

ONE ELEVATOR. ONE HUGE SECRET.

COUNTERWEIGHT MANEUVER



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Chapter 1

The early morning fog rolled inland from San Francisco Bay, carrying with it the low moan of a horn. It was hard to see much in the low light — the video was clearly taken on a smartphone — but behind the gray, billowing vapour, a dark, angular shape gradually grew more distinct within the dissipating wisps of the previous night.

“This video shows the Ultra Large Container Vessel, Cáifù, of the China Container and Shipping Company entering the Port of Oakland last Sunday. CCSCO has been an emerging force in international shipping since the 1980s and is now responsible for 90% of all incoming products from Japan, Korea, and, of course, China. Today, CCSCO is valued at over \$148 a share, and is currently setting the global benchmark for swift and economical shipping in the fast-moving world of container transportation.”

The Cáifù was almost fifty meters wide and over 600 meters in length, and piled high with carefully stacked container crates. It looked like a gigantic fortress powering its way into the bay, carrying with it vast quantities of electronic goods, ranging from luxury automobiles, textiles, and industrial machinery, to advanced photovoltaic technology, all backed by the growing economic and technological powerhouses of the Far East.

The video swung to the right and zoomed in on the Port of Oakland. Giant gantry cranes jutted into the sky in front of its massive terminals, while, stretching into the distance, thousands of containers filled the yard with a mountain of brightly-colored boxes in blue, red, and yellow.

In the water, a relatively small Panamax-class container ship with Free American Line markings on its side was moving out of the Harbor and into the bay. It was half-empty and listing ever so slightly to starboard, apparently due to its uneven load. The camera moved further out to reveal another FAL ship just ahead of the first, and then swung back toward the Cáifù.

Zooming out yet again towards the foreground, a line of Panamax container ships moved slowly out of the port, each vessel marked with the FAL logo, and appearing quite insignificant compared to the looming Chinese ULCV.

“While Asia’s economic rise is widely acknowledged, this footage, taken by Bradley Wilcox, a freelance reporter, and his accompanying article in the Oakland Tribune, exposes a disturbing trend within the infrastructure of America’s largest industries. Wilcox’s article, ‘Setting Sun’, reveals that the Port of Oakland — the first port on the Pacific Coast to build terminals for ultra large cargo ships, and the fifth busiest container port in the United States — was totally unprepared for Sunday’s delivery due to a failure of the port’s antiquated logistics system. According to Wilcox, a backlog had suddenly developed, causing the system to malfunction. The Chinese vessels were given immediate priority, with twenty-five Free American Line ships forced to clear the port half-loaded. This is the first time an emergency evacuation of any kind has ever occurred in a US shipping port.”

The camera moved over the line of FAL ships, then settled back on the Cáifù. Behind it, the shadowy images of yet more gigantic Chinese ships slowly appeared in the distance, all packed to the limit, all closing in on the port.

The image cut to the head of the Chinese fleet as it entered the channel leading to the outer harbor, this time narrowly missing one of the trailing outbound FAL ships and causing it to rock violently in its wake. Even from a distance, crates could be seen slipping away from their fixings, and unsteady containers moved across the deck of the smaller vessel.

Now the camera showed a clean-shaven man in a tan jacket, smiling: the name Bradley Wilcox flashed briefly along the bottom of the screen.

“This isn’t just the result of an increased volume of imported goods from the Far East.” His voice crackled. “This is a direct result of the government’s apparent failure to assist American exporters. It appears that in certain government circles they are deliberately trying to minimize corporate homeland grants so as to make it harder for our home companies to compete on fair and even terms. China’s getting stronger and we’re getting weaker. This is an indisputable fact.”

The picture changed back to the port, showing the slim, blond presenter standing beside a crane while dock workers moved busily in the background.

“The Port of Oakland has yet to comment on the article,” she said, pushing windswept hair out of her eyes, “but these images speak clearly: China is now leading the world in terms of technological innovation and economic growth, while the United States is currently a nation in decline. You’ve been watching Joanne King for KSF Bay Area News, signing out.”

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Ronald Hawk watched the video end with a cold eye and passed the tablet back to his aide with barely a flicker of emotion. As advisor and confidant to the President of the United States, he had to appear in control, even though he was seething with rage.

“Tell the Press Secretary I’ve been held up and won’t have time to go over the finer details of the Presidential announcement or the budget meeting.”

Hawk’s cell phone buzzed on the table and he picked it up, seeing the caller’s traceless ID “LBM” revealed on its screen.

“You have the file,” Hawk said, dismissing the aide with a wave of his broad hand. “Keep me informed of the board’s progress.”

The aide paused for a second, then left the room with a quick nod. Hawk waited until he was gone, and then put the phone to his ear.

“Greetings, Brother Ronald. How have you been keeping?” The voice was calm and spoken with a refined English accent. “I realize that we haven’t spoken for some time, but I assume you have also seen the Oakland media story.”

“I’ve seen it,” Hawk replied. “In fact, I was expecting some form of communication from you.”

“The Brotherhood has convened and the decision to proceed has been made. Given your seniority within the inner cell, I trust that you are in full and final agreement and understand what needs to be carried out?”

Hawk smiled. It was high time something was done. “If the supreme council wills it, then I am in total accord, Brother.”

“You need to be very clear about this, Ronald,” the voice continued. “The sacred Thelema has determined that the problem has escalated beyond mere trade imbalances. If we do not act now, our planet may never recover from the vacuous actions of the eco-pernicious Pacific Rim. The Aeon of Horus is fast approaching, and the time has come to purge from this Earth the undesirable factions ruining our society.”

Hawk felt his pulse rise. “Then the Maneuver has been sanctioned?”

“By each and every member of the highest inner circle,” the voice confirmed. “It must be implemented and pursued without impediment or further delay.”

With that last line still sinking in, the caller hung up. Hawk sat there transfixed for several long seconds. He knew what the call meant and what he and his sacred organization were about to embark upon. Finally, after years of preparation, it was time.

He got up, pushed aside his espresso, and left the Cabinet Lounge, smiling politely at the mid-level government officials as he left. He walked down the hallway to the elevator, passing the marine stationed at the door with nothing but a cursory glance, and waited for the elevator door to slide shut behind him.

The iris-recognition software acknowledged his identity and he pushed the button to the tertiary-basement level. He felt the merest tremor as the primary mechanism activated and the elevator began its sixty-second descent to the old basement war rooms, recently renovated at his own personal expense to be his strategic office.

While he waited, Hawk smoothed his graying hair and pulled his tie straight. He was the President’s confidant and the mastermind behind the quarterly “Standard American Values Assessment.” The one thing the American people had come to expect of this President was “values,” and that was largely because they had given up on anything else. Foreign policy, the economy, social services — it wasn’t so much that the administration’s policies on these matters

were disastrous, but rather that the President was incapable of presenting them adequately. This fact

alone had reduced the public's expectations to shockingly low levels. And, to be frank, if it wasn't for Hawk himself, the President's approval ratings would look even worse.

Hawk had once harbored dreams of becoming President himself. But because his war hero father had died on that fateful day on Hill Eerie, young Ronald — only an infant at the time — had never had the benefit of a father figure to look up to. Now, years later, he realized that he had actually spent most his life trying to measure up to a man that he hadn't even known. Yes, Hawk had his father's sense of high duty and moral purpose, but he hadn't exactly inherited his movie-star good looks, broad reassuring shoulders, or the perfectly-honed stately gaze that the general public had become so accustomed to in their perception of public figures.

Nowadays, Hawk spent most of his time strategizing for the President instead of accomplishing anything legitimate or tangible himself. Unfortunately, this primarily involved helping the President justify America's faltering world status, rather than talking about building something new and significant for the future. And then there was an increasingly hard-to-control gutter press making all kinds of false and sensational accusations against the government — people like this damn reporter, Wilcox. It only made Hawk's job much harder. "Another muckraking moron," he muttered to himself.

When Hawk had first entered politics, after finishing a military career that included rising to the rank of staff sergeant in the Vietnam War, it hadn't been like this. Back then, the White House had carried real weight with the American people. Citizens took the time to watch the Presidential address live on television, instead of just reading about it and criticising it in the blogosphere. The President shaped public opinion by what he said, and didn't say, in those days. Yes, back then there'd been a sense of real respect. But now the President, the most powerful man in the world, had

to cower down before a tide of useless public opinion just to stay in favor. And all this coming after the efforts of people like Hawk's father — people who had sacrificed their very lives for this nation. Journalistic scum like Wilcox were happy to bury their country for a cheap editorial spread.

The elevator door opened and Hawk walked into his office. The lights activated automatically, flooding the room in a cool white light. He turned on the monitor in the corner and sat while he waited for the shielded browser to warm up. The screen erupted in white static, then coalesced into a set of scales clutched in the talons of a bald eagle.

“Mother, please retrieve all web data on Bradley Wilcox,” Hawk said. “Focus search on Oakland Tribune article, ‘Setting Sun.’”

Search engaged, the computer replied while searching for the data that Hawk required.

In the blink of an eye it was there on the on the screen.

The Oakland incident had gone from Monday morning political blog fodder to a full-fledged media maelstrom, something only the modern instantaneous news cycle could produce. Every pundit, blogger, critic, comedian, and average Joe in America had now gotten in on the discussion of their nation’s certain decline. Good Morning America had a panel of experts on a half-hour segment detailing the high and low points of America’s tenure as global superpower, complete with graphics that depicted the nation now at its lowest of lows.

He watched the footage again and again on the screen. The Chinese vessels, low on fuel and toting billions of dollars’ worth of electronics, cars, and other high-value cargo, were given priority while the much smaller American vessels couldn’t even finish loading their cargo before being ordered to evacuate.

The article Hawk could handle — he knew better than anyone that the words of a journalist could always be discredited, disputed, picked apart, and watered down — but the film was about as damning as it gets, and it was now the lead video on the Huffington Post, the Daily Beast, Slate, the Drudge Report, and just about every single blog and news website in America.

The very thought that United States vessels were being ordered to evacuate a home port was more than Hawk could bear. And for what? For the cheap consumer goods and silicon gadgets that were now making his fellow Americans a bunch of lazy, complacent, high-tech-obsessed denizens, too overweight to enlist in the military, and too stupid to continue the tradition of entrepreneurship

and technological innovation that had formerly made the USA so great. The scene also underlined the very real fact that Hawk was all too acutely aware of — that the great American corporations were fast losing ground against the voracious growth of the Far East. Well, now the Brotherhood had made its judgement, and with their decree, Hawk would bring this matter to a successful conclusion.

He picked up the phone on his desk and dialled his PA in the White House. She answered immediately.

“Barb,” Hawk said, cutting her greeting short. “Get Blewitt and his people onto the Wilcox story. Yes, the one that’s all over the news.” He hung up before Barb could ask any further questions. Hawk knew it would be difficult, but Blewitt would get it done. Truth was relative. But there were always other ways to manipulate it.

His thoughts went to the press conference that was due to start in twenty minutes, but he could do nothing but shake his head. It was supposed to signal the start of restoring the old school days of American social values which had been so quickly and cruelly cut short by the convenience of smartphones, computers, and the isolation of social networking. And now, thanks to a local tabloid reporter’s Sunday scoop, the very notion of America’s dominance was the laughing stock of the internet and the entire world.

Hawk knew something more than a Standard American Values Assessment was required to reinstate this nation’s place as the indisputable champion and the greatest power on Earth. Today’s news was a sign that things would only get worse, much worse. But the sacred Thelema had at last initiated what needed to be done. He, together with the other members of the Brotherhood, were the

ones who would have to change the course of history, period.

He lifted the receiver again, dialled the White House internal line, and instructed them to put a call through to one of his personal aides.

“Jenkins,” he said, when the young man answered. “I need ten copies of the proposal brought up to the Cabinet Room. Have them ready in fifteen minutes.”

Hawk hung up and pushed the phone away. The next call would need to be fully encrypted and totally off the record.

“General Morgan,” he said, speaking into the microphone on his computer.

The screen shifted to black and Morgan appeared on the screen. He was dressed in uniform, his thick black beard immaculately groomed.

“Mr Hawk, sir,” he said, eyebrows raised. “I wasn’t expecting your—”

“General, the Maneuver is go,” Hawk stated. “Get Carrington.”

Morgan’s expression didn’t change. “Sir, has the President been informed of this?”

“He will be,” Hawk replied. “Now go to it.”

Morgan nodded, and the screen immediately went dark. Hawk switched off the monitor. It looked as though he might just make it to the meeting after all.

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President Robert Moore was well into his itinerary by the time Hawk arrived.

“Glad you could make it, Ronald,” the President remarked. “I was told that you may not be coming. I thought you might be unwell or something.”

There were some chuckles from around the room.

Hawk smiled politely. “Just a few minor issues, Mr President. I hope I can still be of some use.”

“Well, the news isn’t good, but when is it these days?” the President said, with an exasperated look on his unblemished face. “But we’re setting a good standard for the next quarterly Values Assessment. That’s obviously important with the election next year.”

The President smiled at Hawk as he seated himself, then continued with his pointless exercise in feel-good statistics. “We’ve seen a rise in high school GPA consistent with the 2% increase targeted

by the Responsible Education Act, and we've still managed to cut spending by 40%. Good news all round, I think?"

Hawk knew it was a load of bullshit. Cutting spending while also reducing grading requirements only made people more uneducated, but it made sense if one was already a product of the system. Christ, no wonder this great nation was now in such a state of terminal decline.

"Defensively speaking, a third of our air force is grounded, but the Korean military is looking stronger with each passing day—"

They looked stronger because the US was getting weaker.

"—and then there's the deficit. Well, there's no getting around the fact that there are some hard times ahead."

But not if you're the CEO of a foreign oil company, Hawk thought to himself, biting his lip.

Hawk looked to the door and saw his aide, Jenkins, on the other side of the glass. He motioned for him to wait there and poured some water from a jug on the table.

He had made some big plays in his time, but none like this. He had on a previous occasion casually mentioned some aspects of his proposals to the President, but he doubted Moore would even remember the conversation. The President would fall in line though, he was sure of that, just as he was equally sure that the others would also follow suit.

Hawk looked around the table. Most of the Cabinet were suck-ups and idiots, with many of them in the pockets of Big Oil, the NRA, and that GMC company that nobody was even allowed to mention by name anymore. None of them had the spine to stand up to Hawk — with perhaps one exception.

Christine Sheen sat at the far end of the table, a cool expression on her lined face as she watched Hawk. She'd been in the game a long time, through three administrations, and had survived by playing to the midfield. Furthermore, up until the present time Hawk had to admit that her policies had worked to some extent.

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At fifty-six, with a PhD in Economics and Public Policy from Stanford University, together

with several other honorary doctorates, Sheen was the only female member of the President's Cabinet. With a long list of previously published articles as the author and by-line creator, her subsequent reputation was rock solid.

Even though her principles and convictions were impressive, they were too fluid for Hawk to take seriously. Recently, however, she and Hawk had come head to head on several key issues, and Hawk knew she was going to be the one serious contender to his grand scheme. He locked eyes with her, but she turned her attention back to the President.

"Anything I've forgotten, Ronald?" Moore asked.

Hawk looked through the sheaf of papers in front of him and shook his head. "You've just about covered everything in the itinerary, Mr President."

"Then I think we should adjourn—"

"If you'll pardon my interruption, Mr President," Hawk interjected, "but there was just that one final matter that we discussed in detail last month. You asked me to bring it up before the next Standard American Values Assessment and, uh, that is today."

The President's mouth was agape but he closed it quickly. "I'm very sorry, Ronald, you are indeed correct. Please feel free to remind the assembled cabinet the finer points of the discussion? I must admit that I have been extremely occupied as of late."

"Absolutely, Mr President," Hawk said, smiling and getting to his feet. He waved to the door and Jenkins entered the room, holding a stack of gray-sleeved documents in his arms. The aide placed them in a neat pile in front of Hawk, then left the room.

Hawk took a swift drink of water and swished it around his dry mouth, then looked out across the U-shaped table at the rest of the hushed Cabinet. "The matter that I — that is, the matter the President and I wish to address, is that of our country's current and on-going economic decline — its moribund stagnating economy, its lethargic education system, its crippled military, and this government's consistent failure to step up and meet these very real and serious challenges."

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There were rustles around the room as people shifted in their seats and shuffled their papers.

Hawk forced himself to smile. “The President and I recently discussed an option that would not only permanently solve these issues, but also completely reverse them. And with your permission, Mr President, I would like to present this option to our gathered and learned friends.”

“Ah, yes, of course,” President Moore said, attempting an expression of gravity.

“The United States is indeed undergoing a great crisis,” Hawk said, scanning the eyes of his audience. “Now, I know that we’ve been here before, with people saying the US has seen its greatest day. They said it in 1958 when the Soviets launched the Sputnik. They said it in 1973 during the Arab oil embargo. They said it in the 80s and 90s when America’s industrial towns started to fade away while the corporations commenced manufacturing overseas, and, most recently

in this millennium, they said it yet again during the global financial crisis that sent our markets spiralling into decline while releasing shockwaves around the globe. But this time it’s different.”

Hawk began distributing the documents, placing them in front of each Cabinet member. “I’d like to introduce you all to the idea of power as a three-dimensional chess board,” he said, moving around the table. “The top layer of the game is military power among states. For as long as we can remember, apart from the bankrupt and failing Soviets, the US has had no real contender in military might. Now, as hard as it is to admit it, we do.” He placed a document in front of Sheen. “The middle board is economic power. If any of you have observed the recent incident in Oakland, you’ll have noticed that we have been surpassed in that arena, also.”

Sheen coughed and cleared her throat while Hawk paused, but she only looked up, smiling apologetically.

“The bottom layer,” he continued, trying to hide his irritation, “is the most important for our purposes. The bottom layer of the society that we occupy is governed by those things which are outside government control. The things that shape events which no one person or group of persons can be blamed for — pandemics, floods, natural disasters, unexpected acts, and pure, indifferent bad luck.”

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Hawk placed the final copy in the President’s hand, and everyone’s attention dutifully

turned to the 150-page document laid out in front of them. Unlike most drab policy documents, this was marked with the highest security clearance possible — only to be viewed by the ten pairs of eyes in the room. “Counterweight Maneuver” was printed in bold type on the front page.

It read, in part:

In 1800, Asia was home to half the world’s population and made half the world’s products. By the start of the industrial revolution, its production had dropped back to one-fifth of the world’s goods. However, in the present time, we see that yet again the vast majority of the world’s manufactured goods are produced in China, Japan, and the Pacific Rim, but are now consumed around the entire globe.

Currently, China, India, Japan, and Indonesia are said to be collaborating on expanding and opening new state-of-the-art manufacturing plants to build highly advanced aeroplane and satellite systems, which will have serious implications for US aerospace industries and our long term space programs.

China, until recently a fairly low-tech economy, has now miraculously turned full circle into a high-tech powerhouse that has overtaken the entire world in economic production. It has also been strengthening its People’s Liberation Army for well over a decade.

In just ten short years, their defense spending went from \$30 billion to almost \$120 billion.

This year, it’s expected to reach \$195 billion. If they maintain this current pace of defense development, they will totally outpace the US by 2035. China’s urgency has only heightened since the US became engaged in costly wars in Afghanistan and in the Middle East. However, while seeing the high-tech and targeted forces that have been adopted to replace ground combat forces, the Chinese have also changed course.

No longer focusing on military prowess on the battlefield or with a face-to-face enemy, China’s military strength is now focused on highly technological and precise attacks. As a military ideology, they have adopted a strategy called “Unified C4ISR.” The four Cs are command, control, communications, and computers; ISR stands for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance.

The US has also developed sophisticated counterintelligence that the Chinese have been working on, where we have also acquired A2/AD, or “anti-access/area denial” capabilities. However, the Chinese have recently developed a far superior technology, which allows them to pinpoint any ground attack or anti-ship missile system. They also have a growing fleet of modern nuclear submarines, with undersea cyber intelligence capability and highly sophisticated anti satellite weaponry capable of destroying or disabling another nation’s military assets from afar. Not only that, the PLA’s document, “The Science of Military Strategy,” plainly states that “active defense is the essential feature of China’s military strategy.” It goes on to say: “if an enemy offends our national interests, then it means that the enemy has already fired the first shot, in which case the PLA’s mission is to do all we can to dominate the oppressor by striking out first.”

After a brief period of reading, ten pairs of eyes looked up from the document and began darting around the room looking at each other. It was hard to tell what everyone was feeling, until Clint Addison, the Secretary of Defense, spoke up and said the obvious.

“Mr Hawk, we’ve known that this has been happening for quite some time, but our hands are tied. We can’t declare any more wars. That would be disastrous for public opinion and you’ve heard the reports from our generals. Our military infrastructure simply can’t handle another costly campaign.”

“You’re partially right,” Hawk said. “War, in the traditional sense of the word, is both antiquated and out of the question. But this is about more than just military strength. This is about regaining the captive attention and respect of the American people and the wider world. We need to regain what power we’ve lost over the past decades to concentrate on competing with the high-tech industrial and manufacturing giants now firmly located in the Far East.” He took a breath to let his words sink in, and continued. “If there’s one fundamental difference between the citizens of the West and those of the East, it’s in their attitude towards government. In the West, we believe that

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the authority and legitimacy of the state is a function of democracy. But citizens have become ambivalent about that authority — they barely even care if it’s there anymore.

“In the East, the state takes on a more spiritual role. For over 2,000 years, the power of the Chinese state has not been challenged — the people accept it as the head of the family. The state is everywhere in China, its authority is ubiquitous. It is called the ‘Way of the Han.’” Hawk placed his hands on the desk and looked over those seated, his eyes finally settling on the President. “The American people need us to step in. But it must be done in a way that is strategic. We cannot do this as a state actor.”

There were murmurings from those seated. This was going to be crucial, Hawk knew, and he wasn’t surprised when it was Sheen who spoke next.

“So what you’re saying is that the US is now going to intervene, but not as a state actor. Isn’t that called terrorism?”

“Terror is what will ensue when the US is no longer able to defend itself against the rest of the world,” Hawk said, turning to confront Sheen. “In case you haven’t noticed, Miss Sheen, China has no compunction when it comes to attacking our networks and manipulating our currency. A carefully placed computer virus can wipe billions off the stock market. It might not be as distasteful as a tactical strike, but the result is just the same: lives destroyed, businesses lost. When our economic dominance declines to the point where we no longer have the power to sway international agreements, when our people become so fat and lazy from sitting in front of a television screen that we can’t put together the elite military that America has relied upon so many times in the past, then you might notice that we’ve been the victim of the most subtle and heinous example of covert terrorism the world has ever seen.”

There were more murmurs.

“Forgive me if I don’t read this entire document now,” Sheen said, talking over the others.

“But what exactly will this ‘intervention’ entail?”

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“Quite simply a Black Op,” Hawk said, “under the direct command of myself and key military personnel.”

“What do you exactly mean, Mr Hawk, by a Black Op? What are you getting at? Do you

really think that a clandestine military option is preferable to forging economic and military alliances with these new powers?" Sheen asked. "We've made great progress recently, and opened up new markets."

"Excuse me, madam, but do you want the world to hear of America's weakness from the lips of its own leaders?" Hawk replied, frowning. Deep inside he was seething, but calm was required. He turned away, shaking his head. "I understand your ties to atheist China, Miss Shin." He paused, waiting for those listening to realize he'd used her real name, not the adopted Sheen, and not by accident. "Please remember that you are now working on the side that you picked."

There was some commotion in the room as Hawk walked back to his seat. He could hear several of the Cabinet members defending Sheen, but he'd made his point. He sat down, locking eyes with Sheen once again. She stared back with fury in her eyes, but he could also sense her fear. The President was standing and the noise abated. "Now, as Ronald has indicated, I am very troubled by these developments, but no decisions will be made without great care and deliberation. In the next few weeks, we will develop a specific strategy for how to deal with the task in front of us."

Hawk looked defiantly at those around the table. Had they never heard the ancient story of the young lions of Tarshish? The President could mince his words and offer all the pleasantries he liked, but the Brotherhood's plan was already in motion.

All Hawk had to do was make sure the American people never found out who was behind the events that would unfold. And once they had Oswald Carrington in their grasp, that would be very easy.

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Oswald Carrington poured boiling water over the noodles, half-listening to the infomercial on the television.

“The new programmable Sani-Bot 3000 from Wèilái Guòqù will revolutionize your home.”

“Simple crap,” Carrington said, shovelling the still-crispy noodles into his mouth. “Basic, simple crap.”

“What can it do, Dave?”

“Well, it’s a vacuum, Bob, but it’s capable of much more than that.”

“It’s a shitty trash can, Dave,” Carrington said, laughing to himself.

He had finished his graduate studies at the prestigious Massachusetts Institute of Technology six months ago, but he still had no idea what he wanted to do with his life. His work on miniaturized robotic drones had gained him great acclaim at MIT, with professors from every department — astronautics, physics, bio-mechanical engineering, nuclear, and computer science — not just encouraging, but practically begging him to pursue a career in their given field. In the end, he’d chosen a position at Apex Technologies, pursuing his favorite field: robotics. If he’d realized at the time that they were going to limit his work to simple drone technology, then he wouldn’t have even lasted the two months he’d managed to complete.

“With this attachment, the Sani-Bot 3000 can clean in-between tiles, and it’s precise enough to get between the individual keys of your laptop without disturbing the text on screen.”

“Bullshit. Keyboards will be obsolete in two years.”

The problem was that nothing could hold Carrington’s attention for long enough. Not girls, not jobs, not hobbies — none of it was interesting enough on its own. He’d been this way since he had been a very young child, and what with his parents having to work relentlessly to keep their brilliant offspring from getting bored, they were forever trying to stimulate his brilliant brain by setting him ever more complicated challenging tasks in order that he never stopped mentally progressing and thus losing his motivation in life altogether.

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“And at \$199 plus tax—”

Carrington turned off the television with a whispered curse, and placed the bowl of noodles on the table whilst retrieving a half-smoked joint from the ashtray. He lit it and took a long toke,

feeling the comforting haze wafting slowly over his eyes and quietly tranquilizing his buzzing, hyperactive brain. Fucking Sani-Bot 3000? He could build a better robot than that using an empty can of beans. And it wasn't even autonomous! It relied upon a primitive pre-programmed routine that gave it the illusion of semi-intelligence.

Well, Carrington had to admit that even he hadn't quite solved the true artificial-intelligence problem, but his insectoid Droniks used a highly advanced and sophisticated swarm-intelligence program to allow them to make extremely complicated decisions. They could identify friend from foe and easily incapacitate a fully-grown man. He had already proven that he could build the working prototype of one of those at college, but God knows how far he could have gone with the right backing.

Sadly, most companies were no longer interested in state-of-the-art technology. They just wanted to build cheap crap which they could then sell to fucking lazy morons, and none were willing to give Carrington full autonomy. This was why, despite having possibly one the greatest inventive minds in the US, he was currently living in the basement of his parents' suburban Pennsylvania house and smoking copious amounts of marijuana, all in an attempt to stop really thinking about all the thinking he should be doing.

It had been weeks since he had done anything productive, unless you counted watching daytime television or hacking into the Pentagon archives and various celebrities' Twitter accounts, and yet he had no plans of changing that mind-set any time soon.

The clock said 18:15. Another hour until his parents got home and almost time for Doctor Who.

A beeping noise disturbed him from his thoughts. He walked through the kitchen to the living room, the joint clenched in his teeth, and pulled his battered laptop from under the cushions

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of the sofa, placing it down on the cluttered coffee table. The beeping stopped as he opened it but the icon in the corner of the screen was pulsing red. What the hell? Surely not intruders? He tapped the icon and activated the Droniks he'd positioned throughout the house.

A dozen square windows opened on screen, displaying the views from each of his twelve Droniks. He frowned. Droniks 3, 4, and 5 were blank. He tapped the screen, then checked the software, but everything was working. He'd positioned 3 and 4 upstairs, guarding the balcony outside his parents' room, and Dronik 5 had been lodged in the chimney breast.

Carrington turned from the screen and glanced back in the direction of the kitchen and the hallway. Had he heard something?

He took a long drag on the joint, then thought better of it and stubbed it out on the remains of the pizza he'd had for breakfast. He picked up the laptop and walked quietly across the carpet to the cupboard, ducked inside it and sat down, the computer on his lap in front of him. He opened the Dronik file and activated the remaining drones. "Fucking wrong house to break into, buddy," he whispered under his breath.

Droniks 1 and 2 were folded into the smoke detector at the top of the stairs, 6 through 10 were hidden in the air ducts throughout the house, and 11 and 12 were on his desk downstairs. He watched Cam 1 as it lit up and saw the top floor of the house slide into view as the drone quietly hovered out of its hiding place. "All clear," he whispered, activating its search-and-identify function. He then tagged 2, 7, 8, 9, and 10 for patrol.

The insect-like drones were all linked, all learning. The moment the threat was identified, the others would engage their combined combat function, and whoever was in the house — Carrington was pretty damn sure that someone had got in — was about to discover that his drones were far more effective than anything he'd previously used at MIT.

His breath caught in his throat as the power went out. The Wi-Fi was gone too. Something was definitely going on. His Droniks were operating on their own enclosed wireless system and

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running on miniaturized hydrogen cells. But now he had no way of reaching the authorities or anyone else — not unless he got up and physically fled the house.

The drones had already compensated for the darkness, and 11 and 12 had warmed up and were heading up the stairs from the cellar. Droniks 11 and 12 were packing a new invention that

Carrington was particularly proud of. He called them Hornet Grifters, and while they were heavier and therefore slower, no burglar was going to appreciate the sting these things carried.

A pop sounded from his laptop — Dronik 7 had identified a threat! He stared at the screen.

Dronik 7 was hovering by the door to his parents' room, and 1 and 2 were speeding their way towards it. He felt horror crawling up his back as the door swung inward.

Nothing was there?

'TARGET LOST' was flashing on the screen and he overrode it with a punch of a key. His drones could never lose track of something once they had found it! They latched onto complex visual patterns, heat and audio signatures. They could hear a pin drop and tell you where it was dropped, how much the pin weighed, and even the composition of the pin. Any movement in that room should be showing up like a brass band, yet nothing was there.

Droniks 8 and 10 were still patrolling and he engaged their stealth function. The drones were already quiet, but now they were flying at one-tenth power — slower and lower, but with all the energy focused on detection.

There it was! The signature matched a footstep close by — a boot on carpet. Something was on the stairs!

A fizzing crack sounded, and Dronik 7's screen went white. Carrington stayed calm. He'd assumed that whoever had broken into the house was after money or jewellery. He hadn't even remotely considered that they could be after him, and even if that were the case, they'd soon be aware of at least the basics of his technology. No one, but no one, was as good as him. The tech didn't exist that could stand up to his incredibly advanced imagination.

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The Hornet Grifters — Droniks 11 and 12 — had reached the ground floor and entered the kitchen. He set them to combat mode and watched as they descended to the floor, their cams aimed at the staircase and the entrance to the living room.

Droniks 8 and 10 were responding to the loss of 7, following the edge of the wall. There it was! Dronik 7 was on the ground, scorched and in pieces. The air above it was distorted by heat —

whatever had hit it must have been a high-energy pulse. But then the distortion was moving and gone. Carrington realized that something was indeed generating that heat signature, but it wasn't his

damaged drone. Dronik 8 had noticed the heat source and powered up, buzzing into the room at speed, its weapon systems fully activated.

He engaged the tag-gas function and Dronik 8 released its payload, flooding the room with a mildly radioactive nerve toxin, designed to paralyze or at least slow down any intruder while painting it with a radioactive signature. Dronik 8 dropped and 10 was in, immediately latching onto the target.

Carrington froze. His drone had flown like a bat out of hell towards something, but he was so shocked he wasn't aware at first that both drones were done for.

The localized electromagnetic pulse caught the machines totally by surprise, frying both of them and wiping the images from their cams clean from his laptop in a blinding flash. Carrington, though, had seen something quite clearly against the blaze of light: a smooth mouth, jagged teeth, a compound eye, and a vein-like crest protruding from behind a metallic skull.

"What the fuck?" he mumbled to himself.

Quickly recovering, he shifted his concentration back to the Hornet Grifters. There was nothing on the stairs — not yet. Droniks 1 and 2 had moved into stealth mode in accordance with the survival algorithm he had programmed into them, and 6 and 9 were following the course of the air vent down to the living room. If anything got past the Grifters now he'd have at least some backup, and he'd use 1 and 2 as soon as he knew what was going on. He was certainly up against some very advanced tech, and whatever that thing was, it definitely knew what it was doing.

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Carrington needed to think differently now, more creatively. At that moment he realized, as terrified as he was, he was bizarrely starting to enjoy himself.

Something creaked overhead and he realized he was in danger of being outsmarted. He opened the cupboard door just a crack and cautiously peaked out, looking up at the ceiling. There was a strange humming noise reverberating through the house, flakes of plaster began to slowly

drift down from above. Was it about to come through the ceiling?

Carrington folded the laptop closed and climbed out of the cupboard, sprinting for the kitchen just as the ceiling fell in with a gigantic cloud of dust. He didn't stop to see what had caused it and immediately leapt over the kitchen counter, falling heavily on his back, the laptop hugged protectively across his chest. An eerie creaking, humming, screeching noise sounded from the living room as he saw what appeared to him to be a laser spike tracing the wall through the thick dust-laden air, almost as if it was investigating.

"Fuck. Fuck. Fuck," he said, as he pulled himself across the floor to the door of the basement. He heard an explosion — Dronik 1 had detonated to cover his escape — and the screeching rose an octave.

Carrington was already halfway down the basement steps, slamming the door behind him, when the Grifters also went off, releasing dozens of tiny, poison-packed, ambulating Goops: tiny marble-sized walking machines that were programmed to sting anything that moved. He tripped in his haste and fell face first. His laptop went skidding across the floor but he quickly grabbed it back up before heading for the drawer beside his bed and the Glock 17 he kept there. He pulled it out and spun around, his back to the wall, the gun aimed at the closed door at the top of the stairs.

Nothing moved and there was total silence.

Suddenly he heard a strange high-pitched humming whine coming from the other side of the door, then silence again. Keeping the pistol trained on the door, he reached for his laptop and flipped it open. Twelve square windows of static reflected in his glasses. Every Dronik was down. Every single one.

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"No way. No fucking way. Not possible," Carrington murmured.

The center of the door creased inwards, and the whole thing was pulled from its frame. A blinding blue and white flashing light shone down on him. He tried to pull the trigger, barely aware of what was happening, but felt the Glock pulled from his numb grip.

He caught a slight glimpse of thick compound lenses, and then a clawed hand was holding

him down. An alien voice like he had never heard before — hostile, deep, and distorted — croaked angrily in his ear, “We have you now,” as a thick black hood was pulled over his head. He could hear his breathing getting louder in his ears and subsequently smelled a strange chemical odor. A series of red lights flashed in sequence, up and down, inside the hood, as he felt himself being lifted, higher and higher, until the cold chill air declared he was outside.

Carrington struggled, harder and harder, but the lights were calming, soothing. He felt his muscles relax, felt his breathing slow, and the last thing he heard was a groaning noise so terrible he embraced unconsciousness.

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End of sample

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