

FOUR (Cruz)

As the armored SUV approaches the police headquarters, Cesar Cruz feels his pulse quickening. Something in the heavy concrete walls, the vehicle barricades they weave through, the heavily armed officer at the gate has him flashing back to the powerplant.

He breathes deeply, trying to will himself calm. *The doctors said it will fade with time.*

Seated across from him, his aide Lorrain eyes him. "Sir, are you okay?"

"I'm fine." He gestures to all the armed men and equipment around them now that they've entered the police compound. "Just...remembering."

Lorrain frowns, "This may not be the best thing then—"

She pauses as the driver rolls down the windows to allow the officer standing guard to peer in the back. He doesn't seem to recognize Cruz, but apparently the suited pair in the back aren't enough to raise concerns. He waves them through.

Cruz cuts off Lorrain as she opens her mouth, "No. If we're going to capture the Marigolds, I need to be there." *Because politics abhor a power vacuum.*

The driver parks, Cruz steps out of the car, flinching as a motor revs nearby. Two officers on quads rev their motors a few times, then pull out the gate into the street, headed out for neighborhood patrol.

Lorraine slides out to the seat behind him, catching his elbow. "Let's get you inside."

Twenty minutes later, Cruz's hand is damp from shaking hands and they are inside a massive control center. Here, at least all the police are commanders wearing dress uniforms. Cruz doesn't have the same visceral response to the crisp and decorated uniforms as he does to the tactical kit of the patrol cops.

With every new introduction to the command staff he is reassured about his decision to come.

Chief Peterson, the ranking police officer in the city, joins him. "Good to see you, Cesar. We don't get too many suits visiting us."

"Glad to be here." Cruz shakes Peterson's hand. There's a momentary battle of tension, as each man seeks to squeeze slightly harder than the other. It ends a draw, Peterson smiling and stepping back.

Peterson is a large man, he looks down even at Cruz's six foot height. His waistline is large too, giving him a formidable presence in his dress blues. The brass accents of his uniform gleam with reflected light. "Have they confirmed you yet?"

Cruz puts on a self-deprecating smile, "No official decision has been made."

Peterson snorts a laugh. "Well in that case, *Acting* Governor, I look forward to the good news soon."

"Thanks. And hopefully some good news today."

The Chief's smile fades, "We'll get those fuckers back for Davis, sir."

"Good," Cruz says, trying to match the Chief's steely tone.

"Are you doing alright?" The look of concern doesn't come naturally to Peterson's face.

Cruz doesn't know how to answer, just like he hasn't known how to answer any of the other people asking the same question throughout the week. All the worried faces, wide eyes looking at him. Empathy he had no use for. Only his wife had known what to do, pulling him away from all the worried faces, stripping his bloody clothing while he stood, trembling uncontrollably as soon as no one was watching. Soothing him in the night when he jolted awake, yelling for Davis to keep breathing. "I'm doing fine. Thanks for asking."

An officer joins them, addressing Peterson, "Should have the team feeds coming online shortly."

Cruz checks his rank insignia, *oak leaves, meaning...what again?* He's had enough trouble trying to memorize the military ones that were a mother language to Davis. Learning the police ranks was a whole new exercise in confusion.

Peterson saves him the effort, "This is my Deputy, Peter Oletski. This is future Governor Cruz." Oletski nods brusquely through the introduction, mind clearly elsewhere. "Good to meet you, sir." *Not much for politics, then.*

Cruz shakes his hand, "A pleasure, Deputy Chief Oletski."

Behind them, the main screen flickers on, pulling their attention.

It fills the entire wall, divided into sixteen sections. The first illuminates to shaky first-person camera footage. All that can be seen are someone's arms, wearing black and carrying a rifle. At the top of the footage, small words and symbols presumably give more information about what they're looking at.

A moment passes, the only view being the man's arms as he preps his rifle.

Another section flicks on, with a similar view. Then several more in rapid succession, until eight of the sixteen sections are all streaming first-person footage from men in SWAT gear.

Without formality, Deputy Oletski steps up to the desk, keying a radio mic. "Sergeant? We've got your feeds ten-two here."

"Copy. We're performing final checks, will be to target in five mikes."

Cruz finds the lingo unnecessary. Did it actually improve communication, or just part of the mental gymnastics needed to put oneself in harm's way? Before he can follow up on the thought, the sounds of weapons being loaded and racked makes him clench.

Chief Peterson glances over at him. To cover, Cruz asks, "Where are they?"

"About twenty miles north of here. The last of the suburbs before you reach the farms. The target building was a middle school or something."

"Hmm. And how did you find them?"

"Using some of the near equipment the Japanese provided us. Were able to pick up radio chatter indicating Marigold would be here. If we're lucky maybe we'll scoop up junior too."

"Radio chatter?"

Peterson smiles, a cold predatory expression, "They're getting sloppy."

The SWAT Sergeant interrupts their conversation. "Deputy, we're on the move. ETA three mikes." The surge of a heavy diesel engine sounds every time the SWAT sergeant keys the channel.

Oletski replies brusquely, "Command copies."

A different voice calls out, "Perimeter team in place."

"Command copies."

Some of the SWAT officers' hands are flexing on their rifles, others seem frozen.

A new voice, "Spotter units in position."

"Command copies."

The screen suddenly lights up as the doors of the armored truck burst open. The footage is silent and jarring, the men all moving jerkily as they leap from the vehicle. There's a flash of a heavy metal gate, someone's hands carrying metal hooks. The SWAT Sergeant keying his mike interjects some audio; the revving of the diesel engine, his voice, "breach breach bre-!"

Silence again as eight different points of view show the metal gate being ripped out of the wall. The men swarm into the compound, rifles up and blocking most of the footage. Cruz catches glimpses of rusted playground equipment, then the men reach the doors to the building.

Please let this be the end of the Flock.

As they move into the building, snippets of audio come through every time the Sergeant keys his mic. The rest of the team isn't linked to the command center. "—olice! Hands on your face, hands on your face!" Cruz sees footage of them grabbing a few scruffily dressed men, throwing them on the ground. The footage is too dark and jagged to make out what's happening. Moments later, "Ground floor clear. Four in custody. Looks like just bums."

Tension is leaking into Oletski's voice as he replies, "Command copies."

Please let this be the end. Cruz realizes his fingers are digging into the arms of the chair.

The stream clears, the men are regrouping at the base of a concrete stairway. Cruz feels nauseous from trying to watch the eight different first-person views at the same time.

A different voice cuts in. "Roof units have something, second floor. Could be the silhouette of a man."

"Approaching stairs."

Please...

The SWAT team storms the stairs.

The captain must be accidentally keying his mike, flashes of noise come through, "—lice, hands up!"

Nausea twists Cruz's stomach.

The streaming footage is jumbled, dark. Flashlights illuminate parts of the wall, creating weird shapes.

"—he fuck?" The SWAT sergeants voice.

The Lieutenant leans toward the screen, clenching the microphone until his knuckles turn white. "Is it them? The Marigolds?"

...let this end

The footage flashes, showing someone dangling from the ceiling. No, Cruz realizes, not someone, something; an effigy. It was a store mannequin, hanged awkwardly from a noose tied around a ceiling beam, feet dangling above the floor. It's dressed in a suit, cheaper than anything Cruz would wear. Even so, Cruz feels the cold creep of recognition. Its smooth mannequin face has a piece of paper stapled to it.

The SWAT team moves closer, revealing a fractured insect-eye view of the paper.

Chief Peterson turns slowly to Cruz, all predatory gleam gone from his eyes. “What the fuck...”

The paper is a Cruz’s face, a headshot taken when he transferred to Antium. A forced smile over a suit collar, the American flag hanging in the background.

The eyes have been crudely scratched out, scrawled across the face is the message: *Render unto Cesar.*

Bile rises up into Cruz’s throat.

Oletski’s voice cuts through, “They knew we were coming! Get to co-,” his words are cut off but the percussive sounds of automatic gunfire.

Cruz covers his mouth, rushing out of the room toward the bathroom.

FIVE (Kane)

Kane Marigold watches the federalist thugs as they rip their way into the school.

His eyes are intent over the tattoos on his face. His allegiance to the Flock shown proudly, as befits the only living son of Timothy Marigold. A crusader’s cross on each cheek, casting a permanent shadow on his gaze. Still, he can’t help but smile at their wasted efficiency. Ripping the gate out of the outer wall with their truck, then running to the main building. So confident they were the predators...

He’s been hidden on this hill for hours now, only the dappled shade of a camouflage net between him and the sun.

The land is pleasant enough here, where the human settlements finally give way to farmland. There had been years of blood spilled, but it had only made the grass grow greener and the crops plumper. The crops were what brought Kane Marigold’s ancestors here years ago. Not to farm, that was for softer men. But there was wealth here, in a time when wealth meant enough food to feed your children.

Now, all that farmland had been reclaimed by the government, and the small figures of men and women working the fields were refugees and conscripts.

As the SWAT team breaches into the building, the rest of the police vehicles emerge from their pre-staged locations, forming a perimeter around their target. They vomit armed officers, covering the windows of the school. Each waiting for a Flock soldier to stick his head up.

So focused on revenge, they didn’t bother to look around.

Kane feels a twinge of pleasure every time he thinks of General Davis’ last moments. *Did he live long enough to know it was the Flock that got him? His violent past finally reaching out and snatching him from the world of politics.*

Pushing those thoughts aside, Kane turns to the machine that shares the camouflage netting. It resembles a large beetle, a three-foot diameter domed carapace held steady by six articulated legs. From the front a few tubes protrude, along with glass nobs that Kane assumes are sensors.

Hardly looks like a weapon, Kane thinks.

He strokes a few buttons on the rear of the machine.

The beetle emits a low whine, coming to life. Small computer screens flash on, displaying symbols he doesn't understand. He follows the instructions he's received, tapping commands into the keypad. The machine purrs and moves, barrel sweeping across the valley below. On the screen the machine's brain pick out a few rifle barrels in the hills, the muted heat signatures of the Flock men hidden in the grass. He keys the machine as he was shown and each of the signatures glow blue, marked as friendly.

The machine adds a new excitement to the ambush. The police would not be expected this level of sophistication. His hand-picked personal guard were the ones who had the honor of using this weapon.

It wasn't hard to find Flock volunteers among the refugees. Many had traveled hundreds of miles, thinking they would find a new life in Antium. Instead they found hard work, with all of the products being sent east to Colorado, or west to Japan. After a year of indentured work on these farms, it was easy to hand them a gun and point them in the right direction.

Kane's own men were a step above the desperate refugee. Each bore a crusaders cross tattoo, ensuring they would never see the light of day if they were captured. There was no going back for them.

Kane spots movement behind the frosted glass of the second-floor windows. He steadies his breathing, "Blessed be the Lord my strength, who teaches my hands to war, and my fingers to fight."

With a stroke of a button, the weapon rumbles into full activation mode.

His men fire first, rifle fire spraying from the hills overlooking the suburb. As the police dive for cover, Kane can't tell how many were actually hit.

The officers react immediately, returning fire. The hills spray dust into the air, new bullet holes overlapping the old. The police training asserts itself almost immediately, these are experienced professionals. Tight groups of bullets chase each Flock man that raises his head.

Kane crosses himself rapidly, then keys the machine. It emits a low *whirr*, then booms to life. The pad displays incomprehensible figures as it begins spraying lead into the police with inhuman accuracy. Spend casings spray from a port on the beetle's carapace, spilling down the hillside. Its shells tear through the police vehicles, exploding into shrapnel at impact. Within seconds the tempo of the battle is altered, wounded cops drag themselves away from their burning vehicles to be finished by rifle fire.

The weapons program prioritizes; once the vehicles are neutralized it begins tracking individual police officers with robotic precision.

Kane smiles at the beauty of it. He scarcely notices when the police locate him and the hilltop whines with lead ricochets. A lucky shot hits one of the weapons supports, knocking it lopsided. It twitches like a beetle on its back, trying to fix its barrel on the enemy.

Kane pushes himself up, ignoring the whine of the bullets nearby and muscles it back into place. *The Lord will not take me yet*, he thinks, just in time to feel bullet fragments tearing into his bare skin.

As soon as the beetle resumes its jerky spray of bullets, Kane dives back into the relative cover of the dirt.

He checks for wounds, finding only superficial cuts from shrapnel. The adrenaline covers any pain.

Below him the single functioning police truck begins to reverse, realizing they are outmatched. But the suburban street makes it hard to maneuver and the Flock men tighten their cordon. A few desperate officers make a run for it, not making a dozen steps before they are cut down.

The firefight dies down to a few sporadic shots as his men finish off the survivors.

They move quickly, stripping weapons and supplies from their fallen enemies. Soon reinforcements will come, and they must be gone.

Kane reluctantly pulls his hands away from the machine. *What a beautiful weapon.*

At his side a radio hisses to life, and he hears his father's voice.

"Did you destroy the destroyers?"

"Yes, father."

"Good work. Finish and come home."

Kane returns to the machine, keying a final sequence into the pad. He quickly grabs his radio and begins the jog down the side of the hill.

It was time for them to fade back into the city. His men would stash their weapons in dozens of caches all across the city and surrounding forest, then return to their day jobs and families.

Kane and his personal crew would hide out in the hills, riding out any backlash within the city.

An angry hiss sounds behind him, the machine burning itself from the inside.

It was unfortunate they had to destroy it, but it was too big to move quickly, and Timothy had made it clear that they couldn't afford the government learning where they obtained it. If everything went well there would be more death machines for them soon.

The hiss expands into a percussive explosion as the remaining ammunition and explosive charges light up the evening as the weapon tears itself apart.

Father will be proud.