

---

**WILDERNESS OUTTAKE**

---

This excerpt from the forthcoming novel

**WILDERNESS OF MIRRORS**

**by Nicholas Hallum**

*has not been approved for publication.*

[WildernessofMirrors.net](http://WildernessofMirrors.net)

---

**STORY NOTES**

These chapters constitute an alternative version of Peter Fisher's experience after he returns from China's Qingcheng Prison. In this alternative storyline, he returns much earlier than in the published novel. In fact, he is back in the United States by the mid-1990s. During his time Stateside, he experiences much else at the McChord Air Force Base prior to his deployment in 2001 during the new War on Terror.

---

[wildernessofmirrors.net](http://wildernessofmirrors.net)

**ALTERNATE SECTION**  
**MCCHORD AIR FORCE BASE**  
**1990s**

---

**1995**  
**MCCHORD AIR FORCE BASE**  
**TACOMA WASHINGTON**

Robinson Gale did indeed come through on his promise to grant Peter a safe sinecure after his ordeal in China. Peter Fisher was requisitioned to the SIG-INTEL team at McChord Air Force Base.

As an on-base technician, Peter was re-inducted into a branch of the Armed Forces, this time assigned to the NSA, on rotation from the CIA. His work at McChord was exactly what had been promised: it was a safe and unchallenging work environment, a place with no possibility of violence or untoward behavior. And at first, Peter was sure he would never be in harm's way in such a back-office data analyst position. He'd been put out to pasture.

In his position as a senior analyst, Peter started with encrypted telexes, and as the system grew over time, his knowledge grew with it. Late into the 1980s, telexes still were transmitted to the listening sub-station on the McChord Base property. As the 1990s dawned, the system was gradually switched over to a new highly secure DARPA-developed networked system called ARPANET, which connected every U.S. military operation on the planet through a secure and highly redundant mesh network.

Peter spent much of the next decade working days in the code factories of the NSA – mining through data stacks to find obtuse and intractable signals in the noise. His office was in a nondescript office building on the grounds of Joint Base Lewis-McChord. So ostensibly, it was a secure location, and only a small contingent of the legion of cubicle drones were cleared to know what he did every day.

When he first landed at Fort McChord Air Force Base, his cover said that he worked at Boeing, and he was given a very realistic Boeing employee ID card, and even a Boeing Employee's Credit Union account. At night, with a lack of much else to do, Peter became somewhat obsessive about a new field of technology and the emerging field of hobbyist mini-computers. After he returned to the United States, he discovered that he was the beneficiary of a modest inheritance that had grown in size since his mother's death. He used part of his inheritance to buy a \$3,000 Packard Bell PC and a modem, and he discovered that average citizens were using a public version of the DARPA-net project to communicate with each other, online.

In fact, by 1995, only a few years after his arrival, his cover file was updated and he was given mandatory training in a new cover role that provided him with excuses to interface with

the public Internet in an official capacity. He was instructed to tell outsiders that he worked for a Web startup in Seattle – not an unlikely possibility in these early fermenting days of the Web and the proliferation of Internet protocols and the massive overnight success of stocks like Netscape and local success stories in the Seattle region like Real Networks. He was even given a great amount of detail on his cover story, in a classified dossier handed to him in a red folder which he was told to burn, in the ultra-old fashioned style of the NSA's vaunted predecessor, the OSS.

According to the contents of the folder, he apparently worked for a “stealth startup” located near a gaming company called “Wizards of the Coast,” in Renton, south of Seattle. He had to laugh at the “stealth” aspect of it all, but everything else was an accurate description of the world he had now entered. He sank from sight into the welcoming waters and let the easy excitement of the tech world in Seattle suck the memory of the pain and anguish in China and Hong-Kong and Tibet from his weary soul.

The file even contained details on what he was to wear to fit his ostensible “cover.” He supposed they thought he had to be told what to wear on this Coast, because of his long tenure on the suit and tie environs of Washington D.C.. But they were right it was very different here: every day his attire included no buttoned shirts and not a single tie. Instead, he was instructed to wear old jeans, soiled Grunge band t-shirts, or shirts with technical jokes on them (“*Query my API, baby!*” or “*I like my JAVA hot*”) and the kind of Doc Marten boots that had been a staple of working class miners in England in the 1970s. He was fine with all of it, especially since he saw people dressed like this every time he went to Seattle or Tacoma. He fit right in, like a hand in a glove, and he found it perversely satisfying to realize that he had gone to ground here. After China and Tibet, he was more than happy to have a safe place to land.

The tech scene in the Pacific Northwest soon became a vibrant microcosm, as a small company named Amazon began hiring spasmodically in Seattle and the long-in-the-tooth Bill Gates entity – Microsoft – began their interminable “browser war” with Netscape. Peter had seen real war, and he did not think it was particularly humorous to hear them throw terms around that properly belonged on the battlefield, when all they were talking about was competing sets of software engineers laboring away at lines of code in adjoining cubicle farms.

In 1996, Robinson Gale sent him a terse note on the ARPA-net secure digital mail system, telling him that due to an operation involving former Director Colby, he would be out of sight for some time. After that, Peter didn't hear from Gale for five years. Despite this, his first reports always were addressed to Robinson Gale / Gloucester Building, Alec Station, which he knew to be the primary CIA listening post in Tysons Corner, Virginia. It was the same address he'd always sent things to, and he began to assume that no news was good news. Just as he'd thought, he'd been put out to pasture. He did his best to keep his head down, and remain invisible.

But after nearly a decade on these systems, despite his best intentions, Peter's work with the Echelon signal-gathering system did begin to stand out. He gradually became the lead architect for interesting (and highly secure) projects with names like “Integrated Overhead Sigint Architecture.” And in that capacity, he wrote voluminous technical memos with obtuse sub-titles like: “to improve Sigint performance and avoid costs by consolidating systems, we will utilize a new data processing facility and revised algorithms. Examples follow (215 pages).”

Given his language skills, Peter also became the *ad hoc* technical assistant to Special Operations teams in the field in the Middle East and Asia. His work largely consisted of rapid-

fire translation of words, documents and entire conversations over-heard during a fire-fight in contested parts of the Himalayas or in the back-country of Yemen, where Special Ops forces were hunting down rogue players bent on attacking the United States. In 1996, some group issued a *fatwa* against all agents of the United States, declared itself to be a “base” of operations for continuing guerilla attacks. This kind of emergent threat was laughable, but it did bring more work to Peter and the Special Ops teams he assisted.

Occasionally, he was able to bring his encryption expertise to the forefront, and break a modest code that some group or other had thought would protect their communications from the all-seeing eye of the United States. He even had a chance to use his Morse code, as many groups in the deep deserts continued to use such codes, despite their deprecation by the United States: so he found himself reviving rusty skills and once more listening to *dits* and *dashes* on an ancient headset. Even more rarely Peter caught a hint of forces on high mountains or confined in ancient structures: he documented such forces in lengthy private reports to Gale and Angleton.

Peter enjoyed the Special Ops work, but privately he was sure that he was entirely washed up: he was nearing 50 years of age, with two failed missions to his name. It was clear to him that he would probably finish out his career there safely at McChord. And besides, who was left for the United States to fight? The Soviet Union had collapsed, the Chinese were friendly now, and the Berlin Wall had fallen. America had no real enemies left standing, and thus, no need for soldiers, virtual or otherwise.

The military substation at McChord Air Force Base near Tacoma Washington was one of the semi-mythical White House “top twenty” substations for listening to and interpreting intercepted signals intelligence. Other substations in the secure circuit at that time were Vandenberg Base, Kennedy Space Center, NORAD’s Pine Mountain station in Colorado, the CIA secure floor at the World Trade Center in New York City, the Sears Tower in Chicago, Patterson Air Base, Fort Detrick and Virginia Key.

At McChord Air Force Base, Peter spent the bulk of his time, and his considerable energy, hearing radio transmissions and burrowing deep into signals intelligence. Fortunately, DARPA had created and maintained a large and useful backdoor into the public Internet system – they called their backdoor “Echelon” – and Peter was in charge of maintaining Echelon’s access to the public, open Internet. With the advent of Echelon, all signals, sent by anyone on the planet, were now considered signals intelligence. And thus, Peter Fisher’s office became a secret hub for America’s communications. Every message sent out into the ether, every email typed on a keyboard, left in voice-mail, sent as a text message – every message came through his secure DARPA-funded office at McChord.

The vast majority of messages were easily traced back to their source, and encrypted or not, the intent of the messages and phone calls were easily categorized by computer algorithms. Business communications were filed in one exabyte database, while personal missives went elsewhere. Peter ran algorithms that found terrorist cells and child pornography: these were easy to find, like tracing a connected root system down into the soil until the heartline was reached.

But there was another class of message that had begun to appear on the liminal edges of the ARPANET system. The origin of these messages was often not possible to trace, for their senders had been obscured. And the recipients were equally ambiguous. Most of the phone calls

that fell into this category were calls to random numbers, or emails to addresses that didn't exist on any domain server, anywhere, so they bounced around the ether from one DNS to another, attempting to find a safe landing space in the endless circumlocutions of the Web.

Peter constructed a filter to find these types of messages. Of the many hundreds of millions of messages sent every week, his filter had found only the ones that did not receive replies. So there were love notes, and adultery propositions, hate mail and revenge texts, jokes and resumes, junk-mail and voice mails left before a desperate suicide. He saw poems posted in instant messages, forum comments from idiots, unreadable half-completed novels sent to non-existent editor email addresses, recipes for strange dishes and pleas for help that went unanswered. But his role at the NSA was not to provide that help, not to heal the love that needed mending and not to halt the suicide or forestall the revenge that was surely promised in so many late-night beer-fueled text messages.

Yet after he discarded the vast bulk of unanswered communications, there was a tiny sliver of messages that seemed to have meaning, yet didn't make sense on any rational level. And gradually he was seeing a new and unorthodox set of patterns in their chaos.

At first, he saw the patterns by actually reading them. To start with, he noticed the few scattered words at the end of a rote spam email, randomly generated by a machine somewhere – to try to make the spam email read like a “normal” piece of email and ensure it wasn't shunted to junk / spam. But these scattered words – selected randomly by a computer somewhere – fit together with another set of words in another email sent thousands of miles apart, from a different server, on a different IP address. Somehow, they formed a coherent message. Out of 10 million emails Peter's specially tuned algorithms seemed to be able to fit together a spare few hundred with the same words or the same pattern of meaning.

When he requested technical assistance from the spooks in Langley, Peter's ability to churn through and identify patterns in the “waste” email became stronger. Much of it could be categorized as “spam,” yet in these emails were buried a deep pattern – a system that Peter felt he could almost grasp. The patterns were obscure, and disappeared if he applied the standard filters for meaning. When he changed the Echelon filters, so that they filtered out clear meaning and only found nonsense, then he saw new things, unforeseen things. Buried in the dross was a strange sort of gold, tiny flecks of meaning scattered among the meaningless.

Something was happening on the outskirts of the signals: some parasite riding the airwaves, using the new packets of online information to transmit its own data, and to encapsulate only a part of its meaning in each packet. It was buried in there, like a perfect diamond hidden in a nest of glass.

Peter recalled that sense of a pattern he'd first had as a boy at the Smithsonian, the sense that there were pieces of a great puzzle, stretched over time and spread through the many buildings of the Smithsonian – trapped in separate cases. It seemed to him that if he could only unite the disparate pieces, he'd be able to see a larger picture – and he was beginning to see what that picture would show, once he joined the pieces together. He was certain of the outlines of the pattern, as he filled in more and more along the edges, the border, sketching the shape of it in the dark, with his eyes shut, his face screwed up in concentration.

Peter began to feel there was a master frequency – a master signal – that was manipulating the ether, causing these emails and messages to be sent with their hints and pieces

of the puzzle. If he could merely find that master signal, then he could solve the whole puzzle, and see the entire picture of the message being sent. And he was not alone in trying to find that answer.

When Peter mined back through the vast archive of signals sent and received, he found in the dross of chaotic messages that others had come before him, trying to unravel this puzzle. Along with the strange signals he tracked, that were so reminiscent of the signals that Su-Linn and he tracked when they were undergraduates at Yale, Peter found himself longing for connection with her, with someone who could help him interpret these signals.

Most of the other people who were mining these signals, of course, had psychiatric issues: those seemed to be both the only ones who could sense the pattern, and also had the lack of inhibition that would cause them to seek the solution. Peter read the archives and found that one man in 1986 began to tune into the frequency, and meddle with it, trying to uncover the frequency that would give him the answers.

A series of messages in the open – including one from the same “Base” Arab extremists to “become familiar with your skyscrapers and extend the terror campaign to the United States” – had hinted at the larger pattern under the surface, and apparently this drove the man to action. Peter read the accounts of the man accosting a news anchor who had mentioned these hints on the air – a news reporter named Dan Rather – and asked him directly for the *frequency*, demanding answers to this unanswered question, until he ended by beating Rather. The man was never found, but Peter understood his frustration: he knew the frequency was there, he knew the message was being sent, but he couldn’t easily identify the source.

Like the man who had accosted Dan Rather, Peter could sense it: there was another life in the ether, which every billionth message hinted at, every twenty millionth text message, one errant voice-mail out of hundreds of millions. When these messages tried to speak plainly, beyond the hints and subtleties, Peter could tell they were not trying to enforce any particular way of encoding meaning. The speakers or writers were simply trying, in their own mad way, to state something that was close to un-stateable.

And finding in their myriad machines, the same set of instructions, the same letter being transcribed by every virtual hand, in an assortment of languages and origins and a myriad flock of clicking connections sending a tiny virtual wave across the miniature waving circuited seaweed wires of copper and gold welded to a silicon chip, catching the vibration of faint electricity like current in the water. It was the magnetic resonance of a hard drive drifting towards a certain pre-ordained meaning, a meaning and import that took Peter weeks and months and years to deduce.

And even at the end, he wasn’t sure he’d got it right.

As he read many hundreds of thousands of these messages-to-nowhere, he found himself catching on certain repeated mechanisms and formulations. The idea of it rarely – if ever – used the same words or even came close to the same turn of phrase (that repetition in itself Peter knew would have been tagged by the Echelon system as a pattern worth noting). Instead, what Peter found was a repeated emotion, a longing almost like that of lust or romantic attachment, but broader and more diffuse. It was a near-erotic longing for completion and for consummation of a decades long infatuation with someone or something. The feeling of it was that of an approaching possibility, the hope for some kind of touch or further proof of affection. But it was

never directed at a single person, and such a hope was expressed between the lines at the end of a business proposal, or a last coda on a long contractual voice-mail – it was blurted or murmured or whispered into the unanswerable ether – as if for a private set of ears that were listening intently for just such murmurs.

The Echelon machine would never pick up on such subtle traces of desire, of an errant love within a nest of contractual arrangements and Nigerian business codicils.

But it wasn't love, not precisely. The more Peter listened, the more he came to hear such vague murmurs and small postscripts as the protests of a trapped lover in a sadomasochistic relationship, longing for more punishment. Someone was trapped by this feeling, and yet despite their own agony, they longed nearly against their will for more pain from their captor.

The inability to understand the messages made Peter anxious with frustration and with near-madness himself. Were all such messages made of insanity? Was it madness that had crept into the ether? Was he simply the recipient of every message that had been sent from a psychological treatment center over the last twenty years? Insane asylum attendant?

He traced some of them back to the source. Some of them came from places of psychiatric treatment. But oddly, those seemed the most coherent, the most sane. Most of the people in those facilities seemed to be recovering from whatever had plagued them in the past, and the medications they took seemed – more than not – to work to help their minds to heal.

The few stray messages he intercepted from mental health facilities often seemed like the last gasp of a lingering malady, a few sentences to say “good-bye” to a friend who was departing for another sphere, a place of sanity and normality.

The truly strange messages – the ones that seemed to ramble into esoteric recipes, asking for the last ingredient, or a contribution of someone else's knowledge to the picture, so that one person's weekly nightmare could be made “complete” in some fashion – those were the most disturbing. Peter got the sense that the senders were truly working outside the bounds of normal human interaction, and did not find their messages odd in the least. They did not even realize that what they talked about made no rational sense, and did not have any grounding in the workaday world. They were unaware of their insanity, and thus could not be shaken from it.

When he traced these signals back, he found that one out of ten emanated from government buildings, from prestigious Washington D.C. think tanks, from their own foreign embassies, and from National Air Defense facilities like the one he stood in. One of them came from the next building in his group at McChord Air Force Base (the signal went dead when it hit the building, according to TCPIP line protocol, and he could never narrow down who in that building of 2,000 people actually sent the signal).

The voice-mail had started normally, but then rambled off into speaking of great towers of Babylon on fire, and men throwing themselves off of buildings to preserve themselves from Hell, and an aircraft with a cargo of pellets from Prague (that was what he thought he heard) that carried “the sacred numbers that would confuse their purposes” and “bring us all that we have so long desired.” Then the voice-mail ended with a light and cheery tone again, saying “Well, talk to you next week, my friend. Thanks for all your help!”

The voice-mail had been left in a phone system that had been defunct for a decade, acquired in some telecommunications merger, and never quite closed down, the remaining phone numbers sequestered like a set of dead-letter locations in the Call Connectivity database. The

phone number had no other messages, and no other evidence of use. He took a line recorder, and tapped every line he could on the McChord base, but after a week, Base Security removed his taps, and there was no way he could get more data.

And there had never been a follow-up call – not next week or the week after, or any weeks previously. It was a one time drop. But what did it mean?

Among the many signals he traced back, that one signal gnawed at it, because it came from his own safe McChord NSA campus, and because the obvious irrationality of its message was masked by a cheery initial greeting, as if the sender knew it might be intercepted, and wanted to conceal its real payload. He only heard it by accident because the system flagged the words “cargo” and “aircraft” – and this made him wonder how many other messages without those words did the system miss?

Sometimes though, Peter woke in the small hours, and he could hear that vibration again, something echoing in the basement of his mind, a sense of satisfaction denied, of longing deferred, and he worried that in the night he'd arisen from his bed, and sleepwalked to his computer, and he himself had sent one of those strange longing emails that did not speak plainly of desire, but asked for a completion beyond what he could comprehend.

*What if that happened? What would he make of it?* The thought of finding his own IP address appended to the list of dead-letter files made him break out in a cold sweat, and he lay there for the rest of the night, wide awake and fearful of his own fingers twitching in the night. He waited in the darkness as the moon traversed the sky and the stars grew dim, and finally the blue hour came before dawn, and then he forced himself to get out of bed and dress, and go to the base and work out in the weight room until his body was trembling from fatigue, not from anxiety.

And then he would shower and get dressed again and find his way to his cubicle.

But all day long, the weight of his dream would wait with him, pressing down like a heavy anvil of fear and trembling. And he found himself unable to complete a sentence of his own without re-scanning it for some hidden meaning.

And then, as he spent more time with the signals intelligence, he began to hear a faint dark tremble in the strangest signals, as if there was something responding to the call, as if, behind the scenes, there was an unmoved Mover, or Movers, whose replies stretched eons long and whose thoughts were stranger than any human language. Or were faster than he could capture the signal – which seemed impossible.

Signals intelligence took everything in, and the rule was it was only processed later. More than once, as he listened, he heard something vibrating through the Heaviside Layer, and since it was recorded, he thought he'd get to it later.

But when he came back to the set of recordings later, there was nothing there, just empty static, dead air. What he thought he'd heard in the background of a conversation had been nothing more than a mirage, a signal reflecting another signal on his eardrum, a mirror in a wilderness of mirrors.

Despite this strange uncertainty, Peter felt he'd nearly broken the code – if code it was – for the strange messages buried in the ether. Finally, he felt he was on the brink of knowing what this was all about. Although he began to receive odd looks and a few stray joking comments

about the frequency of his reports, he moved his report cycle from monthly to weekly, as he tried to edge closer to an answer. There was so much to discover in the signals.

And frankly, he didn't know or care who his reports were read by anymore – or if anyone at all read them, or cared. But right after the election of 2001, after nearly ten years on the job, he received a communique that the new Vice President – Dick Cheney – liked his work a great deal, and that he should keep it up. He was stunned by this revelation that Cheney himself was reading his reports, and he applied himself with renewed vigor to his analysis.

For years, he had assumed the only entities who were interested in the human race's relatively ephemeral existence were those whom human nations themselves had managed to entice, entrap or otherwise coerce into caring about the activities of the nation states. With the interjection over decades of unusual signals into the very fabric of humanity's communications mechanisms, he was beginning to wonder if the entire architecture of human thought was not manipulated via such subtle means by entities whose purposes and interests could only be imagined. They were pulling the strings, not the human beings at all. But then he wondered if such thinking in itself was not a sign of paranoia, of nascent insanity?

Peter also found himself playing in less cloudy waters. He regularly mined the dwindling Morse code traffic, mostly out of nostalgia. Morse code was used by Navies all over the world until 1997, when Peter heard and translated the last haunting transmission of the French Navy: *"Calling all. This is our last cry before eternal silence."* In 1999, Peter himself had provided the final sign-off from the United States official transmission. He chose to use Samuel Morse's first transmission, repeating the opening transmission from 1844: *"What hath God wrought."*

But even after the official transmissions ceased, Peter found himself corresponding with a few remaining Morse code enthusiasts. He was one of the few remaining who still used this oddly jerky dots-and-dashes, an outmoded alien language that only had binary bits.

One day in the spring of 2001, as the weather turned and the Pacific Northwest rain renewed its relentless onslaught, the message came in. He was performing his daily routine of checking signals both personal and professional, and he saw a new message in an ancient UNIVAC account he'd been assigned in 1973 when he was a Yale undergraduate. A string of numbers were sitting there, waiting for him.

It was Su-Linn – it had to be. But it took him weeks to decipher. He tried more complex algorithms and decoding schemes, assuming a rigorous encryption key. But in the end, it turned out to be simple. ROT13 in Morse Code. A simple greeting, a way to re-connect after all these years.

He began to respond to the messages with the same encryption scheme, a simple one. He didn't give away any state secrets, but he did begin to tell her about his life.

*Was she truly on the other end?* There were hints that it was Su-Linn, but there were also hints that she was being observed or she felt her communication stream was monitored. For she mentioned nothing of their time together in Hong Kong. It was as if their weeks of bliss there had never occurred. All of her references were to the time at Yale and the intervening years.

And so Peter began to wonder if this wasn't some false Su-Linn, luring him in to a false security, another Chinese prison to take away his secrets and abscond with his soul. He could not be sure. What if they had simply captured her and used her knowledge to ensnare him?

Over those many months in the year 2001, his time was consumed with signals processing – SIGINTEL – and decoding the strange thread of hallucinatory thoughts on the ends of millions of spam messages. And he spent his free time composing and decoding messages to this potentially semi-mythical or imaginary Su-Linn: a Su-Linn of his mind, perhaps not a real person at all.

Sometimes, late at night, he wondered if he had made up these communications with himself, as a way of salving his conscience for leaving her behind, for betraying her in her hour of need. He left her in the lurch, and for all he knew she had been captured and kept in the same Chinese prison that he was held in for those years.

Finally, he contacted Gale and managed to obtain an offer that could not be misunderstood or retracted. He forwarded to her the offer of asylum in the United States, if she would join him. He waited anxiously for her reply. Yet for many months, there was no answer to his offer. Peter thought the line had gone dead.

But someone else was listening. They were the ones to intercept the last message from Su-Linn. And they used that secret against him.

2001

**MOUNT RAINIER  
WASHINGTON STATE**

The safest time of year to climb the great mountains of the North Cascades in the Pacific Northwest is high summer. August is best, when the snowmelt has collapsed the worst of the deep crevices, and the new dangerous blizzards of winter and spring are unlikely to occur. It was in mid-August of 2001 that Peter recruited a Chinese-American friend from his work at Fort McChord – a fellow data analyst named Morris – to join him in climbing the great summit of Mount Rainier.

In the American style of work, neither of them had any real manual labor to perform at work, but after his imprisonment in China Peter had long felt the compulsion to regain his former level of physical fitness. His days were spent at a desk, and so in the late '90s, he began to spend an hour every evening pretending to be running on arduous trails, lifting heavy weights to mirror the work of lumberjacks and miners of old, and even swimming miles in perfectly Ph balanced water. He climbed at the local gym and worked his aerobic capacity until he was running five minute miles on the treadmill. Eventually, he felt primed and ready to tackle a real mountain, with real challenges.

But the mountain they'd chosen seemed to push them back at every moment. First, Peter's car broke down twice on their way to the high resort of Paradise on the side of Mount Rainier. The electrical system kept shorting out. Then at the inn on top of Paradise, equipment kept breaking. They finally left the inn late in the morning – too late to reach their goal of going all the way up and back down in one day, but early enough they could conceivably still make the summit in one day. Yet as they climbed, Peter kept feeling a sense of resistance in his chest, something that made it hard to breathe, and even harder to think. The sensations grew worse as the day progressed, and as snow-laden clouds overtook them. He felt as if some force were trying to keep him off the mountain.

The two of them were eleven thousand feet up, above the high base refuge of Camp Muir, when the snow flurry turned into a small blizzard. His companion put a foot into a crevice hidden under the new fallen snow, and twisted his ankle. Peter took stock of the situation, and decided then and there to pitch a tent. They could warm up inside, wait for the snow to die down, and get off the mountain as soon as possible. Given how bad they both felt, he'd have to give up on making the summit that day.

Inside the tent, out of the storm, the snow still seeped in, the hard particles whipping through the crevices and seams. Against all mountaineering advice, Peter lit their white gas stove, and heated up some tea. They tried to dry their wet socks out beside the fire, and shivered as the wind pushed, a great thrust of air and snow against the thin fabric of the tent.

Peter went to the door of the tent, and unzipped it slowly. He felt as if he were sleep-walking.

Outside, it could have been the center of a cloud for all he knew. Visibility was nill. The

sky and the terrain whorled together in driven snow. The world was gray and shot through with white buzzing flakes, like static on an old television. A great whirling shape, shot through with rain and hail, twisted across the mountainside.

The tent leaned under the pressure. One pole moaned and snapped. It was if a giant hand was pressing down, slowly flattening everything to ground.

And suddenly, Peter knew exactly what force was there, what was pushing against him, making it hard for him to breathe, to think, to exist. Everything in him screamed to hide in a hole, to run. But he did not.

He thought of the careful platitudes found in the ancient Arab texts, of the ritual greetings exchanged before the single sacrifice at the border described in the Confucian texts. Compelled always, to follow protocol.

Beside him, he barely noticed Morris cowering into the ground, like a rat trying desperately to dig a hole through the rip-proof nylon of the tent and into the unforgiving rock and ice of the mountainside. Something had frightened Morris beyond conscious thought.

Peter hoped to hell his protocol would work, wished he had around his neck that wadjet, left behind in his living room, hanging uselessly on the wall. Using whatever archaic Arabic he could remember, Peter cleared his throat. Honoring the manners refined over centuries. Millennia of diplomatic protocol, bound to respect.

Peter spoke, the sounds grating in his American ears. “*Aleph... ah... yal’opa...*” He continued, gaining strength as he found the syllables. There was a music to the words now, a certain rhythm he’d slipped into. The blizzard seemed to lessen for a moment, as if something was listening.

He had invited the wind into the tent. There was a gust, a blast of snow and freezing air into the midst of them, it knocked the stove over. The flame sputtered for a moment and then went out, and the cold came fast after it, filling the place.

And then out there, in the whirling snow, he saw a shape move. It resolved slowly to a man in a heavy wool parka, a model that had been old a century ago, something like that Edmund Hillary would have worn on Mt. Everest. The man’s footsteps were silent as Peter watched, and it was only as he came close to the tent that Peter heard sound from him at all, as if a radio had been switched on. The heavy crunch of his boots in the frost came clear, and then the huff of breath whistling in and out of his heavily lined face. The snap as he lifted a set of old-fashioned wooden mountaineering goggles from off his face and revealed eyes that Peter somehow couldn’t bring himself to meet.

The man bowed gently just before the entryway to the tent, as if in momentary respect. When he stepped inside, Peter could see the steam from his breath gather in the open air, just as real as the rest of them. Peter felt his hands drop down as the wind fell to a whisper outside, and almost, he let go of the wadjet. He felt his knees go out from under him and he dropped down. Should he just release the steel, let go of everything? Was it safe? But when he glanced over at his companion, he saw the man’s fists lifted to cover his eyes, his face screwed up in utter terror, and he noticed a dark spreading spot of wetness on his friend’s pants. The man had wet himself. One of them had no doubt that the danger had not passed.

*And you shall remove your shoes in the presence of our Lord, thought Peter. For the Lord*

*our god is a... terrible god.*

Peter did not remove his shoes. He tried to lift his eyes again. He could not get his eyes to move above the man's parched lips, the skin that looked wrinkled as an old mountaineer's, tanned and scarred by wind and sun. Things seemed hot, then cold. The fabric of the tent and the open door behind their visitor swam in Peter's eyes, moving back and forth, a strange mirage. In a gust of wind and snow, the stove blew out.

"Gentlemen," said the old man in English, a guttural accent cutting his words off near the end. He tipped back his hood. "You are getting close, you know."

Peter licked his lips, trying to get moisture back into his mouth. He thought of his work on the email data. Was this the one who was sending messages? Was this the creator of that master message?

"To a solution?" Peter responded. "The data..."

The old man shook his head, the ghost of a smile touching his lips, displaying perfect white teeth for a moment. "To the summit, of course."

Fear came over Peter, a wave of it, irrational but uncontrollable. Trembling spread through his limbs and images of corpses filled his mind, pieces of meat on the summit, wide as he could see, red blood seeping into the snow. "What will we find there?" he said, a quaver in his voice. Something hissed beside him in the tent.

The old man smiled again, wider this time. He did not answer Peter's question. "We would like a family here on this summit." But in the instance he said the word 'family' some other impression filled Peter's mind, pushing hard against the wadjet held limply in his hands. It wasn't a human family the man meant – not mother, father, brother, sister – but instead some other meaning. A community? A colony? *A kingdom?*

"Yes," said the old man, licking his lips with a pointed dry tongue. "A kingdom. Yes." As if he had plucked the word whole from Peter's mind.

"Once, there was such a gathering. On the summit you call Ararat. And before that, on Olympus. And now here, on this new high lonely place, we will come together again. You will bring him here, yes?"

Peter felt himself trembling, trying to concentrate in the midst of this silent terrible storm. He felt as if his mind would come apart.

The old man reached out towards the man cowering on the floor of the tent, as if he would pick him up.

Peter's friend let out a hoarse squeal. "Who are you?"

The old man stopped moving and looked at the man on the floor for the first time. "Oh, didn't you know... we are.... *the old phrase?*" he mused. "Ah yes, we are Legion."

Peter looked down at the white gas stove, the hissing stove filling the tent with dangerous vapors. Then he passed out.

Hours later, they had managed to crawl off the mountain and make their way abjectly back to Olympia. Morris was still babbling about their near-death experience in the blizzard,

when the stove filled the tent with gas and gave them terrible hallucinations, and how lucky they'd been that the tent blew open in the wind. But despite his irritation at Morris's incessant blather, Peter accepted his invitation to finish their long day at a little hole in the wall brewery in Olympia called Fish Tale Ale.

As they went in the door, Peter looked up and saw a huge carved wooden fish over the bar. He was reminded then of a strange little catch phrase Robinson Gale would mutter from time to time "*Oh Fish, are you faithful to the old covenant?*" Strange phrase. It reminded him of Skyrise's current call and response phrases, all derived from Milton – "*Whom shall we send of this new world, upborne with indefatigable wings?*" Peter shook his head, shook away the memory of what he'd seen on the mountain. He took a beer and tried to forget that he'd seen anything more than a wind in the door, a vision made of altitude sickness and naphtha aerosol poisoning in the air.

"Now I'm from the U.S." said Morris after their second beer. "I was born here. But you said something about being born over in Taiwan, like my Mom was?"

"Yep." Peter nodded. "I was born in Taiwan – Formosa. Grew up there, in fact."

"Well, you might know the answer to my question then. After the fall of China, why didn't the Communists merely invade Formosa and take out the Kuomintang?" asked Morris.

Peter looked at him. Maybe after today, he'd finally found someone he could confide in, without harm. Morris would believe him, after what they'd seen today.

"You might know some of the legends," he said carefully. "Since you're Chinese-American. Deng Xiaoping believed – perhaps rightly so – that Chiang Kai-shek had some very special knowledge regarding *tiānlóng* in China. And to attack a dragon in his chosen sanctuary would call down supernatural wrath."

"Dragons, ha!" laughed Morris. "Next we'll be talking about unicorns."

Peter was perturbed. "Look, you must know this – a dragon in Chinese culture," he explained patiently. "It is a force of nature – if not beyond nature. It's not the reptilian thing, easily killed by St. George."

"Or not so easily," said Morris.

Peter took a sip of his green beer. "Right," he said. "Or not killed at all. See, the thing about Chinese *tiānlóng* is that they are much more than a physical thing, more than just a single body." He held out his hands, trying to explain. But his fingers still had a tremor in them, so he quickly hid his hands again.

"They can shake things, move things."

Morris muttered something. "Spooky action at a distance."

"Yes," said Peter. "Like what we saw on the mountainside. Today. Something that transmuted. That was a real Chinese *Tiānlóng*."

"Ye-ah, uh-huh," stuttered Morris. "You think we saw something? That's crazy."

Peter was silent for a long moment. He finished his beer, and tried again. It took effort to him to speak here, and finally he almost whispered. "These things are real. They know me, somehow – I draw their attention – something in the pattern of who I am. Like the patterns we

study, some signal in me calls out their name.”

“In *you?*” said Morris, disbelieving.

Peter ordered another round of beers. He didn’t know why he was sharing all this, on this night. It was shock, he told himself, that and the companionship of Morris, whom he’d know for five years now. *Wasn’t five years long enough to trust?* Maybe it was just the potency of the Northwest micro-brewery ferment, filling him up with alcohol, and with uncharacteristic volubility.

He steeled himself to talk longer. Morris was just a mountain-climbing friend, but they’d seen and heard things that night that Peter had decided to not simply *ignore*, for once. This time, he would not leave this night behind as a mirage, as an errant dream. He told Morris everything.

Later that same week, Morris requested a transfer out of Peter’s signal analytics unit. The man who approved the transfer, Colonel Berzins, was new to their division.

Berzins gave him what he later thought of as strange advice, over coffee that Thursday afternoon. “I’ll tell you straight, Peter, the reason Morris requested a transfer is that he couldn’t shake a feeling that you were pulling him into something he didn’t want to be part of. He said that on the summit of Mt. Rainier, you met someone who really freaked him out. And that you had some crazy talk afterwards. That freaked him out too. Let that be a warning to you.”

Colonel Berzins gave him a look from under his beetled brow, and said no more.

Peter wracked his brain. He didn’t have a clue what Berzins was talking about. They’d never made it to the summit. He suspected that all during the week since their return, Morris had experienced the same haunting dreams he’d known. But his friend hadn’t shaken them off in the morning.

And later that same week, Morris was found dead in a closet. He’d hung himself, with a rope they’d bought to climb the mountain.

The week after Morris’s death, Peter had dreams of being up on the mountain, above the level where they’d stopped climbing. In fact, in his dreams, he and Morris were up at the very summit of the Great Mountain *Talol*, the mother of waters – the same mountain known in contemporary times as Mount Rainier. And all around him were empty skulls, full of wind, calling his name.

But when he woke, he always remembered that he’d never reached the summit. Somehow, it seemed important to remind himself of that, every dawn. It seemed dangerous to him to even think about summiting any mountains, ever again.

In a moment of unfortunate timing, the same week that Morris died, Peter had to take his annual polygraph, for the renewal of his NSA security clearance. Previously, he’d always been able to steel himself and use a few of Aldrich Ames’s tricks in order to avoid any sign of his secret life appearing on the tests. But this time, for some reason, he couldn’t control his body’s reactions. The needles bounced all over the place when they asked about espionage and secrets. He tried to call Gale, but there was no response: he hadn’t heard from Gale in months by that point in any case, and he didn’t expect to reach him, unless there was an emergency. And this

didn't count.

A failed polygraph could be taken again, but in this instance, Colonel Berzins intervened.

"Look, I'm concerned about you," he said kindly to Peter. "First, you pull some dangerous stunts up on the mountain. Then you talk your head off with craziness. Then you lose your friend shortly afterwards. Some PTSD, I'm thinking."

"I don't have PTSD," said Peter. "I was just nervous this time. I failed because I'm on edge. I don't have any mental issues."

"I don't have your service record, it's sealed. But have you spent some time in combat – in the sand box?" Peter knew he meant the Middle East.

He shook his head, and Berzins continued. "No? Well, where have you been?"

"Mostly classified."

"Yes, I know that. But general geography isn't classified. And I can look it up if I really need to, get access to your record."

"China," blurted Peter, and then he went further. "Accused of espionage by the Chinese. Interrogation in a Chinese prison for two years."

"Wow. Ok, then, that puts a new spin on it. Humint." Peter knew he meant Human Intelligence, the military term for anything involving human assets or running agents. Berzins sat back in his chair and stared at Peter.

Then he went back to organizing papers on his desk again, not looking at Peter any longer. "Well, then Fisher, I hope you knew Morse code, so you could blink to us what was happening in that Chinese prison, eh?"

"Right, sir. In fact, I do know Morse code, sir."

"Ok then, so you admit that part. About the Morse code." Berzins looked carefully at him, and pushed a button on his desk. "Lieutenant Gruber, could you come in?"

"All right." Peter stood up. "May I be excused, sir?"

Berzins ignored his request and motioned for him to sit back down. A uniformed human resources officer appeared in the doorway. A lieutenant, who sat down beside Peter.

Berzins leaned back in his chair. "So you've been inside a Chinese prison. Special kind of warfare, prison could be. I myself spent some time in Fifth group and the schoolhouse at Fort Bragg teaching Swick."

"SWC? Special Warfare Center?" guessed Peter.

"Yes, exactly. We teach prison evasion techniques there. Never got myself accused of espionage by the Chinese though." He gave a low whistle, as if the experience would have been pleasurable. "Foreign prisons really muck with your mind, am I right?"

Then Berzins gave a tight grin. "My point is that I've seen this kind of stuff before. I think you're losing it, my friend. You're a danger to yourself and others. Telling stories to Morris – he told me all about it – that you've seen dragons and demons and shit. That's some scary stuff, for sure." Berzins leaned across his desk towards him. "But it's not real, that's the real problem right now, not at all."

“But sir, I’ve actually experienced things that... things that are classified.”

“You’ve had something like this happen to you before?”

“Yes, sir,” said Peter in frustration. “Several times. But sir, if you’ll just allow me to reach Robinson Gale in the CIA. Based out of Alexandria, Virginia.”

“Our records show no such person. I have a CIA clearance, I can see the records in the clear.” Berzins tapped on a file folder on his desk. “You need to face facts.”

“I’m perfectly fine,” said Peter. “Just let me contact – ”

“You need to see this through my eyes – I’ve got a guy sending hundreds of pages of incomprehensible reports every week, sometimes two of them – to an address and a man who doesn’t exist. Not even on the secure channels, not even with a CIA clearance.”

“But I – ”

“No, you’ve got to hear this, Fisher,” said the Lieutenant sitting next to Peter. “Hear it from his point of view.”

Colonel Berzins looked momentarily mollified. “Thank you, Gruber. Now, listen – this same guy who’s sending stuff in secure channels to addresses that aren’t CIA verified, he goes around and runs a secret wiretap on every phone line on the joint base, and is surprised when security flags this as a violation. You’re walking around base, babbling about a signal only you can hear to everyone who will listen to you. And finally, you start talking nonsense to a valued member of our team. You convince this guy there are unseen creatures manipulating him. This guy freaks out so bad he hangs himself.”

“I can explain all of this, sir. I’ve got a service record, sir. I’ve got credentials.”

“Sure you do. I’ve been looking through your record, and you keep talking about this Gale guy, but he’s not a CIA asset or on the NSA approved list. You were assigned here as liaison from the CIA, but the only CIA supervisor we have for you in the records is, let me see, Aldrich Ames? And he’s in prison, for Soviet espionage.”

“Talk to James Angleton then.”

“Dead. 1987. Lung cancer. Also discharged from the CIA, under suspicion of internal espionage. Investigated for accusing his colleagues. Inconclusive results.”

“William Colby then. Call him.”

Berzins’s eyebrows went up. “Died. Nearly five years ago now. Suspicious circumstances. Murdered we think. Case is still open. You oughta know that. You sure don’t keep up with the news, do you now?”

“What about... what about... The office of Dick Cheney? He knows my work.”

“Sure, sure he does.” Berzins closed the file. He gave another tight smile.

Peter smiled back uncertainly, and gradually Berzins’s smile fell away. “Look, we traced the IP addresses you’ve been sending and receiving from. The Morse code ones. You’re receiving coded messages from the PRC.”

“PRC?” said Lieutenant Gruber.

“China,” barked Berzins. “People’s Republic of China.”

“I can explain about the Chinese signals,” said Peter.

Now the liaison officer also sounded angry. “Chinese signals? Regardless of explanation, you’re violating protocol – regardless of the messages content – by not immediately revealing those messages to any superior officer.”

“Right, I understand,” said Peter.

“No, I don’t think you do,” said Lieutenant Gruber. “A foreign power without intelligence sharing agreements with the U.S. needs to have all messages vetted immediately. Otherwise – ”

“Are you a double agent, Fisher?” barked Berzins. “Did the Chinese turn you when you were there?”

“Sir, I was in prison there. I was hardly in a position to – ”

“That’s not what I’m asking. Sure, you don’t have access to much that’s classified now – you’re a signals flunky, and I think there’s a good reason you were assigned to that before my arrival. Right now though, I think you’re concealing information that could imperil us all, and I don’t know what you’ve told them about our base layout or our signals equipment. What have you told them, Fisher?”

“No-nothing,” stuttered Peter. “Nothing at all. You need to listen to me, you – ”

“No. Dishonorable discharge.” Berzins slapped the file closed. “I’m calling it, right now, without any more information to go on.”

“Now wait a minute,” said Lieutenant Gruber. “I’m here as his Department of Defense liaison, and he’s technically still an NSA officer. A hearing under UCMJ rules with JAG representing the accused. You can’t just – ”

“Try to fuckin’ stop me. I’m the officer in command, he’s under my jurisdiction,” Berzins glowered at the lieutenant and turned towards Peter. “You can go, Fisher. Just turn in your damn side-arm, hand off your SIGINT files, and get your ass the hell off my base by the end of the month.”

“But the message you intercepted,” said Peter. “That message. Can I have – ”

Colonel Berzins leaned forward, his face red with anger. “That transmission is from an agent of a foreign power, from the Chinese, and we’ve decrypted it, and it’s pointedly addressed to you – just you. You had private correspondence with this agent.”

“Let me see it.”

“No, Fisher, we believe you’re planning something with this person – an operation on U.S. soil – and we can’t let you do that.”

Peter reached out to his desk, as Berzins slapped the file folder closed.

“You don’t have a registry in the CIA secure list, and you’re a danger to the base and to your fellow analysts. I’d get you court-martialed and executed, but I’m going to do a favor. You’re over fifty years old, and I think you’re mentally losing it. We’re going to discharge you, but I won’t be surfacing the violation of protocol, because I honestly don’t think you know

enough to endanger us. We're kicking you out of the service, but I'm trying my best not to get you executed for your insanity, you understand."

Colonel Berzins stood and saluted.

"Thank you, sir," said Peter numbly. He stood at attention.

The liaison officer stood beside Peter as Berzins continued speaking. "Lieutenant Gruber here will collect your side-arm today, and then you can transition out of the service over the coming three weeks of debrief and transition. We'll have a counselor available to you. A priest too, if you need one. You're dismissed, soldier."

**SEPTEMBER 10, 2001**  
**MCCHORD AIR FORCE BASE**  
**TACOMA, WASHINGTON**

During the entire week after his last meeting with Berzins, Peter handed off files and projects to other team members, and tried to explain to other people how to stitch together SIG-INTEL from listening posts in the Eastern hemisphere.

A tortured sense of duty kept him at the work, a loyalty to the program itself kept him focused on trying to transition all that he knew before he departed. He was still in his grungy Joint Base on-base living quarters, but he had to find a new place to live as well. Life was starting over for him. Retirement – especially forced retirement – had not been in the cards.

Finally, near the end of the week, Peter let himself relax. He numbed his brain with several Fishtale beers, followed by *Star Trek: Next Generation*, repeated on the local late night channel. In the very early morning hours, he sank into somnolence as the station signed off by broadcasting its nightly salutation: the waving Stars & Stripes, the playing of the National Anthem, and then darkness for the last hours of the night.

Peter dreamed that night, more vividly than he'd dreamed in twenty years. He saw people in the air, holding hands. But they were not flying: they were jumping from a great height, certain of their deaths. Far, far below were the streets of a city, and they knew when they hit the ground, there would be no return. And in fact, when they struck the ground, it was so forceful there was a pink mist in the air – a sight that nauseated him, the impartial observer who saw all. He was a boy, young and impressionable, watching the approaching horror of the falling people, flames and smoke behind them, above them. The bodies, when they emerged from the smoke, looked like birds at a great distance, on fire and plummeting as fast as death. They fell, unstoppable, irrevocably, into a smoking canyon at hundreds of miles an hour.

Peter felt his perspective shift from the street to the towers, and now he was standing on the brink, a broken window in his hands. He felt an immense hunger to leap out, to join the leaping people, but he was trapped inside the cage of the tower, as the flames roared. At first, he he joined the flames eagerly, but then as the iron frame collapsed inward, they burned his substance, bit into his flesh, destroyed his essence until he had only pain left, and he threw everything he could – all his consciousness – into the falling people around him, but all that he succeeded in doing there was terrifying more of them, so they leaped higher and fell faster.

Every death he experienced as part of his own death, each soul winking out seemed to be a mote in his spirit, fading away, drifting on that reddened mist that filled the air around the gaping wound of the twin towers.

Then he turned desperately and ran out of the blowing ashes and the cloud of smoky choking dust, and found himself on the desperate streets below.

In the early dawn, Peter was roused by the sound of the television: yet on this day, no happy voices from *Good Morning, America* greeted him. No silly comments about fashion and food. Instead, he saw the images from his dream, brought to terrible life in the darkened room, on the glowing light of the television.

What was worse, for Peter, was that when the first plane hit, he could feel a painful twinge behind his breastbone, as the djinn in the tall tower tore itself apart in a paroxysm of agonizing division and death. Peter remembered the moments on that rainy night in 1973 when he had touched the frame with the djinn inside – and when he had watched it dance in the smoky rain down the vast Manhattan avenue towards the building site.

Somehow, the entities he'd helped to encapsulate in the Twin Towers back in 1973 had reached out to him when the attack happened, and had communicated to him the destruction they were experiencing. Now Peter remembered the visions he'd had when they were building the Twin Towers. He flashed on it now, he knew what had happened, finally, bringing an end to their voracious hunger, destroying all that they had been.

## SEPTEMBER 16, 2001 OLYMPIA, WASHINGTON

For one week, the towers tumbled on the television over and over, the plane striking in silence, the plume of smoke and dust and explosion coming a moment later, and then the structure itself sliding apart, crumbling to bits.

Peter still felt in shock as he watched the television. He had not turned it off for the last week, ever since the moment he had first watched the towers fall, in stunned and horror-stricken disbelief.

All military discharges had been put on hold, and Peter sat in a kind of bureaucratic limbo: not part of the active military duty cycle, yet not civilian either. He waited there, in his on-base apartment. He waited to discover what would come next.

More than half the shock he felt now was at that twinge of recognition, the feeling of death coming into him, reverberating in his knowledge. For he had not known that a djinn could die. There had been only rumors, ancient case files read by veterans and whispered about years later in drunken early morning confessions. Old Robinson Gale had something to do with a djinn death, said the rumors, sometime after World War II. *Was it true? Had Gale killed a djinn? Was that the goal of the airplanes striking the towers?*

Peter watched as Tim Russert interviewed the Vice President on television. Dick Cheney,

the man Peter had met the year before in Washington D.C. – there live on television. Peter was too sleep-deprived to really care. But he listened.

“I’m going to be careful here, Tim,” said Cheney. “Because I... clearly it would be inappropriate for me to talk about operational matters...”

Peter’s attention drifted, but Cheney hadn’t finished. “We also have to work, though, sort of on *the dark side*, if you will. We’ve got to spend time in the shadows.”

Peter saw then, in Cheney’s set jaw and unblinking gaze, exactly what the man meant. Nausea rose in his throat at the memory of building that tower, of what he’d tasted that night. *The dark side, if you will. In the shadows.*

Peter stood up, shaking off his sleep. The television kept blaring behind him as he turned and stumbled through the kitchen. He pulled the bottle of Tequila out of the bar behind the counter. He took vigorous swallows, trying again to wash that nauseating taste from his throat, out of his mouth.

Cheney blathered on, but he hardly heard the man. “That’s the world we live in now, Tim. The world these folks operate in... so it’s going to be vital for us to use any means at our disposal.”

Peter glanced at the clock. It was almost seven p.m. Nearly ten o’clock on the East Coast. Military shuttles arrived at McChord Air Force Base here in Washington state at eleven p.m. every night from D.C., and would depart for the East Coast before dawn came again.

He slammed the half-empty bottle down on the counter. He couldn’t feel anything anymore from the alcohol except a terrible burning in his throat.

Peter retrieved his suitcase from under the bed and began placing carefully folded sweats and military-issue uniforms into the compartments. He would need shoes for outdoors, and desert gear. Possibly even a raincoat.

He pulled up the formica in his kitchen now, and then the floorboards. Here, in a secure compartment, he’d stored a waterproof case. Inside was all the specialized gear he’d purchased after his return to the United States. He’d only tested the gear, but he’d never had cause to use it in combat. Nevertheless, he’d kept it ready, just as his father had suggested. The waterproof contained his own personal Glock 18C machine pistol, the one he’d purchased with his own money – not the standard issue military one. Inside the case was also a set of Blackhawk integrated tourniquet pants. He placed in the pockets several spare 33-round magazines of armor-piercing ammunition. Clipped to his pants was a SureFire LumaMax flashlight – longer than a man’s hand and thick as a thumb, with duct tape around its middle, to make it easier to hold in the teeth. Useful both as a weapon, and as a light. And at the bottom of the case was a carefully wrapped HK USP Compact Tactical, plus spare magazines and VBR-B .45 armor-piercing ammunition.

After he checked the weapons, he was done. He stood there afterwards in his kitchen with the plundered floor. He fully dressed and prepped, his gray hair long, but combed and neatly parted. He waited in the darkened room, his dark clothing and expedition boots lit only by the bright glow of the television as he watched over and over the news channels, waiting for more of a hint about Cheney’s intentions.

The call for activation came forty-nine minutes later. He had been re-activated as active

duty combat personnel, SKYRISE designation – when he had a chance to read it, he saw that the order was signed by Vice President Cheney himself. As he had suspected, he was being sent to the Pentagon, and from there to Annapolis and Langley and then further points east. Peter never saw Colonel Berzins at McChord Base again.

**SEPTEMBER 18, 2001**

**ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND**

The SKYRISE briefing at 0400 hours was conducted in a vast hanger in Annapolis Maryland that looked to Peter like it could hold an entire Navy fleet in dry-dock. To one side, Peter was sure he could see something that looked like a nuclear submarine, but it was so far away and so shrouded in shadow, he couldn't be sure. One corner of the huge facility was lit with a set of incandescent klieg lights, and in that corner stood the men and women who had been selected for the mission. Some were younger office functionaries, which concerned Peter. They were noticeably out of shape, pasty from desk cubicles and overweight from sitting too long. Analysts, on a field adventure? And then there were a very few hardened field agents, people with weathered skin and toughened physiques. But there were only a handful of them, and Peter was one of the fittest among them, despite his long gray ponytail. The fit ones were the oldest, all in their fifties or even early sixties. Experienced, but slow reflexes, out of service for decades some of them, by the look of the long hair and the beards he saw around him.

Peter glanced around, expecting to see – hoping to see – a seasoned SWAT team or Army Ranger team that would join them, supplement their mis-matched ranks. Why only desk analysts and over-the-hill field agents? Why no one from a current active duty corps? Perhaps this was the support staff group for the targeting mission personnel.

A group of people were approaching out of the gloom, and Peter stared expectantly into the darkness. Perhaps these were their saviors – the ones who would really perform the mission – the ones they would be supporting. But as they came closer, his heart sank. It wasn't a set of hardened battle Rangers at all. The men moving forward wore ranks of ribbons, in formal dress uniforms – except for one old bald man in a bland suit, who led the way. A civilian with expertise or orders to share. These were the briefing staff, the ones to give them their orders. They were, in fact, the ones they'd been waiting for. The men around him were, in fact, the ones who would be committed to the field. His heart sank.

As the group moved closer, he saw that the old man in the bland suit was, in fact, Cheney himself. His hair had disappeared entirely now, and his face was a little more war-worn than last he'd seen the man. But he hadn't changed, it seemed. Cheney was, as always, blunt to the point of rudeness. He started talking before the men around him had even come to a halt.

“Men,” he said. Then he saw the single female lieutenant in their midst, and inclined his head with that enigmatic grin. “And ma'am.” Then he paused, looked at all of them, met their eyes.

“Today, I ask you to keep first and foremost your responsibility to safeguard the United States of America and the lives of its citizens. You will be wondering why you were selected for the most critical mission after this terrorism attack. We are sending you – all of you, even the ones who have never done field work before – because this mission requires a particular kind of expertise, and those who have that expertise have never been needed in an active deployment of

this magnitude before. You are on a specialized mission for the Circle. You are here to take their chief agent of destruction from their ranks. Not an assassination, oh no, not at all. This is a mission of recruitment and enticement.”

A tingle came over Peter. Everyone here had been selected for their affiliation with the Circle. It came over him that he had never known there was much in the Circle beyond Angleton, Gale, and himself. There was more to the picture, much more. But who – or what – would they be recruiting?

“To recruit this entity, you will be prepared to offer everything we can offer – we are willing to offer *much more* than Saddam has ever been able to offer. We want this thing on our side, and to get it here, we are willing to sacrifice. Do you understand?”

“Sir, yes, sir,” came a resounding call, the sound echoing for long minutes in the recesses of the hanger.

Peter hesitated. He recalled the ancient Chinese texts he’d read at Yale. The single victim at the border, to secure the kingdom. *What exactly were they offering to this entity? What did they have to give?*

“I have heard from some – ” Cheney gestured at a group of civilian men in suits standing to his right. “That we should not engage in this type of pre-emptive action, and especially not in the unorthodox action we are about to ask you to engage in. But I disagree. My response has always been – ‘Tell me what terrorist attacks you would have let go forward, because you didn’t want to be a mean and nasty fella?’ In essence, are you willing to trade the lives of a number of people because you want to preserve your honor? Or are you going to do your job, and do what’s required?”

“Yes, sir,” came the resounding reply.

“We will take it to them – after all, the entire world is our combat zone now, open for free fire. Any questions before you begin your technical briefing?”

There was a long pause. Finally, someone spoke up, that young female lieutenant with a chip on her shoulder: “Mr. Cheney, sir, with all due respect, I’m not sure I agree on the free fire zone. We must respect sovereign rights. The rights to – ”

“Oh really?” Cheney snapped back. “Our people on 9-11 in New York were in a combat zone, and they didn’t even know it. We are now taking our power to them. A pre-emptive strike. They’re in our combat zone now – they just don’t know it yet. Any objections to that, officer?”

The lieutenant shook her head. Cheney stared at her a moment, his mouth twisting before he turned from addressing his interlocutor and spoke loudly to all of them again.

“Any further objections? Any officers unwilling to serve in this capacity?”

“Sir, No, Sir,” came the resounding reply. After a moment, Colonel Schwarzkopf stepped forward. He shook Cheney’s hand. “Thank you, sir. Appreciate the pep talk.”

After repeated applause – and a few quick photos – the Vice President and his entourage turned and moved away from the assembled motley collection of soldiers and analysts. Peter felt himself beginning to fall asleep, standing up on his feet. After Cheney was gone, their commanding officer stared down at the floor like a bashful child. After a moment, he looked up, a hint of steel in his eyes.

“Listen up now,” the man said at first, quietly. His voice rose, a hard edge in it now. “I’m Colonel Schwarzkopf, I’m commanding this operation, and I need you to hear the truth here. Saddam spent years trying to suborn an entity to serve his country’s needs. He did everything he could to bend it to his will: whole villages wiped out in sacrifice – nearly all the Marsh Arabs wiped out in the swamps of Eastern Iraq. It looks like he nearly succeeded. We’re going to stop his advance, once and for all, and remove this terrible power from the Middle East. We’re going to claim it for our own. That is our mission!” He looked around, his face showing only anger. “So, you’ve got your orders, so what the hell are you waiting for? Go to barracks, soldiers, begin mission prep.”

The men began to scatter, but Peter felt his feet heavy, his head buzzing with exhaustion. After the long flight, after the long evening, fatigue weighed Peter down, he could hardly concentrate. He blinked his eyes wide though, as Colonel Schwarzkopf pointed at him. “Fisher – you stay right here – ” The colonel pointed at him, “And you too, El-Amin, I’ve got a few protocols to share with you two.”

---

### WILDERNESS OUTTAKE

---

This excerpt from the forthcoming novel

### **WILDERNESS OF MIRRORS**

**by Nicholas Hallum**

*has not been approved for publication.*

[WildernessofMirrors.net](http://WildernessofMirrors.net)

---