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Scarecrow and the Army of Thieves

Written by Matthew Reilly

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SCARECROW AND THE ARMY OF THIEVES

Matthew Reilly



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The President's face set itself in a fixed grimace. 'I asked the French President to cancel that bounty and you know what he said to me? He said, "Monsieur, I will accede to your demands on finance, trade, on Afghanistan, even on Iran, but I will not bely that order. That man killed French soldiers, destroyed a French submarine and sank a French aircraft carrier. The Republic of France will not rest until he is dead."'

The President shook his head. 'Call this Scarecrow. Send him in behind that SEAL team with the same orders: sabotage, disable, destroy. Tell him to do whatever he can to stop this madness.'

DEFENSE INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

BACKGROUND REPORT

CLASSIFICATION: TOP SECRET/EYES ONLY

AUTHOR: RETTER, MARIANNE (D-6)

SUBJECT: THE 'ARMY OF THIEVES'

INCIDENT 1: 9/9

THE CHILEAN PRISON BREAKOUT

The first incident occurred on September 9 and it involved the mass breakout of one hundred prisoners from a maximum-security military prison at Valparaiso, Chile.

Shortly before dawn, a small force of heavily armed men attacked the prison using military tactics and suppressed weapons. The operation took less than thirty minutes. All of the prison's guards were killed.

Among the prisoners released were twelve former high-ranking members of the Comando de Vengadores de Mártires, the 'Avengers of the Martyrs', a right-wing paramilitary

group that performed abductions and assassinations for the Pinochet regime.

On their departure, the attackers left a message on the gates of the prison:



THE ARMY OF THIEVES IS RISING!

It had been painted in the dead guards' blood.

INCIDENT 2: 10/10

THE THEFT OF THE 'OKHOTSK'

One month and one day later, on October 10, a Russian cargo freighter, the OKHOTSK, was seized by persons unknown off the west coast of Africa.

According to its cargo manifest, the ship was carrying timber, fuel and building supplies destined for Zimbabwe and its seizure was initially believed to be the work of west African pirates. But then the Russians sent half of their Atlantic fleet to find the ship.

Our investigations have revealed that the OKHOTSK was actually carrying a large weapons shipment intended for sale to three embargoed African regimes. Its cargo was:

- 310 AK-47 ASSAULT RIFLES;
- 4.5 million rounds of 7.62mm AMMUNITION for those rifles;
- 90 RPG-7 GRENADE LAUNCHERS;
- 9 STRELA-1 AMPHIBIOUS ANTI-AIRCRAFT VEHICLES, each equipped with four 9M31 surface-to-air missiles;
- 12 ZALA-421-08 unmanned aerial surveillance DRONES;
- 18 machine-gun-mounted JEEPS;
- 9 SHIPBORNE TORPEDO LAUNCH PODS containing four APR-3E torpedoes each; and
- 2 MIR-4 DSRV (Deep Submergence Rescue Vehicle) mini-submarines.

The freighter was manned by a ten-man squad of Spetsnaz special forces troops.

This last fact makes it extremely unlikely that the OKHOTSK was taken by African pirates. African pirates are usually poor fishermen who attack commercial vessels for the purpose of securing ransoms; at the first sign of any military presence on a ship they invariably flee.

On the contrary, the force of men that took the OKHOTSK knew exactly what was on it and were skilled enough to defeat a team of crack Russian paratroopers to get it.

To this day, the OKHOTSK has not been found.

INCIDENT 3: 11/11 A ROBBERY OVER GREECE

In the early hours of November 11, an unmarked German Gulfstream jet carrying nine billion euros from Germany to Greece disappeared from the skies above northern Greece.

The plane's cargo of hard currency was intended for use in the latest stage of Greece's financial bailout.

The wreckage of the plane was discovered the following morning. One crew member was missing, the other three had all been shot in the head at close range.

The money was gone.

Painted on the interior walls of the plane was the same symbol seen at the Chilean military jail: a circle with an 'A' inside it plus the taunt: 'THE ARMY OF THIEVES WAS HERE!'

INCIDENT 4: 12/12

ATTACK ON A MARINE BASE

Helmand Province, Afghanistan

In the early hours of December 12, a large and heavily armed force of over one hundred men attacked a remote United States Marine Corps staging and supply base in southern Afghanistan.

The force attacked with precision, skill and overwhelming violence, killing all of the twenty-two engineers and maintenance staff stationed at the isolated base.

The attackers' objective, it seems, was not the murder of US service personnel. They were after the aircraft kept at the base.

The attackers took four AH-1 Cobra attack helicopters plus two Marine Corps V-22 Osprey 'Warbird' gunships (one of which contained eight crates of brand-new USMC cold-weather Arctic/mountain warfare clothing intended for US forces fighting in Afghanistan over the winter).

The attackers painted on the walls of a tent: 'SEASON'S GREETINGS, YANKEE SCUM! FROM THE ARMY OF THIEVES!' plus the 'A' symbol.

INCIDENT 5: 1/1
A SECOND BREAKOUT
Darfur, Sudan

Soon after midnight on January 1, a temporary UN prison camp in the Darfur region of Sudan was raided by a force of armed and masked men.

102 prisoners variously described as 'revolutionary fighters, Islamic militants and narco-mercenaries' from several African nations were freed from the prison and spirited away. All but two of the camp's UN guards were killed.

The two surviving guards reported that the raiding force used a variety of Russian-made assault weapons and two American Cobra attack helicopters. The raiders departed with their large number of escapees in two V-22 Osprey gunships with US Marine Corps markings.

Before they left, they spray-painted a message on one of the prison's walls: 'THE ARMY OF THIEVES JUST GOT STRONGER ...'

INCIDENT 6: 2/2

APARTMENT BOMB IN MOSCOW

The spectacular destruction of a twenty-story luxury apartment building in Moscow on February 2 has been well documented in the media.

What was not revealed to the media was the graffiti found covering every wall of the destroyed building's adjoining parking lot: hundreds of A's in circles had been spray-painted there.

INCIDENT 7: 3/3

THE TORTURE OF AN AMERICAN OFFICIAL Washington, D.C., USA

Shortly after midnight on March 3, a small group of unidentified men raided the Georgetown home of the former US Secretary of Defense, killed his two bodyguards and kidnapped the ageing Secretary.

The Secretary was found — alive — by two early-morning hikers in Rock Creek Park, bound to a torture device.

He had been waterboarded.

Carved into the skin of his chest was the following symbol:



During his subsequent debriefing, the Secretary exhibited symptoms of severe shock. He continually shouted: 'Beware the Army of Thieves! Beware the Army of Thieves!'

CONCLUSIONS

The seven incidents outlined above describe in somewhat grim detail the rise of a new non-state entity calling itself the 'Army of Thieves'.

Where it is based and who comprises it are not known.

What is known is this: it is a force of militarily-trained individuals

that over the last seven months has obtained for itself a considerable supply of weapons, finance and manpower.

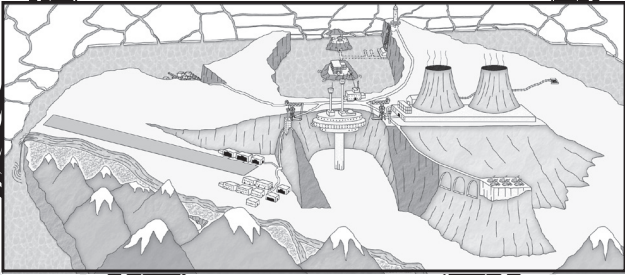
It does not, as yet, show any religious or cultural motivations for its aggressive acts. We do not yet know what is driving this rogue 'Army'.

But it wants us to notice it.

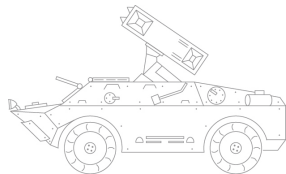
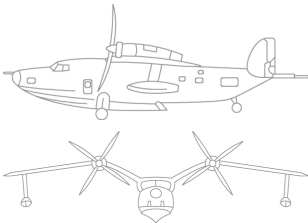
It has carried out one operation a month, every month, for the last seven months, in accordance with a pattern where the number of the day and the month are the same. Clearly, it wants us to see this pattern, and we should be aware of it, because tomorrow is April 4 ...

PROLOGUE

THE ISLAND OF THE DRAGON



DRAGON ISLAND BASE
AS SEEN FROM THE AIR
FACING NORTH





**OSTROV ZMEY
ARCTIC OCEAN
4 APRIL, 0500 HOURS**

The plane hurtled down the airstrip, chased by furious machine-gun fire, before it lifted off with a stomach-lurching swoop and soared out over the vast expanse of Arctic sea ice that stretched away to the north.

The plane's pilot, a sixty-year-old scientist named Dr Vasily Ivanov, knew he wouldn't get far. As he'd lifted off, he'd seen two Strela-1 anti-aircraft vehicles – amphibious jeep-like vehicles that were each mounted with four 9M31 surface-to-air missiles – speeding down the runway behind him, about to take up firing positions.

He had perhaps thirty seconds before they blasted him out of the sky.

Ivanov's plane was an ugly Beriev Be-12, a genuine 1960s Soviet clunker. Many years ago, as a young recruit in the Soviet Air Defence Force, Ivanov had flown this very kind of plane, before his talents as a physicist had been spotted and he had been reassigned to the Special Weapons Directorate. On one recent occasion when he had sat as a passenger in the freezing hold of this plane, he'd actually thought that the Beriev and he were very similar. They were both ageing workhorses from a bygone era still toiling away: the Beriev was an old forgotten plane used to shuttle old forgotten teams like his to old forgotten bases in the north; Ivanov was just old, his

bushy Zhivago-style moustache growing greyer every day.

He also never imagined he'd actually pilot a Beriev again, but his team's arrival at the island that morning had not gone according to plan.

Ten minutes earlier, after an overnight flight from the mainland, the Beriev had been making a slow circuit over Ostrov Zmey, a remote island in the Arctic Circle.

A medium-sized semi-mountainous island, Ostrov Zmey – 'Dragon Island' – had once held the highest security classification in the Soviet Union alongside nuclear research bases like Arzamas-16 at Sarov and bioweapons centres like the Vektor Institute in Koltsovo. Now, its massive structures lay dormant, kept alive by rotating skeleton crews like Ivanov's from the Special Weapons Directorate. Ivanov and the twelve Spetsnaz troops on the Beriev with him had been arriving for their eight-week stint guarding the island.

When they'd arrived, everything had appeared normal.

As winter faded and the Arctic saw the sun for the first time in months, the sea ice around Dragon had started to break up. The vast frozen ocean stretching north to the pole looked like a pane of smoked glass that had been hit with a hammer – a thousand cracks snaked through it in every direction.

Yet the cold still lingered. The complex at Dragon remained covered in a thin layer of frost.

Despite that, it looked magnificent.

The base's striking central tower still looked futuristic thirty years after it had been built. As tall as a twenty-storey building, it looked like a flying saucer mounted on a single massive concrete pillar. Two slender high-spired

mini-towers were perched atop the main disc, as was the base's squat glass-domed command centre.

The towering structure gazed out over the entire island like some kind of space-aged lighthouse. Looming to the east of it were the two mighty exhaust vents. Where the tower exuded grace and sophistication, the vents expressed nothing except brute strength and power. They were the same shape as the cooling towers one saw at a nuclear power plant but twice the size.

The once-great base bore the usual signs of a skeleton crew: pinpoints of light in various places – offices, guardhouses, on the disc-shaped tower itself.

It was also a fortress. Well defended by both its construction and the landscape, a small force like Ivanov's could protect it against any kind of attack. You'd need an army to take Dragon Island.

As his plane had arrived at the island and overflowed it, from his seat in the hold Ivanov had seen a steady plume of shimmering gas issuing from the massive exhaust vents, rising into the sky before being blown south. This was odd but not alarming; probably just Kotsky's team venting excess steam from the geothermal piping.

Upon landing on the island's airstrip, Ivanov's team of Spetsnaz guards had disembarked the Beriev and made their way toward the hangar, where Kotsky himself had been standing, waving. Ivanov had lingered behind in the Beriev with a young private he'd ordered to help him carry the new Samovar-6 laser-optic communications gear he'd brought along.

That small delay had saved their lives.

Ivanov's Spetsnaz team had been halfway across the tarmac, totally exposed, when they had been cut down

by a sudden burst of machine-gun fire from a force of unseen assailants who had evidently been lying in wait.

Ivanov had dived into the pilot's seat and calling on the skills of his past life, gunned the engines and got the hell out of there – which was how he came to be fleeing Dragon Island.

Ivanov keyed the plane's radio and shouted in Russian. 'Directorate Base! This is Watcher Two—!'

Electronic hash assaulted his ears.

They'd jammed the satellite.

He tried the terrestrial system. No good. Same thing.

Breathing fast, he reached around and grabbed the Samovar radio pack on the seat behind him, the new hardware he'd brought to Dragon Island. It was designed to make secure contact with its satellite not through radio waves but through a direct line-of-sight laser. It had been developed specifically to be immune to the usual jamming techniques.

Ivanov thumped the high-tech radio on the dashboard, pointed its laser sighter up at the sky and turned it on.

'Directorate Base, this is Watcher Two! Come in!' he yelled.

A few moments later, he got a reply.

'Watcher Two, this is Directorate Base. Encryption protocols for the Samovar-6 system are not yet fully operational. This transmission could be detected—'

'Never mind that! Someone's at Dragon! They were waiting for us and attacked my team as soon as they disembarked the plane! Shot them all to bits on the tarmac! I managed to take off and am now being fired upon—'

As he said this, Ivanov once again saw the gaseous

plume rising from the island's massive vents and his blood went cold.

Mother of God, he thought.

'Base,' he said. 'Perform a UV-4 scan of the atmosphere above Dragon. I think whoever's there has started up the atmospheric device.'

'They did what . . . ?'

'I can see a vapour plume rising from the towers.'

'Good Lord . . .'

Ivanov made to say more but suddenly the Beriev was hit from behind by a 9M31 surface-to-air missile fired by one of the Strelas. The entire tail section of the old plane disintegrated in an instant and the plane plunged out of the sky.

A few seconds later, the Beriev hit the sea ice and nothing more was heard from Vasily Ivanov.

His distress call to the Russian Army's Signals Directorate, however, *was* heard by one other listener.

A KH-12 'Improved Crystal' spy satellite operated by the US National Reconnaissance Office.

The message was downloaded and decoded by an automated system according to standard protocols – intercepts of Russian military signals were picked up all the time – but when the keywords DRAGON, UV-4 SCAN and ATMOSPHERIC DEVICE were all found in the same transmission, the message was immediately forwarded to the highest levels of the Pentagon.