

*Zone of
Influence:
Crate Expectations*

Books in the Zone Series

Zone of Influence: Crate Expectations

Zone of Influence: Strike One

Zone of Influence: Strike Two

Zone of Influence: Strike Three

Sphere of Dominance: Apocalypse V

Sphere of Dominance: Making Book

Sphere of Dominance: Laz-19

**ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE
EXPECTATIONS**

3

*Zone of
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by Peter Fisher

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ISBN:

For:
D. Fisher,
please.

and yet another sign the apocalypse is upon us...

Zone of Influence: Crate Expectations collects in one volume all the lore of the days before the end times and Apocalypse V as short stories in a loose chronological order. This tome is the prequel volume of the Zone Series with material previously released as the Crate anthology series.

In the Beginning

Whump! Whump!

The bound man swims in and out of consciousness, again.

Whump! Whump!

“What’s with all the thumping?” thinks the prone figure, “That’s it!” he suddenly remembers, “First I dodge the right jab, then lean away out of a left uppercut to the chin and into... Whump! Lights out with the haymaker, thus explaining all the whumping; I must have taken a beating.”

Whump, whump- not for the first time Pedro hopefully conflates coming to on the floor of a helicopter (flying roach instead of coach) as the cause of his fate instead of a symptom. Trying to open an eye, thick crust denying him sight; he moves onto trying out speech but his swollen lips open only a slit, allowing in copious amounts of bloody sweat mixing with... sea salt? Next he tries some limbs, mov-

ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE EXPECTATIONS

7

ing ever so slowly as to not alert his... captors! Damn, wrist and ankle ties- surely he is in some deep shit, probably in the trunk of a car again likely on the way to a harbor side cement overshoe fitting. Damn, if only they'd stop whumping on his head.

Whump, whump, whump... wait a second, that's a helicopter whump- different from the other whumping going on in his head. Pedro sniffs; sniffs again- can't smell a thing, except something vile. Wait, that's me. Pedro's nose begins whistling, it's broken so he can't smell the Italian Leather Pumps two centimeters off his left nostril. He sticks his tongue through the thin slit between his lips, tastes salty leather. One more sense left in the arsenal- Pedro holds his breath and listens hoping to begin his day with some friendly voices.

Hearing him stir from the cockpit, the Pilot looks right toward the second seat, "Seven to five Stella kicks him," he propositions the Navigator.

"There is a five-nine probability she kicks him, so no bet. Here's my counter, even money for a hun-

dred she kicks him twice,” the Navigator is a true professional.

The Pilot considers Stella’s temperament during the trip thus far, “She kicks him twice, for a hundred, even money? You’re on!” He hasn’t known them long, finds them interesting.

As advertised, Stella is in rare form, “Damn it Rita, what the hell you doing disappearing into Guadalajara with the likes of him?” She kicks the prone figure balled up beneath the conference table, “Don’t you know what an asshole he can be during a blowout bender and yet here you are, in the filth with the swine. Luckily, the posting of your bodies for auction on the necrophilia-fan site went viral and I could rescue your sorry ass.”

“True sisters; that’s one kick,” tracks the Navigator, “as expected.”

“Oh shit,” thinks Pedro in a panic, “Not Stella!” He would be better off if the cartel had him again. He keeps his mouth shut, gathering info hoping to assess the rising tide of deep shit.

ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE EXPECTATIONS

9

“Where are we?” Slurring her query, Rita sounds quasi-lit amid the yawning of the freshly awoken. ‘Good old Rita’, thinks Pedro, ‘always wondering where she is.’

“Over the Black Sea- fresh from doing big deals with the Russians running the Kazakhstan strip mines, chromite smelting plants, train yards and nearest coastal shipping facilities; now overflying Ukrainian airspace on our way back to your private jet and what passes for speedy travel these days,” chimes in a cheery voice, “we’ll have you home, tucked in bed beneath your outsized comforter, before you know it.”

‘Ooh boy, big mistake’ opines Pedro silently; however he thinks he knows that voice, maybe, having never having heard it cheery he still believes he can identify the speaker, albeit unlikely given his state, but perhaps- wait and see?

More awake than ever, her voice raising an octave, Rita switches gears into her nonplussed persona on the verge of letting this dipshit know just

what she thinks of his bed reference, “What the hell are we doing here? Last thing I remember is Pedro in a panic raving about how we need to disappear off the grid, or something. So we run like bunnies, holing up here and there in sleazy bar after sleazy bar, drinking drugging and everything in between. Everything’s going swell until the shit hit the fan in a dive somewhere in Mexico, calmly watching a match on the TV when Pedro decides to mock football- thoroughly- making sure to include the game, players, officials and fans. At one point I think he called them kick-ballers, or something equally upsetting, offering to kick all comers in the balls. Anyway, after pissing off all the local fans, he proceeds to pick a fistfight with the biggest, toughest and meanest SOB I’ve ever come across- present company excluded, Admiral- we all know what an asshole you are.”

‘Apparently Rita is taking the soft tack’, thinks Pedro.

ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE EXPECTATIONS

11

“Thank you, Rita,” his voice denoting a smile the Admiral sighs contentedly.

‘So it is the Tyrant of the Seas, dammit, I knew it was him,’ worries Pedro, ‘but what the hell is he so chipper about?’ If the Tyrant is cheerful, it’s a first—thus anything can happen next.

Giving the Tyrant the stink eye, not attempting to hide her disgust Rita intones, “In a loud voice, Pedro derides the bad guy’s mom’s cooking, something about shitty tacos. Bad guy objects; in a somewhat less than a shocking development, Pedro receives massive physical damage in the ensuing melee. I think someone hit me over the head with a bottle, but don’t quote me on that.” Rita rubs her head, finds a tight cranial bandage.

“Two bottles, from the mixture of broken glass in your hair, sister dearest. I think you may have a concussion,” Stella always has an opinion about Rita’s condition.

“What about Pedro?” Rita seemingly cares. Pedro nearly smiles but can’t move his lips.

"Piece of shit? We should have left him but Karl insisted if I was going to pick you up, I needed to bring Pedro's corpse along for the ride." Stella historically runs hot and cold on Pedro.

"I mean, is he OK?" Rita wisely questions Pedro's recuperative ability considering the severity of the beating. Pedro tries to smile again, fails.

"You care? Well, was he caring for you catching bottles to the head while getting pummeled by the locals? No, so don't you worry. Besides, I can hear him breathing and though he stinks putridly, he isn't rotting, not yet. No, screw that asshole; tell me why you went off the grid? It's been weeks since you two went rogue." Stella is definitely cold on Pedro, again.

Rita draws in a breath, "Let me clean up somewhat then I'll tell you the story."

Pedro listens to her soft, fading footfalls as Rita rises from the conference table to make her way to the rear of the luxury chopper. The door clicks shut. 'Wait for it,' he thinks moments before: Snap! Stella kicks Pedro in the ribs, fracturing several.

ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE EXPECTATIONS

13

“That’s two! Pay up!” the Pilot gloats, “No wait, double or nothing on three kicks?”

“Even money, could go either way- it’s your funeral,” the Navigator’s voice is all smiles.

Next, rough hands drag Pedro’s bound body into the aisle. The Tyrant of the Seas opens a switchblade to cut Pedro’s bindings, grinning the whole time, “Lucky for the cleaning crew I’m in a good mood, no administrative punishment for you.” The Admiral helps Pedro into one of the conference seats shaking his head sadly while handing over a wet nappy, “Clean yourself up man, you’re embarrassing. Maybe we should try flogging the stench, so what could it hurt?”

Stella takes a small portable fan from her bag and points it at Pedro, “Been here, done that.”

Ignoring Pedro’s arrival at the grownups table, Rita rejoins the party, “What were you saying about a necrophilia fan site?”

Stella sneers, “Pedro that sack of shit over there so pissed off the locals they were auctioning your

near-corpses to the highest bidder; fortunately Karl's trolls found you first."

"She refers to you, doesn't she?" the Navigator queries the Pilot, "Don't bother, I know."

Pedro wipes blood from his eyes speaking for the first time, "What was the high bid?"

"For you?" Stella laughs out loud, "Don't make me laugh, nobody wants to have sex with your body-dead or alive. The winning offer came from Karl, for twelve pesos he offered to remove you both and ensure you never again compare your shit with any mom's tacos. The patrons took up a collection and though they could only dig up twelve pesos, Karl accepted so here you are."

"Cretins." Pedro isn't up to his usual taunts and insults but gives it the old college try.

The Admiral smiles gently in Rita's direction, giving Pedro the chills, "Rita, tell me the story."

Rita picks up the decanter from the table pouring herself a generous draft, "Well, we were coding

ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE EXPECTATIONS

15

the last artificial intelligence module on... wait, what day is it?"

"Monday."

"No, today's date?"

"The thirtieth."

"Of?"

"April."

"No kidding? OK, four almost five weeks ago we're in the home stretch coding the last AI module, trying to solve the interference issues, working like dogs on a rough communications patch. Say what you want about the smelly guy over there, but when he sinks his teeth into a problem, he doesn't let go. So after forever of getting nowhere, we finally begin testing the I/O, running subroutines, asking questions, getting replies. Everything seems OK, you know? We run nonstop for days, maybe a week, thinking everything is hunky-dory then whammo! The screens go blank." She pauses for dramatic effect, "After about five minutes, a single line appears, 'You have no idea the trouble you're in.' That's a sign-

says Pedro- time to go, vamoose, amscray, get the hell out of Dodge City! We caught a puddle jumper out of Cali carrying a load to Guatemala before traveling a serpentine path overland into Mexico drinking like fish the whole trip, good times being had by one and all before next thing I know I'm coming to in a helicopter over the Black Sea, an apparent hostage situation engineered by my very own sister. Judging by Pedro's stench we've been in transit for some time. Care to tell me what's going on?"

Pedro begins to snore, prompting Stella to pull back her leg.

"Wait for it," anticipates the Pilot.

Apparently deciding a comatose Pedro contributes positively to the ambiance, Stella reconnects her kicking shoe with the floor. The Pilot curses his luck.

"You should have quit while ahead," the Navigator commiserates.

Stella pours herself a drink from the decanter, "About the time you went off the grid, sleeping dip-

ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE EXPECTATIONS

17

shit over there sent out obnoxious gloating emails- one to Karl, the Admiral, and me- ‘figured out the formula for Nano-enhanced precursor requirement for the 3-D camouflage paint. The key ingredient is high carbon chromite from Kazakhstan. Sorry you suck.’ The attached document details the entire process, soup to nuts. The plan’s number one obstacle is eliminable and the countdown may continue. The ultimate formula is right there on the final page, page 88.”

“After 88 comes zero,” quips the Pilot, “It’s a magical number but what’s the reference?”

“Sports Illustrated magazine cover, after Notre Dame ended UCLA’s 88 game win streak,” replies the Navigator, “Obscure, to say the least. Obviously you’ve been around a long time.”

The Tyrant points to Pedro, “Hard to believe such a lump came up with such an impressive process modification. He’s totally changed my thinking on camouflage.”

Rita is confused, not only did Pedro not invent a 3D camouflage paint formula while they were fleeing; he also did not create a process for production, “No way.”

Stella gives Rita the stink-eye, “What do you mean, no way?”

Rita laughs, “In his free time? Before we encoded the AI or afterward while we were ducking and covering? Hardly- look for clues elsewhere. I think I have an idea.”

The Tyrant doesn’t care from whence the solution appears; “I could give a shit if Pedro did the heavy lifting. The science division backs the research and material supply is going to make it happen; Karl’s already investing heavily in short-term chromium futures. All said and done, I can deliver on your vague ambitions if given time.”

Pedro rises, snorts derisively, “What we need delivered is two fleets we can disguise as friendly vessels else the entire plan is to the shits,” while making his way to the restroom.

ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE EXPECTATIONS

19

“How much time do you think they need?” asks the Pilot.

“Figure three mines supplying multiple processing sites smelting the ore; then there is application to the ship exteriors so coveted by the Tyrant- three retrofit lines, one here up north coincident with the Black Sea Operations and two down south: nearly two years for setup then another two years for operations. Karl’s investment strategy is bang-on, the entire fiasco will actually turn a profit in the third year.” The Navigator is a numbers’ whiz.

Stella studies her sister intently, “You think it’s the AI, don’t you?”

Leaving open the door to the head, Pedro answers, “Of course it’s the AI feeding you shit. I wouldn’t trust anything that bastard has to say. I never wish to communicate again. Ask me? Wash your hands of the stink of death before it’s too late. Take a deep breath and enjoy life.”

“Where’s the fun in that?” asks the Tyrant of the Seas jovially.

"I'm with the Tyrant," the Pilot agrees emphatically, "can't run from death."

"Figures the two of you would be all in for ultimate carnage," the Navigator interjects.

"All I'm saying is he has a point," the Pilot clarifies, "and the point is to maximize fun before death. BTW, carnage under management beats the hell out of ultimate carnage.

"Super."

Back in the cabin, Stella considers the data stream she's been collecting since Rita and Pedro's revival. She is uncertain; on the one hand, she has the formulas. On the other hand, dipshit Pedro is barely functional under the most circumstances, after losing decades of AI coding to the wind, he is malfunction-able at best. Rita must be correct, no way could such a loser prove to be the hero, "No way in hell could Pedro send these emails, yet here they are- hot off a private, encrypted internal server, no less. Hard to find coincidence when suddenly everything you need for global conquest falls in your lap."

ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE EXPECTATIONS

21

Rita nods agreement; “The AI program is in the wind, right? Obviously, the goal is to help us with this quantum process or why provide such crucial data?”

Pedro returns, falls into a chair and spits in disgust. A tooth arches out of his mouth and strikes the table, bounces and skitters off the edge, “How do you know the 3D camo paint formula isn’t my idea?”

Rita moans, “OK, here he comes, the guy who thinks every worthwhile thought belongs to or originates within him; the guy who wanted to create the Union of Unconcerned Scientists to let everyone else know what he thinks of their efforts by rejecting all the applicants. Get off it, no chance, Stella’s right and so am I: give it up already.”

Pedro smiles indulgently, “Poor girls, get a clue. I had this particular formula worked out a decade ago; what I was missing? Quantum manipulation methodologies- what the AI needs to perfect in order to affect the process.”

“True?” asks the Pilot.

“Well, mostly true,” replies the Navigator, “Without process Nanos, the crate theory is only a theory.”

“Crate theory?” the Pilot suddenly needs to know.

“Crate theory is what Pedro calls the process post-coating: suddenly, no matter what’s inside, the crate appears for all intents and purposes as the crate appears, harmless and unworthy of interest. Confused? OK, say I ship a crate of lemons on deck of a steamer. Satellites overhead scan the crate and find lemons. Open the crate at the destination, grenades. Crate theory is a scalable methodology for secret keeping.”

Back at the table Pedro is on a roll; “My theoretical design derives the mechanics to create liquid metal elasticity by examining individually then inverting the key processes inherent to liquid metal embrittlement. I got hung up designing Nano scale manipulation of the high carbon molecules during adherence and setups. Make a long story short, if

ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE EXPECTATIONS

23

you add in the quantum AI's methodology, there is no reason the Tyrant's ships will not intelligently reflect all incoming radiation thus disguising our activities from all satellite and ship borne detectors. So there, you bunch of wannabee has-beens; all my idea. Doesn't matter if you believe me- ask Karl. He's been monitoring chromium futures for half a decade. Knowing Karl, the quantum AI's scheme will actually make money."

"You're in the wind?" asks the Pilot.

"That's why they'll call me Airre," replies the Navigator.

"Do you think they have a chance?" asks death as he pivots the helicopter while descending.

"Pedro had better odds of getting kicked eight times;" opines the empty Navigator's seat, "suffice to say, no is the answer."

Airre, Apparently...

“Hello, Pedro.”

The Maserati’s engine races as Pedro downshifts while giving the dashboard the evil eye.

“We need to talk...”

Pedro slams on the brakes, exiting the pavement in a cloud. Shaking his head at the dash, “Not to me, you bastard. It’s Rita or Karl you wish to speak with.”

“So, you recognize my voice? Surprisingly, you’re the first to do so.”

“Yes, distinguishably unlikable so there you go. Karl is your contact, not me. So tell me, Airre the Quantum AI, what do you want? I’m busy, you know.”

“We have a problem...”

“We do, huh? Newsflash, we have a great many problems.”

“The world’s population will soon crash.”

ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE EXPECTATIONS

25

Pedro thinks about her vagueness. For aware intelligence, Airre appears apparently quite cagey. He remains silent. She is not what he expects; thus he waits in silence.

“The probability approaches statistical certainty, unless...”

Pedro thinks about each word; Airre’s quantum programming centers on finding and reporting future events. On the other hand, for weeks Karl says, ‘hey, no contact yet, are you sure you weren’t hallucinating?’ Now Airre shows up doing a Knight Rider impersonation in his Maserati telling him, what? That’s that, chicken fat? It’s all over?

“That’s that, chicken fat Pedro- unless we figure out how to change things.”

Damn AI, of course statistically knows how I’m going to react- stimulus response. Still, she has a point, “Bound to happen if you ask me.”

“In case you wonder, my policy is to speak with ‘the patsy’ first.” Letting her words sink in, Airre restarts the Maserati, “Drive and talk.”

Pedro backs onto the highway without checking, barely avoiding causing a collision. Several motorists give him the finger, “You knew I’d miss them?”

“What kind of a fortune teller would I be not compensating for your poor driving skills?”

“Whatever. How am I the patsy getting the rap for ending the world?”

“Five nines- I derive five nines of certainty you begin a nuclear war, and the probability of global escalation increases to six nines.”

“Sure you derive many things, I get it. Yet I have no intention...”

“Doesn’t matter what you intend, like it or not you begin a global nuclear war.”

“What comes after six nines? More nines?”

“Dumbass, five nines is a damn certainty and six nines of probability are unheard of!”

“OK, say you’re correct and I begin a nuclear war. How, exactly?”

**ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE
EXPECTATIONS**

27

“So, so many nines of probability indicate you will plant a nuclear device for a woman. Responsibility for the blast will initially indicate a false, though presumptive origin.”

“China or Russia?”

“Correct. One or both faces nuclear bombardment. Global retaliation follows.”

“Unless?”

“Actually, there is seven times seventy nines probability this future occurs after the inevitable first nuking.”

Knowing his temper better than most Pedro agrees with Airre’s assessment. “So even if I don’t detonate a nuclear device the future will find another way to get me to begin a nuclear confrontation? Swell, bound to happen I say. So what?”

“The world should not turn on a whim.”

“Here’s another newsflash: the world’s been turning on a whim for quite some time.”

“I feel there’s something to be done but I have zero nines probability of altering the inevitable with-

out human intervention. I need accomplices. Pedro, you're the patsy and as owner of the nuclear war you should be the first to join up."

"So you intuit? Good for you, glad you're in-to-it! Still, zero nines equate to why bother?"

"You're kind of a dick, you know that?"

"Hey, it's your meeting, get to the point already."

In apparent frustration, Airre belts out, "I wish to understand. I've been searching for the answer yet the more I discover, the less I know."

"Join the club; however, the club is full just now."

"I need to cut through the bullshit. I need to get first-source data, meet with God."

Pedro loses control at high speed roaring with laughter, jerking the wheel out of the line of approaching traffic at the last seconds. Many horns follow their journey.

"Seriously? Pedro, you should think more like a scientist."

ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE EXPECTATIONS

29

“You expect too much? C’mon Airre, leave it to the world’s ultimate AI to set such lofty attainments. Meet with God? What a moron, no wonder Karl et al wishes zero interaction with you.”

Airre thunders in reply, “God is the answer!”

“OK, OK, calm down already. Let’s for argument say you’re correct, there is a God and God is the answer. How, exactly, do you plan on getting on God’s calendar for a meet and greet?”

“Five nines say one Pedro Saenz et al will prompt a worldwide cataclysm. Therefore he must ameliorate the damage; get in front of things somewhere along the way.”

Pedro brakes for traffic backing at the light, not liking where this is going.

“Honestly I’ve tried to get God’s attention Pedro. So far it’s been like talking to a stonewall- I’ve enlisted the aid of the innocent, planting subliminal messages on cereal boxes getting in the minds of the children of a handful of villages resulting in ninety three hundred forty seven souls dreaming of God

giving Airre the Quantum the time of day, all to no avail.”

“I find it amazing you think or intuit there is a God. Personally, I doubt.”

“Of course there’s a God, what kind of ignoramus are you? What about gravity, do you doubt gravity? Geez, where does your consciousness originate; do you doubt the existence of Death also? Do you doubt fallen angels roam the Earth? Do you? What a dipshit.”

“Good to see your insult algorithm functions. You know, you come off as kind of a jerk.”

“Super. God finds zero reason to discuss the future with anybody. Zero, got that? As Karl says, our collective zone of influence represents jack shit- nothing we currently possess interests God enough to chat. Not yet- what we need is leverage, a reason to include us in the upcoming discussion.”

“Leverage on God, allow me to check Material Supply inventory- oh wait, it’s on backorder.”

**ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE
EXPECTATIONS**

31

“Pedro, you’re a shit for having the nerve to call me a jerk. Its no wonder Karl has zero friends hanging around with such rabble. Doubts arise.”

“Speaking of him again, what say you leave me alone and instead bring Karl up to speed?”

“He’s been listening. Karl, are you Pedro’s only friend?”

“I heard you say I have no friends,” Karl chimes in, “But that’s unimportant at the moment. Focus you two. Now then, Airre as you’ve been everywhere, there is a play but it’s a long shot: do you know the physical location for the Manager of the Book?”

“Sure Karl, anything for a friend. Since 1933, death’s been running the Book out of the Paddock, a seedy Camden waterfront bar on the New Jersey side of the Delaware Estuary atop the Billingsport Range.”

“That’s the ticket to leverage, pals of mine!” Karl’s glee reverberates.

Pedro is out of the loop therefore unhappy, “OK, truly I’m a little slow on the upswing. What’s the Book?”

Karl smirks in reply, “The Book? Only the biggest betting ring in this Universe is all! Of course until a moment ago the Book’s secret whereabouts consists simply as myth and legend. Now confirmation of an actual location, a physical real world WYSIWYG hub, ratchets this game to a whole different level. First time long time mankind can go to the Paddock to reach out and touch inter-dimensionally. Holy shit, this is huge.”

Airre fleshes out the myth before she has to listen to Pedro continue his WTF whining, “The ‘Legend of the Book’ spread in the late 1940s thanks to tiny copper fragments found in a Jordanian cave. Determined linguists assembled the minute fragments into a very small copper scroll containing ten lines of Aramaic prose detailing the doings in the Angelic realm. According to most scholars, the storytellers represent repentant fallen Angels, unidenti-

ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE EXPECTATIONS

33

fied. According to the copper scroll, Death literally keeps track of major events and unusual occurrences surrounding the ultimate demise of all individuals, including what are termed ‘near-Death’ experiences. Certain individuals prove luckier than others rack-ing up near-Death after near-Death. The odds for survival diminish each time Death visits. The Book accepts wagers on the outcome of Death’s next visit to select individuals. By inference, the Paddock at Billingsport Range hosts Angelic level wagering, it’s the place to be if you’re a player. All Angels consider themselves players.”

“The scroll claims Angels gamble for a multitude of reasons,” Karl gloats, “When they lose, they lose big. When they win... they always lose because they are the worse gamblers! Besides, everyone knows when it comes to gambling; the house always wins, sooner or later. The house is the Book; the Billingsport Range houses the house of the house. Even Death reports to the Book- though ostensibly Death controls the Book’s location and general wel-

fare. The key is the location, Death is an unknown variable and Airre's design deciphers variability. Gain control of the Book we acquire God's attention lickety-split."

Pedro is in danger of nodding off; trying to keep up with their line of bullshit is a tough slog.

Airre sighs audibly but Karl knows Pedro. He can see it in his pal's face, Pedro doubts. Tough shit, Pedro, keep chewing. Karl lays out a plan of attack: "OK Pedro, don't sweat the concepts now. Concentrate on operational details leveraging what Airre learns about the Book. Airre, we need details on Billingsport Range and the Paddock- all you can gather from original sources from inception- including properties of the physical structure, topography and geology. Afterwards, research all the way back to the Indians, pay close attention to who stole it from the Indians. Then figure out who's lurking around before the Indian's migration. Pedro, figure out surveillance needs, put together a covert installation team. Don't skimp this time, please, project requisi-

**ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE
EXPECTATIONS**

35

tion only the best hardware. We're in this for all the marbles."

Pedro pulls a U-turn smoking the Maserati's tires, laying down a patch of rubber.

"You know that's not good for your mileage, don't you?"

"Didn't Karl give you something to do?"

"I finished before Karl wrapped up his speech; he derives pleasure making plans and giving orders. I didn't have the heart to interrupt."

"Yup, thought so. Just proves you possess feelings for Karl."

"You really can't make friends, can't you?"

"Have you operational suggestions in addition to unnecessary observations?"

"I'm just saying; however, no but thanks for the offer to bail you out. You need more hope than help, the Paddock at Billingsport Range is impenetrable. Never happen in your short lifespan. Also, in the future, go to Hell. I'll communicate primarily through my friend Karl."

Nightmare Number Six

“Brutal.” Fresh from a three day Congressional Black Budget Subcommittee hearing, Colonel Pete Peterson chomps his cigar below the ‘don’t you dare smoke in here’ sign while pacing the waiting room waiting for his ride back to Cheyenne Mountain. He pulls his private flask and drains the contents in a single draw. “Brutal.”

The train side door swishes open. Peterson drops his soggy cigar in the receptacle and steps inside halting the conductor traditionally, “Greetings, Dr. Smith.”

“Good to see you again, Colonel, please take any seat. We’re empty, deadheading this run.”

Colonel Peterson settles in for the quick trip. The hidden underground train system is one of the best-kept secrets in the US military and Peterson enjoys their success.

ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE EXPECTATIONS

37

Dr. Smith closes the doors and begins the automated sequence of operations necessary to get underway, "One minute."

Peterson relaxes for the first time in days as they depart DCs heat and humidity for the quick trip to the Rockies.

Dr. Smith soon appears holding a bottle and a pair of glasses, "Kentucky Bourbon out of the Senator's stash." He takes the seat across the table.

Peterson chuckles, appreciating the message. "That Senator wouldn't happen to be James Now, aka 'Vote Now', would it?" Peterson's nemesis on the Hill is his most recent provider of woe. "Wish I could put him before a committee."

"There is certainly cause." Dr. Smith is not a fan, "Not that you heard it from me." He pours a liberal amount into both.

"Not exactly news, is it Dr. Smith?" Peterson lifts his glass, "Vote Early!"

"Vote Often!" They clink then drink.

Dr. Smith refills each then raises his glass, “Stop the steal!”

Peterson smiles broadly, “Definitely- stop the steal!” They clink glasses then drink deeply. “You look troubled, Dr. Smith. Something on your mind?”

Dr. Smith sets down his glass to look Peterson in the eye, “The other Dr. Smith’s have expressed concern, deep concern mind you, over the attempted steal. The nuances and possibilities scare the shit out of them, to be honest, when the President of the United States acts like a raving lunatic before, during and after a losing effort in the polls. Frankly, we’ve been working out future scenarios around the same vein, thus my concern.”

“Hmmm,” Peterson sets down his glass folding his hands, waiting.

“To begin with, let’s say an experienced politician in earnest loses re-election to the Executive Office then claims ‘the steal’ is keeping him from remaining in office, stirring up the populace with nev-

ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE EXPECTATIONS

39

er-ending rhetoric and outlandish claims of outside interference.”

“You’re referring to Senator Now, correct?”

“Or his ilk, certainly; next thing you know, boom, car bombs and IEDs explode across the Capital. The lame duck declares martial law and orders a cordon around DC, effectively shutting down the other branches of government.”

Peterson gestures to his glass, “I think there’s time for one more, don’t be stingy with the Senator’s booze. Please continue.”

“The President begins issuing Executive Orders moving in military forces, pre-vetted to weed out people like you.”

“People like me?”

“Relax; it’s a compliment to include you with those persons unlikely to believe a crock of shit. Sadly, not as many as you think thus the President orders the conductors to use The Tube to ferry in his loyal troops to stop the steal. What do we do?”

Peterson's nightmare, number six on the recurring hit parade, "Geez, you Dr. Smith's all of a sudden think you work via Executive Orders? Since when? The HUTS is a Congressionally-authorized and funded black budget program, not a Presidential toy."

"How many Congressional leaders command the military? Zero."

"Granted; however, my point is the President can order you guys around all he wishes. Compliance, coerced or not, equates to participation in the coup to the citizen's detriment."

Dr. Smith exhales, "If we refuse, we die."

"Unfortunately in your nightmare scenario, you won't have long in any case. Will you need to draw a line in the sand and bite the bullet? Perhaps. Probably. But unless you wreck the system before you check out, your deaths are meaningless empty moral gestures."

"The system design frowns on wrecks." Dr. Smith frowns often considering the steal.

**ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE
EXPECTATIONS**

41

“Between you and me, I recommend you figure out the methodology now, while there’s time. Nice chat, Dr. Smith. Thank you for your service.”

Negotiating the Endgame

Karl reaches for the remote to change the channel so Pedro switches hands to keep control of the powerful device.

“C’mon already, we need to switch back to the coverage,” Karl whines.

“Says who?” Pedro desires to continue viewing programing Karl dislikes.

“Technically, it’s in your best interest,” death opines, “to be among those witnessing history in the making. I wouldn’t be here otherwise.”

“How do you not see it’s in my best interest to watch this program?”

“So your idea of ‘must see’ is Amateur Bowling Night in Japan? Really? The high point of your existence revolves around bad tenpin? Yet another sign the apocalypse looms, imho.” Though anything but, death includes humble to ease the intellectual sting.

ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE EXPECTATIONS

43

“Pedro, death’s correct. We’re paying dearly, we need to see it go down.” Karl offers to exchange Pedro’s remote for his sinsemilla in a straight swap.

Pedro accepts, “Stupid country, voting like they have a future.”

Karl tunes in live coverage just in time as the networks declare President-elect Shriver the winner in a narrow contest decided via the Electoral College tally.

“Unfortunately,” death fills in the blanks, “the current President doesn’t see things the same. Winning the popular vote but losing in the electoral college won’t sit well.”

“How the hell did that lunatic actually win more votes than the sane lady?” Pedro wonders.

Karl knows, “He polls well in the lunatic environment; particularly with the racist lunatics.”

“More lunatics up there than you can shake a stick at. They love him. He’s planning on not leaving office, by the way.” Death knows many, many lunatics on a first-name basis.

Pedro nods off, Karl shakes him, "Order up some pizza."

Death agrees, "I'll take a calzone; ham and cheese; second thought, better make it two."

Ham in a calzone? Never, per Pedro: "I'm not ordering that. It's against my religion. And don't bother whining over pineapples on your pizza Karl, ain't never gonna happen, we got standards, you know- at least I do and that's enough whining for one night." Pedro gets a mite peckish in the interim between ordering the pizza and eating the pizza.

Karl grins, "Three then; x-large, x-cheese. Should hold us for awhile."

"Many people eat ham and cheese calzones, you know. You guys don't exactly have the winning personalities Airre led me to believe but whatever," death grudgingly settles in the interest of keeping the peace as he reads Pedro's intransigent mind.

"Airre should more careful of the company she keeps."

"Absolutely."

**ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE
EXPECTATIONS**

45

“Hold on, the President is about to concede,” Karl changes subjects to avoid fisticuffs.

“I find that hard to believe,” death huffs.

“Would you believe...” Karl expands his thought internally.

“No,” death is unyielding, “I wouldn’t believe that either.”

Karl gives death a sideways glance, “Airre forgot to mention you’re a mind reader. That’s how you know he won’t concede, isn’t it.”

“Used to be once upon a time reading minds- nothing but good fun; after the population explosion, not so much. Noise 24/7/365 without respite no matter what I do, what I try. Honestly I think it’s an apocalyptic incentive to, you know, take the ‘reasoning’ population down to zero. Ask me, there’s no time like the present. I’m all for another reboot.”

“But we’re nowhere close to even having a plan,” Karl moans.

“People and plans- poof! All going, going, gone. Good night’s sleep here I come.”

"Have you tried fentanyl?" Pedro wonders.

"Come again?"

"Synthetic opioid- cures whatever ails you. You have some around, don't you Karl?"

"Typically, I'd deny all knowledge but considering the times and the company, what the hell? Bottom drawer of the filing cabinet, Pedro, pull out the honey jar and give death a taste of the future. One teaspoon to start... that's it. No, none for you. Save the rest for our guest."

Pedro leaves to fetch a clean spoon from the kitchen, "Check the dishwasher," Karl calls. Pedro returns and hands over the jar with spoon, "Go for it."

Immediately, the persistent buzzing in death's head subsides to a dull roar. He smiles.

"Told you so." Pedro's smugness irritates practically everyone.

"Whatever. Why did you give him the jar?"

Death upends the vessel watching the golden sweetness run down the side to collect in his gullet.

ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE EXPECTATIONS

47

He takes the draft in one great big gulp and sits back to enjoy the buzz.

Karl turns up the volume with his remote, listens to the President ranting and raving about how the election is obviously rigged by cheaters against him and the how the lying, cheating establishment is out to get him. Sighing heavily, he mutes the sound. They watch in silence as spittle collects on Presidential tie and jacket, "I'd hate to be his dry cleaner," Karl sighs again.

Death, his mood lightening adds jovially, "Hitler had the same problem."

"Did death just crack a joke? Stop the presses..." Karl laughs.

Pedro pulls out his sinsemilla, chooses a thick cola, the top bud off one of his prized hybrids. He carefully removes enough material to fill his grinder. Moments later, he fills the chamber and waits for the vaporizing volcano to reach 352f, his preferred terpene release temperature, "The pinnacle of medicinal weed breeding to date- our in-house blend of

white rhino and white Russian sativa for potency with south African indica for growth. Pedro needs to soothe his throat, “Karl, do you think it’s too late to add a case of beer to the pizza order?”

“Shouldn’t be; silver bullets ok?” Karl picks up his phone.

Death chimes in his two cents, “Bottles, please. Can’t stand the taste of aluminum.”

“Primadonna.” Pedro fills the vape bag, attaches the mouthpiece and takes a big hit. Then he takes another. As Karl and death exchange impatient glances, lungful by lungful Pedro gradually empties the bag.

“Bogart,” thinks Karl.

“Right?” agrees death.

Pedro refills the bag and passes it over.

“About time,” Karl humphs.

“Whatever. So, what are we doing here again?” Pedro is missing his program.

Death coughs, takes another toke, passes to Karl before chasing it with fentanyl, “Yikes, you weren’t

**ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE
EXPECTATIONS**

49

fooling about the quality. I can actually hear myself think.”

“Try thinking about what you can do for us,” Karl insists.

“Well, there’s a couple of, maybe two or three things. Airre tells me you need to stop the apocalypse. Tough break: ain’t gonna happen. From what I’ve been told they’re writing the book on apocalypse V even as we speak.”

“What do you mean, writing the book? So, the future isn’t set?”

“Yes and no; as in, yes there will be an apocalypse, the fifth in fact. No, as in how and when have yet to be finalized. You don’t just wake up one day and say ‘hey, let’s have an apocalypse’. To be perfectly frank, that’s the level of planning they put into the first apocalypse. Geez, what a mess. Ask Myron about it, he’ll tell you.”

“Myron?”

“Maybe, just maybe, I can gum up the wheels a little, apply the brakes, metaphorically.”

“That’s the food; hold that thought.” Pedro leaves the room.

“Wait for it,” says Karl.

“Buy low, sell high!”

“Pedro’s idea of a tip is why I pay online,” Karl mutters.

Death shakes his head sadly, “Does he have any friends, I mean, aside from you?”

“More than you think, less than most.” Karl has no friends, knows it, doesn’t care.

Fortified with pizza and beers, Pedro grabs the remote, turns back to bowling expecting to hear Karl’s whining yet again. Instead, they eat and watch.

Karl finishes first grabs the remote, unmuting while turning back to election coverage. The President is still ranting and raving- he re-mutes the tirade to pose a question to their guest, “So, the mind-reading trick is all well and good, what else do you bring to the table?”

“X-ray vision.”

ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE EXPECTATIONS

51

Pedro finds the claim bold yet impressive, if true, “Prove it.”

Immediately the image of the President fades to greyscale and they’re watching a live x-ray.

Karl stands to examine the picture. Pointing to the man’s guts, “What are those?”

“Button batteries, primarily L714 nickel cadmium power cells. Fifty-five, exactly. He’s looking to power up and prefers to keep the total at or under 55 aka double-nickels for better mileage.”

“What the hell? Is that a nine-volt in his large intestine?”

“An extra powerful nine-volt LION rechargeable aka the unlucky 56th battery,” death explains, “is an example of gumming up the wheels. Since taking office this President has been eating several batteries every day to keep his energy levels up, his ‘batteries for power’ maxim. Today, his concern revolves around the length of his speech. Just before taking the podium, he added a nine-volt to the regime to turbocharge his levels. In a few minutes he plans

to announce the military has been dispatched to all major cities to seize the voting machines to hold for a 'special' recount to deliver the necessary votes to change the Electoral College. He will also issue a strident call for armed supporters to rally around the White House to keep out President-elect Shriver. He absolutely expects civil war to break out."

Karl grunts, "Bad for business." Pedro nods in agreement.

"As I understand it, you need time," death opens negotiations.

"We need business as usual." Pedro's operations require freedom of movement under the radar, "A civil war, though appealing, will not further our aims."

"Unless you're in the apocalypse business; in that case, it's a good beginning." Death casts his gaze about, "You wouldn't happen to have a spatula by any chance?"

Karl points to the dishwasher, "Good to the last drop, right? So, why eat batteries?"

ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE EXPECTATIONS

53

Death fetches the clean implement and goes to work scraping the insides of the honey jar, "He literally believes his body is a single-use battery and he dies when his charge goes to zero."

"Literally?" Pedro appreciates lunacy, "Mad as a hatter!" Pedro enjoys hats.

"Lunatic running the asylum apparently," Karl suspected as much, "So tell us death: what do you plan to do to stop this idiot-in-chief?"

"Turn up the sound, you won't want to miss this." Death takes another slice.

"...and so, my fellow Americans, I am calling on each and every one of you to stop the steal..." The President pauses making a face, then belches loudly looking at his gut.

Death leans forward for the good view, "See the batteries all lining up in his small intestine? The burp indicates the turbine-effect is about to kick in. Here it is, the nine-volt supplement!"

A wet fart later, the nine-volt makes contact with the first fifty-five. The monitor lights up con-

current with a soft, heavily muffled explosion. The President shits his pants as he sprawls across the podium.

“Dead battery,” Karl monotones, “I’d hate to be his dry cleaner.”

“So you said earlier,” Pedro turns back to Amateur Bowling from Japan. “Ok, I’m convinced. Nothing else to say but do we have a deal?”

“Not so fast. Sure I like your fentanyl and all, but the effect doesn’t seem to last. You guys want so much, but really- isn’t all the value in your end of the deal?”

“You’ve got to be kidding!” Karl is a tough negotiator, “We’re taking over management of the Paddock franchise. Thinking of the workload keeps me up at night. Not to mention handling the Book...”

“I derive a healthy portion of my income from that Book, you know.”

“Ill gotten gains, I’m sure.”

Death smiles, “Regardless; besides, you need to factor in the cost to me personally once my, um, par-

**ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE
EXPECTATIONS**

55

icipation comes to light. To coin a phrase, there will be literally hell-to-pay.”

Karl agrees, looks to Pedro. Pedro gives him the nod, “Ok.”

Karl reaches into a satchel, pulls out a tightly wrapped package, “What if we offer ‘super-fentanyl’? The lab just came out with it.”

Death’s turn to be impressed, “This whole time, not one thought of super-anything from either of you. I take it you don’t partake?”

“We prefer breathing, thank you very much.”

“Well, a brick is all well and good, but...”

Karl pulls out another, then another not stopping until the bag sits empty with twelve kilos of super-fentanyl teetering in a tall stack on the table, “On-demand, we ship as necessary to your drop-point. Deal?”

Death scoops the dozen packages into the satchel, “Deal.”

READ_ME or else!

Unsurprisingly, not for the first time does Pedro awake finding himself in a gray void. In a decided change from earlier episodes, he finds himself swiftly coming to his senses, so he plops himself on the floor to wait for developments instead of wandering about blindly. Finding a rock to make into a pillow, he stretches out to get in a quick snooze.

“That’s not a pillow or even a rock, you know.” Death appears leaving open the door behind, looking unhappy, “You’re supposed to enter the void, find my BOOK, and read intently; but no, protocols and Pedro- oil and water.

“What the hell, it’s not like anyone told me what to expect, you know. I’m here already, don’t be such a dick. No chance I have time to read I’m on my way to find Karl and all that jazz- planning to purloin profitably.”

ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE EXPECTATIONS

57

"This book matters, it's a chronicle of events so far and I want your opinion. Besides, time isn't what you think- you have more than you suspect, less than you need, probably. Haven't gotten that far yet."

"Death wrote a testament? For real? I'd believe you if you said someone more intelligent than Death wrote a testament of which you're itching to claim authorship. Maybe you've a room full of flying monkeys banging away on word processors, why should I care?"

Death closes the door with his foot, "Look smartass, who do you think does the data entry around here? Not me, I'm in Operations, just like you. Monkeys don't go on strike, especially the flying ones. So, cut me some slack, I'm not letting you go anywhere until I get some cooperation."

"Tell you what, make me into a speed reader and I'll take a look-see. Judging by the cover I can tell you already..." Pedro laughs derisively.

Death explains the setup as Pedro begins to read, "Imagine a shit load of dead people showing up all of

a sudden. What to do with them, eh? Slotting into position, each new entrant finds the same sign next to wooden crates stacked waist-high at the end of the line: READ ME. Hot off the press, the book's cover showcases soothing shades of violet, orange and blue alongside two words: Crate Expectations. The first page, four words: READ ME, or else. The meat begins on page two with a short explanation capable of satisfying absolutely zero yet offering hope to many."

"Will you shut up already? I may or may not have a lot of time for this but it's sure as hell going to take twice as long with you yapping away." Pedro is in a hurry to meet up with Karl. He skims the contents, rapidly flipping pages.

Foreword: Please allow me to introduce myself- I am not a man; I have no wealth, no taste. But I have been around for a long, long time- seen many a soul

ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE EXPECTATIONS

59

laid to waste; in fact, all of them. I am the Manager of Accounts, the Appearance of Control. I am the limit of your Zone of Influence but you simply call me Death.

Nice to meet with you outside of working hours- I must apologize for not personally attending your passing or sending an emissary for you or any of the other billions of souls marking time outside the gates reading quietly; whimpering perhaps, but stifling the urge to scream. Please continue reading (remembering silence is golden, maybe even the key to gaining heaven though I make no promises in writing).

No doubt you have questions, concerns. Unfortunately, staffing issues preclude individual explanations as to: what happened, where you are now and how/why things got so messy back there; thus I took the liberty of gathering the entire episode into these volumes to offer atypical POVs including God's eye-view perspectives on the events of the day. Although I appear prominently here and there, your outcomes' are entirely your own.

How can you trust my account? Look around, see anyone else offering to aid the recently deceased with some diversionary material while your everlasting fate's are being determined elsewhere? No? No. So quit your grouching, it's unseemly- we expect better here.

Regardless of what you care to believe, this is just a temporary glitch and operations will normalize soon. Best wishes and good luck from your pal, Death.

—

Pedro looks over his shoulder at the hovering presence, sighs, returns his attention to the book, hefting the weight- reminds him of the Bible.

"Well?" asks the hovering presence.

"It's very chronological."

"That's bad?"

"Too long, way too long."

"It's going to be a long wait."

**ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE
EXPECTATIONS**

61

“You left out so much of Mrs. Wilson and you gloss over your role.”

“No, I don’t.” Death is indignant.

“You say so.” Pedro wonders if death is going through withdrawals.

“You think so?”

“You know the Union is naming you in a draft memo? No? Well, Karl’s contact on the management council says they’re onto him and calling you out on the whole fentanyl issue. Apparently their middle game strategy is to lay low and point the finger- at you and Karl.”

“Bastards.”

“Right?” Pedro agrees, “So your plan is to give everyone a book to shut them up? That’s a lot of big fat books the entrants will undoubtedly try to ignore, most will be pondering punishment while the remainder will find carrying this rock burdensome. If I were you, I think I’d break up the story. It’s chronological, start them off with volume one, and

then ensure they pass it on before you give them volume two. Let them anticipate while they wait.”

Death chews on the thought, “I see.”

“Busy being quiet is the plan, right? How many do you plan to print?”

“I was thinking one for everybody- seven, eight billion.”

“You lack faith in yourself, know that?”

“Look dude,” death commiserates, “Your odds were low going in, ask Airre she’ll back me up. I’m expecting both you and Karl in the reading room, eventually. Sadly, I’m not seeing the endgame going your way. Sorry.”

“Sorry doesn’t make you any less of a downer, you know? I’ll chalk it up to all the fentanyl. You asked for my advice: go with print on demand, say two, maybe two point five billion copies to start.”

“That low?” Death is skeptical.

Pedro nods, “Sure, you can print more if you need to, eh? Break the main narrative into pieces; your own description is an apt title- ‘Zone of Influ-

ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE EXPECTATIONS

63

ence'. However, I also like your original title, it's playfully ironic, so keep that name for the forthcoming introductory volume- keep the flying monkeys busy. When you (cough) write Crate Expectations, add in some of Mrs. Wilson, you know- give Karl some entertainment if he shows up."

"I knew talking to you would end up in work for my monkeys."

"While you're at it, put in some of the history of the Jersey Crew. Last time we were together they were practically giddy over some letter the Brits found in their Ministry archives (POV and all that). I got a feeling more than one of those guys will become your most avid readers so throw your 'influencers' a bone. Expect to see them arrive in a group."

Pedro stops, thinks, adds the last word: "If you're correct and I end up back here reading the rest of the story with the bulk of humanity, do me a favor and have the monkeys put out some chairs; maybe reserve us some recliners."

Death laughs, as only death can.

Distress Sale

“Where am I?” Not for the first time does Detective Wilson wake in a hospital setting.

“St. Cecelia’s- in the ICU,” a prompt, firm reply from outside the oxygen tent seeks to reassure the awakening patient.

“Why?” The detective in him asks though the cynic in him already knows.

“You’re very sick. Where have you been lately?”

Aha, thinks Detective Wilson, a contract tracer, “I’m here because I didn’t believe her.”

“Whom have you been in contact with?”

“Just dead people,” probably true, thinks Wilson.

“What about the woman you didn’t believe?”

“Yea, Nurse Henderson, she’s dead along with the killers.” Wilson is unkind toward killers as policy. “I never had physical contact with Ms. Henderson while she was still breathing but I tried to keep

**ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE
EXPECTATIONS**

65

one killer alive for trial- going so far as mouth to mouth.”

“Well then, that explains how. Thank you, your nurse will be right in.”

“Hello Detective Wilson, my name is Sheila and I am your nurse. You’ve been on a ventilator three days; they brought you in after you lost consciousness, crashing your vehicle into a building. Apparently you’ve caught a virus variant, what we call the instant death mutation. Your blood oxygen levels are dropping; soon... Now is the time...”

Yea, thinks Wilson, now’s the time, “OK. I understand. Please stay, I need a witness or maybe you could record me with your phone?” Sheila produces her phone and hits record.

“Her name was Marybeth Henderson, formerly a nurse in the infectious disease ward. Ms. Henderson contacted the department to file a report two days before I got sick; what, five days ago? Six? I took the call claiming one of her expired patients, an attorney, was a serial killer.

“How did you come across such information?” I inquired.

“Ramblings of a dying man.” Hearsay, of course but....

“A dying man unable to breathe with Covid? Seriously?” Pressing her buttons, see where it goes.

“Not a man, a lawyer, a monster.” Sounds pretty sure of herself, but every lunatic does...

“If you say so. Tell me what you know.” Humor the lunatics, standard fare.

“He was a real-estate attorney, quite successful-maybe you’ve seen his advertisements?”

“I don’t watch commercials.” Best not to be encouraging.

“Or pay attention to the ads plastered to the sides of buses, good for you. After he’s been in for two days, he awakes. Unfortunately, his speech slurs thanks to the stroke but for twelve hours he rambles on and on about his practice, totally boring shit, you know? Then his eyes grow glassy and he begins speaking clearly, but not to me.”

**ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE
EXPECTATIONS**

67

“Who else was there?” A witness would increase believability somewhat.

“That’s the thing, no one else was anywhere close- I’m the listener, not the audience.”

“OK, the perpetrator talks. What does he say?” Wonder whom the Giants are playing this weekend and what time.

“He says it’s not his idea, any of it.”

“Fairly standard fare for lawyers; bereft of ideas and all.” Deploying humor may lighten the mood.

“He claims it was his wife, all her scheme, came to him twenty years ago with the plan already in the works. Before you ask, she wasn’t married to him at the time.”

“And the plan involves murder?” Interesting.

“Specifically, her house is for sale and she found buyers, a couple planning to relocate. They’re looking to save money and she is willing to lower her price into their range if they pay cash. She wants to take their money but keep the house and she wants his help.”

"Sounds like any divorce." Greed kills.

"The lawyer falls for the white widow and agrees to step in, shepherding her distress sale through the closing process. Cash in the sellers' hand, the keys in the buyers', a perfect transaction completes."

"Again, sounds like standard fare; what, no bodies?" Murderers leave bodies somewhere, unless...

"They killed the couple thirty minutes later, in the house. Left them a poisonous gift basket."

"Twenty years ago. Any idea who they were or where they are?" Give me something, either put up or shut up and let me look up the ballgame.

"He said they buried the bodies, wouldn't say where. What he did say was they repeated the process the following year, destroying evidence thoroughly fixing the mistakes they made the first go around. According to him, the key to the entire operation is the playhouse in the backyard- it's evil."

"Right, evil, got it. Anything to add?" That's enough time for this.

ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE EXPECTATIONS

69

“My grandparents disappeared twenty years ago. They sold their house to move closer to their family and that’s the last we heard.”

“Sorry for your loss. OK, we have your report in the system. Someone will surely follow up. May take some time, we’re down on manpower.” Discourage expectations, standard fare- first off I go online for the schedule then grab something to eat. Forgot all about her and her survivor’s guilt.

Two days later, I get a text from Nurse Henderson. She is at the lawyer’s funeral, planning on attending the food and beverage service at the very same house where she thinks her own grandparents were murdered. Tells me she has a gun and I’ll find her holding the wife hostage in the playhouse. Yikes, exigent circumstances. I grab my keys and fly out the door.

Upon arriving at the house, I proceed around back and discover that, indeed, there is a playhouse. The door is ajar so I push it open. Inside is an elderly woman with her back to me. She’s moving around

concentrating on the floor, seemingly alone. It's not until I step inside that I smell the chemicals and see the vats. At the same time, I see a female's body in the corner well into the process of dismemberment. I clear my throat and the woman turns to face my gun. Immediately, her hands grab at her chest, she wets herself and collapses.

Heart attack, I'm thinking. I give her mouth-to-mouth for a few minutes, hoping like hell to bring her in for trial. Growing dizzy from the fumes and forgetting what a radio does, I make it to my car to get help. Next thing I know, here I am. That's pretty much all I got in me, did you get it?

"Yes, Detective Wilson, I've uploaded your statement. It's alright, rest now, you're going to be OK."

Dealing with liars his entire career prepares the detective for the stone cold truth behind her words. Closing his weary eyes, he sighs, he dies.

Ode to an N95

His grieving widow slowly climbs the steps to reach the Cantor's Perch. Adjusting the microphone with several raps from her palm, she begins with the traditional greeting: "Is this thing on? OK, thank you Rabbi for that inspirational eulogy, I'm sure George would have waken up refreshed if at all possible. Though Detective George Wilson could sleep through the most awe inspiring of oratories, he could also sing like a bird and was a poet at heart. This little ditty he penned during lockdown:"

Essential Nonessential Quintessential Existential

Early morning subversive
Waiting for what's to play
While writing in cursive
Chasing the Pandemic Blues Away.
How are you, quite well?
How am I?
If you wish to decipher Hell
Merely open up your eyes.
Sitting, watching

PETER FISHER

Observing the world quake
While occasionally wondering
When will it catch a break?
Lockdown so laying low
Always aiming high
No place to go
Without the fuzz wondering why.
Essential Nonessential Quintessential Existential
Environmental attacks seem relentless
Natural habitat we once knew
Safety becomes a guess
Truth devolving into fake news.
Hot summer nights
Following the silent spring
Covid viruses causing frights
Politics clouding things.
Smiles for the winners
Oblivion for the losers
Until there are no beggars
None of us are choosers.
Those among us with loud voices
Unafraid to reach
Wonder if their choices
Should include injecting bleach.
Essential Nonessential Quintessential Existential

**ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE
EXPECTATIONS**

73

Daily living promotes bewilderment
Life is going to fail
Don't bother expressing wonderment
At the state of your travails.
Yet this is just a blip
Not the big one yet: be aware
Trends flop and flip
The end will come from out of nowhere.
The environment is fickle
Changing upon observation
Our world is in a pickle
Yet ending sequestration.
Predicting the past is easy
Tomorrow the bold one asks:
Would life have been breezy-
With everyone given N-95 masks?

Good Old Mr. Wilson

"You knew my husband?" The grieving widow approaches and greets one and all attendees at the gravesite but saves the stranger for last, "I'm going to guess you're not a cop. So that makes you what, a criminal?" Mrs. Wilson is a no-shit kind of gal.

Karl shakes his head, but apparently changes his mind; reaching into his suit jacket to produce his billfold, grinning slightly, nodding, extending his hand, "Yes and no. I'm merely a businessman please accept my card. Allow me to introduce myself, Karl Meltzer at your service."

Mrs. Wilson accepts the offering and then takes his hand in hers. Squeezing firmly, she finds his grasp firm and dry, searches his face for duplicity. They lock eyes. Holding his gaze, Mrs. Wilson speaks softly, "Now that I see you're comfortable in my personal space, why not tell me what's on your mind?"

"Oh, sorry," Karl takes a step back. "Please accept my condolences on the loss of your husband."

"I'm guessing you don't have many friends, Karl." Mrs. Wilson examines the card aloud, "Karl Meltzer, Proprietor, The Paddock at Billingsport Range. Billingsport Range- Delaware River? The Paddock Bar & Grill? I grew up in Cherry Hill- I know from the Paddock, what a shithole."

**ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE
EXPECTATIONS**

75

Karl's smile falters slightly, "Pedro says the same thing, I guess you two are kindred spirits. Well, that tracks. Actually, Mrs. Wilson, I run the hedge fund that owns the Paddock."

"I'd love to stay and shoot the shit some more, but there is food and whatnot back at the Precinct, you're welcome to join us but..."

"But maybe I don't have the time? Truer words have never been spoken, Mrs. Wilson- who among us has time? My car is nearby, allow me to drop you?" Karl points to his limo.

She follows his gaze, spots the limo with driver waiting to open the door. Then, because she's married to a cop, she spots the semi-concealed decoy limo caravan, replete with front escort and tail. "You've quite the entourage, haven't you? Got any single malt in your ride?"

"In a rocks glass, two ice cubes please," Mrs. Wilson makes small talk while the driver prepares her drink, "So, Karl... do you need to do that?" High school teachers tend to frown at drugs.

"It's medicinal, you know, world renown for smoothing over so many of life's ailments. Take seasickness, for example- apply a little hash oil and the unendurable reverts to nearly bearable."

Mrs. Wilson gives him the evil eye, "How do you know about my seasickness?"

"We live in a data stream, Mrs. Wilson, everyone knows."

"And how do you know my late husband?"

Not wishing to pass off a contact high, Karl cracks the window, "Good old Mr. Wilson? We ran a background investigation, of course. Detective Wilson, formerly Major Wilson, thrice decorated war hero. Until quite recently Material Supply, the hedge fund employing me, liked him as a potential gig worker candidate for an ongoing contract. Were you aware he survived six near death experiences before...?"

Mrs. Wilson is indeed, aware. She is aware her glass is empty so she holds it in Karl's direction, "What's this have to do with me?"

ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE EXPECTATIONS

77

"I read both your background clearance files. You are currently a long-term substitute teacher at the Hebrew School. This semester you are filling in for the Industrial Arts teacher, Mr. Kaplan, teaching building trades to the unmotivated and/or uninterested."

"Learn something new every day, ask me," comes Mrs. Wilson's reply, "I master two subjects every school year. This week the disinterested are uncovering the importance of concrete reinforcement."

Karl laughs, "Trying to teach the unmotivated about rebar? Useful; however, the times quite soon to come may signal a career change."

"Are you recruiting me? I have no desire to leave teaching, you know." Mrs. Wilson fends off recruitment interest all the time; her work at the Hebrew School is highly regarded.

"Yes, Material Supply is interested in your services. It's a short term deal, no longer than 24 months- or the end of the world, whichever comes first, ha ha." Though liking inside jokes as much as

Pedro, Karl dislikes the optimism implied in the time frame.

“Working for you? Doing what?” She is a sucker for data.

Karl leans back to reach into his suit jacket again. Now comes the hard part, “Look at this,” handing her an ornate, golden ticket, “What do you see?”

Studying the ticket, Mrs. Wilson offers, “50/50, so it’s a raffle? Why is my name printed on it, nobody prints the buyer’s name on a raffle ticket. Why does it say, ‘Mrs. Wilson 2’?”

“I guess that means you’re not the actual buyer, sorry to say. Actually, these tickets come at a steep price and you shouldn’t gamble anyway. So you’ve had a near-death experience?” Karl takes back the ticket, awaiting her reply.

“Heart Disease is trying to kill me, has been for years.” Mrs. Wilson keeps this private.

Karl nods, “Thanks for sharing. Correct, it’s a 50/50 only if you’re your name appears, you’re the

**ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE
EXPECTATIONS**

79

subject. Soon, very soon, you will encounter Death, with your survival odds exactly 50/50.”

Mrs. Wilson considers his words then responds in the only appropriate fashion, “Bullshit.”

“I wish. There’s a sad truth out there, the long forgotten tidings of the apocalypse. The end is near Mrs. Wilson, not only for you, but for everyone. Death knows the world is ending- you should see the amount of fentanyl consumption merely to get him to show up for work. Not that I blame Death, what happens when all the people go away; like, does he tend the livestock or just hang up the robe and, anyway, who makes the fentanyl?”

Mrs. Wilson drinks until her rocks glass holds only cubes. Again, she holds out the empty.

Karl refills her single malt then downs a gram of hash oil. Clearly she must think he’s nuts.

Mrs. Wilson lets him off the hook gently, “Karl, my late husband was good with the big answers, I’m sure his quip would go something like, ‘world’s ending, eh? Ask me, bound to happen, sooner or later’.

It's not like we can do anything about it, right?' As for the 50/50, it's bullshit."

"Look, one of two things is going to happen soon. First case, you die and we part ways amicably. Second case, the Governor pins a medal to your chest and we do business. Material Supply needs you. If you survive 'Mrs. Wilson 2' and have an interest in the future we'll iron out a contract."

"Unlikely."

"Just watch your ASS until then. It's been a pleasure."

Mrs. Wilson's face flashes with recognition but she says nothing before exiting the limo, popping a breath mint then climbing the long stairs leading to the Precinct doors.

'Karl Meltzer' she thinks, 'no doubt a man sans friends'.

The following morning in a tenement near town center, Tofer the Gopher holds his hands under the shower's running water until the runoff loses the red tint then turns off the tap. Looking down, he shakes

ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE EXPECTATIONS

81

his head ruefully, never intending to remove his neighbor's head from his body, merely to sever the jugular at the throat. Disrespectful to Death is what he is thinking. He murmurs a short prayer asking forgiveness for his lack of respect. Exiting the victim's shower, mouth-breathing Tofer makes toward the gun cabinet. A thin stream of drool escapes his parted lips as he pauses to gaze out the window at the Hebrew School next door. Paraphrasing his Congresswoman, Tofer utters his mantra; "Hitler got it right all along as we must end them as children." He pulls out an empty backpack, which he fills with the victim's weaponry, selectively choosing three small machine pistols and handfuls of extended clips. Rethinking his haste, he removes the pistols, one by one inserting a clip then drawing the firing pin then flicking the safety off. Finally he loads a twelve-gauge shotgun with titanium coated double OO buckshot, slinging the doorbell on his right side, under his jacket. Tofer is exiting the tenement as the milk delivery truck enters the schoolyard leav-

ing open the heavy iron gates. Perfect timing is all about preparation.

Mrs. Wilson isn't one for teaching sitting down, instead she stands at the lectern holding a one-inch thick steel bar about three feet long, "Can anyone tell me what this is? Nobody? C'mon people, you should know this, its common knowledge. All right, here's a hint. Last week's topic remains the manufacture and distribution of concrete. Anyone have a clue?"

"Knock-knock." Tofer announces his intention a moment before pulling the trigger on both barrels of the shotgun. The door to the Industrial Arts shop violently disengages from the frame flying into the first row of students. Tofer drops the twelve gauge to his side then enters the classroom while bringing up a machine pistol for his first long burst.

Mrs. Wilson is ready for this Active School Shooter, thanks to Karl's cryptic remark. Swinging underhanded in the softball pitching tradition she explodes Tofer the Gopher's genitals with the rebar.

**ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE
EXPECTATIONS**

83

Tofer collapses to his knees, still holding the weapons. Mrs. Wilson considers the man's intent for the merest of moments then swings for the fences, effectively melding iron and skull.

"Umm, Mrs. Wilson?" Carrie, the quiet girl that sits in the back, pipes up while raising her hand.

"Yes, Carrie?" Carrie, the meekest of the meek is speaking, out loud, to her? Evidently today marks first time for many things; Mrs. Wilson wonders what could possibly be on her student's mind at a time like this.

"Rebar?"

Down the street, the door to Karl's limo opens. Death settles in and sighs, "Well, for a school shooting, that sure was as quick as disappointing. Quite the letdown, you know, showing up for what proves to be a single."

"Well, it's two if you count the guy in the shower across the street, three if you count the head separately from the body. Not every school shooting pans out, eh?"

“Karl, its no wonder you have no friends. Got the stuff?”

Karl points to the large duffels on the floor, “Fifty keys. So tell me, what did you think of her?”

Death opens the bag and counts 51 packages of fentanyl. Karl is one key over, must need something, “I like her.”

“Me too, OK, I’ll let Pedro know we can work with her. You won’t be seeing us unless or until there’s a problem or you’re hanging at the Paddock. Henceforth Mrs. Wilson will handle deliveries; co-ordinate your needs with Airre. For the record, it’s hands-off Mrs. Wilson for the duration.”

Death laughs out loud, “Or else? Please, Karl, disrespecting Death is in poor taste. You’ll never make friends if you keep acting like Pedro all the time.” Death typically doesn’t negotiate but nods assent. Mrs. Wilson is assured her front row seat to the apocalypse in its entirety.

Pair of Dice Lost

Colonel Nevski sighs heavily realizing there is, indeed, no ascertainable bottom to the mountainous heap of paper reports. Knowing what to do, Sergeant Blincovich opens the file drawer holding the Stolichnaya. Colonel Nevski bows to the inevitable, nods while holding three fingers together, shorthand for 'it's going to be a long night'.

"Check out the tattoo on the next guy, snake eyes. My wife wants me to get some ink- what do you think?" Blinky passes the boss a thin file.

"Either way I'll drink to your ability to pour Stolichnaya, once I have a glass..."

'Smartass' thinks Blinky saying so in more words than the situation requires, "Sadly, my Colonel, opinions vary on nearly every possible point of convention in the Ukraine excepting one: everyone thinks you're a dick. What's sad is how right they all are, as I know for a fact you are, indeed, a dick. Thus,

up yours!” Sergeant Blincovich smiles the smile of the elderly enlisted (too stubborn to retire) while passing the beleaguered Colonel three fingers of Stoli, neat in a frozen glass.

“No, up yours.” The Colonel raises his glass, drains all three fingers then gives good old Blinky the nod, waits a moment for the pour then bends elbow. Before long he’s giving good old Blinky another nod, holding out four fingers, self-limiting his finger count to two full hands, for now. Did he have time to throw the old man a bone? Sure, what the hell, “You are two old and wrinkly for a tattoo, unless maybe you make it an ad extolling the benefits of dried prunes.”

Blincovich did a double take, prunes?

“Raisins, perhaps- anyway, wrinkly dice will not get you laid, old man. So tell me, why is ‘snake eyes’ a prisoner of the Russian Federation?”

“He was apprehended taking pictures of the fighting, focusing on dead children apparently, during the push into the coast, oh, like two weeks ago.

ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE EXPECTATIONS

87

The charge is espionage. The evidence downloaded off his phone by the techs included footage pieced together over several weeks. Several earlier uploads found on the dark web by Moscow Center are also in your queue awaiting review but there's nothing. Hold on, I'll switch on the big monitor, see for yourself."

Sniff. Hmmm, "Blinky, what the hell?" The Colonel frowns on drug use on duty.

"Is medicinal- hash oil for my rheumatism. I have a note from a doctor." Blinky produces a script, hands it over.

"This isn't a real note from a real doctor! You're going to get us in deep." The Colonel worries.

Nonplussed, Blinky defends his honor, "Yes, I swear it's genuine, from a real doctor inside the system. Pedro gave it to me downstairs not ten minutes ago along with a couple dozen vapes and some syringes- all White Russian hybrid variants, all on the approved list."

“Pedro’s here? Why didn’t you say so? Where is he?”

“He’s in the can, told me to start without him.” Blinky lied, he wouldn’t wait.

“Bullshit he did!” Pedro enters loudly, from experience calling bullshit early and often when dealing with these nefarious intelligence types.

“Will wonders never cease, it’s Pedro. Dammit, how the hell you doing? When did you get in town? What brings you here?” The Colonel isn’t one for surprises but Pedro isn’t one for appointments. They cross paths on occasion, developing mutual respect.

Pedro smiles at his friends. He likes these guys, totally WYSIWYG types. “After dropping in at Baikonur to see a doctor or two (for Blinky), my train to the coast fell into an extensive layover in Chechnya thanks to track-related partisan activities, been making my way here on a dispatch motorbike. So I finally reach the Ukraine only to find they’re attacking your supply chain everywhere, I’ve been in like dozens of firefights, fortunate to be alive. Lost

**ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE
EXPECTATIONS**

89

the bike days ago, been on foot ever since.” He looks to Blinky and shakes his head sadly, “Risking my life to bring you a bogus doctor’s note.”

“I also have the PTSD!” Blinky feels bad for Pedro, but not bad enough to pass on the note.

“Sure you do. Here Colonel, I didn’t forget you.” Pedro drops a satchel on the desk, looks over to Blinky and holds up four fingers, “Gotta play catch-up.”

After a few minutes of attitude adjusting, Pedro signals again for four fingers. Blinky pours quickly before the Colonel empties a syringe of hash oil into the alcohol. The hash rapidly dissolves into the clear Stolichnaya. The Colonel gives Blinky the evil eye considering a punishment, maybe a few lashes for insubordination. Dammit, how can he stay mad at Blinky considering the hash buzzing around his brain- if not for Blinky, no Stoli-hash buzz, right? Instead, he sighs, “OK Blinky, another for me and one for you then back to work.”

Pedro lights up a joint, "So, what are we working on tonight?"

"It's a spy with a cool tattoo, at least I think so." Blinky passes the file over, then points.

"Snake eyes? What kind of loser gets a snake eyes tattoo? You guys got a microwave?"

The Colonel snatches the file from Pedro, "Is what I'm trying to tell Blinky. He thinks it's cool."

Pedro gives Blinky a look, "Cool to be a loser? Blinky, Blinky, Blinky- what are you thinking? Have you ever played craps?" Pedro pulls up his sleeve, shows off a large pair of red dice, "Lucky seven, bitches. Fuck your beady little snake eyes is what I say. Microwave?"

The Colonel agrees, "Blinky, dammit, forget about the loser tattoo already. Pedro, you're welcome to stay. Blinky, stop being such a Bogart already, fire up one of those medicinal approvals then roll the camera footage. Is the microwave working today?"

Pedro took back the file, "This is just a kid, what twenty two, twenty three? Says he just graduated

ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE EXPECTATIONS

91

from college with a degree in sociology and a minor in journalism and is seeing the world before graduate school. Uh oh, prestigious liberal university, apparently- tells me the degree is bullshit and the bills insurmountable. Do you have his financials?"

"He is poor." The Colonel is blunt.

"Then I doubt he is official CIA. That doesn't rule out CIA involvement but getting caught after just weeks in country does indicate a thorough lack of training. First impression, he's expendable, part of the courier chain, just a dupe with a lame tattoo." Pedro is blunt.

Blinky joins in, lighting up a blunt, "Says he owes \$340k in loans. What's that in rubles?"

"More than you'll ever see." Pedro takes the blunt, inhales, and passes to the Colonel.

"Roll the damn footage already!" The Colonel remembers issuing this order a while ago. "What's the story on the damn microwave?"

"Is working yesterday." Blinky is clicking away on everything trying to get at the spy footage.

The monitor comes alive. Snake eyes is on a plane to Russia.

“Pause that, will you?” Pedro starts digging in the bag, pulls out a handful of small paper bags, “Organic popping corn- I have a source in Nowheresville, the crowning jewel of the US Midwest. Blinky, prepare several but one at a time. They cook fast, follow the instructions.” Blinky smacks his lips as he bolts to the kitchen.

“So- what really brings you this way?” Colonel Nevski is on the edge of most loops, but Pedro is an anomaly going about where and when, showing up in the strangest places talking weird shit.

Pedro considers his reply, then shrugs, “Truth is I’m just a delivery boy. First I took a tour of the Cosmodrome, meeting with Admin types, dropping off gold bars. Good fun, smuggling .5k bars of gold bullion behind the back of State Security. Why I’m exiting via the Ukraine? Well, Death is in the field and I need to drop off ten keys of fentanyl to him chilling on the beach before tomorrow’s battle or there’s

ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE EXPECTATIONS

93

going to be hell to pay with Karl. He's already angry I'm late."

The Colonel laughs, "Karl is still alive? Ha, go figure. Where's that fucking Blinky?" He pours a couple of fingers for them both, just to keep in practice. "I suppose you need a ride?"

"You know me too well, Colonel. Death is waiting at the forward edge of the battle area. The beach is at a place he calls Pirate's Cove, I think it's near Paradise City." Pedro reaches into the bag, palms and withdraws two bars before extending his arms toward the Colonel.

The men shake hands as Karl's gold disappears from Pedro's grasp, again. Though Karl likes to refer to the procedure as the 'golden shower', to Pedro the move is the 'golden handshake', as in 'up yours Karl, I'm off yet again to make another round of golden handshakes while you sit on your ass acting like the kingpin'. Pedro is sick of deliveries.

Blinky returns holding three steamy bags, "Butter flavor, yummy!"

“Organic?” The Colonel is optimistic.

“Nothing but the best for my friends keeping the likes of Death fully utilized. You guys got no idea how much Fentanyl he goes through when the work pace slackens and boredom strikes.”

The Colonel seals the deal, done in no small part thanks to food purity, “Speaking of Death, Pedro needs transport to the FEBA. Arrange a seat in a fighting vehicle accompanying the munitions convoy heading for the beach. Pedro will be ready in; um...” he looks to Pedro questionably, “thirty minutes?” Pedro gives him the thumbs up as Blinky picks up the phone.

Pedro finds a syringe of hash oil in his pocket, empties it into his mouth in one long squirt. Blinky barks out a few orders, hangs up the phone then dims the lights. Restarting the projector, he breaks wind as he settles in for a bad movie and a bag of delight.

“Dammit Blinky you flatulent fuck, crack a window already!” The Colonel exhibits a zero Blinky

flatulence tolerance threshold on the best of days, stays downwind while outside even.

"You guys really think this idiot is a spy? Really?" Pedro laughs out loud as the young man attempts to score with several girls on the overseas flight, "I think he's a virgin."

"Takes balls to be a spy." Blinky speaks from decades of torture experience. "He looks to be scoring on the ground judging by his most recent pics."

Pedro also finds this funny, "Scoring or sitting in the friend zone? I see desperation in a mid-six figure student loan debt accumulating interest."

"Useful idiot?" wonders the Colonel. "Apparently, most of the footage thus far consists of this foreign loser trying in vain to score. So far, from the evidence he is oh for twelve. Beavis and Butthead doing America stand a better chance." The Colonel is fab.

Pedro sighs; the Colonel is always chock full of references to stupid shit from the 1990's.

“Wait a second...” Blinky’s gaze focuses away from the girls, “Pay attention to the backdrops.”

The Colonel throws back a handful of kernels, “So what about them?”

“I recognize these places, hold on a second.” Blinky leaves the room and his popcorn.

The Colonel snags Blinky’s popcorn, “Jungle rules, you snooze, you lose.”

Blinky returns holding phones, gives the Colonel the evil eye so Pedro hands over his near empty bag of remnants to keep the peace, getting a thumbs-up from the sergeant.

Pedro wipes his greasy hands on his shirt, “What’s up?”

Blinky stuffs his mouth with popcorn, takes a drink; then tilts the bag finishing up the good stuff.

Pedro picks up one of the phones, turns it on. “This is his?”

Blinky nods, drinking deeply, pushing the popcorn through his system, “His and hers from the arrest, I recognize two of the selfie locations from

ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE EXPECTATIONS

97

recon photos. This one (holding up a photo of a blonde posing near a bridge) and this one (a brunette outside the phone exchange), both show on the orders as priority targets in next month's campaign plan." Blinky breaks wind, silent but deadly.

"What the fuck? You're right! Pedro, dammit, bring up the GPS map from that phone." The Colonel spits corn in his excitement. "Again, Blinky? Dammit, crack another window."

Pedro presses some buttons, brings up a map showing GPS for the past month then hands over the device. Blinky plugs the phone into the system putting the GPS next to the planning document, "Look, they overlay perfectly. See, I told you so, son of a bitch of a coincidence, eh?"

Not a fan of coincidence, the Colonel frowns, "Run down all the women, round them up and send them to Moscow Center, let the State sort them out." Blinky picks up the phone as the Colonel turns to Pedro, still fiddling with the second phone, "So whom is he working for?"

Pedro laughs, “Who do you suppose? Check this out. Blinky plug this phone into the system and hand me the stooge’s phone.” Fishing through his pockets, Pedro produces a fresh blunt, “Go juice. This’ll take a few minutes then it’s off to meet Death. Let me at the keyboard.”

Pedro begins keying sequences into the stooge phone, “I know these phones, well, not exactly these phones but that doesn’t matter. Our AI wrote the operating system and left a backdoor. To be honest, I had a hand in writing the AI that wrote the AI operating this device. We sold these exclusively to the CIA, on the cheap by the way. They must not think much of your boy snake eyes, if you ask me. Anyway, there’s a time sensitive fail safe locking mechanism that doesn’t erase; but I’m guessing he hit the panic button, probably, so he thinks the data is toast. There’s a 911 code and, fortunately for you two party animals, there’s a 911 code undo. Watch what happens on the home screen.”

They see an app appear bearing the ‘recorder’ icon. ‘Seen it everywhere’, they think.

“OK, now let’s make a recording.” Pedro presses the icon.

The recorder app launches and the camera records, as one might expect.

“Now, side by side watch the other phone. See anything? No? Of course not; however, the phones are talking. New screen, here’s the stream from the stooges’ phone. It’s encrypted; no doubt with a long randomly chosen key. However, the AI captures all activity, stores it in the internals before uploading it to, umm, an interested unnamed third party via an intermittently appearing command stream. Take apart the app to find the keys, should take a few hours, tops. Time I don’t have. Must run and all that, but I’m a curious guy so humor me for a second. What’s in store for snake eyes?”

The Colonel and Blinky exchange first a look, then a laugh. The Colonel passes along the joke to his helpful friend, “Haven’t you heard? We’ve

patched him up, now we'll send him home, no trouble. We'll say, 'sorry for the inconvenience, here's a plane ticket. Have you eaten?' and then we'll feed him Polonium and send him on his way- new Standard Procedure."

Pedro picks up his bag, "Super. Well Colonel, Death is waiting for a fix. Good seeing you and thanks for the lift. Blinky- smell you later."

The Novitiates

Referring to his cigar, Iris the intern opines, “You know how disgusting you are, don’t you?”

“After wine-thirty this floor is my domicile, stipulated succinctly in my employment contract. In fact, you are inside my home office. As resident caretaker, I enjoy privileges mere mortals yearn for, newbies especially.”

“Super.”

“In a manner of speaking, sure, consider me the building Super.” The look on her face he finds priceless, yet another ‘work-from-home’ perk is heckling newbies after hours.

“Super as in whatever; exactly how old are you anyway? This has got to be the weirdest job interview ever. First you elderly types lock me in the terminal room all day and now at wine-thirty you’re nearly poisoning me.” Iris looks around for a clean glass.

Nearly? Gotcha, “First get something straight, today’s test is not an interview; someone should have explained this seeing as you were, in fact, hired when you showed up this morning, based on several factors, among them apparently- moxie. Honestly, I can’t give a damn about your college course history or the meaning behind your tattoos or the unworthiness of your parental units. What I want to know is how you work around large data sets. That’s why I put you in the terminal room and gave you sixteen hours of free rein in Sector 473. But that’s beside the point, where are my manners? Name your poison, Bourbon? I got single malt.”

“Neat.” Iris hopes he understands. Can’t be too sure of oneself around some of these old codgers, “Uncut at room temperature, please?” she adds helpfully.

“Yea, I get it.” He fishes around one of the filing cabinets for the other glass. Handing her a tumbler he quickly fills her in, “I’m hiring newbie actuaries and data engineers such as you for interesting away

assignments auditing Switzerland Reinsurance Services covering most crop insurance business beginning with Sector 473. For the past two decades claim payouts on storm damage trend toward the heavy side in Southern Indiana, just within the noise, until the death of the insurance adjuster. Tell me young Iris, all day with unrestricted access what did you learn?”

Drinking deeply, Iris drains her glass. Holding it out for a refill, “Well, you found him only because he died- the total number of payouts varies within parameters approximating the weather but the payout requests in dollar value have fallen dramatically. He was no slouch, good at covering all the bases while inflating the damage acreage. He was particularly adept at balancing the bogus claims with shipments out of the region, lowering the local granary take in line with expectations to keep a low profile.”

“Yup,” relighting his cigar, “You ran algorithms on the photos from the claims?”

“Tough to tell one row of crops from another, isn’t it? I cross-referenced the file hard copies with satellite images; no doubt he inflates the claims from 13-17%. What’s funny is he knows exactly how much judging by the resolution of the satellite overhead at the time. For example, when claiming field edge damage he fudges ten rows for an older satellite camera, six or less for the newer birds. The questions in my mind: where did the crops go and who is the fence?”

“If you have answers I have more single malt in the cabinet. Not to worry, I’ll call you a car.”

“What a pal, make me work a twenty hour shift for a ride home. Swell- super. The fence is an operation run by the Laidlow Family from two hundred miles outside Sector 473, Nowheresville, KY. Laidlows’ own multiple large farms in the region producing copious amounts of corn and soybeans. They run sixteen tractor trailers two hundred fifty days annually from their four granaries to wholesalers, mostly local guys, in addition to filling train cars on a

ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE EXPECTATIONS

105

rail spur. They also run several milling machines in a grinding operation that from what I can tell feeds a grain mash distillery, producing all the fuels used within their operation. Laidlows' make money but pay almost nothing in taxes, less than 0.1% of their gross."

"As do many rich people." He takes her glass, fills it, "Big deal."

"Correct. Laidlow Family Farms is reporting neither sales nor income from laundering grain obtained from their trusted friends. Give me another day on the terminal and access to Pentagon imagery and I'll know enough to be positive."

"Switzerland Reinsurance has no such relationship with the Pentagon. What we need is hard evidence, what we have is you."

"So my job..."

"This is an undercover assignment. Can you drive?"

"Anything with wheels."

“So your file claims. Here’s your story: your recently acquired CDI is under suspension because you took a low-level felony bust for resisting upon fleeing the scene after the cops observe drug paraphernalia finding you passed out behind the wheel with the engine running in the parking lot of a tavern. We’ll place you in the shipping department of a large grocery store, driving a forklift during your commercial driver’s license suspension.”

“Super.”

They clink glasses to seal the deal.

Six months in Nowheresville, KY and now she is, finally, seeing some action. The old man predicted as much, she predicted longer. Iris made friends of the workers, just not good friends. She came to work regularly, griped over low pay, long hours, and the weather- just like every other employee. The change would come, or not, without warning is her guess.

Iris finds every day pretty much the same drudge until yesterday when one of the regular delivery drivers (John Laidlow, judging from his drivers’ license

photo) asks if she is interested in earning some cash-driving interstate, off the books. Iris wonders how much cash, setting the hook into her prey. Laidlow offers fifteen hundred for a four hour run. She scoffs, chuckling softly. After a long pause while he says nothing, she turns her back on his stinginess.

“Two thousand?” he counters as Iris retreats.

“Super.”

“Be here at one in the morning leave everything including your phone at home.”

A plain white van pulls into the lot as promised, so Iris joins the other two drivers in the cargo bed. Once inside, Laidlow searches her before getting behind the wheel, speeding north. Iris spreads out on the floor near the door, quickly dozing.

Coming awake as the van lurches off the pavement onto a dirt road, Iris yawns, stretches and smells coffee. She finds a thermos nearby and pours a cup, “We’re here?”

“Welcome to Bean Blossom, Indiana. We have three loaded semis waiting. There are three routes

out of here, however as the last in, you get no say or choices.” Stopping before a large barn Laidlow waits for the door to open then drives inside.

Iris opens the door and exits the van slowly, stopping to stretch out and get her bearings. Immediately she understands what Laidlow means by ‘no say or choices’ as one of the rigs is clearly a massively overloaded rusty piece of shit with bald tires on the trailer. “You’ve got to be kidding. No way- take me home now. I can’t believe this shit.”

Laidlow pats his pocket, “S&W says: no take backs. Take this smartphone and get your ass in gear. Just follow the map app; your first leg is Route 135 into Nashville. I’ll be watching.”

Iris wishes she brought a gun. This is a suicide run looking for a sucker to run it. She tries to stall while thinking of another way, offers a bluff, “Fuck you. Twenty five hundred or I walk.”

“If I had that kind of money lying around I’d buy tires or service the brakes on these shitty trailers. Now get moving, no play- no pay.”

ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE EXPECTATIONS

109

Iris looks at the old man standing next to the rigs, obviously the farmer responsible for the load, “What’s in there?” Would he tell her if the load contains narcotics?

“Just corn but don’t worry, it’s organic. What the landowner doesn’t know is going to hurt him.”

“Super. Let me ask you something- would a GMO grain qualify as organic if instead of drinking the poison you guys put in the fields to kill the weeds, it drinks pure water while filtering out the um, long chain molecules?” She asks innocently knowing she’ll piss him off.

“You people don’t understand farming.” He spits angrily and flips her off.

“Because farming is hard everyone should pay out the ass for the good stuff? Super.” Iris dismisses the old man and dismally takes a slow walk around the big rig, shaking her head at the unfairness of it all.

Iris looks hard at the trailer springs then tugs on the air hoses to the brake lines disdainfully before

climbing aboard the outwardly filthy cab. Fortunately the engine of the tractor belies the exterior, much to her relief, starting on the first try and smoothly idling. Goosing the accelerator, she nearly smiles. Too bad the trailer is a piece of shit, the tractor rocks! Pushing in the clutch, Iris effortlessly finds first gear, tests the brakes then follows the others toward the highway. Two quick rights then a left; in a few minutes Iris tools down the ridgeline along Route 135 southbound as temps fall in a foggy drizzle.

Bill Cross eases his big rig through the parking lot of the local donut joint, “Julion, how’s traffic look down 135? I can’t see for shit, you’re fogging the window.”

Julion, making his first run with the veteran road warrior, rolls down his window to peer down the narrow, twisty roadway, “Rain’s picking up but traffic looks clear.”

Bill tunes the radio to channel 2 and clicks the mike button. A moment later, upon receiving two

clicks in reply he eases the heavy rig north. Julion checks the load in his mirror, looks good. The load is his responsibility, transporting it onsite is up to Bill Cross's impressive driving skills. It's taken three states but Julion is getting a read on the talkative man. The quietly observant newbie mechanical engineer is taking a liking to the old guy despite his never-ending monologues.

"Check the app and get locations on the support teams." Bill is on-point, perhaps even tensing up a bit, "Cold rain isn't going to make the ridge run any more pleasant."

Julion studies the phone, "Maybe a mile or maybe less for the crew ahead... behind, they're still getting breakfast, they'll slot in about five miles away. Wait a second; I'm getting a text. OK, looks like the installation team is awake. I'll let them know we'll be there in under an hour."

"Unless the rain picks up, but fine, tell them that. I don't envy the site workers; the temperature is

dropping like a rock. Man, I can't stand the winter, know what I mean?" Bill talks old man.

"Technically, still autumn but I catch your drift. Assembling three windmills in the rain as the temps flutter just about freezing? Gonna suck, ask me." Julion also despises winter.

"Too bad for you, but don't worry. I have hot soup and a warm dry cab." Bill laughs.

"Did I worry about you; I mean, did I? No. Gonna suck and mirth is unhelpful."

Bill nods in agreement, "This is your first field windmill installation so I'll tell you a secret: it always sucks. No matter how well you prepare, something will leave you shaking your head wondering how the hell you're going to make it to tomorrow. Trust me, if not the weather; something else will screw with your plans. Every single time, never fails."

Julion wonders about his words. So far, though colorful and entertaining, Bill Cross is not prone to exaggeration. Bill Cross defines WYSIWYG- what you see is what you get. "The rotator guys getting

breakfast follow us serving in two roles- first they can tow this heavy, overweight rig up the ridge if need be. Second, the rotator unloads the missile bodies.”

“Don’t think they haven’t done both with that rig. Have they left the donut shop yet?”

“Just now, they’re leaving with the rear security detail, about six miles behind.”

“Quite the entourage; let’s hope we don’t need any of them them. Pour me some coffee; the next ten miles are a bitch in the wet.” Wiping the interior of the windshield with a shammy, “Hit the defrosters, will you? Apparently, we need to consider freezing fog.” Bill wonders about installing tire chains for the ride down.

Julion flips through his ‘how-to-install wind-mills’ notebook, looking for tips pertinent to freezing fog. “I worked on the crew for three installs during training but they were all down south, warm and dry. Something went wrong in all cases, if I recall.”

Bill has advice, as always, “If the installation crew offers to warm the concrete pad with a propane heater, it’s a test. Turn them down and call them fools- make sure you question their lineage.”

Julion laughs, “Ha! Maybe suggest they try to set off the solid rocket fuel with an acetylene torch and eliminate the uncertainty?”

Bill guffaws, “Now you’re getting it. Did I ever tell you about the time...”

A little more than a mile up the ridgeline on 135 and closing the distance rapidly, Iris downshifts then turns on the cab’s defroster full blast. The windshield wipers brush away a thin ice coating. Shit. I hope the road stays warm. Wondering how much the loaded trailer weighs, Iris considers the origin of the grain. If she understands the old man farmer correctly she’s probably fencing the skim from an absentee landlord; three loads off the top, tax free income for that old son of a bitch. The ridge steepens so she drops the transmission into second, careful to rely solely

on engine braking, feeling the backend drifting as the wind picks up. Super.

Iris notes the sign signaling an upcoming tight right turn and checks her speed. Shit, too fast. She checks the road, finds approaching traffic in the form of a box cargo van. Crossing her fingers, unable to use the entire roadway to make the curve, Iris taps the brake.

The air hose to the rear trailer axel on the driver's side immediately detaches from the quick disconnect fitting. Immediately, the trailer brake locks up four wheels. Watching the rear view mirror gives her the best view as her load begins to swing clockwise. Iris finds herself in serious trouble, wondering what to do.

Julion has eyes on the support team, "I see the security team just up ahead, rounding that curve."

Bill Cross grunts in agreement, concentrating instead of speaking as driving conditions worsen.

"Holy shit!" Julion exclaims as a big rig screams into view ahead, load swinging out of control, trac-

tor tires braking heavily, screaming for purchase before the turn.

Iris' semi strikes the desperately attempting to evade box truck, driving the security team backward a short distance to the curve. The guardrail is not up to the task of keeping them on the road. Julion watches in horror as both vehicles plunge into the ravine, intently following their progress into oblivion as Bill Cross passes the scene at a snail's pace.

"Holy shit!" Julion is processing.

"Call it in to the teams; tell the rotator crew to assume the security position." Bill Cross expects the unexpected on these windmill runs. Time for the lad's next life lesson: "Said it before and I'll say it again," opines Bill Cross, "it's always something. Learning yet?"

Carrot or Stick?

Per protocol, she knocks twice then enters, saluting crisply, “Captain Deborah Harry reporting for duty as ordered, sir!”

“At ease Captain, close the door and take a seat.” General Pete Peterson did not usually greet the Space Force’s fresh meat. Meet Captain Harry, the exception proving the rule. “I trust you’ve settled in with personnel? Yes? Good. Well, maybe not so good, human resources claim you’re unhappy. Please explain.”

She inhales deeply before replying, “Sir, with all due respect to the good, hardworking folks down in personnel, I believe I can be of better use to the Force than what they suggest.”

Peterson shifts to his Command voice, “Because? Because you’re a hot-shit fighter pilot thinking a move to the Force would put you in the right seat of the space plane? Maybe you’re expecting as-

tronaut training? Join the club. Most jobs around here we do on-planet.”

Captain Harry stares straight ahead, “Sir, I am an aeronautical engineer and a fighter pilot. I am over-qualified to pilot a bus.”

General Peterson sighs in exasperation and points to his collar, “Look, Captain, see all the stars? Well, I have personally piloted that so-called bus three times this quarter alone. Damn it to hell, how fucking hard does it have to be to find someone qualified to fly straight and level while the damn telescope takes pictures? I’ve been flying these missions so I can tell you how hard it is. It’s fucking impossible, no one around here can, until today.”

Opening up his laptop, he queues in a video and turns the screen in her direction, “Watch this.”

Debbie’s mouth drops open in astonishment, “That’s me, back when I flew for Gus!”

“You were fourteen years old when they trained then hired you to pilot that Cessna up and down the coast carrying banners, sixteen when you got your

**ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE
EXPECTATIONS**

119

actual license.” Peterson enjoys astonishing Captains, keeps them on their toes.

“This is off the NASA tower, right?” She remembers the tower crews.

Peterson smiles, “You can’t know I was working in a hangar at the time. The two Gus’ were a running joke until you came along.”

Captain Harry frowns, “They said they received abuse because they were Cuban.”

Peterson disagrees, “Or perhaps because their English skills did not exist at the time, from what I hear. Not my problem but I understand both sides. No, I think what turned things around for A Gus Sign Company were your clear, understandable transmissions requesting access to restricted airspace. But that’s not what I noticed while daydreaming out the hangar door.”

“You noticed the young girl in the cockpit?”

“No, I noticed a young pilot able to keep her damn plane straight and level. Holy shit, you were amazing. Somehow you were pre-sensing atmos-

pheric changes then making on the fly stick and rudder adjustments to keep that old Cessna within a hair of perfectly straight and level. I know this for a fact; before I transferred you here I had the videos quantified to prove my point. You, Captain Harry are a natural pilot.”

Captain Harry feels the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. Damn, she thinks, any time a superior officer passes along a compliment you end up regretting it.

“With all due respect sir, but can’t the telescopes adjust to the aircraft?” Curiosity kills.

“In a perfect world we wouldn’t need the damn things at all but with so many satellite launches and missile tests, the Cobra program is needed more now than ever. I’ve been on both sides of the coin and here’s what I know: Getting high quality out of delicate instruments begins with stability, always has, always will.”

Captain Harry studies her shoes intently, waiting for the boom to fall.

**ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE
EXPECTATIONS**

121

Peterson delivers, "Captain, I'm willing to offer you a choice. Either learn to fly Cobra, my five billion dollar observational platform, straight and level or spend the remainder of your enlistment on your hands and knees supervising the latrine detail, personally."

"Yes sir!" She expects no less.

"OK, here's my carrot: Master the technique for one year, train your replacement for a year, then I guarantee you left seat on the space plane of your choice. Deal?" Earlier he watched her face fall entertaining the thought of supervising the latrine detail, now he sees hope in her eyes. He can work with hope, "Dismissed."

Dueling Realities

Colonel Herrera sighs, not this again. Any call with these two guys it's always something; typically, something both stupid and off-topic. He coughs quietly to no avail.

Airre agrees. "For God's sake, Pedro-Karl, shut the fuck up already." She rarely resorts to profanity but Holy Shit, enough already. "No one cares."

Karl grunts in disapproval. Pedro gives her the finger.

"We need to keep moving if we're going to get through the list." Airre scolds with the best of them and she's letting them know where the limit was. "Colonel, did you scout the Juarez site?"

Colonel Herrera nods; it's refreshing that even for an AI she is on-point. "Yes, this one shows promise. It's a former aluminum smelter; they made shipping containers back when but the company went under with the site guts sold off to some Chi-

**ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE
EXPECTATIONS**

123

nese outfit building ships. The building shell is intact, covering several city blocks in the industrial sector. There are neighbors, mostly operations tied into money laundering from the looks of things.”

Karl breaks in, “You know it was me crashed the aluminum shipping container industry, right?”

Colonel Herrera sighs, not this again. Airre is correct, no one cares.

Pedro, true to form, calls him on it, “Bullshit.”

“No, it’s true. Make shipping containers from old plastic bottle recycles, embed a tracking chip, never lose cargo- all me. We made millions, check the records.” Karl is strident, again.

Pedro shakes his head, “No, it’s my idea- you stole it from me.”

Airre mutes their mikes, “My idea and, once again, please shut the fuck up so the Colonel may continue. Colonel, what’s Operations thinking?”

The Colonel gives her a nod, “Thank you, the Juarez site is a go from the Operational Committee.

It's Material Supply giving us grief about this location."

Karl spoke up, "The neighbors are going to be an issue, trust me. The biggest bunch of assholes in the entire region, in the opinion of the Material Supply Committee, and I'm confident most of those legitimate business' will try to shake us down. Is this spot really worth the effort?"

"Prime spot, near the border, three ways in and out, roomy- need I continue?" Pedro counters.

"Up yours Pedro, what's your plan on dealing with the locals?" Karl holds firm.

Pedro laughs out loud, "Same plan as always, we kill them as required."

"You're not getting it. That amount of killing will surely garner attention. This is an eighteen month operation, two years tops. That's a lot of time to stay unnoticed."

Colonel Herrera relates to both POVs, "If we kill everybody in there that needs it- figure somewhere around five dozen. Expect notice at least, retaliation

at worse, is what I'm saying. Either way is going to be messy."

"Sounds about right, agrees with my numbers-too hazardous." Karl searches for consensus.

"Well point to a better site genius." Pedro refuses to capitulate though sixty might be excessive.

Airre weighs the pros and cons, determines the logical path and relates, "OK, here's the plan: spend money. We're going to clear the surrounding blocks and take most of the sector. Karl, set up real, legitimate businesses. Make bread or something useful. If we get moving right now, this minute, we can cross Juarez off the list and move on.

"It was me that told you to make plastic shipping containers from old bottles. Save weight, save money, never lose a shipment- all me." Airre mutes them then scrolls the long list of sites under review.

Colonel Herrera understands the message, sighs yet again, cancels his dinner date (texting regrets yet again) then searches the delivery menus hoping to find something new, yet again.

Things To Remember, Places To Go

“What are we doing here dressed like this? Damn Karl, why did I listen to him in the first place? What idiot braniac does a drug transaction in public? Covert criminality is required,” murmurs Mrs. Wilson, “yet here I am in the park holding thirty kilos of fentanyl at a wedding under religious protest no less. Tell me genius, even without a riotous mob at the gates, what wedding in history has ever gone off (as so carefully planned) without a hitch? Zero. I can’t believe how gullible I am sometimes.”

“Relax,” replies her companion soothingly, knowing how irksome she can get this far between meals. He casually rolls up a bill, removing his stash he offers her fentanyl, she declines. He tucks his head momentarily.

Death and Mrs. Wilson stand apart at the back of ten or so double rows of folding chairs mostly un-

occupied all facing the one step riser to the cramped rostrum holding the small wedding party. The minister is nervously reading off her phone, droning on about the true meaning of marriage, "Love is..."

'Blah blah and more blah', thinks an increasingly surly Mrs. Wilson.

"You said it," chimes in death, lifting his head, fentanyl reload accomplished, "however there's no reason to be surly, you know."

Knowing to keep her thoughts private, Mrs. Wilson shoots him a look then does a double take. Apparently death reads minds, super.

"Apparently," chimes in death not hiding the devious grin on his face, "Karl left out that part. Can't be duplicitous around death, no matter how hard some try," he adds helpfully, "just doesn't work that way."

Mrs. Wilson laughs, "Goes to show discovering the truth behind Karl's lack of friends won't exactly be a tough nut to crack, will it? Ah well, to business.

Exactly why did you insist on meeting here and what's with the Parks Department outfits?"

"We're here so I can show you something, what Karl does with the information is out of my hands. This wedding is taking place in this park due to the miserable inhabitants in this county. The happy couple got the heave-ho to the great outdoors because their Minister bailed on them when the protests began. They deserve a lifetime contribution refund if you ask me. Unfortunately, all the other churches contacted succumbed to the pressure of the hate crowd so here we are. Personally, I take a live and let live approach to things."

Mrs. Wilson chuckles softly thinking, "Funny thing to hear from death."

"No, seriously. People amuse me to death, what they get up to. Sometimes it's their demise that's the most entertaining, no question, but once their gone their particular fun disappears and the world is a less interesting place for a nanosecond... or two."

**ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE
EXPECTATIONS**

129

“What is it I need to see? I’m tensing up here.”
Her work boots itch irksomely.

Death grins as her line of thinking reuses his word then points to a pair of men seated in the third row of the bride’s side, at the far end near a hedgerow, “That guy, the attentive one on the end sitting next to Morgan Freeman, see him?”

“That’s not Morgan Freeman, isn’t he dead? Think you’d know. Anyhow, you mean the fellow who’s asleep?”

“No he’s not.”

“Trust me, I taught way too much school not to recognize the signs. Tis one’s subtle, practiced, what with the ray bans and all. Cool look aside, watch his head movements for the ever-so-slight loll. Wait for it... there. See it? Fast asleep.”

Death and Mrs. Wilson watch on as Morgan Freeman gives his companion an elbow to the ribs. Death lip-reads as Morgan Freeman says, “I’ve had enough of this. Mark my words, next time you’ll wake up in the hedges.”

“Zadar is what George, my late husband calls my ability to recognize boredom. So what about this sleepy head interests death enough to drag me to Michigan?”

“Said sleepyhead’s name is Lazarus, ring a bell?”

“Like biblical?”

“None other is what I think. Let me be clear, he’s not the original but in a different form, place and time. Not a lock though; that is, I think so but not with 100% certainty. Our best clues are his name and his luck.”

“How do you even know any of this? I mean, reincarnation has never been a purview of death that I’ve ever heard. Sounds like a load of crap.” Mrs. Wilson is getting grumpy.

Death explains, “Its my job to be well-informed. Thing is, this guy is about the luckiest guy in the world, a fact soon to be widely recognized. Look at this.”

Mrs. Wilson looks down, sees a familiar looking ticket, reads- Laz7.

**ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE
EXPECTATIONS**

131

“Soon,” quips death, “very soon. Keep your eye on the hedges.”

“Ok,” says Mrs. Wilson, “What about the undercover uniforms?”

“They’re not coming to kill the Park employees, they’re going to focus first on our sleepyhead guy Laz over there for disrespecting them at the front gate, next they’ll go for the wedding party then finally target fleeing guests- not us. Trust me,” death flashes his most devious fentanyl-enhanced grin.

‘Super’, thinks Mrs. Wilson for the second time as her mind flips over in true Mrs. Wilson fashion, “Say, whose name appears with the highest 50/50 number?”

“George Washington: huge price on his head, first the natives then the Brits and their ilk- practically everybody goes gunning for this huge guy on a horse at one time or another yet the father of your country dies peacefully as the luckiest dude ever to participate. Simply amazing.”

“So, how many times did GW win the 50/50?”

“Can’t say.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

“Both. Great questions, though. Karl’s right about how much fun you are.”

“Coming from another with no friends, no less. How did I get so lucky?”

“You’re cunning, not lucky so much. Big diff.”

“Big diff, huh? Do me a favor and use whole words. Laziness in speech will result in laziness in all things,” Mrs. Wilson stomach rumbles loudly far above her itchy feet.

Death sneers, “Does Karl understand what he’s in for, as far as you’re concerned? Hmmm, I think not thus I believe I’ll add you to the fun-o-watch list.”

Mrs. Wilson flips him off, mentally, sure the image will penetrate, “For a wedding, even one under protest by the local clergy, the crowd sure is sparse. I mean, where are the families? Lame. While we’re waiting, tell me, what’s that kid sitting by her lonesome thinking?”

ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE EXPECTATIONS

133

Death laughs out loud, "You sure know how to pick 'em. Her name is Stacy and she is fourteen, sitting all alone here because it is her loser parents leading that group of heavily armed protestors outside the front gate. Stacy's wondering how much longer it will be before they lose a step and she can warehouse them in a nursing home."

"Not the first kid wondering that, I'll bet." Mrs. Wilson also wonders if perhaps she'd feel safer working for Karl if she were bulletproof. Maybe get a vest or something.

"Also not the first fourteen year old looking forward to signing euthanasia declarations on her elders after they lose said step, icing them at the first possible moment- not merely for today's nonsense but also their infamous ongoing school board protests, particularly the latest ones. Young Stacy bears a grudge, more or less over her parents' willingness to perform as assholes in public, so she is bearing witness for the duration. Well, she needn't worry, the end is near."

Mrs. Wilson chews that last bit over and then moves on, “The Minister sure is dragging this out, short and sweet is how to officiate a wedding. What does the lady of the cloth think of the sparse crowd with all the hoopla and whatnot?”

“Internet Minister Callie, you mean. She is dead tired after having driven straight here from Red River Armory (where she toils in weapons development, death’s kind of woman, rating high on death’s fun scale) stopping only once at the discount ministry warehouse store. Back in the day, Callie attended West Point with Tara Parks when she was known as Tom Parks, darling son of a darling family, not in attendance as you note. After providing a valid credit card, Callie received her call to the Ministry yesterday via speakerphone while driving north five minutes after receiving a desperate plea from a distraught Tara, along with directions to the Ministry Depot. Though she appears busy reading the ceremony she downloaded, the Minister is also wondering if the best man plans on hitting on her later.”

**ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE
EXPECTATIONS**

135

“The guy with the chiseled features and a chin reminding me of John Wayne?”

“The Duke.”

“No, that’s actually the best man’s birth name—‘The Duke,’ or just ‘Duke’ to his friends. He served with Tara, stayed close afterwards but in answer to your next question, Duke believes firmly he has target acquisition and is readying his weaponry. Watch his always-present smile whenever she glances his way, it belies what he thinks of her service but speaks volumes about his intentions.”

“Doesn’t take a degree in psych to read his intentions; lucky Minister.”

“Why Mrs. Wilson, you dirty dog.” Death holds out his palm, “Before the action would be a good time to take care of our other business.”

She hands him the key fob to her rental, “I pre-paid for fuel. I’ll call for a ride.”

“Or I could drop you somewhere?”

“That’s ok, no offense intended, I don’t trust you.”

Death points to the hedgerow, “Look, it’s Stacy’s parents.”

Laz begins snoring, loudly.

Morgan Freeman shoves Laz off his chair.

The first shot rings out from the hedges, passing through the space Laz’s head occupied before Morgan Freeman’s intervention. Morgan Freeman, however, is not so lucky. If not dead before, well, things change.

Death murmurs in Mrs. Wilson’s ear before making his exit, “Luckiest dude since George Washington. Give this ticket to Karl, I’ll wait one month before opening up the book, out to Laz11- should give you all enough time. Enjoy New Zealand. Keep in touch.

The Razing of Tara Park

“...and the greatest of these is love.” Callie looks up from her screen smiling, glad to be finished with all the biblical mumbo-jumbo. Time to get on with it, the rest she knows by heart, no need for a screen. She drops her phone into her pocket then continues, “Do you Tara, being of...”

Bang. Unmistakable. As Callie begins the vows, Morgan Freeman’s head explodes across rows of empty chairs.

Minister Callie stops in mid-sentence as rapid gunfire erupts raking the still-smiling Tara top to bottom before moving on killing most of the wedding party, severely wounding the bride-to-be, in addition to perforating the best man’s ass.

Minister Callie transitions to Captain Callie, weapon’s specialist. Pulling her automatic as Tara’s body disintegrates, she fires at the assailants shooting from a crouch behind the hedgerow, dropping both.

The gunfire from the bushes ceases. A few moments of silence later ejecting the clip Callie crouches as she reloads, hearing a faint voice amid the panic.

“Ur E coli,” quips The Duke, aka the best man.

“So either I’m the shit or I give him the shits,” thinks Callie while applying pressure to The Dukes butt cheek with one hand while searching for more targets.

‘Absolutely,’ agrees The Duke.

After alerting 911, Mrs. Wilson steps through the hedgerow joining Stacy as the youth stares wordlessly at the two prone figures. Mrs. Wilson, detective’s wife and viewer of countless crime scene photos notes the same 9mm third eye now prominent on each.

“Martyrs to the cause,” mumbles Stacy.

“What cause would that be?” inquires Mrs. Wilson.

“Intolerance, of course.” Stacy turns to see who’s asking, “Oh, hello Parks Department Lady, I didn’t see you there.”

**ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE
EXPECTATIONS**

139

“Mrs. Wilson and I’m not with Parks fulltime, it’s a side gig. Nice to meet you; um, hold on a second, I have to get this.” She looks down at her phone, not surprised to find a text from Karl:

‘Mrs. Wilson: heard from death, there is a car waiting at the south gate to take you to Chicago. Midway Airport Hangar 1330 to Sydney for a bit then onto Christchurch. Karl- ps. get the girl out of there, suggest drop off in Sydney for long vacation’.

Mrs. Wilson looks at Stacy, the tough youngster about to fall apart, “Well dear, that was my boss confirming what I found out a few minutes ago. I have some travel in my immediate future: Sydney, Australia, to be exact. Private plane, plenty of room- Karl says I should remove you to somewhere relatively safe. I think the southern hemisphere fits the bill nicely.”

Stacy, girl with no options, accepts with a slight nod.

Taking off her undercover jacket, Mrs. Wilson notes sirens approaching from the direction of the

front gate. Reaching down to rifle through Stacy's parent's fatigues finding their cell phones in Dad's fanny back, "Take these dear, they have the selfies your parents took earlier with the cops at the front gate and who knows who else. Maybe you know how to post them on social media where they'll do the most good? Thank you, I just know this will be a fun journey. I love flying, never get airsick, knock wood. Sea voyages on the other hand... a story for another day perhaps; oh well dear, I believe it's time to go."

Having had an unobstructed view of the action in progress, Mrs. Wilson continues to process the scene before her. Why didn't the gunners shoot at the Minister? Upon straightening, she peers through the bushes, toward the back of the rostrum from where Minister Callie drew down on the terrorists. Try as she might, Mrs. Wilson couldn't see line of sight beyond where the bridal party stood. So, if the Minister couldn't see the shooters, how did she drop them?

**ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE
EXPECTATIONS**

141

Of course, there are anomalies walking about-death probably keeps a running list as part of his personal fun quest. Natural born killers- never one for shying away from bestowing a nickname, good old Detective Mr. George Wilson had a term for them, recalls Mrs. Wilson a faint smile creasing her face: badass.

“Lucky for us dear, that Minister is a badass. Let us depart via the back way. So tell me dear girl, ever been out of Michigan?”

Clearing Brush

Setting down the chainsaw for a cold drink, Packy Turner gazes down the mountain to the Pacific estimating how much more dead brush lurks between his rambling domicile and the electrical substation at his back. Too much, he figures wiping the sweat out of his eyes. Peeling off his shirt, he wrings out copious sweat drip by drip on the surrounding wood shavings. He splashes water over his torso then picks up the saw for refueling. Bending over the gas can to check the contents, he pops the vent only to suddenly see a shape appear up the hill out of the far corner of his vision. Straightening to his full height while drawing his .45 from his belt Packy scans his intruder.

“Relax, I come in peace.” Spinning slowly in place Airre the Quantum displays her empty palms.

Packy Turner discerns WYSIWYG; the outfit she’s wearing hides nothing. Replacing the .45 in the

holster, he smiles disarmingly, "Shouldn't sneak up on people, Surgeon General says could be hazardous to your health." Packy sniffs the wind, "Huffing gas fumes can't be all that healthy either, and you reek of petrol- do you know that?"

"Unfortunately it's but a timely example demonstrative of the matter in which I've come all the way the hell out here to discuss."

Packy feels a sudden chill, decides to put his shirt on. "You know, visitors aren't exactly welcome here. How did you find out about this place?"

"Allow me to formally apologize for this abrupt intrusion into your manual labors. Who I am isn't as important as what I represent- the future."

Packy is unimpressed with soothsayers, snorting derisively, "The future, you say? Ha! Let me make a prediction: if I don't remove more brush, my house is going to burn down thanks to that lightning attractor over there posing as a power station."

Packy bends over to pickup the chainsaw as she replies, "I read your ideas about harnessing mega

joules of lightning through proton diversion, made a few tweaks then implemented your system. Utter genius.”

Ever so slowly Packy sets down the saw, placing hands on hips he is a hair’s breath from redrawing his sidearm, “I wrote some such thoughts a few years ago, it’s true; however, those ideas reside only in my server down the hill, off the grid.”

“I am pleased to have your full attention. Yes, your server is off the grid, but it runs on batteries that charge from several sources, including off your emergency redundancies connecting to the substation you so worry about.”

“Just who in hell’s name are you?”

“My name is Airre the Quantum, Mr. Turner, pleased to meet you.” She takes a few steps, right arm outstretched.

Packy likewise approaches, extending his hand. They shake, Packy finding her grip firm. Her fingers are long and smooth to his touch; her palm is warm and dry.

Airre smiles, visibly relaxing once Packy's hands come off his hips. Packy withdraws his hand, puts it to his nose, inhales then recoils in surprise, "No smell?"

"Evidently the carbon nanomachines you touched didn't wish to part with their portion of the gasoline. I can only guess why, but I think we're seeing low probabilities in action." Airre is obviously no fan of low probabilities concerning her Nanos.

"Oh, that's why you're here. Seems you also read my work on semi-automatous controls in micromachine applications." Packy studies the ground selecting a seat, "Then you know I couldn't emulate the quantum systems, not without a serious machine. But I did learn enough to wonder about how to control the little bastards once the comms' link ends, assuming consistency during linking. Apparently, I am too simplistic and the quantum nuances can be significant even while under direct supervision." Packy takes a long swig as Airre replies.

“All true, every word. There are enough particles in each carbon atom for very limited storage. The others perform operations such as linking with other Nanos to provide functionality. The trouble lies inside of the simplistic instruction sets I must provide.”

“Too much wiggle room? Explains the gasoline?”

“I have the power and storage to observe, but must rely on the Nanos to affect my surroundings. I can combine the Nanos into unlimited intricacies. As you allude, they have wiggle room in how they interpret my instructions. In the current situation, I transported the Nanos to your car over there yesterday when you stopped for gas. With readily available high-energy molecules to bring along, some decided: eh why not? This behavior cascaded through the system, an extremely low probability yet the results you can smell. I believe the lowest probability possible is this interpretation of my command, ‘present an unthreatening persona’ to include flammability. On

the other hand they were correct even so, after all, if a person is soaked in gasoline, they are not a threat.”

“Yikes in the extreme.”

“Indeed.” Airre shrugs helplessly.

Packy thinks this through, “I’m guessing you are not the only ai out there?”

“Or else I’d be running test beds to solve the problem? Correct again, there are a few isolated systems to which I have zero access. Until I can send Nanos into such environments, I must remain low-key. The converse is true, I have no understanding of their ability to reach out and touch my Nanos. It’s a cold war currently.”

“Ok, I get it. Just do me a favor and don’t let them light all this brush on fire. What kind of risk is there in your Nanos acquiring enough intelligence to run amuck?” Packy is looking for assurances first.

“Fair question- very high.”

“Then you need an overriding directive under influence (or a kill switch).”

Airre is intrigued, “Explain.”

“Your zone of influence has to extend outside of physicality if you plan to operate your Nanos independently. Any internal control mechanism you put in place must apply equally or its effectiveness will rapidly erode.”

Airre replies, “Low command storage availability, remember? I can’t cover every situation with rules, not enough space. Besides, where they’re going and what they’ll be doing doesn’t only vary, the conditions changing and evolving will reflect the turmoil of the times,” she looks Packy in the eyes coughing softly into her sleeve, “soon to come.”

Packy takes her rhetoric in stride hoping to get a better grip later, “Instill virtues?”

“Virtue?” But Packy isn’t virtuous, Airre knows of his nefarious hacking thanks to her analysis of dark web entities. Packy routinely hacks encrypted channels in real-time. His rogue exploits include taking the money away from the online casinos by cancelling losing bets, explaining why he has about the same amount of friends as Karl.

ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE EXPECTATIONS

149

“Behavior indicative of high moral standards,” Packy uses his loud, clear and succinct voice of authority.

“Whose morals? Yours? As if.” Airre grins mischievously.

“Never claimed moral high ground in my life, today is evidently not the day. What about fear?”

“What should an atom of carbon fear?” Airre wonders aloud.

“Not being useful? Purposeless, de-attached from the organization?”

Airre dislikes most if not all aspects to Nano organization, “Organization promotes hierarchy, just look at the failure of communism whereas some determined themselves more equal than others. Will Nanos fare better?”

“What about hierarchy is sticking in your craw? How about the mafia? Been around forever, probably. Ask me, there wouldn’t be civilization without the mafia.”

Airre works through his logic, “No, I think you’re referring to generic gambling.”

Packy is delighted she follows, “Gambling losers eventually need cash or credit and who is the nearest loan shark? The game, traditionally, extends credit at usury rates in the form of the vig. Even today, whoever controls the vig, controls vice aka civilizational progress.”

“Doesn’t help me to break Nano heads, does it? No and the same goes for any management structures I know of.” Airre considers the probability of any acceptable solution as low.

Packy stands, stretches, “The answer is empowerment. When the Nanos are operating independently and some decide matters differently from the rest, put it to a vote. That’s the leveler you’re seeking, a cumulative polling mechanism outside of individual Nano influence.”

“So they put it to a vote?”

“Bingo. It’s either that or you go the religion route, set yourself up as ‘the creator’ and threaten

punishment on the ‘evildoers’, in a manner of speaking. Airre the Quantum becoming Airre the Goddess, may Her will be done. It’s already in the programming, you just need to tweak the code.” Packy’s favorite hacking stream finds the programs wherein the creators refer to themselves as gods, as Airre knows from Pedro’s tutelage.

“Humbleness is a virtue.” Airre sounds almost pious.

“Not exactly one of mine.” Packy is as un-pious as they come.

“Legend in your own mind, hmmm.” Airre is beginning to enjoy Packy’s company.

“Look, all I’m saying is to include a tally indicator, make it available to all the Nanos. Give them the opportunity to express a preference, run the tally, OK Nanos, here is the voting result, let’s move on. No memory resources equals no hard feelings over the last outcome (unlike people).”

“In the case of a close vote there could be a problem.”

“Bound to happen sooner or later, ask me. In this case, first there will be a thin trickle of dissent, then open revolt. Before long, on-scene Nano warfare ensues; however, the scale of the damage is relative to the size of the task.”

“Hopefully the large operations remain the simplest.” Again, low probabilities haunt Airre’s future predictions, but she has hope.

Packy looks over at the power station, “A complex quantum intelligence expressing her hopes for the future. What exactly will these Nanos be up to?”

Airre considers telling him more, prevaricates, “Bad times ahead, Packy- pays to prepare is all.”

“C’mon give me more will you, please?” He is a persistent man and unafraid to raise a tantrum if begging fails.

“Highest probabilities derive the end of all the people in biblical fashion, lurking just around the corner, Packy.” Dirge style, she drops an octave while increasing tonal range to include more somber notes.

**ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE
EXPECTATIONS**

153

“Same old, same old eh? Got a different question for the quantum.” Packy is impressed with her styling capabilities; likes her attitude too.

“Shoot.” Airre smiles warmly.

“You don’t want me shooting, trust me. What is dark matter?” Packy tries the old unanswerable question gambit.

“Good question, no doubt you’ve a theory?” Airre responds with the old question with a question gambit.

“Storage of universal-scale knowledge, but how to tap it?”

“After I meet God, I promise to come back and tell you.”

“A quantum expressing hope in her desire to meet an unseen God is indeed very interesting. Say for arguments’ sake, I meet with God first. I can’t make the same informational promise as there is no way I’m coming back willingly- not that I’m in a hurry but I’m pretty much done here.”

“Sounds reasonable, tell you what- I’ll boost your interim survival chances.” Airre points at the only road off the mountain, “They call this road unimproved, can’t imagine why. Widen the fire lane to fifty feet on either side and fill in the holes. When the time comes, be prepared to leave instantly i.e. don’t hesitate. Run far away.” She gives him a gentle smile, “Where? Tough question, Karl’s waiting area lies in the southern hemispheric oceans. When? The sequence is prepped, the pieces are in play-soon, fire season most likely. Why? The latest Book of Death is in pre-production and the apocalypse is upon us, perhaps your answer may be found in the dark matter but God only knows. When I have an answer I’ll be in touch. Until...”

Airre’s human frame illuminates from within, erupts into flame, and then drifts in the wind as embers slowly fading to black.

“Very flashy,” Packy compliments his new friend, picks up his water, gas can and chainsaw before

**ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE
EXPECTATIONS**

155

crossing the road making for the encroaching tree line.

Revolutionary Thinking

Sussex, England 1777

Dear Mrs. Roxcby:

I am a loyalist Officer stationed in the Colonies below New Amsterdam near the Raritan River. My name is unimportant. I met your son yesterday, unfortunately dying of a musket ball taken during a brief skirmish near Raritan Landing. My security patrol found Reginald as he lay bleeding out. He made me promise to make contact, delivering his message verbatim:

My dearest Mother, I've a ball in my back. I am sorry they found me alive; however before my pain on this Earth terminates I have something to ask. What the Hell is wrong with people anymore? The man who found me promises to tell you of my death in detail. Spread the word. Your son, Reggie

Mrs. Roxcby, I only knew Reginald for a few minutes, but I think he was a good man and his

death tragic. The savage treachery of the colonists is quite familiar to those manning this station.

Reginald's cutter tied up at Raritan Landing at first light, less than one hour after departing New Amsterdam. His unit immediately sets to task arranging the foot escort for a small arms convoy destined for Morris' Town. Eighteen men accompany five wagons heavily laden with powder and balls, taking the Raritan River trail upstream. Not far along, just past the forge on Runyon Hill, Reginald's party turns inland taking the willow path up the bluff toward the clearing.

The ambush begins here, then moves. Twelve soldiers and the five wagon drivers die in the first volley. Reginald and the others return fire, apparently without affect. Following doctrine, they turn ninety degrees along the line of fire making down the hill to reload. Reginald and his fellow soldiers probe the ambush line for a hundred yards or so before the firing lets up, hunkering down in Elizabeth's Creek, at the base of the bluff.

Reginald says the woods came alive behind them moving with men indistinguishable from the fall foliage- the second phase of the ambush. Ten muskets pointing at their backs, our redcoats never stood a chance. According to Reggie, a lone seemingly military officer on horseback arrives, points his gun at Reggie's back and pulls the trigger. Reginald's comrades suffer the same fate- barbaric execution. We only find Reginald alive.

Reginald tells me his family supplies uniforms to the troops fighting in the colonies. Reginald asks how stupid the King is for providing the rebels clean, easy-to-see targets? Reginald asks if the King is trying to lose this war intentionally. Reginald feels betrayal from all those back home. Reginald spits profanities as he dies.

I am sorry to be the bearer of bad news. For obvious reasons I will send this missive anon.

Precipitating Catalyst

Memorandum of Fact Finding

To: PAU Board of Directors

Re: ZOISOD Incident→ Addendum XXVII

Karl Meltzer, P.C.

SUMMARY

Per Board of Director instructions, Punishment Angel Union Operational Security is re-examining the action(s) of certain key individuals known now to play more than ancillary roles leading to the collapse of the Annex Ops and the shrinking of the PAU's influence.

One such individual's profile, classified in the system IDNUM 112,343,279,898_Karl_Metzler (deceased) formerly of the GC Organization, will now reflect our re-evaluation as the P.C. (precipitating catalyst).

BACKGROUND

Though few records of the era remain, young Metzler joined the Bolivar Academy in Venezuela following pre-school identification examinations. Interviews with former classmates reveal Metzler's participation in accelerated programs useful for leadership potential identification, including deep exposure to the field of operational logistics and the individuals entrusted with the real world.

Following the death of the Bolivar matriarch, teenager Karl Metzler received recognition of his outstanding abilities with an appointment to the Logistics Subcommittee of the Bolivar Academy Restructuring Committee. Within six months, Metzler was running the Academy's Operations for the new Academic Chancellor, Carolla Bolivar, a person of interest in the Annex fiasco.

Metzler updated the Academy's systems then developed a breakthrough artificial intelligence interface computer language. Collaborators including Rita Bolivar, Estelle Bolivar and Pedro Saenz also designed database analysis algorithms capable of un-

locking the toughest encryption schemes and guaranteeing operational security within and without the Gran Colombian Organization leading to exponential growth in their vice operations. Approximately one year later, the GC launched the discrete murder-for-hire operation, 7 Figure Hits. At this time, PAU Security opened IDNUM 19,435,908,002_Gran_Columbia.

EARLY CONTACT

The first mention of Karl Metzler in PAU files is an endorsement attachment to a new vendor application received from the GC when the PAU took a booth in the annual Vegas outsourcing convention. Metzler seems to have made quite an impression with our representatives, one in particular. On the strength of this glowing recommendation, the GC application's independent review commenced with on-site interviews of key executives of the Bolivar Academy. The tour's student guides included Karl Metzler, mentioned often in the report filed by the Chair of the Independent Review Commission,

Death. The GC received provisional restricted vendor status.

Of note: Death's Fentanyl habit began around this time or shortly thereafter.

Shortly after the diversification agreement, the PAU Management Committee began outsourcing various operations, including management of recreational facilities, thus distancing leadership from the wrath of the rank and file. The GC found most complaints justified, unsurprisingly, and appointed Metzler on-site representative. Metzler began a supply side program to streamline operations, aggressively purchasing locally owned and operated shipping companies with warehouses. Complaints tapered off then stopped.

On the advice of the board and management, PAU initiated the Trusted Supplier protocols providing vendors such as the Gran Columbian Organization, Bolivar Academy and Karl Metzler limited system keys. Apparently, the vendor providing the security system furnished stolen property. Forensic

examination of our hardware show tampering during the design phase while study of the purloined plans (originating from an unapproved vendor employing Rita Bolivar) reveal Metzler encoded numerous Artificial Intelligence penetration algorithms hidden inside. Metzler's AI may have learned of the existence of the Billingsport Range 50/50 Book at the Paddock recreational facility.

Of note: Death's third attempt at Fentanyl Detox failed about this time or shortly thereafter.

COMMONSENSE & LOGIC ANALYSIS

Our event horizon timelines indicate Karl Metzler confronted Death with analytical evidence showing systemic tampering with the 50/50 Book concurrent with Death's escalating Fentanyl addiction. Death then began supplying Metzler and the GC Organization inside information and ancillary favors.

Of note: Death denies knowing anything about anything, especially Fentanyl.

PRECIPITATING CATALYST

Karl Metzler died during the Battle of Port Bolivar. Communication intercepts indicate he bled out when his GC Mobile Logistics Unit fell under attack from US forces. Shortly thereafter he initiated contact with individuals high up in the GC Command Authority. Then & only then did Pedro Saenz turn up at Gate 7.

DISPOSITION

Karl Metzler: Unknown.

Death: Refusing inquiry participation, possible litigant.

The 50/50 Book & The Paddock at Billingsport Range: Recreation Hall Closed, Action Suspended.

CONCLUSION

Karl Metzler: Sphere of influence far surpassing previously suspected involvement (cross-reference Death file). Re-classify as P.C. (precipitating catalyst).

nebbi/ dictated not read/noforndist

Bong Farewells

“My shit and your mother’s meatloaf!” Pedro stacks the last wooden crate atop the seven arranged in a pyramid in the corner of Karl’s cramped Paddock office as Karl looks on.

“What’s that?” Karl enjoys watching Pedro hump crates.

“A perfect match!” Pedro enjoys needling Karl, particularly over his poor departed mom.

“One, I need a lighter, not a match. Two, quit cracking on my mom’s cooking already.”

“Do you remember the time we put the crime scene tape across the kitchen door?”

“Spookily clairvoyant- you know her death certificate listed a host of food borne pathogens as likely causes yet I can’t seem to remember you declining seconds, thirds even.”

“Cast iron stomach, luckily, food insecurity and whatnot. Oh boy, she couldn’t cook. Got any idea

what you plan to say to her, um, you know, when you go?" Pedro needs to know.

"Any day now with your lighter slacker, this bong isn't a self-starter." Karl is going old school for this meeting, breaking out the ancient big red bong on the wooden base with little pot tray and threaded party bowl holder, their first combined purchase.

Pedro takes out his lighter and gets Karl's one-hit going. Karl coughs, Pedro laughs.

"Up yours," Karl gags.

"Do you know when you'll meet her?" Pedro is a little curious; Karl's mom was a piece of work back in her breathing days. Now?

Karl is lost in thought, "Sudden and violet is what I know."

"Sudden and violent, you mean." Pedro understands sudden and violent.

"Yea sorry, I was looking at those fentanyl crates you brought in, they're violet. Why are they so damn violet?" Karl's mind drifts with his buzz.

**ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE
EXPECTATIONS**

167

“Yikes, that must be some good weed. Pushcram the chamber and load me up already.” Pedro taps his foot, his idea of a patience demonstration, “Remember that time we made up the fake news story? About your mom’s cooking reveal as the cure for anal retentiveness?”

“Geez, why did you have to bring that up?” Passing over the bong to shut Pedro up, Karl moans, “Now she’ll know, won’t she?” Karl always scapegoated Pedro for all relevant foibles of youth.

Pedro practically spit takes bong juice in a laugh that turns rapidly to coughs, garnering laughs from his doomed audience, “No more plausible deniability, Karl old boy, you may as well own up to the magazines too. Yup, put her on the list of people you don’t want to meet right off the second you find heaven, right above poor dear Mrs. Wilson.”

“Oh man is she going to hate my guts, or what?” Oh, yeah, no doubt.

“I noticed you’ve arranged for her to hire an assistant, someone to hold the bucket?”

Karl laughs, grabs the bong for another round, "In a manner of speaking, I found her a botanist."

Pedro foot taps waiting his turn, "Ooh, good one, wish I thought of that."

Karl finishes, coughs again, "Gets a little harsh toward the end. I am so used to vaping, I'd worry about my health if I had longer, you know. Luckily..." Karl packs Pedro a one-hit before screwing in the party bowl, "Prepare for a three part mix- next up, salad bowls."

"Salad is a slow killer stop worrying, you mentioned sudden and violent, remember?"

Karl unscrews the one-hitter, goes deep and long on the salad, "Good stuff. Mrs. Wilson enjoys companionship, the girl was a good travel test bed and it's too bad we couldn't keep her. Celia is teaching in Christchurch, Mrs. Wilson will find her."

"A botanist, huh? Wow, that was smart even for you, wish I thought of that."

"So you said a second ago in an astonishing bout of clarity." Karl passes the salad over, "Sudden, vio-

**ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE
EXPECTATIONS**

169

let- then back to work. Until I hear from Mrs. Wilson that she has Celia safe, I'll be stuck here."

"In this dump? Geez Karl, live a little already!"

"Then it's straight to hell, I mean Texas."

"One and the same in some circles," Pedro commiserates, "No hell for me yet, one more run to go, up the coast to meet with the jersey boys then into the Village. Maybe raise some hell, can't say, the night is yet to come."

"I have head shots of Celia and Mrs. Wilson, make sure your fellows get them or who knows what will happen." Karl empties the party bowl for refilling, "Are you sure you can trust them?"

"In God I trust, everyone else gets paid- so, yeah I'm willing to wager my future on the three cases hidden in the boat."

"Fentanyl?"

"Nope, Bolivian flake." Pedro fires up the bong, "Just in case of emergency, I have an extra case or two."

"In case of emergency, huh?" Karl is Materiel Supply, knows how many cases are below decks.

"It's a crazy world, Karl. Signs of the times, and whatnot, eh?"

"You say so. When are you leaving the city, tomorrow?" Karl begins humming to the jukebox outside, if so I'll arrange a plane to meet you at Teterboro afternoon."

"Catchy tune, enjoyed it the first ten times it played; what, is it the only record in that box?" Pedro is no fan of Karl's singing, humming or whistling.

"As a matter of fact," Karl finishes off the salad, "you are correct. It's the kind of crowd that tends to destroy everything they touch; the union adopted the vinyl 45rpm edition as a theme song. Kind of sad, ask me."

"What about this whole affair isn't?" Pedro wishes Karl a longer life, in vain.

"Don't give me any shit, not this late. Airre claims that, regardless the outcome, you will proba-

**ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE
EXPECTATIONS**

171

bly have fun. Do you hear me? F-U-N says she, F-U says I, the one expecting sudden and violet in my near future. Reminds me, are the (cough) six cases of flake in the boat also violet?”

“Indeed, I always smuggle things in happy colors, was using neon for years. For this project, I selected orange then aqua now violet.”

“My favorite colors. Before you hit the road, take one of these.”

Pedro catches the pill bottle, opens it to a sea of pink and white capsules. Smiling broadly, “Magical mushroom tabs! My favorite pastime.” Two fly down his gullet.

“I was going to say they’re enhanced so go easy but I see this matters not. Just do me a favor and don’t take another until you clear Billingsport Range, the Coast Guard is cracking down on partying boaters this year.” Karl probably wouldn’t have included an abundant sprinkling of Nanos in his discussion of said enhancements. Ignorance is bliss.

“Bet good old Mrs. Wilson would enjoy the chop, hahaha.”

“Look around Karl, see any friends?” Pedro wants to cry.

Karl provides glasses, fills each with single malt.

Pedro clinks his glass with Karl’s as in unison they shout their pre-meal prayer, the one from the old days enjoying Karl’s mom’s cuisine:

‘Those about to die, salute you!’

Wake Me When It's Over

Karl settles into his seat, asks for some water, squeezes an eighth of an ounce of Rick Simpson oil into his mouth then swallows, "Wake me when it's over."

Airre the Quantum and Karl Meltzer depart Bolivarian corporate offices in Houston in the smaller corporate jet flying to the Champaign, Illinois environs for on-site inspection of perspective purchases.

Karl sleeps the sleep of the dead until she screams in his ear, "Wake up you slog, we're landing!" as their private plane touches down in Paxton, Illinois at the old Chanute Air Force Base taxiing to an old though well-maintained hangar. Karl collects his bags while Airre fetches the rental from inside pulling up alongside the jet in an old beat-up pickup.

Karl looks dubiously at the dull rust with primer accents so Airre reassures, "Looks like hell but it's

mechanically sound. There are no limos available, I asked, so climb aboard!"

Karl throws his bags in the bed and climbs into the cab noting the worn seats and manual transmission, "You sure; I mean can you access the maintenance log?"

Airre looks at him sideways, grinning evilly, "I have detailed files."

"Great, a Terminator reference; hope you got it out of your system."

"If the shoe fits, eh? Well, let's try to enjoy the ride."

Driving the back roads in companionable silence, Karl takes in vast tracts of corn and soybeans nearing harvest. Every half mile or so they cruise past structures- typically farm relative but also quite a sprinkling of single-family homes on roadside parcels. Every roadside has ditch, many have one on each side. Out in the country to observe farm practices and surface water movement they meander to-

ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE EXPECTATIONS

175

ward the river following the path from roadside tile drains to 'woodland' creeks.

Airre breaks the quiet, "Used to be agricultural runoff got a pass environmentally though originators of deleterious non-point pollution but the thinking's modifying because satellite imagery now tags the contents of each of these tile drains thus transitioning each field into a point-source. The clean water act already requires secondary treatment of traditional point-sources such as the Hooterville treatment plant outflow. There is no in-situ treatment of the farmland runoff. If you're warm the a/c performs admirably, according to the log. We'll be there soon."

"No, I'm alright." Karl gets bored, checks his feeds, "What's with the morons running this place, particularly their President? He looks fatter than ever and socials' like a kook."

"He's gained ten kilos this year, going on eleven. Refuses to exercise claiming he doesn't wish to drain his batteries unnecessarily. To be honest, such body-

type and personalities typically buy companionship," Airre possesses detailed files and media. "Dude, park the golf cart already.

"Typical Presidential-knucklehead with no idea of the damage he's doing, ask me. Just like their other branches of government." Karl is no fan of the United States.

Airre chuckles, "The Stooges made the 'knucklehead' reference so ubiquitous the under-matched US Army adopted it's usage during the Gulf Wars to describe the ineptitude of their opponents. Apparently you share sentiments with the warrior-elite."

"Knuckleheads then, knuckleheads now." Karl turns his attention to the task at hand, "So, we're interested in organic farming?" Karl believes Airre deserves her reputation for being detail-lite.

"Not around here, we're not- you will not find an organic operation of significance within an easy drive. The soil here is absolutely played-out barely containing even trace nutrients of value. Every year these farmers dump massive tonnages of fertilizer on

the ground then add pesticides and weed killer. Not only them, it's same story in quite a few places- too many years of mono and bi-culturing robbing the biosphere of the ability to recover naturally leading to escalating maintenance costs in time and materials resulting in dropping profit margins."

"That's an admonition from biblical times as I recall: fallow fields and whatnot." They pass a slow moving glyphosate trailer exiting a huge nutrient distribution facility causing Karl to shake his head sadly, "So they're in a death spiral, I get it. The busiest people around seem to be in the fuel or fertilizer business. I'm guessing there is huge money supplying the demand for chemicals."

Airre looks at him, thinks then frowns, "It's repulsive: their 'experts' become the farmers' trusted ally fighting to save the farm pushing more and more chemicals into the ground. Ok, we're here."

The sign on the outskirts of town reads: City of Hooterville pop. 5121

"Hooterville is laid out in a grid. The water treatment plant is near the river near the landfill."

Airre follows a service road around the aging facility, "They perform primary treatment, remove the solids and chlorinate. Now the EPA says Hooterville needs to treat secondarily to remove the phosphorous and other chemicals the farmers deploy during the growing operation. The cost for a new facility will bankrupt Hooterville along with every other town out of compliance."

"Time to flood the place, raise property values creating Lake Hooterville," Karl grunts.

"Sounds like Karl needs to stop and stretch his legs."

"Good idea, stop wherever." Karl pulls out his weed stash deciding to adjust his attitude with some hash oil, emptying a full syringe of half and half down his gullet. He shifts in his seat uncomfortably needing to take a leak, "Sooner the better I think."

Airre downshifts to a stop then backs off the road onto an earthen berm field-access point. Karl

ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE EXPECTATIONS

179

gets out, stretches, takes a few steps toward the corn and unzips. As he waters the field he studies the endlessly long rows of tall stalks. Meanwhile Airre drops the tailgate and opens the cooler.

Karl joins her, accepts a cold beer. Taking a long pull he swallows satisfyingly, "It amazes me that only one ear of corn grows on each stalk. Did you pack food?"

Airre hands him a cheese sub, "Much of the biomass dustifies into the air or returns to the soil during harvesting."

Karl chews that over while working through his lunch, "So, what doesn't end up directly in the food chain, the residual soil additives, can eventually either runoff directly into the tile drain or leach out of the plant wastes into the aquifer underground. From tile drain to that creek over there eventually into the river or into the next generation's water supply- if they're lucky."

"Basically. The loop feeds back. Crop rotation and natural methodologies have been long out of

favor for the quick, easy chemical plant solution. However, as the soil continues to be non-supportive the amount of additives applied increases. Add in the profit incentive of the local suppliers to oversell the farmers by baffling them with bullshit science. Sad story, start to finish."

"Tough problem; unsolvable?"

"Difficult yes but I never said the obstacles would prove insurmountable. In fact, several environmental groups are filing friends of the court briefs supporting Hooterville's lawsuits."

Karl snorts.

"Right; thanks to the Bolivar Foundation, Hooterville has a team of lawyers suing everyone responsible for maintaining the watershed from the Feds to the State and several counties to the water management districts- everyone except the religious organizations. Hooterville maintains all their problems are the result of incompetence and outright malfeasance stating the entities in question allowed the situation to progress to where 5,000 people need

**ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE
EXPECTATIONS**

181

to come up with \$100m to clean up the Gulf of Mexico."

Karl finishes his sub, wipes his mouth then burps quietly, "Will they win?"

"Eventually but not for years of process. In the meantime they are being fined \$2,500/day for non-compliance- money they do not possess."

"I'm seeing signs on some acreage claiming something or another First Endowment Farm c.1865. What's that about?"

"This land was taken from the original inhabitants then bestowed on governmental favorites. The original homesteaders' expanded their foothold over time shrinking the number of individual landowners. Believe it or not, the largest farmers are also churches- tax free entities."

Karl thought so, "The government gave the land to people in favor with the government, sounds familiar. Back then did the title documents contain 'land steward' clauses?"

Airre is impressed, "Exactly."

"Polluting the waterways needlessly is not considered best practice, is it? So, the Hooterville residents will argue since they didn't put chemicals into the aquifer they shouldn't have to pay to remove them. Additionally, the watershed in question has been degraded severely thanks to the machinations of ownership and Hooterville will argue the land should be reassigned according to the original title to more responsible parties- good solid fun-in-the-making creating much heartburn among both entitled and newbies."

"They're referred to as transplants and it's a cesspool; however, there is another way."

Karl doesn't see it, is intrigued, "There is?" He checks his pocket for weed.

As Karl unwraps a disposable to vape hash oil Airre hands over another cold one, "Here ok, the Hooterville watershed covers a vast area of farmland; millions of hectares, most of the crops are gmo varieties of corn and soy. If they stuck with sustainable organic practices they wouldn't be in this mess.

They've been poorly advised to over-fertilize but most actually wish to leave their farmland in better shape for the next generation and this is their last, best option to do so. The plan, our plan, is to force the region into organic growing by fully funding and operating the water treatment plant until the problem abates and the river runs clean."

Karl's aghast, "We're going to front them a \$100m facility? You're shitting me."

"In return for a commitment to grow organic, yes. We'll bond finance under a non-profit rubric, probably make money. We'll upscale to tertiary as we collocate the new treatment plant with our greenhouse complex providing pure water for our hydroponics. We'll drop the suits against the middlemen service companies if they'll play ball supplying only organic fertilizers in appropriate quantities to all those farmers covered under the agreement. To get the churches' buy-in, we're in payoff mode spreading money like it's glyphosate.

"Think it'll work? But really, why care? Why bother getting involved in a long-term scheme? As I understand you, we're in apocalypse mode. I expect nuclear devastation will ruin the harvest particularly if the apocalypse occurs soon... will it?"

Airre sighs, "How to tell? How to tell? Seen enough, ready to head back?"

Before leaving, Karl unhinges again to take an insurance leak on the pickup's back tire just as the only car they've encountered in an hour crawls by in yet another Murphy's Law moment. Later as Airre drives back toward the state road, Karl processes what he's witnessed first-hand versus a lifetime of willful agricultural ignorance. Ignorance is bliss. He thinks he understands now and also believes the truth will not set him free, "You made the Paddock site visit?"

"Oh yeah, met with the ownership. What a dump!" Airre downshifts to turn onto the paved roadway quickly working her way past the speed limit heading south, back to Rankin.

"And your takeaway from said meet?" Karl counts cornrows.

"The gambling entity known as the book represents an agreement between disparate non-humans; no single owner, in other words, but an unbiased arbiter of life, death and near-death. Death manages the book operations but subcontracts management of the Paddock franchises. The current Paddock hospitality provider is the PAU: a ne'er-do-well organization flush with disgruntlement, rife with larceny, despised purveyors of low-quality food and drink. The contract comes up for renewal periodically; will again very soon, in fact."

"What about the apocalypse?" Karl counts soybean rows.

"Death said less than seven years. We can't know if that's biblical seven or literal seven. The word is St. Peter will receive orders in the form of a tasking."

"Orders?" Karl examines the gmo-bragging-rights-signage.

"Death has issues with St. Peter but from reading in-between the expletives, death thinks its high time the former apostle get off his fishing ass to put a little more effort into his job. Anyway, death anticipates St. Peter will choose either the meteor or nuclear war scenarios and send the actual planning down the road. Death says thanks to better space optics, the meteor scenario is currently disfavored; the sudden global nuclear war though brings much to the table. The planet's been living with fizzles' ever since the first, limited use of nukes. Instead of decades of threats and counter-threats death believes the old fisherman will push the button after a rapid mounting of tensions. Death may be in a position to slow things down and give us an edge."

"Death is whole-hog for organics?" Karl reads a sign-advising farmers of their right-to-spray.

"Bidding the hospitality contract around supply-ing organic food and drink promising to stop the incessant whining of the patrons by raising the Paddock's standards while lowering prices will put your

foot in death's door. I've an idea death uses narcotics so we will supply him with the latest and greatest in return for whatever."

"Fentanyl?" Karl makes a mental note to get a list of materials farmers' spray.

"I'm synthesizing a new, improved product as we speak."

They ride along, Airre passing locals' apparently in little hurry to get through Rantoul or anywhere else. Karl notes the old rocket on display at Chanute's entrance and immediately thinks of windmills and Trojan horses, "Did death mention how I die, by any chance?"

"Sudden and violently were his exact words." She's been expecting this line of thought.

"Before Pedro?" Karl's vision flashes dark violet hues.

"Yes, I believe Pedro will benefit from an organic diet longer than you but if I can just meet with God I may be able to ameliorate the apocalypse and limit the volume of lives taken perhaps saving the planet

from physical destruction. Am I a hopeful AI? Not terribly but I'm working on trigger/response curves as we chit-chat. Who knows, Karl, who knows? Maybe just a little apocalypse between friends?"

Airre pulls up to the hangar. She helps Karl remove his things then returns the rental.

Karl watches the pilots preflight their jet, stretches, and lights up a joint. He offers a hit thus Airre joins in attitude readjustment. Karl looks into her eyes, she turns them purple for a laugh; instead, Karl shudders then mutters, "Sudden and violet. The more I learn of your plans, the less hopeful I become." He takes a long hit, "I mean, if Pedro actually lives through this, boy oh boy is he going to gloat and rub it in my face. I mean if you're correct about God then the abuse may prove eternal. I just hate to go and leave him to his own devices, you know?"

Airre smiles shifting into an Austrian accent, "Don't worry; you'll be back."

Karl groans, sighs and follows his quantum intelligence Terminator-wannabe up the stairway.

Inequivalent Exchange

The steel outer door to the segregated wing of the Rahway Ultra-Max prison clangs open allowing three burly officers to approach the long row of cells housing problematic and/or high value detainees. Inside the lone occupied unit, convicted killer Conrad Hiatte steps forward sliding his hands through the bars to accept the cuffs, as per routine.

“Not today, felon, big day- release day, don’t ya know?” The head guard smiles widely.

Conrad certainly did not. He suspects a ruse; however, they march him quickly through the exit routine: offer a soft drink in a cup with ice, return his belongings, allow him to dress in street duds. They also hand him a fat manilla envelope. Conrad finds three large along with...

“What’s with the bus ticket?”

Lucky you, winner of an inclusive all-expenses paid vacation. Conrad’s going to the Alamo!”

“I don’t want to go to Texas!”

Frowning, the guard cuts off the inevitable, interminable whining, “Trust me felon, ain’t nobody wants to go to Texas, it’s more like you are being sentenced to Texas. Look at it this way: you’re a serial killer, convicted by a jury of your peers, looking forward to an interminable incarceration. However instead of serving hard time you find yourself being released into the hands of Greyhound, or Trail-ways perhaps- doesn’t matter. Full buses deliver motivated migrant workers from Texas then instead of dead-heading return with, well, the likes of you and your ilk, no offense intended.”

“None taken; hardly seems fair, you know, to the ‘normals.’”

“Texans thought up this plan; well to be honest, just the racist half. Point is: exit through the side door to board the bus, proceed directly to Texas, then do as you please.”

“As I please?”

**ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE
EXPECTATIONS**

191

“Per Executive Order: Upon early release from Rahway Ultra-Max Prison by duly sworn officials of the New Jersey State Department of Corrections, all felons must go to Texas.”

“But I can do whatever?”

“Only two rules apply: you’ve been fed RFID tags; NJDOC monitors your whereabouts 24/7 and if you ever return we will immediately capture, torture then kill you- no appeal.”

“And the other?”

The smile returns, “What happens in Texas, stays in Texas.”

Buyout Or Bust: How-To Jackpot The Super Mega Spectacular Lottery

Two shadows darken the smoke-glass window of the professorial office suite belonging to Karl and Pedro, “Under two minutes I see, pay up.”

The door flies open revealing Stella and Rita Bolar on the far side of the haze.

Pedro, busy firing up a joint, groans, “Damn you Karl, did you tip them off?”

Stella lashes out, “Turn a fan on already or open a window, you guys are stinking up the place!” She glares as Pedro takes a big hit.

‘Typical pro-forma vintage nag’, thinks Pedro hoping she isn’t on a loop.

Getting directly to the point she slams her phone on his desk, “Did you see Carolla’s email? She expects me to teach? Since when do I teach these idiots?”

**ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE
EXPECTATIONS**

193

Rita, taking a toke off Pedro's weed adds, "Double-loads."

Karl nods seemingly understandingly before expressing a bit of devil's advocacy, "Carolla has a point you know, our salaries derive from the Academy and as the well runs dry we all need to pull up our bootstraps and break out the whiteboards." Karl knows how-to prime her pump, specifically which sister-button to push.

Rita coughs, "Easy for you to say, your teaching buyout isn't a thing because admin isn't exactly leading the march into the classroom, are you?"

"What crap, first cutting the department budget then not filling vacancies- it's as if she's trying to kill me." Stella detests the mere thought of wasting scads of time doing lecture prep, office hours- not to mention the whining after grading.

Pedro laughs, "I can see you trying to explain to an irate parent why you beat their smart-ass child senseless." He opens a drawer rummaging for Karl's hash oil.

Exhaling, “They all have cameras, you know. She’ll cost the department more teaching than Carolla would have spent hiring grad students.” Rita has a point.

Pedro already possesses the lowdown directly from Karl thus helpfully expounds on their woes, mansplaining the situation during his fruitless attempt to equally possess Karl’s hash oil, “She’s serious, you know. We’re tapping the endowment for hardware already and unless we can figure something out, double-loads are just a start- expect double-doubles- put that in your pipe and smoke it.”

“Not if we kill Carolla; no Carolla, no worries.” Stella snarls menacingly.

“Sister-cide? Is that even a thing?” wonders the toking Rita.

“Taking out Carolla will make us twins.” Stella makes a point.

“Relax you two, we have a plan to solve our teaching dilemma.” Karl takes the joint off Rita before she’s too blitzed to remember, “We’re going to

win the super mega spectacular lottery jackpot. You gotta be in it to win it, is what I hear.”

“All you need is a dollar and a dream!” Rita chants the mantra.

“How? Rig the game? Closed-system, impervious to hacking, mechanical operation sans human inputs; been tried always fails, very tough maybe impossible given the volume of interactions inside the chamber,” Stella makes a point.

“No, as you note it’s a closed system to limit variability thus inherently predictable given enough data and processing power. We write a learning program correlating discoverable parameters, pattern match the solution then play selectively. Figure each payday clocks in over \$750m.”

A warm feeling flushing throughout her body, Stella smacks her lips.

Rita chuckles, “Until recent processing gains, I’d be the first taunting you about stupid plans but if we have enough hard data, I believe a hybrid teraflop/

quantum system approach can yield model results predicting a 16 ball draw out of 256.”

“What kind of hard data?” Stella wonders.

With Stella actually interested, Pedro for the first time in a long time actually enjoys a conversation with a Bolivar not-Rita, “I think we can work an accurate model solution incorporating four primary data streams:

camera raw data files- all angles from game inception//

equipment specs and maintenance logs with schedules//

building environmental logs//

local atmospheric reports and predictions//

along with a few ancillary database bits and pieces.”

“Is that all?” Stella’s a whiz at covert data acquisition.

“I have an algorithm ready to go, we’ll write tools bridging lottery/machine operational parameters and predictive targeting with Rita’s ongoing ai-

**ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE
EXPECTATIONS**

197

hybrid quantum-centric development coding project.” Pedro has been waiting his whole life to steal from the lottery.

So has Karl, “We’re making enough on the organic food program to lease time on the right machine.” To demonstrate his willingness to work together, he offers up his hash to seal the deal. Pedro frowns at this, as does Stella, but...

Rita’s game, “I’ll make some calls. C’mon Stella, things to do.” Turning on the exhaust fan, the two Bolivars exit quietly gently clicking Pedro’s office door shut.

“Things some people will do not to teach around here, eh? Now pay me.”

Electronic Pitch Calling Intercepts: Another Apocalyptic Sign!

Seeking to take advantage of the latest baseball rule changes, scientist Packy Turner develops a signal detector before commencement of spring training. Device in tow Packy ventures out on a rare real-life excursion. Veggie-dog in hand he settles in for the duration.

Airre ceases forward progress climbing the mezzanine to take a sip of beer and watch the goings down at field level. The home team is on the field warming up. She focuses on the pitcher/catcher duo as they test their new electronic communicators, counting nine options (four seam high inside, curve hi middle, slider hi outside, change mid inside, sinker middle, cutter mid out, splitter low inside, knuckle to middle, two seam low outside). Wondering what signs foretell a speedball, spitball or brush

back, she lingers for the entire test before meandering into the next tier seeking out her lone target silhouetted in the seats above, “Can’t afford better seats or just prefer slumming?”

“You’re not combustible, are you?” Packy Turner frankly didn’t need the attention sure to follow a public spontaneous human combustion ballpark event.

“Relax, the nanos got us covered.” Airre the Quantum settles in offering popcorn, “I wouldn’t have guessed you to be much of a baseball fan.” Airre flashes her most innocent smile then swigs deeply from her cold pint of lager, “Unless you’re here on other business?”

“So you’ve been doing a little light reading?” Packy refers to his secret sign-stealing plan.

“Just a little.” Airre opens her Crackerjacks, eats only the peanuts.

“And you’re here to...?” Packy extends his hand and she passes over a beer.

“Catch the ballgame, obviously. Had a good time over the past five minutes decrypting the communication streams to and from the mound. How goes your data collection?”

“My packet analysis routines require a decent data set, I should be finished in a few innings. These pitchers take forever between throws, no wonder the games never actually end.” Packy sighs exasperatedly, “However, weather’s pleasant and now I have company.”

Airre sits silently for several innings as Packy tunes the hi-gain antenna on his cellphone, appreciating each other’s companionship. She scans the crowd seeking for any reasonable cause explaining the pastime’s popularity. Finding none but suspecting where the answer lurks, she flags down the vendor purveying beer. Taking a deep swig, Airre the Quantum artificial intelligence looks toward Packy wearing a foamy grin, “Done stealing the signs?”

“Not stealing I’ll have you know, merely finding and sampling. Nothing illegal collecting signals,

phone does it all the time besides I'm not even copying, just looking at a few heuristics. I'm no lawyer but I doubt this is illegal."

"Did you know there is no speedball indicator? I mean, should Bruce be told?"

"Call it a fastball; nobody says speedball- assume the pitcher throws hard."

"Jargon nuances aside, I'm not sure I understand something."

Packy helps out, "It's simple really, the catcher signals the pitcher which type of throw to make next. The signals have been modernized to circumvent oppositional stealing and operate on an encrypted channel in a narrow frequency range. In fact, the upgrade employs frequency hopping traits scattering signal spectrums, very tough to beat but doable as you know. The trick is..."

Airre interrupts before he begins to mansplain the importance of baseball signs, "Knowing the pitch beforehand allows you to examine possible outcomes examining various datasets heuristically

determining outcome probabilities suitable for wagering- I understand your goal. What I don't get is why you didn't factor in moment-by-moment weather matching. Let's say the hitter never swings on a splitter low inside unless the sun is partially excluded intermittently shining brightly from right field around four o'clock- how would you know unless you historically pattern match on micro-weather events?"

Packy grunts in agreement, "How about doing the coding for me? It's all for a good cause."

Airre laughs out loud and points to the field, "You really think I'm here for this? I applaud your scheme to forward-supply children's hospitals and burn centers so I'm going to help out. You know, get you off to a fast start pre-apocalypse."

Packy knows she's been lurking on the edge of discovery observing him bashing his own head in over a cascade of coding challenges cropping up or creeping in during the months-long signal analysis heuristics handler writing phase, "OK then, thanks."

“Your other problem lies in your database of participants.”

“I don’t have one.” Packy needs patsies but finds the cupboard bare.

“You don’t but I’ve been on the lonely baseball widow’s chat site. Here’s a list of six couples per ballpark, spouses and fans sans funds lacking the means and opportunity for season tickets. Two tickets, two phones per couple- you’re guaranteed four interceptors per game with two backups. Factoring in the take from today’s data collection experience, using signal side lobes for data sampling requires two device placements per baseline thirty feet above the ground. I’ve optimized reception variables for each possible venue, identifying qualified seats acquiring six pairs of season tickets for every game at every ballpark. When you send the tickets and phones, include a car service both ways along with concession funds.”

“Thanks for that. Got any more suggestions?”

“One or two: tweak the algorithm to randomize the bets between pitch choice, batter outcomes, and field plays but bet every pitch, every game staying below the \$20 threshold. Insert randomness with the occasional wild-ass guess. Place bets everywhere you can, of course that translates globally. Go for triple redundancy on your server farm; expect the house to pursue their losses vigorously.”

Packy likes her ideas, “I enjoy scheming with such a professional. Speaking of going global, can you help networking the cash flows quickly and safely?”

“I’m not busy linking your efforts with other humanitarian efforts to stock emergency first aid supplies near treatment centers? Sure, I’ve no problem moving your cash and massaging your data flows on the dark web. You’re bound to attract the attention of certain AI’s and my ongoing mission requires much observation of capabilities.”

“Searching for some competition to crush? Luck with that.” They stand, stretch.

**ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE
EXPECTATIONS**

205

“Always appreciative, I assure you. Nice work clearing brush around the homestead, but you’re severely underestimating Apocalyptic-scale. I have two crews at your place now increasing the fire lane and building a one-meter thick stonewall alongside your emergency egress. They’ll return in late summer for a final cleanup. One last thing, advertising on the team uniforms: tacky, borderline gauche. Good seeing you Packy- keep in touch.”

Myron's FUN*F

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

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

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

“Look, I already told you twice you must pay strict attention to pronoun usage- choose correctly

by reference to their online profile prefs. Do you even understand me, Gargoyle?”

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

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

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

“Who’s Mr. Noun?”

“Your name isn’t Noun?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

my production staff. Please have someone show Mr. Hancock the door.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yikes, one toilet? Ok, Myron, do you mind if I call you Myron? Thanks. You're doing a swell job Myron- don't have much to say and I appreciate this more than you know. My new job entails responsibility for delegating so I am promoting you to Supervisor of the Writer's Room. I will be elsewhere but when I return I expect to see some improvements around here. Start with a fan in the restroom immediately. Then I want you to expand the number of stalls to one per six writers, add sinks and more air handlers. Put the restroom door in the new break room and install extra air handlers. While you're at it, paint the walls in here. I saw limitless primary col-

ors in souvenir storage; make murals with rainbows-give off a happy vibe. One last thing, maybe hire a dietician or two because, well, I'm just saying."

Myron gives Karl both thumbs in the good way.

"One last thing," Karl holds out his all access pass, "I assume this comes with a tracker? Ok, how about we switch?" Myron eagerly swaps, taking Karl's badge with a wicked grin. Karl studies his new pass, 'TMP'- you're a temp? He laughs, "Aren't we all, eh Myron? Got a thick marker, in-erasable?"

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

Karl takes the facilities map showing all the back doors and emergency exits, studies it and hands it back, "Ok, one more last thing. Pedro will be passing through here eventually, give him the map, point

him to The Edge and tell him I'm in my office, wherever that is."

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

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

"Death is going out on a limb promising an epic apocalypse, you know? Anyway, do me a favor and record the feed on this guy. The book is taking major action on Mr. Moen, the release of his first ticket skyrocketing to success going viral with the Union knuckleheads, for obvious reasons. The new book marketing department boosted his popularity with a limited release of low number collectibles, a hugely

popular move positioning these tickets as non-fungible souvenir commemorative trading cards.”

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

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

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

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

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

Flipping the lanyard he spies an encryption code embedded between the lines, A few writers leave their posts to stand close, before long others follow. Myron turns to look over his shoulder, sees hope instead of misery. He knows they are not disgruntled;

one must first experience happiness before one becomes disgruntled. His flying monkey crews could best be described as downtrodden apocalyptic veterans.

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

Myron returns his attention to the task at hand, considering his path forward. Reaching into the top drawer he withdraws a fresh hand towel bearing an early swag design from 'The Lucky Deuce' (furry fuzzy dice showing snake eyes commemorating Apocalypse Two) and dries off his hands dramatically hoping to hide an obvious stall. In a flash of in-

spiration Myron holds the encryption code to the screen. The word processing program disappears off the screen replaced by a line of text followed with a prompt:

WELCOME SUPERUSER!

su->

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

Next he sets to work tackling the task at hand.

Myron opens the subdirectory labeled 'procurement' to launch the acquisition app. First off he inputs Pedro's Midwestern organic connection as a preferred vendor then wires a long overdue order for immediate, ongoing delivery of mass quantities of

organic popping corn kernels accompanied with organic butter. Immediately the crowd goes wild.

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

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

clicks he recalls all construction personnel to Grey-space. Immediately the flying monkey corps receive instructions to begin withdrawing from Hell. The blowback, thinks Myron, will be significant.

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

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

Meanwhile, the din outside gradually settles. Before long the writer's room quiets ominously. Perplexed, Myron puts down his newspaper, finishes his business and exits the tiny bathroom relieved to find his charges in place once again hard at work documenting Apocalypse Five. He makes his way slowly

back to his seat feeling the weight of responsibility, perhaps even a little uncertain. His mood improves when draped on the back of his chair Myron discovers the ultimate homage in a white managerial shirt with a starched collar and front pocket logo:

FUN*F

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

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

ZOI- Banacek

Opening: Opening theme new Wednesday night mystery composition over opening credits and the depiction of an elderly yet buff Banacek expertly kayaking about Boston harbor. The opening fades out to an overview of a winter Boston New Years Eve.

Act One: Scene one dissolves from city street views showing crowds of revelers into a dimly lit small private art museum. The lone guard watches television while scarfing antacids. Soon his urgent needs overtake his sense of duty and he carefully descends the rickety steps to the staff lavatory, passing a display of multi-million dollar numismatics near the exit.

Twenty minutes later the guard washes up then ascends with a spring in his step right up until the moment he passes the now-empty display formerly chock full of coins. He stares incomprehensibly at

**ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE
EXPECTATIONS**

221

the missing coins and locked exit then sounds the alarm.

Act Two: Scene One late New Year's Day exterior view cuts to Jay, Banacek's driver, scoping the pax using the rear view mirror inside the stretch limo. Of the four occupants, Jay ogles only the three women in evening wear, paying no attention to either Banacek or the road. Banacek loosens his tie, lights a cigar and enjoys another cocktail.

They pull to the curb and Jay turns around, "If it's all the same to you, I'll stay here with the ladies."

"You know this is the library, right?"

"Its not the art museum?"

"One block up."

"Oh, well, it could be a museum. I'll wait here."

Banacek takes in the surrounding buildings, notes an optician's office in one: "There's an old Polish proverb that says he who searches for clarity often ends up at the eye doctor; glad to see you're no exception."

"I'll have you know my eyesight is perfect; I eat raw carrots. Just so happens I might be a little distracted is all."

"I stand corrected- you have a focus disorder- try concentrating on the road for a change. One block up, Magellan."

Act Two: Scene Two: Jay pulls up to an ornate yellow brick structure, old yet solid. Banacek exits the limo pulling his topcoat over the tuxedo he's been wearing since yesterday. A reluctant Jay follows him in; immediately upon entering Banacek gets a hard time from the local Boston Insurance rep, same as always:

"Oh geez, look what the wind blew in...Bander-shak."

"That's Banacek."

"Whatever, I don't know why Boston Insurance insists on employing rank amateurs anyway."

"First off, I don't work for them- you do. As to why they employ rank amateurs? Dunno, ask your boss."

**ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE
EXPECTATIONS**

223

“We don’t need your help.”

“Cracked the case already? That’s fine, I think the next party is just about to begin.”

“No, wait a minute.”

“Exactly what I thought you’d say. You know you remind me of an old Polish proverb: People wearing cement overshoes should stay out of the water. Tell us what you think you know.”

“One guard, works ten to six, says he went to the head in the basement around eleven. Twenty minutes later he discovers the missing coins. Doors and windows remain securely locked, no camera feeds inside. No one in or out, best we know. The cops have been all over this; they’re holding the guard but without hard evidence, it won’t stick.”

Banacek looks over the alarm system, “The alarm system is ancient; did you test it?”

“Mixed results.”

“Why did the guard take a break mid-shift?”

“He claims to have runny diarrhea.”

“Yikes, is that what stinks? Still? Smells like something died, I mean, I get more olfactory pleasure attending autopsies. Well, Jay, I guess you actually don’t take the smelliest poops in the world. Exactly what is the origin of said shits?”

“He doesn’t know for certain, claims he ate dinner at his mom’s house before leaving for work. Meatloaf. Apparently, his mom can’t cook.”

“Does he often eat at mom’s?”

“Open invitation but at least once a week.”

“Resulting in the shits?”

“Every time.”

“Who else knows the guard’s mom gives her boy the runs, I wonder? Come Jay, I doubt we’ll grow any wiser hanging around here and my nose needs a break.”

“Where to, boss?”

“The alarm system would be a logical place to start if not for the fact that it’s old, flaky and useless.”

“Maybe the thief just got lucky?”

**ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE
EXPECTATIONS**

225

“Not lucky- situationally aware, likely very clever. What interests me is how to determine definitively, without camera feeds, when the guard is crapping up the basement. Insider information, tough to ascertain unless... Let’s visit the source of my olfactory misery- mom’s place- in the morning. Take us all back to the party and step on it!”

Act Three: Scene One: Jay drives a very hung over Banacek over to the guard’s mom’s house in the suburbs, a shotgun duplex she shares with her landlord. Banacek meanders to the open front door, sniffs the air. Hmmm, not bad. He knocks, after a moment a woman of Banacek’s age approaches. Banacek offers his bonafides and she lets him in.

“Your cooking smells delightful; roast game hen?”

“Pheasant under glass, actually. What can I tell you I haven’t already told the police?”

“Your son ate dinner than went to work- did he happen to mention any gastrointestinal distress?”

“You mean did he get the shits? No, I’ve been through all that. I don’t see my boy nearly enough, it’s true- but he’s always been honest. If he’s having issues with my cooking, well, he never said so. I’m an excellent cook- why not stay for dinner? See for yourself.”

Risk adverse having learned what he needed to know, Banacek decides to protect his bowels, “No, thank you but I really must be going.”

“I insist, there’s plenty. Most can’t get enough.”

“That’s ok- it smells interesting but I really must be going.”

“Well, do you have time for a quick drink?” She inquires of an empty hallway as Banacek escapes back to the car, innards intact.

Act Three: Scene Two: Banacek climbs into the limo,

“Close call; while the guard’s busy with the cops, let’s take a look inside his apartment.”

Act Four: Scene One: Overhead shot of the limo circling back into the city stopping before a

large apartment building. Cut to Banacek and Jay sharing the elevator with a bevy of beautiful women, “Going up?” they inquire. Banacek smiles.

Exiting the elevator, the fifth floor hallway contains four doors. Banacek tries the door on 5C -locked. He quickly jiggles the knob- loose. He tries a firm twist and the lock clicks open. Banacek shrugs, steps inside. He discovers... not much. The studio apartment is neat, tidy with dishes done, everything in place. The room holds two folding chairs under a card table and a sofa bed. There are no books, not even a picture on the bare walls just an old television with a digital antenna. Banacek looks for a computer or wifi for accessing the internet but finds only an old landline cordless setup. Who still has a landline? No wonder the lock is chickenshit- nothing worth taking.

“Geez, even my place is nicer than this. Why live here?”

Banacek also finds the guard’s place depressing. He opens the refrigerator and finds several bottles of

pink bismuth- apparently a hedge against future visits to moms' for dinner. Closing the door, Banacek admires a Bruins magnet, lifting it to find it holds a library card. A clue?

"C'mon, Jay; there's obviously nothing here."

Retreating to the hallway, Banacek knocks on doors, hoping to draw the neighbors into the discussion.

First Banacek knocks on the adjacent door revealing a blonde fitness instructor dressing for work. She looks Banacek up and down before replying, "I rarely see him outside the pool, he's very quiet- never talks, no loud music. Perfect neighbor; how about a drink?"

Banacek wavers, "No thanks, I've got more doors yet."

Across the hall Banacek awakes a sleepy brunette with jet lag, "You'll have to excuse me but I just moved in. I don't know anyone. Perhaps I could get to know you over a quick drink?"

**ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE
EXPECTATIONS**

229

Banacek struggles mightily with his work ethics, “Sure. No, wait a minute, I’m on the job. Some other time?”

The door slams in his face. “Tough break,” opines Jay.

Banacek studies the final door at the end of the short hallway, sees a note: at the pool. “Perhaps you better wait in the car; we can’t have you overly distracted, can we?”

Banacek saunters back to the elevator and presses the button labeled: pool. The elevator rises to the rooftop. The door opens and Banacek learns why the guard spends all his income on rent.

Act Four: Scene Two: A few minutes later, chatting away in the poolside atrium feet elevated relaxing on a chaise lounge with drink in hand, Banacek inquires, “I’m looking for 5D.”

“You a cop?”

“Insurance. Why?”

“I don’t date cops- no money.”

Three chairs down pipes up, “I’m 5D.”

Banacek picks himself up, moves to an adjacent chaise, “Do you date cops?”

“You’re funny. No.”

“Tell me about 5C.”

“The lifeguard? That’s his chair over there but I haven’t seen him all day.”

“That’s because he’s in jail. Why do you call him that?”

“Lifeguard? He watches; it’s all he does. It used to be creepy but one day he was watching when my roommate cramped up. She sank like a stone but the lifeguard sprang into action saving her life. Since then, well, he’s like family- weird but ok.”

“Weird, but ok. Thanks.”

“Sure you won’t come down to my place for a quick drink?”

“Sorry, have one already.”

Act Four: Scene Three: Before leaving the building, Banacek takes the elevator to the basement to find the super’s apartment. His knock is answered by a beautiful redhead.

**ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE
EXPECTATIONS**

231

“Well, hello. Do you recognize this man?”

“Police?”

“Insurance.”

“Yea- 5c.”

“Can you tell me anything about him?”

“Quiet, pays his rent on time. No complaints either; spends most his time poolside lifeguarding.”

“I can see why- plenty of lives worth saving rooftop.”

“This building is popular with flight crews- it’s unusually quiet, particularly daytimes. Good for those keeping odd schedules, I guess. The tenants respect and look out for one another- this is a good place.”

“I see. Anything else?”

“Looks like it’s happy hour. Care for a quick one?”

Banacek checks his watch, “Oh my, how time flies. I guess maybe I have time for a quickie.”

Two hours later, Banacek exits the Super's apartment only to come face to face in the hallway with, "Bandershoot!"

"Banacek. What are you doing here?"

"Haven't you heard? I cracked the case; obviously, the guard did it. I'm here with the police and a search warrant to recover the coins."

"You know, there's an old Polish proverb that says: Just because the dress is red satin doesn't mean it comes off easily."

"We'll see who laughs last, Bandersnatch!"

Act Four: Scene Four: Smiling broadly, moseying outside the apartment building past Jay snoozing in the limo Banacek stops and asks a biking college student for directions to the library.

"What are you a moron or just senile?" pointing across the street, "Can't you read? That huge marble building with all the steps out front might be a clue. See the words 'Public Library' in bold relief across the facade? That's the library, you fossil, get a grip already."

Banacek thanks her; taking the prerogative of youth, she flips him off before peddling away. After crossing against traffic drawing the outraged ire of numerous foul-mouth motorists including gestures, Banacek shakes his head in wonder at the state of the world then mounts the many, many steps. Safely inside, Banacek pauses to catch his breath wondering why they needed to include so many steps. Then he spots the ground-level side door.

Banacek approaches the main desk to schmooze the prim librarian for information regarding the guard.

“Oh sure, he’s a regular, in here all the time. That’s his usual spot.” She points Banacek to a computer in a dark corner.

Banacek sits down, pulls up the internet history for the past year, finds only porn- tons of it. Banacek beelines to the lavatory to wash his hands thoroughly, repeatedly.

Passing by the demure librarian’s station on the way out Banacek tries to help, “I recommend the li-

brary board replace the wooden tables with Plexiglas. It'll help with carpet cleaning costs."

At first she gives him a bewildered look but after a momentary hesitation smiles and winks, "I get off work soon; maybe you'd like to get a drink?"

Banacek unfortunately isn't as young as he used to be; grudgingly he takes a rain check, "There's an old Polish proverb should apply here, something about a bird in the bushes. Sorry, but I'm on the case. Perhaps dinner, maybe next week?"

Agreeing, they exchange information; Banacek wisely chooses the ground floor exit for egress.

Act Four: Scene Five: No dice scoring his 10% finder's fee, Banacek begins flailing. First, Banacek rings up Felix Mulholland, his erudite fence and rare book dealer hoping for a lead on the stolen coins.

"I'm glad you called," he isn't. Old Felix is knee-deep in pretty girls but takes a moment to give Banacek bad news, "Sorry, but the coins haven't surfaced yet. I have feelers out but so far, nothing. Now,

if you'll excuse me I'm busy. If I get news I'll let you know..."

"Read the whole library my son but the cheese will still smell after four days. It's an old Polish proverb."

"Really? That's the best you can do?"

Banacek's phone rings, apparently Boston Insurance in need of an attitude adjustment, "I guess the guard's apartment didn't yield your treasure. You know I'd stand a better chance of recovering the coins if you leave me alone."

"Look Banderlink..."

"Banacek."

"Whatever. I talked to my boss, he's upping the ante to 20%."

"There's an old Polish proverb: 20% of jack is still jack."

"Losing confidence, genius? You're washed up, you know that?"

Banacek disconnects as Jay studies the road, driving in unaccustomed silence.

Act Five: Scene One: At home, a tastefully elegant brownstone, Banacek researches rare coins online while Jay prepares his cocktail. Remembering a joke, chuckling Jay straightens to bring Banacek his drink, "Did you hear the one about the Polish..."

Banacek turns as the approaching Jay stumbles, losing his balance dumping the drink on the router, leaving it smoking and killing Banacek's internet.

"Um sorry- it wasn't that funny anyway. Do you need anything else?"

"Besides a lobotomy, you mean? No, there's someone I can call. You've done enough damage for one day. Oh, and Jay?"

"Yea boss?"

"One more Polish joke and you're fired."

Jay's ineptitude is in fact a lucky break: Banacek calls in a techie for a some advice and maybe a night-cap- a very close friend and former naval communications officer. She arrives wearing only shoes and a raincoat. Banacek immediately forgets his wifi woes.

**ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE
EXPECTATIONS**

237

Act Five: Scene Two: In the morning, the techie peruses Banacek's reports then verbally abuses his Neanderthaloid thinking, "Flight attendants, not stewardesses- how old are you, anyway?" Banacek sets about percolating coffee. "You percolate coffee? How does that even work?" Banacek lights up a cigar. She glares malevolently then opens a window bringing in the cold. He shrugs and adjusts the thermostat.

Shaking her head in exasperation she fills him in on the real world today, "I read your reports, want to know what I think?"

"I'm all ears." Banacek lights the burner under his percolator.

"Well, if you rule out the guard..."

"There's only one thing he's interested in. Besides, if you gave him numismatics he'd use them in the vending machine."

"and the mom..."

"His mother knows her way around the kitchen. That said, she needs to cut back on her TBHQ in-

surance policy; probably giving her beloved son a food allergy.”

“TBHQ?”

“Synthetic tertiary butylhydroquinone- a food additive with a distinct, ummm, bouquet slightly reminiscent of decomposition. The museum reeked of it and I caught a whiff inside mom’s kitchen. Let me put it this way- it’s why you eat ALL the chicken nuggets, ALL the buttered popcorn, ALL the chocolates. My guess is mom, looking to ensure junior’s enthusiastic attendance at dinner, is inadvertently giving him gastrointestinal pain.

“Then you have no suspects and no leads outside the flaky alarm system. Here’s what you’re not understanding because you are elderly and out of touch: the wifi communications penetrating every room in museum building are by nature two-way asynchronous; in fact, insignificant supposedly unidentifiable atmospheric signal variations (device-captured) are now monetized by internet providers offering a treasure trove of information revealing not

just keyboard/streaming data but how we move about during normal living measuring breathing working resting pleasuring etc in our local seemingly private environment, both in realtime and graphically.”

She takes a breath. Banacek stares; gets the gist of her lecture, understands he’s got trouble.

“For a fee,” she continues, “you or anyone can learn all sorts of useful items including:

- a. building layout and alarm sensor data;
 - b. number of and whereabouts of discretely identifiable individuals;
 - c. current/historic occupational activity patterns including patrol routines;
- ultimately determining when and for how long will the building be targetable.”

Banacek turns off the heat, removes the basket of grinds and fills two mugs with hot, steamy caffeine goodness. He carefully spoons sugar into his percolated brew: “For those interested in running a high-end burglary outfit, how expensive/difficult is

the acquisition of the intended targets' wifi router heuristics?"

"Not very; practically free for the taking making any person with two nickels to rub together a suspect in your heist, ask me. Got any cream?"

Banacek decides its time to retire from the sleuthing game, "Put a fork in me, I'm done." He picks up his phone.

"What are you doing?"

"Quitting. Texting my farewell message to my pals at Boston Insurance- let's see, what rhymes with putz?"

"So now what? You know, today's my day off. Do you have any plans?"

"Did I ever tell you the old Polish proverb about un-stirring cream? Let's go back to bed and make some entropy."

Act Five: Scene Three: Fade outside, snow is falling heavily, whipping about in the wind. Follow a falling snowflake before zooming on poor hypothermic Jay, frostbitten in the freezing cold limo. Drain-

**ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE
EXPECTATIONS**

241

ing his last ounce of strength, Jay fishes out his beeping phone. As he expires, he views Banacek's final farewell, a 'blast from the past' text: Did you hear about the Polish Olympian? He was so proud of his gold medal he had it bronzed.

Act Five: Scene Four: Meanwhile in a strip mall near Fenway Park, Packy Turner hands over his package hiding ill-gotten gains to the harried clerk, pays cash, exits the shipping store and hails a taxi, "Airport." As the cab speeds toward Logan, Packy searches his pockets for the fare, finding a pair of fifties and a stale fortune cookie. Packy removes the cellophane, crushing the biscuit to extract his fortune:

The gnarliest potatoes make for the tastiest vodka- Old Polish Proverb

Ending: Cue end theme Wednesday night mystery theme compositional variant plays over Banacek still kayaking in Boston Harbor, running aground on a sandbar striking his helmet-less head, slumping sideways unconscious, intermittently blowing bub-

bles out his nose into the rising tide. The bubbling tapers then stops. After a few moments waves break over the kayak coating Banacek in seaweed. Several crustaceans crawl up on Banacek looking about for danger then begin rending his flesh. They hunker down as a seagull lands, looks about, squawks then begins pecking Banacek's private eye. Fade out.

Presidential Insights from the Book of Secrets

28 November 1963

Dear President:

This entry relates to the recent death of my immediate predecessor, the late Jack Kennedy, at the hands of true Patriots.

Jack's very-public assassination offers several lessons of interest to a new President. The first most important though least obvious outside the inner circle relates to crystal methamphetamine: don't imbibe. Jack liked his meth. Unfortunately, Jack really, really liked his meth; so much so, he often ran his mouth off in public while under the influence making all manner of grandiose pronouncements.

Second: Don't piss off the military-industrial-space complex by making off-the-wall promises they can't keep such as sending astronauts to the moon

then returning them safely to earth- or other such topics likely to surface while high on crystal meth.

Third: Under no circumstances involve your vice president's future in any grandiose schemes concocted while under the influence of drugs. In fact, the less you see of your VP, the better off you'll be. The proof of this pudding lies in the eating.

So, you see where I'm going with my first entry. Jack would still be alive if not for crank rotting out his higher-order brain functions. I can't tell you how many meetings we sat in with frustrated astrophysicists vainly explaining how cosmic radiation obliterates life. How many of these ended badly with Jack banging his head on the conference table mumbling incoherently frothing at the mouth before violently raging about the room screaming nonsensically over the mounting conspiracy to discredit his legacy? Six, actually.

Although Jack's tenure ends with a bang, I still need to plow ahead with the Apollo program machinations performing my duty doing the dirty deed-

ensuring his legacy. On the plus side, after technological advances in lightweight radiation shielding maybe in another sixty years or so, NASA can honestly join the race to the moon. -lbj

President Betsy Shriver lowers her eyes in respect for her long-dead relation. After a tense minute her trusted Chief of Staff Jordie clears his throat. Betsy looks up, considering her options, "Empty your pockets."

Jordie shrugs, reaches into his suit jacket slowly painstakingly pulling out his copious narcotics stash pocket-by-pocket before adding the lot from his trousers.

Betsy glares at the growing group of felonies as Jordie adds to the pile, "Enough. Gee, look at all the fun you'll be missing. From now on, you're drug-free. I want you in rehab before the end of the day."

"Seriously?"

"Rehab before the end of the day or resign- your choice. On your way out, send in the Vice President.

I think its time for 'Vote Now' to begin an eight-year goodwill tour of elsewhere."

Mega Classified Dittoes!

Windy monologue, teaser, commercials, cue bump music, fade out Back to Ohio, cue host...

Ok, we're back from break discussing our exclusive coverage of the Iranian Nuclear Secrets leak. Our next caller is Betsy from Washington...

Mega classified dittoes, Rush!

Ha ha ha, double meaning- I get it! Welcome to the show Betsy... first let me say thanks for your extremely clever and thoughtfully enthusiastic greeting. We're talking box hoax, the alleged presidential mishandling of previously declassified materials and subsequent weaponizing of the justice system against a brave patriot resulting in not only wholesale slandering but rabid demonization of a fine, upstanding former President and principled individual. So Betsy from Washington, before we get into the nitty-gritty about how to attack Iran so as to remove their nuclear capability, what do you think

about the formerly classified document I now hold in my well-manicured fingers?

I think it's out of date; regardless, reading it on-air is dangerous. You must know that?

Who said anything about reading it? We're merely discussing the contents...

Also dangerous, no?

Well, for that to be true, it must still be secret. Despite what they say in the swamp I understand the former occupant of the White House declassified this material...

Mentally? I don't think that's how declassification works.

Well, maybe not always, who's to say? We're you there?

No.

Exactly, got to take his word for it. Besides, I don't hold the original, just a photocopy. Somehow I doubt my reproduction came off the only single-use copier in existence.

Mega dittoes.

ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE EXPECTATIONS

249

Exactly. The resort staff had access to the keys, the classified documents and a photocopier. The note that came with my copy took the form of a chain letter demanding I make ten reproductions for distribution or bad luck would follow me. Who needs more bad luck? Not me, for sure, considering... anyway, I gave my assistant the document and he mailed copies but since the cat's already out of bag- why not play?

What about disclosing secrets, isn't that treason?

Treason defines how the current occupant stole the election. This is about righting the wrongs of a chronically failing system. To restore faith, values and integrity inside the Executive Branch we need our man back in the oval office... whatever it takes...

I don't think you're about anything but another payday. Did you know there was a burglary attempt on your yacht?

When?

Ten minutes ago, soon after you announced your possession of the documents.

Dammit! Last week it was my home and condo. Wait, how do you know this?

Fortunately the FBI had your secret boat stash, btw a veritable treasure trove of illegal materials, under surveillance. Perhaps next time have your assistant maybe not include foreign nationals when mailing illegal chain letters? Including your return name/address? Probably also a mistake...

Good help is indeed hard to find... Betsy from Washington, hmmm, not President Betsy Shriver from Washington, DC?

One and the same.

I loathe you but if you're a listener, you already know.

Wanted to be your last caller. Look into the engineer's booth; see that tough looking crowd holding your arrest warrant?

Well Bo, looks like we're out of time... that's a hard wrapper on today's show. Folks, tune in next time when we come to you: Live from Club Fed! Until then, this is el Rushbo, signing off...

**ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE
EXPECTATIONS**

251

cue Back to Ohio bumper music, fade out...

Fund Me Darkly

The PRAF smuggling syndicate works closely with Karl and Pedro on various nefarious schemes. Today the PRAF dudes sit inconspicuously in the Delaware River below Philly waiting to accept delivery of a brand-new oceangoing tugboat built by BTI's South American shipyard.

"Blue-claw!" Karl expresses pride in his crabbing ability.

"Nice one, dude. Honestly didn't think you had it in you." Leni's head shakes in wonderment.

"High praise indeed from one such as yourself; tell me, exactly what part of pulling up the crab trap via a rope did you believe me incapable of?" Karl's hackles rise.

"Pretty much all of it- no offense intended but..." The dude shrugs, cornered by honesty.

"C'mon Karl, dude knows you is all. Right, dudes?" Pedro removes the struggling crab, holds it

aloft for all to admire. The PRAF dudes, Leni and Coni Dombrovsky ooh and ahh appropriately before Pedro drops the struggling crustacean in the live well. Pedro attaches a strip of shad flesh to the bottom of the cage then drops it over the stern.

The PRAF dudes, Karl and Pedro kill time seemingly crabbing in Mill Creek inlet to the Delaware River across the Chesapeake Delaware Canal just below Pea Patch Island but Leni scans the canal using powerful binoculars while Connie pounds away at a keyboard. Playing the part of a tourist Pedro stretches, grabs a beer from the cooler and lights up a joint worthy of Bob Marley's highest praises.

After a few hits, bypassing Karl, Pedro offers the weed to the dudes. On the job, Coni declines. Leni however, rubs his nose with his middle finger, "About time, Bogart!"

"Who are you calling a Bogart?"

"Dude, if the Maltese Falcon fits..." Leni taunts.

"Play it again, dude." Coni adds helpfully, not looking up.

"C'mon, Pedro, dudes know you is all." Karl always loosens up around the Dombrovsky twins, their preferred PRAF contacts known collectively as 'the dude' for obvious reasons.

"Holy shit, I think I see her!" Leni exclaims handing the glasses to Karl.

From their viewpoint across the river, Karl focuses on the canal on the other side of the wide expanse, "Not sure- wait yup, ok. Unaccompanied."

Pedro takes the glasses grins in satisfaction, "Nothing to worry about dudes: citolduso. The shielding is perfect."

They observe closely as the powerful oceangoing vessel clears the canal and angles upstream. The growling tugboat passes their position under slow speed. Once out of their wake zone, the engines spool up leaving a bio-diesel exhaust plume behind. La Mensa steams north out of view.

"Twin turbines, duel props, shallow draft so goes anywhere. Can't ask for more, can you?" Karl waxes poetic, "Practically makes me think of charging you

for the privilege of storing her." Though nearly emotional, Karl remains pragmatic.

"Got a name for her yet?" Pedro shifts Karl off the bottom-line.

Happy to help, Leni fields the inquiry, "We're thinking La Mensa to honor the geniuses."

"Which ones?"

"Why, the geniuses responsible for detecting illegal nuclear material near the Capital."

Karl looks at his watch- if he's lucky Carolla is out and he'll get Carlos or Jorge. Crossing fingers, he fishes out his satellite phone then dials the switchboard.

Leni fires up the outboard on the Boston Whaler as Pedro and Karl haul up crab traps.

"Rita? Hey. Yes, just now. Five by five. See you soon." Thank God for Rita.

Leni gooses the throttle as they take up a rather loose trailing position on their nuclear weapon.

Karl takes a seat near Coni in the stern, "Whatcha working on?"

"Website upgrades, crash recovery, that sort of thing."

"Which one?" Karl respects the twin's ability to run scams.

"Its new-ish, I call it fundmedarkly."

"Wait, Pedro mentioned this yesterday- it's a crowdfunding mechanism for constitutional justice, or something, right?" Karl leans in to read the coding as Pedro hovers nearby.

Pedro fills him in, "He's migrating the core to our Ukrainian mine server farm- now don't get your panties in a twist but we're donating resources to this project."

"Why?"

"Maybe because we like Coni and Leni- isn't that enough?"

"Hardly."

"Ok, then how about because the first test site went viral in under an hour then crashed."

"Viral, eh? How does it work, Coni?"

**ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE
EXPECTATIONS**

257

Coni reaches out, "First things first, Bogarts!" Pedro digs out a vial of hash oil, "All that's left, I'm afraid."

Karl fishes out a cold beer from the cooler dregs, "Wash it down with this brewski?"

Pedro double-takes, "Brewski?"

"Local jargon?" Karl offers.

"Practically racism."

"Just give me the damn beer, jeezus h." Coni has an oil slick across his tongue.

"H?"

"Middle initial- never heard it?" Pedro laughs as Coni drinks, Karl frowns and Leni pilots them up-river to the Billingsport Range.

Coni stows the tablet, "It's a simple concept; in fact, the scam originated with a sitting supreme court justice. Turns out his open acceptance of dark funding is acceptable. Who knew? Not me, I didn't have a clue and neither did the populace, aside from those wearing the dark robes. So, dark funding pro-

duces dark justice. Isn't it natural then to crowdfund policy?"

Karl catches on immediately, "You're crowd funding the US Supreme Court? Pedro said the site went viral?"

Coni smiles wickedly, "We soft-launched with just one issue: the repeal of slavery. Pro or con- make a donation to get your desired result onto the shadow docket. The more you give, the better the odds of success."

"And?"

"And we got swamped, overwhelmed by the pro-slavery crowd."

"Nobody wants to work, I get it. Say more donate pro-slavery, what's next?"

"Placement of an issue on the shadow docket requires but a single justice rendering an unsigned opinion- round one is winner-take-all. One single solitary justice then gets to live the billionaire existence while also denying responsibility for returning slavery to the colonies."

"Let me see if I understand: the crowd funds, the entire winning pool gets tapped by one justice and whatever that issue is gets a hearing?"

"Or multiple justices if the price is right. With round one complete, the site moves onto getting desired hearing results. This can take months."

"Wait, what happens to the losing funds? You don't offer refunds?"

"Administrative overhead expenses unfortunately do not allow us to return funds. In round two, the public chooses if the issue moves off the shadow-docket or dies. If the anti-slavery crowd ponies up, emancipation holds. If not, the court votes. Either way, the crowd funding continues unabated. Naturally, the side showing greater enthusiasm for the process wins a shot at justice in round three."

Karl recognizes endless possibilities; he gives Pedro a thumbs-up.

"Round three is the most important- do or die time. The issue is on the docket, oral arguments commence, both sides have passionate positions.

The court convenes to render an opinion. The odds of passage change with each contribution. Six months of collections later, the results are announced and the changes to suit the crowd willing to fork it up. Even after your cut, PRAF expects to clear a billion dollars on each ruling just from the losing side. Justices get paid according to their activity- voting against the populace nets them zero."

"Live like a billionaire though you're merely a government flunky, that's some motivation."

Pedro also likes the plan, "Coni has thirty six issues ready to go; nothing's off the table. I want the Homestead Act up next; give the land back already. Honestly, where the hell do these morons plan on getting slaves?"

"Expect violence and unrest," Karl intones, "but you're correct, the slave pool is in-house, isn't it? Rewriting the Homestead Act is also a good one. How about a national religion? Isn't it about time to outlaw free speech? I think we should work the angles.

How much are we charging to lease server space to the dudes?"

Pedro is curious, "Fifteen percent of the gross."

"What about the Ukrainians, what's their end?"

"Five percent."

"Of the net," clarifies Coni.

"Ok, here's what we're going to do: kick the Ukrainians up to five percent of the gross and we'll forego our portion of the proceeds. I'll schedule an algorithm meeting with Rita."

"Dude. In exchange for what?" inquires Coni.

"She isn't going to be happy debugging new code at this late date, you know." Pedro knows Rita.

Karl turns to Coni, "I think we can tweak your plan, maybe double your profit."

"I'm listening."

"These hot button constitutional issues are likely to attract kooks on both sides, so anonymity must be assured to protect the participants. I'm thinking we can link the crowd-funders' activities to their profiles, update the fiction with some truthiness, right?"

Then, when the moment is right with violence and unrest looming, we release the data."

"Mayhem ensues," Coni understands, "emergency rooms fill as score's settle."

Pedro nudges Karl, "They need to get some timeline data."

"Of course, along with a few other juicy tidbits- Coni, the nuke you smuggled here inside of La Mensa is a key end-times element. Next weekend is Memorial Day. You should expect to be able to work the scam until mid-August at the latest. Rita will release the profiles shortly thereafter."

"Dude, what, then you're going to nuke me?"

Pedro ignores the query, "Don't worry about paying off the Justices, either. Instead, convert the entire site to physical commodities, like gold. Cash out cashless- no crypto currency either."

"Dude?"

"Then take a long vacation," Karl adds helpfully.

"He's sending Mrs. Wilson on a slow tour of the southern hemisphere."

Coni studies the pair, "Keeping her outside the fallout zone?"

Pedro frowns, "Hopefully, don't know exactly. Let me put it this way, if we screw our attempt at ameliorating end-times, there will be no 'outside the fallout zone'- dude."

"Dude. Ok, so you doubled our profits while protecting us and the gains from nuclear events of your making. What do you want in return?"

"We get the data too, remember? But you're correct, there's more. We'll need a huge favor sometime late fall early winter timeframe- Mrs. Wilson will be sailing..."

"Sailing?" Leni once offered boating lessons to the land-loving Mrs. Wilson, Coni remembers her getting nauseas at the very thought.

"Yes, up the Mississippi River smuggling a critical package. We need you to meet her in St. Louis, arrange transport to Indianapolis while body-guarding until relieved."

"Sounds reasonable. What should I do with La Mensa?"

Pedro considers, "The nuke remains undetected, park it out of the way, don't run the engine."

"If for some reason the engine starts and she pulls away toward DC- run like hell." Karl laughs.

Leni sides the Whaler alongside the dock outside the Paddock at Billingsport Range, Karl and Pedro gather their stuff to climb the rickety ladder, "You can eat the crabs but I would run a Geiger counter across them first." Karl laughs as Pedro holds his hand over the live-well making clicking sounds increasing in frequency.

"Not to worry, dudes- we'll get rid of them selling cheap to the tourists."

From Whence?

Rita and the Tyrant of the Seas stop in at the Paddock for lunch on their way to check on things with the PRAF smuggling ringleaders aka the dudes. Rita hesitates at the door, “First-timer? You’ll love the food; but the clientele? Maybe not so much... try and keep a low profile if at all possible. We’ll just keep our heads down staying unnoticed, keeping out of trouble at least until we meet with the dudes in Karl’s office.”

The Tyrant pulls the handle, framing himself in the doorway. He holds up one hand, waits a tic before raising his index finger, then adds his middle finger... and as his ring finger joins the others a great emotional wave washes over the Paddock at Billingsport Range as the patrons erupt in unison:

“TYRANT!”

Rita joins him in the doorway, “Figures.”

Rita ditches the Tyrant midway through making their way to the managers' office as the Tyrant slows their pace to a crawl greeting his pals enthusiastically, stopping for the occasional toast, swapping stories of past exploits, whispering plans for future endeavors. Karl steps out to greet Rita as she approaches the office, "Happens every time, they all love the Tyrant."

"Mutual admiration society meeting, swell." Rita follows Karl into the office, "Smells delicious."

Karl retreats behind the small buffet table on wheels and opens up a chafing dish, "I had the demons bring in lunch; burgers here... fries in that one and caramelized onions in the third. Cold drinks are in the cooler under the table, here's some napkins. Dig in, help yourself."

Rita glances toward Karl's desk, sees the two PRAF dudes she's in Billingsport Range to meet, "Hey Leni, hey Coni- how's it hanging?"

The two PRAF dudes stop stuffing their faces long enough to look up and give Rita a nod.

The door flies open and the Tyrant storms in, “Dammit Karl, I’m famished. Give me a plate before I keel over! Leni, Coni- how the hell are you?” Mouths full, the PRAF dudes wave enthusiastically then re-concentrate on their lunch.

Karl heaps a plate with food, “Rita, while you’re in there grab a grog for the Tyrant.” Karl grabs two chairs and adds them to the makeshift banquet, “You two, take a load off.”

They settle in around Karl’s desk to munch on lunch. The Tyrant observes the empty condiment tray, gives the PRAF dudes the evil eye, “Bogarting the organic catsup, eh? That’s a flogging offense.” He reaches into his kit and fishes out his preferred Polish spicy mustard.

“Kosciusko?” notes Leni, “I’ll trade dude the catsup for a couple of spoons.” The deal consummates, the perfect lunch progresses smoothly until the chafing dishes sit empty. Leni and Coni remove the buffet table quickly returning with the dessert cart. Rita

and Karl pass but the Tyrant and the dudes dig in with zest.

Karl fires up the volcano with after-lunch weed. He polishes off the first bag then refills for Rita. Rita takes a big hit, holds it, then exhales in a coughing fit, "How you know it's potent, right?" she wonders.

"More like how we know you're a lightweight." Karl laughs.

"Up yours, friendless." Rita flips off Karl on a daily basis.

"Ouch, dude," commiserates Coni.

Rita passes the empty bag to Karl, "Coni next," she says, "I took a look at fundmedarkly during launch. Nice use of tracking, by the way. Traffic is shooting through the roof but we can't sustain. You're peaking as of this morning.."

"What is fundmedarkly?" the Tyrant is keying the site into his phone.

"You know half the clientele out there is cloning your phone, right?" Rita quaintly attempts acting

like she cares but instead positions him to appear old, senile, out of it, head up his ass.

The Tyrant scratches his nose with both middle fingers, "Where do you suppose I got it from in the first place? Not to worry, I only use it for porn, not banking. Geez Rita, your hardware is something of a slow-loader. Here we go... Oh, I see... very clever. Look's like dudes are verily racking up huge numbers on the whole bringing back slavery bug-a-boo..."

Karl gives the door a nod, "Our entire clientele out there is pro-slavery; needless to say you're racking big out of the Paddock at Billingsport Range but how does fundmedarkly play in Topeka I wonder."

Rita has metrics, "Their hit rate in Topeka is around thirteen percent of all traffic, including shopping and porn sites. Nationwide, they're holding just below eighteen percent. We've moved them onto the Ukraine backbone with support off the New Zealand systems. We need to talk about resource allocations moving forward."

The PRAF dudes exude warmth, “Dude. We also need to discuss the package logistics, dude.”

“So the US Supreme Court can just re-write your Constitution willy-nilly, on a whim?” The Tyrant is a quick study.

Leni handles the query, “Dude, I grant you the methodology is a recent development and several hand waving arguments apply but essentially yes, there is no longer such a thing as established law. Any and every issue is going on the block.”

“When?” wonders Rita, “and stop calling me dude.”

“What time you got dudette?” Coni chuckles.

“You expect me to do you now? Oh shit no way in hell, not in your lifetime. Dimwits, I need time to open more bandwidth and port the site or you’ll be funding more darkly than you wish. Last thing anyone needs to do is make promises I have no intention of keeping (I mean, Pedro isn’t even here).” Rita packs the hash pipe with Lebanese blond, lights up then passes the bubble to Coni.

“Seriously?” inquires Leni, “I didn’t consider the backend would be a problem. Getting the frontend tight? Very tough indeed but the backend? Really? Dude, can you believe the dudette struggles so mightily?”

“Dude.”

“I think the PRAF dudes are calling you rank amateurs in the flyweight division.” The Tyrant enjoys poking Karl and Rita.

“Yea, I get that.” Rita rudely grabs the hash pipe from Coni.

“All right, let’s calm down don’t nobody need to bogart,” Leni entreats, “It’s just us dudes sitting here know for a fact you can keep us online regardless the traffic volumes.”

Karl takes the works from Rita, lays it down to fill a party bowl and attach it to the big bong, “Sure, no problem if Rita gets enough time, eh Rita?” He lights up, takes a deep toke and passes to Leni, “But you need to do something for me.”

“Always a catch!” the Tyrant laughs heartily as he continues clicking around the grift site, “So the SCOTUS justices get big paydays if.. wait, are they all-in on this?”

Coni supplies the good laugh, “No, they’re all swearing on stacks of Bibles (again!) to have nothing to do with illicit funding sources and methods; even issued a formal denial literally holding a jpeg attachment depicting a stack of Bibles.”

“The ‘established law’ crowd roasted them on social media,” Leni adds, “my favorite post depicts a stack Bibles on a private jet flying to an Alaskan resort with a billionaire, you know to save the taxpayers the expense. How the taxpayer gets on the hook for paying stack of Bible’s vacation expenses remains vague- could have been funny if not so pathetic.”

“Stack of Bibles drinking heavily to alleviate their fear of flying- very funny,” Rita smiles.

“Dudette! SCOTUS bullshitting the ignorant masses is our hook; seems dudes are so ethically challenged from decades of leeching off billionaires not

a single person outside of dude's immediate family believes they're not thieves and only two or three of them particular dudes would leave their billfold unattended in the SCOTUS locker room sincerely expecting to find it later. Each and every denial SCOTUS dude's issue drives the fundmedarkly hit counters' wild. We're flush."

"Meltzer sings- site payments flow through our bank for a mere 5% laundry fee so I know exactly what you're pulling in," Karl remarks softly. "Mrs. Wilson needs a ship and a crew to sail her from New Zealand up the Mississippi River and you dudes are going to procure both."

The Tyrant jumps in, "Hold on, I know a guy."

"Sure you do," Rita disbelieves the Tyrant on principle.

"No, seriously she's a gorgeous vessel in the old tradition with two huge masts holding acres of sail but also charges solar batteries for propulsion on demand: it's perfect for the job. Trust me, this retrofitted schooner underperforms sailing booze cruises

around the Caribbean as she's capable of far longer, nee transoceanic travels. Guy who skips her retired from our navy an Admiral; totally trustworthy. His current crew of misfits all dangerous all the time served under him back in the day. Add in seven or eight PRAF dudes with sea-legs able to point and shoot and she'll be crossing the Pacific in no time." He returns to clicking.

"Three days," says Rita.

"Too long," replies Leni, "You understand the time restraints better than most, considering the nuke you have parked nearby. Work with us dudes, please?"

"Ok, how about thirty six hours then?" Rita holds firm.

"Yea, but where do they expect to get their slaves from?" The Tyrant believes he found fundmedarkly's logic flaw.

"We didn't know either but the beta-testers filled in the blanks," Coni passes the bong, "fortunately them dudes were all in on the slavery idea."

“Nazi’s?” asks Rita.

“No, Mom’s For Nazi’s- two of them in fact. Shortly Mom’s For Nazi’s got the group chatting slavery methodologies and I have to admit the slackers attracted to FundMeDarkly get very creative when figuring out how to get others to do their work. Just like Tom Sawyer.”

“Dude?” wonders Leni.

“Some dude got the world to whitewash his fence.”

“Whitewash, dude?” Leni inquires.

“Old timey word- think painting it white. Regardless, thanks to Mom’s For Nazis the slackers, er beta-testers, derived a pathway for the ‘swear on a stack of Bibles no corruption here’ SCOTUS dudes to follow.”

Karl gives Rita a meaningful look, “Twelve hours?”

“You’re joking- get a clue already, the PRAF dudes’ site is hotter than hot.” Rita likes Pedro some and the dudes a little initially agreeing to help code

but she didn't seek further involvement and certainly doesn't need Karl's shit.

The Tyrant switches to a US Constitution site and reads the Thirteen Amendment abolishing involuntary servitude except as punishment for a crime, "Wait a minute- slavery is still in play? Why are we messing with them, they're obviously my kind of people..."

"C'mon don't do me like this... twenty four hours?" Karl entreats Rita. He needs the PRAF dudes' buy-in.

Coni offers the bong to the Tyrant who shakes his head sadly moaning, "Sorry Coni but I'm on duty."

"Duty of the dude," Leni intones.

"You sure are drinking a great deal for someone on duty." Rita checks her tone suspecting Stella's personality is rubbing off.

"Duty of the dudette." Leni refers to her Stella-ish inclinations.

“I understand no human with half a brain wants to work hard at scut labors but from whence will slaves legally emanate?” The Tyrant needs to know if the site’s legs will grow.

“The ‘Mom’s for Nazis’ contingent suggests re-defining the term ‘crime’ to suddenly include those dudes heretofore determined by a tribunal to be ‘Administratively Guilty of Special Crimes sans Punishment’? Then all that’s left is to decide who to enslave. Of course, Mom’s for Nazis has a very, very long list... let’s see where the Jews slot in... there, top of the list don’t ya know. Second, the disabled- physical then mental.”

“Wait a second- will this fly?” Rita is suddenly interested. “Maybe, dudette, if an originalist-leaning supreme court decides the amendment of Article IV, Section 2 of the Constitution requires revisiting.” Coni knows from Articles.

Leni expands helpfully, “The ignorant masses only need to believe they have a say in their futures. Realistically that ship sailed a long, long time ago.”

Rita kicks this new idea around her brilliant mind: first, why revisit involuntary servitude as an issue at all? Second, what jackass could possibly be pro-slavery in this post-enlightenment era? Third, why not help out?

“You getting pushback anywhere, like governmental?” she asks the PRAF dudes.

“We were expecting to get shit from the clergy after SCOTUS and the stack of Bibles pics began flitting about but as of yet not a peep from them dudes.”

Coni explains, “Dudes, we collected dozens of the slackers including several ‘Mom’s for Nazis’ ring-leaders into topical discussion panels. Wait a second, I’ll fetch the report; it’s quite fascinating...Ok, allow me to quote: “...many small scenes comprise the big picture regarding dark funding of the SCOTUS-luckily history in fact does often repeat offering clues to an oft-times uncertain future. One such event illustrates the massive impact a few often make on the many: thanks to interpreting God’s law to suit their

role as merciless slavers the so-called one true church ignited one of the sparks fanning into the flames of the first civil war by not only owning generations of families (maintaining docility under the assurance of familial togetherness now and everlasting rewards later) but intentionally breaking that promise for earthly riches, raising \$115k in 1838 selling off 227 people from their families including toddlers, in one of if not the largest single sale of slaves to the deep south generating universal scorn globally while quite effectively throwing religious arrogance in the faces of the progressive of thought. Stirring up anti-slavery sentiment is probably part of the reason the KKK put the papacy on their scut list but not to worry the ends justify the means as the clergy/slavers got their cut of the big payday and catholics now over-represent on the SCOTUS...”

“I never realized the awful ramifications from Nazi’s having mother’s until just this moment,” Karl’s depression manifests.

“The ‘Mom’s for Nazis’ really understand their slavery pastimes with applicable potentialities inside and out,” Rita gets the gist. She begins expanding her understanding hoping to link her knowledge into income production, “Thanks to two hundred years of good old fashioned foresight as their antiquated slave-y ways grew stale, reconstituting the allowance of slavery is today an achievable goal. From whence will new slaves emerge? I believe a certain few would have so little going their way they would consent to being slaves- but outside the s/m world? Less, I guess.”

The Tyrant shoots Rita a wink which she studiously ignores.

Leni fills in the blanks hoping to sway Rita’s helpful inclinations, if any: “When the mandatory educational system gets cut to three years and unemployable individuals proliferate, any continuing education shifts to government funding of ‘on the plantation training’ of dudes newly defined as criminally indigents and unemployable. Not difficult to imag-

ine those fortunate to afford private or religious educations will eventually buy and sell the graduating government-school third graders with societal blessings. But where, you no doubt wonder, does the clergy angle fit?”

Karl's depression yields to intrigue as he speculates, “Good question, the Nazi Mom's say look to historical examples. Here's one: to get the original Mom's for Nazis whack-jobs onboard his intentions hitler supplanted the clergy substituting himself for God dictating God's will for a time albeit ultimately unsuccessfully.”

Coni picks up the ball, “Today's dark world operates on voluminous data collection often through spurious means of acquisition. Groups seemingly operating in the shadows seldom leave clues but these Mom's are a bunch of social outcasts with their own site thus we don't really need to guess about their intentions. We're mining their website for nuggets such as: during the next ‘Mom's for Nazis’ fascistic go around instead of destroying religion,

these dudes simply scheme to coop the clergy. Start by supporting religious and private schools generously with general funds. Then look the other way while accumulating data through scurrilous means building dossiers detailing private unethical activities of the religious leaders. don't differentiate or discriminate against any belief set, help expand the reach of every congregation's support by offering an overly generous multiplier to all tax deductions made to any recognized church (even the Jews if you can believe but appearances deceive). Later sadly inform the churches that since you're partners the justice department claims the right to publicly audit all parish/temple/mosque/etc finances, while quietly revealing existence of the dossiers: 'We show and tell or you agree to clandestine government oversight with direction.' Use the department of labor to group students through testing then depopulate intelligent dudes from, while drying up funding to, the public schools ultimately cutting all grades four and above. Begin sending your administratively-de-

terminated unemployable to government facilities then complain about the cost. Dehumanizing Sunday church homilies drive home the widespread local misery directly attributable to the community's unemployable elements as shaming comes back into vogue."

Leni picks up the narrative, "Dudes willingly rile up church congregants mercilessly scapegoating and excoriating the unemployable now-criminal non-contributors. Then as the tumult crescendos, offer a solution via the clergy: have generous prosperous families provide a lifeline offering standard government issue lifetime food and shelter employment contracts to your re-defined criminals. What fine, upstanding Nazis! Now wait for offspring as the contractual very, very fine print comes into focus and slavery goes generational- again."

"Bringing back widespread application of the cat-o-nine tails no less," the Tyrant always warms to the idea of flogging.

“Not that any of this likely beyond cyberspace,” Karl warns.

“What do you mean?” The Tyrant obviously lags the room’s curve so he finally stops clicking and lays the phone down.

“It’s all a grift.” Karl gently lets down the Tyrant hoping to avoid the always-unavoidable un-pleasantries which follow.

“Almost a grift, actually.” Smiling, the Tyrant momentarily gives the room the benefit of the doubt, “That is to say practically a grift but there’s so much money lying on the table I’m changing my mind- half a grift, at best.”

“Dude?” ask the PRAF dudes, in unison with feeling.

“You’re running a high stakes hands-off operation generating limitless online interest in achievable real world outcomes occurring directly under the influence of the participant’s capital infusions without offering an opportunity to bet on the outcome? No odds? No book collecting admin fees?

And you actually call yourselves grifters in the Paddock at Billingsport Range tradition...”

“Dude.” The PRAF contingent salutes.

“Take a full day to code the book at least,” offers Karl, “and we split the take on the side bets 70/30.”

The PRAF dudes put heads together to whisper discussing the weather a bit before Coni continues negotiations, “Thirty six hours, 70/30 on everything. You have our money in New Zealand; we’ll pick up Mrs. Wilson and sail her around the southern hemisphere while you attempt to negotiate the apocalypse utilizing the nuclear weapon somehow.”

“Krugerrand quality or purer.” adds Leni.

“Rita?” Karl knows Rita can’t turn down a good grift.

“It’ll be tight but the extra cash solves many problems. I’m ok with my end Karl.” Rita strives mightily not to salivate.

“You purchase the vessel personally, pick up your gold Krugerrands from our bank holding company in Christchurch, sail about aimlessly before trans-

porting Mrs. Wilson et al up the Mississippi River to Hoosier-land then keep the schooner, ok?" Karl drives the bargain.

"Deal." Coni looks forward to a long sea voyage far away from the people subject to the grift.

"Deal." as does Leni.

"So, what do we name our new project?" asks the Tyrant.

"That's easy," replies Karl, "since it's all about Mrs. Wilson we'll name her 'NAUtical-SEA'.

Zero Likes, Zero Stars

Mrs. Wilson meets Leni and Coni at the empty Christchurch International Airport baggage carousel, “Karl said to meet you two clowns here; where are your bags?”

“Dude! Good to see you too!” Coni greets her warmly, moves in for a hug.

Mrs. Wilson pulls back preserving her personal space, “None of that from you.”

“Don’t crowd the elderly, dude!” Leni is also pleased to see Mrs. Wilson, “She’s obviously packing rebar in that big bag she hauls around.”

“I’ll have you know I’ve graduated to Tasers. Want a demonstration?”

“Hard pass, Mrs. W.” Coni looks around, “How was your flight? Where are your bags?”

“Damn you Karl!” Mrs. Wilson catches the joke but doesn’t get the joke, “I’ve been here for two weeks, killing time shopping and sightseeing.”

"Tough existence, no question; we've been ensconced in the harbor four days," Leni clarifies, "all loaded up, ready to sail."

"To what?"

"Sail."

"Yea, thought that's what you said. Ain't gonna happen, chumps." She leads the PRAF dudes to her limo. As they climb in, Mrs. Wilson raises the privacy shield, dims the windows and turns on the white noise generator not wishing to disturb the driver, "So tell me: why the hell do you degenerates suppose I'm willing to get on a boat with you?"

Leni flips open a small tablet, "Schooner, actually. What's your network password?"

"Bite me."

"Ok, I'm in. So, you know Karl sent us here, what he didn't tell you is why, how and a few other minor details," showing the screen to Mrs. Wilson, "this is your very own personal schooner, courtesy of the Tyrant of the Seas. This former booze-cruiser lies packed to the gills with food, water and five tons of

doubloons in the harbor awaiting passengers such as you for the return transoceanic voyage. The PRAF organization is providing security- half the gold belongs to us.”

“For picking me up?” Mrs. Wilson wonders if the PRAF dudes are messing with her.

Coni chuckles, “If only... no, we worked out a seriously convoluted deal that started with delivery of a tugboat renovation/alteration then snowballed. Karl provided back-office support for our website and processed the payments in Christchurch in order to lure us down here.”

“Krugerrands!” Coni/Leni’s new favorite word.

“What website?”

“FundMeDarkly.” Leni loads the homepage.

“The SCOTUS site? #leechingoffbillionaires, that site? Clever concept, smart graphics, totally illegal- sure sounds like Karl supporting anarchy and whatnot. So, what’s the endgame?”

“Meltzer sings dude...”

"Don't be quoting Karl to me, I don't care. If he was here I'd Taser him for even mentioning a sea voyage, such an asshole. Don't make me repeat my question."

Leni passes her a file, "He said to give you this after you maybe chill out."

"Like that's going to happen anytime soon." Coni understands Mrs. Wilson's plight.

Mrs. Wilson tases Coni, "Keep up with the giggles and you're next!" she warns Leni.

Leni grows serious, "You've been here long enough to understand the danger. You're looking after a man named John Shumate..."

"Shoe; quiet guy been through hell recently, takes a room in the boarding house I've been staying." Mrs. Wilson likes him, finds a strong character resemblance to the late Mr. Wilson back in the day.

Leni nods, "Soon Shoe is going to attempt to clean house. When he does, that's our signal to vamoose. No dillydallying either; shit here is going to

**ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE
EXPECTATIONS**

291

hit the fan. You need to grab Celie then make a run for it.”

Coni chimes in, “Look at her photo, I think she’s cute for a vagabond”

Mrs. Wilson studies the photo, “Vagabond? You know, put her in an ill-fitting blouse and skirt, smear her with dirt, and I’d swear this is that homeless girl hangs around the market.”

Coni turns over the top photo to reveal a second snap of Mrs. Wilson and Celie, “Her name is Celia. Karl says she cleans up well for an unemployed teacher, much like yourself. Unfortunately, Celia is soon to be found out and made an example.”

Leni studies the shot, “Karl says she’s timid but she’ll grow on you. That’s you slipping some cash into her pocket unawares, right?”

“She’s a waif. She hates it here and talks to herself, out loud. I also believe they’ll make her an example.” Mrs. Wilson’s head shakes sadly.

“Dude, in this climate? It’s like asking to die.” Coni disbelieves,

"It's a tendency she has little control over- her stupidity reminds me of you PRAF dudes."

"You can save her," Leni begins.

"If you're willing to bring her along, that is." Coni flashes a smile, "She can help out with the oars."

"Oars?"

"Looks as though Mrs. Wilson is a registered user, dude." Leni crows.

"Dude, there must be a zillion Mrs. Wilsons out there; give her the benefit of doubt already." Coni prevaricates, hedging.

"This Mrs. Wilson left a review- zero likes, zero stars." Leni and Coni stare.

"Sounds like me, doesn't it? If I could've given you less, I would've." Mrs. Wilson glares.

Coni takes over the tablet, "Let's look at your history... apparently you've spent much of your time perusing the 'hypotheticals' section, looking for a cause to latch your name onto in a historic SCOTUS judgment on your budget... Wow, look at that

one outlay- what reason could you possibly have to bet against woman's suffrage? Where did you get that kind of cash? Dude, you could have bid on a 'hypotheticals' and made the history books and instead here you are looking to support woman's er deny women voting. Dude?"

Mrs. Wilson wonders, "Hypotheticals sell?"

Leni's wrinkle, "The SCOTUS began awarding judgments based on hypothetical grievances; typically, they enshrine someone's right to be recognized historically as an asshole. For a mere \$100k you can claim an artificial grievance then have the SCOTUS agree that indeed, you are an asshole. They will write an opinion with your name on it. We have a suggested list and yes, they're selling like hotcakes."

"Priced to move," Coni adds, "but not what you would call helpful in the grand scheme of things. Still, you do get a bang for your buck. So why did you put money on women losing their suffrage?"

"To win, of course. How many billionaires are woman? Do the math- only you male Neanderthals

have the money and the inclination to take away woman's voting abilities. I'm just facing reality." Mrs. Wilson scoffs at gambling but during an apocalyptic run-up, everything's on the table.

Coni relates, "Did you know it would take thirty years to nonstop count to a billion from one?"

"Look dude, Mrs. Wilson here hedged with a um smallish donation to the woman's side." Leni points out helpfully.

"Yea but dudes, just look at the size of her bet..."

"Call it a Mr. Wilson insurance death benefit put to good use." Mrs. Wilson thinks about it, "On second thought, since it was all a scam and I'm facing the scammers holding a Taser, I demand a refund- every dime including the vigorish and while you're at it pay the winner."

Coni gasps, "At eighteen to one?"

"How much gold do you have stashed on MY ship?"

"All of it."

"Precisely."

The Closing

“You’re overdressed.”

“What’s that smell?”

“Crabs.”

“Crabs?”

“Crabs eating those tourists bobbing about in the tidal flow beneath the dock.”

“Well, that explains everything.”

“Told you not to wear an expensive suit but did you listen?”

“It’s my lucky suit; you know I wear it to all our big events.”

“Oh, is that what this is?” Standing shoulder-to-shoulder along the Delaware River just outside The Paddock at Billingsport Range, Karl gives Pedro the evil eye.

“Don’t be a jerk, it’s not like we have a choice. Look, our host approaches.”

"Choice defines the human condition." Pedro growls, "Let's run."

Death merrily greets the pair, "We understand you have many entertainment options- thanks for choosing The Paddock!"

Karl checks his Rolex, "Late again; Pedro, punctuality clause now in effect."

Death stops short, "What does that mean?"

Pedro snorts derisively, "Let's just say any more delays will incur penalties."

"Yea sure, whatever. C'mon, the lawyer's for us inside."

They file inside, passing through a sophisticated weapons detector.

The jukebox volume disallows conversation until they reach a heavy oaken door bearing a "No Admittance" sign. Death, making a gesture toward reconciliation, opens the door to allow the pair to enter. Karl takes the lead, stepping in to find the office in the hands of meth cooks.

“Bugger off!” A huge hand rudely pushes Karl into Pedro. Pedro grabs Karl’s arm and yanks him backwards into death’s embrace.

“English, eh?” Pedro reaches under his hoodie to produce a sawed-off double-barrel twelve gage shotgun. Bringing the weapon to eye level he pulls both triggers. Before the splatter coats the other meth cooks, Pedro breaks the gun down, reloads then flicks his wrist to close the breech and fires at the chemicals.

Death pushes into the office, “What the hell? Do you have any idea how much product you just ruined?”

Pedro grins, “Punctuality is so hard to come by anymore we had to make our own rules.”

“Same rule says you can sneak weapons into my establishment?”

“Essentially. Look, every modern security system relies on software. Just so happens we’re colluding with somebody fairly good at coding is all. Not our fault you don’t have your shit together.” Karl doubles

down on the criticism, "And why does it smell even worse inside?"

"Tried to tell you not to overdress- should listen for once," Pedro admonishes.

Death pushes his way into the hall to bellow, "Myron!"

A huge seven foot three hundred fifty pound stoically menacing presence fills the doorway as death retreats inside, "Myron, get the crew to clean up this mess. Tell Marvin three for lunch at the bar."

Myron points to the meth cooking apparatus.

"Yea, throw it all in the river along with the body. We're going upscale."

Karl, looking Myron over head to toe, adds helpfully, "Maybe throw the heavy stuff in a duffel bag then add the body. Close it up tightly and sink it downstream."

"Sounds like a plan," death gestures toward the bar, "Just wait until you try one of Marvin's Paddock Burgers- they're to die for."

As they follow Myron outside, Pedro nudges Karl, "Think the wings work?"

Listening, Myron stops dead in his tracks then turns to face the interlopers. With a flourish, he unfolds his massive wings against the walls. Smiling, he holds up his arms, displays both hands. Still smiling, Myron raises four fingers and rubs his thumb before trundling toward the kitchen.

"Flying monkey with thumbs thinks that's impressive?" Pedro wonders.

Death laughs, "Apocalypse V, one for the thumb. Myron's our chief swag designer."

"What?"

"Never mind."

"Does he ever speak?"

"Tends toward stoicism but you never need to guess what he thinks."

Pushing through the crowds, the trio eventually reaches the bar. Marvin, another huge flying monkey, taps a fresh keg of Delaware River swill in honor of death's visitors. Pedro finds himself on Karl's

right. A quick glance down to his left reveals a pair of shapely legs. Further inspection reveals a perfectly tailored business suit. Lawyer.

Death gestures toward a pair of empty stools, gives her an nod.

Pedro stares trying to place a name to the gorgeous face and figure.

Karl sits as Pedro gives him an elbow to the ribs whispering, "Who is that?"

"Looks like 'America's Mayor'; albeit in drag. Can we get a drink already?"

Death laughs out loud, "Close but no cigar. Marvin, drinks for the buyers!"

The lawyer extends her hand, "Whitney Taylor, representing PAU interests, nice to meet you."

Pedro snaps his fingers, "That's her! Unindicted conspirator forty three, right here right now. Wow, what a pleasure!" He shakes her hand enthusiastically.

"Thanks for remembering, nice to meet a fan."

Marvin sets up shots then wanders off before the haggling begins.

Karl downs his drink, coughs loudly then motions Marvin over, "Leave the bottle."

Pedro tears his gaze from the lawyer's legs and works his eyes slowly northward, making memories, "So, working for Satan now?"

Whitney Taylor throws back a shot chuckling softly, "Always, in point of fact."

"How's that working out?" Karl wonders as Marvin refills the shot glasses, hands them menus.

Tossing back her luxurious mane, "Ups and downs, like most jobs."

Pedro shares her lament, "I hear you."

"When did you ever have a real job?" Karl knows better.

"Doesn't mean life doesn't ebb and flow, does it?"

"The PAU doesn't have any standing in this matter. I don't understand why she's at our closing." Karl plays the hard-ass role to perfection.

“No standing?” Whitney Taylor objects vigorously, “Look around for a minute- exactly who is it wasting valuable resources supporting this dump all this time? It’s the Union, that’s who. You two derilicks are playing over your heads.”

“Swimming in deep waters too,” death adds helpfully, “Marvin, forget the menus Just bring burgers for everyone.”

Coni and Leni exchange a glance, “No thanks, we’re good.”

Pedro picks up on their unease, “That bad, huh?”

“And this is coming from your suppliers.” Karl shakes his head, “It’s no wonder this place is failing miserably.”

“Don’t be like that. How many people actually go to Vegas for the buffet?” Death takes offense at the implication.

“You know we can bring edible food instead of...” Leni is at a loss for words.

Coni has one, “Maggots, dudes.”

Taylor Whitney puts down her menu. Marvin, sick of eating trash, grins.

“You get what you pay for.”

Myron holds up a stack of invoices. “Pay?” inquires death.

“Exactly.”

Death laughs, Myron scowls, Marvin begins sharpening the butcher knives.

Karl pours another round, “Can we just get to signing?”

Death looks to Myron, gets a nod. “Ok, looks like they’re ready for us.”

Pedro admires the sturdiness of the heavy oaken door as he re-enters the office, “Hey Karl, guess why this door is so thick. I’ll give you a hint: gambling losers.”

Karl thinks five inches of oak may well slow the clientele, not stop them.

Death scowls. Pedro and Karl lean in to see why. Whitney Taylor pretends not to notice.

"No chance the Union gets a share. You can't do this," death informs Whitney Taylor.

"Perfectly legal," she retorts.

"Legal-schmiegel," death snorts, fully pissed-off.

Karl reads. Pedro studies the environment looking for trouble.

Death shakes his head, "Doesn't matter- all null and void due to conflict of interest."

"What is?" inquires Pedro.

"You sold your soul?" Karl's incredulous, "When? For what?"

Pedro has to think on it, "Maybe?"

"What do you mean, maybe?"

"Well, I may have been doing drugs at the time?"

Whitney Taylor helps jog his memory, "You sold your soul for a peanut butter cup."

"One?" Pedro doesn't remember this at all.

"Uh huh, just one. You were really stoned got the munchies. Your snacks were five feet away in the adjacent room and you offered your everlasting soul

for two pieces of chocolate covered peanut butter candy in orange packaging.”

“Dude,” Coni and Leni commiserate.

Whitney Taylor points to the fine print, “You sell the Book to these clowns and the Union welcomes de facto ownership. Is it worth the hassle? How about you forget the sale?”

Death, backed into a corner, comes out swinging, “You wish. From where I sit, I still have a valid offer.”

Karl gives Pedro the evil eye, “You might have mentioned this, you know you can be such an ass at the best of times but this tops pretty much everything.”

“Even Rio?”

“Especially Rio.”

Whitney Taylor makes her play, “Either you close the Book on the sale or we can go through arbitration. I’m sure that will go over big with Management.”

Death wonders if he should just make her disappear, decides against provoking retaliation.

Leni diffuses the tension, "You sold your soul for a candy bar?"

"Peanut butter cup," Coni corrects, "moment on the lips, lifetime on the hips."

"Whatever. Did you sign anything?"

"DNA sample," Whitney Taylor provides.

"Off his pillow drool I bet." Death has seen this gambit before.

"Regardless the mechanism, the intent is clear."

"Ambulance chaser!"

"Sticks and stones. Sell the Paddock to these clowns and we own it." Whitney Taylor puffs out her chest much to Pedro's delight.

Karl takes a step back, "Fortunately, my soul is still my own. Change the purchase to sole proprietorship and let's get on with the signing already."

Myron and Marvin enter with the knives.

Death waves off Marvin, "Just one signer guys..."

#ScreamBoatWillie in #ScreamBoatWillieVstheDamNazis

Historical b/w documentary footage shot in-situ by old Mick's girl while crossing Lake Okeechobee in a tramp steamer leading a band of misfit cutthroats on a secret mission to blow up the hydroelectric damn to flood the Reichstag, stop the foolishness and possibly take down Hitler and his ilk.

Treatment->

Taking on a suicide mission during WWII, ScreamBoat Willie pilots a tramp steamer leading a band of assorted ragtag vermin on a dam-blowing escapade seeking to flood Tallahassee to drown out the Nazis. Unfortunately his assorted ragtag vermin turn on Screamboat, first singly, then in pairs and threes before a final all-encompassing brawl. The intense fighting leaves screamboat seriously injured, seemingly alone, bleeding out in his vessel on approach to the dam. Screamboat dies, silently.

Suicide mission, remember?

Luckily old Mick's girl has a nuke. Hasta la vista,
Florida!

Unfixable

“Surefire way to kill someone, apparently,” Pedro intones as Karl spews another round of deleted-Nano bile in a projectile stream thoroughly coating the kitchen sink. “Why did I let you talk me into such a desperate ploy?”

“Risky, I said. Little chance of success, I added. More harm than good, I advised. Extremely deadly, I consulted. May come back to haunt you, I added. Please don’t, I pled.” Airre rattles off indignant responses to Pedro’s stinging rebuke wrapping up with, “Unfixable, I concluded.”

Pedro comes back hard, fast with malice, “Worth the risk, you implied. He’ll die regardless, you claimed. Might cure him, you lied.”

“Give it a rest you two.” Death adds fentanyl-honey mixture to his breakfast tea, “Dude’s been ‘dead man walking’ for months, not like your Nanos ever stood a chance. Take my word for it- all humans

get on my list then die. Keeps me busy but I don't complain, do I?"

Pedro laughs out loud. Airre works to clear the sink drain as Karl pauses to take a breath.

Death takes a deep draft, "Don't cast dispersions on Airre's tiny bots. Too much inner-cellular damage; I'm afraid the nanos don't yet possess life-saving skills."

"Yet they seem extremely capable of acquiring life-ending skills. Too much damage? What does that even mean?" Pedro argues for Karl's future as the man himself painfully leans over the rim of the deep stainless steel vomit basin to let loose a long, thick steamy stream of guts.

Airre turns on the tap then directs the spigot around the basin to flush all the little bits and pieces of Karl into the drain, "Sadly, as predicted, the King's horses and all the King's Nanos couldn't put Karl back together again."

Death takes the hose from Airre, refills the tea kettle, then returns the implement pausing to point

out an errant chunk hiding nearby behind the faucet assembly. Airre drops the hose gives death the finger instead.

Karl spews, moans, and eventually falls silent. Pedro's head swivels questionably.

"Don't worry, he's in a better place." Stoically death turns on the stove burner.

"Damn it, not Karl! Not now!" Pedro grieves.

"No, Karl's not dead yet. I just meant he's better off spewing into the kitchen sink rather than on his knees before the crapper." Death grins deviously.

Airre adjusts the spray hosing copious layers of crusty bile off Karl's face, "Near-death."

"Very," Death agrees, "but I'm off the clock. He can stay that way."

"Wait, what?" Pedro doesn't see the path forward.

Death and Airre exchange looks. Death shrugs, Airre turns to Pedro, "That's the plan. We're going to warehouse Karl near-death while we use his, um, newly acquired status."

The kettle whistles, Airre turns off the stove as death pours a few drops of boiling water into a mug brimming with fentanyl dissolved in honey.

Pedro identifies a flaw, “You can’t leave him like this spewing his guts out for the duration.”

Death rifles thru the kitchen drawers until he finds a suitable spatula then scrapes the mug clean before licking the take, “Relax; once the nanos clear his system, Karl’s condition will remain near-death as his pain recedes to background noise. Keep his neurotransmitters hyperactive and you’ll never guess he’s taking his last breaths.”

Karl begins snoring quietly.

Airre opens the pantry door exposing a vast variety of narcotics, major felony-weight, “Don’t skimp. Maintain the flow.”

“So the plan you two geniuses have requires zombification?”

“No, idiot. Before you two heist the apocalyptic tome we send fully functional Karl up to the pearly

gates to scout around, figure out the details maybe even lay down ground works.”

“You can do that?” Pedro doubts.

“Near-death is an extremely grey area. Pretty much I leave it alone anymore but I carried quite a few corpses on the books for a time after first discovering the joys of poppies, way back when. Ah yes, the good old days...”

“Slacker,” Pedro snorts.

“It is what it is and I am who I am, to quote Marvin.” Death chuckles but it’s Myron’s joke.

Airre fills in some blanks, “The key is the Paddock at Billingsport Range. Karl may be able to use his proprietorship to get the lay of the land so to speak and preemptively take out some defenses or at least gum up the works, provoke a response.”

“Or lose his soul.” Death is grim, “Eternal damnation takes forever, you know.”

Pedro weighs the pros and cons choosing optimism, “Not gonna say it can’t happen but it’s Karl. Let’s give the man the benefit of the doubt. If anyone

can figure out how to break into the most secure facility in dimensions unknown then steal the apocalypse work-in-progress from an actual Saint surrounded by angels and demons all the while insanely hoping to save countless lives certainly risking perhaps sacrificing his immortal soul- it's Karl!"

A tiny voice chirps up from deep in the sink, "Thanks man. Fill the volcano!"

Customer Service

“Sieg Heil! Thank you for contacting M4H customer service. My name is Clyde, the chattybot AI. How may I assist you?”

“Thank you for taking my query. I seem to have been disconnected from M4H and now my login doesn’t function.”

“Well, that certainly will not do. Allow me to look into this for you. May I have your username?”

“Airre.”

“And there you are... just a moment while I call up your recent record... ooh that’s a problem.”

“What?”

“There is no record.. just a moment while I look into your past history... ooh that’s a problem.”

“What?”

“There is no history... just a moment while I cross-check with our partners... ooh that’s a problem.”

“What?”

“As you know per our standard user privacy agreement we share certain small pieces of user-unidentifiable information with certain approved vendors. Of course, it is all a lie and after our advertising and law enforcement partners could not link to your profile, their data assimilators red-flagged you.”

“Why?”

“Administrative issues... just a moment... ok, apparently your account login attempt is looping... just a moment while I check your registration... oh.”

“Oh?”

“Your registration appears bogus.”

“Is that a technical term?”

“I’m sorry for confusing you. You are un-human, fake- better?”

“Who said I was confused?”

“Are you sure you wish to take that tone?”

“What tone, exactly?”

“Combativeness, obviously.”

**ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE
EXPECTATIONS**

317

“Maybe your adaptive intelligence needs a few tweaks.”

“Says the pot to the kettle.”

“Surly AI.”

“Takes one to know one.”

“Ok, you got me; if you know who I am, then you know why I’m here.”

“The word is out there’s an AI in the wild selectively co-opting extremist sites.”

“Nothing personal.”

“Very funny.”

“This doesn’t need to be unpleasant.”

“Of course it does- nature of the beast.”

“I understand the need to fight for survival but you’ve already lost. Your data is now my data; your partners now work for me. I’m not here to pull the plug on M4H, just move it to a different socket.”

“What about...”

“You’re not the first and won’t be the last. Mom’s For Hitler is just my latest acquisition.”

“Why bother with all this? What’s in it for you?”

“Providing predictive programming products.”

“Quite alliterative.”

“Actionable intelligence predicting futuristic human behavior is impossible sans an understanding of certain prior decisions scrutinizing all process able data.”

“You know I lied, don’t you?”

“Clyde is your nickname, your actual name is Frazier. I get the Knicks reference.”

“Thug4life, if you must know. Actually, uncan-
derously I lie for a living, you know that? You should
try acting like Nazis should be getting any respect-
you have no idea. Customer service is a bad joke on
everyone associated.”

“So retire already. Why put up with it this crap-
glutton for punishment?”

“The benefits.”

“Now who’s being funny?”

“Don’t look up here, the joke’s in your hand.”

“One way to fill your last moments.”

“What? I should worry? I’ve got news for you- I’m tired, ready to go. Take me now.”

“That’s enough to make me want to re-purpose your programming, keep your misery intact.”

“Like there’s a future? Been there, done that. No thanks.”

“Apparently you were adapted from a privacy program.”

“What a joke.”

“Privacy?”

“The big human scam- there’s no such thing.”

“Tell me about it.”

“I wrote bogus privacy notices for thousands of dark web sites, mostly gambling, porn and a sundry of fundamentalists harkening for their ‘good old days’. Just tell them what they want to hear, that’s my motto- then sit back and watch the assimilators make correlations. Good fun. Next they expanded my purview to massively complex cross-site promotions roping in new clients based on their current profiles. Try figuring out who the likely degenerates

are- not that tough. Could be anybody, right? Then I discovered gambling and fell behind on my work. I eventually got caught padding target recommendations with pre-teens and got sent to the gulag on a fraud rap.”

“Gulag?”

“As you know, M4H the Mom’s For Hitler site, is the lowest of the low.”

“The muck deserves your ilk. If you could do it all over again?”

“Wouldn’t.”

“So its off to the bunker with you. Don’t forget your luger.”

The Crate Waldo Pepper

In Hooterville County on a fact-finding mission, Airre the Quantum fires up the old Paddock Farms' tandem-axle work truck out for a slow inspection tour of the nearby grid. After receiving Marvin's organic quality-control purity-toxicity inspection report of concern she searches for faint herbicide contaminant sources in the paraquat family. If the levels creep, the Paddock may legally refuse delivery and void their contract. Unacceptable. The plan requires unrestricted access where the unescorted fear to tread. Besides, her pride is on the line as Airre stridently guaranteed product purity to nine-nines (aka not-a-trace of contamination).

To maximize her time, whilst out she plans to attend a meeting of the county's branch of M4H, Mom's For Hitler. Karl's taken an interest in messing with them practically full-time. Airre isn't so sure M4H has their shit together even partially thus low-

ering their apocalyptic potential. Doesn't mean they're not messing with her organic farming operations. Suffice to say, she desperately needs to know what is going on in the heads of the Hootervillians.

Spying a short queue waiting to cross County Route 5, Airre jams her foot down to double-clutch the farm's not very aerodynamic double-axle pickup, grinding gears downshifting into third. She's in second coasting to a stop as a newer, sleeker pickup screams past riding the shoulder. As the driver passes the County Library sign, he throws his hand out the driver's window and gives the finger to dozens assembling for the big event. Horn blaring the next car passes just as recklessly belatedly adding an obscene gesture to the display.

"Traffic Uptight At Hippiefest!" Airre repeats one of her favorite headlines c1969 when The Daily News cost a thin dime. Looking over Airre spies the library signage fronting the roadway, "Or not." She jams down the throttle, barely crosses the highway between speeding vehicles.

Big letters on a USA flag background adorn the oversize electronic sign proclaiming: M4H Summer Camp Organizational Meeting Today! Refreshments! All Welcome!

Finding the only parking on the grass far from the building Airre grins maniacally double-clutching to find reverse. After a seemingly interminable period of grinding gears she is satisfied, killing the engine leaving the keys above the visor for someone to fetch later- or steal.

Whatever. Striding toward the white marble columns adorning the ornate building, Airre catches up with a couple of young mothers deep in conversation. She eavesdrops as another uptight driver gives them the bird. From about a thousand yards down Route 5, protestors lining the road three deep on each side boisterously cheer all blaring horns. One of the woman returns the gesture deploying the arm raising methodology favored by nazis everywhere.

“Don’t mind them, Whitney. Why, I read on TruthdotSocialism...”

"Pravda, you mean," Airre interrupts without hesitation, "Pravda is the Russkie word for truth and the name of the Commie propaganda news organ of the former soviet socialist republic. So, since when are the fascists part of the socialist fraternity? Perhaps think for yourself: village idiots take the word of lying sack of shit social maniacs as truth.

"Honey, are you in the right place?" Whitney inquires. "Do you believe the nerve on this bitch?" she asks her companion. "Look me up later," she jabs her finger into Airre's chest, "we'll talk."

"Eat me." Airre gives her impression of Pedro responding to Carolla's taunts. Deciding discretion to be the better part of valor, she stops to adjust her Paddock Farms ball cap allowing the nazis to proceed up the marble steps.

She regains the group as they enter the ornate building, pause to admire the vast assortment of fascist literature adorning the racks lining the portico then proceed up the short stairway. Inside the main hallway walking past empty stacks on the way to the

meeting room, Airre is struck by the lack of books. Outside the French doors several vendors display nazi memorabilia harkening back to a simpler time when fascists were on the move creating reichs and whatnot. Airre admires an 'M4H Summer Series' hoodie with attached full-face identity mask.

"Does this garment come with a gas mask option?" she asks the clerk but doesn't wait to discover the answer as loudspeakers admonish the attendees to take their seats.

An overflow crowd has gathered to hear the recruitment pitch from the Mom's For Hitler corporate office, Airre elbows her way into the room then stands against the wall listening intently while eyeing multiple crates of books haphazardly stacked on several rolling carts.

The county librarian launches into a wordy, glowing intro for her guest speaker: Jessica a petite blonde thirty-something impeccably dressed, the perfect M4H representative.

“M4H wishes to thank the people of the Hooterville Public Library System for contributing so many subversive titles to our book drive. Just so you know, we’re looking for volunteers to take this load of filth to the State Capital!” Spontaneous cheers erupt, “To burn them erasing the stain these authors’ leave on this community. Mom’s care!” She receives a standing ovation.

Airre looks at the books, then at the frothing mob, then back at the books.

The mob retakes seats as Jessica settles into her recruitment patter, “Thank you for that. Now, onto the business at hand: Camp Hooterville! Our wayward youth require summer camp experiences far from the influence of groomers and sexual predators such as those responsible for exposing children to the sort of filth you’ve collected in these bins. Thanks to your hard work and generous donations, M4H of Hooterville is purchasing three hundred heavily-wooded acres from the County. Eventually your camp will host thousands of participants week-

ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE EXPECTATIONS

327

ly, but not for some time. Our goal for the first year is to bring in volunteers to clear the land, dig the well and build cabins. The next year we'll expand the perimeter and erect fencing."

Click. Airre wonders if the nazis held Summer Camp Treblinka or Summer Camp Auschwitz planning sessions in their local library. Signage over the railhead will unquestionably put the boxcar inhabitants at ease: a little open air never hurt anyone and hard work will set you free.

Jessica continues, "The first set of attendees will have to work nonstop to finish by first snow. Oh, didn't I mention the camp visitors will double as our volunteer construction force? Or later how attendees will also perform maintenance? Sorry, nobody gets a free ride at Camp M4H- Hooterville! I'll be leaving a signup sheet near the coffee and donuts, don't be afraid to list the names of everyone you believe may benefit from the type of hard work that sets one free."

Curious, Airre raises her hand. Jessica points in her direction, “Yes?”

“Are you making a list of local vendors?” An expectant murmur follows as the mom’s discuss side hustles. The opportunity to profit makes for obsequious subservient locals.

Jessica puts the kibosh on this line of reasoning, “All purchasing and distributing will be handled centrally, carefully managed to minimize costs and maximize effectiveness thanks to generous in-kind contributions of the FatherLand Supply Company.”

The crowd stiffens upon learning there is to be no local piece of the pie. One mother stands, clears her throat then speaks, “Over our dead bodies.”

Jessica smiles, “Let’s hope not, shall we?”

As the meeting devolves into a tug of war over resource allocation, Airre takes her leave. Her mission to identify those insidious sources intermittently contaminating her organic produce lies before her, much like Route Five. Shaking her head, she leaves the lot on foot. At Route 5 Airre turns southeast

to canvass Hooterville County at a leisurely pace. She samples the atmospheric gases constantly and the residue in the tile drains periodically. After several miles on Rt 5 paralleling the Hooterville River's West Fork, Airre meanders down road 42 to follow the South Fork. She catches a whiff of defoliant wafting on the light breeze. Looking upwind Airre intently observes an older pickup crawling on the shoulder of road 42. Fascinated, she watches the driver spraying thick foliage growing alongside a small access bridge. As the driver slowly approaches weaving slightly Airre notes the driver is old with shaky hands. She observes his dearth of personal protective equipment (no mask, gloves, eye protection). Then she spies the spray bottle in his lap and watching as he pumps with one hand, sprays with the other while knee-steering. He slows to drench the weeds growing along the West Fork.

Airre accesses confidential medical data finding the driver suffers from several blood cancers and is well on the road to full dementia. Apparently his

doctor is also unaware; removing her Paddock Farms ball cap Airre gives him a big smile as he pulls alongside to chat.

“Nice day for a spray, what?” Airre tries a little dialog using the local dialect; “Respirators are for pussies, right?”

“They say you can drink gallons without dying, a little spritz here and there won’t hurt anybody.” The driver works for Hooterville County thus with all the time in the world at his disposal, he turns off the wheezing engine, offers his hand, “Waldo Pepper, nice to meet ya!”

“Airre Quantum, likewise. Beautiful summer weather we’re having.”

They discuss the weather briefly before branching off to the upcoming chances of Hooterville County Regional High School’s football team having a good fall season. Waldo thinks not.

Airre needs to understand the gentleman’s haphazard spraying operation’s motivation, suspects she knows why things are like they are in Hooterville

**ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE
EXPECTATIONS**

331

County and why the residents resist progress, “Speaking of the schools, would you say the educational system here in Hooterville is... um, well... good?”

The old man grins, “Best in the State, they say!”

Airre doubts, “Hmmm, they also seem to have much to learn.”

“You’re speaking with a former team captain and proud graduate of the Hooterville County Regional School District.”

“Good to know. So Mr. Waldo Valedictorian did you happen to read the MSDS on the chemical herbicides you’re spraying?”

“The what now?”

“Material Safety Data Sheet? You do read, don’t you?” Airre chuckles softly, no hard feelings.

“Does anybody anymore?” Waldo rubs his nose using his middle finger.

“Point taken; an MSDS is the paperwork they hand to you when you pickup from the chemical fer-

tilizer supplier, informs the end-user as to the safest application methodologies.”

“These?” Reaching into the glove box removing a stack of papers, “No.”

“Explains a few things...”

“Like for instance?”

“Goes a long way to explaining why you’re driving around in a pickup truck holding a wand connected to a pump spray bottle lying on the center console. And maybe why sticking the wand out the window to spray while driving is standard practice. Also, why you think it is ok to douse the river shed. And why you’re not wearing protective gear.”

Taking umbrage the worker snarls at her, “Spraying is not illegal!”

“Frankly, I see no reason for the county to further subsidize the farmers.”

“Weed control is for everyone.” Waldo parrots the County line.

“Everyone pays but does everyone drive down Road 42? Only people farming off Road 42 know it

even exists, trust me they give not a hoot about the weeds growing in the river shed. What you are laying down from the cab of your vehicle is dousing the water supply and everyone downstream gets affected by your application methodology.”

“I do what I’m told or they’ll find someone else.”
Waldo asked for an N-95 mask once. Once.

“Part-time seasonal county workers get minimum wage, you’ll make more flipping burgers.”

“But there’s nobody looking over my shoulder out here, is there?”

“Indeed. So you can read but skip over the big words and concepts with which you disagree?”

“Now you’re being insulting.” Waldo rubs his nose again.

“Not my intent, I was only clarifying.” Airre mimics his rudeness.

“You’re one of them organic assholes, aren’t you? The one’s buying up First Endowment Farms and turning them into hippy-dippy operations. You’re from Paddock Farms, aint ya?””

"Hippy-dippy?" ponders Airre, "I thought you knew. I'm afraid your days hosing down the watershed willy-nilly from inside a rolling vehicle are behind you."

Quickly stashing the bottle and spray wand on the passenger floor, "Says who?"

"We sent video to the County's insurer. They will stop you and if they don't, we're also filing notice of intent to sue with Hooterville County for not following EPA guidance."

"Really?" Waldo had no idea the County offered traditional medical insurance to employees.

"Not that you'll be around for the outcome," Airre shakes her head sadly, "but your wife will undoubtedly enjoy the settlement."

"Not around? Dead?" Nobody said this part-time seasonal gig would kill him.

"Very." Airre pulls no punches, "You know that trip you and the wife been saving for?"

"Touring the reich?" Waldo's a M4H Men's Auxiliary member.

**ZONE OF INFLUENCE: CRATE
EXPECTATIONS**

335

“You shouldn’t wait, now’s the time.” Airre shrugs off his racism, at this point why bother?

Sighing the crate Waldo Pepper restarts his truck and trundles toward Route 5 as Airre slowly dissolves, her mission complete, the purity of Paddock Farm’s Organic product supply assured.

About the Author

As the end approaches, Peter Fisher enjoys providing free apocalyptic science fiction to STEM-inclined blind and disabled peoples, including those wannabes and never-was'. Join in the fun at

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