



## **Paladin Blake And the Secret City**

-From the files of Blake Aviation Security-

By Eric Nylund

### **Chapter One: Thicker than Water...**

Paladin Blake had never had it so good-and had never felt so lousy about it, either.

Gray light diffused through his office window; outside was the Santa Monica pier and the roiling Pacific. In another hour the sun would be up, and the citizens of Hollywood would start their day, take the trolleys to work, build planes, and pretend the world had a happy ending like every motion picture churned out by the studios.

He flipped on the intercom. "Tennyson, you there?"

"Yes," replied a voice with a British accent, "*working up a bit of a surprise on one of our Devastators.*"

"Surprise? Is there a problem?"

"*Everything is under control, my boy. Business as usual, smooth sailing and all that.*"

"Good." Paladin snapped off the intercom.

Smooth sailing and success were dreams easily bought into. Blake Aviation Security had been out of the red ink for a solid year. Barely. There had been a string of headline-smashing cases-The Phantom Prototype, the Klondike Caper, and the Destruction Island Incident-but good business *was* the problem.

He picked up a handful of telegrams from his in-box. There were urgent requests from Empire State bureaucrats and Dixie dignitaries, mission requests from Boeing and Hughes, and three checks wired as payment for his services.

Paladin glanced at the map of North America covering the west wall of his office. Pushpins and lines of string traced the air lanes protected by Blake Aviation; they crossed and crisscrossed from Seattle to Baja, Cuba to the Maritime Provinces. His business was making sure passengers and airfreight got delivered safely along those lines...and making sure that every pirate got what was coming to them.

Each line on the map was there because the state militias looked the other way when pirates attacked their competitors, and because there were behind-the-scenes cold wars raging between the tiny empires.

Blake Aviation Security prospered because of it. Paladin would have felt a lot better if there was no need for his protection-indeed, if there was no need for Blake Aviation, at all. The world was falling apart and he was profiting from it. That made him sick to his stomach.

Paladin flipped to the next telegram-and froze as he spotted the sender's address: Matthew Blake, Sky Haven, Free Colorado.

Paladin dropped the telegram like it was on fire.

Matthew Blake. Paladin thought of his brother as a dead man, and had for the last eight years. Paladin knew Matthew was really alive; it was just easier to pretend he wasn't.

Paladin opened his lower desk drawer and retrieved his bottle of fourteen-year old bourbon. He also pulled out the yellowed photograph of his father sitting on the wing of his plane, pistol in one hand, and in the other, a bottle identical to the one on Paladin's desk.

The picture was snapped on Thanksgiving 1927, when there had still been a Blake family: his father; his brother, Matthew, his sister, Flora; and, of course, Paladin.

The next day pirates shot his father down as the wily old bootlegger flew moonshine across the Colorado-Texas state line-pirates that Paladin had sworn he'd pay back. Every last one of them.

Matthew had his revenge on pirates, too. He took their money and planes, and whenever he could, their lives. He had become a pirate preying upon pirates, until eventually, he took anything from *anyone* that crossed his path. Now, Matthew was the thing he most hated.

Paladin uncorked the bottle of bourbon and poured a shot. He cradled the glass, warming the liquor until he smelled its smoky aroma.

His mouth watered. It brought back those days when he and Dad and Matthew had flown and fought and drank together. Like it was yesterday. Like it was a million years ago...and when Paladin had been a very different man.

Paladin poured the bourbon back into the bottle, replaced the cork, and then stowed it back in its drawer. Drying out was one of the hardest things Paladin had ever done. He should have poured the last of this booze into the ocean once and for all.

Ironically, his family crest appeared not only on the Blake Aviation Security masthead, but also on the labels of the most infamous brand of bourbon in speakeasies from Hawai'i to Iceland-Matthew still carried on the family tradition of moonshining and bootlegging. Anger

burned in Paladin's gut every time he saw the rampant black knight.

"Okay, Matthew," he whispered. "Let's see what you want."

Paladin tore the telegram open and shook out a slip of paper. It read:

*DON'T KNOW IF YOU CARE IF I LIVE OR DIE STOP. CORRECTION STOP. SURE YOU PREFER ME DEAD STOP.*

*SENDING THIS FOR FLORA STOP. OUR SISTER IS NO STRANGER TO TROUBLE STOP. BUT THIS TIME SHE HAS BITTEN OFF MORE THAN SHE CAN CHEW STOP.*

*MEET ME ALONE STOP. DUSK SATURDAY DURANGO FIELD FREE COLORADO STOP. OR NEVER SEE FLORA AGAIN STOP.*

*MATT*

Flora? What did Matthew mean by "she had bitten off more than she could chew?" Or that he'd never see her again? "So help me," Paladin said through clenched teeth, "if you're using her to get to me--"

-No. Not even Matthew would use Flora. Everyone loved Flora...that was her biggest problem.

Paladin had last heard from her a year ago. She was in Paris, hob-knobbing with the social elite and indulging in equally elite vices; her lifestyle made Dashiell's wild partying seem like a church bake sale in comparison. She had asked Paladin for money. He had wired her five hundred dollars along with a suggestion that she clean up. While he had hoped for the best, he knew the odds were long.

He re-examined the telegram. *Today* was Saturday-which figured. Leave it to Matthew to cut things close.

Paladin drew his .45 from its hiding place under his desktop, holstered it, then strapped it on. He flicked on the intercom. "Tennyson, get me a plane ready. Pronto."

"*Of course,*" came the reply. "*Can I inquire...why the rush?*"

"I'm coming over to show you what the rush is."

Paladin hung a "Be Right Back" sign on his office door, and stepped down the zigzag of stairs to the pier. He hurried past the bait stores and the ice cream parlor and the penny arcade to the old cannery warehouse. He unlocked the door and stepped inside.

The interior looked more like the inside of a combat zeppelin than a cannery. The machinery had been removed and a dozen planes hung on hooks from beams over the open water. Crates of bullets and rockets were stacked in a corner. Half a dozen engines on blocks were in various stages of assembly and disassembly.

Paladin's nose wrinkled involuntarily; the place always seemed to reek of tuna.

Blake Aviation Security had leased this building because the rent at the Burbank Airport went up every time Paladin made the headlines. The press and other unsavory types were always watching Paladin and his planes. There had been a few instances of sabotage, too; one such "accident" had nearly ended his career for good.

The cannery had been the perfect solution. Tennyson had seen to the architectural modifications, and designed a floatation chaise for their planes. These pontoons could be released in flight if needed, or left on for a water landing. Their planes were safer here and Blake Aviation could scramble flights at the drop of a hat.

Tennyson set down his wrench and ducked from under the engine compartment of a Devastator. He carefully wiped the grease from his hands on a clean towel. Somehow, Paladin mused as his loyal friend strode to greet him, Tenny never seemed to smudge his coveralls.

"What's the emergency this time, my friend?" he asked Paladin.

Paladin handed him the telegram.

Tennyson stroked his white beard as he read and then re-read the message. "It's a trap, of course," he murmured. "Matthew knows you are a man of character. A man who would not hesitate to charge to Flora's rescue."

"You're right," Paladin said. "But...she's my sister, Tennyson. What would you do? Ignore it?"

"What would I do?" Tennyson pondered this, frowned, and then declared, "Why I would come with you, naturally. Obviously, you'll require a wingman."

Paladin set a hand on his friend's shoulder. "Can't let you do that. Half the people in Colorado wouldn't mind seeing me dead. The other half wouldn't mind killing me."

Tennyson's hands clenched and then relaxed. "Our friend, Dashiell, has started a rather morbid pool wagering when your final mission will occur. I can see he is not too far from the truth." He exhaled. "But if you are determined to meet Matthew's deadline, you must take my Devastator. I have fine-tuned her motor to perfection. She is the fastest plane here-" he arched a bushy white eyebrow "-she has to be, to survive the modifications I have made."

Paladin eyed the plane curiously. "Show me."

Tennyson turned on his heels and marched toward the suspended Devastator. He stood under the aircraft with his arms akimbo. "Tell me what is different."

"I don't have time for a quiz-" But Paladin saw it immediately: all eight of the Devastator's hardpoints were loaded. Two pairs of rockets, however, pointed backwards.

"Ah, you've spotted them," Tennyson said. "The outer set are flash rockets. The inner two are high explosives. Both have a customized fuse that detonates a quarter of a second after launch."

Paladin shook his head with disbelief. "That'll blow off the tail."

"Correct," Tennyson replied. He mounted the ladder next to the Devastator and gestured inside the cockpit. "With one caveat, however."

Paladin climbed after Tennyson saw he pointed at a hand-painted line on the airspeed gauge.

"If you're flying faster than this," Tennyson explained, "there is a very good chance you will outrun the explosion-at least, that's what my calculations indicate. They should make for a nasty surprise to an opponent on your six, don't you think?" Before Paladin could reply,

Tennyson continued: "I was going to test the modifications tomorrow, with a flash rocket loaded with a charge of paint."

"Great." Paladin climbed past Tennyson and maneuvered into the cockpit. As he strapped himself in, he said, "I'll let you know how these contraptions work."

"Wait," Tennyson said. He climbed down and trotted to his locker. He returned with his lunch pail. "You need to eat. There is a thermos of English Breakfast tea as well."

"Thanks, old man."

"Just come back in one piece."

"I always try." Paladin fired up the engine and waved to Tennyson as he pulled away the ladder. He closed the canopy then flipped the release-a second of freefall-and the Devastator splashed into the ocean.

"I try," Paladin said to himself, "but it just never works out that way."

Paladin eased the throttle to one-half, and rode over gentle waves until he was a hundred yards from the pier, then he opened her up all the way. The Devastator nosed up and broke free of the ocean. Paladin pulled a lever and dropped the pontoons.

He shot into the sky, pointing the Devastator toward the rising sun.

Flora wasn't the only reason Paladin was going to meet Matthew. Paladin had promised his dead father that he'd get every last pirate in the sky...no matter what it took.

Even if that meant shooting down his own brother.

## **Chapter Two: White Knight / Black Knight**

Paladin banked his Devastator between red and gold mesas. Below, a herd of wild mustangs scattered, startled by the roar of the plane's powerful engine. It was four o'clock and he had just cleared the Navajo border. Headwinds, a brief layover, and trouble with the locals had held him up.

He had initially stopped to top off his tanks. If Matthew had a welcoming committee in the air waiting for him, the last thing he wanted was to be flying on fumes. Paladin also purchased a gallon of beige paint to cover the BAS logos on his Devastator. For the pirates in Free Colorado, those markings were bulls-eyes.

Back in Navajo territory, his pale skin-and the handful of Hollywood five-dollar gold coins he had used to pay for the fuel-had raised a few eyebrows at Sunning Lizard Airfield. They'd taken his money without comment, but four dust-colored Ravenscroft Coyotes had appeared when he'd tried to take off...to "escort" him to the border of the Navajo Nation. An escort that hadn't been free.

The mesas and meadows melded into stone-covered foothills, pine forests, and the snow-capped peaks of the Rockies. Paladin increased his throttle and climbed over them.

Free Colorado was certainly beautiful to look at from a thousand feet. It was too bad, he thought, that upon closer inspection she was infested with pirates, bootleggers and other human vermin. Like his brother.

Paladin would deal with Matthew, but first he intended to find out what happened to their

sister, Flora-assuming Matthew hadn't lied about her, and this wasn't an elaborate trap.

Durango Airfield was a dirt strip cut into the forest, a few shacks, and scattered fuel tanks. He circled the field, then eased this Devastator onto the bumpy runway, taxied to the end, and parked so he could take off quickly.

Sunning Lizard Airfield had been clean and neat-complete with whitewashed adobe buildings, chili reaños and piping hot coffee in the pilot's lounge. Durango, in contrast, was a disaster. The area was cluttered with discarded airframes which lined the runway. Old engine blocks and rusty machine parts were strewn across the ground, and the odor of grease, smoke and sour mash wafted from a leaning A-frame. Over the door of this structure was a sign with a painted figure of a woman encircled by a leering cobra, and the words: "Snakes and Ladders." It was just the kind of dump Matthew would like.

The drone of aircraft echoed off the mountains. Paladin squinted and spotted a line of six incoming Fairchild F4 Corsairs. The snub-nosed planes banked, descended, and then landed, one after another.

Paladin flipped the secret kill switch under his Devastator's control panel and climbed out of the cockpit. He checked his .45s-making sure each pistol had a round in the chamber-and then strode toward the Corsairs.

Matthew jumped down from the wing of his Corsair. He pulled off his flight cap and shook out a mane of gray hair. He was taller than Paladin by a head. Matthew's face was similar to Paladin's-the same strong jaw and blue eyes-but his features were weathered by age, crossed with frown lines, his eyes ringed with fatigue.

Matthew's wingmen clambered out of their planes and gathered around their leader. They looked like a tough bunch, in black flight jackets and combat boots. Each of them-three men and two women-packed a mix of weapons, mostly bulky revolvers. But they looked a little scared of Paladin.

Good, he thought. Let them be scared.

The truth was that Paladin was a little scared, too...of Matthew. Anything that crossed his brother's path, anyone that got in his way, Matthew made sure they never caused him trouble again. Pirates. Mercenaries. Lawmen. Civilians. They were all equal in Matthew's book: all equally dispensable. Did that extend to his kin as well?

Probably.

Paladin broke the silence: "You said to come alone, Matthew. I did...but I see you needed a crowd to face me."

Matthew took a step toward Paladin. "I don't need anyone's help to handle you, little brother." He glanced at the horizon, then back at Paladin. "I just didn't know if there'd be a few"-he spat the name out-"Blake Aviation planes buzzing around. Or maybe a combat zep."

"I came with everything I needed," Paladin replied, his right hand resting lightly on the butt of his holstered gun.

"Look, I didn't come here to exchange shots." Matthew frowned, and pulled his gloves off. "We've got important things to talk about." He nodded to the leaning A-frame. "Come on."

Matthew marched toward the "clubhouse." Paladin followed, and Matthew's crew trailed

behind them.

Paladin wasn't so sure if turning his back on this pack of wolves was a good idea. Then again, Matthew was many things-but he was *never* subtle. If this meeting had been a trap, it would have been sprung the instant Matthew had seen he had Paladin outnumbered.

Paladin pushed through the double doors of the A-frame. The smell stopped him cold-burning charcoal and the scent of bourbon so thick it made him choke. There was a player piano, a Ben Franklin stove with a fire crackling inside, and a stained bar top with a brass railing. The thing that caught Paladin's eye, however, was the back wall-shelves jammed with bottles: tall slivers of icy-looking Vodka, cobalt blue decanters, magnums of champagne, moonshine jugs, and rows of square bottles filled with an amber liquor that he was all too familiar with. For a dive, it was well stocked.

Matthew dropped a ten-pesado silver piece onto the counter-which was snatched up by the barkeep. "Drinks are on me tonight, gang. I'll be out back with my brother." He grabbed a bottle and two glasses, and held open the back door.

Paladin left, glad to be out in the fresh air. There was a small table set up on the back porch. The view of the mountain silhouetted against the purpling sky was magnificent.

"A drink." Matthew popped the cork. "For old time's sake."

Paladin sat and said nothing. He watched his brother pour from the bottle labeled with the same knight-and-shield insignia that Paladin used for Blake Aviation Security...only *this* knight was black, not white.

"I came to hear about Flora, Matthew, not to get drunk with you."

Matthew slammed the bottle on the table. "Can't you ease up for a second? I stick my neck out a mile to meet you, and you don't even have the decency to say 'hello,' or 'how've you been for the last six years?' Nice to see you, too."

"How have you been, Matthew?" Paladin's right hand eased from his lap to the holster on his right hip. He quietly unfastened the snap.

"I'm lousy, thanks for asking." Matthew filled the highball glasses to their brims-downed one, then the other. "You know what happens if word of us talking gets out? No decent bootlegger will get within spitting distance of me."

"Sorry to be a such an...embarrassment to you," Paladin said and set his hands on the table. "You want to tell me about Flora?"

"I guess we really don't have anything to talk about *but* her." He slumped into his chair. His eyes met Paladin's for a second; he opened his mouth to say something, hesitated, then blinked and looked away.

"Flora?"

"Yeah, Flora. You know she's always been in trouble-not the kind of trouble you and I get into, but booze and men and all that high society stuff." Matthew poured himself another shot. "Well, I guess it's not so bad when you stop to think about it."

"Uh huh," Paladin remarked.

Matthew was wrong. Flora had not *always* been trouble. Once, she had been enrolled at

Smith College with plans to go on to law school. Then their father had died and nothing mattered to her, except trying to forget. She wrapped herself in vice and extravagance. Liquor and men were just a start. She often indulged in things much more "sophisticated"...and much more unsavory.

But Flora was always everyone's darling. She entered the room and instantly became the center of attention. Everyone loved her. They couldn't help it, not even Paladin.

"This time," Matthew whispered, "she's in *real* trouble, little brother...I mean, she's in *way* over her head. She got mixed up with a New Orleans crowd."

"Last I heard she was in Paris."

Matthew snorted a laugh. "A year ago. She's spent time in London since then, and South Africa. I got a postcard from her last week to meet her for Mardi Gras."

Paladin winced. The only time Flora ever contacted *him* was when she needed cash. "And? You saw her?"

"Kind of." Matthew gazed into his glass. "She said she could only get away for an hour. She looked scared. And not for her...for me."

Matthew furrowed his brow, struggling to find the right words. "I followed her after she left and got a glimpse of her new friends. I asked the locals a few questions about them. I had to get rough before they coughed up what they knew."

"These friends of hers have money and hired muscle. Their kind buy and sell things, doesn't matter from where or from who. Guns, booze, narcotics-" Matthew paused, then added, "Well, you name it and they can get it for a price."

A smuggling outfit? Paladin could see why Flora would be with that crowd. Exotic delicacies and fast times would, for her, outweigh the danger involved.

"They call themselves 'Derpsins,' or 'Diespines'-something like that," Matthew said. "Thing is, when Flora's ready to move on, I don't think these people will let her go. She knows too much."

"You wired me because you think I can get her out?"

"You've got the guns and the men to go in there. Hell, you did it when you were in the Pinkertons-for strangers. You should be able to do the same for your own flesh and blood."

"Working with the Pinks was different," Paladin said. "I did all the wrong things for the right reasons. And, it was a long time ago."

"Well, there's another reason it's got to be you. If I get Flora out, then what? How do I tell her to clean up? I'm no angel. She'd laugh in my face and have every right to do it." Matthew drank his shot of bourbon. "But you're squeaky clean, a businessman. Hell, you're a *hero* if you believe the newspapers. She'll listen to you."

He was right-it had to be Paladin. Matthew would use a sledgehammer when a light touch was needed. He'd go in with guns blazing and get everyone killed. Paladin knew the odds that he could convince Flora to change her ways were long, but there was another way to help her. Dasheill had connections with a hospital in Santa Barbara that dried out studio starlets. That might do the trick.

"I'll see what I can do." Paladin stood. "Thanks for telling me, Matt."

"I knew you'd do it." Matthew stood, too, and held out his hand.

Paladin stared at it. He wanted to reach out and clasp it. He tried to move his arm, but it might as well have been made of lead. Matthew was his brother, his blood, but he was also everything that Paladin had sworn to fight.

"There's one last piece of business between us, Matthew. You're coming back with me. You're wanted in Hollywood, Texas, and a dozen other places for larceny, theft, murder-take your pick."

Matthew retracted his outstretched hand. He looked his bother up and down, then laughed. "You think you can take me? With five of my crew to back me up? You're a hoot, little brother."

How fast could Matthew draw his gun with a quarter bottle of bourbon in him? Probably too quick for Paladin's liking.

"I mean it, Matthew. You come with me now, the easy way...or later, the hard way."

Matthew's smile vanished. "Get out of here. Get out of here and get Flora-or don't. I don't care anymore."

"Everything okay, boss?" Matthew's crew stood silhouetted in the frame of the back door.

"Get back inside," he growled at them. "This is none of your businesses."

Matthew then turned back to Paladin and whispered, "If I ever see you again, on the ground or in the sky, I'll kill you. Brother or no brother."

"That's good to know," Paladin said. "It looks like we *do* have something in common."

He stared at his brother-years of drinking and hard living had made Matthew's eyes sunken and his skin pallid. In the shadows, Matthew's head looked more like a skull than human flesh. Paladin didn't know the man anymore-no, that wasn't right. He knew him, he just wished he didn't.

"Goodbye, Matthew."

Paladin turned his back on his brother and marched back to the runway. He climbed into his Devastator and tried to stop his hands from shaking. He had promised his father he'd get every last pirate in the air. But what would Dad say about this? Which of his sons would he disapprove of more? Matthew for his murdering and thieving or Paladin for wanting to bring his own brother down?

That didn't matter. His father was long dead, and Paladin was his own man, with his own reasons for fighting.

Paladin flipped the ignition switch, cranked the Devastator's engine, and taxied onto the runway. He pushed the throttle full open and shot into the sky. The moon rose past the edge of the mountains, casting silver and shadows into the valley. He climbed to three hundred feet then banked and headed back toward Durango Field.

Sometimes, he thought, you need a light touch to solve your problems. This wasn't one of those times.

Paladin lined up with the runway and dove. He opened fire, peppered the Corsairs on the ground with .30-caliber bullets, then launched rockets one and four.

He pulled back on the stick. He risked a quick glance, and saw two planes explode as men and woman ran onto the airstrip. Paladin circled back for another pass, but the remaining Corsairs were already taking off.

### **Chapter Three: In the Shadow of the Black Knight**

Paladin Blake pushed the stick forward and sent his Devastator into a dive, right toward the runway-and straight at the first two Corsairs gathering speed on the field. Just as their wheels cleared the ground, he opened fire.

His Devastator's .40-calibers stitched a hail of gunfire across their tails and canopies. The Corsairs dropped to the earth, bounced, and crashed into the trees at the end of the landing strip.

Had one of those been Matthew's plane? A sickening heaviness settled in his gut. Paladin pulled back on the stick and banked for another pass.

His radio crackled. "Shooting men on the ground, huh?" It was Matthew's voice. "So the great Paladin Blake isn't the hero the papers say he is. I knew you'd show your true colors."

Paladin didn't bother replying; it had been four-against-one with him on the short end of that deal. He didn't gamble with odds like that...especially when the bet was *his* life.

He made another pass over Durango Field. He spied the glint of reflected moonlight off the wings of the two remaining Corsairs-now aloft and behind him. Paladin had survived two-on-one dogfights before...but not flying against Matthew.

He pushed the throttle to full, started to bank right, hoping the pirates would follow. Paladin quickly reversed and pulled hard to the left.

Corsairs were notorious for their high engine torque-which made starboard turns easier, but port turns more difficult. Paladin had, hopefully, bought himself a little maneuvering room.

He glanced back. One of the pirates had fallen for the feint; the enemy pilot broke right and was trying to recover and find Paladin. The other Corsair was still on his tail. That *had* to be Matt.

Matt-who learned to fly in the Great War-would never be eloquent with words, or successful with the ladies, but he was a brilliant pilot. He'd shot down five Germans in Europe-all of them aces-and never had the favor returned. Paladin knew he was outclassed.

"Give it up, brother," Matt said. "Land and I'll let you walk out of here-that's the best offer you'll get from me."

That was a lie. No one crossed Matthew Blake and lived to tell about it.

Paladin dove, weaving back and forth, skimming over the tree line.

Matt was right on his tail.

A burst of .50-caliber fire peppered his Devastator's wing. Paladin pulled up.

The Corsair followed-less than a hundred feet behind him and closing.

He was toying with Paladin. Matthew couldn't miss at this range. One machine gun burst or rocket would shred his plane to confetti.

Rocket? Paladin thought, struck with sudden inspiration. He risked a glance at his port wing. It was still there: the tail of Tennyson's aft-facing rocket.

Matthew couldn't miss at this range...but neither could Paladin. He squeezed the trigger, twice fast.

The number one rocket launched forward as expected. The second rocket's control flashed brightly, forcing Paladin to look away. A few seconds later, Paladin saw the blue-white starburst of the rocket's detonation.

Bits of metal pinged off his canopy as Paladin pulled into a steep climb. His Devastator shuddered; the tip of his port wing was gone, still smoldering where the rocket had ripped away the hardpoint.

He inverted and looked for his brother. Matthew's plane was far below...trailing smoke and fire, but still aloft.

The Corsair banked, slowly climbed, and headed southwest.

Paladin began to dive towards his brother. His Devastator's canopy-starred by bullet holes-exploded inward, and bits of glass slashed his cheek. Paladin looked about wildly and saw tracers spitting from the other Corsair at nine o'clock.

He ignored Matthew, righted the Devastator, and headed toward the immediate threat.

The Corsair turned to face him. A head-to-head attack? Paladin's Devastator was outgunned against the Corsair's .50-calibers. He couldn't out-shoot him; he'd have to out-fly him.

Paladin cut the throttle to half and let the Corsair close. A half-mile out, it opened fire.

Stupid. Matthew was a pilot of unparalleled cunning, but he apparently hadn't passed any of that skill on to his wingmen.

Paladin pulled back, started to climb, then cut the throttle. He stalled and dropped like a rock-he fought the stick to keep the nose pointed straight up. The Corsair rushed over him. Paladin rammed the throttle to full power; the engine roared to life, and slowed his fall.

He fired rocket number three. A trail of smoke connected the two planes-followed by a brilliant flash as the rocket impacted on the Corsair's undercarriage. The Corsair's port wing-severed at the fuselage-fluttered away in freefall. What was left of the Corsair plummeted to the ground.

Paladin quickly shoved the stick forward, sending his plane into a shallow dive before leveling off-another few seconds and his unconventional maneuver would have been unrecoverable.

He exhaled, trying to relax. The fight wasn't over. He still had to deal with Matthew.

He nosed his plane south, and followed the stream of black smoke from his brother's plane.

The remaining Corsair attempted to evade as best as it could, trying not to let Paladin's line up on his six. Matthew wasn't going anywhere, though. A smear of oil fanned out from his plane's nose and along the wing.

Paladin cut his throttle back to a quarter power and easily caught up.

Matt's voice crackled over the radio. "Nice trick with the rocket, little brother," he chuckled and coughed. "You did it. You got me." There was a burst of static, then, "Now you're going have to finish me, too. You're not taking me in alive."

Paladin clicked off his radio, and then dropped behind the Corsair.

He *had* to take him out. If he didn't, Matthew would keep bootlegging...and worse, he would keep killing. He was just another pirate that had to be shot down, or every death Matthew caused from now on would be on Paladin's conscience, too.

Paladin's squinted, lining up his shot.

His finger tightened on the trigger-

-then, reluctantly, relaxed.

What was the matter with him? Was it because he had used Tennyson trick rocket to take Matthew out? No. Fairness in dogfights was a luxury Paladin could rarely afford.

Matthew would have shot Paladin down if their positions were switched. Paladin couldn't bring himself to shoot, though. Maybe *that* was the biggest difference between them. And Matt, like it or not, was his brother. Like Flora, Matthew was a part of him-no matter what kind of man he was.

Paladin flicked on the radio. "Get out of here," he said. "I'll get back to you soon enough." He broke off, opened the throttle to three quarters, and banked east, towards New Orleans. "I've got better things to do right now. Like save our little sister."



Paladin cradled his coffee and stared at his black reflection at the bottom of the cup. He had gotten nowhere fast. It had been twenty-four hours since he landed at Pontchartrain Aerodrome. Since landing, he had canvassed the city searching for Flora-and her new smuggler friends.

He had rented a room, cleaned up and bought a suit, and then hit the high-class joints: Four Aces, Bourbon Beach, and King's Retreat. His questions about importers only got him leads on a legitimate French textile manufacturer and an invitation to the Banker's Cotillion.

His luck changed as he worked his way down the lists of reputable bars and jazz clubs to places like Furious Fists, The One-Legged Dog, and Le Petit Scandal, establishments where the bouncers frisked everyone as they entered and handed out receipts for confiscated sidearms.

Paladin got plenty of leads on importers, illegal and otherwise, especially since he was buying drinks for those talking...until he mentioned the name Matt gave him, "Derspins." When Paladin dropped the name, the flow of information vanished like water into sand.

Whoever this guy is, Paladin thought, he values his privacy.

He had stopped on his way back to the hotel for coffee at a tiny bar called Officer's Roost

located atop a three-story colonel on Cataouatche Avenue. The interior was decorated with polished copper and brass ship fixtures and had open balconies overlooking the Mississippi with a view beyond of the brightly canopied storefronts and gas lanterns of Jefferson Heights. An occasional barge drifted by on the river, almost serene if you ignored the anti-aircraft guns mounted on their prows.

"More coffee?" The bartender refilled Paladin's cup before he could reply. He was in his mid-sixties, had a slight Creole accent, and a slick of long black hair streaked gray. He jerked his head to the back of the bar, "Or would *monsieur* prefer something stronger?"

"No, I don't-" Among the rainbow colors of aperitifs, brandy, and bourbon decanters behind the bar, Paladin spotted two bottles of Dark Knight whiskey. That threw him for a moment, remembering Matthew and his sister and how much trouble they were. "No," he said. "Thanks all the same."

The bartender followed Paladin's gaze. "You have a taste for the best." He retrieved the square-bottomed bottle. "This is my personal favorite as well, particularly the rather elegant smoky aftertaste. But almost too expensive to keep in stock, *non?*"

"I don't see why." Paladin said and took a sip of his coffee. "That quart cost thirty cents to make. Even if it got marked up for a tidy profit you still shouldn't pay more than two or three dollars for it."

"*Mon Dieu!*" The bartender leaned closer. "If you can get a bottle for that price, I would very much be interested."

A new angle to the search for Flora dawned on Paladin. He had been looking for these smuggler friends of hers by asking questions, by playing at being a cop. That wasn't working...so maybe he could make them come to him. Or at least meet him half way.

And the best way to make a smuggler come to you was with a high profit margin.

Paladin asked, "What do *you* pay?"

"Twenty-five francs, gold standard, when such a bottle can be found. It is very popular." The bartender then leaned even further across the bar top and whispered conspiratorially, "You said you could find such a fine whiskey for three dollars a bottle?"

"I should say so." Paladin smiled. "I make the stuff."

The bartender raised one eyebrow and examined label on the bottle. Matthew's name was there, listed as chief refiner and president of the "company."

"*Monsieur* Blake? Matthew Blake?"

There was an element of risk to this. Anyone who knew Matt would not only see that Paladin was an imposter, but they might see enough family resemblance to figure out who he *really* was.

On the other hand, if Black Knight whiskey was so rare in New Orleans, it was unlikely Matthew was bootlegging here. Anyone running booze from Free Colorado would have to circumnavigate Texas and the Rangers...something even Matthew would think twice about doing.

"Yeah, I'm Matthew Blake," Paladin lied. "Glad you like my whiskey so much. That means a lot to me." He reached to shake the bartender's hand.

The bartender crossed his arms. "Really, *monsieur*. Do not make a fool of me." He started to replace the bottle on the shelf.

"That aftertaste you so like," Paladin said quickly, "we that get from burning Aspen saplings. Tricky, because you have to get it close enough for the smoke to settle into the liquor, but not close enough to ignite the stuff. Then, we age it for three months in oak barrels. Let it breathe for a few minutes before you drink some, and you'll smell and taste it."

The bartender considered this, looked at the bottle, and then back to Paladin. "Indeed?" He set the bottle back on the bar top, then took Paladin's hand. "It is an honor to meet you," he said with the utmost sincerity. "I am Jacques Apollonaire."

"The pleasure's mine, Jack." Paladin held on to his hand and gripped it tighter. "Especially if it's like you say and we can get twenty-five francs a bottle."

Jacques smiled a little uneasily and he slipped his hand from Paladin's.

"That's why I'm here," Paladin said. "I need help moving this stuff. I'm not fool enough to bust my way into someone else's territory. I figure there's got to be someone running things here. Someone who can protect, distribute, and export whatever I bring in."

"I see." Jacques plucked at the tips of his moustache.

"I keep hearing one name," Paladin said, struggling to keep his voice even. "Some guy named 'Derspins' or something. Ever hear of him?"

Jacques stopped fiddling with his moustache. He cast a furtive glance about his empty bar, then whispered, "*Monsieur*, I fear you've been somewhat misinformed. This 'Derspins' is not a man. It is *Die Spinne*, a rather...formidable business venture. These people would not handle a mere bottle, or even a case or ten cases. They deal in quantity."

"How about three hundred cases?"

Jacques whistled appreciatively.

"And if you're going to be my middleman, I'll cut you in on a percentage. Provided, of course, that we have a deal?"

Jacques considered this for a long time. He wrung his hands, then set his sweaty palms on the bar top. "I can arrange a meeting...if you can deliver the goods to New Orleans from Free Colorado. That will be no small task."

"If it was easy," Paladin replied, "there'd be no profit in it, no?"

Jacques nodded knowingly.

Where would Paladin scare up three hundred cases of whiskey? And how the heck was he going to get it through Texas? Impossible. But he had to. It might be the only way to find Flora.

Paladin finished his coffee and stood. "I better get busy, friend. I'll be at Pontchartrain Aerodrome with the stuff in one week. Guaranteed."

#### **Chapter Four: Fire in the Hole**

Paladin Blake fired the twin sixty-calibers; the jarring kickback nearly rattled the teeth out of

his head. He swiveled the guns to track the incoming Devastator as it strafed the *Aegis*. The nimble plane twisted and turned and tried to shake him.

"Not today," Paladin said through gritted teeth. He tore into the Devastator's black wings and shredded the bat-winged Jolly Roger insignia.

From the machinegun nest he watched the flaming wreckage plummet to the mountains below. He turned and looked up and down and then side to side. No point in listening for incoming planes-the drone of the 600 horsepower Aereodyne engine he was practically standing on drowned out everything.

The skies looked all clear. They'd been lucky. The Blood-drinker gang had caught them by surprise, dropped out of the clouds and had them surrounded before Paladin could launch a single plane from the *Aegis*. Good thing she was no ordinary zeppelin. The *Aegis* carried enough armor plate for a battleship, had twin sixties protecting each engine nacelle, and well-armored rocket launchers (a trick he had learned from a Unionist group during the "Phantom Prototype" case) sat next to her seven-inch broadside cannons.

He should have stayed at the helm of the zeppelin when the Blood-drinkers ambushed them- instead he had climbed out here, asking to catch a bullet. But he was leading his men and women into the heart of lawless Free Colorado territory, getting them to fight a battle that should have been a family matter. Risking life and limb was the least he owed them.

Paladin turned toward the hatch, but had to pause to admire the view. Hanging off a zep at five thousand feet, skimming the edge of snow-covered mountains wasn't something he did every day.

Along the spine of the Rockies, clouds had caught on the peaks. The icecaps thickened in spots, and compressed into glacier flows. To the east were the rolling green hills of Texas, and to the west, mesas and desert that stretched all the way to the Pacific and his Santa Monica office.

He'd flown straight back there from New Orleans, ordered Tennyson to prep the *Aegis* and removed all BAS insignia from her, and then assembled an all-volunteer crew.

Paladin unclipped his safety harness, opened the hatch, and climbed back inside-down the ladder, then across the catwalk. Inside the cavernous belly of the zeppelin, his crew prepared the squadron of Furies and the tiny Ford Hoplite Autogyros.

Tennyson caught up with him in the corridor to this cabin. His bushy white eyebrows furrowed over his eyes. "I wish you would let me launch a fighter escort," he whispered. "We should at least scout the area."

"Not this time, Tenny." Paladin entered his cabin; he held the door open for his old friend, then closed it behind them.

The room was spartan: a bunk bed, the lower half full of radio equipment; a sturdy desk bolted to the floor; one wall covered with a map of North America and shelves of rolled up aerial charts.

Paladin keyed the intercom to the bridge. "Reduce speed to one-quarter. Move in nice and easy."

"Aye Aye, Mister Blake."

Paladin turned to Tennyson. "I agree the *Aegis* is vulnerable. We *should* send out scouts...but we're near the distillery. The less noise we make from here on, the better."

Tennyson leaned against the bunk and crossed his arms. "That is not what I meant. The *Aegis* can take care of herself. It is you I am worried about. You have a crew of twenty-seven. You, personally, should not be taking all the risks."

"This time I have to," Paladin replied "None of you should even be here, let alone sticking your necks out."

Tennyson leaned forward, setting his hand on the desk. "We trust you. We want to help. You wouldn't place any of us in danger unless there was good cause."

Paladin wondered how good *this* cause was. Rescuing his sister, despite the fact that she didn't want to be rescued, was a worthy thing...it was just the way he had to do it that bothered him. Dealing with Matthew-and a host of bootleggers, pirates, thieves, and smugglers-was bad enough; posing as one of their ilk was a bitter pill to swallow. He would have preferred a stand up fight.

Paladin retrieved a map from the shelf and spread it out. It was hand-drawn, with yellowed edges, and was covered with the secret symbol language of the Rocky Mountain moonshiners. Cryptic code names dotted the map, places with names like "Fire-water Glacier" and "Poison Tasters Hot Springs" and "Ghost Whispering Canyon."

"The distillery is here." Paladin indicated a blank spot on the map near a place named Knifeback Ridge. "We'll get the *Aegis* close to this peak, and I'll chute down. If the weather holds, I'll take an hour to cross the glacier on foot. Get the autogyros ready. When I need them I'll fire the flare gun-then give me five minutes before you charge in guns blazing."

"It has been more than a decade since you were there." Tennyson stroked his white beard as he considered the location of the distillery. "Matthew could have moved your family's operation."

Paladin inwardly winced at the Tennyson's choice of words: "Family operation." The distillery had been there as long as anyone could remember. It had supplied hooch to Confederate troops in the Civil War; Paladin's Father won the place in a poker game and Matthew had inherited it when he died...and now Paladin was going to take it away from him.

"It's there," Paladin said. "They use the runoff water from the glacier; nothing tastes quite like it."

"And Matthew?"

"When I catch up with him-" Paladin opened his desk drawer, and removed his pair of .45s. "-I'll make sure he gets what he deserves."



Paladin trudged over the rock-strewn icy summit. The snow pack was neither too slushy nor too hard-he still half skied, half slipped down the mountainside on his descent.

The wind whipped around his parka as he crawled to the edge of the cliff and gazed through

his binoculars. He spotted saw a thin wisp of steam rising from the face. He couldn't see it, but he knew hidden in the shadows was the cavern entrance. He squinted and saw something new: a wooden platform, cobbled onto the rock face, just large enough for a single autogyro.

There was no autogyro there, but there was a man sitting on a stool, reading a book, a rifle in his lap.

Paladin thumbed the focus back and forth to get a better look. The man had leathery skin, stringy gray hair and a long handlebar mustache. Jeremiah Grimson. He'd been up here when Paladin had first come to this place with his Dad, fifteen years ago.

Paladin couldn't shoot at him. First, he didn't fire on unsuspecting old men, though he had few illusions that Grimson would return that favor. Second, at this range he'd likely miss; the sound would certainly bring everyone out of that hole-which Paladin wanted to avoid...for the moment, at least.

There had to be another way. Paladin donned his goggles and picked his way down the rough trail that led to the platform. He affected a limp, then waved his hands and called, "Hey, Grim!"

The old man was so startled he nearly fell off the stool. He shielded his eyes to see through the glare reflecting off the snow, and then he raised his rifle.

"Come on," Paladin said like he was an old friend. "Help a feller out."

Grim started forward. He stopped a dozen paces away for Paladin, still squinting and looking unsure. "Hold it right there, partner."

"I twisted this knee real good, Grim. I could use a hand."

Concern creased the old timer's brow. He slung the rifle and ambled over to Paladin.

Paladin stood up straight. "Remember me?"

The old man's eyes widened in surprise. "Youngun' Blake." He smiled but it quickly evaporated. "Matthew's madder than a stepped-on rattlesnake over what you did." He brought up his gun.

Paladin's uppercut caught Grimson under his chin, lifted him off the ground and sent him skidding along the trail. "Sorry, old timer. No time for tearful reunions." He dragged the old man up the path, and out of sight.

Paladin raised the flare gun and fired it. There was a dull "whoomp" and a star rose into the air, arced, and burned out. Five minutes until the cavalry rode in.

He trotted to the cavern entrance. A set of rickety wooden stairs spiraled into the darkness. He started down them. There was a strong breeze flowing out, carrying with it smells of Aspen smoke and sweet fermenting corn mash-so pungent it made his eyes water.

The stairs ended and Paladin hunkered down under them, letting his vision adjust to the dim light of flickering lanterns.

He was in a dome-shaped chamber three hundred feet across; stalactite and stalagmite teeth punctuated the ceiling and floor. A fire pit blazed in the center with dozens of closed copper kettles, each bigger than a bathtub, bubbling away. Rail tracks ran to and from the

room. There were bunks for ten men. Shadowy figures stirred the pots, pushed squeaky carts, and talked in hushed whispers.

Paladin remembered the place, but didn't recall it being such a big operation. In his prime, his father only had four small stills.

He crouched against the wall and eased through the shadows to the back of the chamber, through a long tunnel, and emerged in a second vaulted chamber. No one here. There were, however, a hundred oak barrels stacked atop one another. This is where the bourbon aged, three years at least-but for special releases there were barrels in the back that hadn't been tapped since the turn of the century.

Paladin moved on, his .45s drawn. The tunnel twisted; he paused and listened, but heard nothing save the dripping of water. He rounded the corner and stopped short. The tunnel he remembered had been excavated since he was last here. The tunnel had, long ago, tapered into a rathole; now, it stretched two stories high, and ran a hundred feet to a dead end. Along both walls, stacked and packed all the way to the ceiling, were crates stamped with the Black Knight logo....not the three hundred crates he had hoped would be here-but closer to three thousand.

Matthew had been busy. And, Paladin thought with a suppressed grin, Matt had been stupid to retain so much stock. It was ironic that Paladin had been the one to find a solution to his distribution problem...and doubly ironic that Matthew had been so close to discovering that his contacts in New Orleans could have been his ticket to the big time.

But that was about to end for good.

Paladin glanced at his watch. Time was up. He walked back to the main room, crouched in the shadows, and waited.

The sound of autogyros started as a distant buzz, then became a purr that filed the cavern, echoed and reverberated off the walls. The shadowy figures working on the "production floor" stopped, then ran toward the cavern's entrance.

Paladin walked through the chamber, making sure everyone had left, then followed them up the stairs.

Six men stood at the mouth of the tunnel. "That's not Matt's bird," one of them said. "Who are they?"

"Shoot 'em when they land and we'll sort it out later," another bootlegger replied "Where'd that old buzzard Grim get to, anyway?"

"Hold it!" Paladin yelled. "One move and I'll drop all of you."

The pirates, startled by the shout from behind them, whirled around and leveled their guns at him. When they saw Paladin, alone and armed only with pistols, they relaxed. The group's leader smiled with false cheerfulness. "You better go on and drop those pistols, son. You're outgunned."

Paladin put two fingers to his lips and whistled loudly. In response, a dozen of Paladin's men, led by Tennyson, rushed into the tunnel's entrance, shotguns, pistols and Tommy guns at the ready.

"Not the way I count it," Paladin said.



Paladin took three hundred cases of Black Knight Bourbon and loaded them onto the *Aegis*. Not a drop more.

The moonshiners had told him that Matthew was in Aspen, getting a busted leg fixed. If Matt had been here, Paladin was sure only one of the Blake brothers would have walked away alive.

He ordered his crew back to the *Aegis*. Only Tennyson remained in "Bumblebee," his customized Hoplite, perched on the landing platform.

Paladin opened the autogyro's door, and Tennyson handed him the fire axe he had requested.

"I would ask if you are sure about this," Tennyson said, "but you are always sure, aren't you?"

Paladin took the axe and hefted it.

"A man cannot escape his past," Tennyson told him.

"Maybe not...but a man can make a few good dents in it." Paladin gave his friend a wry smile. "Get the 'Bee running. We'll need to take off pretty quick."

Tennyson nodded and started the Hoplite's engine.

Paladin descended the stairs, past the boiler room, through the barrel chamber, and halted in the tunnel lined with cases of Black Knight Bourbon.

He swung the axe, cracked a case and let the liquor and broken glass spill on to the floor. He swung again, busted open another, then another, and he didn't stop until his shoulders were stiff, the walls of crates lay in ruin, and he stood ankle deep in liquor. The smell was overpowering. Paladin was drenched in sweat and alcohol. He tasted bourbon and salt on his lips.

Paladin sloshed into the barrel chamber, toppled them all and sent waves of bourbon splashing onto the floor.

Paladin took a long look at the place. He remembered when he-along with his father and his brother-had ground corn here, simmered the stuff, and gotten drunk. But the booze had killed his father. It had turned Matthew into a monster. And maybe it had turned Paladin into what he was, too.

He backed into the boiler room and retrieved a lantern from the wall. He threw the lantern against the far wall; it shattered and burning oil seeped over the rock...toward the lake of bourbon in the tunnel.

Paladin ran. He took the stairs four at a time, bounded onto the platform and into the cockpit with Tennyson.

"Go!" he shouted.

Bumblebee lifted, turned once, and rose into the air.

Flames mushroomed from the mouth of the cavern. Paladin felt the dull thumping explosions within the mountain. Dribbles appeared from the cracks and faults in the cliff face; the liquor ignited and sent plumes of smoke skyward. Bourbon gushed from the rock, as thirty years of stock drained from the caverns-cascading down the mountainside in waterfalls of fire.

They watched it burn for several minutes, then Tennyson asked, "What now?"

"New Orleans," Paladin said. "We've got our calling card. We meet this *die Spinne* gang...and then we get Flora."

### **Chapter Five: Midnight's Heart**

Paladin Blake set down the case of liquor with a slosh. The noise echoed throughout the hangar. There wasn't a soul here at five in the evening-and the only planes present were their Ford Hoplites and an ancient dust-covered Fokker biplane. In fact, this end of the Pontchartrain Aerodrome was deserted. The lack of activity in the Aerodrome was good for what they needed to do...but it still gave Paladin the creeps.

Half an hour ago, the *Aegis* drifted overhead at six thousand feet-hidden inside a cumulonimbus-and launched two Hoplites. Paladin and Tennyson piloted them down to five hundred feet, cut their engines and drifted through the tidal fog as noiselessly as a pair of falling leaves. They landed near Hangar Six, where he had agreed to meet Jacques Apollonaire, the mysterious New Orleans barkeep that was Paladin's only link to the *Die Spinne* smuggling syndicate.

Tennyson leaned against the stacked crates and mopped sweat from his bushy white brows with a pristine handkerchief. "We couldn't have the crew do this?" he asked with a tired sigh.

"Think of it as our new employee fitness program," Paladin answered with a sly grin. "Besides, we can't have any of our clean-cut crew here. It's just you and me-small-time bootleggers with aspirations."

"More like perspiration," Tennyson muttered. He carefully refolded his handkerchief and tucked it back into his white coveralls. He then fetched the last crate from his customized Hoplite, "Bumblebee."

Paladin absentmindedly scratched the stubble on his chin. He hadn't had a shave or shower for a week. He hardly looked like himself anymore-but more like his brother than he cared to admit.

In fact, his rugged appearance-necessary for the undercover job he was about to undertake-had been a problem in Texas. He had flown ahead of the *Aegis* to secure her safe passage across the Oklahoma territory, and had landed at the Ranger Airstrip One outside Amarillo. Texas Rangers tended to act first-jailing or shooting anyone who remotely looked like trouble.

Luckily, Marshal Jed Bouregard was stationed there and recognized Paladin. Last year, Blake Aviation had unofficially helped the Rangers blast raiders out of some Aztec ruins across the border. Jed had asked no embarrassing questions and gave the *Aegis* an escort all the way to Galveston.

Paladin's attention snapped back to the present. Beyond the frosted glass of the hangar's

massive doors, two shadows moved toward the side entrance.

He waved at Tennyson to get his attention, then nodded at the biplane in the corner. Tennyson trotted to the plane and crouched behind the fuselage. Paladin ducked behind his Hoplite, drawing his pistol.

The side door opened and two brawny uniformed police entered the hangar. Their guns were out, too. They sidled over to the Hoplite, and Paladin held his breath.

One of them took off his cap and scratched his bald head. He spotted the crates and said, "Bingo."

The other cop grinned with gapped teeth.

There was no way that they were coincidentally making their rounds in this deserted part of the Aerodrome. They knew exactly what they were looking for. Paladin tightened his grip on the pistol.

"And what have we here?" The bald cop pointed to the biplane and the exposed boot that belonged to Tennyson. He sniffed. "Smells like a bootlegger to me." They both chuckled.

Tennyson stood and smoothed out his coveralls. He held up his hands, almost looking relieved to see them. "No trouble here, officers. I'm always happy to help the local law enforcement. You see I'm really not a-"

Paladin quickly and quietly stepped behind the cop with the gapped teeth. He brought down the butt of his .45 on the hapless officer's skull. The cop dropped onto the cement floor.

"If you twitch," Paladin said to the policeman's partner, "it'll be the last move you make. Your gun: put it on the ground. Now."

The officer hesitated...then slowly knelt and deposited his gun.

"Put your hands up."

Tennyson looked horrified. Paladin motioned him out with a wave of his gun.

"It's a set up," Paladin muttered to Tennyson.

"No," the bald cop said. "It's no set up, Mr. Blake. We're supposed to check the place out and make it safe for you guys."

Paladin grimaced. The cop had called him "Mr. Blake"-but did they know he was *Paladin* Blake? Or did they still think he was Matthew?

Before Paladin could question the cop further, he spied a new figure silhouetted in the door. He wheeled and pointed his gun.

Jacques Apollinaire stepped forward. He wore a black tuxedo and bow tie and had his hair slicked back. "Welcome back to New Orleans."

"A bit overdressed for the occasion, aren't we?" Paladin asked. He prodded the bald cop in the back with the muzzle of his gun. "Get over there, buddy."

The cop stumbled toward Jacques.

"I have an appointment to keep after this business," Jacques said. He brushed the lapels of

his tuxedo. The suit is appropriate attire, I assure you. As for the police, you have my apologies. They are in our employ." He shot a contemptuous glance at the bald officer and his companion on the floor. "They keep away government officials with their ludicrous two hundred percent excise tax. They were also here to prevent-" He crinkled his eyebrows. "What is the expression? The 'double cross?'"

"You've read too many novels," Paladin told him.

"I wish someone would explain what all this is about," Tennyson whispered. "I don't see why, Pal-"

Paladin silenced Tennyson with a slight shake of his head. That's all he needed was to be called by his real name; Tennyson was even less accustomed to undercover work than Paladin was.

"Tenny, this the Jacques. Jacques, this is Ten...Tennessee Gordon, the finest brewer and distiller of bourbon on either side of Appalachia."

Jacques clicked his heels and gave Tennyson a curt nod.

"Charmed," Tennyson said, in a decidedly un-charmed tone.

Jacques clapped his hands and told the police officer, "Take your partner outside and rouse him. Wait for me."

"Yes, sir," the bald cop said. He cast a glance at his gun on the floor, then looked at Paladin. He grabbed his unconscious partner and dragged him outside.

Jacques had changed in the few days since Paladin had last seen the mild-mannered bartender. He was acting like a big shot...and maybe he was. At the very least, he seemed to have the local police in his pocket. Or were they on loan from the *Die Spinne* group?

"These police are not smart," Jacques whispered, "but they are obedient." He scrutinized the stacked crates, and wordlessly moved his mouth as he counted. "One hundred twenty five, *Monsieur*. We had agreed to three hundred cases, *non?*"

"I have all three hundred-in a safe place. You'll get the balance when I see the cash."

"I understand." Jacques flicked at his moustache in irritation, then gestured to the cases. "May I?"

"Knock yourself out."

Jacques pried open the lid of a crate and removed one of the squared bottles. He uncorked it and took a sip. "Excellent. We said fifteen francs a bottle?"

"We said twenty-five."

Jacques reached into his jacket pocket and withdrew an envelope. "So we did." He thumbed through the envelope's contents and pulled out a sheaf of blue- and red-embossed bills. "If you prefer I can convert this, for a slight additional fee, into gold."

"Gold suits me better."

"As you wish. I can meet you with-"

"And as long as we're talking about my preferences, Jacques, I prefer to deal with the people in charge, too. See, I was thinking that maybe I could get you more than three hundred cases."

Jacques eyebrows shot up and a smile spread across his well-oiled suave features. "Indeed, that would be most-"

"I was thinking three hundred mores cases," Paladin said, "...a week."

"Three hundred a week? Impossible."

Paladin stepped toward Jacques, his pistol casually aimed at his heart. "Don't get me wrong: I like you as my middleman, and that's not going to stop as long as things continue to run smoothly. But I won't risk my neck crossing the Texas border just to have someone on this end tell me they can't move my merchandise. I want to meet these *Die Spinne* people. Face to face."

Jacques' gaze darted to some distant point as he thought this over, probably figuring now much his cut would be, then his oily smile oozed back over his face. "But of course, Monsieur Blake. I had intended to this very thing tonight. You have a plane, yes?"

Paladin nodded at their Hoplites.

"I will have the men load it, then we can deliver the goods, in person."

"Perfect," Paladin replied.

Jacques whistled and the two cops re-entered the hangar. The one who Paladin had cold-cocked was rubbing his head; he cast a murderous glance in Paladin's direction. Jacques instructed them to load the crates.

As they put back the cases Paladin and Tennyson had just unloaded, Tennyson stepped close to Paladin and whispered, "You couldn't think of a less colloquial name for me than 'Tennessee?' And how did you know these police were crooked when you drew your gun on them?"

"I'll explain later, Tenny."

He didn't know if he could explain it, though. Those cops had gone after Tennyson-reason enough to draw his .45-but there was more to it. He was close to finding Flora and ending this business. Maybe close enough that Paladin wouldn't even let the police get in his way.

He didn't like the way this was going. He had stolen-albeit was from his pirate brother-but it was still theft. He had leveraged his reputation, and that of Blake Aviation, to transport contraband. And he would he have shot, maybe killed, two men to get what he wanted.

Maybe it was more than Paladin's looks and name that lent themselves to playing the role of Matthew Blake.



When the Hoplites had been loaded, Jacques said to Paladin, "I will go with you." He nodded and smiled at Tennyson. "And *Monsieur Tennessee* can follow."

"Follow us where?" Paladin asked.

"I am afraid I must show you. You would not believe me otherwise." Jacques turned to his police escort. "That will be all for tonight, gentlemen."

The cops gave one last long look at Paladin, then left. Paladin hoped that was the last he saw of those two.

He, Jacques, and Tennyson then boarded their Hoplites and taxied onto the runway. Inside, the planes had seventy-five cases of liquor crammed into every available square inch. It took all five hundred feet of runway for the overloaded planes to get airborne. "Head southeast," Jacques instructed.

"We're going to run out of land quick," Paladin remarked.

"*Oui*, I know," Jacques said. "Southeast, please."

Paladin keyed the radio microphone. "Follow me, Tenny."

"Roger." There was a moment of silence, then Tennyson added: "You realize that, to carry our cargo, I had to remove all the armor off the Hoplites? It will take only a single magnesium round to ignite the two hundred and seventy gallons of bourbon we are sitting on."

"So we're flying Molotov cocktails," Paladin muttered. "Great. Just keep your eyes peeled and bail out at the first sign of trouble."

Paladin realized Jacques had no parachute over his tuxedo. He better know what he was doing.

They banked over New Orleans and then skimmed over the Mississippi delta. Below were tangles of mangrove trees and mats of swamp grass and quicksand; it was a maze of twisting and turning rivulets. Thousands of white cranes stood in the waters and glowed amber and pink in the setting sun. Along the riverbanks crocodiles floated and soaked up the last of the day's warmth.

How Jacques was navigating Paladin wasn't sure. This could be a wild goose chance with him and Tennyson ending up one hundred and twenty-five cases lighter-and a bullet heavier.

-But he doubted it. He didn't trust Jacques...but he could depend on the man's greed.

Paladin watched the airspeed indicator and kept the Hoplite exactly at one hundred miles per hour. He had left Pontchartrain Aerodrome at precisely 5:15. He should be able to figure out the total distance to wherever it was they were headed.

The swamps thinned into muddy tidal flats, reflecting the twilight so it looked like a plain of gold leaf.

"Now head due east," Jacques shouted over the engine noise.

Paladin adjusted course and double-checked his seven. Tennyson was right there, watching his back.

The muddy flats vanished underwater and they flew over the Gulf of Mexico. Although the sun had set, there was a glow ahead-not from the west, but from the east.

As they approached, Paladin saw the light came from an island. Dozens of cargo ships and tugboats swarmed around the piers that stretched into the water. On the ground there was a city with more flashing lights than Manhattan; there were three runways, two aerodromes, and more zeppelins docked than he could easily count. Paladin squinted and spotted dozens of anti-aircraft batteries silhouetted on hills around the island.

"What is this place?" Paladin asked.

"Welcome to '*Le Coeur du Minuit*,' *Monsieur* Blake," Jacques said. "Welcome to the secret pirate city."

## **Chapter Six: Deadly Reunion**

Three Furies rose in a V-formation behind Paladin's autogyro. His first instinct was to dive-but he checked his hand on the stick. He wasn't outmaneuvering anything with a Hoplite loaded to the gills with bourbon-and a single round from one of those Furies would turn him into a fireball.

"Allow me to handle this," Jacques said. He adjusted the radio frequency and spoke into the microphone in rapid-fire Creole. He smiled and nervously glanced over his shoulder.

After a pause, a voice bristling with static gave a terse reply in French.

"They are allowing us to land." Jacques sighed and slumped into his seat. "See, *Monsieur*? Nothing to worry about."

"Sure," Paladin muttered. There were several more planes in the air now, squadrons of Devastators and Brigands circling the island like vultures. "Nothing at all."

The Furies pulled ahead, banked, and descended toward the island: "*Le Coeur du Minuit*" - "Midnight's Heart" Jacques had called it. Paladin was no stranger to trouble-but infiltrating this secret pirate city this was more than just trouble; he was stepping into a pit of vipers.

"I hope you know what you're doing, Jacques." Paladin noted the radio frequency he had used, then spun the dial back to Tennyson's channel. "Follow me in, Tennessee." He set down the microphone and said to himself, "I hope / know what I'm doing."

Paladin banked his Hoplite and trailed behind their escorts, skimming over the waves breaking on the beach below.

The island was a square-mile of worn hills, swampy farms, and mudflat shores. The place looked bigger, though, because of the piers that stretched into Gulf of Mexico. There were roads switchbacking up the slopes, and a host of four-story Spanish haciendas. Most of the buildings were decorated with flashing signs-diamonds, spades, hourglass-shaped feminine figures. "CASINO," and "FREE BEER," and "GIRLS" blinked and sparked across trashy neon advertisements as far as the eye could see.

Hardly a "secret" pirate city. Then again, with the swarms of planes patrolling the place and those anti-aircraft guns on the hilltops, maybe they weren't afraid of being conspicuous.

Paladin's escorts dipped and buzzed an airport runway-his cue to land.

He touched down and noted the aerodromes silhouetted against the dusk...as well as the outlines of a dozen tethered zeppelins.

One of the zeps had a distinctive pointed nose; Paladin recognized her: the *Commerce* from

the I.S.A. Like his own zeppelin, the *Aegis*, she was armed to the teeth and had a reputation for blasting any unfriendlies that came too near her.

The *Commerce's* presence came as a jolt to Paladin; it would take a very tough pirate gang to swipe such a dreanought. Funny he hadn't heard about it, though he had been out of touch for the last week. The states could have reunited and he would have missed it.

Paladin spied something else out of the ordinary: a squadron of German-made Hellhounds sat parked in neat rows alongside the zeppelin. What were the German planes doing so far from home? The plane had only debuted a couple of years ago, and was a rare sight in North America. They were expensive to import, and even more expensive to maintain without parts being regularly shipped from Stuttgart.

"Over there." Jacques indicated a hanger. "We can secure our cargo."

Paladin noted that *his* bourbon had suddenly become "ours." He taxied through the open hangar doors and killed the Hoplite's engine.

There were three beat-up Devastators and a Warhawk parked there as well. The Warhawk bristled with rockets—all her hardpoints were laden with high explosives and beeper-seekers, with two more racks welded on the *top* of her wings, too.

Paladin knew this plane without having to look at the name stenciled across her nose.

Tennyson climbed out of his Hoplite—stopped short when he spotted the plane, then briskly walked to Paladin, concern wrinkling his brow. "Isn't that 'Cold Justice?'" he quietly asked. "I thought you shot it down six months ago."

"So did I," Paladin whispered back. "I never saw it crash, though."

"We will pay a call on our new friends," Jacques said as he climbed out of the autogyro. "We're just leaving my bourbon here?"

"Of course, *Monsieur*. It is under *Die Spinnes'* protection. No one will dare touch it."

No one but *Die Spinne*, Paladin thought. What was going to stop *them* from taking it? "This island is theirs?" he asked Jacques.

"In a matter of speaking." Jacques smoothed out his recently waxed moustache. "It is...on loan from the Louisiana government." He looked about, and spotted a call box in the corner of the hanger. "Pardon me, I will call a taxi."

Tennyson whispered, "These pirates must pay a pretty penny for this place."

Paladin nodded. "Worth it, though, if the French foreign legions garrisoned in New Orleans keep Dixie and Texas away...and it makes sense for the French Louisiana government to keep the pirate's happy. It'll keep them from signing on as privateers for Dixie or Texas. It's a smart set up."

Jacques returned and fished three bottles of bourbon from the autogyro's hold. "They are sending a car from the tower. It will only be a moment."

A tall man sauntered into the hanger. He wore greasy coveralls and a gun-belt with two ivory-handled Colt revolvers. Scars raked down the left side of his face where he was missing an eye. He removed his smoldering cigarette from his leathery lips and did a double take at Paladin and Tennyson.

Paladin knew him-Cold Justice's pilot, "the Judge." He'd taken the law into his own hands and killed a dozen men and woman during the Texas-Oklahoma riots...most of them innocents who had simply gotten in the Judge's way. Paladin tried to act nonchalant, even though his heart raced and his hand now rested on his .45.

The Judge's eye darted between Paladin and Tennyson, then briefly to Jacques. He then tossed his cigarette butt to the ground, crushed it under his boot's heel, and continued walking toward his plane.

A silver limo rolled to a stop in front of the hangar. "Our ride," Jacques said. "As you can see our new friends have impeccable taste."

"Great," Paladin muttered, not taking his gaze off of the Judge. He eased into the back of the limousine after Tennyson and Jacques.

"The King's Cross," Jacques told the driver.

As they drove away, the Judge walked to the hangar doorway and watched them go.

The hair on the back of Paladin's neck prickled. He didn't like this...one word from the Judge and every cutthroat on this island would be tearing the place apart looking to kill Paladin Blake.

The car sped away from the airport, the acceleration cushioned by the crushed leather upholstery. Inside, the car had polished silver trim and a stocked bar complete with crystal decanters and gold-tipped cigarettes. Outside, however, there were barbed wire fences and tin-roofed huts amid fields of sugar cane and tobacco and red peppers.

"This island used to be farmland," Jacques explained. "I believe they made hot sauce here. Well," he chuckled, "they still do under a new label. Those that fall into the debt of *Die Spinne* are put to work, a form of indentured servitude."

"More like slavery," Tennyson whispered. "Barbaric."

"Considering the alternative," Jacques replied as he poured himself a martini and eased into the seat, "they are getting off easy, non?"

They wound up the hills then down again. The shacks gave way to white adobe buildings with red Spanish tiled roofs; starlight faded under the glare of flashing neon signs. A strange mix of people moved briskly on the streets-men in suits, with gowned women on their arms alongside well-armed pilots in bomber jackets and scarves.

The limousine rolled to a stop on the cobblestone entryway of a Colonial mansion with Greek columns and a wide porch. A red neon cursive "X" strobed from the second-floor balcony.

A doorman dressed in a Napoleonic army costume-but with a modern Winchester rifle-opened the door for them. As Paladin stepped from the car, he noted machine gun nests on the roof.

"Come, gentlemen." Jacques strolled thorough the entrance; Paladin and Tennyson followed.

The foyer had black marble floors, and overhead a crystal chandelier bathed the room in warm lighting. To the right was a ballroom crowded with men and women, clustered around tables covered with cards and chips and red franc notes. A roulette wheel spun; there were roars of delight.

Jacques led them left to the cloakroom. A girl in a French maid costume stood on the other side of a counter; beyond were racks of camel hair overcoats and sable furs and locked strongboxes. Jacques whispered to her in Creole then handed her a wad of francs. She curtsied, led them in back and pointed to a rack of suits.

Jacques looked Tennyson up and down. "A forty-eight regular will do for you, *Monsieur* Tennessee." He sorted through the tuxedos on the rack then handed one to Tennyson. Jacques then picked out a coat for Paladin. "Forty-four tall for you."

Paladin looked at the proffered coat like it was a coiled cobra. "I don't wear monkey suits."

"Very well, *Monsieur*," Jacques said, "then you will have to allow me to negotiate on your behalf. You cannot enter the casino in such attire-even if you had the moon to offer." Jacques' eyebrow shot up. "There are standards, after all."

Paladin grabbed the suit. He slipped into the tailed coat. It fit. Jacques handed him a bow-tie and Paladin awkwardly knotted it. It felt good to dress up, Paladin thought. He'd been living like a pirate for a week.

He glanced in the mirror and smoothed back his hair. From the waist up he almost looked respectable. That was the problem; Matthew Blake wasn't supposed to look respectable. He didn't dare clean up anymore.

As the Frenchman sorted through pants on the rack, Paladin growled, "This'll do, Jacques."

"Very well, *Monsieur*." Jacques looked them over with a pained expression. "I had hoped you could be more...presentable. *C'est-la vie*." He led them back through the crowds in the casino to double doors in the back. He whispered to the two guards there, and they let them pass.

The next room housed another casino, but for a different class of customer. There was no poker or craps here. There were padded stools and girls circulating with trays of drinks between the baccarat and blackjack tables. Gold coins and private notes of credit littered the green felt. The gamblers wore tuxedos and sported monocles. Their diamond cufflinks gleamed.

Jacques cut through the room to another door, guarded by a single man in colonial costume. He frisked Jacques, and removed his small .38-caliber pistol. Paladin reluctantly handed over his .45s. Tennyson, to Paladin's surprise, removed a sawed-off shotgun from his coat and surrendered the weapon. The guard then frisked them thoroughly, apologized, and unlocked the door.

Beyond was a parlor with gilt wallpaper and floors covered in thick oriental rugs. The far wall was all windows that overlooked the harbor. The air inside the room was thick with smoke. Paladin smelled something sweet and rich in it-he couldn't place the scent, but it tickled his nose, enticed and repelled him at the same time. It felt like he was drowning in honey.

Flora was here.

Paladin's heart fluttered. She stood in the corner, by the windows, the glittering lights in the harbor and the moonlight on the Gulf of Mexico creating a halo around her. Men and women swarmed around Flora, fixed on her every word. She wore a clinging black satin dress that flowed over her body as if it were liquid. Her red hair was piled high on her head and tiny curled wisps fell about her cheeks. Emeralds adorned her delicate neck and brought out the color of her eyes-eyes that suddenly fixed upon Paladin.

Flora smiled at him, but it immediately faded, and she bit her lower lip and her brow crinkled. She looked around the room, then back to Paladin. Her smile returned, but it was somehow colder.

He took a step toward her. Finally. He had to quietly and quickly escort his sister out of here, get back to the airport and-

Flora turned and whispered to the woman next to her.

Paladin stopped dead in his tracks.

The woman next to Flora wore a gown of white silk that flared about her feet. She wore diamonds in her black lustrous hair. Her deep blue eyes flickered casually from Flora to Paladin, then back to Flora.

Paladin remembered this woman's features: the wide expressive eyes, the full lips, and tiny dimple in her chin. When he had last seen her, he was strapping her into a parachute and practically throwing her from a doomed zeppelin.

She was the pale man's companion, the secret mastermind behind a Unionist plot to bomb Washington, a plot he had foiled two years ago.

The women left their admirers and walked arm-in-arm to Paladin.

"Good evening, Mister Blake," the woman in white said. "I see you're a gambling man."

### **Chapter Seven: Sugar and Spice and Everything Vice**

Paladin didn't like games-especially when the wager was his life. "Am I a gambling man?" he replied, struggling to meet the steady gaze of the woman in white. "I suppose so."

"So your sister has said." She tilted her head and the diamond brooch in her dark hair flashed. She offered her hand.

He was sure he had seen her before-not only on the pale man's zeppelin, but also with Flora. He had an image of the two together-giggling, dressed in uniforms-but *when?* Paladin took her slender hand and kissed her white glove.

"A gentleman pirate?" she cooed, smiled and dimpled her cheeks. "How novel."

He released her hand and cast a hard gaze at Flora-hoping she understood that one slip of his real name would get him killed.

Flora cleared her throat. "Karina Von Gilder, allow me to introduce" -her mouth quivered with a half-suppressed laugh-"my *dear* brother, Matthew Blake, distiller of fine spirits and smuggler extraordinaire."

She whispered to the dark-hair woman, "Be careful, Karina...he's a the lady killer." Flora saddled next to Paladin and laced her arm through his. "Matthew: meet Miss Karina Von Gilder, owner of the Kings Cross and practically everything else on this rock." She cupped her hand over her mouth and said, "She'd be quite the catch, too...one of the richest and most beautiful women on two continents."

"Don't embarrass your brother," Karina said coolly. "He's certainly been through enough this evening traveling to our island."

That was an understatement. Paladin had fought his own brother, torched the family moonshine operation, and trod through every seedy bar in New Orleans to get to *Le Coeur du Minuit*- "Midnight's Heart."

"I'm sure the two of you are itching to get together-" Flora said, "-and talk business. But give me a few moments with my brother. It's been weeks since I've seen him."

"Of course," Karina said. "I shall await your pleasure, Mister Blake." She glided away with effortless grace. Jacques approached her, wringing his hands and bowing as if she were royalty. He held out the bottle of Black Knight Bourbon for her inspection, but she ignored him.

Flora grabbed Paladin's arm and led him toward the bar, brushing past Tennyson.

"Miss Blake," Tennyson said startled. "How good to see you again."

Paladin shook his head at Tennyson. "Get that limo, Tenny," he murmured, "minus the driver. And be ready for anything." Paladin quickly glanced around the room-all the doors guarded. "Bring the car around back if you can swing it. Get our guns on your way out, too."

"Understood." Tennyson nodded to Flora and left.

Flora watched him go. "Tennyson," she muttered with a scowl, "your 'ever-faithful manservant.' Do you still feed him scraps from the table?" She dragged Paladin to the bar and sat with a flourish of her black satin dress. She spoke French to the barkeep and he returned with two drinks. She slid a highball glass to Paladin. "Drink it," she hissed. "It'll look strange if you don't."

Paladin looked at the drink as if it were poison.

"It's only water," Flora said. "I know better than to try to ply *you* with liquor."

He took a cautious sip. "What are you doing here Flora?"

Her lips parted in a grin. "I'm having fun. These people have money and power and aren't afraid to use them. They know how to live...unlike some men I know." She swilled the contents in her glass. "What are *you* doing here?" she whispered. "Do you know how many people on this island would like to see you dead?"

"Probably not as many as would like to kill me." He crossed his arms over his chest. "I came for you, Flora."

"That's sweet of you, brother. But let's try the truth. What Blake Aviation Security scheme are you running today?"

"Matthew and I are worried about you. Your drinking, this lifestyle, and your new friends...they're more dangerous than you realize. I'm here to take you home."

"I see," she said and stared into her drink. "You think 'poor little Flora' is all sugar and spice and everything vice. I hate to disappoint you, but I'm all grown up-and there's no home for me to go to. You and dad and Matthew have seen to that."

It was true. Neither of them had a real home or family anymore, but that's what Paladin was here to set straight. Now all he had to do was find a way to tell her that without sounding like a sap.

He looked around the casino at Flora's "friends." They wore designer gowns and smart tuxedos and jewels. They spoke in French and German. Opium smugglers? Moonshiners? Who were they really?

His gaze landed on the dark-haired woman, Karina; she was lovely and smart...and deadly. She had engineered the theft of a Lockheed prototype, almost started a war-and was the architect of a scheme that would have killed or injured hundreds of innocent bystanders. She had fooled everyone...including Paladin.

"Who is she?" he asked.

Flora drank deeply from her glass until there was only pink froth at the bottom. "Karina Van Gilder, I already told you." Her eyes narrowed. "You really *are* interested in her. I wonder why?" She scooted closer to Paladin and set her hand on his arm. He smelled the same overly sweet odor on her breath that filled the room. "We were at Smith together. You met her in '28."

Paladin visited Flora the summer before she dropped out of college. He remembered her very young and awkward girlfriend who had eyes for him. *This* was the same woman?

"The Von Gilders have real money," Flora said. "They go anywhere and do anything they want. They make things happen."

A gunshot rang out-less than a block away. No one noticed...or if they did, they didn't seem to care. Then again, in a city of pirates and smugglers, murder and mayhem in the street was probably normal. This place, despite its opulence, gave Paladin the creeps.

"Matthew thinks you're in danger," he told her. "If you won't listen to me, then-"

Flora giggled. "Poor Matthew. He must have been convinced I was in peril to even *talk* to you. Was he even sober when he told you about the King's Cross and *Die Spinne* social club?"

"He was sober...to start with," Paladin said. "You don't know your friends half as well as you think."

"Really?" Her hand on his arm gripped tighter; her nails-through his tuxedo-dug into his skin. "And what are you going to do about it?" She released him and waved the bartender over, ordering another pink margarita. "You're in way over your head." She closed her eyes and whispered, "Go back to Hollywood, Paladin. I'll send you a postcard...and tell you how much I miss you."

She looked up. Paladin searched her eyes and saw the pain in them. She'd been running away from life since their father died, killing herself-slowly and with style, but just as sure as if she'd placed a gun to her head.

"You're cleaning up, Flora. Maybe not today, but I *will* get you out of here."

She smiled and stood and smoothed out her gown. "I think, you better take care of whatever business you have with Karina, and leave...while you're still alive."

"Flora, I-"

Karina walked across the room, her white dress trailing behind her. "Mr. Blake, shall we talk now or wait until tomorrow? There are other matters I must see to tonight."

Paladin didn't want to stay in this vipers nest a second longer than he had to. "My sister and I are done," he said. "For now."

"I must take your brother," Karina said to Flora. "Forgive me."

Flora leaned into Paladin, kissed his cheek and whispered, "If anyone needs saving it's not me...it'll be you. Be careful."

Karina took Paladin's hand and led him from the bar. "Do you prefer dice, cards, or the wheel, Mr. Blake?"

"I thought we were discussing business, not games."

"Gambling *is* how we do business with newcomers on *Le Coeur du Minuit*," Karina said. "They must prove their intellect, their resourcefulness, and their luck. Besides, all of life is a wager, no?" She flashed him a dazzling smile.

"I never to gamble with anything but my heart," Paladin said. "But for you, I'll make an exception. What are we wagering?"

She snapped her fingers. "Jacques."

Jacques obediently stepped forward and tried to take her hand to kiss. She withdrew it. "You have a sample of Mr. Blake's fine liquor?"

"*Oui, Mademoiselle*," Jacques stammered. He gingerly handed her the square bottle of Black Knight Bourbon. She took it and waved the Frenchman away.

She ran her index finger of the label. "I thought we would wager your cargo. If you win, I shall pay you the cash equivalent-say twenty-five francs a bottle? Then we can move onto more...interesting stakes".

"I see," Paladin said cautiously, unsure of just what her plan was. "Cards then."

Another gunshot sounded-possibly in the street outside the casino. A few heads turned, but in moments the gamblers returned to their games, nonplussed.

Karina approached a Baccarat table and with a nod of her head, the players and dealer got up and left.

Paladin sat down opposite from her.

She set the bottle on the green felt between them. "We have met before, Mr. Blake, but I cannot quite place where and when." Her green eyes squinted slightly as if she were trying to see through him.

"I'm flattered, but I don't think we have."

She *had* to remember who he was. Paladin's photo had been splashed on every paper and newsreel when he'd brought her brother's zeppelin down practically on top of the Washington Memorial. So why keep up the pretense?

Why did a cat play with the mouse before ripping it apart?

Karina reached under the table and handed Paladin a sealed deck of cards.

He opened it. They didn't look marked. He shuffled, offered her a cut, which she took. "A

test of luck?" He dealt two cards face down. "Lady's pick. High card wins."

With her delicately long fingers she flipped over a card: the eight of clubs.

Paladin turned over his: the Jack of Diamonds.

She leaned forward and her brows arched. "Very good, Mr. Blake. I owe you ninety thousand francs. Would you care to wager again?"

"Sure." Paladin tossed the Jack onto the table. "My three hundred cases and the money for information. If I win I want to know more about the Die Spinne social club...and how a guy like me gets to join."

She scooped up their cards and buried them in the deck. "You appear to be a gambling man after all." She shuffled with the speed and precision of a sewing machine, and then threw a card in front of Paladin and dropped one in front of herself.

"I will tell you this," she said, "*Die Spinne* is more than a social club...as you have obviously gathered. We are an import-export enterprise. Independent operators and several national governments use us to move their products."

She withdrew a business card from her long white glove and flicked it across the table. Embossed upon it was a spider web. "*Die Spinne*-'the Spider' in German," she explained. "Each strand of our web extends to a different nation, across North America, Europe, and even the Orient. We are everywhere."

Paladin saw the spider-web was bent, the strands kinked halfway from the center.

"We have other, more ambitious plans, of course," she added, "but before I can tell you of our future...the cards."

A gunshot blast echoed in the adjoining room. This time everyone took note. Karina stood. Paladin instinctively reached for his .45s-which weren't there.

The door to the other casino flew inward off its hinges. The Judge stepped in, Tommy gun pointed at the crowd. He glared at Paladin with his good eye. "I *knew* it was you."

"Judge," Karina said in a deliberately calm tone, "I hope you have an excellent explanation for this interruption or you will walk the short plank."

"I've got reason enough." He pointed with the muzzle of his gun. "That's Paladin Blake."

Karina didn't look surprised. She turned over her card, revealing the Ace of Spades. "It appears, Mr. Blake, that your luck has run out."

## **Chapter Eight: Cold Justice**

Paladin Blake stared down the barrel of the Judge's Tommy gun-there wasn't much else he *could* do with it pointed at his face. "You got me mistaken for my brother," Paladin said smoothly. "I'm Matthew Blake."

The tuxedoed men in the casino anxiously watched, but no one interfered. No one dared get in the Judge's line of fire. Flora, however, giggled and ordered a bottle of Black Knight Bourbon from the bartender.

Karina looked at Paladin, then at the Judge. "Well," she purred. "Which is it? Paladin or

Matthew Blake?" Her blue eyes narrowed to slits.

The Judge wagged his gun at Paladin. "I've gotten drunk with Matthew Blake. I've been shot down by Paladin Blake. And I'm tellin' you: this *ain't* Matthew." He glared with his one good eye.

Flora sauntered across the room, holding her bottle by the neck and halted by the Judge's side. "He's right," she said and clutched onto the Judge's free arm to steady herself.

"Flora, no," Paladin whispered.

"That's my brother," she slurred, "...Pal'din. He told me he'd break my neck if I tattled."

"Indeed," Karina said and looked Paladin over. "It appears, Mr. Blake, that we have met before." She collected the cards on the table and squared them. "And it appears that our business is not concluded after all." She balled her white-gloved hand into a fist. "Judge, take him to the green room. Get the doctor. We will then have an extended conversation with our guest."

Paladin didn't like the sound of that.

He had to do something-but there weren't many options. He couldn't dodge the Judge's aim at this range, and he was too far away to grapple with him. He could grab Karina, use her as a shield...and get mobbed by every man in the casino.

Flora laughed hysterically. "Brother dearest, you are a pain in the ass, but I still adore you." She reeled back and swung her free arm-along with the bottle-and landed a blow on the back of the Judge's head. Glass and liquor sprayed across the Persian rugs on the casino floor.

The Judge stood still, staring at Paladin. The pirate took a step forward...then collapsed in a heap.

No one moved. Everyone fixed upon slender Flora, singularly elegant in her black satin dress and glimmering emeralds, the jagged bottle neck still grasped in her delicate her hand as she stood over the fallen giant.

Paladin broke the spell first; he stood, grabbed his chair and threw it at the windows on the western wall. They shattered, and razor sharp shards rained onto the ground below. Men and women scattered around the room. In the confusion, Paladin ran to the ledge-skidded and turned for Flora.

She backed away. "Go," she whispered and raised the serrated bottle. "You're not taking me anywhere. I belong here."

Paladin had come to *Le Coeur du Minuit* to get his sister out of the snake pit. That wasn't happening tonight. He no longer had the luxury of trying to "save" his sister. He had to save himself.

He jumped through the broken window.

Silvers of glass sliced through his tuxedo, his cheek, arms, and legs. Paladin flailed through the air-three stories-and landed on a rose hedge in the sunken garden below.

He pulled free of the thorns and got his bearings. From the broken windows of the colonial mansion people stared and pointed at him. On the rooftop he heard the racking of machine

guns. He looked for cover: there were fountains, and a hedge maze. Behind him was the roar of a car engine. Paladin turned and saw a silver limousine mowing down topiary animals.

The car skidded to halt next to him. Tennyson popped open the driver's door and slid over. "Get in. Hurry!"

Paladin shouldered himself behind the wheel and stomped the gas pedal to the floor.

Bullets pinged off the trunk. The limo fishtailed over a fountain basin, knocked over marble planters with night blooming magnolias and crashed through plaster Greek statues. The wheels caught and the limo rocketed back over the topiary animals-bumped over a sidewalk, scattering pedestrians, and then screeched onto the cobblestone boulevard.

Paladin smoothly accelerated toward the hills and the airport on the other side of the island.

"What happened to Miss Flora?" Tennyson asked.

Paladin gritted his teeth. Flora took out the Judge by herself and bought him a split second to get away. She had saved *him*-when he'd come to save her. He owed her one for that. He was going to return the favor and get her out of her...even if he had to straightjacket her first.

"Flora has her own plans," Paladin said. "We'll be back for her soon enough."

He glanced in the rearview mirror. There were no cars behind them on the winding road. "We're home free. By the time they catch up to us, we'll be up in the air and halfway back to the mainland."

Lights flashed in the mirror-far away but directly behind them. Paladin had to slow as he took the corners, switchbacking up the hillside road. The light-no matter which way he turned-stayed on his tail, and was closing fast.

Paladin kept one hand on the wheel, turned and squinted into the darkness. Those lights were at the same level as their car, floating a half-mile out.

"What the hell?" Paladin muttered. "That's no car, its-"

Fifty-caliber bullets tore into the limo's trunk and top, ripped through the velvet-upholstered seat between Tennyson and Paladin, and then sprayed and sparked across the hood.

A Devastator thundered overhead, arced up, and banked.

"He's setting up for another strafing run." Paladin looked for his pistols-useless against an armored plane flying at a hundred miles an hour. They were sitting ducks in the limousine.

Tennyson drew his sawed-off shotgun from his overcoat.

"Get out," Paladin said. "Make a run for it. That's not getting through the plane's armor,"

"Quite right," Tennyson calmly replied. "This, however, may." He removed from the folds of his coat what looked like a scaled model of a rocket, two feet long, with white shark teeth painted on its nose. "I developed it for our boys at the Dixie branch office. Remember they were drawing heavy ground fire at the Tallahassee Airport?" Tennyson slid the rocket into the truncated barrel of his shotgun.

"What the hell are you doing?" Paladin asked incredulously. He recalled Tennyson's backwards-firing rocket had almost torn the wings off the plane he had fitted them to. "You've tested this?"

"Stop the car," Tennyson said and rolled down the passenger's window. He leaned outside.

The Devastator lined up on them. It dove. Over the drone of its engines Paladin heard the thunder of its .50-calibers.

When it was three hundred feet distant-when the line of bullets were a heartbeat away-Tennyson fired.

A streak of smoke and fire cut through the darkness and impacted with the Devastator. A split-second of illumination outlined the plane. The left wing shattered and the fuselage spun off its collision course with the limousine. It tumbled to the ground, cartwheeled, and exploded.

Tennyson dropped the smoldering remains of his "shotgun"-now little more than twisted, smoking metal-and shook his blistered hands. "Tested," he announced. "A qualified success."

Paladin scrutinized his friend. "Tenny, I can't decide if you're crazy carrying three pounds of high explosive and launching it by hand...or if you're a genius."

"Genius, old chap."

Paladin looked up; there were twinkling stars and clouds obscuring the moon and no more planes. There had to be an airstrip near the casino...which was probably how that Devastator had found them so fast. He'd bet there were more on the way.

He stomped on the gas and the limo jumped. Steam poured from the hood, and the gearbox rattled and ground metal. It was another mile to the airport-this car had to hold together. Paladin raced over the summit, past the fences and barbed wire protecting the anti-aircraft guns, then down the other side of the hill, through the farms and tin shacks. Soon, the lights of the runway and the shadowy outlines of zeppelins appeared on the horizon.

Paladin aimed the car at the airport gate. The red- and yellow-striped arm of the gatehouse was down. He didn't slow.

The limo crashed through the arm and then through a chain link fence. The front tires blew, but Paladin didn't ease up on the accelerator. He struggled to steer the screeching car toward the hangars.

A glance in the rear view mirror: men ran after them, rifles drawn.

There was a clank in the gearbox and a rattling; the engine revved, but there was no power to the wheels. Paladin turned hard, and slid to a stop, slamming into the hangar wall. They jumped out of the battered car and ran inside. Tennyson climbed into the cockpit of his customized Hoplite, Bumblebee.

Paladin started toward his Hoplite-stopped. "Tennyson, wait. There's no armor on 'Bee, and it's full of bourbon. It's the last thing we want to fly out of here."

"What then?" Tennyson asked and his bushy white brows arched.

Paladin glanced quickly about the hanger at the three beat-up Devastators...then spotted

the Warhawk bristling with rockets, "Cold Justice." The Judge's plane.

Her hardpoints were laden with rockets and there were additional racks on the top of her wings, too. She also had a new modification since Paladin's last aerial encounter with the Judge: the cockpit had been extended forward and a rear gun turret had been welded on her tail.

"It would be justice to steal *that* plane." Paladin climbed into the cockpit and hot-wired the ignition.

Cold Justice's three engines sputtered and turned and roared to life. Tennyson crawled into the rear gunner's seat.

Paladin pushed the throttle from idle to one quarter and taxied out of the hangar. A small crowd of armed men were on the runway waiting; this Warhawk had no cannons-every inch of her frame carried rockets-but the mere sight of her turning toward them scattered the guards like leaves.

He eased the throttle to half, rolled onto the runway, gathered speed and rose into night. Paladin then banked and turned back toward the airport. He dialed the radio to the same frequency that Jacques had used on their approach to the island.

"This is the Judge," Paladin said in his best Texan drawl. "We got intruders on the ground, boys. Paladin Blake and his security thugs, thirty...maybe forty of 'em. Better watch yer backs."

A French-accented voice acknowledged.

Paladin kept one eye on the anti-aircraft guns; they remained silent. He pointed Cold Justice at the row of parked Hellhounds on the ground and fired. A dozen rockets whooshed from her wings, snaked through the air, and turned the expensive German planes into fireballs of fuel, bits of glittering shrapnel, and plumes of oily smoke.

That would gum up their runway for hours, and limit the number of planes they could get into the air.

He pushed the throttle to full, cut the running lights, and pulled back on the stick.

Like his "Lightning Girl," this Warhawk was just as clumsy, but she did have one advantage over the nimble Devastators and Furies that protected the island: her 37,000-foot ceiling. If he could climb high enough, fast enough, the smaller planes wouldn't be able to touch them.

Cold Justice rose through layers of clouds and broke through. Paladin saw stars and the half moon, and as far as he could see, no other planes.

"Tennyson, get on the radio and raise the Texas Rangers. Ask them to get the *Alamo* and the *Crockett* into the air. Then call the relay station in Amarillo and patch through to Hollywood. Have them contact the *Aegis* in New Orleans and get them here. I want every plane we've got in the air and in Houston in twelve hours.

"I've got one last thing handle personally...then we're going to take care of *Le Coeur du Minuit*."

## **Chapter Nine: The Chicago Connection**

Paladin had to do the thing he hated most-wait. It would take time for his squadrons and

zeppelins from Santa Monica to rendezvous with the Texas Rangers near Corpus Christi. Two days, at least, before all of the pieces fell into place. He wasn't fool enough to return to the *Le Coeur du Minuit* until everything was ready.

He would have to wait to rescue Flora. What would be done with her? She'd cold-cocked the Judge and bought Paladin the seconds he had needed to escape. How far could she stretch her friendship with Karina Von Gilder?

For Paladin, "waiting" didn't mean he'd be sitting on his hands.

From a distance the Chicago skyline was beautiful, spires and canyons of concrete and steel with art deco filigree of gold and silver. The sunrise reflected off the Chicago River and Lake Michigan and made the buildings glow. Despite the warm image, the I.S.A. always seemed hollow and cold and uninviting to Paladin. He banked southwest and landed his newly repainted blue Warhawk-which he had re-christened "Justice" after capturing it from the Judge-onto runway seven at Midway Airfield.

Paladin and Tennyson had made the marathon flight here overnight because there was a connection between *Le Coeur du Minuit*-the secret pirate city near French Louisiana-and the Industrial States of America. The two cops in Jacques' employ were from Chicago, according to BAS files. Their involvement with Jacques meant they were also part of the crime syndicate, *Die Spinne*. And there had been no report of the Chicago-based zeppelin, the *Commerce*, having been stolen, even though it was being unloaded at the pirate aerodrome. There were also all the German-made Hellhounds on *Le Coeur du Minuit*...and the grapevine in the aviation community was rife with rumors about secret deals between the I.S.A. and Germany.

Each fact by itself was circumstantial evidence at best, but added up it was glaringly obvious that something fishy was going on. Paladin had a feeling that all the answers to *Le Coeur du Minuit* and Karina Von Gilder were here in Chicago.

He taxied the Warhawk to the Blake Aviation Security hangar at the end of the runway then cut the engine.

The Chief of Operations of the BAS's Chicago's office, Eliot Ness, ran out to meet him. He wore a gray suit and tie. He was neither tall nor short, and his hair had been neatly combed and parted in the middle. He had the kind of face that blended into a crowd, although his ears stuck out a bit. He was not the kind of man you'd have expected to spearhead the Treasury Department task force to eliminate bootlegging in Chicago.

When the U.S. collapsed, Eliot stayed in Chicago, working with the local cops to root out corruption, and was one of the first people Blake hired when he set up offices in the I.S.A.

Paladin liked Eliot. The man delivered on his promises, and having him on the payroll gave his business some badly needed prestige with the I.S.A. The mobsters hated him, but he was a bona fide hero to the average citizen.

"Mr. Blake," Eliot said and extended his hand. They shook and then Eliot greeted Tennyson as well. "This is an unexpected visit." Eliot looked up and down the field. "You came alone? I guess that means someone's in trouble."

"Just me," Paladin said. "Let's head into the office and get a cup of coffee. And Tennyson could use a nap."

"A spot of tea will do fine," Tennyson said, yawning.

They walked together on the tarmac. "I'll need some information on a zeppelin." Paladin said to Eliot, "She's called the *Commerce*."

Eliot opened the door for them, "I know her. Leased by Mercury Shipping Lines, she has six hundred thousand pounds of lift, and is armed with broadside cannons and a fistful of machine gun nests. She'd give your own *Aegis* a run for her money. One of the I.S.A.'s biggest and best, sir."

Paladin stepped inside the hangar. Inside was a parked squadron of Kestrels, ready and gleaming with spit and polish. One corner of the building had been converted into office space. Unlike Paladin's Santa Monica office, the place was neat as a pin. There were rows of filing cabinets, not a stray paper out of place, maps of Chicago and the I.S.A. on the wall, and a ticker machine in the corner chattering off the headlines.

"I need to know where the *Commerce* is supposed to be now," Paladin told Eliot. "Any word about her on the news services?"

Eliot wrinkled his brow. "Is there something wrong with the *Commerce*?"

"That's what I'm trying to figure out," Paladin replied.

Eliot picked up a phone and dialed. "Tower? This is Ness. Yeah. Can you guys, off the record, give me the flight plan filed by the *Commerce*? I can hold." He pulled a pad and pen from his pocket then jotted down notes. "Thanks-owe you one." He hung up.

"She's on a run for 'Heartland, Inc.' They make farm equipment-tractors, fertilizer spreaders, things like that. They loaded the shipment from hangar 1056, and she's scheduled to deliver it to-" Eliot checked his notes. "-Oklahoma City." She's reported in and supposed to returning with a cargo of corn meal in three days."

"Checked in, huh?" Paladin rubbed his chin, thinking. "When?"

"Noon, yesterday." Eliot stared at his handwriting. "Funny thing is that Heartland doesn't own or lease hangar 1056. That's Anvil Manufacturing. They make guns, including a nice .45 by all accounts."

"And, by all accounts," Paladin muttered, "secretly running guns."

Eliot shrugged. "The bogus manifest adds up. They'd do that to protect themselves. A shipment of guns would be a tempting cargo for pirates to hijack."

It added up all right, Paladin thought. Anvil Manufacturing could have supplied *Die Spinne* with the arsenal it had protecting *Le Coeur du Minuit*. But what was Karina Von Gilder planning to do with another zeppelin full of guns? Two years ago, she had attempted to plunge North America into war-her goal to unite the state nations by conquest. Was this a prelude to another war?

"Can you get me an appointment to see someone at Anvil Manufacturing?"

"You bet, Mr. Blake." Eliot picked up the phone. "What do you want me to tell them when they ask why?"

"Tell them I'd like to buy a gun," Paladin said.



## Chapter Ten: The Battle of Midnight's Heart

"It'll be our three zeppelins against a dozen of theirs," Paladin said.

The only sound on the bridge of the *Aegis* was the drone of her 600-horsepower Aerodyne engines. Air Marshall Jed Bouregard, the captain of the *Alamo*, and Helen Ryan, captain of the Blake Aviation zeppelin, *Perseverance*, stared at Paladin, dumbstruck.

"I don't mind a good fight," Bouregard said, tugging on his goatee, "but I do mind a turkey shoot...when *I'm* on the wrong end of the shootin'." He leaned back against the brass compass pedestal and crossed his arms.

Ryan cleared her throat and brushed her black bangs from her eyes. "Excuse me, sir...but how are three zeppelins-even ones as heavily armed and armored as ours-supposed to stand against twelve?"

"We won't have to." Paladin stepped away from the chrome control panel of the bridge and walked aft to the map of *Le Coeur du Minuit* he had sketched on the chalkboard. "The twelve zeps I saw were tethered near the aerodrome...here." He pointed to the south side of the island. "When they spot us they'll try to launch everything they've got-so we hit them hard and fast before they get airborne."

Bouregard squinted at the map. "Might work...if our aim's dead on." He tapped the center of the map. "What's this star in the center?"

"A complication," Paladin said. "Antiaircraft guns, at least ten .70-calibers, maybe more."

"I can handle those," Ryan replied. "My 'Sharpshooter' squadron fliers claim they can hollow out a quarter at a thousand feet in their Kestrels. Time to let them try."

"One more thing," Paladin told them. "There'll be at least four squadrons of fighters on patrol around the island. It'll get dicey if they launch more planes. We'll keep most of our fighters in reserve to defend the zeps."

"They'll want to bloody our noses," Bouregard said, nodding, "to distract us and get us fighting the little guys."

"And if we get distracted"-Paladin scratched a large cross over the aerodrome on the chalkboard-"if they get those zeppelins into the air first, they'll have a dozen more squadrons launched out of their bays and twelve more decks of guns aimed at us."

"Don't worry, sir," Ryan said and stood straight. "I'll stay on target."

"Good," Paladin said, then he turned to Bouregard. "You have confirmation that the Texas navy is sending reinforcements to mop up trouble on the ground?"

"Yep," Bouregard replied. "Two destroyers and three troop transports launched from Amarillo with us, should be an hour or so behind. They'll take care of the rabble...assuming we've got control of the air."

"And if we don't?" Paladin asked.

"Then, as my friends in the navy put it, 'y'all are on your own.'"

Paladin scrutinized them as they studied the map of the pirate island. Bouregard's jaw clenched and unclenched, and Ryan chewed on her lower lip. They were nervous, but not panicky. Both were seasoned combat pilots and good captains...but would the three of them be good enough?

"I wanted to tell you both how much I appreciate this."

"Hell," Bouregard said, grinning. "The way I figure it, that island's the rightful property of the Republic of Texas. It's my duty to take back what's ours."

Ryan said, "If guns were being smuggled to pirates from Chicago, then it was done on my watch." She crinkled her eyebrows together. "I feel obliged to do something about that, to balance the scales."

"Fair enough." Paladin glanced at his watch. "You two better get moving. It's going to be a busy day."

Both zeppelin captains shook Paladin's hand, and then they both went aft.

A moment later, Paladin saw Bouregard's Peacemaker and Ryan's Warhawk glide toward the *Alamo* and the *Perseverance*, flanking the *Aegis*.

From his vantage on the bridge, he spotted the coastline behind them in the distance, ocean sparkling in the sun as far as the eye could see, dappling the clouds in a turquoise sky-and four wings of aircraft spearheading the sky ahead of them-planes from Hollywood and Texas and the I.S.A. Added to the squadrons in the zeppelins' holds, there were more than a hundred pilots ready and willing to fight-and most likely die-on his command.

Paladin had never seen so much firepower aloft, not even during the Great War. He hoped it was enough.

In this fight, retreat wasn't an option. Many of the Devastators and Furies flying along side him had just enough fuel to get from Amarillo to *Le Coeur du Minuit* with enough left over for maybe ten minutes of dogfighting. A lot of good people could die today, and the responsibility-and the blame-for every death would rest squarely on his shoulders.

He regarded the *Alamo* two feet hundred off to port. She was forty feet longer than the *Aegis*, held twice as many planes, and had six more engines. The Texas flag had been painted on her side, red and blue fields and a white star thirty feet across. She was fast, and in the right hands, remarkably maneuverable. She had six-inch cannons and plenty of .50-caliber machine guns. Formidable and fast, pure Texas.

The *Perseverance* cruised serenely off the *Aegis*' starboard side. The zeppelin had a blue castle painted along her side, with the accompanying motto: "Perseverance Always Wins." She was the smallest of the three zeppelins, relying on the extra machine gun nests that replaced most of her broadside cannons. She could fill the sky with lead and cut down any plane foolish enough to get too close. Defensively, she was the strongest among them.

If Paladin had to pick one zeppelin to command, however, it would be his *Aegis*. She had extra gasbags in the nose and tail sections and in parts of the cargo hold. The extra lift compensated for her double layer of armor; she wasn't as nimble as *Perseverance*, but she could take a beating and keep on coming. She had double machine guns mounted on every engine nacelle, seven-inch cannons on the gunnery deck, and between them, racks of rocket

tubes. The *Aegis* had not been designed to carry cargo-she was a war machine.

Tennyson ran up the spiral set of stairs that led below to the gunnery and machine decks. A streak of grease smeared his usually spotless white coveralls "Cannons locked and loaded. Planes and pilots ready to drop. Port and starboard fuel tanks balanced at three-quarters each. Reserve tanks are full." He paused, then, added, "The crew are a tad nervous, but they're ready as well."

"And you?" Paladin asked. "Are you ready?"

"Quite," Tennyson said, looking nonplussed as ever.

Paladin paced then returned to the chalkboard. "There's one thing I didn't tell Ryan and Bouregard," he said. "Those zeppelins on the ground are probably nothing more than pirate gasbags. Their numbers make them a threat, but they'll be lucky to be in decent running order, let alone a real match for us."

"Then why do you look like a mother cat who's lost her kittens?" Tennyson asked.

"The *Commerce*." Paladin gritted his teeth. "If that monster is still there, she'll be at least an even match for the *Aegis*-and probably the *Perseverance* and *Alamo*, too."

Tennyson stepped closer to Paladin and whispered, "And what of Flora?"

"She'll be down there somewhere." He sighed. "This fight is about much more than my family now. As much as I want to go in and get her the hell out of there first, I *can't*. Flora will have to take care of herself a little while longer."

Paladin returned to scanning the horizon. Soon, he spotted *Le Coeur du Minuit* in the distance, a smear of gray upon the water.

He positioned himself at the wheel and flicked on a bank of radios set to the frequencies of the *Alamo*, the *Perseverance*, and their escort wings. "Target sighted. Descend to one thousand feet and rig for flank speed."

Paladin switched on the *Aegis*' intercom and gave the order to bleed helium. The zeppelin gently nosed down.

The island looked far less impressive in the daylight. No lights, no neon, just worn hills and swamp and mudflat shores.

"Ryan, send your Kestrel sharpshooters in. Take out those antiaircraft guns."

"Aye aye, Mr. Blake," she piped over the radio.

The Kestrels broke their orderly "V" formation, banked and dove straight toward the center of the island.

"Tennyson, get below and make sure the exhaust vents on those rockets are set up. I don't want to set ourselves on fire when we launch."

Tennyson nodded briskly and ran below decks.

There were five miles from *Le Coeur du Minuit* and Paladin spotted swarms of planes circling the island-not the four or five squadrons he had seen here, but five times that number. A dozen planes dipped lower, chasing the Kestrels.

"My men are getting cut to shreds," Ryan yelled through the speaker. The *Perseverance* opened fire.

"Jed, let's give her a hand," Paladin said. "All escort wings: bank to port."

Their fighters moved out of the way, and the *Aegis* and the *Alamo* fired their machine guns. The air became a shower of shooting-star tracers. Enemy craft exploded into fireballs and trails of smoke.

A hundred planes turned toward the zeppelins.

"That got their attention," Paladin muttered. He shouted into the radio: "Escort wings, take them out! *Perseverance* and *Alamo* launch your reserve fighters now and have them bank to starboard."

Warhawks and Devastators and Peacemakers dropped from the bellies of the zeppelins. Paladin couldn't count the number of planes in the air. They circled and swooped and dove and barrel-rolled-all the while spitting fire and launching rockets, peppering the air with flak, smoke and shrapnel.

A series of explosions ripped through the center of the island. A moment later, columns of fire and inky black smoke spiraled into the sky. One of Ryan's "Sharpshooters" spun wildly out of control in the updraft; the Kestrel slammed into the ground, adding more fuel to the conflagration. No one bailed out.

"Sharpshooters report AA guns down," Ryan said.

"*Alamo*: flank speed," Paladin barked. "Punch straight ahead. *Perseverance*: hang back. You've got the firepower to handle the fighters. Keep them busy while we take out those grounded zeps."

There was a moment's hesitation, and then Ryan replied, "Roger, *Aegis*. Give 'em hell for me."

"Tennyson," Paladin called into the intercom. "Flank speed."

The *Aegis*' engines roared and the zeppelin surged ahead.

It wasn't a clean break from the swarms of enemy fighters. A handful dogged the *Alamo* and the *Aegis*, firing their rockets, and then diving away. The *Aegis* rocked as explosions detonated on her port side. Paladin grabbed the brass rail to steady himself as the zeppelin suddenly decelerated.

"Engines four and seven destroyed," Tennyson yelled through the intercom.

The *Alamo* pulled ahead. Smoke trailed from half her nacelles and fire flickered inside her launch bay.

Paladin grabbed a pair of binoculars and scanned the runway and aerodromes in the distance. He made out the misty outlines of zeppelins docked there. Three started to rise-ten, twenty, fifty feet above the tarmac. He could see names painted on their sides, in lurid calligraphy: "Vainglorious" and "Hustler" and "Prophecy."

He breathed a sigh of relief. None of them were the *Commerce*.

"*Alamo*: prepare to fire all guns."

"Roger that," Bouregard replied. The *Alamo* was a half-mile closer to the runway now than the *Aegis*.

"Bridge to Weapons Deck: make sure those rockets have long-range fuses," Paladin called into the intercom. "We can't afford to have one of those birds blow up in the tubes."

A moment later, Tennyson's preternaturally calm voice crackled from the speaker. "Confirmed, sir. All rockets ready."

"Fire!"

Thunder rumbled from the starboard side of the *Aegis* as her seven-inch guns blasted shells at the enemy. A moment later, a salvo of rockets streaked groundward, leaving behind a solid sheet of white exhaust.

There were flashes from the *Alamo's* gun deck as well and she tilted thirty degrees off her center.

Explosions sprinkled the runway, the aerodromes, and the zeppelins tethered there; shells rained down and shattered concrete, cratered the tarmac, and tore open the sides of the zeppelins. Rockets impacted next, flashes of fire magnesium bright; fuel ignited and splashed onto the runway, metal skeletal frames twisted and burned.

Only the *Vainglorious* rose above the inferno. The pirate zep was less than a quarter-mile from the *Alamo*. Bouregard had just started to turn her port side to toward the enemy-when the *Vainglorious* fired.

Shells punctured the side of the *Alamo*, her fore gasbags deflated, and she tilted nose first to the ground and the firestorm below.

"Tennyson," Paladin said, "reverse the starboard engines and give me best speed on the port."

The *Aegis* came about, agonizingly slow.

"Target that pirate zep," he said. "Fire everything you've got."

Rocket and shells blazed from the *Aegis*.

The *Vainglorious* reeled from the impact, then her frame groaned and distorted as rockets detonated. Her gasbags ruptured...and she sank into the flames.

The *Alamo* dumped ballast and halted her descent, rose slightly, and with only four engines turning, moved off the coast.

Paladin slumped over the wheel. "Too close," he muttered. "Too damn close."

Bouregard's voice crackled over the radio: "Thanks for the save, *Aegis*. Looks like your plan was aces after all."

Paladin saw movement in his peripheral vision: a school of shark-like projectiles moving with eerie grace, glided past the *Aegis*. Aerial torpedoes.

"*Alamo!* Break off!" he cried into the radio. "Get out of there!"

The torpedoes slammed into the *Alamo's* gunnery decks and bridge. She shuddered, hung in

the air...then her gas cells rippled and split.

Scarlet and orange flame burst from the bridge. The *Alamo* gracelessly fell to earth, her superstructure twisting and crumpling in on itself.

Paladin angrily toggled the intercom. "Bridge to spotters," he snarled. "Where the hell did those torpedoes come from?"

Before the spotters could reply, a shadow eclipsed the sun. Paladin's head snapped up.

Another zeppelin dropped into view. It broke free of the glare, and Paladin watched her head straight towards the *Aegis*.

It was the *Commerce*.

### **Chapter Eleven: The Sky Dreadnought**

Paladin watched death glide toward him. The *Commerce* slowly maneuvered to point her starboard guns at the *Aegis*. She was the same size as his zeppelin, but had double gun decks, a dozen seven-inch pieces on each side. She was the color of lead, and moved with hypnotic grace.

He tore his gaze from the combat zeppelin-glanced at the *Alamo*. The Texas Air Ranger zeppelin was now a heap of twisted metal atop the other destroyed pirate airships. She was burning like a funeral pyre.

He glared at the *Commerce*. He'd been angry before-had fought for his life, sometimes with murderous rage-but this was different. His blood ran cold when he thought about the fallen Texan crew.

This time he didn't want to see justice done. He wanted revenge. He'd bring down that zeppelin no matter what the cost.

Paladin hit the intercom. "Tennyson, cut starboard engines and bring us about. Get every port side gun and rocket ready to fire."

The roar of the starboard engines dulled to a purr.

"Port guns ready," Tennyson reported. "Our rockets, however, were spent on the grounded zeppelins."

"The guns'll have to do then," Paladin replied. "Stand by."

With starboard engines idling and the port engines at full speed, the *Aegis* spun in place, her nose turning toward the wreckage of the *Alamo*, her guns rotating into the proper firing line to target the *Commerce*.

The *Commerce* was turning more slowly, even with the *Aegis* missing her number four and seven engines. Something wasn't right.

Paladin raised his binoculars. The enemy zep's starboard engines slowed and stopped...and she hadn't lined up her firing arc.

"What's she doing?" Paladin muttered, and then to Tennyson he said, "Maybe we've got a lucky break. Ready to fire when we've come about."

"Ready to fire, aye," Tennyson said.

The *Aegis* drifted clockwise, her guns coming to bear on the *Commerce*. The *Commerce*-even with her dead engines-still had momentum, still turned at a snail's pace toward them. With a dozen guns bristling from her double decks, Paladin knew if he didn't get in the first shot, he might not get a shot at all.

Paladin held his breath.

"Target is in our sights," Tennyson reported.

"Fire!" Paladin yelled.

The *Aegis*' seven-inch artillery thundered. Paladin flinched from the report and the fiery flashes. The *Aegis*' deck tilted as their zeppelin tipped, slammed by the deck guns' recoil.

The first shell impacted on the *Commerce*'s nose. Explosions traced an arc along her side-dots of fire and streaks of oily smoke, accompanied by the screech of metal.

The smoke cleared. The first gas bag had been ruptured-but to his horror, Paladin saw the other shells had left blackened scars and streaks of exposed metal across her heavily armored sides...and no other damage.

"Reload," he barked into the intercom. "Quick!"

The *Commerce* drifted into firing position. Her guns aligned with *Aegis*, but she didn't shoot.

"What's she waiting for?" Paladin murmured. He squinted through his binoculars and watched as she rotated past her arc of fire...then stopped and slowly turned back toward them.

Then he saw why: her starboard engines had halted, but now they were turning again, spinning in reverse. They hadn't *cut* the engines on that side-they had thrown them full reverse.

"Tennyson, brace yourself."

A double row of fire erupted from the gun decks of the *Commerce*. Clouds of smoke swirled and billowed as the *Commerce*'s broadside guns barked. Faint vapor trails swirled from the incoming shells.

The *Aegis* shuddered. Windows on the bridge shattered and scarlet curls of flame roiled across the ceiling. Paladin slammed into the control panel, found himself airborne...then smashed into the deck face-first.

Paladin wiped away the blood streaming into his eyes and staggered to his feet. The *Commerce* spun in place-her nose wheeled toward them, then away. Her captain had nerve, Paladin had to admit. It was a tricky move-switching engines on either side forward to reverse-with the quickest turnaround he'd ever witnessed.

He grasped the wheel, spit out a tooth, and pawed for the intercom. "Tennyson! Bail out. They're-"

The *Commerce* rotated until her port gun decks aligned with the *Aegis*. Before Paladin could complete his warning, the enemy zep fired.

She looked like a storm, a thunderhead cloud streaked with flashes of lightning. Then Paladin saw nothing—he woke up stunned, sprawled on the deck, blood trickling out of his ears.

His stomach rose. Overheard, the frame groaned. Wisps of smoke rose from the ladderwell to the lower decks. Several of the *Aegis*' gas bags must have been hit. They were crashing.

"Tennyson?" he yelled at the intercom.

The *Commerce* turned and gunned her engines and steamed straight toward them. They'd pass right over the crippled, falling *Aegis*. She wasn't even enough of a threat anymore to finish off? No. They had more important targets.

Paladin reached for the radio. The metal panel was torn away and busted vacuum tubes and sparking wires spilled onto the floor. He keyed the radio, hoping it could still transmit.

"*Perseverance*, come in. We're dead in the air. Get out of here! Warn off the Texas Marines! The *Commerce* can fire her artillery before she gets into your range."

No answer.

"Damn," Paladin spat. He glanced out the window. The *Aegis* was two thousand feet about sea level and dropping fast.

He craned his neck to get a look at the *Commerce* as she cruised closer. They'd hardly scratched her armor. He'd never seen anything like it. He had to get off another salvo and try to stop the juggernaut. But even if he could have fired again, their guns now pointed a hundred feet too low. There was no way to change that. They were falling. They'd keep falling. No way to aim.

Or was there?

He slammed his fist into the intercom. "Tennyson, tell me you didn't bail out."

There was a cough through the speaker, then, "I...I am still here."

"Glad to hear it, old friend. We still have fuel in the tanks?"

"We would not be discussing the matter if they had ruptured," Tennyson remarked.

"There's no time to explain this, Tenny—but I want the starboard guns loaded and locked on their tracks."

There was a pause, and then Tennyson said, "I'll have the crew on it."

"Great. Now I want you to purge the starboard fuel tank. Then pump the reserves into the port tank."

"That will require a moment."

"You've got just that, Tenny—a moment."

Paladin glanced up. The *Commerce* was a quarter mile away and closing. They'd get one shot at this. Only one.

"Done," Tennyson said. Purging and pumping, now."

The *Commerce* was a hundred feet away—almost on top of them.

Paladin said, "Tell the gun crews to hang on tight!"

A moment passed...and nothing happened. Then, the *Aegis* tilted. Her steel frame creaked and shuddered. Guide wires and cables snapped. Paladin's gambit had paid off.

A zeppelin used water as ballast, pumping it through pipes strung throughout the airship's rigid internal frame. The *Aegis* was no exception, though her ballast tanks had been shattered in the initial salvo from the *Commerce*.

But there were still thousands of pounds of aviation fuel aboard the *Aegis*.

As the starboard tank dropped twenty thousand pounds of fuel, and as the port tank filled, the zeppelin became unbalanced, rolled onto her side-and pointed her port guns straight into the air.

The *Commerce* drifted directly overhead.

"Fire," Paladin cried as he clung to the brass railing. "Everything we've got!"

Six thunderclaps of cannon fire blasted from the gunnery deck.

The underside of the *Commerce* detonated with smoke and sparks as the artillery penetrated her lower decks-probably the only section of the zeppelin they had neglected to armor. Fire blossomed and belched out of the mid-decks as their fuel tanks burst. Fireworks erupted from the double gun decks as their munitions were touched off by the blast.

Paladin whooped triumphantly.

The *Commerce*, wreathed in flames, hung in midair for a heartbeat then fell-directly atop the *Aegis*.



Bright light poured through the open blinds of Paladin's Santa Monica office window. He opened his desk drawer and pulled out the bottle of fourteen-year old bourbon and the photograph of his father sitting on the wing of his plane. Paladin uncorked the bottle and poured a shot. He clinked it to the picture frame. "Here's to another 'success,' Dad."

This "success" had cost him, though.

One hundred and fourteen dead. Most of them were the men and women aboard the *Alamo*. There were casualties on the *Perseverance*, too, and heavy losses in Captain Ryan's Sharpshooter squadron. Not to mention the thirteen killed on the *Aegis* when she had been crushed under the wreckage of the *Commerce*.

All in all it had been one of Paladin's deadliest operations. Had it been it worth it?

*Le Coeur du Minuit* was out of business. The pirates' air power had been shattered and the Texas marines landed and mopped up what was left of their ground forces. If Paladin knew Texas justice there'd be a few hundred quick-and-speedy trials and just as many quick-and-speedy hangings.

Flora had been arrested as well, but-with a word from Paladin to the right judge-the Texas

authorities immediately released her with their profuse apologies. Flora had come out of the incident unscathed by the pirates and *Die Spinne* and the law. She was out at the pier hangar now, delivering lunch to Tennyson, probably smiling and laughing as though nothing had ever happened. Paladin had already arranged-through Dasheill-an extended stay for her at Oceanview Sanitarium in Santa Barbara.

Of course, he still had no idea how to tell her about his plans to send her to Santa Barbara. Facing the *Commerce* was going to seem easy by comparison.

As for *Le Coeur du Minuit*, Texas had claimed it for their Republic (although they were in heated negotiations with French Louisiana to sell them back their own island). Texas had given him a medal of honor. The medal came with a formal request-the next time he rallied their troops, he should ask the President in Houston first.

Louisiana sent Paladin keys to the city of New Orleans in appreciation for ridding them of the "pirate menace." The mayor had extended an invitation for him to visit, so they could properly repay him. Considering, however, how much money that corrupt Louisianan government officials would lose from their "lease arrangement" with the pirates, Paladin had little doubt what kind of payback they had in mind. He had politely declined the offer.

Anvil Manufacturing and the I.S.A. were curiously silent on the entire matter. Paladin had filed a report with them, describing how pirate forces had captured the *Commerce*, and how she was subsequently destroyed. Their cargo had presumably been lost.

"Presumably" meant that their tanks and artillery pieces were now sitting under lock and key at Blake Aviation's secret Burbank warehouse. The last thing that Paladin was going to do was return those arms.

As for the buyer of the weapons of war-Karina Von Gilder had vanished. Reports and rumors placed her on the docks when the battle for *Le Coeur du Minuit* had started. Survivors from the *Commerce* said they offloaded their cargo onto steamers, most of which were then captured by the Texas Navy. But they also claimed to have loaded the majority of Anvil Manufacturing's rifles and ammunition onto a submarine.

Paladin would bet anything that Karina was on that submarine. He hoped she vanished for good this time, but he had a feeling she'd pop up again when he least expected it.

Tennyson knocked and quietly entered Paladin's office. He wore a cast on his right arm, but otherwise looked as fresh as ever in his clean white coveralls.

"You wanted to see me?" he asked.

"No." Paladin wrinkled his brow. "I would have called you on the intercom."

"But Miss Flora informed me that you required my assistance."

Paladin flicked on the Intercom, "Flora?"

"She gave me this." Tennyson struggled with his left hand to unbutton his coverall's front pocket. He finally retrieved a folded letter and handed it to Paladin.

It read:

*Dearest Brother,*

*How can I ever thank you for your rescue? I suppose I can't. Tennyson let slip the*

*wonderful surprise itinerary you have planned for me in Santa Barbara. I'm afraid I'll have to decline. I have traveling plans of my own, you see.*

*Love,*

*Flora*

Paladin heard a splash near the pier, then the sputter and the roar of a Devastator's Tornado G450 engine. He snapped open the blinds and watched as the Devastator skimmed over the water, banked, and headed south.

"She flies?" Tennyson whispered incredulously.

"All the Blakes fly," Paladin said. He crumpled her note and tossed it into the wastebasket. "Let her go."

Paladin had had enough of his family-Flora and Matthew and even his father. He scooped up the last bottle of Dark Knight whiskey in existence and dropped it into the trash as well.

He was his own man now. The past wouldn't control his life and his destiny any longer.

Besides, there were more important things to take care of. Paladin turned to the map of North America on his wall. Pushpins and lines of string traced the air lanes protected by Blake Aviation; they crossed and crisscrossed from Seattle to Baja, Cuba to the Maritime Provinces.

"Tennyson get a map of the world in here. And then call your contact in London. We're setting up an office there-nothing fancy, just a set of eyes and ears. Call our friend in Geneva, too."

"I'll get right on it," Tennyson replied.

Maybe this escapade *had* been worth the price paid in blood after all. Paladin now understood that pirates and bushwhackers and raiders weren't the only thing he had to worry about. There were bigger forces conspiring to do evil, here in North America...and abroad.

Paladin would learn more about them. And then, he'd make it his job to stop them.

Martin Heiselberg looked like a man who had lived the good life too long. By Paladin's reckoning he was nearly as wide as he was tall. He wore a conservative black suit and bow tie and sported a thin gold band on his pinkie (which Paladin suspected might have been his wedding ring). With considerable effort Heiselberg rose from his mahogany desk. He offered his limp, sweaty hand to Paladin.

"Mr. Blake, may I say it is an honor to have you visit Anvil Manufacturing."

"Thanks," Paladin replied.

The view from the nineteenth story office window caught Paladin's eye-a panorama from Lincoln Heights to downtown to the I.S.A. Institute of Technology-a conglomeration of skyscrapers and steaming factories, bridges and swarms of aerotaxis.

"Every time I look at it," Heiselberg said, "I know I'm in the best country in the world. Even more

impressive than your Hollywood?" He sat back in his chair.

Paladin cleared his throat. "I try to think of myself as a citizen of the world. Blake Aviation Security can't afford to take political sides or show favoritism to any one country."

Heiselberg nodded appreciatively. "A wise business policy." He gestured for Paladin to sit. "What can Anvil Manufacturing do for you today?" A nervous laugh escaped him. "I trust we're not under investigation?"

"Not at all," Paladin lied. "I only wanted to discuss the possibility of you supplying Blake Aviation with sidearms. Your reputation for quality is known from coast to coast."

Heiselberg brightened. "Anvil Manufacturing can provide anything you require. We might even be able to work out a bulk discount. Let's say-"

The phone rang. Heiselberg frowned and picked it up. "I said no calls." His face went blank. "Oh, yes, I see." He handed the receiver to Paladin. "For you. An emergency."

Right on time, Paladin thought.

He took the receiver. "Yes, Eliot? How many? Well get them to the hospital as quick as you can. I need you to-" He looked up at Heiselberg. "Would it be possible to take this in private?"

"Of course. If you could just step into-"

Paladin shouted into the mouthpiece: "No! I told you three, Eliot. I don't care if it is the Princess of Hawai'i. I want *three*." He shot Heiselberg a glare. "I appreciate this. It'll only take a few minutes."

Heiselberg sighed. He struggled to stand from his overstuffed chair. "I'll...just be outside then, Mr. Blake. Please, take your time." He flashed a disingenuous smile and left, closing the door quietly behind him.

"Okay, Eliot, it worked. Hang on-and keep talking in case anyone picks up an extension." Paladin set the mouthpiece on the desk, got up and jammed his chair under the door's handle.

He could have tried to dance around the information he wanted from Heiselberg, played a game of verbal cat and mouse, and maybe stumbled upon the information he needed. Paladin knew his limitations, though. Being sneaking and sly were a stretch for him.

He opened the filing cabinet first. Their contents had been sorted by date. Good. There was only one shipment that left the same day as the *Commerce*. Paladin scanned the manifest: seven thousand repeating .30-caliber rifles, three hundred thousand rounds of ammunition plus reloading machines, five thousand .45-caliber sidearms, pieces to assemble five-inch field artillery, water-cooled .70-caliber antiaircraft guns-and Paladin had to reread the last entry twice-one hundred tanks.

This wouldn't make *Le Coeur du Minuit* a fortress-it would make it unassailable. But why? They already had the silent approval of the Louisiana government to do business. What was so important about the island that they had to arm themselves to the teeth?

Unless this wasn't for the island. Maybe *Le Coeur du Minuit* was just a midway point for wherever Karina was really sending these arms.

Paladin shut the cabinet and went to Heiselberg's desk.

Under the gleaming mahogany top there was a large center drawer and three smaller ones stacked vertically. In the larger drawer sat five guns on a velvet pallet. Paladin hefted a .32 automatic. It was a little too light for his tastes-ever since Dashiell had gotten him to carry the .45s. He set it down and tried the small drawers.

The first contained stationary, pens and envelopes. The next drawer was empty save for a small bottle of syrupy brownish liquid that Paladin doubted was bourbon. He smelled it: sickeningly sweet and smoky. It made him gag.

The last drawer was locked. Paladin tried to jimmy it, considered busting the thing open, then thought better of it. Instead, he removed the first two drawers and got a hold of the wood panel beneath with his fingernails. He tugged and pulled and the wood splintered, cracked-then gave.

Inside this last compartment was a dagger; a pearl-handled .38; an envelope stuffed with I.S.A. C-notes; and a man's signet ring, heavy and gold with a green stone set flush in the center. Carved in the stone in relief was an eagle clutching an emblem.

For a split second Paladin thought he recognized it. The pale man had a ring almost exactly like this. Only that one had an eagle grasping a star-a Unionist symbol for their "Brotherhood of America."

But this ring was different. The symbol in the eagle's talons wasn't a star; it was a strange, canted cross.

Maybe Paladin *had* seen it before, after all.

He retrieved the calling card Karina Von Gilder had given him in her casino, the one with the embossed with a spider-web, its strands kinked halfway from the center. It was a dead ringer for the cross in the ring.

Paladin didn't know what it meant, but staring at it made his stomach turn and the hackles on the back of his neck stand.

This had started as a personal quest to save Flora...but it was turning into much more. He had to put an end to the secret pirate city-and Karina Von Gilder-for good.

He removed the chair blocking the door, then picked up the receiver. "Eliot you still there? Good. I want as many men and planes as you can spare. We're all flying south a special mission. Volunteers only-nobody married-and extra hazard pay.

"Wake up Tennyson, too, and tell him to get ready for a war."

THE END