

PROLOGUE

Kat missed the thrill of exerting her power in person. Holding her own in a physical room full of men. As she took her time climbing the winding staircase, she could make out a blurred reflection of herself in the surface of the mahogany railing and wondered how others saw her in these new circumstances. She'd spent nearly thirty years learning to master her authority, and now that she was limited to virtual meetings and the occasional masked encounter, she felt as if she'd lost a step. Apparently, the fearful respect she would sense in someone's presence was a critical component of her confidence—she fed off it. As it turned out, when she couldn't feel that fear, she couldn't feel her power. She couldn't remember the last time she'd been able to detect the bobbing of an Adam's apple as a man swallowed nervously at something she'd said.

But it was a small price to pay for the havoc she'd wrought. It was *because* of her and her partners that the world had had to turn to virtual communication—her pharmaceutical corporation had been the *mechanism* for it—and now they just had to wait to reap the benefits.

It wasn't as if she'd have been throwing her power around in this evening's session anyway. This would be a meeting of equals, and things had been going so well that the primary order of business

would probably be reveling in their success. A sick world was destined for better health than it had ever known.

Crossing the landing overlooking the foyer, she wondered about the previous owner, a man who'd possessed great wealth but not the *krysha*—the government's version of mob protection—to hold on to it and had simply disappeared. As a child, she hadn't dared to imagine such comfort even in her dreams. In those days, the only way for a woman to occupy an opulent country estate in Rublevka was by marrying a senior government official. And even now, she was the only one to have done it on her own, the only woman at the helm of a state-run company-turned-private industry titan. The only female oligarch. (The term was now considered crass, though. The president, who excelled at flag waving, preferred *czar*.) And she hadn't relied on the help of men to get there. With the exception of the unconditional ambition her father had ruthlessly instilled in her, she'd succeeded *despite* the obstructions of men.

Now she was one of them.

As she stepped into the home office she'd decorated with leather and wood pieces that were comfortingly oversize—she'd made a point of surrounding herself with much more of anything than she needed—she dimmed the lights to soften the lines and edges of things. Maybe it was just her imagination, but low light seemed to prevent others from defining her. And it wasn't just about blurring her age. She'd spent most of her life surprising others and capitalizing on that surprise before they could figure out what was going on. Many of them had sat behind sprawling three-hundred-year-old desks with legs as thick as birch trees, like the one she now approached.

Before sitting, she tapped the control pad and gazed at her screen saver—the view of the Black Sea from her Sochi villa—and took a satisfied breath. After pulling a bottle of Tovaritch from the ice bucket and pouring herself a shot, she clicked on the Zoom logo, which disguised a secure channel to her colleagues. If someone else

were to see her screen, they'd see nothing but the icons to be found on the average laptop. The notification icon was blinking red and she clicked the hidden tab.

Framed by an austere white wall as always, Osiris's face filled the screen. The three had been addressing each other by code names for eight years, and that's how she thought of them by now. Her own still rang proudly in her mind: Sekhmet. The goddess of absolute power and authority. The mythology was Egyptian but the tradition was perfectly Russian.

"Comrade," he said, betraying none of the joy she assumed he felt. The video technology was wasted on him. His expression never changed.

"Comrade." She gave him a conspiratorial smirk just for fun. His eyes seemed to soften a little, but she couldn't be sure. She wasn't sure he was even capable of smiling.

When Anubis appeared in the upper left corner, framed by a tapestry of burgundy and gold, the contrast was almost comical. His satisfaction couldn't have been more obvious—he was as serene as Buddha.

"Hello, my friends. Life is good, is it not?"

Osiris nodded soberly. "Indeed."

"The reports are everything we'd hoped for," Kat said.

"It appears that the West is weak in even more ways than we'd expected," Anubis said. "The situation in Brazil was predictable to a fault. The president has shown no regard for science in letting the rainforest be decimated—why would he treat humans any differently? But as for their neighbors to the north..." He shook his head.

None of them had foreseen Americans' resistance to the national mask mandate, let alone the outright demonizing of mask wearing, and even Osiris shook his head in wonder as Kat and Anubis shared a laugh over Americans' absurd attachment to personal rights—the allegiance to the individual at the expense of the society. The

freedoms of the nation's brand of democracy had proved to be even more undermining than they'd predicted. Challenged with "managing" a soft pandemic, America was dismantling itself more efficiently—more *systemically*—than any outside power could have hoped to. Their well-meaning but ineffective President Richardson was proving more useful than ever, ensuring that the full shutdown of life in the United States would persist for longer than could have been hoped for. Imagine how gloriously they would implode in the face of a virus with more terrifying symptoms than slow suffocation.

"The great irony is that the leaders responsible for the failure of 'the American experiment' were all freely elected by the people," Anubis said, his eyes wide with a mix of glee and amazement. "Americans could hardly argue that they wouldn't have done better if a dictator had seized power and made the rules."

"The *right* dictator could have controlled the population," Osiris said.

"Quite right, quite right. And that is what this is all about, isn't it? The *right* dictators."

Osiris gave him half a nod.

"Leaders who will provide what every president since Reagan has claimed to provide while exploiting the people for their own gain." He wagged his head incredulously. "Even the precious capitalism Americans had so much faith in is an utter failure. And that's what they were *really* counting on. They've made a show of putting their faith in democracy, but in 1925—a *century* ago—Calvin Coolidge said, 'The chief business of the American people is business.' Ever since then, their leaders have tried to convince their people and the rest of the world that they prioritize the dignity of human life over the almighty dollar, but who do they think they're fooling? Whose idea of democracy is this?" He threw his head back in laughter. "Oh my, the hypocrisy." After wiping a tear from his eye, he shrugged. "Oh well, at least it's good for a laugh."

“It’s not a wonder the Americans are so soft,” Kat said. “What do they have that is worth fighting for? The freedoms and rights they’ve desperately clung to have proven worthless as their institutions crumble.” In her box on the screen, she saw herself beaming.

Osiris snorted derisively, the closest he ever came to a laugh. “People with so much control over their own rights are their own leaders, but they know nothing about human nature and survival. The blind are leading the blind. They believe the capitalism *they* are enslaved to can change the world, but their so-called free market system has all the power of their leaders’ promises. They can’t even save *themselves* with it. Look at their squabbling over food and the price of the vaccine.” His voice had risen so much that he almost sounded like a woman. “Pathetic—a nation of fools.”

Clearly, Osiris wasn’t the celebratory type, even now.

“And their reign as the superpower will soon be at an end, and we will provide the leadership they so desperately need,” Anubis said, eyes ablaze. “The leadership the *world* so desperately needs.” His magnetic smile reminded Kat why he had so many followers. “Something they can have faith in at last. So let us be grateful.”

“He who doesn’t take risks doesn’t drink Champagne,” Kat said and raised her glass. “To even greater success the next time—*supreme* success.” She threw back the shot and savored the cool coating on her throat and then the burn it left in its wake. When she lowered her head again, the fire in Anubis’s eyes had turned to ash, and she felt her breath stop short. It was as if his soul had just left his body.

He slowly lifted a teacup. “To the end of an era...and the beginning of our supremacy.”

ONE

// We just hit eight hundred thousand.”
Eight hundred thousand dead Americans. Dead from COVID. At least four hundred thousand more than necessary, according to the GOP. In the three months since patient zero was reportedly bitten by a bat, the pandemic had been at least twice as deadly as it would have been under a Republican administration that had targeted workable solutions that *wouldn't* have busted every agency's budget. At least that's what Chase had heard so many times on the news and through social media that it had almost lodged itself in his brain as a fact. Almost.

And now the Senate majority leader was presenting him with what he assumed really was a fact.

“It's official?” Chase said.

John just nodded, seated in the leather armchair across from the desk. He'd dropped in as he so often did when the Senate was in recess, and Chase had put his schedule on hold for him as he so often did. Not that his schedule was especially full, considering that the courts were closed for business.

That the toll would reach eight hundred thousand had been a foregone conclusion for weeks, but it felt like a lingering punch in the stomach anyway. The ache showed no signs of going away.

“Goddamn.”

John gripped the chair's arms like he was expecting turbulence, but Chase could tell from his twinkling blue eyes that he was wearing his usual calm smile beneath his mask. "A lot's changed since you helped with the reelection campaign twelve years ago. Aside from the pandemic, I mean. And most of it not for the better."

The ache was getting worse.

"But then, that was to be expected, considering who's running the show. Even after we get a vaccine, we're going to be left with this inflation for years to come because of the money we've been printing like a daily newspaper. You know that, right?"

"I do."

"How angry does it make you?"

Chase took a deep breath, but his gut wouldn't relax. "Plenty." He looked out at the severe angles of the US Steel building, a block down Grant Street, grateful that he was literally above it all. On the fourth floor of the federal courthouse of the Western District of Pennsylvania, he couldn't see what was happening on the streets of his hometown unless he walked to the window.

"Son, you need to harness that anger." The concern in John's voice reminded Chase of his father, when he would encourage him to use his "compass." "You've been very fortunate in your career. You have countless attractive options. And now you have an opportunity to make a real difference in this broken society, not least of all here in Pittsburgh."

No one knew better than John Angelbaum how fortunate Chase had been. Ever since "the Great Facilitator" had introduced himself at a Naval Institute leadership forum, John had had one thing or another to do with most of the milestones in Chase's career. The letter of reference to Harvard Law after Chase's last tour of duty. The introduction at Laskey, Bergen and White. The connections in Harrisburg and, should he need them, at the DOJ. And ever since Chase had taken a sabbatical to serve on John's fourth

campaign—partly out of gratitude but mainly out of admiration and appreciation for what the senator had accomplished in three terms—John had made no secret of his hope that Chase would one day run for office himself. But until recently, it had always taken the form of good-natured coaxing. After the pandemic hit, though, a note of pressure had entered their conversations, mentions of an “obligation” to save a sinking ship. Chase had tried to ignore it, but now his distressed gut sensed that the issue was about to be forced.

“Did you ever think you’d see the day when the Russians sent us aid?” John said. “When we would give them the opportunity to pity us and show the world their superiority to us at the same time?”

And now, with its airlifts, Russia was beginning to posture as if it were the logical heir to America’s throne as the world’s superpower and ultimate provider. “I can’t say I did.”

“Pennsylvania needs you, Chase, never mind the *nation*. I’ve worked very hard for this state, but I’m not going to run again.”

Wait—what?

“You can bet that if Democrats had their way all these years, Pennsylvania never would have survived China’s theft of eighty thousand jobs. But we did, and my retirement could mean the end of that stability unless we put the right candidate up against Jenna Wilkins. You know she’ll be the one, right? And you know she’ll run us into the ground.”

Holy shit. He wants me to run for his seat. He’s hanging it up. How can he be hanging it up? “I’m very sorry to hear this. I’m sure I speak for most of Pittsburgh when I say you’ll be profoundly missed.”

“You’re very kind,” John said as if he didn’t quite agree.

“*Jesus*. A Pennsylvania without Senator John Angelbaum. I have to say I never thought much about that possibility. Guess I’ve always

thought that was way off in the distance. Now that I *am* thinking about it, I don't like it at all."

"All the more reason for you to be the one to take my place."

Chase laughed uncomfortably. "Senator, I just assumed you'd always had a state-level office in mind for me, at least to start." He leaned his arms on his desk to steady himself. "I don't know what to say."

"You don't have to say anything. I'm just asking you to think about it."

"Why would anyone vote for someone who's never held a legislative office?"

"Have you noticed that our front-runner for the highest office in the land has never held *any* office?" Private equity kingpin Bryan Decker, who'd made his bundle in pharmaceuticals and waste management and reveled in playing the maverick (not even bothering to deny the "booze, broads, and blow" rumors), was promising to give conservatives exactly what they wanted: rushed science and recovered portfolios at any cost. In his version of the future, he'd quash the pandemic by fast-tracking both a vaccine and its distribution and restoring the economy, all within his first year in office. "The outsider concept is having a moment, and it may never come again. And the truth is, it makes a lot of sense. You know as well as anyone what power can do to people. Here's a chance to see what politicians who *haven't* been corrupted can do."

"Uh, sir"—Chase swept a hand toward John—"we have plenty of government representatives who haven't been corrupted."

John chuckled. "You have no idea."

Chase looked around his 150-year-old office, with its artichoke-green walls and harsh lighting courtesy of the original fixtures, not to mention the ever-present hint of mustiness—the quintessential eastern-city government office. "I'm not sure I'd know how to act in an office with all the modern conveniences."

“I have faith in you.”

Chase had figured that his next—and last—career move would be assuming a judgeship. It was the most direct enforcement of justice, ensuring that thousands of defendants a year got what they very literally deserved, be it restitution or prison time. At John’s suggestion, he’d considered the idea of playing a role in hammering out the laws the courts upheld, but those musings always ended in a fiery collision between ideals and reality—reality being that the political divide had become wide enough to swallow ideals and idealists whole.

John was well aware of this reality, and yet here he was, suggesting that Chase could succeed where so many others had been swallowed. “Why me?”

“You’re the perfect combination of outsider and insider. You’ve been close enough to politics to have an understanding of how the process works, how we arrive at the outcomes we do, and you’ve spent most of the past twenty years defending that process in one way or another. You’re a soldier, literally and figuratively.” His eyes narrowed thoughtfully. “America needs warriors. Take a look at how races are shaping up around the country—how many warriors do you see? Even with a pandemic going on? If candidates can’t instill confidence in wartime, whether it’s a war on terror or an attack on our health or the economy, they have no business in politics.”

Chase noticed that the pain had finally left him, and he leaned back in his chair. “Huh.”

“The GOP can fix this whole mess.” John’s head jerked with a laugh. “Probably not as easily as Decker is promising, but we can do it. We just need the right enforcers. Enforcers who can get the public behind them and build coalitions like we used to do. That’s the only way to lay the groundwork for long-term change. And it’s obviously time to start thinking about the long term instead of

starting over from scratch every four years. We've been treading water—at best—for longer than I care to acknowledge.”

Forced to seriously consider the option for the first time, Chase could only see the gaping void in his knowledge of the process. He got up and made himself walk to the window, where he saw a street strewn with uncollected bags of garbage and dotted with what he prayed were homeless nappers rather than dead bodies. “You know, I’ve felt reasonably prepared for everything I’ve taken on since high school. One step led to the next—*prepared* me for the next—and that’s what I’m comfortable with.” One of the bodies moved, and Chase walked to the other side of the office, studying the marble tiles beneath his loafers. “I’m not talking about the kind of comfortable that comes from not challenging yourself too much. I just mean I’m comfortable knowing I’m doing what I’m supposed to be doing. I’m making the biggest contribution possible because I’m doing what I’m an expert at. If I changed course my expertise would be wasted, and something feels wrong about that...I’d be starting a whole new learning curve, and I might turn out to suck at the job.”

John chuckled. “Nothing can really prepare you for a career in politics, so you can drop *that* ridiculous expectation. But you *would* have one advantage over the other rookies.”

“Oh?”

He let go of the chair’s arms and turned his palms up. “Me...I’ll always have your back. You’ll have my five terms of experience to draw on. Consider me an open book.”

“Hmm...that sounds suspiciously like cheating.”

John leaned forward, elbows on his knees, and clasped his hands. “We need a sure thing. We can’t let Wilkins undo all the work we’ve done. With my endorsement, you’d be a sure thing.”

Chase sat at his desk again. “So maybe I could just skip that whole campaign thing? Yours was enough to tell me that it’s not

really my cup of tea—talking myself up and my opponent down and all that. Pretty distasteful stuff.” His role had been to reel in donors, and after four months of massaging egos, he felt as if his dignity had snuck away while he wasn’t paying attention.

“I can connect you with some people who will take all the pain out of it. Or most of it anyway.”

“You really are serious.”

“It’s awfully dark out there, Counselor. I don’t have to tell you we’re having a hard time finding our way. We need someone who can see in the dark.”

Chase glanced at the antique pewter steeple clock on the corner of his desk—a gift from John on the occasion of his graduation from law school. The card that accompanied it had said, “Time is the enemy of the ambitious. Keep the enemy close.” The clock’s hands showed three thirty, and he needed to review a case before conferring with one of his prosecutors. “Well, Senator, you’ve certainly given me something to think about.”

“Just like I’d requested.” He got to his feet. “It’s not every man who gets to pick his successor, but I’d very much like to be one of them.”

Chase stood and started to extend his hand before stopping himself. He hadn’t had a hard time swearing off hand shaking in this COVID era, but he was apparently preoccupied enough to drop his guard now. “You make me lose sight of what’s good for me, Senator.”

John raised his eyebrows. “You can’t blame *me* for that. I know you’re not a man who’s susceptible to influence.”

“Only yours, Senator, and I’m flattered that you’d entrust me with your seat.”

John sighed and started across the room. “If only it were mine to give.” At the door, he stopped and turned back. “But then, if that’s the way it worked, voters might get the leaders they *need*

instead of the leaders they think they need.” He winked just before disappearing into the hall.

As Chase resumed his review of a six-month-old murder case, the word echoed in his head.

Need.

Did the legislative branch really need him more than the judicial branch? Neither system was perfect, but wasn’t it too late for the sinking ship of Congress? Wasn’t it an outright shipwreck by now? Could a salvage mission be anything but a royal waste of time?

And hadn’t John warned him against wasting time?