

THE CULPABILITY OF CHAOS

One might view the calamitous state of things today and reach out for a source, someone or something to hold responsible for all the world's suffering. It's easy to believe that all the tragedy, all the grief and confusion is somehow planned. This idea gives people the strength to keep fighting, to hunt down the malignancy at the heart of it all and excise it for good. Sadly, this view is also horribly naïve.

Villainy, in concept and in practice, is subjective. Except for the mentally unhinged, people rarely relish inflicting pain or instilling fear, and within the mind of nearly every so-called "evildoer" is a commitment to some greater cause, a justification for every so-called "injustice." By example, most of Project: Pitfall's stalwart operatives tenaciously believe that the extreme steps they take are justified and that any unfortunate fallout from their actions is a far cry from the inevitable alternative. As will become evident throughout this chapter, this is also the case with two of the *World on Fire's* less obvious "antagonists"...

HONOR IN VENGEANCE: PROJECT PITFALL

Ephraim Roth was a proud man. He was proud of his heritage, his parents having smuggled him out of Nazi Germany at the eve of the holocaust so that he might live the dream they were denied. He was proud of the life he'd led since then, a life founded on strong ideals and even stronger convictions. He was proud that he'd always fought for causes he believed in, never backing down because he was hurt or afraid. He was even proud of the little things, like his kinship with animals, birds in particular.

Before this latest unhappy business, Ephraim had indulged this, his greatest passion. His life was simple. He ran an avian sanctuary and toured with an old-fashioned bird circus. His family — he never called them "pets" — they performed complex aerial tricks, acrobatic stunts, and feats of ingenuity and charm. He even trained messenger birds he would send from one tour location to the next with amusing notes he would read for the audience.

Ephraim's work had been noticed and he'd scored several high-end clients, including some in Hollywood and, surprisingly, with the U.S. military. It seemed that in this age of satellite imagery and instantaneous global chatter the safest forms of communication were in fact the simplest ones. Ephraim trained several carriers for his new employers, though he demanded and received clearance to work directly with the spy birds as they performed their secret work. He never knew much about the people for whom he worked, though his birds were never mistreated or used for anything he knew to be wrong.

Nine years ago, Ephraim came to understand that his government employers had at some point broken away from U.S. intelligence and branched out on their own. By this time they were calling themselves the Banshee Net and they appeared to be part of a broader network operating without a parent state. They undermined groups that they claimed were threats to the entire world, but Ephraim didn't buy into this bombastic claim, instead withdrawing his services and returning to civilian life.

He'd half expected retribution, men in black vans in the middle of the night, but none ever came. Ephraim lived an unmolested life for another six years before a very different visitor appeared on his doorstep: a strikingly beautiful woman with shocks of shoulder-length auburn hair. She reminded Ephraim of his mother in her glory days in the old country, and her scent... That elusive fragrance still clouded his mind.

The woman introduced herself as Julia Fine, though in retrospect he was sure that wasn't her real name. She explained to Ephraim that he was needed again, that his unique services would aid the Banshee Net against a new villain that could not remain in power: U.S. President George Winter. Julia produced reams of evidence indicting the leader of the free world with crimes rivaling those of the most infamous warlords — kidnappings, torture, political warmongering, and worse.

Ephraim didn't want to believe her, didn't want to believe that this could happen again, here in his new home, to the people he'd come to respect and love. God help him, though, he did, at least at the time. There was a lot about that night and the following months that Ephraim couldn't clearly recall, though it was coming back to him now that he was out of Julia's grasp, out of her sweet embrace, away from those intoxicating lips...

"Come on Ephraim..." The pleasant interrogator with the boyish face leaned in over the pictures spread across the cold steel table — pictures of Julia, or as the interrogator called her, Minx. "We've shown you the truth about her. She lied to you. She drugged you. That's what she does. She seduces men into helping terrorists."

Ephraim tried to process it all. If it was true, he'd trusted the wrong people. Twice. There was no way to be sure. For three years he'd believed that the man in front of him was the enemy, that Stephen Century and his Pitfall cronies were nothing more than stormtroopers with a new flag.

He wished he could remember his meetings with Julia. He knew they'd met regularly since he'd come back into the fold and he knew she'd briefed and debriefed him about his courier duties for the Net. The details, however, were... hazy, like a fading dream.

"You're a good man, Ephraim," Century said. "You've done good things with your life. You can do more. We aren't looking to hurt them, but they're dangerous. We already know roughly where they are, but we're running out of time and we need what they know about this Nightfall virus."

Ephraim's entire life he'd lived under the open sky. His first memories were of a vast expanse of unbroken blue, and it was there that he'd always found peace. He hated being in this windowless room, beneath this harsh artificial light. He missed the cool breeze at home and the gentle cooing of his birds.

"People are dying, Ephraim. Help us save them."

Images flooded Ephraim's mind's eye, first the pictures spreading through the news services earlier that day. The virus victims, their neurochemistry severely compromised, had literally torn each other to shreds. Even so, the losers of these brutal battles were the lucky ones; the survivors were slowly reduced to messy piles of pulpy flesh, their humanity stripped away cell by dissolving cell.

"The Banshees know who's doing this, Ephraim, if they aren't doing it themselves."

Ephraim squinted his eyes shut but the images kept coming, now from somewhere else. Memories, he realized, of a body on a table not unlike the one in front of him, a steel death slab where