

HOLD THE LINE CHAIN OF CUSTODY

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HOLD THE LINE

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PROLOGUE

London

The Taite Global Foundation occupied the top floor of a restored Georgian building overlooking Kensington High Street.

Outside, London moved in measured currents of red taillights and evening pedestrians. Inside, the office was quiet, holding the stillness of old money—leather, walnut, muted amber light.

Kensington Taite stood at the window, his deep hazel eyes gazing down at the traffic below, one hand resting lightly on the window frame. His reflection stared back at him, looking distinguished, composed, and deliberate. His once-dark brown hair now showed a little age in the greying at his temples.

Taite's gaze drifted over the London traffic, but his thoughts were nowhere near Kensington High Street. They slid, unbidden, to a memory he rarely allowed himself to touch.

A name he had learned too late.

A child he had never known existed until the system had already swallowed her.

He had been younger then, reckless in a way he no longer permitted himself to be. A brief relationship with an American attorney during a conference in D.C., a handful of letters afterward, then silence. He hadn't known she'd been pregnant. He hadn't known the child had entered the foster system. He hadn't known anything until the attorney's sister contacted him years later—too late for him to do anything but read the case file and feel the weight of every line.

A child lost in the machinery.

That was the moment he'd vowed to build something better. Something that would keep other children from disappearing between jurisdictions, between signatures, between the cracks no one admitted existed.

But as he stared at the Meridian routing data now, a quiet unease threaded through him. What if the system he built to protect children had become something else? What if, in trying to correct a failure, he had created a new one?

He exhaled slowly, the glass fogging faintly beneath his breath.

He had funded Meridian to prevent loss. So why did he feel, tonight, as though something was slipping out of sight again?

Across the room, Edmund Harrow, his chief of staff and senior executive advisor, stood beside a long walnut table, a tablet in one hand, a thin folder resting flat before him. The blue glow from the tablet reflected in his glasses

“Sir, the Meridian Child Relocation Initiative has reduced processing delays by fifty-three percent,” Harrow said. “Interstate coordination has improved. Placement timelines are shorter.”

“And the children?” Kensington asked.

Harrow cleared his voice and said, “They are spending fewer nights in intake facilities with the faster jurisdictional transfers.”

Kensington gave a small nod.

Meridian had been built to address a bureaucratic failure—children stalled between agencies for years, with enormous paperwork loads outpacing the urgency of their situation. He had funded the software architecture himself. ‘No child,’ he had said, ‘should disappear inside a system designed to protect them.’

“And are there any frictions?” Kensington asked.

Harrow paused, “Very minimal, Sir,” he replied.

“That’s not an answer,” Kensington chided.

Harrow’s grip tightened slightly on the tablet. Harrow glanced at the numbers again, though he knew them by memory. “The children are moving through the transport coordination hubs with exceptional speed. There have been no formal complaints.”

“No formal complaints,” Kensington repeated softly. Kensington turned from the window. “Minimal frictions are not reassuring in an initiative this size.”

Harrow changed the screen to display routing timelines and authorization chains.

“Sir, transfers are moving through coordination hubs with consistent efficiency. No formal resistance. No flagged irregularities.”

“No resistance?” Kensington repeated, incredulous.

Silence settled between them—not awkward, not tense, evaluative. Harrow changed the tablet display in silence.

Kensington turned at last and crossed the room with measured steps. He looked down at the tablet Harrow held. His eyes traced the clean progression of timestamps.

“Children do not move cleanly, not when they’re frightened. What’s the incident rate?” He asked.

“Negligible,” Harrow replied.

“Escalations?” Kensington queried.

“All contained,” Harrow answered.

“And there is no resistance?” Kensington asked.

Harrow met his employer’s eyes. “None of any significance, Sir.”

Kensington studied the screen for a long moment. His gaze was not drawn to the upward arrows or the percentages highlighted in green. It lingered, instead, on timestamps and routing intervals.

“Nothing moves this smoothly, especially little traumatized people,” he said.

Harrow did not respond immediately.

“Your concern,” Harrow asked carefully, “is that the system is functioning *too well*, Sir?”

“My concern, Harrow,” Kensington replied, “is that efficiency without resistance suggests an unnatural design.”

Harrow set the tablet down and opened the thin folder.

“There is a consultant that might prove useful, Sir,” he said.

He handed Kensington a photograph of a tall man exiting a municipal building in New York. Dark hair cut short, posture relaxed but alert. His eyes were not fixed on anything in particular, yet nothing seemed to escape them.

“His name is Nicolas Gunthar,” Harrow said. “He is a former special operations officer, highly decorated. He was noted for anticipatory threat assessment.”

“Anticipatory threat assessment, interesting. Go on.” Kensington said.

“He identifies structural weaknesses quickly and reads environments well. He is highly regarded for situational anticipation,” Harrow explained.

Kensington studied the image.

“There is one thing that stands out in his dossier, Sir.” Harrow paused, “He complied with a withdrawal order during a black operation mission six years ago. When the operation was completed, he filed a formal report with the Judge Advocate General afterward.”

“A man who follows orders,” Kensington said. “And understands when they cost something, which suggests he is disciplined and has principles.”

Kensington set the photograph down.

“He left the military shortly thereafter,” Harrow said.

“And now?” Kensington asked.

“Now he is a private consultant specializing in observation, risk assessment, and improvisational security strategy. There is little else known about him through official channels.”

Kensington walked back toward the window. “Find out all you can about him. I want him to observe Meridian. I want him to inspect the transport network from bottom to top.”

Harrow inclined his head slightly. “To report irregularities?”

“To report what he sees,” Kensington replied.

“And if he sees nothing, Sir?”

Kensington's reflection stared back at him from the glass, calm and unreadable. "Then the system is working, and I will be reassured."

Harrow closed the folder. "I'll arrange a meeting," he said as he moved toward the door.

Kensington nodded once.

Behind him, London continued its quiet motion—lights moving in orderly lanes, unaware that somewhere within the Taite Global Foundation's administrative arteries, something might be moving too cleanly.

Harrow paused at the door. "Do you anticipate escalation?" he asked.

Kensington did not turn. "I anticipate movement," he said. "Let's see who notices."

The door closed softly.

On the table, the photograph of Nicolas Gunthar remained under the warm glow of recessed lighting, a still image in a room built for influence.

Outside, the city carried on. While inside, the office settled back into a silence where the air itself seemed to be poised...waiting.

On the tablet, the routing lines of Meridian advanced in steady digital progression—from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, from signature to signature.

Efficient.

Too efficient.

1

Taite Global Foundation New York Branch

Edmund Harrow sat stiffly at an otherwise empty conference room table in the New York office before business hours, a thin stack of printed documents aligned precisely before him.

The digital file on Nicolas Gunthar was comprehensive—service record, commendations, redacted mission summaries, and post-action reviews. But digital records could be curated, smoothed. Paper trails, on the other hand, resisted smoothing.

Harrow had requested supplemental documentation through private channels available only to institutions with long-standing federal relationships and deep pockets.

Background verification firms could gather surface details; Kensington Taite's reach went deeper. Archival military records. Financial disclosures. Property filings. Quiet inquiries that did not leave visible fingerprints.

To Harrow, it was not distrust. It was due diligence.

Family history: unremarkable.

Father deceased.

Mother relocated to Arizona. Limited contact.

Raised by maternal grandmother in South Carolina. No paperwork trail to explain that.

No spouse.
No engagement history.
No long-term domestic partnership.
Financial profile: stable.
Conservative spending.
Rural property owned outright.
Social footprint: minimal.

Two consistent contacts from a former black operations unit. Infrequent, concise exchanges. No extraneous language. No emotional residue.

One civilian acquaintance from childhood—a mechanic in upstate New York. Occasional bar receipts in proximity to the man’s garage. Nothing habitual. Nothing indulgent.

It seems that Gunthar did not build a community. He maintained the perimeter.

Harrow turned a page.

Withdrawal order—six years ago.
Operation redacted beyond clearance.

Gunthar had complied, but later filed a formal objection through the Judge Advocate General. He had followed the order and, upon returning, documented his dissent.

He left service within eighteen months.
No press interviews.
No grievance campaigns.
No memoir.

He simply stepped sideways into private contract work.

“Interesting,” Harrow said out loud. The sharpness of his voice startled him just a little in the silence of the building.

Men like that were either disciplined or they carried something unfinished.

Harrow closed the file and removed his glasses, setting them carefully on the walnut table. He rubbed the bridge of his nose and leaned back in the leather chair.

There were still two hours before the building woke—before assistants arrived with coffee trays and phones began their steady chorus. In these early stretches, the office felt less like an institution and more like a room with walls and air.

He did not nap. He did not idle. He replayed what he had read.

No financial excess.

No domestic entanglements.

No visible ambition beyond contract work and quiet land ownership.

Gunthar had not built a life around noise. He had no noise, and that was what Harrow found unsettling about him. Most men leaving special operations compensated: money, indulgence, publicity, private security firms that kept them in a similar line of business, something to fill the vacuum left by command structure and velocity. Gunthar had chosen stillness.

Harrow reached for his glasses again just as the outer door opened. Measured footsteps crossed the corridor. Kensington Taite entered without announcement, removing his gloves as he walked.

“Good morning, Harrow,” he said.

“Good morning, Sir,” Harrow replied.

“You’re in quite early this morning,” Kensington stated.

“So are you,” Harrow said as he closed the file on the table.

Kensington’s gaze shifted to the closed file, then to Harrow’s posture.

“You’re unsettled,” he said. “Gunthar?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“And?”

Harrow sat up straighter and narrowed his eyes slightly.

“He is clean, disciplined, isolated. He has a minimal social footprint. There are two former teammates and one childhood acquaintance. He has no visible dependencies and no meaningful ties. He owns, bought in cash, five acres on the fringe of the Hudson Valley.”

“And your concern?” Kensington asked as he removed his coat and draped it over the back of a chair.

“He does not appear to have strong ties to anything or anyone,” Harrow replied rapidly.

A faint flicker of interest crossed Kensington’s expression.

“Very few men with his history have no close connections,” he said. “So, Mr. Gunthar is an enigma.”

Harrow held his gaze.

“Or they require something they do not name,” Harrow said, “and that is what concerns me.”

Kensington considered that.

“Yes, I believe that may be the case with Gunthar. We will see.”

He moved toward the window, settling into his familiar position overlooking the street.

“Have him brought in to my office when he arrives, and leave the files on the table.”

“Yes, Sir.”

The building began to stir slowly—distant footsteps, the low hum of the building now fully awake.

New York did not ease into the morning. It asserted itself.

Traffic pressed through intersections in layered impatience. Delivery trucks idled at curbs that were never truly empty. Steam rose from a subway grate and dissipated into the air, already thick with exhaust and conversation. The city moved forward without asking permission.

Nicolas Gunthar stood across the street from the Taite Global Foundation's American headquarters and let the city move around him.

He did not like cities. They were loud in ways that weren't always audible. They multiplied variables. Too many sightlines. Too many windows. Too many blind angles disguised as convenience. Too few exits for someone who didn't want to be found and too many for someone who did. Too much noise that means nothing, and silence, when it comes, means everything.

Cities were environments to be managed, not places to live. Nic preferred quiet. His property upstate had trees that absorbed sound instead of amplifying it. Gravel that warned him when someone approached. Air that did not taste like brake dust.

The building itself was restrained. Twenty-two stories of glass and steel. The Taite name was etched in brushed metal beside the entrance, neither large enough to boast nor small enough to ignore.

He noted it all automatically as he watched the door.

A cyclist cut too close to a taxi, which blared the horn. Shouting. There was always shouting. The city corrected itself and continued.

He adjusted the cuff of his jacket, not because it needed adjusting, but because stillness in a city drew attention.

Two exterior security personnel rotated positions every twelve minutes. One favored his left leg slightly—an old injury, probably compensated for well enough. The cameras were positioned with intention, though one quadrant overlapped unnecessarily. The secondary exit near the underground parking ramp held a blind pocket if someone knew exactly where to stand.

He checked his watch once—not because he needed to, but because punctuality was a signal.

Then he crossed the street.

The lobby doors opened before he reached them. Climate-controlled air replaced heat and traffic. The marble floor reflected light from recessed fixtures. The space was designed to imply stability.

He registered everything in a single sweep:

Receptionist posture—trained, alert.

Discreet panic button beneath the right edge.

Security desk door off to the left.

Elevator bank with mirrored surfaces.

Potential concealment angles.

Advisor standing near the interior hallway—silver hair, precise posture, watching without appearing to.

Harrow.

Nic didn't know the name yet. He knew the type.

The receptionist smiled. "Mr. Gunthar?"

"Yes, ma'am," he responded, part military cadence, part southern manners.

"Mr. Taite is expecting you."

Nic signed in, not using his full legal name. The pen was heavier than necessary. That was intentional, Nic thought. He returned it to the desk exactly where it had been.

The silver-haired advisor approached with measured steps.

“Mr. Gunthar,” he said. “Edmund Harrow.”

Nic extended his hand.

“Sir.”

Harrow’s grip was firm but not dominant.

“This way.”

Harrow led him down the corridor without offering an explanation.

Good, no preamble.

They walked down a corridor lined with framed photographs—children at ribbon cuttings, press conferences, ceremonial handshakes. All smiling faces and neatly dressed officials. Nic noted something else. Every photograph showed public events, but none showed operational environments.

Interesting.

They reached a set of double doors. Harrow opened one without flourish. The office beyond was quiet. It smelled of old wood, leather, and furniture polish. It was dim but lit enough to avoid reducing visibility with amber light. That’s different.

A man was standing at the window, hands loosely clasped behind his back. Kensington Taite did not turn immediately. He let Nic enter the room first.

Power move, Nic thought, so Taite likes to control the room. Typical. Nic stopped three steps inside, hands at his sides, posture neutral.

After a moment, Kensington spoke.

“Mr. Gunthar.”

“Sir.”

Kensington turned then. His deep hazel eyes assessed the man standing before him.

“You’ve been in this building less than five minutes,” he said. “What concerns you?”

Nic did not glance around the room.

“You have redundant camera coverage in the northeast quadrant and a blind spot near your secondary exit,” he said evenly. “One of your exterior security personnel favors his left knee. Your panic button is beneath the right edge of the reception desk. And your advisor hasn’t blinked since I entered.”

The room was silent for a moment.

Harrow blinked.

Kensington’s expression did not change, but something shifted behind his eyes.

“And why does that concern you?” he asked.

“Redundancy without intention wastes resources,” Nic replied. “Blind spots invite exploitation. Compensated injury reduces response time. And people who don’t blink are either trained or nervous.”

Silence.

Kensington inclined his head slightly. “You observe automatically?”

“Yes, sir,” Nic replied.

Silence. No forthcoming explanation was offered.

“I have not yet retained you,” Kensington said evenly. “This meeting determines whether I do.”

“I funded a program called the Meridian Child Relocation Initiative. It was built to reduce bureaucratic delay in interstate child placement: software architecture, transport coordination, and jurisdictional acceleration.”

He studied Nic. Nic stood, no fidgeting, unmoving, silently listening.

“Children were getting stalled between agencies for months, sometimes years. Meridian shortens that window.”

He let that sit.

“Did you conduct your own preliminary research?” Kensington asked.

“Yes, sir,” Nic stated, as Kensington had suspected.

“And your first impression?”

Nic did not answer immediately.

“Meridian was approved in early 1996. In its short time in operation, it has been praised in three national reports. Advocacy groups call it the future of child welfare. It’s a privately funded digital coordination framework designed to reduce administrative lag in interstate child relocation. It centralizes intake data, streamlines judicial transfer approvals, and accelerates placement timelines.” Nic said.

Kensington watched him closely, but Nic did not give his opinion of Meridian in his expressions or voice inflection.

“What is your impression?” Kensington probed.

“It’s efficient,” Nic said simply.

“Is that praise or a criticism?” Kensington asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Efficiency isn’t inherently good or bad, sir. It depends on what it’s serving,” Nic replied.

A slight pause.

Kensington stepped closer.

“Meridian exists because children were being lost between jurisdictions. Paperwork was outpacing urgency. I funded its architecture to prevent that,” Kensington said with tension in his voice.

“Yes, sir.”

“Yet, you sound unconvinced,” Kensington observed.

Nic met his eyes.

“I haven’t seen it operate yet,” Nic replied.

“And if it functions as designed?” Kensington asked.

“Then it’s an asset,” Nic answered.

“And if it functions too well?” Kensington asked with the same raised eyebrow.

That question landed differently.

“Then I’d want to know what’s smoothing the edges,” Nic replied without a blink. That question lingered in Nic’s mind.

Most people worry about systems breaking down. Kensington seemed concerned about the opposite. There was something unsettling in that. A machine that failed drew attention. A machine that ran flawlessly often didn’t.

Nic wasn’t entirely sure what Kensington meant, but he suspected the answer had less to do with paperwork and more to do with people. Systems didn’t smooth their own edges. Someone always

made the decision about which obstacles to remove and which safeguards to keep.

He filed the thought away. Experience had taught him that the questions people asked often revealed more than the answers they gave.

Kensington studied him.

“Mr. Gunthar, if you are hired, you will observe only, and you will report directly to me. Not to agencies. Not to press. Not to outside interests. Not even to Harrow, here.”

Harrow remained silent near the wall.

“Yes, sir.”

“And if you find irregularities?” Kensington tested.

“I report what I see,” Nic said.

“And if what you see is inconvenient?”

“Inconvenience isn’t my metric,” Nic said without hesitation.

A fractional pause.

“What is?” Kensington asked.

“Risk,” Nic replied.

Kensington went still and studied him for a long moment.

“If protecting the system protects thousands,” Kensington said carefully, “but harms one child—what do you protect?”

Nic’s jaw tightened once.

“The child,” Nic said without reservation. The room went silent. Nic did not elaborate.

Kensington inclined his head slightly.

“And if what you see implicates my funding?” Kensington asked.

“I report what I see,” Nic answered without hesitation.

A long moment passed.

“Very well, Mr. Gunthar,” Kensington said.

Outside, New York continued its restless rhythm. Inside, two men assessed each other without raising their voices. The contract had not yet been signed on paper. But it had been signed in posture.

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