

***COWBOY  
ANGELS***



**COWBOY**  
Paul **ANGELS**  
McAuley



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For **GEORGINA**

and

for **JACK WOMACK**

*We ought to look in a mirror and get proud and stick out our chests  
and suck in our bellies and say: "Damn, we're Americans."*

Lieutenant General Jay Garner

## PENNSYLVANIA, JANUARY 1981

“**T**hey’re Americans, Adam. Americans like you and me. Americans who want to rid their homeland of communist tyranny. Americans who are laying their lives on the line to return liberty and freedom to their version of the US of A. Their government may not be the perfect model of democracy, I’ll give you that, but they uphold the Constitution, they’ve kept the flame of liberty burning for fifty years, they sure as hell deserve our full support. And here you are, got up like an undertaker, ready to sell them out.”

“Go easy on me, Tom. I’m just the messenger.”

“Just the messenger, huh? And I guess you’re just obeying orders too, like all those bloodless nine-to-five office workers who’ve taken over the Company. Jesus, Adam. I’d be happier to hear that you side with Jimmy Carter and his merry band of quitters. At least it would mean you still believed in something.”

The two men were sitting on either side of a government-issue steel desk. Adam Stone in a black wool overcoat and a black suit, the briefcase on his lap handcuffed to his left wrist; Tom Waverly in a brown leather jacket and combat fatigues, greying hair caught up in a loose ponytail and pulled through the clip of his baseball cap, cradling a half-empty bottle of Jack Daniel’s. Trucks roared past the makeshift office every couple of minutes, shaking its plywood walls. A space heater blew baked air and the smell of burnt wiring. Music thumped out of a battered mini-system.

“You want to know what I believe?” Stone said. “I believe that the time for crude interventions like SWIFT SWORD has passed. I believe that these so-called Free Americans don’t have a chance of winning their war unless we back them up with a lot more than a secure resupply line. And the country’s tired of war, Tom. It doesn’t want to be dragged into another quagmire. That’s what the election was all about, in case you didn’t notice.”

“So you *are* siding with the quitters. Adam Stone has turned peacenik. I never thought I’d see the day.”

“And I never thought you’d take something like this so personally.”

“How else am I supposed to take it? How are General Baines and his men supposed to take it? Jesus Christ, Adam, we’ve been working on this for six months, we’re all tooled up and ready to go, and at the very last moment, only a couple of hours before the show kicks off, we’re told that we aren’t

going to get the tactical support we need. Okay, I admit it's hardly a surprise. Carter slid into office on an antiwar ticket, Senate delayed implementation of SWIFT SWORD until after the election, and Baines has been taking calls from the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the secretary of state all week. But it's still a callous and cowardly act, and I'm as sorry as hell to see you fronting for it."

Tom Waverly took a sip of Jack Daniel's. He was red-eyed and drawn, and looked as if he hadn't slept for a week. "How did it ever come to this? Here we are, two of the first guys to have been shot through a Turing gate. Key players in the first operation to organize a coup d'état in an alternate America. The fall of the American Bund? They teach eager new recruits all about it. We're in the fucking textbooks, Adam, and what have they got us doing? You're about to deliver history's worst Dear John letter, and I've just wasted three months running SWIFT SWORD's training and morale programme. Fact is, Baines's troops were trained and ready to go *before* they came through the mirror. They're good, disciplined soldiers who don't need to be told which end of a rifle is which, or how to run an assault course in full pack. And they certainly don't need me to tell them that the communists are the bad guys. My so-called training programme consisted of making sure they got hot meals three times a day, running back-to-back movie shows, and giving their officers access to all the liquor and whores they could handle. Which was plenty, believe you me. Those boys were so hot-blooded I had to bring in working girls from as far away as New Orleans to take care of them. I admit it was kind of fun to organize, but it wasn't what you could call real action."

"It looks like you're dressed up for action now," Stone said.

When Stone had arrived at SWIFT SWORD's camp, he'd been warned by Bruce Ellis, the colonel in charge of perimeter security, that Tom Waverly was in a bad way. "Baines will take his own sweet time organising an escort to his HQ," Bruce had said. "While you're waiting, you could maybe talk to Tom, try to calm him down." But Tom had already been half in the bag when Stone had found him, and he'd been getting steadily drunker ever since, alternating between self-lacerating bitterness and blustering bravado. And he kept identifying with the Free Americans, too, saying things like *we're* ready to go. . . .

Saying now, "You miss it, Adam? Being in action?"

"Not a bit."

"Don't try to bullshit a bullshitter. I know you miss it as much as I do." Tom Waverly leaned back in his chair and crossed his boots on top of the desk. The wings of his brown leather jacket, a scuffed antique with fleece

collar and cuffs, fell open, revealing the .357 Smith & Wesson revolver and the throwing knife hung on his customised shoulder rig. “You and me, Adam, we’re not the kind of guys who end up pushing paper across a desk, signing off reports on aid programmes and friendship initiatives, tootling around golf courses in those little buggies at weekends, shooting the shit at the nineteenth hole while we wait for our first heart attacks. Don’t you think we should go out on our own terms? Wouldn’t it be better to burn out than fade away?”

“I think you’re drunk, Tom. You always get this way when you’ve had a few too many.”

“Yeah? What way is that?”

“Sentimental, mostly. Maudlin. Listen, I’ll be happy to share that bottle with you and talk about the good old bad old days, but I have to get this little job done first. Why don’t you use that phone on your desk and find out where my escort has got to?”

“He’ll be here soon enough. Ease back, my man. Relax. You’re not in the DCI’s office now. This here’s *my* house. You want a drink? Loosen your tie and *have* a goddamn drink. We can shoot the shit and listen to Bobby Dylan until your man gets here.”

“I thought I recognised the voice,” Stone said, grabbing at the chance to change the subject, “but the songs are like nothing I remember.”

“It’s a new album. A friend of mine black-bagged a cassette tape through the mirror, and I had one of the wizards in Technical Services transfer it to disk. Bobby Dylan has had himself some kind of midlife crisis and turned to evangelical Christianity, but he can still make a point when he wants to.”

“He sounds pretty funky.”

“‘Funky,’ huh? Where did a straight-arrow guy like you pick up a word like that?”

“I believe it was in the Nixon sheaf, that time we worked together.”

“Oh yeah. You buried yourself in the New York Public Library, doing your sociopolitical research, and I got to hang out with those zippies or yippies or whatever the hell they called themselves. Happy times.” Tom toasted Stone with his bottle and took a sip. “Tell me something, and don’t lie. Bruce Ellis put you up to this little visit, didn’t he?”

“He mentioned you were here. And because I have to wait for this damned escort, I thought I’d stop by and catch up.”

“Colonel Bruce Ellis,” Tom said, with a teasing lilt. “As I recall, he was a brand-new lieutenant when you two went through the mirror. It was the

first time for both of you, wasn't it? A couple of virgins lost in the wild woods of that wild sheaf. And look at you now, all grown up and working for the DCI's office, thinking it gives you the right to meddle in other people's business. Well, it doesn't. And besides, there's no need."

"This is the first time I've seen you in a couple of years—"

"First time, I believe, since I saved your life."

"I hadn't forgotten. Do you want me to thank you all over again?"

"It was embarrassing enough at the time. You don't owe me anything, Adam. Don't you ever think you *owe* me, that you have to somehow pay me back."

"What I'm trying to say is that it's been a long time. I stopped by because I wanted to see how things are working out for you."

"Well I guess you can see where my career's headed—straight into the crapper, like my fucking marriage. How *that* worked out, thanks for asking, is I got to keep the clothes I was wearing when I walked out, and the car I drove off in. Brenda got the house and everything else when the divorce was finalised, she threatens to use my disks as skeet-shooting targets every time it looks like I'm gonna step out of line, and now her boyfriend has moved in, the slick son of a bitch. Fucker wants Linda to call him Daddy, like he's part of the family, but Linda isn't having any of that. She calls him Robert to his face, Mr. Hair Oil when she's with me." Tom's expression softened for a moment. "My little girl's grown up strong and smart, Adam. And she's not so little anymore. She'll be twenty this April and wants to join the Company as soon as she graduates from NYU. You can imagine what Brenda has to say about that."

"Nothing good, I bet."

Tom's ex-wife was employed by the analytical arm of the Company, turning raw data into finished intelligence: she'd always had a pretty good idea about what his clandestine work in Special Ops had involved. Her attempts to persuade him to transfer to a safer position had sparked a series of spectacular and legendary rows that had eventually led to their divorce.

"You still going out with that photographer?" Tom said. "Nora what's-her-name?"

"It didn't work out. I guess I'm kind of in between relationships at the moment."

"Sorry to hear it. I know I'm no advertisement for marriage, but I always thought you'd make the ideal all-American father. Clean-cut, hardworking, loyal. . . . I guess we should strike out 'loyal,' given why you're here."

Stone let that one go.

Tom put his head to one side, listening to Dylan sing about naming animals in Eden. "I guess he does sound a little bit funky. But it doesn't matter what the man chooses to do, he's always cool. Always has been, always will be. He doesn't care what other people think. He just does his own thing." He took a sip of Jack Daniel's and said, "These poor guys are going to get slaughtered if they don't have any backup." He suddenly sounded tired and sober and sad.

"That's not the idea," Stone said.

"Maybe it isn't. But that's what going to happen."

A horn blared outside, long and loud.

Tom checked his watch and said, "That'll be the guy come to take you up the hill."

Stone's pang of relief was immediately tempered by guilt. "As soon as I've seen the general, I'll come straight back here and have that drink with you."

"It stinks, Adam. Jimmy fucking Carter is going to let Baines's men go back through the mirror and commit suicide because that's easier than finding some way of standing down and repatriating five thousand soldiers. You know what this reminds me of? The Bay of Pigs."

"I don't know it."

"It's part of the same history as 'funky,' and this particular doppel of Bobby Dylan. Look it up. One thing I'll tell you now, the only thing we've learnt from all the different Americas we found through the mirror is that we haven't learnt anything at all." Tom Waverly screwed the top onto the bottle of Jack Daniel's and stood up, saying, "Let's go, *compañero*."

Stone hesitated for a moment. On the one hand, he had a politically sensitive delivery to make, and didn't really want to have Tom Waverly around when he made it in case Tom got it into his head to cause some kind of scene. On the other, he felt that he should keep his old friend under close watch in case he was working himself up to do something reckless. . . .

He said, "If you want to ride along, be my guest."

"You bet. I'm all done here."



Adam Stone's Free American escort, Captain Gene Lewis, drove his Jeep with reckless speed, overtaking a string of trucks lumbering toward the staging area, barely slowing when he swung onto the dirt track that climbed to the farmhouse where General Wendell Baines had his headquarters.

Tom had taken the shotgun seat. He turned to Stone, gestured at the wide valley spread below the ridge, and said, "Ain't that something?"

Two thirty-foot-diameter Turing gates—clones of the primary, which had been opened onto the Free America sheaf at Brookhaven in 1978—stood under a raked steel canopy at one end of the huge concrete apron where trucks, half-tracks, and light tanks were drawn up in neat rows like the audience for the world's biggest drive-in cinema. The low winter sun glowered through a haze of diesel smoke, and in this apocalyptic light soldiers were lining up to receive ammunition and grenades from quartermasters, standing in front of a field altar where a military chaplain elevated the host, or sitting around oil-drum braziers among piles of equipment.

In the Free America sheaf's version of history, the USA had fallen to a communist revolution in 1929, and a cabal of disenfranchised politicians, bankers, and businessmen, backed by loyal elements of the army and navy, had occupied Cuba and Haiti and established a government-in-exile. Operation SWIFT SWORD, approved by President Floyd Davis just before he'd been defeated by Jimmy Carter in an election so close there had been recounts in fifteen states, had been set up to help the Free Americans strike at the communist heartland. It had brought a division of Free American troops into the Real through a Turing gate at Guantánamo Bay and transported them to a camp a few miles outside Gettysburg, where they had been equipped with modern weaponry and trained in its use.

According to the original plan of campaign, the Free Americans would have reentered their sheaf at Gettysburg, and the Real would have defended the Turing gates and built up resupply routes while the Free Americans staged a fast, hard march across Pennsylvania and Maryland to Washington, DC, destroying the seat of the communist government, inciting a popular uprising, and bringing another version of America to the Pan-American Alliance. But because the centrepiece of Carter's campaign had been a promise to end the so-called wars for freedom that Davis and three Republican presidents before him had fought across a dozen versions of America, and scaling down support for SWIFT SWORD was the first step in making good on that promise, the Free Americans would now either have to fight their war on their own or return to their version of Cuba.

"We do not give up," Captain Lewis told Stone, bellowing over the roar of the Jeep's engine. He was a muscular young man with shaggy black hair and a dark, contemptuous gaze. "This is what we dream of for fifty years. You break your word, but we do not care. We fight anyway. We fight and we win."

Tom clapped Captain Lewis on the shoulder. “You believe the balls on this guy?”

“If you don’t help us, we fight on our own,” the Free American said. “What else can we do?”

They passed through a security check into a compound where Jeeps and powder-blue sedans with military plates were parked in front of a fieldstone farmhouse. A line of soldiers carried stacks of accordion files and sacks of shredded paper out of the farmhouse to feed fires burning in a row of oil drums. Ashy curls and flecks sifted out of the cold air like snow. Off to one side, a small black helicopter squatted beneath its drooping rotor blades.

Tom Waverly told Stone that the helicopter had brought in the Old Man about an hour ago.

“What’s Knightly doing here?”

The Old Man, Dick Knightly, had been in charge of the Central Intelligence Group’s Directorate of Special Operations ever since it had been set up in 1968. He’d lost his job two days ago, when President Carter had been sworn into office and his reorganisation of the CIG—the Company—had taken effect.

“He delivered four helicopters to Baines,” Tom said. “Crop dusters rigged with rocket launchers and machine guns.”

“Jesus, Tom. They could put him in jail for a stunt like that.”

“He has paperwork showing they were donated by a wealthy patriot. Watch out for him,” Tom said, as Stone climbed out of the Jeep. “He might try to feed you a line about how us old-school guys will need to stick together because bad times are coming down. Don’t believe a word of it.”

“I quit Special Ops, remember?”

“Yeah, and the Old Man got himself fired. But he still thinks he can call on his cowboy angels whenever he needs some help.”

“What kind of help? What is he into?”

Tom shook his head. “I’m just giving you a little friendly advice, Adam. Don’t try to take advantage.”

“Why don’t you come inside with me? This thing I have to do won’t take long. Then we can talk—”

“I have some business of my own,” Tom said, and gave Stone a sloppy salute. Before Stone could say anything, Captain Lewis popped the handbrake and the Jeep sped off with a slippery squeal of tires.

Stone pulled out his cell phone, called Bruce Ellis, and told him that he was worried that Tom was planning to do something spectacularly stupid. “He just rode away from Baines’s HQ with one of the Free American officers.”

"I don't have any jurisdiction inside the camp," Bruce said.

"You have security camera coverage. Can you keep track of him for me? I want to talk to him again as soon as I've finished with Baines."

General Baines's aide was waiting on the porch of the farmhouse, flanked by two soldiers. He insisted on patting Stone down for concealed weapons and asked him to open the briefcase.

"What's in the briefcase is for General Baines's eyes only," Stone said.

The aide stared at Stone and said with frosty disdain, "It is not necessary for me to see, because I know already what you bring."

"So how about letting me do my job," Stone said. "Or are we going to stand out here in the cold and keep your general waiting?"

With the soldiers at his back, he followed the aide into the farmhouse's front parlour. Blinds pulled down over the windows glowed with the last of the sunlight. Lamps dropped pools of light at a table where men talked in low voices over a tiling of maps, on a steel desk where a sergeant was typing with two fingers on an IBM Selectric. A grey cumulus of cigarette and cigar smoke drifted under the sagging horsehair plaster ceiling. The air was hot and oppressive, stale with the weary sense of failed intrigue.

General Wendell Baines was sitting in an armchair in a corner of the crowded room. A short, straight-backed man with a lined and deeply tanned face and crew-cut white hair, dressed in neatly pressed camouflage fatigues, he studied Stone and said at last, "I've seen you before, son."

"We met at a briefing at the State Department, sir. Two weeks ago."

Stone was sweating inside his overcoat, but he couldn't take it off because his briefcase was cuffed to his wrist.

"I remember now," Baines said. "You were with the incoming director of Central Intelligence, Admiral Turner. How do you like your new boss, by the way? Is he the right man for the job?"

"It's too early to say, sir."

"The impression I took away from our brief meeting is that he's the kind of unimaginative martinet more interested in the state of the cutlery in the canteen than in the morale of his men. Well, I suppose we must get this thing done. In the last week I have many meetings with members of your government and armed forces, and I talked on the telephone to your Admiral Turner this morning. He confirmed his government's position and told me to expect you. He told me what you would be carrying. Show me, please. Let us complete this formality."

Everyone in the room was watching them. The sergeant had stopped

typing, and Stone's former boss, Dick Knightly, was standing in the doorway, lean and tough as whipcord in his trademark Harris tweed suit and yellow waistcoat. He looked straight at Stone, then inclined his head and whispered something to the muscular man who stood just behind him.

Stone unlocked the handcuffs, set the briefcase on a side table, worked its combination locks, and took out a thick cream envelope printed with the presidential seal. The aide intercepted the envelope and slit it open in a single fluid motion, extracted and unfolded the single sheet of paper, and with a click of his heels presented it to Baines.

The general glanced at it, then told Stone, "I have great respect for Floyd Davis. He is a man of vision and integrity. He sees an eternal chain of Americas connected to each other by your Turing gates, each freed of oppression, each spreading its democratic influence to other histories. This operation, which means everything to me and my men, was part of that vision. Your new president, I don't know him too well, but I see that he is at least a man of his word. He promised that he would withdraw tactical support for this thing of ours if he was elected, and this letter confirms it."

The men in the room gave a kind of murmuring sigh.

"He requests that we consider standing down the entire operation," General Baines said. He was speaking to everyone in the room, but his gaze was still locked on Stone's face. "He offers us repatriation. I say what I have been saying this past week. I say the hell with him. I say that we take orders from *our* president, not from this spineless upstart. And our president honoured me with the task of leading my men into war, not away from it."

Several officers began to clap. The general silenced them with a raised hand.

"Mr. Stone, you may tell your new director of Central Intelligence that we'll strike at twenty hundred hours, as already agreed. I will not betray the loyalty of my men; nor will I throw away this opportunity. Besides, I already have guerrillas in place. They are preparing to knock out much of the local air force and military, and they are under a radio blackout. I can't recall them."

From the door, Knightly said, "The gates will be opened on schedule, General. Carter doesn't have the guts to cancel the entire operation."

"Of course they'll be opened," General Baines said. "We are unwelcome guests, and it is the easiest way to be rid of us."

"I'll see that they'll remain open as long as possible," Knightly said.

"That's very good of you, Dick, and I hope you won't get into any trouble

for it. But I do not intend to come back.” General Baines looked at Stone and said, “I believe you have my answer. Go tell your boss.”



Knightly’s bodyguard intercepted Stone on his way out of the farmhouse and told him that Mr. Knightly wanted to have a word.

“Mr. Knightly and I have nothing to say to each other.”

“He told me to tell you that it’s about Tom Waverly.” The bodyguard was stuffed into a black suit and had about six inches and a hundred pounds on Stone.

Stone pictured the Jeep carrying Tom and the Free American captain speeding down the hill toward the Turing gates, and said to the bodyguard, “What’s your name?”

“Flynn. Albert Flynn.”

“Are you with the Company, Albert?”

“No, sir. I resigned when they fired Mr. Knightly.”

“So you work for Mr. Knightly now.”

“Yes, sir. But if you’re going to ask me what this is about, I don’t know.”

“Does Tom Waverly work for Mr. Knightly?”

“Not that I know of.”

Albert Flynn had a pretty good poker face.

Stone thought for a moment, told Flynn that he would talk to Knightly once he’d made a couple of phone calls, and walked outside into the cold, floodlit compound.

He talked to Bruce Ellis first, then made an encrypted call to Bud Goodrich, the special assistant responsible for the disposal of SWIFT SWORD. He told Goodrich that the letter had been delivered, gave a summary of Baines’s response, and said that the general was committed to the invasion.

“You can stand down,” Goodrich said. “I’ll expect a report on my desk oh nine hundred tomorrow, but there’s no need to pad it.”

“There’s something else,” Stone said. “Dick Knightly is here. He was with Baines when I delivered the letter, and I believe he brought four modified helicopters to help the Free American cause.”

“I know. Some gung-ho cattle baron fronted the papers.”

“Do you know what he’s up to? Is he being watched?”

“He’s showboating, making a political point about honouring promises. Don’t worry about it, Stone. It’s none of your business. Your work is done.”

“Right,” Stone said, although he knew that it wasn’t.

Albert Flynn was waiting on the porch of the farmhouse. Stone walked up to him and said, “Take me to your leader.”



Dick Knightly stood at the edge of a steep drop beyond the farmhouse, hands clasped at his back as he studied the army assembled in front of the Turing gates down in the valley. “I’m sorry to see you reduced to running errands for chair-warming bureaucrats like Bud Goodrich,” he said. “You deserve better.”

“With respect, sir, that’s a cheap shot,” Stone said.

“It’s my honest opinion. I know you had a hard time of it on your last mission for Special Ops, and I don’t blame you for opting for a nice easy job in the DCI’s office. But frankly, son, you’d be better off in an insurance company. It’s the same kind of work, and at least you’d get a gold clock at the end of it. Speaking of retirement, I hope you’re not too attached to your new job. Stansfield Turner was a classmate of Carter’s at Annapolis, and Carter put him in office for just one reason: to cut us off at the knees. Word is, he’s going to open the Company’s cupboards and ransack the family jewels. Clandestine operations, black ops, executive orders—they’ll smear us with everything we had to do for the good of the Real and all the other Americas. And don’t think that your new position is going to save your lily-white ass from a reckoning for your past sins. If he thinks it expedient, Turner will throw you to the wolves without a second thought.”

“Is that a warning, sir?”

“It’s sound advice,” Knightly said, and extracted a cigar and a silver penknife from the breast pocket of his tweed jacket and sliced off the end of the cigar and plugged it into his mouth.

Down in the valley, one of the pair of giant Turing gates blinked on, its circular maw suddenly lit by the reflected light of the setting sun. The familiar deep hum of the gate filled the dark air and sharpened Stone’s anxiety, but he knew it would do no good to ask straight out about Tom Waverly. Knightly would come to that in his own sweet time, or not at all. So Stone stepped on his impatience and waited quietly while his old boss returned the penknife to his pocket and took out a Second Infantry Zippo lighter and snapped it open and bathed the end of the cigar in its flame. The little finger and ring finger of Knightly’s right hand were missing, lost to frostbite during the Battle of Moscow. Like many senior Company men, he was a veteran of the Russian Campaigns.

“I must have seen hundreds of gates open,” Knightly said, “but it still makes my blood race.”

“I thought this wasn’t kicking off until twenty hundred.”

“That’s when the main force goes through. But the gates have been opening and closing all day, retrieving scouts and sending in advance parties.”

A Jeep shot out of the bloodred mirror and swerved to a halt at the bottom of the ramp. On the other side of the gate, in an alternate version of America under communist rule, an observer would have seen the same vehicle vanishing into a shining circle of light hung in thin air. A moment later, the mirror vanished like a burst soap bubble and the deep, ground-shaking hum faded away as technicians returned the Turing gate to its resting state.

“The poor bastards,” Knightly said. “They spent fifty years in exile, hoping all the while that the communist government would somehow collapse so that they could return home. And then we appeared out of nowhere and told them that we were willing to give them the chance to take the fight directly to the communists, that if things went wrong they could disappear back into our reality, regroup, and try again. Who could resist a deal like that? We were the answer to their prayers. So we brought them through the mirror, we armed and trained them, and we helped them gather intel and work up a credible Order of Battle. And then, just when they’re fired up and ready to go, we turn around and kick ’em square in the ass.”

He drew on his cigar, looking down at the army arrayed in the floodlit dusk.

“Baines is an exceptional soldier, but this isn’t like George Washington and Valley Forge. He isn’t trying to evict an overextended colonial power. He’s going toe-to-toe with an entrenched government that exercises complete control over an entire nation. Even if he and his men manage to melt into the countryside and start up a guerrilla campaign, it isn’t likely anything’ll come of it.”

“If anything can happen in the multiverse, it will happen somewhere.”

“No use quoting that at me, son. I may have invented that little *bon mot* to screw funding out of the Senate, but it doesn’t mean I believe it. Oh, I don’t deny it’s possible that SWIFT SWORD will split history into a hundred separate sheaves, and Baines may defeat the commies in one or two of them. But mostly he won’t. The bad outcomes will outnumber the good outcomes. The sum of human happiness will be diminished.” Knightly blew a plume of smoke into the cold dark air. “Did you follow the election?”

“I know who won, sir.”

“It was a true contest of thesis and antithesis. Davis is a visionary; Carter is an opportunist. Davis supports continued expansion, locating new Amer-

icas in need of aid and enlightenment, going to war to bring them the freedom they deserve, carrying the flame of freedom to every corner of the known multiverse. Carter wants an end to what he calls military adventurism, an end to exploration of anything but so-called wild sheaves. The difference is as clear as day and night, right and left, good and bad. Do you know who I supported?”

“I don’t suppose it was Carter.”

“The fact is, I think both of them are wrong. Carter is wrong about ending exploration, and Davis is wrong about using military force to expand our influence. War is a blunt tool, it’s costly, and if it goes badly there are huge political costs. In short, as Davis has so recently discovered, no democratic government can maintain a permanent war state. The sad thing is, it should never have come to this. We didn’t need to fight those wars. I’ve always argued that the best way to topple a government is by covert action. With just a few good men applying force at exactly the right place, you can do anything. And if you fail, no one has to know about it. It’s how we started out, it’s what the Company does best, it’s what we should be doing right now. How about you, son? Do you still have fire in your belly? Are you still ready to lay down your life for your country?”

“If I didn’t know better, sir, I’d think that you were trying to recruit me for some kind of covert op,” Stone said.

Knightly looked straight at him, the same heavy-lidded stare that Stone had endured when he’d first reported for duty in the makeshift headquarters of the newly created Directorate of Special Operations, some fourteen years ago. Marsha Mason, the only woman in the first batch of Special Op field officers, had once said that it was like having your soul x-rayed.

“You always were the smart one, Adam. Not the most intelligent of my little band of cowboy angels, not by any means, but the most savvy. As a matter of fact, I *do* need your help, but not for any operation, covert or otherwise. No, I want you to go to the assistance of your friend Tom Waverly. He went through the mirror about half an hour ago with one of the advance units. . . . You don’t seem surprised.”

“I talked to Tom before I came up here. I was pretty sure that he’d try something like this, so I asked perimeter security to keep an eye on him.”

“Ah yes, your old friend Colonel Ellis.” Knightly smiled around his cigar. “It’s a small world, isn’t it? What would you say if I gave you the chance to go after Tom and bring him back?”

“Is that an order, sir?”

Stone was having a hard time hiding his relief. When Bruce Ellis had told him that Tom had gone through the mirror, he'd immediately decided to try to rescue him from the consequences of his stupid bravado, even if it meant chasing after him through the middle of a battlefield. He'd agreed to talk to Knightly only because he needed all the help he could get, and suspected that the Old Man wanted to save Tom for reasons of his own.

"You don't work for Special Ops anymore," Knightly said, "and neither do I. So how on God's good green Earth could I give you an order? What I *am* giving you is a chance to save the life of the man who once saved your life. You won't be able to go through until after Wendell Baines has led his troops into battle, but as long as Tom sticks with that advance unit I know exactly where you can find him. You can take Albert with you—he's a useful man in a tight spot—and I'll make sure that at least one of the gates is kept open until you return. How about it? Are you game?"



General Baines's speech to his troops was short and punchy. He quoted Shakespeare, the old chestnut about Saint Crispin's day from *Henry V*. He made much of the fact that Gettysburg was just a few miles down the road, and told his troops that they were lighting a flame of freedom that would drive communism's evil works from their native land.

Stone watched the general's performance on a monitor in an Airstream trailer that housed one of Bruce Ellis's surveillance teams. Bruce was talking on a telephone in a cubbyhole at the far end, jammed between the chemical toilet and a kitchen nook where a pot of coffee simmered on a hot plate. Half a dozen technicians in roller chairs hunched over keyboards and CCTV monitors. One of them had shown Stone footage of the advance platoon passing through one of the Turing gates. Captain Gene Lewis had been driving the lead Jeep. The man in the shotgun seat next to him had been wearing a fleecetrimmed leather jacket and a baseball cap pulled low over his face.

Baines got a big cheer at the end of his speech. A bugler in a cavalry hat blew the Charge; several hundred engines revved up, pumping plumes of black smoke into the floodlit air. For a long moment, nothing else happened. Then the floodlights around the apron dimmed, the air filled with a low rumble that the turning axis of the world might make, and the mirrors of the two Turing gates flicked on, giving back the dazzle of the headlights of the vehicles facing them.

Bruce Ellis handed Stone a mug of coffee. "I guess you still take it black."  
"Have you found out how long the gates will stay open?"

"I still have a few people to call. Hang in there," Bruce said, and went back to his cubbyhole.

Stone sipped coffee and watched a rack of monitors that showed different views of two orderly lines of vehicles moving through the pair of gates. The coffee was pretty good, but it burned like acid in his jittery stomach and he couldn't finish it. Two by two, vehicles moved toward the silvery mirrors of the gates and were swallowed by their reflections. Only a couple of dozen trucks were left when Bruce came back down the narrow corridor between the techs and racks of monitors and electronics.

"I just got word that Knightly has been pulling strings back at Third Div headquarters. We're supposed to shut down the gates as soon as the last of Baines's men go through, but Knightly managed to get that changed. They'll stay open for another three hours. Will that be long enough?"

"I think so. If Tom isn't where he's supposed to be, I'm coming straight back."

"If you're going into combat, you need to get kitted out," Bruce said. "Let's start by losing that nice suit."

Stone stripped to his underwear and pulled on a set of khaki coveralls and a flak vest with ceramic plates front and back. He borrowed a pair of combat boots from one of the technicians; Bruce gave him an olive-green parka with wolf-fur lining, a Kevlar-lined resin composite helmet, a Browning Hi-Power pistol, and a .22 pocket auto in an ankle holster.

"As you once told me, always carry some kind of backup in Indian Territory," Bruce said. "It's small, but it fires high-velocity hollowpoints with plenty of stopping power."

"Thanks, Bruce. I owe you big time."

"That parka's a vintage item. If you get blood on it, don't bother coming back."

Stone carried a spare flak vest and helmet outside. Albert Flynn was leaning against the hood of the Jeep he'd requisitioned, smoking a cigarette. When Stone handed him the combat gear, he said, "You take the wheel, I'll tell you exactly where to go."

Stone said, "Do you have combat experience?"

"Five years in the Marines. I can handle myself."

"What rank?"

"Sergeant."

“Let me make it clear, Sergeant Flynn. I’m in charge. If you don’t like that you can stay here.”

“I don’t like any of it,” Flynn said. “But I have my orders, just like you.”

“I’m not doing this because I was told to do it. I’m doing it because I want to help out an old friend.”

“Did this guy really save your life?”

“Once upon a time, in a place far away from here.”

Stone drove as fast as he could down the road into the valley and across the empty, floodlit apron of the staging area. He braked and shifted down as the Jeep climbed the broad ramp, and couldn’t help holding his breath as the arch of the gate swept overhead like a scythe. There was the usual moment of blackness, as if every neuron in his brain had short-circuited, and then the Jeep thumped down on a steel-mesh trackway laid over mud.

They were on the other side of the mirror, in a version of America where the course of history had diverged from that of the Real more than fifty years ago.

Stone had passed through the mirror more times than he cared to remember. He was used to the idea of moving from one landscape to another in a single step. But he had never before driven straight into the middle of a war.

The gates had been opened in the middle of a collective farm. Their two silvery circles hung side by side with no visible means of support. The ground level here was a little higher than in the Real, and cut chords out of their bottom edges. A vast muddy field stretched away into darkness, rutted by vehicle tracks. The night seemed colder than in the Real, but perhaps that was just Stone’s imagination. A cluster of buildings was burning on the ridge above the valley. The black sky strobed with huge red flashes. The crackle of small-arms fire sounded from several points in the middle distance.

As Stone drove past the empty low-loaders that had transported Dick Knightly’s helicopters through the gates, Flynn reached under his seat and pulled out a radio with a whip aerial. He gave the call sign of Captain Lewis’s platoon and asked for an update, repeating the question three times without getting a response, then clicking through channels until someone answered. After a brief conversation, he told Stone, “The guy I talked to is with the main column. They’re under heavy fire just a few miles away, a little place called Catocin Furnace. No one has heard from Lewis’s platoon.”

“Let’s hope it’s still where it’s supposed to be. Point me in the right direction, Sergeant Flynn.”

“See that clump of trees?”

It was at the edge of the huge fields, silhouetted by a small fire.

“There should be a country road leads straight to a railroad,” Flynn said. “Lewis’s platoon was supposed to secure it.”

A Jeep was burning beyond the clump of trees. It sat in the middle of the road, a chalice of yellow flame with dead men lying all around, some in camo gear, some in heavy woollen coats. As Stone drove past, a plane roared overhead and something screeched down and exploded on the ridge and lit up the whole valley. Stone crouched low as the Jeep was rocked by a solid thump of air and clods of hot earth rattled all around.

“I thought the guerrillas were supposed to have sabotaged the local airfields,” he said. His ears were ringing and he felt as if he was speaking under half a mile of water.

“Looks like this thing is coming apart,” Flynn said. “Maybe you could get this heap of junk moving. I feel kind of vulnerable sitting here.”

Stone drove as fast as he dared down the dark road, headlights off. It climbed a small rise, dropped down, and there were lights up ahead, shimmering through a scrim of leafless trees, moving to and fro along the length of a train of cattle cars halted on a single-track railroad. Soldiers were hauling back the doors of the cars and yelling at men crowded inside, telling them to jump down, telling them they were liberated. A massive brute of a locomotive stood at the head of the train, clouds of steam leaking from the joints of its pistons, a big red star splashed across the riveted flank of its tender. A small group clustered below its cab. Soldiers, three men in bib overalls—Stone guessed that they must be the train crew—and a burly man in a fleecetrimmed leather jacket.

Stone told Flynn to stay frosty, and they both sat still and kept their hands in plain sight as Captain Lewis and three soldiers trotted toward the Jeep. Tom Waverly followed right behind them. He had lost his baseball cap and a bandage was wrapped around his head and spotted with blood over his right ear, but he was cheerful and animated, saying, “You’re just in time, Adam. We’re going to use this train to outflank the unfriendlies and punch right through their lines.”

Captain Lewis pulled the Browning from Stone’s holster, told him to put his hands on his head and step down. “What you think you doing here?”

“What were *you* thinking, Captain, letting Mr. Waverly ride along with you?”

On the other side of the Jeep, Flynn was telling the two soldiers patting him down to take it easy, he was on their side.

Captain Lewis said, “We are friends. He ask me for a favour, I should refuse him?”

"If you really are his friend, yes, you should."

Tom put his hand on Captain Lewis's shoulder and said, "Let me handle him, Gene."

"You will be responsible for him?"

"You bet."

"Then you are also responsible for Mr. Stone's friend. If Mr. Stone tries anything, his friend dies."

Albert Flynn said, "Wait a fucking minute. . . ."

Captain Lewis told Stone, "I move out in ten minutes no matter what. Do we understand each other?"

"I'm here to talk with my friend, Captain, not cause you any trouble."

Captain Lewis held Stone's gaze for a moment, then turned and walked back to the locomotive, following the soldiers who were escorting Flynn at gunpoint.

Tom said, "We're gonna ride this train all the way to Washington. It'll be a lot of fun."

"You won't get five miles." Stone's ears were still ringing. Nothing seemed quite real and he had a claustrophobic sense of time passing too quickly, of the narrowing window before the gates were shut down and he was trapped here for good.

Tom said, "We're going all the way, old buddy."

"You're going straight to hell if you don't come back with me."

"You came through the mirror because you wanted to, Adam, why don't you admit it? Admit that you miss the action."

"I came through to ask you to come back with me, Tom. This isn't our war, and you know it."

"Let me show you something," Tom said, and led Stone along the side of the train.

Soldiers were hauling men out of the cattle cars. They were manacled in pairs by wrist cuffs welded to short iron bars, or shackled in groups of four or five. Soldiers in the cars pushed them to the open door. Soldiers on the track reached up and grabbed their legs and pulled them down. Men fell and tried to get up and other men fell on top of them. The soldiers worked in a fever, hauling men from the recesses of the cars, screaming at them, pushing them out. A soldier kicked a man square in the crotch and he fell to the ground and the four men chained to him fell down too. Men fell out of the cars and lay in heaps. Only a few managed to get to their feet. Soldiers swore at them and tried to shove them out of the way, but they took only a few steps and stood still again, blinking stupidly.

Stone caught the arm of a soldier who was about to strike a skinny man with his rifle butt and pushed him away. “What are these men? Slaves?”

“Political prisoners. Remember the American Bund? This is worse,” Tom said, and grabbed the shoulders of the man Stone had rescued, turning him around.

He wore a ragged shirt and filthy trousers that ended in tatters around his calves. He was barefoot and there were welted scars around his wrists and ankles. He stank horribly. His gaze flicked here and there, not resting on anything or anyone for more than a second. He looked as if he might bolt at any moment, if only he could figure out how to do it.

Tom plucked a penlight from the pocket of his leather jacket and shone it in the man’s face. His teeth were black with decay and he had no tongue, just a stump that jumped like a frog at the back of his mouth.

“The commies cut out the tongues of political prisoners and lobotomise them or treat them with a chemical cosh to make them docile,” Tom said. “Send them to work in factories, steel mills, mines, farms. They only last a year or two, but there are always more prisoners. This is what this is all about, Adam. This is what we’re going to destroy.”

He patted the man on the back and told him he could go, he was free, but the man just stood there, smiling a stupid ingratiating smile.

Stone said, “How about the slaves the Free Americans use on their farms and plantations in Cuba? Are you going to free them, too?”

Tom pulled a hip flask from the pocket of his leather jacket. “Know what we should have done here? Brought a nuke through, set it off in the middle of Washington. The commies don’t have nukes. If we nuked Washington and told ‘em New York or San Francisco was next, they’d cave in the very same day.”

Stone shook his head when Tom offered him the flask. “Commit an atrocity to end an atrocity—it’s no way to win a war.”

“Look around you! Look at these poor fuckers! The whole fucking country is an atrocity!”

The two men were standing toe-to-toe in the near dark while soldiers hauled men out of the cattle cars. Shouts, the sound of rifle butts on flesh, on bone. Stone took a breath and put his hand on Tom’s shoulder. “You want to do something useful? Come back with me. Tell me why the Old Man needs you.”

Tom knocked Stone’s hand away. “You don’t have clue one, do you? Why I’m here, the Old Man made me the kind of offer you can’t refuse.”

“If you’re in trouble, Tom, I swear I’ll do my best to straighten it out.”

“I’m better off here. Better to burn out, bro, than fade away.”

They stared at each other for a few moments, Tom Waverly mulishly stubborn, Adam Stone angry and frustrated. Then gunfire started up somewhere beyond the head of the train, the snap of rifles, the heavy rattle of a machine gun. Rounds sparked off the boiler, sparked off spoked driving wheels. Tom ran toward the locomotive and Stone chased after him, into the roar of an incoming plane. Soldiers were returning fire. Stone saw Captain Lewis walk up to the three men in overalls who knelt on the ground, saw him shoot two in the head, one after the other, saw him haul the third to his feet and shove him toward the cab of the locomotive. Albert Flynn stood to one side of this, hands raised to his shoulders, two soldiers aiming their rifles at him.

The plane tore low overhead. Leafless trees threshed in its wake. It climbed and turned back and came in again. Captain Lewis's soldiers started up a ragged fusillade and the plane's guns flashed along the edge of its wings, tearing long furrows out of the embankment. Then it was gone again, making another turn out in the darkness.

Tom Waverly ran to a Jeep and lifted a fat cylinder from the back seat—the launch tube of an M-288 smart missile, totally forbidden to locals in any sheaf. No doubt it was another of Knightly's gifts. Tom flipped open the tube front and back and shouldered it, and Stone yanked the .22 from his ankle holster and shouted Tom's name.

Tom grinned at him. "That won't do much against a plane, but I appreciate the gesture."

"It's time to go home, Tom."

The plane was making a rising noise out in the dark as it swung back toward the train.

Stone cocked the .22. "Put that thing down, Tom. Come with me."

"Fuck you," Tom said and threw the launch tube at Stone and reached inside his jacket for his revolver.

Stone shot him in the right shoulder, ran forward as Tom dropped to his knees, and clipped him on the point of his chin and laid him out.

The plane made another roaring pass. Something slanted down with a piercing whistle and flame burst on the other side of the locomotive and a blast of hot air knocked Stone down. He took a little while to get to his feet. The locomotive was venting jets of steam from its broken boiler. Most of the cattle cars were on fire. A few soldiers and prisoners were stirring; many more lay still. Stone saw Albert Flynn stoop over a body and pick up a rifle, saw a soldier fire a burst that kicked dirt around the big man, saw him spin around and fall down.

Stone got his hands under Tom's shoulders and hauled him into the back seat of the Jeep. Soldiers were staggering out of the steam and smoke. One of them was Captain Gene Lewis.

The young officer was covered in dirt and soot and he was bleeding from his nose and ears, but he was aiming his pistol straight at Stone. He screamed something lost in the howl of venting steam and the ringing in Stone's ears, and fired. The shot crazed the Jeep's windshield and Stone snatched Tom's knife from his shoulder rig and threw it in a flat arc. Captain Lewis took a step, his hand reaching for the handle of the knife that protruded from his breastbone, and then his gaze lost focus and he collapsed.

Stone swung behind the wheel and gunned the Jeep and pulled a U-turn, scattering soldiers. Something big was on fire a mile away and heavy artillery was lighting the horizon beyond it, making thunder under the black sky. Stone swerved past the burning Jeep and rattled over a smashed fence. One of the Turing gates was still open, a circle of beautiful silver light shining at the end of the trackway like a tethered moon. Stone accelerated, saw a smoking crater that bisected the trackway, swerved to avoid it, and got bogged down in mud. He gathered Tom's dead weight into his arms and slogged around the crater and walked into the glow of the gate.

Black lightning flared inside his skull, and then he was walking down a broad, floodlit ramp. Dick Knightly was waiting at the bottom, in front of the open doors of an army ambulance. Stone staggered past his old boss and allowed two medics to take Tom from him. When he turned, Knightly was right behind him, asking a question. He had to say it three times to make himself understood; Stone's ears were still ringing.

"Where's my man? Where's Albert?"

"Sergeant Flynn is dead. One of Captain Lewis's soldiers shot him. If you want his body, you'll have to go get it yourself," Stone said, and brushed past Knightly and walked away across the empty stage of the apron.

Behind him, the mirror of the Turing gate winked out.