

PROLOGUE

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On a warm, mid-September Tunisian night, a man stands at the secluded back entrance to his opulent villa. The scent of jasmine from his formal garden saturates the air. He is of medium stature, trim, in his early 50s, wearing a cool gray Ermenegildo Zegna suit (a clothing firm still very much in business despite the devastation of Italy and most of Europe in the Final War some 83 years ago). The man's face is lean and intense, his precisely groomed black hair graying at the temples. He is World Federation Vice President Skandar Gharzoul, arguably the second most politically powerful person on earth.

His home and those of other high-ranking Federation and Church officials are ensconced in a walled, maximum-security zone of the world capital of Carthage. As he stands on his porch, Skandar can't avoid seeing the glow in the sky and hearing the cacophony of horns and sirens from downtown Carthage, less than a mile away—an area with the wildest nightlife and highest crime rate in this part of the world. Skandar sighs. It's yet another issue he isn't happy about. *Such behavior*, he thinks, *even while their*

President lies in intensive care. Not that the President himself would make an issue of it—and yet that’s precisely the problem, isn’t it? Permissiveness! This debauchery should have been crushed long ago. But it’s only a matter of time, and things will be brought to order, if I have anything to say about it. And I will.

A car appears in the long driveway and floats to a stop. As Skandar was expecting, Arden Depperman steps out—his trusted intelligence and surveillance specialist—the one he calls when he doesn’t trust official Federation sources—which is pretty much all the time.

“Thanks so much for coming over,” says Skandar.

“No problem at all, Excellency” says Arden. “I think you’ll find this little excursion to be spectacular. The drone is already in the air. It’s about noon over there with clear skies. Visibility will be superb.”

“Gooood!” says Skandar, smiling and rubbing his hands together, as the two men walk down a long hall, lined with photos of himself engaged in various charitable works around the globe.

“Any news on President Kazdaghli?” asks Arden.

“He’s not well at all,” answers Skandar, shifting his smile to a sad frown and shaking his head. “Not at all.”

“I’m so sorry to hear that,” says Arden. “We pray for the best outcome for his Excellency.”

“Yes, yes indeed we do,” says Skandar, leading Arden into his magnificent study, the walls lined with dark oak bookshelves all the way to the 14-foot ceiling. On one side of the room are what look like two dental chairs with headrests sprouting multiple gadgets. The two men sit and lean back. A menu pops up in the air in front of Arden. He pokes a few icons, activating the Primary Visual Cortex Interface (PVCi) and connecting the two men with an airborne drone on the other side of the world.

Instantly they are surrounded by deep blue sky. Their chairs are gone, along with their bodies. They are moving through the sky a mile or two above an expanse of water, approaching a shoreline scattered with ruins of what used to be a great city. Hulks of skyscrapers crumble between flows of mud and debris, some green with vegetation. Twisted cranes and broken docks to their right identify a once-busy seaport. Beyond the ruins, beyond lakes and rivers flanked by traces of ancient suburbs, the horizon is fractured by a range of rugged mountains. To the right in the distance, an enormous peak belches gray smoke into the sky, and miles of recent lava flows extend down its slopes into surrounding valleys.

“To give your Excellency perspective, we are approaching from the west over Seattle,” says the voice of Arden, seeming to come from nowhere in particular. “There wasn’t much left here after the Final War—in addition to the earthquake, tsunami and volcanoes. You can see Mt. Rainier over there on the right. And you can see evidence of the pyroclastic surges that wiped out much of the population from Tacoma to Seattle. Another active volcano, Glacier Peak, is ahead of us on the left.”

Skandar squints downward (although squinting is pointless) at decaying homes on a lakeshore. “Does anyone even live here anymore?”

“A few brave souls—far less than elsewhere in the American Wilderness. The Vancouver Safe Zone is about 150 miles north of here. And about 170 miles to the south there are a bunch of really weird people in the Portland Wilderness. But most of what used to be Washington State is desolate. In addition to other calamities, the forests below us are plagued with mutant plants and animals—a result of a genetic experiment

gone awry by some 21st century health guru—Belknap, I think his name was.”

“Hmm,” says Skandar. “A foretaste of Hell. It’s quite clear that God punished these people harshly because they had deeply offended him. This should be a lesson for us—we must restore moral order to the world, lest God send even greater catastrophes.”

Skandar turns his field of vision behind him, and sees a line of snowy peaks. “What’s that range back there?”

“Those are the Olympic Mountains—not volcanic like the Cascades, but still rugged and remote.”

“Fascinating!” says Skandar. “May we proceed toward our destination?”

“Certainly, Excellency.” Arden focuses on an icon in his floating menu. The PPCI tracks his eye movements, translating them into commands. The drone accelerates and the land under them begins to move rapidly. They pass over vast reaches of rugged, forested peaks. Smoking Rainier is far to their right and Glacier Peak is to their left, emitting puffs of white steam. Soon the mountains below dwindle to hills, the forests disappear and on the other side of a long river, the world becomes flat and arid, punctuated by low hills and rock formations.

“Ha!” says Skandar. “This seems more like home to me.”

“We have crossed the Columbia River, Excellency,” says Arden. “Now we’ll turn northwest toward our destination. Again, for perspective, I’ll gradually drop our altitude and take us up the lake.”

The horizon tilts to the right as the drone banks leftward. The ground seems to rise and soon they are low enough to see old grain elevators, rusted tractors and traces of small towns and farmhouses.

“Not much out here,” comments Arden. “This used to be called Big Bend country. Rich soil from glaciers and the Missoula Floods. Little towns like Mansfield and Waterville. They grew a lot of wheat here in the 20th and 21st centuries—back before Mexico took over agriculture.”

Now they’re heading west. Suddenly the plateau below them ends. They cross a river again, they pass over an old dam bolstered by an accumulation of rocks and debris, and in a moment they’re skimming the surface of a long blue lake flanked by semi-arid hills. Decaying buildings hug the shoreline, apparently a once-bustling resort area.

“Is this it?” asks Skandar.

“This is Lake Chelan, Excellency, but we haven’t yet arrived at our objective. It doesn’t seem too isolated right here—but just watch the transformation.”

As they skim the lake, they see the thick forests return. Craggy, snowcapped peaks loom on each side of the lake. After about 20 miles, they spot a small boat near the right shore.

“Ah! The first sign of human habitation!” exclaims Skandar. Can we go over and examine it more closely?”

“Of course.”

As the drone approaches the boat, its sole passenger, a young woman, drops her fishing pole and stands up in alarm. From her buckskin coat she pulls a large caliber handgun, aiming it at the drone with both hands.

Skandar winces. “Hostile little thing. Is it possible to speak to it?”

“Proceed,” says Arden. The drone hovers 10 feet away from the terrified woman.

“Lower that weapon!” booms Skandar’s voice, with

a middle eastern accent. “Your puny armaments are of no consequence to us.”

The woman lays her pistol down and raises her hands. “Wh...whaddaya want from me? I’m just tryin’ to catch a few fish to feed my family.”

After a few tense moments, the voice booms, “We will let you go for now. Just be sure to pay your taxes and tithes—every ninth fish to the Federation and every tenth fish to the Church.”

The woman shakes her head in confusion. “Wait...what? Tax? Tithe? What church? How do I...”

The drone begins to back away. “Remember—we are *watching you!*”

Skandar and Arden guffaw as they resume their journey up the lake. “This technology,” observes Skandar, “can be developed for much more effective uses than mere surveillance.”

Five minutes and 20 miles later, Arden slows down, ascends a couple of hundred feet and slowly turns to the left. They pause over the lake, facing a gorge that invites them into the mountains.

“This is indeed remote,” comments Skandar.

“Even back in the 21st century, there were no roads to this place to speak of. The only way you could get here was by boat, air or a rather arduous hike. And by the way, this is one of the deepest lakes in North America—almost 1,500 feet deep and nearly 400 feet below sea level at its deepest. There were legends of mysterious underwater caverns inhabited by some kind of sea serpent or monster.”

“Ha! Intriguing—and excellent,” grins Skandar.

They lift higher, moving into the gorge. Below them an ancient road switchbacks up the face of a hill, and continues, following a creek at the bottom of the long gorge. Snow appears on the ground, with increas-

ing depth. A pack of substantial wolves is moving below them. Further ahead, they spot a lone elk—the object of the wolves’ interest. Finally, they see the remains of a small logging and gravel operation and a compound of cabins and buildings in the distance. The snow is about three feet deep, and it’s only October first. A wall of frozen rock towers beyond the village, and on either side of the village stand steep, forested slopes.

Arden drops the drone to the height of a human, and they move between the buildings, finally perching on a stump. Audio becomes available—the sound of wind, birds and growling and yelping wolves back down the road, accompanied by a terrified bleating that abruptly ends.

“Ah! They must have apprehended their prey,” observes Skandar.

“This is Holden Village, Excellency. It was originally a copper mining town. Later it became some kind of retreat center run by Lutherans I think.”

The image flickers briefly. “Are we still functional?” asks Skandar.

“That’s just the connection. It gets a bit difficult here. Our geostationary satellite is just below that ridge,” says Arden, fiddling with his menu.

Skandar is beaming. “This is perfect. Absolutely perfect. Isolation. Volcanoes. Mutant predators. Inhospitable climate. It doesn’t get better than this.”

“Perfect for *what*, if I may ask?” says Arden.

Skandar smiles. “You may certainly ask, but I may not answer—yet.”

“Forgive me, Excellency.”

“Oh, no no no! It’s quite alright. When the time comes, you will know. And I will definitely need your talents to execute the plan. And many other plans, it goes without saying.”

“I am at your service, Excellency.”

“Perfect indeed,” muses Skandar, staring at a cabin with broken windows and the roof half collapsed. A loud knocking seems to come from within. “What’s that? Is someone in the cabin?”

“I think that’s a knocking at your study door,” says Arden, deactivating the PVICI, and suddenly they’re back in Skandar’s study. As Arden sets the drone on a course back to its base in Vancouver, Skandar rises from his chair and pulls the heavy oak door open to reveal his aide, Kais.

Kais’ face is grim. “Excellency, I regret to report that his Excellency President Kazdaghli passed away just minutes ago.”

Skandar’s mouth drops open and he steps backward. “I...I didn’t think it would happen this quickly...I mean... there is so much to do. Firstly, send my sincere condolences to First Lady Syrine Kazdaghli. Secondly, alert the Foremost Council. Thirdly, contact the patriarch. We must let no time pass before the swearing in.”

Kais skitters off down the hall.

“I’m so sorry, Excellency,” says Arden, heading toward the back door himself. “I’ll leave you to what I’m sure will be a busy night.”

“Yes, and it is a sad and dark night for all of us,” says Skandar as he closes the door to his study. But in his last glimpse of Skandar’s face, Arden thinks he detects a smile.