

MERIDAS 5

BOOK 1 - SAMPLE CHAPTERS

A NOIR THRILLER

JONA SOLV

Meridas 5 – A Noir Thriller

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GLAD YOU FOUND YOUR WAY TO MERIDAS 5.

What you're looking at is an exclusive, roughly 50-page preview of **Book 1** of my noir thriller trilogy. No sign-up required, no newsletter strings attached—just straight to your reader.

As an author, I've poured months of blood, sweat, and plenty of coffee into crafting this dark world. If you dig the vibe and want to know how the story unfolds after the cliffhanger, I'd be thrilled if you kept the full book on your radar. Every reader and every honest review means the world to me.

For the ultimate immersive experience, tune in to the curated playlist over on my YouTube channel. Dim the lights, cue up the sound, and step into Meridas 5 with me.

– Jona Solv

PROLOGUE

"It was the answer to a question I'd never thought to ask. Thirty years carrying a badge, and it never crossed my mind that I'd end up staring it in the teeth. The *why*. The *how*. The *who*.

If someone had told me six months ago I'd end up here, I would've laughed in their face. Not after everything this city has dragged me through. Not after everything I've managed to crawl back from. But the threads are pulling tight now. Every loose end twisted into one single, ugly knot. I never imagined I'd have to wade through a literal hell just to drag up an answer I was never hunting for in the first place.

And yet. Here I stand.

Right here, where the reek of burnt grease and damp concrete numbs every sense I've got left. Where the rain hammers the corrugated iron above like a runaway pulse, steady at first, then climbing, then racing too hard to track.

Here, towering over this miserable wreck at my boots. I can hear a stripped servomotor in its shoulder whining down. Grinding metal against metal. Giving out. Black hydraulic oil bleeds through the fractures in the floorboards, soaking in alongside the blood we both spilled.

The weight of my .45 revolver sits heavy in my sweat-slicked grip. It trembles. Not much, but the steel is shaking. I keep the iron sights pinned dead against my adversary's skull, hammer back, index finger curled around the trigger, ready to put this butchered thing out of whatever misery it has left. But I freeze.

For all the rot Meridas 5 has carved into me, I am still no cold-blooded executioner.

Still. Who's going to step between us? Who would dare judge me if they knew the filth I've dragged into the daylight over these past few days? Nobody's watching from up here. Nobody can hear a sound. And I am damn good at making traces disappear into thin air. You learn that trade across thirty years on the street, especially inside an outfit like the F11-SK Police Command.

Do I pull the trigger?

Would it change a single damn thing? In my own head? In this godforsaken city?"

A gunshot detonates from the cylinder of a revolver like a crack of thunder, ripping the suffocating quiet wide open.

CHAPTER 1

HOW IT ALL BEGAN

The television bolted to the squad room wall flickers to life. Nobody asked it to. Nobody ever changes the channel. A broad news banner crawls across the bottom of the screen.

"Political unrest, technological advances, a growing collapse in birth rates. Good evening. It is Wednesday, April 13th, 2098. You are watching the news of Meridas 5."

Cut to a sharply dressed female anchor. She sets her cards aside with practiced care and stares directly into the lens. The studio behind her is one vast projection surface, cycling its backdrop to match whatever story is loaded in the queue.

"Political unrest in the capital. In Meridas 5, ten followers of the underground movement Free Nation Generation, the FNG, managed to breach the government district. They were aided by a rogue government employee operating from the inside. Their goal: to steal documents and video recordings from government offices in support of their..." She pauses, lips tightening. "...please forgive my choice of words: their ludicrous claims that the government conducts human experimentation. Rest assured, I can tell you personally, this is not the case. Nor will it ever be."

Anyone paying close attention can feel the contempt sitting just below the surface of every word. For decades, the government of Meridas 5 has managed its public image with surgical precision. Opposition gets smothered before it can draw a full breath. Rebels in this city have long accused the networks of manipulated reporting, of keeping the populace soft and pliable and grateful.

"Since we at PolitTV operate in close proximity to the relevant authorities, we can tell you with full honesty: the claims are false. From us, you receive only honest, unvarnished, direct reporting. During the activists' incursion, two government employees were injured and are currently receiving hospital care. Be good citizens and keep them in your thoughts. These are the heroes who stood against the demonic activists." She urges the audience in a tone that has been bled of all warmth.

"The ten FNG activists who participated in the attack were apprehended by heroic response forces. Following an expedited court hearing, their executions were carried out that same evening by means of nerve agent provided by the appropriate government agency. The inside contact from the inner ring has been taken into custody to help authorities understand and dismantle FNG structures." The anchor delivers this with a look of carefully cultivated optimism.

"Further riots are feared. Please exercise appropriate caution on the streets of Meridas 5 and report any suspicious persons or actions immediately to your nearest police station. We at PolitTV care about your safety. We wouldn't want to miss a single viewer. Moving on."

The projection behind her, which had shown the government district under breach, shifts to the sterile whites and muted blues of hospitals and examination rooms. The anchor reaches for her water glass, drinks, straightens.

"More troubling news on the birth rate." Calibrated for a

brief flutter of alarm before leveling back into professional composure.

"Statistical projections and census data confirm that the birth rate declined by a further 3.7% last year. This is attributed primarily to the rising mortality rate among young mothers during pregnancy and in the period immediately following childbirth, where medical teams continue to work tirelessly toward solutions. The symptoms observed are, in almost every case, nearly identical. Unborn children are developing with extraordinary physical strength, resulting in an increased incidence of bone fractures sustained prior to birth from the child's own kicks. In rare cases, fractured bone has pierced the mother's organs, causing severe internal damage. Following delivery, cases have also been recorded in which women died within a few months from the compounding secondary effects of pregnancy."

The anchor pauses. She lifts one finger.

"Nevertheless, authorities are urging citizens to have more children. The government plans to launch a campaign across public spaces highlighting what defines family and family life. People coming together, enjoying one another, providing the mutual support needed to face daily life. The intention is to motivate citizens to build functioning families once again." Her delivery smooths into something almost warm. Almost convincing.

The projection behind her fills with families playing ball in open parks. Laughter. Arms around shoulders.

"The downward trend in birth rates has now persisted for thirty years, averaging an annual decline of approximately three percent. Should you have questions or wish to inform yourself further, freely accessible archived recordings can be found throughout the city, covering the topic of family life through picture and sound in full detail. We also highly recommend the museum in the center of our wonderful city, which houses many exhibits from times past."

The projection shifts. Warm colors drain away entirely, replaced by something cooler and darker. Steel gray. The color of a threat that has been normalized.

"Androids continue their advance. As has been announced, a new era of androids is approaching. This involves the fourth generation, distinguished primarily by their ability to..."

A veteran of the local F11-SK Police Command reaches over and kills the set. His partner walks through the door a moment later, takes in the dead screen, and fires a sharp look across the room. Then the grin comes, the one that surfaces whenever Thomas has spotted an opening.

He slings his jacket over the back of his chair and drops into it.

"Real shame. I was genuinely dying to hear what makes these magnificent new androids so extraordinary." Dean still doesn't look up. "I still hold that a genuinely functioning artificial intelligence could become very dangerous for us. We're already playing God in practice. Things like that never end well." The older man says it the way he says most things, like it's been decided.

His partner, working on a cup of coffee, answers dry as old wood: "Just look at what we've already pulled out of androids. They've proven enormously valuable as caregivers in hospitals and cut the skilled-worker shortage in nursing significantly. Their error rate is far below human levels. Surgeries don't go wrong. An android doesn't get tired at the wrong moment or lose focus mid-procedure the way a human does. And Dean..." A brief sigh. "You can't tell me you don't feel safer when a Code Red Zone has been cleared by androids in advance of our entry. The number of deaths in our special command is substantially lower than ten years ago. Those are facts. Even for you. Or how do you see it?" Thomas asks.

Dean stands. He turns to the window and tilts his gaze up

at the sky, which is marginally less gray than usual. He holds his coffee in both hands and drinks slowly. When he speaks, it comes out weighted.

"Despite all of that, four months ago our operation didn't stop several tonnes of steel plating from coming down on top of you. Because one man from the underground hid himself, put a detonator on a support column, and blew it. You were unreasonably lucky. Back on full duty in under two weeks. By rights you should have been dead. Most people would have died on the spot or from the internal injuries alone. And yet here you sit, telling me to give these humanoid machines a chance?"

He takes a breath and hears himself getting wound up. He settles back into his chair. His eyes drift once to the photograph on the desk before he goes on.

"I do not hold with handing tasks that humans used to perform over to machines. It is a perversion of what we are. We place our existence in the hands of steel, and then what?" Not a question. A verdict.

Thomas receives it all with that easy, unhurried smile. They have been an inseparable team for five years and have been through more than most people accumulate in a lifetime. Thomas catching another bullet on an operation. Dean's separation from his wife and children, who now live in a small town far to the west, away from the violence, away from this city's particular flavor of slow rot. They trust each other without conditions and have never deceived one another. By any honest reckoning, they are among the finest working teams in the entire special command.

"Dean, my friend, you are right. A lot of other men would have died there. But weeds don't die. Me least of all. My will is too strong for that." He takes a sip and lets the grin settle in. "I cannot leave you alone out there on the streets. You couldn't manage it at your age. I don't think we need to blame the machines for whatever personal grudge you've got going

with them. Just imagine some nurse six months out of school changing my bandages every morning. Or worse, some woman twice my age giving me a sponge bath every day."

Thomas pulls a face. The thought appears to cause him genuine distress. It is no secret that Trevor Thomas is not exactly a monk. Quick lines, easy charm, a bachelor in full operation who has never shown much interest in that changing.

Dean cracks. Just slightly. Just enough to show. Thomas has always been able to do that to him, pull him back into the room whether he intended to come or not.

The separation from Mia and his two children still sits heavy in Dean, nearly five years on. Like too many men in the F11-SK, he married the job a long time ago. The training rotations, the drills, the operations that ran over and over into family time that Mia eventually stopped expecting to get back. When Dean was home, arguments came automatically, because as a father and husband he was never anywhere close to as capable as he was as an investigator. Even Mia, who had trusted him past the point most people would, eventually ran out of room to absorb what he brought home with him. The argument that ended things was not the first. It was just the one that stuck. A botched operation ushered in the great darkness. That was nearly five years ago. He has not seen Mia or the children since, though he has not stopped carrying them.

In his quieter moments, he is still with them. If he could trade anything to go back and unsay certain things, he would make that trade without thinking twice. Thomas was freshly assigned as his partner when the whole thing came apart and watched the collapse from close enough range to know what it did to the man. He still watches now, quietly, as someone who used to be joyful and sharpened on the job has been just barely enduring for five years. The sunken face. The three-day stubble. The story that lives in every line of it.

Thomas knows Dean still loves his wife and would not

look for anyone new. He would die for his family without a moment's calculation if it would protect them. It is precisely this that gives Thomas, on occasion, a private fear that Dean's judgment might give way at exactly the wrong moment.

"You're right that a nurse old enough to be your grandmother washing you down every day would not do at all. Better someone fresh out of school." Dean says it with just enough edge that it counts as humor. He settles more fully into his chair and breathes for a moment, almost at ease.

"I'm still glad you made it back to full duty. Even if I remain skeptical about these new recovery compounds, whatever they're calling them this week. Who knows what shows up down the line." He puts the skepticism down without pressing it further.

Thomas rolls his eyes and points out, not for the first time, that Dean finds everything questionable that did not come from the ground or from human hands. Nobody has ever nailed down exactly why. Thomas long ago accepted it as part of the man he works beside every day and stopped trying to convert him. Dean is the only person in the department who holds this view, and he is still valued without reservation as one of its most important members. His instincts have cracked several cases that everyone else had filed away and written off. It is not for nothing that Dean and Thomas rank as two of the highest-placed operational investigators in the F11-SK Police Command, as effective at working a live crime scene as they are at breaking a cold case.

Then a message hits both their wristband communicators at the same moment. Report immediately to the department chief's office. Violent crime on the streets of Meridas 5. Get out there and establish whether it is murder or something else. The order carries the weight that orders only have when someone upstairs has already decided the answer matters. Both men move without needing to discuss it. Coffee drained, jackets on. Top floor.

CHAPTER 2

A NORMAL DAY AT THE GYNECOLOGIST

A white-coated doctor in his middle years pushes through the front door of his practice in a flat-out hurry. Nearly fifteen minutes late. The streets into the Third District were in no mood to cooperate, same as every other morning. The autonomous rail system and the Transpo-Pods were supposed to make this city run clean and on time. In the Third District, the busted systems and routine breakdowns manage the exact opposite. Morty Mingas prefers to drive himself, and in Meridas 5, hunting for a parking spot requires a particular brand of patience he does not always have. Most days the shortage pushes him to park several blocks out and walk the rest.

The waiting room already has an audience. Pregnant women, mostly, booked for standard examinations.

"Good morning. How many on the schedule today, Ms. Parcs?" he asks, moving past the reception desk without slowing.

His receptionist has the phone wedged between her ear and shoulder. She catches his entrance and meets it with the practiced ease of someone who learned long ago not to take his arrivals personally.

"Good morning, Doctor. Three pregnant women waiting for standard examinations and two women for preventive care. After those five, the morning is already done," she says, and the smile she sends across the room is bright enough that he almost stops.

He turns and looks at her. His expression is careful, edged with something. "Very good. Send the first patient in two minutes. Thank you." Already moving.

"Of course, Doctor. Is everything all right? Forgive me for saying so, but you seem distant this morning. That's not like you." Ms. Parcs pitches it gently, but the concern underneath is solid.

Mingas lets the question drop without answering and disappears into his consulting room. Seconds later the lab coat is on, the machine is up, and he's settled in to wait. Dr. Mingas is a compact man, stocky build, and professionally nearly without equal in what remains of his field. Because of the death rate climbing steadily among young mothers, he has maintained close contact with government health authorities for years, delivering lectures on the birth crisis and whatever narrow hope the data still supports.

He is one of the last gynecologists still practicing in the city. The birth rate has been in free fall long enough that the demand for specialists has steadily hollowed out. Besides Mingas, only four other gynecologists serve a city of approximately 350,000 people, roughly half of them women. The government determines which doctor each patient sees. Free choice of physician is a memory in the capital. Appointment waits stretch long, which has pushed general practitioners to cover gynecological examinations as a stopgap.

He pulls up the first patient file. A routine pregnancy examination. He lays out the instruments for a smear with the economical precision of someone who has done this ten thousand times, no wasted movement, nothing out of place. The digital file reads less like a medical record and more like a

damage report. Like so many expectant mothers in Meridas 5, this patient's fetus has already fractured her bones. More than once. Modern regenerative methods close the fractures fast, but the horror of it does not close with them. Children in the womb have become enormously strong, and in a significant number of cases that strength translates into broken bones before birth, some of them severe.

Occasionally the outcome is worse. A child kicks at the wrong moment, and whatever help might have come doesn't come in time. One powerful movement, the splintered tip of a rib finding its way to the heart. The mother goes down before the pain has even registered, nothing visible on the surface, bleeding out from the inside. The autopsy reads the story afterward.

That is one case among many born from the government's cynical research program. As weather patterns and environmental conditions continue to deteriorate across Meridas 5, fetuses are artificially strengthened in the womb. The stated objective: double survival odds through the critical first years of life. The side effect written in bone: compound fractures, internal hemorrhage, death. In more recent months, an increasing number of infants have also died from sudden infant death syndrome, adding another layer to a crisis no official broadcast will name directly.

Two minutes later, a knock at the consulting room door. Dr. Mingas greets the entering woman with his customary dry efficiency. He doesn't look up right away. He skips the handshake. A brief gesture toward the examination chair. She already knows the procedure. She has been through it before.

CHAPTER 3

UNEXPECTED

Murder: The killing of one human being by another. There are four kinds of murder: felonious, excusable, justifiable, and praiseworthy, but it makes no difference to the murdered party which kind he fell victim to. The classification is for the benefit of lawyers only.*

-- Ambrose Gwinnett Bierce

Dean and Thomas are on their feet before the message finishes loading. They take the stairwell up to the third floor where the department head keeps his office. The walls along the way hold nothing worth reading: the latest work instructions, duty rosters, internal training schedules, the occasional item someone no longer wants. The kind of institutional wallpaper nobody takes down and nobody replaces.

"Do you really think it could be a murder, Dean? That would be the first real one in years. With the surveillance blanketing every corner of this city, you'd have to be genuinely out of your mind to plan a killing and think you'd walk away clean. Can it actually be that someone killed another person with premeditation?" Thomas asks. He is

already slightly winded from the stairs. Dean, despite his years, answers without missing a step.

"Do you think what the government does isn't murder? I won't start on that. But murder outside the government. Yes, that would be unusual. I haven't seen one myself since..." He pauses briefly on a landing and pulls the thought back. "...nearly fifteen years. And I agree with you. The blanket surveillance across the entire area has driven the crime rate down to almost nothing. Made a unit like the F11-SK Police Command nearly redundant. These little witch hunts for pickpockets and fences are not why I transferred to the special command. Let's wait for the briefing. Judging by how Louiz wrote that message, he has plenty to say," Dean adds, as they reach the landing.

"Tell me, Trevor. If this really is a murder, then..." Dean begins.

Thomas cuts in before he can finish. "Then we solve it. Like always. Clear enough, isn't it?" adds the younger colleague.

Both continue up the remaining flights and greet oncoming colleagues with the easy nods and smiles customary in the precinct. Dean and Thomas carry the highest standing in the building. They have worked as a pair from the very start, and no lasting fracture has ever cracked what they have. Small frictions, sure, nothing that would threaten the friendship. They trust each other completely and, when necessary, can finish the other's thought without missing the mark. In the special command, this is worth a great deal. Their case closure rate sits at eighty percent, far above what any of their colleagues manage.

Dean came up the long way, more than ten years on patrol before he transferred to the F11-SK Police Command. Thomas arrived through a side door, connections landing him directly in the special command as an investigator from the start.

In the beginning, nobody believed the two would ever

function as a team. During the early months, they would have gladly ruined the other's career. Dean was the meticulous one, the man who logged every detail correctly and let no procedure slide. Thomas was the one who always wanted to be at the front of everything, who took the rules as a suggestion he would consider when convenient. Neither conceded anything to the other. Once, over something trivial, it came down to a fistfight. The root of it was simple enough: Dean had long been known in the force for doing his work with exactness and care, while Thomas was the one who took everything lightly and bet on instinct. In the strict sense, an ideal mixture for a team capable of cracking any case. But it took a single joint operation to weld them together for good.

Both were called in to support the local fire department. A high-rise in the Third District, sixteenth floor. Radio dispatch confirmed people still trapped inside. Dean and Thomas were on patrol nearby in a cruiser. They did not need to discuss it. They exchanged a brief glance and drove straight to the building, ready to back up the emergency crews with everything they had.

The flames already raged around them when Dean located the incident commander and addressed him. "David Dean, special investigator. We heard on the radio that all available help is needed here."

Thomas stepped in before Dean could continue. "We came right away. We want to help. What can we do?" He was uncertain for a moment how Dean would react to the interruption. This time Thomas was not chasing credit. He was a special investigator because he wanted to help people. He glanced briefly at Dean and saw that Dean nodded, approving.

The incident commander wiped soot from his face and looked them both over. "Dean and Thomas. Good to have you. We can use every hand we can get. People are still inside, upper floors we think, though we don't know exactly where.

If you two go in, you follow orders from my people. It's about your lives, boys. Go in with the next squad. Good luck, men," the commander replied, visibly relieved to have additional hands.

Together with the trained firefighting units, the two swept the sixteenth floor searching for injured or trapped civilians. On that floor, the smell of burning plastic from the apartments gnawed into their airways, sweet and poisonous in equal measure. Dense plumes of smoke rolled through the corridors and cut visibility to almost nothing in stretches. Dean and Thomas left no door unchecked, pressing forward through the heat with everything they had.

When the floor appeared cleared of civilians, the units began trying to contain the fire, which grew harder by the minute. The inferno spread faster than it could be countered. Walls and doors caught. One could already see that properly containing the blaze would become progressively impossible.

"Help! Please help me!" A child's voice, somewhere close. Wrapped in panic, trying to be heard over the roar.

Dean's hand shot out and gripped Thomas's arm. Thomas had heard it too.

"I know, Dean. I heard it. We have to find the child," Thomas said, scanning for the direction of the sound. "There, end of the hall!" Dean called, pointing.

Both ran back from the stairwell toward the far end of the corridor as fast as they could move. To their right, the floor was beginning to buckle and whole rooms had become furnaces. Neither was prepared to turn back. They pressed on against the intense heat, the near-zero visibility, and the chemical stench settling into their sinuses, calling out to the child as they closed the distance, listening for replies over the roar of the flames. Ceiling sections dropped around them. The situation grew more dangerous with every second.

They could not simply leave an innocent child behind. Smoke thickened and further blocked the view. Again they

heard the child, calling for help, this time very close. Both called back and pushed hard for the remaining distance. Ceiling sections were falling more freely now and the flames around them were wilder.

Over the radio, an immediate withdrawal order came through covering all units. Dean and Thomas heard it clearly. They kept moving.

"Thomas, cover your face. Use your sleeve as a mask. Nothing happens to us either. But I am not turning back. I am going to try to save the child. Get yourself to safety, Thomas. That is an order," Dean called to his partner.

"We see this through together, Dean. Together we have better odds," Thomas shouted back through the roar. Dean nodded, wiped sweat from his face with the cloth, and fixed it as a mask. Thomas did the same.

With what remained of their strength, both drove forward through the flames and the heat.

Finally the two investigators found the apartment from which the voice was coming, though they could not yet see the child. They pushed into the fire-dominated space and searched. Then the child called out once more, and both finally made out where the voice was coming from. The child had been hiding inside a wardrobe.

An urgent emergency call tore across every radio on the floor.

"Dean, Thomas. I know you're still in there. Get out now! You cannot enter the stairwell anymore. The front ceiling has collapsed. There is a fire escape on the rear side of your floor. Move! That is an order. Get out!" The incident commander's voice was ragged. Then a second voice broke onto the channel. Louiz.

"Out, both of you! You help no one by dying in there. Out of there immediately. That is a direct order!" Louiz barked.

"Louiz. There is a small child in here. We are not leaving without bringing the child to safety," Dean answered his

superior clearly. Before he could stow the radio, a section of burning ceiling dropped and buried the wardrobe beneath it. The wardrobe in which the small child had just been crying for help.

Thomas was the first to break free from the shock, which lasted what felt like an eternity. Dean stood rooted. He could not move a millimeter. He could not take his eyes off the collapsed ceiling. He could not comprehend what had just happened in front of him. The child he had come to save, who had been only a few feet away, was gone. The child had been barely older than his son Ilon was at the time.

Thomas had to physically drag Dean away from the spot to keep him from being buried in the fire as well. With what remained of their strength, both managed to reach the fire escape and get out to safety. Neither has ever learned to this day who the small child's parents are. Thomas was able to recover, over time. Dean was not. The guilty conscience moved into him and never left. His wife and children tried to take the weight from him, though they loved him as much as he loved them. But they could not reach what had been sealed off inside him. After that day he was never the same, and he threw himself into work even more than before. As if a part of him had died in that apartment and never come back out. The nightmares still visit him today.

They knock at Louiz's door. A beat. Then the word to enter. Both step through. The office is slightly cooler than the stairwell and smells of fresh coffee and lacquered wood. "Chief. What do we have?" Louiz looks up from the desk and takes them in for a moment before answering. "Used to be faster, Thomas. Sit down, men. I'll brief you on what I know, and on what you're supposed to do," Louiz begins, his tone serious from the first word. A fresh cup of coffee sits before him, steaming quietly.

Both take seats across the desk and hold their notebooks ready. The work surface here is significantly more elegant

than anything on their own floor. Finest teak, cleanly lacquered. Louiz is enthusiastic about art and all things extravagant. A writing pad, a few files, and several pens sit in front of the screen where he works his cases. The desk is populated with small art figures made from glass, stone, and various other materials, each one placed with deliberate care.

"Men. Here is what I know, which is not much. We received several calls from extremely distressed passersby who reported a man lying completely disfigured in the alley near the Hotel Belara. Here is a recording from one of the callers," the police chief announces, rising from his chair and crossing to the right side of the extravagantly furnished office. He presses a few buttons to replay one of the latest emergency calls received. A female voice, breathing hard, tries to describe what she is witnessing.

"Hello? Is this the special command or the police? Please, I desperately need help," the woman says, her voice breaking. "I don't know what to do. It's so horrible. I am walking along the promenade of the Hotel Belara right now and had to, oh God, this is so embarrassing, step aside to relieve myself briefly. In the alley I walked into, I saw a somewhat heavyset man lying in the corner. Face down."

A pause. The sound of a breath being steadied against itself. Knuckles dragging across a wet cheek.

"Oh my God. Everything is full of blood. The blood has already congealed on the asphalt. He must have been lying there a while because it was no longer welling from his open skull. Oh God, what should I do? I think he is dead. He is not breathing. Help me. What should I do?"

The caller's voice is extremely desperate and agitated. It is unmistakable that this person is in an extreme and threatening situation she cannot cope with on her own. The call is, like all others, recorded and archived directly upon receipt, as is customary for everything in Meridas 5. The state knows everything about everyone. This is precisely how crime rates

have been driven to a record low, at the expense of privacy and data protection for every person living here. Officers in the F11-SK have long developed a correspondingly dark gallows humor on the subject.

"Judging by what was said, this person is almost certainly dead. No patrol car is on site yet, as the case was forwarded directly to us after the first call came in. Your job is simple. Go to the supposed corpse and confirm what we are dealing with. Also make sure this is not a stunt from someone in the underground, a deliberate distraction designed to pull our attention while something else happens somewhere else. I do not assume it is a murder. The last recorded murder was approximately fifteen years ago. I worked that case and investigated it personally. I want you back here in three hours. Men, I rely on you and I know I can. Any questions?" The police chief leans back and crosses his arms, gaze settling on Dean and Thomas in turn. The wall clock ticks in the silence behind him. A moment of absolute stillness.

Dean and Thomas look at each other, partly questioning, partly aware that what awaits them could be one of two things: a real murder case, or, as has happened before, a very carefully prepared human-sized mannequin transformed into a realistic-looking body with cosmetics and props. It has happened in this city before. Dean, as is well known of him, is the first to find usable words.

"The questions will arise at the scene. For now, none. We head out immediately," Dean replies without elaboration, and closes his notebook. Thomas closes his at the same moment. Both stand. Both move toward the door. Louiz sends them off with one final note.

"If I may give you a tip: if the callers' accounts prove accurate, do not eat too heavily beforehand. Whatever is lying in that alley sounds badly mangled. Dismissed, and close the door behind you," Louiz commands.

The two investigators leave the room and move directly to

the building's transport center. All patrol cars are currently occupied. It makes no difference. People have not routinely driven their own vehicles for a long time in this city, unless there is no other option. The rail system handles everything. Both settle into a Transpo-Pod and enter the target coordinates. Shortly thereafter the pod seals up, fires its engine, and carries them smoothly toward their destination at the Hotel Belara.

The city outside the windows, Meridas 5, looks like most cities in these times. Deserted in the broad sense. The occasional Transpo-Pod gliding past on the rail, very little life moving on the street below. At intervals along the wider boulevards, info pillars have been installed to promote family life. For years, the campaign has run: the family as the highest good of humanity. Robots that only loosely resemble humans demonstrate leisure activities in scripted loops: ball games, embracing figures, laughter performed on command.

The city looks dark and cold even where the light falls on it. Everywhere, neon signs hum their sad advertisement songs. People, when they appear on the streets at all, appear only during daylight hours. Though drones have taken over most delivery and logistics work, a residual number of street-level shops still exist where people can pick up everyday goods in person. As a general rule, however, delivery by drone has replaced it, one reason why empty retail spaces are put up for rent over and over again and stay empty.

The Transpo-Pod moves smoothly and quietly over the streets toward its destination. Dean looks out the window. Thomas watches the city scroll past on the other side. Neither says anything. There is nothing yet to say.

CHAPTER 4

NO MISTAKES PERMITTED

A heavy, muscular figure with cropped dark hair and a white suit stands bent over a pool table, cue in hand, killing time with it, the same controlled tension in every shot. The smell of cigars and expensive alcohol hangs in the air, thick and familiar. He has to lean awkwardly to play, his height making the table look like it belongs to a different room. The giant waits impatiently for his two men. Mildly irritated, he sinks ball after ball into the pockets and checks the wall clock at regular intervals. The minute hand moves relentlessly forward and gives him nothing back.

Despite the coiled posture, his game is flawless. Karl and Hank were supposed to report back fifteen minutes ago. Each of the four sides of the pool table is decorated with golden sculptures drawn from various mythologies. First-timers walk in and don't say anything for a few seconds. Katanas on the walls. Weapons in the cabinet. Gold wherever you look. Nothing in this room was left to chance. Every detail was designed and placed to inspire respect quickly, without effort, and without negotiation.

Dressed in his fine white suit as though he has come

directly from a business meeting, the man rolls up his sleeves with a short snort of irritation as the door opens behind him. His two enforcers enter silently, heads bowed. The last ball he needs to pocket sits perfectly in front of its pocket. To someone who did not know this man, he might read as a respectable businessman. He carries his massive frame with control and dominance. When he is not angry, when nothing has gone wrong, you can usually speak with him in a reasonable tone without needing to calculate your exit. Today is not one of those days. There is a palpable danger in the air that tightens with every step. Still turned with his back to the two, he begins in an aggressive tone.

"What held you two morons up that you dare to arrive late? You had clear instructions. Your job was to be here fifteen minutes ago to report on the progress of your assignment. Did you do what I instructed you to do, you miserable failures? Or do I have to remind you two once more who has the balls in this outfit?" the giant mocks them in a loud voice that fills the room.

The tougher of the two, Karl, steps forward and begins to speak with his head still bowed. "Sorry, Boss. We had to take some detours on the way back due to certain occurrences, but we eliminated that damned traitor. He got the compound injected, but he still fought back until it took effect. In the process, he stumbled backward off the roof of the hotel. He will not pose a problem in the future. He was only an ordinary human. He could not have survived the fall from the roof of the Belara. We told you that you could rely on us. That rat of a gynecologist isn't talking to anyone anymore. His secrets fell into the depths with him, and if I might add..."

In less than a fraction of a second, before Karl can properly finish his sentence, the burly figure spins with lightning speed. A hard blow cracks through the room. Karl collapses immediately. Hank stands frozen to the spot. Everything

inside him is screaming. Just from watching and from the sound alone, he feels the blow in his own body.

His lips stay closed. He knows exactly what will happen if a single word slips out. Hank breathes so quietly the giant doesn't register him. He swallows his saliva, which feels like swallowing broken glass. His boss steps over to Karl, turns him onto his back, and tells him in a cold, calm, almost casual tone to stop bleeding on his marble floor immediately. "You won't stop bleeding, huh? You'll see what you get out of that, you filthy maggot!" the giant roars at him. The spotlight at the side of the room casts both shadows onto the wall, which grows increasingly red. Blood drop upon blood drop falls and paints a bizarre artwork on the wall while a metallic smell bleeds into the layered notes of alcohol and cigar smoke.

Every single blow lands like a gunshot and makes the floor vibrate beneath Hank's soles. The force coming down on Karl is beyond imagining. The room echoes with screams of pain, splintering wood, and breaking bones. Hank cannot manage to turn his eyes away from the martyrdom happening to his partner. Shocked, his body trembling, he watches wound after wound open on Karl. Where there had been a face, there are now only deep, ruinous gashes that will mark him permanently. You would not be able to say who it was without already knowing. Hank tries slowly to reach for some composure. "Boss..." he stammers, a thin attempt to intervene.

"What the hell is it? You are not supposed to interrupt while I am showing Karl how I feel about mistakes and impudence. This pile of filth can be glad I do not have a baseball bat in my hand right now," comes the reply in a suddenly calm and conversational tone that does not fit the moment at all.

The boss rises from his victim, walks over to the table with the trophies, and pours himself a drink. Standing at the bar, he looks down at himself and takes a deep breath. From Karl,

only a faint wheezing can be heard. Still alive, but already numbed past anything he can articulate, every movement costing him strength he does not have. At the last edge of consciousness, he manages to turn over. He tries, with what remains, to crawl toward the door.

"You ruined my drink. You ruined my mood. And worst of all, you ruined my suit with your blood. Look at it. It is covered in blood. Your blood!" The giant works himself up and does not stop. "I just had the girl at reception pick this up from the dry cleaner this morning! You think this is funny? You think I'm a joke?"

Enraged, the boss reaches for one of the golden trophies he won in shooting competitions. The calm and relaxed surface washes away completely. He walks directly toward Karl, who is still trying to refill his lungs with deep, labored breaths. He does not hurry. He moves slowly, like a predator in the last few steps before it tears its prey apart, calculating at what angle to strike for the greatest damage.

Before Karl can get his hands under him with his last strength, the back of his skull is struck full force with the trophy. The blow leaves a gaping wound immediately. More violent strikes rain down on the helpless man. Hank on the other side sees only blurred movement and hears desperate sounds that grow progressively quieter. It becomes harder and harder to look, but he does not dare look away, out of fear of what happens if he does. Karl ranked above him in the hierarchy. What would happen to Hank if he made a mistake? He forces himself to stare forward, nearly lifeless in his stillness, even as tears push against the back of his eyes.

A telephone rings. The boss releases the body, sets the trophy inscribed with "Gold Shot" quietly aside, and picks up the receiver. His voice changes completely as he speaks into it. Friendly, easy, a different man. "Yes, Cobalt here. Yes. Of course. Yes, the assignment was carried out. Of course. I am coming right away. See you shortly, Monsieur Clerice."

Cobalt stands, commands Hank to clean up and dispose of the trash, and tidy the room. He has to change clothes before going to Monsieur Clerice. He disappears down the hallway at a quick stride.

Hank stands there, stunned. He looks down at the body of his partner. Just this morning, before they went out to carry out the assignment, the two of them had sat together at their regular bakery.

Just a few hours ago, Karl had laughed, licked powdered sugar off his thumb, and said: "Hank, you have to show up in a suit when I ask Sibylle the question. You are going to be my best man. No excuses."

This morning they were laughing and talking about the future. Now Hank is alone in a room that smells of blood and money. He looks around for something that could help him transport what remains of his friend. After a long search that turns up nothing useful, he grabs Karl by the ankles and drags him toward the back exit, where bodies are as a rule incinerated or dissolved in acid.

"I am sorry, Karl. Today it was you. Tomorrow it could be me. Save a spot for me up at the bar when the time comes. I will miss you, buddy," Hank says, walking. He lifts the body and drops it into the acid vat. The clothing is consumed immediately. A chemical cloud rises. The body dissolves slowly, turning the acid red. He goes back into the house, retrieves a cleaning cart, and with a bowed head begins to work the game room clean.

CHAPTER 5

LOST IN THOUGHT

Dr. Ramez stands behind David Dean, who gazes through the large street-facing window into a rain-storm. The rain strikes the massive glass front of the psychological practice like a steady drumroll. Occasionally the drumming breaks apart for a lightning flash and a rolling clap of thunder. Dr. Ramez's practice occupies the fifth floor of an outer district of Meridas 5. Out here, compared directly to the center, things are somewhat quieter. Nevertheless, here as in every other part of the city, countless neon signs serve as glaring advertisement surfaces wherever a surface is available.

The further one moves into the outer rings of Meridas 5, the thinner the traffic becomes. Most residents avoid everything beyond the first four districts, where the crime rate still seems manageable by comparison. The Fifth District marks the threshold where civilization ends and the law of the strongest begins. Doctors practice here who work for little money or keep open appointment slots because few patients wander into these gloomy corners of Meridas 5.

As so often, Dean is here for his weekly therapy session, working through past events and the weight of his trauma.

He has gone through three therapists in the last few years. Many did not believe they could help him effectively or sustainably. Only Dr. Ramez possesses enough ambition to keep trying, no matter what it costs and how much of his own energy he puts into it.

As in many sessions before this one, the fire in the high-rise in the Third District is today's subject. Dean still struggles with his guilty conscience. The death of the child presses down on him so heavily that he regularly suffers from sleep disorders and depression. Dr. Ramez asks if Dean is ready to begin. Dean nods slowly and makes himself comfortable on the black sofa. In front of him sits a small side table with a glass of water and a box of tissues. As Dean looks at the water, his hand trembles slightly. His body wants something entirely different. His thoughts crave Scotch.

The practice is sparse, like most in this part of the city. One room, a desk, the small side table, two chairs, and the black sofa. Plain walls decorated with certificates and credentials. Here one finds only what is strictly necessary to receive a patient. From the furnishings alone one can tell that the practice has seen better days. Everything is dusted clean, but the furniture looks several decades old and shows every year.

Dr. Ramez sits down across from Dean to speak with his patient at eye level. He glances at his wristwatch and notes the date and time. To ease the beginning, they start with simple relaxation and breathing exercises before Dr. Ramez guides Dean into a deeply relaxed state through medical hypnosis.

The therapist asks Dean to relive once more the situation that has haunted him night after night in his nightmares for years. Dean is to try to describe what happened, precisely and in sequence, and how he experienced it from moment to moment.

"Pay attention to as many details as possible, David. What does the place look like? What does it smell like? How do you

feel from moment to moment?" Dr. Ramez guides him through the hypnosis.

After several minutes, he brings Dean back from the trance state and goes through with him what his subconscious revealed in those moments.

Everywhere Dean looked, bright, dancing flames raged, and unbearable heat rushed at him from all sides. The air was so hot that every breath burned in his lungs like liquid lead. The sweetish, pungent smell of melting plastic stuck to his palate and would not leave. He heard the crying and calling of a child not far off, but he could not locate the source. Every cry made his heart beat faster and harder. He had to save the child. He had to. The fire raged higher and more menacingly. Again and again he heard the pleading cries until they found the apartment from which the calls were coming. The voice was loud and clear for both of them. Because of the fire and the rising, thick plumes of smoke, however, neither investigator could see where the child had hidden itself.

After Dean and Thomas searched the room, they located a nearby wardrobe from which the initially loud calls were growing gradually quieter. Before they could get the child out of its wooden hiding place, a burning section of ceiling came down and buried it. The screams stopped within a single second, and with them something snapped in Dean that he has never been able to put back together. He stood there. Unable to grasp what had just happened. The fire raged up beside him. Had Thomas not dragged him away, he would have burned.

"That is how it happened, isn't it, David?" the therapist asks. He has walked Dean through this more than once. David Dean had every form of professional help available to him. Yet to this day he holds himself responsible for the child's death. A guilt he cannot forgive himself for. To this day he hears the pleading in his ear at quiet moments. The guilty conscience has grown so heavy that the child visits him in his

nightmares every night. And the child does not even accuse him. Dean is simply reminded, again and again, every night, that he could not save the boy from being buried in the flames. He has been carrying a mountain of guilt and shame ever since. He has never been able to face the parents. Never told them that he was the last person near their child.

"What matters most is that you forgive yourself, David. For your own sake and for your family's sake. You did everything in your power. Some things aren't in our hands. I am certain, and I know, that you could not have prevented it. Do not blame yourself, David," Dr. Ramez says quietly, and holds out a tissue.

Dean stands, turns, and gazes sadly through the large glass window into the persistent rain before he answers.

"Dr. Ramez. That poor boy was barely older than my own son Ilon was at that time. If I had only been a fraction faster. If I had been on scene a little sooner, that boy might still be alive today. He could still be laughing. I would not have failed his parents. He would have grown up and had every chance to make something of himself. How must it feel when you know with certainty that your own son died because someone who is supposed to save lives could not save that poor soul? How much must it torment those parents? And all because I did not see the wardrobe in time to act on it. I have not even been able to tell them personally to this day," Dean confesses, his eyes wet, a suppressed rage running beneath every word.

He lifts both hands in front of his face to hide the shame. Dr. Ramez gives Dean a short moment to collect himself, then stands, moves toward him, and looks at him with understanding in his eyes. He places a hand on Dean's shoulder.

"David, you have been in treatment with me for nearly six months now. I genuinely want to help you become well again and find some closure. I want you to be able to look forward instead of remaining stuck in the past. But you have to help me do that. You have to start forgiving yourself. You have to

understand that you bear no guilt whatsoever for this boy's death. Unfortunately, you wear your pain on the outside, where everyone around you can see it. Your social contacts may not know that you drink, but they almost certainly see your overall state. If I may ask: How are things at home right now?" the doctor wants to know, assessing how acute the risk is of Dean losing his grip entirely.

"At home. It's heavy and quiet. I have buried myself in my work, taking every course and training session I can find just so I do not have to think. That naturally creates a great deal of conflict at home. My wife complains that the children and she barely see my face anymore, that I am no longer approachable. The worst part is: I know all of it. I know. But I cannot do anything about it. I cannot stand the thought that a child died because of me. I feel myself drifting further and further away from my family. There were moments in the office when I had to turn the picture of my family face-down because I could not bear to look at it. In my mind there is only fear, pure fear, that I cannot protect my own children and my wife. She has already threatened to leave. I think Mia is serious. I would understand it. I cannot stand myself anymore."

"Do you want to let your family go, David? Your wife and your children have always been the most important thing in your life. I am seeing that correctly, am I not?" Dr. Ramez tries to lead him back toward the people closest to his heart.

"Yes, of course they are important to me. But I cannot give them what they need, what they deserve. I cannot be a father right now, and even less a loving husband, as long as I have not paid off my debt. Do not misunderstand me. I would die for my family. But right now I just want to be alone with my thoughts. I will not find peace in this life. I am certain of that," Dean replies in a quiet, stoic tone that holds very little room for argument.

The therapist looks at him full of worry and answers with a lowered voice. "That sounds very concerning, David. I am

worried that you are losing complete contact with active life. As a therapist and as a father myself, I am asking you: Take care of yourself and of your family. I have spoken with each of them, and every person in your family wants to help you, wants to give you the support you need. Nobody sees a bad man or a bad father when they look at you. Everyone would give everything, immediately, just to make you feel a little better, even if only slightly. Your children miss you, David. Please do not gamble this away." The doctor draws a brief breath before closing the session. "The hour is unfortunately over. Next Tuesday then, yes? I am not giving up on you. We are all getting through this together. I promise you that."

Several more sessions pass in which David is repeatedly brought face to face with the boy's death. But the trauma he carries seems beyond healing. Trauma therapies and antidepressants bring him no further. At home, the situation grows increasingly unbearable for everyone involved. The burning taste of straight Scotch is the only thing that briefly silences the echo of the screams in his head.

In the office, the dust on the overturned picture frame grows thicker week by week. At home, empty alcohol bottles accumulate. With every sip Dean becomes more aggressive, more irritable, until one night, for no apparent reason, he hurls an empty Scotch bottle against the wall with full force. His wife and children wake from it. Bit by bit he neglects his family further. When he is home, he is barely reachable. He has sunk too deep into his own interior world.

The only thing he stays faithful to is his work. After some time, his wife Mia makes good on her threat. She moves with the children to a small plot of land outside, roughly a two-hour drive from the capital, into a simple but cleanly furnished country house. Here they find, even though they painfully miss their father and husband, a little peace. A life with less luxury but more contentment. They begin growing vegetables and fruit themselves. Though much of the soil is

scorched and dry, with honest work quite a bit can still be coaxed into the ground successfully. The Dean family soon calls two goats and a cow their own. All told, they lead a reasonably content life out there. Quite unlike the abandoned David Dean.

Dean sits alone in his apartment in one of the run-down quarters, staring at the rubble of his own existence. The silence of the empty rooms is unbearable. For a long time he has wanted someone to come home to in the evenings. Someone he could talk to. A person who could show him he is not the monster he believes himself to be. In the end, the man who once shone with top marks and clean operations lost everything. Lost it all over something he could not have changed.

Alcohol becomes his constant companion through the lonely, dark hours. Only on duty does one experience Dean sober and fully functional. Anyone who does not know him would never guess he carries private devastation. He has learned to wear a near-impenetrable mask the moment the job begins. Hardly anyone knows what moves behind his facade, or how deeply broken he truly is. Nobody can come close to imagining what it actually looks like inside him.

“Dean! Hey, are you asleep? You are completely gone. I have been talking to you and getting nothing back. We are almost at our destination. We should start getting ready and gathering our equipment,” his younger partner calls, pulling him back.

Dean starts up from his thoughts, disoriented. Before his eyes, the soot-blackened face that Thomas had worn in the middle of that fire still flickers for a half-second. Then the sterile, cold light of the Transpo-Pod wipes the image away.

Thomas gives him a short, light pat on the shoulder. Both

look out the window of the Transpo-Pod. As so often in Meridas 5: gray street canyons, washed in the cold light of humming neon advertisements. On the surface the city appears clean enough. In the side alleys, its true face shows itself: gray, dirty, and given up on. The Transpo-Pod slows to a halt. Both prepare for what is waiting for them a few seconds from now.

CHAPTER 6

BEHIND THE ANTI-GAWKER MESH

Having arrived at their destination, the two officers take stock before doing anything else. It has been years since there was a premeditated murder in this city, which means nobody here has a playbook for what comes next.

"Thomas. First priority: we cordon off the entire area. The view for outsiders needs to go. No one has been here yet to deal with the victim. The crowd is already growing. I do not want us disturbed while we work, and I do not want parents walking their children past this and accidentally contaminating evidence. Beyond that, whatever is lying in that alley is not something anyone needs to see. We spare them the impression where we can," Dean says, clean and professional, standing at the edge of the side alley with a checking glance.

Thomas nods in agreement and pops open the trunk of the Transpo-Pod. Their standard equipment sits stacked inside, ready to go. While Thomas pulls out the gear, Dean approaches the onlookers already clustered near the scene and, politely but without room for discussion, moves them along. Some go easily. Others require a firmer word. Within a

few minutes the crime scene is clear of civilians and the work can begin in earnest.

The city formally authorized officer violence against civilians years ago, after the crime rate spiked hard enough that someone in government decided restraint was the wrong answer. Dean remembers one particular operation with perfect clarity. He had been stationed amid a protest when he was attacked from behind and thrown hard to the ground. His partner at the time fared worse. Several assailants beat him so severely that he died in the hospital that same night. After that incident, the question of how to better protect officers was taken seriously. Bodycams mounted on every officer were part of the answer. The footage quickly and reliably demonstrated what the department had long maintained: that excessive violence in those situations almost always originated with civilians. Rebel groups, demonstrators, street criminals looking to build a name for themselves in the alleys of Meridas 5. Only through these measures could the accumulating problems be managed. The relative peace and quiet in the city today rests on those methods.

On-scene death sentences are not unusual. The senior officer or squad leader can pronounce and carry one out right there. What many in the department prefer not to say out loud is that certain colleagues pass these sentences from pure arbitrariness, to demonstrate authority rather than enforce justice. Such incidents are usually covered up thoroughly enough that no questions surface. Dean, by contrast, has always tried to resolve situations by diplomatic means first. Thomas, for his part, frequently exercises the right to act as accuser and judge on scene simultaneously, though he has never personally carried out a death sentence.

"Make sure you draw the sensor radius wide enough for the Anti-Gawker Mesh. We need space, quiet, and above all, no gawkers," Dean says to Thomas, who has just arrived at the scene lugging the heavy case.

Thomas lifts five crystal-like sensors from inside the black case and positions them at roughly two-meter intervals in a ring around the site. He steps back, checks the alignment, and shows Dean the result. "I think this radius will do it, Dean. Activating the nano-mesh now. You should step inside the circle. I do not want you getting hurt."

It has happened before. Colleagues have taken severe injuries while erecting the protective wall, known in special command slang as the Anti-Gawker Mesh. The technology is advanced, and equally dangerous. Anything caught in the path of the beams at the moment of activation is severed without warning. Usually it is shreds of clothing or, in worse cases, fingers that get cut off in the process. Modern medicine reattaches such things without difficulty, but the worst accident on record came two years prior: a drunk bystander, despite multiple warnings, walked directly into an active mesh setup and was sliced horizontally into two clean halves. After that, the protocol for physically clearing the perimeter before activation became considerably more aggressive.

From the outside, the Anti-Gawker Mesh presents as a solid gray wall, as though a sturdy barrier had been thrown up in record time. With the effective stopping power of several centimeters of steel, the mesh holds any approach. Inside the perimeter, the setup is a different world entirely. The inner surface of the wall functions as a fully equipped, large-format display system. The technology nowadays equates to a compact command center and communications hub combined.

The entire wall surface acts as a giant monitor with multiple functions. Investigators can run most tasks directly on site as though working from a full laboratory. Findings go straight into case files without detour. Photos and video feed directly into the record. Inside the perimeter, a stable uplink provides constant access to headquarters data.

Data exchange with external units runs in real time,

meaning colleagues at other stations immediately see anything entered and can begin processing it in parallel. The first standard procedure when investigating a potential murder is the bioscan of the victim. Dean calls the function up on the wall display and initiates the body scan. The first setback comes quickly: the victim is not a registered criminal. The only certainties established at this point are that the person is dead and that the trajectory of the fall is consistent with the roof of the hotel above them.

Dean takes a slow look around, getting his bearings. He examines the victim and the ground around the body, trying to put his impressions into words that will hold up. The sight leaves him outwardly cold. Inside, his mind is already running through scenarios: what might have happened here, and above all why. He opens a new case file on the wall display and begins entering initial notes, using the digital keyboard projected on the surface. The voice input feature has been there since day one. He has never once used it.

The victim, male, white, approximately fifty years of age, lies lifeless on the street. Presumably fell from the roof of the adjacent hotel. Found face-up. Ruptured eyeballs with blood pooled beneath. Other notable features: slight belly, smartly dressed. Location: corner alley of the Hotel Belara. Time of death, based on external indicators, estimated at three to four hours prior. Proceeding now with automatic deep-scan before manual search of the body.

Thomas steps to one of the monitors and instructs the system to initiate the deep-scan. In this procedure, a laser traverses the entire body, X-rays it, and analyzes the blood chemistry simultaneously. Scanning units extend from the wall in a smooth mechanical arc. A calm, synthetic female voice begins its report:

"Person unknown. Age unknown. Multiple fractures to the back and skull. Blood type AB positive. Blood laced with toxin. Attempting to identify toxin class."

Thomas looks across at Dean to confirm he caught it all. "

Dean. Did you hear that? Our unknown friend here was poisoned. What does that mean to you? Did he fall because the poison hit him up top?" he asks, visibly thrown.

"Hard to picture, but it has to be on the table," Dean replies, quieter than his usual register. "When we're done here, we go up to the roof. There may be something up there that tells us what happened," he adds, the thought already sharpening into something.

The synthetic voice returns as the scanning units retract:

"Scan complete. Toxin identified with 68 percent certainty. High-dose nerve agent, designation NV5 Variant 1X. Mechanism: paralyzing and catastrophic damage to neural systems. Additional effects: boiling blood, collapsing organs, bursting eyeballs, certain death. No known antidote. Symptom onset within seconds of exposure. Victim, with high probability, was already dead prior to impact with the ground."

Both officers look at each other. Thomas begins to pace in a slow circle, working through the information. Dean gets there first.

"That was no ordinary nerve agent, Thomas. That is the material the government uses for on-site executions once a death sentence is confirmed and final. It is not identical to the government compound, but it is clearly a highly developed derivative of the state poison. How did this man get hold of something like that?" Dean stares at the body, the disbelief in his voice real but controlled.

Thomas crouches and examines the victim's neck. Something catches his eye. He points with one finger to a specific spot he wants Dean to see. "No idea. But look here. On the carotid. Puncture mark. Syringe, most likely. My read: he tried to take his own life. Injected it himself. The onset hit him before he could brace for it and he went over the railing backward. Accident, not murder. That is how I would write it up. Dean, I think we're done here. Let's move. I'll buy lunch on

the way back," Thomas proposes, already starting to move toward the equipment case.

Dean's hand lands on Thomas's shoulder and stops him.

"Wait. We still do not know who this man is or whether it was genuinely an accident. You are moving far too fast. Or are you just looking to clock out? Do not be lazy. Let me check whether he has a wallet or any ID on him. We cannot write 'John Doe' and call it closed," Dean says, pushing back.

Thomas makes no effort to hide his irritation at Dean's persistence. He knows his partner, though, and knows that when Dean locks onto something, the path of least resistance is to let him run. Both end up bent over the body, looking at each other, the unspoken negotiation hanging in the air between them over who is going to put their hands into a dead man's pockets.

"I'll do it, Thomas. You keep watch and make sure I do not miss anything," Dean settles it himself.

Dean works through every pocket methodically. No wallet. What he does find is a matchbook from a local association: the Gynecologists' Association. Thomas has straightened up again and resumed adding notes to the case file. All gynecologists in Meridas 5 are organized in this association. There are very few of them, which makes Dean quietly confident that at least one member might be able to identify the body.

He decides to photograph the corpse in detail and approach the association directly, to ask whether anyone can place the face. In the best case, it might also tell him where this person practiced, assuming he is indeed a gynecologist. Without a name, the case goes nowhere. Dean is still quietly puzzled by his partner's impulse to wrap things up and go home, but he lets it pass. He tucks the matchbook into his inside coat pocket. He is already certain it will matter.

If I were following procedure to the letter, this find would go directly into the record. But I want to understand what it means before I announce it.

Dean straightens up and tells Thomas what comes next. "I am going to try to get onto the roof of the hotel and have a look around. There must be surveillance recordings up there, either from the hotel system or from the public cameras covering the area. I may be able to establish what happened and whether anyone else was involved. I cannot close this as an accident without being certain. You understand that, Thomas?"

Thomas sighs and rolls his eyes in a single fluid motion. He suggests Dean just let it go since, in his reading, the case is already solved. They negotiate briefly and reach an agreement: Thomas drives back to the precinct, notifies the cleanup crew to transport the body, and starts on the report. Dean goes to the hotel roof on his own.

Thomas retracts the mesh, collects the crystal sensors, and stows everything in the case. He steps into a waiting Transpod and heads toward headquarters. Dean walks the short distance to the foyer entrance of the Hotel Belara on foot.

The Hotel Belara has one defining reputation: pure luxury and deliberate decadence. The entrance does not understate this. Two large pillars of the finest marble flank the portal, trimmed with fine gold details. As Dean steps inside over a deep red carpet so soft it absorbs the sound of his steps, an intense wave of rose scent closes around him. The material underfoot is among the most exclusive on the open market. Beyond the gold-forged door, the foyer opens up.

Everything here is built from the noblest materials. Soft music circulates from somewhere he cannot pinpoint. An artificial waterfall runs the full length of one wall. In the deep basin below it, various fish trace their slow rounds. Fine wood paneling, gold, silver, and plush carpet dominate every surface. The overhead chandeliers are dressed with pure

crystal. Even the hotelier, dressed in a tailored suit from a major fashion house, approaches in three languages and inquires about the guest's desires before Dean has taken two steps.

"Sir, welcome to the Hotel Belara, where every discerning dream finds its home. If you would be so kind as to share your requests or desires, I will make every effort to address them comprehensively. Our guests' satisfaction is very close to our hearts. Only by asking directly can we fulfill every open wish. No guest of ours should leave with anything unresolved."

Dean, who waited without visible impatience for the man to finish, opens his badge and gets to the point in a quiet, cooperative tone. "A body was found in the side alley. All indicators suggest the man fell from your roof. I require access to the roof and to the hotel's video recordings covering that area. As quickly as possible. Every minute gives a potential perpetrator more of a lead. One murder is enough. There does not need to be another."

He deliberately withholds his conviction that this was, by every indicator, a targeted killing. A nerve agent injected directly into the victim's neck rules out an accident in his mind. But withholding the conclusion and appearing to leave the question open has always produced better cooperation in Dean's investigations. Nobody wants to be associated with capital crimes. People typically fall over themselves to help the special command when they are not already implicated.

This man does not fall over himself. He holds still, says nothing, and looks Dean up and down with a measured disdain before his eyes land on the badge. Looking closer, something shifts in his expression. He fusses with his cufflinks. He is buying time. He reads Dean's name a second time.

"I am sorry, Mr. Dean. Unfortunately, there is nothing I can do for you in this matter. Our procedures for situations like this are clearly defined. No access to video data, and no access

to the roof for security reasons. This is for your protection and for the protection of our guests."

Dean had not expected a flat refusal this firm. "Is there a supervisor who can override this? The general manager, perhaps? What you are doing right now constitutes obstruction of an ongoing investigation. Depending on the circumstances, that is a criminal matter. I am asking you once more to cooperate," Dean says, the emphasis now unmistakable.

At that moment a second, more polished figure steps in behind the reception counter. He does not acknowledge his colleague with so much as a glance. His full attention settles on Dean. He looks the investigator over with deliberate slowness. "May I assist you? I trust my front desk manager has already done his best to address your needs. If not, I am truly sorry," he says with a sigh that manages to sound simultaneously concerned and condescending.

Dean keeps his composure. "Strictly speaking, your employee is currently obstructing a special command investigation. I need access to the roof and to the hotel's video recordings in the area of the roof. The more angles available, the more complete the picture."

"As Mr. Thomson has certainly explained, that is unfortunately not something we can arrange. Executive management has forbidden it for everyone, whether guest or police. No exceptions. However, I am happy to request a special authorization from the owner. This will take some time, as the owner is not currently on the premises. Whom may I announce?"

"David Dean. Special command."

"Mr. Dean. I want to be transparent with you: the probability of approval is very low. I will do my best and contact the special command as soon as I have a response. I wish you a good day."

Dean takes his leave politely and walks out of the Hotel Belara. He is barely clear of the door when the slickly dressed

manager reaches for the telephone and presses speed dial nine. The line connects after a few seconds.

"Boss. The special command wants access to the roof and to the video recordings."

"Do you have a name?"

"Yes. A David Dean from the special command. F11-SK, based on the gear."

"F11-SK. David Dean." A pause. "I will handle it. Let us see what we can find out about him. Good work, Paul. Tell Alec to erase the tapes once he is finished on the roof. I do not want this Dean getting ideas about pulling the recordings through indirect channels." The line goes dead.

AFTERWORD

This is where the free preview ends. Want to know what happens next? The full book, *Meridas 5 – Volume 1: A Noir Thriller*, will be released by October/November 2026.

Visit www.jonasolv.com/en/ to stay updated on my progress. You'll also be the first to know the moment pre-orders go live for the english version of Meridas 5! Just bookmark the site and keep an eye on it. Feel free to stop by my social media channels as well.

- Jona Solv

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Behind the name Jona Solv lies no traditional literary background, but the perspective of a dedicated IT professional. By day, witnessing the relentless tide of digitalization, data streams, and algorithms in the fashion industry—by night, a chronicler channeling these observations into the shadows of a near future. Rooted in Germany’s Main-Franconia region, these worlds come alive where code collides with gritty reality.

Shaped by cinematic masterpieces like *Blade Runner* and a deep passion for classic sci-fi and dark film noir, it was a single, intense lucid dream that laid the foundation. The sensation of damp asphalt and cold machine oil felt so palpable that the world of Meridas 5 and the story of investigator David Dean never let go.

This technological mindset feeds directly into the craft: *Meridas 5* is not drafted in conventional word processors, but engineered like software in clean Markdown. Even the marketing infrastructure operates in the background like an autonomous, automated compute node. As the line between human and machine blurs, Jona Solv remains behind at the terminal—to document the truth.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Ein besonderer Dank gilt meinen Freunden und Testlesern, die David Deans Weg kritisch begleitet haben. Ebenso möchte ich die technologische Unterstützung durch moderne KI-Systeme erwähnen, die mir in diesem Prozess als unermüdlicher Sparringspartner beim Lektorat und World-building zur Seite standen. Die Geschichte von Meridas 5 ist ein Zusammenspiel aus menschlicher Vision und digitalen Werkzeugen – ein Spiegel der Zukunft, über die ich schreibe.

