



Chapter Seven

Pointing the Finger

All right, Mr. Blake," growled the young Lockheed rep, "you've got your two phone calls...and twenty-four hours to explain your part in this mess. "I'd make sure one of the calls is to your lawyer," the suit concluded, the reek of his expensive cologne permeating the room.

"That's all I need," Paladin replied. "By this time tomorrow, I'll have it all sorted out." *At least, he thought, I'd better.*

If he didn't get to the bottom of this dizzy affair, Blake would end up taking the rap for the theft of the prototype.

He dialed. The line rang eight times before Dashiell picked up.

"Hello?" a sleepy voice asked.

"Dashiell? It's Paladin. I need a favor. Round up your buddy on the Hollywood PD. What's his name? Slaughouser? Then bail Jimmy the Rap out of whatever drunk tank he's in. Get them all out to Lockheed's Pasadena airfield by noon."

"That's three favors," Dashiell said and yawned. "I suppose this is an emergency? A matter of life and death?"

"Yeah, my life and death."

There was silence on the other end, then: "Very well, then. I'll see what I can do."



"One more thing," Paladin said. "Get to my Santa Monica office. Bring that fancy detective kit with the fingerprint equipment. If we're lucky as hell you'll find the break I need."

Paladin then explained what he wanted it for.

"It's a hundred-to-one shot," Dashiell replied.

"Try anyway," Paladin told him. He hung up, then rang Tennyson.

Tennyson was his business partner. The Englishman had been with Paladin since the Great War, and had taught him how to fight and fly and kill and be a gentleman all at the same time.

"Has the cleaning woman come, Tennyson?" Paladin asked. "Yes? Well chase her out of my office. I need it intact and messy, just the way I left it."

Paladin heard the receiver drop, an exchange on the other end in heated Spanish, then Tennyson picked up and reported: "It is as you requested."

"Good. Let Dashiell in when he gets there. He'll fill you in. Then get to Lockheed's Pasadena airfield with your tools, and be ready for anything."

"Consider it done," Tennyson replied.

Paladin set the phone back in the cradle and looked up.

Mr. Cologne and the older Lockheed official exchanged an incredulous glance, then the older man asked Paladin, "Will you require anything else?"

"I'll need you to fly my people here. I also need the personnel files of your security people at the Pasadena airfield."

The older man told his associate, "Ship the files Mr. Blake requires on the next flight out."

"I could also use a little lunch," Paladin said scratching the stubble on his chin. "Maybe a shower, too, and a razor so I can clean up."

Or, Paladin thought, so I can cut my throat if this daffy scheme doesn't work.



The transport plane landed at half past one that afternoon. There were no windows in the passenger's section of the fuselage. Lockheed wasn't taking any chances of revealing the location of their secret testing facility.

Tennyson sauntered off the plane first, lightly stepping down the stairway as if he were the Duke of Kent in tails and black tie at the Queen's Reception. He was, in fact, wearing a set of freshly pressed white coveralls, a Hollywood Stars baseball cap, mirrored aviator glasses, and lugging a tool chest in each hand.

When Tennyson saw Paladin, he set his tools down, clasped Paladin's hand, and patted him on the back. "So good to see you, my friend." A smile split his white beard, then disappeared. "We had been told there was an accident, and that you were injured."

"That's the least of my problems," Paladin muttered and absentmindedly massaged his wounded shoulder.

Jimmy the Rap got off the plane next. His crumpled suit looked like it had been slept in, and he winced when he got a dose of desert sun.

Following Jimmy was a pudgy man in a navy blue suit and worn fedora that had "cop" written all over it. That had to be Detective Slaughtouser.

Last to deplane was a giant of a man, the Russian fighter ace who had gotten Paladin into this mess: Peter Justin.

"Where's Dashiell?" Paladin asked.

"He did not come," Tennyson replied. "He said the only desert he would be going to would be Palm Springs. All the others were too dry, he told me. And I do not believe he was referring to the climate."

Paladin gritted his teeth. "That's it? He didn't say anything else?"



"He told me to give you this." Tennyson reached into the vest pocket of his coveralls, removed an envelope, and then handed it to Paladin. "He said 'your long shot paid off,' and that you owe him a bottle of champagne."

Paladin cracked it open and frowned at its contents. "Hmph. It isn't as clear as I'd hoped," he whispered. "Still, we're lucky we got anything at all. It'll have to do."

"What will have to do?" Tennyson asked.

"A miracle...if I can pull it off," Paladin said. He stuffed the envelope into his pocket.

"Mr. Blake?" asked a voice embellished with a Slavic accent.

Paladin turned. Peter Justin—all seven feet and three hundred pounds of him—had somehow crept up behind him. Justin's pointed beard had been immaculately trimmed since Paladin had seen him last. He wore a light gray silk suit and a Panama hat to shade his face. "It is most distressing news about the prototype," he said. "I very much would like to see the wreckage." He shot a suspicious glance at Tennyson then looked back down at Paladin. "If there is anything I could do to help, please tell me."

Paladin took a step back. "Did you bring those Lockheed employment records?"

"Of course." Justin hefted an alligator skin briefcase.

"Good." Paladin nodded toward the hangar. He raised his voice so everyone on the field heard him: "Then let's take a look at the plane."

He marched to the hangar. Across the dry lakebed, shimmering heat rose in waves so it looked like a lake in the distance. A mirage...a reminder that maybe it wasn't the truth he was chasing, just smoke and mirrors.

No. His hunch had to be right.

Paladin stepped through the door adjacent to the gigantic hangar bay entrance. The temperature inside was twenty degrees cooler, and Paladin's sweat immediately chilled his skin to gooseflesh.



A trio of armed guards scrutinized him and reached for their sidearms. They relaxed, though, when they saw the older Lockheed official and Mr. Cologne.

The prototype flying wing was the only plane in the cavernous building. She was parked in the center, and a spotlight painted her steel with reflections and glare. Paladin could still see the scrapes and scorch marks from their close calls and felt sorry that he'd banged up the beautiful craft.

"First thing," Paladin said trying to sound like he knew what he was doing, "I'll need my chief mechanic to look over the plane."

"Absolutely not," Mr. Cologne said, stepping between Paladin and the plane, and raising his neatly manicured hands. "You've done enough damage. For all we know you're trying to steal more technical data and sell it to our competitors."

"If you think I already stole the prototype," Paladin replied, lowering his tone and meeting Mr. Cologne's stare, "and if I already had it to examine for an entire day, what could it possibly hurt for me to take one more look?"

Mr. Cologne considered, cupping his dimpled chin, then he said, "Very well, but I insist one of our mechanics watch you."

"Good," Tennyson remarked. He started to lug his tools to the plane. "We could always use a little help."

Detective Slaughtouser cleared his throat. "Is this something the Hollywood police needs to look at? I was told a plane here was stolen."

"Stolen and recovered," Mr. Cologne said. "We already have the thief. All that we require of you is to take him into custody."

Paladin crossed his arms so he'd be less likely to take a poke at Mr. Cologne, who was really starting to get under his skin. "There'll be a charge of espionage to add...maybe even a count of treason or two."

Detective Slaughtouser's raised his eyebrows and tipped up his fedora. "That so?"



"The suit here has it wrong, though," Paladin said, "I'm not the thief." He turned to Mr. Cologne, "and what he thinks was stolen...wasn't."

Jimmy the Rap looked nervously about, as if he was suddenly claustrophobic in the immense empty hangar. "Don't no one go pointing a finger at me." He backed away from Paladin. "I was in lockup for the last two days. I didn't take nothing."

"Shut yer trap," Detective Slaughouser said. He scratched his head, then asked, "So what's going on, Blake? I know you're on the up-and-up. Spell it out for me. But in English, huh?"

"I will. I'll even gift-wrap the thief for you, complete with the details on how they did it, and their motive. But I'll need to ask everyone a few questions first." Paladin glanced from Justin to the older Lockheed official to Detective Slaughouser to Jimmy the Rap. "Then I'll reveal which one of us is the crook."

"This is outrageous," Mr. Cologne said.

"I must agree," Justin murmured.

"I ain't done nothing," Jimmy said and edged toward the door.

Detective Slaughouser grabbed Jimmy by his wrinkled collar and marched him back.

"But one of us did steal the prototype," Paladin told them. "...in a way.

"Mr. Justin," Paladin said, "take a careful look at this plane. Is it the one you sent me out in two days ago?"

Justin removed a set of spectacles from his coat pocket. He circled the sleek craft. "It is a close approximation of our prototype, but"—his forehead crinkled as he searched for the right word—"more refined, as if a movie studio reproduced it from a picture perhaps."

"Not quite," Paladin said.

"The real prototype?" Justin inquired. "I have been told it was crashed."

"I was shot down. It's completely destroyed."

"A pity all that is left is this forgery," Justin said.





"Is it?" Paladin asked. "Jimmy, two nights ago, you told me about some parts that left the Lockheed facility in Pasadena? Parts belonging to a prototype?"

"How would I know about that stuff?" Jimmy squeaked.

Detective Slaughouser slapped Jimmy on the back of his head. "Because you're a fence for every jewel thief, burglar, and high-roller in Los Angeles. Answer the man's question."

"Okay, some stuff walked out of Lockheed, sure. You hear things on the street. That ain't against the law. These were big-ticket items, too. A pair of engines, a fuselage, and some new-fangled air brake."

"Impossible," Justin said. "Those items would have been missed."

Paladin asked detective Slaughouser, "Do you think it's possible?"

"Naw, couldn't be done," Slaughouser replied. "Not the way Lockheed's got the airfield locked up. And not with the Hollywood police on the job. Besides, why risk moving the parts if it was a spy job? Why not just scam with the blueprints?"

Paladin turned to Mr. Cologne. "Can you think of a reason, other than espionage, that your prototype might be stolen?"

"Sabotage, for starters. That plane represents a year and a half of development and investments. It will cost a fortune to replace, if we can replace it at all."

Tennyson slammed the engine compartment shut then returned, wiping the grease from his hands with a rag. "The plane is a jigsaw of sorts, Paladin. The fuselage, engines and other components are missing any manufacturer's serial number. The remainder of the plane appears to be off-the-shelf materials: a Hydrodyne water pump, Delco lighting, Top-Flite tires."

"Good," Paladin said. "Very good."

"One more thing," Tennyson said in a low whisper so only Paladin could hear. "I don't know what the old girl has been through, but I wouldn't take her up in the air. She's got stress fractures up and down her frame. An engine block is cracked. It's a wonder you made it back to the



ground in one piece, old boy.”

“Excuse me,” Mr. Cologne demanded. “What does this prove?”

Paladin ignored him. “One last question. Can I see those files you brought, Mr. Justin?”

Justin opened his briefcase and handed over a stack of manila file folders.

Paladin flipped through the paperwork until he found the one he wanted. He checked the fingerprint on record.

“Ah, there we are,” he said with a smile. “You wanted answers? Well I’ve got some.

“Let’s start with this prototype”—Paladin pointed to the plane in the center of the hangar—“the *real* Lockheed prototype. The one that was stolen piece by piece from Pasadena, and then reassembled. Its fuselage, the engines, and air brake system all match the list of stolen goods our friend Jimmy provided. The parts that weren’t swiped from Lockheed were replaced by the best fitting parts available.”

“But that doesn’t add up, Blake,” Detective Slaughtouser said. “If this thief could have gotten big items like the fuselage, they should have been able to grab ‘em all.”

“No,” Paladin answered. “Our thief needed an alibi. They used the remaining parts to build a mock prototype. One that would have never passed the close scrutiny it would have received had she ever reached this test facility...but it was good enough to shoot down. And good enough to send me up in to play the patsy.”

Justin reached into his coat.

“Not so fast,” Detective Slaughtouser said and drew his pistol.

Justin slowly removed a silver case, opened it, and took out a black cigarette.

Detective Slaughtouser relaxed and lowered his gun.

“It saddens me to hear this from you, Mr. Blake,” Justin nonchalantly replied as he lit his cigarette. “I would have thought that a professional with your reputation would take responsibility for your mistakes, rather than try and shift the blame with some implausible story.”



"I have proof." Paladin removed the envelope from his pocket. He withdrew the card inside and showed everyone the half-smearred fingerprint. "I think you'll find this print, which we lifted off the plane, matches the print on Mr. Justin's personnel record."

He handed the card and Justin's file to the older Lockheed official. "I took the liberty of borrowing a friend's fingerprint kit and had Tennyson dust the plane."

Paladin held his breath, hoping that his bluff sounded only half as phony as he thought.

Justin shrugged. "If this plane has stolen Lockheed parts, then my fingerprints *should* be on it. I supervised every phase of the production of the prototype parts."

"True enough. However, your prints are on the other parts, too," Paladin said. "On parts that you should have never touched."

Justin examined the glowing tip of his cigarette. He straightened his arm. There was a click and a slim, silver .38 popped from the sleeve of his silk suit and into his massive hand.

Moving with deceptive agility for such a large man, Peter Justin stepped behind Mr. Cologne, locked him in a stranglehold, and pointed his gun at the Lockheed executive's neck.

"Drop your weapons," Justin growled. "Back away, or this man dies."



Chapter Eight

One Way Out

Paladin took a step toward Peter Justin. “Don’t do it, Justin.” His words echoed though the cavernous hangar. “There’s nowhere to go.”

Tennyson took a step closer, trying to flank the massive Russian. Paladin gave him a short shake of his head, and Tennyson froze in his tracks.

Justin twisted the neck of his captive and pushed the muzzle of this gun deep into his target’s throat. “I disagree,” Justin hissed. He backed away—using Mr. Cologne as a shield between himself and the trio of armed guards and detective Slaughouser—moving closer to the prototype. “I will be flying away from this place.”

“No way,” Slaughouser said. The cop steadied his grip on his .38, trying to aim past the squirming hostage, hoping for a clear shot at Justin.

The older Lockheed official set his hand on the Slaughouser’s arm. “No, Detective. Let him go.” Slaughouser muttered something Paladin didn’t quite catch. He lowered his gun.

How much influence did Lockheed have with the Hollywood police? Paladin thought that *Hughes* was the big player in Hollywood. But a man like Slaughouser didn’t back down in the middle of a standoff—not unless someone was pulling his strings.

Paladin dismissed that thought and focussed his attention on Justin.

“Why’d you do it?” Paladin asked. “Was it the money? How much did the pale man pay you?”



That stopped Justin more effectively than the threat of Slaughouser's gun. He stood straighter, crinkled his bushy eyebrows and looked like Paladin had just slapped him in the face. "I thought a man like you would understand, Blake. This was *never* about the money."

Justin's eyes were steel hard and stared through Paladin. Blake had seen the look before on the soldiers and fliers from the Great War—half shell-shocked and full of the reflections of dead friends.

Paladin hazarded a guess: "So that's it: you're a *patriot*. White Russian to the core, huh? Maybe you don't fly against the Reds anymore, but you're still fighting for czar and country."

Justin relaxed his grip on the young Lockheed official who managed to finally gasp and inhale a full breath.

"Then you *do* understand," Justin whispered.

"Well *I* sure as hell don't," Slaughouser muttered.

"Alaska," Tennyson offered and tugged thoughtfully at his white beard. "Our Mr. Justin is from Alaska...and before that from Russia, a soldier of their revolution."

"When the White Russians were ousted by the Reds," Paladin continued, "a bunch of them lit out for Alaska."

"*Da*," Justin growled. He tightened his grip on his captive and took a step back.

"The Reds and Whites are still going at it up there," Paladin said. "The Reds want the last of the aristocrats dead. If half the reports are true, the fighting up North is twice as bloody as the revolution. Innocent civilians are getting planted... all in the name of Mother Russia."

"The 'pale man,' as you called him," Justin replied, "promised me planes, guns, supplies, even a combat zeppelin in exchange for the prototype" —he glanced quickly over his shoulder to the flying wing, then back— "my people need these things or all will be dead within a month."

"There are other ways," the older Lockheed official said. "We can negotiate—"

"We negotiate nothing," Justin said. He dragged his captive backward to the prototype. "Capitalists and police," he sneered. "I trust you less than I trust the Communists." He nodded



to Paladin, and added, "I must thank *you*, Mr. Blake, for returning the prototype. I shall bring it to the 'pale man.' Perhaps it will not be too late for my people."

"Don't do it," Paladin cautioned. "That plane's had it."

Justin smiled. "A few bullet holes will not stop me from flying this plane."

"It's not only the exterior damage," Tennyson told him. "Look for yourself. She's got stress fractures up and down her frame. The block is cracked. And the intakes are—"

Justin ignored Tennyson and sat on the wing's leading edge. He saddled back, pulling the young Lockheed official up on the wing with him as if he weighed no more than a rag-doll. Mr. Cologne let out a strangled squeal. With more dexterity than a man Justin's size should have possessed, he eased into the cockpit, dragging Mr. Cologne with him.

"Stay calm, people. Let them go," the older Lockheed official said, glacially calm. He slicked back his neat white hair, then gestured at the guards to back off.

The three Lockheed guards lowered their weapons.

"No!" Paladin protested.

"There are alternatives to fisticuffs and gunplay, Mr. Blake," the older man admonished, "as our Mr. Justin is about to learn."

Justin closed the canopy. The prototype's engines roared to life and the aircraft eased forward.

Paladin backed away from the plane's twin .30-caliber machine guns.

The older Lockheed official signaled the guards to open the hangar doors.

For the first time in his life, Paladin almost wished one man could escape the law. Justin was a veteran, a patriot. Maybe he had done the only thing he could have in his desperate situation. Maybe the same thing Blake himself would have done, if the situation had been reversed.

The flying wing rumbled onto the runway.

Paladin and the others ran outside. The sun was high and heat shimmered off the dry lake bed.

The prototype accelerated down the runway, then arced into the air. It banked left, pulled up



higher, climbing toward the glaring sun—

—and disintegrated into bits of spinning wing and confetti metal, a spray of fuel and fire and smoke.

Paladin's insides turned cold and hard. That could have been him. Maybe it *should* have been him, and Justin, one of the last White Russian resistance fighters, should have walked away from this mess alive.

He turned to the older Lockheed official whose gray eyes were squinting at the smoky scar in the sky. "You said there were other alternatives," Paladin growled. "Like what?"

"Such as," the older man whispered, "we can always build another plane."

Paladin clenched his fists and stepped toward the Lockheed rep.

Detective Slaughouser reached into his overcoat's pocket and shook his head.

Paladin stopped dead in his tracks.

The older gentleman ignored Paladin's clenched teeth and hateful stare. He calmly asked, "Dinner, Mr. Blake?"



The Lockheed secret airfield, the wreckage of the prototype, and the sweltering desert sun were a hundred miles away and twelve hours in the past. Still, Paladin hadn't quite washed the sandy grit or the bad taste of the incident from his mouth.

Paladin straightened his tuxedo and sipped ice water. He avoided looking at the prime rib and the martini that had been ordered for him, nor did he look at the swing band or the dancing feather girls on the stage of Oscar's—a ritzy hole in the wall for Hollywood's movie moguls and the power brokers. From the steely-eyed bouncers to the well-bribed *maitre d'*, the message was plain: no party crashers allowed.

The older Lockheed official sat across the table from him. He wore a light gray tuxedo that matched his eyes and hair. His name was Dunford, James Dunford.



Since they returned, Paladin and James were on a first name basis. He was very grateful for Paladin for wrapping up his problems—the missing prototype and the elusive Peter Justin. He was even more grateful that Blake Aviation Security had a policy about keeping its mouth permanently shut about their clients' cases.

"Unless there's some illegal activity the police should know of," Paladin added.

"I assure you, Paladin," Dunford said with a smile, "Lockheed engages only in legal activities and commerce."

Legal activities and commerce might, however, cover a lot of territory if the Hollywood police were looking the other way. Come to think of it, Detective Slaughouser hadn't said a word after the plane crash. Would a report get filed? Or would the incident—and the death of a Lockheed employee—be swept under the rug?

Paladin leaned closer to Dunford, wrinkling the white linen tablecloth. "You knew about the plane? Knew it would fall apart?"

"Of course," Dunford said calmly and cut into his porterhouse steak. "The frame was a special aluminum alloy designed for light weight but with reduced tensile properties. I am amazed it held together for your aerial combats, Mr. Blake." He chewed. "Remarkable."

Paladin had an urge to reach across the table and, if not strangle Dunford, at least blacken his eye. *Maybe both*, Blake thought. *He's just too damn smug for his own good.*

Paladin reined in his impulse, though. The theft of the prototype, the Russian connection, and Lockheed's apparent control of the police was all part of a much larger—and more sinister—picture. If he wanted to find out what was really going on, Paladin had to keep his cool and play along. It wasn't easy.

"I assume," Dunford said, "that you found our retainer sufficient?"

"Very," Paladin replied.

"Sufficient" didn't begin to cover it; Lockheed had paid him a considerable sum to retain



Blake Aviation Security on semi-permanent basis for what Dunford called “special operations.” The kind of money they dished out would keep his offices from here to the Empire State in black ink for the next two years.

Dunford set his fork and knife down and riveted Paladin with his eyes. “How did you know Mr. Justin was our thief?”

Paladin found himself unable to hold Dunford’s stare. He looked instead at his martini; it was cool and clear and shimmering silver. It would be easy to sip—to drink the thing down. He inhaled the faint scent of gin...then reluctantly slid the glass into the middle of the table.

“It was the cigarettes,” Paladin finally said.

Dunford eased back, raised an eyebrow, and then retrieved his own package of cigarettes. He shook one out for himself, then offered one to Paladin.

“No thanks,” Paladin said to the offered smokes. “I found a pack of European cigarettes on the pale man’s zep. You know, the kind wrapped with the black papers? They’re hard to get in North America these days. Especially in Hollywood.”

“True.” Dunford examined his plain white Lucky Strikes then lit up. “So I can assume our Mr. Justin smoked the same European brand, yes? That *could* have been mere coincidence.”

“Yes, it could have,” Paladin mused. “Hell, it may have even *been* a coincidence, but who else was in a position to steal the major components for the prototype from the Pasadena plant? Who was the only person to see me off in that mock prototype? Who arranged the flight schedule to ensure that my takeoff didn’t lead to any inconvenient witnesses? All the pieces fit.”

“That bit about the fingerprints,” Dunford chuckled. “It was a dazzling display of deduction, Mr. Blake.”

“Thanks,” Paladin muttered.

In fact there had been no deduction. Tennyson hadn’t found a single fingerprint on the pro-



totype. He had, however, lifted one of Justin's prints from Paladin's desk in his Santa Monica office. That was the print Paladin has handed Justin, the print Blake had compared to his Lockheed employment record. It had been nothing more than a flimflam.

As far as Paladin was concerned, though, no one at Lockheed ever had to know *that* little detail of the case.

Dunford wiped his mouth with a napkin and covered his plate with it. "Very good. But now, on to new business, Mr. Blake... or rather, a continuation of our old business. Our retainer is conditional on Blake Aviation Security following through on this case."

"*What* case?" Paladin asked. "I thought this case was wrapped up. You've got your plane back...most of it, anyway."

"There is no need to feign naivete, Mr. Blake," Dunford said and grinned. "There will be a bonus upon completion of your investigation, of course, but I must insist that you continue. The pale man...he must be found. *You* must find him."

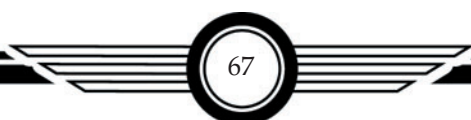
Dunford paused to sip his martini. "When you locate him—and I do not doubt that you will—there shall be no need to immediately involve the authorities. The pale man's day of reckoning will come in a court of law, but Lockheed would first like to have a word with him."

"I see."

Dunford wasn't only buying Blake Aviation Security's service—he was also buying his silence. Why? What did Lockheed want with the pale man? Revenge?

The pale man had promised Justin planes and guns, men, and even a military zep. Where the hell was he getting that equipment? And why was he so willing to give it away? He was risking the wrath of Lockheed, and bringing the entire nation of Hollywood to a boil, not to mention the lives that would be spent in bitter conflict in Alaska. That was a lot of heat for one plane, fancy prototype or not.

"Sure," Paladin said, finally. "I'll find him."





Paladin would find the pale man, all right, but for his own reasons. *And one thing is for damn sure, he thought. Before Lockheed or the Hollywood police ever get to talk to this mysterious “pale man,” I’m going to have my own question-and-answer session first.*

When Paladin learned the truth, nothing—not Lockheed, not the police, not the entire nation of Hollywood—would get in his way of seeing justice done.



Chapter Nine

Chasing Shadows

Blake stepped under the police tape sealing the threshold of Peter Justin's apartment. The place was a shambles. The Hollywood cops had given the place a thorough going-over: a sofa was overturned, its stuffing ripped out and strewn about the small living room; yellowed photographs of Russian farmers and the spires of Saint Peter's Cathedral had been pulled off the walls; potted cactuses that had once rested on the window sill had been uprooted and their sandy soil scattered.

Fortunately, the police were done with the place. Not that they had found a clue. Paladin had been reluctantly given permission—after a few well-placed phone calls from Lockheed—to look the apartment over.

Late afternoon sunlight filtered through the panes of the window, casting four clean squares of illumination that seemed far too orderly when projected onto the chaos.

"Amateurs," Paladin muttered and gingerly placed the prone cactuses into their pots.

Peter Justin had run a clandestine operation past his own security at Lockheed for weeks, maybe even months. Did Detective Slaughouser and his crew think the wily Russian would be stupid enough to hide anything of value *here*? The cops were looking for obvious signs of criminal activity: stolen goods, wads of cash, incriminating photos, and the like.

The cops were way off target, though. Justin was too subtle—and too smart—to just leave



damning evidence lying around his apartment.

Peering out the second story window, Paladin saw La Cienega Boulevard below and the trolley station across the street. The place must get noisy in the morning with all the cars rolling in and out on the track. Justin made a bundle of cash as a Lockheed executive. So why live in this crummy neighborhood?

Paladin stepped into the bedroom, cringing at the pants, shirts, and sheets that looked like they had been through a tornado. There were slashes in the mattress and handfuls of wadding had been scattered haphazardly around the room. Part of the wrought iron headboard had been unscrewed.

He spied the gleam of gold in the corner and moved closer. A picture of the Virgin Mary, framed in gold-leafed scrollwork, had been overturned.

Nearby, a dozen jelly jars holding candles were toppled over, too, but were remarkably intact. Their wicks had been recently trimmed and soot marks on the glass had been wiped clean. One of the jars, however, had heavy dribbles of red wax on its side as though it had been tipped over while still lit.

It was nothing; still... it struck Paladin as oddly out of place.

Peter Justin, with his fastidious habits and immaculately tailored suits, would have kept this place as neat as a pin. So what was one candle doing with this dribbling of wax? Maybe because he had done something so fast that he had forgotten—or hadn't had time—to clean up?

Most likely, it was just meaningless wax.

Paladin started back toward the living room, stopped, and on a whim ran his hand over the back panel of the picture. Smooth wood grain. He brushed across the front. It was smooth, too—no, not quite. A tiny scar of slick candle wax marred the otherwise glassy surface, obscured from casual observation by the glitter of gold leaf and lacquer.

He tilted the picture in the light and saw a faint wax imprint: a circle with a stem. The circle had reversed numbers printed on it, L9879. The stem had a jagged side...the outline of a key.



Paladin reached into his pocket. This was a long shot, but he had lifted a signet ring and a key from the pale man's zeppelin. The key he had pilfered from the pirates, while similar in shape, had no numbers.

"If you want to live," a female voice behind Paladin announced, "just keep your hand in your pocket."

Paladin froze when he heard the cold, metallic ratcheting of a pistol's hammer locking in place.

He slowly stood, and turned—keeping his hand in his pocket.

A woman stood in the bedroom doorway. She wore a Colorado Zephyrs baseball cap, a flight jacket zipped to her breastbone, and loose pants that were tucked into a pair of shiny, knee-high boots. Waves of red hair had been tucked into her cap. Her black-gloved hands steadily held a massive .45 revolver.

The skin above her open collar bore the swirls and traces of flames...tattooed flames. Paladin knew her face instantly, a face that had been on several wanted posters in Hollywood, Texas and Utah—Lady Kali, recently employed by the pale man.

"You have one hand free," she said. "Use it to open the left side of your coat. No sudden moves, please,"—she smiled—"since it would be a shame to shoot such a handsome specimen." Her smile, however, hardened into a line of clenched teeth and Paladin saw a few of those teeth had been filed to points.

Paladin opened his coat, revealing his holster, the butt of his .38 revolver and his handcuffs.

"Use two fingers," she ordered him, "and place the gun and cuffs on the floor, then kick them here." Her eyes were dark and they didn't waver from his for a second.

Paladin complied.

"Your wallet next. Toss it to me."

Did she recognize him? Then again, why should she? She may have only gotten a glance of his filthy face at the pale man's military outpost. And he had been wearing a dirty coverall then,



not his gray Brooks Brothers suit. He fished out his wallet and tossed it to her.

Lady Kali didn't try to catch it. She let it fall at her boots. "Turn around," she said.

Paladin wasn't about to rush a confirmed killer with a gun pointed at his heart...but he wondered if he'd get it in the back and die facing Justin's little shrine to the Madonna.

"Blake?" she said. "Never heard of you. Let me see your face again."

Paladin exhaled and turned around. Every day he wished Blake Aviation Security was big enough to scare pirates out of the skies from here to the Empire State. This once, though, the tiny stature of his company was a blessing.

"You're no cop," she said looking him up and down appraisingly. "No badge. No cheap suit. So what's with the bracelets? And what are you doing here?"

Paladin carefully removed his hand from his pocket. "Mind if I sit?" He nodded to the torn mattress.

"Go ahead," she replied, and she lowered her aim a notch from his heart to his stomach.

What was she doing in here? Could Lady Kali and Justin have been friends? That didn't figure; Justin wouldn't endanger his patriotic operation by fraternizing with the hired help. Nor would the pale man trust a mercenary with sensitive reconnaissance work. That left only one reason for the deadly aviatrix's presence: cash.

"I'm a private investigator," Paladin told her. "Did a little pavement pounding for Justin."

That wasn't too far from the truth. Lady Kali must have sensed that because she lowered her gun, then sighed, and stuck it in her belt. "Did he stiff you, too?" she asked.

"It was all nice and professional for awhile, wasn't it?" Paladin said. "But things apparently went to hell in the desert and everyone disappeared or suddenly developed amnesia...at least as far as my money is concerned. All I ended up with is a measly retainer and more bills than I can cover."

She chewed on her lower lip, thinking, then said, "Maybe we can help one another." She dug



a packet of cigarettes from her leather jacket and offered one to Paladin. He took it and she lit it for him. "You're the detective; where do *you* figure the pale man is?"

The question threw Paladin for a heartbeat. She didn't know?

"And what do I paid get for my services?" he inquired.

"Why, Blake," she said and batted her eyes, "you get to live." Her pointed smile returned. "And maybe if you tell me something I like, I can sweeten that deal a bit."

Paladin eased back with all the nonchalance he could muster. "It's like this: Justin paid me to follow up on rumors that Lockheed was missing some expensive experimental equipment. After a while I figure *he's* the one that grabbed the stuff and just wants me to cover his tracks. I have no problem with that. All part of the business—if you get my meaning."

Lady Kali nodded and sat on the mattress, not too close, but not too far away from him either. Apparently she was more at ease with one of her own kind.

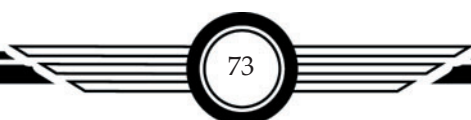
Paladin was momentarily distracted by her scent: lilacs mixed with aviation fuel. He shook his head to regain his composure, though he was sure that Lady Kali had seen his momentary lapse...and was amused by it.

"The last thing I heard from Justin was that there was a problem with the prototype. He flew off to Lockheed's base near Palm Springs." Paladin shrugged. "Later, I got word that he bought the farm in some air crash. The police came up here for a visit; the housekeeping is their handiwork, not mine, by the way. After they left, I...let myself in to see what they missed. Next thing I know," he added, "a beautiful woman with a gun shows up."

Lady Kali drew on her cigarette and blew a perfect ring. "And?"

"And nothing. I've laid my cards on the table. Now its your turn. Tell me what you know and I might be about to track down the pale man. If he was paying Justin, then maybe we can both collect."

Lady Kali shifted and stared at Paladin. Her jaw clenched, then she relaxed, and draped an





arm over the wrought iron headboard. "Okay, Blake. I'll take a chance on a pretty face." Her eyes narrowed to smoldering slits. "Cross me, though, and it'll be your last mistake."

"I figured as much." Paladin looked away from her and pretended to examine the burning tip of his untouched cigarette.

"The pale man," she finally whispered. "He had something big planned. Not the Lockheed prototype—that was just one of his small-time operations leading up to something big...*really* big. This guy has three zeppelins, eight squadrons of planes, mechanics, and enough ammunition to start a small war. Only, he's cagey, walking on eggshells every step of the way. Doesn't make too much sense, does it?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. So what happened to these big plans?"

"What happened?" Her eyebrows shot up. "Someone took off with the prototype, and the pale man started grouching about a rat in his ranks. He ditched us when we touched down in Free Colorado. I barely had enough cash to get back here. It's a good thing Justin's dead or I would have killed him myself."

"I see," Paladin said—not seeing much of the big picture at all.

"Here." Lady Kali flipped open the cylinder of Paladin's revolver and dumped the bullets into her palm. "If we're going to be partners, you might as well have this back." She handed the gun to Paladin.

"Thanks," Paladin said and stuck it in his holster. "The cuffs, too, please?"

She twirled them once around her index finger. "What are you going to use them for?" Her smile—part seductive, part predatory—gave Paladin the chills.

"You'll see." He mirrored her leer and leaned closer—near enough to feel the heat from her face upon his.

"Mm. I can see you're taking this partnership seriously," she murmured, her hands moving towards his face, her eyes closing, her lips parting—



—until Paladin snatched the handcuffs from her.

With a catlike move, he snapped one shackle on her wrist. He slapped the other around the iron post of the bed frame. His free hand grabbed the gun from her belt.

Lady Kali let out a strangled scream and lunged for him. She was fast, with the reflexes of a seasoned combat pilot; Paladin barely avoided the brunt of her attack—but not before she landed a sharp blow on his shoulder.

Paladin aimed her gun at her chest. “I appreciate that a mercenary like you wants to get paid, but I want the pale man for my own reason, Lady Kali. A reason that pirate scum like you will never understand.”

“What reason?” she spat, still struggling with her restraints.

Paladin backed into the corner near the Madonna icon. He carefully confirmed the backward number in the wax impression, L9879, then scratched it off.

He kept the gun trained on Lady Kali as he edged out of the bedroom. “Justice,” he said. “Get warmed up to the concept. You’re going to get a taste of some Hollywood justice after I call the cops.”

Paladin left the apartment building, ignoring Lady Kali’s screamed obscenities as he crossed La Cienega Boulevard and entered the trolley terminal.

He took out the key he had lifted from the pale man’s zeppelin. It looked like it matched the imprint in Justin’s picture, though the serial number had since been filed off.

There was, Blake mused, a good reason for Justin to live in this crummy neighborhood after all. It was a perfect transfer point, a place where information could be anonymously exchanged at a moment’s notice. No one down here paid any attention to the activities of others. People who noticed too much or were seen talking to the cops tended to meet sudden—and nasty—ends.

Justin could also watch all the comings and goings in the neighborhood—just in case someone tried to engineer a double-cross.





Paladin strolled into the terminal lobby, his shoes clicking across the well-worn terracotta tiles. He took a left, passed the cafeteria, and found a wall of lockers. A nickel rented you a breadbox-sized container. It was a nice hiding spot, if, for example, you had something you didn't want the cops to find...or you needed to move secrets between two parties.

He stopped at locker L9879.

Paladin took his pilfered key and smoothly slid it into the lock. It clicked open.



Chapter Ten

Pirate Try-Outs

So what does it mean?" Paladin asked Dashiell. He leaned forward on the edge of the chaise lounge, trying to not ruffle the silk fabric.

When Paladin had seen the contents of Justin's locker, he brought it all up to Dashiell's Hollywood Hills bungalow. It was private up here. Neither Lockheed, the police, nor anyone else would be getting through the gated community unannounced. Until Paladin knew more about what he had found, he wasn't taking any chances with anyone—not even the people who were supposed to be on his side.

"It means trouble," Dashiell said with an unlit cigarette dangling from his mouth. He was rapt with concentration, poring over the architectural diagrams that had been laid across his Persian rug.

The blueprints had been in the locker, along with a manila envelope containing three thousand dollars, and a note scrolled with neat cursive that stated:

Need a dozen pilots. Must have their own aircraft. Must not be afraid to fight. Money, as usual, not an issue. Dalewick Airfield. Dusk. July 7.

July 7 was today.

"What kind of trouble?" Paladin asked and crossed his arms.

Dashiell stood, straightened his navy blue satin lounging robe, finally lit his cigarette and took a long draw. "For a man who has been to so many exotic places, Paladin"—he exhaled



silver smoke—"I'm shocked you do not recognize it. The long rectangular wings and the enormous central round gallery? The marble cornices and colonnades?"

Paladin stared at the building's cross-section but saw only white lines and blue smudges.

"It's the old Capital building," Dashiell told him. "In what used to be Washington D.C."

"Sure," he muttered. "I see it now."

It was more than just the white marbled Rotunda Paladin was seeing. He saw the vague outlines of what Lady Kali had called the pale man's "big" plans. He wasn't sure what those plans were exactly, only that he was liking them less and less.

"The note," Dashiell said, "appears to be written by a woman of distinction and breeding. And from what you have told me, I can only surmise these 'pilots' she refers to are replacements for Lady Kali and her cohorts."

Paladin got up and paced. "Okay. That takes care of the contents of the late Peter Justin's locker, and the key and the black cigarettes I found on the pale man's zeppelin. But there's one last piece of the puzzle to fit. This." Paladin handed Dashiell the gold signet ring with a cabochon of jade had had "borrowed" from the pale man's desk. Carved in relief on the stone was an eagle with talons extended around a star.

Dashiell raised an eyebrow.

"You recognize it?"

"Yes," Dashiell remarked as he tried the ring on for size. It was too big. "I'd say getting caught with this number would buy you a rubber hose massage from the Hollywood police and three years hard labor. You're quite lucky Slaughauser didn't see it." He returned the ring to Paladin. "We used a similar prop in a recent film. Had to cut that scene, though. The censors didn't very much—"

"The note said dusk," Paladin reminded him. "I've got three hours, maybe, to make it to that airfield and stop what's going on. Just tell me what the ring is."

Dashiell sighed. "Unionists, my dear Paladin. The rampant eagle clutching a star was the



symbol of one of the splinter factions. The 'Brotherhood of America,' I believe they called themselves. As far as I know, its members had all either been caught or killed. Perhaps those reports were in error."

Paladin whispered, "Unionists never had anything like battle zeppelins, squadrons of planes or buckets of cash to throw around. And why a blueprint of the old Capital building? You'd think they'd revere it as the center of their America." He stared into thin air, trying to see the connection.

Dashiell got up, frowning, and ground his cigarette in a crystal ashtray. "I know that look. It's your 'nothing-is-going-to-stop-me-until-I-solve-this-even-if-it-kills-me' look. So let's pretend this time that I've tried and talk you out of it, and then you ignored me. That way you can get to the airfield before the sun sets. Just do me a favor"—Dashiell dug into the magazine rack next to the chaise lounge and withdrew a holstered .44— "and take this. Since you lost your .45, you'll need a replacement...something other than that sissy .38 you insist on carrying. A gun like that could get you killed."



Despite his recent mishaps in the air, Paladin felt the weight of this case lift from his chest the moment the wheels of his plane parted from the runway.

"Lightning Girl," a modified Curtiss-Wright P2 Warhawk, was Paladin's current favorite. Tennyson had tinkered with the three stock Wright, R-1350 engines and coaxed out a quarter more horsepower than they had been rated for. She burned quarts of oil and guzzled more fuel than a bonfire, but she was faster than anyone suspected a Warhawk could be...a surprise that had saved his skin on more than one occasion.

But speed wasn't why Paladin had named her "Lightning Girl."

Her standard guns had been replaced with four .60-caliber Smith and Wesson "Scorpion" cannons. Tennyson had engineered a double set of triggers on the stick, one over the other, for each pair of guns. Using two fingers, squeezing both triggers at the same time, all four guns could be simultaneously fired.





The blazing lead, streaks of tracers, and sheer mayhem that Lightning Girl could deliver was an awesome sight. So far, no one had seen her spit fire and lived to tell her secret.

Paladin nosed his plane up, banked east, and headed toward Riverside, and Dalewick Airfield.

A layer of nimbus clouds had settled around four thousand feet, a white and gray inverted landscape that glowed gold and orange as the sun set. Below, large boulders dotted the landscape; white and yellow washes of soil made meandering patterns broken by an occasional emerald patch of avocado grove. To the south were rolling hills, and farther, the San Bernardino Mountains rose, the highest peaks still capped with snow. Nice country.

Dalewick Airfield serviced the region's handful of seasonal crop dusters. Paladin had stopped over before. It was a smooth patch of dirt runway and a radio shack, as close to civilization as the middle of nowhere could be.

A speck hovered in the distance, then another, then three more. Hard to tell—but there must have been twenty aircraft circling like buzzards over Dalewick. And they weren't crop dusters. As Paladin got closer he saw these planes were painted in gaudy colors and sported a variety of emblems: fiery horses, crossed rifles, and falcon silhouettes.

There were six Grumman Avengers, a Ravenscroft Coyote, a pair of new M210 Ravens, and a few PR-1 Defenders.

Paladin flipped on his radio and tuned in the airfield's frequency.

"Dalewick come in. This is 3-Delta-475 requesting permission to land."

There was a hiss of static, then: "Denied 3-Delta-475. This is an invitation-only party. Better scram while you can, buster."

That definitely was no Hollywood-certified flight radio operator.

"Dalewick, this is 3-Delta-475. I was invited. Justin sent me...before his last flight. I've already been paid to show up. You want me to leave? I'll just pocket the money. Its all the same to me."

The radio crackled with silence for three heartbeats. "Okay, 3-Delta-475, join in. We



were odd anyway.”

Odd? Did he hear that right? Paladin didn’t want to blow his cover, so he just kept his mouth shut.

“3-Delta-475, your partner is Foxtrot 41-niner. That’s the red J2 Fury.”

“Roger that, Dalewick.”

Paladin would play along. “Partner” probably meant he had been assigned a wingman. Maybe for a test of skill?

Planes buzzed around, under, and over Lightning Girl as they all continued to circle the airfield. He spotted the red J2 Fury, which also bore a silver snake emblem coiled on each wing. Nice and subtle.

The Fury was circling directly across from “Lightning Girl.” Paladin eased back on the throttle so they could catch up.

The little red plane slowed, too, however, matching his speed and keeping a fixed position across from him.

“Helluva lousy wingman,” Paladin muttered.

The radio crackled, “Okay, ladies and gentlemen. The show’s on. Let’s see what you’re made of.”

Gunfire erupted and every plane veered from the circling formation. The red J2 banked and dove toward the underside of Paladin’s bird.

A Defender on his wingtip shattered as a rocket exploded over the cockpit—Paladin reflexively banked hard to starboard.

So this recruitment of Justin’s was apparently only open to a select few. That’s what the ground controller meant by “partner.” Not wingman. The J2 Fury was Paladin’s target...and Lightning Girl was the Fury’s.

Paladin rolled Lightning Girl upside-down to get a better look. The nimble J2 Fury was attempting come up under him, to align its deadly .70-caliber cannon and make



short work of him.

“Nice try,” Paladin growled.

The Fury was lighter and faster than his Warhawk, even with Tennyson’s modifications. But the Fury was nose-heavy and could stall even at a moderate angle of attack unless the pilot knew exactly what he was doing.

Still inverted, Paladin pushed the stick forward and poured on the speed, climbing in a loop. The Fury followed him-almost straight up.

He leveled out at three thousand feet; he had to. Ribbons of smoke poured from his port engine. Lightning Girl couldn’t take much more.

Beneath him, however, the Fury sputtered black smoke, and her nose dipped. The pilot quickly recovered from the stall and leveled out. That was all the invitation Paladin needed.

The Fury’s pilot must have realized his mistake. He dove.

Now it was Paladin’s turn to pursue. He opened up the throttle, and the full weight of his Warhawk gave him a crucial speed advantage. Lightning Girl fell toward her prey like a meteor.

The Fury rolled to port, a mistake at stall speed. If he had continued a full-power dive, he might have gotten close to the ground and pulled out at the last moment. A Warhawk wouldn’t be able to match such a maneuver.

Paladin didn’t hesitate to exploit his enemy’s error. The instant the Fury lined up in his sights, he opened fire with the outer pair of .60-caliber guns. Bullets streaked past the Fury’s wingtip.

He let all four guns blaze. The noise was deafening—louder than the trio of engines at full speed. The Warhawk’s frame shuddered, but Paladin held her steady in the dive, ruddered over, and let the torrent of bullets spray across the Fury. A moment later, amid a fountain of red paint chips, the Fury fell—her snake decorations obliterated by the dark, smoking pockmarks of bullet impacts, both wings chewed off.

Paladin rolled and pulled back on the stick, easing out of the dive. He cast a glance over his



shoulder and glimpsed what was left of the Fury's fuselage spiraling toward the airfield.

He looked away. He wasn't squeamish by any means, but there were dogfights in every direction, whirling pieces of metal, clouds of smoke and tracers whistling past his cockpit—he had to get out of here.

Paladin spied a clear piece of sky and nosed Lightning Girl in that direction. He sailed over Dalewick Airfield, not more than a hundred feet off the ground. The radio shack was on fire.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the radio announced. "Cease fire. That was an excellent demonstration of skill and daring. We regret that we only have a limited number of berths for your fighters, and that we had to resort to such a drastic selection method. But as they say: to the victors go the spoils."

Overhead, a shadow darkened the clouds, which parted as a massive zeppelin began its descent. Mounted within the observation deck were a dozen machine gun nests and the gleaming noses of a hundred rockets.

"3-Delta-475, please climb to one thousand feet and proceed to dock. Welcome aboard the *George Washington*."



Chapter Eleven

Under a Banner of War

Paladin was exhausted. He couldn't let his guard down, though. If he nodded off he'd wake up with his throat slit.

He sat in the dark, along with dozens of soldiers, pirates, and mercenaries, any one of whom would have gladly tossed him overboard if they discovered who he really was.

The thrum of the engines reverberated through the chamber—a section of the zeppelin's interior superstructure. Instead of a gasbag, there were crates, spare airplane parts, and three bleachers arranged before a small projection screen.

A beam of light pieced the darkness. The pale man stood in front of his audience, hands held in a steeple. He wore a linen suit, had slicked back his thinning hair, and sported a monocle. His white suite and pallor blended into the screen behind him so he appeared—to Paladin's sleep-deprived eyes, at least—to step out of the flat surface.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "thank you for accepting our invitation. Now that we are close to our destination, I can brief you on the mission."

Paladin counted his lucky stars to have made it this far. It had been a full day since he had docked Lightning Girl with the *George Washington*.

When he got out of the cockpit, he kept his leather helmet and goggles on. Unlike Lady Kali, someone in this group might recognize him. If not one of the hired pirates, then one of the *George*



Washington's crew. They wouldn't soon forget the man who had stolen their pilfered prototype from the heart of their secret base.

So far, no one had grabbed him or put a gun to his head. Yet.

Each pirate lined up, signed a contract (with the usual clauses stipulating non-payment in the event of mutiny and cowardice), and got paid three hundred dollars in the national script of their choice. Another five hundred dollars plus bonuses were also promised, upon completion of the mission.

One clause in the contract had caught Paladin's eye, however. It gave the pale man and his crew permission to reinforce his plane's hardpoints. Lightning Girl could already carry rocket racks and extra fuel tanks so what gave? He didn't ask. The last thing he wanted was to draw attention to himself.

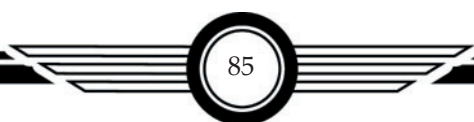
Along with the new pirates that had survived the "interview" process, there were another two dozen mercenaries on the zeppelin, and a comparable number of soldiers in drab gray-green uniforms with shorn heads and black circle insignia.

He and the rest the hired help had been fed pheasant, mashed potatoes, and pumpkin pie, before being assigned to cramped berths. The others in the informal "barracks" played poker or told wild tales of their exploits to pass the time.

Paladin had curled up in his bunk and pretended to sleep. He tried to rest but his heart wouldn't stop racing.

It probably wouldn't be too suspicious to keep to himself. Pirate's and mercenaries weren't noted for their friendliness. That wasn't too much of a problem. But where were they? The zep's engines had been running at full throttle for twenty hours. If they had caught a trade wind they could be two or three thousand miles from Hollywood—anywhere from Panama to Hawai'i to Alaska.

"Our mission is clear," the pale man said, snapping Paladin back from the edge of his groggy recollections. "Our mission is destruction."





This brought murmurs of approval from the audience.

The pale man nodded. There was the ratcheting of a mechanism from the shadows and an aerial map of a city flashed upon the screen behind him. Two river tributaries ran down either side. On the left there was a grid of buildings, but the right side had only a few structures, acres of green lawn, and rows of trees.

"We have prevailing cloud cover today at four thousand feet. Two of the three zeppelins in our battle group will maintain position just above this altitude with their escort squadrons."

Another slide and three zeppelin silhouettes appeared in the corner.

Paladin spied a figure sitting in shadows next to the stage. She sat just close enough to the illuminated screen so he could make out her features: a fall of dark hair, full lips, a tiny dimple in her chin, and wide expressive eyes. Paladin instantly recognized her—the pale man's companion, the one he had seen during his raid on the pirate base.

"The *George Washington*," the pale man continued, "will launch our two dozen fighters, half of which will proceed toward"—he nodded again and a large arrow flashed upon the map from the zeppelins to the center of the city—"this green belt. There, they will briefly engage the defending units, perhaps four to five squadrons, which will have been scrambled to counter our attack."

A voice shouted from the dark: "Two dozen planes against five squadrons? That's nuts."

"Hardly," he said and peered into the shadows. The light reflecting from his monocle made the one eye seem huge. "I said 'briefly engage.'" He turned back to the map. "Napoleon called it the passive lure."

Another arrow appeared from the center of the map back to the zeppelins.

"You will let these defenders chase you to the *George Washington*. Climb to four thousand, two hundred feet. The *Thomas Jefferson* and *Samuel Adams* will then enter the fray." He inhaled deeply and let out a sigh of contentment. "Between the machine gun fire and our initial salvo of rockets, there will be little resistance left for our fighter escorts."



The pale man snapped his white-gloved fingers. "Phase two."

He pointed with his cane to a white rectangular building on the map. "Our heavier planes in reserve will then proceed unopposed to the primary target."

This structure looked familiar to Paladin.

"These planes have been fitted with two quarter-ton incendiary and two high explosive bombs. When the primary target has been destroyed—" the pale man pointed to another building—" this will be your secondary target. And this—" he indicated a tiny square that cast an unusually long shadow—"is our tertiary target. Destroy them all, ladies and gentlemen, and your pay shall be doubled."

The motley crew in the auditorium broke out in applause.

Paladin, however, had a sinking sensation in his stomach. Not only for the defenders of this city—who were certain to get blasted into confetti by the three battle zeppelins—but because he finally recognized the targets.

It was that long shadow that gave it away. The tiny white square came to a point at the top. Paladin stretched out the shape to match the length of the shadow compared to the relative sizes of the other buildings' shadows. The structure had to be a hundred feet tall, maybe more. There was only one building like that in North America: the Washington Monument.

And the secondary target across the beltway park? That was the White House.

The primary target, east of the others, that was the Congress Building—just like he had seen it in the blueprints from Peter Justin's locker.

"Ready yourselves, pilots," the pale man said. "We will be arriving shortly."

The audience started talking excitedly to one another as they pushed their way out of the auditorium. Paladin sat there numbly for a moment and stared at the map until they were all gone.

"You see, perhaps, a flaw in this plan?" a female voice from the dark asked.

The woman who had been near the stage, the one who had always been by the pale man's



side, was seated a few feet away from Paladin on the bleachers.

His heart skipped a beat then pounded in his throat. She, if anyone here, would recognize him. She had gotten close to Paladin before. Maybe she couldn't quite see him in the darkness.

"No flaw," he replied.

What stumped Paladin were the pale man's motives. No Unionist in their right mind would attack the Capitol Building of the old United States. Paladin couldn't ask him directly, but maybe his friend here might spill the beans.

"I don't see the analogy between this plan and Napoleon's passive lure," Paladin said in the calmest voice he could muster. "The French used cannon, cavalry, and infantry. We have none of that."

"An educated pirate?" she cooed. "*On aura tout vu*. I'm impressed, mister...?"

"Call me Dashiell," Paladin told her.

She moved closer. From the reflected light off the screen Paladin saw she wore a tight skirt that flared around her shapely calves, a tight blazer and ruffled white shirt. He also spied the sparkle of diamonds on her fingers.

"Well, Dashiell," she said, "the analogy *does* hold. Our zeppelins carry over a hundred rockets. The exhaust backwash is ducted out the opposite side so we can launch dozens simultaneously. That is our artillery. The machinegun nests next to them are the infantry. And you, and your fellow fliers, are the cavalry."

Paladin imagined the battle: rockets could do a boatload of damage from a considerable distance to a tight formation of planes. *If* they got closer, the machine guns would finish them off. Add a dozen fighters and two more zeppelins bombarding the incoming wave of advancing planes...there'd be nothing left of them but smoke.

"It will work," Paladin admitted, "but why bother? I mean, bombing a few buildings hardly seems profitable. Unless profit isn't your motive?"

"Are you sure you're a pirate?" she asked. "Most pirates concern themselves only with money."



Paladin started to say he was a pirate—but he checked himself. He always tried to tell the truth, because frankly, he was lousy at lying. Most people picked up on it.

"I'm not a pirate," he whispered. "I'm a patriot. My great-grandfather fought in the American Revolution and my grandfather lost both legs in the Civil War. My father died when the states fell apart. I guess my family always ends up fighting and dying when their country is in need."

That was not far from the truth. Paladin's father had died during the break-up of the states—but on a bootlegging run gone sour.

Was telling her this the right approach? Were the pale man and his crew Unionists? Paladin had found a Unionist signet ring in the pale man's room, but that didn't mean he was member of the Brotherhood of America. It could have been a trophy taken from an enemy, or for that matter, he could have picked it up in a pawnshop. Yet, would a man like Peter Justin have allied himself with anyone but a patriot? Paladin decided to take a gamble.

"I guess what I'm trying to say is that a real American has to operate outside the law when he lives in a country that itself is illegal."

"Eloquently put." She set her hand consolingly on his. "Would it help if I told that you are in the right place at the right time to serve your country?"

Her touch gave him the chills. Paladin didn't move away, even though every instinct screamed that this woman was poison.

"How, exactly?" he asked.

She was silent a moment as she considered his question, then she said, "As we speak, representatives for every nation in North America are in the old Capital making deals to strengthen their political ties and lower trade barriers."

"Isn't that a good thing?"

"Good?" She withdrew her hand. "I suppose it is good for the tiny state nations. Good that they will become complacent with their diminished status. And good that their divisions will be



all the more permanent, cemented by new treaties and agreements and guarantees of peaceful coexistence. But there is another way...not necessarily easier, but better for all in the long term."

"I think I see where this is going," Paladin murmured.

He had heard similar words years ago in Europe, and he had witnessed the brutal consequences.

"Then you understand," she said. "We disrupt the talks and encourage the nations to believe another state was responsible. One such operation was successful in Pacifica. Boeing—and the Pacifica government—have been led to believe that Hollywood spies stole a new plane. We had some...setbacks during a similar operation in Hollywood, but suspicions between nations will now grow.

"We drive them toward conflict," she continued, her eyes glittering. "The most aggressive we back with money and weapons and guidance. Only as strong nation, willing to risk everything—to do anything—will have the willpower to reunite our country and make it great again."

"Under a banner of war," Paladin said.

She gave his arm a squeeze. "Yes."

Paladin had a couple of other names for this deal: Nationalism. Fascism. Rotten through and through.

But as much as the morals of the pale man's scheme repelled him, the logic driving the plan was sound and its eventual outcome was horrifyingly possible.

A klaxon blared, echoing throughout the chamber.

"We are preparing to launch phase one," the dark woman said. She kissed Paladin lightly on the cheek. "You must go."

"Yeah, I better," Paladin said and stood.

It looked like he was going to be a patriot after all. He had to stop the pale man—even if he had to die doing it.



Chapter Twelve

One-Man Invasion

Blake held his breath, carefully maintaining his plane's position in the double-arrow-head formation of warplanes. Paladin's every instinct screamed at him to blast his way out of this mess...but that would be suicide.

Instead, he gritted his teeth and pointed Lightning Girl at the heart of Washington, capital of the nation of Columbia.

The pale man's officers had positioned their black Grumman Avengers on the tips of this double-V formation, herding the characteristically sloppy pirate pilots into a precise pattern of aircraft with no more than ten feet between any one of them.

It was a sight that the defenders of Columbia couldn't possibly miss—which was the point.

Paladin had been assigned a dual role on this mission of destruction. He was to fly Lightning Girl out and lure the defenders of the peace conference back to the Unionist zeppelins. After the zeps made confetti out of them, he had orders to turn back and bomb the Congressional building.

Lightning Girl had been singled out for both parts of the mission because the pale man's mechanics had been wowed with her horsepower, beefed-up armor and devastating firepower. They also knew she'd be one big, flashy target that would be irresistible to the defending militia pilots. And she could take far more punishment than the majority of the lighter craft on his



Warhawk's wingtips. The Unionists had offered Paladin a hazard bonus for the extra duty, and he had accepted—itching to do something...*anything* to stop this.

But how was he going to stop them? He was just one plane against dozens, each flown by an experienced killer.

He glanced over his shoulder. The *George Washington* floated under a ceiling of iron-gray clouds at four thousand feet. The other two zeppelins, the *Samuel Adams* and the *Thomas Jefferson* were concealed just above her, nestled within the cottony banks of clouds.

Paladin dialed through the radio frequencies, hoping to pick up some chatter, trying to remember what channel Columbia's militia used, but only heard static. He reset his radio.

"Lightning Girl," a voice growled through his speaker. "Get your nose up!"

"Roger," Paladin replied, startled.

He had allowed his plane to drift a few feet above of the formation. He quickly pushed the yoke forward, easing his crate back into place.

He scowled, wishing Lightning Girl wasn't so sluggish. She had been loaded with two high explosive and two incendiary bombs, not to mention her full fuel tanks, yards of ammo belts, and rockets.

It was a good thing the pale man's officer had caught his slip. A minor collision would mean disaster for everyone...which maybe was exactly what Paladin needed.

Not that he was ready to sacrifice his life. No—there had to be another way.

Paladin pulled back on the stick and keyed his microphone: "Black Ace One, this is 'Lightning Girl.' I have a sticky wing flap. I need to give myself a little maneuvering room to see I can free it up."

"Break and return to base, 'Lightning Girl.' Wait for phase two, then proceed as ordered."

Paladin eased his plane up and poured on the juice, pulling in front of the formation.

This wasn't the first time he'd flown in a dicey situation. In the Great War he had to hit moving targets—trains and tanks, and columns of soldiers—but never a target like this. There would be no near miss.



He glanced down at the double-V formation. Planes shifted gently, closing to fill the hole made by his absence. Good.

Paladin nudged Lightning Girl ahead, his eyes flickering between his instruments and the formation below.

There. That would be his best shot.

His radio crackled and whined. "'Lightning Girl,' I said return to base!" the pale man's watchdog snapped.

"I will," he replied. "But I have to leave you creeps a little going away gift."

Paladin released his bombs.

He pulled up hard and firewalled the throttle. Lightning Girl climbed and inverted. Paladin watched as his bombs tumbled into the tightly-stacked formation.

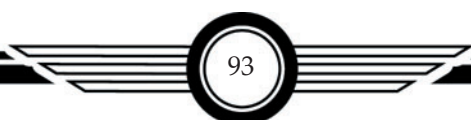
The first bomb shattered the canopy of a Kestrel, as another simultaneously slammed into—and through—the wing of a J2 Fury. There was an incendiary spark, which coalesced in a split-second into a brilliant blue-white flash of light as the spark reached the glittering cloud of aviation fuel spewing from the Fury's severed wing tanks.

Like Fourth of July firecrackers, there was one flashbulb detonation after another as Paladin's bombs found their marks. The planes slammed into each other, transforming the tight, precision formation into an insane tangle of smoke, whirling propeller blades, glittering shards of metal, and igniting fuel that mushroomed and roiled with screeching thunder.

Wings and tails and glass hailstones emerged from the cloud, fuselages spiraled out of control, and other twisted hunks of steel plummeted toward the earth. Paladin caught a glimpse of an opening parachute, and a tangle of fluttering silk wrapped around a body.

Paladin didn't waste his time feeling sorry for any of them. They had wanted to start a war—they'd damn well get a war.

He banked back toward the zeppelins.





It wasn't the acceleration that made his stomach sink; Lightning Girl had dumped her bombs to remove the advance squadron. Now how was he going to stop three fully-loaded military zeps and their escorts?

Paladin eased the throttle back. He needed time to think.

The radio crackled: "Come in, Black Ace One: repeat your status and position."

It was now or never. The pale man's forces were confused and blind. Paladin quickly planned his approach and opened the throttle up. Whatever he was doing to do, however he was going to stop them—he had to do it fast. Their confusion, and Paladin's window of opportunity, wouldn't last for long.

As he drew closer, he spotted the shiny bulk of the *George Washington*...then saw the shadows of the *Samuel Adams* and the *Thomas Jefferson* as they descended from the clouds. They took positions in front of the *Washington*—a triangular formation that would maximize their firepower if anyone was foolish enough to engage them.

Circling above the zeps were their escort squadrons, the fighters that would catch any strays the zep didn't get, and then bombers that would turn Washington into rubble.

They were expecting Columbia's militia to be hot on the Warhawk's tail. They were expecting a fight. So he'd give them one.

Paladin pulled back on the yoke, executed a quarter roll, and accelerated toward the *Jefferson*. He lined his plane up, aiming to pass slightly above the line of fire of the zeppelins' machine gun nests and gleaming rocket tips.

He held his breath—waited until he was close enough to see people inside pointing and panicking and running from their positions as the plane they thought was on their side barreled toward them—then opened fire with cannons and rockets.

Smoke trails snaked from Lightning Girl to the belly of the zeppelin. Fire blossomed inside the converted passenger's galley—then a staccato string of detonations as the munitions inside



exploded in a chain reaction. A hundred rockets launched to port and starboard, billowing thunderheads of smoke and flame and sprouting greasy blossoms of flak and fire.

Paladin snapped Lightning Girl upright and pulled back fast—arcing up and over the zeppelin, so close he felt the randomly firing machine gun rounds zinging off his plane’s fuselage, so close he thought he could feel the heat of the passing rockets.

He leaned over and strained to get a look at the *Jefferson*. Her underside was ablaze, and flames and plumes of sooty smoke curled up the sides of the airship...flames that quickly dwindled and died.

“Damn,” Paladin muttered. So much for the element of surprise. It all figured, though. This wasn’t some low-rent bunch of pirates; this splinter group of Unionists had the money and the resources to fill the zeppelin with helium. Had she been filled with cheaper hydrogen, she would have gone up like dynamite.

The pale man’s moment of confusion, and Paladin’s luck, had just run out. He glanced back. The sky was thick with swarming planes...all of them gunning for him. Bullet holes stitched across his starboard wing, and a trio of slugs ricocheted and pinged off the canopy, cracking it.

The *Jefferson* was still aloft and her engines were running at full speed. The zep, however, looked like a bite had been taken out of her. Where the galley had been, there was now a twisted, blackened mess of skeletal superstructure. The central gasbags were rapidly deflating and jets of fire spouted from broken fuel lines.

Paladin had to make a break for it. If he gained altitude fast enough he might be able to get away in the cloud cover.

But what about the peace conference? The pale man still had two zeps and enough planes to pull off his mission—maybe not as easily as intended, but it could still be done.

Paladin sighed and patted the instrument panel of Lightning Girl. “This may be the dumbest stunt we’ve pulled all week, friend.” He pulled back on the yoke, rolled, and righted Lightning



Girl—heading straight into the face of his enemies.

Two dozen fighters opened fire. They dove toward him. It looked like it was raining tracers outside and enough bullets impacted with Lightning Girl to make the plane's engine stutter.

The Warhawk's starboard engine smoked and coughed but kept going. Paladin squeezed both triggers and peppered a pack of Devastators directly in front of him—cracking the canopy of the lead plane. The planes veered aside at the last second, as the lead Devastator began to tumble. Scratch one pilot.

It was suddenly silent save for the thrum of his plane's engines.

Paladin had broken through the pack of pirate escorts. It would take them a second to turn and get on his tail. He refused to think about what would happen then; he had to stay focused on the *Jefferson*.

He turned toward the line of engine nacelles on the wounded zeppelin's port side.

Blake knew he would never get another sweetheart shot like he had taken on the *Jefferson*. The *Adams* and the *Washington* would cut him to shreds before he could blink. No...there was only one way to take out those zeps now—with another zeppelin.

The *Jefferson* wasn't dead in the air; she kept pace with the *Adams*. By destroying the galley and bridge, Paladin had only cut off her head. Her engines were running at full speed—dumb and blind, but still running.

He was a quarter-mile away from the *Jefferson*'s port engine nacelles when he opened fire. It was a million-to-one shot at this range, but he'd need all the firepower he could squeeze off to make this work.

The Warhawk's guns sprayed destruction as she closed the distance to the zep—one motor sparked as Lightning Girl lined up on the proper trajectory and hit—then it exploded into sparks and bits of spinning metal. Paladin quickly aimed at the next engine and blasted away, then a third, before Lightning Girl zoomed past the dying airship.



A rocket blast shook “Lightning Girl.” Paladin looked over his shoulder and spied a pack of incoming Grumman Avengers. He rolled back and forth, then dove to gain speed.

They followed him like bloodhounds on the scent, a shower of lead shredding his tail.

“Come on girl,” Paladin urged his plane. “Hang on just a little more.”

Paladin pulled up, ignoring the shudder that ran through his airframe. If his luck could hold out for a few more seconds, then the party would really begin.

He spotted the *Jefferson*. With three of the five engines on her port side shot to pieces, she listed to one side, right toward the *Samuel Adams*—

—and collided with the battle zep.

The starboard side of the *Jefferson* impacted on the *Adams*’ stern. Their spinning props ripped into one another, tearing fabric and gasbags, wrenching blades and frames, pulling them into a tighter embrace. The zeps tangled and locked together.

The *Adams*’ nose crumpled and sagged. Many of the *Jefferson*’s gasbags had been torn open. Together they tilted and started to sink.

Paladin lined up Lightning Girl, right over the *George Washington*, and matched speed and direction. He double-checked his parachute harness, praying the chute he had packed wouldn’t tangle.

He popped the canopy. Wind stung him with icy needles. He bid Lightning Girl a silent goodbye, then cut her engines.

The Warhawk sputtered and stalled and Paladin jumped.

The thirty-foot fall wasn’t bad—he broke a handful of his ribs on impact, rather than breaking his neck. Paladin bounced once—twice—toward the edge, then caught the slippery fabric before he went over.

He climbed back to the top. Beneath him, the zeppelin shifted and turned west.

He drew a knife from his boot and cut into the fabric, then grabbed onto the steel frame and pulled himself inside. “No you don’t,” he growled. “This time, there’s no way in hell you’re getting away.”



Chapter Thirteen

The Lady And The Tiger

Paladin had one leg in the hole of the zep's fabric when he noticed Lighting Girl in his peripheral vision. His prized Warhawk, now without a pilot, arced wildly upwards, wobbling, pitching, and yawing...

...before inverting, her engine stalling out. Seconds later, Blake's favorite airplane was falling towards the nose of the *George Washington*.

The Warhawk slammed into the zeppelin and ripped through the hull as her fuel tanks ignited in a stunning fireball.

The zeppelin shuddered, knocking Paladin off of his precarious footing on a structural beam. He teetered, struggled to regain his balance—

—and fell, barely managing to grab hold of the beam with his left hand. His busted ribs exploded with pain.

He looked down. Below him was a seventy-foot fall, crisscrossed with a supporting skeletal framework that held the *George Washington's* bloated gasbags. If he lost his grip, he'd end up with a cracked skull, or worse. If he took his time climbing down, one of the gasbags could rupture. The flood of helium would probably suffocate him. Either that, or the force of the gasbag bursting would dash him against the deck or a steel crossbeam, knocking him unconscious or killing him outright.

He had to move—fast.



Paladin gritted his teeth against the pain in his chest and caught the beam with his other hand. He braced himself with his feet, then half climbed, half slid his way down, into the heart of the zeppelin's envelope.

From outside, he could hear the roar of cannon fire, the staccato echoes rattling through the zep. Bullet holes dotted the fabric skin, allowing thin, pale streams of sunlight into the dim interior. A flicker of shadow rippled past, blocking out the light passing through the punctures—a fighter plane, making a close pass to the zeppelin.

It looked like Columbia's defenders had finally wised up to the danger in their skies. Too bad their timing was lousy. Paladin was caught in the crossfire.

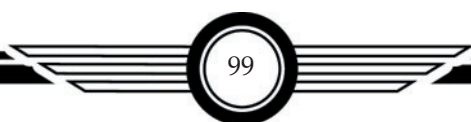
He stepped gingerly down onto the zep's gondola roof, and made his way to the nearby hatch. The steel plates under his feet shook with the din of rocket and cannon fire, and the occasional metal fragment whizzed by, stray debris from the battle raging all around him. He took a deep breath—wincing as his tortured ribs protested the abuse—and opened the hatch, quickly climbing down...

...straight into Hell itself.

The fore end of the galley was engulfed in flame. Oily, choking smoke obscured Paladin's view, but he could see that the damage was extensive. Where there had once been a .50-caliber machine gun nest, there was now a gaping, ugly hole, its razor-sharp edges blackened with soot. Smoldering metal twisted and blossomed inward, and burn scars and blood streaked the walls and floor.

Ammunition belts—spilled from a nearby ammo crate during the breach—were strewn across the deck, and the fire hungrily fed on them. Machine gun rounds popped like firecrackers, sending slugs whistling past Paladin's head. Ricochets buzzed through the companionway like angry hornets. Five crews manned the remaining machine guns, grimly concentrating on defending the zep from the swarm of planes outside.

No one spared him a glance.





Paladin covered his head—more to keep from choking on the stench of smoke and cordite than to disguise himself—and ran aft. He moved quickly through the corridor, pushing past men clambering to assist the gun crews. Once clear, he made his way toward the passenger section...and the pale man's cabin.

The door to the cabin was locked. He drew his pistol and put his shoulder against the door. He shoved and cracked the frame. Paladin quickly entered, his gun sweeping the room, ready to shoot at the first sign of trouble.

Nothing.

The room was a mess: bookcases were overturned, every drawer in the rolltop desk had been opened and dumped, and the impressionist landscape had been torn off the wall. The safe the painting had once concealed now stood open...and empty.

"So the rat's getting off this sinking ship," Paladin muttered. He started toward the door—and stopped when he heard a low moan from under the upended bookcases.

He carefully aimed his gun at the source of the sound, thumbed back the hammer and kicked over the case.

A woman—the pale man's companion—lay there. She sat up unsteadily and rubbed her head, tousling her thick, lustrous black hair.

Paladin lowered his gun and knelt next to her. "You all right?"

"I was next to the bookcase," she said, still dazed. "There was an explosion." She pursed her lips and her eyes came back into focus. "I always thought that 'seeing stars' was a euphemism."

"It's not." Paladin helped her stand.

She teetered a moment, straightened her skirt, and smoothed out her wool blazer. Her gaze darted over his face and she arched an eyebrow. "Ah, the intellectual pirate." She smiled and winced, gently touching the lump on her head. "I remember you."

He would have given anything to question her. She probably knew plenty about the pale



man—but there was no time for that.

Paladin's father had been many things—a moonshiner, a bootlegger, and a con artist—but he had also been a country gentleman, and he had taught his sons how to treat ladies, even ladies who were accomplices to a crime. He'd have to get her off this floating deathtrap...he could hand her over to the cops later.

"I don't know how you're involved in this mess," he said, "but I've got a feeling you're just in the wrong place at the wrong time. At least, that's what I'm hoping. Don't prove me wrong."

He unbuckled his parachute harness and wriggled free. "This zep is going down. Your boss' plan has backfired. I want you to take this and get out of here."

She looked into Paladin's eyes. and Paladin didn't like what he saw in them—hard reflections, like faceted ice, cold and calculating and unyielding.

"You know how to use one of these?" he asked, trying to ignore the disquiet her penetrating stare provoked.

"Yes." She took the chute, slipped into the harness and secured the buckle. "But what about you?"

"I've got another way off this gasbag," he said.

Paladin rolled up the parlor's steel shutters and opened the large window. "Here."

He held out his hand and helped her sit on the edge of the sill. He reached down and pulled off her high heels. "You'll never make a landing on those," he told her. "Pull the cord only after you've cleared the zeppelin. Count to seven. Don't hold your breath."

The women looked down and then back at Paladin, crinkling her brow with worry. "I don't—"

"No time for discussion, sister. Go!" He shoved her.

She gave a startled yelp and tumbled out.

Paladin watched as she plummeted, nervous and anxious until he saw the white bloom of hand-stitched silk pop into view.



"My good deed for the day," he muttered.

He holstered his gun and left the parlor. He made his way down the corridor, past a dozen pilots and mercenaries bustling by. Steeling himself, he pushed open the double doors of the zeppelin's launch bay.

The cavernous room was nearly empty. A single Grumman Avenger remained in the bay, ready for launch, perched over the opening in the floor.

The pale man stood next to the plane, surrounded by three men in green uniforms. He wore his usual linen suit, but now instead of its typical immaculate cleanliness, it was soot-streaked and sweat-stained. He held a briefcase in his right hand, and Paladin noticed it was handcuffed to his wrist. He also wore a leather cap, goggles, and a parachute.

It looked like he was taking the last plane off the *George Washington*. Maybe Paladin could hitch a ride.

Paladin started toward them.

"You!" the pale man shouted. "Help the others put out the fire on the gunnery deck. Move it!"

Paladin shrugged and waved, pretending he couldn't hear the pale man's orders. Paladin moved closer.

When he was four steps away, the pale man opened his mouth as if he were going to say something. He paused, and looked back up at the Grumman Avenger, then back at Paladin. "*You...*" he hissed.

Damn.

"Shoot him!" the pale man screamed, pointing at Paladin.

The pale man's guards reached for their guns.

Paladin had hoped for a ride in that Avenger, but it looked like there was only one way he was getting off the dying zeppelin in one piece. He lunged for the pale man, tackled him—
—and together, they tumbled through the open launch bay doors.



The wind tore at Paladin and made his eyes water. The pale man squirmed in his grasp, cursing and struggling to break Blake's grip. Paladin held on to him for all he was worth, one hand clutched the lapel of his suit, the other clamped onto his enemy's right wrist.

Spinning together, the pale man kicked at Paladin. The hastily aimed blows rained across Paladin's midsection: his leg, his hip, his stomach. Then a well-polished wingtip connected with Paladin's busted ribs.

He gasped, unable to inhale, as bands of red-hot pain clamped across his chest like a devilish vice.

Paladin lost his grip and flailed helplessly in freefall.

He caught a glimpse of the ground, the sinuous glimmering Potomac River, and the ivory sliver of the Washington Monument in the distance.

He spun dizzily, trying to slow his fall, the first hot spike of panic knifing through him like a bayonet. A scream welled up in his throat—

—until his fingertips brushed the handle of the pale man's briefcase.

Fighting back his mounting fear, he grabbed on tight, the length of his body snapping like the end of a whip.

The pale man yelled in pain as the briefcase—still handcuffed to his wrist—brutally jerked his arm, nearly dislocating it.

Paladin pinwheeled around his nemesis, the sky and ground spinning in his peripheral vision.

Paladin's panic began to subside, replaced by cold rage. With a growl, he reached for the pale man with his free hand. The pale man retaliated, hammering Blake with kicks and punches, trying to dislodge his attacker.

They were getting too close to the ground. Paladin spotted waves in the Potomac, and saw tiny cars inching along the roads. Images of slamming into the unforgiving earth, of his body shattered on the unyielding stone and dirt below filled Paladin's mind.



No. He had to focus on the pale man, forget the ground and his pain.

The pale man reached inside his jacket.

Paladin fumbled for his own holstered gun.

The ground rushed closer.

The pale man's gun cleared its holster first, the silvery muzzle swinging toward Paladin's head. There was a burst of smoke and fire as the pale man pulled the trigger, though the report was eerily muffled, drowned out by the rush of air.

The bullet whistled past Blake's head, missing him by a fraction of an inch.

For a moment, Blake was sure he was dead, that the pale man couldn't miss at such close range.

Lucky. He was damn lucky.

Blake's own gun was out. He fired, and the pale man jerked, blood exploding from a thigh wound.

Paladin shot the pale man again, this bullet taking him in his shoulder. The pale man went limp, the gun tumbling from his grasp.

Paladin climbed hand over hand, toward his unconscious foe. He looped his hand through the parachute harness.

He pulled the rip cord.

Silk ruffled and unfurled above him, crackling in the wind. Paladin saw the lines above him threaten to tangle.

Too low, Paladin thought. The chute isn't going to open.

Paladin's head snapped back as the lines yanked taut and the chute above him opened.

Seconds later, they bounced off the ground, locked together. Paladin let go, twisting to let the pale man take the brunt of the impact. The pale man's limp, unconscious form crashed to the earth with a bone-jarring impact.

Blake tumbled through blackberry brambles and over rocks before he skidded to a halt on



the muddy banks of the Potomac.

Overhead, the *George Washington* was in flames. Planes buzzed around the dying airship. Rockets left smoky lace trails in the air, and tracer fire etched ghostly lines of light across the sky.

The zeppelin drifted over the mall, yawed slightly...and collided with the Washington Monument. The zep's steel frame sagged and crumpled to the ground with a terrible screech.

Paladin dragged himself to his feet, clutching his wounded ribs. He limped to the pale man, who was shrouded in white silk that was dotted with his own blood. Paladin felt for a pulse—and was almost disappointed when he felt a strong, regular rhythm.

"Gotcha," he whispered, before collapsing to the ground, unconscious.



Light and fresh air streamed through Paladin's office window. The sunrise reflected off the distant water and sent waves of light dancing across his ceiling. He lowered the blinds.

"A job well done, Mr. Blake," Mr. Dunford remarked.

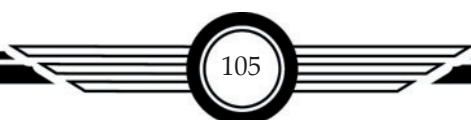
The Lockheed official straightened his white silk tie and adjusted the shoulders of his gray suit. He placed several manila folders on Paladin's desk, raising tiny clouds of dust—left over from Dashiell's fingerprinting of the room.

"Here we have a signed confession from Mr. Von Gilder, or as you called him, the 'pale man,'" Dunford continued. He set down another envelope. "Copies of his battle plans for Washington, Manhattan, and Dallas...for your personal files."

Dunford reached back into his alligator skin briefcase. "And, we recovered these stolen schematics for airplanes, machine guns, autogyros, and engines." He returned the documents to the briefcase, latching the lock with a sharp, metallic click.

"Yes, our Mr. Von Gilder was a very busy man. Once the extradition proceedings are concluded, I suspect there will be a speedy trial and execution in Chico." Dunford smiled.

"Maybe Aero-Tone News will cover it on a newsreel," Paladin said sarcastically.





Dunford met Blake's gaze. "We owe you a great deal, Mr. Blake."

"Oh?" Paladin limped back to his desk and sat down.

He was only half listening to Dunford. Yes, he had brought the pale man to justice. He had the broken ribs to prove it, too.

But something still felt wrong. Justin had strolled into this office a few days ago with what seemed like a simple delivery job, which had turned into a prelude to war on a terrifying scale. Nothing was ever what it first appeared to be in this case.

Maybe even the end wasn't what it seemed.

The dark-haired woman hadn't been found, lost in the chaos of police, firefighters, and militia forces that descended on the area. Something about her, something he couldn't put his finger on, still bothered him. There had been a moment of recognition when Paladin infiltrated the zeppelin to steal back the Lockheed Prototype. But he couldn't place her. Fortunately, she didn't seem to remember him, either. Morocco, maybe? The sniper in Chatanooga?

It didn't matter. There was time enough to track her down later.

"As I said, we owe you great deal." Dunford handed him a slip of paper. "Consider this payment in full for your services, and a small down-payment for our future dealings."

It was a cashier's check with more zeros than Paladin had ever seen before.

"You should rest now," Dunford said and started toward the door. "But not too long, I trust. We have another business matter to discuss. Can we meet next Wednesday? Say, seven o'clock at Chasen's?"

Paladin nodded, still counting the numbers on the check. He finally tore his gaze away. "Of course. Let me see you out."

"No, no. Sit. Rest. I can see myself out." Dunford smiled kindly before quietly closing the door behind him.

This was it. Blake Aviation Security had enough cash not only to survive, but also to expand



and flourish. Paladin's rag-tag operation had finally hit the big time.

There was only one last bit of unfinished business.

Paladin took the bottle of bourbon from his bottom desk drawer. He grabbed two glasses and set them on his blotter, then opened the bottle.

He poured the twelve-year-old bourbon into the glasses, then turned the photograph of his father to face him. "Here you go, you old bootlegger."

His father sat on the wing of his plane, pistol in one hand, a bottle—identical to the one on Paladin's desk—in the other. But this morning it looked like the old bastard was laughing at Paladin rather than toasting his good fortune.

Paladin set down his glass, perplexed.

Instead of his ritual toast with his father, he examined the pale man's battle plans, still laid across his desk.

They were identical to the briefing on the zeppelin. There were diagrams and blueprints of the various target buildings and tiny hand-scrawled notes in English, German, and French. It was a schematic for war, a chilling blueprint for death on a massive scale.

Next, he examined the pale man's confession.

Something nagged at him, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it.

It was all too easy, too neat. Nothing was ever this tightly wrapped up.

Paladin shook his head. He set the handwritten confession down. Maybe sometimes you got lucky and things *did* neatly wrap up—

Then he saw it. The two handwriting samples—the notations on the battle plans and the handwritten confession—caught his eye when he placed one next to the other.

The notes on the plans had neat loops. The "T's" were crossed and the "I's" were dotted with a perfectly straight and steady hand. The handwriting on the confession was slanted the opposite way and sloppy...as if the battle plans had been drawn by another man.



Or another woman?

Paladin remembered when he had stolen aboard the battle zeppelin in the desert—how the mysterious dark-haired woman had given orders to the gunners like she was in charge. He remembered how she had been seated in the shadows during the briefing before the attack on Columbia, and how the pale man looked to her from time to time...for what? Guidance? Approval? Orders?

And how maybe he had given his parachute to the one person he should have brought to justice. No. It couldn't be.

Paladin cradled his glass of bourbon, warming it until he could smell the smoky aroma.

The picture of Paladin's dad looked like he was still laughing at him.

"Maybe she *was* the one behind it all," he told his father, "but we came home this time in one piece. And there will be a next time—don't worry."

He clinked his glass against his father's. "If it takes a hundred years, no matter what I have to do, I'll get every last of one of them for you."

He poured the two glasses back into the bottle, then put them away.

Paladin glanced at the check again.

Suddenly the money didn't matter; it was just a means to an end. Like the pale man, and maybe the dark-haired woman, he had his own personal war to start, a war against pirates and injustice.

It was a war he intended to win.

About the Author

Eric Nylund has a Bachelor's degree in chemistry and a Master's degree in chemical physics. He has published five novels: virtual reality thrillers, *A Signal Shattered* and *Signal To Noise*; contemporary fantasy novels, *Pawn's Dream* and *Dry Water* (nominated for the 1997 World Fantasy Award); and the science fantasy novel, *A Game of Universe*. Nylund attended the 1994 Clarion West Writer's Workshop. He lives near Seattle on a rain-drenched mountain with his wife.