

THE DESTROYER

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PHOTON BOOKS

The Destroyer

Traveling backwards through the corridors of time, Agent 77 felt the energy expended from his body with each passing second. Surrounded by a barrage of blurred light, the process of being transported through history was always an intense visceral experience.

The Agent knew well that the further one traveled not only took longer, but was also more physically draining. It was a reality of his work that, unlike nearly everything else, he had no control over. Regardless, he was determined to complete his assignment for the Echelon.

His mission remained clear.

After what seemed like minutes, the Agent felt the process slowing down. The corridor-like flow all around him altered once again and moments later, his surroundings stabilized. Leaving him dizzy and disoriented, the man fell to his knees, taking several deep breaths before looking around.

Slowly raising his head, his eyes began to adjust and he felt the heat of sunlight. Coming into focus was a nearby ranch. He confirmed the correct location and time.

Los Alamos, New Mexico. 1940.

Seeing a partial desert landscape with the sun setting in the distance, the temperature was hot. Scorching. Not too surprising, he thought. After all, this was the American southwest and it was summer.

Regaining his strength, the Agent readied himself and proceeded. As he approached the residence, there was only one visible automobile. The owner of the house, his target, would now be alone.

At least he hoped.

Agent 77 soon found an easy access into the building, infiltrating it with little effort, and quietly began to search it out. As he did, he heard music playing softly, originating from an obsolete machine he had learned was called a record player. Following the source of the noise, he was led into a large study area where thousands of books lined the walls. A man sat in a chair with his back to him, reading.

It was his target - Julius Robert Oppenheimer.

The Agent knew the American theoretical physicist was the wartime head of the Los Alamos Laboratory. He also knew about the man's achievements in physics, including the Born-Oppenheimer approximation for molecular wavefunctions. He had studied his contributions to the theory of electrons, positrons, nuclear fusion, cosmic rays and even quantum tunneling. It was also a historical fact, Agent 77 silently attested, that Oppenheimer was an inspiration in the field of quantum mechanics and quantum field theory, as well as neutron stars and black holes.

But none of those things mattered. Not in the long run. Especially now.

Through his role in the Manhattan Project during World War II, Oppenheimer would become the father of the atomic bomb, ending the war with detonations on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Hundreds of thousands would die and the events would usher in a series of world events culminating in potential destruction.

That is, if Agent 77 did not intervene.

The invention of the atomic bomb, despite the international motives behind it, was one of the most dangerous creations in the history of mankind. A creation capable of wiping out most all life on Earth. The invention would change the course of human civilization, propelling the world into a new age of darkness.

The Agent's training in world history had been extensive, leaving him with indepth knowledge of events going back to the beginning of recorded time. He had been trained in alternative history as well, as the impact of specific occurrences by the Echelon often changed timelines, which occasionally needed to be reset.

It was not his job to reset things - that was a task for the cleaners. His duty as an agent was to fulfill whatever assignment he was given. This now involved the man sitting before him, fresh in his mind from the briefing just hours before.

Silently, he raised his plasma weapon, aiming it at the back of Oppenheimer's head as music from the record continued to play. The Agent was aware that history recorded Oppenheimer living

for another twenty-seven years.

This would be changed in a matter of moments.

The Agent placed his finger on the biometric trigger, not knowing just how many lives he had taken while working for the Echelon. Sometimes he felt as though he no longer had a conscience, performing what many considered murder; those who had no knowledge of his work. The Agent had once considered himself to be a moral person, but that was long ago. He had stopped contemplating the moral implications of his actions years before and sometimes wondered if there were any.

Perhaps there was no such thing, right and wrong being opinions of a bygone age. Morality seemed like an argument for an antiquated time, his faith firmly placed in those he worked for.

With no hesitation, the Agent pulled the trigger and within seconds, Oppenheimer was dead.

It's done, the Agent silently affirmed, remaining for several moments to make certain his mission was accomplished. He hoped, as did those who sent him, that it would be for the better. Activating his familiar retrieval beacon, the time traveler was soon whipped away, moving towards a future point in earths time line.

William Templar sat alone in the private room of the underground headquarters watching the images on the screen. It was the middle of the night and like many others, he could not sleep.

The United States had gained confirmation some hours earlier than another nuclear strike could

be imminent. Nobody knew how far reaching or deadly it would be this time. Everyone was in the dark together, both figuratively and literally.

Everyone knew this could be the end.

Having turned down the volume to a low level, Templar watched the news broadcast as he sipped a glass of scotch. His eyes dull, his heart sank within him. He had been moved there several weeks earlier, following the latest attack on American soil. Only the most important political, social and scientific figures were deemed worthy enough to be brought here. Located deep within the Rocky Mountains, those within remained completely concealed and protected from the outside world.

The self-sustaining location had been constructed in complete secrecy, taking over a decade to build and costing millions of government dollars. Within, it contained everything necessary for survival, and then some. Currently housing nearly four hundred people, it had the maximum capacity for just over five hundred.

Fresh air, water and food were plentiful here, able to be artificially produced to last for at least a decade. In addition to housing, dining, common and exercise areas, there were offices and even entertainment rooms. The five-level bunker was made to withstand even a direct nuclear blast.

The Cold War had intensified dramatically over the past few years as tension between the US, Russia and China had grown worse.

It was 1973, and although Templar was considered one of the President's most trusted scientific advisers, having served under three

different administrations, he was worried. And he was not the only one.

The last few decades had afforded him with more opportunities than he could have ever dreamed when he was first offered the chance to serve on the Manhattan Project thirty-three years before.

It had been through unfortunate circumstances following Robert Oppenheimer's premature death that the young scientist had been chosen. He rose to become one of the leaders of the project, and in 1951, made the discovery leading to him becoming the father of the atomic bomb.

Now at the age of fifty-nine, Templar felt that not only were his glory days behind him, but also those of the great United States. The mighty nation, once a world super power, was now a shell of its former self. The American dream no longer existed, most forgetting it had ever been a reality to begin with.

The pessimistic outlook was further enhanced by the failing economy. Following the end of World War II, what at first seemed to be a time of peace and prosperity quickly dissipated and the world entered a darker time.

All of the optimism America had felt during the mid to late 1940's was now gone, vanishing after the infamous nuclear detonation in the heart of New York City ten years ago that was now referred to as Black Christmas, or Black Apple; the event occurring on the eve of the holiday and decimating more than most cared to remember.

The attack had taken the United States completely by surprise, shattering the hopes and

dreams of millions of Americans. Thousands had perished in the explosion, and like the subsequent detonations in Los Angeles and Atlanta, the majority of the city still remained in ruins.

In the immediate aftermath of the first explosion, President Kennedy declared a state of emergency. The US infrastructure had been compromised, suffering irreparable damage. The new, world-wide depression, far worse than that of the 1930's, had spiraled into something far worse. Chaos and lawlessness ensued. International trading ceased and many countries were completely cut off from one another.

Templar's thoughts were interrupted as the door opened and one of the President's security guards appeared.

"Hello Markus," he said to the quiet, young man. Templar knew little about him, other than he was ex-military.

"Sir. Is everything alright?" The patriot asked.

Templar held up his glass, forcing a smile. "Right as rain, fine as wine."

Markus nodded in response, scanning the room briefly.

"Is the President sleeping?" Templar asked.

"I believe so, Sir. He's been in his room since ten."

"Ah," he said, wondering how the leader of the nation could sleep at a time like this. He had not been able to sleep more than a few hours at a time since his arrival at his new home. "What do you think about all of this, Markus?"

“This?”

“Yes,” Templar said, motioning to the news broadcast.

“I don't know, sir,” the young man soon replied. “I guess I haven't spent a lot of time thinking about it. Hopefully it'll end soon.”

“I wish I could share your optimism.”

“You don't?”

“Maybe we're instruments of our own destruction,” Templar suggested after a short silence, releasing a subtle laugh. “All of us.”

Markus gave a nod.

“Would you like a drink?” Templar asked, holding up what little drink was left in the glass.

“No Sir, but thank you.”

“Tell me, Markus, do you have a family?” Templar asked.

“Yes sir, parents and a brother.”

“Wife? Kids?”

“No Sir.”

Templar looked down at his drink, rolling the scotch around as he tilted the glass. “If you could be anywhere in the world right now, if things were different, where would you like to be?”

“Maine, Sir. It's where I'm from,” Markus responded.

“Maine,” Templar repeated, having only traveled through the state once, many years before.

“How about you?”

Templar scratched the back of his head. “Vegas.”

“Vegas, Sir?” Markus asked.

“That's right, because what the hell?”

Markus watched as the man took another drink.

“I don't think it matters where we go anymore. We can't escape what's coming.”

There was several moments of silence as Templar fixed his eyes on the broadcast once again.

“If you need anything, sir, I'll be down the hall.”

“Thanks,” Templar said, unable to break his gaze, remembering a private conversation he had shared nearly two decades before with then-president Eisenhower involving a combined idea of establishing a space aeronautical organization. The Soviets had launched the world's first artificial satellite in 1957. This act had served as a challenge to the United States, which perceived the new technology as a potential threat to national security.

Unfortunately, the National Aeronautics and Space Act never made it past the conceptual phase. Templar grieved its stillborn fate, wondering if things might have been different had the organization been established. Perhaps it might have restored some measure of hope to the nation.

Surely it was too late now.

In the midst of yet another World War and teetering on the edge of Armageddon, the United States heralded towards an apocalypse to which it might never recover. It was the truth most Americans had accepted, although many would dare not say aloud. The implications were far too frightening, spelling certain doom not only for the current generation, but also for all that would follow.

Or not, as the case may be.

What if this was the end? Templar wondered. The end of not only his life, but that of countless millions of Americans who also waited in silent desperation, fighting to survive and anticipating the next event that would rock the fallen nation or completely destroy what was left of it.

Releasing an extended sigh, he bowed and raised his glass into the air as if toasting God.

“To *carpe diem*,” he said, before drinking the remaining scotch.

Templar wished there were a way he could go back and somehow fix the things that had led the nation down the dangerous path to this critical juncture. Yet, he did not know how, and even if he did, it was not in his hands.

Templar had never been a man of faith, but of science. The two systems of belief were mutually exclusive in his mind and he had never been able to reconcile them. Still, science had been the catalyst that had brought all of this about. He now wondered if things would be the same had he walked away from Project Y as a young man.

Am I responsible for this? Did I bring this upon us?

They were questions he had asked himself many times, feeling a vague guilt deep within his soul he could no longer ignore.

Pouring himself another glass of scotch, he thought about the many civilizations of old that had fallen and been wiped from the face of the earth – The Mayans, the Babylonians, the Roman Empire...

Lifting his gaze, he looked back to the news broadcast before him. Only minutes later, the lights

would flicker all over the underground bunker, signifying the sum of all fears.

Agent 77 found himself atop an elevated, mountainous location. Arriving from his time voyage, he took several moments to breath in deep; acclimating himself to his new environment.

It had been just a short time ago that he had killed Oppenheimer. The agent learned the assassination had triggered a timeline of events in the wrong direction. His mission, though successful, had failed to move world events ahead in a positive way, as originally intended.

Through the cool breeze and unusual silence, the Agent stood and walked to a nearby clearing. From there, the ruins of a large, American city were visible in the distance. A small, lenticular device on his cuff confirmed he had successfully reached the correct time and place.

Had there been a current calender, it would have confirmed this to be the year 2080. Instead, it was not the familiar history the Agent had learned about and had traveled to many times.

Things had indeed been changed, the death of Robert Oppenheimer propelling a series of events impacting the entire world, and not in the way hoped.

The facts had been swept entirely under the rug, the U.S. Government recording that the man died of a heart attack. History recorded less than ten percent of the world population had survived the nuclear apocalypse that impacted every nation.

But why? He silently asked with a slight

curiosity, but it was not his job to know.

The city before him once known as Denver was now little more than a heap of concrete and steel. It was a visual representation of what every city in the former United States looked like. Scorched earth. There had been no place left untouched.

Instead of departing the place and time, and returning to the Echelon, as he usually did, Agent 77 decided to explore the ruins of the once great city. After hiking down the side of the mountain, he slowly approached from the west. The closer he came to the site, the more devastation he saw.

An eerie silence had settled over the area. Even the winds seemed to cease, as though being held back by a giant, unseen hand.

The Agent walked along the cracked pavement of a street leading into the heart of the dead city. He witnessed a collection of destroyed buildings, broken glass and rusted remains of automobiles. Weeds and vegetation had grown up – nature reclaiming once again.

Other than himself, there was no movement. Life had perished here long ago.

The Agent passed by the outer shell of a vehicle to see human remains in the seat behind the steering wheel. The destruction that occurred here happened fast, killing all human life within mere seconds. Millions of people – men, women and children – had been wiped out.

The Agent wondered if anyone had survived at all. If they had taken refuge underground. Perhaps if they had, they might still be there, he considered.

He dismissed the idea, realizing how unlikely it was.

History now recorded that Denver had been completely wiped out, just as other large cities. The Agent had little doubt mans greatest enemy was himself; the evil residing in the hearts and minds of men. The Echelon was opposed to believing in such things as evil, considering it to be a primitive, religious concept.

However, Agent 77 did not share this belief. He had seen too much to ignore or sweep under some philosophical rug and pretend mankind was amoral. Even as advanced as the future he was from, with its scientific wonders, man still struggled with hate, lust, greed and the desire for control.

He doubted it would ever change.

Preparing to leave, he looked back once more at the destruction. It would take at least a century for the land to heal enough for people to live here again.

The Agent had done what he was told to do, while the orders to nullify and correct the original mission given to the cleaners. The maneuver was complex, but the Echelon was skilled in such matters.

It was the early morning hours just before dawn on the 16th of July, 1945, in the New Mexico desert, 120 miles south of Santa Fe. A group of scientists and dignitaries stood waiting in anticipation. Among them was Robert Oppenheimer.

Lighting a cigarette, he had given the site the code name Trinity after a poem by John Donne, believing in some ethereal way that what was about

to happen here carried a spiritual meaning. With each passing second, an excitement filled Oppenheimer, also leaving him feeling conflicted and tense.

This was the culmination of the last two years of The Manhattan Project, the original budget of \$6000 growing to over \$2 billion.

The scientist checked his watch once more, waiting as the appointed time drew near. Moments later, he and the other men listened as a countdown commenced. After, a large cloud mushroomed and a searing light stretched 40,000 feet into the air, generating destructive power that mankind had never seen.

A massive fireball rose high into the sky over the desert. The men held their hats on as strong winds soon arrived.

This was the beginning of something that would change the world, ushering in a new age of weapons and warfare.

Watching from an unseen distance, Agent 77 studied Oppenheimer before departing. Deciding this would be his last mission, he wanted to see it through. It was for just one final moment, but it was enough. Although Oppenheimer remained silent, the Agent knew what the man was thinking, just as rest of the world soon would.

*Now I am become death,
the destroyer of worlds.*