Warhead

Andy Remic

PROLOGUE

THE SCOURGE OF WAR

It began with a contract.

A building contract worth 939 billion US dollars.

The sleek black Manta screamed through the heavens at over a thousand klicks an hour, armoured engine ports hissing and thumping, exhausts vibrating with metal torture. Carter gave a nasty sideways glance towards Mongrel as the sun broke in a sudden explosion over the distant horizon, its rays sparkling through the tinted cockpit and radiating fingers of violet iridescence over the serrated steel-blade skyline that defined New York City.

'ETA one minute,' growled Mongrel as tracer started to streak and flash from the urban landscape below; heavy-calibre rounds smashed up from anti-aircraft guns and localised groups of small-arms fire. Thunder seemed to rumble in the distance. Explosive purple flashes flickered, lighting the underside of the fist-bunched clouds in a surreal display. 'I've got SAMs coming in; get your shit together, Carter.'

'Let's do it.' Carter hit the cockpit release, which folded neatly back on tiny hydraulic sighs. Wind thumped in, making the small fighter rock violently; Carter stood, gloved hands grasping alloy rings riveted into the fighter's flanks as Mongrel banked the aircraft and Carter felt suddenly – weightless. His eyes widened and his breath was ripped away in a ragged gasp as Manhattan rushed beneath him. The Sentinel Corporation tower block raced towards him. Tracer streaked all around, coloured bursts tossed carelessly into the dawn sky on high-explosive projectiles.

'Da vai!' screamed Mongrel, but Carter was already leaping. The fighter roared over him and was instantly gone – and the wind cracked him in the face like a brick. He dived, and the Sentinel tower block sped towards him.

Carter armed the Spiral Parasite, felt it buzz beneath his gloved fingers as the world spun crazily around him ... and fired: it rocketed into the lip of the concrete roof, tiny alloy teeth chewing to burrow deep. Carter was jerked violently and abruptly, swinging in a huge arc on an umbilical cord of two-millimetre TitaniumIII cable. His speed carried him forward and around with the stepped world of Manhattan flashing below him as a tiny buzz screeched like an insect in his earpiece. His dive

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decelerated as the Parasite hummed in his fist, and his downward trajectory slowed as his boots thumped against the vertical dark glass wall of the Sentinel Corporation's New York HQ.

Carter grunted, all wind knocked from him. He glanced quickly around. The tower block fell away beneath him for a hundred storeys. Far below, NYC was a toy town, with hundreds of tower blocks staggering away in huge stepping stones. Carter's M24 carbine was slung tight against his back, his battered Browning 9mm HiPower holstered on his hip, and he grinned.

'Knock, knock.'

Kicking himself backwards, he swung for a moment, aimed and threw a tiny HPG, which connected with the black glass fifteen metres to his left, with the dial set to CFE – concentrated funnel explosion – it was designed to create a rapid entry point for Carter. He averted his gaze, and there came a sharp crack. Carter walked himself across the vertical wall, buffeted by the wind, nostrils wrinkling involuntarily at the cold chemical stink from the pressure grenade's explosive – and blinked in astonishment.

The explosive had failed to penetrate the Sentinel tower block – and failed even to shatter the glass. Which was unusual: an HPG could eat a ten-metre hole in twelve-inch armour plate.

'Son of a bitch.'

Bullets ricocheted with howls and sparks to Carter's right and he flinched, feeling suddenly extremely vulnerable.

Carter looked around frantically, hanging on his tiny spider's thread. Gritting his teeth, he began to climb as Mongrel banked the Manta far above, and the tiny matt black fighter went into a steep dive, its heavy machine guns thundering.

Carter kept climbing.

Reflected in the dark glass of the tower block, the world seemed on fire behind him. More Spiral fighters tore through the glittering heavens, tanks rumbled through the streets far below, crushing cars under heavy steel tracks, and Spiral soldiers fought Nex killers across the insanely ordered grid of streets and buildings that was modern New York City.

Carter focused on staying alive. The Parasite buzzed beneath his gloves and he carried on walking his way up the skyscraper, boot soles squealing in protest. Within a few minutes he reached the roof, leapt onto the galvanised flat roof rim and turned, inhaling deeply and looking down into the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

Bullets spun up towards him, tracer rounds trailing streamers of fire past his gaze. Carter dropped to a crouch and turned. The roof spread out before him on a gentle incline that rose to a tapered point – on which flashed the steady pulse of a bright

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white light as a warning to air traffic. The roof panels were formed from corrugated alloy, undulating away and criss-crossed by galvanised grey walkways with handrails for the use of servicing personnel. Huge extraction fans stood in grille-masked steel enclosures, and smoke poured from a narrow silver chimney beside a scattering of high-tech satellite dishes.

Carter's boots pounded heavily as he made a charge for the black-alloy lattice-work doorway—

Which burst open, three masked Nex spilling out onto the concourse. The butt of Carter's Browning thumped against the palm of his hand as his bullets tore the face from the lead Nex and crushed the chest of the second, leaving it on its knees.

The third Nex had disappeared.

Carter changed mags, his back against the ridged alloy columns of a satellite dish's support struts. His head snapped right, then left, eyes narrowing, tongue moistening dry lips. His breathing calmed and his boot found purchase against the Sentinel skyscraper's rooftop as the Nex with the caved-in chest coughed and vomited a stream of blood and mucus into a large puddle to one side.

'You want me to do it?' came the cool voice of Kade.

'I don't need your help, brother.'

'Yes, but I need you ... Come on, don't be such a spoilsport, let me kill them – I will take them all! It's months since I imbibed the copper stench of blood. An age since I rolled from dreams of pumping bullets into unprotected faces, watching soft, rotting fish-flesh part and the handsome, neatly carved flush of crimson spurting from a perfectly pulped brain ...'

Carter rolled, his Browning describing an arc that ended with a—

Bullet. The Nex tried to flip, but was a nanosecond too slow; the bullet entered high in its throat, slightly to one side but still destroying the larynx. The Nex sat down slowly, hands pressed against the heavy flow of spurting blood, eyes swivelling up to stare at Carter. He strode forward, cautious gaze scanning left and right. Above, Mongrel's Manta screamed and accelerated with a burst of stinking aviation exhaust. Carter looked down at the Nex, gazing into the soft glow of the copper eyes – fixed on him in anger, and hatred, and loathing. His steps left imprints in the Nex's blood. He rubbed at his mouth with the back of his gloved hand and clamped a boot on the Nex's MP38 sub-machine gun.

He aimed the Browning.

Carter thought briefly of Natasha. Natasha, the mother of his baby boy; Natasha, lying cold and dead in a grave over two thousand miles away, flowers withering against the simple black marble cross bearing no inscription. Carter's teeth bared in a grimace that displayed his burning need for revenge.

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The bullet smashed through the Nex's nose, spattering its brains across the damp roof from the back of its shattered skull; the body flopped limp.

Carter should have felt better. Should have felt avenged. But he didn't.

'We need to get this thing done,' said Kade.

Carter looked deep within himself; looked into the glossy black emotionless eyes of Kade set in a face that was his own, only seen through a much darker mirror. 'Yes.'

With a blink Carter spiralled back into reality.

Took a deep breath.

And headed for the stairs ... and Durell beyond.

The Spiral mainframe had decoded the signals thirty-five minutes earlier. All units had been scrambled – not available units, but all units. The call had gone out – Code Silver. They had received the coordinates of Durell's exact location in New York.

Carter crouched in the darkness on the stairs, the only light a stroboscope of spinning red, flickering on-off, on-off, on-off. He moved forward, boots smooth against the alloy and eyes scanning for sensors. His ECube rattled in his pocket, digitally disabling a hundred different detection sequences. And yet – Carter knew. Knew that they knew he was there.

Carter grinned a malicious grin and hefted his trusty, battered Browning 9mm, his loyal and steadfast friend – the one thing in his life which had never – ever – let him down.

Carter moved down the stairs – expecting a fight, and wondering where the hell the rest of the Spiral squads had got to; Carter was merely one among many. And yet now he felt suddenly alone ...

He reached a door. Behind it he could hear voices.

Bracing himself, he lifted his leg and delivered a kick which thumped open the steel portal, revealing ...

Antarctica

16 kilometres south, Mount Erebus Base Camp

Sunlight gleamed against slick ice. Corrugated waves rolled off across an endless plain leading to distant mountains.

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Metal gleamed under the witch-light of a cold and frosty Antarctic day. A snub nose emerged, followed by a smooth tapered cone edged with four delicate fins. Ice fell away, tumbling to the frozen plain as the missile rose on powerful hydraulics. Motors whirred and engines ignited, fire flowering out against the ice and briefly scorching it black before it melted. There came a roar and the missile suddenly leapt into the sky like a fish escaping the jaws of sudden death snapping at it beneath the surface of a still lake. It powered away on twin jets of glowing purple into the cold vast bleak sky.

The ice continued to crack, revealing subsurface black alloy blocks: missile batteries, containing M1270-k launchers, advanced 2ti radar and tiny elegant Engagement Control Stations.

Another missile nose appeared. Then off to one side of the broken web came another, and they were joined by still more, until the whole plain of ice seemed to be covered with the tapered, eerily ascending bulks of TitaniumIII warheads – and their gleaming single-stage rockets.

Within seconds the air was filled with sleek, ice-streaming bodies as two hundred glistening missiles, each the size of a PAC-5, arced up into the big blue like a spreading plague, engines thundering as the glinting machines rapidly accelerated and dispersed – each one targeting a specific destination.

And then it was done and it could never be undone.

Namibia, Africa

Global Army [GA5] camp, 35 kilometres west of the Kalahari Desert

The missile carrying the 5000-kiloton warhead flashed from the sky's fathomless blue vaults. A thousand metres above the huge structure of the combined Global Army HQ, on the plains of south-western Africa where 2,000,000 amassed troops of all nationalities were camped, along with enough military hardware to conquer any land mass on Earth – the HighJ explosives detonated, creating a massive shock wave which propelled plutonium-239 shrapnel fragments into a sphere. They struck pellets of beryllium and polonium at the sphere's core, which in turn started the basic initial fission reaction accelerating quickly to create supercritical mass – and causing the trigger-bomb to explode ...

This initial explosion took 560-billionths of a second.

The warhead's cylinder casing was cast from uranium-238. Within this tamper squatted the fuel for the explosion – lithium deuteride, and a hollow rod of plutonium-239. As the implosion fission device exploded, this trigger released lethal X-rays which heated the interior of the bomb and the tamper, causing the uranium-238 to expand and burn away forcing pressure towards the lithium deuteride; these compression shock waves initiated fission within the plutonium rod which in turn ejected radiation, heat and neutrons, the neutrons impacting with the fuel to create tritium. As a result, deuterium-deuterium and tritium-deuterium fusion reactions

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began producing excesses of heat, radiation and neutrons – and the neutrons from this first fusion induced fission in the uranium-238 pieces from the tamper. Fission of tamper and shield occurred, producing yet more radiation and heat, and causing the nuclear warhead to

explode.

The fission reaction took another fifty-billionths of a second.

The Global Army – its soldiers, tanks, helicopters, fighter jets, jeeps, trucks, weapons, artillery, ammunition, tents, support staff – was immediately and utterly vaporised.

What detritus remained on the outskirts of the blast after the initial ignition was fused into a sea of molten glass. The world merged with the desert sands in a bright white blinding of insanity and death.

Moscow, Russia

Red Square: Spiral and RFSS HQ

Rekalavich reached the entrance to the Sp_bunker in the narrow back alleyway. He stood, chest heaving, stars of exhaustion dancing in front of his eyes as he fought to halt himself from retching. And then, by some unbidden instinct, his eyes lifted, squinting into the darkened sky.

Something, the tiniest of sounds, intruded on his thoughts as a glint appeared in the sky.

Realisation kicked him viciously in the heart and he stumbled backwards, tripping and tumbling and bouncing down the long narrow stone staircase, falling and slamming his way down and down, deep beneath the ground as outside—

Outside, a white flash ignited the sky.

An 800 k.p.h. blast wave screamed outwards, exerted pressure smashing everything within its roaring path and pulverising all that it met above the ground for twenty kilometres. At the hypocentre of the thermonuclear explosion, the rising and expanding fireball reached 480 million degrees Fahrenheit and vaporised the collapsing Cathedral of Vasily the Blessed. The initial blast destroyed Red Square, the Spiral and RFSS HQ and all buildings and life instantly within a six-kilometre radius.

The sky became illuminated by a surreal, blue-green tint. A writhing column of fire and dust and smoke climbed steadily into the sky, four kilometres wide at its base and curving majestically upwards; colours flickered and danced within the mammoth tower, grey at the base, amber at the heart and pure white capping the rising column until suddenly it sprouted a huge mushroom cap which surged up and out, driving the column upwards.

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Thunder seemed to be churning the ground and there was a roar of awesome destruction, wrought by the hand of man.

New York, USA

Sentinel5 Tower, The Sentinel Corporation

'Ah, Mr Carter. I'd like to say "I've been expecting you", but that would be so clichéd.'

Carter uncoiled, eyes scanning left and right, Browning held high against his chest. The entire top floor of the Sentinel Corporation's New York HQ was a single high-ceilinged room – filled end to end with a dazzling array of high-tech next-gen equipment. Radar and guidance systems, military servers, with wall-sized banks of glittering lights, mammoth, free-standing plasma displays sporting spinning maps of cities, countries, continents; distant squatting banks of military simulators, gleaming and silver on silent resting hydraulics. On steel benches sat prototype engines, glittering machines of incredible complexity, and a small black platter on which nestled a tiny, inoffensive-looking frost-hazed black cube.

Durell, with his hood thrown back to reveal the terrible deformities of his twisted face, smiled with a twisting and a crackling of flesh, and stared at Carter with slitted copper eyes. In one deformed claw he held a tiny silver disc which he squeezed – and there came a hiss of superheated air as Carter was suddenly surrounded by a haze, a gentle green glow ... He was caught in some kind of force field, a cube of pulsating energy which ensnared him from all sides. Carter started firing, Browning slapping against the palm of his hand as he dropped to one knee. But the bullets were caught in the haze of the field, spinning gently as Durell turned his back on Carter and moved towards a long alloy panel.

Slowly, Carter uncurled and glanced quickly around, a bad taste nestling in his mouth as he watched the still-spinning bullets melt and drip slowly to the floor. What would it do to a human body? he thought.

'You are just in time,' said Durell, pressing a small black button. To Carter's left, the QIV Quantech Edition military processor began to hum. Durell laughed. 'In fact, this is a perfection of timing. Especially for you, Mr Carter. Especially for our oldest adversary – and, dare I say, friend? You will be here, at the beginning, at the end, you will witness our triumph – you will witness my triumph.' Durell's head had lowered, his voice dropping to little more than a whisper, eyes fixed like bayonets on Carter's expression.

'What are you doing?' hissed Carter, filled with horror, submerged in bile.

Screens, previously black squares of obsidian, flared into colourful life along one wall. Cities sprang into view, aerial views displayed in real time from locations across the globe. Durell moved towards the window and looked down over Manhattan. It was bathed beneath him in early-morning sunlight. Durell gave a deep sigh.

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Carter's frowning gaze was dragged to his left, to the glittering images on the screens: to the images of twisting, speeding missiles.

Carter changed the magazine in his Browning and moved slowly forward, towards the walls of his hazy prison. He reached out with the tip of the Browning, and almost had his arm torn from its socket as the field wrenched the gun from his hand – and slowly melted it. Carter watched as liquid metal ran down the inside of the ethereal green glow and pooled near his feet.

'I hope Spiral have a good life-insurance policy,' said Durell softly. Carter's eyes lifted to see—

To see a tiny glitter against the blue sky, a fleeting needle of mercury. And then there came a flash of such brightness, such intensity that even through the heavily shielded windows of the Sentinel Corporation skyscraper Carter flinched, dropped to his knees and knelt there, arms hanging loose, useless, mouth open and incredulous eyes filled with sudden tears.

'No,' Carter croaked.

Durell turned. 'But yes,' he whispered, as a wall of fire smashed across New York, powered screaming towards them – and left a rising cloud of pulped and pulverised debris, atomised and crushed and pulled into the all-consuming mushroom cloud.

Carter knelt, eyes dark and hollow and fixed disbelievingly on the furnace of devastation. Durell turned, slitted copper eyes watching him closely, and Carter thought:

We are going to die.

We are going to fucking die.

Kade was silent in his brain, observing as the blast wave hit the Sentinel5 tower from which they watched in trepidation. Carter's stare was dragged back to the screens and he saw missiles flashing through the glittering blue atmosphere of the planet called Earth.

The tower shook. Shuddered. Rocked.

Outside, the world before them was excluded; covered by a death veil; drowned by a sea of ash and fire.

'You are quite safe,' came Durell's soothing voice. 'These towers were built specifically for this day.'

'To survive a nuclear blast?' spat Carter.

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'Yes – only a nominal yield, but yes. After all, nothing without such a design brief would be able to survive that ...' The screen flickered as satellite scanners kicked in and Carter looked down on a desert. His stomach churned as he saw the fused and glowing glass, the edges of a crystallised wasteland, the charred half-corpses of an army lingering at its edges. And he saw that the Global Army, the mammoth united worldwide conglomeration of the soldiers and weapons of all nations formed to combat the Nex and Durell had been utterly – totally – destroyed.

Carter vomited onto the smooth stone floor as the building around him shook with thunder and below him millions of people died in the raging fireball.

There came a fizz.

The force field surrounding Carter disintegrated and Durell motioned to two Nex warriors carrying Austrian Steyr TMP 9mm sub-machine guns. They moved forward on well-balanced heels, clad in simple body-hugging grey uniforms, their faces pale and white, eyes copper and burning. They approached Carter. One reached down with a gloved hand and Carter's face snapped up, lips covered with spittle and vomit. The long black knife in his fist slammed into the Nex's eye. The dark steel thrust hard and deep into the brain beyond. Blood spattered against Carter, pumping out over his fist, and he had the Steyr TMP in his grasp even as the Nex began to fall, the sub-machine gun's strap caught across its shoulder. Carter squeezed the trigger and a swarm of bullets ate into the second Nex, drilling a slick, bloody groove up its chest and caving in its throat. It flipped to the ground, fingers clawing at the metal in its flesh. It screamed long and shrill.

Carter rose to his feet, face covered in speckles of blood, eyes wide and wild and filled not just with anger and hatred but also with a terrible emptiness.

What good? What good now?

You are just too late my friend ...

Durell turned, mouth opening to show deformed teeth within the circular void of his black mouth. His tongue was like a tiny fish. And he was smiling in victory.

Carter wanted to speak.

But he did not. Could not.

There were simply no words.

Outside, the conflagration caused by the thermonuclear explosion continued to roar.

Carter closed his eyes, and pulled the trigger.

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SIU Transcript

CLASSIFIED NK54/nuke277/SPECIAL INVESTIGATIONS UNIT

ECube transmission excerpt

Date: November 2XXX

On 5 November 2XXX two hundred nuclear warheads with varying yields struck strategic military and civilian targets within the space of 35 minutes. Targets included heavily militarised cities such as London, Paris, New York, Tokyo, plus a variety of vast armies and stockpiles of military hardware.

The destruction was on a vast scale. The loss of human life runs into billions.

During the emergency, World Agencies were crippled. They were unable to do anything about these targeted strikes; all fail-safes failed, anti-nuke satellites swam blindly in near-space orbits, ground silos refused to operate: all were under the seemingly omniscient control of the QIV cubic processor. This fully sentient machine finally delivered its threatened promises.

Shortly after the staggered nuclear strikes, a further wave of long-range missile warheads was delivered; this time they did not contain bombs but advanced chemical agents named Half-life Accelerators. These chemicals were scattered over strike zones, and over the following months quickly reduced dangerous radiation levels to a moderate and effectively survivable level.

The self-proclaimed perpetrator of these nuclear attacks was the former Spiral agent named Durell.

World governments have been assimilated and are run with pro-Nex staffing; centres of control, trade and finance [CTF] have been shifted to the many Sentinel Corporation towers which adorn most major world cities. From these Sentinel towers Durell now rules his empire.

More to follow>>

SIU Transcript

CLASSIFIED SG54/nuke976/SPECIAL INVESTIGATIONS UNIT

ECube transmission excerpt

Date: December 2XXX

SpiralGRID/GRID network update:

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All major Spiral installations have been destroyed.

All Spiral HQs have been destroyed.

Personnel numbers have been reduced by 75% and Spiral are operating on a skeleton structure.

All Spiral core mainframes have been destroyed.

Sub-system mainframes remain operational.

Secondary controllers remain operational.

SpiralGRID has been activated and is now live; it is fully on-line.

With the SpiralGRID active, covert operations are being allowed on an accelerating and growing scale. This is being closely monitored. It is suspected that Spiral contains several spies who have leaked critical data, thus allowing such an incredible and devastating attack.

[Note: SpiralGRID is PlanZ. The last line in defence. The final safeguard that nobody ever dreamed would have to be used: a vast network of underground tunnels controlled by the sub-system mainframes; this is what keeps Spiral operational. This is Spiral's hiding place. This is Spiral's last resort and its final hope. Let us pray it does not become its tomb.]

Durell and the Nex are aware of the GRID's existence. They seek to wipe out Spiral once and for all.

We must hope the enemy never discovers its secrets. That is why the rooting out of traitors is KEY PRIORITY.

The current media propaganda for HATE is intensifying; Durell's empire is seeking to rewrite history, offering the people of the world a fictionalised past. Durell proposes – via FactAds – that HATE was a US-military-created biological weapon – unleashed in the wake of the nuclear dominance, which he claims were nothing more than acts of gross incompetence by world governments.

It has been rumoured than an 'antidote', an anti-HATE agent known provisionally as EDEN is being designed alongside HATE and could be used to free humanity from their current thrall. This is an unsubstantiated rumour, but nevertheless contains a high probability factor – when analysing the manner in which Durell first nuked cities, and then used Half-life Accelerators to reduce radiation levels in order to achieve his desired long-term effects.

Priority codes:

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897635879643897689764353 4

879689634897654378965873 4

890709876987653223234322 3

a] GRID protection

b] Spy termination

c] EDEN confirmation

More to follow>>

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