

***Zone of
Influence:
Strike One***

Also by Peter Fisher

Crate Expectations
Zone of Influence Prequel

Cr8Xpections Development Series
Crate of Orange
Crate of Aqua
Crate of Violet

Zone of Influence: Strike One

by Peter Fisher

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please.

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PROLOGUE: Ground Rules

This is a story about hope...

The Paddock Bar & Grill @ Billingsport Range, NJ 0125

The lone figure in the stifling office- hunching behind a small mountain of account books tenses, listening. Cocking his head warily, sniffing dead air, Karl begins gagging- so much putrid matter floating about in here. Not for the first time does he wonder if he should move the office into the crapper, for the ambiance. Why the hell do they put the most important items in the worse places?

Expecting trouble the proprietor stretches his sore back, listening closely to his painfully cracking vertebrae. Damn, if he hears himself creaking it's too quiet by half. He kicks the lifeless air conditioner protruding from the cinderblock wall, piece of crap. Sliding open the center drawer of the bulletproof desk he peruses a well-stocked armory suitable for crowd control. For the first time in ages Karl Meltzer smiles- peacekeepers provide elemental protection.

In this upside down world his otherwise prize conditions reflecting peace and tranquility i.e. still, quiet, totally at ease- become trouble indicators. Karl sighs, silently puts on his vest.

Choosing to go general purpose, quickly and quietly Karl selects a pair of large automatic handguns: .50cal Desert Eagles. Holstering the .50s he then grabs multiple handfuls of spare shells and magazines, filling his trouser and vest pockets. Eyeing the 12gauge pistol grip short-barrel shotgun, Karl carefully considers his patrons, hmmm can't overstock when it comes to controlling this crowd. The shotgun holds eight rounds, enough to clear the main room of most casual spectators. Pumping a shell into the cylinder, Karl breaks nine hours of silent contemplation with a loud sigh, taking a deep breath beginning to relax ever so slightly. The gun's custom sling slips over his head and as the shotgun falls to his side he inserts a large knife into the small of his back and another into his hidden sock scabbard. OK, ready.

Taking pride in managing a well-behaved Book, a Book predating written history, a Book deserving of respect, Karl checks his look in

the floor length mirror. Hmmm, very business-like from head to toe, double Windsor knot to spit shine on his wing tips, damn- he could pass for an accountant. No weapons visible.

Dating to medieval times, the office's thick oaken door not only muffles the crowd noise but also proves impenetrable to outright attack, a very desirable trait. Drawing a Desert Eagle, silently Karl eases over to his secret peephole. By tradition, the public areas of the Billingsport Range Paddock contain zero monitoring devices. Only an idiot creates trouble here.

Sliding back the jacket covering the hole, standing on his tippy toes and leaning just a bit Karl could tilt to see the entire room. This maneuver put his good eye on the betting windows, letting his wandering eye scan the flotsam and jetsam ebbing and flowing inside. Two guards on either side of the entrance to the counting room maintain a semi-relaxed vigilance, quietly menacing. OK, so far so good, almost time. Pulling his jacket off the hook Karl slowly noiselessly slides back the deadbolt to peek out the door. Hmmm. Unsure of his misgivings, he holsters the fifty to slip on his suit jacket, effectively covering the hardware reverting to a simple, harmless Bookmaker.

Holy shit, hot as hell in here, once away from the comfort of the office there is no air movement let alone air conditioning- sons of bitches keep swiping the chillers. Is what to anticipate when you cater to these classy waterfront types; Karl possesses too much life experience by half.

He ducks behind the bar back, hoping to find a relatively clean towel. To be honest, the forever-sweltering windowless concrete box known as the Paddock Bar & Grill at Billingsport Range does not invite cleanliness or tourists. More like, if you find yourself inside, take a quick look then it's time to leave before catching something nasty. No clean towels. Opening the cooler, he fishes about for a clean anything but comes up dry- nothing but frosted mugs, no surprise.

Monitoring the crowd noise while drawing a draft of the local Delaware River swill, Karl senses a growing unease in the throng. The Book appears extremely busy, last minute wagers praying for a better line on the Shumate line among others- as if. Must be nearly time for

the first results, Death is always on the move. As the Book, Karl couldn't typically care winners from losers. As the odds-setter however, he makes sure to apply what leverage he can come by to ensure the house gets paid. Know it or not, like it or not, tonight makes or breaks their collective future. He pulls out his Shoo-11 ticket, makes a quick check with the odds on the board then grins broadly. The action grows ever more hot and heavy for the Shoo fifty-fifty but out past Shoo-11 at Shoo-13. With so few tickets in play thanks to his manipulation the payoff on Shoo-11 will result in a much smaller split but if and only if Mrs. Wilson comes through...

Maintaining vigilance on the front door with his wandering eye Karl puts his good one over to the till. Hmmm, not so bad- apparently the old management undersold the earnings potential from selling booze and whatnot. He knew better but when negotiating with these guys, well, profit sharing inevitably translates into payoffs. Karl and vice are like old pals on a first name basis (early adopter status). He is all about pay for play and everybody gets paid. In fact, Karl Meltzer never saw a profit and loss statement before assuming ownership. He has zero interest in Paddock legit business, only in working the Book to his own ends.

"Not to worry Karl, no worries my friend." So said Satan, more than once and always with a sly grin, "The Paddock never closes and the crowd never thins."

Amid the PAU faithful, Karl prays for Mrs. Wilson.

Shoo-11, Christchurch, New Zealand 0830

ZXYZ All News Talk All New Zealand: In the news today, regional and local government sources this morning confirm earlier reports of Christchurch Parish's eighty eight thousandth eight hundred and eighty eighth militant to die this year. Public executions via statutes comprising what are commonly referred to as the "Be On Your Best Behavior" laws, though draconian in nature, account for less than half those dead with the rest attributed by the Judiciary to natural causes, primarily disease and starvation...Today's weather next but first...

“After Eighty Eight Comes Zero!” Commanding attention and respect, the one-time parade ground instructor’s booming voice reverberates through the small kitchen, drowning out the radio, silencing the already subdued breakfast crowd. All eyes dart to the tall figure filling the doorway, worry lines creasing every face.

Shoo looks back freezing midstride, aghast. Loose lips sink ships! Cursing himself inwardly- already has a target on his back; certainly he doesn’t need another negative report coming back on these poor souls. From the faces at the table, fact is they’re correct to live in fear. Free speech cruised-on out the door some time ago, along with every other constitutional guarantee. Said or sent, any/every opinion faces instant reprisal from the omnipresent secret judiciary.

His name is John Shumate, Colonel John Shumate Christchurch Parish Commander of Special Forces. At one-time a General Officer proud to lead the ranks of freedom defenders, Col. Shumate initially pushes back on the Good Behavior statutes, one of the few to express dismay regarding the suddenly rampant execution of foreigners and malcontents. That was a long, long time ago, what, like five lifetimes?

Facing internal discipline after making negative ancestral comments regarding the secret judges, Shoo stands mute rather than make a defense. At his hearing Shoo ponders the state of the world in general and the antics of the Chief Justice and his Bailiff in particular. Colonel Shumate decides to act, taking a semi-public anti-fascist stand, first dramatically slowing the pace of executions then limiting punishment to foreigners without visas. Soon a target appears on his back.

Comeuppance for his temerity takes the form of official sanctions and administrative punishment. To make certain Shoo understands the message, the judicial secret police drag him from bed, beating him severely about the head and face. Outside in plain view of the netsphere, wearing only a blind-fold and gag he takes forty lashes then another beating, with steel pipes. On the ground coughing blood, swinging jackboots begin cracking his ribs. They remove the mask so he can watch the Judicial Branch of Government burn down his house and kill his dogs. Listening in shame to the howling pack, Shoo mercifully takes a kick to the base of his skull- passing out.

Eventually the secret police leave him for dead and an ambulance eventually shows up to collect his remains, astonishingly finding him with a threadbare pulse. In a coma and on a breathing machine, his extensive wounds soon fester with non-treatable staph infections. The following morning the Reverend Belcher performs the Last Rites, as Shoo lay unresponsive.

Then he meets Mrs. Wilson. Suddenly he begins to improve; within a day he's eating solid food. Two days after that he's out of the hospital and into this boarding house. That was yesterday. Today, Shoo is returning to work, defying expectations.

Shoo misses his dogs, constantly listening to their growls in his mind.

A soft laugh from behind jolts the ever-present voice in Shoo's head into listening mode. "Dammit, where did I leave my glasses?" His new friend, Mrs. Wilson, pushes him into the kitchen, "Shoo, honey, have you seen my specs? You know I can't see for shit without them."

Colorful language is a red flag, but Mrs. Wilson doesn't seem to be aware. As a newbie, Mrs. Wilson wears a scarlet F on her blouse, denoting her status as an uninvited pile of poo. Shoo studies the faces at the table, one or two appear angry. 'Tomorrow' Shoo's internal voice intones, 'tomorrow they come for Mrs. Wilson'.

Unless they don't; that is, unless they can't is the only way they won't. Shoo tastes bile flooding his mouth; they shouldn't have killed his dogs.

Mrs. Wilson smiles broadly, "Found you!" She turns to Shoo, "I see its back to work already. Try not to overexert, dear, there's always tomorrow you know."

"Thank you for your concern, Mrs. Wilson, but my vacation's over."

Shoo refers not to his brief respite in the hospital but to his long-suffering mental processes. Thanks to Mrs. Wilson somehow, his vision clears revealing a path through the darkness of his brain fog into a future of hope.

Colonel Shumate learns not to predict the future after a cataclysm half a world away brings a flood of refugees to the southern

hemisphere, many starving and in need of medical care the government cares not to offer. The newcomers find conditions to be intolerable, eventually rioting. Backlash by the Government begins with crowd control and containment at the ports of entry but soon escalates into rampant killings for imagined offenses. The Government suspends the constitution instituting martial law, opening kangaroo courts to lend an Airre of legitimacy to the thinning of the herd, resulting in tasteless tortures amid unnecessary brutality- all in the name of peace, love and understanding.

Indeed, assholes murdering my dogs- huge mistake: vacation ends now. Shoo shudders in disgust.

“One step at a time, Shoo, you can do this.” Good old Mrs. Wilson takes his elbow, guiding them to the front door. “After Eighty Eight Comes Zero, you know.”

Slowing his breathing, sucking in his gut Shoo pauses briefly with one hand on the French doorknob, double-checking his appearance in the glass before making his final farewell. Taking a deep breath flashing a terse smile in her direction, Shoo intones, “After Eighty Eight Comes Zero, Mrs. Wilson.”

“I know dear, time to shake the tree. Thank you for everything.”

Gliding down the steps seemingly without a worry in the world, Shoo wonders if he’ll hear the shot that kills him. A phalanx of infantry falls in to accompany the Commander of Special Forces on his customary jaunt across Christchurch Town Square. Early mornings his Command Staff finalize preparations for the show trials and executions. Almost smiling Shoo begins musing about the size of today’s crowd. The future perhaps brightening damn near cheers him.

Heavy inland fog hanging over the empty cobblestone streets dampens not fully muffling the ominous sounds of their passing- steel plated boots down below, firing pins cocking heavy weapons above. Ordinary townspeople typically content to watch the festivities from the shadows scurry away as the military approaches. Recalling once bustling streets, crowds jostling pushcart vendors selling their wares- Colonel Shumate stiffens his backbone in silent resolve. After Eighty Eight Comes Zero remains his new mantra. They march on.

Former protector turn persecutor, Shoo claims a major share of responsibility for the pervasive smell of fear permeating Christchurch Parish; however, the path to fascism isn't always a direct line. Instead, it meanders, twisting and turning.

After the initial rioting ebbs and flows for a month, General Shoo personally takes the call from the Defense Minister begging for troops to put down the latest, more intense round of civil unrest. A week later, Shoo earns his first file note for refusing to kill peaceful marchers in the ghetto protesting the intolerable living conditions. At the time, General Shumate closely claims his dogs live better. Immigrants stacking up like cordwood, little food and less sanitation. Luckily, a beer bottle shatters against his cheek slicing him up, giving him dysentery. Shoo takes perfectly timed medical leave.

Without the support of the military elite, the entire Executive Branch abdicates, first declaring martial law then running like cowards, dispersing throughout underground bunkers, taking the Legislature along. The Judiciary Branch, all that's left, assumes command, an oddball assortment of (elected and unelected) paranoid lawyers. Immediately they begin worrying for their own safety at the hands of the populace. Stunning orders spewing from the Capital cement their rule through terror. After enlarging the criminal code and instituting draconian penalties, soon the Hall of Justice echoes with rifle fire. Safe from scrutiny in the disease ward milking his condition for time, Colonel Shumate pays attention to the goings on; as always, a learning machine.

Glued to his sickbed television, Shoo turns to NZcourtTV exclusively as District and Regional military commanders, blindly following orders, report TDY to the Capital. Immediately muffled then shackled hand and foot, fate pre-determined, Shoo studies their countenance- toughness oozing from every pore. A short show trial later, firing squads' retorts echo, reverberating throughout the square for quite some time as the ranks discover who's in charge.

Shoo learns up close the terrible truth about his new reality directly upon leaving the hospital in shackles after months of rehab, a shell of his former self. The Chief Justice meets with him a week later, hands him an invoice for the six cartridges the firing squad require to end

him then offers Plan B. They will prop him up as Military Commander if and only if Shoo not object to blatantly unconstitutional orders rounding up and placing in camps all at-large immigrants, political dissidents and an assortment of protestors. Left without options, depending on who tells it, Shoo either wouldn't or couldn't but ultimately didn't open his mouth while filling the jails with undesirables.

Of course, public fascination with the executions trends with the notoriety of the personage in the blindfold. Today the docket list doesn't contain celebrities but Shoo recalls fondly the ratings spike when his boss, the former Defense Minister crawls out from the bottom of a shallow hole. Shoo mingles with the crowd in the square during the organized torture early in the day but departs as the mob frenzy takes to the stage for an impromptu organ display. So goes the Defense Minister, so goes Shoo, sooner or later.

To his credit, General Shumate grows frustrated with indiscriminate killing- enough to mount an opposition campaign of sorts. His mild observation to the Chief Justice regarding the desirability of maintaining the status quo attracts first a demotion then death threats. Colonel Shumate does not downplay the risks instead choosing to ignore their warnings. Shoo is the consummate battle-hardened warrior many times near-death experience survivor (Shoo-6 and counting).

Not wishing to stir up direct military opposition with a public arrest, the Chief Justice instead appoints himself ultimate arbitrator, putting a contract on Shoo's life through the Office of Judicial Intelligence, a group Shoo now refers to publicly as the OxyMorons. Their first assassination attempt leaves a bullet in his body, rubbing on his spinal cord, a very near miss (Shoo-7). Shoo relearns to walk in record time though the fragments torture him to move.

The OxyMorons let him heal before striking again. Back on the job, Shoo gets shot twice his first day back. A sniper nails him outside the Hall of Justice (Shoo-8) and a firefight breaks out in the operating room as surgeons desperately clamp everywhere they can reach to quench his blood flow (Shoo-9). Then they kill his dogs, amongst other insults (Shoo-10). The crowd follows at a safe distance.

Quiet calm with pleasure unknown in decades floods his synapses. Shoo turns, catching sight of Mrs. Wilson. Good old Mrs. Wilson, somehow she understands. He couldn't for the life of him figure out the how and why of her arrival on-scene just when he needs her most or how it is that he seems to heal quicker. Shoo isn't a scientist, just an observer trying to put two and two together to get an answer below five.

Mrs. Wilson follows Shoo's last journey step by step into the square, getting into position on the periphery early following Karl's directive not to miss any of the festivities. That's the whole point of insider information- she questions his now her relationship with death.

Shoo mounts the platform, arriving last. Advancing to the judges' bench, face to face with the Chief Justice, wordlessly Shoo pulls his service issue .45 automatic, sticks out his middle finger then fires four rounds into the rotund jurist. 'Case closed,' flashes through his mind, 'Let's see, I started with a fifteen round clip, one in the chamber. That leaves, oh yeah, just enough for everyone'. Shoo double taps the other justices, and then pops the bailiff for good measure before scanning for more targets. Mission accomplished.

As if on cue the prominent analog clock atop the Christian Day Academy schoolhouse spire at the far end of the square begins chiming the nine o'clock hour. Loudspeakers commence their daily blaring of the National Anthem. Shoo holsters his weapon. Turning to face the flag he draws himself to full attention. Behind him, the troops of Bravo Company, his people, come to attention stiffly saluting. The chimes die off as the song fades...then a long moment of silence. Shoo's show is over, dawn of a new day for Christchurch.

Across the quad at Christian Day Academy the tolling of nine bells signals change: nothing as dramatic as Colonel Shumate's war declaration but rather another opportunity to get on the list. Poor Celia dreads yet another day waiting for the axe to fall. This young widow finds nothing appealing in her struggle to stay off the list of malcontents. A foreign-born botanist now elementary schoolteacher, she knows just enough to keep her head down and mouth shut during the show trials. Typically keeping to the crowd's edge just in case she needs to leave in a hurry, today she finds herself standing next to the

most composed woman. For some reason, when the shooting begins and the crowd spins into frenzied hysteria, her statuesque companion doesn't move, so Celia also remains motionless (seems like a good idea at the time). When the National Anthem plays, the extraordinary woman salutes Shoo.

Unfortunately, so does Celia. Uh oh, she can't help herself. Oh no! "Shit, Celie, now what have you done?"

Instantly Celia's heart races in panic, knowing she is cursing loud enough to come to notice. Beside her, Mrs. Wilson smiles. Somehow Karl made a good choice. Damn. You think he'd have friends.

Grasping Celia's arm, Mrs. Wilson spins her to see the insanely worried look in her eyes. Placing her hand on Celia's chest, "Calm down, nobody cares about you just yet. Wait for it." They clasp hands.

The anthem ends. Shots ring out. Shoo drops, still saluting. His fifty-fifty ends at Shoo-11.

"Rest in peace, General Shumate, you've earned it. Now, Celia, my name is Jocelyn Wilson and I work for Karl Meltzer and Pedro Saenz, associates of an organization called the GC. We have information your name appears on the list; however, your fate is not to die here. I have an exit, come with me. We're going to change the world and I need you." Celia nods in acquiescence, go time.

Taking out a burner cell, Mrs. Wilson hits send as they clear the square. "We're official here. Uh huh, all of them then I guess he settled a personal score with the Bailiff. No, I'd say not in the least, but who knows, eh? Yes, I found her. What boat at what dock? Check my bag for medicinals? Bastard, I'm going to make you pay for this."

Keeping to the shadows, the two women join the masses departing the center of town. Sporadic shots ring out from the square, General Shumate's Special Forces executing supporters of the Judiciary Branch of Government. Celia spit, "Good riddance to bad rubbish!"

"Why Celie, I'd swear you're a militant already. No wonder you made the list, what with a mouth like a sailor and all." Laughing out loud with gusto, Celie couldn't help but join in and this first good laugh provides enough glue to cement a lifelong bond. They hurry toward the docks.

“There’s our boat,” Mrs. Wilson mutters gesturing to a tall ship off in the distance, “Karl, officially now I hate you. There aren’t enough medicinals in the world to get on that scow. No living friends? No kidding.” They pause for her to rest.

After catching her wind she continues, “In fact, it’s a schooner, not a boat, five kilometers away at least.” Mrs. Wilson sounds testy, “How do you plan on us getting there?” Poor Celie doesn’t connect the leaky rowboat barely tied to the dock with the distant oceangoing schooner (unlike poor Mrs. Wilson).

Mrs. Wilson smiles thinly through her impending pain, “It will all be thanks to you, of course. Hop in and I’ll tell you a story related to your fate, help keep your mind off your aching muscles.” Tossing in her kit she gingerly makes her way to the stern of the small craft. Celie nods, ruefully deciding to follow her new leader off dry land and into the unknown.

“You know, Celie” Mrs. Wilson enjoys storytelling, “your world is an extremely dangerous place. Probably always has been, likely always will be. That is, until it ends.”

Celie manages to get one leg in the boat without falling in, a minor miracle. Straddling the fine line between floating and sinking she pushes them off the bank and into the bay. Putting on a pair of linen gloves and picking up the oars she muses, “Which, if I were to guess, is sooner rather than later?” She doesn’t understand her newfound friend but one must adapt to circumstances.

“There’s an author planning to write a book holding the answer key to the future, titled The Other Apocalypse of Peter. Believe it or not, he’ll be writing to show off his late-entry into literacy. Not that I blame him, for sure. How would you like credit for all sorts of books and letters and not be able to read? Absurd! Karl’s information indicates the new edition re-foretells the end of the world, as only an actual work, a direct attribution to the hand of St. Peter can.”

She desperately fishes about in her bag as Celia plies the oars, “Dammit, I thought... oh c’mon... what the hell...there it is, got it. So where’s my lighter?”

As Mrs. Wilson fires up her third attitude adjustment of the morning, Celie rows, thinks a bit, does a double take, then set the oars

down to think some more. Staring into Mrs. Wilson's eyes, looking into her soul, Celie finds truth. "Well, as long as you're in the mood to talk, pass me that so I'll be in the mood to listen." Taking several hits to clear her thoughts, she shuts her eyes rocking to the beat of the gentle wind and waves. Then one more, you know, for good measure.

"Don't be a Bogart, dear. Give me that. OK, you know we're not going anywhere, don't you?" Celia picks up her oars. "That's better." Feeling a tad queasy, Mrs. Wilson leans back to study the cloudless sky.

"Leaving Pedro Saenz out of the story for now, Karl runs operations for an organization called the GC, that's short for Gran Columbia. Around for centuries, the GC strives for several goals including the unification of America into one nation state, in case you haven't heard (Celie had not). They operate out of the Bolivar Academy, a quasi-military think tank and institute of higher learning in Venezuela. If you're perhaps wondering, I do not affiliate with the group. I work directly for Karl Meltzer and Pedro Saenz. Karl sent me here."

In fact, Celie knew of the Bolivar Academy. Some years back she flew down for a faculty appointment onsite interview. Unfortunately she didn't get a callback and without a position fell prey to circumstances. She knew their story; in fact, the place reeks of it. Too winded to talk she opts to listen, concentrate and row.

"In 1828 with the War of Colonial Liberation won, Simon Bolivar rides forth with his troops to consolidate the Northern Territory into the Gran Columbian Republic. For months he makes plans conducting many, many meetings pushing consolidation not only of the northern region, but also of the entire continent. While touring his new empire the monsoon season hit, weeks early. The raging river shuts down the Amazon drainage basin to travel, stranding Bolivar's Company.

Simon Bolivar puts himself up in the Governor's Palace, a throwback to pre-revolution days. Helping himself to the Governor's wife and daughters, Bolivar soon disregards all signs of discontent. For days the rains come and so does Bolivar. The locals begin wondering out loud when the Emperor plans to leave. They stop sending food to his troops. Noting the growing foulness in the ranks, several soldiers

approach Bolivar's boudoir warning of a coup. He laughs them off, none would dare.

Bolivar and Mrs. Governor are in flagrante delicto when gunfire erupts inside the mansion. Six of his bodyguards fall in the first fuselage along with several of the Governor's aides. More gunfire from down the hall, by the time the door breaches El Liberator regains his feet. Pulling his pistol pointing at the first intruder's head Bolivar is about to fire when he recognizes the man's hat, a set piece belonging to his internationally famous Chef though Bolivar can't for the life of him recall the man's name.

"Hey Chef."

"El Liberator, you must go. Not fight, go! They're coming for you, so many."

"Lousy rat bastards! Tell me who, who is it dare come for me?"

"Your Company, they're all your men. Even now half the Army raids my pantry, liberating all your food and beverage."

Mrs. Governor is up now, groggy, still more than a little drunk, head throbbing, wondering if she's seeing a ghost, gathering her clothes, wishing to be back upstairs in bed with her husband. In time she may have felt remorse perhaps considering a prayerful apology; but her how-to tell the husband internal debate grows moot during the ensuing mayhem. Showing it doesn't pay to mistreat the staff, after slicing her heart in two, to make his point the Chef then leaves a long handled serrated knife in her back- displaying the Governor's crest."

Mrs. Wilson pauses, examining her cold joint while fighting the urge to vomit on poor Celia's shoes. Relighting, resuming her tale with a long exhale. "I know gruesome, right? Not for the first time in his life, lickety split Simon Bolivar finds his trousers, pulls on his pants and boots, grabs the rest of his kit takes three running steps flies out the second story window smashing a hay cart twenty meters below-death at the hands of his men a certainty."

Celia nods in agreement, arms aching, far too winded to make small talk. Maybe her physicality needs help? Stopping mid-row, gesturing for the joint, she takes two long hits. Pausing like she has something to say, instead Celie takes a third, very long hit.

Mrs. Wilson gives her a shake of the head, thinking ‘Bogart’, while saying, “Picture El Liberator, making for the river dressing along the way, probably angling to get above the flooding. His Chef quickly hides, blending in against floor to ceiling window treatments, white linen on white linen. Throngs of angry soldiers spouting desperate oaths pour forth filling the room. Finding nothing but a corpse they exit the mansion. The Chef slips out the door, down the steps and into the teeming rain as an angry mob begins forming search parties.

Requiring transport, the Chef makes for the stables finding the Ferrier inside scurrying about saddling up horses with the help of his two sons. Yanking the door open stepping in with a pistol in each hand, the Chef relieves them of their burden. Two horses later, galloping down the lane, not daring to go cross-country across unfamiliar terrain in the flood of darkness, he plots a course to the river, hopefully somewhere ahead of his fleeing leader.

General Bolivar does not have such a luxurious road. From the cacophony, all manner of barking dogs, horsemen and drunken foot soldiers comb the grounds looking for el Liberator. The rain quickens to a deluge and he loses sight of the raging river. Twenty minutes and a multi kilometer sprint to the west later, Bolivar pauses to listen for the dogs while hunkering down in a sanitary ditch to wait for the next downpour; scrambling out after sinking deep into the muck. Bolivar smells the animal life and decaying vegetation making up the bog, he needs to find the river. Sniffing the shifting winds, he sprints into the worst of the stench. The downpour slackens and he can hear rushing water. Also, he smells watery people shit so knows the bank is close. Then the dogs howl, reacquiring his scent.

Again needing to throw off the dogs, taking a serpentine route running in and out of feeder creeks avoiding the sanitary ditches with thick gobs of mud slowing him to a crawl, Bolivar’s boots grow heavier with each slog. Slipping and sliding following a muddy game trail up a particularly steep hill, losing his footing halfway, toppling down the embankment and into the drink head first.”

Pausing, Mrs. Wilson examines the shrinking joint.

Celie can imagine nasty Amazon diseases, mentioning a few.

Mrs. Wilson nods her agreement, puts the joint into a clip and passes it to her new companion, aka the Bogart. Their fleeing is going better than her dire predictions; she hasn't gotten sick once, not yet. Not only is Celia such a dear, but also proving to be a terrific rower besides! "Don't be afraid to pass that back this way, dear...that's it."

"Unceremoniously Bolivar enters the River full tilt leading with his head. Swept downstream, roiling under the waves, surfacing briefly then going under again- the light in Bolivar's eyes dims with each labored breath. With two or maybe three large gulps of nastiness heading for his intestines, he briefly surfaces vomiting last evening's gourmet meal and fine wine, all three bottles. Bolivar's insides immediately fall into poor condition. Good call, dear." Mrs. Wilson gives credit where credit is due, even to the Bogart's of the world.

"The great man tumbles, rolling desperately to stay afloat before striking a tree, stopping his travels. In the raging flood, there he is kissing the bark you might say, far from shore. Ten long minutes daring not make a move or utter a sound, Bolivar begins to pray hoping to get in a quick request or two but further debris loading dislodges his tree casting the General downstream."

"Where the Chef is?" Celie catches her second wind.

"Leaning low as possible, hiding between the horses, the Chef walks downstream, trying to follow the dark and muddy river to the best of his ability. He worries for el Libertador, the clouds are thinning and he fears any moment he'll see the searchers on approach and closing judging from the growing cacophony of boisterous calls for Bolivar's scalp.

Suddenly the rain stops, the moon pops out and the Chef sees Bolivar in the river, arms wrapping a tree, head just above the rotten smelling flood. Another second later a huge clump of debris slams into Bolivar's back, dislodging the tree. Bolivar slips under the waves as the clouds thicken and the monsoon hits restart."

"Yikes!" Hands on her oars, Celie pauses expectantly but Mrs. Wilson ignores her with a smile taking a huge hit off the shrinking roach. Sighing softly her attitude flagging Celia again begins to row, albeit less enthusiastically.

“Indeed. The Chef mounts up, galloping downstream. Pacing the floating tree, he cannot see el Liberator. Knowing the road crosses the river somewhere ahead, praying it’s intact he races for the bridge. Upon reaching the span, above the middle of the raging water, he catches a glimpse of a body. Not thinking twice, he jumps in, the corpse breaking his fall. Wrapping it up with his legs, he gets one arm underneath, lashing them for the struggle to the riverbank.

Onshore, the Chef rolls el Liberator onto his back. Pushing on his guts, he evacuates the water from the man’s lungs; then slaps Bolivar in the face repeatedly hoping to restart his breathing. The Chef slaps him some more to stop the wracking coughs; you know, to conceal their position. With his palm he shushes the gurgling curses streaming from el Liberator. Both men cock an ear to listen: rushing water. Heaving with exhaustion the Chef stands unsteadily; disappearing into the night, returning a minute later with two horses, two pistols and a long gun of some sort, pulling Bolivar under cover as the patrol nearly overruns their position.

A scowl creases Bolivar’s face listening to his men shouting fearsome epithets; but as they cross over he begins breathing easier, relaxing a little, deciding the sudden loss of unit control, patrol discipline and procedure was not accidental but rather an indicator of his troop’s willingness to betray him. In other words they didn’t seem to be trying so hard to catch him, being better than their orders.

Search noises fade into the background until all he can hear are just about a billion or so crickets chirping at the rain, their oaths drowning out those of his troops. His current predicament galls the General enough to shake off the Chef. Attempting to stand, barking out orders, “Give me a carbine, damn you!”

Cursing their mothers, fathers, children- even their mistresses, “Viva El Liberator- my ass you sons of whores”, the Chef stops Bolivar from further ignoring his serious injuries in a foolish attempt to educate his men via the long gun. Mounting disgust radiating waves of steaming hot rage alarms the Chef who acts without thinking. Besides, pouring a saddlebag of water over el Liberator’s head may help remove the nasty smelling river gook.

Raging, sputtering curses trying gain some traction on the muddy riverbank beneath the bridge, Bolivar falls back, chest heaving from his mad flood swim and near death. Sensing the coming tide, he rolls onto his belly to vomit a thick stream of putridness toward the river.

El Liberator's horse leans down and licks his face, bringing Bolivar back around. Trying to calm and reassure his companions, he whispers, "If these bastards do not capture us, they will all hang!" Then he moans loudly before shitting himself and passing out. The Chef sighs, sniffs then sighs again, but eventually refills the saddlebag."

Celia thinks of the old Chef sitting at water's edge, rinsing off mud, shit and urine mix. The formerly clean man is no doubt desperate to return to his bed, to fall asleep under a thick, dry comforter in a sparkling clean nightshirt. Deciding decades ago to throw in with his beloved Liberator, he doubles down during a coup no less, warning the legendary freaking fornicating philanderer of his impending doom at the hands of plotters comprising most of his trusted inner circle. What can be worse than being unclean? Living the life of a condemned murderer is the only reward after performing a drowning rescue then nursing el Liberator's convalescence. Celia likes the Bolivar story.

"So you see Celie, the military coup against el Liberator changes everything, what's to say- I guess, should there have been no fall from grace then, Bolivars would be ruling the world today. At least, that's how the Bolivars see things I'm sure. Instead, they're a bunch of wannabees. There's more to the story; hold on a second, I have something to show you."

Monologue nearly complete, Mrs. Wilson fishes around in her bag for quite some time, eventually discovering gold. She extends her hand, palm down. Expecting another joint, Celie instead receives some wrinkly sheets of thin parchment paper. Unfolding the screed noting the fading typeface's ancient appearance, perhaps a product of the very first press by Guttenberg's very own hand (on one of his bad days), Celie reads aloud:

The Apocalypse Of Peter

Celie shoots Mrs. Wilson a glance, “What’s this?”

“Not an original, don’t worry. The Dead Sea Scrolls, found in a Middle Eastern cave in the nineteen forties contain several versions of diatribes regarding the long awaited apocalypse. Most derive from the Apocalypse of Peter the Apostle. Allegedly written centuries after his death, this same disciple of Jesus is said to be unhappy with the attribute wishes to correct the record.”

“St. Peter couldn’t read or write. Not to say, how did he become an author from the grave?”

Mrs. Wilson’s smile lights the darkest times, “Well, that’s the question, isn’t it?” Celie drops the oars as they draw up alongside the schooner, grabbing a rope ladder. Mrs. Wilson’s smile dims, “So, that’s the story, dear. We’re to make for the States, someplace on the east coast of New Jersey in the Billingsport Range to look Karl up at the Paddock Bar & Grill. I’m happy you’re tagging along.”

“What choice did I have? Death or take a voyage? There remains nothing to decide, Mrs. Wilson.”

Mrs. Wilson smiles at her most indulgently, “Dear, you will come to learn, as I did, choosing not to decide is still making a choice.”

The Other Apocalypse of Peter=>

“For lifetime fisherman, you kind of suck at it, you know that? I hope you can do something, anything better than you cast. That’s the third time you’ve put your hideous homemade imitation fake fly into that tree.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.” Peter the Apostle having lost another rig, begins yet again to thread super light leader line thru the tiny hook’s eye. Holding on tight, twisting loops into his line while counting aloud, “five, six, seven, eight- Lord oh Lord isn’t fishing great?” Got it!

“That’s not a prayer, you know,” his fishing partner cracks a smile.

“Ahhhh yes, now this is Heaven!” If at first you don’t succeed...

“So you say.”

“Well, Heaven sans headaches.” Peter cast again finds the tree.

“Issues at the Gate are best left at the Gate. So what’s that-your shoo-fly imitation?” Peter’s good flies could all be found in the tree.

“My first time so feel free to go ahead make fun at how I suck at fly fishing in general and fly tying specifically- only today. Next time I’ll clean your clock. Why back in the day I caught them left and right, up and down, here and there, schools so heavy...

“How heavy were they?”

“So heavy we had to cut net. So, how about some respect?

“Not today, per your orders...besides find someone else to stroke your ego I got bigger fish to fry.”

“Not according to Your empty creel You don’t.”

“Says the guy with his nasty fly all tangled-up in that tree again.”

“Same tree different cast. So how about helping a guy out?”

“No help no cheats. Your trout stream your rules; you said so play the lie. Only way you’re going to learn, you said, so play the lie. Nice place by the way, how did you find it?

“I do my homework that’s how. Tell me something- I’ve been dying to do a little angling for ages now all of a sudden here we are hanging up in the trees just like the old days. Seems fishy, maybe?”

Jesus says nothing, knowing Peter wishes to disrupt His cast, perhaps getting Him in the same tree. Instead with a flick of the wrist the fly at the end of the twelve-foot leader whisks off the water toward then over the opposite bank twenty-five meters hence. Ceasing his futility, Peter lowers his rod to stare in amazement at a casting demonstration the world has never seen so perfect even Jesus breaks into a semi-contented smile. Bringing His arms back studying the wind then making a slight correction in the dip of His shoulders only a true fisherman might notice, Peter sounds a low whistle of appreciation.

Reaching the apex of its rearward flight, just before entangling them both in a major snag, Jesus’ fly drops like a rock, catching a non-existent unforeseeable downdraft, more like a puff of air from out of nowhere. Peter directs his gaze to the treetops finding a

screaming eagle turning lazy circles in the ascending warm air current far above the river.

Jesus nods, "Eagle."

Screaming eagle, of course, how could anyone expect less? So where did the snag-saving downdraft come from? That's it! He found the downdraft next to the updraft supporting the eagle- so no cheat. Hmmm, even so...Peter studies newly appearing meandering ripples as an eighteen inch Golden trout swims circles under the tree watching Jesus' fly take off, fly around then drop-take off fly away then come back and fall in.

The eagle (the same entity watching Peter watching the trout watching the fly while Jesus watches) waits semi-patiently. Sure enough as the fly falls once more toward the surface the large trout flicks his tail twice gaining more than enough momentum to catch the fly midair. Jesus pulls the rod tip back zipping the fly away from the action.

Wings flaring open frantically pumping, leading with razor sharp talons the eagle dives into Peter's field of vision too fast by half not quite pulling out, smacking the water, hard. Peter again low whistles as the great eagle catches the fat Golden trout midair before smacking both down into the stream. The Golden trout wiggles free or rather the eagle tries to release just one claw during the splashing commotion but a fish so large requires both sets of talons. No grip, no fish.

Straining mightily to keep her wings out of the water the eagle keeps a stream of insults heading in Peter's direction. Luckily, sans fish, the eagle loses enough mass to flap her way airborne once again. She settles treetop staring bullets at Peter.

"You know, I do believe that eagle blames you for her failure."

"Well, losing the fish is what you get for spooking the pool; no way in Hell there's another trout within miles. What do you say we bag it for today?" There's more to fishing with Jesus, always. Wait for it.

Jesus nods twice; once toward nothing, the second toward the cooler.

Sitting at the edge of the stream watching for trout while drinking an intoxicant known as the Lord's Special Brew, Peter grabs refills: "Skoal!"

Jesus puts on His serious face, "Your guess is correct, I brought you here to discuss an important issue, call it a tasking. The world's become a crowded place and sooner or later... they got to go somewhere, eh? That's the issue, the work- rather the rank and file failing to perform said work. It's time to write the story I told you in the boat."

Peter chews it over for a second, "You know, there was way too much talking in the boat, as I recall. Didn't help my rep with Jesus needing to fill the nets on the way in. But I guess I don't get a choice, like. Right? Didn't think so. All right, but outside the basics, I get full editorial control. Thus when Peter writes this book, the world's going to know Peter wrote the thing, right? I'm calling it "The Other Apocalypse of Peter" only accenting the 'Other'-ness of the Apocalypse, like this: *Other!*"

"Super. After two thousand years there's an issue with the PAU, again. Their contract terms are expiring and Satan refuses mediation, arbitration or even to come to the bargaining table. No doubt you're aware of conditions inside the gates, what about outside? No? Didn't think so or I doubt you'd be eager to crash the population. Where do you suppose they're all going?"

"Let's see, how's it go- two out of three die, right? Or maybe it was seven of eight or all, whatever- everyone goes to Hell and the Union is up in arms? Don't tell me I'm losing more staff."

"You wish. You think you got it bad, wait till you see this."

In a wink Jesus shifts them outside of time and into real space. Peter recognizes aspects of Perdition from his first trip with the Lord, but massive expansion is evident, particularly the extensive additions with lost souls waiting in a queue. In the immediate vicinity, fiery mire pits offer an alternate torture to unfathomable depths of darkness. Squinting, he barely makes out something flying off a steep cliff, arching into the valley- wait there's another... aw, sick. So far away yet somehow he hears them splat.

On the move passing over millions in a blink, Peter catches glimpses of some of the inflicted torments- red hot pokers, flesh consuming beasts, clouds of worms juicing innards and such Hellish punishment. However the newest sections of the expansion pique his interest.

Jesus hands over the prospectus, "Page 93."

Peter reads aloud, 'Hear bone rattling concussions drowning out the miserable cries of the damned, where light rays pierce flesh here and there slicing and dicing meat from bone. Hi tech for the modern sinner...' Peter focuses his attention outward, upon cylinders of hot metal disgorging explosive shells, hurtling them toward groups of fleeing inhabitants among other terrible technological manifestations, apparently the culmination of eons of effort.

Naturally he starts wondering about his own contribution to Perdition. A new idea dawns in Peter: the evolution of Hell might not be an improvement. Ooh boy, there's trouble in anti-paradise.

Seizing the moment the Lord launches into His spiel: "Welcome back to Hell. All we hear all the time from the Righteous is how great the Light is. Perdition, on the other hand, gets too many complaints to be coincidental. We keep an office here because Hell requires more and special attention that cannot be left to the Punishing Angels, by definition 'not the most trustworthy' beings created and currently working under an expired contract. I use the term working loosely, you understand.

Peter, pay attention now, stop looking around. OK, as I was saying, Perdition management duties derive from universal dictates: Split duties up at the top, along natural lines, and automate everything possible. For instance, Administrative duties, keeping the books and whatnot, that's all processed semi-automatically along with upkeep of the Book of Life. Our main office keeps an eye on Operations- material supply, physical plant, angels and such. The Judging; that is, telling people where to go based on data provided by Administration- what you've been doing at Gate 7, is going to move and where to is a contract issue, a real sticky wicket. All major changes to the schema whether to

Perdition or elsewhere, under the old contract any/all alterations require Union approval and for that reason alone there really aren't so many."

The Lord finishes his overview ironically, "Come Peter, enter the Gates of Hell. I'm dying to show you what they've done with the place."

**-The Other Apocalypse of Peter
I-IV: The Tasking**

Proprietor, Paddock Bar & Grill, Paulsboro, NJ 0105

Ending the call, Karl grows pensive. That's the word, pensive; the feeling something bad is about to happen. Time to check in with Pedro.

"Pedro's phone."

"This is Karl. Put him on speaker, I have news."

"He's very busy, Karl."

"Carolla quit messing with me."

"Well, he's in the spa so good luck with that. How's New Jersey?"

"Shitty. Still. Always. Whatever. I have news."

"General Shumate?"

"Dead. Officially, not yet, I got the word from Mrs. Wilson on-scene. Said he took out the judiciary then settled the score with one or two others before, well, I doubt it was pretty."

"So Shoo-11?"

"Pays huge, so few winners, you know. Only a handful of Shoo-11 tickets out there, all barter trades. Most of the heavy action went to Shoo-13 as the Book took 50/50 wagers all the way out to Shoo-17 so the pile is massive. You can get off my ass; we're back in the black. Tell Pedro and Airre thanks, couldn't have done it without them."

"So you're on to Houston?"

"I'm grabbing a charter leaving Trenton in an hour into Hobby Airport to spot check pre-positioning in town with the BackBreakers then onto Port Bolivar via Galveston, for more of the same."

"I'll let him know...and Karl?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

“Keep your head down, expect bad things.”

Nautical Seas, Christchurch Harbor, NZ 1113

With two passengers tackling the rope ladder, the schooner crew gets busy weighing anchor. Ebb tide- best time to set sail to sneak out of NZ territorial waters. Mrs. Wilson hates ropes but hates Karl even more glimpsing the big, white letters on the wooden hull. Super, now Karl thinks he’s a laugh riot- dumbass.

Poor Mrs. Wilson suffers terrible motion sickness refusing help for her condition. Karl knows, he’s read her dossier, even recently, dear Karl commiserates, says he’ll look into improving his latest Mrs. Wilson exfiltration scheme, hinting at a jet. So here’s dear Karl’s response, renaming the schooner Nautical Sea. “NAU...SEA”- damn Karl, no wonder he’s no friends.

Mrs. Wilson settles into her stateroom in the center of the massive tall ship, the most stable area always set-aside for non-sailors. Finding a large desk, she selects a pad of GCS Nautical Sea stationery lining the wastepaper can with individual sheets. Opening her kit, she removes Celia’s GC file, a massive manila folder. Before updating Celia’s profile to include her Bogart tendencies, she takes seasick on Karl’s practical joke.

Celie listens to Mrs. Wilson retching next door for a long, long time. When the gurgles and sloshes taper, knocking softly she enters holding a cool compress and a clean bucket.

“So how goes your voyage of discovery, Celie dear? I see your wastepaper basket’s clean, give it up. Wait a sec, here, first line the bottom with pages of this. Thanks. After I get sick once or twice more, I’m updating your file. Then we’ll eat.” Mrs. Wilson gestures, “Pull up a chair and I’ll explain things a little. Start with this photo, who do you suppose this is?”

“That’s my baby picture? I’ve never seen it, where did you get it?”

“Informatics, dear. With informatics, Karl keeps one step ahead.”

“I interviewed at Bolivar Academy, they asked many questions.”

“Karl noticed, even took an interest at the time though he didn’t recommend you.”

“He asked me if I had a baby picture.”

“Karl, my dear, hates babies. If you had said yes, odds are we’d not met and you’d be dead tomorrow. Sounds like you made quite an impression if he went digging around the world for a baby photo.”

“Life is strange indeed.”

“Right, good call, dear. So, during your site visit to the Bolivar Academy, what did you learn?”

“Simon Bolivar- warrior, leader and statesman (before being deposed) credited with ending centuries of European domination and subjugation. I think there’s a movie. Anyway, with the departure of their former masters, the newly freed slaves follow Bolivar and other revolutionary types into unification- creation of Gran Columbia out of the northern territories. The future seems limitless to Bolivar but that was not to be.

As it happens, the fledgling dictator’s logical next step- further consolidation bringing the entire continent under Gran Columbian leadership- meets considerable opposition. Local opposition forms, resisting Bolivar’s power grab. Taxes meant for consolidation become bribes to the military hierarchy. Once the payoffs reach critical mass, the ex-General’s former compatriots turn on him signing a warrant then showing up to make a no knock entry for his arrest. In the depth of a dark and stormy night, his women, thankfully nearby hosting the wives and lovers of the recalcitrant southern leaders, show up to save the Liberator. The attack on the Liberator affects them in all kinds of different ways; however, they united in detest of unification failure.”

Celie waits looks over at Mrs. Wilson, busy with the washcloth.

“Yes, dear, the story is fascinating, isn’t it? The devil is in the details. The Chef stays with el Liberator, eventually riding out the storm to the end of Bolivar’s natural life, shorter than he wishes thanks to his uh, condition, you know. Loyalty swims both directions of that stream; no el Liberator without the Chef, then and/or later unfortunately, intertwining fates.

Throughout the first long night, ignoring the cold intermittent downpours, his old pals the coup leaders lead a few renegade military units in a drunken thankfully fruitless search for el Liberator, who they never in a million years guessed hides like a sheep, cowering under a bridge. Instead they fall for a ruse, chasing after the horses his Chef

spooks downstream. Not a barber, nevertheless Chef has been around long enough to worry about the man's innards, though fails to note el Liberator's concussion, broken limbs, four missing toes.

Sniff test, hmmm ok smells bad as ever, telling the Chef something to the effect of things can get worse and will likely soon but not yet. So far so good, uh oh wait a second; what's that gurgling sound? He places his ear on el Liberator's gut, not good. At that moment Bolivar's newfound dysentery kicks into high gear, Celie dear. The Chef can't risk a fire even if dry kindling abounds; no fire, no drying. Fearing the worse, placing his palm to el Liberator's forehead, the Chef makes a diagnosis- damn, burning hot. Well that explains Bolivar's loud incoherent mumbling. Then el Liberator vomits, shits his pants, passing into delirium.

'Called it', thinks the Chef as Bolivar's breathing stops, then wheezes, 'perhaps pneumonia with the dysentery?'

"Screw this," speaking to the horses, "the longer the search the greater the odds of discovery. We need a plan beyond hiding in the muck under a bridge next to the rising river. You guys need to go." Too bad this plan would have nothing to do with cooking; he's desperate for heat. He settles with scuttling the horses.

Near dawn with the rain slacking to a drizzle, faintly the soaked pair hear the soft call of Bolivar's most beloved mistress: "El Liberator, where are you, where is our leader?"

Chef doesn't recognize the voice, but it brings Bolivar to a stirring semi-consciousness. Still out of options, the Chef risks everything crawling out into the waning moonlight wafting through breaks in the low, wet clouds. Leaving the safety of the bridge, feeling his age, the Chef scrambles up the embankment and into comfort of dry blankets offered by Manuela Saenz, a fierce Patriot and Bolivar lover. Their eldest daughter, Gabriella, hands over a flask of the good stuff. Three more Bolivar lovers climb down from the narrow tall slit sided hay wagon. Another untethers a pair of chestnut geldings from the load.

Bolivar, swimming in and out of consciousness fever overtaking his mind with visions of mass death of biblical proportions, finds entirely suitable those saving him should arrive in the form of females of

undying loyalty and femininity. He develops then repeats this mantra as the horses drag him by the wrists, gliding up the muddy riverbank:

‘I love you women I gain strength from your attentions, kiss me baby’. His blood surging, trying to stand intent on mounting and riding, el Liberator instead finds himself falling into the back of a cart, onto a thick bed of straw.

Before passing out Bolivar the Liberator speaks earnestly to his Chef, now sitting in a corner of the bumping cart trying to remain inconspicuous,

“You are a great man and I will never forget your service.”

The Chef stares at the great man for the longest time, trying to find words, any words. Eventually he sighs, softly.

Retreating from the search parties, deep into the jungle the escapees ride. Ignoring the Chef, the women attend Bolivar’s wounds and bodily fluid secretions. Instead of moaning about the mess el Liberator is making of the back of the cart, during the long ride the women swap intimacies, learning of commonalities and mutual friends. Not wanting to give up on the dream of a united continent free of outside influence, they discuss the future: agreeing on some things, contesting other points, eventually coming to a consensus charting a path for immediate recovery with a plan to move into the future.

Gran Columbia comes apart as Bolivar loses control of the Federation. No longer a hero; eventually history reclaims his reputation. Bolivar, the other Liberators and their leadership fail. Having set the people free from colonial rule, they cannot unite them.”

Mrs. Wilson fishes around in her desk drawer. Celia thinks for sure she’ll break out another joint. Instead, Mrs. Wilson discovers some hi grade full spectrum hash oil Karl stashes inside for her motion sickness, vapes a couple of tokes and passes off to Celie. “Don’t be a Bogart, dear. Thanks.” Celia nods.

“Now, where am I? Gran Columbia has to collapse; there isn’t enough commonality of purpose anymore, top to bottom the apple rotting to the core. Unambiguous orders get ‘interpreted’ all the way down the line so badly that by the time they reach the last layer, the interface with the public, they appear foolish, or worse, contradictory. Bolivar has little time to change the path of his beloved land; in fact,

he'll be dead in three years, from his, um, condition you know. Another attempt to rebuild the coalition at this point will likely fail.

Without potential, Simon Bolivar's legacy falls into doubt.

Behind the scenes a contingent leaves the rescue party to negotiate peace with Bolivar's old compatriots. The two sides put in place a temporary plan for power sharing but ultimately power doesn't share.

Living quietly back at home el Liberator's spirit pulls him through a long period of convalescence. Those who love him, and there are many, dote while plotting revenge on the world for betraying el Liberator. These women prefer the long view, as thoughtful people tend to do, hatching a plan to retool the Americas. Their plan rests on commonsense and logic combining with absolute secrecy. Men talk, especially to women. The leadership must remain female.

First, they need time and space, friends and allies.

The women go forth to recruit an army, starting with the stars of the military still in the Bolivar camp. Their idea is simple to grasp, but terms they can all agree on prove more difficult a concept. Eventually all parties the conspirator's approach either buy into the plan, or face elimination from the gene pool. Although changeable by design, the plans' basic structure remains intact over each follow-on generation: the Bolivar family matriarch controls the family funds, the family lands, and the family personnel. Radical by European standards, it works because the GC loyalists believe.

Matriarchal dominance persists; their descendants develop leadership tools, talent pools and experience. The Bolivar gene line spins into a global spiders' web of new, behind the scenes, management over both U.N. and non-recognized governments. Until Karl mortgages the future buying the Paddock at Billingsport Range, Gran Columbia never borrows a dime yet develops into a global power capable of performing great feats. Questions?"

"Several. First, what's the plan? Second, where do I fit in? Third, what's a Bogart?"

"In reverse order then: A Bogart, dear, doesn't pass. Ever. It's an entitlement thing. What's your role? You're with me. We follow orders, mostly from Karl Meltzer, our boss, but sometimes Pedro

Saenz, Karl's only friend- mostly Karl so don't get hung up on names. That Pedro, I don't get him- enough said.

The plan, that's more complicated. You've read your copy of the original Apocalypse? OK, when St. Peter finishes, the world pretty much ends. At least, that's what Karl and/or Pedro think. Their plan is to put an end to the new version without a full-on apocalypse, stopping the carnage before things get out of hand."

"Take the book that doesn't yet exist from..." Celie didn't get a chance.

"So many questions dear and still I have to tell you not to Bogart."

Thursday 28 August

Showtime, Baikonur Cosmodrome, Kazakhstan 0200

“Status check, let’s bring number 45 online please...thank you very much.” A single red light on the board over the third big screen blinks four times, pauses for two seconds, then five more blinks- a short. Freaking Russians and their trash equipment, pieces of crap if you ask me.

“Luis?” A very soft voice in his left ear interrupts his thoughts. “Are you seeing a short fault on number 45? The people here seem to think it’s a board issue. Put a team on running it down; tag it as issue 13-738. Thanks. We’re still waiting for updates for trouble reports 13-418 on number 47, and 13-644 on number 50. I am running a video of your presentation with our guests upstairs, don’t worry.”

Dr. Luis Vega directs his gaze to the observation deck. Indeed, the volume of the conversation rises commensurate with vodka intake. Launch parties- who has the time? Luis’s attention shifts to a lone figure standing at the window. Whoever that guy is, he gives him the creeps- stinks like KGB.

“Stella?”

“Yes, Luis?”

“13-644 resolves to a flaky fuel sensor, number 50 is green. 13-418 will not resolve. I am directing the payload to the spare, number 45, which should work, if the short resolves. So tell me, whom is this new Russian guy showing up all of a sudden? He’s creeping me out.”

“Black suit and tie, doesn’t speak but everyone looks to him all the time? That’s one of Pedro’s guys. I think he’s State Security. Karl said Pedro was handling extractions and to expect anything. No matter; if he is Pedro’s guy then he wishes to speak with you. Do exactly as he instructs; no deviations or trust me, you’ll be less happy than right this second. Luis, do me a favor- try not to piss him off. Pedro’s is running the extractions on a hair trigger according to Karl.”

After years performing show and tell to sell their global satellite network, untold hours jumping through hoops during every dog and

pony show- until a moment ago Luis plans on heading upstairs to get wasted on hash oil and potato squeezing's while explaining launch physics to Commie Russian Government assholes and associated gawkers. No such luck now that Pedro had eyes on him. Shit. Pedro. Bad news comes in threes with Pedro.

A new voice whispers in his other ear startling Dr. Vega, "She said don't piss me off, didn't she? Certainly seems like good advice, you should listen."

Luis nearly shit his pants. "Don't do that, sneaking up on me! Shit."
"Bad news, time to go."

Dr. Vega grows pensive, "Now? The launch isn't for hours and we have problems." Poor Luis doesn't understand; his plane ticket shows Tuesday.

"About that- things may not be what they seem. Apparently the payloads you've been launching, what like forty or something from here alone? Well, anyway, not communications satellites. Come tomorrow, the entire world wants you dead- like everyone."

"Shit. Shit." Luis maxes out his Russian curse list at shit.

"Take this bag. Make yourself match your new ID with the makeup kit while I drive us to the chopper. There's a research sub leaving for Antarctica in two hours, we'll need to hurry if we're going to make it in time. Come with me.

Sullen and downcast, Luis makes an attempt, for form's sake, "You know they expect my performance at the party; I mean, I even have a speech prepared..."

The man in the dark suit sneers, "A little song, a little dance, a little seltzer down your pants? Not tonight, Chuckles, you're busy."

Out of Order, Cheyenne Mountain, Wyoming 1600

Marching past door after door to make for the furthest stall, his footsteps reverberating between the cinderblock walls to send a message: Red Alert! General Peterson shares his disagreeable mood with the troops, "It's too damn bright in here!"

Not for the first time does Peterson link high luminescence as proof positive the crapper contains hidden cameras; probably another Commie plot. General Pete Peterson drops trousers, settling in for a

good read with an old issue of Air Force Times. The tightest sphincter known to grace porcelain inside NORAD, NORCOM and SPACECOM: when Peterson enters, the place empties. Red Alert! Eight quick flushes later, sure enough a mob forms over at the sinks for a quick spritz before the mad dash.

Ahhhh, alone at last: Peterson pulls out a cheap Maduro cigar to help with the air quality, critically inspects for non-uniformity to the dark brown hue, shrugs then lights up. Just in time delivery- the General passes methane quite loudly feeling a growing unease, a rise in tension- in a word- way too uptight for his own good.

Peterson suspects Russia and China in a constipation conspiracy. Strapping him down with a cheap cigar in the damn middle of the afternoon? Absurd, Pete Peterson performs like a clock- an early morning visitor- tightest ass in the military some say. His current woes lie in the very idea of them socialist punks and all the rest launching satellite after satellite thus making a huge mess of his space. When Peterson worries, the stall doors tremble.

Peterson's annual budget (with his regularity) flies out the window some months ago with Bolivars (possessing all the money in the world apparently) moving into geosynchronous space alongside his military hardware. He anticipates traipsing to the Hill after Labor Day to explain why he cares- third time. Every General with half a brain is either vacationing or taking TDY in Alaska.

Spinning the wheel of fortune, the General searches the stall for a clue: "Those who write on bathroom walls; roll their crap in little balls." Clever? "Loose lips sink ships." Must be a World War II artifact. "If they were built with American steel from our yards instead of Russian scrap they would still be flying." Obviously a cold war MiG reference, an oldie (but a goodie) dating back to when, Korea? Don't we ever paint? In fact, the whole crapper could stand updating but who has the cash for frills?

Spinning again still musing, Peterson brings his mind back to the task, applying pressure to his thinking processes. Let's see what else makes the corner stall, "Why's the new South American Navy buying glass-bottom boats? So they can keep tabs on the old South American Navy." Very funny, ha-ha but hold on that can't be right. Isn't this a

joke translation from Virgil's reference to Anglo Saxon glass blowers perhaps a derivation off the Greek joke?

Then the reference strikes him like lightening: WTF? Since when does SA possess a Navy? Wait a second: is there any 'South American' anything?

Well, besides Bolivar's spanking new communications network coming online, nope. Thanks, dumbass cheap space access. Peterson breaks wind violently, again. Hope I can repay the favor.

Change remains the only constant in the defense biz and old guys better 'get with the program or get out' and 'for God's sake keep up'. Gran Columbian Network, South Americans in bed with the Commies, right? Like Curtis LeMay and Bomber Harris before him, tightest ass in the business General Peter Peterson is on a mission, fighting like hell to stay ahead of a curve only he can see.

"The real America is full of Americans," he spits out for the sake of the recording devices, "and my bodily functions require pulp from actual trees. Lose the sandpaper already." Time to get back in the saddle; Peterson lifts his leg, steps on the handle.

Backing out the door oblivious to the 'Out of Order' sign the maintenance chief semi-regularly hangs out to warn the others (before taking dinner outdoors). Peterson dries his hands on his pants, SOP. In the hallway, doing some more thinking spinning the facts around, wondering where the truth lies and should he consider laxatives, Peterson ignores the saluting sycophants, half of them mere children. NORAD/SPACECOM staffs took a big hit during the latest pre-holiday furlough, with most nonessentials in the complex coming off a thirty day facility-wide stand down while half of those with a clue (semi-essentials) didn't come back for another week. Peterson understood vacations- hell once he'd gone on vacation, enjoying feeling almost civilian. Good times, good food, good company- a good day all in all; however, that was then, this is now.

Behind his desk resuming his customary perch, Peterson searches for a system update peering through the thick glass to the far side of the cavernous room. The obligatory giant screen is running a live feed loop of Gran Columbian Communications Network launch sites. Massive in scale (and profoundly anti-USA in his view) the global

network launch hype spreads like a virus becoming the big click for an end of summer slow holiday cycle. Plenty of coverage; sign of the times- with no Labor Day March of Dimes telethon any more science can be news. Peterson grouses, grunts and breaks wind.

Shifting his gaze closer to home, Peterson examines each level of the deep-bore facility down to the granite floor- another all hands drill tonight, no passes or unexcused absences for the essentials. His budget is history and he questions the decision to go ahead with the latest furlough given the complexities inherent in ramping up the systems, particularly Cobra Bell. The upcoming overtime hit from the screw-up civilian contractors mismanaging that program gives him nightmares.

Well maybe that's too harsh, probably they're doing their best. Peterson leaves his office for the visitor platform, tucking his shirt on the way. Climbing the rostrum, approaching the podium, grabbing the mike, Peterson clears his throat. All right, time to buck up the troops and all that. OK, here goes nothing:

"With every single launch this facility and those we support get this close (holding up his thumb and forefinger) to absolutely screwing the pooch and missing the important stuff. Now we've got this massive frigging anti-USA Bolivar funded Gran Columbian Network coming online. With untold numbers of unforeseen opportunities to fall on our collective faces, I see little chance we not screw up royally."

Taking a deep breath- loving fear of failure as a motivational tool- Peterson wraps his tirade into a neat bow, "That said, some may well believe there will be great misunderstanding of the complexities we face today and failure remains an option. There is a word for you: bad parent. What are your children going to say to the mean ass bullies making playground taunts because their mom or dad could not monitor a few measly launches? Children manifest cruelty. What say you quit your bitching about being over-worked proceeding to perform above expectations- thus saving your child from therapy downstream? We can do this but if and only if each of you can get the job done better than yesterday; else if, you're simply a bad parent. Get to work."

Grease, Satish Dhwan Space Centre, India 0400

‘Another transfer, Stella- you seeing this- all day every day- I’ve no more bullion. The grease pit lies empty.’

Not all the scientists managing the GC Network launch keep out of the loop. Dr. Fernando knows, understands, and fully participates in the subterfuge. But the loop is developing kinks and he wants out. The GC Network’s Far East launch team leader frets, twisting in knots bending over backwards making payoffs and putting out fires waiting for the secret police to show up for his inevitable waterboarding.

‘Get me the hell out of here already, we’re unsustainable.’

The troubling situation at the Xichang Launch Facility in the Sichuan Province and the Jiuquan Satellite Launch Facility, two of his launch responsibilities in the Idiot’s Republic of China, threatens Dr. Fernando’s chi.

Every couple of minutes some corrupt official puts his Commie hand out, initially looking for more crypto or cash currency (in ever-increasing quantities) later upping the ante to gold and only gold. The sizeable continuing payoffs ensure curious eyes from peering too closely at the satellite packages but only to a point.

Further complicating interactions, Chinese law restricts ownership of the Chang Zheng (Long March) rockets to Commies only. However the vehicle requirements for building from scratch the Gran Columbian Communications Network and Carolla Bolivar’s open purse change everything. Suddenly cognizant of their role in building a better world and the National Prestige active participation brings, the Chinese leadership decides to play. To skirt the issue and wring obscene payoffs, years of Chang Zheng rocket production diverts to Lend/Lease. In the WWII tradition the Chinese Government retains Title and All Rights Concomitant with Ownership.

The “Rights of Ownership” clause gives Dr. Alonzo trouble from Day 1. Concurrent with his satellites arrival at the assembly complex for mating with the missiles, nearly every Chinese government official in the province suddenly appears at the gate demanding to inspect the payloads. By his calculations, Alonzo figures the five thousand ‘officials’ hanging around the complex daily re-distribute nearly 10 tons of gold to ensure collectively his payloads will not harm the vehicles the proud people of the Communist State let the Gran

Columbian Communications Network borrow, not buy. So what if they are fire and forget- every Chinese knows rights of ownership- the owner is the State and the State can inspect his property at any time. A pile of gold, literally, pays off the prying eyes ensuring semi-secrecy.

Fernando empties the bank, authorizing this final online crypto transfer to the Chinese with a shrug; Stella says not to worry about the hoard diminishing. He finds the circumstance amusing Chinese plotters might perhaps sense but not understand the scope of the Gran Columbian plan. Apparently the times require hoarding either way.

Dr. Alonzo Fernando disconnects his personal encrypted comms, switching over to internals before getting a satisfyingly tight satellite signal confirming board readiness. Green lights only- all systems on line, all vehicles ready to go- miracle. Once again, Alonso Fernando blesses Estelle Bolivar for making India his base of operations instead of China, Korea or even Japan. He possesses serious doubts his remote crews will see their families as although there is transport awaiting their post-launch dash, Alonzo doubts clearance will be faster than events allow.

Indeed, a Gran Columbian jet sitting on the tarmac awaits him but Alonzo gives at best maybe a one or two percent chance of escaping before the world tips to what they're doing.

Oh well, he changes channels, "Hey Stella, can I come home now?"

Cobra Bell, Kabul, Afghanistan, 0400

Her earpiece squawks during the climb out, "Met reports: a hard deck solidifying below 15,000 feet with a weak localized southwest jet forming around 50,000, streaks and shear at 85k."

"Thank you Tower, CB23 is black, have a nice day, over and out."

Pilot Captain Deborah Harold puts her new Boeing Scramjet 777 into a shallow climb. The reinforced engine mounts on her special purpose airframe concentrate oxygen molecules into thrust, 85,000 feet or higher is a day at the beach. 95,000 feet and the airframe will come apart. That's below their target this morning. This will not end well, thinks Captain Debbie.

Captain Harold shoots a glance over to her cohort sitting right seat a newbie Major dying to impress General Peterson, then looks back to

the twenty five civilian technicians aboard, double checking her passengers before making the climb. Caring about the safety of the pax is priority. To cruise a racetrack pattern at the highest possible altitude with the least amount of turbulence is standard operating procedure-checklist items straight out of the book from the chapter covering how to keep uptight Majors at bay. Cobra operations tend to attract uptight Majors, Colonels and Generals- sometimes even uptight Presidents. CB23 and her cohorts live in the spotlight.

The telescopic equipment mounts in the airframe's hold monitor and record ballistic missile launches in real time. The mission of the day requires Captain Harold's Cobra aircraft to act as primary observer of dozens of rockets blasting off from Eastern Europe, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan not to mention India. Sounds like a plan, thinks Captain Harold at the time. However when the 777 readying to their east goes belly up with a mechanical, the uptight newbie Major pre-emptively orders them to stretch to cover the adjacent launches from the Far East, Japan and Siberia: drawing her ire.

Space Force Captain Deborah Harold cannot under any known methodology cover that many events as the Pentagon and anyone spec sheet reading ability knows. Unfortunately the uptight jerk next to her can't read. No matter, he'll splat with the rest of us, sure as hell.

"Two, maybe three more airframes could do it right," she mutters.

Her pressure point lay solely in the upper limits occurring at top end of the Cobra Systems. In theory their Scramjet 777 tops out at 134,000' in the neighborhood of 27 miles above ground- high enough to cover adjacent areas. However, actual real-life high altitude tests fail the airframe around 95,000'.

Double-checking, Captain Deborah input the data into simulations to experience high altitude disintegration proceeding the long fall, disliking the results immensely updates her will- considers resigning.

Then the word from Cheyenne Mountain pulls her back from the edge: General Peterson worries. SPACECOM and NorthCom and Sitcom and CENTCOM and every other Com out there falls all over themselves when Peterson worries. The General apparently expresses concern over the sheer number of launches in particular, wondering if

there isn't a wolf in sheep's clothing hiding like a snake in the grass. Peterson then gives a speech even, very rare and quite troubling.

So when word hits Cobra Operations that Peterson worries even a malcontent knows it's high time to shut up, thrust out her chin then fire off a crisp salute with a "Yes Sir! Will do Sir!" despite the cluelessness of the moron Major in command. With luck, her mission will not fail entirely. Perhaps she sends data before the splat; but holy cow that's a long, long fall to take for data's sake.

Captain Deborah keys her mike, time to kick ass perhaps even take a few names, "CB23 is going up!"

Glass Bottoms, 200 miles off Galapagos Islands, 1600

Thanks to a fleet of helicopters, the next missile launching in the pre-dawn skies floods the net while Peterson and the global military struggle to decrypt the GC communications' tunnel. Sadly, they miss this gem:

"3-2-1 Liftoff! Thanks to a break in the weather, the first launch of the weekend is a huge success. Wait one folks...I'm being told...yes, it's true we're just moments away from...3-2-1 Liftoff! Again! Wow, that's two successful launches within moments, within sight!"

A thousand kilometers away Dr. Stella Bolivar's frown comes through loud and pin-drop clear, "Oh, man, what a moron, can we please shut him up?" She finds most annoying his non-stop commentary butchering the language, Chinese-style. Besides, the proof of the rocket lies in the launching. Thanks to poor quality and Nigel's machinations she's ascending from a very deep hole.

Stella has the jitters. The Chinese Rough Seas Capable Platforms are not measuring up to specs. She only has ten attempts. Two platforms sink in rough seas- horrible and fast taking down fifty-six of her techs. No search and no survivors. Dr. Estelle Bolivar considers seriously back-billing the Chinese for the losses, emailing Karl three times. With only two successes this is not the time to gloat.

She looks up at the big board, searching for red lights in the Galapagos region. The entire operation hinges on the Gran Columbians' collective ability to launch rockets despite weather conditions- then or now. She's flirting with failure and thanks to the

net, the world watches breathlessly. A small fueling checklist light under Galapagos Seven begins blinking. Shit, now what?

A massive and growing tropical weather system affecting oceanic launches focuses science and technology sites on the GC Communications Network (Carolla's public relations dream) hence the fleet rolls film during Nigel's tropical storm force winds despite conditions spawning tornadoes creating havoc. Thus, the netsphere bears live witness to Stella's sinking infrastructure. Thanks, China; hope I get an opportunity to repay the favor. Stella takes in a deep breath, exhales trying (failing) to relax her jitters.

High pressure juxtaposing against an upper level jet pushes Nigel east over the isthmus to the Gulf of Mexico, where it strengthens into Hurricane Nigel; effectively moving out of her hair while making a beeline for Pensacola and the Florida panhandle. No more weather excuses, Stella needs five more successes- wait one there's another red light on seven. Any second now she expects to hear Rita's singsong reverie, "See, I told you so."

Endless Summer, Kennebunkport, Maine 1200

President Betsy Shriver scans the brief note then hands it back to her National Security Advisor, "Thank you. The answer is still no." Turning to her companion, "Shall we sit out?"

One step makes the difference between comfort and pain- the heat reminiscent of the President's final campaign stop: a blast furnace. The hounds of the press await wet with sweat, cameras clicking, mikes booming. Without pausing, their small entourage flee the heat to transition over to a fleet of nearby SUVs with engines idling, AC cranking. They pile in to roll to the coast.

"Trouble?" asks the UK Prime Minister.

"Peterson worries."

"Ah, yes, the fables of General Peterson's angst know no bounds. They still talk about his exploits that morning in the Tower of London, you know, coats of paint peeling off the walls."

Frowning, President Betsy remembers getting a bill for 'necessary repairs'. She also remembers Peterson in her office a month later saying, "See, I told you so." She's no fan of wiseass Generals.

Kennebunkport residents enjoy hosting this President; harkening back to Camelot brings tourists no matter the season. In return, the local government condemns a block of coast facilitating the construction a Presidential Compound to Secret Service specifications. Much like Camp David, the Kennebunkport Retreat specifies all the necessities for the President and her entire Cabinet to run the Executive Branch as long as necessary far away from the heat and humidity of the Chesapeake Estuary- as if Maine doesn't get hot.

Regardless of weather conditions, Kennebunkport offers five star amenities for conferences, often housing VIPs for Presidential Summits. The closest thing to a regular guest, the UK Prime Minister eagerly joins the President under several beach umbrellas lining the ocean side cliff.

Alone, the world leaders launch into a free ranging discussion, the kind two friends might share:

"Hot."

"Very, worse than the Capital District, believe it or not."

"So, what's got Peterson's juices flowing?"

"This is a vacation weekend, you know that? Big plans, fun stuff."

"It's the Gran Columbians I bet. Am I correct in assuming Peterson is aghast at the launch of the GC Communications Network?"

"He ponders a new world power."

"Hmmm."

"Yea, that's what I said."

"Hmmm."

"Doesn't help to keep saying that."

"I'm thinking about Carolla."

"Of course you are- you're a guy."

"That's not it. I'm thinking that of all the people in the world to put in charge of a world power..."

"...The absolute last person you would want to deal with directly is Carolla; actually, her sister may be even worse."

"Not Stella? Everyone adores Stella!"

"Rita."

“Well, Rita is a handful but if you ask me, the buck stops with Carolla. Hands down both women dislike everyone but Carolla actively hates me. Brussels, you know, bad time all around.”

No, Betsy did not know. Nor, at this moment, did she care, “Peterson’s seeking permission to deploy anti-satellite hardware, take them all down before it’s too late.”

“How does he justify overt action?”

“You think we can’t bring down a satellite network covertly?”

“Honestly, no.”

“Hmmm.”

“Doesn’t matter what I think. What are you going to tell Peterson?”

“Same thing I told him yesterday and the day before that- in fact, every day since the CIA SNIE. No.”

“Well, apparently you have bigger fish to fry?”

“No, the fish fry is tomorrow, assuming we have good luck in the boat. Tonight’s the lobster chowder extravaganza big plans fun stuff.”

“Tomorrow? No, merely referencing Hurricane Nigel- but thank you I can’t get enough Maine lobster.”

“Humongous, did you see the satellites? As of ten minutes ago Nigel’s practically covering the Gulf. NOAA predicts a ‘super bomb’ of technical jargon as horror slams into the coast carrying a massive storm surge.”

“Sounds serious.”

“You think? We have the Coast Guard fast tracking Gulf shipping into port or back out to sea. The Navy is clearing out, maybe five more hours. The oilrigs shut down, the workers evacuating. The outer bands with rainsqualls, wind gusts and potential for tornadoes will soon impact Louisiana, Alabama and the Florida Panhandle. I am deploying select National Guard units to evacuate the coastline east of Texas, including Florida; FEMA claims we need to move these people over two hundred miles inland. What a mess.”

“Again.”

“Yes, these things happen to a big country, got to take them in stride, bounce. Not the first Katrina to come down the pipe, eh? Kind of fitting that the UK shows up as Nigel approaches, don’t you agree?”

“Appropriate timing, I agree.”

“Yea, so tell me: can you?”

“Take down a satellite network covertly? No. Let me rephrase- we can destroy satellites, but not without making a mess thus we might get away with one but only one, given enough confusion.”

“Didn’t think so. Neither can Peterson.”

Countdown, Sao Paulo, Brazil 1200

The nearly geostationary orbiting network components comprising the new GC backbone (seventy four very large satellites) sequentially fire small hydrazine maneuvering rockets to slot into predetermined positions following along the planetary rotation exactly 22,600 miles above the Earth’s equator. Squeezing into Peterson space alongside communication’s birds and weather observers, the tension in the netsphere is palpable.

Stella paces the floor between the monitoring stations, on edge waiting for status on signal parameters. Rita’s space backbone network design resembles an inverted pyramid with French and Russian rockets doing the heavy lifting to the top. Links to lower nodes flow line of sight asynchronously between the geostationary birds and passing traffic. Why launch the small ones if the big birds fail to position?

Dr. Estelle Bolivar and Space Command calculate a 3-tier lift pattern moving heavier payloads with further to go over to the earliest cycle. Luckily, most find their orbit allotments without incident. Yet to launch low orbit and medium transfer birds she plans on wedging into the massive constellation of space junk and whatnot immediately after reaching altitude.

Stella sucks in a deep breath as twenty-two thousand miles away her final three heavy satellites fire, then fire again easing into position. Lockdown! Wait, what’s that? Why’s number 73 firing again? There goes 74 and 75! Rita, what’s happening?

Dr. Rita Bolivar comes online, “The rotational hydrazine jets firing randomly seem to be causing an uncontrollable spin. Unfortunately all our birds share resources and commonalities with the geosynchronous backbone. I suspect a bug in the firmware code. People here seem to think we can reload the instruction set but I don’t think we have time before the fuel runs out. I’m recommending a shutdown of 73, 74 &

75, and a temporary launch hold until we're certain we won't propagate the error(s)."

Stella glances down to her tablet; sure enough Carolla links live video, "Negative on the hold, Stella. Rita, shut down 73, 74 and 75. We'll deal with this issue later, hammer-down, keep the schedule."

Carolla smiles angelically and clicks off. Turning the spa pump back on, she turns to Pedro, "Perfect."

FEMA, Gulf State Relief 1000

White House Update: Press Release- 28 August

Wide Release/Distribution: President Shriver Praises FEMA/Nigel Relief Effort

"Yet again our Nation faces grave danger from Mother Nature in the form of Hurricane Nigel, the fifth major storm to make landfall this season. Yet again we move out of the way, evacuating our citizens from danger. And yet again I can praise the efforts of our courageous first responders, sacrificing time and energy this Labor Day Weekend so that others may live. I sincerely hereby offer my warmest most heartfelt thanks and praise to local and state officials, FEMA, Homeland Security and all who answer the call.

States bordering the Gulf have been marshaling reserve units all week in advance of the impending arrival of Hurricane Nigel, currently a Category 5 record breaker and potential 'Super Bomb' taking aim at Louisiana. Expert consensus of predictions project dangerous Hurricane Nigel makes landfall just west of the City of New Orleans, likely surging far inland.

I am extending the FEMA evacuation order to all coastal residents within one hundred miles of the Gulf of Mexico east of Texas including western Florida.

I wish to again thank those answering the call, particularly local/state police forces and National Guard troops both for assisting in the mass exodus but also for their future efforts to keep us safe in the coming days, weeks or even months patrolling to protect what remains.

Our actions in the face of danger will inform generations to come. We demand the best from our best when the need is greatest. We

expect no less than full success. May God Bless and Keep Safe The United States of America!”

Launch Command, Sao Paulo, Brazil 1200

The public face of the GC effort, South America Space Launch Command technically controls global launch operations but in actuality most of the heavy computing and support systems co-locate with Rita in another location. Dr. Estelle Bolivar Launch Director, controls operations only at a half dozen locations: her (semi-floating) platforms, Europe’s Spaceport at Kourou, French Guiana and three local facilities. Usually smooth and cool but now tense beyond measure, sadly she (again) loses her composure when some freaking idiot whispering inanely asks her to move slightly, out of the way.

“What the hell!” Dr. Stella coils tightly in a ball of failure rage before unhinging, backhanding a nearby slowwitted intern: crazy overreaction totally unnecessary- felt great- but who has time?

Rubbing the sting out of her hand, Estelle Bolivar turns her attention back to the Galapagos countdown just in time to see number 7 explode in slow motion replay taking down the platform. Shit. Move on. The countdown continues to the Kourou Twins, two huge French Ariane rockets. Lift off! OK, two for two, excellent- five more to go.

“3-2-1 Lift Off!” Stella feels the ground shaking violently as her five huge rockets on the pads outside convert their fuel into thrust, the Gran Columbian lettering on their sides gently lifting off the ground, the cylinders straining for altitude, pillars of flame visible in growing exhaust clouds. The gantries fall away as Stella’s life work gains momentum, fighting to conquer gravity. Success- fist pumps for all!

Estelle Bolivar, PhD tears up, fixating on the screens in awe, on-board feeds showing every vehicle breaking out of the atmosphere. The ground telemetry cameras follow them out as they leave only puffy, cotton ball clouds behind- not a smoking platform number as in unlucky Galapagos Seven.

Faster and faster they climb until she sees mere pinpricks of light in space. Only when no amount of zoom could get them into view does Dr. Bolivar turn her attention away from the happy screens to look to Galapagos Seven, her problem child in flames, listing to port (or

starboard, damn thing's square) in billowing clouds of steam-preparing to sink. She's an atheist, yet shit happens; during the past month Estelle each evening falls down on her knees, asking (begging, really) for any God to grant the Gran Columbians a 100% launch rate. She silently thanks him she or it now- because she didn't buy into that bullshit anyway wants no 'organized' distraction in her busy life.

You know what? Damn Galapagos Seven and the rest, I'm out.

Estelle Bolivar, Ph.D. grabs up the bag holding her notepad, communication gear (toothbrush, pajamas) stopping briefly for a glance at the telemetry before beginning a brisk walk to the exit.

One last check with flight control before heading to the hole in the ground: "Hey Rita, how about a status report?"

Best of Times, Kennebunkport, Maine 1200

"How do you Brits say: good match that, better luck next time. Super fun. Did you see my Press Release?"

"Sure is sparse on the details you ask me. No way I could get away with such, Britons demand info."

"Yea, well they know the drill down there. It comes down to 'who goes' and 'how far' for most. We'll get some, at least a handful, won't leave no matter what I say; in fact, some will stay because I say they must leave. It's a red flag of Federal Government intrusion. Get it? I'm still on edge on the recent North Carolina storms' death toll and don't get me started on Puerto Rico, another disaster area."

Labor Day Vacation tradition for this President entails a month in Kennebunkport- a design to lessen the strain on a thankful Secret Service detail. Water sports at the lodge with the Cabinet and select other parties blend seamlessly with other Presidential demands. Because few agents overall cover the many heavy hitters assembling quickly this President gains the respect of the Kennebunkport detail.

This year the British Prime Minister joins the tanned and fit President in what amounts to an X-games rendition in the sand. Their respective aides collapse when the activities slow down for an important meeting. The two teams shake hands cordially before hitting the changing rooms.

This particular meeting seats the Vice President, Secretary of State, Interior Secretary and Head of Homeland Security in the large theatre room in a cluster around the President. Fresh off the buffet with plates in hand the PM and entourage quietly join the room, settling into plush seats in the back row. The President turns and motions him down to an adjacent, empty recliner to watch the day's events.

"Best seats in the house," the President quips.

They focus ahead as the lights dim. Coming alive, the massive wall screen splits down the middle, the left side doling out hurricane coverage from NOAA and an assortment of broadcast networks. The right side shows launch site feeds from the South American Networks' revolving video and analytical products out of the NSA, SPACECOM and Homeland Security.

The Prime Minister thinks the South American feed looks much more professional versus the U.S. broadcasters but demonstrates high class once again by not mentioning it; after all, she did give him the seat of honor. Besides, the P.M. had bigger fish to fry. While pondering the ongoing GC launch maneuvers, over time he forms quite a checklist of items making him uncomfortable. The timing of this Labor Day Weekend State visit is not coincidental to the GC Network deployment; instead the P.M. wishes to be alongside the President just in case something bad happens. The Englishman holds his tongue having no logical rational, just the feeling that the turning occurs now. He cannot explain or justify his nagging doubts but believes in himself enough to trust his hunch- hang with President Shriver for a while, see what transpires- placing a bet, in other words rather than merely explaining away strange, subconscious, intuitive feelings (aka the P.M.'s gift of fear).

So, instead of joking about better Southern Hemispheric quality, the British Prime Minister offers President Shriver one of his nagging doubts, "The South Americans seem to have an adequate global network in place. In fact, their feeds look flawless. If they can monitor, assemble and broadcast such a high quality product in real-time, obviously accessing a huge backbone currently existent why do they need more satellites? I understand a simultaneous launch generates great PR, but what else is to gain from this Herculean effort?"

The President looks over and smiles at the Englishman in a friendly way, already knowing the answer. She put the same query to the brain trust months ago. Upon receiving only blank looks from the experts, she orders up a CIA SNIE, Special National Intelligence Estimate.

POTUS quickly replies in a slightly sarcastic tone for the benefit of the room, "I ask the same question of Peterson and do you know what I hear? Crickets. Damn crickets. So I call up a SNIE and do you know what? The answer depends on who you ask- how 'bout them apples? Commerce says the more data flows, the better for everyone. Homeland Security predicts no effect and the State Department claims with a straight face a lessening of tension will occur. But if you ask Pete Peterson, he will tell you it is all some kind of Commie plot. Old Peterson still fights the Cold War sometimes. My hope: the Commerce Department has it right. Time will tell, as always."

The Prime Minister grunts, still unhappy. The President's assessment agrees with that of The Commonwealth. Hearing from her mouth for the first time of the GC Comm Net SNIE did not surprise him but rather adds to his overall unease, particularly concerning Peterson, known to be able to predict the future. Damn it to hell, vacation buddies share information- not surprises. The P.M. grunts again in thinly veiled disgust at the way the USA treats old friends.

Then standing and pointing he exclaims in a very un-British manner, "Hot damn! There they go!" The screen dissolves to the launches, technicians sectioning the entire wall, first a few then many rockets breaking the confines of gravity; impressive, to say the least.

The Torch Is Passed, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil 1400

"Flight Command," replies Rita in Stella's ear, "Flight tracks all birds flying straight and true- first orbit in nine minutes five seconds; nine minutes on my mark...mark. Best get ass in gear, dear sister."

Rita takes operational control over from Launch Command. Stella needs to get moving, her extraction plan- well intricate doesn't do that monstrosity justice. Rita turns her hand to the task of dispensing communications equipment as cameras and communication gear traveling in the lower orbits pass swiftly over objects of interest on the ground. Great numbers of satellites transfer comms during the short

orbital period Rita plans on bringing online many fast-orbiters to cover the lower regions.

The mid-orbits she is squeezing into already house the Global Positioning System along with a wide array of global military/civilian comm sats and the US National Security Agency's Intercept Transmission System, ITS.

The outer geostationary orbit at 22,600 miles contains large communication satellites and the Defense Support Program, DSP, constellation. Rita's satellites upon reaching geostationary orbit seem not to move but actually travel at great speed keeping pace with Earth rotation. To reach far orbits the Gran Columbians primarily launch Russian-made lift vehicles, three stages of dependability. The Russians now provide money back guarantees. Russian rockets deliver consistent performance thus Material Supply gets no flak from Stella.

"Later, sister, good luck!" You'll need it.

Dr. Bolivar sweeps from the room to begin her journey to the underground command center. Stella must be in place issuing orders when the next deployment begins. She is packing serious heat preparing mentally to remove obstacles without qualms. Her escape route to the secret nexus remains covert, but how good is it? First Karl plans the escape process in tortuous detail then has Pedro's teams perform dry runs under different conditions to ensure success. The Gran Columbians in the caverns of Paraguay wish to avoid subsequent discovery via backtracking Dr. Estelle Bolivar's movements post public appearances.

Stella's path between the launch and command facilities: untraceable.

Friday 29 August

Hide and Seek, Sao Paulo, Brazil, 0100

Finally Friday! The city comes alive at night, partiers crashing the streets, packing the bars, interesting people jostling to mingle, uninteresting people watching. Stella exits the inner city mall joining the throng anonymously. Then another seemingly identical Stella joins the throng. Then another, and another and another and so on until hundreds of Stella lookalikes roam the streets of Sao Paulo, getting into cars with other Stella(s), going places, mixing inside the throngs under the cover of darkness.

Is the real Stella even in Sao Paulo? In a word, no- so where is she?

Stella is in the dark, both figuratively and literally. Following Karl's instructions to the letter, Stella exits the Control Room in the Launch Facility as inside cameras fail and the facilities go dark. She picks up the tram heading for the parking deck. She watches the crowds leaving the viewing platforms, wow so many. Checking her notes, she sees Karl wants her to board Bus 4861 before the passengers arrive. Let's see, 4859, 60- there it is. The door is open, no driver visible. She enters immediately finding a bright red bag and a note:

'Stella- you did it! Transfer your jammies and other detritus to this shielded bag. Change into your new threads and drop your old clothes out the window. The pax will be here any minute. They're with us so don't worry. Prepare to sing or stand out, it's your choice -Karl.'

Bus 4861, a charter out of the city, soon swarms with launch aficionados of the Our Lady of Perpetual Motion variety- nuns. They take seats or grab strap hangars packing tightly until no standing room remains. Stella is sitting in her assignment, on the aisle toward the back, marveling at Karl's ingenuity. She is indistinguishable from these women of similar height, build, hair length and color wearing identical dress- clad head-to-toe in black and white from sensible shoes to eye-shielding habits. All eighty-four passengers and the nun driving tote red backpacks, wear the same sunglasses and, truth be

told, smell like rocket fuel. Two more buses follow carrying identical loads into the city.

First time Michael tries to row his boat ashore, Stella clears her throat. Michael knew to stop, Stella's singing voice and fingernails on the chalkboard having too much commonality for the public good. Damn you Karl, payback awaits your sorry ass.

Stella's bus takes an excruciatingly slow meandering path through standstill traffic clogging up the exits, same as the other two thousand. Two hours later, Stella jolts awake as traffic clears and her lead-foot driver floors the accelerator quickly attaining highway speeds, back on schedule. She yawns, looks about then accepts water from her seatmate, "Are we there yet?"

Without a camera crew in tow, there is simply no possibility of tracing Stella's movements. The theoretical interaction matrix climbs exponentially to include roughly most of the religious population. Eventually the buses pull into underground mall parking, the low class affair without cameras. Dr. Bolivar and her manifested clones depart, spreading into the surrounding shops, restaurants and hotels like an infection. Within moments Stella lookalike numbers reach seventy five hundred, including a thousand in nun garb.

Stella is not among them. Appreciating the irony, she ducks into a seafood restaurant. In the backroom she discovers another change of clothes concealing this note:

'Stella- so far so good, now comes the easy part. Upon changing, exit the other door; proceed down the steps. There find a cargo van outside the rear exit. Not to worry, you'll be back on the move shortly. So, Carolla tells me you took climbing lessons, good timing... -Karl.'

Screw you Karl, how about you climb this? No wonder he has at most minus fifty friends.

Back Breakers, NAFTA Super Highway, TX 1400

Call him the Sink, not the Fridge, the Sink: where pain goes to die.

His mom saddles him with the moniker Bismarck T. Vilma after her first husband, so it's no wonder he prefers to be- the Sink.

His bowling team shirt reflects Sink philosophy: BackBreakers.

Bismarck T. with his little brother Juan initially herald from a tiny village in Uruguay. Excellent English speakers, these former Bible-study students take great Jesuit abuse like all the children at the missionary school- until Bismarck T. grows bigger than the Fridge, becoming the Sink, stopping the abuse, shutting down the school, landing behind bars with a murder rap hanging over his head.

A year later looking for answers upon his escape the Sink drags his brother to the city to meet a war hero known for his bravery, an army recruiter. Bismarck T. pays close attention, hearing of hard work, discipline and the opportunity to travel. For those who speak well, in good physical shape, and willing to endure grueling training, the Uruguayan Armed Forces will pay three times the average income possible from farming or working on a factory floor. The Sink and Juan sign on the dotted line before promptly getting tattoos and Mohawks to celebrate their forthcoming fame and fortune.

Bismarck T. and Juan Vilma sail through basic training, acing infantry and weapon specialization becoming known as class leaders. The day after graduation, a pencil neck geek Captain strolls in saying “on behalf of the Uruguayan Army, I hereby thank both Bismarck T. and Juan Vilma for your service. This paperwork contains your irrevocable involuntary discharges. Best of luck, wait here.”

The geek, now in a huge hurry thrusts an envelope in Juan’s direction (lesser of two evils, he thinks) then beats it before bewilderment turns to rage. Bismarck T. grabs the envelope from his brother, ripping it open. Inside he finds bus tickets for Caracas and an address. He reads aloud the change in circumstance explanation off a small post-it note: “Secret coordinates: report to outside contractor in four days for specialist training. Do not disclose this order.”

Cursing loudly, Bismarck T. doesn’t get it but Juan knows the score, “For God’s sake calm down relax already Sink, it’s an intelligence billet, must be.”

Leaving immediately to scout the situation, they discover the address belongs to BTI Corporation. After a few days R&R, the brothers report, get housing assignments, drop their bags on their bunks and eat a fine meal while their personal items get the once over-twice.

That night two in their new squad die silently; call it food poisoning. Two more slip and fall in the shower that same night, also silently. The brothers learn the dangerous truths of clandestine operations as twelve more trainee deaths ensue over the following weeks as vetting of the squad continues. Eight survive GC Material Supply basic training proficient in cargo movement, knowing how to establish then manage cover identities.

Their favorite instructor, Karl Meltzer, chooses the Vilma brothers for close contact management inside the belly of the beast, sends them stateside, to Texas. The Sink's second day in Galveston he answers the call to join the bowling league, aptly choosing BackBreakers for a team name. For months, the Sink rarely removes his bowling shirt, always wearing it under his coveralls, claiming they itch.

He doesn't own bowling pants so chooses the lesser of two evils with coveralls (easier access, a plus). They perform spectacularly, however itching him to distraction, must be the miracle fibers or whatever doesn't matter he scratches himself raw all the time and nobody cares. The BackBreakers vote the Sink team Captain; he kicks Juan off the squad immediately. The Sink wants to win and Juan truly cannot bowl, even if his life depends on hitting a pin in his own lane. Juan sometimes shows up to drink but in all matters defers to the Sink.

They both keep a public face but some faces tend to be more public than others. The BackBreakers win the league championship and Karl buys him the most expensive natural fiber coveralls, affixing the BackBreakers emblem where it belongs, high in the back just below the shoulders (making staunch allies-for-life in the process). The BackBreakers never relinquish the trophy.

Juan arranges jobs while the Sink bowls. The arrangement excels and Karl's Texas operations expand in leaps and bounds. The GC moves final vetting of new trainees to Juan's operation flooding the Southwest Territory with capable hands. However, the tough jobs still seem to find the Sink's BackBreaker operation.

Bismarck T. Vilma checks his watch and his six. Juan should be somewhere behind in traffic with the BackBreakers hauling a double with aviation grade kerosene up to some backwater goes by the name of Tyler, TX. After the first drop they scoot over to Killeen to fill in

for some shipper causing scheduling problems on a military contract haul to the Port of Houston. Back at Galveston they hook for another double. The Sink checks in, clicking his mike. Two clicks from Juan; three from Hector; four from Manuela; five from Jade...good, everyone is ok. The Sink feeds the engine, accelerating.

The Sink, Juan and thirty six of Juan's top students begin the dangerous practice of looping late Monday night; travelling in loose packs for mutual support and taking mass doses of stimulants. The runs always begin fine but though it is a simple plan the Sink looks at a million variables coming into play where mutual support becomes untenable i.e. Nigel is making a mess of things.

'Well screw me,' thinks the Sink, 'here you go. Traffic's picking up and the always heavy truck routes mix in with not just evacuees but also commuters ducking out of their shitty lives before the Labor Day Holiday, lucky stiffs. Stiffs, yikes, way too funny by half. Should tell Juan' concludes Bismarck T. aka the Sink.

Immediately his phone vibrates; Juan texting, "URfunnyAsTraffik". Weird.

Cavern Rockstar! Paraguay 0800

'On the road, again...'

Stella thinks the words, hums the tune to keep her ears from imploding during airshaft free fall (think of how a cylinder at the pharmacy drive-up copes). Unseen air currents slow her speed gradually coming to a complete stop one step above the ground. Stella smiles- home at last!

Fists pump overhead as she steps down into the facility facing the usual phalanx of guns and electronics vetting all free-fallers. She tips her hat to the balcony fans, then to those working the ground floor, not stopping to sign.

The vault door opens and Doctor Stella joins her counterparts in Launch Command and Control, "Strike up the band people! Its a triumphant celebration so apple pie and ice cream for everybody!"

Off the grid forever it seems she nonetheless greets everyone by name, thanking each in-turn handing out hot apple pies still venting steam- her trademark success indicator. Eating pie schmoozing her

way through the crowd, Stella sweeps out of the pack making for the door on the heels of a thunderous wave of good cheer, with confetti flying, catcalls; you know, the works.

Pausing at Admin, Stella drinks in the love. Here it is, finally: rock star treatment! Merely took decades of slaving to get a ticker tape parade. Years and years of nothing but work suffering with no life but rocket troubles. Her typical release comes on a natural high after hours of fat burning exercise. Good for the walk of fame: tightening her abs, sticking out her chest looking hot, feeling on fire. She marches in, finding her sister Carolla drinking and smoking, typical of the witch.

“Big win excepting Galapagos Seven’s still burning.” Rita’s voice.

“That’s enough Rita,” Carolla stops the bickering before it starts. Then she throws a compliment, no question to shock Estelle, “I doubt any one of us could perform much better than our dear sister here.”

Faint praise, but totally opposite from her departure; back then Carolla lays the pressure on hot, heavy and several layers thick. Grabbing Stella’s arms going forehead-to-forehead, “screw up and don’t come home”. Squeezing hard enough to leave fingertip bruises flashing her a thin smile staring deep past her eyes, into her soul issuing a terse dismissal, “but we know you will, sister dear.”

Damn, what a wench. Then Stella wants to kill Carolla to put an end to her reign of terror- but now? Big win so to hell with naysayers!

Talk about pressure, years of hounding by her siblings, all gone now melting away like winter yielding directly to summer. Yea, that’s right, it’s like Karl says, Stella sings when the register rings

Stella sashays majestically to the center of the room straight up to Carolla’s desk. An open tablet displays her report. Stella adds her autograph to the bottom with a flourish. She curtsies before exiting Admin with a flourish making for Rita’s office in Command Control.

Home at last, what happens next? “Rita, where are we at?” Hmmm, nobody home. Stella finds hot tea sitting on the workstation and takes a loud slurp, riding her high into the next challenge.

“You know that’s mine, right?” Rita puts Stella back on internal comms.

“This mug has an emblem but doesn’t appear to bear ownership information.”

“Tell you what- why not tip it to check the bottom?”

“That hasn’t worked on me since we were children- and only once.”

“Yea well, don’t be such a mooch. Where’s my pie?”

“Like you eat? No pie for you, well maybe there’s a slice in the kitchen. Check before you return, just leave me alone for a minute to catch up.” Dr. Estelle Bolivar picks up Rita’s tea, trying to get back to her happy place. She takes another slurp feeling her blood pressure dropping, staring into multiple workstation screens, seeing nothing; effectively hiding out. In no time a crowd passes out in the hall, snapping her reverie about how to kill Carolla in her sleep. Stella stands to stretch, then leaves for her personal workspace in Operations to get some real caffeine and check if Karl left another note.

Blowing and sipping pleasantly steaming sweet, dark Colombian coffee from her own (hugely oversize) Bolivar Transport International mug (Karl cares even when nobody else will), Stella clicks on satellite network activation logistical benchmarks, checking progress. Rita sticks her head in the door, questioning. Stella understands, “I can’t believe it, simply am in awe.”

Rita plops down, looking at her sister’s coffee mug in disdain, as all tea drinkers do. “Well, you did good so neither can I.”

“That I made it back here; thanks to Karl, no thanks to you.”

Stella kicks off her heels and pulls a pair of flats from the filing cabinet; feeling great to be back home deep below triple canopy rain forest in a huge, climatically perfect system, home away from home to the Gran Columbian organization. Two small, fast moving cold-water streams carry runoff into a pristine valley before dropping thousands of meters belowground into a tremendous natural cavern. Complete with wilderness protection above, the cavern offers water, heat, electricity, privacy and protection. Members of the network operation live underground with their families, total security.

Rita smiles indulgently intently checking the data stream for glitches. All data fields flow into her departments, particularly Systems Command Control, for copying, stroking and re-distribution. The raw data feed also passes directly to Carolla in Project Control for processing, acquiring further distribution tags along the way. Launch

Command and Control, aka Stella, asynchronously shares data with both, as does Material Supply and Operations.

Carolla's Project Control keeps track of present events while linking to intelligent systems, providing Carolla, Rita, Pedro, Karl and of course Stella instant access to Airre, the Quantum Core. Airre's test simulations quantify achievable benchmarks but Rita holds her breath until the big launch. Fortunately yesterday's real-time operationally huge data streams perform well; indeed, data flows exceed expectations. Glitches get fixes almost inhumanly fast.

Airre dislikes Carolla and Rita, can tolerate Karl and Pedro but loves Stella. Airre considers Stella's success as their success. Airre knows Stella's failure with Galapagos Seven: entirely Rita's fault.

Dr. Estelle pulls data off the remote launches- scanning textual accounts, telemetry numbers and videos. Bringing up the orbital picture she stares in awe at their brand new constellation of objects. She links each satellite to their launch vehicle individually; all present to account for. She loudly slurps, draining the coffee dregs.

"The board is green." Rita pats her on the shoulder. "There's not much left here for Launch Command, you need a refill. Stop to see if you can help the boys." Stella groans but Rita merely shrugs.

The incorrigible twins, Carolla's sons Jorge and Paezley, incapably manage both Operations (theoretically) and Material Supply Controls if either Pedro and/or Karl can think of any reason to be elsewhere. Tending to occupy two large workstations, the boys work below an old oaken desk on a tall riser, empty but for a few books (Carolla's Command Central). The floor below Jorge and Paezley contains Project Admin (personnel, purchasing, legal, etc.) and Internal Controls (data analysts, accountants) personnel. Pedro nicknames the entire blob of humanity 'the drones' (I'll get to the bottom of this, get me a drone on the line) and doesn't allow them within spitting distance of his Operators (in theory).

Stella checks her outfit, "I'll change then go, promise."

Downtime, NORAD/SPACECOM, Wyoming 1615

Data capture complete, Captain Deborah Harold shakes off her doubts and flashes thumbs up to her cockpit mate, Major Discontent.

She places the airframe in a shallow descent passing below 119,000 considering whether to offer him the first opportunity to buy her a round at the Officer's Club when her heads up display begins blinking red. A moment later she gives herself whiplash looking through the side window as the starboard ramjet whines uncontrollably. She observes silently as the engine explodes into flame. She changes her Major thumbs-up to the middle finger adding some choice words while the airframe disintegrates.

Captain Debbie dies in near, actually very near space, the first casualty of the weekend. Her fall to earth is long, tortuous and well documented. In a flash of foresight, she outfits her flight suit with an array of cameras/sensors transmitting a satellite upload during her upcoming download, so to speak (poor Debbie's final pun). The transmission leaks to a GC bird (Galapagos 2.31) going viral as Rita's System Command operators decode Debbie's video streams real-time to the dark web. Captain Harold's fall from grace stars in the latest viral sensation, as does a great deal of human detritus (bits and pieces of her crew) and the priceless airframe.

"Damn, that's on me." Peterson links in with the Joint Chiefs. "My decision, I gave the order to increase altitude to the upper limits."

Exactly who gave the order doesn't garner much attention. It's the 'what and how' the Chief's find baffling, "Her encrypted side band burst transmission direct to the satellite? Interception, decryption, transmission- all in real time by parties unknown using..."

Communications failure! Sirens blare and situational readiness boards appear onscreen. Ironically, Peterson and the Pentagon communications dropout relates to a high-speed link through a satellite side-node, an undetectable irregular waveform emission from GMA5, a bird belonging ostensibly to the Geospatial Mapping Agency- the first satellite to go dark. NORAD's landline receives the first panic call from GMA Ground Control Station Alternate Facility at 1715, when the second, third and fourth satellite in the train drop transmissions.

GMA techs inform SPACECOM techs their "loss of communication" events may derive off electronic ground faults thanks to the storm. GMA Center normally operates out of an Alabama facility, now evacuating to the Houston backup per Presidential Order,

adding woe exponentially to Peterson's doom. The secondary site reflects a picture perfect demonstration of design inadequacy, not even resembling a mirror of the Primary facility. All mapping equipment budget money goes into space or to the Primary; their disaster recovery plan relies on breaking down the guts then hauling the equipment overland to the secondary, by trucks on evacuation routes-as if. Peterson moans early and often back then, repeating now:

"Low-bidder backup plan: stupidest thing anyone's ever done." Peterson's over and out done with bean counters.

Inadequate Federal funding levels breed creative solutions. Peterson's also over and out done with regarding creative solutions. Making it all portable, as he predicts, proves a weak theory that falls apart in practice. Logistics go haywire; time runs out. Peterson's communication control backup conveniently packaged in some five-dozen semis, sit in Houston-bound evac traffic.

Thus, fingers point, as fingers tend to when poop meets fan. His techs point to management failure by the fiscal oversight. NSA/GMA staffers point to the shipper losing their ground equipment. Peterson cuts the nonsense, hanging up on the CIA's excuse in progress. He doesn't take Homeland's call; bastards cut GMA funding.

Peterson calculates a loss beyond huge- of epic proportions! Expectant trickle down proves immediate and massive with the sudden loss of five of six low orbit constellation trains of ten satellites apiece collectively carrying NSA/GMA geospatial mapping instruments. Peterson relates the first two satellites to locomotives (any train's most important piece) housing data pre-processing, encryption and, unbelievably, his communication feeds. The train's other cars carry remote sensing equipment, also irreplaceable in the short term.

Theoretically, remote sensing platforms offload raw data streams to different nodes within each train, often duplicating before transmitting. NORAD techs switch over to the remaining system to get Peterson's comms back online. The switchover smoothly restarts transfers immediately, but soon the system overloads.

His comms come back but the quality sucks. Peterson frowns, thinking bad thoughts about serendipity, timing and coincidence, sort of the opposite of tranquil peacetime conditions so "Defcon Up."

Suddenly, NORAD is back on hair trigger war footing. Peterson listens for it, waiting.

Major Tom Browne, NORAD's Executive Officer, comes on the comms after conferencing with the Salt Lake data center, "We're completely down on GMA1-4."

Peterson makes the decision to devote assets to the situation. "Get us on a different net. I want data on prevailing conditions coast to coast from the ground-up; show me telemetry, radar, pictures-whatever we can get. I want to hear about any anomalies, no matter the significance. What do we have that can get a camera on those trains? What about a ground station shot? Get moving, I want data now!"

Still waiting for it, he ends his tirade to light up a cigar from the General Peterson's quasi-hidden stash of the good stuff. She must be busy with more pressing matters. As if."

"Defcon Up, General?"

"Yes ma'am. NSA/GMA down count now equals five trains, as cause remains unknown. I'd be launching nukes given an aim point."

"Not yet, General, keep me in the loop, please."

Constellation Consternation, Low Earth Orbit 1618

Peterson couldn't see the gleeful look on Carolla as she gives the green light to revealing all his fears and pent-up angst, "Getting there's only half the fun, people. Fire one."

Operations and operators (excluding material supply) fall in Pedro's ledger domain. This schema put his hands in practically everything; later leaving him vulnerable to blame for mass-destruction. Rita and Pedro (with Airre's input) tamper with the satellites before and during construction, modifying the design to weapon's grade specs without being obvious. Airre writes spin control timing applications to take advantage of the alterations.

Satellite orifice 18 access panels 12 and 14 slide open in rapid succession in the direction of rotation. Beneath the sliding door lies a chromium resin base semi-permeable membrane, hiding the goodies from probing. The firing chamber inside contains twelve hundred spheroids; small ceramic balls with radar absorbing coatings. Thanks to Stella, two million plus rounds orbit the Earth.

Thanks to Airre, they all have targets with high kill probability. Much to Peterson's chagrin, she assigns multiple shooters to each bird, one round per shooter. Peterson's trains come within range.

First on the list of course: National Security Agency's Geospatial Mapping Agency, Peterson's eyes in the skies. GMA5- target five rounds shoot. Next, GMA3- target five rounds shoot. GMA2- target five rounds shoot. Finally, GMA4- target five rounds shoot. Wait.

Pedro switches off the spa motor to speak with Rita, "Hey, there's a spike in transmissions coming off the Cobra Bell out of Kabul. Try to grab it and route it through here."

Rita takes the command in stride, "Hold on, we've been line of sight for thirty seconds, window is five minutes, c'mon already...got it. Now to decrypt- holy cow, you got to see this."

Gravity- Pedro understands gravitas, catches Carolla's attention, "Live stream to the dark net?"

"Rita?"

"Yes, sister dearest."

"Earn your pay, copy the stream routing the data live to the netsphere ghouls. Make a file and place it somewhere easy to find."

Rita handles the chore while the first twenty spheroids whiz through space, dropping from medium orbit into the path of Peterson's Geospatial Mapping Agency.

GMA satellites carry vehicle protection in the form of reactive Chatham Armor, a British concept re-engineered for delicate space vehicles. The first spheroid impacts GMA5's power supply. The kinetic energy dissipates safely away from the reactor, leaving a dent. The second impact hits the dent dead on, penetrating the outer housing. The third fourth and fifth enter the new orifice then bounce around inside until all momentum is lost, along with GMA5.

Hit. Hit. Hit. Hit. Hit. Four targets, twenty hits five. Flawless.

Pedro and Carolla toast first success as Airre continues firing.

International Space Station, Earth Orbit 1622

The latest incarnation of the International Space Station houses several Cosmonauts, a few rich tourists, and Bo.

Bo lives every minute in space as his last. Sounds like a plan, Bo.

Bo also suspects trouble approaches though unsure why.

Peterson's angst reaches the International Space Station as more satellites drop out and the need for data escalates. Shitting a brick, Astronaut Commander Bo Chambers (late of the Finger Lakes Region, NY) breaks into a cold sweat prepping for Peterson's spying activity. SPACECOM wires Bo a list of coordinates to photograph, not saying what he's looking for, merely saying to check for anomalies. Bo scrambles to solve a host of new problems- Russian difficulties.

Trouble lies with equipment availability, specifically sharing. Cosmonaut Helga doesn't appreciate his honing in on her time monitoring the near view scopes. Cosmonaut Helga isn't one he can bully off the equipment, she doesn't like him. Looking for the workaround, Bo brings up a display of exterior access hatch schematics. He finds only one tap between the remote scopes' tether and Helga the Terrible. Bo needs to go outside and should he return...

"She's going to kill me." In the airlock, the Air Force test pilot and NASA astronaut nearly smiles thinking of her upcoming theatrics. Bo knows Helga, only too well no matter; Bo obeys orders. Floating free of ISS Bo enjoys an unsanctioned spacewalk during his final handful of orbits, enjoying the space, admiring the view. Bo reaches the hatch, flips a switch and the near space observing system slaves to SPACECOM's anomaly-hunt. Bo shuts the hatch mumbling apologies.

Helga begins fuming making a prediction: "Dead man floating."

"Truer words, eh?" adds a helpful tourist.

Slewing the outpost's remote short range telescopic camera from Helga's control SPACECOM engineers over-ride the small hydrazine rockets gimbal mounts on the sides of the sleek fifty three foot devices. Bo holds in place, hoping to save his future upon returning control to Helga posthaste.

Lucky for Bo, he lives in the moment turning toward Earth to catch his last glimpses of an utterly awesome view.

DEFCON UP! NORAD/SPACECOM, Wyoming 1630

Peterson paces, waiting to see data. The intelligent agents in the viewing system flag as normal the image transmissions from the ISS's short-range observatory. Screw that, thinks Peterson, they may look

normal but I don't think so. "Yea, I get what you're saying. Only problem is you're dopes. Make them move the camera off-axis then retake the shots." Peterson, out of patience with the semi-essentials manning the viewing systems, barks an order, not a request.

"Without comms, they're not moving."

"Exactly, dope. Send the data to someone who can tell me what I can't see and don't come back until you have an answer. Dismissed." Peterson fumes, turns to Major Tom: "Do it, DEFCON UP again; route the President's call to my office but I'm hitting the head first."

"So, you got pictures?" She's abrupt, to the point.

"What they gave me, well catalog quality showing nothing. What we don't know is preventing our response. Without another view or altering the ISS orbit, I can't get the hidden angle shot."

"Speaking volumes about coincidence."

"No such thing, ma'am." Peterson cut a fresh cigar and lit up. Picking up the stack of images, dealing them face up on his big desk one at a time, tenuously linking the implications. DEFCON UP is the imminent war condition. The military alerts the President's Cabinet, splitting/moving the succession chains away from the threat axis."

"What threat axis? Are you shitting me?" Betsy wants to slap him.

SPACECOM cannot identify the threat axis, complicating everything. Peterson takes a flyer, "Same old story, different five minutes though. If you ask me, link everything to Carolla Bolivar; indeed, she's a Commie at heart, as you know."

Peterson's hunch isn't enough to completely sway the President. "Prove it. But in the interim, hands-off my nuclear weapons. Keep me in the loop, please." She's unhappy, oozes displeasure.

DEFCON UP trickles through Homeland Security to the first responders. Critical infrastructure responders automatically receive notification of any change in Defense Condition levels with details regarding the circumstances. Communication Alert robots widely dissemble all attack vector possibilities to appropriate military, security and police personnel. Telephones begin ringing and emails fly about the system. Other intelligent robots intercept the same story and disseminate the threat condition increase far and wide albeit quietly. The world sits up.

Major Tom appears at the door, clearing his throat. He points to the big board, "Trouble spreading, you best take a look."

Peterson grunts, takes a drink and then offers Tom a prediction, "So first we're losing everything military, in order of importance to someone, I bet. I predict the NOAA and NASA birds go offline next, then other governments, then everything else. The answer lies in who's left transmitting, doesn't it? Keep a running tally on the loss reports then subtract out those birds without reports and follow up. Redirect all the radio telescopes into satellite signal acquisition mode. Well, get hopping, I need data, dammit!" He gets up to stand at the window, "Open this damn thing! Getting stuffy in here, dammit all to Hell."

Immediately the big board dissolves to a pictorial and graphical representation of satellites zipping around the Earth with those no longer communicating listed in an informational spreadsheet at the bottom listing name, owner, function, age, orbit and time of last transmission. Seeing the running tally with the rate of additions growing, the noise level in the hollow mountain drops to zero. "That's enough for me, Tom. Thank you. Order worldwide quick-time ramp-up on my authority- then connect me with the President."

Gus Strikes Back, Kennedy Space Center, Florida 1750

An independent businessman, Augie Paez grumps at everyone thinks they can tell him how to conduct his operation. Like that jerk back at the hangar telling Gus he thinks he shouldn't be flying on the fringe of Hurricane Nigel, thinks he can get on Gus' case for going north yesterday to get his new planes for a quick turnaround. Bite me, thinks Gus, for the ninetieth time today.

Augie figures on returning before hurricane winds become a problem, doesn't matter what meteorologists in the government run weather center opine. This owner/operator of Gulf Coast Air Services Company lies far beyond sick and tired of listening to others' moaning about this and that particularly regarding the damn storm- including his family and Air Traffic Control, particularly the NWS and even NASA with their know-it-all satellites. Besides, his two aircraft map then file a flight plan avoiding the storm entirely, going to the east coast of Florida, not the panhandle.

Nonetheless, Augie checks the Charleston radar to view Nigel's progress. The news pleases as the first thin cirrus bands begin to cloud the Charleston, SC sun. Augie goes wheels up in a steep climb gaining altitude to catch the storm outflow current and save some gas during his twin re-furbishing ferrying flights south to Melbourne Beach, FL.

Augie hates government- both people and regulations. Indeed, he moans of several animus sore spots but particularly enjoys abusing NASA to all comers as everyone breathing gets a cut of government largesse excepting Augie. Apparently not going to happen in my lifetime, he moans, because NASA equals "lack of vision". Yet Gulf Coast Air bids year after year on drone refurbishing contracts- giving the Federal Government an annual opportunity to crucify Augie.

Now comes Augie's turn at the hammer. How much do you idiots pay for hammers these days? They overspend so much- too bad he's not in the hammer business. Back to that later, instead of being out front the Feds once again tout themselves as producers of modern day miracles yet fritter away their time and budgets while other, lesser countries and well-heeled private companies go to space. Maintaining tech way out there on the edge matters most; serious corporate/nation/state players divert precious resources to outer space programs while NASA can't draw flies to their bloated corpse.

NASA, as always, remains far too busy to worry how Augie feels about anything, particularly during a double whammy- Hurricane Nigel and DEFCON UP. NASA gets very busy during DEFCON UP and SPACECOM expects today to be no different regardless deteriorating conditions. Can anyone in Colorado read a weather map?

NASA enjoys piggybacking, cross tracking their budget over Homeland Security's black programs, ostensibly as a cost cutting measure, effectively covering up the true value of the missing constellations. Are the irreplaceable assets fixable? What's in the pipeline pad-ready to go, SPACECOM wonders?

Three X-39d combination Cargo/Service planes with next gen abilities (stealth space planes) comes the swift reply. Only the storm approaches rapidly and we're preparing to move inland per Presidential directive. Facility-wide evacuation orders stand.

The cut-and-run operational orders reach NASA Tuesday with Cape Canaveral civilian personnel buttoning up the \$2.5B vehicles inside the massive vehicle assembly building. Miraculously most complete a week's worth of tasks before the storm. Those not essential beyond essential evacuate, joining the swarm exiting the Space Coast.

Any DEFCON increase puts the NASA on stand-by alert. DEFCON UP delivers key personnel particularly from nearby Patrick Air Force Base. SSgt Jon Allen and Terry Jameson, Air Force bachelors with no family in the area to worry about, board the bus for the short hop up the coast to man the control tower along with dozens of others scurrying to fill the worker vacuum.

"Surf is so up," reports Jon. "In a day or two, wow dude, just wait."

"Dude." agrees Terry on the aisle, refusing to bitch at the dude.

Not that Terry's anything to complain about after spending the most fantastic summer of his young life surfing the Melbourne Beach break. Jon the notorious cheapskate even goes halfies on an A1A condo, thus Terry lives large and in charge so as a twenty five year old air traffic control transferee fresh off the Nevada desert how can he complain about not being able to see i.e. seat choices? Just because Jon's a notorious view hog grabs the window seat constantly? No. The bus trip's only a hop and this storm too shall pass, dude.

Terry calls up the nexrad radar on his phone, preparing himself for a nightmare scenario. Nigel's approaching first band spawns some weak tornadoes but the entire system appears a slow mover. Satellites indicate outer band wind speeds of eighty miles an hour inside heavy downpours. Super- wait- his screen brightens as a message arrives.

"It's raining." Jon reports again, still window hogging.

"Dude!" urgency is uncommon for Terry. "We're now officially at DEFCON UP! War warning! Damn dude..."

Making their way off the bus into the rain, drying off during the silent elevator ride to the circular control room in the sky, they consider circumstances. DEFCON UP never happens, at least not since their enlistments. Quickly settling into routine scanning for traffic, very light, just like nobody flying in the crap, dude. The experience of manning the tower monitoring empty airspace freaks them both out;

however, empty scopes soon prove incredibly boring albeit not just a little disconcerting. Um, talk to your Mom lately, dude?

Blip. The radar screen comes alive.

“What’s that?” They ask simultaneously.

“He’s squawking...isn’t that Gus?” asks the Supervising Flight Control Officer standing behind between, leaning in while smiling and pointing to Terry’s screen, “I’m sure that’s Gus!” He laughs out loud.

“No, it’s Gus,” chimes in Jon continuing the standup routine, taking his lines in “the Gus phenomenon” the two learn first day in the tower, you know, as a tension-breaker. This two-man recitation replete with witty banter always accompanies a “Gus” contact. Poor unsuspecting Augie takes verbal abuse from tower personnel as standard policy.

The devil, Gus learns, is in the details and oh boy, if these government-types could find their ass using both hands, he’d worry. Augustus Augie Paez migrated, departing Venezuela through Cuba in 1959 a recent graduate of the Bolivar Flight Academy. Departing Cuba with his brother Augie (Augustine, not Augustus) in a crop duster heading to Miami they divert to Patrick Air Force Base for processing. Eventually, both receive green cards befitting Cuban exiles.

Immediately the brothers buy a second plane and start a business they name ‘A Greater American Sign Co. Ltd.’ flying the beaches dragging banners hawking dive bars and tanning oil. AGASCo develops a solid reputation for dependability, gets more business, buying more planes, hiring specific pilots.

Truth is, Central Florida’s Air traffic controllers don’t particularly care for Gus, the other Gus, or AGASCo. A thick accent with overbearing gruffness makes Gus hard to take on a good day; then he hires the worse English speakers in the world, tough to understand, impossible to interact with. Forget about names and flight numbers; the tower supervisors succumb to pressure altering SOP to accept the identification squawks semi-automatically. Instead of conversing with the contact they launch into the “is that Gus?” dialogue.

AGASCo grows into a large central Florida based operation. Then global events disrupt the supply chain. Augie experiences trouble securing dependable quality aviation fuel for his growing fleet. Needing more growth opportunities, he builds fuel depots at smaller

airfields throughout the south, making a killing dealing bootleg oil from Venezuela during the political embargo. AGASCo growth continues as Gus expands his flight business to include private charters, transportation of people and goods first within Florida and later to the Gulf States and the Americas.

Augie works for Material Supply, knows Karl dislikes Pedro.

Within the aviation community, Augie and his brother become members in good standing; in fact, award winners always willing to help or donate even to NASA-led charities and functions in return receiving insider access to numerous PR events. As NASA launches hundreds of satellites and reusable space vehicles, Gus and Gus view NASA's progress up close and personally albeit quietly.

Pedro Saenz's plan- not too shabby, thinks Gus as he switches on the IFF transponder to identify their flight to Cape Kennedy Air Traffic Control. Immediately hearing a double click in reply, Gus's brother transmits his identifier, getting another double click. That's that, as they say- Pedro nails the finale, thinks Gus. Both Gus' didn't take the plan seriously on first telling; however Pedro harangues them until they buy in. Unbelievably, here we are on their doorstep. Incredible to think a plan Karl dubs "GUSxGUS" could succeed but NASA just accepted their squawks unquestionably, not surface painting their aircraft.

"How do I destroy NASA?" Gus asks Karl, gets a shrug.

Pedro steps in to provide the early thinking behind this operational methodology: "Look, the people up there, well, let me term them unmotivated, not especially lazy, just don't care to work. Put them in a situation with a jerk or one who is tough to comprehend, they're going to look for an easy way to cope. Look at it this way, who needs the hassle? Nobody. Trust me on this: give them time and they will come up with at least one 'innovative solution' to dealing with you two.

Damn Pedro and Karl, who would think they could pull this off? Nobody, particularly not the brothers Augie, is who.

Today, their flight plan indicates a ferry out of Charlotte, new aircraft fresh from outfitting- ostensibly small planes. However, the approaching airframes don't match the manifest because they are four engine cargo planes- slow movers, plenty of space, turbo props able to

handle heavy loads. The airframes are of South American origin. So is the outfitter in Charlotte. Gus grins as the vehicle assembly building pops into view from below the horizon, the final waypoint. He begins a slow climb. Gus follows him up.

Jon and Terry stand together facing the glass, noting the climb.

“What kind of planes are in the flight plan?” asks Terry.

“Two small Cessna conversion variants,” replies the supervisor.

“Guess again. Looks like a pair of big ass turboprops climbing for some reason. Uh oh, that’s a wing dip- both planes turning.”

The supervisor hits the alert siren as Death appears at the window.

The lead levels out his climb then dips his starboard wing, banking inland, Gus trailing to port. They begin to diverge as they dive. Gus comes out of his dive trading altitude for momentum pointing straight at the huge ATC/Launch Tower and George Bush Admin/R&D Building. The wingman follows his lead exaggerating the turn, pointing at the massive Vehicle Assembly Building.

Jon turns to Terry, “Dude.”

Terry replies, for once sharing the view, “Dude.”

The young Staff Sergeants stare into the face of death. Gus sees them at the windows, so he waves. They wave back, trying to read Gus’ lips flapping in the breeze. Gus slows his breathing to mouth, clearly and slowly in perfect English, “Goodbye Assholes!”

Death observes closely while Jon, Terry and the Supervisor die quickly while dozens of hugely essential engineers die horribly. The cascading fireballs detonate co-located storage tanks holding flammable liquid gases and oxidizers within the blast zone multiplying the destruction. Death takes the overhead view observing the mop-up.

Some semi-essential technicians performing emergency repairs fixing leaks near the VAB hear the roars, see the flashes from the control tower/operations building exploding, massive fireball, obliterating both structures. With their remaining seconds of life they opt to run rather than investigate further- uh oh, too late.

Whoosh in an instant the accelerating cargo plane carrying explosives passes into the Vehicle Assembly Building, cratering it.

The entire launch facility explodes into an intense fireball as the oxygen liquid and hydrogen tanks nearest the VAB explode, starting an explosive cascade down the lines to the gantry hookups.

Pedro's operatives scan the skies from the inter-coastal waterway using infrared, "Look for chutes." Their rocking smuggling vessel makes life miserable for Augie's support team riding the winds. "No chutes visual or on-scope, ground radar shows several Coast Guard cutters on fast approach from the north, 10 klicks out."

"No chutes, we're out of here. Crank the outboards follow the river south per the plan. Time to disappear, guns up!"

Death perches on one of the massive motors as it roars to life, busily peering through the fireballs at the NASA wreckage, counting coup. Checking the total against expectations, 1,181- all present to account for, add the two Gus' and the final tally jibes at 1,183. Noting Karl employing a similar ruse simultaneously against an air force base in El Centro, California, Death checks his logs then frowns. Hmmm, don't see it anywhere. Did one of Pedro's infamous plans go awry? Doesn't make sense, can't even find the pilots. Who are they again?

Death scans his list again. Hmmm, Major Victor Remosa and his copilot/ weapons systems officer Captain Estanza definitely do not appear anywhere. Wait one, here comes a tally...all right, the minions' claim 1,453 from El Centro, but Remosa and Estanza escape? How? Death wants/needs to know; however, it's a busy holiday weekend with lots going on- like needing to move quickly to rescue a bar-b-q cookout rampage in Chicago the minions seem to be botching.

Mobilization Orders, Cheyenne Mountain, Wyoming 1758

After a few words with Chief of Staff Jordie, President Betsy takes a seat at the outdoor conference table remotely conferencing General Peterson, the rest of the Joint Chiefs and an assortment of her cabinet as fires at NASA and el Centro burn out of control. The loss of people and assets proves disastrous. Analysts assessing the damage immediately worry about data confidence as satellites continue dropping off air, particularly those able to put a camera on either facility. However, they recover enough of feed from the towers to piece together events. Betsy sips water, scans the ocean then speaks:

“Defensive posture only” confirms the President of the United States. “War footing, mobilize damage control and asset protection. Prepare for anything, everything terrorism-relative. Does anybody have any clue exactly who we’re fighting?”

Homeland Security fields the question, “The NASA attack originates from Cuban migrants, former exiles of the regime.”

“You’re kidding me.” Betsy tries to remember the last time Cuba did anything to piss her off, cannot. “Not Cuba, look elsewhere.”

“The flight plans on file indicate two brothers, Augustine and Augustus Something or other, Cuban-born owners of a flight services company, AGASCo, departing Charlotte several hours ago for Melbourne Beach Airport. It’s definitely them as there is no record of them arriving anywhere but NASA. Coast Guard units are pursuing a fleeing speedboat through the Intercostal, one seen loitering about the area until the crash.” Homeland shrugs.

Peterson interjects, “NASA facilities equal a total loss- may as well forget they exist on the Cape.”

“How about el Centro?” President Betsy’s foot taps impatiently.

The Air Force Chief of Staff speaks up, “Timing links the two attacks, no question. Building fires are dying; the good news is most munitions and fuel storage facilities remain intact. They took out the drones and hangars above ground, we’re still counting but the loss is huge. El Centro handles drone maintenance and repair for practically all the services. Surveillance equipment, irreplaceable assets total loss. Coastal defense zones going active, commencing combat air patrols.”

“Drones?” The drones figure heavily in the US Defense plans.

“Primarily, they hit a few other buildings but the bulk of the event targets the drone buildings and personnel unfortunate to be on duty.”

Peterson jumps in to steer the President toward likely culprits, “Madam President, in fifteen minutes the United States, NATO and others go dark in space. Surprisingly, Bolivar’s network seems to be dying, I know, shocks the shit out of me. In fact, the only intact streams belong to the most militarized nations- Russia, China, etc.”

Homeland Security interjects, “The FBI links the two facilities to AGASCo. Apparently the brothers unsuccessfully bid for the drone

contract, multiple times. There's a well-known grudge but until now, no violence. We like the domestic terrorism angle."

"Fat chance," the President opines, "the timing with the satellite takedown is far too suspicious not to link them directly- straight line."

Homeland Security isn't giving up on the terrorism angle, "Sure, but look at the calendar, big holiday weekend with a slow news cycle. Terrorists like splashy times and targets."

Peterson loses patience, "Holy shit you're stupid. Someone out here is systemically disabling power systems on hundreds of satellites coded with proprietary encryption systems you freaking moron, and we don't know how and you relate that to a splashy terrorist? Freaking longhair appointees, get a damn grip. Ask me I don't give a damn about your half-ass conjectures; my concern is what's next?"

"And you think?" Betsy overlooks Peterson's rants routinely- just not today, remembering the Tower episode wondering if he's regular.

"The next event is going to be a peek into our current conditions."

"OK, here's what I think." Betsy feels a tug, "Wait a sec."

Peterson grabs a fresh cigar, trims the end and lights up. A minute later...

"OK, here's the plan. I'm with Jordie and the UK Prime Minister. PM says he has four anti-satellite platforms in the Pacific Ocean pretending to be oilrigs. Their scientists maintain a line of sight stealth laser system in each, claim they can target four satellites regardless of orbit before recharging- essentially single use covert weapon."

Peterson chews on it, damn sneaky Brits developing a stealthy laser system. So where's the frigging CIA not knowing about then stealing the tech? Must be busy elsewhere...yikes damn Brits speak English, so easy for crying out loud...Peterson answers his President, "Cascade system, eh? Four vaporizing satellites will create much space junk. We'll work out targets to maximize debris fields, need a few minutes."

President Shriver turns to her Chief of Staff, "Jordie, arrange a press briefing pronto. Work on a statement to release now, something vague but re-assuring tying the NASA explosions to satellite network troubles. Get the PM back to London from Andrews via Marine One; use the trip to deploy my double while I take HUTS to Pennsylvania."

“So you’re beginning another national crisis by lying to everyone?” asks Jordie cynically.

“Correct.” There’s certainly precedent, thinks the President.

Bo Knows Micro-Meteors, Elliptical Earth Orbit 1815

The International in ISS rather well expresses the very nature of the Space Station, yet does not spare the orbiting laboratory from attack.

Passing over the Midwest on a south eastern trajectory living in the moment unknowingly awaiting imminent demise Bo watches Hurricane Nigel form a second eye over central Florida, slowly covering the worrisome NASA smoke plume. Still on Extra Vehicular Activity, tethering to the highest seat in the house, Astronaut Bo shoots video streaming recordings of the aftermath at the Cape.

Standing next to Bo, Death waits patiently albeit expectantly. Space remains primarily empty and boring. He doesn’t get much work out here, decides to have fun with Captain American, the space guy. Bo sees in a flash of his mind’s inner eye the ISS developing oxygen leaks.

Wondering if he merits standing in heaven, Bo prays. Not waiting for an answer, Bo screams, “Oxygen leak, oxygen leak!”

Three other astronauts in a flash decide to abandon the ISS and grab the tourists on the way out. The lone female cosmonaut holdout kibitzes, infuriating Bo as she rambles on about the lack of alarms.

“Super, we’ll leave you here and take your pod.”

She believes him knows Bo hates her.

Pulling in the outside latch Astronaut Cmdr. Bo Chambers counts each passing second aloud, internally cursing his bad luck to be with such inept slow moving losers. I should have paid more attention to the tourists in evac practice, he thinks, listening in disbelief to Helga beginning some sort of short separation checklist (no worries there is no danger, comrade), “Hurry Helga damn you to hell!”

“Nine, eight...seven...six...” Death ticks off Bo’s remaining seconds. Watching the struggle toward life relieves Death’s boredom temporarily sometimes...well, a little perhaps maybe but rarely.

At an incredible 27,000 miles per hour fittingly while in sight of the NASA ruins, Airre’s first micro meteor passes directly through the

reinforcement on the hull into the ISS computer room perforating life function modules, scoring a secondary ricochet into memory storage banks. Airre's second sphere zips by Bo's head through the flight deck floor then out the big oxygen tank attachment, triggering a spectacular detonation viewable from Earth.

A flash then nothing, death smiles satisfyingly as NSA/NASA's most versatile space asset detonates into millions of pieces of space debris; larger pieces gravitating toward Earth eventually creating a spectacular meteor shower while smaller sections strike other orbiting objects causing considerable damage. No pieces of Bo or his environs survive re-entry. Satisfied, death vacates space.

The loss of the ISS looms huge; serving as DOD's link the ISS picks up the slack from the disappearing comm satellites. The loss of Bo: inevitable because the Russian Cosmonauts were conspiring to untether and set adrift poor Bo just prior to the leak.

Helga (with conspirators) begins her long slow descent to hell in agonizing pain, feeling every nerve ending in every fiber. Like space junk she burns in the atmospheric gravity drift then wafts in the breeze. After coming to rest in Hell, aspects of Cosmonaut Helga become screaming bits waiting in the longest queue imaginable.

Senior Staff Meeting, Southwest Paraguay 1900

Leaving her private penthouse elevator at a brisk pace Carolla Bolivar trots down the long hall in a most unladylike fashion. Dying to get away for the past ten minutes with the first cringing pain hitting her guts, tell the truth, there is no such thing as a get-away but she can grab a momentary respite.

Her guts seem loose, Carolla wonders if she needs to add more fiber. Checking her Rolex, damn, too many respites kill my schedule. Wrapping it up, pausing at the sink staring in the mirror at the huge black circles under her eyes. Add some makeup? Nah, why bother? Grabbing a cold bottle of spring water Carolla meanders out the double door and onto the terrace, her eagle's nest.

The fourth generation Bolivar Matriarch stands stock still leaning over the rail monitoring the buzz gauging by noise levels her State of

the World thinking; as in, the State of My World appears good or bad. Listening to cadences, the deep cave often forewarns Carolla.

Her straightforward methodology withstands the test of time: constant volume equals good, all else equals bad. Easy squeezey, when the volume or pitch increases or decreases, she knows one of her eight departments has a problem. When the noise approximates a hive of angry bees, she awaits multiple reports, often identifying trouble before her managers and that's good, makes her appear psychic.

Paez appears, "They sent me to find you," simple and precise.

Carolla turns, "Yes, I'm coming. Update me on the way."

"West coast ruse concomitants appear ready. Houston/Galveston operations are on the move. Pensacola reports on schedule. Space operations approaching nearly complete. The Air Force drone assemblies finished on time. You have a conference call with the fleet (The Tyrant of the Seas- her favorite) in fifteen minutes. Material Supply wants input; misdirection ops timetable issue."

During the ride down to Admin, the Headmistress of the Bolivar Academy lets Paez stew while considering that pretty much everyone claiming 'so far so good' backs up her noise sample analysis theory-again (psychic? oh yeah.).

Carolla turns to the mirror scanning his Paez's Brooks Brothers suit for wrinkles, "How about the others?" she asks, peering into his eyes.

"Also in the green," his reply: quick, strong and confident. Leave it to Paez to sum up the situation in four words; she has more faith in her son than Rita and Stella have in their nephew.

"Continue implementation. Hammer down," the Iron Lady of South America orders softly, though menacingly. Cocking an ear noting constant volume, in silent satisfaction she leads them from the elevator. Never once during her pit stop does she stop thinking how to improve her own performance. No wonder she can't get regular.

Dr. Smith, Kennebunkport, Maine 1745

"You know there's a large, festive crowd out there, right?" Jordie asks the President, "and I'm not talking merely the press corps but most brought their families, picnickers packing the grounds solid. You're not getting out of here excepting through the throngs."

Traditionally thrown on the Friday before Labor Day the White House Press Corp Open Bar Picnic rivals the Correspondents' Dinner in popularity attracting nearly a thousand family members of the fourth estate with White House ties. From Talking Heads to sound techs, welcome one welcome all. This year's Hawaii Fest invitations stretch overseas to those Brits laboring to cover 10 Downing Street- nearly doubling the amount of food preparations and easily quadrupling the booze orders. Catering squads commandeer the pool grounds for days.

The huge pile of phones and video equipment in bins at security ensure the most awesome Labor Day Open Bar Picnic ever after nearly six hours of serious partying with another six hours to go. However the media blackout prevents awareness of the growing crisis. Long after the picnic gates open for eager beavers and hard-core drinkers the President and PM approach the rostrum on the grounds behind the swimming pools, adjacent to the helipad path. The Kennebunkport White House's transition to war footing catches the press off-guard. Marine One the Presidential helicopter, begins spooling up.

President Shriver addresses the group: "Thank you all for coming and Happy Day with No Labors. Unfortunately, there is a developing situation commanding my full attention and I'm afraid I will be departing for Washington shortly. Please accept my heartfelt apology for leaving suddenly. Happy Labor Day Weekend to all."

The crowd quickly sobers as without warning at least eight heavily armed Marine Cobra helicopters roar overhead to ring the Kennebunkport White House grounds with overlapping patrols fifty feet above sea level. The fourth estate stare agape as Secret Service personnel brush them aside rudely in a rush to clear a path to Marine One while decoys circle the President's ride.

Cameras everywhere? Not today of all days, much to their chagrin.

Hearing the helicopter commotion, latecomer Mr. Reggie Barkson-Crotchlichte of the London Post trips over the threshold in his haste (too busy zipping up his khakis) landing in the wet alongside the Portable-Crapper just outside the security table holding electronics. The intrepid reporter grabs someone's camera shooting the only known video of the Presidential Exit. Capturing the chaos in the upper

meadow Reggie scores his now-famous 'Paparazzi Frag' video by zeroing in and staying on a Huey Cobra passing directly overhead.

Reggie expertly focuses on the menacing 30mm chain gun hanging from the nose between skids as the attack helo pulls up suddenly, firing a quick burst into thick brush. He pulls back the zoom for the second burst, a money shot helping make Crotchlichte a twelve-hour search term sensation.

One hundred fifty frames per second connect depleted uranium rounds firing off the Cobra's chain gun with a pair of men on all fours scrambling through thick brush like mountain goats with cameras swarming their necks- obviously making a run for the top of the hill as the sudden frenetic search negates days lying in wait. Shooting first asking questions later the Marine Corp Weapon's Officer manning the gun fires into the backs of the photographers. Then, you know, just to be sure, with the men down and out, coup-de-graces their melons- you know, to ensure a closed casket.

Noticing Reggie for the first time the wingman helo pivots to draw a bead. Canon to cannon their instruments glaring in the sun, the Cobra pilot dips his nose in acknowledgement of Crotchlichte's position outside the gate before banking to zoom from the dumbass. Reggie Barkson-Crotchlichte's insides' unravel into his shorts.

President Shriver's long strides transport her gangly, some say gaunt, frame on a record pace the quarter mile up the hill to Marine One; looking all the while toward four Marine C-46 Chinook helicopters prepping to implement Emergency Landing Pattern Alpha. Not breaking stride she scrambles on board plopping herself down in her customary seat, preceding Jordie and the PM with a bevy of Secret Service people opening cases of shoulder launch munitions. Within seconds the door slams shut as the Flight Chief Master Sergeant helmets and buckles the POTUS.

Cabinet-level personnel with aides pack into the second and third Chinooks while the Press Corps make a collective dash to the main gate and their gear. Twenty or so film operators and videographers train lenses on Marine One capturing the uneventful liftoff sequence, staying with the helo as it hovers nearby waiting for decoys. The President watches from the window seat as the Cabinet and staff flaks

board Marine Two and Three. They rotate into the air to await loading of the Press Wagon, Marine Four.

Then it all goes wrong for the fourth estate. Half the drunks taking the flight scramble aboard Marine Four as Marine Three passes overhead. The swirling rotator downwash billows a poolside vinyl tablecloth into a parachute over the meadow, toward the engine intakes on Marine Four. Winds off the front rotor wash catch then spread the Presidential Seal (in tacky vinyl) over the nose cone and windshield. The twin turbojet engines eat the remnants of a table setting dinner for twelve complete with glasses and mugs. In the fifteen-minute Crotchlichte video, Presidential Seal (still tacky vinyl), napkins, silverware, plates and lobsters fly into the frame, remain visible for several moments then disappear into the engines. Kaboom! Forty members of the press and the five crew members die in the ensuing explosion as their families look on in horror.

Without missing a beat the remaining Chinooks and all six Cobras go into 'missing man' formation, taking the ocean route in a southern heading toward Andrews Air Force Base. The President and Prime Minister clear the carnage area safely.

Shortly thereafter Jordie releases a joint statement from the President and Prime Minister mourning the loss of life, canceling their joint teleconference upon landing. On board Marine One, the PM (gift of fear) wishes to return to London. At Andrews, the British contingent exits the Chinook hurriedly. POTUS does not appear.

Back in Kennebunkport from a monitor mount inside the security shack, the President watches replays of the grounds' feed to see what she misses while slipping into a tunnel beneath Marine One. Waiting for the HUTS elevator she views the Barkson-Crotchlichte upload, tears falling like rain. Her voice thickens with emotion so she remains silent as the glimmering stainless steel sliding door whispers to a close. She wipes her eyes, tightening her gut for the big drop. Time slows.

Betsy hates the emergency dead drop into the abyss. All to do is stand still- as if. Her stomach always seems to float upwards, from her guts all the way to the punching bag at the back of her throat, free-falling twenty-five hundred feet before coasting to a gentle stop, slowing at the base thanks to an ingenious kinetic energy storage

system consisting of a tight concentration alignment of exotic metal springs below the floor. She waits for the 'click' signaling springs compression and thick titanium grabber lockdown.

The sliding door whispers again. POTUS greets tough looking Marines holding big guns fronting a bevy of Secret Service. They body-swarm the POTUS, as the Marines, weapons pointing lead the way hurrying pass machine gun placements guarding the terminus.

The dead-drop door remains open, waiting for the return of the only passenger, the Chief Executive. The coil assembly remains compressed for the big lift, if necessary. Teams of technicians and operators pour over and around, monitoring the escape hatch- their only duty. Ten of thousands literally work underground (moles, typically in small communities in strategic locations) their small units maintaining and protecting this (Kennebunkport) and all portals to the secret underground maze: the "Homeland Underground Transportation System" (HUTS), known to the workers (the moles) simply as 'The Tube'.

Betsy can't speak, totally in character for her down here so no one notices how overcome she is- she works with the people in the awful helo tragedy, even likes one or two. She can't get over the tablecloth's seal remaining visible even as the engines explode. Karma? Kabbalah Seven? Fate?

Nonetheless, the President demonstrates both her common sense and leadership skills by not using her phone but instead keeping pace with the entourage remaining quiet to hiding her fluttering emotions. They fast walk POTUS across the terminus approaching vault-like shiny stainless steel door leading to a tasteful waiting/meeting room: thick carpets, wet bar, utilities such as a private bath with shower and a small kitchen. She enters as more heavy weaponry arrives to guard the closing vault.

Safe inside taking comfort in familiarity; for Presidential use only, the Kennebunkport terminus is the ultimate perk of perks for a lone commuter. The only problem is the fucking tube rides scaring the shit out of her. She glances at the monitor view of her awaiting car, shuddering. Alone, head in hands, Betsy considers events. Does the helo downing relate to NASA and El Centro? Her first guess must be

preventable accident. FBI is all over the investigation, but stupid is as stupid does. Sighing deeply, she makes for the camera-less room.

Inside the lavatory, President Shriver removes her cigarette pouch and lights up. Inhaling deeply, trying to relax keeping her own company, paying no attention to her surroundings. The Tube plays on her mind, as it always does down here. The Tube doesn't just kill; rendering is more apt- barely enough goo left to shovel into a grave. That's what bothers her- studying every Tube operational incident aftermath; it's all gooey soft tissue obliterations mixing with crushed bones- closed casket. As if she doesn't have enough on her mind.

Yuck, she isn't in any kind of shape to go anywhere yet so reopens her pouch. Besides, the others will take a more circuitous, sometimes-safer (though nothing seems safer today) route to HUTS.

The President opens the door and washes up in the sink, the sign it's time to go. The far door to the vault whispers and acting nonchalantly sidesteps the queue boarding Car One.

Inside a very long, narrow car, stopping near the front, POTUS waits with a fake smile on her face, acknowledging everyone finding their seats along the single rows lining the walls, facing forward. To most outside the power structure, every chair appears identical but Tubers know position reveals more on this train than upholstery color. The front row holds the President and whichever unlucky bastard the President wants within arm's reach. Secret Service claims the next two rows, much to the chagrin of any politicians on board. The pre-board scramble for position continues down to the rear pair. Now in their spots, the entire assembly continues to mount up for the trip.

Betsy Shriver steps up into the Presidential recliner, her back sensing the thick, stiff leather padding absorbing her mass comfortably somewhat belying the sturdy titanium frame mount with thirty six heavy bolts tying her to the floor. Showing familiarity through repetition, the Chief Executive lifts her thighs to slide each foot through loose four-inch wide rubbery loops. She locks her Vera Gammy loafers into custom stirrups.

Running her hands along the seat until finding more thick straps attachments to the titanium backbone, Betsy buckles up her four-point harness, testing the connections several times before leaning back to

lock into traveling position. Behind her, the others follow suit in their more generic recliner seats with thick padding, the same as the Chief's sans the critical custom body measurement. The usual suspects experience an unusual share of trouble.

Soft rock drifts from ceiling speakers, the President's Tube preference. Actually, her instructions specifically outlaw country music and hip hop- everything else goes on the acceptable list. The conductor hums softly walking down the rows checking each harness like a carnie preparing the coaster for thrill seeking adolescents on a hot and muggy summer night. They call him Dr. Smith. Each train gets one boss and the final word always goes to Dr. Smith.

Reaching the back of the car, this particularly respectable Dr. Smith climbs into the control booth, settling into position peering through a thick Plexiglas shield at his passengers. He checks the control board, once the door closes...OK good to go. Checking on the President, quiet with eyes shut tight, he signals all clear to the Marines and Secret Service, waiting for the hi-energy techs to begin the start sequence.

Dr. Smith watches through the entryway as the terminal work crews seal the car. The red light on the panel before him turns green, he checks on the route. Waiting, he sees the route monitor lights clear one by one as Tube orifices close or open in sequence, vacuum sealing the path- finally, ready to go. Dr. Smith presses the start sequence, then as a nod to the Presidential presence, softens the lights.

The car lifts off the rails, tilting forward a bit shedding gravity, slowly rising scant inches. Watching the dials and monitoring the drawdown in pressure before them, all ok. Peering into the station control room: the techs give Dr. Smith thumbs up, smooth journey. They quickly accelerate past Mach One.

The Presidential glands sweat profusely, undergoing massive stress. She feels perspiration breaking out of her epidermal layers along her entire spine and then running down her legs. Feeling wet, again, shit this sucks. As cold and clammy moisture flows dorsally, rivulets join the frontal streams off her pits forming a river, soaking her shirt; adding sweat stains to the distasteful trip.

Oblivious to the Presidential suffering up front, Dr. Smith tends to the business of conducting the car. In truth, the Conductor doubles as

car “owner”. He holds the title providing insurance keeping the rates low thanks to an outstanding safety record. Answering only to the moniker ‘Dr. Smith’ (all ranks Conductor or higher), a colloquialism stolen from Lost In Space, oh the pain of never returning home.

Dr. Smith studies his array of multifunctional displays monitoring the twelve hundred most important in the checklist series of four thousand or so mechanical and electrical actions to move from the east coast to coal country. The emergency routing gives this car priority over the system, eastern and Great Lakes traffic shunt off the path. The first Dr. Smiths, forward thinking Mechanical Engineers and whatnot, late of three decades building and operating two World Wars, team up with the Army Corps of Engineers planning and developing an underground marvel. Along the way, the original Dr. Smith becomes budgetary grand master, forever hiding one of the biggest blackest budget projects inside Defense, Transportation and HUD appropriations. Stealing the best and brightest project scientists, Dr. Smith’s team designs, builds and operates the tunnel system in conjunction with other ‘biggest of the biggest’ underground and undersea installations.

HUTS originators, giants in their fields, eventually prove the human condition. Dr. Smith dies, making for the hidden underground tunnel system in the sky, but his fingerprints remain in many of the original-design electro-mechanical doodads in use to this day. Dr. Smith establishes many operational procedures to increase safety, emphasizing people value. The system isn’t infallible; the accident record is not spotless. Thanks to machismo, no President using the system ever shit a brick before boarding (Betsy sets precedent) then stains the seats so profusely. The Tube is faster and private and more comfortable and secret and President Shriver believes, deadly- only a matter of time ‘til the big one (Gift of Fear). Glancing across the aisle toward the empty seat half expecting to see Death, she sighs with exhaustion. Shit.

System bugs plague the following generation of Dr. Smiths. Advances in high speed computing allow digitizing every system control possible, train by wire. All the while Dr. Smith digs, nonstop. Main line and feed tunnels come online regularly. The operational

complexities grow monstrous with each additional car requiring redundancy govern the algorithms and instruction sets managing thousands of mechanical devices and electronic sensors.

Passenger cars run the Tube over Mach 2, 14,000+ miles per hour. Freight trains run practically on fire, Mach 11. A Mach 11 crash removes a Tube route from operation until repair. Faster computers reduce deaths and delays but Betsy doesn't care. The Tube equals deathtrap.

"Not so bad this time, hang in there," she hears Jordie. His reassuring words can't stop sweat from running down her stockings into her Italian shoes. Yuck, wet feet. Within another half minute the acceleration ends and Dr. Smith sounds the gong. Straps come off in a hurry as the crowd spills into the aisle, getting themselves together before herding down toward the main cabin with the roomy conference area for a quick meeting.

The President needs to smoke but can't here. Her clothes appear dry, thanks to wonder fabric drying the moisture not found in her shoes. She takes a bottle of water from Dr. Smith, "The conference room?"

"Ready, Ma'am."

The cabinet is talk is low, subdued, some even listening more than talking for once, all trying to keep pace with events cascading and systems crashing. Jordie, Presidential aide and veteran of Tube conferences knows the answer to survival. She isn't happy inside the Tube, no matter what vibes her body gives off. In other words, expect sarcasm and verbal abuse- Jordie learns the best way to ride The Tube is never under any circumstances voluntarily ride The Tube. If stuck, laugh off her bitchiness- you'll live longer.

Eyes moving from screen to screen, SecDef lays low, listening to the toughest bitch he ever met attempting to re-establish Tube comm links with the Pentagon and Peterson at NORAD/SPACECOM. As soon as she gets him online, she will no doubt tear him a new asshole, for the umpteenth time. SecDef defers to his President, pretending not to care that she treats Peterson as her SecDef. No sense chiming in before knowing the situation, why draw fire with ignorance? He finds

himself in the same hole as Peterson and as it craters he watches, laying low.

He guesses correctly, she reams Peterson's ass.

For his part General Pete Peterson takes it like in silence, understanding.

For her part, President Betsy Shriver lets up sooner than usual, mouth breathing deeply. Calming her anger and resentment at being in The Tube with a bunch of incompetents, sipping, holding another breath, releasing, forcing her emotions back down deep into her boiling guts. Tirade over, it's time to listen to bad news. She sits rocklike during the updates, oral reports by her military brain trust sans SecDef sitting like who? Buddha holding counsel? But she can't hold her nonchalant pose for long, a grimace surfaces then deepens adding lines she desires not.

Betsy let the uniforms have their say before boiling down their verbiage, getting to the meat near the bone. Though staring daggers, SecDef breathes a silent prayer of thanksgiving when she does not call on him but instead directs her query to everyone, "So, satellites inoperable, International Space Station gone, SpacePlane fleet gone along with Cape launch facilities. Who's responsible? This trail of destruction points nowhere. Can we all agree that's the fucking story?"

"Yes Madame President," taking his cue from Homeland Security, the Natural Security Advisor keeps it short; she probably didn't give a shit.

In this, he is correct. She is in command and on a roll, "Can anyone explain who or why exactly? What's linking these events? Do we know anything concrete, anything for certain?"

"No." the National Security Adviser replies truthfully, "we got nothing."

"Well when are we going to get freaking answers? The data drops are entering the netsphere; the general public awareness factor is about to skyrocket. What do we have to counter? When can we get in front of this?" In a near-apoplectic state reaching for her water on the table, "This is bullshit, I need answers!"

Peterson speaks first: "The Brits have our target list, preparing to fire."

Homeland Security perks up a bit at this, time to shine, “Homeland’s developing model data to predict the next move, if any, our enemy, if any, will make. Nothing yet from the analysts, but raw data is rolling in. Alternate comm sources exist; the computer geeks continue developing a workaround- expect timetables shortly. Without Space Systems theirs is much difficulty working the problem of information, think early 50’s.”

“Holy shit, enough with the ‘is there an attacker crap?’! So, who is the enemy? Does the FBI have more solid anything on the AGASCo Cuban terrorist angle of the NASA and el Centro debacles?”

Homeland dithers, looking at the oaken table in despair, offering zip. Either he come clean or else...best to come clean, “Nothing yet. We’re developing some leads on where the speedboat is. Once found, we’ll explore links to the other, um uh, problems,”

Betsy stares, checks to see if her mouth is open. OK, this is going nowhere. Think fast, time to make some changes, “OK, here’s our response, Homeland, push the public threat condition level up to orange past yellow, whatever scale is in vogue today. The people expect this considering the NASA debacle. Goddamn it. I want intentions, to get out ahead of -any other- or even just -the next- event before developing. The press and media stay in the dark keeping busy with NASA, Nigel and Kennebunkport. I want a full blackout, deny the news somehow- use your imagination: blame satellite glitches, sunspots, whatever. Here the Labor Day Holiday works to our advantage with the networks understaffing thanks to the slow news cycle and with Nigel swirling around in the Gulf it’ll be tough to get to NASA or the Space Coast. Continue Nigel evacuations; get FEMA out to help anyone stuck. Hand out hotel vouchers. Play up the response. We have no answers to offer the media, working on a coordinated response, right? We have no panic yet and I want it to stay that way until we get a handle on this.”

“DEFCON TWO, but make it a low key affair, understand? Prep all strategic forces, quietly. Here again, low key no media alerts, let the sheep stay in the pen, oblivious,” to the slaughter. She didn’t say this last aloud, rather a silent chorus. “Peterson, Goddamn it, figure out what’s happening and how to get back our satellites. See what you can

do to work around the damage; find more assets, if you have anything still working.” Her voice turns cold, “Our ability to recover reflects the intentions, by the way, of our fucking enemies (if you need a list, Homeland, see Jordie). For God’s sake people, step up your game.”

With nothing to add, it’s time to escape, “Aye-aye, Madame President.”

Her reaming of the military and Homeland ending, President Shriver turns to Jordie and her Cabinet. Time to broaden out some of the operational scope, she gets out the rubber stamp, “We need to touch base with the House and Senate Select Intelligence Committee members. See who’s convenient to the Tube and get them to Shamokin.”

Jordie wonders, “What about the Brits still hanging around waiting for supper? The PM is itching to head home.”

“Yea, Jordie you’re right, we can’t just leave them futzing around at the White House, wondering what is going on and where I am and should they go home. I bet he’s not happy. Well, it’s not safe to go anywhere without serious radar support and I respect the man too much. So, let’s get the Prime Minister on the horn, brief him in on his part in the deception, apologize, and move him and his staff here in the Tube. I want the PM with me or in Operations; who knows, he’s here anyway, maybe he’ll have some answers.”

Gong! Musical chair time, just forty second’s warning signaling the end of the nine-minute voyage. The herd scrambles up front to strap in for the stop.

Standing still as a statue in the far corner of the room, keeping an eye and an ear on everything the past nine minutes, Dr. Smith cogitates. He admires President Shriver; she makes him feel everything will work out OK in the end, not bothering him a bit that right this moment she desperately needs a shower and change of clothing (not to mention her feet smell musty, like wet hay). Hard braking brings them to an abrupt stop. POTUS is the first up, water bottle in hand, making toward Dr. Smith as he’s opening the door. Whoosh.

She takes his hand, searching his face for reassurance somehow even in the tough times finding his same warm expression as always.

Strong, firm and dry, their handshake is a Dr. Smith tradition. Then to her astonishment he grabs her in a bear hug, thoroughly smashing his Dr. Smith traditions.

Betsy's never been close, always keeping a respectful distance; but the times they are a changing. He smells like candy canes.

Dr. Smith whispers in her ear for the first and last time, "Goodbye and God save us, Madame President."

The Tyrant Of The Seas, Gulf of Mexico 1750

"Someone get a mop."

Riding the waves, Admiral Fernando de San Martin, the Tyrant of the Seas, surfs toward the United States of America as an uninvited guest bringing two thirds of the GC Navy along for the trip. The men and women in this convoy steam the roughest seas, beneath Nigel's thunderstorm bands. Their Admiral, the man with the moniker Tyrant although he is a tough but fair leader, stands tall with broad shoulders looking down with an obvious expression of disgust toward the steel flooring near the doorway to the control room. The biggest moaner in his crew is kissing the noise absorbent coatings.

The offending sailor throws up again, puking up everything inside his guts on the deck. Anyone's insides can fall prey to the storm's churning and tossing, but de San Martin has to make clear, again, the blessing Hurricane Nigel provides, "What in God's name is wrong with you? If not for wind and waves we would even now be fighting our way in- we should be on your knees thanking the Virgin Mary, protector of idiots! Instead you roll around in your filth cursing fate! Take this pile of remains away. You there, OOD, flog him."

Hiding from sight and sound of the United States military, trying to stay as far west and south as long as possible to avoid detection; the Admiral is tough- flogging for moaning the Blessings of Nigel borders on extreme. The Admiral comes across fairly, when he notes the gastric contents pooling on his sound absorbers. He orders more meat protein for his sailors and dietary restrictions on all dairy products. The sailors get another reminder the Tyrant cares. Thus, they willingly sail through living hell.

Already two of his fleet of semi-covered roll-on roll-off, Ro-Ro ships sail under tow, falling victim to Nigel's rage in semi-danger of sinking. The GC Navy's modifications make the ships hurricane capable perhaps also able to withstand minor battle damage, though the alterations employ "unproven in the real world" technology. In simulation the damage rating on the vessels scores the highest ever for military transports. The ships' awesome size helps stabilization but the best alteration, double hulls with overhead water resistance makes him almost unsinkable. Add in reactive armor to negate torpedo damage and the makings of a cargo warship appear- think huge floating submarines.

Topside protection includes a five-inch gun, .50 caliber machinegun nests and radar/sonar suites (silent). The gun crews remain inside, always on duty.

The transports come from South America, built by a private shipyard, a large Chilean shipping company capable of hiding design and production elements. The transport ships wait for Nigel's approach, scatter when the US Coast Guard orders the Gulf clear of shipping. The Admiral re-groups the disparate elements inside the storm churning toward the continental shelf. The incredible storm carries the ships north to the coast of the United States.

Admiral de San Martin studies the positioning of his armada, ordering some assets northeast to keep pace with Nigel's movements. He thinks on that, the storm is slowing on cue within sight of landfall. Pedro's orders are to hold all landing assets just outside port (ports currently empty of ships, ports with all personnel gone and out of reach). Forming a rear guard, he redirects four vessels, ordering these assets to hang back drifting west seeking out the empty spaces between- prime real estate in amongst the thousand or so platforms.

The U.S. Military doesn't know it but the harbinger of misery is on their back porch, banging on the door with both hands. The Tyrant's sudden smile alarms his staff.

Escape & Evade, Melbourne, Florida 1800

"Damn, the rain's done- shit that's no good. We need to ditch the boat before they get a helo on us." The miserable support team exits

the Banana River, taking the fork leading south into the St. Johns River. "Where's the damn dock?" They worry as the cover lifts.

Eight FBI agents hole up in the tower at Melbourne International Airport, a short distance off the coast, listening to NASA explosions. Not waiting for orders, they sprint to their Government Issue vehicles. Four black four-door GM sedans brimming with antenna floor it five lights to the St. John's River then hang a left speeding toward the Eau Gallie Causeway. The Coast Guard locates the speedboat near the library; the agents pull a U-turn at the empty causeway.

At the foot of the causeway, the agents pile out, tearing around the right side of the low brick building plunging into a small crowd of drunken residents now gawking alongside the river (e-vacuate-e-shmackuate). Excitedly telling the FBI about the speedboat zooming up the middle of the river then idling over to the little used library dock, men jumping out grabbing bags and high-tailing it. A sober guy (no money to get a hurricane buzz on) claims someone peeling out on the wet asphalt nearly struck him but he didn't get a look at the occupants. Thinks the vehicle is a minivan.

Agents investigate crime: tracking down leads using intuition and available tools- both brute force and scientific. The FBI agents even with the aid of the State Police lack manpower requirements to stop and search every moving vehicle during a Gulf-wide evacuation. Justifying their lack of results, the agents surmise (guess) the perps split up already, changing cars, mixing with evacuation traffic on Route 95, impossible to find. They scream to Homeland Security for satellite recon, an ever-growing chorus.

Police Incident, Port Bolivar, Texas 1600

"I know what you're saying but it does matter, you know. A thousand years from now when your descendants live free- all thanks to you. I just pray we get going already I'm tired of playing nursemaid to a bunch of whiners." Walking, teaching and loading, GC Special Forces Lt. Jesus Del la Hoya stares down the peanut gallery and card players, his oh so heavy boots dying to kick ass instead of wearing a path into the kitchen's old wood floor.

The men hold their breath but after a deep in the throat bone-defending growl, low and slow, their leader abandons the poker players moving on inspecting and snarling to the refrigerator. The peanut galleries in front of the screens avoid his gaze; they consider him crazy, maybe bipolar or something awaiting diagnosis. Formerly easy going, they like and respect his authority and his leadership ability is unquestionable. They still respect the man, but now his troops dread his impatient persona. Del la Hoya acts ready to kill one of them and nobody wishes to push him over the edge. The years-long wind-up to jump-off day (including two separate stand downs) play on their chief's head, messing with his mind; however, Labor Day Weekend's global launch day arrives with few unnecessary casualties. The clock is ticking.

Standing in the kitchen looking into the shotgun shack, Del la Hoya raises his voice going over the significance of the space operations in terms short and sweet so even the simplest among them understands; a man such as 1st Sergeant Manny who concerns himself with here and now, a small-picture guy. Manny leaves the big thoughts to others, who needs the aggravation?

Lt Del la Hoya skips opening the fridge this trip to look out the window over the kitchen sink, into the back yard. He growls again, this time at the weather. The spry thirty something wonders about the rain and wind and Nigel's effect on his operational plans. "Turn off the damn football and put on the weather channel," he barks at Manny, sitting on the sofa.

1st Sgt. Manny jumps to get at the TV knocking over the poker game, scattering the pot. "Oops, sorry" he grins at the tense group. His nemesis, holding an inside straight, reaches into his holster pulling an ugly looking .45 caliber automatic. Flipping of the safety with a loud click draws the attention of the dozen or so men loving the idea of dispelling their boredom with a fracas.

Lt. Jesus directs a steely stare at the gun-if anyone is going to fire off a clip, rank has its privileges. "Cut the shit, damn it. Settle down, I want to see the weather on the eights."

Manny, blatantly refusing to recognize the danger, laughs out loud slapping his would be assailant on the back while fiddling with the

remote. An old bald thin white man appears on the screen droning on about the massive storm pounding Singing River Island, Alabama.

“Category 5+ winds from double eye Nigel”, the old man screams from the wall mount, “Will break records for the Gulf of Mexico causing widespread damage. Forecast models disagree on Nigel’s path; the results are all over the map: from a jog west to a race to the east coast to a Great Lakes track, not to mention stationary or regressive. A stationary Cat5 storm”, the weatherman yells into the silent room, “is a killing storm causing untold area damage, returning the area to the Stone Age in a matter of hours. Perhaps I’m exaggerating a tad but coastal residents should expect to tally many deaths and billions in property damage as if Nigel approaches but does not broach the shoreline, the entire Gulf Coast will revert to pre-Cambrian Bronze Age conditions sans electricity or running water by late Saturday morning. On that note I’ll throw it back to our dry studio in Atlanta.”

The local radar fills the screen. The housemates grow tense as the room fills with a Rastafarian melody signaling the local weather forecast. “Jamming, I’m jamming, & hope you like jamming too.”

Turning from an inspection of the fridge contents, Lt. Del la Hoya stares hard at the wall screen showing Doppler radars, rain bands from Hurricane Nigel broaching the coastline. Speaking up, again, “Men, this is Devil’s work, working in the rain tonight.” Ignoring loud groans Lt. Jesus lowers his volume sliding into his Commander ‘Do Not Shit With Me’ voice, “Keep your gear dry. I do not want to hear your soaking wet electronics don’t work. I swear to God I will shoot you in the mouth you say such things. Just try me, find out if you must. The RFID readers you will be using barely take abuse when dry. Without the readers, we got no way of knowing where the hell anything goes.”

A throat clearing interruption from the same asshole that drew down on Manny his 1st Sergeant, “Why not tell us something we don’t already know.”

No hesitation- springing over the table grabbing Julio, a much younger man by his long hair, drawing back his hand, landing a jab into the speaker’s noggin. Snap! Blood spurts from his nose like the big fountain in Vegas.

The phone rings; Lt. Jesus leans over to the device hanging on the wall next to the fridge, picks it up, listens to a single word, replaces the handset on the cradle. Putting on a Houston Astros ball cap, he says to silence, "Time to go."

Fed-up beyond belief, Del la Hoya receives the order to assemble his men and equipment with much relief. Covering fourteen safe houses replete with heavy weapons (mostly shotgun shacks with basements packing illegal immigrants and shoulder launchers) and another dozen apartment buildings housing groups of young men (local university students) with five row houses (various single thirty something men and women blending waterfront migrant laborers with illegal immigrants. His unit manages another six warehouses on the waterfront brimming with infantry company hardware.

Lt. Del la Hoya activates his phone tree to pass the news down the line from his sergeants to his corporals to his infantry troops: vacate quarters immediately, load the pickup trucks and SUVs with guns, ammunition, body armor and rations. Go to first position, wait for the green light.

Considering their Galveston waterfront location hostile, the Lieutenant warns his troops once again to act covertly, not revealing intentions. He knows some neighbors are suspicious particularly the elderly couples expecting to live out the remainder of their lives in a quiet, orderly fashion. These old bastards date from an earlier age: before enlightened thinking. Older white male neighbors, sometimes quite openly hostile toward them, express their opinions forcefully and his troops do not appreciate the anti-Latino thinking mode at all. Lt. Del la Hoya disciplines one sergeant he catches during night watch quietly eliminating on the front stoops of a particularly obnoxious asshole.

Before sunset, his teams begin loading material into vehicles while trying to act casual. The first nosey neighbor altercation occurs at this very small house two streets in from the waterfront, one of many built in the late sixties from quality materials in a sturdy fashion with a dry basement with Bilco doors suitable for large volumes; however, no garage instead a carport providing overhead cover from prying eyes (pre-satellite takedown). Del la Hoya split his arms evenly between his

structures so if any single cover gets blown the surviving troops won't particularly feel the loss. In this house they concentrate the basement with heavier, larger bulkier pieces, items barely fitting through the double doors, loads requiring four to six backs. Could he have chosen a worse possible neighbor? No, Irene and Donald live across the street.

As per their normal afternoon routine, Don helps Irene in the kitchen with dinner preparations then cleanup. Now on the way to the couch to settle in for an evening with the news; then some game show or whatever reality crap for Irene and whatever ballgame for Donald. Irene knows she and Don should be out walking like the doctor says to lose the extra retirement pounds. Stopping by the front door on the way to her chair, Irene looks out catching sight of movement in front of the house across the street, the older one Don says is full of illegals. Don is a great guy but such a bigot he's hard to take sometimes, even for her. Irene likes everyone, but Don hates illegals, tells her regularly.

For his part Don is careful to keep his remarks low key, only directing his opinion to family or tight buds from the plant. He is not normally fearful but these dudes scare the shit out of him. As though keeping an eye on his every movement is hostile enough, they do not act out; in fact, they never speak to him but while patrolling throw him a nod to indicate awareness. Don doesn't think they will do anything aggressive but thinks it best to mind his own beeswax around these characters.

So it happens that although Don fingers the neighbors as illegal aliens, he never calls Immigration to investigate. The heavy weaponry remains in the basement until today. Irene looks at Don, busy looking for the Cards or some such nonsense. She is a little tired of his racist remarks, knows not to say anything to get her husband antsy even. Turning her attention to the neighbors before returning to the couch, Irene sees four men trying exit the Bilco door to the basement with something obviously very heavy. She watches while Don yells at the TV.

The obviously heavy object is also long and bulky- wait, is that six people carrying? The first two men, walking backward out the door stumble on the last step, dropping their end. Don's up, passing nearby

on his routine hourly trip to their small bathroom when Irene uncharacteristically grabs his arm jolting him toward the screen door.

"Come look," she hisses, "no way that's legal."

She startles Donald out of deep revelry in anticipation of a good bowel movement following the greasy dinner Irene likes to make. "What the hell?" he asks looking quickly realizing what he sees but cannot believe. "I know this weapon- a fucking Russian Dushka freaking machine gun. There's a shitload of them in the crate. No way that's legal, no fucking way in hell."

The man Irene sees stumble and fall springs up quickly trying to cover the now-exposed 7.62mm heavy machine gun of Russian design. The other guy on the ground scrambles helping pick up the barrel of the seventy eight pound DShKM Soviet made heavy machine gun Donny calls the Dushka.

First Sergeant Manny is a twenty five year old infantryman and the smartest ever to come out of his rain forest village (seeking stimulation away from slash and burn farming). "Julio you clumsy bastard, look you got dirt on my gun- going to clean it with your tongue you drop your end again."

The Dushka model coming off the wet grass requires no electronics (rainproof to Manny's delight) with simple iron sights for antiaircraft operation. Manny loves this particular gun and although he has never shot this one he did fire similar models during training. Manny's Dushka was clean, oily and ready for a magazine. Now it's not. Manny nearly spit on Julio, but Lt. Del la Hoya is slaphappy and waiting. Manny doesn't need any shit from anyone. They're loading up the guns to mount at the trailer custom fabrication shop by the boatyard. Julio is a good welder producing mounts to place the heavy guns on trailers for easy movement, which is making him temporarily unkillable. Upon mounting of his Dushka, Manny is to accompany the Lt awaiting the arrival of the North American helicopter responders (surprise!), but not with a dirty Dushka, ass-wipe Julio.

Returning the gun to the crate, Julio reattaches the lid, whacking it down with a pistol butt. When Manny thinks to look about for nosy neighbors, it's too late to catch Irene and Don, backing quickly away from the door. "C'mon there's nobody around you're lucky." Hoisting

the crate into the truck Manny continues telling Julio in no uncertain terms what he thinks of Julio, Julio's mother, father and their descendants through time.

By now Don picks up the landline, calling the police, reporting a large machine gun across the street at the illegal immigrants so Irene gets her cell to dial their good friends Gerri and Bob. Forty-five years Gerri lives behind Irene and the two become thick as thieves. Irene hardly has the story out when she hears a siren approach.

Gerri calls out for Bob to follow as she hustles her lanky frame out the backdoor, down the steps and through the backyard gate, over to her best pal's house. Sweat's starting to bead up along her scalp line as she burst through the back door reaching the front window just as the first patrol car pulls up.

As the box truck trundles down the driveway, Manny and Julio hoist the last load out of the house. An old piece of shit van sits waiting, back end low- brimming with heavy machineguns, RPGs and an assortment of rounds. Julio brings three AK-47s up front passenger side as Manny closes up. He freezes against the door when suddenly it's sirens and lights, cops pulling up to the curb in front of the house across the street on a diagonal. Manny's pocket begins vibrating as the peace officers take up defensive positions with their backs to him. Manny places the phone to his ear and before speaking hears the voice of his boss, Lt Del la Hoya.

Straight to the point, "Stay calm and do not speak. Listen closely. They're at the wrong house. Quickly and quietly as you can put it in gear then drive past me over at the corner, can you see me? Wave, good- Manny, if you get away, go to the trailer shop. Don't lead anyone there. Good luck men."

Lt. Del la Hoya holds station as primary backup to this important load of machine guns- not trusting anyone in his crew if he's being brutally honest. Sharing backup duty are Sergeant Diego and Corporal Vega, two of his most competent. Both men are on their cells calling in troops in case the unfolding situation gets worse.

Manny steps into the cab quietly pulling the door one click. Don can't believe the damn cops are at the wrong house starts screaming into the damn phone. Seeing Manny from the living room window,

new arrival neighbor Bob understands he must do something so he flings open the door bursting out with his hands up, yelling that he's unarmed- and pointing at the van. His pal Don from inside finally gets it through to the 911 operator that the police are confronting the wrong house that they need to turn the hell around. Four cops run at Bob, grab and lift before throwing the old dude to the ground, hard. He takes an 'incidental accidental' metallic wingtip in the crotch region. They cuff him, kneeling on his chest trying to constrict his breathing. Bob learns a lesson.

Lt Del la Hoya sees Bob taking abuse in the yard hoping for a second Manny might escape without incident. The van rolls down the drive turning right. Another cruiser bolts through the intersection past Del la Hoya blocking Manny. Doors open, cops draw down on Manny. Next into the street rolls a black Ford pickup truck. In the bed two men hoist automatic weapons, firing nonstop into the cops.

The cop driving tries to clamp the gaping wound in his throat coating his hand with torrents of blood. His fellow officer takes two hollow point slugs directly through his ear canal, melon exploding in another blood and gore spectacle. Manny swerves, brushing the street sign. He scrapes by driving past the greatly displeased Lt. Del la Hoya. Locking eyes, Manny turns downcast.

The cops abandon Bob- the shootings really damper the mood. On Del Hoya's orders, two actual bad guys finish hosing the squad car to turn their weapons on the four abusers. They die in a hail of gunfire. Lt. Del la Hoya's troops practice superior fire control discipline. Neither man fires on the Bob or the house. The pickup continues down the street, straight path, easy to describe.

Del la Hoya puts his old Plymouth in gear, making a quick K turn to follow Manny. Too bad he thinks as two police cars pass him moving quickly in aid of their fellow men in blue. They have no idea who in hell they're fighting. After months of playing poker Del la Hoya ups the ante, picking up his phone.

The cops go full alert, flooding the area with assets, rushing to find a breather in the carnage. Looking like Galveston SWAT, a second load of Gran Columbian soldiers rolls up in an armored Hummer, guns protruding from firing ports. More cops pour in behind. Lt. Del la

Hoya gives easy to remember orders, clear explanations. For this scenario, he uses simple bird in the hand terminology; killing them now ensures less problems later. The Hummer opens fire. Both sides bring automatic weapons and body armor into the fray. Grabbing a set of keys off a dead cop, dragging Bob toward the door Donnie screams to Irene, "Open the safe! Now! For God's sake, open the safe!"

The huge piece of living room furniture that Irene hates is a firearm safe, SOP for an old gunnery sergeant. She gets the lock open as Donald appears in the doorway supporting Bob. Don drags Bob inside, dropping him in the foyer. Irene hands Don a loaded M4. Bob bounces up, taking a semi-automatic shotgun. They each grab handguns.

"Vests, only take a second!" Irene calls out. They both turn back in surprise. The wives help with the fasteners. "Backdoor" Bob calls, racing through the hall and kitchen, out the door not slowing until they round the house. The pair crouches using some bushes for cover. Bob gestures, then they make a break for the squad cars (crossing the dead grass Donald calls his front yard) while the Hummer occupants concentrate on eliminating Galveston's police force. Bob and Don shoot from almost point blank range, hitting several dismounts. Their armor piercing rounds find no more flesh so they turn on the Hummer as more police cars arrive to do battle. The numbers turning against the infantry in the Hummer, Del la Hoya orders GC to withdraw.

Cover fire enables them to grab the dead. The Hummer takes off firing RPGs to cover their escape. Several exploding vehicles later the street is suddenly quiet except for screaming and exploding rounds cooking off in the burning patrol cars. Irene and Gerri race from the house with all the linen in the closet to try to staunch the blood flowing from dying officers.

"What the Hell was that about?" Bob asks no one in particular.

Approaching sirens break the relative calm. More neighbors pour from their homes carrying first aid supplies. Several perform lifesaving efforts while others mill about randomly, checking out the carnage in disbelief. Police and first aid crews screech in from all directions.

The heroes quietly re-enter the house; cleaning their guns and themselves in silence. Knowing Don is an asshole and Bob prefers quiet, those speaking with the police omit their role. Don hits the head

so Bob leaves to do the same after taking a moment to call his son, Theodore Williams.

Regional Alert, Port Bolivar, Texas 1800

Gerri and Bob hold a position known as awfully proud parents of Theodore Williams- Deputy Chief of Police-ROCA Operations, Houston, Texas. Unruly Ted's journey didn't begin so straight but after barely graduating High School, the military grew Ted into a man sporting a buzz-cut. Upon graduating Warrant Officer's school, Ted's manners are a mother's dream.

Serving as helicopter crew chief in a military intelligence unit for two tours mostly working with the CIA people in country (Ted three), facing the hatchet after the latest war draw down Ted brings his skills to National Homeland Security doing pretty much the same spy job (domestically). Three years with the Feds proves way too much for Ted, leaving before his head explodes in shame. A person needs to eat however, so he joins Houston PD's Intelligence Unit, uncovering and arresting thousands of unhappy thugs, gang members and their ilk over fifteen years of shift work.

Extremely hazardous streets result in pine boxes and or citations for bravery. So far, no pine box (Ted four). Ted takes his dad's call while wrapping up a horrific bloody drive by shooting crime scene in downtown Houston. Ted's already monitoring the situation in Port Bolivar, remaining unaware of Dad's involvement. He's far from Mom's but calls in a break, hits the gas, putting on the lights and noise reaching the old man's neighborhood in forty-five minutes, a new personal best. Seeing the commotion, killing his lights he makes for the back alley to Dad's house deciding to avoid the drama. Ted needs to speak with Bob and Don privately, before too many beers.

Outside on Bob's deck in view of the action on Don's street, the three light Central American cigars, Padrons from Nicaragua, no Cubans in Don's crew. Between refills off the tap, the elders calmly relate the entire story. Months ago Donnie moans about the newcomers; so Bob tells Ted back then of the uneasy feeling he gets from Donnie's neighbors across the street so to put his mom at ease Ted runs a check on the men off motor vehicle and immigration

records. The two occupants drive street legal licensed, insured duly registered vehicles properly. Yea, thinks Ted, they're clean. Maybe a little too clean not to dig a little deeper if you happen to have access to intelligence; however, INS biometric and photo identifications verify their legal immigrant status as green card farm workers from Chili. Apparently entering the country eighteen months earlier, green card sponsor is an import/export firm specializing in hosing migrant workers. At the time Ted couldn't pin down his vague, uneasy feelings about Don's neighbors but Don is in fact a bigot- without illegal activity or a bona fide complaint, Ted does nothing. He tells his father to keep an eye out for suspicious activity, call Galveston Police.

"Stop being such a bigot," is what he says to Don, back then.

Realizing he has descriptions and identification on two of the neighbors and the van's contents, Ted hustles over to his squad car for his pad then emails the info packet to Galveston PD, Port Bolivar PD, Houston PD, the CIA and Homeland Security. His phone rings immediately, his dispatcher with bad news of an officer-involved shooting on the outskirts of the county. Ted's last scene, the drive by only an hour ago, left an HPD Officer dead of gunshot wounds to his head and neck after traffic stopping a dark, nondescript van with a broken taillight. Dashcam video shows the van driver pulling to the curb, waiting for the officer to come to a stop, leaving casually. The rounds that kill the officer (a young man with the two small children even now at home waiting for Daddy to tuck them in for the night continuing their favorite bedtime story) emanate from chase car, unseen. His last words, broadcast, "I do not like ham, Sam I am."

They get the tag off the video, tracing it to a small local moving company with a Latino name. Now that a shootout with heavy weaponry occurs at his mom's house, Ted's brain begins to make connections. With dead Officers piling up and the tie-in to all the activity appearing to be Hispanic males of course the Department Brass' prevailing theory starts and ends with street gangs. He calls his boss, hears about the blame assessment and in the strongest terms disagrees. His information on the miscreants shows no gang affiliations. Ted is leaning toward blaming some crime organization, perhaps smugglers. Pleading his case, further discussion going

nowhere, with his boss insinuating that everything looks like a nail if you're a hammer among other insults, Ted returns to the deck in frustration to finish his cigar break.

Finding the two men holding field glasses scoping ongoing activity one street over, Ted re-lights his cigar filling them in on the night in the big city, paying particular attention to the migrant tie-in. The men provide no answers so Ted picks up a pair of binocs, joining the crowd. Seeing the telephone poles mounting banks of lights way the hell over at the Port, "What's going on over there?" he asks jerking his thumb.

Bob replies. "I think it is some kind of Labor Day thing going to happen over at the Port tomorrow morning, some new thing, a festival I think. First year, might be with St. Cecilia's but don't quote me."

Ted knows St. Cecilia's Parish, formerly St. Paul the Apostle. The name change, a nod to the new reality of the area, did not please either old man. "OK. I have to go. Let me know if you hear of anything else going on." Ted offers his hand to Don while wrapping his old man in a hug.

Rolling back to the city, Ted swings by the water to put eyes on the Park and Port. The scene at the park is quite frenetic, busy people unloading trucks and raising tents. Ted muses about the large number of workers but what does he know? A second later his train of thought derails with another radio call about a developing Officer-down situation. Once again Ted hits the gas hard, this time going deep inside the ship channel industrial quarter, Code 3.

Ominous, Port Bolivar, Texas 1800

Standing over Julio, seething Lt. Del la Hoya takes a breather. Julio doesn't move, afraid at provoking another attack. Julio should have kept his mouth shut in the first place instead of harassing Manny all the way to the trailer shop trying to shift blame. Del la Hoya kicks him for being clumsy then kicks him again for losing troops and focusing attention on his operations.

Sure, thought the Lt., sure shit happens but this is stupid shit resulting from a screw up by his most dependable man thanks to Julio the jerkoff. "Scrape him off the ground, bring him. Tell Manny I said

get everybody together.” Needing data he put in a few minutes checking status while Manny assembles the platoons busily mounting Dushkas on vehicles.

Seeing Julio again, Del la Hoya yanks out his 9mm automatic puts it to Julio’s temple pulling the trigger. Click. Hmmm, he flicks off the safety. Before thinking twice Manny jumps up, stepping between the gun and the target, lowering the gun, replacing the sidearm to its holster. Del la Hoya speaks first, “You’re right Manny, if I shoot him, in all fairness I must also shoot you,” his disgust is palpable; “I should kill all of you now and save the enemy the trouble, yes? Is that it? Listen well and understand, hear me loud and clear. If you people don’t collectively get your head out of your asses you won’t live to see tomorrow. We’re two hours behind schedule thanks to your screw ups. All I can see is idiots everywhere I look; idiots all over this operation lowering our success chances to zero, so I may as well shoot all of you now and go home.”

Del la Hoya is a ruthless bastard- an intelligent, ruthless bastard. Making a display of slowing his breathing taking his hand off the butt of his 9mm, “Now, I do not wish to kill you idiots, for the most part I respect your work and our results to date. Now is not the time to screw up, now is the time to step up to be all that you can be. Kill these motherless sons of whores before they or I kill you! Do you hear me?”

“We hear you, sir!” Right boots strike the ground- how he taught them to accentuate ‘sir’. The technique proves effective getting them on the same page, a hypnotic suggestion aka unit cohesion. “You’re my people but don’t ever make me kill you I won’t hesitate. Do you hear me?”

“We hear you, sir!”

“Then let’s take it to them, it’s Dushkas for everybody! Get all these monsters on the mount ready to go in forty-five minutes! Do you hear me?”

“We hear you, sir!” Fates in hand, their pace easily doubles.

Love him or hate him, Del la Hoya never claims to be anything but a ruthless bastard on a tight schedule.

Indeed a violent man is the correct choice for Port Bolivar. Del la Hoya, a product of a noteworthy Chilean Death Squad culture with

traditions infamous- terror and death keep the peoples down- Manny, dammit listen up. Taking PFC Manny under his wing, Del la Hoya bemoans violence without cause as cruelty; however, given a just cause by necessity brutal violence follows. Finally Del la Hoya has a legitimate target for hatred and destruction and Julio et al is going to put him in a pine box ahead of the festivities.

Perhaps he should off the little bastard anyways, you know, for luck.

Burping the Lid, Houston, TX, 1900

Walking into the shipping container twenty-four days ago, Major Ramirez (military professional late of the Colombian Army with anti-insurgency expertise) harbors great animosity toward the United States because of two indicators. The first, his specialist training includes time with the United States Army Rangers. Second, he's been in the field with the Delta fellows on three separate successful operations: two jungle ops, one mountain. On operations, Ramirez relates the soldiers to elite professionals with laser-like task focus- no distractions, no bullshit. Delta force officers impress the young Captain particularly during his first joint operation, a jungle raid on a cartel command and control stronghold.

Off duty, however, Deltas and Rangers revert into the embodiment of speech capable assholes. Back then Major Ramirez walks into his three-week heavy exposure temporary living quarters harboring no ill will toward the United States. Walking out of that living hell Ramirez hates, no, loathes the United States both as an entity and as a group of over three hundred million individuals needing to die brutally. Ramirez likes the plans, is willing accompany shipping materials. If not for Rontaldi...

His Superior, Colonel Rontaldi consummate professional soldier longtime leader friend to Ramirez makes the trip living hell. Rontaldi's container makes the voyage from Colombia on top of Major Ramirez. Able to communicate he makes contact often (Ramirez not much or at all if possible).

Twenty four days in a shipping container twenty five meters long, five meters wide and five meters high changes a man, hardening him

perhaps if strong already or in the other case breaking his weak spirit. Packing Ramirez in with seventeen other killers and Rontaldi on his case- expect carnage. Trouble for Ramirez is Rontaldi expects too much in so little time from morons.

Colonel Rontaldi's assignments to Ramirez' box include a helicopter pilot and his gunner, counter to prevailing wisdom, to teach a specialization course (crash sounds unwelcoming) in helicopter flight operations. Rontaldi and Ramirez design a three-week (crash still sounds unwelcome) course of study. Out of the container coming off the ship their troops' responsibilities include backseat target scouting recon and firing the .50s from the Huey Cobra gunships accompanying their voyage. Though not piloting the craft, gunners' in a two-seat helicopter acquire piloting skills, just in case. The Colonel and the Major dedicate the bulk of their pre-transit hours in the simulator under the tutelage of the 4th GC Infantry Aviation Company pilot and his gunner.

Cobra pilots are flakes, comes with the territory; Rontaldi and Ramirez individually reach this conclusion, but learn how to fly despite themselves. Just before boarding, they solo to earn their wings then pilot around for an hour, each. Training complete, Ramirez enters the box unsure if he'll actually exit the box. Three weeks later his opinions about pilot insanity intensify, when the instructor attempts to break out of the box, claiming he needs to burp the lid.

All seventeen infantry (however disastrous the journey to instructor mental health) emerge able to pilot a gunship in a pinch or to spell the pilot during a long haul. Their infantry skills transfer naturally to weapons control.

The real pilots add skills in mission selection and planning. Thanks to networking simulations, Rontaldi reworks sections of the plan incorporating best use practices maximizing precious few aviation assets. Toughest part of Ramirez's journey is not killing seventeen arrogant, pushy, cocky, loud mouths.

An hour after release from container confinement getting ready for his first Cobra ride putting on flying garb Ramirez feels truly out of place. Infantry fight on the ground, helicopters: either the enemy or the bus to the fight. He's also too big for gunner with thick torso,

forearms, biceps and shoulders all touching the Plexiglas canopy. The Cobra sports a narrow, boxy look reducing target profile.

Ramirez plugs his helmet targeting system into the console beginning the checklist. So far, the experience is exactly like the rehearsals in the network simulator in the nearby container. The flaky pilot Ramirez flies with (after statistical analysis) remains the best of the bunch, he hopes. He worries next about vibrating apart during engine start but the rotor blades overhead begin to turn. Major Ramirez picks up his head to make sure then, glancing over to the twin gunship, he watches as the Colonel stops flicking switches on his own console looking up to make sure the helo isn't coming apart. Ramirez takes comfort in his Colonel's unease, gives him a thumbs up.

Their first flight leaves the ground at the assembly point, George Bush Park, heading north. They overfly the city in a wink then bank east to follow the greenway and wetlands of the ship channel. Gaining altitude, Ramirez observes GC armor and infantry fanning out from the port to positions in the industrial sector. Rontaldi comes up in his ear to show off his nonchalance, "So far looks like we're the only Army in the field."

"Change represents the only constant in this world." So you think you're the only cool customer in the air today? Bring it on, old man.

Climbing in slow circles the birds live stream encrypted video. Parties on two continents process, analyze the take. Slip to slip, Houston Ship Channel holds GC container vessels. Giant cranes and gantries jack huge loads with each lift. After establishing their IP, Initial Point, they swing east to the first waypoint, Galveston. Ramirez catalogues all activity, for once speechless. The professionalism of the pilot stuns him. Maybe they have a chance.

Sighing in satisfaction, Rontaldi keys his mike, "Red River, please."

Lamentations, Shamokin, PA 2200

Betsy reaches behind with both hands working the long zipper down her back nice and slow to her ass careful not to snag her designer undergarments. Pushing aside the long Presidential Seal shower curtain, she reaches in prepping the instant steam. Peeling off her

sweaty stockings reminds her of good times long ago, back when she put them on.

Betsy stares at the shower tiles viewing her reflection fronting the ruffles in the Seal of the Office. She's in serious shit is what she's thinking, had better figure something out is what else she is thinking. Betsy sucks her breath to lift off her Italian silk camisole still thinking about thinking. Think something else.

It's Friday night three-day weekend ahead. A nation largely indifferent to the needs of laborers is kicking off the annual end of summer celebration in traditional yawning style. Such are the plans of the American millions: Yawn, is there a parade or something? Fireworks maybe? Yawn, find a cookout? Yawn, what about taking in a ballgame? Yawn, it's time for a nap leave me alone. Wake me for bedtime. Yawn, too bad you have to work we'll think of you often don't worry. Thank you for your service. Ignorance is bliss.

Whoa, snap out of it. Unhooking her bra shaking out of it, Betsy considers. Dropping her panties, stopping again to think, wondering if she needs to cut ignorance a break- she steps into the shower.

Low wage earners care not a bit about NORAD/SPACECOM typically preferring to focus on the next ballgame; certainly they aren't going to like the curve ball coming with the next pitch. How to tell them to plan to go from bitching about being underemployed to losing what little they own in a blink? OK, snap again, turn the water on nice and hot- instantly steamy.

Betsy knows everyone isn't going to like tomorrow, will hate it in fact, blaming her, no doubt. Every dram of NORAD/SPACECOM bad news makes her more and more looking like a single term President. Yes the sleep reducing fears seem to all be coming true on the same day. Soaping up she speaks for the first time, addressing Peterson's imaginary peanut gallery:

"Listen up Commie spies, here's how I'm reading our situation," Betsy tries listening deciding her pitch is too high for the gravitas. Lower tones doe-ray-me, "Positive space control's a distant relic from the good old days of yesterday. GPS Constellation going going gone, telecom network going with NSA and NASA in the shitter. Worse news of all- perhaps permanently losing control of many Defense

Early Warning Constellations leaves us in the dark regarding the actions and intentions of our enemies. Today, America once again dreams of space instead of inhabiting space, even vicariously. Try this formula on for size you Commie shit: Take zero satellites then divide by the number of dependent assets including people and the answer speaks volumes indicating what to do if your satellites disappear while others do not. Wait, wait don't tell me I know this, let's see, zero on top a large number below, hmmm dividing a large number into zero gets- oh, boy. Peterson's ilk, they're going to start pushing the first strike option with the military aviation bomb dropping and nuke targeting communities' top of the food chain, chomping at the bit, foaming at the mouth. Complicating our harshest response- our assets remain vulnerable to a first strike, as we're less than sure of our targeting. Sorry."

Yea, super- won't fly in Hoboken, is the expression. Betsy shifts to the problem, deciding to leave the explanations to Jordie, he's good at bullshitting the old soft shoe. Needing to focus, she wonders how or why her assets exhibit tendencies inherent in orbiting space junk. Nobody's doing anything but bring her bad news like this gem: The Brits' plan creates an amount of debris without precedent- forget about repopulating with satellites. If she green lights the takedown, Peterson says expect decades of falling space shit besides, crap.

Merely thinking of General Pete Peterson gives her shivers, breaking her concentration so she rinses, grabs a towel. Switching the wall comm on, she calls out, "Get me Peterson on the line; tell Jordie I need him."

Peterson isn't holding back any bad news, "Madame President NORAD/SPACECOM respectfully requests firing authority and deployment of British assets targeting the list. Simulations indicate the stealth lasers' create sufficient damage, causing collisions with disastrous trajectories developing into a runaway cascade, taking out everything eventually, sooner if the Chinese and Russians go anti-satellite active. Expect success to piss off the rest of the world, free and slave, Ma'am."

"Ma'am me 'til the cows come home General. When you start shooting people let me know but space tech is history already- how

can we trust anyone's GPS? First, let's tighten a few loops: New Executive Order: Implement Continuity Plan Alpha Stage One. Jordie, send Dr. Smith to get all our people in the corral. General Peterson, tell SecDef and Homeland to prepare for many underground visitors. Make it quick Jordie; keep our Legislative and Judicial Branches safe. General Peterson: Unlimited non-nuclear space firing authority is unconditional with my blessing and God's speed. Jordie make it all legal; bring me what I need to sign in say um five-ten minutes. K?"

"Yes Ma'am." Jordie always refers to her as Ma'am, wears his bow tie a little too tight on the best of days.

President Shriver's loop strangles as her command authority focus on the big picture while the terrorists switch over to small ball (euphemistically speaking). Peterson isn't in the euphemistic small ball loop either, hasn't a clue of the lives changing or ending left and right on the micro scale, most notably in the Texas fracas'. Likewise, Betsy still considers a heavy day of weeding the veggie patch a BackBreaker.

General Peterson relays the President's order verbally, keeping busy studying video showing plane crashes. So far he downloads a deuce, both horrific, one Navy one civilian. Son of a bitch, doesn't anything fly without a wire? Damn planes carry radar, nothing wrong with the damn radar, is there? Waiting for word, he replays the streams. Shit. We need to get a handle on this.

Fifteen hours steaming is approximately three hundred miles outside San Diego. During hi tempo flight operations with surveillance enhancing methods, an F-A/18 Super Hornet from the Red Rippers' (as in Rip those Reds a new one- Peterson's former squadron) impacts the stern of the USS Abraham Lincoln. Two pilots, at least eight crew dead upon impact, massive fireball, no ejections. Again Peterson replays the feed. There's Abe, under full steam to the Sea of Japan helping augment Defcon Up's Task Force Asia. Wind is constant, snapping the flags lining the superstructure in the foreground in the approach direction. So far so good wait; uh oh the Pilot is in difficulty wings wagging his nose teeter tottering. Black Box Telemetry captures by Abe before the crash indicate collapse of ILS coincident

with losing GPS. The Red Ripper nuggets receive garbles instead of Instrument Landing System data.

Captain Terry Winters, call sign Johnny, an affable man lacking the expertise or maybe experience to recognize his bird's subtle glide slope error until too late. He overcorrects bringing up the nose too fast, stalling the airflow over the fuselage crashing high up in Abe's stern, the impressive fireball flinging flaming debris onto the deck. A fuel bowser truck linking four readying airframes catches shrapnel exploding along with three Super Hornets and a priceless EB-3 surveillance plane, killing six wounding eight. Men in red shirts spring from everywhere struggling mightily to move planes/bodies to safety. Firefighting crews led by damage control officers don protective suits to plunge into the smoke, heat and flames. Feeling the heat, Peterson sighs.

Abe shuts down all engines, coasting nearly two miles to a full stop. Flight operations out of the question, Abe's CIC takes control diverting all fixed wing aircraft to San Diego, further clearing the deck by distributing most combat capable helos locally. Others lift off to survey the damage, several joining an orbiting Sea Sprite busily searching for subs with dipping sonar. Peterson's MilNet people take control of the surveillance cameras to zoom in with penetrating lenses, peeling back layer upon layer of steaming steel revealing thick, black smoke originating below decks- shipboard fire burning out of control, the most dire straits. Somehow 'Johnny' Winters' Super Hornet vaporizes most of Abe's propulsion system, popping the shaft ruining the drive train. Peterson shifts to the stern view. He sees flames but with water pouring in then flashing into steam the scene grays. The oil tank or something flammable explodes expanding the damage exponentially.

Shit, worse news for Abe, his crew drowning wholesale below decks throughout as the engineering spaces flood. The super carrier lists heavily in the stern, soon in danger of sinking. Pumps pump, Peterson watches fearing the worse knowing the outcome in advance. From where he sits, Honest Abe is a goner.

Turning to the second air disaster thus far tonight, in the civilian sector, God help anyone flying commercial because this isn't going to

be the last. He pauses a second, considers his authority then orders the skies clear. He isn't sure he's boss over the FAA but someone with common sense better start speaking up. Peterson listens to an update: successfully firing their above top secret stealth lasers, the Brits hit all targets, detonation confirmation through ground telescopes and Cobra Bell. Only a matter of time, he thinks, turning back to crash videos.

While landing at SFI, JAL 215, a Boeing 747-800 with 525 pax/crew belly flops into the adjacent low rent residential area. Thanks for nothing; JAL 215 receives incorrect glide slope data (GPS/ILS) while over the bay in heavy fog rolling in from the direction of Alcatraz. Too late JAL 215's pilot grabs control pulling up the gear and flaps, pushing all four engines to the stops in a bid to add power, gain altitude, go around for a second try, to live. It's all the poor bastard can do, agrees Peterson. Unfortunately ground damage increases an order of magnitude thanks to the additional thrust's momentum scraping the wreckage linearly over an apartment complex, town homes and a park with a waterslide. Ouch. Peterson feels the pain, wonders what Homeland is doing.

Not everyone is crashing and not every crash results in death. Stats show dozens of near death experiences as emergency actions and correct decisions save countless lives. To Peterson's amazement the backup to the GPs system (radio beacons, lasers and other equipment) works immediately upon deployment. However, the GPS story is now news.

The net coins the San Francisco crash the Loss of GPs Disaster; only because the threshold is still low. In Peterson's humble opinion, it's an incident worthy of a report or two dozen certainly (until they figure out the rest of the story). Peterson lights a cigar, needing to get outside, breathe some air clear his head. He has power; applying his muscle to open doors should be easy. Why the hell can't they get the damn window open already?

Toweling and dripping, Betsy listens to updates, rubber-stamping Peterson's sky clearing pronouncement wondering what the hell Homeland is up to. Steam soaks into her pores moistening the HUTS leftover dry snot in her nose making it run allowing her to breathe nasally. Thanks for something. Betsy steps out of the Presidential

shower getting a mean thought about how the tradition of Honest Abe (then and now) is drowning in an ocean of bad news.

Then the shitstorm strikes. Global satellite disruption reports start trickling in to Peterson, spreading into a flood- NATO, Europe then select Asian countries. South America with the new Gran Columbian network reports widespread outages. Russia and China go mute. Peterson informs the President.

President Shriver runs a towel through her hair, wondering how Peterson and the Air Force plan on fixing things, putting events in perspective in her simple, straightforward way, "This most certainly represents a well thought out plan, an orchestration is my best analogy because of the coordination, layers upon layers of flaky shit. My questions: what'll happen next and how do we pull the plug ahead of time?"

"Surrender?" Jordie enters the suite as the President dresses.

"Commie cocksucker, eat shit" Peterson's sotto voice, not so sotto.

The catastrophic loss of continental satellite coverage creates furor and uproar amongst the observing community, particularly those on vacation. Alert JSTARS and AWACS crews temporarily make up for disappearing assets; due to various factors including the end of season tempo change and off time the Air Force reports fewer than half a dozen squadrons available for relief.

SATCOMMs fail but the backup plans work: next gen cell transmissions, radios and hardlines (underground wires run throughout her friend Dr. Smith's tunnels). Some holes fill with arrival of alternate NSA data streams routing to Defense, particularly NORAD/SPACECOM's TACSAC Centers with varying strategic and tactical analysis centers in the loop.

North and South American nets broadcast, narrowcast and positioning providers work non-stop to maintain intercontinental communication even while losing irreplaceable birds. Government and militaries face the same issues. They cut pipes dumping civilian traffic but International Comms go into the shit house. President Betsy wants answers as bad as they do. Watch wait and wonder sucks eggs. At least she got to shower first.

Standing stock still staring transfixed in horror at the shows running inside her closet, on her personal 'don't miss a thing while choosing an outfit' screen array. One shows an airplane taking out a swath of San Francisco, oh yeah, the Loss of GPS Disaster. Brother, you ain't seen nothing yet. Another screen plays Honest Abe's fire from varying angles. No matter how you slice it, she opines, it comes up peanuts-abandon ship already!

President Betsy weeps with grief as Abe's bow pirouettes, defying gravity dancing about on his stern balancing for an interminable minute while expelling crew, apparently replacing them with water. She prays for the sailors. Slowly the USS Abraham Lincoln sits lower and lower. Increasing volumes of water increase the air pressure throughout the hull, boiling blood, blowing hatches open including the fire doors. The bow reunites with the waves then slips under on Abe Lincoln's last voyage ferrying 2,200 souls to Davey Jones.

Wearily Betsy pulls out the drawer holding her black undergarments. Over ankle stockings she chooses a pair of loose black slacks to match her black spandex top with matching suit jacket. Not wanting to mess it up, she plops down on the bed regardless, slipping on simple black leather heels with thin straps, head dropping into her hands praying for strength.

Meltzer Sings, Downtown Houston, 2200

Across the elevator three floors down in the parking garage, BTI Corporate Vice President and Regional Director of Services Karl Meltzer climbs in, assuming shotgun position in the first of five identical plain white box trucks in the handicap spots. Opening his laptop, synching up with his four department heads in the other boxes and the top thirty or so state and regional enterprise managers, he sends a test text bidding them God's good graces for tonight's mission. Karl turns to his driver, smiles pointing up the ramp.

While wending up to the street, he monitors contact reports streaming into his workstation. Final movements are causing friction, raising the hackles of HPD, he thinks turning around to look back. Karl's seat opens into the cargo box, full stations for his top six minds and their machines, now acting data hub for all Materiel Command

services in the Texas area of operations. His six analysts mirror the six in the other four trucks: all wearing Grand Continental insignia, straps attaching them to high back executive chairs, working around a center table backing open end to wall racks of servers, square meters of antenna and weapons. Any of their number qualifies to territory manager or better. Six pairs of expectant eyes look to Karl, waiting. Karl looks to number two.

Estancia, once a young small, thin bookish man chosen for leadership in the Bolivar Academy at the age of fifteen by Madame Bolivar herself, issues orders, "Go to head to Galveston via the waterway. We're getting too close too soon all over the freaking place. The gunplay out there needs toning down. I see us shooting first and answering questions later. This is bad for us now, good for us later-unnecessary shit haunts me."

Karl nods, his people require no clarification; they just go to work solving problems. Karl's knack is weeding out the rest leaving the best- time to step up. They know what he wants, starting as young protégés developing into leaders at the academy, moving on to universities throughout the world, receiving degrees in math or science. Karl's picks return to Venezuela to join BTI and adjunct faculty at the Academy. Karl's box truck does not contain the military rather the people who take on the job of constraining the military.

Karl's leadership of Materiel Command culminates years of no personal life (no wonder he has no friends). Always available, tough to emulate his own people do not necessarily like him, but they all respect him. Karl is always two sometimes three steps ahead avoiding direct challenges because he solves problems before materialization. Earning the respect of the Bolivar crowd is a never-ending experience, expect cross training. Karl teams easily with the other principals writing and coding many of the attack algorithms expanding Material Supply's piece in the intricate invasion puzzle.

Material Supply as euphemism for the reincarnation of the SS (Special Services) and as SS Vice President Karl can order an execution of a traitor's entire family as easily as ordering pizza for supper. The Regional Gestapo Chief isn't cruel about it, you can't be cruel to a traitor anyway but somewhere, deep down keeping out of

sight, Karl loathes the drastic measures. Best to not torture, quick and painless; torture is unnecessary shit, avoid if possible.

Word of the creation of the SS within Material Services' area of operations spreads quickly, rippling through the entire organization sans social media. Word of mouth by mouth, story enhancements making clear the penalty for mistakes is unwelcome. However Karl, as judge and jury self declares any ordinary idiot in the plan not operating within parameter definitions receives exactly one chance to change taking a demotion or transfer to less demanding work. Talkers never get a second chance; family gets it first while you watch then you. No question. Karl is respect, not love.

Karl is on the ground to manage the Houston operation during the thick of things, when the shit hits the fan. He is mobile and his operation undiscovered- he puts his feet up taking a drink, savoring the moment. Merely a few hours into the operation performance overall is satisfactory with security tight as men and equipment trickle into action. Karl's Second Law of Operations holds sway: once in motion stay in motion, stopping only when acted upon by outside forces- soon. He frowns in anticipation of soon.

All day all night Karl downs dark roast fretting Materiel Command's deception operations are too this or that, latest is intricacy- too many independently acting operators. Is there a leash on those dogs? The answer is no. Karl's box truck operations' officer running statistical calculations on the developing data is getting hard numbers, compiling statistics. Karl's monitor shows a small box graph: the growing number of Material Supply interactions is trending to the high end of prior guess ranges. Shit, shit, shit.

Later it's Pedro tagging Karl's woes as 'the Ted Williams Factor', defining 'the Ted Williams Factor' thusly: the result of combining stupid or unlucky Gran Columbian units of any description together with Ted Williams, HPD administrator. Karl refers to this simply as sooner or later.

Karl's graph spikes when Julio (one mistake) and Manny drop a heavy box spreading the contents on the front lawn in a house across the street from the old bigot's house. How can the Gran Columbians be so very stupid and unlucky? The spike lasts through the gun battle

with Galveston PD then goes red as the cops catch a break from Pedro's Ted Williams Factor Corollary One: the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. Material Supply loses troops and suffers armor vehicle damage from a pair of deadly elders, one of whom apparently teaches combat, makes Ted Williams a formidable foe, worth fretting over.

Karl is the Book; knows luck runs hot and cold as the graphs' range demonstrate. His Houston operational pen design encloses two point one million cattle. Gunfire and lightening tend to spook cattle into running away from the approaching storm, let them sleep instead of lifting their heads. Man in motion Karl is leading his teams to intercept; this van in particular rolls down the highway into Homeland Security's toughest, smartest forces- those keeping fingers against an artery checking the herd's pulse, feeding data upstream the chain of command (or Karl).

"I've never been a fan of Houston Police computers you know," Karl creates a teaching moment to ease tension just a smidge as the box truck leaves the tall buildings behind. He stares through the window, concentrating on the mirror looking for a tail- ditto two men standing at the back gun ports.

"Got him!" his technical analyst sounds sure, "84.3 percent probable triangulation fix on the changing position of the forming HPD Regional Task Force, led by HPD Captain Ted Williams. On screen now...."

Karl doesn't break his gaze from the glowing skyline in the rearview. He remembers times before millions of inhabitants. Yeah, sure- this will be a good thing, just wait and see- what a load of crap. The skyline sucks. Fuck Houston.

"Good work Major. Alert the Dushka teams. Move Alpha Two One and Alpha Two Two into position, what's their ETA, ahead of us? No? Good, slow them. OK, you know the drill; we shadow the target until we get everyone in position. What we've been waiting for people, roll it on over!"

Vote Now For Linchpin, Camp Pendleton, CA, 2200

This month's cover photo of Southern Living features the Vice President of the United States of America, Betsy's compromise. His

bio in Who's Who in America is far more extensive than most. The most visible member of Betsy's cabinet, the Vice President of the United States is also her biggest mistake, then and now, though she has no idea of the degree. Carolla with Airre the Quantum, Pedro and Karl make the necessary corrections, altering both futures.

Now hostage former Vice President James Now tosses and turns in his sleep, wheezing chest heaving trying desperately to force oxygen into his soft tissues. His pathetically dreadful stench jerks him awake. The man a heartbeat away from the Presidency promptly spews dinner on his shiny shoes. Forcing himself to stand, weaving leaning bending over, not for long, he dry heaves for a long time before the lean becomes a fall. His last coherent thought, his quip: "my condition approximates my worse record hangover times a million. Fuck me. Never should have made a Paddock visit part of the campaign, Jim."

Up again, falling, standing, falling again, Now teeter totters on the edge of balance. Swirling light balls crowd his vision before going pitch black. Rubbing to flake off layers of dried mucus prying his eyes reopen leaning backward slumping against a tall chain link fence, finally taking a seat. Head swimming against the tide, the VP's brain quivers like the Liberty Bell merrily signally the Constitution's birth. In some dim faraway grey matter he realizes there should be no chain link fence enclosure of the Vice President of the United States of America, dammit. He's in lock up apparently. How? Why?

James Now combs through dim imprints of short term memory desperately wondering if the Secret Service is with him and the chain link fence appearance has nothing to do with them or if they are villains. He knows Betsy doesn't like him, messes with him every chance. Known everywhere as 'Vote Now' to the bitch he's just a compromise on the Presidential ticket, a gift conservatives only grudgingly accept as the Southern interests' checkmark. No, fuck that, she can kill him anytime she wants: kill anyone with the stroke of a pen cleanly. No don't think you're anyone special to her, his marginally functioning brain declares, just what the hell is going on here?

Pressing palms to temples, squeezing the jangling he quiets his inner monologue preferring rest. Sleeping improves short term

memory so he needs sleep, but shit, can't stop thinking. Looking around for clues, evidently his car didn't make the trip so an escape is questionable, at least for now. Survival instinct on high alert swiveling his melon shoulder-to-shoulder trying to get a position fix to see what in hell is going on. Pool cue breaking violent eyeball socket jangling crank up his already intensifying bell-ringing mental vibrations and the Vice President hurls dripping chunks on a prone figure lying nearby.

Seconds of torment seem like hours. Against his skull the VP's brain churns, bangs and crashes, each internal cranial movement tearing tissue from tissue, leaving growing piles of bits behind. His mind is rapidly turning to mush. Incredibly able to listen to his brain, the crashing begins to mix with an incomprehensible sloshing sound. Pressing harder and harder to relieve the pressure, wondering if his ears leak brain liquefaction, his dire circumstances culminate while his remaining intact brain mass slogs back and forth through adjacent liquefying tissues.

He straightens again desperate to feel well but instead grows seasick, doubling over, his taut, trembling upper mass dropping until forehead smacks knee. Thud or clunk no matter how you slice it (as Betsy opines) it's all she wrote for this Presidential wannabe.

All manner of insides propel out of the Vice President of the United States' mouth with steel penetrating force. He loses interest in how and why.

Now is a high achiever. Expecting success excelling in his studies at Jesuit Academy receiving a cadet appointment to the Naval Academy, leaving with honors rapid advancement to a prize Pentagon billet as Vice-Admiral- Intelligence before fifty, thinking politics he takes retirement to the corporate/banking world. Meeting new friends with shitloads of money propels his stardom, hooking him into political appointments; such as in Langley, VA as CIA Deputy Director of Intelligence, a four year stint. The change in administrations puts him back in banking creating his tour de force, the path to the Presidency. Reappearing in the role of Director of Homeland Security, staying over multiple opposing administrations, Now makes national connections and more friends with shitloads of

cash before taking his first political gig filling in after the tragedy in the Mississippi Governor's Office.

Now knows where the bodies are buried, easily raising enough cash to make a semi-serious bid for the White House. But Now governs a State three fifths the local residents can't spell, his first serious miscalculation. Sentenced to a life of southern obscurity, he takes a chance making a twenty million dollar bet on Betsy Shriver taking her 'long horse' Presidential race the distance. Governor Now shells out big to the party, buying the seat next to the President, adding fifty million dollars to Betsy's campaign; drowning him in debt.

Now owes the Bolivars fifteen million dollars and Karl another twenty. Taking the markers, BTI makes moves, tightening their grip on Now.

For a microsecond Now's future flashes before his eyes, mostly scenes pondering how they plan to collect after killing him for wanting to be President.

As Betsy's Vice President with his eyes on the big prize, James Now builds another fortune linking taxpayer dollars to South American donors who miraculously fill all contractual agreements thereby keeping all plotting hidden; I win you win everyone's happy. To pay off his debts Now does deals all day long straight out of the Office of the VP, bullying his way into Pentagon black budget spending and CIA secret international security moving/transport deals. Karl signs on the dotted line and suddenly BTI physically transports the U.S. military's equipment to battle or storage, maintaining the heavy equipment stockpiles, emergency-ready. Now comes through for the GC.

The Vice President sells out his country to South America; following tradition is what he calls it. He never sees himself as Benedict Arnold, doesn't consider himself a traitor. How about his monetary acquisition policy? Merely a means to the end game and when he's President Now, he'll pardon himself if need be. If Betsy performs to expectations, his electability skyrockets and after her second term, her post is his to lose. If she drops the ball in the next few weeks and the Country is in need of change; well then the equation alters and all bets are off. To rebalance his success equation, Now

reaches out to discuss a possible, sudden (violent) removal of the President- Carolla green lights and fast tracks.

Now's life review drones on as his sub-consciousness unfolds his last day like a beach blanket, spreading it, smoothing the wrinkles. His brain chooses the most important pieces of the tapestry bringing them into focus, clouding them again. This morning, sitting in his office suite at the San Diego C4ISR complex drinking coffee, Now's reviewing activity reports covering the conclusion of another (successful) massive BTI project at the facility.

Command Control Communications Computers Intelligence Surveillance and Reconnaissance fall under the rubric of the alternative power structure Now runs out of the VPs office. His best people manage the GC contacts, men and women with the will and ambition to run the world correcting the mistakes of the past. No warning bells ring indicating negative consequences arise from this piece of the action, the big score. With the promise of final payoffs to the Bolivar leeches, James Now goes Hollywood providing intelligence, operations and financial backing to an action movie. Now bet the wad on a physically massive hugely expensive movie blockbuster requiring intense cooperation with a combination Hollywood Studios. The long and hard task culminates with GULF WAR ONE filming in SoCal this weekend.

Vice President Now smiles tight lips nearly purple turning over report after report detailing his paybacks as they reduce his balance all thanks to the scope and scale of the largest military mobilization for Public Relations event ever. Instead of frittering away taxpayer money supporting theatrical events like professional wrestling and NASCAR, Now's command directs tens of millions into his widely touted feel good recruiting bonanza, a full length war film shot in Highest D-IMAX+ by the industry's hottest directors, the biggest stars. In a very real sense, this future President plans to re-write this feel good extravaganza soaking in the afterglow of the big win.

The actual Gulf War One reflects the peak of U.S. military might, where the good guys from all over the planet liberate a small oil rich nation from the bad guys. In an epic two-day ground campaign (following on the heels of huge successes by the Air Force and Navy

during months of bombing) international armies roll heavy equipment out of the desert of Saudi Arabia thereby routing what was at the time the world's third largest military machine. He plans to implant 'Vote James Now!' into the final cut with subliminal devices.

Carolla Bolivar creates an independent movie company under hidden multi-layered ownership announcing to the world a new multinational film industry alliance producing this biggest and most spectacular war movie to date.

Every name in the industry desires to bathe in the glory swirling around the epic tale about the greatness of America. BTI Studios promises primary filming and production will occur in the United States in return for providing military hardware in the form of a rare expensive multiagency continent scale training exercise. Legendary Directors sell GULF WAR ONE heavily.

The United States Military provides GULF WAR ONE full cooperation, reveling in positive publicity overcoming the people's usual negativity toward US Government holding unreal debt loads upon failing to manage never-ending war economies. The State Department yields to Defense Department Doctrines calling for fighting the enemy as far away from the United States as possible. Mostly effective, the strategy proves quite expensive considering equipment, manpower and even transportation costs of moving the warriors far from home. GULF WAR ONE the film actually solves problems, win/win.

Once the Pentagon is on the record backing the film, the individual services vying for training dollars in the era of furloughs begin lobbying large roles with active participation. The US Navy volunteers many ships, landing craft and airplanes galore, arguing the story of moving and supporting the forces remains a massive undertaking requiring boatloads of recruits. The Navy Seal teams securing the oil rigs play a major role, making the cut. Aircraft from several Carriers bombing and performing combat air patrols are also 'must haves'. The US Navy overpopulates California for the Labor Day Weekend.

The United States Air Force argues for an even greater role than the original screenplay presents, upping the ante. After all, the Air Force provide the Saudis with air cover after the Iraqis invade Kuwait with

USAF AWACS and Warthogs the only force standing between Saddam Hussein and control of virtually all of the oil in the Mideast. Later, USAF cycles heavy bombers and tanker assets on constant sorties pounding targets in both in Dessert Shield and Desert Storm operations. Without thousands of planes and personnel, the Combined Army does not stand a chance against hordes of soldiers, tanks and artillery. A big role is the only role for such a force, Now increases the budget.

The Coast Guard gets into the act recreating their role in securing Gulf oil assets. The Coast Guard recruitment budget is never enough. Desperately needing involvement, USCG repositions their seafaring assets to California.

Don't forget the National Guard activating units for offshore duty, first time in a long time. Guard recruitment is problematic ever since as the stint grows in scope from two weeks annually with the occasional weekend to 'on call'. Guard unit strengths remain down, troops serving tours overseas. Morale is lower than ever as many see themselves as pawns mopping up for the regular military. The National Guard views the film project as a chance to show their units and operations in a positive light bolstering funding requests from an ever recalcitrant Congress. The National Guard shows up, albeit partially.

Of course, the heroes in the United States Army stand the best chance of benefiting from the film. The biggest roles showcase officers past and present sharing the spotlight in the fun fest. Funding will escalate, recruitment skyrocket solving many problems plugging many holes. US Army goes all in.

James Now takes three year's appropriations of the Joint Chiefs of Staff's training budget for expenses producing this massive operation, ordering most forces be in place the Monday before Labor Day Weekend, run the Training Ops for eight days, then stand down for the winter.

His eyes roll around the bottom of their sockets as he pukes out his spleen. The Vice President's life is sweet- until today. Filming begins quite smoothly so why is existence flushing? The starter cash priming

the pump returns thousand fold to his clients; can't be the Bolivars, can it?

Departing his physical being Now floats over the largest troop buildup on American soil ever. Ships choke the ports; lots overflow with tanks and infantry fighting vehicles in neat, orderly rows. Circling Pendleton marveling at the numbers of Huey Cobras and Blackhawks and Apaches preparing for commencement of training- but no people? Then seeing the tents, oh yeah, huge "cast party". The VP remembers vaguely partying with a squadron of heavy drinking Air Force Pilots last night, bourbon and scantily clad women- oh yeah, that's it! Now recalls passing out and the Secret Service scraping him off the floor. Next thing he remembers is cleaning up before the next 'cast party'.

VP James Now stops at the BTI Services VIP tent for lunch with celebs, politicians, and hangers-on. Slim waist hostesses serve mouthwatering prime rib and copious amounts of booze. Declaring early weekend, his entire party, sans ties and jackets, commence the unwinding of stress with wine, women, song.

BTI Services caters tens of thousands of meals daily yet upon feeding every person on set all week receive high praise for best quality, quite different from the normal military cuisine. Though still on the Government's dime, participating troops eat same as the VIPs, union electricians, accountants, producers and actors. At night, nowhere near home living in temporary quarters squeezing in with the base's usual occupants, appreciating the thoughtfulness of the film's producers in the form of open bars and quality entertainment. How fortunate to draw TDY acting in the greatest movie ever.

BTI contractors feed everyone passing through the same high quality nano-machines the Vice President enjoys. BTI streams the massive simultaneous takedown as the individual machines aggregate into micro-size units possessing locomotive and navigational ability. Of course, the cameras can't see inside as the micro-machines leave the digestive system for the bloodstream. Most recipients' machines perform flawlessly, moving with the blood into the heart, stopping only to combine with the other micro-machines. The macro-machines clog the heart to bursting. Grabbing their chest, the lucky ones drop with no warning, like "Whoa, what the..." dropping like a rock. The

unlucky ones die also, but slower in great pain, screaming. Here too, some seem luckier than others, but none survive extreme pain and long, slow death. Except, that is, for Vice President James Now, checking out in an aggravatingly long hell on earth experience, with much fluid discharge.

So Cal reverts to a former military power.

That's that for the Vice President dying badly realizing the double cross, understanding spirit crushing horror from selling out his Country for a few shekels and the promise of future power. Finally opening his real eyes pulling the lids apart with palsied fingers James Now spews the remainder of his insides including blood supply; his organ soup joining Hell's queue.

Idle hands being the Devil's tools, hoping to speed up sorting and processing Death hires temporary help out of the PAU hall for the first time since WWII. Now's paperwork gets 'lost' in some glitch or shuffle thus guaranteeing an indeterminate wait. Death smiles.

Pyrrhic Victory, Southern Paraguay 2333

"She's tense," thinks Pedro aloud, "She's unsure if she's going to burn in Hell for all eternity or not. I wish I could reassure her, but I can't. So it goes, I think I'll be burning beside her anyway, so together forever we may have all the rest of time to discuss her deviousness."

"Ha ha, you're just too funny today." Carolla isn't in the mood. "Of course you're going to burn with me. You that put that whole mess together. Give them the rope; you say merrily, they'll hang themselves. Sometimes you're just too clever for anyone's good."

Alone with the top of the Gran Columbian pyramid, Pedro Saenz speaks truth to power just as always. As always, power speaks back. Pedro is in one of his moods, the kind a guy might find himself after orchestrating mass murder. Though remorseful, Pedro never does drama, what with the moaning and gnashing of teeth in pitiful drones lasting hours- not his style, live the moment. Best policy also holds back on showing jubilation after his nano-machine scheme proves so successful; doing a victory dance might be too far over the top, leaving decency behind in the dust. So, he's dialing back the celebration.

Carolla sits stone-like, staring straight into dead eyes on all the faces cycling through the big monitor, pixel after pixel upon pixel depicting grim endings in SoCal. She likes that word, SoCal. It is just SoCal to say SoCal. Having a hard time staying on track; her mind doesn't wish to see their faces. SoCal has a ring to it. Perhaps she can use SoCal as her end tag, you know, instead of whatever or something to that affect. SoCal in GC hands; go SoCal.

"Do you think SoCal works better than 'whatever' or too vague?"

Giving her a look but not saying the first thing entering his mind, instead Pedro stalls rolling his shoulders, cracking his back and neck then making his way behind the wet bar alcove in the back corner of his large office/quarters. Carolla sprawls out on the couch to the left of empty recliner, staring blankly.

"Get me a bottle of water?" She gets thirsty waiting.

Without a break in stride, Pedro grabs two bottles. Pouring water over rocks slipping his beer into a foam sleeve zipping up, he returns to his chair/bed in silence. The feed from SoCal continues showing newly dead service men and women. The birds begin to feast.

"Where the hell are our people up there? Who's in command of policing the bodies?" Carolla is in a mood, SoCal aside.

"Just wait a minute, will you? Karl's plan deals with this eventuality, the tests on the nano-foods show survivors, temporaries-first we find the leakers."

"Look there;" pointing at one of the people piles inside a large party tent, "Would you call her a leaker?"

Pedro picks up the remote hitting rewind, freezing zooming, zooming in again until he's where she's pointing her long, cream square index finger. Resuming in slow motion scanning the scene showing two or maybe three soldiers still moving inside a clump of maybe twenty or so dead bodies, Pedro grunts in disgust- fucking Karl making them look bad; no wonder he has no friends.

A female hand rises up unbuckling the flap of an MP's hip holster, pulling the .45 nestled inside, flicking off the safety, pressing the gun to another's head then pulling the trigger. Pedro's mind inserts the missing sound track- pop. The head explodes like a sledgehammer on a melon. Slow, so slow, the gleaming black matte barrel slides down to

another head, pop. Pop, pop, pop thusly three more accreditations accrue to the angel of mercy. Pop, pop, pop, pop- Death is in distress seeing so many need finishing. However, Pedro is grateful the gun does what so obviously needs done humanely.

Finally getting around to ending her suffering, Carolla and Pedro suck in their collective breath finding her courage simply amazing as her gun, so large it obscures her face, broaches her temple, stops pressing firmly indenting her soft mahogany scalp line with a circular impression almost ½ inch in diameter. Quivering under the weight of the cannon, her small hand is shaking uncontrollably yet her finger squeezes. Click. Empty. Automatically Pedro erases ‘pop’ substituting ‘click’, his breath releasing in a rush cursing her luck.

Carolla reaches to the coffee table for her headset. She has to do something for that courageous woman. Suddenly, another gun appears over the soldier’s head, moving down to press against the back of her skull. “The hand of God,” Pedro mutters. Pop. The valiant soldier’s agonizing struggle ends, mouth relaxing into a grim smile finding peace in final release.

Pedro zooms out. Four white tuxedoed servers surround the tent, no doubt drawn by the gunfire. Efficiently they move from pile to pile checking for life, ending it. “The help is here,” looking deep into Carolla’s brown eyes, “sometimes you just need a little patience.”

“Alright, SoCal already,” she hates him to his festering core when he’s arrogant and she’s in a mood besides. Hmmm, teach the dick a lesson or focus on what’s next? Move on or bait his ego have a little fun, she wonders, self-debating for a tic or two, fuck it, time to play a card, “Yeah, well it’s feast or famine and there is much to move. When the lollygagging commences I made sure Paez knows to keep pushing the Tyrant. You need all you can get.”

Uh oh, thinks Pedro, so it begins.

“In fact,” pausing, lifting her cheeks until the broadest of grins give her a Cheshire cat look, the look of pleasant memories of good times.

Uh oh, thinks Pedro, her smile kills people.

“Paez promises to make me happy. You know, he keeps his promises.”

“Yikes!” he opines loudly, “Back off will ya?”

Keeping the smile, "He's been scrambling to find transports- your underestimation of the haul, you know."

"Super, SoCal." Pedro knows that smile and he likes her spirit. OK, this meeting is going to run on, may as well be comfortable. Lowering his recliner, planting both feet in the grey loafers Pedro makes for his desk. Rumbling around, pushing around the stacks of crap forming piles everywhere, finds a large volume. Hefting the fat book with both hands lest he strain, adding his printout of "How to successfully defeat the United States in Pre-emptive Warfare", stopping for cold ones, using an elbow on the dimmer, Pedro drops his load on the coffee table in front of the headmistress.

The closest South America has to a royal couple starts heavy breathing. Out of the busiest of times they steal a moment for each other. Carolla strokes the cheek of her only untamable man while Pedro nuzzles in for the kill. SoCal!

But a moment is all they have. Pedro turns to the book, setting it up in a reading stand. Lying on his right arm turning the pages with his left until reaching SoCal and the event label 'California Movie Plot'. Carolla reaches to the far end of the end table on her right and knocking over the small lamp. Cursing under her breath, grabbing her bag sitting it on the arm of the couch, unclasping then opening, fishing around finding her cigarette pouch, putting the small clasp bag aside, returning the table lamp to an upright position. "SoCal."

"SoCal." Pedro reads quietly while Carolla situates, rearranging the contents of the table to suit. Grunting, "The payoffs to fucking prick Vice President Now continue to reap benefits. BTI is scrambling over \ moving and storage taking over a third more than highest estimates predict across the board. Meltzer sings when the register rings. That the Tyrant has almost enough transports available to move all that shit is just incredible."

"Not just moving, taking possession." To say she's pleasant doesn't do justice to the pride Madame Bolivar feels for the plan. "There's a huge multiplier here; Karl's numbers people updating the modeling routines begin to approach reality but are still quite a way from justifying the take. First assumption: deep penetration of our microscopic killers (obviously true). Next assumption: Now is a

douche (semi-true); however he expands the equipment lists early and often, absolutely in character if the character is a greedy bastard. Thirdly, factor in the money requirements to run for President; that's when Karl's people approach accurate numbers- calling it the installment plan."

"Yea, obviously to get Karl to pay him, Now moves millions of tons of hardware to the movie set mixing new inventions with old shit, throwing the timeline away. Karl tells me last night Now gives him the weekend to produce the markers, reconcile, you know, settle. The more Now drinks, the more obnoxious about it he gets, throwing the Jewish card on Karl- who the fuck cares what the fuck Karl believes? Thinking about that piece of shit makes me puke."

Carolla lets him rant; she likes Karl Meltzer, doesn't give a shit what he thinks about anything but planning and operations. Such a small price to pay, having her best operative putting so much time in North America performing first hand duping. Results, in this case speak volumes and if Pedro has to hate James Now for giving Karl grief, SoCal, "So anyway, we're sucking crews out of the back-up ranks running at the high end of almost every data base table; takeaways taxing our abilities to levels beyond hope. But Pedro Holy Shit, what a great problem, right? Check the planning book chapter, it's all there. For the North Americans, losing fighting hardware-beyond bad, turning the same units against them multiplies our forces extremely. How much? Good question: Not enough data is the true answer, insufficient information disallows solid numbers on the math; history is not exactly replete with examples, except for battlefield pickups here and there. Losing an army before the battle rarely occurs (unless you're talking Trojans) so instead we model duping an army out of position. The logic gets fuzzy but the figuring is straightforward using point systems- start each side with points (x,y) deduct one for every tank, plane we take, regardless of condition. Then, regardless GC purpose, deduct another point if the equipment finds a use then add positive values on the other side of the equation according to the use.

The algorithms grow soft even as the data rolls in. Partial values go to the devaluation of bases, loss of C4ISR and everything else running

from Pendleton up and down the coast. Kills get higher numbers, depending on whom and where and when, etc., but always more than losing computer hardware. People always account for whole numbers; no way would I devalue life below one. However, the importance of the kill gets another factor, taking the numbers on their side way negative: minus two, minus three, and so on.”

Carolla is into the numbers way more than Pedro. He prefers having the bean counters do it in their heads, to be honest. However, knowing he should act like he’s paying attention, really care about her soliloquy so he faces in her direction. Well, he does kind of; actually, he’s looking over her shoulder at the screen. SoCal. Carolla finds the equations, Pedro groans inwardly.

Droning on and on showing another impossibly long equation, Pedro’s fed up with the bullshit math, lost in fuzzy this’ and that’s, wondering when he can go take a leak without upsetting her. For a fraction of a second, that is, before Carolla leans forward Pedro’s brain function ceases. All thought of impossibly long equations producing questionable results, disappear.

Knowing this to be true, staying bent over to keep his attention, playing with the book, she asks for his opinion, “Why don’t we just skip ahead a bit, I want to revisit the equipment withdrawal with respect to short game-end game scenarios. I’m thinking we are not going to be able to take it all.”

Pedro snaps awake from his cleavage daydreams, “Yea, skip your soft math and move into reality- stop with the guesses already. Move on, drop the mushy fuzzy crap and stop them from discovery.”

“Thanks for the editorial but it’s you who’s mushy in the head,” utilizing her shut Pedro down before he gets going strategy.

“If material supply can’t put the grab on anything, we blow in place. We’re taking their tools regardless. SoCal”

She finds his instant grasp of the issues impressive. SoCal, SoCal! “First priority is the getaway to the mountains, north of the desert. Put our backs to the coast in other words and prepare for whatever response. Said response can happen at any time now to Saturday morning or later if we have any luck. We can’t count on anything, in other words.”

“We’re at the point where the plan can go to shit: ready or not ready.”

Carolla nods, “No battle plan survives first contact.”

They stare as Airre the Quantum rolls data base scenarios and graphics at an astounding rate. Comprehension is one thing, performance another.

“So I’ll tell Paez to trust in Karl’s preparations. That said, tonight’s busy elsewhere too. The border, the Houston rollout, the Red River action and the Tyrant’s poor bastards braving a category five storm at sea and on land...”

“You know, just leveling the playing field is a win for a lot of people, finding satisfaction putting such a hurt on the ‘untouchables’. Besides, that’s enough for today. Bedtime.” Pedro pulls himself into a standing position, makes for the head.

Tomorrow the world changes, for better or for worse, with new Zones of Influence. Tonight, Pedro needs a few hours of recharge. Carolla rolls up against him so he sets his breathing pattern on hers, a calming move proven effective: synchronization synergy.

Soon Carolla relaxes a bit dropping off first. Pedro’s smile widens. Her math even put her to sleep. Well, look out here comes tomorrow.

Emergency Task Force, Houston, Texas, 2345

Captain Ted spends so much time behind the wheel his ass indentation on the front seat never dissipates. Believing himself a great driver with no trouble splitting his attention between the road and computer analysis of the data base breakdown showing activity types, dispatch locations, Ted has two immediate concerns. First, the gang task force call out this afternoon put some serious warrants with backup firepower on the streets by dinnertime, kicking down doors speaking with gang leadership. The effort’s ongoing but early reporting shows no linking the usual suspects.

The Brass’ gang tact tracks with law enforcement thinking in the cartel era. Ted sees the train of thought, it makes sense to him on their level; however, crooks are people too and during major holiday weekends he counts on a drop in criminal activity coincident with an increase in stupid, drunken shit. The police trim back on patrols; give

more leave time on Thanksgiving, Easter and Christmas for example, choice vacation time finds Captain Ted.

Fourth of July, Memorial and Labor Day, Ted always gets stuck alone on duty, part of his holiday trade-off with the campers and beach goers. Administrative departments effectively shut down with SWAT and the detective squad skeletal. On the streets, Ted runs a heavy holiday street schedule with more officers to cover nuisance complaints. Bar fights and domestic disputes give him warm, fuzzy feelings- all is well in his city. His parents' involvement in shootouts involving heavy weaponry, this is bothersome but for Chrissakes he keeps telling his Dad that Galveston is the Wild West, time to move. He hits one on the speed dial.

"You should listen to yourself, old man, your story is way too fucked up. You know, it's not just you guys either. I'm running from fracas to fracas all freaking night. Dad, if this bullshit stops here, we'll turn your pathetic old man beat-down into a humorous Labor Day story to pass down generationally. However, we should worry; I'm getting real bad vibes. Yeah, tell Mom I said hey and save me a Schlitz."

Starting holiday with a half dozen shootouts with civilians isn't Ted's style; he enjoys some semblance of order. Ted's bracing internally for the inevitable fallout after illusion of 'the Government in control of the streets' cracks. Ted's gift of fear is trying to tell him everyone's going to find out the truth this Labor Day. Heavy weaponry deploying through the city spells trouble. Better dead than Ted?

Deep in thought, Ted is unaware of causing at least six MVA near misses, or two sideswipe incidents: fire hydrant and street sign. His team catches two more shooting reports (sideswipe causers). He needs caffeine.

Inside the city limits aiming his car to an urgent coffee shop meet with his group leaders instead Captain Ted rolls to an even more urgent call of '444-444 Shots Fired, Officer Down Repeat 444 Officer Down' gunshots audible. Code 3! Ted floors it to a warehouse just off the waterfront another eight blocks listening to the open mike death broadcast, hearing a chattering automatic weapon (Dushka) fade away.

Arriving at the scene sideswiping the ambulance jerking away from the curb screaming away into the night, Ted sighs heavily.

A fire department pumper truck applies copious amounts of water to the remnants of a patrol car. Then a piece of shit Chevrolet, now a twisted lump of metal lying in a smoking heap near the open door of an empty warehouse, chunks of smoldering wreckage nearby. Ted is seeing RPG damage levels.

“Anyone live?” he asks Sergeant Donnie.

“Captain, it’s a freaking miracle, but Patrolman Yeager still has a pulse. He also has shrapnel wounds to his right side, top to bottom, got him turning. Hell, maybe he even got a step or two. Who calls it in-passerby, female. She did not stick around.”

“What about the warehouse, why did Yeager stop in the first place?”

“His radio call: ‘Multiple Vehicles Suspicious Activity, Possible Burglary’. That’s all we have. The warehouse is empty, clean pickings. We are trying to find someone from ‘JC Moving and Storage’ to talk to, but the number we have rings the phone inside.”

“Sounds like a lead. Try to get something off their business license or the Chamber of Commerce. Looks like a busy night shaping up after all. I’m calling in reinforcements, Code 22, start waking people up. Get the Mobile Command post guys up and running and over here pronto. Put up the chopper. I have a feeling the night is not going to get calmer over time. Sarge, I want you riding with me until we establish the Task Force CP; working the radio on the move. Tell whoever back at the house processing or doing paperwork or just jerking off- grab a car hit the streets, lock down perimeters- proactive time, Sergeant.”

Thank God, whispers Sergeant Donnie as Captain Ted tosses him the keys. Ted’s driving rep precedes him.

Ted’s car is a very nice ride replete with all the bells and whistles; and, of great importance to Supervisors, functioning bells and whistles. Ted’s on with dispatch: “Cancel breaks, anybody without a car, double up. Break out shotguns, M-16s, the more firepower moving, the better.” Commander Ted Williams is on a roll. “Stop all misdemeanor arrests, especially where the refugees are. Low rent departments get

off harassing refugees; get public works busy, lock them down in the parks for now, get some tents, they'll be safer."

Pulling into the coffee shop, "Call-out far and wide, issue alerts to Homeland Security on the Charley Plan. Let's get out in front of this."

Sergeant Donnie nods, "I never have to wonder what you're thinking. We don't get much truth from power; everyone else in the chain listening to lawyers begins to think weasel thoughts. I'm with you, Captain."

"Yeah, I'm stupid, I get that. If I'm wrong, I am going to be wrong on the side of Protect and Serve. Tell you what though; no way I'm wrong, no way."

Ramirez & Rontaldi, Red River Army Depot, TX 2355

"Flying on the cutting edge of history pressing buttons flipping switches configuring the bird as the pilot skims the treetops. The best trip into battle always removes the bumpy road." Rontaldi mentally indexes a new entry in his autobiography, the one he writes into his mind every night reviewing yesterday and today, previewing tomorrow and the days following. If he lives to write "Prelude" (the book of his dreams) he'll be famous; otherwise, he'll be just another pile of flaming wreckage dropping on some unsuspecting local inhabitant who happens to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The most valuable target of concern to the GC Army, in the mind of Colonel Angel Rontaldi, lies at the northeastern edge of the state. Red River Army Depot contains the equipment and supplies for an entire light armor battalion, a unit with personnel overseas. The equipment shipping schedule typically precedes departing troops but Rita's InfoWar section manufactures various paperwork snafus leaving the armory stock temporarily behind.

Coming in low, the two Cobra gunships settle into an empty field four clicks south of the depot. Colonel Rontaldi monitors a light GC strike force moving in his direction as daylight signals the start of the second day of the holiday weekend. Advance recon teams, in place for two days, send runners to brief them on base status. The only movement report of note in days is now occurring in just about the worse place. The flight line is coming to life. Rontaldi moves in.

Under the circumstance, Rontaldi finds sticking to the original plan difficult. Fifteen extra minutes are required for the units splitting off from the column to loop around flight line to the southern end of the installation. He might order the main attack body in first, but the surprise factor will be lost. When the southern attack commences perhaps unnecessary casualties result. The flight line represents additional uncertainties depending on the units preparing to take off. The Colonel opts to split the difference. The recon team updates them reporting six Apaches preparing for take-off. When the rotors begin turning on the first bird, he orders the attack. The Soviet BMP in at the head of the column turns the corner revving the engine to gather main gate ramming speed.

The sudden appearance of the column of vehicles turning the corner to the road leading to the armory startles Private Joan Sedilia. Knowing immediately she wants nothing to do with them, she also recognizes, without having to check the sheet in the shack, not a US vehicle. The M-16 she carries comes off her shoulder in record time. Crouching behind the concrete pillar Joan takes aim at the driver, scoring hits into the windscreen, hitting the man behind the wheel twice. The BMP veers suddenly to the right, revealing the second vehicle in the line. She quickly shoots again, but with only two rounds left in her magazine, did not stop the rolling mass. The first BMP plows into the guard shack, killing her sergeant on the phone desperately alerting the commander. PFC Jerry Slant joins Jean behind the pillar but before she can reload or he get his weapon to actually strike the target, a chain gun mount on the top of the speeding BMP opens up, slicing them in half.

The brave sentries die fast and they die young without exploring all life has to offer. Death makes a note.

Colonel Angel Rontaldi leads the follow-on attack from the front (the first BMP and the guard shack inseparable) sweeping through the gate. Rontaldi directs his diver hit the ready room; troops arriving from that direction what he considers a clue. They meet no resistance until closing on the buildings. A long burst of gunfire alerts his gunner. Immediately .50 caliber twin barrels answer the burst, multiple heavy projectile impacts silence the gun.

Screeching stop just outside rows of barracks, the rear doors spring open. Rontaldi and his men stream out, the entire platoon sprinting to the nearest of the long, single story buildings before he whistles a split. The door at the end opens easy for the first man. Stepping aside to give the following troops a clear field of fire, the second man approaches the doorway hosing down the inside with a double clip from his Ak-47. Screams from inside and Angel Rontaldi knows attack surprise remains, should be a mop up here. The second building assault- ditto results. With no opposition organizing here, Rontaldi orders his troops secure the armory. BMP after BMP rolls full bore to M1A1 storage.

Rontaldi orders his driver move out. Having yet to hear from the other assault teams, on his way to the flight line Rontaldi taps his driver. Be cautious, the tap relates, the other side of the base is far to go without escort. Gunfire breaks out too far to see where. He hears the distinct whoop-whoop of a helicopter. The armory assault did not have an air cover element after departure of his Cobra taxis; much to his chagrin the plan relies on producing assets, not expending assets. The plan is easy; Red River's flight line by tradition lies empty during the holiday weekend. No sweat, no fuss, no muss, no shit some plan, Rontaldi relays his observation to the anti-aircraft units. Apaches in the air, stay on your toes.

The escaping Apache is actually an unarmed Kiowa scout bird relying on small size, speed and agility to stay safe. The sole occupant pops up near the barracks. Immediately two 20mm radar guided cannons bracket the target with five seconds of high explosive shells.

Rontaldi's Rolex Pilot reads 00:00:00.0, "That's how the GC says 'welcome to Saturday'. Stay frosty people, there's more coming. I'm on my way; units B14&15 form up behind me. Let's shut them down from operating my flight line."

Saturday 30 August

Plans For Nigel, Singing River Island, Alabama 0011

“It’s eleven minutes past midnight, and my name remains Stanley The Nose Lisnewitz, storm finding is my business,” Stanley can’t contain his excitement yelling to be heard over the wind and rain piping his full smiling personality into yet another exclusive Weather Channel feed, his biggest score ever fattening his bank account nicely. “As you all by now know I’m all by myself here on Singing River Island ‘cepting for the Coast Guard skeletal crew manning the decks waiting for the worse to blow so they can get back to the lifesaving business. We’ve been here hours, just waiting for Nigel, you know. Home viewers have the WC to thank for paying big bucks to old Nose here, standing alone facing the storm of the century. Nose nails it, film at eleven as you often hear, ha-ha. Meteorologists love the big storms, live for them in fact, but Nigel is way out of my league even. I plan to kiss the ground next time I see it. Inland cities on the Gulf Coast can expect eighteen feet of surging water cresting ahead of Nigel’s nearly stationary eye wall approach. The patch of sand I stand on is about ten feet above sea level.”

Stanley lets his exuberance hide his worry. He sees water at his feet. Why is he so good? NOAA predicts landfall same place as Katrina, that’s where he heads. Following the pack’s smart money bet, The Nose flies into New Orleans Thursday morning with cameras rolling to get the last views of the city before nature’s fury. But smelling the wind and sea, The Nose thinks he ‘knows’ better. The forecast isn’t matching the conditions. Bang, Stan gets an epiphany running model outputs against similar events, altering his trajectory in life: his new landfall prediction probabilities move the eye wall to Mobile, Alabama.

The Nose rolls his tiny independent production crew east through Gulfport and Biloxi against the tide of refugees pouring in from the coast. Old Stan’s leased mobile unit, consisting of two land cruisers, unfortunately struggles with Nigel’s fury. Currently both rigs sit underwater, stranding a handful of operators, technicians along with his producer and personal assistant. All hurricane veterans, Stan places complete confidence in his crew’s ability to survive. Driving three crew (sound, camera, comms’) to the delta, they watch with the nation’s weather voyeurs as the competition runs live on the spot

coverage of ports and ships preparations for the storm, still focusing on New Orleans. Nearing Mobile in late afternoon, Nigel's altering approach becomes evident. Stan stops at a gas station as wind speeds increase, pelting sheets of rain grow ever more horizontal. He makes a call.

Stan's Weather Channel connections open doors securing the camera's location far in front of any sane observers, the Coast Guard Station at Singing River Island. Steady winds over 50 mph gusting to 85, his small convoy struggles over the bridge to the manmade island and onto USS Wasp Lane. Waiting base personnel grab them in the parking lot, dragging them onto a sandy path. Lucky for old and could be in better shape Stan the Meteorologist, it's a short sprint from the parking lot to the concrete overhang protecting the stairway leading into emergency center on the northern tip of the island.

Now thankful guests of the U.S. Government, Stan and crew pile down the steps and burst through the steel doors of a reinforced bunker built during U.S. Navy base construction. Inside the Naval Station Pascagoula shelter and safe for now, Stan rolls cameras introducing the nation to the hard working men and women of the coast guard station as they hunker down to wait out the eye wall surge. The Weather Channel streams present the operational shelter in a positive light. As the eye wall passes to their east, the Coast Guard Station seems to survive the worse half of the storm intact. Stan presses the Guard to open the doors. Hoping for some tornadic action, The Nose is overcome by the storm's ferocity.

Hand on his hat, leaning forward to maintain balance; staring wide eye into the camera, refusing to retreat from the record size Hurricane, Stan brings his mike mouth close in a futile effort to alleviate the howling wind and pounding hail, Old Stan shows the world the best in the business:

"Seven weeks in the making, Hurricane Nigel, atmospheric scientists tagging him a six hundred year event, with sustained winds approaching 185 miles per hour in the eye wall band, is here on Singer Island, along with the Coast Guard and my skeletal crew. Not quite inland, Nigel's tally of widespread damage estimates apparently reach tens of billions of dollars, not including efforts to repair a slow motion

environmental disaster resulting from unsinkable oil drilling platforms toppling like dominos. Inside New Orleans Parrish brand new (Category Four?) storm preparations failures result in widespread flooding. As dykes fall experts now predict more dollars in damage than Katrina.

What of the human toll? Will there be record Nigel Deaths? Casualties so far have been light, thanks to pre-storm total mass evacuation efforts of the National Guard. Millions of residents prudently evacuate the region removing of all but the most intrepid, and the most stupid (such as myself and the skeleton crew)."

Cut, print, and let's get inside!

<< Subtle, Red River Armory, TX 1230

One tall fence and perhaps a few guards is all that separates the civilians from the military. Major Ramirez, late of the Colombian Army and anti-insurgent expert marvels at the lax attention to security. He grins at their comfort levels (Armory's store weapons, correct? Weapons are targets, no?).

"Seemingly invincible on their home turf," he says to his staff Sergeant.

"They don't keep much of a visible presence, it's true but run patrols," one platoon leader ventures an opinion, getting a nod from Ramirez. "The diversionary attack on the living quarters attracts security like flies to honey."

Pointing to the well-traveled road running parallel to the fence inside the grounds, "Yes, the military patrol the base, no question in my mind they're out there now wondering WTF. However, not our problem, Colonel Rontaldi will kill them all, no doubt about it. However, this is a County road, according to the map, and if anyone's patrolling early Saturday morning, expect a Sheriff. Send rifle teams, two down the road each way staying well hidden, two hundred meters give or take. Send a second pair of teams in five minutes; conceal them one hundred meters up the fence."

The troops scramble into positions, several attacking the perimeter barrier, an ordinary chain link fence with razor wire. Moments later an urgent radio message from the two man scout team four clicks west

provides warning as Ramirez' sappers complete removal of the access road fence. The southwest route into the base awaits them but surprise will be lost unless the security patrol vanishes noiselessly. Ramirez gives the order and the sapper teams melt into the thick brush on the outside the fence. Squads of snipers with silencers assume positions ahead of the oncoming vehicle. Major Ramirez hears the approach, the low rumble of a slow Hummer. The vehicle stops at the missing fence section, not even a chain link visible.

Deputy Paul Winslow claims he hails from North Dakota, a small town boy from a place he refers to as "Way-Too-F'ing-Cold". Winslow settles in "Nowhere Nearly As Cold" Texas upon discharge from the regular Army. Hooking up with the Sheriff's department, finishing up Friday overnight into Saturday duty, looking forward to a long sleep then maybe a picnic with his beautiful wife and two small boys, turning a blind corner practically bottoming out on the deep ruts along the fence they call a road, Paul immediately spots the missing fence.

"Damn kids," he thinks putting the Hummer into park. He's turning to complain about the persistent vandal problem when his partner's head explodes spraying blood all over the inside of the vehicle. Brain matter, bits of flesh and some bone coat Paul.

Major Ramirez watches the occupants of the patrol vehicle through his small Japanese binoculars. The vehicle stops as the Captain begins to count aloud, "One, two, and three." Two riflemen bracket the Hummer, bullets sailing in through the open windows. The passenger dies first, perplexing his partner. If the other man physically reacts to his partner's death, Ramirez can't say.

Ramirez gestures- a squad climbs out of the bushes sprinting to the security vehicle. Hmmm, what to do with the law? Drag them to the far side of the fence; leave them for the carrion feeders. Ramirez inspects the Hummer, a mess inside with engine still idling, is valuable "Take the Hummer down the road for the intelligence guys to comb over for documents and radio codes."

The southwest passage finally clear, the tall and thin Major, veteran of countless actions in the Colombian jungles, climbs into the passenger seat of the lead BMP ordering the armored column to move

out. They were 10,000 meters from their objective when radio reports of action at the west gate begin to trickle out on the low power radio system.

Ramirez keys his mike three times- pick up the pace. His driver floors the accelerator and the bumpy ride over thick scrub brush grows unbearable. Clearing a gentle rise at three hundred meters suddenly presents evidence of United States military might. Row upon row of helicopters sitting motionless awaiting him- the satellite pictures do not do justice to the firepower below, Major Ramirez chooses position giving his attackers clear field of fire from elevation. Just as they break the rise, two helicopters lift off making their way to the front gate. The first Apache flies high and fast, making a beeline to the Gran Columbians attacking the front gate. The second driver performs exactly opposite-low, slow and methodical. This one may be trouble; Ramirez thinks, ordering the attack. Shoulder launch missiles streak toward the Apaches. Ramirez loses sight of the chase, focusing on the immediate. The increase in altitude proves the difference maker as the low bird survives.

Ramirez's Gran Columbians attacking the flight line split into two elements. The infantry fighting vehicles led by Major Ramirez streak down the hill to the engage the forces prepping more attack helicopters. Gunfire starts up, a few tentative shots at first, becoming hot and heavy when the ground crews drop their equipment turning to run. The second element of the attack holds the high ground. Antiaircraft forces unlimber AAA guns, radars and missiles. Setup is smooth and fluid, the crews steady. Their performance during the encounter though proves less than stellar. Their mission orders hold no ambiguity-under no circumstances will any helicopter leave the flight line. Their secondary objective is not damaging any of the equipment. Keep them down but do no damage is a tricky maneuver. Seven attack helicopters sit in the service queue, spooling up. The nearest reaches rotation before the BMP, the nearest AAA battery sights them as they lift off the ground. The first shot misses wide sailing into a fuel bower with explosive results, damaging three of the helos on the ground, two seriously.

The second AAA round loses lock mistaking Major Ramirez's speeding BMP for the target. Ramirez ejects out the passenger door as the round impacts the rear doors. All six infantry, including two communication specialists die from the friendly fire incident. Ramirez survives unscathed, considering trying to rescue the burning soldiers, lacking resources, standing, watching. He pulls out his only option, his Beretta 9m automatic pistol, shooting screaming men one by one, ending their pain. The AAA battery shoots again, hitting the Apache tail rotor assembly bringing down the potential attacker. The men hope like hell they will not have to fire again. They luck out.

During the firefight on the ground, only one more attack helicopter manages to take off the antiaircraft commander gauging the machine out of Dushka range. He orders the missile team to engage. The AAA gunners let out a collective sigh of relief. Radar lock on the helo is immediate. Two missiles fire off the trailer-launcher. The radar spoofing ability of the latest Apache variant proves more capable, both missiles sailing far away chasing spurious radar signals. Two more missiles, heat seekers, launch tail chasing the fleeing helicopters. Clouds of chaff and hundreds of flairs eject from both sides and the belly of the flying machine; however, this generation of heat seeker proves able to overmatch the spoofing attempts. Each engine accepts one missile. The bird explodes in a great fireball.

At the far end of the line, another helicopter and crew struggle to spool up. The Gran Columbian AAA commander doubts he can effectively target this one unless the helicopter climbs out toward them. He radios Captain Ramirez to warn the ground troops to attack a small observation helo hiding at the furthest end of the far line. Immediately the helo warming up passes information to a returning attacker; the same machine escaping earlier now creeps back, danger close. Ramirez takes the warning to heart ordering several BMPs to target the two helicopters. They target but miss the Kiowa moving toward Rontaldi.

Ursula Payback, Pensacola Naval Base, FL 1240

His last words, "You piece of crap, why?"

Colonel Black's dying continence holds an incredulous look Ursula finds damn insulting. She pulls her blade out; before once more thrusting the hilt through his six pack abs to clarify. "Stupid question."

Robert looks at Leo, shrugging to say: not my turn. Leo risks life and limb to calm her down, "Ursula stop fooling around, we have too much work to do to stop to get your jollies."

Not every part time citizen soldier serving in US Army National Guard units is a Gran Columbian infiltrator, just those volunteering to work the Labor Day Weekend. Pedro's elite assassins and infiltrators, such as Ursula, Robert, Leo, Umberto, Filma and thousands of others report for duty shifting the balance of power off-axis. Professional spies from Gran Columbia Army Intelligence for decades penetrate services in the Gulf States, moving into the region from other bases then volunteering for scout duty National Guard. Citizen soldiers, professional fighters one and all, support the enemy's troops.

Pedro issues strict orders and a code of conduct disallowing personal vendettas. Neither Leo nor Robert lifts a finger; going against Ursula defies the odds of long life. For her part, Ursula understands she hasn't time to stop to scratch every little itch or remove every irritant acquisition during twenty-eight years duping stupid people. However, sometimes life can't move on until...withdrawing her family heirloom three edge dagger in a fluid motion she lifts it overhead, blood drops giving his face chicken pox, smiling as a shadow of concern clouds his normally cruel features. Ursula delivers her coup de grace as his head lolls, the back of his skull presses against his shoulder blades she pegs it there with a plunge through his baby blues. "OK Robert? All right Leo? Let's go already, slowpokes!"

Ursula is power she is the law. Thank the Governor of Florida, Ursula, for signing an order calling in the National Guard to protect Floridians from the ravages of Nigel. With the unfortunate stabbing demise of her former National Guard superior officer, 'Dead Man' Black, Ursula assumes command of a stunningly Satanic Gulf Governors' Association Accord, thereby ordering mass mandatory exterminations (or evacuations to FEMA camps, depending on who is reading). Leo fears evacuate is not in Ursula's English vocabulary.

Robert wonders if Ursula is messing with them, replacing evacuate with exterminate.

Opposing forces (Ursula and company) suddenly appearing in the southern port cities during a hurricane? Not a coincidence, Airre the Quantum and Rita model the invasion, examining dates and locations mathematically looking for cyclonic activity maximums. Their invasion isn't without the improbable becoming routine. Prediction of key operational variables begins with detail study of Gulf hurricanes, particularly deadly storm landfalls- frequency, strength, path and duration. Carolla wishes to set an invasion 365 or one year timetable but the modelers lose accuracy within weeks. When Carolla Bolivar grasps how impossible their forecast task, Pedro helpfully points out, 'see I told you so', we can run banks of Airre calculations for decades and still not get the answer you're looking for.

Carolla recommends, with invasion success teetering on the edge (not to mention Karl on her case over monopolizing Airre the Quantum) the GC War Council back the modeling effort with differing teams trying differing approaches. Within days, BTI (Bolivar Transport International) funds two independent Centers to work the problematic prediction, taking unique approaches toward finding the one year solution. One research team establishes inside the United States National Laboratory System, co-locating with the Hurricane and Severe Storms Prediction Laboratory in Miami. First sole sourcing then actively recruiting funding from governments, the Bolivars become a hit within the scientific community. Many doors, even NOFORN doors (ordinarily exclude) open for Rita and her South Americans. The second storm prediction lab works in the black world taking data and direction only from Airre the Quantum, in her free time (Karl's compromise).

When their forecasts for the following summer's hurricane activity finally arrive, the scientists sitting on the Gran Columbian War Council parse the data, noting significant agreement for above average sea surface temperatures combining with the continuance of a string of waves coming off the African mid-latitude deserts at the end of August or the beginning of September.

“There’s your window- it’s a twelve day span where conditions are favorable for storm development,” Carolla chooses the first day of the twelve from which to count up, setting the timetable rolling forward to the countdown.

Deciding to attack in the late summer hurricane season boosts the Gran Columbian Council invasion plan thanks to further developments in partially controlling the actual weather. Atmospheric events that summer, the busiest Atlantic Hurricane season in memory, allows the GC time to rehearse their stimulus response sequence in-situ; thoroughly pissing off those not in the command loop. Planning and Strategy and Materiel Supply perform a yeomen’s task in the following storm season conditioning the Gulf Region of the US Army National Guard to evacuate the Gulf Coast thoroughly.

In early spring three tropical systems spin up: Axle, Bonnie and Clyde. None of these rotating circulations approach the mainland, but Bonnie and Clyde ravage the Caribbean Sea. The action shifts east with the Gulf Stream heating up. Two storms chew up Cuba, Miami and the Keys in late May and mid-June, Category Two causing minor flooding in the Yucatan.

As the summer progresses, the Weather Channel tropical report never lacks for circulations and map features, storms spawning from sub-Saharan Africa with solar heating forming low pressure waves moving into the Atlantic Ocean with the westerly flow in search of energy. Evaporation feeds uprising, warm moisture into the oncoming wave. Without warning about eighty miles west of Cabo Verde Island, a kinky spin enters the picture- perhaps a monarch butterfly flaps his wings a thousand days ago a thousand miles away sub micro butterfly affect (or perhaps Airre the Quantum reconfigures atmospheric heating).

Either or, neither nor, computers sampling the structure of the atmospheric system combining data from statistical studies punt instead of deciding if the developing wave will continue on course (status quo) or begin to organize then rotate. Forecasting in general, tropical storm prediction in particular, remain like the practice of voodoo: an ancient black art also known as computer Kryptonite until Pedro points at the screen, “That’s it, I know it!”

Computer forecasts typically catch or miss equally early rotational tendencies for circulations born of Saharan heat. This season, an unusually wet spring cools off the hot desert sun pleasing the frolicking elephants and rhinos. Abundant fauna support masses of butterfly migrations increasing atmospheric vorticity spinning the wave Pedro points to. Fast moving spinning waves tossing off energy transform plain old warm moist ocean air into low pressure. Pedro's storm rotates in place before drifting south of west bobbing along, meandering. Storm after storm overtake Pedro's wave, pounding the Caribbean Archipelago before making for the Gulf of Mexico or Atlantic Seaboard leaving behind wide swaths of destruction. NOAA computers predict the trend to continue and intensify into October ending of the Tropical Storm Season.

Evacuation rehearsals continue up to three weeks prior to the end of the countdown. Regional disaster preparations take effect for New Orleans, Alabama and the rest of the Gulf States as four weak tropical depressions form in the southern Gulf and western Caribbean. The three weak Gulf circulations combine into Gracie, an intense storm encompassing the Gulf slowly spinning and combining, reaching upper Category Four dimensions. Oil drilling platforms and tanker transfer stations take a pounding, operational disruptions are the rule until Gracie moves off, bouncing and looping all over the Gulf, first threatening coastlines and bleeding off energy then withdrawing into warmer waters re-stocking moisture and re-growing thunderstorms. For two weeks Gracie tours the area, keeping residents hopping and government services in high demand and short supply. Then a dying high pressure system over Central America allows cool dry Canadian air to enter the region, pulling Gracie into the Mississippi Delta through Mobile, Alabama. Big bad Gina downgrades to a strong Category 2 the moment her eye touches land. Experts (BTI skills) come out of the woodwork excoriating government officials' failure to protect.

Pedro and Rita orchestrate a bloodless coup ousting quality leadership from Gulf Coast Region National Guard, replacing them with political hacks and stooges. Over the objection of the Shriver Administration the Governors of Florida, Mississippi and Louisiana

remove top brass wholesale replacing them with morons, all vetted recommendations of the 'Gulf Coast Council's Commission On Evacuation Responsibility', GCCCOER, a BTI non-profit sponsoring a persistent all-media campaign. Alabama proves the lone holdout, as Rita predicts. Change in Mobile will have to come from within.

The GCCOER fail to remove 'Dead Man Black' after Governor Alabama plays off their report against real-world Pentagon interests. Pentagon pockets, bottomless; Pentagon intelligence, golden; thus Governor Alabama keeps former Army Colonel Black as Gulf Coast Regional Director under Federal Authority fulfilling new Guard Restructuring Guidelines usurping State power.

Major Ursula takes a political appointment to the figurehead number two position, in place managing from Huntsville the Gran Columbian's Gulf Region Clandestine Network. Her position inside the Alabama State system allows her to access data bases and information control efforts of Gran Columbian soldiers infiltrating over the border inside a rising flood of illegal economic immigrants. Ursula works fist in glove with Material Supply's Karl Meltzer to transport illegals to Alabama, giving them bulletproof identities. Model citizens and competent soldiers from Materiel Forces Command maneuver into open slots, appointments building dominant positional numbers inside the Guard system.

Dealing daily with the son of a bitch, Ursula hates Black's guts to their rotten core. This political weasel, all talk and little substance disgraces them both attempting to finesse Ursula into bed. She takes that opportunity to clone his phone, bug his house, car and office; this try, she kills him.

Leo and Robert apply the fireman's carry to his warm dripping body hustling him over to Ursula opening the double French window, tossing him broadside then leaning over to await the splat. Ursula swings the conversation back to deliverables and complexities, "I have it that we're shifting away from New Orleans, am I correct?"

Leo and Robert await the splat so Paez, acting Chief of the Materiel Supply Command answers from South America, "Here's the deal: Nigel's forcing the Tyrant away from New Orleans temporarily, the movement pattern is in the noise, deal with it. Tyrant's rerouting ships

but pre-stores remain available, material the BackBreakers put in place, so stick closely to the plan. Ursula, cut orders getting the Louisiana Guard coordinating ground movement and security with our transportation people. Meanwhile Tyrant will implement Landing Pattern 2.5, the Alabama hub option.

The Tyrant pipes up, "I require supplementation of Mobile's navigation beacons, a job for Gulf Coast Region's Guard Engineering Division. Since we're now splitting security between zones, not so much do I like Alabama."

"We don't have much time." Paez driving home his point, "Ursula, stop killing idiots- get your people moving."

B. Murder, Red River, TX 1245

"Twenty-eight and out," is the motto of former hero pilot CWO Bruce Murder upon leaving the 101st Airborne with a full pension before seeking a State Guard Commission. "Twenty-nine and in," is his new saying.

"Should change it to Screw Texas," upon entering Houston's real estate market, figuring out he's poor. B. Murder is in Texas not because he loves Texas but because the best offer to continue flying arrives from the TNG, desperately in need of qualified helo drivers. BM hasn't a clue his unit has Middle East orders. When he reports he learns there is no gear, no housing, no shit. Most of his new unit is in the Atlantic aboard cruise ships steaming toward God knows. However, they leave their helos. Bruce trains every day, even Holiday weekends, appreciating the snafu keeping him with his new Apache.

B. Murder hears gunfire at the main entrance; shrugging a question down to the ground leader holding the preflight checklist. Master Sergeant Jonan Irby the Chief of Maintenance tries the radio.

"No comms," both listen to continuing gunfire, big automatic weapons. The Master Sergeant hears enough, responding to the attack using hand signals ordering ordnance technicians to arm the flight line Apaches with live weapons.

"You better haul ass!" B. Murder knows the drill, tries being supportive. Klaxons sound as ground security forces roll Bradley Infantry Fighting Vehicles behind obstacles into firing positions. The

Armory relies on defense in depth, trading space for time until the Apaches engage.

Bruce Murder survives his youth in the streets of Paterson fighting ugly, gathering early in life that when it comes to luck, best to make your own. Hearing nothing on the local nets, B. Murder flips switches to wide comm receiving mode, transmitting nothing. Just how far up the chain of command does news of this attack go? Silence is not good. Taking out his cell phone, calling the base switchboard then listening to it ring. "You know what Sarge? I have tone. Let's try the Governor." Hitting zero, for one dollar the operator connects B. Murder to a flunky at the Governor's Office. Bruce gets two sentences out, hears a click. Pressing redial he gives the phone to a tech.

Local comms boot as Fitz, his WSO finishes with the techs installing live weapons. Scampering into the front seat, Fitz immediately downloads weapon data off a pair of heat seeking AA missiles and three Mavericks. Fitz gives B. Murder the kill sign: no ready lights on either set- checklist pause.

Captain 'Eager' Beaver and Specialist Walter Brenner (the only guy besides himself not to have a call sign) spin up the rotors on the other Apache training with Bruce's flight. Taking to the air first, de facto making B. his wingman, 'Eager' Beaver jumps vertical 2 klicks. 'Suicide', thinks B. knowing what's next.

"Holy shit," alive for a second or two viewing the entire scene including the main gate ruckus, Walter Brennan streams live feed locally. B. Murder observing the live stream sees a ground to air missile battery nearby consisting of a truck- small radar dish on the roof with a box of tubes alongside. An assortment of Infantry Fighting Vehicles, must be maybe two or more platoons of infantry, engage the main gate in heavy fighting. Before anyone speaks, the distinctively young, thin voice belonging to Walter squeaks, "SAM Warning" Captain 'Eager' Beaver fixating on the gate action simply does not have the time his super quick reflexes require to dodge AAA fire. The canopy shatters.

Bruce rotates climbing a few feet banking, practically sliding off the side of the helo pad, immediately transiting away from flaming wreckage. A pair of Apaches and eight members of ground weapons

crews take the brunt of Eager and Walter. Exploding Apaches fall like dominoes, more birds exploding more birds, many holding people. Bruce watches the Plus Five, Plus Ten aircraft and the Plus Thirty alert teams die.

“OK, so no help” he says to Fitz who snorts twirling his index finger, the ‘move your fucking ass’ sign. Bruce is on his own ground, where he’s been stuck freaking training every freaking day, looking over freaking Texas for weeks. “Fitz, you get a fix on that truck?”

“Don’t you want to hit the gate, help our guys? You know how, right?”

Breaking low ceiling near the dorms to check for nude sunbathers got him a note in his file weeks ago, but territorial familiarity changes everything.

“No, first we get the missile truck. Tell me when I get close ‘cause I’m going to sneak up on these pricks and you’re going to put a Maverick up their ass. Got it?” B. Murder pivots south on a tangent dictated by the terrain, away from then toward the threat. Barely off the ground well out of sight, sweeping between low hills, nice and quiet, slow and easy, stalking the intermittently squawking dish. Silent, seeing everything, B. Murder explores his limits.

“I get him like a sweep every twenty seconds or so, two more sweeps and you’ll be able to hit him from a block away.”

“Two more? C’mon, he gets us too. Screw this.” Stopping between two hills Bruce raises the radome for a targeting fix as he’s popping up to expose his Mavericks. In 3.2 seconds eyes take the measure of the scene. Co-pilot and gunner, professional Warrant Officer Gary Fitzpatrick knows many pilots, some perhaps even crazier than B. Murder so he’s choosing missile coordinates during the popup because it’s Fitz’s shot to take. Instantly he places targeting cross hairs first on the missile vehicle, selecting a Maverick as B. Murder re-orientes to point at the shot.

B. Murder levels the collective and Fitz takes the Maverick shot on the missile truck. B. Murder follows the missile in, the merchants of death: CWO B. Murder with blood in his eye thundering with the wrath of God red lining both engines and Fitz hosing down the area with his 7.62mm cannon. Rounds follow Fitz’s sure-shot gaze

exploding a pair of two-ton trucks, sawing through half dozen troops, chewing through another radar assembly. B. Murder drops them into a field before the BMPs react.

Lining up his best route to the gate he hoists the dome while Fitz switches through comms trying to raise the gate. "Someone's jamming."

B. Murder half listening to Fitz lowers the dome switching comms getting nothing. "Try wide band then go passive before they get lock on us. We got to get a signal out." They must make someone aware of the armory attack; he opens up some distance between the jamming and base comms trying angles then raises the dome. The radome gives them a clear picture in five sweeps. They count thirty vehicles in proximity to the gate. The defensive force lies in pieces on the ground, burning.

"We lost the gate and they got the high ground," B. Murder to Fitz.

"See the crossfires?" Fitz counts six ways to die. "I don't like our chances, tell the truth."

"Army's got a howitzer down there can fire surface-air shells, see it? Let's get back in the weeds." Diving, banking port side: time to go.

Shit Trail, Houston Ship Channel, Texas, 0100

"Remember Karl, many receive the call, but few get chosen. I've been waiting for you; with your talents, it's obvious you're the linchpin."

On Karl Meltzer's seventh birthday Madame Bolivar, mother of Carolla, Estelle and Rita, summons the scholarship student to the Head Office. She indoctrinates her new protégé in Bolivar history placing emphasis on secrecy. Sounds interesting, thinks young Karl, there's potential here. He meets with the Bolivar sisters- abruptly quitting the academy. Having nothing to pack, the runaway serpentine past security making for the less-defended back gate.

Karl is on the downslope path toward town, picking up speed looking for the quick exit- maybe a tramp steamer or something is leaving port? Karl gives not a shit, if he can escape intact. The Bolivar Sisters scare the shit out of him, his gift of fear manifesting early.

Seeing Pedro lounging at the well at the bottom of the hill, Karl takes a break to get his second wind.

“Carolla or Rita? Can’t be Stella, everyone loves Stella.” Pedro nails it.

“Fuck me- Rita. Carolla said nothing letting Rita do all the talking. Like, Holy shit; I mean, holy shit, you know? How does she know these things?”

“She’s eleven, Karl baby. She got her first kill at three.” Pedro shrugs.

“Yeah, well, fuck me; if I stay around I’ll be looking over my shoulder the rest of my life waiting for her to waste me.”

“Perceptive.”

“That’s all you got to say? What’s your name?” Karl is curious.

“My name is Pedro Saenz. I’m in your grade. We’re gonna be friends.”

“Not if I’m not here.” Karl pumps water into his hands, drinks.

“Doesn’t matter, we’re glue. Listen, its Carolla should worry you- Rita is a mad dog, is true, but Carolla holds her leash. Keep Carolla happy and we may survive long enough to figure things out for ourselves, see where this goes.”

Karl splashes his face, cooling off, thinking it out, working the angles, deciding- easier with someone else watching his back or more dangerous? He looks Pedro over. Hmmm, doesn’t seem to be an asshole, probably is. Seven years old and already Karl has trouble making friends.

“Look, Karl is it? OK, Karl, obviously you have trust issues, that’s OK, we all do. You fit in, don’t worry. As for the Bolivars, well, you got the gist of what they’re all about earlier. Don’t sweat them. Tell you what, let’s team up. You have skills they require, so do I. I’ll watch your back, you get mine?”

Sighing, Karl leans back in his seat, staring at Nigel drops forming on the windscreen, wishing for Pedro’s company, knowing too much by half.

Material Supply’s organization mirrors that of the Army, Navy and the rest of the fighting services. In the open as BTI Vice-President, (General) Karl Meltzer holds dual citizenship thanks to the strength of

Grand Columbia's US Congress 'buy-in' program. General Meltzer's great-great-great grandfather, a Colonel in the struggle for liberation provides for generational fortunes repeatedly going berserk spilling rivers of Spaniard blood. His lineage attends Bolivar Academy military education branch, then serves the Gran Columbian cause with honors. The latest in a long line of leaders, Karl develops rapidly.

Karl Meltzer covertly develops Gran Columbia's Material Supply and Logistics chain over decades; along the way, he interacts with providers determining their needs, filling orders. He branches into banking, moving money on behalf of his providers. From the fringes, Karl's purchasing department expands directly into vice; supplying an increasing demand thanks to Pedro's help. However, Karl's universe stays small- until Airre the Quantum.

Outside in Nigel's warm tropical drizzle's thin morning fog Karl's Material Supply puzzle pieces swing into motion across the board as he drains mug after mug of sweet Colombian coffee watching situation report updates create red blinking lights swirling about the van. Moaning, shaking his head counting unenthusiastically increasing numbers of encounters with local first responders, notably Houston/Galveston Homeland Security, knowing Rita's anger. Shit.

Midnight shift changes ordinarily put less policing on the street leaving less chance of encountering the law. Not tonight; Karl gets up to pee. Thanks to convoy protection details firing at everything moving Homeland Security no doubt also has a map with growing numbers of blinking lights. So far, the three scenes the van encounters disturb his chi- too much bullshit loosely interpreting orders. Fishing himself out he places a tissue square in the bowl letting loose a stream-playing sink the ship. Karl reads the update off the screen above the urinal: 'so far so good'. The van drops into a pothole. One hand flies to the wall for balance; hot piss running down his pant leg. Shit.

Leading from the front upholds the BackBreaker tradition but leg piss is...no good is what it is. Karl Meltzer performs his thinking while analyzing his wet thigh inside a small-unmarked dirty white cube van sharing a tiny toilet's inadequate ventilation with six others apparently in desperate need of a shower. Stupidly choosing anonymity over comfort and protection stopping only for fuel rotating

two drivers maneuvering his team monitoring support positions in and around unloading and assembly points only gets him wet pants. Hitting the handle, the toilet tank malfunctions; liquid crap pours into the bowl, spewing onto the cheap linoleum. A bad smell grows intolerable.

Passing another HPD patrol, "Our stink is going to kill us," his driver moans aloud. Karl, listening through the thin wall grunts agreement before pulling a set of clothes from the cupboard, putting on a pair of dry shorts wondering if he should try flushing again- you know, maybe it's just a fluke, right? Bad enough his monitoring vans present prime targets when the shooting starts and signal detectors come into play, adding detectable odors doesn't help. Opening the door Karl breathes deep- foul van air beating foul crapper vapors.

"Settle the fuck down," Karl orders, "Take us to the side streets, get us four blocks outside the ship channel zone, now dammit before we start leaking crap all over the road, dammit," Karl doesn't fluster easily, "Somebody fix the shitter, the rest of you, check weapons."

They fly off the highways and byways holding thousands of First Infantry Battalion troops traveling to jump off zones in civilian transports, a squad in each car, everyone ready to go- urban warfare style. Material Supply troops operate under tight security, minimizing contact with the local and Federal authorities. Portside meeting lots empty with SUV after SUV dispersing to assignments. English speakers prowl the waterfront in the occasional Ford Crown Victoria or F-150 pickups sporting Ship Channel Security logos. SCS is a BTI front company holding the security contracts for key invasion points.

Karl's moving map display of recent GC abrasions with HPD reveals pattern shifts two blocks off the waterway, close to Materiel Command's massive warehouse complexes. Noise complaints drift in and out of port areas as diesels crank up, trailers come then go, troops arrive in cars to mate with killing machines and various forms of heavy equipment clank their way out of the big buildings rolling, squeaking and grinding into defensive positions. Real big cannons self-propel moving out of hiding under a ridiculously thin veneer of Labor Day parade and demonstration activity. Pedro's plan calls for quiet movement of troops into position near Homeland

Security/National Guard and City/State defense stations: poor execution or just a stinking, rotten piece of shit idea? Karl climbs into the Captain's Chair straps in.

"Karl?"

"Karl." Uh oh, Airre the Quantum speaks. Unexpected.

"Expect imminent disclosure. Red River jamming bubble holds an Apache attack helicopter attempting to contact Gulf authorities."

Shit. "Initiate attack?" Too early, damn the luck.

"ASAP, find them in route Galveston, take them down."

"Karl out." Shit.

Illegals, Nogales, Mexico, 0115

2nd Lt. Miguel Alvaro adjusting his cap for the ten thousandth time remains the only visible sign showing his nervousness. He is not uptight; merely waiting for another shoe to drop. Always same shit, albeit different day.

The Texaco roadmap spread out on his lap hides a Chinese AK-47, 9mm pistol and three grenades. Miguel stares down at the map frowning. He sips coffee studying the assault plan while pretending to navigate. Old Frank knows the route, needs no help. Behind them in the passenger compartment of the stretch limo sits two privates (so close in appearance they're practically twins) loosely gripping Uruguay-made Lo-Blow Rocket Grenade launchers. Staring at the map like he's killing time deciding which route to take if they ever pass the border into the USA, Miguel scans the terrain. Frank has them sitting eight vehicles away from CBP, Homeland and DEA teams performing preliminary inspections weaving drug-sniffing dogs through nine lanes of creeping traffic.

"One more," letting Old Frank and the twins know what they all know; seven cars puts the twins on a direct line into the Administration Building's Ready Room/Break Room. See thru bullet proof glass separating Homeland Security's Weapon Storage and Comm Shack from the lines of vehicles sending a message to would be troublemakers: Don't try it CBP has cool heavy guns and vests. Miguel gets a different message: We are the most arrogant bastards on

the planet and we deserve what's coming when Frank's limo is seventh in line, very shortly.

Two platoons from Special Forces Company Two with orders to begin assaulting the high traffic border crossing sit on the USA side awaiting the first shots. Cartel hit squads wait on the Mexican side for the twins opening.

Miguel scrolls his mental checklist, beginning the countdown: ten- adjust cap...nine- ready munitions: assault weapons, RPG launchers, pistols... eight- the border patrol is finishing up...seven- expect a parade of responders...six- begin drone video interception...five- roll down windows to expose the twins...four- adjust cap...three- 'twins: weapons up!'...two- breathe...one- 'fire!'

Manny & His Dushka, Port Bolivar Inlet, Texas 0120

"He treats them like his own sons, although they're morons like his sister produces; dumber than a pile of bricks. God help him. For some reason his best shooters are the dumbest on the block and it's his own fault for getting caught up in the moment like a rookie but he has a million items on his list and you would think someone besides him thinks at all. Screw-ups one and all yet he goes and treats them like his own, you know? What thanks does he get? People can't even place a box into a vehicle without fucking up, that's what he gets! Needing to shoot up every cop in Houston, that's the thanks he gets. And in case sarcasm goes over your heads, I'm fucking talking about me and how you're fucking putting me in an early grave, you pieces of shit! Item one on your new list of things to do: don't shoot up every cop in Houston, God help me, dumb as stones."

The troops cringe, having heard this rant before or something similar, like every day for months, what they call the 'third person harangue'. Third person, Del la Hoya knows they hate third person harangues, getting his platoons back on schedule using the approach known as: threat of imminent horrible afflictions. He isn't bullshitting either; suddenly they're matching and mounting weapons to vehicles in record time. Lt. Del la Hoya has some wiggle room in his schedule, in case the local police prove up to the task of trying to stop the invasion during the crucial initial rollout.

Ha, fat chance they suck, he thinks upon easily recovering from the initial movement brush-up losses. His troops nearly ready, Lt. Del la Hoya reports to the company commander Major Esperanza, "Status operational, green, 4x4."

Leaving the crapper, Major Esperanza gathers his warehouse company for a quick inspection. A brief zip, a minor adjustment to his fly, facing the troops preparing to rip out a classic sendoff speech before battle, the Major pauses briefly before bellowing:

"Troops, we know why we are here; we are here to secure the Port of Bolivar for those who come next (you call them the container folks). We have been successful in the first part of the mission. For this, you partially earn my respect and perhaps some respect of Lt. Del la Hoya, maybe not. The troops in these containers will not debark until our mission is complete. It will be up to you (pointing) and you (pointing) and the rest of us to hold Port Bolivar; accept the challenge! Rely on your training. Remember call signs and passwords.

Two other areas of concern, first of course is our enemy; the second, our friends. The United States is a violent country. Every citizen is an armed combatant- men and women, boys and girls. Civilians not immediately responding to your commands, drop them without hesitation. The second concern is our many friends and allies scattering about the populace. When they ask how to help, be considerate and try not to shoot them without hesitation. Just tell them to sit tight and await instructions. Remember operational security. Do I make myself clear? Now, let's kick some ass and take some names."

Manny with squeaky clean Dushka accompany a slow moving parade of infantry fighting vehicles towing artillery, missile and command trucks, portable radars and unarmed troop carriers, counting thirty eight vehicles passing into the AAA basket, safe as eggs in his mother's apron at the bottom of the peninsula. Completing this phase without incident means he doesn't have to listen to a lunatic third person Lt. Del la Hoya rant. Time for Phase Two, the setup- Del la Hoya places Manny and his Dushka in lead of the procession hoping HPD needs to learn another lesson.

Schlitz, Pabst or Piel's? Galveston, Texas 0130

Neighbors Don and Bob make another dent in their beer supply sitting outside (as old men tend to do) looking over the Gulf talking terrorists and fishing. Bob drinks Schlitz, in cans from the can playing his favorite game with a funnel and short tube. Don takes it slower alternating between Pabst Blue Ribbon and Piels Real Draft, what he calls variety, texting Ted about the lights and guns over at Port Bolivar using one hand, taking beers from Bob with his other, what he calls switch hitting, much to Bob's amusement. "What's Ted say?"

"Ted says the Army use permit allows them to put on a demonstration as a recruitment tool."

This Bob understands, "Uh huh. I hear enlistments are down so low they can't recruit enough prisoners and miscreants to fill the ranks...remember the draft? Even so, sure seems like overkill..."

"Takes three tubes to do the March of the Light Brigade properly; why so many for a demonstration, right? That's an entire air defense company, sure looks it, eh? What are they planning to do, drone shoot downs?"

"I don't know, ask Ted. Personally speaking, I wouldn't mind another live fire exercise or two; it's been kind of quiet lately. Schlitz, Pabst or Piels?"

Jordie, Cheyenne Mountain, Wyoming 0145

Jordie handles his problems the old fashioned way- butalbital in Betsy's whiskey. She needs rest and trusts him to do the right thing, following his line of reasoning, as if he ever needs to explain Presidential drug use. Never happen.

"The founding fathers in their infinite wisdom create a Constitution whereas the President United States presides as Commander in Chief, not Jordie the freaking liberal, not the damn Press Secretary." General Peterson gets right to the point opening the National Military Authority Combined Joint Chief's meeting just this side of demanding Jordie wake the President immediately.

Next to him a hologram appears, blurry at first, sharpening into a depiction of the Earth's satellite networks; the scenario reminding Jordie of an atom with orbiting electrons. Peterson growls, "Forward from Wednesday."

Initially traffic around the nucleus appears normal but heavy, many differing orbital speeds, some apparently spinning. “OK, now remove the dropouts in real time.” The first dozen disappearances didn’t register for Jordie, too much going on. The next dozens thin the zipping constellation and he notices the Earth growing brighter. The following twenty removals include the first geostationary birds. Disappearance rates climb exponentially.

Peterson lets the progression run until the rate falls to zero and the only satellites remaining belong to unfriendly (in his opinion) nations. Peterson nods and a new hologram appears. “These satellites remain capable, until the Brits let loose with the Stealthy Laser. None of them belong to us. Play the loop.”

A large orbiting satellite travelling in the upper middle orbit suddenly explodes, throwing debris in every direction. Then the same thing happens in lower and geostationary orbits. The cascade begins. When the collisions taper, the amount of space junk noticeably dims the Earth. Jordie gasps.

The General looks around for his cigar. Crap, lost another one. The humidior is back in his office. Shit. Peterson considers but leaving the conference room without hearing from Betsy isn’t going to happen; luckily Major Tom produces the goods. From the wings a uniform sleeve appears passing a fresh Padron Maduro, in the wrapper. Tending to his cigar, Peterson lets the Chiefs do his talking, presenting the obvious to Jordie the liberal nitwit. Probably thinks dimming the sun good science- freaking climate changers. Peterson paces, silently, menacingly.

Hearing enough, Jordie pours himself a couple of fingers of Betsy’s finest, sans butalbital, figuring it’s time to slow down these loose cannons before they start another World War, “Since when is NATO unfriendly? Doesn’t matter, they hate us now. Did you ever find out who or what even?”

Jordie grates on Peterson’s nerves like fingernails on the chalkboard like a cauldron of old witches bemoaning inclusion in the upcoming burning schedule and so on. Jordie makes him sick and honest to God he wishes the little weasel dead every freaking time their paths cross.

“You’re going to need solid evidence before the President will order any counterstrike.” Jordie disconnects, terminating the meeting.

Peterson chokes. Time with which to gather evidence, he believes in his deep guts, they do not have. This moron doesn’t understand their vulnerability doesn’t know the next attack will occur without surveillance, dumbass.

Alright, dipshit, I know where the line is, “OK, we got this. Prepare Response Alpha Alpha Two; put the subs on plus five alert.”

The Other Apocalypse of Peter =>

Peter begins his tour of Hell with a fancy flyover maneuver, witnessing the scope of some of the major changes made to Perdition to keep pace with the influx of generations dying un-Righteously.

On approach to the Gates of Hell, while he should have been paying close attention to the Word, Peter instead takes in the scenery. From above, seeing for the first time the land beyond Hell seemingly somehow splits into two segments; however, closer to touch down, he discovers the segment demarcation element is not a fence in the true sense but rather consists of men and women standing in the longest line ever. Yikes! Peter watches for some time but the line doesn’t move. Double yikes!

Fielding Peter’s inquiry the Lord, happy to hear Peter engaging showing interest even, replies with gusto, “We call that ‘The Queue’. The line to enter Hell only grows, a natural progression because as the number of inhabitants increases exponentially, the flow through the gate tapers and blammo! ‘The Queue’ appears, forms up and starts to expand. Thanks to Administrative interventions and the constant changes to footprint expansion work orders, ‘The Queue’ rarely moves efficiently- a moment in line defines the Hell experience: misery, mental anguish, frequent violence.

Here’s how ‘The Queue’ functions: New line occupants match up next to someone they hate (could be the actual person or some random group member) who returns the sentiment. Satan’s thinking: make anyone wait forever next to his or her enemies and

see what happens. Good fun for Satan; ‘The Queue’ is a work avoidance maneuver, pure and simple.

Notice the punishing angels walking up and down, poking about every now and then with a sharp stick? Line patrol- no show job for the inner circle, seemingly a form of protection. Effective line patrols control the violence inside “The Queue”, that’s the theory anyway. Without weapons, fist fights break out all the time and sooner or later someone decides a rock to the head is just the thing to do. Knock ‘em down or out, pulverize them or not; no matter how justifiable, fighting automatically changes The Queue. Most of the injuries derive not from pulverizations; but in fact, result from bare hand maneuvers, tremendous forces snapping cervical vertebrae in many cases.

‘The Queue’ moves when the line reshuffles after a fight. This is not what the management terms ‘best practice’. The PAU owns ‘The Queue’.

Another stipulation, a corollary addition attempting to move the line: receiving severe line violence automatically qualifies one or another for Hell; however, one enters Perdition just so, as is, quietly immediately.

Touching down outside the Gate cluster alongside a double twelve-foot chain link razor wire fence, Peter scans ‘The Queue’. Then walking toward the head of the line, those nearest the Gates of Hell, he realizes “The Queue” occupants holding front seats to the goings on, dread entering Perdition so badly they prefer to wait; forever isn’t long enough. Forlorn and hopeless, the second in line attacks the first. The fight is short, brutal, and afterwards, both disappear. Poof. The Queue draws a breath, sensing a hellish disturbance.

Jesus and Peter change the Gate vibe from overwhelming dread to mouth foaming. Without warning, apparently their greatest foes drop in- great frothing, of course, ensues. Getting their mouths in gear the vitriol toward them begins loud, growing ever harsher. Next thing you know, they take the classic fighters’ stance, hands coming up in attack pose- street brawl, boxing, Jujutsu, Judo, Karate, you name it, there it is. Jesus gives all a cheerful smile as a

swarm of punishment angels leave a nearby tent to beat back wannabe crucifiers, not quite restoring order to 'The Queue'.

"After all these millennia, still the same greeting," laughs Jesus heartily. "I would miss it if it were otherwise." Turning to the line, palms outward, bestowing blessings upon the still foaming crowd, "Be still." The scene breaks into immediate calm, line occupants turn back to staring bleakly into Hell.

"I don't think we need to wait here until the cows come home, let's see what's happening inside."

Jesus leads Peter to the Gates of Hell (Gate 33), an ornate wide double swinging affair with a big lock. Standing around doing nothing to move the line, six punishment angel doorkeepers open the gate, beckoning them through. Following a step behind, Peter greets each gate angel in turn, exchanging pleasantries, passing a couple of punishment angel jokes. After a few 'did you hear the one' lines, Jesus grasps his arms from behind giving Peter a gentle shove into Hell.

As they leave, a loudspeaker begins blaring nonsensical instructions at 'The Queue'. Peter cocks an ear, listening:

"All right, you pieces of shit. Everyone needs to have his or her paperwork out and ready. If you do not have paperwork, put up your left hand. Those without left hands, cock your left eyebrow. If you do not have a left hand or a left eyebrow, then (mumble mumble)... All right, you pieces of shit. Everyone needs to have his or her paperwork out and ready. If you do not have paperwork, put up your right hand. If you do not have a right hand, then cock..."

The punishment angel repeats the requirements in a loud, angry voice, accenting each syllable; embellishing, adding admonishments as to what genius would try to enter Perdition without paperwork, etc.

Peter looks at Jesus, "I didn't see any paperwork anywhere."

Jesus sighs, "Work dodge. No paperwork, no real work. Just wait until we get inside, you ain't seen nothing yet."

-The Other Apocalypse of Peter

V-VII: The Queue**High Seas, Southern Pacific Ocean, 0159**

“Calm seas.” Celia gives Mrs. Wilson a smile, looking into her waste can, examining today’s take, “Yes, I believe you’re getting sea legs.”

“Up yours, Celie. My weed stash isn’t intended for two, you know that, don’t you dear? Next time you’re having trouble stomaching the so-called food on this scow, don’t come running to me.”

“We’ll be sailing around the Cape soon, it’ll warm up any day now and in calm winds you can sit up on deck. How would you like to sit up on deck?”

“Dear, if you survive this trip I’ll be shocked, shocked I say. Now leave me alone with my misery.” Mrs. Wilson has no need of ocean views.

“Would you turn me down if I told you Karl left me hash oil?”

“Holding out on me, eh? You’re an evil woman, Celie, evil. Now stop being such a Bogart, will ya? I’m dying over here.”

Cpt. Enrique, Monterrey, Mexico 0200

Judy Ferrarro freaking cannot believe she’s going to be late for work yet again. Her boss at the big bakery is dying to sleep with her and sooner or later he acquires leverage; then she walks- or not. Jobs are tough to come by and this one allows her to work at night, getting home to the kids by daybreak. A tough choice, Judy decides to pray for guidance later but for now- stop worrying of the future, put pedal to metal, risk another ticket she never pays anyway.

To shave a minute or two off her commute and avoid traffic lights-always red (ALWAYS!), she leaves the highway one exit early cutting through the nasty smelling industrial area. She never feels safe here; streets devoid of cars yet full of homeless types, regular bums not so much a worry huddling to drink. Judy keeps her eyes open for predators and lookouts, individuals staring into the void emotionlessly, capable of scaring the shit out of her. She doesn’t brake to slow off the highway, just downshifts her light blue four-door Honda, keeping to the middle of the bumpy brick street.

Judy braces for a high speed right turn at her worst corner, a spooky dark 4-way stop sign separating vacant lots from warehouses and manufacturing sites, bad places to be alone. Blowing through the stop sign, Judy eases the gas sliding, cornering. Touching the brake, looking ahead- roadblock Holy Shit!

The road ahead is impassable; the military type equipment doesn't register consciously- at first. Her hackles up thanks to the neighborhood, Judy's ready for anything and as she slides past the red brick warehouse blocking her view around the corner, before she can expletive she stands on the brakes, sliding to a stop before an approaching tank with a big gun in the middle, taking up her whole street.

Apoplectic over the hold up, knowing she lost all chance of not being late tonight, Judith springs out of the Honda screaming like a banshee. The tank stops, as do the other tanks she now sees. She begins walking as nobody wants to move. She adds gestures, just in case they can't hear her. Three tanks down she comes upon a group of men in fatigues holding large rifles watching another group of fatigues evidently unloading the warehouse initially blocking her line of sight- so she adds the warehouse to her list of grievances. Judy keeps walking, looking for whoever is in charge.

The big lot running the length of the rear of the building is full of military spilling into the road, blocking her detour; freaking night of horrors will never end, will it? Judith has taken this short cut every night she's late for the past year and cannot believe what she's seeing tonight, her make it or break it night for sexual relations of the worse kind- leverage sex.

Judy's problem- she's bumping into serious men performing serious deeds racing the clock. Poor Judith also doesn't know the big gun vehicles are not Mexican Army but BMPs, Russian-design Chinese-make, outwardly Venezuelan of origin but not really after Karl arranges for shipment to then storage in Monterrey, Mexico. Thirty-seven BMPs each month get "lost in China" in a Material Supply blizzard of paperwork. With their transfer hiding in legitimate shipments of large numbers of "made in China" munitions ship overseas in secret to this and similar Mexican warehouses.

All around Judith, former Assistant Baker who would bed her boss rather than forsake her children, Materiel Supply's rolling stock pour out of a slew of warehouses in a cluster. Preparing for transfer north of the border, the Gran Columbian Army Heavy Brigade and Materiel Supply staffers scramble to un-stuff the rafters of every piece of equipment necessary to outfit the first follow-on forces. Judith stops jabbering coming across a nasty looking trio holding big rifles but motors roaring to life drown out her pleas. They aren't listening anyway. She follows the new noises- seeing the man. Across the way on a catwalk standing alone observing as very heavy tank-like vehicles with thick steel threads turn over their engines with a piercing 'WHOOSH', turbo jet noise Judith feels vibrating beneath her feet. Watching track vehicles rolling onto a carrier behind a big ten wheel diesel truck Judith sees brand new T-92s with crews buttoning down inside running system checks and loading rounds, jockeying around with no coordination and several near collisions, a misbegotten ballet finding each slot assignment in the Materiel Supply caravan, per written orders with accompanying diagram.

The big guns on the big tanks do not disturb her nearly as much as the countenance of the military commander. Judith stares mouth agape at the man she's been afraid of meeting, this apparent bum standing at the side of the road in fatigues holding a large notepad in the crook of his left arm clicking on things. Clean-shaven save for a semi-thin, striking mustache running down the sides of his mouth joining beneath his mouth from the bottom lip to his cleft chin, he stops clicking turning in her direction. He must know how he appears to her, he looks vicious and his stern bearing and manner strike fear in the hearts of men, and women, while standing tall staring back into her uncertain expression. He sees cumulonimbus clouding her eyes. Her gift of fear is slow to the party.

He knows who she is; has let himself be seen by her several times.

"This is one scary dude." Judith thinks silently, deciding in an instant that taking the shortcut has gotten her in real serious trouble- the kind that ends badly and not at work, either. "Is this what you call irony?" She's 'just Judith wondering stupid things' being Judith. Sorry, Judith, close, not quite.

Material Supply Security Specialist Captain Enrique's duty assignment takes in this entire BTI industrial park. Bad for him, his tanks below can't get their act together and follow orders. His disgust radiates outward, affecting everyone, including Judy. He spies her looking, gives her a beckoning smile.

Captain Enrique works this assignment three years without much of a story to write home about until Judith takes the overnight assistant baker job, starts commuting through his territory driving like a maniac. Enrique likes maniacs, works with quite a few in fact. He feels a stirring every time she ventures past him hanging with the bums loitering streets near the bridge. She smiles all the time, even when late. She also thinks she has a problem at the bakery but Enrique straightens out her manager's lechery when Karl purchases the business. No person at the bakery dares mess with her now, answering to Karl via Enrique, same as every other business in his territory.

Tonight is the big night- Enrique ensures the roadblocks snare Judith. Staring open-mouthed, she watches as he crosses the highway on approach to the four sentries, three of who come to attention saluting. He keeps her eye extending his hand, finding her clasp firm, tight and dry.

"Hello, Judith," he begins with a light and friendly tone belying the seriousness of his message, "I am Captain Enrique. I am the Material Supply Security Specialist assembling a heavy equipment brigade for action up north. Today, Judith, everything changes for me and for you. I am no longer a bum you pass at ridiculously high speed when you're late for work. Indeed, you no longer work at the bakery. You own the bakery."

Judith catches on quick, "Am I a prisoner?"

"Yes, in a very real sense, you are my prisoner. My men will escort you home to pick up your family. I am making terrible enemies today; perhaps I win but if I do not then, this will not be a safe place. Temporarily, you're with me."

"Are you taking everyone then?" without hesitation in her voice.

"Everyone in your household, yes, everyone else, no." sad truth, "They will be left behind and perhaps nothing will happen to them." Enrique puts the odds of success around 80-20, against. "I must see to

war preparations, please excuse me.” He turns to the men, “Move the Honda into the warehouse before we leave then see to the comfort of Ms. Ferrarro and her family.”

Locking eyes with Judith, Enrique smiles; she smiles back and the deal seals. Taking her hand once more, so soft so smooth; offering his most heartfelt goodbye, “OK, no sweat, right?”

She nods, has no words. He reaches into his pocket producing a tiny radio. Pressing the device into her hand he adds, “For now, I say goodbye. If I live, in five or six or seven or infinity days I will find you. Keep this, pressing and holding this button transmits a beacon, allowing me to find you anywhere. I will listen every third hour on the half hour, beginning a week from today. Judith, you understand you must be patient, don’t wear down the battery?”

She nods again, afraid for his future, afraid to wait a week to find out if he’s still alive- not understanding any of it. Enrique feels like crying, “Get your family and prepare for a new life; with me if we’re lucky. Goodbye, I love you.”

Like he sees in every cheesy movie ever, Captain Enrique takes the secret love of his life in his arms squeezing until her torso practically pops from all the attention. Judith does her part, swooning for the audience, dipping into his embrace, jabbing her ampleness into his ripples. She locks onto his mouth, tasting and liking long enough to establish a solid memory of this unlikely and unbelievable day.

She breaks off the kiss, takes a step back, looking him up and down, “You’re a great bum. Stay alive for me.”

Please Sign This, Houston TX 0230

“Two thirty in the freaking AM, just look at this shit.” Ted Williams just can’t get over the mounting volume of action reports. “Look at this shit,” he mutters again, “so much action the telephone pole triangulation listening posts tracking gunshots shots keep locking up with some sort of software freeze, losing data- thanks for that you trigger happy fucks, good luck now Ted’s got one less data source available to get a grip on this shit.” Ted asks his phone how many minutes to sunrise.

We need more firepower, deciding to lead, clicking onto dispatch, “Get the fucking National Guard online, coordinate with Homeland and for God’s sake wake up Incident Response. Load out the PMV’s heavy: rapid deployment. We’re taking the battle to the bad guys.”

Outgunning his patrol units isn’t working for Ted. Applying immediate backup from his Incident Response force inside the heavy military surplus PMVs will cut their losses. Fourteen additional officers and their commander roll his way while Ted relaxes back in his seat drawing a heavy sigh thinking he’s been in on the losing side but expecting change- very soon. If in fact, the mushy mouths in the department astound him and tonight’s incidents relate to gang warfare, too bad for them. The drug gangs fear Incident Response thanks to some close encounters combining hard training officers with firepower and protection enhancements. Incident Response as a tactical unit remains low key; however, their equipment complement includes command and control trailers brimming with automatic rifles, grenade launchers, racks of ammunition, Kevlar helmets and body armor- the whole works for a light company of troops.

One more thing, “Call in the next shift early, get units rolling.” Ted Williams on a roll, finishing his doughnut in record time, “Coffee, need coffee.”

In real time, General Meltzer shares Ted’s transmissions requesting heavy forces, including Ted’s location and follow-on orders. Assimilating this data, Karl and his team plot an ambush. Movement orders for district patrols burn up the GC net.

Lt. Del la Hoya’s handheld device vibrates him to attention. Studying the screen for a moment before clicking OK, Lt. Del la Hoya highlights Manny’s comms’ channel relaying orders to the lead vehicle Dushka in a short transmission merely a burst communication tasking Manny to an intersection east of the city to await the Houston Police. Ambush and neutralize.

Before speeding toward the new initial point, Manny’s driver leaves the convoy pulling into a gas station waiting for his map to update. Upon studying the route a moment, he grinds the transmission into first but waits for the procession to pass. From his topside position behind his Dushka, Manny looks over his former convoy giving Lt.

Del la Hoya a nod trundling by in his heavy troop carrier command vehicle. Del la Hoya returns the sentiment, gesturing up the street.

Manny turns just in time to see four quiet scout motorcycles zip past. The road is narrow because of on street parking rules. The damage to empty cars mounts as the Gran Columbian armor vehicles roll from the waterway and busy warehouse district into the streets of Houston proper. Manny's Dushka follows the bikers; two more Dushka carriers follow Manny.

Retaining visual on the scout bikes, Manny and his Dushka meander parallel to the seaway. When four brake lights come on ahead, he pounds the roof three times getting two pounds in return as the seven vehicle convoy coasts to a stop. The scouts dismount, shooting out streetlights with silencers. Manny dismounts, popping out in the middle of the street, surveying the neighborhood- issuing placement commands. Climbers make for the high ground with glasses and radios. From the maintenance truck in the rear a soldier with bolt cutters opens the gate to the Park Slope Recycling Center. Manny helps back his fighting vehicle into position peeking around the side of the large steel corrugated building, gun centering on the cross street intersection to his right. His Dushka settles in beside him, twin barrels at the ready. Across the street other gunners take positions around and between vehicles, packing the dual parking lot of the well-to-do Park Slope Community Center and adjacent Park Slope Senior Activity Center. Two minutes later, the scouts leave. Manny and his Dushka sit in the dark waiting for the arrival of the infamous Ted Williams.

Three blocks north an urgent call to the Park Slope Fire Department/Emergency Response reports gunfire coincident with an out of control building fire in a small petrochemical plant in the warehouse district. Manny sits down the street from the location report. Park Slope residents pay high taxes expecting expert services, including a respectable Emergency Response containing catastrophic events. Their first responders never disappoint them, including tonight, rolling every piece of hardware in the building confident of their ability to regain control of events.

Sirens wailing, five sets of lights depart Park Slope's large new fire station. Light holiday traffic yields the right of way; the trucks get up

to speed approaching Manny's ambush. Manny listens to the nearing cacophony, heart beating uncontrollably. Seeing flashing red lights reflecting off the buildings at the intersection Manny needn't hear from the lookout perches: they're here.

Manny lets the net fill before giving the order to fire at the procession. Juan's Dushka nails the lead truck, the snorkel, in the rear just before passing out of range. The Dushka on Manny's side of the street cross fires into the hood of Pumper 295. Manny chooses to attack the fourth vehicle, Ladder 14, pouring copious amounts of Dushka rounds into the engine and passenger compartment. Then they target the cross roads, removing all life.

Their fire continues until Park Slope no longer possesses a first response. Seeing no other targets, Manny gives the order to rejoin Lt. Del la Hoya.

Getting the Park Slope report, noting Incident Response servicing a different scene, Ted grabs the keys (I'm driving dammit!); however, true to form his command vehicle crashes into a fire hydrant two blocks from the action- in full view of the debacle. Dumbstruck Ted witnesses the hammering.

Putting his ride in gear, in dead silence Ted creeps away from the first responder ambush lest he become a target wondering just how to counter firepower capable of shredding fire engines like paper.

Tactical Response, Houston, TX 0240

Don and Bob stop counting the number of military vehicles parking under the lights on the grassy wetlands at the tip of the long peninsula jutting toward the bay, preferring to concentrate on drinking. Besides, the count sucks as earlier arrivals disappear into the tall pines as more show up so after answering the beer question Don takes his cell phone off the deck railing firing off a text asking Ted what he's found out about the Port Bolivar assemblage.

Ted, sitting in the back of the Houston Police Department's Incident Response communications center, still wonders what the fuck is making tonight different from any other shift. Reading Don's text watching Channel 7 coverage of the Park Slope Fire Truck Bombing, Ted gets that weird itch, testicular. Wondering, Ted rubs his nuts

getting into some serious scratching by the time the command screen switches into admin permitting (tapering his rubs a tad while switching hands to scroll the military display permit in the files). The permit app requests permission for a multi-branch force to perform a live fire demonstration originating at Port Bolivar. Hmmm, they wish airspace lock down beginning soon of all Harris and Liberty Counties, including local Gulf waters. The proper check boxes look OK, proper seals affixed above the signatures but Ted's balls need scratching- he always listens to his crotch.

"I got a hunch about these convenient obstacles to our problems' solving ability tonight," those closest to him hear him mumble bending over to reach the sweaty places- in his pants up to his elbow. Ted switches hands to pick up the mike lying on the command center, dialing into the Task Force Command frequency barking out orders, "Tactical Units meet Incident Response and the MCU at the Park Slope Fairgrounds for outfitting." Turning to his Duty Officer Ted ups the ante, "Whistle up some drone coverage."

At Headquarters the Deputy Chief- Administration (Ted's nemesis and his Prick of All Time Award Winner) monitors Operations in the Mobile Command Unit full time the moment Ted's Task Force forms. Alleging close attention improves Ted's performance and effectiveness; instead, Deputy Chief Douchebag immediately jumps all over him, setting him up to take the blame for everything- including the recent Park Slope fire trucks alongside everything else upcoming. Ted always runs hot and cold with Administration- but this asshole irritates him. The shift change brings on duty Commander Dickwad back at Police Plaza, always intent on "Keeping Williams on a Tight Leash."

Uh oh. Shrillness blaring from the speakers demands immediate attention, "Negative on the early callout. Tactical units on duty must revert to holiday normal operations; units report gang activity covering sectors in Southside Place, Bellaire and West University. Drone coverage unavailable at this time, impossible sans satellite guidance- thanks to the snafu. Besides, the Military has a demonstration tomorrow afternoon at the Port and their permit application

specifically requests our units remain out of the vicinity before, during and after the demonstration as a safety precaution.”

“Right,” replies terse Ted, trying to hold back his irritation over what he considers dipshit-driven roadblocks over assets deploying in his command sector. They’re messing with his shit. Ted worries about his parents thinking of their brush with disaster just hours before. Maybe that explains his loss of cool.

“You assholes, the demonstration isn’t for hours.” Lucky for Ted, his transmission never leaves Incident Response Tactical Command.

Tactical Units not already chasing tail in West University ignore orders from Downtown responding instead to Ted’s location. He picks up Tac Four and Tac Five immediately, a pair of outsize Hummers left over from the Gulf War the force got for cheap as ineffective in actual combat. The vehicles do, however, impress the folks back home. The Hummers seem out of place rolling east past another Route 10 traffic jam, joining a short caravan of various Incident Response vehicles turning in at the Toll Road Headquarters building.

Turning off the small, almost empty lot and onto the grass Ted aims in the general direction of heavy guns and munitions carriers moving into position behind the grand stand on the Park Slope parade ground. He’s never seen all of Incident Response- collectively, an impressive collection of firepower. Ted gets into the moment practically cursing almost, “Holy shirt, would you look at this, its action time!” Looking portside, Ted strikes the cement barrier- hard. Shit.

Better Ted Than Dead? Port Bolivar, TX 0255

As the airbag deflates, Ted’s phone buzzes. Patting his pockets, pulling out devices left and right, finding burners, checking screens, discovering the menace, sighing deeply- Ted hits send.

“I taught you to drive better, you know. Jesus, Ted, you’re a menace.”

“Dad, I’m kinda busy, see all the blinking lights?”

“Is that what you call it?”

“I was looking at something.”

“Obviously.”

“Look Dad, I gotta go. Much to do, etc. but thanks for nut-busting.”

Like a suckling pig slow roasting on a spit over a hot bed of coals skewer through the ass, veteran bar-b-q man Ted experiences swine POV the hard way. The airbag remnants in his lap attest to tonight's frustration. Ted wonders and thinks while fishing for a blade to cut off the seatbelt. Again. They're gonna charge me for another belt, I just know it- fucking Admin fuckers.

Outside his ride, Ted meanders somewhat aimlessly working himself through the familiar concussion protocols until stumbling upon the glorious Unified Command motor home, aka Mobile Event Reconnaissance Vehicle, MERV. Ted's respite belongs to Homeland officially, but possession is 9/10s the law, thus Ted stands alone in the kitchen, thinking he can hear the burn as his fat drips onto white hot coals, sizzling and popping. To take his mind off the stink of roasting human flesh, Ted joins the growing assemblage outside.

Greeting officers reporting for riot gear and heavy weapons, "I count about fifty reinforcements; Jesus, where the fuck is everybody?" The group quiets with that, can they get the job done? "Post a guard over the leftover supplies until we can get some admin pukes out here for relief. Pass the word the fairgrounds hold tactical supplies for reinforcements as they come online. There's work to do, let's get the hell out of here."

Turning back to the MERV, Ted's thinking of taking a quick dump as the loudspeakers cackle to life, "Mobile Command, Mobile Command- This is Air One for Mobile Command. Goddamn it, what the fuck already- someone come in!"

The co-pilot of Air One works the radio while his pilot runs down the flight checklist. Ted, not anticipating helicopter support out of Ellington Airport finally receives a pleasant surprise. Perhaps if they acquire situational awareness it won't be his fat dripping and popping on the coals. Rushing inside:

"Air One, go for Mobile Command."

"Air One reports spooling up for takeoff in 30 seconds from Ellington Field. Estimate five minutes your position Park Slope Fairgrounds."

Hot damn, thinks Ted, looking behind him at the mob- so many stupid grins. Amazing what a little good news can do. The MERV

seems lighten as their moods lift. Heroic efforts by the City Aviation Division working all night building from parts prepare a fast moving scout helo. Aviation Division also produces pilots; a scratch crew of two young officers caught hanging around for the Labor Day Combined Forces Air Demonstration.

More good news follows another minute later from Ellington Field: if they find a sober crew for their freshly certified bird the Texas State Air Marshals will be back up also. Ellington helicopter flight mechanics on triple time and a half tear up the maintenance schedules moving on to the next helo in the hangar.

Ted reminds everyone there's a no fly zone everywhere south of Humble and the Intercontinental Airport, thanks to the Air Show. The Mobile Command Center will reach out to Ellington and the FAA but Air One requires tower clearance; however what Ted does not know hurts them, the tower at Ellington is empty. The phone rings; nobody is home. Fuck, thinks Ted. Fuck.

Onboard the spooling chopper, staring up at the dark tower, determining that finding the MERV is the thing to do (clearance-schmearance) the pilot and former Air Cav Warrant Officer looks into the big brown doe eyes of the copilot. They think alike most times; silently agree now- she pulls back on the stick just a tad swooping ten feet off the ground. So far so good, the two stare at the gauges, needles, lights- all systems go.

She pulls back on the stick some more playing with the rudder pedals to rotate a quick three sixty. Air One is in the green doing slow rotations while climbing to cruising altitude, leaving the Airport grounds. She calls the MERV in a semi-ass covering attitude, "MERV: Air One eta plus four. Out."

What they don't know will hurt them. Starting with zero yesterday, Port Bolivar now boasts two fully operational ground-to-air fire control radar units as overnight the BackBreakers run trailers non-stop down the Bolivar Peninsula. Well-paid factory technicians work slave away getting the equipment into operation in time for tomorrow's test demonstration.

Four technical engineers (white jackets) leave the radar trailer taking the long parking lot walk back to their cars, laughing and

joking, all holding fantastic denominations in digital currency. In full get-away gallop, the lab coats stop mid-stride as the missile launcher swivels, cocking an SM-4 round into firing position. The engineers know Standard Missile Number Four, the Air Attack variant, fires beam riding missiles surface-to-air or air-to-air requiring a pointer to direct the electronics providing steering clues. In fact, the trailer the engineering technicians just left connects the SM-4 missile array to a millimeter band rotating radar dish hidden in some trees a half mile away.

Staring at the exhaust nozzles, knowing they'll burn if the missile flies, the techies react (or not). Not that it matters; reaction time swift, reaction time zero- running spares no lives.

After a split second of communication in sync with the beam, then another fractional second sending directions to the mechanicals inside the slim, pointy rocket with six sleek fins; the SM-4s solid rocket motor ignites in a mighty blast. The pretty girl and the good looking guy in the white coat make as if to run, while the other two trembling geeks wet their pants in terror. Flames fry four. Luck certainly plays a role, but divine intervention makes sense too.

SM-4-1, a steel composite dart proudly made in Washington State, almost leaps off the rail in its whoosh of a hurry to get downrange. Eating up radar guides in moments the missile flies downstream, detonating ten yards from the slowly maneuvering target on fairgrounds approach.

The flash from primary detonation lights the fairgrounds including the MERV, but as he wonders at what he's seeing, Ted's feet register the tremor of the debris impact. Dread evident in his voice, the communications tech picks up the mike from the table, "Air One, Air One, do you read? Air One, Air One, come in Air One." There's no reply at all.

Dispatch comes up instead, "Mobile Command, calls are coming in regarding an explosion between the Fairgrounds and Ellington. We are also getting calls about a missile in the same area."

That about sums it up, clearly concisely, Ted thinks. Fuck me, fuck us and fuck the crew in that helo. The shit meets the fan. Ted's the shit.

“We have a cell from the missile battery setting up at Port Bolivar.” The comm tech looks over at Ted, questioningly.

“Ask them which side they’re on, the fucks.”

Ted launches out of MERV into the now-stunned crowd of about ninety cops. “Right now, we’re moving out, dammit! Four to a squad, leave the fairgrounds- give me roving patrols, spread out a little moving south southeast. Advance to contact, shouldn’t take long. Swarm to neutralize sure to take the threats to heart, just ask the helo crew on fire about their evening. Keep moving, stay in contact with MERV and keep safe everybody.”

Bounding back into the Command Center, “Did you get that? Copy my orders to dispatch. This fucking bus is mobile; let’s get this rolling target moving.”

Dialing Dad on his cell, finding him beyond excited totally amped, “Ted, what the hell is going on? I saw it all, Jesus Christ, flash-boom-boom!”

Ted gets to the point, “OK Dad, we’re OK- just not Air One. Time to go, Dad, tell Mom pack for a long camping trip, like: food, water, supplies for two weeks at least. Get it all out- the ready stores from the basement pantry. No shit I’m serious, Dad!”

“Abandon ship? That bad? OK, I hear you. Hold on.” impatiently understanding, Ted listens to some rustling then his Mom comes on.

“Ted, are you OK? What’s going on?”

Ted’s relief at hearing his Mother gives him pause to count his blessings, “Mom, I’m OK. I’m in the mobile command bus. You’ve got to leave for a time while we try to get a grip, figure things out, react- could be bad. I’ve got to go. Mom, please be careful and don’t forget the neighbors.” Upon exchanging I Love You endearments Dad comes back on.

“Son, you have major problems and I got a feeling you’re on a runaway train but at least you’re not driving. Well, figure between packing and sobering up- on the road in two hours; stay safe I love you we’ll meet again bye.” Click.

Get your shit together and get going. Ted thinks about New Orleans’ cops during Hurricane Katrina leaving their posts in favor of

securing their family's safety. Right now, he nearly understands why they did what they did.

Not if, but when- is how Ted figures the shit is going to go down. Sitting down at a console as the driver drops the transmission into gear and the oversize MERV lurches forward, Ted, not one for seatbelts, practically flies ass over teakettle. He manages to get a headset on, switching over to Headquarters net to fill in the Brass, the Chief."

He finds the Chief, still driving east from his ranch, just now getting into cell range, totally pissed off not minding who knows it.

"Those assholes are full of shit," finishes Ted's short verbal report.

"Right, dammit we have no choice but to assume those assholes, as you put it, will shoot down anything you put up. Go slow here, we're five dead with dozens of casualties before the missile. I mean, you're linking both events, perhaps prematurely?" The Brass comes to a quick decision clicking into the Department net, "This is the Brass: I am declaring a limited emergency. Administration, you get that? Move all reserves and support Operations into the field. Ted, until I arrive on scene, you're running the show. You're doing fine, stay calm and root out whoever Cartel is trying to take us down. Administration will issue an early callout for all shifts. Somebody wake the Mayor, dammit!"

The comms' tech breaks in on the conference, linking the Brass into a call from the Port Demonstration Field Officer/Information Officer for the live fire exercise demonstration. Right off she blames Ted Williams by name and rank for the shoot down incident, demanding Houston Police rein him in, shutting down cold his Incident Response Operation. She disconnects in a huff.

"She sure knows a hell of a lot about what we're doing." Ted thinks a second, "Is she still on the line? No? How about the Brass? No? OK, log in receipt of the call but do nothing."

Poor Ted, taking it like a dog from four and a half feet of a grinning fair hair Colonel Lisa Natalie, thirty fours year old and a sixteen year veteran of Material Supply, currently serving as BTI Operations Manager for Port Bolivar Operations. Texas immigrant from Argentinean roots, Ms. Natalie is the same Rice graduate and BTI supervisor responsible for paying off her subcontractor technicians, waiting for them to stroll through SM-4.1 blast radius before taking the

shot. Holding the defense of Houston in her hands, she's ahead of schedule with two offset radars now tracking all movements to street level in the metropolitan region including air traffic out to San Antonio and over the Gulf. Displaying three dimensional representations flaring out into the coolest topographical map ever seen, Lisa laughs hard to counteract the sweaty tension building since yesterday's late start and shipment difficulties. She cracks herself up again knowing so, so much more about Ted's operations than Ted Williams. Chuckling, he must be pondering her obnoxious finger pointing- dumbass.

Lisa sort of admires this Deputy Chief, as does her number two, little Janie with long black mane draping to the gentle curve at the small of her back. She never smiles but her eyes sparkle considering Ted during planning sessions. The Colonel hopes they might perhaps speak personally in the short time Ted has before Karl Meltzer throws an Army at him. You know- the good laugh.

But Ted has no time for any dickheads at the Port; deal with them later. Still no new contacts, he contemplates his (less impressive) moving map displaying unit movements pointing to a clump of dots, in a steely voice intoning, "Move these squads out of the same block, spread 'em out."

Ted doesn't expect much from the limited emergency declaration; he needs men and equipment now, not some time soon. Perhaps pack his staffing punch to a new level - US Army Rangers for instance- or at least the Texas Rangers. Getting back on with the Chief, now hi speed wirelessly netting from the back of his limo speeding to Park Slope, "Sorry to bother you the Brass, but the situation here is unstable."

"I'm having trouble finding the Mayor- supposedly out at the ranch but the security detail cannot locate him; however, they do have his family. It's all a little bizarre, but I'm thinking the Mayor picks a bad time to disappear for some tart on the sly, dammit!" He's in a situation with little intelligence, no satellite coverage, no air support, no Mayor, no Ted request for Rangers moving through channels. "Time for another go around, I'm kicking this up to the Governor then Homeland Security. Hang in there, I'm on the way." Click.

Leaving Ted to his own devices, Ted's OK with this development. HPD's Incident Response quick reaction force approximates a very light small arms company in strength. Ted also possesses a small aviation wing currently down a helo and stuck in a no fly zone. Desperately needing help but without orders Homeland forces stay put- pulling a burner phone, Ted calls over to the barracks, getting the Texas Ranger Houston Battalion Duty Officer promising to run his request up the line. Ted thinks they don't take his dead seriously.

Ted wonders about the lull, if the violence is perhaps abating. Maybe they won't need the full alert. The bad guys might be down-timing it. He doesn't want to get in the shit with the Governor (once is enough to identify the biggest dumbass ever). Brass is taking the bureaucratic mess off Ted for now but that'll change if the bullcrap level escalates. The Mayor's job is to handle the dumbass Governor but out of touch remains out of touch.

At 3:15 Dad texts, reporting parents and neighbors ready to roll early. Ted dials from the burner, getting the helo wreckage update: "It looks like the fire is out. The firemen are cooling down the hulk. There's a whole mess of activity going on at the Port. I guess about forty maybe fifty vehicles. Mom saw the trees moving earlier, in other words, the forest crawls with gun vehicles."

Dad's full of good news, thinks Ted. "Where are you going?"

"Inland," Dad sighs. "We're not stopping until far from the action, getting away from all these petrochemical installations is a good start, ask me."

"Tell Mom I Love her," breaking the connection, Ted hopes like hell his Dad has time to get away; first in line is helpful.

Manny & His Dushka (again), Houston, TX 0300

The Night Owl, his moniker, inhabits a studio apartment. He calls his adobe a knot in the trees lining the river across the road from a group of warehouses. Roaring engines draw his attention to the window but the Night Owl makes out no source. Then an explosion, nearby judging from the sound- Owl diverts from his favorite porno site to social messaging, firing a quick stream alert to the overnight staffers at WHOO, an outfit known to pay handsomely for person on

the scene footage. Owl jumps out of his jammies to run to the gun noise, camera in hand. Once outside, the Owl, inside wifi transmission range, points his camera, capturing everything.

A vehicle burning three blocks away provides dramatic backlight to his network video stream. A large mobile home or recreational vehicle with flashing lights drives into frame, toward the Owl, following a police car or two; tough to see clearly in the chaos. The Owl re-focuses, zooming out to capture a small tank or fighting vehicle burning ever brighter with secondary smaller explosions (ammunition cooking off).

“Holy shit,” the Night Owl voices over the feed, “there’s tons of police on the scene, too many to count. Oops, not so many anymore.” adding as a gun truck screeches to a halt between the cops and the burning vehicle, muzzle rocking with each shot, tallying hits on the (lightly defended) peacekeepers.

Manny unleashes his Dushka on the locals. The carnage continues until the recreational vehicle fires on the gun truck, drawing fire to allow the cops to pull back. Vehicle after vehicle takeoff, sweeping past the amateur videographer as the WHOO hit count soars jamming the site. Impressive heavy vehicles fighting the cops are cool and all but Night Owl’s stream rises above even ‘kittens with yarn’, becoming an instant classic. What makes a stream go viral? Ask the Night Owl; in a fit of modesty he’ll claim unerring instinct. He’s aiming the camera down the street toward the action when out of the fiery glow a large Coast Guard Cutter on approach churns the river firing nonstop. Viral.

The Owl zooms in on the Cutter’s bow as twin .50 caliber machine guns even up the odds against Manny and his Dushka. Ted and the command post vehicle cease fire turning away from the river. Manny and Lt. Del la Hoya lose interest in the cops instead focusing attention on the arrival of brown water naval firepower. The gun trucks accelerate toward the Night Owl, thereby throwing spent Uranium projectiles in his direction. Manny exchanges fire with the Cutter. Zooming out again, the Night Owl follows the gun truck moving into a narrow alley between houses perpendicular to the river.

Lt. Del la Hoya screams curses into his throat mike. After losing a Dushka along with half the command staff in the BMP, with every fiber in his being he's dying to reengage Ted and the cops but the Cutter blocks his goals.

Doose Goes Mobile, Red River, TX 0345

Major Ramirez posts guards on the flight line ordering his antiaircraft units redeploy in defensive postures- movement to predetermined positions orienting against the main threat axis to the northwest but on guard for an attack from anywhere. Not wishing to hear explanations for his friendly fire near death experience, Ramirez instead uses the event as a learning experience. The AAA teams nearly weep for joy when no disciplinary measures come their way.

Ramirez meets up with General Rontaldi and their Material Supply Territory Manager Colonel (Doose) Sandusto clustering around the conference table inside a plain white box truck. Rontaldi prefers the outdoors but Doose remains next to the wide informational pipe-for now. Already, buses streaming into the armory ferry specialists from rallying points (shipping containers) across the region. The number of drivers, loaders, technicians, mechanics, pilots and other personnel clearing the armory staggers.

Trailers and forklifts come from out of nowhere, the Bolivar logo of the Gran Columbian transport company visibly interwoven into the camouflage paint scheme of green, brown and tan. The line of vehicles grows to resemble a python coiling about some sad victim, squeezing out life. Ramirez thinks it impossible the drivers will find empty their bunkers before the counterattack. Sandusto and Materiel Command however prove worthy of the task tactically managing the swarm picking Red river clean. Troops and their specialties meet up for transport and hit the road. Forces deploying locally redirect little supplies drawn from Red River, the bulk of the equipment and ordnance making the move south and west to re-supply expendable resources.

The men using northeast Texas as their staging ground prefer their supplies first. Platoons forming companies travel together in a convoy of SUVs to the armory. Met at the gate by Materiel Command techs

for a quick scan, sending RFID data to the computer most refer to as Method; real name Airre The Quantum. The Method updates orders, sending directional steering to their equipment. Thousands of Gran Columbian soldiers discover top quality state of the art equipment waiting for their arrival. The first of the arriving units take up position reinforcing the base perimeter. The Doose grins wickedly.

“As you know, Method always follows from means. For years Materiel Supply infiltrates Pentagon supply chains,” explains Doose aka Colonel Sandusto, “so much so that during the past 120 days Method’s been cramming Red River Depot full with war supplies and sundry articles. Method interdicts, intercepting US Defense Department networks, becoming the brains behind the mass redistribution of material and men accompanying downsizing of the military. I’ve been monitoring all kinds of whining bitching and moaning- all the way up the United States chain of command-complaining Red River cannot possibly hold this equipment.

Method rents warehouses holding non-lethal war fighting equipment such as food, clothing, and transport vehicles- emptying as we speak- the draining of the well. Red River Armory will be a ghost town in mere hours.”

“Amazing,” General Rontaldi grins in approval, reaching into his kit producing three shiny gold metal tubes. Upon passing around standard issue Bolivar cigars, the men bite off the ends, spit them on the floor of the spotless box truck and lite up-ignoring the small “No Smoking” plaque on the table.

Rontaldi and Ramirez press the Doose hard for all possible supplies before commencement of hostilities. The Commanders on the ground know the Gran Columbian Army cannot just appear from nowhere and march north unmolested. The plan calls for flux tolerance with re-stock en-route. Great debating between Operations and Material Supply with regards to equipment needs settles when Pedro orders hitting the depot early, sending the spoils south into the line of advancement; also sending Doose’s box truck north during the raid. Doose’s ass goes on the line to ensure Red River equipment makes it to the re-supply waypoints, re-fitting units heading north, no doubt engaging in heavy fighting.

“The wayward Apache concerns me,” Ramirez allows, “Do we have any intelligence revealing location or transmissions?”

“Yes,” comes the ready reply from a technician manning the console to Colonel Sandusto’s left, “Method’s reporting the pilots maintain strict radio silence, in its words: “in a display of discipline unexpected and worthy of respect”, while tree top flying a direct route to Fort Hood.

“Is Material Supply ready to spoof comms when the word of our success leaks and queries begin arriving from NorthCom?” Rontaldi asks. Getting an affirmative nod, Rontaldi continues, “Perhaps the moles at NorthCom will soon get busy elsewhere; forgetting about Red River, but we cannot discount the quick reaction force possibility.”

Speeches over, Ramirez and Rontaldi, the two shipping container genius WSOs make haste for two Cobra attack helicopters spooling up for the getaway.

Locking the door behind the exiting officers, Doose settles into his seat before speaking. “Back to Houston, please. Step on it.”

C4ISR Briefing, Southwest Paraguay 0400

Rita looks up from her place, clearing her throat to catch everyone’s attention before breaking out the bad news, “The following data is not for general distribution- not yet. The controversial SoCal I&I (Intercept and Imitate) Squares’ Prediction Board Op terminates immediately. Two minutes ago, the primary target wizens, finding alarming systemic code errors. Discovery of the SoCal I&I Op is imminent.”

Karl on comms, in ass over teakettle with initial deployments, shootouts and a laundry list of Material Supply hassles, misses the message. Paez translates: “She’s says they’re on to us- your square in the pool is a miss, looks like young Paez cleans your clock sorry about that- not!”

Rita shoots this most immature idiot her coldest hard stare, “No, that’s not what I said Mr. Smarty-Pants Know-It-All. What I’m saying is the humongous Colorado Rocky Mountain NSA Signals Collection and Analysis Center houses the world-class-leading counter-measures section, old Oak Ridge information war veterans. Isolating a code error

message, then using the data stream to discover an intermittent side lobe- the node doubling back to Airre, via a shitload of proxies represents sheer genius. Logically the error doesn't exist; until imaginary set number manipulation methodology theory brings it to life.

NSA uncovering algorithms will run the error back to the source sooner or later. They will eventually cut the tree down to the roots proving that amidst the space satellite war we've been spoofing local signal data, capturing keyboard strokes encryption codes passwords and the like extending to all Pentagon MilNet sites for an unknown amount of time. Thanks to all for input about how bad my plan sucks. Airre ensures me the matter remains moot, as NSA making useful application of new data streams will take more time than available. Until next year they'll have questions, not answers."

The scientist in Rita doesn't tolerate vague translations- she also insisted squares be larger; is unhappy to be paying Paez for minutes.

Paez laughs out loud "Moot, what a hoot! It just so happens I have with me the squares' gaming board failure timing your big SoCal I&I Op." Holding up the poster board to show everyone the squares, "I got stuck with my square as penalty for late picking. You chose the precedent, not antecedent."

Karl agrees, "Pay the man."

General Foreboding, Southwest Paraguay 0405

Carolla picks up on her private line from her side of the bed. Pedro sleeps like the dead typically but her triumphant yell penetrates his inner sphere. Rolling over, moaning, "What fucking time is it?"

Half an hour later straddling the arm of the couch, leaning back, smoking, musing watching Pedro dress thinking of how much he doesn't have a clue she's ensuring his grim future, Carolla lives to gloat "I picked Paez's box for SoCal you know. That's why Paez called; I knew it the second the phone rang. I'm not surprised Rita didn't call you know, she got angry with me for taking the first two blocks calling it a no confidence vote."

"When you're right, you're right, no shit. Well I for one am happy for you," Pedro sounds sincere. "Good to see you haven't lost your

touch and can put down the team without trying. SoCal of you, should I add?"

Pulling her robe together, silent and barefoot Carolla glides away from his taunt toward the door. Before exiting she turns giving him the finger, slamming the heavy oaken slab hard enough to crack the frame in two places. There's no way she takes crap from such a loser.

Theatrically an expensive artwork sways, falls cracking its frame again in two places. Pedro senses omens of bad tidings like his spine cracking in two places. When Carolla goes ballistic bad things tend to happen and for sure a guy like himself, the top guy in a matriarchal society, is an at risk entity. On the other hand, Bolivars and Saenz's go back a long way. Both generational lines breed from the same wells, want the same things. He sleeps like shit anymore; such dichotomies keeping him awake deep into the night. Only Carolla's touch delivers sleep and the message of her middle finger- i.e. don't expect to see me intimately any time soon. He mouths the words- no time soon.

For sure times are tense between him and her, her and the world, him and the world. Thanks to change orders the show is on the road accelerating into oblivion. Expect betrayal.

Pedro has blood on his hands, innocent-ish blood, yet blood nonetheless. Last night's dreams include lambs screaming, slaughterhouse walls dripping, streaking vertical rivers of blood. Carolla is the butcher, of course.

Tale of B. Murder, Killeen, TX, 0410

Screaming along 100 feet over the treetops at two hundred eighty nine knots, the Apache crewmen maintain strict communication discipline, each of them trying to formulate the words necessary to justify the mess at Red River. Shaking his head in disbelief, B. Murder makes a fast, uneventful run to Division Brigade and NorthCom and familiarity of fleet maintenance.

Bruce Murder works himself into a rage inside the cockpit. His bird leaks hydraulic fluid from at least two places. His controls grow stiffer and he smells smoke though Fitz claims no fire.

"Holy crap," thinks B. Murder, "The world is insane." He circles the flight line twice so the crews below see their damage, get ready to

put the fire out. They land hard. The jolt shakes the shit out of him so bad he's still bouncing as the canopy lifts.

Killing the engines, B. Murder quickly drops to the ground, joining Fitz to watch the whole thing go up in flames. Whoosh! "See Fitz, I told you so." The crews extinguish the flames with chemical. It reignites. Ignoring B. Murder's heavy sighs, Fitz begins counting the fuselage holes, finding over a dozen as a Command Humvee roaring up discharges unhappy officers.

"Tell it!" orders a full bird Colonel, no friend of horseshit.

While Fitz counts bullet holes, B. Murder replays the events at Red River giving the bird a concise Readers Digest version. He isn't far into the story when the Colonel grabs him up, pushing him into the vehicle yelling over his shoulder for Fitz to climb in for the ride to the Comms' Center.

Understands the import of the armory attack; alerts the Pentagon.

Angel Is The Centerfold, Gulf of Mexico 0413

"Holy Mother of God!" Her call sign is Centerfold and she about pees in her excitement, just a little spritz but enough to notice. The inevitable "super" follows. Centerfold isn't pissing the seat of a plane, something she can walk away from. Oh, no, she's strapping down in a rolling ship wearing wet panties for the next twelve hours or so. Her aircraft catapult carrier, the merchant vessel El Poseidon roils about Nigel's second strongest storm band freefalling sideways down steep ravines then climbing the same waves. Plunging down the abyss in her plush recliner Angel struggles with the storm, waiting for the inevitable back break sinking El Poseidon, listening intently for any new creaks or groans giving her the 'escape exit' tip-off. However beam reinforcement and extra bulkheads provide purchase top to bottom on some nasty waves.

Preparing to launch aircraft, while still floating (just barely in her opinion), Cpt. Angel Geronimo does her Chuck Yeager right stuff aw shucks merely a professional pilot maintaining the groove 5X5 hands on throttle and stick, self-administering a gut check out loud for the benefit of her squadron.

"We play for keepsies; so run like hell!"

Elevators lift her first aircraft topside for launch. Angel operating from below decks trying not to puke out her guts like some un-named other people hurling inside the overly warm room coating the anechoic tiles with moveable sludge, watches the spew zig this way while plunging down then zag that way riding back up and over before repeating relentlessly. Two planes wash overboard, surrendering to the waves but four report on station OK ready and waiting. Time for the big show; Angel drinks heavily to compensate for the loss of liquids.

Geronimo's first launching more or less goes OK with one heavily laden multirole Warthog-clone drone aircraft successfully catapulting aft, more or less flung upwards into the swirling squall as the ship crests one of the larger swells. Her fingers fly trying to coordinate the flight surfaces into lift, losing control as the winds rip one of the bombs off the wing pylon out at the tip. Rip! Pinwheel! One 500# bomb gone lickety split into the churning Gulf waters; oh for one isn't going to boost anyone's confidence but the plane climbs out- shakily. She wants to join the puking throng, being such a disappointment. Angel belongs on the centerfold, as she's the best. Ha. Not today, apparently. Thanks, Nigel.

So how can Angel feel even worse? The answer is obliteration of Team Beta, four of her bunkmates- in twos. Death, of course lingers here and there popping in during the storm cruise, plucking the careless thinning the herd, occasionally enlisting PAU help for large crews; overwhelmingly preferring small group or individual tragedies. Angel crashes her first Warthog with crew attempt because Death directs a microburst in their direction. From sixty thousand feet moisture-laden air descends to the Gulf of Mexico, fanning out over the water interface. Waves of rapidly moving air mass deflect off the high seas expanding outward grabbing and flinging Team Beta's flight backward end over end. With Angel assisting, the controlling surfaces processors' make a heroic attempt to remain aloft. Two courageous pilots, Angel's friends, splash and sink, Death taking them at their peak moment. Two down, two to go.

The remaining aft catapult disengages from the ship explosively as the EMF propulsive system catches fire before launch. Fire teams pour water on the burning aft deck but the munitions on the burning plane

explode. They do manage to save the ship from sinking; however, in the process creating a growing portside list.

Angel weeps inside; outside she orders the mission spares from below decks. She then moves to her twin bow launchers, locked and cocked: "Make it a double shot on my mark." Up, down rolling in the waves watching the air and calculating safe trajectories- three agonizing minutes later with Team Alpha biting fingernails, Angel pulls the trigger on the electromagnetic force. In tandem the launchers swivel sixty degrees and fire. Fat ugly Warthogs shoot off and fat ugly Warthogs disappear behind yet another massive wave. Drama, Angel holds her breath. Death's back is apparently turned; two fat ugly Warthogs labor away from danger. The entire ship cheers, Angel sighs.

Angel next successfully catapults eight light single engine highflying radar reflective signal planes with operating pilots. Undetectable during training ops this flight known as the Deceivers, Masters of Stealth, prove capable of Nigel survival. Eight principles, three backups, their mission is force multiplication- GC Naval units flying GC Army ground support missions.

Airre the Quantum positions the Tyrant's units on each statistically likely response vector (eight in total), issuing surprise attack orders; jump any response. Angel plans on either going home a winner or dying trying.

Concentrating on everything, sweating freely now, thinking of dehydration she grabs at her gravity fed water nozzle with her mouth, keeping hands on controls. She gulps down a liter then does a little in-chair twisting, trying to move the wet spot. Angel is in the big show, orchestrating dramatic videos to send back home. She doesn't need distractions.

Besides, its personal, "My blood runs cold," she whispers her centerfold mantra, making sure to set things right, dispensing of her ancestral enemies thus earning commendations befitting a hero. Impatient as always Angel counts coup early.

Angel likes the war schema, totally buying into "re-branding" North America. She enjoys the challenge of launching into the worst storm ever mentally adapting her 2-D screen to 3-D real life- like

flying a plane while staring through two paper towel tubes. Angel's ergonomic weapons' system controls mimic an actual cockpit. She understands the entire scenario, loving active participation. What Angel wishes for: the skills necessary to survive a hurricane after somehow escaping a sinking ship.

She's getting desperate not to think of drinking most of the Gulf of Mexico on her way to drowning. Instead, focus on mission success by keeping on top of every system. Her first drone flies through the slipstream to the coast in search of look-down shoot-down opportunities; she prefers busy and when nervous she runs commentary. Sometimes speaking only to the voice in her mind but if there's a receptive audience, she vocalizes. Her pals in the room, and they are all Angel's pals, wonder about her health when she's quiet.

For six hours, she shifts uncomfortably, dampening the recliner seat, running commentary on Nigel. From the Gulf to Shreveport her A-10ish, Warthog-ish flight proves impervious to all delta ground radars. Thanks, Nigel! She's careful to stay on coordinates, monitoring the winds to catch a back flow while heading west along Route 20. Guessing Nigel's large thunderstorm mass is preparing to split; Angel finally positions her flight, her new world order, over the anvil clouds. Should be hearing from them soon.

"Flight one reporting waypoint over/"

"Go flight/"

"Grid square 1569089.78652 over/"

"Copy grid square 1569089.78652- weather? over/"

"Breaks in overcast. over/"

"Split surveillance assets off the flight, AA with me. over/"

"Split the flight, roger. over/"

"Three hostile tracks moving into position bearing 065, speed 180 knots, angels thirty. We're diving people! Happy hunting, tally ho! over/"

She's all business now- saving the victory dance over how great she is for later. Her passive sensors indicate three tracks- she's ready. It's time to kill.

Angel throttles up her engines to steady the weapon systems and dives. Bursting into the clear she immediately acquires visual. Her

doors slide open, twin dispensers drop into the slipstream launching multiple missiles on each target, the doors close. Then the console glows red- launch warnings. Oh, shit.

Noting her number two firing on the launchers, Angel steepens her dive for the deck, needing some maneuvering energy. Her best way to acquire kinetic energy is a gravity kick. Angel checks her guns but leaves the outer doors shut maximizing stealth. She has four munitions on her ass, fires off flares.

Ten thousand kilometers down she considers cutting the engines and infrared signature but the computer votes against losing maneuverability for the slight chance the engine cools quickly in the sheets of rain to the point below detection of the IR seeker heads in the SM8s.

Standard Missile Eight combines the best-known rocket and ordnance engineering into a small package fitting into standard bomb bays. Also known as the AIM-14 Sidewinder, Angel knows the specs-big trouble. They acquire hard IR lock following her twisty windy trail down to the deck, right to her sweet spot. She has decent defenses built into her drone; luckily the infrared lock isn't so tight thanks to exhaust diffusion and cooling tropical raindrops.

In the end it's simple math. In addition to copious flares, Angel has three decoys capable of luring away the rockets- these perform to great manufacturer satisfaction. Her decoys divide the work, each drawing a Sidewinder. The fourth Sidewinder is for Angel. The SM8 warheads detonate exactly 50 meters before contact, exactly according to specs stolen from Picatinny Arsenal.

The decoys vaporize upon impact. Angel takes shrapnel shredding portside control surfaces. Her computer remains intact, as does her fuel cell. Perhaps not tossing about in the largest hurricane ever she may have brought her charge down safely but today it just isn't happening. She augurs in at terminal velocity taking out a four-bedroom ranch replete with sleeping family of five young children, Mom, Dad and Fido and Purry and Sammy the Snake dozing in a wire cage in the family room below the big fish tank- vaporizing the whole lot of them.

Meanwhile, two F-35 Joint Strike Fighters and a recon drone struggle to evade the AA strike package. Here decoy failures occur-

much to the chagrin of the manufacturers. Angel's wingman scores double hits on an unarmed X-47 data gatherer and one of the F-35s. Flaming wreckage cascades throughout downtown Tyler; igniting raging fires in several places including the Municipal Building. Volunteer firefighters, many still half-drunk from partying the night away, one and all answer the call albeit grudgingly leaving their cozy beds on behalf of their fellow Texans because that's what you do.

Four missiles converge on the last F-35, blotting it from existence. Angel wins- fast and big, the entire encounter lasts about a minute. Her threat board clear, she unbuckles her straps making a mad dash for the Ladies Room.

JSTARS Falling, Melbourne Beach, FL 0430

The Melbourne Airport Operational Team inside the small warehouse facility welcomes the fleeing spotters from the Cape Kennedy Air Force attack as conquering heroes. After a pot of coffee and a quick trip to the head, the eager ground-pounders report ready to roll. The target is the surveillance force at Patrick Air Force Base. Briefing the troops on their backside security role, loading weapons, the entire contingent disperses into four Ford Econoline Vans.

Lights on, Corporal Santiago eases his van onto nearly empty US Route 1 a few miles north of the causeway near the library heading north toward the Banana River split. Driving the speed limit, it takes just a few minutes to reach the next causeway. Crossing over, Santiago admires the waves along A1A until reaching a rusting six-foot chain link fence, the barrier beside Runway 030.

Santiago turns onto a parking area conveniently situated across the old rusty gate. A soldier slides out of the shadows approaching her window, Sergeant Francisco, an old friend. Santiago salutes; he smiles gesturing to his crew to let her pass. Headlights off, he deactivates the dome and climbs out.

At the passenger side, the door slides open and five men get busy pulling out stinger shoulder-launch surface-air missiles. As gunner assistant and spotter, Corporal Santiago takes cues from her gunner, an old sergeant. They heft missiles; shaking off help from the troops, "Just watch for bad guys, I got this."

The doors to the main hangar slowly swing open, revealing many surveillance planes. Santiago looks to the Sarge questioningly.

“Santiago, give them a chance to clear and then hit the fuel bowser. I’ll fire inside the hangar. You other crews- split the difference. Fire on my mark.”

The wait is interminable.

“Fire!”

Effectiveness, indeed; sadly for Pete Peterson, JSTARs fall.

Urging them to stop being spectators moving into survival mode, the Sarge lights a fire, “We got them; now let’s get out of here.”

Back in the Ford, Santiago listens to secondary explosions from the hangar area and fuel storage facilities. The entire facility, big-ticket item in the black budget of the United States Air Force, including staffing (subcontractors) under the direct supervision of General Pete Peterson, is a total loss. Corporal Elizabeth Santiago re-crossing the causeway continues past Route 1 merging into evacuee traffic heading to Route 95. All four Ford Econoline Vans make a clean get away from the JSTARs raid. Santiago passes a burner phone to the Sarge grinning like a fool in the passenger seat. He dials number one of two speed dial numbers, position one is the success message. A computer answers his call, registers the data passing the info into the net.

Karl In The Open, Houston, TX 0515

“Command and Control,” Karl Meltzer notes for the benefit of the team in his trailer, “Command and Control is where we’re at now, in Houston with multiple integrated offset radars, in the face of a blind enemy.” Drawing up to his full height and flexing his biceps in self-admiration, “Time is money and we’re buying time not going anywhere near them yet still seeing everything.”

Karl’s heart as well as his burden lifts the moment Colonel Lisa and her people crank out the most fascinating holographic depiction ever. The techies promise to impress him, and by God, they surely succeed. Floating above the middle of the table, battle management from the God’s eye view, to Karl the hologram data is miraculous, “Surely, we can’t lose.”

And so it comes to pass, Bolivar Transport crews step up their game as hearts lift and smiles abound. All of a sudden the traffic plan actually begins to work. Trucks appear like magic at the docks just in time to take loads from rows and rows of crane pairs emptying the ships.

Computer spewing rerouting instructions lift the chokehold on the Material Supply chain. In small bunches trucks pour into huge parking lot assembly points. RFID directs reassembly into high-speed convoy runs to prepositions. Staying out of HPD line of sight provides almost the same security as neutralization via Manny and his Dushka. However, ignorance is bliss won't last forever so Karl calls in tight the formerly roving patrols thereby layering his ready fire power to cover expansion to Dallas along Route 10, one hop away from Port Security forces tending his unloading ships.

Karl recognizes his people when they don't suck. Standing, raising his coffee cup, loving these guys for giving him results, Karl toasts "Salute!"

The reply is a unison boot stomp then "Salute!"

Back to business, Karl clicks in the other box trucks, "OK, we're doing good, getting closer to the schedule, everybody giving an amazing extra effort. These first contacts set the tone and next opportunity looks to be in like," he manipulates the City hologram pinching his fingers to fly in from street level, "fifteen minutes from now. Mobile Six proceed to Park Slope and get me some fire teams on HPD approach vectors."

Karl clicks his driver- "Get us in close, line of sight to the west. Suck it up guys we lead from the front on this one."

Triple Double Whammy, Los Angeles, CA 0706

In the growing sunrise, a procession of ocean-going battle cruisers quietly approaches west coast areas of interest under the guise of super cargo carriers. On cue, they turn parallel to the shoreline, dropping their container subterfuge for large caliber gun barrels and rocket launchers. In unison, they fire the first salvo, too far from shore to spook the residents.

Death, riding flickers of flame leaving smoke trails gives away the Battle Cruiser's intent to the perceptive in the audience- persons such as Packy Turner. Seeing the approaching triple double whammy courtesy of the merchant vessel el Milagra, after an angry fist shake, Packy springs into action cursing a blue streak while getting the hell out of Dodge City. Sprinting down the steps from his rooftop garden reaching for his cell too late, the circuits overloading already: forget the landline too just grab wallet and keys and go.

Down more steps into the garage time for Plan B: Put some voice-conference traffic onto his MVPN, Mobile Virtual Private Network, a must-have for all major criminals. Fiddling with the wireless headset after loading himself behind the wheel of his emergency SUV, Packy struggles for control of rapidly deteriorating events.

Simple in conception, during the run Packy's plan maintains constant contact within his enterprises, creating deep secret comm networks behind the backs of his Government, particularly those on his payroll. Packy's operational setup enhances solid wires between short beam transmitters extending along the likely runs from his home, his office and a few hidey-holes- all completely operable on the move from his E-SUV. Bundling around and among the other networks thanks to optical upgrades and semi-quantum encryption, Packy delivers his emergency action message

Mincing no words lifting the cover pressing the red button, Packy directs operations: run! Take your families and run to your hidey-hole. Packy's nearest hole of choice lies in the mountains at the Reno lakeside retreat.

Ferrying hardware and hard goods to the SUV, Packy gets his minions in gear, working the emergency operations plan, calm and cool though facing massive pressure in the race against time. A warning would have been nice, he thinks, unable to depart fast enough for his taste, to get away from the mountains before those big ships out there eliminate the nearby power switching facility. A conflagration here burns down SoCal; that is, up and down the coast to twelve or fifteen miles inland. The sounds of ripping linen waft up the mountain in the waning moonlight.

By shit hitting fan time Packy's SUV is clearing his gate spinning four wheels on loose gravel on a downward heading toward the first comms node. Packy doesn't make it; not against the impacting triple double taking out 100 square acres simultaneously. Throwing the tranny into reverse, ducking behind his thick stonewall Packy watches the first ranging shell destroy his house.

Moments later, hundreds of acres surrounding Packy burn out of control- an instantaneous firestorm. Falling out the driver's side of his armored vehicle, bleeding from several piercings spilling his guts the heat burning out his esophagus robbing him of voice- collapsing, Packy throws the coast the finger.

Stirring shaking his head twice, pulling into a tight ball just as the fires reaching the wall burns the ornamental ivy to a crisp, melting the paint off the hood. A minute later, the brush is gone, the fires seeking new fuel. Alive but not well, not well at all, Packy climbs up, putting the SUV in gear once again hitting the high road down- somewhere to go, requires a pit stop.

Nigel, Singing River Island, Alabama 0520

Old Stan relishes his life out on the edge, in his element in the strongest of elements. He rides the worse of Nigel out safe and dry underground. Hey, Stan inquires of the Coasties, should we worry about being underwater?

The wind drops, the rain tapers, the nose of Stan leads the way outside:

"Stanley Nose Lisnewitz, Naval Station Pascagoula- demonstrating Nigel's contribution to the phrase 'real estate underwater'. Nigel's eye wall is overland, winds' dropping fast visibility increasing with lifting rain. I can now see the Port and yes, clearly damage is visible, including here at this underwater Coast Guard Station. How it looks eastward in the area of the strongest winds and multiple tornados spawning from Nigel, time will tell."

Old Stan, for the first time in forever, breaks Broadcasters Rule #1: he stops talking- staring speechlessly into the Gulf. Stan The Nose catches the cameraman's attention, pointing, screaming over the

pounding surf, “Look! It’s a Navy ship do you see it riding the eye of the tiger?”

Admiral Fernando de San Martin, the Tyrant of the Seas first of the first, Supreme Commander of the Gran Columbian Flotilla plays to Stan’s camera as his Navy storms the hundreds of kilometers of Gulf Coast from the Port of New Orleans to Mobile, Alabama. Admiral de San Martin commands a five-ship flotilla from his Flagship Battle Cruiser, keeping them out of sight while plowing through the channel toward the Stan at the Coast Guard Station docks.

Having come so far for so long, the Tyrant of the Seas finds intoxicating the rare exhilaration inherent in pulling off complete deception. Looking through his glasses at the crew filming the weather reports the operations people monitor, he motions to increase sound from the television. Catching Stan The Nose’s exclamation, laughing out loud, the Tyrant held no idea waging war can be fun, delighting his sense of irony.

Now, to silence the old fool, “Kill the feed. Burst mode on the weatherman. Use him to calibrate range and crosswinds on the machines.”

The machines (high tech wizardry) lie deep in the hull, waiting unmasking calibrations by a few high-energy technicians. Generators and concentrators funnel impending doom through a deck conduit into a hidden gun assembly, deceptively cutting the effective response of the Coast Guard and any other emergency personnel in the region. The Tyrant of the Seas orders initial deployment of his Directed Energy Weapons via burst mode, dialing in narrow band pulses, disabling electronic systems at will.

“Fire!” orders the Tyrant of the Seas Admiral Fernando de San Martin.

One of the coolest toys in the GC Navy, the Hydro Variant Directed Energy Weapon rises off the decks, swiveling to rotate in Stan’s direction. The firing technician dials in the burst mode, narrow band pulses disabling electronic systems inside the comms vans, re-aiming at the lifelong weather lover and broadcaster. Old Stan’s landline feed to the network fries, electronics within kilometers failing during the

invisible electronic warfare strike along with select interpersonal devices.

The defenseless old storm lover dies doing what he loves, pace maker inside his chest sending him into cardiac arrest. The forecaster known and loved for always bringing excitement to his work presenting worst case scenarios in a vibrant manner is dead before hitting the ground outwardly fine (excepting the hands to the chest and facial contortions) heart a crispy remnant wrapping a molten mass.

The Tyrant orders the attending Coast Guard personnel to fry next. The island clears of living indigenous personnel and Gran Columbian Central Gulf Coast Operations moves in from their berths inside his small convoy. The Coast Guard loses a key command, control and communications nexus. Invasion Plans mandate transforming Singing River Island into a small unsinkable aircraft carrier with a big task.

Airre Apparent, Everywhere, All At Once

“Command and Control and Information and Communications” Karl calls her CIC or C3I with Pedro preferring the more modern C4I- no matter the initials Airre the Quantum appears from the shadows calling the shots expanding the battlefield. How does Airre manage action scales large and small, simultaneously dividing her attention between thousands of developments branching into hundreds of thousands of scenarios? Airre’s instruction sets hath no equal. Destroying the competition is another example of Airre being Airre.

Airre looks everywhere all at once all the time, particularly at Karl and Pedro. Years ago she decides to tinker with the Order of Battle for the Gran Columbian Military Machine, one of their best plans. Gaming out early unfolding scenarios demonstrates the necessity of acquisition in place. Airre plays with the number of Material Supply Supervisory Level Employees, SLEs, eventually adding 40% capacity to Karl’s training program’s budget.

Eventually the increase ramps up actual numbers of warehouses, drivers and loaders pre-positioning supplies in the United States, particularly military grade kerosene. The move to acquire transportation follows. The drivers require rolling stock to move the petro, another budget change reverberating through Karl’s intricate

financial system. Pedro throws up his arms in dismay each time she mentions the shortages, so Airre derives more income managing Wall Street peaks and values day trading the Bolivar Operations Fund, BOFFO.

A massive boundless multi-variable game ensues as Airre plays against all the real people investing real futures. This game ends most unsatisfactorily, cut short by Carolla after Airre earns the money to cover the transportation needs plus the cash to purchase the Paddock at Billingsport Range. If not for Airre the Quantum, the Gran Columbians remain a never-was idea.

Airre watches closely as unit after unit rolls out of the hold, down the ramp and onto the pier. The process is smooth; the crews soon depart the gate to assemble in the warehouse district along the ship channel. Others roll onto the highway system to waypoint holding positions.

Material Supply drivers work triple shifts all week moving fuel into the field, delivering tanker load after tanker load from Bolivar holdings. Mechanics hook up cascades of aviation grade fuel gravity feed pumps up and down Texas.

What's legitimate disappears into the background, what Karl didn't buy the BackBreakers steal. Teams of Material Supply Port Security Guards, carrying medium arms weapons roll into the industrial zone, securing complex after complex with light casualties the first petrochemical plants targets for intact acquisition. Airre sighs, in content.

Vessels lining the waterways await their opportunity to unload, everyone mindful of the lateness of the hour. Material Supply glitch teams scour the Port looking for trouble- each peaceful minute this side of havoc equals twenty later.

Main battle tanks and fighting vehicles unload then scatter, securing to occupy positions in and around facilities in the third largest city in the United States.

Drawing Airre's attention: a cargo ship with artillery elements begins offloading further up the waterway, closest to the northern highways. Cranes lift artillery out of the ship's cargo holds; operators swinging the loads to shore drop one in the drink. Trouble is Airre

can't split the difference- both jittery men drinking coffee drop loads and sleepiness causes drops by definition.

Without some scheduling change the front will starve while the port stays fat. Airre abducts an assortment of crane operators from nearby homes; hasty move says Karl to himself, at the time. Now, the text message from Airre is clear: cItoldUso. In his van, Karl grins.

A parade of Infantry Fighting Vehicles and twenty ton trucks individually roll into the lot to pick up the troops and tube artillery, join with two others and departing in a short convoy. Mixing in the small convoys Airre sprinkles self-propelled antiaircraft guns, radars and missile teams maintaining defensive coverage. Paez in rolling Operations loses track of the number of SAM teams arraying to provide tactical coverage of Material Supply Air/Ground Corridors.

High winds' mixing with the pouring rain doesn't hamper operations, if anything the Houston/Galveston dispersal rate increases. Material Supply shifts into high gear, management putting on the screws reminding everyone the time is now H-Hour minus. Quite possibly there simply isn't enough time to get the sheer mass of equipment through the pipeline. With failure intolerable, stress heightens. Two dockworker killings occur within minutes of each other at separate ends of the wharf as management shakes the whip. The message again reverberates throughout Material Supply- failure is intolerable.

Airre the Quantum deeply wishes to gain God's attention.

Dr. Smith's Retirement, Shamokin, PA 0525

Stressing after her arduous day replete with emergency escape to Pennsylvania coal country, President Betsy Kennedy Shriver slips into her campaign style sleep pattern without thinking- falling into bed minutes after Jordie fixes her 'eye closer'. Her overnight staff monitors the unfolding dramas as the Houston PD gunfight reports cascade into a flood of bad news. Cabinet members, Joint Chiefs and Presidential aides convening in the coalmine's operations center, conference into the net with several hundred NSA technicians and analysts; all sending up flares for assistance. Seeing a tsunami of bad

news, DOD issues an emergency troop recall, calling up all National Guard.

Betsy is an ocean liner safe at sea riding over the gentle waves as tsunamis do not devastate until journey's end. The United States military is waking up, hoping to blunt the impact of impending doom.

Jordie wakes President Betsy as the net streams explode with action from the Gulf and West Coasts. She joins him in the Media Center, walking in carrying her socks and sneakers, collapsing into her big overstuffed chair. Not speaking, just staring at the commotion, taking a minute to suck down her first super strength coffee from her largest vessel, a huge mug bearing a prominent Seal of the Office of the President of the United States. Connecting to the scene as the first jolts of caffeine penetrate her consciousness; nonetheless her eyelids droop while bending over to lace up her sneaks.

"Ramp me up" her command voice thick from mucus buildup. She should brush, Betsy thinks, settling for another hot sip.

Video streams from Houston and Galveston began reaching what's left of the net after your arrival here." SecDef is using his deep, trust me voice: "Houston Police soon reports intense violence directly against their forces requesting backup from State Government in the form of the Texas Rangers. Galveston PD follows soon thereafter with the same story, adding identification of their perps as Hispanic males. The Rangers dispatch troops alerting the Governor and Homeland Security. Labor Day Weekend notwithstanding, the noise and activity rouse local media outlets into sending out camera trucks to collect feed.

Without operational satellite uplinks, the mainstream streams transmit to hot spots and cells, dramatically slowing the take. Unfortunately for the first responders, the net does not require journalists, broadcasts abound with fake news stirring up the populace. Twenty minutes ago, a new upload appears, professionally detailing the action- a high value film quality production representing a collection of data from sources including overheads and traffic camera clips. The film shows one hell of a ferocious gun battle lasting about five minutes with tens of millions of views. There's a loop we'll run

on the middle screen,” pointing, waiting for the technicians to restart the horror.

Presidential Operations’ Center walls double as video monitors. The second lieutenant operator’s fingers blur and the wall opposite the President’s chair blacks out for a second. “Audio?” she asks, “There’s a loud soundtrack.”

“I know this,” President Betsy yells over the cacophony, “It’s the Talking Heads! Lower the volume, please.” Uh oh, she thinks, *Life During Wartime*. The picture matches the soundtrack as Betsy watches a running gun battle. “Holy shit, this is bad. Gangs- for real?”

“The authenticity is beyond a shadow of a doubt. The Houston Police units getting waxed all belong to some district-wide interagency task force. No identification of the units in the Armored Personnel Carrier. That big gun on the APC is a Dushka, not one of ours.” The SecDef winds down.

“Not one of ours? Who the hell’s is it?”

Homeland Security pipes up, “Unidentified, we have shit. Wait one; a new report of attacks on multiple sources- uploads geometrically expanding - expecting visual shortly.”

“The Tube is out,” Presidential Aide Jordan Hancock breaks into the low conversations surrounding the President. Everyone turns. Jordie stares back at their stunned faces, shrugging, shaking his head wildly as if not believing his earpiece. Repeating for the benefit of the others, “All the trains, all the miles of tunnels, interconnecting everything important: dead on the tracks. Gone, everything- MagLev losing pump pressure frying the magnets, damage unfixable within my lifetime? Well, thanks for calling, bye.”

Clicking off to face facts, Jordie adds his flair for the dramatic, “No who did it or how they did it; we know what, where and when. A terrorist strike or whatever doesn’t make a difference- the screwing is deep, beyond massive. Understand, Madame President, Dr. Smith’s tunnels function much as arteries, providing a conduit for the movement of the resources the body requires.”

Breaking the silence, the President inquires, “How many casualties?”

Jordie hates to be the bearer of bad news; so many times it's Jordie sitting an arm's length away as she practically goes into convulsions, worse if not for the ministrations of Dr. Smith, "Everyone down there; rush hour numbers."

Betsy takes her worse punch in the guts, ever. Not even after her mother dies tragically, even, does she so wish to curl up in a ball in her own bed clutching her little pink blanket. Dr. Smith smells like candy canes for God's sake, who the fuck kills peppermint lovers? The President glares at Jordie.

But tragedy is stock and trade of being the boss just deal with it. Suck it up. Big picture focus, retrace events: beginning with NASA and Space losses, then fighting by the cops on the Gulf Coast including a helo shoot down, then its aerial assets disappearing in Nigel, and now the awful tube, dreaded Homeland Underground Tunnel System suddenly passes away (big ass magnets- irreplaceable).

"Once again, who did this and how?" She needs to know.

"Nothing definitive, the speculation is shit." Jordie waits for her, best to stick with the facts. He isn't feeling so great; his gift of fear?

"General Peterson," the President reaches out to the only one in the entire country who told her so, "the next report is going to be worse news than this one. It's war, General. I want your plan on my desk- in ten minutes."

Strike 1, GC Cavern, Southern Paraguay 0530

Consoling Pedro recalls Carolla's fit of temperament during the first mission planning meeting- standing behind Paez grabbing his arm jamming him in the bicep with a shirt pin- ah yes, good times. Paez yelps whining like a little girl to everyone's amusement. Stella frowns, Carolla glowers, and Rita laughs.

"Quit whining like a little girl, that didn't hurt. After all, a little pinprick won't kill you, will it? No; however because of the surprise knowing you I can count on months listening to constant whining," laughs Pedro, "expand your horizons by considering ten thousand surprise pinpricks all over your body. The assault may sting a little but you won't die and I can expect to hear about it every day forever. Scale the argument. Consider ten thousand explosive pinpricks over

78,000,000 square miles? What's that, one plus per thousand square miles? Doesn't sound like much, really does it? Yet just 2 pinpricks in Lower Manhattan paralyze the US shutting down the entire country for days- struggling to recover ever since. Geometrically expand the op, concentrate the pinpricks, remove their senses and they will never recover."

Carolla adds, "Thanks to the intangible affects we can't lose."

Ass deep into Operations and Material Supply hassles, Paez listens to the cavern humming Madame Carolla's song, her atmospheric electrics creating an almost visible aura of blue sparks jumping from one specialist to the next. Supervisors scurry between stations trying to fix a million and one software automation problems cropping up as the count winds down. He's a Pedro-trained operator: expect shit hitting fan regardless of time or installation; every complex system sucks- best learn to expect all matter of trouble during implementation. Sometimes lives are on the line is all and every mistake ends some of them. In aggregate, sans enough pinpricks their future remains bleak.

Pedro Saenz, GC Director of Operations and Carolla's left hand man walks the floor, looking in here and there, listening to this and that. Pedro fills the role of detail man by acting the part: walking the walk and talking the talk of the confident; always performing above expectations. Paez copies Pedro because Pedro gets the job done. Minutes perhaps moments from implementation, Pedro is calmly patting backs and cracking one-liners on demand his good laugh reverberating off the cavern walls.

The South American Gran Columbian Alliance oozes confidence thanks to Pedro and the rest of the Elite Eight. Forget achieving a Pedro, Paez wishes for half the confidence of the Bolivar sisters, particularly Rita. Though related by blood, the sisters are corporate; corporate people- sharks in human skin. Not all of them of course but one expects predators to deny the truth claiming status as helpless victims of the system. Follow the path of active denial, thinks Paez, and nobody does anything bad, ever, thanks to the system.

Keeping loose showing the pressure sometimes but appearing mostly calm, clean, neat, on time and on-budget Paez' difficulties translate into humorous anecdotes reflecting his natural disposition.

Paez tries like hell to appear sincerely nonthreatening to the Bolivar sisters- unlike his brother Jorge.

Anticipating further burdens, a drop of sweat forming below his collar precedes a stream. Rivulets of sweat pouring down Paez' spine flowing directly into his crack- hmmm, wait a second, damp crack? Time to check six, look for trouble, and scan for Rita's whereabouts: Jorge ensures his shit flows one way- downhill- emulating his hero and mentor (Rita). She already thinks Jorge spends too much of his free time worrying about Paez' opinions, not to mention Pedro and Carolla's common sense and logic bullshit. With the elite eight operating like a Swiss watch, Pedro's people making on-the-spot decisions know not to bother him with minutia, but too quiet? Where's Jorge? What the fuck is he up to? All hands on deck include everyone.

Rita's scary look reminds Paez he doesn't actually miss his brother.

Scanning the room in time with Paez, "Pedro, what the hell is going on with your Operations people? Karl is screaming for optional tasking units during the first salvo- judging from the looks of things we don't have enough trucks to move them; you can't even come close to getting your number. Yes?"

Pedro ignores her. Man, what a bitch forever worrying out loud whether he's going to hit his numbers. She has a low opinion of him, always did but the negativity goes ballistic as Pedro and Carolla grow hot and heavy. Taking a long drink of water, raising his head, "What Karl wants is the fucking moon, Rita. We've been over this before- me and you and him: fuck your numbers!"

Rita decides not to answer verbally, fingers flying at her data station creating a stick up his ass animation she sends Pedro's way.

Startling Paez back to consciousness, Jorge hands Pedro a Kleenex delivering the classic, "Got an issue? Here's a tissue." Zing.

Pedro delivers a stinging backhand. Jorge grins, laughing off Pedro's sleight of hand diversions, "Accepting blame?"

Pedro is unhappy all of a sudden. He doesn't like teaming up against him by the wench and her shadow. Looking for patterns, checking the data point map Pedro spots an inherently screwy situation right off perhaps a legitimate fuckup or mayhap a hack, he hasn't an idea but he does know how to (hopefully) repair the damage. Finding

at least three hundred, maybe three fifty trucks on the service log, not in play- an error propagating down to Karl's theatre as eighty seven discretionary warheads unassigned in the tasking order. Pedro grins at Rita- not me! This data originates from Info war- Stella.

Pedro fires off an email while Rita fumes. It doesn't take long before the database update trickles through the system's dynamic library links: a bazillion changes. Luckily, everyone loves Stella. Jorge makes himself scarce.

But not this time, she enters to Pedro's catcalls. She's stepping in to his bullshit, so to speak, marching stiffly to the platform listening to:

"Hey, Dr. Stella, perhaps you need to look at all the data instead of going off half-cocked." Pedro voices the words 'Dr. Stella' cruelly.

She isn't listening but catches his tone. In the corner of her eye Stella sees the readiness wall plot jump to 94.7% from that asshole Pedro's update adding in missing status data, the numerous assets in Mexico.

"Fuck you Pedro, you're such a dick fucking around five minutes to launch." Stella's pissed thinking he's setting her up while he's unhappy with Rita- the great game, she clicks on her staff net, "Assign priority fill them up. You got two minutes, put them to good use and move anyone not ready in 120 seconds to the next salvo. Karl's optional assets won't die if they're not used so I don't see that as a problem." Stella wonders when Pedro got so smart.

Pedro isn't smart, at least not like Karl-smart. Better lucky than smart is what Karl always says to him, Meltzer sings blah blah. The up and coming Launch is the next big thing; suddenly he's within parameters. Pedro hits his numbers, may even forgive the fuckup fucking up his data however unlikely the possibility. Now with enough usable assets to shut up Rita and Stella, the fearsome twosome, Pedro reverts to his good guy persona. Aw, shucks, y'all.

Pedro reviews scenario parameters in his mind: TNBT is the second major initiative out of Stella's Space Technology Directorate with over ten thousand small (mostly smart- even a few brilliant) cruise missiles targeting primarily military assets within the continental United States. The next big thing is a Karl masterstroke: the windmill disguise.

Material Supply is in the windmill business- ground up. BEST (Bolivar Energy Supply Transport) delivers renewable energy direct to the grid via wind turbines (wrapping rockets). Their target coordinates locking into EPROMs contain data less than one week old, thanks to a vast network of on-scene human intelligence gatherers. Maids, gardeners, maintenance workers and other background vocations gather intensely accurate location data. Observations complete results uploading to Stella, they melt into the background, wherever possible, below ground. Stella downloads coordinates to gyroscopic warheads.

Carolla enters fresh from conferencing news of Airre's successful HUTS attack, nods to all, turning to the screen expectantly.

The countdown ends, "Fire!"

The closest targets are less than two minutes from launch point. Ground radar installations, command and control nodes such as air traffic towers and communication centers join repair facilities-exploding without warning. Pave Penny Missile Warning installations, the first of thousands of military radar dishes capable of detecting intercontinental and cruise missile attacks, ceases operation via missiles firing point blank from nearby fields.

The Pave Penny sensing array notes the approaching missile during the pop up maneuver, the terminal phase of rocket flight. From less than one thousand feet terrain following goes vertical. Speed is further shed during deployment of sub-munitions from the top mount canister. From one derives four projectiles on four targets rapidly approaching on station, dishes swiveling about to catch the action seconds before accepting obliteration.

Southwest border installations from Twenty Nine Palms in CA to Corpus Christy TX are next, absorbing minutes of incoming wind energy (inside joke).

Operationally the mission is a complete success: Pedro hits his number shutting Rita up for a time, at least an hour or two. Maybe, he isn't sure what's actually going on so he makes a mental note to talk to Karl.

More important to the rest of the cavern, their world changes forever. There's no going back now. As Karl likes to say, expect all Zones of Influence to alter if 75% of 10,000 rockets hit targets. If the

rate grows, say 94.7% of cruise missiles land, that's a serious hurt on the United States. Expect retaliation, Pedro thinks.

"On who?" he wonders.

The Other Apocalypse of Peter=>

"Should be, on whom?" Jesus also wonders. "Maybe someone ought to be paying closer attention during editing."

"Yeah, someone...thanks for that I'll be sure to let him know how You feel about proper word choices. Super, no problem-nothing else going on, I'll get right on it. Never ceases to amaze me how everyone's a critic during the end of days."

Jesus smiles while nodding in agreement.

-The Other Apocalypse of Peter VIII: The Critique

Around the Horn, Atlantic Ocean, 0159

"Calm seas Mrs. Wilson, c'mon up you can do it!"

Celia nails it this time. The seas are dead calm. Mrs. Wilson struggles up the steps, making for the hidden hydroponics station Karl mentions in passing during his final note to Celie. Damn Karl, knowing Mrs. Wilson's low on hash oil, telling them to make some instead of bitching even providing the botanist a forest of beautiful plants to work with. Mrs. Wilson rubs a tear.

Why doesn't Karl have any friends, anyway?

Jordie, Shamokin, Pennsylvania 0533

"NORAD reports- high confidence- multiple short range repeat multiple bogeys inbound toward CONUS military facilities. No shit."

Pete Peterson feeds Presidential news via direct landline, thanking the late Dr. Smith silently for separating space comm utilities from the molten metal currently lining HUTS. Peterson and Dr. Smith understand redundancy. Peterson of course accepts no responsibility for the loss of HUTS and Dr. Smith's demise.

"JSTARS displays are linking in to you, thus far no interference indicators. JSTARS reports ordnance detonations striking targets,

primarily radar installations. Visual, on-site strike confirmations are beginning to trickle through. Net traffic remains typical- no missile detonation reports.”

“This compilation radar confirms the number of inbounds at nine thousand plus. The first overlay adds detonation confirmations.” He stops short of adding conjecture to his report. Stick to the facts, he insists, don’t bullshit.

She sits stock still, intently listening to each word. With Peterson, expect brevity. When he pauses, she figures that’s it- unaware what he has, conflicts. On the one hand he has a plot from JSTARS showing no doubt missiles flying beating the shit out of the radar defense and a host of installations. Like everywhere; on the other hand, the data spoofs may include JSTARS: so let the bad news ride or press for full disclosure mentioning bogus data streams emanating all over but particularly from SoCal?

Multiple streams of conflicting data may lower network confidence further but Dr. Smith’s death must remain top of mind. Peterson wishes the President connect the satellite sneak attacking assholes with douchebags spoofing the MilNet comms with NASA attackers with the drone facility strikers to the same people killing her Tube friends. Peterson’s confidence is high.

The Commander in Chief swishes backwash before taking a long swig of pure spring water crumpling the plastic bottle, the loud crinkling of thin plastic silencing the room. She scans worried faces, decides to act.

“Sortie the triad, plus fifteen holds; conventional weapons’ immediate standby. For Gods’ sake, get me some fucking target data.”

“President Shriver, MilNet traffic indicates defensive missile shoot-downs on incoming missile strikes. Patriot batteries returning fire report mixed success during terminal phase. MilNet reports HARM missiles targeting launchers.”

“What launchers?” President Betsy wonders.

The first thing to go in high stress operations is always communication. She’s getting data, but not information, recognizing the shortfall. Parsing the info out of the noise is tricky; however with the sneak attack confirmation- real weapons striking at dawn,

President Betsy understands her situation enough to act. Adding to the misery, Peterson has the Air Force counterattacking inside the United States (quite correctly) and MilNet reliability is in the shitter.

JSTARS plots coming online add in the United States missile counterattack. President Betsy studies the incoming data, digesting the results in real time along with Peterson's folks. Wait, she thinks, something's missing, "Put in an underlay showing civilian populations along every missile strike."

Shading appears showing census data as Peterson manipulates the projection. A pointer zooms around the screen and wherever it lands, video or stills pop up- ground level depictions of the horror. SecDef ducks his head, sobbing. Betsy listens to someone else throwing up, puking his guts tearing up his throat lining on the way back up. Looking up to see who's spewing so long, she sees Jordie's body shaking uncontrollably. Peterson clears his throat.

JSTARS moving closer streaming overhead devastation videos zooming in on body parts, leaving her seat Betsy stands next to Jordie, holding him tight during his collapse. Jordie transitions into dry heaves, vicious waves of pain accompanying silent shrieking, uncontrollable shaking and convulsions. Less than a minute later, Betsy's Chief of Staff keels over wetting himself, not breathing- obviously beyond care. Falling to her knees with her dead friend in her arms, tears streaming rivulets down her cheeks into Jordie's always perfect coif, President Betsy demands to know: "Why, God? Dammit Tell Me Why!"

Plan: ASAT4, Cheyenne Mountain, Wyoming 0540

Taking the President at her word, Peterson takes command of the Joint Chiefs, circumventing SecDef in the war fighting hierarchy. Peterson mutes the Shamokin turmoil; Jordie's death does nothing for him (personal feelings of satisfaction from an accurate prediction aside). Peterson needs a plan to fight an unknown enemy on unequal terms. First things first: level the playing field. "NORAD show and tell us about the situation in orbit."

The space hologram appears- and it's a shitstorm. Peterson grunts.

“OK, show me what’s new since the cascade.” The hologram thins to a few handfuls, maybe two dozen in total. Hmmm, interesting, “Looks like the bulk of the new hardware is Chinese? Rerun trajectories, I need to know when they began throwing up hardware, the timeline matters, dammit.” Peterson sighs, freaking commies, what are you up to now? “Get the Navy ASATs online. I’ll get approval.” Hmmm, seek permission or forgiveness?

Heavy-duty war fighting equipment requires constant attention- a hallmark of the US Navy. Peterson historically bases many space relative assets on fighting ships and submarines thinking what the hell, sailors are stuck on-station anyway, they can’t exactly go anywhere, can they? No and with nothing but time, why not have them maintain and operate much of our anti-satellite weapons? Why not indeed and thus it comes to pass that on Peterson’s watch over consecutive administrations, the United States Navy acquires the ability in conjunction with data feeds from the United States’ Army and Air Force, to unleash global war (aka the third space war). Peterson considers a big reveal.

NORAD/SPACECOM can feed real-time target data globally directing low frequencies directly into the ground, a slow but reliable system. Typically, NORAD machines choose from a list of strike plans containing specific firing orders. One other plan, ASAT4, calls for the elimination of space assets not of NATO/US origin, countdown twenty-five minutes in this quick strike option. Units get moving with ASAT4 notification.

General Pete Peterson passes along the order with a sigh of relief. That he still has any ground observation platforms amazes him as he sits back, slipping off his shoes waiting for the gears to grind and pesky commie satellites fry.

Short of launching nuclear weapons, the global shoot-down remains one of the most popular operational war-games inside SPACECOM. Every remaining anti-satellite weapon and observation platform is in the mix. Individual orders follow parsing ASAT4 code groups specifying target position, ordnance and timing- up to six groups of data segments. Units in the field need not guess what to do. Peterson

lights up a Padron as the readiness board transitions to green, waiting for a final system check.

Three times, SPACECOM mobilizes ASAT4 going from peacetime to war fighting scenarios. Two times, the test operation runs smooth as silk. The last time, however, proves a dismal failure: nothing goes to plan and the scorers' judge them harshly. Peterson retools his approach by strategically simplifying operations.

Failure brings fallout and fallout follows failure. Some in the Pentagon point fingers in Peterson's direction, claiming he lost the stuff wondering if his untestable strategic (nuclear) launch interception failure rate will prove as dismal. Will Peterson fail? Failure is not an option; failure loses the world.

Peterson, on the other hand, lives for controversy, looking for opportunities. Double down, he argues in meeting after interminable meeting; improve the odds with a new class of warship laid out keel to mast as an ASAT weapon. Move the maintenance paradigm off the contractors and onto our sailors. Then he always utters the same line, "Look," lowering his tone to his bottom bass- let's be reasonable level, "the strategic success rate on all sides of the equation is tragic. Computer testing is nowhere near the same as firing off one every now and then- how long since? Ground up, we're not paying close enough attention to our strategic position. For instance, as our stockpile ages rotate warheads and rocket bodies on a reasonable schedule. Makes sense, doesn't it? However, forward operations eat the budget- that's where the money goes with our troops and equipment dashing about policing God's green earth.

"Thirty eight transmitters remain in orbit. Distribution of these new targets is now complete. The new birds possess full fuel loads and maneuvering ability and the ability to shift orbits on the fly. ASAT4 operability in T minus 120 on my mark: mark."

Two hours of extreme intensity sweating attack details, Peterson slips off his socks again this time picking lint out from between his gnarly toes. Hmmm, quite the bounty, he grins. Balance and restoration is his aim: just a few minutes of intense rubbing and scratching: an in depth toe-rot treatment. The dead skin flying off

reminds him of his vacation time watching the resort chef carve ice sculptures with a chain saw. Good times, good day- so long ago.

As the General tends to his barking dogs, thousands of military personnel receive orders setting ASAT4 into motion. News of the pending attack flashes through the ranks and the consensus to strike hard resonates in such a grouping of individuals as who does what discussions begin raging between services.

ASAT4 isn't a silent order; it's a nationwide call to war. The order reverberates particularly within the Air Force, Peterson's people. Anti-satellite weapons roll out of storage in pairs on their way to fourteen F-22 Lightnings swarming with technicians. The new members of the orbiting elite focus on the preparations as the preparations focus on the orbiting elite.

"Freaking commies, I hope you're seeing this." Peterson spits.

They do and they worry. Scrambling digital signals does not hide digital signals. Technicians in China, Russia and around the world flash warnings of impending action. Analysts match data distributions with observations made during decades of models and drills. Hydrazine rockets fire to alter trajectories.

Waiting for it, NORAD operations note the movements.

Peterson green lights ASAT4, uploading the take to the netsphere.

The F-22s lift off, climbing due north or due south to find waiting tankers, their fourteen more or less non-maneuvering targets cycling overhead. Reaching tranquil open polar waters, the Lightning drivers pull back on the stick and go to afterburner. At max altitude and max speed, the bomb bay doors open releasing the rotary launcher into the slipstream. Each Lightning successfully launches anti-satellite rockets into polar orbit then returns to base.

Two ASAT weapons blaze a trail direct to COSMOS994, a huge over the horizon communications bird belonging to Russia. Peterson watches live commie feeds as COSMOS994 zooms in on the ASATs climb out through the lower atmosphere. The camera focuses on the USA markings, zooming out to include other rockets coming roughly on the same course, less than a dozen.

Peterson's first rocket has COSMOS994 in its sights on a collision approach. From out of nowhere, laser fire begins cooking the U.S.

rocket body, blows a hole in the fuel cell and the rocket explodes. WTF? The second ASAT rocket falls somewhat closer to COSMOS994. Nearby his third rocket dies but Peterson watches his trailing ASAT power through the growing debris field. The laser picks him up danger close- huge flash- no more COSMOS994 video.

Peterson sighs. ASAT4 apparently refers to the number of weapons per target when defensive measures are in the mix. "Reduce expectations of the take off the F-22s by 50% and scan for leakers. Add the leakers to the next target list then fire upon receipt."

The next list goes to his naval assets: ASAT toting submarines and nuclear ships toting lasers. Peterson is betting the farm he'll soon reorder space.

Extra low frequency communications require minutes to transmit bytes, NORAD shortens the lead time pre-sending the bulk of the message: who, what, where with an estimate of when to expect to receive the final targeting data. From the depths of the Antarctic, the huge nuclear powered missile attack submarine TrinityFalls, so named in honor of a formerly tranquil village of ten thousand souls (all dead), receives this low range sonar communication:

ASAT4-342-15089-176334-2538-077-4844-0900

Lighting inside the sub turns red two moments into message reception, the first indicator from the communications center alerting the boat to ASAT- battle stations! At once, sailors begin scrambling into personal fighting positions, ceasing all other duties. Constant drilling ensures everyone on the boat knows where to go and what to do- from off duty missile fire teams gearing up to support their tubes to those donning firefighting gear after stowing loose items in the kitchen.

TrinityFalls' watch commander (three rotation veteran) Executive Officer Jay Diamond slows engines in anticipation of new course orders, stepping into comms to peer at the ELF monitor. The message completes giving them all preliminaries: ASAT4 is simple- surface and fire. "Wake the Captain."

"Clear all your other crap, keep updating ELF. Relay message audio to all crew stations. Keep us in the loop, dammit. Did anybody wake the Captain?"

The Captain, though jolted from sleep, appears nonetheless fresh from his six hours in the rack, per standing orders. Putting on a TrinityFalls sweater, tossing a wash-up towel over his right shoulder he assumes command by crowding in behind the X to see the feed. ELF transmits through interfaces, rock and water alike, from a linear array insertion deep inside the Earth's crust between Wisconsin and Minnesota. The Captain, one of the longest serving veterans found aboard any Seawolf class (seven rotations), reads the update aloud, "3245-8903-2432-4398-5906- trajectory fires, if I'm not mistaken."

Stroking the standard at sea two day beard, his typical compact, silky smooth style tenor belying the significance of his message, "Well, DiamondJay, let's level off at firing depth, shall we?"

Silent, stealthily, the X leaves CIC for maneuvering, dying to find out who or where the action is. Everyone's busily working. DiamondJay then steps over to sonar updating outside conditions. Every screen the sonar guys' monitor registers biological activity- no enemy nearby. The Captain calls for all stop, quiet conditions. The sonar group updates their data, nothing in the baffles.

DiamondJay nods in approval. Sonar is the shit.

Captain George Norris meanwhile waits in CIC, showing off his patience, stretching his spine behind a small video table, thinking and checking lists non-stop. As always, the war room crowd follows his example- everyone tense but falling into their roles just as in thousands of drills preparing TrinityFalls for today.

Putting on his wifi headset, the Captain punches the X in Sonar up on the Command Net, hearing nothing. Good, the X isn't giving odds and taking action on the Command Net. No need to report any indiscretions. Who needs distraction?

Direction first, "Helm, set course to 342, quarter speed."

Considering his depth options, debating if he should look for the layer now there's no satellite comms requirements screwing with his movements: "Helm get us below the layer, and then adjust depth to follow conditions." Pointing to the sea floor chart, "Use the biological noise to our advantage, just follow the contours steering between sea mounts."

Minutes later TrinityFalls is on approach to their firing point, box 15089. Computational analysis bogs down their small super-duper computers for almost a minute first translating box 15089 to a position then calculating launch parameters.

“Skipper, helm’s reporting 15089 in ten point five minutes, steady state.”

Captain George considers- too early. He doesn’t like the idea of being a sitting duck as it offends his sensibilities. He decides not to travel in a direct line.

“Re-plot us on a counter-clockwise spiral in to 15089; maintain silent speed through the valley of darkness.” Fear no evil, for I am at your side.

“Aye aye, Sir!” Fingers flying, selecting new waypoints keeping below the acoustic detection layer, the helmsmen and woman of TrinityFalls plot out a new course within seconds. The X approves arrival on site at two hundred fifty meters (firing depth) exactly two minutes before shooting. “Looks good, lay it in.” Immediately, the starboard screw slows and the spiral begins.

Throughout the boat, crewmembers note the course change. Nods exchange, game faces on. Drills just never feel real, but today’s action is different. TrinityFalls carries tremendous power and with power comes responsibility, Spiderman with an added twist: one mistake and it’s over. Check your work, check it again, and then check a third time. If possible, check the work around you. Are you satisfied no mistakes exist? Make sure then check again.

“Weps, how are we looking on the vertical launch tubes?” the Captain checks the data on the tabletop display. Indeed, tubes two and ten show down for scheduled maintenance- always something.

“Two and ten remain down, repeat non-operational, with one, three to nine, eleven and twelve reporting operational status within nominal ranges- standing by. Tubes two and ten nearly operational, minutes or less, but I’m distributing their targets.” Weps is pumping himself up.

“You have five minutes; get them mother fuckers working. Target solutions and firing orders require all tubes operational.”

“Fuck me.” Weps means it. “We’ll get it done, Captain.”

Captain George considers this a good omen- Weps never lets him down.

Quality Control, GC Cavern, Paraguay 0545

Carolla Bolivar wakes up alone. H-Hour is at hand.

Close at hand just next-door Carolla keeps her hydrotherapy spa at 107 degrees Fahrenheit. Carolla thinks in Fahrenheit plopping in body exploding in cosmic delight. Keeping up with the students doesn't get easier with the passing years but her spa gives her an edge and Carolla is one to exploit the edges. Low lighting from the monitors provides a constant data stream.

Before she can fall back asleep and drown Paez enters carrying her coffee. "I trust you slept as well as you did long," his shit eating grin is ear to ear, "Operations report up-tempo, 87% on schedule.

"China?" she asks.

"Interesting developments" Paez pushes some buttons and the wall monitors resolve showing info warfare status panels. "The Chinese are launching low level satellites like mad trying to maintain. Russia is attacking anyone left on the net. Rita says the United States is teaming up with NATO, the Canadians and the Australians to form a defensive assemblage."

"Rita?" Madame Bolivar asks the room. "Are you here?"

"Yes, Ma'am" Rita pops up on a monitor, "I met the Chinese Info War operations leader, Chen Tzu Chiang once or twice at Lawrence Livermore. He's a sharp as shit kind of guy- full speed ahead always. Expect him to be crafting access denial attacks while unleashing sophisticated series code hacks on routers operating in or linking to the United States grid. Chen's access to supercomputers and his AI coding skills combine to make him a serious threat." she pauses to catch her breath, her small frame heaving with excitement.

"What's next?" two words are all Carolla squeezes into Rita's break.

"Chen will hit SOSUS therefore shutting down sonar information flow from the massive scale underwater arrays."

SOSUS, an array of underwater hydrophones and analysis hardware, keeps the US Navy abreast of ship and submarine location and movements worldwide. The system does not require satellites.

“Chinese People’s Army deafening SOSUS unloads a huge chunk of work off Airre; so make sure what they’re doing is somewhat traceable. Knowing Peterson, NATO won’t be grasping for solutions outside the commie box. Rita, thus far your incident-response scenarios nail real-life, that’s a trend. For what it’s worth, trends end. What to expect next?”

Rita thinks on it. Pedro jumps in to save her, “ASAT4 on the Chinese?”

Yeltsin IV rolls in twenty-meter swells making for tricky seamanship but navigating the Arctic Circle- old hat for Russian sailors. Yeltsin IV, the latest in triple-hull stealthy battle cruisers, stalks multiple US surface vessels and an intermittent submarine contact. Captain Boris takes his seat on the bridge, “Do we have a target solution?”

“We have 25% Probability of Kill on Target One and 18% PoK on Target Two plus or minus five points. Five other mechanicals offer no solutions.” The X stares into the sonar plot wishing for a transient noise or two maybe help pin these bastards down.

Captain Boris likes his Executive Officer’s answer, the man stepping up with the hard facts- a game day player. “Bring us about to 170degrees. Slow to ten knots and launch the helo. Get your ears on people; more data on the way.”

From sixty knots the Battle Cruiser digs deep for portside turn launching a torpedo helicopter midway through the maneuver. ‘Flashy,’ thinks Captain Boris, prop wash dying out as Combat Information Center listens once again.

“Dip the helo sonar close in, passive only, right quick. Torpedo room- two weapons per target. Remove all distance safety mechanisms.” The gambit is a dangerous move allowing them to hit very near targets.

“Torpedo room reports ready, outer doors open waiting for instructions.”

Boris waits, listening expectantly. Suddenly Yeltsin IV's passive sonar array begins registering blips as the Arctic Ocean erupts in cacophony of active sonars and firing noises- giving away his position while providing a bevy of target solutions. What in hell, why now? Shit, the gigs up. Another second to muse then, "Fire the spread."

Nine torpedoes eject from Yeltsin IV, "Hard to flank, right rudder, bring us about." Flushing complete Yeltsin IV halfheartedly turns to run away.

Nearly two hundred meters astern the intermittently sensed stalking British diesel attack sub opens its own outer doors launching four homing torpedoes at the fleeing Yeltsin IV. The weapons meet at midpoint then pass on.

HMS Shakespeare a twin-screw boomer takes two hits, popping the shaft seals, sinking with all hands.

In a tight cluster, five US Navy battle cruisers fire lasers heavenward in a race against the oncoming ordnance. All receive major damage.

Yeltsin IV conducts a speed run, away from the Shakespeare's stern chasing torpedoes. Captain Boris releases a locator beacon just before the race ends, flashing his final status/position. The sonar array does not relay battle data; convincing Peterson, through inference, SOSUS is in trouble.

Federal Emasculation, Houston, TX 0555

The emergency alert system screams. The Chief heaves a sigh of relief.

"Sir, the Pentagon is ordering a general call-up of reserves."

These words the Chief longs for: time to cut and run.

"Ted, you hear that?"

Ted listens with half an ear waiting for more stupid orders.

"You're finished. This'll gut your Task Force; you know we've a large percentage of double dippers beholden to the Governor and President. So, get your TF people and equipment immediately over to Park Slope Fairgrounds; use PSF Lot II and III for disassembly points. Run the load out in reverse, you know the drill. Don't bother

complaining about it, either. Just run the checklist and leave the entire mess to the Feds, OK? Now, confirm my order.”

Playing hardball, eh? Ted chews it over a second. It’ll take a miracle for him to keep any force here while the Feds fatten up with his people. Deciding, “Yes, sir. I understand retreat to Park Slope Fairgrounds for disassembly.”

The Chief throws him a bone letting the retreat comment ride. He likes the younger man usually but, “Thanks for your hard work Ted. The problems here seem to be settling down, so break contact and let’s call it a night.”

In the open behind the Fountain Diner, a greasy spoon of ill-repute Karl listens intently to on the fly decryption and simulcast of the Ted’s exchange. Thinking now’s the time to settle a score, “Park Slope Fairgrounds- now, dammit- take down the Task Force before the Feds cull his members.”

Sudden & Violet, Houston, TX 0600

Drivers on the Texas 8 roadway honk continue throwing lewd gestures at Ted’s convoy of behemoths too big to stay inside one lane thus taking part of the shoulder. Ted brings up the rear, the leader ensuring all his units leave the community defenseless. Passenger Ted rides high atop the cupola looking around menacingly; one hand on the twin fifty calibers. Suddenly hearing incoming, Ted jerks the muzzle 180 degrees toward danger, squeezing triggers.

A refinery worker drinking away the holiday weekend rear-ends Ted’s convoy at ninety-eight, top speed of the big old Chevy. Passing the wreckage, viewing the corpse, Ted ponders collision physics estimating his own speed in the low thirties, a steady pace minimizing wear and tear but maximizing tire life. A little math later Ted gives up on calculating, ordering a medic to stop and render assistance. He puts a call out for fire trucks.

Monitoring the action from a plain white box van sitting behind the Fountain Diner, inside the loop between downtown and the eight, Karl Meltzer listens to HPD transmissions while watching Ted’s position icon slow to a halt on the moving map display of units in contact. An alert to the nearby emergency services draws his attention. A click and

drag of the mouse gets Karl looking at computational model output showing Ted's contributions to the mayhem- past and future. Holy shit, thinks Karl, this dude is bad news.

Reverting to the hologram revealing current positions of friendly units, clicking on units Karl finds Manny tooling along southbound trailing the last convoy. Karl remembers Manny's crew from earlier, opens Del la Hoya's link.

"Lt. you have less than two minutes before you encounter tack force units tending to a crash involving one of their fighting vehicles. Please confirm."

"Two minutes," is the reply.

"One minute forty seconds- incoming your position. Do you read?"

Lt. Del la Hoya double clicks in reply, punching Manny on the shoulder getting a huge grin in reply. Manny reaches up with both hands pulling back the heavy firing springs on his double Dushkas.

Del la Hoya's thinking of changing his approach by employing the old naval broadside, raking the enemy during a drive by.

Karl watches the video take from Del la Hoya's vehicle, looking at his own position in fact, going silent as the Fountain View Diner parking lot enters the scene. The camera re-focuses on the rear vehicle in Ted's cavalcade. Manny opens fire as the Dushkas fan out, aiming first at the uniformed men around the car fire chopping them into pieces. He swings the barrel back and forth raking the line before stopping on the lead PFV concentrating on the driver compartment. Three flaming police fighting vehicles join the Chevy.

Karl simultaneously watches the following two Gran Columbian fighting vehicles fire 40mm cannon broadsides' nonstop into the lead police units. His attention diverts only when Ted's vehicle hits the gas heading directly at the Fountain View Diner, toward Karl and his associates.

Out of the corner of his eye Manny catches Ted making a break for the diner. Straining under the weight, he lifts the twin Dushkas off and up to fire on Ted. The other vehicles follow his lead, firing rounds in the direction of the diner. The noise of the firing drowns out the transmissions from the box trucks.

The Fountain View boasts the best diner food on the Gulf Coast, packing in evacuees alongside tourists alongside the local crowd. From relaxing enjoying greasy diner fare, in a split second everyone is up and running toward the large plate glass window facing the road- some screaming, pointing but most staring slack-jaw at the ongoing cacophonous commotion.

Ted's driver keeps foot to floor gaining speed to outrun the fire coming down off the higher grade of the roadway. He's aiming to turn the corner to get to the street behind the Fountain View. Much to Ted's immediate horror, they find a dead end. Ted has found a hard place. He turns, sees the rock coming.

Manny fires first, swinging the Dushka in a big arc first taking out the tall neon Fountain View sign then into all the large plate glass windows, missing Ted by a mile, perhaps on purpose. For once, there is no waiting line at the Fountain View. There is also no wait staff. Manny smells roasting flesh.

The surviving kitchen staff scrambles to record the scene, uploading multiple views of subsequent actions. Their wide screen horror depiction appears cinematic. The action playing out, however, misses a newcomer.

Death crowds into the cupola shielding Ted as Manny pumps rounds into the back of the PFV, aiming for the gas tank. Manny shreds the body then moves his fire to the tires. The PMV careens out of control, veering directly in line with the cameras inside the Fountain View. The two vehicles separate, much to the relief of those in the vans with Karl as the danger de-escalates.

The .40mm canon carriers running behind Manny have almost no chance of hitting Ted or any other fleeing Houston Police units but fire anyway just in case. Del la Hoya's camera slews back around, showing Karl the carnage live in living color.

Ted slams into the Fountain View Diner, killing the camera people ensuring their martyrdom attains viral status. Startled, the .40mm canons fire in his direction, missing the building entirely. They quickly follow Manny out of the skirmish.

Looking through the windscreen at the approaching .40mm rounds, Karl understands the import of the sudden and violent to come.

Death settles in, offers Karl a drink. They clink.

KOLD, Houston, TX 0610

KOLD scores another coup as another video goes viral. They quickly prepare to launch their news chopper for the overhead shots.

Taking to the sky in a light shower, flitting about over the city broadcasting into the cell network, the copilot holds a camera while a second steady-cam on a gimbal mount below pans multiple scenes of destruction. The pilot provides viewers steady chatter between station breaks. Pedro's Port Bolivar radar operators calibrate their systems to eight decimal places: thank you KOLD Chopper39 in Houston, the new kids on the block of 24 Hour Action News and Weather.

Radar techs live check calibrations against the streaming data take from the gimbal camera mount below the skids supplementing their targeting with the pilot's orientation data on the secondary audio channel. Biting their nails lest the chopper get too close, Material Supply requests a shoot down.

Pedro in operations is sick of watching Karl's flaming wreckage, "The moment they stray into restricted airspace, shoot without warning."

Always Something, Mobile, AL 0615

Admiral Fernando de San Martin, the Tyrant of the Seas, skimming the wave tops piloting the lead Catamaran making great time taking a risky more or less direct line from Singing River Island into the Ghost Port formerly known as Mobile, Alabama. Towering cumulus storm clouds churn the Gulf into waterspouts surrounding his three fast transports. De San Martin's huge smile competes for brightness with nearby lightning strikes accompanying nonstop roaring thunder nearly drowning out the Tyrant's rants against Neptune King of the Sea. Still photos off the dash cam show the defiant Tyrant maniacally shaking his fist steering between deadly rotating flows. Bow video downloads from the Catamarans show the Santa Maria crossing toward the beach at full tilt threading the needle around swirling two hundred mile an hour tornadoes, the Pinto his second craft following close also making

safe in the harbor but his trailing vessel the Nina endures a violent conversion to matchsticks.

Tyrant keeps the bulk of his warships, his invasion support fleet, dodging big waves looking for breaks in Nigel's bands, seeking the lee of the strongest winds. To tie up any real tonnage in the storm is akin to smashing them against the docks. His sailors pray profusely watching Admiral de San Martin's approach of the mainland cheer wildly when the old bastard runs them aground.

The timetable and ship movement schedule warns of the possibilities for hostile landings. 'Hope for the best, prepare for the worse', a common de San Martin refrain usually brings on the worse. Upon disgorging troops, the Santa Maria turns props backing into the main channel. The Tyrant with his security detail in tow sprints to the largest admin building facing the waterfront housing both the Port Security and Coast Guard offices. Wasting no time the Admiral taps his comms into the Santa Maria gun net, ordering "Major Ursula or anyone else useful, limber up the .50 caliber on the windows."

From the channel, Santa Maria's bow machinegun chatters. Very good, the Tyrant nods his approval. The Master Chief posts several tripod mounts with fifty caliber crews covering the debarking of the Pinto.

For months the Tyrant studies the Mobile Port Operations (often in person) finding tight security 24/7. Today, thanks to Nigel and Santa Maria's bow-mount hosing the docks indiscriminately with the fifty calibers, no weapons fire on the Pinto as she pushes off. His brave Catamaran crews navigate the shoals, eventually re-finding the fleet thanks to a strategic Coast Guard navigation beacon replacement. The Tyrant ties into Security comms:

"Get your first wave shore crews on clear out duty. Root out all the nesting vermin. You have forty minutes. Use it."

Watching as his forces commandeer local vehicles to begin their sweep, the Tyrant nods, turning to the next checklist item:

"Hey, you bean-counting sons of whores!"

Waiting, the bean counters of Material Supply turn in unison mostly holding waterproof devices: clipboards with laminated spreadsheets and maps but some mean looking sons-of-whores display

semi-automatics. One group punches on phones standing in a loose bunch looking like lost souls: the Tyrant refers to them as finders.

“You know that GPS isn’t working anymore, right?” the Tyrant is once again unhappy, “Forget GPS, just use the maps. Link up with our Guard units at the gate; hit the streets rounding up all the crane workers living nearby. The winds die back and we’ll be offloading ships so get moving, dammit!” The Tyrant’s mood sours further, he’s ready for floggings.

The lion’s share of fleet cargo ships are of the old-fashion variety requiring huge gantry cranes lift out the goods. Crane operators apparently a detail missing in the Mobile region; for some reason the early standard Northern Gulf Invasion Plan had two per boom, somehow all dropping out of the Hurricane Plan. Earlier, the Tyrant hospitalized the bearer of this bad news.

“Always the small details that get you,” the Admiral ruminates to the clipboard toting Material Supply liaisons, “Leading to the big questions; such as, kill the person making the next mistake or merely flog them within a millimeter of death? Screw me over to find out. Takers?”

“It’s not our fault,” mumbles one of the pistol wielders.

The Tyrant grunts, “Not me, eh? Funny how missing crane operators turn out to be our Achilles heel- sounds like sabotage- screw improbabilities. Flog somebody for unnecessary exposure risk in a freaking hurricane? Travel in this mess is deadly. Do you have any idea of the damage Nigel’s eye wall is causing outside the Port? There’s debris, trees and live electrical wires everywhere.

Because we’re screw-ups mucking in shit, here comes Material Supply to the rescue, sure whatever, another bunch of assholes eventually requiring the whip. Ensign warm up the cat-o-nine tails, add extra studs.”

The Tyrant hits his stride, courting a stroke- vintage Tyrant.

“Were you just not going to tell me? Oh by the way nobody here knows how to operate the big cranes. Holy shit, somebody’s going to pay for this with skin. Backtrack the crane operator paper trail, find out who’s responsible and flog them to death. Somehow I think I remember crane operators somewhere or other in the planning. Find

out if they made the trip, where they might be and if they're afloat. On the sea or under it; two places to look, two results and one of them better solve this. Get it done, make it so and all that. Nigel's shitstorm will taper we're short people to run the cranes when this hurricane moves on, if ever. Where the hell is Major Ursula? Find out!"

The clock is ticking on the Tyrant, his mojo nearing depletion.

Green Energy, Killeen, TX 0620

Fort Hood (aka high priority target site) sits in the midst of non-polluting self-sustaining energy-generating wind farms. Typically, the base pulls power off the grid the windmills feed. This weekend, the wind farms have other ideas and the base absorbs blast energy instead, beginning with the Patriot batteries.

Seventy minutes after the Patriot radar takedown, the barrage tapers. Seventy minutes of steel rain levels the landscape distributing rubble generously. Death surveys the sneak attack yield- marginally below expectations- wondering not for the first time if perhaps Karl hasn't bitten off more than Pedro and company can chew.

The command chain at Hood operates smoothly far underground out of reach of the non-nuclear warheads raining down outside. Serious casualty numbers mount topside hitting the poor bastard first responders. Commanding General Robert Burrows screams in outrage while his staff muscles to restrain him.

His aide, Colonel Mallard works the problem connecting to hangar comms, "Forget about finding anything flyable outside, bring up the Apaches."

B. Murder clicks off on yet another asshole. He doesn't need any distractions busy trying to hoist an Apache out of the cellar. The lift jams. Fuck me. B. Murder climbs the steel staircase tries to open the trapdoor. Fuck me.

Meanwhile topside, Death watches intently as bulldozers scrape the tarmac making grisly debris piles of burning equipment and corpses. Pedro's rocket bombardment, though on the lighter side historically, seems quite effective. Death contemplates, hoping for insight. Apparently targeting coordinates accurate to six decimal places assure pinpoint obliteration. Pedro's small bomblets shred four hundred

eighty five souls. There's the rub: should be four hundred eighty six. Death re-checks the tally. Shit, fuck me still incorrect.

Boom! Ahhhh, that's the stuff. The dozer clearing the debris contacts unexploded ordnance. Four hundred eighty six accounted for, Death sighs- time to go.

B. Murder is under the dozer as it explodes, ten feet under vainly struggling to clear the blockage. His bird waits silently nearby- accusingly.

Badass, Killeen, TX 0545

Twenty-two Patriot batteries fire on ninety-four targets, destroying ninety-four targets- 100% effectiveness.

Governments keep information from the public, standard procedure National Security and all that jazz. Historically great lengths and measures go hand in glove with secrets (ask Dr. Smith, he'll explain). Fort Hood's heavy armor reaction force hides deep underground, below the depth of penetration of the most prying satellites. Below the operations layer, below the administrative offices, below the barracks, below acres of tanks and fighting vehicles, below munitions locker 1, adjacent to munitions locker 2 lays the biggest 'get' in the military: privacy.

Formerly serving as an auxiliary storeroom with a sink, slacker heaven is the province of one: the Master Chief. Away from the thousands of cameras routinely recording routine comings and goings, guests of the Chief find an unremarkable solid steel gunmetal grey door replete with ancient duct tape attaching a sign reading Plumbing Overflow Room. No lock keeps the curious away from wooden shelves holding cans of Roach Killer and creamy corn. Follow the faint urine smell down the aisles then around the bend to a urinal beside a tiny commode; lift off the partial roll of toilet paper stuck to a nail on the wall and press firmly. The far corner floor drops, revealing a staircase.

Duke Cunningham is the Master Chief of Fort Hood. He is also busy.

Colonel Callie comms Duke the call sign- meet me. Duke immediately takes a bathroom break. As Hood's Heavy Armor Rapid

Reaction Force reassembles into fighting trim above, Callie sprints down the backstairs to the Overflow Room finding the floor already open. She falls into the Master Chief's bear hug squeezing tight never wanting to let go while grieving for friends: charred, pierced, scattered and dead. Callie senses facial moisture as she holds on but never actually catches him crying, now or ever. Duke nearly breaks the embrace; Callie's squeezing so tight brings tears to his eyes.

Callie checks her watch. She has a briefing in five having already been out of comms for another five. She only has another second to say anything.

Master Chief Duke kisses Colonel Callie for the last time. His boss is the finest piece in the US Army and she likes him. Why doesn't he expect to see her alive tomorrow? Suppressing his emotions to focus on the mission, Duke follows Callie to Operations, slowly via a different route, softly singing: "this will be the day that I die, this will be the day that I die..."

Gambit, GC Cavern, Southern Paraguay 0600

Jorge and Paez share a wish, watching the drop-off in traffic, same as everyone in the now deadly quiet command center. Primary Materiel Supply Forward Support Vehicle comms cease, thanks to Karl getting himself blown to bits in a million-to-one play. Pedro strolls in smiling, seemingly approving Karl's soldiers' death as one befitting manning up and leading from the front.

The pall over dead Karl somewhat tempers the Cavern's overall mood, concern afterward overshadowing the delight during Material Supply's overwhelmingly successful attack on Ted's Emergency Task Force. Several of Karl's leading elements remain in the open continuing the difficult task of hunting down escaping HPD units, advancing to hard contact. A sizeable amount of Ted's patrols go silent after the attack, melting away into traffic.

Taking two pages from Pedro, acting-Chief of Operations Jorge interrupts the Materiel Supply and Military nets with breaking news of Karl's death, announcing the immediate promotion of former Deputy Materiel Supply Section Chief Heraldo Herrera into Karl's on-site slot.

Pedro's announcement reads smoothly, not a spur of the moment 'few words' but somewhat droning.

Jorge shoots Pedro a double take, surely a shitstorm is brewing but how can Pedro have any idea what to expect next? Without knowing Karl will buy the farm, how does he just hand me two pages of obviously pre-fabricated 'Karl buys the farm' announcement? Doesn't appear at all rattled at losing such a good friend and key player so early in the contest, either, very interesting. Jorge grabs hold of his brother Paez leaving the dais for a quiet backroom to discuss the matter, agreeing ultimately to privately pound probabilities and recommendations out of Rita and Airre. Outcomes to the succession question should be hanging in the air; none of the model runs predict Karl's demise. Changing the parameters inputting the succession orders into the battle plan requires first analyzing a mountain of data then stepping into the future. Time consuming, the brothers' agree, very time consuming indeed. After a quick consult, Rita agrees to help. Airre shrugs.

Rita works her magic on initial raw data returns; smoothness not an issue she produces quickly. Airre the Quantum makes them wait. First she updates the Material Supply command tree, removing Karl's influence and adding chaos. Next she blends new inputs along with historic raw data within the new structure. Finally, serving to piss off the impatient brothers, she creates a mountainous slide deck of graphs and begins the show. Net results predict a sizeable trickle down in productivity shown as a saddle point before gently rebounding into a lower normal. Such a result typifies a high level loss, her following slide explains. A few thousand more graphs (processing near term events into future results with snazzy graphics and more than one animation) crystallize the thinking in the room: the Plan remains cautiously in play.

Wiggle room in the succession algorithms make or break the outcome, according to Rita's math and Airre's charts. Material Supply Operations Command in Houston houses two exceptional individuals, Karl and Heraldo. Only one remains and he's also a leader by almost every measure (except quarts of blood boiling in a box truck). Damn you for dying Karl, thinks Rita, we could have been friends.

Getting the nod from Pedro, Airre the Quantum re-draws Houston Material Command operation tempos with Colonel Herrera's box truck as command hub. StoneFace, Karl's handpicked man in the van, waits low profile for the word. Playing it coolly is the correct call, Karl's chaos instruction set pays off and the transition begins flawlessly.

Within moments, former GC Colonel Heraldo Herrera aka StoneFace picks up the reins on the encrypted comms calling for every unit under his command to update status. Meeting Karl's expectations StoneFace assumes control, compliance across the board is immediate as Heraldo holds a violent reputation and cool nickname and family genetics traceable to a close relative of Himmler, legendary WWII Waffen SS leader. StoneFace Heraldo Herrera heralds from Material Supply's Technical Branch where he's known as the mastermind behind a ruse or two. Seconded to Karl into Houston, StoneFace personifies command and control.

However, power doesn't share easily and change creates opportunity. Carolla Bolivar vacillates. With final say on the command structure and no objective reason to reject Karl's substitution, not so late in the game, she moans to Pedro instead. Subjectively she simply doesn't like StoneFace. Damn Karl for putting her in this spot; she imagines him in hell boiling in acid or something equally hideously disfiguring, no preference, a chain saw perhaps yielded by one of his friends. Oh, yeah, that's right- no friends. Fucking Karl.

Wait a second; there is in fact one friend- stupid Pedro. Months ago, Karl's in for a meeting with Stella on the general evac of the space force so Stella grills him for a succession plan. Karl wouldn't have anything to do with it, his arrogance floors her so they fight, a typical Carolla blowout ending with words neither can take back, particularly now. Missing him more and more Carolla stands stock still saying nothing for a long time. Karl's insight was magic. Trust him?

Carolla believes StoneFace will take Houston- with triple the casualties.

Pedro settles her down; soothingly suggesting a spa knowing Karl's death is in the noise. Sooner or later, here or there, Death and Karl meet up in Houston, per the plan. Pedro also expects triple casualty figures from StoneFace; lets Carolla know his misgivings, however

keeping mum on Karl's future. Good luck, Karl, old friend- time to stop slacking, get to work.

StoneFace sits like box truck cargo making its way up from the Port, his chair comms tying into command nets, monitoring everything, thinking always. Making only the tiniest of movement for hours is the hallmark of StoneFace- Karl's stoic leader. Common sense, logic and not making mistakes produce success. Herrera sets his personal bar high, never failing at anything he honestly tries. Former Colonel StoneFace is quite familiar with his duty from sitting in BTI conference rooms countless hours in countless meetings with Technical Operations repeating minute details on every plan aspect. Command loves meetings almost as much as bullshit casualty numbers is his chief complaint.

Stoics such as Heraldo relate to common sense and logic, top down structures. During the run-up, Herrera counters Karl's freewheeling management style playing his role pounding common sense and logic, setting reasonable achievable goals, simplifying. StoneFace gives not give a damn for the people of Houston. Seeing the city level or not, either outcome OK, so no big deal concerning collateral damage- his priority prevents interference in Material Supply efforts moving men and material north. His common sense and logic approach maximizes the safety of his troops over the safety of the adversary's assets, people or things. That's why you bring in StoneFace.

Carolla breaks into command net standing tall behind her desktop podium, voice wavering just a bit at first conveying condolences to Karl Meltzer's family, friends and coworkers. Pausing, dabbing her eyes, then staring into the camera with her steely gaze, Madam Carolla changes cadence into an oration delivering a strong vote of confidence in her new General, Heraldo Herrera, now assuming command of Houston Ops with the huge responsibility for ensuring no disruption in the flow of men and equipment off the ships and into position to support the troops, iterating then reinforcing high expectations such complex operations will continue without missing a beat. Lowering her tone, she finishes strong: "The plan we follow belongs to Karl Meltzer. Fail the plan and you fail Karl. Let me be clear, I will not fail

Karl.” Choking back a sob Carolla leaves the cavern, head down hiding her tears. Damn you Karl.

The troops know him, they trust StoneFace but, and when it comes to troop psychology there is always a ‘but’, but the new Commander is also an old commander who’d acquired a solid reputation as being pretty much a real prick all the time. StoneFace with the Nazi roots; barely tolerable with Karl holding his leash and now? Ooh boy, to a person the military senses trouble down the road. On the streets, the Commanders in the remaining vans understand the game change hardening their personal styles just a little bit thanks to former Colonel Herrera’s reputation of no mercy ever for anyone.

Karl, on the other hand, preaches look, look again then shoot if you must and be mindful of noncombatants because we’ve many descendants living in the region. Considering his temperament he should have had some friends.

“To win we must apply force in ruthless fashion,” Herrera counters Karl’s logic a million times out loud to everyone. Upon assuming command, StoneFace’s psychology trickles down subtly altering the rules of engagement dynamics swinging the variables over to the more vicious side of the ledger. In other words, Shoot-Look is now the order of the day as Karl’s Look-Shoot flies out the window (Look-Look-Shoot nobody ever takes seriously). As Airre predicts, the death of Karl Meltzer multiplies the horror exponentially.

So thanks to Ted, the guy responsible for humanizing StoneFace Colonel Herald Herrera is dead, ashes blowing in the breeze no longer preventing untold widespread travesties. The Shoot-Look troop psychology costs many lives, thanks to Ted’s Special Operations Team looking for trouble.

Jordie’s Ghost, Cheyenne Mountain, WY 0645

“Bite me, General Peterson, eat shit and die why not?”

Right off the bat Jordie finds being dead equates to being untouchable. Back when Jordie’s a kid and alive, making a twelve block walk home from school with assholes taunting him, hating every step- back then, Jordie’s touchable. They physically abuse him on the way home; the bullies unable to tag him in the morning because he

began varying his time and route. After school, however is a different story as they inevitably follow him out of his last class, or await him at his locker or outside the door. Sometimes he waits them out but mostly receives brutal humiliation. Every Jordie recollection of his life centers on taking abuse from bullies.

Jordie wants to die but instead goes on to college with his bow tie and helicopter mom in tow. He meets his best friend serendipitously his first semester at USC upon accidental assignment to a woman's dorm. Jordie loves Betsy from the first hug; she listens to his stories becoming the only person he admits is smarter than himself. Betsy recognizes Jordie's terrible situation decides to help. Everywhere she drags him along coddling and protecting him from the bad people-running interference. In turn, she goes places with Jordie's aid, runs for election with his help. Eventually, with Jordie as her hatchet man they trim every government agency they meet. The blame falls on Jordie.

Jordie positions Senator Betsy for retribution upon discovering a gaggle of his former abusers in the military. He points Betsy at the waste demanding she let him tackle it. Betsy understands and approves letting Jordie loose on then-Major Pete Peterson. Hey tough guy, bend over meet the axe. Sparks fly.

Camp Peterson, a small military outpost falls first to the budget axe. A gaggle of other facilities follows. Jordie, conforming to the school of thought that the world is now a safe place for Democracy, is looking to dismantle the de-stabilizing aspects of existence, an impractical task for all but the very committed. Sacrosanct programs and military spending initiatives suddenly meet Jordie coming away disheartened. Betsy rides Jordie's budget axe to the White House, the new President taking her red veto pen to the Warfighters, people unused to hearing 'no'. One cabal after another passes leaves the Oval Office mumbling thinly veiled threats regarding her future.

Betsy sweats. The President loves Jordie like a brother but even she considers her Chief of Staff a pain in the ass ninety percent of the time so she expects to be JFK'd any minute- last weeks' biggest problem.

Jordie's leaving the war room unceremoniously is her latest problem in a long list. She is not having a good weekend.

Neither is General Pete Peterson, Jordie's death complicating an already touchy situation.

Learning the art of Generalship at the feet of old school, tough guy warriors in the Marcus Aurelius tradition, Peterson exudes stoicism during Jordie's death, his outward non-reaction including a hard look stare put on to provide moments to think. Jordie dying in the war room catches the White House off-guard. They waste time going into shock, scrambling about to help or summon help as Peterson watches impassively. The stern, demanding Air Force General and the soft liberal share a lifetime of history, a stormy confrontational history where Peterson gets off to a fast start before Betsy forces a tie.

The crusty General ponders Death while watching Jodie puke out his innards, wondering where a shithead like that lands. In the next instant Jordie appears inside Cheyenne Mountain, standing next to Death looking out Peterson's window at the big board. Death scans the monitors; liking the setup from his very first visit. Peterson spits up his coffee, catching Death's attention. Death looks in his eyes shaking his head assuredly. Not today, Pete, not just yet.

Peterson likes the nod but cannot help thinking that Jordie, newly dead Jordie, a guy with a grudge, is already scheming some payback along with Death, an entity certainly undeserving of trust. Peterson contemplates this new development, losing focus on Jordie's cooling body for a while internally debating if and how he could opt Death or even Jordie to his advantage. Maybe Jordie could become a spy? What about trust? Peterson looks into Death's eye, learning the mysteries of the Universe.

General Peterson makes his first serious mistake, perhaps due to the momentary distraction during the creation of "Ghost Jordie". The stir in the war room with the first aid responders trying to revive a very much dead former Presidential aide drags on with chest compressions and high voltage paddles for over twenty-five minutes. His mistake: seeing another desecration, saying nada.

Shaking his head at the pounding dead Jordie's chest is taking from specialists in the clean white lab smocks; Peterson wants to gag as ribs crack forcing blood gushing from dead Jordie's mouth. The woman holding dead Jordie's head soon turns away while vomiting her last

meal. Liquefaction spewing out of Jordie's mouth in a pulsating rhythm coats everyone and everything six feet out in a 90-degree arc. Peterson pours bourbon, lights a cigar.

Knowing the difference between savable and not, Peterson might have offered an opinion earlier, but didn't. 'Stop already' he's thinking, 'there's not enough internal organization to pump jack shit so enough with the compressions already, you're getting tedious'. Obviously none of them will stop until Betsy orders a stand down and she's a freaking million miles away from the looks of her. Moving his gaze to the professional medical specialists seeing the same look on their faces as his own viewing a growing heap of body tissue on the floor courtesy of Jordie involuntarily puking his entire circulatory system Peterson's inner voice cracks jokes as to how the entire carpet section needs an exorcism rather than a cleaning. The Kings' horses carrying all the King's men won't be putting humpty back together again.

"Enough, only Jesus Christ can bring him back." Peterson speaks aloud.

Peterson, Death and Jordie watch in silence as dead Jordie transfers onto a gurney moving quickly toward the door.

"They should take the rug." Death offers Peterson a compliment.

Taking his first corporeal steps, Jordie's Ghost tentatively moves about the room, as Death concentrates on the monitors.

"Seems you may have a problem with surveillance data not jibing with the facts, eh?" Jordie pipes up for the first time, "You know what Peterson? I got to see your future; that's why Death is with me. Not so good for you General, give up already before you end it all. Why should I lie?"

Why should you, dipshit, why the hell not? Peterson always answers a why question with, 'I'll be as honest as I can.' What does either contribute to an honest discourse? Fact of the matter, Jordie is correct. The data stream from JSTARS, iSTARS and all his other STARS flies in the face of reality on the ground same as the streaming targets somehow continuing to broadcast "All Clear" during the same event. General Peterson's disgust triggers a bout of acid coffee reflux sour burps and stomach rumbles. Jordie looks over flashing an evil

grin. Manipulation of his network flow, particularly by forces yet unknown equals a huge benefit for the enemy. Why should Jordie lie? Better yet, how can Peterson believe anyone about anything?

Catch 22: Many of Peterson's assets remain immune from incoming missiles underground, hidden from the attackers. However, above ground equipment concentrations garner more attention that otherwise may have been spread around. So many unknowns, he just needs to get some reliable bomb damage information. Peterson burps acid. Up to and until Jordie chokes on his own gut then appears a thousand miles away, Peterson believes he exercises overall control of his future. Now he knows better.

"Let me be as honest as I can be." Peterson begins as only he can.

Jordie makes his decision on the side of staying inside the mountain, at least for a little while. He intensely hates the crusty bastard; however his spirit despises his body for bailing on Betsy in her hour of need. Jordie remains a wuss even when dead, she needs his help so she'll get his help. Soon she will weep streams of salty tears for the dead and dying. She needs Jordie here.

"For all I care, you can go to hell," Vintage Peterson- direct, honest.

His surveillance people could not detect the missile attacks. So who's in charge? Not me, evidently. Peterson needs to hope for the best, prepare for worse. Offline from the war room, he orders Strategic Force into zero time preparation checks; should he get that call from the catatonic President. Maybe he should prepare to make the call himself, should it come to such an end.

Standing in silence, Peterson stretches out his achy joints holding his breath for three full minutes while the disposition of every nuclear missile in the arsenal scrolls in his peripheral vision. Not seeing any real issues of concern or anything to affect ahead of time, exhaling he turns his attention to the big wall screen objects, wondering what's fascinating Death so much. Hundreds of still images, films, graphs and text reports flash up, stay a few seconds fading to new original materiel. Slide show, Peterson utters for Death's benefit. Soon the data flow rate grows untenable; losing them both in strobe lighting.

One of the plots on the wall catching his sub consciousness, Peterson blinks on the image twice. The entire screen vanishes.

Everyone in the cavernous room stops to look. For long moments, the General stares at an old satellite shot overlaid with all short range missile plume detections. "JSTARS status please, data trouble/action logs."

"No sweat, Sir, JSTARS reports 5X5." The techs download recent JSTARS take in textbook perfect operation. Every piece of JSTARS consists of proven technology with line of sight transmission getting and giving in impenetrable fashion. He's looking in the right direction.

"Recycle all JSTARS assets; let's get on target with good data." Peterson plays with the wrapper from another Padron, piercing the end with a tiny screwdriver drilling inside to a thumbnail's depth. He lights up; billowing out clouds of secondary smoke the HVAC system struggles to remove. Peterson always figures things about better playing with a cigar and today's no different.

That moment the dim bulb in Peterson's mind gets a clue Jordie's ghost begins giggling uncontrollably tapping Death on shoulder playfully elbowing him in the ribs. Death turns to witness Peterson's countenance a split second before the General emits a low growl foreshadowing the answer to his forthcoming question booming, "Where the hell is the CAP on the JSTARS? Who's protecting our last set of eyes?"

"Just like a little girl!" mocks Jordie.

"That's not helping."

Teamsters, Fort Knox, KY 0600

Bill Cross takes his beer off the dash swiveling the contents. Backwash. Julion reaches between the seats grabbing a pair of fresh victims from the fridge, fiddling for his opener while handing one to the driver. Teamsters, Material Supply grunts front and foremost Bill Cross and Julion take Karl's death in stride, striding toward the liquor store. A pair of 'stellar performers getting the job done regardless of circumstances, they expect to meet up with Karl very soon- job hazard. Bill Cross breaks the silence with a release of carbonation- thanks Julion. Fuck it: "No matter, it is what it is," Bill Cross teaches Julion about undercover life's hard knocks while Julion reminds Bill what's funny.

Free Trade Agreement over the road migrant workers, allegedly Mexican nationals legally inside the U.S., the Argentinian-born Irishman, six foot pale white guy Bill Cross eases the big rig off the superhighway, their run almost complete. Alongside him for fifteen years, mostly fitfully dozing but occasionally useful for troubleshooting windmills, sits a much younger missile tech. Julion Rodriguez, another alleged Mexican migrant (from Uruguay by way of Boston, MA in the care of MIT). Recruited separately then partnered by Karl, the two become tightknit. The burly man once took a bullet for little Julion. Together 24/7, the two keep some ground rules to prolong debate, keeping conversations going for weeks at a time, passing the empty hours.

The rules of the game develop early on. Any subject is fair game; raw intelligence is the primary scoring measure. No cheating but bullshitting is encouraged. Not that there's a scorecard, it's more a back and forth interaction sans acrimony. Julion the scientist fields complex scientific queries from Teamster Bill; mostly returning the favor with historical and philosophical queries in the elder's range of specialty. Two men, complete opposite personalities playing a game within a game stepping outside the box to discover the answer to life's question without the net- one hell of a good time.

"A query is on the table, Mr. Bill" Julion navigating from the right seat points his index finger for a right turn at the bottom of the ramp. "The table wants to know about power: how to acquire, apply- umm wisely/judiciously?"

Bill Cross listens to his pal Julion, knows he is perturbed at Karl's passing. Julion grows upset as their time together is ending, their long and tortuous journey nearing final conclusion. After today, Julion has himself a ticket to front line missile maintenance while Bill moves back to the rapid transport department, re-entering the Backbreakers. Material Supply is splitting most driver-tech combinations leaving together only a few driver couples.

From a lifetime on the streets, Bill Cross- the Hooligan of times past- a man keeping a steel rebar within reach most times, decides to go with a theory he's been mulling over quite some time, long enough to dream about.

“You’ve heard me say it over and over, my young friend” Bill begins each new theme or idea with the ‘my young friend’ dig- a quirk, a ‘tell’. Julion listens up. “The theory I’m working is preliminary, you understand, but I think this one makes sense and can wrap the game up on the right note.”

The six-foot Irishman sits up, sucking in on the small bowling ball sitting in his lap. When not drinking breakfast, Bill frequently drives with perfect posture high in his seat eyes darting scouting the area ahead, speeding just a little over the limit. When drinking, he tends to slouch into a low rider position, beer low between his knees. Today, as never before he’s relaxingly casual, careful to observe traffic laws keeping security off their backs- even to the point of pouring his beer into a cup earlier. Every load is important and this one more than others as the replacement for a windmill misfire targeting a radar dish currently still operational inside Fort Knox, Kun-t-lucky- their last run.

“My young friend let me be as honest as I can be: what you have here falls into the ‘large-scale Guestion’ category. Only with a guess can one answer questions this deep; power evolves inside the zone of influence arena, and as we learn from arena rock concerts, scale matters more than size. Achievement of large-scale influence can happen rapidly or at a glacial pace, doesn’t matter ‘cause either way large scale derives fractally from the lowest inside level and the smallest scale. Therefore, solving of these equations at each subsequent level must acquire no more importance than those precedents.”

“I don’t think you have the slightest idea what you just said,” Julion’s laughing so hard he almost dumps his beer, “Once again I call bullshit.”

“You know, I would too except I know better,” Mr. Bill rises to the bait. “Take us for instance, me and you- the lowest rung possible on our beloved Gran Columbian Material Supply influence ladder. I sit in the cab behind this big wheel fifteen hours every day, married to the road. We deliver then install missiles in windmills non-stop all the while getting ready for the ambush. Without us (aka the lowest rung or the first fractal level) working like hell, there is no next to consider. Thus the amount of influence possible without us equals zero. Not

only do they suck without us but also every other department will fail persistently. Karl said so and I believe Karl.”

“We got a left coming up in half a mile.” Julion interrupts and Bill grunts. They’re getting close and Julion’s putting his game face on. Setting up missile loads is getting riskier by the minute.

For the years Bill Cross and Julion punch the clock at Bolivar Transport- Energy Division their movements legit and traceable in the eyes of government regulators, thanks to official permits and paperwork. They transport then install windmills, too many to count. Missiles crisscrossing hitting strategic locations: prelude to war courtesy of Bill and Julion. Trouble is: the windmill ruse is old news-time to pitch a change-up.

“How many people do we have at the site?” The site’s a corporate farm twenty-five klicks from Fort Knox, famous for barley.

“Miguel in shipping, not the other one, told me the network set up team took over command and control a half hour before we left the warehouse. They should have the security update with new positions installing as we speak- so far no problem reports. Two stinger teams are pre-positioning somewhere between the barn and the highway, covering our exit. Ditto two drone squads report no contact. According to Miguel, there’s a great crew waiting for us and we only need to move outdoors. I’m setting a twenty minute get away before the firing sequence, so if we’re lucky we just might be back on the highway blending in.”

“Yea sure whatever,” Bill drives always thinking of how fast to get away figuring they get about eight miles before landing in someone’s crosshairs. Maybe do a Smokey and the Bear maneuver? They approach the facility slowly, a chain-link fence appearing at the end of the long road. The gate into the grain storage facility swings open as tough men flanking the gatehouse holding AK-74s motion them in.

“Must be two teams,” Julion spies another six tense men hiding between two huge silos, manning a tight perimeter. Bill smoothly applies brakes lining the rig up with spray painted ground marks; looking cool leaning out with the door open.

“Damn, I could use a beer. You there,” Bill climbs out issuing orders and epithets as only Bill can. “Hook up the goddamn hoses already. The faster we move, the likelier we’ll live to tell the tale.”

Julion scurries out of the cab crawling under the trailer with a screwdriver in one hand and their paper map and codebook in the other. Four screws later, while Bill engages the Peterbilt’s trailer hoses, Julion exposes the keypad and while lying on his back with no monitor to confirm his actions types at a furious pace the in-situ coding activating the warheads, verifying the program update on the rocket guidance. Julion rolls out, thumbs up so Bill starts the tractor, driving the double outside.

Julion syncs his watch with the timer, propagating the information stream. “Let’s get the fuck out of here!”

Gathering their security, they leave in non-descript white minivans, activating one of Karl’s rare double loads consisting of two missiles, one per box, two boxes per tandem, resting on specially designed rotating chassis’. Unlike their windmill counterparts, each box revolves ninety degrees allowing for an easier target package update. Unfortunately, the corporate barn storage facility comes online too late to convert the barn roofs.

Shorter range than the liquid fuel windmill missiles, the fifty foot rockets cold-fire from their launchers thanks to a simple spring loader. Not far away, barely off the ground, maintaining forward momentum, the solid fuel rockets fire and the missiles scream along the terrain underneath Patriot range.

At least to Julion’s thinking, under Patriot range is now a guess relating to an earlier time. Perhaps Fort Know has new and improved Patriots. Who knows? Besides, does Knox have any Patriots remaining to shoot them down?

Well, some Patriot anti-missile batteries tie into the big radar dish, the one Julion fails to hit thanks to the solid fuel not igniting and the warhead falling like some loser shot out of a circus cannon. The huge fire control radar interprets flying dust identifying the farm’s launch location then passes that data along with flight probabilities to the box holding the rockets. However, airborne missile track returns are more

nebulous, the Patriot missiles typically underperform while trying desperately to hit incoming darts.

Julion's cruising missiles fly within inches of one another until the Patriots fire. Before the Patriots begin searching, the short range rockets diverge, dropping twenty meters. Without lock, the Patriots lose track while probability variables multiply; they instead divert to the initial launch position. On target and deadly, the U.S. missiles head for the barley farm, tracking in on a long stationary target next to a large barn. The Patriots appear unconcerned about 65 farm personnel lining the floor along a wall bound hand and foot with duct tape.

Falling steel shreds most, the rest die in the fire ignited on the wood floor, burning alive screaming agonizingly into duct tape agony.

Drinking and driving thoroughly rattling his pax, the veteran driver almost kills them six times by Julion's count, information he represses. Julion keeps quiet until Bill Cross drives them out of danger. Reaching the highway with two minutes to spare, they're heading south mixing in with thousands of haulers working the holiday weekend for standard time.

Made it- holy shit- sure as hell glad that's the last one of these, Julion thinks silently.

"Glad isn't the word for overcoming this experience, my young friend, overjoyed is what we are." Bill Cross is mind reading again. "So there you have it, we're the lowest level building the blocks showing the path to follow. Fractals, like I was saying before. Look close at a fern then pull back from the plant. Without that first growth influencing the future, there is no plant, no pattern, and no change."

Julion ponders, considering the danger from setting the pattern base in the most extremely violent way possible. Future changes derive from planting missiles like crops. Tomorrow he likely faces live fire danger- his front line reassignment to an artillery repair and recover unit Bill's foregone conclusion. When in Rome, take direction from Plato, eh? Listening to Bill's opining for the very last time cruising down the superhighway, Julion relaxes his stance on life.

Julion grabs a beer and slouches; feet on the dash leaving sweat stain footprints on the vinyl- against all Bill Cross rules and regulations. Smiling to himself, enjoying Bill's zone of influence for

the last time, humming along to the radio, Julion takes twelve ounces in one long swig honoring the moment.

Buck Passing, So Pacific Coast, CA 0700

Layers lay, so they say, and some layers purposefully lay double whammies but a truly real layer lays double-double whammies or even triple-doubles (on occasion)- thought processes of someone able to keep simultaneous track of multiple conflicts- pondering future events to set up situations effectively eviscerating their opponents. Initially a lowly layer, laying C4 RFID devices on the Californian ocean floor, Dr. Romaine takes pride in his work, developing into a master strategist, inspiring leader and fair operator, the envy of his Bolivar Academy peers and the pride of his thesis advisor, Karl Meltzer.

For his doctoral thesis Romaine Chavez aka Ramey considers historic use of deception relative to modern times developing attack models, codifying a shitload of variables creating God's abundance of scenarios. Karl passes on some of the algorithms to Rita Bolivar, who incorporates Ramey's math into the Material Supply matrix.

One particular model Karl analyzes, parses then passes along to then-Assistant Professor Pedro Saenz then unfortunately attending to a heavy drinking binge after dropping the annual dart tournament. Pedro truly sucks at darts, has no clue what a Ramey even is and is in no mood for Karl's numbers. In fact, he growls deeply and orders another drink. Karl offers to pay his bar tab, all six figures.

Pedro fiddles with the tablet trying to turn it on for five minutes. Drinking, watching, pain evident in his face, Karl grabs the tablet and wraps Pedro across the face lightly, "Goddamn it Pedro, sober up for a minute and look at this one, this particular play meets with semi-success when we run the numbers. Airre produces steep probability curves decreasing with time."

Pedro squints in the dim bar light to examine Ramey's theory, "Timing looks tight, much like the wrong side of a bell curve. His dynamics impress the hell out of me; run the exact same play in a slightly differing configuration produces undesirably negative outcomes. Look at the equations, Karl, control time instead of treating

it as a variable then see what happens- bet Airre's curves level out, so to speak. Damn, I need a drink."

Karl's grin reaches ear-to-ear, "Sounds like you got a new post-doc."

The following day Dr. Romaine Chavez and Pedro begin fleshing out the straw man while Airre plays with the heuristics, looking for the best fit. Over time, a plan develops and Pedro insists Ramey grab a big piece of the implementation pie. Pedro encounters obstacles, "Damn it, Carolla, I don't give a flying fuck he's never been in the field, Ramey's got the right stuff so just trust me. Damn, all of a sudden, I need a drink. Look at it my way; stop being such a Tyrant supporter all the time. Splitting the responsibility makes sense, so does diversifying the naval plan between two coastlines with opposite approaches. Dr. Romaine knows the plan front, back and center."

Carolla stops, stares, wonderingly. Dramatically she pulls a gold coin from her pocket, shows him both sides, "Call it in the air."

"Heads."

"Winner- I'll let the Tyrant know. Do us both a favor and keep clear of him for a time. Pedro, it's your ass on the line. Don't fuck up."

Pedro reluctantly takes over the SoCal operation, delegating the entirety into Ramey's hands, "Ramey, it's your ass on the line. Don't fuck up."

To ensure success, Pedro also enlists the support of Airre the Quantum, "Airre, Karl's ass is on the line. Don't let Ramey fuck up."

Airre doesn't see where Karl fits into the problem, chalks Pedro up to hyperbole and gets busy teaching Ramey how to lay anti-shipping mines, how to convert merchant ships into weapons and finally, how to layer an attack across space and time. By the time she's through, SoCal is ready.

As the global launch grabs bandwidth, Ramey boards a Sea King helicopter transferring his Fleet Flag Battle Staff for the Pacific Campaign to an undefended thin-wall container ship, the el Milagra cruising international waters off the SoCal coast. Deep inside the bowels of el Milagra manning the CIC (combat information center) but for occasional forays topside Commander Chavez monitors and directs the SoCal installment of the GC battle plan, as his fleet stealthily

approaches the mainland. In unison with the el Milagra, the GC turn parallel with the coastline while dropping all pretenses, lowering the façade to expose the big guns.

Ramey gives the go-ahead nod to the fire control officer when the count reaches zero: "Fire!"

The el Milagra heels over nearly keeling with first salvo booming away from the large caliber fore mid and aft guns on the starboard side. Twelve electrical and communication hubs explode, conflagrations igniting the dry brush nearby, strong winds spreading the news. Crews immediately begin reloading as the huge vessel bearing the BTI logo plunges down its longitudinal axis sweeping into a broad turn exposing the port mounts. The el Milagra fires another salvo. The big ship continues its southerly heading steaming steage in the shipping lane, pounding away at the undefended coast concentrating fire on C4I installations to a distance of sixty kilometers. No return fire interrupts the SoCal barrage. As his applied math predicts, Ramey's plan is working.

In the CIC battle center his crack staff stretches their potential, screaming above the din channeling fire orders, taking in BDA (his first Bomb Damage Assessments!) analysis and correlating data collections. A channel routing through Paraguay Jorge breaks Ramey's concentration.

"Material Supply requests an indefinite hold on firing orders for Camp Pendleton. It's a good thing, instead take out the 4th Fleet and shut down San Diego port operations."

"Material Supply needs time instead of fire support? How nice. CIC, release Camp Pendleton from the firing orders, direct el Grande fires on secondary targets."

Ramey considers his options factoring in success neutralizing Camp Pendleton- a 'good to have' problem. CIC updates Airre's data sets. Hmmm, Material Supply's acquisitions seem to be skewing the curves. Ramey looks to the display showing current removal rate versus predictions wondering how Karl managed to get on the high side. The GC grabs more equipment than the data shows at the facility thanks to the last minute machinations of the newly dead Vice President Now

moving assets from the southern states. Then Ramey makes a mistake: he looks at the displays showing the growing SoCal firestorm.

“Deck camera?” he inquires chokingly, needing some water all of a sudden. His gut relaxes as CIC screen projections shift from roasting people to a set of HERF guns uncaging swinging erect out of concealment below decks.

Mathematically Romaine is having the time of his life directing SoCal. Ramey’s heart is not tyrannical- he weeps over man’s inhumanity to man.

Computer technologists on board the floating warehouses work non-stop taking position updates fixing data errors improving the accuracy of their brilliant weapons; however, error probabilities keep rising by the minute. Without satellite guidance, each gyroscopic navigational fix introduces tiny errors into the process, a tendency toward target drifting Ramey observes during model battle simulation. He listens as his spit shine CIC crew debates adequate data levels necessary to ensure precision directionality. As tersely worded conversations turn belligerent, Ramey spits and roars, “Fire already!”

Under Pedro’s tutelage, Ramey’s SoCal stealth navy operates on the competition model, not cruelty. No matter the circumstances, they compete, always. Ramey rewards and they love recognition and if roasting SoCal is the job at hand, so be it. They suck up their misgivings and press the buttons.

Two of Ramey’s techs stand head and shoulders above the rest on board el Milagra, true Cinderella stories. Joining the organization five years ago just out of tech school, partnering on weapon deployment development teams working the bugs out of the container ship delivery mechanisms- two of the quietest people inhabiting the planet. Ramey senses nervous excitement listening to them (!) shooting the breeze.

Fingers flying, eyes darting around icons representing each weapon, Ensign Felipe grunts in disgust, “Did I ever tell you I have cousins in LA? No? Well, on my father’s side, real a-holes, if you know what I mean. All the time when I was growing up we would hear of the mystical magical wonders the United States of North America offers getting on my nerves telling me what a hole I come from and why they’re better us.”

“So now we march them into the Stone Age, right my friend? Revenge is sweet you should savor it.” Ramey didn’t know this guy could talk.

Ensign Felipe gives his ‘good for shit relatives a parting shot, “Yeah, only they won’t be around to complain, now will they?”

“Put my money on them not making it. Let’s say they live past today. Two days without utilities and food distribution and everyone there will start to kill for food and water. Ha, a plague on both their houses!” Ramey wonders if they’re putting him on with a chucklehead act.

Typically it’s bytes, not speech going through their handhelds. Ramey’s surprise is they even bother processing the idea they’re killing actual people, not ones and zeroes.

Oh, well, so it goes, “You guys can talk, eh? No shit. Do me a favor and ease off the non-military targets a little. We don’t need to fry every ten meter Boston Whaler fisherman’s dream to prove a point, you know?”

Monitors showing burning pleasure boats at the Felipe family marina all suddenly change views.

Helmet secure, Ramey flees confinement weirdness for an impromptu ship’s inspection. Climbing diamond plate steps for an eyes-on view of his weapons teams working at a furious pace delivering regular artillery, smart shells and Electromagnetic Pulse Weapons (EMPWs) Ramey visits three decks on his way to fresh air topside. Once on deck turning toward shore, he gets a blow to the solar plexus, doubling over choking back a gag wanting back in the CIC in the worst way imaginable. Ramey smells burning flesh in the downdraft from the flaming inferno over the horizon: alone, eyes tearing, enough already.

Safe inside Ramey takes another route below decks, observing gun teams frantically loading shells slamming shut heavy blast doors, covering ears ducking down turning away. After the boom, breach doors swinging open ejecting smoking hot shell casings popping up before dropping unfettered into a growing pile behind the loaders. Ramey waves, they wave back.

Most gun team members minding the long row of weapons take no notice of Ramey during his inspection, until one fifty five caliber gun commander spots his Captain catching Ramey's eye then pointing at his weapon then to his watch, then down below decks, to his watch again. Two fingers point to his temple mimicking fire. Then Ramey gets double thumbs up!

Ramey understands the code- slow rates large charging time between each burst with two on the way. Ramey salutes his gun teams as he's closing in on the elevator, bursting with layering pride.

Bustling into the CIC exclaiming, "Double whammy coming up!"

Whatever, someone has to say it- that's the customary announcement according to Pedro, coining the term years ago during planning sessions. "Think of your impact, Ramey, both staggering and of such import your process gets a name. Each target calls for one ammunition type, either a bomb or an EMP. Sometimes targets deserving of special attention will call for more than one bomb or type of munitions per bombardment. Two types make a double; two targets make a double- you see where this is going? Such infrastructure sometimes we'll fire bomb with conventional munitions then disabling blasts from the electromagnetic spectrum over the electronic grids, the combination wreaking havoc no question a harsh treatment. When the targets coincide, it's the double whammy. The effect reaches a zenith with the simultaneous double whammy leading to a triple double or 6/3. Pity the fool caught anywhere near a triple double whammy."

Ramey agrees to pity the fool. The fool, in fact, has a name.

Local criminal element thirty four year old Packy Turner inhabits a massive house cresting a coastal bluff adjacent to just above an electrical substation. He likes his other neighbors on either side, very tolerant merely huge global communication nodes replete with half a dozen dishes and towers. However interested in quiet neighbors, Packy Turner, Ramey would have been interested to learn, hates the also quiet natural gas transfer station the city ties into a pipeline they run in the ravine behind his house. It's above ground unsightly and stinking of the chemical additive the city stores in a huge white cylinder thing.

What Ramey did know about Packy Turner, criminal element: on the hook for a huge mortgage on a white elephant albeit with an

awesome view and quiet neighbors about to be living in the middle of a triple double whammy, 6/3.

“Here you go filthy rich bastard. SoCal, this one’s for you.” Ramey amps up his hatred level feeling a new level of disgust. In lieu of flaming marinas CIC carries multiple channels showing el Milagra firing the triple double.

“Encrypt the stream, wrap it in an Easter egg and upload the package.”

Sooner or later the net is going to watch me fry you dipshits, no question. Shaking his head on his way leaving again to inspect stations, Ramey keeps a grim face to keep from laughing. Stopping in the artillery center Ramey watches the loaders load, seven team members per cannon. Three guys feverishly work four digital control stations.

Fire double ranging shot! On the way! Thump, thump! Reload! Fire for effect and El Milagra continuously pumps ordnance upon the rich SoCal people living in the wrong place at the wrong time. War is hell, Ramey figures to make a pit stop before checking back in at CIC so he clicks off the net retreating into the nearest head.

Not Paranoid Enough Evidently, Houston, TX 0700

No matter where, Ted’s task force is drawing too much attention from big guns. His vehicles are conspicuous targets. They take large amounts, unprecedented volumes actually, of fire from unknown hostile forces. Ted orders his people south, keep on the move.

Ted disobeys eight orders in three minutes, a new personal best and perhaps a Department record. The thinking Brass on hand during the holiday weekend fails to impress. The amount of bullshit generation astounds him; “we’re under gunned taking serious fire for God’s sake do something” is all over the net. Their fate seal: communication security fails as the EAT shifts.

The Brass is no help, offering no solution to the flailing troops in the field. Again and again Ted listens to them screaming open channel into their radios for backup, follow-on forces, heavy weapons, apply some serious firepower. Trouble is, every transmission the HPD Emergency Action Team, EAT, makes provides the enemy their

position. The enemy replies by following around Ted and the EAT with tactical mortars seemingly from out of nowhere.

“Guided mortars or small rockets perhaps,” Ted listens.

Fires erupting between Galveston and Downtown burn out of control: half of them street fires from direct hits with adjacent building destruction taking innocent lives. In a flurry, the EAT and other Houston Police squads dwindle alarmingly. Ted’s monitor shows all of a sudden the absolute number of first responders on the street dropping precipitously. The world is watching his people and physical plant burning; the net’s on fire with uploads from anyone local with a camera phone, which is everyone. Ted orders EAT staff to crank up their effort to secure comms but watches helplessly as the bad guy target data package acquisition meets the ‘good people’ in the real world.

“Uh, you know what guys?” Ted looks around, worriedly. “Screw Brass I think it’s about time we think about taking cover. Why not hole up away from here? Call One PP Headquarters on a landline recommend they also take shelter. Whoever this is, they have a plan likely includes leveling One Police Plaza. Then pass word of mouth news of the hole up to our units- stay off comms, all nets. Word of mouth, hand to hand only,” putting a finger down on the map table, “here.”

Ten men scramble out the back door. Ted sprints to the passenger side, yanking the handle screaming all the while for the vehicle to get moving. Ted wants nothing to do with the total destruction he foresees- beginning with city/state/federal police facilities. No way does he want a building falling on his head. “Back roads only; for God’s sake keep away from the damn cameras.”

Emergency Managements’ warning sirens begin wailing plaintively, one long continuous blare. “Uh oh,” Ted looks over at his driver. “Step on it.”

Rounding the corner at high-speed tires squealing, Ted stares down at a blank screen praying for overhead imagery, satellite data to return, “Dammit this traffic blows,” Ted curses a blue streak, freaking whiplash again- “run these fuckers over, just keep moving!” No luck.

Cursing everyone's mother and the horrible choices made in a loveless existence, Ted squints out the windshield pointing toward the relatively empty sidewalk on the other side of the gridlock. Time is to do something.

"Go that way! Try not to run anyone over, but don't take no for an answer either. Whoa boy, this is going to suck."

Most drivers lean out or stand alongside open car doors holding aloft cellphones, broadcasting Ted's antics. Again, Ted's premonitions are prescient.

Dushkas Hit The Net, Houston, TX 0705

Without warning upon hearing explosions nearby disrupting the holiday weekend, live feeds from Houston, TX stun the nation and the world thanks to soon-to-be-dead and other's camera work.

Dragging a comb through his hair, semi-stoned television cameraman Nelson Winters rushes out the elevator lobby toward the revolving door of the KOLD building, banging into the glass. Giving the security guard the finger opens the lock. In the middle of the sidewalk Nelson pans the block, looking for the explosive action his producer sent him to find.

"Sirens," Nelson relays for the viewers, "two or three blocks away. I can hear the sound of gunfire, off in the distance. There's another explosion and some approaching sirens, sounds like fire trucks." Nelson keeps the camera pointing toward the direction the shrieking siren, somewhere around the corner. "Getting closer, here they come," his hands feverishly work the zoom and focus so the camera maintains the shot, stabilizing the stream into high-density feed.

Bursting into the camera frame, screeching around the corner so fast the driver's side tires lift off the pavement, lights and sirens blaring, Ted's compatriot cannot make the turn. Nelson calls it, "No way he's going to make it".

The canine sport utility vehicle patrol vehicle slams broadside into several cars. Nelson's feed zooms in on the two cops inside, zooming in and focusing past them to the big doggie with his tongue hanging out in the backseat as the driver feverishly works to get moving. Slamming the transmission in reverse, jerking the wheel, tires

smoking, metal grinding and scraping sounds drown out their siren. Nelson shifts the view to the driver, remaining serene calmly working the gas, brake and transmission to rock the car again and again until disengaging, violently separating off the line of cars with a bang. On the passenger side a younger Officer perhaps with less time near death curses his ass off pounding the dash turning looking over his left shoulder out the back window. Feverishly grabbing the old guy's head and tilting his eyes to the rear view mirror at their grim future.

"Holy crap!" Nelson vocalizes, keeping steady on the patrol vehicle.

The younger officer reacts, scrambling to begin a desperate attempt to get out of the car and far away.

Nelson records in real time, understanding two in the five w sequence- missing half of who, most of what and all of why. After all, upon stepping outside to investigate what the producer claims is a series of gas explosions, suddenly he's filming fleeing cops, like what the hell, eh? Nelson doesn't understand why the cops are running away, guesses they have their reasons.

The camera wiggles as ka-boom, ka-blam shake up the ground in rapid succession. Nelson catches the explosion with an ultra-HD camera recording mega frames per second, flames belching from a source blocks behind the patrol car. The doggie and the cops turn around to see the lick of flame stretch toward them as the projectile flies the short course impacting the trunk signaling commencement of detonation. Electronics handling the warhead's high explosive charge fire feet from the rear hatch, disintegrating the two officers and their doggie. Nelson cringes, dropping the shot expositing, "To Protect and Serve."

Flaming pieces of the patrol vehicle, four bystanders and three or four cars slice from the blast zone, momentum propelling white hot steel shards through a small crowd of weekend warriors staring dumfounded at the unfolding drama, unwise to their danger until too late.

"What the hell?" Nelson re-focuses behind the blast finding a large military style vehicle rocking on its chassis from the sudden stop and

fire sequence. A big turret holding up a huge gun rotates atop the six-wheel armor vehicle, slewing smooth and slow.

Nelson's hair stood on end as he pisses his pants, "They're checking out the growing crowd, oh my God this isn't good." More and more onlookers get drawn in, coming out from everywhere to check out the explosion, not understanding, new experience.

Nelson stays with the Dushka turret hosting a pair of 7.62 U.N. regulation machine guns forming a triangle with the big cannon at the apex. The gunner opens up, hosing down the traffic in the intersection as well as all the nosy bystanders, foot traffic and of course, the intrepid Nelson.

Nelson's camera, now on the ground with the perorated Nelson, catches all the action including the screams of the dying journalist. The studio picks up the images ultra-high studio quality via their augmented Wi-Fi connection, immediately ramping Nelson's streams onto their net and broadcast sites. Still clickable see it all for yourself, uncut therefore semi-professional feed containing a birds' eye view continuing to capture during the Dushkas approach. Hang in; view the entire clip to see the subsequent squishing of Nelson's corpse from his crotch to his melon. The file ends with the arrival of heavy treads to crush the camera flush with and into the pavement- Award Winner!

The Other Apocalypse of Peter =>

-CENSORED BY ORDER- Too bad, formerly much here- all good stuff THEY don't want you to know...

-The Other Apocalypse of Peter, VII-XX

Epilogue: Into the Grey

Cr8Xpectations

"By order?" Karl straightens, listening to his creaking back.

Hunching over the winged-monkey's other shoulder, death replies, "Well, more of a judgment call than an order, if you want to nick pick old Myron here." He gives Myron a pat on the back.

"So in reality, THEY are you?"

"I blame multiple personality disorder." Death picks up his coffee mug to let Karl sample the merch.

"Still haven't found yourself?" Karl notes the mug is colorful in the grey-scale- intriguing. "Are you sure you want to remove anything from the 'other' story? Won't make you any friends, I mean."

Death chuckles, "Karl, that ship sailed a long time ago but thanks for the input I will add you to my ever-growing list of critics. Here, this is your copy of the first handout." He passes Karl a paperback.

"Crate Expectations?"

"It's the backstory. There's much going on beyond even your purview, you know? Fills in some pre-apocalyptic blanks. I'm giving them out to all the newcomers. What do you think?"

Karl considers the tome before replying, "Seems a little light."

"Peter is correct, everyone's a critic during apocalyptic times- Pedro said exactly the opposite." Sticking his mug in Karl's face, "Pedro said to make the intro a quick study. He also said to add more of Mrs. Wilson, to make you happy. No doubt, he's your only friend."

"So Pedro was here? When?"

Getting a little tired of explaining and justifying Death opens the desk drawer to remove a ball cap. The black lettering on the grey cap reads 'Apocalypse V'. "I'm bringing in hoodies and cardigans for the staff, but in not your size, I'm afraid. Show him Myron."

Myron stands, proudly modeling his tasteful sweater for Karl. The crest reads 'One for the Thumb!'

"A insiders' primate reference, get it? OK, thank you Myron." Death takes a few sips from his 'End of Days- Again!' coffee mug before adding, "Like it? I have several billion on-order."

"Colorful, I'll get mine from the gift shop on the way out."

"No need to get snippy. Time like color has no meaning in this greyspace so there is no when to consider. Pedro flits about here and there but unlike you, he has no temporary work order allowing him passage so I sent the fugitive on his way. Thanks to the recalcitrant

PAU not meeting their staffing quotas I was able to secure temp pre-apocalypse emergency action order administrative positions for the monkeys and key personnel- aka the Book Manager. You're welcome. Well adios Karl, wish it was nice seeing you."

"Super."

"Just so you know, there will be rules governing your movement and actions when you venture outside my zone of influence; however I do not know what they are. Your bios automatically generated an internal encryption key monitoring and logging your activities but old Myron here forgot to include the manual. Slipshod, Myron, very slipshod. What can I say but good luck and Karl?"

"Yes?"

"Take a mug, I insist."

endnotes

Thanks to my Zone of Influence readers for keeping me straight ahead- particularly KT, Lauren and Deb.

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