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New Orleans, 1993

The ranch hat and hand-tooled boots were pretty much standard, but Sam Warrender didn't usually show up at corporate headquarters in faded blue jeans and a dusty chamois shirt. He had come to New Orleans on a hurry-up because of an emergency call he'd taken on horseback that morning on his Oklahoma ranch. The company had a new problem in Venezuela, a major one.

Before holstering his cellular phone, Sam had called a neighbor and canceled afternoon plans to fly over and check out some breeding stock. Then, without bothering to change clothes, he'd packed his black satchel for South America and hustled his twin-prop Cessna off the end of his ranch strip and out across the Panhandle haze toward the Crescent City. He'd parked the plane about eight hundred miles away and four hours later at the municipal airport beside Lake Ponchartrain, arranging to have oversize tail numbers affixed for Caribbean customs, a life raft and vest stowed aboard and the long-range fuel tanks topped off. Then he grabbed a taxi for the central business district and the Proteus Industries building on Lafayette.

Inside, the security guard greeted him warmly and ushered him into the private elevator serving the skyscraper's three top floors. Sam's fifty-nine years showed far more in close-up, under the bright elevator gridlights, than they had in his ambling stride across the vaulted lobby. Considerable history was stamped in the rough-hewn features, in the hollowed, stubbled cheeks and hooded, wolf-gray eyes, and on the weathered brown hide and prominent veins of his large hands. The thinning, silvery hair, however, was deceptive. Sam's hair had actually darkened a bit over the decades from the dazzling snowcap of childhood. It had been a comfortable stretch of years, thank God, since anyone had invoked his schoolyard name of "Whitey."

A chime bonged, and the mirror-polished brass doors opened on the thirty-first floor. Evangeline Birdette, corporate receptionist, stood welcome with her benign, schoolmistress smile. Behind her, under the atrium skylight, water trickled discreetly from a welded-sculpture waterfall.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Sam. Another short retirement?"

"What the hell, Birdy. You know I hate golf."

"They're all waiting for you inside, Mr. Sam. LuEllen just sent out to Copeland's for your favorite red beans and rice." She made a grab for the ranch hat, but he whisked it behind him.

"I hope she got it to go, Birdy. I'm not staying long."

A full-fledged war council was assembled around the oval slab of black marble, a panoply of top corporate management and divisional vice presidents. Among the missing was the company's new president, D.W. Lee, who was off vacationing on his private yacht somewhere in the Caribbean. And several faces along the window wall were blotted out by the afternoon panorama of the great river basking in the Delta sun. On the wall opposite, Proteus's global operations had been rendered as chromium tentacles embracing a Mercator spread of hammered copper continents, from Alaska to Antarctica, and from South America to Siberia.

Sam made a quick social circuit of the room—it had been several weeks since his last flying visit—then turned to Hardesty Eason, a big red-faced man with a square-cut jacket, who had just cleared his throat. As Proteus’ chief financial officer and a company director, Hardesty ranked second only to Sam among those present.

“If you’re ready now, Sam, we can start.”

“Hold your fire, Hardy. Let’s keep this real simple. Ray, why don’t you just show me the situation on one of those maps you got there?”

Ray Arrillaga, head of South American mining operations, came around the table. He was a small bronze man with steel spectacles and doctorates in engineering and geology. He had been executive vice president of one of Proteus’ major competitors when Sam had hired him away. Arrillaga unfolded a large geological survey map of Venezuela’s Bolívar State and placed a manicured finger on the site of the company’s recent iron-ore find, Cerro Calvario, a hundred miles south of the Orinoco River and Ciudad Bolívar.

Sam grimaced. “That bad, Ray? Right on top of us?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“So some academics stumble on a bunch of broken pottery on our land, and now we got a cultural minister threatening to shut down our entire operation?”

“Not threatening, Samuel,” Hardesty cut in. “We’re dead in the water as of this morning.”

“*Temporarily* dead,” Arrillaga suggested. “Our friends at the Ministry of Energy and Mines are on the case.”

“Well, shit! Did anyone think about just roping off this archeological site and working around it?”

“Their site survey shows artifacts scattered all over the mountain, in a pattern roughly coextensive with the high-grade ore.”

“Goddammit, Ray, sounds like someone’s seeding the dig, just to stop us. Who are these guys, and what the hell are they doing on Cerro Calvario?”

Arrillaga hesitated.

Hardesty Eason spoke up: “You okayed their presence, Samuel. In fact, you arranged it.”

“I don’t remember doing a damn-fool thing like that!”

“It was when we were down in Caracas last spring, after we agreed to help fix up their Natural Sciences Museum in that rundown park beside the Hilton. You gave your big hemispheric speech, Sam, then threw money at a couple of scientific groups. One of them, as I’ve been reminded this morning, was an outfit doing archaeological research along the Orinoco. Apparently you also gave them access to our sites.”

“Jesus Christ, Hardy! You mean we’ve been *paying* these assholes to shut us down?”

“That is exactly what we’ve been doing, Sam. In fact, we still are.”

“Well, stop the damn checks!”

Sam glared at the assembly, as if daring anyone to even smile. When the room tension reached an uncomfortable level, he gave a low chuckle—a cue for general laughter.

“Now, Sam, nobody’s blaming you. Exactly.” Parry Joyce was old and harmless enough to get away with this bit of *lèse majesté*, having recently been eased out as CEO of a Proteus subsidiary and given the meaningless post of chairman of the executive committee.

“Maybe not, Parry. But next time any of you high-paid wazirs hears me shooting off my mouth for a bunch of Third-Worlders, shut me up quick, okay?”

“Want me to cut a memo on that, Sam?” deadpanned Rowland McCall, vice president of public relations.

“Good idea, Rollo. And while you’re at it, put something in there on how you probably just got fired, okay?” Sam flashed a predatory grin, then nodded to Ray Arrillaga. “Ray, I’d like to take along copies of your relevant maps.”

“They’re in your office, packed to go.”

“That’s fine.”

“Hold on now, Sam,” Hardesty interrupted. “You don’t need to go rushing off to South America like an old fire horse.”

“The hell I don’t. I’m sure not solving anything up here, staring out this wonderful big picture window, waiting for the sunset.”

“Sam, you’re forgetting about D.W.”

“*You’re* forgetting, Hardy. The man’s on vacation.”

“A working vacation.”

Sam squinted across the table at the speaker, visible only as a broad-shouldered silhouette against the afternoon glare. Ex-Marine Dave Twyman was general manager of the company’s South American petroleum and liquid natural gas operations. “I was on the phone with D.W. this morning, Sam. He was a little north of Tobago, en route to Venezuelan waters to check on our LNG operations in the Gulf of Paria. When I gave him the news, he changed course for the mouth of the Orinoco. I think he gets around fifteen, sixteen knots.”

“D.W. wants to handle this mess all by himself?”

“With our help, Samuel,” Hardesty said. “He *is* president, after all, and, like Dave says, he’s already down there. And look at the job he did for us in Indonesia.”

“Hardy, I’m not saying anything against D.W. Hell, I picked him for the job. But Indonesia—that’s more D.W.’s neck of the woods.” A naturalized American citizen, D.W. had been born in South Korea; the initials stood for Duk-Won. “He doesn’t exactly speak the lingo down south.”

“He’s going to need our help, Sam. That’s why we’re having this meeting. While you were flying down from the Lazy S, the rest of us have been drafting our strategy ideas.”

“That’s fine, Hardy. Let D.W. run the show, you folks back his play every way you know how, and I’ll do the same. You might just tell him I’m on my way down—and bringing my old machete, just in case the red tape gets kinda thick.”

“Dammit, Sam!” Hardesty exclaimed.

“Hardy, relax. Gentlemen, if you’ll excuse me. I’ve got a plane to fly.”

Sam wheeled and strode out of the conference room. After the heavy door latched behind him, the executives traded uneasy glances. All were aware that though the meeting would now continue, it had just been rendered, along with their carefully drafted memos, utterly irrelevant.

