in the middle of the empty road. The rumble turned into a roar as though freight trains were coming from all quarters. Crowns of trees growing along the

road were tossed about. Window glasses vibrated. A young woman holding the hands of two small kids ran out of the adjacent house. Some more people poured out of distant buildings.

Andrew felt the asphalt under his feet flex like an inflatable mattress and begin to wave. Women's and children's screams supplemented with car alarms split the air.

A crack appeared in the road a few steps away. Snaking and widening, it spread to the house opposite his mother's. A fountain of water rushed out of the crack – probably the pipeline laid along the road underground had broken.

All of that continued for a few seconds. Then the shaking and rattling stopped as suddenly as they had started. The crack stopped widening, but water kept gushing out of it flooding the road and the green lawn before the nearest house.

Barkov looked at Nellie and Emily. His mother was standing, her teeth clenched, and looking around while Emily's mouth was wide open.

He tugged at her arm. "Stop shouting!"

She closed her mouth and looked at Barkov in bewilderment as if he had just dropped from the moon. It became quieter at once. Gradually, neighbors' yells subsided, too.

Barkov looked over at his mother's house. It seemed to have no damages. There was not a single crack on the façade. That was luck!

Andrew knew from school that earthquakes could be caused by movement of tectonic plates at their joints or by eruption of volcanoes. But neither had ever happened in Miami. Why was it the case now?

Nellie Barkov answered his unvoiced question, "If the Earth core has slowed down, and the crust continues to spin with its own speed, friction arises between them. That part of what President Cheng said was true. I've worked as a land surveyor at construction sites and know about subsoil, and the geologic changes we're seeing now are consistent with what I've learned. Earthquakes will happen everywhere. Even where they have never been."

"You see, I was right!" Emily blurted out with untimely joy. "The world is collapsing!"

Andrew recognized her outburst – he'd seen it before in victims who are so traumatized that they laughed at something that had no humor.

"Yes," Nellie confirmed. "Most probably, yes."

Emily turned her attention to Nellie. "Bring your son to reason then. Let him release my father! Don't you understand that otherwise I'll never see him again? Show compassion!"

Nellie stared at the girl and replied after a pause, "I'm sorry that your father is an offender. I'm sorry for you, too. And for all other people. However, most of all I'm worried about my son's fate. Do you understand that, Emily?"

The girl lowered her head and said in a dismal voice, "Sure."

Nellie continued. "Therefore, I'm going to ask him to act not for you, your father or someone else but for himself," she turned her eyes to her son. "Andrew, free her father, please!"

Andrew thought he misheard her. "What?"

Nellie looked around her. Neighbors didn't pay any attention to them. The young woman's children were crying and she was trying to calm them as she took them back to their house. The others were so far that they would not be able to catch her words.

His mother talked in a subdued voice looking him straight in the eye, "Son, the situation couldn't be worse. The processes in the earth's crust alone can kill the whole of humankind. We'll also face problems with the air, oceans, solar radiation. We live on our planet like in a test tube, in very comfortable but delicate conditions. If there's a minor shake-up, our number's up. If what Emily overheard is true, the government officials are trying to escape to a refuge. They won't let you or me in. But there is another way. I've heard about her father." She cast a glance at Emily who was listening to her intently. "Many years ago Housman worked at BioTech. He was a promising young scientist, wrote articles... If you help him, he might help you. Tell your bosses that he's innocent!"

“What are you talking about, Mom? How could he help me?”

“He’ll change your genome. He’ll make you... a superman.”

Andrew laughed. “Will he crossbreed me with a tarantula? Mom, it’s not time for jokes now!”

She took his hand. “I’m serious. No crossbreeds – that’s too primitive. BioTech has been around for a long time, and underground laboratories exist, and they continue their work.”

Andrew shook his head. “It’s not that simple to find them. You know quite well that a whole security department tries to find their location, but without much success.”

“That’s the point! That’s why you need Housman. He has relevant ties for sure,” Nellie shot an inquiring glance at Emily. “Doesn’t he?”

The girl nodded.

His mother’s words boggled Andrew’s mind. They contradicted all his views of genetic engineering. This science was the cause of terrifying mutations that happened to people all over the world. It could lead humankind to destruction.

“Mom, do you realize what you are saying? BioTech has already tried to create a superman. Don’t you remember the results? Gills and chicken wings on newborns, wool at puberty, sterility in the second generation! Is that salvation?”

“They hurried too much at BioTech,” Nellie objected. “They needed profits. They committed a crime not by intention but by their experiments on people without calculating all the consequences. Hopefully science has made great advance since then. This is our only chance.”

“Yes,” Emily interjected. “They have continued their research, but slowly, carefully and made great strides. I’m sure my father can help you. Help us all.”

His mother’s words seemed to be logical. Maybe Emily was right too, although he suspected she’d say anything to be with her father again. Of course, it would be better to change than to die. But how real was the threat? President CHENG Wenming promised them all problems would be solved. Arrestee Emily Housman asserted that the President lied. Who to believe?

*I must know exactly if the refuge for the government is being built. If yes, things are really in a bad way.*

“Mom, go back home, lock up and call me at once if a Cadillac with those guys shows up, okay?”

“Yes, my boy.”

He kissed his mother and made for his vehicle. “Emily, get in the car.”

“Where are we going?”

“You’ll find out soon.”

## Chapter 5

There was more free space on Dixie Highway now. A portion of wrecked vehicles has been removed from the road, the rest stood on the right-hand shoulder. Driving at the maximum possible speed, Barkov passed the airplane crash location in just ten minutes. The fire had already been put out, but the plane hull and remains of the buildings it had struck were still smoking.

At the crossroads right after the metro station, he turned to Rickenbacker Causeway. To the right of the road, stood the stone fence of the Alice Wainwright Park; behind it stretched a solid wall of leaf-bearing trees. Residential skyscrapers dominated on the left. Ahead of them a bright shield with the inscription “Welcome to Biscayne Key Island Paradise” stood conspicuously on the green grass in front of the central mall.

“Already to paradise? Isn’t it too early?” Emily said darkly.

Glancing at the rear-view mirror, Andrew realized that he had broken protocol by forgetting to raise the partition. But that was a mere trifle compared to what he was going to do on the island.

“A smart aleck lives in this ‘paradise’. It’s necessary that we convince him that we act on behalf of the World Government.”

“Why?”

“He’s able to procure any kind of information. If what you said about the asylum proves to be true, I’ll try to help your father.”

“Hurrah!” the girl yelled.

Giving a start of surprise, Andrew glanced at the mirror again. Emily’s eyes were shining with joy.

*This girl is very emotional. It’s easier to understand such people, but it’s harder to control them.*

They were approaching the Rickenbacker Causeway toll plaza. In fact, it was not one causeway but two, connected sequentially with bridges. The road led to a small island, Virginia Key. From there, one could get to Biscayne Key via another bridge.

No less than a hundred vehicles accumulated before the toll plaza. It had never happened within Andrew’s memory. It was not difficult to guess the reason. The automatic toll system was down because of the gravitation leap, so drivers had to pay the old-fashioned way with credit cards and cash. Andrew drove his car to booth number three between concrete guard rails as the queue was a bit smaller there.

Music drifted from a nearby car. A well-known Italian singer was belting out a song about unhappy love. *A happy man, singing his heart out like that. What a strong and beautiful voice he has! I’ll never have one, even if Mortimer coached me day and night.*

Unintentionally, Barkov started to tap with his fingers on the steering wheel in time to the music. Suddenly his heartbeat sped up, and an unpleasant tingling started in his right temple. A distinct image appeared before his eyes. An off-road beige colored Lexus... A young man in the back seat... Black curly hair, a hooked nose... A leather holster with a Beretta pistol in it... Long, thin fingers touch the plastic fastener on the holster...

In a moment, the image disappeared. Andrew’s heartbeat slowed down gradually.

Andrew knew what it meant: someone had wanted to put a bullet in Andrew’s temple, but had suddenly changed his mind or was just distracted.

Barkov turned his head right. In the queue leading to booth number two there was a beige Lexus, exactly the same as Andrew had just envisioned. A middle-aged blond fat man was sitting at the wheel and a curly headed young man with the hooked nose was in the backseat. Both of them were looking to another side. There was evident tension in their posture.

*Who are they? Why did that guy want to shoot at me?*

“What’s wrong?” Emily asked and exclaimed in surprise as she traced Andrew’s eyes, “Oh! They’re here too.”

“Your accomplices?” Barkov inquired thinking about what to do – flee or attack.

“No. Just employees of the security department of the company my father delivers... delivered vegetables to. Do you know them?”

“Not in the least. But they seem to know me.”

He couldn’t attack first. There were too many people around who could be wounded. Besides, how would he prove in court that he had acted in self-defense? The vision he had in his head would not be taken into account! In fact, revealing it could only draw questions about whether he was genetically modified.

He looked around. Vehicles were packed in solid rows. It was impossible to jump the queue, even if he turned on the police siren. It was also impossible to turn around.

Suddenly he noticed that a gap appeared in the adjacent row: some cars moved forward, but the next driver lingered. Andrew turned the wheel to the left, pressed the accelerator and slid into the vacant place.

An indignant signal resounded from the back. Ignoring it, Barkov cast a glance to the right. The queue closed up there, and a shield in the form of a minibus appeared between him and the potential killer.

“What is this maneuver for?” Emily said.

“I’m saving my skin. One of those boys wants me dead.”

“I don’t think so. Those are ordinary guards! Probably they’re going to the beach.”

“To wash off the blood?”

Watching the Lexus from the corner of his eye, Barkov drove the car into the narrow passage between guard rails up toward the toll booth. The possibility of maneuvering was lost, but Andrew felt no threat in his head anymore. Probably the curly headed man decided not to attack in such an inconvenient and populous place.

The cars were moving forward slowly. Finally, his Ford reached the open booth window. Taking a banknote from his pocket, Andrew held it out to the officer in an orange waistcoat. The officer, fumbling with more cash than he normally encountered in a month, started to look for the right change, and Andrew quickly said, “Keep the change.”

A green color lit up at the exit for him. Slightly touching the accelerator pedal with his foot, Barkov squinted to the right. The Lexus was still in the queue – there were two cars before it. So, Andrew had a minute head start or a bit more on the guys. *Can I escape within that time?*

He glanced over at a wide bridge in the distance. Apparently, wreckers had not reached it yet. There were about fifteen warped cars on it. Some of them were blocking traffic lanes. He would have to maneuver between them at low speed. It would be hard to escape that way. Besides, there was no place to hide in the process. Two small islands loomed ahead, Virginia Key and Biscayne Key, with no shelter for the car on either. After Biscayne Key, there was only the ocean. If the criminal started to shoot on the move, Emily could get hit. Andrew had to prevent that. He was responsible for those he arrested, but he also had to admit that he needed her to see this through. Her abilities could come in handy in saving them both. And, as much as he didn’t want to admit it, he found her attractive.

“Why are you driving so slowly?” the girl asked.

Barkov looked around. His Ford had not entered the bridge yet. To the left of the road, there was a parking lot. A commercial truck with a semitrailer loaded with a caterpillar bulldozer screened a part of it. The semitrailer was flat on the asphalt, its torn off wheels nearby. Probably the axes had not been able to bear the sharp increase of the load when the gravitation changed.

*The semitrailer and the bulldozer might be an excellent shelter.*

Barkov turned to the parking lot. “Stay in the car. I’ll be back soon.”

“Where are you going?”

“To stretch my legs.”

He parked the car behind the truck so that it would be impossible to fire at it from the road. A holster with his Colt was in the glove compartment. Opening the compartment, he took out the gun, thrust it under his belt in front and got out of the car. The truck’s cab was empty. Going around it, Andrew stopped with his back to the road and made a show of examining one of the broken wheels. He could be seen from the road quite well as he was standing in an open place lit by sunrays. The heat of the rays was so strong that he felt it on his skin under the shirt.

He didn’t wait long. Shivers ran down his neck and spine as if a cold wind bit him. Blood hammered in his temples. The Lexus appeared in his mind’s eye. The passenger was holding the plastic butt of the Beretta with two hands, his finger was hardly touching the metal trigger. The man was looking at Barkov through the open window hesitating between whether to shoot at the back of his head or the middle of his spine. The Lexus braked smoothly. Andrew kept on standing motionless. The killer chose the base of the skull to finish his work with one shoot. He rose the pistol and took aim.

As soon as the muscles of his forefinger started to contract and the trigger started moving, Barkov swung aside. The criminal didn’t have time to correct his sight. A shot rang out. The bullet flew past Andrew’s head and twanged on the metal bulldozer cab.

*Now I have the right to defend myself in every way.*

Andrew fell onto the asphalt and rolled sideways.

The killer moved the barrel and took aim again.

Barkov stopped sharply and rolled to the other side. The second bullet hit the asphalt and ricocheted into the bulldozer caterpillar.

Andrew’s movements were not as fast as when he arrested Housman. The new opponent had time to trace his movements. *Is heat influencing me? Or maybe I’m not scared enough?*

The man started shooting faster and with less concentration. Obviously, he was nervous. There was no need to dodge the next two bullets as they flew high and hit the semitrailer platform. Two others would have pierced Andrew’s leg, but he moved away and took up a position for shooting.

*He has spent six cartridges. So, nine more are left.*

It was not a pleasure to jump like a monkey under fire, but Andrew didn’t want to kill the bastard. His training required avoiding killing unless absolutely necessary. A slight wound would be enough to disable him. However, it wasn’t clear what to aim at. Andrew could only see the guard’s head and the hand holding the pistol.

*I must only scare him.*

Barkov leveled his Colt at the lowered door glass and pulled the trigger. The bullet shattered the upper edge of the glass. Fragments flew into the man’s face. He jerked back and hid behind the door. *Very well!*

Now it was possible for Andrew to reach the Lexus in a few jumps shooting above the criminal’s head, and making a hole in his leg or hand. Or, if it worked, Andrew could just take his pistol away, pull him out of the car and tie him up.

Barkov jumped up to execute his plan, but a new danger struck his senses. [2] A soviet assault weapon, a Kalashnikov, its barrel cut off, lay on a seat... Another man eyed Andrew... A plump hand removed the safety lock and racked the slide...

*The Lexus driver! He’s also going to open fire!*

However, this time it wasn’t clear how to escape the bullets. The fat and sweaty fair-haired man sitting at the wheel was not going to level his gun to put Andrew in his sights; he just wanted to press the trigger and to pour lead as if it wasn’t a Kalashnikov at all but a hose for watering a lawn. Andrew’s chances to stay unhurt were close to zero. He didn’t know where bullets would fly because the shooter himself didn’t know that.

Andrew knew he had no choice: *I’ll have to kill him.*

As soon as the man lifted the gun from the right-hand seat and put it out of the window, Andrew fired a shot. The driver yelled. He dropped the gun and caught his hand as he beat his forehead repeatedly against the wheel, roaring with pain.

Barkov didn't have time to rejoice at such a successful hit. The curly head and the pistol appeared above the back door. Andrew realized that bullets would fly into his stomach in half a second as the killer had already turned his Beretta into the automatic mode.

It was a mortal threat. No acrobatic tricks would save him in this situation.

Barkov aimed his gun at the enemy in one short, precise movement and discharged. The bullet exploded into the man's left eye. Bloody liquid splashed on his face. Death was instant. The body fell on the seat.

Andrew aimed his Colt at the driver. "Get out of the car!"

Without a glance, the driver raised his head, grasped the wheel with his bloody hands, and the Lexus rushed forward. Just before the bridge, the car turned left, its tires squealing, onto the last entrance of the parking lot. It caught on bumpers of several parked cars with its side, crossed the lot and turned at full speed to the road leading back to the city. A taxi moving in the same direction managed to brake in time and let it go.

Barkov lowered his gun and looked about. Not a single car was moving towards the islands. Lots of them were concentrated at the toll plaza as the barriers were now closed. The cars seemed to be empty. One by one, curious heads started to emerge above front panels and seat backs.

Andrew took his badge out of his pocket and raised it above his head. "Everything is all right! I'm a policeman!"

He put the badge back and directed his steps to his Ford. It was necessary to leave immediately before his colleagues arrived. All investigations could be conducted later.

Emily came out from behind the truck. Her eyes sparkled with amazement as she spoke, but her voice came to him in an unnatural, slow way, "I saw everything. That is, I have never seen anything like that! How did you do it? Like in the movie!"

Barkov shouted back, "What the hell are you doing out here?"

Her face expressed surprise. "What? Speak slower, I don't get you!"

*I'm still not all there*, he realized. He took a long breath, then trying to prolong each sound, he pronounced slower, "I told you to stay in the car! Why the heck are you here? Did you want to get a bullet?"

She started. "What for?"

"A bullet not from me, but from them. Get back!"

She turned back to the car and sat on the backseat in silence.

Sitting down at the steering wheel, Barkov felt sudden fatigue and weakness. *Here it is again. I've got to do something.*

He recalled that he had bought a cola recently. There was caffeine in it, so it had to help.

"Take a cola can out of the backseat pocket, please."

"Where?"

"Behind me."

Although Andrew didn't try to prolong sounds anymore, Emily understood him. It meant that his adrenaline-rushed metabolism had started to "brake".

The girl handed him the can. Barkov held it in his hand with difficulty. It seemed to him the can weighed about ten kilograms. He put the can on his knee and pulled the ring. To his surprise, the ring did not unclasp. Andrew didn't have enough strength! He tried once again, to no avail.

He didn't want to confess to the girl that he couldn't do it.

"You open, please. It might splatter over the controls."

Emily took the cola, and in a second there was "Click"!

Taking the can back, Andrew raised it with both hands and took a few gulps. The liquid reached his stomach quickly. The can seemed to be lighter at once. He continued drinking, feeling an increase of strength with each gulp. *It's amazing how fast the caffeine works!*

Finishing the cola, Barkov squeezed the can with one hand and dropped it onto the right seat. He felt neither weakness nor sleepiness anymore. *Now I'm ready.*

He started up his Ford and drove to the road.

Bypassing broken cars, Andrew ignored them. He had the curly-headed man in his eye at the moment. It was the first human being Andrew had killed in his life. An unpleasant gnawing at his gut had spread through him. In the past, he had managed to take criminals alive, wounded at times, yes, but alive nonetheless. He should have guessed that the driver could also take part in the encounter. He shouldn't have been so sure in his fast reactions.

*Cocksure idiot! I'd had a clear view of them both. I should have figured it out and disabled him before I was forced to kill him! Or found a safer vantage point to start the attack and avoided this altogether.*

He remembered that there was a park at Virginia Key that skirted the road. If Andrew and Emily had hidden among the trees, the criminals would have had to follow them on foot. It would have been easier to injure them either in a leg or an arm.

"Damn!" he exclaimed as he banged his fist on the wheel.

"What's wrong?" Emily asked with caution.

"I hate this job. I should have quit long ago. Did you know that those people were going to attack me?"

The girl rounded her eyes. "Me? How?"

"You said you knew them. According to you, they were ordinary guards from a vegetable company."

"I just saw them a couple of times when I went there with my father. They stood at the entrance and opened doors for us!"

Emily's tone was convincing, but he knew she couldn't be trusted. It was possible that she had known about the attempt on Andrew's life or even ordered it herself.

*I'll sort it out later. Now I must solve a more important problem.*

They entered the wide causeway of the Virginia Key island.

Occupied with his own thoughts, Barkov didn't pay attention to the familiar surroundings – sand beaches to the right and the harbor to the left.

"Good heavens! The boats are lying alongside!" Emily exclaimed suddenly.

"So what? Haven't you seen a marina before?"

"They are lying literally! On the soil!"

Barkov looked left. At the location where the smooth blue-green water surface had been seen before, there were bumps of slimy sea bottom covered with algae. The harbor had turned into something like a swamp. Snow-white boats stuck in it, tilted and resting on each other like a pile of beached sea creatures.

Andrew cast a glance to Biscayne Bay on the right, the other shore identified by dim contours of Miami skyscrapers. The width of the nearby beaches had increased noticeably – from usual fifteen meters to two hundred or even more. *Oh my, is that the low tide? It has never been like that before!*

"I know what's happening!" Emily exclaimed even louder now. "When water pulls away from shore like this, it's the first sign of tsunami. We must go somewhere higher – now! Drive faster, please!"

Andrew's skin prickled – she was right. Before a tsunami, water recedes far from the shore making the seabed visible. Earthquakes are often the cause of that. Now they faced two signs of an oncoming disaster.

"Computer!" Barkov pronounced loudly.

A semitransparent screen flared up above the gauge panel and a pleasant female voice replied, “I’m listening.”

“Is a tsunami possible in the Miami region?”

“Unfortunately, the forecast is unavailable at the moment. Repeat your request later.”

It meant that the connection with the central server was broken.

After waiting for a couple of seconds in expectation of further commands, the screen finally went out.

“To go somewhere higher’ on Virginia Key and Biscayne Key wasn’t possible. Both islands were absolutely flat. The tsunami wave height could be a few dozen meters, so the only chances to survive would be on the top floors of high-rise buildings. There was no such construction on Virginia Key, but there was one on Biscayne Key. It was the 70-floor condominium where the man that Andrew was going to visit lived.

Barkov pressed the pedal harder, hoping he could make it in time.

## Chapter 6

In the center of a multi-colored flowerbed surrounded by manicured green bushes there was a stone plate with inscription *White Reef Condominium*. Bypassing the flower bed, Barkov stopped the car under a portico with columns in the form of sea horses and had a look around. This place gave a clear view of the ocean. The water was quiet to the very horizon.

*It seems we still have some time.*

Andrew turned off the engine and looked at Emily.

“We’ve arrived. Listen to me carefully. We need a man whose name is Lippo Lorenzetti. He’s a hacker. He lives in the penthouse. His job is rendering services to various companies, namely hacking their computer systems.”

“Why do they need such services?” Emily expressed surprise.

“To search for vulnerabilities. He steals commercial secrets of a customer and then explains to the customer how he has done it. They then pay him to improve their security. The government hires him for that too. Washington needs to ensure the protection of the President’s secret data. In our case, Lippo’s task will be getting the data and delivering it to us. You’ll pretend to be a secret agent. And your name is... say, Rosalinda.”

Emily frowned. “No way!”

“Why? Are you scared of the consequences? Our lives are at stake here, you know.”

“I don’t like the name Rosalinda. Katherine is better.”

Andrew shook his head. *We’re facing death from an asteroid, tsunamis, assassins and the government’s secret plans, and she objects to a name!* “As you wish. Only I will talk. Your task is to accompany me. Keep silent and nod. No initiatives, no ideas, no disputes. Is it clear, *Katherine?*”

She pressed her lips and nodded in silence.

Barkov fastened the holster to his belt, thrust in the gun and left the car. A young parking valet was already standing near the door with an affected smile on his face. Giving him the Ford keys, Andrew made his way to the entrance. Emily followed him.

Looking back at the ocean once again and making sure that its surface was still quiet, Barkov entered the door.

The spacious hall of the condominium was stylized like the seabed. The floor was carpeted with a thick pile rug that resembled algae with decorative crabs, starfish and shellfish scattered on it in an artistic order. Tables in the form of closed shells surrounded with chairs resembling open shells were situated on the perimeter of the hall. Only one table was occupied by a young man and a woman who were conversing quietly. In the center of the hall there was the bridge of an ancient ship with a large wooden steering wheel in the middle. To all appearances, it was a concierge counter. However, there was no concierge at the moment.

“How beautiful!” Emily exclaimed as she gazed around. “And the air is cool here. It seems as if we dived into the ocean!”

“If the tsunami strikes, we’ll dive actually.” Andrew went to the doors with the inscription “Elevator Lobby”.

Andrew wanted to find the concierge and to warn him or her about the possible disaster and necessity to evacuate people. But what if the pending disaster would be caused not by a tsunami? The water might have receded from the shore for another reason. What if people should instead be concerned about another powerful earthquake, not a giant wave? In this case, they had to run *away* from buildings instead of climbing them.

*Let seismologists and rescuers think of it. I’ve got another task to resolve.*

The elevator lobby door opened and a concierge dressed in a black suit with a mindphone on his lapel came out.

“Can I help you?” he asked courteously looking at Barkov’s holster.

Andrew showed him the badge. “Lieutenant Andrew Barkov. We need to go up to Mr. Lorenzetti’s place.”

“Just a minute.” His mindphone clinked, which meant it had established a connection with a certain apartment that the concierge had chosen mentally. “Hello!” said the man distinctly. “Is this Mister Lippo Lorenzetti?”

Barkov knew little about Lippo Lorenzetti. According to stories from other policemen who investigated cyber-crimes, Lippo was a genius. In his youth, he spent a short time in prison for breaking a bank network. Since then, all his activity had been legal. Working for large commercial and state companies, he found vulnerabilities practically in any system. Sometimes the police used his services when it was necessary to find some prominent illegal hackers. At that, Lippo led a covert life. Andrew had never met him in person and hadn’t even seen his photo. He only knew where Lorenzetti resided – also from colleagues’ stories.

“Hello!” the concierge continued. “Glad to hear you, Rosalinda.” Hearing the name, Andrew and Emily exchanged glances. “Is Lippo home? Very well. I’m sorry to trouble you, there are visitors here, police lieutenant Andrew Barkov and a lady.” Covering the mindphone with his hand, he said to Andrew, “Mr. Lorenzetti’s assistant asks about the purpose of your visit.”

Andrew said, “We have a special order for him.”

The concierge transmitted his words and, listening to the answer, looked at his watch.

“I don’t think our business can wait for fifteen minutes,” Emily said suddenly.

The man stared at her, frowning. “How do you know what she told me?”

The girl smiled. “I have a sensitive ear.”

The concierge still frowned, then listened to his earpiece and said, “Rosalinda says you can go up now,” and pointed with his thumb over his shoulder. “Please proceed to Mr. Lorenzetti’s elevator. It’s the last one on the right. Unfortunately, you can’t go to the penthouse by the stairs as there is no way. Only by the elevator.”

Barkov was surprised. “Who would go to the seventieth floor on foot?”

The man hesitated. “Probably you don’t know yet... Half of our elevators crashed because of the asteroid. Nine people were killed. Many dwellers prefer to go on foot now. Don’t be scared, Mr. Lorenzetti’s elevator is the most reliable one. It is light, armored, safe. By the way, they will ask you to remove your gun before entering the apartment.”

“Sorry, buddy. I’m a cop!”

The man shrugged his shoulders. “You can refuse, of course. It’s up to you. Have a good trip!”

Andrew and Emily directed their steps to the elevator lobby across a wide blue-colored corridor with the succession of white elevator doors whose outlines resembled sails of ancient ships. Some of them were closed up with striped red and yellow sticky tape crosswise over the doors.

“It’s a real nightmare. Nine people!” Emily muttered.

“Yes, among millions of others. Billions are in jeopardy, I’m afraid. Why did you interfere in my conversation with the concierge? We had an agreement that you would keep silent!”

“Yes, at the hacker’s place. We had no agreement concerning the concierge, did we?”

“Okay. There’s one more thing. If you can hear electromagnetic waves, it is not necessary to boast about it to everybody.”

“I didn’t mean to. I got worried, since we don’t have time to wait around. Besides, the guy had no clue. He believed that I simply had a good ear.”

They approached the last elevator on the right. Entering it, Andrew saw a console with just two buttons, “Up’ and “Down’. He pressed the “Up’ button. The doors closed, but the elevator didn’t move. A female voice came from above, “Attention. An armed passenger. Weapon model: Colt. Type of ammunition: service cartridges. Please deposit your weapon for the period of your visit.”

The same text in capital black letters ran from left to right on the white wall of the elevator at eye level. A massive box without locks or handles slid out from under the push-button panel. It was so deep that it could accommodate a dozen pistols.

Probably an intellectual scanner was installed in the elevator, just like at some important government sites. Lorenzetti must have spent quite a lot of money to ensure his safety!

“I’m a policeman!” Barkov announced as he took out his badge and showed it to the camera in the ceiling. “You have no right to request my weapon!”

A few seconds later, the doors opened. The female voice announced, “The armed passenger, you have thirty seconds to leave the elevator or to deposit the weapon. Otherwise, the doors will be blocked until guards and an attorney arrive.”

The text version of the same statement appeared on the wall. Then bright red digits started to flash there. 30, 29, 28... Each digit was accompanied by a loud beep.

“Damn!” Barkov mumbled.

He had neither the authority nor the desire to give his gun away for storage to other people, let alone to put it into a box in an elevator. But meeting Lorenzetti was absolutely essential. He was the only one Andrew had heard of who could get hold of top-secret information.

Pulling the gun out of the holster, Barkov put it into the box. The countdown stopped at once and the box slid into the wall.

“Thank you for cooperation,” the female voice became kindly. “Welcome, dear guests!”

The doors closed and the elevator started. Its movement was so smooth that it was not clear if they were going up or down.

Emily neared Andrew and whispered in his ear, “I’ve heard the signal supplied to the box for it to open and the signal to start the elevator!”

*Boasting again. What a strange mania!*

“Congratulations,” Barkov replied in low voice. “But I know about your abilities. I don’t need you to remind of them constantly.”

“You don’t understand. I can send the same signal to open the box. I can transmit signals as well as read them. You can take the gun, and I’ll re-start the elevator!”

It was an interesting idea. Andrew didn’t know who would meet their “dear guests” at the top or what the reception might be. It could happen that the weapon might prove useful. However, if Andrew took the gun again, Lorenzetti might panic and escape. It was possible that the hacker had provided for some other safeguards for himself besides the elevator blockade.

“No. Don’t do anything.”

“Are you sure?”

Barkov nodded. His senses would alert him if danger awaited them. Then again, what had the concierge said about the elevator? “It is light, armored, safe.” Safe for who? Maybe it could block out his sense of danger too.

About ten seconds passed. The elevator stopped and the doors opened. Andrew saw a multi-colored flowerbed lit with the sun’s rays and surrounded with precision cut green bushes. *Have they sent us down instead of up?*

Leaving the elevator, he saw that they were in the penthouse. Sunshine filtered through the windows occupying all the space from the floor to the ceiling and through the glass roof. Around the bed on the marble floor there were some sofas and chairs made of light bamboo. The opposite wall was decorated with flowers in bamboo pots. Tightly closed compartment doors also trimmed with bamboo were located in the wall opposite the elevator. On each side there were two trolleys with trays filled with fruit and berries – apples, pears, peaches, strawberry and grapes.

“Let’s go back downstairs!” Emily exclaimed, her voice tight, forced.

Barkov looked back. She huddled in a corner of the elevator.

“Why?”

“I don’t feel well. This room is stuffed with electronics!”

Andrew grinned. “Electronics? It looks like a garden to me? It’s nice!”

The girl didn’t answer. She turned her gaze past Andrew.

Turning around, he saw a middle-aged woman. She was a short stout blonde with blue eyes and pink round cheeks, dressed in a multilayered green dress reaching down to her ankles, and wearing white moccasins. She had just entered through sliding bamboo doors, behind which Andrew could see what appeared to be an empty room; she went to the visitors quickly. There was radiant smile on her face. The doors closed automatically behind her.

“Welcome! I’m Rosalinda. You must be lieutenant Andrew Barkov. What’s your lady’s name?”

“Emi...,” Andrew almost blurted out the real girl’s name. “Her name’s Katherine.”

“Katherine, dear, why are you standing in the elevator? Come in, please, we don’t have savage dogs here!”

Saying that, Rosalinda gave a ringing laugh.

Barkov looked at Emily. She stayed in the elevator looking at the blonde cautiously.

“I’ve got it!” Rosalinda exclaimed. “Are you allergic to primroses? Or narcissuses? Poor girl! My cousin has the same problem. It’s okay, we’ll fix it.”

The woman took a mini remote control out of the folds of her dress and directed it at the flowerbed. The ground with flowers and bushes lowered and disappeared.

“What to replace them with?” the plump and ever smiling assistant continued. “We don’t want to see this hole in the floor, do we? A fountain will fit best, right?”

She pushed a button. It was strange that she used buttons instead of mind commands.

Soon instead of the flower bed there was a structure in the form of several bowls of successively decreasing sizes, fastened to a thin rod. The bowls resembled water lilies. A stream of water spurted from the top, the smallest one. Falling back, it soon overflowed and started filling the next bowl. Then the next.

Andrew turned toward Emily, speaking quietly. “Yes, there are electronics. But I don’t sense any danger.”

She sighed and got out of the elevator.

Rosalinda sat down on the left part of the nearest sofa. “Take a seat.”

Unlike Emily, Barkov felt no danger. Besides, Rosalinda seemed to be a nice, kind and absolutely harmless woman.

Emily sat down on the other part of the sofa and Andrew in the middle of it.

“I enjoy watching flowing water. And you?” Rosalinda said, then got down to business without waiting for an answer. “So, you want to see my boss. May I ask you why?”

“I... We would like to talk to him about it in person,” Barkov answered.

Rosalinda giggled. “You can’t. He’s chewing food now. He doesn’t talk when he chews. Besides, I’m his personal secretary and decide myself whether to admit strangers to him. If they seem to be dangerous, I show them the door.”

Barkov smiled. “Aren’t you afraid of dangerous people yourself?”

“A little bit. But I will always have time to shout ‘Danger!’.”

She really shouted the last word. At the same moment Andrew felt burning all over his head as if it burst into flame. He jumped up, grabbed his hands to his head trying to extinguish the invisible flame.

Emily did the same, crying out.

“Cancel!” Rosalinda commanded loudly.

The burning stopped.

Andrew and Emily stood, gaping at each other.

“What’s wrong with my face?” the girl asked, her shaking hands running over her cheeks.

Her skin was as white and smooth as before.

“Nothing.”

“Don’t worry, it was just a warning!” Rosalinda declared joyfully as she dangled her legs. “I forgot to warn you: if someone does me any harm, the system will burn them automatically. Microwave radiation, you know. Just like in a microwave oven! There are sensors and emitters all over this place. But you have nothing to worry about – you are good people, I can see that in your eyes. Well, will you tell me the purpose of your visit now or go back to the elevator?”

Andrew was amazed. The protection system she had used was quite advanced as it could discern people, otherwise Rosalinda herself would have suffered as well. Obviously the emitters were focused. But the biggest wonder was that he had not felt danger before it happened. *Why? I’ve always sensed if someone meant me harm before...* And then it hit him. It meant that Rosalinda didn’t even give a thought to causing him pain.

*She is more dangerous to me than any killer!*

Barkov sat down back on his place. “All right. I’ll tell you. Katherine,” he pointed at Emily with his forefinger, “is a representative of the President’s Secret Service. She has a job offer for Mr. Lorenzetti. He is being asked to find vulnerabilities in the President’s private communications system. That is, we need to see if he can obtain secret documents about the building of an asylum for the World Government and give them to me as a proof. The payment will be one hundred and fifty thousand credits in cash.”

That was exactly the sum on Barkov’s bank account – everything he had collected during his years with the police, intended for the purchase of a new house.

“How interesting!” Rosalinda shouted joyfully, clapping her hands. “Katherine, do you have a document proving that you are the representative of the President’s Secret Service?”

“Of course not,” Barkov scoffed. “She fulfills a secret mission and can’t have any documents with her. But I have my police badge.” He showed it.

“I already saw this when you showed it in the elevator. I’d like to receive evidence that Katherine is not a trickster. We can’t risk our reputation!”

“Being a public officer, I can confirm her credentials. I was called in by the President himself to escort her personally on this mission. Do you think I would risk my career without taking precautions?”

After a pause Rosalinda shook her head. “No, I don’t think so. Why do you talk all the time? The only words she’s said were ‘what’s wrong with my face!’”

“She is afraid of eavesdropping. The presidential elections are next year. The opposition might use a recording to link the administration with hackers.” He raised an eyebrow. “Neither you nor the President want that, right?”

“Certainly not!” Rosalinda confirmed with enthusiasm as she rose and went to the bamboo doors. “Neither we nor the President. Please stay here, I’ll talk to Lippo. Maybe he has finished eating. By the way, help yourself if you are hungry, too.”

She directed the remote control at a trolley at an entrance, and it moved to the sofa where Andrew and Emily were sitting.

## Chapter 7

Rosalinda left and the trolley stopped right opposite the sofa.

Barkov's stomach growled at the sight of food. He recalled that all he had this morning was just a cup of coffee and a piece of a sweet roll. There simply had been nothing else in the kitchen. He lived alone in a small one-story house in the north of Miami and often forgot to restock his kitchen.

The fruit and berries lying on the tray looked appetizing, although in some of them there were wormholes. It was a good sign – a proof of the absence of GMO. Worms could live in only natural crops!

Barkov took a large peach and sank his teeth into its fleshy tissue with delight. Chewing, he stood up and went to a window.

As before, the ocean seemed to be calm. The flat surface glittering in the sunlight – and no signs of a tsunami. Perhaps things were not that bad?

Bringing his forehead closer to the window glass, he looked down at the beach. It was about half a kilometer wide. Most of the surface was covered with dark green algae. It meant that water continued receding. Where to? Was there a crack in the earth's crust? Was water going into it? Hardly. Deep in the planet, there couldn't be any hollow space. There was high pressure inside. In case of a large fracture, movement would have started in the opposite direction – from within to the surface. That is, it would have burst out as a volcano. Or even a supervolcano such as Yellowstone. In that case, the consequences would be as devastating as a world-wide nuclear war.

*Good Lord preserve us!*

Terrified by his own thought, Andrew turned to Emily. She was eating grapes, plucking them one by one and looking at the fountain with concentration.

*She has pretty fingers*, Barkov noted to himself. Finishing the peach, he returned to the trolley, put the kernel on the edge of the tray and nipped off a few grapes.

It dawned on him that he would prefer to live in such a penthouse as opposed to owning the two-storied house he had been dreaming of for a long time. In the morning he would get up from bed and admire the bird's-eye view of the ocean. The city, people, cars, problems – everything would seem to be small. It would be nice if his beloved one was there, too. *Will I meet my other half one day? Or the world will collapse first?*

The bamboo doors moved apart, and Rosalinda came out. This time she stopped three steps away from the doors that were left open. The woman's lips stretched into a wide smile.

"Mr. Lorenzetti decided not to take your job offer," she proclaimed. "Please walk out of the apartment."

Barkov choked down grapes. "What? Why?"

"Katherine's identity is not confirmed. Her real name is Emily Housman. You lied to us. But Lippo will not call the police. He doesn't want a scandal. Besides that, he won't charge you for the eaten fruit."

She raised her hand and pressed a remote control button. The elevator door opened. Andrew thought, *She uses buttons on her remote control for security reasons – she doesn't want the signal to be intercepted by an intruder's device and duplicated at a distance!*

"But... how did you find out her name?" he asked trying to think of how to explain away the deception, but seeing no solid arguments.

"Have you forgotten who he is? Even if you had brought a girl from Mars, he would have uncovered her identity. Farewell!"

Andrew realized that his mission had failed. The best solution in this situation was to go out without making a fuss and to try to obtain the information about the government's plans another way.

“Have a nice day!” he said trying to keep his composure and giving the sign to Emily to follow him as he walked to the elevator.

“I won’t go anywhere,” Emily uttered in a quiet, but firm voice.

Barkov stopped and turned back. The girl was sitting and still eating grapes.

“Oh, the beauty can speak!” Rosalinda showed a not very sincere surprise.

“Emily, we’ve agreed that I make the decisions,” Andrew said. “Get up, we are leaving!”

“No. Your plan has failed, so the agreement is void. Now it’s my turn.”

It was clear from her tone that she was not going to give in. *Should I drag her by force?*

“Dear Katherine... I mean, Emily,” Rosalinda cooed. “If you don’t leave this premise right now, I’ll turn on our cutting-edge microwave system. I wonder how long you will endure. In fifteen seconds, water will start boiling under your skin. In thirty seconds, blisters will appear. In a minute, your skin will be charred. I start countdown. Ten... nine... eight...”

The girl continued eating grapes as if nothing were wrong.

Pausing between digits longer and longer, Rosalinda kept counting. “Seven... six... five... four... three... two...”

This time, unlike the demonstration earlier, a tingling of danger penetrated Andrew’s spine. But he had no visions of the source or the target. No rush of energy to counteract it. He knew he should act yet how?

“...one... Well, you have only yourself to blame! Zero!” She shouted the next word, “Danger!”

Barkov felt no burning. Strangely enough, Emily didn’t show any signs of pain either. Moreover, she continued to chew the grapes, taking seeds out of her mouth and putting them on the tray near the peach kernel. Her fingertips, however, were trembling noticeably. *That’s a sign of excitement, not pain.*

“Are you not hot?” Rosalinda asked with genuine astonishment.

The girl shook her head and looked at the elevator. Its doors closed.

Rosalinda’s eyebrows flung up. She directed the remote control at the elevator and pushed the button several times. The doors jerked, but did not move apart.

“That’s weird,” she mumbled examining the control from all sides. “It must have broken down.”

“Bad quality?” Emily guessed as she stopped chewing.

Rosalinda uttered a short shriek. The remote control slipped from her hands, her eyes widened. Freezing for a couple seconds, she suddenly turned around and rushed to the bamboo doors. The doors drew together in her face. The woman seized the handle with both hands and tried to move a door panel. She was not a successful. Seizing the other handle, she pushed it to the opposite side bracing with her whole body. The door was motionless.

“Lippo!” she yelled as she clutched her head in hands. “It’s burning! It’s burning me!”

“That’s strange. You said *I* would be charred,” Emily observed.

It came to Andrew what was going on: The girl had “heard” how electronics worked on the premises and intercepted control. It meant her brain was able to emit electromagnetic impulses as strong as the remote control lying on the floor at the moment. He’d sensed danger earlier, yes, but the danger hadn’t been targeted at him. Whether it was from Rosalinda feeling angry at Emily’s response or from Emily’s intention to get rid of the assistant, he didn’t know.

“Stop it!” he commanded. “You’ll kill her!”

Emily pretended to be surprised. “Me? I have nothing to do with it! Don’t you see that it’s a problem with their system?”

Rosalinda ran clumsily to the fountain, jumped into the lower bowl and tried to hide under water. The container proved to be too shallow for her plump body. No matter how she sprawled and clasped to the bottom, water covered less than half of her. The naked parts – forearms, ankles, neck, face – started to redden.

“The madam lied to us,” Emily continued. “Thirty seconds have passed, but there are no blisters. Perhaps she’s thick-skinned? All right, it doesn’t matter. It seems to me, the system has just switched off. She’s so lucky!”

Spinning twice more and snorting, Rosalinda stopped in her tracks as she raised her head above the water level and waited. A bit later she sat up. Wiping her face with her palms and pushing her hair back, she looked about. Her face expressed nothing but terror.

The elevator doors opened.

“Flee now! As fast as you can!” Emily advised.

Rosalinda flew out of the fountain like a ballistic missile from a submarine and ran to the elevator. Wet clothes stuck to her body and instead of concealing her rolls of fat they now accentuated them. Entering the elevator, the woman hit the button a few times desperately. The doors shut. A faint buzz of the elevator going down was heard.

A moment later the bamboo doors drew apart without noise.

“I guess everything’s working fine now,” Emily stood up and looked at Barkov with a pleased smile. “Shall we start looking for the hacker?”

A part of Andrew knew that Emily should be reprimanded. She was still under arrest and should have executed his orders – after all he was still a public officer! On the other hand, he was not like his boss Palmer who hated any initiatives of his subordinates.

*I have to admit the girl did well. She’s smart. And she achieved her aim!*

“Let’s go.”

They made their way to the open doors, but a tall, lean man of about fifty came out before them. He wore a black suit, a white shirt and black shining shoes. His dark blonde hair was slicked back and the tips of his neat thin mustache were bent up. He stood in the doorway, raised his hands slowly and clapped several times. “Bravo, Emily Housman! Bravo! You are a real godsend. I’m ready to hire you. How much do you want a year?”

“Who are you?” Barkov asked.

“The one you’re looking for. Let me introduce myself: Lippo Lorenzetti, a computer technology expert.”

He bowed courteously.

In appearance, he was a typical dandy of the end of the nineteenth – the beginning of the twentieth century. Andrew had expected to see someone totally different – a person in creased jeans and a shirt worn outside the jeans, twenty years younger at that.

“Glad to meet you. My name is – ”

“Andrew, I know your name. I studied your file while your companion played with my poor assistant.” A shadow of a smile flitted across his face. “It must be admitted that I had been thinking about replacing her for a long time. She’s been eating too many sweets lately. Hopefully you, Emily, eat carefully to control your weight! But this is not the main point. I would be very interested in a person who can control electronics by force of her thought. How do you do that? I’ve never seen anything like that in my life!”

The girl tried to object. “Me? I can’t control any electronics. Why do you think – ”

“Don’t lie to me!” Lippo interrupted her in a calm and self-confident way. “I have equipment all around, as you mentioned rightly in the very beginning. The sensors detected the signal coming from you. It was quite strong! Haven’t you tried to light up lamps? For a fraction of a second at least?”

She shook her head.

“That’s okay!” Lorenzetti continued. “I’m not interested in lamps. We are not performing in a circus after all. On the contrary, our task is to stay in the shade. When you, dear Emily, start working with me, I’ll explain the rules to you in detail. Will six hundred thousand credits a year be sufficient for you?”

The girl’s eyes dilated. “Six hundred thousand? Legally?”

“Yes. Absolutely legally.”

“Of course it will!” She took a squint at Andrew for a second. “Well, on condition that we fulfill our mission first, that I’ll be free and the planet will not freeze or melt in the meantime. What will I have to do?”

“I’ll explain later. So, once again: do you accept?”

“Yes!”

“Excellent. In this case, my friends, let’s get down to your problem first. You were interested in some secret documents, weren’t you? Something about a refuge for the government?”

“Yes,” answered Andrew.

“What for?”

“I want to find out if the President told the truth about consequences of the planet’s core braking.”

“To what end?”

“To know what future awaits us. And to get ready.”

Lorenzetti laughed again. “To know the future? Do you think the President or any other mortal beings know God’s ways? And how can you get ready for what you have no idea about? My opinion is as follows: if the planet is fated to destruction, it will be destroyed. I’ll give you a simpler example: if you are fated to get smashed up in a road accident, you won’t drown in a swamp! Do you think you are able to change the march of time?”

If Andrew hadn’t known who he was talking to, he would have decided that this was an orthodox priest.

“I’m willing to try.”

The hacker laughed haughtily. “I pity you, but I won’t impose my opinion on you. One day you will realize your fundamental mistake. Follow me!”

Going through the open doors, he stopped in the middle of the next room. This room was twice as small. There were no windows in it, but it was lit up brightly by built-in lamps on the ceiling.

“This is my home office,” Lorenzetti said proudly as he spread his arms. “No sounds penetrate here from outside. An ideal place for work, isn’t it?”

Barkov glanced back. The doors shut behind them. This side of them seemed to be made of a white material equal to the material of the walls. No gap shown between the door panels. Were it not for a pair of metal door handles, one could have thought that the wall itself closed.

*Is it a trap?*

“A strange office,” Andrew said trying not to manifest his uneasiness. “Where are the tables and chairs?”

“I don’t use them as I prefer to work in the standing position. But I’ll let you sit down.” He raised his voice. “Computer! Lift two chairs!”

A part of the floor moved apart before his feet. From the square opening, two light brown spheres resembling large balls of wool emerged. Coming abreast with the floor surface, the spheres rolled to the wall on the left. Meanwhile, the floor closed.

Having stopped at the wall, the balls flattened. A hollow appeared on one side of them while the other side stretched up and bent. This resulted in two armchairs.

“Self-moving transformers,” Lorenzetti explained. “They can take the form of a table, a sofa, a carpet or, as in this case, an armchair. Have a seat!”

Andrew had seen advertisements of such goods, but had never bought them because of their high price. *Lippo has lots of money. With his kind of work, it’s natural that he’d earn big fees. But what else might Lippo be involved in? What if legal work for various companies is just a cover, and Lippo is an ordinary crook with extraordinary abilities? If I wasn’t going to leave my job, it would be interesting to conduct an investigation.*

He and Emily went to the armchairs and sat down.

“Is it comfortable?” the hacker asked with a pleased smile looking at the girl.

“Yes,” she said.

“If the seat is too hard, I can make it softer. If it’s too soft, vice versa. What would you like?”

“Nothing. Everything is absolutely perfect,” Emily said with some irony.

“That’s great. Let’s get down to business then. Here’s the globe!”

The planet appeared in the air in front of Lorenzetti. Its lower part floated several centimeters above the floor and the top almost reached the ceiling. The Earth looked like an absolutely real object. The sphere started spinning slowly. When the waters of the Atlantic Ocean passed by and the shores of the North America showed up, the sphere stopped. The hacker’s face was directly opposite Washington DC.

“Bull’s-eye!” he exclaimed with satisfaction.

Barkov knew that such realistic images could be created not in the air but directly in a viewer’s mind by a new game computer that cost more than fifty thousand credits. *I wonder if this man pays taxes.*

“Are you going to play a geography game with us?”

Lorenzetti looked at Andrew with astonishment. “Do you think it’s a game?”

“Of course.”

“You are mistaken. This is how our planet looks at the moment. The image is transmitted from satellites that remained intact after the asteroid attack. We are online!”

Andrew smiled wryly. Yes, he knew the government had devices such as this, with the ability to transmit images and sounds to a human brain in real time. The devices could be controlled by their owners who were able to select game modes and give commands mentally without lifting a hand or even stirring a finger. But holographic representations like this one were beyond the means of anyone outside the government; only gamers with thick wallets could afford something that even resembled the real thing. “Give me a break!”

The hacker’s face became stern, almost angry. “I guess you have no idea who you have come to see. All right, I’ll prove it to you. Let’s start not with the President but with your mother. Is she home now?”

Andrew bristled at the mention of his mother – and Lippo’s threatening tone.

“Why do you want to know that?”

“I want you to make sure that this isn’t a recording of past events or an imitation of the present ones, but a reality. Is your mother’s address 1237, Southwest Street, Miami?”

Barkov nodded unwillingly. Really, Lorenzetti had studied his dossier thoroughly!

The globe turned down, then started to scale up. The North Pole disappeared somewhere under the ceiling and the South Pole, under the floor. The western and eastern parts went into the walls. The image shielded the part of the room that was behind it. It seemed that the planet’s surface was approaching quickly, not scaling up. Wind whistled in Andrew’s ears. Although he had the wits to understand that there was no danger, he felt a unpleasant chill in his stomach and a desire to back up.

Soon he recognized the Biscayne Bay outlines, the network of streets leading from the seashore to the center and, finally, the gray roof of his mother’s house. He could even see branches of trees around the house swinging from the wind.

“I’m switching to the street viewing mode,” Lorenzetti announced.

The point of view changed. A part of the room they were in turned into the street. This time the image was a bit dim. In some places of the image there were gaps where the opposite wall of Lorenzetti’s room could be seen. Nevertheless, Andrew easily recognized his mother’s house, three coconut trees growing in front of it and the garbage can lying on the road with some black bags of garbage and cola cans spilled out around it. He instantly remembered the burglars’ Cadillac that had run down the garbage can.

“That’s it! It’s her home!” Emily blurted out.

Andrew's brain spun as he realized, *Of course this guy has a brain e-vision system just like the government – he was probably the one who helped develop it!* He was starting to understand why Lorenzetti was treated like such a highly secret government asset.

"It is her house!" Lippo claimed with triumph. "But that's not all. Let's switch to the premises viewing mode!"

The house scaled up and the spectators "entered" the closed front door.

Nellie Barkov was collecting things scattered around the house and putting them into a cardboard box.

"Mom!" Andrew shouted as he jumped up.

Lorenzetti smirked. "Don't shout, she can't hear you. But we can hear her!"

The shuffling of the woman's feet and remote voices that came seemingly from her old e-vision could be heard.

"That's impossible," Andrew murmured. Now his heart raced. No one could penetrate any private premise. First, it was illegal: the International Primal Privacy Act, enacted by the President years ago, ensured total privacy within any private residence. It had been a keynote in his campaign, as assurance to the world that eliminating borders and creating a World Government would allow all citizens to retain their privacy, not give it up in the process. Second, since Andrew worked in dangerous missions and he or his family could be a target for revenge, Andrew had installed an insulating shield on his mother's home. It was a shield impenetrable by electronic interference to ensure his mother's safety. Even an electronic bug placed in her house would set off an alarm on Andrew's monitor. So... no way was this video feed from inside his mother's house real – it was surely a hoax.

Raising his hand, Andrew looked at his mindphone ring on the fourth finger and commanded, "Connect with Mom!"

The old bracelet on Nellie's wrist started to flicker. The call melody was heard. The woman stood straight, looked at the bracelet and pressed the button, smiling. "Listening, Son!"

Andrew's skin crawled as he heard her voice. "Mom, are you at home now?"

"Yes, I am cleaning up. And where are you?"

"Not far off. I'm doing... business."

Her voice became anxious at once. "Do you have any news? Have you tried to free Housman?"

"Not yet. I can't discuss it at the moment. I'll call you back as soon as I can."

"Okay." She paused. "Don't forget to have dinner, Son!"

"I'm not hungry, don't worry. Bye!"

Andrew disconnected. Nellie looked at the bracelet thoughtfully for a few seconds, then sighed and continued tidying up.

"Have I removed your doubts?" Lorenzetti asked.

Still shocked, Barkov nodded. Lippo couldn't have modeled Andrew's conversation with his mother beforehand. The big question was how had he managed to transfer video and audio from a house where there was not a single video camera and a total electronic shield?

"Fine! The next stop is the residence of the President of the United States of the World, Washington DC. You'll be able to eavesdrop on everything said in that house as well. God help us!"

Lippo closed his eyes, crossed himself slowly and in a sweeping manner. Then he opened his eyes and looked intently in front of him.

The picture changed at once – Barkov felt as if he flew up through the mother's house roof and soared into the sky.

## Chapter 8

Andrew Barkov had been to Washington only once, in his childhood, on a tour with his mother. His only recollection of the tour involved a small dog with long ears that ran around a fountain before the White House. Andrew had wanted to throw his ice cream into the water to see if the dog would swim after it. Mom had not allowed that, and he was upset. He even refused to finish eating the ice cream!

He recollected all of that while staring at the approaching satellite image of the city. From above, the world capital looked like a fanciful carpet. Parks and public gardens with flowerbeds and lawns, a rectangular grid of streets with diagonal avenues lined with trees and bushes, roofs of buildings covered with multi-colored solar panels...

The White House roof looked gray. It was not hard to discriminate it in the city – it stood separately in the center of a green park. There were two round fountains near it, on the north and south lawn. *I wonder which of them the dog had been running around.*

“I’ll take you in through the doors only six people in the world can enter,” Lorenzetti said in a ceremonial tone. “Those are the governors of North America, South America, Australia, Africa, Europe and Asia!”

“Can the President not enter the doors?” Emily inquired mockingly.

“I mean guests. The President is the chief of the White House, he can enter anywhere!”

Lippo made a sharp gesture; as a result, the northern entrance moved closer. To the right of the entrance stood a marine who seemed to be looking right in the hacker’s face.

“And now the most interesting thing,” Lorenzetti continued. “Computer! Turn on the 3D mode and full interactivity!”

He took a few steps on the spot lifting his knees high, and the building continued moving towards him so that he penetrated through the closed doors. The marine disappeared.

Now Lorenzetti was in the entrance hall and Andrew and Emily felt as if they stood right behind him. It was a rectangular spacious room decorated with columns, several marble sculptures and pictures in gilded frames. A portrait of the last President of the United States of America was hanging on the left wall and a portrait of the first President of the United States of the World on the right wall. An antique grand piano was standing before the left portrait. Its legs were made in the form of sitting eagles with spread wings. The keyboard lid was open.

Three men came out of a corridor adjoining this entrance hall and went to the exit. One of their shoulders caught on Lippo’s shoulder. Emily gasped as the hacker didn’t even stir as the man’s shoulder went through his.

Lorenzetti followed them with his eyes, spread his arms to both sides and smiled. “Isn’t it impressive? It’s me who made it all! Not the White House, of course, but the computer program to allow this penetration.”

Approaching the grand piano, he started fingering the keys.

“There’s no music,” Emily observed.

The hacker laughed as he went away from the instrument. “Certainly. All the objects are virtual here, I can’t affect them directly. They can’t affect me either. But we’ve no time to waste. Computer! Scan the White House and find the President! And one more thing: scan all the computers of the White House and find any notes on a refuge for the government. Display the retrieved information,” he looked around, “on the portrait of the President of the World!”

Holding his hands behind his back, he started to walk at an easy pace circle-wise, looking around him. “A beautiful interior, don’t you think so? To tell the truth, I’m here for the first time.”

“Are you sure we’ll stay undetected?” Andrew asked.

“Absolutely. My technology is unique. No one has ever made anything – ”

A melodious female voice announced, “Data has been retrieved.”

Instead of the portrait of the President, the layout of the White House appeared on the wall. A small red circle began to blink in the western wing marked as the “Oval Office’.

“Here he is, the mankind leader,” the hacker said. “This is done. What about the refuge?”

“Two hundred and fifty-six concordances found,” the female voice answered.

Instead of the layout, a long numbered list with extracts from texts appeared in the frame.

“Narrow the search,” Lorenzetti commanded. “Find the asylum intended for salvation of the government.”

The answer was prompt. “No concordances found.”

Lorenzetti shook his head, clicking his tongue. “You see? You’ve been misinformed. The President is not going to hide while others die!”

Andrew wanted to believe that, too. CHENG Wenming had fought for justice for all his life. He was one of the founders of the Nature Party that opposed corporations manufacturing GMO and trying to turn the whole population into zombies – insatiable consumers of their produce. He was at the head of the World Unification Movement. Thanks to people like him, governments of all countries signed the Agreement on Creation of the United States of the World. When separatists tried to take their revenge in different locations of the planet, CHENG Wenming entered into the struggle against them – not as an army general but as an ideological leader. During recent years, after becoming the President, he imposed a ban on using oil and gas as fuel. Fast implementation of ecologically safe technologies started as a result. *Such man wouldn’t try to hide while the earth’s population was destroyed!*

“No concordances found?” Emily said to the hacker. “Is that all you can do? You promised that we’d listen to the President!”

“Fine. But bear in mind that it is not only illegal, but also unethical. He might be in a bathroom or with a secret lover.”

“He doesn’t have a secret lover!”

“Do you think so? Maybe, maybe. Computer! Depict the situation to me. Is the President still in the Oval Office? What is he doing?”

The text was replaced by the White House layout. The blinking red circle was moving. The female voice replied, “The President has just gone downstairs. The President is walking to the Situation Room. There are sixteen people in the Situation Room. The President is opening the door. The sixteen people are getting up...”

Lorenzetti interrupted it, “That’s enough. Meetings are held in this room only in crisis situations. We must hurry!”

He ran in place while Andrew and Emily still stood but watching, as if they were in the middle of a movie and the scene moved in front of them.

*He’s in a good physical form,* Barkov noted to himself.

The building moved towards the hacker, and he came to a stop on the red carpet in the corridor. Raising his arms over his head with his palms turned up, Lippo “fell” through the floor into the basement. Emily gave a slight gasp again as she and Andrew felt they, too, had fallen. They stopped on the floor below where there were no windows. The massive arched walls created an impression that it was a bunker hidden deep underground.

Lorenzetti continued to run in place. Some doors and gold yellow statues flashed past. Then there was a turn, and the hacker entered a small hall lit by sunrays. A rose garden was seen behind the glass doors. One more turn, and the hacker rushed along a lighted corridor to the western wing of the White House.

Having penetrated into the closed doors, Lorenzetti went down the stairs and stopped before the door with the inscription “Situation Room”. In a second, he entered.

“Sit down, please,” CHENG Wenming pronounced loudly.

Andrew jerked at the words, but those words were not addressed to the hacker, of course.

The central part of the room was occupied by a long table. Men and women standing along it began to sit into armchairs. The President of the United States of the World, a short lean man, sat down in the far end of the table.

Lorenzetti went around the table and, folding his arms on his chest, stopped behind the President of the World.

Barkov knew by sight almost all the people who were in the room as they had often spoken on e-vision. There was the Secret Service Director Radomir Novak and several ministers – of transport, construction, communication, public health, agriculture... Obviously, the whole ruling top had gathered there.

“I’ve invited you to listen to the report from the professor of physics, the president of the International Academy of Science Sam Goodman,” CHENG Wenming said. “Sam, please!”

A gray-haired man wearing a light gray suit sitting to the right of the President stood up unhurriedly and surveyed all those present with a heavy look. Then he looked at the control panel installed in front of him on the table for the laser e-vision.

“I can see two scenarios,” he said in the distinct voice of a professional teacher. “Bad and very bad. Which one to start with?”

“With the bad one,” CHENG Wenming said.

“Okay. Now I’m going to show you the Earth.” Over the middle of the table, an image of a globe appeared and started rotating slowly. “The Earth is a sphere, isn’t it?”

“Certainly,” the Minister of Health, a dark-haired woman of about forty answered.

“The answer is incorrect!” Goodman retorted. “A sphere is a perfectly round geometrical object in three-dimensional space.”

“Are we having a geometry lesson?” the minister inquired.

A snicker spread over the room.

“I’m just reminding you of the ABCs from the school curriculum so you can understand the problem properly,” the professor objected. “And the problem is that the Earth is not perfectly round. It is flattened on its poles!” He made a gesture, and the image compressed vertically a little. “Waters of the World Ocean are retained on the equator thanks to the planet’s rotation. Now, as the rotation is slowing down, their outflow to the poles has started. For instance, the Canadian Arctic Islands have submerged almost entirely. The bad scenario is as follows: in a couple of weeks the Earth’s rotation will decelerate a few times. All the territories to the north of 50 degrees will be flooded.”

“It can’t be true!” the Minister of Agriculture, a bald-headed man with a light golden moustache resembling an ear of wheat, said.

“Yes, it can. Now you’ll see the flood.” Arrows denoting movement of waters of the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans appeared on the globe and areas in the north and south were painted over with the blue color gradually. “Most parts of Canada and Russia, the whole of England, Norway, Sweden, Finland, the Netherlands, and half of Germany will submerge. But that’s not all! The atmosphere, just like the oceans, will be displaced to the upper and lower parts of the planet. Life on the equator will be impossible. The atmospheric pressure will become less on the ground level in future than it’s at the altitude of twenty kilometers now. At such pressure, the whole body will simply boil up.”

“What do you mean by ‘boiling up’?” The Minister of Health looked puzzled.

The professor pointed with his finger at a stoppered bottle of mineral water standing on the table.

“Open the bottle, and you’ll see bubbles foaming the water. If you happen to be on the equator in two weeks, the same thing will happen to you: the gas dissolved in blood and lymph will start to ooze. It’s certain death. In the tropics – for example, in Rio de Janeiro – such things won’t happen, because you’ll die of suffocation there first. The same applies to Singapore and Bangkok. Air in those cities will be too thin to support life.”

“It’s a real nightmare!” someone’s muffled voice was heard.

“Yes, it is! Now look at the zones where life will be possible.”

Two greenish stripes appeared on the globe – in the northern and southern hemisphere.

The professor commented, “Those are spaces between the latitude of 30 and 50 degrees North and South. Air will be accumulated in the southern part of Australia, Africa and South America; in the northern hemisphere, we would be able to breathe in some parts of the USA, France and China. But there, a new problem will arise – increased solar radiation. The magnetosphere created as a result of the rotation of the Earth still protects us against destructive rays. As soon as the rotation slows down, the magnetic field will decrease. Sunrays will be deadly. People bent on suicide won’t have to jump from a cliff – it would be enough to sunbathe for ten minutes on a beach. Besides, there will be earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and thunderstorms all over the planet. However, life will be possible in the latitudes mentioned before. We call them ‘green zones.’”

“So, we must start building camps for refugees!” exclaimed the Minister of Agriculture, an elderly man with a hatchet face and dark shadows beneath his eyes resembling bruises.

Instead of the professor, a reply was given by Radomir Novak, the Director of the Secret Service, who was a big and strong man looking like a weightlifter. “Three camps are already being built.”

The Minister of Agriculture looked at him in surprise. “Really? Why don’t I know anything about it?”

“Those are secret projects, former underground military bases. We’ve started their re-equipment for the members of the World Government and their families, the management of corporations and the international police.”

“What about other people?”

“We’d been waiting for the final conclusions of the Academy before deciding how many bases we need for the rest,” the President of the World interjected, “after which we could declare total evacuation.”

The minister looked confused. “I see. Sorry for the interruption!”

*So, people were not forgotten, Barkov thought. The President is really going to save everybody, just as he promised in his speech.*

“I’ll continue with your permission,” Sam Goodman said, casting a cold glance at the minister. “In case of a *very* bad scenario, the underground military bases will be useless. They might be destroyed during earthquakes. We will need absolutely autonomous, airtight constructions on the surface. Just like those that were designed for the colonization of Mars because conditions on the Earth will not be much better.”

“You didn’t tell me about this before,” the President of the World said. He scowled at this news, then asked, “Can you substantiate your conclusions?”

The professor paused and cleared his throat. “We’ve got some geophysical evidence that the Earth’s core might stop completely. Day and night will last for half a year each, and deadly cold will alternate with unbearable heat. For instance, the temperature might go down to as low as minus one hundred Celsius at night and rise to plus eighty by day! But the worst thing is as follows: The magnetic field will be so weak that solar radiation will start to annihilate air. The Earth atmosphere will be useless for breathing and, with time, it will disappear completely.”

A few people moaned quietly.

“When will it happen?” someone asked.

“It’s hard to say. Maybe in a few hundred years... or maybe in a few months. We’re still gathering data and the dynamics are changing.”

Andrew Barkov felt a shiver down his spine. He looked at Emily Housman beside him. She looked at him, too, her eyes wide open.

“It’s a damn narrow squeak,” she whispered.

She looked at him with worry etched across her brow, her delicate lips trembling. *She's lovely*, he thought, then chastised himself for thinking of anything but the current crisis.

Trying to calm down not her as much as himself, he replied, "That's just an assumption. A tiny probability."

"What is the probability of the planet stopping completely?" the President of the World asked, as if hearing him.

The professor paused again and uttered distinctly, "The probability is very high. That's all I can say at the moment."

He sat down knitting his long gray eyebrows.

Silence reigned. All eyes were turned to the President of the World. At last, CHENG Wenming said, "We must get ready for both scenarios. It is necessary to build both the camps and autonomous constructions. Radomir, do you have projects of such constructions for Mars that we can convert to use on Earth?"

"Yes and no," the head of the Secret Service replied. "The habitats built for Mars aren't suitable here. But we have a construction like that for Earth. Its codename is 'Noah's House'."

"An analogy for 'Noah's Ark'?"

"Exactly. I call it 'The Base', for short."

"How many people can we put up in such Noah's Houses?"

"Two thousand people. But only in one House. It's been built for a long time near Salt Lake City. We can't build anymore."

"But the population is more than twenty billion!"

Radomir Novak spread his arms. "There aren't sufficient resources for the rest. We didn't know that such Houses would be required so fast. We started construction before anyone knew about the asteroid."

"Why did you start building? And why was I not informed about it?"

"We didn't consider it to be important. At first, only private assets were used. The new owner of 'Apple' was the initiator. He was afraid of a flood because of global warming. Two months ago, the Security Council decided that the state had to take part in the construction – for any emergency. We improved the project by requiring that the Base be able to move not only by water, but also on the ground and even by air."

The President was silent for a while. He took a pen and started to twirl it. At last, he spoke to everybody. "First, the right for living in Noah's House should be granted to most talented and healthy representatives of mankind, not just businessmen and government members. Second, we must decide on what information should be provided to the mass media. Shall we declare both variants – the green zone and Noah's House – or just the first one?"

Ministers dropped their eyes. The Director of the Secret Service answered, "We can't possibly tell the whole truth by any means! Otherwise, each person will try to get into the safest place – the Base. It will be the war of everybody against everybody. As a result, no one will survive."

The ministers kept silent.

"In this case," the President of the World said gloomily, "I have to make the most difficult decision in my life. We will declare evacuation to the green zones... and pray for them to be really green. If the worst case scenario happens, at least two thousand people will survive in the airtight base. Let's vote."

One by one, all the ministers raised their hands.

"Unanimously," the President of the World summed up. "In half an hour, I will give an address to the people of the Earth."

"I'd advise to do it in two hours," the Director of the Secret Service said. "I must put all our security forces on full alert."

"Why?"

“I think the opposition will try to revolt. Especially separatists in the green zones. They might shout about strangers who will drive the local population out, take away their homes and food. They’ve been looking for a reason to restore borders between nations for a long time. In America, Europe, Asia...”

“I see. You’ll have one hour, no more.”

Suddenly a man with colorless eyes and white eyebrows wearing the uniform of a police sergeant appeared in the room. Barkov did not understand where he had come from. It seemed the man had walked through the wall. All the others present in the room froze as if someone pushed a pause button. A perfect silence fell on the room.

The sergeant stopped in front of Lorenzetti and said, “Mister, what are you doing here?”

Lippo stepped back. “That’s impossible!”

“What is impossible?” the sergeant asked.

“Computer!” the hacker cried out. “Break all external connections! Quickly!”

The table, chairs and people, including the sergeant, disappeared. Lorenzetti was standing alone in the middle of his white room. He had a confused and scared look, his face almost as white as the wall.

As Lorenzetti stood silent, Andrew Barkov turned to look at Emily. He understood now that Emily was right. Appearing on the e-vision, the President hadn’t told the whole truth. In fact, he told lies. He was going to continue lying, even if he meant well. Mother was right, too. Neither she nor Andrew would be able to get into the secret asylum – the so-called Noah’s House. If the Earth stopped rotating completely, one could survive only in there. It meant they were both in mortal danger. Cold, heat, radiation, lack of air... Genetic modification could be their only chance of survival.

*I must act decisively and quickly. Before it’s too late.*

“How did they trace me?” Lorenzetti squealed.

That was the least of Andrew’s worries. He caught Emily’s hand, stood up and towed her to the doors.

“Stop!” Lippo shouted. “Where are you going? Take me with you! I can’t stay here. They’ll come for me soon. I don’t wanna go to jail!”

“In that case, our ways part here,” Barkov replied. “Jail is the place we are going to right now.”

## Chapter 9

Walking to the elevator, Andrew looked out a window.

The ocean kept receding. Since he and Emily had entered the hacker's study, the shoreline had moved about two hundred meters further to the horizon.

*The professor said that water is moving to the poles. It's hard to imagine what's going on in the northern territories.*

The elevator doors opened. Letting the girl enter, Barkov followed her and turned back.

Lorenzetti was standing in the doorway of his study staring into space.

"Farewell," Andrew said.

Lorenzetti seemed to pay no heed to it, his eyes glassy. Barkov pressed the "Down" button. The doors closed and the elevator started moving.

The box slid out of the wall. The female voice announced, "Thank you for your visit. You may take your weapon."

Taking the pistol, Andrew checked to be sure the cartridges were in place, and shoved the pistol back into the holster.

"Do you have a plan how to release my father?" Emily asked.

Andrew knew now that what Emily had told him about the Earth's crisis had been true. Now he had to fulfill his promise to help her release her father; besides, her father would be valuable if they had any chance of survival. He knew that Eddy Housman was in the pretrial prison built a few years before in what used to be a parking lot in the center of Miami.

"Yes, I have a plan. First, I'll enter the prison."

"Do you have a permit?"

"No, but I've been there many times. I know the location."

"Will you try to get my father by force?"

Andrew imagined Captain Palmer. He would knock out the captain with pleasure by hitting his chin with a good blow with right fist. But what to do to the others? To those Andrew had been working with all these years? They had helped him more than once in times of need – some of them by saying kind words, others by covering him with fire.

*I can't hurt those people.*

"No. There must be another way."

"What then?"

Andrew didn't have a solution. He needed some time to think it over.

Suddenly he felt a chill in his feet. The feeling strengthened quickly. Shivers ran up his legs, spine, neck... In his mind's eye, the picture flashed up: a dozen cops were standing before the elevator doors, weapons at the ready. The safety was released, forefingers touching the trigger...

Barkov grabbed his holster, but pulled his arm away at once. *I will not shoot at my colleagues.*

The elevator stopped and the doors moved apart.

"Don't move!" one of the police shouted. "Hands up!"

Emily uttered a loud scream and jerked up both hands. Andrew froze looking over the policemen. He knew three of them: two worked in headquarters, one in the southwest department. Captain Palmer showed himself from behind a policeman's back.

Barkov was glad to see him again – the second time in his life.

"Captain, it's me! Order them to lower their guns!"

"I can decide myself what to order, lieutenant," Palmer replied. "Come out over the elevator. You are under arrest!"

*Guess it was too early to be glad.*

"What for?"

“We’ve got orders from above. I’ve always known you can’t be trusted! Where’s the third terrorist?”

Barkov guessed the problem. The White House Secret Service technologies had proved to be much more sophisticated than Lorenzetti had believed. The virtual sergeant saw not only the hacker who was inside the 3D image, but also the detached onlookers.

“We’re not the terrorists! And there are only two of us,” Andrew answered.

“Come out of the elevator!” the policeman standing before Palmer ordered.

Barkov had never been in the position of a criminal before. The feeling was very unpleasant.

*Maybe it’s all for the best. According to protocol, they must take us to the pretrial prison. I’ll be able to find Housman there.*

“I can close the doors, and we’ll return to the penthouse,” Emily whispered.

“No,” Andrew answered in a quiet voice.

He raised his hands slowly and stepped out of the elevator.

“Turn around!” the same cop commanded.

Barkov turned round.

The cop ran up to him, put Andrew’s hands behind his back, and slapped on electronic bracelets that clenched automatically. Then he pulled Andrew’s pistol out of the holster.

“Now you, lady! Come out of the elevator!”

Emily fulfilled his order without uttering a word. The policeman put handcuffs on her wrists, too.

“Guys, listen to me,” Andrew said. “We are not terrorists. We just know too much. In two hours, the President of the World will be on e-vision and announce evacuation to green zones. But what he will not say that it’ll be impossible to survive even in the green zones if the earth stops rotating completely. I have an idea how we can save our lives!”

“Stop talking crap!” Captain Palmer snapped out. “You were going to blow up this building, confess to it!”

“What?”

“You’ve had your eye on my position all these years. So you decided creating a fake terrorist attack that would get me ousted, proving I couldn’t prevent crimes in my area!”

“Captain, you are paranoiac. Consult a doctor!”

Palmer came up to Andrew. Having checked if the bracelets held Barkov’s wrists tightly, he took the arrestee by his shoulders and turned him round. Andrew saw that the captain’s face twitched with emotion.

“At last, I can do what I’ve been dreaming of for so long!”

“What’s that?” Barkov inquired, knowing the answer already, his senses showing action and reaction.

The captain clenched his fist and threw his arm upward aiming at Andrew’s chin. Barkov moved aside letting the fist fly past him, and struck the captain’s groin with his shin. Palmer moaned, clutched his groin and folded up.

At the very same second Andrew realized that had been unwise. He shouldn’t have resisted. On the contrary, he should have feigned fear and dejection. And even to gratify Palmer’s wish – let him strike him once. In the pretrial prison, meek inmates were allowed to the common canteen and gym where he could see Housman!

Too late, his mistake caused blows to rain on him from all quarters. Andrew tried to evade the most dangerous of them. The cops knocked him down, kicking his back, stomach and head. Green spots danced in his eyes.

“Stop it!” Emily screamed. “You’ll kill him!”

The blows stopped and two of the cops hurried into the elevator, ready to retrieve the third terrorist.

“Captain, the elevator won’t go,” a policeman said. “It requires us to deposit our weapons!”

Palmer replied, “Don’t deposit anything! Six of you, climb the stairs, penetrate through the roof, the sewage system, whatever, and get the third member of the gang for me! Meanwhile, we’ll take these two to the prison. Detectives, take them to the car!”

Cops grasped Andrew’s arms and led him and Emily across the foyer to the exit. The concierge and the couple sitting in armchairs followed them with frightened eyes.

Before the building, there was a long line of police cars. The prisoners were put into a van with long, narrow slit-like windows. Palmer and one of sergeants Andrew didn’t know sat down on opposite seats.

Barkov came to his senses fairly quickly. His whole body was aching, but fortunately, there were neither fractures nor displacements.

“Don’t even think of escaping,” the captain warned as he took out his pistol and put it on his hip, the barrel towards Andrew. “I am ordered to bring you in dead or alive. And I’ll do it, have no doubts!”

Police alarm signals started howling. The van set out accompanied by several other cars. The columns in the form of sea horses and the flowerbed with the condominium name passed by.

Barkov made one more attempt to explain the situation. “Captain, a global disaster awaits us. You must not stay in Miami. You and your family must...”

“Shut up!” Palmer shouted, raising his gun. “If you say one more word, I’ll shoot a hole in your bean!”

This man had never been particularly bright. All he knew to do was execution of higher-ups’ orders, and he required the same thing from his subordinates. *Fool. So much the worse for you.*

Turning to Crandon Boulevard, the convoy of vehicles moved faster. In about three minutes, the Biscayne Key island disappeared behind them as the cars entered the bridge to Virginia Key.

Water had left the Biscayne Bay almost completely. Now it was an uneven field covered with dark green algae. Only in some points of the field were there small blue backwaters.

“They want to shoot you,” she looked directly at Palmer, “and to question us,” Emily said suddenly as she took her eyes off the window and looked at the captain.

Palmer stared at her for some time in silence. Finally, he reacted, “What are you babbling on about?”

She turned her head to Barkov and re-stated, “They want to kill them,” her eyes shifted quickly to Palmer and back to Andrew, “and to interrogate us.”

Her voice sounded even, but there was extreme tension in it.

“Where’s the information coming from?” Andrew asked, remembering the girl’s ability to hear electromagnetic waves.

“From above.”

“What do you mean by ‘above’?”

“We must run away,” she looked at Palmer again. “Stop the car now!”

Captain’s eyes widened. “What? We are sitting with guns in our hands and you are in handcuffs. Why are you trying to give me orders?”

“Ah yes, handcuffs!” the girl mumbled, as if changing her mind.

Barkov felt that the bracelets on his wrists suddenly slackened. He could cast them off. *Not yet.* He needed to pick the right moment.

The drone of a motor was heard from the ocean on the east side of the bridge. The sound increased quickly. In a few moments, it was clear that a helicopter was approaching.

Barkov tipped his head to one side trying to see the aircraft in the sky. The window was too narrow. He just managed to spot a formless shadow sweep past on the asphalt. The roar of the rotors made the seat vibrate for a few seconds. A bit later, the van braked abruptly.

Pressing a button on a transmitter fastened to his shoulder, Palmer said in irritation, “Why have we stopped?”

“Captain, the way is blocked,” came the answer. “A helicopter is landing.”

“Damn! It must be the higher-ups. Sergeant, watch the prisoners.”

Palmer opened the door. Putting his head out, he looked around and jumped out of the van. The cop who stayed in the van took his weapon out of his holster and put it on his hip – just the way the captain had done before.

Barkov discerned chatter of one more helicopter coming from the east. It couldn't be seen through either of the windows or the open door, but judging by its powerful and even noise, it hovered somewhere over the end of the police cars line.

*We're being squeezed in the vice*, he guessed.

No doubt, those were representatives of the secret service. Had they decided to stop a possible leak of information by shooting the local cops? Unlikely. Law enforcement agencies couldn't be at war with each other. Most probably, Emily had misunderstood something.

“Did you hear their conversations mentally?” he asked forcing his voice over the noise of helicopters.

“Yes!” Emily replied. “It was a secret service agent who talked to a certain General Larsson.

“What did they – ”

The sergeant raised his gun. “Stop talking! Otherwise, I'll plug a hole in your beans!”

The guy was young. Obviously, he had graduated from the Police Academy recently and was trying to imitate the captain. Andrew had been like that in the past. *If what Emily said is correct he won't be able to grow up.*

“Listen, sergeant,” Andrew began, “this girl has a gift. There might be truth in – ”

“Silence!” the policeman commanded sternly.

“...her words,” Andrew continued.

“Silence!” the sergeant shouted even more sternly.

Palmer appeared in the doorway.

“Come out!” he ordered loudly.

Barkov knew his boss very well. If the man had decided something, it was impossible to dissuade him. Grasping the bracelets so that they didn't slip off, Andrew stood up and got off the van. Emily followed him.

The convoy, as he could see now, consisted of five police electromobiles: three cars before the van and one behind it. A helicopter had landed and was blocking the way in front of the first vehicle. Its blades kept rotating. The side door was open and a multi-barreled machine gun was stuck out of it. Behind the machine gun, a man wearing an olive drab uniform and a helmet sat pointing it towards them. On one side, in front of the helicopter, there stood two men in civilian clothes.

Behind the convoy, an attack aircraft was hovering. A gun was in the fore part of its fuselage, rockets glittered under the wings. Such helicopters were called “flying tanks” unofficially. No more than two dozen of them were left in the world. In theory, their task was supporting special mission units when they suppressed riots or destroyed terrorists' bases, but in reality they had not been used for a long time as there was no such need in the restructured world order.

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