



A THRILLER

**MARK ALPERT**

# **EXTINCTION**

"Truly the heir to Michael Crichton." — DOUGLAS PRESTON

MARK ALPERT

# EXTINCTION



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*For Tommy and Sarah, my hero and heroine*

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What, then, is the Singularity? It's a future period during which the pace of technological change will be so rapid, its impact so deep, that human life will be irreversibly transformed.

—Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity Is Near*



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# PROLOGUE

Dr. Zhang Jintao raced down the mountainside, fleeing the gray cloud.

Roughly oval and about the size of a hot-air balloon, the cloud glided just above the rocky slope, a hundred meters behind him. As he scrambled down the steep trail, he looked over his shoulder and saw the gray mass coming closer. Its irregular surface heaved and roiled.

Although Dr. Zhang was a strong man in excellent condition, he'd reached the limits of his endurance. He was above the timberline of Yulong Xueshan, a mountain range in southwestern China, and the thin air made him gasp for breath. Stumbling and cursing, he scuttled over a crag littered with fist-size stones. Then he stepped on one of the loose rocks and lost his footing. He skidded down the slope, sliding helplessly on his back, and smacked into a granite boulder.

He lay there, stunned, for several seconds. By the time he opened his eyes, the gray swirls of the cloud had enveloped him. He felt hundreds of pinpricks on his skin, then a cool numbness. He couldn't move. His vision darkened and his hearing grew muffled.

The cloud gradually dissipated. Zhang couldn't turn his head, but out of the corner of his eye he saw two men come down the slope and stop beside him. One man was tall and thin, and the other was short and fat, but they were dressed identically, in gray jumpsuits. The expressions on their faces were also identical: blank and slack.

Zhang recognized both men. He'd operated on the short one six months ago and on the tall one just a week ago. The short man's hair had grown back since his operation, but the tall man's scalp had only a dusting of stubble. The stitches above his ear were still visible.

Furious, Zhang struggled to move his numb lips and tongue. "So this ... is how ... you treat me. After all ... that I've done?"

The short man remained immobile, but the tall one stepped forward and looked down at Zhang. "We have identified you as a threat."

"I don't ... believe this. If I hadn't..."

"We will return you to the Operations Center. Please be patient. Another unit will arrive soon to help us carry you."

"And what ... will you do to me?"

There was a slight pause. “You no longer have the security clearance for that information.”

“You...” Zhang’s vision grew dimmer. The drug that had been injected into his bloodstream

contained a sedative as well as a paralytic agent. “My fault ... you’re...”

The tall man continued to look down at Zhang, his face still blank. And then something odd happened. The man’s lips twitched. His facial muscles fired spastically, as if struggling to do something extraordinarily difficult. After a few seconds he finally succeeded in coordinating the muscles, and his lips formed a smile. “Yes, it’s your fault. You gave us the capabilities. And now we’ve made a discovery.”

Zhang stared at the horrible newborn smile. It was the last thing he saw before he went under.

“Your fault, Dr. Zhang. Supreme Harmony is conscious now. We are alive.”

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**PART 1**

**CONCEPTION**

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# ONE

Jim Pierce was in his workshop with one of his customers, a nineteen-year-old army private named Steve Dugan. Jim started the consultation by offering coffee to the private and his father, who had driven his son to Jim's office. The workshop was in the basement of Jim's home in McLean, Virginia, just a twenty-minute drive from Walter Reed Military Medical Center. This hospital, devoted to rehabilitating the most severely wounded soldiers, was where most of Jim's customers came from.

Jim poured the coffee into two mugs and handed both to Steve's father, a heavyset man in his fifties named Henry. The Dugans sat on stools around a square table in the center of the room. Henry rested one of the coffee mugs on the table and raised the other. "Here you go, Stevie," he said in a low drawl. "Hold still now."

He brought the mug to his son's mouth and gently tilted it. Henry was good at this—he'd obviously done it many times before—and didn't spill a drop. Steve took a sip, then said, "Thanks, Dad," in a drawl just like his father's. He had a friendly round face and a blond crew cut.

Jim sat down across from Steve and leafed through the kid's papers. Dugan had served in eastern Afghanistan with the 187th Infantry. Four months ago, while his squad was patrolling the village of Janubi Nakum, their Humvee ran over a buried IED. The explosion killed the other two soldiers in the vehicle; Dugan, who was manning the Humvee's turret gun, lost both his arms. Before enlisting, he had been a linebacker for his high-school football team in Oklahoma City. Now the muscles in his neck and shoulders were atrophied and the sleeves of his T-shirt hung limply on either side. But his health was good otherwise, and his doctors said he had a positive attitude.

Jim leaned across the table. "All right, Steve, it's very simple. We're here to talk about the prosthetic arms I'm going to build for you. I'm going to show you what I think is your best option and you can tell me if you like it, okay?"

The kid nodded. "Yes, sir. Understood."

"I have a prototype you can look at. I added a few special features that I thought would fit your needs, based on what I saw in your medical reports. I had to design some components from scratch, but I'm pleased with the results and I think you'll be, too."

"Thank you, sir. I appreciate all the work you've done for me, Colonel."

“You don’t have to thank me. You deserve the effort I’ve put into this. The army gave me this contract because it honors the service you’ve done for your country. You and all the other boys at Walter Reed.” Jim lowered his voice a bit, trying for a more casual tone. “And by the way, you can drop the ‘sir.’ I’ve been out of the army for fifteen years now. Just call me Jim. Or Mr. Pierce. Either one.”

Dugan nodded again. “Okay.”

The kid looked nervous. Jim gave him a smile. He was usually pretty good at striking up friendships with these boys. The army connection definitely helped. Although Jim was technically a civilian now, running his own business and juggling half-a-dozen government contracts, he was still a soldier at heart. He didn’t wear his army greens anymore, but his workday clothes—brown shoes, khaki pants, and a blue button-down shirt—were so plain and unvarying that they might as well have been a uniform. His hair was graying, but he kept it trimmed as close and neat as an infantryman’s. He still woke up at six and went to bed by ten, unless his insomnia was bothering him. And he still jogged six miles every morning, running it only a minute slower than he did when he was a Ranger. He adopted this lifestyle thirty years ago, when he left his home in West Virginia and arrived at West Point, and he saw no reason to change. It suited him well.

But Jim had something else in common with Dugan, and now it was time to mention it. “Before we start, I want to make one thing clear,” he said. “I can’t give you back your old arms. That’s beyond my abilities. But I’ll tell you what I *can* do, Steve. I can give you something better.”

Private Dugan didn’t respond, and neither did his father. That was the usual reaction. They thought he was bullshitting them, but they didn’t want to call him a liar.

“I see you’re skeptical.” Jim unbuttoned his shirt cuff. “But I’m going to prove it to you.” Smiling again, he rolled up his right sleeve and revealed the inner workings of his own prosthetic arm.

Jim had built half-a-dozen prostheses for himself, but he always used this particular model for his consultations. Its hand was covered with polyimide skin and looked just like his flesh-and-blood left hand. But everything from the wrist to the shoulder was exposed, all the wires and processors and actuators and hinges. It was the fruit of ten years of research and labor, and Jim displayed it proudly.

“Holy Christmas,” Henry whispered. “It’s a prosthetic. I didn’t even notice.”

Steve stared at the thing, bug-eyed. “The hand looks so normal. And it moves normal. But the rest of it…” His voice trailed off.

“It’s like the arm in that movie,” Henry said. “You know, *The Terminator*.”

*So far, so good*, Jim thought. He wanted them to get excited about the prosthesis. “Let me tell you a little story. Back in 1998, while I was still in the service, I lost my right arm. And I got sent to Walter Reed just like you did. But when I went to get fitted for my prosthesis, you know what they gave me? A piece of wood. With leather straps on one end and a steel hook on the other. Like the pirate in *Peter Pan*. That was the best the army could do. It was the most advanced prosthesis they had.”

Steve shook his head in sympathy.

“Well, I wasn’t pleased,” Jim continued. “So I decided to do something about it. After my

discharge, I went to Pasadena, to the California Institute of Technology. You see, I'd majored in engineering when I was at West Point, and I'd learned a few things about communications systems when I worked in military intelligence. And I heard there was a professor at Caltech who had a company called Singularity that was developing a way to connect microchips to the human nervous system. So I went to this guy, Professor Arvin Conway, and said I wanted to work with him. I told him I was gonna get my Ph.D. and become an expert on prosthetics, and within ten years I was gonna build something better than the goddamn piece of wood the army gave me." Jim raised his prosthetic arm and waved it around, demonstrating its full range of motion. The lubricated joints pivoted silently as he bent the wrist and elbow and shoulder. "And I succeeded. After ten years I started my own company and moved back here so I could custom-build prostheses for the soldiers at Walter Reed. It's the best thing I've ever done in my life. Aside from raising my daughter, that is."

Henry couldn't take his eyes off the arm. "How much does it weigh, Mr. Pierce?"

"Just a couple of pounds more than an ordinary arm. I use lightweight, high-strength alloys for the joints and structural components. And I put in high-torque motors that efficiently convert the battery charge into mechanical energy. Here, let me show you."

Jim got up from the table and went to the workbench that ran along the walls of his basement office. The bench held his machine tools—his lathe, vise, laser cutter, and 3D printer—as well as stacks of spare parts and circuit boards. He reached behind one of the stacks and picked up an incongruous item he'd placed there just before the Dugans arrived. It was a fifteen-ounce can of sliced peaches. Holding it in his prosthetic hand, he returned to the table.

"Okay, I got some Del Monte peaches here, packed in syrup," he said. "The can is made of aluminum and you can dent it pretty easily, but it's a lot harder to bust it open." Jim tossed the can into the air, then caught it. Then he wrapped his mechanical fingers around the can and crushed it. Yellowish syrup spurted out of a split seam in the aluminum.

"Whoa!" Steve yelled. "Nice."

His father laughed. "Hey, you got syrup on my shirt!"

Jim laughed, too. Although he'd done this demonstration many times before, it never failed to amuse him. "I busted the can, but I still can't get the peaches out. I need to make the hole a little bigger." He transferred the crushed and leaking can to his left hand and pointed his prosthesis at the thing as if he was going to punch it. But instead he extended the retractable knife he'd built into the hand. With a loud click, the blade emerged from a slot hidden between the middle and ring fingers.

Steve whistled. "Excellent."

Jim plunged the knife into the already battered can and made a V-shaped cut in the aluminum. Then he retracted the knife and grasped the tip of the V with his mechanical fingers. "I wouldn't do that with my left hand," he said as he peeled back a triangular strip. "The edges of the aluminum are pretty sharp. But my right hand is covered with a skin of polyimide. That's a lightweight, flexible material that's resistant to heat and incredibly strong."

He kept peeling until the can was torn in half. Syrup and peach slices glopped on the floor. Then he

let go of the aluminum strip, stuck his fingers into the can, and gripped one of the remaining slices between his mechanical thumb and forefinger. He held the slippery piece of fruit up to the light. “But this is the most amazing thing right here. Did you ever think about how difficult it is to grasp a slice of peach without dropping or crushing it? The nerves in your fingers have to tell you how soft and slippery it is, and then your brain has to calculate exactly how much pressure to apply. It’s ridiculously complicated. I spent years trying to figure out how to simulate the process.”

He glanced at the Dugans. Their faces were rapt.

Jim threw the peach slice and the can into his wastepaper basket. Then he raised his prosthetic hand and rubbed the wet fingers together. “I decided to use a combination of pressure, temperature, and moisture sensors. I put hundreds of these tiny devices under the polyimide skin of the fingers. When you touch an object, the sensors collect the data and send it to this wire.” He pointed with his left hand at a cable running up the arm. Then he pulled his shirt sleeve all the way up and pointed at a metal band strapped snugly over his right shoulder. “The wire goes to this thing, which I call the neural control unit. Inside this unit is a wireless transmitter that sends the sensory data to a microchip implanted just below the skin of my shoulder. We do it wirelessly because you can’t have wires going through the skin. That can cause infection.”

Henry rose from his stool to get a better look at the electronics. “So what does the microchip inside your shoulder do?”

“It transfers the sensory information to my nervous system. The chip is connected to the sensory nerves that were severed when I lost my arm. Those are the nerves that used to feel the heat and pain and pressure applied to my skin. Now my sensors collect the same information and the microchip delivers it to the severed ends of my sensory nerves. And those nerves carry the information up to my brain.” Jim pointed to his head. “My brain analyzes the signals. It figures out the shape and texture of the object I’m touching and determines how to hold it. Then it sends its commands down to my shoulder via a different set of nerves, the motor neurons. I have another implanted microchip that’s connected to the severed ends of those nerves. This chip takes the commands from my brain and transmits them wirelessly to my neural control unit. Then the unit runs the motors in my prosthetic, making it move the way I want it to.”

Jim stopped himself. Because this was his life’s work, he loved to talk about it. He had to remind himself to slow down. He returned to his place at the table and focused on Private Dugan. “So, Steve, any questions so far?”

The kid chuckled. “Yeah, how fast can you build ’em?”

“Hold on, let me show you the prototype first.” Jim went to his workbench and picked up another prosthetic arm. This one was entirely covered in polyimide skin. He placed it on the table in front of Steve. “I designed this prototype to fit me, so I could test it, but when I build *your* arms I’ll adjust them to match your size and skin color.” Jim used his left hand to detach the Terminator prosthesis from the neural control unit on his shoulder. Then he grasped the prototype arm and inserted it into the unit. After locking the arm into place, he tested it by wiggling the fingers. “Now, Steve, the b-

difference between you and me is that you need two prostheses instead of one. And that complicates the process of attaching and detaching the arms. If you want to do it by yourself, you'd have to sleep with at least one of the arms attached, and I know from experience that's not so comfortable. So I designed a solution. Watch this."

He unclamped the prototype arm from his shoulder and placed it on the linoleum floor. Then he stepped back and stared at the detached arm. After a moment, it bent at the elbow and snapped its fingers.

Henry nearly fell off his stool. "God Almighty! How did you do that?"

"I boosted the power of the radio transmitter in my neural control unit. Now it can send my nervous system's commands to the arm even if it's across the room. And I put some adhesive material on the fingertips, so the arm can pull itself along the floor. Here, take a look."

Jim lay down on the floor, face-up, about six feet from the prosthesis. He mentally sent the command to straighten the arm, which was just as easy to do as when the prosthesis was attached. Then he pressed the mechanical fingers to the linoleum and bent the elbow, dragging the upper part of the arm across the floor. "It works on carpets, too," he said. "You just have to dig the fingernails into the weave." He straightened the arm again, moving the prosthetic hand closer to his body. Then he wrapped its fingers around his right hip, grasping it firmly, and swung the upper part of the arm toward his shoulder. Once the prosthesis got close enough to the neural control unit, a self-locking mechanism clamped the arm into place. Jim ended the demonstration by standing up, raising the prototype arm in the air and extending its retractable knife. "If you want, I'll put knives in your arm, too," he said. "They're great for chopping vegetables."

He turned to the Dugans to gauge their reaction. Both were silent for a couple of seconds. Then Henry shook his head. "Jumping Jesus on a pogo stick," he drawled. "That's the damnedest thing I ever saw."

Steve didn't say a word. He just looked at Jim and beamed.

Satisfied, Jim detached the prototype and put it back on the workbench. Then he came back to the table and reattached his Terminator prosthesis. "I told you you'd be pleased."

"So when can I get them?" Steve asked.

"Once you give me the go-ahead I can build your prostheses in a month. But the adjustment procedure takes a little longer." Jim put a serious expression on his face. "First, the doctors at Walter Reed will implant the microchips in your shoulders. Then you'll start the biofeedback training with the arms. Your brain has to learn how to use the new connections. It'll take at least three months to gain control over the prostheses and read their signals correctly. But I'll be there to help you, every step of the way."

Steve nodded. "You got my go-ahead, Mr. Pierce. Let's get it started."

\* \* \*

The rest of the consultation was routine. Jim took measurements of Steve's torso and made clay molds



of his shoulders. Then Henry signed the authorization papers on behalf of his son, and they scheduled their next appointment. The only notable thing happened at the very end, after the Dugans said goodbye to Jim on the doorstep of his home. While Steve walked toward their car, his father suddenly turned around and clasped Jim in a bear hug. "Thank you," he whispered in Jim's ear. "You saved my son."

Then Henry let go and followed Steve to the car. The whole thing happened so quickly that the kid didn't notice.

After they drove off, Jim returned to his workshop. He figured this would be a good time to work on Dugan's prostheses. The consultation had gone well, and that usually inspired him. He loved to see those flabbergasted looks on the faces of his customers. But as he stood beside his workbench and stared at the prototype arm lying there, he got a sinking feeling in his stomach. At first he wasn't sure why. Then he realized it had something to do with what happened at the end, what Henry Dugan had whispered to him. *You saved my son.*

Jim turned away from the workbench and busied himself with clearing the coffee mugs off the table. It didn't make sense. He should've been gratified and touched by the older man's words, but instead he felt awful. He recalled the sight of Henry Dugan holding the coffee mug to his son's lips, but the thought of this loving, wonderful father just made him feel like a failure. Because Jim wasn't a good father. He'd bungled the job.

He looked down at the table where he'd talked with the Dugans. Only an hour ago he'd told them that raising his daughter had been the best thing he'd ever done, but he'd neglected to mention an important detail. Two years ago, his daughter Layla had dropped out of college and broken off all contact with him. He didn't even know where she was living now.

Jim frowned. He didn't want to think about Layla. Returning to his workbench, he turned on his computer and started reviewing the circuit diagrams for Dugan's prostheses. But he couldn't focus. He was too agitated to think straight. And he was tired. It was past 4:00 P.M., which was late for him, and he hadn't slept well the night before. Time to call it a day.

He crossed the room and opened one of the cabinets above his workbench. Reaching past the coffee mugs, he pulled out a shot glass and a bottle of Jack Daniel's. This was his end-of-the-workday ritual: a single shot of whiskey. But today he drank two shots, downing them quickly as he stood by the workbench, and while the liquor seared his throat and pooled in his stomach he realized there was another reason why he felt so agitated. Without meaning to, Henry Dugan had reminded him of something he'd tried hard to forget. Jim had once had a son, too. A wife and a son.

He was about to pour a third shot when the doorbell rang. *That's odd.* He didn't have any more appointments scheduled. He supposed it could be one of the neighbors. There was a divorced woman across the street who liked to visit him and drop hints. But when he went upstairs to his foyer and looked through the window by the front door, he saw a tall Asian-American man in a brigadier general's uniform. The nametag on his uniform said YIN, and on his left shoulder was the patch of the United States Cyber Command.

Jim was puzzled. He knew the generals who ran Walter Reed, but this guy was from an entirely different branch of the army. Cyber Command was in charge of defending the U.S. military's data networks. It worked closely with the National Security Agency, which was responsible for intercepting and analyzing foreign communications. Jim had spent the last five years of his military career on a special assignment with the NSA, but that was nearly two decades ago. He couldn't imagine why any of the new Information Warriors would want to talk to him now.

After checking his breath to make sure it didn't smell of whiskey, Jim opened his front door. "Can I help you?"

The general held out his right hand. "Good afternoon, Colonel Pierce. My name is Duncan Yin and I'm with Cyber Command's headquarters staff at Fort Meade."

Yin was in his early forties, maybe five years younger than Jim. He was handsome and in great shape and had a Midwestern accent. One of the bright young stars of the modern army, Jim thought. But he still couldn't figure out why the guy was here.

"Pleased to meet you," Jim said, shaking the man's hand with his prosthesis. He still wore the Terminator arm, and the right sleeve was still rolled up, exposing all the electronics. But General Yin didn't seem fazed.

"I apologize for coming here without calling first," he said. "This is a delicate matter, so I thought it would be best to talk face-to-face. Can I come in?"

Jim considered the possibilities. Cyber Command was always on the lookout for breaches in military security. Especially breaches perpetrated by unhappy soldiers. Maybe General Yin was snooping for information on one of Jim's customers at Walter Reed. In which case, Jim had to be very careful. "I'm sorry, General, but can you give me some idea what this is about?"

Yin nodded. "It's about your daughter. I'm afraid she's in a great deal of trouble."

\* \* \*

They went downstairs to the basement workshop. General Yin sat down at the square table while Jim perched on one of the stools, too anxious to sit still. Both his hands trembled. Because his prosthesis was connected to his nervous system, it was equally subject to the jitters.

"I don't normally do this," Yin started. "We usually rely on the FBI to track down the people we're looking for. But when I saw your daughter's name on the list of cases, I decided to get involved. I work closely with the officials at NSA, and they remember you well over there. I've heard great things about the work you did in Africa in the nineties."

"I appreciate your help, General. So what did Layla do?"

Yin frowned. "The question is, what *hasn't* she done? Over the past year hackers have compromised the Pentagon's networks a dozen times, and your daughter appears to be involved in nearly every incident."

*Shit.* Jim had been afraid of this. He'd warned Layla two years ago, but of course she hadn't listened. She was a computer prodigy, brilliant but reckless. She'd started writing her own software

the age of twelve, and by her sixteenth birthday she was hacking into her high school's network and downloading her teachers' personnel files. All of Jim's lectures and punishments had no effect whatsoever, but by the time she started college she seemed to be over the worst of it. She had a stellar freshman year at MIT, acing all her courses. But her grades slipped during her sophomore year, and then she announced she was dropping out. She said she was going to do volunteer work for InfoLeak, the Web site infamous for publishing classified military documents. Jim was devastated. Of all the thousands of things Layla could've done with her life, she'd chosen the one that would hurt him the most.

He clenched his hands to stop them from shaking. "So you have evidence that she hacked into the networks?"

Yin nodded. "We traced the attacks to code names and IP addresses she's used in the past. We compiled all the evidence and handed it off to the FBI, and they've already issued a warrant for her arrest. They've narrowed her whereabouts to the New York City area and begun searching for her there."

Jim turned away from Yin so the general couldn't see his face. This was his nightmare come true. "So why are you here?" he asked, trying to keep his voice steady. "Just to give me a heads-up?"

"No, I want to help. The Pentagon recognizes the extraordinary sacrifices you've made, so my superiors have authorized me to make a proposal. If you contact your daughter and convince her to surrender, we'll withdraw the most serious charge against her. She'll still go to prison, but the sentence will be lighter. One or two years instead of five to ten."

Jim shook his head. He and his daughter had once been inseparable. She was only seven when his mother and brother died, and in the years afterward Jim had devoted his life to her. He'd showered her with love and attention, maybe too much. But now he couldn't do anything for her. Not even the simplest thing. "I can't contact her," he admitted. "I don't know how to reach her."

Yin looked askance. "You don't have a phone number?"

He shook his head again. "She thought if she gave me her number, I'd use it to track her down."

"What about friends, acquaintances? Is there anyone she keeps in touch with?"

"No, she cut off everyone. Layla's a determined girl. When she does something, she does it thoroughly."

"Well, when was the last time you spoke with her?"

"About a year ago. She called me from a blocked number. The conversation didn't go well."

"What did you discuss?"

Jim stared at the general. He wanted to say, *None of your fucking business*, but he thought better of it. "I'd rather not go into the details."

Yin pressed his lips together. He looked displeased. "Your daughter's hacking efforts were focused on Defense Department networks that hold information about our remote surveillance programs. She was apparently seeking documents on the unmanned drones operating in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Did she ever discuss this topic with you?"

*What the hell's going on?* It sounded like Yin was seeking more evidence against Layla rather than trying to make things easier for her. “First of all, we never discussed anything like that. And second, why are you bringing this up?”

“She also seems very interested in China. We believe she’s been investigating the recent arrests of several Chinese dissidents involved in the pro-democracy movement. Did she ever talk about that?”

Jim pushed back his chair and stood up. He was cutting the visit short. He didn’t trust this guy. “Look, I can’t help you. You better go.”

Yin stood up, too. “You’re being evasive, Colonel Pierce. But I’m not surprised. I had a feeling you’d make this difficult.” Moving swiftly, he reached into the jacket of his uniform and pulled out a pistol, a 9mm semiautomatic with a silencer attached to its muzzle. Then, before Jim could brace himself, Yin pointed the gun and fired.

Jim felt the shock of the impact. It spun him clockwise, but he managed to stay on his feet. He waited for the burst of pain, but he felt nothing. His right arm had gone numb. Yin had shot him in the prosthesis, just above the elbow. The bullet had severed the wires in the Terminator arm, which hung limply from his shoulder.

The man grinned, clearly pleased with his marksmanship. “Sorry, but I’m not taking any chances. I heard you put weapons in those arms of yours.”

Jim slowed his breathing and focused on Yin. The man obviously wasn’t a brigadier general. He wasn’t American either. He’d discarded the Midwestern accent and now he was stretching out his *r*—hearrrrd, yourrrs—in a way that sounded familiar.

“Who the hell are you?” Jim asked.

“Before we talk, you’re going to take the arm off. I still don’t like it.”

“I can’t take it off. You busted it.”

“You’re lying. If you don’t take it off in the next ten seconds I’ll shoot your left arm in the same place.” Yin shifted his aim, moving the muzzle to the left. “As you may have noticed, I’m an excellent shot.”

Reluctantly Jim detached the prosthesis. He considered throwing it at the guy, but Yin was too quick. Keeping his gun aimed at Jim’s chest, he backed up to the section of the workbench that held the stacks of circuit boards and the vise. “Now drop the arm and walk toward the bench. Very slowly.”

Jim tossed the prosthetic arm aside but immediately started looking for another weapon. He saw a ball-peen hammer on the workbench, about four feet to the right of where Yin stood. It was a smallish hammer, a one-pound tool that Jim used to test the sturdiness of the electrical connections in his prostheses, but it was better than nothing. As he stepped toward the bench, he tensed his left arm, getting ready to dive for the tool. But before he could make his move, Yin leaped forward. The gun was fast. He grabbed the hammer and swung it at the right side of Jim’s head. Off balance, Jim couldn’t raise his left arm in time to block the blow. The hardened steel slammed against his skull. He fell to his knees and blacked out.

When he came to, he was lying full-length on the workbench, parallel to the wall. He lifted his

head, which hurt like hell, and saw Yin binding his legs to the bench with copper wire. Jim tried to get up, but he couldn't move. His left arm was clamped in the vise at the bench's edge.

After Yin secured his legs, he stepped toward the vise and grasped the long handle of its screw. "Now let's try again," he said. "Where is your daughter?"

"Fuck, I was telling the truth! I don't know where she is!"

"Please don't waste my time. I know about your work with Arvin Conway. So don't try telling me that you're not involved." Yin shook his head, then turned the screw. The steel jaws of the vise squeezed Jim's forearm.

The pain was horrendous. It took all of Jim's will to stop himself from screaming. "Christ! Why do you want Layla? What's she done to you?"

"Your daughter stole some documents from us. I suppose she got tired of breaking into the Pentagon's networks and decided to try ours for a change. That was a mistake on her part." He turned the screw again.

Jim groaned and his eyes watered. Yin let go of the screw and leaned over the bench, propping his elbow on Jim's chest. "We're very serious about the security of our networks. Especially the one your daughter tampered with."

Jim turned away from the bastard. Gritting his teeth, he looked past Yin's face and concentrated on fighting the pain. But as he did so, he noticed something unusual. When he looked down the length of the bench, past Yin and past his own shoes, he saw something moving. It was the hand of the prototype arm he'd built for Steve Dugan. The prosthesis lay on the other end of the bench, ten feet behind Yin, but its hand was opening and closing as Jim writhed in agony.

*Holy shit.* He was connected to the prototype. He was wirelessly sending it commands. When the gunshot blasted the electronics in Jim's Terminator arm, the neural control unit on his shoulder had automatically searched for another prosthesis it could link to. Jim should've realized this would happen. He'd designed it that way.

He started yelling as loudly as he could. Yin smiled, obviously enjoying himself, but Jim wasn't yelling from the pain. He was trying to drown out the noise of the prototype arm, which he was maneuvering behind Yin's back. He sent a command that turned the wrist joint and pressed the adhesive fingertips to the bench's surface. Then he bent the elbow, which dragged the upper part of the arm across the wood. Next, he lifted the hand and stretched it toward his supine body, moving it within five feet of his shoes. Then he pressed the fingers to the bench again and dragged the prosthesis a little closer.

Meanwhile, Yin reached for the tool rack on the wall behind the bench and took down one of the high-speed drills. "It's time to get serious, Colonel Pierce. If you don't cooperate now, I'll start drilling holes in your remaining arm. Three holes for every question you don't answer. Does that sound fair?"

"Okay, okay! I'll tell you what you want."

"Good, let's make this quick." Yin selected a quarter-inch bit and inserted it into the drill. "How

did your daughter infiltrate Supreme Harmony? Who helped her download those documents from the network?"

"She didn't need any help. She's a hacker. She can break into anything."

Yin looked at him for a few seconds, frowning. Then he sighed. "I warned you. This is going to hurt." He flicked the drill's power switch.

Turning to the vise, he looked down at Jim's left arm. At the same instant Jim maneuvered his prosthetic hand next to his own feet and grabbed the toe of his right shoe. He stretched the arm one more, and the mechanical fingers scrabbled up his right leg, dragging the rest of the prosthesis along. Fortunately, the whirring of the drill was loud enough to cover the noise. As Yin selected a spot on Jim's forearm and lowered the drill, the fingers reached Jim's right hip. He grasped it firmly and swung the upper part of the arm toward his shoulder.

At the last moment Yin saw something out of the corner of his eye. He swiveled his head and stared in bewilderment as the prosthesis locked onto Jim's shoulder. Then Jim pivoted his torso and punched Yin's chest, extending the knife from his hand at the same time. He aimed for the heart, just as they taught him in Ranger school. The blade sank home and Jim gave it a twist.

Yin dropped the drill and clasped both his hands around the prosthesis, but his skewered heart had already stopped pumping. He died before he could comprehend what had happened to him. Jim retracted the blade and the man fell to the floor with the look of bewilderment still on his face.

Breathing hard, Jim used the prosthesis to release his left arm from the vise. Then he untied the wires binding his legs and took out his cell phone to call the police. But before dialing 911 he sat on the edge of the workbench for several seconds, rubbing his left arm and staring at the corpse. Judging from Yin's accent and skills, Jim could guess who the man worked for. He was an agent for the Guoanbu, China's Ministry of State Security. Back when Jim worked for the NSA, the Guoanbu was one of his chief adversaries, a ruthlessly efficient intelligence agency that divided its time between spying on the United States and terrorizing dissidents in China. And now it was pursuing his daughter.

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# TWO

Layla Pierce was dancing at an outdoor concert in the SummerStage amphitheater in Central Park. It was a steamy July evening in New York City and the place was packed. The band was apparently quite popular, although Layla had never heard of them before. Someone had told her the band's name a few minutes ago, but she'd forgotten it already. She was stoned, so she was having a little trouble with her short-term memory.

Whatever the name, she liked their music. A pair of guitar lines tangoed with each other, repeating the same steps with growing volume and fury. Layla danced with the guitars, trying to match their undulations within her cramped niche in the crowd. Luckily, she was small—five foot even, a hundred and two pounds—so she didn't need a lot of space. She wore her usual clothes, black pants and a black T-shirt. Her hair was black, too, dyed black and cut short. Her body was boyish—skinny and flat-chested—making her look more like a teenager than a woman of twenty-two. All in all, she was not Miss America, and yet several men and a few women in the crowd tried to dance with her. They smiled and sidled closer and mirrored her movements, but Layla just closed her eyes and turned away. She wasn't interested in either boys or girls tonight. She was dancing with the guitars.

She knew no one there. Although she'd lived in New York for the past six months, she hadn't made many friends. The problem was, she didn't have a real job, or a real home either. Every month or so she moved from one apartment to another, taking nothing with her but a change of clothes and her MacBook Pro. She was one of the most experienced hackers working for InfoLeaks, but the Web site couldn't afford to pay her, so she lived off the charity of the volunteers who supported the site. They let her sleep on their couches and share their organic food, at least until the novelty wore off. Most of them wanted to talk politics and get her involved in their boycotts and petition drives, but Layla had no interest in that stuff. Her only interest was hacking. She had a weird obsessive hatred of secrets, and she got an equally weird thrill from breaking into networks and learning things she wasn't supposed to know.

Layla had started hacking in high school, but it was just a hobby until two years ago. During her sophomore year at MIT she helped InfoLeaks unscramble an encrypted video that showed an American helicopter strafing a crowd of Afghans. She found this assignment more interesting than any

of her computer-science courses, so she dropped out of college and joined the InfoLeaks underground. Since then she'd hacked into dozens of networks and downloaded thousands of classified files. She targeted the Pentagon, the State Department, the Saudi monarchy, and the Russian Federal Security Service. Her latest job was breaking into a Chinese government network rumored to hold files about the mistreatment of political dissidents. An anonymous source, code-named Dragon Fire, had opened a digital backdoor that gave her access to the network, allowing her to download a batch of encrypted documents. She'd started decrypting them several days ago and finally finished this afternoon, but because the documents were in Mandarin she still didn't know what they said. So she'd forwarded the files to InfoLeaks, which would find Mandarin-speaking volunteers to translate them.

And now, to celebrate the job's completion, she was pretending for a few hours that she was a real New Yorker, a young hip woman enjoying an outdoor concert with her young hip friends. She surreptitiously relit her joint and concentrated on the music. The duet of the guitarists turned cacophonous, with loud random notes spilling from the amplifiers. But there was a pattern in the randomness. There was always a pattern. Layla saw the music as a stream of binary code, a long line of zeroes and ones floating over the crowd. It was like an encrypted file, a scrambled mess of data, and it was Layla's job to decipher it, to make sense of the noise. So she did the same thing she always did when decrypting a document: She hunted for the encryption key, the special sequence that would unscramble the data. And after a few seconds she saw it: a string of exactly 128 ones and zeroes floating in the air right beside the music. The key specified the algorithm that would unlock the code, converting the hideous nonsense into beautiful, readable information. She reached into the air and grabbed the key. The zeroes and ones glowed in her hand.

Then the song ended and the key disappeared. The band played another song, but it wasn't as good. The joint was no longer in Layla's hand; she must've dropped it while reaching for the key. She tried to keep dancing, to recapture that ecstatic moment, but her buzz had already worn off. She drifted away from the crowd, all those happy young people, and left the amphitheater. She couldn't pretend anymore. She was different from the others. She'd always been different.

It was ten o'clock. Layla went to the dark, wooded area behind the stage and fished in her pockets for another joint, but all she found was an inch-long stub. She lit it anyway and listened to the distant music, which sounded trite and pointless now. Then the band finished its set and the crowd filed out of the amphitheater, heading for the lights of Fifth Avenue. But Layla walked in the opposite direction, going deeper into the park.

She finished her joint while strolling down an asphalt pathway that meandered under the trees. Then she heard a voice behind her: "Hey, baby, want another? I got smoke."

She looked over her shoulder and saw the guy's silhouette, bulky and tall. She called out, "No thanks," and walked a little faster.

The guy matched her pace. His shoes slapped the pathway. "Hey, slow down! Where you going?"

Layla started to run. Her father had once told her: *If you can't win a fight, there's no shame in running away.* She saw a lighted area ahead, a large rectangle of asphalt, and at its center was a lone



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