

An advance look at *The Wrath of Leviathan*,
the second book in the *Sleep State Interrupt /*
BetterWorld trilogy

The Wrath of Leviathan will be released
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São Paulo, Brazil

Kiyoko

“The CIA will snatch you up or shoot you in the head.”

Pel’s parting words echoed inside Kiyoko’s ears as she rode the narrow, creaky elevator down to the ground floor of their São Paulo apartment building. Pel was always saying things like that, ever since they fled Maryland. But Kiyoko was a princess, and wouldn’t cower, especially when she had important tasks to do.

The elevator stopped with a shudder and she entered the lobby, empty except for a bank of locked mailboxes, and Gabriel, their muscular ex-special forces bodyguard. Gabriel stood just inside the grated doorway, glancing up and down the street. His black-framed augmented reality glasses had 10X zoom with image enhancement and could identify any face with a criminal record or military background.

Still scanning the street, he thrust up a hand. “Hold on, I haven’t finished the recon,” he said in gracefully accented English.

“There’s no bounty on me,” Kiyoko reminded him.

Gabriel turned to face her. The dark-lensed data glasses obscured his eyes, which she thought were his best feature, closely followed by his Roman nose and prominent jaw. Spoiling the effect, huge ears jutted out from his close cropped brown hair like radar dishes. “I am responsible for your safety,” he said, “same as Pel and Charles.”

Beneath his loose-fitting blue shirt, Kiyoko knew, were two high-tech guns she hoped he’d never have to use. “Well, I do feel safer with you around,” she said, “and appreciate all your help.” He was certainly friendlier than Alzira, who worked Fridays and Saturdays and didn’t like to talk or go anywhere. Gabriel was nice to look at too, except of course for the ridiculous ears.

He tugged on the curved visor of the blue baseball cap he liked to wear outside. “Are you really wearing that outfit?”

Kiyoko was wearing regal scarlet and gold robes she’d sewn back in Baltimore, and a bright red wig indistinguishable from human hair. She owned twenty wigs and changed them every time she went out. “Red brings luck. And this is the most respectable attire I own.”

“You look good, of course,” he said, “but the officials won’t take you seriously if you wear that wig.”

“But it matches my robes.” *He said I look good.*

“And the—crown? Is that what you call it?” Gabriel’s English was excellent, much better than her Portuguese, but his vocabulary had limits.

“Tiara. Princesses wear them to formal events.”

“I suggest you not wear this tiara.”

“Maybe you’re right.” Her realm was large and influential—at least it had been. But it was located in BetterWorld, Media Corporation’s virtual reality. BetterWorld had over a billion users and an economy that was overtaking the physical world’s, but some people were stuck in the past and didn’t get it.

“But the wig must stay,” she added. Her real hair, brown with rainbow streaks, clashed with the robes, and she didn’t have time to change.

He shrugged, scanned the street again, and unlocked the door.

It was bright outside, no clouds. Squinting, Kiyoko followed Gabriel down the cracked tiled sidewalk along Rua dos Estudantes, inhaling the fruity, spicy smell of caramelizing sauce. Rini Takahashi, the petite cashier at the yakisoba stall, waved. “Konnichiwa, Pingyang-san!” They bowed to each other.

Liberdade, Kiyoko’s adopted district in São Paulo, was home to the world’s largest Japanese community outside Japan. Otaku heaven, leagues better than Baltimore. Japan, China, and South Korea wouldn’t grant her asylum, so this was the next best thing. And once her eyes adjusted to the sun, the weather was perfect, especially now that the rainy season was over. No freezing cold, no sweltering heat.

Still, she missed her Baltimore friends, some of whom she’d known since elementary school. She might never see them again. Not to mention her poor sister, imprisoned and alone.

The yakisoba smells gave way to garbage and chlorine. They passed graffiti-covered walls, a crowded manga store, and an empty sushi restaurant. Kiyoko quickened her pace until she was next to Gabriel. “Do you think Pel’s right about the CIA? Will they come after us?”

Gabriel turned his head. “Take it easy, they have not so far. But your CIA loves to meddle.”

“So is that a yes or a no?”

“Risks probably outweigh the benefit. If one of their agents is caught, Brazil would take advantage. The USA would look like stupid outlaws to the rest of the world. But if my government did not think they might try, they would not have hired a close protection officer. Your friends are famous. The government would be embarrassed if they took no precautions and you were abducted.”

“We’ve been here two months and nothing’s happened.”

He nodded. “Hey, either no one is looking for you or they haven’t found you yet.”

“Yet?”

“You are starting to worry as much as Pel. Relax, let me do the worrying.”

Ahead and to the right, the canyon of whitewashed shops, restaurants, and apartment high-rises opened up into Praça da Liberdade, an aging tile and concrete expanse with withered cherry trees and teeming knots of people. Her uber-cute friend Reiko rushed toward her, wearing a red and yellow Super Fox costume. “Yahho Kiyoko-hime! Genki desu ka?” *How are you?*

“Hai, genki desu.” *Good.*

“My boyfriend agreed we can keep your cat as long as needed,” Reiko said in Japanese. “He wants to know when you will travel.”

If they had to flee again and couldn’t take Nyasuke, Kiyoko wanted him in caring hands. “I haven’t planned anything. It’s just in case.”

“We have an appointment,” Gabriel interrupted in English. He didn’t know a word of Japanese beyond *biru kudasai* - how to ask for a beer. “Officials are not like other Brazilians. They expect you on time.”

Good point. Kiyoko couldn’t screw up her first audience at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs if she wanted her sister freed. She told Reiko she had an important meeting, and apologized for leaving.

They took the stairs down into the Liberty Metro Station, bare concrete plastered with ads. Gabriel bought new pass cards with cash, same as every trip. Kiyoko averted her face from the white surveillance cameras. They were in every Metro station and every train car, effective crime deterrents according to Gabriel.

Pel thought the CIA could hack into the Metro and traffic cameras and

they should never leave their apartments without a disguise. In case he was right, Kiyoko made an effort to vary her appearance and avoid the cameras. Anything to keep Pel from losing the rest of his sanity points.

A northbound train arrived, shiny white and brightly lit. It was after rush hour so there were plenty of seats. They added some kind of lavender freshener in the air conditioning and it didn't stink of fast food and puke like the trains back home.

Kiyoko faced away from the camera on the rear ceiling. Gabriel sat next to her, in the aisle seat. Kiyoko opened her big Sailor Moon carry bag, another remnant from home, and plopped her tiara inside. She pulled out a faux-Victorian hand mirror and brushed her wig.

"We get off at Luz," Gabriel said. "Three stops."

"I know." He was always stating the obvious, as if she were a clueless tourist who'd never been in a city before.

He didn't say anything else until they arrived at the Luz station. "We can take the underground walkway."

That was a shame. Luz was European grand at street level, a huge arcing hangar of metal and glass, with a big clock tower outside. "Lead on," she said.

The round-ceilinged pedestrian tunnel was starkly lit, with bare concrete walls. It had moving walkways in the center that were motionless.

"This section isn't finished," Gabriel said. "But it goes straight to the Ministry."

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs had offices in a brand new skyscraper, along with other tenants. Kiyoko had waited over a month for an audience.

The tunnels were mostly deserted except for construction workers and the occasional homeless person laying on newspapers or cardboard. They took an escalator up, passed through a guard station with a walk-through body scanner, and rode an elevator to the 28th floor, arriving at yet another guard station.

"They're as paranoid in your country as they are in the U.S.," Kiyoko whispered as they waited in a square, formaldehyde-reeking lobby for confirmation of their appointment.

"I think it's more that security is a big industry in Brazil." Gabriel flashed a friendly smile. "Which is good because it pays well. Not enough to get rich, but SSG pays all my expenses, too."

He'd never told them how much he made, and Kiyoko considered it rude to ask. But the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was using some special fund to

pay Serviços de Segurança Globais fifty thousand reais per month, some fraction of which went into Gabriel's bank account.

A young woman wearing a blouse and dark skirt entered the lobby. "Olá! Siga-me por favor." *Follow me.* She led them past busy cubicles to a corner office.

A pale, rounded, middle-aged woman in a crisp business suit stood up behind a polished desk with a big computer screen. Behind her on the gleaming white walls were pictures of her receiving or giving awards, and framed screens playing silent loops of children with puffy cheeks.

The woman shook their hands. "Miranda Rossi. São Paulo Bureau Chief, Department for Human Rights and Social Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs." She spoke English with only a faint accent. "Your dress is very... elaborate."

Suddenly Kiyoko felt out of place. "It's traditional. But thank you."

Everyone sat, Kiyoko and Gabriel in blue padded chairs facing the desk. Kiyoko began formally, using the protocol she'd acquired as a princess in BetterWorld. "I thank you with all my soul for granting this audience. And as well for your government's granting of sanctuary."

Ms. Rossi's brow furrowed. "So as I understand it, you want Brazil to pressure the United States to release your sister, Waylee Freid, from custody?"

"That's it exactly. Yes." Doubts crept into Kiyoko's head. This wouldn't be easy. Maybe impossible. But she had to try.

Ms. Rossi stared at her desk screen and moved a finger along it. "Ms. Freid is being held by the U.S. government on charges of conspiracy, fraud, theft, assault, trespassing, various cybercrimes... I assume you know the list?"

Kiyoko still trembled and cried when she was alone in her bed and thinking about her sister's plight. But she wouldn't do that here. "That sounds so negative, the way you worded it. Waylee let people know how MediaCorp is trying to control the world. She's a hero. No one was hurt."

"It says here twelve people were injured, two of them hospitalized."

Guards mostly. No one had been seriously hurt. "An exaggeration. Waylee is a political prisoner and should be freed. I've been trying to get Brazil to help, other countries also."

With Charles's help finding addresses and disguising her location, she'd been contacting ministers and diplomats all over the world. She had also started petitions and fundraisers in BetterWorld and on the general Com-

net, but most were deleted, probably on orders from MediaCorp management.

Ms. Rossi hadn't responded, so Kiyoko prompted her more directly. "Can you assist?"

The woman almost smirked. "Your government considers itself the leader of the world, not a follower, and doesn't release prisoners just because another country requests it."

Not going well so far. Kiyoko kept her composure. "Brazil is powerful, with much influence. An official request would at least be considered. You could make a case for exile instead of imprisonment, saying that Waylee was following her duties as a journalist to uncover the truth and let people know about it. She belongs with her family, not in a cell."

Ms. Rossi folded her hands together. "We have already received considerable pressure to return your friends Pelopidas Demopoulos and Charles Marvin Lee. Your government claims that we are harboring criminals."

"What we did was share information, let people know how they're being scammed."

"Scammed?"

"Manipulated."

"The U.S. government provided a compelling case," Ms. Rossi said, "and our asylum conventions do not normally cover persons under indictment, like your friends. It's only because our government considered their acts to be of a political nature that we granted asylum. I suspect this was to point out the hypocrisy of your government when they lecture others about human rights and democracy and so on."

"We greatly appreciate your hospitality. Couldn't you extend it to Waylee?"

Ms. Rossi half smiled. "She's in custody. There isn't much anyone other than her lawyers can do. Why not leave it to them?"

"You read the charges. They're overwhelming her."

"What do you mean?"

"The government came up with as big a list as possible to overwhelm her defense. Even if not all the charges stick, she could be in prison until she dies." Kiyoko fought an outbreak of tears. "She has this illness and might not survive long in prison."

"What illness?"

I'm a princess. Don't cry. "Cyclothymia. But Pel—Pelopidas Demopoulos—thought all the stress, when we were on the run, turned her totally

bipolar. Bipolar two, it's called. She was doing fine last I saw her, but now she's all alone, and she's one of those people who hates being alone. When she hits the depressive cycle, she might kill herself."

"Maybe her lawyers should use a mental illness defense, then."

Kiyoko bit her lip and clenched her toes. "She'd never allow it. It would undermine everything she did. Can't you help?"

"Your sister should at least be treated for her illness, maybe put on suicide watch."

"She should be freed. She can come here and everything forgotten."

Ms. Rossi shot out a quick breath. Just enough to betray a sense of disdain. "I will see what might be possible." She glanced at her screen, rose and shook their hands. "Please leave your contact information with my secretary."

Kiyoko fought an urge to step up her arguments. That would only irritate her most important potential ally. "Thank you for your efforts."

On the way out, she prayed to Yudi, the supreme deity with many names. *Please guide Ms. Rossi's heart. Please give me strength. Please don't let my sister die in prison.*

* * *

Waylee

Gripping her by the arms, a burly white man and a burlier African American woman marched Waylee down a brightly lit concrete hallway lined with steel doors. Special Housing. Waylee's wrists and ankles were shackled, limiting her steps to inches. She carried a thin bed roll and a set of generic-looking toiletries, and wore a bright orange shirt, pants, and slippers.

The receiving guards had taken her original clothes, strip searched her, photographed her naked from every angle, led her past hoots and hollers to a shower, made her scrub with delousing shampoo, and blasted her with scalding water. After that, they gave her the orange uniform to wear. Most of the other prisoners wore asparagus green, but she was special, they said.

They halted in front of a door stenciled 1057. "Your new home," the male guard said. He had a dark goatee and shaved head with stubble on the sides that betrayed early hair loss.

Never in her life had Waylee imagined confinement in such a place, the high security wing of the Federal Detention Center in downtown Philadel-

phia. Back to her birth city, where she and her sister suffered years of abuse until she blinded her stepfather and escaped. *Wouldn't it be funny if Feng was in this prison too?*

"This place is an assquake," the female guard said, her breath stinking of fried sausage. "But wait 'til you get to ADX Florence."

Waylee wasn't sure where that was, but obviously it was bad. "I'm innocent until proven guilty."

The guards chuckled.

I should shut up. Her lawyers told her not to talk to anyone because every word would be recorded and used against her.

Baldy spoke into his wraparound mike, "Unlock 1057, please."

She heard a click, and the man opened the door.

Her cell had the length and width of a cargo van interior. It had white concrete block walls, a narrow slit window, a concrete ledge with a brown plastic mat, and a stainless steel toilet/sink unit. The door was solid steel except for a small plexiglass window and a metal flap at the bottom. It smelled like bleach.

"I'm not violent," she said. "Why am I in solitary?" Bad enough the magistrate denied bail, but why did they have to make things worse?

"All terrorists go to maximum security," Baldy said. "It's the rules." They ushered her inside the cell.

"I'm not a terrorist."

"Lunch will be delivered between 1100 and noon," Fried Sausage said. She turned Waylee to face the door and pointed at the flap on the bottom. "It will come through that slot. You have half an hour to eat and then slide the tray, plate, cup, and utensils back underneath. If you fail to do so, you will not receive your next meal. Do you understand?"

"Jawohl, mein Kleinlichführer." She didn't know much German, but some phrases stuck in her head.

Fried Sausage gripped her arm, the one that was shattered in the car accident, hard enough to choke off the circulation. Even though it was healed now, Waylee winced.

"Don't you get sassy with me," the woman said. "I will knock you into the next century. Do you understand me?"

Waylee was pretty fit before the accident, but weak now from three months in the hospital, and couldn't wriggle free even without the shackles. She embraced the calmness that had kept her sane since her capture. "Yes."

The woman let go. “Alright then. Just remember who’s in charge if you wanna keep your teeth.”

Baldy unlocked and removed her shackles.

“After lunch,” Fried Sausage said, returning to bureaucratic mode, “you will finish your intake screening. You will review the Admission and Orientation Handbook and complete the inmate acknowledgment forms. Then you will meet your case manager and get your ID card.”

Sounds fascinating. “Can I have a pen and paper?” Waylee had started a book while confined at the Homeland Security hospital on Marine Corps Base Quantico, about how people could create a better world. She’d given it to her lawyers since she couldn’t bring anything when transferred. She had a good memory, though, and could start over.

“You can buy it from the commissary at the end of the week,” the woman said. “You have to fill out a Commissary Sheet.”

“How am I supposed to do that without a pen?”

The guards ignored her and left, locking the door behind them.

Waylee threw her bedroll and toiletries onto the plastic mat. She felt lonely already. She scanned the tiny cell and spotted a small camera lens in the ceiling, probably with complete coverage of the cell. She gave it the finger out of habit.

She peered out the narrow window, but the thick plexiglass was too scratched on the inside and too yellowed and dirty on the outside to see much. Unless her lawyers could pull a miracle and get acquittals on all charges, or get most of them dropped, she might be in a place like this the rest of her life. Her fingers shook and she fought for breath. Somewhere below, a scream, a guttural scream of terror, clawed toward the surface.

No. Fuck you. No. She brought her breath under control. In. Out. In. Out.

How long could she keep her shit together? Would they let her mingle with other prisoners? Even if she had to fight some of them, she had a lifetime of training at that, and it was a lot better than being alone fending off the enemy within.

She wouldn’t have any visitors. Kiyoko, Pel, Shakti, and Dingo were all out of the country. Safe, hopefully. Anyone else who visited, M-pat for example, might be implicated and arrested. She couldn’t allow that. Couldn’t ruin any more lives.

She’d just do what she could. It was all anyone could do. She’d achieved the near impossible a few months ago. She was a nobody with no money

and not much influence, but her conspiracy revelations struck a serious blow to the oligarchs, one which might ultimately topple them.

Anyone could challenge the system. Even in prison, she could reach out, show others the way.

Waylee unfolded her bottom sheet and wrapped it over the plastic mat. She laid her head on the small pillow and grasped the top sheet to her chest. She closed her eyes and tried to remember what she'd written in the hospital. It needed tightening and reorganizing.

Beneath her active thoughts, detectable if she stopped and focused on it, the feeling of dread wouldn't go away.

* * *

Dalton

Dalton Crowley sat strapped into his form-fitting passenger chair on the Ares International VTOL jet, staring out the rain-streaked window. They had just descended into the clouds, and the plane juddered in the wind. Dalton's eyes scanned the clouds for lightning flashes, not that there was anything he could do about it.

This had better be good. Vacations were sacred, especially when they involved two-on-one hookers and menus of designer drugs. But he'd been personally summoned by the vice-president of operations, Mikhail Petrov. You didn't say no to Petrov.

Dalton was the sole passenger in the VTOL's cabin. The other nine seats were folded up and the space filled with crates of food and other supplies, strapped to the floor inside webbing. The box nearest him was stamped 'Bermúdez.' Good stuff as rum went.

They exited the cloud cover. They were feet wet, over the Caribbean Sea. Through the rain, he saw green and brown mountains on the horizon. The southern coast of Haiti, only a couple hundred miles from the Dominican Republic sex resort he'd been staying at.

He had played a key role in the team assisting "General" Renaud, a well-funded ex-Haitian Army officer, three weeks ago. Renaud's Ares-trained mercenaries took the presidential palace and government buildings. Dalton had accompanied them to make sure they didn't screw up.

At the same time, Ares employees, well paid ex-special forces from around the world, secured the Port-au-Prince airport. With MediaCorp's

help, cyberspecialists took over the Comnet feeds and now controlled all information leaving the country. There was still some resistance in the slums and countryside, but it would be quelled soon enough.

No worries about interference from Brazil or the other left-leaning countries in the hemisphere. The U.S. State Department had announced the change in government was an internal matter and foreign governments shouldn't intervene. Dalton's job was done.

Or was it?

The plane circled, and the *Polemos* came into view. Closest he had to a home. A converted container ship, it was one of the company's biggest. Painted a uniform light gray, it was nearly a thousand feet long and displaced over 60,000 tons when loaded, but massive turbines could give it a speed up to 35 knots.

A wide landing platform stretched from the bow to near midship. Behind this was a hangar for VTOL aircraft and helicopters, and a big cargo crane. The six-story bridge superstructure and twin smoke stacks were aft.

The ship was headed into the wind. The big jet engines at the ends of the VTOL's wings rotated until they faced down. The plane slowed, matched the ship's speed, then descended toward the yellow circle on the landing deck.

They landed with a mild thump. After the pilot switched the engines off, Dalton unbuckled his seat harness and unclipped his big duffel bag from its alcove near the back. Everything he owned was in there - he hadn't lived in one place since joining Ares six years ago.

The rear hatch opened and a gangplank dropped. Bag over his shoulder, New York Giants cap on, Dalton walked out into the rain onto the gray steel deck.

A tractor emerged from one of the big hangar doors to tow the plane inside. Dalton bypassed the hangar and entered the receiving station on the starboard side.

The antechamber was small, bare, painted gray like everything else, and smelled like disinfectant. Sensors ran along the walls. The ceiling was perforated with holes that could release incapacitating gas.

He posed in front of the interior hatch camera and entered the monthly password on a keypad. A light turned green and he pulled the hatch open. A young, white-uniformed guard sat at a computer console inside. Dalton handed his Ares ID to the guard, who placed it face down on the desk skin.

The guard peered at his big wraparound screen. “Welcome back, Mr. Crowley.”

“Petrov wanted to see me.”

“You’ll have to check your weapons outside Command.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know.” Dalton had a custom semi-auto in a shoulder holster and an XD mini strapped to his ankle. Neither was loaded. He also had a serrated combat knife in a belt sheath and a neck knife beneath his left sleeve.

The check-in guard returned his badge. “Go on through.”

The next door unlocked and Dalton followed passageways and ladders to the command deck, checking his pistols and knives at the inner guard station. He had to wait an hour in the lounge before a synthesized voice came over a hidden speaker, “Mr. Crowley to the executive conference room.”

The conference room was dominated by a varnished table with a dozen leather chairs and individual data screens and touch pads. On one side, a picture window looked out to sea. It was still raining. Data screens covered the other walls. One displayed a map of the world, with business opportunities indicated by various icons. Haiti had an orange outline, meaning operation in progress but nearly complete.

Petrov was sitting at the far end of the table, an athletic but graying man wearing a dark Italian suit. Dalton wasn’t enough of a connoisseur to identify the brand. An aide sat next to the V.P., face hidden by a mirrored augmented reality helmet, black leather body suit and gloves covering everything else. Judging by the curves, the aide was female.

Neither Dalton nor Petrov were technically military, so no one saluted. “Reporting as ordered,” Dalton said.

“Sorry to interrupt your holiday,” Petrov said. He had a fairly strong Russian accent even after ten years in international waters.

Dalton tried to suppress his irritation. “Duty calls, I presume.” He sat at the near end of the table.

The V.P. gave a slight nod. “Good job in Haiti.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“We’ll be staying a little longer to help Renaud stabilize things,” he said, “and MediaCorp wants us to pump up security at their Gonâve facility.”

Why MediaCorp had a research facility on a barren island in the Gulf of Gonâve, Dalton had no idea. But it wasn’t his place to ask. “So you want me to go back?”

Petrov folded his hands. “We have another task for you. We’d like you to manage project 993.”

That was probably good. Another rung toward senior management. “What’s project 993?”

“To bring in a couple of fugitives.” Petrov turned toward the robotic-looking aide, who moved her fingers in the air. Three faces appeared on the wall screen directly opposite Dalton and slowly rotated. Names and other information displayed underneath.

On the left, an attractive white woman with intense eyes and a lot of face jewelry. Waylee Freid, 28, 5’ 5”, 135 lbs. In custody.

In the center, an olive-skinned man with close-cropped black hair, long sideburns, a mustache, braided beard, and pierced eyebrows. Pelopidas Demopoulos, 26, 5’ 11”, 170 lbs. FBI Ten Most Wanted Fugitive. Reward \$2 million.

Holy crap!

On the right, a pudgy black youth, light-skinned, short hair. Charles Marvin Lee, 17, 5’ 5”, 160 lbs. Another most wanted fugitive. Reward \$2 million.

“Alive, I assume?” Dalton asked. Dead would be easier, but the FBI preferred arrests.

Petrov unfolded his hands. “Yes, alive, so they can turn over names and stand trial. Your background makes you a good fit for this.”

Dalton had spent thirteen years on the Jersey City police, mostly as a detective, after his stint in the Army. Multi-talented, Ares HR acknowledged during his interview.

“They were part of a conspiracy to bring down the American president,” Petrov continued. “Ms. Freid and Mr. Demopoulos assumed false identities and infiltrated an invite-only event, where they recorded damaging information. And they weren’t content just to release it on the Comnet. They broke into Media Corporation’s broadcast headquarters, incapacitated a number of employees, and replaced the Super Bowl signal with a hit piece aimed at President Rand and MediaCorp.”

“I saw that.” He’d had money, a lot of money, on his hometown Giants, who lost the game. The message neither inspired nor bothered him. He didn’t really consider himself an American anymore. But he’d been impressed at the broadcast’s audacity and professional look, and thought it a nice touch to wait until a commercial break to air it.

“Mr. Lee and Mr. Demopoulos belong to the inner circle of the cyber-activist organization called the Collective. As part of their operations, they stole information and money from some very influential people. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security is seriously embarrassed, and so is Media Corporation. They caught Freid but the other two escaped. The FBI placed a million dollar reward each on Demopoulos and Lee, and MediaCorp matched it.”

Three more faces appeared beneath the first three. An Indian woman named Shakti Seecharan, 22. A mop-headed man of mixed ethnicity named Oscar Sanchez, aka “Dingo,” age 23. And a beautiful Asian girl, cheery smile, named Kiyoko Pingyang, age 19. Japanese? Chinese? Korean? Dalton could never tell the difference, but wow was she a looker.

“These are three of their accomplices,” Petrov said. “We know there are more, but they haven’t been uncovered yet. Other than Freid, who’s awaiting trial, the criminals fled to Guyana, where Seecharan and now Sanchez by marriage, have citizenship. Demopoulos, Lee, and Pingyang continued on to Brazil, where they were granted asylum.”

“Is there a reward on the bottom three?”

“No, so they’re not worth bothering with unless we need them as bait. So here’s where you fit in. We were approached by contacts in the U.S. government and MediaCorp, requesting assistance. They want Demopoulos and Lee, but a rendition mission is too risky. They’re not worth a diplomatic mess if anything goes wrong. Considering our developing relationships, we can’t pass this up. Besides, it’s an easy delivery.”

“So they’re in Brazil?”

Freid, Seecharan, and Sanchez disappeared from the wall screen. Demopoulos, Lee, and Pingyang slid to the right, making room for a map of South America. It zoomed in to São Paulo, a big blob along Brazil’s southern coast.

“According to NSA intercepts,” Petrov said, “they’ve been settled in São Paulo. But we don’t know where exactly.”

“That’s a big city.”

The faceless aide spoke for the first time. Female voice, Central American accent. “24 million people in the metro area. 13 million in the city boundaries alone.”

Petrov kept his attention on Dalton. “You’ll be the project manager, but we have an agent on site you’ll be working with.”

A balding, heavysset man with a dark mustache - possibly dyed - ap-

peared on the screen. Beneath: Olivier de Barros, Inspector, São Paulo Polícia Civil.

“De Barros works for us, but he’s a detective in the state investigative police. He speaks fluent English and obviously he knows the city. I don’t trust him, though. Never trust a man with two masters.”

“I’ll keep him under control.” Lots of Jersey City cops had worked side jobs - himself included - and the majority did it honorably.

“Good,” Petrov said. “He’ll get 20% of the reward after expenses, and you’ll get 40%.”

A million and a half, maybe. And he didn’t pay taxes. If he succeeded, maybe he could retire - buy a cabana someplace cheap like Guatemala or Mozambique. At 43, he was getting a little old for field ops. He’d been angling for upper management, but beaches and hookers were better.

“Thank you, sir,” he said. “I’ll bring them in.” *I can send Donnie and Madison all the money they need for college.* The government didn’t provide financial support anymore and tuition, even at public schools, was absurdly expensive.

Petrov pointed a thumb at the aide. “Martinez will send you everything we have on the fugitives.”

“The hot girl. Pingyang. If I bring her in too, can we get something for her?”

Petrov stared at him. “I told you Demopoulos and Lee are the targets. There’s no reward for anyone else. If Pingyang gets in the way, do what circumstances dictate, but don’t bother bringing her in.”

That meant a bullet to the head. He didn’t like killing women, but for \$1.5 million he’d shoot a pregnant nun.

