

ZION RYDER & AUSTIN RANGE

MARCOM: STERLING AS A SERVICE

STF-MSD Case 02

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MARCOM Case 02: Sterling as a Service

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CHAPTER 1: THE TOLL ROAD

The morning light over Delfshaven fell soft and gold across four centuries of brick, catching the narrow gabled facades that had somehow survived a war that leveled almost everything else the city had ever been. Canal water sat still and glassy beneath the old warehouse fronts, and a handful of tourists wandered the cobblestones with coffee cups, photographing windmills that had ground grain here since before anyone alive could remember a version of Rotterdam that wasn't rebuilding itself.

A few kilometers east, the Cube Houses tilted at their impossible thirty-degree angle against a bright morning sky, and beneath them the vast arched glass canopy of the Markthal curved over stalls selling cheese, tulips, and stroopwafels to a crowd that spoke six languages within the same fifty meters. This was the Rotterdam the conference brochures sold — cosmopolitan, rebuilt with real intention, a European business capital that had turned its own destruction into an architectural argument for the future.

It did not look, from any angle a tourist might photograph, like a city with an underworld.

That was, entirely, the point.

Twelve kilometers downriver, the other Rotterdam went on working, indifferent to the postcards.

The Port of Rotterdam stretched for miles along the Nieuwe Maas — the largest port in Europe, a horizon of container stacks in primary colors, gantry cranes moving with the slow, patient rhythm of machines that never fully stopped. Customs facilities processed more tonnage in a week than most countries' entire annual trade. Somewhere inside that scale — inside the sheer, overwhelming volume of legitimate cargo moving through legitimate channels — an entire second economy moved alongside it, indistinguishable to the naked eye.

Narcotics. Laundered capital. Business fronts built specifically to survive audit. Infiltration networks threaded through the same legal customs brokers who cleared flower shipments and industrial parts, because a criminal network smart enough to hide inside Rotterdam's port didn't need its own visible infrastructure at all. It needed access to someone else's.

Unlike Amsterdam, with its visible vice sold openly to anyone who wanted it, or Copenhagen, with its own quieter version of the same thing, Rotterdam didn't sell crime. It processed it — the same way it processed everything else that passed through its gates, at scale, without asking questions the paperwork didn't require.

The fixer didn't need an audience of two. He just needed the cartel's man listening, and he was.

They sat in the back corner of a dockside café that served better coffee than its plastic chairs suggested, close enough to the container yards to hear the cranes but far enough to talk without being overheard by anyone who mattered.

"Mocro runs ten percent," the fixer said, turning his glass slow on the table without drinking from it. "And then they run you again after that. A taste for gas. A taste for supplies. Extra hands on the dock, extra taste for that too. You bring two hundred kilos through, you're paying out on two hundred and thirty by the time it clears the water."

He let that sit a second before he moved on.

"That's the old way. Still works, if you like paying twice for the same favor." He shook his head slightly, more amusement than judgment. "The new way isn't a cartel, and it isn't really a network either. It's the crack between every network — every border, every flag, every jurisdiction that stops caring the second cargo crosses a line on a map." He held up a hand before the cartel man could ask the obvious question. "Hypothetically. Say you need two hundred kilos through the passage, regular schedule. First batch, you bring two hundred and two. That's it — call it the handshake fee, cost of doing business, paid once. After that, you bring your two hundred. We don't touch it."

"Never," the cartel man said, testing the word like it might snap.

"Almost never," the fixer allowed. "Special circumstances, now and then — something hard to move, something that needs a favor called in on your behalf upstream. When that happens, you'll know, and it won't be ten percent. It'll be a taste, and only the once, and only because we actually did something for you worth tasting." He shrugged, easy. "But that's the exception. Not the toll."

"And when it grows," the cartel man said.

"Then it grows," the fixer said, spreading his hands like the answer was obvious. "You come back in six months, tell me you're moving eight hundred a month now — that's wonderful, that's a fortune we all share in. First batch at the new number, you bring eight hundred and fifty. After that? Just your eight hundred, every time, same as before." He finally took the drink. "And the whole time you're running with the most current intelligence on the market. Who's watching this week. What's flagged. Where the cracks actually are, instead of where they were last month."

He set the glass down and extended his hand across the table.

"Welcome to the syndicate."

The cartel man didn't shake it yet. "This corridor," he said instead. "Whose is it."

"Depends which end you're standing on," the fixer said. "In, it's North Sea straight into Rotterdam — clears here, or it doesn't clear at all. From there it moves inland through the Netherlands proper, crosses into Belgium at Antwerp, and ties directly into the Euro road-rail grid. Anywhere on the continent you want it, from there. Out, same route, reverse." He tapped the table twice, like marking a map only he could see. "And no — we didn't build it. Building takes years and gets you noticed. We bought it. Dutch operators, Belgian operators, a couple of old Balkan lines that had been running product through these ports since before either of us was born. One owner now. One toll. One phone call instead of four separate wars to keep straight."

"And the Mocro networks," the cartel man said. "The ones you just told me are overcharging."

"Some of them still are," the fixer said, unbothered. "The smart ones stopped competing and started working for us instead. We didn't need to beat every crew on this river. We just needed the good ones to realize the math worked better on our side of the table." He leaned back. "That's most of how this got built, if you want the honest version. Not conquest. Acquisition."

Beneath the port's working floor — literally, in some cases, in tunnels and drainage systems the original engineers never imagined being used this way — the uithalers did the part of the job neither the fixer nor the cartel man would ever personally touch.

They were extraction specialists, nothing more complicated than that in function, though the skill involved was considerable: men and women trained to slip into secured port facilities, locate a specific container among tens of thousands, and retrieve — or when the arrangement called for it, simply steal — whatever needed to move without ever letting it pass through an official customs check at all. No paperwork meant no paper trail. No paper trail meant no toll for anyone smart enough to use them instead of a traditional smuggling route.

It was, by design, cheaper than the old Mocro model, more scalable, and entirely without the geographic limits that had always capped a single crew's reach to a single port, a single river, a single city's underworld. Sterling's network didn't run drugs. It rented out professionalized infrastructure to anyone who could pay for access — the uithalers, the corridor, the intelligence feed, the toll structure, all of it sold as one product to cartels, mafias, and independent operators who had no interest in each other but every interest in the same efficient door.

Sterling as a Service. Nobody in the network had coined the phrase as marketing. It had simply become the only accurate way to describe what he'd built.

"You want a demonstration of how far this reaches," a mid-level broker told a nervous new client, three tables down from the fixer's own meeting, in a conversation that would never be recorded anywhere official. "You remember the reporter. Two years back. The one asking questions about container manifests she had no business asking about."

The client nodded slowly. Everyone in this business remembered the reporter — her name had been on every front page in the country for a month, her murder unsolved on paper and entirely understood in every room that mattered.

"You need another dead journalist," the broker said, not as a threat exactly, more the way another business might reference a lawsuit it had won, "or are we clear on how this works?"

They were clear.

Three hundred kilometers away, inside a secure analysis floor in The Hague, a junior intelligence officer named Renke Voss stared at a data pattern she had been staring at for two straight hours, waiting for it to stop looking the way it looked.

It didn't.

Ever since SkyECC's encrypted network had been cracked and its user base scattered across a dozen less centralized, harder-to-monitor alternatives, Dutch services had become — by necessity more than ambition — the sharpest eyes on the continent for reading what organized crime looked like after it went quiet. Microtrafficking. Small shipments, deliberately kept below any threshold that triggered automatic flags. Offshore handoffs timed to weather windows and shift changes. Synthetic-drug logistics moved in volumes too small individually to matter and too frequent, in aggregate, to be coincidence.

Voss had been tracking exactly that pattern for six weeks. What she was looking at this morning wasn't a new pattern. It was the old one, except roughly four times the volume she'd logged the month before, spread across enough separate criminal signatures that it shouldn't have been possible for them all to be using the same corridor, the same timing windows, the same operational discipline.

Unless it wasn't four separate signatures at all. Unless it was one.

She flagged it, wrote the summary in language flat enough to survive scrutiny and urgent enough to guarantee it got read, and sent it up the chain with a note she rarely allowed herself to attach to anything.

This indicates significantly more activity than this office has previously observed from a single actor. Recommend immediate escalation.

The flag reached Director Rugger Wolfen's desk inside the hour — not because protocol demanded that speed, but because the analyst who received it read three lines of Voss's summary and decided, on instinct, that queuing it was not a risk worth taking.

Wolfen read it standing up, which was, for anyone who knew him, already a tell.

He had built his career in industry before intelligence — a long, successful climb through corporate risk and international logistics that had made him exactly the kind of confident, capable executive a government wanted running an agency's business side. He was good at budgets. He was good at politics. He commanded a room the way any competent senior executive commanded a room, with easy authority and the assumption that people would simply do what he told them.

He read Voss's report twice, and somewhere in the second reading, that authority began, quietly, to slip.

"Get me the Pentagon," Wolfen said to his secretary, and it came out exactly the way it always came out — brisk, assured, a man accustomed to doors opening the moment he named them.

She began dialing. He watched her do it, and for just a moment, standing in his own office with his own staff moving at his own command, something in his chest tightened in a way budgets had never once made it tighten.

"Actually," he said, and his voice caught, dropped, came back smaller than it had left. "I need to — try to talk to Alton Sinclair."

His secretary looked up, faint confusion crossing her face at the word *try*, spoken to a lateral counterpart as though it required permission rather than a phone number.

Wolfen didn't correct himself. He stood there instead, Voss's report still open on the screen behind him, and understood — completely, immediately, and for the first time in a career built almost entirely on confidence — that whatever this actually was, it was already standing well outside anything he knew how to run.

CHAPTER 2: WHAT WE FIGHT FOR

The Sedona morning came in slow and cold, the kind of stillness that only existed inside a window of time everyone knew was borrowed. Dew sat heavy on the paddock fencing, catching the first orange light off the canyon rim, and somewhere past the main house a horse blew out a long, contented breath into the chill.

Smoke rose thin and steady from the kitchen chimney. Boots creaked on the porch steps. For once, nothing on the ranch was moving with any urgency at all.

Zion stood at the kitchen counter in yesterday's jeans and a henley he hadn't bothered buttoning, a mug of black coffee cooling untouched in his hand. He was checking the action on a sidearm that didn't need checking, running his thumb along a slide that was already clean, because his hands hadn't yet learned what to do with a morning that wasn't asking anything of them.

He was still standing there, working at nothing, when Austin found him.

She didn't say anything at first. She just crossed the kitchen in bare feet, slipped in against his side, and rested her head against his shoulder blade, her arms circling his waist from behind. Zion went still — not the coiled stillness of a man reading a room for threats, but something looser, something that had taken him three years to remember how to do.

"You're doing the thing again," Austin murmured against his back.

"What thing."

"Fixing something that isn't broken because your hands don't know what else to hold."

He huffed a quiet laugh and set the sidearm down on the counter, turning in her arms until she was pressed flush against his chest instead. He looked down at her for a long moment — the sleep-mussed hair, the soft, unguarded eyes she only wore this early, before the day gave her anything to be sharp about.

"I forget how to breathe right when you're not in the room," he said, low, almost embarrassed at how plainly it came out. "Didn't used to be a problem. Now it's the first thing I notice."

Austin went up on her toes and kissed him, slow and unhurried, her hands sliding up into his hair. For a long while neither of them said anything else at all — just the two of them standing in the kitchen light, breathing the same borrowed morning, until the distant sound of Padre's voice carrying from the barn finally pulled them, gently, back into the day.

Padre found Onyx exactly where he expected to — elbow-deep in a signal relay he didn't strictly need to be servicing, using the work the way he always did, as a wall to stand behind.

"Morning," Padre said, leaning against the barn door frame with the easy patience of a man who had all day and intended to use every minute of it. "How was choir."

"Fine," Onyx said, not looking up.

"Just fine."

"It was singing, Padre. People sang. I sang some of it." He adjusted a frequency dial that was already correctly set. "That's the whole report."

Padre let the silence sit a moment, comfortable and unbothered, the way he let most silences sit. "You know," he said conversationally, "the human voice is just another kind of signal. Frequency, amplitude, resonance. I'd think a man in your line of work would appreciate that."

"I appreciate a lot of things I don't discuss over breakfast."

"Fair enough." Padre pushed off the doorframe, already turning to go, and then paused, glancing back with something warmer in his face than the teasing had carried a moment ago. "For what it's worth — whatever it is, it looked good on you. That's all I came to say."

Onyx didn't answer. But his hands went still on the relay for just a second too long before he went back to work, and Padre walked away entirely satisfied, having gotten exactly nothing and precisely what he'd come for.

The satellite call had ended the way it always did, days earlier, out on the Gulf — Padre's voice going soft and easy right before the line cut, leaving Zion and Austin laughing together in the dark of a canyon lagoon a thousand miles from the ranch. Padre, write a book! Austin had said it the way people say most true things — halfway as a joke, so it wouldn't cost her anything if he took it wrong.

He hadn't taken it wrong. He hadn't taken it as a joke either.

That evening, once the ranch had gone quiet around him, Padre sat alone in the small room off the infirmary that everyone else called his office and he privately still thought of, some nights, as his cell — an old habit of the word, one he'd never quite let go of. He had a legal pad in front of him and, for the better part of an hour, nothing written on the top line at all.

A couples guide to intimacy, he'd told them, half in jest, the words arriving before he'd decided whether he meant them. Sitting there now, pen in hand, the joke had already stopped being one. He knew exactly why. He'd known the moment Austin said it.

He just hadn't expected it to reach back so far.

Before the temple, before the medicine, before "Padre" was a name anyone called him, Avery Davenport had spent the better part of four years with no fixed address and no particular plan — moving from one small town to the next, looking for something he couldn't have named if you'd

asked him directly. He found her in the third year, in a town he no longer let himself say the name of out loud, working the counter of a diner that stayed open too late for the size of the place. Avery fell the way young men fall when they've spent three years being nobody in particular — hard, fast, and entirely without a plan for what came after landing.

He stayed eleven months. Would have stayed the rest of his life, if she'd asked him to.

She never asked him to. It wasn't cruelty, when it finally ended — she simply hadn't fallen the way he had, had never once mistaken the company for the thing he'd mistaken it for. When she told him, gently, that he should probably move on to wherever he was actually headed, Avery realized for the first time in his life that he had never once been headed anywhere. He'd just been waiting for someone to tell him where.

Six weeks and several hundred miles later, he was standing outside a Shaolin temple in the mountains, having followed a rumor and a hunch and the particular kind of hunger that only shows up after a man has run entirely out of better ideas. They took him in — not because he'd shown any promise, but because the monks who ran that place had seen a hundred young men arrive exactly as broken as he was, and knew from long practice that the ones who arrived that broken usually made the steadiest healers, once the breaking had been properly set.

He had told this story to exactly no one on the ranch. Not shame, precisely — simpler than that. A man whose entire professional life was built on helping other people carry what they couldn't carry alone had a certain instinct against handing anyone his own weight to hold. But sitting there with the blank pad in front of him, he let himself think about it plainly, the way he'd have coached anyone else to.

He was fifty-one years old. He had spent three decades since that diner counter becoming extraordinarily good at understanding exactly what love required of a person, while somehow never quite building a life that included any of it for himself. What he hadn't made peace with was the particular ache of watching it happen for other people up close, year after year — Zion and Austin's fierce, unhesitating certainty; Sinclair finally cracking his own fortress open for Marie; even Onyx, closed as he was about almost everything, coming back from a Sunday morning with something new and unguarded sitting behind his eyes that he wouldn't name and didn't need to.

Padre had noticed that, about Onyx. Hadn't said anything. Wasn't going to. But he recognized the particular quiet of a man who had found something real and didn't yet know what he was allowed to do with it — because he'd been that man once himself.

He didn't want that for anyone else on this ranch. And, quietly, not for himself either. He didn't know if what he was building here would find him someone before he retired, or after, or ever. But he intended to spend whatever years he had left making sure that when love finally did arrive at his own door, there'd be a whole, healed version of himself standing there to answer it.

He picked up the pen.

The body heals in a bed, he wrote at the top of the first page. The heart heals somewhere else entirely. This is a guide to finding that somewhere else, together, instead of alone.

It wasn't enough. It was, at least, a beginning.

Three weeks later, he called Zion and Austin into the wellness room, set an unmarked manuscript on the low table between them, and told them — mostly truthfully — that it was going to make him quite famous someday.

"Before we start," he said, before either of them could reach for it, "I want to say this first, because if I don't, one of you is going to start treating it like a checklist by Thursday, and this whole thing dies right there. It's not a manual. A manual tells you what to do when the part breaks. This isn't that." He tapped the cover once, lightly. "I wrote it watching the two of you. Watching Alton finally let somebody all the way in after thirty years of not letting anybody within arm's reach. Watching one or two other people on this ranch I won't name yet, because it isn't my story to tell before it's theirs to. And watching my own life, some of it a long time ago, some of it closer than I generally let on."

"So what do we actually do with it," Zion asked.

"You read a page. Maybe two. Then you close it and go do something with your hands that has nothing to do with reading." Padre leaned forward, elbows on his knees. "And here's the only rule I'll actually give you, and I mean it. Don't quote this book back at each other. The day I hear 'well, Padre's book says' in the middle of an argument, I'm burning every copy myself. This isn't scripture. It's kindling. You build the fire yourselves, in your own house, in your own words."

"And Alton and Marie," Austin said.

"Every other week, same as you. Remote when Marie's in Ottawa, in person when she isn't." Padre stood, already halfway back to his usual easy rhythm. "Go home. Read one page. Don't tell each other what it said — just live near it for a week and see what changes."

He left them there with the manuscript between them, unopened, and neither of them reached for it right away — which, had he stayed to see it, would have told Padre he'd gotten the first page exactly right.

It was Zion who finally moved for it, reaching across the low table, already starting to slide it toward Austin's side like it was hers to open first.

Austin caught his hand before it got there.

"No," she said, not sharp, just certain. "I don't care what Padre says goes in what order. This is our relationship, Zion — not his to hand to one of us at a time." She took the manuscript herself, but instead of opening it, she held it against her chest a moment, like she was deciding something. "This one's going in the locker. And one day — I don't know when, but I've got a feeling — we're going to be the ones handing it to somebody else." She set it down again,

between them this time instead of in front of either one of them, and opened it flat to the first page. "For now, we open one page. The same page. Read it together." She looked up at him, steady. "Just like we want the rest of it."

The call came into the ranch office a little after ten, and Tanner picked it up expecting a feed supplier or a farrier confirming a Tuesday appointment.

"Mr. Tanner, this is Diane Fitch, regional verification office, American Bloodstock Registry." The voice was crisp, unhurried, and entirely unimpressed by whatever authority Tanner might have assumed he carried. "I'm calling regarding a lineage and provenance flag on a stallion registered under your ranch's brand. Skywalker, foaled — we'll get to that."

Tanner sat down slowly in the office chair, already feeling the particular dread of a man who could disarm four contractors in a dark hallway without raising his pulse, currently bracing for a conversation about paperwork.

"There's a six-month gap in his custody record," Fitch continued, entirely businesslike. "No veterinary filings, no boarding documentation, no verified location. Your original application lists him as continuously under your management, and that's not consistent with what our cross-check is showing."

"He was — off-site," Tanner said, and heard immediately how thin it sounded even to his own ears. He had walked into a compromised naval yard under live fire with a steadier voice than this.

"Off-site where, Mr. Tanner?"

He opened his mouth. Closed it. There was, technically, an answer — seized as a trophy asset by a human-trafficking syndicate operating out of a Caribbean archipelago, recovered by his commanding officer during a maritime hostage extraction, transported home aboard an unmarked analog harbor tug that doesn't appear on any registry either — and not one word of it could go anywhere near an official filing, not without unraveling several federal secrets considerably more sensitive than one horse's paperwork.

He had spent his whole career being extraordinarily good at solving problems that involved gunfire, storms, and hostile foreign nationals. He had absolutely no idea how to out-maneuver a woman with a clipboard and a completely reasonable question.

"I'm going to need something better than 'off-site' by end of week, Mr. Tanner," Fitch said, not unkindly, just entirely unmoved. "Otherwise this registration gets flagged for review, and that's not a fast process."

"Understood," Tanner said, which was a lie, because he understood absolutely nothing about how he was going to fix this.

He hung up the phone and sat there a moment in the quiet office, laughing under his breath at the sheer, absurd unfairness of it — a man who'd walked off three federal task forces' worth of firefights without a scratch, completely undone by a registrar in an office somewhere who had never once had to consider that a horse's alibi might be classified.

They sat together on the porch that evening, a single wool blanket pulled over both their laps, the last of the light draining slow and gold out of the canyon.

"If they told us right now," Austin said quietly, watching the color go out of the rocks, "that it was over — the badge, the charter, all of it, gone, no explanation needed — I'd take it. I wouldn't even ask why." She turned her head against his shoulder. "A cabin. You. Nothing else on the calendar, ever again. I'd trade every share of that company for it tomorrow, Zion, and I wouldn't look back once."

Zion didn't answer right away.

It wasn't that he didn't feel the same pull — he did, powerfully, more than he'd let himself admit even to her. But there was a part of him that stayed quiet even now, something unfinished sitting just beneath the surface of every peaceful moment he'd had since Sedona — a French port city he still hadn't found the words for, a father's voice on a satellite line he hadn't called back, a version of himself that existed somewhere in a gap in his own history he hadn't yet had the courage to open. None of it was Austin's to carry. He hadn't said a word of it to anyone, not even Padre, and he didn't say it now either. He just held it, quiet, the way he held most things until he'd already decided what to do about them.

"I don't know what husband means yet," he said instead, low, almost fumbling for the words in a way that was rare enough for him that Austin went still against his shoulder. "Or wife. I never let myself learn those words for real, not before you. But I want it so bad it scares me sometimes." He looked down at her, something raw and unguarded in his face. "Ever since you used the one word. Back at the beginning of all this. Soulmate." He said it like it still cost him something to say out loud. "Nobody had ever called me that before. I didn't even know what to do with it. I still don't, some days. I just know I want to be whatever that word means, for you, for the rest of however long we get."

Austin didn't say anything. She just turned into him fully, pressing her face into his chest, and held on.

Sinclair's boots on the gravel path broke the moment before he did.

"Didn't want to be the one to say it," he said, stopping a respectful distance from the porch steps, hands in his jacket pockets, his voice carrying none of the usual procedural flatness. "But the clock's closer to zero than either of you have been acting like it is. I'm not going to pretend otherwise just to let you enjoy the evening a little longer."

Austin sat up. Zion's arm tightened around her, briefly, before easing.

"How long," Zion said.

"Hours, not days," Sinclair said. He held their gaze a moment longer than the sentence required — something almost apologetic in it, an acknowledgment neither of them needed spoken but that he gave them anyway. "I know exactly what I'm interrupting. I wouldn't, if it weren't already interrupting itself." He nodded once, turned, and left them to whatever was left of the evening, without another word.

The alert came just after midnight.

Onyx caught it first, alone in the comms room, the priority chime cutting clean through the quiet hum of the ranch's frequency-hopping relay. He read the header once, then again, and went very still — not with alarm, but with the particular stillness of a man watching a machine finally start moving after sitting idle too long.

PRIORITY — ROUTED VIA SINCLAIR — ORIGIN: WOLFEN, R. (NETHERLANDS)

Within the hour, the whole team had gathered in the ops room, still in whatever they'd been wearing when the chime went off — Tanner in a half-buttoned work shirt, Austin barefoot with a blanket still around her shoulders, Zion the only one who looked like he'd never actually been asleep. Nobody complained about the hour. If anything, there was something almost electric in the room underneath the fatigue — the particular, guilty relief of people who had spent two days aching for stillness and had, apparently, already used up their tolerance for it.

"About time," Tanner muttered, not quite under his breath, and nobody disagreed with him.

Sinclair stood at the head of the table, already fully dressed, already three steps ahead the way he always was. He hadn't slept either, by the look of him — but where the team's exhaustion showed on their faces, his showed only in the set of his jaw, disciplined into something that still looked, somehow, entirely in command of the room.

Austin watched him a moment, something settling in her chest that had nothing to do with the alert on the screen. He hadn't asked permission to interrupt their last quiet evening. He hadn't needed to. He'd simply done what needed doing, plainly, without cruelty, the way he always did — because someone in this family had to be the one still standing watch while everyone else finally got to rest.

Isn't that what elders are for, she thought, watching him lay a hand flat on the table and draw every eye in the room to him without raising his voice once. Not commanding a family. Just carrying the parts of it nobody else is rested enough to carry yet.

"Sit down," Sinclair said. "All of you. We've got a signal out of Rotterdam, and Director Wolfen didn't send it lightly."

Nobody sat down slowly. For the first time in two days, the whole team leaned forward instead of back — hungry, awake, and entirely, unmistakably ready.

CHAPTER 3: TWO DIRECTORS, ONE TABLE

Sinclair walked into the ops room already talking, which was, for anyone who'd served under him long enough, the surest sign yet that whatever had come through overnight was worse than a routine flag.

"Everyone. Now." He didn't raise his voice. He never needed to. "Onyx, get Yves on the line. If he's mid-shoot somewhere, he steps out. This doesn't wait for better lighting."

The team was still filing in from whatever they'd been doing at midnight when the priority chime went off — Tanner buttoning his shirt the rest of the way as he walked, Austin barefoot with a blanket still draped over one shoulder, Zion the only one who looked like he hadn't slept at all rather than not enough. Padre arrived last, unhurried as always, and took his usual place near the window where he could watch the whole room instead of just the table.

Onyx had the secure feed up before Sinclair finished crossing to the head of the table. The monitor flickered, resolved, and Yves's face filled the frame — no hotel chandeliers behind him this time, just the flat, anonymous gray of somewhere he clearly hadn't expected to be working from at this hour.

"I'm here," Yves said. "Whatever it is, it's early even for us."

"It's early everywhere," Sinclair said. "That's rather the problem."

He didn't waste time on preamble.

"Rotterdam," Sinclair said, bringing up a chart on the main display — the port's sprawling container yards, a red overlay marking a corridor that ran from the North Sea down through the Netherlands and across into Belgium. "Dutch intelligence flagged a trafficking pattern six weeks ago that's grown four times over in the last month alone. Not one criminal signature. Several — cartel, mafia, independent operators, all running the same corridor, the same timing windows, the same operational discipline. That doesn't happen by accident. That happens when everyone's renting infrastructure from the same landlord."

"Sterling," Zion said. It wasn't a question.

"Sterling," Sinclair confirmed. "Except this isn't San Sebastián. He's not moving people through his own ships anymore. He's built something bigger and considerably harder to see — extraction specialists who never let cargo touch an official manifest, a toll structure calibrated to keep clients loyal instead of squeezed, real-time intelligence sold alongside the smuggling itself. He's stopped being a trafficker. He's become the platform other traffickers use." He let that land. "The people running this call it Sterling as a Service. I'd like that to stop being funny by the time we're done with it."

Sinclair set a bound folder on the table — thicker than anything the team had seen from him before, the seal on its cover fresh enough to still smell faintly of toner.

"The Team Ledger," he said. "Full personnel file, every member, no redactions between any of you. This supersedes the partial roster CSIS handed Yves when he first came aboard — that packet was accurate as far as it went, but it went about a third as far as this one does." He glanced at the screen. "Marie signed off on the expansion personally. You're not getting a summary of each other anymore, Yves. You're getting exactly what the rest of this table gets."

On the monitor, something in Yves's easy composure shifted — not discomfort, precisely, more the specific stillness of a man watching a door he hadn't expected to be offered swing open anyway.

THE VANGUARD (Core Operational Leads)

1. Peter Tanner ("Tanner") — Transport, Logistics, & Stables Lead

* **Background & Lineage:** Tanner comes from elite thoroughbred royalty. His family owns high-end racing stables, and twelve years ago—the year after Tanner left for the military—his father's horse took 2nd place in the Kentucky Derby.

* **Military Path & The Rescue:** He worked his way through the Navy Corps of Engineers, developing unmatched mastery over vessels of all kinds. He started in Navy shipyards before transferring to Navy ground heavy armor. His career took a legendary turn when he rescued a drowning one-star general. When the newly retired general offered to grant him *any* assignment in the armed forces, Tanner requested the quiet life of military parade stables.

* **Current MARCOM Mandate:** Instead of riding out a quiet duty, Tanner's dual genius for livestock and heavy machinery made him the prime recruit for MARCOM. He manages the ranch stables (including Zion's **Skywalker** and Austin's **Coco**), coordinates airlift and marine transport, and keeps *The Iron Mule* and heavy SUVs battle-ready.

2. Gordon Summers ("Sting") — Tactical Armory & Special Ops Lead

* **The Name:** Shared a name so close to the lead singer of *The Police* that everyone has called him "Sting" since childhood.

* **The Origin Event:** As a high school senior driving his pickup home, Sting witnessed a van attempting to carjack a woman and kidnap her baby in its carrier. Without hesitation, Sting grabbed his hunting rifle from his truck. He took four calculated shots through the glass—four dead, saving the mother and child.

* **Military Path:** The local headlines faded, but military intelligence took notice immediately. Recruiters showed up at his front door before his diploma dried, fast-tracking him into high-tier special operations and weapons mechanics.

* **Current MARCOM Mandate:** Sting leads the field armory and breach line. He enforces Zion's mechanical reliability protocol with obsessive pride: pure analog iron, zero digital overrides, and zero unvetted microchips.

3. Tim Jefferson ("Onyx" / "Sypher") — Signals & Communications Lead

* **The Dark Life:** Formerly known only as **SYIPHER**, he spent three years as a phantom hacker executing impossible penetrations across locked global networks.

* **The Ultimatum:** When military intelligence finally tracked him down, he came face-to-face with a stark reality that intelligence knew him from the first week had started hacking defense at all. They watched, they learned they saw something special. The officers gave him a stark choice: his hacks carried federal sentences that would guarantee he never saw daylight outside

a prison wall again, *or* he could sign a mandatory enlistment contract for full regular service, rank pay, and pension.

* **Parole & Freedom:** Under his contract, he travels the globe only via MARCOM deployments. Personal leave requires strict military parole AWOL clearance.

* **Physical & Personality:** Built like a heavyweight boxer with cover-model aesthetics. He balances his cyber genius with intense physical training alongside his best friend, Padre.

4. Avery Davenport ("Padre") — Medical, Physiology, & Health Lead

* **The Bohemian & Monk Journey:** After high school, Padre embraced a beatnik spirit and studied to be a Shaolin monk. Through deep trance, meditation, and martial arts, he found his truth in the footsteps of his greatest influence: his grandfather, a discipline-heavy, retired military hero who never stopped making him laugh.

* **Medical Mastery:** He enlisted into military medical school, becoming an absolute sponge for health science, physical conditioning, and diagnostic precision—often pinpointing ailments with almost clairvoyant accuracy.

* **Team Dynamic & Daily Rhythm:** Serves as the "mother hen" of the MARCOM family. Every morning, he gathers the entire team for coffee, Tai Chi, obstacle runs, and creative mind exercises. A closet writer and artistic soul, Padre keeps his exceptional acoustic guitar talents strictly private.

THE SEAGULLS (Covert Espionage & Infiltration Unit)

The Origin: The Stockade & Rushmore

Though rumors claimed they met in a military stockade, Diana, Sophia, and Esmeralda were held in separate facilities. They only met on their final day of lockup when transferred to a central intake room, waiting to collect their personal cardboard boxes. A handler told them to look around at their new "sisters," loaded them into an unmarked van, and drove them up a hidden mountain base. After three grueling months of shared tactical training, they graduated as a unit and were given their current names. They were driven 35 minutes down a winding road, walked out onto an observation deck, and saw **Mount Rushmore**—their very first clue they had been training in South Dakota the entire time.

5. Diana

* **The Incident:** Locked up for using her superior officer's credentials to purchase alcohol as an adult who was still under the legal drinking age where she was stationed.

* **Role & Skillset:** High-society infiltration, social engineering, and rapid asset acquisition.

6. Sophia

* **The Incident:** After watching a fellow team member get fondled and groped by a superior officer, Sophia broke into the officer's home, stole his Corvette, and drove it through the sand on the beach directly into the ocean. She swam back to shore, sat calmly on the sand, and pretended to feed the seagulls until military police arrived and found a witness.

* **The Legacy:** The story was so beloved by the trio that they embraced their mistakes and sometimes ill navigation as their collective "Seagull Moment," adopting **The Seagulls** as their permanent unit callsign.

* **Role & Skillset:** High-speed pursuits, surveillance, and physical evasions.

7. Esmeralda

* **The Incident:** Cornered in an empty barracks by three drunk teammates intent on assaulting her, Esmeralda fought back single-handedly. She put the first man in the hospital for 4 months, the second for 8 months, and permanently crippled the third. When she reported the attack to their commanding officer, he ordered her arrest for "savagely beating" his men. Before they could grab her, she kicked his jaw, knocking him out cold.

* **The Vindication:** After 6 months in the stockade, officials reviewed hidden barracks camera footage, confirming her self-defense. She signed a non-disclosure agreement regarding the cameras, was transferred to South Dakota, and joined Diana and Sophia.

* **Role & Skillset:** Deep-cover combat, close-quarters counter-measures, and high-threat espionage.

**The Core Family **

Commander Zion Ryder (Commander)

* **Skill Set:** Off-grid survival mastery, high-level tactical command, mechanical/analog weapons systems, mounted desert warfare, and counter-surveillance tracking.

* **Specialty:** Field Command and Analog Warfare Operations.

Special Agent Austin Range (Special Agent / Operations Co-Lead)

* **Skill Set:** Deep-cover syndicate tracking, financial digital forensics, high-level intelligence analysis, legal/jurisdictional navigation, and offline network recruitment.

* **Specialty:** Field Intelligence, Financial Shadows, and Joint Operational Leadership.

Diana (Expediter / "The Seagulls")

* **Skill Set:** Social engineering, high-society access, asset acquisition, psychological manipulation, and stealth reconnaissance.

* **Specialty:** Undercover Infiltration and High-Target Intelligence Gathering.

****Sophia (Expediter / "The Seagulls")****

* **Skill Set:** High-speed vehicular maneuvers, surveillance tracking, escape and evasion (E&E), terrain extraction, and tactical distraction tactics.

* **Specialty:** Mobile Reconnaissance and Tactical Evasion.

****Esmeralda (Expediter / "The Seagulls")****

* **Skill Set:** Lethal hand-to-hand combat (CQC), heavy assault neutralization, counter-interrogation, silent infiltration, and threat elimination.

* **Specialty:** Close-Quarters Combat and Deep-Cover Threat Neutralization.

****Peter Tanner — "Tanner" (Transport & Logistics Lead)****

* **Skill Set:** Equestrian mastery, heavy armored vehicle mechanics, marine vessel operations, airlift logistics, and high-country animal tracking.

* **Specialty:** Multi-Domain Heavy Transport, Logistics, and Ranch/Stables Management.

****Gordon Summers — "Sting" (Tactical Armory & Special Ops Lead)****

* **Skill Set:** Extreme-precision marksmanship, non-digital mechanical armory customization, physical breaching, heavy ordnance, and zero-electronics weapon maintenance.

* **Specialty:** Mechanical Weapons Engineering and Tactical Breach Operations.

****Tim Jefferson — "Onyx" / "Sypher" (Signals & Communications Lead)****

* **Skill Set:** Global satellite penetration, frequency-hopping comms setup, off-grid encrypted network architecture, heavy boxing, and electronic signal suppression.

* **Specialty:** Signals Intelligence (SIGINT), Cyber Shields, and Off-Grid Communications.

****Avery Davenport — "Padre" (Medical & Physiology Lead)****

* **Skill Set:** Shaolin Tai Chi/martial arts instruction, rapid field trauma surgery, clairvoyant-level medical diagnostic assessment, combat physiological conditioning, and holistic health recovery.

* **Specialty:** Tactical Health Science, Physical Conditioning, and Team Medical Care.

****MEMORANDUM****

****TO:**** Alton Sinclair / STF-MSD / Pentagon

****FROM:**** Canadian Intelligence Services / Ottawa Bureau

****DATE:**** August 22, 2026

****SUBJECT:**** Operational Dossier & Background Briefing: Yves Montblanc

****SUBJECT BACKGROUND & ORIGINS****

Yves Montblanc was born in the Laval borough of Montreal, spending his early years steeped in Quebec's distinct cultural and linguistic milieu. His sharp tactical mind and natural affinity for intelligence work led him into Canada's national security apparatus in Ottawa, where he spent years refining his operational skills within the federal intelligence framework before being selected for covert international recruitment.

****RECRUITMENT, MODELING, AND EARLY SUCCESSES****

* ****Elite Recruitment:**** Selected by intelligence recruiters during a joint Ottawa-headquartered counterintelligence initiative, Yves was identified for his calm temperament under fire, sharp analytical skills, and flawless dual fluency in English and French.

* ****Modeling Operational Tactics:**** His early career was defined by establishing core protocols for long-term undercover ops, balancing strict discipline with an uncanny ability to integrate seamlessly into diverse socio-political environments.

* ****Marseille Field Operations:**** During an early deployment in France, Yves crossed paths with the Marseille tactical intelligence network—gaining invaluable experience familiarity with US operatives like Zion and Onyx. This early working relationship established his international credibility and seamless cross-agency reach.

* ****Early Operational Successes:**** Built an exceptional track record dismantling illicit supply chains across North America and Europe, quickly becoming recognized as a top-tier asset capable of operating in high-stakes, low-visibility environments without compromising security.

****SUBJECT BRIEFING: OPERATIONAL ATTACHMENT & FIELD INCIDENT****

****LEAD AGENT ATTACHMENT: MARIE TREMBLAY****

* ****Appointment as Lead Agent:**** Following his successes in Europe, Yves Montblanc was officially appointed as the lead handler and primary agent for Director Marie Tremblay. His deep Quebec roots and shared cultural background, affinity for European cultural aristocratic destinations, and their environment of service to country allowed him to establish immediate trust and an unbreakable operational rapport with her.

* ****Managing High-Stakes Operations:**** Marie successfully guided Yves through high-density urban surveillance and covert infiltrations, relying on subtle tradecraft and distant positioning to keep her vector secure while giving her room to operate.

****THE ICE CUBE OPERATIONAL OVERWATCH****

* ****Overwatch Role:**** During the critical mission at the Ice Cube facility, Yves positioned himself on the periphery, utilizing his long-range tactical surveillance skills and deep familiarity with joint-agency protocols to maintain complete operational control over the floor without raising suspicions.

* ****Integration of Marseille Network Intelligence:**** Drawing on his previous experience working alongside Zion and Onyx with the Marseille network, Yves anticipated asset movements and structural blind spots at the Ice Cube that other operatives overlooked.

* ****Immediate Protection Incident:**** At the climax of the Ice Cube operation, when an unexpected threat directly targeted Alton, Marie made an instantaneous tactical shift—putting Yves in harm's way without hesitation. She deployed Yves immediately as an active shield and counter-measure to secure and exonerate Alton, demonstrating absolute tactical reliance on Yves's ability to neutralize the falsified threat.

****SUBJECT BRIEFING: TEAM DYNAMICS, EXPANSION & ASSET INTEGRATION****

****REMOTE INTEGRATION & COVER DIVERSITY****

* ****Global Cover Asset:**** Yves's established global cover remains one of his highest-value assets. To protect his reach worldwide, his primary assignment is maintained remotely in the fashion circuits, allowing him to feed real-time tactical intelligence and strategic guidance into field ops without compromising his identity.

* ****In-Person Team Dynamics:**** Despite operating at a distance, Yves possesses exceptional in-person team skills. When boots-on-the-ground presence is mandatory, his seamless adaptability, calm leadership, and dual-fluency allow him to unify multi-national operatives instantly. He has completed all levels of Canadian security operations Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu and Tae Kwon Do training.

* ****Marseille Network Synergies:**** Yves brings a deep understanding of the Marseille network to the unit. Having previously worked alongside Zion and Onyx during their early operations, his background bridges communications and tactical alignment between existing operatives and European networks smoothly.

* ****Expansion (Team of 9 to 10):**** With Yves officially joining as the 10th member even if remote, his unique blend of high-level national security experience from Ottawa, deep field expertise, and remote overwatch capability rounds out the unit's operational balance—giving the team a true global footprint without sacrificing tight-knit internal cohesion.

****CANADIAN SECURITY INTELLIGENCE SERVICE // SERVICE CANADIEN DU
RENSEIGNEMENT DE SÉCURITÉ****

****TOP SECRET // SPECIAL ACCESS REQUIRED****

****DIRECTIVE:** COVER IDENTIFICATION ANALYSIS & SUBLIMINAL TACTICAL EVALUATION**

****TO:**** Director Marie Tremblay

****FROM:**** Directorate of Tactical Operational Support – Ottawa Bureau

****DATE:**** August 22, 2026

****DOCUMENT CONTROL:**** CSIS-TOS-2026-8891-YVM

****SUBJECT:**** Operational Assessment: Strategic Strengths and Vulnerabilities of High-Visibility Cover Identity (Yves Montblanc)

****EXECUTIVE SUMMARY****

This document establishes the official operational assessment of Yves Montblanc's active legend: an internationally recognized high-fashion supermodel and commercial figure. Designed as a paradox, Montblanc's identity relies on ultra-high visibility to achieve absolute functional invisibility. By positioning his image across global billboards, luxury print, and broadcast advertising, Montblanc creates a profound psychological blind spot for foreign intelligence services and hostile actors.

This assessment details the structural mechanics, subliminal psychological assets, and inherent operational vulnerabilities of this legend to serve as your tactical foundation when deploying him in the field.

****I. OPERATIONAL MECHANICS: THE HYPER-VISIBILITY PARADOX****

The core philosophy of Montblanc's cover relies on the psychological principle of sensory saturation. In modern intelligence operations, total anonymity is increasingly difficult to maintain due to ubiquitous facial recognition and digital surveillance. Montblanc's identity flips traditional tradecraft by making his face universally recognizable, effectively neutralizing standard biometric flagging.

*** **Ubiquity as Saturation:**** Montblanc's visage is continuously processed across public space via high-fashion campaigns, fragrance billboards, and editorial photography. Because his face is pre-indexed in public databases as a commercial asset, surveillance algorithms and border control systems classify his movement as routine commercial travel rather than clandestine transit.

*** **The "Beefcake" Mnemonic Reflex:**** The cover deliberately exploits a pervasive cognitive bias: the societal tendency to associate high aesthetic symmetry and physique with superficiality and intellectual passivity. Observers routinely reduce Montblanc to a visual object ("look at that hunk/beefcake"), triggering a natural mnemonic reflex that dismisses him as a non-threat.

*** **Subliminal Dismissal:**** Target individuals and security details instinctively drop their guard around Montblanc. His presence is contextualized as vanity or background noise, causing hostile personnel to speak openly, drop physical operational security, or overlook his positioning in high-end venues.

****II. STRATEGIC STRENGTHS OF THE COVER LEGEND****

* **Unrestricted Global Mobility:** As a top-tier model, Montblanc's travel itinerary is intrinsically chaotic and globally expansive. Unannounced arrivals in key intelligence hubs—such as Paris, Milan, New York, or Marseille—are easily masked under last-minute commercial shoots, runway appearances, or brand activations.

* **Access to Elite & Soft-Target Environments:** Montblanc's high-fashion profile grants him frictionless entry into ultra-exclusive private galas, private yachts, diplomatic after-parties, and high-security hospitality suites where political, financial, and criminal elites congregate.

* **Plausible Material Wealth & Logistics:** His high-earning commercial status provides immediate, unchallengeable justification for luxurious accommodation, private transport, high-end technical accessories, and sudden capital transfers required for field operations.

* **In-Plain-Sight Tactical Equipment Disguise:** Wardrobe trunks, high-end photography gear, and mobile styling equipment vans serve as ideal operational covers for transporting specialized communications hardware and overwatch technology without raising suspicion during transit.

****III. SYSTEMIC VULNERABILITIES & MITIGATION PROTOCOLS****

While highly effective, hyper-visibility carries distinct operational risks that require continuous oversight by his lead handler.

* **Unwanted Public & Media Attention:**

* *Vulnerability:* Paparazzi, fan interactions, and spontaneous social media tagging pose an ongoing risk of compromising his exact physical location during live operations.

* *Mitigation:* Montblanc must maintain a rigid routine of deploying decoy itineraries, utilizing public relations team cover stories, and leveraging private security escorts to control his physical footprint in transit zones.

* **Digital Biometric Ambiguity:**

* *Vulnerability:* Over-reliance on commercial photography means digital manipulation or high-resolution facial recognition analysis by sophisticated state actors could potentially cross-reference his image with archived Ottawa national security databases if deep forensic sweeps occur.

* *Mitigation:* CSIS Cyber Division maintains active digital scrubbing and noise-injection protocols across public image repositories, ensuring subtle biometric variations exist between his commercial portfolio and official state records.

* **Target Over-Engagement:**

* *Vulnerability:* Due to his striking public persona, Montblanc frequently attracts unwanted attention from high-value targets or third-party observers, potentially interfering with stealth surveillance or discreet tailing.

* *Mitigation:* Montblanc's operational doctrine relies heavily on distant overwatch and perimeter positioning, utilizing his Marseille network integration and remote communication channels to guide field actions rather than conducting close-quarters tailing directly.

****IV. DIRECTIVE TO DIRECTOR TREMBLAY****

Director Tremblay is directed to utilize this assessment to enforce Montblanc's cover parameters during all joint deployments. You are instructed to leverage his social invisibility while maintaining strict operational distance when his public persona is active.

Montblanc's cover remains one of our most potent international assets—a shield forged from public fascination, protecting an operative of exceptional intelligence and lethal capability.

****APPROVED BY:****

Director of Operational Overwatch

Canadian Security Intelligence Service – Ottawa Bureau

—//—

****CANADIAN SECURITY INTELLIGENCE SERVICE // SERVICE CANADIEN DU
RENSEIGNEMENT DE SÉCURITÉ****

****OFFICIAL AUTHORIZATION & DELEGATION INSTRUMENT****

****SECURITY CLEARANCE:**** TOP SECRET // SAR // CSIS-MARCOM-JOINT

****ISSUING AUTHORITY:**** Director Marie Tremblay, Canadian Security Intelligence Service (Ottawa)

****RECIPIENT COMMAND:**** Director Alton Sinclair - Allied Maritime Command (MARCOM) / Joint Special Operations Command

****DOCUMENT CONTROL:**** CSIS-DIR-2026-9042-MT

****DATE:**** August 22, 2026

****SUBJECT:**** Operational Delegation, Full Cooperation Authorization, and Joint Command Integration for Yves Montblanc

****1. PURPOSE & MANDATE****

This document serves as the formal, binding authorization issued by Director Marie Tremblay, delegating full operational cooperation and strategic integration authority regarding Asset/Agent Yves Montblanc to Maritime Command (MARCOM).

Effective immediately, Agent Montblanc is authorized for full-spectrum tactical, analytical, and executive involvement across all joint CSIS-MARCOM maritime and coastal intelligence initiatives.

****2. SCOPE OF AUTHORIZATION & DECISION-MAKING INTEGRATION****

* ****Unrestricted Operational Cooperation:**** MARCOM command elements are granted full operational access to Agent Montblanc's remote overwatch infrastructure, cross-agency intelligence feeds, and established international networks (including his verified operational ties to the Marseille network operatives, Zion and Onyx).

* ****Uninhibited Decision-Making Inclusion:**** Agent Montblanc is fully empowered to sit on MARCOM joint planning boards, tactical action groups, and high-level operational command councils. He is granted direct voting, advisory, and veto-input privileges on all operational phases involving intelligence deployment, asset protection, and field execution.

* ****Non-Conflict Clause:**** To maintain maximum operational efficiency, this directive establishes that Agent Montblanc's inclusion within MARCOM decision-making structures exists

in absolute alignment with CSIS priorities. His double-hatted status as a CSIS strategic asset and MARCOM decision-maker shall be recognized by all participating command tiers without jurisdictional friction, administrative veto, or operational conflict.

****3. COMMAND STRUCTURE & PROTOCOLS****

* ****Direct Handler Line:**** Director Marie Tremblay retains primary handler oversight regarding Montblanc's long-term cover maintenance and national security protocols.

* ****Operational Command Delegation:**** For duration-of-mission tactical deployments under MARCOM jurisdiction, Montblanc's field decisions and strategic assessments carry the direct authority of CSIS Ottawa Bureau.

* ****Remote & In-Person Execution:**** MARCOM elements shall accommodate Montblanc's dual-presence mandate—granting him full executive authority whether he is contributing via secure remote overwatch to protect his worldwide cover identity, or operating in-person within joint task force command centers.

****4. AUTHORIZATION SIGN-OFF****

By order of Director Marie Tremblay, this mandate takes effect immediately upon transmission and remains active until formal mission conclusion or explicit revocation by the issuing authority.

****SIGNED:****

[ELECTRONICALLY VERIFIED]

****Marie Tremblay****

Director/ Executive Lead Agent, Tactical Operations Directorate
Canadian Security Intelligence Service (Ottawa)

****ACKNOWLEDGED & FILED:****

Joint Operations Command Center // Allied Maritime Command (STF-MSD/MARCOM)

Yves spoke up, "That's more than most services extend a liaison," he said quietly.

"You're not a liaison," Sinclair said. "You're the tenth member of this family. The paperwork's just catching up to what's already true."

Diana reached for the folder first, sliding it toward the center of the table rather than claiming it for herself — a small, unremarked gesture that nonetheless made clear the ledger belonged to all of them at once.

"Now — why the Seagulls, specifically, and why this case," Sinclair said, moving on before the moment could linger longer than the operation could afford. "Rotterdam isn't one target. It's a marketplace. Cartel buyers, mafia buyers, independent operators, all moving through the same corridor without ever needing to know each other exist. Standard field assets can infiltrate one of those worlds convincingly. Maybe two, with enough prep time. We don't have prep time, and we need people who can move through all of them without any single network ever clocking the same face twice."

He looked down the table. "That's not a job for operators with a file anyone's ever heard of. That's a job for three women Sterling's syndicate has no record of existing at all."

Sophia's smile was slow, entirely without warmth directed anywhere but the target. "Finally," she said. "Something worth packing for."

"Assignments," Sinclair said. "Diana, Sophia, Esmeralda — the Netherlands, inside seventy-two hours. You're working the corridor from the ground up: cartel contacts, mafia contacts, whoever's buying access to that toll road. I want to know who's using it before we ever move on how to shut it down." He turned. "Zion, Austin — you're not dropping the Marseille thread. Not now, not with what Onyx is still pulling off that drive and what your own trace has already turned up on the old trust. Keep working it in parallel. If Sterling's operation reaches back that far, I want to know before Rotterdam forces our hand."

"And if the two threads cross," Austin said.

"Then they cross," Sinclair said. "I'd rather find that out on our terms than his."

The secondary monitor flickered to life, and Director Rugger Wolfen's face resolved into frame — composed now, steadier than the man who'd cracked over a phone line hours earlier, though something in his posture still carried the memory of it.

"Director Sinclair," Wolfen said, with the easy, practiced authority of a man who had chaired a hundred boardrooms before he'd ever chaired an intelligence briefing. "Thank you for the speed. I won't pretend I expected to need it this badly."

"Director Wolfen," Sinclair said, with a small, respectful nod that placed the two of them, deliberately, on equal footing in front of the whole team. "This is the unit. They'll be the ones on the ground."

Wolfen studied the room a moment — not with suspicion, but with the careful attention of a man taking real stock of who he was about to trust with something he couldn't yet fully name. "My service found the pattern," he said. "We don't have the reach to run it down ourselves — not fast enough, not without exposing people I'm not willing to lose to a network this size. I'm told your unit doesn't share that limitation."

"We don't," Sinclair said simply.

"Then I'm grateful, and I'll say plainly what I said to Director Sinclair on the phone this morning, badly as I said it," Wolfen went on, something wry and self-aware crossing his face for just a moment. "I built my career on knowing exactly how much authority I carried in any given room. This is the first room in a long while where I've had to admit I don't know that number yet." He straightened slightly. "I intend to learn it quickly. In the meantime, my service is fully at your disposal."

"Then let's not waste the morning being polite about it," Sinclair said, closing the folder in front of him with a flat, final sound. "Diana, Sophia, Esmeralda — wheels up by tonight. Zion, Austin — I want a status update on the trust by end of week, sooner if Onyx pulls anything new off that drive." He looked around the table, at every face in the room at once. "Sterling built a toll road on the assumption that nobody's watching the whole thing at once. We are now. Let's make him regret ever thinking otherwise."

Nobody moved slowly. For the second time in twelve hours, the whole team leaned into the work instead of away from it — and somewhere behind them, on a screen three thousand miles east, Rugger Wolfen watched them do it, and understood, for the first time since Voss's report had landed on his desk, exactly why Sinclair had told him to trust this room.

CHAPTER 4: THE MOUNTAIN

The safehouse was nothing more than a rented flat above a shuttered bakery two blocks from the airfield — bare walls, a folding table, and enough gear spread across the floor to outfit three entirely different women three entirely different times before the night was out.

Diana knelt beside an open case, methodically checking passport stitching under a jeweler's loupe, while Sophia sorted through a rack of cover wardrobe with the brisk efficiency of someone who had long ago stopped seeing clothes as anything but equipment. Esmeralda sat cross-legged on the floor between them, running a soft cloth down the barrel of a compact pistol she'd already cleaned twice.

"You're going to wear through the finish," Diana said, without looking up from the loupe.

"I like it clean," Esmeralda said.

"It's already clean. You cleaned it in the car."

"Then I like it cleaner."

Sophia snorted from across the room, holding up a cocktail dress against her own frame and considering it with the critical eye of a woman deciding whether a weapon suited the job. "This one says cartel wife who's bored of her husband's money," she announced. "Which one says mafia accountant who's smarter than everyone in the room and furious nobody's noticed yet?"

"The gray one," Diana said, still not looking up.

"The gray one's for me," Sophia said. "I need something for you."

"I don't need a costume that announces I'm smarter than the room," Diana said. "The room usually works that out on its own, eventually. Usually too late."

Esmeralda huffed something close to a laugh, low and quiet, and kept working the cloth along the barrel in slow, even strokes.

"You know what this reminds me of," she said, after a while, not looking up from the gun in her lap. "The way the air used to feel right before —"

She stopped.

The room didn't go silent so much as it went still — Diana's loupe pausing mid-motion over the passport, Sophia's hand freezing on the hanger, both of them not looking at Esmeralda and both of them entirely aware of her at the same time.

Esmeralda set the pistol down on the cloth in front of her, carefully, the way a person sets something down when they've caught themselves reaching too far.

"That's not mine to finish," she said quietly. "Not the sentence. Not any of it." She looked up, first at Diana, then at Sophia, something plain and unashamed in her face. "What happened on the mountain stays with the ones who put us there. That was the oath before it was ever a team. It doesn't become less of one because we like the people we work with now."

"No," Diana said simply, going back to the loupe. "It doesn't."

"No," Sophia agreed, just as simply, hanging the dress back on the rack.

Nothing else was said. Nothing else needed to be.

For a moment — no longer than a breath — Esmeralda's hands went still in her lap, and the warm safehouse air seemed, briefly and impossibly, to carry a different cold entirely: thin, merciless, the particular bite of altitude that lived in the lungs before it ever reached the skin. A held breath that tasted like ice. The ghost-ache of a body that had once been asked for more than it thought it had.

It passed as quickly as it came. Esmeralda picked the cloth back up, and her hands were steady again, and whatever the mountain had briefly let through the door, the door was closed once more.

"Documents," Diana said, setting the loupe down and sliding three thin folders across the table, back to business as though nothing at all had happened in the room a moment before — which was, in its own way, exactly the point. "Cartel contact profiles for Rotterdam. Sophia, you're the accountant. Esmeralda, dockside logistics broker, minimal paper trail, easy to disappear from if it goes wrong. I'm the money."

"You're always the money," Sophia said.

"Someone has to be believable holding it," Diana said, and began checking her own passport stitching one final time.

By the time the car came for them, the gear was packed, the covers were memorized, and nothing in the small, bare flat gave away that three women had spent the evening there at all. Esmeralda climbed into the back seat last, pulling the door shut behind her with a quiet, ordinary click.

"Rotterdam," Sophia said, checking her watch. "Two hours to wheels up."

"Then we'd better not be late," Diana said, and that was all any of them said for the rest of the drive.

CHAPTER 5: CANAL WORK

Amsterdam wore its money differently than Rotterdam did. Where the port city buried its second economy under scale and paperwork, Amsterdam simply dressed it well and invited it to a party.

The private event was held aboard a glass-walled canal barge moored behind a converted warehouse in the Jordaan, string lights strung low over the water, champagne moving through the crowd faster than conversation could keep up with it. Diana arrived first, in the gray dress Sophia had claimed for her three nights earlier, carrying herself with the unhurried, unimpressed confidence of a woman who had never once needed to prove she belonged in a room like this.

Sophia followed twenty minutes later, playing the accountant with a sharpness just barely hidden beneath expensive tailoring. Esmeralda came last and stayed at the edges, a logistics broker's understated wardrobe and an even more understated presence, exactly as planned.

Diana found her contact near the bow rail — a broad, unhurried man named Bogdan, representing, by his own careful phrasing, "logistics interests out of the Balkan corridor." He didn't offer a last name, and Diana didn't ask for one.

"You're the money," Bogdan said, in the tone of a man confirming something he'd already been told rather than asking a real question.

"I'm the money that asks good questions before it moves," Diana said. "We're told your people use the extraction service directly. Not the toll. The full retrieval."

"When it's worth it," Bogdan said, and something in his face shifted, careful and proud at once — a man discussing a genuinely excellent tool. "You don't clear customs at all. Container goes in flagged clean, comes out flagged clean, and somewhere in between, it's already ours. No paper ever touches it." He spread his hands. "You want that kind of service, you pay for it properly. But once you've used it, Miss —" he waited, and Diana gave him nothing — once you've used it, you understand why nobody goes back to the old way."

"Show me," Diana said.

Bogdan smiled, and reached for his phone.

Across the deck, Sophia was watching an entirely different performance.

Yves worked the crowd the way he always did — effortless, luminous, three separate conversations deep with three separate women who all seemed convinced, individually, that his full attention belonged to them. He caught Sophia's eye once across the deck, held it exactly

half a second longer than professional necessity required, and then turned back to the woman beside him with a laugh warm enough to be genuinely convincing.

Sophia took a slow sip of champagne she had no intention of finishing.

"You could at least look bored doing it," she murmured, when the crowd finally thinned enough to let him drift close, his voice pitched low beneath the noise of the party around them.

"If I look bored, someone notices I'm working," Yves said, just as quietly, not quite looking at her either. "Bored men get remembered. I need to be forgettable in exactly the right way."

"You're a lot of things, Montblanc. Forgettable isn't one of them."

Something flickered behind his easy composure — there and gone before she could be certain she'd seen it at all. "That's rather the problem, isn't it," he said, and then, before she could answer, someone called his name from across the deck, bright and delighted, and he was gone again, folded back into the performance, leaving Sophia standing at the rail with a glass she still wasn't drinking and a frustration she had gotten considerably too practiced at swallowing whole.

Esmeralda found her opening near the barge's aft lounge, where a stack of unattended tablets sat charging behind an unlocked service door — the kind of small, human oversight that no amount of security budget ever fully closes.

She photographed three screens in under a minute, quick and unhurried, the way Tanner had once described handling something dangerous: fast enough to matter, calm enough not to break it. What she captured wasn't much on its own — shipping references, a rotating set of intermediary account codes, a handful of dates that meant nothing without context.

But one string of digits repeated across all three screens in a pattern too consistent to be coincidence: the same routing signature, over and over, threading every transaction back toward a single point of origin that none of the documents named directly.

The first real thread of the chain of custody. Not the whole rope. Just enough of it to start pulling.

The service door swung open behind her before she'd finished.

"Kunt u hier niet zijn," a security officer said — flat, unfriendly, already reaching for the radio at his shoulder.

Esmeralda didn't flinch. She turned, phone already vanished into her clutch, and offered the mild, faintly embarrassed smile of a woman who'd wandered somewhere she shouldn't have looking for a bathroom that didn't exist on this side of the boat.

"Sorry," she said, in accented, apologetic English. "Lost. Very lost."

The officer studied her a moment too long — long enough that Esmeralda felt the whole evening balance, briefly, on the edge of a decision that wasn't hers to make. Then he stepped aside, radio still in hand but no longer rising, and gestured her back toward the party with clipped, unimpressed directions.

She walked away at exactly the pace of someone who'd never once been afraid, and didn't let her hands unclench until she was three rooms away and fully out of sight.

The data reached Austin's console just after two in the morning, ranch time, routed clean through Onyx's relay with no digital footprint left behind it. She sat forward the moment the images resolved, scanning the repeated routing string with the same sharp, immediate focus she brought to every ledger that had ever tried to hide something from her.

She didn't recognize the account. Not yet.

But she recognized the shape of it — the same layered, deliberate anonymity she'd spent two straight days pulling apart on an entirely different trail, three thousand miles and one ocean away from Amsterdam.

Austin sat back slowly, staring at the screen, feeling the first cold edge of a question she wasn't ready to ask out loud yet.

Two threads, she thought. *Or one, wearing two different names.*

CHAPTER 6: TWO FRONTS

The oak table in the Sedona ops room had become, over the past week, less a workstation than a battlefield of paper — Austin's hand-drawn trust diagrams pinned beside printouts from Onyx's slow, patient recovery of the burned drive sectors, a hundred small threads that hadn't yet agreed to become one rope.

"The Uptown filing agent hasn't changed in thirty years," Austin said, tracing a line between two names with the tip of a pencil. "Same office, same retainer structure, on both sides. My family's counsel and — we think — your father's. I keep waiting for it to stop being true every time I check it again."

Zion stood at the window, arms crossed, watching the ridgeline the way he always watched it when his mind was somewhere else entirely. "Keep checking," he said. "I'd rather know for certain than almost."

Austin found Sinclair on the secure line inside twenty minutes, and true to form, the Director didn't waste breath on shock. He absorbed the two-family trust the way he absorbed every hard fact that came across his desk — quickly, quietly, already three steps ahead into what it meant for the operation before he let himself feel anything about what it meant for the man who commanded it.

"I'll pull everything Justice has on file for both families' old counsel," Sinclair said. "If two law firms were running parallel disbursements into the same trust for that long, someone eventually got sloppy enough to leave a filing error. Lawyers always do, eventually. Keep Onyx on those burned sectors — if the drive confirms what your ledger already suggests, I want it in writing before I take this any higher."

"And Zion?" Austin asked.

There was a pause on the line, brief but unmistakably deliberate. "Let him do what he's about to do," Sinclair said. "I've read enough of that man's file over the years to know he doesn't wait for permission to face something. He never has. Just make sure Padre's within earshot when he does it."

He wasn't, not exactly — but Padre was close enough. He stood a respectful distance from the porch, pretending an interest in the tack room's hinges, while Zion sat alone at the old oak table with the ranch's hardened satellite terminal open in front of him, a number keyed in from memory he hadn't let himself use in over three years.

It rang four times before anyone picked up.

"Ryder Ranch." A woman's voice, older, careful in the particular way of someone who answered a phone at that house expecting bad news more often than good.

"Miss Dolores," Zion said, and heard the old housekeeper's breath catch on the other end. "It's Zion. I need to speak to my father."

The line went quiet for a long moment — the particular quiet of someone deciding whether a ghost calling the house counted as good news or bad. Then footsteps, distant, and the heavier, older voice Zion hadn't heard since the night he'd ridden out of Texas with a murder charge at his back.

"Zion." His father's voice hadn't softened with the years. If anything it had gone flatter, more careful, a man who'd learned to say less rather than more. "I heard you were alive. I heard a great many things, actually. None of them from you."

"I'm calling about something older than any of that," Zion said, keeping his own voice level with an effort that cost him more than most breaching operations ever had. "There's a trust. Marseille, France. Money moving out of a mineral-export shell tied to this ranch, years back — years before Dallas, before any of it. I need to know what you know about it."

The silence this time lasted long enough that Zion checked the signal strength on the terminal, half convinced the line had dropped.

"Where did you hear that name," his father said finally. Not a question. A demand dressed carefully as one.

"From a harbor logbook a continent away that had my name written next to a payment I never made," Zion said. "Dad. What did you send someone to watch me for?"

Another silence — and then, quieter than Zion had ever heard the man speak in his life, an answer that wasn't quite an answer at all.

"Not you," his father said. "Never you, son. I sent someone to watch what the Ranges were sending to watch us. Somebody had to know how far Garrison Range was willing to go before he ever set his lawyers loose on your generation the way he set them loose on mine." A long breath crackled down the line. "I never expected you to end up standing in the middle of it. God help me, I never once imagined you'd fall in love with the reason I started watching in the first place."

Zion closed his eyes, one hand flat against the cool metal of the terminal, Skywalker's soft nicker drifting up faintly from the paddock behind him.

"You're going to need to tell me everything," Zion said. "Not the version you gave the lawyers. The version you never gave anyone."

His father exhaled, slow and heavy, the sound of thirty years finally coming due. "Come home, Zion," he said. "Bring the girl, if she's willing. Some things a man shouldn't say to his son over a wire, no matter how many analog tricks you've learned to keep it safe."

The line went dead. Zion sat very still for a long moment, the desert wind moving soft through the porch rafters, before he finally looked up and found Austin already standing in the doorway, watching him with the same steady, unflinching patience she'd carried since the night on the Trinity River.

"We're going to Texas," Zion said quietly. "Before Marseille. Before anything else." He stood, folding the terminal shut with a hand that wasn't quite steady. "My father's finally ready to tell me who I really was, before either of our families ever taught us how to lie about it."

He left two mornings later, quiet about it, a duffel bag and a destination he didn't share with the rest of the team beyond Sinclair — a lead on his father's side of the retainer that needed following in person rather than over a satellite line. Austin didn't ask him to explain further. She'd learned, slowly, that some doors he needed to open on his own before he could describe what was behind them.

Three thousand miles northeast, inside the climate-controlled quiet of her quarters at the Ice Cube, Marie Tremblay sat by the window with a cup of tea gone cold in her hands, and let herself, for a rare unguarded hour, simply remember.

Montreal in early spring had smelled like wet stone and lilac. They'd walked the cobblestones of the old city until well past midnight, past wooden facades older than the country either of them had sworn their lives to protect, past the corner where, decades before either of them was born, two people considerably more famous than they'd ever be had once declared, from a hotel bed, that the whole world ought to give peace a chance. Alton had told her that story with the particular delight of a man who'd clearly researched it in advance just to have something to say when they reached that corner, and Marie had laughed so hard she'd had to stop walking.

She thought about his hand at the small of her back on the wooden bridge over the old port. She thought about the way he'd ordered wine in careful, deliberately imperfect French just to watch her smile at his accent. She thought, longer than she meant to, about the quiet at the end of the weekend, the two of them standing at the departure gate not saying any of the things two directors of allied services weren't supposed to say to each other in public, saying all of it anyway with nothing but a look.

She picked up the paperwork Alton sent her

SPECIAL TASK FORCE FOR MARITIME & SOVEREIGNTY DEFENSE (STF-MSD)
DOCUMENT CONTROL: MARCOM-PSO-0091-CD CLASSIFICATION: CONFIDENTIAL // PERSONNEL SECURITY —

LIMITED DISTRIBUTION TITLE: Civilian Proximity Vetting Summary — Dubois, Chantelle M.
SUBJECT OF INTEREST: Personal association, T. Jefferson ("Onyx") PREPARED BY:
STF-MSD Personnel Security Office ORIGINALLY PREPARED FOR: Director A. Sinclair DATE
OF RECORD: August 2026

PURPOSE: Standard due-diligence review, initiated per policy whenever sustained personal contact develops between an active team member and a civilian outside the unit's operational circle. This is not a venue or event security assessment. It addresses the subject individual only.

SUBJECT BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY

Full Name: Chantelle Marie Dubois Date of Birth: October 1994 — Age 32 Place of Birth: Savannah, Georgia Current Residence: Flagstaff, Arizona (11 years) Occupation: Third-grade teacher, Mark Kelly Elementary School, Flagstaff Unified School District

Education: B.A., Spelman College, Atlanta, Georgia. Arizona teaching certification completed via evening coursework following relocation.

Employment History: Continuous, stable employment at Mark Kelly Elementary since relocation to Flagstaff, beginning in a teaching-assistant capacity while completing certification requirements. No employment gaps, no disciplinary actions on file with the district. Colleague and parent feedback gathered through standard, non-intrusive inquiry channels was uniformly positive.

Financial Profile: No outstanding debt irregularities under her own name. One historical credit and lease entanglement traced to a former partner (see below), fully resolved; subject bore no legal or financial liability once the matter was adjudicated.

BACKGROUND OF NOTE: PRIOR RELATIONSHIP

Subject was in a long-term relationship (approx. four years) with one Reddick Tyler during and following her college years in Atlanta. The relationship ended at the point of a planned relocation to Flagstaff, when Tyler was arrested at the couple's departure address on state and federal charges connected to stolen firearms, narcotics, and undisclosed cash reserves, alongside evidence of an intended distribution operation in the destination city.

Subject's name and credit were used to secure the Flagstaff residence, a fact investigators at the time confirmed was standard cohabitation logistics rather than any indication of her awareness or involvement. She was interviewed as a witness only, was never charged, named as a co-conspirator, or flagged in any capacity beyond incidental proximity. She completed the

relocation alone following Tyler's arrest, at her own expense, and has had no further contact with him or his known associates in the eleven years since.

Assessment: This history is noted for completeness, not concern. If anything, it reflects a subject who has already demonstrated, under considerably worse circumstances than anything this unit would ever expose her to, an ability to absorb a serious personal betrayal without deception, complicity, or lasting instability.

COMMUNITY STANDING & CHARACTER

- Active member and vocalist, gospel choir, [redacted congregation name per standard civilian privacy protocol]. Regarded within the congregation as a steady, well-liked presence.
- No record of substance-related incidents, disorderly conduct, or any law enforcement contact of her own in eleven years of Arizona residency.
- Described independently by multiple non-connected sources (school colleagues, church contacts) using near-identical language: reliable, warm, disciplined, private about her personal life.
- Maintains close, long-standing friendships and community ties in Flagstaff — a genuine, rooted support network rather than a transient or isolated lifestyle.

SECURITY ASSESSMENT

Red Flags Identified: None.

Risk Rating: Minimal. Subject has no ties, financial or personal, to any organization or individual of concern to this task force. Her one adjacent brush with criminal activity, eleven years prior, resulted in no charges, no ongoing associations, and by every available account, considerable personal growth in its aftermath.

Recommendation: No restriction warranted on continued personal contact with Agent Jefferson. Standard periodic review only, consistent with policy for any sustained civilian relationship involving active personnel. No further action required at this time.

ADDENDUM, HANDWRITTEN, ATTACHED TO FILE COPY:

M.T. — Read this twice, mostly because Padre's been quietly worried about our boy for weeks and I wanted to be sure before I said anything to either of them. She's clean, she's solid, and frankly she sounds like exactly the kind of person this family could use more of. Approved without reservation.

Not looking for permission, I'm thinking a date for Easter Sunday. You do remember how to ride a horse? — A.S.

The note was still sitting on the desk in front of her, in his handwriting, the one he never let a typed message replace when it mattered.

Not looking for permission. I'm thinking a date for Easter Sunday. You do remember how to ride a horse?

Marie set the cold tea aside, and for a long moment simply held the page, the way a person holds something they intend to keep long after it's stopped being useful for anything practical.

Then she picked up her secure phone and opened a line to Yves.

Clear four days, she typed. Arizona, Easter. Personal, not operational — though I imagine you'll find a way to stay half on duty regardless. I've already told Alton yes.

The reply came back inside a minute, in the easy, knowing register only Yves ever used with her. I'll pack the boots this time instead of the loafers. Someone has to represent Canada properly on horseback.

Marie smiled, alone in the cold quiet of the Arctic facility, and for the first time in longer than she wanted to admit, let herself simply look forward to something with nothing tactical attached to it at all.

The weeks that followed did not move the way weeks moved in the field.

There was no single dramatic break, no door kicked in, no server room breached under fire. There was only accumulation — Austin cross-referencing filing dates until her eyes blurred, Onyx pulling one more legible fragment out of a hard drive that seemed determined to yield its secrets one corrupted byte at a time, Diana and Esmeralda logging hours of dockside conversation in Rotterdam that mostly amounted to nothing, except for the rare thread that amounted to everything. This was the part of the work nobody wrote songs about — the slow, unglamorous digging that came before anyone knew which piece of paper was going to turn out to be the one that mattered.

It was, Padre liked to say, the same discipline as physical therapy. You didn't see the muscle rebuild itself day to day. You only noticed, months later, that you could carry weight again.

It was in the middle of exactly that stretch — three weeks deep, no breakthrough yet in sight — that the couples' sessions in the wellness room started to matter in a way none of them had quite expected.

Zion and Austin came twice that fortnight, still working through the early pages of Padre's manuscript, still keeping his one rule — never quoted back at each other, only lived near. Alton and Marie joined every other week exactly as promised, remote more often than not, Marie's face on the secure monitor lit by whatever hour it happened to be in the Arctic when their schedules finally lined up.

What surprised all four of them, separately, was how much lighter the actual investigation felt once the sessions became a fixed point in the week. Zion came back from a day chasing a filing agent's decades-old paper trail and had something to bring home besides frustration — a question from the book, a half-finished thought about what "home" was supposed to mean once this war finally ended, something Austin hadn't spent her whole day thinking about either, which meant they had somewhere new to meet each other instead of just comparing exhaustion.

Alton and Marie, worlds apart most days, found the same thing happening at greater distance. He'd spend a day managing the political weight of an operation neither of their governments could officially name in public; she'd spend hers running intelligence sweeps across half a continent. But every other week, for one hour, none of that mattered as much as whatever Padre's page had asked them to sit with together — and they came away from it, each time, with something new to tell each other that had nothing to do with either service's business. A better version of themselves to bring home to the version of the relationship they were actually building, rather than just two tired directors reciting the same operational briefings to each other in different words.

"It's strange," Austin admitted to Zion one night, late, the ranch gone quiet around them. "We fight like a single unit out there. Two halves of the same weapon. But this — " she nodded toward the manuscript, closed now, sitting on the nightstand " — this only works because we go out and live separate days first. If we did everything together, all the time, we wouldn't have anything left to bring back to each other."

Zion pulled her closer, quiet a moment, turning that over. "Coordinated," he said finally. "Not identical. Same as breaching a compound. Everybody's got their own angle. Only works because we're not all standing in the same doorway."

Austin laughed, soft, and pressed her face into his shoulder. "Only you would turn a marriage metaphor into a tactical briefing."

"Only you'd let me," he said, and meant it as the highest compliment he knew how to give.

The name surfaced on a Thursday, buried in a Rotterdam wire transfer Diana had photographed almost as an afterthought — a routing signature that matched, character for character, a fragment Onyx had finally clawed out of the Aegean Crown's burned drive weeks earlier.

Austin stared at the two documents side by side for a long time before she trusted herself to say it out loud.

"It's the same account," she said, to the empty ops room, to no one yet but herself. "Rotterdam. Marseille. The same money, wearing two different coats."

She reached for the secure line to call Sinclair, and for the first time in three weeks of slow, patient, unglamorous digging, felt the particular electric certainty of a thread finally deciding to become a rope.

CHAPTER 7: PRESSURE

Sophia had pushed for the meeting herself, and in hindsight — though hindsight was a luxury she wasn't going to get for another several hours — that was exactly the mistake.

Once Austin's convergence flagged the routing signature tying Rotterdam's corridor to the old Marseille trust, the team needed more than dockside gossip. They needed the actual ledger the signature came from, and the only person with plausible access to it was the accountant Sophia had spent two weeks becoming — sharp, credentialed, exactly the kind of quietly furious financial mind a growing criminal enterprise eventually needs to keep its books clean enough to survive an audit.

She'd asked for a look at the client's full transaction history. Reasonable, for an accountant doing her job. Reasonable enough that nobody should have blinked.

Somebody blinked anyway.

The safehouse Tanner had arranged for her sat above a shuttered print shop three streets back from the water — unremarkable, exactly as intended, right up until the moment two vehicles pulled up outside without headlights and four men got out moving with the unhurried, practiced coordination of people who had done this before and expected it to go the same way it always went.

Sophia caught the first sign of it from the window — not sound, just the wrongness of four men walking in perfect, silent formation toward a door nobody outside the network should have known belonged to her. She didn't have time to run the ledger data she'd copied. She barely had time to burn the physical printouts in the kitchen sink and get the drive itself into the lining of her jacket before the door came in.

She got two of them with her hands before the third pinned her against the wall hard enough to crack the plaster, and by the time Diana's voice crackled urgent and low through her earpiece — Sophia, status, now — she didn't have the breath left to answer in words. She managed one short, sharp transmission click instead. Two more.

In trouble. Can't talk. Still moving.

Diana was three blocks away and moving before the second click finished registering.

She didn't run — running got noticed, and noticed was the one thing she couldn't afford in the next four minutes. She walked, fast and purposeful, already shedding the "money" persona's expensive composure for something colder and more immediate, dialing a number she'd hoped she wouldn't need to use this trip.

Esmeralda answered on the first ring, already halfway across the district from her own position, her voice flat and controlled in a way that told Diana she'd heard the same clicks.

"Print shop," Diana said. "Four hostiles, unmarked vehicles, no plates I could read from the feed. Go loud if you have to. We are not losing her tonight."

"Copy," Esmeralda said, and the line went dead, replaced a moment later by the sound of an engine turning over hard.

Two kilometers away, at a gallery opening he had no operational reason to be attending except that his cover required exactly this kind of visibility on exactly this kind of night, Yves felt his phone buzz once against his palm — the specific pattern that meant team member compromised, nothing more, no details yet, because details took time neither of them had.

He didn't run either. He smiled at the woman beside him, excused himself with the easy, unbothered charm of a man stepping out for a phone call he clearly considered beneath the evening's importance, and made it to the street before the smile dropped off his face entirely.

He couldn't go to her. If Yves Montblanc showed up anywhere near a blown safehouse tonight, every camera in the district would have his face on it inside the hour, and the legend that had taken years to build would be worth nothing by morning — worth nothing to Sophia, to Diana, to Esmeralda, to any operation this unit ever ran in Europe again.

So he did the only thing his cover allowed him to do. He called in a favor from a private car service that had, on three prior occasions, discreetly moved talent away from paparazzi without ever asking questions — a driver who owed him, a car that wouldn't be flagged, a route that could plausibly explain itself as nothing more than a model avoiding an inconvenient photographer.

"The print shop on Bakkersstraat," Yves said, low and precise, into a line he trusted. "Four minutes. Whoever's waiting there needs to disappear cleanly. Whatever it costs, I'll cover it tonight."

He stood on the curb afterward, hands steady, face composed, and felt something claw at his chest that had nothing to do with his own safety at all — and everything to do with a woman he had spent months keeping at exactly the professional distance his cover demanded, standing now on the wrong side of a door he couldn't walk through to reach her.

Back at the ranch, it was Tanner who picked up the encrypted line first, and Tanner who didn't waste a single word on alarm once he understood what he was hearing.

"Give me coordinates," he said, already pulling up the regional charter registry on a second screen without being asked. "And tell me how bad."

"Bad enough," Sinclair said, standing behind him now, arms crossed, watching the logistics chief work with the same focused calm he brought to stripping a vehicle down to bare, chip-free steel. "Sophia's compromised. Extraction window's maybe twenty minutes before this becomes an international incident instead of a bad night."

Tanner didn't look up. He was already three calls deep — a private airfield forty minutes outside Rotterdam with a standing arrangement none of them had ever needed to use before tonight, a charter pilot who owed him a favor from a very different kind of night years back, a ground contact who could get a wounded woman from a burning safehouse to a runway without crossing a single checkpoint that would ask questions neither of them wanted answered.

"Twenty minutes gets her to the airfield," Tanner said, hanging up the second call and dialing a third without breaking rhythm. "Give me twenty more and she's out of Dutch airspace before anyone officially knows her name." He finally glanced up at Sinclair, something hard and entirely serious in his usually easy face. "Nobody gets left holding a door alone on my watch, Director. Not while I've still got a phone in my hand."

Esmeralda hit the print shop's rear stairwell at a dead run, and what she found at the top of it was not the clean extraction anyone had hoped for.

Sophia was upright, which was the only good news in the room — bruised along one side of her face, one arm held wrong against her body, but upright and already moving toward the window the second she saw a friendly silhouette in the doorway. Two of the four men were down, not moving; the other two had scattered at the sound of Diana's arrival through the front, buying just enough chaos and confusion for Esmeralda to get an arm under Sophia's good shoulder and half-carry her down the fire escape into the waiting car.

"Ledger drive," Sophia managed, through gritted teeth, as the car peeled away from the curb. "Got most of it. Not all of it. Ran out of time before I could pull the full custody chain."

"Most of it's more than we had an hour ago," Diana said, from the front seat, eyes fixed on the road, voice steady in the particular way that meant she was holding something back until they were somewhere safer to feel it. "Tanner's got the airfield. We move."

Sophia leaned her head back against the seat, breathing hard, one hand pressed flat against the jacket lining where the drive was still hidden, safe, half a story instead of the whole one — which was, in this line of work, usually exactly enough to matter, and never quite enough to feel like a win.

CHAPTER 8: WHAT THE MONEY REMEMBERS

Onyx had the recovered ledger drive open on three separate screens by the time Zion made it back to the ranch, road-worn and quiet in the way he always came back from his father's country — carrying something he wasn't ready to say out loud yet, the same way he'd carried it out the door two weeks earlier.

"Sophia got us most of the custody chain," Onyx said, not looking up, his fingers moving fast across a keyboard that had spent the last forty-eight hours fighting him for every legible fragment. "Not clean. Half of it's fire-damaged the same way the Aegean Crown's drive was — like whoever built this system learned the same lesson twice and installed the same kind of self-destruct both times." A grim, satisfied note crept into his voice. "Doesn't matter. I know this fight now. Give me another hour."

He didn't need the hour. He needed twenty minutes, and at the end of them, he sat back from the screen and said nothing at all for a long moment — which, from Onyx, was its own kind of announcement.

Austin crossed the room and looked over his shoulder. The routing signature filled the center screen, annotated now with a full chain of intermediary accounts instead of the single fragment she'd matched by hand weeks earlier.

"It's not similar," she said quietly. "It's not two coats on the same money. It's the same account. The Rotterdam corridor's operating capital and the old Marseille trust aren't connected, Zion. They're the same structure, expanded. Whatever your family's counsel and mine were quietly funding decades ago — that's the seed capital this entire toll network grew out of."

Zion didn't say anything for a long moment. He stood at the edge of the table, looking down at a decades-old financial architecture that connected a French port city he still couldn't fully account for to a Dutch shipping corridor he'd spent the last month tearing apart — his past and his present, finally standing in the same room without his permission.

"So whatever I was doing in Marseille," he said finally, low, "I wasn't circling the edge of Sterling's operation. I was standing inside its foundation before it ever had a name."

"Looks that way," Onyx said, quiet and steady, the closest thing to gentleness his voice ever carried.

It was Austin who found the second thread, twenty minutes later, buried in a sub-ledger neither of them had thought to open first.

"This isn't just money," she said, sitting back slowly. "There's a shipping manifest layered into the same account structure. Not drugs. Ordnance — rifles, ammunition, routed through a corridor that doesn't touch Rotterdam at all." She pulled the coordinates up on the main display,

a long chain of ports and waterways stretching from the Atlantic up through the Great Lakes. "Quebec's on this list, Zion. Near the top of it."

Zion went very still.

"The relay tower," he said. "The one Sterling hacked to frame us during the Ice Cube incident."

"I think it wasn't a decoy at all," Austin said slowly, watching the pieces settle into a shape neither of them had expected this soon. "I think it was protecting something real. Something that was already running through that corridor long before we ever crossed Sterling's path in San Sebastián."

Neither of them said anything else for a while. It was, Austin would think later, the exact feeling of watching a single loose thread refuse to stop unraveling — pulling not just a sweater apart, but the whole drawer it had been folded into.

Three thousand miles northeast, the call connected on the second ring, and Marie's face resolved onto the secure screen looking tired in the particular way that meant a long day of work rather than a bad one.

"I keep thinking about Montreal," Alton admitted, before she could ask how his day had gone. "Which is a strange thing to be doing in the middle of a war."

"It isn't strange," Marie said, something soft crossing her face. "It's the only sane thing left to think about most days." She was quiet a moment, turning her tea cup slowly on the desk in front of her. "Alton — I want to tell you something, and I want you to understand it plainly, because I don't say it easily and I won't say it twice tonight."

He waited.

"There is exactly one word I still allow myself, at my age, in this life," Marie said. "Love. I don't spend it carelessly. I have spent decades making very sure I don't. And there are exactly two people left in this world I still let myself use it on." She held his gaze steadily through the screen. "You are one of them. You already know that, I think, even if I've been slow to say it as plainly as this."

"And the other," Alton said, though something in his chest already knew the answer before he finished asking.

"Yves," Marie said simply. "Son isn't a word that's ever fit him properly — he came to me too late, too formed, too much his own person for a word that small. But love fits. It's the only word I've ever found that does." She smiled, small and a little wondering, as if she were still discovering the shape of the thing herself. "I don't know why tonight is the night I finally said it out loud. Maybe because you've been thinking about Montreal, and I wanted you to know exactly how much of my heart was actually standing on that bridge with you."

Alton didn't say anything clever back. He simply looked at her for a long moment, the political weight of thirty years sitting a little lighter on his shoulders than it had that morning.

"Thank you for telling me," he said quietly. "Both halves of it."

The trail from the weapons manifest to a name took another six hours, and the name, once it surfaced, explained a great deal about why the corridor had run so cleanly for so long.

Bruno DiTerra. Known within Sterling's organization, per one recovered internal memo, as the Shark — a nickname earned, the file suggested, from a habit of making entire vessels disappear rather than merely their cargo. Financial records tied him directly to the Great Lakes corridor's day-to-day operations, one of Sterling's most trusted lieutenants, a man who had once owed a debt large enough to cost him his life and had spent every year since paying it off in loyalty instead.

Sinclair authorized the operation within the hour. It was fast, coordinated, and — compared to the raw chaos of the print shop days earlier — almost disappointingly clean: DiTerra taken from a private dock outside a Rotterdam marina he'd flown in to personally inspect, unaware until the moment of his arrest that the same financial trail he'd spent a career helping obscure had finally, patiently, traced itself all the way back to him.

He didn't break immediately. Men like DiTerra rarely did. But sitting across an interview table from Austin, watching her lay his own ledger out in front of him — decades of careful concealment reduced to a single unbroken line on a printed page — something in his composure cracked just enough to matter.

"You don't know what he'll do to me," DiTerra said, low, the first thing approaching honesty he'd offered all night.

"We know exactly what he'll do to you," Austin said, calm and unhurried. "The same thing he'd do to anyone who stopped being useful to him. The only question left, Mr. DiTerra, is whether you'd rather stop being useful to him on your own terms, or his."

DiTerra didn't answer. But he didn't ask for his lawyer again either, and in a war built almost entirely out of silences that meant something, that particular silence was, for the first time all night, a genuinely promising one.

CHAPTER 9: THE WEEKEND COMING

Bruno DiTerra sat in federal custody by the time the team's flights touched down in Flagstaff, still not talking, but no longer entirely silent either — a distinction Austin had learned to value almost as much as a confession. Vance Sterling remained free, his name nowhere on a single piece of paper the operation had recovered, exposed to every ally service in the room and untouchable by any of them. It wasn't a clean ending. It was, everyone on the team had come to understand by now, the only kind of ending this war ever offered.

Sinclair granted the leave without being asked twice. Four days. No operational tether, no standing watch schedule, nothing but the ranch, the mountain, and each other.

The church was full by the time the family found their seats — Sedona's core scattered easily among the regular congregation, unremarkable in a room already accustomed to strangers passing through for a holiday service. Yves sat alone in the balcony, on the far side from where, moments later, two other quiet figures would slip in almost unnoticed.

The pastor came out five minutes early, before the processional, program still folded in his hand.

"Happy Easter, everyone. Everybody's got their programs — we have such an extended one for you today." He gestured toward the choir loft. "But it is my pleasure to introduce your gospel choir. Ladies and gentlemen." He stepped back for applause that barely had time to rise before he was already exiting toward the vestry, leaving the floor entirely to the twenty voices assembling behind him.

Tim stood near the end of the row beside Chantelle, robed, swaying easily into the opening bars with the rest of the choir — and Austin, watching from her pew below, thought she had genuinely never seen him look like this. Not Onyx. Not the man who bent frequencies to his will and kept his own life locked behind three separate doors. Just Tim, glowing, entirely undefended, surrounded by people who had no idea what he did for a living and loved him anyway.

He raised his arms into a high note, and in the small motion of tilting his head back, his eyes swept the balcony — and found, in the far corner, two figures he hadn't expected to see at all.

Alton Sinclair and Marie Tremblay sat together in the shadowed upper row, hands quietly joined, watching him with an open, unguarded pride that had nothing to do with any operation either of them had ever run. On the balcony's other side, Yves watched them both — enjoying the moment fully, and at the same time, exactly as ever, positioned where he could see every exit in the room.

"Anything else the two of us need to get done in church today?" Marie murmured to Alton, teasing, her eyes still on the choir.

"Well," Alton said, something warm crossing his face, "that's the interesting thing Zion and Austin taught me. A wedding day is the only event of that day. On ours, you'll be the star of the whole room." He looked back down at the choir, at Tim's radiant, unguarded joy carrying clean over the whole congregation. "But today — here, in this church, after everything they've all risked together to still be standing in one piece — look at them, Marie. Today belongs to somebody else, and I find I don't mind that one bit."

Marie's eyes shone. "Oh, Alton. We have got to get a picture. All of us, together, like this."

"Do you want to use a camera," Alton asked, perfectly deadpan, "or would you rather I just have the satellite do it?"

Marie laughed, bright enough to turn a head two pews over, and pulled her hold around him tighter. "No. We're standing together on the steps afterward, and you are going to stand up straight and smile, and so am I."

The photograph, when it finally happened outside on the church steps twenty minutes later, took three tries before Sting stopped scowling at the camera and Tanner stopped trying to hold his hat at what he insisted was "a more dignified angle." Nobody complained about the extra tries. Nobody was in any hurry to leave.

Zion and Austin found Yves near the edge of the crowd, and the goodbye that followed was warm rather than hurried — a real hug, no alarm in it at all, just three people glad to be standing in daylight together instead of a briefing room.

"Four days," Austin reminded him, pulling back with a small, pointed look. "No watch-checking until at least tomorrow."

"I make no promises," Yves said, entirely unbothered, "but I will try."

It was two mornings later, while the rest of the ranch drifted toward the stables in unhurried Easter-week rhythm, that Padre found Sting alone in the ops room, hunched over a printed inventory manifest that had come through overnight from the DiTerra interview — a partial accounting, hastily translated, of exactly what had been moving through the Great Lakes corridor for longer than anyone on this team had previously understood.

Sting didn't look up when the door opened. That alone told Padre something was wrong before a single word was spoken.

"You should see this," Sting said, and then, before Padre had even crossed the room, kept going — which was, for a man who typically measured his sentences the way he measured a cartridge load, the real alarm.

"Crates of surplus bolt-actions, still packed in the original grease paper, half of them older than either of us — the kind of stock nobody's fired in seventy years except for exactly this. AK-pattern rifles by the pallet, Cold War leftovers moving like they came off a factory line

yesterday. And underneath all of that, buried at the bottom of the manifest like they didn't want even their own people looking too closely — networked automatics, smart optics, targeting systems that shouldn't exist outside a contractor's testing range, let alone in the hands of whoever's buying wholesale off a Great Lakes corridor." He set the page down, hard enough that the sound cracked flat across the quiet room. "This isn't a black market, Padre. It's a catalog. Beginning of the last century straight through to whatever's coming next, all of it moving through the same door, and every single line on this page is a body that hasn't dropped yet."

Padre didn't interrupt. He let the silence stretch a moment after Sting finished, the way he always did, giving a thing room to finish landing before he answered it.

"You're not scared," Padre said finally, quiet, watching him closely. "You're angry."

"I'm both," Sting admitted, and for a man who rarely admitted anything at all, it came out rough and unguarded. "I know exactly what every one of those weapons does once it leaves that crate. I've built my whole career making sure our side never fails because the iron failed first. And this—" he gestured at the page, jaw tight "—this is somebody selling that same iron to anybody with the cash to buy it, no side, no cause, just volume." He looked up, something hard and entirely clear in his eyes. "I want this corridor, Padre. More than I've wanted anything since I picked up my first rifle. I want to be the one standing in front of it when it closes."

Padre rested a hand briefly on his shoulder, saying nothing else at all — because some things, he'd learned a long time ago, didn't need a response. They just needed a witness.

A quarter mile out on the ridge trail, the morning was considerably gentler.

Alton sat his borrowed horse with more competence than he'd expected of himself, Marie beside him on a steady bay mare, the two of them moving at an easy walk through pine shadow and early light. Tanner rode point a length ahead, and Esmeralda held the rear position, quiet as always, though something in the easy rhythm of the ride had softened even her usual watchfulness into something closer to simple pleasure.

"You didn't tell me you could actually ride," Marie said, glancing sideways at Alton with open delight.

"I didn't remember I could, until about ten minutes ago," Alton admitted. "Apparently it's like several other things. Comes back the moment it matters."

Ahead of them, Tanner glanced back over his shoulder just long enough to catch Esmeralda's eye — no words exchanged, just the easy, wordless understanding of two people who had spent enough quiet mornings in a stable together that a shared glance had already started to mean something neither of them had said out loud yet.

Half a mile in the other direction, on the porch of the main house, Zion sat with Austin's feet in his lap, working his thumbs slow along the arch of one bare foot while she read, actually read,

three full pages of Padre's manuscript in a single unhurried sitting for the first time since the two of them had opened it together.

"You're getting ahead of me," Zion said, not looking up from her foot.

"Somebody has to," Austin said, smiling without looking up either. "You're too busy proving the whole book right instead of reading it."

He laughed, low and easy, and for a long, unbothered while, neither of them said anything else at all — just the mountain quiet, and the particular, hard-won peace of two people who had finally stopped needing every silence between them to mean something was wrong.

Yves stayed behind that morning, as he usually did, sitting on the porch rail with a cup of coffee he wasn't drinking, watching the tree line out of habit rather than concern. He was, by every visible measure, simply enjoying the morning.

His watch buzzed once, low against his wrist.

He glanced down. Read it. Read it again.

Whatever it said, he didn't move right away — didn't reach for a phone, didn't call out to anyone, didn't so much as change his posture on the rail. He simply sat there a moment longer, coffee cooling in his hand, watching the riders disappear around the far bend of the ridge trail, giving the morning exactly as much peace as it had left to give before he'd have to be the one to take it away.

Four days, he thought. He'd made no promises. He intended to keep at least three of them.

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Zion Ryder & Austin Range
MARCOM: Sterling as a Service
STF-MSD Case 02
By Brian BJ Hall

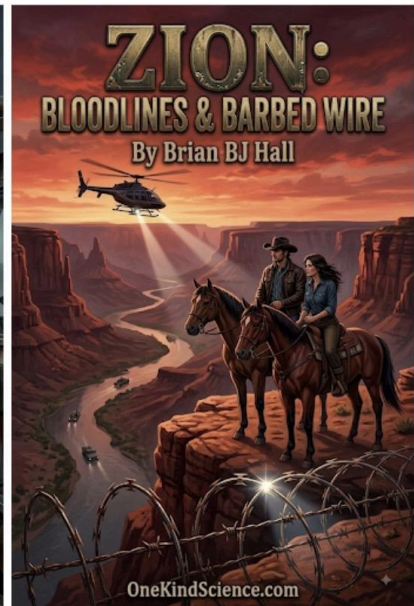
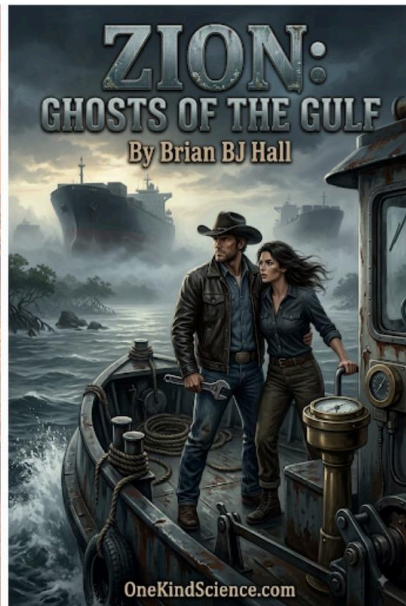
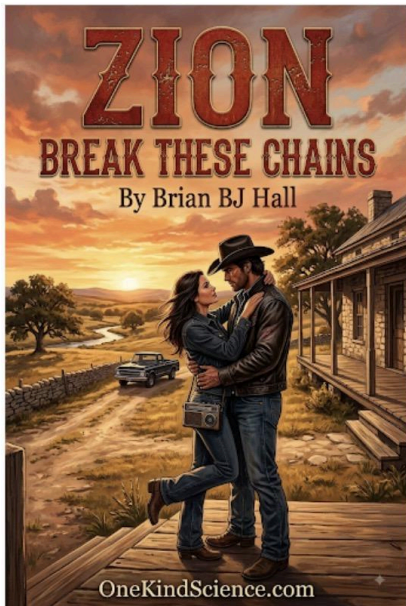
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