

Sovereign Deception

A John Klade Novel

Miguel R Balfour

Chapter 1

At 5:20 a.m., John Klade's house was an island of order. His office, the library, held the cold of the night even as the first cracks of sun shot past the horizon. Every surface in the room was deliberate. The faintest film of dust on the bookshelves was the same, every day. The disorderly was a controlled variable.

Klade sipped his coffee with slow precision. Black, very hot, the mug heavy and reassuring in his right hand. He drank the first cup standing at the kitchen window, facing east, counting headlights in the slow trickle of commuter traffic. The second, he brought to his desk.

The desk, a slab of stained walnut, sat broadside to the window. He faced the room, the door, but always checked the line of sight out through the glass before he sat. The window was double-laminated,

Miguel Balfour

triple-glazed. Aesthetic concessions to the builders; ballistic rating was for him alone. At this hour, condensation feathered the edges, and beyond it the world was blue and indistinct.

He placed the mug on a coaster, not because he cared about water rings, but because every deviation had a reason. The mug made a muted sound as it touched down—ceramic to cork, and then wood to silence.

Klade took a measured breath. He inhaled the oily edge of the coffee, the sharp metallic tang of his desktop, the faint glue of aged book bindings. His morning uniform: pressed navy henley, jeans, and hair still wet from the post-run shower. He had shaved too close, left a pink stripe under his jaw. He could feel it, throbbing against the cool air of the office.

He drank again, this time letting the heat burn the tip of his tongue. Pain was information. He catalogued it, sipped again, letting his eyes wander over the paperweight—an old shell casing, engraved, a gag gift from a navy buddy years ago. The edges had dulled, but the primer was still indented, a memory under metal.

His office was lined with books, half of them real and half of them props, their spines selected for effect: philosophy, tactics, art history. He could recite the contents of the real ones from his eidetic memory. The rest were hollowed, filled with storage drives and camera batteries and cash.

The sun hit the lip of the windowsill at 5:27 a.m. The library's overheads were off, so the only light was from the window, a pale wedge that advanced on the room like a slow breach. Klade watched it crawl, timing its arrival at the edge of his desk to within a minute. He liked to see if the sun would beat him to the day's work. Today, he won.

He closed his eyes, just briefly, and listened. The silence was total except for the quiet burble of the koi pond outside—he had opened the

Sovereign Deception

vent above the window, just an inch. This was his meditation. Sensory audit, then the routine. Coffee. News. Work. Repeat, always.

A thought intruded. Not unwelcome, just stubborn: the way his mother had scolded him for drinking so much black coffee. "It'll calcify your arteries and rot your teeth, John," she used to say, always with the faintest lilt of amusement under the lecture. She'd take her own coffee with oat milk and sugar and still make faces at the taste. He could almost see her now, the delicate arc of her wrist as she pinched the handle, the way she balanced the cup in her lap while she cross-examined him about some mundane habit, some edge of his life she wanted to soften.

Klade let the memory hang for a moment, then set it aside with the same deliberation as the mug. He reached for the stack of folders, fingers brushing the unblemished manila edges. He hadn't yet opened any of them. That would be the next act.

First, the ritual. He drank the last inch of coffee, then swirled the dregs to inspect the sheen and sediment. He noted the residue, the tiny flecks of coffee grounds floating on the surface, an echo of past mornings. Satisfied, he stood and crossed to the far end of the office, where a small, lacquered tray held his Chemex and grinder. He ran his finger along the rim, feeling for cracks, for chips, there were none. Order maintained.

His phone buzzed, briefly, with a calendar alert. He ignored it. There was time. This hour belonged to him alone.

He poured another cup, watched the steam rise in a thin, disciplined spiral. He returned to the desk, set the mug on its ringed pedestal, and sat. The chair was old leather, the kind that never lost its shape, only grew more defined to its occupant over years of use.

He exhaled. Allowed himself the comfort.

The day would come. He would greet it when it arrived.

Miguel Balfour

Chapter 2

The library was twice the size of most Manhattan apartments, which Klade found both satisfying and, at times, excessive. Forty feet from end to end. Every foot was accounted for. He had measured it himself with a laser tape, not because he didn't trust the architect, but because he didn't trust anyone.

The bookshelves dominated three walls, mahogany so dark they looked like slabs of black ice before sunrise. Half the shelves were filled with the heavy, academic sort—reference encyclopedias, old legal texts, war memoirs annotated in several hands. The rest were empty, or filled with objects: a rusted sextant, a bust of Machiavelli, a stack of yellowed CIA yearbooks with the Agency crest carefully scraped off the spines.

Above the fireplace (non-functional, but imposing) hung a triptych of satellite photos. Kabul, Damascus, and San Francisco, blown up and printed in monochrome. The cities blurred at this scale, rivers and boulevards coiling like arteries, the neighborhoods reduced to tissue and void. Klade liked to study these maps when he needed to think laterally; he found patterns in the chaos, familiar shapes hidden in the sprawl.

The main wall opposite the desk was lined with vintage globes, their continents still colored in faded empire reds and sun-dried ochres. Klade had collected them obsessively, seeking out inaccuracies—wrong borders, collapsed countries, seas renamed and erased. He liked the idea of a world in flux, history unmoored from the present.

To the right of the desk stood the tech shrine, masked behind a false cabinet of National Geographic hardbacks. Klade pressed a thumb to the hinge, and the shelf whispered open, revealing six monitors stitched together in a semi-circle, each running a different news feed or security