

Operation SERF

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5 Chapter Sample Version!

This story, characters and events are fictional.

Chapter 1

Eduard Morgan sat in his wheelchair looking at a laptop on the kitchen table. A household wireless unit connected to a two-way home satellite system fed his browser with the latest news. He and a handful of other residents in his gated community were among the small minority of people in their city who still had regular access to the internet. Given the city's frequent power outages and cable thefts outside his secure subdivision, household usage of the internet had dropped from its national peak only a few years ago.

The internet was well on its way to reverting back to its original users within the walls of government, education, and large corporations. Even without the loss of physical infrastructure supporting the hard-wired, few could afford it given the economic situation. The two-way home satellite system was a luxury even in Eduard's neighborhood, but he still had some personal connections from his past professional career that cut him a good deal.

Eduard was a retired Air Force officer who still took pride in signing his correspondence to his elected representatives and other federal agencies as "Eduard Morgan, Lt Col, USAF, Retired". His letters regarding his military retirement pay coming in later and later each month had been sent more frequently over the past year. There were plenty of internet rumors

that even federal retirement pay would be deposited quarterly and the amounts were going to be “readjusted” lower. He was one of the lucky ones; outside of the federal government and a few multinational corporations, retirement pay and pensions had gone the way of the dinosaurs.

Eduard’s net-surfing was limited to two hours per day within the twelve hours that the power was kept on to his home. This was the internet company’s time restriction. However, he had been using it less than 45 minutes that morning when his last clicks resulted in no pages loading. He tried “refresh” a few times and clicked on some of his reliable bookmarks. Still there was nothing. A minute later the page refreshed on its own and displayed only two simple lines. The first said “Emergency Notification” and the second said “Tune in to local news by Television and Radio”.

“That’s a first,” Eduard said out loud.

Eduard rolled into the next room where Maria, his personal assistant, had been watching TV. She was already advancing through various channels in which each screen looked like a jumbled mosaic of tiny colored squares. Every channel was the same.

“Looks like the local towers are down again,” she said in a heavy accent.

“Leave it on one channel and give it a minute,” Eduard said. “There’s supposed to be an announcement.”

The tiny blocks reorganized into a sky blue background. “Attention: Special Bulletin. Do Not Change Channel.” began slowly scrolling from right to left across the screen. It repeated three more times.

The background changed to red and the next string of text with English above and Spanish below in unified lock-step brought a gasp from Maria. “24 Hour Emergency Curfew Now In Effect. Remain At Home Or Work. Do Not Leave Current Location Until Further Notice. Violation Will Result In Arrest And Detention.” Eduard understood enough Spanish to know the lines said the same thing in both languages. The sentences continued to repeat on the red screen.

“What does this mean?” Maria asked.

“It’s not good,” Eduard replied and looked through the picture window out into the palm-tree lined street of his tight subdivision.

“I know that,” Maria said, “but what’s happening? Did something really bad happen somewhere else?”

“World news was the usual,” Eduard said remembering that the news was always bad, but

not any worse than usual today. He got a momentary sinking dizzy feeling. He reflected upon reports, scenarios, hushed conversations from more than two decades ago.

He rolled over to an analog multiband radio on the coffee table in front of the couch near the picture window. He turned it on and advanced through the daytime shortwave bands. Every international station that was normally clear had either a bubbling or electric fizzing sound pulsing over it that was characteristic of active jamming. Eduard noticed the same thing on many of the domestic AM stations. He switched to the FM band and found only one station working. It only took a few seconds of listening before his dizzy feeling turned to slight nausea.

“These are the ones who have done this to us. These parasites. These blood-suckers. They took our jobs. They took our money. They made our children their slaves. They tried to take our future. Now we have to do something to take it back. Now is the time. It’s our time to take back what’s rightfully ours...”

“Who is this?” Maria said. “This was the only channel you could find?”

“I don’t know,” said Eduard followed by “Yes.”

Hate speech had been made illegal and most real political debate outside of the mainstream had faded from even the local media years ago.

This local station normally carried music and it was now the only one still on the radio. Even internet forums containing angry speech far below what he was now hearing was often blocked by the service-providers themselves. As the radio rant continued Eduard turned down the volume. The vitriolic verbal stream continued unabated for ten minutes as he looked out the window. It wasn't clear to Eduard and Maria who the "They" were being mentioned by the anonymous faceless broadcaster.

"Shouldn't the police stop that?" Maria said. "They should go right to the station and make them stop. It's right here in the city."

"They should," Eduard said. "But, I don't think they're going to today."

A different male with a more somber voice began to talk on the radio. Eduard immediately noticed the more professional tone of the new speaker and turned it back up.

"Ok, everyone, this was just delivered to us. It was brought in by special courier minutes ago. This is the list. I'm breaking the seal on the envelope right now as I speak. Here are the names..."

A non-alphabetical list of first and last names each with a street address was read off. It appeared married couples were read as two first names conjoined with an "and" followed by a

last name and their street address. There were also many people with different last names, but with the same addresses who were read off back to back.

Different names and different house numbers, but the same streets were kept together in the reading. Eduard and Maria noticed the street addresses were all in their city. As the streets came closer to areas familiar to them, they noticed the listing went street by street in one neighborhood at a time. There were no names read from Maria's neighborhood just a mile away over the river.

The announcer continued to calmly read off the names and streets which now entered into Eduard's gated community. A handful of names and addresses on each street seemed to march from one cul-de-sac to another and Eduard held his breath. Two names with one address on Eduard's street were read off before two more names from the next street and two more names from the next before the voice moved past his walled boundaries and onto the next subdivision.

Eduard looked at the house directly across the street from him that had just been read on the air only two minutes ago. Maria also looked out the window as a dirty four door sedan pulled up and four men got out. They were wearing t-shirts and jeans. One carried a crowbar, another a sawed-off pump shotgun with a pistol grip, and the other two men had pistols stuck inside their waistbands.

One man took a drink out of a large bottle of beer and passed it around to the other three men. It was emptied by the last man and dropped on the road shattering it with only the bottleneck remaining intact.

“Who are those people?” asked Maria. “Have you ever seen them before? Do the Shepherds know them? How did they get here so fast when their names were just read on the radio?”

“They’ve never been here before,” said Eduard who was already discounting the coincidence to himself. “I’m sure the Shepherds don’t know them.”

A black suburban with blue and red flashing lights pulled up behind the sedan and three men in tan clothes overlaid with black tactical vests got out. Black balaclavas were over their heads covering their faces except for the eyes. They were armed with pistols on their sides and machine guns slung over their shoulders. One of the men in t-shirts who had arrived a couple minutes earlier waved at the new arrivals as his and his partners’ demeanor remained altogether casual. The newly arrived men retained nothing less than a quiet military bearing as one of them pulled two long black plastic bags out of the back of the suburban.

“Are they going to be arrested?” Maria whispered.

“This isn't going to be an arrest,” Eduard said. “You need to get out of here now – go to the Jones’ home behind us.”

Eduard rolled a few feet across the living room to the closet next to the front door, took out an M1 Garand rifle and pulled the action open. He grabbed a single eight round clip from a coat pocket hanging in the closet and pushed it into the rifle causing the bolt to snap forward and chamber a round. When Eduard ordered the rifle from the Civilian Marksmanship Program many years before it was closed down, he could never have imagined it would be put to use on anything other than shooting holes in paper or marching with the VFW.

“Maria!” Eduard snapped at her. “Go out the back! If I’m not here after things calm down, there’s a coffee can under the sink with some gold coins in it –it’s yours.”

“I know all about the coffee can with the little gold coins,” Maria said quickly. “I want to know what’s going on!”

“Think Sandinistas, Zetas, or KKK, it doesn't matter, but you need to get out!” Eduard looked Maria in the eyes and he seemed filled with an anger she had never seen in the five years she had assisted him.

Something in Eduard's eyes and tone sent Maria out the back door and scrambling through the

overgrown hedges toward the next house. Eduard rolled back to the picture window and quietly swung open a smaller window in the frame adjacent to it. The first four men were already walking toward the Shepherd's front door as the other three heavily armed men stayed with the vehicles back at the road. No one noticed Eduard.

'Fascists, communists,' Eduard thought, 'one thing they all have in common is going for the devout first. I have seven targets and eight bullets. Guess I'll have one bullet to spare today.'

Eduard rested the rifle's fore-end on the open window sill and aimed it at one of the men bearing a machine gun standing closest to his own home. He positioned the sights over the balaclava-covered head which was not protected by armor like the man's torso. Before he could apply pressure to the trigger, the Shepherd's front door opened.

"I'm not afraid of you!" yelled Mr. Shepherd. Mr. Shepherd crossed his arms and stood in the open doorway. The retired religious man's wife was pressed up behind him and looked around from his side. The man with the pistol gripped shotgun yelled something and raised the weapon toward the Shepherds.

"Oh, God damn it," Eduard said barely above his breath as he craned around in his chair, bumped

the rifle against the other side of the window frame and repositioned the sights over the unarmored man holding the shotgun. The angle was such that the armed man was between Mr. Shepherd and Eduard. The flight path and penetrating power of Eduard's 30-06 bullet would take it not only through the thin-skinned thug, but both Mr. and Mrs. Shepherd as well.

"Gun!" yelled the man in the balaclava closest to Eduard's house whose attention had been caught by the sound of a dull wood on wood thud and now saw the rifle barrel sticking out of the window.

* * *

"Sir," said the soldier who had entered the office of First Lieutenant Smith. "The security guards have left the front gates."

"Are they on patrol?" asked 1LT Smith.

"No, Sir," said Staff Sergeant Brown. "They've left. They got in their POVs [privately owned vehicles] and left. There's no one at the front gate right now."

1LT Smith wondered for a moment if the guards' private company had stopped paying them and they had all walked off the job. "Get Specialists Jones and Miller and put them on the gate."

SPC Miller came running to the doorway of 1LT

Smith's office and caught his breath. "Sir, SSG Brown, a Colonel Jordan just called on the DSN phone and said we needed to evacuate the armory."

"Why?" demanded 1LT Smith. "Is he still on the line?"

"No, sir."

"Why didn't you come get me?"

"He hung up," explained SPC Miller. "Sir, he just said who he was and we –these are his exact words- need to evacuate immediately due to an imminent threat. That was it."

1LT Smith silently digested what he was told and reflected upon the lack of information. The unit's commanding officer, executive officer, and First Sergeant had all been called away to an unscheduled meeting at the state capital yesterday. Now a Colonel he had never heard of was telling a junior enlisted soldier to evacuate the armory.

"This is either the commander testing us or someone from the armory in Adam County messing with us," said SSG Brown.

"Possibly, but..." Smith trailed off for a moment. "SSG Brown, get someone from battalion on the phone. Find out if they have a problem with the security guards. SPC Miller, go get SPC Jones

and come back here.”

The two enlisted men left and the officer rose and stood in the doorway outside his office. Both his soldiers went in opposite directions, Miller to the assembly area and Brown to an office just a couple doors down. There were four other soldiers on duty Smith was aware of in the motor pool area.

“Sir!” yelled SSG Brown from the other office. “All the phone lines are down. Computers are down.”

Smith was checking his government cell-phone as Brown came walking back. There was no service on his phone. SPCs Miller and Jones also came back.

“SPC Miller, go round up everyone from motor pool. I need them here. Go now.” 1LT Smith commanded before turning to the other two soldiers. “SSG Brown, we need to issue weapons and ammunition to everyone here.”

“Sir, is this an exercise?” SSG Brown asked.

“I don’t know, but let’s be ready,” 1LT Smith said. Part of him was concerned about over-reacting to coincidences, but there was another part steadily filling with worry about the unknown. “Now let’s move.”

* * *

Mike Shroud sat in his trailer and watched the same text flow over and over on the red background on his TV as he smoked his last rationed cigarette for the day. He had tried his radio earlier and couldn't find a single working station. There was nothing to hear across both the AM and FM spectrums.

Through his screen door he heard and then saw a pickup truck coming down his gravel driveway which snaked through the dense forest in which he lived. He recognized the truck owned by his friend from the farm down the road. When it came to a stop, his friend exited from the driver's side as other men got out of the back. Everyone was armed with rifles or shotguns.

"Have you heard?" said his friend Steve as Mike stepped out of his trailer.

"No, what?" Mike said.

"They're rioting in the state capital," Steve stated.

"My TV and radio don't have much of anything," Mike said before taking the last drag of his cigarette, dropping it to the ground, and stepping on it. "How do you know this?"

"Ted from the State Police said so," Steve replied. "He left with the whole post to go shut down the highway. They got orders from the governor."

“But, you guys are out driving around,” Mike said, “with martial law and all going on.”

Steve smiled and looked at the armed men milling around the truck before saying “That doesn’t apply to us out here. Martial law and all those lists of people are mostly in the city.”

“Lists?” asked Mike.

“Yeah, Ted said there were lists going around. There are people on them and they’re being rounded up. There was someone on a list in the next county, but mostly in the city.”

“Why are they on lists?” questioned Mike. “Are they terrorists or something?”

“Who knows. Who cares. Unless you’re the one on it,” said Steve. “You want to know something, Mike?”

“Yeah, what?”

“You’re on the list,” said Steve in a suddenly serious tone.

The men who had been talking around the truck were all silent. Mike didn’t react in any way. Mike and Steve looked at each other for a moment.

“I’m just fuckin’ with you,” Steve said and some of the other men smirked before they began

talking again. "I don't know why there's a list or who's on it. But if we're on one, we're not going. Oh, and there's one more thing Ted said before he left."

"Yeah?"

"The private security guys were moved to the power plant and the railway station. All the ones at the armory were reassigned. The armory was left wide open," Steve said. "We were thinking about going over there and getting our own five finger federal tax rebate. It's been a few years."

"Don't you guys think you have enough guns already?"

* * *

The large room deep in the mountain looked like something out of the final scene from the movie "War Games". However, rather than personnel in military uniforms, workers in civilian garb ranging from sweaters and slacks to suits either sat at or stood between rows of terminals stretching from one wall to the other. Various electronic maps of the US were projected on two of the four walls in the room. Doors were in another wall and there were some mirrors set deep in the remaining wall. There was no ceiling lighting and the room was dim except for the digital maps and monitors.

On the two walls some maps of the US had a blue background while other maps were green.

Outlines of the nation and each state were in a distinctly contrasting color as well as points representing the state capitals and many other major cities. There was a lot of background noise from typing, mouse clicking, and conversation in the room. As the crescendo of human activity began to rise, the US maps began to slowly change. Some of the states began blinking red as well as the cities and capitals within them. Some states did not change color, but some of their cities or capitals were blinking red.

A middle-aged man in a suit stood next to a much younger man hunched over a keyboard. The younger man would stop typing, straighten up for a moment, rub the back of his neck, hunch back over and begin typing again. He would also drag various windows on his screen, highlight and copy text from it before pasting it onto another window and dropping it down to the task bar.

“Mr. Mond,” said the younger man with a raised inflection.

“Yes,” responded the older man.

“We're getting a lot of outside reports,” said the younger man. “There are also a lot of problems coming in from outside the simulation.”

“What kind of reports?” asked Mond. “What do you mean by problems?”

“We’re getting a lot of requests from outside agencies asking if we’re either running an exercise or requests from inside agencies asking if there’s something different running than what they’ve been briefed on.”

“Request denied,” said Mond.

“Which ones? The outside ones asking if there’s an exercise going on or the inside ones who know there’s an exercise, but asking if it has gone beyond the stated parameters?”

“All of them. Deny all of them,” said Mond.

“Mr. Mond,” said the young man. “The other problems I mentioned. That’s something else entirely.”

“Yes, I asked about those, too. Tell me.”

“Well, Mr. Mond, there are outside –completely outside the system—reports coming in. There are real incidents happening. They’re happening in the red states, in the blinking cities, in...”

“No, no,” interrupted Mond, “that’s all just part of the exercise.”

“I don’t think you understand,” said the young man at first in a louder voice before lowering it back to their compartment of space within the room. “These are not variables in the simulation interacting with our subjects in a controlled

setting. These things are happening for real. In real life.”

There was a long moment of silence and the young man glanced behind to see Mr. Mond staring intently at his back. A chill came over the man as he looked back at his screen. Even in that brief glimpse the mouse-mover noted Mr. Mond had clenched fists at his side and his lips were narrower than usual.

“I can assure you,” began Mond, “that this is not real. None and I repeat none of what you’re seeing on your screen is real. This is all part of an exercise involving hundreds of teams and tens of thousands of workers nationwide. This exercise is taking place on the inside with the adjustment of fictional factors in real time, but it is a fabrication, and despite some insignificant external leakage of information and resulting inconsequential feedback, there will be no real measurable external outcome when it’s complete. Now continue with the next phase of the simulation.”

The young man high-lighted the last list of names before dropping them into the body of an electronic memo and clicking the send button. He opened a new application on his desktop. He positioned the pointer over the “run” button and looked over his shoulder at Mr. Mond. The older man dipped his chin slightly and there was a single mouse click. In a few weeks a long dormant virus would become fully active.

Chapter 2

It was a half hour after dawn and the early morning light provided enough illumination to the living room via the large broken picture window and open front door to Eduard Morgan's home. Mark had regretted allowing his aunt Maria to come back to the home with him to check things out. She was now knees down on the carpet next to Eduard's body sobbing with her face buried in her hands.

Mark looked around the room. The front door, large and small windows and walls had all been peppered with bullet holes. Shattered glass was blown everywhere on the inside of the living room. A rifle with a broken stock lay on the inside of the doorway. Given the blood-sparkled deep gash on the inside of the door frame, it appeared the weapon had been broken against it. The broken butt-stock was covered in blood and bits of brain and hair.

He looked down at the body beside the wheelchair that was flipped backward. There appeared to be a single bullet wound in the upper left chest close to the collar bone. But the real damage had been done to Eduard's head which had been smashed in from the frontal cranium down to the palate. An unpeeled portion of scalp held together some larger fragments of cracked skull on one side barely keeping the remaining interior contents of the head contained. The tilt and condition of the

fractured head was such that only the slightest tip would allow gravity to spill the rest of the brains onto the carpet.

“Maria,” said Mark in a voice loud enough to be heard above her sobbing, but not carry too far outside of the house. “Maria, we need to leave.”

She didn’t respond and Mark gently touched her shoulder “Maria, we can’t stay here.”

Maria stood up and wiped her face. She looked at Mark and then around the rest of the living room. She took a few steps and got a folded light blue fleece blanket that was over the top back of a chair. Maria shook it once to open it fully, and lifted it again in the air allowing it to billow and float down over the upper body of Eduard. It took on his outline and patches of red soaked through the blue synthetic material.

“This is not dignified,” Maria said. “He has a folded American flag back in his bedroom closet. It was his wife’s.”

“We don’t have time,” Mark said. “We’re not even supposed to be here. We don’t know if the Joneses are going to let us stay there until nightfall. I’m sorry, but we can’t stay.”

“You’re right,” Maria said. “This was like the time back in the village before your mother and I came here. This wasn’t supposed to happen here.”

“This shouldn’t happen anywhere, never,” said Mark as he picked up the broken rifle by the barrel. The action and trigger mechanism were still intact. He pulled it open slightly and saw that a live round was still inside the chamber. He picked up the piece of stock by the splintered end less red with blood. “Does he have more bullets for this? More guns?”

“No, he let me trade the bullets to Jose last year,” she said. “He didn’t have any other guns.”

“Did he have anything else we could use?” Mark asked as he wrapped the two pieces of the weapon in a long black rain coat from the closet.

“Yes.”

* * *

“I am *Teniente* Hernando Ramirez,” said the man standing outside of the front gate of the armory. A score of humvees, some with mounted machine guns manned by gunners and one with a rocket launcher were lined up on the road behind him leading to the armory. In the homes and businesses along the street, many people were looking through windows at what appeared to be a severely mismatched Mexican standoff between an invading army and a small group of local guardsmen.

“Mr. Ramirez,” began 1LT Smith before he was immediately interrupted.

“*Teniente* Ramirez,” interjected the man standing before him on the other side of the horizontal tubular steel cattle-style gate which was closed next to the guard shack. A tall chain link fence continued from both sides of the gate and enclosed the public parking area in front of the main armory building. The man added “I am a *Teniente*.”

“And what is a *teniente*?” mustered Smith in a demanding tone.

“An officer in the Army of National Defense of Mexico,” said Ramirez with further explanation, “similar to a Lieutenant such as yourself in your army.”

1LT Smith’s single black vertical bar was clearly visible in the center of his unarmored chest and a silver bar stuck in a blue army flash on his black beret was only a couple inches above his left eye. The Mexican soldier across from him did not have any rank visible on the heavy body armor and magazine pouches that covered his torso and a new-looking camo cover without insignia was tightly stretched over a Kevlar helmet on the man’s head.

“*Teniente* Ramirez,” began 1LT Smith again, “I’m Lieutenant Smith and I’m the officer in command of this facility. Why are you here?”

“We were ordered by General McBride to secure this armory,” Ramirez said. “We were told this armory had been abandoned.”

Smith had heard of General McBride of the US Army, but he was on the federal side and not in the state's National Guard. “As you can see for yourself, we hold this armory. It has not been abandoned. You came all the way from Mexico to do this?”

“No, Lieutenant Smith,” said Ramirez. “We were already in the US on a joint training exercise—one coordinated by General McBride—when we were ordered to do this. We were ordered to come here by General McBride and my own leaders. It was a joint defense decision.”

“General McBride did,” Smith repeated becoming skeptical. He recalled family stories passed down about his great-great grandfather during WWII and the “Battle of the Bulge” in particular when his grandfather's unit ran into German soldiers disguised as American soldiers. This seemed to Smith like a modern but far less skillful attempt at infiltration.

Smith was vaguely aware of the current joint exercise, but it was in the next state. He knew the USA, Mexico, and Canada had been military allies under the North American Defense Agreement for years despite their tightly controlled borders and strict immigration policies

currently between each other. Smith was aware the countries had assisted each other during many natural disasters and terrorist incidents. However, he was suspicious given the earlier timing of both the deserting gate guards and the phone call yesterday. He wondered about outside events and remembered past history in which allied countries suddenly changed sides and attacked those who were once friendly or at least peaceful and neutral.

“Yes, he gave it to me himself in person,” said Ramirez. “Major Frank was my liaison from the US Army and he was there as well. He was in the training exercise with us, but he was ordered to secure another armory. He went to Shelbyville.”

“Why was he securing that armory?” Asked Smith.

“It was being looted,” said Ramirez as he became a little surprised by the question. “There were terrorist attacks on Washington, DC and New York City yesterday. There are riots in your state’s cities. Do you not know what is going on in your own country?”

Smith considered what to say next. He didn’t want to appear ignorant to Ramirez and still wondered what kind of game might be afoot, but he also wanted more information. Even if everything he had just heard was a lie, sometimes elimination left the truth. He was concerned that asking too many questions

about the outside would also reveal that their communication was still down. Still, he had to.

“What kind of attacks on Washington and New York?” Smith asked.

“Bombs. One happened during a special session of Congress. Another at the exchange. There were thousands killed,” Ramirez replied. The Mexican officer looked past his American counterpart at the two other soldiers behind him and then beyond them to two soldiers wearing soft caps peeking above the roof of the armory as if they were archers on medieval battlements. Ramirez guessed there might be a few more soldiers scattered around the facility and at the back. “Lieutenant Smith, we’re here to help you. You need our help in your country’s time of need. There aren’t enough of you here to do this. You can’t secure this place on your own.”

1LT Smith looked back at SSG Brown who was standing a few feet away with SPC Miller outside the guard shack. The other two soldiers were fully within earshot and could hear the entire conversation. The armory in Adam County was located outside of Shelbyville. They couldn’t make any guesses about alleged attacks on DC and NYC or riots in the state capital. If true, though, the significance of everything wasn’t lost on any of them.

The two enlisted men kept their M4 rifles at the low ready while Smith had his arms straight at his

sides. The officer's sole weapon, his pistol, was fully holstered with a lanyard lassoing it to his belt. None of the men wore body armor since this item had never been stored at their local armory. Their personal Kevlar helmets had been pulled months ago under an emergency Executive Order to help make up for short supplies to soldiers who were deploying for the long war overseas. It was with some irony at the time that removal of this required headgear had kept them from using their own handful of military vehicles still remaining at the armory during their most recent annual training. It would have violated safety regulations.

"Teniente Ramirez, I would like to thank you for offering your assistance" said Smith. "However, I am in command of this facility and I am declining it. I do not have orders from my chain of command allowing anyone access at this time."

"Lieutenant Smith, I understand your position completely, but is that your final answer?" asked Ramirez.

"Yes," answered Smith immediately. "Besides, I imagine your own country could probably use you even more than we can. There are many problems in Mexico which could use your attention."

"You are correct," Ramirez said. He stepped forward and extended his right empty hand

through the cattle gate which was chained and locked on one end. The chain was probably far stronger than the two hinges on the other side. "I think my people would be better served by our return home. I wish you and your nation the best of luck in this time. But, may I ask you one favor?"

Smith met Ramirez in a handshake. "If it is within my power."

"We were sent here with hundreds of thousands of rounds of ammunition from your army, but very little food. We used up all our MREs just getting here," Ramirez said. "Do you have any to spare?"

"I can give you MREs," said Smith. "May I also ask for one thing in return?"

"Yes?"

"Some of that ammunition you have," Smith said remembering how his soldiers had found none in the armory yesterday. "We could use some more ammunition."

"Of course," said Ramirez with a smile. "It was yours to begin with."

* * *

"What the hell are they doing?" asked Mond as he stood over a different man at a terminal in a

different row in the large room.

“Sir, it looks like they’re shaking hands,” said the man as he scrolled a mouse wheel and the screen zoomed in to view the wristwatch bands on both soldiers.

“I can see that,” stated Mond. “Why is that soldier even still there inside the gate? Why are any of them still there? Tell me why the Mexicans aren’t on the inside already?”

“I don’t know,” stated the operator. “The US unit has already taken the other armory. This doesn’t appear to be members of that unit inside of this one. They’re not wearing any body armor and none of the vehicles inside of the wire are warm. I would guess these are soldiers who were already in place when this began. It’s the locals. Those soldiers weren’t supposed to be there when the Mexican unit arrived.”

“I know that,” snapped Mond. “Back up the frame view so I can see both sides. This is going to muddy things up completely in this sector by the time the next element of play was to come into effect. If those US soldiers stay in there, that element will not come into effect with the local population.”

“I have the entire Mexican unit in view on the road and there are eight soldiers inside the wire,” stated the man as the view on his screen not only enlarged but made a change of angle as well.

The view from above turned as if a camera was slowly circling above the entire town.

“What’s keeping them from moving in?” said an exasperated Mond who was still clearly rhetorical to the man who didn’t answer until asked a direct question. “What does the drone have onboard?”

“Full complement,” the operator stated. “Two missiles and two guns, one with explosive and the other with non-explosive ammunition.”

“Excellent,” said Mond. “We might be able to turn this into an even better opportunity.”

“How would you like it done, sir?”

“Don’t pull the trigger just yet,” admonished Mond. “Does this facility have anything of value in it for the immediate next round of takers or in the long-term view?”

“Sir, hold on please,” started the man before turning to the worker at the next terminal. “Hey, Bob, what does this armory mean to us?”

“Just a second,” said the other worker as he glanced at his co-worker’s screen, looked back at his own and made some mouse clicks. “No material or strategic value. Everything except the small-arms, food, and a few unarmored vehicles were already removed. No ammunition or fuel is on-site. Communication cut yesterday.

This is a symbolic action objective. Mexicans were to move in, then retreat when...”

“Yes, yes,” interrupted Mond. “I know the original plan. This could still work with minor modification –maybe even better than originally planned.”

Mond touched the operator's shoulder “How accurate is the drone?”

“Sir, you saw the handshake,” said the operator. “How would you like it done? It's your call and I can do it.”

“Let's see how we can stir up the wasp nest,” said Mond before going silent and watching a full circular pass again on the screen. “Put one rocket into the armory's main building and put some non-explosive rounds into the lead Mexican vehicle and the men at the gate. Both sides of the gate.”

“Sir, although I appreciate the dramatic effect of the missile on the building, someone might actually see it flying in,” cautioned the operator. “May I suggest some of the explosive rounds instead for the hit on the building?”

“You're worried about witnesses,” said Mond. “How old school of you. That isn't going to matter in a few weeks. Use the paints and brushes I originally asked for but feel free to be individually creative, yet subtle, with the brush strokes. Are you capable of applying that kind of

high art?"

"Yes, sir, I'll just have to wait a few seconds for the right angle over the Mexican column with the single rounds and then I can launch the missile when the sun..."

"Don't tell me how you're going to pull the trigger," said Mond. "Just do it."

"Yes, sir," said the operator followed by some mouse clicks a few seconds later. "It's finished."

"This is still just the beginning," said Mond. "Take the drone to the next armory. We'll come back here later."

* * *

"Sir, take your hands off the computer!" one soldier yelled at the other who was ignoring him. The soldier who just gave the order had an armband signifying he was a Military Police officer. Another younger soldier with the same armband also moved into the room with him. A far older soldier at the antique oak desk continued to type on the keyboard and tap on the mouse pad without making a glance of acknowledgement toward them.

"Sir, lift up your hands and move away from the computer!" he bellowed again as one hand brushed past his pistol and went to a small taser on his belt.

“Stop,” said a voice from behind as another older soldier entered the room next to the two MPs and put his hand on the MP’s wrist before he could draw the non-lethal weapon. “That won’t be necessary.”

“Excuse me, Colonel Barry,” said the MP as the officer let go of his wrist and pushed by.

The older soldier walked over to his similar-aged counterpart who was still typing and oblivious to them all. Barry came to a stop in front of the desk and with one hand calmly reached out and unplugged the Ethernet cable from the back of the laptop. The seated man stopped typing and looked up as Barry let the cable fall to the Persian rug on the floor.

“It’s over, Colonel Gordan,” Barry said. “You’re finished. You’re people are finished.”

“Over?” said Gordan as he sat back in the leather-covered thick padded chair. “I’m not the only one you’re up against. You won’t be able to stop us all.”

“Things have gone too far already,” Barry said before looking back at the MPs. “Sergeant, take him into custody.”

* * *

“This is getting boring,” Steve said as he sat on

the couch with three other men across from Mike who was fully-reclined in an easy chair. Three other men were lying on the carpeted floor asleep. "Who else wants to leave?"

There was no answer from the men who were awake on the couch. The men on the floor didn't stir. Mike moved his chair into the upright position and reached over for a toothpick on the lamp stand next to him and put it in the corner of his mouth. Mike looked at Steve without saying a word. Steve sat up straight and gave him an angry look.

"What?" Steve said.

"Are you A-D-D or something?" Mike said without taking the toothpick out.

"A-D-D? What do you mean by that?" Steve asked quickly.

Mike took out the toothpick and asked "Did you forget yesterday already?"

"What do mean? Those helicopters?" Steve said and one of the men on the floor stirred.

"Yes, those Apaches," Mike replied. "The ones that scared your butts back up here after you left yesterday."

"That was yesterday," Steve said. "They haven't been back. What's your point?"

“Shut up,” said one man who stirred on the floor. “I’m trying to sleep.”

“No, you, shut up,” Steve said to the man before looking back at Mike. “If something was going to happen to us, it would’ve happened by now.”

“No, it hasn’t happened because you guys aren’t running around out there being stupid,” Mike said as he rolled the toothpick between his thumb and forefinger. “That’s going to change as soon as you guys start playing like it’s ‘Red Dawn’ in town. Like I said yesterday –don’t get mixed up in someone else’s fight. Wait till it’s over and then see who’s still standing when the dust settles. When it’s over.”

“I don’t have to listen to this,” Steve said as some spittle escaped into the air on the last word. “You act like you know something. I mean what the fuck were you in the Marines? You were a cook, right? Or, was that just your cover and you were really some kind of SEAL team guy?”

“I was a specialist in all aspects of food service,” said Mike as he leaned forward in his chair. “I wasn’t anything else. Why don’t you just take a long deep breath and calm down before...”

“Before what?” Steve yelled as he stood up. “What are you going to do? Pull a Riddick and kill me with your toothpick?”

With the reflexes of a snake lunging toward a mouse, Mike shot his hand forward plunging half the toothpick into Steve's thigh and withdrew the unbroken wood in its entirety. Steve fell to the floor with a high-pitched scream just missing one of the men who had been asleep. All three of them jolted awake. Two of the men on the couch were frozen with wide eyes while the third unsuccessfully attempted to stifle a laugh which came out mostly through his naval cavity.

"Get a hold of yourself," Mike said to Steve, "I didn't break it off in you."

"You stuck me!" Steve said as he sat up and looked at the small wet area forming on the side of his jeans.

"That's right," Mike confirm. "I took you out with a toothpick."

"Like an olive or a little cube of cheese," said the man who had laughed on the couch.

Mike helped Steve up off the floor and Steve stood on both legs on his own.

"There are some band-aids in the medicine cabinet in the bathroom," Mike told Steve. "Stick one on your leg, then come back here, and sit down."

The men who had been startled awake were sitting up on the floor. Mike looked at them and

then at the other men on the couch. No one said anything as Steve limped slightly down the hall.

“There is something going on out there and it's very dangerous,” Mike said. “Just give it one more day and stay out of it. You can wait here.” “Mike,” said one of the men on the floor. “I'm worried about my family.”

Mike opened the side door of his trailer and looked out the screen door as the cool morning breeze came in. He looked back at the man and said “I am, too.”

Chapter 3

“This is an illegal assembly!” proclaimed the man wearing a slate gray uniform, black boots, olive drab web gear and carrying a submachine gun.

The uniformed man walked down the center aisle between the rows toward the altar area where a young man stood at the head of the sitting group. Two other men dressed in a similar manner with weapons stood back toward the entrance and behind the people. The faces of all three were cleanly shaved and straps from their gray helmets were snapped around their chins. When the uniformed man made it to the front he turned around to face the audience with his back toward the young man. He let his firearm dangle by its sling, took off his helmet and held it under his left arm.

“Now I know all of you weren’t attending a service here on Friday morning when the curfew went into effect,” he stated as he scanned the audience of fifty people packed into the single room building. There was a mix of the local population ranging from families with young children and some teenagers to middle-aged couples and elderly women. “Those horses haven’t been standing out there for over two days and all those vehicles are still warm.”

The adults seated in the room kept eye contact with him, but said nothing. Some of the younger children whispered quietly to each other as they

looked at books in the pews. A teenager was breast-feeding her infant off to the far side of the room and its suckling sometimes rose above the pops of burning wood in a nearby iron stove. An elderly man sat up slightly and folded his arms before checking his watch.

"We just heard singing before we walked in here," the man said as he hooked his helmet to his web-gear by a small carabiner and then put his black-gloved hands on his hips. "And now we don't hear a peep from any of you."

"What do you want from us?" asked the young man behind him.

Without taking his hands from his hips the uniformed man looked over his left shoulder at the bearded young man and said "Are you in charge here?"

"We are all leaders here," replied the young man.

"Really?" said the man in a half growl as he turned half way toward the man and then waved his gloved right hand out in the air toward the people. "Leaders of what?"

"Proclaiming the word to the world," answered the young man.

"The word?" the un-helmeted man said sarcastically.

“Yes. The word.”

The gray-clothed man stepped toward the bearded man, reached over with his left hand and grabbed the long hair kept in a ponytail at the back of the young man's head. An obese teenage boy in the front row suddenly stood up, but an elderly woman grabbed him by the sleeve of his sweater as she whispered “No.” Neither of them could see the red dot painted on his back by the laser mounted on one of men's weapons behind him. She tugged again and as he sat down the laser light went out without any shots fired.

Still holding the bearded man's hair with one hand, the man in gray quickly kneed his captive's leg from behind causing the man to drop down into a submissive position on the floor. He lifted the man's head up by the hair and with his right hand drew an extendable baton from his belt. With his left hand the gray man snapped the bearded man's head back up so he faced the ceiling and with his right hand flicked the baton fully open. The chrome shaft of the weapon was clearly visible even to those seated at the back of the room.

“Give us the word!” yelled the man in uniform before he smashed the young man once across the mouth. As he lifted the bloodied baton back up a single tooth flung itself from the shiny cylinder and landed at the feet of the teenager.

There wasn't a second blow. The gray man released his hold on the ponytail and let his victim drop completely to the floor. The injured man on the floor gargled and gasped as the other man stood over him. He writhed on the floor and coughed a few times before he spit out another tooth which pelted lightly against a wooden podium nearby.

The man in gray turned and faced the people with a grin before looking serious again. He looked at the fat boy in the front row who still had the old woman firmly holding the sleeve of his sweater. Both were looking down at the first tooth at their feet. The boy was breathing loudly—clearly the exhales of anger rather than fear.

“What are you going to do, Hoss?” the man said sardonically as he stepped toward the teen in the front row. The crunch of the tooth was heard beneath the heavy black boot of the man in gray. The teen didn't move or look up as the man used the teen's other sleeve to wipe the blood off his baton. The breathing from the teen became more pronounced, but there was no movement from the boy otherwise.

“We're out of here,” said the lead man in uniform as he collapsed each of the sequentially larger pieces of the baton back into the handle, put it back in a pouch on his belt, then donned his helmet and walked briskly toward his partners at the main doorway.

He and the other two men burst outside through the double doors leaving it wide open for the cold air to blow back into the large room. Light flakes of snow were slowly coming down, but had not colored the ground white as they quickly melted. They strode through the middle of two rows of rusty cars and trucks and horses still hitched to wagons and buggies. They approached an open top jeep at the back of the parking area out in front of the building. The smoke from a woodstove pipe off to one side of the building's narrow roof curled past the naked branches of the nearby trees.

"God, this is going to get cold today," said the man who had aimed the laser sight.

"Yeah, and we've got three more places to check out today," said the other who had also waited at the back. "How did we get stuck with the jeep for this assignment?"

"Shut up and quit your bitchin'," said their leader who had wielded the baton. "Be thankful, you're not on horseback for this shit."

Just as the men were about to get into the jeep, a dozen other men swarmed them who had been hiding behind the vehicles, wagons, and some evergreens in the nearby tree-line. The three were on the ground immediately with weapons pinning them to the ground without a shot being fired.

“Oh, crap,” said the gray leader on the ground.

“Good morning,” said a man in a camouflage pattern made up of green, tan, brown, and black arranged in a random digital pattern. He wore a boonie hat of the same camo pattern. The eleven other men were dressed the same way and the assault rifles they carried were painted flat tan. The man in multi-color motioned for his comrades to stand their prisoners up. People started coming out of the building including the young bearded man holding his bloodied face. The people remained close to the open doors, though, and did not approach this new group of armed men.

“Has there been some sort of mayhem here today?” asked the multi-color camo leader of the gray man who had squeaked out the two words upon capture.

“Fuck you,” said the man in gray calmly.

“What was that?” asked the camo leader.

“You heard me.”

“Yes, I did,” said the camo man. “But are you sure that’s the answer you want to stick with? Maybe this is the time for you to repent and ask these good people for their forgiveness?”

The man in gray spat at the camo man and the phlegm hit the other in the cheek. The gray man

had a look of calm determination mixed with a fully resolute sense of fatalism his inquisitor was quite familiar with from the past. The camo man casually wiped his cheek with two fingers on one hand and flicked off the mucous chunk.

“Stand them up toward the tree line away from this place of worship,” the camo leader ordered his eleven followers. As they did the old lady who had held the teenager back came quickly hobbling forward.

“Don’t do this!” She yelled and the camo leader turned to look at her. She pointed her finger angrily at him as she said “Who do you think you are?”

“I’m the one who oils the hinge of the narrow gate,” he answered.

The old lady hesitated and then shivered more in horror rather than the outside temperature before she asked “What gives you the right?”

“I can assure you that this is not by my right,” he replied. “Go and tell the others to go back inside now. Close the doors and tend to the injured. Don’t look outside the windows. Now go.”

The group of men kept the trio standing as the old lady hustled everyone back inside the building. The doors were closed. The leader of the camouflaged men took a pistol out of his brown leather shoulder rig and shot each of the

other three men in the face. Each of the three had stood unbound and had accepted their fate without additional struggle before they fell one by one.

“John,” said one of the camo men to the leader as other men dragged the bodies past the tree-line and deeper into the woods. “We need to get that jeep out of here before the others come looking.”

“Yes,” said John as he switched magazines in his pistol for a full one out of his jacket pocket. “Siphon most of the gasoline but leave some in it. Tell one man to take the jeep and drive it back to the bridge. He can dump it further away alongside the riverbed. Do not set on fire. Have another man trail him and bring him back here to his four-wheeler. They can meet us tomorrow at the next rally point.”

As the other man walked away, John looked back at the building and saw no one looking back at them through the windows. The snow began to fall harder and was beginning to stick to the ground as the air temperature began to drop. He reached into another pocket on his jacket and pulled out a satellite phone. John tapped in a few numbers and put the phone to his ear.

“We’re going to be a little late,” he began. “Can you get on the net and give me the weather forecast for the next point? You can?”

Good. Yes, I can wait a moment. Excellent. Thanks. Good-bye."

He put the phone back in his pocket as one of the men approached the jeep and others came back from the woods on four-wheelers which had very quiet mufflers attached. John yelled loud enough to be heard by all "It's going to snow all night. Let's get moving."

* * *

"Sir," said the man at the wheel next to the captain of the small Canadian Coast Guard patrol craft. "What's going on? Why is this worse than usual?"

"I don't know," said the captain as they watched the rowboat coming into better view. There were at least ten adults on board who were wearing winter coats, hats, and scarves. A plastic tarp was pulled across the middle like a blanket in an attempt to shield the occupants from the wind and light snow that was falling. This was the second boat coming from the US side of southern Lake Huron in less than an hour.

"Stop! You are entering Canadian waters!" warned a voice out of a loudspeaker mounted on the Canadian craft. "Turn back or we are authorized to escalate force."

The captain and his crew usually encountered one boat of illegal economic migrants per day.

On a weekly basis, they also intercepted the movement of drug or gun runners going north or someone with untaxed goods moving south. The craft carrying goods rather than people were often motorized and could be quite fast. But whether it was illegal people or contraband moving across the water, this usually happened at night. However, it was only approaching noon for this day and they had already encountered a second boat.

The captain could recall a time when the CCG was not a paramilitary organization and would not have been used in this way. Armed RCMP officers were added on an interim basis a few years ago before a new round of training in the use of weapons for interdiction were required for every crew member in the CCG. Everyone who wanted to remain gainfully employed adjusted well to the change. It was either that or move to western Canada.

“Sir, they haven’t turned back,” advised another man in the control room.

“Proceed to the next step,” ordered the captain.

A siren began on the coast guard vessel and was left on. A non-lethal sonic weapon on the bow of the ship was pointed at the small boat and activated as well. The people on the smaller boat jostled around a bit and covered their ears and the rowing ceased. The tarp almost blew away when most of the hands had let go of it.

The weapon was switched off for a couple seconds and then reactivated again for a few more seconds to make a point before switching back off. The siren wound down and ceased.

“Turn back now or you will hear the bad sound again!” bellowed the voice over the loudspeaker.

The small boat began to comply as the rowers changed course. They had difficulty battling with the choppy water and it almost tipped over as they went parallel with the waves. After the small boat was fully turned toward sight of land, they began moving again to the South.

“I can't believe they're even trying on a day like today,” said the man at the wheel. “What's happened in America?”

The captain was silent since he was not one given to idle speculation. He only hoped the boat people could make it back to their own shore alive.

* * *

“Mommy, when is daddy coming home?” a small girl said as she lay wrapped in a blanket on her mother's lap.

“Soon, baby,” the mother replied as her own mother opened the woodstove in the common living area of the family's home.

The middle-aged woman stoked the fire before adding another split piece of wood from a washing basin nearby. There were only two more small pieces left. She closed the glass and steel door to the woodstove and turned the heavy handle down which made a loud metallic squeak.

"I hope it is soon," said the older woman. "He works all day cutting wood and then can't even keep us stocked."

"Mom, please don't start."

"Your dad kept us stocked," said the elder as she sat back down in a wingback chair and pulled a blanket over herself. "No one had to tell him to do that. He just knew it had to be."

"Well, he's not here is he? And whose fault is that?" said the younger woman and the child buried her head under the blanket.

"I don't want to talk about it," retorted the woman sitting on the chair.

"Like I said –don't even start," said the younger woman in a louder voice.

"Mommy...grandma..." the little girl said from under the blanket. "Please don't fight."

Both women went silent. They watched the

flames through the glass window of the woodstove. A few minutes later the door opened and a young man walked in. He stomped off the snow on his boots, set down a backpack, and began taking off his winter outer clothing and putting the garments on brass hooks on the wall.

“Oh, yeah,” he said. “That heat feels good after a walk like today.”

“Daddy,” said the little girl as she sat up on her mother’s lap and pulled the blanket from over her head. “Grandma says we need more wood.”

“Everyone needs more wood, sweetie,” said the young man as he sat down on a chair next to the door and took off his boots. “That’s why daddy has a job and I can feed us all.”

“Speaking of food,” began the woman on the chair.

“Yes,” interjected the young man as he picked up the backpack, “speaking of food. Let’s see what we have in here. We’ve got some potatoes, a loaf of bread and four eggs. Thank, God, I didn’t break the eggs on the way home. I think the potatoes are from Canada.”

“That’s it?” said the younger woman. “That’s all he gave you today? You cut wood all day and help fill a train for Illinois and we barely get

enough to stay fed until tomorrow?"

"I can remember when this country used to export food," said the middle-aged woman in a calm reminiscent way that sounded more akin to someone in their golden years. "It also wasn't long ago when we sold cars and other things to people all over the world."

"Yes, that's it," said the man as he sat down next to the mother and child and gave the little girl a piece of bread. "Be thankful for even this much today."

"What's that mean?" asked the young woman as the child received the bread and began chewing on it.

"After I got to work yesterday there was some news going around," said the man as he took some bread over to his mother-in-law and sat back down. "Frank heard on the radio in his truck the day before that some terrorist attacks had happened in DC and New York. There was a military order given that we were supposed to stay home. None of the rest of us had heard about it so we came in yesterday anyway. The train was still there that came in Friday night. Those guys on the train said they were still told to pick up the load. So we all figured yesterday we'd just finish the job. Even Frank showed up with his truck again today because he wanted to get paid, too."

“When again?” said the woman in the chair after she had quickly chewed and swallowed the piece of bread. “Did this happen on Friday or Saturday?”

“The train coming or Frank showing up with the truck?” asked the man as he gave a slice to his wife.

“Neither of those,” said the woman on the chair. “When did the terrorist attacks happen?”

“Frank heard it the day before yesterday,” said the man as he broke off a piece of bread for himself.

“You mean Friday?” asked the older woman.

“Yes. Something happened on Friday.”

“I wish we had some batteries for the radio,” said the woman as she looked back toward the fire.

* * *

“Ladies and gentlemen, the President of the United States of America,” said the TV announcer as a man took to the podium with the presidential seal on the front and cleared his throat.

“What is he even doing sucking air on live TV?” yelled the fat man sitting on the black leather couch facing the TV. His feet were propped up

and crossed at the ankles on a glass-topped coffee table in front of him. A short glass with Russian vodka on the rocks was next to one heel and a Cuban cigar rested alight in a crystal ashtray beside his other. Two dozen men, many in suits, were off to the sides or behind the couch also watching the TV, but none sat with the man on the couch. "Someone answer me now God damn it!"

"Apparently, he survived," said one of the men.

"I can fucking see that!" retorted the seated man. "Why isn't he dead in DC? The only way I should be seeing him right now is being pulled dead from the rubble. I want an answer why that did not happen. Tell me why?"

There was some mumbling among the men as the fat man leaned forward then sat back with the drink in his right hand and took a sip. He pressed the mute button on the remote with his left hand and the TV went completely silent before he dropped the remote onto the cushion next to him. He looked around, waved his left hand once in the air and cupped it behind his left ear. "I'm waiting."

"There's been some chatter indicating he may have been purposely moved beforehand," said a different man.

"Who moved him?" asked the fat man before he took another sip and appeared to relax a bit

more.

“We know the Secret Service moved him off the schedule, but we don't know who gave them the order,” replied the same man. “The federal agency heads and the Joint Chiefs were all tied up in the exercise and were locked out of the real world. They still don't have half a clue about what's going on.”

“Someone had a clue,” stated the fat man. “Does this fuck on TV have a clue yet?”

“No,” said another man who then stepped through the other men and stood at the fat man's right. “Intel says he had no idea it was coming and doesn't know why he was moved out in time. We don't know who else knew in advance. There has been no communication among departments, agencies, military posts, or even a single field agent or junior officer upward explaining any independent actions one of them might have taken. Whoever did it, isn't communicating with the president or anyone else in their chain of command that we can hear. We're not even sure the people he's staying with did this.”

“Is Mond and his people a part of this?” the fat man questioned.

“No,” said the man on the right. “They haven't said anything about it. They're still too busy playing games. They're probably seeing the

President on secure satellite right now like we are.”

“Good. Pull Mond’s plug,” said the fat man before he finished his drink. “It should’ve been lights out for that asshole and his drones yesterday. In the meantime, take this feed, edit it, keep a few uplifting sound-bites and then put it back in the trough for our own people to lap up after our towers get switched back on tonight. This doesn’t change the message we’re going to put out tomorrow. Then ours goes on heavy rotation.”

“Yes, Governor.”

* * *

“Sir, please don’t move,” said the Mexican Sub-Lieutenant as he put one hand on Ramirez’s chest and another on the arm which had an intravenous line taped to it.

“How long have I been out?” asked Ramirez as he turned from looking at the ceiling of the humvee to the other officer. He was laid out on a stretcher which went down the center of the humvee’s interior between the occupants with two soldiers on each side.

“Hours,” the officer replied. “You have been in and out of consciousness since yesterday.”

“What has happened?” asked Ramirez. “Tell me,

Subteniente Gonzales, did you fire on the Americans?"

"No, sir," said Gonzales. "Someone fired on us and the Americans. We fired on no one. The Americans at the armory fired on no one. But there have been losses."

"Tell me everything" ordered Ramirez.

"We suffered two killed and one wounded in our lead vehicle all by a large bore weapon. The Americans lost at least six men. Three of them were killed at the front gate. They were also all killed by a large bore weapon, but we couldn't see where any of the shooting came from. The other Americans were lost when their main building blew up. We believe it was hit by a missile. Our turret gunners heard the whoosh sound before the explosion. We don't know where that came from either," explained Gonzales.

"What happened to the American officer at the gate?"

"Dead, sir," said Gonzales. "He was nearly cut in half at the waist. There was a lot of...We thought they had had killed you, too. There was one American who survived unscathed and another who was slightly wounded. None of them had made any prior movements against us. We found afterward that none of the Americans inside the armory had any ammunition. No

cartridges in their magazines and no spent shells on the ground. There must have been others who attacked us both.”

“I agree,” said Ramirez. “There must be others. I suspected the Americans didn’t have any ammunition even when I was talking to their Lieutenant. I think their communication had also been cut off. I need some water.”

Gonzales put a drinking tube from a hydration pouch into Ramirez’s mouth.

“We are almost out of fuel, but we are close to General McBride’s forces,” said Gonzales.

“No,” said Ramirez after he spit out the tube and attempted to lift his own body before the driver quickly reached over and put one hand firmly down on Ramirez’s shoulder.

“Order the convoy to stop!” Ramirez yelled.

“Sir, please don’t move” said the driver as they came to a stop and the Sub-Lieutenant radioed the convoy to stop as well, “you will start bleeding again. You must stay still –you have lost most of your right arm.”

“Gonzales,” Ramirez said as he reached out with his left arm and took the other officer by the cuff of the sleeve. “Do not go to General McBride. I think the Americans are attacking each other. We can’t be in the middle of this. We are going

to be blamed for what happened at their armory. This will only get worse for us.”

“What should we do?” asked Gonzales as he rested the handset on his leg as some brief chatter and beeps on the radio continued for a few seconds among the other vehicles in the convoy before falling silent.

“We must go south,” said Ramirez. “We need to get out of the middle of this fight.”

“Sir, I’m sure the men would agree, but we are almost out of fuel and the border is still miles to the south,” said Gonzales. “How would we get there?”

“We’ll do what my grandparents did every year in the old days,” said Ramirez. “We’ll walk.”

“What about the cartels?” questioned Gonzales.

“We’ll cross that bridge when we get there,” said Ramirez.

“What will we do with the mounted weapons and ammunition? We can’t carry all of it.”

“I’ll regret what might happen with it, but we’ll have to leave it all behind,” Ramirez said sincerely before he looked at the driver with some confusion and asked “Did you say I lost my arm?”

Chapter 4

“Why were you off mission?” asked the man sitting at the kitchen table in a farmhouse on the south side of the Ohio River. “What were you doing 30 miles inside of Indiana yesterday?”

“I lost three of my men,” replied John who was seated across from the man. They were the only two men in the room. “I needed to retrieve their complete remains and give some payback.”

“John, I regret you’ve lost some men, but there are going to be losses in this war,” began the bald man with a face wrinkled by a life of hard weather in the outdoors. “We have you on a critical mission and there isn’t time for personal vendettas. We’ll have a lot of time later to exact appropriate justice.”

“Scott,” began John, “I don’t think you understand. They took my men’s heads. I want them back. This isn’t just about retribution; it’s also the morale of my men over the long-run...”

“Stop right there” Scott said sternly. “The long-term is not your problem it’s mine. And, don’t think for a second that I haven’t suffered my share of severed heads. Been there, done that, played the tit-for-tat when you were still on your momma’s. I’m sorry about your men, but you don’t see the big picture. This intel has Mond somewhere in our area and we need you looking for him and not getting side-tracked.”

“Intel? Really?” John said in an incredulous tone. “What kind of so-called intel begins with ‘it is highly likely Mond is in a secure location in Kentucky probably in an area next to a boundary where three states meet.’ Has someone looked at a map?”

“Yes,” replied Scott before leaning forward and putting his elbows on the table and laying his hands down crossed. “I have been where you are sitting right now and I understand your anger. It is the only reason why I am tolerating your attitude right now. But, you need to understand, and I mean clearly understand, that my tolerance has its limits. I want you back out there on mission making your way toward Ohio.”

“Great,” said John still somewhat angry, “only four more corners to go. Do you really think Mond is going to sit still and wait for me – especially inside unfriendly territory? He could be in a high-rise in Chicago or Indianapolis maybe one floor beneath the President right now for all we know.”

“That’s not how Mond works,” explained Scott. “Mond might be a civilian fobbit –he was when I met him twenty years ago- but he will still operate inside enemy territory wreaking havoc as long as he can. He can handle enemies fighting each other all around him. He won’t stop until he’s forced to move. When we cut his link, he’ll be helpless. We have another problem now, too.”

“And what’s that?” asked John as his anger deflated.

“The fat man knows Mond is somewhere in our territory,” answered Scott. “He’s going to send in his own teams. This is why I said you don’t see the big picture yet, John. Right now the factions are mostly concerned with internally suppressing their own populations and positioning themselves. We’re not at full war yet. It’s going to be hard playing hide and go seek with Mond and fighting the brown shirts sneaking into our own backyard without going off to the next block looking for some reds to fight.”

“So Mond indirectly uses us as a protective hedge against the fat man,” said John. “What’s the military doing?”

“For the most part the military hasn’t even reacted yet,” stated Scott. “Other than securing the borders, picking up the pieces on the East Coast, and protecting their own bases, they’re still waiting for orders. Right now they’re either getting no orders, conflicting orders, or suspect orders. As the news comes out about the attacks and they see how the chips are falling, they’re going to be forced to take sides.”

“And that news is?”

“First it will be home-grown domestic terrorists,” replied Scott without hesitation. “No foreigners

on this one. The factions are all in agreement on how their game starts at least. But it will get hairy fast when the talking heads in different media outlets around the country begin pointing fingers at public figures. Parties and feds followed by the states will be split. It has already happened out of the public eye. But as the curtain fully opens for the public's view over the next few days, this is not going to be the usual so-n-so's failure to do his job or an entire department's lapse of security followed by firings and resignations, we're talking about open accusations of multiple public figure's involvement in terrorist acts followed by actual firing squads and scenes of fighting in the streets. Think break-up of Yugoslavia rather than C-SPAN hearings and LA riots."

"So it's really going all the way this time?" John said after a few moments of silence.

"Yes," Scott said as he continued his explanation. "Over the last 72 hours each faction has already attempted to use the old law enforcement apparatus in attempts to detain or arrest other factions' high-level members and there has been resistance. Again, we're not talking about people negotiating on a location to meet followed by the old backroom deal that maintained the nation's balance of power between the factions for decades; we're talking about shoot-outs with bodyguards and even between agencies as loyalties are tested. This has been mostly at the federal level, but it is also

starting in key states. Outside of what happened in DC and New York, there have been scores of assassinations across the country. Even the average person on the street knows that something on a far larger scale is being orchestrated right now. They can't do much about it. Between the old security state and the factions' private armies the sheep are being kept under control. Mostly. But, this game is already going beyond internal repression of the herd. There are too many players and they each want to control the board."

John was silent again before asking "Where are the physical lines being drawn nationwide – besides just between us and the others across the Ohio River?"

"We're good on the South side of the Ohio River from all the way east of the Mississippi River straight across to the Atlantic and back down to the tip of Florida. The gray faction you've met holds everything north of the Ohio River and across Pennsylvania. They're trying to get others west of the Mississippi to throw in with them. Between us and them on the East Coast there is a large area of FUBAR even outside of the cities that went toxic. On the positive side, the West is mostly out of play right now. That won't be for long, though, and they're going to have to make a decision," said Scott. "I would love to talk with you further, but I have a meeting with Fort Knox and you need to re-supply and get back out there."

“Thanks, Scott.”

* * *

“Let’s call the committee to order,” said the first man. “Do we have a volunteer for secretary for this meeting? OK, thanks. All matters are open here for discussion, so let’s get started.”

“Thank you, Mr. Chairman, if I may begin first,” said a lady who appeared to be the youngest member of the group seated with forty other people at a number of tables which had been set up in a large box shape in the center of a large conference room with a very high ceiling.

“By all means, Stacey, please start us off,” said the Chairman.

“Wood shipments have arrived on-time from Michigan and Wisconsin and will be distributed for sale in the city as soon as the public control order is lifted. I need to note that we’re getting reports in the city about households and independent shops running out of firewood as they wait out the control order. I’m concerned this could lead to outbreaks of civil unrest – outbreaks which could be avoided if we eased things now. When can we lift the control order?”

“Well, let’s have internal security answer that one for us,” said the Chairman as he looked to the man seated at his right.

“We had some rioting in cities which didn’t get as much snowfall, but it looks like state assets have kept most of the situation under control,” said the other man. “The weather shut down all the cities and large towns further north which we were initially concerned about going into this. There were also isolated incidents across our entire area where people resisted the control order and still went to a place of worship sometime over the weekend beginning Friday night through yesterday. Behavior modification worked successfully with that in most locations. However, we did lose some teams in the wild areas of southern Indiana and northern Michigan. But, I’ll have the word go out to lift the control order tomorrow at dawn.”

“How many men did we lose?” asked another man with a crew-cut who sat across the open square of tables.

“Not many,” replied the man. “We lost about twenty of ours and fifty auxiliaries between the mod operations and attempts to take down other factions in flight. About three times that number of public service personnel from across the states was also killed during the riots. I’d say we’ve fared well. Better than expected. When can we start enforcing the internal no-go areas?”

“As soon as I have complete control of the air,” said the man with the crew-cut.

“And, when is that?” said another woman.

“I can’t give you a time-line yet,” replied the man. “I don’t know what kind of assets we or the other factions are going to end up with just yet.”

“What does that mean for us right now then?” she asked.

“It means we can’t risk the air we do have right now. It’s very limited. We can’t blow our air force in year zero,” he replied. “By the way, how’d you manage getting me some nukes for what I do have?”

“Not well, I’m afraid,” the woman answered. “I was told I couldn’t have any of the cruise missiles from out West.”

“Who told you this? What did they say to you?” asked the Chairman quickly back to back.

“It was an Air Force general –I can’t remember his name,” she began.

“Cass, what exactly did he say to you?” reiterated the Chairman.

“He told me I was nuts –he used that word-before he signed off,” Cass said.

The Chairman let out a chuckle. “You’ve got love those military types who will still play it by the old book. We’ll need to send him the new

edition. Find out where he has family, but also keep an eye on him. Let's see who comes to Bastogne's aid."

"I'm sure it wasn't a General Bastogne," said Cass.

"Who's General Bastogne?" asked the man sitting to the right of the Chairman.

"It's not a person, it's a place," began the man with the crew-cut as murmurs and side conversations began, "back during World War II..."

"Enough, people, enough" said the Chairman and the talking ceased. "Let's stay on topic, please. Bullet points only. Next."

"Speaking of nukes," said a frail man with a laptop, cell-phones, and satellite phones scattered over his portion of the table in front of him. "The UN and EU are wondering about ours. They keep calling me all hours. The Chinese even called me once over the weekend. I had to turn off all my phones before I even came in here. It's been hard to get any real work done today."

"What about the Russians? Did they call?" Asked Cass.

"No," replied the frail man. "Nothing from them yet. Not a phone call or an email."

“Did you check your fax machine?” asked another man in jest which was followed by some chuckles among the group.

“We’ve made it clear far in advance that we’d pose no threat to them,” said the Chairman. “Let’s move on to other business.”

“The President asked again today to see you,” said another man. “He’s been asking all weekend.”

“By the way,” began the Chairman, “how did he get dropped on our doorstep? Any answers yet? Gilbert, can you tell us anything?”

“I really think that was just a death spasm from the machine moving on its own,” answered the man with the crew-cut.

“When the head was removed from the machine and the eyes were put out,” the Chairman said as he looked at each of the people sitting around the outside of the box, “we weren’t suppose to end up with an old mouthpiece floating around. When the new machine is put together, there is not going to be a part labeled ‘president’ on it. We might have worked him in yesterday for that nice fireside chat to comfort the flock, but everyone needs to bear in mind that his position isn’t part of the new model.”

“What about using him to get some nukes?” asked Gilbert.

“No,” answered the Chairman quickly. “That’s just going to confuse the new people that we’re trying to work into this program who are still on the outside. Again, it’s not part of our model. Not in year zero and not in year one thousand. Anything else?”

“Mr. Chairman, the President had asked to see you.”

“Oh, that again, yes,” said the Chairman. “Hasn’t someone shown him the secret Kennedy takes a drive in Dallas tape or dangled him over an open elevator shaft yet?”

The room went completely silent not only from a lack of human speech but from the holding of breath and the purposeful stiffness that kept clothing from even rustling. The frail man who had been typing lightly as everyone spoke kept his fingers lifted without movement above his keyboard.

“Oh, that was bad,” said Cass.

“Yeah, not even funny,” added Stacey.

“Ok, ok, so I’m not much of a comedian,” said the Chairman. “But, you guys have no humor and are way too serious today. David, how’s the training with the new volunteers going?”

“Very well,” said the man seated to the

Chairman's right. "Some had asked over the weekend to assist in the cities on the East Coast, but we leaked those minor incidents from the wild areas I mentioned earlier and it kept their attention focused on our problems closer to home. I'm glad we didn't have to agitate them ourselves to give them a sense of purpose."

"I need to be clear about this again," began Gilbert, "that when David's new people get issued the gray uniforms they all get red tabs. That includes their political leadership."

"Gilbert," said David, "I heard you the first time when we talked about this last year. I remember it and don't need to be told twice."

"Chill, guys," said the Chairman. "Right, we still remember. Red is for David and black is for Gilbert. Speaking of Gilbert's guys running around on the hinterlands, how are things going with the other factions?"

"We've run into the nationalists all along the Ohio River. They still hold both sides of every bridge and were able to enlist many federal and state forces without any delay. So far we're unhindered as we begin movement across the northern plains..." explained Gilbert before he was interrupted.

"No one's out there to be an obstacle," said David loudly without looking up as he wrote some notes.

“The area southwest of Illinois from across the Mississippi River,” began Gilbert again as he looked down at his own notes, “to the east border of Texas is unaligned right now. We’re not sure who’s in control from Texas through the Southwest and to the West Coast. There was a lot of air movement over the weekend between Dallas, Santa Fe, Phoenix, Las Vegas, and LA. We’re still working the patterns for those. Also, some regional air movement between Boulder and Salt Lake City as well. It’s been silent in the Pacific Northwest with no pressure toward Alberta we can see.”

“As it should be,” stated the Chairman. “Anything else? No? Ok, then this meeting is adjourned until tomorrow.”

* * *

“Governor,” said the man from within the room as he looked at the fat man standing out on the balcony. “I have the transcript from the committee’s last meeting ready for you.”

Without turning or speaking the Governor lifted one hand from the rail and motioned the speaker forward. The other man came out on the balcony of the high-rise building looking out over the city. Straight down from the top floor where they stood was a semi-circle drive lined with palm trees which went under an overhang to the entrance of the building. Past some of the

downtown buildings was one of many golf-courses within the city. Looking far off in the distance were a few bare stony short mountains which seemed to get progressively smaller as they backed up to the vanishing point on the horizon where flat tan earth met a clear blue sky.

"Sir," said the man as he handed the papers forward.

The Governor turned, took the cigar out of his mouth with one hand and took the papers with the other. "Thank you."

"You're welcome, sir."

"Let's see what we have," said the Governor as he started reading the first page and a smile came to his face a minute later. "Excellent. Go ahead and funnel part of this intercept back to them. You can leak any part of this except the part about the Russians. Do not mention the Russians. But, cut as closely to that part as possible."

"Sir?" replied the man in a confused tone.

"Don't worry," assured the Governor before he took a puff on his cigar. "I'm completely sober."

* * *

"Jim!" The young woman yelled to her husband as she looked out the window next to the

woodstove. "The truck is here."

Jim rushed over to his outdoor clothing hanging on the brass hooks on the wall and began dressing. He put on his boots and picked up his backpack which had contained the family's food the day before. He put a bottle of water in the backpack. His daughter Lilly and his mother in law Beth came over and gave him hugs.

"Daddy I wish I could go with you," said Lilly still hanging onto her father.

"Well, maybe you can," said Jim before looking at his wife. "Judy, this morning is just a trip for supplies into town. We'll have to pass back by here again on the way to work, so we could just drop her back off."

"Mommy, can I?"

"Sure, why not," replied Judy.

"Do you think there could be room for another?" asked Beth. "I haven't been to town for a while. Maybe I can trade something for batteries."

"I only see Frank sitting in it," said Judy as she looked through the window at the truck.

"Well, I guess so," Jim said. "We just can't bring back a lot of stuff."

"Double A's don't take any more room than my

pocket," said Beth as she put on her winter coat and hat and started dressing Lilly with her boots first.

"What do you have worth trading?" asked Judy.

"I still have a couple DVDs stashed away," Beth said as she took them out of a drawer and put them in her coat pocket.

"Those?" said Judy with some skepticism. "They're not exactly hot titles."

"It's worth a try," said Beth before she and Lilly waved at Judy.

"Bye, mommy"

"Bye, sweetie," Judy said from her spot standing next to the window as the three walked out and closed the door behind them.

The four occupants of the extended cab truck drove away from the house in half-tire deep snow between two lines of bare trees and bushes. Even when there wasn't snow on the ground it was little more than a two track dirt path through grass and weeds. The truck exited the private drive onto a county road that was equally unplowed. The only tracks visible were the ones made by the same truck that had just gone in.

In fair weather this county road would be seen to

be reverting from hard-top road back to gravel. It had not seen new asphalt, let alone an official taxpayer-funded patch, in at least ten years. A few more miles down this county road led to a state route that would now go unplowed for the rest of the winter season. Even this road had only seen a couple more sets of tires through it earlier in the day.

The state route was the last road in the county to have seen repairs by a professional crew and that was completed four years ago. Since then not only had some stretches become so potholed to look like a long slice of Swiss-cheese, but other areas were regularly impassable due to conditions exacerbated by the weather. If the road wasn't flooded in places a couple feet deep for a week or more in the Spring due to the clogged ditches and broken tiles of a deteriorating drainage system; it was closed by snow in Winter for possibly weeks at a time. In between some natural thaws the only times the road really opened during wintertime was when private contractors plowed ahead of loggers moving large loads of wood. That lasted only until the next big snowstorm. The best time for travel from June through November still required four wheel drive and a heavy suspension just to handle crossing some of the broken spots.

"There's a cop ahead," said Frank. "Coming towards us."

"How do you know it's a cop?" asked Jim as he

looked down the road at the unmarked SUV with headlights on. "Because he has his lights on?"

"Because he even has headlights," replied the driver. "I haven't seen that SUV out here before either. Damn it."

"What? What's wrong?" asked Beth. "You're not carrying something illegal are you?"

"No," said Frank as the two vehicles approached each other and were still more than a few seconds apart due to their slow speed to cope with the road. "There's still a control order. We're not supposed to be out here at all."

"Jesus, Frank!" said Jim. "Why didn't you say something? My kid and my mother in law are with us."

"I've been the only one out here," said Frank. "We'll just be cool, maybe it's not even a cop. Maybe one of the poachers has a new car."

"Poachers are armed," Jim said.

"Grandma?" Lilly said behind the two men as she sat with Beth.

"It's ok, sweetie," said Beth in her best reassuring voice.

"Do you have your pistol?" asked Frank.

"It's at home," Jim said. "Do you have your rifle?"

"It's behind the backseat," Frank replied. "But it's unloaded anyway."

"Wait," said Jim. "He's stopped. We need to stop."

Frank brought his truck to a complete stop. The two vehicles were a little more than fifty yards apart. A few heads were visible through the windshield above the front and back seats of the SUV. One of the back row heads was completely outlined as that person looked between the two others seated in the front. Although the front windshield wasn't tinted, the side windows were and when combined with the overcast early winter sky and distance it still made it difficult to see any more than human silhouettes.

"What are you doing?" asked Jim as Frank made a U-turn and pulled away at a higher speed.

"I'm going back."

"I don't know who these guys are," said Jim. "Don't lead them back to my house."

"Jim," said Frank as he looked in the rear view mirror and saw the other vehicle resume course, "the only tracks out here are mine and they go to both of our houses and the worksite. I'm going

to take us all to work and we'll sort it out there if they want to follow us."

"He's flashing his head-lights at us," said Beth as she looked over her shoulder.

"OK," said Frank as he quickly did another U-turn. "They're definitely not cops. Screw 'em, we're going into town like we all planned."

"Oh, shit!" Jim said as the two vehicles passed each other and he could see the men in the front seat were wearing helmets followed by the large black fore-end and folded bipod of a weapon sticking out from the passenger's open window behind the driver. "Did you see that?"

"Maybe we should pull over," stated Beth. "We'll just say we didn't know we couldn't be outside."

"I'm not pulling over without a siren and red flashing light," stated Frank. "These could be some guys out to rob us. Ok, they just turned around and now they're following us. I'm going faster."

* * *

"Stay with him," said the man in the seat next to the driver of the SUV. "Now get up close and give him a tap."

"Shit, he about lost it there," said the driver as he stepped on the breaks and backed away. "I

don't want us to crash into him."

* * *

"Grandma!" the little girl screamed in a high pitch as the truck nearly went sideways and fish-tailed as Frank retained the vehicle on the road and kept going.

"I'll hold you, sweetie," Beth said as she scooted past the center of the back seat and wrapped herself around the child seated behind Frank.

Frank kept the truck going as fast as possible without losing control on the snow, but the truck was still swimming back and forth on it. Every so often he would hit a pothole which made control difficult, yet he still managed to keep going.

* * *

"No more cat and mouse," said the man next to the driver of the SUV. "Stay behind him, but move off to his right.

He looked to the man seated behind him to the left who held a belt-fed machine gun pointed out the window. "Put a short burst into his left rear tire."

"Roger that," yelled the man over the air coming through the window as he pointed the weapon more out the window and re-shouldered the stock from right to left as he tried to get a better

angle on the truck. He squinted over the cold air and the immediate watering in his eyes it caused and pulled the trigger. A line of automatic fire started past the left corner of the truck before it went back down toward the rear left tire, looped back up into the driver's side of the vehicle breaking part of the left rear glass and then diagonally across the bed of the truck before ending on the right side of the open tail gate.

"I said a short burst on the tire!"

The SUV driver stomped down and held on the brakes causing the anti-locks to kick in. As they came to a controlled stop on the road they watched the truck slow before sailing sideways across the other side of the road. It turned 180 degrees and came to stop facing them from the white open field. The driver's head was leaning on the glass on his door, but the front-seat passenger quickly emerged from the truck's right side and ran around the front of the truck to the door behind the driver.

The SUV passenger next to the driver jumped out of the vehicle and pointed a bull-pup assault rifle toward the truck and yelled "Stop right there! Move back from the vehicle!"

The man with the belt-fed and another man to his right also armed with a bull-pup rifle exited from the SUV with their weapons raised as well. All three advanced forward as their own driver remained seated. They could hear sounds of

panic, but not clear words, from the man who had just ran around the truck and opened the other door. The first man out raised his weapon into the air and let out a three round burst.

“Move away now or I will shoot you!” their leader yelled and the man backed away from the truck.

“Oh my God,” cried the man who stood before them as they came past the front of the truck. “You’ve killed all of them.”

“Don’t move,” ordered the lead man in the gray uniform before he glanced at the other one with the belt-fed. “Cover him.”

As the third gray man with the bull-pup covered the truck from the front, the gray leader moved toward the driver’s side. Through the open back door he could see two motionless heads laid over in the back seat, but also some blood running down the inside of the window where the driver’s head leaned against the glass on the closed door. He swung open the driver’s door and the driver’s head quickly tipped to gravity but the body remained in with the seatbelt. Blood was evident across the back of the driver’s head through his yellow stocking cap and his front left cheekbone looked severely deformed under freshly swollen but un-punctured skin.

The gray leader stepped back and looked again through the open back door at the woman and

child slumped over together on one side in the back seat. He brushed aside the long hair on each and checked for the pulse on both necks and found them fully lifeless. He pushed the adult's body back a bit from the child's and reached his un-gloved hand between the two of them and felt around before removing his now bloodied hand and looking at the back of the driver's seat.

"Those five-five-six bullets are always unpredictable," the gray leader said over the sobs of the man who was standing only ten feet away. "One couldn't even penetrate all the way through this guy's head after it broke the back window, but it looks like we had another one go through the sheet metal, this woman, this kid, and still plant itself in the back seat."

"Maybe it's in the driver's ass," said the other man in gray with the bull-pup who had lowered it and moved around the side between the leader and the other man still holding the belt-fed on their prisoner. "If you want to check that, too, I could get you a single latex glove."

"No, but I was just a little curious about what this one did," said the leader before he looked over at his follower with the belt-fed and the man who was still sobbing, but now standing with both his arms raised at right angles in the air. "Don't you know what a short burst is? Here let me show you."

The leader let his bull-pup hang down by its sling, walked over and took the other man's belt-fed weapon before pointing it at the surrendered man and tugging the trigger once. Approximately half a dozen rounds slammed into the chest of the man and he fell backwards into the snow. "Now that's a short burst. This is not a video game with unlimited ammo. We only have two more belts for this thing so I don't want you to waste it."

"What do we do about this?" asked the other man with the rifle.

"See if they have any weapons in the truck," said the gray leader as he handed the belt-fed back to its original carrier. "If there is one, make sure you put it with this guy in the snow. Come to think of it, go ahead and grab that revolver we confiscated yesterday and put it next to the driver. That should muddy things up a bit for the locals for the time being. Now call them in to clean this shit up."

"Hey!" yelled the driver who just stepped out of the SUV. "Chicago says the curfew is going to be lifted."

"That isn't going to make this look good," said the gray man with the belt-fed as he looked at a few wisps of steam rising from the open wounds on the body in front of him.

"Don't worry about that," said the leader. "That

isn't going to make any difference out here. I've heard from higher this is going to be a no-go zone. So it was either we shoot this guy now or he'd be shooting at us from an overpass next month anyway. Trust me; this one would've been a problem after he pulled himself together."

Chapter 5

“Thanks for meeting with me, Colonel Barry,” Scott said to the officer seated across from him. The two men were alone in the Colonel’s office within the wire of Fort Knox. “I had hoped we might have the commanding general here for this meeting as well.”

“Scott,” said Colonel Barry, “it’s just going to be you and me today. Anything you say to me I will pass on to the general. I know the general appreciated the information you gave us regarding Colonel Gordan. But, to be up front with you, our future meetings are just going to be the two of us.”

“Does that mean that we can’t count on any armor from you?” asked Scott.

“That’s one thing I always appreciated about you,” Barry said, “just business up front. So with that let me just say to not read anything into that particular decision for now.”

“So you guys are going to sit on your hands and see how this plays out from the sidelines?”

“Scott,” said Barry. “It’s that kind of pushing that just never played well for you on the Hill. Sometimes you need to play the politics for the appearance in the game itself.”

“I didn’t have time to play the game with them

and I have even less time for it now," Scott said. "This nation is going to completely pull itself apart if we don't act now. We could already be in Indianapolis and Chicago putting a stop to one piece that's about to break off."

"Most of us," began Barry, "and this just isn't us at Fort Knox, want to stay put a few more days and let the civilians figure their end out first. Outside of the East Coast most of the cities are secure and there's no active threat coming from outside CONUS [Continental United States] right now. But, we have a very vocal minority who are wondering if the leprosy has gone too far already. They want to stay completely hands off of the civilian side, but do want to set out and secure our own resources right now. Then there are those of us in the middle who don't want to be stuffing a sausage casing outside the wire if another cow hits the fan. No matter which direction it comes from."

"Jesus," Scott said. "DC and Manhattan are in ruins and the official back-up sites have been actively locked out of communication. No one is paying any attention to the line of succession among the survivors. The civilians have completely disregarded their own Continuity of Government plan. We have different shadow governments around the country vying for authority with cabinet members and agency heads assassinating each other. Don't you see a coup happening here right before your eyes? Help me go get the President. We can at least

use the figurehead of office as a starting point for this country to rally around. Please help me."

"Thanks for making my case," Barry said. "This is exactly why the general doesn't want to roll tanks into two different cities in an attempt to locate the President. Cities which I might add are completely calm right now."

"The President is probably being held under duress right now," began Scott.

"He looked fine to me in his speech last night," interrupted Barry. "The TV is working again and there are even commercials on it..."

"I'm the one who had the President moved before the bombs went off in DC," Scott cut back. "He wouldn't have survived otherwise. I haven't been able to communicate with him since then. What I do know is there's a fifth column that's come out into the open up north right now. They're very well organized, using the authority of federal and state agencies, and already taking control of the local population. There's something similar happening across a large part of the southwest all the way to the West Coast."

"We're aware of what's going on up north," said Barry. "We also know what's happening in the southwest under altogether different leadership. All of our communication and intel hasn't been cut. Knowing this doesn't make any difference in

our position. That still leaves us the problem of three shadow governments trying to give us orders. And, if we initiate active intervention at this point, we could end up assisting the greater of the evils in the long-run.”

“But it has been said,” Scott said, “and I quote ‘Evil prospers when good men do nothing.’”

“Save it,” said Colonel Barry.

“How can rescuing your Commander in Chief and restoring the President to the full power of his position assist evil?”

“That’s the point, Scott,” replied Barry. “How do we really know he even needs rescuing? And, with everything that’s been going on should we be restoring him to full power right now?”

“I don’t know if he needs rescuing, but at least the President could be a starting point for fixing things.”

“You’re going to need to bring me something,” said Barry, “in regard to the President needing our help because right now all you’ve got is a communication issue with him. By the way, if you could move him, then why not move him somewhere you could control in the first place? Why not send him straight south?”

“I could only warn of the threat to him, not pick his destination once in motion,” replied Scott.

“After he was on the ground, we ended up with two signals. One is him and the other is a ghost. Both have been maintained the entire time.”

“So who did that?” asked Barry.

“I’m fairly sure Mond had a hand in at least part of that,” Scott said.

“Oh, yes,” said Barry with a smile, “the mysterious Mond you keep warning me about. The man you said who is more of a threat to this country than any faction by itself. As far as we can tell, he has a few traitors helping him and a few drones. I’ll be honest with you; we fail to see the greater threat he poses. But, anyway, thanks again for pointing out Colonel Gordan to us.”

“Ok,” said Scott without missing a step. “What can you tell me about Gordan and his use of the drones?”

“He was able to have some re-armed and re-fueled,” said Barry. “None of the military sites he once accessed will re-service them if they return. But, we don’t know how many other drones he may have repositioned around the country.”

“How many were launched locally?”

“He launched a high altitude drone and two heli-drones,” replied Barry. “We don’t think those have been used anywhere yet. We had reports of others operating across the southwest. Some

of those have been falling out of the sky when they couldn't re-fuel. A few the Air Force shot down. If it's not joint-owned in the air, it's being removed now. That much we could all agree on."

"Those local drones could be waiting anywhere right now," said Scott.

"I guess we can pray for more bad weather," said Barry. "Thanks for visiting. We'll talk again. I'll have the Sergeant show you out now."

* * *

"Dad," the bearded man in his twenties said after he entered the front open area of the log home, closed the front door, and stomped the snow of his boots. "The French are here."

The other bearded man in his early fifties barely lifted his eyes from the book he was reading as he sat on the large leather couch with his legs stretched across a primitive-style rough cut wooden coffee table in front of a large soapstone woodstove set a couple feet out from the log and glass wall. A fire danced behind the glass on the stove door from a log that had been put in a few minutes before. A long black stove pipe went up past the upper loft landing and through the roof. The man turned another page within a very dog-eared black and white cover soft cover edition of "Tao Te Ching" by Lao Tsu. The son who had just entered sat down on one

end of the couch.

“They’re not far behind me. They’re with the guys on the other sled. Can you do me a favor?” asked the younger man.

“What would that be, Daniel?” said the father.

“Please don’t get all Yoda with these guys,” replied Daniel. “We have a good case and a chance to make ourselves heard outside of Michigan.”

“Do you really think that the reason they have come here has anything to do with our case?” the older man stated more than asked as he closed his book and gently tossed it onto the table.

Before Daniel could answer the front door opened and a group of men came in one by one and also began shaking the snow off. Most of the men wore heavy camouflage coats and hats. Two other men wore gore-tex coats in brighter shades, one red and the other yellow. It looked as if a group of hunters and a pair of skiers had all made reservations at the same vacation lodge. After coats were removed all the men wore various styles of sweaters and long sleeve sweatshirts. One of the visiting pair removed a hard-shell case from his backpack, opened it, and took out a small digital camcorder. The other visitor took off his boots and walked over to the two men sitting on the couch.

“You must be Josiah Shroud,” said the man as he came to a stop next to the older man on the couch. “I’m Phillippe Granger and this is my cameraman Jacques Lance.”

“Granger,” said Josiah and offered a handshake which was reciprocated, “how appropriate.”

“You’ve heard of my work?” asked Phillippe as Josiah motioned him to sit on a matching leather chair that was set at a right angle to the couch.

“No,” replied Josiah as they both sat down. “I just like the name. How was your trip here? What kind of delays did the attacks cause you?”

“We had just landed at O’Hare in Chicago when news of the attacks came,” said Phillippe as his cameraman came by and circled the group to get a good angle before mounting his camera on a lightweight tripod with extendable legs. “The martial law kept us in our hotel two extra days, but we were still able to get our ride up here until the road stopped in town. We left word at the tavern you had written us about. The dog sled ride was quite exciting. We had never done that before.”

“That’s just how we get around up here once winter has come,” said Josiah. “How was travel south of here? We had heard there were checkpoints.”

“Yes, there were still many checkpoints until we got to your town,” said Phillippe. “We had travel papers from Homeland Security and this made things easier for us.”

“Yes, I’ll bet it did,” said Josiah. “I’m wondering why you still bothered to come here rather than change plans and head for the East Coast to cover what’s happening out there instead.”

“As you can probably imagine,” began Phillippe, “things are very bad there right now. Since the first report of the bombings on the capitol building and the exchange building it also now seems that there were multiple dirty bombs – some kind of radiological weapons. Jacques and I weren’t really equipped to handle a story like that. We’ve heard that tens of thousands of people living in both DC and NYC are already very sick. Travel papers alone won’t protect us from something like that.”

“No they wouldn’t,” agreed Josiah as Phillippe looked around the room and then toward the bookshelves along one wall of the great room not too far from them. Some of the titles were large enough on the binders to be read from where they were seated. Phillippe looked down at the single book on the coffee table.

“You have quite a collection,” commented Phillippe. “Many religious and historical texts from around the world.”

“These books are just my personal favorites,” said Josiah. “We also use these when we teach world history to our home-schoolers.”

“This will lead nicely into our interview,” said Phillipe. “How many children do you have living here with you?”

“Only a dozen of school age right now,” answered Josiah.

“They are all yours?”

“None of them are mine,” said Josiah. “They’re children of nieces and nephews. My grandchild –Daniel’s son- is just a baby. I need to clarify that Daniel’s family is the only one living in this house with me. We have some other family members scattered around the property in their own homes. We give out our books as needed to them and also to non-family members across the county.”

“Yes, that is what we are here about –the property and the controversy. Can you tell us more about the land here and your family living on it?”

“The land was all bought by me within the last twenty years. My wife and I started with only fifty acres and it grew from there. Even before she died we had built up hundreds of acres and started encouraging our extended family to move out here,” said Josiah. “This included the

wives and husbands of my brothers and sisters and any of their in-laws who wanted to live here. Some of them also bought their own land. Everyone has their own house who wants one."

"The court records we read said you have personally amassed nearly 4000 acres. How were you able to buy this much land?"

"Easy," said Josiah. "Michigan's economy had collapsed; there were few jobs north of Lansing, and a lot of unemployed individuals and bankrupt companies who needed to sell over the last ten years."

"But this still took money to do. How were you able to this at a time when so many other investors were already over-extended?"

"Gold."

"Gold?"

"I bought and sold gold at the right times," said Josiah. "This allowed me to buy land at the right time; when it was very cheap because others got in at the wrong time. They were grossly over-extended and when either they or their bank came up short I was there with cash and coin. There were plenty of auctions around me where I was the only one who even showed up. I did all of this without a single loan from anyone. It is all bought and paid for."

“But there is the issue of back property taxes,” stated Phillippe. “This has led to your difficulties with the county and the state.”

“There is a county in name only here,” said Josiah, “which in reality provides absolutely no services to anyone still living here. It is completely bankrupt. There are no county or township employees here. Someone from Lansing –a state government bureaucrat- files paperwork once a year and sends me a letter to the tavern in town marked ‘general delivery’ because there is no regular federal postal service to this area. Those letters always claim that I owe them back property taxes. Taxes, which I might add are at the old 2010 rate and have never been reassessed since then.”

“This led to your legal challenge in court in Lansing?”

“Yes,” said Josiah, “and I wouldn’t call it a real court or even some place where due process is actually practiced. My first so-called hearing included the same bureaucrat sending me letters who also sat on the same side of the table as someone else with the title of ‘Hearing Mediator.’ There was no one I would even consider a judge at that first meeting. I don’t think those two people could even pass a bar exam let alone get a law degree. When I attempted to work out a deal with them on a currently affordable rate per acre, they completely refused. When I asked about speaking with their supervisor, the ‘Hearing

Mediator' said she was where the buck stopped. I wasn't satisfied with that so I filed a petition against them in the State court just a few blocks away from them that same day. Those of us who no longer have a court system functioning within our home county are allowed to do that now. But to make a long story short, that court held a pre-trial meeting without even serving me notice, changed the date of the hearing, and then held proceedings without me even being present. Next thing you know I get another general delivery letter notifying me of hundreds of thousands of dollars in back property taxes and fines."

"So you are not able to pay this?"

"That's not even the main issue here," replied Josiah. "This entire process wasn't even done legally right in the first place. This was the way things are done in some banana republic, not in this state –the country- I grew up in. When it's done like that it's just amounts to theft by the government. Now, secondly, since this is a property tax issue and I want to make sure I have your attention here, Phillipe..."

"Yes, you do."

"If the point of paying property taxes is to support the local government and for that same local government to provide services to the residents who pay those taxes, then tell me this: where are my local services?"

“Do you want me to answer that question?”

“Yes, Phillipe, tell me what local services you've seen since you arrived here?”

“I haven't really been here long enough to know.”

“Well, there aren't any here,” stated Josiah. “My son and the other guys will take you on a tour of the area tomorrow and show you this for a fact. But let me tell you there's a lot missing that used to be here ten years ago. We used to have plowed roads this time of year. In fact, we used to have functioning roads. But, I guess there's not much use for roads if there's not going to be local police, fire, and ambulance vehicles using them. No school buses for the kids either. In fact, don't even get me started on what happened to our schools here over the last ten years. We'll just stay on common basic infrastructure which everyone uses.

“We have no law enforcement outside of a State Police post. But there's no need for local cops and keeping a county 911 call center staffed after the phone lines and the cell towers get pulled up and every gas station closes except for one in the county. Add this to shutting off all natural gas lines and then the electrical grid for this and many of the counties around us. How is that supposed to maintain business or to even provide for the general welfare of the people

who live here? Why is that although this state has nuclear power plants and wind farms all along Lake Michigan that all the electricity gets sent off to Grand Rapids, then Lansing, the other cities along I-94 and ends in Chicago? The only place still even on the grid near here is Traverse City.”

“Well, those were private utilities and the economy was very poor,” said Phillippe. “Can you really blame such government and business decisions made during a severe global depression?”

“That I understand,” agreed Josiah. “Really, I do. But if that was the case, then why didn’t we see our property taxes reduced accordingly and as quickly? Why is it that although we have been reduced to subsistence living even by 19th century standards that I haven’t seen my property taxes reduced to less than a dollar an acre? Why is it that when I saw banks and corporations have all their liabilities wrote off and pension plans, both private and public, declared null and void with no further legal obligation, that my back taxes couldn’t be forgiven as well?”

“I can’t really answer that.”

“Of course, not,” said Josiah. “And neither could anyone in a third world kangaroo court in Lansing without officially confirming the big theft from the people of this country that happened and has continued...”

“Dad,” interrupted Daniel politely.

“This is exactly the same thing which happened to small landowners throughout history,” Josiah began again. “You’re French, you’ve heard of the feudal system?”

“Of course.”

“That’s what’s happening here right now,” said Josiah. “We’re being taken right back down the road to serfdom again. And I’ll tell you that when you take free men, back them against a wall, and try to force them into chains that will always lead to...”

“Dad.”

“I see no monarchy here,” said Phillipe during the gap provided by Daniel, “no king ruling over you. You have elected representatives...”

“Oh, please!” interjected Josiah. “Our official polling station is in a school in the next county. But, we don’t even have so much as a county drain commissioner to vote for any more. You know what? Thanks for leading us into that one. Tell me what politician do I really have who represents me? The ones we elect at the state level who once they get to Lansing never come back here or the ones at the federal level who were never from this state in the first place? Most of these people are the kids of the politicians who gave tax breaks to their buddies who then

looted the money from this state and this country year ago. Neither those politicians nor their counterparts in business are anywhere to be found now. Tell me how is it that I got stuck with their bill for the past twenty years when I saved my own money and never took a thing from any of them in the first place? Never.”

“Dad, let's take a break.”

“I would hardly say you are a serf,” said Phillippe. “Please and I don't wish to offend you on this, but maybe it is you who has simply over-extended not unlike those you bought from previously? Maybe it is you who should sell some land now? You mentioned the history of feudalism, but didn't the nobles also have to sell their large estates when they ran short of gold?”

“Such nobles were usually forced into that position by the betrayal of their fellow nobles,” replied Josiah. “History has also shown many an honest man who arrived in that same position, who was caught in such a snare, that it was consciously rigged by another party years in advance for that very purpose. Then as now the commonly accepted rules were changed by design of the elite while the honorable men were still playing the game in order to trap them and take their pieces completely off the board.”

“Are you saying there is some larger conspiracy to deprive you of your land?”

“Yes,” answered Josiah. “That is exactly what is happening right now with me and this land. I am saying that I am being deprived of my privately-owned property by another party. Even if I came up with all the tax money or ten times that year after year in perpetuity, they would still want me and my entire family removed from it. I can’t even begin on how bad this really becomes as far as inheritance of this property by my children under the current laws. That is a separate set of laws governing money and property, but the end result is still the same: to take private property.”

“But for what purpose is this all being done?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” continued Josiah. “They want all the people gone from here. They want us all re-settled somewhere else like the first tribes who lived here. Given what we’ve heard going on over the last few days, I don’t think a reservation is what they have in mind for us. No, not some place even half that nice. They want to put us all in some kind of gulag or concentration camp...”

“Dad!”

“Tell me this, Phillipe,” said Josiah, “why bother sending you here at all? What even makes this a story in France and the EU?”

“I work for a world news service and I go where I’m sent by the company,” said Phillipe who seemed to stammer a little out of confusion before recovering. “You contacted our short

wave radio program desk and we were assigned. Didn't you want someone to come?"

"Yes," replied Josiah. "You and Jacques have traveled many thousands of miles during a dangerous time. You are our honored guests. I think this would be a good time to take a break for the day since you will be with us through tomorrow."

"Thank you," said Phillipe. "I'd like to ask one more..."

The front door burst open with a slam against the wall which jolted the other men sitting around the great room from their quiet observation of the interview. A man in a black leather coat and topped with a fur hat didn't do the ritual of boot stomping but quickly pulled down a brown neck gator that had been over his mouth and goatee.

"Josiah!" the man yelled. "Some federal agents have killed your niece's family!"

* * *

The Michigan State Police trooper sat at the round table in the center of the tavern across from the leader of the gray-clad gunmen who had killed the two men, woman, and child in the truck the day before. A lit oil lamp was on their table and off to one side. The other men dressed in gray stood with their backs against the bar and faced the men at the table. Five other

Michigan troopers stood spread out along one side of the open floor area closer to the entrance.

The tension between the two different groups of uniformed men had been immediately palpable to the handful of other patrons in the tavern soon after the MSP troopers entered. These customers had all shuffled around the officers and out the front door while the bartender had made his way through an interior door at the other side of the bar away from the gray men. Two lit oil lamps on the bar counter and some solar-powered lights along the walls kept the interior of the tavern visibly above mood-lighting level.

“Do you have your verbal statement from yesterday in writing for me today?” asked the trooper seated at the table.

“No, Trooper Browning,” replied the gray leader. “I really haven’t had time to get to that yet.”

“But you have time to be here,” stated Trooper Browning.

“This is the closest thing we have to an ops center right now,” said the gray leader.

“Yes, I heard you guys just helped yourself to the rooms upstairs,” said Trooper Browning. “Rooms that were already occupied by the bartender and his wife.”

“They didn’t need all three,” said the gray man. “Maybe I’ll get some time tonight and I can write down a statement and leave it in an envelope here for you to pick up tomorrow. Do you need anything else?”

“I really need you to write down something now,” insisted Trooper Browning.

“I don’t have any paper,” said the gray man. “There isn’t even a napkin in this place to use.”

“That’s fine,” said Browning. “I brought some paper for you and a pen, too.”

“I’m not going to do this now.”

“That’s what I figured you’d say,” said Browning.

“And you still made the trip back into town today.”

“There were a lot of problems with that scene yesterday,” said Browning. “You saying that there was a gun fight, ‘an exchange of fire’ I think is how you sent this out over the radio, had taken place wasn’t even the beginning of what had really happened out there.”

“It was the beginning of what then?” asked the gray leader.

“The beginning of a lie,” said Browning. “The beginning of you and your men covering up a

murder. A cold-blooded murder of those two men, that woman and that little girl."

"I can't believe you would say that to me. What makes you say that?"

"Everything," replied Browning. "Everything about that scene points to a murder and the false staging of weapons after the fact. Would you like to know about the weapons themselves?"

"Sure. Tell me."

"We have one 300 Winchester Magnum bolt action rifle," began Browning. "The rifle was definitely bought by the father of the driver of the truck many years ago from a local FFL who went out of business. But it hasn't had a bullet shot through it in recent memory. A rifle that was unloaded at the scene. A rifle with a 5.56 bullet key-holed sideways into the butt-stock with a matching key-hole in a plastic gun case we found left open beside the truck at the scene. Would you like me to continue?"

"Well, how were we to know he was pointing an unloaded weapon at us," said the gray leader flatly.

"We have one 44 mag revolver," continued Browning, "stainless with a nice scope on top left on the seat next to driver. It had two empties inside the cylinder which did smell like they were

fired off yesterday. Even if I completely ignored that the driver was shot in the back of head, there's still a problem with the source of the revolver."

"What's that?" asked the gray leader as he drummed his fingers once on the table and appeared bored.

"The original owner of the revolver made a report at our post first thing this morning after the control order was lifted," began Browning. "He told me how four men dressed in gray came at the beginning of Sunday services, roughed him up at the door, took his weapon, and told everyone they had violated the control order. He gave me a good description of each of you, your weapons, and your vehicle."

"Well, he had probably sold that to the driver who was shooting at us yesterday. They were probably friends and he just wants to get us in trouble," the gray man who was holding the belt-fed machine gun at low ready over at the bar counter said loudly. The gray leader didn't glance back, but straightened up in his chair before leaning forward.

"The young guy has a point," said the gray leader nodding back toward the bar. "It sounds like someone is just making up a story to cause trouble here –to harm the working relationship between our agencies."

“Ok,” said Browning as he also leaned forward and began to look more aggravated than the gray leader. “Two things I need to say there...”

“Go right ahead,” said the gray man.

“First off, the relationship between our agencies,” said Browning. “I don’t even know what federal agency you really work for. Some voice from Homeland Security in Chicago and some other person from MSP in Lansing who I’ve never heard of both contacted our office over secure lines and told us to render assistance only to the bearers of new red CAC cards. Less than an hour later, sixteen guys in four vehicles, including the four of you, all show up flashing those red cards and passing out some DHS letter. That DHS letter signed by some assistant sub deputy or other in Chicago puts you in authority over a joint security operation which is apparently taking place nationwide right now.

“Now second thing, let’s get back to that pistol. The owner of that pistol was my brother-in-law and that happened at my place of worship while you had me sitting on checkpoint on the highway. Now I don’t know what your big operation is all about, but I can put two and two together when it comes to a murder and that’s exactly what you guys did yesterday.”

“They violated the control order,” began the man with the belt-fed.

“Shut up!” yelled the gray leader at the table. “We’re the ones in charge here. He can make all the accusations he wants and it’s going nowhere. Nowhere.”

“You’re right,” said Browning. “I found that out already today. I called my brand new commander in Lansing and I even went through an old DHS phone book and found their number was the same as the one that had just called us from Chicago. I even called that one, too. Both people told me the same thing: to keep cooperating with you even though things appeared confusing right now and that there was a terrorist element deeply rooted within this area. Twenty minutes later all my outside communication, both my secure line and my radio repeater are down.”

“I guess that should tell you enough about getting with the program right now,” said the gray leader as he sat back and smiled smugly.

“It tells me you’re a son of a bitch and there’s some evil shit going down,” said Trooper Browning before he stood up quickly, kicked the chair back, drew his pistol, and pointed it at the still seated and calm gray leader. “All of you drop your weapons, you’re coming with us!”

The other five State troops had taken the cue at the kicking of the chair and had drawn their pistols as well and were pointing them over at the three gray men at the bar counter who had yet

to react. The man with the belt-fed at low ready flinched, but neither raised nor dropped his weapon. Everyone looked at each other silently for a moment.

“Just knock it off,” said the gray leader as he raised his other hand from beneath the table with his fingers firmly around a grenade. “Don’t you guys get it? We are in charge. You were told that already.”

“Shit!” exclaimed Browning before he looked back over at the other troopers behind him. “Stay back! He has a grenade and the pin has been pulled.”

“All you had to do,” the gray leader said as he slowly stood up, “was to take your place on the totem pole one notch above the other rednecks around here. All you guys had to do was keep the public under control and you would continue to get paid. We even had jobs for you after we all moved the operation on from here.”

“Put it down,” said Browning quickly who then noticed the gray leader smile. “No, uh, I mean put the pin back in it.”

“You still just don’t get it,” said the gray leader as he stepped around the table and took slow deliberate steps toward the trooper. “You can solve a tiny crime scene, but you still can’t see the big picture. All you guys had available today to arrest us with was your handguns. Who do you

think removed your rifles and shotguns earlier this year? You guys have no real authority left; you're meter maids. Now tuck tail and get the fuck out of here."

"Everyone, out!" ordered Browning to the other troopers behind him and they each backed out the front door with weapons still drawn. "Out!"

The door swung closed on its own on a hydraulic hinge as the last trooper exited. The gray leader pinned his grenade and walked over to the other gray men at the bar counter. He put the grenade in a side pocket on his pants, picked up a bottle of whiskey and took a long drink. One of the gray men seemed to shake off a shiver and the other with the belt-fed set his weapon up on the counter.

"Is that thing real?" one of them asked.

"Of course, it is," the gray leader replied. "What use would it be if it wasn't?"

"You had the pin pulled?"

"Shut up," said the leader. "Quit asking stupid fucking questions."

The six troopers gathered in the snow-covered street next to their state-issued SUVs and the gray team's SUV. Josiah and Daniel Shroud approached the troopers. The rest of the Shroud clan men were around the corner from the

tavern with the French pair of reporters. A group of women were further down the block by another fifty yards.

“Browning,” said Josiah gruffly. “Where are they? Why aren’t they in your custody?”

“Joe,” said Browning, “the guy threatened us with a grenade. He would’ve blown us all up in there.”

“Did he put the pin back in it?” asked Daniel. “Was it their boss who had the grenade?”

“I don’t know,” said Browning. “I didn’t wait around and see. Yes, the guy in charge had it. I don’t know who I’m supposed to call about this. I don’t know how I can get more help here right now. Those guys are out of control.”

“You had your chance,” said Josiah, “now it’s our turn. Danny, come with me.”

“Joe,” said Browning as the two men walked to the tavern door. “Joe!”

“Stay out of this,” said Josiah after he turned back toward Browning and held up one finger. “This is a family matter and it isn’t up for outside discussion now.”

“Danny,” said Josiah as they both approached the closed door. “I don’t want you to shoot unless one of them goes for his weapons. Keep

in mind these guys are probably wearing body armor. I'm going for their boss right off when we get in. Go to my left when we get in there and don't step past me. I intend to fire the first shot."

"Ok, dad."

Josiah swung the door open hard but its full range was completely caught by the hydraulic hinge before it even hit the wall and he continued in for a few feet before coming to a stop. He only heard the movement of air as his son swept up to his left and then the door began to gently swing closed on its own again. All four men were facing away from them and toward the mirror behind the bar counter. The angle was such that the Shrouds didn't cast a reflection in it. Likewise, the rather subdued sound of their entry hadn't garnered the gray men's attention. Josiah had a pump action shotgun already raised and his son had a semi automatic pistol in a two-handed grip in front of him. The lack of immediate response from the men in the bar coupled with the elder Shroud's intent forward focus brought a sense of surrealism to the younger Shroud. He could see the men in front of him, his handgun, and even the figure of his father out of the corner of his eye all at once.

"Unbelievable," said Daniel in a strained excitement that constricted his voice and gave his spoken observation the decibel status of subscript more than title.

“Who’s in charge here!” shouted Josiah as a call to attention rather than a question.

“I’m in charge here,” yelled the gray leader as he quickly straightened up, turned around and added “What’s it to you?”

The first blast erupted from Josiah’s shotgun and sent a slug through the gray leader’s right eye and out the back of his head. The slug smacked sharply into the mirror behind the group and was immediately followed by a wide fine misting of blood in the air, narrow splattering of brains, and a single horizontal crack across the entire glass which grew from the gore-caked black hole. The thunderous exclamation of the first shot was followed by the relatively minor punctuations of the rear-racking of the pump action and the empty plastic shell bouncing and rolling on the floor to the right of Josiah. The sound of a completely renewed deadly potential was made as Josiah slid the action forward and chambered another slug.

The next blast followed only a second after the first as the other three men began to turn around. The only man to the right of the leader had been turning in place counter clockwise and was raising his bull-pup assault rifle which had been at his right. Josiah’s second slug entered through that man’s left bicep and into the left side of his chest when he was at three quarter turn. After the gray leader had crumpled almost straight down to the floor, this second man would seem

to whirl by comparison and drop over top of him.

The third man who had been to the leader's left had turned fully around at the same time as the second man who had been shot. He had fumbled for his rifle when Daniel began rapidly firing his handgun. Daniel started at the center of the man's chest and then walked the shots up the torso as he remembered his father's advice about the body armor and the man seemed to just jostle and shake as the rounds hit. Daniel's last two shots took off the man's right ear and punched a hole in the right side of his neck before he dropped to the floor gurgling and twitching. Daniel's pistol was automatically locked back over an empty magazine as his father ejected his second empty shell and pumped a third live round.

"Don't shoot me! Don't shoot me!" yelled the remaining man in gray who had been standing to the far left of the other three. His belt-fed machine gun had sat untouched on the countertop. He moved further to the left with his hands up.

"Keep those hands up," ordered Josiah as he moved toward the last man with his shotgun still raised. "Danny, check those men."

Daniel ejected the empty mag from his pistol and let it drop to the floor. He was shaking slightly from a rush of adrenaline as he lifted a full mag from his coat pocket, inserted it under the

grip, and released the slide forward. The two men his father shot were completely motionless, but the third man Danny had shot was not. That man moved his jaw mechanically, almost like a toy nutcracker, turned his eyes toward Daniel and seemed to deliberately blink twice at him. Then the man's jaw stopped moving, his pupils fixed onto some point in the distance, and his eyelids remained open over a blank stare. The man became completely motionless.

"They're all dead now," Daniel said.

"Drop your gear right there where you're standing," Josiah told the survivor as he kept him covered with the shotgun. "Then you're coming outside with us. Danny, go open the door."

Daniel walked halfway across the floor toward the door before he stopped and leaned against the table for a moment.

"Danny?" said Josiah as the gray man dropped his tactical vest on the floor.

"I'm ok," Daniel replied before he started walking again. "I just felt dizzy for a second."

"You'll be ok," said Josiah as Daniel got to the door and kept it open.

"Now move," Josiah ordered the gray man. "Out the door."

The three men exited the tavern and were immediately met by a small crowd made up of the extended Shroud family, male and female, the state troopers, and the two foreign men, one with his camera running. Although most of the downtown's businesses had been abandoned, there were still some habitable apartments on the second floors of the buildings. Some of those residents were now standing along Main Street.

"Tie him up like we talked about," Josiah said to two of his men as he lowered his shotgun and they took hold of the lone man wearing only a gray uniform. The two men tied their captive's hands with duct tape behind the back and then completely encircled the man's upper body with a long single sticky strip which kept his elbows against his sides. "Let's take him down to the lake."

"Joe," said Browning as he walked with the group as it moved down the street and was joined by a dozen other people from town. "Joe, what are you doing?"

"We're going to finish carrying out justice here," said Josiah. "I hadn't really expected any of them to survive the fight. If they had made it out to the street instead of us, they would've been shot down on the street like the rabid dogs they are. But just in case we had one or two live past that, we were still going to finish this."

"Joe, what are you going to do?" Browning

asked as they approached the frozen over lake right next to town and the French men also walked right along next to them.

“We’re going to do what a functioning society does with its murderers, its child killers,” said Josiah. “We’re taking it upon ourselves to manage what our state can’t do anymore.”

Most of the crowd remained at the edge of the ice as the two men led the gray man out onto the ice first. The three of them stopped at a hole in the ice cut just large enough for a single man to slide through the surface. A cinder block stood on one of its smaller narrow sides next to the fresh opening over the water. A yellow tow strap was looped through the heavy block. Josiah had followed the first three men half of the way out onto the ice until Browning caught up and grabbed him by the sleeve of his coat next to his left elbow.

“You can’t do this!” shouted Browning. “He should be my prisoner for a trial!”

“Are you kidding me?” Josiah shouted as he yanked his arm free, stopped and turned to meet Browning. He still held his shotgun at the center of the weapon with his right hand and continued to tilt it downward, not in a threatening manner. “Trial? Who’s going to conduct a trial on him? The people who sent him here?”

“We’ll find a court,” Browning said. “We’ll hold him until a legitimate authority can convene a hearing.”

“How can you be so blind?” Josiah said before turning his head to the two men standing with the third. “Put that tow strap around his neck.”

“Oh my god! Oh my god!” yelled the man in gray as he ran a few yards back toward land and then slipped and fell.

“Don’t do this, Joe,” said Browning as the two men began dragging the bound crying kicking man across the ice back toward the hole. “You’re just going to kill him in cold blood. This isn’t self-defense now.”

“This is real justice,” said Josiah. “Not the bullshit mock trial he would get if we turned him over to anyone. Who are we kidding? There wouldn’t even be a trial. Stand him back up!”

“Dad!” Daniel yelled from the crowd onshore as the two men stood the third back up and put the loop from the other end of the tow strap around his neck and cinched it. “Maybe we should just hold him prisoner.”

“Don’t you lose stomach now,” Josiah yelled back toward shore as murmurs and talking grew among the crowd. “None of you had better. God damn it. They killed Judy’s family. Four people were killed. These four all need to pay.”

“For the love of Jesus,” began Browning as he and Josiah began another round of yelling back and forth at each other. Daniel continued yelling for his father from shore but was ignored.

Judy forced her way through the crowd and silently strolled unnoticed past Josiah and Browning as they continued to argue their own points of law, criminal justice, and then began to debate the extent of societal decay in their lifetime. She walked up to the three men standing out on the frozen lake. The two older men who were familiar stoic relatives to her flanked the young stranger in gray who looked terrified and was only a few inches in front of the hole in the ice.

Judy met the gray man's gaze and stared into his eyes quietly for a few seconds before she used both hands and grabbed the upper front part of his gray uniform jacket. In a single motion she pushed him backwards over the hole and he dropped in. The man let out a short scream before he plunged straight down into the cold water. This was immediately followed by the sound of a splash and some water jumped back up and out over Judy's boots. The man's head quickly bobbed up completely above the surface and he let out a gasp. Judy immediately bent down and tipped over the cinder block which hit the man in the side of the head while his mouth was still open from the exhale. The block went straight down as the man took a

deep breath in and then he was pulled beneath the surface with it.

Judy remained on one knee looking at the calm water in the hole for a few more seconds, then stood up and walked back toward shore. Josiah and Browning silently looked at her from their same spot halfway out on the ice. Judy walked by them without a word and with her eyes straight ahead. Likewise, as she stepped onto shore at the center of the standing crowd they parted in half in front of her except for the two French men. They barely took a full step off to one side of her.

“Get that fucking camera out of my face,” Judy said as she looked at the lens and then pushed the camera aside with the back of one hand and continued walking without a change in pace. Daniel vomited behind her in the center of the open space and right across from the Frenchmen.