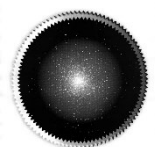


Final Limit

By

Stefan Vučak



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Chapter One

May 24, 2022

Cuarteron Reef, South China Sea

08:00 am local time, 12 hours ahead of Washington DC

At 15,000 meters, the B-2 Spirit cruised through clear skies, the morning stillness broken by the whisper of its four GE F118 engines. A fuzzy smudge of land appeared on the horizon and began to resolve into something solid.

In the right seat, mission commander, Captain Rick ‘Shaver’ Dufort, glanced at the glass radar display. “Target in sight, Prowler,” he declared with as much emotion as though approaching a gas station. “Forty-six kilometers.”

Major Stanly ‘Prowler’ Lennon shifted his weight and nodded. “I see it.”

Piloting the heavy stealth bomber came easier to him than driving a car. Controlled by quadruplex fly-by-wire systems that automatically manipulated flight surfaces and settings to eliminate pilot feedback and maintain aircraft stability, without which the thing would go belly-up and tumble down. Still, regardless of how magnificent, the machine nevertheless required human input for final decision-making. Planned future military aircraft would not even require a human pilot on board, as the Rebus Aviation F-26 vividly demonstrated against the celebrated Chinese Chengdu J-20 fifth-generation stealth fighters in a recent furball near Taiwan.

Lennon relished the idea of conducting aerial warfare strapped comfortably into a remote control station with a mug of coffee at hand. If his aircraft got smeared, he would still be alive to link with another bird and get on with business. He had never believed in fully autonomous UAVs, although he

acknowledged that in years to come, human pilots were likely to give way to smart AI systems. Conflict, then, would become a virtual game devoid of the human factor. As complexity grew, so did the prevalence of software bugs that could never be totally eliminated irrespective of any testing protocols. It is a pain if bank failure prevents payment with a credit card, but a glitch in AI software that controls an unmanned weapon gone rogue could cost human lives. The thought that a computer could make life-and-death decisions made his skin crawl. He figured somebody out there must have thought this out already. Then again...

Right now, with the B-2 Spirit humming around him, he felt in his element, where he belonged.

"You got anything lined up for tonight?" Lennon asked his buddy, eyes on the fuzzy horizon.

Dufort chuckled. "Thana and I are going out for dinner. Afterward, who knows?"

Lennon grinned, amazed at his friend's physical stamina and determination to relentlessly pursue anything in a skirt or kimono while stationed in Okinawa. He never even broke stride when the TDY assignment to Taiwan came up. Of medium height, ruggedly handsome, easygoing with a disarming grin, Shaver rarely had to pursue too hard. Somewhat reckless on the ground, he maintained total professionalism in the air.

"What happened to Tasha, your last love?"

"That was last week. What about you?"

"If I danced around like you, Mirana would turn me into sashimi. Besides, I'm a happily married man, and you're incorrigible."

Dufort gave a sorrowful sigh. "Your wife isn't in Taiwan, man. You need to spread your wings. These Taiwanese broads need to be flight-tested." He glanced at the radar display. "Thirty-two kilometers."

"Driving this beast, my wings are spread, and I'm done with testing," Lennon remarked with a grin.

"The problem, pal, this beast doesn't cuddle up."

"True, but Mirana's there for me, even though she isn't in

Taiwan right now. Makes for great reunions when we rotate back for weekends, though.” His eyes flickered to the displays. “Time to pucker up. Are we painted?”

“Search radar only. Still below acquisition threshold,” Dufort said. “The guys in the White House are probably into their second whiskey by now,” he added irreverently.

“I’d go for that right now. Time for us to do some paid work,” Lennon growled and touched the comms button icon on the glass display. “Tower One, this is Hawk One. Cuarteron Reef in sight. Permission to engage.”

* * *

In the main Briefing Room, one of four that comprised the Situation Room crisis management and intelligence center in the West Wing, which some called ‘the basement’ due to its sunken location, Air Force General Oliver MacCreedy, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, looked at the president.

“In position,” he declared deliberately.

Tall, impressive in his dress blues, four rows of ribbons on his chest, he looked young for a four-star. Black hair cropped short, face hard, his command presence felt almost palpable.

Samuel Walters fixed his attention on the officer and nodded, liking what he saw. Kenneth Pacino had convinced him to appoint the fifty-six-year-old four-star. It meant bypassing twenty-three senior Pentagon and duty station officers, but Walters put a lot of stock in his national security advisor, a former rear admiral and a general pain. Pacino cut it the way he saw it, not always to the president’s liking. However, Walters needed a real-world view, not the preprocessed mush dished out every morning in his Presidential Daily Brief or by timid staffers. He told everybody to dish it out plain without worrying he’d jump down their throats, but some could not accept talking to the president as though he were merely another man. MacCreedy’s appointment annoyed several four-stars, they submitted their resignations, with hearty approval from Pacino. The general worked smoothly with the SecDef

implementing the Administration's policies, and so far, Walters had no reason to regret his choice.

"You need fresh officers in senior posts, Mr. President," Pacino pointed out firmly. "The ones who left were mostly dead wood anyway. You saw the services reduction report from Randal Spinner. Those four-stars were on his list to go, and several considered the CJCS posting as a cushy sunset job before landing on some aerospace company's board. Our command structure has become too procedural and top-heavy. The SecDef is working to identify more officers who, in my view, would serve the country better if they were elsewhere."

MacCreedy distinguished himself in Iraq and Afghanistan, recently in Operation Inherent Resolve against ISIS, and several counter-terrorism campaigns. He proved himself a brilliant tactician and strategic planner, writing several notable papers on current and emerging political, economic, and military threats, not only from Russia and China, but surprisingly, coming from within Western countries in the form of growing right-wing isolationism, a trend that had become notable within the United States itself, pushed largely by Chinese disinformation campaigns. His papers were mandatory reading at every US military academy.

As the Joint Chiefs chairman, he had a secure four-year term—unless he screwed up badly—and the Democratic Party machine already looked at him as a possible senator, as did the GOP. Their policies might be misguided, influenced by far-right religious interests, but they recognized his talent.

Walters glanced at the wall clock: 8:06 pm. One way or another, it promised to be another long night. He could have launched the strike during daylight Washington time, but he wanted Zhou Yedong up and wide awake to dissect what happened, hoping it would add to his collection of gray hairs.

"Approved," he said in a hard voice.

Opposite the long, brown-grained wood table stood an enormous LED Virtual Mission Center screen showing a tactical map of the South China Sea. Little blue and red triangles

denoted friendly and potentially hostile surface forces. Fortunately, none were near each other. Single, smaller screens flanked the VMC, displaying the blue White House logo. On his right, a blank 62" screen hung mounted on the wall. On the left were two more large screens. Subdued overhead lighting accentuated dark ceiling cornices and side paneling. The room held none of the elaborate communication stations and computer monitors found in rooms where he held videoconferences with world leaders or observed covert military ops. The current simple ops did not require such an elaborate setup.

"Hawk One, this is Tower One. You're go to engage," MacCreedy ordered.

* * *

"Roger, Tower One," Lennon replied and gave his buddy a thumbs-up. "Let's get this done and haul ass. Arm the CBU-72s. Descending to 2,000 meters."

Dufort touched a virtual button on his battle systems screen to tell the weapons management computer to activate the infrared targeting laser.

A relatively short flight from Ching Chuan Kang Air Base in Taiwan, only two hours and fifteen minutes to cover 1,700 kilometers to Cuarteron Reef, the two men readied for the bomb drop. The B-2 could push at 900 kph, but this mission did not require urgency.

A soft *beep* from the targeting display map showed two blinking red dots. The invisible laser had locked onto the targets and passed the information to system guidance packages in the two CBU-72 weapons mounted in the belly rotary launcher.

"At 2,000," Lennon announced, arms crossed over his chest, ready to take control if the flight management system gave a burp. "Anybody getting excited down there?" he asked casually.

Dufort glanced at the radar display, the hit rate still below

acquisition threshold. “We’re good.”

It might be quiet down there right now, Lennon reflected, but things would warm up quickly when they made their bomb run. The B-2 might be stealthy with a radar signature of a bird, but birds don’t fly close to the speed of sound. More than anything, stealth counted on not getting noticed in the general background clutter. With increasingly smart ground systems, stealth wasn’t all that it’s cracked up to be. Current generation fighters were designed to defeat Ku, X, and C-band radars. Everyone knew that and were rolling out VHF and UHF fire control systems. Stealth shapes and special skin can minimize an aircraft’s radar cross-section, but it cannot mask its Doppler shift. His B-2 running subsonic, it was not a real bird, and that’s all a missile needed to kiss his ass goodbye, especially as some Chinese SAMs were rumored to have radar acquisition packages.

Still, driving the Spirit was better than flying a lumbering KC-135 fuel tanker, or a boring airliner, something Mirana obliquely mentioned more than once. She wanted a full-time husband in bed, not a box of medals and citations. Well, so did he. She never tried to change him, though, knowing his soul belonged in the air pushing the envelope. Anyway, piloting the seventy-three metric ton B-2 wasn’t *that* dangerous.

At twelve kilometers from Cuarteron Reef with its radars, communication, missile sites, fuel tank farm, and various buildings, he watched Dufort touch a virtual button to open the barn-sized bomb bay doors. At that point, the B-2 became vulnerable, and threat receivers immediately issued a sharp warble. He knew the Chinese had FK-3000 short-range SAMs on the island capable of taking out the B-2...provided the battery could get a lock. Dufort pickled the weapons release button and two CBU-72s fell away. A harsh *deedle-deedle*, you are dead, missile lock sound increased the situational pucker factor. It would not do much for their careers if they bent the priceless stealth bomber. Then again, they were unlikely to survive a multiple SAM attack either, which solved any career worries. Sad when the higher-ups were more worried about

equipment than personnel. At what point did a human life become more valuable than a B-2? Lennon did not need to ask; he already knew pilots were expendable. The reason why all armed services were looking at smart, unmanned fighters wasn't because they undervalued human life. In their minds, the cost and years of training and ongoing upkeep of a pilot far outweighed the price of a UAV fighter. In his opinion, not a very smart doctrine, one that Rebus Aviation decisively debunked with their F-26. Any kid who knew how to play a Nintendo game could be trained to operate a high-performance aircraft, but understanding how to use it properly in any conflict scenario took serious training to apply.

Calm silence returned when the bomb bay doors closed and the Spirit became invisible again. Chinese radars on the island lost lock before the batteries could launch, but they knew trouble had arrived even though they could not do anything about it. His mouth twitched with amusement as he pictured men running around down there, knowing death had come.

"Weapons released and we're done," Dufort announced with relish.

Lennon added power and pulled back the joystick to gain altitude, glad to be out of the hot zone. They would loiter until the CBU-72s did their stuff, then do a Kodak photo run to give the boys in the White House something to watch and talk about. He never worried about the strategic implications of what he did, happy to drive his B-2. Too much thinking only contributed to worry lines and gray hairs.

Scuttlebutt said the Advanced Remote Pilot Laboratory at Randolph Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas, had opened candidate applications to become F-26 remote-controlled fighter pilot instructors. A genuinely stealthy bird according to the dope—something with the way they polarized the aircraft's skin—and he considered tossing in his hat. Even pilots who lost flight status on medical grounds were eligible, which made sense. Driving a ground console did not require the level of fitness demanded when handling a Mach 1-plus aircraft.

They were looking for maturity and experience.

If accepted, it meant relocating from Okinawa to San Antonio, but he would not mind life back in the States, and neither would Mirana. She would have him around all the time and he could still mix it up with the bad guys while firmly grounded. According to the grapevine, San Antonio marketed itself as a nice, affordable, and family-friendly city with a 'big small-town' feel, offering a lower cost of living than the national average, which was likely to change quickly as the facility expanded to accommodate an influx of new personnel. Besides, as a major, unless he did something spectacular, promotion to lieutenant colonel would not come anytime soon, and the F-26 offered a totally new and potentially exciting career path, worth getting in on the ground floor. A lot of stuff circulated about the fabulous F-26 Wasp and he wanted to check out the machine for himself.

He did check it out visually. It stood parked in its revetment, a semi-enclosed reinforced bay, at Ching Chuan Kang Air Base, next to the two B-2 Spirits, the three precious aircraft guarded by grim US Air Force military police to keep sightseers away. As a B-2 pilot, he managed to get close and walked around the amazing manta-ray aircraft. Two captains trained at Edwards Air Force Base to operate the bird gushed about its capabilities and stealth-enhancing airframe geometry that absorbed or deflected impacting radiation. Lennon lusted to get his hooks into it. They even allowed him access to the remote control terminal's simulator mode and allowed him to play with it a little. It made him more determined than ever to apply.

* * *

Fixed on the assigned targets, the GPS guidance packages kept the two weapons on track as they deployed maneuvering fins to execute course corrections. Search radars immediately locked onto them, but the bombs were too fast and too low for missile targeting and anti-aircraft battery fire to engage

them in the time available before they hit.

At 200 meters, onboard computers released the scatter charge capsule in each weapon, which dispersed a cloud of powdered aluminum and organic oxidizer from the bomb casing. The dispersed fuel progressively ignited as it came into contact with atmospheric oxygen.

Short of a tactical nuclear burst, the detonation waves enveloped the three-mile length of Cuarteron Reef, ripped apart every standing structure, the lighthouse, two helicopter pads, and seriously damaged a cargo vessel. Hurricane winds generated by the explosion tossed three Shenyang J-15 fourth-generation tactical fighter aircraft parked on the flight line of the 500-meter east-west runway and sent them up in flames. Anything not garaged slammed into walls and obstacles, which added to the conflagration. The tank farm erupted into balls of fire and shed rivers of burning fuel everywhere. When the initial pressure waves subsided from the two fuel-air weapons, air rushed back into the partial vacuum created by the blasts and completed destruction of anything still above ground.

* * *

Lennon could not see what happened to personnel caught in open spaces or ruined buildings, for which he expressed thanks. He preferred to consider the whole exercise as an impersonal surgical strike against inanimate objects. It helped him sleep better.

The B-2 Spirit circled once, the onboard system automatically sending the video 'take' to the White House.

"Picking up a transmission burst," Dufort declared. "Someone is still alive down there."

"Their problem," Lennon remarked. "Tower One, this is Hawk One. Mission completed. Permission to RTB."

"Permission granted," came the immediate reply. "Well done, Major."

Lennon pumped his fist and exchanged a high-five with Dufort. "Let's get out of Doge."

“Thana, here I come!” the mission commander hooted.

* * *

President Samuel Walters nodded, and MacCreedy cut the video feed from the B-2 Spirit. The horrific destruction and power of modern weapons unsettled him, but the strike should also send a clear message...he hoped.

“It’s not like I didn’t give Zhou Yedong any warning,” he remarked, regretting the loss of life. How many more would it take on both sides before this ended? Sometimes a situation left no other option. As long as they were not wasted, the loss could be reconciled. The problem he faced was that Chinese leadership rarely valued life as highly as he did. If Zhou did not, he probably valued the loss of equipment and infrastructure more, which should give him pause to reflect.

In 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruled the Chinese claim over the South China Sea invalid under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. Predictably, the CCP ignored the ruling and continued its program of island-building and reef occupation, turning them into fully-equipped military bases to consolidate their objective to control the entire waterway and all maritime traffic, commercial or military. Tired of China’s bullying tactics against Vietnamese and Philippine fishing boats, supported by Quad—Quadrilateral Security Dialogue—warships, Walters acted when he took office in 2017. He supported previous administrations’ position to hold the 7th Fleet in the area and make its presence felt to curb China’s dangerous adventurism.

In response, China deployed hundreds of armed trawlers, part of its Armed Maritime Militia, to fish in Exclusive Economic Zones of all South China Sea countries in blatant disregard of numerous diplomatic protests, including those from the US State Department. They were doing the same nonsense off the western South American seaboard and Pacific island nations, but those countries were unable to do anything about it. In warning, US Coast Guard and Navy ships were ordered

to make a point and sunk several Chinese trawlers in Philippine waters. Undeterred, China simply sent others to take their place. Those that withdrew first emptied their bilges and flushed ballast gunk directly into the sea. The situation became particularly nasty when Chinese barges started to dump raw sewage in the Spratly Islands chain in area denial to local fishing vessels, which enraged the entire world community. Like Zhou Yedong cared for world opinion.

The latest brinkmanship incident started innocently enough, if equating anything China did can be called innocent. On March 12, Carrier Strike Group 5, led by the *Nimitz*-class USS *Ronald Reagan* with its escort of cruisers, destroyers, submarines, and replenishment vessels, exercised its freedom of navigation right to steam through the contested South China Sea waters, which China considered its own. Two *Arleigh Burke* screening destroyers had a brief, but fierce encounter with two Chinese guided-missile ships, which resulted in loss of life and damage to ships on both sides. In response, tired of this nonsense, Walters ordered a strike against the Chinese-occupied Fiery Cross Reef, and demanded that Zhou Yedong vacate all reefs and man-made islands in the Paracel and Spratly Islands, and Scarborough Shoal, or in sixty days the US would bomb them out of existence. At the same time, Walters recognized Taiwan as an independent sovereign nation, which enraged China, and immediately initiated diplomatic relations with President Hsin-Yi Liao.

He did not expect Zhou Yedong to ignore the developing situation. However, the sharp Chinese response made him blink. On May 25, they launched a missile strike against the *Ronald Reagan* group and allied Quad vessels, with loss of men and ships, and obliteration of most of the Chinese force sent to resupply and relieve personnel left on Fiery Cross Reef. In response, the US sent B-2 bombers to take out ground facilities on several Chinese Spratly Islands bases.

After the strike, Walters reminded Zhou Yedong he had forty-seven days left to withdraw. Until he did, the US would maintain a blockade on every island facility in area denial to

aircraft and warships. The Chinese Paramount Leader did not quite hang up on him, which made Walters smile. They used to be on first-name basis, he mused.

Zhou stepped away from an outright confrontation and the world had given a relieved nod of approval. The vexing issue around armed Chinese trawlers also saw some improvement. The enormous fishing fleets still roamed the oceans, but no longer encroached into national Exclusive Economic Zones. According to diplomatic communiques, Pacific and South American governments were particularly grateful, and most of them looked more favorably at furthering economic and strategic alliances with the US to counter China's Belt and Road Initiative programs. He wondered how long that gratitude would last before self-interest, bribes, and outright corruption overrode good sense. A visible naval presence should serve as a reminder of what the United States did for them in case they were again tempted by Zhou's charms.

All positive things, but since then, Zhou had not made any attempt to evacuate his remaining South China Sea bases. That made it a US move and Walters immediately decided to attack Cuarteron Reef.

He reached for the steel decanter, refilled his cup with freshly ground coffee, added one teaspoon of brown sugar, and took an appreciative sip. He did not know where the chief usher procured the bean mix and never particularly cared as long as the stuff kept coming.

A window opened on the bottom right corner of the Virtual Mission Center screen. "General, we're picking up coded message bursts between Beijing and PLA Rocket Force Base 61 and 62," the duty Navy captain at the Pentagon National Military Command Center announced calmly.

"Keep us advised if you notice any change in readiness posture, Captain," MacCreedy ordered.

"Yes, sir." The window closed.

Walters frowned. "Where are these bases?"

"Base 61 is in Huangshan city, Anhui Province, Mr. President. They're responsible for coverage of eastern and part of

southeastern China. Base 62 is in Kunming city, Yunnan Province. They cover lower southern China. They are People's Liberation Army's primary Rocket Force command and control centers."

"Mmm. That means they're alerted across the board. Your assessment?"

"It's a normal response, not a preliminary to a launch, sir. We'll be keeping an eye on them."

Larry Tanner gave a mirthless smile. "Not asleep on the switch, are they?"

Walters turned to his Secretary of State. "Well, Larry?"

He regarded his Republican SecState with respect. Always impeccably dressed in conservative suits, thick brown hair neatly combed back, a small bulge around the middle marred an otherwise trim form. At six-three, he presented an imposing figure. At the start of his first term, Walters came in for considerable flak from the Democratic Party machine when he announced the appointment. They could not believe a Republican to be the only choice for an extremely important and influential posting inside the Administration. Walters stood firm. He wanted only the best in his cabinet and senior staff positions, and Tanner was the best. Often a monumental pain in the butt, they argued heatedly over foreign policy issues, with Walters an irritated student and Tanner a patient tutor. However, when Walters made a decision, whether Tanner agreed with it or not, the Secretary of State carried it out with matchless efficiency. He often threatened to resign and run for the Senate, but Walters dangled an unbeatable trump in front of his SecState—shape the world's foreign policy. Tanner continued to grumble in his abrasive way, but stayed on. The Republicans wanted to lure him away to run in the coming midterms, but Walters dismissed the rumors. Tanner had a job with almost three years to go. Still, if the man wanted to leave, he would not hold him back, apart from suggesting he run on a Democratic ticket.

Tanner shifted in his black leather seat and cleared his throat.

“I outlined my position when you planned this move, Mr. President. After giving Zhou the sixty-day deadline, you had to strike to maintain credibility. After today, be prepared for a military response. The Chinese people have an ingrained respect for authority and strong leadership, fostered by centuries of repressive rule. They admire someone who will do exactly what he says. With an MBA from Stanford, Zhou understands the Western capitalist mindset well. He believed you would not risk destabilizing the dollar or the world’s economy by forcing a confrontation if he failed to withdraw, so he vacillated. Today’s strike against Cuarteron Reef demonstrated your resolve. In my opinion, he will admire this as much as he can respect any uncultured Westerner.”

“But he will retaliate?” Walters demanded.

“You may have put him into a no-win position. Zhou wields a lot of power, but he is still answerable to the State Council, the Politburo, and to a certain extent, the PLA. Privately, he may want to withdraw from all their man-made islands and standing reefs, the program started before he became president. Engaging in military conflict will negate his economic programs, particularly the Belt and Road Initiative China is pushing on developing countries to put them into political and economic bondage. If he does withdraw, his opponents will see this as loss of face by kowtowing to the West. He could face a revolt.

“After the failed attempt to resupply the Fiery Cross Reef, Xhal Shenglai, the then Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission, attempted to launch a nuclear strike against the *Gerald Ford* group. According to the CIA, his whereabouts are now unknown. In April, Premier Dzhang Qishan staged a failed coup against Zhou. Although a fellow *taixidang* princeling, he didn’t like Zhou’s push toward a more market-oriented economy.”

Walters snorted. “Come off it, Larry! He’s a dictator. Dzhang overreached himself and fell on his sword. Zhou is ruthless when it comes to covering his ass. There won’t be any revolt.”

“No one is invulnerable, Mr. President, but we cannot ignore their mindset,” Tanner pushed on. “We’re fixated on seeking binary outcomes for multifaceted issues. We don’t like to compromise when total victory is seen as the only acceptable objective, often prosecuted at the expense of the country we’re supposedly helping. The Chinese Communist Party, on the other hand, pursued change through reasoned argument, understanding that there is no single right answer or solution to a complex problem.

“They navigated through a tapestry of opposing social and national political contradictions within which a pragmatic workable compromise allowed progress to take place. Since the fall of Mao, successive leaders such as Deng Xiaoping and Hu Jintao steered China from a primary producer to an industrial, financial, and global military power, done largely by aping Western thought, methodology, and technology. Stolen from the West, by the way,” he added with a grin. “Zhou and the CCP don’t see any conflict pursuing this pragmatic ideology, happy to embrace a philosophy of logical contradictions if it produces results. They love to play multilayered politics, and that’s what Zhou has done so far. However, he must be seen by his supporters to project CCP’s interests. A strike against another South China Sea installation at this time might not be wise.”

“You like to play that game as well,” Walters reminded him. “I don’t mind a bit of fun either, but China’s position in the South China Sea is not a game, and Cuarteron Reef is a reminder of that, binary or not.”

“There is another dimension, Mr. President,” Tanner countered, apparently unfazed. “Ordinary Americans on the street don’t really care what is happening halfway around the world as long as supermarket shelves are filled with cheap consumer goods, regardless of where they come from. If China mounts a military response, they won’t like it if it costs American lives and sets prices soaring. You’ll take a political hit.”

“My popularity numbers climbed when I confronted Zhou Yedong in March,” Walters pointed out reasonably. “You may

also be underestimating our people and their understanding of what's going on."

"I merely point out that you should be prepared to deal with a volatile domestic situation if this escalates into open conflict."

"You can leave that to me, Larry. Granted, total withdrawal will cost Zhou political points, but that's something he'll have to resolve internally. I'm not about to back down or help him. If I see a forces buildup as a preliminary to a military response, I won't deploy the 7th Fleet or risk Quad assets. I'll simply tell him SADES is up there ready to react. American lives will not be at risk. He saw what that weapons system can do when we took out his Lingshui Air Base to neutralize its J-20 squadrons.

"Summon Ambassador Meng Hyson and give him a formal note for Zhou Yedong. Begin immediate withdrawal from all sites or the United States will progressively take them out. The next one will be Subi Reef in four days' time. One more thing. If Zhou fails to comply, I'll also stop interest payments on his US Treasury bond holdings. Add a PS: End this."

Brows drawn, mouth tight, Tanner nodded. "Yes, sir."

Walters took a sip of coffee. *Damnation!* The SecState sometimes really got under his skin with his obfuscation. He turned to the national security advisor. "Opinion?"

Rear Admiral Kenneth Pacino pulled a clutch pencil tip out of his mouth. "I agree with Larry, Mr. President. We need to be prepared to face a limited retaliatory response, but we positioned conventional assets in Taiwan to ameliorate the threat. We secured permission from President Liao to station two B-2s, six F-35As, and one F-26 Wasp at the Ching Chuan Kang Air Base. There are also two B-2s, two F-26s, and six F-35As at their Chiayi Air Base.

"We only have three Wasps in theater, but they represent a major deterrent against Chinese encroachment into Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone. China's ladar-equipped J-20s are a serious threat to our conventional inventory, but the F-26's stealth characteristics make it immune, as the J-20s found out the hard way. We also secured rights to station elements

of our 7th fleet at Zuoying Naval Base to discourage any incipient plans to invade the island or carry out illegal fishing by Chinese Maritime Militia trawlers.”

Walters glanced at Spinner. “Pilots for the Wasps?”

“Two at Ching Chuan and Chiayi with remote control stations. All were trained at Edwards Air Force Base.”

“Our weapons shipments?”

“Twelve Patriot and ten THAAD batteries,” Spinner said, referring to the latest generation Terminal High Altitude Area Defense missiles.

Walters nodded. “While we’re on Taiwan, I want you to do something for me, Larry. Call President Hsin-Yi Liao and ask her to relinquish Taiwan’s claim over the Kinmen and Matsu Islands group. They’re a focal point of political and military conflict, and a source of intense irritation for the CCP. In the past, their proximity to the Chinese coast, only some ten miles, underscored their importance in regional security dynamics. However, since Taiwan’s declaration of independence and a defense treaty with the United States, that dynamic has changed. Hsin-Yi doesn’t need those islands, and they represent an ongoing support drain for Taiwan. Tell her I would take it as a personal favor if she relinquished all claims to the group to enhance regional stability.”

Tanner nodded. “A very measured gesture. I’ll get on it.”

Pacino gave a tight smile. “A good move, Mr. President. Getting back to China...Strategically, you’re right to point out that SADES is a Damocles sword hanging over Zhou Yedong’s head. China has ground-based and space anti-satellite capability, including laser weapons, but as you know, SADES is shielded and maneuverable, and we have more than one bird up there. It is not a threat Zhou can remove easily and he knows it. The CCP military hawks wouldn’t mind tangling with us, but they’re also realists when faced with a threat they cannot counter. They’ll bluster for public consumption and demand that Zhou act, but I believe they will push for something limited to save face. We hold a sword over China’s head, they also wield a blade of their own.”

“You mean their Léi Shēng anti-sat orbital array we’re not supposed to know exists?”

“Yes, sir. If we launch SADES again, they’re likely to take out our military satellites. Most are hardened, but still a disaster. Our entire military command and control structure relies on space communication. We have assets in depth, but any gap in our net will be disruptive. If they hit commercial birds, the impact would be incalculable, and all bad. We’d be thrust into a response scenario to their retaliation. You can picture the situation, Mr. President. We could quickly end up in a cascade chain reaction that could lead to something more serious.”

“I’m aware that using SADES could be a pyrrhic victory, Kenneth, but we haven’t reached that point. I want your assessment of the current situation. Will Zhou withdraw from occupied islands?”

“He will undoubtedly face some internal pressure, but he’s not a military hawk. I believe he’ll progressively withdraw assets from the South China Sea theater, but it will take time. It’s a question of logistics and economics. He’ll need time to position ships for withdrawal, and a military confrontation with the United States would negate everything China has worked for over the last fifteen years. I suggest that you give him that time.”

“Only if I see movement on Subi Reef,” Walters replied firmly. “He has ships there to enact an evacuation. If I blink now, Zhou will continue to play the waiting game. Every time I concede something, he’ll want more. Meanwhile, he’ll run a disinformation campaign on our social media to turn public sentiment against me. No, Admiral. I want to close this now.”

A touch of frost at the temples added authority to Pacino’s otherwise full crop of brown hair. Six-two, clear black eyes that missed nothing, the quietly spoken man commanded attention by his very presence. He and Tanner often struck sparks, but got along surprisingly well because both were able to maintain focus on the issue at hand without descending into personalities. At least not too much.

Barely eight months into his position after Graham Stone retired—Walters fondly recalled many late-night philosophical discussions they had in Stone’s office—Pacino slipped smoothly into the role. He appeared to know just about everything to do with national and international military forces, potential and existing strategic threats, reflected against every geopolitical tapestry. A historian and widely read, Pacino used his considerable expertise to present frighteningly accurate scenarios. In many ways like Stone, scrupulously honest, integrity never in doubt, above reproach and utterly pragmatic, he understood instinctively the fine balance between policy and its execution by government organs and the Pentagon. Not always a comfortable fit for the Pentagon brass. The man used to be one of their own.

An extraordinary set of circumstances brought Pacino into the White House. During a joint Field Training Exercise two years ago with the South Korean navy, a DPRK corvette opened fire on an *Arleigh Burke*-class destroyer, which resulted in casualties. Among them, Pacino’s son. Walters and Tanner were engaged in delicate negotiations with North Korea to topple its leader and swept the incident under the rug, not wanting to disrupt the larger strategic picture. A grave mistake. Determined to demonstrate to the Navy and the Administration that every life mattered, Pacino launched a strike against North Korea’s Yongbyon’s nuclear facility. An Article 32 hearing recommended that Pacino face court-martial, but Walters refused to allow a valuable man rot in Leavenworth, and made a deal with the Chief of Naval Operations. They gave Pacino a dishonorable discharge and Walters made him a special advisor, a decision he never regretted despite many energetic arguments they had since. Like most men, Walters hated having his nose rubbed in smelly truth, but as president, he needed to know the good and the bad to make decisions, and Pacino never hesitated to dish it out to him.

“Mark Price told me Zhou has already completed partial evacuation of several man-made installations in the Spratlys,” he mused.

“I read the CIA report, Mr. President,” Pacino countered. “Superficially accurate, there is an addendum. What appeared to be withdrawals were merely routine procedural steps to remove antiquated equipment and rotation of personnel. Despite your deadline, Zhou has not evacuated one of his major South China Sea bases.”

“That’s why I mounted today’s strike,” Walters said and focused on Oliver MacCreedy. “What’s our alert status in the East and South China Sea?”

“We’re still at DEFCON 3 in the Indo-Pacific theater, Mr. President.”

“Keep it that way. Our blockade?”

“Still in place. Since our skirmish on March 25, Chinese PLA Air Force sortied flights toward Scarborough Shoal and several Spratly Islands bases. All were intercepted without incident. As per your directive, Mr. President, we carried out inspections of ships that attempted to resupply China’s bases and turned them around. None had warship escorts. We did allow vessels to carry out partial evacuation of Mischief and Subi Reefs.”

“Well, if we hit Subi Reef, our strike will cause minimal collateral damage. What else?”

“There hasn’t been any air or sea activity this month. Satellite surveillance shows no movement by their East and South Sea Fleet assets. However, we intercepted an increased volume of signals intel between PLA’s Rocket Force installations.”

“They’re cooking something,” Walters mused.

“Mr. President, I suggest we conduct aggressive F-26 patrol sorties to prevent violation of Taiwan’s ADIZ. I also recommend we position the USS *Nimitz* Carrier Strike Group 11 and USS *Carl Vinson* CSG 1 closer to the Spratly Islands chain to interdict Chinese trawlers that encroach into Vietnamese and Philippine Economic Exclusion Zones. USS *Ronald Reagan* Strike Group 12 and USS *George Washington* CSG 5 should remain in the Taiwan Strait.”

After the attack on USS *Gerald Ford*’s CSG 12 that crippled the carrier, Walters positioned two strike groups into the area

to replace the carrier, and USS *Ronald Reagan* took over CSG 12. One hypersonic missile on the stern part of the deck disabled a fifteen-billion-dollar vessel. The attack served to reinforce most dramatically the vulnerability of carriers in a modern theater environment swarming with relatively cheap drones and hypersonic weapons. America once considered battleships as expressions of national power projection until Pearl Harbor forced everybody to reevaluate and carriers became weapons of choice.

The Chinese attack on *Ford* silenced a number of Joint Chiefs admirals who promoted an increase in the number of carrier battlegroups. Walters felt justified canceling the construction of more carriers. There were far better economical options available to bring combat aircraft into a hot zone and project power, such as multi-purpose amphibious ships capable of operating F-26 and F-35 type VTOL aircraft.

He nodded. "Approved," he said, and turned to Randal Spinner. "Where are we with Rebus Aviation? If the PLA wants to mess with us, it will be good to have more F-26s in Taiwan and on our carriers."

The Secretary of Defense cleared his throat. Five-ten, slim, thick crop of black hair, he cut an impressive figure. After a successful career as an Air Force major general, one of the youngest in the service, Spinner resigned and joined Boeing as a senior executive in their missiles division. When Walters decided to run for the White House in 2016, Cottard lured Spinner onto the team as the campaign's financial manager, dangling the SecDef position if Walters won. Shape defense policy, don't just grumble about it, Cottard told him. That's how Spinner described his entrapment to Walters in one of their mellow Oval Office chitchat sessions.

"I spoke to Ogdan Kostan late in April. The Rebus F-26 plant will be fully operational by mid-July, with aircraft coming off the line in late September. We ordered 2,300 Wasps with a potential of 3,000 more, not counting international interests."

Kostan, a former Air Force major and test pilot at the secretive Edwards Air Force Base in California, abandoned a

promising career and resigned his commission to create Rebus Aviation. His dream: build a sixth-generation stealth fighter able to match itself against anything currently in existence, including the Lockheed F-35 Lightning and the F-22 Raptor, at significantly lower cost per unit. To prove his radical manta-ray shape, he tested his concept on the commercial luxury Vector business variants that provided a revenue stream to fund research for the F/X-26. Unveiled in a demonstration flight at Edwards, the aerospace giants, under the umbrella of the Omicron Group, were immediately determined to destroy Rebus and its CEO, and scuttle any chance that Congress would fund production. The effort resulted in a major scandal that still reverberated through the industry, and prompted SecDef Spinner to accelerate his shakeup of Pentagon's senior officer cadre, and revision of weapons procurement procedures, with hearty endorsement by Walters. The days when Congress is seen as a bottomless cash cow were over.

"You told me Rebus made a deal with Boeing and Lockheed to manufacture the Wasps under license," the President said.

"Kostan wasn't too keen on the idea, fearing loss of production control, possible theft of intellectual property, and patent violations. Not only by Lockheed and Boeing, but Chinese, Russian, and hackers in general. That includes possible penetration by allied intelligence services. The F-26 is one of our most valuable assets and I assured him the government would take care of his security concerns. In the end, he accepted the harsh reality that his new plant cannot possibly service required domestic and international orders, and had to enter into partnerships. Very lucrative partnerships, I might add."

"Have you addressed his concerns?" Walters demanded. "I recall how Lockheed sourced vital components from China, of all places, for the F-35 to cut costs. I couldn't believe they did such a stupid thing."

The SecDef gave a tight smile. "That's been sorted out, Mr. President."

Pacino chuckled. "I'm sure Boeing and Lockheed loved the idea of working for a competitor they tried to destroy only two months ago."

"I laid it on the line for them," Spinner quipped. "The Defense Department has canceled all F-35 Lightning II orders, and Lockheed's international market has dried up. Boeing and General Dynamics F-16 legacy orders were either scrapped or are up for renegotiation. Everybody wants the F-26, but it will be two or three years before Rebus can meet the demand."

"The NGAD program swallowed billions in public money without delivering any tangible return, Boeing and Lockheed's prototypes are still in development and it will be years before they deliver operational aircraft—very expensive aircraft. While we poured money and resources into the NGAD black hole, the F-26 has already proved itself in combat, each unit at less than half the price of an F-35. More importantly, its per-hour flight and maintenance costs are also significantly lower, including turnaround sortie time, critical factors in any active theater. In many respects, the F-35 is a marvel of technology, but with lots of bugs still to be ironed out. However, it's a flawed concept, the aircraft designed to do a multitude of tasks, and does none of them well. Rebus Aviation followed the F-16 philosophy and designed the F-26 as a simple all-weather tactical fighter, bomber, and ground support aircraft without all the add-on wizardry, and it performs brilliantly in all areas. It didn't take the Joint Services long to do the math and slash their F-35 orders, with my approval. Lockheed either partnered with Rebus or faced seeing its plants go out of business. After the failed assassination attempt on you by the Omicron Group, Boeing and Lockheed swallowed their pride and didn't fight too hard."

Walters winced and instinctively touched the scar on his right temple left by an assassin's bullet on the Congress building steps. About to personally deliver the 28th Amendment bill to the House, the Omicron Group, as he came to learn later, tried to close out his term a little early, unhappy with his reform agenda.

His initiative to have the Supreme Court reverse the 2010 ruling on *Citizens United v FEC* that directly led to the rise of Big Money interference in US politics and emergence of Super PACs, got many corporate vested interests agitated. If the Court failed to reverse its decision, he had a bill ready to legislate the change, which would drastically limit corporations' and wealthy individuals' ability to influence and buy off House and Senate representatives by forcing disclosure of all donations with imposed monetary limits. With 297 House seats out of 435, and sixty-eight Democrat senators, the bill would see an easy passage. Before it came to the floor, the Supreme Court reversed its decision, recognizing that it misinterpreted existing laws.

He followed this with introduction of the constitutional 28th Amendment bill to set House and Senate term limits. The proposition would directly affect corporate lobbyists' capacity to pressure representatives with promises of ongoing electoral funding. Term limits should force reps to be more honest and transparent, recognizing they no longer had the ability to build empires. Walters understood the amendment would not eliminate corporate influence—impossible in a democratic system—but it would make their job more difficult and open to public scrutiny.

The Military-Industrial Complex in particular, really got riled when he ordered the Justice Department to jump down anyone's throat for violation of the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act. He campaigned on a platform to rein in corporate bribery during his 2020 reelection primaries, and he wanted to deliver.

To secure international weapons orders, military contractors regularly enticed buyers with large payoffs to secure an order. They didn't call them bribes, but 'promotional expenses'. That's how business was done by everybody, Manfred told him with a shrug. If we didn't do it, buyers would go to the French, the British, Russia, or somewhere else. Walters never subscribed to that shaky logic. If US manufacturers had superior products, they should be able to sell them on merit.

"If a corrupt minister or general somewhere doesn't get his

expected kickback, perhaps we shouldn't be doing business with them," he told Manfred. "Defense contractors keep churning out weapons and are willing to sell them to anyone without a twinge of conscience. Well, the Corruption Act is this country's conscience and I want everybody to know it."

Walters answered to the people, not the Military-Industrial Complex. When he announced the Administration's intention to enforce the Act, the defense contractor's lobby immediately started a disinformation campaign, trotting out the usual sobs that the move would cost jobs and cause company closures. They quietly put the squeeze on House reps in districts where defense contractors had manufacturing plants. After the Omicron Group scandal, public sympathy for major defense players had run dry.

Omicron...Lockheed Martin, Boeing, Raytheon, Northrop Grumman, and General Dynamics CEOs created the secret cabal with the sole objective to totally dominate and control the military aerospace industry, with them as sole club members. They were prepared to destroy anyone who wanted to muscle in, such as the Rebus Aviation upstart and its F/X-26 prototype, even a sitting president. They wanted to be the ones to tell the Pentagon what it could buy and at what price. To demonstrate their ruthlessness, they assassinated Raytheon's chairman when he disagreed with the plan to eliminate Walters.

When the attempt failed, the DOJ instigated proceedings against the Omicron principals, which in turn resulted in board and executive resignations in each company. The corporations were still in the process of restructuring in an attempt to salvage something from the shards of discredited reputations.

"I expect them to retool their production lines by September, keeping in mind that Lockheed must maintain some capacity to support sold F-35s and stock spare parts inventories. That aside, they'll start to roll out Wasps in volume by January." Spinner gave a sardonic smile. "Our F-26 order also sig-

nificantly boosted demand for Rebus Aviation's civilian Vectors. Two months ago, Ogdan Kostan faced financial ruin. Today, he is leading the sixth-generation fighter aircraft charge."

"Randal, I know Boeing and Lockheed would rather eat glass than partner with Rebus, but in the current negative political and public climate, they had little choice, not if they wanted to protect their bottom line and placate skittish investors," Walters reflected.

"That's the bare reality, Mr. President," Spinner agreed. "There is something else. Rebus Aviation has set off a seismic shift in fighter jet procurement policy even they never anticipated, domestic and international. They did, but not of such magnitude. The F-26 represents not only a revolution in aerial warfare tactics and strategic application, but has an impact on established aerospace manufacturing and supply chain logistics. International manufacturers such as Dassault, BAE Systems, and Saab's Gripen will be severely affected. This is all good for us and our manufacturing base as it extends our influence, but it could also create a severe political backlash if we don't handle this carefully."

Larry Tanner nodded vigorously. "The State Department has already received queries from our NATO allies as they slowly digest the implications."

"It's not like everything will go into a meltdown," Walters observed, "but we need to be prepared. Randal, you said we committed to an immediate order for 2,300 Wasps?"

"That's right."

"What about pilots?"

"The Advanced Remote Pilot Laboratory at Randolph Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas, is expanding its facilities to train the trainers. Certified pilots will be relocated to several major Air Force and Navy facilities assigned to receive and operate the F-26s. Rebus developed comprehensive flight training and maintenance procedures manuals approved for service. I looked at them, and they're quite comprehensive. It's a good thing that Ogdan Kostan is a former fighter pilot and knows what's required."

“Rebus ran a group of Air Force and Navy aviators through the program at Edwards AFB, and is rotating another batch. These will form the core of trainers at Randolph. What’s holding back the program is lack of F-26s the students can fly. A simulator provides basic familiarity, but proficiency comes from actually flying the bird. At the moment, Colonel Alex Laumer, Rebus Aviation’s chief test pilot, is the principal consultant and trainer, but he’s only on loan to the Air Force, and Rebus wants him back. We’re in for a lot of changes and resistance from some Joint Services sectors before the F-26 Wasp is integrated into our defense posture. Like it or not, the days when strapping on a fighter demanded the right stuff are gone, or will be soon.”

“As a former fighter jock, that’s not necessarily a bad thing,” Walters said. “Who’s looking after the training program?”

“Trudy Riggs. She’s very capable,” Spinner added. “I’ve given her authority across all the Services. If heads need to be knocked, she’ll do it.”

“Right. It seems we covered all points,” the President of the United States declared. “Thank you, everybody. A moment, Manfred.”

The chief of staff remained seated while the others stood and filed out. When the door closed, Walters refilled his cup. He really ought to cut down on coffee, the White House doctor advised, as did Cathy when they shared dinner or a quiet moment in the residence. They were both right, he admitted, but they didn’t sit in the Oval Office. Try tea or some alternative herbal weed? He would rather grow an ulcer.

“When Randal raised Rebus’ concerns about cybersecurity, had Baker moved on that front? I want a single federal law in place that mandates security, not a gaggle of disparate legislation.”

“The VP has a bill before the House,” Cottard said. “NSA Cyber Command has moved to strengthen internal protection protocols, but this won’t be totally effective until corporate,

government, and military sectors beef up their own cybersecurity procedures. The harsh reality is that everybody is hacking everybody else, and we're no better. That's how business is done these days, Sam."

"That doesn't mean we must make things easy for the other guy. Haul in Secretary Kane and have a hard chat with him. I want the Commerce Department to stomp on anyone dragging their feet on this. He has existing legislation as a whip. I don't want companies whining to us, demanding a bailout, when they get hacked. Tell DHS to look into all government departments for compliance. Where are we with TriCon?" Walters added quietly, not an issue that concerned anybody else.

Unknown to him at the time, the multilateral security and strategic think tank company operated a semi-secretive arm of agents for hire, mostly former military and intelligence operatives, who were prepared to perform any service an anonymous client desired—including wet work terminations, to use the CIA's euphemism for assassination. Omicron hired one to kill him. After detailed forensic analysis, it appeared the assassin changed her mind—the FBI managed to identify and pump her—and she only inflicted two wounds to placate her employer. An expression of patriotism? He ordered the DOJ and the FBI to put TriCon Security under a microscope, and some charges were likely to be filed.

Also unknown to him, and a source of possible embarrassment to him personally and his administration, according to Mark Price, the CIA used TriCon's independent 'cleaners' to carry out domestic and international sanctions. When Price took over the Agency two years ago and learned what went on, he immediately terminated the practice, but by then, the damage had already been done. Exposing TriCon's activities risked creating a serious public backlash for the Administration. The things they did, he mused.

From what Manfred told him, TriCon did some exemplary strategic work, and several government departments, including the Pentagon, tendered their services. Walters did not want

TriCon destroyed and told William Hurst, his Justice Department secretary, not to tread too heavily. TriCon never directly involved itself with their cleaners and always stayed on the fine edge of legality. They provided a portal for clients to engage operatives and could not be held accountable for what clients wanted done, in the same way gun manufacturers were not liable if someone used one of their weapons to commit mayhem. The Supreme Court had ruled definitively on that one. Still, TriCon had to know what some of their Extra Services operators did, but could the DOJ prove it to lay charges?

“Hurst passed them a message,” Cottard replied in a deep voice befitting his chunky, powerful body, and rubbed the underside of his bulbous nose in a characteristic gesture. “Keep your cleaners’ business at arm’s length or the DOJ would clean them. I think they got it, but it’s a hollow threat, and their website still advertises Extra Services.

“The FBI obtained warrants to look into their operation, but got nowhere. Protected by end-to-end encryption and elaborate firewalls, identities and locations of darknet users cannot be tracked by anyone, even TriCon, and there is nothing the courts can do about it. NSA and CIA use similar techniques to protect sensitive communications and data. Like it or not, Sam, when dealing with dirty players, we sometimes need to wade into the mud ourselves.”

Walters laughed. “We should use one or two TriCon cleaners to persuade a reluctant Republican governor to endorse the 28th Amendment proposition.”

Cottard blanched visibly. “You can’t be serious! We’d be wiped out in the midterms if something like that came out, and your approval rating would go into single digits. Everything you’ve done so far would be forgotten and you’d be impeached!”

“Just kidding,” Walters assured him, enjoying the look of confusion on his friend’s face.

“Not funny,” Cottard grouched.

There were days when being president was not as much fun

as he thought it would be. When he sank into one of his retrospective moods, Manfred always straightened him out. A formidable chief of staff, Walters readily acknowledged that, without the wisdom of his formidable chief of staff, his administration would not have lasted a year were it not for his friend's administrative skills, unwavering pragmatism, and ability to terrorize Congress.

Better to have remained a simple Michigan senator, he reflected sometimes.

He knew what he was getting into, sort of. When Manfred suggested that he run for the White House in 2016, Walters laughed at him, but his friend got him the Oval Office. A comfortable majority in both Houses enabled his administration to carry out a formidable reforming legislative agenda, and under Larry Tanner's guidance, America regained lost international respect and again became a genuine leader of the free world. Reelected in 2020, Walters looked forward to an easy four years in office and retirement. He might have had them were it not for China and its prickly president, Zhou Yedong. Walters may very well be remembered as the president who started WW III...if anyone remained to remember.

"Pass a message to Mark Price, Manfred. I never want to hear that the Agency is using TriCon's cleaners. If I find out he did, he'll be on the street, and he won't be the only one."

Cottard gave a wolfish grin. "You'll never find out, but I'll give him the word."

"Plausible deniability, eh? Never mind. Talking about Republican governors, anything on that front? I want the Amendment ratified before the November midterms. I'm rushing, I know, but if we can get this done, I expect an increased House and Senate majority."

"You'll get that anyway, Sam. I think we're good to swing ten Republicans to bring the count to thirty-eight needed to ratify the thing," Cottard said. "Three are already on board: Wyoming, Texas, and Montana. After all, this doesn't affect them or their power base, and most would love to see the Washington swamp cleaned up. It's been a cushy club for far

too long. In the coming midterms, thirty-four states and three territories have their gubernatorial elections. All know the electorate wants term limits passed. The incumbents also know the people will eat them if they don't support the proposition. We'll get our ten."

"Good, but let's not get complacent, Manfred. Keep hammering them. If any of them want a handout to fund a particular program in exchange for their support, I'll consider it. Nothing outlandish, though. I won't be subject to extortion. I'll go public if they try that stunt."

"I'll pass the word to Adam Howard. He'll corral them," Cottard replied comfortably, referring to his deputy chief of staff. "After the assassination attempt and how you handled the South China Sea confrontation with China, your approval rating soared. People want to see an end to entrenched politics and they're with you on this. You're likely to go down as one of the greatest presidents this country had."

"Like I give a toss about popularity ratings. A little anyway. Has anybody tracked down this Mamba cleaner character? I don't like the idea of another stay at Walter Reed, or worse if he gets me."

"The FBI and the CIA are still on the case."

"What if he tries to pop me with a .50 caliber while I'm in the Oval or in the residence?" A former fighter pilot, Walters knew a lot about high-powered weapons and what they can do.

"We've been over this before, Sam. All White House windows have five-inch, Level 10, multi-layered, angled, ballistic glass, and the walls are protected with internal armor shielding."

"Why can't we use Austin Warner's ID to simply log into TriCon's Extra Services and terminate the hit on me?"

"We did, but the account's been deleted."

Walters shook his head. "The guy probably figured I'd be his last job and wanted to disappear."

"A likely scenario," Cottard agreed.

"Damnation! Doesn't TriCon hold backup files we could

sift to identify this Mamba?”

“They do, and they keep them for ninety days before they’re overwritten. When a cleaner retires, everything is deleted, including backup records. So I’m told.”

“Come on, Manfred! You’re telling me TriCon doesn’t keep archives?”

“They probably do, but short of hauling in Barin Lazars, TriCon’s CEO, and interrogating him under drugs, we can’t prove they maintain archives of Extra Services operatives. The CIA already crossed the line with Warner. We try something like that with Lazars, our whole case against the Omicron Group could blow up in our faces. As it is, even though the DOJ Grand Jury recommended criminal proceedings against all the players, the case is circumstantial at best as Warner’s testimony is inadmissible since the FBI obtained it illegally. If Warner and the others hire a good lawyer, they could walk. The good side? We managed to break up Omicron.”

“I wonder. There is something to be said for authoritarian regimes when they want to eliminate opposition,” Walters growled. “The Omicron’s manifesto has an insidious appeal to far-right elements in our culture, but hides a murky underbelly.”

“That’s the price we pay for being an open society.”

“So, we sit on our hands until this Mamba character decides to pop me?”

“Thomas Meecham is looking at options.”

“Well, tell him to look harder. I don’t want this hanging over my head for the rest of my term.”

“No open air excursions and you’ll be fine.”

“I’ve got to attend functions, Manfred! I can’t remain a prisoner here.”

“Take it easy, Sam. The Secret Service will look after you.”

“You’re right.” Walters took a sip of coffee and replaced the white porcelain cup stamped with the presidential seal onto a saucer with a click. “I tell you one thing. If the FBI doesn’t get to the bottom of this, grab Austin Warner and make him contact Mamba to call off the hit.”

"If this were to get out—"

"The public would applaud my action. Now, about the meeting. You hardly said a word."

"Nothing I wanted to add, and the others had it covered. Larry, as usual, couldn't help himself and lectured, but he gave it to you straight. I'll update Stewart Granger for his Press Briefing Room gaggle briefing. The Dow Jones will probably take a hit, you know."

"I want him to sound off on the bare facts of today's strike," Walters warned. "No speculation on a possible Chinese response. That should ease any market tensions."

"Got it, but the gaggle will ask for details."

"Tell Granger to handle it. While you're at it, brief Hugh Striker with the full picture. Our UN ambassador needs to know everything when he faces the General Assembly."

Cottard chuckled. "I'd like to be a fly on the wall in Zhou Yedong's office right now."

"I wouldn't mind walking in on him with a can of fly spray and give him the lot in the face."

Cottard shook a warning finger at him. "Tut tut. So undiplomatic of you, Sam."

"Screw him!"

"This thing about canceling our bond debt. You really want to go through with it? I still think the move will trigger an increase in yield and interest rates, and equities everywhere will crash. I still don't understand where you got the idea. That sniper's bullet has scrambled your brains."

"I had a good advisor. Damnation, Manfred! We're funding Zhou's military with our interest payments."

"Wait a minute. You didn't talk to that shit Kepler in Treasury about this when you were at Walter Reed?"

"Doctor Kepler is a good man with a strategic outlook. In his field, he's like Tanner. I don't know why you don't like him."

"He's a social climber."

"Aren't we all? I'd like to see him promoted. Talk to the Treasury Secretary about it."

“If you say so,” Cottard replied, not convinced.

President Walters stood and gave his chief of staff a hard look. “I want Zhou Yedong to abandon the CCP’s insane Nine-Dash Line claim and evacuate all South China Sea bases. If bombing them doesn’t work, stopping interest payments on China’s bond holding will get him thinking. He’s an economist and knows how these things work.”

“You’re playing a very dangerous game here, Sam. I guess all we can do is wait and see how Zhou will react.”

“I’m going upstairs to the residence for a moment.”

“About tonight’s strike. Is something bothering you?”

Walters bit his lower lip. “We plastered Cuarteron Reef and made it uninhabitable, but it also caused unintended collateral damage. Tell me, Manfred. How many more lives will it cost before this ends?”

“It’s the price for doing business,” Cottard answered solemnly.

“Yeah. Have labor, unemployment, and inflation numbers ready for me when I come down. I also want the latest on the pay dispute between air traffic controllers and the FAA. Talk to Teelan. I want his Transportation Department to settle this or I’ll settle it for him.”

Cottard stood and bowed. “I serve at the pleasure of the President.”

“Bastard,” Walters muttered and walked out. He really ought to fire his ass.

America and the world in general liked a positive, determined leader who delivered on his promises. In January 2025, he would be out the door, but before he went, he intended to see Kimberly Baker in the Oval. The GOP had no one with enough stature to challenge her. Increasingly dominated by the far-right Heritage Foundation and Christian fundamentalist organizations, the Republicans abandoned traditional core values of social conservatism and economic liberalism in blind pursuit to destroy the Democrats, even when detrimental to the country’s best interests. This misguided policy always cost them dearly during any election, and in the midterms, he

would make sure the Democratic Party machine took stock of that fact, even if he had to campaign in every Republican-held state.

Pragmatically, Walters did not care if the GOP got wiped out, but he also recognized the very real danger that represented for the country's political stability. Every government needs checks and balances, and a strong opposition kept administrations in line. Right now, the Democrats enjoyed high popularity, largely due to his leadership, but complacency could lead to stagnation. That's where the states came in. They served as electoral mood indicators in the form of governors and local city mayors people elected. To keep the system healthy, he badly wanted the 28th Amendment ratified...whatever it took.

Manfred had only good things to say about the Vice President's performance while Walters convalesced from his wounds at Walter Reed's National Military Medical Center, a luxurious suite some jokingly referred to as the Rest Wing. He already knew Baker was capable, and was the reason he picked her as his running mate in 2016. Perhaps he should give her more executive responsibilities to prepare her for the Oval. The thought made him smile, as did the prospect of seeing Katina Kozlova, Baker's chief of staff, clash with Manfred. Every time the two met, the room temperature dropped ten degrees. Walters liked Kozlova and told his friend more than once to simply marry the woman. The two were really very much alike, although he knew Manfred detested any such idea.

Perhaps five-seven, a little overweight, and with brown hair marbled with dirty blond stripes, Kozlova had large black eyes that always seemed to regard Manfred with undisguised amusement every time he saw her. Everybody knew of his intense contempt for her, which generated a lot of gossip and mirth around the West Wing.

Manfred could dislike her with justification if she were a political amateur, but the woman had an air of unshakeable confidence and competence he appeared to find disquieting.

“The way she carries herself, occasionally sweeping back a wayward lock of hair, the tilt of her mouth when she smiles, always sets my emotions churning,” Manfred told him more than once over coffee.

“Does your dislike hide an incipient attraction because she reminds you a little of yourself?” Walters countered, deriving a measure of amusement in his friend’s confusion.

He enjoyed ribbing Manfred on potential romantic entanglements, content he had Cathy behind him. They had a solid marriage, and one reason Walters believed it remained solid, he treated it as one unbroken romance and love affair, and she liked it that way. Their two girls married, one living in New York, the other in Boston, left them to enjoy moments of intimacy without worrying that one of their girls would suddenly barge into the room.

The long days his job demanded sometimes caused friction. They had an agreement worked out over his years in the Senate, though. If he failed to show up by midnight, she would not wait up for him. Regrettably, there were far too many nights when he walked into a dark bedroom. He would slip into bed and her arm instinctively wrapped itself around him without waking. Both could use some quality time relaxing on a quiet beach somewhere, or hiking a mountain trail.

He wanted to see the Grand Canyon, Yellowstone, sail the Mississippi on a paddle steamer, and chomp his way through a plate of smoked barbecued ribs at a Texas eatery. He wanted to be among plain people who used plain talk devoid of hidden political nuances. All he got these days were cold briefs, exaggerated newspaper headlines, and biased TV commentary.

None of those relaxing things were likely to happen until he left office.

When Manfred saw him in a brooding mood, he would tilt his head and give him a cheeky smile.

“Tired, are you? Not exciting anymore, is it? Too hard, eh? Let the chief of staff handle the tough bits, right? You’ll happily jet around in Air Force One, wining and dining with your

international friends. Well, you wanted this, Sam. Now that you've got it, suck it up and do the things people elected you to do."

Walters did want the Oval, and enjoyed the power of his position and things it could achieve. Still, on some days the sight of open mountain peaks, crisp air, and the crunch of pine needles beneath his feet would add ten years to his life. Cathy anchored him when he got the blues, and he loved her deeply, but he knew she also longed to be away from public scrutiny.

At fifty-seven, he had his health, enjoyed full mental powers, and kept fit with regular exercise in the downstairs gym. His black hair combed straight back, deep blue eyes that never wavered, an unmistakable radio announcer's New England accent, often earned him top billing as one of the handsomest men in America. He used all that when he campaigned for the Michigan Senate seat. His record as a former Air Force pilot with two kills in the Gulf War, riding on a platform of reform people wanted—every candidate everywhere shouts about that one, Manfred used to tell him, but Walters meant it—he got his seat as a fresh rookie in Michigan's political grinder. A professional strategist and party machine insider, Manfred shielded him from inevitable faction infighting until he learned the mechanics of how to be a politician. Walters learned, all right. Learned well enough to campaign for the presidency. He swept through the primaries in 2016 and got the Oval, to the consternation of the leftists in the Party.

He remembered with nostalgia living in Detroit's leafy, quiet Berkley suburb in a sprawling ranch house with lots of open spaces to play in. His father, a police lieutenant at the time, an imposing figure in his decorated blues, had time for him despite often long work hours. His mother, a senior lecturer of philosophy at the University of Michigan – Ann Arbor, got him reading high-brow books far too early in his childhood and contaminated his mind in a good way.

He never intended to be a pilot, not really, but an excursion flight in a glider captivated his heart and mind. As soon as he grasped the stick, he felt one with the magical machine, and

understood perfectly the principles of flight a bored instructor gave everybody before the outing. When he graduated high school, his announcement to join the Air Force met with stern disapproval from his father, who considered it a juvenile fantasy, but Walters would not be swayed. It meant moving to Colorado for a few years, then extended service at some base. His mother also disliked the idea, but accepted that her son could not be tied to her apron strings. In 1984, he joined the Air Force Academy and graduated with honors in Aeronautical Engineering as a second lieutenant. With top grades, he had his choice of assignments and chose the F-15 Eagle, which he tossed around in the 1990-91 Gulf War.

Then Cathy walked into his life one pleasant afternoon at Travis Air Force Base some fifty-four miles northeast of San Francisco, and his established routine shattered. Up for his annual psych evaluation every active pilot had to endure, he showed up at the appointed time to be greeted by a five-seven slim captain whose dark green eyes immediately captivated him. Long chestnut hair spilled straight down her back when she rose, extended her long hand, and smiled. It turned out, she would do his evaluation, holding a master's in psychology, he learned later. As far as he was concerned, she could evaluate him any time.

Her examination positive, they married in October 1994. Looking back, Walters figured Cathy still had not completed her evaluation, and he did not want her to stop.

Brigit came along in December 1996, then Ethel in February 1998, and time came for some serious career forward thinking of his own.

In September 1998, at thirty-two, a major, pushing F-15 Eagles through the blue no longer fulfilled his yearning to accomplish more. He could specialize and become a test pilot at Edwards where they played with all the new toys, but military life no longer had the appeal he thought it would. More importantly, he agreed wholeheartedly with Cathy that life at an Air Force base offered less than an ideal environment to raise kids.

After several soul-searching sessions, he resigned his commission and considered offers from Boeing, Lockheed, and Grumman. She could always join a college somewhere once he decided what he wanted to do, she told him. To his father's surprise and dismay, he chose to enter politics. With quiet approval from his mother, he joined the Democratic Party with an offer as a senior advisor in the state's Senate Appropriations Committee. He and Cathy bought a comfortable house in Berkley not too far from his parents' place, and only fourteen miles from downtown. Cathy joined the University of Michigan as a lecturer, quite content with academic life. Brigit and Ethel loved his parents and demanded they spend every weekend with them, not always practical or desirable. He figured his parents wanted some quality time for themselves away from kids, but was glad they all meshed well. Too bad Cathy's parents lived in San Francisco, on the other side of the world as far as his two daughters were concerned.

At first, the tangled nature of politics and infighting confounded him, amazed that those people actually managed to pass laws and do something constructive. As he learned how to handle himself with state House and Senate influencers, in an insidious way, he came to enjoy the cut and thrust of politics, the only game for grown-ups, as someone told him wryly.

In 2007, the chair of the Appropriations Committee introduced him to Manfred Cottard, who urged him to run for the 2008 state Senate. The idea never occurred to Walters, but the more he thought about it, he saw an opportunity to effect and set policy, not merely execute it. Nobody felt more surprised when he actually won the seat. From a mere cog in the party machine to suddenly become a major wheel in the legislature demanded an entirely new set of behavioral codes, and that is where Manfred helped. There were moments when he really hated the man, but admitted readily that without his mentor's guiding hand, he would not have lasted his first term.

Walters shook his head at the memories, the history behind them, and focused on the real world. It hadn't been all fun, though, but he now sat behind the Roosevelt desk. As Truman

said, the buck stops here. Sometimes the burden did get a little heavy when he ran out of answers, but he had a record of achievements to be proud of.

He often wondered how his two daughters coped, having the Secret Service protection details underfoot all the time. Unobtrusive and out of sight, they were nevertheless there. Anyway, they became used to it when he got the White House; a regrettable necessity dictated by the world. Better this inconvenience than face the horror of having one of them kidnapped or worse.

Two-and-a-half years to go...if he lasted the distance before the job killed him.

South China Sea...he projected confidence and a firm stance handling Zhou Yedong, but he harbored niggling misgivings in his determination to continue strikes against Chinese bases and the inevitable loss of life. He never doubted the correctness of America's position to dissolve China's claim to that waterway. He worried about the nature of China's response to the Cuarteron Reef strike. It all depended on how far the PLA pushed. Zhou Yedong's authority to control them, and his willingness to negotiate.

Should he call the son of a bitch? No, he'll wait for Zhou to make the first move.

About the Author

Stefan Vučak has written twenty novels, which include eight SF books in the Shadow Gods Saga. His *Cry of Eagles* won the coveted Readers' Favorite silver medal award, and his *All the Evils* was the prestigious Eric Hoffer contest finalist and Readers' Favorite silver medal winner. *Strike for Honor* won the gold medal.

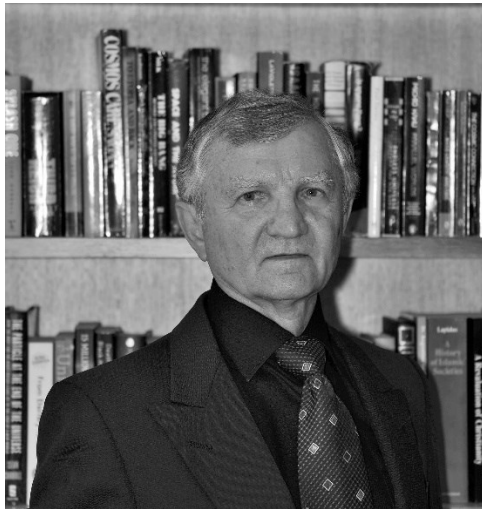
Stefan leveraged a successful career in the Information Technology industry, which took him to the Middle East working on cell-phone systems. Writing has been a road of discovery, helping him broaden his horizons. He also spends time as an editor and book reviewer. Stefan lives in Melbourne, Australia.

To learn more about Stefan, visit his:

Website: www.stefanvucak.com

Facebook: www.facebook.com/StefanVucakAuthor

Twitter: [@stefanvucak](https://twitter.com/stefanvucak)



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