

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

The Grinder

Twenty years earlier, Zhao was just eleven and he had never seen anything like the factory the Americans were building. Everyone said it would make food for American dogs, but he didn't believe them. In his village, dogs ate scraps and rats. No one needed a factory to make scraps.

The village watched in awe as the factory rose from the mud. Hypnotized by the swinging cranes, people soon stopped caring what the factory would make. With its strange gleaming machines, the factory would bring money to the impoverished village. The Americans were constructing a dream.

They were still painting the walls when the great machines began to turn and Vector began work. Twelve hours each day. He worked at the grinder, pushing rotting carcasses into its ceaseless steel jaws. Even today, decades later, he could hear the scream and whine of the voracious machine as it snapped through gristle and bone.

When he was not feeding the mechanical beast, he sorted through the piles of dead animals. Pigs and cows, chickens and rats. Even dogs. Rotting and foul, coated with blood and organs and feces. Even worse were the occasional slabs of edible meat,

food good enough for humans, food that could have taken the hunger from a starving family in his village.

His job was to dig through the horror, searching for stones and pieces of metal. Nothing could be allowed to damage the machine.

And those were not the worst days.

Once each week, Zhao had to crawl inside the grinder, cleaning its savage steel teeth. The dank fog of decay turned his stomach, daring him to breath. When he did, the fumes from the harsh cleaner clawed at his lungs until he coughed blood.

But only a child could clean the grinder. Adults could not fit inside. Children would work there until they grew too big. Then a new child would come. One the day foreman told Zhao it was time to move to another part of the factory, he felt the profound relief of a child waking from a nightmare.

His elation was short lived. The next child in line to take his place was his sister. She was just nine-years-old when she entered its mouth for the first time.

Zhao tried to spare her, to squeeze in and take her place. But the foreman beat him and sent him to work cleaning the drains in the slaughterhouse.

A week later Zhao heard the alarm. A faulty switch had caused the grinder to turn on unexpectedly. His sister had been inside.

He remembered the tears of his parents and his own sense of helpless horror. That night, a group of workers came to his home.

Lying in the bed he had shared with his sister, Zhao could hear their angry words. The Americans had already caused death and injury among the workers. When the foul waste from their factory poisoned the river and the drinking water many in the village become ill and some had died.

Now they had killed a child.

The workers would fight back. They had had enough. In the morning, the strike would begin.

But in the dark, the police came. Zhao heard them take his parents. Before they could come for him, he crawled out the bedroom window into the cold winter night and hid under a pile of frozen garbage. From there, he could hear the gunshots. He could hear his mother's screams.

Since that moment, Zhao has been alone.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Zhao

I run from University station to the virology lab. I managed to bandage my injured arm on the train using a tee shirt from my backpack and ignoring the horrified stares of the other passengers.

As I turn into the parking lot of the lab, I see it.

A white van.

I duck into the bushes. The van is backed into a corner of the lot, surrounded by a thick row of evergreens. There is no Seattle Public Utility symbol on the door. Maybe it's just a University van.

But maybe not.

Then, I see Athena's bike in the rack just outside the front door. I need to check out this van before I go inside.

I bend down and run behind the row of evergreens that lines the edge of the parking lot until I am next to the van. I peer through the bushes. I see the jagged edge of the broken rear windows.

Like they were blown out by an exploding battery.

Athena was right. The killer has come after the last two authors of the paper. Now, it looks like she could be caught in the middle of it.

I take off my backpack, pull out my phone, and dial 911.

When the operator picks up, I speak in a whisper. "The terrorist," I hiss, "is in a white van park outside of the UW Virology lab. The license plate is WHZ-910."

"Sir, are you in danger?"

Then I hear the banging. I drop to the ground. I hear it again. From inside the van

My voice sinks to a whisper. "He tried to kill me, but I escaped. He might be nearby. Send the police. I can't let him hear me." I hang up, drop the phone into my backpack and slip it back on.

I scan the parking lot. No one. I crouch in the bushes. Who is inside? Is it the killer?

More banging. I drop to the ground again. Another sound. A strange, humming, voice-like sound. High pitched. Then more banging. And more of the humming sound.

The parking lot is still empty. I run to the side of the van away from the lab door and creep toward the back window. I peek past the broken glass into the dark interior.

Athena.

She's lying with her back towards me, her hands and ankles bound with heavy layers of duct tape. Another layer has been wrapped around her head to cover her mouth. I jerk at the back door handle. Locked. "Athena. It's me," I whispered, "Are you OK?"

She stops kicking and nods her head. "I'm going to get you out," I promise. I grab the top of the rear door with my fingertips and climb up onto the bumper. Balancing, I am able to snake my hand through the broken window. With my fingers fully extended, I can just reach the inside latch. I curl my fingers around it and pull. The door pops open.

I pull my arm back out and climb into the van. I kneel down and roll Athena over. Her eyes fill with relief. "Give me a second and I'll get you out." I search for the end of the tape and began to pry it loose. I have just pulled the edge up when Athena starts thrashing and kicking the side of the van with her feet.

"Calm down, It'll just take a second..." I look up at her face as I speak. That's when I see terror in her eyes. Athena is staring over my shoulder.

Before I can turn to look, I feel the blow to my head.

Then blackness.

CHAPTER FORTY

In the Web

SODO? Terry stares at the map of Seattle on the screen of his laptop. A green dot marks the location of his phone. What is Jack doing in the gritty industrial district on Seattle's South side? And how has he gotten there from the hideaway on the North side?

When Terry heard that the police had identified a suspect in the bioterrorist attack and were searching for a white van, he had decided it was time to bring Jack in from the cold. First, he would find the phone's location. Most likely, the phone was off and he would find nothing. If it were on, he expected it to be in the park.

Not SODO.

This can't be right. Terry refreshes. Again, his phone shows up in SODO. But there's more.

The dot has moved. And not just a little. Terry refreshes the screen again.

"What the hell?" he mutters to himself.

Jack just moved almost a quarter of a mile in twenty seconds. He isn't walking. Or even running. Even if he's managed to get hold of a bike, there's no way he's cruising SODO at over 40 miles an hour.

Jack is in a car.

Terry watches the green dot move south for another mile. It turns onto a cross street, drives two blocks, then turns again and pulls to a stop in the middle of a block. It has to be a parking lot.

What's going on? Terry switches to satellite view, then street view. An image of the Olympic View Apartments comes into focus. Terry has a bad feeling.

Even in a car, it would take at least fifteen minutes to drive to the south side from Ravenna. That means that Jack left the hideaway before word got out that the FBI has identified a suspect. Why? All of the explanations he can come up with end with Jack in trouble.

Time to stop guessing. Terry grabs a landline and dials the number of the phone he gave Jack. The cops are no longer a concern.

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After the Americans killed his sister and his parents, Zhao fled. He ran and ran and kept running. He had nothing. But he ran. He stole food. He slept in the fields. For weeks, he ran. Until he reached Shanghai.

A twelve-year-old, alone in Shanghai, he begged and stole and fought and was beaten. He worked any job he could get. He found a way to go to school. He joined the Army.

He thrived in the Army. Success followed success and his intelligence found an outlet. The Army sent him to a secret bio-weapons lab and trained him to be a microbiologist.

The government sent him to the Virology Institute for a PhD. He had been sent to learn the tricks of the Americans. For years, he had worked hard, keeping to himself and learning everything he could. He was quiet and studious, but always he remembered his sister and thoughts of revenge raged beneath the surface.

Then he met Alpha.

That connection had come unexpectedly, after months of conversations at the Silk Road Cafe, a dusty storefront on a side street in the International District. Once each week, he would join the recent immigrants and foreign students who crowded into a small room to sit at its mismatched tables, drink

coffee and tea, and complain about America. Faded photographs of exotic lands hung on the concrete walls. A cloud of resentment and cigarette smoke filled the air.

Word of those conversations and the special knowledge of this man who would become Vector filtered up to the fifth floor walk-up where Alpha held court. Soon, Zhao found himself at the feet of the immense Chechen, at least six and a half feet tall with arms like the branches of an oak tree.

Alpha told him of the Alliance and their conviction that the rich countries of the world, especially the United States, had created dire poverty and environmental devastation around the world. The goal of his organization was to bring the misery of world's poor to the doorstep of the world's rich.

In the years since, he had become Vector. His job at the University and everything else that remained from life outside the Alliance had come to feel like an alias, a false identity that provided cover for his real life inside the Alliance. Every day, he went to work and pretended.

Zhao had continued his work in a lab at the U, but his energy went into his work in the cramped, but highly sophisticated lab he had built in his small apartment.

As building superintendent of the Olympic View apartments, he had been able to make all the changes he needed without drawing

unwanted attention. By the time anyone found his lab, it would be too late. The plan had been perfect.

But he had not planned on the boy.

He should kill the boy. He should kill them both. Vector does not mind killing Americans.

But a child? He can't kill a child. If he kills the two of them, he will be no better than the Americans.

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The ringing phone startles him. Zhao's eyes fly towards the sound. It is not his phone.

It rings again. The backpack. The boy's backpack. He picks it up. A third ring. He fishes out the phone and stares at the caller ID. N RIVERS.

Is someone looking for the boy? He shuts off the phone. He stares at it for a moment. How can he have been so stupid? This phone can be tracked. Zhao throws it to the ground and crushes it with his heel.

Who is this kid? He thought he was shooting at a man, not a child. What was this boy doing in the van at 5:30 in the morning? Why did he destroy the pump? Why did he suddenly show up at the Virology Lab. How is he connected to Athena?

Zhao dumps the contents of the pack on the table. A half-eaten sandwich, an empty water bottle, a jacket, and a small

box. Not much to work with. He opens the box, but the only thing inside is some sort of toy mechanical bird, which he examines and drops on the floor. He checks the pockets of the jacket and, finding nothing, dumps it on the floor as well.

Finally, in a side pocket of the pack, Zhao finds a wallet. He pulls it out. Inside, he finds a student ID card. He stares at it, reading the name. Jack Boston. Dr. Boston's son?

Zhao thought he was finished with Charles Boston. He had planned to be finished with all of them.

Now, he has two of their children locked in the lab.

He has done everything he can to avoid killing children.

But what choice does he have?

But Athena. When he met her, she was the age of his sister, even reminds him of his sister. He would never want to harm her.

He will find a place to hide her. Leave her where someone will find her. In a day or two, he will be long gone and whatever she says wouldn't matter.

But the boy is different. The boy destroyed his van, his pump, his plans. The boy has destroyed everything.

This is no child. This is a man.

And he will have to go.

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When the green dot disappeared, Terry knew something was wrong. There is no good reason for Jack to be in an apartment in SODO. And no good reason for him to make himself untraceable. Something is wrong. Very wrong.

Terry dials 911 on the landline. With a finger resting on the "send" button, he imagines the conversation. Ah ... I lost the signal from my cell phone at an apartment building in SODO. Do you think you could run a SWAT team over there, pronto.

He hits the "clear" button.

But Jack needs help. Now. If not sooner.

And there is only one way to get to SODO in a hurry.

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Minutes later, Terry is pulling out of the drive, knowing only one thing for certain. His father is going to go ballistic. But what other choice does he have? And what's the worst thing his father can do? Ground him for two lifetimes?

Twenty minutes later, Terry is rattling through SODO, pushing the old Volvo as hard as he dares. He has a plan, but will need some luck.

His first glimpse of the Olympic View Apartments is not reassuring. The aging, cinder-block horror with a view of nothing but a rundown warehouse looks like something out of a B movie horror film. He pulls into an alley behind the building.

Then, as he enters what looks like the parking lot, he stops short.

A white van. The police were looking for a white van. And this one has its back windows blown out.

His heart now at full gallop, Terry backs out of the parking lot and drives around the corner. As he parks the Volvo, he has the terrible sense that Jack's life depends on what he does in the next few minutes.

