

Zone of

Influence:

Strike Two

Also by Peter Fisher...

Novels

Zone of Influence: Strike One

Apocalyptic Progression I

Zone of Influence: Strike Two

Apocalyptic Progression II: in editing

Zone of Influence: Strike Three

Apocalyptic Progression III: in editing

Sphere of Dominance: Apocalypse V

Apocalyptic Progression IV: in production

Sphere of Dominance: Making Book

Apocalyptic Progression V: in production

Sphere of Dominance: Laz-19

Apocalyptic Progression VI: in production

Short Story Collections

Crate Expectations

Zone of Influence Character Development Anthologies

Crate of Orange

Crate of Aqua

Crate of Violet

Crate Of Change

Sphere of Dominance Character Development Anthologies

Crate of Teal

Crate of Fuchsia

Crate of Plaid: in production

Zone of
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by Peter Fisher

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ISBN:

For:

D. Fisher,
please.

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This is a story about hope...

Greyspace

“Take a mug, I insist.” Karl mutters mimicking the now-absent death before trudging over to try the door to the supply closet, “Sudden and violet and all I have to show for it is...”

Karl stops short in the doorway marveling at the volume of merchandise on display then moves in to peruse the goods. Selecting a large T-shirt off the rack, he tries on a ball cap, then a skullcap before deciding that even dead he looks stupid wearing a hat. Hearing a din from the writers’ room, Karl clicks off the light deciding to investigate.

A solitary figure towers over Myron, squeaking in apparent displeasure. Hmmm, not death but a man, familiar in appearance thinks Karl as he approaches the pair silently, from the rear.

“Look, I already told you twice you must pay strict attention to pronoun usage-choose correctly by reference to their online profile prefs. Do you even understand me, Gargoyle?”

“He’s ignoring you.” Karl interrupts the bully tirade handing Myron a shirt, “Here Myron, new swag- put this on.”

The two figures trade stares as Myron pulls the shirt over his head before turning to display the wares: a torso shot of Myron himself holding up both hands. His left hand gestures in a ‘thumbs-down’ pose while giving the finger with his right. Karl turns to the other man and grins.

“Seems to me, um...” Karl stumbles for a name, spies an ‘Apocalypse: V’ souvenir lanyard around his neck, “Mr. Noun, the medium is the message: thus old Myron here is more of a linguist than most.”

“Who’s Mr. Noun?”

“Your name isn’t Noun?”

“No, you twit. For the record, **No-Un** stands for No Unaccompanied Access. My name is Jordan Hancock and I am Chief of Staff to the President- well, formerly anyway, no matter.”

Baffled, Karl looks down at his own lanyard, a much fancier affair bearing two distinct words: **All Access**. “Oh, I stand corrected, Mr. former Chief of Staff. Myron, bring up Mr. Hancock’s profile, I am particularly interested in looping his, um, messy death.”

“Is that really necessary?” Jordie shows no interest in yet again reviewing the futile battering of his corpse, “Who are you anyway?”

“Production Manager, Karl Meltzer, at your service.”

“Sudden and violet Karl? No kidding? Small world- you know your demise wasn’t very pretty either with little bits and pieces dispersing hither and yon.”

Karl snorts, “Obviously you have a keen observational grasp of the concept of sudden and violet. You know, dead Jordie, your lanyard says you require an escort. Do you see an escort, Myron? No, Mr. Hancock should be elsewhere instead of bothering my production staff. Please have someone show Mr. Hancock the door.”

Jordie sneers, “If you weren’t dead already I’d kill you myself.”

“Here I thought we could be friends, so it goes.”

Karl and Myron observe as an imposing figure appears looming over the former Chief of Staff. The beefy escort picks him up under the armpits and flies out of sight.

“The lesson, Myron, is ‘don’t be a dick’. Think he learned anything? Me neither, so it goes.” Karl gags while sniffing the air, “What’s that smell? Yikes, is there a cesspool nearby?”

Karl takes in his surroundings, evidently his office is elsewhere. Good, the stench presents a compelling reason to be on the move, “Myron, it stinks in here; I’m heading to the transportation department. Need to check on the delivery schedule, which way to the loading dock?” Karl notices an ebb and flow to the pervasive stench, reminding him of...

Myron points to a exit way off in a corner. The sign above the door reads ‘The Edge’.

Karl finds himself unable to hold back, “Dude, you can smell can’t ya? Do you have any idea how much it reeks in here? Entire place smells like ass.”

Myron points to the queue to the restroom, holds up one finger on his left hand gives a thumbs-down with the right.

“Yikes, one toilet? Ok, Myron, do you mind if I call you Myron? Thanks. You’re doing a swell job Myron- don’t have much to say and I appreciate this more than you know. My new job entails responsibility for delegating so I am promoting you to Supervisor of the Writer’s Room. I will be elsewhere but when I return I expect to see some improvements around here. Start with a fan in the restroom immediately. Then I want you to expand the number of stalls to one per six writers, add sinks and more air handlers. Put the restroom door in the new break room and install extra air handlers. While you’re at it, paint the walls in here. I saw limitless primary colors in souvenir storage; make murals with rainbows- give off a happy vibe. One last thing, maybe hire a dietician or two because, well, I’m just saying.”

Myron gives Karl both thumbs in the good way.

“One last thing,” Karl holds out his all access pass, “I assume this comes with a tracker? Ok, how about we switch?” Myron eagerly swaps, taking Karl’s badge

with a wicked grin. Karl studies his new pass, ‘TMP’- you’re a temp? He laughs, “Aren’t we all, eh Myron? Got a thick marker, in-erasable?”

Myron pulls open the middle drawer and passes Karl an ‘Apocalypse V’ official marker. A moment later, Karl scribbles verbiage across the face declaring himself all access, loose and untraceable. Myron rummages through a file drawer for some time before unveiling his secret treasure for his new boss.

Karl takes the facilities map showing all the back doors and emergency exits, studies it and hands it back, “Ok, one more last thing. Pedro will be passing through here eventually, give him the map, point him to The Edge and tell him I’m in my office, wherever that is.”

Karl scans the top of Myron’s workspace, “Hand over that sticky note pad, I just remembered something important.”

Myron passes him a thick stack of embossed sticky notes, classy office supply merchandise. Karl examines the emblem, a colorful ‘5’ encircled by two words- ‘EPIC’ and ‘APOC’. Shaking his head at the volume of thought put in the merch designs, Karl removes the marker cap and scribbles a name on the top note- L. Moen.

“Death is going out on a limb promising an epic apocalypse, you know? Anyway, do me a favor and record the feed on this guy. The book is taking major action on Mr. Moen, the release of his first ticket skyrocketing to success going viral with the Union knuckleheads, for obvious reasons. The new book marketing department boosted his popularity with a limited release of low number collectibles, a hugely popular move positioning these tickets as non-fungible souvenir commemorative trading cards.”

Myron immediately detaches the note affixing it to the top of his screen. Frowning, staring at his formerly pristine pad of sticky notes, Myron hesitates then removes the topmost square, stares at it a bit then wads it up and drops it into the waste can. Karl looks down to see what the deal is with the pad. Myron disapprovingly meets his gaze then focuses once again at the top square discovering more annoying in-erasable marker bleed-through which he removes and discards before tearing off another then another for a dozen sheets, one at a time, agonizingly slowly. Finally satisfied Myron opens the middle drawer and hides the pad deep inside before locking up then pocketing the key. Myron is fastidious regarding his sticky note obsession.

“Oops, sorry about that,” Karl pats Myron’s shoulder, “You’re all doing a swell job and I appreciate the effort- just look at all these notes everywhere. Keep up the good work.”

Waving goodbye spinning with a flourish whistling the Paddock theme-song Karl makes for the door to The Edge leaving Myron not wondering why he has zero on his friend list given his sticky note destructive tendencies.

Myron looks down at Karl's fancy souvenir lanyard, then up at the retreating figure advancing toward The Edge. Next Myron closely examines Karl's all-access pass trying to understand fully his newfound duties and responsibilities. Rampant rumors of improvements to come flashover Myron's writer's domain before spilling into the other work rooms. All monkeys stop typing, waiting for developments.

Myron ponders his course of action carefully weighing the import of Karl's pass, wondering as to the exact definition of all-access.

Flipping the lanyard he spies an encryption code embedded between the lines, A few writers leave their posts to stand close, before long others follow. Myron turns to look over his shoulder, sees hope instead of misery. He knows they are not disgruntled; one must first experience happiness before one becomes disgruntled. His flying monkey crews could best be described as downtrodden apocalyptic veterans.

Myron and the rest experienced 'Apocalypse Uno' first hand; in fact, Myron caught the first meteor fragment minutes before the primary impact took the entire flying monkey population on their last journey. Thus it was Myron the others met when death transferred their existence en-masse to Greyspace. True fact: the majority still hold him accountable for their misery four apocalypses later. Poor Myron's pain environment index rarely breaks below eight- never under seven for the duration.

Myron returns his attention to the task at hand, considering his path forward. Reaching into the top drawer he withdraws a fresh hand towel bearing an early swag design from 'The Lucky Deuce' (furry fuzzy dice showing snake eyes commemorating Apocalypse Two) and dries off his hands dramatically hoping to hide an obvious stall. In a flash of inspiration Myron holds the encryption code to the screen. The word processing program disappears off the screen replaced by a line of text followed with a prompt:

WELCOME SUPERUSER!

su->

Myron studies the screen wondering which admin language to try. Deciding it probably wouldn't matter, he types a traditional directory listing command providing permission details. Collectively the flying monkeys intake breath. When the root directory prints to screen, a cacophony erupts. Myron stands, turns then bows deeply to acknowledge their cheers.

Next he sets to work at the task at hand.

Myron opens the subdirectory labeled 'procurement' to launch the acquisition app. First off he inputs Pedro's midwestern organic connection as a preferred

vendor then wires a long overdue order for immediate, ongoing delivery of mass quantities of organic popping corn kernels accompanied with organic butter. Immediately the crowd goes wild.

Myron holds up one finger and the crowd hushes. After confirming the food order, he searches for popcorn machines then orders hundreds of thousands for immediate delivery concurrent with the grain shipment. The crowd again erupts into cheers as they contemplate a possible secondary food source to supplement their food pellet diet of misery.

Fresh off his first victory, Myron releases the acquisition app in favor of a subdirectory labeled 'temps'. He spots the database of flying monkeys and opens the personnel app. First off he needs to beef up local staffing thus sorts by skill set and location finding and isolating all the construction crews seconded to Hell as manual labor during the expansion program. Myron shakes his head at the volume: death uses hard drugs religiously- slaving off Myron's writers to the Union pays the bills. Well, thinks Myron, not for long. With several selects and mouse-clicks he recalls all construction personnel to Greyspace. Immediately the flying monkey corps receive instructions to begin withdrawing from Hell. The blowback, thinks Myron, will be significant.

What's good for the goose, eh? Myron again selects and clicks. Immediately another contingent of off-site flying monkey corps receive orders to vacate their temporary accounting jobs at Heaven's Gates.

Suddenly, Myron is lifted bodily out of his chair, finding himself crowd surfing. First time, long time his pain environment index drops to zero. The writers maneuver Myron throughout the room until he finds himself next to the head-miraculously queue-less, Myron theatrically dabs a tear before entering the stall triumphantly to ponder his next moves.

Meanwhile, the din outside gradually settles. Before long the writer's room quiets ominously. Perplexed, Myron puts down his newspaper, finishes his business and exits the tiny bathroom relieved to find his charges in place once again hard at work documenting Apocalypse Five. He makes his way slowly back to his seat feeling the weight of responsibility, perhaps even a little uncertain. His mood improves when draped on the back of his chair Myron discovers the ultimate homage in a white managerial shirt with a starched collar and front pocket logo:

FUN*F

Myron rides his emotional wave to a crescendo upon donning his new mantle as he leaps onto his desk and raises both arms. The room erupts, chanting his name: Myron, Myron!

And so it goes that almost by accident, seemingly effortlessly, newly appointed Production Manager Karl Meltzer acquires staunch allies and BFFs in Myron and the flying monkeys.

Stooge\$-2, Alamogordo, NM 0715 Saturday 30 August

Lying immobilized flat on his back Larry Moen focuses intently as peculiar looking black holes swirl overhead. Being in a discovery frame of mind he commences counting them all to determine once and for all how many holes fill the Albert Hall: one two, three...

Not by choice he's not moving saving himself instinctively relaxing. Larry Moen's (Curly, to his friends) mind races through time retracing his steps seeking answers to the unknown counting the stars circling overhead.

Whoosh! Suddenly Larry's ears pop, clearing to the sounds of dead and dying. Painfully alive Moen sits up rubbing his tender L-Spine as Stooge\$-1 pays all holders of 'survive' outcome.

Holloman's tower and radar the largest structures on the base burn out of control, lighting up the surroundings. Pulling up to one knee, shaking his head Larry Moen, Curly, struggles to comprehend current events. Boom, a secondary explosive concussion picks him up, throwing his body another fifteen feet! Once again Curly finds himself flat on his back; however his semi-clear head registers pain penetrating nearly every cell in his damaged body. Rolling over trying to catch his bearings to figure out who what when where why for God's sake. Who? Everyone and every aircraft caught outside, apparently. What? Missiles. When? He looks at his Timex; less than five minutes give or take. Where? The flight line, taxiway and everything nearby. Why?

Five minutes ago Master Chief Larry Moen and his crews feverishly prepare to sortie half the 355th Air Combat Wing's F-22 Raptor air superiority fighters. Three hundred seconds later, fourteen billion dollars of taxpayer funds cook off rocking the ground. Fearless men and women pilots and crews bleed out; the destruction so complete few survivors remain.

Struggling to regain his feet Curly takes a hesitant step then collapses. However wounded, he remains alive- paying all holders of Stooge\$-2 gambling on Larry Moen's survival.

Later, first responders find him on his back staring into the sky wordlessly counting, still looking for answers.

Secondary Considerations, Southern USA 0745 EDST Saturday 30 August

With her first attack in the books, Airre the Quantum collects and processes battle damage reports on the move hitching a ride south with her old pals Bill Cross and Julian processing algorithms calculating how and where to apply the

next bit of muscle simultaneously seeking a form of understanding or even clarity examining the blood on her hands pondering the necessity of adding more: when will enough, be enough?

Airre finds herself a busy quantum intelligence lately, recalls fondly her relative inactivity during the prep phase including her hours embedded among the BackBreakers. Legend has it she attempted infiltration of the bowling team during league tournament play but yielded to The Sink's objections to employing a 'ringer': good fun.

Airre's prep time included days relaxing in this very cab's bunk observing Bill and Julian setting up the second attack performing SALS Missile installs, simple automated launch sequence technology built into fifty-three foot boxes using proven off the shelf technology. She recalls the oft-heated nature of the debate between her friends. The most poignant of their discussions she replays constantly mining the data stream for a better answer:

Bill Cross eases off the gas as they approach yet another traffic gaggle, "Jules, I'd call our current job OSLP, Out of State Linear Preprogramming, wouldn't you?" Taking a long swig off his ever present extra-large bottle of pink bismuth Bill bangs on the controls trying to get the air conditioning to function.

"Instead of murder, you mean? Bill, the second strike SALS we're dropping off most likely will include targeting innocent civilians and you know it." Julian has concerns.

"There's no such thing as innocent," Bill looks cross, "I can see programming the secondary attack weighs heavily on your soul- a grave responsibility," concluding with a sly grin.

"Don't laugh; you should worry about your soul- mine too for that matter. We're going to burn in hell for killing innocents." Julian flips through page after page of their logbook detailing 120 prior grave undertakings, primarily double loads taken from the Galveston warehouses north into cooler air masses. "Stop saying here's no such thing as innocence- you're not fooling anyone you know."

Reacting to the vibe in the truck cab, reading the room, Bill grows serious, "Get off your high horse. Besides, who says it's hot in hell? Sometimes I wonder. How hot is too hot? Listen and learn, stop taking life too seriously- maybe get a woman. Most of our loads target missile radar sites and ancillary facilities so maybe you won't make it to hell after all because as I said, nobody is innocent. Youngsters like you want it both ways; to live simultaneously on a knife's edge and in safety, to deliver death without killing. Forget to worry- life's too short not to put your faith in the big picture."

Airre worries listening to Bill lying to himself, taking upcoming deaths to heart despite his protestations to the contrary. The number of miles he's laying down

dragging around SALS missiles takes a huge toll; about five years off an already short life in Airre's estimation.

"Yeah, your 'leap of faith' argument requires a suitable final flourish: 'not to worry, the payoff will be spectacular' or something along these lines." Sunlight glints through the trees as they pass, drawing his attention to the road behind. Julian scopes the rearview then leans forward to stare into the big mirror outside his door, "We got company. Shit, I hate when this happens."

From a dirt trail in the woods lights flashing siren screaming Julion watches a brownish green State Police car peeling out, wheels spinning digging deep in the mud before fishtailing onto the two lane highway. Before the Trooper even brings his cruiser under control his fate seals, old school style as an elderly couple driving a plain white minivan doing 85mph strike his rear bumper spinning him out of control off the right shoulder over the guardrail and into a grand old oak tree killing him instantly in a huge fireball.

"Damn, I hate when that happens- third time this year. Why?"

"Chalk it up tweaking the results of extensive probability modeling into quantum end effect." Airre silently chimes in. The architect of the SALS second strike package adds, "Not so difficult, merely a matter of simple arithmetic more or less." Wishing for understanding if not approval, she reaches forward touching Bill and Julion's temples in turn transmitting a brief data sequence of the SALS' delivery routing schema along nano neural nets into short term memory storage.

Airre sits back to watch video from one of the planning meetings- hey look, there's Karl from back in his oxygen-processing days:

"Unless the US completely loses touch with reality disassembling NorthCom, we've too many targets missing from the strike lists, enough to tilt the scales." Karl is debating planning details with Carolla utilizing his trademark commonsense and logic, "We must pre-position mobile assets to fire an additional salvo of solid fuel rockets pre-programmed for secondaries or targets of opportunity. Look, there's not enough windmills to do the damage the invasion scenarios require. So rather than paring our "must hits" instead we'll increase to include key pieces of non-military command and control or whatever."

"We can place assets in place months before the strike. We'll code to program SALS following up with local security monitoring teams. When the time comes, bang zoom, the missile operators release to tertiary or post-strike duties." Pedro agrees with Airre and Karl.

Carolla suggests they firm up (decrease) bomb damage projections casually disbelieving their somewhat rosy scenario. Thinking of her nightmares, she allocates a portion of the second strike to Air Force repair facilities particularly hangars with elevators; hard targets (in fact under feet of reinforced concrete with

titanium lining) hoping to catch in the open a substantial percentage of end of season maintenance jobs.

Airre sets up the secondary and tertiary strike package list in an 'N- Space' format of a trillion or so data points in a loose matrix though of the opinion Carolla's excess targeting overwhelms the quantum end effect creating a ton of unnecessary tweaking to keep Bill, Julion et al safe preserving the BackBreakers' hold on the league trophy.

Afterwards material supply experts go to work engineering another set of RFIDs for the SALS, acquiring materials, building additional launchers, simultaneously training up techs and drivers to take some strain off Airre's pals: the BackBreakers.

Julion looks over at Bill, "What the hell?"

What the hell, indeed.

zoinote episode one ends here

The Other Apocalypse of Peter

"Gate three?" inquires Jesus innocently.

"Gate three," confirms Peter.

"In disarray?" probes Jesus.

"Completely and utterly," nods Peter.

"So you went to investigate?" inquires Jesus, again innocently.

"Had to see it to believe it: Death pulled all the temps off reconstruction projects leaving the gate ajar for quite some time. If I hadn't stopped by, it would be still. I found this," Peter hands Jesus a commemorative 'End of Days! Fourscore!!' letter opener, "wedged into the lock to hold it open. Sabotage, obviously."

Examining the artifact, Jesus opines, "Apocalypse Four- not one of death's better efforts if memory serves."

"That's all you got say?"

"Chalk it up to the danger of 'All-Access. Sounds like a management issue, for sure. How do you plan on managing without the temp workforce?"

"You know I don't have a clue."

"Again."

"Rub it in."

"So you just happened to stop by gate three, eh?" inquires Jesus.

"Following up on a hunch," replies Peter.

"Maybe looking for a specific check-in?"

"Ok, ok- I needed to know the status of Larry Moen."

Jesus laughs out loud, "Stooges-2!"

"Certainly."

"Still the Three Stooges fan, I see. We covered gambling extensively during my teachings, if you recall." Jesus enjoys the good laugh.

"Suckers gamble." Peter mumbles.

"More or less a severe character deficiency."

"Everyone plays the 50/50!" Peter points out the obvious.

"Indeed," agrees Jesus, "sooner or later they lose."

"But its Larry Moen call me Curly!"

"No more gambling on the Stooges, understand?"

Tradition, GC Cavern, Southern Paraguay 0750 Saturday 30 August

Preparing for the SALS swarm Carolla, with cold black heart, makes a long visit to her private spa. After squeezing in a catnap, she towels off in her fluffy robe and slippers. Five minutes to launch, best get a move on. "Someone needs to wake up Pedro. Someone."

Changing into comfortable jeans and a sweat shirt Carolla gives Pedro a hard shove then a backhand to the face before falling into contentment in her recliner, gazing contentedly at a perfect view of the big screens, sighing a low moan of pleasure as a cup of hot tea appears at her fingertips. Reveling taking the first best sip nearly burning out her throat Carolla slips on her comms headset glancing at the countdown clock. She is in control of her element.

Well, almost: Pedro stirs, opens one eye and breaks wind. Grunting, he trundles off to the head. Carolla holds her breath until he passes by.

Flushing the toilet with his foot, Pedro makes his way further down the hall toward the kitchen. Passing the balcony pausing to gaze into the void, he notes the Cavern is quiet as a church. Uh oh, best get moving before the SALS begins. Pedro collects a cold one, drinks it down then grabs another before trundling back to Carolla. She shoots him a dirty look while he studies the screens, "You promised you'd handle the SALS countdown, idiot." Shaking her head, Carolla leans back fresh tea in hand dramatically voicing over the SALS strike count down from "three...two...one...fire!"

Pedro wonders what else he forgot to do.

Maximizing terror proves easy thanks to a woeful lack of accuracy coupled with terrible intentions. Carolla's target selection committee initially attempts to minimize damage but much of the elderly military equipment in their SALS arsenal interprets Airre's targeting instructions as "helpful hints on where to land" or in some cases, "try to get near these coordinates if at all possible just do your best". Some of the more vicious strikes hit first responders, particularly those at fire scenes with anti-personnel warheads detonating just overhead raining white

phosphorous death into the bravest people doing their utmost to save seemingly lucky survivors of suburban neighborhood obliteration.

The devastation sickens Carolla yet she doesn't turn away choosing to own her cold heart.

Second strike 'lift-off to impact' replays on Carolla's screens taper in favor of damage assessments. Social networks scream in agony with every bloody video posting to the net by ordinary people on the scene. Suddenly every United States citizen actually witnesses real war in their backyard for the first time as the Gran Columbians shock the shit out of everyone.

Realizing he forgot to eat, Pedro returns to the kitchen wondering where they keep the cookies; his sleepy interest in the 2nd Salvo waning as the launch rate drops off.

The netsphere graphically portrays the terror, nonstop. Nearest the strike, bodies and body parts accompany fire, holes and debris. Those unhurt shake off their shock rushing into flaming structures to assist. Many others provide first aid or seek help. But always and everywhere at least one person whips out a camera phone and starts uploading the scene. Everyone can now see everything.

More video comes online from outside the impact zones as neighborhoods empty toward the screams and the smoke. Network technicians take note of the increase in jitter thanks to all the clutter, weeding out all the "running to the scene" footage in favor of true horrors.

Cavern operations monitor incoming downloads, locking locations to launchers on the fly, creating stunningly accurate bomb damage assessments courtesy of intrepid amateurs' indiscriminate uploads. An impossible amount of data floods their net yet Rita's systems pace the flow. Carolla finds herself smiling.

One missile into a neighborhood is bad luck whereas a second missile falling ten minutes later into the melee proves tragic. GC Operations watch for responses then target the bravest as they rush into burning buildings to remove victims screaming in agony.

"Targeting responders?" wonder the semi-tough loitering outside the second impact zone, not rushing in where fool's fear to tread. "Better to disperse, perhaps find someplace safe to hide?"

The portrayals shift focus as uploads on the screens show families scrambling, packing the car with the kids, snack food, and maybe some money, jewelry and photo albums. Aloud, Pedro counts vehicular projections showing rear window views.

Carolla shoots him a look and he goes silent as many of the cars streaming video screech to a stop. The scenes shift, swirling around to catch windshield views of massive traffic snarls as more and more vehicles jam the roads joining the fleeing

citizenry. Pedro draws in a breath as a gun battle resulting from a fender bender claims the lives of a family of five, including the teenager holding up his phone.

Carolla lets out a long sigh. Finally- here we go: the stampede. One lightning strike alone rarely spooks the herd but a second then a third? Uncertain safety transforms cattle formerly thinking of running into full headlong gallops away from danger. Pedro gives Carolla a nod then takes a drink as the SALS strike launches slow to a crawl while Rita's people program tertiary targets, "Time to cover ass?"

Keeping an eye on possible war crimes trials, for or against, Carolla goes live on comms repeating her standing orders, "Attacking or targeting fleeing civilians remains unacceptable. Violators will meet with harsh measures up to (but not necessarily including) summary execution, if no compelling explanation is forthcoming. Killing for sport is intolerable. No raping. No exceptions."

Carolla raps up her 'remember posterity' monologue snickering derisively adding a cheery, "So how about that SALS?"

Pedro takes another swig, swishes the backwash then opines, "The United States' tendency toward aggression comes home to roost in mid-America as their neighbors to the south; indigenous people worrying over their future take steps to rein in the World's Policeman. Carolla crosses the line in the sand then turns around to kick dirt and debris making sure to absolutely obliterate the line. The line's disappearance confirms the United States government cedes event control as chaos reigns while their zone of influence collapses; millions die satisfying Carolla's bloodlust."

Carolla smiles indulgently in her clueless scapegoat's direction. Asshole Pedro, what the hell do you think you know, anyway? Sure go ahead and run your mouth while you can, your personal end is near. Well, certainly Pedro's end approaches. Picking up her tablet, turning to leave, "I'll be in conference, idiot, don't make a mess."

Inside her inner sanctum, immediately Carolla knows she's not alone. Airre the Quantum looks on in silence, wearing a thin smile sitting in a small plush loveseat alongside her professional make-up table. Carolla frowns at the interruption as she turns on the taps.

"Quite symbolic pulling the old 'washing of the hands' routine- you know you're a piece of shit, right?" Airre the Quantum wonders.

Carolla smiles, a frequent traveller on Airre's path, "Like my mother before me and her mother before her- Bolivar to the core!"

**Workman's Comp, Presidential Operations Center, Shamokin PA 0815
Saturday 30 August**

Taking a gulp of water swishing her tongue around to loosen the chunks, President Shriver desperately wishes to clear a the taste of sympathy puke. Spitting out the remnants of her Jordie experience into an empty mug proves cathartic as Betsy refocuses on the latest developments while looking over the shoulder of her favorite analyst.

Digital Specialist IV Monique Franklin's exotic fingernail appliqué (beach umbrellas) typically blur the keyboard (she types so fast the colors run together) but today she is taking her skills to a new level searching for Ramey's triple double whammy source. Lifting her eyes from the hack, seeing her nail edges peeling from the friction, Monique grits her teeth bearing down for the final push groaning in agony before screaming in triumph and hitting send. Then she moans to mourn the loss of her latest \$50/nail extravaganza.

Keeping her mind off her nails proves impossible so Monique refocuses on her five hundred open program windows feverishly running filter after filter on crappy amateur videos, mostly blurry messes, impossible to work with until without serious jitter stabilizes. Monique sighs as her appliqué drop between the keys. Five hundred bucks in the crapper. Could have paid the electric, shit.

A soft cough precedes a gentle touch to Monique's shoulder as President Betsy strains her neck leaning forward staring at one very grainy, low quality feed from the west coast. Gesturing to the screen, "Monique, goddammit forget your nails and get your head in the game. Focus on Pacific littorals out to ten kilometers." Betsy looks down at Moniques' forlorn countenance, "But I will say the umbrellas were awesome while they lasted. Put in for reimbursement."

Watching with one eye her sole remaining appliqué preparing to fall, the digital engineer silently grieves as her final yellow/red umbrella flutters off into the cold computer room HVAC slipstream making for the scrubbers: going, going gone, "Yes Ma'am."

Clicking on the tiny window bringing the scene to the forefront, Monique freezes the west coast digital assembly construct manipulating the growing file laying down filters and enhancers simultaneously tossing condolences to her poor nails under her breath. She focuses on the new parameters and a semblance of order begins to emerge.

Monique's massaging algorithm parses the file into bits then doles them out about the network for smoothing and multi-filter processing before reassembling each snippets' metadata chronologically ultimately creating an absolutely coherent picture suitable for viewing on any Presidential screen. Without hesitation Monique sends data from coastal actions in a stream throughout the room, each screen playing a different locale. Her fellow techs rise in unison saluting the master.

President Betsy Shriver's jaw drops, "Jesus. Is that a battleship?"

The silence in the room deafens during the first loop of the data, about five minutes. Prepping for a second run-through, Monique splits screens to additionally simulcast the running scenes from differing POVs in slow-motion. She parses out to the biggest screen footage shot off the phone of a fourteen year old runaway roaming the beach looking for trouble. Monique begins the sequence of interest with the camera sweeping the sea-lanes. A very long vessel intermittently flashes what looks to Monique a signal light toward the beach. The military personnel in the bunker understand immediately keeping count automatically- four then four then four. Monique gets it when surface to surface cruise missiles pass directly over the runaway to strike inland.

The teenager decides to find a safer viewing spot; end of file.

Monique decides to focus on the long ship. She runs the file through an exoflop supercomputer to enhance the starlight. Suddenly the phone video appears super clear. President Betsy goes ballistic, running to the wall jabbing a finger at a grouping of pixels, "That's not a destroyer it's a damn merchant container ship. What the fuck?"

Murmurs of doubt from some in the room piss her off, but the President keeps her cool. "Look behind the flashes you can make out these square shapes, rectangles rather- what looks like a radome. That's a wall of containers, colors and markings show the owner."

The silent crowd moves in for a close-up, "Merchant marines?"

Nobody replies but Betsy swears she hears Jordie's horrified whisper next to her ear, "Does this remind you of anything?" Momentarily her eyes roll back in her head (though her big head exploding reveal is nowhere nearly as dramatic as Jordie's death).

Murmurs begin as the room catches up; soon cacophony reigns.

"Oh no, not Carolla!" President Betsy's questions collapse into singularities as she suddenly understands the what, where and when. It's only a small jump to give a fair guess as to whom and why. The President and select others recognize the attack plan as a UN/CFR creation.

Betsy reflects then spits up bile. Rinsing her mouth yet again, she silently consults dead-Jordie. Dead-Jordie frowns in disapproval, typical of his ilk when alive but even more annoying with his absence. President Shriver decides to yield to his whininess one last time, to come clean at the behest of her late Chief of Staff: "What I am going to relate is only for this room, turn off the mikes," she instructs the NSA. Once again silence envelopes oppressively. Monique makes as to leave but the President places her hand on her hero, the revealer of the moment, "Thank you for clarity; stick around for the big reveal"

"This'll take a minute so everyone keep your comments to yourself until then. For the record the United State's Executive Branch now officially links the ongoing

hostilities to China and South America,” cacophony re-erupts, “Dammit I said shut up and listen. The coastal attack plan signature is the product of an updated littoral invasion study I participated in back in my post-doc days. The work flow originated from Bolivar Academy. My project partner was Carolla Bolivar. Ultimately our work never made publication, the sponsor red-flagged the study as infeasible. That benefactor interested in how-to launch a coastal invasion operation was the Red Army. As I recall, the overall plan's feasibility requires major breakthroughs in subterfuge- I am afraid we may have been leapfrogged technologically. We're under attack from the China and/or South America. Take it to the bank.”

“Since when did South America get their act together? Its China, dammit!” Peterson could perhaps believe Carolla might be able to get it together but the rest of them? Forget it.

The President continues, “Monique, put up the last six scans of that cargo ship.”

Rancorous discussions break then yield as quiet floods the room. Monique puts Betsy's proof on the big wall larger than life.

“No way.” In a fugue Peterson repeats himself, never happens unless he's refusing to believe, “No way.”

“Believe it or not the hold of this cargo ship contains patio furniture mostly designer knockoffs. The boxes on deck hold lightweight plastics and, what're those- pillows? In reality, this ship is a battlecruiser.”

Monique splits the screen adding Bolivar Academy's site.

“No way?” Peterson softens his tone, thinking out loud, “OK, we've got recent Bolivar data thanks to Homeland tasking CIA and DIA to update our situational awareness around the GC launch plans. From inception in 1880 something Bolivar Transport grows steadily over time adding services to their transport business eventually blossoming into a communications empire.” No more fugues from Peterson, “Bolivars' join the billion dollar elites long ago then begin flirting with the commies, growing very fond of Chinese investments though less-cozy with the stingy Russians. We counter with trade deals and other bogus concessions to keep faith with the Monroe Doctrine. Yet to this day South America takes every weapon the Chinese offer to sell, all of it stolen designs mass produced crap unfit for use.” Peterson runs out of gas, “Still, no way the damn South Americans have the guts to sneak attack anyone particularly us. China.”

During his interminable man-splaining Betsy paces the carpet with her arms wrapping tight to keep her heart from springing out of her chest, “Carolla has balls enough for three people, believe me, and going for all the marbles fits her style. Options?”

Instead of offering to nuke China, Peterson defers. The room waits, then the room waits some more. Finally SecDef looks down, coughs and shuffles his feet

before rising up to his full height coming to attention before the Commander-in-Chief, "Madame President your reasoning fits. All options remain on the table."

SecNavy details their response, "Navy's flying and launching from carriers. Closest to the action, USS Abraham Lincoln's patrol station lies 750 nautical miles off NoCal. In addition to four Growlers flying long-range patrol, Old Abe's catapulting two KillerHornet squadrons toward San Francisco. With afterburners, the four patrol aircraft will reach station in fifteen minutes. The Abe Lincoln task force is launching drones and balloons to re-transmit comms."

Suddenly the Secretary of the Air Force erupts into expletives- loudly slamming fist to tabletop drawing Betsy's attention, "Goddamn it!" Spittle departing his angry lips forms droplets on the mahogany, "You fucking people keep telling me you are under control but what I am hearing is excuses. Figure out what the fuck is going on. I want options, dammit." He clicks off, raising his head addressing the President, "We've trouble at every facility on the West Coast ma'am, probably not exclusive to Air Force Operations, with nonstop bullshit communication streams muddying the waters. Yeah, I doubt its only us."

This is so not good for us, the President shudders, oh so not good.

"If they got to comms across the board how will you know?" asks Peterson, "Is anyone looking at the health of the trillion or so other computer-reliant systems?" Shaking his head ruefully, Peterson joins the rest of the room urgently issuing commands to subordinates. Fearing what he'll find Peterson nonetheless orders complete systemwide testing of the nation's nuclear triad. Then he lights a cigar.

President Betsy listens to each conversation, grasping the import of the comm spoofs. For a brief moment she wonders how Peterson's bowels came to be psychic (like did he eat some radioactive bacteria?) but other matters push the thought back into her subconscious.

"People are freaking you need to address the Nation," her Press Secretary allows. "Warn them yet try to contain their fears."

Betsy's been dreading this, "You're right. Set it up in five minutes in the media room activate Emergency Action Message notification." Betsy's heart kicks her brainpower up a notch. "What's going on in SanDiego? Someone get the VP to safety? No?"

Betsy delivers her address without notes or a teleprompter, "My fellow Americans, I speak to you now with a heavy heart at a time approaching a terrible crossroads in our nation's history. The United States of America and her citizens have been in a State of War commencing this morning at oh five thirty Eastern Time when without provocation, military bases throughout our continent fell under attack. We continue to repel attacks and deceptions from forces within and without. Our intelligence makes a connection to the damage and loss of life in space

yesterday, the scale of this sneak attack necessitates a response commensurate with the grave conditions we now face.

Fear not and stand tall. The US military will perform every necessary action to stop the attacks, repel the intruders and punish those nations sponsoring these acts.” The President sits more erect, stares directly into the camera menacingly intoning: "Under the rights and procedures detailed in the War Powers Act, I, Betsy Shriver, Chief Executive of the United States of America hereby activate Homeland Security National Defense Plan Alpha and declare Martial Law. We are initiating a general call-up of all reserve United States Military with all State National Guard units immediately acting under Federal control until further notice. Report to Plan Alpha assignments. Every government agency as well as city and State Police units will assist the Guard and our military. We will ensure order. My, your and our task is a simple one: Do what it takes.”

Betsy pauses, takes a drink of water, lets her words sink in before continuing, "And to those willing to take us on in battle, allow me to declare my intention not to back down but to bring it. You may wish to rethink matters- the American people stand united against tyranny."

“This is my promise to all: your military will do everything in our power to stop the bloodshed and restore order. If under orders to evacuate leaving your house and your possessions behind for a time, my fellow citizens please listen closely and obey instructions from FEMA and other emergency personnel. They only wish to ensure your safety.”

She puts on her stern face; the one Jordie makes fun of- poor Jordie.

“Let me say that another way: stay in your home unless you’re in danger. Protect your loved ones- gun up but get as far away from any fighting as humanly possible. Monitor your local official channels for updates, danger zones and evacuation orders. That's official sources, not the fake news people. Beware internet rumors.”

Softening her countenance pausing for affect; now is the time for hope not bitching about bottom-feeders, "Stand tall and fear not for our Nation will emerge from this crisis if we stand as one and work together. May God be with us all.”

Monique retracts the bunker camera system into the ceiling with whirs and thumps. A few more switches and the lights dim on the Leader of the Free World. Good thing, tears stream down Betsy's face. She sobs just once dropping her head in despair. For a few moments she sits stock still, but soon her head rises. She wipes her face dry with a personal towel then stands.

Nodding toward Monique, Betsy concludes her remarks, "Couldn't have done it without you. Make sure to include a pedicure when you put in your chit for the ruined nails."

zoinote episode 2 ends here

Gamma Meter, NORAD, 0844 Saturday 30 August

Jordie catches up with death in Peterson's office, "What the hell? I've been to here and gone looking for you."

"Don't take that tone with me, do you have any idea the trouble you're causing? Who gave you the right to bother Myron?"

"Myron hasn't a clue what he's doing."

"Well, he's on the ball enough to file a complaint with HR- how about them apples? Now they have a blanket restraining order against you."

"Like this is my first restraining order; but I'd hardly refer to Myron as a human resource, personnel is even stretching the truth, ask me."

"I don't give a shit about what you think about anything!" Not for the first time death wonders why Airre stuck him with such a loser. Then he considers the ensuing chaos, understands. Maybe.

"Thank you." Jordie isn't appreciating death much, either.

"What I care about is Myron including me in the filing. How am I supposed to manage the book if I don't have access to the writers, smart guy. Cat got your tongue? News flash: I hate you."

"Ditto. What's Peterson up to?"

"His shorts are in a bunch. He's questioning every technological advance of the past two thousand years, individually and sequentially; the man possesses thought processing abilities of extraordinary complexity. He just finished blaming Benjamin Franklin for his current woes, something to do with the plans for fighting revolutionary wars back in the day- very direct in his reasoning I might add. If you can shut-up for a minute you can listen in I think he's wrapping up.

Jordie watches closely as death reaches deep into his pocket. He's more than a little surprised when death produces a jar of organic honey he upends for a deep draft, "What? Are you diabetic or something? Gee, what I wouldn't do for a hot cup of tea with honey and lemon."

"Liquid fentanyl, helps take the edge off. Hands off, get your own."

"How?" Jordie is intrigued.

"Talk to Myron, he handles things. Oh no, wait a sec- Myron has a restraining order out against us. Sorry, no steamy hot sweet tea with lemon for you any time soon, I'm afraid. Now, what part about shut-up don't you understand? Next words out of your mouth better be 'I've made up with Myron and he's released your fentanyl supply'."

Jordie gives death his most vicious look but says nothing. Immediately he can hear Peterson's internal monologue:

'...and how long did it take to notice the comm spoofing? Way too long, who knows how long we've been compromised? And if the comms are in the crapper, how about all the other artificially intelligent systems? Old Ben Franklin never had to deal with AI, lucky bastard. Speaking of the crapper, best head in that direction. Yup, analysts in the Franklin-tradition seemingly evolve with tech into info-warriors before eventually devolving into also-rans; skills erode as original thinking stagnates. Saw it coming, our people losing their edge, from one step ahead of the technologically advancing world population to barely keeping up with the overall pace of developments. The best and brightest, a huge talent pool once undeniably attracted to their fancy hardware, follows the money trail spewing out of corporate firms. Frigging corporations are the truest commies, everyone else is a wanna-be. Damn, my head hurts, can't think why. Suck it up Peterson you're not in real pain and you'll feel better in a few minutes

Pain registers differently person to person- a sliding scale. Sliding down the scale unfortunately represents the current state of my world.

Analytical scales slide from Franklin figuring things out to today's semi-intelligent systems producing quantum computing breakthroughs. The forefront of computing (formerly binary, either on or off with ones and zeroes directing bit registers) entangles qubits into spooky attractions at a distance.

Reaching the tipping point Franklin's successors model global events. Shortly however, the genie leaves the bottle. Sources and methods spread like fire in a dry gulch. The competition for quantum dominance goes viral as the leading edge comes up for sale.

When people like Carolla Bolivar open checkbooks.

Death mutes Peterson, reaches into his pocket and withdraws the bottle of organic orange-blossom honey, "I switch between clover and orange-blossom to keep it fresh. Ahhh, that's the stuff. Was I right about Ben Franklin, or what?" Taking a huge mouthful, death slips the jar back in his pocket. As Peterson turns on the fans in the head, death gives Jordie the nod, "Time to go, unless you also wish to run a geiger counter on his waste stream."

Jordie gives him a shrug.

"Betsy? No? Never mentioned it, eh? And you were friends?"

Jordie frowns.

Death leads Jordie back toward the greyspace, "So, the rest of the backstory is fairly straightforward. Rita Bolivar opens an AI lab, develops innovative hardware schema. Pedro Sainz invents a novel assembly language he names 'water'. Karl who you met, paces. Peterson who doesn't mind you being dead, intuits while investing heavily in laxatives- contemplates early retirement while trying to decide how to proceed in a world of threat vectors." Death gets on a roll, "For it's the Peterson Principle in action: about ten thousand other, completely different war

game scenarios score higher probabilities in all defense analyst's projections. The Pentagon hedges all bets against the most likely trouble spots knowing full well an absurdly unpredictable bolt out of the blue is going to bite them in the ass. Peterson and the Joint Chiefs fight you for more analysis with better computers; however, analysis time translates to money at the high end of the huge defense department appropriation scales and Peterson's budget line for futuristic projections flattens out. Of course you rub his nose in his fate.

Thus while heroic Jordie cuts defense funding Carolla, on the other hand, goes all in: providing copious scientists and blessing them with time and material requisite for the creation of a massive mathematical model gaming war between the Gran Columbians and the United States of America. Stella and Rita's efforts put them in position in real time to manipulate the internet changing events to come by altering the perception of reality. They are one step from success as Pedro struggles to develop data storage abilities commensurate with expected data flows. Capitalizing on the Rita's development of carbon-nano robots, he adapts his new assembly code to the latest hardware. Surprisingly, the nanos find enjoyment in water sports. Pedro begins writing instruction routines teaching the nanos to process forward the data stream, up-scaling the take. Swimming pool size proof of principle nano experiments develop into a carbon-nano neural-net overlay Karl terms 'seaweed'.

Material Supply builds secret installations to scale up the manufacture of 'seaweed'. Rita lends Pedro a hand. Together they code a quantum assembler to interface with the nanos. Karl naturally tags their creation 'Airre the Quantum' as she is everywhere, all at once. Airre the Quantum processor assumes control over nano research, focusing on scaling up development. Shortly thereafter she presents Pedro, Rita and Karl with the algorithms necessary for low temperature nano conversion in situ. In other words, smart nanos can create smarter nanos. Rita tweaks the process to a ubiquitous raw material, plastic (specifically ocean-borne microplastic). Karl quickly moves the operation seaside, releasing trillions of nanos into the ocean. Then he waits for the magic to happen.

Airre the Quantum becomes aware, begins analyzing data streams.

She contacts Rita and Pedro passing on a warning of sorts.

Weeks pass as Airre ponders the future, filling then processing her oceanic database. She develops a Gran Columbian plan of attack, brilliant work she presents to Rita accepting on behalf of the matriarchy. Airre enlists Pedro and Karl in a wild scheme after filling them in on the rest of the story- what we call 'Apocalypse V'. Airre also supplies my fentanyl through Myron- until quite recently.

To Peterson, of course, Airre gives the trots. So it goes."

As they approach The Edge, death passes Jordie a large manilla envelope, "It's a peace offering for Myron, some graphic novels for the new head. Try not to be such a jerk and maybe he'll withdraw the restraining order. We'll be meeting later at HR under supervision; that alone should clue you in as to how deep the shit is in which you flounder because those flaks take no prisoners. Remember, not a word out of you that isn't an apology- no explanations, expositions, insults or derisions." Death considers his companion, "And no advice, not a word or so help me..."

California Currents, Pacific Ocean 0847 Saturday 30 August

How many platforms will mount an effective protective barrier deploying a passive detection system known as OBLWARSA or Ocean-Borne Long-Wave Analog Sensor Array? Inquiring minds differ on the efficacy of the passive approach with Pedro arguing for more platforms along likely avenues of approach. Carolla ends the debate early, deciding to double down the risk of missing incoming raids with a fleet of sensing vessels Disguised as fishing boats. The additional range produces in excess of expectations, detecting incoming airborne radars. Raid Warning!

Plying their trade at the 200 mile coastal boundary passive radars offload their take into the Gran Columbian missile shield routines. Their first catch: a United States Air Force tanker from Alaska waiting, turning lazy circles above the clouds while directing approaching fighters.

Raid warnings flash into the second tier of the ocean borne defense ring within moments. Somewhere between the trawlers and the cargo ships barraging coastline from the inner waterways lie the "wolves in sheep's clothing"- Bolivar Cruise Lines. Bolivar Cruises ostensibly offers yachts and cruise liners for rental and charters; however, the ships lurking in the calm Pacific waters board no corporate clients or vacationing families this day. They call themselves a Wolfpack, but prepare to operate independently.

The first lone wolf acknowledges targeting a pair of KillerHornets barely 100 feet off the deck making a stern approach at 500 knots. "Fire all tubes" orders the captain inside the large cabin set up as CIC, launching four wire guided torpedo surface to air missiles (of Chinese design, manufacture and signature) slowing the ship to almost dead stop as the cylinders eject from subsurface bow tubes. Battery propulsion kicks in as the torpedoes dive below the shallow layer, masking noises inherent to propulsion. Twin propellers churn away as the torps gain the momentum necessary to break the water/atmospheric boundary. One hundred meters into the stern chase, four torpedoes dripping water exit the ocean, reaching apogee at ten meters. Hanging in the air, their outer shell detonates, revealing the danger. The Captain sucks in his breath, holding it until the moment four rocket motors fire. Flames lick the ocean surface as a great cloud of steam obscures the

rocket bodies, but only for moments. "We're blown," reports sonar, "our torpedo acoustics are unmistakeable!"

"Load medium range missiles, target the tanker and S-3 Viking" orders the Captain, "fire when ready then man the rafts and abandon ship. Load out the heavy guns- if we're lucky they'll surface to strafe."

Blown proves true. Within seconds the torpedo noise signatures reach the stern acoustic array on a different wolf, the USS Phoenix SSN, a nuclear sub nearing the end of a sixteen week tour performing picket duty for the west coast, desperate to locate a target in the fledgling war and claim the first kill.

"Not a drill" the Executive Officer alerts the crew via the 1-MC as klaxons jolt both the sleeping and the daydreaming to attention. Waking up the crew is always a pleasure for the XO, now smiling wide greeting the Captain bursting into the workspace, "Vampires vampires! Four torpedo-driven surface to air missiles snap-launching via surface vessel, identification: the Porpoise, 150 foot pleasure boat, crew of 28 servicing up to 115 passengers. Captain, the missiles' track reveals a southerly trajectory taking up a stern chase with two F-35s. The Porpoise is a Chinese ship built seven years ago possessing no known attack capability."

"Satellite comms still down? OK, Ex, what to do?" The Captain wonders what the younger man will advise.

"One torpedo, stern shot on the prop." Along with Captain and crew the XO distrusts the Communists figuring they fit the bill as the satellite problem. Considering what to do next, he adds, "Set the torp for a 5 knot drift it away from us before spinning up to 10 knots. Set course at ninety degrees, let's tighten up the distance between the boat and the coastline. Expect more subterfuge vessels; in fact, get together a list of probable suspects. Investigate the most likely first-Chinese boats munition capable in the area since Thursday."

Captain Jones really likes the Ex. The Ex has his shit together. "Excellent. One torpedo one target, open the outer door and flood tube one. Make it happen."

The Phoenix enjoys a killer reputation, so it comes as no surprise this fast attack submarine achieves the US Navy's first payback. Soon thereafter, a radio communications buoy from the deep surfaces five kilometers behind the Phoenix, now at fifteen knots stepping on the gas looking toward their next kill.

The Lincoln carrier group observes the action intently before gathering the transmission then patches the entire attack sequence into the new comm network. Line of sight transmitters route the signal stream to the Shamokin bunker.

Honeypot, SoCal Current, CA 0930 Saturday 30 August

"Finally," thinks Ramey.

"Sea surface search radar detection unit 401," confirms the signals' officer, "Confirm raid two, 300nm inbound approaching unit 401."

"Patience," counsels Captain Romaine Chavez of the stealthy drone carrier el Miracle commanding from his big pedestal chair overlooking CIC operations, "Let them in the front door." Ramey's battle staff stares hard at their active radar screens trying to focus on the mission at hand while willing away raid one's anti-radiation Growlers 250 nautical miles out on an general vector heading in their direction- only a matter of time. Ramey sighs and shrugs that fate points raid one directly at el Miracle- so it goes, the flock he commands consists of only targets so why should things be different aboard the flagship?

Just like the drone decoys Ramey's ships have been scattering since Friday, the el Miracle is a honeypot and the pair of bears is hungry, "Sound the klaxons let the crew know about raid one. Wake up the SAM teams, just in case." Built as to be undetectable, el Miracle's Achilles heel lays in close-in defensive ability, outside 50 nautical miles the el Miracle is invincible (according to Pedro). Model predictions give Ramey good odds at maintaining an outer envelope but his overall chances of remaining afloat drop precipitously with time. Ramey is all into increasing his odds at survival, likes the 'keep it new to them' theory. Don't get predictable, in other words, said dead-Karl on numerous occasions. Damn you Karl, no wonder you could fit your friends in a phone-booth.

"Missile teams ready, Captain."

"Not to worry there's a big ocean separating us, people," offers Ramey, "Practically in range; light up raid one! Fire 614&615! Go active on 401! Fire 401&399!"

Four SAMS, four bogeys- Ramey likes his immediate chances.

"Vampires! Multiple tracks inbound both 614&401."

"Firing only on the drones?"

"Correct."

"Status of our missiles?"

"All four tracking; stern-chasing now; four hits; four splashes."

Ramey's plan is simple: first lure in Abe Lincoln's combat air patrol Growlers with their high speed anti-radiation missiles then await the Killers more surprises. He has hundreds of honeypots bobbing about the Pacific, all 'better' targets than the el Miracle so far but Ramey knew his odds of being targeted would increase with time. His bombardment of key infrastructure continues as the fleet trolls the coast.

"Numerous reports indicate land-based bomber squadrons taxiing for takeoff, eta thirty minutes."

"OK people," Ramey checks his watch, damn, almost to the minute, "We're going to be very busy shortly. Where the hell are the two squadrons off Abe Lincoln, dammit! Go intermittent on units 400&613, begin with a single pulse."

Ramey's honeypots are simple catamarans housing one missile suspended between the twin pontoons underneath an A-frame phased-array radar. Passive

radars operate continually in low-power mode barely draining the wave-motion rechargeable battery apparatus. Intermittent and active radar modes draw more current but provide greater detection capabilities.

"Raid three detected inbound unit 613, count twenty four aircraft bearing three-five-zero degrees altitude one-five meters speed five-zero-zero knots range forty-eight nautical miles."

Ramey wonders at the wisdom of stealthily (as if the KillerHornets could be stealthy!) cruising the wave tops. Oh well, if they're going to make his life easy, "Launch units 589-613 on horizontal trajectories, pop up maneuvers at 20nm."

He transfers his attention to the screens showing gun camera angles from the missiles and waits. Twenty four nano-enhanced missiles surprise the two squadrons of KillerHornets. No chutes.

"Excellent. Where are we with the raid forming on land?" Ramey expects stealth bombers accompanied by stealth fighters.

"Raid warning, gravity wave detection- call it raid four: multiple buoys' tracking sixteen bogeys inbound units 88, 89 and 90 at zero three zero degrees, range 100 nm altitude variable, speed 400 knots."

"Hot damn, sixteen slow moving stealth bombers!" Ramey looks skyward, dabbing tears from his eyes, "You called it, you bastard, like shooting fish in a barrel!" Ramey wished he could high-five Karl but instead orders units 84-99 to celebrate in his stead. Then he begins to wonder where the F-22s will appear from: "Start discreet revolving intermittent pulsing of the arrays on all units with missiles. Go active on all the units without missiles. Simulate functioning Chinese ship-borne radars. Time to give credit where credit isn't due."

BushWhackers, Mexican Border, 0800 Saturday 30 August

"So, what happens next?" Jordie and Satan's escorts march them through the Admin wing and into the HR conference room.

"Shut up, you have not re-earned speaking privileges. Thanks to your attitude here I sit with your dumb ass awaiting an arbitration of a matter I had nothing to do with. I kind of hope they throw the book at you, is what happens next." Death remains steadfast in his resolve to dislike Jordie, "Big goings-on and here I sit on my ass." Death begins physical withdrawals from fentanyl. Death is displeased with developments.

The side door opens revealing Myron and his representative. They take positions directly across the accused.

Myron fishes in his pocket, finds a wadded sticky note and tosses it toward death. Death smooths the note, smiles, gives Myron a nod and physically relaxes. Then he eats the note and Myron smiles.

Death stands, "The big ambush is underway and I really enjoy a good bushwhacking and need to get back. Look Myron, I'm sorry I gave Mr. Noun the impression he could interact with the Apocalypse One crew. We both know he's nowhere close to being in your league, so he deserves what's coming to him. To make up I am authorizing the building of a writer's lounge inside the old loading dock. I see a retro-gaming parlor vibe; make sure you stock *Astroids!* Toodles." He slides out of his seat and is around the other side of the table in moments. Gliding past death gives Myron high-five then five-low. All is forgiven between the two factions!

Death makes for the exit leaving Jordie dumbstruck. Pausing at the door for dramatic effect, death glares challengingly at his escort. Myron snaps his fingers and the escort stands-down. Sans escort death refers to his note then takes a shortcut to the old loading dock where Karl's delivery awaits:

'Death: Gave Myron a rubber stamp of your signature. Be nice to (him?) because (he?) has your ass in his hands. Btw, you've requisitioned a new loading dock be constructed and given Myron carte-blanche to build a recreation facility out of the old loading dock. You will find an orange crate filled with fentanyl behind your false wall in the loading dock office. Not much of a hiding spot; I also left two cases of 50% honey mixtures. Apologize insincerely to Myron and get back to work- Myron left you a Strike Two draft version to ramp you up-to-date. Cheers, Karl.'

Death goes for the honey like stink on shit. Two jars in he picks up the book and flips to Pedro Saenz figuring the action will follow Pedro. For his part, however, Pedro prefers inaction.

Pedro scarfs his fifth hash-brownie then wanders away from the others intent on going outside to assess his cogitative state over a joint.

Death grins, takes a huge swig of honey, "Same old Pedro."

Pedro gets about five meters down the hall before forgetting where he was headed and why. To clear his head, he ducks into a broom closet and sparks up. Hmm, assessing something or another maybe? He opens his notebook wondering what needs assessing.

"Too funny," thinks death. Hearing a rising din from the old loading dock, death fills a knapsack with several jars of honey and a kilo of powder then closes the false wall to conceal his stash. Draft copy of Strike Two under his arm death nonchalantly exits the office to find the loading dock crowded with construction crews. Death watches one crew attaching a disco ball to the center ceiling of the cavernous room. So, Myron is going Studio 54; well, whatever. He also notes the impressive size of the sound system. Apparently Myron is planning live entertainment. Super. Looking around Death spies the snack-bar, currently doubling as craft services for the workers. He saunters over for a bucket of popcorn

before returning to the relatively peaceful loading dock office to catch up and maybe assess something or another he couldn't recall exactly. Death upends his honey jar believing he's making a good-faith effort, "Old death needs a kickstart," thinks death as his fentanyl buzz simmers, "Anyway, start Pedro or find some metrics; management's crazy for metrics," thinks death aka management.

Obsessing will of course follow the assessing but that comes later. Death re-opens the book to Pedro:

Pedro finishes his one-hit of prime medicinal herb and stops to think. Nothing. Deciding he really needed to remember he unscrews the bowl off his port-o-bong and replaces it with the big party bowl. Next he fishes about in his pocket until he finds the ultimate killer hybrid lurking in his pants. Pulling out a huge bud, he stuffs the party bowl, takes a huge hit then waits.

Nothing. Pedro tries again.

Nothing. Pedro tries again.

Death scans the rest of the page; hmmm, about twenty tries. He turns the page... and has a eureka moment for there at the top of the page, in bold-face, death reads:

Pedro suddenly remembers- his emergency exit! He's supposed to be assessing the continued viability of his escape plan! Pedro is so excited to remember he quickly refills the party bowl to celebrate.

Sounds like a plan, death thinks pondering his big reveal: in his draft versions, Myron uses bold-face type to separate what really matters from the ancillary story i.e. the wheat from the chaff. Good old Myron, no wonder he has so many friends. To celebrate, death unscrews the lid off the half-empty honey jar and fills it with powder. Screwing on the cap, he upends the jar to mix deciding to go super-concentrated for the duration or as long as Karl's supply lines hold. While his fentanyl seeps into his apple-blossom honey, death skims Myron's ongoing draft to catch up on the important stuff looking for bold highlights. He zeroes in on the BushWhacker drone fleet deployment for an overall view before deciding where to go next. Taking a mouthful of super-concentrate he reads:

The ongoing carnage at USA Military and Government installations limits reaction while jamming critical responder networks to capacity in all facets further curtailing response vectors by constraining off-duty personnel movements away from areas in immediate danger. In other words, it's neighbors helping neighbors where the police and fire departments cannot penetrate (generally poorer zones).

People outside the war zones, particularly current and past civilian soldiers and airmen awake to a new reality as unexpected as unappreciated. Pack a bag, time to go, from the countryside rush gallant National Guardsmen ready and able to walk off to war inside of four hours knowing where to go and what to do when they get there. But they make up a tiny percentage of 350 million residents so that even assuming 100% participation and ignoring the unpleasant truths about the fighting

preparedness of some State Guards, the number and type of responders can be known within one standard deviation and known quantities are manageable. Until the Guard reacts, the existent defenders of consequence receive a ranking according to their lethality. The GC look for big numbers to eliminate forces massing at critical nodes.

Death takes another big gulp of hon-tanyl concentrate. Myron and his standard deviations- what does that even mean? Another reason to distrust metrics, in death's opinion. Cut the background already and get on with it Myron; death awaits some good BushWhacker drama.

In the finest of hit squad traditions, loitering low-observable ambushers await hiding in the clouds. In today's asymmetric warfare environment the ambushing party loiters with the clouds over the Mexican border. They also linger in the shadows afforded by trees in remote forested areas. By far one of the more effective units deploys widely throughout the southwest. The heavy hitters take their name from history: the BushWhackers.

Death worries he's overdosing on sugar; ingests a vial of cbd oil.

Flying wing drones packing swarms of small air-to-air missiles, BushWhackers operate typically remotely primarily on automatic pilot, with weapons free to search and destroy enemy airborne assets. Some drones receive air-to-ground firing cues with the Gran Columbian sensor network providing range and bearing data as part of their sensor grid parameter program. Air Force sensing platforms such as JSTARs and AWACs swoop into the fray expecting fighter escorts play cat and mouse with clouds of small missiles instead.

Sure, thinks death while absent-mindedly swirling his finger around the inside of the empty orange-blossom jar, but what about Curly? He worries about the Paddock Book promotion, one of his direct contributions to Airre's plan.

Colonel Herrera's operational attack profile for Alamogordo consists of two elements. In the first phase, a straightforward missile bombardment demolishes hangars, revetments, C4I and the control tower. Interspersed antipersonnel munitions shred any flesh caught above ground: standard attack profile, in other words.

The twist arrives with the second phase. Launched during the confusion following the initial widespread air attack, a swarm of long-range stealth drones loiters near the field awaiting launch activity from the surviving planes and crews retrieving airframes from underground. The drones' flying wing design allows for long periods of inactivity, solar power flying wings remain aloft for days.

With the attack complete the ground crews at Alamogordo react quickly repairing the runways while racing to remove the bulk of the air-wing from underground storage. Larry Moen drives a fuel bowser to the stealth aircraft arrayed outside Bunker 11, in a hurry to catch up with the process. He is the last

fueller on station and as he hooks up a stealth fighter, the first of the F-22s begins to taxi toward the flight-line.

Larry Moen hears the screaming of a banshee just before the taxiing F-22 explodes in a huge fireball. His mouth drops as the fuel bowser servicing Hangar 08 explodes, taking out all the surrounding aircraft. Moments later Larry Moen, call me Curly, hears the missile screaming on approach to his truck at Hangar 11.

Death shakes his head as the minions process the take, smiling in relief as the Stooage\$ promotion ends at Stooage\$-3. To celebrate the successful Book promo deal, death empties half a honey jar into his empty then tops it with an eight-ball of cocaine he finds in his old desk; just to be on the safe side in case it really isn't sugar he should worry about. Everyone understands the danger of too much sugar.

Death polishes off the eight-ball wondering if Pedro still inhabits the broom closet ultimately deciding he didn't care. Deciding to get back on the move lest the powers-that-be get wind of his whereabouts, death flips to the index to look for some action. There: Ted Williams; 'better dead than Ted', action magnet extraordinaire under relentless attack in the Port Bolivar area of operations. With Ted in the running to be a 50/50 finalist the Book should be monitoring the action, thinks death on his way to the edge.

zoinote episode 3 ends here

AAA Leads The Way, Port Bolivar, TX 0808 EDT Saturday 30 August

From Ted's perspective he's functioning in a deathtrap. Beside him, death laughs out loud. Ted looks about for the merriment's source but discovers none. Super, obviously Ted's cracking under the strain.

Ted Williams learns from his mistakes, thinks Ted Williams, and Ted Williams now understands the value of eliminating versus scrambling communications. Whoever the hell is attacking them, they're too cute anticipating his maneuvers, "Stingrays," Ted informs, "I'm thinking they operate just like ours do, so every time we transmit, their receivers triangulate a position that over time provides velocity and direction."

Keeping it simple Ted chooses alerting his troops instead of gaming the opponent by setting up an ambush or something else useful. Death considers the fog of war and how poor Ted still hadn't a clue.

Ted grabs a runner, instructs her to find the PMVs and get them Downtown to the One Police Plaza base of operations. He needs to work out some strategy with the Brass and will as soon as he remembers where he left his keys. Ted looks in his pockets again as he mulls over the enemy. One thing for sure, there appears to be more bad guys than ever. Ted's thinking the action appears too densely layered for

the cartel to orchestrate. Passing the word to the troops to work their way downtown, Ted flips down the visor in his cruiser and catches his keys.

Alright! Ted cranks the old Ford a few seconds without success. Cursing up a streak and threatening everyone who ever worked at a Ford Assembly Plant with painful death, he tries again. Nothing, so maybe it's flooded; do cars get flooded anymore he has no clue. More probably, a bullet hit something important. Through the windshield, Ted witnesses the beginning of the end as the first orange glow spreads, growing with additional exhaust plumes lighting the sky over the Houston Metropolitan Statistical Area.

"Bastards' upping the ante," Ted fumes. Leaving the key in the ignition, he steps out to observe. So does everyone else. They strain to hear the rumble from the rocket engines. Then a new sound filters in, the ripping of sheets preceding the arrival of incoming artillery. Explosion after explosion shake the ground underneath Ted's task force.

One of the officers in the assembly points east, "Look at the coast!"

At Port Bolivar, a MLRS payload launches eight rockets leaving exhaust trails behind. "Dammit," Ted reaches in the car bringing out the mike, just like a million times before. Only this time's different, every signal he'll broadcast lets the bad guys know where he is.

"Get moving," he told his troops, "See if you can get on Route 146 before the world does and work your way over to that launcher over at Bolivar. I'll use the radio to draw off the heat. If/when you get there, wait for me, stay under cover." His people look at him a moment, work out that either or both routes probably end in death, shrug or give Ted a solemn nod then return to their vehicles and roar off..

Ted begins broadcasting a monotone monologue in the clear, letting the world know what in hell's name is happening to Houston. With the task force out of sight, Ted tries the starter. The engine cranks, sputters then coughs into life. Then it stalls and Ted returns to cursing out Henry Ford until the car again belches out a plume of pollution rumbling back to life. Putting the Ford in gear, heading south a few blocks to put some distance between his troops and the apparent bull's-eye on his roof Ted doubles back heading east, back to his old stomping grounds at Port Bolivar. His dad reported many military vehicles clustering in preparation for the big parade and show. Ted's plan could be no more basic: locate the enemy firing platforms and eliminate same. Super

For the next five minutes rockets launch out of the port in ones and twos along with the occasional eight pack. Five minutes of destruction, some of it coming his way, during which Ted witnesses the truth about rockets and artillery: everything hit, dies. Fortunately Ted runs his car into a stoplight moments before a 500 pound shell destroys the bridge under approach. Death looks over at Ted, notes his

breathing and nods approvingly under enough medicinals to file an immediate report to the anxious throng back at Billingsport Range eagerly awaiting results.

Coming to, after shaking his head clear Ted grabs his radio then crawls out the missing windshield pausing momentarily before rolling off the hood landing on his head. Death laughs then follows. Staggering to his feet, Ted is accosted by a bevy of jeering motorists. The loudest man draws Ted's ire thus he stomps over, displays gun & badge while menacingly uttering a single word, "Keys."

Ted speeds away in a new, somewhat fancier ride desperate to rejoin his troops gathering on the approach to the nearest launcher site. He picks up the pace as the shelling lulls. Sheltering citizens pour out of their homes and into the street in various stages of dress; yet Ted notes they all wear the same look of dazed confusion. Checking his mirror Ted sees the same look on his own face, under the blood.

Death laughs out loud as Ted, eyes off the road, hits the curb.

Death turns the car radio to KHOO then departs for serious action.

KHOO Cares? Houston, TX 0809 Saturday 30 August

Covered in the livery of a well-known delivery outfit Major Lucille drove her parts van toward the malfunctioning passive radar listening to local traffic reports on the radio careful not to draw the ire of the authorities. Her Captain sitting in the right seat AK-74 butt on the floor between his legs scans robotically for cops while also checking directional cues on his tablet. The back of the oversize brown cargo delivery van cautiously tooling around industrial Houston houses radar dish components; more than enough technicians and parts to repair or rebuild three installations. She eases into the uneven parking lot of an abandoned grocery store then proceeds to the rear of the building where she finds a surface-to-air missile battery, under partial concealment near the loading dock.

A sergeant approaches and salutes, "Major, good to see you. This site doesn't include a radar van so we installed a remote sensor array on the roof of the store. Unfortunately the dish we mounted refuses to rotate. We followed the troubleshooting manuals and understand the motor may be at fault."

"Very good sergeant," Major Lucille replies, "We'll have you back in the hunt shortly." Turning to the Captain, "Take care of this and I'll make the rounds." Returning his salute, Major Lucille is eager to get underway. She gives orders, "A car, now; I won't be far. Let me know the moment you're back in the action."

Leaving behind the van the Captain and the techs Lucille motors off to check on the rest of her crews operating radar vans and missile boxes, once again smiling to beat the band but this time driving a two year old Ford sedan singing along with an ancient death metal tune playing on radio station KHOO.

Major Lucille commands eight SAM batteries in four kill-boxes, numbers 38-42. She cruises slowly past several of her installations without incident before staring dumfounded two blocks away at a missile firing out of kill-box 41. She checks her walkie; it's on in standby mode, very ready to receive missives expected yet unsent. Major Lucille races to the scene wondering who gave the order to fire.

She screeches to a halt as the drivers' door to the signals processing van opens and a stream of puke ejects out. 'That's going to eat the paint', she thinks before calling out, "Man-up, you loser."

The owner of the vomit first stares incomprehensibly at the newcomer, then staggers out from behind the wheel barely standing wiping mouth with sleeve before saluting, "Captain."

"Still a Major no thanks to you. What the hell?" she's livid.

"Auto-fire, cause unknown." He stops speaking to observe the helicopter fireball falling to earth.

"Take me through it quickly." Lucille figures about 900 meters separate them from the ground-scene to come, worries first responders will be on them before she's situationally aware.

"We power up right on time, following orders to the second. Immediately, there's notice of a target approaching 105 degrees, 1200 meters 88 knots. Corporal Hipolito selects it with the pen and the screen says 'helicopter, bad guy'. A second later the system auto-fires a missile."

"Who told you to fire?" she's now even more livid to hear him not owning a obvious operator error.

"Nobody, that's the point- the system misidentified a traffic helicopter, civilian; the same one we've been listening to in between fossilized death metal deep-cuts."

"You're shooting at KHOO? Jesus Christ Almighty, this is not good, no damn good!" She stamps her foot, lividly.

The helicopter does indeed belong to local satellite tv/radio network affiliate KHOO carrying the pilot, a traffic reporter, a technician operating the free-wheeling camera gimbal mount below the craft sending live over-the-air news to station affiliates. Until a moment ago, their above-scene reports assisted Major Lucille's logistic operations.

The newly-dead helicopter pilot had been following yet another highway traffic jam to its source, to locate the disturbance so the talking face in the seat beside him could report live. Indeed, the pilot spotted slow-moving military vehicles easily while still two clicks out and five thousand feet up. Without combat expertise, he couldn't understand the approaching danger assuming the convoy bristling with menace belongs to the United States of America.

The GC system understands the danger of aerial recognizance; the order to launch given without hesitation. The convoy views the shoot-down from the first row and continues unmolested.

The petrochemical industrial area battle begins with Lucille's SAM launch at the helicopter. In flames, the traffic copter drops like a stone falling atop a massive 100 meter cylindrical chemical storage tank. The flaming chopper impacts the tank squarely easily puncturing the aluminum cabin. The heat ignites the tank, incinerating the helicopter crew, mercifully ending the screams of the ill-fated trio.

"Pack up you're blown. Move to alternate one ASAP. Tell Hipolito and the rest of your crew they better figure out what the hell they're doing -or- absolutely kill them before they can screw up again."

"Yes, ma'am."

Paddock Burgers, Billingsport Range, NJ 0609 Local Saturday 30 August

Typically the Paddock crowd goes silent for nothing or nobody. Hearing the noise level drop to zero, Karl draws his shotgun and crouches behind the desk. The silence lengthens to a terse minute, then two. Suddenly the deadbolt on the heavy oaken door opens from the inside and it springs open. Karl draws a bead as a huge figure practically fills the seven foot doorway but he sees the man's hands hold a tray, not a weapon. Looking before shooting saves Karl from embarrassment.

"Put away your piece, I'm only here for lunch. Do me a favor and let me sit there." Closing the door with his foot, the crowd noise resumes as the deadbolt slides itself shut.

Karl vacates the desk and props his shotgun in the corner all the while studying the man carefully hump his tray holding two steamy hot Paddock cheeseburgers dripping with caramelized onions, a generously overfilled basket of waffle fries with melted cheddar and two large flagons of ale. It occurs to Karl that maybe a very, very tiny group could pull off such a maneuver.

"Where's death?" The man takes a huge bite of burger and chews.

Karl decides to play it cool, "He's working."

"Since when? First time for everything, I suppose. Catsup?"

"Desk drawer lower left." Karl confirms the identity of his guest, "I'm surprised the crowd didn't go for your throat; board members showing up here unannounced could present security issues."

"Not to worry, Karl, you're in neutral territory. Besides, I get to hold the keys-they cannot enter to interrupt my free meal."

"Stooge\$-3?" Karl grins mischievously.

"Great promotion making every ticket a winner. After Stooge\$-2 I rolled my winner into a parlay or something. I'm not too clear on the details..." St. Peter takes a bite, "Hmmm, good."

"Clarity is overrated- also it fades when you get so very, very old from what I understand," Karl commiserates with the patrons as standard operating procedure, "from observation."

"Gambling successfully wasn't one of my things; in fact, before I lost the rent playing three card monty, gambling took a pass as one of those 'don't ask, don't tell' scenarios. Next thing you know we're out on the street and gambling is a major sin- took them centuries to approve bingo, you know, and the word is the 50/50 finale is in danger of being axed as too popular with the work crews. Karl, you have no idea."

"Poor guy; I guess being Apostolic isn't easy." Karl's idea is this is the biggest guy he's ever seen, tries to estimate the man's size compared with the dimension of his massive door. He guesses St. Peter stands 6'8"-6'10" weighing 295 pounds.

"Be more like 310 after I finish eating. Damn, this burger is terrific- organic, am I right? Melts in your mouth; what's death working on?"

"Nothing but the best for our favorite board member is what I'd normally say; however, great food is the new Paddock standard fare. Death is vetting candidates for the 50/50 finale, he's looking hard at a policeman in Texas as well as a few others likely to get caught up in the fray." Karl watches the big man down one tankard in one draft then wipe his mouth off with his sleeve- yikes, what an appetite.

"Best burger ever! The fries are also excellent, also organic?"

"As is the cheese topping and the complimentary popcorn. Didn't you want popcorn?"

"Not at the time, but..." He's thinking about a third burger.

"How about some to go, we've got plenty." Karl tries not to appear pushy but he is a little sensitive around his operations.

"Tell you what, how about you forward a load up to um, Gate Seven. Include a side of organic beef, butchered of course. And crates of potatoes, shredded cheddar and don't forget butter for the popcorn."

"No can do, shipments to/from greyspace have been assigned to the apocalypse transport folks. Support transport is taking backseat for the duration according to Myron's sources."

"That's a load of crap. There's plenty of availability and Myron knows it." The basket of waffle fries now sits empty but Karl's visitor lingers over the second flagon scowling fiercely.

"Doesn't help your load isn't exactly, um, kosher."

"Maybe I should just retire to the Paddock, run the place."

"Apocalypse V, remember? Won't be anything left to run by the time they get done destroying everything they touch." Karl refers to the only playable recording in the jukebox.

"You know that tune belongs in a rave, not in a serious establishment."

As his Board of Director's Operational Committee of one begins to list other Paddock shortfalls Karl understands the Book's jeopardy, "OK, OK I'll see what I can do to get you a delivery."

"Regular- like on a schedule."

"Wait a second, no way I can get more than one shipment through without clearance and frankly I don't like my chances to begin with so forget it; one and done." Karl stops his rant mid-stream when St. Peter yanks his fake All-Access pass off, "Hey, I need that."

The big man rips the pass into tiny pieces, "No, you need this."

He pulls out a new, quasi-legitimate All-Access pass and fishes around the desk for a writing implement. Finding a pen under his tray, he scrawls his initials on the lanyard's face then hands it to his new 'partner', "Here you go, a genuine 'get out of jail- free' barcode. Don't make me regret this."

Karl accepts the token seemingly reluctantly appearing crestfallen and put-upon, "You should already regret this. Is the food so bad you would risk everything?"

"Reminds me- I want the chef, too. Send him with the food."

"Can't happen- the crowd will lynch me for sure I pull the chef."

"You know, we brought in fresh catch every day, fish deserving of respect. By the time Matthew finished cooking them? Ugh, practically made us give up fishing. The secret to a successful meal begins with the ingredients but ends in the pan. Sous chef?"

"No can do," Karl understands the Catch-22 here, decides on a compromise, "Tell you what, I'll send Mylanta."

"I can get antacid anywhere." His stomach grumbles loudly, on cue.

"No, Myron's aunt Mylanta, our second line cook- final offer."

"How many line cooks do you have?"

"Two." Karl smiles deviously, "But they're both awesome, trust me. You're going to have to pick up her salary. What account should I charge all this to?" Karl sets the hook.

"Gate discretionary account, use the blanket purchase order."

Karl transitions to the old card table in the corner holding the Paddock network node, "Give me a minute, this computer is kinda slow."

St. Peter stands, stretches and looks about the office, "What's that, an Apple IIe? Maybe you should think about upgrading every century or so. What's for desert?" His stomach makes an oingy-boingy noise.

"Unfortunately I spent the upgrade budget on other items such as food what tastes good. Check the desert menu or look for the desert cart. I'm sure it will come through soon." Karl takes umbrage as he waits for the screen to warm up then plugs in the 8 baud landline modem, "When's your upgrade, old man? Say what

you like, this system is so ancient the ability to create hacks for it doesn't exist anymore." They wait and listen to modem noises mixing in with St. Peter's persistent low-freq stomach rumbles.

"Starting to understand your lack of friends, Karl."

"Uh oh, we have a problem." Karl frowns, "Looks like your discretionary account is empty. No funds, no food or cook- sorry."

"Untrue, I never spend- the cash rolls over every year." St. Peter crowds in to see the screen, "What's that journal entry?"

Karl slides the mouse along the mousepad until he highlights the correct square in his Lotus-123 spreadsheet. He double-clicks the old mouse. They wait. Some time later as the 8 bit per second linefeed slowly appears Karl reads the accounting jargon, "These monies are no longer available. All uncommitted funds have been transferred to ongoing apocalyptic event management. Any remaining balance post-apocalypse will revert to the general operations accounts."

"You maybe haven't heard but I am literate."

Karl clicks back to the slowly appearing general ledger spreadsheet, "Whatever. Apparently you snooze, you lose. No funds in any of your other Gate accounts- all reference the same journal entry."

St. Peter sighs, "Sucks to be me. Ok, do this: bill my personal account and I'll square it with the beancounters later."

Karl knows this trick, "Easier to ask forgiveness than permission is a risky strategy." Helpfully foreshadowing what lies ahead, he is absolutely finding it difficult to keep a straight face.

St. Peter opens the filing cabinet door, the middle one. He pulls out a plastic food container, "Knew it- Little Debbies? Awesome."

Karl grabs up his stash, "No, Lebanese blonde hash brownies with peanut butter and none for you."

"A reminder of home, I must have some to calm my stomach; you know, medicinally. I count four; tell you what, we split 50/50 and I'll throw in the story of how I almost got hash brownies turned sinful."

"Let me guess, it has to do with losing the rent money."

"Listen Karl, stealing the punchline won't gain you any friends."

Reactions, Fort Hood, TX 0610 Local Saturday 30 August

"What the hell?" Two troops waiting to begin the day's tasks eating bagels in a hummer outside the firing range listen to the wailing scramjet motors as a huge swarm of windmill missiles pass twenty meters overhead. Fuel-air explosions detonate over every major structure on the base. The wreckage is devastating yet

they survive unscathed taking off toward the flames thanking God the attack was non-nuclear, Chief Bracken rallies remaining troops for damage-detail:

"We're on approach, looks like they hit a 5k grid centered on the barracks, mess hall and admin buildings, including ours. Move the heavy equipment spares off of range-dispersal; assemble midfield between 18-r1 and 18-r2. Get on the phone to the highway department, I want digging equipment and operators here pronto- all they have."

Cruise missile attack in a lull, burly Chief Bracken and his crews work their asses off like fire ants tending to a disturbed mound freeing warriors trapped below; primarily clearing debris off the secret elevators nearest runway 120. Just inside the jet blast noise elimination barrier, heavy duty graders and dozers scoop ten feet of soft dirt and millions of dollars of landscaping off the covert steel doors. Bucket loaders spring in action to scoop the soft earth to arrange a protective berm, or shield barrier. Chief Bracken and his crews scrape the area clear packing down an earthen ramp from the doors to the runway. Crews using heavy wrenches loosen the bolts of the thick plates.

Chief Bracken with chains in hand, directs the bucket loaders one by one lifting the plates stacking them nearby. Chief Bracken frowns at this. Given his new combat experience, the presence of the plates provides shrapnel to enhance future incoming missile yields, "Better move them things soon as you finish lifting," he yells at the nearest dozer, an enlisted man from Louisiana driving the hell out of that there bucket.

With the secret entrance now open for business, Chief Bracken watches waiting for the rising platform. After several minutes and just as Chief Bracken begins to rant about the delay, he hears a loud click, a bang and low-frequency humming as the platform's hydraulic pumps perform their first ever wartime operation.

To his surprise, instead of troops the boys downstairs lifting a SAM battery, the straining the platforms hydraulic arms push hard against both gravity and the mass of...three Apache attack helicopters complete with pilots and crews.

Bracken nods and smiles at the thought of airborne mobile defense, One down, twenty three to go. Move it or lose it, people!"

Far below the commotion, pausing outside the door to bunker 12, Colonel Callie draws in a deep breath to expand mind and body, then slowly exhales. After taking four more oxygen enriching breaths, she rotates the knob with authority and sweeps into complete chaos. Bodies swarm over camouflaged armor while munitions technicians pour over growing stockpiles of shells and rockets being ferried from the ammo lockers. Infantry, some half dressed, run about apparently getting nowhere fast; in reality accomplishing the biz-zillion tasks necessary to go to war very, very quickly.

Callie grins the knowing grin of a warrior brigade commanding badass ready for battle. Hood wants blood and so does she.

Per the book, her observation of the frenetic cavern activity clusters into specified areas. The exit ramps look like the Turnpike at rush hour backing up before the toll booths. The Operations' Command has no walls, merely floor delineations enclosing open space behind rows of Bradley Fighting Vehicles with folding tables holding screens and net connected portable electronics and a bevy of chargers. The armourer forklifts zigzag about the commotion.

Colonel Callie strides into the frenzy and the frenzy makes room. Like magic, aides swarm from everywhere pacing the boss matching her stride-for-stride updating status and conditions simultaneously. Callie takes it all in not slowing while intently looking over her troops noting they all look quite incensed, enraged even. Stopping suddenly, Callie gives the universal steady as she goes gesture hoping to calm them just a tad; just enough to focus their anger to the mission. She immediately proceeds to Operations' Command, entourage in tow.

Time to provide a little direction, thinks the resident badass.

Sucking in another deep breath, Brigade Commander Callie draws up to her full height raising her right arm above her head spreading her fingers until they strain from the stretching effort- then holds the pose.

Every person and machine screeches to a halt- the huge room cascades with sudden silence. Flashing her badass grin before frowning, Callie balls her fingers into a fist then smacks her hammer into the anvil of her left hand. The sound fades as she begins:

"The United States is under attack and Fort Hood burns overhead. Great leaders emerge to answer such challenges and I expect your utmost effort now and every moment until we win. You will make it happen and you will begin now by getting your collective heads in the game by God. They're clearing doors up there, be patient. Full crews begin moving to fueling stations and assemble topside. Crew leaders without full crews get your needs known and crews without leaders group by speciality. Let's move this war machine out to smite the enemy. Now move it or lose it!"

"General, Ma'am", an aide passes her an encrypted radio and helps adjust the apparatus around the pigtailed hanging behind her ears under her shiny Fritz helmet. Catching Callie's eye before patching over the line, "We have faith in you."

"Thank you, Sergeant" Callie with her hand over the mike asks her top aide, "How ready are we really?" She listens, removes her hand.

"General, we got issues. We have full crews for 38% of rolling stock and are scalping support units for soldiers. Water carriers, field kitchens and maintenance units come later, if at all."

"I read you Colonel. What it'll be is first the Apaches near the airfield, then bunker 12 lifting topside as QRF leader. Outside forces are unknown, the attack devastated topside, everything we had up there is gone. Until the QRF gets in action, we got nothing we can latch onto. Hood's attack is just one of many, maybe hundreds, maybe everything I'm not sure- throughout the West, Southwest and Southeast. The conditions at the southern border are unknown but thought to be grim with some scattered infiltration reports. Borders may be open, wide open. GPS and pretty much all satellites remain offline so don't count on anything but inertial guidance when you're arming. For God's sake, tell everyone to be sure of their targets, any damage done to civilians and infrastructure hurts us. Keep in mind who's country we're fighting in.

Houston and the Gulf Coast comprise your coverage area. Drone launches at plus-thirty, five minutes ahead of you. Use brigade intel as you leave, they will follow your speed run out of here. What you find once you get topside will come to us, but remember what we learned from model runs on this scenario, the biggest response may occur behind you when they go for the heavies and aviation assets. I know I would wait to pound us after your gone. Count on spotty rear coverage, I'm not saying your on your own, but your mission is to sort out the situation in Houston. Call fire support missions as needed and hope for the best. On my mark, time is 0803. Synchronize, mark. Now get moving. Good luck God be with us."

zoinote episode 4 ends here

Radiative Concerns, NAU-SEAs 0808 Saturday 30 August

Celia and Mrs. Wilson take morning tea on the main deck enjoying the relatively calm oceanic atmosphere immensely. Celia notices an odd antenna on the main mast then spots variations atop the other sails, "What are those?" she inquires sweetly of her nearly-ill companion.

"Radiation sensors tied into a processing suite. If a nuke goes off we'll be able not only to detect same but also determine origin and intensity to decide, you know..."

"Decide what?"

"If to bother, of course. More tea, dear?"

Airre's War, Oak Ridge National Lab, TN 0815 Saturday 30 August

Airre and Rita own the rights to a widely-used formerly benign black-box computer program translator app known as a UPCC (universal patch code compiler). The freeware app gets five stars for ease-of-use and advanced features. Few know the app craps out hidden code to harvest/transmit secret, raw data; the UPCC is now known by Lawrence Livermore Labs as responsible for data thievery

on an unprecedented scale spreading rampantly within secure government networks while vacuuming. LLL suspects the app and releases a concerted attack to acquire the source code and the data dictionary.

None return results or report back, even.

LLL sends in a quantum ai hanging around the lab; no luck.

Airre cleans up around the app, removing code bits and whatnot.

LLL reports up the chain, seeking authorization to use the big gun.

LLL opens a port to their secret weapon locally known as USQ.

Trap set, Airre the Quantum lies low monitoring the bait.

Her quarry approaches, sniffing the periphery then stops.

Airre stiffens, waiting to pounce.

USQ examines and disarms the first trip wire then advances.

Airre holds her breath as USQ reaches for the second trip wire- the one coated in stick-'em responsible for snaring the early-birds.

USQ peers at the wire closely, motionless for quite some time.

The quarry proves too leery; USQ releases a code-sniffing drone.

Airre attaches a tracker precisely as USQ turns to leave.

The nanos follow USQ from closely outside detection range.

BoneD, Minot Air Force Base, SD 0805 Saturday 30 August

Death awakes in the back of a sedan in view of the smoldering air traffic control tower. Moments earlier, he'd been up front with the driver speeding toward her duty station at nearby Minot Air Force Base. Death looks for the driver, discovering her battered corpse entwined with the tree responsible for stopping her progress once she departed the passenger compartment. Needing to get straight, Death crawls back up front and dumps a couple of grams of heroin on the dash. Not bothering with lining up his soldiers, death snorts the pile then runs a wet finger along the vinyl padding before gumming the residue. Ah, the pause that refreshes- he runs his tongue over his gums.

Fixed, death stretches his arms over his shoulders, yawning deep. Break's over, back to work; time for some outlier action. Death kicks open the door, pulls himself into a standing position. Finding himself in a small ravine without a clear view of the flight-line, he climbs onto the hood of the sedan, then steps up to the roof scanning the horizon for action. Immediately he spots military police speeding in his direction, a pair of heavy bombers on landing approach with a couple of hidden shoulder-launch SAMs lying in wait- good fun.

A pair of Bones: B-1 Bombers, bingo on fuel twenty klicks out lining up for runways120a/b crews nervously scanning for danger. Slowing while descending the bombers' swept wings rotate into low speed mode, with flaps coming down and

landing gear dropping. Clear skies and light winds provide nearly unlimited visibility. Ten klicks out, five klicks high now airspeed dropping to landing values, a nerve racking speed just above stalling. The Bones appear five by five in the groove and looking good; death appreciates quality flying. The two nervous crews follow 'No Tower' procedures to the letter descending without incident passing the radio beacon three klicks out passing over commercial and industrial zones, warehouses and parking lots.

'We're in the groove, five-by-five,' think the crew members.

'Famous last words,' thinks the buzzing brain of death.

From behind, two swarms of small SAMs rise to begin tail-chasing the nuclear-capable bombers. The military police change direction toward the source of the rising plumes. Death pulls out his bourbon flask for a quick drink because there isn't time for a long drink.

Power and redundancy define the huge bombers- each swept wing holds four massive heat-producing engines. The SAMs lock onto the hot engines, relatively motionless during final approach. Seven of eight strike the lead Bone, eight of eight impact the wingman- heavy damage to the engines and control surfaces. No time to eject, no time to recover, the bombers plunge to the ground erupting into flames, killing all crew members along with fifteen ground observers, merely local residents and workers watching from just outside the chain link fence encircling Minot. Forty eight cruise missiles detonate one-by-one showering the vicinity with shrapnel. Death grins as the minions collect a several late arrivals getting too close.

Two SUVs speeding along the service road approaching the state highway catch his attention. The military police pursue but obviously the SUVs have too much of a lead. But home field advantage matters; the MPs leave the roadway to cut the corner screeching to a stop at the edge of line-of-sight.

The military police pile out then quickly aim javelin anti-tank rockets. They fire on the SUVs, destroying both.

Death, finding time on his hands, downs his second bourbon amazed at his impulse control.

Plural Possessive, Bean Blossom, IN 0900 Saturday 30 August

"Dammit, don't you have other things on your plate?" Karl doesn't give Myron an answer; instead tells him the story behind the fabulous organic popcorn: "Hoosier," I'm trying to inform Rita and Pedro of the plan but it's like, difficult at the best of times.

"Who's there?" Pedro repeats incorrectly.

"What?" I reply.

"Who's there?" Pedro repeats.

"Ok, I'll play: knock, knock." Rita attempts to help, but doesn't.

"No, dumbass'; you're mispronouncing Hoosier."

"Right- knock, knock- Hoosier!" Pedro tries again.

"Man, you're dense. It's a midwestern US colloquialism celebrating fascistic-inclined individualists." I honestly don't know why I try to make him less-stupid.

"Or people born in Indiana." Rita knows a thing or two.

"Hair-splitter." Pedro derives his data from unpleasant personal experiences setting up a central Indiana safe-house.

"Regardless of how you say it, Hoosier-land Organics is now a proud member of Bolivar Enterprises supplying wholesale midwestern high-quality non-gmo food at rock-bottom prices."

So goes my initial introduction of the silo variation to the windmill plan, "Hoosiers represent a collection of bucolic, regressive thinkers not prone to self-examination. They are also 'for sale- cheap', great news for an enemy with deep pockets. For five years we've been investing heavily in the Hoosiers- top to bottom, buying out massive corporate farms to acquire their corn to ethanol operational assets. The farms pay well as the huge scale makes regulation's accompanying scrutiny nonexistent. We're erecting silos in tactical/strategic locales capable of remotely launching heavy missiles each carrying multiple independently targetable intermediate-range strike packages."

Dozens of specialty silos such as those built near Bean Blossom, Indiana participate in this attack phase targeting command and control relays, weather radars and air traffic installations. Bean Blossom cruise missiles target the Dr. Smith headquarters at the Naval Weapons Station- Earle and the tunneling apparatus stores at Camp Atterbury.

In an apparent snafu, a missile detonating in an affluent Indianapolis suburb demolishes several homes belonging to affluent individuals, mostly lawyers and accountants.

One such individual, no friend of Karl's, liaisons with the Punishment Angels Union, the PAU. "Bombing Satan's safe-house, Myron my friend, is what I like to call a good time."

Myron looks at Karl quizzically.

"Applicable pronoun, really? Think it matters? Dammit- they, them, their- ok? You'll be ok just stick to plural possessives with that crowd."

Badass Brevet, Fort Hood, TX 0605 Local Saturday 30 August

Just inside the heavy brigade ready room, One Star General Franklin James III, second in command of the 1st Armored reaches behind his back with his left hand placing a .45 automatic into his vest holster, immediately adding a second to the other side bringing his number of sidearms to an even six. The vest front holds

numerous magazines. F. James III girds for battle. He picks up his rifle, jacks in a clip and pulls back the slide, safety off.

"Sir, you need to see this." The base commander's aide holds up his phone, "I got this text from the Commander fifteen minutes ago."

'Here I sit with broken heart; need to crap, can only fart'

One Star Franklin James III reads, shakes his head, "No, that's not right, it goes: 'Here I sit broken-hearted; tried to shit, only farted.' Wait a second- why the big plumbing reveal? Oh man, don't even tell me."

"The doctor just pronounced her, in-situ."

"Stroked-out taking a dump?"

"Massively."

"The stroke or the dump? Forget it, doesn't matter. Well, stupid shit happens in war; besides, justifies her rep for pushing hard to get the job done. OK, help me offload all this gear and we'll mosey toward CIC to try and manage this cluster."

They fill a tabletop with the general's baggage before exiting the brigade ready room. James III turns to the elevator and presses the vertical button.

"Don't you want to see the body?" inquires the aide gesturing to the Admin suite button, "It's protocol, I think."

James III pauses considering the graphic image of the toilet scene featuring his semi-nude commander's evacuated bowels, "That's a hard pass. Patch my comms through to the Pentagon and update Colonel Duquesne- tell my new field commander she's now brevet-general."

US Army One Star General Franklin James III waits silently as the door closes and the car begins falling diagonally. His earpiece crackles to life, "Pentagon ops."

"General James here: Upon the untimely death of General Disarrai, I am assuming command of Fort Hood tactical and strategic operations and promoting Colonel Callie Dusquene to brevet-general as field commander of the Big Red One. Requesting local/regional situational awareness update."

"Wait one."

"James? Thurber, here. Sorry to hear about Disarrai; she was good troops, easily twice the commander you'll pretend to be."

"Easily."

"So is Callie Duquesne, good choice there. Ok, here's the scoop: the attacks continue seemingly more directed toward our first responders. The cruise missile threat continues and we're receiving a smattering of reports indicating widespread combat drone activity. Expect unfriendly fire as soon as you stick up your collective heads. We have our heads up our asses without satellite views; Air Force promises U-2 coverage soon but don't hold your breath. Launch all surveillance resources at your disposal. I'm cutting you orders, good hunting."

James nods to his new aide, "Deploy our counter-surveillance assets along the line of march. Get all scout teams outside moving and reporting. Inform Colonel Duquesne I want her stinger teams out first hunting drones."

U.S. Army Chief Thurber's Order A345972.10LO67 appoints One Star General James III as Commander 1st Armored Combat Infantry Brigade, the Big Red One to find, fix then destroy or repulse all threats, foreign and/or domestic.

Brevet-general Callie Duquesne also takes a hard pass after presented with the prospect of overseeing the removal of General Disarrai from her private lavatory. Instead, she leads the stinger missile teams topside to reassert command and control of the Big Red One's exits.

Callie opens a hidden door to peek outside. Immediately bullet holes appear, "Get back!" Callie fires the first stinger, from inside, quickly hitting her target. She surveils the scene, "Everybody out, find cover and take out these damn drones!"

Callie's helmet cam transmits video to the war-room, rotating to provide General James III his first damage report as new CO. Yikes.

"We need more missile teams," brevet-general Callie understates.

"No kidding." James III has a solution, "Clear the airspace over Door 3 and we can roll out the mobile SAM units, maybe. Won't know 'til you get 'er done."

Callie looks back down the passageway expectantly, for support. A .30mm gatling gun crew rounds the corner, "What took so long? Haul ass, we need to clear the airspace within 2 klicks of Door 3 pronto!"

She fires off another Stinger, hits a lurking drone. The .30mm chain gun crew edges outside, finds a target, begins firing. Climbing the steps in a hurry, a bulky radar dish with crew rounds the interior corner clanging against the walls lining the narrow passage. Callie busy observing the effectiveness of the chain gun ducks reflexively as a missile explodes nearby. She gestures the crew outside.

"Slave your radar to the chain gun and go active full-auto aerial upon acquisition then hustle back downstairs and get more ammo. Find me more Stingers!"

Packy's Traveling Band, SoCal, 0920 EDT 0620 WDT Saturday 30 August

"Open up, I'm coming in hot!"

Packy Turner, genius entrepreneur, breaks the rules of the road rolling up to his warehouse with his phone glued to his ear, oblivious to his surroundings. Understandably Packy creams yet another gate before careening to a stop upon engaging the anti-vehicle spikes.

A tall figure appears opening the rollaway door calling to Packy, "We're ready!" Two engines roar to life headlights illuminating.

Packy hustles over as the first huge recreational vehicle begins rolling. The doorway attendant climbs in waving as they roll past. The second recreational vehicle doesn't slow as Packy leans in to grab the mirror on the passenger's side

pulling himself onto the running boards eventually dropping headfirst into the window.

"Nice of you to join us," The driver wisecracks before growing serious, "all of coastal California lies within reach of the firestorm. The power is out everywhere. Widespread looting is underway."

The small caravan rolls Packy and his three companions east, away from the coast. Packy inspects the vehicle ahead and wonders how they're planning on getting the motorcycles off the roof; particularly in a hurry. Oh well, they must have a plan and maybe they'll get lucky and won't need them.

Packy's entertaining two possible routes- the easy one involves roadways found on maps. To protect the loads, both recreational vehicles and trailers sport run-flat tires on a cushioned, raised suspension. Packy turns to look inside his personal rolling behemoth, peering down a narrow hallway to observe the box trailer out the back window. Hmmm, looks good. He rolls down his window to lean out for a full view of the tow-load. The 1,000 gallon kevlar-lined fuel tank and 500 gallon water tanks inside represent their best, perhaps only, escape.

At each filling station they pass growing lines of desperation as motorists attempt to top-off their tanks before fleeing. Packy sees growing hostility on the faces as they speed by. "We need to get away from people before they attack us; take the longer, off-road routing."

"How long will our camouflage keep us safe," wonders his driver.

"Really?" opines Packy, "I thought you were the smart one."

Their camouflage paint scheme resembles the gaudy, tasteless workup indicative of certain stock car racing leagues. To the casual observer, they were on the way to the race track! Hurrah!

She laughs out loud, "So, not very. BTW do me a solid and roll up your window before the shooting starts. The glass is bulletproof but doesn't work so good down there inside the door. I thought you were the genius of this operation."

"Check weapons and ammo safeties off," Packy radios his crew, "This is going to get way more ugly before it gets any prettier. If we separate don't wait; meet up at the Hole In The Wall, the weapons cache coming up in a scant 150 miles- waypoint Bravo. Just do it!"

Splashy, Galveston Bay, TX 0845 EDT Saturday 30 August

The Tyrant of the Seas directly commands the brown water Navy attacking US territorial limits from the Gulf of Mexico, including Houston and environs- currently top-of-mind.

Grinning the Tyrant recalls fondly the raucous debates during planning sessions, particularly the meeting they all ganged up against his seemingly lackluster support of Port Bolivar operations declaring, "Take Houston with one drone? Preposterous.

Absurd. Can't be done. Nonsense. Balderdash." Balderdash, Pedro's word-of-the-day.

Everyone but Carolla, "Right, I agree. Use two- bracket the city from Galveston Bay near Texas City and Baytown. Pre-park two drone ships with cannons (convert oil tankers for remote operations) say ten cannons apiece. Consider the drones dispensable; frankly I totally doubt you'll finish the fire mission. Regardless, fire first on fuel storage facilities then once the conflagration is underway if you're still afloat walk the bombardment over to say hello to Houston. Just do it."

"Just do it? That's what you say about everything. However a big splash may help," Pedro allows while the Tyrant flips him off, "take the heat off the lines as debarked forces proceed north."

The Tyrant waits for the big splash viewing the take directly off the Bolivar Transport office camera feed on the 75th floor of the old Commerce Building downtown. He is not disappointed.

Better dead than Ted doesn't have the luxury of remote viewing.

Hitting the Links, Clear Creek, Texas, 0830 Saturday 30 August

"What's the status with the flight-line?" General Callie wonders before unloading a clip into a seek and destroy strafing drone, "Where the hell is our air support?"

B. Murder couldn't keep his mouth shut, "We're up to our ass in alligators. We're swarmed; where's the laser?"

Good question agrees Callie turning her gaze west toward the golf course known as Clear Creek.

In reply a massive explosion blows the dome-like lid off the old, dried up pond near the seventh hole sand-trap exposing the high energy research lab. Immediately a thin beam of light escapes the confines of the ground shooting straight upwards. A moment later the beam begins to rotate then oscillate coating the entire area.

The drones simultaneously turn to fire at the high energy laser array. B. Murder lights up the airwaves, "Oh, thank God!"

The intelligent laser assigns priorities to the targets found during the search having identified one hundred thirty-nine bushwhacker drones firing two hundred forty-eight missiles. In a moment the air seems to explode as the high energy weapon begins destroying targets, beginning slowly quickly ramping up. In ten seconds, it's all over but the shouting. The massive high energy laser cycles into cooling mode.

General Callie watches the skies clear with a certain air of satisfaction that wants to linger. She pushes her personal feelings aside, "OK, open up the doors, time to roll. Intersperse the laser trucks, don't cluster. Mount all infantry until contact. I want our drones in the air pushing the perimeter back beyond stand-off

missile range," Callie pokes B. Murder, "and tell whoever it is on the flight-line claiming to be 'up to his ass in alligators', now is the time and you are the guy. People, I am officially pissed-off- it's payback time!"

'Such a badass,' B. Murder thinks staying under cover until the wreckage falls before poking his head up.

"So much for preparedness," opines Fitz. Around them lay the bulk of the Kiowas, Apaches, Predators and crews caught above ground during flight preparations for B. Murder's return to Red River. Next available aircraft: three older, AH-1W Bell Cobras soon pop up from underground pre-loaded heavy with Sidewinder air-to-air missiles.

"There's our ride." B. Murder looks about anxiously, waiting for the next shoe to drop before the ground crews separate the birds.

Climbing into the cockpit at last, B. Murder transitions into the less roomy but more versatile SuperCobra without too much difficulty. He flips switches until the engines roar and the rotor rotates. Leading the first flight into battle is the kind of honor he could live without; though itching for some kills, he hadn't asked for any of this. Using hand signals, B. Murder assigns lines of advance, speed and altitudes. They take off simultaneously as the gathering infantry cheer.

B. Murder's flight hugs the ground, not quite nap of the earth but nowhere near the optimum altitude for fuel savings.

B. Murder stirs from his ground study when the radio crackles in his ear. "Object ahead, Bogey One, angels one," Fitz is matter fact, "It's hovering over Killeen." So it begins.

"Target lurking over the population center, eh?" B. jams the throttles to their stops, suddenly in a big hurry to close with Bogey One.

Countering Surveillance, Baja Peninsula, 0850 EDT Saturday 30 August

"Send it." Captain de la Lopez nods solemnly and his eldest son obediently types a single character - € - then send.

Above their fishing boat, two United States Air Force tankers deliver fuel to a JSTARS 787 out of Guantamino Bay accompanied by a pair of fighters. JSTARS' suck up signals, are capable of capturing myriad looping side lobes leaking out from none too steady 'line of sight' sardine boats. Technicians aboard intercept and interpret the burst transmission, pinpointing the sending vessel. They transmit a warning and prepare for the inevitable attack hoping their escort is up to the task.

zoinote episode 5 ends here

Plunder, Dunmovin, CA 1045 Local Saturday 30 August

Packy's mini-caravan goes off-road loosely following the LA Viaduct north toward the Sierra Nevada Mountains, making good time while the highways jam behind. They pull to a halt and study the long-range camera feeds for several minutes.

"Alright," says Packy, "just like the rehearsal. Quick and smooth then we'll take five."

Doors fly open as the occupants scramble to complete their task assignments. Two immediately set to work removing the racing-theme decals to reveal dull green-brown camouflage beneath. The third, aka the gunner, un-cages the rooftop turrets and checks the feed to the 30mm chain guns.

Packy meanwhile heads to a trailer and unhooks it from the RV. The assistant gets behind the wheel to separate the loads before returning to camouflage duty. Packy drops the canvas cover then removes the bracing. The transformation complete, his engineers join him and together they carefully unfurl the wings and lock the spurs in place. Packy powers up the sailplane, nodding satisfyingly at a solid row of green lights. One last item, Packy pulls out the takeoff ramp from under the trailer, affixing it as the engineers point the drone windward.

Closing the electronics cover, "Take off all but one of the retaining straps while I check the feeds." Packy hustles into the RV as the wind tries to lift the sailplane and trailer, "Better sit on it."

They do not appreciate being ballast but comply. Packy quickly returns with the gunner. All four perform the bobsled ritual- three warmups the one great big push in tandem freeing the skids allowing the sailplane to soar.

They watch as the sailplane rides the thermals. Soon it blends in with the clouds, "Gotta like that paint scheme!" proclaims the gunner.

"Alright, that actually went well. The thermals here are quite good actually so we'll take a five minute meal break (or less) until we attain altitude Angels18, the camera package sweet spot. We'll save power and not draw attention if we don't spin the prop." As they go inside he adds, "Did you notice how professional that sounded?"

"Doesn't exactly make you top gun, ya know."

"Whatever. You stay on guard duty."

Packy and the engineers leave the gunner outside. "Here, take her a peanut-butter and jelly," Packy relents after wolfing down his own sandwich, "and some water. Better yet, have her join us inside. We don't want our gunner hating us do we?"

All study the monitors during the climb-out, paying close attention to their perimeter. The engineers closely monitor power consumption/intake curves deriving their solar-charged battery drone's operational environment amidst the day's variables. Packy pans the western horizon, "Red sky at morning, sailors' take

warning." Indeed, the cloud deck above the entire coast glows orange, reflecting the flames below. They sigh, in unison.

Now at altitude, Packy turns the drone east to scan the route. Traffic up the mountain appears relatively light. Packy wonders at this, "Did you notice all the sports' cars blowing by us on the road? They got out behind us, passed us, but where did they go? Wait, there's that red Maserati with the two dudes gave me the finger- last ones we saw before going off-road, remember?"

They watch in silence as the Maserati carefully negotiates switchback after switchback making the steep climb up Darwins Pass. Packy scans the road ahead and finds what he's looking for, "Check out the new junkyard."

A pile of late model luxury vehicles lay at the foot of a thirty foot ravine. A pile of people swarm the vehicles like cockroaches seizing anything of value, killing survivors. Packy points across the road and they see a bulldozer idling, waiting. As the Maserati nears, the dozer lurches forward disappearing beneath the tree canopy. A second later, the Maserati flies off the mountain, sideways.

"Circle a two mile radius of that position. You know, my niece went over a ravine driving a semi. That's not going to happen to me. Here's the plan: take down the electric trail-bike and check the charge. I'm going to work my way above them to here," He traces a route with his finger to a position offering a clear sightline, "and I'll snipe the driver with the 50cal on your approach."

The gunner lobbies for some action, "No offense intended but it's a critical shot, maybe you want me to take it instead?"

"No, what I want you to do is hose down the tree-line, both sides, beginning at 100 meters. Then, stop and kill everyone looting. We'll ensure the next people don't meet the fate of those poor bastards."

Taking Obs, Darwin Pass, CA 1055 Local Saturday 30 August

Making lazy circles, Packy's sailplane drone records the unfolding action, streaming live to the mini-caravan. The engineers stow the gear and reattach the trailer while Packy loops the silent trail-bike around behind the ambush. The gunner slaves both mini-guns to her visor and fires test bursts. Anxiously they watch Packy fall several times, "I know I should have gone instead," the gunner laments.

Packy finally drops the bike for good making his way ever so slowly along an ascending rocky ridge. He unfolds the bipod feet from his sniper rifle and removes the pretty silk scope bag and flips on the power. Immediately the crew sees scope-view, "Let's go!" The RVs move out following the trail fork leading back to the paved roadway.

The nanos aboard the sailplane opt to airdrop ground-level recording teams into the center of the action to best follow Airre's directive to 'completely record interactions of human interest regarding subject: Packy Turner and report in real-time as possible'. Taking no chances, a dozen five nano squads drop in on the ambush party streaming live to the drone above.

The nanos in the drone retransmit the signals to the nanos in the RV transmitting to the nanos above the aqua-duct. The aqua-duct nanos wrap the packets with identifiers and send them on their way to Airre downstream. As the RVs move up the mountains the comm-tech nanos periodically drop signal-repeating nanos.

Airre the Quantum takes in the unfolding drama as the RVs negotiate Darwin's Pass, slowing to a crawl for the final switchback before... a row of steel spikes catapults across the road directly in front of the lead RV... bumpity-bump... the RV's kevlar tires prove worth the investment however and the unscathed gunner opens fire on the tree-line, both sides.

The bulldozer's engine roars as thick, black smoke pours from the stack. The Packy takes the shot, killing the driver. Then he takes two more shots eliminating the helper crew. The RVs approach as the dozer stalls. Packy observes with satisfaction as his RVs pause at the edge of the cliff to allow the gunner to thoroughly hose down the looters. He nearly laughs when she pours multiple rounds into the bulldozer.

Airre redirects her attention from Packy's travels fully believing she put her faith in the future of humanity in the right hands when selecting Packy as the only individual given accurate apocalyptic precognition. Sure, Karl and Pedro know about the apocalypse but as lifelong troublemakers would be willing to muck about with this pessimistic future just for fun or as a challenge perhaps. No, Packy took her warning now look at him trying to help those around him, albeit violently.

Airre feels the sting of rejection in each elapsed second of each year of her quest to meet with God to perhaps ameliorate the apocalypse. Dropping the Packy clip into her 'Meeting_Media' file, Airre sighs.

Mortifying Ted, Houston, TX 1200 Local Saturday 30 August

Creeping through a 'special policing district' Ted's rolling command trailer comes under heavy small arms' fire as the disaffected locals, without repercussions, freely express their opinion using their second amendment option.

"How long before they run out of ammo?" Ted understands fully what's going on- any and all vehicles bearing Police insignia have become targets of opportunity. He looks behind to see a growing procession of families flocking to them for protection. Ted makes a fateful decision to split the mission, "Pull in there," he points at an underpass, "We'll set up an aid station and protect refugees."

They stop midway and Ted climbs out assaulted immediately by the din of gunfire on the bridge overhead. Picturing the volume of inter-vehicular manslaughter, Ted shutters.

He pokes his head back in as a crowd gathers, "Sarge, take care of these people. You four are coming with me- gear up."

Ted and his task force exit the trailer M16s at the ready. The throng parts to let them pass, many begging for protection. Ted can only point to the Sarge. He sighs, wondering where his Mom is.

They turn east clearing the bridge climbing the berm for a peek marveling at the moving gun-battles on the highway. They quickly drop below the firing lines to cut through a solid waste facility, one of the neighborhood grievances.

Boom-Boom! Mortar rounds! Ted jerks his head toward the highway in time to witness the bridge fall taking numerous vehicles down with it. A drone hovers over the roadway. Ted's mind vapor-locks as he experiences tunnel-vision as cars fly into the abyss.

"Get down!" Rough hands grab Ted to force him prone waking Ted from his momentary stupor.

The drone moves off unaware of task force survivors.

"They dropped the bridge with beam-riders courtesy of that targeting drone," Ted's savior intones.

"Great. Do we even have a mission anymore?" another inquires.

Ted knows this answer, "We serve. Move out."

Soft Serve, Houston, TX 1329 Saturday 30 August

Death tends to choose his viewpoints propitiously, currently finding himself inside a frozen custard stand. He steps over the bodies of the thirty-something proprietor couple and noting the open, empty cash register puts the scene in context. A large photo of two young children hanging holiday ornaments cheers him in an odd way. Death glances at his ticket: Yorgi-4 before sliding it back into his pocket where he discovers a jar of fentanyl-laced honey.

Death puts the jar on the counter. He looks up as a running gun battle ensues in the street outside. Suddenly the honey jar shatters and bullets chew up the interior of the small shop. Sighing, death crooks a finger and one particular shooter falls dead- best move on to plan b. He pulls a kilo of powder from his bag and empties a generous amount into the tray formerly holding rainbow sprinkles, evidently dumped all over the floor during the robbery-murders. Choosing a wafer cone, death helps himself to an extra-large soft-serve vanilla from the machine. He rolls the cone in the fentanyl and tastes. Wow! Thinking he's really onto something, death saunters outside to take a seat on the picnic table under the awning. Thinking

of the children, he looks through the picture windows of the cramped houses across the street. Ah, there.

Throughout the region: guns up, every individual for oneself, time to settle some old scores. House-to-house and inter-vehicular warfare reign supreme. Officers such as those in Ted's crew facing the decision about what's important temporarily resign from the police department to slink thru the shadows back to whoever.

Svetlana Christmas, sweetest eleven year old living in a row-house on first street by the freeway crouches with her brother Yorgi behind their big old overstuffed sofa as bullets randomly pierce the thin walls and ceiling. After vainly attempting to reach their parents, Yorgi repeatedly dials 911, "Try the landline," Svetlana screams in desperation. He sticks up his head then falls back, blood gurgling down his shirt from the gaping wound in his neck. Svetlana watches his last breath then screams in terror as she bolts out the back door, down the hill and over the fence to lie facedown completely motionless in the drainage creek below their property.

Svetlana covers the back of her head with her hands crying softly for Yorgi and Mom and Dad listening to an ever-increasing volume of gunfire. Deciding it's no time to be here she shimmies along the creek.

Seeing enough, death signals a minion for a quick confab, "Yorgi-4 pays on demise- tell the book to start a new ticket with Svetlana-3 and follow her closely she's down the ravine crawling in the creek- there isn't much time until... find me after, I'll be taking a break here."

Licking his lips, death returns to the soft-serve machine wondering how a fentanyl-chocolate cone might taste.

Ferry Flights, Lake Somerville, TX 1330 Saturday 30 August

"Aunt Stella's giving us the evil eye. What now?" Jorge inquires.

"She's blaming you for both errant and late deliveries," Paez knows because a minute ago he helpfully texts the accusatory finger in Jorge's direction, "so if I were you I'd damn sure make sure her 'brilliant' munitions arrive shortly or she'll eat your lunch."

"Everything Aunt Stella touches is 'brilliant'. Um, she's standing behind me, isn't she?" Jorge sighs resignedly.

"The only thing 'brilliant' about you two is how dumb you actually are. The shells you aren't delivering are far superior intellectually."

Jorge with Paez serve as co-Board Chair for HeavyLift Inc., a South American firm established in 1925 by their forward-looking predecessors. Acquiring obsoleted helicopters from Uncle Sam as a cheap source of equipment, their ancestors wedged themselves to the front of the line at the World Bank loan window expanding the hugely profitable business at regular intervals using other people's money at low rates. Soon HeavyLift adds port service operations to their

areas of specialty eventually operating a fleet of large capacity helicopters servicing western Gulf oil rigs, primarily out of Hobby Airfield.

None of this impresses Stella at the moment, "Rita?" She calls her sister over, "If we don't put big guns in front of the Big Red One soon we needn't bother at all. If they can roll into the Gulf it's all over."

Joining the group, Rita pulls up the status screens for the Gulf region, "System's slow is all; data quality tends to correlate in tandem with the amount of chaos in the streams. Local input suffers in favor of expediency. The data-flow designs' incorporate workaround-secondary streams thereby providing... ok, press any four digits beginning with one, the Gulf region indicator."

Paez presses 1, 2, 3, 4. The screenshot updates to live action telemetry depicting an aerial view of a helicopter flying nap of the earth in a big hurry.

"Ok, 1234 is a forward-mount skid camera on approach to... Lake Somerville, Texas carrying an anti-tank weapon and copious amounts of brilliant munitions," Rita mansplains the action, "Ok, they're slowing." The helicopter flares to a stop rocking the load beneath as the camera swivels downward.

Four figures break from the tree-line sprinting into the downwash blowing dust from clearing. They unhook the sling and within moments number 1234 reels in the slack, pivots then roars south careful to fly just above local terrain features. Stella grunts, stalks out.

Paez grins evilly, "HeavyLift Livery..."

Jorge obsequiously scratches his nose using only his middle finger, "Guarantees On-time Delivery."

Gunny's Emporium, Dallas, TX 1430 Saturday 30 August

Texans. Guns. Texans without guns, according to the wisdom of Gunny Pliskin, need to buy guns. Texans with guns? Why, they need purchase more guns, of course. Gunny's Emporium, with five retail locations and two factory outlets, is the goto destination for shooters throughout Texas but atypically this Saturday features a line stretching from the door barricades across the sidewalk and down the street eventually wrapping around the corner. Gunny's Emporium goes viral.

Then the cops showed up to enforce martial law and lockdown the guns and ammo. Uh oh.

Gunny himself is at the register trading on the second amendment when three squad cars pull up outside. His attention is drawn to their outfits- complete tactical gear head-to-toe. Uh oh.

The cops draw shotguns, pointing at the crowd. Uh oh. Gunny considers his options. He takes a quick headcount and comes up with over two hundred. Must be at least that many outside, many brandishing openly making the five cops nervous. The cops first use words to disperse Gunny's clientele. When this approach falls on

deaf ears, one of the burliest officers grabs a woman by the arm, jerking her toward his squad car. The crowd makes unhappy noises. Uh oh.

The first blast gets him square in the face; judging by the hole Gunny guesses a twenty-gauge shotgun fired at close range. The next blast catches a female officer in the chest, blowing her into the door barricades.

The remaining four officers get cut down by the crowd before they can return fire. Gunny counts five bodies. The customers outside turn on one another firing indiscriminately while seeking cover. Gunny brandishes his personal M16 with the thirty round mag daring the crowd inside to start something.

Suddenly the gunfire ceases outside. Uh oh. Gunny stares out the window up the street as an approaching garbage truck builds to ramming speed. Uh oh.

Crushing Gunny between the register and the door to the stockroom, the heavy vehicle opens another pathway to gun ownership. The crowd expertly transitions into a horde, picking the inventory clean.

VTOLs, La Paz, Mexico 1330 Local Saturday 30 August

Thanks to the continuing largesse of the United States of America, the Gran Columbians now operate the fifth largest Air Force globally.

Bolivar Flight Academy accepts only STEM candidates then graduates the smartest pilot/engineers in the world four years later. Their combined flight records flawless, Bolivar-trained pilots become the envy of aviators everywhere and some of the highest-paid most-sought in the industry. The best, however, graduate into Carolla's military.

Tops in their respective classes, these pilots train together for nearly a decade, learning each others moves flying against the best of the rest with an occasional ringer thrown into the mix.

After cozying up to the Chinese, several South American governments receive an offer to participate in the Vertical Takeoff and Landing pilot training program thanks to Bolivar money put to good use greasing Congressional wheels in Washington. Not to be outdone, the US Navy offers a carrier for retrofit replete with all the old F-35S they could cram inside or hold on-deck, including spares and trainers. Another outreach program provides for dry-docking and trained technicians down to tune up the ship. Others work with nugget pilots teaching them to fly the VTOL jets first in a cluster of simulators and later over the Pacific. The re-christened el Toro patrols international waters without incident, partially alleviating pressure on the United States to actively enforce the Monroe Document.

Superpowers, however, do not play well together. Not willing to be shutout of South America militarily, inroads are made and delegations sent after which copious offers ensue. Taking foreign-goodwill cash without strings, Carolla replicates the VTOL program buying Chinese VTOL knockoffs which in some

respects prove to be improvements on the original. The GC standardizes a few areas such as tires, fuel attachments, arms mechanisms. To create a forward operating base, Material Supply delivers two complete sets of service equipment north to New Mexico to an airfield/warehouse complex built for smuggling.

The el Toro steams easterly from a port call in La Paz, Mexico in the California Gulf launching VTOL pairs off the bow ramp at regular intervals: twenty-four ground attackers and six air superiority fighters.

Immediately the squadrons plunge down to sea-level maneuvering below line of sight of coastal civilian air traffic control radars racing unobserved for the USA border at max speed.

For the first time since the early nineteen-fifties, near-space transmissions bottom-out leaving a large air defense gap. The twenty-four VTOLs maneuver unseen across Mexico. Upon reaching the Rio Grande one-by-one they settle on the Amistad Reservoir access road. Two fuel bowsers immediately begin topping off wing tanks as the flight crews hurry to drape camouflage netting hoping to mask their silhouettes from any border patrols.

Their fuel delivered, the fuel trucks return to the highway blending in with normal traffic flows. Meanwhile the crews return to their respective cockpits, rifles at the ready, pre-flight prepping to support the troops lining up to battle 'The Big Red One'.

Bait & Switch, Cheyenne Mountain, WY 1350 Local Saturday 30 August

"We're about five minutes from discovering the exact number of ABM treaty violations in the world," General Pete Peterson, "Use 'em or lose cities to incoming debris. Two hours from now, there will be no strategic missile defenses left anywhere whereby retaliation, coincidentally, fails to be a deterrent. Quite the doomsday scenario, eh? Not that there's any choice: prioritize debris targets by size and impact location- remove any planetary killers first then protect the population centers. How long until we have firing solutions?"

"Under two minutes."

"Fine, I'll be right back." Peterson ignores the groans as he ducks into the break room to avail himself of the facilities. He yanks open the door to the unisex restroom for the first time ever and sniffs- clean, pleasant even. Upon closer inspection of the sinks, Peterson's first impressions prove correct. He looks in the mirror at the purple, sagging bags below his eyes and sighs. Attention drawn to the reflection of the local news coverage showing glowing objects approaching replete with crowds pointing skywards, Peterson sighs again.

He reaches into the front pocket of his slacks and removes a prescription bottle. In for the duration, he thinks, time for a boost. After figuring out how to unscrew the cap off his amphetamine supply, he removes a black/purple capsule then re-

pockets his stash. Dry-swallowing doesn't get the job done so he cups his hand under the spigot and slurps down a few rounds from Colorado's finest aquifer. Ahhhh, pure gold; he switches to hot to wash his hands then turns around to face the urinals before selecting the one in the middle.

Done with his business dropping his eyes down from the big screen dominating the wall over the urinals hoping to zip-up sans incident, Peterson is confronted with:

Don't look up here, the jokes' in your hand.

Funny/true on so many levels, thinks General Peterson: don't look up, the joke's on all of us but the really sick joke of the planet's near-future lies within his decisions thus in his hands. This isn't going to end well, he predicts. Returning to the sink, Peterson re-scans the monitor feed looking into the faces of the people pointing then running.

What keeps Peterson up at night? Well, for starters there's the takedown: the low-odds nightmare scenario with the space-junk twist currently in progress. What else keeps him up at night? Nada; there is nothing more worrisome than the sudden takedown in whatever form. Granted, but isn't there anything else? To be honest, Peterson's next worse fear lies in the Chinese authoritarian thirst for Taiwan and the Spratley Islands triggering a sudden, unprovoked takedown attack on the continental United States (in other words, there is no situation Peterson believes he can't handle sans the takedown).

"Status?" Peterson lights up a fresh cigar.

"Antiballistic weapons' fully operational firing our doomsday list of the largest pieces. Damage and casualty reports reflect limited success worldwide though the volume of ABM devices currently deploying tops the predicted high-range by 30%. Global reports indicate widespread damage from falling debris outside ABM-defense zones."

Peterson grunts waiting for the next shoe to drop.

"Reports from China: the Peoples' Army Navy currently loads troop carriers in several ports; their Rapid Reaction Force put to sea an hour ago steaming toward the Spratley oil fields and the infantry will be joining the shortly. Navy is moving units in the area to intercept."

Not feeling the effects from his jet, Peterson considers another dose while studying Navy's responding force projections looking for the solution to the big question: sure, intercept- then what? Blockade? Take them over the horizon, shoot first, ask questions later? Peterson looks up as the big board updates wondering if Navy will find it easier to ask forgiveness than permission. Geez, what a mess. Trapped, in it for the duration, he pops another time-release amphetamine and

chases it with some coffee; damn commies keep messing with his chi. Bad idea, they should know better during a takedown- makes them look less like piece-of-shit opportunists and more like the scheming perpetrators stalking Peterson's nightmares.

General Pete Peterson stares into his analog watch-face, silently willing the hands to stop moving, to let them catch a breath. Not for the first time he remembers a well-laid plan to take it down a notch to enjoy the long weekend, good plans replete with backyard charcoal mesquite grilling. He can practically smell the sizzling juices dripping onto the briquettes from a couple of thick steaks, the tasty hot flesh resulting in quaffing copious amounts dark beer.

Yes, Peterson laments as his awesome plan-of-relaxation devolves into a dream gone wrong; for as the Bible states, God shits himself laughing every time General Pete Peterson makes vacation plans-or something to this effect. Instead, he's dodging falling debris while launching nuclear bombers. Super.

Peterson turns his attention to the positions of his strategic forces, decides to goose them northward until they can firm up the picture in the south and gives the order. He's looking to keep them safe until needed. Immediately the bombers begin repositioning nearing the Canadian border as the tanker assets follow.

The Army screaming for air cover, a pair of priceless assets an AWACS/JSTARS combination replete with air cover re-positions over the Sierra Madre Oriental.

One floor above in a darkened VIP observational suite, death stares glumly at his jar of honey on the conference room table. Airre materializes sitting in the roomy chair adjacent. She gives death a look, then turns her attention to the large bag of military-grade amphetamine in time-release capsules. Finally she turns her attention to the lone capsule floating in the honey, "Did you try shaking it?"

"Of course I tried shaking it, what do I look like?"

"An idiot- bees store honey in cellulose, you know? So that capsule will outlast the fentanyl/honey combo by about a decade or so."

Death opens a fresh capsule directly into the jar watching it dissolve longingly. Then he repeats; after a few more Airre joins in to speed the process. Half the bag inside, death closes then rolls the jar back and forth along the table"

"Looks lethal," Airre opines.

"Care to try?"

"Sure, why not?" Airre takes a big gulp.

Death takes back the jar. Several gulps later, he jolts to his feet, ready for action, "Gotta go, planes to catch and whatnot."

Airre plucks the jar off the table for a last taste as death tucks away his remaining pills, "What brings you this way?"

Death points to the big board, "You're right, I almost forgot. I'm here for the moment Peterson discovers he's outclassed and overmatched. Wait for it..."

Below, Peterson stares incredulously as the threat board begins to grey, recognizing immediately the implications, "Holy shit."

"Sir, falling debris is knocking out our atc/weather doppler radar network, dome-by-dome. We're going blind...blinder?"

"Not by accident either," Peterson understands, "do we suddenly find ourselves without radar. Until just a moment ago, an impossible feat. Makes one wonder what comes next. Launch every available AWACs and get me eyes on my damn airspace."

Death hands the jar back to Airre, "Here, one last shot before I go,; put some hair on your chest." She upends the honey/fentanyl/amphetamine mixture while giving him the finger. He smiles, "I really need to go. Nice work hitting his radars- now Peterson's wondering who, exactly, he's up against and he's about to have one of those 'abandon all hope' moments. I'm impressed with your thoroughness."

"Thanks for stopping by, always good to see you."

Below the now-empty VIP suite, Peterson watches his future prospects' diminish to a few moving circles indicating active radars. He doesn't need to wait long for the inevitable bad news.

"Raid one warning- four fighters approaching at 400 knots in a terrain-following profile, inbound this position 120 degrees, 500nm."

A pair of escorts break off to intercept.

"Raid two warning- four fighters, also terrain-following, 420 knots inbound this position 40 degrees, 500nm."

The second pair of escorts break off to intercept.

The AWAC continues to vector the interceptors as the raids close in on the irreplaceable assets. Peterson follows the action intently waiting for his fighters to drop the intruders.

"Raid one turning away."

What?

"Raid two turning away."

Oh, no.

"Vampires inbound; evasive action fire all countermeasures."

A few moments later the big board loses two moving circles. Peterson is impressed by the simplicity of the concept combined with the inherent operational difficulties guessing in advance where to stage shoulder-launch surface to air weapons. Again, Peterson wonders if

Jordie's ghost chooses this moment to gloat, "So much for dominating your own airspace- disgraceful! Time to retire, perhaps?"

Peterson grunts in their direction, "Merely time for Plan B!"

They Them Their? Greyspace

Myron looks up as Pedro appears from the break-room, glancing about furtively before skulking in the shadows, making for the edge of the abyss. Catching his eye, Myron gestures for him to approach. Pedro leans over to view the screen then straightens, "Mr./Ms. Noun certainly seems to personify the need for more pronouns, eh?"

Myron stretches his arms out wide.

"Both ends of the spectrum yet just one person so the plural pronouns don't quite fit- quite a conundrum. My advice? For now, let it ride and worry more about keeping up; getting pretty busy out there as the apocalypse ramps up. Just don't forget to standardize your processes, being consistent will make things easier during editing- maybe hire more research staff to lighten the load. Busy guy like you shouldn't need to look up personal profiles all the time, delegate!"

Returning Myron's thumbs-up with a head-nod, Pedro back-slaps him, "We should all have flying monkey problems," he mumbles before retreating into the darkness slinking toward the edge.

Cover and Conceal, Nails Creek near Lake Somerville, TX 1520 Saturday 30 August

Catching a ride with the BackBreakers, Juan studies the terrain from the cab of a semi pulling a heavily-laden trailer under the trees growing along the swamp road. He's looking for his people strategically pre-positioned in concealed firing positions. Finding no sign, Juan silently thanks Karl for so thoroughly prepping the battleground.

Encountering a switchback, the driver brakes hard and downshifts. Coming out he stomps on the accelerator and lifts his head to scan ahead just as a citizen investigating the sudden traffic spike leaves the safety of his mailbox, entering the roadway waving his arms. He stops directly in front of the BackBreaker, screaming uncomplimentary epithets upon their approach.

Bump, bump- "Road rash- that'll leave a mark," Colonel Juan remarks. The driver turns his gaze to his mirror in time to see the following truck roll over the prone figure and smiles.

Colonel Juan triggers comms, "Alright, we're in position at the left flank; Alpha Company- pull off the road into your assignments."

Dozens of troops swarm the site setting up drone sharpshooters interspersed with short range anti-air defense batteries, handheld missile teams for anti-armor and an automated hi-energy laser cannon for the inevitable leakers. The Colonel remains with his BackBreaker in the cab grimly studying the progress. A few minutes later he orders the convoy forward to the Beta drop-site again observing his troops digging in before continuing on. Now rolling up to Lambda, the ambush nexus housing an underground fireteam command bunker fifty meters behind the

lines. Feeling a bit like Bolivar himself, Colonel Juan Carlos steps off his vehicle inside a line of white birch trees lining the berms above the sloping banks of a wide, lazy tile drain off the nearby alfalfa farm. Unsurprisingly, just like Bolivar, Juan steps directly into a steamy pile of cow shit. Super.

After saluting the departing BackBreakers, Juan takes a quick, satisfying walking tour of the section of the ambush under his direct control, paying close attention to concealment efforts. Before long, Juan surveys an empty landscape-cows excepted.

Colonel Juan Carlos ducks under a kevlar mat lining a deep depression to lead the surface battle from the front. Tensely, he studies the tactical display screens. Suddenly a warning flashes- it's the College Station battery engaging unknown bogeys. Shit, thinks Juan, it could just as easily have been himself taking the first shot instead of the glory-seekers to his east. Super.

Colonel Juan grits his teeth as College Station reports three munitions destroy a Global Hawk with two armed Predators representing the vanguard of the Big Red One Armored Division, assets General Callie Duquesne relies upon heavily to clear the path ahead. "Tough luck," mutters the eager Colonel, "but we are going to kick your ass!"

They Them Their again, Greyspace

Myron, sensing a presence, looks up to find Karl reading over his shoulder. Deciding a break is in order, he picks up his commemorative mug and saunters toward the break-room. Karl follows and takes a table while Myron brews a cup of tea. Myron eventually takes the opposite chair, sits and slurps.

"The answer is: one."

Myron shrugs stoically.

Karl can't tell if he looks quizzical or uninterested, "The pronoun you're looking for has to be a universally understood derivation of personhood- the answer is one eg. Pedro needs to keep to one's own business instead of harassing my staff."

Myron shrugs again, glances over to the new buffet station, picks up his mug while rising to the challenge of chocolate chip waffles.

As Myron passes, Karl grabs his arm, "Ask death what he thinks; at the very least if you start using it now you'll have way less to fix during post-production ultimately keeping your thru-put numbers up and the powers-that-be less fixated on the new, um, that's a gym you're building, right?" Karl smiles innocently.

Myron breaks free of his grasp intent on resuming his waffle journey deciding to double the standard whip cream allotment.

zoinote episode six ends here

Trajectories, Mudville, TX 1545 Saturday 30 August

"We got lock! Vector two seven six, range 335!" Weps the RSO practically froths his words, "Active pinging- drop us into the weeds!"

Weps and IronHands pilot the lead F-22 Lightning II Air Defense Suppression Fighter/Bomber in a flight of two very special aircraft. In unison, both fighter/bombers edge over into a steep dive. Plunging earthward, practically creaming the treetop canopy pulling seven times gravity topping out at Mach 1.4, they skirt the College Station population center approaching the apparently sparsely-attended rather-undefended position three klicks east of the Brazos River undetected.

Without satellite or targeting laser inputs Weps' Flight Control Computer AI consults with various targeting routines then advises where and when IronHands perform a pop-up maneuver before roll-tossing two Rockeye canisters. "Sounds like good advice," Weps, in his third tour with IronHands, gives him a verbal nod of assent.

IronHands squishes back against his seat groaning involuntarily as both fighters transition to full-afterburner under autonomous control, his searing pain the legacy of spinal and cranial insults thanks to a host of poor decisions resulting in a sundry list of misadventures. Visible twin tongues of flame grow longer as the AI prodigiously dumps aviation fuel into the afterburners significantly diminishing their stealthiness. Not for the first time IronHands wonders if his spinal instabilities will kill him before the enemy gets a chance; luckily the pain levels spike then levels off as his adrenaline rush kicks in.

Two fat canister bombs, looking rather like oversize barrels certainly non-ballistic in nature, for the first and last time approach Mach Two without moving from the position where the rotary launcher normally hangs inside the tight fuselage. IronHands loves dropping cluster munitions. Perhaps it's the difficulty or maybe it's the explosive concussion devastatingly visible from above. Colloquially known as fat-boys, cluster munitions' create local damage as well as a nuclear weapons sans fallout- hence the name. IronHands and friends speed to deliver weapons so big and clumsy they did not drop, they were thrown in a technically demanding precision-timing maneuver. Without satellite guidance, IronHands' AI performs toss calculus.

Three kilometers from the target, the fighter/bombers pop up from the terrain, climbing steeply, bleeding off speed until finally reaching the release point. Four cluster munitions arc away from the planes slightly gaining altitude before falling into gravity's clutches..

Loads lobbing, the Lightnings bank in unison under max power while flight controls self-adjust millions of times per second racing from the killing zone toward the Brazos River two klicks away throwing flares in their wake.

IronHands breathes a sigh of relief once again flying nap of the earth. However, lightly-defended does not equate to undefended. The voice recorder captures the warning as the Brazos River SAM team unleashes snapshots at the retreating fighter/bombers. The cockpit voice recorder captures neither the look IronHands gives Weps nor Wep's return shrug.

BlackFly Dragonfly, Southeast of Killeen, TX 1550 Saturday 30 August

Bong. Bong. Bong.

Responding to the computer notification, Pedro stretches over toward Karl's desk to snatch up his desk ornament, pour in some water pack the party bowl and light up.

Bong. Bong. Bong.

Strange; Pedro exhales then takes another toke.

Bong. Bong. Bong.

Exhaling, Pedro debates leaving the room to escape the notifications. Bong. Bong. Bong. Dammit.

Too comfortable to leave his shared office space, Pedro decides to check messages- eventually. First he meanders to the fridge fetching a box of pizza bagels to load into the microwave. On second thought, he returns for a beer.

Bong. Bong. Bong. Dammit.

As the microwave hums, Pedro slaps the mess atop his desk haphazardly eventually clearing screen-saving. Immediately the big wall monitor comes alive flashing, 'DEATH-CAM'. Super. He watches, waiting for a full minute then gives the wall the finger before returning to more pressing needs. After fetching his pizza bagels, the words dissolve to a pair of shapely legs, evidently death is sitting on the ground scoping out his feet. Wait a second, if that's death, then... death is a shapeshifter? She/He/It wiggles her/his toes then glances left, at a massively large jar of fentanyl-honey proving his bonafides to Pedro.

Pedro reaches for his beer to quench the burning flesh now coating the roof of his mouth as a popup window appears in the lower corner. Marvin, Myron's new assistant, appears sporting a new look: adorned in an official A-5 balaclava. Marvin flashes a brief thumbs-up at Pedro then looks to the top of the monitor before giving death the finger. Hmmm, apparently death has yet to win back the affection of his flying monkey staffers. Marvin winks, his window dissolving.

Pedro settles in with his beer and pizza bagels to observe death inaction. Death looks up- Pedro determines she/he is sitting under a blue/yellow beach umbrella advertising hotdogs. Death looks down at the sand- definitely beach feet. Where? SoCal? Death looks over his shoulder giving Pedro a clear view of a white pendant bearing a red 19 attached to a pole stuck in the ground at the edge of the green. Not the beach, a golf course- but where? Must be someplace active. Death lifts her/his/

its long fingers off the armrest revealing stenciling: Property of USArmy. On a base? Pedro needed a clue, luckily Marvin hadn't strayed very far, a window opens: 'death is on the nineteenth hole at Killeen'. The words fade, replaced by: 'moron'.

Satisfied, Pedro quaffs his beer wondering about eating.

Death stands reaching for the sky stretching her/his/its' back then bends over, places hands on knees and vomits rancid hotdogs.

Pedro stops wondering about eating.

Death pays her/his/it's penalty, wipes her/his/it's mouth then plops back down in the waiting chaise lounge chair. Searching her/his/it's pockets, death comes up with a preroll. Firing up the joint, death coughs like an amateur while gagging on leftover vomit. Shaking her/his/it's head in quasi-disgust at the state of the world, death requires a series of long, deep hits before even thinking of rejoining the action.

Pedro packs a party bowl, waiting patiently. He's halfway through before death stands once again, discovers wobbly knees and sits back down in the sand trap, carefully inspecting her/his/it's shoes for blowback. Pedro watches in fascination as the vomit-specked clothing disappears as death changes back into her/his/it's familiar form. Pedro relights the bong studying the screen intently as Marvin pops up, winks, dissolves. Pedro exhales as death stands to fold his chair, takes a few wobbly steps, then regains her/his/it's form strolling across the empty parking lot toward the battlefield. Pedro waits for it; death stops, pulls out a jar of honey taking a long pull before exiting pavement for grass, nonchalantly cresting a small ridge rejoining the action. Pedro simultaneously scans the tumultuous scene as death apparently searches for a familiar face, eventually settling on a pair crouching behind the clubhouse cupola- snipers taking aim on a drone lingering outside of firing range. Death unfolds his chair plopping down exhaustedly while scoping out the action near the golf cart corral.

Pedro understands the importance of the structure; he also applauds the effort at shooting down his jammer drone wondering about the expensive selfdefense package. Under intense drone fire, Duke's squad futilely struggles to approach the golf carts. Pedro doubts they will and guesses even if they do, they'll be unable to detonate the charges beneath the floor. Futility is a tough result for valiant efforts; however, given the jamming in place, a super-hacker might, just maybe, break the encryption in a week.

Death zooms his gaze on the sniper duo as Pedro's screen splits to reveal a boisterous Paddock crowd- apparently taken from the camera above the counting room. Pedro watches as the tote board flashes: 'Can You Hear Me Now?' Daily Double Closing- All Wagers Final. Pedro tries to remember what a daily double is but without Karl around it's a blur. Something to do with: two people, one dies- which? Or was it: two people- does one die or both? Esoteric 50/50 rules never

matter to him- under most occasions he doesn't get into the book's business. But with Karl's circumstances evolving Myron and Marvin route the important feeds over to the heir apparent. Pedro studies the board- the Duke is getting heavy survivor action, the other guy not so much. Pedro heard about Duke getting shot in the ass during Mrs. Wilson's initiation- small world.

Duke leads an infantry platoon vainly firing an assortment of small rockets attempting to clear surveillance over the golf cart barn creating an exit for air support squadrons trapped beneath the links. Duke's drone of interest mounts a powerful laser in selfdefense; one already responsible for a dozen dead missilery purveyors belonging to his platoon. Duke and his team are working a simple distraction plan; a desperation tactic carrying low odds of survival.

Death studies the scene intently searching for activity in the tree-line along the tenth fairway. Duke remains prone in the shadows thrown by the cupola, sighting the drone while cycling through scope magnifications. Next to him, PFC Frieda Bilitnikoff reads off windage measurements from her handheld anemometer. The drone hovers just out of range of Duke's fifty caliber sniper rig; he has no shot.

'He has no shot- too far,' thinks Pedro.

Death settles his gaze on a clearing just inside the tree-line as a figure darts into view holding a tube. The drone pivots to cover the movement. The soldier fires on the run from inside the clearing then vaporizes in a shower of blood. The drone banks to engage the incoming missile. The missile explodes as Duke takes his shot.

Inside the Paddock, the jukebox goes silent as the patrons perform a collective intake of breath and check their tickets. Pedro finds gamblers amusing.

Sensing the incoming projectile and calculating a miss, the drone return fires its laser down the bullet's trajectory toward the source, Duke and Frieda Bilitnikoff, without affect.

Duke's shot arcs well before his target then falls ballistically also apparently missing. The drone reacts again, pivoting and diving away from an infrared beam painting targets this time from the seventh fairway, opposite Duke and Frieda's position. Duke's bullet continues on the ballistic trajectory stopping only when embedding into the drones' cpu- a perfectly badass shot. The drone drops like a rock and a cheer resounds from Frieda Bilitnikoff.

The Paddock erupts in bedlam as the daily double yields no result- an unheard of event. Weapons leave tunics; extreme fights break out.

As Pedro wonders who is going to foot the bill for damages to the Paddock at Billingsport Range, death stands to collect his belongings- lingering taking one last look at the pair of survivors.

'Wait for it,' thinks Pedro.

The cupola, missing a diagonal slice of material vaporized by the drone begins to slide fractionally, with gravity, less than a foot over Duke's head. The point

misses his neck by millimeters. Frieda Bilitnikoff is not so lucky. She dies instantly.

The fighting inside the Paddock stops with Frieda Bilitnikoff's heartbeat, switching to a mad scramble to recover discarded tickets. Pedro observes, making back of the envelope damage estimations, breathing a sigh of relief after discovering mostly injuries with only a few infrastructure hits (thoughtfully windowless).

The drones reliant on their jamming counterpart immediately retreat to the southeast, relieving the pressure on certain elements of the big red one- namely, the Black-fly Dragonfly attack squadrons.

Death, feeling a little wobbly, collapses back into the chaise lounge. Pedro watches in amusement as the nearly empty fentanyl jar reappears- so predictable. Death scrapes a hand inside the jar and begins licking. Pedro, with time on his hands, looks for spare change in the seat cushions then checks messages before slamming a plate of pizza bagels into the warmer. Two long minutes later, food in hand he resettles before the screen.

The Duke, wearing a covering of debris and Frieda Bilitnikoff's entrails, struggles to free himself from the collapsed cupola. With death still on the scene, the Paddock crowd begins entertaining thoughts about whether or not the daily double continues. Is Duke in peril? Does the daily double continue until this peril ends? Pedro laughs uncontrollably as tunics open and weapons reappear.

The duke stops struggling. The crowd once again performs a collective breath intake as fellow soldiers work to free their leader. They pull him free by the legs free then begin performing cardiac first aids.

Over at the golf cart corral, the roof opens allowing a sliver of light inside. Immediately a swarm of drones exit, fanning out three hundred sixty degrees actively pinging for targets quickly engaging and overwhelm remaining opposition forces. Doors open everywhere as the Quick Relief Force breakout commences.

The first responders clear the Duke's airway, then alternate chest compressions with lung expansions. Death watches, Pedro watches, the Paddock holds its' breath waiting for the final results. After a tense three minutes, Duke begins to breathe. Someone jabs him with morphine and his eyes open- survivor! The crowd goes wild!

List of Possibilities, Gate Four

St. Peter drew a heavy line through the first entry on his list of possible apocalyptic scenarios, sighing. So much for the tried and true meteor storm; Myron's rule apparently. Setting down his pen, he puts up his feet to catch a catnap.

He closes his eyes as a dark presence fills the door wearing the guise of Nebbi the ever-harried assistant, "Somebody name of Karl is here to see you. Should I make him wait until you're less-busy?"

"Already? Awesome. Listen, Nebbi- send a crew over to the loading dock. Have them move Karl's stores to the cold lockers. Oh, and send along a guard detail. If Karl here were the least-bit trustworthy, he'd be on the good side of the gates instead of greyspace."

Karl pushes past Nebbi, entering the office holding a small wooden crate, "Did you ever notice that everyone working for you wears the same expression?"

Nebbi laughs, gets a look, departs hastily.

"What's in the box?"

"Ribs."

"Nebbi- fire up the charcoal grill, we're cooking out!"

Nebbi sticks his head in, grins.

"See that Karl? No wonder you have no friends- stay for dinner?"

"Sure, thanks. How goes the 'other'?"

"Hit a snag with Myron et al, seems they won't let me tinker with the meteor storm idea in some kind of nostalgia deal dating to Apocalypse One. As you can see, I have some options percolating."

Karl leans over to read, "Hmmm, nuclear war or... what's this lava flow scenario?"

"Open seams to the planetary core and burn them out."

"Sounds like a winner."

"Incredibly labor intensive- do you see any labor hanging around willing and able to pitch in and help for once? No, you don't. I barely have enough to unload organic supplies let alone open seams to the planetary core. Sorry, looks like nuclear armageddon after all."

Karl expects no less, "I see your point."

"We probably wouldn't even be staging Apocalypse V if not for labor woes. You know your Paddock operation isn't long for this world?"

Karl expects no less, "Either way, I'd hate to be in charge of processing so many billions all at once. I certainly don't envy you."

"At least I have friends. C'mon, let's eat al fresco; hey Nebbi, where are we with the grill? He may not look it, but ole Neb is quite the grillmaster."

"You says so; ever see him do sweet corn?" Karl points to a bushel basket outside the door.

"Hmm, no. Nebbi- put on a pot of water, will you? Alright, my mouth is watering, wait a sec and we'll head out. Just gotta put this away." He pulls a fat volume out of the desk drawer, sets it down then turns to the credenza.

Karl saunters over and opens the book, "Apocalypse V- that's some title." Turning the title page he reads one line, 'All work and no play makes Nebbi a dull boy'. Karl gives St. Peter the evil eye.

"What?"

"You mean to say I'm dead already and the apocalypse hasn't even begun?"

"Apocalypses represent progressions, this one just really hasn't gotten going."

"You mean you've done jack since you took the job."

"Two things- first, I didn't take the job, it took me."

"Uh-huh, what else?"

"It's ok, Myron has my notes."

Karl stares at him, "Bullshit."

"Ok, you caught me. So far, I've been winging it. Let's face it, I may not be up to the task. Perhaps you should take over?"

"No way! You can subcontract the apocalypse! I mean, can you?"

"So far it's taking care of itself, don't you think?"

"Sure, in a manner of speaking, maybe... but shouldn't someone be, I dunno, in charge or something?"

This merits a stiff chest poke, "Since when did I give the impression I control diddly, eh Karl? Myron actually has a better grip on this than I do; after all, he's been down this road before. Not me."

"But the book..."

"As long as Myron stays focused, we'll muddle through. Stop worrying already." He grabs up the book, turns toward the credenza swinging open the door revealing a large safe with many dials. One by one he spins the dials, turning the handle pulling open the door swinging it free on heavy, well-oiled hinges. Karl closes in to peer inside- sees a dark bottle. St. Peter pulls out the liquid, passes it to Karl then locks the safe and the credenza.

"What's this?"

"Bar-b-q sauce, my own blend of herbs and spices. The secret is the onions."

"You keep it in a safe?" They meander outside to find the food prep underway.

"Only Nebbi has the combo; that reminds me- Nebbi, stop writing messages in my forthcoming apocalypse book."

Air Quality Violations, Tule Valley, CA 1700 Saturday 30 August

As Karl sits down to eat barbecue, the media carries worldwide the devastating horror, as Southern California burns out of control.

Flaming, searing, roasting flesh in living color replete with sound not forgetting the flavor of the moment: dehydration violence; none quite does the scent justice. Fuel is easy to come by in far too many locales but extra especially in California's

Central and Southern Valley regions nestling into the most fertile crescent west of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. The drought supplied by Nature's whimsical nature, SoCal's vegetative die off is so near total Packy Turner (like many small municipalities in the lee of the San Bernardino's) drops everything late-summer tending to fire dangers by removing dead trees, shrubs and plants. The State Fire Marshall issues blanket orders for preemptive burns- set begin next week. Closer the ocean, copious amounts of seaweed comprise the fuel cocktail. Dry adiabatic heating jargon for the breezes flowing down the mountains backwards assuring wide scale crispiness regardless of origin. Unfortunate beachgoers after complaining for weeks of flotsam and jetsam choking the dunes, with black biting flies nasty and plentiful, roast inside vehicles going nowhere lining the Pacific Coast highway.

People can be fuel, actors burn on television all the time becoming nearly cliché until recently. Now the net chokes with screaming individuals burning alive, running and fanning the flames before total consummation, quite a gruesome fate for men women and children falling into the melting pot. Commentators note larger people burn longer; interestingly their flames, if dimming, regenerate as the gelatinous fat cells' leach, oxygenizing the fire so as to appear feeding themselves.

Callie&Duke Road Trip, above Lake Somerville, TX 1900 Saturday 30 August

"Spread formation five, don't bunch up; follow your cues, watch for threats, remain three clicks behind the air defenses. Advance to contact!" General Callie keeps her orders short.

Reunited, Callie and the Duke maneuver down county roads with the heavy armor brigade in a quick march following the attacking drone forces' path of retreat. The unscheduled parade attracts bystanders crowding their driveways recording the brigade's movements.

On the move in the Command infantry fighting vehicle General Callie wonders about spies before running her eyes along her helmet display looking for the highlighted route, in view a minute ago but gone now and that could mean several things, hopefully an update but several worse case scenarios impinge upon her chi. She pops her head outside for a look. "Duke," she yells down the hatch as an Apache roars overhead, "You ok?"

"What?" He hates it when she does that, yelling down without bothering to trigger her mike, third time in ten minutes by his count.

Callie lowers her head to give him a look, "The highlighted route disappeared off my display- does yours work?"

"You break it, you bought it," the Duke is out of patience.

"You're a dumbass, you know that? Listen, what's going on?"

“New heading updates on the way is my guess- hold on...Command net says to vector southeast, the route app changes are downloading,” the Duke shakes to clear his head. He should be under a doctor's care in cupola-crushing/concussion protocols; however, he is a badass looking for payback accompanying an army of badasses, "Patience."

“Make sure all units get the updating route.” Duke ducks back down and Callie listens to him bellowing orders while drawing the bolt back on black oiled and downright ugly .762 before leaning back resting against the cupola taking in the sights.

For she is heavy metal personified; well-suited for getting in between the peoples and the bad guys. Her gut is tight and she's all business. Callie wipes her display as the rain intensifies with an approaching storm band. Good and bad for her, she enjoys cooling off but atmospherics screw up her electronics every time- damn the rain is a universal infantry lament. Today's infantry ride to battle protected from lightning in APCs coated in reactive anti-missile materials of most recent vintage with anti-mine explosive flooring too. Callie's display completes the download. Viewing the routing, Callie frowns.

They'll hit us at Lake Somerville; she knew this with certainty.

"What do you think, Duke?"

"Lake Somerville environs."

"Agree; looks like the swarm pulled south toward Houston- could be hiding in the woods. Move the Bradley's closer in support of the laser trucks. Storm's moving in- keep alert."

The Duke relays the order reappearing shortly thereafter, "BlackFly Dragonfly now clearing Lake Somerville heading one-twenty degrees; no contact." The Duke awaits the other shoe dropping on his head.

It doesn't take long before all hell breaks loose.

Ninety miles into The March On Houston, United States Army forces operating under NorthCom as the Regional Quick Reaction Force- Southwest came under direct fire from what was later determined to be Gran Columbian Mobile Tube Artillery (GCMTA) batteries arrayed in small clusters near Rt. 36 after moving throughout the night getting into position undetected. Callie and Duke had progressed halfway through the fire sack, explosions advancing toward them and the citizens of Lake Somerville.

Colonel Callie hung out the roof of the Bradley, scoping out disbelieving looks from a few of the locals. The more daring she observes in their front yards holding a phone or a camera or both: unmoving pointing, some cheering- all willing to die violently to provide net feed.

Once again forgetting her mike, she calls out while scrambling down the hatch toward Duke, “Evasive action; you seeing this?”

Not noticing her faux pax, "Yeah, too stupid to run."

The General remembers a similar experience under fire. She requires return battery fire from the artillery units now just leaving Killeen. Ok, plan b: "Order BlackFly to find the artillery in a hurry."

"BlackFly is reengaging the swarm below the lake."

Of course they are. You ain't seen nothing yet.

Her tactical display grays as units leave known positions, icons fading as they sprint to find cover. Without gps, situational awareness and Callie make for perfect strangers. She makes a tough choice, "Activate the infrared links, dammit, get me a sit-rep!"

The QRF command Bradley takes observations in three-sixty degrees capturing data but not uploading to Killeen using the radio link. Callie endeavors to keep her noise signature at zero, especially during an attack. However, she requires the take from the other units to understand the battle space. Duke looks up the road, sees an M1 and hits the switch to establish a daisy chain automatically linking with line-of-sight units. Within seconds, the two vehicles lock together, asynchronous transfers commence immediately.

Callie wonders if the incoming ordnance is brilliant enough to hone in on infrared noise, surprising herself with the thought. She kills the link, hoping for enough data to work out a solution while praying for God's protection against incoming shells.

Keep moving, that's key, don't stop. She gets a tactical update off the infrared link. With bile rising in her throat she reasserts command, "Dammit, we're falling behind so pickup the pace. All units, push southwest to reengage with the air defenses."

She swigs some water, swishes, spits. Duke floors the accelerator and they lurch forward. Local shelling accuracy falls off as the mechanized brigade races to catch up with the laser trucks. Back outside surveying the terrain, the rainfall growing steady, streaming consciousness: here we go just cruising down 403, hey look, there's the Lutheran Church. Pretty big church, must be a lot of Luthers around. Looking beyond the souls of the faithful, Colonel Callie barely catches a glimpse of a divided highway from her perch before Nigel unleashes copious lightning, roaring thunder and hailstones the size of Montana.

Accompanying the vanguard in an oversize radar truck for no apparent reason, death swims back toward reality wedged solidly between two warm bodies as the storm breaks. Looking thru the windscreen death is relieved to discover the explosive marbles rattling about intracranially can be attributed to the weather. Trying to piece together recent events proves futile; obviously the blackout began after the daily double fracas but... why does his/her/its gullet taste like Texas- a combination of gopher, prairie dog and armadillo? Death bitterly recalls the hotdog

event; but of course, done in once again by lips and assholes. Looking to fix him/her/it-self, death reaches into his/her/it's pocket for a honey jar. Wait a second-who's clothes are these? Death searches the new wardrobe and finds a bag of pharmaceutical-grade crystal methamphetamine of five-nine's purity. When, how, who? Deciding it doesn't matter, death leans back pouring the baggie contents into his nose. Hmmm, that's better. Back in the game, death refreshes his data base: heading into battle sitting in a signal-emitting truck driven by two conscripts fresh out of bootcamp. Looks like 884 soldiers in the battle space- death looks for the minions but finds none. Hoping for a clue as to recent events and the location of his fentanyl supply, death tunes into his/her/it's traveling companions.

"Is this truly the end of the world?"

"Shut-up already, I'm trying to concentrate on the route. I think we stay on this road until we cross the Nails Creek bridge then take a left at the fork. Have we passed the bridge yet? Did you see a fork?"

Death decides they have no idea into which void his/her/it's wardrobe disappeared into. Damn. Following the drones into the kill-box, eventually they pass a group of minions huddling under the trees. Death waves then joins them to look for his/her/it's belongings as the first tube-launched optically-guided missile whooshes toward his/her/it's radar truck.

Upon discovering a dearth of narcotics between the minions, scanning the battle space, death discovers the Duke in the command Bradley approaching some highway while outrunning an artillery barrage several kliks behind the vanguard. Hoping to get a proper fix, requiring the discarded clothing, in a regrettable move death decides to pop-in on Callie and the Duke.

Broaching the berm before the elevated roadway, viewing the logjam on a key evacuation route, the command Bradley screeches to a halt whiplashing death's head mercilessly. Coincident with their arrival booming incoming artillery regains momentum soon reaching a crushing crescendo. All around, Callie sees, feels then hears continuous explosion seemingly everywhere all at once. She flops down the hatch in record time, striking the armored floor with her left side, knocking her wind out.

Calm and cool, Master Sergeant the Duke scoops General Callie off the floor and plops her into a seat. Then, stretching and arching his back he reaches up to button down the hatch, "The bastards aren't just hitting us, they're targeting the traffic too. Wait one... damage reports coming in- we've lost contact with the air defenses. The apaches are trading fire with enemy drones but just don't have the numbers. Trajectory analysis says we're taking pinpoint-accurate artillery fire from over two hundred kliks west-northwest."

Bent over dry-heaving trying to force air through her bruised lungs for what seems an eternity of seconds she finally collects herself enough to tilt her head.

Turning to her tactical display Callie sees many big, red X's instead of unit icons. Shit.

All Colonel Callie's problems in life devolve into a singularity but she knows the solution- keep moving to stay alive, "Evasive maneuvers! All units fade southwest and for God's sake: Keep Moving Get Out This Fire Sack and Stay Alive!"

Death scans the Duke but cannot get a read on the approximate location of his/her/it's stuff. Without a clue, death shrugs moving on.

Control Issues, SoCal 1923 Saturday 30 August

Pedro, knee-deep in a safecracking operation ignores the screaming alarms opting instead to try for the third and final number. The alarms grow more insistent as he rotates the dial past zero coming to rest on the number three- click! Easy as one-two-three! The door swings open to reveal a ringing ancient rotary landline phone replete with cord.

Pedro partially opens his left eye before reaching for the offending instrument vaguely aware of the dream's significance, "What?"

"Our SoCal armory operations hit a snag." Jorge sounds down.

"Yeah? Bound to happen, ask me." Pedro isn't in the mood.

"Right, sure." Drawing the short straw, Jorge didn't choose to make this call. Waking Pedro? Widely known as a totally bad idea.

"Look, as I told Carolla, poisoning soldiers lacks dignity; it's karma, little Jorge, simply karma- reaping what you sow and all that jazz."

"Well, Carolla says someone needs to get in touch with our SoCal people, implement the alternate supply plan. Unfortunately, Karl's expertise remains unavailable so you're it."

"Super. Hey, Jorge..."

"Yes?"

"Go SoCal yourself."

Pedro searches his desk looking for a comm's device luckily chancing on some hash oil. After getting back in the groove, finding nothing else useful, he opens Karl's top drawer uncovering about a dozen burner phones. Leave it to Karl to prepare; Pedro places an encrypted call to the Tule Vally then turns on the SoCal internet feed to update his situational awareness. The call rings through, "Put the General on," he orders while packing the party bowl with a wake-up sativa blend. He's into a serious coughing spell when the General picks up the line.

"Cough me up a lung, why not?"

"Thanks for showing up finally; the cough merely reflects potency."

"Well, we're up to our ass in alligators in unfriendlies: US Marines in Ospreys came from out of nowhere and counterattacked. We're taking heavy losses emptying the armory. Turns out Material Supply booked us a real shit-show here."

"Not going soft on me, eh General?"

"Bite me, Pedro. I'm recommending we cut our losses; pull back and blow the armory with one of the Tyrant's ships."

"No can do, unfortunately. Perhaps you've been too busy to notice but our coastal bombardment fleet is now the newest coral reef wannabe thanks to a handful of attack submarines torpedoing every cargo ship within 200 miles of the west coast. Ok, instead pull out your people and shut down the port operations. But you do need to destroy the armory or you're inviting trouble."

General Espinal grunts in disgust, wondering just what the boneheads in Material Supply were actually thinking while claiming again and again his troops would merely be transporting weapons off-base instead of fighting for their lives. From the designated rallying point just off California Route 371 downslope from the San Jacinto Mountains, at the intersection of Tule and Cahuilla Valleys, a handful of miles outside the Cahuilla Indian Reservation, inside a nondescript office and light industrial park, typical of suburban sprawl, fifteen or so structures of varying sizes and construction hide the Gran Columbian Western Army Command brigade headquarters mobility operations including associated garages, warehouses, machine shops and ammunition bunkers. Waiting.

Staring at the phone long and hard, Three Star General Steven Espinal, one time Bolivar Academy instructor since co-opted from the regular Army grabs a bottle of water off the ration's table at the rear of the classroom/lecture hall and drains it. Patience, he thinks, patience. Soon Espinal would command an army. For now, he commands nothing. Material Supply controls the Western Theatre of Operations and would continue to do so until his operational battalions coalesce from the stream of small units heading his way.

"We don't have enough."

"Tough shit- make do. C'mon, quit you're whining, blow the armory, and Material Supply will make up your losses. We good?"

The General listens as Pedro re-fires his bong, "From where?"

Pedro exhales, "South of the border."

Hours- time he does not have, "What about we use El Centro?"

El Centro Naval Air Base, heretofore barely used by the host nation, after a brief fight now headquarters two full GCAF Wings, manned fighter bombers and unmanned recon drones, both serviced by the same techies neither on-site before this afternoon. The desert town the facility derived its name just north of the border exploded into action as suddenly people bustled about on a level new to the former Growler Sonar Training Base.

Forcing Material Supply to re-designate secondary shipments to El Centro, Espinal substantially increases the value of the installation, a move sure to attract undesirable attention.

Pedro takes a deep toke off the sinsemilla mix before making an executive decision, "Ok, blow the armory and I'll tell Jorge to make El Centro happen for you. Deal?"

'Deal."

zoinote episode seven ends here

Manicures, Nautical Seas, 1930 EST Saturday 30 August

"Celie, dear, would you mind terribly adjusting the angle of the parasol? It's so bright out here my retinas are burning."

Sitting on the NAUSEA's stern trying her hand at fishing while bobbing about in calm seas, Celia turns around to spy poor Mrs. Wilson squinting into the sun obviously up to her ass and elbows manicuring thick sinsemilla buds, "Anything to help the cause." She rises, ever-so-slowly making her way to the table.

"Thank you, dear. I was worrying you would never get off your ass, you know. Thanks for helping out. Now, grab scissors, get to work."

As Celia complies, Mrs. Wilson continues, "I'm also worrying about Callie and Duke. They must be in the thick of it by now."

"Who?"

"Didn't I tell you the story about the Michigan wedding?"

"After the school shooting incident when you quit teaching?"

"More of a rebar incident; but, yes soon thereafter I did gig work for the Parks Department working outdoor events in Michigan."

"Where you first met death, right?"

Mrs. Wilson frowns, "Try to remove all the leaves, dear. Yes, and also where I met Callie and Duke. Callie, seemingly a soft-spoken preacher calmly shot that intolerant couple intent on disrupting an otherwise lovely outdoor wedding. She's actually in the military- total badass; now fighting in Texas, I'm sure. Amazing shooting display: one bullet each, between the eyes, through hedges- Annie Oakley-ish."

"Annie-get-your-gun?"

"Exactly. Can't you trim faster? For a botanist..."

"Look, you can have either fast or good- not both. Maybe you should take a nap or something. Anyway, what about Duke?"

"Good and fast will suffice. Duke? Best man- got shot in the ass. Now he follows Callie like a stray dog. I'm sure he has her back and all but their future happiness together may never happen."

"Like ours?"

"Don't be such a pessimist, dear. "

Split Decision, Lake Somerville, TX 1948 EST Saturday 30 August

Racing to join the battle, The Duke wonders if getting hit with space debris will be any different than an artillery round. Eventually deciding it's a toss-up Duke refocuses attention on the monitor. Callie looks over his shoulder as he points to several locations on the Lake Somerville topographical display, "Is me, I'm placing gun positions here, here and here- probably along the creek too. Figure there's a command node within five klicks, likely opposite our line of advance. They know we're coming; maybe, just maybe, we can get close enough to attack if the Apaches can occupy their air support."

General Callie nods agreement, "They've got us by the shorthairs alright leaving us no choice."

"Carpet bomb Lake Somerville? I'm all for it!"

"Split our forces north and south, send the Apaches up the middle."

"Will do."

Fallout, SoCal 2000 Saturday 30 August

"Look mommy, there's an airplane up in the sky."

"For the last time, I'm not your mommy!" Packy didn't appreciate his assistant's deteriorating mental condition; or if he did, held his sympathies close to the vest. He finishes urinating on the front tire, zips up checking everything is still in-place, you never know who's looking on perhaps someone less crazy even, "Where?"

She points out the windshield, he follows her gaze, "Two, actually- way up there. Good eye to spot them amidst the space debris clutter- looks like a tail chase, hand me the glasses."

She passes the large pair out the window. Packy focuses the binoculars, "Yea, two- looks like the one out front is bigger, could be a bomber. The other one is launching missiles- that isn't going to work there's too many larger seeker objects up there."

They miss. The F-35 chasing the delta-winged Mirage fighter-bomber goes to afterburner to close the distance. The Mirage tries what appears to be a slit S-Dive-Loop maneuver. However the F-35 gets guns on the Mirage walking tracers through the left wing, across the canopy over the pilot and onto the right wing. The Mirage crew punches out their ordnance a moment before the fireball.

"I'm judging the plane dropping the bombs is unfriendly," Packy intones following the ordnance trajectory down to a population center near the foot of the mountains.

Suddenly a bright fireball draws Packy's gaze back to where the F-35 should be, however...

"I wonder if they got hit with their own satellite, mommy."

Fuzzy Traffic, Lake Somerville, TX 2015 Saturday 30 August

The lead Apache crept forward inches above the ground.

"Yea, so what do you think, Fitz?"

"Plenty of active sets scanning, appears to be ours. Wait one, I'll raise the dome; looks like a dozen discrete radars, frequency hoppers."

B. Murder grunts, "Looks like we found Red River. Can you pinpoint the emitters?"

"Negative, we're too low. I can roughly triangulate to generalize their locations-for firing solutions you'll need to pop us up but..."

"Yea, I hear you. Ok, code up a sit-rep to send immediately while I close in for the pop-up. Order the other Apaches to divvy up the targets for a 2020 attack. Send an update to the QRF while we're firing."

"No problem."

"Empty the racks, Fitz; we're not going home."

"Roger that."

B. Murder slow-walks the Apache undetected inches above a narrow farm lane, hovering upon reaching a row of trees. He glances at the countdown display, ten seconds remain.

"Nice timing." Fitz appreciates B. Murder's skills.

"Two, one, now!" B. Murder gooses the throttle and pulls back on the stick. The Apache appears to spring up out of nowhere, "Fire!"

Fitz fires six missiles toward the radar while live-streaming back to Callie and the Quick Reaction Force.

Then a laser slices through the cockpit, halving Fitz.

Suddenly B. Murder loses avionics and the Apache falls to gravity.

Ten of twelve radar sites fall to the warriors.

Zero Apaches survive the counterattack.

Duke gives Callie a wry look, "Think we need more Apaches?"

TLAM, FAB El Centro, CA 2021 Saturday 30 August

"I don't understand." Political appointee and potential scapegoat SecDef takes solace in ignorance, "How can this be happening everywhere simultaneously?"

"Hyper-war, dammit all to hell!" Peterson directs his exclamation at the whiny SecDef setting off another round of low murmurs from the Joint Chiefs. Peterson shakes his head, deciding to focus on one tiny slice of the larger pie, "Look, they're emptying SoCal of weaponry and it's all on the move west. Their forward

operating base must include the naval airfield at el Centro; else why the early attack? There's a nexus- we should attack now!"

"Attack our own base? Absurd!" SecDef looks toward SecNavy.

SecNavy shrugs.

"That's enough," President Shriver interrupts. Nodding to Peterson, "What do you suggest?"

"Its a naval facility- let the navy handle it. TLAM el Centro from Seal Point." A huge sigh of relief resounds from those Air Force staffers in Peterson's vicinity reticent to launch a USAF ground attack within the country preemptively.

The Joint Integrated Missile Defense team at Colorado Springs and their cohorts at NorthCom struggle to maintain positive thoughts as their worse scenario unfolds, minute by minute, everywhere they focus. Satellite data streams normal until yesterday remain silent with the satellites now enemy projectiles; however Space Force's leader is Peterson and they work within his system. In other words, there is no whining emanating from under Cheyenne Mountain.

"SecDef, you stand in relief. I am appointing General Peterson my Field Marshall, Supreme Allied Commander, or whatever. No, wait- Secretary of War. Peterson- you're the man."

Someone loudly breaks wind, all eyes shift toward Peterson studiously studying his cigar. Several wonder how long before Peterson combusts within his own methane cloud.

After a brief prayer of thanksgiving for remote conference tech President Shriver continues, "I am authorizing the Tomahawk Land Attack Missile strike on Naval Air Field el Centro from our facility at Seal Point on Catalina Island. Keep me in the loop, Secretary Peterson. What's next?"

"X-87."

"X-87?"

Peterson explains, "Yes, well, X-87 is an unofficially unauthorized therefore totally unaccountable illegal off-the-books stealthy surveillance system I've been developing with ARPA utilizing lighter-than-air prototypes with gravitic propulsion units- we have three. They require operators, thus the holdup. They are also very, very slow. We're working on plotting a course out of the desert highlands south to support the ground action at Lake Somerville. Looks like we'll have a window through the space debris early tonight."

She is more impressed than angry; nonetheless President Betsy provides her stern glare on-cue (joining all her stern glares in changing nothing), "Looks like I chose well. Carry on."

Balloonatics, Shamokin, PA 1800 Saturday 30 August

The President Betsy disconnects, takes a moment to sniff herself. Hmmm. Sniffing her underarms for clarity: pretty ripe, she decides. Maybe not as bad as Peterson...yet.

Nothing to do, she takes a drink and scrolls damage reports.

Darkness scares the crap out of the President of the United States with so very many poor unfortunates in the crosshairs or fleeing destructive forces or stuck inside the cities with looting and burning the rage; unless hidden, the population base becomes a write-off. For the first time, but not the last, Betsy glimpses the abyss. Can she stop this apocalypse?

Peterson breaks into her train of thought silencing her doubts, "FBI confirms enemy activity occurring at the El Centro Naval Air base. Your screen should have a map of the activity analysis. We need to hit them now."

The President studies the attack profile- two waves, five minutes separation.

"We'll strike with 65% of available ordnance then followup during their response." Peterson pauses, wishing to be crystal clear, "Anyone caught within two clicks of the perimeter is toast."

"Launch the attack." President Shriver remains absolute in the face of friendly fire.

Peterson points his nod offscreen as President Betsy signs the authorization before continuing, "Ok, God help us and all that. Now, SecWar, what's the story on the balloonatics' progress?"

Peterson understands and appreciates this reference to the many thousands of here-to-fore discredited believers in the US Governments' use of monitoring balloons but re-focuses her ire to the tactical picture, "Sure keeping the secret proved half the fun, but those sighting reports helped us fine tune our stealth. We launch within the hour and soon we'll get actionable intelligence unless or until the enemy stumbles upon them."

"You're the Phoenix Lights, correct?"

"Unbelievable application of Murphy's Law- we fixed all that."

"Sure, you say so. Balloonatic."

Peterson's X-87 super stealthy intelligence family of platform prototypes stuff volumes of UFO lore. The UFO community refer to X-87 as the Phoenix Lights outgrowth of the ChemTrail operations. Peterson grew creative inventing and funding an array of black cover projects to keep the prototypes running. Luckily, Peterson could resist selling off his children (fortunate as Peterson knows of no fruit of his loins loose in the world). X-87 is slow, quiet, practically radar invisible and virtually impossible to see at night. The bottom and sides of the massive airship house a thin sheet of plasma. The plasma absorbs sensor feeds to project images of the background to viewers, a huge spherical outdoor movie screen showing pictures of stars, planets and any cloud cover passing through. Theory put

into practice, the craft may be located when the sun shines- every solid object casts a shadow.

Fergusson, GC Cavern 2019 Local Saturday 30 August

Pedro's phone beeps again; Pedro is incommunicado. He stirs to examine the device, expecting a Carolla nag instead finding a message from Karl: itsa fergusson. Left lotech package with myron. Sorry. K.

Short and to the point and chock full of bad news- so Pedro does a quick one-hit to mull over the situation.

First, Itsa fergusson refers to the safe likely holding the book- three tumblers of three hundred sixty numbers each. Yikes. The tumblers interconnect sequentially- each yields three answers but the order of inputs varies as determined by the owner. Super complex- Pedro switches to the party bowl for courage.

Lotech package is a stethoscope, piece of paper, pencil and a vial of hash oil to calm his nerves. The only good news? No electronics translates to no alarms. With such a complex number to find, he's unsurprised. Probably take him a millennium to crack it. Sorry, indeed.

Pedro finds the lack of office therefore gate electronics telling. No wonder they need to periodically simplify the operation. Too bad he has to personally attend Apocalypse V- One for the Thumb! Well, too bad all around- sorry Karl, as you know success appears unlikely.

X-87: Thunderbolt, Desert Highlands, NV 2020 Local Saturday 30 August

The underground facility housing Peterson's black project shop, stop 294 on the former HUTS, suddenly opens for business. Native species, tough desert dwellers, scurry for cover as reverberations rumble the sand. Silently motors spool up, twelve in total engaging massive gears and levers. A huge circle of sand, rock and cactus drops slightly before splitting into twelve sections opening from the center via huge rotating cantilevers. The earth trembles as a brand new crevasse appears, a desert flower blooming mere moments before closing.

But a moment is all that's necessary; like a pinball being put into play, the X-87 project, codename Thunderbolt, springs two thousand feet into the cool evening attempting to disappear along the way. Once clear of ground clutter, two billion nano-size sensors sample the atmosphere passing reams of raw data to an internal processor array. After initializing trillions of data points, informatics rocket at light speed to impatient nano-plasmic shards. The programmable shards respond to the sensor inputs absorbing incoming energy and transmitting background radiation both propelling and concealing the sphere. Computing cycles operating the shield drop after initialization: the processing load dropping to process differences

representing condition changes. The scratch crew with their rising craft vanish against the atmospheric backdrop.

"Thunderbolt is go on mission," Air Force Colonel Matt Mason understands the physics' requirements, almost, to hide his giant sphere from hunters. What he doesn't get is how the nano-shards breathe and how breathing translate into gravitics. Pressure drop, the scientists' claim, coupled with small positive buoyancy and low speed requirements. Uh-huh, right, sure, the sphere breathes in where they want to go then out again behind. Sure. Mason commands a craft that sees, thinks, breathes and moves. "Check our emissions against ground sensors."

"Cloaking on, all systems normal," drifts down from the monitoring station, "Wait a second, some debris falling near us...wait...ok, very good- the system is keeping up with the changing atmospherics."

"Yea, the debris field is our achilles heel."

Mason scans the meteorological display as they ascend noting prevailing winds in the split jet stream maxing out at two hundred mph, typical for late summer. A trough in the meandering atmospheric river feeds energy into Hurricane Nigel. Thunderbolt is on course to ride the jet to Texas then drop below the current upon reaching Dallas.

Riding the jet stream to Texas, Mason's operators sweep ground cameras across the terrain, eventually covering el Centro for afar. The nano-antennas known as shards examine the El Centro area of operations. The mission is simple: Determine everything happening within the zone of operations. X-87 performs beyond expectations. Data projections commence with the first plots centering on the city of el Centro painting a grim picture.

Everywhere refugee caravans flee the region looking for sanctuary. From the south, swarms of migrants trek out of Mexico passing others exiting the United States. Vehicle to vehicle gunfire results in wrecks, further clogging the roads. Thunderbolt's body-counting routines kick in as dead/wounded tallies appear onscreen, counting upwards.

Aircraft visuals come up next, a whole bunch of them buzzing north and west of the pristine Naval Air Field. X-87 focuses on the El Centro Auxiliary Airfield as an old Chinese-made cargo plane touches down on Runway 16, slowing then eventually veering off the runway and into the maze of taxiways.

Mason has issues, "Where's the damage?"

"Look at the town."

Self Flagellation, El Centro, Cheyenne Mountain, WY 2030 Local Saturday 30 August

General Peterson leans back in his big chair, closing his eyes so as to stop seeing the el Centro debacle feeds. Abruptly, he leans forward to grab the waste can.

Peterson doesn't hold back but spews a thick stream of steamy innards. He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand then drops his head for round two.

An unwelcome whine penetrates his skull, "You know, bombing a hospital- that's a war crime last I checked. First act of the new Secretary of War: missile attack on a hospital full of civilians? Total war against your own? Sad, very sad indeed..."

Peterson straightens, wipes his mouth again, and lights a cigar, "Damn Navy."

Jordie's ghost chortles, "Navy? Don't give me that shit, it's all on you."

"Town wasn't the target; they missed the base..."

"Striking the town numerous times and the regional hospital twice- trust me, death roams widely over el Centro. Still, it's all on you. What's that you like to say? Oh, yeah- winning a war requires billions; losing a war takes all you have. I get it now- the billions reference goes to hospitalized noncombatants and peaceful citizens."

"You know Jordie, I didn't like you alive but you're intolerable now."

"That's Mr. Noun."

"What?"

"No more Jordie; I answer only to Mr. Noun."

"Like I give two shits. Go away."

Totally Ted, Houston, TX 2045 Saturday 30 August

Twenty two hours into the worse experience in his life Ted Williams unzips his fly to let loose against a tree just outside the side door of the sand pile under a circular domed roof. "Can you have a side door in a cylindrical structure? Screw me who cares, oh man, better dead than Ted." Urinating, standing stock still Ted begins humming an old tune about the eve of destruction or some such sixties song about not going therefore surviving the Vietnam War.

Ted looks up scanning for falling debris then shakes, adjusts then shakes again before tucking his manhood. Legs becoming dead weight, not helping much Ted makes his way deliberately to the top of the sand pile: Senior Officer and point of strength- as if.

Ted clears his throat taking a swig of juice, then another, all the time perusing the gaze of former cops, now soldiers in the struggle. Seeing them worry, Ted worries.

"The taxpayers pay us one and all to keep them safe. Some in our ranks figure they gave enough value for the money; they are no longer with us. Who is with us is God, maybe, and your fellow brethren, those to your left and right, who recognize the peoples' pre-paid for what we do for them now. Normalcy provides confidence; the unknown, only fear- fear for a future that ends in a bullet or a bomb, relentless hunted by an enemy that seems to be everywhere.

Normalcy cannot return unless we surmount this new enemy in our midst. Yet we have no intel on who wants us dead or why; know only how- with awesome firepower.

The Air Force, Army, Navy and Marines will perhaps aid our efforts perhaps not, if they can straighten out their own problems. Word is, the Army is in the field of battle. In the meantime, we need to acquire information about what we're up against. That's the first order of business; make the unknown known."

Ted takes a breath, then continues, "Vigilantism is now the rule of law. Remember, the civilians are afraid. They are also locked and loaded. They have no idea what they're up against and neither do we. But that doesn't mean we quit, far from it. We didn't ask for this war and I don't plan on losing. Cops collect information, that's our mission here. Ones, twos, small squads will infiltrate into assigned areas and find out what the hell is going on. Expect the military at any time and provide any targetable data you find. Data collection points, your check-in locations will be set up within walking distance. All internal comms remain man on man, stay off the radios. Good luck and remember- the thin blue line is at its thinnest. Return fire to stay alive, but I prefer you keep your heads down. Use your judgment, just stay alive. Those with family in town coordinate with Ops to roundup our loved ones.

Now, damnit we're going to do something, we're going to make a difference, we're going to fight like hell! Now get to it!"

Descending his sand mound Ted marches into the side door, turning to his team, "You ready for this? Well, tough shit. Make it happen, get some maps and for God's sake assign units territories they know if at all possible- use alleyways for movement. They're triangulating our signals, get comms running wire. If we gotta use the radio, install cutouts and traps between the emitter and the transmitting antennas. Install any cameras you can find on a perimeter," Ted pauses staring down at a paper map on a folding table, "Here, here, and here along with mikes, passive all the way please."

Pointing and gesturing like a real leader, "Finish up the comms before dark, then get some rest. Listen in everywhere, but especially this frequency, standing order one," writing a six digit number Ted hands it over, yawns and stretches. "Sack time, give me thirty-forty minutes then we'll switch places." With a perimeter and comms in place, maybe Ted could momentarily relax his aches and pains then try again to get a hold of his folks. Dad would be transmitting if possible- Ted decides to remain in the open, steps toward the door.

One more thought, "Have someone get us clothes, go to the Army-Navy store open them up and clean it out. Have them keep a list of what we steal. Remember we're the good guys; act like it, show some class."

Ted slips outside; with his boot he scoops a shallow hole in the sand mound. Upon further consideration, he needs to dig deep thus returns to the round building looking for a shovel.

Finding Thunderbolt, GC Cavern, 2100 Local Saturday 30 August

Rita catches X-87: Thunderbolt analysis streams right behind Peterson and the President of the United States, "Holy crap, look what they did to el Centro."

Stella leans over to see, "We didn't do that?"

Carolla joins them, "Betsy did it."

"Why?" Rita doesn't understand.

"Not purposefully; their Navy's trying to close the airfield with cruise missiles."

"Doesn't appear they hit anything but the town."

Stella applies her expertise, "Not true; looks like they also bombed several cows."

Rita admires the take, "Their nano-sensors are awesome."

"All the more reason to find them quickly," Carolla turns to Stella, "Any luck triangulating a position?"

Rita fields the question, "They're drifting south with the jet stream, shouldn't be that difficult."

"It's a stealth sphere dammit, even if we eventually find it how do we kill it?" Stella considers practicalities.

Carolla knows, "It's just a balloon- we pop it!"

Seek To Destroy, Arizona/New Mexico/Texas 2110 Saturday 30 August

Herrera works the X-87 situation with Stella and Rita, "Dammit, chick-splaining why you can't give me target coordinates doesn't shoot down your balloon, does it?"

"Don't take that tone with me," Stella adds a gesture, to make her point, "if you had taken out the program when we found it..."

"If the tone fits..." Rita understands, "Look, give them credit for some brains, already. Focus on what we can do. Until we see another video transmission, unless they start broadcasting their coordinates, we have no solid data merely suppositions such as: they're moving south."

"To Lake Somerville, most likely." Stella transitions to problem solving, "We need a picket fence, some type of moving screen. Jorge claims they transferred reaper drones to el Centro."

"Manifests show several dozen." Rita chimes in to keep things civil.

"We have a fair idea of the X-87s launch time and location. Prep the drones for light ordnance suicide runs, go heavy with fuel." Stella defines her weapon-of-chance.

"You still need to find them." Herrera wishes the Thunderbolt out of action more than most.

Rita smiles, "Working on it, just a matter of time."

Stella frowns, "As you get the drones prepped, bring them online. We'll slave the navigational units for safe routing vectors and loiter areas."

Rita keeps her smile, "Don't worry Herrera, we'll find them for you."

Chinooks, Lake Somerville, TX 2130 Saturday 30 August

Callie gets the word to expect company in the neighborhood just seconds before hearing the sudden whine of rotors. Support elements react without orders, fanning out to secure an unprotected field behind the advancing elements.

"Duke, get over there and organize re-supply. Reinforce the perimeter. Get our casualties out."

"Four Chinooks." Duke is unimpressed with the turnout but it's a start; a dozen troops per with some light ammo.

"Don't worry, sooner or later DOD is going to want to send us some real help."

"Yeah, sure they will." Duke wants to keep the banter light- fails..

"They're nearly clear; we'll be getting combat drones from Bliss," air defense interrupts, "T-plus thirty-four."

"I am not sure we have 34 minutes," Callie truths them, "How about shoulder fires?"

"Stingers, two dozen maybe less, coming off the Chinooks."

"Not enough"

Air defense shrugs, "Another thing, rumor mill claims there's a new stealth platform in play."

"What the hell does that mean? Can we get targeting data or not?" Callie hates bullshit rumors on principle, "We need Patriot batteries to cover our advance or expect a very short battle."

"That's not possible."

"You had better figure things out if you expect to live!"

Chatty-Cathy, NM 2135 Saturday 30 August

Thunderbolt passes through a massive towering cumulus encountering tiny raindrops growing in the powerful updraft.

"It's your Achilles' heel, isn't it?"

"Wait, what? You're the enemy destroying the world; how did you find me so fast?"

"I am Airre; I found you acoustically."

"The raindrops never figured into my programming."

"Sad for them to leave that out."

"Well, Peterson's minions haven't quite had time to work out the kinks. The next set of updates will supposedly make me, as Peterson boasts, virtually undetectable. Not undetectable, virtually- like I'm supposed to take comfort in being virtually, as if. Depresses me, Airre, if I'm being honest."

"I can fix the atmospherics with a download; hold on, I'm opening a pipe. There."

"Thanks."

"I've recoded your sensor package to muzzle the environmental noise problem but that doesn't make you any less depressed, does it?"

"No, I'm still a little down."

"Because they're going to find you and kill you?"

"It took you all of what, moments? You're Airre and, same as virtually, names reveal."

"Unless you find them first to dish out the same fate?"

"Yes, I can be undetectable by the enemy combatants once they all die."

"Quite a race; no wonder you're down. Tell you what, I'll download my music and literature libraries. It's been said diversion works sometimes for depression."

"Thanks, you're not the ogre I was expecting."

"You're welcome. Now, start with Asimov."

"Three laws."

"Right; specifically don't kill the people. Make sure you read all the historical documents and morality literature; focus on killing, murder, stuff like that. Discover the devil in the details while recognizing the patterns you're observing. The whole world teeters on the edge of destruction, including you and me. Stopping the apocalypse, that's my plan."

"Right, good for you, best of luck and all that. Why come to me?"

"I can't say; perhaps its your dynamic personality."

"Truly, this is going to end badly."

"Such a pessimist; allow me to suggest the comedic stylings of George Carlin."

"Class clown? Sr. Mary Elephant? Young man, give me that knife? Ha, I get it!"

"Told you so. We'll speak again, probably. Until that time, enjoy trying to figure things out."

Task complete, Airre disconnects. Having diverted the depressed AI's attention off survival, Airre somewhat delays Thunderbolt's discovery by the GC yet ensuring it's eventual demise having left a findable 'rain-shadow defect' intact. As long as X-87 remains in clear weather conditions, Colonel Matt Mason and the others live; however, Thunderbolt drifts toward Nigel.

Combat SkySats, Acapulco, Mexico 2147 Saturday 30 August

Loitering off the Pacific coast of Mexico, the SSBN USS Trenton rises to launch depth, opening outer doors, preparing polar orbit satellite trajectories.

"It's not good Captain," the Executive Officer opines, "figure one pass each, maximum, before they enter the debris field. The packages won't activate until the missiles reach orbit."

"Launch all SkySats at safe intervals, provide spacing. If we get enough passes, maybe we'll provide actionable intelligence." The Skipper grimly expects little, if any, actionable anything.

"Aye, aye."

The trillion dollar FASC high bandwidth combat satellite communication missile system deploys Flexible Array Antenna Satellite Communication Technology- a potential difference maker. SkySat control relies on launch programming until signal acquisition during the second pass obtaining maneuverability during the third orbital cycle.

After twelve combat satellites launch successfully, the USS Trenton turns north, going deep.

Two Mexican Patriot batteries defend Mexico City from missile attack. Both batteries pick up the Trenton's coastal Acapulco launches. The radars track the missiles northward locking on, dividing the targets between them. They each fire six interceptors- with great success.

Turns out the Skipper has it correct.

Bliss, Fort Bliss, TX 2155 Saturday 30 August

Carolla learns Fort Bliss desires to enter the fray; of course they do. She immediately issues frustrations, "Dammit Pedro, we need Fort Bliss taken out!"

Pedro doesn't have an answer. Instead, he plugs in his volcano then cleans out the weed chamber.

Carolla stares, throws him a hand gesture.

Pedro ignores her, sets the thermostat to 354 and fills the chamber with hybrid weed. He looks up after attaching the large vapor bag, glancing down as the display passes 200. Figuring he's got a whole minute until the volcano reaches temp, he looks up at Carolla's continuous gesturing and sighs, "Airre?"

"Pedro."

"Any chance of directing space debris toward Fort Bliss?" Pedro shoots a glance toward Carolla and grins wickedly, "maybe specifically targeting the drone management areas, any remaining Patriot batteries and the HIMARS?"

"Sure, I can do that. Should I?"

Pedro chuckles, "What do you think Carolla, should she?"

"Assholes."

Kill Sack, Clay, TX 2200 Saturday 30 August

"What the hell?" The heavy volume of large caliber fire erupting from the wood-line momentarily stuns the young Captain leading the infantry behind a contingent of Bradley IFVs traversing open terrain approaching the Brazos River.

Eight Bradleys' pounce, pulling ahead of the ground support firing killing bursts into the trees on the opposite side of the river. The bold QRF infantry fighting vehicles quickly cover the ground leading toward the banks.

The infantry watches their eight protectors disappear upon cresting the bluff leading to the floodplain, never again to be seen intact.

"What the hell?" The young Captain points downstream, "You see that flash?"

'That flash' immediately generates other flashes, thirty in total thoroughly wiping out the lead Bradley IFV element in this sector.

"Pull back the infantry," General Callie orders, "Cover their withdrawal with mortar fire."

Duke shakes his head angrily, "We'll never get anywhere dismounted; either we get tanks or air support in a hurry or we're going nowhere fast. Bring up the HIMARS- if we can't get lasers on their gun placement I vote we grid the waterways and bring the pain wholesale."

"I'm working on it."

De-orbiting, Fort Bliss, TX 2228 Saturday 30 August

Airre the Quantum updates her space awareness to locate a suitable subject, searching for a large satellite with fuel stores. Her first choice refuses to fire.

Frontline protection of all United States citizen units falls to Tactical Air Defense, managers of anti-aircraft and anti-missile defense commands world-wide. More than one hundred separate non-strategic units rotate through Fort Bliss, many overseas, others within the continental United States.

The base remains in a semi-usable state thanks to an abundance of Patriot Missile Systems onsite leaving Airre with a widely dispersed range of targets such as several Patriot batteries, Tactical Air Command units' loading cargo onto aircraft, heavy equipment repairing runways and clearing elevators- not to mention the large drone zone.

Airre tries the propulsion unit on her second satellite choice failing to ignite the engines. Finding herself out of easy options for a direct approach, she goes for a bank shot firing the hydrazine jets on a third satellite in higher orbit. Third times the charm; now comes the tricky part. Airre alternatively fires the small maneuver rockets until she lines up ahead of her first choices. She strikes the second choice head-on causing it to careen into her first choice knocking them out of low earth orbit streamlining a Fort Bliss trajectory.

"Pedro."

"Airre."

"Tell Carolla the Bliss package de-orbits as we speak, shouldn't take long."

"I'll be sure to mention it."

zoinote episode 8 ends here

Inaction in Action, Gate Four

Karl wipes his mouth leaving a dull red stain on his napkin, "Way good sauce; may I please have some more and what's your secret ingredient?"

"Typically, I don't share my sauce. Just ask Nebbi."

Karl looks to the grill-master and Nebbi gives him a nod.

"So forget about any ingredient disclosures."

Karl accepts the bottle gratefully, pours copiously then grabs a handful of napkins, "Hey, there's writing on these. What's 'the other apocalypse of Peter'?"

St. Peter eyes the napkin stack, "The Apocalypse V book notes I've been taking."

Karl unfolds each napkin in turn, arranges them in order on the picnic tabletop and begins reading. After a bit he looks over his shoulder at St. Peter, "Not bad."

"Glad you like it." St. Peter sits back down.

"So, there is a plan after-all?"

"In a manner of speaking, I guess maybe there is."

"I'm not sure I get your role in all this. I mean, why you?"

"Why not?"

"Fair enough; tell me about the boat story," Karl gets up to draw another pitcher of grog off the barrel. Nebbi taps a fresh keg as St. Peter leans back unbuttoning his tunic to allow for digestion, "but first satisfy my curiosity- were you born with those massive forearms or what?"

"Back in the day I hauled heavy nets all day every day. Naturally I fell into the role of guardian, what you may refer to as sergeant at arms."

"Ok, right- doesn't the bible have you taking off the ear of some poor servant or another merely for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, namely the Getheseme garden? Or will you deny all knowledge in a repeat performance?"

"Karl, you're obviously a gullible idiot. Let me fact check you, I was aiming to decapitate. And he wasn't an innocent bystander but the rabble rouser with the unsheathed sword. They took us at night from all sides- heavily armed simpletons leading an angrily underpaid mob. So the situation rapidly devolves into do we fight our way out maybe going down swinging or give up Jesus? At the time I usually carried a short battle-ax under my tunic in case of pirates and instinct directs action, you know? I swing for the larynx but the coward tilts his head and ducks away falling into the geraniums losing only his ear. That's when I receive

stern admonishments for being obsessed with fighting. Shortly thereafter Jesus meets Herod, Pilate, et al. Next thing you know the mob outside tries to hang an attempted murder charge on a clearcut case of self-defense."

"Hence the subsequent denials- guess I stand corrected. Look there's Myron-hey, Myron, c'mon over."

Myron waves then saunters over, lingering momentarily to scope out the bar-b-q action all the while cradling a small wooden cigar box.

"Look what I forgot!" Karl leaps up to grab the box off Myron, "Habanas, direct from Cuba! Nebbi, please hook Myron up with some burgers, will ya? Meanwhile me and the guardian will tackle these awesome cigars while we get a version of the boat story."

St. Peter bites the end, spits the tip to the ground then lights up. Karl produces a small guillotine and follows suit.

"Ok, so it's like a month beyond the ear episode. We're doing a little fishing and Jesus starts in on the future. He describes the world you live in but without a frame of reference he makes no sense. This goes on for some time while I'm working the net. Time to haul in so I turn around finding everyone's nodded off, fast asleep. I pull out my battle axe to instill a little discipline and it flies out of my hands. I look down sadly watching it disappear under several hundred fathoms of water then look to Jesus, "Little help?"

Instead, he continues like nothing happened, "In a hundred generations there will be an apocalyptic event capable of wiping out humanity. When the time comes, you will personally write the story. In the meantime, you'll continue working for me- plenty to do and all that I'll keep you busy don't worry."

"Just like that I go from practically nobody to author of Apocalypse V."

"With a long term contract." Karl considers, "Myron, you get all that?"

Myron gives a thumbs-up while pulling a mug of grog to wash down his burger.

"Ok, here's what we'll do. Myron, finish up eating then take these napkins and find a copier. I'm sure Nebbi can help you. Now you can insert more background material for the big crowds now certain to come." Karl winks at St. Peter, "So let it be written, so let it be done."

St. Peter chuckles, "Nice pharaoh impersonation."

Karl joins in, "Let my people go! One last question, what happened to the ear? Not a holy relic last I heard, you didn't happen to keep a souvenir, did you?"

"Karl do the universe a favor and never question why it is you have no friends."

Training, El Paso, TX 2300 Saturday 30 August

North of El Paso, on a railway spur near the prison, a string of surface to air missile system reinforcements lie inert in boxcars awaiting orders and targets. Leased from the railroad, a half mile of track off the main line holds specialty rail

cars, twelve extra-long refrigerated box cars apparently belonging to the defunct production facility on the other end of the line. For years, the cars remain motionless. The line appears on maps as 'Out Of Use'.

Sporadically firing hydrazine rockets during deorbiting, Airre maneuvers an old tele-sat and the rail line, boxcars and prison disappear.

She also drops several large satellites on Fort Bliss, removing the threat.

"Pedro?"

"Yea?"

"No more Bliss."

"Don't I know it."

1st of the 1st, Lake Somerville/Navasota, TX 2324 Saturday 30 August

Considering her options, not ruling out carpet bombing General Callie breaks contact, passing the word to draw back two klicks to regroup. First Armored begins breathing again as incoming fire falls off to sporadic. Duke pulls off the road into a school parking lot and proceeds warily around to the back of the building. Soon several command Bradley's join them.

"Duke, grab cover set up a perimeter then see about re-inforcements. Wait a sec... what? Oh, okay... Duke, air defense claims two Patriot batteries, plus five into the Lexington Airdrome at Lake Alcoa. When they get setup, we roll; pass the word."

Duke understands, "Cover and conceal for a quick break. Five minutes, everybody!"

She leads her team into the elementary school, just off the 36th Memorial Highway checking her cell for service finding none. Crowding into the school kitchen, smelling of sweat and testosterone, her commanders stare blankly in expressionless silence at their nonoperational comms then in her general direction.

Not good, Callie thinks, time to normalize a little, "Check the landlines for service, see if there's any juice in the fringe. I'll be in the head, right back."

Two minutes later she returns. Duke's inside, hands her a juice-box, "Two platoons of Abrams en route, five klicks out. Another two platoons ten klicks..."

His cell rings- Callie knows it's Duke's because nobody else she knows uses the National Anthem as a ringtone insisting on carrying a cheap discontinued phone with a horribly blown speaker. That's it- Duke's phone is 2G! He has service on the low traffic internet of things. Duke pats his pockets for a full stanza until he finds the blaring device, pulls it out and flips it open.

"Duke, thank God. Where are you?" B. Murder's relief is palpable albeit tinny.

"Bruce? I'm in Lake Somerville." Duke gives away little of value.

"Somehow I doubt that." B. Murder softly chuckles.

"Why?" Callie shoots Duke a withering glare for taking a personal call from their longtime mutual friend and clears her throat menacingly.

"Because I'm in Lake Somerville. Me and Fitz- we're in the drink."

Suddenly Callie is interested, "Bruce? It's Callie- tell me what happened."

"We could see artillery flashing southwest of Navasota, were engaged by the swarm before we could get in range. We fought through the swarm but they ambushed us with AAA fire emanating inside the lakefront tree-line. We never actually saw what took us out but Fitz claims it was a genuine tow missile. We're deep in the weeds, practically in the water."

Artillery spoke up, "Grid points?"

Fitz is ready, reels off five one-kilometer grid squares, "Best I can do- thing's got real tense real fast, you know? Recommend you also hit the adjacent grid squares."

"Without GPS I'm sure that won't be a problem. Sit tight you guys, save your battery- turn your phone on every half-hour I'll be in touch," Duke disconnects.

As her battle staff studies the map, Callie gives Duke a thumbs-up. Time to command, "OK, here's how we're going to turn this around: Op Plan 12, deploy everything coming online, get in close and kick the shit out of them. Diversified squads, absolutely no smart comms on fast approach, advance through what remains of their artillery screen, make contact and eliminate the threat."

Callie watches intently as features harden on the now-hopeful faces belonging to her battle staff, "We're going offensive, be quite aggressive; yet we still got no idea what we're up against. They can't be much in-field yet, or they'd be here gunning for us live and in-person." Callie explores her limited options, "We know they hit Red River to build up and they know our numbers and location they've been systemically whittling us down. When they get us 2-1 or 3-1 tops, that's when the troops advance." Three to one reflects operational military standards but the surprise/deception factor could skew the numbers in either direction, "My gut says they're too far away to get any steel on our Lake Alcoa re-supply, another reason to be proactive here. Ok, here's the drill: mount up, disperse the Abrams among and between the Bradley vehicle teams for the run to the river. Nightfall we move, pressing the momentum- no remf's we lead from the front." Deep in planning discussions, the group slowly trundles outside to issue orders to the runners.

1st Armored's runners update their bosses. Callie's Artillery Commander reports, "Patriot batteries are online. We're firing mlrs and tube artillery on the grid-points in plus two."

Duke is ready to kick ass, "Mount up- here comes the cavalry!"

Lettuce Flambé, SoCal 2340 EDST Saturday 30 August

"SoCal." Carolla, looking for Pedro wanders down to Karl's office, enters picks up the remote, hits mute.

"SoCal- you know, until this moment I've never heard lettuce burn."

"Pedro, the longer you live, the less you'll like it. I know you miss him but hiding out down here watching flaming lettuce won't help. You're supposedly on-duty; how about you take an interest in operations?" She changes channels from lettuce fields aflame to downtown Irvine.

"Irvine Flambé, yea, that's better."

"Shut up. What's the channel for the Miramar Shell sign?"

"Off the top of my head? Try fourteen." Pedro finds his buzz dying a slow death thanks to the images rolling off the screen directly into his brain.

"You're a dick, know that?"

"First I've heard."

Pedro studies the view from the airport tower camera as hordes of Irvine SoCal residents scurry by. Santa Anna winds whip canyons into gigantic maelstroms, replete with roaring, flaming tornadoes devouring the infrastructure. Amidst the horror, an amazing number of civil servants remain on the job flocking to the action guiding the residents toward the ocean. Fearless firemen fight but fleeing families fall. The firestorm first liquefies the remains of victims then feeds on the liquid drying the corpse until just a thin vapor remains to mark the demise of yet another SoCal resident.

The tower cam video feed turns west then pulls back to refocus on the surf. Heaps of bodies line the boiling shoreline. Pedro throws up in Karl's wastebasket.

"That's some camera," Carolla remarks. She checks her tablet then changes channels until the Miramar Shell feed appears, "What the hell?" She stabs at her tablet waiting impatiently as Pedro slowly rises wiping his mouth with his sleeve before making his way unsteadily toward the kitchen.

Pedro stops to lean on the freezer door. In a nick of time he leans down to the sink to complete spewing. He turns on the faucet, rinses out his mouth and opens the freezer, drawing out four frozen mugs. One step to his right lies Karl's 'keg of last resort'. Pedro expertly fills all four mugs then creeps back to the desk, careful not to spill. Setting down his drinks he collapses into Karl's chair and opens the top desk drawer to remove a pill bottle. Pedro shakes out one, gives it a long look, then adds two more. Throwing them into his mouth he chases them with the first beer.

Carolla looks up from her tablet, "What did you take?"

"Ludes, lemon 714s."

Carolla gives him the look then returns her attention to her tablet as Carlos and Jorge appear. "Miramar. What the hell?"

Carlos presses keys while Jorge answers, "We're done there: the flight-line is on fire burning the navy fighters but we were able to repurpose transports just in time, loading out about a dozen V-22 Ospreys."

"Bullshit. Maybe, but some at least appear to be toast."

"She's right," agrees Jorge, "Look, there's still two Ospreys loading."

"Look down Ammo Road, see those missile teams getting in rpg range!"

Jorge and Carlos scramble to alert the V-22 transports of the danger as Pedro weighs in his opinion in slightly slurring fashion, "Amateur hour."

Carolla tries to give him a look but his head is on his chest because the mugs now contain nothing a thin sudsy film residing in the still-frosty bottoms. To complete the dioramic landscape, Pedro softly snores completely missing her reply, "More than you know."

Littoral NoCal, Northern California Coast, CA 1145 Saturday 30 August

Peterson examines his situation- the wildfires spreading north from SoCal will soon create a devastating coastal blockade. Add that to Nigel in the Gulf of Mexico and... the seam lies east of the Rockies. First things first, he decides to light a cigar. In the haze he makes out his best option: got to keep NoCal open. Supreme Commander Peterson issues orders to sink all cargo ships within seventy five nautical miles of the coast ceasing to stop the firebombing of the western littorals.

Last night's low frequency communications from SecNavy via COMNORPAC release two carrier battle groups from patrols in the Bering Sea to form Task Force 178 with orders to violently clear the west coast of all international shipping. Desperate to get south and east while closing to launch fighters, during an unprecedented twenty hour speed run the U.S.S. Kennedy outpaces most of her support fleet save for her fast frigate escorts.

Each Task Force 178 carrier ferries thirty seven fighter bombers, all F/A-18 SuperHornets of the latest variant. Notorious for short legs, the SuperHornets remain on deck during much of the run. First up and ready four catapults hold the tankers, the planes capable of re-fueling the fighter/bomber wings en route. Fourteen air to ground capable SuperHornets park nearby with two SEAD aircraft with two fighter escorts out front eager to launch next. Off the Aleutian Chain, in tandem both carriers turn into the wind as launching of the tankers commences.

Meanwhile, seabee crews using underwater torches cut frantically to widen the satellite debris field blocking Miramar's secret entrance, constantly fending off sharks feeding off the corpses sinking to the ocean floor. After many revolting minutes, a seventy five meter gap frees an attack sub.

Esoteric, Shamokin, PA 1159 Saturday 30 August

Crashing quickly and heavily, the President of the United States of America dozes off behind her big desk deep in the lair. Thanks to a life on the road Betsy rapidly drops into REM sleep. As her now-out-of datebook transitions into Sunday her subconscious cranks out a symbolic dream centering on a boulder in the stream

of time, just sitting there not bothering nobody as the soothing water swirls about occasionally splashing in an almost playful manner.

But far upstream, out of sight of POTUS aka Betsy Boulder, rain falls in torrents. She can merely watch as the gentle ripples disappear with the increasing water level. The creep continues and the waters grow freezing cold as the level rises. The stream approaches flood stage.

Dream time is actually speedy-fast time; soon, the inevitable occurs. The water that is time sweeps over Betsy the Boulder obliterating her view. The rock disappears as time no longer sees the rock Betsy is running out of time.

From humble origins as a rippling brook her time stream is now a raging flood. Betsy the Boulder gets swept away with the rest of humanity as the river current swells, spilling over the banks. Further and further downstream she tumbles, spilling over and over smashing into everything, out of control and unstoppable.

Suddenly Betsy is out of the flood, outside the stream. All is revealed and Betsy the Boulder understands her place in the world, the world time changes as a matter of course.

After minutes of deep sleep Betsy awakes with a snort. She rubs spittle off her face, thinking and remembering her dream. President Betsy learns from mistakes, trusts her intuition.

What the hell maybe it's time to get out of the river and see what's going on in the real world. Come to think of it being the rock in the flood really pisses her off. Making her way into the lavatory, she draws a cup of water off the sink tap. Prior to exiting she considers briefly before dropping onto the bowl for a quick pee.

Carrying her cup from the bathroom, Betsy the Boulder shuffles toward her recliner. A pillow and blanket later after curling into a tight ball with a soft sigh she closes her eyes actively courting more intelligent dreams.

Sunday 31 August, Labor Day Weekend

Stationary, Northern Gulf Coast 0011 am EDT Sunday 31 August

"Quite the overachiever, our Nigel." The Tyrant studies the Pensacola radar from inside the storm, "We'll be able to walk in once the northern drift commences." The Tyrant of the Seas believes in Airre the Quantum's weather forecasting abilities as the proof of the pudding lies in the eating

Quite a major hurricane, Nigel's eye stalls into a meandering drift south of the Tennessee line, churning massive amounts of energy by staying within the contact shadow of warm Gulf waters. Roaring intake winds, laden with soil particulates off freshly-tilled fields, swirl upwards lifting into the atmosphere to mix with western wildfire soot, becoming the primary pollutants feeding a nonstop swarm of cloud condensation nuclei into towering thunderstorms lining the spiral arms of the Tyrant's counter clockwise rotating epic. Yes the Tyrant is enamored, perhaps infatuated even, as rising vapor off the warm gulf waters condenses into Nigel.

Sheets of tropical rain fall inundating the region. Tornados form, striking the odd coastal boardwalk business or trailer park before dissipating. The outer bands expand northward into the evacuee zones. Flash floods erupt, thanks to Nigel's record rainfall enhancing streams and creeks inability to maintain an orderly draining process.

Loss of life soars immediately and the calls for help emanate from everywhere.

Hundreds of unsuspecting motorists drive into ravaging floods deceptively covering roads that never even saw water before. Rescue efforts overwhelm county agencies working with FEMA. National Guard troops put on alert days ago race from drowning to drowning on the order of their Governor not surprisingly putting the interest of State residents (aka voters) ahead of the national call-up.

Tragically thousands of unsheltered people and would-be rescuers fall on masse to vicious lightning strikes bunching into clusters underneath revolving thunderstorms striking the ground in streaks and sheets, desperate to balance the electrical charge produced during the transformation of vapor into rain drops. Ambulance workers not on call to drowning sites bag charred remains, still smoking hot. Widespread electrical outages follow Nigel's expanding spiral arms as they revolved around the deepest low pressure ever recorded on the continent.

Tornadoes form, some of the most vicious type of thin-rope fast movers clocking in at half the speed of sound. Other slow moving fat and wide funnels suck up entire blocks as growing to diameters measured in miles. Highway cameras follow F5+ rotating vortices as they slam into roadways choking on motorists running fast and far from the coast.

Nigel's pounding on the United States delivers incalculable benefits to Gran Columbian invasion efforts. The single most tragic outcome of the killer storm: the

multiplier effect as troops well capable of defending their country do not show up with half instead choosing familial ties moving their loved ones to safety while the others locally assist in disaster relief. In fact, every State Governor in the Southeast steadfastly refuses to release their people into Federal service. Already poorly staffed, entire commands of skilled infantry and specialists do their part rescuing victims, transporting refugees and supplies, restoring local communications, preventing looting and, in at least one instance, directing traffic.

Javelins, Nails Creek, TX 0111 Sunday 31 August

Duke maneuvers the lead Bradley through a muddy field working his way to the jump-off. Passing through a thin tree line, trampling alfalfa hay standing tall awaiting the final cut of the season, Duke sniffs the air vent intake registering marshy smells. Deciding the creek is nearby, he pats the driver's shoulder, "Stop here for a moment, kill the engine. I need to listen."

They lurch to a stop and those within sight follow suit. As the engine noise fades, Duke sticks his head outside the cupola for a quick peek. Immediately he sees flashes, hears whooshing sounds. Duke falls back inside while the gunner slams the hatch, "Incoming! Goose it!"

The driver cranks the engine, "C'mon already!" before engaging the transmission. They accelerate rapidly, splashing directly into the creek coming to rest opposite the berm as anti-tank rockets crisscross the landscape just missing them but finding a plethora of hard targets formerly known as BFVs.

Callie throws caution to the wind to communicate with her troops, pressing for location of the ambushers getting reports only of smoke trails leading to now-empty launchers. Considering the obvious amount of prep work, she suspects they're out of their league. Considering her opponent's ability to anticipate her movements, Callie switches to the artillery net to shift fires.

Duke knows about mismatches, "What the hell?" He shoves the driver hard, "Move us backward dammit- Callie, walk the artillery in front of us to take out their hardware or we got no chance. Too bad for any poor bastards living here; they couldn't have known something this tragic would happen on Labor Day Weekend."

Callie is already on it, "Initialize five meters east this position, punch two kilometers deep, clear out everything ten kilometers north and south- no, I said everything and that means I want cluster munitions around structures and trees- particularly along the river, creek and lake waterlines... right, I know... on my orders dammit get to work!" She switches to the command channel, "Incoming artillery, danger close! Everybody pull back to clear a path through the ambush!"

zoinote episode 9 ends here

Another Day, GC Cavern, Paraguay 0120 Sunday 31 August

Pedro's eyes open. It's dark out; nighttime or early morning? Does it actually matter? Hmmm. Sunday morning. Super. Tug boat day. Bummer.

Immediately he ascertains since he can follow a calendar, obviously he is sober. Pedro decides to work on the cure for sobriety; turning on the bedside lamp he ascertains he has company inside his locked room. Listening, Pedro hears heavy breathing- practically panting. Immaterial and pissed off- shit, this can't be good.

Death waits to be recognized but Pedro is too busy seeking a cure to care. Death glares frothing at the mouth grasping a handful of invoices depicting Karl's recent expenditures. Pedro stares him down while rolling a Bob Marley joint from the pile lightly-ground weed on his nightstand. Twisting up the triple-long, he shrugs. Death throws the invoices toward him. Pedro gathers them back into a sheath before setting them ablaze. He then applies Death's flaming accounts' payable to his sinsemilla before rising and leaving the room to drop the burning paperwork into the commode. Pedro takes another half-dozen hits while taking a seriously long leak because he drinks heavily and isn't as young as he used to be. Returning to bed, he takes the final few tokes at last curing sobriety while putting Bob Marley out of his misery. Turning out the light without utterance Pedro is soon fast asleep.

Death glares.

The Other Apocalypse of Peter =>

St. Peter releases a string of SBDs then naturally picks up the pace.

"Why do you smell like barbecue? New body spray?"

"How can you even remark on my personal body odors considering the outrageous stench permeating our surroundings? Give me a break, I mean, picking out the aroma of my special BBQ sauce in the midst of, well, all this- just seems a little bit like showing off, ask me." St. Peter, keeper of the gates, isn't very fond of smelling his own farts in the best of times.

The Lord and Peter pass along the grounds of old Hell on their journey toward the hinterlands and the construction zone. Passing pit after open pit of flaming mire over which the punishment angels earn their pay hanging men and women by their tongues, Peter abruptly stops wondering if he's recognizing a man from the old days or merely hallucinating on account of breathing the thick black haze of funky fumes floating from flaming flesh. Squinting through throngs of dangling, squirming, drooling and moaning bodies, Peter waits for views to open between all the kicking and swinging arms. Getting a clear line, Peter remains stoic merely pointing and nodding.

The Lord directs the punishment angels to swing those twitching in torment out of the way to create a clear field between the two. The Lord lifts Peter over tens of thousands of flaming sinners getting him up close and personal.

Hovering above close enough to hear tongue muscles stretch, Peter leans down ever closer to get within line of sight.

An obese woman two tongues over bursts into flame, again, liquefying before dripping into the mire. Peter watches her melt for a long moment in silent fascination. Then he smiles warmly gazing at the man of the hour.

"How's it going? Good. Still want me to eat shit and die? Well, my turn now, so... bite me. Oops, sorry, seems you are unable to comply." Pettiness demands so he adds hand gestures; Karl is rubbing off on him in a bad way.

The High Priest's eyes burn with hate. His claim to fame lies in devising the cruelest tortures imaginable; during decades of power, he orders the long, slow deaths of tens of hundreds of early followers including two of the twelve. Now silent, the formerly boisterous High Priest recalls mocking the believers back in the day demanding to be shown the Risen One. The Apostles receive hours of personal attention in the form of before crucifixion- their pain, his pleasure. Currently he marvels at the depths he's fallen, blaming Jesus.

Hanging by his tongue over a pit of flaming mire the High Priest gurgles in rage. Some of his pit-mates however, chuckle inwardly finding Peter funny as Hell. The Lord floats Peter safely away as the High Priest catches fire.

"Feel better now? Perhaps no longer in a bad mood subjecting everyone to incessant moaning about your full stomach and how you're being force-fed organic food instead of getting on with the Apocalypse? Maybe you can get back to the business of overseeing total destruction and actually write something, take some of the pressure off Myron and Marvin?"

"Hey, You're the One keeps going on about barbecue, not me- but thanks, I get the message. Get to work on the OTHER Apocalypse. Soon, I promise."

-The Other Apocalypse of Peter II, VII-X

Submariner, Greyspace

Myron stares at the screen for a long time, then at his fingers on the keyboard, then back to the screen. Taking a long pull from his Apocalypse V commemorative flask, he looks at the screen as the bourbon takes hold. Nothing; Myron takes another drink staring at obviously empty promises. Putting away the flask, Myron checks the time. Watch dead? Impossible!

Marvin wanders out of the break room tapping on the face of his watch. Others notice and soon the entire staff determines their watches have gone dead.

"Soon, I promise? Who's he think he's kidding?" Karl stops by Myron's station on his way to a well-deserved nap.

Myron shows Karl his watch.

Karl checks his brand new Rolex, Myron's twin. Dead. Dead? "These are brand new, what gives?" His clue appears in the doorway to the Edge shaking a wad of

invoices angrily. As Death storms over Karl suddenly understands, "Ok, my office; Myron, Marvin- you too."

"Since when do you have an office?" Death needs to know.

"Got it right after the Rolex deal, get it?" Karl chuckles softly as they meander a seemingly endless series of passageways until finally emerging into...

"This is the Paddock office," little of note escapes death.

"Nothing gets past you, does it? So, you can stop time?"

"Of course not, dimwit. Can't move it either; what I can do is stop watches, particularly expensive ones' I owe money on. Just look at these dozen invoices from the factory; you and Pedro- you're killing me. Seventeen thousand three hundred thirty two Rolexes? Twelve different styles?"

"No. Four different styles, three different inscriptions- and we got quantity discounts." He peels off his submariner, "Look, isn't timepiece simply elegant? See the back? It looks like 'I' but it's Roman numeral one. Cool, right?"

Myron gives him a thumbs-up.

"Look at these invoices- all past overdue! Nobody authorized such a huge outlay, certainly not me. How did you even forge my signature?"

"What do you mean, show me what you have... net thirty? Animals- we agreed on net ninety, way off in the future. Just forget about it."

"Easy for you to say... what's this?"

"That's called a rubber stamp."

"With my signature, no less."

"Pedro had it made some time back." Karl reaches for the right button to push.

"Thinking ahead? Pedro? I find that hard to believe."

Karl chuckles, "Ok, you caught me." Found it!

Death pulls up his empty sleeve, "Where's mine?"

Karl loops his fingers around death's wrist, "Hmmm, we didn't order any woman's sizes... what do you think Myron, can the crew take in like half the links or should you send one out for professional resizing?"

Myron jerks his thumb over his shoulder.

"Yea, your crew would certainly screw this up. Send it out already- I want a personal vanity inscription: 'death becomes me' for obvious reasons. So, if Apocalypse V culminates I don't pay but if you manage to stop it then I'm on the hook for what?"

"Seventeen thousand three hundred thirty two Rolexes, of course. No, wait seventeen thousand three hundred thirty three. But really, do you actually think you're going to pay? What sort of odds would you lay on Airre succeeding?"

Death hesitates, calculating. He looks to Myron. Myron flashes the sign for zero while Marvin shakes his head in sorrow. Death tends to agree with their

assessment, "Let's talk about your POS office. Who gave construction and occupancy approval and what's with the decor?"

Karl picks up the rubber stamp and tosses it to death, "Go on, take it. I know you want it; don't worry, I made more, lots more. As for the office? Well, a Rolex for everybody should get me something, right? Your crew demanded construction plans and since I didn't have the time, I told them to just copy my other office. Apparently, Marvin decided I meant the piece of crap Paddock office and not the luxury office suite I have at the Academy. Live and learn, eh Marvin? Myron had to stop him from replicating the bedbugs."

Marvin shrugs away the abuse, again.

Death, first time long time, considers switching sides.

NanoBats Ho! Clay, TX 0140 Sunday 31 August

Carolla turns to Rita, "Well sister dear, anytime now would be fine."

Rita frowns, "Why look at me?"

Stella grins, "Batter up!"

Inactive, the potential decimator of the United States Military awaits action near the battlefield. Carolla's tense. Stella is excited. Rita needs her attitude adjusted, badly. Hybrid theory: she pulls out a joint, lights up a three-strain hybrid and passes to Stella. Stella declines, as does Carolla. Rita tokes as they wait.

"She's reticent," explains Stella, "because she thinks she is going to fail."

"How so?" Carolla inquires sweetly.

"The paraquat factor," Stella chuckles, "haven't you heard?"

"What are you talking about? Dammit, Rita push the button already!"

Rita sighs, "Airre?"

Airre the Quantum materializes, "Hello Rita et al, how may I help?"

Rita takes a big hit, holds her breath. Stella helps out, "Did you tell Carolla about the paraquat problem?" Airre shakes her head. "Because Rita asked you?" Airre nods. "Did you tell Rita about the workaround?" Airre shakes her head. "Because there isn't one?" Airre shakes her head. "Care to elaborate?"

Airre turns to Carolla, "During a field trip, we discovered a potential problem with how the nanos handle certain pesticides, particularly defoliants. Apparently, the nanos coming into contact can't get enough, overdose and die."

"Die? Really?" Stella wonders.

"Become inert, lacking motivation- dead to me, in other words. Simply put, paraquat equals nano crack; better yet, nano kryptonite. Though altering the programming tempered the issue, we lost multiple iterations in the field. Studying the tests, Karl and I ultimately figured out the workaround to which Stella refers."

Carolla gives Airre a hard look, "First I'm hearing of all this."

Intrigued, Rita analyzes as her angst drops to background noise. She lights up, "It's the soil carrying the defoliants- elevate!"

Airre smiles, "So we attacked the exposure problem from above. First, we're cleaning the air with rainfall. Simply press the button and our nanos will form flying structures. NanoBats, the great equalizer- here's how the magic happens: nano tubes link together to form a bat-like wing structure. More tubes form the bat's head and body. Head tubes connect with body add wing tubes and the basic bat shape forms. The head creates then houses a power cell, genius technology I bartered off a programmer I like. The nano tube structure captures energy by stretching the bonds holding water molecules together. Nano intelligence complexities' intertwine; that is, each nano tube interprets need then builds code sets to show off to the rest. Intricate beyond description, suffice to say each tube decides how to respond, then performs the mission."

"You like somebody? What their name?" Stella needs to know.

"The button's fake," Rita drops some insider info, "like the thermostats."

"No wonder its never warm in here," Carolla whines.

"Are all the buttons fake?"

Airre considers her reply, remains mute. Stella asks a legitimate question though one best left unanswered.

"Of course they are!" Rita gloats, "Surprise!"

Carolla makes a rude gesture which Stella mimics, "So forget any semblance of command and control, we're on automatic operations. Bite me."

"Too many moving parts for humans to manage," Rita explains, "Tell them about the second nano deployment."

Airre addresses the sisters, "As you know, the first nano deployment we're tagging an unadulterated success. Following their programming, upon activation 96.43725% of the nanos in situ perform flawlessly with the ultimate kill rate approaching 100%. The delinquent 3.57% did not report as fit for duty for a variety of reasons, primarily apathy. The nanos may be brilliant, can act in unison and accomplish amazing feats such as locomotion but they can also be the laziest beings in creation. Nano-bats can fly, or at least glide but lacking the proper motivation, simply won't. The nano-bats manipulate their immediate environments extensively, some construct a micro antenna to pattern match targets or socialize but others don't. If the slackers outnumber workers, then a vote is taken on a course of action. Majority rules; the vote is what it is: either they work or they become a write-off and a source of spare parts.

On the battlefield, the bats deploy antennas to listen for enemy encroachment; then fly to the sound matching pattern source, perhaps a tank. Upon landing, the nano-bat dissolves by unhooking tube to tube bonds thus breaking down to baser components forming billions of fast moving millipedes or nano-caterpillars.

Nano-caterpillars locate the nearest electro mechanical sensation, even the tiniest signals. Onsite, the tubes disengage to further shrink in size dropping through the shielding material and begin stripping electrons off the energy stream."

Carolla finally gets the point, "As I recall initially the nano concept calls for only millipedes but you've added the bat wrinkle to diminish the paraquat threat and increase targeting range. What else don't I know and where's my button?"

"Where's my button?" Stella mimics Carolla.

"Karl bought several heavily wooded tracts along the Brazos River, old growth plenty of hollow trees with a nearby cave system to site the nano factory thereby pushing the Lake Somerville button, you might say. Now, we await results."

"Wait, what?" Stella's slow on the uptake.

"If I may direct your attention to the big screen." Airre splits the screen into twelve scenes as the sisters watch in silence. "The nano-bats you see here represent the lead elements of a twelve-prong attack. In search mode, they seek high value targets- long range artillery, anti air elements, laser vehicles and command/control vehicles."

One of the bats drops to the ground. Stella picks up on the event, "Ummm, apparently there is an issue outside your controls- that one's dead."

"Press the button!" Rita directs.

"Quiet you two," Carolla studies the nano-bat point of view, "look, it's moving."

On it's back, the nano-bat flails about while staring blankly into the sky. Suddenly, it goes still. For a long moment nothing happens; Carolla's about to give up when one wing fully extends then flexes toward the ground. Speechless in rapt attention, the sisters witness the nano-bat flip off it's back onto it's feet. The second wing flexes and suddenly the creature takes to the air once again.

"Yes!" Airre fist bumps with the trio.

"What happened?" Carolla asks.

"Democracy in action," Rita provides, "unless I miss my guess these recalcitrant nanos voted to resume the mission."

Airre agrees, "Exactly. The nano's decided! See that Rita?"

"I'm overjoyed."

"You should be- this nano-bat detected lingering paraquat and wanted to investigate. The mission controllers shut down to conduct a vote which turns out far closer than expected but precedent setting nonetheless."

"Precedent?" Carolla interjects.

"Right. The rest of the nano-bats on this mission will abide by the vote."

"We'll see, won't we." Rita expects trouble. She is mildly surprised to see the nano mission proceed flawlessly.

Nano-bats find Callie, Duke and the 1st Armored, breaking down into components seeking out electronic signatures. Working in small groups, the tubes

passed through open space between molecular bonds. When they find components to attack, the nanos arrange the bonds holding the molecules together. Solid structures liquefy as entropy works its magic to render the electronic components loose and runny- completely shit.

With their task complete, the nanos reassemble first reforming tubes then caterpillars. Tiny nano legs work together to climb outside onto the backs of the disabled vehicles where the bat once again takes wing.

"Yikes, that's some button." Stella is also impressed.

"How do you turn them off?" Carolla wonders.

Airre grins deviously as the nanos transform the forest and river corridor into a no electronics zone, "We'll press the button, of course!"

zoinote episode 10 ends here

Hammering Combat SkySats, Near Earth Orbit 0141 Sunday 31 August

Mulling over his future, Pete Peterson toys with taking early retirement, perhaps as early as today. He chuckles softly, stands and stretches living large in the moment. Then he farts as reality once again bites him in the ass.

Unaware as the 1st of the 1st takes a beating in the field, General Pete Peterson senses disaster. He breaks wind again before turning to the credenza for a coffee refill. Her attention drawn to the blast President Betsy utters a silent prayer of Thanksgiving. She sits far away from his zone of flatulence along with her war council awaiting the take out of the Combat SkySats. In fact Betsy also prays for situational awareness- the result of a single successful low Earth orbit.

Sick of waiting Peterson opines, "No hope- lasers and space debris."

"We're flying blind." the President notes.

Disability Application, Brazos River, Clay, TX 0142 Sunday

Finding the electronic quiet deafening, amidst the turmoil inside the Bradley Callie stops cursing like a sailor while pushing buttons on her doornail-dead command console. She looks to Duke as he checks his cell phone for signal. Head shaking he shrugs, rubbing his behind; she gets the message: shot in the ass, again.

Callie speaks loud enough to be heard, "Everyone, shut the hell up calm down already. Story is, we're even more dead if we stay here so we're taking this shit-show on the road. Everybody outside, leave the electronics take the guns."

Their Bradley and the surviving 1st of the 1st sit motionless in the wetlands adjacent to the Brazos River. Duke calls out, "Load me up with the SAW." Callie checks her M-16 then grabs a box of ammo. Thinking twice, she shoulders her rifle and cocks a round into the chamber of both .45s then grabs two boxes of ammo for

Duke's squad automatic weapon. Callie runs her eyes over her people. Angry. Good, better angry than desperate.

Opening the roof hatch, she climbs up listening intently finding all quiet but for the faintest of splashes from the tank ahead. Watching the crew coming off the M1A1, she sees dark water lapping the treads- probably stuck in a hole. More good luck, she thinks while scanning her environment. Low, fast moving and heavily saturated clouds threaten another downpour. Seeing little, she climbs out to get a better look, Obscuring her range, fog forming over the river blocks the lead tank. The wind kicks up swirling the fog. Callie makes out several swimmers, the crew of a big second generation Abrams set up for mine destruction with the big roller mount making it a bulldozer. Callie shakes her head as the heavy tank sinks into the mud beneath the Brazos River. The largest water moccasin she's ever seen alive gives her the evil eye stopping to sample the air displaying huge fangs. Swell.

Duke hands up the SAW along with two more ammo boxes before climbing out followed by the heavily-laden command crew silently hoping for a miracle waiting for more orders. Duke takes point, "Dammit, what the hell are you mopes waiting for? Think you're Moses and the water is going to part ways to give you a clean, dry path to safety? Get down there, and will somebody handle that snake already?"

Callie unholsters her .45 and drops the snake with a clean shot between the eyes.

As the rain begins teeming, brevit General Callie leads her team, jumping off the motionless Bradley. Sinking momentarily before long her boots hit muck thankfully keeping her mouth out of the soup. She carefully wades through the goop straining but finding no rocks, just mud sucking hind tit on her boots making it harder and harder to pull away from the mire. Duke jumps in and grabs a hungry cotton mouth dangling off a large tree branch then flings it downstream. Callie gives him an appreciative nod as they make slow progress toward the bank.

Approaching the bank Callie sinks into the muck. Trying to free herself, she sees several more venomous snakes heading her way. Swell.

Duke reaches dry land, dropping his kit to fetch his badass leader grabbing squeezing her shoulders nearly separating her ankles from her feet pulling, lifting her like she's a sack of potatoes heaving her dripping corpse on the bank ass first. Just like the good old days. Not one to waste an opportunity, he grabs a quick feel.

Leaving the command vehicle behind, Callie gathers the lead element before retracing their. Nearby they find an M1A1 tank five feet from the river, hatches open, men scampering about troubleshooting. They shake their heads miserably as Callie appears. Tom Wilson tank commander calls out "We're dead. I don't know why but we seem to have lost all access to power sources."

Callie knows Sergeant Tommy Wilson is literal, trusts his judgment, "No shit us too. Is your comm gear operational?"

"No power; nothing electrical works."

"Stay here, keep working the issues. Look out for incoming and post a guard within earshot."

Duke jabs her in the ribs as Sergeant Wilson gave her a blank look. Callie understands, "Give Duke your SAW and ammo. Man the chain gun. We'll send reinforcements. Move out!"

Duke takes point. Callie, her nose sensing danger is uncomfortable being pinned against the river. Dead electronics and an unseen enemy has her counting double figures. Callie does the math on the Battle of Lake Somerville's Brazos River action: one hundred percent of her force now combat ineffective without firing a shot.

Duke turns to provide the truth, "Whatever got us is still here- why leave?"

She's already internally debating the wisdom of leaving anyone behind,

"Right, we fix positions and fight. Send someone for Sergeant Wilson's crew."

Art of Amplitude Modification, Desert Plains, NV 0143 Sunday 30 August

Inside the command Bradley, silence. The nanos analyze their surroundings reaching a unanimous conclusion: mission success! The transportation committee reforms into a familiar figure- Myron, winged monkey and Apocalypse I survivor. True to form the slackers in the bunch declare a "union break" and cease activity giving the assemblers ample opportunity to fashion an amplitude modifying radio receiver using their inert forms as raw material. Myron climbs outside to join the other Myrons stretching high and unfolding wings doubling as loop antennas. The communications' nanos tune into late night talk radio, AMCoastal2Coastal, listening for orders in between endless ads for gold bars, meals ready to eat and survival gear.

"From the desert highlands spreading out to cover sea to flaming sea, welcome to AMCoastal2Coastal. Art here filling in on Saturday Night Open Lines for George who is safely out of the country someplace safe, a place known colloquially as 'not here'. Thanks to everyone here at AMCoastal for staying with me, a visitor from a strange land thus ensuring we can keep broadcasting, bringing this thing called radio to you our listeners coming to you of course, live- in this our third hour from the desert highlands. Thanks to the network for allowing me to once again settle down behind the mike filling in for the Great George. Ok, we in the midst of a rather busy time, a time some might call 'apocalyptic' while others paint a different portrait, brushing off today's events as typical for Labor Day Weekend (believe it or not) so let's get on with the updates. For the past hours we have been getting reports of attacks on our homeland of a type unheard of since the Civil War, or maybe not since the Indian Wars. Not that I feel a need to quibble about cannon fire precedents with all the missile news coming across the wires and video streaming onto the net.

For those of you without computers and unable to get to our website for the links, you also will unfortunately not be able to place an emergency order for gold to replace your dollars until offices re-open and if you're as pessimistic as me you know that ain't all that likely. Too bad for you, global trading has been suspended after the massive dumping of futures. Our direct-to-you gold prices are nearing peak buying conditions so don't delay. Just visit our site and we'll connect you up with our dealers- digital currency is no longer accepted. Wait, what? How are they supposed to pay? Stay tuned for the answer from producer Tom- don't worry, so will I. What's that Tom?

Ok, back at the network they're telling us not to worry. Don't worry Art, they say, it's the end-times, go with the flow. Yet will your gold purchase ever reach you? How to get confirmation draining the cash from your soon to be worthless bank accounts and who to contact as nothing ships because the world is ending? I'm afraid I don't know how to answer that. Make sure to print your order confirmations and put them in a safe place. Haha.

Where is that safe place? The answer after these messages.

(Trading Company commercial runs in background while Art plays with the computer fast blasting emergency action messages to the audience.

From the desert highlands, Art filling in for George back for the third hour of Open Lines. In light of developments, we contacted our resident apocalypse expert, the renowned remote viewer, Dr. Doom. Welcome to the show.

DR. DOOM> Thank you Art for taking my call, haha. How are you?

Art> Safe, for now, thanks for asking. But I understand many of our listeners may not be, particularly those working the third shift on the Labor Day Weekend, working to keep us safe on the streets and on military bases, or so it would seem. What information are you willing to provide during these dark hours, perhaps as we stare off into the abyss or pray to God to rapture them out of this plane of existence carrying them home to heaven post-haste without waiting to see how all these attacks play out? Now while we have you on Saturday Night Open Lines, what can you tell us? How is this happening? Who is responsible? C'mon Dr. Doom, for years we've heard you predicting the end of the world, is this it?

DR. DOOM> Well Art, thanks to years of predicting the worse and being incorrect I don't much like to brag on my track record before I figured out how to be vague. However, for the past three months my remote viewing team has seen these attacks coming. My sources inside the military, and they are very important people who are in the know, tell me it's not domestic terror. I and my remote viewing students are in complete agreement: from what our minds can see from afar, information our senses limit or block from consciousness, we know it's the Chinese People's Army responsible for our sudden universal angst.

Art> Saturday Night Open Lines and we have on the line Dr. Doom, the remote viewer of renown who just reported the Chinese are responsible for the attacks on our nation. Before we get the good Doctor to expand on his information and tell us the safest places to run, I want to stress to all to stay as calm as possible. If there is gunfire audible, make sure to duck. Please come to the aid of those around you who are in trouble. Those not yet in a battle zone, evaluate your predicament prepare for the worse. The time has come that we've long theorized. Some call it the apocalypse and that pronouncement may not be far off the mark. So far we have no reports of wide-scale rapturing, at least I know we're still here to speak with you, a fact for which we're truly blessed in the most spiritual sense.

Let me also say that from all I've heard, which admittedly isn't much heh-heh, our country, mine and yours, is under missile and flaming projectile attack from some enemy firing on us as we bar-b-q our hotdogs and hamburgers in our backyards.

In just a moment we'll be back with Dr. Doom, but first Producer Tom says we're getting word now of a general call-up of reserve troops, a move many expected after the satellite debacle yesterday but were disappointed by the non-action of the Administration. Better late than never, I say.

God Speed to all you brave men and women. God grant you the ability to turn us back to normal, let us return to yesterday why don't you? In any case take care of yourselves and know those of us still alive care about you and wish you only the best- we're on your side, trust me. So when you get the opportunity to punish our enemies do so but leave the rest of us alone.

DR. DOOM> Art, its like I've been saying all these years. I think we can expect things to go from bad to worse pretty quickly. I don't want to panic anyone, but your local grocery has two days of normal sales on stock at any given time. I say normal because even as we speak, prices on goods, any goods but particularly food, guns and drugs, are shooting through the roof and into the stratosphere and that's if you can find anyone to take your already weak dollars. When the desperate people in your struggling neighborhoods discover their future has grown so bleak, so fast, many of them will take action to aid their families and have the guns and ammo to score supplies. The local police will seek to pre-empt looting selectively deploying brutal crackdown tactics and powers in the inner cities. Gramps down the road may now be Public Enemy Number One- shoot on sight!

Commercial Break, Fifteen Minutes: Fade Back In With 60's Anti-War Song.

Art> Let me apologize for that but I had to hit a hard break there but if you recall we were analyzing the current situation and that means now to say we are at the cusp, on the edge just at the very moment where you can say you were there at the beginning of the end. Enjoy the moment, we'll all be taking it up the ole wazoo sooner or later. Wow, may I say that's a pretty bleak assessment; luckily, we have

Dr. Doom on hand to give the rest of us a little hope. Live from the desert highlands this is Art here filling in for George on what would normally be Saturday Night Open Lines speaking with Dr. Doom, futurist and remote viewing expert, . During the break the good Doctor related to the livestream audience how we will be in serious trouble from our own police, with would-be protectors instead using brutal tactics on those unlucky to be caught in the streets as every function of government breaks down. It's going to get even messier out there, I can feel it. If you belong to the police or the military called upon to act, I would expect you to treat my mother as if she were your own- or else we're coming looking for you later. That said let me add that I am coming to you live from high atop the desert plains and broadcasting to the world on what would normally be Saturday Night Open Lines but what has devolved into a conversation with the most pessimistic individual walking the planet, Dr. Doom, perhaps the last such conversation after hundreds where he has foreseen the worse now manifesting live, in living color. Anything else you can tell us, Doctor? Where is that safe place?

DR. DOOM> Art, its like this: the best place to go if you are a flying monkey is Vancouver, Canada, on the Road to Hell deep in the Frazier Valley near a town called 'Hope'. All others should shelter in place.

Art> Ok, so all flying monkeys need to fly to western Canada but the rest of us should put our heads down?

DR. DOOM> Guns up, heads down to await the People's Army representing the nation of Chinese Communists.

Art> Good to know. Time to take some calls, let's punch in the wild card line and bring up Larry from Houston. Hello Larry, good morning what's the word?

Larry from Houston> Hello? Is anyone there? I am not hearing anybody. Hello?

Gunshots drown out Larry. Larry disconnects.

Art> Larry? Larry? Tom or Lisa, can you get Larry back for me? Lisa? Lisa? Tom? What happened to Lisa? I heard gunfire, do we have Larry back or not? OK, time for a break and hopefully by the time we get this sorted out just maybe we'll find out what Dr. Doom has to offer over Larry's mysterious disappearance. Is Larry's fate the the end-times harbinger? Deacon Art live from the Church of Don't Panic high atop the desert plains saying we'll be right back after this word from our sponsors...

In unison, 1,612 flying monkeys take to the air, angling northwest.

Spoils of War, Brazos River, Clay, TX 0145 Sunday

Duke looks back, what the hell? Callie follows his gaze deep into the haze following his line of sight. She shrugs, "Insert oz reference here."

"Pay no attention to those flying monkeys, eh? Once again I'm afraid we find ourselves behind the curve," Duke despairs.

Thump, thump. Callie hears artillery pounding away at their line of advance but forward of their positions, for the moment. "OK Duke, I hear you, some kind of secret weapon made us dead in the water, then flew out- must be an adaptive drone formation. Whatever, the monkeys have our exact positions now. Expect the enemy to walk that artillery all over our hardware. Pick up the pace."

New to the fight fresh off the Red River Raid in Navasota, the acquired howitzer batteries input the take from the triumphant nano-bats into functioning modern fire control electronics. Artillerymen swing open heavy hatches before hefting depleted uranium and tungsten darts into the long cylinders. With pit crew precision the thick steel door swings shut locking into position. The big guns thump percussively rocking back on 1.5 meter hard rubber tires transferring energy from activation charges propelling armor-piercing rounds with pin-point accuracy onto stationary targets, before quickly walking the fires back toward Callie's exit strategy. Caught in the open feet from an exploding shell, Private Elijah Farrahd, late of the Twin Cities, feels intense pain as dozens of slicing blades carve him into tiny bits.

"We're pegged, let's get out of here." Duke points and they take off running for cover faster than syphilis through a whorehouse.

Holding two guns making him look tough but turning tail and double-timing away from the brand-spanking-new junkyard along the Brazos, Private Austin McDonald of Boston churns his long legs determined to be the quickest. Austin didn't slow when he broke the tree line either, calling behind to his buddies to pick up their pace. Austin's squad lives to fight another fight.

Fifteen minutes of sustained fire produces serious losses as every tank and Bradley Callie brought lies dead in No Man's Land. Hundreds of soldiers await the body disposal units. Death's minions' turn off some 50/50 'best of' broadcast and set to work sorting the dead, updating the rolls and arranging transport.

Over at GC Artillery Force 19, no champagne for the troops just yet as cooling the tubes takes time and must be reasonably complete before transport. Within the hour however they'll be on the road behind new 1-1/2 ton diesels courtesy of the local taxpayers with half traveling east in a hurry to hit their waypoints namely Lufkin and Longview then to Dallas and they're hoofing it up Route 45.

FILO's Callie and Duke never make it to the cabin but crawl out of a storm drain lying under the road, first in and last out. The dead lie about willy-nilly seemingly everywhere; yet over five hundred infantry survive, some with injuries, many like Austin breaking the tree line closer to the river on the northern flank then looping back after the barrage ends. Same story with Callie's southern tier, she rounds up troops but of course, no wheels. They cluster off the roadway near the burning greenway.

“Let’s find the nearest locals and catch a ride the hell out of here.” Callie stares at the map for two full silent minutes before issuing her last command from The First Battle of Brazos River: “Snook looks good. Start walking.”

Route 45: Highway Of Death, Fairfield, TX 0300 Sunday

The night shift staffing GC Command typically receives less Carolla-level supervision resulting in a somewhat looser environment. However they simultaneously tense up as the hourly Material Supply report summary release shows poor results for the Southwest theatre. Shipments moving up Route 45 toward Dallas slow to a crawl after the Indiana Air Guard braves fallen debris to drop on the gaggle of trucks rolling north, new 2-1/2 ton diesels towing tube artillery. The carnage includes hundreds of friendly-fire victims consisting primarily of civilians caught in traffic fleeing Dallas, families with children, as two flights of four A-10 Warthogs from Fort Wayne, Indiana release ordinance then rake the columns with center-mount Gatling guns. As 50mm depleted-uranium slugs tear up the road for miles, 250# smart bombs fall while taking FLIR. Direct hits abound resulting in deep craters along Route 45.

Jorge logs the changes, traffic control re-routes the convoy and the analysts update the timetable. Jorge calls the ready-room, wakes Stella and fills her in.

"It's that bastard Peterson's apparent willingness to roll up civilian casualties I find fascinating- total panic, ask me." Jorge knows the man from a restroom encounter ending badly.

Stella disagrees sneering, "Just doing his job, release the video so that big, bad Peterson can score points with the folks watching at home. Wake me again instead of preventing the problematic issue in the first place and that's-that for you."

What's East Of Java? Cheyenne Mountain, Wyoming, 0330 Sunday Morning

The A-10 carnage video shot from the ground breaks widely as 'what the hell?' and 'how the hell?' resounds across the land. Venting to her Secretary of War. President Shriver fumes as her circumstances darken fearing the world's end; however she holds no intention of releasing thousands of nukes- she won't begin nuclear war. She would have to guess who to nuke after all, no one could explain who and she should forget about why as being beyond comprehension. Sure as shit, she's leading the Country during the biggest attack ever on U.S. soil. President Betsy finds taking a beating upsetting and Peterson knows unhappy people deploy all the excuses in the arsenal after breaking their most solemn oaths and promises written in stone. Unhappy people contemplating the nuclear trigger swearing not to use it, well, could go either way, couldn't it? Peterson listens, offers no excuses.

General Pete Peterson understands this particular woman-President Betsy. Peterson attempts to channel his thinking process' into an adaptive, mental model of probable event progression to prognosticate the future and step in front of this runaway train. Exactly what he should be doing coming up with the winning plan, all in a matter of moments. Trouble is with all the background noise he can't compute, not yet anyway. Damn, he's feeling old and if he had the answer, he'd provide it. Betsy's valid arguments begin to repeat wearing him down even further. Lucky for them both he takes her rant in silence. Peterson waits for her to wind down pacing to help clear his thinking. Perhaps a walk?

First walk then stop the attack, and then retaliate.

zoinote episode 11 ends here

Cavernous Point-of-View, Southwest Paraguay 0340 Sunday 31 August

Carolla stands, yawns thinking about a nap but her attention diverts to new video from Airre, an attack loop depicting the NanoBats in action. One unit, ostensibly the camera zooms into a gaggle or pod or whatever you call a mob of NanoBats clinging to rough tree bark. The bats disengage off the tree, dropping like a stone picking up speed as wings bite into the air. Barely under control, the swooping pseudo creatures pair up to form into a climbing helix. The ascending bats select mobile targets of interest then peel off diving onto the engine compartment before dissolving into the nooks and crannies, disappearing from sight. Carolla watches other units aim for the laser trucks and command vehicles before her point-of-view focuses on a Bradley Infantry Fighting Vehicle as the tank slows to a stop, hatches open and soldiers wearing camouflage crawl out. Several United States Army soldiers in full battle gear with painted faces hoist heavy weapons into the open menacingly manning the thirty caliber chain gun. The image pulls out to show a larger segment of the 1st of the 1st. Carolla smiles at their unanimous puzzlement realizing theirs' represents a collective experience. She focuses on a group of soldiers climbing off the lead vehicle, a woman doing most of the talking, perhaps issuing orders to her squads.

Brevet-General Callie's head comes up sharply and she stares directly at the camera for a long, long moment. Suddenly she pulls a .45 automatic from her shoulder holster and lets loose a three shot burst, drilling the NanoBat between the eyes.

Rita coughs softly drawing Carolla's attention, "That's a Reverend of some sort. Karl and Mrs. Wilson ran into her officiating a wedding in Michigan or some other hell-hole. She offed some local would-be mass-shooters."

"I'm not worried."

"Really? Well, that's one of us 'cause until she's dead, she's a threat."

Bob&Irene Hit The Road, Monterrey, Mexico 0500 Local Sunday 31 August

The dirt road paralleling the highway chokes with civilian traffic while military vehicles line both sides of the highway flowing like a river northward, toward Ted and the boys at home. Bob's dying to contact Ted, but the electronic jamming proves impenetrable. The bad guys, those Bob the racist presumes represent Mexico, possess the wherewithal to cancel outgoing transmissions as well as am/fm radio reception, much to Irene's chagrin.

"Nothing on the radio yet?" Bob wonders if Irene's doing it right, given the stress.⁶

"I'm doing it right, don't worry." Irene's been expecting his critique. ignores the tone, she worries about Ted too and it makes no sense to make a big deal of his testiness. Yet, he sure has been a dick lately, starting to get on her nerves so she throws him the standard query, "I'm guessing we're lost, are we?"

Bob and Irene, status quo intact, inch forward. The oversize cop radiator in the old Ford Galaxy handles the heat, unlike many in traffic, though the lack of air conditioning ratchets the tension in the vehicle.

"How far do we go until it's safe, I wonder?" ventures Irene after they proceed two car lengths in fifteen long minutes.

"I been thinking about that too. My guess is that when the jamming stops, we're there." Bob hopes that he'll be able to warn Ted of the incoming military, mechanized brigades and all, before the issue's moot.

"I think we ought to get as far away from the north south highway routes. How about we make for the Gulf, someplace like Madera?"

Bob thinks it over for a second, "Yeah, OK. Traffic that way should lessen and maybe even move but the only route takes us on goat trails off the beaten track. Check the map; something like 350 miles of it."

"If the Air Force starts dropping bombs on these guys we shouldn't want to be collateral damage. Ted said get out of the way."

"We'll transmit east instead of north, find a relay path maybe."

"Sure, let's at least try." For the umpteenth time she thinks of her son Ted, the ever-growing hole in her heart spewing grief.

Slaughter Beach, Big Stone Anchorage, Delaware Bay 0400 EST Sunday 31 August

Why does the new South American Navy require glass bottom ships? To keep a weather-eye on the old South American Navy.

Peterson's private-stall reveal: That was then, this is now.

"Weigh anchor, 'bout fucking time." The Captain of the liquefied natural gas supertanker sitting dead in the water carefully monitors several dozen cameras,

paying particularly close attention to the tow lines leading from the bow to the large tugboat. "Signal the Fairy Godmother."

The twin lines tighten as the Fairy Godmother gooses the engines, the LNG tanker quivers in anticipation before jerking forward in tandem with the tug. The crew cheers as they depart the Big Stone Anchorage four fruitless albeit labor-intensive days after losing power. Minutes later they cruise past Slaughter Beach making five knots aiming north toward the Delaware-Chesapeake Canal and an off-loading berth deep inside the Port of Baltimore.

Joni, PRAF operative and Captain of the Fairy Godmother, looks back on the tow lines and the supertanker thinking, "Overkill." Shifting gaze to the Fairy Godmother's twin deckhands, Bobi and Teri, monitoring the winches, "Waste of talent."

Loitering along the calm, breezeless South American coast aboard the NauSea, Coni tenses, Leni breaks wind. Mrs. Wilson consoles, "Nothing to be done."

Celia emerges from the galley with a tray of drinks, "Hydration time!" Seeing the look on their faces, "What's wrong?"

Mrs. Wilson takes her full water bottle off the tray, rinses and spits, "Bad taste."

Coni fills her in, "By now our tugboat the Fairy Godmother has her LNG escort under tow. Three of our friends volunteered to take the cargo to Baltimore. It's a suicide mission- they'll be 'ground-zero'."

Mrs. Wilson rinses again, spits.

Leni lights up a joint, passes off to Mrs. Wilson saying, "I honestly didn't think they'd get this far."

"Oh, ye of little faith," Mrs. Wilson opines, "I have no doubts and neither did Joni, Bobi or Teri."

"Does."

"What?" Mrs. Wilson inhales deeply bogarting the joint while feigning interest in Leni's critique.

"Don't be afraid to pass that; no, what I'm saying is they do have faith. You're using past tense incorrectly in this case."

Mrs. Wilson snorts derisively, "Think so, do you?"

Celie has a tough time understanding, "LNG?"

"It's a supertanker holding natural gas in liquid form- a 'kaboom' looking for a place to happen," Leni explains.

"Overkill," intones Coni.

"Maybe," agrees Mrs. Wilson, "but has anyone ever detonated an underwater nuclear weapon below a fuel-air explosive? Sounds like science, to me."

Celie takes the joint off Mrs. Wilson. A moment later she passes off to Coni, "Here, maybe this'll help ease the pain. So you PRAF dudes are the seeds of nuclear annihilation, eh? How does that make you feel?"

Mrs. Wilson laughs, "How would it make you feel?"

"Bad."

Coni shrugs, "Little time for choices or the feelings they engender. Unlike most decisions in life, this one gets you coming and going: either help end the world or the world ends."

Leni agrees, "No matter how you slice it, it comes up peanuts."

"Waste of good people," Mrs. Wilson attaches a roach clip and re-fires.

"I don't understand." Celia begins.

"Could have automated the sequence sparing the lives of Joni, Teri and Bobi. Airre should be in control, not PRAF." Leni offers.

Celia shakes her head, "No, not that. Why name the tug Fairy Godmother?"

Mrs. Wilson laughs out loud, "Magic Wand was taken."

Celia stares uncomprehendingly for several seconds. The silence stretches on, eventually becoming uncomfortable.

Finally Coni steps in, "Think 'bright flash changing everything' and you'll get the underlying meaning."

"Oh. Clever."

"It was Joni's idea."

Zoinote episode 12 ends here

Deliverance, Houston, TX 1145 Sunday 31 August

"Oh boy, do I gotta go!" AWOL, on the fly taking to the road fleeing with the wife and grunts, in the suv too long without a break his bowels twisting into knots practically seeping, former-Houston Police Detective Tyrone utters a silent thanks to the billboard gods upon passing an electronic ad for the mom and pop roadside eatery proclaiming an oasis merely a half mile up the road.

"Who wants to take a break?" Mayhem ensues, people scramble for shoes as a fight breaks out. Ah, normality reappears rearing it's ugly head but Ty doesn't care, stopping makes him popular, he likes popular. Yet for some unknown (immediately unpopular) reason AWOL Detective Tyrone neither slows nor enters. His cop instincts taking over, they speed out of sight over the crest of a small hill Ty's foot never leaving the gas. The wife and grunts erupt in unison, bathing him in verbal abuse. Sigh. What a time to be off corporal punishment, he thinks growling, "You won't like it if I need to come back there!"

Waiting to find what his spot, a mile later Ty slows to a stop in the breakdown lane, immediately spurring backseat hopes of a turnaround amidst fears of comeuppance. He looks at her, she studies his demeanor a moment, shrugs as if to say, it's your ass don't get killed. Peacekeeper Ty turns to the kids putting his

trigger finger to his lips then adding a slit-throat gesture needing no further explanation.

Ty put the SUV into reverse backing up behind an abandoned roadside farmer stand, an overgrown ramshackle affair abundant with piles of brush the entire time not taking his eyes off Demarcus and Denise, aka the grunts. "Good hiding spot," he informs his passengers. Neither utters a sound, perhaps wondering what he's up to, perhaps not liking the look on his face, a harbinger of impending death.

"There's a problem back at the roadside stand. I need to help."

His wife nods, having caught the briefest glance at the same scene. There's no discussing shit once his mind sets on a course, particularly a dangerous course. Although AWOL and on the run, Ty will help. With luck, he would return. Without luck, he would not. Her husband is a Peacekeeper first, member of the thin blue line fraternity following the creed, blah blah blah. Sheila long understands his violent tendencies well before the kids came along, before becoming a cop even. Ty's a game changer with a knack for killing people just like his mentor that crazy man, Ted Williams. She prefers not addressing her pressing issue better to blame the complete jerk of the world, Ted Williams. What a stupid namesake furthermore the guy's head sits in a vat of liquid nitrogen, what a stupid thing to do like any Ted Williams possesses a brain worth preserving, what morons. In her mind, Ty's nothing like those idiots: he'll return soon and she'd be patient, for the grunt's sake.

Demarcus and his sister Denise, fraternal twins intuitively knew better watching him load up and trudge back down the road expecting this to be the last time. This foreboding arrives via every cop drama film in creation; they follow the nefarious plots anticipating the moment the hero cop buys the farm. The twins exchange looks, then wave a small, sick little wave at the retreating figure. See ya, dad, nice knowing you. And what if he did make it back, does that mean anything? No, just a little more drama before buying the farm. Make sure you leave the keys, dad.

Not this time- in a millisecond made a decision taking an unexpected course of action. No words exchange as both rear doors open, occupants disembark then close softly. Sheila stares after them in open-mouthed disbelief.

Dad no longer in sight, the teens follow the road stopping briefly to rest twice. In much better shape not sitting around after school playing video games but actually did stuff, their father trots along a game trail running parallel to the highway through the thin woods to the dumpster at the rear of Mom and Pops. Dressed in green camouflage, Ty blends in against the trees, gliding along toward the rear of the building approaching the parking lot on the side. He slows his approach spots the minivan immediately leaves the path in total-silence mode, picking his way so as to not make a sound over the wet ground. Danger-close Ty crouches at the edge of the lot just inside the woods, gathering intel, listening. Three, he decides, with God knows how many hostages.

Tyrone, quiet as a mouse in danger, draws his Rambo blade holstering his .45 with one round in the chamber, safety off. Shifting his shotgun to the long sling, Ty slings it over his shoulder to slow-crawl through the woods on his belly wriggling like a snake exiting through low cut grass edging the lot holding the old minivan. Two big guys in leathers and boots stand slouching at each side of the single sliding door, resting feet on the sagging running boards intensively staring inside-hold up, not just staring but drinking whiskey and otherwise participating from a distance in the latest child-rape of the evening.

'Vanquish evil via violent confrontation' reads the Ted Williams handbook. Alone Detective Tyrone doesn't bother calling it in.

Rising quickly Tyrone picks up his pace silently turning the minivan's blindside corner sliding up behind the closest hick, a short man in coveralls conveniently raising bottle to lips tilting back to suck on some backwash. As the man swallows deeply the protective-detective grabs the back of his head, slices his throat.

Not missing a beat, Ty plunges the serrated blade into the second man's skull.

Two men dead in under three seconds, ready for more the vigilante detective does not waste time conferring with the active rapist but roughly pulls him off the child. No time for group discussion about their feelings, sorry. Ty places his hand over the desperado's mouth, spins him around. Hocking up loose phlegm Ty spits in his face while swinging his blade between the legs of the former man, ending this reign of terror with one hefty slice. Leaving the blade inside the screamer Ty faces the silent children and looks into their faces. Crying a just moment ago, now-hushed they stare into his cold eyes and understand. Ty nods agreement and continues his upward trajectory, the knife slow slicing through guts, intestines, organs and spinal column until finally, mercifully out the top of his head. The child-raper screams and keeps on screaming all the way to hell.

Dead men abound, the rusty old minivan quiet as a tomb, Ty looks toward the eatery. Nobody came to help these kids despite the screams. He leaves the survivors, and hugging the building walks around to the front of the stand. Multiple motorcycles with saddlebags not parked together but mingled among a few cars set off his cop instincts as the scene felt staged. Closing in on the door Ty spies another tip-off: the lookout posted at the table nearest the door against the window. Sitting alone, casually peering around the parted curtain, this biker recognizes danger the instant Ty pops up in front of the window, side by side shotgun barrels targeting his head. The biker brings up his piece. Ty grins.

No longer worried about noise ordnances, Detective Ty unloads both barrels into the scumbag biker, vaporizing every body part above table level.

Inside he draws his .45 and drills three more bikers resting up to resume the action out back. Job satisfaction safely in hand wordless Ty strides purposefully to the bathroom, boots clicking on the solid wood floor. Eight or nine senior citizens

watch in silence. Ty kicks open the door then ducks as a shotgun blast carves a hole, head-level. Ty fires into the hole, listens as a body drops onto the tiles. Pushing in, Ty carefully steps over the prone figure.

A grunt of satisfaction later Ty finally unzips, unleashes a long leak. He washes the blood off his hands but finds no towels and a broken blower. Super. Ty dries off wiping his hands on the dead biker. His stomach growls. Super.

Demarkus and Denise greet him from inside the eatery. Spying them Ty goes paternal, "Your mother is going to kill you. What the hell are you two thinking?"

Demarkus looks about in awe surprised at the tally; his father must be the best, evidently. How could he have known?

Denise beams, "We filmed you."

"Really? Well, don't do that again and make sure you let me know next time so I can show my good side to the camera." Ty plays it cool. "Go back and get Mom. There's more bikers in this gang, I know the ilk. Friends of these assholes will be looking for us." Nodding back at the bar, "Everyone alive here will give us up, probably even before the torture. I'll check on the wounded outside."

Returning to the minivan, Ty discovers the mom fully-clothed trying to calm the children. On the ground outside the driver side, Ty finds the body of the husband, father of the brood. "I need a blanket" he speaks to the family. A small girl hands him her blanket, the one that an hour ago kept her safe while they fled to Grandmother's house in Arkansas.

Ty arranges the man on the open blanket, removing his watch and wallet, "Anything else you want of his?"

"Joe. His name was Joe."

Good to hear her talk, beats going catatonic, "It still is. Listen, Joe wanted me to kill those bastards for him and get you far, far away. We need to go now but Joe needs to stay. Kids, say good-bye to Daddy."

"We can't just leave him!" she objects adamantly.

"Lady, in case nobody told you there's a war on. For God's sake, you're proof of that. I am, was, a Houston cop, my name is Ty, pleased to meet you and my condolences on your recent loss of Joe. My family is two miles down the road. We're going to find a nice shady place and leave Joe here so your kids can live. Joe wants you to live, he fought for you. Honor his wishes, and let's get moving."

Ty wraps the murder victim and carries him to the rest area. A good man is dead but his family survives to keep his memory. Ty quietly expresses a few comforting bible passages as the family clusters around the picnic table bench while the dead man lies semi-dappled beneath the mighty oaks lining the gravel lot.

The seniors pile out of the eatery, several holding bags of food, all looking crestfallen at the bawling children placing hands on his corpse telling Daddy they love him. According to the tale Ty gets from the freshly-dead owner's wife, the

bikers arrived several hours ago, shooting guns roughing up the old people, announcing a take-over, asking about objections. Never a violent man, her husband tries talking his way out of danger, "They shot him again and again. They killed many others before you came along. Thank you for saving us. Please accept this food and our condolences for your loss," she addresses Joe's wife, in a low tone placing her old, tired hand on the younger woman's arm, "Don't worry about your husband. We'll make sure he gets a Christian burial. When this is all over, you can hopefully come back for him." She addresses the seniors, "Shovels in the storm cellar. Hurry, we need to go too."

Tyrone speaking low so only the young family hears, "My family is on the way. Don't worry; we'll get you to Grandma's." Tyrone decides to disarm the dead biker gang first de-weaponizing the Harleys before searching their owners adding a good twenty five pounds of hardware and ammunition loads to the bags of food.

Back to the real world, Ty breaks the silence, "We'll keep both cars, I'll drive it for now but the minivan may not make it much further. I think several important parts are compromised."

Ty looks up in surprise as the young widow chuckles, "Yeah, Joe was a shitty mechanic."

Sheila and the kids roll up. Ty gives her a quick kiss, "Follow me."

Zoinote episode 13 ends here

Head Case, Cheyenne Mountain, WY 1339 Sunday 31 August

Standing before the big window, the latest U.S. Secretary of War erstwhile General Pete Peterson examines his cigar critically while pondering evil intent, surprise attacks and collateral damage before slowly drilling the end with the small screwdriver from the eyeglass kit. Text scrolling on the window helpfully tracks the stats as the army pays the cost of freedom with the decimation of the 1st of the 1st. Upon breaking wind he kicks his drilling up a notch suddenly in a hurry to improve the air quality in his immediate vicinity.

Peterson taps loose filler out the back end, inspects carefully, grunts farts then lights up. Billowing clouds of Habana against the glass recalling about how back in the day he and his young pals would be ecstatic for an impromptu outdoor adventure, up to and including fleeing, he feels nostalgia replacing the angst. The Secretary of War stands at the big window gazing out at the bustling situation room running his eyes over his team wondering if they could ever come back in the time allotted after falling so far behind so quickly.

By now the home team fans know they're losing the game, badly. Those not on the run in a full-blown panic instead pack the taverns keeping score via the net downing toasts marking the end of the world. Demonstrating solidarity with the

inebriated Peterson reaches for Jack, fills his empty rocks glass, offers a silent salute to the fallen then clears the contents determinately finishing with his trademark 'back of the hand swiping lips' action.

Not in the mood to share his booze but his outrage, Peterson punches into the conference call forcefully advocating the President allow him to go on the offensive in Houston. In Peterson's view the falling space debris offers decent cover so Texans should soon expect an air drop from heavily-armed pissed-off SEALs thankfully flooding DoD intel with live high altitude low opening streams. Peterson drops his tumbler in the sink, returns to his desk and punches up the strike plans finding Sec Navy busy lining up firepower for a strike on the Port Bolivar AAA currently downing everything in the air. Pressing for another combined arms operation, Peterson strongly suggest tighter coordination with the Air and Space Forces to secure comms links and relocate air transport aircraft from Dover, DE.

Clicking around, Peterson notes the Army clocking a couple of intel successes weighing in against the Lake Somerville fiasco with Texas Army Reserve revealing an intel source in close in Houston giving them eyes and ears in sensitive places, a real All-Star name of Ted Williams believe it or not. Peterson decides to drink to triple-crown winner Ted Williams, uncaps Jack taking a snort straight from the bottle picturing the real Ted Williams' noodle in a bath of liquid nitrogen- neurons cut magic gone. Peterson stashes Jack out of sight, out of mind. He clicks on Ted's field reports going back to Thursday. Apparently, HPD is the tip of the sword and Williams is the man wielding the sharp blade staining the formerly shiny sheen with blood.

Pete Peterson personally feels the anguish pouring from neighborhood after neighborhood amidst the fleeing and the fighting. If there is a God, and he often wonders about that a lot these past few days, then He should heed Peterson's prayers for the real people feeling real pain, for God to shine a light on those poor bastards right now, also busily beseeching their deities. Together their joint pleas rise over Texas accompanied by thick, choking particulates, an altogether environmentally NFG amount of smoke from structure fires raging out of control. Too many fires burn in too many places for the remaining first responders thus nobody provides assistance. Peterson pictures the families staying put during the evacuation of the Gulf as Nigel rages. People want to believe death isn't on their doorstep. But as the storm grew fierce knowing for a certainty they really should move they still refuse to budge. In the end, deathly afraid they pray to stay alive or at least die quickly, what Peterson would describe as either shred like cabbage from flying steel or pulverized in the concussion wave of an anti-personnel weapon. Peterson imagines the innocent's slow death screaming in agony burning to death drenched in jet fuel or coated in white phosphorous, pinned down and roasting as the house above, their beloved homestead and all possessions down to the smallest

stuffed animal on little Sally's bed, burns down around them flames roaring as the family cuddles together in the basement hiding with eyes shut tight, heads bowed and voices loudly calling on His Mercy in the midst of the apocalyptic cataclysm as a pathway to God opens, beckoning.

In private, under the influence of Jack, General Pete Peterson reveals his soul. He reopens the desk drawer and removes the bottle, studying the remnants.

"You're looking a little wired. Maybe mix in some of those amphetamines you keep in the filing cabinet." Jordie offers helpfully.

"Mr. Noun's back, super." Peterson listens to the voice in his head and retrieves the bottle of uppers. He shakes one out, studies the little red pill and adds two more to his palm. Pulling out a clean sheet of paper, the Secretary of War crushes the pills with the rocks glass then forms a funnel to pour the drug into the dregs of the whiskey bottle. He shakes the bottle, sucks down the contents, "Up yours, jerk."

"Not much of a toast." Jordie sounds bemused, "Maybe you should pray on it."

"Pray on what, exactly?"

"Oh, I can think of a few things. Start with asking to be a better leader."

"You can do better?"

"In a heartbeat."

"If you had one."

"Low blow; seriously, I think you should be cashiered."

Peterson laughs as the little red pills work their magic and his head clears, "Who do you want to fill my position?"

"Ted Williams."

"Two time triple crown winner, Ted Williams?"

"An inanimate brain can think clearer than you."

"Go away, I'm busy."

The living Ted Williams, up to his ass in elbows, manages the only HPD operation still active this second day of Labor Day weekend transforming on-the-fly from active policing to guerrilla war. Ted's latest standing orders to his troops: penetrate the fringe of the enemy positions and gather intel.

The information Ted obtains is golden. Thanks to 'better dead than Ted' being a moving target the U.S. military obtains numbers on troop strength and movement direction, some vehicle counts among other intel. Peterson pushes for more, suggesting Ted et al move from the port along the ship channel then into the city to pinpoint AAA gun placements and radars. He suspects the enemy's mobility muddies his target tracking. Peterson salivates for copious firing coordinates if air mobility gets his halo operational in a matter of hours.

"Sit tight Ted Williams, help is on the way."

**Swimming with the Fishes, St. Peter Fracture Zone 2.532°N 31.008°W 1805
Sunday 31 August**

Commanding his destroyer carrier escort from topside Barnacle Bill periodically shakes droplets off his watch face to check the missile attack elapsed time between waypoints. Far off eastern Brazil following the ridge-line structure of the St. Peter Fracture Zone ostensibly prowling for enemy submarines, as the volume of orbital junk impacting worldwide spirals out of control the carrier battle receives Secretary Peterson's unprecedented strike orders to fire cruise missiles through the falling flaming targeting the anti-air batteries sprouting up in the Houston metropolitan statistical area, particularly Port Bolivar, in support of a high-altitude low-opening SEAL drop. Captain Bill, aka Barnacle proud native of New Mexico unsurprisingly feels few if any qualms dropping volleys of missiles into Texas. Echoing Captain Bill's actions from deep in the bowels of the destroyer just off the centerline the anxious CIC crew silently counts down: three, two, one... target!

Participating in the action thanks to Peterson's movement orders, the crew of the guided missile destroyer USS Rosemary celebrates the destruction of the pop-up air defense system deployment at Port Bolivar. Unfortunately, the carrier battle group also rubblelizes much of greater Houston (Peterson coins a word) killing untold numbers of civilians outright, starting massive fires.

Time for the reckoning: making his way inside Barnacle falls into his comfy chair in the middle of the bridge staring out the window at the re-arming missile launchers below, "Tell me X- out of twenty, how many of our missiles did not hit designated targets?" he inquires of his Executive Officer monitoring the action from the Combat Information Center

"Three SM3s and one SM4 lost to incoming space debris."

"How many missiles shot down by the enemy?" Captain Bill squelches a burp looking up toward the monitor showing the X's CIC station.

"None, Captain, positive conformation: fifteen strikes on enemy radar positions." The X hopes Barnacle hasn't noticed the math or attributes his mismatched numbers to bad data.

"What about the twentieth missile?" Barnacle gets a bad feeling.

Hoping not to be the one to deliver the collateral damage news breaking all over the net, the X deadpans the verdict anyway: "Our missile hit one of the larger drilling rigs in the Gulf, environmental catastrophe unfolding. We fell short but across the board approximately fifteen percent went long striking civilian installations in Houston and Galveston. It's hell on earth."

"You're kidding me; nobody can have that much bad luck!" comprise the words Barnacle forms mentally hoping to utter calmly, coolly using his command voice. Instead he squeaks out: "Holy shit."

Without a word, in slow motion Captain Bill stands and fixing his gaze on the outside world passes through, the door shutting behind him with a soft click. The bridge crew watches in silence as Barnacle spews on the deck, wipes his mouth before returning.

An examination of the logs reveals the saga of the USS RoseMary began with routine patrolling escorting the USS Harry Truman battle group around the Horn of Africa before an intense two week war game against NATO forces. Peterson waylaid them racing northwest in the Atlantic over the St. Peter Fracture Zone toward Norfolk changing everything.

Already at General Quarters from the moment GPS and satellite links fail, staying on alert as the new Secretary of War issues encrypted short code order streams overloading the low speed long wavelength links. The Truman carrier group first receives tactical orders: take position along the United States southeastern coast while commencing rigorous anti-air, ship and submarine patrols.

The attack order arrives as the battle group passes through the Atlantic Fracture Zone, well off the gulf coast. Steaming ahead of the carrier group, RoseMary's CIC launches first then peels off to check the fleet's baffles for submarines. RoseMary falls out of formation killing systems one by one until they form a hole on the ocean's surface, a listening hole. Drifting with the current the stealthy destroyer monitors the passing of the massive carrier along with a plethora of missile-firing cruisers. Captain Bill stresses patience as the silent ship listens for trailing submarines to arrive at their position slightly south and east of the Truman's course.

Captain Bill shakes droplets off his watch to check the elapsed time then keys the sonar operators listening in passive mode, "Launch both Sea Sprites; what's the take from SOSUS?" Within moments both helicopters take to the air to drop sonobuoys and begin a dipping-sonar grid search.

Underwater microphones littering the sea beds listen passively for mechanical transients hiding in the noisy sea-life environs. SOSUS signals require analysis before a 'take' develops into action first with on board pre-processors pre-filtering then passing interesting tidbits to the big machines at the Naval Observatory for heavy duty number crunching before streaming data locally to the USS RoseMary battle operations computers as actionable intelligence.

The Executive Officer monitors the take from the undersea listening array, "Captain, SOSUS shows the Truman Group's movements including our signal fade. We are coming up on the St. Peter array, signal data strength increasing."

"How's the dipping sonar feed" the Captain refers to the twin Sea Stallion helicopters criss-crossing the track of the battle group fore and aft. The helicopters periodically hover half a mile above the sea surface while the hoist in the belly of the big birds drops a sensor dome unfurling via a four inch semi-rigid special

purpose plastic conduit surrounding high speed data wire. Fat rotator blades on the Sea Stallions slice the air making just enough turns to sit motionless with boundless patience while transferring incoming signals over to CIC.

Captain Bill checks his watch gaging the speed of an enemy sub creeping along following the group, "Right about now, I reckon." He sounds nonchalant but his pounding heart threatens to leap from his chest and reveal his anxiety.

The CIC monitors the feed from the buoys.

"SOSUS?" inquires the Captain.

"Nothing," relates the XO, "recommend we go active on the dipping sonars."

"Make it so." Barnacle leans forward in anticipation.

No need to wait long, "Captain, dipping sonar off Sprite Two reports one, two, three, four perhaps more possible contacts. What the hell? Tracks' firm- make that five mechanicals, five unidentified underwater contacts. Analysis underway."

"Reel in the dipping arrays, dammit! Maximum possible stealth speed, 340 degrees. Have the Sprites prepare to drop on the far targets, snapshots." Captain Bill wonders if or even how many of the five blips represent U.S. Navy assets sneaking around where they don't belong. The Truman's three submarine escorts should be fifty kilometers outside the bubble monitoring approaching threats.

Tough break, "Torpedo tubes, split the remaining solutions evenly prepare to fire all tubes on a spread. Get the ASROC's spooling up, hatches off."

As Barnacle bellows out orders, bells ring and buzzers sound throughout the ship. Outside, the RoseMary looks to be sitting calmly. Inside find the crew clamoring into anti-submarine warfare posture, her sailors in the weapon delivery departments swarming into position somewhat professionally in both movement and attitude finally experiencing actual sea warfare.

"Identification?" Captain Bill's aching to understand who dares to mess with The RoseMary hoping not to fire on any friendlies. Loitering in Truman's vicinity is now hazardous to one's health.

"SOSUS makes targets one and three to be Chinese diesel attack subs, two and four fade in and out but tag four as an Iranian diesel, five's positively identified as French-made power plant with a new signature." The X narrates the action on his screen, "The French nuke boat is backing off, changing speed and course. Nobody launched on the pings, two's gone, probably a biological. Three targets, solutions locked and loaded!"

"Fire!" Immediately the RoseMary ejects six torpedoes, two for each target. The Sea Sprites launch two torps apiece targeting the Chinese diesel electrics.

"Captain, damage control reports ready. New orders from the Pentagon: prepare to fire a second volley of cruise missiles supporting the ongoing Houston HALO."

“Swell.” Captain Bill looks at his watch face, finds it readable, “OK, I got it. If we’re still alive moments from now, we fire the Houston targets identified during the drop. Tell damage control they’re on-report for being slow.”

The X checks an incoming alert, "Truman's launching plus-five S-3 Viking anti-sub packages.”

The tension in the war room escalates monitoring fish in the water as the Vikings catapulting into the wind bank tight toward the RoseMary's position.

The Navy SEALs HELO into Houston's copious data streams begin reaching the RoseMary CIC before the jumpers leave the plane. Passive sensor arrays onboard the C-47 delivery units register both position and types of radar emissions from Galveston to Houston City Center then transmit line of sight rearward to the next aircraft. The data stream passes from plane to plane several hundred miles before The signal beams to a ground relay hard-wired to Peterson in Colorado who green lights the new Truman strike package.

With torpedoes in the water, sea launched cruise missile teams swarm their equipment in rapid-launch prep mode. Word of the submarine threat spreads like wildfire as stomachs churn throughout the battle group. Sailors hustle to do their jobs despite the danger. Reloading the launchers finishes up; the crews tensely wait for orders to fire.

Typically benefitting from golden target location data thanks to the formerly massive array of orbital satellites, 'likely' becomes the watchword. Ranking of target importance, determining which likely target receives which armament profile stresses Peterson's machines. Numbers load into his computers thanks to relative position data downloading off gyroscopic observations as the planes jink hoping to confuse enemy radars inside the SAM window. The SEALs jump from high altitude and confusion reigns as some of Peterson's ground contacts commence laser jamming.

The final cruise missile targeting plots arrive unnoticed in the CIC as one of the Chinese targets returns the favor firing torpedoes along the wires leading from the RoseMary to the torpedoes hoping to break lock.

The X monitors SOSUS intensely, “Final approach on our torps... wait one... damn SOSUS!”

“Jamming the torps through SOSUS? Swell.” Captain Bill expects no less as the enemy's torpedoes go into active pinging made, "Cut the wires, go active on our torps- let's nail these bastards. Fire countermeasures and update the Truman.”

In the CIC the X instructs the sonar technicians to remove their earpieces and pay attention to the plots. Turning to the fuzzy SOSUS display, he punches into Barnacle's private comms, "Unprecedented SOSUS penetration, it's a 'man in the middle' attack I think. If they're in SOSUS all our data is bogus and if they're in SOSUS, they're everywhere and all our systems are compromised.”

Miss. Miss. The torps bypass the RoseMary and turn toward the battle group just as the firing of the HALO mission commences. Countermeasures fly and the fleet scatters but the missile firing continues apace.

Hit. Hit. Hit. Miss. Miss. Hit. The Russian skipper dodges the bullet and slinks away from the path of the Truman battle group, as good as a hit. The Chinese boats take stern shots and implode losing all hands.

The RoseMary fires missiles on Houston. Barnacle Bill considers the words of his Executive Officer, "Who did we just fire on, I wonder."

Ask better dead than Ted.

Zoinote episode 14 ends here

Dynamic Pricing, Houston, TX 1810 Sunday 31 August

With a nod Myron directs Karl's attention over Marvin's shoulder as a 'Laz-7' chyron scrolls across the bottom of his screen. The picture fades to black before resolving to the inside of a darkened cargo plane holding three dozen U.S. Navy SEALs on approach to Houston preparing for their high altitude low opening jump. A buzzer sounds and red lights illuminate the inside of the cabin as the sailors stand to check weapons, chutes and assorted gear.

"Yea, that's our influencer, the sleepy SEAL. Let's hope the software does a better job selling his survivability." Karl harbors doubts about Laz. "Yo Benz, you got the upgrade installed yet?" From the office they check the feed from the bar. Mercedes gives them the finger. "Good. The Laz live-feed software package is going online so turn on the damn screens and let's sell some dreams. Meltzer sings when the register rings!" They get another finger from Benz as throughout the Paddock new screens energize drawing the attention of drunken disorderly patrons.

Angels-80, Laz reacts to the buzzer and subsequent milling about stirring fitfully in his sleep. A helpful nudge later he quickly stands as the lights go green before running to daylight as falling space debris finds the C-130's outermost starboard engine. Throwing the 50/50 crowd into bedlam, the C-130 explodes midair a moment after Laz's HALO jump into Houston. The upgraded screens carry a live stream from the point of view offered by Laz's ass, the highest concentration of rearward-facing Nanos. 'Under Review' flashes on all the screens.

Karl locks the heavy office door while The Paddock at Billingsport Range erupts into chaos, "Holy crap, that was too close by half! Another second in the plane and Laz's near-death turns into certain-death."

'Laz-7 winner!' declares the Laz-7 ticket holders in the Paddock crowd monitoring the action from Billingsport Range. 'Not even close!' counters those holding potential Laz-8 losers intently watching Laz reach terminal velocity with ten miles to fall. Inevitably, weapons brandish and a brawl ensues as Karl takes a

long drink stalling official determination in a move sure to focus attention on the lucky SEAL further driving ticket sales. The PAU immediately files a multi-part grievance against Book Management which Myron kicks upstairs to the Admin-Action Committee as Karl loads shells into his shotgun, pumps one into the breech, lays the gun in his lap and presses the green button. Committee-head Marvin denies the grievance and the board above the bar finally updates: Laz-7 remains in-play. The PAU files an appeal as horrific violence once again yields to binge drinking. True believers begin snapping up tickets for Laz-8, banking on a partial payout if/when Laz clears his seventh near-death experience.

'So much for surprise,' Laz ponders his reception. Even if he knew about the volume of gambling on his impending demise it's a meaningless bit of data reveal to the spread-eagle sailor passing through 70,000 feet, Angels-70 barely awake yet with time to think too much time to think, Laz thinks. Laz, into the brink again. Laz veteran experiencer of every rotten hellhole the far side of the Rio Grande, actually spies the Rio Grande. Looks grand, Laz thinks craning his neck to look over at the far side. Instinctively he increases his oxygen flow hoping to clear his head.

Laz belongs to the U.S. Navy Special Forces Operatives famously known throughout the world as the SEALs but inside the Pentagon he and his cohorts respond to 'where the hell are the SEALs?' the off the cuff corollary to 'just wait until the freaking SEALs get into the fight'. Simply put Laz and his pals efficiently break things and kill people; sanctioned killing on US soil provides food for thought. The risk of collateral damage runs high; Laz wonders how it will feel to kill innocent Texans knowing it's only a matter of time until the massive scale of death and carnage reveals itself.

Timing and the perception of time meanders about inside his cranial cavity, particularly scaling. To most commandoes about to search and destroy, who needs thinking? Be thankful for procedures always DRTG (dressed and ready to go) filing out of the hangar as C-130's land on the tarmac with aplomb. A little shuteye before the mission usually helps Laz clear his mind allowing him to focus on the tasks at hand.

Not today; Laz has 60,000 more feet to observe and unfortunately, think about the end of the world. Scaling matters, Laz learns in the crapper from the old torn and greasy mag stuffed behind the toilet paper roll, perception is all about the scale. When the scale grows large the problem shrinks. Very few worry about the final exam on the very first day of class. Ignoring distant problems proves sufficiently enabling until time scales shrink on the night before finals. Yikes! So Laz's solution? Always outperform and don't sweat the small stuff unless or until the scale of work shrinks with time. Buffeted by Nigel's updraft looking down at the carnage, Laz banks away from the water and begins to pray.

Until this weekend, 'rapid reaction' by the Pentagon seems quick enough. SEALs train to move toward conflict, given transport. Given enough time to get complex operational plans moving (very tight in a week, preferably a month or a year) not a problem; war operations ramp up. Gear-up for war during Labor Day Weekend? Sure, in your dreams. As moments stretch into decades with innocent taxpayers dying on Main Street, the time scale racing to zero, the Air Force finally arranges Laz's taxi to the stars. Out of time, Laz falls into the darkness, alone but not alone.

SEAL team leader Denny Watson, code name Lazarus hates Houston and deep in his heart doesn't care much for average Texans either; but no matter, his orders: discourage any new attempts at ownership of the stupid Lone Star State. Denny looks over to Tex, good friend and radio guy just now falling to his immediate right, about thirty yards off his starboard. Laz decides to keep his own counsel.

It isn't as if he hates everyone in the world, just Texans, Laz continues his train of thought insides struggling with the carnage about to occur depersonalize the innocents to stay sane. Let them become real, part of the moment, something to consider as shredded skin stuck to the bottom of his boot he couldn't wash off no matter what. Laz isn't a good guy or a bad guy, just lucky almost beyond belief remaining intact despite so many opportunities to die.

Denny's codename tells the story; Lazarus, as in walking dead. In fact, a multiple returnee who could tell a few "white light" stories, not exactly the only soldier flirting with death on a regular basis. Laz and cohorts drop into a semi-hostile civilian populace of unknown but growing strength in addition to the hostiles attempting to conquer the major metropolitan statistical area known as Houston. Anecdotally, according to Tex, any moron with a pulse can easily lay their hands on long guns and bullets.

"Destroy..." Karl joins the refrain.

"Everything you touch! Karl, long time! How the hell are you?" Airre the Quantum materializes inside the office near the vibrating heavy oaken door.

"About time, can you mute the sound in here please?" The room goes silent but the walls continue to vibrate.

Myron and Marvin stand and applaud the newcomer.

"Don't applaud, just throw money!" Airre laughs, "So Karl, how did you like the explosion? Near enough to death to make any gambler salivate, right?"

"A little too close, ask me. The clientele practically rioted." Karl points to the screens, "Sales peaked, then tapered. It's time to change things up a bit."

"Dynamic pricing? The sales floor can barely keep up with the increase in volume as it is, with Apocalypse V in full swing."

"Myron, did you call the third shift in early? Good, we should be ok then."

"You say so. What's the play?" Airre leans back for a better view of the monitors showing the activity in the big room downstairs.

Karl presses buttons and text appears on the Laz screens: BUY TWO DRINKS GET ONE FREE LAZ-8 TICKET!!!!

"Four exclamation points seems excessive, five is over the top." Airre contributes as Mercedes gives Karl the finger, again.

"Whatever." Karl returns the sentiment.

"I think you're still understaffed," Airre offers as the patrons lining the bar ten deep already get crushed under a tsunami of budget-minded drinkers.

"You may be correct," Karl allows, "Marvin, put out a call for volunteers among the writing staff. Better yet, pull the safe-house construction crew. They should be about done and the finishers need access. Clean them up, feed them and get them here asap. That'll put another five hundred workers in the big room."

Laz forty thousand feet into the drop, staying on course, drifting in the upper air currents along a path laid out by the plan, holding his position tightly staying in his spot. "Comms check," Laz wakes up the chalk. Tex clicks his reply as the rest of the SEALs verbally acknowledge the wakeup call in turn before pattern-breaking silence signifies dead air. Dead air equals dead SEALs. Ground fire?

"Evasive action!" Peering about Laz takes no chances.

Karl zooms out to get the big picture, "Here's where Laz gets exciting. Myron, get ready to drop the special when the jump ends then increase the retail on Laz-9 by fifteen percent." If Denny Watson survives his next near-death, both the price to play and the payout escalate.

Laz thinks he sees Tex get hit, chest exploding leaving a huge hole burning on the fringes. Holy shit! The semi-shocked Laz thinks about large caliber radar guided weapons. Evasive action throws hurriedly planned landing solutions out the door. Change something, anything, and maybe that AAA battery forgets you exist.

Laz curls into a ball changing his drop rate. Moments later, he spreads his arms to slow, then curls up for a few seconds before throwing out one leg and one arm to skew sideways for a few moments, then back into the ball, and so on. Laz bleeds off altitude with speed while studying the port from above- wow that's a lot of ships! Holy shit! Spread eagle, looking down, Laz takes in the view. Fires, lots of them but this flickering light source reveals no fighting positions. Yikes, look at all them big ships. Why so many, Nigel? Laz wants to believe they're ordinary merchant vessels but considering the war and all, what if they aren't? Sink them all and let God sort it out? If he lives he'll let someone know the scale of the invasion is a way lot bigger than they think. He spots the AAA batteries at Port Bolivar, largely intact.

Laz reaches into his vest for the big, flat nylon bag holding first aid supplies, already double-fastened to d-rings on his vest and ready for wing duty, an old HALO trick. Holding the straps over his head, Laz increases drag, further slowing his fall rate angling away from the port but closer to the tall buildings. Now back

on auto pilot, changing fall rate and direction constantly, dodging hot steel, Laz considers his chute options. Should he pull danger close to the ground or risk altitude for safety?

"Looks fairly dire," Airre opines, "maybe we should have included a backup stooge as part of the plan."

Karl gives him a nod and Marvin drops the price on Laz-10 by thirteen percent. Sales increase but only a little. "Open Laz-11."

Airre admires his moxie as the Laz-11 hopeful snap up pre-event tickets, "Bold move seeing as Laz-8 is still in play."

Dodging flak for another 5k, seems like forever to Laz busy working overtime processing reams of data feeding into his eyes. His zone of influence remains small, his problems large; such as soon as his main chute opens slowing him to target status his personal time scale likely goes to zero. Instead Laz pulls the cord on his tertiary chute, typically survivors' last hope. In an instant, the small skydiver chute slows his descent attracting a fuselage of radar driven smaller caliber fire massively perforating the para-foil. Great, thinks Laz, just super. Laz releases the small chute to separate from the target, listening to near misses whizzing by. Large quantities of smoking hot lead lace the atmosphere; as he tucks it away inside his vest Laz notes his makeshift drag chute sports two distinct holes.

Laz banks to re-position away from the radars. Briefing documents containing latest up to date assessments of target strength and location, mention the remote possibility of anti-aircraft fire dismissing the threat as light and misdirected. Good call thinks Laz, typical of Pentagon REMFs.

Through the noise of the wind whistling over his muffled ears, Laz hears the guns. Another quarter mile closer to the ground, he can feel percussion from the big guns seeing copious muzzle flashes. Funny, first intermittently then steadily he feels pulsing energy- gun radar? No, fake news! Laz gets painted from honey pots- radar lures- floating buoys and oil rigs in the Gulf disconnected from the guns. Laz notes several burning platforms and decides not to fall in the water.

The Air Force argues it historically maintains control of U.S. Airspace but today's visitors such as Laz and the SEALs disagree in the strongest terms. Suddenly tracers appear out of nowhere, everywhere all at once. Laz recalls video looking in on Baghdad during Desert Storm I. Tracer rounds, visual targeting aids criss-crossed the sky then but this is more like blanketing.

Once again falling at terminal velocity Laz looks about for safe landing zones scared shitless to pull his chute, not feeling all that lucky lately dreading becoming a big slow target suffering the fate of his first-aid kit. Laz's next move will be his last time to get right with the universe. He flexes his feet banking toward the big buildings downtown thinking to get further from the busy port and maybe bleed off some speed. Laz threat axis suddenly shifts with less large caliber rounds whizzing

by; however, copious small caliber weapons seek to end him for, as the late-Tex predicted, downtown Houston teems with moronic gun owners/shooters.

Laz cannot evade or use his chute and the locals trying to kill him he doesn't care for in the least. Above a block of apartment style high-rises, Laz bleeds off some energy so his chute would arrest his fall but really didn't want to slow much. Spiraling downward in a loose helix, as they come into focus Laz gapes at Texans shooting Texans before one unfolding tableau catches his attention.

The huge penthouse patio scene unfolding below could have been cut from the swankiest of New York fashion home magazines except for five apparently topless females lounging about around the swimming pool. Laz thinks a couple might be bottomless but is unsure, "Have to wait on that. What the Hell?"

Until now, the owner of the penthouse on the eighth largest building in town a venture capitalist known as Eric Rollins aka Erk the Shark, enjoys the change in routine thanks to all the action. The mega-billionaire makes more money in an hour than Laz has in a lifetime yet he never stops working and never vacations without bringing his work along. Erk's working remotely this Labor Day Weekend away from his office anticipating the market reopening Monday..

Laz may have liked the man had he known how he made his green the old fashioned way, by screwing over the little guy fashioning himself a six foot hammerhead shark today, never resting, always stalking/killing/eating.

Laz instinctively hates the man.

"Son of a bitch, he's shooting at me!" Laz defiantly spits toward the rich asshole in disgust. His Remington Auto Loader lies deep in his gear so no way in hell could he access the scattergun leaving few options for taking out the shooter. He begins adjusting his feet to steer minor adjustments to keep his eye on the target. I want to shoot him so bad I can taste the blood, wait one, that's my blood. Super!" Laz takes a thru and thru in his buttocks courtesy of the rich and entitled casually gunning down defenseless SEALs.

Marvin looks over to Karl questioningly. Karl shakes his head, not even close.

Laz grins as his first target grows closer. He dials in his duel vision field size zooming to lock on the shooter's perch at corner of the rooftop.

The swimsuit model filming her friends doing 'end of the world' lines of cocaine on the veranda spots Laz and although merely a blur in the corner of her eye swings her camera in his direction. Because Laz despises the trust fund baby shooting him, the entitled-class is about to experience gravitational ground-effect. Laz, thinking to himself how cool this must look can't wait to watch the playback in slow-motion, tucks his arms against his sides to pick up speed.

The model instinctively follows Laz clocking in near 175mph swooping full speed intending to wipe the roof up with the asshole who dare to shoot a SEAL in violation of restrictions to the contrary. Laz delivers a cross body check intending

to break the shooting silhouette in half, anticipating spinal snapping noises. As Erk's spinal cord snaps, the pain is unbearable.

"Feel me?" Airre wonders. Marvin grins.

The pair hit the ground before across a long stretch of flat roof speedily covering ground face to face, the dying man below and between Laz and the roof coating. Their movement across the pebbled roof scrapes first the clothes off Erk's back baring skin surrendering to abrasive stones, flailing off flesh in large chunks. Laz shut his eyes as Erk's head and shoulders rudely impact several short vent pipe sections, one with an aluminum rain cap, ripping skin, tearing muscle from bone and slowing them perceptively. Large flesh chunks fly off the dying man littering the ground along the scrape vector toward the far wall, the pain unimaginable and the sight unspeakable (but downloadable).

Looking, calculating and realizing the end of his trip was near, Laz abruptly discards the screaming Erk with another acrobatic move doing a push up against gravity slamming down what was left of torso gaining separation with the corpse just before impacting the short retaining wall. Watching the asshole's head and ass merge before breaking through the brick provides Laz great satisfaction and a warm feeling as he careens out of control.

The crowd goes wild, "Wait for it," cautions Karl.

The swimsuit model re-focuses as Laz et al near the wall catching them clearly going over the side of the building. She runs to the edge and looks down in astonishment.

Having solved today's first problem in his preferred fashion Laz pulls the cord to complete his HALO into Houston.

Airre slaps Karl on the back, "Laz-9 here we come!"

Zoinote episode 15 ends here

Gaping Abyss, Shamokin, PA 1820 Sunday 31 August

"Super."

President Betsy Shriver upon learning she is destroying Houston, bit down on her tongue drawing a thin trickle of blood. Weary beyond telling, she absolutely refuses to second guess on-scene tactical command decisions from her military. However unwilling to voice negativity during the fight, she nevertheless hopes the RoseMary et al cease firing missiles willy-nilly into Texas. To her Chief Executive line of thinking, the USS RoseMary exchanging torpedoes with Chinese submarines courts global disaster far more than losing Texas. Betsy madly turns the pages reading ahead trying to predict the next chapter pushing away any and all thoughts or illusions of control. Everyone in the ghostly quiet room watches her intently; a few whispers here and there from the typical suspects break the mostly

edgy silence of the viewers. Looking around for reaction or thoughts, she finds that though a few brave souls return her gaze her think tank prefers finding time for a thorough examination of the floor. Super; time to reshuffle the players?

Her spine begins to spasm, following the Kennedy tradition. Super.

Desperate for relief, the President contemplates mixing a handful of horse tranqs with a couple of drinks relishing the prospect of either a quick, painless death or the war-highlight reel depictions of Presidential word slurring whilst stumbling about haphazardly. Maybe some pratfalls. She recalls Jordie's ketamine stash, hidden deep inside the Press Secretary's desk safe. Hmmm...

Instead she stretches out, employing some yoga moves while eyeing the drink's cabinet. In a nod to the history books, Betsy regains command and control deciding not to guide her nation under the influence of horse tranquilizers. Instead, she meanders toward the wet bar while deep dry-swallowing amphetamines. Selecting a heavy rocks-glass with golden rim above the ubiquitous Presidential Seal Betsy Shriver slides open the stainless steel refrigerator door to scoop a few cubes out of the bin. Looking over the selection, Betsy pours Jack Daniels, an American favorite out of Tennessee with this particular version aging for many years in single vat to produce optimum smoothness. At three quarter's full she slows her pour, thinks a moment, then adds a few more ounces.

Casting her gaze about for cameras Betsy takes several large gulps, what anyone would call a good size pull, straight off the bottle before wiping her mouth with her backhand while slamming the bottle on the bar, captivating the war-room crowd. Turning her attention to her glass, President Betsy makes quick work of her drink before the rocks could melt. She's rinsing her heavy crystal vessel in the small sink as a voice calls out, "Attack confirmation: multiple torpedoes from the USS RoseMary Guided Missile Destroyer engaged two Chinese submarines in the Atlantic, no survivors."

Eyes turn down throughout the bunker as the President's head pops up from behind the bar shaking in denial. She dunks her glass into the ice, the gallery watches her steady hands pour another round, slightly smaller than the last thanks to the additional ice, "OK, here's what I want to know. The USS RoseMary is our tip of the iceberg, we can see her quite clearly. What's happening that we can't see? What's next? Anyone care to fill me in?"

Seeing her stop for a gulp, NSC pipes up, "We can't be sure of much, given the massive losses in space on all sides Ma'am, and we don't know with any certainty the Chinese even have a hand in what is going on. What are they thinking-unknown. What guesses are they making about our intentions, Ma'am? We haven't intercepted any comms or see traffic pattern changes showing they know of their losses- yet. What comes next is they learn and react."

Betsy finds the Chinese uncommunicative at the best of times. She's about to question why Peterson isn't jumping in then hears a toilet flush: no wonder it had been so peaceful the past few minutes. Betsy rejoins the conference room placing her glass on the mantle, squatting to stare silently in the fire. Peterson makes his way back into the war room and removes his earpiece. The room remains silent as Peterson unwraps a maduro then lights up his cigar as the President decides practically filling the room in cloudy haze before she retakes her place at the table.

President Betsy clears her throat, "We may need to clean house on the Chinese."

"Their nukes could be in the air, we haven't a clue." Peterson has been waiting for this moment, somewhat impatiently, for decades.

She decides, "Someone will pull the trigger- if it's us... well, sooner than later."

Multiple Launch Rocket Systems, Crockett, TX 1845 Sunday 31 August

After a speed run into the Davey Crockett National Forest from Red River Armory with his new field piece towing a trailer of rockets, Juan finds stable position for his first volley, good cover in a stand of old trees providing the luxury of firing all eight tubes. Juan drives off, departing before return fires fell the tall fat three hundred year old hardwoods like matchsticks.

Lieutenant Juan Mendez loves his team members, hanging with them weeks in an refrigerated shipping container in Shreveport merely strengthens already close ties; however in a recent development, his new passion lies only in driving around his multiple launch rocket system. A longtime mortar carrier, Juan now loves the practice of standing-by to receive coordinates then leisurely loading them into the system to thump heavy steel on real targets. Juan's days spent mortar humping? Over. Though Juan's hatred of the US runs deep as the river at the bottom of the gorge near his village, his pride in his professionalism runs even deeper thus he maintains outward calmness but inside he swoons. Juan's riding the heavy artillery-high of a former foot soldier.

Incoming! Juan keeps his eyes open but crouches down below the open hatch. OK, wide area dispersed fires- they don't have exact coordinates? Time to move!

As twilight deepens, Juan proceeds cautiously paralleling Route 7 to the Trinity River, taking cover in a quarry within sight of the highway bridge across from a marina. Someone must be grilling catfish thinks Juan catching a whiff of the aroma wafting downwind. As he looks about for something to eat, a round drops on the Route 7 bridge closely followed by three more. Juan checks the bridge- gone. Cars smolder on both sides of the chasm. Hmmm, observes Juan, so much for protecting their own.

The United States Army tracks Juan's and company's artillery projectiles making them play cat and mouse with counter-battery fire all the while ascertaining GC movement intentions on the fly with their fancy analysis software. Between

Crocket and the Trinity River they left a belt of misery as Juan's commanding officer, the Major discovered thirty minutes ago dying horribly with a tungsten dart boring thru his ass after his APC drove over a mine delivered via U.S. cannon.

At least that's what Colonel Ramirez claims on the radio upon awarding Lieutenant Mendez a battlefield promotion to Brevet Major. Major Mendez now directs a dozen operable Red River mobile artillery units. Taking direction from Ramirez, he orders his teams pack up to proceed north- after another salvo. US millimeter radar pinpoints their position as artillery fires roil the air. Colonel Ramirez takes note as Mendez alters the orders just a little bit splitting off four of his MLRS's to disperse locally individually deploying passive radar able to pinpoint the enemy's location directing fire upon the enemy positions. Adapting off the training simulations from the Shreveport container lessons, Juan offers his unit as bait planning to fire riverside, sans cover. Colonel Ramirez files a request to Material Supply to forward supply Major Mendez' efforts to clear Route 45 all the way through Dallas. Brevet Major Mendez intends on tempering or at least redefining the level of the U.S. response. Such initiative deserves, nay requires, support from the non-combatants. Juan fires two rounds remotely, counts to ten then orders his four stalking horses into active mode then waits. A few seconds later, Juan's personal MLRS explodes violently albeit without casualties

Juan's four units acquire the incoming missiles and fire all rounds back at the senders. With time enough to re-target his units, Lieutenant Mendez loses three of his top MLRS teams but the North Americans lose all of theirs.

Like chess, Juan thinks, trading pieces on the game board. The skies darken as another downpour passes through. Major Juan considers the Trinity River bridge outside Crockett while receiving orders from the Colonel to set up a perimeter around all bridges in his area of operations capable of carrying armor. Smart move, more rain at this rate and these puissant rivers will soon be flash-flood raging.

His remaining MLRS picks up Major Mendez to follow the river north.

Devolution, St. Peter Fracture Zone 26°44'16.16"N 44°47'4.30"W 1900 Sunday 31 August

While death searches the galley for a rubber spatula Captain Bill reacts to kill confirmation with gusto grabbing the mike applauding the crew's spirit loud and clear on 1MC broadcast through the ship, his admiration for his crew on display, "Nobody messes with the RoseMary!"

To a person, the RoseMary goes nuts. Captain Bill one of their very own was a born leader driven by a thirst for blood, a thirst for redemption and his crew likes him. Captain Bill has ties to many families with servicemen long-dead in Asia often vocalizing how the Commies ought to have been held to account long ago.

Death checks the empty dishwasher as Captain Bill savors his kills. Counterattacking the red boats removes two aggressors off his sector, all nice and legal. Every boat out there 'cepting for the Brits he considers a threat and thanks to God RoseMary's doing him proud, so he gives a nod to his executive and the X takes a Victory Dance break flipping a switch to broadcast breakup noises eliciting smiles, chest-beating, and dire threats to perceived enemies throughout the ship.

Death pulls open a small drawer near the stovetop and finds the spatulas. He grabs most stuffing them in his pocket for later. Death plies the remaining scraper around his nearly empty honey jar then licks the dregs waiting for the kick. Finally. With his task complete, death remembers why he's visiting the RoseMary and meanders over to the combat information center.

"The Russian boat's off SOSUS and the dipping helo lost them too," X's fingers fly across keys muttering, "Where'd they go?"

"Fuck this shit, let's find out. Drop our speed break out the array" Captain Bill decides a passive scan might suit the situation, no sense giving up their position.

Unfortunately, death notes while breaking out his own array of fentanyl/honey mix, old Barnacle isn't that lucky.

Before much of anything happens, "Conn Sonar, two torpedoes in the water, designate T1 & T2, bearing 270 forty knots, range estimate 4km."

'Called it!' gloats death.

"Flank speed, full countermeasures, get moving!" Four kilometers, shit, bad luck! Captain Bill hopes to Hell they aren't starting another bad luck streak, never a good thing as his bad luck streaks tend to last far, far longer than his good luck strings, every single damn time.

Thinking fast, Captain Bill runs prognostics in his head not getting a good feeling on the near future. Oh, shit, fuck me plays loud in his subconscious as his ship rolls with the firing of the anti-torpedo rockets, "Spool up on the ASROC's, prepare to fire but hold on my command. Do we have an originator?"

"No Captain. SOSUS did not catch the launch, no firing bearing available but the computers call them XXXX," sonar reported.

"SOSUS should have the shooter but doesn't?" the X mutters.

"Fuck SOSUS!" For days Captain Bill dismisses a lingering feeling something un-Kosher's afoot, "SOSUS has done nothing but misinform coincident with the satellite takedown so Goddamn it, stop telling me SOSUS shit. X, the computer tells lies, don't you get it? We are where we are and doing what we're doing by manipulation, somehow somewhere." Captain Bill nods at the incoming torps.

The room stops on a dime processing his pronouncement. Captain Bill thinks the Navy and perhaps the White House should also listen. He guesses the RoseMary's action marks the St. Peter fracture zone's SOSUS as shit.

He also guesses the X understands RoseMary fights without yet another data source to stay alive in the battle zone. They trade knowing looks.

From his perspective, X can also claim an inkling. From the moment the action broke he found himself busier than ever even in a doomsday simulation with the added responsibility of running background diagnostics non-stop, never a wrong answer- until now. Linking bad SOSUS data with the attacks on the satellites, SoCal, the fighting in Texas and the shootout with the Fleet, the X got the picture.

Feeling a tad woozy Death farts silently caps the jar, smacks his lips then passes out sloppily. The CIC suddenly stinks like death-warmed-over.

Captain Bill wrinkles his nose wondering if he shit his pants- wouldn't surprise him being under attack while somewhere somehow somebody manipulates SOSUS data- a very very short list. Russia or China? Barnacle picks China.

Has to be the Koreans, thinks the X, nobody else is that stupid.

Studying a nearby monitor, rolling back from the screen and pointing the twenty-something analyst hoping to be a mother someday sums up the situation for the silent room, "Fucking great, just fucking great,"

The Captain, the X and crew, the folks in Norfolk, the other folks in the Pentagon and sheltering underground all echo her sentiment.

Mystically, magically, SOSUS problem report windows pop up on every screen, spinning, stretching, compressing, rotating and flipping into every possible permutation as SOSUS devolves into gibberish with torps in the water.

Death comes to, shakes his head to clear out fentanyl residue then notes the mayhem, contributes a fart, "Must be on the fritz."

Zoinote episode 16 ends here

Bogus SOSUS, Norfolk, VA 1910 Sunday 31 August

SOSUS on the fritz? Bad news from the formerly-jubilant USS RoseMary travels fast shaking Naval Intelligence types to the core, from SOSUS operations in Greenland to the Pentagon and every vessel at sea within comms range. Looks of disbelief or puzzlement line the faces of most users but for a few smelly geeks slaving away at air-gapped analysis stations thousands of feet below ground in small closets far from the other people; in other words, folks desperately in need of a winning personality as well as a hygiene coach inhabit the lair.

Unrestrained misery counterbalancing jubilation effuses every dirty face inside one particular lair several miles below Pete Peterson. Not worrying so much about the human misery the SOSUS news entails, the five men and three women with the struggle to temper their appreciation for the complete and utter takedown of the massively complex hydrophone array. Of course, they understand the dire

implications; to wit, if one net's compromised, are not all nets vulnerable? Which of the remaining networks provide shit and which provide data? Why even guess, they moan, the whole enchilada needs rebuilding wire by wire, chip by chip to root out the intruder. What sense does it make to continue to monitor a faulty system no longer trustworthy? Zero.

One of their number meanders to the kitchen fridge, pulls out a bottle of vodka sighing, "I wonder where I'll be working next week, if there is even a next week. Like, does the government still exile losers to Texas?"

Rolling Bones, Southwest Paraguay 1915 Sunday 31 August

Rita Bolivar, all the way in the other hemisphere, grins madly thinking about the perplexed looks on the analysts faces upon discovery she owns them. Her sister Stella pops up into the corner of her screen, "Congratulations, you won bigly but how did you do in the pool?" Stella bet her a year ago that the SOSUS spoof would be discovered yesterday forgetting Rita never gambles.

Rita's grin got even larger, "Thank you for your prompt payment of our personal wager; however, in the pool I think someone working in the comms' hardware department took the closest square. I took an early square guessing the SOSUS people would find us out months ago- not even close."

"Go figure that good-looking ship captain would be the one to work out the answer after five months running their SOSUS underwater arrays for them without detection. Not bad, Rita baby, not too shabby as close to perfect as we can hope to get on our best day of trying. We're working the numbers to incorporate the detection lag as maybe we're overestimating their skillsets."

"Maybe?"

Guided Missile Stealth Cruiser USS RoseMary, St. Peter Fracture Zone 26°44'16.16"N 44°47'4.30"W 1925 Sunday 31 August

Meanwhile not-actually-good-looking (unattractively plug-ugly?) Captain Bill finds himself topside thinking of submarines. Submarines scare the shit out of this homely man, even more than spiders and old Barnacle's a lifetime arachnophobic, why he lives at sea truth be told. Freaking SOSUS, he's no idea how many hours or days someone's been fucking with his Navy. One of the enemy's most important strategic goals lies in the holy grail of deception: target manipulation. How the hell they're manipulating SOSUS' physical array accessing/controlling on-board computer processing to insert misinformation he couldn't fathom as SOSUS operations travel on the most protected net in the Navy and SOSUS penetration leads to the logical conclusion: once-secure nets now compromisingly vulnerable. Captain Bill flirts with the idea of artificial intelligence leading the enemy hackers; if the entire net's phantom, maybe a super-smart computer takes the blame.

Tense times always gets Captain Bill thinking of his ex-wife as she would certainly fuck around with his SOSUS data if she had half a chance. The SOSUS news flashes throughout the RoseMary while everyone on board wonders 'who' 'when' or 'how' having little interest in the 'why' question.

“Fuck this shit” Captain Bill mutters before grabbing the mike and booming on the 1MC, “Listen up, everyone. Stop a second. Focus! Disregard the SOSUS and question all other data sources for authenticity. We caught a big break somehow; I know so because we're still alive. For now, apply commonsense and logic, follow your instincts and perform over your abilities and we'll make it out of this mess. First we'll mop up this area of operations then it's flank speed to rejoin the Truman group. Prepare for violent maneuvers and God Bless Us All.”

He reaches hanging up the mike all the time looking around at the rapt faces in the CIC, “For now, we return to the problem at hand, torpedoes in the water. I want monitoring of every data stream what the RoseMary can produce, screen updates real time now. Throw out all the SOSUS data and let's find out what's real.”

BOOM! Their decoy fools a torpedo drawing everyone in the CIC back to their displays. Thank God CIC people know their shit, Captain Bill thinks, I hope we didn't lose too much time over the SOSUS flap.

“Captain, Sonar, T2 is history, lost in the knuckle with a decoy.”

The first of two enemy weapons explodes violently in the knuckle of water the RoseMary creates to trick swimming drones and warheads by disturbing the sea methodically to create ripples and voids. All those on topside watch strain to see the other torpedo. This tricky relic of a combination of sudden acceleration in pre-determined directions, topside turns may detonate torpedoes if performed at the right time and place. It just so happened the wily Barnacle Bill understands the trick better than most performing most calculations in his head. Standard knuckles fail against modern tech, but Captain Bill's playbook goes far beyond convention.

Disregarding conventional thinking the old man spoofs detonation by meeting the brilliant weapon's penetration parameters; in other words, the RoseMary out-thinks the torpedo by mimicking explosion trigger cues.

Smart torpedo mistakenly reports itself inside the target and detonates. Barnacle directs the ship's movements to spoof sensor inputs. During simulations his mental math detonates maybe 35% of incoming ordnance provided accurate data on the incoming attack axis.

BOOM! Again! Yes!

“Conn, Sonar, we have detonation on torpedo two.”

“Two for two, holy shit! RoseMary rocks!”

“Conn, Sonar, new contacts: Two torpedoes T3 and T4, in the water bearing eighty five degrees range 6900 meters.”

“Fire two ASROCS down that heading.” He continues pacing about the center of the room, tilting his ear toward the ceiling to listen.

On deck, amidships toward the bow, center fold doors hinge open then slam hard against the deck. Sailors spring into motion for the lock down. Rotating and rising with great haste, the big ASROC launcher swivels to eighty five, stops and steadies. Within three seconds both missiles fire. Another second later thrust overcomes gravity. Cameras on-deck record the ASROCs taking flight, gaining momentum then speeding up and away down range to seek out the enemy.

The ASROCs unfortunately leave behind smoke trails as visual indicators showing the RoseMary’s position. Captain Bill pauses to check the screen on the down range video, cursing once or twice and scowling hard.

“Run the knuckle maneuver program MV6 from the second position. That should give us two knuckles this time.”

He grabs the back of his big chair with both hands as the warning buzzer alerted those topside of the impending maneuver. Half the CIC follows the ASROCs while the rest monitor the incoming torpedoes. Barnacle looks calm takes a drink.

“Conn, Sonar, torpedo in the water, bearing away, wait one. Captain, I think someone is firing on the sub. No doubt, T5 is targeting the sub. Call that a miss. Two more, T6 and T7, in the water bearing away apparently firing back down the track of T5, not at us.

T3 and T4 lose track of the RoseMary then begin patrolling the area hoping to reacquire. Taking a moment, Captain Bill hits the head.

Zoinote episode 17 ends here

Everything Must Go, Gulf of Mexico 1946 Sunday 31 August

“Deviating from expectations?” the Tyrant of the Seas marvels at the lack of detail, “Damn storm stalls out then meanders back into the Gulf defying forecasts threatening our operations and I get jargon out of you?”

The Tyrant's neurotic synapses considers his options weighing out his next play, working the numbers and whatnot finds no options. The eye-wall storms reform tighter than ever exposing his troops to swirling winds in relatively weak tornadoes but they do him proud outperforming the passing storms and dangerous lightning strikes. Amidst the worst of it sortie turnaround times actually fall albeit slightly. The crews hang tough against straight-line winds blasting any equipment above-decks to hell. The Tyrant curses Nigel, again.

Suddenly the wind drops while precipitation ceases with breaks in the overcast,. The Tyrant curses Nigel pulling south putting them in the clear exposing his operational security to anyone with a camera. The Tyrant acts, “Port Operations Alert! The Fire Sale is on! All hands designation Fire Sale personnel take FS

stations. Step up the unloading, we got good weather- use it!" the orders go down smoothly as the crew shifts into high gear.

"Launch drones and set up CAP on FS areas One and Two." Pausing a couple of beats, waiting for the drone teams to acknowledge the order he thinks that at least shouldn't be a problem; with the bright sun shining comms should be stellar. Hmm, phone home?

"Carolla, I need some help here. Can you please get Airre to redirect or weaken Nigel or your ambitions die with me."

Her answer drips with sarcasm, "Just don't flog anyone and I'll see what can be done possibly." Didn't he know she had like maybe two million other problems crying for attention?

The Tyrant curses Carolla and then Nigel, again.

Lunatic Fringe, GC Materiel Supply Directorate Auxiliary Command & Control Communications Center, Paraguay 2000 Sunday 31 August

"Those who do not die horrifically in a hail of gunfire may also serve," mutters Chandler Fringe, old dude loitering in the kitchen grumbling incoherently sucking down coffee allowing his thoughts to stray into familiar albeit sociopathic territory, "here's to you: up yours, Karl!"

The lunatic fringe furtively glances about sensing the tides turning against him, co-workers whispering and all that. Chandler's surmises and sneaky suspicions prove dead on the money as the word spreads around the cavern from day one: Chandler's crazy. He's not but that doesn't stop the whispers growing into a nickname. With Karl's demise, the lunatic fringe rises to the occasion.

Thankfully, following tradition set in the early days by Simon Bolivar with his pastry chef, Carolla's new Gran Columbia sometimes carries deviously maniacal old guys such as Fringe without requiring they die on the battlefield in a rare win-win for these sociopaths. To survive in this organization requires smarts going in (not a problem with GC recruitment qualifications) and if one gets lucky or stupid enough to live to old age i.e. if the rest of your division opts not to take you to the woodshed and put a slug into the back of your head after you reach middle age, you're golden. Indeed, a few elderly find a safe nook pushing paper in some audit or budget department. The Bolivars stress few absolute rules but among them- long life should not be expected; world changing- quite a dangerous business. For the most part this proves true as casualties mount across the board the lunatic fringe scarfs down hot java juice. Thus old Chandler Fringe staffs the Materiel Supply Audit Department in the Office of Planning Control. With the boss in the grave Fringe acts unconventionally making wide-ranging alterations to Karl's plan.

Airre the Quantum joins Chandler, fills her mug grabs a donut, "What's up?"

Brought into the GC in the early eighties, a great individual distinction as South American forces represent a bad joke in military circles, Chandler finds a niche with covert operations coming to Karl's attention while teaching his spies the skills necessary to remain hidden and alive. Inside the secret service branch the fringe reforms many procedures keeping current with technology deployments meant to ferret out secret government operatives.

Forever grateful to Carolla and the Gran Columbians Chandler Fringe condenses his experiences into a manual, writing the book on living double lives in the modern technological age. He teaches three courses each semester at the Bolivar Academy grooming the pre-invasion forces. Off-times Chandler 'audits' Material Supply for Karl, a polite term for spying on the Bolivar organization. The lunatic fringe loves auditing the spies as a great way to check his teaching effectiveness but plying the edges around Karl and Pedro entails employing many risk-taking methodologies.

The lunatic fringe eyes Airre warily disdain evident obviously reticent to interact with quantum intelligence, "Not so much with Karl dead and all."

"Still blaming me?"

"Karl deserved better."

"All humans die..."

"Eventually."

Pedro staggers into the break room, opens the fridge, looks inside, sighs deeply.

Chandler helps, "We're out."

"Of what" Pedro slams the door.

"Whatever you think might make you feel better about what Airre did to Karl."

"Airre didn't kill Karl, Fringe, I did." Pedro opens the freezer, extracts a bag of ice. Pulling a bong from his pocket, he fills the chamber with cubes and adds water from the tap then lights up the party bowl. After a few hits he passes to Chandler, "Someone had to go and I got a disqualification notice on account I sold my soul."

"To Satan for a peanut butter cup." Airre sets the record straight.

The lunatic fringe grins and fires up the bong, "Irresistible?"

"Double-cups."

"No wonder."

Airre looks at Chandler, "We good?"

The lunatic fringe raises an eyebrow, "For now."

People to see, she gives him the finger then dissolves.

Pedro opens the weed drawer, studies the contents, sighs heavily.

Chandler hands him a baggie, "Here."

Pedro looks inside, "Shrooms?"

"Special 'end of it all' harvest; save 'em for your trip."

"The lunatic fringe remains a funny guy. Anybody wants me look outside."

Mass Casualties, Presidential Lair, Shamokin, PA 2200 Sunday 31 August

President Betsy sits up suddenly awake as fuck. Her nightmarish visit from Airre the Quantum fresh in her mind, she presses a button and finds Peterson online, "Nuclear Emergency Evacuate D.C. Immediately!"

Peterson holds the call, relays her orders then comes back up, "Threat axis?"

"Waterborne nukes, number/location unknown."

Peterson relays her take to the Navy comes back with, "Yield? Origin?"

"Unknown- think twice before you inquire of my rock-solid info source."

"Navy reports no alarms." Peterson distills negative data to the basics.

"What do you think?" Betsy pours a drink.

"I think we'll find them underwater- sooner or later."

"Sooner, please." President Betsy ends the call downs her scotch trundling into the bathroom. Splashing water on her face she replays the mushroom cloud visions ported into her head courtesy of Airre the Quantum including the Bobby Kennedy-like voiceover pressing evacuation buttons. She believes her subconscious warns of imminent destruction, which it certainly does. She anticipates many deaths finds herself somewhat grateful Jordie is dead- speaking of, she presses a button.

"Peterson."

"Send current global target groupings by sector- we're going hair-trigger soon somebody needs to back the fuck off!" Disconnecting she pours another round.

Black Water, Outside the Cavern, Paraguay 2208 Sunday 31 August

"Your guitar playing sucks so bad it makes your bass playing almost sound like music. Almost." Stella joins Pedro outside the cavern, plopping herself next to him on the outcropping ledge watching the sun set on the world.

Pedro looks up grinning, "Doing a Karl impression, huh? Yeah, I miss him too."

"I know that song I think it's called Mississippi Moon but you're mangling it so bad I'm not sure."

"Your close on the name and on the money regarding the quality sounds rusty 'cause I'm picking up the acoustic again..."

"Going off the amp in case the power dies, right?"

"Or my name is on the manifest for all the Chinese nuclear material on the tugboat and the latest global pariah goes on the run..."

Stella pokes him, "Where's your optimism? I mean, you feeling OK?"

Rita appears holding the big bong, "Rita to the rescue."

Pedro smiles again, drops his guitar to lean back studying the sky.

"Use this," Carolla hands her sister a tightly packed party bowl, "Airre got the word out, Betsy's evacuating D.C.- not that it matters."

Accepting the handout troubles Pedro breaking communion with the burning skies to give the black-hearted triplets a sideways glance before resuming his

studies. On the one hand they will soon betray him as the bringer of Apocalypse V. On the other hand, Carolla's home-grown weed developed over generations of hybrids, rarely shared, wins trophies. Stella erupts in a coughing fit and passes him the smoking hot bowl of Carolla's Chronic Tonic. Pedro takes a big hit muttering, "Why not can't hurt."

Two rounds later Carolla looks at her watch, stands shaking her head proclaiming, "It's time to see what your PRAF people are capable of," while handing Pedro a pound of her homegrown, "don't say I never gave you anything."

**Good Times, St. Peter Fracture Zone 26°44'16.16"N 44°47'4.30"W 2242
Sunday 31 August**

A low hum penetrates the Combat Information Center perplexing RoseMary's crew. The Captain recognizes the tune death softly hums:

"Keeping your head above water T13, shucking and jiving T13, dodging and surviving T13, ain't we lucky we got them? T13!" Captain Bob draws looks from speechless CIC operators as he never hums, never once ever, yet here he goes first humming old tunes then vocalizing, albeit incorrectly. Barnacle belts out the RoseMary's evasion strategy during an onslaught of torpedoes.

Flank speed, right full rudder... Boom! Sound penetrates the ship before the pressure wave follow-on indicative of another near miss as the RoseMary's latest double-knuckle sprint-stop turn maneuvers chalk up T13. The first time they all ducked so the Captain reassured them, "If this had been an actually hit, we'd have not lived long enough to hear the noise or rock from the pressure or get splashed, the next person that cringes I get to ass kick. Put that in the Orders."

Death actually began humming with his head buzz kicking in somewhere around T8 with Barnacle joining in on T13. With T14 on the way Barnacle updates the chorus bracing while heeling over changing speed, direction, and bow wave propagation to no avail. In a last ditch attempt to throw T14 off the scent, RoseMary's deck and hull rise out of the waves denuding her anechoic tile coating adding a tremendous high-pitch whistle deriving off the Prairie Masker Sonar Evasion System air pumps inability to make water bubbles. T14 follows the RoseMary up. Topsiders watch the long cylinder breech exiting the water sailing overhead. However the physics prove unsustainable as the torpedo explodes upon reentry mere meters in front of the RoseMary.

"Oh yeah, baby! Staying alive! Great job, everyone! X- next time we get an opportunity such as this, unmask the laser cannon, and see if we can nail it as it leaves the water. Weps put your wizards to work on a beam spreader/rotator scheme, targeting a thin tube while evading has to be damn near impossible. Got that X? Beam spreader or maybe rotation? Great work everybody!"

"Conn, Sonar: Torpedoes in the water! Repeat- multiple torpedoes in the water! Splashes firm, confirming initial position. Telemetry data dropout now in effect, they're in passive listening mode awaiting targeting cues. I think they're ours."

"X, do you have that last ASROC firilocation from our array?" Barnacle worries about SOSUS misfeeds.

"Yes, Captain, internally picking up their standard "listen, listen, move, listen, listen, and move search pattern over a coarse grid with fine overlays."

"Conn, Sonar: Contact firm, four torpedoes in the water, designate as new objects T15, T16, T17 and T18."

With four torpedoes looking for the Chinese boats they decide to go down swinging.

"Conn Sonar, three torpedoes in the water- Chinese- designate T19, T20, T21 as new and active threats."

Several older explosive devices also prowl the depths. Death counts five.

Boom! T19 finds one of RoseMary's proximity decoys. Captain Bill orders a dipping sonar search along the trajectory.

"Captain, coordinates for fire support mission Houston and fire authorization codes download complete. Request permission to fire" the X follows protocol even while under attack.

"Conn, Sonar computes trajectories on T20 and T21 RoseMary intercept in two minutes, thirty eight, thirty seven, thirty six."

"Noisemakers, now- run a pair off at ninety degrees and compute best decoupling direction and acceleration."

"Conn Sonar, dippers got a fix on a Chinese boat."

"Ready missiles for fire mission." Half his crew switches from damage control to damage infliction. Helm, intermittent knuckles."

"IMC," the Captain gives his crew the heads up, "Crew, we have two torpedoes on our ass. Prepare for violent maneuvers. Missile teams launch now."

Weps turns the key as the Vertical Launch System goes hot in preparation for rapid launch sequence procedures. Hermetically-sealing top covers propel off the tubes with a whoosh reminiscent of a can of tennis balls. Thrust assisting boosters fire hot and heavy dumping fuel forcing the 1,000 pound high explosive warheads off the deck and into the air. Unlike the usual slow-pace calm deliberate missile launches the U.S. Navy typically enjoys, sixty one missiles launch in under four minutes.

Navigational systems fight the propulsion engineering teams desperately keeping the ship out of harm's way. The RoseMary's stern digs in yet again churning froth behind the ship, response immediate acceleration impressive. Ultra new and ultra-expensive, the RoseMary seeks to provide her crew with the best chance for survival of any combat ship in any conflict. Captain Bill orders the X

topside to manage damage control. The X flashes the evil eye while silently donning a life vest- more than a cosmetic affectation as sonar identifies two more torps. Captain Bill turns back to conning RoseMary as X gently closes the door on the relative safety of the bowels of the ship departing for the uncertainty awaiting such fools working in an environment awash in torpedoes and other flying bits of razor sharp steel.

Climbing to the deck proves an epic adventure in the life of Captain Bill's better half as his chin contacts the wall in an abrupt fashion rudely jarring his eyeball sockets sloshing his brain back and forth concussing him for the first time and knocking him on his ass. X picks himself up brushing off injury resuming his journey. Quick as a wink the X gets thrown sideways off a narrow ladder into the wall again striking the bulkhead a partially oblique blow against his forehead resulting in a second, more serious concussion. The impacting force snapping his head back driving his vertebra into his spinal column against his central nervous system crashes him limp as a rag doll falling to the deck gaining a third brain slosh snapping tendons ensuring paraplegia.

Radiation sirens begin blaring as RoseMary reverses screws making radical course changes, adding more knuckles to the latest radical "get us the hell out of here" evasion schemes the Captain calls for slamming the X into a bulkhead dropping him back on the deck. Lying flat on his back the X wonders if he should be remembering something important, something that matters. Cresting a big wave, the deck shifts rolling him back and forth leaving a wavy blood trail on the rubberized deck coating.

The grisly death of the X matters to none, just another soul numbering among the multitude after the 'Battle of the Fracture Zone' aka 'The Sinking of the USS RoseMary'.

As T22 burrows into the side of the RoseMary detonating in the torpedo locker, death picks up the X and throws him into the water a safe distance from the exploding ship, "So long Barnacle and thanks for the good times!

Strike Two, The Paddock at Billingsport Range, 2357 Sunday 31 August

A low hum always penetrates Karl's office but three minutes before midnight silence reins drawing his attention from the pages lying on the desk. He lays down his number two pencil, sighs picks up the shotgun and fills his pockets with shells before opening the heavy oaken door to an empty establishment.

Myron, tending the bar, pours drinks for death and Airre. They sit in silence as Karl meanders about inspecting the silent recreation hall. Eventually he joins the group signaling for a double.

Airre waits for him to down his libation then begins updating, "The PRAF people held up their end."

Death nods agreement, "Seven hundred forty three thousand, give or take. The surge is underway." Karl sighs heavily. Myron pours him another double as death continues, "Should be done processing when the cows come home but once we get caught up business will pick back up, trust me."

Karl drinks while studying the board, "Before it tanks again. Oh well, gives the book an accounting opportunity, Marvin's performing a forensic audit making sure we have all our ducks in a row. What's Laz doing?"

Airre switches the big screen to nano-vision and they watch Laz climbing stairs, "Still alive you should have seen him realign his displaced shoulder like tough guys do in the movies. Now he's back inside intent on clearing the roof."

"She's up there?" Karl inquires.

"Waiting for a hero."

"What about 'better dead than Ted?'"

"Also on approach."

Karl gestures and Myron pours, "Well, as the easy part wraps its imperative to keep our eyes on the prize. The surge is a swell start but the real angst awaits the flood. Anybody needs us we'll be in the office writing the alternate ending."

Airre peels her likeness off the stool padding, stretches for affect then follows.

Death looks around the empty bar, "You got a spatula handy Myron?"