

Imminent Threat is a fast paced action thriller. A Middle Eastern Corporation moves to acquire a new Nanorobotic Technology by any means possible. It's up to Michael Tagtmeyer and his D.A.R.C. Organization to neutralize the Hostile threat.

D.A.R.C. Imminent Threat

By Dennis Collins

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D.A.R.C.

IMMINENT THREAT



DENNIS
COLLINS

A MICHAEL TAGTMEYER NOVEL

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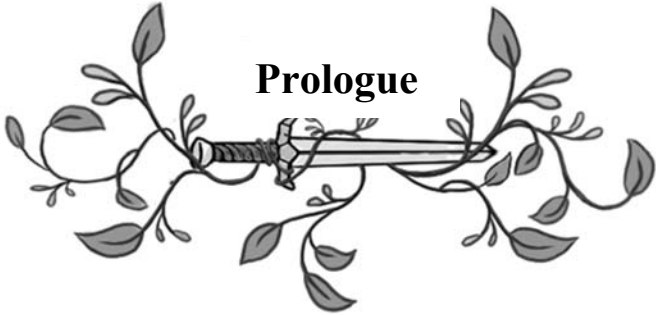
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Prologue



The G280 Gulfstream rolled to a stop just outside the private hangar at Switzerland's Lugano airport. Exiting, he was greeted by the massive mountains on the horizon and two diminutive young women in business suits waiting patiently by a black Mercedes-Maybach GLS SUV. The woman on the left wielded a laptop, a pair of sunglasses on top of the laptop, and a congenial smile. The woman to the right wielded a Walther PPK in each hand. There was no sign of humor or affability on the second woman's face.

Dutch focused on the woman to the left. He wasted little time approaching her and handing her an unsealed envelope. She accepted it and handed him the pair of sunglasses in return. Sliding them on, he stood staring at her wordlessly for what many would consider an awkward five seconds. She assessed the data from the laptop while her partner stared at Dutch with PPKs out and ready.

“Thank you for your cooperation, Mr. MacArthur,” offered the first woman with a winning smile. She placed the laptop in the crook of her arm, held the door open, and waited for him to enter. Dutch watched her companion slide the PPKs back in their holsters, and enter the front of the vehicle.

“Of course, my dear,” answered Dutch. “The council must make sure I am who I claim to be.” He slid into the SUV, returned the glasses to her, and asked, “Are they all here?”

“They are always where they are supposed to be, sir.”

“Yes, of course. And, please call me Dutch.”

“Yes, sir.”

It was a short drive from the airport to the council’s location...a nondescript restaurant on the pristine waterfront of Lake Ceresio. When Dutch walked through the doors of the Locanda Gandriese he was immediately taken by its quaintness. The mountain views coupled with the glimpses of the sparkling lake were breathtaking and the smells wafting in from the kitchen made his mouth water. He shook his head...he knew he wasn’t here for the ambiance. He glanced around, only now seeming to note the vacant tables despite it being the heart of the dinner hour. “It appears they have reserved the entire restaurant,” he stated casually to his escort.

“Yes, sir,” was her curt reply. She gestured toward the open balcony door.

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He followed her guidance and stepped out onto the balcony where four men and two women captured his attention. They were seated around a circular teak table and appeared to have made their way well into the evening meal. They looked up casually at his approach and nodded a greeting in one degree or another. Though their faces were not familiar, he knew they were the most powerful group of human beings on the face of the earth. He knew this because he used to be one of them.

A woman with alabaster skin delicately wiped the corner of her mouth and gestured to one of the two vacant chairs across from her. "Please have a seat, Mr. MacArthur." Her words held a slight Hausa accent.

Dutch offered a genuine smile and complied. "Just Dutch." When he settled, he leaned back as a servant set a plate of food and a moderately sized glass of beer before him. "Ahhh... jagerschnitzel and kristalweizen. My favorite."

"Of course." The simple statement was directed at him by a heavyset man to his left. The man lifted his glass and offered a toast. "To a full belly for all!"

"Hear. Hear," echoed the others as they raised their glasses and took a sip. Dutch joined in the gesture. The next hour had them continuing to eat, and Dutch doing his best to catch up. He paid particular attention to his beer. In between bites and sips, Dutch listened to the casual conversations of current events. The common language happened to be English, though it was not exclusively being spoken. He

knew they were strangers to one another, but any outsider looking in would be able to tell there was a common bond between them.

“It is time.” The speaker was the second of the two women. She was of Japanese descent gifted with strong facial features that did not detract from her femininity. With hair tied pristinely back, her penetrating eyes were all the more intense.

The table was thoroughly cleared in a flurry of activity. As the last of the servants scurried from the room, Dutch’s escort placed a napkin of fine white silk at the center of the table. Discreetly embroidered on one of its corners was the letter “A” pierced by a medieval long sword. Both the “A” and sword were entwined in twisting vines in the incomplete shape of a number eight on its side.

The escort departed with a bow.

The woman who had given the order gracefully rose to her feet. “I am Asia and I have called this meeting of AEGIS.” She held a time-worn gold coin the size of a silver dollar and twice as thick in her hand. On its face was a design similar to the one stitched into the corner of the silk napkin. “This is the token of my station, a symbol of my ongoing struggle for duality and balance.” She placed it gently, face up, on the napkin and sat.

The woman with the alabaster skin rose. “I am Africa. It is an honor to respond to the summons.” She held up a similar coin. “This is the token of my station, a symbol

of my riches and perpetual conflict.” She placed it next to Asia’s token and sat.

The man to her left stood and held his coin for all to see. “I am North America and will come at the call of my colleagues at any time of day or night. This is the token of my station, a symbol of my wealth and inherent responsibility to all.” He dropped the coin and it *clinked* to a stop next to the other two. He sat without further comment.

The man next to him stood. He appeared distracted, saying, “I am South America. This is the token of my station, a symbol of my extremes. I am here. I will always be here.” He placed the coin among the others and took his seat.

The man to Dutch’s left rose, leaning heavily on the table. His chair seemed to groan in relief and the table creaked in protest. “I am Europe. This is the token of my station. It represents time scarred and singed by fire during my troubled, yet enduring, history. I too am honored to answer the call as were those before me and those who will come after.” He lay the coin on the growing pile and plopped back in his seat with a *huff*.

“I am Australia.” Standing, he displayed his coin and dropped it on the napkin. His face was scarred from above his left eye to just above his lip. There was a patch covering the eye. “This token of my station represents my devotion to you.” He motioned around the table, adding, “A sacred duty that reaches beyond time and state.” When he sat, they all turned to Asia.

Asia reached to the center of the table and lifted each corner of the napkin over its center until the coins were concealed. “As it has been since AEGIS’ inception, we are again as one.” After her rote words of ceremony were complete, she sat and paused only slightly before continuing. “I have heard whispers that one of my most challenging of children—Iran—is walking a path that threatens our global stability and the very balance for which we strive.”

North America and Europe both nodded. The others continued to look on attentively.

“A learned scholar has made remarkable headway in the field of nanobyte technology. I believe it is safe to say that he has found a way to insert a single nanorobot, or possibly multiple robots, in a human body and program them to perform a variety of tasks at the click of a mouse or touch of a screen”? Tasks include chemical delivery, cellular rejuvenation, antibody facilitation, and neural manipulation. And,” continued Asia, “...said nanites can lay dormant within the body for many years.”

“That is an accurate summary of the intended capabilities,” interjected North America. “A number of my children have been watching him closely. Are you saying he has been successful?”

“Yes,” confirmed Europe. “Our eyes and ears in Dresden shared their concerns. My colleague was right to call this meeting.” He tilted his head toward Asia in deference.

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“Your child’s intentions?” asked Africa.

“To shift the balance of power within Iran,” came the swift response. “Though once accomplished, that child will surely reach out to control my other children...and yours. A discussion is called for.”

“The technology is valuable, but not just monetarily,” offered Australia. “It will advance peripheral medical research beyond measure.”

“Extremely so,” insisted Africa. “It could be instrumental in saving thousands upon thousands of lives. But, the technology could prove dangerous as well.”

There was more than one nod from the members around the table.

Dutch sat silently...waiting.

“The scholar? His intentions?” asked South America.

“Honorable,” answered Asia. She glanced at Dutch and received a curt nod. “Although he seems to have breached personal medical protocol by using his discovery to help some close associates, one cannot discount the scholar’s results. Can one, Dutch?”

“By associates, I take it you’re referring to Miss Bertarelli and Mr. Tagtmeyer. If so, both personally agreed to undergo the procedures.” Dutch raised his hand to ward off questions, hurriedly adding, “Granted, the professor’s fondness for Michael Tagtmeyer may have caused him to push the boundary a bit. But, as you say, there is no

questioning the results. It is clear his discovery has already advanced multiple areas within medical science.”

“Yes,” agreed Asia. “His intentions are indeed honorable though his attention to security is questionable at best...a subject I am particularly sensitive to in light of the seriousness of the COVID incident. My failure in properly reading the warning signs that had come from Wuhan in the People’s Republic of China still weighs upon me.”

“Would he agree to be chaperoned by any of our less volatile children?” asked South America, ignoring Asia’s words of contrition. “Security could be adequately addressed and development, with appropriate and controlled distribution, would be assured.”

Europe cleared his throat. “I have nudged Great Britain to pursue the role of patronage. I believe MI6 will make arrangements.” He tapped his fingers on the table and shifted his glance to North America. “That is unless your Americas wish to be at the forefront.”

North America shook his head. “No. But thank you for the kindness of asking.” There was sincerity in his tone.

Europe nodded. “So, will the scholar be amenable to our approach?”

“Will he?” Asia turned her head to Dutch. “Of all here, you know him best.”

Dutch nodded. “All seated here know I am one to speak plainly. Allow me to say that Professor Anthony Giovanni is an extremely intelligent *and* extremely stubborn man. It is the intelligent part of his psyche that will listen to

reason and ultimately understand that he will indeed need a champion to protect himself and humanity from the possible ramifications of his discovery. Yes; he will be agreeable to the right approach.”

“Thank you, Dutch.” Asia looked around expectantly at her fellow members. “Proposals?”

“Great Britain,” offered Europe immediately.

“The United States,” offered Australia.

Africa nodded, then lifted a chin toward Australia.

“If not Great Britain, then Germany,” stated South America. “France is acceptable as well.”

North America considered and stated, “Great Britain.”

Asia nodded in acceptance. “I believe Great Britain will do nicely. Shall we cast the appropriate—”

The *clickity-clack* of a coin hitting the table followed by the gentle rolling as it settled to the surface interrupted Asia. It was a coin minted in the Byzantine Empire, sometime between AD 582 and 602, during the reign of Maurice Tiberius. All eyes shifted to Dutch. They knew it was his chosen token as a prior member of AEGIS. Every past member received three of them for their use over a lifetime. It was the only means of seeking a boon of the collective council. This was the first time he had deemed to use a token since completing his twenty-year stint on the council nearly three years ago.

D.A.R.C.

Asia received a nod of acceptance from each of those at the table as they recognized Dutch's legitimacy. "Speak freely, friend of AEGIS."

Dutch did. "Perhaps Professor Giovanni would be more amenable to accepting the protection of a friend as opposed to a country."

"You?" asked Asia.

"Possibly. Are you familiar with my company?" asked Dutch.

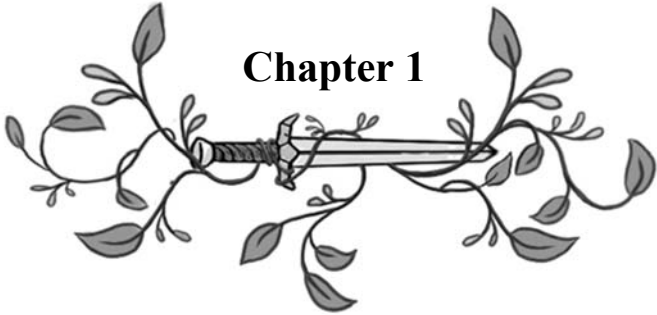
"Your Development, Acquisitions, and Recovery Company?"

"Yes. The young man we have already mentioned, Michael Tagtmeyer, makes D.A.R.C. tick. I believe the Professor would say yes to him if he were to say yes to anyone. I'm thinking there may be advantages to the professor associating himself to a private organization versus a specific country."

There was a general mumbling of interest around the table.

Asia smiled for the first time since hearing about the professor and his nanotechnology. "Tell us more about Mr. Tagtmeyer."

Chapter 1



“Mile twenty-seven,” he whispered to himself, racing up the uneven mountain path. Jumping an errant boulder, he landed on another, pushed himself to the side, and continued on at a steady pace. His breath was not labored and his heart did not pound in his chest as one might expect during such exertion. He casually tapped the holo-containment device on his hip and was instantly rewarded with a visual display of his vitals along with peripheral data such as distance, time, and terrain variables. The sudden display would be disorienting if one’s mind were to allow it. Tagtmeyer’s mind did not.

I’m averaging a sub five-minute pace over rough terrain and increased elevation, he thought on the run. Looking at his heart rate of forty-one beats per minute made him mumble an insincere thanks to the professor. I appreciate the boost to my system, but it would have been

nice if you would have asked my blessing before administering that nano-cocktail. He knew the normal resting heart rate for adults ranged from sixty to one-hundred beats per minute. *And I'm far from resting.*

He came to a skittering halt, kicking gravel ahead and beyond the precipice he was about to run over. "Rock slide," he said aloud, watching and listening to the gravel clatter into its depths. He examined the recently carved thousand-foot-deep chasm separating him from the highest peak of Norway's Trollveggen...the *Troll Wall*. He looked across the gap to the cliff's face, gauging its distance and marking a free-climb path up along its surface to the cliff above. A typically chill summer breeze sent a shiver up his spine and a light mist began to swirl, forcing him to zip his specially designed jacket up to his neck. A moment later he pulled his eyes from the wall, sighed and shook his head. Turning back down the path that had brought him so near the summit, he considered the extra time it would take to circumvent the slide. He took only a dozen steps before stopping. *No, Tag. Don't do it! You'd be a complete and utter fool,* he scolded himself. He turned and eyed the far wall again. *That would take an incredible jump.* He tilted his head. *And landing precisely on those handholds would be nearly impossible. Why the hell would I even take such a risk?* A thin smile lifted the corner of his mouth as he answered his own question.

"Why the hell not?"

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Michael Tagtmeyer immediately sprinted toward the cliff's edge, laser focused on the speed and trajectory that would place him precisely at the point he needed to gain viable hand and footholds. His legs pumped and the sound of his breathing pounded in his ears as he shot forward. Reaching the edge, he launched himself with practiced ease...every sinew and fiber of his body working in unison. Quicker than a bullet could sever a spine, every inconsequential sight, sound, and thought disappeared from his awareness. The thousand-foot drop was no more. The dropping temperatures vanished. The slight drizzle held no purchase on his skin. Even the professor who had enabled him to get to this point disappeared from his thoughts....well, mostly.

Tagtmeyer hit with a *whump* of flesh on unyielding stone. He had missed his mark and immediately began to slide down and away from the wall. He didn't panic. No, panic is something he could never be accused of. He twisted his body and extended his right hand to brush the wall. A grunt escaped his lips. He wedged his hand in a crevice and his arm was nearly pulled from its socket. But he succeeded in slowing his descent and pulled his body closer to the wall. He immediately found purchase with his left hand which gave him a split second to wedge his toes in a cleft to help support his weight.

He drew a deep breath, released it, and drew another. With a practiced eye, he re-plotted his path upwards. That's when the stone beneath his left hand

crumbled and gave way. Both feet slipped from their precarious purchase until he was dangling by four fingers. Tag looked down, said, “Ah shit!” then pushed himself from the wall.

The rush of air whipping past his ears and along his body brought a surge of adrenaline, sharpening his awareness and pricking every nerve on edge. His hair, left untouched by the blade since he departed the force, was tied by a leather strap and slapped against his neck. His muscles strained against the fabric at the forearms, biceps, and chest. His back broadened with muscle layers and caves, bulkier than normal, gave him the endurance of the finest of stallions. Eyes, bluer than the most vibrant and cloudless sky, intently searched the earth below.

“Now!” he shouted aloud. The word was lost to the rushing wind well before it could be heard by anyone who happened to be listening. The smile that had made its way unbidden to his chiseled features during the split-seconds of his exhilarating plummet quickly washed away. He fully employed the wing suit with a sharp *snap!* The wind played through the reinforced fabric of the wings as he curled horizontally to the broken ground, missing the jagged rocks by less than one hundred feet. *Precisely ninety-four feet, seven inches*, he corrected himself as the protective goggles slid in place and the superimposed display fed him critical data. He veered left and right to avoid the many juts and crags the Trollveggen had to offer before gliding into the open.

“Engage audio,” ordered Tag.

The screen flickered dully in response.

Okay, he thought. Low altitude engage mechanism fully functional...thank God. Audio needs work. He flicked his wrist and clicked a button which in turn slid a control panel into his palm. *Manual control panel deployment fully functional.* He proceeded to test other functions of his company’s latest wing suit iteration including elevation thrusters, infrared sensors, temperature gauges, descent and horizontal speed gauges, and tracking mechanism. It was with the latter that he zeroed in on his intended target: a single vehicle in the heart of the Romsdalen valley.

When Tag approached the field, he angled his body to provide as much wind resistance as possible without sacrificing too much forward momentum or placing undo stress on the restraining straps. At the precise moment he manually activated the soft thrusters, releasing a series of air bursts that succeeded in slowing him. He landed on his feet at a slight jog and came to a walk no more than ten feet from the man leaning against the tail of the black Land Rover.

“Hey, Dutch. I thought you were getting a Jaguar.” Tag tilted his head toward the vehicle while peeling himself from the high-tech developmental suit.

Dutch pushed himself from the vehicle and took a couple steps toward Tag. “You know that wasn’t ready for testing yet.” His voice was steeped in aggravation.

“As ready as it could be to take us to the next level with—”

“And what if it hadn’t deployed?” interrupted Dutch. “What if a hundred things that could have gone wrong did go wrong? What if—”

Tag tossed the balled-up suit to Dutch. “I got as slow as twenty miles per hour on a straight descent and two hundred thirty miles per hour horizontal.”

There was a slight pause before Dutch repeated, “Two hundred thirty?” He unrolled the suit on the hood of the Land Rover and began folding it in his precise way.

Tag nodded. He rubbed his right shoulder and looked back at the imposing peak of the Trollveggen.

“Audio?”

“Tanked.”

“Unfortunate. We need that to verify the feasibility of connecting nanobot technology and neural stimuli. We’ve got to get you hooked up for some tests back at the lab; they might shed light as to why audio failed. What of the infrared? We have to test the suit as well; it needs some post-flight analysis.”

Tag ignored Dutch’s rambling and stared up at the Troll. Closing his eyes he faced a cool breeze that began rolling through the valley. He looked like a wolf that had caught the scent of a potential mate. He let his mind wander until he felt a tug on his hip. Turning, he saw Dutch snapping the holo-containment device into a larger emitter. Tag shook his head and turned back to the mountain.

Dutch began a clinical recitation of his observations. “Normal levels of cranial neurotransmitters. Adrenaline

levels normal. Nothing unusual in capillary activity. Lung activity normal. Nothing unusual concerning hydration or levels of body heat. Muscular and skeletal mass and density as expected.”

“Normal. That’s good,” stated Tag flatly.

“Yes. Normal for an elite athlete in his prime at a state of rest. You, however,” continued Dutch, “...just spent the last five hours running up a mountain and plummeting down its face in an experimental flight suit that has never been tested. Your vitals should be through the stratosphere.”

“The professor’s nanites?”

“Undoubtedly,” answered Dutch. “They are helping boost the needed oxygen to your extremities which prevents your lungs and heart from having to do so. The adrenalin boosts are much the same. And, I see you are no longer nursing your shoulder; is the pain gone?”

Tag didn’t respond.

Dutch answered his own question. “Of course it is. The nanites are also pushing your body’s collagen synthesis to abnormally efficient levels resulting in an accelerated healing process. What takes the normal human body months to heal takes yours a fraction of the time.”

Tag remained silent.

Dutch sighed and set the emitter aside, joining Tag to stare up at the Trollveggen. He didn’t let the silence last. “It seems we all have our mountains to climb and our challenges to overcome, my boy. It was David McCullough

who said, *'Climb mountains not so the world can see you, but so you can see the world.'*”

Tag did not respond.

Another moment of silence passed before Dutch added, “Happiness is not at the top of the mountains but in how you climb it.”

Tag shook his head only slightly.

“Be like a mountain, my mother always said. Aim to touch the sky but stay rooted to the ground. A wise one she was.” Dutch adjusted the grip on his cane and slowly nodded his head. A moment later he added, “C.S. Lewis, a good friend of my father, once said, *'There are far better things ahead than the ones we leave behind.'*”

Tag cocked his head, motioned to speak, but remained silent.

“Without mountains,” continued Dutch, “...we might find ourselves relieved that we can avoid the pain of the ascent, but we—”

“Enough!” shouted Tag.

“Hmmm. Very well,” answered Dutch. “But that last one speaks of the thrill of the summit and absence of—”

Tag shot a stifling glare which brought silence and a slight smile from Dutch.

Dutch pulled out his well-worn pipe and started packing in his favorite blend of tobacco.

“You always brandish that tarnished old thing whenever you’ve got some nonsense on your mind and feel obligated to share. So, go ahead. Get it off your chest.”

Dutch chuckled. “You mean wisdom...not nonsense.” He lit the contents of the bowl and puffed it to life. “I just got back from a rather interesting meeting in Switzerland with...my friends.”

Tag shot him a glance and just as quickly looked away. “Topic of discussion?”

“It would seem our good professor Anthony Giovanni has drawn a lot of attention to his research as of late...apparently not all of it from desirable elements. They invited me to discuss options.”

Tag shook his head. “He’s probably still carelessly administering that nano-cocktail upper of his. So, how does the professor’s situation affect us? He left D.A.R.C. a couple years ago. That was a mutual decision, if I recall correctly.”

“Yes. True. But, a touch of guilt may have been a contributing factor with that decision. There may have been some overreaction by someone toward another who had good intentions.” Dutch took another puff.

“What? Overreacting to some experimental treatment with who knows what side effects! Are you serious?”

“Be calm, lad. You know the professor’s fondness for you. He felt he was doing it with your best interest in mind. You’re going to have to get past the anger.”

“I am? I ask again: How does the professor’s situation affect us...affect me? The abbreviated version.”

“MI6 is taking the lead. They have an intern research agent who is a personal friend of the professor’s, and they’re sending her to meet with him at his laboratory in Dresden, Germany. She’s to evaluate the professor’s knowledge of the pending threat that he’s facing. They’re going to have her suggest he bring his research under the protection of the crown.”

“You know as well as I do he’s going to decline that offer. He’s too...let’s call it independent.”

“Be that as it may, he needs to understand this goes beyond that of just academia. My friends hope the MI6 agent will be able to convince him of that. If not MI6, then perhaps another friendly agency.”

Tag gave Dutch a cutting expression. “Another friendly agency? Am I reading between the lines correctly? Did you offer up our services to this global social club of yours?”

“Options, lad. I simply gave them a viable option should the need arise. Ultimately it will be your decision if we should get involved. Let’s see how it plays out.”

Tag nodded. After another moment of silence he said, “It was Lounsbrough.”

“What was?”

“Without mountains we might find ourselves relieved that we can avoid the pain of the ascent, but we will forever miss the thrill of the summit. And in such a terribly

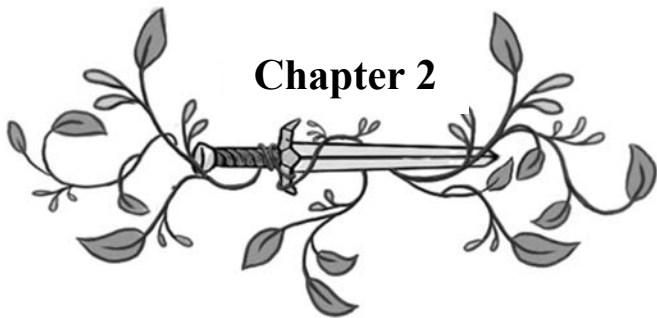
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scandalous trade-off, it is the absence of pain that becomes the thief of life.”

“Yes. So it was,” agreed Dutch. “Come now; we have an ascent of a different type to tackle. D.A.R.C. requires your attention.” He moved to the car, pulling his collar up against the sudden breeze.

Tag took a final look at the mountain and whispered, “Damn! I feel a storm coming.”

Chapter 2



“*Velkommen tilbake til Grand Hotel, Mr. MacArthur.*”

“Thank you. I mean...*Tusen Takk,*” corrected Dutch. He flipped the keys to the valet.

“Ahhh, your Norwegian is getting much better, sir. Are you in for the evening or shall we keep your auto readily available?” His accent was thick but did not mask his fluency of the English language.

“Please tuck her in for the night, Oskar.” Dutch handed him a five hundred krone note but Oskar held both hands up as if the money were toxic.

“Your money is not good here, sir,” argued Oskar while helping Tag remove the cases from the back. The valet then slid into the driver’s seat and pulled away.

“Your money is not good here?” observed Tag.

“Sir. Don’t forget the deferential *sir,*” added Dutch with a sideways smile. “One of the benefits I receive of being the face of D.A.R.C. is taking credit for the items you

have been recovering as of late. You, and thusly *I*, have made the Norwegians look rather industrious on the world stage.

“People do tend to enjoy finding lost baubles,” admitted Tag.

Dutch chuckled. “Baubles indeed.” He extended a tip to the doorman but was politely rebuffed again as he and Tag stepped into the lobby. It was modest by all accounts, typical of the Norwegian society. Contrasts were evident between modern decor and well-preserved historical elements carved from generations of challenging living on fjord and mountain alike. The high coffered entry ceiling had multiple eloquently designed chandeliers that would illuminate the darkest of the Norwegian winters. The aged wide-plank quartersawn oak flooring added a warmth which complemented the well-appointed seating area near the large, stone fireplace.

“Mr. MacArthur,” announced the manager. He stepped from behind the thick mahogany counter and approached them, waving the bellhop away. “Sir.” he tilted his head to Tag. “Will you gentlemen be joining us for dinner this evening?” He motioned them toward a singular elevator set aside from the main bank and walked with them. “We, of course, offer our signature national dish of *fårikål*, or mutton in cabbage. The chef will have *lapskaus* stew with beef, potatoes, carrots, and the traditional swede and leeks. And the special today is *smalahove*, but it must be pre-ordered.”

“*Smalahove?*” asked Tag.

“Yes, sir. Sheep’s head; the most flavorful parts are the eyes and tongue.”

“Shall we say seven?” Dutch asked Tag, who gave him a nod. “Seven it is. Thank you.”

“Sir,” responded the manager. He hurriedly turned away to attend to other business.

A muffled *ding* brought the attention of both men to the elevator where a man the size of a bull stood patiently waiting with his hand keeping the door open.

“Good evening, Aksel,” greeted Dutch. “How is that little one of yours doing?”

“Much better thanks to you, Mr. MacArthur.”

Dutch gave him a familiar clap on the shoulder and entered the elevator. “So glad I could help.” He tried to hand the guard a five hundred kroner note but it was pushed aside.

“*God kveld min herre,*” offered Aksel.

“Good evening to you too,” answered Dutch as the door closed and he pressed the only button...one that would bring them to the sixth and uppermost floor.

“And you helped how?” asked Tag as the elevator began moving.

“Nothing really. I just facilitated some medical care for one of his eight children; a lovely child with a delightful smile.

“It seems you are quite the patriarch around—”

Tag’s words were cut off when the elevator opened to a cacophony of sound and activity. A pair of guards no

less in stature than the one in the lobby stood to either side. They were less talkative than their cohort but no less respectful as they nodded and stood aside.

A modest bank of computers with oversized monitors were arranged along a section of the right wall. The screens displayed a plethora of images including satellite depictions of various geographical locations throughout Europe, breaking global news, live security feed, and other concerns worthy of attention. In front of them were three technicians tending to their assigned stations, each with smaller screens flowing with data.

To the left was a small group huddled around what appeared to be a glass bubble with streams of holographic data shimmering above it. Tag recognized what he knew to be high-end forensic laboratory equipment including an arc spark spectrometer and a fluorescence spectroscopy off to the side. There were some other pieces he didn't recognize. "Did D.A.R.C. come into some money that I'm not aware of?" he asked.

"It is simply a benefit of our success in acquisitions—in particular, the Mesopotamian tablets you recovered. You know how people tend to latch on to one's success."

"Come on, Dutch. You wouldn't allow anyone to latch on. And we both know that we don't need anyone's money to pursue our ventures. This is from your Swiss fan club, isn't it?" He gestured around the room for emphasis.

D.A.R.C.

“You’re becoming cynical in your old age, my boy. Let’s just say that associating ourselves to an organization that has a wide array of vetted and highly specialized personnel has its advantages. You wanted D.A.R.C. to remain, what did you say, compact yet effective. Well, this is what that looks like. We have a small army of scientists, doctors, information technology specialists, and elite military professionals at our fingertips. Not to mention a number of secure locations throughout the world and an infrastructure that could get you a genuine Belgian waffle delivered to you on the sands of Waikiki in a matter of hours.” He patted Tag on the arm and said, “You just focus on what you do best and allow me to take care of the rest.”

A woman with hair tied back in a tight bun and a no-nonsense expression painted upon her face approached them with a clipboard tucked against her bosom. She wore a lab coat buttoned to the neck. Another woman closely followed; her demeanor was less cold. In fact, she wore a smile from ear to ear.

“Mr. MacArthur,” began the first woman.

“Yes, Dr. Francisca. How goes your team’s analysis of the Mesopotamian artifacts?”

“I have received the latest from our base in Poland. We have successfully identified and dated the cuneiform tablets. Though they were created around 3500 BC, they are clearly not the ones we were looking for on behalf of the Museum of Egyptian Antiquities.”

“Unfortunate,” offered Dutch. He caught the attention of a bearded technician and pointed to the cases Tag carried. He turned his attention back to the doctor, saying, “It seems our friends in Cairo will be disappointed.”

“On the contrary, sir. The find is significant and quite valuable in its own right. These tablets were stolen from them in 1942 by Hitler’s Germany. I’m sure they will be extremely grateful for their return.”

“Very good. We must speak more on the subject of preservation and delivery...later this evening please.” He turned his attention to the less severe woman. “Dr. Valees. You seem to be bursting at the seams to deliver some news, but I must ask you to wait one more moment.” Dutch spoke to the bearded technician who now held the cases. “The flight suit has a glitch in the audio sub-routine, which means there could be deficiencies elsewhere. I expect a full analysis by tomorrow morning. Also, connect the emitter for Mr. Tagtmeyer’s bio data analysis. I will see to it personally within the hour.” The technician nodded and sped away. “Now, Dr. Valees. What do you have for me?”

“Mr. Tagtmeyer’s deep dive in the Trondheim Fjord has indeed brought us confirmation of the legal status of the *Three Brethren*, among other items of interest.” She glanced at Tag and blushed.

Dutch smiled. “So the documents he recovered have been adequately preserved?”

“Yes. The vast majority have, sir. Some of them have been dated as far back as 1645 within ninety-nine point

eight seven percent accuracy. Many were sealed as was common at that time. Fortunately, we were able to employ the nondestructive technique of X-Ray tomography which allowed us to create computer visualizations of the interior features without breaking the seal. Though irrefutable ties to ownership have yet to be confirmed, sir, we know the current private collector took it from the Vatican without permission. The Catholic Church, as it turns out, wrongfully confiscated it from its rightful owner. We have what we need to legally retrieve the jewel.”

“What *do* we know of ownership of this little trinket, Dr. Valees?” questioned Dutch. He gave Tag a sideways glance.

“Trinket?” started the Doctor. “I should say not. It is an exquisite piece of jewelry that was created by Parisian goldsmith Herman Ruissel in 1389, which consisted of three rectangular red spinels arranged around a central diamond. The jewel is known for having been owned by a number of important historical figures including Duke John the Fearless of Burgundy, infamous banker Jakob Fugger, King Edward the sixth, Queen Elizabeth the first, and King James the sixth.” Dr. Valees paused. “Mr. MacArthur, the *Three Brethren’s* true ownership and whereabouts after 1645 remained unknown...until now. If this piece of jewelry is in even fair condition, it will be considered quite priceless.”

“Ownership?” repeated Dutch.

“King Charles the First claimed possession of the Three Brethren by ‘divine right of kings’ which he felt gave

him the right to sell it when he was plagued with financial problems. As the country descended into the First English Civil War, Charles sent his Queen Henrietta to Paris where she immediately attempted to raise funds.” Valees pulled a breath and continued. “In early 1645, she succeeded in selling an unnamed piece of jewelry that fit the Three Brethren’s description for the comparatively low price of 104,000 guilders. That would amount to roughly a 1,650 U.S. Dollar valuation back then and a \$9.9 Million valuation today.”

Dutch moved to interrupt her but was stopped by Tag who seemed fascinated by her recitation and enthusiasm.

Dr. Valees did not notice the gesture. She continued. “A letter to Henrietta’s secretary identifies two Hague jewelers and gemstone dealers, Thomas Cletcher and Joachim de Wicquefort, as middlemen or buyers of the unnamed jewel. There is a substantiated rumor that their client was none other than French Chief Minister Cardinal Mazarin, a renowned jewel collector to whom Henrietta Maria was deeply indebted. The Crown’s debt to him allowed him to buy the jewel at a substantial discount.”

“A Cardinal of the Catholic Church having the wherewithal to afford such luxuries? How surprising.” Tag’s sarcasm seemed to be lost on Dr. Valees.

“Not really,” she answered. “He was a collector and was well financed as a Chief Minister to the King of France.”

“Okay,” conceded Tag. “But, doesn’t a Cardinal take a vow of abstinence? Who did he pass the Brethren on to?”

Dr. Valees smiled as a professor would when they have a student drawn into the subject. “Though the Cardinal had no legitimate children, he had seven nieces of marrying age that he used to solidify his power within the French aristocracy. One of his nieces, Marie Anne Mancini, was considered his favorite. It is to that niece he gifted the jewel as part of her dowry in an arranged marriage to Godefroy Maurice de LaTour d’Auverge, Duke of Bouillon. With this key information we were able to follow the convoluted Mazarin lineage and trail of the Three Brethren to Hungarian Count Antal József Batthyány-Strattmann de Némethújvár in the late 1700’s.”

“Then the trail went cold?” asked Tag expectantly.

“No. It got more interesting,” answered Dr. Valees.

Tag poked Dutch’s elbow with his own, repeating, “It got more interesting.”

“In 1793 the Count used the jewel as collateral for a significant estate expansion. He placed it in the hands of the Ordine di Cristo or Order of Christ. They—”

“Ordine di Cristo?” interrupted Tag. “Wasn’t that the organization that was established in the early 1300’s by the Knights Templar? The same Knight Templar that had been dismantled in the rolls of the Catholic Church just years prior?”

Imminent Threat

“The very same,” answered Dr. Valees. “They had won enough support in Portugal to reestablish themselves as an entity outside the Church.”

Tag nodded, sincerely interested. “The jewel?”

“To the Order’s chagrin, the jewel had been stolen while in their possession, forcing them to absorb the financial loss of restitution. The results of their investigation were never available to the general public, though many suspected the involvement of the Catholic Church.”

“Interesting. Am I correct in assuming that you followed the lineage to present day?” asked Tag.

“Yes; you are correct. We tracked the ancestry all the way to Adelma Margit Vay de Vaja and her husband. But that’s where we thought we hit a brick wall; both are deceased and there is no record of them having any children.”

“You thought?” prompted Tag.

“A deeper search pulled up records from the Argentinian Catholic Diocese orphanage. It revealed that they did indeed have a child that, unfortunately, was placed in an orphanage due to financial difficulties. The child’s name is Maria Belapor. She is currently forty-seven and, coincidentally, works at an orphanage in Buenos Aires, Argentina. We believe she is unmarried and has no children.”

“Well done,” complimented Dutch. “You stated, ‘Among other items of interest’.” The doctor continued to

stare at Tag, forcing Dutch to repeat himself. “Dr. Valees. Among other items of interest?”

“Oh...yes, sir. An exhaustive collection of coins, some gold bars, and fragments of what appear to be hand-drawn maps.”

“So you see, my dear Mr. Tagtmeyer—” Dutch stopped himself when he saw a sardonic smile on Tag’s face. “What?” he asked.

“Priceless baubles. Worthless costume jewelry. They’re all still shiny trinkets meant to catch the eye and itch a man’s desire to own the world. Or better yet, to capture a woman’s fancy. Yes, I prefer the latter; to catch the fancy of a beautiful woman. Which leads me to ask...what do *you* think of the items found, Dr. Valees?”

The doctor blushed and began to stutter an answer.

Dutch interrupted her. “Thank you, Doctor. That will be all for now.” After she had reluctantly turned and departed, Dutch shook his head and whispered loud enough for Tag alone, “You are incorrigible.”

“Yes. Thank you,” answered Tag. “Ironic, don’t you think?”

“How so?”

“A search of a Catholic Church database resulting in identifying the legitimate owner of a priceless jewel that the Catholic Church illegally appropriated?”

“It does have its ironies,” admitted Dutch.

“Oh, by the way, I’ve decided that I will not be joining you for dinner this evening...though the idea of

slurping down sheep's brains sounds delicious. Can you arrange a tuxedo for me?"

"I can and will. May I ask the occasion?"

"Yes." Tag walked away from Dutch with a coy smile painted on his face. He approached the nearest technician.

Dutch joined him.

"Please pull up the last known location of Professor Anthony Giovanni."

The technician turned to his terminal and began his research. His response came quicker than Tag expected. "Monaco, sir. He is a guest speaker at a pharmaceutical symposium and is due to return to his laboratory in Dresden on a late flight in three days."

"Good. Thank you." Tag turned and began to walk away. When he passed Dutch he placed his hand on his shoulder, squeezed, and said, "A formal dinner hosted by a very special clergyman. I do so want to make a proper impression when I retrieve another one of your expensive baubles." He continued walking.

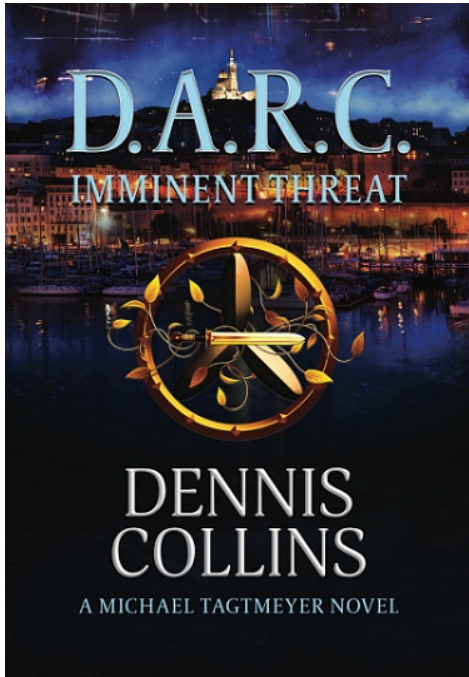
Dutch let him go.

About the Author

Action and adventure have been author Dennis Collins' passion throughout his music and general contracting careers. D.A.R.C. Imminent Threat is his latest expression of in-your-face creative legacy. If Dennis isn't on a construction site creating masterpieces for his clients with his general contracting business, he's delving into writing the next D.A.R.C. Novel. Get ready to strap in for a fast-paced adventure to the likes of Baldacci, Matthew Riley, Steve Berry, Gregg Hurwitz.

He currently resides in Fishers Indiana with his loving wife, children and their two Wheaton terriers.

There's more on the way from this new author. Keep your eyes open for D.A.R.C. Blood Sanction (early 2024) and D.A.R.C. U398



Imminent Threat is a fast paced action thriller. A Middle Eastern Corporation moves to acquire a new Nanorobotic Technology by any means possible. It's up to Michael Tagtmeyer and his D.A.R.C. Organization to neutralize the Hostile threat.

D.A.R.C. Imminent Threat

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