



his fingers and jaw would be removed to prevent identification. The poor soul was one of them, a Banshee, but he'd been turned by one of the organization's faceless enemies. One of Ephraim's birds had delivered the man's picture to a field operative. He was to bring the man on the slab home, presumably alive...

They'd killed him. The Banshees were afraid of what the double would reveal, so they'd killed him and mutilated his corpse. Why hadn't Ephraim remembered that before? Why did he suddenly taste fine wine? The same wine Julia loved, that she drank the night Ephraim learned he was a murderer. She'd kissed him...

"I remember," he said.

"What, Ephraim?" Century asked. "What do you remember?"

Ephraim Julius Roth, codename Conduit amongst the Banshees, made his choice. "I'll help you," he said, "but I have terms."

Stephen Century stepped out of the interrogation room and closed the door. He approached General Cornelius Fitch, who had been observing from behind a one-way mirror. The General didn't shift his stance, didn't look Century's way. His face was a stern mask of focused planning.

"You see, General? No violence, no threats." Century was quite pleased with himself. He'd scored a victory in that room. He'd proved Pitfall didn't have to do it Fitch's way. Not every op had to end with blood on the floor.

Fitch was not amused. "We lost twenty-eight and a half minutes to that production, son. How many more people do you think ripped each other apart in that time?"

The staccato clack of icy heels approached from a nearby hall. Madeline Sax was making an appearance, though as she entered the room she uncharacteristically yielded to one of Fitch's aides, a young lieutenant with an eager stride.

"General, Captain Drake reports we've successfully breached the target's upper floors."

Century interrupted Fitch's response. "I didn't agree to an attack, General."

"I did, Stephen." Sax, her charming voice laced with betrayal. "Like you said, we're running out of time."

"There were terms," Century stammered. "I assured him we wouldn't use lethal force."

Fitch looked at Century for the first time. If anything, his jowls were clenched even tighter than usual. "We aren't selling a used car here, son. We don't owe him anything."

"I gave a man my word, General."

"Wrong," Fitch said. "You successfully processed an enemy combatant."

Century's face burned as Sax pushed a sheaf of papers into his hands. "Memorize these. The press conference is in an hour."

The papers crinkled in Century's gripping fist. He whipped around at Sax and screamed, "How the hell do you know more of us won't come out of there in body bags than them?"

Sax produced a second sheaf of papers. "Just in case," she said smugly.

Century's hand shot out toward one of the nearby monitors. On the screen was more news of the mounting casualties around the world. "How do you know any of this is even gonna matter?"

Sax reached for yet another sheaf...

## THE FELL HAND OF FREEDOM

Stephen Century's press conference broke into every major broadcast in the world that night, lauding Pitfall's latest victory with a carefully scripted blend of pride and arrogance. The organization's finely tuned public relations arm massaged the teleprompter text right up to the moment the feed went live, milking every image and crafting every word for maximum effect. As usual Pitfall camera crews had accompanied the front line troops, documenting their successes for promotion and cataloguing their foibles for reproach. This time they'd struck PR gold. The sweep had gone well, tearing through the halls of the Illuminated Futures Building with no known escapees and only three Pitfall casualties — one a cameraman lost to friendly fire (Century made the call to the woman's family three hours later).

Away from the cameras, Century railed against the spin doctoring, offended by its skewed depiction of the day's events. Sax's crew squarely laid the blame for the Nightfall virus on the Banshees, playing on the public's outrage to justify the attack. They focused attention on Pitfall's win, omitted mention of civilian casualties, and took credit for rescuing the world from certain doom (*even though Century and others knew otherwise — see The Nightfall Virus, page 45*).

This is just one example of how the Pitfall organization that is perceived by the public differs from the reality. At the highest levels, Project: Pitfall is far from the united force for freedom seen above the fold; rather, it's as divided as the populace that never got to vote on whether to raise the stakes in the so-called War on Terror. Stephen Century is the organization's poster boy, the man credited with leading the charge, but he must contend with several other personalities lurking just outside the spotlight.

His biggest rival in the organization is Madeline Sax, former Deputy Communications Director for the White House and head of Pitfall's Public Relations branch. Sax was appointed several months ago when Century blasted U.S. President George Winter for a speech equating humanitarian Gideon Barbary's aggressive peace tactics in Eurasia to the Banshees' "opinion bombs" (*for more about Gideon Barbary and the Eurasian Conflict, see page 48*). Sax is the mastermind behind Project: Pitfall's unblemished public image, even in the face of declining terror attacks and the agency's questionable necessity. She's also a fierce patriot whose first loyalty is to her President, which often threatens Century's desire to keep Pitfall's mission clear, focused, and uncorrupted.

Sax respects Century's charisma and ability to hold Pitfall together, but she frequently voices private doubts regarding his methods and personal agendas. In particular she believes that Century's apolitical views marginalize Pitfall's influence and endanger its longevity. She knows that the pendulum of public opinion will eventually swing the other way, that people will grow weary of the struggle and want to withdraw with as much dignity as they can manage. She also knows that if Pitfall isn't ready to weather the subsequent storm of discontent, it will succumb to it — and she'll have to find a new cause to support.

A force covertly tugging at Pitfall's strings is CIA Director of Central Intelligence Oliver Johnson, who seeks to usurp many of Pitfall's resources to supplement the U.S. espionage campaign. Unlike Sax, Johnson has no vested interest in Pitfall's continued success, or even its existence (indeed, the CIA's job would become easier without a brash, rogue military force trotting the globe). Johnson is mainly concerned with the funds, manpower, and other tools at Pitfall's disposal, including many U.S. intelligence resources that were originally earmarked for the CIA. To date, Johnson has