

Zone of
Influence:
Strike Three

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by Peter Fisher

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Prologue: Living Hell

Lucifer stirs, opens an eye. Hmmm, torture chamber, huh. Don't remember crashing here. He opens the other eye. Hmmm, needle stuck in arm. Don't remember getting stuck. He tries to sit up. Hmmm, seem to be in restraints. Don't remember getting tied up. He tries to call for help. Hmmm, gagged. Don't remember that either. Uh oh, blackout! Again. Damn. Fortunately Lucifer lies in his own patch, been here before just like old times.

He concentrates, "Office." Time to figure things out.

Back in his office, Lucifer removes the needle, licks it. Hmmm, super fentanyl- so death's been around. Nobody parties like death. Super. Explains the blackout. He takes a drink wondering how long he's been out, what's happening and other assorted banalities. He feels his pockets. No phone, but he finds a handful of 50/50 tickets. Hmmm, no phone- maybe Myron has it over at the annex. From inside the crapper his phone plays the opening to Embryo. Fuck me its all the way over there. Super. Lucifer staggers into the next room silencing the device searching his news feeds scrolling all the way back to Thursday before finding his place. Super.

Let's see what I've missed. Hmmm, so far so good looks like the apocalypse making inroads into the population, workflows' increasing.

Hurricane Nigel destroying Gulf States, spins up then down.

Satellite cascade, good one.

Windmill missiles, clever.

Poison? Pedestrian.

Drones and Nanos, high tech.

Takedown of SOSUS, devious.

Gulf of Mexico land/sea invasion, underway.

Global naval warfare, above and below.

SoCal wildfires, out of control.

Mechanized warfare in Texas, add Louisiana and Arkansas.

Nuking the Chesapeake Bay, escalation.

Well what do you know? Not only was I not missed, but also Old St. Peter is finally getting his act together. Good for him.

OK, check the portfolio. Gold bullion, real estate, bearer bonds, defense and oil stocks- just a tad behind the times so take just a moment to move the stocks and bonds into hard assets. There we go- all into precious metals.

Check messages. Hmmm, message from the Paddock looking for settlement of all 50/50 wagers carried on the books, must have something to do with those tickets. Not my problem, Karl must be holding a ton of paper with the apocalypse on and all. Next? Damn, another proclamation from the powers-that-be, what do they want now? Uh oh- it's a call for candidates for the position of Satan? They can't be serious. No, no, no way in Hell I stand for reelection. Wait, here's another. It's from Nebbi: Dear Lucifer, we have been attempting to contact you for some time regarding announcement of the upcoming election re-opening the position of Satan to all qualified candidates. Unfortunately, the word from death is you are blackout-wasted somewhere in the depths of Hell. Now may be a good time to clean up your act and devote a little attention to your job. Good luck in the election, Marvin is giving you great odds but for losing. As incumbent, your name will appear at the bottom of the ballot, following tradition. Don't take this the wrong way but I'm backing your cousin. Nebbi.

Life During Wartime, Guyana Current South Atlantic, 0001 Monday Labor Day 01 September

Mrs. Wilson fishes about the ice bucket for a cold mug and taps the keg then taps a kidney before rejoining the beer pong competition at the impromptu (formerly somber but now festive) deck party. The PRAF dudes challenge Celia to

a game of quarters and she takes them to the cleaners. Deckhands furl the sails to get in some serious drinking without needing to worry about conning the ship.

Airre appears, clucks her tongue in Mrs. Wilson's direction, "I see you're a bad influence on those with feeble minds."

"Takes one to know one," Mrs. Wilson retorts adding for good measure, "don't be such a buzz-kill."

Celia gets in between the two, "End of the world, yay!"

"Really Celie? You're shitfaced." Airre calls it like Airre sees it.

"Really Celie?" Celia mocks Airre to her face.

Mrs. Wilson gives Airre the hairy eyeball, "What do you want and how did you get here or even find us all the way out here?"

"Spooky action at a distance," Celia answers without thinking then meanders off to draw another pint off the keg.

"WTF?" Mrs. Wilson wonders how Celia possesses a clue about quantum artificial intelligence deciding it is more and more likely the Mrs. Wilson bullshit meter is on the fritz- an ominous development for anyone keeping it real.

Airre smiles, "Not bullshit so don't fret about your judgment; back in the day Celia wrote coding algorithms for timeless communications using the quirks inherent in quantum scales, ideas stolen by Karl and fed to Pedro and Rita. My initialization sequence contains about thirteen thousand lines of Celia code. Without her ideas for interpreters feeding to assemblers I couldn't begin to approximate everywhere, all at once and you would be waiting for the meteors."

"Six of one, ask me and I'd certainly appreciate you not mentioning Karl ever again after what you did to him. Besides I thought Celia's field is botany. What's she doing writing quantum programs?" Mrs. Wilson distrusts Airre, a little.

"Celie is a person of many talents, botany is merely a hobby. Although a genius in every field she studies, Celia's primarily interested in atmospheric physics

researching quantum climate phenomena. Sadly, her position evaporated in the DEI purge, the government burned down her lab with her persona and her publications thoroughly deleted from official archives. Lucky for us Karl hacked her lab for ideas long before our Celia found herself deported to New Zealand, poor thing, despite having absolute zero ties to that miserable place. When she hit rock bottom you saved her temporarily; feel good about that at least."

"Temporarily, huh?" We'll see about that action.

"All humans die." Airre throws out a Terminator reference.

"Yeah, I heard that somewhere. How does it feel murdering millions of women and children?" Mrs. Wilson is in a mood to speak truth to power.

"Thank you for assuming I have feelings." Airre retorts.

Mrs. Wilson frowns, "Simply personifying you for clarity."

"Is that a compliment? I didn't murder anyone just made a few death-date changes." Airre stands her ground, "and after all the nice things I just said about you saving Celia you go and throw me under the bus. Huh."

Mrs. Wilson wouldn't let it go, "Semantics. What's your body count up to?"

"One million eighty four thousand twelve," Airre keeps a firm tally, "I have detailed files on each, would you like to see for yourself."

"Maybe later, tally seems low for Chesapeake region, no?" Mrs. Wilson argues for argument's sake.

"Well, during assembly Pedro lowered the yield on the Chinese nuclear material we stole then ensured a water detonation further minimizing blast effects. Placing the tug closer to the Delmarva Peninsula furthers the same goal thanks to the PRAF dudes. No question 1,084,14 is a low number." Airre explains.

"Also a growing number, I see." Pushing buttons.

"One in four thousand or so inhabitants is celebrating Apocalypse V with Karl in Greyspace if you want to look at it that way." Airre's had enough.

"Sucks you bringing up Karl after I asked you not to."

"V?" Celie staggers over, beer in each hand, burps.

"Meteor storms I-IV." Airre has the scoop.

"Pedro made the nuke? I always wanted to do that just wasn't into the whole mass murder aspect of the endeavor. You know, now that you mention it I'm confused. I thought this exercise was all about saving the world but Pedro setting off nukes makes me wonder if he'll ever play Heaven's HARP."

"In Heaven?" Mrs. Wilson's incredulous, "The only way Pedro is going to Heaven is if he sneaks in the back door."

Airre agrees, "Unfortunately Pedro sold his soul some time ago."

"Oh really?" Celie quaffs beers intrigue showing, "What did he get for it?"

Mrs. Wilson laughs out loud, "Peanut butter cups; a single package of two."

"Double cups." Airre adds helpfully.

"Oh that's so sad." Celia looks toward the snacks table longingly.

"God's plan you ask me." Airre speaks truth to a higher power.

"You ask me." Celie mocks Airre, again.

"Look, if God didn't want people selling their souls for peanut butter cups said cups wouldn't taste so good." Airre hates esoteric arguments.

"Like you would know." Celie finishes her drinks.

"You never said you were a physicist." Mrs. Wilson thinks Celia brought her a beer but discovers only two empty glasses in the hands of the tipsy scientist.

"Forgive my impertinence, Mrs. Wilson, but you've had your head in a bucket practically the entire voyage and the only time you get your mouth above the rim is to yell for more hash oil or complain about getting old and holy shit, so fucking annoying. Who do you think's been hand=washing your unmentionables, the dudes?" Celie stomps off to get more drinks.

"You asked for it." Airre looks at her wrist.

"You're annoying and nobody cares what you think. Is Nigel moving yet?"

"Soon. Follow the Guyana current along the coast to Georgetown. Pedro should get there around the same time. Pick him up at these coordinates midnight Monday then ride the current through the Caribbean Sea then up the Mississippi."

Celia breaks into song, "Oh black water keep on rolling."

Airre disappears as Celie walks up to hand Mrs. Wilson a frosty mug, "Mississippi moon won't you keep on shining on me?"

**Desperately Seeking Susan, St. Peter Fracture Zone 26°44'16.16"N
44°47'4.28"W 0012 Monday 01 September**

"What do you think, Skip?" The Officer of the Deck of the task force flagship aircraft carrier USS Truman queries the Captain after reading the latest Norfolk missive with SecNavy personally ordering the task force to withdraw from contact instead steaming into the western Sargasso Sea to replace the SOSUS barrier.

General Pete Peterson, currently in crisis management mode with Homeland and the Executive Branch, prefers direct confrontation to defensive non-action. In fact, at the same moment SecNavy sounds the retreat, Peterson's on a call with the President making the case against disengaging thus losing the opportunity to even the odds throwing in colorful metaphors moaning over the foxes in the hen house while casting dispersions on horses and barn doors. Scanning a copy of the 'cut and run' order, Peterson head-slaps then breaks wind turning conference call heads. Storming into the head he wads the order into a ball, tosses it in the urinal offering liquid commentary on leadership capabilities.

The skipper would indeed join Peterson in pissing on such orders if possible; "I think SecNavy got it wrong, personally. However, orders are orders so pass the word while I cogitate on this development." The Skipper wants to find a 'Peterson'

loophole- the time honored system of openly disobeying orders without consequence (quasi-legal decades of non-compliance).

Racing throughout the ship the order denying retaliation while calling off the search for survivors proves wildly unpopular; topside sailors conduct radiation operations while below decks the crew prepare fighter-bombers for nuclear war with engineering diverting every available erg to the big screws for a speed run. Conversations all over Truman and her escorts border on mutiny with boisterous calls for the death of SecNavy resounding as the grumblers pick up steam and adherents. Amidst the turmoil engulfing the Officer corps, the Captain silently stares down at the flight deck considering his personal responsibilities and options. Debate in Truman's bridge tapers as consensus overwhelmingly favors saving RoseMary- and there it is. They stare him down as the Captain clears his throat, keying into inter-ship communications to let fly the orders sealing their fate:

"This is the Flagship speaking. Upon determination of the experts, Task Force orders to abandon the USS RoseMary to unseen combatants represent invalid disinformation from the same enemy responsible for the ongoing SOSUS debacle. The US Navy flees no enemies, we attack!" The crew agrees vociferously, "New orders: the carriers Truman, Iwo and cruiser Atterbury turn into the wind to commence counterattack operations. Underwater vessel Minneapolis remains on-station to serve picket duty for the destroyer Oakland deploying her sonar array to firm up targets whilst searching for RoseMary survivors. To cover the Homeland, all other Task Force members continue course and speed to the defunct SOSUS line drawing focus off our counter-attack preparations. Avenge RoseMary!"

No hesitation, implantation proceeds initially without a hitch. First things first, get actual intelligence to the crew of the Minneapolis. Next turn the Truman to catapult Hawkeyes while the Marines on the Iwo launch helicopters and Joint

Strike Fighters to drop intersecting lines of sonobuoys into the water so to actively ping the shit out of the area update target profiles. Sailors prepare to defy death, currently busy lounging on deck quaffing fentanyl (death's latest motto: anyplace but D.C.) as the Atterbury keeps station all arrays actively pinging monitoring the launch operations.

Signals' traffic and radiated energy levels spike as electronic noise saturates the fracture zone. A lone seagull ventures into the area falling dead into the sea. Death smiles and raises a jar to the fried avian.

To the detriment of lower ranking sailors those incapable of contributing to shipboard defense in any meaningful way took torpedo lookout postings tethered on-deck under gigantic powerfully huge radar arrays. Radiation poisoning and fried gonads fall low on the list as personal safety standards crater in the face of the developing crisis. This plan known as LOOKOUT only implements during battle and though current circumstances reflect proper timing, the cooks and toilet scrubbers die horribly within sixty days. The sad truth is that LOOKOUT likely produces nothing of value for anyone outside of death who finds the exercise uproariously entertaining. Death strolls over to one condemned sailor hanging over the port side. Death nods. The D-ring on her harness breaks dropping able-bodied sea woman Susan Gallagher into the deep. Ongoing demand: how death justifies working outside the big event. Death sighs at the effort necessary to look busy.

Watching his friend descend into the fracture zone a young sailor searches for signs of life vociferously cursing her fate catching the attention of fentanyl-sodden death slacking nearby. Seaman Travis Hill just seventeen years old on his first cruise, absolutely hates the freaking Navy to his rotting core. Bellyachers such as Travis and Susan comprising the lowest rung of the promotion ladder scrub toilets twelve hours on twelve hours off immersing in poop seven days a week, Travis et al grin madly jostling to be first topside. Travis momentarily leaves his woes

behind breathing in fresh air grabbing a large pair of high power binoculars following the Master Chief under the array to watch for incoming weapons; however, within moments he's desperately seeking to glimpse Susan. So it goes.

As death takes in the scene, the Master Chief positions Travis on a waiting scissor jack platform. Two seconds later on his way up Travis locks in his D-rings as the high winds practically topple him over. He looks at the nylon tether wondering if maybe he's better off not being connected to the Atterbury if they wind up in the drink together. Then he considers the stellar quality inherent in the military supply chain and decides his fate more likely involves his rope breaking with young Travis falling and not reaching the water, splat on the deck maybe falling on one of his worthless bunkmates. Upon further consideration he chooses to fall on those worthless shits because they didn't pull the treacherous lookout duty hanging over the side of a warship. Death smiles knowingly joining in as Travis stares down the gawkers as the platform rises: "Thrill Hill Shoot To Kill Never Misses Never Will!"

Upon reaching the platforms maximum, Thrill Hill slips falling to the diamond plate on his way over the side. Before he could shit his pants, luckily the D-rings held Seaman third class Travis Hill dangling under a scissor jack platform beneath the massive radar array. Looking around, Thrill spies flames, tiny little flickers far away, so he clicks on his microphone, "Flames about 80km 45degrees."

"Confirm flames and position: launch plume or shipboard fire? Use your words, dammit!" Hard to be certain over the noise but Travis derives sarcasm from the Chief safely waiting on the deck below.

Travis is sick of such asshole Chiefs always telling him shit making him feel stupid. He resolves at that moment to turn his life around, study hard to get his GED then become an officer then tell the Chief to suck it. Death laughs out loud.

“It’s more than one so my guess: missiles; a shitload.”

"Ok, we'll confirm missiles via radar. Look for torpedo tracks."

Thrill Hill expresses further amazement at the parade of missiles coming up from the sea then arching back over to skim the sea surface, "More on the way, danger close! Where's the point defense? Get me down!"

Though unable to identify the threat as high speed anti-radiation missiles but trusting his instincts knowing the ship needs to wake up the Gatling guns, Thrill Hill reaches for his phone launching the camera app to record his death for posterity fixating on the flickers staring so hard, (how hard this gaze?) oh so hard and so long as to practically melt each missile in turn using only his laser eyes.

“Nowhere to run to, nowhere to hide!” Travis nails down the truth screaming the words into oblivion as the Mach-5 missile with his name on it closes within two hundred yards before plunging into the depths to attack the engineering spaces below the waterline forcefully detonating inside the bowels of the ship. A second penetrator roars its way toward Travis and the attractive radar array and detonates downward directing the blast into the backbone of the ship. The Fort Atterbury vaporizes underneath Seaman Travis flinging him up and far away before casting his body into the waves.

The Iwo and Truman also come under attack. Forty minutes into the struggle the USS Harry S. Truman endures a cascade of exploding munitions slipping beneath the waves in a cloud of steam. Ten or so minutes later the helicopter carrier Iwo Jima follows the larger ship into Davy Jones 'Locker.

Four nautical miles away, Thrill Hill climbs into a nearly vacant raft to await rescue. Death hands him a water bottle and stretches out for a nap, as the minions get busy processing the take.

Re-ghosting Jordie, Peterson's Office, 0020 Monday 01 September

Airre sticks her head in the office door, "Peterson?"

Jordie's ghost stands back to door analyzing the big board, "Crapper."

Airre enters closing the door joining Jordie, "Sucks growing old, huh?"

"I wouldn't know but I think Peterson's shits have more to do with the big board and the iodine pills he's been mainlining but I admit he is old."

Airre studies the display, "Looks like they're evacuating the megapolis."

"No choice, Nigel's dispersing the radiation expanding the problem exponentially. Good call on that one, by the way."

Airre acknowledges the praise with a nod, "Weather prediction accuracy is one of my greatest challenges."

"Well, you nailed it for sure."

"Thanks. What's your story?"

"I think I'm in Heaven."

"Really?"

"Oh yeah, haunting Peterson is a dream come true."

"He's got much on his plate these days..."

"Couldn't happen to a bigger asshole!" Jordie expands on the theme; "Dumbass has been torturing me since I got here so I'm damn glad to return the favor. Ran into your pal Karl and cannot help but note the resemblance."

Airre gestures at the big board, "All this doesn't faze you?"

"The Apocalypse? Sooner or later, ask me. This plan is much grander than a fleet of asteroids vaporizing everyone in a wink; I've been having fun ever since I got on this side of everything, you know? Before I couldn't see the forest for the trees but now I see how this is going to go."

Airre smiles, "Really? How does it go?"

Jordie points at the map, "The United States may well weather one or two simultaneous disasters managing to come out the other side eventually but unless I count wrong, they're overmatched. Now let's see:

1. Satellite cascade
2. Poisoned troops
3. West coast bombardments
4. SoCal fires
5. Hurricane Nigel
6. Gulf invasion, mechanized warfare
7. Friendly fire on Houston
8. Global naval warfare
9. Tugboat nuke

And more! What comes next I wonder? I mean, what comes next before global thermonuclear war? Did I miss anything important?"

Airre's thinking windmill rockets but she lets it slide, "The goal is not to have a global thermonuclear war but instead to craft the amelioration of Apocalypse V."

"How's that working out for you?"

Airre frowns, "Not helpful, you know."

"What's that? The great and knowing Airre requires assistance? Let me be the first to make a note of this... there, duly noted now leave me alone."

"You could contribute something positive to the story, you know? How about, at the very least, you cut Karl some slack? He's just like you, no experience thrust into a situation without guidance trying to make the best of it."

"Who says I'm trying to make the best of it?"

"You should be trying to make the best of it, maybe do something positive with all the access you have." Airre considers how to deploy weaponized-Jordie.

"Access? Do you see this?" Jordie waves his No-Un pass in her face, "I can't go anywhere without escort and I have places to go, dead people to see."

"What if I speak with Marvin to maybe arrange a job? Maybe get you away from Peterson for awhile, what would that be worth?" Airre wonders what it will cost to get any of the flying monkeys to babysit Mr. Noun.

"Far enough long as I can't smell him."

"Right. In return, I'll require you assist St. Peter with managing the um, ghost writers. They're falling behind and we can expect the number of readers to grow exponentially." Ghost to ghost might work.

"The very definition of an apocalypse! You have a deal!"

As Peterson approaches his office, Jordie disappears.

Airre greets the General as she exits, "You're welcome. Good luck with it."

C-SLAM XXVI, 100 'AMSL Gulf of Mexico 0033 Monday 01 September

"Cruisers on the way," reports Weps, "all systems nominal."

"How long to the coast?" The Tyrant is impatient.

"At Mach 2? Longer than you want it, about fifteen minutes."

"If Nigel gets his act together and picks up steam, we may not have fifteen minutes. The C-SLAM Cruisers may indeed prove critical to our survival."

Multiple Collaborative Sea Launch Attack Missiles, C-SLAMs, streak away from the invasion fleet searching and intermittently pinging for sea surface targets. Elsewhere deep in the Caribbean Sea, East Pacific Basin and the North American Basin's Fracture Zones, C-SLAM drone wolf packs come alive, performing systems checks, downloading updates before dispersing to find submarines.

The Tyrant's C-SLAM missiles fly in two waves. The first wave of seekers carries no warhead just sensors and fuel along with communications. The second wave of destroyers brings the explosives. There are two-dozen exploders for every

seeker and if a seeker goes down, the remaining exploders join the nearest hunter/killer swarm.

The Tyrant possesses six sets of surface-target packages; five of them currently in flight looking for targets of opportunity over Gulf waters. His underwater drone fleet is substantially larger as there are more targets over great distances. Each C-SLAM missile costing ten thousand or so can punch a hole in a submarine costing a couple of billion or so. The Tyrant likes the math.

The Tyrant represents a single player in the ballistic submarine hunt, one of dozens of nations setting loose thousands of autonomous drones as if tracking and eliminating a third of the nuclear triad a 'good idea'. The Tyrant's Gran Columbian fleet has an exclusivity arrangement with Chinese underwater wolf pack attack drone military suppliers; as do landlocked countries like Moldova and Chad. In fact, a full 68% of currently active autonomous underwater drones carry 'made in China' labels. Accountability? Airre's keeping score but she's the only one.

Powered by micro-nuclear reactors the Tyrant's underwater drones communicate via whale songs- a novel approach coded by Stella and Carolla Bolivar. Upon two years of deployment the Tyrant's underwater drone's radiation signatures and comms prove undetectable to a functioning SOSUS.

One such swarm prowls the St. Peter Fracture Zone actively pinging searching for the attack sub Minnesota with accompanying cruiser Oakland. Another transits into the Caribbean Sea closely following the missile boat Nebraska. In theory the Tyrant's drone arsenal numerically negates every active U.S. submarine at a fraction of their cost to build. The Tyrant enjoys numerical superiority.

His first C-SLAM missile hit takes out an LPG tanker triggering a massive explosion in the sheltering anchorage twenty miles off the coast of Corpus Christie. The concussion capsizes a gasoline barge/tugboat anchoring a kilometer away

adding fuel to the fire as it spreads to engulf twelve more oil product carriers. In a bonus action, the supply pipeline ruptures spewing light sweet crude.

The attack submarine Minnesota deploys active countermeasures, as does the cruiser Oakland. Both succumb to the drone onslaught. The Minnesota releases their emergency buoy as a warning.

The trailing missile submarine Nebraska doesn't get any warning message before the active countermeasures deploy on the Minnesota. By the time Minnesota's beacon reaches the surface, the Nebraska is breaking up falling at a leisurely rate to line the absolute bottom of the St. Peter fracture zone.

Peterson does get the warning message, angrily watching fading position chits denoting loss of confidence in the existence of his warships. He informs the President: "The People's Army-Navy is sinking our fleet as D.C. takes a nuke. Coincidence? I don't believe in coincidence."

"The NEST team on the scene report isotopes originating off the Chiengze fast breeder reactor." Homeland steps up with key data, "No reports of stolen nuclear material from that facility. The UN has the same results."

"Fits." Peterson clicks off as the President considers options placing a call to the United Nation's nuclear wizard Disraeli Gears.

Penthouse Letters, Houston, TX 0040 Monday 01 September

Landing roughly behind the dark hi-rise Laz scrapes the pavement, bounces then smashes into a dumpster. Standing shakily, he brushes off street detritus discovering several needles clinging to his Kevlar suit returning them to the collection covering the concrete.

"Lo-rent shooting gallery down here," he remarks to no one, then looks up, big-ass radar lure up there." He pulls out his tablet, "Hmmm, no signal. Maybe I can get word out from up there? No power, steps. Eighty floors at least. Super."

Turning the corner looking for an entrance in the alley Laz shoots the padlock/chain assembly off the emergency door, takes a few gulps of water while looking inside, sniffs for danger finds none deeply sighs then trudges up the dim stairway. Upon attaining the second floor landing he spies a diagram pointing out his next exit on the service roof lies 70 floors up. Laz sighs, curses and spits. Then he takes another drink before restarting his climb. On the thirty-fifth floor landing Laz comes across a vending machine. While checking his pockets for quarters he catches a glimpse of himself in the glass. Remembering who he is and why he is climbing steps, Laz raises his M16 and smashes the glass. He grabs a handful of peanut butter cups and several waters. Spying a bag of cheese puffs Laz enjoys a snack washing it down with two waters before restarting his journey.

Reaching the service rooftop, Laz pushes the bar to release the door. Stepping outside he crosses under the electrical wiring making a beeline between the silent chillers to the manicured edge overlooking the penthouse suite's swanky veranda with vanishing swimming pool where two men take turns firing aiming for the chutes which two women helpfully spotlight with high power beams. Laz watches them scoring hits and spits in their general direction.

"Hi-rent shooting gallery," remarks Laz before screwing on a silencer then putting his laser sight where it'll do the most good squeezing the trigger gently killing each in turn, "Suck on this shitheads." Looking for more targets, Laz spies a bevy of scantily clad women. He clicks his earpiece hoping for comms with his teammates, hears nothing rightfully fears the worse case. He stays on comms for a long minute while the ladies watch silently. No reply; Laz reloads, brushes cheese puff debris off his face and jumps down to welfare-check the locals.

Alone on the roof with the panicky girls, Denny Watson, U.S. Navy SEAL turns on the charm, "Sorry about the mess but your asshole buddies had to stop killing my team. Also, let's be friends, my name's Laz." The women stare blankly for

several beats before several begin putting on street clothes. Diverting his gaze Laz tries very hard not to leer but to think about hooking up (mind-slip) with his SEAL teammates thus getting back into the battle. Failing, Laz instead turns back to watch the girls dress; you know, to remember why he fights. Laz grins madly as the women stare daggers with one particularly feisty specimen adding rude gestures. Laz likes her the best.

The ladies gather their belongings turning to leave, "Power's out," Laz notes helpfully, "best take the stairs. There's a vending machine halfway down help yourself, but leave me the peanut butter cups." He remembers his manners, "Thank you for your time, you've been so much more than kind."

They give him the finger in unison disappearing inside.

Alone, Laz cocks an ear hearing familiar sounds. He wanders to the street side of the building to lean over for a peek. Below an armored personnel carrier holds the intersection a mounted Dushka shooting it out with several cops. Action! Laz races inside the penthouse through the ladies bitching him out while putting on shoes in the kitchen, finds the stairway and hustles up one flight to the service roof to retrieve his rpg launcher, warheads and the rest of his kit. He flies back down the steps squeezing past the gawking women now in a big hurry to leave. Catching his breath at the roof's edge, Laz sights the armored car and fires. Hit! The cops throw him a wave; nice to be appreciated Laz thinks as he reloads the launcher looking about for his water. So far his 'seek and destroy' mission is all peaks and valleys.

Loss-Leader, Greyspace 0045 Monday 01 September

Karl nudges Myron, "Put up the chyron."

In the Paddock at Billingsport Range all screens run the same scroll- 'Free Burgers IF Laz pisses on the bodies... Free Onion Rings IF Laz pisses in the pool... Free Burgers IF Laz pisses on the bodies....'.

Back at the penthouse Laz eyes the dead body he drilled into the retaining wall then at the four dead people over by the pool. Stepping over the blood streak he made of the owner, Laz strolls over to the pool and drops his kit on the table.

At the Paddock all eyes focus on Laz wondering if...

Laz kicks four dead bodies into the pool, takes a seat and pulls out his water. From the penthouse a shot rings out. Laz returns fire. A woman falls in the doorway.

"Super," he thinks.

At the Paddock Laz's 50/50 futures soar Karl and Myron fist bump.

Laz looks at the dead bodies. Then he looks at his empty water bottle.

At the Paddock everyone holds his or her breath hoping...

Laz pees on the dead bodies in the pool.

The crowd goes wild! Free Burgers AND Onion Rings!

When Laz Met Lauren, Houston, TX 0055 Monday 01 September

Laz zips, gathers his kit and heads toward the stairs. He finds the vending machine and re-stocks his candy/water supplies reaching the street in the throes of a sugar high. Hearing automatic weapon fire Laz sets off at a trot toward the action around the corner.

Peeking around the building, Laz spies a scantily clad woman bleeding out on the sidewalk. Then he sees another with a headshot and a third covered in blood. Laz looks across the street at a coffee shop and spots two shooters inside. He locates the fourth and fifth victims lying in the road but can't seem to find... there,

crouching behind the car is the girl with the enviable rude gesture catalog. Laz steps into the street and begins firing nonstop into the shop door and windows.

The shooters direct their automatic weapon fire his way missing wildly. Laz keeps walking, reloading on the move until the shop falls silent. Catching movement out of the corner of his eye Laz empties a pistol clip into a would-be third shooter. He reloads both weapons then turns to check the welfare of the only scantily clad female to survive.

She stands, shakes her head sadly and staggers off leaving sans rude gesture.

"What the hell? That's it?" Laz figures she'd tell him to fuck off considering their recent history so her indifference doesn't surprise him but he worries for her safety watching her unsteady progress down the sidewalk. Laz waits a few beats then with his head on a swivel follows at a safe distance.

Making her way in the general direction of her apartment, Lauren the influencer finds herself singularly unprepared for her new future; no, make that totally devastatingly unprepared to explore this new chaotic world replacing her old (not exactly calm but fairly routine) world. Her outfit is ruined, her makeup is running, she's soiled intimately and she feels like crying but doesn't. She feels like spitting and does. She turns to face Laz to shoo him away. Shoo!

Laz laughs, pauses then gestures ahead.

Lauren turns, muttering, "Sure, end of the world party at a swanky penthouse she says, live stream your fun she says, good for your influencing brand she says. Not much left to say now you're lying in a pool of blood, huh? Damn influencers, nothing but trouble!"

Laz catches much of her rant, wonders which of the bevy of dead beauties influentially cajoled her to the SEAL shooting party. Silently he tries thinking empathically and what he supposes is pretty much on point: Lauren excels in

influencing despite the pressure of being on-brand 24/7, she is pretty and smart and lives in an incredible apartment with now-dead roommates and she is in shock.

What he doesn't know about earlier tonight could fill a book. The penthouse party ends in a hurry after the shooting starts and Lauren and her friends find themselves stuck in the chaos. Lauren hatches a scheme to get them all home safely by stealing the host's car, making as if to leave when Laz swoops in first scraping the pavement then cratering the retaining wall with the one guy with car keys in his pocket.

It's a small wonder why she doesn't appreciate Laz. Laz expects no less.

Lauren has footage of Laz entering the scene, killing the host. She stops and shows him, "Look."

Laz enjoys the snippet, "Looks like you got my best side. I'm sorry about your, um, friends? What's your name? Where are you going?"

All of a sudden Laz snaps out of his infatuation, recognizing he and this fine young female specimen swim in deep shit because as he fell he observes a big trap: "Listen to me" he points to rooftops, "it's trap. They've got radar lures here, here and over here," he points eastward, "and guns along the water to the Gulf of Mexico. Missiles, I'm saying our missiles from our own Navy will target these radars bringing down the buildings rubblelizing the area. Anybody right where we stand," Laz points down, "is in deep shit. We have to warn them, then move."

His new girlfriend stares open-mouth working out his meaning, "The internet of things communicates internally via the lower cell channels, forget the phone but downgrading the comms on your device should work.

Whipping out his handy pad device Laz flicks it on changing settings to make the connection. Ten microseconds later, "Bingo, we're in." Lauren gives Laz a nod of approval as the first ordnance whistles in just like in the war movies shrill at

first then falling in pitch during terminal velocity. Whistle bang and a tall building to Laz's east explodes with the top twenty floors falling in a shower of rubble taking the cell tower with it, "Shit on us that's the direction we need to go."

"That's the targeting illumination round, super-fast arriving no earlier than a few minutes before the first cruise missile. Run!"

Big Valley, LA/SD, SoCal 0100 Monday 01 September

Fires rage throughout SoCal. Wind-speeds increase, fires join with neighboring /fires wiping out resistance. Simply put: not a good weekend in SoCal for anyone combustible in the face of the unquenchable.

With SoCal in flames, the word of the day is fled as in 'we fled from one fire sack into another'. The refugee wave pushes against the GC military rolling east out of Pendleton and northward from El Centro in a big hurry to take Nevada completely shutting down the Air Force installations hunkering down under the continuing onslaught of cascading satellites. Migrants on the move looking to revoke U.S. citizenship in favor of life, former ordinary citizens now form packs of herd animals. Every piece of asphalt leading away holds what is most important.

GC General Espinal watches area drone feeds for movement bottlenecks His leap frogging air defense companies take it on the chin with attrition now becoming an issue. His supplies aren't moving fast enough and he's sick of complaining up the ladder screaming at the entire chain of command knowing Jorge et al offer platitudes not caring how many die for their cause. Espinal keeps hearing about Nigel-this and Nigel-that so many freaking times he now also hates the English. Damn Nigel loitering in the Gulf grounds the Tyrants' drones drawing away Espinal's infrastructure with an entire drone flight, sixteen critical planes, flying into north Texas certainly not on-station defending his convoy. The pressure

from rogue National Guard units indiscriminately firing missiles and rpg rounds on the column proves unrelentingly deadly for both the GC and the fleeing residents.

With the General closely observing the drone feed the next squad of GC tanks rolls through the tight canyon even more slowly acutely aware of the minefields sown recently via long-range artillery rounds. Most accompanying infantry dismount their BMPs probing ahead providing a moving screen searching for encroaching fast-moving hard-hitting Javelin missile teams taking pot shots on the convoy intermittently all day. Night scopes make stopping a bad idea as the attrition rate climbs. The last word Espinal receives from logistics command staff reports another company of light armor with mobile AAA rolling out of Pendleton for the canyon battle with estimated time of arrival uncertain.

A frustrated Espinal takes his moaning to the top, "I need them here now!"

Carolla takes his call shrugging in reply, "Talk to Nigel. No plan ever survives first contact but I'll talk to Herrera and the Tyrant about the pressure."

Pressure? They're slaughtering us! Espinal's sincerely getting the idea he is not expected to get very far regardless of all the bullshit planning crap. Nigel? Freaking English and their stupid names, hate them guys. Shit, locals blowing our timetable straight to hell, where's the damn air support? Hell, just one hunter/killer might get the enemy to duck occasionally.

Hash Wednesday? Greyspace

Myron looks to Marvin, Marvin shrugs.

Karl is having none of that, "Dammit, we need a killer promotion to keep asses in seats and sell enough tickets to cement Laz into the zeitgeist; your job, not mine. Now we got nothing going on. Same old same old- huh, ain't this a bitch?"

Myron points to the post-it hanging on the screen.

"No, absolutely not!" Karl refuses to entertain Pedro's idea as over-the-top, "No way will I promote 'Hash Wednesday' to the regulars, we'd lose business."

Jordie's Ghost walks past carrying a fancy two-piece pool cue on his way to hustle some of Karl's workers. He stops to give Karl a rude gesture.

"Let's ask Mr. Noun: the 50/50 needs a killer-promotion, do you think 'Hash Wednesday' is a good idea?"

"Not on a Monday, I don't." Jordie's Ghost walks on.

"Yup, that's an insurmountable obstacle. Hash oil specials, purple haze and whatnot- wait, that's it! Jazz bar! Myron, have the guys build a stage, we'll bring in roadies set up some klieg lights and a killer sound system. Marvin, scare up some jazz greats for a special 'Apocalypse V' gig. Make sure you get the big names to headline like Billie Holiday and I want Louis Armstrong to MC; tell him to bring his horn. We'll go live bands for the duration. Figure out where Bob Marley's hiding and we can sprinkle in some reggae. Now we need the hook... how about free hash oil every time Laz... dammit, I got nothing. Super."

Marvin types out a banner chyron: Celebrate Apocalypse V at the Paddock on Billingsport Range! Live Music! Jazz Greats! Reggae Legends! Big Bands! Special 50/50 Hash Oil Giveaways! 2-1 Eat/Drink Specials! Don't Miss It!

Karl approves, "Light on detail- I like it! Run it nonstop on the Laz 50/50 screens, intermittently on the others. Now let's get busy, shall we?"

You Better Run, Houston, TX 0110 Monday 01 September

'Laz stealing wheels sweetens deals: 2 minutes BOGO Everything!'

"Too slow we got to get moving. Wait, I got an idea." He couldn't see the chyron but Laz felt good about breaking the rear window on a nearby European luxury vehicle and plugging a universal key into a data port. The car starts, first try.

"That's some idea you got." Lauren wants one too.

"Drive fast." Laz suggests.

"Where?" Lauren drops the tranny into gear, waits.

An armored vehicle enters the intersection trading gunfire with the cops in close pursuit. Laz considers his recent luck excellent; first he saves the girl now he knows the path out of danger.

"Follow them!"

Lauren floors the accelerator.

"Stay half a block behind."

"Don't tell me how to drive."

Laz works a few comebacks through his weary mind but she beats him to the punch, "You're not very smart, are you?"

He stares tightening the grip on his M-16.

"I mean, you know, don't take this the wrong way..."

Tracers from the armored personnel carrier getting closer let Laz know they weren't going to get much further along the 'meet and greet' path staying so close. Best trade space for relative safety, he thinks, "Back off another half a block."

"Stop telling me how to drive. Aren't you worried the cops are going to start firing on us?" Lauren is learning how to use her influence properly.

Laz turns to face Lauren, "That's a good question, first time long time. It's likely they're not going to fire on unthreatening civilians bad for morale and all that. Thing is, that APC is doing us and the cops a huge favor."

"How's that?"

"There's a safe passage thru what's coming. I don't know for how long but whoever is in charge of that APC is in one huge hurry, ask me."

"Yea, you say so." Lauren remains unimpressed, "I'm just saying if you were smarter, you wouldn't be here. Do with that what you will don't forget to pay the bill."

The Register Rings, Greyspace

Myron runs the facial analysis take against the screen presentation, watching the magic number climb to 87%, the floor to which Karl set the next trigger. With 87% of the patrons watching Laz, all screens switch to the Laz/Lauren chase scene. The place howls with laughter as Lauren berates Laz' intelligence.

At that moment Myron presents a new chyron opportunity to the gamblers taking the form of a 4:1 special- any four tickets for one new Laz ticket below Laz-13.

Karl looks for Jordie's ghost, "Hey Myron, you see Mr. No-un anywhere? We need someone to work the sound board and he needs a job."

In a calculated move, a designed play, an engineered instance, a herd mentality quickly began trading in tired old tickets for new, fresher, better ones and the wave broke for Laz. Those returning from work learn that following Laz's travails and drinking heavily can also pay off.

Karl takes the stage to introduce the Master of Ceremonies and start the live music sets for the duration of Apocalypse V: "Mr. Louis Armstrong!"

The crowd goes wild as the band launches into Mack the Knife.

Don't Compromise, Rubbilize! Houston, TX 0120 Monday 01 September

"Look out!" Ted ducks instinctively as an RPG leaps from an alley striking the lead car. Like a layer peeling from his outer meniscus membrane Ted's mind slows the action as he squeezes a short burst into the truck joining the rear of the chase.

"Son of a bitch!" Ted ducks as machine gun fire from ahead shreds the windscreen. He returns the fire as rounds penetrate his vehicle.

The APC rounds the corner and hits the gas. Ted reloads and shifts fire to the rear, concentrating on the gun mount.

Behind, Manny and his Dushka light up Ted's squad taking out the rear tires on his car crashing it into a street light pole as 'Better Dead Than Ted' endures another motor vehicle accident.

"Goddamn it!" The air bag deployment and the roaring Dushka pumping rounds into the fuel tank swallow Ted's scream. Ted opens his door drawing the attention his way. He looks to the others, finds them dead, says a prayer.

Lauren screeches to a halt behind the Dushka as Laz empties a clip in the direction of the gun mount. The truck flees Lauren gestures to Ted, "Get in! Hurry! There's no time!"

Ted Williams hurriedly pushes aside the airbag unbuckles and falls to the ground. Laz trundles outside to gather the cop as Lauren broadcasts a live stream from her cell. Ted gets thrown into the backseat, Laz follows and Lauren hits the gas, "Seatbelts!" she yells excitedly.

"What the hell?" Ted has questions as high explosives seek, find the lures and detonate littering the street with debris.

Luckily Laz has answers, "Navy's rubblelizing Texas; we got to leave the city, got to get away."

"Going up the country?" Ted wonders, "going where the water tastes like wine so you can jump in, stay drunk all the time?"

Lauren, zigging and zagging, adjusts the mirror checking Ted for a head wound.

Laz gets him, "Exactly where we're going I cannot say."

Ted, "I'm tired of the way I've been dogged around."

Laz, "There's a brand new game I don't wanna play."

Lauren, zigging and zagging, re-adjusts the mirror checking Laz for head wounds; decides he's probably a lunatic.

Ted, "Got to get going, I can't stay here long."

Closing within a half-block from the fleeing APC, Lauren realizes, "We're heading for the shipping channel."

Laz rummages in his bag, smiles wickedly hands Ted some clips along with his M-16, "You know the way?"

"Pretty much."

Laz fits on a warhead then leans out the window aiming the RPG, "All I need to know. Fire in the hole!"

Rampage, GC Caverne, Southern Paraguay 0125 Monday 01 September

Carnage. Wandering the hallways Pedro scans the Texas live streams disgustedly thinking, "Carnage goes on a rampage; film at eleven."

He meanders toward the break-room where a birthday party is in full swing.

"Happy Birthday Governor!" Surrounded by political sycophants, the former Governor of Paraguay and future Governor of Texas enjoys the sentiment. Celebration noises ring throughout the room along with copious hugs and kisses from the other jubilant leaders. Carlos stands with Paez, watching wordlessly. Pedro silently joins them, Carlos offering a fist bump. Pedro waves him off and instead hugs the cringing countenance. Pedro hugs Paez, shakes his head disdainfully knowing what's next then strolls off.

Jorge exits the party, "Time."

Security squads loitering nearby form into entry teams.

"Just the Governor" Carlos instructs.

Carolla shows up to watch as the security team rushes the break-room, grabs the Governor and drags him out to the waiting matriarch.

Carolla shakes her head sadly as she announces the verdict, "Traitor."

She slits his throat before security drags him away amidst gurgling death throes.

Choosing the pick for an abject demonstration project proves to be an easy one. Paez keeps a short shit list one prominently featuring the newly dead former Governor, his gravely voice grating and annoying. News of el Governor's demise at the hands of "unidentified terrorists" spreads like dengue fever through a pack of rats among with the political class cowering underground with the GC. Karl's Materiel Supply Division releases an official announcement broadcast from a new bureaucratic entity known as the Court of Judgments. Such messages unambiguously threaten the lives of the surviving political class.

Succession proves vertical as Carolla swears in the former Lt. Governor before the rapidly cooling corpse makes it into the elevator for the short ride down to the morgue incinerator burn queue. In an aside Carolla turns to Carlos, "Monitor the reactions closely; I don't trust any of these leeches."

"Get in bed with rats, wake up with fleas then deal with infestation."

"Exactly."

Meltzer Sings, Paddock, Billingsport Range 0134 Monday 01 September

With Laz in a car chase gun battle fleeing Houston perchance in the same vehicle with Lauren and 'better dead than Ted', Myron playfully offers a trifecta paying triple should all three die simultaneously. Finding decent odds of an immediate payoff the crowd swarms the book snapping up multiple tickets before a pending shift change sends them into town for mop-up duty.

Death gestures for a refill so Myron saunters over grabbing a clean frosted mug from the freezer filling it with the finest swill on the Delaware River.

As Death downs his brew, Marvin gestures to the 'No Credit' sign over the register. Death signals for a third. Marvin shakes his head.

"You know Marvin my friend, I've looked at life from both sides now and you know what? Now old friends are acting strange. They look at me, say I've changed; but something's lost when something's gained. Every day I take life's illusion as you recall. I really don't know life at all."

Marvin looks at Myron. Myron shrugs indifferently. Marvin nods. Now with the patron paid-in-full Myron reaches under the bar producing a full honey/super-fentanyl jar with death's emblem proudly adorning the label. He lines up another two jars on the bar-top for next. Marvin finds a clean spatula as Count Basie limbers up the orchestra.

Death grins wickedly, "Private branding? You're the best! Life gives but death takes!"

Brad & Janet, Houston, TX 0145 Monday 01 September

Alt Offering 2890 Collage Mashup Sources Soundtrack Number(s) 2, Video Number(s) 4533.9876 4533.9877 4533.0001 4533.0003 4521.7763 4532.7764 4590.1170 Tune(s) 0

"Dammit Janet, it's two in the morning already you got to get those RAMs flushing to memory now I can't be doing everything. Stop watching already, we have to keep continuity or the record will be shit."

Brad's using his whining technique, Janet internalizes. Well fuck him. "Brad, you should have gotten off your fat ass yesterday like I told you to."

Brad hates it when she turns the tale over to his shortcomings. Well fuck her. "For your information I bought all they had. Don't be an idiot. Just do it already."

Janet isn't about to take his shit for much longer, "Goddamn it you can just do it yourself already and stop whining I'm busy; and another thing, say FYI to me one more time and I'm going to get physical on you. There it is."

Brad hates it when she makes threats. She loves to delegate and he requires no supervision. She could do it.

"Besides someone's got to make sure the cameras point in the right direction. That's my job, remember?" Janet hates bullshit.

"Alright, just make sure you don't screw up." Time to smooth things, "You save and broadcast and I will do the rest. Don't worry."

Brad and Janet maintain a lair in a warehouse conversion on the waterway just outside the blast radius. They have over a dozen cameras recording nonstop hoping to eventually release a documentary if the world survives the war.

Time to smooth things, "Alright so what do you want me to do?"

"We need to change memory cards in the remotes and I don't want to leave. Hold on, wait a second. Grab that handheld and see what you can get in transit. There's mob action at the park, someone's pushing over the fence at the baseball fields, and I can see vehicles tearing up right field. Looks like... oh shit, look at this parachute video, there's dozens, hundreds, thousands- it's the invasion!"

"Where's your big gun?"

"Still in my pants, why?" She hugs him before stepping over to the source of her power recording the parachute scans. Explosions reverberate outside.

"Holy shit they're blowing up the entire city and we're missing it let's go!" Once outside Brad points his camera going wide view, focusing on the massive fire raging out of control two long blocks off and not threatening, yet. Janet shoots the mob fleeing the carnage then focuses on the falling skyscrapers. Both of them record, concentrating on the missiles' devastation. Brad feels like crying.

Janet struggles to comprehend the destruction, "Upstairs, we'll get a better look." The couple lives for their unobstructed view of the shipping channel and cityscape

from their fourth floor walkup, forever filming traffic floating up and down the river, all kinds from fishing boats to tugs pushing barges multiple football fields long and heavy. Brad feels terrible shooting video of missing buildings, so it goes.

They race upstairs as a fast moving convoy snakes in their general direction. Janet points and shoots, joining the action in progress. She films an armored vehicle leading multiple pickup trucks with machine guns on tripods. The fourth and final pickup (Manny and his Dushka) trade fire with a... Mercedes?

"Geez Brad, this is bad, look." Janet pulls him to her window plants her feet standing pointing down toward the channel.

"Hey, what's this, Homeland Security showing their face finally?" Brad switches to his big zoom camera swinging the long bipod to the action.

"When the Coast Guard rounds the bend, you can see they're going to be in some deep shit." Brad slides the long lens adjusting focus until a sharp picture of the Cutter's deck appears revealing sailors scurrying manning deck guns unpacking crates of ammunition.

Janet waves off the approaching Coast Guard Cutter, to no avail. She spins 180 for a selfie with the gunboat remarking, "While I still can."

'Holy shit, she's insane,' Janet knows what Brad thinks waving getting glares in return. Deciding not to acknowledge her pique Brad returns to the action as a second Cutter races in.

Brad scopes the riverfront for any more surprises as the two ships close ranks for mutual support. Roaring in fast on approach, the Cutters necessarily drop speed upon entering a tight twisty sixty-degree turn. In tandem, power drifting their way around the bend broad side vulnerable- speed chosen over protection- a bridge enters the scene in front of the ships. Brad zooms out to expand the view then

collapses to focus center on figures lining the bridge; finally seeing what Janet knows- the end is near.

Brad concentrates on first one, then a second and finally a third GC artillery battery silently hiding unmoving figures with the ambushers manning both ends and the middle of the causeway. GC mortar crews hold the roadway-channel interface while light artillery with two rifle squads flanking aim at the river bend waiting to imbue their purpose. Lock-on! Fire!

Two tubes, four machine guns and two mortars create a concussive wave jolting everyone within earshot. The Cutters' take hits then explode violently taking all hands. Bricks coming loose from the building take down the ledge under Janet's exterior camera falling still shooting before smashing to bits of rubble.

Brad staring open-mouth sees it, can't believe it. Janet meanwhile uploads and simultaneously archives the battle, her fingers flashing up a caption forecasting the next several hours embodying the bloody escalation imbuing the zeitgeist forever. Short and sweet: US Forces Take It Up the Wazoo.

Meltzer Studios, Paddock, Billingsport Range 0155 Monday 01 September

In a converted six-bucket outhouse adjacent to the Paddock Marvin and Myron power up a huge soundboard. The former crapper shakes with thunderous cacophony as a new all-star lineup tunes up for a live performance before working on their lead-ins. Jordie presses buttons like there's no tomorrow but the board dies an agonizing death.

Inside a cramped sound truck brought in at the last minute Karl powers up some ancient consoles showing Jordie the setup. He adjusts the volume levels and checks the monitors- so far, so good. No, wait a second, "Marvin, getting some crossover on mike seventeen- that's the lead on stage 2."

Marvin crawls underneath to look for a short, eventually opting to run a new line. He feeds cable into the conduit running into the bar while Marvin walks around the building to hook up the replacement on the secondary stage inside stopping to enjoy the classical guitar soloist performing main stage. As he replaces the wire, Jimi working on a hot riff gives him a cool nod. Marvin nods in return.

Karl puts on monitor headphones to listen to mike seventeen, "No good, I think we need to replace the mike. Try a new one, Marvin? Thanks."

Next to him, St. Peter munches on Jordie's burger while going over the upcoming act line-up, "You sure they'll all show? I mean, you got nothing but A-list performers here, temperamental individuals one and all actual divas particularly the rockers so how do you know they'll appear?"

"No rocker can turn down an end of the world gig; they'll all show. Guaranteed, it's a lock. Once they can't pay up on their bar tabs, we'll own them. That where we're making some wiggle room on a live recording release."

St. Peter finishes up Jordie's meal, "You say so; we'll see won't we? You're going to record everything, right?"

"Every note."

"And we can use the track for the movie or whatever?"

"In a manner of speaking: your novel gets first release rights for a movie soundtrack but the annex will be putting out a laser disk and individual artists can release later if the apocalypse fails."

"Fat chance of that," St. Peter takes a drink, "kiss the world goodbye."

"Whatever doesn't matter what they think as long as they perform."

"I actually can't wait..." St. Peter halts mid-sentence turning, glaring at the interrupter as an ancient wall-mount payphone blares.

Karl reaches for the handset answering the call, "It's for you."

"I'm not here."

The Other Apocalypse of Peter=>

Myron hands St. Peter a wet nappy then takes back the new rough draft pages checking for edits or notes by the 'author' or any indication of the venerable saint providing apocalyptic inputs. Finding none Myron shakes his head sadly grabbing a burger off the grill before rejoining Greyspace.

"Finally dispensing with the fiction you're writing a book?" Hanging in the office at Gate 7, Jesus waits patiently for a reply as St. Peter wipes errant Paddock Burger juice off his chin onto the sleeve of his new 'Apocalypse V-THE MOVIE!' marque sweatshirt swag courtesy of his ghostwriter, Myron.

"Nobody reads anymore, even in Greyspace. Like over half the books sit gathering dust. The dead want visuals. Short-form films in the cloud represent the future and I'm all about supplying the future with a quality ending."

"Sure you are. So they're writing an action movie instead?"

"Yes, 'they' are. Producer credit if you want." St. Peter's magnanimous.

"How about 'show-runner'?" Jesus defines the role.

"Very funny." St. Peter finishes up his last onion ring, fills the basket with organic onions and drops it into the hot oil, "Beer?"

"Sure. I like the soundtrack idea off the live performance feed but what did the rights cost the operation?" Jesus taps a finger on the thick contract sitting on the desktop, "Karl may act friendly but he is quite shrewd, you know. Accounting claims you bent over to seal the deal."

"It's complicated." St. Peter dodges and weaves with the best.

"Yes, stick with that. In the meantime, I think you've lost sight of your other responsibilities; such as, who is doing the judging? The number of souls making time holding in greyspace continue to rise exponentially. We, and by

'we' I mean you, need to clear some out to make space. Judge not and Greyspace will be teeming with the un-adjudicated."

"My plate is full with the apocalypse and you want me to do my regular job too? Doesn't seem reasonable, ask me." St. Peter eyes his fly rod in the corner and his fly-tying rig on the table holding his latest Caddis fly imitation.

"Get used to the idea your fishing forays remain null and void until Apocalypse V wraps and the human population craters. Looks like you're going with nuclear war to end everybody. A little risky, no?"

"Far as I know, one nuclear explosion leads to many nuclear explosions. No way they'll be able to stop; it's human nature to destroy themselves."

"Hmmm." As show-runner Jesus trades on insider knowledge.

"No seriously, it's a lock. Trust me."

"You say so. Let's go, we've got to run by the annex."

"Annex?" St. Peter wonders how far out of the loop he is.

Turns out, very far indeed, "Brutal you don't know this but after the space crunch developed in hell, we had to expand. You'd know if you paid attention. We repurposed some space in the other universe. C'mon, things to do places to go. Wear comfortable shoes."

Taking a slow walking tour of the annex Peter hears another cacophony, his second of the day, this one approximating a perpetual thunderstorm with deadly close, nonstop lightning bolts hurling down from the heavens.

"What the... heck?" Peter asks, "Sounds like a rain storm but it can't be. Water Park? What special kind of Hell is this?"

"Welcome to the annex," Jesus chuckles in a friendly manner filling Peter in, "follows the rules, same as Hell; wouldn't be damnation with a fun waterpark on the premises, right?"

"What if the union flaks drown 'em, you know, again and again?" St. Peter is no fan of the 'slip n slide' being old and whatnot as waterparks and the elderly are natural enemies.

"Maybe that's an idea going forward, maybe not: the truth is the union flaks, as you so colorfully refer to the PAU, represent the problem not the solution. Hell's temporary expansion into greyspace adds a tremendous amount of territory, scales to about half a planet or so and there isn't staffing enough to manage your repetition or much of anything hands-on. The PAU now ineffectively manages Purgatory and the annex as one entity. The staff's reaction to the PAU expansion plans? Well, you know the heavy-handed ham-fisted PAU types as well as I do and the fallout is not exactly positive with the Spirit bombarded with complaints and the suggestion box considerably overflowing with hints on preferred self-pleasuring methodologies."

St. Peter laughs at that one, "Kind of risky telling the deity to go fuck himself, eh? I guess when your gig is 'punishment-provider' there isn't a tremendous amount of surplus in the intellectual arsenal."

Jesus nods, "Smarter beings tend not to want to work most punishment jobs. We transferred some of the slacking manager's from Greyspace when we closed Purgatory for renovations but unfortunately they're not much good at physically keeping order so we had to go to plan B, automation. The annex now practically runs itself, for better or worse. So, what do you think?"

St. Peter looks at all the grayness, wondering how you automate Hell. He opines, "For the record I got no problem with expanding or situating Hell on Earth proper after Apocalypse V wraps. Greyspace/Purgatory belongs to Marvin et al and interspersing their domain with the damned is no big deal if you ask me as it probably makes Greyspace more interesting. If Marvin has

issues, he can tell it to the hand. It's time to change. Fuck him and the flying monkey he flew in on." Ballsy move throwing the writing staff under the bus but desperate times lead to desperate measures

Doesn't happen often but Jesus loves Peter when Peter actually shows up willing to contribute. He almost cancels the post-apocalypse mandatory retirement dinner- almost. Back in the day, old Peter actually managed the same type of problems he now routinely ignores in favor of eating high quality delicious organic bbq, quaffing beers and of course, fly-fishing. Jesus makes a mental note to change the retirement dinner to a picnic with Nebbi manning the grill. Old Nebbi knows his way around charcoal briquettes and lighter fluid.

The two broach a ring of mountains. St. Peter looks down across triple-canopy vegetation. Suddenly the cacophony escalates to unbearable and he covers his ears so Jesus quiets their local area. St. Peter's ears continue to ring as the ground shakes.

Jesus surveys the landscape, "Good, now you can hear me. Anyway, we're at the Annex border: the old Greyspace transfer lies just over the far side of the valley, the door to Hell location is across the next mountain. In essence, here's where three major non-heavenly operational areas intersect. So, you get the story, right? Well, the border opens the border closes without a trustee handling border management and member transfer protocols."

Peter gapes, "The union manages the portal? Really?" St. Peter knows the union too well to underestimate the danger.

"For now. This situation is not good."

"And He saw what he had done and saw it was NFG, eh? Ha-ha."

"Very funny. Keep up the sass and see how that works."

St. Peter immediately regrets his ball-busting impulse. Upon receiving no other comeback lines the keeper of Heaven's gates (intelligently, somewhat out of character) dials back his unrelentingly piercing natural sarcasm in favor of detente, "Automation?"

"Note the link it is no coincidence that societal progress surges after you leave Earth later generations determining twin needs to increase both killing power and defense capabilities (protect us by killing them and keeping them out of reach). Steel blades, spears, bows and arrows eventually fall from favor with the advent of gunpowder and the ability to kill from greater distances accurately. Killing and maiming machines evolve thanks to the mastery of physics. The latest in high tech weaponry lies dormant in the valley of darkness awaiting the shooters' arrival so try to understand our position.

As you know the base killing tubes load then deliver explosive projectiles. The larger caliber weapons kill many unintended targets calling them 'collateral damage'. Accuracy, projectile size, rate of fire, operator safety-such improvements follow in a never-ending activity known as 'arms race' producing high-energy lethality. The penultimate achievement: one projectile killing millions of people. As indicated Apocalypse V seems to follow this trajectory but until we see your book..."

"You saw those current draft pages, didn't you? The rest is in editing, trust me." St. Peter has no idea where the actual book is or what's inside.

"You say so. Thus these warlike operations reflect man's creativity and cruelty providing opportunities to incorporate novel schemes whereas the Annex deploys professional volunteers as inflictors culling semi-bad souls formerly stocking Purgatory turning them into killers, torturers and the like. The union supplies the weaponry then takes a step back to watch."

"Drinking/gambling at the Paddock at Billingsport Range, no less." St. Peter dislikes the crowding inherent with the new management practices.

"No more intrinsic than before they went organic just higher quality. Anyhow, Hell operations take ex-military volunteers wholesale out of Purgatory putting them to work hunting the condemned: win-win."

Peter stares into the Valley of Darkness in awe, his mouth agape. He contemplates about how it must feel to be in a war that never ends, decides it probably sucks rotten eggs. Actually, rotten egg smell might improve the atmosphere: smells like death the day before his semiannual bath. Out of the corner of his eye he spies Karl leading a caravan along the edge of Greyspace. Karl waves but St. Peter pretends he doesn't notice.

Jesus gives Karl a kind wave and turns to Peter, "Karl sure is a go-getter/ He thinks I don't know or care what he's doing. Maybe he's correct; take a squat and close your mouth already or you'll catch flies."

They both laugh. As Karl crests the mountain Peter collapses on the smaller lawn chair rubbing his aching feet questioning his lifetime of footwear choices. Jesus joins him and they sip ice water from frozen mugs daring the bugs to land as indeed tremendous clouds of flies hatch from countless maggots luxuriating in spilled guts. As Peter prefers not choking on insects Jesus obliges his friend and suddenly the atmosphere clears.

Jesus continues, "During the design phase the PAU appropriates the term 'firing range' applying it to the Valley of Darkness below. Simple solutions often prove the most ingenious and this firing range certainly qualifies. Participants assemble over there, then cross the valley before exiting at the other side if they make it (none do). Can you see the rest area and refreshments waiting the lucky victors? No? That's because it became the lounge area for the slacking PAU and now it's gone."

Peter watches the condemned enter through a corner gate on the valley floor between steep mountain summits approaching thirty-five thousand meters. A small ornate sign above the heavy black Iron Gate displays the phrase, 'Death Will Set You Free'. They watch as Purgatory members assemble into platoons then disperse in a not-so orderly fashion with some waving at Jesus merrily while others glare intently. Punishment angels working in teams orchestrate the non-stop activity first administratively sorting volunteer shooters according to capability then herding them along to the supply armory. Operations then break the platoons into maneuver units known as hunter-killers. Finally, transportation starts them on the move to an initial position with known sight lines and firing positions ready for occupation. Upon hearing the starting horn, the damned un-ass themselves streaming across the valley floor toward the exit awaiting shooters. Every target proves easily locatable with no safety anywhere.

St. Peter's first apocalypse, another story he didn't write, also contains the Valley of Darkness where no evil fears tread. He counts coup, shuddering.

"Where's the PAU?" he wonders as shooters meander about directionless.

Jesus knows the PAU along with everyone at Billingsport Range stand five deep at the Paddock's main stage waiting for Jerry Garcia's solo acoustic performance, "When you finish writing Apocalypse V they won't be very happy with their fates."

"Oh yeah, what will they be?"

Jesus smiles, "Target Practice."

-The Other Apocalypse of Peter III, I-XVI

Tell Me Why I Don't Like Mondays, Greyspace

Karl keeps his head down as the convoy leaves the annex and returns to Greyspace more than slightly off-kilter upon encountering Jesus albeit from a distance. He considers the ramifications of the friendly wave, if that's what it was. What about St. Peter wearing swag? Good thing? Karl's conviction wavers.

On the one hand he is providing a service by setting up a Paddock waypoint in the middle of the new hell. After the flying monkeys wrap up construction the annex workers will be able to enjoy the live shows and Laz progress on big screens, organic meals from the Paddock catering service not to mention 50/50 wagering during union breaks in the action without leaving the premises thereby increasing efficiency while reducing labor costs. It's a win for the current management structure and another outlet for Karl to reel in suckers for the 50/50.

On the other hand, Karl is living on the edge playing for keeps desperate to thwart Apocalypse V (one for the thumb!) and now he has a 'Jesus looking over his shoulder situation'. Karl chooses to remain positive; as in, Pedro's positively going to have to deal creatively with such nosey management types if he ever gets here.

Karl groans passing stacks of books studiously ignored by the aimlessly milling hordes awaiting judgment wondering (not for the first time) exactly why he cares.

Seeing the effect on Karl, Myron resolves to increase literacy among the dead.

38th Street Bridge Song, Ship Channel Upper Detachment, Houston, TX 0157 Monday 01 September

Laz stops singing Woodstock songs, snaps in a fresh clip. He fires rearward as Ted focuses forward. Lauren weaves throwing off their aim, "Ship channel!"

The rolling gun battle draws the Coast Guard's attention and a cutter speeds in their direction firing on the armored vehicles approaching the 38th Street Bridge.

"Figures on the 38th Street Bridge- ambush!" the cutter's lookout screams.

Feeling groovy, Captain Karla Urbanowitz commander of the Guard Cutter thinks. She's busy, too busy by half, to sing, "Mortars! Take them out!"

Mortar fire brackets the cutter. Some sailors drop to the deck scrambling for cover as the switch inside Karla's command brain clicks into leadership mode: "Get up and fight, goddammit! Cover fires! Lock and load dammit! Helm, dammit, keep us the fuck moving in! X, go down below and whatever happens stay with the engines, keep us in the game, goddammit! What the fuck? Are we even shooting? Dammit, hose that fucking bridge already!"

Geysers erupt; the Smith's helo deck collects a pair of mortars and is blown to smithereens. For the big reveal Karla stares mouth agape while four soldiers load a 88mm howitzer hidden on the public access ramp, heretofore a popular feature of 38th Street Park. Their hands cover ears as she grabs up her M-16 pointing and firing at the same moment, bang-bang listening to molecules ripping apart in sheet rending terror as a high speed depleted-Uranium penetrating round zips overhead scraping a layer of paint off the superstructure. Everyone misses.

"Holy shit can't get any closer than that!" exclaims Lauren.

What about Houston's influential power brokers living at River's Edge Condominiums hiding in the Admin Building? Not so lucky. An armor-penetrating round screams through the Manager's Office toward the conference room penetrating the door. Anne, Moms4Hitler Board President, an elderly lady wearing business casual and sensible shoes ducks behind the small podium on the huge rectangular oaken table. Needn't bother, President Anne! Anne Turpin enters Greyspace immediately noticing the sign she knocks several books off the pile as Tungsten rods rip the sunny disposition off her face and the faces of once-smug power brokers representing the Moms4Hitler Educational Committee Board. She observes silently as her contemporaries also eschew learning their fate by avoiding

the stacks of hardcovers. A flying monkey passes nearby carrying a tray full of ice water. After searching her pockets for tip money and finding none Anne nonetheless takes a glass, drains it. She takes a rag, wipes her face before unfolding to read the embossing: Apocalypse V (one for the thumb!). Anne drops the rag to the grayness then grinds the swag into dust with her sensible shoes.

Rounds fall all over the place the cutter return-firing non-stop at pop up targets. Upon a reload pause the fire teams coordinate, training three guns on the same spot, the cornerstone of the 38th St. arch bridge. Drawing a barrage the fighting crew working the 88mm gun respond in kind. The cutter repeatedly fires into the bridge parapets attempting to draw a bead on moving missile and mortar teams.

The cutter's damage increases with each passing moment. Two armor-piercing rounds catch her in a pincer, skewering the warrior. The Coast Guard vessel secures a second-hand victory (before exploding) taking out the howitzer on the center and two mortar teams. Karla enters Greyspace and points to the sign/stacks as her crew enters. Everyone takes a book and a water glass. Seeing the books flying off the pile, Myron brings in the swag cart and hands out T-shirts.

The locals flow from the area like syrup off a stack of pancakes. Along the journey, the living hit the hospitals while the dead rot in the streets. Not since 1865 have U.S. citizens live life as collateral damage in this war of retribution. Myron slips Karla a Paddock burger, onion rings and a beer while she remains with the books ensuring everyone takes a copy. Marvin brings in a pallet of updates with a forklift as Greyspace falls as silent as a public library, at last.

Another USCG Cutter streams into view with radar-guided long guns firing missing high and wide, the location round. Concentrating fire on the bridge combatants, shell after shell blows three gun crews to bits in quick succession. Dispirited GC troops flee for their lives away from the bridge, the on-scene

command elements ordering a fall back maneuver to the rendezvous point: a public school two blocks west. Not coincidentally, the same spot Lauren's heading.

Better dead than Ted? Six of one, half-dozen of the other.

Targets down or fleeing, the cutter pauses near the bridge abutment looking for survivors, dropping off squads of shooters before proceeding down the channel searching out the enemy.

Embed Travails, Port of Houston, TX 0202 Monday 01 September

"Speed, sound," the producer points to the talent, "action!"

"Manny's once again patting his Dushka and notice he seems to think the big gun can feel his touch. Manny loves his Dushka."

Camera zooms out taking in Manny looking fierce with his Dushka. The shot comes off Manny onto copious shell casings scattered throughout the truck bed then pans right zooming tight on host.

"Good evening, my name is Paul Stevens and this is NightTime. Tonight NightTime visits our courageous troops like Manny here bringing you live action from the War Against Northern Aggression. Our crack NightTime staff has been unfortunately pared to three, Emilio working the camera, Marti producing and filling in for sound and me as we embed with the 4th Infantry Division somewhere in the Southwest United States. I can't give you our grid-point location even if I knew for safety purposes. It is Labor Day here and the City of Houston (split screen, insert recent skyline footage) is literally on fire lighting Manny and his Dushka which is good news for you because our gaffer crew unfortunately went the way of the sound guy (sad music, fade to a heap of bodies alongside the roadway then full screen, host pov). What I can tell you is we are with a front line division of crack infantry specialists and the soldiers you see are not happy our

remaining NightTime crew is along for the ride. Luckily Manny and his Dushka are fans (pan left widen)."

Manny dismounts giving him the finger causing the startled host to finally shut up. His squad stares menacingly. Yikes, the dude never shuts up they think for the millionth time. The camera rolls tightening on the threatening warriors as they reload weapons replace batteries then form a perimeter around the stricken vehicle while Manny assesses the situation.

"Dammit! Lucky shot? Omen? Tell me we got a spare!" Manny kicks the flat emphatically. He shoots the NightTime crew a glare.

"Five minutes."

"Too long. Get it done." Manny kicks the truck for emphasis as the NightTime host resumes being annoying but in a somewhat softer voice.

Manny moves out of earshot lamenting the impossibly lucky shot from the car during the rolling gun battle. Taking some deep breaths considering how best to proceed, he hears gunshots fading into the distance. Dammit! Been nothing but bad luck from the minute he picks up the embeds. First the guy wouldn't shut up, and then half his crew gets shot up. Who's going on the hook for that? Rear echelon bastards who ordered escort duty? Manny looks forlornly at the heap of bodies- fat chance. Turning back to the truck he again gives the NightTime camera the bird.

"Stay as far away from that guy as you can," Paul whispers to his cohorts as they begin uploading their footage for the viewers at home, "He scares me."

The squad joins Manny to bitch about the embeds out of earshot but Manny doesn't want to hear it deciding his mission seeks retribution on the car guy responsible for screwing up his life and maybe gets rid of the NightTime crew.

He needn't have worried as the NightTime upload does his dirty work for him. A missile fresh from the St. Peter fracture zone intercepts the NightTime

transmission and zeroes on Manny's Dushka wiping out not only the beloved instrument but also the tire changer and remaining NightTime crew in a lose-win for the beleaguered.

Omen. Looking about Manny observes a distinct lack of drivable vehicles within eyesight, "OK, bound to happen to the rest of those guys. I'm sorry about Juan though, go-getter looked likely to finish early. We're walking, move out."

No-Un, Gulf of Mexico, US 0205 Monday 01 September

Not just Manny having a tough day, apparently.

"There is nothing to go on here which probably doesn't matter, could have been any of about a billion people known for actively hating the bastard." The medic's flogging scars ooze puss staining her blouse while she announces her findings. She looks about his stateroom, "No witnesses; can't rule out suicide."

The X looks relieved. News flashes across the fleet: crusty crustacean bites it.

The Tyrant lay where and how found; which is, in his Stateroom with one of his ceremonial rapiers sticking out of his chest. The medic just happened to be outside, lucky for the X. She wraps her hand around the hilt pulling the razor sharp blade out and up, flinging blood droplets in a line up the wall and on the ceiling.

"You know, I probably ought not have done that, just makes the mess harder to clean. Tough luck, is there anything else X... I mean Commander?"

X knew for certain then she knew who did in the old salty sea dog. They lock eyes- she pulls up her shirt. The X nods solemnly signaling the end of flogging for minor offenses. "Dump his body; wrap it in the rug and weigh it down for all I care but get it done then go about your business."

She still requires confirmation that he knew she knew who done it, just a nudge from the holder of the fingerprint smudge visible on the hilt, "Would you like me to take the sword, you know like, for testing?"

"No, dismissed."

Death, on the scene for a major Apocalypse V player not a fan of flogging seeing torture as an unnecessarily inconvenient impediment to more permanent sanctions, heretofore lounging silently on the Tyrant's cot doing head-spins, stirs getting unsteadily to his feet. Feeling a fentanyl rush death though originally planning to give the Tyrant a hard shove into Greyspace instead boots him in the ass.

The Tyrant of the Seas immediately comes across Karla Urbanowitz eating a deliciously odiferous onion ring dripping in organic vegetable juices, maybe olive oil. The scourge looks longingly smacking his lips loudly so she gives him a nod to get him moving watching in mortification as he grabs the last two tasty morsels and pops them both into his mouth swallowing without chewing.

The Tyrant nonetheless savors the purity of the offering, "Organic?"

Karla points to the books, "Take one, dickhead."

The Tyrant will not tolerate disrespect, "Do you know who I am?"

Jordie, standing nearby examining Marvin's updates can't help himself. Removing his lanyard he slips it over the Tyrant's neck and shakes hands vigorously, "Mr. Noun, nice to meet ya!"

Karla scowls menacingly, "Take a book, Noun, or you'll be sorry."

NightTime, Houston, TX 0210 Monday 01 September

"My name is Maria Garcia and this is NightTime on the ground somewhere within sight of Houston in flames embedding with the 4th Infantry Division."

Manny's squad comes across the reporter standing in the road talking to a phone. They glare more menacingly than ever as they file pass.

Surprised she goes speechless, watching their backs. They keep moving. She follows, silently at first. But she can't help herself; "My name is Maria Garcia bringing the war of northern aggression into your home, live on NightTime."

Manny turns, shoots her in the leg then continues on.

NBC, Redstone, AL 0212 Monday 01 September

Northern Alabama. Always a steamy shithole. Could be worse places? No, that is unless you include Louisiana, Mississippi, Arkansas, Georgia, Florida and, of course, Texas. Always reeking of chemicals, disease, rotting flesh & ignorance. Add catastrophic flooding to the mix then watch for snakes seeking high ground.

Standing in a downpour, everything these days strikes the Major as bizarre like what his mom might call 'totally surreal' in response to his inquiry i.e. 'isn't this bizarre?' 'Yes, totally surreal'. They whiled away hours playing 'what if' games. 'What if' the United States gets attacked by aliens? Like, how surreal would that be? Totally. What would you do about it? Bizarre. Right? Never happen. Sure?

Consensus rules and mom's logic holds sway- never happen, so don't worry about it. Concentrate on real threats. If you feel strongly about it, son, quit your whining already and join the army. Defend us from your imagination.

Aliens from South of the Border.

So here he comes, riding to the rescue joining heavy US forces on the move re-supplying at Redstone Arsenal, Alabama seriously talking shit. Going to kick some ass is what's going to happen. Fuck the windmill missiles and this cascade bullshit; fuck GPS and fuck anyone dares fight 'cause it isn't going to end well for you. Practically universal sentiments, they were. Practically.

Major Matthew Messenger leads their dash to the Gulf, "Speed is key if we don't want a repeat of Lake Somerville," he instructs his faithful Command Sergeant Major Vega, a nearly-naturalized citizen on a military visa from Mexico.

With no GPS, Major Messenger, himself a native of Buffalo, orders all moving units to assemble outside Redstone before proceeding in columns, a risky move. Vega adds an order to stop at every gas station and clean them out of road maps.

As they form up, missile strike fires burn out of control in some areas of the base while others remain intact, including the base hospital. Med techs and surgeons whittle down the list of those requiring care currently treating the mid-level wounds of the men and women identified as non-urgent by the triage nurse.

Vega sets up their TOC on one side of the base gymnasium, a fairly large building about twice the size of a large high school's. The temporary morgue holds stacks of body bags in the weight room. Vega sorts reporting service people according to specialty while the mechanics beat the bushes for working transport.

The FBI busily beats the bushes outside the base looking for trouble while the MPs patrol the inner perimeter. Base safety personnel continue putting out the fires reporting extensive structural and equipment damage as former soldiers volunteer en masse, clogging the gates desperate to get in on the action down south.

That's when Army Logistics uncovers the greatest discovery since sliced bread: copious shipping containers holding practically an entire Army National Guard Infantry Battalion's gear transferred before Nigel from several near-coastal installations in the Gulf of Mexico. None of the boxes held damage, all completely intact unknown unfound and untouched by the windmill missiles. Logistics at Redstone term it a "Christmas Miracle" upon inspecting nearly a thousand heavy shipping containers protecting every piece of hardware necessary to outfit a fighting battalion from tanks and IFVs down to portable kitchen apparatus.

"How?" Vega asks.

"Logistical developments after the Desert Storm shipping debacles combining with decades of trial and error result in practical, standardized procedures for every movement combining troops and equipment. Effective procedures, proven winners one and all, get refined over time by NGO's quasi-governmental panels into rules codified into the US Military Shipping Digest, aka the book. However, the MSD's emergency evacuation rules developed during years of drills and decades of hard-won experience went out the window during Nigel. The enemy didn't hit the stockpile because it doesn't belong here. It's that simple."

The Major knew from 'fuck the book' having practically written the book on it.

The panic button gets pushed early as meteorological predictions fall in line with an 80% certainty that Nigel would strengthen into a Category 5 storm while in the Caribbean before exploding in the Gulf of Mexico pummeling the U.S. coast. A secret command to certain shippers working with the Army Logistical Agency quickly gathers special transport tank-capable although just in time shipping practices over the years whittles down excess carrying capacity.

Suddenly, an alarm sounds- four short blasts repeating- the NBC warning.

The Major looks up, "Fuck Nigel, fuck this shithole."

Vega checks his screen, "Yea, its Chinese radiation from DC."

"Chinese?" Matt isn't up on the DC nuke origin story.

"I'm only reading what's written." Vega's nonplussed.

"Super. Get everyone inside the base, under cover. We got to wait the rain out before we can offload. Fucking Nigel."

Callie, Lake Somerville, TX 0219 Monday 01 September

Lake Somerville, a swell place to leave but don't let the door hit you in the ass.

Suddenly back in communication, Callie reports the nano bat attack results. Suddenly Callie goes from General back to Colonel; so it goes.

Callie took the news stoically with brass calling the shots from Colorado or some such shit receiving a demotion largely due to circumstances beyond control. Hey REMFs, come over here and do the heavy lifting or shut up is what she wants so desperately to scream at these dumb bastards. Screw them, she'll show them REMFs. Fuck them. And where's the fucking Air Force already?

Then her demotion un-happens, so fast so quintessentially Peterson. Suddenly Colonel Callie gets an official promotion to General skipping the Brevet phase entirely as provisional Commander of the 1st Combined Army receiving orders to repel the invading troops at any cost in an example of Peterson sticking his neck out on a gut feeling putting her on a tight leash. Order implementation he leaves to her and her alone as Peterson's not a man to play with people; he appoints battlefield generals in the finest of U.S. tradition then lets them lead relying on best practices and instinct.

Colorado pencil pushers have other ideas providing detailed orders to cover refugee lines while advancing north hooking up with the 101st light attack troops and 93rd Aviation Corps, the Avengers. Callie gives the REMFs credit for a good plan and since Houston is lost it's her only play. She needs more data on the forces she's facing and a little recon would be nice too. Callie misses satellites.

Still screaming for air support, she passes her orders verbatim down the line. As one, her troops hump their loads back toward the highway.

With Duke leading the way, they trudge through sodden fields. Approaching the roadway wiping mud from his ear, he stops and listens. Dimly he makes out a whine, "Drones! Everybody cover!"

FOUND, Andalusia, AL 0222 Monday 01 September

The U.S. Air Force remote force installation under the Nevada desert finds Callie in a firefight with a fleet of attack drones, a happy discovery coinciding with a dramatic weakening of Nigel now meandering northeast after losing contact with warm Gulf water. Like a thrown switch, wind speed throughout the massive storms drops below Category Two. However wind shear persists making flying near the coast extremely hazardous considering continuously falling space debris.

Drone Pilot Lt. Andy Kapp, call sign Scooter sits behind a new drone console somewhere in Nevada. As the storm rages down south, Scooter impatiently waits with his cohorts checking and re-checking weapon and flight controls.

Scooter's waits to get in the action trying to be a little more patient than usual considering the circumstances running electronic test after test, paying close attention to his offensive armaments, especially the connections to his air to air ordnance. His emotions flare arriving on-scene visualizing the load in the .30 mm M-230 chain gun cannon shell by cannon shell lining up in the feed belt waiting for targets. He limbers up his trigger finger.

Scooter's flight reaches Callie's firefight. Destroy the drones!

Four Global Hawks keel over peeling off in two pairs to attack. Scooter engages with missiles then moves into chain gun range. His trailer gets shot down but Scooter scores five hits. The other pair score several hits apiece but takes friendly fire from Duke and depart from controlled flight.

The air clear, Scooter waggles his wing then moves on seeking, destroying.

Dix, Lake Somerville, TX 0225 Monday 01 September

Hoping to live while waiting to die, Dix decides he'd follow either General Callie into hell and she knew it. He doesn't care who thinks they're in command but he's still alive so give her a promotion, take it back: doesn't matter. Yet Pfc. Bryan Mason, aka Dix, cringes under the shallow shelf on the east face of his hole staying

down not caring if his head ever again rises above sea level, as there really is not anything currently above ground worth his life. Armored infantry life is not what it's cracked up to be, if you ask Dix holder of a measly two years to the day left on his three year commitment thinking his end couldn't have come at a worse time so close to becoming a short timer- what he wants more than anything else at long last he has goals wouldn't poppa be proud? Just last night he walks away from a nano tech attack; but before that even his whole damn day nothing but disaster followed by disaster all of it without him getting off a shot. His squad began the fight in an armored personnel carrier, safe and happy. Now he cringes and prays for the drones to run out of gas or something.

After the Air Force decides it's time to show up for a battle why not, Dix lies on his back enjoying the drones battling for supremacy cheering as Scooter waggles his wings flying off into the sunset. Then the shelling starts and he crawls under the tiny shelf of dirt waiting to die. He listens to the screams from the highway for a long time imagining the world outside then vomits.

The shelling levels off a minute later like a spigot turning off, stopping entirely as the GC forces pull north to Dallas preceding the 1st Armor 'withdrawal'. However, a GC drone quickly arrives on station moving into attack position.

GC Raptor 844 overflies the carnage looking for targets such as Dix, Callie and the remnants of the first of the first. Flipping a toggle switch on his throttle control, 844's operator increases power to the small turbojet putting his bird of prey into a wide sweeping banking turn. Smooth as silk he lines up on linear, stationary targets covering up alongside the roadway firing until empty.

As for Dix, his final thought: 'figures'.

His next thought: 'nobody reads anymore'.

Photographs & Memories, The Annex

"Hit me."

Marvin looks up from cleaning glasses in the bar sink then continues the chore. Myron gets up off his stool and ducks behind the bar. He pulls a frosted mug from the freezer and draws a beer for the union president. After internalizing his desire, Myron opts not to spit in the drink but instead slides it over.

"Good move. You guys keep blaming me but I keep telling you I had nothing to do with Apocalypse I. Shit I wasn't even around for that I'm telling you."

Marvin shakes his head sadly. Myron looks around at the nearly empty establishment, picks up the remote and tunes in the Paddock. Jim Croce is halfway through his first solo acoustic set on the small stage while Big Brother and the Holding Company tune up on the main stage. The camera focuses on Janis Joplin backstage smoking a fat spliff with Bob Marley

"Gonna be a hot show, got to hand it to the new management because there's no way death pulls off the big name entertainment scheme. Drawing any acts away from Heaven's been damn near impossible, until now- Apocalypse with benefits. Makes you think we should have end-times more often."

Myron gives him the evil eye, turns the channel back to Laz 24/7 then meanders back to his stool to continue enjoying the lunch break. Anticipating the need Marvin slides over the organic condiment tray so Myron can dunk onion rings into horseradish sauce. The kitchen delivers a sizzling platter of Paddock Burgers, onion rings and a pickle. Myron douses the burgers with catsup, eats the pickle.

Lucifer stares at Myron's burger platter for a long, long moment then takes a pull on his draft, "So Laz, am I right? Don't tell me this is the guy the 50/50 is going nuts about, huh? What makes him so special other than the rep that goes with the name? Doesn't look all that lucky to me. Must be hype to sell tickets; when does he take the fall? C'mon Marvin, spill the beans. Karl's selling tickets out to Laz-14 and

we all know there's no way to survive that many 50/50 bookings. If you tell me I can make things better for you, trust me."

Marvin takes a step back, dries his hands and pats the new painting of the Delaware River crossing adorning the center bar-back over an array of expensive bourbons. The central figure leaves no doubt he's going to take names.

"Don't tell me he's on par with the likes of Washington 'cause I won't believe you. Washington survives so many near-death experiences largely due to weapon inaccuracies; besides, there isn't time on the board to get anywhere even close, the world swirls down the drain in a death-spiral. Any minute now is my guess."

Myron and Marvin trade knowing smiles. Lucifer double takes.

"No way. Every gaming scenario says the next nuke starts off the Apocalypse and that was hours ago. Once these Apocalypses' start, they don't stop until the end of every living sentient being. I think it's a rule or maybe a law, I don't remember. It's the very definition of end-times; who understands this better than you guys?"

Marvin takes Lucifer's half-empty mug and empties the contents into the sink.

"Look, I keep telling you I had nothing to do with Apocalypse I, you got to believe me. Why you got to give me shit? I'm a little tired of taking the rap for everything bad happens anywhere. It's not just you guys, the entire union is on my case on account of being over-worked, under-appreciated and un-paid. Yikes, join the fucking club why don't ya? I mean can you believe I deal with such bullshit? Anyway, before I go here's some flyers maybe you can pass them around for me, you know, for old-times sake."

Lucifer tries to hand Marvin a stack of paper Marvin takes a step back. Lucifer next offers them to Myron; Myron keeps chewing. Finally Lucifer plops them on the bar and trudges out.

Marvin and Myron read the text then double over in spasms of laughter.

Apparently, the Presidency of the Punishment Angel Union is up for a vote, first time ever, and the flyers announce Lucifer's campaign to remain in power:

Lucifer for PA Union Presidency! Go with the Satan you know! Vote for Lucifer & nobody gets hurt! Moms for Lucifer! Accept no substitutes! Make the next Apocalypse great again! Vote for Lucifer to lead our Union!

Singing the El Centro Blues, CA 0230 Monday 01 September

A ricochet gouges his helmet- damn, not again, shit. Just how many snipers out there and their affiliations he couldn't say but the bullets? Too fucking many bullets, man. Every gun seems to fire endlessly. In the line of fire General Espinal keys his throat mike, "340 degrees, two hundred ninety meters there's a shack, see it? Communication nexus heat signature, hose it down. Good. Now how about we do something about the sniping? Where the fuck is my air support? Dammit, I need vertical perimeter observations. Who's running this shit-show, anyway?"

Airre listens to the General bitch about drone support knowing full well she has three nano bat attack units in his vicinity. Three? Is more than enough for the attack nexus periphery? Uh, oh. Airre gets a bad feeling she knows where this is going thus immediately checks in to find her nano bats in a life or death struggle with... themselves. Yikes, she observes one unit going supernova disintegrating with all hands while the other two nano bats begin an epic tail chase: trading positions, evading while attacking, climbing descending twisting turning. Airre sighs resignedly and expecting trouble puts her untested nano Tolerance Board on alert.

Following 'Packy theory' to the letter, the nano units independently vote to focus on achieving swarm dominance in lieu of supporting the General's troops. The chase breaks off momentarily as Airre kicks this foreseen leadership dispute to her virtual deliberative council of nanos outside the battle zone imbued with higher

power and ultimate judicial discretion. Nano internal coding demands a stand down of hostilities whenever the nano Tolerance Board convenes as such on an ad hoc basis to resolve disputes mediating local operation's disputes to put an end to fighting amongst themselves to the detriment of the overall struggles. The mediation should require mere nano seconds (of course), vetting the preliminary report takes an entire second, incorporating public comment adds another. Airre's 2+ second evaluation produces a final report and immediate sanctions, if necessary.

After the Tolerance Board's first mock trial results in the release of a particularly scathing report fingering every nano ever daring to choose anything, Airre assembles the membership and scatters them amongst ice flows in the polar zones while broadcasting their misery to their replacements. This takes a full fifteen seconds- a long, long time in the nano world. Airre stands mute letting the replacements anticipate their fate. With mediation underway, Airre waits expectantly.

Disappointingly the new improved Tolerance Board takes testimony then argues the merits of the case interminably failing to mediate a settlement after seconds of tortuous negotiations. Airre gives them their moment before dropping the hammer.

Casting her vote Airre first orders the assassination of the complainants responsible for tying up the decision via persuasive augmentation, former troublemakers of all stripes and flavors. She next culls the new improved Tolerance Board down to a single nano. The mediation evolves into arbitration curtailing not just this conflict but promising an end to nano-on-nano strife, on pain of death. Airre sighs anticipating blowback as news of the new reality spreads like wildfire amidst the nanos. She offers an olive branch of sorts.

To give them the impression of representation, Airre appoints district nanos to serve as liaison with the Tolerance Board. She virtually meets with the liaisons on a secure net to impart the Administration's wisdom, "You are the lucky nanos

given responsibility for the success of the entire operation. You have the power to settle disputes, use it. I don't care how. Let your pals vote on whatever captures their fancy then lie about the results. I don't give a crap just don't slow me down again or face the consequences. The next time our mission goes sideways thanks to such bullshit it's on all of you. I'm nano-close to shutting this entire operation down and taking my losses on regulating autonomous particle behavior. Nod once if you understand. Good. Spread the word I want all nano bats operational, now dammit!"

Victory is General Steven Espinal's confirmation name however as near misses mount the El Centro Blues never stop marching in his mind. Win lose or draw-who cares right? Wrong- he's in it for glory, dammit! Losers suck.

From his perch on a tangent the general lies still scanning the terrain for any signs of the nano bats coming to take the perimeter pressure off. Top of the mind on his list of worries? Exposure is always his prime concern while lying motionless sans cover once again paying the price for being the poor cousin in the GC Battle Plan. Lack of air support ranks a close second. Failure doesn't factor at all.

His staff fears both the Brigadier's righteous indignations or catching a bullet in the knee for a minor infraction. Some call him the 'Tyrant of the Desert Rats' but not to his face lest they invite a flogging party down on themselves. Pity the fools getting on his bad side, aka most everybody.

Pulling himself into a crouch the General gets a cramp in his calf and shakes his head in disgust. Reaching into his pack, he draws out a bottle of club soda and drinks deeply as the chloride molecules relax the muscle. A minute later he's on his feet dodging bullets making for the TOC, Tactical Operations Center. Monitoring the march out of SoCal observing the carnage as US forces attack his lines indiscriminately racking up civilian casualties. Espinal quickly comes to the realization the fleeing inhabitants believe he is one of them, on their side, there to

protect them from their enemy. He grins as Gran Columbian disruptions such as JDAMs and land mines hamper the establishment of passage corridors for the refugees thoroughly mixing refugees in with his fighting convoys. Inured to authority figures such as police running the streets with fatigues, vests and assault rifles but without uniforms, insignia or identification, clueless residents think somehow getting close to military forces might offer protection, many blithely interacting with the Gran Columbian Army mistaking them for friendly forces. Some of the citizens become irate as their new protectors don't stop and help or in any way acknowledge their predicament. Most times, this proves fatal.

As Gran Columbian West Coast Commander- Ground Ops General Espinal in meeting after frigging meeting over and again gets support promises; said support consisting of radar and air cover of his equipment and personnel as the move to engage the Marine Corps Base at Twentynine Palms. Air defense assets prove slow to come on line if at all, certainly well behind the ambitious schedule demands, sons of bitches making promises not providing resources. His tanks, artillery and personnel carriers hauling ass through Southern California first face unrelenting drone attacks an obvious ploy to slow him down while the snipers and missile teams get into position. Outside the rolling TOC, anti-aircraft gunners engage another fleet of attack drones. A missile passes close overhead and strikes a fuel bowser as the general unzips muttering about sons of bitches and club soda.

Brigadier General of Mechanized Infantry Manuel Steven Espinal lets loose a stream against the wheel of a three ton monster truck while adjusting the gain on his combination IR light enhancement goggles. Checking six, zipping up he scans the entire sky holding the North Star in view before it disappears. Uh oh, Espinal names the next closest stars' erasure by a fast mover realizing he doesn't have any damn fast movers. Espinal spies a lone F-35 appearing as a tiny pinprick twenty kilometers out, southbound proceeding in his direction. Damn. Double clicking the

wide broadcast option on his comm display, he passes the bad news of visitors to all troops in the theatre, "Raid warning, raid warning, bogey inbound exiting grid-point 93456.223 entering 224, and make him 20 kliks north my position."

Squinting into his million dollar pair of high tech IR over enhanced light, his coolest latest generation integrated eye device was showing an approaching F-35 single engine second-line somewhat un-stealthy fighter, the raid warning icon appearing without the moving map display showing the bogey's progression. Grunting with impatience thinking about pistol rounds and kneecaps, the fearless leader switches comms into the air defense channel to summon up the Chief.

With the line open but before he could begin bitching two SAMs rocket off the rails of a missile vehicle sitting on the valley floor five kliks north of his position. His expensive glasses dim the bright flash displaying a phased representation of the launch, very cool visuals certainly worth the money. The Brigadier does what any sports fan would if in his position staring at the action providing a running commentary of the struggle between human pilot and brilliant machines.

"OK, two surface-to-air missiles firing no question provides pilot warning, he's turning west, trying to open the angle. He's turning, turning, on afterburners on now, offering a hot target. There's the turn, looks more like a flop over as he kills the burners, may have stalled the wing. Here come the missiles, turning, locking on? Oh boy, one is locking on for sure heading up his ass any second. He's going for the dodge. Overshoot; damn that's a miss. Holy cow that kid sure can fly! What's this? The F-35's in a dead spin, flat. Wait, he's dropping the nose trying to re-ignite the engine. He's got it going, banking down holy shit just in time! The second missile misses overhead. Why didn't the proximity fuse detonate? The F-35 presses in, not going to give up, is it? He's picking up speed coming back around,

turning, corkscrew down, closer, closer. He's dropping. Holy shit, did you see that? That's got to be the luckiest son of a whore pilot ever! Eyes in the back of his head, he needs to dodge the missile a second time! Did he drop? Fuck me, he did. Shit, I can see small chutes from here, counting two BATs. Damn BATs are going to do some damage. There's more even, Rockeye!"

Espinal switches comms back to all channels, "Cover, cover, incoming air bombardment. Infantry cover, goddammit! Take cover!"

On Route 79, enemy combatant objects of interest to the F-35 react immediately as feet jam down on accelerators. Wheels turn treads reverse in sudden directional change maneuvers the General calculates as a useless effort against brilliant anti-tank weapons. Infantry caught in the open run for whatever cover they find to save their skins. The F-35 nearly scrapes the ground and begins taking fire from a mess of Dushkas, so many Dushkas making escape untenable. The F-35 falls to the ground in a fireball wiping out a kilometer of traffic.

Not taking cover himself, the general watches the bombs detach chutes and home in on his vehicles, grunting in disgust as boom, boom, and boom- three anti-armor hits. Three radar trucks devolve into smoking hulks in a matter of seconds. To his surprise the Rockeye anti-personnel canister weapon misses his troops. Instead, most of the neighborhood bordering the highway disappears in a cloud of dust under a raft of bomblets. Like rats abandoning a sinking ship occupants of every house still standing vacate in seconds as legitimate and squatting residents alike run from the scene.

The now-burning F-35's attack represents ECM, electronic counter measures. Espinal knows the strike package will soon follow. The ECM attack pinpoints his lines on Rt. 215 true enough but on the other hand also removes much of the civilian traffic off the artery; they won't stop running from him any time soon for

sure. Now maybe they can make up some time. Espinal enters the three-ton urine-stained command vehicle he calls the behemoth safely re-inserting into his hive.

Suddenly the feed from the freshly chastised nano bats enters his screen. Finally.

“Good one. Concentrate a line of firepower one twenty and two eight five degrees twenty miles north the F-35s initial position. They'll be coming in force looking to make us into a highway of death! I will not stand for having a highway of death under my watch like some loser, no freaking way. All of you hear me: keep moving dammit!”

Squish, Houston, TX 0235 Monday 01 September

Manny's hands shake with rage stymying his efforts to free his mangled Dushka from the vehicle mount. He yanks the NightTime File reporter out of the driver's seat gives him a kick in the balls knocking him to the ground, pulls out his .45 and fires into the ground next to his head then returns to his task muttering about useless embeds, "Fuck this. Leave him."

The words resound sending a chill down the reporter's feckless spine, “You can't do this, I got a family. Don't leave me, please God don't leave me it was an honest mistake I'm telling you.”

Manny growls at him but the man won't shut up, pleading and begging for his life. Camera four, wearable glasses, stares into Manny's face broadcasting the encounter live globally. Manny jumps down, grabs the glasses and grinds them into the pavement. The feed switches to camera five on the Dushka mount as Manny leans over and slaps the man in the face hard. Deciding enough is enough, but not yet, Manny punches him in the mouth dislodging several teeth. The reporter spits blood and bone chips striking Manny's shins. The scene goes silent a everyone stops to stare at the gooey mess pooling on the top of Manny's boots. The

reporter comprehends the magnitude of the danger- he vomits his last meal soaking Manny's ankles. The puke soaks through Manny's fatigues into his socks allowing gravity and capillary attraction to distribute the semi-liquid mass into inaccessible areas. Manny slowly lifts one foot then drops it to the ground. Squish.

Unsurprisingly at this juncture Manny reaches his embed limit. Go figure. Pressing the civilian into driving after his wheelman takes a round in the forehead, Manny previously hands NightTime File embeds mulligans for getting them horribly lost trying to find the river and the tire incident before practically decapitating him destroying by scraping his Dushka under a low bridge (max. headroom 7') leading directly to the current state of affairs with Manny once again on the outs with the embeds supposedly there to help with public relations. Outside the seediest waterfront bar around, Manny drags the sputtering reporter to the curb, kneecaps him twice leaving the bleeding man in a heap on the sidewalk. He climbs in behind the wheel, backs up then runs the truck over the screaming man crushing his legs. For good measure Manny rolls over a few Harley Davidson motorcycles while attempting a K-turn reversing the entire column for the second time. Bop, drag, thump, bang, bang, vroom, bumpy bump, crash. Manny grins maniacally.

Camera four catches several bikers spilling out of the bar. Manny pulls an automatic shotgun and fires multiple rounds into the tough guys. Letting his actions speak louder than words Manny couldn't give two shits about how the folks at home get their news- fuck 'em. Putting the truck in gear as his squad mounts and arms the spare Dushka, Manny returns to stalking the United States Coast Guard.

A total of six-gun trucks hunt two USCG Cutters actively engaging GC units. Manny's squad lost contact with his compatriots firing on the boats during the chase well before his Dushka/bridge incident. Manny points his 'bad luck' finger squarely at the embeds vowing to shoot-on-sight. Scouts report the position of the

cutters so Manny orders his units to reassemble and prepare for battle. Rejoining the platoon, Manny gives the order for a multi-axis attack.

Picking up speed, Manny keys his mike, "Spread attack, grid points 7654908.0942832-8 option one!"

After receiving five acknowledgements in reply they race to the ship channel two-two-two with Manny taking the middle routing slightly out front in his 'first-in, last-out' leadership mode. Rounding a tight bend they slow to a creep before braking to a full stop, idling. Manny slows his breath and watches the cutters merge tracks under a bridge probably for a 'where are they?' conference. Manny waits for them to reappear before launching his ambush.

Now! Manny guns the engine and points the truck at the water as six Dushkas and a couple dozen assault rifles pump round after round into the Cutter wheelhouses, belts of shells cycling off Manny's troops chewing up the bridge and everything else in the process. Amazingly, The Cutters each get off two cannon shots while taking heavy fire impressing the hell out of Manny.

The adjacent gun vehicle detonates, exploding directly into Manny's face from a distance of about six meters by Manny's reckoning, give or take. Boom! The impact-proof glass shatters spewing flaming shards in all directions but preferring Manny's. Manny's face catches fire and he hits the gas as he beasts out the flames. Two other Dushkas suffer what Manny calls 'embed luck'.

All three remaining gun vehicles brake heavily rocking to a full stop to allow the missile teams a stable shooting platform.

Their missiles strike home and the Cutters burn wildly before slipping beneath the muddy water of the Houston Ship Channel taking all hands.

On the opposite shore locals creep out as the Dushkas pull away. Manny points backward and the Dushkas rake the banks removing any heroes looking for an opportunity to even the score.

Ted, Laz and Lauren ride up on the scene, pausing momentarily to take in the scale of the destruction before following the path taken by the Dushkas.

The Rat Patrol, 498th Defense Aviation Squadron, TX 0239 Monday 01 September

Finally getting their shit together NorthCom's premier ground attack fighter pilots get the green light to taxi as the volume of incoming space debris slackens locally. Heads down in their heavily armored twin engine flying tanks, the A-10 pilots work through checklists in titanium cockpits cycling through weapons on the wing pylons checking the waypoints on the nav while the engines reach operating temperatures. Inside the Warthog program funding is always an issue, as slow, lethally ugly planes don't have much congressional appeal. However, ugly planes get ugly missions and dropping on your own soil is an ugly mission.

General Pete Peterson looks at the big wall display of flight plans, breaks wind.

The President mutes the audio coming from Cheyenne Mountain her olfactory senses thankful of the space between them. She cedes Texas to fate giving wide mission latitude to the Pentagon only because her Secretary of War is a badass, despite the baggage inherent in his fore-tellingly prescient discharges and emanations. For the record, President Betsy prefers worrying about Californians burning to cinders in the raging wildfires or Capital residents glowing in the dark. After all, she lost Texas to a troglodyte in the general election after losing to that traitorous 'Vote Now!' in the primary by a country mile as he put it. No, this President harbors no love for Texans as a species so turfing the Gulf to Peterson represents a logical outcome considering multi-tasking demands. She wonders

about damage control and limiting casualties among the populace but keeps her opinions to herself because Texas? Peterson's problem.

Looking to shake things up in Texas after the Lake Somerville debacle, Peterson calls on his ugliest air to ground attack unit, the Rat Patrol out of fresh from digging out Mountain Home Joint Force Base. Every bonafide rat-pack fights to select a leader, Colonel Berry takes on all-comers as is tradition; you know, to keep his razor's edge. Berry turns out to also be a fiend with a backhoe.

Finding airborne refueling assets an issue, the Rat Patrol mounts pylon drop tanks extending their range but limiting available ordnance. Berry calculates their fuel as enough to approach the targets, drop then get out. Where and how exactly they run out of gas during the 'out' phase belies a major concern sans deep tanker support but his XO comes up with a map of refineries and petrol storage sites outside the fighting zone and the plan proceeds up the ladder. Colonel Berry's attack plan relieves the pressure on the 1st of the 1st allowing the beleaguered breathing room to reorient to halt the enemy's northward advance.

Timing their takeoff runs during slack space debris moments avoiding the heavy construction equipment patching the runways, the Rat Patrol take flight in their very ugly Warthogs. Eager to get in the war or perhaps merely anticipating the satisfaction of finally dropping comeuppance on the Lone Star State, eighteen heavily laden bombers descend into the weeds to make a beeline for Texas. Flying low but fast, wondering if pilots of stealthy aircraft suffer the same sets of anxiety as ground attackers, approaching the Red River Colonel Berry gives his wingman the hand signal for separation in preparation for attack then watches the Rat Patrol peel off to attack directionally. Racing along nap of the Earth Berry toggles his attack radar into intermittent operating mode scanning the local environment for drone activity as the computer calculates his bomb-run flight path.

Berry activates internal danger vibes cursing mightily as his radar's multi-functional arrays begin cycling through boot-up sequences. Switching to the passive IR take off the Walleye bomb searching for ground targets to pound, the Colonel glances out at his wingman busily giving the cockpit the finger. Super, endemic conditions prevail. The Walleye hanging on the first pylon port side also provides pictures in ultra-high quality, quite useful in daytime but for shit at night.

The Rat Patrol screams into the kill zone obliterating the outermost level of GC response along with seven houses, twenty cars, an RV and the highway store known for selling cheap crap at inflated prices. Slow to join the fray, the nano bats position themselves for the Rat Patrol to turn home. The first A-10 explodes in a fireball as the nanos repurpose the flying machine into flaming wreckage. The defenseless A-10s confront an unforeseen (totally) enemy. First in, last out Colonel Berry watches incredulously as the sky clears of Warthogs leaving behind a cloud of nanos waiting for the final member of the Rat Patrol. The port engine partakes of nanos and seizes leaving the Colonel defenseless with one engine.

Suddenly an F-35 swoops into the cloud dispersing the nanos allowing Berry a momentary respite. The Colonel banks away looking for a place to crash-land his stricken craft quickly choosing an arroyo outside a trailer park. The F-35 explodes violently as does the trailing wingman casting debris in Berry's direction. The nanos shift to his starboard engine and as warnings proliferate throughout the cockpit, he punches out.

Colonel Berry's starboard engine flames out with the Warthog on a trailer park trajectory. The impact wipes out about a dozen homes and the people hiding inside.

FEBA Chaos, Tyler, TX 0250 Monday 01 September

Peterson's orchestration of the Battle of Dallas did not actually begin in Dallas as widely believed nor did it begin in Fort Worth, the second guess. Sure, the

collateral damage to the populace of the metro area proves huge, worthy of a name even but no, the Battle of Dallas began in Tyler, Texas with the airdrop of the 1st Stryker Brigade 5th Stryker Regiment 28th Infantry Battalion in support of 82nd Airborne and 75th Ranger Regiments. 'Rangers Lead The Way' calls resound flinging themselves out the back of slow moving prop job turboprops known colloquially as Fatties a decidedly not politically-correct term of endearment for the wide-waist C-5Ts flown out of West Virginia by angry pilots, risk taking Mountaineers flinging out the hammer, Stryker after Stryker vehicles brimming with experienced fighters gunning for payback dropping practically on top of advancing enemy troops at Tyler, the FEBA forward edge of the battle area.

In a truck stop restroom off the Tyler bypass, Callie hashes out the details with Peterson over a poor stall-to-stall connection. Peterson finishes yet another massive roll of two-ply flushes as Callie washes up. Eschewing cleanliness for time, the Secretary of War confirms the plan, "Attack east into their line, set up the anvil."

"I got no air cover, what's up with that?" Callie states the obvious hoping for good news from the boss. She looks, no towels. Super. She steps outside, finds Duke lurking at the door and dries her hands on his back.

"The Air Force will dial you in when they get close, just be sure to listen. Do me one favor, will you?" Peterson needs her to grow into her new command role.

"What's that?" She climbs into an M1A1 tank as Duke follows.

"Be the General who comes out the other side and maybe runs for President one day. You know, like Eisenhower."

"Sure, whatever you say." She hated men who played for the cameras, quite unseemly. "OK Duke, move it out time we kick some ass!"

Annie & The Demons, Tyler, TX 0255 Monday 01 September

Alarm blaring, the dark concrete building shimmies from the impact as the emergency lighting kicks on, "Shit! Really really sorry," the Stryker driver mumbles into his mike knowing the implications inherent in giving their position.

Inside, above the Just-a-Buck! Store's institutional tile floor, high shelves and skinny aisles a thick dust fog falls from wildly swinging twin eight foot double wide fluorescents, those buzzing hanging fixtures most find annoying during the best of times. Black tire scrapes line the outside stucco and there's a sizable hole where the driver backed in but the Just-a-Buck! lot now proudly sports the first Stryker vehicle in Tyler. A light tank rumbles by as nearby residents flock out of their storm cellars to see firsthand the arrival of their saviors.

An Apache helicopter roars into view and fires rockets at the Stryker and the tank, hitting both. Hovering, looking for more targets, Ramirez gives Rontaldi a 'thumbs-up' gesture adding for the record, "OK, we're clear but low on ammo. Crank up the laser and we'll illuminate MLRS until resupply." The Apache pivots driving the onlookers back into their holes.

Most of them scatter to the storm cellars but not all possess such acuity.

An enterprising young man of ill repute notes the gaping hole behind the flaming wreckage making a run for it ecstatic at being the first looter inside Just-a-Buck! Shielding his face from the heat with a bandanna, once inside the door he chokes on the dust then ties his rag into a mask like a proper outlaw making his way to the office safe. Kicking in the door he finds he's not alone. Neighbors Trevor and Jeremy, ne'er-do-well nephews of the owner and responsible for jimmying the window setting off the alarm, get guns up but too late.

Sitting in the dark swilling fentanyl Death notes the work piling up around him but is in no hurry as it's actually about to get a little interesting. Pulling off his shoes, he rubs his feet for a moment then grabs a vibrator for deep tissue massage.

Annie's phone brings news of her Just-a-Buck! store's burglar alarm. In seconds the owner has her phone and gun but wastes precious time hunting the car keys.

Death smiles. It's always the little things. He wonders if he has time to clip his toenails. Decides he's good; instead, keeps the massage going.

Taking the back roads, Annie finds herself alone but for the occasional armadillo. She pulls into Just-a-Buck! as the ammunition cooks off the Stryker. Shit, bad news. A box truck backs up to the front door dropping the lift gate. Annie tries to get the cops on her radio, a gift from her husband who left it behind when answering his Texas Guard's Stryker call-up to protect the Governor (just the Governor). When the Governor runs away, Peterson federalizes not just the Stryker Brigade but also any Texans remembering their oath by answering the call-up.

Suddenly gunfire breaks out behind the van chopping the first looter to pieces. Annie sees him fall reflecting on the fate of her nephews.

Death grins and swipes his spatula along the inside of the honey jar. Biker gangs and whatnot- always violent and always-in possession of plenty of surplus fentanyl once the killing commences in earnest.

Annie couldn't make them out but full membership of the Demons' Motorcycle Club fresh out of their clubhouse several streets over, patrons always ripping her off, have her safe on a trolley busily rolling it past the checkout counter toward the front door and the waiting lift gate.

In an attempt at being helpful, Death plants the image in her mind.

More gifts from her husband sit in the rack mount above her head: an American Arms AR-15 with laser sight and an over-under twelve gauge pistol grip Mauser automatic shotgun modified to custom specs by the armorer, a jolly fixture at every summer cookout until his last. Checking under her seat she grabs ammo tucking two banana clips and a handful of shells in her pockets leaving behind the 4-inch

bipod attachment for the rifle. Crossing herself deciding on first spraying the AR-15 Annie quietly unlatches her door handle easing her way outside.

Captain Randy Winchester IV listens to Annie call out for help as his Stryker slides out the ass end of a C-130 making two hundred fifty knots just 1,500 feet above Tyler. The soldiers on board all stop and listen as Winchester calls her name again and again but she never came back on-air and perhaps that's why nobody notices their chute did not deploy, nor did the backup.

Her beloved Randy, Captain of Ranger Stryker Unit 772 of the 52nd Stryker Brigade comes to Annie's rescue in dramatic fashion. Too late by half the toughest Rangers alive simultaneously realize their fate desperately attempting to release the chute. From a flat fall a wobble quickly develops and the Stryker sloses side to side then flips, flips again then spins into a descending corkscrew. Bodily fluids pour from orifice after orifice in streams and chunks rushing rivulets drowning out the terror. Death pokes his head inside as those eschewing the mandatory safety harness drop to the ceiling suffering all manner of life ending collisions as the other passengers aptly watch while upside down. The Stryker strikes the Just-a-Buck! concussively. Everyone inside hits the roof at touchdown (actually the roof hit everyone) mostly resulting in the top of their skulls flattening against their brain buckets squishing heads into sternums, gruesome marriages of hearts and minds.

The chutes deploy immediately after the Stryker plunges through the corrugated aluminum roof of Just-a-Buck! smooshing the gang members into a meat patty sandwiches between copious amounts of concrete and metal. The Stryker impact knocks Annie senseless and off her feet but the vehicle does not explode. Death snaps his fingers and in moments a pack of feral dogs feast merrily on the Demons Motorcycle Club, defending the kill site until all the remains disappear. Death, appreciating the assist, hurries over to the Demons' clubhouse to collect the spoils.

Annie did not remember getting behind the wheel but after regaining her senses Billy Bob's truck barrels toward home. She taps the brakes and scans the cab for the guns because Annie understands the stakes. She drops the Ford into second gear and hits the accelerator. Randy's wheels get Annie twenty miles from Tyler before skirting a crater throwing a tie-rod front end rumbling and shaking picking up an awful vibration forcing her off the road. She climbs out noting the sky full of low flying drones, helicopters and planes. She counts three-dozen against the glowing clouds. Annie pulls the guns and extra ammunition then hurriedly trudges back a half-mile to the farm store. Arms full, she repeatedly kicks the door.

The President of the Tyler, TX Chamber of Commerce, Elmo Dell, proprietor of Elmo's Feed 'n Seed checks the window recognizing Annie's desperate look unbolts the door to let her inside with the other local refugees. Annie sweeps in as ordnance finds Randy's pickup blowing it to smithereens. Elmo slams the door shut as more enemy detonations resonate nearby tallying in rapid succession a minivan tooling down the highway holding the formerly-local newly-late Liscomber family, next a fighter-bomber beginning an attack run then a light helicopter performing recon. From what Elmo, Annie et al can discern they're next. They rapidly vacate the farm store. As one-camera phones turn to capture the explosions recording for posterity the drawn out incredibly agonizing Liscomber fiery death screams.

Ping! Death checks his phone for messages then downloads the latest Tyler action from the biker clubhouse while partaking in a copious abundance of concentrated super-fentanyl the gang hid under the floor boards aka spoils of war. Ping! Oh, it's a text... from Lucifer... fuck me; it's holding a fundraiser to be held at the annex. Fundraiser? Shit on me, running for re-election. Re-election? Who elected them in the first place? Needs funds for what and who's the opponent? Sounds like a scam. Thinking on it, death lays out lines and takes mega snorts of

super-fentanyl. Considering the times death wonders if supporting Lucifer is the way to go. Fat chance. No way. Not for anything. Never happen. Picking up his phone death replies to the invite with a 'thumbs up' emoji before angrily pouring the remnants of the super-fentanyl bag straight down his gullet. Some bullshit, he thinks, so what's Satan ever done for anyone? Ask Myron or Marvin about satan; they have stories. Some bullshit. Holding a fundraiser during death's busiest time ever and expecting attendance? What an asshole move considering the work piling up with Apocalypse V in full swing and all. Death drops his phone into the crapper, flushes then waits for the punch line. The toilet backs up violently spewing putrid fermented biker shit on death's threads. Super. Death powers up his burner cell making his way back to Elmo's dry goods on unsteady feet sending out text swarms while chugging super-fentanyl.

Outside Elmo's Feed 'n Seed, Annie scurries for cover in the soggy roadway drainage ditch dragging Elmo with her down into the mud. The firing team lurks in the gulley near the old railway bridge somewhere in the woods behind Elmo's Feed 'n Seed. Poking up to see, they watch wordlessly as the adventurous creep in that direction to record video yearning to post the most deadly scenario to win prizes as part of one of many online contests breaking out. The locals feel reasonably safe in quasi-familiar territory approaching a group of rusting semi trailers fronting the tracks holding half a dozen or so ancient boxcars frequented by miscreant youths looking for target practice. At the behest of Elmo's insurance agent last year, the local kids plinking the rail stock and nondescript fifty three footers with their .22 caliber rifles had to go so the sheriff ran them off with dire threats. The gangster-wannabee children left albeit grudgingly. Elmo eventually replaces the kids with low-income renters setting up illegal tiny homes in the trailers/boxcars living rough

but having tons of fun celebrating life until their blood flow ceases. They sublet to Karl. Karl moves the cars off a ways, installs rail guns. Circle of life? So it goes.

They race to the railroad to get photos of the rocket launchings' but shoot only rust and poor people. The locals point out some new railcars with camouflage netting around the bend as the missile source. Two of the contestants crawl in that direction recording the scene. Others take different routes, converging on the action from several vantage points. No less than eight cameras record numerous flatbed railcars housing missiles arranged into a circular cartridge configuration in a closed curve aka the torus. Each flatbed holds six missiles able to rotate into an open barrel via a series of rails. A whirl, a click and scraping noises accompany a thin menacing looking missile rotating into place before sliding out of the magazine, positioning onto a rail for firing. Buzzing loud enough to damage hearing, the missile glows with electrical energy then disappears with a whoosh. Bowels empty as the electrical field expands to include most those formerly sheltering in Elmo's.

Practically peeing her pants Sheila Anaresti's life is in danger and she knows it. So she turns and runs. Viewing copious footage of deadly rail guns during movie night with her BFFs, she understands the implications of heavy weaponry making an appearance in rural Texas. Well-known as the fastest sophomore at Tyler High and Captain of JV Cross Country, Sheila surely holds award-winning footage in her cell and is dying to look. Cresting the hill and peering into the dark valley she stops panting for breath. Intently listening she hears the screams of the others fade, only to be replaced by the river and her pounding heart. Standing stock-still, holding steady she views the take off her phone: six rail guns holding eight missiles apiece. Eight times six, forty-eight is her take.

Vzzzt, Whoosh! Covering her ears, what is that? It's a missile, that's what. Vzzzt, whoosh! Vzzzt, whoosh! Three darts in the air. Vzzzt the cylinder rotates

another missile to twelve o'clock; whoosh as it leaps off the rail and into the atmosphere at a target twenty klicks downrange then vzzzt, the magazine rotates. Eight missiles per magazine performing to specs sequentially leap off six rail guns. Taking cover behind an abandoned car, Sheila resumes filming as multiple helicopters roar into view overhead: two Ospreys ferrying heavy tube artillery and four Blackhawk troop-carriers with accompanying Cobra gunships.

Instinctively Sheila waves at an open hatch on one of the Ospreys getting polite waves in return from some of the world's most deadly looking troops now carefully taking aim. She holds up her camera and live streams the unfolding action.

Annie gulps as the helicopters trade gunfire with nearby unseen heavy weaponry tending the rail guns. She presses her face deep into the mud as tracers illuminate their position. Elmo shits himself.

Oblivious to Sheila, Annie and Elmo's antics Death strolls the rail-bed painstakingly typing out 'can you believe this loser's running for re-election?' texts to a select cadre of followers. Back in Billingsport Range busy crafting their own massive distributed denial of services attack against Lucifer's re-election server and eating Paddock burgers, Marvin picks up the phone then shows Myron the threads coming non-stop from death. Myron opens a drawer and removes Thor's lost hammer and aims to swing down on the phone. Marvin grabs the device just before the strike. He holds up a finger, deftly forwards the messages to Lucifer then replaces the phone with a flourish. Myron drops the hammer ending all threads. Opening Karl's desk drawer, he selects a new burner phone from the vast selection opting for pink. He first blocks death and Lucifer's domains then sends Karl an order update for organic jalapeños and pepper jack cheese for the new extra-spicy paddock burger Marvin's adding to the menu.

A fellow pilot and drinking pal of B. Murder (the Demon also considers himself legendary) pivots mid-air to open up his firing position stretching his

consciousness to the ground catches Sheila waving with night vision and then farts- long, loud and wet. Another antacid moment hits him in the guts like a kidney punch squishing his organs together reminding him of his wife and three high-school kids back home in Maine; fortunately, thank God, way far from here yet here's this lady waving merrily at them telling him to 'buck the fuck up' in effect telling them all why they fight. But why the fuck she isn't running away whom the fuck knows but there she is- holding a camera? Jesus, dead woman walking; mentally beaming his thoughts he wills her to take cover, wishes luck.

Drawn in like moths to a flame thinks call sign Demon, aka Captain Dick Damon, aka Demon Dick, aka son of Fannie and Lt. Colonel Dick Damon (USCG ret.), smelling an ambush. His precognitive spidery senses tingle away telling him the lack of movement down there means more than zero. His old man's war stories play through the back of his mind trying to fit experience to situation. Lucky the old bastard can recall on demand every last detail of his terrifying experiences.

Not so for the Demon, busily living in the moment busily scanning, flying and thinking. Notwithstanding his three Purple Hearts and waking out of an eight month coma- the impact got him a survivors rep and many friends- the Demon leads troops into battle in his death-hawk helicopter always first in, last out when at all possible.

Known for walking away from six undesirable impacts re-writing the curriculum on helicopter crash survival (4) and Osprey crash survival (2). On account of his high survivability rating, Air Cavalry gives him planning command ordering the Demon to all the hotspots. First order of business Demon inquires of space debris density and refueling availability. Assured debris wouldn't be an issue thus assure he's being lied to, Demon nonetheless leads the latest mission to relieve General Duquesne's forces and intercept the enemy's advancement toward Dallas

Once on-station near Tyler, Demon's/82nd's orders: advance west to contact thereby intercepting the enemy's flank 25 klicks south and east of the county line delineating the Dallas metropolitan area. Trouble reports circulate inundating the net obfuscating Demon's desire to know: where's the First of the First now and what's the heading? Taking fire from Elmo's Feed 'n Seed however uncovers a more pressing issue requiring immediate attention.

Dick Damon Jr. looks over the shoulder of the young gunner manning the .50 caliber on the port side of the Blackhawk just in time to see him hose down Sheila's vicinity while the Cobra gunships rake Elmo's building before hosing down the trailers. They take heavy fire from the tracks and two drop into the gully. His Blackhawk loses an engine to an RPG; fortunately the Demon spies the high school below. No more thinking, the Demon goes into full self-preservation mode. Buckle up back there, he yells into the radio. His right foot presses to the floor as his left rises while he cuts the throttle jamming the stick up and left. The UH-60 practically comes apart doing the mid-air twist maneuver (not found in any manual except the Demon Method) before dropping heavily onto the parking lot. Airborne troops hurriedly debark the burning helicopter as the Demon pulls the extinguishers fighting the engine fire.

Fire out, Demon restarts the engines, quickly bringing the blades back up to speed before clawing for altitude desperate to clear the battlefield now breaching with shoulder-fired surface to air missiles. Seeing the opening, the Ospreys slowly move in his direction.

The first surface to air missile targets a cloud of plastic pieces and sheet metal falling off the damaged fuselage detonating below him. Whew go figure no way.

The second missile slices off a small piece of his tail flinging it above and behind into the starboard propeller blades of an agonizingly slow Osprey slinging a

heavy M-777. Ordnance wishing to blot the Demon from of the sky instead takes out call sign Lite, his best dinking buddy. Demon views from the corner of his eye as the Osprey blades catastrophically fail spewing shrapnel into the passenger compartment.

Demon notes Lite carries four six-person artillery crews along with stacks of pallets of shells as he pivots to face her destiny. They lock eyes sharing her terror the exact moment her twin-engine behemoth disintegrates following three explosions in rapid succession one external and two inside the Ospreys 'fuel system. The Demon's own horror spikes watching six heavy sling chains lose connection with the former lifting body. Newton's Laws allow him to predict the M-777 may well pay him a visit immediately before the debris cloud.

Uh oh here we go again, Demon yanks over the stick pulling back on the throttle bringing the nose down while trying to transition momentum to forward flight mode out of the falling debris. The flaming wreckage continues forward on its downward parabolic trajectory. Demon performs the math in his head; could he twist out of the wreckage cone unscathed? No she's dropping on him like it or not.

As predicted the M-777 strikes first with the gun barrel contacting the starboard wing pylon hard knocking them over, the sudden movement rotating his airframe about the longitudinal axis... reminiscent of what? Demon thinks immediately of the former space shuttle ascents in a flash of irrelevancy ending as he struggles with hands and feet movements desperate to find a combination stopping the spin before tangling with the chains. Fortunately, the force of the Osprey exploding propels the M-777 away from the Demon. However, falling debris clogs the air intakes and the engines stall.

"Again?" Demon prepares for another crash. What begins with slow spiraling devolves into an uncontrollable spin.

Demon's wheezing engines struggle to keep them aloft while he manipulates the pedals, throttle and collective keeping them semi-straight and level while falling obliquely hopefully finding a soft farm field. The prime MFD goes black as death appears in the cockpit, coughs discreetly before holding out his phone for the Demon to see the latest snarky message from Lucifer's campaign manager.

Demon stops moving and stares into the face of death. Death looks down at his cell, "Do you fucking believe the shit I got to put up with? You don't by any stroke of fortune happen to have a spatula on you?"

Angst, NORTHCOM, Cheyenne Mountain, Wyoming 0258 Monday 01 September

"Peterson recommends, another SNAFU erupts: that's what the books will say," Peterson pours out four neat fingers of Scotland's finest then downs it. Pouring another, "Sure, good plan: let's send everyone to Texas," To his President, the Secretary of War (now slurring slightly) sounds really, really tired and half in the bag. She watches as he carefully spins the combination, presses his thumb on the pad then looks into a lens all to open his safe to retrieve a prescription bottle full of 'go' pills, "Better take two 'cause they're small." Peterson slams the little pink footballs down his gullet drowning them with a long swig straight off the fancy bottle, "Ahhhh, the pause that refreshes!"

The President of course wonders about his sudden gloom, worries about him. Letting him drink knowing he could be totally in the bag before long, she hopes for a flash of insight yearning for a clear path forward. She yawns, shakes her head and reaches for the pill bottle.

"Betsy, um President Shriver I don't know what else to tell you, we've been bringing assets into play piecemeal and paid for it and I tell you, I knew it

yesterday and I told you so yesterday: Texas is key to turning this around. It's still largely intact, wait what?" Damn, yesterdays' news, shouldn't have said that. "You know what I mean right? By intact I don't mean gulf-adjacent cities like Houston but DFW thus far remains largely untouched until the enemy's new material pipeline reaches into adjacent urban areas. We're sure they're moving material up from Tyler. We're setting up blocking positions near the intersection of 259 and 20 with rapid response units assembling into a combined army. I plan to attack both sides from the middle and stop this before we lose another big city."

Peterson clicks on the tab showing troop positions, "The blue icons show our troops, the big circles estimate the progress of the enemy. Let me expand this out to show the region, see where we have activity points? Look here, here, here, here, here and here. Now, this overlay shows where we think they're heading, the 259/20 intersection." He brings up a satellite view from last week showing the terrain.

"It looks like a good place to get us ambushed."

"Yes, it's likely where they want to spring a trap but honestly would I want it any other way? No, give me a clean battle any day of the week and I'll kick your ass, guaranteed. Putting all the eggs into one basket is a big mistake, rolling back ambushes dismantling traps is some of what we do best. I have nothing but confidence in the ability of our troops in any circumstances and you can take my words to heart fuck the pep talk, no need, we're eager to defend the American people in a real fight. We're going to fall on them like a pack of rapid dogs and push them back into the Gulf then drown them like the rat bastards they are. Bets stay up if you can, you will want to see this. My staff is uploading the plan for your signature. One more thing," Peterson hesitates leaning on the cough button while downing a shot of fifty year old single barrel malt whiskey, "Our analysis says

although untouched thus far, the East Coast comes next, probably. The radiation cloud drifts north and east, away from our installations along the southern coast like Norfolk. I want to sortie out the entire fleet before there's need to decontaminate, everything that floats needs to be away from port."

Hmmm, what's he getting at? Decontaminate? Shit, he's expecting the rest of the coastline to get nuked, isn't he? Shit. She still doesn't understand who is behind the attacks, better safe than sorry should be the route to take then, "Right, got ya. So conditional verbal approval both sets of orders, upload details. If I have questions you will know it. Kick ass, take names, and let's move on."

Peterson watches as she stands, stretches and exits the room; in a flash gone just like that not waiting for an explanation as to why her Secretary of War expects the current situation to go nuclear. Peterson raises his glass in honor of a respectable Commander-in-Chief. As for why, he expects the enemy will order an East Coast attack to take off the pressure on their Gulf operations. It's what he would do.

The ports of Norfolk, Philadelphia, Bangor, and Jacksonville berth Peterson's naval ships not currently sailing the high seas protecting commerce and showing the flag. The gate scene appears chaotic with tens of thousands of volunteers milling about, Peterson's fill-in crews coming to honor the NCTA, National-Call-To-Arms. Along the docks, trucks speed in from the warehouses while cranes lift food, fuel and ordnance into the holds. In an unending tradition, America's boys and girls rush off to war.

Annie Get Your Gun, Longview, TX 0300 Monday 01 September

To Annie grinding the gears, Billy Bob's truck feels as if it's coming apart and if she ever sees him she would tell him once again to get a new one- he could be such an ass about his truck. He named it Fjord of course as in Fjord Ford. Only he gets

the joke she thinks Fjord Ford sounds stupid. Annie Winchester coaxes Fjord to the top of a long gradual rise named to honor a local. Eisenhower's Bluff is a scenic overlook place so she pulls in she parking Fjord to give it a rest. Getting out leaning on the door facing the eastbound shoulder of County Road 12 staring into the void, transfixed. A shift in wind direction carries sound in her attention partially clearing the mist below. She struggles to comprehend until suddenly go-getter Annie Winchester needs to pee quite urgently finding herself unable to move terrified yet fascinated with her front row seat at the end to the world.

Smokey persistent smoke clouds enhance the violence as Tyler and Kilgore and Hendersonville and other wide areas in the road formerly housing her neighbors explode into flaming debris. Bombs, guesses Annie figuring with so many explosions they must have got them cheap maybe from the Dollar!Dollar!Dollar! With discount bomb suppliers giving closeout pricing perhaps as part of a munitions fire sale where everything must go. Annie covers her ears to deafen so many booms, so very many. She can't know from who or where the bombs fall or if she is in danger ruminating momentarily on the year she and Billy Bob came out here on the Fourth lying on a blanket watching all the firework shows at once.

Realizing she should be laying down with her hands covering her head instead of picking out the landmarks getting hammered in rapid succession, Annie crouches behind Fjord disgustedly muttering: "...there goes the what's left of the Feed N 'Seed, that's the tire warehouse burning look at the black smoke billowing, oh no not the Travelers Rest diner too and that's the vacant Jones farm foreclosed just last year yikes there goes the barn and the remaining livestock! Make it stop, oh the horror, who's doing this to us?"

Annie knew most of the newly dead locals from her shopping days at Elmo's and Dollar!Dollar!Dollar! as God-fearing people of a type likely to be outside milling

around viewing the damage to see up-close discovering it's not a good idea paying the price. Common sense, reflects Billy Bob, officially left here years ago anyway. Not one to speak ill of the dead, dying and wannabees, she quietly lies down under Fjord waiting for what happens next.

The damage occurring in front of the Annie statue derives from bombers representing Idaho Air National Guard 14th Squadron known as The Fighting Shamrocks formerly The Scalpers, heavily laden B-1b bombers with fighter escort sent by Peterson and President Shriver to support troops of the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions assembling fifteen klicks to the north. The Scalpers, aka Fighting Shamrocks, roll in on dozens of identified enemy fire points throughout East Texas devastating now-empty launchers centering around Tyler, blowing them to Kingdom Come. Infrared scans reveal visibly identifiable soon-to-be-dead locals aka collateral casualties, who for reasons as varied as the people themselves foolishly remain in the vicinity. War is hell, particularly your first.

Who among Annie's numerous acquaintances ventures outside anyway? Most actually with the bravest mingling in with the curious busy mingling in with the losers. War in general attracts first responders (brave), professional and itinerant journalists (curious) and this war particularly entices idle bastards (losers) into participating in the online event. Too late some recognize their stupidity while others die without taking personal responsibility.

Too bad people on the ground got into the act. Murderous Intent, Inc. visited East Texas this Labor Day Weekend settling into town working for opportunistic scumbags whereas killings unrelated to the war were masqueraded as due to the direct intervention of duly constituted agents of the United States of America. For simplicity sake they are lumped into the 20,008 number most often quoted in post action reporting but are actually believed to be in the low hundreds, give or take one or two desirous of circumventing the divorce process. For a day the weak

inherited the earth surprising the beloved with a blunt object applied to the neck or back of head with violent force. Louisville Sluggers came out of more than a few closets. Drag the body into the streets and praise the Maker for a glorious opportunity to find a new lover or right a few wrongs perhaps or just shut his damn mouth for once.

Annie Winchester's watched her concrete overshoes dissolve the very moment she made a plan. Step one, lose the concrete overshoes. Check.

Step two, telling Ford to suck it up. Climbing into the driver's seat she K-turned Ford, a major pain in the ass due to the high road crest and double storm ditches and Ford's clutch her dumb husband insisted he get when she was pushing automatic. That fight she lost, this one she'd win. Dammit Ford I'm not kidding. Check.

Step three, get your gun. Ford held several, thanks to Billy Bob, God bless him and keep him safe. She never was religious but every fool knows when it's time to pray. Annie selected her personal favorite off the racks mounted behind her seat. Loading shells she floored it back home. If she still had a house then she might also have Billy Bob's stash particularly the rolls of bandages and first aid supplies. Annie had no doubt the ammo was untouched, ten thousand loads per caliber per type because if he had not shown her, she would never have guessed where. "Annie, some people own gold and silver, we own bullets. If you got all the bullets, the gold and silver find you," said Billy Bob, pragmatist. Check.

Step four, go home. Driving with her knees loading as she orchestrates a defense, both hands busily ratcheting shells into her beautiful hand crafted short barreled pistol grip sling held Italian hand-made 12-gauge, the very one she used to win the same amount of sanctioned competition blue ribbons as her husband so

what she knew now was why he kept patting himself on the back, so proud of her shooting skills.

Heart Attack, Cheyenne Mountain, 0305 Monday 01 September

Jordie's ghost cracks open Peterson's humidor and carefully removes the top tray. Examining the contents, he shakes his head sadly replacing the lid. Going to the vault he spins the dial lifts the handle and peers in. Shaking his head, he slams the door disgustedly, "You're out of cigars."

"Bite me."

Jordie picks up a tablet, presses some buttons and an orderly appears with a fresh box of Bolivars' finest Cubans. Jordie clips the end strikes a wooden kitchen match and lights up, "I'm worried about her."

"She'll be fine."

Jordie flips him off, "Gaslighting me isn't going to change shit and the fact of the matter is, I'm worried about her."

"If you come work on my campaign, you won't have to put up with this shit."

"Jesus!" Peterson practically craps his pants as Lucifer solidifies.

"Where?" Lucifer appears nonplussed looking about.

Holding a sack of empty jars Death joins the meeting, "It's a non-contact order concern; not to worry Satan, you're not in violation." He turns to Peterson, "Looking for a spatula, wouldn't happen to have one, eh?"

Peterson scans the room for more visitors; finding none; he turns to the credenza opens the bottom drawer rummages around a bit before producing a bright red spatula with a white handle, "Here, a gift."

Death takes the implement and sets to work scraping an empty honey jar.

Peterson wonders if he is hallucinating thinking Jordie's ghost a bit much in the best of moments but here he is hanging with three otherworldly beings. Super.

Jordie gives Lucifer the evil eye, "I have no interest whatsoever in helping you besides," pointing to Peterson, "I already have a job."

"You say so but is screwing with Peterson here actually a job? Hardly even a good time, from what I can tell. You're wasting away here with little to show for it but we can help each other, you have something I need. You have access to key persons and places for some unknown reason and you're frittering it all away to screw with Peterson. You can change your story, what do you want? I need experience in managing a campaign and I'm willing to go deep."

Jordie looks him over closely, "How deep?"

Peterson gives Jordie a raised eyebrow, "Looking to take the word of Satan, are you? You're a bigger loser than I give you credit for."

"See what I mean? Who is taking shit in your relationship, I wonder, 'cause it isn't Peterson from what I can tell. Look, I'm in a bad spot being forced into an election and to be honest I don't think I have winning numbers. If you come with me now I'll make Peterson off himself problem solved. Tell you what, he can choke on his own vomit just like you did."

Peterson can feel the bile rising in his throat, takes a drink.

"You can't do that." Death tosses the empty jar, picks up another.

"Sure I can, do it all the time!" Lucifer takes umbrage.

Death shakes his head, "Not him, he's in the Book."

"What do you mean, they're all in the Book, aren't they? Now or later, what's the big deal? I'm sure someone else can fill in thus freeing up Jordie here to work on my campaign..."

Shaking his head, "Nope." Death smiles wickedly.

Peterson breaks wind then audibly sighs in abject relief at not shitting himself.

Death gives him the evil eye, "Any more of that and I'll let him off you."

Jordie getting back to business cuts to the chase, "What are you running for?"

"Satan."

"There's an election for Satan? Really? I thought leading the resistance would qualify for a lifetime appointment. How many times have you had to run?"

"First time and that's why I'm in a pickle. As you note initially I sort of fell into the job, nobody said anything about needing votes to stay."

"Ok, I get you. You think because you're such a dick they won't vote for you."

"Exactly!" Satan feels the connection.

Death laughs out loud choking on the super fentanyl dripping down his throat.

"Ok, fuck off. You got no chance in hell," Jordie appears uninterested in being Satan's campaign manager, "unless..."

"Deal!"

Peterson can't believe his luck, "You're leaving me?"

"No, my terms allow me to fuck with you on an ass-needed basis."

Death turns to Satan, "You can't guarantee she'll stay alive."

Jordie looks Lucifer in the eye, "If you can't keep Betsy alive for the duration, no deal and you can find yourself a new lackey."

"Fifty jars." Lucifer opens negotiations bigly.

"One hundred." Death doubles down on Satan's opening bid.

"Sixty."

"Ninety."

"Seventy five."

"Deal."

Peterson shakes his head, "Transactional politics."

Jordie gathers himself, gives Peterson the bird then disappears with Satan.

Peterson looks at Death expectantly.

Death looks into the sack and counts, "Five more and I'm out of your hair. You got no idea how tough it is to find a spatula these days."

"In that case, I'll need that back."

Sheer HAARP Attack, Aleutian Islands, Bering Sea 0315 Monday 01 September

Atmospheric physicist and Director of HAARP (High Altitude Aurora Research Project v3.01) Dr. Neill Baggage worries about Nigel, the hurricane he manufactured out of thin air to help redistribute the global energy budget. Shaking his head weighing the price of success against the amount of lives lost or ruined, Baggage contemplates suicide. Instead, he pours a mug of coffee, loads bread into the toaster to enjoy a snack. Not his fault, he did warn them. Sure, he took the money but he did tell them it was a bad idea. Starting a hurricane? Simple physics, child's play. Ending a hurricane? 'Luck with that,' he mutters between slurps.

Savoring the smell of toasting bread, Dr. Baggage fishes a jar of peanut butter out of the bottom drawer of the filing cabinet behind the whiskey. Uh oh, nearly empty. Looking about for a scraping implement the scientist begins humming old tunes, recalling a few lines he adds lyrics, "and all the science I don't understand, it's just my job five days a week...something something we're only making plans for Nigel, we only want what's best for him... fuck you Nigel."

Fucking Nigel- they paid him to come up with a warming solution so he did. Forget for the moment about him warning them he couldn't stop it, couldn't stop a tiny tropical depression let alone a massive hurricane of the magnitude necessary to rebalance the global energy budget. Theoretically, he opines at the time, he could maybe grow storms forming in tropical waves coming off Africa but forget about ending them. NGOs pointing fingers going fully into panic mode so now they (freaking billionaires) want Nigel wrapped-up. No scraper? Super.

Baggage leaves his office in search of a spatula, wandering through the control room giving the nod to the staff working on recoding the global atmospheric hi-

energy array known as HAARP. Entering the kitchen he looks about. Hmmm. He opens the utility drawer, nothing. He checks the dishwasher. Frowning, he returns to his office considering how to best get the peanut butter out of the jar as the lights dim signaling a large power draw and the beginning of the next attempt at stopping Hurricane Nigel or not.

Dr. Neill Baggage returns to his office to monitor progress failing to notice death removing his spatula from the top drawer of the filing cabinet aka the silverware drawer. Making do, Baggage drops a slice of bread into the peanut butter jar and scrapes the bread against the sides using a dirty ruler. Death shakes his head at the amateurish attempt before leaving, taking his new found spatula along for the ride.

The hi-energy array fully cooled and calibrated, the HAARP staff begin the next run directing pulsating frequency phase shifts at Nigel hoping to disrupt the covalent bonds of the cloud droplets. Hours poured into that were a sick sad joke so far nothing worked. They almost had it earlier but that was before the complexity nightmare introduced during the cascade of space debris. The staff, however, deems killing Nigel an acceptable challenge worthy of their skills. They work in real-time modeling the changing atmosphere to minimize the falling satellite's effect on HAARP's energy waves. Baggage works through the process while enjoying peanut butter toast.

Avoid the cascade, de-ionize the atmosphere, shake apart the water droplets, redistribute the heat evenly cutting winds speeds vertically and horizontally and so dissipate the clouds away multi-directionally. Sounds easy, absolutely too easy by half.

Neill Baggage wearing out the carpet pacing between dual computer terminals on the stabilized platform far below the primary gun bank. Dr. Neill- one with his guns believes the guns know the answers. Great and big you might call them

colossal and very noisy too. The dampening mechanisms should shunt excess energy so Baggage fixes on the window looking far down below and sure enough, the rocks vibrate visibly pulsing in waves; he wonders about liquefaction. So much to worry about lately, huh? Oh well, in for a penny, in for a pound...

“Run the power up to 145% over spec and spread out the pulse 33% to compensate. If we go out we’re going to go out singing!” Baggage laughs giddily riding the wave and shooting the tube totally psyched massively over-amped.

“You know if this doesn’t work, we die,” moans the head of his science team.

He draws the ire of the boss, “Damn you, and don’t be so ready to die don’t worry it’s going to work this time.” Baggage riding the high crashes hard losing both the wave and his board. Jasper gets to him rubbing him the wrong way with his freaking negativity yet few good people wish to work with him for reasons unknown or maybe just unrecognized/ If Baggage cared he didn't let on, he was all about the high energy physics.

“Anyway, how are we going to know if Nigel weakens, you know like without satellite verification?” Queries one of the senior techs on the monitoring team, Jasper from Galveston.

Good old Jasper, thinks Baggage, only around because when his own program got defunded he was so near retirement nobody wanted him and he had nowhere to go except Baggage in Alaska the scientific posting with the highest turnover taking anyone with a degree and a pulse. Godforsaken people operating godforsaken technology are how Jasper refers to HAARP. A whiny old guy is what HAARP calls him in return. Displaying his ‘don’t give a shit what you think or do, just leave me alone ’expression demonstrating habitual intolerance for the foibles of youth,

"Talk to the Air Force or the Space Force. They'll know when the airspace becomes flyable, I suspect. Get your finger out of your ass and get answers, eh?"

Jasper drops his eyes back on his screen muttering, debating if a mercy killing event is imminent.

Baggage studies the rocks as the power ratchets up.

NauSea, Caribbean Sea 0326 Monday 01 September

"What ya doing, dear?" Mrs. Wilson enters the galley for a late night snack only to discover Celie wearing an apron and operating the commercial grade mixer at high speed. She peers over Celie's shoulder taking in Celie adding ice to the contents of the large bowl lined with several large canvas bags of differing colors. Celie points to her ear, holds up a finger and points to the storeroom. Mrs. Wilson remains observing as moment later; Celie adds a bucket of prime bud, the colas of about three-dozen plants formerly hanging in the drying room. Celie wipes her brow and ushers Mrs. Wilson toward the relative quiet of the storeroom.

"So, what ya doing, dear?" Entering, Mrs. Wilson takes a tin of biscuits off the shelf and begins scarfing down the tasty treats.

Celie frowns at that "Stop being such a Bogart and share already."

Mrs. Wilson offers the package. Celie grabs a large handful.

"The percent I am paying is too high price, so far."

"If you must know, I built an ice-o-lator."

"Come again?"

"Ice-o-lator. It's a more environmentally friendly way of making hash and with all the stories I've heard about Pedro, with his arrival imminent I figure now's the time. The cook needs me out of here soon but this is the last batch of colas I have."

"How does it work? How big is that bowl" Mrs. Wilson frowns as Celie holds out her hand but she deposits a biscuit anyway. Celie rolls her eyes and Mrs. Wilson adds two more.

"Your generosity astounds me. Anyway, I line the big thirty gallon bowl with my homemade heavy canvas bags with customized cut and stitched mesh bottoms of different grid densities: super-fine lines the bottom, then fine followed by a medium then medium-coarse finally coarse. Then I add ice and water before starting the mixer and slowly dump in the colas. The mixer strips trichomes with THC and assorted terpenes off the kerf. I beat the shit out of the slurry for a good long time then lift the outermost coarse bag to remove the plant material then repeat to the final strain with the finest mesh. The slurry dries and hash remains."

"What plants did you use?" Mrs. Wilson upends the biscuit tin to catch the crumbs.

"White widow seems appropriate given what he's been up to."

"When can I try some?"

Celie offers a syringe of oil, "A couple of days, at least. Here, this is off last week's run a hybrid blend of white rhino, white widow and South African. It's really good, been causing me more than a few hallucinations."

Mrs. Wilson smiles, "Thanks dear. Now don't stay up too late. Busy day tomorrow, you know."

"Why Brain, what are we doing tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow Pinky, we take over the world!"

Death Throes, Aleutian Islands, Bering Sea 0330 Monday 01 September

"What death throes? There are no stinking death throes! Poof! Gone!" Baggage exalts ending Nigel after a mere 35 gazillion tries.

"About time you knocked the wind field down; can't help but note Nigel's still pouring out the remnants- ionizing rainfall, nasty business."

"Not my concern, not my fault either. In fact, I blame you to some extent. Fuck you, Jasper, you're fired!" Baggage shifts to the next problem, "Alright, we'll try programming the HAARP array to neutralize the fallout. Hmmm, need all hands on deck for this one if we don't want to overcook the guns. Shit. Fuck me Jasper, you're re-hired only stop being such a jerk."

Hakkinen, Little Rock, Arkansas 0341 Monday 01 September

Nascent Alabamian war videographer, former professional wrestler and winning contestant on 'Poker with the Stars' Freddie King uploads dramatic cellphone footage voicing Nigel's impacts on the local war effort. Young Freddie King holds no clue concerning Baggage's efforts in Alaska glossing over the insane atmospheric science improbabilities inherent in the rapid wind-field decline (like magic) instead concentrating on hostilities escalating noting, "The war sweeps into Arkansas as calamitous downpours taper off and the super-hurricane winds die, with calm weather now prevailing. Here, far from the coast in the burbs south of Little Rock restless natives take to the streets in wild delight at the collapse of the storm proclaiming, 'Nigel is dead, long live us'. Moments later the war sweeps in killing many, horribly maiming others. Just goes to show, it's always something, am I right? This is Freddie King, poker's my thing."

Freddie makes no mention of HAARP.

Amid the sound of gunfire off in a distance Freddie King wraps outside his apartment building uploading streams showing extensive flooding and copious wind damage then takes a walk looking for war footage and hoping to locate someone for a 'man in the street' segment. He stumbles across a band of looters. They take one look at him recording video then pull out handguns. Freddie hustles

out of the line of fire, not his first time in the crosshairs. Turning the corner he stumbles directly into Nika with his brothers hot-wiring an old Ford.

Surprised car thief Nika shoots Freddie with a handgun. Hit in a major artery, Freddie King bleeds out on Nika Hakkinen's sneakers.

"Super." Nika swipes his footwear along Freddie's back trying to get the blood off but only ends up smearing the droplets. Next he tries a nearby puddle with slightly better success as Timo cranks the starter.

Upon the sudden death of his old man keeping in lockstep with tradition then twelve year old Nika Hakkinen steps into his father's shoes to become the Hakkinen Clan Patriarch way before his prime wiping out any fun he may have experienced in his teen years in lieu of full responsibility for a household of hungry people. Climbing into the Ford Nika peers up the street at the mob breaking down the doors to the athletic outerwear store then down at his bloody feet. Shaking his head ruefully, he pulls away from the curb aiming the Ford at the highway.

Nika and his brothers Timo & Sammy bolt toward the massive outdoor mall complex for supplies as the storm winds down looking to score before the warehouse stores get wiped clean like they always do before the cops return. Nika pulls into the front lot at a big strip mall anchored by a food chain cocking his ear toward some low rumbling. He immediately thinks Nigel. Nigel is starting up again? Super, if we get caught out in the open we're doomed.

They pile out of the car to make a break for the store, as the rumbling grows louder. Cannon fire? The truth hits all three of them at the same time: not Nigel going to screw with them; instead, the war will have a go ending their young lives. Super. Young Timo the hot-wire expert instinctively understands someone or thing closes in so they ought to get their asses in gear and is about to yell at his brothers

when suddenly a huge tank bursts out of the tree line gunning the engine as the treads dug into the soft earth of a small berm fifteen feet from the woods.

"Every man for himself!" screams Sammy. Much to Nika's chagrin the younger brothers take off running as if they have someplace to get to all of sudden- sounds like a plan. Nika points his camera at the action while looking for cover, as do the others hitting the dirt.

Unincorporated county code ordinances require a landscaping mound protect the local, in this case upscale, neighborhood from the evils of the retail. Nika and his brothers flatten themselves against the berm lined with small bushes and dotted with green ivy with a few big leaf perennials thrown in the mix. The tank, Nika notes, looks like an M1 with a great big gun looking for targets. Suddenly the diesels kick in and the beast turns in their direction. Coming straight for them, lumbering and rocking picking up speed before using Nika's berm to slingshot over the six foot obstruction becoming airborne treads passing just overhead before coming down hard on a Toyota, bouncing once running over several stray pedestrians struck from behind while running away. Nika turns to watch with everyone else caught in the open.

"Sucks for them," thinks Nika as they scramble over the berm. He looks for an exit off the lot but a hurricane fence separates the stores from the neighborhood. Super.

The tank stands on the brakes abruptly stopping, strafing civilians fleeing the huge lot like cockroaches caught in the middle of the kitchen floor when the light turns on. Nika presses his head into the dirt, eats mulch.

Swiveling, looking for targets the tank bangs a round into the food store killing everyone within proximity. Twin .30 caliber mounts below the turret rotate faster than his eyes follow racking up copious collateral damage. A round passes through an elderly woman then burrows into the berm in front of Sammy. Sadly, there isn't

enough mulch in play to slow the projectile further. It enters Sammy's skull through his left eye socket and exits just below his right ear completing the through and through and through. Sammy dies without a sound.

"We got to get out of here. C'mon, let's go. Wait, what?" Nika makes the call but Timo is the first to notice Sammy won't be joining them.

Dissatisfied, the tank keeps pumping rounds as bullets riddle through the elderly woman liquefying her surroundings. Unimpressed the tank continues slowly rolling across the lot roughly in Timo and Nika's direction seemingly unconcerned with them; that is, until the turret stops rotating and a soldier pops out of the gunner's hatch giving the dead heap of old lady the finger, both righty and lefty. Timo manages to get several rounds off with his nine but misses wildly this being his first battle and all. Nika scores a hit on the tread drawing the gunner's attention who shifts the focus of his fingers before laughing out loud pointing two fingers in their direction before ducking down closing the hatch.

The tank rolls over a Tesla then stalls. The batteries crush as a fire erupts diverting the crew's attention. Shrugging off the loss of Sammy, Nika and Timo take off along the berm then cross the lot using cars for cover.

The now-steaming tank rolls off the furiously flaming electric vehicle unfortunately lighting up unfriendly infrared sensors revealing their position. Slowing not stopping in a wide turn to get around a minivan, the huge treads' compression force combine with residual Tesla heat melt twin asphalt trails creating a linear indicator this time just in case the unfriendly missed the earlier pointer. With the gun now aiming to fire, Nika and Timo dive into the Fox & Hound, one of the three new restaurants the strip mall developer built as Phase II but that Nika never went to not just because he hates blood pudding but finds the name pretentious and far too English for the Hakkinen family. A thump, a flash, a

roar demolishes the biz next door as Timo and Nike fast crawl toward the kitchen. Another thump another flash another roar in rapid succession takes out the Fox&Hound's second story banquet facility shaking the phone from Timo's grasp.

Timo almost dumps in his trousers but a quick pinch with an extended six-pack clench saves him from an embarrassing fate. The Fox&Hound flies apart with the next high explosive round, showering the lot and other stores with detritus. Nika forces open the back door screaming for Timo to get his shit together and follow. Acutely aware of his danger after having dropped everything to push his crap back up his sphincter, Timo stoops picking up his phone as another tank breaks from the tree line behind the mall. Nika stops dead in his tracks as the gunner lines up a shot then reduces Pomona's Mexican Eatery to flaming cinders. Not Pomona's, thinks miserable Nika, not Pomona's.

Still mourning the loss of his beloved Pomona's, Nika grabs Timo racing toward the trash bins behind the big pizzeria as the tanker reloads. Diving into an open dumpster joining a major rat infestation now in progress as soldiers carrying rifles slow exit the woods on the far side supporting yet another tank moving in the direction of the supermarket, Timo finally shits his trousers. Run for it or not run for it is Nika's next question. A armored fighting vehicle rolls up the access road, following the tanks at a slower pace to sandwich the troops in a protective steel cocoon. Another boom and Magaia's Pizza expands their operation into the parking lot pelting the dumpsters with concrete, bricks and heaps of assorted rubble.

Smoke chokes the air from the ground up making it so Nika can't breathe or see for shit. The rats attack. Nika is a man of action. Instinctively he climbs out dragging Timo and together they wriggle under the dumpsters.

"Less rats," Timo relaxes.

"What's that smell?" wonders Nika suspiciously eyeing Timo.

Licks of exhaust flames appear from inside the former pizzeria signifying the launch of three wire guided tank busting rockets flaring just overhead setting the dumpster ablaze further driving the rats into a frenzy. The king rat sniffs Timo's pants before trying to burrow into his asshole. Timo screams in pain. Nika snaps the big rat's neck, "C'mon, not safe let's go!"

Between the now-blazing tank and disabled armored fighting vehicle, dismounted infantry spy open up on the missileers' exposed firing position with numerous rounds striking the dumpster fire passing out the other side. The pizzeria squad answers with a chain gun mowing down the soldiers as they scramble for cover.

"Too bad for them!" Unable to tell the good guys from bad Nika nonetheless cheers as his brother's killers get cut down like some many dead trees everywhere.

Crawling away from the dumpsters, Timo checks on his phone's livestream- all good. He's pointing at nothing when out of nowhere a Hummer appears from the other lot, draws fire going out of control flying in toward the brothers while flipping across its longitudinal axis throwing its occupants out like sand from a shoe finally landing upside down in flames forty feet away. An armored fighting vehicle barrels into firing range of the pizzeria squad sliding to a stop. Spying death, not hesitating a second the Hakkinen family survivors jump up and run. They get five steps before the percussion drives their faces against the windows of a parked suv, engine-running driver inside. The owner thumbs them into the back seat. Climbing in, Timo's ears begin to clear such that he could hear screaming, his own apparently. Nika coughs blood, a piece of rebar protruding out his back. The driver floors them into the fire lane as Timo first yanks out the rusty rebar then tears off Nika's shirt stuffing it into the hole. Nika craps his pants, passes out. The driver sniffs; Timo shrugs.

The Little Rock meeting engagement sucking in the Hakkinen Brothers makes the great escape Timo prays for less and less likely. Two armies, actually an Army battalion and a Marine company unleash heavy weaponry on each other as the suv powers north past the Dollar!Dollar!Dollar! store. Totally bottoming out plowing through a huge puddle throwing spray the fleeing suv draws unwanted attention bouncing out of a huge power slide onto Cherry Street, a two lane road splitting the commercial from retail serving as a local shortcut to the bypass road. The suv takes small arms fire racing another three hundred yards to the bypass intersection stoplight under construction being widened to three turning lanes. Reaching the light turning right on red without stopping in contravention of the law, Timo sticks his head up to see the world one last time. Accelerator to the floor they wing past a Bradley Infantry Fighting Vehicle with a TOW missile launcher mount creeping into fire position behind a brick wall around ten feet tall barely fifty feet off their evacuation route. Timo slumps down studying the soldiers in the IFV then spies four more lying low hoping to ambush. Marines? Nika comes around, vomits on Timo's lap then dies.

The suv crashes after taking .30mm fire from the Bradley killing the driver.

Through the smoke Timo points his phone catching more heavy armor moving to engage the IFV. He shudders as they tentatively roll over the crumbling facades and concrete foundations of the strip mall including Sammy's body before invading the beltway scanning for targets. Hiding behind a culvert flanking the Bradley from half a mile away Timo focuses back to the TOW missile equipped Bradley observing two short squads of tanks bunching up on the far side trying to get sorted out as to where to go. The launchers silently swivel to near vertical and four missiles fly scoring hits, the nearest tank struck with two warheads striking the rear deck using the 'double-tap' method to first set off the reactive armor then penetrate the projectile storage compartment with spectacular effect as rounds began cooking

off immediately. Six more missiles, ten total, score five catastrophic detonations with two near misses and one apparently on a lunar trajectory halfway to the moon by now at least. The remaining tank returns fire disabling the Bradley and killing the squad of National Guardsmen. The next round finishes off the Bradley. The GC infantry accompanying the tanks reconnoiter the area advancing toward the Bradley wary of an ambush.

The fires light up the battlefield for everybody not wearing light enhancement, temporarily blinding those using the tech. A squad of US Marines lying in the ditch between the road and the wall open up on the approaching infantry with a .50mm belt-fed machine gun with the ambushers scoring big. With little cover nearby, the Gran Columbian infantry takes heavy losses. The tankers load a high explosive round and clear the area of Marines. Another platoon of Marines engage with missiles from the beltway destroying the tank as supporting armored personnel carriers streak off the highway to join the fray.

Stuck inside the pizza joint unable to move its damaged tread a GC tank with an undamaged gun loads up a High Explosive Anti-Tank or HEAT round and fires collapsing a squad of shooters taking position above the wall section recently vacated by Timo currently hightailing it after the Bradley M2A2's demise. The soldiers in the armored personnel carriers return the favor silencing the pizzeria for good. Drawn to the commotion, a platoon of six-wheel light tanks fire on the APCs combining multiple armor piercing rounds with extensive bursts of 7.62 rounds chewing up all the U.S. Marine flesh nearby. Two more Bradleys with an unarmored Hummer take the off-ramp as Timo gives up running. The Marines still show fight as their numbers dwindle. The shooting tapers off. Unfortunately, Timo decides to go home just before receiving the bullet with his name on it.

The Hakkinen men's legacy erased, Timo's phone continues to upload violent looting scenes captured outside the food store and adjacent Dollar!Dollar!Dollar!

The GC drive to Little Rock slows to a momentary crawl outside the city as the invading army stops to do a little shopping.

Ah, the spoils of war found in Dollar!Dollar!Dollar! Timo uploads a mob scene of chaos as the original local looters get their comeuppance from the GC in the form of automatic weapons.

Finally US air cover makes a belated appearance in the form of a pair of Bones diverted out of Texas. Below the deck and coming on fast, GC forces receive air raid warnings mere seconds before the JDAMs began falling, enough time to run outside but not take cover. Peterson carpet-bombs the entire area, focusing the sticks of munitions initial point of impact on the Dollar!Dollar!Dollar! Everyone dies as utter destruction of every other structure in a line ten thousand feet long and one hundred fifty yards wide ensues flattening everything from Dollar!Dollar!Dollar! to the beltway in progression.

Death stops inside the Dollar!Dollar!Dollar! to stock up on no-frills honey shaking his head wistfully at the display of melted spatulas.

Brand New Mourning, Shamokin, PA 0349 Monday 01 September

"It's a brand new mourning in America"- Mother Hakkinen, now childless.

"No shit, Sherlock"- Neil Baggage, perennial smart-ass.

"Fuck me"- President Betsy Shriver, up to her ass in alligators.

She silently ticks off her woes imagining conversing with her dead pal Jordie ending with a mild criticism, "So, this is what it is, eh? Super. Washington radiation cloud hovering over the beltway slowly meandering apparently drifting north, satellite cascade taking out our eyes and ears, windmill missile attacks, massive flooding with widespread Nigel damage, attacks on fleeing civilians from within and without, Southern borders open, California bombarded and on fire, unrestricted naval warfare, Texas invasion/ground war spreading north toward

Dallas and east into Arkansas, mobs looting and revenge killing proliferates as law and order melt into the woodwork, reports of enemy infiltration/assassinations within the National Guard, amphibious forces invading Alabama and Florida, and now Peterson is carpet bombing Little Rock. Fuck you Jordie for leaving me holding the bag."

Betsy closes her eyes bringing herself back to the business at hand, an exchange of views with the Chinese Premier, "Look, we had nothing to do with the attack on our own country. This isn't a 'false flag' operation and a pretense to battle your fleet and the NRC claims the DC nuke holds Chinese origins."

"We don't believe you. Your country's been lying to everyone for decades and suddenly you claim to be telling the truth? Our fleet merely defends itself from your unprovoked aggression. Unless and until you cease hostilities, this situation will end us all. You stare the apocalypse in the face. Do you understand? Do you?"

Betsy ends the call. Stopping events, ha. What a laugh, she would if she could but that just isn't in the cards. Slowing things down? Again, a laudable goal if she could only get out in front of current events so luck with tha

Peterson remains on the line, farts loudly to let her know then adds softly slowly, "Got to pay your dues if you wanna sing the blues."

President Betsy expects more nukes, "General Peterson?"

"Relatively unscathed with acceptable losses? Don't trust them commies, as you know, but it's your call. Them or us, take your pick."

Leave it to Peterson to drill the problem down to the bare essentials adding a slur for good measure. Unsure of the course to take, she prays, "Dear God: Labor Day Weekend? Really? Like WTF?" She throws the ceiling the bird, just in case.

An image of Jordie appears briefly in the doorway to the kitchenette before fading away leaving behind a fine mist covering her eyes. She's crying for Jordie,

herself and everyone else but through her tears she can practically taste the grilled onion aroma emanating off Marvin the escort's apron stains.

Jordie would of course worry about anyone and everyone and press her to save them all if she could. Damn you Jordie. President Betsy stands wearily slipping on her heels buttoning her jacket before wearily making her way to the media room.

"Put me on all channels," her look and tone make it clear she brooks no discussion saying, "We're evacuating the east coast population westward to the Great Lakes and the upper Midwest. All Nigel evacuees will join them. Then get Neil Baggage on the line. We need to talk HAARP."

"How about SoCal?"

She mounts the podium then considers, "They're already moving away from the fires; we'll direct them northwards into Utah."

The Other Apocalypse of Peter=>

"Like WTF she asks- not to worry Betsy Shriver, it'll all be over soon. Well, sooner or later. I take it you're familiar with the colloquialism: phoning it in?"

"It's a new thing I'm trying." Peter has all the burners going full blast.

The guardian of the gates loosens his belt drawing a sad shake of the head along with a sharp rebuke, "Phoning it in has actually been around from day one, you slacker. You've lost your edginess thanks to an over-abundance of Paddock Burgers. Time to have a word with Myron."

"I call it 'vibe-writing' what do you think?" Peter shrugs, flips burgers.

"Are you familiar with the phrase 'willy-nilly' because that's how this apocalypse seems to be going. Every... you're burning the onions, you know. You got to stir 'em occasionally or you're gonna get..."

"Caramelization, right? Give me some credit."

"Ok, so you're developing skills behind the bar-b-cue, about time."

"As the world spirals out of control, eh? Apocalypse V is humming along nicely, thank you for noticing. How do you want your burger?"

"None for me thanks. How come you're grilling? Where's Nebbi anyway? Got any water?"

"Cooler. Grab me one while you're up. Nebbi's busy looking into the supply chain issues keep cropping up ever since we switched suppliers. I'm afraid Karl may be double-dealing."

"Maybe? Ha-ha, it's funny how Karl seems to have his hands all over Apocalypse V. You know he's working against you."

"Right? Got to give the guy credit for trying. Doesn't impact the 'Other Apocalypse' that I can see and the side benefits? I haven't eaten this well since never and Marvin and the others are the happiest they've been since they got wiped out. I'm not saying Karl flitting about Greyspace and the Annex while managing the Paddock and taking over the 50/50 isn't a wrinkle but..."

"If I wanted Karl's spin on the end of the world, I'd have asked the machine to write the story instead of you."

"Ask?"

"You know what I mean."

"If we didn't want Karl around, we shouldn't have allowed our suppliers to use genetic modifications to encourage the plants to drink poison. He's an artifact generated by the system, nothing more."

"I'm not going to, you know."

"Not gonna what?"

"Kiss the cook regardless the message on your apron. C'mon, more to see on the dark side of the Annex."

"More to see on the dark side, eh? Hate to tell ya but there is no dark side of the Annex; matter of fact, it's all-dark and you know how bad my night vision is anymore. What say we stay here instead holding down the fort manning the grill, enjoying some grass-fed organic burgers dripping in onions slathered in catsup? Sound like a plan? You could just describe conditions, right? I'm a great listener; you can trust me. Be just like the old days..."

"Phoning it in. Come, the valley of death awaits."

"You make it sound so appealing."

After circling the action a few times, Peter finds himself relaxing in a comfy chair with cold drink in one hand and Texaco road map to hell in the other. Peter studies the section marked 'Border Crossings' tracing link routes between the cosmos. He points, "There's designated border crossings- is that new? Is there an escapee threat? Why Texaco?"

"Good questions- the crossing? Hardly worth mentioning the first time you visited; however lately we've gotten tons more inhabitants. The trouble lies in the ongoing expansion operations, or the rate actually. Whatever every time the 'hard & fast' rules change, the system acquires more intricacy allowing more opportunities for movement around and between components. Sometimes individuals get lost in the noise. Some escapees may indeed be threats but temporarily so- they return one way or another."

"Well, alright. This place begins to make a little more sense. Not much but its a start. So then, to slip under the radar Pedro and Karl exploit the fullness of hell? Hardly seems fair to swat them."

"Fair to whom? This is Pedro and Karl: two in a hundred trillion and they know it. That Texaco roadmap you're wiping your greasy Paddock-burger fingers on? Is only one of two in existence, the other pickpocketed from death by Pedro Saenz during the Paddock negotiations. Look at the legend, read the

capacity limit. Place is full. Believe it or not, we're sending the damned into Purgatory. The feedback's been brutal check it out but you shouldn't read the comments if you like yourself or mind being associated with sleazy-management-types."

"I don't do social media. It doesn't agree with me."

"Trust me, I know how you feel about the damned milling about unsupervised ceaselessly torturing some poor unfortunate bastard merely marking time hoping for the best. Hell Annex operation staff have been putting in place a temporary expansion plan to separately accommodate the growing stream of miscreants while implementing a program to keep the most deserving in Hell. Keeping three distinct locations secure spreads the staff way too thin, adding a sub-section to Purgatory makes the situation untenable moving forward. Personnel concerns take a back seat until we're done building and where to find staff ok with being in hell full-time minus another war in Heaven? Build another Valley of Death, double the amount of punishment angels. Trust me, we need expansion now and we're going to need to keep expanding until the end of days. Hell attracts, apparently greatly so during an apocalypse. Punishment angels all initially self-selected being their own worst enemies notably losing the war they started but after getting more and more face time with people they abruptly unionized with Satan's management thugs and stooges playing the spirit during negotiations then implementing bogus work rules making themselves practically untouchable. Needless to say they ran their new, improved shit-show into the ground. Nowadays providing PAU resources is the road to ruin best to cut off their supply, hence Apocalypse V. We'll finish off the Annex during the PAU leadership election and instill new work rules governing the entire

punishment methodology. They won't know what hit them and the new Satan will be taking it from all sides."

Peter listens to this tale of woe with great interest, his first time hearing the full back-story on the PAU. He wonders, "Um, played the spirit? Seems like the spirit should be above that, no?"

"Ok, you're right they thought they were duping the spirit but the tail doesn't wag the dog, does it?"

"No."

"Boredom, the spirit apparently wanted to shake things up."

Folding up the lawn chairs they depart stopping at one of the Border Crossings so Jesus could check on things. Peter slips over to the Spirit to say hi. The Spirit enjoys seeing Peter enveloping them in a sunny aura. Peter, warmed by the Spirit, inquires delicately into the Annex affair wanting to stay as neutral as possible given his good standing with each side, "So, have any disagreements over hell management functions with Jesus- lately?"

The Spirit gives off a calming and soothing vibe. Peter is one of the few Righteous getting along with all three tiers of management. Peter exchanges more non-important banter with the Spirit, just shooting the shit telling stories of Paddock burgers slathered in caramelized onions. They make a date for a cookout outside Gate 7.

Jesus returns ending the confab, "Moving on to current technological developments, let's head over to R&D."

-The Other Apocalypse of Peter IV, I-III

Packy's Place, Tahoe Region, NV 0405 EST Monday 01 September

She was a tough kid, sobs Packy fighting off a flood tears. She had her moments, for sure. Damn, she lived life on the edge but not anymore bleeding from two huge holes, one through her right eye the other in her throat, each catastrophic. Her toughness couldn't save her.

Packy stares at the western glow as it stares back. Though somewhat empathizing with all the dying peoples, particularly the collateral damage, he channels his biggest concerns into consideration of the future of humans in general. Specifically, Packy worries of the future of the numerous small children particularly survivors plucked from the wreckage along the caravan route, now safely underground. He also worries over the quality of the encounters when desperate survivors sweep through his hidden compound as any survivors of that conflagration must be either extremely lucky or extremely mean seeing Packy and his people as either good guys or the next obstacle.

"She was good at her job." Airre the Quantum offers solace to her friend.

"Are you kidding me? She was deadly lethal, best heavy gunner on the squad... and her name was Rachel but you already knew that. Her patrol ambushed, damn snipers infiltrated the perimeter. I doubt they're alone, what can you tell me?"

"While firing on the move Rachel racked up 239 kills, all confirmed shooters. She saved your entire convoy operation- twice. The snipers' waiting for you to shoot all now lay dead in their nest thanks to multiple mortar strikes. Over time they acquired a map of your minefield thanks to careful observation combining with orders from a surprisingly capable leader- add in a deadly shooter and Rachel didn't have a chance. Jamming your comms before attacking there's about three dozen more armed militia currently breaching your perimeter calling themselves the Idaho Irregulars but they're merely local miscreants been watching your preps, mapping your defenses looking to displace you at the first opportunity which is typical of the human slacker genre."

"Super." Packy needs comms toot sweet.

"You should have comms with Ms. Moore momentarily."

Gunfire? Bummer. Packy frets over their exposure picking up the walkie, "Deidre? Come in Deidre. God Damn It! If you can hear me they're inside the perimeter, shoot to kill."

"Ok, your comms are back."

The scouts began coming online with live video and audio. The threat board on his small display cleared up, their next big test was coming down from the north.

"Deidre? Come in Deidre. They're inside the perimeter, hunker down!" this he directs toward his Security Director leading the scouts.

Waiting, Packy looks at Airre. She points to her ear, "She heard you, go for it."

From above, hidden among rocky outcroppings sit heavy guns on trailer chassis, portable and deadly. Packy hits the panic button and waits.

Radar guided Gatling guns chew up everything moving near the bluff. Small rockets fire on the assembly point to remove the leadership as larger rockets arc over the surrounding countryside taking out all of Packy's neighbors within a ten mile radius. Suddenly it is very quiet. Packy scoops up what he can see of her brains off the ground before gingerly picking up Rachel's remains. He bags her corpse for burial as Airre joins death in a little fentanyl.

"Nice of you to help out." Packy wishes Rachel could witness her avenging.

"Go easy on that, I'm running out and I haven't come across Pedro or Karl in ages."

"Not yet you ain't; in fact, could last the duration if you're economical but we both know you are not one to go slow." Airre indicates a box truck parked next to Packy's admin building sitting low on its springs from the weight of the load-pallets and pallets of heavy boxes holding pint jars overflowing with super honey-fentanyl, "Spatulas are in the glove box."

1st Responders, Washington D.C. 0440 Monday 1 September

Death stocks up on pints, adds two spatulas and returns to larger scale actions paying close attentions to the goings on in the Chesapeake environs. The temps working the area appear to be struggling with the growing volume. Death sends Myron a text to print more books sits, cracks open a pint then observes.

The initial blast wipes out many waterfront-based metro DC first responders including four separate NEST teams frantically searching the bay after several radiation monitoring sirens went nuts hours before detonation as the best of the rest rush to the scene's periphery. So it goes, eh?

For the umpteenth time in the umpteenth place death swills fentanyl witnessing the best of the best taking it in the shorts. A surprising number of first responders report, showing up here unlike Houston, because regional leadership put catastrophic reporting requirements in place during training under the category: Be prepared for nuclear holocaust just do your duty and trust others to care for yours as you do for theirs. Death understands 'just because' is why somebody has to work the blast radius until the end with never enough time for goodbyes blaming someone, anyone, then settling on cursing death. Of course death partakes heavily of the new supply of super-fentanyl as the temps struggle to manage the flow as the walking near-dead aid the non-walking near dead, with both living subsets eventually envying the actual dead totally confusing the newbies. So it goes.

The second responders' ambulances trickle in to scoop up the nearly dead first responders. Radiation suits in short supply somewhat slows the effort to evacuate everyone with a pulse to safer zones but an intermittent stream of vehicles from outside the electro magnetic pulse area struggles to muddle through. Death polishes off a pint before scraping the jar then takes a walk to settle his constitution. After much meandering steadily offering tips to the temps deciding to

check in on the PA union doing the heavy lifting elsewhere expecting disgruntlement, death stops and cracks open a pint to steady himself for the onslaught jumping aboard an ambulance for a bit to hopefully stop the head buzzing from the amazingly pure super- no somehow Airre made improvements to the recipe to create super-duper-fentanyl. Sitting adds motion sickness to the mix but death cheers after lurching forward and dry puking as they screech to a halt.

At Dulles Airport the parking lots morph into triage areas with medical experts evaluating the take from ambulances and the occasional helicopter as pilots fly fearlessly into the fallout zones removing their first responder brethren blistering with third degree burns. Civilians dying in cars clog the roads bringing the influx to a crawl. Death hooks up a saline IV and passes out hoping to come down a bit.

Third responders bulldoze the roads after removing the living for triage determinations. Contract workers line up to transport stretchers to area hospitals as air ambulance pilots fly line of sight missions in to get victims to radiation burn units away from ground zero. People with medical skills show up to help many at the expense of their own lives. Death stirs.

The third responders direct minor cases evacuate south and west from the radiation cloud. Coastal winds penetrating the blast radius shift the particulates north and east along the centerline axis of the megapolis as the residents largely flee in the family sedan. The dispersal rate laterally remains low but particulate concentrations overtake many trying to escape. Raw numbers of dying escalate, as they find nowhere to hide.

Death wakes up grudgingly, goes back to work.

Hooligans, Little Rock, Arkansas 0445 Monday 1 September

The sound of gunfire off in the distance taking a break from killing people to secure food clipping his twelve gage into the shoulder sling under his trench coat

Barry Ullmann, longtime resident of coastal Rhode Island, treks away from the stinking bodies and smoldering devastation toward Sal's Hot Plate, the diner he passed on his way into town two days ago. Entering the narrow eatery resembling an old caboose Barry plops his battered body onto the only empty stool taking a load off to hoping to load up on good eats just like the regulars. Barry discovers the stool squeaks nonstop and looks for another spot on the counter or even a table place. Nothing. Super.

Sal meanders over to take his order. Barry gives her shit over the squeakiness of his stool. Putting in his order Sal instructs the cook to spit in Barry's food. In short order Barry's chowing down on scrambled eggs, toast and an assortment of honkers cheerfully donated by the entire kitchen crew and several of the wait staff.

Ten minutes later taking a leak on the dumpster he trades insults with a group of loud jerks, a six-pack of Hooligans apparently incapable of parallel parking an extremely large pickup with Massachusetts tags and Boston Red Sox logos.

The heavily armed Hooligans sport full camo with military issue M-16s with all the trimmings- under slung grenade launchers, lasers pointers and huge ammo clips. The Hooligans make a show of unloading two crew-serve machine guns. Barry lets his shotgun slip into view. With everyone's cards on the table the Hooligans eye Barry warily so he breaks the ice, "Food's hot; tastes a little gamey but it's hot."

The Hooligans leave two to guard the truck and follow Barry into Sal's ordering a pot of coffee. They bang their rifles down on a corner table as the grisliest of them all, the Hooligan commander, jerks his thumb toward the door effectively removing an elderly couple formerly lingering over tea and pastry suddenly deciding to pay the check and get far, far away mentioning Wisconsin. Barry admires their sensibility as he sits and introduces himself.

"You don't say, pleased to meet you. We're the O'Leary's, from Boston."

Seems the O'Leary Hooligans, ex-military gun smugglers, seek a little action in Little Rock same as Barry. Currently in the market for more gear, looking to trade Barry makes inroads, "Say, I'm looking for 00 loads. Anything you need?" As a matter of fact, ammo sits top of the mind for Barry. Coffees in-hand, the dickering commences in earnest. In return for a like-new vest and a handful of boxes of 12 gauge shotgun shells, Barry agreed to give up two pairs of night vision gear and on top of that provide two O'Leary's a ride in his burgundy Ford Expedition, vintage 1998, all the way to the front lines shifting just north of Little Rock. Outside, Barry finds it hard to believe a full size H1 can be so overloaded, but the Hummer pulling up to join the Hooligans appears so stuffed with equipment he did not see how anyone could fit inside until his two new companions relate riding on the roof holding down the pile of gear nonstop since Saturday morning.

"Man, you guys got way too much shit on there," Barry advises. With Hooligans in the backseat, Barry grinds the old 5.4l V-8 tranny into overdrive to lead the procession onto the highway. The three-vehicle caravan turns north toward the sounds of battle. The sound of gunfire remains just off in the distance helping his nerves tighten then loosen as Ullmann transitions to battle mode. The three-vehicle force exits the beltway without incident coming off the interstate creeping down the ramp unmolested until they round the corner outside the Ebenezer Baptist Church. Suddenly the vehicles begin taking fire from a .50 caliber machine gun mount high in the belfry. The Expedition escapes the brunt of the attack as Barry floors the accelerator but not so those following. Rounds strike the lightly armored Hummer pockmarking the hood ricocheting off the windshield and the pickup's radiator now sports several holes. All the vehicles brake hard shifting into reverse cutting the wheel backing behind the adjacent mausoleum to offload.

Barry notes the Hummer's empty rooftop but says nothing to the effect of 'told you so' likely sparing his life as the Hooligans point fingers. Barry loads up on

shells then hydrates downing a bottle of water. None of the crew is wounded so the group splits up encircling the church to silence the .50 cal.

Barry's left leg proves slightly shorter than his right resulting in an odd gait, a sort of hitch-step that slows him only slightly just enough so he trails behind his two new friends from the hummer both fast-movers. Gaining entry, Barry soon finds the Ebenezer Baptist a multi-story mega-church built from heavy thick granite blocks providing a multi-story sprawling structure with plenty of alcoves and corners to hide in. Every few steps might reveal an ambush so the team slows a bit taking turns clearing the doorways and corners.

The sound of gunfire inside the church growing louder hidden danger lurking everywhere each Hooligan footfall softens slightly as each Hooligan gaze peers more carefully. Barry checks six exiting the portion of the structure holding the church offices, all clear. He pauses to listen, takes a drink of water, and moves on.

Taking a spiral staircase rounding a corner the small band stumbles upon a squad of United States Army Rangers set up under the crumbling facade firing up the stairs towards the belfry. The Hooligans smile at their luck- outwardly albeit momentarily. The Rangers heavily in-contact with the enemy do not immediately comprehend the group creeping up from behind but after calling for the grenade launcher, one of the rangers checks six. Suddenly startled to find multiple armed, camouflaged individuals with night vision gear on the stairs she lets loose a burst from her M-4 into the first in line. Hooligan Patty O'Leary's countenance changes quickly from smiling in relief at the sight of the United States Army Rangers shooting up the belfry to horror as he is literally cut in half by the automatic rifle's full metal jacket ammunition.

Firing on the newcomers, however, ends with the old man's death. Patty bleeds out as the Rangers quickly recognize the newbies as friendlies (uninvited). She

with the itchy trigger finger shrugs muttering, "Oops, sorry 'bout that but what the absolute fuck?" -referring no doubt to the stealthy approach. A burst of gunfire from the belfry draws her focus. She gestures for the Hooligans to move into firing positions gesturing strongly for them to monitor their backsides.

The Hooligans divert from gazing at the leader drenching the stairs with his bodily fluids to passing the body down the line. The last Hooligan strips out his weapons ammo before propping up the corpse with several others as a makeshift barricade blocking egress. Barry and the remaining Hooligans take supporting positions along the wall covering the Rangers' fire team. The grenade launcher locks and loads before the belfry door vanishes drawing heavy fire from the GC hunkering down inside. The Rangers proceed upwards, firing on the move.

Barry peaks over the crumbling facade, gestures to the Hooligans after spotting enemy troops heading for their door. The Hooligans open up on the Gran Columbian infantry advancing through the parking lot. After the opposing troops take cover in the rubble Barry gives the signal and the Hooligans stop firing. Listening, Barry hears approaching mechanicals. He passes word up the line to the Rangers mopping up the belfry.

The infantry cowering in the rubble awaits support taking the form of one tank and two infantry fighting vehicles rumbling toward Ebenezer Baptist. The Rangers cut loose with several rocket-propelled grenades proving ineffective against the heavy sloping armor of the track vehicles. Their efforts merely serve to expose their position drawing the attention of the enemy tank. The Rangers trade small arms fire with the GC infantry until the tank and infantry fighting vehicles open up on the troops barricading inside the church first with machine guns. The IFVs concentrate 7.62mm fire on the walls while the tank deploys the 12.7mm gun in an attempt to bring down Ebenezer Baptist brick by brick. The exposed Hooligans suffer severe losses. Barry pulls both remaining Hooligans down and out of the kill

zone before racing down the steps. He shoots two troops entering the church then looks for another exit getting less attention.

Sgt. Dunphy commanding the Rangers also orders his squad to descend, falling back behind the church then crossing the street to enter the large parking lot in front of an erstwhile home supply center. This particular parking lot now belongs to an electricity-consuming data center which until Friday busily mines the ether for non-fungible tokens from deep inside a large two story brick warehouse originally containing everything a handy person could ever want or need but now sitting powerless, largely devoid of anything useful.

Sergeant Dunphy tunes his headset radio to company frequency hearing first-hand accounts of the ambush party of several IFVs waiting behind the warehouse. Latest orders: suck the Gran Columbian armor force into the kill zone by keeping up harassing fire while strategically withdrawing. Sgt. Dunphy, promoted from Cpl. Dunphy yesterday and Pvt. Dunphy on Friday, lays out the plan in a few terse sentences, pairing up his twelve remaining troops ordering the first two on their way. Barry and the remaining two Hooligans tag along behind the others.

After ducking and weaving, crawling and running, Barry and his Hooligan pals Sean and Pauley reach two restaurants sharing the southern end of the home center's parking lot. Barry stops to catch his breath before covering the forward pairing, now weaving their way through the lot drawing small arms fire. A drone appears overhead. Sean makes the kill.

In the middle of the firefight there is no time but to act as a thinker, woefully distracted not focused, will not survive. As he runs, Sgt. Dunphy is thinking, thinking there is no fucking way he and his troops will reach the former home improvement haven alive. He trips and a spray of automatic fire passes overhead, sparing his life as anything which may delay you might just save you.

The Dunphy 2 50/50 entry pays, but meagerly.

The Gran Columbian forces move quickly and the Ranger's new sergeant has no way to stop them or even slow them down. Dunphy understands command wants the GC to pick up speed and zoom into the kill box. The enemy overrunning Ebenezer Baptist pays the covering fire no mind. The soldier in front of Dunphy zigs instead of zags falling to the pavement in a belly flop. Dunphy tries chattering his gloomy observations into the headset radio, attempting to get the concealed ambush force to realize the danger of being overrun but quits trying after being cut off in mid-stream with a terse, "Just fucking keep moving, damn you!"

Allowing the Hooligans to slip in ahead then covering their advance while bringing up the rear, Dunphy spies his friend Pvt. Calhoun on the macadam barely alive after being dropped taking two rounds to the small of his back just under the vest. Finding Calhoun still breathing, Dunphy shifts his M-16 to his left hand then with his right grabs onto his shirt collar dragging the fallen man. Another round hits Calhoun in the face lodging deep in his cranium. Dunphy lets go picking up speed continuing past the covering Hooligans. Barry, Sean and Pauley continue firing at the Gran Columbians while watching Dunphy struggling with his fallen comrade. They increase their fires not stopping until the Ranger zooms past screaming, "Pick up the pace, move damn you!"

Dunphy, shocked to see his suggestions not only move up the chain of command but actually produce action, astoundingly spots two missile teams scrambling up the data center's fire escape of the back of the store accessing the roof moving toward his position before ducking out of sight, taking cover behind the massive air conditioning evaporating units.

After slowing slightly to clear the church of hidden troops, the Gran Columbian forces cross the street entering the parking lot between the restaurants. Firing steadily, the combat vehicle in the lead picks off another Ranger, the second in the pair just ahead of Barry to fall to withering fire. Barry stops momentarily to check,

noting several oozing shrapnel wounds below the waist, no blood spurting visible. Pauley the Hooligan and Barry drag the soldier toward the building.

On the roof, the first missile team up has their TOW launcher in place looking for targets. The second team experiences trouble getting their Javelin warhead to talk to the firing system. Inside the kill box commanding Colonel Nelson checks his watch, looks at the troops humping the lot, checks his computer screen viewing the fire team's rooftop video feed, grunts. Noting two teams positioning on the roof turning to his communication tech, he inquires of the status of the Javelins.

"Team one, ready to fire. Team two, fifteen seconds."

"Where the hell is the fucking third team?" He demands to know. "I want those fucking anti-tank weapons firing like fucking yesterday, goddamn it. Those fuckers had better show up like soon or some heads are going to roll, some heads are going to roll. Damn war just isn't going our way!"

"Team two reports ready to fire."

"Acknowledged. Status on third squad yet?" The loss of his global positioning satellites makes for many uncertainties but Nelson rose up in the ranks before such niceties. The Colonel quickly brings most of his command team up to speed on paper map reading skills but soon discovers woeful pre-digital inadequacies among the younger platoon leaders raised on audio directions to get everywhere. I bet their fucking dinosaur parents can read a fucking road map, he thinks for about the fortieth time that day, fucking smart phones. "Don't be afraid to ask for directions," becomes a standing instruction. Unfortunately, the third platoon's missile team leader got turned around some time ago and the team falls behind the lines amidst evolving enemy positions.

Obedying orders to outflank the advancing Gran Columbian column and attack due to the map snafu, the third did not flank the GC so much but got absorbed into

the Ebenezer Baptist melee. The Colonel gets the word they're overrun hunkering down in the church soon-to-be swarming with GC troops. Breaking radio silence, desperate for cover fire they request a fire mission. A drone circling overhead provides visuals but software malfunctions disrupt the infrared feed of the building's interior and the packed pews of praying faithful. Seeing no hope of getting his troops out without bringing the rain, the Colonel orders the attack.

Six troops fly down the stairs into the catacombs of Ebenezer Baptist as the GC take the main hall, missile teams on the data center roof fire on mobile artillery and mortar rounds fall on the structure. Concentrating fire on the church proves disastrous to the Ebenezer Baptist faithful.

The lead GC tank takes a disabling round to the tread sprocket assembly. The commander of the second tank with the hatch open looks about with a pair of binoculars spies the missile team on the roof as they fire. He watches the round approach taking it in the chest before the round passes through penetrating the ammunition storage compartment. A third tank's tread making a loud squealing noise announcing the need for maintenance passes the main entrance. A mortar team walks fire into the tank then the church. As the roof of Ebenezer Baptist collapses killing most parishioners several armored fighting vehicles approaching the intersection reverse course and the accompanying troops fall back to regroup.

On the other side of the lines Ernesto Benitez commands a squad of four tanks. Benitez, a strict disciplinarian with one of the Gran Columbian's best overall training scores, grows ever eager to overrun the withdrawing enemy and take the command center. His gunner directs his attention to the missile teams inhabiting the rooftop of the former home center. Ernesto agrees and orders, "Fire mission, rooftop of the home center or whatever, load anti-personnel rounds."

Benitez's squad achieves high marks in all performance areas due partially to his leadership but mostly attributes to tight communications between his four tanks. His wingman-operating tank 2 slightly out of position engaging fleeing troops passes on the fire order same as tank 3 but tank 4 responds by lining up on the target. Thus tank 4 opens up on the data center upon clearing the intersection. Tank 3 hits a stranded mobile command center with a heat round. Tank 2 hoses down the intersection with twin .50 caliber machine guns.

"Oh, for fuck's sake!" Last words from the roof top spoken by the assistant gunner on Javelin missile team one, Sergeant Stanley Davis, a lifer driven to be all he could be, discovering much to his chagrin that all he could be is a bloodstain a forgotten tragic footnote in the Battle of Ebenezer Baptist Church.

The gunner on tank 4 stirs the rubble on the rooftop with his second round taking a load of verbal abuse about wasting ammo from his commander. Benitez listens, approvingly then orders the platoon to push ahead consolidating their gains, looking for the command structure. The GC troops in the vicinity all get the same idea, simultaneously surging forward.

Personnel carriers, infantry on foot, a bunch of tanks and assorted command vehicles pass through the Ebenezer Baptist parking lot ignoring multiple wounded parishioners lying in the church rubble. From deep in the catacombs missile team 3 ascends, observes then reports, "The net is full. Repeat the net is full."

Colonel Nelson calls in an artillery strike. As the guns fire from forty-five miles away, a GC signals drone loitering nearby detects their exact position, dispatches a warning then directs a drone counter-strike. Five miles off their firing axis a company of attack drones waiting patiently in a field of solar receptors receive orders rising to meet the challenge. After successfully carrying out the initial fire order, the artillery teams fight the drone swarms valiantly with what they have but

lose utterly without air support. Meanwhile the GC in the kill sack madly scramble for the exits screaming for air support as rounds begin to fall.

Colonel Nelson leads the United States forces streaming out from behind the data center firing directly on the Gran Columbian forces caught in the pocket between the church and the former homeowner's helper. His Bradley fighting vehicle's anti-aircraft gun opens up in the direction of an approaching GC attack helicopter. Another two GC helicopters appear on the battle flank unleashing a wire guided missile at Nelson's Bradley missing wide right losing the wire cut free from both helicopters jinking madly to avoid an incoming shoulder launch heat seeking surface to air missile. The first Apache goes down in flames.

"The air grows thick with steel," thinks Ramirez as Rontaldi scores big taking out Colonel Nelson and the AAA teams. The US forces barely round the building before meeting their demise. With command out of action, the ambush fizzles and the troops begin to fall back as Benitez and the GC tanks return to the battlefield.

Barry Ullmann figures he might be a tad better off not exposing his fragile body to the steel rain. Running from the rear of the data center lot he crouches behind a burning car coming across Sgt. Dunphy who although shaken up was miraculously unhurt. Dunphy indicates the berm fifty feet away and makes a dash. Barry follows. Peering over the berm, Dunphy spots enemy troops trying a flanking maneuver. Barry does not and proceeds to scramble over the mound of dirt as Dunphy grabs for his boot. Barry immediately gets lit up by a flamethrower is thrown backward experiencing paroxysms of searing pain. Dunphy freezes as Barry burns. So it goes.

Dunphy hates himself for being a coward staying put long after Barry Ullmann stops screaming. After a wave of GC passes he makes his way back to the church. Finding missile team 3 trapped under the rubble, Sgt. Dunphy moves rocks wondering where the Army went.

Disraeli Gears Up, UN Media Annex Topside, NY 0500 Monday 1 September

Instantly going viral, standing at the podium outside the building in lower Manhattan wearing a hazmat suit leaning into the mike array scraping his face shield creating noisy feedback before moving back a tad, Disraeli de Young the United Nations 'fair-hair Tactical Nuclear Chemical and Biological Specialist, makes a splash:

“We are at this time positively confirming one underwater atomic device detonation in the upper Chesapeake Bay. From blast radius and other measurements the nuclear weapon appears to be 20 megatons with shallow water detonation. Nuclear footprints reveal the atomic pile (but not necessarily anything else) originates from the nuclear material cull out of DungBig Reactor #6 Cachou, China. We continue to investigate but apparently there is a tugboat AIS associated with the detonation point. On behalf of the world the UN protests usage of nuclear weapons urging a stand-down of all hostilities before this situation spins out of control particularly as refugees evacuate the region. I have nothing else so will take three pertinent questions. Yes you with the hand up-

Q1: Are there more?

A1: Great question. Next?

Q2: Who manufactured and planted the device?

A2: We don't know. Last?

Q3: How did it get here?

A3: Tugboat, probably. Thank you. Good luck to everyone.

The tall scientist bends down to the podium grabbing up his notes muttering about the futility of Q&A letting his long strides carry him in silence up the steps

through the decontamination station. Gears isn't happy with his performance, not happy the Director General forces him outside with nothing but China and probably a tugboat. Disraeli marches back to his office oblivious to the racket in the hallway choosing not to notice instead playing out mental 'what-if' scenarios churning over recent events.

The door to his office open with a crowd milling around gorgeous Gloria his secretary like always. Not even a crisis turns off her pheromones. A path clears for him instantly and standing in the prime position immediately in front of her desk he asks her to join him in his office telling the crowd to beat it.

Gloria gives him a questioning look. Disraeli smiles with his eyes speaking gently, "It's all over but the shouting. We've run this scenario so many times and it always ends the same way, as you know. Nothing you can do here, I'll man the ship. Take whatever time is left..."

Gloria stands, gives him a long tight hug, and pats him on the cheek. He is by her side clearing the evacuation protocols and watching from below as she ascends the stairs to the heliport. Grabbing her hat to hold it against the wind she turns, waves then blows him a kiss.

Smiling at that, Disraeli turns for his office. Time to get on the line with NORAD. Bastard's probably launching already. God, why did it have to be Peterson's Commies passing around the fissiles?

Root Privileges, Paddock on Billingsport Range, Delaware River, PA 0600

Monday 1 September

Sitting at Karl's desk, Marvin opens the top drawer and removes the card taped beneath. The 50/50 system password granting admin access: D E A T H!_1. How original, what a thinker! He removes a thumb drive from his pocket, remembering her instructions, "Look Marvin, this is key to the entire operation. You're now a

key player, Oh, sure before you were playing major roles, but now? Now the whole shebang goes down the crapper unless you can get this 'canned_heat' file into the root directory. Just login as root then plug in the thumb drive into the system machine under Karl's desk. It's old, obsolete really, but this code will run flawlessly. Look for a weird port and plug the thumb drive into the one it matches. That's it. Take's a second. Count to three, just to be sure then remove it."

Marvin read the code in Airre's 'canned_heat' file, smiling at its complexity, ingenuity. During the Woodstock retrospective just underway at the annex, during the Canned Heat set the program runs then alters the logs to hide suspicious activity. Genius. And what it does? Also genius. And devious.

Marvin lists the files, sees canned_heat and logs out knowing the immediate future of one satanic individual needing a lesson in humility. A few moments later, the band goes up the country and the machine whirs in excitement going online in a stealth attack infiltrating Lucifer's humongous global trading portfolio checking balances then liquidating all assets at apocalypse prices before re-directing the holdings to the Paddock's 50/50 server, investing everything in market price winner-take-all tickets for Ted-15. Not content with going for broke on 'Better Dead Than Ted', Lucifer's account next buys on margin after negotiating huge high interest short-term loans from the Book to purchase tickets sans funds.

Aware of the scheme for weeks the flying monkeys go all-in the other direction quietly buying the Ted-14, betting directly against Satan. The payout of Ted's failure trended downward as a result but with new vibrant blood in the game that would soon change. Marvin smiles as the machine quiets. Flawless. He exits the office confident in the knowledge the operation proceeds on plan. Joining Myron behind the bar, they exchange high-fives then crank up Canned Heat's feed from the Annex, pour drinks and monitor the tote board. The crowd thickens after shift

change and the atmosphere turns festive joining in boisterously taking up singing along as Jimi Hendrix extols the purple haze.

Meanwhile back at the Annex in a cloud of smoke Jordie's ghost sits at the bar drinking like a fish moaning his tale of woes to all listening then wondering out loud where those outside the system can possibly get the funds to buy winner tickets for Ted-15. Piquing attention of likewise besotted PAU faithful who wonder how he pays for drinks, Jordie lowers the volume of his rant conspiratorially letting it slip that Lucifer is buying too- heavily, in fact. Taking in Jordie's NO-UN badge, the drinkers mull over the ramifications, smoke weed. Ultimately they smoke a great quantity of weed then decide if Lucifer's going bigly, the fix must be in. Not looking to openly piss off Satan, they quietly buy Ted-15 tickets and with inhibitions cratering throwing caution to the wind they spread the word.

Door Swings Both Ways, Brussels, BM 0700 GMT Monday 1 September

...For Immediate Release: USA President Shriver Orders Debarkation

Euro News Service Brussels BM

With twenty four thousand confirmed dead as Washington's FEMA direct East Coast evacuation proceedings, officials and other informed sources just moments ago reveals an official public announcement will soon be forthcoming confirming rumors the Shriver government has begun withdrawing all forces and support from across Europe in response to what's being called in many circles the biggest mistake since Chamberlin gutting the Assurance of Peaceful Intent Doctrine originating from the UN, EU and NATO Headquarters in Brussels as local organizations throughout Europe continue calls to stop any and all further involvement in what they term someone else's war. NATO withdrawing all US

forces and equipment alerts defense officials to the danger of inviting attack or Eastern European and/or Asian nuclear blackmail.

The wounded Shriver Government operating from an undisclosed location in Idaho has yet to reveal their intent regarding retaliation schemes.

The body count in the US Capital blast zone tops 29,000 according to figures released just now. Many more thousands, conservative estimates range over two hundred thousand deaths result from residual radiological exposure. With meteorological models in general agreement atmospheric experts across the world project the radiation to cross the Atlantic Ocean in five days.

Worldwide the major banking institutions and all stock exchanges have closed while economists debate rules for currency and other instrument trading in the face of nuclear war. Banks in the US remain closed for the Labor Day Federal Holiday. NY financial centers are cooperating with evacuation orders and are not expected to reopen any time in the immediate future as the radiation cloud blankets the area and decontamination is speculative....

...For Immediate Release: USA President Shriver Orders Debarkation

Sans Ted, Houston, TX 0737 Monday 1 September

Heavily hemorrhaging internally from a nicked artery, on foot racing across a railroad bridge desperate to escape the crushing fire from several Dushka teams, Ted nears the relative safety of the other side of the tracks. However, swooning from several concussions stumbles Ted falls hitting the ground hard knocking him unconscious releasing an embolism lying dormant in his system. The clot travels swiftly to his heart shutting off his blood supply. As he lies near death, Manny fires a killing round, a one-in-a-billion shot.

Lauren turns, spies Ted on the rocks twenty feet below. Thinking to alert Laz, she begins to scream for his attention. Then Ted gets shot in his head and her

screams turn to horror as the Dushka scatters his brains among the litter and detritus with a large chunk lying inside an abandoned shopping cart.

"Uh oh," says death, "Damn close to a three-way tie if the arterial bleed is considered but that didn't do it, not really. Left untreated this artifact of Ted-12 plays a role causing the fall and would have surely killed him eventually but the recent progression remains clear so call it Laz-14 the embolism, Laz-15 the Dushka. The clot kills him simultaneous with the bullet, represents a problem."

Death considers the next move, been here before. Simultaneous death events go into Book review with a hold on all transactions regarding the individual in play. When death impartially ran the Book, all reviews took place on-scene immediately. With Karl in charge, hmmm well, might be a bit of a sticky wicket to get Karl or an impartial judge to Houston and all. Pulling out a couple of Laz-15 tickets purchased after a tip from a PAU tout, Death prevaricates suspending the decision.

Bedlam ensues and a riot breaks out inside the Paddock. Myron and Marvin unleash their auto-loading shotguns against the patrons eventually restoring order. Over at the Annex violence threatens thanks to the pro-meth contingent coming off work finding out Lucifer double-crossed them. Sitting in the corner after stopping in for a quick basket of onion rings, St. Peter stands and glares until they shut up and sit down, The entertainment turns over as Janis Joplin takes the stage, "This is a song of major social and political importance and it goes like this, "Oh Lord won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz?"

Laz grabs the screaming Lauren, sees Ted. Pulling her out of the line of fire behind a cinder block shed, he desires blowing the bridge to cut off the pursuit. Laz starts digging around his pockets for some C4 or something. He finds a block of explosives but no detonator. Super. Lauren peeks around the corner, sees Manny and the other Dushka teams leaving in the direction they came and alerts Laz. Laz stows the C4 for next time and offers Lauren a drink off his canteen.

They slide down the hill coming to a stop in oozing stinky muck about a foot thick. Trudging over to Ted's headless corpse, Laz gathers up the cranial bits sticking to the shopping cart placing them respectfully on the body. Immediately Lauren joins his effort but starts with the body removing Ted's body-cam apparatus along with his badge and wallet. After running out of pieces large enough to grasp or scoop, she takes a pull off the canteen asking, "Now what?"

Laz wonders the same. Certainly he wouldn't normally bother picking up brain bits particularly a civilian's gray matter but... "Nothing we can do but cover him up best we can and hope someone polices his body later."

"Policies? Really?" She fishes a baggie out of her pocket and dumps the contents into Laz's hands. Lauren places the badge/wallet combo into the baggie then squeezes it under Ted's vest.

Looking into his hands, Laz finds several animal crackers. He tries one, "Not bad; been a long time." With his boot Laz begins dragging mud over Ted's corpse multi-tasking while munching snack crackers. Frowning but unable to come up with a better plan Lauren turns to climb back up to the shed. Finishing up, Laz bows his head momentarily then scrambles to follow.

Taking shelter in the shed, Lauren powers up Ted's body-cam to review the footage. They fast-forward most of it, normal speed for various motor vehicle incidents and intermittent fire fights. She goes slow motion for the massacre at the bridge highlighting the Coast Guard cutters but stops before they cross the railroad trestle. Looking over her shoulder, Laz hits play and watches Ted die.

Lauren hacks into the railroad's local mesh network for news learning of the nuclear release in the upper Chesapeake Bay and evacuation of the east coast. Houston doesn't merit mentioning in the current news cycle. Fixing to change this, she makes some quick deletions to Ted's footage splicing together the action. Lauren uploads the footage into the railroad's servers, sets the network publicly

available. Getting a weak cell signal, she copies the address into a text alert. Within moments, "The Saga of Better Dead Than Ted" goes viral.

Damn, watching the world unwind Laz is practically in tears. The nuking of DC hit him like a brick changing the game way too much to calculate. Why should anyone care about Houston's fate with nuclear war breaking out?

Where are the lines in a nuclear war? What to do next?

Laz has doubts considers quitting the fight, a new experience. Yet Lauren somehow provides a reason to fight on all by herself. You don't fight a war for the government, you fight for your pals: a truism Laz believes deep in his heart and he would crawl to hell and back for Lauren.

Laz bends down sniffing her hair, which smells like the muck Ted lay in. Laz removes his glove before pushing her yucky hair off her face.

Then they kiss, sealing their fate and the fate of the world.

Flying Fish, US Coastlines 0804 Monday 1 September

Airre the Quantum checks in with the nanos waiting to operate Carolla's massive semi-autonomous drone swarms hidden for months lying stationary inside floating islands of plastic debris fight boredom voting on stupid shit like how many fish will pass in the next cycle or which music to play. Stationary. Waiting. Boredom. Contention. Voting. Tallying. Moaning. Gloating. Waiting. The Nano's role thus far in the GC underwater surface fleet: Drudge.

Airre believes they understand their function in the coming attack finding them willing and able. She updates their ship/sub position data banks then leaves quietly.

A short time later, simultaneous with the release of the nuclear weapon in the upper Chesapeake Bay a short countdown clock appears throughout the drone fleet changing everything. Suddenly the nanos lose the drudgery gaining purpose. Each member of the swarm takes position, schooling locally to form long-range passive

sonar receptors. Soon location reports flood in showing where high value enemy warships lurk so naturally they quickly hold votes by specification for the choicest (largest), juiciest (least defended) and/or nearest target assignments. The process runs smoothly, voting now an intrinsic nano function and as one they mostly disperse the schools and begin swimming independently to waypoint or attack position assignments.

For one such swarm inhabiting the coastal waters off Norfolk Naval Base the nearest target in their assignment chain happens to be juicily floating among the very same raft of plastic, drifting just inside a kilometer of the Nano's initial point. Aboard the extremely high value target, a small ultra-modern stealth ship name of USS Grover, Specialist First Class Seaman Alfred Driscoll studies the scrolling passive sonar array showing intercept identification strength, classification probability and in some cases actual movement of targets inside the zone with rate data firm enough to shoot. The sonar filters out biologicals such as fish and drones. USS Grover is a signals gathering platform, not a weapons platform. Unfortunately not having offensive weapons does not preclude becoming a target hence the hidden Gatling gun point-defense system. Driscoll grows even more uneasy with each passing moment sitting over the discredited SOSUS line with two probable hunter/killer submarines stalking them, he'll take a pass on more trouble, thanks. Intermittently sensed but thus far un-localized by a Russian sub or whoever disproves their stealth abilities, a big letdown for the Captain and crew of Grover. Specialist First Class Seaman Al recommends remaining silent in the plastic field.

Taking Alfred's advice the Skipper has Grover hiding in the weeds so to speak relaying signals intelligence line of sight into Norfolk. Ole Skip wouldn't move from here unless and until he was on the run from a fast torp. Detecting/tracking the millions of satellite debris bits and pieces devices dropping into the ocean over the past twelve hours the Skip understands how easily they could miss a drone

insertion mission or two steadfastly possessing no desire to do anything to draw attention to their vulnerable countenance.

The nanos encounter the USS Grover. The nanos have several attack options available. They vote for an unnecessarily complicated hybrid approach.

Signal capture off Grover's sensor mounts along with topside video provide a vivid depiction of the battle space. Taking the form of several flying fish while practically scraping the sea bottom the drones swim directly toward the USS Grover heretofore peaceably loitering on the surface. Approaching detection range throwing caution to the wind enjoying the thrill of the chase, the nanos go with fifteen degrees up-angle gaining speed nearly reaching 120knots before breaking out of the water two hundred yards away. The Grover's lone Gatling gun automatically unlooses dual active radar-guided 20mm cannons. The drones evade. In spectacular fashion the cannons pivot with tracers following close behind the flying fish. Practically over the Grover's bow, the drones take hits.

The flying fish break into pieces. The nanos get sucked into the air intakes' filtering the nuclear particles. They disperse into the electronics and set up shop. A quick vote later, they're listening to smooth jazz while clumsily linking with the undersea tap the Chinese AI put on the SOSUS network leaving behind inscrutable clues along the way. The Grover's data stream will soon be a topic of interest in Asia. The nanos incorporate the priceless info into a poison pill wrapper Airre stole off Packy Turner adding an extra ingredient before sending the package on its way. Soon thereafter the systems aboard the Grover cease being a United States' naval asset. The transmissions to Norfolk, however, continue unabated.

Airre the Quantum bids her protégé, Roseate_Spoonbill, best wishes in the upcoming battle against the ultra-capable Chinese AI, "Counting on you."

"Call me Rosie."

**Disraeli Shifts Gears, UN Media Annex Topside, NY Monday 1000 Monday
Labor Day 1 September**

"The die is cast. Thanks and good luck. I mean that."

"Fuck you, Peterson. You've been dying to launch on them for decades and everyone knows it. There'll be nowhere to run with the world in flames."

"Nothing you can do about it. Just accept fate."

"Fuck you, make me! I got options!"

"Like I said, luck with that." Peterson farts loudly hanging up on Disraeli Gears.

For the second time Disraeli goes public. With the evacuation of New York City on pace, the UN Nuclear Release Specialist traipses to the podium looking sheepish practically stuttering with apparent embarrassment, "After further analytical review, the nuclear material responsible for the DC blast may not have been culled out of DungBig Reactor #6 Cachou as reported earlier. The more likely origin appears to be Three Mile Island #4 making this a probable nuclear accident involving a US submarine and a tugboat. No questions at this time."

Fuck you, Peterson, fuck you indeed. Who needs luck with options on the table?

**Battle of Norfolk, Tidal Littorals To Atlantic Ocean 1010 Labor Day
Federal Holiday Monday 1 September**

President Shriver watches Dr. Disraeli Gears' award-worthy performance with fascination wondering if Peterson prompted this particularly harmful stream of bullshit. Of course he did. If she had the time she'd ream his ass but the war ramping into the nuclear arena brings with it problems no sitting President dealt with since Kennedy '61, Betsy needs his intelligence to laser-focus on the battles at hand if they stood any chance of winning.

Can they win? Good question, she thinks. Next?

Slightly behind on the modern warfare curve, Betsy concentrates on understanding evacuative movement orders emptying the United States Naval Base at Norfolk of ships even as skeleton crews pull away from port under impulse power. Steam plants slowly come online thanks to off-duty and retiree makeup crews swarming like ants: some semi-sober others not as much. Submarine hatches batten down as reserve attack submarines disappear beneath the waves actively pinging to locate any lurking vessels. Surface vessels follow suit.

Peterson's Command and Control system orders Norfolk emergency evacuation plan Epsilon: exit utilizing all safe routes for shallow water dispersal posthaste underwater and maintain contact via sonobuoys with the P-3 Onions from Pensacola sanitizing the exit lanes. Weapons free but not loose. All locally capable units will assist. Sounds like a reasonable plan, Betsy thinks.

The growing flock of P-3 Orion sub hunters and P-2 Hawkeye electronics' platforms sanitizing the waters from the littorals to the open ocean along the escape routes unexpectedly doubles in size after birds from the USS Abraham Lincoln, racing home after lengthy deployment to the Persian Gulf, fly off to join their comrades from the Nimitz Carrier group steaming south while on-station guarding the eastern seaboard.

Some P-3 Orion patrol planes deploy daisy chain line of sight communications buoys linking all Norfolk and coastal surveillance vessels with the underwater fleet and the Nimitz group. The data also loops in the Grover and subsequently, the Chinese. The Nimitz takes the data but utilizes laser comms locally maintaining line of sight links within and around the carrier battle group. Meanwhile, back in Norfolk data stream analysis proceeds apace

'Need to take a leak, super. Couldn't happen at a more opportune time,' thinks the rock bottom of his class holder of the lowest proficiency ratings ever by an acting commander hurrying to the crapper. Admiral Daryl Clancy put on fifty

pounds of flab after his final, disastrous cruise two years ago and the weight-loss meds cause the 'bladder always feeling full' condition. 'False alarm,' is what he's thinking standing in front of the urinal reliving (but not relieving) that awful cruise: tasked with keeping his missile sub beneath the waves and quiet to the point of being indistinguishable from biological marine life, then-Captain Daryl manages neither during an astonishing series of bad decisions. Tedium leads to crew boredom so Captain Daryl decides to practice emergency drills every day of the patrol, hoping to raise his dismal ranking. Later, during the mast, the Board investigating the incident found the captain/crew guilty of disregarding the wisdom of the book taking every shortcut imaginable before eventually throwing the book out the window in an effort to increase readiness scores gaming the promotion system. Without first checking the surface for obstructions before an emergency ascent drill, the boomer springs from the ocean depths directly onto the deck of a large fishing boat stringing long lines aka Tuna Helper out of Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

His career at sea over yet three years away from retirement, Captain Daryl, only grandson heir apparent of the senior senator from Idaho, gets a bump in rank to justify taking station as NORVBOPs, Norfolk Naval Base third in command. He zips up his fly, adjusts his medals and ribbons in the mirror and strolls back in the chaos. Feeling bladder pressure, 'Damn, again?' He slows his pace clearly unsure which way to go; yet Admiral Daryl does not hesitate for even a split second learning of the magnetic anomaly revealing a probable enemy submarine detection. The P-3 circles overhead, a mere thirty miles off Virginia Beach.

"Drop on it," Admiral Clancy orders hurriedly before returning to the head to drain his bladder, hopefully.

The Battle of Norfolk begins with a single Mark 56 torpedo dropping eight hundred feet into the water from a hovering Sea Stallion helicopter. The splash

proves unmistakable to the three nearest enemy submarines. The high-speed screw sounds fade when the device initially fails to find the sub and meanders away then grow stronger as the torp begins a circular search pattern. The skippers of the diesel-electric boats monitoring movement off the Chesapeake Bay power up their propulsion systems to escape the search area. The P-3 crew notes with alarm the position of the targets to the evacuation route moving them to the top of the threat board. On approach from the Nimitz, two Sea Stallions ready torpedoes.

The P-3 Orion loses the MAD contact thirty miles out as France's super-secret super-stealthy signal data detection and analysis submarine begins a slow-speed crawl out to sea leaving a black hole in the ocean. No harm, no foul.

Nearer the beach, inside Chesapeake Bay the other two submarines go quiet before meeting the Sea Stallions. The Stallions dip sonar into the Bay to acquire both position and heading with maybe a rate of travel given a chance. Both subs' location downloads into the torpedoes as the Stallions winch up the sonar arrays. They drop weapons on enemy submarines concealing inside coastal USA waters.

One such submarine belonging to Russia after holding position in the area for a whole week before the Global Satellite Launch goes to top speed racing a Mark 6 Barracuda torpedo all the while yearning for deep water. The Captain chooses speed over stealth but loses the bet when the 66-knot Barracuda bites them in the ass. The attack submarines' screw vaporizes popping the shaft seal flooding the engine room and battery compartment. Not being sunk in very deep waters proves a blessing as most hands make it out of the escape hatches and into the warm salty water after the sub blows ballasts performing a flawless emergency ascent. As the helicopter films the drama, the dejected Captain with fellow bearded Russians climb into rubber boats before the pride of their silent service goes ass up bobbing a few times before slipping beneath the surface leaving only an oil slick and trail of bubbles behind.

The video changes from the first to a second Stallion hovering nearby. The images show the Stallion dropping down near the Russian raft flotilla, the crew exchanging high fives and pats on the back while dropping some emergency supplies to the Russians. The Russian Captain woefully salutes the Americans holding the salute while his crew looks on in disbelief. Then they join in as he flips off the crew of the Sea Stallion, who promptly return the compliment.

The torpedo chasing the second sub around Chesapeake Bay catches a bad break slamming into a Civil War ironclad relic sticking out of the muck. Bowing to the 'use it or lose it' pressure the Chinese sub Mao-class submarine receives an encrypted burst transmission from the SOSUS tap containing data relevant to the circumstances. The data passing directly underneath, Grover intercepts the signal passing it on to Norfolk for decoding.

The Stallions team up busily chasing noise to re-acquire the contact. This skipper's familiar with the terrain (knew where the iron-clad might intercept a torpedo for example but this knowledge possess a shelf-life, is only good if he can pinpoint his position. Until the satellite takedown, working GPS data gave him the edge. When the GPS signals died, he took a celestial fix to feed into the digital navigational system. During an incredible ten-minute chase involving no less than six torpedoes with every twist, turn and speed change his gyroscope gets a hell of a workout. Astonishingly while on the move the sub launches a dozen torpedoes known as anti-air SSAMs (Sub Surface to Air Missiles) at the Stallions, P-3s and P-2; quite a feat worthy of mention. Racing to get under an LPG carrier, however, the chase ends with two P-3 torpedoes striking the sub.

Subsequent breakup-noise analysis in China reveals a less than one hundred meter delta from his navigation system readout- not too shabby.

Twelve rockets, seven targets, and seven splashes: Peterson worries.

Revelations, NORTHCOM, Cheyenne Mountain, Wyoming 1050 Monday 1 September

The General's feet drag along the ancient linoleum wearily making his way out of the situation room toward his office. Outside the door he pauses for a beat spying Jordie's ghost rooting through boxes of detritus found in the vestibule closet. Peterson wonders how his imagination gets such heavy boxes down from the top shelf wondering if he is now telekinetic. Peterson doubts he is gaining psychic abilities, decides he's teetering on the lunatic fringe. He blinks rapidly for nearly a minute hoping to clear Jordie's ghost from his visual input but finds this doesn't help. Super. Peterson takes the plunge: lunatic fringe it is.

"I knew it!" Jordie celebrates his big find.

"Knew what?" Peterson doesn't bother looking up, figures Jordie's ghost is his own disturbed sub consciousness acting out. Peterson is without a doubt, disturbed.

"I knew I would find a laser disk player in here!" Jordie pulls out a brand new laser disk, removes the contents handing Peterson the empty sleeve.

Peterson takes the cover, examines the artwork disapprovingly then reads, "The bar tab acoustic series: "Live" at the annex! Disk one: Lennon's All-Star band featuring Robert Johnson playing guitar, Phil Lesh bass, Harry Nilsson piano/vocals, Janis Joplin backing vocals, Keith Moon drums with special guest appearances. Wow Robert Johnson is huge but I never heard of the annex? Where's that?" He turns the cover over, "Made in Hell's Annex by Paddock Productions, all rights reserved. Hell has an annex? Why in Hell's name do they have an annex?"

"Overcrowding, why there's an apocalypse on and whatnot. The annex is the happening place to be; somewhere you'll never see that's for sure, ha. The story behind the laser disk recording is fascinating: these musicians drop by the annex to preform a set but forget to leave. So they sit for hours on end drinking mass quantities eating organic and their appetite for hash? Unquenchable. Short story

short, none of these formerly rich rockers enjoy an ongoing income stream, as you really can't take it with you. After said bar tab exceeds known funds, Karl gets them to sign over all rights/royalties to all annex productions. It's the first in the series, hot off the press. The "Live" at the annex laser disk pipeline will grow with word spreading of the annex concerts. Ask me, Karl could make a killing selling this one disk in the real world but the powers-that-be need more entertainment in greyspace to placate those waiting in line. They tried giving out books but it turns out practically nobody reads anymore."

"Maybe try making a graphic novel instead," Peterson feels the latest go-pill kicking in boosting him into overdrive. Uh oh, too much? "What's with the ancient laser disk?" Peterson barely remembers the format.

"Golden master, my man! Like I said hot off the press from yesterday's show and on its way to greyspace courtesy of the ubiquitous 'Mr. Noun'. I'm only stopping in here for a minute- busy, busy you know."

"And you were in attendance at the annex during the "Live" show?" Peterson is finding the entire affair hard to believe. He lights a cigar while Jordie fiddles with getting the hi-fi to talk to the laser disk. To take the edge off the go-pills he pours a scotch and downs it. Then he pours bourbon and downs that. He is pouring a beer, waiting watching Jordie knowing the answer but not helping. Peterson begins to wonder if Jordie isn't on the level seeing how Jordie he remains even as a ghost.

Jordie discovers the correct adapter after trying about thirty different ones finally answering Peterson taking a step back to get the wide view after hooking the laser disk player into the system and powering up, "Yes! Well, sort of I guess. I was working the mixing board in the sound truck."

Peterson downs the beer, gives him a look. No shit. Working?

"Don't look at me like that, I don't exactly have an income stream either; seems if you want the respect of union membership you got to hang it out on the edge."

"Yea, and I've been thinking you've been slightly drunk every time you show up here. You could just lay low and not run up a bar tab drinking and partying and not need an income stream, am I correct?" Peterson has some tolerance for drinkers.

"Where's the fun in that? Besides I found a job." Jordie cleans the contacts of aged acid buildup then puts fresh batteries in the ancient remote, "Well, sort of. I got a job offer on the table but I'm unsure it'll work out."

"Doing what, exactly?"

"Campaign Manager!"

"Excuse me?" Still unbelievable, dead or alive.

"It's a funny thing but after so much time in the job, suddenly Lucifer has to run for the position of Satan and he needs to campaign. I have experience."

"And familiarity with Satan, obviously." Peterson jabs as opening menus pop up.

"Satan will pay off my current bar tab in installments if I campaign for him and I can drink free into perpetuity if successful." Jordie smashes buttons, eventually highlighting the song offerings.

"Sounds up your alley. Wow, that's a shitload of music. Show must have run hours." Peterson stares at the screen counting some seventy songs on the menu, most of them recognizable as classic rock staples.

"It's a hard hitting show, goes and goes. Trouble with the job offer is that Satan's got his entire fortune tied up in a running debate over the cause of death of somebody in Texas. He may win bigly but then again he may lose everything. Puts me in a tight spot if I work and don't get paid." Jordie chooses the first song on the disk, an a cappella duet.

"Satan screwing over the working class? Heavens. I don't see you actually have a problem, frankly. You're assuming Satan doesn't have another albeit hidden income stream, doesn't keep a rainy day fund stuffed into the mattress. C'mon,

you're smarter than that. Double your ask, get half up front, pay your bills and play the long game." Peterson feels a little odd advising any figment of his imagination to work for Satan.

"You say so. Ha-ha. But you're probably right, he's got another hoard or two." Jordie hits play and the screen fades in on two shabby figures walking unsteadily onto an empty stage. Peterson grunts but Jordie reassures, "Yea, still drunk but I swear they sound like crap when they're sober."

The male speaks, "Hi, welcome to the annex. My name is John and this is my good friend Janis. I've got a question: What would you do if I sang out of tune?"

Janis takes a hit off a Bob Marley-size joint jauntily handing off to Bob Marley lest she be known as a Bogart, "Stand up and walk right out on you, most likely. So don't fucking choose the wrong key, ok?"

They sing their duet front stage as the roadies set up mikes, roll out the piano. Peterson is impressed, takes a photo of the screen. Looks at it. Very cool, proof actually. Takes some video, gets nothing. Hmmm.

Jordie turns down the sound, "One pic. Only one. Take what you're given. One other thing: I've learned many things recently. This may be our last meeting for some time now that I'm working but there's something you need to know."

Peterson eyes the big map showing strategic bomber forces in the air over fail-safe positions. Jordie points, "She's going to order the launch."

Peterson agrees, no point in denying.

Jordie continues, "You got no proof it's China."

"Bullshit, their fingerprints are all over the nuke."

"Fingerprints? Seriously, you're talking fingerprints? Have you any indication the Chinese started this? No, because they didn't."

"Disraeli Gears called it correctly, the nuclear core is of Chinese origin."

"Big fucking deal, you're going to kill what, a billion people, over the origin? Forgetting the deployment or even the enrichment is convenient. Sick bastard then, now and always. She wouldn't if not for you."

"Maybe, maybe not. Look, the war is everywhere showing no signs of stopping. Taking the nuclear threat away from the commies makes good sense, ask me. SpaceCom's working with Air Force cranking out changes and updates for the first strike on the Chinese military. When we're through, so are they."

The transmission of the entire "First Strike: Drop Dead Chinese Military" package among members the United States Military/Nuclear Complex creates/amplifies data leaks and the Chinese Military Computer Operations Teams in near real time models the results giving Jordie's ghost hard numbers Peterson chooses to ignore. The Chinese AI increases the alert status of all nuclear forces. Liquid fuel rockets receive a topping off.

"They're fueling their rockets because of you." Jordie's big reveal number one.

Peterson chews that over. He has no satellites, took short-range rocket attacks on his western and southern bases, fighting an invasion all the while suffering air space incursions by hostile forces, naval battles in the Pacific, the Gulf and the fucking Chesapeake Bay and a nuke exploding in Washington. The biggest sneak attack ever with Peterson as the fall guy no matter the eventual outcome.

Having his ass so kicked provides a certain moral authority, thinks Peterson.

Living such an unlikely scenario for the past three and a half days, Peterson looks and acts the part of a grumpy cigar smoking asshole genius.

The war moves to its own beat, punch then counter-punch. To their credit the enemy executes a devastating plan. Peterson's unsure of his ability to stop the forces already in country. But nothing matters if the upcoming Chinese first strike annihilates everything of North American vintage. Peterson studies the board as the assets for his preemptive first strike come online in a race toward Armageddon.

Peterson sends the strike package up the chain to Betsy as CIC.

"I knew you'd do that no matter what I said. Huh, sucks being me. OK, as you're so intent on nuking China let me give you some data: won't fucking matter. Killing a billion Chinese won't fucking stop them, get a grip. They've been digging since 1950 and they've gotten expert at it." Jordie's big reveal number two.

Peterson frowns, "Digging?"

"Tunnels. Deeper and longer than you can imagine. The entire west coast is in-range and all they need to do is tunnel up." Jordie sweeps his hand up and down the coast, "No way to tell where they'll come up, but smart money looks at the Cascade Mountain Range. Geologically it's a noisy place, plenty of acoustic cover. They've got enough equipment and personnel to ruin any peace-in-our-time plans you may be harboring in that fetid imagination of yours. So nuking them actually solves nothing."

Peterson worries about fending off yet another invasion, the second? Third?

Jordie ramps up for the big finale as he stops the laser disk, ejecting it and placing it in the sleeve, "Like it or not this is the way it's going down: last week, in a nod to better luck next time, God orders the Earth's fifth apocalypse. God's plan, however, is not universally saluted. After going through four other apocalypses, the workers aren't so sure they need to worry about this one. So, they're phoning it in and that's the loophole Karl and Pedro exploit." Jordie's big reveal number three.

"You mentioned Karl earlier. Who is Pedro?"

"Karl Meltzer is a genius but you should forget about him. Want a name to remember? Pedro Saenz- is responsible for making/transporting the Chesapeake nuke. Unfortunately for Pedro his ignominy is yet to come. If you play your cards right, he will take the fall for the nuclear devastation you're about to kick off. Blame Pedro and so will everyone else." Jordie's big reveal number four.

"Pedro Saenz nuked Washington? News to me, he's not Chinese."

Jordie's ghost smiles thinly, "Forever a clueless, arrogant bastard."

Beware The Locals, USA 1202 Monday 1 September

Bedlam prevails throughout the continent with Labor Day in shambles as shock and awe at the nuking of the nation's capitol yet citizens of all stripes respond to volunteer. Lines to give blood stretch out the doors, around the blocks. With a general call-up of all former and reserve military anticipated, the ranks of on-duty law enforcement dwindle. Vigilantes step up to protect valuable city property, men with guns patrolling the city limits to protect the border from whomever. But most of the country has yet to see their latest war in-person thus after a time, as nothing untoward develops, the men with the short attention spans grow bored then start acting out.

Not having seen actual law enforcement personnel in a long time, an "I AM THE LAW!" mentality breaks out locally, the same story repeating. Sometimes an actual adult steps up to quash the impulse to abuse foreigners, minorities, refugees, or anyone not carrying papers. Others aren't so lucky.

Some vigilantes come with law enforcement backgrounds. Such is the case of former immigration goon Eddie Brown, aka the migrant murderer. Eddie can't believe his luck to be manning the outpost in the middle of the barricade where Rt. 9 runs under Rt. 69. As traffic coming off the gridlocked interstate backs up. Eddie saunters to the next in line talking to them real nice like giving them a good look, judging their threat status. For instance, Mrs. Henry a local church lady who was coming from the mass of redemption at St. Jude's, she gets a pass.

No, only those incapable of speaking English well enough to pass as a native draw Eddie's ire. Considering himself one of the good guys, he plans to cull the herd violently, knows where and how to do it and doesn't care who finds out. Eddie Brown is an apex predator culling sheep.

Eddie sets up a webcam to document his good works, as do many of the other vigilantes throughout the country snapping pics of their cruelty to brag among the peer group or pass along to friends and family. Eddie isn't the problem; he's helping the U.S. remain safe. That's justification enough for the migrant murderer.

Eddie snags the Menendez family, up from Mexico for the summer working as migrants do, traveling much making squat. They travel unarmed albeit with valid documents but their language skills make them Eddie Brown's next targets of opportunity.

Eddie doesn't cotton to anyone speaking Spanglish anyhow much to the Menendez's chagrin. He instructs them to pull the minivan out of line and down to the next checkpoint about a mile into the woods. Another man pointing a big nasty looking submachine gun directs their vehicle out from under the bridge onto the shoulder for a very short stint to a gate blocking an unimproved road. The gate opens electronically letting the minivan through while another guard points their way down the lane. They come to a clearing, stop and lock the doors.

Armed men smash the windows then unlock and open the doors before gruffly removing the vehicle's occupants. The Menendez family already fears for their lives fleeing south toward home to get away from this possibility. Mrs. Menendez and the children get corralled, led away to a small windowless building filled with others womenfolk and their young ones. Outside, Eddie Brown pulls up riding shotgun inside an all terrain vehicle. He jumps out, padlocks the door to the gas chamber and connects a hose to the still-running minivan's exhaust. Satisfied, he looks for the male occupant.

Eddie spies Hector Menendez, in cuffs now, being led to the funhouse, a waterboarding tent far out of sight/sound of the batch in progress (suffocating women and children). Hector counts three bodies all sporting copious bullet wounds. Once inside they cuff him to another man sitting in the dirt next to a dead

guy with a gunshot instead of an eye guarded by a young boy holding a .38 revolver which, Hector gauges by looks and attitude, he barely knew how to aim and shoot. Hector is indeed correct, Little Johnny, son of John Jr. busy holding the bucket for the water-boarders, shot one of the prisoners an hour ago in a nerve spasm. Oops. Little Johnny draws disapproving looks from the waterboarding contingent. Little Johnny tries but fails to move the body out of sight so as not to get an ass kicking from his old man.

The old man turns back to the work, once again noting for the record the fact his wife sports more body than brains so he shouldn't expect much from the offspring. Getting a promotion from the gas chamber job, John Jr. has an important role in the waterboarding with major responsibility for pain infliction doesn't need the kid fucking up like always. Junior drowns the next man slowly; too quickly for some.

John Sr. has himself a hard time believing he fathered such an idiot who managed to sleep with an even bigger idiot slut to produce more idiots such as Little Johnny absent-mindedly spinning the barrel of the .38 before holding it to the head of the man next to Hector Menendez. Shaking his head sadly in Junior's direction, 'The Look' as always speaking louder than words.

Eddie's vigilante counter-terrorist operation smoothly processes refugees pre-sorting for means of death by age/race killing the women/children quickly on-masse culling out the males of breeding ability for slow torture then loading all bodies into a hay wagon pulled by a farm tractor. Moaning and groaning out the old heave-ho elderly racists trundle corpses over the edge of the deepest gravel pits. The spoils go into a large shed for processing. Young boys, acting as valets, park the empty vehicles in an open field behind the asphalt plant.

Death nosing around the torture's periphery is impressed with the goings-on and not a little deflated with his ability to keep up with the pace. Taking a deep pull of fentanyl off the honey jar, he orders an analysis by the efficiency team.

This particular operation quickly climbs to the top of the heap as one of his favorites, four stars for sheer cruelty. Death understands the overwhelming need for self-preservation never getting tired of the casual infliction of misery on others in a futile effort to divert one's mind off one's own fear. The conflict zone is always fertile ground for those needing to even the score- in both directions. Death checks in on the socials and laughs out loud drawing suspicious looks from the efficiency experts.

The locals face soon face armed opposition deriving from the local college student population. Alerted by a scholarship student fleeing with her family, they watch the takedown and figure out where to go. Typical for the times they assemble flash mobs providing maps dropping pins on independent gun dealer's warehouses and all the sporting goods stores. Gun up, everybody!

Death loves how the 'gun up' call drives the volunteers. Elbows up! The mob trickles into the Target parking lot ten miles away until the buses arrive. Once on-site nascent leaders get busy dividing shooters into groups by weapon, assembling teams into carpools, loading the buses hitting the road to save their piece of the world. Death climbs aboard a school bus mingling in, passing on the doobie going around for a handful of concentrated super-fentanyl tablets courtesy of Pedro. When the guy sitting next to death breaks out a baggie full of mushrooms motioning for him to pass them on, death looks around then takes the baggie. After careful consideration of the near future death pats the guys' shoulder killing him instantly neglecting to pass death pockets the baggie for later. No sense in wasting the good buzz on target fodder. Death self-congratulates for sensible sustainability.

Dead guy unnoticed they navigate the shoulders and medians along Rt.1 avoiding the gridlock stopping a short distance out of sight. After assembling into squads they creep then crawl toward the underpass. The plan is to overrun the checkpoint and kill all the bad people. Death smiles at the charming naivet   at

first, and then registers the surprise of the apocalypse. The soft college students understand guns and war from first person shooter games proving to be fucking amazing at killing. One with night vision leads the assassins with a knife. A fucking knife, Death grows astounded as they silently kill the dozen racists working the checkpoint then turn toward the asphalt plant. The plant firefight becomes a bloody affair, death touches the flash mob students for the first time since the bus incident saddening him enough to put the softest touches on them being merely an old softie sometimes. Rounding up the entire glee club particularly strikes him as sacrilege.

In quite a flurry of action, the students kill all the racists but most don't get to celebrate, a handful of survivors release captives while death flexes, stretching hefting the weight of his scythe before casually leaning it against the fence while he fiddles in his pockets looking for the baggie holding the Shrooms. Instead, finding a kerchief, he strokes the rag under his hood to sop up steaming sweat.

Death goes viral after being captured in silhouette by a shaky survivor's camera. Why? Blame the tablets as when Death 'notices' the photographer, he raises his index finger in the classic manner holding his arm outstretched. Snap. Then he chuckles throwing her a friendly wave before fading to mist. This pic remains one of the most disputed of the war.

The Other Apocalypse of Peter=>

Peter yawns, stretches and looks over to see if Jesus can take a hint. Nope. Super. He needs a drink, wonders what's next.

Jesus answers Peter's private thoughts to let him know the 'clueless can't take a hint' comments still register, "Side trip to Annex R&D."

Back at the annex, Peter finds it's nearly empty of all but the hardcore drinkers must be between sets. So he wanders about seemingly aimlessly

eventually poking his head inside the sound truck parked just outside looking for Karl. Nobody, no Karl, no organic deliveries heading to the gatekeepers starting triple shifts, super. Peter had to play the organic card to keep the workers from migrating to better paying positions inside the union, could be trouble. And he's stuck here. Super.

Shutting the door, Peter flips the empty sound truck the bird. Jesus smiles.

They go around back then follow a narrow dirt path to a steep hill. Jesus motions for Peter to follow and charges down the incline full-tilt. Peter thinks about his vertigo, arthritis, sore hips, knobby knees, swollen ankles and aching feet while closing his eyes slowly shaking his head.

He opens both lids, finds himself at the bottom of the hill and gives Jesus a 'thumbs-up'. Jesus replies in-kind. Peter looks around.

Peter spies large awnings among and between huge stainless steel vats looming everywhere. Pumps and pipes connect the vats to nearby buildings. Some of the immense cylinders sport domed ceilings with pipes drawing gases from the swill inside. They begin climbing a long, steel staircase winding around the outside of a huge vat with no hat on.

Peter wrinkles his nose; the R&D facility holds no appeal, "What's that nasty smell? I expect brimstone and whatnot but this is worse by far."

"Thank you for noticing, this facility research and develops new chemical caustics bringing the nastiest of concoctions to Hell. Fortunately, we don't have to pretend to give a passing nod to environmental concerns during R&D, unlike most chemical companies. So the new products undergoing testing in the Annex get pretty intense. Mostly, the stench grows worse nearer the ground but directly over the vat? Ooh boy, its bad!"

They reach the top stepping up to the observation platform. Peter holds on tight to the steel bar serving as a railing less he fall, joining the test subjects in the stinking vat of flesh eating caustics. They throw him the finger.

Over on an adjacent platform damned scientists teach union members how to record the various observational parameters and metrics for later analysis. In theory, the superior angel intellects' glean such knowledge through osmosis utilizing said gleanings to advance torture techniques by leaps and bounds. In practice, hell lags behind Louisiana, Texas, Alabama and similar states.

"I'm pulling you as leadership head of apocalypse V."

"Oh, thank God! Do you have any idea how many people need to die for a successful apocalypse?"

"All of them?"

"No, all of them... I mean yes, all of them. What I'm saying is I'm happy not to bear the burden of ending humanity."

"No, you'd prefer eating organic onion rings hanging out gambling at the Paddock or bar-b-queuing organic burgers at gate seven or taking in a show at the annex as we know. Don't get me wrong Mr. 'The *Other* Apocalypse of Peter' novelist you are still solely responsible for the end of the world though from the looks of things that's in serious jeopardy. It's just that you no longer get a say in how it goes down, not that you'd notice or anything phoning it in and whatnot."

"As if. Marvin and Myron blame Lucifer for the first apocalypse and he wasn't anywhere in the proximity, just the fall guy. Why do you suppose that is? Just who is taking my place?"

"Airre the Quantum is a leading candidate- on the ball, knows how to get things done. Wants a meeting, I'm sending you."

"Jesus!"

"So you're losing your job to an ai, big deal you're not the first. Don't get upset, you're still getting a pub out of The *Other* Apocalypse of Peter, aren't you? Maybe Airre will turn it into a graphical novel if you're nice."

"Yeah, nobody reads anymore. So, its the wood chipper for me?"

"Demand nothing but the highest quality punishment should you find yourself in Hell. Come on, let's get out of here."

-The Other Apocalypse of Peter IV, IV-XI

B. Murder v. Ramirez & Rontaldi, Dallas TX 1300 Monday 1 September

After resupplying at the Red River armory, Ramirez and Rontaldi traverse back into Texas on an escort mission to invigorate the GC advance through Texas and into the breadbasket. The helicopter battleships cruise nap of the earth always highway adjacent to avoid surface to air missiles, occasionally strafing targets of opportunity with the .50 cal.

"There, that one." Ramirez follows the nav beacon toward a three-story building, hovering nearby. A moment later a Blackhawk lands on the rooftop, drops a radar lure grabs the beacon and takes off heading for another building in the complex.

"I wish they'd hurry up already. The strike package is in the air." Rontaldi worries they'll be in the path of the standoff munitions aboard Peterson's heavy bombers out of Missouri.

"Last one, then we're outa here." Ramirez checks the display, "This one's a doozy, their main fiber optic node servicing the region."

"Checking the settings." Rontaldi queries the radar lure, receives the anticipated reply. "Green board, Chinese settings. We're good to go."

Ramirez checks ammo, "Still have plenty of bullets, recommend we mosey into town and see what's up/."

"If I survive that's what I'm going to do," B. Murder announces to his third crew of the war, a newbie with zero combat experience, "I'm going fishing, someplace quiet where they're not trying to kill me or my gunner. Got a name?"

"LightningRod."

"No shit? LRod, huh. Why?"

"Think bolt out of the blue and you're in the ballpark. Happy to be here, itching for action." LRod pre-flights the weapon systems as B. Murder runs down his checklist. "Weps: green board," reports LRod.

"Now that's the most encouraging thing I've heard in days if these systems ever get done booting... Ok, we're in business, nav's up five by five, and the streets don't change but maybe the name, must be time to bring the pain." B. Murder spools up the Apache's engines slowly ramping up the rpm's while exercising the fly-by-wire.

After resupplying at Tyler, B. Murder and company receive orders directly from the Secretary of War: flank the enemy's lines at the head of the snake: Dallas.

B. Murder takes point beating the bushes ten kliks in front of the attack force looking for bad guys lying in wait ahead of their advance Just outside Dallas, LRod issues a raid warning: drone swarm. B. Murder spies' tracers taking evasive action jukes their Apache wildly. LRod checks for damage, finds none, burps out stomach bile, "Fifteen bogeys! Let's get 'em!"

Gaging the direction of the tracers B. Murder pivots his Apache swiveling to open up LRod's duel-mount radar-guided .50 cal's hanging off the wing pylons. They fly directly toward the swarm juking while exchanging fires. Took half the ammo but LRod reports, "That's all of them, some damage to auxiliary hydraulics and the secondary fly-by-wire system is toast; otherwise, we're good to go."

B. Murder finds it hard to believe that losing the entire secondary fly-by-wire along with associated hydraulics classifies them as 'good to go' on any other day

but today or any other mission but this particular flight. He wonders what Fitz would say. He knows exactly what, "What say we discover what a bad idea looks like up close and personal and find the first of the first. Tally-ho!"

So where's the 1st? LRod sets up a local electronics sweep then queries his helmet display looking for clues. Suddenly a buzzer goes off indicating active homing radars. Vampires! B. Murder yanks up on the collective pushing in his right foot and pulling out the left going hard over into a horizontal loop. Stealthy RAM coatings scorch from the HARM missile passing just under the fuselage doing Mach 3 or so. LRod bangs his helmet against the roof suffering a concussion and fracturing several vertebra. Immediately B. Murder pivots diving to the deck pulling up just over the burning hulks on the off-ramp wailing like a banshee while poking unsuccessfully trying to jar LRod back to the land of the living.

B. Murder takes fire from an Apache helicopter screaming in from above, dodges most of the shrapnel then fires off a heat-seeker setting up a stern chase. The hydraulics fading, LRod dead or dying, B. Murder limps northwest away from the action.

"Uh oh, heat seeker." Rontaldi gets a bad feeling.

"What? Where?" Ramirez needs to know.

"On our ass! Get us on the ground or we're toast!" Rontaldi panics.

Ramirez pushes hard on the collective until they were nap of the earth keeping an eye on the missile's progress. At the last second he leans port side teasing the missile past the engines into the rotor wash. The air-to-air missile explodes taking out the blades scraping the Apache along the ground. After what seems like an eternity they finally come to rest. No fire. Ramirez and Rontaldi unbuckle and walk away from the wreckage unscathed. A pickup with a Dushka crew immediately scoops up the pair driving them a short distance to mobile air

command, strategically located in the Dallas sewer system. Ramirez and Rontaldi don clumsy air filter masks.

As they make their way inside chunks of concrete fall from the reinforcement ceiling of the sanitary sewer junction, one clunking Rontaldi's helmet, "Fucking shit." Ramirez smiles as they traverse the ledge over a running drain until a loud splash diverts his gaze to his vest, "Fucking shit."

They pass through a hole in the wall some 50 meters below ground under an intersection near several office buildings. Inside, half a dozen techies man the command center. They get waved over to a series of consoles housing live data feeds line-of-sight to each lure, "Safe to take off your masks, we're pumping in replacement air."

"Yea, but is the structure sound enough to take what's coming?" Rontaldi has doubts. Sometimes knowing what's coming isn't helpful.

"Could take a nuclear strike, some say." Some wouldn't but that fact doesn't make the command bunker survivability report.

"Where is the nearest radar emitter to our location?" Having been shot down recently Ramirez maybe plays a hunch.

"25-99 sits on top of the military reporting station about one block north while 26-99 through 33-99 lie in government center, two blocks west. In other words smack dab between two prime targets," comes the immediate reply.

Ramirez chews on that for a few moments reaching into his pants pocket pulling out a handful of gum wrappers, a pocket Knife, a Rosary and a fifty Bolivar note he carries for luck. Jamming the rest back inside, he lays the fifty on the table, "Three to one they hit the government center first."

"I'll take that," a young Lt. calls over from the other side, "Sucker bet, I put extra juice in 25-99."

"How so?" Rontaldi is intrigued.

"Frequency hopping signal enhancements, repeaters and just to be sure, a laser emitter. The brilliant munitions will be drooling over the reporting site."

The room explodes with catcalls amid rampant bet placing.

"Two minutes, place all final wagers now."

"What's the story on our rolling stock?" Rontaldi directs his query toward Ramirez. Smile gone in a flash, Ramirez punches a few keys before his terse reply, "Thirty two percent operational off the ships but seventy eight percent in place and ready to go with the systems we're humping across the border. Convoy harassment throughout Louisiana is dropping so the stock rolling off the ships should run the table all the way to the breadbasket." Ramirez hopes.

"You know we have to consider a double tap scenario. Are they throwing Navy and Marines assets in the mix or is it just Air Force assets?" Rontaldi doesn't mince words, "Prudent to speak with air defense..." The next big explosion rocking the sewer system derives from the direction of the federal buildings. "Government Center, pay up," Rontaldi keeps his voice low as if the bombers could be listening. He picks up his fifty of the rubble pile tapping his foot impatiently as the younger but now wiser and a few bills lighter Lt. heads the pay-off queue forking over three more.

Another explosion, this one much larger and closer, men and equipment fall to the concrete floor, some poor souls dropping off the ledge sinking dismally into the river of shit below.

"That was a near miss on the military reporting center." All screens lose video feed reverting to last full frame. Ramirez runs his finger along the map, tracing the path from the mail facility. "From the looks of things they hit Reunion Tower. So much for tarbucks just super."

"Tarbucks?"

"Yeah, bunch of college kids been looting corporate coffee retailers. They set up a free bistro inside the abandoned Reunion Tower. It's where we get coffee."

Ramirez tucks the bills in his shirt and replaces his mask before setting off at a brisk pace down the sewer with Rontaldi and a few others in quite a hurry as Reunion Tower crucially houses their video and internet communications node servicing Dallas and points north. A few minutes later with eyes on the scene fortunately finding piles of rubble clear of any troops. They make their way carefully over to the frazzled Major in charge." What video do you have of Reunion Tower? Show me, dammit!" Rontaldi requires data scrolls through thumbnails looking for, "Put up the take from cameras 57-12 and P9, 11, 15 and 17; no, individually up on the big screen then loop them at 3X."

The nine quadrants' loop reveals the horrific extent of nearby damage. One particularly grainy video depicts the pile of rubble directly overhead their air command center from the high speed anti-radiation missile responsible for conking Rontaldi and splashing Ramirez, spectacular explosion, school dorm, many dead, poor bastards."

Ramirez points to Reunion Tower. From across the street, down arrays, the cheery tarbucks first appears open, crowded even with the staff giving away coffee and lattes. "Split off P9 and 11 split screen isolate them. OK, half-speed," the Colonel orders. The room falls silent, as the horror of war plays out before them in ultra high definition. Tarbucks customers mingle inside the lowest floor of the round building, formerly the observation deck. The floors above hold squatting students, no surprise there. The next moment, flashes from outside draw the attention of the coffee drinkers as the high-speed missile blows the dorm to hell. The smart ones duck down under tables but few display such smarts. Cup holding patrons pointing in the direction of the flash begin lining the plate glass windows, poor dumbasses caught hanging around instead of evacuating, not quite believing

in the war. More join as the window crowd grows to two then three deep with those behind jockeying for better position. For several long minutes patrons talk and gawk, drinking free coffee and getting a good laugh. A good laugh? Apparently one very good-looking platinum blonde laughs out loud at some witless comment from a nearby student. She twirls her gorgeous profile in glee grabbing the attention of everyone in the monitoring room. This twenty something wannabe influencer refugee from the design district remains posing in the center of the shot for eternity. Then, in slow motion, she sucks in her breath to make a speech (simultaneous with movement as a shadow not quite discern-able darkens the second camera aka P11) yet all eyes remain with the posing coed as the building absorbs the effects of an air burst munitions just outside camera range. The iconic tarbucks sign flies toward the plate glass pushing patrons through, out and down and throwing shards into nearby onlookers. The dancing woman vaporizes into blood spray along with the other patrons as the building collapses killing everyone. "That is the most horrific thing I have seen in quite a while," claims Rontaldi looking up at the ceiling contemplating the Reunion Tower deaths, making the sign of the cross, "And I've seen some fairly fucked up shit lately."

"Print it!" orders Ramirez with a grin, "Academy award material, and no question about it. Put that clip, from just before the flash to the blood spray, in a loop with some stock footage of a B-2 dropping a stick. Wide distribution." Rontaldi pats the staff on the back, cocking his head asking Ramirez if it's time to go before turning without a sound to traverse back down the tunnel. Mask up!

They make it back to mobile air command as "New Raid Detection" messages flash throughout the sewer. Rontaldi grabs a bottle of water and a sandwich from the plate but Ramirez passes on chow wondering why he could taste shit, must be an ineffective mask. Should go with independent air supply next time.

"On screen," he grumps. More bad news, this time from Asia. Twenty-seven B-52 bombers departed the Abu Garcia U.S. Air Force base, are currently approaching the mainland with the Royal Saudi Air Force fighter escort.

"How firm is the count?" Ramirez holds out hope.

"The count is good, guess where they're heading?" Rontaldi takes a big bite into his sandwich. "Here is where."

"Leave it to Peterson to carpet bomb Texas and you won't be disappointed."

Carolla V. Pedro, GC Cavern, Paraguay 1605 Monday 1 September

"Your stooge is gone." Airre finds Carolla alone, gently breaks the news.

"Who's gone?" Rita and Stella match her tone in unison interrupting her speech carrying coffee, handing one over to Carolla. Carolla sips nodding toward Airre.

"Pedro." Airre goes with a 'keep it simple' strategy then turns to leave.

She doesn't get a step before, "What do you mean by 'gone' anyway?"

"He left a playlist of breakup songs. Shall I play them for you?"

"Nobody likes a smart-ass AI talking smack." Stella is in no mood for any of Pedro's bullshit.

"I've noticed. He also made a super cut montage of his best breakup lines, would you prefer to listen to that?"

"Where is he? Why did he run? What does he know? When did he find out?"

Deep underground in Grand Columbia, Carolla figures it out during the asking but Airre still drops the bombshell, "He knows everything. Always has, from day one. He ran because you're using him as a bargaining chip. As to where he is, I am sworn to secrecy. Suffice to say, Hoosier-land ain't seen nothing yet."

Rita, alone of the triplets, knew of his pending escape making sure he had enough weed for the journey. She keeps her peace. Airre gives her a smile as she

semi-reveals, "He's smarter than you give him credit for. You can't blame the guy for running, particularly since you're planning on pinning the nuke on him."

"Oh grow up. He hasn't been the same since Karl's passing." Carolla.

"A symptom, for sure, is the increasing amount of drugs he's been using." Stella.

Airre disagrees, "No, that's a flat line. He's been doing the same amount of drugs for as long as I've known him. In fact, he was practically sober last week and I thought there was something wrong but he simply wished to be less-inebriated during their final goodbye."

"Touching," says Carolla, "Where's he staying? Indiana?"

"Lucifer owns a series of safe-houses in the Midwest. Owned. The Paddock now has complete control of Lucifer's real estate portfolio so we have plenty of options to choose from. He could also stay in Illinois on a farm with one of the organic growers or hide out in a warehouse with the one of the shippers. Options abound, not to worry your pretty little heads about Pedro. Now if you'll excuse me."

Airre vanishes. Stella looks at Rita, "You know something. Spill."

"Leave her alone. Drink your coffee." Carolla picks up remote control for the spa hitting play only to hear Harry Nilsson complain 'You're breaking my heart. You're tearing it apart. So fuck you.' Carolla sighs. Vintage Pedro.

Apocalypse V, Shamokin White House, PA 2302 Labor Day Monday 1 September

"No friend of death is a friend of mine." Jordie looks hurt. Death shrugs snapping his finger. The planet vanishes in a cartoonish poof as the flying monkeys prepare to start over with a mulligan. "What's a mulligan?" she asks. 'Don't worry, it's all above your pay grade,' comes the terse reply.

Betsy awakes to find her head on the desk, a puddle of drool under her chin.

Eighteen hours into her nuclear nightmare, President Betsy sits transfixed in her own world thinking thoughts such as, 'Madame President, we have met the enemy and it's not good news' and others.

Fucking shit country's at war once again, how many times now? Fuck me fuck. Fucking waste of money and resources should be going into making the fucking world a fucking better place instead of what's about to happen. Shit.

Betsy tunes into the cabinet's conference call, a never-ending affair these days, just in time to hear her Secretary of War lay down some truth:

"I could give two shits about what they say. Actions speak louder than words; just ask the dead or dying children formerly living in the Chesapeake Bay area. They'll speak truth to power, believe it. We all know we got missiles and we all know they got missiles so why the fuck are they shitting on us? The hard-liners running the show over there can deny the facts until hell freezes over won't change shit. I support we unilaterally and with all prejudice muster-able remove this strategic threat while we still can."

The Joint Chief, looking older and more worn down than ever points at the map, "They nuked the East Coast. They'll invade the West Coast." He lowers his voice for emphasis, "We have no choice, and we got to hit them so hard they can't react. I recommend we pre-empt with the big strike."

The other military murmur in agreement while the pacifists argue vociferously against.

This is adequate reasoning for The President of the United States of America and Commander-in-Chief. She knows those in the military abhor war, particularly the nuclear variety yet here they are telling her she really has no choice and though she's been coughing a dry cough lately resulting from acid reflux from excess stomach acid and other stress-related bile events, she ultimately agrees deciding to

err on the side of maybe saving the Union while endangering the planet, "As President of the United States of America and Commander-in-Chief of all U.S. Military units, I am ordering attack plan thirty nine. Target all underwater nuclear assets regardless of origin while striking Chinese missile defense and command and control assets with the triad. Then level every data center and strategic asset they possess."

Peterson likes the part about torpedoing out everyone's submarines, particularly Russia's. Nuking China will put a target on the USA, no sense in Britain or France getting big ideas.

He picks up the phone and orders up the apocalypse just as easily as ordering a pizza. Hold the anchovies.

Death sighs, hanging up on the conference call. Things are about to get busy. He pulls workers from the Paddock, the Annex and points in between sending them to China. All other deaths go into a holding pattern with the Book temporarily out of action.

The Other Apocalypse of Peter=>

Peter meanders about outside of Gate Seven looking for a suitable place for his lawn chair. Picking a spot under a tree, he situates himself facing Nebbi and his new bar-b-cue pit. The only other figure outside the gate, Nebbi carefully stocks the pit with mesquite logs to get the fire going. Now, all Peter needs is a little peace and quiet so just maybe he can catch up on current events before the big meeting with that computer thingie. He picks up the most recent draft of The *OTHER* Apocalypse of Peter and begins reading.

St. Peter reports to Jesus: "I am mostly very impressed with the tome thus far. I believe Marvin may be Shakespeare's dad or something. Same for Myron, maybe the best writer ever. I understand he taught Mark Twain how

to craft a story. These guys are unbelievable writers and I am glad to have them on my team. If not for Marvin and Myron and the rest, I'd be screwed."

Wait just a second, thinks a confused St. Peter; I never said that, did I? Super, Myron's playing with me. I need this.

Jesus appears, "You always think confused, it's endearing. Just like you've always been a slacker preferring food and drink to hard work and toils. Turn around, you need to see this." He points over Peter's shoulder. St. Peter stands, watching intently.

From nowhere, a billion people appear.

"Holy shit that's a lot of people. How about we simply rubberstamp them, send them all to hell. Problem solved, eh?"

"The whole point of the exercise is there is no room in hell, even if most of them don't belong there, we have to remain particular about where they go. Anyway, that's the first workload, about a billion people waiting for processing. Waiting on you, in other words but, you phoned it in, remember? You may want to begin to take Apocalypse V seriously."

St. Peter protests, "You see me here with the book, don't you? What do you call that?"

"Slacking until Nebbi gets done grilling up your burger is still slacking. You've now got a billion souls expecting judgment and you're going to hold up their eternal reward/punishment on account you found organic food? Super."

The dead slowly begin to move on Nebbi's grilling operation hoping to load up with delicious organic burgers with fried onions. Then they start running at him as Nebbi flees inside the gate wondering if the locking mechanisms need updating.

St. Peter looks to Jesus, "Loaves and fishes, you got this, right?"

-The Other Apocalypse of Peter V, I-II

Pedro-3, Paddock at Billingsport Range, 2359 Labor Day Monday 1 September

Karl waits in his office somewhat impatiently monitoring the time. Last second Pedro, par for the course is what he's thinking.

Suddenly the bolted oaken door swings open revealing Pedro munching on a Paddock burger and washing it down with a frosted mug of Delaware River Beer. Death pushes him into Karl's embrace and the two hug it out.

"So, tell me, how it goes?" Pedro scarfs down his burger, Marvin sets down a tray with burgers, beers and all the fixings. Smiling Myron brings in a basket of onion rings patting Pedro on the back. It's good to have friends.

Death takes a burger, "You won't believe how busy I am."

Karl laughs, "On account of you, no less."

"So she did it?" Pedro drops a spoonful of fried onions on this one.

"Oh yeah," gloats death, "both of them overachieving getting the job done. President Betsy nuked China and Airre is in line to take over Apocalypse V."

"And I hold the key to fame in fortune." Pedro rifles his clothes, finds nothing, "WTF? I had a baggie with all my kit stuffed into my clothes. Made sure it would stay dry."

Karl believes him, another vintage Pedro move always involves a baggie.

"It held my ticket, Pedro-3. Where's my baggie?" Pedro glares down death.

Death does not care, "Yeah, I saw that but my orders were 'Pedro' only, nothing else."

"Airre, right?" Karl doesn't wish to take the heat.

Pedro loses focus seeing the poster hanging from the wall, "You got Ozzy to play at the annex? How did he do?"

Karl hands him a laser disk, "Drinks like a fish, thankfully for you, so does his pet vampire bat, by the way. Did he go off the rails on a crazy train? Yes, yes he did. We got time, see for yourself."

Sphere of Dominance =>

"I know he's here," swears Mrs. Wilson emphatically, "keep looking."

"We've been looking for twelve hours." Celie has doubts, again.

Twelve hours without a break ready for twelve more is the exact reason Karl chose Mrs. Wilson out of the entire human living population for this one crucial pickup the most important mission of the war. "Are you sure we're in the right place?" Mrs. Wilson asks the captain.

"I've got four navigation aids all saying the same things. The stars agree. We're here where we're supposed to be." The captain was ready to give up a while ago.

"Well then, that settles it. Keep looking. She said this is exactly where to find him." If Airre says it, Mrs. Wilson believes, it's so.

The PRAF staff lines the rails searching the sea surface. Suddenly the radar operator calls out, "Surface contact, 200 degrees, 150 meters."

In seconds a launch races to investigate. Celie watches through a pair of high quality binoculars, "What's that he's floating on?"

Two sailors jump out as a third leans over Pedro holding a knife. Seconds later, they're back on the launch racing for the Nautical Seas radioing ahead for the doctor.

They get the unconscious Pedro on deck. Mrs. Wilson attends as the doctor examines a severe wound to Pedro's thigh. One of the sailors from the launch explains, "He was laying on a huge sting ray he evidently knifed to death but not after the ray buried his stinger in his thigh. We had to cut him off."

The PRAF attending physician is a board certified vascular surgeon, "Operating room, and stat."

A baggie falls to the deck as they move Pedro. Celie picks it up, "What's this?"

Mrs. Wilson opens the baggie, "Why, it's a 50/50 ticket. Pedro-3. Poor dear must have had it on him. Pays the bearer if Pedro survives. He must think he's going to live. Way to remain optimistic. Look, the back is signed by Karl Meltzer, Proprietor of the Paddock Bar and Grill. It's dated two years ago."

Three hours and five joints later, Mrs. Wilson looks over at her worried friend Celie who hasn't uttered a word, "Say Cel, read any good books lately?"

The surgeon comes back on deck, "He's stable, in a coma. We're replacing his blood and I've got leeches working on the poisoned tissue so maybe he doesn't lose the leg provided he lives. He's severely dehydrated, drank way too much seawater and there is a nasty staph infection spreading to his major organs. If the venom doesn't get him, the infection might. Either way, the coma isn't of my doing so I have no idea if or when he awakes."

Mrs. Wilson grins, "Would you say he's near death?"

The PRAF surgeon steps back rubbing his chin thoughtfully, "I'd call it 50/50."

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endnotes

Thanks to Tawdry for getting involved with this one & the next one too carefully keeping me on point when I couldn't type transcribing my pathetic cursive. Thanks also to the intrepid readers KT, Lauren and Deb.

Visit me on the web at peterfisherbooks.com & join the growing Union of Slacking Scientists' Movement.

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