

**The Puppetmasters War**

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**Location: Classified**

**Tuesday, January 27th 2012**

**6.18pm**

“Now, I’m sure you’re all wondering why I have called this meeting,” the dark haired gentleman stood in front of the long boardroom table. His hands were raised as if making sure to encompass all the attendees. He waited for complete silence before proceeding with his speech. “Well, quite frankly, I don’t like the way our country is going. We are receiving threats from our surrounding nations not monthly, not weekly, but *by the day*. I don’t know how much longer we can go on without taking some affirmative action.”

The meeting participants turned to one another in the silence that followed. No-one dared to speak for fear they would bring unwanted attention to themselves. They knew in their hearts the man had already made up his mind about what action they should take - he just needed the time to share his plans with them. No-one wanted to be the first to raise their hands; no-one except the head of the military.

“Mr President, Sir, I completely agree with you,” he spoke with the unquestionable authority of a lifetime spent making orders and expecting people to follow them. Grey haired, he looked aged well beyond his sixty-two years. “What are you proposing?”

“My vision is clear, we need to declare war on all countries that have threatened us. Be they big or be they small, they will all be in our bullseye and we won’t miss,” the president took a step back and crossed his arms, ready for the onslaught of challenges from within his team. He was not disappointed. Whispers broke out amongst the table, chairs shuffled when their occupants squirmed in their seats.

“We can’t just declare war on everyone!” A sturdy woman from the back spoke first. She wasn’t the soccer mum type, she had a steely edge to her that came from years of hard work to break through the glass ceiling. Her face reddened with outrage, hoping she was misunderstanding the president’s intentions.

A soft spoken man in a naval uniform dared to speak next. “With all due respect, sir, we can’t just declare war on the world at large. The people will never agree with this. They don’t even like it when we get tough on crime,” he cleared his throat, ensuring he had the president’s full attention. “How are they going to act when we tell them to enlist their husbands and sons to send them off to a war with no clear target?”

“Can’t you see? A war is exactly what we need to *unite* the people of this country. Every day, it’s every man for himself. A war will give us all a common enemy, someone we can stand united against. We need to do this for the people.”

The naval man wasn’t going to back down so easily. “But sir, just declaring war won’t automatically mean the people will agree with it. Think back to the Great War, half the population protested against it. With all the hippies and do-gooders in the world at the moment, they will stop hugging trees and set up camp outside these very walls.”

“No they won’t, you haven’t heard the rest of my plan yet,” The President smiled smugly as if he had the best kept secret in history. He revelled in everyone waiting with baited breath for his next words. He was about to change the world and tonight would be just the first step. “Ladies and Gentlemen, we are about to unite the people in a way that is both necessary and innovative. By the end of tonight we will have a plan in place that will revolutionise this country, it’s people, and all the generations to come. This will go down as the single greatest event for our country and yet no-one will ever know about our plan.”

The people in the room stole glances at each other, wondering if there was something only they were missing. They had heard several confusing speeches come from the President during his term but this was so far the most peculiar. On one hand they ached to know what he was talking about, but in the pit of their stomach they felt dread.

The President was coming to the end of his term in office. He had mixed reactions from his people. At times you could see the brilliance of a great leader shine through from him, but most of the time he was held with contempt and an overwhelming question mark about how the hell he had managed to get elected in the first place. A survey on the street would find hardly anyone that had actually voted for him, or if they did they wouldn't admit it. His party were quietly waiting out his term, hoping he would behave and keep his head down for the final year. Unfortunately, their prayers wouldn't be answered.

“Before I go on, I need to know who is with me on this. What I am about to tell you is going to upset many. People are going to suffer but it is going to be the minority. Spare a few and save many, as they say. If you are not prepared for this, then I am giving you the opportunity to leave now. Leave now or forever hold your peace, because whatever is said in this room tonight must never leave it. I need not only your word on this, but your life.” He stared at the faces around the table, looking deep into the eyes of all his staff one person at a time. They fidgeted at the scrutiny but no-one left their seat, they knew better. It wasn't so much as an opportunity to opt-out, it was more of a threat for the unbelieving.

The head of the military cleared his throat, breaking the painful silence in the small room.

“Sir, you have our word. Please, go on,” the military man clenched his fists nervously.

The room fell into silence once again as the president took a few steps back. He finally nodded his head and took a deep breath.

“Now, listen carefully...”

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**Part 1: The day the World Changed**

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**113 Frangipani Drive, Sunshine City**

**Friday, July 10th 2012**

**8:02am**

“Don’t be home late, I’m cooking a roast tonight,” Nala Silver waved at her husband Oliver as he backed down the driveway. He smiled to her and returned the wave. He was looking forward to coming home for dinner already. Her roasts were the best he had ever tasted, but she only made them for special occasions. Today marked five years of marriage. It was the best thing he had ever done, she was the perfect wife and together they had two perfect children. In his mind, life didn’t get any better.

Oliver tapped his fingers on the steering wheel, softly singing along to the radio. It was the oldie’s radio station that played only songs released more than two decades ago. It was daggy, he would be the first to admit it, but he enjoyed it regardless.

Crossing the bridge into the city centre, it wasn’t long before he was pulling his car into his personal car park underneath the office building. He jumped out and walked to the lift, still humming along to the tune stuck in his head.

Oliver worked on the 32nd floor for the second largest insurance company in Estoria. It wasn’t a particularly interesting job, but it paid the bills and meant he could have weekends free to spend with the family. His previous job across town had been stressful and was the exact opposite of family friendly. Burning out at thirty-four years of age had been a painful experience, one he didn’t want to repeat again.

“Good Morning Mr Silver,” the receptionist greeted him as he walked through the office to his cubicle, he gave her a smile in return and dipped his imaginary hat in her direction.

He sat down at his desk and waited for the computer to load up. The smell of morning coffee was lingering in the air, it made his mouth water. He couldn't resist the aroma for more than a minute. Succumbing to the addiction, he made himself a cup of the steaming hot brew.

He checked his watch on the way back to his desk and realized he was already running late for a meeting. Cursing, he grabbed his folio in his free hand and hurried off to the boardroom.

"Sorry I'm late," Oliver muttered as he took his seat. He could feel all the eyes of his colleagues on him, even if it was only in his mind. He scolded himself for being tardy for such an important meeting. It wasn't only the top assessors present but the managers, deputy CEO and his assistant. It definitely wasn't the impression he wanted to make.

"Now Ladies and Gentlemen, I think we'll get started," the deputy CEO cleared his throat and waited for complete silence. Everyone in the room faced him, both with nervous energy and a boredom that only came with yet another meeting. "You've probably all heard that Parliament passed the 85th Amendment bill for the Federal Insurance Act late last night. Terrorism is now officially not covered by any insurance agency in the world. They are all issuing a press release as we speak in order to ensure their policy holders are aware of the product change."

"It's about time, only took them 12 months," someone from the back of the room grumbled.

"What are we telling our clients?" A petite woman spoke up from the side, eager to be able to deal with the consequences of the amendment bill.

"We tell them there isn't really anything we can do about it. Besides, what are the



chances of a terrorist attack happening here? We're not some foreign country that teaches children how to use a M16," the deputy CEO chuckled. "It was really only covered to keep people's minds at ease anyway."

"The risk must have been significant enough for the insurers to rally parliament," A quiet voice spoke out, the man looked around nervously, kicking himself for making the comment out loud. Everyone might be thinking that, but you don't question the big boss.

The Deputy CEO smirked and looked at the man. "You know what insurers are like, they'd wet their pants if they thought they would actually have to make good on a payment."

"Especially on a payment as big as a terrorist attack," the grumbling man at the back again couldn't help himself.

"Exactly," the deputy CEO smiled and gave a thumbs up to the man at the back. He may be a cranky cynic but at least he got noticed. "Now, new policy disclosure documents are being drawn up as we speak. As soon as the insurers have them, they will be delivered to all existing customers and to our offices for issue with any new policies. Does anyone else have any questions? No? Okay, then now on to the more mundane issues..."

Oliver Silver spent the rest of the meeting taking a few notes now and then. Mainly he was thinking about his wife Nala and how they were going to celebrate their anniversary that night. He was looking forward to it with anticipation of what was going to be a wonderful and romantic evening. The kids would be put to bed early, they'd open up a bottle of wine and, with any luck, re-live their honeymoon. Infinitely more interesting than discussing the ins and out of the insurance industry and their latest way to sell more

policies.

The meeting ended shortly before lunch, with a sigh of relief from all those that attended. It had been a long one. Oliver trudged back to his desk and glanced at his watch again. It was close enough to lunchtime. He retrieved his lunchbox from the communal refrigerator and returned to his desk. He took a peek inside, Nala had packed a tuna sandwich, an apple, and a mars bar. Everything a rounded diet required. He took out the sandwich and peeled back the wrapping. It smelled good, his stomach rumbled just with the scent of it.

Oliver almost choked when he was hit on the back. He spin around. “James, you scared me half to death. Give a guy some warning next time.” The man smiled a big toothy grin.

“But then it wouldn’t be so funny,” the man named James laughed. He pulled over a seat from a vacant desk and sat down. He was a large man with a belly that hung largely over the belt holding his trousers up. Besides his sizable girth, he was a handsome man with blonde curls that clung tightly to his head. He always reminded Oliver of a big teddy bear.

“Yeah, but next time my reaction might be to turn around and punch,” he joked.

“Point taken. Mary said I needed to talk to you today. She wants us to double date on the weekend, maybe go out to dinner at Leo’s bar. It’s a bit fancy for my liking but it’s a special occasion.”

“I’m sure Nala would be into it. What’s the special occasion, it’s not like you to splurge.”

“Mary and I are kind of adding to our brood. Jeremy needs a little brother or sister. Apparently it’s cruel having an only child. It’s been 12 weeks so we’re celebrating the

fact we can now officially tell people. The Docs given us the all clear that everything is okay with the little fella,” a huge smile spread across James’ face. He had made it sound like the new baby was his wife’s idea but Oliver could tell he hadn’t taken much convincing. He knew James well enough to see through his exterior, he was always the family man above all else.

“Congratulations. Nala is going to be over the moon, finally she will have someone to pass on the baby paraphernalia to, you won’t have to buy a thing. Just say the word and I’ll drop it all around one weekend. Have you told Jeremy yet?”

“Not yet, we thought it would be better to wait until Mary’s showing. That way he can actually see something happening. It’s going to be a shock for the little guy, he’s had us all to himself for so long now. How did you break it to Miller?”

Oliver thought back to when Nala had been pregnant with Sarah. He couldn’t recall actually telling his firstborn about the impending birth of their sibling. Somehow, it had just happened naturally. Either that or Nala had done it when he wasn’t there. He had been spending a lot of time at work back then. “I don’t know. I guess Miller kind of got a clue when we went to the hospital and there she was.”

“Well, he always has been a smart kid.”

“Like his dad,” Oliver smiled and bit into his sandwich.

“I was thinking more like his mum. Anyway, I better get back to it. I’ll call Mary and say that it’s okay. I’m sure she’ll give your Mrs a call and let her know the details,”

James rose from his chair and tucked it back under the spare desk. “See you around.”

Oliver watched his friend go back to his desk. He considered giving his wife a call with a heads up on the weekend dinner plans but decided against it. He had to get through his lunch so he could tackle the stack of paperwork sitting in his inbox. He was

never going to get out of the office on time unless it was all done and he *had* to be out of there on time.

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