

Defend the empire—or lose it.

THE CLONE ASSASSIN

**"A skillful
storyteller."**

—*Sci Fi Weekly*

STEVEN L. KENT

author of *The Clone Sedition*



McGRATH 13

**PRAISE FOR
Steven L. Kent**

THE CLONE SEDITION

“Compares well with the Star Fist series by David Sherman and Dan Cragg, the Lost Fleet series by Jack Campbell, and several series by Ian Douglas . . . *The Clone Sediton* takes the action back to its roots with humans fighting clones.”

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—*SFRev*

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“If you enjoy military science fiction, then this is the book for you . . . Fast-paced and hard-hitting. Punches, bullets, and nuclear bombs are not held back. The characters face hard choices and don't regret them after they are made.”

—*SFRev*

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“Offers up stunning battle sequences, intriguing moral quandaries, and plenty of unexpected revelations . . . [A] fast-paced military SF book with plenty of well-scripted action and adventure [and] a sympathetic narrator.”

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“Exciting space battles [and] haunting, quiet moments after war has taken its toll . . . Military SF fans looking for stories that combine mystery, action, espionage, politics, and some thoughtful doses of humanism in exploring their not entirely human characters would do well to add Steven L. Kent to their reading lists.”

—SF Reviews.n

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—*Sci Fi Week*

“The first sentence gets you immediately . . . From there, the action begins fast and furious, with dark musings, lavish battle scenes, and complex characterizations . . . *The Clone Republic* feature[s] taut writing and a truly imaginative plot full of introspection and philosophizing.”

—*The Village Voi*

“A character-driven epic that understands that the best war stories are really antiwar stories . . . A smartly conceived adventure.”

—SF Reviews.n

Ace Books by Steven L. Kent

THE CLONE REPUBLIC
ROGUE CLONE
THE CLONE ALLIANCE
THE CLONE ELITE
THE CLONE BETRAYAL
THE CLONE EMPIRE
THE CLONE REDEMPTION
THE CLONE SEDITION
THE CLONE ASSASSIN

**THE CLONE
ASSASSIN**

STEVEN L. KENT



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[*Author's Note*](#)

This book is dedicated to Fred Watson, a very good friend who doesn't read fiction . . . including my books. I'm not going to tell him about this dedication. Instead, I'll wait to see how long it takes for him to find it on his own.

Good luck, Fred; the clock is ticking.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are, as always, so many people I need to thank for their help and encouragement. First and foremost, I need to thank the lovely and talented, and let me add *patient*, Anne at Ace. She gave me three extensions on this book . . . Did I mention she is patient?

I also want to thank my agent, Richard Curtis, who really is a wizard. I want to thank my primary readers, Trevor Boll and my father.

Also, I want to thank my long-suffering wife, who really has put up with too much for too long. I really wouldn't be anywhere without her.

Under the smoke, dust all over his mouth, laughing with white teeth,
Under the terrible burden of destiny laughing as a young man laughs,
Laughing even as an ignorant fighter laughs who has never lost a battle . . .

“Chicago,” Carl Sandbu

NINE EVENTS THAT SHAPED HISTORY

2010 TO 2018

DECLINE OF THE U.S. ECONOMY

Following the examples of Chevrolet, Oracle, IBM, and ConAgra Foods, Microsoft moves its headquarters from the United States to Shanghai. Referring to their company as a “global corporation,” Microsoft executives claim they are still committed to U.S. prosperity, but with its burgeoning economy, China has become the company’s most important market.

Even with Toyota and Hyundai increasing their manufacturing activities in the United States—spurred on by the favorable cheap labor conditions—the U.S. economy becomes dependent on the shipping of raw materials and farm goods.

Bottoming out as the world’s thirteenth largest economy behind China, United Korea, India, Cuba, the European Economic Community, Brazil, Mexico, Canada, Japan, South Africa, Israel, and Unincorporated France, the United States government focuses on maintaining its position as the world’s last military superpower.

JANUARY 3, 2026

INTRODUCTION OF BROADCAST PHYSICS

Armadillo Aerospace announces the discovery of broadcast physics, a new technology capable of translating matter into data waves that can be transmitted to any location instantaneously. This opens the way for pangalactic exploration without time dilation or the dangers of light-speed travel.

The United States creates the first-ever fleet of self-broadcasting ships, a scientific fleet designed to locate suitable planets for future colonization. When initial scouting reports suggest that the rest of the galaxy is uninhabited, politicians fire up public sentiment with talk about a new “manifest destiny” and spreading humanity across space.

The discovery of broadcast physics leads to the creation of the Broadcast Network—a galactic superhighway consisting of satellites that send and receive ships across the galaxy. The Broadcast Network ushers in the age of galactic expansion.

JULY 4, 2110

RUSSIA AND KOREA SIGN A PACT WITH THE UNITED STATES

With the growth of its space-based economy, the United States reclaims its spot as the wealthiest nation on Earth. Russia and Korea become the first nations to sign the IGTA (Intergalactic Trade Accord), a treaty opening the way for other nations to become self-governing American territories and enjoy full partnership in the space-based economy.

In an effort to create a competing alliance, France unveils its Cousteau Oceanic Exploration program and announces plans to create undersea colonies. Only Tahiti signs on.

After the other nations of the European Economic Union, Japan, and all of Africa become members of the IGTA, France discontinues its undersea colonization and joins the IGTA. Several nations, most notably China and Afghanistan, refuse to sign, leading to a minor world war in which the final

holdouts are coerced into signing the treaty.

More than 80 percent of the world's population is eventually sent to establish colonies throughout the galaxy.

JULY 4, 2250

TRANSMOGRIFICATION OF THE UNITED STATES

With most of its citizens living off Earth, the IGTA is renamed "The Unified Authority" and restructured to serve as a government rather than an economic union.

The government of the Unified Authority merges principles from the U.S. Constitution with concepts from Plato's *Republic*. In accordance with Plato's ideals, society is broken into three strata—citizenry, defense, and governance.

With forty self-sustaining colonies across the galaxy, Earth becomes the political center of a new republic. The eastern seaboard of the former United States becomes an ever-growing capital city populated by the political class—families appointed to run the government in perpetuity.

Earth also becomes the home to the military class. After some experimentation, the Unified Authority adopts an all-clone conscription model to fulfill its growing need for soldiers. Clone farms euphemistically known as "orphanages" are established around Earth. These orphanages produce more than a million cloned recruits per year.

The military does not commission clone officers. The officer corps is drafted from the ruling class. When the children of politicians are drummed out of school or deemed unsuitable for politics, they are sent to officer-candidate school in Australia.

2452 TO 2512

UPRISING IN THE GALACTIC EYE

On October 29, 2452, a date later known as the new "Black Tuesday," a fleet of scientific exploration ships vanishes in the "galactic eye" region of the Norma Arm.

Fearing an alien attack, the U.A. Senate calls for the creation of the Galactic Central Fleet, a self-broadcasting armada. Work on the Galactic Central Fleet is completed in 2455. The newly christened fleet travels to the Inner Curve, where it vanishes as well.

Having authorized the development of a top secret line of cloned soldiers called "Liberators," the Linear Committee—the executive branch of the U.A. government—approves sending an invasion force into the Galactic Eye to attack all hostile threats. The Liberators discover a human colony led by Morgan Atkins, a powerful senator who disappeared with the Galactic Central Fleet. The Liberators overthrow the colony, but Atkins and many of his followers escape in G.C. Fleet ships.

Over the next fifty years, a religious cult known as the Morgan Atkins Fanatics—"Mogats"—spreads across the 180 colonized planets, preaching independence from the Unified Authority government.

Spurred on by the growing Morgan Atkins movement, four of the six galactic arms declare independence from Unified Authority governance in 2510. Two years later, the combined forces of the Confederate Arms Treaty Organization and the Morgan Atkins Fanatics defeat the Earth Fleet and destroy the Broadcast Network, effectively cutting the Earth government off from its loyal colonies and Navy.

Having crippled the Unified Authority, the Mogats turn on their Confederate Arms allies. The Confederates escape with fifty self-broadcasting ships and join forces with the Unified Authority, leaving the Mogats with a fleet of over four hundred self-broadcasting ships, the most powerful attack

force in the galaxy.

In 2512, the Unified Authority and the Confederate Arms end the war by attacking the Mogat home world, leaving no survivors.

2514 TO 2515

AVATARI INVASION

In 2514, an alien force enters the outer region of the Scutum-Crux Arm, conquering U.A. colonies. As they attack planets, the aliens wrap an energy barrier around the atmosphere. Called an “ion curtain,” the barrier cuts off escape and communications.

In a matter of two years, the aliens spread throughout the galaxy, occupying only planets deemed habitable by U.A. scientists. The Unified Authority loses 178 of its 180 populated planets before making a final stand on New Copenhagen.

During this battle, U.A. scientists unravel the secrets of the aliens’ tachyon-based technology, enabling U.A. Marines to win the war. In the aftermath of the invasion, the Unified Authority sends the four self-broadcasting ships of the Japanese Fleet along with twelve thousand Navy SEAL clones to locate and destroy the Avatari home world.

2517

RISE OF THE ENLISTED MAN’S EMPIRE

The Unified Authority Congress holds hearings investigating the military’s performance during the Avatari invasion. When two generals blame their losses on lack of discipline among their cloned enlisted men, synthetic conscription is abolished and all remaining clones are transferred to frontier fleets—fleets stranded in deep space since the destruction of the Broadcast Network. The Navy plans to use these fleets in live-ordnance military exercises designed to test its new, more powerful Nike-class ships, but the clones thwart this plan by declaring independence.

After creating their own broadcast network, the clones establish the Enlisted Man’s Empire, a nation consisting of twenty-three planets and thirteen naval fleets. As hostilities continue between the Enlisted Man’s Empire and the Unified Authority, the Avatari return, attacking planets using a devastating weapon that raises atmospheric temperatures to nine thousand degrees for eighty-three seconds.

The Avatari attack three planets in December 2517—New Copenhagen, a Unified Authority colony; Olympus Kri, an Enlisted Man’s colony; and Terraneau, a neutral nation. Working together, the Enlisted Man’s Navy and the Earth Fleet successfully evacuate Olympus Kri prior to the attack. Following the attack on Olympus Kri, the Avatari accelerate their attacks, incinerating a new populated planet every three days as they work their way toward Earth.

Despite the mutual threat, the Unified Authority renews its assault on the Enlisted Man’s Empire.

2517

DESTRUCTION OF THE AVATARI HOME WORLD

The Japanese Fleet locates the Avatari home world in Bode’s Galaxy. While the inhabitants of the planet have become extinct, its automated mining and military systems continue their destructive expansion.

After depositing all nonessential personnel on New Copenhagen to establish a new colony, the *Sakura*, the last ship in the fleet, launches a successful suicide attack on the Avatari planet.

Unaware of the Japanese attack on the Avatari home world, the Enlisted Man's Empire divides its military into two groups. One group establishes a colony on the burned-out remains of Terraneau, while the other defeats the Unified Authority, establishing a clone-controlled government.

The clones' hold on Earth proves tentative as remnants of the Unified Authority military attack EME bases on Earth and Mars. After an entire division of EME Marines defects, the clones learn that former members of the Unified Authority intelligence community have discovered how to change the neural programming in clones.

PART I

THE PROVOCATEUR

CHAPTER

ONE

Location: Washington, D.C.

Date: July 16, 2519

The provocateur entered the Pentagon at 10:28. He was a natural-born, something that automatically made him a person of interest. He stood in the queue surrounded by clones, calmly waiting his turn to walk between the posts—the security system that would search his identity right down to his DNA.

His brown hair fell just past his shoulders, not the kind of style you normally see in the Pentagon, home of the flattop. His dark beard ran the corners of his jawline. His eyes were green, his skin pale, almost colorless.

He wore a gleaming white shirt buttoned up to the neck, a bloodred tie, and a charcoal-colored suit. The clones around him wore Navy white, Army drab, and Air Force blue.

The provocateur followed the queue past a security station, closer and closer to the posts. Armed guards with M27s stood in full armor behind a wall of bulletproof/grenade-proof glass. Unconcerned about the guards, the provocateur checked his wristwatch, looked around the lobby, tried to decipher the tabs that a nearby soldier wore on his chest.

The posts was a detection device disguised to look like a set of ten-foot Ionic columns. The column on the left, “the sprayer,” emitted a burst of air and vapor that dislodged flecks of skin, dandruff, and loose hair. The column on the right, “the receiver,” drew in and analyzed the debris. Identity, blood type, genetic information, medical history . . . the posts created a profile based on genetic material, which it transmitted for analysis.

Anyone planning to fool the posts would need to trick the Census Data Agency, the government information storehouse that tracked citizens from the cradle to the grave, an impossible task.

Criminals and terrorists had tried covering themselves with skin peels, loose hair, dandruff, and eyebrows from other people. They’d tried scrubbing themselves with defoliating sponges, laser shaving all their hair, and wearing wigs on their arms and eyebrows, but the posts still identified them. If flecks of skin showed too much decay or if there were signs the hair came from multiple donors, the posts’ computers asked questions.

With the government on high alert, every person entering the Pentagon was searched for metal, X-rayed, and spectroanalyzed for radioactive and chemical residue.

When his turn arose, the provocateur calmly stepped between the posts while its sensors checked his heartbeat, pulse, and brain activity for signs of tension. A set of detectors searched him for traces of chemical agents while an X-ray device identified his telephone, wallet, and belt buckle.

The guard at the far end of the posts asked, “You Leonard Herman?”

“I go by ‘Lenny,’” said the provocateur.

“Lenny Herman?” asked the guard.

“That’s me.”

~~The provocateur stood over six feet. He had big shoulders that had gone soft with age.~~

“What’s your business here?” asked the guard.

“Floors and sinks mostly,” said the provocateur. “My company sells janitorial supplies.”

“Janitorial supplies?”

“Yes, sir. We’re bidding on the Pentagon contract.” The provocateur had a high voice, not effeminate but innocuous. He spoke softly, slowly.

“Who are you meeting?” asked the guard.

The provocateur pulled his phone from his jacket and tapped the screen. “Major Day.”

“We got a bunch of Day’s working here,” said the guard. Never taking his eyes off the provocateur, he accessed the building directory using his visor.

“Major Walter Day.”

“Got a branch?”

“Enlisted Man’s Army.”

Using the equipment in his visor, he contacted Day’s office. The conversation didn’t show on the security brief, but the communications system recorded it. When Pentagon Security investigated the attack, an officer uncovered the recording.

Once he’d reached Day’s office, the guard said, “Major, I’m calling from the main entrance security post. Do you have an appointment with . . .”

“Is Lenny Herman here? Damn, I let the time get away from me. Tell him I’ll be right down.”

“Yes, sir.”

The guard grunted and let the provocateur through.

CHAPTER

TWO

Major Day, a standard-issue five-foot-ten-inch clone with brown hair and brown eyes, met the provocateur in the lobby. The Pentagon had been on high alert since the discovery that the enemy had learned how to reprogram clones. Security not only screened for wolves in sheep's clothing, it screened for sheep that sided with the wolves.

"Mr. Herman, thanks for coming on short notice," said Major Day. He shook hands with the provocateur.

"Call me Lenny," said the provocateur, he of the innocuous persona. He shook Day's hand, looking slightly befuddled. Nothing strange there, natural-borns generally became disoriented when they entered the Pentagon. All of the officers were clones; they all stood five-foot-ten; they all had brown hair cut in a military regulation flattop. To natural-born eyes, the lobby of the Pentagon looked like a hall of mirrors.

"I'm glad for this chance, Major . . ."

"Call me Walter."

He clapped the provocateur on the back, and they headed for an elevator. As they rode to the third floor, Day asked, "Have you looked at the floor plan?"

The provocateur nodded. He said, "Big place. You have a lot of floors to polish."

"It's a big contract," said Day. "Pull this off, Lenny, and you'll be a wealthy man."

The provocateur nodded, and said, "I bet you guys go through a lot of wax and cleanser," as the elevator opened to the third floor.

Day smiled, and said, "Seven hundred drinking fountains, five thousand toilets, seven million square feet of floor space."

"Aren't pentagons supposed to be five-sided figures?" asked the provocateur.

"The original building was pentagonal. The U.A. Department of Defense went with a cube during the rebuild. It's a more economical use of space."

As they started down the hall, the provocateur's voice took on a less friendly tone. "Did you get the cases I sent ahead?" he asked.

"Sure. I shepherded them through security personally," said Day.

"Any problems?" asked the provocateur.

"Smooth as silk."

Major Day didn't notice the way his guest played with the ring on the middle finger of his right hand as they chatted. Day led the way, walking slightly ahead, not bothering to look back as he spoke. In another minute, his trusting nature would cost him his life.

"Your package is in the third-floor facilities locker. That's where we're headed."

They walked down the hall. Most of the people they passed were clones, males, soldiers, sailors, and Marines. Day, an Army man, led the provocateur along the Army face of the building. Army,

Navy, Air Force, Marines—each branch had a side.

They reached a service hall, an empty, dead-ended corridor. Day said, “I know it doesn’t look like much, but you’d be surprised what goes into keeping this place clean. This is only a locker; our main warehouse is on a subfloor.”

The provocateur said nothing.

Day pressed his hand against a security plate, and the door slid open. The lights inside the locker powered on when the door opened. So did the security system. The Pentagon was on the verge of a security lockdown. The entire Enlisted Man’s Empire was on the verge of a security lockdown. What happened next pushed it over the edge.

Major Walter Day stepped into the storage area. He asked, “Do you have a family, Lenny?”

Rows of shelves lined the floor. There was a clock on the wall. The time was 10:52. Having been afraid he might have missed his deadline, the provocateur saw the time and felt a sense of relief. Hoping he sounded relaxed, he said, “Three kids. The oldest is my girl.”

Day said, “You’re a lucky man. Me, I got the Army, but I don’t have a wife or children. You civilians get things too good.”

10:53.

Bright lights shone from the ceilings. The glare caused the provocateur to blink. He asked, “Where’s the package I sent.”

Day turned, pointed to the package, and staggered forward. He didn’t call for help. He barely grunted as he dropped to a knee and turned to face his killer, his arms already paralyzed.

The provocateur had hit Day in the back of the neck, stabbing the poisoned spike in his ring into the spot where the dying major’s spine and skull met. The spike delivered a powerful shock as well as a dose of neurotoxins, paralyzing Day first so that he could not call for help as he died.

The provocateur grabbed the dying officer by his tunic and struck him several times in the face, the spike of his ring puncturing both of Day’s cheeks, his left nostril, and his left eye. Unaware that Day had been dead for several seconds, the provocateur continued hitting him, then dragged his body into a blind between a sink and some shelves. He moved his crates in front of the body to block it from view.

The attack left no blood on the ground. It was quick and clean and silent, leaving no mess and attracting no attention. Security cameras in the ceiling recorded it, but no one was watching.

The provocateur opened the largest crate. He pulled out three layers of cleaning supplies from the top. Beneath the supplies was a burn-a-bomb, a collection of benevolent chemicals that wouldn’t set off bomb sensors until they were exposed to heat and mixed into a decidedly malevolent compound.

Laced around the chemicals was a heating coil that would work as a catalyst, melting the packaging that separated the chemicals, heating them, and converting them into an explosive solution. The burn-a-bomb didn’t pack sufficient power to bring down the Pentagon. The layers of concrete and cement in the floor and ceiling would channel the explosion, spreading the percussion horizontally rather than vertically. In another five minutes, every person on the third floor of the Pentagon would die.

Deeper in the crate, the provocateur found two other weapons—a miniature burn-a-bomb designed to work like a grenade and a porcelain-alloy pistol with ceramic bullets. He pulled the tab from the side of the grenade, allowing an electrical charge to heat the copper coil. The chemicals reacted quickly; in a minute, a whiff of acrid smoke would rise from the globe, signaling that the mechanism was armed.

The pistol, a five-inch tube, had been sent as a precaution. It was a three-shot security blanket that the provocateur couldn’t reload once he’d spent his ammunition. He held it between his cuff and his palm, just under the wrist. He placed the grenade into his jacket pocket.

After checking one last time to make sure that the bomb had started cooking, the provocateur closed the crate and sealed it. Hoping to camouflage his handiwork, he arranged his cleaning supplies on the lid. His left hand thrust into his coat pocket, thumb held over the grenade's pin, the provocateur gave the janitorial locker one last scan and left.

He crossed the empty service hall and entered the main corridor. A pair of soldiers walked past him, then stopped. With the building on alert, civilians were not allowed to travel alone. One of the soldiers called out, "Excuse me. Excuse me, are you with someone?" As he turned to respond, the provocateur whipped the porcelain pistol from his cuff.

The soldiers weren't attached to Security, the only department with personnel who carried weapons inside the Pentagon. They hadn't prepared for a confrontation and didn't recognize the tube as a gun.

It was at that moment that the chemicals inside the grenade melded and emitted a trace of acrid smoke. Security sensors in the ventilation system detected the dimethylformamide and pentaerythritol tetranitrate that the smoke gave off, and alarms began to blare.

One of the soldiers said something about escorts, and then the provocateur shot them both. Blood and brains and scalp splattered the walls. The bodies lay in spreading puddles, their white tunics stained deep red.

The provocateur didn't waste time inspecting the damage. He trotted toward the elevators as alarms echoed through the halls. Soldiers emerged from their offices. The doors of two elevators slid open and MPs poured out. The doors remained open, locking the elevators in place, the first step in securing the floor.

As the halls became more crowded, soldiers with MP bands screened people as they entered the stairs. They detained civilians, employees and visitors alike, escorting all nonmilitary personnel to the security office.

Seeing MPs moving toward the two soldiers he'd shot, the provocateur slipped the cylindrical pistol back into his cuff. He turned a corner and blended in with the crowd, then pushed into a different corridor, wading against the tide of clones coming from another direction.

There was no blood on him, nothing to suggest he was dangerous. He stationed himself against the wall in a corner where two halls met, and herds of workers shuffled past him. From here, he could see the door of the laboratory in which key scientists performed the Enlisted Man's Empire's most urgent experiments. The door was inconspicuous, and the hall looked no different than any other hall.

He stood there for ten seconds, watching the door for movement.

An MP grabbed him by the shoulder and shouted, "We're evacuating the floor. Move it."

The provocateur jumped at the contact. He pulled out the little pistol and shot the man, then entered the nearest stairwell. As everyone else ran down toward the street, the provocateur forced his way up against the tide.

This was not a panicking crowd. Most of the clones had mistaken the evacuation for yet another drill. Combat-tested soldiers and sailors seldom panicked at the sound of alarms. Had they panicked, they would have trampled the provocateur.

By this time, though, Pentagon Security had eyes watching every monitor. The unescorted natural-born pushing his way up the stairs did not escape their notice.

CHAPTER

THREE

Major Alan Cardston heard the alarms and ran from his office to the surveillance room.

He saw the emergency screen that identified traces of dimethylformamide and pentaerythritol tetranitrate had been detected on the third floor . . . the makings of a bomb had been smuggled into the building, and not only smuggled into the building but placed near a high-security area.

Cardston knew the chemicals and what they were used for. The officer in charge of Pentagon Security, he had arranged his organization so that the bomb disposal teams, the evacuation teams, and the MPs didn't waste time waiting for obvious orders. The first team to arrive on the scene was the six-man bomb disposal squad. The lieutenant in charge reported the two dead soldiers, but the team did not stop to investigate the scene as they hustled to the facilities locker.

Cardston studied the security monitor. The floors of the Pentagon showed as two-dimensional mazes with white dots identifying his security men. Red pixels would mark the locations of possible intruders. Only one red dot showed on the screen; the person it represented had entered one of the stairwells.

Cardston tapped the dot, switching to the cameras covering the stairs. He saw a natural-born male tall and pudgy with long hair, dressed in a suit and tie. Using the data gathered at the posts, the computer identified the intruder as Leonard Herman, the owner of a janitorial supplies company.

Cardston looked at the names of the MPs chasing after Herman. The man leading the team was Sergeant Major Gregory Goldsmith.

"Goldsmith, this is Major Alan Cardston. Do you read me?"

"Yes, sir."

On the security monitor, the red pixel moved slowly up a crowded stairwell. Had Leonard gone with the flow instead, he might have been able to escape the building with the flock.

"I've got your target on my screen. He's entered Stairwell Number 121. Do you read me, Sergeant Major? That's Stairwell Number One-Two-One on the north side of the building."

"Yes, sir."

"Take a right at the next hall, and you'll see it on your right."

"I see the door, sir."

"He's moving slowly, Sergeant Major. He's passed the fifth floor and is working his way to the sixth."

"Yes, sir." A pause, then, "We're on the stairs. There are a lot of people in here, sir. Do you have any men on the fifth?"

"Negative, Goldsmith. You and your men are our closest team."

Cardston heard Goldsmith and his men shouting, then the sergeant major said, "Sir, this crowd is going to slow us down."

"Your target has the same problem, Goldsmith," Cardston said. "Proceed with caution; he may be

armed, and I want him brought in breathing. Do you read me?"

"Yes, sir."

Cardston stood beside a console in the Pentagon Security nerve center, a dark vault lined with computer screens, phones, and microphones. Dozens of officers worked inside this lair.

Cardston checked the monitors showing the various exits around the building. He saw screen after screen of people leaving the Pentagon as calmly as moviegoers emptying a holitorium.

"How is the evacuation going?" he asked the captain to his right.

"Smooth. Most of them think it's a drill."

"The disposal team has the bomb," said the lieutenant to his left.

Cardston stepped behind the man and watched the operation over his shoulder. He said, "Is it going to give them any trouble?"

He stared into the screen. Three men in armor stood around a crate in a janitorial closet. They had not bothered to place protective walls around the crate. The operations manual called for a flimsy protective firewall, speck knows why. If the bomb went off, it wouldn't matter if it was nuclear or packed with horseshit, that wall would not protect the men trying to disarm it.

"It's a textbook burner, sir," said the lieutenant.

For Cardston, that explained quite a bit. Terrorists and provocateurs made sacrifices when they used a burn-a-bomb. They were easy to smuggle, but they were also easy to defuse. The only advantage burn-a-bombs offered was ease of concealment. Their innards were simple, straightforward and easily disarmed—separate the chemicals before they oxidized, and the bomb became as benign as a child's chemistry set.

"Alert me when the bomb is disarmed," said Cardston.

"It's disarmed," said the captain.

"That was fast," said Cardston.

"Almost not fast enough," said the captain. "Twenty seconds more, and it would have gone critical."

"Major, sir, we're closing in on him," said Goldsmith. "We got a flash on him."

On the display, the five white dots representing the MPs had gained ground on the red dot representing the provocateur. Once he passed the seventh floor, Herman had run out of options. The stairs led to the roof, but the roof access door was locked, and Goldsmith's security team waited one flight below with M27s raised and ready.

The stalemate lasted nearly a minute.

Goldsmith asked, "Major, did he make it out to the roof?"

Cardston looked at the floor schematic. Something had happened. The provocateur couldn't have opened the door to the roof without a bomb or a bazooka or possibly a laser torch, but the red pixel no longer showed in the stairwell.

The pixel had disappeared.

"Bring up a map!" Cardston yelled to the officers around him. When the map showed on the monitor, he needed only a moment to spot the escape route, then he pulled the microphone close and said, "Sergeant Major, one-two-one connects to a service floor. He's entered a machine-and-maintenance area just below the roof."

"Can you see him?" asked the sergeant major.

"Negative, Sergeant Major. We don't have eyes on that floor." Once they had the bastard, Cardston would personally oversee the installation of cameras and sensors. *What a speck-up*, he thought.

"Yes, sir," said the sergeant major.

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