

THE
GREYZONE



A GLOBAL FEDERATION
OF NATIONS BOOK

THE
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OMAHA, NEBRASKA

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THE GREY ZONE

GLOBAL FEDERATION OF NATIONS SERIES BOOK ONE

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Contact the Publisher at:

Rooney Publishing
c/o Concierge Marketing
4822 South 133rd Street, Ste 200
Omaha, NE 68137
rooney@conciergemarketing.com
402-884-5995

Paperback ISBN: 978-0-9993400-4-2

Kindle ISBN: 978-0-9993400-3-5

Library of Congress Cataloging Number: 2018951811

Cataloging in Publication Data on file with the publisher.

Revised Second Edition

Publishing and Production services provided by Concierge Marketing Inc.

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing 2018

10 9 8 7 6 5 4

AUTHOR'S NOTE

If you are reading this, I would like to start by saying: thank you. Your interest and support mean the world to me. I hope you have as much fun reading *The Grey Zone* as I had writing it.

I need to express some special gratitude to those people that helped me along the way. First off, my parents Michael and Karen McMillan could not have been more supportive. Since I was a child, they nurtured my desire to create. When I committed to writing a book, they did not hesitate to increase their support every step of the way.

To my family and friends and all those who talked with me during the process of creating this book, every comment and question gave me the fuel I needed to power through, even when I was stuck and frustrated. Know this—your words have power. The power to shape dreams and stoke the fires of creativity. Your words can empower someone to accomplish their goals. Though you may not recognize what follows, your words made this book.

A SHORT LIST OF ACRONYMS USED IN THE GREY ZONE

AFA:	American Freedom Army
AFG:	American Freedom Group
APD:	All-Purpose Device
AR:	Advanced Robotics
BHS:	Basic Human Standard
BoLAS:	Band of Latin American States
GFCoJ:	Global Federation Court of Justice
GFN:	Global Federation of Nation's
GSE:	Global Stock Exchange
IWC:	Implanted Wrist Chip
LGW:	Liberation Grizzlies of the West
MAB:	Media Accreditation Board
MOAT:	Mobile Observation and Targeting
N.A.D.S.:	New American Desert States
NASO:	North American Security Office
O.o.B.:	Order of Bedlam
PPO:	Prep Period Ops
SO:	Security Officer or Security Office
SOHQ:	Security Office Headquarters
STAB:	Special Tactics for Advancing Border



PROLOGUE

3 May 2072

“And I’ll have a club sandwich on rye with a kumquat spritzer. Thanks.”

The man spoke to the waiter as he closed out the digital menu displayed on the table. He enjoyed the nostalgia of having a person come to the table to take your order. It added a touch of personal service he thought many eateries were sorely missing.

The man’s companion, a brunette woman in her mid-forties, idly twirled the ice cubes in her water with her straw.

He watched her for a moment, then looked at the glass tabletop which now displayed the daily news. He tapped the table and a graph showing the weekly march of the Global Stock Exchange appeared before him. The GSE continued to climb, up a point and a half in the last twelve hours.

A gust of wind blew across the veranda and the man followed the current, then gazed across the street. It was a warm spring day in Oklahoma City—the sun shone above the restaurant’s patio where some twenty-five other patrons enjoyed their lunch break.

“I think I’ll go to the club after work. Get a swim in,” the woman said as she continued to twirl the ice in her glass.

“Yeah?” the man asked absent-mindedly as his finger scrolled down the table and he changed graphs from one stock in his portfolio to the next.

“Yeah,” the woman said.

She stopped twirling the ice cubes and let the straw settle in the drink. The water continued to swirl around the buoyed straw.

“That means you’ll have to pick the twins up from practice.”

“Yeah,” the man said. His cheek rested on his hand and his eyes were cast down at the table top.

“David, are you listening to me? I need you to—”

“Pick up the twins from practice. I heard you, sweetie.”

He closed out the graphs on the tabletop and the screen faded away, leaving only a faint reflection of David and the blue sky above. He looked up at his wife and gave her a smile.

She smiled back and returned to twirling the ice in her drink.

“Thank you. I just wasn’t sure you were paying attention.”

“I was,” the man said, the smile still on his face. He studied her delicate fingers as they played with the straw. She made this childish motion look graceful.

A man sitting alone in the corner of the patio caught David’s eye. Wearing a granite suit with a black shirt underneath, he blended into the shade. Only his right foot, crossed over his left knee, basked in the sun while the rest of him was covered by the restaurant’s awning. David watched the man while his wife opened an app on the table and played drone footage of celebrities walking in and out of their massive homes. The man in the corner caught David’s curiosity because instead of being entranced by the table screen or his All-Purpose Device the shaded man had a binder next to his plate filled with a few centimeters of paper. It had been some time since David had seen someone in public with so much physical reading material. He thought about how big of a hassle it would be to lug around so much paper.

“Linda said that their family is going to Havana next month to vacation.”

“Yeah?” David watched the man lick his thumb and turn a page in the binder.

“I think it’s time we start planning our next trip. The twins have their summer break coming soon and the only vacation we have planned is to see your parents in Kansas City.”

His wife had stopped playing with the ice in her glass and was looking at David again. She removed her sunglasses and placed them on the table.

“What do you think about Kinshasa? The riverfront is supposed to be spectacular since the renovations. We haven’t been to Africa in years, not since the safari. And the twins were just tykes then.”

“I don’t see why not,” David said. He synced his APD to the tabletop and looked at his planner. “Why don’t you book a flight for the third week of June, Christy?”

David’s job in Sodium-Ion sales had provided the family with ample opportunity to travel the globe and see all the most highly recommended tourist sites—at least those located in the White Zone.

Christy finished tapping at the table, then took a drink of water and crunched an ice cube between her teeth as she put the glass down.

“Done,” she said. “And I scheduled our vaccinations as well.”

“Should be fun,” David concluded duly. He hated when Christy chewed ice, but none of his previous efforts had impeded the quirk.

His eyes drifted away from his wife and into the restaurant through the opening to the patio. Among the crowd, he caught the gaze of a tall, well-built man. As recognition settled on both men’s faces, David tilted his head back in acknowledgement. The man inside said something to the group he was conversing with, then strode through the rows of tables, out the opening, under the awning, and into the sunlight. David started to stand when the man was two meters away.

“David!” exclaimed the man. “No, no, keep your seat. How the hell are ya?”

David lowered himself back into his chair, then grasped the man’s hand firmly. A broad smile spread across his face.

“Charlie, I’m great. Just great, my friend. How are you?”

Christy noticed her husband’s sudden burst of energy and charisma. She turned her head to look at Charlie as she held up one hand to shade her naked eyes from the bright sun.

“And this must be your lovely wife. How do you do? Even more gorgeous than advertised,” Charlie said.

Christy blushed and grabbed Charlie’s hand, keeping the other cupped from her cheek to her forehead.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Yes, Charlie, this is my wife, Christy. Christy, this is Charlie Larkin. We met a few years back rafting with Conner. Shit, what was that now? Six? Seven years ago?” David inquired, bringing the conversation back between the boys.

“Seven years next month, if you can believe it. We need to get back on the Magpie soon.” Charlie placed both palms on the table and leaned forward. “How *is* your brother? I haven’t seen Conner in ages. You still hawking Sodium-Ion commodities? That’s a dying industry with the new developments they’re making with batteries, huh?”

David’s face grew stern for a split second from the barb, but quickly regained its enthusiasm.

“Conner’s fine. He was in town and we got together for drinks about six weeks ago. But yes, I’m still with NanClex. And those ‘new developments,’ as you put it, are still theoretical. Infantile. Sodium-Ion isn’t dying. If anything, we’re in our golden years. With the prevalence of—”

David’s reply was cut short by the roar of a gasoline-powered engine.

The entire restaurant hushed at the rare sound.

Standing high above the shorter, electric vehicles, David eyed an ancient pickup speeding down the street. As it approached the corner and the couple’s lunch spot, he saw three figures rise from the truck bed. The sudden burst of machine gun fire split through the air and was quickly joined by the sounds of screams and shuffles and crashing glass. David dropped beneath the table, shielding his head with his arms. He glanced at his wife and saw only her knees, shins, and stiletto-ed feet. She was still seated, exposed to the danger. David began to crawl, hoping to grab her ankle and pull her to the safety below. Then, in his

periphery, there was a blur of movement. It was Charlie. He was on the ground; his eyes wide, his mouth agape, black blood bubbling down his cheek onto the cement. The visual terror was only overtaken by the unbelievable heat of an explosion. Then, David's world went blank.



CHAPTER ONE

3 May 2072

Natalie Kelley stepped off the railcar at the Metro Station in the Riverside District of Oklahoma City toting only a small overnight bag. The trip on the high-speed electric train from Chicago took a little over two hours. The ride gave Natalie a chance to research the terrorist attack that took place at The Bucket Bistro. The Global Federation of Nations, or GFN, had released a statement regarding the attack on one of its “White Zone” cities: sixteen people had been killed and another forty-one had been injured at one of OKC’s busiest lunch spots.

Natalie covered acts of domestic terrorism for the *Chicago Tribune*. She focused on attacks by the American Freedom Group, or AFG, within the White Zones controlled by the GFN and in areas being transitioned into Federation abiding governments, or “Grey Zones”. In the last twelve months, Natalie had published the details regarding eighty-two separate acts of terrorism directed by the AFG’s military wing, the “American Freedom Army”. Over the past year, she had grown accustomed to traveling to these communities at the far reaches of The Federation. She even spent a week in one of the areas completely devoid of Federation influence designated as a “Black Zone” pocket around Butte, Montana, interviewing supporters of the crude government run by AFG President John Hill.

During Natalie’s research on the train she deduced that today’s attack was unlikely to be orchestrated by Hill or any of his cronies. It was too sloppy. The ex-United States military officer’s strikes were delivered with more precision and they

generally focused on Federation infrastructure and employees, not civilians. Still, as attacks committed by the AFA became more infrequent, Natalie did not want to miss out on this breaking story if she happened to be wrong.

Natalie, a short, pretty, olive-skinned 32-year-old woman, bounced out of the station. She was happy to be out of the Chicago office and in the field. It had been nearly two weeks since she had been on the road. She was dressed casually, wearing a moss-green jacket over a white T-shirt, grey jeans, and white sneakers. She wore her dark brown hair pulled back in a style that showcased her round face, emerald eyes, and ski-jump nose. In her left ear, above faux-diamond stud earrings, a small, circular device called a “Reader” fed her the latest news from her APD regarding the attack. Natalie let the information from her Reader flow but absorbed little as she turned south on Robinson Avenue toward The Bucket Bistro. A block ahead she saw several local Oklahoma City Police cruisers blocking the street, as well as four black Federation Security Office SUVs parked behind them. On the outskirts of the perimeter cleared by the authorities, couplets of broadcast news teams stood around, waiting for more information so they could record and upload their latest segments. Drones circled overhead, capturing aerial footage of the barricaded area without flying into the restricted space.

Natalie turned off the newsfeed from her Reader and addressed her APD: “Call Cooper Gates.”

The phone rang back in Natalie’s ear as she stopped at the edge of the perimeter. The Bucket Bistro was two blocks past the boundary. Natalie scanned the faces of the authorities beyond the barricade. She didn’t see Cooper among the personnel on the street, nor did she see any men or women wearing the familiar GFN Field Patch which signified that the individual was a Federation employee, or Federationist as they were commonly known.

The patch was a symbol overlay of geometric shapes. The base layer was a blue octagon. The eight sides of the octagon stood

for the seven branches of the GFN and the eighth for the still yet to be incorporated lands beyond Federation influence. Inside the octagon was a green rhombus which represented the four major “Hubs” of each branch. Finally, at the center of the symbol was a yellow circle which stood for the fifth Hub and Capital of each Federation branch. The blue of the octagon symbolized the planet’s water, the green of the rhombus symbolized the planet’s land, and the yellow of the circle symbolized the planet’s cities. This final, circular icon became known as the “*Anneau de Lumière*,” or “Ring of Light”. An ever-shrinking globe to a single, unified halo, it only took a few years for the GFN Field Patch to become the most recognizable logo on Earth.

The line stopped ringing and a voice prompted Natalie to leave a message for the number or send a text message to Cooper.

“Cooper, it’s Natalie. I just got here. Let’s get dinner tonight. Give me a call back.”

Natalie ended the call and walked across the street to get a different angle down the avenue to see if she could spot the man she just left a message for.

Natalie had been sleeping with Cooper Gates for close to a year. They met in San Clemente after a desalination plant was bombed by the AFA. Gates was a retired Security Officer for The Federation and was currently the Assistant Press Secretary for the North American Security Office. His good looks and charisma, in addition to his combat experience, made him an ideal face of the GFN military arm, as well as an ideal sexual partner for Natalie when they happened to be in the same city.

Satisfied that Cooper wasn’t at the scene, Natalie turned around and started for the nearest Metro light-rail station. Once there, she walked through the security gates and the station’s electromagnetic sensors read her Implanted Wrist Chip, which gave her clearance to board and started her travel fare. She boarded the Metro, found a window seat, and headed north to the Plains Hotel in Midtown. On the way, the Metro passed St. Joseph’s

Old Cemetery and the Oklahoma City National Memorial and Museum. The memorial, built at the turn of the century, was constructed on the former site of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building. The Murrah Building was bombed on 19 April 1995, by Timothy McVeigh and his truck full of fertilizer. Natalie recalled reading about the seventy-fifth anniversary of the tragedy not long ago. The death toll of one hundred sixty-eight had topped the list of the deadliest domestic terrorist acts in America at the time. Now, after fascist and counter-fascist attacks as well as attacks against The Federation, it didn't crack the top twenty.

Natalie was only a block away from her hotel when she deboarded the Metro. Walking off the platform, she saw a signboard reading "Plains Hotel" running down the length of the twelve-story glass building. The exterior glass of the building rippled from left to right and the brash golds and crimsons of the setting sun reflected off the glass panels of the hotel.

Natalie reached the lobby of the hotel and checked in to room 923 at the digital terminal. She walked past the elevator bank and found the stairwell. At home in Chicago, Natalie worked out six days a week to keep the athletic frame she had sculpted when she played lacrosse at Northwestern. On the road, she had to get creative to reach her exercise goals.

As she entered her room, Natalie checked her heart rate and oxygen levels on her APD. The program told her that her aerobic activity was adequate, but that she was behind on her daily strength training. That would have to wait. Natalie sat down at the desk, maximized the APD's screen size, rolled out the keyboard, and began typing her preliminary notes as footage from the local news station played on the television. After twenty minutes of work, a message from Cooper was displayed on the screen. He wanted to meet her for a late dinner in Bricktown in an hour. She considered taking a quick shower, decided against it, and continued tapping away. Thirty minutes later, she jogged down the stairs and headed for the Metro Station.

Natalie walked into The Mantle and immediately saw Cooper sitting at a table in the low-lit restaurant named after the long-deceased New York Yankee great. He already had a Scotch sitting in front of him and one waiting for her. She beamed as she took off her jacket and tucked it under her arm.

Cooper slid out of his seat and met her, crouching between the bench and table without leaving the booth. He gave her a light kiss on the cheek, then sat back down and directed Natalie to sit across from him. Natalie hesitated briefly at the lack of warmth in Cooper's greeting but quickly obliged and took her seat. She took a drink from her Scotch and placed her jacket in the corner of the booth.

"Nice to see you again, stud. It's been a while since we've been able to get together. Thinking about you on the train made me wish I had a private compartment," Natalie said as she winked and took another drink.

"Natalie, this will need to be a, uh, strictly professional meeting," Cooper replied. "Jenny's parents live in Edmond, so she came with me."

Natalie looked at Cooper, then glanced down at his left hand which cupped his Scotch. His wedding ring ticked against the side of the glass. The ring flustered her. Of course, she knew that Cooper was married; she had just seldom seen him wearing his matrimonial band.

"Okay," she said, disappointed. "No problem." She spoke in a raspy contralto.

"Do you want to start recording?"

"Shit, you weren't kidding about this being strictly professional. We haven't even ordered yet."

"I know. I'm sorry. Jenny was upset when I told her I was going out again. She thought I'd be able to spend some time with her folks. She just thinks I'm avoiding them."

"Are you?"

Cooper laughed. "That's beside the point."

Natalie took her APD out of her back pocket and placed it on the table. Before directing the device to record, she leaned in close to Cooper. “Listen. We don’t need to eat. Don’t feel like you owe me anything. I’m a big girl, I can grab a bite on the way home. Now,” she said as she directed the APD to begin recording and settled back into the booth, “what can you tell me about the men in the pickup?”



Noah Bridger, a white man in his mid-thirties, sat behind the wheel of his car, waiting. The car, a dark green Mustang, was pulled over to the side of a gravel road. Noah had worked on the car’s engine for the past six months and felt that this Mustang rode as well as any of his racing cars. Sitting on the dashboard was a figurine of St. Christopher, the patron saint of travelers. The gravel road was flanked by fields of mustard greens. The leafy plants stood in neat, parallel rows that shot off toward the horizon. In each field rose a few dozen soaring, bright white wind turbines. The turbines’ three blades turned in the breeze. The height from field to blade tip at the crest of the rotation reached two-hundred meters. Noah sat and watched the whirling blades of the nearest turbine. The motion was hypnotic.

A hawk screeched and flew high above the road. Its shadow crossed the rocks ahead of the car.

Noah checked his reflection in the rearview mirror. Looking back at him was a youthful man with old-school Aviator sunglasses, a grey U.S. Patriots cap, and a round, clean-shaven face. He was glad that he wore the sunglasses. He did not wish to see the fear in his own eyes.

The Mustang was parked near the border of what Federationists called the White Zone and, though it was only a couple hundred kilometers from his home and family in Hereford, Texas, Noah felt as if he were light-years away. He had never

been this close to “Civilization”, as he and his neighbors mockingly called The Federation-occupied lands. He did not want to be here any longer than he needed to be. But now, the other car was running late. Not alarmingly late, but late.

Seconds ticked by and Noah’s anxiety grew. He began to doubt why he involved himself in such a dangerous plan.

Noah played with the settings on the control panel and expanded the vehicle’s alert system to three-hundred meters.

“C’mon,” Noah muttered to himself. The escape plan had been detailed down to the minute. He knew that he should have been on the road with the others by now. He thought it was uncharacteristic for Wade to be late, but, then again, he did not know the husband of his wife’s sister very well.

Wade had approached Noah two weeks ago. Noah had been in his garage, working underneath his stock car, when the bellow of Wade’s voice startled him. He had knocked his head on a box section before he rolled out to meet his brother-in-law. Wade told Noah that he needed him for something and that he was the only man he could trust for the job. Noah had been filled with pride that his venerable relative needed his expertise and agreed to be a part of the operation after only ten minutes of discussion. He was beginning to think that he should have thought and prayed on the proposition a little longer.

The Mustang’s computer alerted him: “Vehicle approaching—Three-hundred meters—East.”

Noah looked behind him and expected to see the Gendarmes, one of the resistance’s names for the French-born Federation Security Officers. Instead, he saw a white utility van tearing down the road. It was Wade.

“Praise Jesus,” Noah exhaled aloud. He rubbed the St. Christopher figurine on the dashboard, stepped out of the car, and popped the trunk.



Inside a spacious, sparsely decorated office on the seventy-second floor of The Global Federation of Nations' North American Security Office Headquarters, Juan Carlos Luna gazed out his window. The building sat on the southern edge of Roosevelt Island and his office looked west over the site of the former United Nations Headquarters in Midtown Manhattan. The entirety of Roosevelt Island had been purchased from the United States federal government by the GFN in 2057. Construction of the campus for the North American branch capital began immediately. The SOHQ was the first portion of the campus completed. The building rose like a pyramid with no capstone. It stood eighty stories high and it spanned the width of the island. There were eight square sections of the pyramid ascending from the largest section at the base and the smallest at the apex. On the terraces of each of the sections, massive redwood trees genetically designed for the mid-Atlantic climate had been planted. The effect was startling. Against the steel and glass of Manhattan rose an enormous, forest-covered mass that looked like it belonged in the Catskills. Since its inception, The Global Federation of Nations' North American Security Office Headquarters was known, simply, as, "The Mount."

Luna was alone in his office, waiting for a phone call. It was late, but his responsibilities as the North American Security Office's Lt. Director of Border Integrity required him to keep an unorthodox schedule. He was well beyond fifty and he was an attractive man. He had dark skin, dark hair, and dark eyes. A silver moustache hung from his nose like a crescent moon in the night sky.

The Lt. Director had earned the nickname "La Frontera" due to his legendary escapades heading STAB, or the Special Tactics for Advancing Border force. STAB worked to secure the GFN border in the American West. His actions in the field during the early years of America's adoption of the Basic Human Standard, the principle foundation of the GFN, led to his current position

within NASO. He was a man revered by both those working directly for him within NASO, as well as the highest-ranking generals in the United States military.

While he waited for the phone call, Luna pulled up virtual-reality-infused satellite images of the San Luis Valley and Sangre de Cristo mountain range. The 3D topographic imagery was projected above the teak floor. Luna zoomed in on specific areas by moving his hands outward on the portion of the map he wished to see in more detail. The land he studied was currently in the Grey Zone. The Grey Zone was an area outside of the borders of GFN White Zones, but was currently being monitored and actively secured by SO forces. Luna headed all operations in the North American Grey Zones. During his six years as Lt. Director of Border Integrity, his territory had shrunk and fractured. His work had thus far been a success.

Drone footage showed a live-stream of STAB Unit India X-Ray 6 as it advanced south down I-25 toward Colorado City from Pueblo. The STAB units were methodical. This corridor had been transitioned from a Black Zone to a Grey Zone three years ago, but NASO was still working to ensure a successful and complete incorporation. Black Zones were areas where the GFN had no presence at all. During the acquisition of Black Zones, The Federation tried desperately to limit all civilian casualties and this practice took great patience. It had been nearly two decades since the United States government accepted the Basic Human Standard and joined the GFN, but many Americans were still adjusting to the new political landscape. Others were downright hostile to the transition. In the months following the United States' ratification of the treaty with The Global Federation, there was intense fighting from coast to coast. The Resistance and The Federation both suffered tremendous casualties. However, due to American military might and reinforcements from the European and Asian Security Offices, White Zones were established along long stretches of the coasts. Those that opposed The Federation

moved inland and the primary method of warfare shifted from military to economic.

After intense fighting and massive blood loss on both the Resistance side and The Federation side during the first four years of GFN policy, a new tactic was adopted by The Federation and American leadership. Any populous resistant to the GFN would stop receiving federal aid and, more devastatingly, would be placed under an embargo. Economic refugees throughout the country had fled their homes to the White Zones under the protection of the GFN while millions remained in the Black and Grey Zones and struggled financially. Wanting to avoid more bloodshed, the GFN and D.C. adopted the strategy of “Generational Manifest Destiny.” There would be no more major military maneuvers that put unwitting civilian lives at risk. Instead, the reach of the GFN would creep slowly inward city-by-city, town-by-town, house-by-house.

The live feed showed STAB Unit IX-6. The unit was currently stationed at a private property on the northeastern outskirts of Colorado City.

“Report,” called Luna and the unit’s roster and the latest log from the squad leader materialized at the base of the projection. In the middle of the roster list was the name “Andre Cannon.” Next to the name there was a white circle with a red cross inside. This symbol signified that the SO was still convalescing from an injury or illness. Luna tapped the circle and a bar graph appeared. The graph indicated that Andre Cannon was roughly eighty-five percent healthy. Luna knew that any Security Officer under ninety-five percent health level would not be participating in raids. Instead, they would be performing menial tasks for the unit as well as surveillance work. La Frontera’s interest in the young SO was familial; the boy was his nephew.

Andre Cannon was only 22 years old. He had always looked up to his well-decorated uncle. He joined NASO the day after finishing high school. Once he graduated training from Fort

Stevenson near Bloomington, Illinois, he was assigned to the Mobile Observation and Targeting Division (MOAT). MOAT's objective was to surveil and patrol the dynamic twenty-kilometer buffer between the White Zone and Grey Zone. Like his uncle, Andre Cannon was a soldier who was always squared away. He excelled at his position in MOAT and was quickly promoted to his current STAB unit. Six weeks-ago Andre was shot in the thigh by a sniper on a ranch south of Pueblo. The ensuing assault by Unit IX-6 leveled the barn that housed the shooter. Once the property was secured, the team found that the sniper had been a girl no more than twelve years old.

Andre had a short stay in a mobile hospitalization unit, and, once declared medically fit, was sent back to the field. Juan Carlos had told Akna, his sister and the boy's mother, that he would keep a close eye on his nephew. Juan Carlos had been sending her messages reiterating that Andre was safe and performing admirably.

As Luna read young Andre's weekly performance log, the phone rang.



Natalie was flustered as she walked up the stairs of the hotel after her meeting with Cooper. The "dinner" had not gone how she had hoped, professionally or personally.

At The Mantle, Cooper had seemed distracted and was dismissive of Natalie's questions regarding the identities of the terrorists. NASO usually released the names of attackers as soon as possible, typically no more than four hours after the incident. It had been longer than twice that time and Natalie had hoped to get the identities first, but Cooper was uncooperative. Natalie wondered if Mrs. Gates had given her husband a small window for the meeting and that was why he had kept the conversation short. Thinking of the other woman made Natalie's stomach turn.

When she arrived at her hotel room, she sat down on the bed and opened her APD. She had planned to sift through the local news stories regarding the bombing but brought up the recorded conversation with Cooper instead. She broadcasted the recording to the room's quantum dot screen, put aside her APD, and laid back on the bed.

The screen showed the pair sitting at The Mantle. The screen's brightness automatically increased to accommodate for the dim recording. On screen, Natalie leaned over the table, passing her glass of Scotch from one hand to the next. Cooper's back was straight against the booth and his attention flitted away from the booth toward a group of patrons a few tables away.

Natalie's voice was audible over the room's wireless speakers. "What can you tell me about the men in the pickup?"

"NASO has yet to release the names of the individuals suspected in today's attack."

"No shit, Coop. That's why I'm asking you."

"Although NASO has yet to release the identities of any suspects, the list of identities of those killed and injured in the attack are available."

"Okay." A pause. Natalie took a drink on the screen. Cooper spun his wedding ring around his finger. Natalie hadn't seen his subconscious devotion to the jewelry at the restaurant, but as she noticed it on the replay, she felt disgusted. On screen, she spoke again and reached for his hands. He pulled them away and put them under the table.

"What's wrong with you? You're not yourself."

Cooper coughed and leaned forward. "Do you have any other questions for me regarding today's attack?"

"Yeah, I have 'other questions.' I think I've only asked one question so far..."

"Natalie! Please."

Natalie took another drink of Scotch. "Jesus, okay." There was a beat as she prioritized her inquiries. "Does NASO believe

that the attack was carried out by individuals working under the banner of the AFG?”

Cooper shook his head.

“NASO hasn’t released the identities of those suspected in today’s attack, so there is no way to tie them to the AFA or any other organization.”

Natalie laughed. “Was that an answer? I was waiting for you to give an answer while you were talking, but then you just stopped.”

Cooper scowled on the screen. Natalie thought that he looked good when he was frustrated.

“Okay, I know you want a quote, so here you go. ‘An unnamed Federationist close to the investigation of the attack in Oklahoma City says that the target and methods used during the assault on American citizens is not consistent with previous targets and methods used by the terrorist organization known as the American Freedom Group, leading many to suspect that the responsibility belongs to an unknown party.’ There’s your quote.”

Cooper slid out of the booth, stood up, and looked around the restaurant.

“I gotta go. I’m sorry.” He bent down and kissed Natalie on the cheek. She turned away from him. “Remember, there are names that have been released.”

Cooper walked out of the frame and Natalie downed her drink.

In the hotel room, she backed-up the recording.

Cooper kissed her cheek on the screen. Her face was turned away. Her eyes were closed.

“Remember, there are names that have been released.”

At the restaurant, she hadn’t been paying attention to him as he left. She backed-up the recording again.

“Remember, there are names that have been released.”

He was trying to tell her something. Natalie grabbed her APD and quickly found the names of the casualties from the day’s attack.