



War's nature does not change; only its character.
Von Clausewitz 1832

SIMON ROBERTS

BREAKING WAR

Book 1 of the Robert McGregor Series

Breaking War

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Why is former high-flying Australian military officer, Robert McGregor, in self-imposed exile since 2011 in an island village in the South West Pacific Ocean. What caused him to become anti-establishment? What happened between him and Canadian fighter pilot Danielle Singleton that caused the abrupt end to their marriage plans and an ongoing awkwardness between them? What role does Robert's rare condition, synaesthesia, play in answering these and many more questions?

Prologue

Barack Abd Allah Karimi glanced cautiously from side to side before pushing aside sacking covering the entrance to a pock-marked mud hut. After a succession of battles in and around Wadi Yashbum, most doors were either destroyed or taken for use as stretchers. He paused to allow his eyes to adjust to the dim light then stepped inside, making way for a second, larger man to follow behind.

Against the opposite wall, a figure in dirty robes and no head-dress lay on an old British army folding canvas bed. A man with a battered stethoscope round his neck sat beside him.

“Sabah el kheir,” Barack greeted the men.

“Sabah el noor,” the doctor replied while standing and bowing his head toward the leader of Al Qaeda in Yemen. The patient simply looked and blinked. Nader, the cell second-in-command, maintained a watch by the door curtain as his commander took three paces to stand in front of the doctor.

“Any improvement?”

“I'm afraid not, sadiqi.”

“What is wrong with him?” Barack asked more intently; his small, hawk-like features pressing toward the anxious doctor.

“It is a virus, but nothing I have encountered before. It seems to be attacking his nervous system but is, at least, not getting any worse. No-one else is sick but he does not respond to anything. “Insha'Allah, if I had a laboratory ...” The doctor's voice trailed off as he realised the pointlessness of that wish.

The patient moaned and raised himself onto one elbow. His hands hung limply at the wrist and the sounds from his mouth were unintelligible. Tawfiq Farooq Abdullah was, until he became ill, Al Qaeda's chief bomb-maker and instructor in Yemen. He was the last of the old-school; trained by foreign Government agents to do their bidding. When that arrangement

no longer suited, they were simply declared terrorists and hunted down along with their former target groups.

Since losing his services, Barack's cells had suffered an increasing rate of premature detonations or blinds. He had hoped that today's visit would bring news of a recovery but that was now dashed.

Barack stepped past the doctor and bent to embrace Tawfiq. He reached for the stool and sat by the cot.

"I am sorry that you cannot reply to me, Tawfiq, but I know that you can hear and understand..."

The sick man nodded and looked searchingly into Barack's scarred face.

"The fight goes on and Insha'Allah we will be victorious," Barack continued. "The United Nations now have over 17,000 troops in our country. They spend much of their time dealing with Houthis and al-Islah and are slow to decide. They are afraid to fight."

He paused, considering what else to say.

"The Government forces and the UN make it hard for us to stay in one place for too long. The searches are frequent and they use drones everywhere. We do not have time to keep moving you from place to place."

Tawfiq's face tensed momentarily, then relaxed. He lay back and faced the wall.

"I am sorry, old friend," Barack whispered to him as he drew the silenced Glock pistol from his robes. "I will see you in Heaven. Ma'a salama."

Barack placed the cool grey muzzle at the base of Tawfiq's skull and fired once. Outside, a dog started barking.

The Al Qaeda veteran turned to the doctor who was looking ashen in the middle of the hut.

"Arrange for his burial", Barack directed. "Tell his family he is a martyr and give them this." He handed a bag of wadded rials to the doctor and turned toward the entrance.

"Nader. The CIA agent working in the UN displaced persons' camp," Barack began.

"Aiywa?" his Second-in-Command replied.

"Kill her," he spat. "An eye for an eye."

"Al-ḥamdu lillāh," Nader responded, a crooked smile curling up beneath the filthy patch that covered his empty eye socket.

Nader pulled back the entrance cloth and, after glancing about, the two men disappeared into an alley as crackling speakers blared out the call to prayer.

Chapter 1

The hum of the ceiling fan in his traditional Fijian buré seemed in sync with the pulsing in his frontal lobes. Robert McGregor scanned Al Jazeera's English news service on his dedicated SatBand terminal. He stubbed out a cigarette and frowned at the growing pile in the large, ivory coloured seashell that served as an ashtray. It was unusually humid for June on the north-eastern corner of Viti Levu. He reached for a bottle of water and strolled out into Nakorotubu village to try and find a breeze. The smell of almonds filled the air.

The news of the world was largely as it always was - war, crime and political intrigue with a dose of sport to lighten the mood. However, a new thread was emerging that was as baffling as it was concerning. Russia had finally shown its hand and annexed parts of the Baltic States. Yesterday morning, during a speech to the United Nations Security Council recommending further sanctions against Russia, the Council Chair and Israeli permanent representative, fell ill and had to be helped from the room. Onlookers reported that he appeared to have suffered a stroke.

Nothing unusual about that really, Rob mused.

He headed through a stand of coconut trees toward the river which was the source of both water and fish for the village. It was always cooler down there and he could think without sweating. Finding a shady spot, he stretched out a banana leaf that had fallen conveniently nearby, sat down cross-legged with an agility that defied his fifty-seven years and lit another smoke.

On its own, the Israeli's illness was not significant. But, Rob had a nagging sense of déjà vu. He was drawn back to a time, a decade earlier, when he made his initial discoveries around chaos theory and asymmetric warfare models.

In the past two weeks, it had been reported that at least seven people; politicians, senior military officers and owners of weapons manufacturing companies had also been struck down by differing medical conditions that continued to defy specialists. None of them had died but neither were they able to return to their roles. World media was abuzz with talk of terrorists using biological weapons but no evidence had been produced to support the claim. In fact, all the victims appeared to have been affected by chronic, previously undiagnosed medical conditions.

The sound of a young woman giggling broke his train of thought and he heard footsteps coming softly along the riverbank towards him. It was a young couple, who had recently married, chatting and laughing. They were carrying a bucket and two of the Hawaiian sling spears he had gifted the village a few years earlier, just after Tropical Cyclone Winston devastated the area.

"Bula!" Rob called out making Sia jump with fright.

"Oh ... bula Robbo. We didn't see you there." Paulo replied. "We're just going fishing. Want to come?"

"No thanks," Rob replied smiling. He knew how hard it was for couples to get any privacy in a village. "You two go enjoy yourselves."

Sia giggled shyly.

“OK, vinaka ... moce.” Paulo beamed a big thank you ‘bula smile’ before the two young lovers carried on along the lush, green riverbank and out of sight.

Rob pressed two fingers to his left temple and closed his eyes. He could hear a distant drum beat and caught a vague scent of antiseptic. Images of children crying while holding a parent’s hand in a hospital ward. It was time to make some calls.

Chapter 2

TOP SECRET//COMINT//REL TO USA, AUS, CAN, GBR, NZL

151230Z JUN 2019

RECENT INTERCEPTS CONFIRM PREVIOUS HUMINT ASSESSMENT THAT PRESIDENT PUTIN IS ILL AND A BODY DOUBLE HAS BEEN CARRYING OUT OFFICIAL DUTIES FOR OVER THREE MONTHS. BIOMETRIC ANALYSES OF LATEST PUBLIC APPEARANCES BY PUTIN RETURN SAME RESULT.

A copy of the signals intelligence report sat in front of each of the small group of people in a windowless, ‘Tempest-Grade’ room in Washington, DC. They perused its few lines over and over again, each waiting for another to break the interminable silence.

“Let’s take a look at the names,” the Chairman finally began.

A British Major General stepped forward with a pile of sheets which were quickly circulated to the group.

TOP SECRET//COMINT//REL TO USA, FVEY.

220730Z JUN 2019

APPROVED LIST OF TS+ BIO-DEFENSE SCIENTISTS:

1. PROF LYNNE SHORTER, HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL, USA
2. DR CHARLES MANNING, DEFENCE SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY LABORATORY, PORTON DOWN, ENGLAND
3. DR GERALD DOUGHERTY, DRDC SUFFIELD, ALBERTA, CANADA
4. DR JONATHAN HALEVI, LAWRENCE LIVERMORE NATIONAL LABORATORY, CALIFORNIA, USA

The British Secretary of State for Defence broke the silence. “How quickly can we assemble this team?”

“The people we need aren’t on that list.”

All eyes in the room turned to face the speaker; a woman wearing a Royal Canadian Air Force Brigadier-General’s uniform. The three rows of medal ribbons topped by a pilot’s brevet on her service dress tunic spoke for themselves. However, Danielle Singleton was not

a primary attendee at this meeting of the Five Eyes intelligence partnership. She was there as advisor to the Canadian Defence Minister.

“And exactly who do we need then?” the US Secretary of State snapped. He was not used to having meetings that he chaired interrupted by advisors.

“Have you heard of Bletchley 2.0 – the modern day version of the World War Two code breakers?” she replied, unperturbed at his testiness. BG Singleton had the small stature of a fast jet fighter pilot but her presence in a room was anything but small. Many colleagues, over the years, had paid the price for mistaking her blonde hair and good looks for weakness.

“They’re a myth,” one of the US advisors interjected. “Just a story about a group of scientists that sounds like a Marvel comics version of the Justice League for brainy millennials.”

“Actually...” an Australian Navy Commodore began, “We have evidence that they do exist, at least in theory. Two years ago, we lost contact with an officer in Iraq. He was on an ‘undeclared’ mission – travelling as a tourist and providing us with assessments of local support for current operations and future political solutions. We suspected that he had been captured but couldn’t glean anything from our SIGINT in the area as to where he was. Then, one of our Defence Signals Directorate teams received a message directly across the dark web from someone calling themselves Bletchley 2.0.”

“How the hell did they know how to contact your agency?” a clipped British voice asked.

“Exactly my point,” the Commodore continued. “They came up on a guarded address known, we thought, only to us and all our attempts to trace them proved pointless.”

“What did they have to say?” the same British voice inquired.

“They told us exactly where and when to find him...in Yemen,” the Aussie responded. “And when a team of Saudi Special Forces responded on our behalf...there he was having tea with his adopted local family!”

“So, what is this Bletchley 2.0 ... are they contractors?” Secretary of State Mathews asked.

“They are a group of problem finders and solvers,” Danielle responded. “They are multi-disciplinary – many are what we would call polymaths. They simply take on challenges that interest them – often problems that people don’t even realise exist yet. They have a few things in common. They are all currently serving or former defence force reservists who have met through that forum. They despise the tedium of bureaucracy and academic politics. You can only be invited to join.”

“You seem to know a lot about them, General Singleton,” Mathews said through pursed lips. “Got a name for us?”

Danielle paused for what seemed like an eternity – weighing the gravity of the situation against all other factors. “The person you need to solve this problem is Professor Robert McGregor.”

At the mention of the name, the New Zealand and Australian advisors exchanged surprised glances. There was a murmured conversation in the second row of seating amongst the other uniformed defence and intelligence advisors.

Around the room, other advisors were searching McGregor's name on their secure terminals.

"According to my search, he hasn't published anything of consequence since 2006 and that was management stuff. And his personal professorial chair – paid for by the Fijian Government - is in humanitarian assistance and disaster recovery at the Fijian National University," the UK advisor noted.

"That's because he doesn't publish under his own name. Just give me a moment," she replied while typing into her console. After a few seconds, the screencast system glowed to life on a large display at the end of the room. It was showing the academia.edu website and a complex conditional search based around chaos theory.

Everyone looked querulously as the list of publications grew.

Hamada, Rizvi. (2018). *"The Use of Fractals in Modelling Terror Networks."*

Dan, Li Zhu. (2017). *"Chaos Theory as a Targetting Predictor in Asymmetric Warfare."*

Parikh, Shiuli. (2017). *"The Weaponization of Everything."*

Klein, Sheera. (2016). *"Targetting of Logistics Cells in Contemporary Revolutionary Organisations."*

The list of publications continued to build and scrolled off the screen.

"Are you telling me that all these people are him?" The Minister responsible for New Zealand's two intelligence agencies exclaimed. "But why? Why doesn't he just publish under his own name?"

"I think the answer lies with the Australian delegation, Minister. After all, it was their Government that declared him a security risk and discussed the revocation of his clearances on the front page of every newspaper," Danielle retorted.

Jack Mathews interrupted the exchange, "so how do you know him, General?"

"We attended Staff College in Toronto together," Danielle replied quietly, her eyes flashing briefly to the floor. "He was the first Australian to be sent to Canada for this level of training. He made, aah..., quite an impression and stayed on the following year as a member of the international teaching staff."

"So, he's military then?"

"Yes, he is, or was, infantry. Initial training in Australia where he took out every major prize from the Sword of Honour down. Multiple deployments and commendations on operations. Battalion Group Commander. Pilot. Parachute instructor. Senior Lecturer. The Australian

Defence Force paid for his PhD.” Danielle hesitated briefly before continuing. “He also spent some time in the Special Forces of a non-allied country...”

“So, he’s a lettered former officer. Nothing special about that,” the British Minister snorted.

Danielle paused before answering. “What makes him special, ladies and gentlemen, apart from his phenomenal informal scientific network, is that he is a high-functioning synaesthete.”

“What on God’s Earth is that?” Mathews demanded.

“Synaesthesia,” Danielle explained, “is a neurological phenomenon in which stimulation of one sensory or cognitive pathway leads to automatic, involuntary experiences in a second or multiple other sensory or cognitive pathways. Robert experiences and remembers the world – and problems he encounters – with all his senses. He becomes part of it. Most people are not consciously aware of the condition or can’t harness it as they wish. He can and does. He is a problem-finder without peer.”

The room fell eerily silent as they contemplated what they’d just been told.

“So, a photographic memory then?” someone in the back row quipped.

“Much more than that,” Danielle replied. “He explained to me once how it is more like playing 3D pinball with the data set of your entire life. Except that he can reset the parameters of the game at will.”

“You obviously know him quite well, General?” the British advisor said with a seedy grin.

Danielle flushed slightly and turned to face the jowly British officer seated to her right. “Yes, I do, General. Twenty years ago, we were going to marry. It didn’t work out.”

The Australian Minister put her water glass down heavily - finally breaking the awkward silence. “So how the bloody hell do we get in touch with him?”

“He doesn’t take direction very well.” Danielle responded. “I suggest you ask him to help you with a problem via social media.”

“To hell with that,” Mathews interjected. “We’re not posting our security concerns on social media! If he’s such a hot-shot, then we need him on this team.” He turned to his US advisors, “send some guys to find him and bring him back here to Washington ASAP. Make it low key but make it happen. And get me a meeting with President Pence ASAP.”

Danielle decided to have one more try at explaining. “Secretary Mathews...he won’t work with your specialist team. He only works with people he chooses and he won’t help if you try to force him. You need to appeal to his curiosity.”

“We’ll see about that,” Mathews retorted.

Chapter 3

The afternoon rain had done little to ease the humidity and Robert, like most of the men in the village, was wearing only a colourful sulu round his waist for the after dinner ‘grog’ session. Sweat made the visible colours and shapes of his full-length tribal tattoo shine in the glow of a solitary kerosene lantern. Smoke from a mosquito coil swirled around the buré making his salt and pepper hair seem greyer than brown.

“Bula”, Robert said with a smile as he clapped once and accepted the cup made from a half coconut shell.

The yaqona, known to thousands of tourists as kava – Fiji’s traditional drink - didn’t touch the sides as he drank to a hearty chorus of “Maca” and clapping from the gathered men of the village. Aniseed, pepper, music and dance filled his senses as the cool traditional drink made its way down. He used the back of his hand to wipe away a bit of liquid that escaped onto his close-cropped beard.

“So, Robbo. Who is going to be in the rugby 7s final at the Tokyo Olympics next year?” the village Chief, inquired.

“Fiji, of course.”

A few of the men cheered in agreement.

“...and Kenya,” Robert ended.

“Eeo! Kenya? Why them?” the chief inquired.

“Because they’re big and fast like Fijians, they have a history of rugby from their time as a British colony...again like Fiji...and the fact that the Chinese Government has given the Kenyan Rugby Football Union \$100m to develop the game as part of their deal to build a naval logistics facility at Mombasa,” Robert replied with a dramatic flourish.

“But Fiji will win eh?” the chief’s son said grinning.

“Without a doubt,” Robert responded with an equally big smile. “Please excuse me, but I have some work to do...moce vinaka.”

“Moce, Robbo,” the group called out as he disappeared into the darkness toward his buré.

Chapter 4

Red night-running lights dimmed as the vessel’s twin diesels reduced power. The five men who were gathered in the crew mess leaned closer to the chart which was now barely visible.

“Whose bloody idea was it to sail on this rusting heap of bull crap?” a muscular man with a blonde flat top buzzcut announced in a thick Afrikaan’s accent.

“The boss. You got a complaint then take it up with her when we get back.” The response came from an unsmiling man with a small, lithe build across the table. “Is everyone clear of their tasks?”

A series of grunts and murmurs of assent followed.

“OK, H-Hour for infil is 30 minutes from my mark. In 20 seconds...mark. Remember, if you do not make the exfil point at L-Hour, we will leave without you. Check your kit again and take your positions.” The speaker eyed each person from behind intense acquiline features.

On deck, the bosun of the Chinese trawler was readying davits that would put this group’s RIB into the water. He did not like this diversion from his normal fishing duties but the extra pay they had all been offered would make life better for his family. The group of foreigners had joined the vessel in Tonga and had stuck mostly to themselves. It was obvious that a team such as this going ashore illegally in the Pacific was trouble. Unfortunately, two were to stay aboard the Kim Chung III to ensure they did not depart early. He hoped it would be over soon.

At H-10, the vessel slowed and came to a halt. As per instructions, all lights were to be off which made the task of lowering the RIB difficult for the fishermen on deck. Once the RIB was in the water, three of the group descended a rope ladder and boarded the smaller craft. The equipment pod followed. Lowering lines were disconnected, the outboard started and the raiders disappeared toward land just over three nautical miles away.

Chapter 5

As soon as he arrived home, Robert activated the inverter which brought his stored solar power to 230 volts from the 12-volt deep cycle batteries in the shed outside. He then turned on the SatBand system, placing his eye to the retinal scanner then playing a silent sequence on a small electric piano which had keys with in-built fingerprint scanners. In this modern-day version of a book code, any user not only had to know the song of the week but also how Robert would play it as a self-taught pianist.

Once he had entered, he opened the secure video-conference app, turned on his microphone and said “make a video call to Thomas Nordberg.”

After a brief pause, the screen filled with the image of a man of about 40 years old. The logo of the Gregor Mendel Institute in Austria showed clearly on his white laboratory coat.

“Superb timing, Robert. I’m just about to have lunch,” Thomas said cheerily with his odd mix of Scandinavian, British and American accents. “How’s village life today?”

“Hi Thomas. Great thanks. How’s the world of Chromatin architecture and function treating you?” Robert quipped.

“Not bad thanks, Robert, but I’ve been called up by the Forsvaret for Active Reserve duty so the science will have to wait while I go do my UN thing again,” Thomas said with a resigned look.

“That’s a shame...for the science anyway. Have you been noticing the medical events that have been befalling some big names around the world lately? The numbers seem to be increasing exponentially and that’s only the ones being reported. I’m guessing that there’s a heap more we’re not hearing about,” Rob said.

“I have. In fact, I had a long chat with Mudrika Chawla about it last week.” Thomas replied.

“She’s at the Ayurveda Research Institute in Patna doing something with vector-borne diseases now, isn’t she?” Rob asked.

“Absolutely right.”

Robert suddenly felt his entire body tense as he heard a noise outside, followed by a whiff of stale meat, coffee and the distinctive odour of perspiration from someone who took too many amphetamines. A kaleidoscope of images involving weapons and bodies flooded over him.

“Rob, are you alright? You look like you’ve seen a ghost!” Thomas asked.

“I have to go...I’ll call you later,” Robert told him. “Avada Kedavra.”

On this command, the entire SatBand system and local server shut down, descending with a hiss into the cabinet below. Robert was usually amused by his use of Harry Potter curses and charms to control his environment but not this time. The emergency shut-down protocol he had just used would take a minimum stand-down period of 12 hours before resetting.

He moved quickly to the corner of the room and grasped what looked like a broomstick. However, this was nearly two metres long and intricately carved with Fijian imagery. Of all his martial arts skills, Bo Jutsu, the long staff, was his preference.

As the group entered his buré, he switched off the light and turned swiftly 180 degrees into a long forward leaning stance with the bo resting on his right shoulder parallel to the ground, ready to strike.

“Whoah Robbo...don’t hit us!” his close friend and fishing buddy, Sitiveni, exclaimed.

He turned the light back on, slowly lowering the weapon as he took in the scene before him. Sitiveni and three other men from the village were standing in pairs either side of two men dressed all in black, from boat boots and cargo pants to tight fitting microfibre tops stretched over muscled torsos. The swarthy complexion and aquiline features of one suggested Eastern European and the other looked vaguely Germanic with his blonde buzzcut hair and square jaw. Both had their hands tied behind their backs with the plaited coconut leaf rope that was a local favourite for crab pots. The look of concern and confusion on their faces was palpable.

“Bit late for missionaries to be making house calls isn’t it boys?” Rob asked, relaxing somewhat from his earlier alarm. “Besides, even the Mormons have stopped wearing black except on Sundays and you need a sulu, not trousers.”

“We were heading out for some night fishing on the reef when we saw these guys and one other come ashore in a RIB,” Sitiveni explained. “We hid and listened and heard them

mention our village and you so we decided to grab them. The third guy ran off but we got the RIB and all their equipment.”

“Mmm...did you two bring a sevusevu?” Rob toyed with them knowing they not only didn't have the traditional gift of arrival and acceptance but didn't even know what he was talking about. “Guess not. Hey Siti - the big fella's boots look like they might fit you, by the way.”

“Hold one, OK,” the darker of the two spoke out in a thick Slavic accent. “We're not here to cause any trouble...we just want to talk to you.”

“I have nothing to say to you whatever unintelligence agency in the world you work for,” Robert stated forcefully. “Siti, what did these guys have on them?”

“All sorts of Gucci stuff, Robbo,” he said grinning as he held up a woven fishing basket in one hand. “We've got silenced pistols from Russia, European-brand communicators, flares, several very nice American knives and some plastique and dets from 'who knows where'. And a great medical kit!” The many skills he had acquired in Britain's 22 SAS, prior to returning home in 1990 to join Fiji's now-disbanded Zulu Company, hadn't waned with time.

“Deliver your message,” Robert told them without humour.

The two looked at each other and the four Fijian men before turning back to face Robert.

“They're not going anywhere so you should forget your secrecy concerns and start talking,” Robert prompted the men who were sweating profusely in the night-time humidity. “I know you have an emergency phrase. If you tell me what it is, I'll put it out on the line and your bosses, whoever they are, will know you're OK.”

The silence continued.

“OK, so I conclude that you're contractors...highest bidder...no rules...plausible deniability. I get it. Unfortunately, the price of that is several years in a local prison.”

“Pass me one of their communicators please?” Robert asked.

A small unit about the size of a pack of 25 cigarettes was tossed across the room. Robert had a quick look at it, flipped out the mini keyboard and typed. *Hansel and Gretel can't make the exfil tonight. They can be found care of the Fijian Police in Suva. Don't come back. Robert McGregor.* He then selected the distress channel, toggled burst transmission and pressed **Send**.

“What about the other guy?” Siti asked as he pushed the two captives in front of him toward the door.

“I'll put the infra-red camera up on the drone but I think we'll see him swimming back to the mother ship. Still, it'll be good to see who's doing their Uber-service. Thanks Siti.”

“No probs Robbo – I still owe you plenty.”

“Just promise me that you won’t go parachuting anymore, OK?” Rob laughed as they departed.

Chapter 6

Danielle knew that she was risking her career as she typed on her personal laptop in a hotel suite in Washington. She was an earlier adopter of Trsst, a secure, open source platform that had nudged Twitter from the top spot in micro-blogging and was rapidly making inroads on Facebook and Tumblr. She hoped the security was as good as they claimed.

Danielle Singleton @DaniSing 5 July 2019

***Interested in new #NATSEC #research project? DM me.
#CFCClassOf1998 #Fiji #HADR #JusquaLaFinDuMonde***

She read and re-read her draft. She was sure that Robert would be monitoring at least one of the hashtags through his social media management suite. She just hoped that he would take up the offer and send her a direct message. Finally, she clicked on the ‘Trsst’ button and sat back in her chair.

It had been a couple of years since they had spoken...the 10th International Lessons Learned Conference in Queenstown, New Zealand in 2017... where he had been listening to a paper on red-teaming as a means of developing critical thinking skills in defence leaders. It was a rare occasion for him to travel. The awkwardness of their meeting in the foyer after the session was off the scale.

He had followed her career via online media. She was a poster-girl for the Canadian Armed Forces – an intelligent, successful and decorated female fighter pilot. She was the first western female pilot in modern times to score a ‘kill’ in air to air combat...and she did it with guns, not missiles, in a CF-18 Hornet up against a SU-30 Flanker.

When their relationship abruptly ended, he hung up his uniform and simply disappeared for a few years. It was then that he started publishing under pseudonyms. Leaving her a trail of breadcrumbs, he always included in his publications and social media posts the name of their favourite U2 song – usually in French - since she was bilingual. ‘Jusqu’à la fin du monde’ ... ‘Until the end of the world’ was a lesser known song from the band’s 1991 album ‘Achtung Baby.’ As she often said, “sometimes, the lesser known songs are the best.” It was on this thread that she was hoping he would find her message and get in touch.

Although she was taking a big risk, the stakes were high. Were he able, Secretary of State Mathews would be the first to agree with her. Unfortunately, he had suffered some sort of immune system collapse and was in an isolation tent at Cedars-Mt Sinai Hospital near his home in New York.

Chapter 7

Robert pushed aside his mosquito net, stood up and reached for a fresh 'bula' shirt and sulu from the pile of clean laundry on the sideboard. The bright, floral shirts and skirts had been his mainstay for more than two decades and the pile was a visual symphony of shapes and colours. He remembered where he had got every item and they each triggered a flood of images, sounds and smells.

He knew it was about 5am by the subtle change in light outside. This was his favourite time of the day...cool and the only movement was a few women moving around the village lighting cooking fires a few hundred metres away.

He lit the LPG gas burner under a battered kettle and used the same match for a cigarette. Pressing the red main power switch, he intoned 'Alohomora' while exhaling a cloud of smoke. A metallic click and the hum of small electric servos was followed by the desktop slowly rotating backward to raise his computer equipment up from its environmentally controlled stowage. Humidity in the tropics quickly destroyed circuitry without this feature being in place.

Robert went through his security protocols, made coffee in a large enamel mug and sat down to take in the news. His aggregator app was showing several queued items, the most interesting being a new release from WikiLeaks. He touched the logo onscreen and was taken to the Wikileaks.org website where a banner announced the feature piece "Hors de Combat – Who's Not Killing the World's Combatants?" Delving into the article, Robert found himself reading a long list of names, allegedly leaked by accident through an artificial intelligence glitch at the World Health Organisation. Everyone on the list, which numbered in the hundreds, was a leading figure in politics, national security or the like. All of them were ill but none had died or even come close to it. In almost every case, the diagnosis included natural causes or previously undiagnosed conditions. Clearly, the media were not reporting anything like the true situation.

Robert pushed back his chair and stared at the intricate patterns on the masi cloth panels that adorned the inner walls of the buré. Pressing fingers to his temples, he closed his eyes and summoned an image of a human body. Inhaling deeply, he imagined himself morphing into the body in such a way that he could 'look' inside it. His olfactory sense detected rich, earthy smells, then antiseptic. He could hear his 3rd form science teacher intoning in a broad Scottish accent about 'broteins'. He flashed back to being eight years old and his father teaching him the periodic table of the elements as a memory drill. The table sprang to life in the form of atomic structures and he heard loud explosions, like those of a nuclear detonation, as they bounced off each other and made their way to differing parts of the body.

He was used to this chaotic entry to his recall and problem-solving but it always left him a little breathless. Using the martial arts technique of 'ibuki' or diaphragmatic breathing, he took a moment to clear his mind, then brought up the list of names he had just read on WikiLeaks. Alongside, he recalled the few cases where the diseases or symptoms had been publicly announced. He was surrounded by images of the organisations and activities represented by the victims. It was predominantly a war tapestry. *When everything is different but the same*, Robert thought, as he looked blindly toward a series of news articles from the last decade. Suddenly his body shivered and the images stopped moving. He was in Singapore, running a simulation on biologics and biosimilars. The sights and smells of the

city were crisp. There, in an audience of 80 people from all over the world, one face stood out.

Dr Xie Chun was a scientist at Sichuan University's West China Hospital in Chengdu. He was also a reservist friend with whom Robert had had an intriguing side discussion about his work on the CRISPR–Cas9 programme. The first human clinical trial of Xie's work, which involved injecting cancer sufferers with cells modified using the CRISPR–Cas9 gene-editing technique, was approved in 2016. Robert's vision filled with double helix human genome sequences and a scroll of binary code. He had taught himself to read machine code, the endless stream of ones and zeroes that run all computers, out of boredom, whilst a junior army officer. What he read on this occasion surprised him. It was an artificial intelligence code sequence that looked similar to some early work he had done on knowledge engineering and expert systems. However, it had been changed from its original static application in human sensory evaluation and appeared to be self-learning across the full range of anatomical subjects.

Realising it was just before 1 am China Standard Time, he keyed in a reminder to contact his old friend later in the day and turned his attention back to the aggregator app that monitored the hundreds of sites and information feeds he used. In the Trsst hashtags, two stood out because there was only one instance of each:

#CFCClassOf1998

#JusquaLaFinDuMonde

He smelled her scent even before the image of her face appeared. *Dani!* With a mix of apprehension and excitement, he followed the link through to the full message.

Interested in new #NATSEC #research project? DM me.

She's being used to bring me back in, he thought, frowning. Despite his annoyance at the thought of some government agency persisting in bothering him he couldn't shake off the feeling of longing that always came to him when he thought of her. Clicking on the **Reply** button, he typed simply *"Toi, tu as dit que tu attendrais."* The words from the second to last line of the song's lyrics still brought tears to his eyes... *"You, you said you would wait."*

Robert composed himself and rapidly typed a dot point list of statements, added several addresses from his group of scientific contacts and sent the video conference invitation.

Chapter 8

The gates at the eastern end of Boulevard Leopold III in Brussels slid back silently to allow a small convoy of trucks, each subtly bearing the French flag on their paintwork, to enter and move to the side access-way of the NATO headquarters building. One by one, they backed into the loading bay where a squad of French military personnel immediately began loading them with furniture, cabinets, computers and artwork. Down the road, street stalls were displaying the newspaper headline:

1966 Encore - La France Quitte l'OTAN

Inside the building, the French Permanent Representative to NATO, H.E. Ambassador Nicole Rochette, was doing her final round of goodbyes. Leaving some of her closest friends till last, she made her way to the Belgian Ambassador's office with a heavy heart.

"Hello Jérémy," she said, knocking lightly on the door frame. Although he spoke reasonable French, Jérémy Van Daele was from the Dutch speaking portion of Belgium. It had become their habit to converse in English.

"Hello Nicole," he said through a forced smile. "Is it time already?" He walked around to embrace her.

"I'm afraid so," she replied.

"I just don't see what is to be gained by your country withdrawing from NATO now?" he stated in a slightly exasperated tone.

She lowered her eyes to the floor for a while, then raised them to look directly at his.

"It is simply as I described it to the Council. Twelve senior politicians, twenty-five commanders within the French Armed Forces and almost every key figure in Airbus, Air France Industries and Dassault Aviation have been subject to some sort of biological attack. We cannot sustain that and, despite the provisions of Article 5, we do not believe that NATO can protect us. In fact, membership may be the cause of us being targeted."

Jérémy gripped her shoulders tightly. "You are not alone in this problem, Nicole. Many countries are suffering similar attacks."

"I know," she replied, "and they must act in the way they deem most appropriate...but France has decided to face this alone. Good luck, Jérémy."

"I will miss our chats. Goodbye, Nicole."

They kissed on both cheeks and she turned down the corridor to her waiting car for the last time. Driving out the main entrance, she glanced sadly across the courtyard at the empty flagpole where Le Tricolore had, until today, proudly flown.

Chapter 9

Robert looked up and saw that the sun was nearly directly overhead. Time for his video conference. He tossed the rugby ball back to the village kids he'd been playing with and slipped back on his bright orange shirt adorned with white floral prints. He lit a cigarette as the console swung into action. There were several icons flashing showing that many invitees were already in the secure chat room.

"Hi everyone," he began, mimicking his favourite former politician with a smile and a wave. "We haven't got much time, sorry. How did we go?"

"You haven't got much time? Rob, you always look like you're on holiday," Thomas Nordberg laughed.

“You’re very welcome to visit any time,” Rob retorted with a smile. “Now about my hypotheses?”

“It’s without a doubt linked to genetic sequencing,” Thomas said.

“What’s unconfirmed is whether attacks are vector-based or directly targeted,” Mudrika Chawla added.

“The scale is too vast for each DNA sample to be individually acquired and processed,” Tahiyya Malik, a fresh-faced young Tunisian woman with a Twenty One Pilots concert poster on the wall behind her cut in. “That got me thinking that you were on to something with DNA databases. We know the FBI has one. The Russians and Chinese likewise. Other countries have smaller data sets but they might offer some ‘gap-filling’, particularly the Israelis.”

“Yeah, so she contacted me to do a little port sniffing and guess what I found with a little help from some ‘anonymous’ friends of mine?” Jose Sousa exclaimed with a thick Portuguese accent. “The biggest distributed database of DNA sequences is not owned by any government or international agency. It’s owned by a genealogy company who people willingly provide samples to in order to trace their ancestors. They pay big bucks in fact to find out they’re 50% Arab, 25% Italian and a mish mash of the rest.”

“So, someone’s hacked this DNA database?” Robert asked.

“The database is reasonably secure, although not impenetrable, but the communications in and out of it are not,” Jose replied. “We were able to follow the trails between regional web servers where people log their requests from.”

“What’s the network look like?” Xie Chun asked.

“There are five nodes; USA, UK, Australia and Canada...but,” Jose said with a sense of the dramatic, “the primary node is in Amsterdam.”

“Interesting,” Thomas replied. “So, no connection with known alliances?”

“Actually, yes...but not in the way you would think,” Jose responded. “The genealogy company has been secretly selling their data on a request basis in order to finance other parts of their business. The ‘trades’ are easy to intercept. The company has been selling DNA data to a range of governments but then ‘following’ their own packets home into the receivers’ servers.”

“Then what?” Robert asked.

“Single or short sets of data are then sent to Russia, China, India and Indonesia,” Jose replied.

“Any clues as to why?” Xie inquired.

“Sounds like plausible deniability tactics to me,” an American voice added.

Robert sat back in his chair, lit another cigarette and closed his eyes. That country pattern was dancing around in his head. He smelled the markets and listened to the ethnic music.

“Rob? Still with us Rob?” Tahiyya asked.

“Yep...sorry,” he replied, sitting forward again and taking another drag on his cigarette.

“Jose, do the IP addresses of the receivers align with Moscow, St Petersburg, Bangalore, Shanghai and Jakarta?”

“Yes, they do... plus a couple of other cities in India,” Jose responded with surprise. “What are you seeing, Rob?”

“Manufacturing facilities that produce NCBs – Non-Comparable BioSimilar,” Rob replied.

“Why are they non-comparable?” Thomas inquired.

“Because, while they are an attempt to copy an innovative biologic medicine that has come off patent, they usually haven’t been through full clinical trials.” Xie responded.

“Absolutely right. The governments of those countries, in an attempt to drive down pharmaceutical costs, provide local approvals for the manufacture of NCBs and pay little to no attention to the FDA or other regulatory bodies,” Rob added.

“But people in those countries have been targetted as well,” Thomas added with a perplexed look.

“Yeah, we’ll solve the ‘who’ question later,” Rob responded. “Let’s talk about the means of delivery to the target. Direct is fairly obvious. What about vectors, Mudrika?”

“There’s dozens of possibilities,” she replied. “Too many, in fact, to be useful in the short term.”

“Without the genetic data, they couldn’t proceed,” Thomas offered. “But if we trash the data or disrupt their communications, they’ll just go into disaster recovery mode and continue. Plus, they’ll know that someone is onto them.”

“So, what we have to do is deal to the data but leave it appearing like it’s untouched.” Jose said gleefully. “Anyone want to trade DNA with me?”

“How long would you need, Jose?” Rob asked.

“After the distributed denial of service took effect, probably less than an hour,” Jose replied.

“We would need a cover story. Who would you like to get blamed for the front of house attack?”

Rob laughed. “Someone ‘anonymous’ as usual.” His face turned suddenly serious. “Two questions. First, should we intervene? Second, what happens after they work out what has happened? This will only delay things.”

“On the first point, I haven’t got much on in the three or four hours I try to sleep – why not?” Jose said cheerily while twirling the tips of his Groucho Marx moustache. “Let’s worry about the second part later.”

There was a general murmur of assent.

“Thanks, reconvene same time tomorrow?” Rob asked.

“As you wish Oh High Chief,” Thomas quipped. “What’s Fijian for goodbye again?”

“It’s written ‘moce’ but with the ‘c’ sounded as a ‘th’,” Rob replied.

“OK – mothey, Rob” they all chorused gleefully as the attendee icons disappeared from the screen. *They set me up again*, he thought with a grin.

It was then that he saw Tahiyya Malik’s icon still flashing. “Got a couple of minutes, Rob? It’s important.”

Chapter 10

Danielle re-read the message with a lump in her throat. *Toi, tu as dit que tu attendrais*. He was still hurting. So was she. *Why was he so bloody stubborn?* she thought.

It’s worth one final shot, she decided, moving her coffee mug and beginning to type. *‘J’attends toujours.’ +1 600 757 3143. PLEASE!*

Robert had barely logged off the VC and was about to shut down his system when he saw a flashing icon on the feed aggregator. It had the colour and sequence of a reply. Curious, he reached over and touched the screen. *Damn you, Dani*, he thought. He saw, at a glance, the satellite phone code she had sent. Robert was struck with a serious ‘approach – avoidance’ experience. He did want to speak with her – if only to hear her voice again – but he had vowed never to work for government agencies again. He could smell her, snuggled in front of him as he took her for her first tandem skydive – an odd mixture of her own skin, shampoo and perfume together with fear, excitement, trust... and lust. Her long blonde hair tumbling out from the sides of her leather ‘frap hat’ and streaming in his face as they exited the Pilatus Porter jump plane at 13,000 feet. He stood, walked outside and stared up, through the surrounding trees at the clear, blue Pacific sky. After what seemed an eternity, he went back in and punched the numbers into his SatPhone.

“General Singleton,” the voice on the other end answered. He instantly recognised the slight huskiness that she had acquired from years of G-suits and oxygen masks.

“Dani...it...it’s Rob,” he began, haltingly.

Danielle was a bit taken aback. She had not expected him to call at all and certainly not straight away. “Rob...it’s great to hear from you. Thank you for calling me.”

“Dani – can we get straight to the point? Are you being asked to bring me in?” Rob responded, desperately trying to keep his voice calm and business-like.

“No, Rob. I’m off the reservation here and could be Court Martialled for doing it,” Danielle replied. “I did suggest that you were the person we needed to help with a problem but...”

“That would explain the hostile little delegation I received then...” Rob cut her off coldly. “Does the national security project somehow relate to unexplained illnesses in world leaders?”

“Yes, it does. I assumed you’d probably work that out but what do you mean by a hostile little delegation?” she responded. “Any approach was only going to be legit and through diplomatic channels.”

“Your lot didn’t send a bunch of thugs ashore in the middle of the night?”

“No way – Rob, tell me what’s been happening.”

“Maybe later. It’s been taken care of for now. A few friends and I were quite interested in what was going on so we took a bit of affirmative action.”

“Rob...I...ah...told them about Bletchley 2.0.”

“Why?”

“Andrew is sick. I knew you would want to help.”

Robert paused in thought. Andrew Singleton was Dani’s little brother. He was also the CEO of Colt Canada. They were close and he remembered fondly how, as a young man, Andrew loved nothing more than hanging around them, always asking for another war story. He shook himself out of his reverie with a business-like tone.

“I’m sorry to hear that. Anyway, it will just add to the mystique of an organisation that doesn’t exist to be in the Five Eyes meeting minutes as reported by someone who knows nothing about it!”

An awkward silence followed.

“Here’s what you need to know. We’ve bought you a couple of months’ reprieve, tops. The casualties will start to diminish in numbers quite soon but when the attackers see that the targets are not falling, they will reassess their tactics. You need to get to them before then,” Rob explained.

“But how, Rob? What’s going on?”

“Send me your PGP key and I’ll deliver you the details I have. Should be good for a promotion ay?” Rob replied.

“That’s not why I’m doing this, Rob,” Dani sounded simultaneously offended and hurt.

Rob immediately felt bad. “Sorry. I know you’re not like that. Look, your people will, I assume, be looking in all the wrong places. Stop looking for an aggressor state or Non-State

actor who is looking to wage war. Your opponent is a group looking to END war. They are hiding in the open and using open source systems for most of their tactical moves.”

“You’re right. We hadn’t covered that possibility.”

“More importantly, you need to protect yourself. Once they realise you’re on to them, you will be more of a target than ever. There is a mole somewhere in your intelligence network that is feeding targetting information to your opponents,” Rob stated emphatically.

“How do you know that?” she replied with alarm.

“How else would the attackers know who was the bloody chief bomb-making instructor in Al Qaeda’s Yemen cell?” he retorted. “Let alone why they would take him out?”

There was a long pause, finally broken by Rob. “I’ll wait for your PGP info.”

“Thanks...can we make it more often than two years to be in touch again?” she asked.

“You have my number, Dani.” Rob responded and hung up. He was drenched in sweat and his emotions simply let go once the call ended.

Maybe it would be better to let the peace-terrorists win? He thought.

Robert sighed and lit another cigarette. He could hear beautiful singing coming from the village. He picked up his guitar and headed out to join the meke.