



Chapter 21 – Render unto Caesar...

A lot had happened since that day Sheriff Eckert had pulled David's ash out of the frying pan and informed him that he had been drafted into the Home Guard- a local Patriot Militia group. Things would probably have heated up greatly over David's rescue if it had not been for everyone's attention suddenly being diverted by the nationwide plague outbreak. There was hardly a region of the country that was not affected in one way or another by

either the sudden enormous loss of life, from a disease that no antibiotic could touch, or later by the even greater loss of personal liberty as coast-to-coast martial law was dropped like a lead blanket on the country via Presidential decree.

It had only been a matter of weeks after the shock of the plague had worn off that the food riots began. Transportation, manufacturing, and the retail infrastructure of the entire country slowly but inevitably ground to a halt from the huge vacancies left in the wake of the plague. Supermarkets that were normally stocked to overflowing with food and produce couldn't keep up with the demand when the stores stopped receiving shipments with the previous on-demand, just-in-time regularity. Shelves quickly became bare and finally empty as the surviving consumers raced to stock up on anything they could find. Even pet food quickly disappeared as all available food items became scarce.

The major municipalities hardest hit in the plague had lost, in many cases, over fifty percent of their maintenance staff and were struggling to keep the water running and lights on. Police protection in the cities and suburbs was practically non-existent and finally the President was forced to order up the National Guard and even Federal Military units were called up to maintain law and order. The inevitable clashes between hungry rioters and military finally lead to a suspension of civil rights.

That brought in the numerous alphabet agencies that had previously been restrained by the Constitution and the Bill of Rights not to mention numerous watchdog agencies. They suddenly found their shackles removed and under a plethora of Executive Orders that literally flew across the Presidents desk, they set out on their fervent mission to pacify the citizens of this stricken country, by

any and all means necessary, and oh by the way, to find the perpetrators of the this heinous assault on the American people.

But the undertone was ominous as it echoed through the Democratic halls across the nation. Suddenly the Homeland Security Directors for each state began to assume more and more authority via the various Presidential decrees. Governors found their position usurped by these appointed lackeys from Washington and were helpless to reassert their proper elected authority under the new stream of laws. To say that this did not sit well with these professional politicians would be the understatement of the century. The in fighting at the state level only made the situation worse and the power of the federal government greater.

BATF Agent McNeely was on a crusade. They had finally been given the authority to clean up his region once and for all. No newspapers, no ACLU, no media, the cuffs were finally off. He was now operating under direct orders of the President of the United States and the Senior Homeland Security Director. After the last several weeks of violent food riots in the big cities a strict curfew had been imposed across the nation. Movement was severely restricted, Civil Rights were suspended, and best of all...all gun owners had seventy-two hours to turn in their arsenals over to police authorities...without exceptions.

The seventy-two hours deadline had passed two days ago and now Agent McNeely had carte blanche to insure that the Presidents mandates would be fully complied with.

“And of course,” McNeely smiled to himself, “there was only one way to ensure that.”

SSgt Daniels stood ready with his squad listening to Agent McNeely from the Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms. He couldn't believe the orders they had just received. This was not what his last twelve years of military service had been working towards. It was bad enough when the unit he was assigned to was under the command of the UN during the mess over in the Balkans. But to be under control of a civilian federal agent here at home...was intolerable.

“Anyone resisting a search will be arrested, anyone resisting arrest will be shot! This is Martial Law soldiers, you are operating under direct orders from the President of the United States, your Commander in Chief.” He continued. “Our nation is under attack and we will root out ALL TRAITORS! Remember your oath

soldiers, ALL ENEMIES FOREIGN AND DOMESTIC!” He paused to let that set in.

Daniels could feel the bile rising in his gut. “This guy is Fricken nuts.” He mumbled to himself.

Twenty minutes later the platoon under Agent McNeely’s command had mounted up and was headed out to their first mission, to disarm a small town that was, “A hot bed of domestic terrorism.” As the BATF man had explained.

SSgt Daniels’ squad as the others followed their orders as did the rest of the company of rangers as they hit the community like Nazi Storm Troopers. Years of MOUT (Military Operations in Urban Terrain) training paid off, in just minutes they completely surrounded and neutralized the town. Then with loud speakers all the citizens were ordered to stand to on the sidewalks in front of their houses as four-man search teams cleared and searched every home and business. Special assault teams, of which Daniels’ squad was one, were assigned specific residences on the Agent’s list. These “special cases” were documented individuals that had at some time in the past lawfully purchased firearms. It didn’t matter if they said that they had complied with the current directives and turned in all their weapons, they were arrested anyway, their homes searched, and then they were loaded up to be taken away for further processing. This was not part of the orders as issued, but instead the orders given by the agents on the scene. Daniels was now becoming very, very concerned.

Twelve hours later the sweep was completed. In a community of over 15,000 American citizens they had arrested nearly a thousand. Yet had confiscated very few firearms. But the brutality of the agents and the soldiers in handling these scared civilians really bothered the SSgt. This was un-American, and uncalled for. These weren’t domestic terrorists, these were just average people that went hunting as their fathers and their fathers-fathers before them had. This was a small community like he had grown up in: Hard working, God fearing and honest people. There was no reason for the insanity of the day. Daniels sat in the dark as the last light of the day faded over the far ridge with his squad as they cleaned their weapons.

“You know Staff” Began Corporal Tennyson “There is something just not right about this sh*t today.” He said softly, keeping his voice low.

The rest of the squad nodded in agreement. “Not right at all.” Came mumbled back in nearly a dozen different voices.

“Be careful there soldier.” Daniels cautioned. “Keep that sh*t to yourself, if one of those agents hears you, you’ll find yourself on the back of one of those trucks.”

“Is it true then Staff,” Private Myers asked. “That they arrested some of our own?”

“Yeah I heard...”

“Can the talk and finish cleaning your weapons!” Daniels answered through gritted teeth. His squad knew the conversation was over and they went back to diligently cleaning their rifles.

It was around midnight as SSgt Daniels made the rounds of the LP/OP’s (Listening Posts/Observation Posts) on his perimeter. He didn’t really expect any trouble, but he wasn’t going to take any chances. He knew there had been a lot of people missing from the town today, unaccounted for, especially older boys and young men. He had watched the various Agents in charge of the Ranger Company run roughshod over those that had stayed behind especially the wives whose husband “were out of town on business”. It was all he could do not to cap one of those government stooges right then and there. But he had no desire to end up in Leavenworth for the rest of his life, yet he was not going to take much more of this cr*p and that was for sure.

At the edge of his squads zone of responsibility he saw a shadow approaching. He gave the sign and received the counter sign so he approached the vaporous form.

“Jack...how’s it going?” He asked First Squad’s Staff NCO.

“Totally sucks Danny boy...who’d have ever thought we’d be pulling this sh*t on our own...this totally sucks!”

“How are your boys taking it?”

“Not good...not good at all. You heard about Sousa’s squad didn’t you?”

“Not the details, just the scuttlebutt. They got relieved?”

“Relieved hell, they damn near got shot and were arrested.”

“What for?”

“Seems they refused to arrest this pregnant women. Her husband was on the list and she wouldn’t cooperate...refused to answer questions or say a thing...a tough gal. Well that jack*ss Agent McNeely about had a kitty right there on the spot and pistol-whipped her! You know Sousa Man...he don’t take to that kind of stuff with women!”

“Whoa...the f*cker smacked a pregnant women...was he nuts?!”

“Must be...cause Sousa warned him not to do it again. When he did, Sousa dropped him with a butt-stroke right from infantry school. Laid the suit flat out!”

“Sh*t! Now he’s f*cked!”

“You can say that! The suits ordered Sousa’s own squad to arrest him, they refused. The next thing they know Third Platoon has locked and loaded on them and they are being marched off to the stockade.”

“And the lady...was she alright?”

“Oh get this, after Sousa’s squad gets marched off under guard. That b*stard kicks her while she’s still on the ground and then walks off laughing...F*CKER WALKS OFF LAUGHING!”

“Jack we’ve got to get out of this operation...”

Silence.

“Jack?”

“Yeah I know Man...I know.”

“So?”

“So what!?”

“Danny...I’ve got a wife and kid back on post...I can’t...just. Man you know what I mean! I don’t like this at all, but what will happen to them?” he paused looking around, in a hushed whisper he continued. “You know Danny you’re talking mutiny dude! That’s not a small bust! They hang you for that sh*t man.”

“I know, I know.” The two soldiers stood in the dark, wrapping it around them like a cloak. “I took an oath Jack, same as you. To protect and defend the Constitution...that doesn’t include this cr*p today.”

“But you have to follow the orders of the officers Danny, if you don’t they’ll fry you!”

“Jack dammit, do you remember your oath?”

Jack slowly shook his head.

Jeeze man you’ve forgotten it already!” Daniels leaned closer. "I DO SOLEMNLY SWEAR (OR AFFIRM) THAT I WILL SUPPORT AND DEFEND THE CONSTITUTION OF THE UNITED STATES AGAINST ALL ENEMIES, FOREIGN AND DOMESTIC; THAT I WILL BEAR TRUE FAITH AND ALLEGIANCE TO THE SAME; and that I will obey the orders of the President of the United States and the orders of the officer appointed over me, according to the regulations and the Uniform Code of Military Justice. SO HELP ME GOD." they ask for that on every promotion board!”

”It’s just words man, just words.”

”Jack you are so wrong man, so wrong. It’s why we’re in this outfit, it what we do and why. It’s all right there in the oath man, our first obligation is to DEFEND THE CONSTITUTION and that includes the Bill of RIGHTS. It is not to defend an individual, or a party, or a group, but to defend the Constitution itself and we sure didn’t do that today.”

“But Neely said they were ‘a hot bed of domestic terrorism.’”

“Neely don’t know d*ck! Did you see one shred of evidence of that today...huh? F*ck the only terrorism going on in that f*cking town today was from us!”

"But we've got to follow orders, man. You can't refuse to follow orders!" Jack countered.

"If they are illegal orders you can and it's right in the UCMJ (Uniform Code of Military Justice)! Listen to the oath Jack. THAT I WILL BEAR TRUE FAITH AND ALLEGIANCE TO THE SAME Our allegiance and true faith as soldiers is not directed towards a person or a place but to an ideal, a cause, a higher order, it's to the Constitution, man."

"The second half puts is all into perspective: "AND {sort of – by the way – oh...as an after thought} I will obey the orders of the President of the United States and the orders of the officers appointed over me, according to the regulations and the Uniform Code of Military Justice. So as long as the President and the officers appointed over me operate in accordance with the first part of the oath and within the regulations and the Uniform Code of Military Justice I will obey them....if they don't...refer to the first sentence in the paragraph. EVERYTHING is balanced against our first duty Jack, it's balanced against the Constitution itself."

"To follow and serve a person is risky. They are fallible, they will fail to stay the course, they will f*ck up. It's that absolute power breeding absolute corruption garbage. But a dream, an ideal will and has stood the test of time. I will serve my God and the Constitution of the United States. All others....beware!"

There was a long pause as both soldiers thought about what had been said.

Jack I'm not some fricken barracks lawyer, but I know right from wrong! And this sh*t is wrong...it f*cking wrong! Why do you think they replaced all our officers with these wanna be Agent jerk wads? Cause our officers would know this was wrong and we'd back them. Now we're out here f*cking over these people, OUR PEOPLE...Americans and doing these goons dirty work for them. F*cking government REMF's (Rear Echelon Mother F*uckers).

"But our orders come from the President himself, Danny, he's THE commander in chief."

"Yeah well, my first duty is to the Constitution, not the President. And if he gives me an illegal order...well...then I don't have to obey it. Jack there is no way that what happened here today was legal. You know that and I know that."

“We’re here to defend it against ALL ENEMIES, both those on foreign shores and here at home. Where ever they are! Whether those enemies wear foreign uniforms, towels wrapped around their heads or three piece suits and serve in Congress, or even sit in the White House. No one is allowed to violate the Constitution...no one. If you do, well then... you become my ENEMY! Period...it’s very simple.

Agent McNeely woke from a restful sleep just as the dawn was starting to fully light up the morning. He started to sit up but it felt as if his sleeping bag was caught on the military cot he was sleeping on. He pushed harder and heard a loud click and a strange “sprong” sound off to the left side of his cot. He quickly looked and saw something metallic spinning through the air away from him.

“Strange, what broke off the bed?” He thought, just before the reality of the spinning object flashed through his mind...”Hand Grenade!”

The explosion echoed through the surrounding valleys. The first explosion was quickly followed by several others in rapid succession. SSgt Daniels turned and looked back down the ridge to the bivouac area far off in the distance. The heavily laden combat troops humped past him intermixed with civilians from the town. They knew the surrounding mountains and woods and where to live in them, the Rangers knew how to fight in them. Together they would become a team...an American team. SSgt Daniels gently and firmly grabbed a struggling older lady by the arm and helped her up the path as an entire town and nearly a full company of Rangers disappeared into the mountain mists.

”I DO SOLEMNLY SWEAR THAT I WILL SUPPORT AND DEFEND THE CONSTITUTION OF THE UNITED STATES **AGAINST ALL ENEMIES, FOREIGN AND DOMESTIC**; THAT I WILL BEAR TRUE FAITH AND ALLEGIANCE TO THE SAME... **SO HELP ME GOD!**”

Desert Doc

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Chapter 22-Apostate's Genesis

Eli paused in his work to watch the setting sun. Many days’ work had been done in all to few hours. Mary and Jacob were exhausted, as was he. All that could be

done in such a short period had been done. Jacob had worked incredibly hard harvesting the cattails. He was very proud of his son, not just for the past few days, but for the sheer nature of the boy. Smart, hard working, quiet and contemplative, but with a ready smile he was always ready to lend a hand with the chores of others as well as his own. Eli's heart swelled with pride (which was discouraged by his religion, but Eli couldn't suppress it all) when he looked across the fields and saw Jacob working. A fine boy, he was. Eli shook his head in sadness. He hoped Jacob would live to grow to be a fine man.

He turned to Jacob standing beside him. "You have done well, my son. Your hard work will help us to make it through these difficult times."

"Thank you, Papa. What is going to happen? When will the crops become green again?"

"I don't know Jacob. We must pray. Trust God and pray."

They were silent for a while, and Eli looked back out over the brown fields. Jacob, however, continued to stare at his father.

"Papa, why did you have that man put the hay in the middle of the road?"

"To help keep bad people away."

"Why would they come here?"

Eli sighed and looked back down at him. "Jacob, if what Mr. Thompson told me is true, there will be many hungry people. Not only our own people, but hungry English as well. Our God teaches us that violence is wrong and the English know this. If they become hungry enough, they will come here and take what we have."

Jacob furrowed his brow in thought. "But Papa, that might be like killing us, to take all our food. Why does God say we must let them do this?"

"God says that we may not harm another person. Our Justice is not in this world, but the next. The wicked will be punished, and the good rewarded. You want to be rewarded when you see God, don't you?" He asked.

“Why doesn’t God reward the good people in this life, Papa?”

“Sometimes he does, Jacob. He gave me your good mother. He gave me you for a son. I think that is a fine reward.”

“Oh Papa!” Said Jacob, blushing. He was happy that his father saw him as a reward from God, but was now very worried. His father only spoke of his affection this openly very rarely, usually after a funeral.

“Let’s go inside and wash up for supper. Tonight we will see what miracles your mother can do with a sample of your cattails.” Said Eli as he clapped Jacob on the shoulder and began for the house.

After supper, while preparing for bed, Jacob came to see his father. He had been thinking of the possible problem of intruders on his family’s farm. Responsibility seemed to grow upon him, and he began to think of himself as someone who could help his father with these troubles. He had carefully eaten his whole share of the food his mother served, although the cattails weren’t really that tasty -At least this recipe wasn’t- while pondering the ways he could help keep his family safe.

“Papa, why don’t we use the hunting rifles to scare away the bad men?”

Eli deliberately lowered the Amish newspaper he was reading (“The Budget”), and looked at Jacob. “Come sit beside me, Jacob.”

He said. “If you stood out in front of this house with your rifle, you might scare away the English.” He allowed. “But what if they weren’t scared? What if they guessed you were bluffing? Or what if they were so desperate that they didn’t care if you were bluffing or not. Then you would have to stand aside, or you would have to shoot. If you shot, God would be very angry and disappointed. You would be banished to hell after your death, and shunned by all of us until you died. But what if they had rifles of their own? Then you would see God and be cast into hell much more quickly. No, Jacob. Violence is not the way.

We can make it difficult for the bad men. You yourself have hidden some of our family’s food. We have blocked our road with the hay. Tomorrow we will take paper and cardboard to cover the windows in the parlor, so no one can see our light. We will spread nails on the road at the end of the driveway. But we will not use the rifles.

Go to sleep now, son. There is more work for us to do tomorrow.”

“Good night, Papa.” Said Jacob, though he was still troubled.

The new dawn brought more bad news. Mr. Thompson had walked from his farm to Eli’s, on the pretense of trading for some more preserves. He brought a cardboard box full of quart Mason jars, and a box of unused lids. Eli was appreciative of the gesture, but the truth was, there was not that much additional food of any kind left to trade, save some cows. If Mary’s calculations were accurate, they had barely enough to get them through the rest of the year. Hopefully the next spring would be a normal one. Mr. Thompson had told Eli to keep the jars on the condition that he trade him some food...any food for them. Eli found four small ornamental jars of Mary’s preserves. They had originally been made for sale at the tourist shop near the interstate, but they had been inadvertently pushed back in the cupboard and forgotten. Eli reckoned that given the circumstances, three jars would be a more than generous trade.

“Eli,” Mr. Thompson said, “I don’t mind telling you that I’m concerned. I am more than concerned. I’m scared. Our power went out two days ago. We have some oil lamps that we have been using diesel in. Smoky and smelly, but it’s light. Anyway, I was out on the front porch when I heard gunshots. Mickey Tollefsen came by on a horse and said that the Amberson place had been shot up. Both of ‘em shot dead, took everything that wasn’t nailed down: Kitchen ripped up somethin’ terrible.”

Mr. Thompson paused to collect his thoughts. The worry was visible on his face. “Me and Roger and Roger’s oldest boy take shifts stayin’ awake through the night: Far as I know, they ain’t never caught the fellas that killed the Ambersons.”

“That is indeed terrible news, Mr. Thompson. We shall pray for their souls.”

“Yeah. I reckon you folks will be on the list soon enough.”

“What do you mean?” Asked Eli, trying to keep his voice calm.

“Well, what I mean is, well... that most people in these parts know you folks won’t shoot nobody. As soon as these fellers figure out that they ain’t going to get shot at when they go to Amish places, well... Seems like common sense that they’d

start looking at you folks.”

Thompson had put into a few words what had been haunting Eli since this all began. He believed completely what the elders taught him and what he read in the Bible. But he couldn't silence a tiny part of himself that cried for overt acts of self-preservation.

Later that evening, Eli awoke to a strange popping noise. As he became more fully awake, he realized that the sounds he was hearing were gunshots. He sat bolt upright in bed, and shook Mary awake.” Mary, quickly! Get the little ones and go into the woods! Take blankets Mary, but hurry!” He whispered to her. “And no lights!”

Eli ran to Jacob's room. He shook Jacob's shoulder roughly, saying “Jacob, get dressed and meet me down on the porch. Something's happening at the Thompson's house, I think!”

When Jacob arrived on the steps of the porch a few minutes later, his father was already there, holding a bag with some bandages and ointments in it. There were still gunshots from the Thompson's farm. Eli and Jacob began running across the fields, tripping and falling occasionally in the darkness, but continuing the distance. Presently, they could smell smoke and see an orange glow through the trees and coming over a gentle rise. They could also hear the screams. Eli had angled their approach so they would come up from behind the house, in a mostly wooded area. As they got closer, a horrible, devilish sight appeared before them. There were roughly eight men that he could see. Some were directly in front of him, between himself and the rear of the house. Others were around the front of the house. They were all hooting, screaming and laughing and some acted drunk. The terrible scene was lit by the machine shed and the tractor inside that burned with a dull, smoky flames. Occasionally, one of the men outside would fire a shot into a window then the lot of them would erupt with renewed laughter and cursing. But the Thompsons were not going down without a fight. Jacob could see at least one crumpled form on the ground. For a brief, irrational second he grieved for Mr. Thompson's soul for having killed another person. Just then another shot rang out from the Thompson's house. A man had foolishly (or drunkenly) silhouetted himself to the Thompsons inside, and had paid the ultimate price.

Two dark figures walked closer in the darkness close to where Eli and Jacob lay on the forest floor.

“This is taking too long.” Said one.

“Sheeit, man! We got all the time in the world. Ain’t no cops gonna come and save these a\$\$holes.” Replied the other.

“That’s not what I mean. We’ve already lost Drippy and Kent, and I think Tunks just went down. We stay here much longer, we gonna loose more men. We loose men we can’t take places. We can’t take places, we can’t eat.”

The second man turned to the other men in general and screamed “That’s ‘cause these motherf*ckers can’t shoot.”

“Listen, we’re in a no-win. Let’s just fire the place and move on. These farms never have as much as we think anyway.”

The first man sighed heavily. “F*ck it, man. We really needed this place. Nobody’s eaten since we got that couple two days ago.” His dark shape was still for a moment. Then he turned and shouted “Yo, Jamal! Light it up!”

Whoops of joy pierced the night, as the order was passed and dark shadows bent to their task. Small, bright flames appeared in the darkness several places around the house, then one by one arced through the air to crash and blossom with a gout of flame against the side of the century-old farmhouse. Screams once again emanated from the structure as it became engulfed in flames. Jacob looked in horror at the tableau unfolding before him. He was fourteen years old. He had never seen a television. He had been raised in a culture where violence was abhorred and forbidden. His mind reeled from the wanton murder and destruction taking place yards in front of him. He felt his father shake beside him. From fear, from sadness, from loathing or disgust, he knew not. Jacob himself felt numb. It seemed all a horrible nightmare, from which he was certain to awake at any moment. Feeling detached, Jacob slowly turned his gaze back to the fiercely raging fire. Eli and Jacob were trapped: The men would surely hear them if they attempted to flee.

The men on the outside had apparently done this before: From cover, they began to fall silent, waiting for the occupants of the house. They did not have long to wait: The choking smoke and blistering heat quickly drove the Thompsons to desperation. The front door erupted and two men ran forth coughing and firing their hunting rifles in the general direction of the marauders, who in turn opened fire. Another man fired slow shots from the window of the house. Several seconds later, the ground-level cellar doors in the rear of the house flew open and several women and children ran directly toward Eli and Jacob. Unfortunately, the men who ordered the Molotov Cocktails thrown were standing in their way. One or two shots were fired at the fleeing forms, but it seemed as if once the marauders saw that those fleeing were not armed men, they ceased their firing, and instead began to chase after them, screaming in their gleeful rapine intent. The marauders quickly cut down the men in front. Even the man in the window had ceased firing. The marauders in the rear of the house quickly closed in on the women and children. One of the older women opened fire with a pistol, apparently hitting nothing, but drawing the fire of several marauders. The woman who fired and three others -including the two children- went down in the shooting. Two women remained, and were quickly set upon by the marauders. They were mere feet away from the horrified eyes of Eli and Jacob, who now had to remain absolutely still lest they be discovered. Rough grunts and coarse laughter mingled with screams of despair and pain that continued throughout the night. Jacob and Eli lay with their face in the forest duff praying for the pain of the others and praying that they were not discovered.

As dawn grew near, the men had mostly tired of their spoils, and the women's screams had died to the occasional whimper. The men had produced bedrolls and lay down on the ground some distance away, occasionally waking and walking close to assault the women who had been tied to a stump. Eli's fear grew as the sky lightened. The women were only tied fifteen feet from where they lay. In the dark, the black, plain Amish clothes had hidden them quite well. As it became lighter, the dark black of their clothes would stand out against the browns of the forest floor. Jacob had experienced the same thoughts. What he did about them was not expected. Jacob's world had been shaken, nay destroyed by what he had witnessed. He silently cried all night, tears streaming down his cheeks beseeching God for answers, asking "Why, why, why?" He could not be certain that God answered, but his panic and fear were suddenly swept away. His mind had a sudden clarity that surprised and disturbed him.

Without a word to his father, Jacob suddenly stood and strode as quickly through the last few feet of the forest and leaves toward the stump where the women were tied. He stooped for only a moment to pick up a thick portion of tree branch from the forest floor.

Eli was slow to respond. "Jacob!" He hissed. Jacob did not respond. "Jacob!"

Jacob stooped briefly at the women, opened his pocketknife, and cut their bonds. They were nearly unconscious, but Jacob did not tarry. He began walking toward the sleeping men. Without trepidation, he walked through them to the man sleeping the farthest away from the women.

Surprisingly, the men had not awakened during Jacob's walk, though he made no effort at silence. Eli stood in time to see Jacob stop at the farthest man, raise the branch over his head, and bring it down on the sleeping man's head with all the force that his fourteen-year-old wiry body could muster. A soft, wet thud was all that Eli heard.

He was mortified by Jacob's actions. Jacob very probably had just delivered a killing blow. His son's soul may be in jeopardy yet Eli stood in indecision. Jacob had made a choice. He was old enough to know what he was doing. He looked at the two women, who were slowly realizing that they were free. He looked again at Jacob who had moved to the second man, and again swung the branch. His aim was not true this time, and gave a glancing blow that though it cracked the man's skull; he began to scream without cease. Jacob turned and ran away from the women and Eli. The marauders awakening from their drunken dozing and began to give chase, some firing after him.

Eli suddenly realized what Jacob had done. He had drawn the attention of the attackers so his father and the women could escape. His heart heavy with Jacob's burden but at the same time light with pride for his son, he moved forward to get the women.

"Quickly!" He whispered to them when he was near. "They will not be distracted by my Jacob for long. We must hurry!"

The women -he presumed they were Mr. Thompson's granddaughters- struggled to their feet, supporting one another as Eli pulled them staggering into the woods. He led them deeper into the forest. Before he went too deeply into the trees, he

looked back. The marauders were still occupied with Jacob, and Jacob was still running in an erratic pattern. He saw Jacob stumble and fall, then get back up and resume running away with a pronounced limp. He couldn't watch any longer.

He quickly caught up with his charges and led them on through the woods.

AGrayMan

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Chapter 23 – Ghosts in the Mist.

“The foundation of every state is the education of its youth.” *Diogenes*

From the hilltop overlooking the town three teenagers watched the procession of military vehicles that roared into their town taking up commanding positions in all the intersections. Not that there were all that many intersections to command in the first place, just Main St. running east and west and Harding Ave. crossing north and south. Off in the distance beyond the town proper and past the first few remaining farms you could just about make out the interstate overpass. Their little town had only recently become a bedroom community for the metropolis an hour away, off to the north. What with the escalating cost of homes in the metropolitan area and the runaway crime rates the city dwellers began their exodus to greener pastures over the last few years.

At first they just bought up fallow nearby land and built their country estates, however soon small exclusive housing tracts started popping up around their little community like Scottish Thistles. Next, slowly, incrementally they started moving in the city comforts that this shady agriculturally based community lacked. At first the locals didn't seem to mind these transplants from the big city. They added color and were at times quite entertaining to watch as they played at being country folks and genteel weekend farmers. It wasn't until they started showing up at Town Counsel, Planning Boards and PTA meetings and began to restructure the nature of their rural village that friction began to develop.

Soon the adults were behaving worse than children...and the children. Well Tobias J. Wellington III, or Toby to his new friends, had taken to rural living like a hog to a mud wallow. For the first time in his life he could actually escape the confines of the privileged life that he had been born into. Not that he didn't mind

the privileges that his folks money could buy – but it was the cost of that privilege he rejected. He was a typical teenage boy full of muck and mire and enthusiasm for this new world. The world of his parents was too restraining and ordered. He was not interested in their politics, high finance deals and lavish cocktail parties. The upper crust of politicians, lawyers, doctors and bureaucratic elites held no appeal. Toby liked nothing better than to take to the woods and step back through time. Here he was the explorer or the 'cours de bois' (runner of the woods), an all around Mountain Man trekking across vast unmapped territories. Here he was in command of his life and not commanded over.

Now with his two closest friends, Victor “Vic” Covington and Douglas “Doc” Holliday the three lads sat on the edge of the tree line hidden by in the tall brown November grass and watched quietly.

“Whatcha ya see Toby?” Vic asked in a whisper.

“Just a bunch of trucks, Hummv’s...oh and there are a couple of LAV’s”

“LA – what?” Doc questioned.

“LAV’s, Light Armored Vehicles. Those things with the little turrets on the top and four big wheels on each side.” Toby explained. “Those are Marine vehicles...but...”

“What do you suppose they are doing here?” Vic asked

“Hmmm don’t know Vic.” Toby handed the binoculars to him. “There ain’t no Marine camps any where near here. Maybe it’s like your grand-dad said.”

“I don’t know about that Toby...he’s like really old and says some pretty strange stuff sometimes. Mom says he should be in a home but he won’t budge from his cabin. Dad says he’s just an old coot and we should just leave him be.” Vic paused as he looked through the Bino’s. “But I sort of like him. He’s got a lot of cool stuff up there to mess around with.”

Doc reached over and to grab the glasses from Vic. “Come on man, don’t totally hog the glasses.”

“Hang on Doc...just a second...hold on...HEY what the hell are they doing?”

The boys continued to watch over the next hour or two before they quietly slipped back from the tree line and swiftly made their way deeper into the woods and safety. It took another hour by deer trails and rabbit runs to cross the two ridges, three streams and avoid all the main trails and logging roads that ran through the forest. Old Man Covington had been very explicit when he sent the trio off to check on the town.

“You’ve got to be like the ancient Indians born in these old mountains and the old Long Hunters that first crossed into these parts. You’ve got to be like ghosts in the mists boys.” The old man looked the three of them straight in the eye. “There’s a heap of evil coming down on the land boys, pure e-v-i-l.” He said drawing out the words. “Now you boys got to be my eyes, I’m too old to run the woods these days. But you got the wild wind in you and you know these woods better than most. So get over to Jackson ridge and stay out of sight. Don’t use the main trails or the roads. Stay together and watch carefully. When you’ve seen enough to give me an idea of what is going on, report back to me. Stay together and make sure there is no one following you!”

The boys made it back to Old man Covington’s cabin just after dark. Tired and wet they waited on the perimeter and checked out the entire area before moving silently down to the back door. Standing on the back porch they waited. The old Man’s voice startled them coming out of the darkness behind them.

“Doors open boys, go on in.”

Corporal Daniel Ortega-Mendez wondered just what the hell they were doing here in the middle of nowhere locking down this town. He had heard of all sorts of off the wall cr@p since the Plague had struck and none of it was good. If they were searching for ragheads he wouldn’t object, but this was the third town in as many weeks that his Company had swept through. The President had ordered all guns to be turned in and now it was up to the military and police to ensure that his orders had been complied with. Though what this had to do with Biological attack on the U.S. Daniel couldn’t figure out. Sure the food riots in the major cities required strong muscle to put down, but there hadn’t been hardly any trouble in the outlying regions. Just more bureaucratic crap was all it amounted to as far as he was concerned.

“We should be bustin a bunch of A-rab skulls over in the sand instead of hassling these folks here...just plan stupid.” He thought to himself as he shivered against the cold. “Damn guard duty.”

Inside the warm and well-lit home of the local bigwig, the officers in charge of the Marine Company and their handler’s, several BATF and FBI agents were sitting down to dinner with Congressman Bernard Steffler, two other suits and their host, Mr. Tobias J. Wellington II.

Congressman Steffler lifted his glass to their host. “I must say Tobias you are a most gracious host and have set a very fine table in these poor times.”

Several cries of “Here – Here” erupted from the agents at the table while the Marines acknowledged stiffly with curt nods in the direction of the host.

“How fortunate of you to have relocated your family to these pastoral vistas before the problems arose in the more urban climates.” Steffler continued.

“Well Congressman, what good would it be, to be in the communications business and not...shall I say...listen to the wires.” Wellington responded.

Laughter broke out across the table, again with the exception of the three Marine officers sitting at the opposite end of the long table.

“You do seem to have thought of everything Tobias, this table is exquisite...your own chef?”

“Of course Congressman, one must maintain proper...attitude...regardless of the times we find ourselves in. I couldn’t imagine setting a table for guests such as yourself with...,” He pondered for a second. “Say ah, Captain...what do you call those emergency rations we’re providing to the civilians here abouts in lieu of real food?”

“They’re called MRE’s Sir, and they are real food, Sir.”

“Yes of course they are Captain, thank you.” He immediately turned to his premier guest. “I overheard some of the troops referring to them as ‘Meals Rejected by Ethiopians’.” The table erupted again in laughter, again with the exception of the three Marine officers sitting at the far end.

Two hours later after several five star courses that looked more like modern art than actual food and were served along with the appropriate libations for each course the group finally adjourned to Wellington's spacious office for a brace of fine Cuban cigars and a healthy sniffer of equally fine well-aged brandy. The two junior officers excused themselves to attend to 'duties of command' and left their Captain to entertain the civilians and be the butt of their humor.

As they emerged for the overly lit house the Lieutenants noted the changing of the guard-taking place around the perimeter of the property.

In hushed tones "Could you believe those pompous @sses in there Cliff?"

Cliff shook his head in disbelief. "You know I've thought this whole screaming affair had a strange stink from the very beginning...now I don't have a doubt one."

"You know, Melton can be a total @sshole sometimes but I'm sure glad he got us out of there. Too much more of the elitist crap and I'd be popping a couple of frags across the table and diving for cover!"

"I know what you mean. If I didn't know any better I'd say those bastards knew this sh*t was going down. Did you catch that bit about 'listening to the wires'?"

"Yeah I caught that, but just as I opened my mouth, the Captain whacked me in the shin with his combat boots."

"Me too!"

"Well they sure didn't cover this kind of cr@p at TBS (The Basic School) in Quantico, that's for sure."

The aroma of fine Cuban cigars wafted through the evening air as the group lounged in the plush leather chairs and discussed the affairs of state.

"And how is it you have lights whilst the surrounding community seems to be...in the dark?"

“We fully self-contained here.” Wellington paused to take a sip of brandy. “Liquid propane, a good three years supply worth, plus a more than ample supply of the other commodities of civilization.”

“Like food?” One of the agents tossed out.

”Well you don’t imply that we should be dinning on MRE’s now do you.” He turned to the Marine Captain off to his side. “How do you feel about the current situation Captain?”

“Hadn’t given it much thought Sir. My Marines and I are here to complete the mission as ordered by the President.”

“But of course Captain, of course and you’re doing an exceptional job...so far.” Chimed in the Congressman. “Don’t you think so Brent?”

Brentwood Davis, Under Secretary for Transportation was caught mid sip of his brandy. “Yes, oh yes the Captain has done a, ah, ah, a very professional job. Much better than other units that I’ve visited on my fact finding tour.”

“You see that Captain, Mr. Davis admires your professionalism.” Steffler continued. “As do the rest of the gentleman here, none of the rouge mentality that we’ve heard about with some other organizations.”

Captain Melton nodded his acknowledgement of the left-handed compliment. “Semper Fi Congressman, Semper Fi.”

“Ah yes, and much appreciated I can assure you.” Turning to the evening’s host. “Now Tobias to the business at hand...”

Corporal Ortega-Mendez was returning back from guard duty. His relief had been late and as a result Ortega was walking back to the bivouac site alone. His post on watch had placed him just outside the windows of the dinner party. He wasn’t supposed to be paying attention to the conversations inside but it was difficult to ignore what was taking place, and he didn’t like the sound of what he had overheard.

Walking back alone in the dark misty cold he scanned quickly about using his peripheral vision to find his way as he muttered under his breath.

“Rich gringo bendejo’s. We’re out here in the frickin freezing @ss cold guarding their punk @sses and doing their frickin dirty laundry...” Suddenly the night cold stabbed against his exposed neck and sent shivers down his spine. He heard the faint sound of a whisper in the distance and the cold hit him again. Ortega went in to combat mode and crouched weapon ready as he scanned the area around him. His ears strained to hear any sound, any movement. The hair on the back of his neck tensed as if trying to leap from his skin.

“Hee-to...” The voice came again drifting in on the evening mist.

Ortega froze, his weapon automatically shouldered and ready.

“Hee-to...” This time louder.

“Man this is not cool f*ckin wit me.” He barely spoke through is teeth.

“Hee-to...” The voice was now next to him and Ortega spun around expecting who ever it was to be nearly upon him. The emptiness of the darkness engulfed him. He continued to scan from left to right and back again concentrating on his peripheral vision...but nothing...nothing.

“Man you better knock this sh*t off panocha or I’m gonna light up the night on your @ss!” Ortega hissed.

“Hee-to, is that any way to talk to your Abuelo?” The voice answered, just feet away from him.

Suddenly Ortega began to focus on a form that seemed to step out of the darkness of the night. The form was a shade shorter and dressed in a strange sort of battle dress. The helmet was old style, like in the movies.

“Halt Mutha F*cker or I’ll drop you!” Ortega ordered.

“Hito you are troubled my little one.” His accent was heavy and almost foreign.

“Just who the f*ck are you man?” Ortega held his M4A1 steady on the figure before him.

“Such language from one so young.” The stranger whispered. “You certainly never learned such talk from me.”

Like a lightening bolt it struck Ortega. “Abuelo?” He stuttered. “Grandfather?” He stared in utter disbelief.

“Si my little haba (bean).”

“That’s impossible, you’ve been dead since I was a...a...a...”

“I know...I know, I do not understand myself Hito. But I am here.”

Ortega slowly lowered his weapon. “Abuelo...how can this be?” He looked around nervously. “I know I’m not dreaming. This can not be...”

The pair stood in the dark silence for what seemed like eons. Ortega felt like he had fallen into a twilight zone movie. He was standing just a few feet away from his grandfather, but his grandfather had died when he was just a small boy. He remembered his hearty laugh and the way he smelled, old and leathery, full of the rich loamy smell of the earth that he worked in his nursery. He also remembered the special way he always felt around his Abuelo. But the vision before him was younger and dressed very strange. Something caught his eye. On the left shoulder was a patch or something with the head of an eagle in white on it.

“What is that uniform you’re wearing Abuelo? I’ve seen that patch somewhere before.”

“This is strange my Hito. I haven’t worn this uniform for a very long time...and this IS my M1.” He said hefting the long gun. “Right down to the serial numbers.”

“Why are you here Grandfather? How is it that I can see you? Am I dead?”

The aberration laughed his grandfathers hearty laugh. “No, No, my little one. You are very much alive. I on the other hand...well...I don’t know.”

The pair squat down in the middle of the road and were engulfed in the darkness.

“Go on in and get out of those wet things.” Grandpa Covington said as he began to appear out of the night.

The three boys quickly mustered through the door and were greeted by the warmth of the fire and safety of the cabin. As they began changing out of their wet cloths Victor’s grandfather questioned them on what they had witnessed. Toby described the vehicles and the way they had cordoned off the town and set up roadblocks. Vic told about the soldiers forcing citizens out of their homes and kept them standing out in the street as small groups of other soldiers went through each house. And Doc described the singling out and marching off of many of the men of the town to a special area on the square that was fenced off with rolls of some type of barbed wire. He had seen guns taken from some of the houses thrown into the backs of one of the big trucks. He also saw them take what looked like food from some of the houses and was given out to the neighbors a few parcels at a time.

“Hmmm well that fits the pattern.” Grandpa Covington muttered to himself.

“What pattern Poppa? Vic asked.

“I’ve been listening to that old short-wave out in the workshop. Seems once the government troops get the cities locked down they start to spread out to the suburbs and small town surrounding them. Disarm and redistribute the food and then leave behind a small garrison to maintain control.”

“But why Mr. Covington?” Doc asked.

“Because they’re scared, scared of what we might do, or not do.”

“Who’s scared?”

“That is the ten-thousand dollar question my lads, that is the question indeed.”

The first problem started just outside of the town. Corporal Ortega-Mendez was in charge of a fire-team in a squad that was pacifying the outlying farms. The morning had begun rather uneventful with only angry stares and verbal undertones of the residents as they searched and confiscated outlawed weapons as ordered. Up till now there had only been a few angry mutterings of threats, but at the third farmstead things were not going well from the outset.

“Mr. Sullivan you are required by the orders of the President of the United States and the declaration of martial law to exit your home and cooperate fully with the appropriate authorities.” The agent called to the house over the bullhorn.

“This is your last chance Mr. Sullivan. If you do not immediately cooperate we will be forced to drag you out of there. You are placing yourself and your family at grave risk. Do you hear me Mr. Sullivan?”

Suddenly a shot rang out and hit the fence post to the right of the black cammied agent.

“SH*T!” He yelled as both he and the Marines quickly ducked back behind the vehicles.

“That B*stard tried to kill us!” The agent yelled.

The Staff Sergeant beside him chuckled. “That Mr. Agent man, was a warning. He hit square on that fence post. He’s telling you that if we don’t drop this issue he’s fully capable of tagging any one of us from this distance.”

“I want that b*stard taken out of there Sergeant, and taken out now!”

“Well SIR, considering that he’s got a clear field of fire around his house, he’s on the high ground and he’s made sure that we’re not just driving up to the house due to the ditches and barricades, just how do you propose that we do that?”

“You’re the f*cking Marine, charge the damn place!”

“Lead on.”

“What?”

“Don’t get me wrong here SIR, but just because we’re referred to as ‘Jar Heads’ doesn’t mean that we lack any kind of intelligence. I’ve got a squad of Marines to P.O.L.I.C.E. this action...not to storm a farmer protecting his property.”

“I gave you an order Sergeant! You will obey it!”

"I heard your order...SIR. CORPORAL JAEGER...ORTEGA...ON ME!"

Grandpa Covington was fixing breakfast when the radio crackled to life.

"Breaker Break...Breaker Break. We've got a situation at the Sullivan's, Over."

The static returned. "Breaker Break...breaker break. Any VFW out there with their ears on? Over."

"Go Breaker...you got Airborne. Over." Grandpa Covington replied. The boys began to sit up in their sleeping bags.

"Roger Airborne, big Sarge is that you? Over."

"Roger Breaker, big Sarge here, what's your sit? Over."

"Red here...Hey Sarge they got Sully holed up and they've traded shots. As far as we can tell his whole family's in there. Over."

"Damn!" Covington muttered. He picked up the mike again. "Light up the recall and muster at..." He thought for a second. "Penbroke barn. Over."

"Penbroke barn...Roger that...and Sarge...SHIT!" The line went dead.

"Red comeback!" "RED...COMEBACK!"

"SHIT! Sarge they've just started shooting with those cannons on the APC's. It's punching holes through the house like Swiss cheese!"

"RED GET THE DAMN RECALL STARTED NOW! OVER!"

"R-R-Roger Sarge, Recall started. Over and OUT!"

Covington laid the mike down and looked up at the three faces staring at him. "Boys we've got work to do."

"Victor go grab your Realtree cammies upstairs, bring down a set for Doc. Toby I've got an extra pair that should fit you. COME ON BOYS...SHAKE A LEG! We've got neighbors in trouble!"

Pandemonium broke out as the three teenage boys ran around the house getting dressed as quickly as possible. Grandpa Covington disappeared into the basement and emerged after a few minutes with two rifles slung over his shoulder and one in each hand. The laid them against the wall and disappeared back into the basement.

“Vic give me a hand down here.”

In fifteen minutes the fire team under the command of Grandpa Covington was headed out to the barn. They quickly loaded up the pickup and headed out the back of the property on an old abandoned logging road.

“This isn’t the way to Penbroke’s barn Poppa.”

”No it isn’t. We’re headed over to the beaver dam at Nelson Creek crossing. It’s called a code Vic, you never know who might be listening.”

The truck bounced down the old rutted and overgrown trail throwing the occupants about inside the cab.

At the command center in the Mayors office Captain Melton had just received word that there appeared to be a sudden burst of civilian communication across the Citizen Band radio frequencies. That in addition to stand off at the Sullivan farm, the previously quiet situation suddenly began to trouble the Marine Captain.

“Lt. Sievers, I want you to get out to the Sullivan farm and find out just what the hell is going on out there.”

“Roger!”

“Do what ever you have to, to defuse that situation!”

“And if the agent in charge...?”

“F*CK THAT AGENT! You’re a Marine Officer in command of Marine troops. Get that situation under control and get it under control now!”

“Eye-Eye SIR!” The young Lieutenant spun about and hastily left the office.
“STAFF SERGEANT ACKERS...TO ME!”

The Captain now turned to his remaining Lieutenant. “Lieutenant Brendowski, take a squad and recon that barn...where is it Mayor?”

A chubby red-faced man in a bad suit walked over to the map of the township that was spread across the conference table. He pointed to an area on the southeast edge of the map with his stubby fingers.

“That would be about here Captain. It’s an old abandoned barn about ready to fall down near these crossroads. Back up a driveway here and partially hidden in the trees.”

“OK Ed, do you got that?”

“YES SIR!”

“And Ed, don’t let this blow up into a firefight, just Recon the position and report back to me. Don’t be seen and don’t engage...understood?”

“Eye-eye skipper! Don’t be seen and don’t engage. I’ll call in as soon as I have something to report.”

“Good, now get going.” The remaining Lieutenant bet feet out of the office and disappeared out the front door.

“Now Mr. Mayor, just who are these people with the VFW?”

“Nothing Captain, I can assure you, just some ol’ drunk coots that tell war stories over beer and pretzels. It’s not a very big post here, maybe twenty or thirty vets at the most. Too old to do much of anything else but tell stories.”

“You better hope so Mr. Mayor, you better hope so.

Lt. Sievers had arrived on the scene and despite the temper tantrums of the BATF Agent had taken charge of the situation. He had backed the armored vehicles off and now held a vigil at a relatively safe distance from the house. Dusk was a few hours away and Sievers did not like the idea of spending the evening exposed watching over this house. Hell he didn’t like the idea of the

mission they had been given, but until he could find a way out he was stuck in the situation as it had come down.

The vigil was being maintained on several sides of the Sullivan's farm along the front road. Up in the woods forming an outer ring to the Marine encirclement there now lay a second group watching the now quiet farm. Back just inside the tree line they watched, men that had waited like this once before in a wooded landscape on another continent from another time. They had formed the thin line of defiance against an overwhelming force. Ill equipped, short of ammo, and small in numbers they had held the line against a sweeping evil that threatened the world of their youth. Now over fifty years later they once again found themselves on the line, outnumbered, and defiant. Except this time they were not quite alone. They had brought with them the legacy of their generation, their sons, and grandsons. They had brought their American heritage to the line in the sand, to fight the good fight one more time. This generation of builders and shapers would not "go quietly in to this good night."

Dawn broke to the roar of trucks and armored cars streaming into town. Black trucks and vehicles that sweep through and raced out of town towards the embattled homestead. Several command vehicles broke away and headed to the Marine command center in the Mayors office on the main square. A little less than one hundred civilians held in the concertina stockade watched as black cammied soldiers with the letters "BATF" on their coats jumped out of the vehicles and mounted the steps two at a time entered the Mayors office. Shortly there after a Limousine arrived and an entourage of well dressed men entered the office as well.

"Thank you for your efforts Captain, however, you stand relieved and will order your men to stand-down. My people will take over from here." The lead black suit ordered as he entered the office.

"And just who are you?" The Marine asked.

"Senior Field Agent Smith, Captain. You've done a fine job, however we'll take it from here."

"Razorback two to Razor one over." Interrupted the awkward silence. "This is Razorback two to Razor one over."

“Tell him to standby.” The radio operator nodded and turned back to his radio and relayed the message.

“I have the situation here under control Agent Smith, where are your orders?”

“Orders Captain.” He chuckled. “I am the senior field agent in this sector and am assuming command of this operation.” He paused. “That is unless you’ve resolved the Sullivan issue and rounded up the remaining dissidents in this sector.”

“We are currently negotiating with Mr. Sullivan and as for any dissidents, other than the individuals that we had arrest orders for there have been no further disturbances.”

“Well that may be the case, but negotiations are over. He will surrender as ordered or we will bring his place down around him. Those are my orders Captain. If you will excuse me, I have a sector to run. You will receive new orders sometime this morning. Now if you and your men would mind I believe you have packing to do. Good day.”

The Marine looked at the Federal Agent with more than disgust and quietly stood his ground. Just then the Congressman walked in.

“Oh good that you’re here Smith. I see you two have met. The Captain has done a fine job with the pacification. Well except for that retched farmer, what was his name?”

“Sullivan Sir.” One of his toadies answered.

“Oh yes, Sullivan. Hardly the Captain’s fault, the man is probably deranged or something. His holding his family hostage as well I understand. Took several shots at one of your agents. Dirty business that.”

“Yes Congressman, well I’ve already sent agents and special Home Security troops out to relieve the Marines who will be receiving new orders at any time.” The senior agent turned to the Captain. “Isn’t that right Captain.”

The Marine grabbed his web gear and prepared to leave. “DeNally, get your gear broken down and packed up most skosh.” He said as he exited the office.

“Sarge we’ve got new players on the field.”

Covington edged forward and raised his bino’s. New vehicles seemed to be relieving the Marines and uniformed soldiers he didn’t recognized were taking over the Marine positions. There seemed to be a conference behind one of the LAV’s with what was probably the officers. One of the new players ran up to the group and saluted one of the new officers.

“Idiot! Chester check out that tall one there that just returned the salute...see him.”

“Got’em.”

“He’s a zero, keep an eye on him. He seems to be in charge of this new group.”

“Roger Sarge, he’s mine.”

“What do you make of it Covington?” Another old soldier beside him asked. They both shared the same shoulder patch of their unit from a long ago war. The white emblem of a screaming eagle faded and worn but still proud.

“Looks like the Marines are packin up, being relieved...and I don’t like the look of this new group. I think...” He paused. “The stand off is about to end.”

“Captain just what the F*CK is going on here? First we’re in charge and then all hell breaks loose when those Federal Goons show up! I just about had Mr. Sullivan out of his house peacefully!”

“I don’t know Lieutenant.” The Captain turned to his two junior officers. “This whole thing has stunk from the beginning and now this...”

The three professional soldiers compared notes going over the events of the preceding days. None of them liked what had been going down recently and liked even less the round up they had been apart of. But this new situation looked really bad.

“Sievers who’s the best recon team you’ve got?”

The Lieutenant thought for a moment. “Corporal Ortega-Mendez.” Brendowski concurred with him. “Remember that last op up in Pickle Meadows. The kid was like a ghost in the bush.”

“Ski, you got anyone?”

“Williams and McCrone are damn good in the bush sir, throw in Staff Sergeant Talford and you’d have about as strong a team as we could put together.”

“Good, I concur, get them up and ready in ten mikes. I need eyes in the field. We’re not tuckin tail just yet gentlemen. I want the entire company ready to roll hot in twenty minutes, full combat loads and I want this done quietly!”

Corporal Ortega was on point. The fire team moved silently through the woods. Every sense alert, like wraiths they slid through the undergrowth leaving no sign of their passing.

Toby, Victor and Doc had crawled to within fifty yards of the Home Security outpost on the right flank of the Sullivan’s farm. Their RealTree camouflage blending perfectly into the background of the forest. They could hear the soldiers as they clinked about getting into position, oblivious to the fact that they were being watched, smoking, joking and sucking down sodas in the process of setting up their position.

Approaching from the northwest Ortega and his team could also hear the noise and clatter of the their Federal replacements. They caught the whiffs of cigarette smoke coming from them over a hundred yards away. Slowly they maneuvered through the bush in absolute silence. They were now approaching within almost visual range when the first shot was fired. Yelling and screaming sudden erupted from the direction of the OP (observation post). The recon team froze and disappeared into the background.

Three teenagers raced through the forest towards the Marines. Shots rang out from behind them and ripped through the trees above the fleeing trio. Ortega and his team became part of the forest.

A whisper suddenly drifted past his ear. “Be ready Heto...protect the children!”

The three teenagers broke into the clearing just in front of the Marines. Another series of shots rang out from behind and the sickening “Thwak” of a round meeting flesh preceded the scream of pain as one of the boys dropped to the ground. The other two quickly turned and attempted to pick up him up to continue their escape. But the pause was just long enough for the pursuing Homeland guards to catch up to them. The unarmed trio suddenly found themselves facing seven armed soldiers. They had dropped their rifles when the first shots range out and they took off running, now they were caught empty handed.

Victor lay on the ground trying to stem the bleeding from the twin holes in his thigh. Toby and Doc slowly raised their shaking hands as the armed men approached.

“So you little b*stards thought you’d get away did you?”

Ortega placed the recital of his sight in the center of the soldiers face. They were no more than thirty yards away from his position back in the underbrush. He was now trapped too. To escape would be impossible without detection.

“Well we got one of the rats Murphy!” The dark suited soldier menacingly stood over the fallen teenager.

Ortega’s finger touched the trigger and started to tighten.

“Might as well finish the job.” He lowered his weapon and shot the helpless boy point blank in the chest.

Just at that instant three rounds from Ortega’s M4A1 crossed the distance to their target in less than a millisecond. Hitting the facial bones of the burly soldier they tore through the solid shell viciously before slamming out the back of the man’s brain case sending a shower of pink mist into the air. The two standing teenagers stood in shocked terror as the supersonic scream of angry hornets ripped about the air next to them and slashed through the weak flesh of their pursuers. The firefight lasted less than three seconds and seven men met their makers in that instant.

Cpl Ortega sprang forward instantly taking point and placing himself between the three boys and their combined enemy. The rest if the recon team was mere seconds behind him. LCpl McCrone took up his position to the right of Ortega

while PFC Williams and SSgt Talford checked over the teenagers and made sure their enemy was dead. Victor was alive, but just barely. The round had gone through and through his right lung. Talford quickly slapped a tourniquet on the his leg and started dressing the sucking chest wound when more shoots rang out from the direction of the OP.

“We’ve got company Staff!” Ortega called back.

“Give me a second then we didi mow!” Talford worked feverishly to dress the wounds then pulling the wounded teenager into a sitting position scooped him up and across one shoulder.

“Give us cover Corporal!” Talford shouted as he ran heavy with his burden out of the clearing.

Ortega moved forward to met the enemy. A blur he disappeared into the underbrush trying to put as much distance between his team and himself. He would bring this war to the enemy. His feet pounding like a machine, he cut the distance quickly and exploded into the midst of the approaching squads. Like a pop up target the first figure sprang up before him. No time to shoot he viciously whipped the butt of his rifle across the surprised face and crushed the soldier’s temple dropping him like a rock. His momentum carried him forward and he spun firing in the amazed group. The first three bursts found targets, he hit the ground rolled and came up shooting, picking off first one, then two, three more and he was up and running again. Slamming in to a tree for cover nearly knocking the wind out of himself, he fired first left then right before letting fly with two hand grenades into the now retreating soldiers. He dropped to one knee and lowered the rifle to cut loose a 40mm grenade at head level. The effect was devastating and cut another three soldiers down. Loading in a fresh mag and jacking a new 40mm in he continued to press his advantage.

SSgt Talford gently laid Victor onto the poncho keeping him as much as possible on his injured side.

“Get him out of here McCrone. I’m going back for Danny!”

The four, two Marines and the two teenagers picked up the corners of the poncho and started off through the forest. Talford could hear the fury of battle before him and moved quickly to relieve his fellow grunt.

“Heto...to your left!” Ortega spun and let loose a burst dropping two more. Now wounded, bleeding, low on ammunition and heavily outnumbered, he continued to rip out sections of Government lackeys who still had no idea of just what the hell they were facing. He was still mad with rage, mad with murder for these b*stards that would shoot an unarmed civilian, a child in cold blood. “Not on my watch!” he gritted his teeth as he tried to tighten the battle dressing on his forearm. It was almost useless, he couldn’t feel his fingers any longer, his hand was like a club but he could still hold his rifle and with that he could still fight. It was just starting to dawn on him that he had better get out of this sh*t here quickly if he was going to get out at all. He started to stand up when he felt a solid “THUD” like he had been hit with a baseball bat in the back. His knees folded up under him in that instant and he dropped like a rock into the soft loamy forest floor.

The earth smelled sweet and inviting as he laid there trying to catch his breath. He tried to wiggle his toes, but couldn’t feel them in his boots. He was tired, so tired.

“Heto...they are coming.” The wind called to him.

He struggled to push himself up. Pain screamed from every sinew as he pulled himself into a position to see down the slope at the advancing line of dark soldiers. His breath was now quick and shallow; he could feel the pounding of his pulse in his ears. Training took over and Corporal Ortega-Mendez as if on automatic began preparing his position for a last stand. Three magazines left, two hand grenades, one 40mm. He was in sh*t city that was for sure. He pulled one of the blousing bands off his now useless legs. Pulling some suckers from the forest floor he cammied the end of his rifle.

He sat there no longer afraid and took a long difficult breath. He was back on Edson Range in basic. He let his breath out and slowly squeezed the trigger the rifle bucked. Again...and again...and again.

In the History of the world many last stands have been recorded. Acts of defiance against enormous odds. Yet act they did and they held their honor to the very end.

The forest was suddenly quiet and peaceful. Daniel Ortega-Mendez, Corporal, United States Marine Corps, stood looking down on a tattered shell of a Marine, worn and bleeding now resting quietly as if asleep. His blood slowly nurturing the earthy loam of the forest floor. The blood of a patriot once more mingling with the clay from which he sprung.

“Did I do good Abuelo?”

“You did very well my Heto, very well indeed.”

His arm slowly rested on his grandson’s shoulders. “You can rest now my little one.” And the pair slowly turned and walked toward the shimmering light that lay just beyond the green shroud of the forest.

Semper Fi :marine:

Desert Doc

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Pax Americana – 24 Crossing the Rubicon

“Sarge” Covington watched the dark cammied Government agents and Home Guards troops retreat from the forest across the field on the other side of the Sullivan farmhouse. Whatever they had run into had fought viciously for less than a third of the soldiers that entered the tree line twenty minutes earlier were now retreating from it. He could make out many of the able bodied men helping wounded comrades drag themselves back to the safety of the armored vehicles that they had arrived in earlier this morning.

“What do you make of it Sarge?” One of the Korean War vets beside him asked.

“Don’t rightly know Jeb, looks like they grabbed a p*ssed off badger by the tail and got whumped on pretty good.” The older Covington answered.

“I didn’t know that we had any of our boys over there yet.”

“We don’t.”

Two platoons of Marines advanced through the forest. Spread out and operating in small fire teams they covered the ground quickly using a technique known as bounding overwatch. Lt. Sievers the officer in charge of the advancing ground element had received a quick situation report from LCpl McCrone after he linked up and turned over the seriously wounded civilian teenager to the Company Corpsman. The Lieutenant was now determined to extract his two remaining Marines that were somewhere out in the forest before them and if necessary punish the perpetrators of this heinous act.

SSgt Talford had arrived too late. But the defiant Corporal had not gone down easily. Talford advanced slowly through the wake of enemy dead. Ever cautious and ready he carefully moved through the carnage until he finally found the now peaceful Ortega. His ammunition expended he had held off the last assault with his nine millimeter before he finally succumbed to the multitude of wounds that had pierced his flesh. Talford stood above him and slowly brought his right arm up to a stiff salute.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t get here in time brother.” He whispered. “But you shall not have died in vain. That I promise.”

The Staff Sergeant dropped his pack and trimmed out his kit for serious fighting. Keeping a warriors eye on the forest in front of him he quickly gathered up the Corporal’s empty mags and began loading them up from the reserve ammo in his ruck. He could hear someone moving towards his position off in the distance behind him and he prepared for immediate battle.

He let out his breath when he recognized several of his own men cautiously but quickly advancing towards him.

The quiet of the forest was suddenly broken by the loud call imminently familiar to every Marine.

“Ooooooo-RAH!”

The advancing Marines froze and instantly fixed on the Staff Sergeant’s position and answered with several guttural barks. He quickly gave them the signal to advance on his position and in just a few seconds he was no longer a lone Marine guarding a down comrade. The rest of the platoon formed a hasty

defensive perimeter as the SSgt and his Lieutenant quickly surveyed the battlefield.

Across on the other side Covington and his men heard the strange animal like call as it echoed across the valley.

“What the hell was that?”

“There is only one thing that I know of that makes that call...” Covington answered.

He strained to look past the tree line on the opposite side of the field. “Marines hold those woods.” He said flatly.

“But...weren’t they with the government goons just this morning?”

“Well I would guess by the looks of what we’ve just seen leave the forest...not any longer.”

A young runner, Stan McMurtrey’s oldest boy Rick, came peeling through the brush and slid into Covington’s fighting hole.

“Mr. Covington...” He puffed, nearly out of breath. “You got to come quick!” Puff-puff. “Vic’s been hurt bad and there’s,” Puff-puff. “a Marine officer that wants to talk to...” Puff-puff. “who ever is in charge.” Puff-puff. “Dad said to get you...” The boy blurted out as quickly as he could.

“DAMN!” Covington exclaimed. “DAMN – DAMN – DAMN!”

Meanwhile at the government perimeter command post Senior Field Agent Richardson had his own nightmare to deal with. He had lost over half of his forces and still didn’t know what the hell they were dealing with. He only had bits and pieces of information and lap full of wounded.

“I DON’T KNOW WHAT THE HELL JUST HAPPENED!” He yelled into the radio. “I JUST GOT THE LIVING SH*T KICKED OUT MY UNIT AND I NEED IMMEDIATE BACK UP!”

“I DON’T GIVE A DAMN ABOUT THAT F*CKING TOWN. I’VE GOT HOSTILES RIGHT HERE IN FRONT OF ME AND G*D DAMN IT I WANT BACK UP RIGHT F*CKING NOW!”

Suddenly an eerie wail emanated from the forest area his men had just retreated from.

“What the hell was that?” One of the radio operators asked. Everyone looked back in the direction of the sound.

Richardson put his hand over the radio mike. “ADDISON GET A DAMN DEFENSIVE PERIMETER SIT UP AND GET IT SET UP NOW!” He shouted in angry panic.

The old sergeant slung his M1 up on his shoulder and stepped forward towards the Marine officer standing in front of his own men with the two teenagers Toby and Doc beside him.

Captain Melton recognized the old warriors airborne style uniform, it was right out of the movie “The Longest Day”, the Screaming Eagle patch on his shoulder confirmed its origin. The old man had to be over seventy years old, but still carried himself, albeit slower, with the pride of being a member of one of the finest fighting units to have ever existed. The Captain nodded in respect towards the senior soldier.

“Captain Leslie Melton, Sir, United States Marine Corps.”

Covington returned his nod. “Platoon Sergeant Clayton Covington, United States Army Airborne, Retired, Sir. At least you’ve got the good sense not to salute in the field young man. ”

They stood in silence for a few seconds. “What is this I hear about my grandson?” Covington asked looking at the two teenagers.

Melton looked down at the ground for a second and then looked the old soldier straight in the eye. “I regret to inform you Sir that your grandson has died of his wounds.”

The silence was nearly choking.

“My Corpsman tried desperately to save his life, but his wounds were too great. He was murdered by members of the unit that replaced ours. I have four Marines that witnessed the execution of your...”

“ENOUGH!” The old man yelled, as tears began to well up in his eyes. He visibly trembled and looked to be unsteady on his feet. Captain Melton reached across to steady the old man, but his hands were brushed away.

Covington now pulled himself together and faced the Marine. “Captain...whose side are you on Sir?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I believe the question was quite simple and straight forward...whose side are you on?”

An odd silence filled the air. “Sir...” Melton paused and sought the right words. He knew his actions here put him precariously on the razors edge. It was not only his fate but the fate of his Marines that hung here in the balance.

“I stand on the side of my oath as an officer and a Marine.”

“And that would be what...in this situation Captain?”

“That would depend upon your view of this matter Airborne.” The Marine replied.

The old warrior unslung his M1 and steadied himself resting both hands on it before him. He slowly looked up at the young officer standing before him.

“Young Captain, I fought in a great war a long time ago to preserve the freedoms and aspirations of this noble country. Somehow over the years we have lost our way and forgotten the debt owed to the many good men we left behind in that war.” He paused briefly. “So here I stand too damn old to be of much good, but here I stand just the same.”

“Sir?”

“Young Captain, I stand here, to support and defend the Constitution. I stand here, to support and defend the Bill of Rights. I stand here, to support and defend the dream of our founding fathers.” He paused again. “Now, just where do you stand...sir?”

“Sir...” The Captain began as he stepped forward and stuck out his right hand. “I stand with you!”

The old warrior and the young warrior clasped hands as warriors should, in true faith and allegiance to the common cause. Perhaps this was how it all began over two hundred years ago when tyranny rained across the land perpetuated by a faraway king. Today that tyranny came from the same side of the ocean, but it was tyranny just the same. It had cost the old soldier his only grandson and it would cost a lot more before it was over, that was for sure. But the fight had to start somewhere.

‘Now young man, how do you propose we get ourselves out of this, if you will pardon an old Platoon Sergeant, this f*cking mess?’

Brentwood Davis was exceedingly nervous. He was an upper-level bureaucrat who lived among filing cabinets and sheaves of paperwork. His idea of excitement was attending dinner parties up on capital hill, rubbing elbows with the rich and powerful and while he would not admit it openly he would sometimes escape into his world of “Walter Middy daydreams”. But the current situation had jerked him into the cruel world of utter reality and he did not like it. His assigned mission was to investigate the current status of the transportation system and find ways to ensure goods got to market and the US economy continued to roll on the vast network of highways. The most recent Presidential orders federalized the transportation industry. Caught between the federal governments need to keep the country running despite terrorist attacks and the resistance of the powerful AFL-CIO unions to what amounted to a hostile take over by the Feds, Davis was supposed to come up with answers that would satisfy both sides. On top of that he got sucked into the runaway events during the most recent pacification and disarmament actions in this little out of the way town. He had seen far more than he ever wanted to know and could not see anyway out of the present situation that was getting worse by the minute.

Another horde of Federal Bureau vehicles streamed into town as well as Home Guard troops. Well if you could call them troops, he had his doubts about their

professionalism and they certainly didn't act like well disciplined soldiers. There was something here... that he couldn't quite put his finger on.

He didn't realize how serious the situation was until several heavily armed black helicopters landed in the High School's football field. He was accompanying Congressman Steffler and Senior Field Agent Smith when they entered the Gymnasium that had been converted to a hasty field hospital. The image was right out of an old "B" movie with wounded, dead and dying men strewn about. There was only a small medical clinic in this out of the way town. Serious medical cases were usually run by ambulance to the next town over where a small twenty-five-bed hospital was located. This was a mess.

"Smith I want this resistance to be crushed and crushed TODAY! Do you understand me?" Steffler bellowed.

"Yes Sir, I have reinforcements on the way and two attack helo's have just arrived." The group picked up the pace of their walk.

"I don't care what you have to do! Burn that b*stard out of that damn house and I want the perpetrators of this butchery's head on a pike...DO I MAKE MYSELF CLEAR!"

"Yes Sir, perfectly clear!"

"WELL? WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR...GET TO IT MAN!"

The field agent quickly departed and shortly there after Davis heard the increasing whine and thumping beat of the helo's blades as they passed overhead and headed west out of town towards the Sullivan farm.

"I will not tolerate this blatant defiance to the law." He turned now to Davis. "Can you believe the audacity of these people?"

Davis nodded his head in affirmation then quickly realized his mistake and switched to shaking his head with a negative response and added his own words. "It's just unimaginable Congressman where they get the idea that we're not here to help them. Simply unimaginable."

The Congressman looked at the bespectacled paper pusher and grunted in agreement. He turned sharply and headed for the nearest exit. He had seen enough of the carnage and needed a good strong drink to calm his irritated nerves. Davis followed right on his coat tails like an obedient puppy.

Melton followed Covington back to his OP position as they tried to work out a tactical solution to the growing problem. The Black cammied troops were growing in number and had added several armored personnel carriers to their perimeter. So far the heaviest weapon they had we're fifty caliber machine guns, that was until the two black birds raced overhead.

"Damn!" Uttered Covington.

"It was only a matter of time." The Marine focused his attention on the increased action down below. "It looks like they gathered up a least a company strength of troops down there, with more coming in."

"How long can we hold them off do you think Captain?"

"Not long I'm afraid...and time is in their favor. Right now they don't know you're here, or what exactly is up in those woods." He shifted position to get a better look. "Our greatest challenge is going to be getting out of here. You can bet that all transportation routes out of this region are being sealed off as we speak."

"That would stand to reason. But we can't leave Sullivan and his family trapped down there."

"I know...I know."

"You said that you've got shooters stationed behind them?"

"Yes, spread out in two's and threes all across that back tree line over there. Wrapping around to our position and just about to there near your side of the ridge, he pointed.

"Hmmm and I've got two platoons in the woods across the way. I can hold one in reserve to plug any gaps and that leaves me with one platoon to increase your fire power over here...pretty thin – pretty thin."

“Don’t worry about us over here Captain, you keep your boys and use them to cut off any reinforcements moving up along that road there. We’ve got a few surprises of our own over here.”

“Like what...don’t tell me you’ve got armor and artillery support?”

“OK, if you don’t want me to tell you...I won’t.”

The Captain looked at the old timer suspiciously.

The old warrior pointed down the line. “See that big pine tree...well look just this side of it and back in a bit.”

“What the hell is that?”

“Ever hear of a M8?”

“M8?”

“You probably know it better as a 75mm Pack Howitzer.”

“Damn it old man if you don’t have artillery. Now where in the hell did you come up with that!” The amazed Marine asked.

“It’s been sitting right out in front of our VFW Hall for better than forty years. Couple of the boys slapped on some new rubber and there it is.”

“Will it work?”

“For a short while. We’ve only got a little over a dozen shells, and we’re not exactly sure they are fully functional. But my gunner down there tells me they can still stir up some dust...just hope he’s right.”

“Well I’ll be...! From there he’ll be able to just about march right up the line of their vehicles.”

“That’s the plan.”

The pair continued to work out the details until they were sure that they had a chance to extract the Sullivan's and hopefully extract themselves as well.

The afternoon was cooling off with a sharpness that hinted of pending snow in the air. The plan was for Captain Melton would initiate the action and try to draw the Federal Goons back into the forest. That would negate the effectiveness of the helo's for a little while and in the seesaw battle that would follow they would try to extract Sullivan and his family and cover their retreat with the pack howitzer. But as with all plans it became a game of fifty-two-card pick up the second the first round with off, and it went off on the wrong side of the farm. A large squad had attempted to circle through Covington's side of the perimeter to come up on the back of the Marine position. They ran smack into the field piece and the group of about a dozen locals defending it. Although M16's can deliver a tremendous amount of firepower in a short period of time the Federal troops suddenly found themselves up against in-trenched seasoned hunters with high-powered scoped rifles. The 30.06's, 300 Winchester magnums and 7mm magnums ripped through the sparse cover the Federal troops tried to hide behind and most of them were caught flat footed out in the open. The firefight was brief, fierce and decisively in favor of Covington's men, but it was a shallow victory as they had now lost the element of surprise and given away their position.

The men at the howitzer realizing that they were now exposed decided to use rather than lose the gun and began shelling the line of vehicles in the distance. The first round exploded harmlessly to the right of the road, the second was a dud that spit up blacktop with its impact, but the third round found its mark and sent one of the troop trucks up in flames. Quickly adjusting the range the gunnery crew laid it on heavy. In rapid succession the line of vehicles was filled with sheer pandemonium, smoke and flame, but all too quickly the gun fell silent as they ran out of ammunition.

Now it was the militia's turn to take a pounding and the two black birds began pounding the howitzer's position with mini-gun and rockets. There was nothing for the patriots there to do but hug the bottom of their fighting holes and take the punishment being dished out by the attack helo's. The view of the guns position was obscured by smoke, flame and flying debris as the birds made pass after pass across the front of the tree line.

"CHESTER CAN YOU KNOCK ONE OF THOSE BASTARDS DOWN?"
Covington yelled over the explosions echoing across the valley.

The burly bearded Vietnam Vet trudged past Covington's fighting hole and setup his shooting position forty yards to the south. He snapped open the bipods, locked in the magazine and squared himself away. The four hundred yard shot was practically point blank for his BFG-50A rifle. It took him a few seconds to fix on the moving helo, now all he needed was for it to sit still for just a few seconds...just a few seconds.

The big gun rocked him back as he sent the first round down range; it was quickly followed by a second and a third. The third round was a tracer and Patriots on the ridge watched as it bee lined to the second attack bird and slammed into the exhaust housing of the starboard engine. The round began to yaw slightly after it punched through the outer housing and struck the hot spinning turbine blades like a meteor sending supersonic shards exploding out of the engine housing. The starboard engine began to disintegrate as the transmission locked up, seizing so suddenly that it snapped off the main rotor blades sending them in every direction. Its wings clipped the dark bird dropped like a smoking rock and slammed into the ground.

The lead bird quickly jinked and spun wildly in its attempt to escape the fate of its wingmate. Chester emptied the first mag and quickly locked in a fresh one and continued to pound away at the lead bird.

"It's a little bit different when someone is shooting back at you – ain't it you son-of-a-b*tch!" Chester growled as the big gun rocked him back with each discharge.

Corporal Roy Truitt burst from the tree line and snapped open the sight assembly and the IFF (Identification Friend or Foe) antenna on his Stinger. He spun up the missile as he quickly sighted in on the jinking helo on the opposite side of the valley. Two other Marines quickly spread out in front of him ready to lay down covering fire. Truitt could hear the whine of the system and launched the missile as soon as he had tone lock. Immediately after the launch the ground around him was filled with the supersonic zip of rounds coming up the valley at him as the Federal troops targeted the back blast area of his missile.

The Stinger arched down the valley in a headlong sprint towards the gyrating black bird, but at the last second the missile locked onto the viciously burning wreck of the first helo and blasted into the downed hulk further spreading flame

and burning fuel across the field and into the wood line. Gaining a second reprieve the black bird spun around and let loose a burst of mini-gun fire in Truitt's direction. One of his protective gunners was caught by the burst and jerked past the Corporal like a doll on a bungee cord. Continuing in its spin the gunner of the helo let loose his entire battery of 2.75-inch rockets into Covington's tree line before rolling up and heading towards the retreating Stinger gunner.

The trees above the Militia forces exploded in wicked splinters and shrapnel that rained death and agony down upon them. Covington was suddenly back in Bastone under the fire of German Eighty-eights during the battle of the bulge. The screams of wounded men and boys filled his ears and ripped open the mental wounds of that long ago battle. He pushed his M1 over the top edge of his fighting hole and caught a glimpse of the black bird ripping across the fields towards the Stinger team.

The pilot could see the retreating Marines near the top of the field running like panicked insects for the tree line and bore down on them for the kill, tapping the firing trigger he sent a stream of deadly metal down range kicking up ribbons of dirt and dust. One down! He swung the bird's tail to rake fire across the other two when suddenly the metallic "THWACK" of rounds hammered against the skin of the bird sounded like a hail storm had cut loose on him. His side windscreen cracked then shattered. Sending Plexiglas pellets raining about the cockpit. He started to spin his guns towards the new threat when he felt a vicious mule kick to his left thigh and his goggles were suddenly covered with blood...his. The aircraft flipped over as the pilot in panic pushed off his goggles and looked down at his lap to realize that something horrific had just about ripped off his leg. The tail rotor kicked the bird around drove into the field curling the dying helo around itself before exploding in a fireball of destruction. The blast slammed the Corporal into the ground and he felt the hot licks of its dying breath, but he was still alive!

Covington's militia began to cheer at their success as secondary explosions and small arms rounds cooked off in the inferno bellowing out in the middle of the field, until they realized that a new threat was advancing up the valley towards them. The surviving Federal APC's and troops had reorganized and were now making a frontal assault toward their position.

Captain Melton watched the Federal line as they closed the open ground towards the Militia's position. He had no idea what condition Covington's people remained

in after the pounding they had just received but he hoped that they could hold on long enough for him to flip the rescue over to his side and close the trap door on their enemy. He quickly snatched up his two Lieutenants and improvised an Op Order.

“Lt. Sievers you take Forth Platoon and get down this ridge line behind us and seal off that road. Make sure whatever you ambush stays ambushed...you’re covering our backdoor. Ski you’re on Third Platoon, get to the Sullivan house and get those people out of there, use one squad to escort them out of harms way back towards Sievers and with the other three squads to anchor valley floor. If they have a CP down there...take it out.”

“ROGER SKIPPER!”

“First and Second platoons are on me and we’re going to hit them from this flank.”

He looked sternly into the eyes of his young officer. “SEMPER FI!”

“SEMPER FI!” They returned in unison.

Covington didn’t know how many of his people were still alive. He didn’t know if the Marines were still across the way, but by this time it didn’t really matter. He was too old to change, too old to run, too old and too damn p*ssed off to care anymore. He opened up the ammo cans at his feet and pushed them up to the side of the firing position. The muzzle of the old battle hardened M1 pushed out onto the other side of his reinforced firing position. At three hundred yards he opened fire and saw the first troop drop. Suddenly the woods around him were filled with the comforting and familiar bark of the famous M1 30.06 round and the equally famous metallic ping of M1 clips being ejected.

On the other side of the valley Captain Melton spread his men out just inside the tree line. The Federal troops were closing on the Militia line even through the wickedly accurate hail of gunfire. Their numbers were simply too much and it was now time to join the battle. He looked left and right and received the ready signals from his Staff NCO’s and fire team leaders.

“FIX!” Melton paused and received the reply from his troops “FIX!”

“BAY—O—NETS!” “BAYONETS!” echoed through the woods.

The Militia fire was dwindling in intensity as the Federal troops continued to press forward. They were less than fifty yards away when the Marines hit the back side of their lines and ripped through their backsides like, well, like sh*t though a goose. The fighting was evil, wicked, mean and nasty. Hardly a man walked out of the valley that day without having left some of his blood on the field of battle.

The old warrior and the young warrior stood on the burnt ground and shared in the fleeting moment of victory.

“What will you do now Captain?” Covington asked.

“Airborne...I haven’t a flaming @ss clue.”

They looked out over the battleground littered with the detritus of war.

“You know, that no one will ever really know what took place here today, Sergeant.”

“No Captain, that is not entirely too. We know, and others will learn.”

They sat there in silence until one of Melton’s Gunnery Sergeant’s called out to him.

“CAPTAIN! I THINK YOU BETTER HAVE A LOOK AT THIS!”

The pair walked back into the carnage of the battle. Gunny Ross was kneeling over one of the dead Federal troops and had partially pulled his blouse off.

“Skipper what do you make of this?” The Gunny had his hand hooked into the dog tag around the dead soldiers neck. It wasn’t American. It wasn’t even in English.

“What the hell does this man Captain?” Covington asked in amazement.

“Are there any more like this Gunny?”

“We’ve just started checking now Sir, but it looks like a good number of this men are not American.”

Desert Doc

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Chapter 25 We who are about to die...

Max, Andy, and Darcy sat around the kitchen table. Lisa occasionally looked out small slits in the cardboard that covered the windows, and an AK-47 was slung from her shoulder. A small rechargeable florescent light sat on top of the now-silent refrigerator, dimly illuminating the room.

“The patrols are becoming more frequent.” Said Max, “They are also starting to go house-to-house. It’s only a matter of time before they get to us. We have to go.”

“Damn it. Damn it, Damn it Damn it. I was hoping it wouldn’t come to this. We had so much invested in this place. The solar panels, the well....” Andy trailed off.

“It’s not worth our lives, Honey.” Said Darcy pragmatically.

“I know. It’s just...a waste.” Said Andy with a sigh.

“So how are we going to get out of here? The CB said they have got roadblocks set up on every road out of town. For all we know, those helos have FLIR. They’d spot us before we got far through the woods.” Asked Max. “Any ideas?”

“What we need is a diversion,” said Lisa. “A big one.”

“Maybe we can do that,” said Andy. “ I think I have an idea. How far does their perimeter extend?”

“Well,” said Max. “From the scanner and the CB reports, it looks like they are patrolling pretty heavy around Highway B to the north, County H to the West, and crossways on 21. They don’t seem to bother too much with people inside that triangle. Some deliveries still get made, a little traffic. If they catch them, they search them of course, but mostly let them go. Aside from the 'troublemakers' of course. They seem to be content to confiscate guns, radios and most of the food.

That, and not letting people out of the triangle.”

We’re closest to the north and west point of the triangle. If we can get through there, and get a ways away, then we should be out of the out of the woods, so to speak.”

“That’s the beginning of the problems, though. The cabin is seventy miles away. Are we going to walk all that way?” Asked Lisa, “Those packs are gonna be damned heavy by the end of seventy miles!”

“It beats the hell out of this refugee camp.” Said Max.

“Darcy, will you and Lisa keep watch for a while? I need to go downstairs and get to work on our diversions.” asked Andy

“Sure. We’ll holler if we need anything. Get the light, will you?” She replied.

Max followed Andy down the stairs. There was more light in the basement, as there were only two windows, and those were heavily masked. Max and Andy blinked several times in the harsh glare of the several small fluorescent lights. They were wired into Andy’s battery bank, as well as some other 12V devices, like the radios and the blower to the propane furnace. Andy led Max to a small back room that contained several industrial type-shelving units containing Rubbermaid totes. He selected one and pulled it from the shelf, then indicated another with his foot.

“Grab that one too, will you?” Andy asked.

“Sure.” Max replied and hefted the second tote.

They carried the totes to a table in the corner of the room. Andy set his on top of the table, then indicated to Max to set his on the floor. Andy sat in a chair and looked at Max for a moment.

“Max...” He spoke, “There are some preparations I have made that I haven’t told you about. They aren’t exactly legal, and I didn’t want to put you in a moral quandary. I know you’re a good cop, and...I just didn’t want to make you have to choose.”

“Well buddy, we’re beyond that now.” Replied Max “What have you got?”

“As far as the diversion, I have these.” Said any as he pulled several two-inch pipe nipples from the tote. Next he removed several inexpensive grocery store kitchen timers, a bag containing model rocket engine igniters, and some cans of “FFFF” black powder.

“Hmmm.” said Max “Playing the mad bomber, are we? These will surely attract their attention.”

“Wait!” said Andy with a grin “There’s more!” He pulled a Rube Goldberg-looking contraption consisting of hose clamps, wires, a solenoid and a few other items out of the box.

“What in the Hell is that?” Exclaimed Max.

“That my friend, is an attacking Militiaman.”

“What?”

“This is so great, I surprise myself. Look, this doohickey gets hose clamped onto a spare AK I have. We put a 100 round drum in it, and a bipod. The solenoid can be triggered by a timer, or by remote control. The solenoid can activate the trigger one shot at a time, or in bursts. The b.astards will go nuts looking for the attackers using their fancy thermal imaging gear, because there isn’t anybody! This thing works great, I tested it”

Max stood silently for a moment, looking at his friend’s grinning visage, then at the wire and metal contraption he held aloft triumphantly. With a sudden grin, he said, “Andy, you are without a doubt, one of the most clever people I have ever known.”

“Yeah, I know. Tell your friends. Listen, the hard part is going to be getting all of this stuff to the other side of town.”

“That will be the b.itch. We’ll work on that later. What do we do here?” Max asked sitting down on the folding chair.

“Ok,” replied Andy, warming to the task at hand “What we’re gonna do is make a

couple of old-fashioned pipe bombs. Now, if we really needed explosive power, we could make some of Uncle Ragnar's 'Homemade C-4' or use 'Bullseye' powder."

"Who's 'Uncle Ragnar?'" questioned Max.

"Uncle Ragnar is Ragnar Benson. He's a guy who writes books about all sorts of things self-reliant people should know about. He wrote a couple of explosives books, about how to make some pretty decent improvised stuff. I am a big fan of his 'Improved Homemade C-4' and 'Detonators: How to make 'em.'"

"What was that about the Bullseye powder?" Said Max.

"Bullseye is a double-base powder. If you put a blasting cap in it, it gives great detonation velocity. It is an explosive, rather than just a propellant."

"What does that mean?"

"When you were a kid, did you ever pull the bullets out of a .22 shell and touch a match to it?"

"Yeah. It just burned like a match head."

"Right. All gunpowder does that. Explosives are a different story. They really, well, explode, but they need a detonator: A small initial charge to get the detonation going. For instance, with military C-4, we are talking about detonation velocities of about 22,500 meters per second. Dynamite is slower than that. The speed with which an explosive detonates is its 'brisance' or its shattering ability. Dynamite has low brisance. It's good at 'pushing.' C-4 has high brisance, so it's good at cutting steel, etc. C-4 is also used in grenade filler. Really flings those shards out. Remember that dopey kid who planted those mailbox bombs in the shape of a smiley face? Well, on many levels the kid was a low-wattage bulb, but he was really dumb when it came to pipe bombs. Nobody got killed because he as a crappy bomb-maker. Black powder like we're using, and gunpowder have really low brisance. They just plain burn too slow to send fragments of metal at really fast velocities. We are going to be using black powder, because we don't care about good shrapnel. It would be a waste of time, material and a risk to brew up some detonators, just so we could have a really great series of explosions. They won't be able to tell the difference, and it doesn't matter if they

could. They're just distractions.”

“Well, all right buddy. Let's get to it!”

Andy directed Max to drill holes in the end caps, feed a few inches of wire through, then seal the holes around the wired with silicone sealant. Meanwhile, Andy carefully unscrewed the backs of the kitchen timers. He carefully snipped the wires going to the tiny speakers, and spliced in a length of wire, that he then wired to a relay. He connected the wires from the battery to the other poles of the relay, then to a model rocket engine igniter. He set the timer for 10 seconds, then started it. The timer counted down to zero, then the relay clicked, and a moment later a small flash and puff of smoke marked the ignition of the rocket igniter. He glanced through the acrid wisp of smoke at Max and grinned. “That'll do.” He said.

“All right. We'll put the powder in at the last minute to minimize the risk of while we're handling it. We still need...”

A thump came from above them. Max and Andy both unslung their AKs, and ran for the stairs. As soon as they reached the steps, they turned off the lights and ascended as quietly as possible. Switching off the safeties with a quiet metallic click, they rose on cat's feet to the top of the stairs. The door swung silently open, and they crossed to the kitchen. Darcy met them in the middle of the room, and pulled both men close. Her AK was slung over her shoulder, pistol grip in her right hand, finger outside the trigger guard.

She whispered, “A humvee just pulled into the driveway. It's still there, with its lights off. I can't tell what they are doing.”

Both men nodded and walked to the windows, bending down to look out the small, quarter-sized hole near the bottom of the lowest pane. The humvee remained still, then the doors opened and four soldiers got out. They stood and stretched glancing around with mild curiosity. One of them jumped up on the hood of the jeep, then doffed his MOPP mask and hood.

“Ah, geez man! It's good to be out of that crap. Hey, gimme one of them beers we got from that house.”

Another soldier, also out of his MOPP gear reached through the rear window of

the humvee and emerged with four beers, and proceeded to hand them out. Four soft “Pssst” noises could faintly be heard as the tops were popped.

“Jesus, man. What are we doing here?” said one of the men, who were only faintly visible in the dark.

“Havin’ a beer, Man!” Came the all-too-predictable response.

“You’re such a goddamn punk, Simmons.”

“F*ck you, man.”

“ I mean what are we doin’ here, to these people? These poor b.astards don’t need us f.uckin’ with ‘em. Hell, they’re lucky to be alive at all.”

“Top says were here to stop ‘em from spreading the Plague.”

“Then why we gotta take their radios, man?”

Silence followed.

“We shouldn’t be goin’ into peoples houses, neither. Even if they’re prob’ly dead.”

“Don’t say that with your mouth fulla beer, man.”

“F*ck you, Simmons.”

“We oughta check this place out. Don’t look burned. Might be some smokes or more beer.”

“Goddamn it Simmons, what did I just get through sayin’?”

“Listen, man. The Guard don’t pay too well. my kid's got to eat. The script and rations they give us is shit. This is just a little retirement fund I got goin’. Looky here at this watch. This’s a Rolex man. Where did I get it? Same place I got that beer: Some guy’s house who was way too dead to give a shit.”

“It still ain’t right. That’s all.”

“Come on. We’re due back any minute. Gear up and let’s get rolling.”

The four dark shapes tipped their beers back tossed the empties at Andy’s garage, donned their gas masks and climbed back in their humvee. The engine rattled to life in the still night, and the large vehicle backed out the driveway and rolled off.

A collective sigh of relief washed across the kitchen as the four watchers slumped onto the floor. They all sat quietly in the darkness for a few moments. The conversation echoed in their minds. The soldiers didn’t seem that bad. They seemed like they weren’t too crazy about enforcing the orders they had been given.

“I sure wish those guys would just go home.” Said Lisa.

“I bet they do too.” Said Max

“It’d be a shame to have to get in a firefight with ‘em.” replied Lisa.

“Well, let’s be careful and see that it doesn’t happen. I hope I never have to aim this thing at somebody and pull the trigger.” Andy said, hefting the AK. “Darcy, you still have that patch collection?”

“You mean the insignia? Yes, I think I can find it.” She said.

“Good. I’m gonna grab my BDUs. I want you to make me a lieutenant. With a little luck and all MOPped up, I can plant the diversions and the 'attacking militiaman', and get the hell out of here without getting into a firefight.”

Andy stood, then retreated down the stairs to finish the pipe bombs. Max followed while Lisa resumed her watch out the masked windows. A long night was ahead.

Everyone had been able to sleep five hours or so, with finishing the work and rotating through watch. Darcy had finished the BDUs by morning. With the M17 gas mask and hood on, Andy was nearly unrecognizable as Andy.

“So what’s the plan?” asked Max, when they were alone in the basement. “Are you just going to carry them things in a duffel bag and leave them under

humvees or what?"

"I thought about that, but Darcy couldn't find my Santa suit." Andy grinned "Actually, the CB said they are doing a sweep down at the strip mall. You know, 'commandeering' goods and food. Also, they'll be looking through Jerry's files down at the sporting goods store. I hope to God he had the sense to burn all those forms. The name of every person who bought a firearm, and what they bought is on those files. Anyway, I suspect there'll be a lot of confusion. The mall's about a half-mile from here. I am hoping that if anybody spots me, they'll think I am just a lone lieutenant out looking for the next target. With the pack I may have some explaining to do. With any luck I can slip into a CUCV or a humvee, get to the other side of town, plant the goodies, then come back here.

I'll be on comms the whole time, so you'll know how it's going. It'll work one of two ways. I'll either do this thing according to plan, or they'll start shooting at me, and I'll start shooting back. Either way, you'll have your diversion. When I say 'go', light out of here in the Toyota. Head for Johnson's stables. If I make it, I'll meet up with you there. If everything goes well, I'll drive the humvee here, we'll load up and head for the stables."

"Are you nuts? Does Darcy know about this plan?" Max hissed. "You weren't even in the service! Christ, let me do this part!"

"I thought about that. I really did. But if I fail, the girls will need you to get them out of here. You are stronger and faster than I am, and quite frankly, you're better with a gun. They'll need that. My part has nothing to do with strength or speed. Just bluffing and sneakiness. And don't you dare let on to Darcy that this ridiculous plan is as half-assed as it is."

"This is stupid, Andy. Plain, old stupid. There's got to be a better way."

"Fine. What? What's your plan? Huh? Let's hear it. You don't have one, do you?"

"Don't be an ass, you ass."

"Listen, I'm not happy about this plan either. But what's the alternative? We can't blast our way out. You can't dig a tunnel fast enough. I don't have a helicopter hiding up my a.ss. This is it. This is all I can think of. And we gotta get out of here."

Max sat heavily on the couch, mind racing through options. He couldn't think of any. This was his best friend, and he didn't like him putting himself at risk. But the fact was, someone had to take the risk. As a cop, Max was used to a certain amount of risk. It was part of the job: Every traffic stop or domestic dispute was another chance to die. Andy was a paramedic. Some risk, yes. But not with the frequency that Max was used to. It seemed to Max like sending a lamb to the slaughter to allow Andy to do this. But his logic was coherent.

He looked at Andy. "You'd better make it out of there. I will be one p.issed of unit if you go and get killed. I'm not kidding."

"Hey, I was in Drama club, remember?" Said Andy with a gulp and nervous smile. "Let's get stuff ready to go. We'll go tonight."

Together they ascended the stairs.

Late afternoon arrived. Sober silence reigned as Andy donned the lieutenant's outfit. Darcy helped him with the uniform, adjusting the collar with needless precision.

She looked up suddenly into Andy's eyes, her own eyes brimming. "You be careful. I don't know if it'll be worth going on if you don't make it."

"Aw Hon," Andy whispered with a forced smile "It'll be a cakewalk. You'll see."

"I see that this is a dumb-assed plan, and you're about an idiot or more desperate than you let on for doing it." She replied, her face deadly serious.

Andy held his tongue for a moment and gazed into his wife's eyes. "I'm glad I married you. You're smarter than I give you credit for. Way smarter than me."

"Just come back, OK?"

"I will." He said, hefting the packs containing the distractions. He turned to Max and Lisa. "I'm gonna keep pretty quiet on the comms. Listen close, cause I might be in a hurry when I come back. Take off in the Toyota if you hear a lot of shooting and I don't call. If there's no shooting and no call...well, use your discretion."

“Just get out of here, will you?” Said Max with the rictus of a smile.

Andy pulled the M17 gas mask on, secured the hood, gave a thumbs-up and walked into the waning sunlight.

AGreyMan

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Chapter 26-Molon Labe'

“So how long until I can expect a knock at the door?” David McMillan asked.

Sheriff Eric Eckhart leaned his chair back and took another sip of coffee. “Well with everything else going on in the country right now...I would guess it will be quite some time.” He paused. “But I wouldn’t go about making it easy for them to nab your @ss. You’ve sure p*ssed off that Torgelson gal and I don’t think she’s gonna let the matter drop any time soon.”

“So what do we do now?” Denise looked at the two of them questioningly; she was very concerned about the current turn of events.

Eckhart blew out his breath and leaned forward. “First off we need to get you two into the system here.”

“System?” David looked at him.

“Actually...the Home Guard.” Eckhart replied matter of factly. “The Militia.”

“Militia!” They both replied in unison.

“But aren’t they illegal?” David asked.

“David it’s a little too late for you to be worrying about legalities don’t you think.” The burly Sheriff replied. “But as a matter of fact...No.”

Eckhart gave the pair a brief outline of militia history, its roots, rights and responsibilities. David and Denise listened intently. When the sheriff finally came

up for air almost an hour later they had only about a hundred questions between the two of them to ask.

“Erick, all we’re ever heard about militia’s was that they are full of war mongering, bigoted rednecks just looking for a fight with someone, what makes you’re group so different?” Denise asked seriously.

“She doesn’t beat around the bush does she?” Eckhart said matter of factly to David.

“Not in all the years I’ve known her.”

“Denise, the vast vast majority of that is pure propaganda. Government spin and media hype. True the few bad eggs out there get all the press and there are a tremendous number of ‘wanna be’s’ just looking to strut their stuff and play ‘weekend Rambo’, but we won’t have anything to do with those.”

He took another sip of coffee and continued. “Many of the large ‘official’ state militias across the country are full of those types of people. Now that is not to say that they don’t also have some very dedicated and serious members also, but the one negates the other. That’s what happens when you go out and openly recruit without being able to truly screen your applicants. The FBI and BATF and now the Homeland Security folks have heavily infiltrated most of these militia groups over the years. Hell, some of their top people are working for or with the Feds. It’s a sad thing to say but they are loaded with termites in the woodwork That’s why we don’t and never have openly recruited for members. Just like you two here, we’ve been watching you since you first came in here. When you were seriously looking for property and a job here we checked out.”

“You checked us out?!”

“That is ONE OF THE ADVANTAGES of being the sheriff.” He chuckled. “Why do you think you got such a great deal on this property of yours?”

They both looked at each other in utter disbelief.

“And both of your jobs.”

“All this to get us into the militia?”

“No not really, not at first anyways.” He looked out through the window. “We’re always on the look out for good solid citizens to join our little community here. You both looked like first-class prospects, a pair of solid hardworking citizens. We like that around here. Then...when you turned out to be heavily leaning toward the patriot side of the fence...well...we were very encouraged to say the least.”

“So you’re saying...that we’ve been under the microscope for these past...” David stammered at Sheriff Eckhart in shocked disbelief.

“Five years.” Eckhart interrupted. “Yep, that’s about right.”

Field Agent Henry H. Hinton Jr. couldn’t believe the report that his boss had just dropped in the middle of his desk. He flipped the pages back and forth several times to make sure that he grasped what he was reading. According to this report two detectives and a state educational director had been stopped at gunpoint and their detainee abducted by several camouflaged and heavily armed men...in his district! A one David McMillan, whose teaching credential had been recently revoked, had been placed under arrest by the detectives for operating an unlicensed school and secondarily charged with resisting arrest and child endangerment.

“Child endangerment...oh yes...because the unlicensed school had kids in it...figures.” He thought to himself shaking his head. **“It’s getting more stupid every day!”** Such arrests were on the increase since the state had outlawed private home schooling in an effort to increase enrollments in the failing public schools and regain control of educational system. Such heavy-handed tactics were becoming commonplace and many districts had begun to actually employ active Truant Officers that went out looking for non-enrolled children.

It was the part about the five to seven heavily armed men in camouflage that really grabbed the agent’s attention. The arresting detectives stated in their report that the ambushers carried AR15’s with high capacity magazines and appeared to be wearing full battle dress: ammo pouches, canteens, shoulder harnesses, pistols, the WHOLE NINE YARDS!”

“These people were loaded for bear!”

They were entirely too professional in their actions and appearance as well as disciplined in their conduct. Only two of them spoke and then only minimally, just enough to get the job done and secure Mr. McMillan from the arresting detectives. An overwhelming display of firepower to be sure: mostly AR's and maybe several heavier weapons, possibly FN's or something along those lines and all recently outlawed in this state!

"Hmmm." Agent Hinten spun about in his chair and banged on the keyboard of his computer. He scanned down the screen. Nothing added up. The militia elements in California had been pretty much run to ground a long time ago. Those that weren't entirely eliminated were heavily infiltrated and kept on a short leash. Even open training by militia members was forbidden here. This new element was totally unexpected and worried the field agent.

"We've never had even a hint of trouble from that area before, never. Hmmm Sheriff Eric K. Eckhart is the law around there." A few more key strokes. "He's got a solid record, been on the job for a while, good arrest record. Runs a clean shop...hmmm and now this? Doesn't make any sense."

He quickly dialed up the number and was put through to the sheriff in short order.

"Hello Sheriff Eckhart. This is Henry Hinten with the FBI. I'm calling in regards to this McMillan incident."

Meanwhile a copy of that same report was making the rounds through another federal agency, but there it was causing a considerable stir. In San Francisco at the Field Division office of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, the Division Director/Special Agent in Charge Mike Hernandez stood stoically before his management staff. Hernandez was known for his long fuse and rarely did anything ever upset his apple cart. He was proud of the great strides achieved in this state towards eventually removing all guns from the general population. His state was known for having some of the strictest gun regulations in the nation. He knew that at the present rate he could very well see a gun free California before he retired from the Bureau and where California went so did the nation. Progress was slow but sure and he knew it was just a matter of time, especially since the Executive Order to disarm the population had come out due to the current situation. But this most recent event did not bode well, not well at all.

“Dickerson.” He began, addressing his Public Information Officer. “What do we know about this region of the state? Any known militia elements in that area?”

Dickerson shook his head. “Most of the citizen militias have either been eliminated here or the few remaining groups are totally compromised by either our agents or the FBI’s boys. Usually both. This is the first we’ve heard of anything up in that part of the state.”

“That has me worried as well. I talked to Ben over at the FBI and they’re just as in the dark as we are.” Hernandez shook his head as well. “Ben’s sent over the file on this McMillan character and there is essentially nothing there. He was a medic in the military, a Gulf War vet, retired from the service, sparkling record, a few medals, nothing exceptional to speak of. This guys record is too clean...not even a moving violation to his credit. He completed his degree after he retired and took up teaching, that is until he ran into this...” He looked at the file questioningly. “Senior Educational Director Torgelson...is that name right? What kind of a name is Torgelson?”

“Anyways, Torgelson had him arrested for operating an unlicensed school or something along those lines. As they were driving off they got stopped and this McMillan guy is rescued by what appears to be a heavily armed band of militiamen. There is no question in the two arresting officers minds that they were facing a professional force armed with AR’s and heavier assault weapons, all of which are absolutely forbidden! Besides the fact that the weapons were pointed at officers in the line of duty!” He paused to let that sink in. “Ladies and Gentlemen...we’ve got a real problem here and we’re going to need a lot more firepower on this operation if we plan to get to the bottom of this issue!”

The Division Director turned his back to the agents and looked out the window of their office fifteen floors above the street below. “If this McMillan is important enough for a militia unit to rescue him, then he is important for us to get a hold of and see just what we can squeeze out of him and find out what he knows about this...this...threat!”

“Ok David, you’re wired in now.” The tall gangly telephone repairman began. “This here is your panic button, there’s one in the bedroom and out in your shop as well. The lines are buried out to the sender and totally safe from tampering. This phone in here is isolated from your other phone lines and will link you to the rest of your cell and HQ. Everything is scrambled and encrypted so you should

be pretty safe from eavesdropping. Still the best thing to do is keep it brief, to the point and vague.” Paul Beck the Home Guard’s communications wizard gave him a wink and then continued to brief David and Denise on their new communication and security setups he had rigged throughout their house.

These precautions were especially necessary after Sheriff Eckhart had received calls from both the FBI and the BATF offices. He wanted to make sure that his latest recruits would not suddenly turn up missing and in custody of any one of several alphabet agencies. Eckhart was somewhat surprised that things were starting to develop so soon in light of the current plague epidemic and the unrest that seemed centered around the much larger population centers across the country. Things were pretty hairy just about everywhere and it appeared that he might have underestimated the impact of his rescue attempt. Still David and Denise were valuable additions to the Guard and he was going to insure that it stayed that way.

The instigator of this current situation, Madam Torgelson, had been persuaded to take a vacation out of the immediate area until things cooled down. Especially after the tires on both of her cars were slashed, their windows knocked out and threats were spray painted on the sides of the vehicles. While Eckhart had not worked any overtime to apprehend the culprits of the automobile vandalism, when someone set fire to her home after she left and it had almost spread to the rest of the neighborhood he came down hard. Enough was enough and such vigilante actions were not going to be tolerated, at least not while he was in charge.

Over the course of the next few months several odd chaps had cruised into town and were cautiously asking questions about recent events. The locals were more than happy to direct them to the best stretches along trout streams in the region, which lure or fly worked best and when, but when questions began to point too close to home.

“... well nothing really much ever happens around here?” or “Oh those fires a few weeks back...well we’ve got some pretty old gas lines around, or could have been lightening, bad wiring, you know those squirrels are always building nests around water heaters and such and every so often...”

Beside Torgelson’s place, recently Purdy’s Gun Shop, the only fulltime dedicated gunsmith and shop in town had experienced a sudden fire that almost got away

from the local volunteer fire department. As it was the fire consumed most of his store. While they did manage to save some of the stock in the front of the store, his Gunsmithing equipment, the recent shipment of surplus cammies and hunting clothing he had stored in the back stockroom for Christmas and all of his records were now either ashes or lumps of melted metal. The fire department blamed it on faulty wiring that should have been replaced several decades past but never was and the stacks of old cammies piled up against a faulty outlet.

As it happened, old man Purdy had been planning for years to retire and take up fishing full time, and this seemed as good a time as any to start off on his new career. It was too bad about all those records going up in flames as well and his sizable inventory in firearms, ammunition and hunting equipment.

During this lull in the storm the McMillan's felt like they had been dropped into the middle of the storm. They suddenly found themselves part of an organization that they didn't even know existed just a few months before. And the Sheriff had been right about the seriousness of the business they fallen into. Outside of Eckhart and their immediate Fire Team and Section they didn't even know who the other members of the Home Guard were. This was a 'cell' configuration as Eckhart described it. This was to minimize any damage done should a cell's security be blown. This way they couldn't possibly expose anyone else in the organization. Something that had time and time again and spelled the death knoll for other much larger and far better known organizations that the 'powers that be' had corrupted or taken apart piece by piece over the years.

David and Denise made up a Battle Team of two riflemen, together with another Battle Team they formed a Fire Team. Normally husbands and wives were not assigned to the same Fire Team, but as their kids were all up and out they did not need to worry about tending any little ones. As light riflemen they carried the standard arm agreed upon by the members of the Home Guard, which was the AR15A2. It provided a high rate of fire, reliability (if properly maintained), moderate weight and low recoil. When a Fire Team was operating together one of the members would often carry a heavy rifle that was designated to provide hard-hitting suppressive fire for the Team. This niche was filled by the STG-58 or a similar variant of the famous battle proven FN FAL. While many members also maintained and impressive array of M1A's, Garands, G-1's, and a fair mixing of AK variants as well as a multitude of bolt and lever-action rifles, these two weapons, the AR and the FN were the bread and butter of the Guard.

The next level of organization, the Section, was made up of two Fire Teams, a Section Leader and a Sniper, this 10 'man' team made up the primary mission unit of the Guard. In dire situations two sections could be combined to form a Platoon or Two Platoons could be combined to field a Company. In all the Home Guard could field three Companies of dedicated and trained militiamen and Big Brother never even had a passing thought that they existed at all. As Sheriff Eckhart had explained to the McMillans, "The key to success in these questionable times is invisibility."

Jed Stewart was headed out to his favorite fishing hole to pick off a few breakfast-sized trout. As was his habit he picked up a thermos full of fresh coffee and a box of small sugar coated donuts at the Circle K on the edge of town. He was mentally already on the stream flipping flies out across the moving water in the still crisp predawn light. Then just as he was just about to pull out on the highway the convoy hit town. A handful of government Suburbans with blacked out windows was followed by an equal number of large military trucks, bigger than the deuce and a half's he remembered from days in the military during the Korean War, rumbled into town. Jed turned the aging '64 Ford pickup away from his fishing hole and began to follow at a distance the convoy of trucks as they rolled menacingly through the sleeping village.

David awoke to the sound of someone frantically pounding on his front door and his dogs barking defensively.

"What the hell?" He looked at the alarm clock and his eyes finally focused on the numbers. "Who the hell is busting down my door at ten minutes to five in the morning?"

Then the reality of the situation hit him! He shook his wife awake. "Denise get up we've got problems...NOW DENISE!" David sprang to life and quickly threw on his jeans and a sweatshirt, grabbed his shotgun and headed for the front door. As he exited the bedroom he could see that the front perimeter alarms had been activated and he almost tripped over one of their Shepherds trying to run down the hallway. The beating on the door continued and he could just make out voices on the other side of the heavy oak door. The voices sounded familiar and when he looked out the peephole he quickly recognized his closest neighbors and the two other members of his Fire Team. It took David a few seconds to slide back the blocking beams and release the reinforced dead bolts. The heavy door slowly swung open and both militiamen quickly dove inside.

“DAVY THE FEDS ARE ON THEIR WAY HERE AND THEY’RE PACKING HEAVY!” Larry O’Connor belted out as he dumped his war gear inside against the wall and dashed back to his truck just outside.

“WHAT?!” David looked at the pair in utter disbelief.

Joseph Stanowski the second man threw his gear beside Larry’s and quickly followed his partner back out to the truck. “Ol’ Jed spotted them rolling into town and hit the panic button. We’re just minutes ahead of them right now! QUICK HELP US UNLOAD THE TRUCK!”

The trio raced to move the gear into the safety of the McMillan home and finished just in time to hear the big five-ton diesel military trucks in the convoy decelerate less than a mile away as they dropped into the valley. By the time the first Suburban hit the McMillan driveway, a quarter mile from the house, the four-militia members were locking down the last defensive window shutters and starting to dig through and reposition the gear Larry and Joseph had brought.

David and Denise had been members of the Home Guard Militia for less than two months and now they suddenly found themselves barricaded in their own home with two other militiamen as they were quickly being surrounded by black and cammie clad, heavily armed federal agents and Home Security troops. Things did not look good for the home team.

Special Agent Jordan Kenner halted the convoy at the entrance of the McMillan driveway. He quickly spread out the group into the special assault teams that they had brought for this mission. They planned a total envelopment before they hit the front door and went in heavy. The Division Director had demanded a quick and effective job without any loose strings. He felt that this McMillan character was the key to gaining valuable information on the heretofore-unknown militia element in this area. Kenner’s job was to get his hands on McMillan and get him back in one piece. They would worry about justification of their actions later as well as filling in the blank spaces on the search warrant. Who knows, they could actually find something that they could use against this McMillan guy, if not...well headquarters would take care of such little details.

So far as he could tell their arrival had gone undetected and Agent Kenner felt that they would be in and out before anyone in this backwater mountain

community had any clue as to what had just happened. He smiled to himself as his driver accelerated up the driveway, he would have the paperwork finished and be home well before dinner. He of course couldn't have been more wrong. The first indication of trouble came as they rounded the bend in the driveway and encountered the cattle guard grating, or rather, where the cattle guard grating should have been. Larry and Joseph had thrown a logging chain around the heavy gratings and dragged them off and down the gravel road leaving a five foot wide three foot deep ditch that had to be crossed to continue up the driveway.

“WHAT THE HELL!” The driver slammed on the brakes and the big dark Suburban skid to a stop on the gravel just shy of dropping the front wheels into the hole. “SHIT!”

From the McMillan house the Fire Team peeked through the fighting slots of the second story windows. Larry and Joseph started to giggle. They could see that the big Suburban had suddenly slid to a stop just before the first gate's stone pillars.

“I knew that would slow them up a bit!” Larry chuckled to himself.

“What?” Denise asked.

“Larry got the bright idea of pulling out the cattle guards and dragging them up to the house.” Joseph replied. “Figured that anyone rushing the house in a vehicle would drop off their front axle in that ditch of yours and slow down the whole parade!” He continued to chuckle.

“We've got movement off to the east.” Denise whispered.

“Off to the west as well.” Larry added.

They could see faint movement in the advancing light of that gray dawn beyond the perimeter of their property as troops in black and camouflaged uniforms began to maneuver into their positions. As they neared the property lines the intruders ran into the second major obstacle of the morning, an encircling wall of biological concertina wire that David had first planted over four years ago. This natural fence was made up of a nasty mixture of Thorny Pyracantha (aka Fire Thorn Bush), Catclaw Acacia, Jumping Chollas and Prickly Pears, presenting a

wicked hedgerow of spikes and thorns that made regular military razor wire look like harmless baling twine. The invaders were stopped cold in their tracks!

Kenner was fit to be tied. They had abandoned their vehicle and began to approach the house on foot when the radio reports began coming in about the impassable wall of razor sharp plants that completely surrounded the McMillan property. None of his special agents and Home Security troops could get into their planned positions without making an incredible amount of noise necessary to cut their way through the thick hedges and even then they were not sure how long it would take to break through the entangled mess. Kenner and his front door force was on their own for now.

Just under a hundred yards out the frontal force got their first good look at the McMillan "Cabin".

"Holy Keeerist!" One of the lead agents exclaimed under his breath. "It's a fricken fortress boss!"

The ten men team spread out and surveyed the situation. There was still no alarm from the house, so they still had the element of surprise on their side. They hadn't heard any dogs barking, though they had a strong reason to believe that the McMillan's did in fact have at least one German Shepherd, probably two. The perimeter containment teams were stuck outside the property lines, but if they couldn't get in, then anyone inside couldn't get out. They could still perform their function where they were. Kenner continued to advance his team towards the front gate.

The McMillan compound began to look more daunting the closer they got. Special Agent Kenner was reminded of a Spanish Hacienda or old Spanish Mission by the blocky massive walls that surrounded the home and the heavy arch that the main gate was set into. It wasn't until they were almost upon the compound just fifty yards out that he realized that all the window shutters were closed. Something wasn't right. It was at that moment realization that all hell started to break loose. A tree full of Guinea hens that roosted in the old scrub oak just off the gravel driveway were spooked by the early morning approach of strangers and went ballistic. Caught by the unexpected ruckus of a dozen birds launching from the tree screaming suddenly into their faces, one of the black clad agents panicked and let rip an burst of automatic fire from his MP5 shredding several of the birds and shattering the bark off the old gnarled oak.

Figuring that the element of surprise was now blown the Special Agent took off toward the main gate in an effort to get reach and bash in through the front door before any one in the house could respond. It went from bad to worst as Kenner hit the front gate and found that it was solidly locked against intrusion. The heavy Spanish styled wrought iron gate had been reinforced in the last few weeks with three-quarter inch steel plate that David had acquired at a metal salvage yard. It was the type used in road construction to cover excavations so that cars could pass over the ditches until they could complete the job. There was simply no way to get at the lock, the hinges were not exposed and nothing short of a tank was going to budge that iron wall. Kenner was blocked and effectively dead in the water. Suddenly a gaggle of geese started up, hissing, spitting and honking wildly!

“Holy Sh*t!” Kenner shook his head in frustration. “What next?” Just then the dogs started to bark.

Larry hefted his FN, adjusted his combat vest and turned to leave the group observing from the second floor windows. “Guess I’ll go see who is at the door.”

Static erupted from the speaker mounted in the wall at the corner the front gate. Kenner turned towards the noise.

“Milford, stop harassing the critters you’ll wake everyone in the whole damn valley. I told you yesterday we weren’t going fishing with you this morning!”

Kenner looked dumbfounded at the speaker.

“Milford.” Larry continued, suppressing his giggles. “I told you we’re not going fishing today.”

“Milford?” The speaker questioned.

Special Agent Kenner stepped in front of the speaker. “ Ah...umm...ah, this is Special Agent Kenner here to see David McMillan.”

“Special?” Larry paused “Special what?”

“What?”

“No I asked you first, WHAT?”

“No, I said this is Special Agent Jordan Kenner of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms. I want to speak with David McMillan...now!”

“Oh so now you’re getting pushy...” Larry covered his mouth with both hands to contain his laughter, it took him a few seconds to compose himself. “I don’t care if you’re Special Agent Edgar J. Fricken Hoover today - - MILFORD, WE AIN’T GOING FISHING THIS MORNING AND THAT’S FINAL!” Larry shouted into the intercom in his best mimic of a hillbilly accent.

By this time Joseph, David and Denise were standing in the hallway staring at Larry who seemed about to wet his pants over the intercom conversation. Meanwhile outside the gate Special Agent Kenner was at a total loss of what to do next.

Seven hours later, noon was approaching and the stalemate was firmly entrenched. Other than a few machine gunned Guinea hens there had been no injuries sustained on either side beyond wounded pride and of course a multitude of pricks and scratches inflicted on anyone attempting to work their way through the biological concertina hedge rows surrounding the McMillan property. Finally with chainsaws and bush axes the federal forces had managed to knock a couple of access holes through the intimidating wall of thorns and “gotchas” only to find that the inner pastures between the hedgerows were designed in such a way that anyone entering there was totally exposed to direct fire from the house. The situation was considerably unnerving at best to the men that would have to cross those open fields during the final assault.

Federal Jack Boots left with nothing else to do began to firm up the immediate perimeter around the hacienda and then started in by expanding their influence though out the valley. Kenner sent armed agents to question McMillan’s immediate neighbors to try to gather more information on just what he was dealing with. This too met with failure.

“We’ve got problems boss.” Special Agent Erin Gabriel began as he entered the command center set up at the side of the road next to the McMillan driveway.

“What now?” Kenner asked.

“No one, and I do mean no one is talking to us.”

“How’s that?” Kenner turned to face the field agent.

“Almost no one is answering the door or if they do the first thing out of their mouths is ‘get a warrant’.” He shook his head. “We’re getting no cooperation at all and then to top that off I’ve had two agents shot at when they attempted to climb over locked gates!”

“I thought I heard shots, SH*T! Anybody hurt?”

“No they seemed to be warning shots but we weren’t going to push it at this time.” Agent Gabriel moved forward to the map table. “Let’s see,” He looked over the map. “The two houses that fired on us are up at this end of the valley and hmmm, there and there.” He pointed.

Agent Kenner turned to the local law enforcement officer. “Sheriff you better get your people under control or we’ll be forced to sweep this entire area!”

“Just hold your horses Hoss!” Sheriff Eckhart rose up to his full height of six feet three and one-half inches. “I had THIS SITUATION under control until you busted in here trying to start World War THREE!”

“You better check your attitude there Sheriff!”

“You haven’t seen attitude MISTER!” His color was rising and his “back forty voice” was starting to take over. “These are Proud God fearing people out here and they don’t take to kindly to your heavy handed lame @ss tactics. You come busting in here like you own the place and are about to capture Osama bin Lauden himself. Flashing machine guns all over the place, shooting up livestock and all. Hell McMillan’s A SCHOOL TEACHER FOR CHRIST’S SAKE! And the people around here happen to like him very much.”

“So why doesn’t he come out and clear his name?” Kenner said snidely.

“So why in the hell did you shoot up his place at five o’clock in the morning? Why are you surrounding him with machine guns and assault troops! And what the

hell are you doing here in the first place? All this man is accused of is running a private school!”

“HE WAS TAKEN AWAY FROM LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS SERVING A LAWFUL WARRANT BY MEMBERS OF THE LOCAL MILITIA ARMED WITH ILLEGAL ASSAULT WEAPONS! THAT’S WHY WE’RE HERE SHERIFF!”

“Kenner, you’re an idiot! He was rescued by local parents with bolt action hunting rifles who were protecting their children’s teacher from that Bull Dike Bitch that was sent here by those @sshholes in Sacramento to force their ultra liberal crap on the people of my county. Those store bought detectives had to cover their @sses with that made up story because they got caught with their pants down!”

“Your actions in this incident are already under question my good Sheriff.”

“You better shut this operation down Mr. Agent Man or you are just likely to find out how these people around here feel about your heavy handed tactics.”

“Are you threatening me Sheriff?” Kenner tried in vain to stretch his five-eleven frame to look Eckhart in the eye...it didn’t work.

“I never threaten anyone Special Agent, I don’t need to.” He let that sink in. “I’m just giving you a friendly warning that you’ve bit off far more than you can chew.”

“Agent Kenner, you better come and look at this.”

The agents emerged from the command tent and looked in the direction of the McMillan house. There flying overhead was the Stars and Stripes upside down and beneath it the Gadsden, Don’t Tread On Me flag, with a coiled rattlesnake on a field of bright yellow.

“He’s got the flag up upside down, that idiot!” One of the agents said.

“Damn! No that’s exactly what that idiot wants,” Kenner replied

The agents around the Senior Field Agent gave him a puzzled look.

“That, my uninformed colleagues, is the international signal for distress. It means that he’s in trouble and is requesting assistance.” Sheriff Eckhart stated calmly as he turned and walked out of the compound.

On the borders of the Gadsden flag Kenner could just make out the words written with a black marker. “RUBY RIDGE” on the leading edge and “WACO” on the trailing edge.

“SH*T!” Kenner muttered under his breath as he looked through the binoculars.

Eckhart quickly marched out of the compound and grabbed the arm of one of his Deputies standing next to his patrol car. “Send out the call Jeffery!”

Desert Doc

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Chapter 27 – Bobcat by the tail

[quote] God is not on the side of the big battalions, but on the side of those who shoot best. Voltaire [/quote]

[quote] Once we have a war there is only one thing to do. It must be won. For defeat brings worse things than any that can ever happen in war. Ernest Hemmingway [/quote]

Sheriff Eckhart surveyed the scene of the government standoff of the McMillan homestead from his vantage point on the eastern ridgeline above the valley.

“I can’t believe that idiot Kenner has left the entire section up against this side of the ridge uncovered!” Eckert remarked as he handed the glasses to the large lump of grass and brush to his right. A gloved hand grasped the binoculars and they disappeared under the ghillie suit foliage.

“Hell Erick you can’t expect a rank amateurs to understand combat tactics! They’re used to busting into suburban homes, stomping on cats, kicking pregnant women and running down back streets and alleys...after people that play by THEY’RE RULES!”

Eckhart nodded in agreement. “So... do you think you can get in there without being detected?” He asked.

“How long do we have?” Squad Team Leader Jeffery Dennison asked.

“Kenner’s given them twenty-four hours to come out or they’re coming in.”

“Well that’s nice of him.” Jeffery commented sarcastically.

“Yeah ain’t it though. Our problem is that Kenner’s called in for some serious back up so we’ve got less than twelve hours to pull this off.”

The Squad Leader scrutinized the possible paths leading into the McMillan compound. Most of the routes down from the ridge required them to cross a large portion of exposed rock surface or sandstone bluff. The smallest point of exposure would require he and his team to rappel down over fifty feet of exposed surface before they would once again be under cover from the foliage.

“Hmmm...Ray what do you think? See that small drop over there to the right?”

The second foliage covered lump over from the Sheriff rustled. “Australian rappel down the face and into the brush below?”

“Yep.”

“Roger, looks like the best place. What about a diversion?”

“That would be nice. Erick can you draw their eyes away for say...ten to fifteen seconds?”

The Sheriff looked at his Squad Leader in amazement. “Are you sure that will be enough time?”

“To cross that open area with my team...yeah, that’s enough time. The rest of the stalk will take a couple of hours.” He paused at he reglased the objective below. “About five and a half or six hours...if you don’t want us to be detected that is.”

“How long until you need the diversion?”

“What do you think Ray? Hour, hour and a half after dark?”

“Yeah boss, I can have everything rigged up by then, sure thing.”

“Sounds good boys, I’ll get Davy working on the diversion.”

“Not Dangerous Dave?” Ray asked, sounding somewhat skeptical.

“Is that a problem?”

“Just tell him that we need a SMALL DIVERSION! I don’t want to be blown off the rope by the concussion of one of his over enthusiastic efforts!”

“Oh yeah, that’s right.” Eckhart mumbled. “I’d almost forgot about his last demonstration. I’ll be sure to remind him.”

“Hope so Erick, my eyebrows have finally grown back in.” The Squad Leader mentioned sourly.

The three men chuckled.

The interior of the normally bright McMillan home was now enveloped in a perpetual twilight with all the battle shutters locked down. Scattered around the house small twelve volt DC lights cast dim cones of brightness against the floor like those found in darkened movie theaters. The afternoon sun penetrated the firing slots in the shutters and illuminated dust motes that swirled lazily in the breeze when someone passed near the slash of light. For now the air was quite and undisturbed as three shadows sat at the table in what just yesterday had been a bright and cheery dining room.

“I just don’t see any other way out of this Hon.” David began.

“No, that is simply not an option.” Denise replied.

“But if I go out, maybe they will leave you alone and our place intact. We can negotiate for that.” He leaned forward and put his hands in hers. There was an obvious deep concern in his voice.

“They will never agree to that and you know it. And I won’t see you go to jail for doing what was right in the first place. That BITCH!” There was serious vinegar in Denise’s voice at the mere thought of the person responsible for this entire situation.

“But if they rush the house....” His voice trailed off.

“I married you for better or worse David C. McMillan. I never figured that this would be the definition of worse, but here we are and now we have to deal with it.”

“Maybe I can get you out of this Dee. Get that Kenner fellow to let you out before the fireworks start. You can claim...”

“NO WAY MISTER, I’m not walking out of here and leaving you behind. We’ve come through too much sh*t together in our lives to start running now!”

“Denise, David’s right, it’s going to get a whole lot of nasty in here if they decide to bust down the door after us.” Joseph began. “And one less...”

“LIKE HELL!” She exclaimed as she jumped up from the table. “I will not abandon my husband AND my friends just because I’m a women....” She stormed away from the table and then suddenly turned back. “Have either of you ever seen a ‘Cat Fight’?” She asked with a menacing look in her eyes.

The two men looked had her with a sense of sudden realization and nodded their heads. They knew that she was not referring to the feline variety.

“Well Agent Kenner and all his Jack Booted @sshholes are just about to step into the biggest cat fight they’ve ever seen.” She turned and stomped off into the darkness.

Joseph looked at David with a confused look. “Does she get this way very often?”

“No...” David muttered as he watched his wife disappear into the shadows. “But when she does...it’s best not to get near her for a while until she cools down.” He turned to Joseph. “I think Special Agent Kenner just screwed up.”

“How so.”

“He pissed off my wife and that is never a smart thing to do!”

They both looked back in the direction she had gone.

“Think we should warn him.” Joseph asked.

They paused for a few seconds and then both replied at the same time.

“Naaaaw!”

“Dangerous” Davy Allison, the militia’s premier pyro-technician’s eyes lit up at Sheriff Eckhart’s request for a ‘small diversion’. Eckhart could see and smell the gears spinning as Davy started rattling off formulas and ideas.

“SURE THING!” He began enthusiastically. “ A couple of pounds of RDX or....hmmm PETN.” He mumbled to himself as he turned to the shelves in his ‘Fun Gallery’ as he called it, also known as his workshop and supply room.

“Let’s see...need some jellied gasoline and then some plastique, I could whip that up in a few hours, need some Nitric Acid...ummmm...Acetone, yeah there it is. Now where is that bottle of Pentaerythritol.”

“Davy...Davy...DAVY!” Eckhart’s voice was raising.

“Oh...and I’ll need...yeah, what?”

“Davy...a small diversion.” Eckhart as he held up his hand up indicating a very small object between his index finger and thumb. “A...V-E-R-Y....S-M-A-L-L.....D-I-V-E-R-S-I-O-N.” He said slowly to emphasize his point.

“But if you really want to get their attention...” Davy began.

“Ray and Jeff don’t want to get knocked off their rope Davy. And Jeff wanted me to especially mention that his eyebrows have finally grown back.”

Davy looked at his Militia Commander dumbfounded. “Now that wasn’t entirely my fault Sheriff and...”

“Yes I know, I know, but all we need is a s-m-a-l-l...d-i-v-e-r-s-i-o-n here, just enough to take their eyes away from our people. You can blast the sh*t out of the south highway bridge for me later Davy, but first thing tonight I need a small diversion.” Eckhart again indicating with his fingers.

Davy looked disappointed, turned around and resumed rummaging through his shelves. In just a few seconds he turned back and opened up a metal container the size of a cigar box, extracted a small metal thirty-five millimeter film canister from the foam lined box and handed it to the Sheriff.

Eckhart looked at the small film can in the palm of his hand.

Davy placed the larger container back on the shelf and began to explain to the Sheriff the device in his hand.

“You twist the lid clockwise hard one quarter of a turn. You’ll feel something pop inside. When you feel that you’ve got about thirty seconds to set it on one of those five ton truck gas tanks and get the hell away from it.”

“What happens then?”

“Well what you have in your hand there is a miniature Thermite Grenade.”

The Sheriff looked at Davy in amazement.

“Takes about thirty seconds to get going and active the Thermite action. After that it will burn through just about anything for a short while. There’s enough there to easily drop through a gas tank. Then you’ll have a very nice L-I-T-T-L-E diversion for yourself.”

Eckhart had little doubt that they would have a diversion, how little was another question all together. He had to chuckle to himself as he walked away from the alchemist shop of his units most talented demolitions expert. “And to think that the Army was responsible for creating this wizard of explosive destruction.” Eckhart couldn’t help but shake his head.

“I’m just glad he’s on our side.” The Militia Commander thought to himself, he knew beyond a shadow of doubt that the main highway bridge leading into town would be nothing but rubble by tomorrow morning. Even if all Davy had was

balancing wire and bubble gum. Somehow Davy would pull something out of his “bag of devious deeds and dastardly devices” slap it together with duct tape, fire it up with a delayed clock created from a Bic lighter and an egg timer and thus produce a mind boggling explosion out of nothing. He couldn’t help himself, he just had the knack.

Special Agent Jordan Kenner, BATF, was pacing the command tent. His quick snatch and grab of a high school teacher with possible Militia connections had flopped into a standoff. The simple country cottage had turned out to be a formidable bunker of rock and concrete. The neighbors were not only non-cooperative several had actually taken shots at his agents. The local Sheriff refused to get involved and basically ignored any requests for information or support. His superiors were seriously hot under the collar at what was turning into a media event and to top it off, it would be over twelve hours before his back up would be released from other duties to road march to this forgotten little valley to reinforce his position.

Kenner had tried to talk McMillan into walking out unarmed and into custody. However instead of capitulating and accepting the inevitability of the situation, that damn History teacher started to quote Winston Churchill at him:

[quote] Never give in--never, never, never, never, in nothing great or small, large or petty, never give in except to convictions of honor and good sense. Never yield to force; never yield to the apparently overwhelming might of the enemy. [/quote]

Kenner was stalemated and he knew it. He wasn’t equipped to breach the rock and concrete walls of McMillan’s house. A frontal assault would be suicide without overwhelming firepower and while he had over a company of Homeland Security troops with him, he had a very uneasy feeling using them in this way, in this situation.

“Special Agent Kenner we’ve got more than enough men here to storm that house and you know it!” Captain Bill Cochran, Homeland Security Force and Officer in Charge of the company Kenner had drafted to support this mission, argued strongly.

“There can’t be more than a handful of people in that house. Our snipers can keep those windows covered and if we hit them from all four sides at once there’s

no way they can stop us!” He exclaimed as he drove his right fist into the palm of his left hand.

Kenner ran the Cochran’s plan through his mind one more time and still didn’t like the idea.

“You’re men would be out in the open Captain, no cover on the final leg of the assault.”

“Their soldiers Sir, that’s their job! They might get one or two on the final rush to the house, but no more. That would be acceptable losses.”

Kenner looked at the Captain in disbelief. “Acceptable losses? Are you out of your mind?”

“The longer we stand around here with our thumbs up our butts, the worse we look. We need to bring this to a head and then clean out the rest of this nest of vipers.” He was referring to the other residents in the valley that had refused to cooperate in the current situation and especially those that had fired warning shots at the agents and troopers.

Suddenly there was shouting and some sort of a commotion going on outside and the pair rushed to the opening of the tent to see flames erupting on one of the troop transport trucks.

“It’s going to get worse Agent Kenner. The time to act is now! PUT OUT THAT FIRE YOU IDIOTS!” The Captain stormed off towards the burning truck. “GET THOSE OTHER VEHICLES AWAY FROM THAT FIRE....YOU –YOU THERE, GET THAT DAMN EXTINGUISHER NOW!! WHERE’S MY SERGEANT OF THE GUARD!!”

Four shapeless shadows slinked down the cliff face, melted into the gray-green brush at its base and started their painstakingly slow journey towards the McMillan house. The four had trained in another part of their lives as Marine Snipers. Their objective was similar to that of their final examination during Sniper Training. To cross an open field while under direct observation without being detected. Only this time if they were detected it would mean a bullet instead of just failing the test. This time was for real.

Four hours later just a little past midnight all hell broke loose as the Home Security Forces began their assault on the McMillan home. Hundreds of rounds of automatic fire slammed into the outside walls and sent shattered shards of rock and concrete raining everywhere. The militia team inside ran to their designated fighting positions and tried to catch a glimpse of the assaulting troops through the barrage of small arms fire. The heavy steel shutters were holding out the rain of 5.56 rounds slapping into them but the clang of bullets disintegrating into the steel plate was unnerving.

Larry O'Connor could see the lead assault team pouring through the gap they had created in the thick hedgerow wall a hundred yards away. He popped the barrel of the big FN through the firing slot in the shutters and rested the bipods on the deep window sill. The running troops were directly in his line of sight and he quickly took his aim on the lead soldiers. The big .308 boomed its defiant voice, its resonant report immediately overshadowing the higher pitched bark of the assaulting troopers M16's.

The FN boomed twenty times in rapid succession as O'Connor lay a wall of hot brass into the lead troopers. With practiced precision he dropped the empty mag and slammed a fresh one into the well, cycled the bolt and took up his aim without missing a beat.

Private Donald Gaude knew his was in deep sh*t as soon as he heard the first report of the terrorist rifle from the stone building. He was right behind Corporal "Big Dutch" Vanderlinde when something stopped the ex-All State Guard dead in his tracks. Donald ran smack into the back of the big Corporal and heard the sickening wet sound of the "THWACK" of the second round that dropped the Corporal like a sack of rocks. In the mad rush forward Private Gaude became entangled with Vanderlinde and half tripped half fell with the dying corporal as he landed face first into the freshly plowed earth. That accident is probably what saved the panicked young Private from a similar fate of his big friend. Gaude lay frozen to the dirt somewhere between shock and sheer terror as troopers all around him were cut down by the deadly conflagration emanating from the stone house.

O'Connor pulled the FN out of the firing slot its barrel beginning to smoke and raced to the next window in the room as he fed another fresh mag in and took up the second firing position. The rush of invading troopers had slowed down but

there was still movement there in the dark field. He concentrated on the moving shadows and pealed through two more magazines.

The other members of the militia fire team in the house were doing their own dance with death as they fired through one window, dashed to the next and let rip another magazine. They each had one side of the building to protect and though there had to be some troopers getting though their sector of fire the majority suddenly found the prospect of serving their country not so inviting as it had been just a few hours earlier. This was real and the Militiamen were making it clearly evident that they were not going to go down quietly.

Squad Leader Dennison and his three other ghillie suited militiamen suddenly found themselves somewhere between a rock and a hard place just under two hundred yards out from their goal. Rounds from the defenders were screaming out in their direction as Home Security Forces attempted to storm their side of the homestead. If they opened fire on the troopers they might be mistaken for more of the Security Forces by those inside. If they stayed put they could quickly become casualties from stray friendly fire. Dennison had to do something and do something soon. He quickly caught onto the shifting fire coming from the various windows on his side of the building. Knowing that only four defenders were in the building he realized that only one militiaman was returning fire per side and was trying to expand the perception of greater numbers by moving swiftly from one firing position to the next.

“Ryan take down the right flank! Bryon you and Harv clear the middle! I’ve got the left! ON MY COMMAND...,” He waited for the right moment. “FIRE!”

Four precision super match grade M21, M1A’s barked in rapid succession. Designed to drive tacks at sub-Minute of Angle accuracy at ranges out to over 600 yards, the four man fire team dropped the reinforced squad of Home Security Force Troopers with devastating quickness before a single one of them even realized they were caught in a deadly crossfire.

Denise poked her AR15A2 through the firing slot ready to continue the rapid fire resistance and suddenly realized that she had no targets where there had been a horde of on rushing trooper’s just seconds before. She could just make out the bodies lying strewn about the field below her in the distance, but the hail of gunfire rattling against the her side of the house had suddenly stopped just seconds before she reached her new firing position.

She had no idea where the fire support had come from, but she more than welcomed the help. Heavy fire was still pounding on the north end of the house. She looked one more time at the now still field, silently thanked whoever was watching over her, gathered up her extra bandoleers and ran out of the room to add her fire power to the battle waging hard on the north side of her home.

O'Connor was feeling extremely lonely and very hard pressed. The Federal troops seemed to be pouring into his zone faster than he could drop them. The pounding of Security Force rounds on the heavy steel window shutters sounded like a high intensity drum roll. He had abandoned dancing from one window to the next and concentrated all his effort at keeping the rapidly advancing hordes at bay. His FN cast aside after digesting and spitting out over twenty-five magazines of 7.62mm Ball ammo, he had no time to reload and was now maintaining the pressure with his AR15A2. The gas tube was nearly white hot on the AR as streams of defiant lead screamed out of its barrel. He suddenly felt the presence of some else in the room, turning his head quickly he felt Denise slip two bandoleers of loaded thirty round magazines over his head. Nodding his head in acknowledgement he yelled at her.

“COME TO JOIN THE FUN?!”

Denise hopped over to the other window on the far side of the room to add her firepower to his. This move is probably what saved her.

“OH SH*T!!” Larry screamed at the top of his lungs. Denise turned just in time to see Larry’s side of the room become enveloped in a blast of flame and debris. The concussion pounded her like a rag doll and she was suddenly slammed into unconsciousness.

David and Joseph felt the house rock under the impact of the SMAW bunker buster rocket. The pair immediately abandoned their positions and raced to the north end of the house. David ran through the advancing cloud of choking dust and smoke. A second smaller explosion shook the house just before he reached the doorway. He popped his head inside the door frame just enough to see two shadowy figures stepping in through a gapping hole in the wall. The room was lit by the eerie dancing light from a handful of small fires burning in a room filled with swirling smoke and a jumbled landscape of smashed furniture.

Less than ten feet away from the door David emptied his magazine at point blank range into the intruders and the two figures slumped to the ground. Snapping in a fresh mag he sprayed and prayed through the gaping wound in the side of his house to dissuade any immediate further penetration attempts and began to quickly look for his teammates buried in the rubble.

He found Larry, or what was left of Larry. He must have been at the point of impact of whatever missile they had ripped his home open with. His end had been thankfully swift and relatively painless. "As painless as dying can be." He thought to himself. At that moment Joseph slid to a stop just inside the door.

"Larry's gone Joseph." David informed him in a flat monotonic voice devoid of emotion.

It was just then that he heard her moan. Lightening couldn't have struck David harder than that simple moan from across the room. He nearly leaped over the burning and smoldering debris that had once been their home and landed on the other side of the room. Denise was hurt. Denise was seriously hurt. He couldn't tell the full nature of her wounds as there was blood everywhere. Her hair was matted with blood, dust and straw. He couldn't see the right side of her face from the soot and blood. Her right arm hung unnaturally from her shoulder and he knew the meaning of that sort of tone of moaning. His wife, his life, the mother of their children was really seriously hurt and he was suddenly very alone in the middle of a hopeless battle with no time.

Suddenly something slapped his right shoulder and the back of his upper right arm. Burning and sharp it woke him up and jerked him back into the battle. His right hand instinctively pulled his Colt .45 Combat Commander, the one he had carried for over twenty years including through The Storm into Kuwait. The powerful hot loads leapt out of the short barrel at close to twelve hundred feet a second crossing the distance between David and the breach in the wall with impunity. The two hundred and thirty grains of brass jacketed hollow point met human flesh and nearly detonated living tissue and bone with their impact. His magazine emptied in just seconds, the intruders neutralized, he dropped and replaced the mag in one fluid movement and returned his full attention to his wounded wife.

More bursts of fire erupted from outside the house though this sounded different from the recent attackers. Suddenly he heard his name called from outside the hole in his wall.

“David – David don’t shoot! The MAQUIS IS HERE TO HELP!”

David recognized the key phrase he had only learned just two months ago. “The Maquis is here to help” Members of the militia were just out side his house. Joseph called to the voice.

“Who goes there?”

“Jeffery Dennison, Ray, Bryon and Harvey! Is that you Joseph?”

“GET YOUR @SSES IN HERE BOYS! We’re a little hurtin’ right now!”

Four amorphous shadows piled in through the gaping wound in the wall and took up defensive positions. Squad Leader Dennison could see the mess he had just leapt into.

“What’s the situation?” He asked Joseph.

“Larry’s gone, Denise was in here too...” His voice trailed off.

Dennison turned to his Fire Team. “I’LL COVER THIS POSITION. BRYON TAKE THE EAST SIDE! RAY YOU’VE GOT THE SOUTH! HARVEY COVER THE WEST END! ALRIGHT GET GOING!!”

The room suddenly emptied as the fresh defenders hurried to their assigned positions.

“Joseph, give David a hand and I’ll watch things here for a while...NOW GO!”

Joseph softly placed his hand on David’s shoulder. “Let’s get her down stairs where its safe.”

David had already applied battle dressings to her head and face wounds. Using several American Rifleman magazines he devised splints securing them with cravats to protect and stiffen her damaged arm. He was applying the swath

around her chest to secure the sling when Joseph arrived. Together they carefully carried her through the house and down the stairs using a heavy quilt as a stretcher. In the basement safe room Joseph watched with amazement at the swift and professional nature that David operated. He reinforced the battle dressings that were bleeding through, added a wire splint to the hasty splints he had originally applied, started two IV's and made a thorough secondary assessment of her condition. Joseph felt that Denise was in the best of possible care at the moment and knew that if she was going to survive David had provided her with the optimum care possible under the current conditions. It was then that Joseph noticed that David himself was wounded.

Desert Doc

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[quote] **When the need arises -- and it does -- you must be able to shoot your own dog. Don't farm it out -- that doesn't make it nicer, it makes it worse.** The Notebooks of Lazarus Long, Robert Heinlein[/quote]

[quote]Hard pressed on my right. My center is yielding. Impossible to maneuver. Situation excellent. I am attacking. --**Ferdinand Foch**-- at the Battle of the Marne[/quote]

The first gray fingers of morning were reaching into the eastern skies above the ridgeline. In the valley below the battle had begun shortly after midnight and burned viciously white hot for several hours, the evil embers of a desperate struggle shredding the darkness with tracers of pain and death. The searing flames of war were finally smothered under the predawn fog that rolled in and now clung to the valley floor. The last retched moans of the dying that pierced the roar of silence following the ferocious fighting had finally withered away to leave an eerie hush in its wake. As the dawn approached and the faint gray light of the new day began to slowly illuminate the battlefield surrounding the besieged fortress, the ghostly outlines of the fallen lay scattered like rag dolls discarded by a malevolent child. While the walls of the stronghold had been breached, but they had not been penetrated, the Militia still held their ground as the second day of the war arrived.

Agent Jordan Kenner could not believe the nightmare that he had experienced in the preceding hours. He had never been a soldier, never worn a uniform, and never fired a shot in anger or self-defense. This was his first baptism under fire and it had shaken him to his very core. He was a cauldron of emotions and feelings. He felt elated to have survived the ordeal and at the same time thoroughly disgusted with the butchery of the entire affair, and for what?

He looked about in the predawn gray and could see the exhaustion on the faces of the soldiers and agents around him, fewer in number than when this mess had begun just twenty-four hours earlier. Kenner felt trapped, trapped by his sworn duty and trapped by his responsibility as the Senior Field Agent. He could see no way out of this chaos. Three times they had assaulted the McMillan stronghold. Three times they had been driven back by their deadly accurate fire, each time paying a higher price in lives, yet in spite of all this blatant failure Captain William "Wild Bill" Cochran had insisted on compounding their mistakes with repeated assaults against the stone fortress until Kenner had finally called a halt to the insanity. Even a "bunker buster" square into the side of the building had only intensified the resistance and cost the Home Security Forces another squad in that failed assault.

A strange sound was rising with the sun and carried across the still cool morning air. Kenner looked towards the source of the keening and wailing that increased with the light. It was coming from up on the rim of the ridgeline. Haunting and yet...powerful. 'What the hell was that sound.' He wondered.

It was getting louder and now carried its message clear across the valley. To some it assaulted the ears, grating on nerves and raising a vile distaste from deep within. To others it was the call to the center of their soul and a reminder of a time long lost in the mists that fell across the highland moors of a distant land in a distant time. Piper Ian O'Connor played as he never had before on that high mountain ridge. He played to his older brother besieged in the McMillan stronghold below. His Highland Pipes howled a defiant call to arms that has been understood by all freedom loving people for over a thousand years. It cried out for them to gather up their arms and to stand ready for the coming battle. That also screamed a warning to all invaders that to stay would be to call down their own deaths. These highlanders and all who were moved by the eerie call would not yield, now...or ever.

Ian had no way of knowing that his brother had fallen in the course of the battle. His fingers danced across the chanter as the great drones filled the air with the howling call to war. His pipes filled the valley with his message loud and clear for all to hear. The war had begun.

Captain “Wild Bill” Cochran emerged from his tent in a sour mood. “What the Sam Hell is that screeching!” He demanded to know.

“Scotland the Brave.” A voice from the ranks answered.

“Scotland the WHAT?”

“Scotland the BRAVE, SIR!”

“So what the HELL does that mean. GOOD GOD WHAT AN AWFUL NOISE!” Cochran looked around to ascertain the source of the offending racket.

“Those are bagpipes Captain...highland pipes...I believe.”

Suddenly the morning was pierced with a banshee wail the likes of which the Home Guard Soldiers had never heard before. It didn't even sound like it was something that could have come from human throat. The earsplitting scream was echoing back and forth in the crisp morning air of the valley and was coming from all around them.

On the other side of the country in a region filled with the ghosts of another conflict advancing troops were being introduced to a very similar banshee wail. Major Gunter Neumann, Bundeswehr (Federal Republic of Germany) serving with the Homeland Security Forces as a foreign military observer had never heard such an unholy noise in all his life. A veteran of peacekeeping efforts during the Balkans conflict he had an uneasy feeling about his present assignment. He remembered reading about a foreign military attaché that had witnessed the last American internal struggle almost one hundred and fifty years earlier. He couldn't remember the author's name or country, but his message was loud and clear.

The author was a member of a group of foreign officers that had witnessed the bloody fighting at Gettysburg. Upon writing home one officer warned his government:

“We must never fight these American’s for they fight without any regard to pain or death. Honor and victory are their only battle cries. I have seen whole regiments laid to waste only to see men from both sides readily step up to the battle line. An outside invader could never stand against such madmen.”

Today Gunter more than believed his counterpart from that long ago struggle. What had begun this morning as a disarmament patrol had quickly escalated into a running gun battle. More than a dozen rural homes had been burned to the ground, most with their occupants fighting until the bitter end even as the flames consumed them. For those few that had attempted to surrender they were quickly gunned down by the American security forces for the slightest provocation. That is when things began to get exceedingly more difficult.

For the last several hours the troops Major Neumann had been assigned to had raced headlong into the pursuit of the fleeing rebels. They were racing across the very land that Sherman had decimated on his march to the sea during the American Civil War. Once again Federal troops were running amok in the South. Once again out numbered, out gunned and out equipped Southerners were fighting for their lives in a hopeless struggle. But the struggle had not been all that one sided.

Gunter noted that while the federal troops did hold the better equipment, heavier firepower and larger number of troops, the rebels were taking a good account of themselves with what they had. While the federals seemed bent on spray and pray tactics and recon by fire, the individual rebel militiamen presented extremely effective and accurate individual fire. The German Major learned very quickly to keep a very low profile.

Somehow through out the entire ordeal Gunter felt as if they were reliving an early segment of American history, that of the battle of Lexington/Concord. He was unfortunately presently assigned to the forces acting in the guise of the British troops under Lieutenant Colonel Francis Smith moving along the road toward Concord after their initial engagement on Lexington Commons. And the Homeland Security Forces he was with were racing headlong towards that history bridge that had been located at Concord over two hundred years ago. Only this bridge was located well south of the Mason-Dixon line.

[quote]Since 1775, Americans have proven their willingness to fight and die when necessary to defend their way of life. They have endured the steaming jungles of the South Pacific, the freezing hills of Korea, the blazing deserts of Kuwait, and the muddy fields of France to liberate peoples oppressed by tyrannical regimes. The American people have astonished friend and foe alike by their courage and capacity for sacrifice.

Americans persevered through seven years of war to win their independence from Britain -- then the world's greatest military power. American troops were poorly armed and equipped and often hungry. Many fought barefoot in winter snow. Baron Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben, a German professional officer serving with the American forces, remarked that "no European army could have held together" under the conditions they endured.

Foreign observers of the American Civil War were amazed at the willingness of Americans fighting both for and against the Union to sacrifice their lives in the most desperate fighting. Almost a million were killed or wounded. The war was fought to ensure, as President Abraham Lincoln put it, "that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

British leader Winston Churchill recalled his first reaction at America's entry into the Second World War following the Imperial Japanese surprise attack. "Silly people," Churchill wrote, "and there were many, not only in enemy countries -- might discount the force of the United States. Some said they were soft, others said that they would never be united. They would fool around at a distance. They would never come to grips. They would never stand blood-letting. . . But I had studied the American Civil War, fought out to the last desperate inch." Confident that the American spirit would not fail in freedom's darkest hour, Churchill wrote, "I went to bed and slept the sleep of the saved and thankful."[/quote]

"What the hell were you thinking of Simpson?" Senator Brandson began as soon as the pair were well out of ear shot.

"What? We can't go on NOT TELLING the President what the hell is going on!"

The senators quickly exited the White House and ducked into their waiting limousine. As soon as the door shut and the car began to pull out Senator Eli Simpson of Georgia turned on his colleague.

“Nelson just what the F*CK ARE WE SUPPOSED TO DO!”

“Hell Eli, couldn’t you have waited.”

“HOW MUCH LONGER DO YOU WANT TO WAIT NELSON!” He angrily turned away and began to straighten his tie. “How many more “disappearances” will it take until you realize that we are on the verge of a full scale rebellion here. CHRIST NELSON! We’ve lost three Special Forces Teams that simply geared up drove out off the post. What about that Ranger Company out there in Pennsylvania. AN ENTIRE RANGER COMPANY! GONE – POOF! INTO THIN AIR!?! We’ve got Seals that we can’t account for and now...AND NOW...we’ve got not one, BUT TWO MARINE BATTALIONS THAT HAVE SIMPLY MELTED INTO THE LANDSCAPE!”

Senator Brandson shook his head in frustration.

“OH and by the way MR. PRESIDENT, your Homeland Security Forces are GOOSE STEPPING across the rights of every free American citizen they run into. Oh and don’t run off there James, your Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, A TAX AGENCY OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT – FOR CRYING OUT LOUD – TAX AGENTS! Have just started World War Three in about every damn place you’ve got field agents out trying to disarm the population!”

Simpson was on a roll. His already elevated blood pressure was probably pegging out the meter as the color rose up his neck and into his cheeks.

“Are you aware Sir that there has been an on going battle in Northern California for over twenty-four hours that began yesterday morning and has already cost the lives of at least fifty Homeland Security troops as well as field agents of both the FBI and the BATF.” He took a breath. THAT BEGAN OVER A TEACHER BEING ARRESTED FOR TEACHING! “Oh and a little side note here Sir...the plague is still spreading.” He looked sternly at his fellow senator. “JUST WHAT THE HELL WAS I SUPPOSED TO SAY NELSON!”

[quote]”We interrupt your regularly scheduled program for this emergency message. The following bulletin has been issued by the President of the United States. As of 1200 o’clock Noon Eastern Standard Time today, a state of emergency has been declared across the United States of America and the entire country is now under Martial Law. The Federal Emergency Management Agency has been fully activated and is empowered by Executive Orders to manage all communication, transportation, energy, food and all other vital needs to ensure the survival of this country and our way of life. Congress has been adjourned and habeas corpus has been suspended. The Armed Forces of the United States will be responsible for external and border security while internal security of our nation will be provided for by the Homeland Security Forces. The right to free travel beyond your immediate domicile is here by suspended. Travel permits will be issued for emergency vehicles and after special consideration by local law authorities. You are directed to remain in your homes and remain calm. Further announcements will follow. Keep tuned to this channel for updates as they become available. We will now return you to your regularly scheduled programming.”[/quote]

“HOLLY SHIT! WHAT THE HELL IS THAT!” Cochran grabbed his pistol and spun around looking for a target. The wailing and keening got even louder. The soldiers grabbed their rifles and scrambled quickly about looking for something solid to hide behind. The noise rose in intensity and seemed to be coming from everywhere and those damn bag pipes kept pace with the onslaught of sound!

As suddenly as it had started it stopped. Silence...that seemed to last forever.

“Agent Kenner, Captain Cochran!” A deep hard voice came from just beyond the edge of the ground fog.

“WHAT!?” Cochran spun around again, looking wildly about for something to shoot at.

“Lay down your weapons NOW, and you and your men will live!” It came more as an order than a request.

“LIKE HELL YOU TRAITOUS BASTARDS!” Cochran answered and began firing wildly in to the ground mist. The soldiers around him hit the ground to avoid his random shots. He emptied his pistol, quickly dropped the spent magazine on the ground and was fumbling to insert a fresh mag.

“Surrender now and you will be spared, fight and you all will die.”

Cochran finally locked the mag into place and released the slide. “COME ON YOU BASTARDS,” He fired off two rounds. “I’ll EAT YOUR F*UCKING LIVERS, YOU F*CKING BAST-----”

A single muffled pop was heard that stopped the Home Security Force Captain’s voice in mid sentence. He hung there in the air for a few seconds, then like a marionette whose strings have been suddenly cut he collapsed into a pile of spent human flesh. A small red spot in the middle of his forehead slowly oozed blood across his face.

“Agent Kenner.”

“AGENT KENNER!”

A feeble voice answered the specter from the fog. “I’m here.”

“Will you surrender?”

“What are the terms?”

“No terms Agent Kenner. You surrender now or you and your men WILL DIE.”

“But I can’t just surrender...I’ve got... I’ve got to...contact...”

“Agent Kenner you are cutoff and completely surrounded. You must decide now, there is no time for negotiation. Do you understand that?”

“Agent Kenner?”

“I understand.”

“Your answer sir?”

“I’ve had enough.” There was a long pause. “We surrender.”

“What the hell am I doing here?” Kenner mumbled to himself. “All I ever wanted was to be a ‘G-Man’.” He reminded himself.

During the decades of Affirmative Action, he had been too well educated, too blond, too upwardly mobile, too everything. In other words, he was disqualified for a position in the governments highest ranking elite investigative organization, by virtue of the fact that only people of specific disadvantage were considered eligible by sole benefit of their ‘Political Correctness’ at the time. So he ended up as a glorified tax agent for the federal government. The last ten years had been spent chasing people attempting to skirt the system of government bribes required to produce or transport alcohol, tobacco, and now firearms. He had always obeyed the rules and followed the party line...but this action was now so far out of hand and out of reality that he felt himself wondering about the sanity of it all for the first time.

He had been separated from the others in his command, from the Homeland Security Guards and from his own agents. He was exhausted, confused, and ashamed of his actions. He had surrendered, surrendered out of fear, surrendered out of desperation and now sat numbly before the victor. He hardly recognized Sheriff Eric Eckhart. Or was it Commander Eckhart or Colonel, maybe General Eckhart? It didn’t matter now. Kenner knew his career was over, through, kaput. At least no more people would die under his command.

Eckhart handed Kenner a fresh cup of hot coffee, the Agent numbly took the cup and breathed in its fresh aroma before putting it to his lips. Eckhart sat directly across from him in full battle dress. Decked out in ‘RealTree’ camouflage that blended so well with the natural terrain of the region that he and his militiamen were virtually invisible from just a short distance away, unlike the black of the BATF agents and the woodland cammies of the Homeland Security troops. When Kenner had ordered his men to lay down their arms he had been shocked by the sight of Eckhart’s ghillie suited militia rising up through ground fog like wraiths in a bad dream. Many had penetrated so close to the Homeland/BATF perimeter that had Kenner defied the order to surrender he had no doubt that he and this men would have been ground up seconds later in the whirlwind of the militia firestorm. They would have had no chance of survival...and the reality of that moment struck deep into his inner core. He had been soundly defeated, with out question.

“You did the right thing Kenner.” Eckhart attempted to consol the fallen agent. “You would not have survived final assault. You saved a lot of lives this morning.”

“Well that is one thing.” Kenner weakly responded.

“You’re fighting on the wrong side, son.”

Kenner looked up at the bear of a man sitting across from him. ‘Perhaps he was right?’ Kenner thought to himself.

Desert Doc

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Pax Americana Chapter 29 – Rebel Yell

[quote]Then arose that do-or-die expression, that maniacal maelstrom of sound; that penetrating, rasping, shrieking, blood-curling noise that could be heard for miles and whose volume reached the heavens--such an expression as never yet came from the throats of sane men, but from men whom the seething blast of an imaginary hell would not check while the sound lasted.

Confederate Colonel Keller Anderson of Kentucky’s Orphan Brigade[/quote]

[quote] Col. O. M. Roberts commanded the 11th Texas Infantry in several battles in Louisiana, and left this account of Texans and the rebel yell:

The Texas soldiers in line of battle, with their attention intensely alive to what they were doing and how they should act, were cool enough and intelligent enough to pass the word along the whole line of battle like an electric current; and when the command was given, "Forward, charge!" it, too, would be rapidly passed, and then simultaneously the Texas "rebel yell" burst out from the whole line, as all together they dashed at double quick toward the enemy. The effect of that yell was marvelous....Such yells exploded on the air in one combined sound have been heard distinctly three miles off across a prairie, above the din of musketry and artillery. [/quote]

IT WAS A TRAP! Major Gunter Neumann sprang out of his vehicle and dove behind a small stonewall as a hail of deadly accurate high-powered

rifle fire ripped through the Homeland Security Forces that he had been riding with. The LAV in the lead of the column erupted into flames - it occupants screaming to escape the burning death. The HUMVEE he had been riding in just seconds before was being riddled under the steady barrage of rifle fire, the driver killed in the first volley twitched as each subsequent round added more insult to his dead flesh. This was worse than Bosnia, worse than anything the German Major had ever experienced. He wished he could pull his old Leopard heavy tank out of his pocket and wrap its steel armor about him.

Suddenly the solid stonewall began to disintegrate around him as well-aimed twenty-millimeter rounds blasted through searched for soldiers that had escaped the carnage on the road. Gunter hugged the earth as he crawled down into the ditch beside the road. He looked back to see a soldier that had sought shelter beside him just moments before ripped in two as the wall explosively shattered through him. Blood and burning fuel were slowly mingling with the green putrid slime at the bottom of the ditch. Gunter crawled into the muck as rounds ripped just centimeters above his flesh. If only he had his tank! He thought. Just when he thought it could get no worse – IT started.

David McMillan walked beside his beloved Denise as they carried her out of their ruined house on a litter. Doc Bell had done the best he could for her under the present conditions, but insisted that she be removed as quickly as possible and brought to the clinic in town. Her poor mangled flesh had taken a beating and the Doc couldn't give any reassurance that she would pull though.

"David...I'll do everything I can, everything son. But I can only do so much with what I've got." The old country doctor placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

"I know Doc...I know." David felt the air go out of him and his knees wobble slightly. The Doc's grip tightened on his shoulder.

"Dangerous Dave" Allison sat perched on the ridgeline watching the road below. He'd spent the entire night rigging up his party favors and the moment of truth was just seconds away. He looked left and right down the line and could see all was ready, waiting on his signal for the carnage to

begin. They had just received the word that the battle of the McMillan place was over. Larry O'Connor was dead, Denise badly wounded, David and Ski would sport minor scars but were ok.

Davy shook his head. He had always liked the McMillan's, especially Denise. As the county nurse on the go she made house calls far and wide, helping anyone and everyone. Even if they didn't have the money to pay for her services she would find a way to get them the treatment and medicines they needed. He said a little silent pray for the Creator to watch over her, then turned back to his business at hand.

The relief column was just rounding the first bend in the distance. In another few minutes they would be entering the kill zone. Seconds turned to minutes and minutes to hours as the convoy moved closer and closer. Davy flipped the safety cover off the switch and poised this thumb over the toggle. "Just a little further...just a little more. Closer...closer...closer..."

Andrew Creek could feel the adrenaline slamming through his veins. It pulsed up from his toes, plowed across his gut, blasted through his lungs until reaching his vocal cords where it emerged as a low-deep guttural growl that rose in pitch and tempo until it exploded into the air. Burrowed into the muck and mire of the ditch Gunter heard the hellish wail rising above the explosions and gunfire. As if all the demons of hell had been suddenly set free onto the world, the wall of ungodly protest raced around the perimeter as each militiaman picked up the chorus until they joined as a single voice.

Sound exploded into motion as Andrew and his fellow rebels were suddenly compelled to fully engage in the battle lust. Like demonic wraiths they sprang into action and began racing down the surrounding hillsides through the trees and brush. Their hearts pounding in their ears, their feet slamming into the ground angrily as they leapt over branch and bramble their motion a blur to the eye. Gunter could hear the demon yell getting closer, he instinctively reached for his pistol and came up empty. Foreign Observers were, as a rule, unarmed! He looked about for a weapon, any weapon and spied an M16 abandoned just ten feet from him. He began to crawl towards it in earnest.

Senator Eli Simpson of Georgia sat stunned at his desk. How the hell could the President adjourn Congress? IN THIS CRISIS?! As chairman of the Senate Arms Committee he had felt compelled to brief the President with the grim news of the renegade military units. Those lackeys that he called a cabinet were not about to drop such dire news on their boss. Someone had to do it. These were not little issues to be swept under the rug. They were facing a full-scale disintegration of the entire federal system and all those idiots in the White House could yap as well, getting better, going smoothly.

“F*CKING COCKCOLDS!” He muttered sternly under his breath.

“Sir?” His secretary looked at him strangely.

“Oh...nothing Margaret. Just my potty mouth getting the better of me dear. Please excuse an old man his rantings” He focused back in on the moment. “Now where was I?”

She looked down at her stenographer’s notebook. “You were saying, ‘Never in the history of the United States have we faced such dire times. Now is not the time to reject the very body of leaders that can help you bring this great country back on course. You ended there, Sir.’”

‘Ah...yes. Hmmm...have you heard the rumor that he actually has asked for foreign military and medical assistance from NATO and the UN?’ The southern senator shook his head. Margaret nodded in affirmation .

“Foreign troops on U.S. soil. I never would have thought I’d live to see such a day. The American people well nev’a stand for this Margaret. We shall see blood in the streets, American blood.” He slowly spun his chair around and looked out his office window. “Nev’a stand for this.”

The militiamen exploded from the tree line like the fabled Mongol Hordes of Genghis Kahn. Their yell pierced the air and surely woke the Blue and Gray that had fallen at Manassas, Antietam, Chancellorsville, Gettysburg and Chickamaugua. It echoed off the distant hills and froze the Homeland Troops in their boots as they watched the on rushing militia. It was the infamous Rebel Yell, not heard in the South for over a hundred years. Not

heard in anger since that distant struggle until today as it echoed off the hills.

Andrew Creek's combat boots beat a pounding drum roll as he neared the line of burning vehicles. He hurdled the low stonewall with the power and grace he had displayed during his reign as the low and high hurdles state champion. His rifle held high and horizontal he flew across the impediment, landing in a full sprint and delivered a horizontal butt stroke to the slack-jawed Federal troop staring at him wide eyed and full of terror. The well-oiled American Walnut stock of the Springfield M1A1 met bone and shattered its way through the troopers jaw. Rifleman First Class Andrew Jackson Creek of the Georgia Free Militia drove his rifle butt through the soldier's face and never missed a beat. Leaping the ditch he plunged his bayonet into the chest of the next victim pinning him to the side of the HUMVEE. Creek shucked the now dying federal trooper from the end of his pig sticker and went hunting for more enemy invaders to slay.

The Rebel Militia swarmed the security convoy like ravenous army ants the were all over their prey without mercy. They showed the same lack of remorse that the federal troops had displayed as they ransacked and burned their way across the southern landscape earlier this very same day, that it to say...none at all. No quarter was given and none was received. Major Gunter Neumann lay in shock horror in the stinking muck at the brutality of the American militia attack. They seemed consumed with a raging rabid madness that released itself only with the violent and bloody end of their enemy. His predecessor from the American War Between the States was right. "We must never fight these people!" "For they are surely mad." He thought to himself. "Surely mad!" He was witnessing that very horror before him right now!

The battle was over as quickly as it had started. Gunter lay quietly frozen in the stinking mud afraid to move, afraid to even breath as these demons from the hills quickly and methodically stripped the dead of any useable weapons and equipment. The M16 he had sought was just inches from his fingertips, but he dared not grab it now.

"UUGH!" The German officer grunted as one of the scavenging militiamen stuck him in the leg with his bayonet.

“FRANK! WE GOT A LIVE ONE OVER HERE!” The Militiaman shouted, still holding the burning bayonet in the Major’s leg pinning him to the ground.

Burly hands roughly grabbed the Major’s arms and he was suddenly jerked upright. He found himself surrounded by heavily armed and camouflaged militia as he now witnessed the carnage that they had left in their wake. Fifty yards away sat the remains of the Homeland Security Forces that he had been riding with just minutes earlier. Five Homeland troopers huddled up against the remains of the stonewall under heavy guard. Only five from the platoon he had been riding with had survived the ambush. Only five.

“Well, well, well, what have we got here Billy?”

“Ah don’t know Frank...his uniform looks kinda different from the others.”

Frank looked over the mud soaked officer being held before him. Not Army, Frank had served eight years in the Army. Not Marine or Air Force and definitely not Navy. He didn’t look right somehow.

“Who the F*CK are you Mister” Frank demanded.

Just then shots rang out and Gunter saw the remaining federal survivors slammed against the stonewall before they slide down to the ground, very dead.

The German starred at his captor and quickly decided that keeping silent was probably not a good idea in this situation.

“I am Major Gunter Neuman, Deutsche Panzergrenadiere, Federal German Republic. I am here as a military observer and guest of your government. I wish to speak to your commanding officer!” He tried to straighten to attention but the militiamen that still held him and the bayonet wound in his leg made that all but impossible.

“You’re a freaking KRAUT!” All the militiamen in the immediate area froze and turned towards the German Major. “WHAT THE F*CK ARE YOU DOING HERE?! TEACHING THESE @SSHOLES YOUR

STORMTROOPER TACTICS!! YOU MOTHERF*CKING SON OF A B*TCH!! The militia commander spat into his face.

Franks Combat Commander nearly jumped out of his shoulder holster and buried itself in the German officers neck. Gunter could see the rage literally explode in the militia leaders eyes. For the first time in his life he was truly terrified.

“Dangerous Dave” Allison thumbed the toggle sending an electrical pulse snapping down the ridgeline across the valley, through the drainage pipe and up the far side of the road to the buried charges that he had planted the night before. The first to go where three flame fougasse bombs. Each of the bombs was made from a fifty-five gallon drum filled with thickened gasoline that erupted like napalm across the tail end vehicles totally engulfing them in intensely burning flames. Milliseconds after the first explosions three shrapnel cannons built from six-inch diameter iron pipes buried into the hillside sent twenty-five pounds of metal nuts, bolts and drywall screws ripping through those same trailing vehicles. A chain of smaller explosives along the length of the road pelted the convoy with more metal nails and shrapnel tearing through exposed flesh and thin skinned vehicles.

Davy thumbed the second toggle and a deep rumbling explosion shook the ground beneath their feet. The center support for the main bridge into town started to lean ever so slowly before it buckled and dropped into the streambed below. The convoy was now trapped between a missing bridge and a wall of fire, the proverbial rock and a hard place.

Four almost simultaneous explosions sounded off to Davy’s left. Great puffs of gray-white smoke gave their positions away to anyone in the distance but the black powder had already done its job. Davy wasn’t sure this idea would really work. It was untried, but the cannoneers had assured him that they would hit their marks. Four bowling balls were now arching high over the mountain pass and would shortly begin their decent to the stranded convoy across the narrow valley. He just hoped the fuses worked.

Pandemonium was setting in as the Homeland Security troops sought shelter from the ambush. Many saw the puffs of gray-white smoke on the ridge across the valley but only a few caught a glimpse of four tiny black

objects against a crystal blue sky rapidly dropping on them. One hundred feet above the ground and sixty feet short the first bowling ball exploded sending out a shower of metal fragments that had been packed into the hollowed out core that rained down on the cowering troops. The next two fell long and only one of the sixteen-pound bombs exploded as it impacted the rock face in the tree line above the road. The forth and last bowling ball slammed into the top of one of five ton trucks that was still half full of invading troops where it exploded violently. Its deadly shrapnel spraying out in all directions into and through the nearest soldiers creating a mess of torn flesh and screaming agony adding to the panic along the convoy.

Militia snipers along the ridge top then opened fire. For three minutes they hammered the convoy six hundred yards away. Every one of the riflemen were experienced hunters and frequent shooters. Unlike the so called Homeland Security “soldiers” and federal agents now cowering behind their vehicles and returning only sporadic fire, these so called good ol’ boys practiced almost weekly with their favorite arms, rather than grudgingly being dragged to the range for their mandatory semi-annual qualification as their opponents. The training advantage of one over the other was more than readily apparent.

The militiamen felt the pulsing beat of their rotor blades almost before they heard them racing up the mountain valley towards the battle zone. A pair of black rotary winged death machines now stalked the combatants on the ridgeline. Two AH-64 Apache gunships opened up on the rebel forces spraying the ridgeline with 30mm cannon and 2.75 inch rockets. Shattering rock and splintering trees the pair of attack helo’s ripped through the militia ranks. Davy dropped to the bottom of the spider hole he had blasted and dug for himself the night before and hoped the rest of his comrades had done likewise.

The Mountain ridge seemed to burst open with belching smoke and flying debris as the Apache’s pounded the scattering militiamen. Much like the carnage they had let loose upon the invaders of their mountain home, they were now reaping the whirlwind of their enemy’s vengeance. Davy peaked his trench periscope up over the lip of his fighting hole and witnessed the havoc being wreaked upon his fellow patriots. The scope was wickedly wrenched from his hands and punched him in the face as it rebounded

from a large slab of rock blasted out the mountain from a nearby rocket strike!

“SH*T! THAT WAS TOO DAMN CLOSE!”

Rubbing his eyebrow where a solid lump was now forming he once again pushed the periscope carefully over the lip of his fighting hole. The pair of helo’s were advancing on the militia’s position belching forth death and destruction.

“Hang on there boys...Daddy’s got a little surprise for these bastards...”

Keeping his good eye on the pair of black demons advancing up the ridge “Dangerous Dave” reached beneath his flak vest and pulled out a small transmitter. With practiced precision he flipped the safety cover off the toggle and single button on the face. Flipping the toggle he armed the system and now rested his thumb lightly on the large red button.

The Apache’s marched steadily towards the Patriot trench line pounding anything that moved. The result of their deadly accuracy was that nearly half of the militia force had been destroyed in the onslaught. Davy waited patiently, poised, ready to release his own maelstrom, just a little further, just a little more.

The Security Forces from the ambushed column watched as the back birds hammered the rebel forces on the ridge above. No longer threatened with instant death they rose and cheered on the advancing Apache attack. The birds were midway into their attack when the valley floor exploded with dozens of small puffs of smoke. At first the watching troops didn’t see anything, but the pilots of the Apache’s could see death rapidly approaching them in the guise of small spidery lines arching over the top of them. Dangerous Dave in his devious little mind had taken dozens of relatively harmless Beer Can mortars, attached several hundred feet of high strength 600 pound naval test shot line to the cement filled soda and beer cans used as projectiles. To that line he mated a length of fine stainless steel cable and finally six feet of steel chain.

The helo’s jinked and jived madly to avoid the overlapping shots, but there was no way for them to evade the encircling net. Their blades wrapped up

several shotlines in seconds reeling the cable and chain up in buzz saw fashion to literally Cuisenart the two assault helicopters into so much metallic confetti before the main rotors seized and dropping the birds like fiery rocks into the valley below. Both sides starred in stunned silence at the flaming wrecks that now littered the rocky streambed. Both sides took in a collective breath that was answered by a resounding echo that danced off of both walls of that narrow mountain valley. A single word reverberated through the canyon. That word was:

“YES!”

“Dangerous Dave” Allison screamed at the top of his lungs as he danced on the edge of his fighting hole. “YES MOTHERF*CKING YES –YES-YES-YES---YES!” He spun about dancing and bowing to his fellow Patriots and adversaries below.

Less than a week later the first foreign medical and military personnel were disembarking from their UN transports at JFK international airport and were just touching American soil for the first time when Senator Eli Simpson received the call from the congressional mailroom. Several Secret Service agents met him at the observation window overlooking the room where all mail was screened and inspected prior to being delivered to the legislators.

“Senator, this package was mailed to you from your district headquarters in Georgia.” The taller of the three agents said to him.

“Why all the precaution? I get mail from my headquarter offices all the time.”

Two mailworkers in full biological contamination suits were carefully opening a moderately sized square parcel. One of the workers carefully reached in and retrieved a large clear plastic zippered bag full of small shiny oblong metallic plates.

“Looks like dog tags.” The worker turned to show the Senator and agents in the glass booth above him. “Maybe a hundred or more.”

“OH MY GOD!” The second worker shouted as he pulled the black plastic garbage bag open that had lain under the dog tags. There with the same

expression of shock and surprise was Major Gunter Neumann’s face starring up at the worker. A second smaller clear plastic zippered pouch carried a simple handwritten note printed in bold letters.

“Molon Labe”

Desert Doc

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Pax Americana Chapter 30 – Angel of Mercy

Mark looked at the two cooling bodies lying in the gravel of the country road. The blood had begun to dry in the dust, and flies had already begun to feast. As Mark recovered from the shakes, he reflected at how fast it all had happened; yet as the incident was occurring, it seemed to take forever. Time seemed to be simultaneously speeding along at four times the normal speed, and yet creeping along with agonizing slowness. These were the second and third people he had killed in his life, and while it wasn’t easy, it did get easier. He kept glancing around, waiting for something –anything- to happen. From his experience, you just can’t just kill two people without answering to someone, no matter how justifiable. Could you? This more than anything unsettled him.

He retrieved the revolver from the dead form on the side of the road, and tossed it in the Eagle’s open passenger window. He then opened the rear hatch on the car and retrieved a box of 9mm Winchester Silvertips, and topped off the magazine for the Glock 17. Both the felon’s pickup and the Eagle were still idling. After topping off the magazine of this pistol, he reached into the kit in the back of the Eagle and withdrew a siphon hose and the empty “spare tank” cans. He walked over to the battered truck and turned off the engine. The truck appeared to be a mid-seventies model, and Mark guessed it didn’t have the anti-siphon device in the filler neck. A few moments later, he found that it did not. His siphon hose was a store-bought kind with the squeeze bulb, so the user needn’t risk a mouthful of gasoline. It was a time consuming process, but all told he managed to get nearly six gallons of gasoline from the truck. A cursory examination of the truck’s interior revealed some bloodstained cash, watches and a bag with some potato chips and pretzels, as well as three two-litre bottles of Coca-Cola, and a six-pack of Budweiser. Mark took the food and left the cash and watches. The bed of the truck held little of interest: Some bags of aluminum cans, a short

length of logging chain, and some empty cardboard boxes.

Mark considered burying the bodies, but then thought better of it. He owed these men nothing, and it would be a waste of his efforts. Plus, there might actually be an investigation. He was sure a jury would see this as self-defense. Mark put his newfound items in the Eagle, climbed into the driver's seat and drove away at about 45 miles per hour to maximize fuel efficiency. He had roughly ten gallons of fuel in the tank, and that would get him about 150 miles, as a conservative estimate. At least with mostly real gasoline in the tank, he could shut off the engine.

The gravel road continued for miles, and eventually passed through a small village. "Brearton: Unincorporated" read the small green sign. There was a small gas station and a tavern, but not much else. Mark pulled into the parking lot of the gas station. He immediately noticed a plywood sign with "NO GAS" written in red paint propped against the pumps. Another sheet of plywood looked freshly nailed in place where he presumed one of the windows should be. Several marks scarred the wood in what appeared to be bullet holes. As he exited the car, he checked to see that his Glock was in place on his hip, but covered with his shirt. He walked slowly to the station door with his head on a swivel. There was no movement in the little town. No children played in the yards, no dogs barked. As he drew near to the door of the station, the door quickly opened a crack and a shotgun barrel protruded. Mark stopped and slowly raised his hands.

"No gas! Go way!" Shouted a voice from inside.

"I saw the sign. I don't want gas. I need to talk to a cop. There's been a shooting." Mark said, in what he hoped was a loud, clear and strong voice.

"There's been a lot of shooting, mister. Some from us, some at us. Now get out of here. No cops around here." The voice replied.

"Can I use the phone?" Said Mark, gesturing vaguely to the blue, egg-shaped phone station mounted to the wall next to the door.

"Phone don't work neither. Now get the hell out of here. Next time I tell you, it'll be with buckshot."

"Ok, ok. I'm going." Mark said, as he backed slowly toward the car. He was

sweating heavily as he realized there was nothing preventing the man behind the shotgun from shooting him, then taking all of his supplies. If things continued the way they were going, if this same situation had happened in another month, he suspected the man would have. As it was, most people didn't realize how bad things were getting.

Mark reached the Eagle wagon, climbed in and pulled away. As he drove slowly out of the village, he noticed more than one set of curtains drawn back slightly, and subtle movements behind them as the villagers watched him go. He silently wished them luck. They were going to need it. And yet, these people had withstood one attack already, he presumed from the damage to the gas station. That's probably where their extreme caution had originated. He couldn't blame them, really. He was a little paranoid now, himself.

The road lead once again through the rural countryside. Trees were green, but the crops were mostly withered and brown. He saw not a soul. No farmers in the fields, no kids on bikes. No rural mailman or UPS driver. No road crews. It was peaceful in a way, and yet disturbing in another. The sun was already low on the horizon, and long shadows played upon the ground, and Mark began to consider stopping for the night. He began to look for little used paths that went into the woods. He knew from his childhood these were sometimes used by landowners to collect wood from their forests. Some tracks were used for only two weeks out of the year during hunting season. He began to look for areas that were the most sparsely populated. He finally found a faded track in a large section of dense forest that looked inviting, and he slowed the Eagle to a stop. He exited the car, looked around, and saw no one. Stretching, he walked closer to inspect the trail. The dried, brown grass had grown tall in the wheel ruts, and upon examination, had not been bent or broken. Mark was not a tracker, but he was pretty sure that no one had been down this track in at least several weeks. He walked slowly up the path looking for signs of human activity, but saw none. The forest quickly hid the car, as well as the road, and the track soon curved back behind a knoll, completely obscuring the road. It seemed to be more than adequate for a night's stay. He walked back to the Eagle, put it in "drive" and slowly eased it down the lane, driving until the car was hidden behind the knoll.

The weather was pleasantly warm with the sun still up, yet Mark knew the night would become cold. He drew the sleeping bag from his car, as well as some of his food and a flashlight. The forest slowly resumed its activity as Mark sat quietly, lap full of potato chips. He decided to save the Coke, as he might need

the sugar and caffeine that it contained at a later time. The events of the day played again and again in his mind. He began to consider what he could have done differently. The shoot-out had left him alive. He couldn't think of anything different that he should have done. The incident at the gas station, well, he doubted that they were really out of gas, but he didn't doubt that without too much provocation, the shotgun would have been used. He finished the salty potato chips, and drunk nearly the entire contents of his one-quart canteen. It was nearly full dark now, and the crickets and frogs were beginning to sing. It had been an incredibly long day, and despite the thoughts racing through his mind, Mark was beginning to fall asleep. He stretched out beside the car, letting sleep take him.

He was awakened later that night by something moving through the forest. The loud sounds of crunching leaves and breaking branches in the surrounding quiet seemed to indicate to Mark that it was either an escaped bull or a person. Either way, Mark eased the Glock from his waist and held very still. Hopefully, whoever or whatever it was would pass by in the night, none the wiser of Mark's presence. As he waited, the crashing became slower, and began to hear ragged breathing, and an occasional groan.

"Human, then." Thought Mark.

There was the sound of something falling to the forest floor, then no more crashing. The sound of the heavy breathing remained, but began to relax and become less strident and ragged. Mark lay still, considering his options. The person was about 25 yards away, near as he could figure, and still breathing. Who the hell was it? Friend or foe? Why had they stopped? Did they have night vision? Were they drawing a bead on him even now? Mark figured waiting could hurt nothing. As far as he knew, whoever it was didn't know Mark was there. He could just sit tight, and wait to see what happened. He glanced at his watch, noting the luminous dial said time was one in the morning. He lay still, and couldn't help but be curious about whoever it was.

After an hour, Mark couldn't take it any more. He took the flashlight in one hand, and his Glock in the other, and rose as silently as he could. He moved in the direction that he last heard the noise, walking ever so slowly and placing his feet with the utmost care. It still sounded to him like he made the noise of a herd of cattle, and Mark winced with the noise, but continued. He took frequent stops to listen. He could still faintly hear the ragged breathing, and inched his way closer.

It took him nearly another hour to walk the 25 yards to the person laying on the forest floor. When Mark felt that he was within 10 feet of the figure, every nerve tingling, Glock extended toward the sound and flashlight clamped in the supporting hand, he clicked on the light.

The dazzlingly bright light blinded him for an instant, but revealed the figure on the forest floor. It looked like a young teenager, dressed in black pants and a dark blue shirt. His right lower pant leg was sticky with partly dried streamers of blood. His face was streaked with sweat and dirt, and the light showed his face deathly pale. His breathing was rough and deep, and though Mark's only medical training was his "Combat Lifesaver" class in the Reserves, he could see this kid was in trouble. The kind he didn't think he could fix by himself.

"Hey kid! Wake up!" Mark said, gently shaking the shoulder of the boy.

The only response was an incoherent groan. Mark touched the back of his hand to the boy's forehead. It was cold and sweaty. He found a pulse at the neck and femur, but not at the wrist. That told him the kid's blood pressure was probably between 70 and 80 systolic. Not good.

"This kid's in bad shape." He said to himself, as he holstered the Glock and tucked the flashlight under his arm. He reached down and gathered up the boy in his arms, quickly carrying him to the Eagle. While managing to hold the kid in his arms, he was able to raise the rear hatch and roughly place the boy inside. The weak dome light provided plenty of illumination for Mark's eyes, which were still mostly adjusted to the darkness. He grabbed his sleeping bag off the ground and threw it over the boy, then retrieved his first aid kit, withdrew the EMT shears and began to cut up the seam of the pants to expose the leg. The amount of blood startled him. It was easy to miss how much there was in the darkness, and against the black color of the pants. As Mark cut away the pants, he became aware that they were heavy: Sodden with blood. The boy's lower leg was caked and blackened with dried blood. He went to the front seat and retrieved his other canteen and soaked some gauze 4X4 pads, then began to scrub the blood from the leg. Several times he must have contacted the wound itself, as the kid moaned and thrashed weakly, but soon resumed his lethargic stupor. Several minutes of scrubbing revealed two wounds, one to the back of the calf, and one to the front. The wound to the front was larger, with small amounts of tissue protruding from it. Embedded in the tissue were bits of leaves, dirt and clots. Fresh bleeding that his scrubbing had created obscured his vision. Mark drew a

battle dressing from his kit, and managed to cover both wounds with one dressing. He quickly tied the tails of the dressing tightly around the kid's leg. He arranged his pack and gun case under the boy's legs to elevate them, and tucked his sleeping bag around him like a cocoon.

The boy needed a hospital. He probably needed surgery and blood, and certainly needed the wound cleaned out and IV antibiotics. Although he had the knowledge and equipment to start an IV, but only had a couple litres of Lactated Ringer's solution. Two things were stopping him from doing that. The first reason was -though Mark hated to admit it- selfish. The medications and other contents of his aid kit were there to help him through the tough times. He was as generous as the next guy was. Maybe more. But the way things were going, he would need that stuff.

The second reason was that he still had hope that there were hospitals still accepting patients. All sorts of questions would be raised if a boy showed up in the back of a four wheel drive station wagon with a complete stranger, and had an IV in place, with what looked for all the world like a gunshot wound to the leg. Yes sir, lots of questions. A part of him knew that was bullsh.it. He had killed two men not 12 hours ago. How much more trouble could he get into if he started an IV to save a kid's life? He could see it now:

“Mr. Foreman, have you reached a verdict?”

“Yes, we have your Honor. Guilty of two counts of manslaughter. Oh, and one count of practicing medicine without a license. We recommend he get the chair for that, your Honor.”

“Christ” said Mark as he reached for his aid bag, “When you think of it that way...”

Mark fished out one of his wools socks, and slipped a litre bag of IV solution into it. He fished out an MRE heater and put it in the sock too, then added a little water to the heater, and set the conglomeration aside as he slowly prepared his IV equipment.

In the active duty Marines, he had become friends with one of the Corpsmen who taught him this trick. Mark didn't believe it at first, but as he tested it, he found it was true: A 40 degree litre bag of IV fluids can be brought to about 104-110

degrees with two MRE heaters. Mark figured the fluids from his kit were already warmer than 40 degrees Fahrenheit, so he used only one heater. To make certain he didn't get the bag too hot, he applied a "fever strip" thermometer found in the drugstore pediatric section. It wasn't calibrated, it was a little hard to read, and it only went to 106 degrees, but it was easily secured to the bag with a piece of tape, and was the only thing he had. When (after kneading the bag to evenly mix the heated fluids) the temperature began to climb off the scale, he removed the heater from the sock and spiked the IV bag with the administration set.

With some small difficulty, Mark started an IV in the kid's arm, and began to infuse the warm fluids. He hung the IV bag, wool sock and all, from the hanger above the rear door. He made a final check of the connections to ensure that there was not fluid leaking, crawled out of the back of the wagon.

Stretching, he retrieved his GPS unit and the Atlas and Gazetteer, and began to look for the nearest hospital. The kid needed to get there fast.

AGreyMan

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Pax Americana Chapter 31 – Lazarus

Mark drove with cautious speed down the winding country road. The GPS and map showed him many miles from the interstate, with many more to go to the next town that was shown to have a hospital. When going through several small villages, he hunkered low in the seat and peered forth like a blue-haired matron in a Cadillac, as the towns seemed to become increasingly hostile with each passing hour. While driving through the last town, he saw men in the midst of dragging large trees across the county road with a huge John Deere tractor. Most of them had leaped behind the downed trees and pointed their deer rifles at him, but whether they judged him not a threat, or they were still unprepared to open fire without significant provocation, he drove past without a shot being fired. The reason for that particular town's attitude became apparent. A small grocery store was blackened and charred, its roof gone. The burned wall studs reached like skeletal fingers from a grave into the sky. Mark could have convinced himself that the fire was accidental save two scorched cars in the parking lot with bullet holes in them.

The boy continued to lay in the rear of the car. Mark had braced him into position with some of his supplies to prevent him from rolling around as the car moved. His condition seemed to improve slightly with the two litres of fluid that Mark administered. He could once again feel a pulse in the boy's wrist, and he seemed less cool and clammy. He did not, however, seem to have regained consciousness. Occasionally, Mark would stop the car in a deserted stretch of road and check on him. The Carlisle battle dressing that Mark had placed on the boy's leg showed some blood, but did not appear to be soaked through. That was the extent of the good news. The bad news was that the nearest town with any kind of hospital was still fifty miles away. It was a relatively small town of 5,000 people, but the map legend indicated that it had medical facilities available. He reflected that it was probably good the town was small. It was less likely to be overrun with injured or plague victims...at least according to his logic. On the other hand, the small number of patients that may become injured or infected may easily overwhelm the capacity of a smaller hospital. It was a wash, he decided. He just hoped that there would be somebody there to help the kid before gangrene or something set in.

Mark found himself speaking to the kid as he drove. It began when a particularly rough stretch of road elicited a groan from the boy.

"Hey, are you awake finally?" He had asked, looking for movement in the rear-view mirror.

"Hey. Kid?" Mark said. There was no response.

"Ah well. You're not missing anything. The only people out there to see look like they want to kill us, so it's a good thing there aren't too many of 'em. Looks like they already got a head start on you, though. Can't figure it out; you look like you're Amish, or Mennonite. Can't imagine why anybody would want to shoot you. 'Course, the two guys yesterday who tried to ventilate me didn't have a good reason either. Christ, but that was scary. I bet you were pretty scared too. Nahh: You're probably too tough to be scared. Not me though! Whew! I'll tell you something. I was active duty in the Marines, and in the Army Reserves: Nothing's quite as scary as real bullets comin' at you. I mean, you personally!"
The boy of course said nothing.

"Listen," Mark continued, "I know you're probably pretty tough, and don't need any advice from me, but my tip for you is to hang in there. We'll get to the

hospital soon, they'll work a little magic on that leg, and then I guess we'll find your folks. They're probably worried sick.”

Mark paused in his speech. “Would ya listen to me? I'm rambling like a drunken sailor, and believe you me, I've seen a few of those! Anyway, I'll let you sleep. I'll wake you if anything happens, like a parade or something.”

The Eagle's wheels ground away the miles. His one-sided banter with the boy was mainly to mask his nervousness. The world had gone crazy in such a short span of time. Literally, one day he was on his way to his Mom's house for a visit, and the next day he shot two men who were trying to kill him, and left their bodies to rot in the middle of a gravel road. A day later he had picked up an unconscious kid with a gunshot wound and –after starting an IV- was driving him to the hospital 50 miles away. Despite all that had happened, he still had difficulty wrapping his head around it all. Though he considered himself a realistic person, expecting the worst while hoping for the best, the speed of society's deterioration surprised him. He had always believed that the veneer of civilization had become quite thin in America. Though most of the people were mostly good, riots had become commonplace on the justification of a sports score or jury verdict. Looting occurred with any provocation, with the common justification of “But I need this!” and “They owe me!” People stood by while crimes were committed against their fellow man, half because they were too apathetic to help, the other half because they risk imprisonment by the “authorities” by helping. Television showed footage of accidents, riots and murders while providing humorous voice over commentary. Children were stolen from their families, raped and murdered. We had teetered on the brink of collapse for so long that it was hardly a surprise when we actually fell. The Plague and the Brown had merely been the pebbles that tripped us.

But it did surprise him.

A small part of Mark had hoped for a cataclysm like this. He had daydreamed of a time when his problems would be related to the very real difficulties of food, water and shelter. A time when he could build a shelter without a permit, keep what he made without taxation, and live his life without fear of being sued. But the reality was different. He had been shot at, his car was nearly out of fuel, roads were becoming hostile private property and there was no power. He didn't have a piece of fertile land to grow food, and winter was around the corner. A gunshot wound in the kid that could have been a just warm-up for a competent

surgical team could likely result in his death. Those details were much more harsh in this reality than they had been in his daydreams.

The town of Trinkston and its hospital were a mere five miles away when the window behind Mark exploded. Glass showered the interior of the car and Mark was so startled he yelled a string of obscenities as he hauled the steering wheel to one side and stabbed the brakes, then the accelerator with his foot. The car nearly rolled onto its side as it slid sideways into the shallow ditch. Rooster tails of dirt and dried grass spewed from the rear tires as Mark kept the accelerator to the floor, jouncing with increasing speed along the ditch. Another round flew through the rear window and exited through the roof next to Mark's head. The wind roared along with the car's engine in his ears as he hunched low in the seat and concentrated on keeping the car on its wheels. The ditch shallowed even more, and he was able to get the Eagle onto the macadam.

Mark risked a glance at the aging wagon's speedometer, which showed 40mph and climbing. Another glance in the rear view mirror showed the kid had been tossed into a corner of the car by the vehicle's wild maneuvering. A vibrating, rattling car and an equally vibrating driver had traversed five miles at top speed when the engine gave first one cough, then another, then stopped all together. Mark looked down at the dash in the sudden silence of the coasting car. The fuel gauge was empty, the "Oil Press." light was lit, and the temperature gauge was off the scale.

"Sh.it." said Mark into the quiet. He hauled on the steering wheel to get the car over to the side of the road where it coasted to a heavy stop. There were mostly fields surrounding the car, but a finger of forest projected toward them several hundred yards away. He slumped in the driver's seat for a moment, head resting on the steering wheel. He heard the boy stir slightly in the back. Then he heard another faint sound that made his blood run cold: Engines. Several of them, from back the way he had come.

Mark ran around to the rear of the car, flung open the hatchback and grabbed his gun case. Working the latches quickly, he reached inside to grab the National Match M14 that lay there. He cursed as he noticed one of the spare 20 round magazines had been shattered by a bullet. That left him with just three. A quick glance revealed no obvious damage to the rifle. He stuffed two magazines into the pockets of his windbreaker, inserted the third into the well of the M14 and slung the weapon. He gathered the boy up in his arms and grunted with the

effort. The kid was a good 130+ pounds.

He ran down into the ditch then up and across the open brown field toward the nearest extension of forest. The engine sounds were louder now and he was sure that they would spot him. He ran anyway, his arms aching with the boy's weight and the M14 slamming awkwardly into his back, causing a breathtaking stab of pain every other footfall. The engines grew louder, and Mark made a rapid pirouette to see behind him. There was a pickup truck with several people in the bed, and five people on four-wheelers. The four wheelers traversed the ditch in a few moments then began to race across the field toward him. They fired wildly inaccurately with pistols while they bounced across the uneven field, rifles slung across their backs. The pickup stopped by his car, and people exited and began to poke around in it. The woods loomed ahead of him, and Mark collapsed with the boy just inside the tree line.

"Well kid, this is it." He said to the young man as the turned to face the oncoming threat. The boy uttered a groan in reply.

He pulled a round into the chamber of the M14 and fell onto his belly. The Glock savagely dug into his hip so he rolled to the side, unholstered it, and set it beside him. The nearest four wheeler was fifty yards away when Mark put the crosshairs on his chest. The rifle was sighted in for much farther, and between that and the bouncing target looming huge in the Kahles scope, he was not at all certain of the shot. The M14 barked and pushed Mark's shoulder and a quick glance showed the four-wheeler riderless. As he traversed the muzzle to the next closest rider, they seemed to realize what happened. All the riders peeled off in different directions, all bent on flanking his position. Mark picked off another at about a hundred yards, but the trees obscured the rest as they departed from his line of sight, riding behind the protrusion of forest. He figured it would take them some time to come up behind him. He focused his attention on those intent on pillaging his car. This was more the kind of shooting that he was used to: Long distance and stationary targets.

From long habit, he drew a deep breath and centered himself, letting all outside distractions fade away. The sound of the four-wheelers faded and his awareness focused only on his rifle and the targets. His breathing slowed and all else faded away. Just like in the training, center the crosshairs on the upper chest, compensate for the wind. Breathe, relax, aim, slack, squeeze. The figure next to his car looking for him with binoculars crumpled to the ground. The others

flinched and scrambled for cover, but Mark scored a hit another man before he could scramble away; the man tumbled to the ground and crawled a short distance dragging his legs. Mark noted where another man had leaped into the ditch, and estimated where his head would pop up to look for him. After a few seconds, Mark took up the slack in the trigger and found his guess of the man's location was only a little off. He centered the sights and squeezed the trigger quickly and the man's head seemed to expel a cloud of reddish mist before falling out of sight. Some of the others seemed to panic, and Mark scored at least one more hit as the remaining men jumped wrestled the bodies into the truck and sped away. He considered disabling their vehicle, but then decided that the sooner and farther they fled the better.

As his sphere of awareness expanded, he considered the men on four-wheelers trying to flank him. He rolled to the side to try to find them, when a "crack-crack-crack-crack" struck his ears. He finished his roll facing upward, and looking on in surprise as the kid, eyes wide with terror, pointed Mark's own Glock at a man coming up behind them. The man looked surprised as an invisible wind plucked at his jacket time after time. The man's amazement was short-lived, when Mark swung the M14 toward him and tapped the trigger. After the second .308 round blew through his chest, the man dropped to his knees, then forward onto his face.

Another "Crack-thump" sounded and Mark was pelted by bark flying from a tree close by his head. He looked to see another man standing straddle-legged holding a rifle to his shoulder, and trying to work the bolt of the rifle.

"Christ kid. Get down!" yelled Mark as he centered the crosshairs on the man and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened. Mark automatically tried to push the safety forward, then re-pulled the trigger. Again nothing. He then took the rifle from his shoulder and cursed as he saw the bolt was held open, the magazine empty. Faintly, he recalled not loading it fully to keep the springs from taking a set. While he ripped the empty 20 round magazine from the well, he again heard "Crack-crack-crack-crack" as the boy pointed the pistol in the general direction of the man who had just taken his rifle from his shoulder to finish working the stubborn bolt action. Though the man was fifty yards away, the boy made no great effort to use the sights. All the same, leaves and twigs rained down on the foe, and dirt from the forest floor sprayed his front. Still the boy pulled the trigger "crack-crack-crack-crack."

Before Mark could fully seat the magazine, the man screamed and threw his rifle as he fled pell-mell through the forest. When Mark finally shouldered the rifle, all he could see in the scope were wildly swaying branches where the man had fled. He dropped the rifle from his shoulder fractionally and scanned the area in a rapid 360-degree circle but he saw no immediate danger. He dropped the M14 to his lap and studied the boy. His eyes were wide with fear and elation, and his face pale with the same, as well as his leg injury. He continued to clutch the Glock in his hands as he stared at the man whom he had shot. His breathing was deep and fast. Mark thought he was on the edge of hyperventilation. The boy's eyes did not waver from the body for several minutes, but soon his breathing slowed to a normal rate.

When he finally looked up, Mark shivered. There was an edge of madness in the boy's eyes. He stared at Mark for several minutes.

"I have killed" he said simply.

"I know." Said Mark. The next few moments could send the boy cascading into madness, or prevent that fall. "You saved my life. Those men were trying to kill us. Thank you."

"You saved my life, too." The boy's expression remained flat, but the gleam of insanity had faded. Mostly.

"What's your name?" asked Mark.

The boy thought, and for long moments said nothing. Then, "I used to be called something else...But you can call me Lazarus."

AGreyMan

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Pax Americana Chapter 32 – Rescue and Reunion

The Director's fist slammed down on the dark walnut desktop. He did not react to the jolt of pain that shot up his arm; his rage cancelled all other sensations from reaching his fuming brain circuits.

“IF I HEAR OF ONE MORE FAILURE TO FOLLOW MY ORDERS I WILL HAVE THAT BASTARDS HEAD ON A PIKE AND THEIR ENTIRE FAMILY THROWN INTO THE CAMPS! DO I MAKE MYSELF CLEAR?!” He bellowed at the assembled suits in the room.

Twelve paled expressions nodded back in synchronous agreement.

The Director of Homeland Security reclaimed his composure as he slowly backed up, straightened his tie and veiled his anger once again behind his bureaucratic mask. Resuming his reigning position behind the great desk that dominated the large office he waved his hand to continue the briefing.

A nervous FEMA Director stood up and with a sheaf of paper in hand quickly shuffling through them to find the one he wanted.

“Ah...er...Mister Director the good news is that THREE Disaster Relocation and Sorting Camps ARE ahead of schedule, fully staffed and able to begin receiving pris-...er...ah detain-...ah...evacuees at this very moment.” He patted his sweaty nervous brow with a white handkerchief and continued detailing the progress of the other camps and trying to avoid the deadly glare of the Directors cold predatory gaze.

Sergeant Major Jeffery Lee Strothers, Marine Corps Retired, loved the morning just before the sun cleared the horizon line and splashed daylight across the landscape. Ruger, his trusty Rottweiler, panted in the chill morning air, his breath condensing and making him appear even more foreboding for his breed and size. There was just something about the stillness of the world at that fleeting moment.

“Damn I love the dawn!” He muttered to himself as he glassed the road off in the distance.

From the small bluff the horizon line was over fifteen miles. It was the point just three miles ahead of where he left the secondary highway that he was most interested in. Jeff didn't like the open expanse of the plains and here on the edge of Colorado he felt especially exposed and naked. This type of terrain was a killing field for armor, air power and long-range snipers. Good for defense, suicidal for the attacker or the guerrilla fighter and damn exposed for a smuggler. But the battle scarred old veteran also knew that such terrain could be very illusionary, masking shallow arroyos and cuts that entire armies could march

through undetected. It all depended on a warrior's intimate knowledge of the landscape.

Strothers had maintained his drive west sticking to the major highways for speed and trusting in bureaucratic stupidity and his flawless authentic travel papers. But here, near one of his drops he was forced to leave the main freeway system and travel the secondary arteries. The last encrypted burst transmission he had received directed him to these very specific coordinates. If it were not for the fact that the sender was absolutely trusted by Strothers he would not be there watching the check point several miles in the distance. He scanned the road looking for any sign that would foretell of what he was expected to be watching for, but what ever or whom ever he was intended to witness was well versed in the fine art of camouflage. This too he knew to be an illusion, so he waited and scanned the terrain in the distance. Then he caught it...movement.

Angel MacMurtry-Chavez clung to the shadows as he moved silently through the alleyway in the predawn light. He had gone in search of food left behind in the abandon homes and had spent the entire night trapped under a redwood deck in a vacant backyard as several firefights waged around the neighborhood he was crossing through. The violent scabs that squabbled over the remnants of civilization were fighting another turf war. Sirens continued to scream off in the distance intermittently. The air was filled with wisps of smoke from the fires from the other side of town as Angel paused and listened intently for any hint of danger up ahead.

He had been a junior at Central High when the world that he had known suddenly went to sh*t one day. First came the Twin Towers and Pentagon attack of 9/11, then began the war on terrorism with the government hawks rattling sabers looking everywhere for an enemy that vanished into smoke. Not to be put off of a good fight the feds then turned their focus to a target that couldn't just fad into the mists of places like Tora Bora or Mindanao. They chose instead to finish some unresolved business and started looking around for excuses to pick another fight with Iraq. We still had a huge presence in the region...why not put them to good use and after all they argued, we're going to have to get involved sooner or later because as everyone knows, THEY ARE SO EVIL!

The second Persian Gulf War started with a whimper. A gradual build up of hostilities that began with increased air strikes and punishment raids. As if on cue the US sent in advisors and special operations types to build the Kurds into a

legitimate force to be reckoned with. Again we were playing another rube as a pawn in our game of expansion and control. From there it was only a matter of time until US Marines and Rangers set foot in the land of ancient Babylon, as the latest in a long line of conquerors. This time however Hussein had spent over a decade secretly building up his army to fight the infidel invaders and he was determined to play his version of Seven Card No Peek. After all, he had nothing to lose and no conscience to back it up. This meeting would be a dogfight, a junkyard...dogfight with all gloves off!

In the mean time back in the States the twin plagues (human and plant) had kicked the country solidly in both gonads and left it sucking serious wind. Angel had lost his mother and most of the extended family he had in the first wave of that deadly virus that sweep through the city. Local officials reeled from the devastation wrought by the sudden evisceration of their communities. Angel and thousands of other instant orphans were thrust into a system with too few foster families to begin with and many that themselves had barely made it through the initial assault of that deadly disease and then fell victim to the whiplash as the plague rebounded and slammed back through the wounded communities a second time.

Due to his age (eight months away from eighteen), several of his surviving teacher's endorsements and the government's desperation Angel had managed to push through his emancipation paperwork. He had never felt so alone in his life. It had always been just him and his mother, his father long gone from the picture for various reasons, the greatest was that he was a total flake. Yet despite the hand he had been dealt Angel was as determined to finish high school as he was determined to survive the current crisis. He knew of some distance relatives, uncles he had met once or twice growing up, but he had no way to get to them after martial law was declared and the cities slowly turned into death traps. For now it was survival day to day.

Another scream pierced the early dawn air as Angel crept further down the alley. This one closer and he was sure...female. He inched forward. There was a struggle going on between the houses up ahead. Someone was desperately fighting for their life. Angel peered around the corner of the garage through the cracks in the fence. Three "Bangers" were grappling with someone. He caught a flash of blonde hair – gringa! More screams pierced the early morning air. Angel quickly looked for a weapon among the trash and debris piled in the alleyway. A handle caught his eye.

“BENDEJO B*TCH!!” The lead gangster yelled as the struggling girl sunk her teeth into his arm. He pounded his free fist into the side of her face until she let go as she faded into unconsciousness.

She was a bit on the chunky side and they were having a difficult time peeling her designer jeans off due to her struggling. Roberto was now pissed because his brother had knocked her out, he liked it when they struggled, now he just had a limp fish. They had finally yanked her pants off and as he grabbed a handful of her panties and started to pull them away exposing her soft pubic hair there was a strange hollow echo reverberating within his head, a flash of brilliant light and then sparks fading out to nothing as he dropped face first into her lap.

Strothers focused in on the guard shack and caught a tiny glimpse of movement near the porta-potty. He could see the two guards in the lit shack, idiots! They had probably just finished their thirtieth hand of spades without looking out the windows of their shack the entire time. These bozo’s deserved what ever they were about to receive and the grizzly Sgt. Maj. was sure it was going to be a very early retirement...without any benefits at all!

One of the guards threw down the last of his cards and began to stretch as he stood up and looked around. He checked his watch and headed out of the shack and started to march up to the porta-potty twenty yards behind the building. About half way there he stopped to light up a cigarette and as he took in that first puff and looked up his life ended there as the garrote snapped closed around his throat and he was viciously dragged backwards into the brush beside the path.

“DAMN, that was sweet!” Strothers commented to Ruger.

The remaining guard was tidying up the table and never heard a thing. He walked over to the window on the far side of the shack from the direction that Strothers was observing, unlatched the window and pushed them open to vent fresh air into the stale smoke filled room. As he leaned forward to push the windows open Strothers caught a glimpse of his head suddenly jerking down and he was rapidly pulled out the window. The last image was of his feet clearing the windowsill.

“KEEEY-RIST!” He exclaimed. “Who the F*CK are those fellows!”

Suddenly the area around the shack was alive as brush and grass clumps transformed into professional warriors. He noted that several gillie suited forms emerged from the GP medium tent that quartered the off duty guards. Strothers doubted that any of those Homeland Security boys would be making muster this morning, at least not here on this planet.

Within just a few minutes the guard post looked perfectly normal. Several of the new arrivals got a fire going in a fifty-five barrel drum used for warming the guards in this isolated outpost. Everything looked perfectly normal...hmmm, so what were they up to? He heard the trucks before he saw them as their big diesel engines hauled their heavy cargo up the steady grade. Seven trucks and two Humvee's were approaching the checkpoint. Yeah the post looked very normal and quiet. It didn't take much imagination to know that the early morning quiet was not going to remain that way for very long.

Angel whipped the number one driver into the side of the first would be rapist's head with a resounding "THWACK!" He caught the second assailant on the back swing square in the center of his forehead and sent him reeling back into the wall of the house. The second strike nearly broke the head off the golf club and it flew off as he whipped the club towards the third rapist. The empty shaft slapped the remaining gangster across the arm as he tried to block the attack. With his arm up it blocking not only the strike of the golf club but his vision as well, he didn't see the snap kick that caught him under the jaw crushing his windpipe and shattering his tracheal cartilage. The leading edge of Angel's Doc Martins drove nearly to the cervical spine as the kick blasted deep into the targets flesh, just like his sensei had taught him to do.

In a matter of seconds it was over. Two of the would be rapists died almost instantly, the third would linger on for many hours but never regain consciousness until he finally succumbed to the loss of blood as the feral dogs that roamed the shattered city ate a hearty breakfast.

Angel had never used his martial arts training before in anger, his mother had raised him as a strict pacifist even though it was she that insisted on the lessons. She knew that reality sometimes demanded action and it was better to have the training and discipline that went along with it than to be naked before the world. Sometimes you must take a life to save a life, she had been thinking about her son at the time and the vicious unfair world that he had been born into. Caught

between two worlds, neither white or brown, he would be alone someday, very alone.

Angel grabbed the remains of the unconscious girls clothing and quickly pulled her up and onto his shoulder. It would have been bad enough had she been awake, but out cold she was nothing but dead weight, yet he had to get her away from here as quickly as possible incase there were others about that wanted in on the rape or the remains.

Cynthia Mathews-Saxon felt something cool and soothing on her forehead as she drifted back through the gray clouds of consciousness. She moved her arm knocking off the cool compress and was jolted awake from the sudden shot of pain, then she remembered! A wash of panic flashed across her mind, she bolted upright and that was a mistake. She rolled over and began to throw up. After several heaves with her head pounding and her eyes trying to pop out and come into focus at the same time, she surveyed the room she was in. It was nice with a strong feminine touch. The windows were open and fresh air was lightly blowing the thin drapes open. There was an old lady smell about the room...lavender...yeah that was it. She was laying in someone's bed between clean sheets...naked?!

Gathering up the top sheet as a wrap she carefully and quietly with head pounding crept out of bed. She could hear someone further out in the house moving about. There was a strong smell of cooking in the air and despite her nausea she found herself hungry. As she slowly inched forward she could feel every muscle and joint of her body screaming in pain. The last thing she remembered was the struggle as she was pulled from her car by a group of gang bangers at an empty gas station. She had fought hard and remembered biting down on someone's arm and tasting blood as they were trying to pull her pants down and then nothing.

The house was neat and well kept. She passed down the hallway and looked briefly at the family portraits that lined the wall. They were mostly those of a nice looking white women and her attractive dark skinned child. She could see the child grow as she moved closer to the center of the house. She was on the edge of the living and dining room and the last photos were of a handsome young man. Nice legs she noted from his soccer pictures, athletic.

The smell of something warm and inviting filled the air, was that bread? Fresh baked bread? She peeked around the corner and saw the young man in the picture crouched before an iron pot in the fireplace. He looked up as she moved around the corner into the room.

“You should not be out of bed, Miss.” He said quietly to her. “You were hit pretty hard.”

“How did I get here...and where am I?” Cynthia asked as she eased herself into the nearby chair, her knees shaking and weak, her head pounding.

“You’re lucky to be alive.” He said lifting the lid on the cast iron pot and checking the contents. “What were you thinking of, being in this part of town?”

She put her head in her hands as if that would stop the pounding. “I was nearly out of gas, I just wanted to get home.”

“Well you nearly got yourself killed.”

“How did I get here? And where is here?”

“This is my house, where my mother and I lived.”

“So your mother is she the one...” She looked down, referring to her nakedness as she pulled the sheet closer around her

“No...my mother died in the first plague.” He sighed and paused for a few seconds. “I tried to clean you up a little before I put you in her bed...you were...ah...pretty...ah...dirty and all.” He turned back to the pot.

“I didn’t do anything, honest, just tried to wipe you down with a wash cloth to get the worst of it off. I...ah..well I’m sorry if that bothers you.”

Cynthia could see that he was embarrassed and let it drop. “Do you mind if I lay down on the couch?” She asked. “I don’t feel so good.”

Angel got up and helped her over to the sofa, then pulled out a soft Mexican wool blanket and covered her up. She lay there and watched him as he fiddled with

their meal all being baked in several Dutch Oven pots. Cynthia had never seen anyone cook in this manner before.

“Do you always cook that way.” She asked.

He looked at her with a slight glare. “My mother and I used to go camping a lot. We always cooked with our Dutch Ovens. There’s been no power for some time so the electric stove doesn’t work too well right now.” He answered sarcastically. “So if you want to eat...”

“Oh...I didn’t mean.”

“Yes you did.” He said flatly. “Look, you’re welcome to stay here until you get better. But remember you are a guest in my house.” He could hear his mothers voice in his last words.

“What happened to the three guys that were trying...ah trying...to rape me?” She asked trying to change the subject.

“Number One Wood...four hundred yard drive.” Angel answered flatly.

The trucks pulled up to the checkpoint and the lead co-driver jumped down with his clipboard in hand. He had just reached the door of the guard shack when the ditches on both sides of the trucks suddenly came alive. In single motion of slick well rehearsed military precision the drivers and co-drivers of each vehicle were quickly dispatched. The pair of guards in the back of each of the seven trucks fell forward and either onto the floor or the ground below.

The assault team pulled the lifeless bodies from the cabs and backs of the trucks and dragged them off into the brush behind the camp. The majority took their place and the drove the vehicles through the now open gate and then down a side road off towards the mountains in the distance. The few remaining troops then went about setting up a rather gruesome display. They lined the road to the checkpoint with stakes then mounted the heads of their victims on them to warn others of the folly of fighting for the wrong side.

It was what happened next that sent chills down the veteran warriors spine. Strothers met up with the convoy of vehicles at a prearranged spot well off in the mountains and far from the checkpoint they were diverted from. There he

witnessed the members of the assault team switch suddenly from vicious professional warriors to humble humanitarians as they assisted the cargo down from the backs of the trucks to the ground as freed men and women. The image hit him like a sledgehammer between the eyes of World War Two concentration camp survivors as he watched the frail forms lovingly lifted down from the high cargo beds of the trucks and carried and/or carefully assisted to the waiting medical personnel under the camouflage nets and into the safety of the mining tunnels ahead.

Strothers heard a slight commotion behind him and turned to see his old war buddy, the commander of the Southern Colorado Militia walking towards him.

“STROTHERS YOU CRUSTY OL’ SON OF A B*TCH!” He bellowed and grabbed his hand, pumping it hard and adding a solid slap on the shoulder. “It’s so good you see you again!” He said turning the Sgt. Maj. towards the caves. “We got a lot of work to do here. I understand you’ve got some toys from that old scrounge Lin? How is he doing there in the land of Klinton?” The pair of old warhorses strode like fresh boots just out of basic towards the caverns ahead. Ruger trotted off beside his master as they disappeared under the nets and into the mountain.

Desert Doc

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Pax Americana Chapter 33 – Urban Outpost

Cynthia lapsed in and out of consciousness for the first week after her rescue. Angel stayed close at hand and did what he could. He nursed her with herbal broths and fresh fruit juices trying to keep her hydrated when she was awake. From his mother’s library he figured out that she was suffering from a severe concussion. The Merck Manual became his medical bible as well as Barbara Bates’ book on Physical Diagnosis. She was a strong girl and as time went on the odds slowly increased in her favor. He just hoped that she had not suffered from a skull fracture or something worse, though he could not imagine anything worse than her current affliction and choose not to dwell on the matter.

Angel was becoming an OJT (on the job trained) nurse for Cynthia as he hovered over her during this critical period. He followed his mothers nursing manuals to the “T”; keeping her hydrated, keeping her wounds cleaned and dressed, he

changed her sheets daily and became quite adept at giving her sponge baths while maintaining a level of decency that was appropriate. Day by day Cynthia's strength improved, she was awake more often and for longer periods of time. They were both grateful that the waves of nausea came less frequently. Angel even thought that the steady diet of vegetarian broths and soups was doing her some good besides just keeping fluids in her. Cynthia's color was much healthier, and she appeared to have lost a large amount of unnecessary weight. But it could just be that he was getting used to presence. By the end of two weeks Angel was able to spend more and more time away from her bedside and continue his work around the house and yard. The gardens needed severe tending and he had several projects had been neglected far too long.

Cynthia awoke to a silent house and felt a wave of panic wash over her. For the last several weeks, though it was always very quite in Angel's house, if she listened hard she could hear her protector pattering about somewhere nearby. He always seemed to be doing something, but he would come right in and check on her when she stirred. This was very comforting to her, she still had the nightmares of that horrid attack but Angel's presence reassured her frazzled nerves.

She sat up slowly and while her head did pound with her change in position it was not as severe as it had been. There was no nausea this time and she was sure that, that was a good sign. Beside the bed on the small nightstand lay some clothing folded neatly: a pair of sweats and beneath them a bra, panties and a pair of socks. Her cheeks grew red as she looked at the tag and saw that they were her size.

"How did he know?" she wondered.

Slipping into them she noticed that while they would have been the right size a month ago, they were noticeably too large for her now. She slowly got up and looked in the full-length mirror on the back of the bedroom door and noticed that she was remarkably thinner.

"Guess I had to get mugged and almost raped to finally drop a couple of dress sizes." She muttered to herself. "I'll have to ask Angel to see if he can round up something a little smaller next time he goes shopping."

It then dawned on her that she still couldn't hear anyone nearby. She slipped into the baggy clothing and tightened up the drawstrings. She reconned the house quickly and quietly before she started to check out in the back of the house. She had seen the gardens from her bedroom window but as yet had not ventured outside during her stay. She moved slowly and methodically, as she was still very weak from her ordeal.

It didn't take her long until she assured herself that her benefactor was nowhere to be seen. She did discover that her immediate residence was much more than met the eye.

The first thing that hit her was the multitude of books. There were books everywhere, in nearly every room of this strange house. She scanned the titles as she walked through: Natural Healing, Natural Medicine, Herbal Medicine, Emergency War Surgery-(that sounded scary), Solar Living Source Book, Wind Power, Wood Heat, Solar Design, Steam Engine design. There was a large section of books by someone named Audel: the Machinist's Library, Masons And Builders Library, Electrical, Plumbing, Carpentry and so on. More books greeted her: Brown's Alcohol Motor Fuel Book, Complete Outdoor Building Book, Grow It, Victory Garden, Ruth Stout No Work Garden – (that was Cynthia's kind of book she thought to herself as she was known as the brown thumb of her family). In the kitchen: Putting Food By, various canning manuals, Dry It!, and an entire wall of cooking books, wine and beer making books. And still more books: Organic Plant Protection, Fur Trapping –(in the city?), Self-Sufficient Gardener, Keeping Livestock, Bee Keeping (?), Aqua Culture (?) and it went on. Titles on subjects that she had never heard of, cataloged back issues of CountrySide, Back Home, Home Power, Backwoods and Mother Earth News magazines.

"This kid sure reads a lot of strange stuff?" She thought to herself.

Something else struck her as odd, no lights. She never needed to turn on a single light switch. Instead all the light needed was supplied through several bright tubes of light coming down through the ceiling. Very clever she thought. Also every window in the house except those in her bedroom or facing the garden in the back of the house was secured with a heavy shutter and locked. The walls on the outside of the house all appeared to be over two feet thick?

Having completed her tour of the inside of the house she looked out back. The back yard was full of raised garden beds with a greenhouse and several (she would learn later) cold frames flanking it. There were miniature fruit trees that

were espaliered against the south facing wall of the house. There in the back grew a virtual supermarket of produce in all stages of growth. Several large fiberglass looking tanks stood against one wall of the garage. Sucking in the sunlight through out most of the day they were filled with green algae. As she got nearer she could hear the bubbler's small solar powered pump keeping the water oxygenated. Upon closer inspection of the containers she noticed movement within the tank. THERE WHERE FISH IN THEM! Each tank seemed to have different sized fish but of the same specie. They weren't anything she had seen her dad catch but they were big enough to eat in the tallest tank, of that she was sure.

The door to the garage was unlocked and she slowly peeked her head inside. Once her eyes adjusted to the shadowy light it appeared as if she had stepped into a mad mechanic worst nightmare, either that or a junkyard scavengers delight. Shelves were stacked with all assortments of things; motors, wires, gears, plumbing, wood and metal of nearly every imaginable shape and size. She recognized various tools; a table saw, a drill press, some sort of machine for making metal parts. Sawdust and metal filings covered the floor but the tools and equipment were clean and while they appeared old they were well maintained. A large dark shape covered with a heavy tarp filled nearly a third of the area inside the shop, some sort of large vehicle judging by the huge tires not covered by the tarp. A thin oily odor filled the air that she recognized as WD-40, something her father swore by when he was restoring his old sports cars. Dust motes danced in the still air as she walked carefully around the shop. She recognized welding tanks and an arc welder. It looked like you could fix or build just about anything if you wanted to here.

She squinted her eyes as she emerged back into the daylight. Everything appeared normal but she was still uneasy with Angel gone. Back in the living room she laid down exhausted from her first adventure outdoors in over two weeks. Pulling the warm heavy wool blanket across herself she drifted off to sleep. So tired...so very tired she started to drift off to sleep with thoughts of her family and home.

Brentwood Davis stared into the toilet and flushed its contents away from him. Like his breakfast that had just left, he wished that he could flush away the insane mess that he suddenly found himself in. All he had ever wanted in life was a good reliable steady job as a bureaucrat with a nice pension attached to the end. He had long ago given up on fame and fortune. Pencil neck computer geeks

don't win such hands in the game of life. He'd even settle for having a steady girl friend now and then, but even that escaped him. But this situation was too far beyond any reality that he could ever had imagined for himself.

He pulled himself up and quickly washed his face and hands and checking himself in the mirror before he headed back to his office. His thoughts were spinning like whirlwind inside his head and difficult to focus on. He had survived the massacre in Pennsylvania where the Marine unit had gone rouge and wiped out nearly a battalion of secret UN troops. His knees still felt weak as he thought about spending those two days hidden in that ditch after the column he was traveling in was ambushed. Trapped and partially submerged in a flipped vehicle with his dead driver floating nearby Davis was frozen with fear as bullets and explosions shredded the rest of the column. Then the quiet followed. That loud and overwhelming quiet. By the time he finally managed to extract himself from the wreckage of his custom government Suburban the rogue Marines and over half of the town had vanished by the time the federal relief column arrived.

He was shocked at the carnage he had emerged to, an entire company of heavily armed troops had been wiped from the face of the earth in under five minutes, if that long. The Marines had been viciously thorough, of the over two hundred souls in that column only Brentwood had escaped. The relief troops found him in a mindless stupor slowly walking through the charred bodies and vehicles. By the time he returned to his job in Washington he as been proclaimed an official hero and survivor of the rebel massacre. He finally had his fame.

In his newly elevated position as one of several leading undersecretary's for the Director of Homeland Security he had been suddenly thrust through the veils of bureaucracy at some of the highest levels. The onion was slowly being peeled back to the heart before him and the new revelations that were emerging startled him to his very core. Brentwood had never really given much thought about evil. Good and evil had always been metaphors with varying shades of gray attached. What was good for one person could well be bad for another. It all depended upon where you sat in the matrix. But something was emerging that could not be reasoned away. Something frightening was approaching the corner up ahead and there was no place to hide. Brentwood was scared of what lay just up around the corner. More than scared...he was terrified and he was caught right in the middle of the storm that was about to hit.

Cynthia awoke to the smell of fresh bread and stew filling the room. It was now dark outside and Angel was reading by one the many oil lamps scattered throughout the house.

“What are you reading?” She asked as she sat upright.

He looked up from his book. “Roman History.” He continued after receiving a puzzling look from his patient. “I still have to graduate high school you know...” He paused. “When it starts up again.”

Cynthia shook her head slowly. “Angel I don’t think things will ever be the same again...ever.” She let out a heavy sigh.

“In a way I hope you’re right.” He answered. She looked very puzzled now. “Think about it, things were pretty f*cked up the way they were going. Sort of like this Rome book I’m reading now. At first they had a pretty good thing. Real civilization, everybody took their duties and responsibilities seriously, they served with pride and dignity. My mother used to say they were totally on track.” He paused for a moment thinking about his dead mother.

“Look what has been going on now, the same thing as back then. Totally screwed up man, totally. Nobody is responsible for anything. Nobody is accountable. Did you know that the Romans had a massive form of welfare, tons of bread given freely to feed the poor. They moved more grain daily into Rome than any other civilization until about World War Two. No city could supply as much water daily as Rome until the 1950’s. Then there were those huge bloody gladiatorial games that were used to keep the poor entertained? And in the end it all went to sh*t. It went to sh*t because no one wanted to be responsible for anything anymore.”

This was the most that Cynthia had heard Angel say at one sitting, and he was on a role.

“Cynthia, we are right now on the edge of another dark ages. My mother said that everything was so inter-connected that if one strand breaks everything is likely to pull apart. Did you catch the news before the plague?”

She shook her head no.

“Japan was in major trouble with its economy and had been for some time. Argentina’s economy had collapsed and several other South American Countries were right behind. Russia was still having a rough time of it over ten years after the fall of communism. Europe was trying to come together and holding their own. Africa was a total mess and the Middle East was on the brink of war...AGAIN! Then here we get attacked on 9/11, wade in to Afghanistan and then take on Iraq again. Then the Plague and everything falls apart.” Angel put down his book and moved over to the fireplace and began building a small fire to stave off the evenings chill.

“So here we are on the edge of the next Dark Ages.” He turned around and slowly waves his arm. “This is my castle, my monastery against the cold and evil that has been set loose.”

“Monastery?” Cynthia looked at him.

“Geez Cynthia! Haven’t you read anything?”

“I don’t get it.” She answered.

“All these books, everything you see in this house was because my mother was preparing for just this sort of thing. Knowledge. She always said that knowledge was power.”

“You still don’t get it?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “I’ve never heard of half of what you’ve talked about.”

“I thought you were in college?”

“I am, but it’s not like I’m a History major or anything. It’s my first year and I’m totally Liberal Arts and I don’t remember anyone talking about this kind of stuff when I was in High School.”

“That’s because they don’t. I was home schooled until just last year. Mom felt that I needed more social contact with people my own age.”

“Oh...well I’ve heard that home schooled kids are pretty smart.”

“Well I don’t know if we’re smarter or not...but we sure have spent more time studying that those of you that went to public school!”

“So what is your point?”

“My point is that the world is turning into a total sh*t sandwich and we’re stuck in the middle of it. My mother knew that and this...” He waved his arms about him. “Was her answer.”

“A house?”

“No...a castle.”

The convoy of seven trucks and its two-humvee escort vehicles approached the FEMA camp. A little behind schedule but close enough for government work. Sgt. Dunlap keyed the electronic gate control and the column barely missed a beat as it sped through the high security fencing. He never saw the small red laser dot on his chest or muzzle sticking out of the last vehicle that flashed in near silence popping a string of explosive nine-millimeter rounds towards him. The first round caught him just above his shoulder on his neck, the second ripped through his windpipe. Numbers three through seven arched back up and across his face before eight burned off the tip of his left ear. He never felt the heat from the rifle grenade that leveled the guard station, but then neither did a lot of other fellow Homeland Security Force guards that night.

Strothers lead the first assault team as they hit the central administration building. The younger troopers raced ahead and slammed into the unsuspecting Guards. The front doors vaporized under the impact of two rifle grenades. The lead troopers then fanned out in two man teams and cleared the building. Strothers monitored the assault and took up his position with the second team in the building.

They moved rapidly through the building kicking, flash, and spray each room before moving on to the next. Kick the door in, toss in a flash bang grenade and then spray anything that moved in the room. This was a total recon by fire mission. Search and destroy.

Suddenly the old Sgt. Maj., now newly promoted Light Colonel in the Southern Colorado Militia, felt something wet and warm spray across his face as the trooper in front of him took a shotgun blast to the face. Strothers was in a combat crouch and the buckshot passed through the trooper in front of him and harmlessly over his own head. His combat instincts went into overdrive as he sidestepped the dead militiaman's falling corpse dropping into a full crouch and targeted the guard rapidly spinning back around the corner ten feet up ahead. Strothers fingers double tapped in rapid succession the fading image and followed the imagined track through the wall.

He saw the end of the shotgun barrel jerk and knew he had struck home. Switching the weapon into his off-hand he sent pounded another double set of spitzer rounds through the drywall and into the thigh of his assailant trying to hide behind the corner of the hallway. In one well practiced and smooth motion he pulled the frag grenade from his right-hand ammo pouch swung it towards his left ring finger of the hand holding the pistol grip of his M-16A2, caught the safety ring pulling it out and then backhanded the grenade down the hallway to hit the far wall and careen into the lap of the wounded shot gunner around the corner. Strothers turned and managed to get two quick steps away from his forward position knocking down one of his own people in the attempt before the grenade detonated. His end of the building suddenly became very quiet.

Lt. Col. Strothers finished with the clean up of the headquarters building without any further events and was sitting out on the front steps as the overall commander for the mission and the militia walked up to him.

"Getting a little long in the tooth for this sort of crap aren't you Jeff?"

"Ain't that no Sh*t Bear!" He answered as he offered a seat beside himself on the steps. "Well...was it worth it?"

"It was to them." He said as he pointed to over a hundred prisoners now being lead away from their barracks and out the main gate to awaiting buses.

"How the F*CK did it come to this Bear? What the F*CK is going on here?" Strothers said shaking his head.

A young Militiaman hustled out of the main building and approached the pair of weary warhorses. "Commander, Colonel." He reached out and offered two cold beers to the pair.

"AH, spoils of war Patterson?"

"Er, ah, Yes SIR, Dietrich sends these with his regards to the Colonel for saving his @ss in there Sir." The commander looked questioningly at Strothers.

"Sgt. Major's number one rule." He answered.

"Ooh, the old 'to ensure friendly reception into unfamiliar places always precede entry with two hand grenades rule'."

Strothers took a long pull of the cold amber liquid, wiped his mouth on the back of his hand and answered. "That's the one."

Desert Doc

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[quote] A good plan, violently executed now, is better than a perfect plan next week. George S. Patten, General [/quote]

Todd staggered from the wreckage relatively unscathed. His cadet gray military school uniform was torn and caked with mud and some else's blood. His right leg ached and felt shaky but he was able to walk. It was dark, very dark and he could just see a few stars overhead peaking through the leaves and branches of the surrounding forest. Behind him strewn like a child's broken toy the train was piled up on both sides of the track. Well forward up near the engine a small fire had begun and was gaining in strength. Its smoke drifting off into the still night air and clung about the wreckage like a hovering wraith collecting souls.

Cadet Second Class Todd Curry had been a passenger on the sleeper train that now lay dead and crumpled across the landscape. The military academy he had been attending in North Carolina had finally closed its doors, another victim of falling enrollments due to the plague, bureaucracy and the general state of the

nation. Forced by the current circumstances the Commandant of the academy had finally been obligated to send his entire remaining students home.

Todd was among the last group of cadets to leave, reluctantly. Going home was not something he looked forward to, it was something to dread. His primary mentor at the academy a Retired Sergeant Major Frederick McKenzie tried to explain to the young cadet that life is a series of trials and tests and this was one. The Sgt. Maj. was a follower of the old adage "That which does not kill us, makes us stronger." And while Cadet Curry understood and indeed tried and wanted to believe the grizzly old Marine, leaving the academy was like losing his home for the third time. The first time had been when his father died. The second when his mother remarried and his new stepfather convinced his mother that military school would be the best thing for a grieving and defiant ten-year-old boy. Now, five years later the entire world had virtually gone to sh*t in a handcart and he was once again leaving his latest home and headed off into the unknown.

The reality of the situation was beginning to dawn on him as the fog cleared from his head. He went into his cadet military mode and immediately began to assess his situation. There was no immediate outside threat to his life, he had moved away from the wreckage and was physically safe for the moment. He quickly checked his own condition running down a mental list from top to bottom. He had headache and a nice sore goose egg on the side of his head. That would account for his immediate fuzzy thinking, but that was fading – have to keep an watch on that. Fingers, hands, arms, shoulders seemed to function fine. Ribs on the right side sore but his breathing was unimpaired. His right leg burned, needed to check that. Uniform unsat, torn, dirty, but functional. His kit!

He had somehow walked from the wreckage with his travel backpack in hand! That meant that his basic emergency kit was with him. He quickly rummaged through the pack and came up with his LED (light emitting diode) Flashlight. It had been a gift from the Sgt.Maj. when he won the Obstacle Course competition during last seasons Cadet Olympics. The Lightwave 2000's four super bright LED bulbs and solid circuitry design were so efficient that its lithium double A batteries would last fourteen times longer than a standard flashlight. He immediately flipped on the light and began to reassess his condition. The right leg of his uniform trousers was slashed open from the calf to nearly the ankle. What ever had done that when he had been thrown about the sleeper cabin had also managed to inflict a nasty six-inch slash down the side of his calf; it had bled but not seriously. Thankfully there was only moderate amount of venous bleeding

and not much of that. It was going to require stitches in the deepest part to properly close but with a quick dressing and bandage he could eliminate any immediate threat.

From a side pouch of his backpack Todd pulled his personal first aid kit. He began by spraying the wound with Povidone solution. It smarted but was not nearly as bad as he had expected. He applied a healthy squirt of Betadine Ointment to his only battle dressing in the kit and then placed it over the deepest and worst part of the laceration and secured it by crossing the dressing's tails around the leg snugly and tying it off with a square knot over the center of the dressing. That done he opened a small pouch of roller gauze and secured the dressing further also covering the remaining parts of the laceration that were still exposed. With that priority addressed and his wound adequately protected he stood and began to make a further inspection of his situation. It didn't look good.

Angel sat on the high balcony taking in the cool night air. He laid down his history book and looked out over a dark city that was in its final death throws and wondered if fifteen hundred years prior someone much like himself was thinking these same thoughts. Wondering how a Roman civilization that had achieved so much had been brought to its knees by its own greed and arrogance. He wondered if his world was facing the same end and the beginning of a new dark age.

Over half of the city was now in ashes. The majority of its citizens were either dead from the plague, dead from the violence and rioting, dead from starvation, shipped off to somewhere else by government troops, or if they had been lucky escaped on their own to somewhere else. From the top of the old turn of the century wooden water tower that his mother had rebuilt he looked out at the approaching twilight and wondered where this current insanity would all lead.

Cynthia's health had progressed well and she seemed fully recovered from the severe concussion and beating that she had received in her attack. She was healthy enough to travel, but to where? It was no longer safe for anyone to be out alone on the roads. There were rumors that anyone traveling without the appropriate government permits would be arrested and taken away. Some had mentioned that the government had relocation camps for the homeless and unclassified, which was just about everyone not in the government. She was trapped here until they could get word some how to her kin.

To that end Angel had been spending much of his time trying to gather up and put together a short wave communication system. Angel was the consummate scrounger. That was his niche in the new social order that was coming together from the survivors that remained behind in his community. Cut off from the outside world they had been forced to form a loose confederation of feudalistic gangs and local warlords. The city had been divided up between the strongest groups in to more or less permanent territories. An edgy peace had resulted as enforcers within each warlord's zone of control struggled to keep some form of order.

Angel's urban homestead was located in an area of dilapidated factories and small industrial independent businesses in one of several "Free Zones" that stood as buffers between rival territories. His skill at finding and making broken things work placed him relatively high on the survivor's pecking order and gave him, even for his age, a limited autonomy within his Free Zone.

Sequoia was running for his life through the grove of giant Redwoods. Pillars of light stabbed through the evergreen canopy far above like intermittent spotlights on the dark stage of the thick forest. He was scrambling deeper and deeper into the old growth forest away from his pursuers, the murders of his clan. Pure animal fear propelled him on deeper into the womb of his mother the forest. He could hear the shouts and occasional shots of rifle fire as they attempted to locate and bring him to ground as they had the others. Tears streamed from his eyes as the images of the last few minutes flashed across his panicked mind. He could see in slow motion the bullets rip through the flesh of his friends and of his lover. She was only eighteen and new to the clan, but that didn't matter. The Homeland Security Troops had been ordered to clear the forest of "their kind". The clan had been living outside the law and outside society for too long as far as the government was concerned and that would no longer be tolerated. There was no longer any tolerance for independent thinking, absolute and immediate compliance was the order of the day...with no exceptions. When his people refused to board the trucks to be taken off to the relocation camps and began to run, the Troopers opened fire.

Bluebird his love; warm, cuddly and innocent little Bluebird, she was one of the first to fall victim. Her blood sprayed across his face from the 5.56mm round that had ripped through her neck and severed her carotid artery. He never saw the

Trooper that butt stroked him across the side of his face as he held her dying in his arms, and he too would have died there with his love had not Fastwater, his older clan brother, leapt at the Trooper posed in the middle of raising his rifle to bayonet him. Sequoia wasn't even sure how he escaped the maelstrom that was ragging around him, he just ran, and ran, and ran, and ran.

The sounds of the government invaders faded from his ears as he fled deeper and deeper into the forest. He had never been this far in, never intruded to her dark green depths. But now he was seeking sanctuary from the murderers that sought to add him to their list. Finally after what seemed like hours of running he splashed across the last of over a dozen streamlets and fell into the wet sand and gravel on the far side. Exhausted and spent his chest heaved as he sobbed openly for the loss of his friends and his love.

His clan lived in the woods to protect them. Every one sworn to non-violence and passive resistance, thus they were totally helpless against the assassin's battle rifles when they came and were cut down in swaths much like the great ancient trees that they were trying to protect. His entire family of young idealists now lay with their life's blood at last mingling with the forests they so loved, at last one with the natural world they had sought so hard to protect from the ravages of gluttonous excess of the modern industrial complex.

Brentwood Davis drove his custom Range Rover aimlessly through the Pennsylvania countryside not quite sure of what he was looking for or how to find it. He had been on the road for five rugged days and looked it. The urgency and the insanity of his mission was slowly sinking in. He was a dead man if anyone in the present government fathomed what his was up to, and he was probably very likely dead if he met the people what he was looking for. But someone had to know, the word had to get out.

Brentwood wondered what Benedict Arnold felt like when he took the plans and secrets of West Point to the British and switched sides. Did he ever understand that he was lining up with the wrong side? Was he, Brentwood Davis making that same mistake...or worse. He really didn't know. But he couldn't just sit idly by knowing what he knew. Knowing what he didn't want to know. It seemed that he was cursed no matter what he did...DAMN! But something had to be done. People had to know.

When the first shots rang out the implication of danger didn't immediately register in Cadet Curry's mind. With the smoke, growing fire and confusion of the survivors staggering from the wrecked train there was only so much that one could assimilate at one moment. The numbness of the moment dropped away with a near miss that sparked against the car wheel near him and then the sickening thwack of a high velocity round hitting soft flesh. The man that Todd was helping up the side of the embankment crumpled into a dead ball and fell away from him. Another round whistled past his head. That was more than enough hint for this young military cadet to take instantly to ground behind the nearest cover. For a few seconds his thoughts raced as he looked for options. He was in some sort of an ambush. He was unarmed. He was in the kill zone. He had to get out of there and get out of there now!

The crescendo of gunfire rose sharply sounding like a pan of popcorn as it reaches its climax. The sound of death and destruction echoed through the smoky night and then tapered off. To move with the flames behind him would instantly silhouette him as a target. Todd pulled himself closer to the earth and became part of the timber debris; they would be coming very soon.

There was something about this stretch of road that Brentwood now drove over. He pulled over to the side of the blacktop and got out. His back was cramped from driving and he stretched in an attempt to relieve the growing ache. There was something about this place...he searched his memory, why was this so familiar. Then the shock of realization smacked him in the back of the head. This was where that rouge Marine unit had ambushed the Homeland Security convoy he had been riding with!

“SH*T!”

He spun around and suddenly recognized the area! He ran across the road and found the ditch he had spent almost two days in, trapped in the flipped Suburban as a war raged about him. His knees suddenly gave out and he collapsed into the gravel and starred at the grass growing up over the rusting relic that had almost been his tomb. Hidden beneath the growing brambles and grass the detritus of war was suddenly visible.

Sequoia awoke to the scattered beams of filtered light that strained to reach the forest floor. He began to sit up and suddenly his snug and warm comfortable bed rolled over and dumped him flat onto his face on the hard packed earth beneath! It was then that he realized that he was naked with his backside was exposed to the cool morning air. He rolled over to see that he had been sleeping in a hammock underneath some sort of camouflaged roof. Military green wooden and metal crates made up the walls on one side of the shelter and stacked sandbags for the other three walls that he found himself in. He looked around for something to wear and noticed folded neatly on a large box beside the hammock a stack of clothing. Holding it up he recognized the pattern of camouflage that some of the older forest dwellers wore. They were called Tiger Stripped Cammies.

“OH SHIT!” Sequoia thought to himself.

Fear began to rise again from deep within. His clan had had run ins with some of the ‘Nam vets that lived in the deep woods off by themselves. They were the wraiths of the forest. They existed in an in between time, not here and not there in their minds. They avoided human contact and lived like hermits trapped in a war that had ended decades ago. At best they were unpredictable. At worst they were deadly. He scanned the immediate area for any evidence that the hermit that had brought him here was still about. He had heard that their lairs were often booby-trapped and to invade their space could be very dangerous. Even the heavily armed dope growers in the region avoided confronting these rouge warriors of the deep forest. It simply was not worth the risk.

Sequoia looked about for his familiar clan clothing, but they were nowhere to be found. Cautiously he pulled on the ripstop trousers and pulled the tabs tight against his waist. That was when he noticed the bandage on his side that had wept a small pink-red spot through in the middle. Also on his left upper thigh and down near his ankle were dressings. He didn’t remember being wounded in his flight from the federal troops. With the trousers secured he slowly and cautiously explored the camp. There was a military feel about it. Everything was neat, orderly and organized, far different from the controlled chaos of his clan’s encampments. He had heard about these old vet camps, strongholds they were called. It seemed that somehow he had jumped out of the frying pan and into the fire.

Like evil specters they emerged from the tree line and cautiously approached the sprawling wreck. Todd froze and willed himself to become the dirt beneath him.

One of the attackers was slowly approaching Todd's hidden position. The specter was looking side to side but not down where he walked. His right foot came down on the edge of the small bush just inches from the young cadet's face. Todd felt for sure the man standing over him could hear his heart as it pounded in his ear. Todd had his mouth open trying to keep the sound of his breathing as silent as possible. The heavily armed ambusher moved on closer to the wreck, he had overlooked Todd...for now.

Whatever their intent it was not one of rescue. From time to time a shot would ring out as survivors were located and dispatched. These ambushers were leaving no witnesses behind. The cadet held his position looking for an opportunity to escape. Now the line of raiders was behind him and engaged on pillaging the victims and the twisted wreckage. The smoke from the forward section of the train was beginning to increase and had started to drift heavily back along the scattered cars on the tracks. Todd pulled his pocketknife and flipped out his largest blade a paltry three inches long, not much, but it was better than being totally unarmed. He took several long and slow breathes filling his blood with oxygen like a swimmer just before he springs into the water. He had thirty maybe forty yards to the edge of the tree line and at least several hundred yards to get into the forest until he could consider himself safe from immediate attack. Perhaps several miles to go before he would reach a road but he could take that at a slower pace.

He slowly pulled his feet up into a crouched position and dug the toes of his combat boots into the soft soil. It wouldn't do to slip coming off the blocks. He looked back and saw only the backs of the raiders as they searched the dead passengers and the crumpled cars. One last long breath and...he shot out of the underbrush like a rocket! Forty yards...thirty-five...thirty...twenty-five...shouts from behind...twenty...shots ring out and one zipped by off to his left – ZIG RIGHT – fifteen...ZIG LEFT – THEN – RIGHT AGAIN...more shots – POP! POP! POP! ZIG LEFT- lungs burning...fifteen yards...ten...the sound of popcorn exploded from behind DIVE – ROLL – POP UP - five yards to the trees, his feet pounded the ground like a steam locomotive running wild Todd's adrenaline flashed through his veins igniting every muscle fiber in his body! He hit the tree line still gaining speed and quickly slanted off through the ferns to his right.

The thought of "...put wood – lots of wood behind me!" Raced through mind.

More shouts from behind, more rounds ripping through the evergreens as the giant trunks whipped past. Todd suddenly saw he was on a trail and just as the thought flashed through his mind he saw a shadow pop up in front of him. He met the specter low with his right shoulder at full speed, a perfect midsection tackle that drove wind from the looming specter with the explosive force of a gale wind sneeze. At the same instant he flashed up his right hand and drove the small blade of the folding knife deep into the groin of the windless raider. The contact drove the two to the ground where Todd landed with his full weight on the mans chest driving the last ounce of air from them, he allowed his momentum to swing himself forward and tucked into a tight roll landing just a few feet beyond the now profusely bleeding and unconscious shadow lay. He could hear his pursuit off in the distance and suddenly his mentors gravely voice flashed through his mind.

“Always look for a way to take advantage of any situation, adapt, improvise, overcome.”

Todd crept quickly forward and grabbed the raiders rifle. The feel was a familiar one, M16A2...with the safety still on? Loser! He then began to strip him of anything of value, web gear, butt pack, canteens, ammo pouches, bandoleers, shoulder holster and pistol, machete. The sound of the raiders comrades was getting louder. It was time to “Didi Mow” as the ol’ Sgt. Maj. would say. He quickly slung the gear on, he could adjust it to fit his smaller frame later, now it was time to put some distance between him and the approaching raiders. Cadet Second Class Todd Curry silently faded into the dark forest like a mist.

When the raiders found their comrade a short time later he had drained of all his life fluids onto the moss covered forest floor. It had taken less than four minutes for his heart to pump out through the severed artery in his groin. It was just like the ol’ Sgt. Maj. had said many times “Be swift, silent and deadly, it is the quickest road to victory.”

Desert Doc[/]

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Pax Americana 35 – Changing of the Guard

Author’s note: I often name a chapter at the very beginning when I first start writing. It helps me to keep everything flowing in a particular direction. Most often

the story jibs with that title...somewhat, well that is the idea. However after careful consideration I felt that this story deserved a different and more appropriate title. I hope this change has not confused anyone. Oh and by the way...there's an additional little kicker at the end. Just couldn't keep my hands off, hope you don't mind.

Desert Doc

[QUOTE] Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.
Dylan Thomas [/QUOTE]

Cadet Curry felt that he had stepped through a time machine into some fragment of the primordial past. He had covered at least fifteen miles since his escape from the ambush at the train wreck last night, through some of the roughest terrain he had ever crossed. He had never seen trees so large in his life or a forest so dark. The world he now journeyed through seemed to be forever

shrouded in twilight, yet he knew it was close to mid-day. He had pushed hard for as long as he could through the night half stumbling along blind.

On a gravel bank beside a small clear stream he rested under the shelter of one of the fallen forest giants. Thick ferns growing along the stream bank, their enormous fronds provided instant camouflage and concealment, covering his position under the roof provide by the fallen redwood. Sitting down for the first time since the wreck Todd started to dig through his gear to see just what he had to work with.

He had managed to hang onto his travel backpack during his escape and shed that to his side. Piece by piece he peeled off the captured raiders gear and laid it out to inventory. First things first he checked the M16. A quick field inspection showed that it needed to be properly cleaned but appeared to be in operating order. The bore was clear and serviceable, the action functional overall. The number stenciled to the butt stock meant that it probably came from a military armory. The magazine was about half full, he tapped the mag against his leg to assure the rounds were seated properly and then reinserted it, chambered a round and set it beside his right leg. The pistol was also of military issue, one of the older Berretta 92 SBF's. It appeared unused and clean with a fully loaded magazine. At least he was now better armed than his original pocketknife that he had lost last night, when he collided with one of the raiders attempting to block his escape.

He continued to sort through the gear: the shoulder harness and attached web belt contained two canteens and two small bottles of water purification tablets. He opened and checked the canteens; the second one burned his nose when he took a sniff ; BOOZE!

;What idiot would put BOOZE in his; His disgust trailed off with his voice.

He sat the ;loaded; canteen to one side. He had no intention of drinking it, but it might do to clean his wound with the alcohol. The last thing he needed was an infection right now. He continued on with the inventory: one canteen cup, four ammunition pouches with twelve fully loaded magazines (what luck!), a butt pack with poncho and poncho liner (that Todd immediately wrapped around himself), a twist of 550 cord-maybe fifty feet or so, the remains of a partially consumed MRE pouch (he opened and made quick work of the dessert

bar), a small roll of trip wire? A rifle cleaning kit – that even had a few patches in it and a small bottle of CLP! There was an incomplete first aid pouch attached to the side of the butt pack. Back on the web belt a knife sheath with the bayonet for the M16. Up on the harness a compass and compass pouch – now this was a major find! One of those cheap Mag-Lite copies that didn’t work. One military shoulder holster with two more full mags for the Berretta, all in all a pretty good haul.

In his backpack he pulled out his partial first aid kit, a sewing kit, two spiral binders (homework – he had to chuckle), several pens and mechanical pencils, his cadet pullover sweater, two complete MRE’s he had stashed from a field op, and his cadet windbreaker. He didn’t think he would need the History and Economic books and tossed them to the side - thought again and put them back in the pile. He upended the pack and out dropped a half empty pack of gum, two Snickers candy bars, several empty gum wrappers and the small Swiss Army knife his father had given to him before he died! He held the knife gently in the palm of his hand and closed his fingers around it.

“Oh Poppa, where are you when I really need you?” he murmured to himself and felt his eyes begin to water. “Now is not the time for such things Cadet.” He admonished himself and wiped his eyes dry.

Dressed only in the tiger striped cammie trousers that he had found beside him when he woke up, Sequoia slowly and cautiously moved about the small compound. It was so well camouflaged that someone would have to be right on top of it and then fall in before they would notice it. As he moved silently through the tiny encampment every sense was straining. Somewhere, probably nearby, the grizzly hermit was watching him now. He could feel the hair on the back of his neck stiffen. Sequoia saw a small opening in the brambles that guarded the perimeter like barbed wire and started to move towards it. Just as he was about to step over a large barbed cane a deep voice that resembled the sound of large boulders rolling across the bottom of a deep river spoke calmly to him.

“That would be a mistake there Private.”

Sequoia froze in mid stride. Not one muscle moved as he slowly turned his head towards the warning voice and began to make out the image back in the

shadows. He slowly brought his leg back and placed his foot softly on the hard packed earth.

"I didn't mean to come here Sir," Sequoia stammered. "I'll leave now if you'll show me the way," Sir.

"Can't go out there now Private. Too many gooks on the loose," The old warrior rose up out of the shadows carrying a small black assault rifle and walked past Sequoia and into the center of camp muttering. "Damn NFG's (New F*cking Guy), cherries everyone. You just can't teach them anything,"

The old warhorse popped open a large artillery ammo can and pulled out an old beat up squad stove. In the blink of an eye he had water on and was beginning to brew up a hot cup of Joe. Sequoia squatted across from him and starred quietly. Finally the old man looked up and seem to squint his eyes and stare through the young long hair.

"I saw you escape from the gooks Private. You moved pretty good for regular army," how long you been in country?"

Sequoia looked at him searching for the correct answer. He had to play the game if he was going to survive. "Two years in the," ah," bush, Sir.

"Sir," SH*T! I ain't no f*cking sir sonny. You can take that Sir sh*t and shove it up your @ss. Just a common ol' dogface Sergeant here. Hell my parents were married, f*cking call me a Sir," Hmmm Two years huh?" He looked hard at Sequoia again. "You've gone native haven't you? Been gone up there with them f*cking Monties for so long you've gone f*cking native!"

He poured the boiling water into two waiting canteen cups that he had been dropping various powders in. Taking an old metal spoon from his pocket he stirred the contents until most of the powder had dissolved, then offered one cup to Sequoia. As he brought the steaming liquid to his mouth he could smell the coffee and chocolate as he blew across the top of it to cool it down a touch.

“Gone f*cking native…weeell I can’t blame you. Sure beats the hell out of standing inspections. F*CKING OFFICERS!” He took a slurping sip of his own cup. “Yeah, nothing like saddling up to one of them cute monties for a little of that mountain poon tang at night sure beats the hell out of standing post down here.”

Sequoia wasn’t quite sure just what “poon-tang” was, but he got the general idea. He just hoped his luck would hold out until he could slip away. You never knew what would set off one of these old hermits. Many had never made the mental trip back to the states and after years of trying to cope in a world that didn’t want them, they drifted off to the seclusion of the empty spaces. And there alone for sometimes years at a time they finally lost all touch with reality. Like wounded animals they crawled off into the deep brush to die, for some the dying came quickly, for other it could take years, even decades. It was a sad end to many promising lives.

He felt empathy for the old man. Very sad. And now like the old man before him, he too had lost his world. Something had turned an already insane world upside down and inside out. Just yesterday he had been part of a happy family, the clan. Young idealistic vagabonds out to save the world, one tree at a time. Now, today he was a fugitive, all of his closest friends were dead, in prison or worse. His lovely Bluebird was dead. All because they had chosen not to rape the planet, they had chosen to be different, to be free. And for that they shot his love and all their friends.

He could feel the rage that boiled just under the surface. He used every ounce of his Chi to try to calm the pain that screamed out for vengeance. That road he knew was the way of the dead, not the living, all the same, Sequoia wanted the SOB’s responsible for the massacre of his people to pay, and to pay dearly. Perhaps…just perhaps this old man could help him, could teach him. Sequoia suddenly realized that he would not sit ideally by, passively, non-violently, and take the hand on the other cheek. If he ever saw that hand rise towards him again he could cut it free and beat the aggressor with it. Sequoia wanted blood…he wanted payback! F*CK being passive. He had witnessed first hand where that got you! It got you dead! He had made up his mind.

“The gooks killed everyone in my village Sarge; Sequoia began quietly. Even my poon-tang. If you’re up for it I could sure use your help for a little payback.”

The old sergeant looked over the top of his cup.

“Well you’ve got balls there Private, big mother-f*cking balls.” He chuckled. “Taken on the entire VC army all by yourself.” He laughed louder and rocked back.

Cadet Curry heard the laughter as he moved closer. He froze and slowly worked his eyes across the twilight landscape in front of him. It was then that he noticed the movement off to his immediate right and across the way to his left. At least a squad of cammied soldiers moving in a sweeping formation through the tree roots and fern leaves. Todd recognized the uniform almost instantly when one of the troopers stupidly crossed near a beam of light. Homeland Security forces were out hunting, but what and who he had no idea. It could be the base camp of the raiders that had ambushed the train, or maybe something else. Once again Cadet Curry became part of the landscape and faded back into the shadows.

The first pop up startled both the attackers and the attackees. It was followed quickly by the screams of several Homeland troopers when they tripped several of the rather painful traps set by the ol’ Sarge to detour uninvited guests. The old man suddenly sprang into action and out of nowhere grabbed and tossed an M 16 with ammo pouches to Sequoia and pointed him to the opposite side of the compound. Sequoia had never held a gun before and suddenly found himself behind the world’s biggest learning curve. This was beyond sink or swim, this was shoot or die!

He ran to the firing position that Old Sarge had pointed to and carefully peeked through the firing slot. Not forty yards away he could see at least a half a dozen armed troopers that looked just like the ones that had destroyed his forest family. He pulled a magazine from one of the pouches and tried to figure out how to load it into the unfamiliar weapon. Panic began to spread throughout him as he tried vainly to insert part A into part B. Finally he flipped it around and it snapped into place. His right thumb found the lever on the left side of the receiver and he flipped it to the “F” position. He hoped that meant fire.

Sticking the barrel into the firing slot he pointed it at the biggest advancing trooper and pulled the trigger…nothing. He pulled it a second time…still nothing.

“SH*T!” His hands started to tremble and he tried to think.

What was it he had seen in the movies, those action adventure films that he had grown up watching as a kid before swearing off violence? There was something he had to pull. There was something, a lever, a switch? Something near the stock he was sure. His hands scrambled over the unfamiliar rifle looking for something to pull. He noticed that there were projections to both sides sticking out just above the stock and under the rear sight, low on the carrying handle. He grasped it awkwardly with two fingers and felt it click, release and pull back along the top of the stock. He pulled it until wouldn't go back any more and then released it. The loud metallic “Shaaa-wick” sound it made filled the air.

Once more he pointed the weapon through the firing slot and saw the line was now only thirty yards away. Sequoia tried to peer through the little hole in the rear sight and see the approaching trooper. He knew the front sight did something, but what? He lined up the center post with the bottom of the peephole and positioned it right at the gut of the lead trooper and slowly squeezed the trigger. He was surprised when the gun went off and even more surprised when the trooper that had been his target grabbed his groin and fell to the ground screaming. The rifle bucked against his shoulder six more times as he sent a hail of fire downrange. Twice more he connected with something, judging from the strange thwacking sound followed by a scream as another trooper went down.

Curry, from his vantage point, watched the first trooper drop from the group in screaming agony. For a brief few minutes the entire forest exploded in small arms fire as the surrounding Homeland troops began to open fire from behind the great trees. The firefight seemed rather one sided as from Todd's perspective it appeared that only two riflemen were defending the well camouflaged redoubt. While up to two squads of troopers flailed away in that direction without results.

Todd moved further back into the foliage just in time as more troopers moved through his position to try and lay another flank under siege. As with the other night one of the troopers nearly stepped on the young cadet before moving off to

follow his comrades. Two more troopers, perhaps officers stood just feet from him and lit cigarettes and watched the proceedings.

“Do you suppose that one of them in there is the b*stard that got Jamison three nights ago?”

“Could be. It doesn’t matter much, I’ll gut them all just for the fun of it.”

“Yeah! That f*cker three nights ago sure cut him cold. Damn near cut his balls clean off!’

“Well it probably served him right. The fat f*ck was probably half drunk again. What p*sses me off is the son-of-a-b*tch that cut him got his rifle and all of his f*cking gear!”

“Come on Weingart, let’s get this f*cking show on the road!” The raider said throwing his cigarette on the ground and the pair moved off in the direction of the others.

Todd took in a quick breath. ‘Shit, those are the b*stards that attacked the train!’ he thought to himself. He checked his weapons condition and cradling the M16 in his arms he began to low crawl off through the undergrowth in search of an adequate fighting position.

Sequoia had gone through more than half his magazines and scored no more hits that he could tell. The fire from the troopers seemed to come from everywhere at the same time. Half the time he just stuck the rifle into the firing slot and pulled the trigger without even trying to aim. He could hear the occasional cackle from the crazy ol’ vet on the other side of the redoubt, which gave him some reassurance. At least he wasn’t alone.

Cadet Curry pulled himself into a log jamb of fallen giants and realized that they formed a catacomb of interlaced pockets for well over fifty yards, it was perfect. From his position he had total over-watch of the ongoing assault. He wished that he could have taken the time to battle zero this weapon, but didn’t wish to advertise his presence should someone be nearby. He quickly checked all his magazines and tapped them against his thigh. Curry realized this would be down and dirty and if he didn’t make every round count it would be a short

firefight. His hands were shaky as he brought the rifle up to his shoulder and his eyes refused to focus at first. He drew in a long breath and held it for a few seconds and then took another slow long pull from the musty morning air. This was for real, he knew that. He could just walk away and play it safe, but something in him, his code of honor the Sgt. Maj. would call it. Wouldn't let him take the easy way out. Suddenly two of his famous list of quotes flashed through his mind. The first was from Voltaire:

"I have never made but one prayer to God, a very short one: O Lord, made my enemies ridiculous";

The second was reputed to have come from General George S. Patton:

"A good plan, violently executed now, is better than a perfect plan next week."

Cadet Second Class Todd Curry made a quick prayer for the ridiculous and then began to execute the violence. He pick for his first target a trooper off a hundred or so yard that was broadside to him with a giant redwood to his back. He took aim at the center of his chest and took in a breath. For a few seconds his vision became just that more clear and focused. He didn't realize that he had squeezed the trigger until the rifle bucked against his shoulder. The intended target suddenly jerked as his right shoulder was tacked to the tree behind him.

"Hmmm shoots to the left";

He made the quick adjustments and raised the rifle again. His next shot was dead on and dropped a second trooper and thus began his counterattack. Curry proceeded to take two rapid shots and scoot to a new position along the log jamb. One by one he picked off the tail end Charlie's of the assaulting troopers. He had remembered back to one of his all time favorite movies, Sergeant York, about a World War One Medal of Honor winner. Though Todd had never hunted turkey's as York had, he remembered the strategy behind the method. Rarely in a firefight does an attacker look to his rear. If Curry could keep up the sporadic fire in the York mode he would whittle down the raiders one by one until the attack failed under its own weight.

But time was not on his side. The far flank was pressing hard on the redoubts unprotected side and was on the verge of reaching the perimeter when Curry

recognized the arching lob of hand grenades headed in bound towards the defenders. Todd shifted his fire and in rapid single fire swept the advancing line of troopers. Like bowling pins they dropped under the accuracy of his deadly fire. Unfortunately his action while relieving the pressure on that flank also gave his position away to the raiders and he was now coming under increasing pressure as wood chips and bark started to rain in on his position as the troopers attempted to suppress his supporting fire.

He ducked down and half ran and crawled through the interlocking limbs and branches to emerge in a different area where he immediately sought the nearest threatening target. Curry again took up his pattern of firing off several quickly aimed shots and then moved his position left or right and brought on more fire. To the attacker it appeared that more than one, probably several different riflemen were engaging them and this slowed down their advance. He crawled under another limb and returned fire again. Two more troopers dropped like lead weights into the moss covered forest floor. He changed position again and dropped another attacker.

The Troopers were quick to realize that they were outflanked and suddenly caught between two support groups of shooters. This was not the kind of combat that they were used to. It didn't take long or much courage before their ranks began to slim both from the effective firepower that was now being delivered from their rear but also from the troops that had decided to slink back into the forest and fight another day.

Curry recognized one of the two men that had been smoking a cigarette waving his arms and attempting to rally his troops back into the fight. He took careful aim and sucked in a long breath. The rifle bucked and he could see the man was still standing.

“Shit! a miss!”

He tried to calm himself and took in another slow deliberate breath and focused on his target as he called to his men. The rifle bucked a second time and the target dropped to his knees with a look of surprise on his face. The third round cracked through his skull at supersonic speed and ended his command permanently. That was all it took to break the back of the attack. Like rabbits on the run he saw the troopers beating feet away from the heat of the crossfire.

Curry sent them on their way with a few additionally well-placed shots, less to worry about later.

As quickly as it had started it was over. A uneasy few minutes passed before he could see movement from within the redoubt. An old gray haired man in tiger striped cammies slowly reconned his way out of the fortress to survey the damage, strip the dead and finish off the wounded. The young Cadet cautiously emerged from his timber cover and slowly walked forward to meet the grizzled old vet.

They eyed each other carefully then the old vet extended his hand.

“Sergeant Mick Jorgenson”

“Cadet Todd Curry.”

They grasped hands and men should and met strength with strength.

“Ahh I should have known, Academy man. Getting younger all the time!”

Addendum

Sequoia watched the stranger cautiously move down towards the old man. His clothing was strange with an old style high stiff collar originally meant to protect the wearer from sword slashes and of a dark gray color with streaks of brown and black splashed across it. He carried similar gear to the troopers that had just ended their attack, but...he wore it differently, like it was more a part of him - almost like the crazy old man. Both kept their weapons at the ready but in a relaxed self assured manner. He saw them stand a few feet apart and then clasp hands. The young warrior was little bit shorter and a leaner version of the old war veteran, and had that same hard look about him. Little did the born again pacifist realize that he was witnessing a changing of the guard. There was no fan faire, no bugles sounding or waving flags being passed from one to the other. But the colors of freedom had changed hands, from the old warhorse - to the young colt. The new guard had arrived.

Desert Doc

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Pax Americana Chapter 36 – The Needle in the Haystack

[quote] "Power always has to be kept in check; power exercised in secret, especially under the cloak of national security, is doubly dangerous." –William Proxmire

The Americans will always do the right thing... After they've exhausted all the alternatives. – Sir Winston Churchill [/quote]

Cautious eyes followed the stranger, as he pulled up next to the gas pumps in his brand new British Racing Green Range Rover to refuel. Resembling a tired L.L. Bean catalog that had been used to swat too many flies with, a haggard Brentwood Davis looked around at the dusty broken down gas station and tried to figure out what his next move would be. He had crossed and double-crossed the countryside surrounding the area that the rogue Marine unit and half of a town had fought hard to defend before they faded into the surrounding landscape. He himself had nearly been killed here in an ambush. The Federal and UN troops he had been with were considerably less fortunate and many of them did not survive the encounter. Six months later he was back going over the same ground looking somehow to run into members of that very same resistance force that had nearly ended his life. He kept thinking how ironic life could be and what a sick sense of humor fate had.

He finished pumping the gas and walked slowly towards the counter through the broken screen door. The place was as worn and rough on the inside as it was on the outside. Most of the shelves in the store were bare and the old man running the register gave Brentwood a hard once over as he approached. Davis offered him his government charge card and the old man just stared at it.

“Sorry son, we don’t take credit cards.” He said flatly.

Brentwood looked at him in disbelief still holding the card out. “It’s good I assure you Sir.”

“Don’t care how good it is. It ain’t no good around here. You got cash or hard silver on you, I’ll take that but no plastic.”

Brentwood was stunned. He had never had his card refused and traveled with very little cash as a result. It never occurred to him that someone would actually refuse his government visa! He rummaged around his L.L. Bean vest and dug up enough money to pay for the gas and placed it on the counter.

The old man looked at the bills carefully and tested each on with a pen.

“Well Ok, looks fine.” He grumbled and handed Brentwood back his change.

Brentwood hesitated and then spoke quietly to the attendant.

“What happened around here?” He asked cautiously.

“Whaa?”

“Around here, what happened?” Brentwood paused. “I had driven through this part of the country a year or two ago on vacation and now it looks like it’s been through the ringer. I know the plague and all has taken its toll everywhere, but here...?”

“Don’t follow the news much do you Mister.” The gruff old man began. “Doesn’t matter much as they censor so much of it anymore.”

“Censor?”

“Well you think that crap they have on the networks is the real news, SH*T SON, ain’t been any real news on the airwaves for years now. Censor, spin doctor or just plain out and out lie.” He paused and looked over Brentwood carefully. “Say lad, what part of the government do you work for?”

“Transportation Department. My job is trying to keep the highways open and rolling. I’m out doing inspections right now making sure everything keeps moving.”

The old man let out a whoop. “WELL SH*T SON! YA DONE F*CKED UP THERE AIN’T YA!” He slapped his knee and sat back down in the chair behind the counter chuckling.

“Ever since the war started here the Fed’s ain’t allowed sh*t to come through. It’s sort of a punishment I guess. You’re lucky that I just got a partial shipment of gas yesterday or you’d be out-ta luck. “

“War? Started here? What are you talking about old man?”

“Don’t you folks in Washington know anything?” The old man grunted. “Well that explains a lot.” He said shaking his head as he leaned back in the chair.

“Ever since those Marines turned Patriot and some of the towns folks nearby joined them to put down that group of government gangsters and foreign soldiers that were trying to disarm the entire countryside here, well...we’ve been placed on the black list so to speak.”

“Turned patriot? Oh you mean that rogue outfit that attacked its own leadership and then attacked the Homeland forces?”

“Its all a matter of your point of view there government man. Those Marines upheld the Constitution, that’s their job. We don’t like foreigners muscling around in these parts and we don’t have no kings here in this country. Threw the last one out over two hundred years ago. I guess those folks up in D.C. have forgotten about that.”

Brentwood was at an impasse. He knew exactly where this conversation was going to go; he’d heard it enough in the last week. People were getting pissed off and it was the government that was getting the blame. The old man was right though; those folks up in D.C. had forgotten an awful lot about America and most of all about Americans. Up to this point most of the folks Brentwood had run into were extremely cautious when talking to him. Perhaps, just perhaps this old man would hold the key for him to get in contact with the Patriots in this area. He was about to roll the dice; he closed his eyes for a second and prayed that he wouldn’t crap out.

“If I wanted to get a hold of some of these...Patriots.” He hesitated. “Just how would I do it?” He rolled the dice and waited to see what came up.

The old man looked at him very closely, his lips were drawn tight as he was thinking about the question just put to him. The next thing Brentwood knew he

was looking down the wrong end of a sawed off double barrel twelve gauge shotgun.

“SHIT!”

The small fire took the chill of the evening air. Todd had joined the old Sergeant and the young tree hugger called Sequoia as they gathered up the small amount of equipment and supplies from the redoubt as well as the weapons and equipment from the dead security troopers. It was a heavy load that Todd and Sequoia hefted for several miles before the old vet secured the gear and weapons in several scattered caches along the route.

“We’ll be back later for this stuff.” He explained. “Right now we need to make some time so that we can reach my base camp before dark.”

It was just as the last light was fading from the sky that the three reached the outer perimeter of Sergeant Mick Jorgenson’s forest retreat.

“Make sure you step EXACTLY in my foot steps or you’ll loose a foot...or worse.”

The three finally arrived through the maze of booby traps and pitfalls to the security of the inner stronghold just as the last light was fading overhead. Now gathered around the small fire in the central bunker, weapons cleaned, the three fed and watered the they began to discuss recent events. Sequoia described the nightmare that he had survived when his tribe of Earth Firster’s had been decimated, as well as his failure to fully participate in the firefight. His honesty surprised both Todd and the old vet Mick.

“I just...just...” He paused. “I just never fired a gun before...and...and...I was so – so scared.” He hung down his head.

“You know son, we all have to start somewhere and the middle of a firefight ain’t the easiest of places to start.” An old calloused hand patted the young man on the shoulder. “But you held in there lad, you didn’t run and...you got a couple of those b*stards even if t’was by accident.”

Todd nodded his head in agreement. After a few minutes of silence Todd picked up where Sequoia had finished. He related his coming across country after he

left the military academy and the details of the train wreck. When Todd had finished the old Vietnam vet got up and fetched a couple of more logs for the fire.

“Well I’ve got to admit lads.” He began as he was sitting down. “You’ve both done a lot of growing up over the last few weeks.”

He dropped the split on the fire and sent a small flurry of embers up into the air.

“Cadet you sure know how to handle yourself when the sh*t hits the fan and for a damned tree hugger Sequoia, you’re a tough little nut there too.”

He paused as if he was doing some serious ruminating.

“I’d be pleased if you both would consider signing up for this outfit of mine. It ain’t much but there are others here and about that would join in the fight.”

Sequoia was the first to answer. “I don’t know if I’d be much help.” He said looking at the ground.

The Sergeant gave Todd a stern look. Todd swallowed hard and found his voice.

“Sergeant, I’ve got family up in Washington that I was headed for and will head for once things settle down, but for now...I’m here.”

“Fair enough there Cadet!” He looked at the dower tree hugger across the fire from him. Todd...I’m putting you in charge of Sequoia’s training. You’ll start first thing in the morning, during the afternoon we’ll work together on advanced training for the both of you.”

He rose slowly and painfully straightened up.

“Now it’s lights out for everyone. We’ve had one muther f*ck of a long day and it ain’t going to get any easier from here on out.”

Brentwood raised both hands and started to back up, his eyes locked onto the receiving end of the big sawed off.

“I’M SORRY MISTER, I’M SORRY!” He stuttered as he angled towards the door.

“You better get your damn government @ss off my property and the hell out of this county before I blast you in two!” The old man growled.

Brentwood stumbled backwards out the broken front door and landed flat on his @ss in the dirt and gravel. He continued moving backwards in a half crab, half skedattle mode when he slammed into the side of his Rover with the back of his head. Slipping and scrambling around the front of the vehicle he managed to get into the drivers door and fumbled with the keys all the time with his eyes locked on the old man, who was now standing in the broken doorway with the 12 gauge still leveled at him.

As calmly as someone in total panic could, the Transportation Deputy pulled out of the driveway and rocketed back onto the blacktop keeping his eyes on the rearview mirror until the gas station and that damned huge shotgun was totally out of sight. It took another thirty-five minutes or so before the pounding of his heart in his ears finally stopped. He wasn't exactly sure where he was, but it didn't matter, he wasn't back there and that was all that was important right at the moment.

Brentwood backed off the accelerator and slowed the Rover to a more respectable speed. His breathing finally under control he rolled down the window and took in several deep breaths. He wondered just what the hell he was thinking of! Out in the middle of nowhere looking for people that didn't want to be found. That had already tried to kill him once. He must truly be mad, but he knew that he had no where else to tuen.

Just then something up ahead caught his eye and he started to slow down. It was midday as he pulled over into the grassy field that was the parking lot for a strange assortment of motor and horse drawn vehicles. The sign on the side of the road where he turned off had said 'Flea Market Today!' Down the gravel road several miles off the main tarmac pitched in a farmer's field sat an array of shelters and tents and the largest accumulation of people that he had seen in this area to date.

Right from the start he knew that this was not an ordinary flea market. The young man that directed him into the parking field did so with an AK assault rifle slung across his back. It was not done in any threatening way; it was more along the lines that the weapon was a part of his attire and to be expected. Before

Brentwood left his vehicle he reached into the console and removed the Glock that had been issued to him when he joined the Homeland Security Transportation Directorate. Having never been a part of the gun culture he was rather apprehensive around weapons. But after this morning's event and on the road that he was now traveling, perhaps it was time to rethink his lack of appreciation for weapons.

The new shoulder holster felt uncomfortable and chaffed his armpits. The weight of the pistol and two extra magazines seemed heavy and odd, but he was not going to be out walking around naked any more. He had his federal concealed weapons authorization card, which made him beyond legal where ever he went, even on board aircraft. He just hoped that he wouldn't really need to use it as he had had only an ounce of training and less than a week of range time. He couldn't believe that he was actually doing this.

As soon as he entered the perimeter of the flea market he realized that he was definitely over dressed when compared to the rest of the participants. He had barely a weeks worth of wear on his L.L. Bean outdoor wear while the majority of buyers and sellers appeared to have been living in the rough for months if not years. The image was one that reminded him of something somewhere between the Sherwood Forest scenes of the downtrodden peasants from the various Robin Hood movies and some apocalyptic vision from the future. Only here it was in your face in full living color with all the odors of reality attached.

Brentwood could not image an outdoor bazaar of this type within the borders of this great country. It reminded him of an open market one would find in their travels throughout the third world, yet here it was in one of the founding states of the union. If this was what a year and some months of hard times was yielding what would become of this great nation if things continued. He shuddered when that thought crossed his mind. He knew fully well what was going to happen, what the government had planned. After all he had seen the blueprint of future events and carried the evidence with him locked into a small circular plastic disc. As poor as these people had it now, the current situation would be shear luxury compared to what was awaiting them in the very near future.

Sequoia was an eager and quick apprentice under the tutelage of Cadet Todd Curry. He may have been a pacifist less than two weeks ago, but recent events had turned him one hundred and eighty degrees around. Like a starving man he

embraced the cult of the gun and devoured every morsel placed before him. He still maintained the Rastafarian dreadlocks and refrained from wearing combat boots preferring to go barefoot instead. But he more than made up for his strange looks with his enthusiasm at his new studies.

As promised Mick kept them busy every afternoon with hard physical conditioning and advanced studies in tactics, military philosophy, demolition, trips – traps – and other assorted nasties. The pair of young men were quickly becoming a matched set of razor sharp killing machines that could react without thinking to each other's needs. In other words they were becoming exceptionally deadly to any one or anything that would make the mistake of coming up against them. The old Sergeant held back his proud smile. He knew that he was not much longer for this world. But his legacy would continue on a little longer...perhaps with luck, much longer.

Brentwood had wondered around the market for better than an hour and still had seen only fraction of it. There was heavy trading and bartering in the necessities of current living: Candles and candle making supplies, oil lamps and wicks for the same. Herbal tinctures and unguents, older non-electric tools and appliances were going for top dollar; that is if it were dollars that were being traded. It seemed that most of trade done was for real commodities that were bartered or old silver coins, those minted before '64, before the government began to substitute lesser valued metals into the U.S. coinage. He even saw a few various denominations of gold coins passing quietly between deals for larger commodities. He recognized solar panels that had previously belonged to the state used to power highway signs and call boxes. Car batteries were being charged with human and solar power off in one corner.

He rounded one isle to walk smack dab into an entire row of weapons armorers. Here were small one and two man shops set up to manufacture and repair virtually any weapon imaginable. He tried not to stare at the vast array of weapons knowing full and well that virtually everything here was either restricted or out right banned from ownership with in the borders of the United States. The fact that everyone was walking around armed did not seem as strange now, an hour later, as it had when he first entered the market place. He noted that everyone, and he meant everyone was extremely well behaved and cordial. Perhaps an armed society was a polite society as he had read somewhere. Even the children seemed different, more alive and yet better behaved.

He was half way down armorers row when he spotted the old man. He was standing up ahead pointing at him next to several extremely rough looking men. Brentwood froze in his tracks and started to turn back when the lights suddenly went out.

‘Strange he thought...it’s early for stars...’

Desert Doc

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Pax Americana Chapter 37 – The Seed

[quote] Secrecy is the beginning of tyranny. Lazarus Long

"Do not think there are no crocodiles because the water is calm." - Malayan Proverb [/quote]

Cynthia joined Angel as he was inspecting the gardens. She had been with him now for over six months, sheltered in the self-sufficient oasis designed and build by his mother over the course of many years. It was still far too dangerous for her to consider leaving and she was in no hurry to risk repeating the events that brought her here in the first place. The disease that had ravished much of his garden six months back seemed to be well in check. While he had lost over half of plants when the virus first reared its head and was spreading across the countryside, Angel had managed to reclaim the heavy losses and bring the gardens back to life. Now and then a weakened plant did show the first signs of disease, when that happened Angel immediately pulled and burned the infected offender. While much of the foundation of America’s dominance in the agricultural world community was withering on the vine, he had somehow managed to stay one step ahead of the creeping rot.

“The gardens are looking much better Angel.” Cynthia commented.

“It would seem so.” He flatly answered as he inspected every inch of a climbing cucumber vine. “It still pops up every now and then, with weaker seeds...but I think we’re ahead of it now.”

“I keep hearing over the short-wave that everyone’s crops are dying. How are we able to keep so much growing?” She said as she joined in on the inspection, checking out a nearby Eggplant.

“It’s like I said the other day. The strength is in the variety of seeds that we have.”

“Oh yeah, genetic diversity...something like that?”

“Remember that history book I was reading about the Black Death of the middle ages. In every plague or epidemic there are a few people or species that are already immune or quickly gain immunity and survive.”

“Ok, I remember now.”

“Well my Mom was all about biodiversity when she created the gardens here. She was very big into collecting Heirloom seeds.”

“Heirloom seeds? Do you mean like antiques?”

“Something like that. Heirlooms are seeds that have fallen out of popularity. Now a days it’s usually because they can’t be farmed with modern equipment or take being shipped across the country or around the world. Lots of people save their seeds and use them for their next crop.”

“You can do that? I thought that they wouldn’t grow quite right.”

“That’s hybrid seeds, HYBRIDS won’t grow true, but the big seed companies want you to believe that all seeds are that way. Then you’ll have to come to them year after year for new seeds. It’s a real great gig for them.”

“So all these plants here are Heirlooms?”

“Yep. Some of them have been around for over a hundred years, some even longer.” He waved his arm. “The strength of Heirlooms is their genetic variety. Some are weak and can’t compete with modern diseases or diseases that we’ve imported. But some, the very special ones, are strong enough to fight off the disease and survive, that’s the one’s we want. My mom showed me how to pick the strongest seed for our location and climate, so that each season our seeds are getting better adapted to were we are.”

“So why doesn’t everyone just grow Heirlooms?”

“Well it does require a lot of care and organization. See those bush beans in the back there.”

“The ones under the screen box?”

“Yeah, you have to pay close attention to separating similar varieties so they don’t cross pollinate sometimes, especially if you want to keep a strain pure.”

“Aren’t there companies that grow heirloom seeds.”

“Some, but not a lot of specialty suppliers are left; the big companies have run most out of business.”

“That’s not right!”

“And it can come back to bite us in the @ss. Mom said that back in the seventies there was a huge corn blight that nearly wiped out the entire corn crop in the U.S. When the scientist’s got into looking really hard to find out why all the corn was dying so quickly they found out that all the corn grown in the country was related to a single hybrid strain. And that strain had a weakness to the fungus that was killing them. In the entire country only two small commercial strains of open pollinated corn were immune, but hundreds of seed savers had strains that were unaffected by the blight.”

“So the home gardeners saved the farmers?”

“Well you would have thought so, but no. Instead the big agri-companies tried to make saving seeds illegal.”

“Can they do that?” Cynthia looked up from the Brussels Sprouts she was checking.

“Well they tried to. Started applying for patents on all kinds of different seeds. It’s sort of like when they tried to outlaw the word “organic”. The big corporations are always looking for ways to shut the little guy down.’

“Buy why? How can a little guy hurt them? There huge companies!”

“Mom, used to say that it was all about control and monopolies. The whole N.W.O. thing.”

“N.W.O.?”

“New World Order, something about corporations becoming the next type of supreme government, controlling everything. She would go on and on about corporate corruption and every time some scandal would pop up it was somehow related to the New World Order. I guess one of our presidents even talked about it.”

He sat down on the side of one of the raised garden beds and let out a long sigh.

“Mom saw a pretty scary future all around us. I guess that’s why she worked so hard on this place. She always talked about building an Ark in the middle of all the madness. That’s this place.”

He let out another sigh.

“I just wish...ah...that she could have made it through everything to be here now. I don’t know anything compared to her. These were all her plants, this was her place.”

Cynthia walked over to him.

“She sounds like she was a great Mom.”

“You would have liked her and I think she would have liked you.”

She sat down beside him amid the flowing green that overran everything. It was such a stark contrast to the brown that lived just beyond the walls of Angels compound.

“Angel you did pretty good job on your own, bringing everything back to life here. A lot of people outside are not doing so well. I’m sure your Mom would be very proud of you.”

“Yeah, she was always saying that.” He looked around. “I just wish she was here to help.”

All across the vast oceans of the world, on merchant ships commanded by graduates of the various American Merchant Marine Academies, skippers were receiving a confidential notification that their reserve naval status (awarded upon graduation) was being upgraded to an active status and that they were now under orders from the Commander In Chief (President of the United States) to immediately return to U.S. waters and put in at the nearest American port. The communiqué went on to state that they were not to off load any cargo, especially any food items or grains, but to return at best speed post haste.

Brentwood felt like he was floating in a gray cloud, drifting slowly down. Voices faded in and out from far away. He couldn't make them out at first, but as they came closer he could start to discern individual words.

“Colonel, I think he's coming around.”

The sound of several footsteps coming closer.

Slowly Brentwood became aware of something cool wrapped around his head and across his eyes. It was about this time that the pounding in his head came forward into his consciousness.

“Ooooooh.” He moaned and tried to bring his hand to his head, but it was suddenly stopped.

“Easy there Mr. Davis. You'll be alright. Just a little knock on the head.”

“Ah...little...knock...ooooh?”

“Doc is he going to be alright?”

A gruff voice, older and across the room answered. “He'll be groggy for a little while and should be kept calm for a day or two...but to answer your question – yes, he'll be fine. That is if your gorillas don't waylay him again.”

“Thanks Doc, Yes is sufficient.”

Someone was helping Brentwood slowly sit up. This did nothing to improve the pounding in his skull. He pulled the damp towel from around his head and felt a slight stab of pain as he opened his eyes. The room was dimly lit by two oil lanterns and several rather robust young warriors stood off in the waving shadows of the flickering light. An older version of those stoic warriors was sitting backwards in a chair just a couple of feet from Brentwood, he seemed to be the man in charge and was talking to him.

“Now that you’ve found what you were looking for Mr. Davis would you like to explain why someone of your influence and position would be looking for us in the first place?”

Brentwood leaned forward to place his head in his hands, as if that would calm the pounding in his head. A abrupt wave of nausea passed over him and he suddenly found himself on his knees dry heaving into the dusty wooden floor.

When he next awoke the surroundings were more pleasant and comfortable. The soft mattress under him seemed to hold him afloat and the feel of clean sheets against his skin almost made him think that he was back in his Washington D.C. apartment. But the smell was not right. He cautiously opened his eyes this time to a bright room filled with pictures and the signs of life and family. He slowly tried to scoot himself into a sitting position but the pounding in his head came back. Instead he just slid back under the covers and tried not to think about the messages being sent between his head and his stomach as he faded off once more.

He felt something cool softly being patted across his forehead. The light was not so bright now and the view had suddenly improved. Her eyes were the greenest green he had ever seen and shone with a gentle light. Her touch was soft and tender, at first Brentwood wondered if he had actually died and gone to heaven. He fell instantly in love and then was viciously reminded of his condition when he abruptly tried to sit up.

“Damn the headache!” He muttered.

Flight Lieutenant Jonathan Briggs walked briskly across the tarmac and into the head shed with the film canisters in hand. As soon as the he entered the

intelligence people and photo interpreters took charge of the canisters. Less than three hours later Air Group Commander Dalton Lovell stood before the Prime Minister.

“Its been confirmed Sir. The plant virus has arrived not only on our shores...” He paused.

“Yes Group Commander?”

“Well...er...um...Sir, there are traces on the continent as well.”

“DAMN!” The Prime Minister jumped out of his high backed leather chair and began to pace the room in an agitated fashion. “How bad is it Dalton?”

“Too early to tell sir, I’ve got my boys going over the new film and going back through the records to make comparisons. Could only be minor outbreaks but...”

“But what?”

“Its too early to tell Sir with the limited information we have.”

“Then I suggest that you get your lads busy Group Commander Lovell, and get them busy now!”

The gangly gray haired Flight Officer gave his Prime Minister a brisk salute, turned sharply on his heel and strode purposefully out of the plush office. Meanwhile a phone call was made.

“Get me Buckingham Palace Lizzie, this is urgent.”

In a French vineyard one of the field hands noticed a spreading brown patch on the leaves of several vines near the center of one field. He wondered what it could be this time and went on to check the rest of the field.

Dr. Malcolm Danielson, Professor of Contemporary American History and Ethnic studies was suddenly awakened when the antique front door of his modest Brownstone shattered inward from the force of the police battering ram. He hardly had time to sit up in bed before several riot armored and machine gun

carrying officers pulled him from his home with nothing more than his pajama's and a flannel robe hastily grabbed as he was handcuffed and thrown into the back of the police van. Fifteen minutes later he was joined by one of his university colleagues Dr. Edward Green, Professor of Early American History and Constitutional Government, who had fared a little worse in his handling due to his weak attempt at resistance to the invasion of his home.

The pair would travel together for several days. No charges were given, no questions asked. At times they were hooded and could tell that there were others around them but any attempt to communicate brought swift and violent retribution by the ever-present guards. When the Grey Hound Bus with blacked out windows finally rolled into its final stop the guards briskly ushered the disheveled and confused passengers out and onto the cold blacktop. Danielson and Green in horror recognized immediately the implication of the last several days. The structure before them was unmistakable, their situation as grim as they could imagine. The pair found themselves looking through electrified fencing and razor sharp concertina wire and realized that they were walking into an American Gulag.

Desert Doc

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Pax Americana 38 – Ides of March

[quote]"If once the people become inattentive to the public affairs, you and I, and Congress and Assemblies, Judges and Governors, shall all become wolves. It seems to be the law of our general nature, in spite of individual exceptions."
 Thomas Jefferson.

"War is the remedy that our enemies have chosen, and I say let us give them all they want." General William T. Sherman [/quote]

Senator Eli Simpson of Georgia sat in his dark office and watched the last light of the day fade from the Washington D.C. sky. The thought crossed his mind as he looked down the Mall from his congressional office window past the Washington Monument to the Lincoln Memorial off at the far end, that perhaps our light, the American light, that had burned so bright for over two hundred years, was finally fading. Certainly the events since 9/11 had forever changed the world that

Southern Senator had known so well. He slowly shook his head when he thought about the centralization of power that now emanated from the executive branch of government. Congress had lost control, given up their authority to represent the people due to that damned Patriot Act as well as the multitude of Executive Orders that now spewed forth from the White House. His colleagues had kowtowed under the banner of security and safety and failed to perform their vigilant responsibility to the people. Thus the fine balance of power that had steered a clear course for so many decades had finally been broken and he now felt the country was now spinning wildly out of control.

Simpson leaned back in his high backed leather chair and wondered if over two thousand years earlier some senator in Rome had contemplated the same dark future as he was now when the republican power of the senate was usurped by the imperial throne. He wondered 'what would be our Ids of March?' Though his Roman History was more than a bit rusty he felt that he could almost understand the motivation behind Brutus and the senators that brought down the mighty Caesar that day. Perhaps Jefferson had spoken more truth than he realized when he said, "From time to time, the tree of liberty must be watered with the blood of tyrants and patriots."

A solid double tap knock echoed from his office door.

"Come in." Simpson answered as he slowly spun his chair around.

Into the twilight that filled office walked a shadowy figure. Simpson had hesitated setting into motion the cogs of the machine that would culminate in this meeting, but the escalation of current events gave him no other choice. He was about to play the biggest gamble of his long life and either way it came out he was probably going to end up paying for this decision with his life. Well, it had been a long life, much longer than he could have imagined back when he was a runny nosed eighteen-year-old PFC at the beginning of a long march out of a frozen wasteland known as the Chosin Reservoir of Korea. He strangely wished he was back at the Chosin now, at least there you knew who your enemies were. He remembered back to that grim time. What he wouldn't give for another Chesty Puller now.

The city was dying, not the slow insipid decay that quietly rotted away the walls of hope and created desperation, but from the sharp prangs of starvation. The

emergency supplies that had government had trickled in had only barely kept the community alive following the initial outbreak of plague. Those menial emergency supplies had stopped a month ago. At first the survivors had managed to stave off the crushing prangs of hunger by raiding the homes of those killed off by the plague, but that hadn't lasted very long. In this modern age people rarely kept more than a weeks worth of food on hand. Damian's gang had faired better than most after stumbling upon the homes of several Mormons. Here were a people that planned for bad times. But that source quickly dried up, as those few surviving members of the local ward were more than adequately armed to resist the gang raids and as the price became too high Damian steered his gang away from them. Besides which, what did they expect to do with hundreds of pounds of dry wheat seeds? What they needed was food!

Escape from the controlled zones was impossible as well fed and armed government security forces blocked any flight from the city. They were trapped and doomed to a slow painful death unless they could somehow mange to find more food. The Homeland Security Patrols had become more vicious as time went on. In the beginning they might arrest you and beat you a little before allowing you to crawl back into the fetid hole that had once been a thriving metropolis. Now it was down to just shooting on sight anyone caught out in the open. Well, unless it was a girl that they caught. They still ended up dead, but it just took longer to die.

Damian's gang was a mismatch of plague survivors that for one reason or another had gravitated to his side. He could find food and they were hungry, it was almost as simple as that. Yet unlike most of the gangs that cruised through the ruins searching for scraps his group was made up of a much larger age range. His was more like a village than a hunting group and that was where his strength came from. Only the strongest and swiftest patrolled and ranged for food, while the elders of the group guarded the home front. It was this division that allowed his gang to maintain some resemblance of civilization. It also allowed his people the ability to rebuild a small section of the old community. While the young bloods patrolled and gathered, the elders repaired and maintained. Their weakness was that they could not produce the means of their own survival and sooner or later there were be nothing to bring home.

Old Man Washington looked out over the remains of his city. Damian joined him at the roofs edge.

“Sir...you best get back from da edge. Sixth Street Devils kin tap you from dare if’n you skyline yo’self.”

The old gray haired stooped octogenarian slowly turned around and glanced at his great-grandson.

“It would almost be a blessin’ Boy. It breaks my heart ta see da world done fallen down like dis.”

He shook his head slowly and took his characteristic waddling steps back to the center of the roof.

Damian looked at his Great Grandfather confused.

“Da whole damn honky world kin burn to da ground fer all I care.”

“Don’t be so quick to judge dare Boy, we’z a part of dat dere world.”

“You wantin it like it waz?”

“Oh no, not like it waz, but also not like it iz.” He turned and pointed off in the distance. “Tings waz getting better, not good young’in, but better. Dis t’aint no good. Now daze just shoot us when ever day pleeze, t’aint no laws, t’aint no rights, just the lawz of the jungle. T’aint no future now.” He walked past Damian muttering. “T’aint no future now.”

Colonel Melton, late of the United States Marine Corps and now the defacto commanding officer of the rogue 1st Patriot Marine Force looked up as Meredith Rasmussen descended the stairs. She was a strong and graceful woman and had tended the wounds of many of the local militiamen and Marines during the long struggle, a struggle that began for Captain Melton when he made the critical decision to follow his oath to the absolute letter of the law.

His company of Marines had fought hard to defend the civilians whose rights as Americans had been summarily dismissed by a runaway government. When they discovered foreign U.N. troops masquerading as American soldiers among the dead and wounded in the aftermath of battle his troops, to the man, crossed over the line and reaffirmed their oath to protect and defend the law of the land even if

it meant that they must someday cross the Rubicon and march on the corrupted capital of the nation itself.

Now he had a very strange dilemma to sort out. Meredith had spent the last several days nursing a pencil necked bureaucratic paper pusher from the very heart of the deceitful government that Melton was now at war against. Why had this Davis fellow ventured deep into enemy territory to find them? What kind of trap were they looking at? He certainly didn't look the type to be a spy or an operative from any one of the many different government agencies. His credentials checked out. But why would the Transportation Secretary for Homeland Security venture out into the wilderness looking for what must be to him contemptible revolutionaries and traitors? They had gone through all his personal belongs and basically come up with diddily squat. Well except for that mini DVD disc, but none of his people had been able to hack into it and they had tried.

"How is our guest today Ms. Rasmussen?"

"I think he'll survive provided nobody else tries to rearrange his brain housing" She looked at Melton for the word.

"Group, Ms. Rasmussen. His brain-housing group."

She blushed. "Oh yes, that's it. You military types, your language is most colorful."

"That it is. So is he awake?"

"Oh yes and quite apprehensive I would imagine."

Brentwood recognized the officer that entered the room from the pictures he had seen during a security brief. While it was known that a company of Marines had, it was believed, mutinied. It was not known if any of the officers had been apart of that mutiny. It was generally assumed, after looking at the personnel files of the officers in question, that they had most probably been taken out before the unit went rogue. The implication of this officer's very presence indicated that things were far worse than the higher ups could have imagined.

The media was being kept completely in the dark about the various seditious events that were escalating across the country as a result of the powers now wielded by the President and his Homeland Security Director under martial law. Yet seemed that the harder the federal government tried to bring things in line the more they unraveled at the edges. Few knew the whole facts, unfortunately, Brentwood Davis was one of those few.

Damian watched the Crips in full colors out on patrol. Man what he wouldn't give to have the hardware they were carrying. They were a defacto army and ranged pretty much were ever they wanted. Packing full auto assault rifles only the government troops had heavier firepower and they knew it. They were the undisputed kings of the ghetto.

Damian's advantage was his knowledge of every back street and alleyway in his part of the city. His troops were street kids like himself. They could fade instantly into the background and watch the hunters parade through their turf without them ever knowing they were even there.

Tonight's raid was a tough one. Most of his young bloods were bitching and complaining under the weight of bags of steer manure and potting soil they had raided from a midtown Kmart. They didn't understand the reason behind the night's mission. After all there was still plenty of food left for the taken. They were also not thrilled with busting up empty parking lots to turn into vegetable gardens. The whole thing was crazy as far as they were concerned. But they still complied and hauled the plastic bags of smelly manure and potting soil.

It didn't matter to them that the old man that Damian listened to was crazy and talked to himself most of the time. Damian was plenty street smart and must have something up his sleeve. He'd done good by them so far and that was good enough.

Damian signaled silently and his group moved out. They had barely covered half a block when the dark streets suddenly came alive with tracer fire from behind them. Damn! The Crips had walked into a government ambush! That would mean... Damian heard the roar of the big diesel engines just before they armored personnel carriers burst around the corner and out onto the main street! He was now caught in the vice meant for the Crips patrol that they had watched just minutes earlier.

“BREAKOUT!” Damian yelled.

Like cockroaches hit by the light his group instantly dropped their heavy loads and scrambled into the nearest hole. Damian led a small group down the narrow passage between two brick buildings. When a light suddenly flashed across the opening the other end he slid to a stop. The windows to either side were boarded up but that didn't matter now. They were in the kill zone and had to find another way out immediately.

He whipped off the crow bar that he carried strapped across his back and drove the hooked end through the boards that covered the window. Using every ounce of leverage he had the old rusty nails finally gave way and their escape route was now open. The dark void into which he dropped smelled of machine oil and dust. One, two, three, four and finally a fifth survivor dropped into the dark unknown. He broke out small red lens penlight and scoped out their hidey-hole.

“Stack dem boxes up against dat hole.” Damian ordered. “Cover it up good!”

With that done they cautiously moved single file through the basement storeroom. It was a maze of crates and piles of plastic containers. He cautiously listened for the sound of the owners that might be nearby but heard only the faint echo of gunfire from the streets above. He knew the arrangement of basement meant that they had discovered a Mormon cache, a gold mine of food and survival supplies. It also meant that their very lives were in immediate danger if the owners were anywhere near about.

The door out of the basement creaked loud enough to wake the dead and Damian ducked as the sound pierced the inner silence of the building. He signaled for his people to wait at the bottom of the stairs and he slowly climbed each step one at a time, trying to keep his weight to the outside of the stair where it would be attached to the riser and hopefully less likely to advertise his presence. It seemed like hours had passed before his head was at floor level to the first floor. He leaned forward and tried to listen for anything on the other side of the door. That's when it hit him. That sickly sweet smell that he knew too well. The owners would not be threatening them tonight, or for any time soon. He slowly opened the door and held his nose. It took him less than twenty minutes to check out the rest of the house. Breathing through a cloth rag he found the former occupants, or what was left of them. Back in the basement he quickly located the

emergency sleeping bags and cots. To night they would be sleeping like kings while the world went to hell all around them.

Meanwhile on the streets above the Homeland Security Forces finished their sweep of the area. One of the troopers dismounted the APC and checked the bodies of two of Damian's gang that hadn't moved quite quick enough.

"HEY SERGEANT WILL YOU LOOK AT THIS!"

"Are they dead Private?"

"As door nails, but check this out." He lifted up a bag of steer manure. "THEY'RE EATING SHIT NOW!"

The troopers on the APC roared with laughter.

"We'd better report this to the Captain. He's gonna love this!"

The trooper reached down with his bayonet and removed the right ears from the dead pair and remounted the APC as they continued on their mop up operation.

While it was near midday, it was still dark in the boarded up basement when Damian finally awoke. He quickly roused every one with him and they set out exploring their find. He quickly realized that it would take them several days to transfer all this stuff back to the hood. It was truly a sweet find.

Eli, Damian's cousin called to him. "Man Yo, you betta come check dis out Cuz!"

Damian crossed over to the far side of the basement storeroom to see what had his cousin's attention. Youngblood was a wiz with locks, there was virtually nothing that he couldn't pick and this time he had picked a cherry. Damian's eyes about popped out of his head at their find. The smell of gun oil was heavy in the air as he ducked his head and stepped into an armory of weapons.

"Man oh man, dis mudderfucker wuz one bad Mormon!" He whistled.

As organized as the rest of the basement was, were stacks of weapons in gun racks, enough to more than give his people an edge against any gang in the city. And maybe against the damn government troops that kept them caged like

animals trapped in this dying city. Damian now felt like his people had a fighting chance. He sat down on one of the many crates in the room and took a deep breath.

“Now we gotta a chance, cuz, now we gotta a chance.”

Dr. Malcolm Danielson Professor of Contemporary American History and Ethnic Studies at Columbia University in New York sat stoically, wearing only his pajamas and bathrobe in a cheap folding chair across the table from a bored processing sergeant wearing a Homeland Security Forces uniform.

“Name?” The sergeant droned. He waited a few seconds then asked again.

“Name?” A few more seconds ticked by.

“NAME?” This time he looked up and met the glare of the prisoner across from him.

“Look buddy, you might as well give me your name. If you don’t.” He nodded his head towards the gorilla looking guard just a few feet away. “I’ll order Corporal Rivers there to knock the sh*t out of you until you cough up either your name or your balls.”

Dr. Danielson just glared at his interrogator, and the young Sergeant signaled to the huge corporal to begin conveniencing the university scholar to cooperate with the interview. Dr. Edward Green, Professor of Early American History and Constitutional Government watched quietly as the burly corporal brought the stock of his rifle up quickly and smashed the side of it against the side of his colleagues head sending him flying a good five or six feet off the chair and on to the concrete floor.

Several prisoners standing at attention against the wall wearing orange jump suits quickly collected the unconscious professor and dragged him off to the side and out a small door. The bored sergeant looked up at Dr. Green.

“NEXT!”

Dr. Green picked up the chair and sat down.

“Name?”

“Dr. Edward Green.”

“Occupation?”

“Professor of Early American Hist...”

“Teacher.”

“Address?”

“Excuse me, I’m a university professor or...”

“I don’t give a sh*t where you worked.” He looked up at Green. “You teach don’t you?”

“Well....ah...yes.”

“Then you’re a teacher, Address?”

“What am I being charged with?”

“Huh?” The Sergeant looked back up.

“Charges, what are the charges. What am I doing here?”

“You don’t know?”

“I was pulled out of my house in the middle of the night, it was two...no...maybe three days ago and you’re the first person I’ve been able to talk to.”

The Sergeant rifled through the paperwork before him. “Green, Green, Green...ah here it is.” He paused to read through the first couple of pages. “Says here you’ve been convicted of sedition and high treason, hmmm, that’s bad sh*t.”

“Convicted?!” Dr. Green was visibly shaken. “I haven’t even been tried, let alone notified or arrested until this moment!”

“HmMMM, strange...mmm. Oh... here it is...well that figures. Damn I hate it when they drop the paperwork like this, third one this morning.” He looked back up at the university professor.

He made a clicking noise with his tongue. “Secret tribuneral, found guilty, sentenced to relocation for.....ummmm an unspecified period of time.” The sergeant looked up with a big grin on his face. “I guess we’ll be seeing each other on a pretty regular basis here on out professor.”

Dr. Green felt his stomach drop to the floor. “That’s impossible! This is against the law, it’s, it’s, IT’S UNCONSTITUTIONAL! WHERE ARE MY RIGHTS! I’VE GOT RIGHTS! YOU CAN’T DO THIS!”

“You ain’t got shit anymore professor and I can do whatever I like with you. NEXT!”

Desert Doc

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Pax Americana Chapter 39 – Fool’s Errand

Andy walked down the sidewalk toward the mall, the sounds of diesel engines and muffled shouts making their way to his ears. He repositioned the heavy duffel bag with its deadly cargo on his shoulder and assumed what he hoped was a military gait. His mind reeled at what a half-baked plan he had devised. What was he thinking? Steal a CUCV? Plant explosives? This wasn’t some cheap Golan and Globus movie, this was real life. Real bullets. Real blood. Real death. But his wife and friends needed this. It was for the greater good. He was aware of the ear bud speaker/microphone in his ear connecting him to Max, but couldn’t think of anything to say.

It was late morning, and if it weren’t for troops all-too-prepared to shoot him dead, it would be a fine day. The sun was occasionally peeking from behind some high clouds, and the trees were mostly all green. Before he knew it, he was drawing close to the little strip mall. Three 6X6 trucks, several humvees and

CUCVs littered the parking lot. Several civilian vehicles remained there, though most were missing windows, which were in several thousand pieces on the ground. There were many soldiers still in MOPP gear going into and out of all of the stores, but it seemed an equal number were milling about, or clustered in small knots. Some soldiers were facing him as he walked into the lot, but no one seemed to pay any attention to him. He reasoned that it would look suspicious now that people had seen him to walk over behind one of the humvees and start messing around, so he walk briskly into the crowd and moved through it in a random pattern, pausing here and there. He even received a few half-as.sed salutes, returned in an equally half-as.sed manner. Most of the soldiers were entertaining themselves by trying to tell stories through the gas masks and generally screwing around in the manner of soldiers since the Roman legions. After nearly ten minutes of this mingling, he made his way back to one of the 6X6s. He glanced around quickly, then placed one of his pipe bombs behind the rear bumper of the truck, the timer set for thirty minutes. The cow magnet that had been taped in place held it securely in place.

He stood and walked over to the rearmost CUVC. It was nearly identical to a civilian full-sized diesel Chevy Blazer. He tossed the duffel into the passenger's seat, cranked over the engine, and it started with a typical diesel rattle. One or two heads turned, but then quickly swiveled back to their muffled conversation. He put the CUCV in reverse and slowly backed out. He dared to think that this might be easy. He considered screwing this whole diversion thing and driving the CUCV back to the house, loading it up and getting the he.ll out of there. It was tempting. If it worked it would be so easy as to be laughable. It also had the attraction of being quick. But he remembered a book about Carlos Hathcock, the Marine sniper in Vietnam. Hathcock had said that there was always the temptation to change the plan to something easier. In the middle of a 1000 yard crawl to a firing position, the temptation was to get up and walk, or to only crawl 500 yards, convincing yourself that you could easily make up the difference. The point was, you made a plan and stuck to it. Not to the point of manic inflexibility, but not abandoning it on a whim. That was good enough for him. He kept driving to the other side of town.

He spoke aloud, using the VOX function of the radio: "Step one complete."

There were two clicks in his earpiece in reply.

Across town, Andy pulled in to the parking lot of an empty office building.

Through the copse of trees at the edge of the parking lot he glimpsed the huge sausage-shaped propane tank. There were two soldiers at the end of the long driveway to the tank who were supposed to be protecting it, but they appeared not to be taking their job too seriously. This was in large part due to the fact that there was not enough propane left in the huge tank to fill a residential propane tank. However, the regional command in its wisdom decided that it was worthy of protection. Thus, the sergeant in charge had assigned his two worst troopers to “guard” the nearly empty tank, to get them out of his hair. Their shifts were twelve hours long, and at this early hour, one was drunk and unconscious while the other was merely drunk. Someone had to stand guard, after all.

Had Andy been aware of these facts, he probably would not have exercised the caution that he did while placing his “surprises.” At any rate, before much time had elapsed, he had positioned several of the pipe bombs near the large tank and around its flanks. He also set the AK rifle with the solenoid and timer attached. He aimed it vaguely under the tank and down the driveway at the guards, then covered it with some branches and leaves. The timers were set so the explosives would go off in a random manner, over roughly ten minutes. Keeping an eye on where the guards were supposed to be, he slipped back through the trees to the CUCV. He was surprised as hell when he stumbled across a very visibly drunk soldier urinating in the trees. Andy decided the best defense was a good offense.

“What in God’s name do you think you’re doing out here, private?” he screamed through the mask. He hoped the guy really was a private: He couldn’t tell.

The startled trooper straightened suddenly from peering at his member, arcing urine onto Andy’s boots. “Uh, sir, I was patrolling the perimeter of this here tank, when I had to relieve myself sir....”

“Where is your God damned rifle?” Andy screamed.

“Sir, it’s back at...”

“Don’t you know there are criminals with guns just waiting to ambush a sad sack like you? They’ll come up in here and slit your stinking throat. They’re out there.”

“Uh, they are?”

“Yes, God damn it! Now get the fu.ck back to your post, get your God damned rifle, and keep your eyes open! And get your MOPP gear back on, you idiot!”

“Yes sir.” The trooper said, and began staggering back the 100 meters to the post, while Andy turned and walked the remaining 20 meters to the CUCV.

As he did so, a small voice in his ear said, “You’d have made a fine lieutenant Andy, except you’re supposed to call privates “dickweeds” not “idiots.”

Andy grinned despite his pounding heart and regained his seat in the CUCV.

Across town, Captain Mosher was angry. The jewelry store had been a trove. Diamonds, rubies, emeralds and gold in the strip mall’s jewelry store safe had resisted the pry bars of looters, but had fallen to a well-placed portion of C-4 by an oddly competent combat engineer. All the gems, rings, necklaces and watches had been placed in a 20mm ammo can, which Mosher then commanded a lieutenant to place in his CUCV. The lieutenant came back shortly, still carrying the ammo can.

“Sir,” He said.

“What is it, lieutenant? Why haven’t you put the can in my vehicle.”

“Sir, your vehicle is gone. It’s not where we parked it.” The lieutenant replied.

“What? Did someone move it to get the 6X6s out?” Mosher asked.

“Sir, I asked some men in the area. All they saw was a lieutenant get in it and drive away. They assumed it was me.” The lieutenant said.

“Christ.” Said Mosher, shaking his MOPPED head. “Was the other can still in there? From yesterday??”

“Yes sir, I’m afraid it was.”

“Get me a RTO. I need to talk to Skybird 2-7.” Mosher barked.

“Yes sir.” Replied the lieutenant, heading for the door.

Andy couldn't believe his luck. So far, everything was going better than he had hoped. The CUCV rolled down the side streets, heading back to the house. Showtime was about five minutes away. As the road took a turn, he was suddenly braking hard for a group of soldiers in the middle of the road. They began to wave him close, and Andy hoped his luck would still hold. He pulled abreast of the impromptu roadblock, and rolled the window down. A soldier walked closer holding his rifle not quite in a relaxed manner, but not quite threatening either.

"Sir, please step out of the vehicle." The man intoned from behind the mask's voicemitter.

"What in the hell are you talking about?" Andy demanded.

"Sir, that's Captain Mosher's CUCV. He wants it back. Now."

"Tell me something. Why do you think I am in this thing in the first place? Hmm?"

The man seemed confused by the question. "Sir?"

"I am driving this vehicle," he said, screaming the next part, "ON THE DIRECT ORDERS OF CAPTAIN MOSHER!"

"Uh, hold on a second, sir." He said, as he stepped back to confer with his RTO. "I'll contact Captain Mosher and get this cleared up in a jiffy."

"Uh-oh" thought Andy, "This is where I get to meet Saint Peter and all the other saints and apostles."

He let the soldier get what he thought was a good distance away before stomping on the accelerator. In true diesel fashion, more smoke than speed was produced, but the CUCV began to accelerate away from the roadblock. As he rolled away, one or two rounds thunked into the body of the vehicle, but the hail of bullets that Andy expected to perish in did not appear. Before he got more than three blocks away, however, the "whump-whump-whump" of rotor blades let him know that his escape was not clean. Strangely, though, no rain of fire descended from the sky, rending the CUCV in two.

Inside Skybird 2-7, the pilot behind the darkened helmet visor touched a button

on the cyclic. “Echo 6, Skybird 2-7 we have him in sight. Confirming observation, not interdiction?”

The voice of Captain Mosher sounded clear in his ear. “Skybird 2-7, Echo 6. That’s affirmative. Observe and vector in ground units. Uhhh...Samsons 1, 2 and 5 are going to be on this freq soon...wait one...”

His co-pilots eyes widened slightly as he listened in on the secondary radio frequency to frantic screaming with occasional gunfire and explosions in the background. The co-pilot keyed the intercom, speaking only to the pilot. “That sounds like some real shi.t going on.”

Mosher as Echo 6 came over the headset: “Echo 6, Skybird 2-7...Disregard present mission. Divert south, propane storage facility. Firefight in progress.”

“Goddamn it.” Said Mosher as he dropped the mic. “All right, lieutenant, let’s ride.”

Inside the CUCV, Andy was beginning to piece together what happened. The sudden disappearance of the helicopter was an unexpected Godsend, but for the life of him, he couldn’t figure out why it –and the roadblock men, for that matter– had not simply riddled the CUCV with bullets, then attempted to deal with the “attack” on the other side of town.

The 20mm ammo can in the rear seat held its secrets.

Andy spoke aloud, drawing out the first word to make sure the VOX circuit had picked up the sound and keyed the mic. “Ti-i-i-me to go. See you there.”

He estimated he had about ten to fifteen minutes before he had to stash the CUCV someplace. It wouldn’t take them long to figure out what happened. If it took them longer, so much the better, but it didn’t pay to underestimate the enemy. Max had told him of the “trick” he played, using the empty garage to hide the shot-up squad car. Andy soon was on the look out for a similar situation. It had to be somewhere they couldn’t spot from the air. Once the helicopter was finished with the diversion at the propane tank, it would be out, and so would the other troops, and they’d waste no time in canvassing the area. He shrugged and pressed down harder on the accelerator. If he only had fifteen minutes, he intended to be as far away as possible from the center of activity.

Max and the girls were traveling in the same general direction as he was, but they started out from opposite ends of town. In a short while, the world outside the window began to become more rural.

Andy glanced at his watch. "Just a couple minutes," he figured. He had been this way before on ambulance runs. He remembered there was a tumbledown barn that stood forlorn in a field not far from there. Time and weather had taken their toll, and the grey-boarded barn listed so that the roof's edge nearly contacted the ground. An ancient, lonely farmhouse in similar condition was set off to the side. The owners had long since succumbed to age, and their grown children were not the least bit interested in farming, and in fact, had built their own house on the other side of the farmstead and planted a small forest for windbreaks. They were not likely to notice anything. Andy quickly eased the CUCV off the county road and down the overgrown embankment and rolled up near the barn. The doors stood drunkenly on their hinges, one wrenched loose from the top hinge and laying aside the barn wall. Andy peered through the windshield into the gloom of the barn. Masses of garbage and broken machinery littered the floor of the barn, but with some gentle four-wheel-drive shoving, he imagined he could get the CUCV completely inside. He had only a passing knowledge of FLIR technology. Could it see through the barn? What if he was lucky enough that they didn't look here until after the engine of the vehicle cooled? Would that make a difference? His time was up, and he nosed the CUCV into the barn then shut off the ignition.

He was rapidly realizing that his plan was somewhat lacking in details. Should he set out now for Johnson's Stables? In broad daylight? As he thought he pulled his "PERK" kit out of the duffel, along with it, his AK. The "PERK" was an acronym he came up with to not scare his wife with the name "Bug Out Bag" when he first broached the subject of self-reliance under... Trying circumstances. PERK stood for "Personal Evacuation/Relocation Kit." It had a nice, "FEMA-Approved" ring to it. During the run-up to the Y2K thing, it was almost fashionable to have one. The AK presented another problem. Though it was rugged, reliable and shot a respectable round, the US military did not routinely issue it to his troops. For a brief encounter with sheeple, it might suffice. To them a machine gun was a machine gun. But to anyone with any type of military background at all, it was a huge red flag that he was not really a tentacle of the US government. He squinted at the waning sunlight through the huge cracks in the barn. It would be a while until dusk. He needed to make his way to the stables. Go now or wait until dark? He itched to be moving, and the possibility that the CUCV was a

bigger target than he was foremost in his mind. Along with the knowledge that no matter how badly it want for him if he were caught, it would go much worse if he was caught with the CUCV. In the end, his nerves got the better of him. He couldn't stand just sitting. He had to move.

From his PERK he pulled a set of clothes. A pair of jeans and a dark flannel shirt, along with a baseball cap. It would serve as much better camouflage as he walked across the field than woodland BDUs. After all, camouflage was all about blending in, and it was slightly more innocuous to see a man not running and hiding, merely strolling across the field. He wasn't too near the border of the "triangle" of roads that were heavily patrolled, so this was his best camouflage. He stuffed the uniform, PERK and his AK in the duffel bag, hoisted them on his shoulder and set out across the field.

"Once more, into the breach" He thought as he tried to affect a troubled but not guilty walk across the field, heading toward the far treeline.

AGreyMan

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Pax Americana Chapter 40- Practicum

Denise McMillan awoke from her groggy sleep. She remembered the fighting: hours upon hours of noise, dust and insanity. The flash of adrenaline pumping through her veins setting every nerve on fire. Panic, fear, elation and then the explosion. She saw the room that she had just entered transformed into a slow motion fireball that engulfed Larry O'Connor, their neighbor and friend. The concussion hit her like a violent wall and suddenly her world was slammed full of stars. In that instant she was pierced with a thunderbolt strike that seemed to sear through the right side of her face. She remembered the screaming that echoed through her flesh, then faded off into the distance and was soon replaced with the still drifting quiet of unconsciousness.

The first face she saw was that of David her husband. His eyes so filled with warmth and kindness had a different look about them. As if he was looking through her and off somewhere a million light years away. Oh her David, her silly David.

Her lips were dry and felt like parchment as she tried to say his name. But her tongue stick to the roof of her mouth and her voice cracked and screeched.

“Be still my love.” His warm deep voice flowed across her like a dark velvet river. “Doc says you’re going to be ok...” He paused. “Just lay back Honey and rest. You took a bit of a beating but we’re safe now.”

Her voice cracked again. “Did we win?” She hoarsely asked.

David nodded. “For now my love...we’re safe for now.”

“Larry?” She asked.

She could tell by the look in her husband’s face that Larry had not made it.

“Joseph?” She asked.

“Joseph is just fine Dear, he made it out just fine.”

“And you?”

“A couple of little scratches it all, I’m fine Honey, just fine.”

“And me?”

She saw him swallow before he spoke. “You got a little banged up.... but Doc says you’re going to be all right.” He looked up past her at something or someone and then looked back. “You just need to rest now Baby and you’re going to be fine in a few days.”

She remembered saying “BullSh*ter.” Just before she drifted off through the mists once more.

Sheriff Eric Eckhart put his hand on David’s shoulder. “She’s gonna make it David, she’s a tough ol’ bird. Just hang in there buddy.”

David appreciated the support from his sheriff and militia commander. He knew that Doc Bell had done everything that was humanly possible under the circumstances they were in. He had saved his wife’s life. She would never see

from her right eye again and she would wear the scars of that battle for the rest of her life...but she would live and that was the most important thing in David's mind...she would live.

The wet chill of the evening's air whisked across the back of the neck of the young Homeland Security Trooper and sent a shiver down his spine. Private Brian Wilkerson pulled his field jacket collar up to block the errant breeze and looked out into the darkness beyond the floodlights around the guard post. He was uncomfortable with his first night on post. The company of his Senior Corporal in the shack did nothing to calm his nerves. He was a city boy and had joined the Homeland Security Forces in a moment of patriotic fervor rather than one of the "real military" services that was scouring the planet chasing the ghosts of a probably long dead Muslim terrorist. At least that was the scuttlebutt within the ranks of late. The @sshole that had started this whole mess was probably buried under tons of rock in some stupid mountain on the other side of the planet and here he was getting soaked in the constant drizzle in his own country playing road guard.

For Brian it could have been worse, he had no desire to go off chasing phantoms in a dozen strange lands around the globe and he didn't want to fight in the deserts of Iraq or Iran, or off in some other 'Stan' in that part of the world. He had heard all he cared to about "THE GULF WAR" from an uncle that had fought in that war as a tank gunner aboard a M1 Abrams tank. Brian would have rather been sitting back in a college classroom somewhere listening to a boring professor but his high school grades had never been something to take home to mother. At least not unless you enjoyed being grounded. So here he was in the Pacific Northwest wet, cold, virtually alone and in the dark. He only hoped that things wouldn't get any worse than they already were and he would probably be very wrong about that.

His unit had been placed on alert, mustered up and dispatched out to several dozen remote checkpoints along the major highways spread throughout the region. They were there to supposedly contain any illegal movement by unknown domestic terrorists. In layman's terms, as his Corporal had informed him, their job was:

"...to stop anything and everything that moved and to f*ck up anyone that even

slightly smelled of sedition. If they so much as slightly look crossed eyed at you Private, we nail them to the wall.”

“But don’t we have to have probably cause or something like that?” Brian had asked.

“F*ck them. We’ve got the guns and they do what we tell’em or we cap their @ss and toss ‘em in the ditch!”

Brian wondered if maybe he had made a mistake by not joining one of the “real services”. If only he *had* listened to his parents and applied himself in high school he thought as he stomped his feet to get their circulation going. If only...then he wouldn’t be here in this hole of an assignment watching the drizzle fall though the flood lights in the middle of the night.

It had taken nearly two weeks for Damian and his Youngblood’s to transport the Mormon cache back to his hood through the war zone that his city had become. Limited to what they could carry in their arms or strapped on their backs they made the dangerous trek by slinking through the back streets and alleyways that ran like a maze through this older section of the city. Crossing major streets only when there was no alternative route available they could move the distance virtually undetected.

There had been no more intrusions by the Homeland Security Forces into this section of the city after the ambush of the Crip patrol. They seemed to be rather systematic with their journeys into the city. Hitting the outskirts periodically as if to remind the remaining survivors that escape was impossible and that Big Brother was watching. They would bring their massive firepower to bear on any open gathering or large movement of civilians within the city. Their dark helo’s cruised high overhead as a watchdog on the helpless citizens below and a constant reminder of their position in the food chain.

From within the stronghold that Damian’s people had created they went about the everyday business of surviving as best they could. Damian had never really valued the knowledge and experience of his older neighbors and relatives before the collapse. They were just old, their time was past and they would soon to be forgotten. But it was their collective knowledge that fueled the engine that was now sustaining the “hood”. It was old wrinkled hands that messaged the detritus

of a decaying civilization and gave them a limited amount of dignity at a time when the world around them was taking a nosedive into a new dark age.

His Great-Grandfather with the help of a few like-minded friends had managed to scarp together a chain of generators that gave the hood a few hours of light each night. They had managed to plumb up a water system that not only collected and filtered their questionable water, but also supplied it throughout the stronghold to designated spigots. Three alcohol stills were in constant operation to provide “Shine” for fuel, medicinal use, and of course – some limited libation. But the ‘Elders’ carefully rationed this vital fuel to limit its abuse.

Early on when the true reality of unfolding events smacked them hard in the face, the members of the stronghold had taken a stand to eliminate one of the major factors in what they considered the agent of their modern slavery, drugs. The ganja leaf, various white powders and crystalline monsters that had crippled the weak and the poor among them, were not tolerated within the “hood”. Addicts either left, dried up or died out, such was the hatred of this dragon that had hung on the backs of so many, for so long.

The “hood” began to evolve into what could best be described as...a village. Damian rose to fill the position as their war leader. His responsibility was to protect and hunt for the extended family that he was now apart of. His natural leadership abilities, quick wit and tenacious attention to detail brought him to the front where he shined as never before. Damian was a true hunter on the prowl when he and his peers were outside the “hood’s” perimeter. He missed nothing, not the slightest hint of trouble or potential for gain and it was for this reason and others that he was trusted with this most important position.

His Great Grandfather and several others of his generation gravitated to fill the role of village elders. The make up of this group would probably be considered highly unusual by anthropologist’s off in some dusty ivy league university, in that that over half of the elders, nearly three-quarters of their numbers were Grandmothers and Great Grandmothers. In their own way they were taking the first steps at recreating their world, trying to bring order to the insanity that whirled around them. They were becoming a true community, something that many of them had never experienced in their entire lives. They had to if they were to survive.

Dr. Malcolm Danielson came to on the cold hard floor of the wooden barracks that he was carried to after the beating in the indoctrination room. His colleague Dr. Green had covered him with a green wool government blanket from a near by bunk. His head pounded and he could barely see out of his left eye.

“Easy Malcolm, take it easy. They beat on you pretty bad and you may have some broken bones.”

Malcolm slowly, painfully moved the various parts of his body to determine the damage he had received. He definitely had been pounded on hard, but nothing seemed broken at this point.

“Help me up Ed.” He moaned.

Edward and another prisoner carefully lifted the black and blue professor to the nearest bunk bed.

“Hmmm early Stalag 17 I see.” Malcolm commented, referring to the World War II POW movie from the early fifties that stared William Holden.

“Yes it would seem so.”

“So what are the charges against us Edward?”

“It would appear that we’ve been *tried in absentia* and found guilty of sedition and high treason.”

“WHAT!” Malcolm grabbed his pounding head. “SH*T!”

“That was my first thought as well.”

“When...how...who?” Stammered the bruised professor.

“That I can’t tell you my friend but here we are and it looks like here we’ll stay.”

“Like hell I will.”

“Malcolm you better calm down, you’ve already taken a pretty good beating and from what I’ve heard there’s plenty more where that came from.”

Later that evening they were introduced to the other prisoners in their barracks. It seemed that the government was methodically rounding up anyone that openly had dissented against the reigning status quo. They were especially high handed against teachers and college professors that tended towards any leftward leanings or openly questioned the prevailing ultra Republican right. Malcolm had heard about Lynn Cheney's agenda on freethinking educators that didn't pander to the far right view of education. He had even heard that she and her colleagues had a "hit list" of those educators to be targeted for removal but had ignored such warnings as intellectual paranoia. He was obviously wrong on his summation of the situation.

Malcolm walked to the far end of the barracks where several colleagues were having a discussion on the recent events that had placed them in their current predicament.

"So Dr. Andrade if I understand your point here. It is that there does appear to be a plan or direction that things are leading towards. You're not talking conspiracy theory or anything like that. But humanity does seem to cycle through various mindsets from Village to City States, Monarchies, Sovereign States, Empire building and so on."

Dr. Andrade nodded in agreement. "Yes, but also consider the recent trend of many historians that consider there to have been at least eleven world wars through out history. Not just the two we commonly refer to in our modern era."

He continued. "We do seem to be on the road to some sort of "Imperial Presidency". This actually began with FDR in the 1930's as he tried to centralize control to bring us out of the depression and then to survive WWII. It continued to grow at varying rates through the Kennedy and Johnson eras with Vietnam, until Nixon botched everything up with his Watergate fiasco. From there things slowed down and took some time to gather speed once more. Reagan kicked things off again and very nearly pulled a "Nixon" with the Iran-Contra mess but somehow managed to walk away from that. So along comes Bush, Sr. and now his son, the road we've traveled since 1932 may have wavered slightly along the way but the direction has stayed the same."

"Along with the increasing centralization of authority under the President, are you aware also that the Federal Government has tripled in size since the early-mid

seventies? Was there a real need for that? Are we receiving better services as a result? Do you have more money in our pockets? Are we better off? Or are we paying more (taxes) and getting less for our money?"

Dr. Green chimed in. "I believe that Alexander Hamilton was correct in his concern for the potential of a runaway Federal government. It is like a cancer that will continue to spread and invade every aspect of your life unless you take drastic efforts to curtail it. That was the fear of many of our founding fathers and the reason that so many were against an overtly strong centralized government. There are many advantages to "some" form of centralized authority, but not an all-pervasive and controlling entity, which is what it has grown into and what Hamilton himself warned us against!"

Another member of the group added. "It is scary when you really sit down and think about it. Imagine a Hitler with the kinds of technology that we have today...THAT IS REALLY SCARY. To that end we must be ever on guard and zealous in our protection of our individual freedoms."

Malcolm had heard enough of the intellectual discussion. These people would debate the current situation until hell froze over unless someone kicked them in a place that would get their attention.

"Gentlemen, your discussion would be a most interesting debate in the proper theater. We are however imprisoned as a result of such discussions and you sit here chat about our situation as calmly as if you were in your lounges at home."

The room got suddenly very still.

"It would be best if we concentrated on how we're going to get the hell out of here!"

"But Malcolm...we're surrounded by barbed wire and guns, we have nothing!"

"We have our minds gentlemen, and that is the most dangerous weapon available. That is what sets us apart for the b*stards that have imprisoned us here. They think that we are unarmed and harmless because we are without any apparent weapons. Well I suggest we get to using the one weapon that we do have and teach them a f*cking lesson they won't soon forget!"

Jamal watched the Castle's patrol cross the open street and disappear through the heavy outer portcullis gate into the fortress of Fourteenth Street. His stomach growled angrily as it had not been fed in days and he eyed the full backpacks that the patrol labored under. He had heard rumors of the Castle from the other side of town and had come to see it for himself. It was massive. It commanded the corner of Fourteenth and Elm Streets and linked four of the older four story walkups into one massive structure. All the lower windows and doorways had been bricked up and sealed tight. The upper two floors of outward facing windows were secured with heavy wooden or metal shutters. There was no way to gain access from the outside. He had heard of one of the other gang's attempts to crash through the gate that he had just seen the patrol disappear into. That attempt ended badly for the intruder and showed the power of the "Castle" as it came to be known by all the outsiders.

Jamal had been watching the Castle for two days now, from every angle trying to figure out a way in. He knew that there must be other, secret trails that lead into the mysterious Castle. Their patrols were known to roam through many parts of the city on their gathering raids. He wondered what they were doing in there. While his main concern for his gang was always food and drugs, these strange brothers seemed to be gathering up the oddest things. They would clear out a hardware store, or an automotive parts shop. They took things you couldn't eat. He wondered what they did behind those solid brick walls and he was determined to find out.

Damian stopped at the side of the portcullis and stood guard until the last of his patrol passed under the heavy steel pipe gate. He knew these last few feet were among the most dangerous. There were eyes watching of that he was sure. The hair on the back of his neck always tingled when unfriendlies were near. His eyes scanned the buildings across the street for any hint of danger, his battle rifle ready to respond in a millisecond if necessary. The Beretta made BM-59 felt strange in his hands when he first discovered it in the dead Mormon's house. The hidden armory yielded a treasure chest of weapons and equipment that his people sorely needed to survive in the ever more violent world they had been thrust into. Old Man Jacobson, an elder, had served in the Army for twenty-five years, mostly as a cook, and fought in both Korea and Vietnam, had welcomed the opportunity to instruct and train the Youngblood's of the hood. Damian still

insisted that they maintain a low, near invisible profile on their forages into the city, but he felt much better knowing that if they were pressed – they could respond.

When the last member of the patrol was under the portcullis Damian backed into the safety of the entrance tunnel and the Iron Gate was lowered. A series of heavy inner doors were swung closed behind them as they carried on into the inner ward, at last they could lower their guard and relax. The welcome aroma of cooking filled the air as the troop moved through the inner yard.

“Aaah, the Chin’s are cooking tonight.” Damian thought to himself.

He walked over towards the large wok that was being tended by Momma Chin.

“What be on da menu ta night Momma Chin?” He called.

“Far You, Dam-in, flied kitten. Ever-body else get gung pow chicken.” She cackled.

“Gun-powder chicken!” He exclaimed. “MY FAVORITE!”

He reached his hand in to snatch a piece and Momma Chin caught the back of his hand with her spatula.

“You GO DAM-IN, You eat wit ever-body else! YOU GO NOW!”

He licked his fingers of the hot spicy sauce and made his way from the lower levels up to the roof where he often found his Great-Grandfather tending the garden there. The journey reminded him of one of those PBS specials he had seen on medieval castles. Over the ensuing months after the Big Death, the surviving members of the “Hood” had begun to seriously reinforce the structures that they had laid claim to by default. They cleared the buildings of the dead, burning any of their diseased belongs and began to seal themselves in from the wolves that now openly roamed the empty streets. It was the Old Man that first suggested that they wall up the windows and doors on the lowest levels to keep out the vermin. Then little by little they extended their control to that of the three other nearest buildings. By sacrificing one of the other nearby buildings, gutting it for useable materials: bricks, beams, wiring and plumbing they had been able to continue their building efforts. It was hard and laborious work as they reinforced

the old tenement walkups, filled the outer rooms with cribs full of rock and rubble and thus created a solid dense wall between the outer world and their inner living quarters. Step by step, brick by brick their position slowly improved and with each improvement the survivors became more of a community and a family.

What had once been parking lot and a small concrete covered playground was now walled in and broken up to create the gardens that they hoped would one day feed their entire growing community. It was mostly the older folks of the "hood" that tended the new gardens trying to bring life back to the long covered dirt. The Chin's, who had owned the local Chinese restaurant and the Rodriguez's, a Puerto Rican family brought a wealth of intensive gardening knowledge to the community. While the Chin's idea of using composted human manure was first met with disgust they proved to the Elders that it could indeed be done safely and soon their corner of the garden began to flourish.

Damian felt proud of himself and his community for the first time in his life. While he fully realized the immense danger that constantly circled outside the brick walls of their little world, he also felt hope for the first time. This group of total strangers had survived the Great Death and the famine that had followed. They were building a new world within the confines of a collapsing society. He also felt the weight of responsibility for protecting his extended family. He was no longer just some punk kid in the hood who's future was that of drugs and welfare. He was the War Chief of this urban tribe that was trying to build a new future out of the ashes of the last. His stride was strong and he held his head high as he reached the roof and walked across it through the raised bed gardens to where his Great Grandfather was watching the clouds pass overhead. He wondered what the lesson today would be as he sat down across from the Elder.

Leslie Melton, Colonel of the 1st Patriot Marine Force could not believe his eyes as he read through the documents on the computer screen that Brentwood had opened for them. As he digested the highly classified top-secret Presidential Executive Orders he felt his jaw hit the floor again and again. The several other pairs of eyes that were looking over Brentwood's shoulders likewise could not believe what they were reading.

Echo's of "You've got to be kidding. Oh my God! That's got to be illegal." And a steady stream of "SH*T!" Filled the air.

The next morning Brentwood Davis was walking through the very same rural flea market that he had been captured at just a couple of weeks prior. A heavily armed escort closely watched the pair as they chatted and took in the market.

“I’m still at a loss to believe the information you’ve brought us Brentwood.” Melton began.

“Not half as much as I was when I first came across all that.” He shook his head. “What do you do when the entire world that you have believed in is ripped away from you?”

“Believe me Brentwood I know the feeling, boy do I know the feeling.” He stopped and looked him straight in the eye. “But what do we do now? We know the plan. We have an idea of timeline. But how do we act on this information?”

“I was sort of hoping that you would have those answers Colonel. I’m just a paper pusher. I’m no soldier.”

“Well you’re one hell of a paper pusher there Mr. Davis, and you’ve pushed some serious sh*t right into my lap.”

“Sorry...but...but I just couldn’t sit there and watch this happen.”

“You know Brentwood...at first I thought you were some kind of plant, a spy and I was just about to have you taken out into the woods. Be thankful that Meredith is a better judge of people than I am.”

Brentwood’s eyes widened.

“I’m still having a hard time believing everything on that disc of yours, but it all makes sense now in a sick sort of way.”

“But what can we do about it Colonel?”

“We fight my friend...we fight.”

“But can we win?” Brentwood asked in all seriousness.

“Do we have a choice?” The Marine Colonel replied. “Do we have a choice?”

The heavy drizzle appeared like streaks of silver gray tinsel in the floodlights around the guard shack. Private Wilkerson leaned up against the wall of the shack under the shallow eaves as much as possible to avoid the steady rain that had already soaked him to the bone. He didn't see the shadows that were circling just beyond the ring of lights at the checkpoint. He couldn't hear the near silent movement beyond the veil of rain. By the time his brain recognized the threat of the silver blur streaking towards him it was too late.

The replacement patrol found the Private the next morning. He was still pinned to the outer wall of the guard shack by a pair of steel shafts that had pierced his body and then dug deeply into the wooden shell of the shack, locking him dead against the wall. They never did find the Corporal.

Several hours later the five-ton truck and Hummer drove off and abandoned the guard station. That was the third one this week. The Lieutenant knew he would be in serious hot water for his decision, but he could not risk open mutiny by sending any more of his men to certain death in these remote stations.

“F*ck the Colonel, if he wants these sh*t holes guarded he can come out here and do it himself.” He thought to himself. Man was he going to catch an @ss chewing when he got back. But he felt it was better than getting fragged in the middle of the night by his own troops. The lieutenant was quickly learning about the full weight of leadership and survival that rested upon his shoulders.

“This job sucks!!” he muttered to himself as he leaned back and wished he could be anywhere else.

Desert Doc