

ZION RYDER & AUSTIN RANGE

MARCOM: CORRIDORS OF CARNIVAL

STF-MSD Case 06



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MARCOM Case 06: Corridors to Carnival

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Chapter 1: The Carnival Cover

The dry, dust-laden wind swept across the red rock mesa surrounding the temporary MARCOM command hub outside Sedona, but inside the air-conditioned operational trailer, the temperature felt stifling for an entirely different reason.

Weeks had bled into months.

What was supposed to be a rapid transition after dismantling Vance Sterling's lucrative Mississippi supply pipeline had ground into a excruciating war of attrition. Whiteboards once covered in fluid tactical markers were now dense grids of dark-signal intercepts, satellite sweep logs, and shell-company financial trees that seemed to lead into dead ends.

Special Agent Austin Range leaned against the main tactical console, her arms crossed, watching Commander Zion Ryder trace a thumb along the glass surface of the primary map display. Across the room, Tim "Onyx" Jefferson, (a balance he just recently learned between his worlds Tim Jefferson or Onyx) he sat bathed in the blue light of four stacked monitors, his fingers typing in rhythmic, relentless bursts as he ran another broad-spectrum query through high-altitude intelligence feeds.

"Nothing on the Gulf routes," Zion said quietly, his low voice cutting through the hum of server racks. "Sterling's standard oceanic traffic has gone dark. He's purged his handlers from the North American corridor entirely."

"He didn't just go to ground," Austin added, adjusting her gaze to the broad map of South America taking shape on the wall. "He's shifting weight. You don't abandon a multi-million-dollar distribution net like Mississippi unless you've already prepped a larger reservoir somewhere else."

"And he knows we're watching," Director Alton Sinclair's voice carried from the open door of his interior office. He stepped out holding a thermal mug, his jaw set in that familiar, unyielding line. "Which means wherever he lands next, he's going to build under the noise of something massive. Something big enough to swallow whole logistics networks without setting off regional alarms."

The team fell silent, the desert heat outside mirroring the burning impatience in the room. They had Sterling's perimeter pinned, but they lacked the single operational thread that would allow them to pull the trigger.

At 03:14 local time, a soft, high-frequency ping echoed from Onyx's terminal.

It wasn't a standard alert. The tone was coded to a dark-signal relay originating from elite European intelligence channels—a backdoor channel reserved exclusively for high-tier strategic leaks.

Onyx didn't speak immediately; his fingers flew across his mechanical keyboard, stripping away three layers of cryptographic armor before the data payload decoded into clean text across his center monitor.

"Got something," Onyx said, leaning back slightly as the rest of the team converged behind his chair. "It's a whisper out of Paris, verified through our diplomatic liaisons in Lyon."

"Sterling?" Zion asked.

"Indirectly," Onyx replied, bringing up a dossier photo of a sharp-featured man with intense, silver-gray eyes and impeccably tailored dark hair. "Yves Montblanc."

Austin leaned closer. "Yves? He's been quiet since the Gizella pseudo-scandal broke in Rome. The press searched everywhere for him for six months, and he let the fire burn out on its own."

"He did," Onyx agreed, pulling up a series of encrypted itinerary drafts. "Enough time has past since Gizella and 'we' owe her some favors. The press moved on, and Yves has been biding his time. But he's not planning a quiet dinner party in Paris. He wants an event—a statement return to the fashion world. And he's setting it right in the dead center of Carnival in Rio de Janeiro."

Alton's eyes narrowed as he digested the briefing. "A global fashion spectacle in the middle of Rio during peak Carnival. It's an untouchable cover legend and brings the team together in Brazil. I like it. High fashion, international elite, billions in private capital moving through private airstrips and coastal marinas. If Yves steps onto that stage, every camera and security team in South America will be looking at the Sambadrome."

"Which gives us our venue," Zion said, his eyes darkening with tactical calculation. "And gives Sterling his smoke screen."

Two days later, in a private penthouse suite overlooking the sun-drenched arc of Ipanema Beach, Yves Montblanc stood by the floor-to-ceiling glass, a crystal glass of sparkling water resting in his hand. Sitting across from him on a white leather sofa was a young man whose physical presence commanded the room without effort—broad shoulders, golden-olive skin, and eyes that held the fiery charisma of a rising superstar.

José Trenalda.

In the Latin American market, the name *Trenalda* was a household word. He was crazy big across the entire continent, headlining major campaigns from Buenos Aires to Mexico City. In the elite, rarefied air of global haute couture, Trenalda held undisputed worldwide status as a premier rising star. Yet, despite his explosive trajectory, he hadn't quite secured that singular, legend-tier supermodel status reserved for iconic figures.

Part of it was branding. The first name *Jose*—while beloved regionally—simply didn't possess the sharp, international punch or exotic weight of a four-letter name like *YVES*.

"You're big, José," Yves said smoothly, turning around to face the younger man. His voice carried the effortless authority of a man who had built and destroyed global style empires. "Crazy big all over Latin America. But you know as well as I do that there is a glass ceiling between regional dominance and the brand *Trenalda* gaining global immortality."

José leaned back, a confident, measured smile touching his lips. "And you hold the key to that ceiling, Yves?"

"I hold the stage," Yves corrected gently. "Carnival in Rio. One night. A unified showcase featuring the premier collections from every major designer on earth. Not a fragmented series of private parties, but one definitive, jaw-dropping runway event organized through us."

José's eyes flashed with genuine interest. The sheer scale of the proposal was unprecedented for South America and he was born in Brasilia. "A single runway under the eyes of every major house in Paris, Milan, and New York... hosted right here in my home country."

"Co-headlined by you," Yves added, letting the offer settle in the room. "I bring the four-letter weight that opens the doors in Western Europe. You bring the soul and energy of Brazil. By sunrise, *Trenalda* won't just be a name in Latin America. You will be global."

José stood up, walking over to join Yves by the window, looking out over the sprawling, vibrant energy of Rio stretching toward the mountains.

"Why Rio, Yves?" José asked quietly. "You could have chosen Paris. You could have reclaimed the Grand Palais."

Yves set his glass down on a dark wood side table, his expression softening into something far deeper and more strategic. He leaned in slightly, slipping a quiet, almost conspiratorial whisper into José's ear.

"Because this isn't just about a runway, José. It's about a blueprint."

José looked at him, listening intently.

"Look at what Pernell does year after year with his fashion empire," Yves whispered, his tone filled with intense visionary focus. "Pernell doesn't just put on a show to sell a season's line; he uses his business as an economic engine. Year after year, his empire draws billions in foreign capital, media attention, infrastructure investments, and global opportunities directly into regions that need it."

Yves pointed out toward the city and the vast country beyond it.

"I have every intention of leaving this exact same legacy here," Yves continued, his voice steady and resolute. "We start with Carnival in Rio, but we structure this fashion show as an annual institution. Something that draws massive international money, global press, and genuine

economic opportunities not just to the tourist strips, but radiating outward into developing parts of Brazil year after year. We make fashion an economic conduit for the entire country."

José looked at the elder fashion icon, the ambition in his heart matching the profound responsibility Yves had just articulated.

"One night," José said, extending his hand. "We change the game."

Yves shook it with a firm, decisive grip. "One night... and by the way, we already have Gizella, guaranteed."

While Yves and José finalized their vision in the quiet luxury of Ipanema, a vastly different kind of machinery was grinding into motion beneath the city's surface.

In the narrow, labyrinthine alleyways of the northern districts and along the sprawling docks of Santos and Rio, Vance Sterling's shadow networks were mobilizing to exploit the exact same event.

For Sterling, Carnival wasn't a celebration of culture or fashion—it was the ultimate operational vulnerability. The convergence of millions of people—tourists, elites, migrant workers, and international figures—over a single weekend created a chaotic human ocean where entire logistics streams could hide in plain sight.

Deep within a darkened warehouse along the Guanabara Bay, heavy shipping containers were being unloaded under the watchful eye of armed mercenaries wearing unmarked tactical gear.

The enterprise was brutally simple and immensely profitable. Taking advantage of the sheer volume of crowds, Sterling's local syndicates were executing widespread human trafficking grabs, snatching vulnerable individuals off the chaotic fringes of the street festivals. Simultaneously, massive shipments of high-grade narcotics were being funneled through regional maritime routes to supply the exploding demand of the international crowds.

The sheer volume of dark money generated by these dual operations was staggering. It wasn't just local crime; it was an industrial-scale revenue pipeline designed to feed the rest of Sterling's expanding global infrastructure, funding illegal arms caches, corrupt political bribes, and covert transit networks extending clear across the continent.

Sterling's empire didn't care about the music, the lights, or the high fashion of the Sambadrome. They cared about the chaos. And as the rhythm of Carnival began to echo off the mountains of Rio, the shadow syndicate prepared to harvest their greatest profit yet—completely unaware that MARCOM had already begun to close the net.

Chapter 2: The Southern Fronts

The tactical reality of South America's largest nation was a lesson in scale.

Brazil was not a single, centralized theater; it was a sprawling continent within a continent, defined by distinct geographic, economic, and cultural fronts. Recognizing that Vance Sterling's syndicate was taking advantage of this massive footprint to obscure his operations, MARCOM made the strategic decision to split their strike force into two dedicated operational command hubs.

In Rio de Janeiro, Special Agent Austin Range and Commander Zion Ryder anchored the coastal command element. Nestled in a secured, non-descript commercial suite overlooking the Botafogo harbor, their hub focused strictly on high-society corridors, coastal marina traffic, and the vast logistics web surrounding Yves Montblanc's upcoming Carnival showcase. Yves's return was drawing billionaire financiers, private yachts, and international press into Rio's waters, creating a dense web of elite chatter that required round-the-clock signal interception and maritime tracking.

Four hundred kilometers to the southwest, a second tactical footprint was established in São Paulo.

Where Rio was sea, sun, and high fashion, São Paulo was concrete, industrial weight, and endless financial flow. It was the financial engine of South America—a megalopolis of twenty-two million people where heavy industrial supply lines, private heliports, and massive commercial freight networks converged. If Sterling was using human trafficking and narcotics to fund his broader network, São Paulo was where the dark money was being laundered and where the inland supply routes were being staged.

By splitting the unit, MARCOM effectively pinned the two ends of Sterling's Brazilian axis, preparing to squeeze from both directions.

Director Alton Sinclair was not a man built for passive command.

While bureaucratic protocol dictated that a MARCOM Director remain insulated at headquarters or behind high-level diplomatic desks, Alton had traded his Pentagon-level attire for dark tactical wear and a reinforced surveillance jacket. He chose to take direct personal point in São Paulo, steering ground operations from the front line.

Operating out of a retrofitted mobile command trailer hidden inside a secured logistics yard on the city's industrial periphery, Alton spent his days coordinating directly with senior officers of the *Polícia Federal*. Together, they mapped the labyrinth of legal and illegal commerce flowing through São Paulo's commercial districts.

"Look at the ledger clearing houses in the Financial Center along Avenida Paulista," Alton instructed a pair of Brazilian federal liaisons, pointing his pencil at a digital flow chart spanning three monitors. "Sterling doesn't move cash in armored trucks. He buys cargo shares in

legitimate agricultural exports out of Santos, over-invoices the transit fees, and settles the difference through offshore escrow accounts in Panama. Every time a container ship leaves the coast, his syndicate cleans another five million dollars."

Alton's hands-on approach earned immediate respect from the local federal authorities, who were unaccustomed to foreign directors standing shoulder-to-shoulder with field agents during high-risk surveillance passes. But Alton's intensity was driven by a deeper urgency: he knew Sterling was preparing a move so vast that any delay in mapping his financial infrastructure would allow the target to slip away into the South American interior forever.

Despite Alton's relentless push and the seamless coordination with Brazilian authorities, three days of high-intensity operations yielded nothing but compounding frustration.

Every raid on suspect holding facilities across São Paulo's industrial belt hit a dead wall. When tactical teams breached a cluster of high-security warehouses in the Mooca district—identified by satellite intelligence as primary distribution hubs—they found empty concrete floors, freshly wiped server drives, and immaculate paper trails pointing to fictitious shell corporations registered in the Cayman Islands.

"It's completely compartmentalized," Alton reported during an encrypted status call with Zion and Austin in Rio. He stood beside a tactical table covered in dead-end asset maps, his tone laced with suppressed fury. "Sterling's ground proxies aren't communicating with each other. The guys running the local transit teams don't even know who owns the leases on the trucks. The moment an operational node senses surveillance, it severs itself like a lizard dropping its tail."

"He's running a ghost network, Director," Zion's voice came through the secure speaker. "He's letting us hit empty shells to waste our operational momentum while the real cargo moves through secondary channels."

Alton rubbed his temples, feeling the bone-deep fatigue that comes from chasing an invisible target through an urban maze of twenty million people. The team was exhausting its ground intelligence assets, running out of actionable leads, and Sterling's clock was still ticking down toward Carnival.

By 20:30, Alton realized he was no longer thinking clearly. Staring at the same dead-end flowcharts for another hour would yield no breakthroughs.

"I'm stepping out for forty-five minutes," Alton announced to his primary tactical officer in the trailer. "Keep the dark-signal sweep running on the Santos rail line. If any ping clears seventy percent confidence, notify my comm-link immediately."

"Do you want an armed escort detail, Director?" the officer asked, reaching for a tactical comms handset.

"No," Alton replied, zipping up his dark outer coat to conceal his sidearm. "A four-man security detail in a black SUV sticks out like a flare in this district. I'm taking a walk."

Leaving the tactical yard on foot, Alton navigated the bustling, rain-slicked streets of an upscale yet quiet neighborhood tucked away from the main commercial thoroughfares. The cool night air helped clear the mental fog built up over days of high-stress briefings.

He turned down a shaded side street lined with jacaranda trees and spotted a small, secluded restaurant. It was sophisticated, discreet, and largely empty save for a few low-key patrons tucked into quiet corners—the kind of place where high-level executives went to avoid being seen.

Alton walked in, chose a small, isolated table in the back corner facing the door, and sat down. He ordered a hot espresso and a simple grilled dinner, opening a secure tablet to re-analyze the cold case files under the warm, muted lighting of the dining room. For the first time in days, he felt a brief moment of quiet solitude.

Alton had taken three sips of his espresso when the atmosphere in the restaurant subtly shifted.

It wasn't a loud disruption; rather, it was the sudden, oppressive silence that falls over a room when an apex predator steps through the door.

Alton didn't reach for his concealed sidearm, but his muscles primed instantly for violence. His eyes remained fixed on his tablet, though his peripheral vision mapped the movement in the room.

A towering figure stepped away from the curtained hallway leading to the back of the establishment and walked directly toward Alton's corner table.

The man was massive—built like solid iron, dressed in a sharp dark suit that struggled to contain his broad shoulders, with cold, disciplined eyes and facial features that spoke of Eastern European military backgrounds. Crucially, the man wore no restaurant apron or staff badge, yet his posture carried absolute authority over the premises.

The giant stopped two paces from Alton's table, looking down at the MARCOM Director with flat, unblinking eyes.

When he spoke, his voice was a deep, low rumble with a thick European accent that barely rose above a whisper.

"The table is needed for a private party, Director."

Alton slowly set his espresso cup down into its saucer, the ceramic clicking softly against the glass table top. He raised his eyes, meeting the man's impassive stare without a trace of fear.

"Is that so?" Alton said calmly, his hand dropping naturally to rest near the edge of his jacket. "I was under the impression the restaurant was open to the public."

The towering European didn't flinch. He leaned down slightly, his voice dropping even lower.

"Arrangements have been made for you in our private booth, Director Sinclair. I strongly suggest you join us."

Two thousand miles northwest of São Paulo, inside a sound-dampened, executive transit suite aboard an unmarked long-range aircraft, Vance Sterling sat in silence. The cabin was dimly lit, save for the cool ambient glow of high-bandwidth encrypted monitors displaying real-time financial tracking across Latin America.

A sharp, low-frequency chime broke the silence.

Sterling didn't move immediately; he raised a polished silver pen from his desk, tapped the glass interface of his central console, and allowed the dark-money ping to clear decryption. The transmission originated from an insider asset embedded within a regional land registry in Brazil.

As the data unrolled across the screen, Sterling's eyes narrowed slightly.

Carlos Vasquez—his trusted regional manager, the man tasked with overseeing local transport and holding logistics across the southern cone—had been quietly busy. Over the preceding four months, Vasquez had executed a series of unauthorized property acquisitions across both Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. Using secondary shell corporations registered in Mexico and Panama, Vasquez was carving out private physical footprints, safehouses, and independent asset troves.

It wasn't administrative negligence. It was leverage. Vasquez was building an independent baseline—preparing either to carve off a piece of Sterling's South American syndicate for himself or to construct an exit ramp to flip to federal authorities if MARCOM's pressure became unbearable.

Vance Sterling leaned back in his leather chair, his face entirely devoid of anger. To Sterling, emotional reactions were inefficient. Traitors were simply broken machinery that needed to be replaced.

He picked up a secure satellite communicator and keyed a direct code.

"Inform Vasquez that our schedule has advanced," Sterling said, his voice terrifyingly calm and smooth. "Tell him I will meet him at the private charter airfield in Acapulco in three days to review the South American expansion budget personally."

He disconnected the line, marked Vasquez's asset file for immediate terminal liquidation, and closed the console.

Back in the quiet, dim interior of the São Paulo restaurant, Alton Sinclair remained sitting at his corner table, his hand resting within striking distance of his concealed sidearm.

The towering European operative stood unmoving, his heavy frame casting a dark shadow across Alton's espresso cup.

Before responding to the giant's invitation, Alton's sharp eyes subtly flicked toward the front entrance of the restaurant. Standing just inside the glass doors was a second operative—equally muscular, wearing a fitted dark suit. As Alton's gaze locked onto him, the man at the door made a deliberately slow, measured movement. He pulled back the left lapel of his jacket just far enough to reveal the polished grip of a holstered tactical firearm.

The gesture was smooth, controlled, and distinctly unthreatening. The man did not reach for the gun, nor did he shift into an offensive firing stance. Instead, his eyes held Alton's with an unspoken message: *The perimeter is locked down. We are keeping outside threats out, not keeping you hostage.*

Alton's tactical instincts processed the field parameters instantly. This wasn't a syndicate assassination squad or a street-level shakedown. If an armed crew wanted him dead, they would have opened fire the moment he sat down. This was a high-tier security bubble—a protective escort guaranteeing his physical safety for a meeting that had been orchestrated with surgical precision.

Calculating his options, Alton let out a quiet, measured breath. He slowly withdrew his hand from his coat, leaving his weapon holstered, and stood up from the table.

"Lead the way," Alton said flatly.

The European operative gave a single, tight nod, turning to lead Alton past the heavy velvet curtain that separated the main dining room from the restaurant's private back booths.

The heavy velvet curtain fell shut behind Alton, muffling the ambient classical music of the main dining room into a low, distant hum.

The back room was dimly lit, paneled in dark mahogany and illuminated by the soft, warm glow of recessed sconces. Sitting in the center booth, leaning back against plush leather cushions with an air of relaxed, dangerous elegance, was a man Alton knew better than almost any enemy on earth.

Rajan Al-Fassad.

RAF.

The legendary financier third in command of the MORCO criminal syndicate sat with one arm stretched casually across the top of the leather booth. In his other hand, he slowly swirled a heavy crystal glass filled with amber liquor, the ice cubes clinking softly against the glass.

His sharp, predatory eyes locked onto Alton the moment the MARCOM Director rounded the corner. A slow, disarming, and thoroughly dangerous grin spread across RAF's face.

"Alton, my good friend..." RAF said, his voice dripping with smooth, aristocratic charm. He gestured casually toward the vacant leather seat opposite him. "How are Marie and the rest of the team?"

Alton remained standing for a long, heavy second, his jaw setting hard as he processed the sheer audacity of RAF's presence on Brazilian soil. A director of one of the world's most formidable intelligence-crime cartels was sitting ten feet away from him in a public restaurant in São Paulo, asking after his partner as if they were old university colleagues catching up over drinks.

"You're far out of your standard territory, Rajan," Alton replied, his voice low and steel-hard, refusing to acknowledge the pleasantry.

"Territory is a fluid concept in our line of work, Director," RAF smiled gently, setting his glass on the coaster. "Please... sit down. If I wanted you dead, we wouldn't be wasting good liquor."

Alton smoothly slid into the booth opposite RAF, placing both hands flat on the polished mahogany table between them.

The physical space between the two men was less than three feet, yet the room felt heavy with the weight of decade-long proxy wars, covert ops, and classified files spanning three continents. They were two master strategists who had spent years hunting, tracking, and counter-positioning against each other across international borders.

"I have to hand it to you, Alton," RAF began, pouring a small splash of dark liquor into a second glass and sliding it across the table toward Sinclair. "Your work dismantling Sterling's Mississippi pipeline was impressive. Brutal, efficient, and thoroughly disruptive to his global cash flow."

Alton didn't touch the glass. "If you're here to offer congratulations, save your breath. MARCOM doesn't take notes from MORCO."

"Of course not," RAF chuckled softly, taking a slow sip from his own glass. "You operate on honor, institutional duty, and the preservation of global order. I operate on profit, influence, and survival. But even parallel lines converge when the mountain between them is large enough."

"Vance Sterling," Alton stated.

"Vance Sterling," RAF confirmed, his smile vanishing, replaced by a cold, calculating intensity. "We are playing a very complex game of chess, Director. You, me, Sterling, the Europeans... every piece moved in Rio or São Paulo reverberates across London, Paris, and Washington."

Both men locked eyes, entering an unspoken protocol. Every word spoken was being evaluated for hidden leverage, tactical intent, and strategic vulnerability. RAF was testing Alton's pressure points; Alton was reading RAF's posture, calculating what drove the master criminal to step personally into MARCOM's crosshairs on South American soil.

As the quiet dialogue continued, an oppressive operational reality settled over the mahogany table.

Both Alton and RAF were fully aware of the sheer volume of classified intelligence each held on the other. Alton possessed enough hard operational data on MORCO's European banking routes to trigger coordinated INTERPOL raids across six countries. RAF held deep, subterranean intelligence regarding secret Western black-ops, diplomatic compromises, and sensitive personnel profiles—including details on Alton's private life with Marie Tremblay.

They had reached a point of information saturation—a strategic threshold where both men possessed so much high-grade intel on their rival that it became almost too heavy to use.

If Alton signaled his tactical team not far outside to storm the restaurant and arrest RAF, the immediate fallout would trigger automated dark-leaks across European intelligence networks, compromising active MARCOM operations and placing Marie in catastrophic danger. If RAF attempted to eliminate Alton, MARCOM and CSIS would launch an unyielding, joint military scorched-earth campaign that would dismantle MORCO's global infrastructure piece by piece.

They were locked in a perfect, paralyzed intelligence stalemate.

Neither man could pull the trigger without destroying himself in the process. They sat in the dim light of the São Paulo booth, two apex predators suspended in a deadly, quiet equilibrium, bound by the strange, mutual understanding that for the next hour, their survival depended entirely on the intelligence they chose **not** to use.

Chapter 4: Isolated Sanctuary

Eighty kilometers down the coast from the suffocating pressure of São Paulo and the heavy, urban surveillance grids of Rio, the Atlantic Ocean crashed against an isolated stretch of pristine beach.

Here, shielded by towering coastal cliffs and dense, emerald rainforest, Yves Montblanc and Sophia stole away into a world where shadow warfare, dark-signal intercepts, and international syndicates simply could not reach them.

The late afternoon light painted the sky in shades of bruised violet and burning gold. Yves and Sophia rode two magnificent, dark-coated Brazilian horses, galloping side by side along the edge of the pounding surf. It was a moment of pure, unbridled physical exhilaration—the thunderous, rhythmic impact of powerful hooves against packed, wet sand echoing above the roar of the tide.

Salty sea spray splashed high into the air, glittering like liquid silver as it caught the fading sun and brushed across their skin. Sophia's dark hair flew wildly behind her, her face lit with a breathless, radiant laughter that Yves had not seen since before the crisis in Costa Rica. Yves rode beside her with effortless, practiced grace, his hands light on the reins, his eyes locked on her as the horses flared their nostrils, breathing in the cool, iron-rich ocean air.

For a few fleeting miles, they were not operatives, handlers, or international targets. They were simply two lovers racing the tide.

As the sun dipped lower, casting long, dramatic shadows across the beach, they pulled the horses to a gentle walk, leading them up a private, winding trail that cut through the coastal palms to a secluded, modern villa perched on the cliffside.

They unsaddled the horses, letting them roam in the fenced paddock beside the villa, and stepped inside the glass-walled sanctuary. The physical charge of the ride transitioned seamlessly into an overwhelming, magnetic pull. Shedding their damp, salt-crusting riding gear right in the entryway, Yves drew Sophia into his arms.

Their lips met with a sudden, intense hunger—a fierce, unhurried passion fueled by the constant, looming threat of the world outside. Against the backdrop of the crashing ocean below, they undressed each other aggressively pulling at belts and strings. He laid a blanket about 25 feet from the water as Sophia lay back bare. She spread her legs already feeling the wet fire inside her spreading, “Help yourself Yves.”

“No Chica... soy Papi” reliving their first night together he replied. “However, I can’t say I can think of a better sight”. His kisses from her nipples, down her belly, grazing on a thin patch of hair, then finally plunging his mouth into and around her sex.

“ that’s so incredible.” She squealed. “ Yes, Yes, just like that”

He lifted his head and Yves said with a smile, "I knew you'd like that I was writing my name... Montblanc. It's synonymous with masterpieces" alluding to the famous quill and pen maker that was very distant in his family and unconnected.

"Get back to the masterpiece" she snapped as he dove back devouring her while her hips bucked uncontrollably.

Having craved every touch and kiss for quite some time, they made slow, breathless love on the sandy beach. Later, at a quaint villa, in a broad linen bed, their bodies intertwined moving as one being to the sound of the waves as the ocean breeze whispered through the open terrace doors.

By nightfall, the high-tide waves roared steadily against the rocks beneath the cliff, a deep bass note that vibrated softly through the villa's hardwood floors. In the far distance, down the coast toward Rio, the faint, rhythmic pulse of Carnival music drifted across the water—a reminder of the sprawling city preparing to ignite in celebration.

Inside the quiet sanctuary of the bedroom, the world had shrunk to the space between them.

Soft, warm ambient lamps cast gentle shadows across the white linen sheets. Sophia lay wrapped in the light blanket, resting her head against Yves's bare chest. His arm was draped around her shoulder, his fingers slowly tracing lazy, comforting circles along her back.

In this hidden space, the false legends, the protective armor, and the hyper-vigilance required by their lives stripped away entirely. Yves wasn't the untouchable, four-letter fashion icon commanding global media; Sophia wasn't the razor-sharp tactical intelligence officer monitoring dark-web chatter. They were two people who had survived the fire together, holding on to the quiet reality of each other in the dark.

The cool sea air filled the room, carrying the rich scents of blooming jasmine from the garden and the sharp salt of the Atlantic, wrapping them in a protective cocoon far removed from the cold calculations of Vance Sterling and Rajan Al-Fassad.

Sophia shifted slightly, her hand coming to rest flat over Yves's heart. She listened to its steady, deliberate rhythm—a grounding contrast to the chaotic world they navigated.

"I still think about the cottage," Sophia whispered softly, her voice carrying a rare, vulnerable intimacy. "Back in Costa Rica. When everything was falling apart around us, and we didn't know if we'd make it out of the brothel pipeline alive."

Yves tilted his chin down, kissing the top of her head, his grip tightening around her slightly. "We made it out because we had something worth surviving for, Sophia."

"It's different now," she murmured, looking up to meet his intense, silver-gray eyes. "Back then, it felt like we were running from the shadows. Now, we're walking right into the center of the lights. Carnival. The press. Sterling's syndicate. Every eye in South America will be on you."

"Let them look," Yves said, his voice quiet, steady, and filled with unyielding conviction. "Our love isn't a vulnerability anymore, Sophia. It isn't a secret they can use to break us. It's the anchor. It's the one thing in this entire crazy, broken world that is absolute."

Sophia smiled, a deep, peaceful expression touching her lips as she leaned up to kiss his jawline. In the quiet darkness of the coastal villa, the emotional scars of their past missions felt healed, replaced by a profound, unbroken trust.

Yet, beneath the serenity of their sanctuary, the relentless ticking of the operational clock never truly stopped.

As the midnight hour passed, Yves lay awake for a brief moment, gazing out the floor-to-ceiling glass at the dark horizon where the ocean met the starless sky. Tomorrow, the brief illusion of peace would end.

At dawn, the armor would have to go back on.

Yves would have to step out of this quiet paradise and transform back into *YVES*—the commanding, larger-than-life fashion titan who had to dominate the global media stage alongside José Trenalda. He would have to navigate press junkets, high-society gala dinners, and secret meetings, holding the eyes of the world so MARCOM could operate in the shadows.

And Sophia would have to step back into her tactical skin, strapping on her ear-piece, priming her encrypted comms, and scanning the crowds for syndicate spotters, human traffickers, and Sterling's high-tier enforcers.

They both knew the stakes. One slip on the runway or in the field, and the entire operation would collapse. The quiet sanctuary of the villa was a precious, stolen mercy—a brief breath of oxygen before diving back into the deep water.

While Yves and Sophia held each other in the quiet, love-filled sanctuary of the coastal villa, four hundred kilometers away in São Paulo, the darkness was absolute.

In the back booth of the secluded restaurant, the ambient light reflected off Rajan Al-Fassad's crystal glass. Alton Sinclair sat frozen in a high-stakes mental stalemate with the MORCO mastermind, two veteran directors locked in a lethal game of intelligence chicken where a single wrong word could trigger international fallout.

In Acapulco, Vance Sterling was quietly marking his own regional director for terminal execution, preparing to bleed his own organization to preserve his control.

And in the dark warehouses along Guanabara Bay, Sterling's human trafficking networks were forcing terrified captives into shipping containers under the blinding flash of harbor lights. Girls (mostly) who come to the city for vacation or for more opportunity and find out the hard way, when you realize it arrives, it's already too late. You are taken, you are trapped, you are terrified, and you are used in the most vile sadistic ways.

The contrast was stark, vivid, and absolute. On one side lay the ruthless violence, greed, and political deception of the underworld; on the other lay the fierce, deeply protected love and human connection that gave the MARCOM family the strength to fight.

Yves tightened his arms around Sophia, pulling her closer against his side as the ocean waves crashed below, holding fast to the sanctuary they had built before the storm broke wide open.

Chapter 5: Tectonic Plates

The heavy mahogany booth in the back of the secluded São Paulo restaurant held a silence so dense it felt physical.

Alton Sinclair sat perfectly still, his eyes locked onto Rajan Al-Fassad. Across the polished wood, the MORCO mastermind swirled the dark amber liquid in his crystal glass, unbothered by the sheer weight of the intelligence standoff between them.

"We both know how this ends if either of us makes a hasty call, Director," RAF said softly, the aristocratic smooth edge returning to his voice. "You trigger your tactical sweep outside, my automated relays dump six years of classified Western black-ops logs onto public servers. Marie's location in Paris becomes public knowledge by midnight. I attempt to take you off the board, and MARCOM levels every banking hub MORCO owns from Zurich to Singapore."

"You didn't orchestrate this perimeter just to explain mutual assured destruction to me, Rajan," Alton countered, his voice steel-hard. "What do you want?"

RAF set his glass down with a soft, decisive click.

"Vance Sterling is moving too fast," RAF stated, his demeanor shifting into cold, ruthless calculation. "He's disrupting the balance. His aggressive expansion into South American trafficking and unhinged logistics is drawing heat that threatens operations far larger than his own. I want him neutralised just as much as you do."

Alton narrowed his eyes, reading every micro-expression on the criminal director's face. "You want MARCOM to do your dirty work."

"I am offering an operational convergence," RAF corrected gently. "Sterling thinks he operates in the dark. He doesn't realize his regional manager, Carlos Vasquez, has already been targeted for elimination. Vasquez is being summoned to a private charter strip in Acapulco in forty-eight hours under the guise of an expansion audit. Sterling intends to bleed his own line to sever his paper trail."

RAF slid a slim, silver encrypted flash drive across the mahogany table, stopping it an inch from Alton's hands.

"The flight telemetry, security codes, and Vasquez's asset trail are on that drive," RAF said, sliding out of the booth and standing to his full height. "Consider it a professional courtesy, Director. Use it to catch Sterling... or let him tear himself apart. Either way, our business here is concluded."

Before Alton could move, RAF's massive European bodyguard stepped between the booth and the hallway, providing a seamless visual shield as RAF disappeared past the velvet curtain into the rain-slicked São Paulo night. Alton picked up the silver drive, feeling the cold weight of a temporary, dangerous truce.

Three thousand miles away, high above the Pacific coastline, the heavy double doors of a private hangar at the Acapulco charter airfield clicked shut with a metallic thud.

Inside, the air was cold, smelling faintly of aviation fuel, leather, and fresh paint. Vance Sterling stood on the polished concrete floor, immaculate in a bespoke charcoal suit, watching a sleek, unmarked Gulfstream jet power down its engines.

A side passenger door opened, and Carlos Vasquez stepped down the mobile airstairs. Vasquez, a sharply dressed man in his late forties with slicked-back hair, carried a heavy leather briefcase. He walked toward Sterling with a wide, confident smile, oblivious to the silence hanging in the hangar.

"Vance," Vasquez said, extending a hand as he approached. "The South American land allocations are fully secured. We've established seven new holding centers across Rio and São Paulo under the Panama shell groups."

Sterling didn't take his hand. He didn't look at the briefcase. He simply stared into Vasquez's eyes with a flat, terrifying vacancy.

"You built four independent safehouses in Mooca under your personal offshore holding," Sterling said smoothly, his tone conversational. "And three private asset troves in Barra da Tijuca. All structured with secondary keys registered to your brother-in-law in Guadalajara."

Vasquez's smile froze instantly. The color drained from his face as his hand dropped slowly to his side. "Vance... those were contingencies for the syndicate's protection against MARCOM—"

"You were building an exit ramp, Carlos," Sterling interrupted softly. "You assumed that because the operational volume in Brazil was so massive, I wouldn't audit the baseline ledger."

Sterling raised a single finger.

From the shadows behind the hangar's support pillars, two silent enforcers stepped forward. Before Vasquez could scream or reach for his waistband, a muffled, high-velocity suppression discharge echoed softly against the high steel rafters.

Vasquez collapsed onto the cold concrete floor. Sterling didn't even look down at the body. He stepped over the leather briefcase, pulled a silk handkerchief from his pocket, wiped a microscopic speck of dust from his sleeve, and turned toward his chief logistics officer.

"Re-route all of Vasquez's Brazilian holding codes directly into the central Carnival pipeline," Sterling ordered calmly. "And accelerate the Guanabara Bay container loading schedule by twelve hours. You move to Rio"

Twelve hours later, as the rising sun burned away the ocean mist hanging over Guanabara Bay, the MARCOM command suite in Botafogo was buzzing with high-intensity energy.

Director Alton Sinclair stood at the head of the briefing table, his tactical jacket zipped to the chin, his face showing the strain of a man who hadn't slept in two days. Beside him, Special Agent Austin Range and Commander Zion Ryder reviewed the decrypted data streams flowing from the silver flash drive Alton had brought back from São Paulo.

Across the console, Onyx's hands flew across his mechanical keyboard, cross-referencing RAF's leaked flight manifests with real-time satellite telemetry over Mexico and Brazil.

"Data clears," Onyx confirmed, bringing up a 3D structural render of the Guanabara Bay shipping terminal. "Vasquez is off the board. Sterling executed him in Acapulco six hours ago and absorbed his local infrastructure. The entire syndicate operation has collapsed into a single, high-density push right here in Rio."

"He's using the spectacle of carnival as his final window," Austin observed, pointing to the real-time satellite feed overlaying the Sambadrome and the adjacent coastal docks. "Yves's event is pulling every local law enforcement asset, private security detail, and international media crew that weren't already working a parade or a sideshow, into the city center. It leaves the maritime shipping lanes completely exposed."

Zion stepped forward, leaning his heavy hands on the edge of the tactical table. "Then we don't fight his distraction. We use Yves's showcase as our own shield. While the world is watching the runway, we drop directly onto Sterling's container grid at the docks."

Alton looked around the room at his team—hardened, precise, and completely united.

"Set the strike parameters," Alton commanded. "Zion, you take the dock interdiction team. Austin, you cover signal security and high-value target extraction. Onyx, keep our dark-signal relay locked onto Sterling's command jet. We end this pipeline tonight."

While MARCOM finalized its tactical drop, three miles away inside the grand, marble-floored backstage pavilion of the Rio Showcase, an entirely different kind of tension hung in the air.

Racks of breathtaking, high-concept garments lined the walls—dramatic silks, structured metallics, and hand-embroidered avant-garde pieces worth millions. Dozens of international models, makeup artists, and stylists moved in a disciplined, hyper-fast rhythm under the blinding white glow of vanity mirrors and industrial studio lights.

Yves Montblanc stood near the central dressing suite, wearing a sharply tailored dark suit that exuded absolute, effortless authority. Beside him, José Trenalda adjusted the collar of a custom-designed, emerald-and-gold jacket that captured the vibrant, majestic spirit of Brazil.

José looked at his reflection in the glass, his jaw tight, his chest rising and falling with deep, controlled breaths. The magnitude of the night was settling onto his shoulders. Outside the pavilion, the distant, thunderous roar of eighty thousand spectators packing the Sambadrome echoed through the walls.

"Nervous, José?" Yves asked softly, stepping up beside the younger star and placing a steadying hand on his shoulder.

José let out a short, quiet breath, meeting Yves's silver-gray eyes in the mirror. "It's... loud out there, Yves. Every network from New York to Tokyo is broadcasting live. My whole country is watching."

"Good," Yves said, his voice calm, resolute, and deeply reassuring. "Let them watch. You aren't just walking a runway tonight, José. You are representing the future of this continent. Remember what we talked about on the beach. The music, the lights, the press... they are temporary. The economic door we open tonight stays open forever."

José looked at Yves, the anxiety in his eyes melting away, replaced by an intense, burning fire. He stood tall, adjusting his cuffs with newfound confidence.

"Trenalda," José said, a slow, brilliant smile breaking across his face.

"Trenalda," Yves agreed with a firm nod. "Now let's go show the world how it's done. Gizella will be here in about 5 minutes."

Night fell over Rio de Janeiro like a heavy velvet curtain, lighting up the city in a dazzling sea of neon, pyrotechnics, and roaring crowd energy.

The rhythmic, earth-shaking pulse of samba drums echoed off the surrounding mountains as Carnival reached its fever pitch. At the Sambadrome, blinding spotlights sliced through the night sky, signaling the start of Yves Montblanc and José Trenalda's historic fashion showcase. Millions of viewers worldwide tuned in, Gizella now a household name completely captivated the crowds with her glitter hair and leather boots. Intoxicated by the grandeur, the music, and the high-fashion spectacle unfolding on all the stages, she was in bliss, she had become elite, and Yves was truly her friend for life now.

Sophia stood in the shadowed wings of the VIP pavilion, wearing an elegant dark evening dress that concealed her lightweight tactical earpiece and sidearm harness. Her eyes constantly scanned the crowd, her hand resting near her waist as she monitored dark-signal pings on her wrist display. Yves moved onto the main floor, his presence commanding the international press, holding the eyes of the global media exactly where MARCOM needed them.

Four miles down the coast, away from the glittering lights of the Sambadrome, the darkness was absolute.

Under the cold, flickering floodlights of the Guanabara Bay industrial terminal, heavy steel shipping containers were being hoisted onto massive cargo vessels. Armed mercenaries in unmarked black gear patrolled the perimeter, enforcing a brutal, silent lockdown over the terrified captives trapped inside the steel hulls.

In the shadows outside the terminal fence, Commander Zion Ryder lowered his night-vision goggles, signaling his tactical team as they moved into breaching positions.

The tectonic plates of South America's shadow war had shifted to their final position. The stage was set, the distraction was live, and the net was about to snap shut.

Chapter 6: Thunder at Guanabara

The bass of eighty thousand voices and a hundred thousand drums thundered through the concrete ribs of the Sambadrome. High above the runway, pyrotechnics erupted in golden showers, blinding the television cameras and turning the night sky into a glittering canopy. On the catwalk, Gizella stepped out under the primary spotlights, her silver-glittered hair cascading down her back like spun moonlight, her high-leather boots striking the glass surface with sharp, hypnotic rhythm. The crowd erupted into a deafening roar. In that moment, she wasn't just a survivor of past scandals; she was fashion royalty, completely enraptured by the electric energy of Rio.

Beside the VIP runway, Yves Montblanc and José Trenalda stood shoulder-to-shoulder, bathed in flashbulbs, commanding the global press corps with absolute authority. Every lens in South America was locked on them.

Four miles down the coast, at the Guanabara Bay container terminal, the world was pitch black and deathly quiet.

Commander Zion Ryder crouched behind a rusted steel I-beam at the perimeter fence, his thermal optics focused on six armed mercenaries holding positions around cargo hold Delta-4. Beside him, Special Agent Austin Range checked the action on her suppressed carbine, her eyes hard, reflecting the distant glare of the harbor lights.

"Onyx, status on the harbor grid," Zion whispered into his throat mic, his voice flat and steady against the static.

"Grid is isolated, Commander," Onyx replied instantly from the Botafogo command suite. "I've looped the terminal's closed-circuit security feeds. Local maritime police are held three sectors north on a false distress ping. You have six minutes before Sterling's cargo ship clears the gantry cranes."

"Six minutes is plenty," Zion said, raising three fingers to his assault team. "Breach on my mark."

The breaching charge detonated with a sharp, concussive *CRACK*, blowing the heavy padlock off the primary access gate and sending a spray of white sparks across the damp asphalt.

Before the smoke could clear, Zion and Austin moved through the gap like shadows.

"MARCOM! WEAPONS DOWN!" Zion roared, his voice cutting through the heavy hum of the terminal's diesel generators.

The response was instant and lethal. Two syndicate mercenaries spun around, raising automatic rifles toward the entry point. Austin fired three controlled bursts, double-tapping the first shooter in the chest before pivoting to neutralize the second against the hull of a flatbed tractor-trailer.

"Suppression fire left!" Austin called out, darting behind a stack of hardwood pallets as submachine-gun fire chewed into the wooden frames, sending splinters flying through the dark.

Zion flanked wide, vaulting over an iron hitch and coming down hard on the syndicate team leader. He drove his rifle stock across the man's tactical helmet, sweeping his legs out from under him, and pinned him to the steel floor with a knee to the ribs. Within forty-five seconds, all six perimeter guards were disarmed, zip-tied, and neutralized.

Austin sprinted past the fallen guards directly toward the dark, corrugated steel doors of hold Delta-4—a cluster of four massive, temperature-controlled shipping containers sitting under the gantry crane.

Austin inserted a hydraulic spreader into the seam of the primary container door and torqued the handle. The heavy iron lock groaned, sheared, and popped open with a heavy metallic boom.

She threw the doors back.

The stench of sweat, stale air, and sheer terror hit her like a wall. Inside the windowless, unventilated steel box were thirty young women, huddled together on thin blankets spread over the corrugated floor. Their faces were pale, their eyes wide with panic as the harsh glare of Austin's tactical flashlight swept across them.

"It's okay! It's okay!" Austin shouted, instantly lowering her rifle to hang across her chest and raising her bare hands. She spoke in rapid, fluent Portuguese. *"Nós somos a MARCOM. Vocês estão salvas. Está acabado."* (We are MARCOM. You are safe. It is over.)

A collective, shuddering gasp echoed through the container, followed by low, breathless sobs of relief. They were the victims Sterling's scouts had plucked off the chaotic fringes of Carnival—tourists, local students, and young women lured with promises of event work, only to be trapped inside a dark shipping pipeline bound for international waters.

"Zion, I've got thirty IVs in container one," Austin called into her comms, her voice tight with suppressed anger at the syndicate's brutality. "Call in the federal medical transport team. We need buses and blankets at the south gate now."

"Copy that," Zion replied from the perimeter. "Hold your position. We're opening containers two through four."

As the tactical team secured the container grid, Onyx's screens in Botafogo flared with red tracking alerts.

"Director Sinclair, we have movement at the Santos private airfield," Onyx announced, zooming in on a satellite high-resolution optical feed. "Sterling's personal Gulfstream has just spooled its engines. Transponder is dead-dark. He knows the Guanabara terminal went offline."

Alton Sinclair stepped up to Onyx's chair, leaning over his shoulder. "He's cutting his losses and running. What's his flight vector?"

"Heading northwest toward international airspace over Peru," Onyx reported, his fingers executing a rapid sequence of high-altitude overrides. "He thinks he can disappear into his pan-Asian banking channels."

"Not tonight," Alton said coldly. "Execute Protocol Nightfall."

Onyx tapped a single key. Across three diplomatic networks, an automated dark-signal payload unlocked. MARCOM didn't fire a missile; they fired data. In less than forty seconds, every international bank account, shell corporation, and private aviation clearance code linked to Vance Sterling's name was frozen by synchronized court orders dispatched from federal judges in Brasilia, Washington, and London.

High above the clouds, Sterling sat in the plush leather cabin of his jet as his satellite phone suddenly buzzed with endless, cascading red error warnings. His pilot's frantic voice came over the cabin intercom.

"Sir! Our flight clearance over Peru has been revoked! Air Traffic Control is ordering us to land in Colombia, and our fuel accounts are locked!"

Vance Sterling stared at his dark screens. For the first time in his life, the cold, unyielding composure vanished from his eyes, replaced by the bitter realization that his empire had been completely hollowed out beneath him.

By sunrise, the frantic rhythms of Carnival had softened into a gentle, golden warmth across the beaches of Rio.

At the Guanabara Bay terminal, federal buses and medical ambulances were escorting the freed women away to safety, surrounded by heavy escorts of **Polícia Federal** cruisers. Zion and Austin stood on the dock edge, watching the morning sun illuminate the water, their tactical gear covered in dust and salt.

Back at the Sambadrome's VIP terrace, Yves Montblanc and Sophia stood together by the stone balustrade, looking out over the city. Yves wore his jacket casually draped over one shoulder, while Sophia held a warm cup of coffee, her head resting against his arm.

José Trenalda walked out to join them, holding up a morning newspaper whose front page featured a massive, striking photo of himself, Yves, and Gizella under the headline: ****THE NEW ERA OF GLOBAL STYLE****.

"We did it, Yves," José said quietly, a deep sense of pride in his voice. "The runway was a triumph."

"We certainly did, José," Yves eyes gently, looking past the newspaper toward the harbor where MARCOM's rescue operation was concluding. "The runway was just the light. The triumph was what we accomplished in the shadows."

Director Alton Sinclair stepped onto the terrace, his tablet in hand. He looked at Yves, Sophia, Austin, and Zion, a faint, rare smile touching the corners of his mouth.

"Sterling's jet was forced down in Bogotá forty minutes ago," Alton announced smoothly. "Federal marshals are taking him into custody as we speak. His global pipeline is completely dismantled."

Yves raised his glass of water toward Alton, then turned to look at Sophia. She looked back at him, her dark eyes filled with absolute peace. The long, brutal war across the southern fronts was over. The corridors to Carnival were clear, and for the first time in months, the future was theirs to claim.

Chapter 7: Touchdown in Rio

The high-altitude twin-engine jet cut through the turbulence over the Atlantic at near-Mach speeds, its dark fuselage bearing the low-visibility insignias of Canadian Security Intelligence Service transport.

Inside the cabin, the atmosphere was suffocating. Director Marie Tremblay stood by the primary communications terminal, her fingers white-knuckled as she gripped the edge of the console. The dark-signal flash had reached her desk in Montreal six hours prior: Director Alton Sinclair had gone off-grid in São Paulo, stepping away from his tactical detail to engage in an unscripted, direct face-to-face meeting with Rajan Al-Fassad.

RAF. The third-in-command of MORCO. A lethal, brilliant strategist who left bodies and burned intelligence networks in his wake.

The thought of Alton stepping into a room alone with RAF—unarmed, unprotected, exposed to a potential execution or kidnapping on South American soil—had sent a jolt of pure, instinctual terror through Marie. She had bypassed standard diplomatic flight clearances, overriding CSIS protocol and forcing a direct air-corridor clearance straight into Rio de Janeiro.

Decades of maintaining strict, institutional separation between their professional commands and their private bond vanished in the face of absolute vulnerability. She couldn't lose him. Not to a shadow meeting in a Brazilian side street.

Four hours after his high-stakes encounter in the back booth of the São Paulo restaurant, Director Alton Sinclair returned to his secured private quarters at the MARCOM safehouse in Rio.

He was bone-weary. The heavy, mental exhaustion of standing toe-to-toe with RAF, combined with days of non-stop tactical sweeps, weighed on him like lead armor. He carried the silver encrypted flash drive in his coat pocket—a dangerous, temporary token of a intelligence stalemate.

Alton unlocked the reinforced door, stepped into the dimly lit apartment, and allowed the heavy steel door to click shut behind him. He reached for the wall switch to initialize the secure monitors.

He froze.

Sitting in the soft, amber shadow of the room's far corner, wrapped in a dark coat, was Marie.

Her glass of wine rested on the small wooden table beside her, her hands trembling slightly against her lap. Her eyes—filled with a intense mix of fierce anger, overwhelming relief, and raw emotional exhaustion—were locked onto him.

Alton stood motionless in the entryway, the silence between them vibrating with years of unspoken devotion.

"You took a meeting with Al-Fassad," Marie said, her voice barely above a whisper, yet trembling with the sheer force of her emotion. "Alone. In São Paulo."

"Marie—" Alton started, taking a step forward.

She stood up so fast the chair scraped softly against the floor. The professional barriers, the rigid directorate protocols, and the decade-long discipline they had built to protect their careers melted away instantly.

Driven by the terrifying, paralyzing realization of "I thought I'd lost you," Marie closed the distance between them.

Alton caught her as she reached him, pulling her tightly against his chest. Marie wrapped her arms around his neck, burying her face into his shoulder as a shuddering breath escaped her. They pulled each other close, their lips meeting in a fierce, desperate kiss fueled by the shared horror of how close they had come to the abyss.

There was no hesitation, no holding back. In the quiet darkness of the Rio safehouse, their shared fear transformed into an intense, passionate reunion. They undressed each other urgently, shedding the heavy weight of their directorates, and made deep, breathless love—reclaiming each other in the quiet sanctuary of the room while the distant ocean surf crashed against the coast.

Hours later, the room was enveloped in warm, peaceful shadows.

Marie lay resting against Alton's bare chest, listening to the steady, reassuring rhythm of his heart. The silver horseshoe necklace she always wore rested against her collarbone, catching the faint glint of moonlight filtering through the terrace blinds.

Alton slowly reached up, his fingers gently tracing the polished metal of the horseshoe charm.

"I am not going anywhere, Marie," Alton murmured softly, his voice thick with deep, unyielding conviction. He turned his head, kissing her forehead gently. "No syndicate, no dark-money broker, and no shadow director like Al-Fassad is ever going to take us from each other. I promise you."

Marie looked up into his eyes, her hand coming to rest flat over his heart. "We build the shield together, Alton. You don't walk into the fire alone."

Their shared vow settled over the room like an unbreakable oath. In a world defined by betrayal, dark signals, and lethal proxy wars, their unbroken devotion remained the ultimate, absolute stabilizing force across both MARCOM and CSIS.

As dawn broke over the Rio coastline, painting the sky in vibrant shades of gold and pink, Alton and Marie stood side-by-side at the floor-to-ceiling window.

They were fully dressed in their command attire, holding warm mugs of coffee, their posture unified, sharp, and completely focused. The emotional storm had passed, leaving behind a razor-sharp, absolute clarity.

"RAF gave us the Vasquez trail to clear his own board," Marie analyzed smoothly, her eyes scanning the horizon. "He's using us to prune Vance Sterling's over-expansion."

"Then we use his own intel against both of them," Alton replied, setting his mug down. "We merge the CSIS dark-signal feeds directly into Zion and Austin's tactical grid."

With the core executive leadership unified on South American soil, Alton and Marie initialized a high-priority executive briefing, calling an immediate joint command session to fuse Canadian and American intelligence assets into a single, lethal strike force.

Chapter 8: Anchors of the Family

Between high-tempo surveillance passes over Guanabara Bay and staging runs across Rio's dense industrial perimeters, the broader MARCOM unit gathered at their primary operational base in Botafogo.

The temporary command suite was a hive of controlled activity. Rather than allowing the compounding stress of the multi-front campaign to fray their nerves, the team utilized their brief windows of downtime to calibrate their focus.

In one corner, Commander Zion Ryder and Special Agent Austin Range systematically field-stripped their suppressed primary weapons, cleaning firing pins and checking optics with silent, practiced synchronicity. Across the central table, Tim "Onyx" Jefferson ran broad-spectrum diagnostic sweeps across his server rigs, ensuring that encryption keys were rotated and hard-signal lines remained pristine.

The shared time was not merely maintenance; it was the vital operational rhythm that kept the strike force grounded before launching into the high-risk phases of the coming drop.

At the physical center of the briefing room stood Commander Zion Ryder and Special Agent Austin Range.

They moved together with a quiet, battle-tested unity that served as the anchor for the entire unit. As Austin handed Zion a recalibrated laser designator, their eyes met in a brief, unspoken exchange—a silent language built over years of surviving covert Ops, violent raids, and high-stakes extractions together.

They never compromised their love for the sake of the mission, nor did they allow their bond to weaken their tactical edge. Instead, their absolute, unwavering trust in one another created a core of unshakeable stability.

Watching them work seamlessly together provided a profound sense of inspiration for Alton and Marie, as well as the rest of the team. Zion and Austin were living proof that humanity, devotion, and romantic love could thrive even in the darkest corridors of special operations.

Meanwhile, three sectors south along a quiet, palm-lined stretch of the Brazilian coast, Tim "Onyx" Jefferson was experiencing a vastly different kind of grounding.

Having cleared standard, rigorous security vetting back at the Sedona command hub, Chantelle Dubois had integrated smoothly into Onyx's off-duty world. During an extended overnight break granted for a private local wedding gathering hosted by mutual civilian contacts, Chantelle and Onyx walked hand-in-hand along the warm, night-washed beach.

Chantelle wore a simple, elegant sun dress, her presence bringing a warm, radiant civilian stability to the brilliant cyber specialist. For the first time in months, Onyx was not staring at

scrolling terminal code or dark-signal pings; he was listening to the rhythmic rush of the tide and the sound of Chantelle's laughter.

Away from frequency arrays, satellite uplinks, and encrypted monitors, Onyx opened up to Chantelle like never before.

Sitting together on a wooden bench overlooking the water, Onyx allowed his hyper-vigilant, guarded exterior to soften completely. He spoke about his past, his dual identity balancing Tim Jefferson and "Onyx," and the heavy burden of managing global cyber warfare. Chantelle listened with quiet, deeply empathetic grace, holding his hand tightly and offering a grounded reality unpolluted by international crime syndicates.

Their connection deepened significantly over those quiet coastal hours. It was a powerful, transformative moment, proving that even the most closed-off, tech-insulated operatives within MARCOM were capable of finding real, lasting love and human connection outside the unit.

By the following morning, the core relationships within the MARCOM task force aligned into a formidable, unbroken front.

Zion and Austin stood as the central tactical axis; Alton and Marie commanded the executive intelligence shield; Yves and Sophia held the high-fashion media stage in perfect harmony; Chantelle provided Onyx with an unshakeable civilian anchor; and the quiet, dangerous burn of mutual trust between Tanner and Esmeralda reinforced the perimeter.

As the unit completed their final weapons checks and tactical calibrations, they reached peak operational readiness.

Their mutual trust, emotional health, and unbroken personal bonds had forged an impenetrable family shield. Vance Sterling had built his syndicate on fear, execution, and ruthless betrayal; MARCOM was built on love, loyalty, and absolute unity. It was a psychological shield that Sterling's mind games could never break.

Chapter 9: The Amazonian Networks

Back at the primary tactical table in Botafogo, the digital map of South America shifted from the urban coastlines of Rio and São Paulo to the vast, dense green expanse of the northern interior.

Special Agent Austin Range and Onyx initialized a sweeping satellite intelligence layer, illuminating dozens of secondary supply routes glowing in bright red across the map.

"Sterling isn't just operating out of coastal container ports," Austin began, pointing her stylus at the intricate web of river networks stretching thousands of miles inland. "He's established deep, parasitic roots throughout the Amazonian hinterland, leveraging desperate local criminal rings and river pirates to move black-market contraband far away from federal customs checkpoints."

The surveillance confirmed a terrifying scope: Sterling was using South America's massive interior geography as an unmapped, unregulated transit corridor.

Onyx zoomed in on the central Amazon basin, bringing up intercepted cargo manifests and dark-web ledger transactions.

"It's a dark dual-pipeline," Onyx explained, highlighting two distinct cargo streams moving in opposite directions along the river. "Downstream, Sterling is funneling high-tier, military-grade black-market weaponry directly to violent anti-government rebel factions operating along the jungle borders. In exchange, these rebel groups provide absolute physical protection for his logistics camps."

"And what moves upstream?" Marie Tremblay asked, her eyes narrowing as she studied the ledger numbers.

"Cultural wealth," Austin replied grimly. "Those same rebel factions are systematically looting irreplaceable Amazonian indigenous antiquities, sacred pre-Columbian ceramics, and historical artifacts from protected archaeological sites. Sterling feeds these artifacts upstream into exclusive, dark-money private auction channels in Europe and North America to fund his corporate war chest."

Sting and Tanner stepped up to the secondary tactical monitor, analyzing the physical transit methods utilized across the massive river system.

"He's not using standard commercial freighters inside the basin," Tanner noted, tracing the GPS tracks of low-profile rivercraft. "They're running heavy, shallow-draft barges disguised as timber haulers, backed by high-speed river-launches equipped with heavy caliber mountings."

"They utilize hidden jungle drop-points beneath the dense canopy where satellite thermal imaging can't penetrate," Sting added. "The cargo flows continuously from deep interior border junctions near Peru and Colombia directly toward major Atlantic export terminals near Belém."

Austin tapped the glass interface, bringing up a comparative structural overlay between their previous campaign in Central America and their current Brazilian theater.

"We need to adjust our mental framework," Austin emphasized to the assembled strike team. "In Panama, we were dealing with an oceanic switchboard—a narrow, highly regulated international canal where ocean freighters crossed between two oceans under strict maritime authority."

She highlighted the vast, branching veins of the Amazon.

"The Amazon is entirely different. It's a massive, inland-waterway matrix connecting South America's deepest, unpoliced interior directly to the Atlantic. Sterling exploits these legitimate commercial river channels, blending his illegal barges into timber, grain, and ore shipments to hide his cargo in plain sight."

Commander Zion Ryder stepped up to the head of the table, his heavy palms resting flat against the polished surface as his commanding gaze swept across every operative in the room.

The atmosphere tightened instantly.

"Don't treat the Amazon like an ordinary river or like the Panama Canal," Zion stated, his voice flat, stern, and leaving zero room for compromise. "You need a route-specific security plan."

Zion looked at Tanner, Sting, Austin, and Onyx. "If we push blindly into those river channels without a specialized tactical framework, Sterling's river proxies will ambush us from the canopy and melt into the jungle before we can return fire. We deploy a multi-tiered littoral security protocol immediately."

Chapter 10: The Sanctity of Security

Commander Zion Ryder tapped the tactical display, zooming into the mouth of the Amazon River where the vast waterway emptied into the Atlantic Ocean.

"Sector 1 covers the coastal delta—from Belém and Barcarena out to the open sea," Zion detailed, outlining the primary maritime zone in blue. "This is a conventional port and commercial maritime environment. Threat level is baseline, but cargo volume is massive."

Zion assigned primary responsibility for Sector 1 to joint federal Coast Guard units, mandating automated container tracking, heavy harbor radar sweeps, and standard boarding protocols to ensure Sterling's container ships couldn't clear the estuary undetected.

Zion dragged his stylus six hundred miles upriver, highlighting the high-volume commercial corridor connecting Belém to the major industrial hubs of Santarém and Manaus.

"Sector 2 is our heavy commercial river corridor," Zion explained. "The threat level here is elevated. Sterling's proxies use spoofed AIS transponders to register illegal weapons barges as legitimate agricultural exports."

To counter this, Zion mandated the deployment of heavy-duty utility patrol craft, encrypted short-range comms, and mandatory visual line-of-sight checks on all commercial barges moving between Santarém and Manaus.

Zion's voice dropped an octave as he zoomed into the dense, twisting river corridors stretching southwest from Manaus along the Madeira and Solimões rivers.

"Sector 3 is high-risk littoral warfare," Zion warned, marking the zone in amber. "These waters are controlled by heavily armed river pirates, cartel proxies, and corporate mercenaries. They run high-speed ambushes from hidden tributaries."

For Sector 3, Zion issued strict equipment requirements: all MARCOM riverine craft were to be outfitted with full analog armory setups to resist digital EMP spoofing, physical breaching shields, and heavy suppressor packages for night combat.

Finally, Zion highlighted the deep, untamed western frontier stretching from Manaus all the way to Tabatinga along the triple-border of Brazil, Peru, and Colombia.

"Sector 4 is the dark zone," Zion said grimly, marking the vast border expanse in deep red. "Extreme threat environment. Dominated by transnational narcotics cartels, human traffickers, and heavily armed rebel groups."

In Sector 4, standard tactical craft were useless. Zion mandated deep-cover stealth operations, mounted trail capabilities along riverbanks, and complete zero-digital-emission protocols for all team members operating near the frontier.

Special Agent Austin Range stepped up beside Zion, cross-referencing his 4-tier security framework with regional corporate tax manifests and agricultural registries.

"By layering Zion's security tiers over Sterling's shipping manifests, we've pinpointed the exact corporate fronts he uses," Austin announced, flashing a sequence of corporate logos across the screen. "He's blending weapons and stolen antiquities directly into legal timber and soy exports originating out of Manaus."

By mapping these precise river corridors and establishing strict littoral security protocols, MARCOM prepared to choke off Sterling's inland supply lines before his assets could ever reach the Atlantic export gates.

Chapter 11: The Antiquities Protocol

Thirty-six hours into the implementation of Sector 2 security protocols, a joint MARCOM and Brazilian *Polícia Federal* riverine unit executed a high-speed intercept on a fast launch near a regional port outside Santarém.

Upon breaching the launch's concealed lower hold, agents discovered crates of illegal automatic rifles alongside wooden boxes packed with ancient, hand-carved Amazonian indigenous urns, pre-Columbian gold ceremonial ornaments, and sacred ceramic artifacts.

The seizure provided undeniable physical proof: Sterling's network was actively plundering South America's cultural heritage to generate dark-money liquidity. However, the discovery immediately triggered complex legal, diplomatic, and jurisdictional challenges regarding the handling and chain of custody for recovered historical treasures.

Austin Range immediately took the lead in addressing the legal requirements, convening a specialized briefing for the entire strike team.

"We cannot treat recovered antiquities like standard contraband or illicit narcotics," Austin explained, displaying the legal statutes on the main console. "Under the Brazilian Constitution and Federal Law 3.924/1961, all archaeological sites, ancient coins, indigenous relics, and pre-Columbian artifacts are protected federal property under the direct custody of IPHAN—the National Institute of Historic and Artistic Heritage."

She emphasized that moving or handling these items without strict federal authorization constituted a severe international legal violation.

To ensure MARCOM operated with absolute legal integrity and avoided diplomatic delays, Austin established a non-negotiable operational rule for all team members encountering cultural goods in the field:

Found - Don't remove - Document - Identify - Obtain official clearance before moving or exporting.

"If a tactical team breaches a syndicate warehouse and finds historical artifacts," Austin commanded sternly, "you log high-resolution geo-tagged photographs, secure the perimeter, and notify IPHAN liaisons immediately. No piece of cultural history leaves the site without formal federal authorization."

To reinforce this protocol with seamless inter-American enforcement, Austin executed a brilliant diplomatic move, connecting their current campaign to their previous victories in Central America.

Utilizing MARCOM's secure satellite network, she looped in their trusted allied authorities from *The Switchboard Strategy*: Park Ranger Ana Solano from Costa Rica's La Amistad

International Park, Sargento Rafael Aguirre from the Panamanian Border Patrol (SENAFRONT), and regional customs directors from the ports of Moín and Limón.

These veteran authorities established a direct cross-border verification network, enforcing inter-American cultural heritage treaties to shut down antiquities trafficking routes stretching all the way from Costa Rica and Panama down into the Brazilian Amazon.

By enforcing rigid compliance with international cultural protection laws, MARCOM systematically neutralized another major pillar of Vance Sterling's financial infrastructure.

Sterling could no longer use stolen pre-Columbian antiquities as dark-money collateral for his European banking loans. The antiquities protocol not only protected South America's irreplaceable cultural history but also stripped the syndicate of millions in dark liquidity, tightening the net around Sterling's operations.

The Rat-Trap Strategy

The full MARCOM unit gathered in the main command hub in Rio de Janeiro for the final, comprehensive debrief of Case 06.

Director Alton Sinclair and Director Marie Tremblay stood at the head of the briefing table, flanked by Zion, Austin, Onyx, Yves, and Sophia. Across the digital displays, the full map of South America showed Sterling's river networks dismantled, his container ships seized at Guanabara Bay, and his financial accounts frozen across three continents.

Austin Range leaned forward, tapping the screen to bring up the timeline of their major breakthroughs. "We need to be completely honest with ourselves about how this happened," Austin stated, her eyes sweeping across the team. "MARCOM's massive inroads in South America were *not* caused by a rare operational mistake by Vance Sterling. Sterling's personal security discipline remains virtually airtight."

Zion nodded in agreement. "The vulnerability occurred because Carlos Vasquez tried to double-cross Sterling and build his own independent empire. Vasquez created the exact internal seam we exposed."

Onyx brought up high-resolution intelligence feeds transmitted from Mexican law enforcement liaisons in Acapulco.

On the screen was a forensic photo of the private charter tarmac: Carlos Vasquez lay dead beside his leather briefcase, executed by a high-velocity discharge.

"Vasquez's ambition forced Sterling out into the open to personally execute his chief lieutenant," Marie Tremblay observed coldly. "Vasquez's internal treason was the sole vulnerability that made Sterling break cover and expose his 21-day flight schedule."

The team recognized the critical lesson: Sterling was nearly invulnerable to external surveillance, but his psychotic zero-tolerance policy for internal betrayal was his fatal flaw.

Austin and Zion stepped up together, introducing a revolutionary tactical doctrine that would define MARCOM's future operations:

"Since Sterling never makes operational mistakes on his own, but possesses an unhinged, zero-tolerance policy for internal disloyalty," Austin explained, displaying a strategic flowchart, "we don't hunt Sterling directly. We systematically bait him."

"We fabricate intelligence or leak dark-signal evidence suggesting that his high-tier lieutenants or regional partners are skimming funds or preparing to flip to federal authorities," Zion elaborated, his voice grim and resolute. "We force Sterling to step out of the shadows to personally 'caretake' or eliminate them. Every time he steps out to crush a traitor, we spring the trap."

Director Marie Tremblay stepped to the center of the room, her expression grave as she addressed the directorate regarding Rajan Al-Fassad's unchecked presence in South America.

"We must also acknowledge the dark hand behind this resolution," Marie warned sternly, looking at Alton. "RAF intentionally fed us the intel on Vasquez in São Paulo. He knew Sterling would execute Vasquez and clear MORCO's path in the southern cone. RAF is already playing this exact baiting game—using MARCOM as his personal weapon to prune his corporate rivals."

The team acknowledged the sobering reality: while Sterling was currently on the run, RAF remained a lethal, shadow mastermind maneuvering on the global board.

As evening set over Rio de Janeiro, painting the sky in deep indigo and crimson, Zion and Austin walked out onto the open terrace overlooking the Atlantic Ocean.

Case 06 was closed. Carlos Vasquez was dead on an Acapulco tarmac, Vance Sterling's private Gulfstream was airborne in unmapped airspace fleeing forced landing mandates in Colombia, and his South American logistics networks lay in ruined, frozen pieces.

Sophia and Yves joined them on the balcony, holding hands, their high-fashion cover having successfully shielded MARCOM's tactical drop. Below, the ocean waves rolled steadily onto the beach—a serene backdrop to the end of a brutal campaign.

Armed with their new tactical doctrine—the Rat-Trap Strategy—and bound by the unbroken trust of the MARCOM family, the team stood ready. The hunt for Vance Sterling was no longer a defensive game of tracking shadow signals.

Equipped to bait the syndicate from within, MARCOM prepared to launch immediately into the global hunt

Chapter 12: What the Mountains Keep

The team staged the final extraction under commercial cover once more. Horses loaded first. Gear staged without signatures that could be remotely overridden. Yves remained in Brazil long enough to close the fashion legend cleanly and then prepared his next quiet movement under a new layer of cover. Sophia traveled with the core package.

Evening care of the horses on the last night in the Tijuca compound became collective grounding. Skywalker and Coco stood quiet under familiar hands. Tanner and Esmeralda finished the work side by side and shared one unhurried moment that needed no audience. Onyx received a final private message from Chantelle that carried the clear weight of days still ahead. Sting remained outside the forward motion, the want still visible, the naming still future—but the friendship with Diana had given him one steady place to stand.

Padre closed the notebook for the last time on Brazilian ground.

“The inventory travels,” he said. “The mountains here keep their own secrets the same way the river did. We carry what we can and leave the rest for the next current.”

Zion and Austin rode Skywalker together along a short forested track before the final load-out. No conversation required. The simple fact of moving as one unit on an animal they both trusted became the last private image of the case.

The final image belonged to the mountains themselves—still rising above the city lights, still carrying whatever came next—while the team that had chosen to keep showing up for every layer turned toward the next corridor, the human ledger intact, the unresolved pressures already shaping the road still ahead.

Padre did not open the notebook every night. Some evenings the inventory simply lived in the quiet observation of who stood where, who moved toward whom, and who still kept a measured distance from the forward current.

Tonight he stood at the rail of the small Tijuca paddock with the notebook closed under one hand and watched the horses instead.

Skywalker had already settled into the particular stillness he reserved for the end of a working day. Coco stood a few paces away, weight cocked on one hind leg, the low-grade sensitivity in her foot managed and no longer asking for attention. The two backup horses grazed the limited grass with the unhurried focus of animals that had learned the temporary nature of every paddock they had known since Sedona.

Padre found the whole arrangement quietly amusing.

He had spent a lifetime training people and, later, training people who trained other people. The methods were not complicated. You watched for the places where strain collected. You noticed which load a person could carry without it becoming injury, and which load would eventually

break something important if left unaddressed. You adjusted the work accordingly. You did not force a shoulder that was not ready. You did not pretend a fracture was only fatigue.

The same principles applied to the horses. The difference was that the horses never lied about it.

Skywalker would tell you with a single shift of weight whether the day's ask had been reasonable. Coco would tell you with the set of her ears whether the infection under the shoe was truly settled or merely quiet for the moment. There was no performance. No attempt to protect anyone's feelings or operational timeline. Only the clean fact of the body and what it could sustain.

That, Padre had come to understand, was the quiet revelation of this particular team.

The human relationships moved in the same patterns as the paddock, only with more language and more hesitation.

Zion and Austin had long since settled into the kind of shared balance that Skywalker carried under double weight without complaint. They did not need to announce it. The horse already knew. The rest of the team already knew. Padre simply recorded it as fact and left it alone.

Onyx and Chantelle operated across distance the way a good horse and rider maintained contact through a light rein—present, responsive, without constant pressure. The wedding days had tightened the connection rather than strained it. Padre noted the change in Onyx's shoulders each time a private message arrived and filed it under the heading of healthy load.

Sophia and Yves had chosen temporary separation and then chosen reunion under operational necessity. The choice itself was the interesting part. Most people either clung or severed. These two had done neither. They had treated the distance as a working condition rather than a verdict. Padre found that both rare and useful.

Esmeralda and Tanner continued the long, unhurried approach that reminded him of starting a green horse under saddle. Nothing forced. Nothing theatrical. Just consistent contact, clear asks, and the gradual willingness to carry more weight together. The unhurried moment they shared at the rail each evening required no commentary. The horses already understood that kind of progress.

Sting remained the one still standing slightly outside the working pairings, the way a capable horse sometimes stood at the edge of the herd—present, reliable, not yet choosing to close the last of the distance. The friendship with Diana had given him a steady place to stand without demanding more than either of them intended to give. Padre considered that a successful adjustment of the load.

What amused him most was the synergy.

The team's health and the horses' health had become mutually reinforcing in ways that no operational brief had ever planned. Evening care of the animals forced a daily return to the body, to rhythm, to the simple fact of another living creature that required honest attention. That attention, in turn, made it harder for the human fractures to remain completely unspoken. You could not stand at a rail checking feet and coats night after night and still pretend you did not notice who was carrying more weight than they should.

The horses did not fix the relationships. They simply refused to let the relationships pretend they were invisible.

Padre opened the notebook at last and made a short entry in the margin of the current inventory:

Human and horse remain in the same working system. Strain shows in both. Adjustment of load in one supports the other. Continue observation. Do not interfere with what is already correcting itself.

He closed the book again.

Skywalker lifted his head and looked toward the compound lights for a moment, then returned to his quiet standing. Coco shifted her weight once more and settled.

Padre remained at the rail a little longer, amused and satisfied in equal measure.

The ledger traveled. The paddock traveled with it. And the team that kept showing up for every layer continued to discover, without needing it explained, that the health of the one was rarely separate from the health of the other.

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End of MARCOM Case 06: Corridors of Carnival