

CIA Director David Weissmeyer sat at his desk, at least the one assigned to him in the situation room, considering all that had happened in the last five hours. The room was silent but for the droning of a television on the far wall scrolling with breaking news about the assassination attempt on the President. Not since the attempt on Ronald Reagan's life had there been an incident like this. And not since JFK had the nation and the world been stunned by seeing a gunshot wound to the head of an American president, while the images were being beamed around the globe.

The two marksmen had both found their target, one bullet entering the president's upper right chest, the other deeply gashing the right side of his skull. The President's immediate collapse, as well as a head wound visible through the assassin's scope, gave the impression that the job had been successful and the bullets had fatally wounded the target. The images were so gruesome that he wanted to look away even as he was drawn to them again and again. The clean hole. The lack of blood. The surreal scene of a man collapsing and pulling the security of a nation down with him.

Those images in David's head were followed next by more pictures. Secret Service personnel quickly moving in to form a physical barrier between the President and any further gunfire. On the ground behind the human wall lay the President, the clean hole in his shirt replaced by a rapidly growing pool of blood. Members of the press and TV reporters immediately reported everything they had seen—or thought they saw—merging fact with panic-laced perceptions that formed a glob that was one part truth and one part conjecture. That led to mass speculation and talk of succession.

As the President was whisked away to Johns Hopkins University Hospital to a waiting surgical suite, there was near hysteria as the Baltimore crowd crammed into Carroll Park on Washington Boulevard watched in disbelief. Questions flying on television echoed those in the bunker: The swearing in ceremony of the Vice President. Who would pay the price for this? How did the Vice President's minor squabbles over domestic and foreign issues impact current legislation?

David considered the group and the implications of what was happening. The attempted assassination of President David Lee had initially been thought to be the work of some right-wing extremist group. Not the Klan, but more likely 'Christian' zealots organized into a militia who saw it as their God-ordained mission to rid America of those they blamed for her "demise." David thought again about the Oklahoma City bombing, the Branch Davidian Raid, the DC Shooter and Columbine. America had her share of home-grown terrorists, men of the ilk of Timothy McVeigh. The news coming now was quite different, and the implications chilled him. The war was no longer with nations—that was all 20th century battles. The past two decades had been about changing everything we knew about warfare and the location of America's enemies.

"Let's regroup," the Secretary of State said, commanding control of the room once again, while casting a wary look at David. Higher in the line of succession than Director Weissmeyer, Shirley wanted the whole room to remember it.

All of the media speculation on right-wing conspiracies had ceased when Al Jazeera aired a breaking news story that an Iranian terrorist organization, Askar Mahdi, or *Army of the Mahdi*, had claimed responsibility for the attack on the President.

Her fellow cabinet members sat around the semi-circle, their faces reflecting the panic she'd felt at the news. The Secretary of State was wrapping up a conversation with the security detail guarding the President.

"Madam Secretary," said Rufus McCarthy, senior security agent on the President's detail, "the President is out of surgery and out of danger."

The room seemed to let out a collective exhale. Even the Secretary of Homeland Security and the National Security Advisor relaxed a little, but not enough to let their guard down. Heads would roll over this—of that they could be certain. They would be most concerned

with keeping theirs.

President Lee had just opened a monument dedicated to the millions of African slaves who had been cruelly and forcefully brought to the United States and elsewhere in the Americas. *Ironic!* During a moment lamenting man's inhumanity to man that such an act of savagery should be perpetrated upon the one trying to heal the wounds of centuries past.

"Thank you, Agent McCarthy, for the update. Keep us posted of all changes," Secretary of State Shirley Huntington said before she hung up the phone.

"We need to make plans for—" David started, but Secretary Huntington silenced him with a look. He'd rarely disliked her as much as he did right now. The panic in this room, the President's attack. All could have been averted if she'd listened to what he'd warned her about months ago.

"I am aware of your opinion," she continued, using a tone that was a sweet slap across his face. She had a way of commanding a room and demanding submission, from her fellow countrymen at least. Her success on the international stage left David with some doubt. As the only person who understood these conflicts better than the State Department, David's role as head of the CIA had made him uniquely aware of America's vulnerability and lack of status in the world.

From the moment President Lee appointed David to the position of Director of Central Intelligence, he had always seemed to be one step ahead of the terrorists. David's close contact with Mossad and Shin Bet, the Israeli security agencies, together with his own government's state-of-the-art surveillance equipment meant that any member of the cream of any Islamic terrorist organization could barely take a bathroom break without 'Uncle Sam' knowing where he was and what after-shave he used. Several years before, as a middle-ranking, ambitious agent, the Director had played a critical role in the intelligence-gathering leading up to the strikes on the Islamic State—or ISIS—threat that had ravaged Syria and northern Iraq.

"The Vice President needs to be called," the voice was muffled and David didn't recognize it. That wasn't unheard of since every Cabinet member and Senior Intelligence officer summoned to this lower bunker had felt the need to bring an entourage of two or three assistants.

Secretary Huntington immediately called the Vice-President and updated him on the status of the president. After a few "uh-huhs," "okays" and an "I'll get on it right away," Secretary of State Huntington put the phone down and stared into the eyes of each of the members of cabinet. Finally she was showing some signs of stress. The revelation calmed David. It was arrogance that had led to these continued attacks. Only through some vulnerability would they look at themselves in a way that would reveal the true holes in their security.

Hands clasped together on her desk in front of her, the Secretary of State leaned forward toward her colleagues. "America has become a laughing stock to both our friends and enemies," she began in an ice-cool tone.

David sat back. He'd known this from the intelligence chatter, but hearing it from the Secretary's own lips suddenly made it real. The thought, the implication, was terrifying. "We have been a friend to every down-trodden nation and oppressed people who have called on us in their time of need. We liberated Europe from Hitler's grasp and oversaw the reconstruction of both Germany and Japan."

As David listened to the Secretary of State's words, he thought she'd never before sounded so hawkish. "We defeated the totalitarian communist regimes of Eastern Europe. We've gone out of our way to correct every mistake of the previous administrations and stabilize the fledgling democracies we've sown in the Mid-East." The Secretary's voice was starting to rise.

David considered for a moment that she might have hidden some pretty deep beliefs about the value of war behind the passivism necessary for her political aspirations. The implication of a deception, a duality that deep, did nothing to alleviate the insecurity born in

the chaos of this attack.

“We’ve given billions of dollars in direct and indirect aid to the Islamic world. And what do we get for it? *What?*” she yelled as she slapped her open palms on the desk and stood up.

She’d always been feisty, a term she would have called sexist if David had ever uttered it aloud, but this outburst had surprised everyone present. She opened the office mini-bar and took out a small container of bottled water. After gulping down half the contents, she resumed her seat.

Years of diplomatic, politically-correct language were beginning to fray at the edges. *Was she beginning to lose her faith in humanity?* David eyed her thoughtfully. He would surely set her off again, but someone had to speak. In a political vacuum, well, he wouldn’t think about it. “Madam Secretary,” he began, acutely aware of the eyes suddenly shifting to him. “We informed you weeks ago that Internet ‘chatter’ had been increasing and advised that security be tightened at home and abroad. I personally wrote you the memo regarding President Lee’s...”

“Don’t presume to lecture me,” the Secretary of State rebuffed, cutting him off mid-sentence. “This is no time for finger-pointing and blame-shifting. Here we are, so long after 9/11 and the subsequent War on Terror, and now we are targeted by the cronies of... of... *an Arab Hitler!*” she blurted out.

“Iranians are Persians, not Arabs—but I do see your point, Madam Secretary,” David conceded. With the increased ‘chatter’ over the past month and a half, the security should have been beefed up, but he also knew that no action had been taken because there had been no detectable movement of terrorist ‘assets’ around the globe. Of course she would be eager to not point blame. The blame belonged, in large measure, with her—followed closely by the Secret Service. All of their Pollyanna naiveté had shielded them from harsh realities and the dip in polling data that came with bad news. They’d felt immune to the bad guys and pretended that the world they imagined was the world they inhabited.

But all of that changed today. *Askar Mahdi* was unheard of but the name was enough to send a chill down the spine of the Director. He knew the meaning of both words and was all too familiar with the Iranian President’s obsession with the Shiite messiah, the ‘Mahdi’ or the ‘Hidden’ or ‘Twelfth’ Imam. That he saw himself as a type of ‘John the Baptist’ figure preparing the way for the Mahdi’s return was beyond question. It had been the driving force behind his veiled efforts to acquire nuclear weapons—weapons to be used first to wipe Israel off the map, then destroy the ‘Great Satan’ before destroying Western civilization and preparing the world to submit to a global Islamic Caliphate.

“Mr. Weissmeyer, I want a concise dossier on Askar Mahdi prepared and on my desk ready for me to read at 9 a.m. tomorrow,” Secretary Huntington began, her voice tight and her eyes steel. “Every nuance of meaning the name carries, any history, organization, assets, personnel, affiliates, even speculation and theory if the well runs dry.” The phone on her desk rang.

“I can simply provide you with the report I gave you six weeks ago.” He hadn’t meant it to sound as condescending as it did, but once spoken he couldn’t *un-speak* it. The Secretary stiffened.

“Madam Secretary,” someone said, “it is the Israeli P.M.”

“9 a.m., David,” she said, spitting the words out. “I’ll take the call in the next office.”

“Go ahead, Prime Minister Salomon,” the White House operator instructed as she put down her hand piece. Shirley Huntington worked to calm herself after David’s rebuke. It was easy to indict her now, in retrospect, but with the reams of reports his department dumped on her desk daily there was no way she could give full attention to each one.

“Shirley,” the Prime Minister’s voice was sincere, “how is the President?”

“We’ve just been notified that he is out of danger. Thanks for your concern, Ben.”

“Of course,” he said.

“We know who our most loyal friend is in the Mid-East,” Shirley continued. “Do you have your guys at work on this *Askar Mahdi* organization?” Her voice was a touch more urgent than she’d meant. Her nerves were fraying at the edges. She took a breath and steadied herself. She didn’t need a diplomatic disaster with their only remaining ally in the region.

“First, thank God President Lee is okay,” Ben said. “Now, regarding Askar Mahdi: Zero, zip and zilch in terms of hard facts. Of course, we aren’t surprised that the Iranians are involved. Their regime of radical Shiite Islam is doing whatever they can to force Allah’s hand in bringing about the return of the Islamic messiah to destroy all of their enemies.”

“Yes. We’ve been looking at that,” she replied.

“I’ve spoken to Eli Yankilov, the Director of Mossad. He has assets on the ground inside Iran and drones in the air gathering whatever comes to light about the group.”

“What about ‘spiders’ to crawl the Net?”

“I’m not sure, but I’ll check. But if you know of it, chances are they’re on it,” the Prime Minister answered. “This may take some time, Shirley, given that neither your guys nor ours have anything on the group. They are obviously well hidden.”

“And no doubt well protected! Tell the Mossad to communicate only with Weissmeyer at the CIA. I know you are doing all you can but—*ASAP, please*. We don’t want this to go unchecked any more than is absolutely necessary. I can only imagine that smug SOB in Tehran laughing at his success. Let’s wipe the smile off his face before he attempts to wipe Israel off the map.”

“Weissmeyer will be the first to know. I’ll redouble all efforts and see if we can shut down the Iranian regime and blow this Army of the Mahdi to hell.”

She hung up and began walking to the main room. Everyone seemed unfazed by her summary of the talk with Israel but there really wasn’t anything new. She gave out assignments and deadlines before heading back to her office. There was no longer the fear of a second attack yet there was so much more to be done.

It was to be a night of little sleep for those who worked on the Hill.