



Escape Velocity

By Taavi Soininvaara

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ESCAPE VELOCITY

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Translated by Owen F. Witesman

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MAIN CHARACTERS AND CENTRAL PLAYERS

Arbuzov, Dimitri *A Russian drug and human trafficker*

Arho, Anita *Vice-chairman of the board of Nokia Corporation. Member of the Cabinet*

Birou, Gilbert *Executive director of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)*

Bojanic, Bogdan *Head of the Serbian Vozdovac crime syndicate.*

Butko, Kirill *Major in the Belarusian KGB security service*

COBR (Cabinet Office Briefing Room) *Crisis management committee made up of leading politicians and officials in Great Britain*

Egger, Nadine *Viennese pub owner. Leo Kara's girlfriend*

FSB *Security service of the Russian Federation*

Gilmartin, Betha *Deputy chief of the British SIS foreign intelligence service*

Hofman, Viktor *Behind-the-scenes player in the international arms trade*

The Cabinet *A group of Finnish opinion makers attempting to advance the interests of the Russian government, the Kremlin*

Kara, Leo *Special assistant to the executive director of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)*

Karlsson, Jonny (Paranoid) *Computer guru, data system infiltrator, cracker. Kati Soisalo's boyfriend*

Krylov, Marat (Rat) *Russian criminal. Dimitri Arbuzov's assistant*

Manas *Kyrgyz, KGB-trained killer. Employed by the Mundus Novus Foundation*

Mundus Novus *A research foundation*

Nyman, Claes (Klasu) *Detective chief superintendent. Head of intelligence for the Finnish National Bureau of Investigation.*

Palomaa, Eero *Master of Laws trained at the bench. Assistant to the Cabinet*

Pianini, Sabrina *Physics PhD. Research group director working at the University of Pennsylvania.*

Rostov, Andrei *Scientist in charge of Mundus Novus research programs*

SIS *Great Britain's foreign intelligence service*

Soisalo, Kati *Master of Laws trained at the bench, lawyer. Former chief counsel for the Finnish defense industry group Fennica Plc.*

Tirkkonen, Sakke *President of the Finnish chapter of the MC Black Angels motorcycle club*

Ukkola, Jukka *Assistant director of the National Bureau of Investigation. Kati Soisalo's ex-husband*

UNODC *United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime*

“No enterprise is more likely to succeed than one concealed from the enemy until it is ripe for execution.”

NICCOLO MACHIAVELLI (1469-1527)

“The committee believes, on the basis of the evidence available to it, that President John F. Kennedy was probably assassinated as a result of a conspiracy. The committee is unable to identify the other gunman or the extent of the conspiracy.”

UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES SELECT COMMITTEE ON ASSASSINATIONS,
WASHINGTON, D.C., DECEMBER 29, 1978.

Kati Soisalo lay on the bed feeling Jonny's penis shrinking inside her. The muscular man was heavy as hell. How long would Jonny manage to stay interested in her? Their fourteen-year age difference became more apparent every day, at least to her: the twenty-something Jonny was just coming into manhood, while she on the other hand was quickly sliding toward middle age after having recently passed her thirty-fifth birthday. She and Jonny got along fabulously together and things generally worked well in bed, but an unspoken understanding had always hung in the air between them that their relationship would never go anywhere. Kati Soisalo actually didn't believe she was capable of a real relationship with anyone else either, not after what Jukka Ukkola had done to her. And was still doing.

Jonny rolled off of Soisalo. The mood was uneasy, as always after bad sex.

"Sorry, I wasn't really into it," Soisalo said quietly. "Ukkola is on the rampage again. He marched into my office this morning to try to strong-arm me. He claimed he was going to get back at us for our blackmail trick last year. It scares me to think what that nutcase might be planning now."

An uncomfortable silence descended over the room, but it was interrupted by the ringing of a telephone.

Soisalo reached over to the nightstand for her cell phone and for some reason pulled the comforter over herself when she saw that the caller was Leo Kara. Soisalo had helped the special assistant in the UN Office on Drugs and Crime the previous year on an investigation into some illegal arms deals being made by major Finnish companies.

"Good morning!" Kara said, even though it was afternoon in Helsinki.

"I'm glad you called. Are you in Vienna? What's going on?"

"Oh, nothing earth shattering. Things have been pretty quiet at work since our investigation last year. The director has been keeping me as far away from himself as possible. I was in Afghanistan for a long time and just got back last week from a trip to Myanmar."

"Those aren't exactly holiday destinations. It sounds like Gilbert Birou really wants to get rid of you," Soisalo said with a laugh. "Paranoid says hi, by the way. He's sitting here next to me. You remember our cracker."

Kara decided to get right to the point. “After our paths diverged last year, and I returned to Vienna, I spoke with the head of our human trafficking unit about your daughter’s case like I promised I would. I had forgotten about the whole thing, until he called me just a moment ago.”

The comforter dropped to the floor as Soisalo shot to her feet.

“I’m going to tell you straight off that this doesn’t necessarily have anything to do with your daughter,” Kara said, trying to keep her calm. “But a Finnish tourist couple saw a little girl about Vilma’s age in Belgrade today, and reportedly she looked Nordic and seemed to understand Finnish. According to the Finnish tourists, some Serbian guy was dragging the girl out of some restaurant by force. They notified the Serbian Finnish Embassy in Belgrade and...”

Kati Soisalo opened her mouth, but was unable to speak. Kara’s voice just sounded like white noise. Blood rushed to her head, and she had to sit. The most painful memories of her life flooded back to her: Vilma eating strawberries in Dubrovnik, sitting on a low rock wall along a path in Gradac Park. The perfect silence and boundless fear that had filled her after Vilma disappeared. Vilma’s doll Saara lying in the bushes and the policeman Branko Mikulic, whose foot-dragging and suspiciousness had given Vilma’s abductors a good hour to flee Dubrovnik before they really began investigating the girl’s disappearance.

“Is it possible that the girl was Vilma?” Soisalo asked quietly.

“Of course it’s possible. Serbia is right on the Balkan Route. Organized crime transports drugs, guns, and people to Western Europe right through there.”

“Thanks, Leo. You can’t guess how much this means to me.”

“This is a small service. You saved my skin last year at the paper factory.”

“I’ll keep you informed,” Soisalo spluttered, cutting off the call and starting to pull her clothes on.

Embarrassed, Jonny waited for Soisalo to say something. “Did you get news about Vilma? Tell me.”

Soisalo hurried into the entryway and shoved her feet into her pumps. She opened the door, mumbling something about calling that evening, and rushed to the stairwell. It had finally happened, three years after Vilma’s disappearance, now when she had almost given up hope. It surprised her that she didn’t feel a single bit happy or relieved. She was just afraid. Afraid that she wouldn’t get Vilma back after all.

Kati Soisalo’s law office was located in Hietalahti just a few blocks from Jonny Karlsson’s apartment on Punavuorenkatu. She ran the whole way. She knew exactly what she would do. She

had been over this situation in her mind a thousand times. The door to the A stairway on Tehtaankatu flew open, and Soisalo climbed the stairs to her office. The fire-safe filing cabinet drawer slid open, and she stuffed the most important documents related to Vilma's case into her suitcase. There were half a dozen file folders in all.

After Vilma's disappearance she had lingered in Dubrovnik for more than a month, every day leaning on the police, the Croatian Interior Ministry, and the Croatian Finnish Embassy with phone calls and meeting requests. They hadn't found out anything about Vilma's abductors, not a single thing. It felt like Vilma had just evaporated into the air. In the end she hired a local lawyer to continue sweating the officials in Croatia and returned to Finland. That day had been the most difficult since Vilma's disappearance. Leaving Croatia had felt like abandoning Vilma, like throwing in the towel.

Online Soisalo booked an outrageously expensive evening flight on Lufthansa to Belgrade through Frankfurt. It was the only option if she wanted to get there today. Then she called the Serbian Finnish Embassy and after a long wait got the embassy secretary, who promised to try to keep the tourists who had recognized Vilma in Belgrade. Finally she had to cancel all of her appointments for the following week, which took half an hour. At least she didn't have any trials scheduled this week.

She locked her office door and went down to the parking garage in the elevator. Her two-seater Smart Fortwo microcar accelerated onto Tehtaankatu; Soisalo saw the Mange Suti Restaurant, the successor to a dive called Schipperke, and remembered how hopelessly she had tried to escape the truth after returning to Finland from Dubrovnik. First she had tried to drown her sorrow in booze. Then she dove into her own mind on a psychotherapist's couch, devouring spiritual literature and the gospels of long-dead philosophers, until she was on the verge of losing her mind. Finally she had tried to beat the malaise out of herself with ferocious physical exertion. A broken rib at Krav Maga practice had finally forced her to rest, and little by little she had adopted that most Finnish of all forms of escapism—she became a workaholic. Even that didn't take away the anger and sorrow. Nothing did. She had had to learn to live with them and use them to her advantage. Anger and sorrow had driven her forward like a horseman's whip. They gave her strength.

At her apartment in Herttoniemi, Soisalo packed her suitcase, grabbed a bottle of yogurt, and then stopped in the entryway to consider whether she had remembered everything she needed. Her gaze fell on the picture standing on the phone table of her and Vilma. She took hold of the

frame and looked first at her photograph, then at the mirror. Had she really aged so much in three years? Wrinkles crisscrossed the corners of her eyes and mouth like dried riverbeds. Her firm breasts had lost their shape and her short, blond mane its thickness. She still had a beautiful face and a decent body—she still garnered second looks—but for different reasons than before: an unmakeuped, harried-seeming woman with a bob haircut in a dress shirt and straight slacks probably looked threatening to most men.

Soisalo set the photograph back on the table and her gaze fell on the UNICEF postcard pushed into the corner of the mirror that proclaimed, *Stop Illegal Child Trafficking*. How many volunteer hours had she worked on projects at the Central Union for Child Welfare, Amnesty International, the Association for Abducted Children, ECPAT, and UNICEF since Vilma's disappearance? Self-torment or not, she hadn't wanted to forget Vilma's fate for a second. It would have felt like the worst kind of treason to live a normal life at the same time Vilma could be experiencing who knows what sorts of unspeakable horrors.

She felt wild, feelings that she had long dammed up surging through her mind. She wanted to get to the airport now. She felt constant stabbing pains in her stomach, as she had with disturbing frequency as of late. Soisalo stepped into the bedroom, swung the punching bag she had gotten for Krav Maga practice that hung from the ceiling and proceeded to blast away at the fake leather with kicks and blows until she was gasping for breath.

After her pulse leveled off, Soisalo opened the door to Vilma's room, after hesitating for a moment. She had left everything in place, as it had been before, waiting. The children's bed, the stuffed animals, the Lego box, the doll carriage, the Winnie the Pooh wallpaper, Saara... In the photographs hanging on the wall smiled the most enchanting little girl in the world. Three years of waiting was coming to an end. Finally there would be a clue to follow.

And this time she would not return home alone.

Sabrina Pianini started awake. Had she heard the tinkling of breaking glass or had she been dreaming? A noise came from downstairs, where at the moment the only person staying was the DARPA bodyguard.

She got up from the deckchair, wrapping herself in a towel and walking to the terrace railing. Liliana, with a scarf on her head and a black dress that covered her whole body, was puttering about in the vineyard in the heat despite her advanced years. The woman was leaning on a rake and seemed to be listening to something.

“Did you break something, Liliana? I heard a sound like glass tinkling.”

“The sound came from downstairs. Piero isn’t in the house. Perhaps your American friend had an accident.”

“He isn’t my friend!” Pianini said. “Would you mind going to see what happened. I really don’t feel like getting dressed.”

Pianini retrieved her wine glass and returned to the terrace. The sun was burning like a gas flame. A wind blowing from the north-east brought a little relief from the stifling heat. Pianini pondered where she could find as good a caretaker couple as Piero and Liliana when they were no longer up to the task.

When she didn’t hear anything back from Liliana, Pianini grew impatient and dressed herself. She stepped to the door and grasped the key just as she heard a grating metallic sound come from the stairway. Someone was leaning on the rusted handrail. It wasn’t Liliana; she detested that sound. The bodyguard. It had to be the bodyguard. What had happened? She was already about to turn the key when the alarm bells started to go off in her head. Why hadn’t Liliana returned to the yard? She released her grip on the key, bolting to the hallway that led to the bedroom and clambering onto the rickety flower stand. Its legs wobbled under the weight of her 110 pounds. She peered through the window near the ceiling into the stairway and was so startled by what she saw that she nearly fell off the small table. A green protective suit, hood, goggles, boots. In his gloved hand, the man standing before the door was clenching a pistol covered by a transparent plastic bag taped to his sleeve and splattered with blood. A killer was after her.

The man turned his head. Now Pianini recognized the Asian. They had met twice: while the research contract was being fine-tuned, he had paid a visit to Philadelphia, and last Christmas

he had shown up with a scientist in Barga to offer her work. The killer's left cheek was dripping blood, and a tattered breathing mask was dangling from his ear to his shoulder.

The flower stand fell when Pianini became alarmed. She fell to the floor and hurt her knee. She heard how the killer was yanking on the door handle. She rose to her feet, grabbed her cell phone, and bolted to the terrace with only one thought in her mind—escape! It was a five meter drop down to the backyard. There was only one way to escape.

She took hold of the climbing rose **that grew on the wall** with both hands and lurched over the railing, feeling the long thorns sinking deep into her skin. Tears of pain flooded her eyes. She bit her lip and tried fruitlessly to find a foothold. Blood gushed from her hand when she released her grip, stretching as far down as possible and grasping hold of the thorny trunk again. Now her leg got tangled in the branches, rose thorns sinking into her shin and warm blood trickled down toward her feet. A scream forced its way out of her mouth. Now the killer would find her. Had he gotten the door open? Just one more hellishly painful change of grip and Pianini didn't need to consider anymore whether she dared let herself fall. Her grip failed. She thudded to the stone patio and then shot to her feet, holding her hip.

Sabrina Pianini ran down the path leading to the vineyard as fast as her legs would carry her. She arrived at the iron gates, throwing them open and then glancing back. She saw the green suited man below the terrace on the stone patio. She bolted into motion again. The asphalt of the Via Zerboglio that ran up toward old Barga burned the bottoms of her feet as Pianini committed all her strength to this dangerous game. She was in good shape, but there was no way she would make it to the carabinieri station. It was a good kilometer to the Via Roma on the new Barga side. She decided to run to the local police headquarters on the Palazzo Pancrazi—it was in the old city. There would be cars on the Via Zerboglio. Should she stop some driver, or would the killer shoot her and the driver? She looked back and saw the killer step through the gates onto the street.

The telephone was banging against her thigh in the deep pocket of her linen dress. Pianini's speed diminished only a little as she punched the number for the police into her cell phone. Rage drove her on even faster when her call was forwarded to an answering machine.

“My home was attacked. Via Sasso 18. My bodyguard and housekeeper may have been killed. An Asian man, about 190 centimeters tall, visited my home in Barga last Christmas and at my workplace in Philadelphia last year. Contact my brother Guido...” Pianini drew a breath and turned onto the Via Bellavista.

At the same moment a van stopped in front of her, tires screeching. The side door slid open and two men grabbed her arms. Pianini managed to kick and flail like a madwoman for a moment before the hypodermic needle sunk into the inside of her elbow.

They wanted her alive.

Gilbert Birou and Leo Kara were sizing each other up in the office of the executive director on the 14th floor in the E building of UNODC. More than a year ago a series of events had occurred that had transformed their relationship from chilly to hostile. A strong smell of beer wafted from Kara, and a drop of the Mörwald's sensuous oxtail soup had dripped onto the sleeve of Birou's white dress shirt next to his gold cuff link at lunch.

Birou saw Kara's eyes staring deep in their sockets, his blond crew cut, his white face that accentuated the dark tone of his eyebrows, and the cleft chin visible amidst his stubble. Kara was a bundle of nerves who was serving a suspended prison sentence following several assaults, but he was quick-witted, a skilled polyglot who according to the latest information knew eleven languages, and who had work experience of the likes few 35-year-olds could brag. Kara had worked for four years at the Global Crisis Group Conflict Research Center, three years in the British MI5 security service, and the last three years at UNODC. According to MI5's background check, Kara's parents and sister had died in October 1989 under circumstances that were labeled secret. To Gilbert Birou, Leo Kara was a threat, a walking catastrophe who had rocked the foundations of the perfectly secure life Birou had so carefully constructed for himself—last year Kara had blackmailed him outrageously.

Leo Kara stared wearily at Birou's gold-rimmed Cartier eyeglasses and hair cream darkened temples. The indolent, plump Birou wore a three-piece pinstripe suit and yellow Hermes tie. Executive Director Gilbert Birou was a risk-averse, responsibility-shirking sycophant who was constantly groping for more luxury goods, ate in a restaurant every evening, and acted just as colorfully as the hand of a clock. Nearly every trait that Kara despised could be identified in Birou. In addition to all this, he had almost lost his life a year earlier after Birou had revealed to the Sudanese authorities Kara's plans for a secret arrival in the country. Birou had tried to get rid of him permanently, but unfortunately Kara hadn't been able to prove it.

“You attacked Anders Aasen, who injured his shoulder as he fell,” Birou said.

“True. The man is an idiot.” Kara always spoke English to his superior just to piss him off, even though he spoke French passably as well.

“Kara, why don’t you do us both a favor and just clean out your desk. You’re only working here because I wanted to do a favor for our mutual acquaintance Betha Gilmartin, and I can’t ever fire you...you know things about me that you shouldn’t.”

“I enjoy my work,” Kara said, wondering to himself why he bothered to hang onto his job. Maybe it was the only thing that kept him tied to reality.

Birou was trying to decide whether Kara was joking. There really was something wrong in the guy’s head. Kara wasn’t in control of what he did anymore than what he said. “We aren’t done with this. I’m really going to have to think hard about what I should do to you.”

Kara rose from his chair, only just managing with great effort to swallow the biting comment that came to his lips.

“Do you have any thoughts about these iridium-related crimes?” Birou asked as Kara put his hand on the door handle.

“There are dozens of files on it.”

“Do you understand what the whole thing is about?” Birou asked in a conciliatory tone.

Kara shook his head, trying to look interested, and sat back down.

“No one seems to know why someone has been buying up all the iridium on the world market and sabotaging iridium-related research projects,” Birou complained. “I can’t make any sense of it all.”

That should be a familiar feeling for you, Kara thought, but then he said, “I’m sure it will become clear in good time.”

Birou looked contemplative. “I’ll see you tomorrow evening at five. I’m sure by then you can come up with some sort of tentative summary,” he said and opened the cover of his briefcase, which practically shone with pride over its newness.

“And I suppose that one is the best of its kind as well?” Kara said with a smirk, nodding toward Birou’s briefcase. Everyone who worked at UNODC knew the executive director bragged about almost all of his acquisitions being the best of their kind.

“The crème de la crème, best of the best. A Swaine Adeney Brigg attaché case,” Birou said. “Churchill model. You feel like you’re part of a grand tradition when you use the products of a company founded in 1750.”

I feel like I’m part of a grand farce when I look at you, Kara thought and exited the room.

Gilbert Birou closed his eyes and asked himself for the umpteenth time why exactly he was being punished with Leo Kara. Of course he had run into psychopaths on the order of Kara before during his thirty-year law enforcement career, but they had all been playing for the other side. Kara actually was a criminal, a violent criminal, who to top it all off had blackmailed Birou himself, and who knew how many other victims, without having to answer for his deeds. How would he get rid of him? He didn't want to get into the same trouble he did the year before during the missile dispute. And besides, Kara knew too much—his only secret.

Roughing up Anders Aasen might be enough of a basis for termination, especially with all of Kara's previous misbehavior, but that wasn't much comfort. He couldn't give Kara the boot before he got Betha Gilmartin of the British foreign intelligence service to forget his secret, the events of years ago in London's Mayfair.

There was something truly strange about Kara. You always had to stay on your guard when you were around him. It made Birou ashamed to admit that he was probably a little afraid of the unpredictable Kara, or more likely of the difficulties the man might cause for him this time around.

WEDNESDAY, 11 AUGUST

The staff at the headquarters of the SIS, Great Britain's foreign intelligence service, called the building Legoland because it resembled an Aztec step pyramid. It was located in London's Vauxhall Cross, on the south bank of the Thames. It was surrounded by a moat and its specially reinforced walls would stand up even to the force of a large explosion. Legoland was faced both with a high risk of terrorism and the activities of enemy intelligence services, so it was classified as a Category A space.

In the visitor chair in the office of the SIS deputy chief, sat the director of the intelligence operations unit Clive Grover. Grover, who was known by the codename Conductor when seeing to operational duties, was a skilled leader of men, and his gray lion's mane of hair brought to mind a misleading image of an orchestra conductor waving a baton.

"Now is not the time bullshit. Get to the point. But wait one moment," Gilmartin snapped and then bent over to write something on her leather bound notepad.

Grover was not surprised by Gilmartin's bluntness. She was one of the boys and also severely stressed out. In recent months obstacles to Gilmartin's appointment as chief of the SIS, which had long been considered certain, had started to crop up. The ultraconservative intelligence service was still chock full of old-school Oxbridge spies who had never managed to decide which they despised more: that Gilmartin was a woman or that she had graduated from the University of Edinburgh. According to the rumors, Gilmartin was still leading the competition for the chief's chair.

"Yesterday hundreds of kilos of...elements were stolen from the French Atomic Energy Commission Marcoule reactor site. In an extremely impressive and professional strike," Grover began once Gilmartin had finished writing.

"The French. Last year their Atomic Energy Commission found thirty more kilos of plutonium at their Cadarach reactor site than showed on the facility's books. Apparently they had forgotten to record part of the plutonium in their inventories," Gilmartin said with a laugh.

Grover raised his eyebrows. “You can’t have forgotten the blowup in Sellafield five years ago. They had thirty kilos of plutonium missing from the books there too. That would be enough to make seven nuclear bombs.”

“And why does the Marcoule case interest me...us?” Gilbert asked, getting back on topic.

“Of course we monitor all strikes at this level for the service. At Marcoule they store tons of plutonium Pu-239 isotope suitable for making nuclear weapons, as well as tritium, a radioactive isotope of hydrogen, which is used to detonate nuclear weapons.”

“Goddamn it, I get the picture. Get to the point. You tease like a teenage girl,” Gilmartin snarled.

Grover adjusted the immaculately straight collar of his pink dress shirt. “The name of one of our...acquaintances came up in the French DCRI security service investigation—Manas.”

Gilmartin glanced at her heart rate monitor and became anxious. Her pulse was not allowed to go over 120. That was the doctor’s order. She leaned against the back of her chair and tried to relax.

This sight was familiar to Grover. He waited for a moment before continuing. “The French studied the Marcoule surveillance camera recordings and found that one of the men was clearly the leader of the strike team. He spoke twice.” Grover glanced at his papers. “*Stop, quiet—and—alright, now everyone out, fast.*”

“And that was enough to identify him as Manas?” Gilmartin asked.

“The DCRI investigators found his voice signature in their database, actually a sample we had provided them, the same one the Government Communications Headquarters grabbed during last year’s cruise missile investigation. According to the analysis, the leader of the group that attacked Marcoule was Manas with 92 percent probability.”

“What did they take from Marcoule?” Gilmartin asked.

“That’s the strange thing in all of this—four hundred kilos of different rare metals and elements. And the overwhelming majority of it was iridium.”

Gilmartin’s expression revealed that he had lost her.

Grover shuffled through his papers. “Iridium is an extremely hard metal in the platinum family, the second densest element next to osmium and the most corrosion-resistant metal. Its melting point is an incomprehensible 2419 degrees Celsius, and acids don’t touch it either. Only

three tons of it are produced each year, and most of the world's iridium, if not all, came with asteroids from outer space. Possibly inside the same asteroid that destroyed the dinosaurs."

"The dinosaurs?" Gilmartin said, perplexed.

"Iridium is used in producing metal alloys that are extraordinarily resistant to corrosion or heat, the kinds needed in aircraft engines, plutonium fuel encapsulation for spacecraft, and who knows what else."

Gilmartin leaned toward Grover. "Manas is a hired killer. Why the hell did he steal the iridium?"

"In the last few months, someone has been buying up all the world's stores of iridium, two scientists have been kidnapped, and two research centers doing work with iridium have been destroyed. Local officials in different countries, as well as Interpol and UNODC are already working on the big picture."

"Who's handling it at UNODC?" Gilmartin asked interestedly.

Grover shuffled through his papers. "Leo Kara. The name sounds familiar."

"He investigated the arms dealer Ruslan 'Widowmaker' Sokolov's dealings in connection with the cruise missile case last year," Gilmartin said, although what she wanted to say was that Leo Kara was like a son to her.

"The French are afraid that someone is intending to build a dirty bomb," Grover continued. "Iridium's radioactive isotope 192 is perfectly suited to be the radiation source in a dirty bomb. According to the US nuclear regulatory officials, of the materials suitable for building this kind of weapon, iridium 192 is precisely the one the most of which has been disappearing around the world."

Gilmartin was still digesting what Grover had said when he continued. "Maybe someone wants to steal iridium metal in order to make iridium 192 out of it and then build an enormous dirty bomb arsenal. That possibility has to be taken into consideration." Grover leaned toward his papers. "Radioactive iridium-192 isotope is made from regular iridium through neutron activation in nuclear power plants. Small batches can also be produced in research reactors or particle accelerators."

"That sounds pretty damn labor intensive!" Gilmartin said testily. "Why wouldn't they just go straight for stealing the radioactive iridium?"

“You know well enough. Stealing normal iridium is child’s play compared to stealing radioactive compounds, plutonium for instance. High-radioactivity nuclear waste storage facilities are protected by the world’s most effective security systems.”

“All options must be investigated,” Gilmartin said, suspecting the worst. “Are the French on Manas’ heels? What’s the status of the investigation?”

Grover smiled. “A theft at a nuclear power site is such an embarrassing setback that it almost makes you sorry for the French. But of course they’re doing everything they can to catch the culprits. Their terrorism threat level is set as high as possible, and they’ve asked for information from both Interpol and several other security and intelligence services. Including us.”

“I’ll eat my hat with shit on top if the French find Manas,” Gilmartin said with bluster. “Even we weren’t able to do it last year, and neither was anyone else.”

“We already have one good lead. The day before yesterday there was an abduction in Italy...” Grover glanced at his papers. “A scientist by the name of Sabrina Pianini. According to the Italian security service, the AISI, Pianini called the local police number about the time of the disappearance and left a hysterical message. Apparently she had met Manas in both Philadelphia and Barga. The intensity of the Yanks’ security measures these days mean that they’re bound to find surveillance footage of Manas at Pianini’s university, the airport, or somewhere.

Gilmartin looked a little more hopeful. “So get your ass out of that chair and lead your orchestra.”