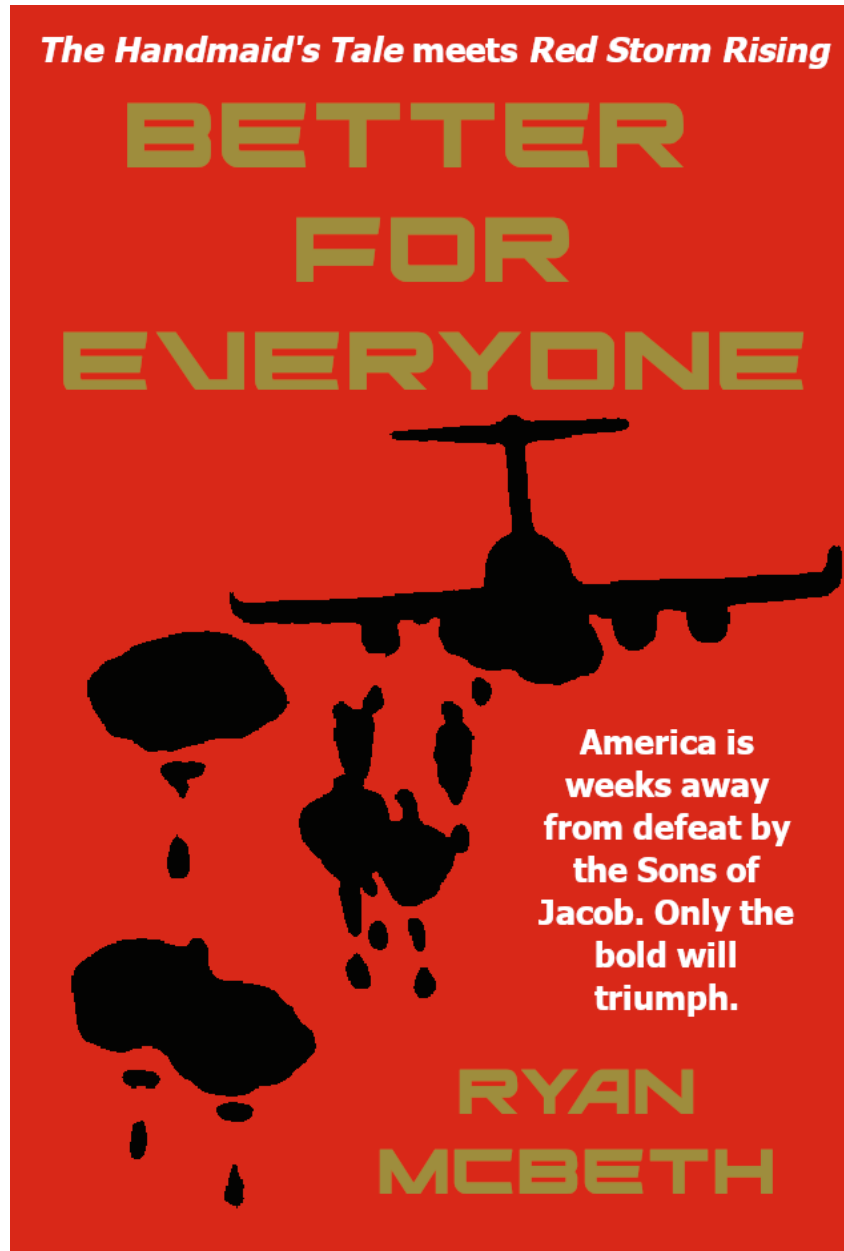


Better for Everyone

By

Ryan McBeth



Author's note:

This work shows the world of Hulu's *Handmaid's Tale* through the lens of a 1980's era Tom Clancy-esque technothriller. The original *Handmaid's Tale* book was a fascinating look at a mirror-image world where America had turned into a theocracy, but it never really got into the mechanics of running a country or fighting a revolution. Margaret Atwood focused on how women would be treated in this dystopian future. If you are looking for more of the same, *Better for Everyone* isn't it. Instead, this book explains what is going on away from Offred's little corner of the world. It's fan fiction, but it's also a nod to the kind of books that Tom Clancy and Harold Coyle wrote back in the late 80's. It's a glimpse into the rest of the world and things aren't looking too good. If you haven't read or watched *The Handmaid's Tale* and you just want your fix of the kind of techno thriller that stopped existing with the Soviet Union, then here's the lowdown: *The Handmaid's Tale* is set in a world where birthrates have fallen to record lows. This crisis paves the way in the US for a theocratic regime called the "Sons of Jacob" where society is re-aligned with old-testament biblical principles. Catholics, Muslims and Jews are murdered. Women aren't allowed to go to school or read. Some women, deemed enemies of the state, are forced into a sort of sexual slavery to provide children for high-ranking couples who can't reproduce.

Better for Everyone takes clues from the Hulu show and mashes them together into a universe where the world economy has collapsed, a Big Mac costs \$1,800 in paper dollars, Dutch pilots fly in Gilead's Air Force, Mormon soldiers in Utah are America's last best hope, and an internet pornographer might just have the key to bringing down Gilead once and for all. I tried to capture the essence of the Hulu show,

but I also wanted to capture that feeling of epic conflict I got when reading *Red Storm Rising* in middle school study hall. Whenever I encountered a question about how the government would respond - whether democratic or theocratic - I looked to the past. Rationing in *Better For Everyone* is based on what the US did during World War II with some modern-day twists added in. When wondering how Gilead's military would work with only two ranks (Commander and Guardian), I looked at the original template for the Chinese People's Liberation Army from 1946-1948 which had no formalized rank structure. Chicago is a mix of Stalingrad and Aleppo. Hawaii is Casablanca for wealthy Gay men. Utah and the southwestern states have a veneer of normalcy that is only held together by deep Mormon roots. Gilead's inner workings really aren't that much different than the Taliban, so I must give credit to Amed Rashid for his amazing book about the inner workings of the organization.

Any mistakes I've made in grammar, geography or military technology are purely my own.

This is a work of speculative fan fiction. As always, the show is cannon.

Get your parachutes on. We're coming in hot.

"Better never means better for everyone...

It always means worse, for some."

- The Commander, *The Handmaid's Tale*

Chapter 1 - The Battle of Sacramento

1200 Feet Above Sacramento, California. Republic of Gilead.

A paratrooper jumping from a plane at 1,200 feet is only eight seconds from death. This fact was not lost upon Private Josh Akers as he shuffled toward the door of the C-130. The briefing had described the drop zone as “unobstructed highway with a concrete median, two overpasses, median signage and vertical slopes.” But everyone in the battalion knew it was really a concrete deathtrap with elevated positions on both sides. This wasn’t the best drop zone, but the 4,000 foot section of eight-lane highway in the Elmhurst section of Sacramento was east of the target. Any Sons of Jacob guardians who shot at them would do so looking into the rising morning sun.

This wasn’t Private Akers’s first jump, but he was pretty sure this one would be his last. Private Akers reached inward toward a passage from The Book of Mormon.

Fear not, little children, for you are mine, and I have overcome the world... and none of them that my Father hath given me shall be lost.

“GO! The jumpmaster yelled.

A Utah National Guard paratrooper spiraled out the door. The jumpmaster collected the departing soldier’s static line in a bundle and motioned the next soldier forward. A Mormon chaplain stood next to the jumpmaster. The chaplain yelled with a voice that boomed above the combination of howling wind from the open transport door and all four of the C-130’s turboprop engines. Each paratrooper, whether Mormon,

Catholic or one of the unit's handful of Muslims or Jews, received a blessing as they stepped forward toward the door.

"Lift up your hearts and be glad," the chaplain shouted: "for I am in your midst, and am your advocate with the Father!"

The chaplain would jump as well - everybody jumped - but he would jump last with the medics and render aid to any wounded.

"GO! The jumpmaster yelled to the next paratrooper in line. That paratrooper shuffled out to his destiny.

Private Akers moved closer to the door. Now he was two men away from death. He remembered a time at the Camp Williams mess hall when he cut in line in front of a soldier who wore a parachute rigger badge. Riggers were the soldiers that configured the static lines and packed the parachutes. His life was literally in their skilled hands. Akers promised to the Heavenly Father that if he could just survive this mission, he would never rush a rigger again.

"GO!"

One soldier away.

Private Akers looked toward the rear of the C-130. He tried to find Private Johnson, who should be with the medics somewhere back there in the forest of multicam uniforms and determined faces. He resolved to finally tell Private Johnson how he felt about her once they made it back alive.

"GO!"

Akers stood in the door of the C-130.

"GO!"

Akers jumped and his thoughts were enveloped with the slipstream.

The feeling of weightlessness when jumping was somewhat like going over a sudden hill in the road or the crest of a roller coaster. Akers suddenly had to pee. He ignored the feeling, tucked his head into his chest and counted.

“Thousand one... thousand two... thousand three... thousand four... That’s funny. Where’s the -”

Private Akers felt the sudden, secure pain of his parachute harness going taut. Good. He looked up at his parachute canopy. The edges of the parachute were drawn together like he had been folding a fitted sheet. This wasn’t an ideal situation, but at least it was something he could control. Private Akers held the risers of the parachute tightly as he frantically bicycled his legs in mid air. It worked. The parachute blossomed above him.

Now what?

Private Akers pulled out his foam earplugs and let them drop to the ground. He scanned his surroundings, starting with the most important feature - the earth directly below. Army parachutes are designed to get a trooper out of the sky as fast as safely possible. They’re steerable - to an extent. The Army doesn’t want its paratroopers steering themselves around and possibly off the drop zone. So hitting the ground is the equivalent of jumping from an 18 foot ladder - and this time he would land on highway concrete.

Private Akers descent led directly on top of an overpass. He recalled from the briefing that there were two overpasses on the drop zone - one for 51st street and one for 48th street. He didn’t see a second overpass, so he assumed he must be directly

above 48st street. This was good, but it meant there was only a 500 foot window between the overpass and a massive street sign. Private Akers flared his parachute forward and away from the overpass. With that problem solved, Private Akers looked forward. A half-mile long stick of paratroopers floated above him. The scene wasn't very peaceful. A Marine Corps V-22 Osprey - a tiltrotor that looked like a cross between a freight train and a hammerhead shark - barreled overhead. The plane banked left, heading down the interchange between I-50 and the South Sacramento Highway. A missile slithered from a launcher rack on the back ramp of the Osprey. The missile made a direct line toward the overpass intersection. The overpass erupted in flame and concrete. The thunder of the explosion rolled over Private Akers a few seconds later. Now any guardian reinforcements wouldn't be taking the highway.

Private Akers looked slightly south of the interchange. The target - South Sacramento Charter High School - lay a mile to the west. The football field stood out perfectly among the low California bungalows. He wondered if anybody was still living in those developments, but he didn't wonder for long. The ground approached.

Private Akers reached down between his legs. He pulled the friction harness of his rucksack. The rucksack fell free of his body. A moment later, he felt the tug and bounce of the pack reaching the end of its fall, arrested by a twenty-foot long nylon cord. Now he had to figure out where to land and he damn sure didn't want to land with his legs between the concrete highway divider.

He steered his parachute toward the center of the westbound lane. The ground came up fast. He felt himself "reaching" toward the ground with his toes. This was a

great way for a paratrooper to break an ankle and it took everything to will himself to keep his feet parallel to his body.

Paratroopers are trained to land with a special gymnastics exercise called a “Parachute Landing Fall” or PLF. This maneuver is designed to minimize stress on the body by hitting the ground with the balls of the soldier’s feet and then rolling right so the body absorbs the impact gradually - hitting the ankles, thighs, waist, shoulders and then continuously rolling until coming to a stop after a half-somersault.

Private Akers hit the highway surface with the sequence of feet-ass-head.

He lay on the ground for a moment as the parachute collapsed around him. He wiggled his toes inside of his boots. Everything seemed to be working. He sat up and released his parachute harness. He gathered his parachute and stuffed it inside of its deployment bag until it looked like a bloated ball of cotton. A vehicle dropped in the first stick would be along soon to pick up the deployment bag and parachute - nothing ever went to waste anymore.

Private Akers opened his weapons case. He pulled out his M4 rifle and chambered a round. He looked west - more paratroopers floated down on I-50.

“Akers!” a familiar voice yelled from behind. “Get that chute to the side of the road and let’s go!”

Private Akers turned around. The voice came from Sergeant Hale, his team leader. The young sergeant had already stashed his gear and was running forward to link up with the rest of his team.

Private Akers disconnected his rucksack from its retention strap. He wiggled into his ruck. Sergeant Hale reached him.

“You’re moving too slow, man.” Sergeant Hale said as he picked up Private Aker’s parachute deployment bag and weapons case. He ran them to the side of the road, dropped them off, and ran back toward Private Akers. He offered his hand.

“Get up, come on.” Sergeant Hale said. “The whole war can’t wait on you.”

Sergeant Hale didn’t look much older than Private Akers, but he carried with him a sense of weary authority. A four-soldier Army fire team is the basic building block of a squad. The days of cigar-chomping, foul-mouthed sergeants had long passed. The American Army - at least what was left of it - was led even at its lowest levels by noncommissioned officers who knew how to fight. And in the past few years, they had done plenty of fighting.

Private Akers extended his hand and Sergeant Hale practically launched him up from the concrete. The pair took off running west. They encountered Specialist Castro about fifty yards up the highway. Specialist Castro knelt by the concrete divider median, loading an ammunition belt into a light machine gun.

“Is your SAW up?” Sergeant Hale said to Specialist Castro.

Specialist Castro hefted his Squad Automatic Weapon, a machine gun about the size of a small leaf blower. Specialist Castro’s brown skin had already developed a sheen of sweat even though it was still relatively cool in the early morning.

“SAW’s up. She’s ready.” Specialist Castro said as he pointed west. “Let’s walk that way and shoot every Dingbat in black.”

The pejorative of “Dingbat” was slang term for the “guardians” - the soldiers of the Sons of Jacob. Nobody knew exactly where the term “Dingbat” had come from. Some theorized that the mostly Mormon Utah National Guard wouldn’t have used a

stronger expletive. Others thought that it came from Gilead's proclivity toward using icons on everything from banks to grocery stores - similar to the Microsoft Wingding font. Either way, it seemed to fit. The guardians fought like Dingbats - more with religious fervor than tactics and discipline.

A moment later, Private Smith, the fourth soldier in their team and the only female soldier in the squad, came running over. Her weapon was equipped with an underslung M203 grenade launcher, a weapon that looked like someone had taped a paper towel roll under her rifle barrel. She stopped and took a knee across from Specialist Castro.

Bravo Team, 2nd Squad, 1st platoon, Company B, 1st Nauvoo Airborne Battalion was now ready for war.

"Alright," Sergeant Hale said. "We're accounted for. Any injuries?"

The paratroopers shook their heads.

"Everybody has your equipment?" Sergeant Hale said. "Rifle? Helmet? Batteries? Castro, what the H?"

A puddle of urine streamed from the far side of Specialist Castro's leg and ran down the pavement toward the concrete median.

"I've had to pee since we left Utah," Specialist Castro said.

"You know," Private Smith said. "When you do that yellow stuff is supposed to come out, not white stuff."

"Oh," Specialist Castro said. "Like you even know what that white stuff looks like you Temple Garment-wearing freak."

Private Smith chuckled. Even in the face of death, male or female, soldiers followed the time-honored tradition of ripping on each other.

“Castro, tie a knot in it.” Sergeant Hale said. We got to go link up with Alpha Team.”

The four of them rose. They fanned out across the highway in a broad wedge formation that looked like a lopsided arrowhead. After a hundred meters, they encountered Staff Sergeant Kimball, their squad leader, and the four additional soldiers of Alpha Team. Their nine-man squad was now complete.

The sergeants from both teams and the squad leader gathered under a highway sign that looked like it had once read “Stockton Blvd 1/2”. Although the white characters on the sign had been peeled off, a layer of soot still provided a faint outline of the letters. Private Akers had seen this before on other missions. What was the deal with Sons of Jacob and signs? He didn’t know and it never made any sense when he thought about it. It was like they were trying to make their population stupid.

The sergeants huddled under the sign for a minute. Staff Sergeant Kimball took out a map. The Alpha Team leader pointed and gestured with his hands.

An Osprey zipped overhead - its massive helicopter like propellers faced fully forward and it was moving fast. But this Osprey was substantially different than the others in the morning sky. Two short miniguns and a long cannon stuck out of the fuselage to the left of the Osprey. The Marines called it a “Mongoose” - an Osprey that had been modified to fly in lazy racetrack circles far above a battle to rain down precision minigun and automatic cannon fire on enemies below.

The Mongoose disappeared over the city. An instant later came a rapid crackling explosion, followed by the sound of the world's largest zipper rumbling across the sky. The Mongoose had found a target.

The sergeants finished deliberating. Sergeant Hale came running back to Bravo Team.

"Ok, guys." Sergeant Hale said to his paratroopers. He snapped his fingers at the soldiers who craned their necks toward the sky. "Hey. Pay attention. Air show's over. You wanted to fly an Osprey you should have been a Marine. Over there-" he pointed south toward the berm on the eastbound side of the highway - "is 46th street. We gotta get the H off this highway. About a block up we turn right on T-Street. We gotta watch the flip out because there's a medical center that's a sniper's dream about two blocks south. If we hit contact, this is our rally point, by this jacked up sign here. Everybody understands?"

"Roger sergeant," Private Akers and the team replied.

The soldiers heard the droning of propellers coming from the west. The rest of The 1st Nauvoo Battalion would be dropping on top of them in seconds.

"Let's go!" Sergeant Hale yelled. "Up that embankment!"

Aerial Outcomes Operations. Travis Air Force Base, California. Republic of Gilead

Her name was Beatrix Blok, but the other pilots called her "Duckling."

It wasn't just because she was short, or that her butch pixie cut jutted out in odd places, or even that her 45 year old face wasn't exactly covergirl material. Pilot call

signs around the world followed the same rambling free-association pattern. The call sign was usually bestowed by your peers and reflected your last name, physical characteristics, or a relevant flying incident. If you didn't like your call sign, it would be changed to something you liked even less.

In Duckling's case, she was a lesbian - or what the Sons of Jacob called a "gender traitor." This would have normally earned her immediate execution, but the commanders of Gilead were a pragmatic people. Her sexuality was her business as long as she was on base and working as a pilot contractor for the Netherlands-based Aerial Outcomes B.V. Gilead needed pilots and they paid in gold bullion straight out of Fort Knox. So retired pilots with flexible morals from nations who flew American-made F-35s, F-15's and F-16's steamed into Gilead from around the world to make their fortune flying as private contractors.

Duckling's fellow pilots initially called her "Portman" after the character in the movie *Black Swan* who had a lesbian sex scene with Mila Kunis. These pilots were made up of a motley crew of retired pilots from Turkey, The Netherlands, Pakistan and South Korea - but the South Koreans couldn't pronounce the "r" in "Portman." So in the spirit of free-association naming, they switched her name to "Ballerina" which had way too many syllables and still had an "r." From "Ballerina" she became "Black Swan," which she liked. When her fellow pilots learned that she liked her call sign, she went from being the "Black Swan" to "The Ugly Duckling." She hated it, so of course the name stuck.

The sun rose in the east as Duckling left the Operations Building and walked toward the Aerial Outcomes golf cart which would take her out to her fighter. She was

joined a moment later by “Mongo” - a massive Turkish pilot who stood just an inch under the maximum height limit for F-16 aviators. They made an odd pair.

The contractor ground crewman in the golf cart laughed when he looked back at who he would be driving to the flight line.

“Well look at that,” the ground crewman said. “It’s Duckling and Mongo. The two ugliest pilots in the company. If you run out of missiles today, just get close to them and take off your masks. You’ll scare ‘em to death.”

“Mongo say little man not funny,” Mongo spoke with an exaggerated grunt. Like most contractor pilots, he spoke English well, but he played up the act of hulking Turkish Neanderthal because it was all in good fun.

The pair piled into the golf cart for the trip out to the alert fighters on Runway Three. The base was still waking up. Running cadence from guardian units out for their morning jog drifted over the base. A woman in a shapeless grey dress and wooden shepherd's crook tended sheep that munched intently on the grass between the taxiways. Nothing in Gilead went to waste, not even the grass in between the aprons of the tarmac. Duckling gave the woman a halfhearted wave, but the woman looked away.

“I’ll never get used to that,” Mongo said as he handed Duckling a metal thermos cup of Turkish coffee. Duckling took a sip of the delicious, strong, sweet coffee. She handed the cup back to Mongo.

“Never get used to what?” Duckling asked. “The shepherds or the way they treat women here?”

“Both I guess,” Mongo said. “These people are worse than ISIS.”

Mongo took a sip of coffee. He passed the cup to Duckling.

“But their gold’s good,” Duckling said. “Another six months and I can retire with my wife and kids and never work again.”

They shared the cup as the golf cart drove them out to their fighters.

The cart stopped a few feet away from two F-16s that perched on the runway like sleek metal carnivores. The F-16 always looked like a stubby silver sex toy with wings to Duckling, but every rounded inch of it was beautiful. She approached the plane with reverence. Two short-range, white-painted, AIM-9 Sidewinder air-to-air missiles hugged the F-16’s wingtips. One long, sleek medium range AIM-120 AMRAAM anti-aircraft missile hung from a pylon on the right wing. Duckling wrinkled her nose. There were supposed to be two AMRAAM missiles. Where was the other one?

Ground crew wheeled a portable ladder next to the cockpit of her plane. The departing pilot climbed out and waddled down the portable ladder. She recognized his portly shape as “Santa” - another retired Dutch pilot. All of the pilots spoke English, but it was always nice to communicate in her native tongue.

“Goedemorgen Santa,” Duckling said. “Wat heb je me gebracht? Misschien nog een AMRAAM?”

“Nee,” Santa said as he shook his head. He switched to English to make sure the ground crew could hear him rant. “I didn’t bring you another AMRAAM. The left one failed its onboard test so it went back to the shop for maintenance.”

“*Godverdomme*,” Duckling cursed.

The entire Gilead Air Force was falling apart from years of war and lack of proper maintenance. Grounded F-15s and F-16s were being cannibalized for spare parts - the mechanics called them “wind chimes” from the music they made when the breeze

whistled through the hollow airframes. Some parts could be made on 3D printers and others found on the black market, but certain parts required exotic alloys and a talent for precision machining that had been lost in the war.

A typical fighter squadron contained 12 aircraft. Her squadron contained a motley assortment of three 1980's vintage F-16's, two F-15's, and one precious F-35 - one of only two flying in what was left of North America. In all of Gilead - from sea to shining sea, only four fighters were on alert - the two directly in front of her and two more at Atlantic City International Airport in New Jersey. There were a few more contractor squadrons scattered around the country, but all of them were in just as dire shape as hers.

Duckling walked around the aircraft as she performed her pre-flight checks. She scrutinized fittings and looked for leaks. She sought anything that could turn her jet into a \$20 million dollar lawn dart. Santa spoke as he followed behind her.

"Two gripes," Santa said. "I turned on the MBX for a test and it blew out the AIDEWS. So you've got no automatic defensive chaff or flares."

"Tell me the good news," Duckling said as she caressed her hands over the airframe.

"No good news," Santa said. "Only bad. The ECS went out with the MBX. So you've got no air conditioning."

"Werkelijk?"

"Ja," Santa said. "Really. Are we good?"

"Nee," Duckling said. "But the money's good."

Santa headed for the ground crewman's golf cart. Duckling climbed the portable ladder to her cockpit. Her first order of business was to check the KAMS secure text messaging system. The system's light-blue, two-line, vacuum fluorescent display looked like it had been salvaged from clock radios and microwave ovens - and it probably had been. It was bolted into the cockpit as an applique layer over a navigation system that hasn't worked since most of America's GPS satellites spiraled into the atmosphere from lack of maintenance. Gilead's paranoia of American electronic eavesdropping had spurred development of the homegrown system. KAMS wasn't pretty, but it provided an unbreakable cryptographic communications channel between the ground and aircraft. Aircraft to aircraft voice communications were allowed but any contact with the ground was done through KAMS.

BA-Dup!

KAMS chirped an incoming message.

RDY OK?

PRES A OK

Duckling pressed the yellow, triangular "OK" button on a KAMS keypad that had once been a Comcast Xfinity remote control.

BA-Dup! KAMS chirped.

MSG RCV OK

UNDR HIS I

Duckling sat back in her ejection seat. She reached inside her flight bag for her knitting.

BA-Dup!

SCRMBL!!!

PRES OK

Duckling looked at the screen. Scramble? Were they serious? She keyed her radio.

“Hey, Mongo. You see what came over KAMS?”

“YEAH.” Mongo replied. His voice sounded tinny and metallic like a subway platform announcement system with severe allergies. “I WAS JUST ABOUT TO ASK YOU THE SAME.”

“*Stront!*” Duckling cursed. This was real.

She pressed “OK” on the KAMS keypad.

BA-Dup!

b45 d30NM

A 1000 PRES OK

This meant that the target was at a bearing of 45 degrees and 30 nautical miles away at an altitude of 1000 feet. Duckling pressed “OK.”

BA-Dup!

MTPL INBD

PRES OK

Multiple targets inbound.

“EH...” Mongo said. “THAT’S SACRAMENTO.”

Mongo must have already taken his map out.

The golf cart that had taken Santa away was now racing back toward her plane. Duckling smiled. Santa had probably learned of the intrusion, pushed the driver out and

was sprinting back, hoping he could convince either Duckling or Mongo to let him replace them in the cockpit. Each enemy plane shot down was worth a 50 ounce gold bonus. Even with only three missiles, Duckling stood to earn a lot of money today.

Duckling lowered the canopy. She hit the switches for the battery and the jet fuel starter. The green JFS light illuminated and the engine whined to life. She scanned her instruments - fan turbine inlet temp, oil pressure, nozzle position and RPM gauges read okay. Two lights went out on the left side panel. Duckling was all clear on engine start. Duckling looked to her left. Santa stood on the runway with his right ear pushed into his shoulder, his left hand covering his left ear and his right arm extended with his middle finger outstretched.

She smiled at Santa and gave him the middle finger. Then she released the breaks and throttled up. The Pratt and Whitney F1000 engine clenched in fiery rage as 32,000 pounds of thrust pushed Duckling into the sky. She climbed to 10,000 feet and banked right with her aircraft's nose pointed toward Sacramento.

She turned on her forward-looking radar. A green "P" for "preheating" flashed on her instrument cluster. The radar would take three minutes to power up. At her current speed for 460 knots, they would be over the target in 15 minutes.

Duckling realized that if any enemy fighters were airborne, their radars were most certainly on and missiles could already be streaking toward her plane.

"Mongo," Duckling said. "My AIDEWS is down. You got any threats?"

"WE'RE CLEAN," Mongo said. "ANYTHING OUT THERE IS PROBABLY IN SIL."

SIL stood for Silence Mode - meaning that the radar was on but not emitting. Air warfare is like a giant game of flashlight tag. Once you turned your flashlight on, you could see, but the enemy knew exactly where you were. At 10,000 feet, Duckling saw out to 122 miles, but any enemy planes out there would be coming in from out of the sun. She could head north and approach Sacramento with the sun at her left, but this wide turn would allow any approaching planes to get even closer.

Duckling's radar display switched from a flashing to a solid "P." She flicked her radar to SIL mode.

"Mongo," Duckling said. "Is your radar in SIL?"

"ROGER."

"Climb to angles 20 and turn your radar to EM."

"ROGER."

Mongo's F-16 shot up and away. This was a crap shoot. Since Mongo had a functioning threat detector, it made sense that he turned his radar on first. Mongo would turn on his flashlight at 20,000 feet and Duckling would remain hidden in the darkness to pounce.

"SWITCHING TO EM." Mongo said. A moment later his voice cracked over the radio at a higher pitch than Duckling was used to hearing. "BANDIT! BANDIT! SIX SLOW MOVERS. PROBABLY OSPREYS OR HELICOPTERS. THEY'RE CIRCLING THE CITY."

T Street and Stockton Blvd, Sacramento California.

Private Akers and his squad lay in the debris of an abandoned Starbucks. The occasional bullet smashed into the already battered fixtures. The Dingbats were dug in with a machine gun on the other side of the road in an old Subway fast food restaurant. Crossing the road now would be like running into a meat grinder.

Private Akers hugged the wall at the entrance to the Starbucks like a child would hug his mother. The occasional tracer round flashed into the coffee shop. The fact that only one round in five was a tracer made him wonder where the other four bullets were going. Staff Sergeant Kimball screamed into his radio.

“We’re pinned down, one-six! We need a Mongoose on that Subway, over.”

The radio squawked back.

“NEGATIVE ONE-TWO. THEY’RE TIED UP AT THE SCHOOL. OUT.”

“Mother father!” Staff Sergeant Kimball cursed. “Okay, second squad, we’re on our own. Listen up! We’re going to push across the road to the left into that triangle looking brick building.”

A burst of machine gun rounds crashed into the Starbucks. The entire squad got even lower to the floor. Staff Sergeant Kimball started yelling again.

“Akers! Get a smoke grenade ready to throw out on T-Street.”

Private Akers ripped a long, green smoke grenade from his pouches.

“Alpha and Bravo teams,” Staff Sergeant Kimble continued. “When I say ‘go,’ I want SAW to go cyclic and grenadiers put as much 203 HE on that Subway as you can. Keep up the fire. When I tell you to move, Bravo team break contact and cross to the building. Set up a base of fire on that Subway. If you hit contact, push through. When you’re in place, I’ll move with Bravo. Everybody got it?”

“Roger!” Private Akers yelled. The other soldiers in his squad replied in the affirmative.

“Go!”

Specialist Castro and the Bravo Team SAW gunner popped up from their position near a blown-out window. Their light machine guns joined a cacophony of noise as they cycled like out of control jackhammers pouring fire into the Subway. Private Smith popped up from her position and fired her grenade launcher with a “Poomp!” She reloaded the grenade launcher with the speed and efficiency of a machine and fired again.

Private Akers stood and threw his smoke grenade in the middle of T Street. The smoke grenade detonated in a shower of sparks and belched out thick white smoke.

“Bravo! Go!” Staff Sergeant Kimball yelled.

“Let’s move,” Sergeant Hale said as he tapped Private Akers on his shoulder. Private Akers had never played high school football. Growing up during the revolution, he had more important things on his mind like finding enough food to survive and provide for his family. The relative safety of the jagged building was only half a football field away, but it felt as far away as the moon.

Private Akers ran. “Thank thee for this day,” he thought. “Thank thee for this day.” At any moment he expected hot, angry machine gun rounds to cut past his body armor and into his flesh.

“Thank thee for this day.”

Private Akers hit the wall. He took a knee and raised his rifle at the Subway. Specialist Castro crashed into the wall behind him. Specialist Castro kept standing,

using Private Akers's body as cover as he fired his SAW into the restaurant that was now erupting in fire.

Private Akers fired his rifle at the flaming restaurant until the magazine was empty.

"Changing mags!" Private Akers said. He swapped out his empty magazine for a fresh one. A few hot shell casing from Specialist Castro's SAW landed on Private Akers's neck. They burned, but he would worry about that later.

The Bravo Team and Staff Sergeant Kimball sprinted from the restaurant across the street to join Alpha Team.

Staff Sergeant Kimball used his rifle to smash through the brick building's glass front door.

"Get through! Get through! Go Alpha!" Staff Sergeant Kimball yelled.

Alpha Team entered the building.

The Subway restaurant was now a conflagration of flames.

"Cease fire, cease fire." Sergeant Hale called out.

Private Akers stopped firing. He wasn't sure how many rounds he had left in his magazine, so he swapped it out with a fresh one to be safe.

"*Oh Dios mio*," Castro said as he looked at the Subway that now belched orange fire. "Nobody could have survived that."

"Give me a LACE report," Sergeant Hale said.

"Green on water." Private Akers said. "Amber on Ammo. I'm not hurt and I got all my stuff."

“Green on water.” Specialist Castro said. “Red on SAW. I got maybe twenty rounds left in the drum and one box on my belt. Green. Green.”

“Geen on waa,” Private Smith said. She looked shocked at her slurred speech. It took a moment for the team to realize that a four-inch piece of glass poked out of Private Smith’s cheek.

“Waa?” Private Smith asked when she saw the stunned looks of her team. She looked at her reflection in the window of the building. “Mudda fargga,” she said as she ripped the glass out of her cheek. She winced in pain. Sergeant Hale reached into Private Smith’s first aid kit and pulled out a lump of Kerlex gauze dressing. He stuffed the dressing into Private Smith’s mouth until it poked through the hole and blossomed out of the side of her cheek.

“Wa, Cas-ro?” Private Smith asked. “No commen on stuffin white stuff in my mouf?”

“Not right this minute,” Castro said. “*La neta te amo.*”

“Alright,” Sergeant Hale said. “Into the building we still got to push through.”

Bravo Team made its way inside what was obviously an abandoned medical office building. It was dark inside and much of the equipment had been looted. They made their way to the back of the building as Alpha Team scanned the street. The back of the structure faced a residential neighborhood lined with bungalow houses and knee-high grass lawns. It was clear that nobody had lived there in ages.

Sporadic machine gun and rifle fire came from about 300 yards away past the houses. That’s where they would head next.

Alpha Team and Staff Sergeant Kimball crossed the road first, taking up overwatch positions next to a ramshackle blue house.

“Set!” Staff Sergeant Kimball yelled.

“Let’s go,” Sergeant Hale said.

Bravo team picked up and bounded across the street. As they reached the blue house, Staff Sergeant Kimball waved his arm forward. “Push, Bravo! Push.”

Bravo Team bounded through the yard to a back alley. They took up defensive positions on the side of a ramshackle bungalow.

“Bravo set!” Sergeant Hale yelled.

Alpha Team appeared from behind. They crossed the alley and set up behind a stucco house on the other side of the street.

An Osprey suddenly thundered overhead. A fireworks display of yellow defensive flares kicked up from behind the plane as it twisted in the morning light. The plane exploded, cartwheeled and crashed just beyond the highway with a roar that shook the ground.

The squad all hoped in unison that the Osprey had been a Mongoose gunship or their ride home would be a game of musical chairs.

10,000 Feet above Sacramento, California.

“Splash one Osprey!” Duckling yelled.

She couldn't believe her luck. She had two missiles left and 500 rounds of 20mm in her cannon. Five Ospreys remained. She stood to make 300 ounces of gold in one day.

"YOU GONNA LET ME JOIN IN ON THE FUN?" Mongo asked.

"Negative, Mongo." Duckling said. "Stay put high cover. I need you to warn for fighters."

"NOW I KNOW WHAT THEY MEAN WHEN AMERICANS SAY 'GOING DUTCH.'"

"I don't think that's where it comes from, Mongo." Duckling said. "Look it up on the internet."

"FUNNY, DUCKLING." Mongos said.

Gilead was practically cut off from the internet. Although the pilots were given special privileges by the Gilead government, internet access was limited to a satellite connection through Aerial Outcomes computers in a shared computer lab. There was always a wait for the shared computers and the connection was as slow as the 1990's. Anything outside of simple email, banking and the occasional picture was tough to do.

The Ospreys below scattered in all directions as if a child had jumped into a flock of pigeons. Duckling singled out one Osprey that flew low over a highway - as if that would protect them. Yes, that one would do. She thought about shooting a missile, but she was rewarded with five ounces of gold for every missile she brought back. Cannon rounds were free.

"I'm turning for another attack run, Mongo." Duckling said.

"MISSILE! MISSILE! MISSILE!" Mongo screamed.

A rocket cartwheeled from the rear ramp of the Osprey. Instinct took over. Duckling urinated in her flight suit as she pulled up and right - toward the sun. She didn't have much time. Duckling jammed her thumb on the manual flare launcher. She needed speed but she also needed to cool her engine. She pulled the throttle back and kicked out more decoy flares.

"CHAFF. FLARE." A female sounding computerized voice that pilots called "Bitchin' Betty" warned in Duckling's headset. The F-16's Computerized Audio Warning System kicked in as her decoy flares ejected from the plane's launchers. Each of the bright yellow decoy flares burned at thousands of degrees and presented the enemy missile's computerized brain another false opportunity to go after a sputtering flare instead of the heat from the F-16's engine.

The aircraft's low speed warning warbled in her headset.

"I'm not a plane," Duckling thought, hoping her mind could push the missile away. "I'm just a big, cold bird."

"CHAFF FLARE LOW" Bitchin Betty warned.

"I know they're low," Duckling thought as she kicked out more flares.

"LOW SPEED" Bitchin Betty said.

"I know."

"STALL. STALL." Bitchin Betty said. "CHAFF FLARE OUT."

Duckling grasped the ejection handle with her left hand.

This was it. Nothing happened.

"IMPACT ON THE FLARES!" Mongo called.

Duckling rammed the throttle to the firewall.

“Mongo, Mongo. Disengage. They got air-to-air shooting out of their Ospreys.”

There was no cowardice in this act of retreating. Gilead would want her to save the plane to fight another day. Ducking and Mongo rocketed west on full afterburner.

South Sacramento Charter High School, Sacramento California.

The Dingbats didn’t know when to quit.

Private Akers crouched in an abandoned home with the rest of his squad. Occasional rifle and machine gun rounds crashed into the house, just like they had in the Starbucks an hour before. There was definitely a pattern to this. Move. Hit contact. Hide. Be terrified. Repeat.

They had linked up with the rest of their 34-soldier platoon which was now spread out in a rough picket line spanning a row of abandoned houses across from the school. Thunder rattled the remaining windows of the house. It didn’t sound like an explosion.

Specialist Castro ventured a suicidal peak out the window.

“I got F-16’s moving west real fast,” Specialist Castro said.

“Ours or theirs?” Sergeant Hale asked.

“Beats me,” Specialist Castro said. “They got the same stuff we do.”

“Listen up,” Staff Sergeant Kimball yelled. “One-six got a Mongoose to take out that building across the street. We are danger flippin close. Everybody get down. As soon as they call end of mission we’re gonna bum rush that building.”

The sound of rotors approached. The noise became a backbeat of the sporadic rifle and machine gun fire from the guardians in the building.

“Splash!” Staff Sergeant Kimball yelled. “Get down.”

The shells from the Osprey Mongoose’s side-firing cannon crashed into the high school with a *crump crump crump*.

The firing continued for about thirty seconds.

“End of mission, let’s go!” Staff Sergeant Kimball yelled.

The squad bounded out of the house. The street before them was strewn with debris and the occasional 25mm shell casing from the Mongoose. The rest of the platoon emerged from their hiding places along the street as well, moving into the school parking lot like a swarm of angry, brown ants. Bodies and body parts of dead guardians littered the parking lot. Private Akers slipped in a pool of blood as he ran. He recovered his balance and kept running toward the building.

“Yeah, I saw that, homie.” Specialist Castro said in between breaths.

Private Akers hit the side of the building.

“Entry team, stack up on me!” Sergeant Hale called as he motioned his team toward the school’s double door.

Private Akers and his team stacked up in a tight line behind their team leader.

“Breech!” Sergeant Hale said. He pulled open the door.

The team entered a long hallway that was filled with lockers.

“Utah National Guard!” Sergeant Hale yelled as the team snaked down the hallway. “If you can hear me, get down on the ground.”

The remainder of their squad filtered into the building. As they moved down the hallway, other squads from other platoons breached the high school through multiple entry points. Behind them, other units secured the perimeter of the school - just as they had practiced for weeks on end.

Sergeant Hale held up his hand in a fist. The squad paused.

The sound of far away weeping drifted down the hallway.

Sergeant Hale waved his hand forward and the squad resumed its advance down the hall. The weeping grew louder.

Sergeant Hale stopped the squad at a recessed door that looked like it led to a gym. Cries of fear and anguish reverberated through the door. This was it.

Sergeant Hale held up three fingers on his left hand. He counted down to two fingers. Then one. Sergeant Hale advanced through the door.

"Utah National Guard!" Hale yelled as he crashed through the door.

The squad followed him inside a high school gymnasium that looked like it had been turned into a refugee center. Green Army cots lay in rows on the floor. A cluster of twenty or thirty women in red dresses lay screaming in the corner of the room. Three women in brown dresses stood like resolute sentinels in front of the pile of women.

The women in brown looked to be unarmed except for black riot batons.

"Drop the weapons. Hands up." Sergeant Hale commanded.

A tall woman in brown shook her head, she was obviously in charge.

"Girls," The woman said. "Do you see these men? They are coming to take you away from our care. They are going to do horrible things to you."

“Ma’am we’re not doing this,” Sergeant Hale said. “Drop the weapon and get on your face now.”

The tall woman turned around to speak directly to the women.

“You see, girls. This is what the outside world has to offer you.”

The tall woman faced the soldiers again. She pointed her riot baton toward Sergeant Hale.

“You,” She said. “Are trespassing.”

“I’m not doing this,” Sergeant Hale said. He fired one precise shot at the tall woman, dropping her to the gym floor like a sack of potatoes.

The other two women in brown dropped their riot batons.

“Alpha Team, zip tie these two brownies.” Staff Sergeant Kimball ordered. Then he spoke directly to the pile of terrified women in red. “Listen, my name is Staff Sergeant Paul Kimball of the Utah National Guard. I’m from West Valley Utah. My mom’s a teacher. My dad’s a cop. America still exists. We live there. I can’t imagine what’s happened to you the past few years. But we can take you back home. We have special helicopters called Ospreys coming in right now. They’re landing on the football field and they’re going to take you someplace safe where these people can’t hurt you. But if you’re not injured I need you to get up and I need you to run. I need you to run as fast as you can with us. I’m not going to make you come with me. But if you want to leave, you have to leave now.”

The women in red remained petrified in place.

An idea struck private Akers. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his iPhone. He activated the screen. The women looked at the device as if they were just seeing fire for the first time.

“We still have iPhones,” Private Akers said. “And Kanye. Kim Kardashian still does Instagram out of Las Vegas. There’s still America, but you have to get up and run.”

A few of the women rose.

“Run where?” One of the women in red asked.

“Out the doors with us.”

The woman took off at a dead run. Others followed.

Staff Sergeant Kimball keyed his radio.

“One-Six, One-Two. Coming out with break-” Staff Sergeant Kimball pointed at Private Akers. “Akers, give me a count. Alpha team lead them out.”

Private Akers counted each woman in red as they passed him by. He reached 28. Five terrified women remained in the corner of the gym.

“Are any of you injured?” Sergeant Hale asked the women.

The women huddled in the corner with their heads down.

“They’re good girls,” One of the handcuffed women in brown said. “That’s right, girls. You’ve chosen the path of God.”

Private Smith kicked the woman in her face and spat the strongest Mormon curse word she knew through the ball of gauze in her mouth.

“Fart bag,” Private Smith said.

“Let’s go.” Sergeant Hale said. The team jogged out of the gym. They headed down the hallway.

“Akers,” Sergeant Hale said as he ran. “You brought a flippin iPhone on a mission?”

“Sorry, sergeant.” Akers responded. “I had it on vibrate.”

“Remind me to smoke the crap out of you when we get back.”

The team approached the door to the football field.

Marine Ospreys, their tiltable rotors now swung vertical like helicopters, flared to land to land on the football field. Another Mongoose Osprey flew in circles overhead watching the extraction from above like a concerned mother.

The women in red were gathered in a flock under the watchful eye of another squad. One Osprey touched down, its rear ramp already lowered. The paratroopers guided the long line of red women toward the gaping cargo ramp of the tiltrotor helicopter.

Private Akers and his team made a beeline toward a waiting Osprey. They encountered a Marine crew chief at the ramp to the plane.

“You got room for nine?” Private Akers asked.

The crew chief nodded and jerked his thumb inside. Sergeant Hale turned around and counted each of his paratroopers onto the crowded plane.

The scene on the Osprey was chaos. The cargo bay was a mix of aghast women in red, wounded paratroopers from different platoons and the soldiers of 2nd Squad. Akers didn’t even have a seat.

The engines of the Osprey strained and the plane lifted off vertically, rapidly gaining altitude. One of the women in red screamed. She stood up and ran out the

cargo bay ramp door before anyone could stop her. She fell out of sight and the Marine crew chief wisely shut the ramp.

"I didn't like her anyway," one of the women in red said.

The Osprey buckled as the rotors shifted from vertical to horizontal. The helicopter was now a plane and it headed east toward the safety of Nevada at full power.

"Medic" Sergeant Hale called. He pointed at Private Smith. A paratrooper medic picked her way through the gaggle of soldiers in multicam and women in red until she finally got to the rear of the aircraft.

"I'm fine!" Private Smith said. She pointed at the wounded in the rear of the plane. "They're worse."

The medic gave Private Smith's filled cheek a cursory inspection.

"Not a lot I can do for you right now," The medic said. "You're gonna need stitches and a tetanus shot. You get that looked at when we land."

The medic she worked her way to the front of the aircraft again.

"Hey!" Private Smith exclaimed. She looked at Private Akers. "Reach into my pack."

"What?" Private Akers asked.

"My pack," Private Smith said. "Reach into my pack."

Reach into my pack?

Private Smith turned around as best she could to allow Private Akers access to her backpack.

"What do you need?" Private Akers asked.

“Oreo.”

“What?”

“Oreo.”

Private Akers still wasn't sure what she was saying, but he unzipped Smith's backpack. He dug around inside the pack until his hand felt... a family size package of Oreo cookies.

“You had these the whole time?” Private Akers asked.

Private Smith nodded.

“Oreos from Canada,” Private Smith said.

“Oreos from Canada?” Private Akers asked.

Private Smith nodded.

Private Akers gazed at the Oreos. He hadn't seen Oreo cookies in years.

Private Smith opened the package of cookies. She bent over, offering each of the women in red a single cookie, working her way through the group toward the back of the plane. By the time the package got back to Private Akers, all of the Oreos were gone.

A woman in red on the deck next to Private Akers finished her cookie with an almost orgasmic: “Oh my God.”

Her eyes focused on Private Akers.

“Do any of you have a cigarette?” The woman asked.

“What?” Private Akers asked.

“A cigarette,” the woman said as she held two fingers to her lips.

"I'm sorry, ma'am." Private Akers said. "Most of us are Latter Day Saints and you can't smoke on a military airplane anyway."

The woman looked crestfallen for a moment.

"But you can still get cigarettes, right?" The woman asked.

"Yeah," Private Akers said. "There's cigarettes. There's McDonalds. I've never eaten there, but if I could, I'd like to try McNuggets. There's still America. Some of it. The government's working out of Alaska. Hawaii's free. So is most of the southwest. Utah, Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico. All free. Appalachia is still fighting and Texas is kind of doing its own thing."

"How so?" The woman asked.

"Texas is kind of their own country now. They seceded. They're still fighting in Florida and there's a guy in Chicago who's fighting there too."

"What about Montana?" The woman asked.

Private Akers pursed his lips. Sergeant Hale overheard the conversation. This would require tact. He spoke up.

"Ma'am, do you have family in Montana?" Sergeant Hale asked.

The woman nodded.

"I'm sorry you have to hear this from me," Sergeant Hale said. "But most of the Midwest was hit with nuclear weapons at the start of the war. We did it to stop the Dingbats from taking our missile fields and bomber bases."

"It's okay," the woman said. "My ex was there. He deserved it. So... they're still HBO?"

Private Akers nodded.

The woman continued.

“So can you catch me up on *Game of Thrones*?” She asked. “How did it end?”

Sergeant Hale grimaced.

“Ma’am, I don’t think you want to know.”

Chapter 2 - Devil take the Hindmost

Prince Kuhio Federal Building, Honolulu, Hawaii. USA.

There were worse places to be a refugee than Honolulu. She could be freezing her ass off in Alaska or hiding from rockets in South Florida or even drinking chicory root for coffee like in New Mexico.

Hawaii still had coffee. That was important. Meat was hard to come by, but fish was plentiful. The homeless, especially the gay homeless, who had thought they would ride out the war from the comfort of the Turtle Bay Hilton on the North Shore, now slept in parks. She didn't have much sympathy for them. If they wanted a job and better food, they could always join the Army now that the recruiting age was up to 50. That's what started this whole mess. Everybody in America posted #Resist on their Facebook accounts and expected somebody else to do something. By the time they were protesting in the streets, the First and Second Amendments had been gutted and it was too late. The pen might be mightier than the sword, but a bullet beat a hashtag every time.

Sasha's Zang's face had a hardness that reflected her attitude. The only curves on her body were her almond eyes. She carried herself rigidly, with the deadly seriousness of a bucket of knives.

Sasha wasn't military - she was far more important as a civilian contractor. She wore her Booz Allen Hamilton identification badge prominently displayed in a Coach Leather ID lanyard that had been fashionable just a few years ago. Now the lanyard

was a relic from another world - back when she took the Washington DC Metro from Virginia to her job in the Navy Yard. She still had her DC Metro SmartTrip fare card tucked behind her badge - a personal totem for the day when she would triumphantly return to Dupont Circle to get her nails done. Her only concession to the absurd Hawaiian Huna philosophy was her Hilo Hattie dress. After all, you didn't become an intelligence project manager by rocking the boat and pretending you were still back in D.C.

A Microsoft Outlook popup window appeared on Sasha's ancient Lenovo Thinkpad laptop screen.

1 Reminder: Daily Intel Meeting. Start time 10:00.

Sasha picked up her computer and Honolulu Coffee Company travel mug. She left her office and worked her way down a maze of hallways and cubicles on the seventh floor of the Prince Kuhio Federal Building.

Most of the workers here were Booz Allen Hamilton government contractors. The company had taken over most intelligence collection and analysis since the NSA and CIA were essentially hollow shells of their former selves. A few employees greeted her as she passed. She occasionally gave a co-worker a tight-lipped smile.

"Sasha, my dear!" A voice called from an office as she passed by its open door. She stopped. There was only one man on earth who could get away with calling her "my dear."

She backtracked a few paces. Harry Powers, The Booz Allen Hamilton Director of Projects leaned on the door frame. A dandruff-covered blue suit that was a size too large covered his emaciated, elderly frame. He wore a tie that had gone out of fashion in the 90s. The spirit of Huna could never permeate a dyed-in-the-wool Beltway man like him.

Harry fancied himself Sasha's mentor. Hell, his connections helped her flee DC with her brother and daughter at the start of the war. But his comments and glances always fluttered close - but never across - the Booz Allen Hamilton sexual harassment line. Not that it would have mattered. Sasha wouldn't have slept with him for all the gold in Fort Knox.

"Are you coming to the meeting with State today?" Harry asked.

"I have a conflict with DOD," Sasha replied.

Harry clutched his chest in pain.

"You okay?" Sasha asked.

"Heartburn," Harry said as he took out a travel package of Tums. "What can I say? The Secretary of State will do that to you."

Sasha wrinkled her nose. Even Harry's breath smelled old. Sasha gave him her trademark tight-lipped grin and nod. She felt his eyes on her rear end as she continued down the hallway.

She stopped her walk at the door to a windowless conference room. A laminated sign with the words "Security Container" was taped to the door. A small, circular Star Wars Princess Leia sticker graced the bottom the sign. The sticker was embossed with the hashtag #Resist.

Sasha rolled her eyes as she swiped her ID on the conference room reader. She pushed inside the conference room.

She called her team “The Jedi Knights,” which probably accounted for the unauthorized sticker. Most of the eight-person crew was at least 20 years younger than her. They were carbon copies of the young, smart, ivy-league men and women who flooded into Washington D.C. every July with their graduation suits and Ann Taylor pencil skirts. Now they wore Aloha shirts and Mumus, but at least they were still mostly Ivy-league and brilliant.

Cell phones weren’t permitted in the Security Container. Nor was WiFi, so her Jedi Knights fidgeted with pens as they waited.

“Good morning,” Sasha said in a tone that implied she really didn’t care if it was a good morning or not. “Is the deck loaded?”

The Knights nodded.

“Who’s going first?” Sasha asked as she sat down at the head of the conference table.

Ginny stood up first. She was the oldest of all of the Knights, and surprisingly still overweight despite food rationing. There wasn’t enough corrective color on Oahu to fix her hair, but she was usually good at her job.

Ginny made her way to a laptop at the far side of the conference table. She pressed the spacebar on the laptop. A large, flat-panel TV blinked to life across the room. The screen read: “Daily Intelligence Brief - US Desk - Ginny Kelly”

Ginny pressed the spacebar. A map of the former United States appeared on screen. A large blue blob appeared over top of Nevada, Utah, Arizona and New Mexico.

Ginny started her speech.

“This morning, units from the 1st Nauvoo Airborne Battalion dropped into Sacramento. Their mission was to rescue some female prisoners at a detention facility. They rescued fifty four women and sustained nine dead and 21 wounded. The Marines lost one Mongoose. They encountered pretty heavy resistance, including two F-16’s - probably out of Travis in California.”

“SoJ planes?” Sasha asked.

“We think they’re contractors,” Ginny said. “The SoJ grounded most of the pilots after that commander defected to Nevada with his F-35. We think they’re using contractors from a private military contractor in The Netherlands. Um... Air Outcomes, we think. They also have contracts to run the air forces of The Congo and Suriname.”

“I thought Air Outcomes only did transport and recon?” Sasha asked.

“The Netherlands has a lot of F-16 pilots who are out of work since they started downsizing.”

It made sense. Since the collapse of the global economy, most European militaries were more concerned with internal security threats than Russian planes. With food shortages and worldwide recession, a riot policeman in the streets was worth more than a fighter pilot in the air.

“Go on,” Sasha said.

“Well the good thing is that the Stinger system the Marines retrofitted to the Mongoose works. We think the contractors saw that missile and they got out of there on afterburner. But here’s the funny thing-”

Ginny went to the next slide. The picture on screen showed a long cafeteria table lined with young women. All of the women wore what looked like donated clothing such as pre-war blue jeans and Utah Jazz shirts. They sat eating from trays of Army food. Some of the women smiled. Others vacantly stared at their food. A few unarmed female Utah National Guard soldiers stood at the edge of the frame.

“These are some of the prisoners that Utah recovered,” Ginny continued. “They were all wearing some kind of red wool pioneer dresses. They all claim to have been the ‘Handmaids’ we’ve been hearing about.

“Are we really going here again?” Sasha asked.

“I think this is good intel,” Ginny said.

“I’m sorry,” Sasha said. “I didn’t believe it when it came out of Canada and I’m not believing it now. All the women Canada debriefed said they had been prostitutes and drug addicts before the war. Who do you put in prison, Ginny? You put criminals in prison. There’s no secret threesome sex club program going in Gilead. There wasn’t when you first tried to pull this crap with me last month and there isn’t now. They’re in prison. They wear red because Gilead doesn’t use artificial dyes and it’s hard to make orange naturally. Utah just ate up thousands of pounds of aviation gas and lost a Mongoose to rescue a bunch of meth addicts because Mormons are idiots and like to ‘help people.’”

Sasha made air quotes with her fingers.

“For the sake of your career and your ration book. Drop it. I’m telling you, drop this nutty handmaid thing.”

“You know,” Ginny said. “Hitler just said they were relocating the Jews. I have decks where these women talk about being raped on an industrial scale.”

“News flash, prostitutes and meth addicts get raped.” Sasha responded. “Do you have anything else? Anything pertinent to actually winning the war or do you have some more threesome sex fantasies you’d like to share?”

Ginny opened her mouth to speak. She glared at Sasha as she thought of something to say. The feeling passed and she returned to her seat at the conference table.

“Who’s next?” Sasha asked.

Bert and Eli, two of her younger specialists stood up simultaneously. Eli, the nuclear specialist, motioned to the laptop. Bert, the capabilities specialist, did the same. They stood stuck in this standoff until a thump came from outside in the hallway and a woman screamed. Everyone looked toward the door. The woman screamed again.

“Turn off the TV and get under the table,” Sasha commanded.

The Knights obeyed. Sasha got up from her chair. The door was electrically locked, but active shooter procedure required her to install a special doorstop and turn off the lights. She paused at the door. No gunshots.

A man’s voice from beyond the door yelled, “Call 911.”

“Everyone stay here,” Sasha whispered back to the Knights.

Sasha slowly cracked open the door. She peeked outside. An old man in a blue suit lay collapsed in the hallway. Two Booz Allen Hamilton employees performed CPR

on the man while a security guard stood above them speaking into a radio. There was only one person in the building with that blue suit and Sasha realized that she would be going to the Secretary of State meeting after all.

Wood Creek Lake, Laurel County, Kentucky. Contested Appalachia.

Low clouds hid the stars from the night sky. Crickets chirped in the tall grass along Interstate 75. Two black-suited guardians sat smoking cigarettes in the back of a broken down Army truck and two men concealed 100 yards away in the overgrown grass on the side of the road watched them with the patience of predators.

Travis Cook and his brother-in-law, Cole MacIntosh, evaluated the truck and men wordlessly.

Mountain lions had roamed Eastern Kentucky in the Time of Travis Cook's youth. He once saw an Eastern Mountain Lion at the age of 10 when he was hunting rabbit a few miles from his home. The cat was as big as his Pa and looked twice as mean. It was there for a moment... and then it wasn't. The last mountain lion was seen in 2015. The government declared it extinct not long afterward, but Travis never had much faith in the government. Nobody in Owsley County ever cared much for people who weren't kin. Now a new group of outsiders was moving in and declaring themselves the government. Travis owned a rifle before he owned a pair of shoes and he didn't much care for government men who came to his holler telling him what was what. It didn't matter if they called themselves the ATF or the Sons of Jacob.

"Travis? What are you fixin' to do?" Cole whispered.

Travis sighed. He moved his knee. Pain shot up his leg. The past sixty years had not been kind to him. He needed to see a doctor, but so did everybody else in the hollar. He had walked twenty miles that night and would walk another twenty before he could rest. But first he had to deal with these damned government men.

“Well, who has kin in East Bernstadt?” Travis asked.

Cole thought for a moment.

“John Abner’s got an aunt. She worked at the Walmarts in London back before.”

“Ok, go git him. And see if Ben Baker brought any liquor. If he done. Bring him up too.”

Cole slithered away.

Eighteen of Travis’s men lay a hundred yards away, concealed in a warren of chinkapin oaks and sycamore trees. It took a piece for Cole to get back, but he returned with John Abner and Ben Baker. Of course Ben had brought liquor with him. After all, he made it in his backyard as had his father and his grandfather.

The two government men remained at the truck talking and smoking. Travis could have dropped them right there with two shots from his rifle, but the sound would carry down the interstate and he didn’t want to meet anyone who would hear it.

“Alright,” Travis whispered. “Me and Cole are gonna stay here. You two are gonna leave your weapons. Ben, how much liquor you got?”

Ben held up a near full mason jar of moonshine.

“Good enough,” Travis said. “Ben I need you to pretend you're drunk.”

“I don’t need to pretend,” Ben said.

“John,” Travis said. “I need you and Ben to walk down the road all drunk like. They’re gonna stop you. You talk to them nice like. Get ‘em drunk. When they’re good and drunk, you take ‘em quiet like and hide them in the woods. Then see if there anything good on that truck. Now this is important. If they won’t get drunk, John you get em back to your Aunt’s house in East Bernstadt. Tell em your one of the faithful and your aunt will put them up for the night in a warm bed. And when there asleep. Kill ‘em. Then get back here and see if there anything good on the truck. Maybe they got some food?”

This perfunctory briefing would have been laughed out of any Army leadership course. But Ben and John could handle themselves. This wasn’t an army where every single order had to be followed to the letter; this was an insurgency where men had to improvise. After years of fighting, all the men who didn’t have the wits to figure on the fly were dead.

“Take good care of her, Travis.” Ben said as he handed over his rifle.

John and Ben rose in the darkness. Ben leaned on John as they shuffled down the road.

Ben broke into a drunken rendition of “Poor Wayfarin’ Stranger” about 50 yards from the truck. The government men jumped down from the truck bed with their rifles raised. John put up his hands, Ben fell to the pavement. The government men came over and helped Ben up. A piece later, the four of them were drunk in the back of the truck.

The attack came with such speed and violence that even Travis’s keen eye had trouble keeping up with the sudden turn of events. The two government men suddenly

cartwheeled out of the truck, dual geysers of blood erupting from their necks. John and Ben stripped the bodies of anything useful. They dragged the bodies into the woods. They returned and gave the truck cargo a quick search. They finished quicker than Travis hoped. Ben and John grabbed the dead men's weapons and ammunition on the way back to Travis's location.

"Any food or medicine?" Travis asked when the pair returned.

"Nare a whit," Ben said as he slid down in the tall grass. "Truck was just full of black uniforms. Shame to waste good liquor on those boys."

"Uniforms could be useful," Cole remarked. "We could use em as a ... a sub-ter-fuge."

"Might-could," Travis said. "We'll pick um up on the way back."

The government men cost them time. Travis and his men needed to hurry, but hurrying got you killed. So they moved with quiet deliberation through the woods. The mountain lions in eastern Kentucky weren't extinct after all, they just carried rifles and moonshine and the hope that if they killed enough government men, their lives could go back to normal.

The motley collection of backwoods folk moved through the night for another half hour before Travis stopped them.

"We're here," Travis announced.

The men stood at the head of a moonless lake. It was the kind of place a man could spend all day with a fishing pole and never tire of God's splendor.

"Butchie, git the batteries out of your poke," Travis said to one of his men.

Butchie was barely 18 and as skinny as a rake. He was one of the Mayor's boys and Travis's sister-in-law's cousin on her father's side. The boys of Boonville had called him "Butchie" for so long even Travis couldn't remember the kid's real name.

Butchie reached into his haversack. He pulled out several sets of 9-Volt batteries. He connected two batteries together, positive pole to negative pole and then gave the connected batteries to another man before the heat from the looped batteries burned his hand.

The men dropped the batteries on the ground in the shape of a 20-yard long inverted "Y." Then they waited.

"I can't see how this work," Butchie said when the task was complete.

"You can't see nuthin'," Travis said. "They're looking for the heat."

The men waited. They passed around what was left of Ben's liquor. None of them dared smoke. Time passed.

"Maybe they forgot?" John said.

"Naw, they would have let me know," Travis said.

"Maybe he was shot down?" another man said.

"Then ain't nothin changed," Travis said. "Cept we lost some batteries."

The sound of a weed wacker came from the distance. The men waited. The sound approached. What appeared before them looked like a grey Macy's Day balloon floating about 100 feet above the water. Suspended underneath in a metal cage was a man in a silver space suit. Inside the cage were a couple of Army containers and a small motor and propeller.

The balloon hissed as it descended toward the lakeshore. It landed directly in the center of the inverted “Y”, its tail deflating into the water.

Travis’s men stood back as the man in the space suit clambered out of the basket. The man was short - maybe 5’4” with his boots on. But he moved with a surety of purpose that marked him as a military man. He pushed away the rapidly wilting fabric. He took off his helmet. The man was clean shaven and much better fed than the 20 men with guns who surrounded him.

“Frog,” The man said to nobody in particular.

“Hook,” Travis responded.

The man focused on Travis.

“Where’s the best place to eat in Owsley County?” The man asked.

“My mama’s house,” Travis responded. “What’s your mother’s middle name?”

“Beverly,” said the man.

The man in the spacesuit walked toward Travis and extended his hand.

“You must be the famous Travis Cook. I’m Captain Moore,” The man said with a thick New Jersey accent. “U.S. Army 5th Special Forces Group. I guess you guys are the Owsley County Boys.”

“You guessed right,” Travis said. “5th Special Forces Group? You’ns don’t seem like much of a group. Where’s the rest a you?”

“I’m it,” Captain Moore said.

“Shitfire,” one of Travis’s men mumbled.

“Are you the doctor?” Travis asked.

“No, but I have some medicine.” Captain Moore said.

Captain Moore made his way back to the balloon, folding over the fabric until he reached the metal basket.

“The Aerolift only holds 600 pounds,” Captain Moore said. “200 of that is me and my gear. I’ll get out of this space suit in a sec. It’s cold up there.”

Captain Moore opened the boxes and pulled out supplies. He spoke as he rummaged through the box.

“Like I said, I got antibiotics. Pills for adults, drops for your kids. Curlex. Stop-clot. I have some medical textbooks too. We used some of the weight for Coca Cola. They’re in Tetrapaks, but it tastes like it used to. I got some cigarettes and I got two stinger anti-air missiles in this box right here.”

“Well,” Travis said with a tinge of anger. “I’m right thankful. But I asked for a doctor.”

“And my boy needs a dentist,” one of the men said.

“Quiet,” Travis said. He didn’t need to raise his voice to discipline his men. “If you ain’t a doctor, what are you for?”

“I’m here to train you how to fight,” Captain Moore said.

The men broke into a quiet chuckle.

“I been fightin’ for longer than you been shavin’ son,” Travis said. “Is that what the bandages is for? You gonna fight us against the government men? You gonna git more of us killed? I can git my men killed right on my own. I needed a doctor and you done brought cigarettes and missiles. I got cigarettes, so what do I need you for? You just another mouth to feed now. I’m fixin’ to kill you and take your stuff. We’ve been

fightin' the government men just fine without another government man around tellin' us what's what."

Travis aimed his rifle at Captain Moore.

Captain Moore chose his words carefully. He was trained for this. Despite what people saw in the movies, Special Forces weren't just combat soldiers, they were a combination of teachers and diplomats.

"Travis," Captain Moore said. "I can't even imagine what you've been through these past couple of years. But I volunteered for this because I believe in what you guys are doing here. I'm the first of many, I promise you. If you won't help me... then I'm sorry I was wrong about you and your boys. If you don't want me, it's fine. You can have everything in my Aerolift. I'll take my personal gear to Tennessee. Maybe to West Virginia? I'll find someone who wants me to help them fight. But someday this war's gonna end. And we're gonna win it. You can be known as the Owsley County Boys, or you can be forgotten because you killed a U.S. Army officer in cold blood. But if you're not going to kill me, we need to quit this shit and hide this Aerolift in the lake."

Travis eyed Captain Moore. The captain didn't seem the least bit afraid and Travis had seen fear up close in the eyes of men far too many times over the past few years.

"You heard em, boys." Travis said. "Let's get this thing in the lake. Welcome to the war, Captain."

Waialae - Kahala, Hawaii

Marty Wolf awoke with the pressing need to pee.

What time was it? Morning? Afternoon? He didn't care. He turned his head to the right to see the stunning shape of a nude woman beside him. What was her name? It didn't matter. He looked to his left. A nude blonde lay sleeping beside him. He couldn't remember her name either? *Ashley? Alyssa?*

He sat up. He didn't have a clock in his bedroom, but he figured it was late morning by the sun streaming through the windows.

"Wake and bake," Marty thought.

Marty got out of bed with the careful practice of a man who had woken up countless times to unknown women in his bed. He crossed his bedroom - a room the size of most people's living rooms. He ended up in the bathroom where he lit a joint from the box on the vanity as he relieved himself in a toilet that could have doubled as a throne. He glanced in the mirror. An overweight, hairy, fifty-one year old man with a joint in his mouth looked back at him.

Amelia? Abby? Andrea? What was that girl's name?

Marty thought about going back into the bedroom for his phone, but decided against it. He didn't want to wake either of the women and anyway, he had work to do. He left the bathroom and walked nude through his house. He put bits and pieces of the previous night together as he walked through the living room. Traces of cocaine remained on the coffee table. Liquor bottles and women's clothing were strewn on the couch. One of his lampshades was impaled by the stiletto of a high heel.

Allison?

Marty turned and walked into his home office.

He flicked on the lights. Four large flat-panel monitors sat on his desk. He pressed the spacebar on his computer keyboard and all four of the monitors sprang to life.

One monitor showed the health of his server network and all of his websites. Traffic was normal. There were no excessive loads on the network. The second monitor showed a real-time tally of his website's membership. The number showed 28,258 members along with an estimate of how much money he stood to make at the end of the month in Euros- the only currency outside of gold that was worth a damn since the dollar was in the toilet. At this point, he stood to make €819,482 or about \$940,000 in pre war money.

The third monitor showed his email inbox. He scanned the inbox for anything pressing, but he didn't see anything that couldn't wait. The fourth monitor held the Slack messaging conversations with his employees. He scanned his workers until he found a green dot next to Alana. He clicked the name and typed.

MARTY: You there?

A message from Alana popped up on screen a moment later.

ALANA: Where are you?

MARTY: I'm having trouble getting moving today. Call?

ALANA: Fine.

Marty clicked the videoconference icon. Alana's pudgy, young, native Hawaiian face popped up on screen. Alana covered her eyes as soon as Marty's video feed came into view.

"Jesus, Marty! Put some clothes on, brah!" Alana said.

"I will when I come in," Marty said. "Promise."

Alana looked through her fingers at Marty in disdain.

"When are you gonna be in?" Alana asked. "Accounting needs you to sign some checks."

The joint in Marty's mouth bobbed up and down as he thought of the women in his bed.

"I'll be in soon," Marty said. "Did we get any hits last night?"

"Yeah," Alana said. "They're in the drive. I really have issues with what you're doing. You know, technically it's still illegal."

"Don't worry about it," Marty said. "You keep writing the software and I'll keep paying you so you can shovel food into that fat face of yours." Marty took a drag off his joint. "Hey, do you know what I did when I left the office last night?"

"No," Alana said. "What?"

"No, I mean, do you know what I did? Because I don't remember."

"I don't keep track of you when you leave the office, Marty."

"Did we contract with a girl named Ashley?"

"I don't think so," Alana said.

"How about Amy?"

Alana thought for a moment.

"Not recently."

"Allison, Abby, Alyssa?" Marty asked.

"What is this regarding?" Alana asked.

"Never mind," Marty said. "Have a bagel ready for me when I get in."

Marty closed the connection. He got up from his chair and left his home office. He walked through his house again, ended up standing in the kind of kitchen that only people who didn't cook could afford. Marty had two refrigerators. One of the refrigerators was shut tight with a combination lock and hasp.

Marty unlocked the combination lock. He opened the door to a refrigerator full of half-pound butcher paper packages of ground beef. Marty withdrew three packages of meat. He placed the packages on the kitchen island. He took a Sharpie marker from the kitchen junk drawer and wrote "Blonde" on one package and "Brunette" on the other. He relocked the refrigerator. Then he walked the packages back to his bedroom. The girls were still asleep, but they had snuggled against one another in his absence. Marty put the packages of meat on the nightstand.

Marty washed himself in a shower the size of a walk-in closet. He noticed long blonde and brunette hairs entangled in the shower drain, but it didn't jog any memories. He changed into an aloha shirt, shorts and sandals. The girls were still asleep when he left. They would see themselves out, or with any luck, they would still be at the house when he got back from work. He stopped in the kitchen to get another package of meat and his travel coffee mug. Marty grabbed his car keys from the counter and went into the garage. He unplugged the black Tesla roadster from its charger on the wall. Had the girls got back to his house in a two seater car? How had he done that? Did one of them sit on the other's lap? Did one of them get in the trunk?

Marty pulled out of his garage.

Marty was late for work, but when you were the boss, that sort of thing didn't matter very much. Instead of going straight onto H1, Marty took the scenic route down

Diamond Head Road, enjoying each twist and turn as the Tesla wound its way toward Honolulu. He passed the surfers at Kaimana beach, living life as if nothing had changed. Marty had lived on the island ever since the revolution and he had never bothered to try surfing. It was always something he was going to try tomorrow, or after he bought a Rolex, or after he made a million dollars, or after he made ten million. There was always another excuse. But in truth, it was hard to fit surfing in between work, getting drunk, doing cocaine and having wild parties with women whose names he couldn't remember.

Marty stopped for the traffic light at the intersection of Kapahulu and Kalakaua Avenue. A tall black man in his early 30's stood at the intersection wearing a mesh t-shirt and a pair of jean shorts that were so small, its white cotton pockets protruded onto his legs. The man stood next to a metal coffee urn that was decorated with the words "Paris Coffee" in rainbow lettering.

"Hey, Paris." Marty said as he handed the man his travel coffee mug.

"Lookin' good today, Marty." Paris said as he took Marty's coffee mug. "You wanna put me in one of your videos today?"

"Depends on if you're pregnant," Marty said. "That's got to be an untapped fetish. A pregnant, gay black man."

Paris filled up Marty's travel mug with coffee.

"When you gonna let me move into your mansion?" Paris asked. "Every Batman needs a boy wonder."

"Get a job, Paris." Marty said.

Paris handed the coffee mag back to Marty.

“I got a job,” Paris said as he presented the coffee urn like a model displaying a showcase.

“If you’re tired of sleeping outdoors, the Army’s hiring,” Marty said.

“I already dealt with those people once coming here. I’m not volunteering to go back.”

“You see,” Marty said. “That’s the problem with you gays.”

“Honey,” Paris said. “You didn’t exactly jump up to enlist.”

“I’m too old,” Marty said.

“And I’m way too pretty,” Paris said.

Marty took the package of ground beef from his passenger seat. He handed it to Paris.

“Thank you,” Paris said. “You know I can’t make change for this.”

“Keep it,” Marty said. “Or use it to buy some better tasting coffee. See you tomorrow.”

Paris blew Marty a kiss as the traffic light turned green and Marty sped away.

Marty passed by Ala Wai Golf Course. The place had never been that nice, but now it was home to a sprawling military base filled with shipping containers, tents, motor pools and housing trailers. Even though it was midday, civilians were lined up for a half mile outside the main gate with wheelbarrows full of scrap metal and old electronics that they could turn in for a few extra ration points on their SNAP card.

Traffic was light as usual. Only doctors, firemen, police and clergy got gas rations these days. Everybody else made due with walking, cycling, taking the bus or in

some cases riding on horseback. The few electric cars on the island were prime targets for carjackings, although Marty had been spared such an encounter so far.

Most porn studios at least made a modest effort at hiding their activities back before the revolution. They kept their offices in nondescript industrial parks and shot movies in rented homes. Marty didn't do this - he wanted talent to know exactly where he was - and anyway, they often came by public transportation so it had to be in the city. His offices occupied the top two floors of a four story building on Kapiolani Boulevard just one block from city hall. The only other tenants were a Geico claims office and ironically, the Hawaii Republican party. A little gold went a long way in Honolulu and the landlord and city council had swallowed their pride and allowed the puffy Pink and Blue "Ready To Drop Entertainment" sign on the side of the building.

Marty parked his car in the garage off Cooke Street. He took the elevator up to his office. While the third floor was mostly production space and editing, the fourth floor looked like every other pre-war tech company. Young men and women in t-shirts and shorts sat typing in their cubicles. A few more workers left a conference room carrying laptops and notepads.

Marty made for his corner office. He opened his office door. There was no bagel on his desk. Marty walked two doors down. He stopped at the door with the nameplate of "Alana Aukai."

"Alana, where's my bagel?" Marty asked as he opened the door.

Alana didn't look at him. Her attention was focused on one of the four computer monitors in her office. Instead of responding, Alana picked up a Nerf gun and fired a

dart toward the door. The dart missed Marty by a few inches, crashed into the wall and bounced harmlessly to the floor.

"It's after lunch," Alana said. "And I'm not your secretary." Alana paused for a moment. "Cindy tried to track down the bagel cart but the police got there before she did."

"Brilliant detective work by Honolulu's finest," Marty said. "Burn up gas to find black market flour. I'm gonna go check the drive."

"I hate you," Alana said as Marty disappeared from the doorway. Another Nerf dart whistled past Marty's head. He ignored the missile and kept walking.

Marty's office was clean and spartan. He had a desk with the same monitor setup as Alana, a few guest chairs, a credenza, a small conference table that sat six, and black leather couch that probably needed to be washed down with a fire hose and bleach. He sat down in his executive chair and swiveled to grab a Tetrapak of Coke from a mini-fridge under his desk. He took a paper package of Taro chips from a drawer on his credenza and ate his breakfast while reading the latest news on the now Miami-based Wall Street Journal website.

Gold was up. That was no news. Oil was down, of course. The world was drowning in oil now that most of America was under the Sons of Jacob. The U.S. had led a raid into Sacramento to free some female political prisoners and Gilead was negotiating with Mexico to restart trade.

Trade for what?

Marty closed the browser window and opened up a remote desktop session. He navigated to what Alana called "The Drive." This was where all of her intelligence

collection was dumped whenever her computer virus collected some interesting data on SoJ servers. There weren't many SoJ machines connected to the public Internet, but her software was smart enough to collect information and hop from computer to computer until it found a way out.

Marty transferred the files to his desktop. Once the files were downloaded, Marty unzipped and scanned through the files. One file caught his eye. The Sons of Jacob had reduced basic training for their guardians from eight to four weeks. This made sense. There was no point in training soldiers extensively when all they did was shoot people who didn't shoot back. Guardian Marine basic training had been reduced to six weeks. They would get an extra two weeks on squad level tactics and live-fire exercises. Marty was no military man, but he was smart enough to know that the Guardian Marines would probably be used in direct combat against U.S. units that were still fighting - probably in Appalachia, Chicago and Florida. The war in the southwest had ground to a stalemate. The land there was too flat and the citizens - mostly Mormons and Native Americans - knew what would happen to them if they lost. From the pictures he saw online, the borders of New Mexico and Nevada looked like they came from World War I. Chicago was like Stalingrad on Lake Michigan.

Then Marty saw something that really caught his eye. Gilead was going to drop the age for mandatory enlistment to 16 and that was just about the age his son would be, assuming he were still alive.

Marty wasn't a traditionally trained programmer like Alana, but he was self-taught and knew a little bit. He wrote a small search program in Python and set it to scan the intel package for the name "Jason Wolf." Nothing.

He thought about setting the program to search for his wife's name as well, but there was no point. He had married a porn star - a woman who everybody knew whether they admitted it or not - and he was sure of her fate. And that's when it hit him. The blonde girl's name didn't start with an "A" at all.

"Emily!" Marty said as he pounded his desk in triumph.

Chicago Pocket, Contested Chicago, Illinois. USA

Nobody asked about the meat.

Normally their diet consisted of Canadian humanitarian rations in burnt-orange plastic packaging that came emblazoned with the words "A gift from the people of Canada" in English, French and Spanish. The package was about the size of a small makeup bag and contained about 2200 calories. The contents were designed to appeal to all religions and dietary restrictions - beans and rice, crackers, jam, lentil stews, raisins, and occasionally shortbread cookies. The rations were universally known as "HA" or "Humanitarian Assistance" but most people just called it "Ha."

Although Canada was officially neutral in the conflict between Gilead and the USA, the occasional Canadian Aerolift still floated over the city to drop HA from the sky like helicoptering Samara seeds from a maple tree. In the early days of the war, Canada sent boats filled with HA, but the mobs of refugees who attempted to board the boats resulted in massive drownings. So the boats stopped. Chicago was mostly on its own.

The Canadian HA was never enough. People needed meat. Some brave souls tried fishing for bluegill and largemouth bass on Lake Michigan, but their boats were usually fired on by SoJ patrol craft. So the pets went first. People who were unable or unwilling to kill their own dogs and cats gave them to neighbors who killed and butchered the animals for a share of the meat. The remaining animals in the Lincoln Park Zoo had long been eaten. The first winter had been mild, but the second winter was the coldest since 1904. With no gasoline to run excavators to dig graves in the frozen ground, the dead remained where they lay and Chicago saw a biblical eruption of rats. Four years later, if you were handed protein in the chow line, you didn't ask questions about where the meat came from. Humans shot humans. Rats ate dead humans. Humans killed rats and humans ate rats in a barbaric circle of life.

Heather Coley stood in the chow line with her M-16 rifle and a tin mess kit that was about the size of a salad plate. She didn't wear a uniform. The remnants of the US Army and National Guard had long run out of uniforms, although she wasn't exactly a soldier anyway. She wore simple old jeans and a ratty grey Dickies shirt.

The Chicago Pocket ran in a rough 16 mile bulge that stretched from Wacker Drive along the Chicago River to Lake Michigan. The city still had a somewhat functioning government, complete with police, fire, and horse-drawn trash pickup running out of an old apartment building at 1000 North LaSalle St. War had changed a lot, but some political views died hard. The notoriously anti-gun mayor was still catatonically afraid of armed civilians, but the city still needed to be defended. So the solution was the creation of "Chicago Emergency Augmentees to the US Army" or CEAUSA's - which had rapidly been shortened to "Seesaws." These Seesaws had

special permits to carry weapons and were identified by a red armband tied around the left upper bicep. Seesaws came in a multitude of flavors and ethnicities although most units organized around ethnic or religious lines. The Seesaws in West Ridge tended to be Arab and African American Muslim. The Seesaws in River North were usually white and formerly upper class. The Seesaws in Heather's District of Uptown tended to be African American and Christian.

Most of the units got along, although there was always tension when traveling from one area of operation to another. As a sniper, Heather was constantly moving from district to district, but her time as a high school principal had taught her how to deal with insolence wherever she went.

The chow line moved quickly. Heather held her plate out to a Seesaw cook who carefully placed two Chicken-McNugget sized pieces of cooked rat meat on her mess kit. She moved to the next station and got a cup of rice and beans dumped on her tray. She moved forward and got half-ladle full of thin HA barley soup drizzled over top of the rice. This was the end of the station. There would be no crackers or shortbread cookies today.

Heather scanned the Seesaw cafeteria for her spotter, Joquetta. She found her sitting at a cafeteria table in the back of the room near an old flat screen TV that was tuned to a FOX news report on Utah's raid in Sacramento. Heather approached the table.

"Hey, Jo," Heather said as she sat down. "How in the world you still have your nails done, girl?"

Joquetta looked up from her food as she smiled. Her fingernails were painted with orange gel. She spread out her dark, black hands.

“Thank you. It’s called ‘On da Bula Vard’,” Joquetta said. “I’m seeing Dwaine tonight after our shift. Can you believe it’s been one year! I traded some batteries to this Korean woman in my building for her to do my nails.”

“Well, you look fine!. One year. God! You got plans?”

“Stayin’ in.” Joquetta said with a sly glance.

“Plans enough,” Heather said.

“I stopped by the S2 shop and got our dope,” Joquetta said. She slid a folded piece of paper across the table at Heather.

Heather opened up the paper and read the contents. They would be assigned to overwatch Horner Park from across the river tonight.

“Horner Park’s the Muslim Battalion’s sector,” Heather said.

Joquetta shrugged as she ate a mouthful of HA.

“S2 says they need us there,” Joquetta said. “They got Dingbats setting up mortars in Horner Park. They could try to push across the river again.”

“They want to run into the meat grinder again? It’s fine by me,” Heather said.

Every once in a while, the Sons of Jacob tried to push across the river, but river attacks had stymied generals all the way back to Alexander the Great. After five years of fighting, anyone who knew such tactics was dead. It was worse in the winter when the Chicago Ship and Sanitary Canal froze over and Gilead sent wave after wave of conscripts into the ice to die by US machine guns or from drowning in the churning water. They never learned.

Heather finished her meal in six spoonfuls. The rat meat was stringy and stuck in her teeth.

“Ready?” Heather asked Joquetta.

Joquetta nodded. They stood. Joquetta grabbed her M4 rifle. Heather grabbed her M-16. They washed their mess kits and aluminum utensils in a basin by the door and headed outside. They walked over to a section of wooden cubbies. Backpacks weren’t allowed in the chow hall - ostensibly to prevent suicide bombings but more likely to prevent someone from tripping over a bag. Heather grabbed her backpack - a battered, black, pre-war Jansport. Joquetta retrieved her bag.

They walked together through a thicket of concrete barriers until they arrived at a Dutch door that read “S4.” A bored-looking Illinois National Guard supply sergeant leafed through a pre-war comic book that was perched on the Dutch door’s wide ledge.

Heather and Joquetta presented their identification documents - frayed paper cards that were folded inside old leather wallets. The cards were unlaminated - such luxuries were reserved for only the most important documents.

“Hey,” the supply sergeant said with feigned interest as he gave the cards a once-over. He had seen them hundreds of times over the past few years and never bothered to learn their names although he was friendly enough for small talk.

“Were you two headed tonight?” The sergeant asked.

“Horner Park,” Heather said.

“That’s the Muslim section,” the supply sergeant said. He was more surprised than concerned.

Heather didn’t respond.

The supply sergeant tossed a clipboard onto the Dutch door ledge. He disappeared into the room for a moment. He returned holding two bundles of cloth which he placed on the Dutch door ledge. He reached to the side of the door and dropped four AA batteries on the ledge. Then the supply sergeant disappeared again.

Heather and Joquetta unwrapped the bundles and inspected the contents. Inside each bundle lay an pre-war Pringles potato chip can that had been retrofitted with a lense at one end, an eyepiece at the other, a battery cradle on the top, and a rifle mount at the bottom.

Heather took two AA batteries and plugged them into the contacts at the top of the can. She looked through the eyepiece and saw the green glow of night vision.

These homemade night vision scopes were made by the remaining teachers and students at the Northwestern University McCormick School of Engineering. The brainpower at the school was one of the reasons the Chicago Pocket still existed against the overwhelming onslaught of SoJ forces. The scientific brainpower of the university contributed everything from ways to make bleach from road salt, to primitive penicillin, to the simple night vision rifle scope that Heather held in her hand.

Heather and Joquetta recorded the receipt of the night vision and batteries on the clipboard. The supply sergeant returned again with exactly ten rounds of 5.56 mm rifle ammunition.

Heather picked up each cartridge and inspected the headstamps on each casing. Nine of the cartridges were stamped "556 LC SOJ" or Lake City, Sons of Jacob which indicated that the cartridges had been manufactured in Lake City, Missouri by the post war Gilead government. This captured ammunition was unreliable at best and

dangerous at worst. The sole remaining round was stamped “556 VC” for “Verdun, Canada.” This cartridge was just as reliable as US pre-war ammunition, although with Canadian neutrality and an arms embargo against the US, Heather wondered how it had ended up in a Chicago supply room.

“Hey,” Heather said. “I’m a sniper, I’m supposed to get pre-war Lake City.”

The supply sergeant shrugged.

“Sorry,” He said. “Get here earlier next time. I gave you a Canadian round to make up for it. Sign please.”

Heather signed for her ammunition. She gave five rounds to Joquetta and kept four rounds and the Canadian round for herself.

The pair left the supply area. They worked their way around multiple concrete barriers and through one final checkpoint that let out onto the corner of North Marine Drive and West Irving Park Road.

“You want to walk?” Heather asked.

Heather watched Joquetta do some mental arithmetic as she determined whether the calories she had just eaten would be blown out on a three mile walk to their evening post. Any debate was settled by the arrival of a Chicago Transit Authority horse drawn trolley.

The trolley consisted of a mishmash of rubber trailer tires, wooden railings and a canvas awning that wouldn’t have seemed out of place on a Halloween hayride in the time before, but still looked downright strange in the heart of Chicago. The number “80,” indicating the trolley route, was painted on two wooden shingles that hung from the side of the trolley on metal hooks. A teamster sat on the right side of the driver’s box.

To the left sat a Chicago Policeman in pre-war uniform armed with a shotgun and sidearm. The trolley was about half filled with exhausted farm workers. Almost anyone not involved in defense or city services was used to farm every bit of arable land possible.

Heather and Joquetta showed their identification to the trolley teamster as they boarded. They sat in silence as the teamster snapped the reins and the trolley slowly moved westward.

They passed Thorek Memorial Hospital, which by some miracle had never been hit by any bombing or shelling in the five years since the war began. A few French physicians from Doctors without Borders stood on the other side of West Irving Park Road across from the hospital, enjoying cigarettes exactly 25 feet from the still-enforced no-smoking zone. A gaggle of malnourished children waited patiently on the corner, ready to snatch up the doctor's cigarette butts for later recycling.

The quantity of children remaining in Chicago still astounded Heather. Logic would dictate that children would be the first to succumb to starvation - but it didn't account for the fact that most parents would give up their food ration if their children were still hungry. Sixty percent of the remaining 250,000 souls in Chicago were between 10 and 24 years old.

The trolley passed Graceland Cemetery. The 121 acre cemetery had been active at the start of the war and still saw about 60 internments a day. Most of the graveside funerals and burials were done under cover of darkness to avoid providing the Sons of Jacob with a juicy target for a mortar round.

The trolley stopped periodically to pick up or discharge passengers along a route that seemed to consist of only dust and piles of concrete. Any rebar, glass, paper or copper had long been pulled from the rubble for recycling. Lakeview School Park was now a gigantic pumpkin patch, whose seeds were destined to be turned into vegetable oil for cooking and biodiesel for Chicago's remaining fire trucks.

The trolley stopped at North Ravenswood Ave right across from the Irving Park El Station.

The driver turned around in his seat.

"Last stop North Ravenswood Ave," The Teamster said with casual boredom. "This trolley is now out of service. This trolley is out of service. All passengers must disembark."

The teamster got out of the driver box. He placed an "Out of Service" shingle over the trolley number shingle and went to check on his horses.

The buildings here seemed strangely less damaged than the buildings in the center of the city - probably from the nature of the structures. Most of the buildings in this part of town were storefronts and homes that didn't rise much further than two stories, making it much harder to use landmarks to aid in adjusting artillery fire.

Heather and Joquetta stepped down from the trolley with their weapons and backpacks. They were still about 300 yards east of the Muslim sector's checkpoint. They walked west for a few blocks until they came to a roadblock.

The checkpoint was staffed by mostly shirtless black boys who all seemed to range in age from 12 to 15. Most of the kids carried Army M4 rifles in their hands and sported light green bandannas around their bare left arms. The Muslim Battalion was

the only unit in the city that bucked the trend of wearing red identification armbands, as green was the favorite color of The Prophet Mohammed. The children at the checkpoint eyed Heather and Joquetta suspiciously as they approached. An older boy who looked like he was in charge stepped out from under the shade of a blue tarp.

“What down?” The kid asked. “Who you?”

Heather’s years of being an educator came bubbling out of her with the speed and ferocity of a shaken can of pop.

“I am unsure whom you are speaking to?” Heather said. “I know you must not be speaking with me using incomplete sentences. Have some pride in who you are and your position and try that again.”

The kid took a step back.

“Ma’am can I see your papers for where you’re going?”

Heather handed the paper she got from Joquetta over to the kid. Heather stifled a frown when she saw the boy move his lips as he read.

“Ma’am,” said the kid. “I’m not... I don’t mean no disrespect. But I’m only supposed to let in people from the Muslim battalion in our AO. I have to call this up.”

Heather gave the boy a practiced smile. She had long ago learned that no amount of arguing would get you across a checkpoint if the guard’s rations were tied to them performing well at their jobs.

“Yo, Butter!” The boy said.

A young, shirtless and weaponless boy of about ten years old leapt up from a rusting lawn chair at the edge of the checkpoint. He ran over.

“Go by JJ,” the older boy said to the younger one. “Tell’em we need him at Checkpoint 3-C to approve passage of lines by a sniper team.”

The boy darted off to the west. Everybody stood in silence as they waited. Finally, the older boy went inside a shack and returned with a package of HA.

“You want some, ma’am?” The boy asked as he offered the pair some HA sugar cookies while they waited. Heather and Joquetta politely accepted one small cookie each from a yellow foil packet. The cookie tasted metallic with a strong, lemony chemical aftertaste.

A few minutes passed. A golf cart manned by two young African American men pulled up to the checkpoint. Both men wore pre-war blue jeans and old, 1980’s style camouflage Army blouses. Green bandannas graced the upper arm of both men. The passenger of the golf cart got out and gave Heather and Joquetta a gold-toothed smile.

“Yo, black, what down?” The passenger spoke to the checkpoint leader. Then he saw the two women and stopped. A look of recognition came over the passenger’s face when he saw Heather.

“Doctor Coley?” The passenger said. “Dat you?”

Heather searched her brain. Even with the reduced population of Chicago and her extreme weight loss from starvation during the second year famine, former students still recognized her. It happened a few times a year. The man addressing her was about 25, which would have placed him at her middle school at least 11 years ago.

“I’ve been me my entire life,” Heather responded. She still wasn’t sure who the guy was, but at least she could correct his grammar.

“It’s me,” the man said as he got out of the golf cart. “Juvante. Juvante White.”

Now Heather remembered. Her teachers always called the kid “Juvie” because that’s where they always said he would end up. Despite him setting garbage cans on fire, cutting class, smoking weed in the back of the school and getting in fights over basketball, she always gave him in-school suspension. The teachers hated it, but putting him out on the street wasn’t going to work for him either. She even let him take time outs in her office when he got angry.

“Mrs. Coley, I graduated.” Juvante said. “I joined the Navy. I was on a boomer when it all went down. I got in good with Allah and turned my life around. I don’t smoke weed no more. Hop in. I’ll give you a ride to the hide site.”

Heather and Joquetta piled into the golf cart. Juvante told his driver to head out to the river.

“How long have you been here?” Heather asked. “If you were in the Navy, why didn’t you just stay out at sea?”

“Doctor Coley,” Juvante said. “I was on the USS Maryland.”

Heather thought the name of the boat sounded familiar.

“Is that the nuclear sub Gilead owns?” Heather asked.

“Sure is,” Juvante said. “The captain was SoJ. Half our ship was Catholic. Couple a Muslims. Couple of Jews. He didn’t kill us because he needed all of us to fight our way home. We was under the Arctic ice pack when he told us we was at war and had to make it back to King’s Bay to take on new weapons. But, Doctor Coley, it got weird. Everybody was coming after us. The Russians. NATO. Our own Navy. We had a couple of close calls. Popped a couple who was meant to pop us. If we had known

what was really goin' on we would have scuttled the boat ourselves and denied them the nukes. World situation would be a lot different today."

"How did you make it back up here?" Heather asked.

"The captain holds a lot of weight and he's an honorable man. He gave all of the non-Christians a choice to convert or be discharged. I got a pass to travel and a bus ticket and I came home. Dr. Coley, why you snipin?"

"It's my summer job," Heather said. "Chicago doesn't carry educator rations through the summer. It's not like I can be a lifeguard or bartend right now."

The golf cart stopped at the corner of North Western Avenue and Irving Park Drive.

"You do sixes, Dr. Coley?" Juvante asked.

"Only way to keep it random," Heather said.

Heather and Joquetta got out of the golf cart. Heather pulled a six sided die from her pocket. She rolled the die on the pavement. The die came up on the number three.

"Hide site three," Heather said as she got back into the golf cart. "Where's that?"

"Straight ahead. There's an old sign on it that says 'Skin and Hair clinic.' The building in front of it's gone. I got your dope."

Juvante handed Heather a folded piece of paper. Heather unfolded the paper and gave it a quick inspection. The paper sketched out ranges in an arc all the way out to 1,000 yards along with notable landmarks. This covered all of Horner Park.

"Anyone in there?" Heather asked.

"No, ma'am." Juvante said.

Heather knew better than to ask where the other hide sites were or the location of the team they were relieving. This is why they rotated snipers - if one was ever captured, they couldn't give away positions in their new area.

"Mr. White," Heather said as she extended her hand. "It's been a pleasure."

"All been mine, Dr. Coley." Juvante said as he shook Heather's hand. "I'll be by with some hot soup later tonight. Today's challenge and password is Turkey-Whistle."

Heather turned and walked toward the building. When darkness fell, she would kill three men before Juvante returned with the soup.

Prince Kuhio Federal Building, Honolulu, Hawaii. USA

Sasha sat in a conference room waiting for the satellite to finish connecting with the feed in Alaska. Bandwidth was precious with so few satellites remaining and the feed took its time connecting. Windows on a second monitor appeared. Each window contained another person. The admiral from USPACOM from down the street in Pearl Harbor appeared. Then the Deputy Secretary who was in China popped into focus. The head of the Pacific Fleet, who was operating on one of two remaining U.S. aircraft carriers, came into view followed by a litany of deputies and assistant deputies. Finally, the Secretary of State appeared on the big screen. The Secretary of State looked exhausted, ashen and far older than she looked in her official pictures back before the war began.

“I’d like to start,” The Secretary said. “With an acknowledgement. Harry Powers was a good man. He gave years of service to this country and he stuck around long past retirement because he wanted to see America made whole again. I just wish he could have had the chance to witness it firsthand. He’ll be missed. Sara, I understand you are now the project director.”

“I am, Madam Secretary.” Sasha said. Sasha always spoke her mind, but she knew not to correct The Secretary about mis-remembering her name.

“I’m going to make this short,” The Secretary said, “Negotiations with the Chinese on debt re-consolidation have broken down. They’re demanding hard currency now. At our current expenditure levels we have about eight weeks of gold reserves left. The president is going to ask Congress to reintroduce the Gold Reserve Act to buy us a few more weeks. But that didn’t go over well in 1933 and I’m not sure if the American public is going to go for it now.”

The Secretary paused.

“In eight weeks, we won’t be able to service our debt. We won’t be able to pay our troops and are going to lose this war. Now does anybody have any ideas?”

The idea hit Sasha out of the blue like... a pile of gold bricks. She thought of the sorry state of Gilead's Air Force and the experienced insurgents fighting in Appalachia. It was Harry’s parting gift to her- the man she wouldn’t sleep with for all the gold in Ft. Knox.

“Madame Secretary,” Sasha said, “It’s a longshot, but I might.”

Chapter 3 : Periods into Commas

Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, Republic of Gilead.

Praise Be Jason Wolf would eat today.

He remembered a time not that long ago when he was a child and his life consisted of PlayStation and YouTube. The refrigerator always had cans of Coke, not the paper Tetrapaks he saw smuggled in, but actual cans made of aluminum. His mother kept the cupboard next to the oven in their kitchen perpetually stocked with Doritos and Little Debbie snack cakes. He had gone from any kind of food at a whim to starvation and eating things best forgotten - worms, dandelions, garbage. It was a miracle he had survived when so many of his childhood friends were dead.

There wasn't a lot of food on the tray in front of him- maybe 500 calories total. Two pieces of bread, a ladle full of grits and a piece of bacon that was intentionally undercooked so the fat could be eaten. But it was beautiful to Jason. He stared at it lovingly. He would do anything his commander ordered as long as they kept giving him food.

Jason sat at a long table with nine other of his comrades. It was one table of many in a dining facility that was designed to hold two hundred. All of the men wore the black fatigues of The Guardian Marines with the uniform shirt buttoned up all the way to the collar. They were "Boots" - first day trainees - and they would have to earn the right to open the first button on their collars.

A guardian drill instructor passed town the rows of hungry boys.

“Pray!” The Drill Instructor commanded.

“O God! Bless the food You have provided us and save us from the punishment of hellfire.” The room of boys chorused.

Jason Wolf had started life as a Jew because his parents were Jews. He didn’t believe in hellfire any more than he believed in the Easter Bunny, but he believed in food and he savored every bite. If the Sons of Jacob wanted him to be a Christian he would pray with the zeal of the enlightened as long as they kept giving him three meals a day.

The drill instructor spoke as he paced between the tables.

“Look what I have here,” The drill instructor said as the men ate. “I have seeds. I have the seeds of greatness. Men who will rise up and take back the Earth. The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor. You will sprout and you will grow into mighty men. You won’t just be guardians. You’ll be Marines. You will carry on a legacy that is older than the nation of the time before. You will spread peace and prosperity across the land. I will be hard on you, but I will love you as a father loves his children. I swear this before God under his eye.”

Jason finished his meal. He stood.

“Guardian Boot Wolf finished,” Jason yelled. He picked up his tray and swiftly walked toward the dining facility door. He handed his tray to a Martha on his way out and he got in formation with the rest of the men from his company who had finished their breakfast.

It didn't take long to finish 500 calories and the company was all present within five minutes. The drill instructor formed them up and marched them past their barracks to someplace new - a long, low slung white-painted building. Jason realized that this was it. The days of waiting in reception were over. They would take their first steps to become Marines today.

The drill instructor stopped them in front of the white building. Two civilians in the grey clothes of econopeople stood nearby with a stack of small pocket bibles and a crate of M4 rifles.

The drill instructor addressed the trainees as the civilians made their way down the ranks of men. The civilians placed a bible in the right breast pocket of each trainee. Then they handed that trainee a rifle as the drill instructor spoke.

"Today you receive the two items most important to a Marine - his bible and his rifle. You must study them both if you are to keep God's promise. Today, we will march to the rifle range where you will learn how to shoot. Your bible and your rifle and you are one now. One trinity in service of The Lord. Like a trinity, you shall never be apart. But before we begin, there's just one last thing."

The Drill Instructor waited until every trainee was equipped with their new tools of the faith.

"Repeat after me," The Drill Instructor said. "I pledge to God."

"I pledge to God," the company repeated.

"That I will enjoin good and forbid evil," said the drill instructor.

That I will enjoin good and forbid evil.

The drill instructor continued, pausing for each response

“That I will reject oppression, corruption and subjugation... That I will treat the earth as my mother and my appointed commander as my father.... That I will be steadfast in the truth and the righteous deeds of the faith.... That I will liberate every inch of the bountiful earth and leave the true judgement to God... Before God I shall fulfill this pledge.”

The drill instructor beamed with admiration.

“Make me proud, today boys.”

Jason didn’t care about the oath, God or the drill instructor’s pride. His only thought was what might be for lunch.

Naval Submarine Base King’s Bay, Georgia. Republic of Gilead.

Even Commander Faircloth had trouble understanding who was in charge. He had been responsible for the U.S. Navy Fleet Forces Command in the time before, back when ranks actually meant something and God must have truly been guiding Gilead for this whole scheme to have worked. Gilead's push toward biblical equality essentially created two ranks - Commanders and Guardians with no clear delineation of who was middle management. It just kind of ... worked. The older Guardians stepped up and became leaders. Younger commanders fell in line under commanders with more political capital.

This was fine for the Army - any idiot farm boy could pull a trigger and take a bullet. But a modern Navy needed skilled personnel - machinists, electricians and weapons officers - all of which were skills that took time to develop. Nuclear submarine

sailors had to know every valve, pump and knob in the reactor. They had to know weapons systems and damage control procedures. One day he would push to introduce some kind of petty officer rank, but politically it just wasn't the time.

The sailor who stood before Commander Faircloth looked to be no older than eighteen. But with no rank or insignia - just his blue coveralls and blue sailor's baseball cap - there was no way of telling exactly who he was.

The sailor stood guarding the gangway to the SOGS Maryland - Gilead's last surviving Ohio Class ballistic missile submarine. The long, black submarine lay silently tied up at a concrete pier, lying on the water like a dark memorial to its founding country.

But Gilead or not, some traditions never die.

Commander Faircloth saluted the Sons of Jacob flag on the conning tower of the submarine. He turned and saluted the guard at the gangplank.

"Request permission to come aboard," Commander Faircloth said.

"Come aboard," said the guard after he returned the commander's salute.

Commander Faircloth ambled up the steel gangway.

The further concession to Naval tradition was the captain of the boat. Commanders abound on the boat, but there was always only one captain on a vessel and that man waited for Commander Faircloth at the ship's conning tower.

The boat captain saluted Commander Faircloth when he reached the conning tower.

"Good morning commander," The Captain said. "I trust you had an easy journey? Can I get you some refreshments? We have some Cuban Rum and fresh bread from the ship's bakery."

“No,” Commander Faircloth said. “Just show me the problem.”

The Captain led Commander Faircloth down the spine of the submarine, back toward the missile launch hatches. A blue portable canopy was lashed to the deck over the top of an open missile launch tube. A few sailors stood crowded around the large, open hatch. The nose cone of a nuclear warhead sat under the tarp like a giant black traffic cone.

Commander Faircloth paused at the edge of the hatch. The missile tube was over six feet in diameter and could have swallowed the commander whole. The Captain took out a flashlight. He shined the light on the exposed warhead internals.

“That’s the problem,” The Captain said. You see how the explosives around the warhead are all buckled and bent out of shape? They should be in a perfect circle.”

“Will the warhead work in this condition?” Commander Faircloth asked.

“Well, we don’t really know,” The Captain said. “The whole point of the explosives is to focus the detonation inward at the same time. It might work or the explosion might fizzle. We’re running some math on it right now. Best case is the yield will be off, maybe five kilotons instead of one hundred.”

“How did this happen?” The commander asked.

“All the warheads exhibiting the condition were scheduled to be refurbished at the start of the war. These have been sitting here for years. Our guess is that these particular warheads had too much Plutonium-240 impurities, so the gamma radiation from the decay cracked and bent the explosives over time.”

“You said ‘all the warheads,’” Commander Faircloth said. “How many have been affected?”

“All of them,” The Captain said.

Commander Faircloth felt like he had been punched in the gut. Gilead no longer had a credible nuclear deterrent and that was the only thing keeping the Canadians and British at bay.

Owsley County, Kentucky. Contested Appalachia.

Travis Lewis sat on the front of his porch in a homemade rocking chair watching an Army officer from New Jersey in women’s dungarees attempt to milk a goat. Travis’s ten year old grandson, Vernon, stood nearby the officer giving pointers when he could.

“Grab,” Vernon said. “Roll. Grab. Roll.”

“I’m grabbing,” Captain Moore said. “But it’s not-”

“Captain,” the boy said. “Just grab as high... as high as you can with your trigger finger and your thumb together. You got it?”

“Okay,” Captain Moore said.

“Now just keep it tight and bring the rest of your fingers together top to bottom.”

A jet of white milk shot into the metal bucket.

“Great job!” Vernon said. “Now look at the milk. You gotta make sure there’s no blood or clumps. If they’re blood or clumps, that’s infection. Now put some water in there and swish it around and dump that milk out. That was like you primin’ it.”

Captain Moore poured some water from a plastic bottle into the bucket. He swished the bucket around and dumped it out on the ground.

“Now keep doing it until nothing else comes out,” Vernon said.

Captain Moore repeated the process. Sometimes milk came out. Sometimes it didn't, but Special Forces soldiers were selected for their ability to adapt and learn new things, even if they were from New Jersey and had never been this close to a goat.

“How did you get here anyway,” The boy asked. “My grandpa said you came from a balloon but where did you get the balloon?”

“I was on a submarine,” Captain Moore said. “The USS Virginia. They surfaced off of North Carolina, we inflated the balloon and I flew here.”

“Why didn't you bring trousers?” Vernon asked while pointing at the captain's pair of jeans which had previously belonged to his mother.

“I brought pants,” Captain Moore said as he continued to milk the goat. “But the balloon could only hold so much weight so I only brought one pair. I can't wear my army pants because I'm trying to blend in.”

Captain Moore gave the goat's teat a few more tugs. No milk came out.

“Now just give the teat a little punch,” Vernon said. “It's what a calf does with his head. Let's see if we can get a little more out.”

Captain Moore squeezed some more milk out of the teat. When he let go, the teat looked shrunken and wrinkled. The boy handed Captain Moore a jar filled with a cream that smelled like beeswax.

“Smear that on the teat,” Vernon said. “I'll take the milk inside.”

The boy grabbed the bucket of milk. Captain Moore stood up, gave the goat a pat on the side and the goat wandered away. He turned to walk back to the porch.

Travis watched him wordlessly. The Captain collapsed into an ancient, dirty folding camp chair next to Travis on the porch.

“Whaja think?” Travis asked.

“I think I’m exhausted,” Captain Moore said. “It’s a lot easier to just go to Wegmans.”

Travis chuckled.

“You know,” Captain Moore said. “Back in the world. People call you the Redneck Rebellion. I can see why.”

“You’ns from outside the holler call us that?” Travis asked.

“It’s on the news every night.”

“Well, that’s kina’ funny and all,” Travis said. “Seein’ as a redneck lives in a trailer, eats at the Mac-Donnalds and goes on Jerry Springer. I’m a hillbilly. I live in a shack. I grow my own food and I ain’t got a tee-vee.”

“Touché’,” Captain Moore said.

“A fine word for a man wearin’ my daughter’s pants,” Travis said. “Sounds like something a New York fruit would use.”

“I wouldn’t know,” Captain Moore said. “I’m from New Jersey.”

The screen door opened. Travis’s daughter, Ariel, ambled out onto the porch wearing a maternity smock that was more patches than clothes. Her belly was swollen with a baby and she carried a glass of water in each hand.

“Thank you,” Captain Moore said Ariel handed him the water. He waited a respectful moment before he gulped down every last drop.

“You’re right welcome,” Ariel said as she handed the other glass to her father. “I figured you two was tired. How my pants holding up?”

Captain Moore rubbed the flower-embroidered denim. All of the men’s pants Travis had were too large on him but Ariel’s fit just fine.

“Very well, thank you.” Captain Moore said. “I appreciate it.”

“I can’t wear ‘em no more nohow,” Ariel said as she patted her belly.

Travis took a joint from his overall pocket. He lit the joint with a plastic Bic lighter and took a long, slow toke.

“Knee acting up again?” Captain Moore asked. “I got some Motrin in the pack.”

“I’m just fine,” Travis said. He took another puff and handed the joint to his daughter. His daughter inhaled and offered the joint to Captain Moore.

“Screw it,” Captain Moore said. “They’re not drug testing me out here anyway.”

Captain Moore took the joint and inhaled. He coughed as he handed the joint back to Travis. Travis took the joint with a smile.

“Powerful stuff ain’t it?” Travis asked. “Betcha didn’t have this back in New Jersey.”

“I was on the wrestling team,” Captain Moore said. “I didn’t even drink until after West Point.”

Travis knew every sound in the woods and his ears had always been exceptionally keen even as his body aged. Travis heard the sound of hoofbeats in the distance before anyone else on the porch. Someone was coming on to his property.

“Ariel, get your gun and stay in the house with Vernon.” Travis said. “Captain, you come with me.”

Travis leapt up from his chair with the dexterity of a man forty years younger. He ran into the house, grabbed his rifle, and a bandolier of magazines. He paused for a moment to listen. Was it one rider or more? The hoofbeats came closer. The cadence told him it was only one.

“Grandpa, what’s going on?” Vernon asked.

“I don’t know yet,” Travis said. “Stay in the house with your ma. If anything happens you take a gun and run as fast as you can to Ricetown and tell the boys to get ready.”

Travis left the shack.

“Where are we heading?” Captain Moore asked as he trailed behind Travis.

“I figure they only one rider and there only one place they coming from. I’m fixin to ambush them at the crest of the hill where the trail turns sharp.”

They ran and the pair made it to the top of the hill just as Ben Baker rounded the corner of the trail in full gallop on a horse.

“Dang it Ben!” Travis shouted. “I almost shot ya!”

“We are all going to get shot,” Ben said. “We got government men coming up Route 11, ‘bout twenty miles away. Six trucks with tarps, two Humvees in front and behind with big .50 cals. Movin’ real slow like they lookin’ for something. One’s got a sweeper in the front.”

Ben’s horse stopped a few feet before Travis and Captain Moore.

“Are the Humvees armored?” Captain Moore asked.

“I dunno” Ben said. “Billy Mack came riding up on my property and I started the chain. Already warned John and Andy. They’re headed toward the bend in the road.”

Eight trucks weren't that big of a problem. His boys had hit bigger convoys, but if the two Humvees had .50 caliber machine guns, then that meant they are guarding something important, and probably something worth stealing.

"Did you rally Cole yet?" Travis always had to ask about his brother-in-law. Cole tended to be more concerned about his hogs and only joined the fight if Travis asked him personally.

"He wan't around. I told your sister," Ben said.

Travis sighed. Cole had probably heard Ben's horse and skedaddled.

"Then gather up the boys," Travis said." Tell them to meet me at the bend in the road. Maybe them trucks got food?"

"Hell," Ben said as he looked over Captain Moore in his ladies dungarees. "Maybe they got men's trousers?"

Ben reared his horse and took off down the road in a gallop.

"Where is this bend in the road?" Captain Moore asked.

"Yonder to the south, 'bout two miles by Freeman Branch." Travis said. "There's this bend in the road and a creek down below. We got the high ground and can shoot at 'em from two sides. Good as spot as any for an ambush."

"L-shaped ambush from the high ground," Captain Moore said. "That's a textbook move."

"It's common damn sense in the holler, let's git!"

The pair ran back towards the shack. Travis wasn't much for horses, but he kept a four-seater John Deere Gator ATV in a lean-to next to the chicken coup. He had

jury-rigged the Gator to run on pure alcohol back before and his effort at self-sufficiency had paid off in spades.

Captain Moore peeled off headed toward the house.

"I'm gonna get the Stingers," Captain Moore said.

"Forget about the dang Stingers," Travis yelled as he hopped into the Gator.

Captain Moore stopped. He pointed at the shack.

"If they've got air-

"You don't need to worry about no air. You need to worry about me! Don't you dare sass me in front of my men like you're doin' now or so help me, I will clobber you. Now get in the damn Gator. We can move faster without the damn Stingers."

Captain Moore looked back at the house for a moment. He ran to the Gator and got inside.

"I'm sorry, Travis." Captain Moore said as Travis sped down the trail in the Gator. "You're right. I want to learn from you, but you've got to be willing to learn from me too."

"Right now," Travis said. "The only thing you're worth a damn for is that fancy satellite phone you got. Maybe I kill us enough government men today you'll call us a doctor."

They drove over hills, through the woods and down deer trails until they reached one hill that came up at a 30 degree slope. The Gator's engine strained, but the wheels bit into the dirt.

Travis saw a number of his men gathering near the top of the hill, but not so high up that they profiled themselves above the crest. A clearing near the top of the hill held several ATV's and a few horses. About ten men had already gathered. Some of them

wore new black pants they had looted from the broken down truck a few nights past. None of the men were dumb enough to wear black shirts.

“I didn’t know you distributed the uniforms from the truck,” Captain Moore said. “I could have used a small short trouser.”

“Well I... well.” Travis laughed. “You just looked so plumb pretty.”

Travis parked the Gator. The men crowded around Travis. A few more men arrived on horseback and foot, increasing their number to fifteen.

Butchie arrived carrying a captured machine gun. Belts of ammunition crisscrossed his shirtless chest. A cigarette bobbed between the boy’s lips.

“Butchie!” Travis yelled. “You come here. You stay next to me. Now who’s got the fireworks?”

John Abner handed Travis three bottle rockets and a stick of Roman candles.

“Here’s what I’m fixin’ to too do,” Travis said. “John, you take three men and go to the far side of the bend in the road. Everyone else, line up with me along the ridge. Don’t shoot nuthin’ until you hear Butchie open up with the machine gun. Go for the gunners in the Hummers first. Then start shooting at the truck drivers. If the Hummers done got armor, throw your Molotovs. Try not to shoot up the trucks too much. When you see the bottle rockets, that means rush ‘em. John, you stay put and start shooting down into the ravine to catch anyone we flush out. Butchie, you pick up and move to the south of the ridge and set up to ambush any reinforcements. If you’ns see Roman candles above the convoy scatter into the wood. Any questions?”

The men shook their heads.

“If any you’ns see more of the boys come in, tell ‘em to spread out on the ridge. Captain, you just stay here right next to me and Butchie. And if you’ns see my brother-in-law send him up to me.”

The men broke up and moved to their designated positions. Travis climbed the ridge until he overlooked the road. He positioned Butchie where he could best control his shooting up and down the road. Captain Moore lay down to Butchie’s left, ready to feed him ammunition.

Ben Baker came riding his horse up the ridge. He dismounted about fifty yards from Travis and advanced up the woods on foot with his rifle and a brace of Molotov cocktails.

“They’re about two miles back,” Ben said. “First Hummer has rollers out in front of it like they lookin’ for mines.”

“Did you lay down IED’s?” Captain Moore asked Travis.

Travis wasn’t much for military lingo, but he had read enough during America’s last two wars to know that “IED” stood for “Improvised Explosive Device.”

“Naw,” Travis said. “We don’t do that. I ain’t gonna order a man to do somethin’ I wouldn’t do myself. And I ain’t damn fool enough to make a bomb in my kitchen. Might-could the Robinson boys from Breathitt started bakin’ bombs when they ran out of stuff to make meth.”

Travis heard what sounded like a hundred wheels squeaking all at the same time. Then he heard the low-pitched drone of diesel engines. The lead Hummer came into view. Sure enough, the Hummer pushed what looked like eight giant thread spools on a carriage in front of the Hummer’s engine. Six large military cargo trucks followed

and a second Hummer brought up the rear. Both Hummers carried three-foot long machine guns manned by a guardian who stood exposed waist-up in the cupola. This would be a slaughter.

“Go for the rear one first,” Travis said to Butchie. John and his boys are gonna concentrate on the lead.”

The government man in the rear Hummer never knew what hit him. The first burst of bullets from Butchie’s machine gun slammed the guardian’s body into the roof of the Hummer. The bullets walked their way into the Hummer’s windshield, spidering the glass until holes the size of a man’s forefinger opened up. The Hummer slowed to a halt.

A flaming bottle thrown from the crest of the ridge sailed through the air and smashed into the rear Hummer, engulfing it in flames.

“Sweep left!” Travis yelled.

Butchie pivoted his machine gun left, walking yellow tracer rounds up the convoy. Bullets from the rest of the men on the ridge perforated the unarmored cabs of the trucks. A few guardians lept from the truck cabs or tried to return fire, but they were cut down where they stood - stabbed through with tracers from Butchie’s machine gun. Some of the trucks crashed into each other. One of the trucks ran off the road where it tumbled down into the embankment and rolled into the stream, its cab coming to rest under the water. One driver jumped from a truck, only to run forward and be run over by the truck he just abandoned.

By some miracle the gunner of the lead Hummer had survived the initial fusillade, although this driver was now dead and his vehicle rested motionless on the road. The

gunner ducked down inside the Hummer with only his hands and the tip of his head exposed. He swiveled his machine gun at the only target his primal brain could see - the tracer rounds from Butchie's machine gun. Travis knew it was coming before he could do anything about it. He saw a flash and then the sound of a freight train as rounds the size of a man's thumb shot over his head.

Butchie pushed his head in the dirt, but Captain Moore took aim with his rifle and fired several rounds into the open cupola. The gunner jerked his hands back inside the Hummer and the machine gun fell silent. Maybe Captain Moore was useful after all? Or maybe he was just stupid?

Several Molotov cocktails spun through the air toward the remaining Hummer. A few fell short, but two impacted on the side and the roof. The flame took hold on the Hummer. Black smoke rose as the Hummer's paint peeled down to the metal.

Travis surveyed the convoy. A number of black-uniformed government men sat crumpled in the trucks or dead in heaps close to them. Travis saw movement inside the Hummer. The gunner was still alive, but he was being cooked like a Thanksgiving turkey.

Travis lit his three bottle rockets. The rockets shot up over the road and detonated above the wrecked convoy.

"Push through," Travis yelled to his men on the ridge. "Stay away from those damn Hummers case the rounds start cookin' off."

Butchie rose and took off down the crest of the ridge where Travis knew he would plant himself at the edge of the convoy to wait for any reinforcements.

Travis moved carefully down the hill. Now was no time for a sprained ankle. The pungent odor of burning hair and barbeque wafted over the convoy as Travis crept closer with his men.

Travis beamed with pride when he reached the roadway. The cabs of the trucks could have been mistaken for pasta colanders but most of the tarps were intact. His men had grown up making every shot count. Cartridges were the one thing they couldn't make themselves in Appalachia. One cartridge, one deer, one rabbit, one hog. His men didn't waste ammunition then or now.

"Anybody hurt?" Travis asked. He made a quick count. All 16 of his men, minus Butchie up on the ridge were accounted for. It was a good day and it got much better as the men clambered into the trucks. Travis's boys called out their score. The trucks contained sacks of flour and rice - enough food to last their families a month. They also found a couple of boxes of batteries, ammunition and a few grenades.

"See if you can get any of these trucks runnin' again," Travis called out to his men. "Strip the bodies of anythin' useful."

Travis looked at Captain Moore.

"Maybe go find you sum trousers there Captain?" Travis said.

"Travis," Captain Moore said in a whisper. "We have to go. If one of them got on the radio-"

"Like hell," Travis said. "We got families to feed. Anyways, Butchie ill' shoot 'em up before they get here. Go find yourself some trousers now, boy."

Two of the trucks started up. Travis organized a bucket brigade to move as much as they could from the dead trucks to the ones that still ran. He thought about

sending a squad down to the stream, but his bit of bravado with Captain Moore was only that of a pirate talking to a knock-kneed mate. Travis was scared of reinforcements, but he figured there was at least a half hour before anyone showed up. This was plenty of time to strip the trucks.

Travis saw the nude backside of Captain Moore as the soldier shimmied into a pair of blood-soaked black uniform pants. The legs of the uniform were too long for the Captain's short frame so Captain Moore cut off the remainder of the fabric with his knife.

"Now you look like a hillbilly," Travis said to the Captain.

The men were almost done cross-loading the trucks when someone called out.

"Got one alive!"

Travis looked for the source of the voice. Two trucks down, the man who had been run over during the battle was still alive. Travis's men had pulled the guardian from underneath the truck. They stood in a circle around the wounded man, grinning.

"Finish him off with your knife," Travis said to the men.

"No!" Captain Moore shouted.

Travis fixed Captain Moore with a glance that could have turned him to ash. He was about to let loose a stream of cuss words so profane that the Lord himself would have covered his ears, but then he got another idea.

"He's right," Travis said. "Don't touch him."

Travis walked down the convoy to the black-clad government man. The sea of legs surrounding the guardian parted to let Travis through.

Both of the government man's calves were crushed into ripped fabric and gizzards with bits of bone poking out in odd places. Blood soaked out onto the road,

covering up the yellow lane divider. The government man was probably about thirty or so with blonde hair in a crew cut. He looked terrified, not at the nature of his injuries, but at what he knew would come next.

Travis knelt down.

"What's your name son?" Travis asked.

The man looked confused, as if this were a trick. A glimmer of hope crept into the man's eyes.

"Michael," the man said. "I didn't want to do this. They made me do it. I was in the Army and my family-"

"Now, now. Don't you worry," Travis said. "You're lucky. We got a very special guest here. And this is what I think you call a teachable moment. This here is Captain Moore of the U.S. Army Special Forces."

Travis motioned to Captain Moore.

"We're gonna get you medical attention," Captain Moore said.

"Oh," Travis said. "I didn't say nothin' about that. I said this was a teachable moment."

Travis took out his knife.

"Oh God! Please!" The man said. "They made me-"

"Shut the hell up," Travis said. "You done made your choice. They didn't make you do nothin'."

The man started mumbling a "Hail Mary." As far as Travis knew, this prayer had been banned but he figured the man must have been a Catholic back before. What the man said about being forced to fight was most likely true. The poor bag of guts was

probably just falling back on his early education - regressing like a child. Travis let the man finish his prayer.

“Now you get to see if everything you done used to believe in back before is true,” Travis said. He looked at Captain Moore. “Now when you cut a man’s throat, you gots to do it from ear to ear. That ain’t no figure of speech. It’s an instruction. You got to get all the arteries and you also want to get the windpipe too so he drowns as well as loses blood. Now you gots to grab his hair real tight like this-”

Travis grabbed a hunk of the man’s hair and the government man started his Hail Mary again. Travis paused. He heard an engine. It wasn’t a car it was... a propeller?

Butchie’s machine gun opened up down the road. Yellow tracers stabbed out at the sky. A small pre-war civilian propeller plane flew about 200 feet above the road. The plane’s wings had some kind of metal drums attached to the underside. One of the metal drums fell free from the left wing.

The men pointed their guns at the plane as the drum fell end over end in the air. Travis didn’t see the drum hit the ground, but he felt himself get lifted off the earth as if he were a doll. The next thing Travis knew, he was lying in the bed of an Army truck, its tarp ripped to tatters. What happened? How much time had passed? He tried to look at his watch, but he couldn’t move his arms. He tried to sit up or move his legs but nothing seemed to work. He turned his head toward the road. A few of his men were now strewn in bloody chunks across the pavement. Travis suddenly felt sleepy, but he forced himself to keep his eyes open.

“He’s coming around again!” Captain Moore shouted.

The captain was still alive. His clothes were torn and he bled from a dozen places, but the soldier stood like a rock, rallying the few men who remained. Butchie was there with the Captain. Had he run all the way down from the ridge?

“Don’t try to lead him!” Captain Moore said. “Keep your rifles at thirty degrees and he’ll fly right into the bullets.”

The men fired as fast as they could, their rifles backed up by the ripping of Butchie’s machine gun. Travis heard the plane’s engine sputter. The plane came into view for a moment, banked right and exploded on the other side of the ridge. His boys were safe and Travis let sleep overtake him.

Camp Williams, Utah. USA

The idea for the Camp Williams Sunrise Chapel was first conceived in 2005 when evacuees from Hurricane Katrina saw the sun come up over Box Elder Peak. Post officials realized that their old World War II era clapboard chapel was suddenly too small, but by law, National Guard funds could not be used to build new places of worship. So the call went out to the community, and if there was one thing Latter Day Saints did well, it was organize. It took ten years, 2.5 million dollars and the help of local businesses, but the chapel they built took in the view of the Jordan River and the whole Utah Valley. When the sun came in through the windows, it looked like God himself was flooding the room with His love.

Taking the sacrament was always Private Akers favorite part of worship services. He constantly felt a connection with Jesus Christ, but it was with the eating of the bread

that he felt most close to Him, although this particular Sunday, no bread was available. The sacrament trays contained bits of flour tortilla torn up even smaller than usual. At least it was better than the time all they had were potato peels. This was the first food Private Akers had eaten all day. It was a fast Sunday at his church and he wouldn't eat anything else until supper.

Not everybody in his unit was a church member. Specialist Castro was a lapsed Catholic. Sergeant Hale was a Mormon but didn't attend services regularly and Staff Sergeant Kimball attended a different temple with his own family. A few soldiers from his platoon were there and other soldiers chose to sleep in on Sundays. Private Smith was there with him. Her wounded left cheek now looked like a spider had burrowed into the skin from the crisscross of black non-dissolvable stitches.

A few soldiers and some base support civilians came up to speak and give testimony and then the service was over. There would be no Sunday school, relief society or priesthood meetings. The chapel had to clear out to make way for the Protestants and Catholics later in the morning.

Private Akers and Private Smith collected their rifles from a rack at the back of the chapel. They walked outside into the bright Utah summer sun and pulled their dark blue Nauvoo Legion berets from their pockets. The beret didn't help much as protection from the sun, but its dark blue color harkened back to 1849 and the State of Deseret flag. The badge on the beret was white with a dark blue image of the Angel Moroni blowing his trumpet while facing left. The beret identified them as airborne troopers and while coveting was a sin in the LDS church, every paratrooper treasured their beret. Older and more experienced soldiers could be identified by berets that had faded to an

almost indigo color from the sun. Occasionally soldiers would be caught baking their berets in ovens or rubbing them with salt in the effort to make them look more weathered than they had earned.

Both Akers and Smith had berets that were still their original color. They pulled them on as they stepped out from under cover of the chapel awning. Private Akers stopped for a moment to re-tie his boot and wait for a glimpse of the woman he promised he would speak to back before his last battle.

“What the flip you doin, Akers?” Private Smith asked.

“I’m waitin’ for someone.” Private Akers said.

“Who?”

“Someone,” Private Akers said. “I promised the Heavenly Father I would tell this girl I loved her if I lived through Sacramento.”

“Like H you are,” Private Smith said. “French toast that is the creepiest flipping thing I’ve ever heard. You can’t do that. It would freak me the flip out. And I’m... I’m me. Who is it?”

“Private Johnson,” Private Akers said. “The medic from Bravo.”

“Who, Brenda?” Private Smith asked. “No, you don’t want her. My buddy’s roommates with her. She smells her clothes before she puts them in the laundry bag - like her drawers after she runs. Like what the flip? She thinks there gonna smell good after a run? No, not her. Have you ever even talked to her?”

“No,” Private Akers said. “I mean, I asked her for some Motrin once when she was the range medic and I got a headache.”

“No, you are not gonna talk to her.” Private Smith tugged on Private Akers until he stood up. “I am your flippin' battle buddy and if I let you do this basically no woman is ever going to talk to you ever again. Not even me.”

Private Akers grimaced as the girl he so adored walked by with her gaggle of friends.

“You look devastated,” Private Smith said after Brenda passed.

“I’m hungry and you just broke my heart, Smith.” Private Akers said.

“Maybe I can fix one of those problems,” Private Smith said as she pulled out her cell phone. “Come with me to dinner. I’ll text my dad.”

“Won’t he be at services?” Private Smith asked.

“Then I guess we’ll just have to surprise him. You got a magazine?”

Weekends were days off if they weren’t training or didn’t have duty. Some soldiers who lived in Salt Lake City and Provo went home for the weekend, but they had to stay in uniform, keep their unloaded rifles with them, and carry at least one magazine of ammunition on their person at all times. It was common in Utah and most of the southwest to see soldiers hitchhiking home. In Nevada, some soldiers even went to nightclubs in uniform with their rifles slung over their shoulders.

Private Akers bent down and tapped an ankle pouch on his uniform pants that was just large enough for a 30 round M4 magazine.

“I got a mag.” Private Akers said. “Thanks, Smith. I think I’ll take you up on dinner.”

It took about 20 minutes to walk to the main gate. A number of soldiers were going in the same direction and everybody seemed heady with hunger and the

intoxication of knowing they would see their families soon. When they reached the front gate, the pair stood in line with scores of impatient soldiers who played on their phones or cracked jokes as they waited their turn to sign out. A military policeman wearing a boonie hat passed each soldier a sign-out sheet on a clipboard as they went through the gate. Most of the airborne soldiers wearing berets regarded the boonie-hat wearing MP with sight contempt as they signed out. Private Akers made a mental note to be respectful.

When the pair reached the gate, the MP pointed at a large white sign that read:

RULES FOR OFF POST CONDUCT
No Alcohol
No Swimming
Always have a magazine within reach
Report all contact with foreigners

Private Akers and Private Smith signed their names and wrote down their destination. They passed a Utah Highway Patrolman and several helmeted Utah National Guard soldiers who stood guard at the gate. The Utah Highway Patrolman waved and Private Akers waved back.

“Stay safe out there,” The highway patrolmen said as Akers and Smith walked passed.

A long line of civilian vehicles sat on the shoulder of the main gate. Most of the cars were driven by women - civilians who served the Heavenly Father by using their precious gasoline rations to drive soldiers home on the weekend. Gas wasn't rationed as much in the southwest as it was in Hawaii, but Private Akers knew that it was still a significant sacrifice.

The pair headed toward the first car in line, an older, but well kept white Ford Explorer SUV. The driver was a woman in her late 50's who was dressed like she had just come from church. A large Igloo thermos lay on the passenger seat along with some rugged plastic cups and a few old tablets and laptop computers. The woman powered down the passenger window when the pair got close.

"Where you two headed?" The woman asked.

"Sandy," Private Smith said.

"Hop in. My name is Charlotte. Thank you for protecting us."

"You're welcome, ma'am." Private Smith said as she climbed into the rear seat. She jerked her thumb at Private Akers. "This is Josh. My name's Madison."

"Pleasure to meet you," Charlotte said. "You two want lemonade?"

"Thank you, ma'am," Private Akers said. "That would be nice."

Charlotte poured two plastic cups worth of cold lemonade from the thermos bottle. She handed the cups back to Private Akers and Smith. The lemonade tasted tart and acidic. It was the real thing and Private Akers wondered what Charlotte had traded for on her SNAP card to get real lemons.

"Are you two going to see family?" Charlotte asked as she started the SUV.

"My parents," Private Smith said. "Sunday dinner."

The SUV pulled out onto Highway 68. There weren't a lot of cars, but most people were still at church, and even if they hadn't been, there wasn't much point in going shopping. Most stores were empty and the one place that people could still afford to go - movie theaters - wouldn't open until a few hours after church let out.

"What are the computers for?" Private Akers asked while motioning to the pile of laptops and tablets on the front seat.

"My sister's school is having a WPB chip drive," Charlotte said. "I was going to drop these off at her house if I was taking anyone close to Sandy."

Chip drives had become a normal part of life in the southwest ever since China's economy collapsed. The only reason people still had smartphones was that so many people were dead from the revolution or its associated lean times that there was still a supply of old phones in working condition. Google Android phones were still made in Europe, South Korea and Israel, but the iconic and treasured iPhone hadn't been produced in years. Some Apple employees who had escaped to Texas were trying to restart production in partnership with Dell, but Texas considered itself its own country and was officially neutral. So the War Production Board, or WPB, held chip drives to salvage old chips, screens and rare earth metals to break the parts down for missile guidance systems and radios. Private Akers' pre-war iPhone SE gave him exceptional social cache, even though its screen was cracked and its battery life was dwindling.

The three made small talk as they drove north. The woman had been doing this for a few years and she spoke with a fluid, disarming tone. She was able to make conversation without delving into the territory of "operation security" or OPSEC which she knew would get her the cold shoulder by all but the most careless of soldiers.

The SUV pulled into a neighborhood of well-kept, upscale homes. All of the homes had crops growing on their front lawns and none of the cars in the driveway were newer than seven years old.

“Did you grow up here?” Private Akers asked Private Smith.

“It’s the only home I’ve ever known other than Camp Williams,” Private Smith said. She pointed out the window. “I used to play in that park.”

Private Akers had grown up in the outskirts of Levan near a poultry farm. He knew that not everybody had grown up raising chickens in their backyard but he had never been in a rich girl’s home.

“Are you rich? Did you ever go to McDonalds?” Private Akers asked. “I always wanted to try a chicken McNugget.”

Private Smith laughed.

“We’re not that well off that we could afford McDonalds.”

The car stopped on a tree-lined street in front of a red-brick two-story house. The corn that was planted in the front yard was about knee-high. There was even a basketball hoop mounted to the top of the garage, although there was no car in the driveway. Smith’s parents were probably still at services.

“You have a lovely home,” Charlotte said as Private Akers and Smith got out of the SUV. They shut the doors. Charlotte powered down the passenger window. She smiled at the pair.

“My sister lives in White City,” Charlotte said. “So you call me after dinner and I’ll get you back to post.” Charlotte looked directly at Private Akers. “You’re a nice young man, Josh. She’s very lucky.”

“Oh, we’re not-” Private Smith started to say, but the woman drove off, her point made.

“Are your parents home?” Private Akers asked.

“I don’t think so,” Private Smith said. “Want to come inside? My brother has a Nintendo Switch. We can play Mario Kart.”

“I... I don’t think it’s right to be alone with you in the house.”

“Shut the front door,” Smith said. “We’re battle buddies.”

“I don’t want to disrespect your parents,” Private Akers responded. “I’ll come in when they come home.”

“Suit yourself,” Smith said as she unlocked the door. She disappeared inside.

Smith stood outside. He looked at the front door. Was he being stupid? It was always better to err on the side of being respectful but still, she had invited him in. As the thoughts bounced around his head, he heard the garage door open. Private Akers walked around to the side of the house. Private Smith stood in a garage that was uncluttered and organized. Tool cabinets lined the walls. The back of the garage had a pegboard for larger tools. There was even a TV and a couple of old recliners. Private Smith had unpinned her hair and it flowed down her back. She had also taken off her uniform blouse and was just wearing her tan issued t-shirt. She held two glasses of water.

“Can we sit in the garage?” Private Smith asked. “At least come out of the sun?”

“That works,” Private Akers said as he unslung his rifle. He placed his weapon against a tool cabinet but he kept his uniform blouse on.

“What does your dad do?” Private Akers asked as he took the glass of water from Private Smith. “Is he a mechanic?”

“He works for UDOT as an IT manager,” Private Smith motioned to the recliners that faced the TV. Private Akers took the hint and the pair sat down. They were close enough to talk but far enough away that nobody could suspect any hanky-panky if Smith’s parents came home.

“What’s with all the tools?” Private Akers asked.

“He used to work on cars in his spare time as a hobby. I helped him rebuild a Fox Body Mustang that was supposed to be mine, but he gave it to a woman from our church who was in an accident and needed a new car.”

“He sounds like a good man.”

“He is,” Private Smith said as she sipped her water. “Can’t really get cars anymore unless you get them from Texas, but who has the gold?”

They both nodded. At the start of the revolution, Texas nationalists sealed the borders and established a state of limited government. Now Texas was the 10th largest economy in the world and due to the Pantex weapons plant, a nuclear power.

“Want to play Mario Kart?” Private Smith.

“Out here?” Private Akers asked.

“Yeah, I can move it.” Smith said. She got up from her recliner and went inside the house. She returned a few moments later with a Nintendo Switch and some wheel controllers. She handed him a controller as she plugged the game console into the TV.

Private Akers inspected the controller like it was an ancient artifact from antiquity. How long had it been since he played Nintendo? His parents could never afford a

Nintendo and his experience playing had always been at friend's houses back before the war.

"Just so we have an understanding," Private Smith said. "I'm Yoshi."

The two played Mario Kart and for a while there was no war or hunger or Sons of Jacob. This went on until the pair heard a minivan pull into the driveway. Private Smith paused the game. They both stood. Private Akers walked toward his rifle and picked it up as he respectfully waited for Smith's parents to get out of the minivan.

Minivans were ubiquitous in Utah due to the large families. Many gentiles jokingly referred to them as "Mormon People Movers." This particular minivan was an older Chrysler Pacifica that had a few dings and dents but looked like it was in good repair. A tall, thin, greying man got out of the driver's seat. Private Smith's mother looked like a slightly older version of Private Smith. Mrs. Smith grimaced with concern when her eyes fell on her daughter's wounded cheek. The mother then gave Private Akers a tight lipped and knowing smile as she exited the car. She obviously approved of his choice to remain in the garage. A 12 lanky year old boy consisting of mainly arms and legs rocketed out of the side door to make a beeline to his sister.

"Madison!" The boy yelled as he hugged Private Smith. He was taller than his sister and surprisingly thin. The boy broke the embrace.

"Can I clean your rifle?" The boy asked.

Private Smith smiled.

"It's in the kitchen," Private Smith said. "It's not loaded, but clear it. This is Josh. He's in my fire team. Josh this is Wyatt."

“Hi,” the boy said with a quick wave before he dashed through the garage and into the house.

Private Smith’s father approached Private Akers. Private Akers noticed that the man carried an old-style all-metal .45 caliber pistol on his hip. The pair shook hands.

“You must be Josh,” the father said as they shook hands. “Welcome to our home.”

“Thank you for the invitation, sir,” Private Akers said. “I see you prefer the 1911.”

“It’s the weapon of our people,” Mr. Smith said with a smile. “John Moses Browning was a genius.”

“I’ve never even fired one,” Private Akers said. “All we have now are 9mm Berettas and they don’t really give us grunts pistols.”

“If we’re using pistols the Dingbats are way too close,” Private Smith interjected.

“Language...” Mrs. Smith said.

“Mom, it ain’t a cuss word.”

“Madison, come inside and help me with dinner,” Mrs. Smith said, ending the conversation. “I want to look at that wound on your face. Josh, it’s good to finally meet you.”

Private Smith was a terror on the battlefield, but no match for her mother. She followed her inside the house.

Mr. Smith motioned to the recliners.

“Talk to me while the women go inside,” Mr. Smith said.

Private Akers waited for Mr. Smith to sit and then sat down himself.

“Where are you a member?” Mr. Smith asked.

"I guess Levan, sir. I haven't been home in a while. Nobody drives that far south so I mainly go to the chapel on post."

"Would you pray with me?"

"Of course, sir."

Mr. Smith closed his eyes and reached across the recliners to touch Private Akers on his shoulder.

"Heavenly Father. I ask that you protect this man and guide his hands true in combat against your enemies. Amen."

"Amen."

Mr. Smith relined in his chair.

"How's Army life?" Mr. Smith asked.

"It's not bad, sir. They feed me. I have a place to sleep."

Mr. Smith smiled.

"Yeah, I was in back in the late 90's. I was in between the wars. I was in the 101st, Air Assault. Signal corps. I fixed radios. You know when Madison said she wanted to join up as infantry... well her mother could have ended a drought with all of the tears. Is she getting a purple heart for her cheek?"

"We checked. She doesn't meet the criteria. A piece of glass went through her cheek. But she was tough. My team leader pushed a piece of Curlex through her cheek like a shoestring and she didn't even make a sound."

"How did that happen?" Mr. Smith asked. "She sent us pictures, but she wouldn't say how he got injured."

"Respectfully, sir. You know I can't say."

“Just checking... OPSEC, I know. Have you seen some hard fighting?” Mr. Smith probed.

“No more or less than anyone else, sir. Since we’re airborne, they keep us close to the vest. We really only go out on the important stuff and that doesn’t happen much.”

“How many jumps do you have?”

“Total? Eight,” Private Akers said. “Combat? Two.”

Private Akers watched Mr. Smith do some math in his head. He was obviously figuring that his daughter was involved in the mission to free the Handmaids and he seemed satisfied at this non-answer to his implied question.

“Well,” Mr. Smith said. “I’m glad a man like you is looking out for her.”

“Honestly, sir. She looks out for me. We’re lucky to have her. How’s the corn in your yard coming in?”

Mr. Smith shrugged and held up his hands for a moment.

“Let’s just say that I’ll never be a farmer,” Mr. Smith said. “But the Heavenly Father has blessed me with at least half a green thumb. We got corn in the front and back. Some zucchini too. We got four chickens for eggs.” He chuckled. “Back before, the neighborhood association regulated the color of our mail boxes. Now we’re growing corn in our front yard. My son... with the way he eats... I practically need a whole farm.”

“Well, when he joins the Army, he’ll get all he can eat. When I joined. My first day, I thought it was Christmas.”

The color went out of Mr. Smith’s face.

“You think we’ll still be fighting in six years?”

Private Akers realized his mistake.

"I'm sorry, sir. I didn't mean..."

"Are we still gonna be fighting by the time he's old enough to join?"

Private Akers didn't have an answer.

Nuuanu-Punchbowl, Hawaii. USA

"Hey, big sister. How's the war?" A voice called from the darkness as Sasha exited the patio doors. She smelled the pungent odor of marijuana as she walked barefoot through the grass toward the two-person hammock that was nestled in the corner of her back yard under a palm tree. She carefully carried a small glass of pineapple wine as she moved. She reached the palm. Her brother looked at her languidly from the hammock. He scooted to the left to make room for his sister and the hammock tilted a little.

Sasha sat down on the right side of the hammock. She sipped her wine. Her brother took a hit on his joint.

"We're losing the war, everybody knows that." Sasha said. How's the job search going?"

Her brother sighed. He was too old for the military even with their extended enlistment age and with the current economy, nobody was looking for a financial planner.

“Same as yesterday,” he said. “Nothing. Oh, I’m going food shopping tomorrow. Can you put some points on my SNAP card?”

“What do you need?” Sasha asked.

“Meat if you got any left. Butter. Flour. Can you transfer some eggs? I need to pay the neighbors back from last week.”

Sasha pulled out her smartphone. She opened her SNAP card app and transferred some points over to her brother’s card. Transferring between family members was permitted, but transferring between non-family members was restricted to only four exchanges per month to limit black market trading. People got around this by waiting in line outside of stores, offering to make separate purchases in exchange for goods or in the case of some women... services. But the system mostly worked and kept the black market at bay.

“How was work?” He asked. “What bad news do you have today?”

Sasha took another sip of her pineapple wine. She was sick of this pineapple crap and would murder somebody for a bottle of 2005 Château Pétrus. Maybe all of those women outside of the Times Supermarket had the right idea?

“I have a problem,” Sasha said. She chose her words carefully to maintain OPSEC. She trusted her brother, but he spent all day in Honolulu looking for work and who knew who he could encounter?

“I need to rob a bank,” Sasha said.

Her brother laughed.

“Why? Do we need toilet paper too?”

“Not paper dollars,” Sasha said. “Gold. But if we rob this bank, the banker is going to retaliate in a big way.”

“Well,” her brother said. “Can you sneak in there and get it? Like a cat burglar?”

“I don’t think so,” Sasha said. “Gold’s pretty heavy and the banker’s gonna notice. But if we rob the bank, the bank will fail and then maybe we can take back the town. The banker’s men won’t fight if they don’t get paid.”

“Well, where’s this bank?”

“Ft. Knox, Kentucky,” Sasha said.

“Yeah, the banker’s gonna notice,” he said, “but if you pull off this heist, Lucy Liu can play you. George Clooney can play me. And maybe we can watch it from Virginia.”

Sasha snorted.

“Yeah,” her brother said. “They can make George Clooney look Chinese with CGI.”

The sliding glass door opened. Sasha saw her daughter, Emily, walk outside by the porchlight. Her daughter held hands with a tall white girl as they approached the hammock.

“Mom?” her Emily asked. “Can Trisha stay over tonight?”

Sasha’s mouth tightened. The tall girl - Trisha, was it? - had a goofy face that looked like it was put together with spare parts. Sasha knew her daughter was testing her.

“Fine,” Sasha said after a moment.

The pair hugged, turned around and went back into the house.

“I wish she wouldn’t throw it in my face,” Sasha said.

"It's a phase," Her brother said. "It's cool to be gay right now. Hey, at least she won't get pregnant."

"It's dangerous," Sasha snapped.

"You went through a phase with mom and dad."

"I had a mohawk," Sasha said. "Mohawks don't get people killed. This is... they're killing people on the mainland for that."

Her brother touched her shoulder.

"Then you better figure out how to rob that bank, because my niece isn't getting any straighter."

Chicago Pocket, Contested Chicago, Illinois. USA

Heather and Joquetta lay on a dining room table three feet inside of a room on the second floor of an old apartment building on Montrose Avenue overlooking Horner Park.

The movies always portrayed snipers as exceptional marksmen. That was true, but real snipers used their environment to shape their advantage. The Montrose Building wasn't the best position for a sniper position and that was exactly why they chose it.

As a sniper, you didn't want to be on the roof of a building because that's where enemy soldiers looked first. You didn't want to be in the closest building or in the building that was furthest away. You never wanted to approach and leave a hide site the same way every time. Rolling dice to choose positions helped keep things random.

Office buildings, although tall, were usually bad positions since they were primarily made of glass. Hotels and Apartments were better since they were usually made of brick and had plenty of balconies that cast shadows over shooting positions. Urban snipers didn't blend into their environment as much as they used their environment to redirect focus. You didn't want the enemy looking at your position - they would just blow it up with artillery if they had a general idea of where you were. You wanted the enemy to think you were someplace else. This place was a sniper's dream - high enough for a vantage point, low enough not to stand out and surrounded by other buildings of the same height. With luck, it would be a fruitful night.

The biggest problem was always that guardians essentially had no rank and there was no way of outwardly telling one guardian apart from another. Commanders were different. They usually wore a suit and had an attendant, but commanders were rarely stupid enough to get within 1000 meters of the river, so the snipers always had to settle for guardians and it took time to tell the leaders from the soldiers.

Heather relied on subtle clues and body language to determine who was a higher-prestige guardian and who was just a trainee. Higher prestige guardians usually ate first. Multiple people turned to them when they spoke. Sometimes they had a radio, although Heather noticed that some guardians carried around bricks painted black to look like radios to help the real leader blend in. This facade didn't work that well because nobody ever spoke into the brick.

Heather looked through her night-vision scope and watched a squad of guardians. The squad was obviously off-duty and acting casual. They didn't carry arms or body armor. They smoked and talked and laughed, obviously under the assumption

that the distance to the river and adjacent buildings provided concealment from any snipers. Heather was sure that it would prove to be a fatal decision for at least one of them tonight.

Heather counted the men through her night scope. There were nine of them. At least one of them had to be in charge. Heather looked for any sign of authority: a pistol, a knife, a wristwatch that was nicer than someone else's.

"Heather, just pick one of them." Joquetta said.

"Girl," Heather responded. "I know you didn't just say that to me. One of them is going to show his hand. They've been out there talkin' one of them has got to peacock up sooner or later."

Heather did the math. The target was about 600 yards away. There was a light wind moving south. Her M-16 with its puny 5.56 mm bullet was hardly the best choice for this engagement. At 600 yards, the bullet would drop by 16 feet and the velocity would be cut in half. It would take a little over a second for the bullet to close the distance. She would have to shoot someone who was standing still.

"Someone's coming," Joquetta said. "I hear them. They're in the hallway."

Joquetta grabbed her M4 and worked her way to the apartment door.

"Dr. Coley," Juvante called out from the hallway. "I need to talk to you. Where you at?"

Heather took her eyes off the targets. She looked back at Joquetta

"Let him in," Heather sighed.

"Lipstick," Joquetta called through the door.

"Reindeer," Juvante said from the hallway.

Joquetta opened the door.

"We busy," Joquetta said as she opened the door.

"I know how you do," Juvante said as he entered the dim apartment. He motioned for his bodyguard to remain outside as he closed the door.

"Mr. White," Heather said. "We're busy."

"I know. I know." Juvante said. "Listen, Dr. Coley. I got a few people going across in your sector tonight. I need you to keep an eye on 'em. And I also need you to ... not note it in your log."

Heather rolled over on her side. She looked up at Juvante.

"Mr. White. I know you're not planning to do something that I shouldn't be a part of."

"Na," Juvante said. "It not like that. I... you... you know. Intelligence assets gonna be crossing the river. They go and they get intel and they come back. Only. If I make it an official operation, it's got to go through channels then the Army gets involved and they start to tell me what's what. And then I got to take risks on their terms, not mine. So just... you know. Around Cullom Ave. A boat's gonna go in the water. Someone's gonna get out on the other side of the river. Then maybe after about an hour, they're gonna get back in and come back. I just need you to watch over it."

"When's this happening?" Heather asked.

"About a half hour," Juvante said.

Something didn't seem right about this. It wasn't uncommon to hear about "The Barter." On occasion, soldiers from both sides would cross the river under the flag of truce and trade with each other for small luxuries. The soldiers in the Chicago Pocket

wanted cigarettes, medicine and rations. The guardians wanted old pornographic magazines or thumb drives that were loaded with adult movies, although Heather had no idea how they watched them since computers in Gilead were restricted to only the most elite commanders.

Technically, The Barter was treason and punishable by hanging in the City of Chicago. In reality, nobody got punished, especially since it wasn't going to affect the outcome of the war, just make the lives of people who were going to die anyway, a little more comfortable.

"We're an attached asset," Heather shrugged. "I'll do what you tell me to do. But I don't want to see any foolishness down there."

"Na, Dr. Coley." Juvante said. "It ain't like that. So we good?"

"We're good, Mr. White." Heather said as she returned to her rifle.

Juvante left the room.

Joquetta waited until he was out of earshot before she spoke.

"You think he doin' The Barter?" Joquetta asked.

"None of my business," Heather said.

"I just mean maybe he could get me some cigars for Dwaine. He's always talking about how he would sit in his backyard in the fall and have a cigar and drink hot cider."

"That's a lot of risk for a memory," Heather said. She didn't look up from her rifle.

"I need to get my nails done again," Joquetta said as she inspected her orange fingernails. "My nail bed's growin' out."

"You gonna get the same color?" Heather asked.

"Gotta find something to trade first. You mind if I look around this building?"

“Jo,” Heather said. “You know there’s nothing left in this building. And I need you as my spotter.”

“If they sendin’ someone across then Juvante ain’t gonna want us to shoot anyone no how.”

“I’ll give you twenty minutes,” Heather said.

“Twentyish,” Joquetta said. “CP time.”

“I don’t do colored people time. I just do time. Just go and hurry back once you find something,” Heather said.

Joquetta left the room. Heather continued monitoring the men for a few minutes. One man began to stand out from the rest. His posture was different from the rest of the men. He seemed more confident and self-assured. Heather made a note to kill him first if she had to start shooting.

She scanned the east side of the riverbank. A rubber boat slipped into the water. The boat held a woman who sat in the stern, and a large man who rowed. Heather watched the boat cross the canal. She scanned the river bank. A flashlight blinked on the other side of the river. The man steered the boat toward the source of the light. Someone threw a rope ladder down to the boat when the boat reached the bank of the canal. The woman climbed up the ladder first. The man tied the boat to the ladder and then went up himself. A guardian led the man and women across the park. They three stopped at the edge of an old baseball diamond where they started into an animated conversation. They were obviously negotiating something. The man from the boat handed the guardian something small, but Heather was too far away to see what it was. The guardian removed a laptop computer that he had hidden in the back of his shirt. He

booted up the laptop. A few minutes passed. The guardian folded up the laptop and stuffed it under his shirt again. Then the guardian walked out of the park toward N. California Ave. The couple waited in the old batter's box of the baseball diamond. Was the guardian going to come back?

Heather still wasn't sure what was going on, but she didn't like to leave things to chance. She got the range to the baseball diamond by lining her rifle up on the man from the boat.

The average man was about 5'9" tall. Using the man's height and some tick marks on her scope, she figured that the baseball diamond was a little under 800 yards away. That meant an almost 20 foot bullet drop and a final velocity of a little under 1,000 feet per second. It was really pushing the range of the M-16 but she didn't have any other choice. Heather wrote the range data down in her dope book. When she looked back at the baseball diamond, she saw three guardians approaching. One of them carried a backpack. They looked like they were unarmed.

The three guardians stopped at the baseball diamond. Another negotiation ensued. The man with the backpack shrugged off the pack and placed it on the ground. The man from the boat inspected the pack and nodded. The woman from the boat led the three men into the dugout of the baseball diamond.

"Dammit, Juvante." Heather said. "You lyin' piece of ..."

Heather was far too good of a Christian to continue with her statement. Of course, this might also be part of whatever plan Juvante had hatched. So she watched as the woman from the boat engaged in "The Barter" with three Guardians as the man

from the boat looked on. One of the guardians finished. He staggered out of the dugout while pulling up his pants before collapsing on the ground.

The two guardians suddenly leapt from the dugout and took off at a run through the park. The guardian on the ground rolled over and got up to run as well. The woman from the boat suddenly popped up and threw on clothes. The man left the woman behind and bolted east across the park back toward their boat. What was going on? Heather cursed herself for letting Joquetta scrounge through the apartment building. This is why snipers use spotters. Spotters surveyed the big picture and eliminated surprises while the sniper concentrated on the target. Something had spooked the guardians down at the baseball diamond and she had no idea what it was without her spotter.

Heather scanned out toward the road. Her scope fell on a Mercedes Benz SUV stopped on N. California road by the baseball diamond. Heather gasped. Only one kind of person rode in that kind of truck.

A commander wearing a suit and tie got out of the passenger side of the vehicle. Heather didn't have time to think. This opportunity would never present itself again. Heather centered her scope on the commander and pulled the trigger. The rifle kicked back.

It took about a second and a half for the bullet to cross the 750 yard distance between Heather's M-16 and the parked car. Since the range of Heather's scope was still set to 800 yards, the round hit a little high. Instead of impacting center-mass like Heather intended, the bullet tore through the commander's throat in a geyser of blood and made a neat hole in the door jamb of the Mercedes.

The commander slumped to the ground while clutching his neck.

Heather realized her mistake. She reset her sniper scope for 750 yards and waited. The commander was still moving, which meant that whoever was driving that Mercedes would hear him dying. Sooner or later the driver or security detail would get out of the Mercedes to render aid- at which point Heather would shoot whoever came to help. She just had to wait.

The window of the Mercedes cracked open a few inches. A hand reached out from the window. The hand felt its way along the door jamb until it found the bullet hole from Heather's shot. A finger quizzically probed the hole and then the hand disappeared back into the Mercedes. Heather considered taking a few shots at the vehicle, but she only had 4 rounds remaining - not nearly enough to hope for a lucky hit with random potshots and at this range it was questionable whether her M-16 would penetrate the car anyway. She would have to wait until the driver got out of the car to help the commander before she could shoot again. A moment passed. The hand reappeared, this time holding a pencil. The hand felt its way along the door jamb until it found the hole from the bullet. Once found, the hand stuck the pencil in the bullet hole.

The pencil pointed straight back at Heather's position.

Heather picked up her rifle.

"Joquetta!" Heather yelled. "Jo! We need to go right now!"

Heather reached down to the floor and found the spent shell casing that she had just fired. She was in a hurry, but she would need to turn in the casing to get another round.

Heather threw on her backpack. She stopped and picked up Joquetta's backpack with her free hand and then headed out the apartment door.

"Jo!" Heather yelled in the hallway. "They've got us! Where are you?"

How much time did they have? Heather assumed the guardian was already on the radio, calling in her position. It would take at least a minute to relay the request. It would take another minute to authenticate the request as genuine and check the necessary angles, elevations, wind and weather. The instructions would have to be carried out to the artillery and the guns loaded. If the apartment building was already pre-plotted, the fire mission would begin immediately and the rounds would take at least 30 seconds to reach the building. If the apartment building wasn't pre-plotted, they would have to fire a spotting shot which might give her a little more time. Gilead wasn't stupid. Every inch of the city had been pre-plotted over the past five years. The only reason her building wasn't already dust was a shortage of artillery shells - that and Gilead preferred to take out buildings with the sniper still in them.

Heather knew she had about four minutes to find her friend and thirty seconds were already gone.

Heather tried each door on the floor. Every apartment had been looted years before and every door was either missing or swung open freely, but Joquetta was nowhere to be found.

Odds were the better loot would be higher up. Heather ran toward the stairwell.

"Joquetta!" Heather yelled. "We need to go! They made us!"

Nothing. Heather took the stairs up to the third floor two at a time. Heather had been overweight and feeling every day of her 45 years at the start of the war. She was five years older now and in much better shape, but taking the stairs still winded her.

“Jo!” Heather yelled when she reached the third floor.

Nothing. How long had it been? A minute. Two? What freight train of death was arching her way right now? 120mm mortars? 105 cannon? 155 howitzer? She could run to the basement but that might only mean getting trapped under debris and dying of thirst while waiting for a rescue that would never come.

“I’m sorry,” Heather thought as she ran down the stairs. She exited out the first floor onto Montrose Avenue and ran east.

“Heather!” Joquetta’s voice called.

Heather ventured a look behind her. She saw Joquetta on the rooftop of the apartment, her view concealed from the west by a brick elevator housing. Heather didn’t stop running. Joquetta was going to have to figure it out for herself if she had enough time.

She didn’t.

Heather suddenly found herself on the pavement as the loudest sound in the world pushed into every inch of her body. She gasped for breath as the sudden overpressure created a void of air 100 yards around the street. The noise subsided, only to be replaced by the ringing of tinnitus in her ears. Heather sat up. The apartment building looked as if the world’s largest baker had run a knife through the center of the building and cleaved it in two.

Heather ran her hands along her torso, arms and legs, looking for any sign that a piece of shrapnel had penetrated her body and she was just too amped up on adrenalin to know it. She found no injuries except for scratches on her palms. Heather looked at the damaged apartment building. She knew she would have to go inside - not to find Joquetta. She was almost certainly dead, but to recover Joquetta's five precious cartridges and if she was lucky, her rifle.

Heather left the two backpacks in the street, but carried her rifle. She only went a couple of paces before she noticed a strange shape on the ground. Heather knelt and saw a human finger with an orange-painted fingernail with a nail bed that had grown out a little too much.

KAMS Server Center, Scott Air Force Base, Illinois. Republic of Gilead

The guardian patted the USB drive in his pocket. He felt that mix of anticipation and embarrassment which he knew would turn to shame and self-loathing when he was done. He had gotten the USB drive from a fellow buddy in the communication section, who in turn had gotten it from another guardian and on and on. Nobody knew exactly where the drives originated, but they were passed around like old-time baseball cards from guardian to guardian. They were whispered about at night. They were traded for favors or food. Some guardians watched them alone. Others did so in a group, which was risky. Watching the material alone could cost you an eye. Watching the material in a group could brand you a gender traitor and be a one-way ticket to the gallows.

Still, he understood why men risked it. He had never even seen a pregnant woman, much less a nude pregnant woman and the thought of it made him swell with heat and anticipation despite the cold-air that pumped from the server room venting.

One of his fellow guardians tapped him on the shoulder.

"You want to go to chow?" The guardian asked.

"I'm good," he responded. "You go. Under his eye."

The man's buddy left for dinner. He would be gone for at least twenty minutes. The guardian was in the server room all by himself.

He took the USB stick out of his pocket with a trembling hand. He inserted the stick into a computer console. The computer didn't have any media viewing software, but it didn't matter. The USB stick carried its own video player. The guardian clicked on the video player. What happened next took only milliseconds.

Even before the revolution, most people were blissfully unaware of the dangers of plugging an unknown peripheral into a USB port. In Gilead, civilian computers were as tightly regulated as civilian firearms. Only the most trusted commanders had access to a laptop and even fewer could log into the global public internet. But although Gilead had successfully purged most pornography from the country, it was far less successful at purging the desires of oversexed soldiers. Soldiers traded pornography on forbidden USB sticks with reckless abandon. The most popular kinds of videos were pregnancy porn movies which were still being produced by Americans in Hawaii. Even though most of Gilead's military computers were physically disconnected from the public internet, USB drives full of porn were hand-carried into the inner sanctums of the leadership and military classes.

The video player on the USB stick was a cleverly disguised computer virus. The first thing it did was wake up and check the hostname of the current computer - SVR-47HH3-KAMS. The virus had no way of knowing that it had just infected the KAMS system - the most secure computer network in all of Gilead and the one system that controlled all air traffic - and the virus wasn't programmed to be proud of such an accomplishment either. It simply followed the instructions that its developers told it to do next.

The virus issued a "net view" command and got a list of other KAMS computers around Gilead. The virus hopped to Whiteman Air Force Base near Kansas City in Missouri and then to Joint Base Andrews in Washington D.C. On each hop, the virus gathered any information it could about files on the local computer. The virus sent these files back to the USB stick in California, where the data was seamlessly embedded into the video files of porn on the USB stick. The size of the video files grew a little with each new discovery, but the quality wasn't diminished due to the special video viewer that had been created with this process in mind.

The virus eventually made its way to Hilton Head Island Airport, which was just across Port Royal Sound from the Guardian Marine training facility at Parris Island. There, the virus found a sister copy of itself in the USB drive of a Guardian Marine KAMS computer that sat in the control tower of the airport. The two viruses swapped their discovered files as the occupants of the control tower pleased themselves to the video on screen. The virus sensed that it had explored all of the computers on the network so it shut down and waited patiently. Sooner or later, someone would plug it

into a computer on the public internet again, and the virus would release its intelligence payload to Marty Wolf of Ready To Drop Entertainment.

Chapter 4: Tally. Sparkle. Pickle. Pull.

Aerial Outcomes Gym. Travis Air Force Base, California. Republic of Gilead.

Duckling strained with a primal roar and she lifted the bench press bar away from her chest. Mongo stood over her, the huge Turk counting each repetition in Dutch.

“Zes... zeven... achy... negen...”

Duckling’s arms quivered.

“Kom up! Negen... Kom up!”

Duckling pushed with one last gasp and got the bar onto the rack.

“Tien! Goed werk!” Mongo said.

Mongo high-fived Duckling’s hand. Duckling sat up. She took a drink of water from a plastic sports bottle. She looked around the gym. Her and Mongo were the only two contractors inside. That was strange. Where was everybody?

“Sta op,” Mongo said.

Duckling got up from the bench. Mongo grabbed Duckling’s water bottle.

“Wat is did?” Mongo asked as he held up the bottle.

“Fles,” Duckling said. *“Water bottle. Waterfles.”*

Mongo the Turk had been learning Dutch over the past few days because there was nothing else to do while their squadron was grounded for maintenance. He was a fast learner but most pilots were overachievers and Mongo was no different.

“Waterfles,” Mongo repeated. He pointed at Duckling. *“Je waterfles.”*

“Correct,” Duckling said. *“My water bottle. Je waterfles.”*

A knock arrived at the door to the gym. An Dutch Aerial Outcomes employee stood at the door with a clipboard.

“Jullie twee zijn nodig in de klaar-kamer,” The man said.

“Wat?” Mongo asked.

“We’re needed in the ready room,” Duckling replied in English.

The pair grabbed towels and their water bottles as they left the gym. They moved down the hallway to the Operations Ready Room. All of the other contractor pilots were already sitting down with their notepads out. The Project Director stood behind a podium. Next to him was a whiteboard. Projected onto the whiteboard was the word “Secret” in English, Korean, Turkish, and Dutch.

“Close the door,” The Project Director said.

Duckling closed the door. Something was wrong. All of the other pilots were looking at her. She scanned the room, inspecting each face. Some of the pilots looked like they were about to burst out laughing. Santa looked especially amused. Duckling’s sharp eyes settled on the squadron roster. She scanned the board. “Duckling” was no longer on the board next to “Mongo,” “Belly,” “Top Hat” and “Santa.” But there was a new name on the board: “Puddles.”

“Nou... krijg de kolere, jongens.” Duckling said.

“Well,” Santa said. *“The next time you piss your flight suit, don’t tell your wife about it over a monitored company computer.”*

The room burst into laughter. Duckling... now Puddles sat down in her ready room chair. She extended both middle fingers over the backrest at her squadron mates.

“Settle down,” The Project Manager said. “Well, I may have a way for you to redeem yourself, Puddles.” The Project Manager clicked to the next slide. “Gilead has decided that we are going to give Utah a little payback.”

Downtown Honolulu, Hawaii. USA

The two women seated in Marty’s office had tried their best to look good. Both the mother and the daughter were caked with makeup. They had their hair done. They dressed well in what were obviously borrowed Mumus. But it was the shoes that gave them away - their sandals were worn from the constant walking of refugees looking for work.

The daughter was about seven months pregnant and she glowed with an aura that would drive his members crazy. It was a shame his members would never see it. The mother was going grey and her lips remained pursed as she tried her best to hide her disgust at the situation. Marty knew they were both boney from hunger underneath their mumus even if he hadn’t seen their audition video. He didn’t need to; he wasn’t going to use them anyway.

Marty held the daughter’s driver’s license as he spoke.

“So, here’s the deal,” Marty said. “I don’t know what you two were thinking, but I’m still subject to US Code 2257. This driver’s license is fake. I can’t list a fake license on my 2257 record.”

“But we already shot the scene,” the daughter said.

“Doesn’t matter,” Marty said. “If the FBI does a records check, I’m screwed. And honestly, kid, you have the rest of your life to do porn. I’m gonna make this like it never happened and you get a second chance at life.”

“You can’t do this,” the daughter said. “It’s illegal. I did the scene. I want my money.”

“Not my problem,” Marty said. “You want money, join the Army.”

The mother suddenly broke her silence with a stream of curses that all seemed to flow together.

Marty ignored the mother. He looked at his computer. He opened the Slack messenger and clicked on Alana’s profile. A message window opened and Mary began to type.

MARTY: Can you come in here please and rescue me from these idiots?

ALANA: Am I your bouncer now too? Go to hell.

Marty sat back in his chair as he took the verbal fusillade from the mother. Marty wasn’t bothered by the yelling and the threats. He was used to this. About five percent of all performers, their boyfriends or parents would threaten him after a scene. Money usually shut them up but this particular case presented a problem. If the girl really was underage, paying her anything could be considered conspiracy. If she wasn’t, her fake ID made him in violation of federal law. He decided to split the baby.

“Let me speak and I’ll fix it,” Marty interrupted.

The mother shut her mouth. Marty pointed at the mother.

“What did you do before the war?”

The mother was taken aback, as if she couldn’t remember a time before.

“Um...” The mother said. “Insurance claims.”

“If you had said ‘HR’ I would probably have something for you. Odds are I’m going to fire the girl who let you in with a fake ID. But I’ll tell you what. I’ll let you keep the hotel room until the end of the month. Eat as much as you want on my dime. Look for a job, or just enjoy yourself.”

Marty didn’t add the words “if you keep your mouth shut” but his tone implied it.

The mother grimaced. She realized that this was the best deal that she was going to get.

“Thank you,” The mother said as she got up.

“Can I have my ID back?” The daughter asked.

Marty threw the ID in his desk drawer. He would have one of his employees destroy it later.

“Sorry,” Marty said. “This ends with me. You’re not putting someone else in jail.”

The daughter shot Marty a nasty look on the way out the door.

Marty sighed with relief as the door shut behind them. Another problem solved. Time to create some new ones.

Marty took a brown prescription pill bottle from his desk. He undid the top of the bottle and poured out a generous rail of cocaine on his desk. He pushed the rail together with his building access card and snorted the line with a rolled up banknote. First came the numbness, then a feeling of overwhelming superiority coursed through his veins. Jail? Screw jail. He had the police in his pocket and he paid gold. Hell, he could probably have the two women killed by the police for a few extra gold dollars.

Maybe a fall from the balcony of the hotel? Maybe two more refugees robbed and shot on their way back from looking for work? Screw those two. Maybe -

Alana opened the door.

“What?” Marty asked.

“I wanted to let you know we got another hit,” Alana said.

“Just now?” Marty asked.

“No, like five minutes ago.”

“Then why didn’t you come in here to tell me so I could get those idiots out of my office?”

“Because I hate you,” Alana said. She rubbed her nose. “Clean your face Marty.”

Alana closed the door. The cocaine high of before was replaced by the new high that perhaps this was the day all of his hard work and money would pay off.

Marty opened a remote desktop connection. He navigated to The Drive and brought down the latest intel. Once the files were on his desktop, Marty ran his search program, directing it to find the name “Jason Wolf.”

One document matched.

Marty gasped. He hovered his mouse over the file. What if this was a false positive? What if all of his hopes were dashed? Marty knew the answer to that was “cocaine,” although that was becoming the answer to most questions these days.

Marty clicked the file.

The document was some kind of personnel roster. The file had the logo for the Republic of Gilead, but it also had the Eagle, Eye and Anchor logo of the Guardian

Marine Corps. This was obviously a list of new recruits who had just entered training at Parris Island. Marty scanned the roster and found the name of his son. He placed his finger on the text. It was the closest he had come to touching his son in years. It had to be him. The date and location of birth were correct. He had found his son.

Marty sat back in his chair, overwhelmed with a mix of emotions. He knew he hadn't been the best father in the time before. Hell, the whole reason he had been in Hawaii during the revolution was for yet another drug and sex-fueled "business trip." His own hedonism had left his wife and child unprotected, although Marty knew that he probably would have just ended up dead like the rest of the Jewish population of Georgia.

He couldn't do anything about his wife, but he damn sure could do something about his son if it took every last ounce of gold he had to get him out.

Parris Island, South Carolina. Republic of Gilead.

The Guardian instructor paced as he spoke. He carried himself with an incredible efficiency of movement, like a cat conserving its energy before the pounce. He spoke with a southern twang - all of the instructors did - but there was an underlying menace to his voice. It was a moonless night, and the ambience from the occasional parachute flare would light his twisted, battle-scared face like a deranged jack-o-lantern for 30 seconds at a time. Then the flare would burn out and another would light up the sky a few seconds later. Despite Jason Wolf's indoctrination into the Sons of Jacob's Old

Testament style teachings on the punishments in the afterlife for sinners, the Jew in him still didn't believe in hell. He had been through hell during the revolution. Nothing in the next life could compare to what he had witnessed in this one.

The voices of the damned called out in the darkness begging for mercy. Ten convicted prisoners were tied up out on the infiltration course range. Some prisoners were tied to explosive pits. Others were tied to posts. The condemned prisoners would add a welter of realistic gore to the night's exercise. Nothing in Gilead ever went to waste.

Jason and the rest of his platoon of trainees were wet and shivering, even though it was summer. The drill instructors had hosed them down with water in preparation for the evening's exercise for maximum misery. All of the trainees had blue chemical light sticks attached to the top of their helmets to identify them during the exercise and the light cast an ethereal glow around them when the parachute flares burnt out.

"Tonight," The instructor said. "You will negotiate the night infiltration course. You will move up and over the berm and advance by squad 50 meters from the berm to the trench at the limit of advance. As you move, machine guns will be firing three feet above your heads. If you stand up, you will get shot. If you lose your nerve and don't complete the course in the allotted time, you will be shot. The explosive pits will be going off. Stay three feet away from those pits or when it goes, it will take you with it. Tonight you're going to see people get shot. You're going to see people die slow and you're going to see bodies ripped up into nothin'. The bodies out there are all unwomen or non-believers. They have one last chance to atone for their sins before they meet their Lord and Creator for judgement. Harden your heart at the death you see tonight.

Our country needs men like you to spread The Law of God among those who would shun him. And just remember, we have hot soup and donuts at the end. Make me proud tonight.“

The instructor blew his whistle.

A flare turned night into day.

With a full-throated scream, Jason and his platoon thundered up the berm.

The scene at the top of the berm resembled a barren moonscape for 50 meters out the end of the course. Several machine guns were set up on the far side, manned by guardians who seemed thoroughly bored. Dotted across the moonscape were wooden crosses that held some prisoners spread-eagle to make it easier for their limbs to be shot without killing them outright. Other whimpering prisoners were tied over top of 55 gallon drums that contained a small amount of explosives. When the prisoners saw the trainees appear some resigned themselves to their fate. Others twisted in vain against their bindings. Most of them filled the simulated battlefield with cries of terror.

Jason clambered down the berm and hit the dirt. The machine guns opened up and tracers flashed overhead. Jason buried his head in the earth and got a mouth full of alkaline soil.

The ground was rocked by an explosion. Jason felt his back suddenly get wet. He lifted his head an inch. A severed arm lay directly in front of him. Heedful of the warning that non-finishers would be shot, Jason crawled forward over the arm. He crawled like a baby, inching forward and straining until every muscle in his body screamed. He saw a prisoner get shot in the arm, the blood arching up like a cascade of red. The prisoner, a middle-aged woman, looked at her arm with a contorted mask of

primal fear. Then the flare burned out and the sight was mercifully withdrawn from his eyes. So he crawled. The ground turned muddy. The instructors had obviously hosed down the course to make the journey even more taxing, so Jason reminded himself of the reward at the end: hot soup and donuts. His mind wandered to the time before on Sunday mornings when his father would take him to the Krispy Kreme in Marietta, Georgia for breakfast as his mom slept in. They would eat their donuts hot, always bringing one chocolate cake donut back for his mother to find on her nightstand when she woke up.

Another explosion. A length of intestines fell across Jason like a long wet noodle but he paid it no mind. He was still alive and back in his home on Parkside Village Drive, playing video games and waiting for his mother to wake up so he could hop in bed and snuggle with her.

Suddenly, a trench appeared in front of Jason. This was it! This was the limit of advance! He was finished and could eat soup and donuts and push this night far behind him in his memory. Jason twisted his body parallel to the ditch and slithered into the trench. He came face to face with a drill instructor he didn't know. The instructor wore a red light stick on his helmet which gave his face a particularly evil glow.

"What the hell are you doing?" The drill instructor yelled over the sound of explosions and machine gun fire.

"Sir-" Jason stammered.

"Where the hell is the rest of your squad? Did you leave them out there? Without your squad, you are dead! Because you are dead, your squad is dead. Because your squad is dead, your platoon is dead. Because your platoon is dead, your

company is dead. Because your company is dead, your battalion's dead. Because your battalion's dead, the regiment's dead. Because the regiment's dead, we lost the damn war now get back out there!"

The drill instructor practically threw him out of the trench and back into hell.

If I'm supposed to be dead, how come I hurt so much? Jason thought as he landed back in the mud.

Jason saw the rest of his platoon about ten yards away, inching toward the trench. Jason stayed put. He would let them come to him.

"Move! Damint!" The instructor yelled. "Move back to your squad or I'll kill you myself."

So Jason crawled back into the slurry of mud and blood and fire until he rejoined his platoon.

Home. Donuts. Soup.

Jason turned in a circle and crawled slower this time, keeping up with his squad. He was exhausted when he finally rolled into the trench. He collapsed at the floor of the trench with his blood-covered comrades.

The machine guns stopped. A megaphone boomed: "Cease fire, cease fire. Lock and clear all weapons." Jason was blinded for a moment when the course was suddenly lit with powerful night lights. When he regained his vision, he saw drill instructors beaming with pride as they entered the trench from the sides bearing trays of donuts and bowls of soup. Some of the trainees tried to stand, but the drill instructors implored them to remain seated.

"What a bunch of killers!" one drill instructor said.

“I’m proud of you boys,” another instructor said.

Jason took a donut from a passing drill instructor. He wolfed it down. It tasted like sugar and jam and salty blood.

A groan pierced the night air.

“Somebody out there is still alive,” one of the guardian machine gunners called. A few soldiers got to their feet. Jason rose and saw the source of the moaning on the course. A male prisoner, his arms and legs riddled with bullet holes, lay limp and tied to a post, but he was still breathing.

“Anybody want to put that poor bastard out of his misery?” A drill instructor asked the men. “It will mean another donut for you.”

Jason raised his hand. He was alive for another day and his stomach would be full.

Prince Kuhio Federal Building, Honolulu, Hawaii. USA.

“I don’t know how to say this,” Sasha said. “So I’m just going to say it. In a few months this war is over and we’re on the losing side.”

The secure conference room was never a very jovial place, but her admittance wrapped her employees in a funk of absolute defeat. The conference room grew silent except for the hum of the air conditioner and the rattle of chairs. Ginny took a reflective sip of coffee. Bert looked down at his notepad. Eli played with his ear, folding it between his hands nervously as he looked off into space.

Sasha let the news sink in. She needed to break them before building them back up and they had to be focused on solving the problem at hand.

“The good news,” Sasha said. “I spoke with the Secretary of State. I have an idea that could change the direction of the war but I need your help to make it work.”

The Jedi Knights focused on her.

“What’s the plan?” Ginny asked.

“Fort Knox has 4,500 tons of gold. That’s about 190 billion in prewar dollars.”

Sasha let that sink in. The US paper dollar was so weak that a Big Mac went for \$1,800 if you could find one at all, but you could buy an entire house in Hawaii for five ounces of gold.

Bert spoke up. He was the nuclear guy and all of his scenarios started and ended with atomic annihilation.

“So,” Bert said. “Let’s say we do manage to fight our way into Kentucky. What’s to prevent them from nuking Honolulu or Anchorage or even London for that matter?”

“You told me a few days ago that you estimated that Gilead probably has three or four functioning nuclear warheads left,” Sasha said.

“Maybe,” Bert said. “Based on pre-war records, the USS Maryland’s warheads were scheduled to be refurbished when the war broke out. But what I said was just a wild guess from my math on the Plutonium-240 and the satellite photos of the tarps they put up over the launch hatches. I can’t get into Gilead’s head as to whether they would launch. But mathematically, if they did, I estimate that they have no more than three or four good warheads left. Plenty to nuke Anchorage and our little corner of paradise. If we did this, we would have to run air cover over Ft. Knox and simultaneously strike

King's Bay in case I'm wrong about the Plutonium. We have enough planes to do one or the other, but not both. And... let's not forget that the sub pens at King's Bay is the most heavily defended airspace in the world. Anyone hitting them would take substantial casualties with little chance of success. But, if we were ever going to hit Gilead, the time to do it is while the tarps are up over those missiles. My guess is that they are trying to refurbish them somehow."

"That's good to know," Sasha said. "It will make it easier to sell this if we can't get nuked in retaliation. So how do we get 4,500 tons of gold from Kentucky to South Florida?"

"Well," Eli, the military expert, spoke up. "I think we can discount driving in there with trucks. An Army HEMTT carries about 10 tons. We'd need 450 of them. And that's without the added problem of fighting our way in from Florida across four states. There's no rivers near Fort Knox, so we can't float the gold out. That means we move it by air."

Eli got up from his chair. He moved to the laptop by the large conference room monitor. Eli brought up an overhead view of Fort Knox. He zoomed in on the large, square bullion depository. He zoomed out a bit. North of the bullion depository lay a golf course, and north of that lay an airfield.

"This is Goodman Army Airfield," Eli said. "It's got two runways. One's 5100 feet, the other is 4800 feet. That's enough room for a C-17 and plenty of room for a C-130. So...let's see. There's 2000 pounds in a ton, so that's about -"

"Nine million pounds," Ginny said. She had taken out a calculator and was rapidly punching in numbers.

“Yeah,” Eli said. He turned around and wrote the number on a whiteboard. “So 9,000,000 pounds. A C-17 carries 130,000 pounds.”

“We need 70 C-17’s,” Ginny said. “Or 204 C-130’s.”

The room looked at Sasha. Everyone knew there were only 20 operable C-17 military transports left in America and less than 60 C-130’s.

“We’d have to make multiple trips,” Eli said. “All while fighting enemy air defenses the whole time. And... We’d need to bring our own fuel or mid-air refuel in the middle of a country that’s vectoring every remaining fighter in the country toward us. Now that I think of it, any assault force would need to be airdropped. Transports that carry paratroopers would have to land and be re-configured for pallets to take the gold out. You need 8 C-130’s for a battalion of paratroopers. If we drop the two airborne battalions from Utah that eats up 16 of our birds.”

“But if we drop one battalion,” Sasha said, “and have them secure the airfield we can fly the other battalion in and have them land under fire. That eliminates re-configuring eight more planes.”

“True,” Eli said, “but Utah Guard may have a problem with landing under fire. That’s a great way to lose a whole plane. And plus, if you drop paratroopers on the runway, you’ll have all sorts of FOD you need to clean off before you land.”

“What’s FOD?” Ginny asked.

“Foreign object damage,” Eli said. “The paratroopers aren’t going to police up their chutes under fire. Drop zones are full of crap that can get sucked into an engine or wrapped around a propeller. We’d need to sanitize the runway before we landed anybody.”

“And now that you mention it, we need to get the paratroopers home,” Ginny said. “We need... what... sixteen more planes for that - plus a medevac transport because people are going to get hurt.”

“You’re right. Loading all that gold could take days,” Eli said. “So we would need to fly in a hospital as well. It would probably take at least a day for the SoJ to pull their head out of their ass and counterattack. Fort Campbell is about three hours away. Fort Jackson is about eight hours away. Fort Bragg is about ten hours away. The Marines at Parris Island are about the same. I’d give the airborne battalions about two days before they were totally wiped out.”

“We’ve got special forces operating in Appalachia with local militia,” Sasha said. “All they do is hit convoys. We could set them up in blocking positions along the highways running east-west.”

“Yeah,” Eli said. “They’re great at harassing a few unarmored trucks. But Gilead’s going to bring the heavies. Tanks and Bradley personnel carriers. Unless we can get them some anti-armor, the SoJ’s going to wipe them off the hills.”

“They’ll figure it out,” Sasha said. “How soon can we pull this off?”

Eli thought for a moment.

“The best place to launch the raid is from South Florida. My big fear is enemy air. Gilead has maybe fifty operation fighters left, but all of them are going to be vectored into one tiny killbox over Fort Knox. Our fighters are going to have to protect a line of transports for 600 miles and they’re going to have to mid-air refuel and land somewhere to re-arm. It’s going to take at least a week to move the planes. The

Airborne's gonna have to stage practice runs, so they'll have to build a mock-up. That will take about a month. It's doable. But close."

Sasha nodded.

"I want everyone to take the rest of the day off," Sasha said. "Come back tomorrow with a suitcase full of clothes. We don't have four weeks. We need to get it done in two."

Owsley County, Kentucky. Contested Appalachia.

Travis awoke.

The first sensation came as a massive headache. This wasn't the kind of hangover headache that he remembered from his teenage bouts of drinking liquor. This wasn't even like the headache he got after he dove into the South Fork River and hit his head while trying to impress Betty Henderson back when he was a boy. No, this headache was like someone had cracked his skull open with a bat and was playing with the insides.

The next sensation came from his skin. He tried to localize the source of the pain, but he couldn't. Every inch of him felt bruised and battered. Then the thirst hit him. His tongue felt as thick and rough as the inside of a cowhide glove. He needed water.

Travis opened his eyes. He was in his own bed. Sunlight streamed through the east window, so he knew it was morning. Was he alive? Was he in heaven? Travis

groaned as he rolled out of bed. He noticed he was nude and his body was covered in purple bruises. Travis limped over to his chiffonier. The piece of furniture had been in his family for five generations and the well-oiled wood slid open without a sound. He pulled on a pair of dungarees and an old t-shirt.

The sound of laughter came from outside by the porch. He heard his daughter's voice. Then he heard the voice of Captain Moore followed by the voice of a third man whom he didn't recognize.

Travis looked at his nightstand. His pistol wasn't there, so Travis reached back into his chiffonier, rummaging until he found his grandpa's old .32 caliber revolver. He held the gun by his side as he crept out of his bedroom and through the house. Travis paused in his kitchen. A half-filled glass of water lay on the counter. Travis downed the water quickly. His thirst was slaked, but only a little. He would need to get more water from the well, but first, he had to find out who the hell was on his property. He continued his movement through the house.

He smelled the odor of marijuana waft through the house from the porch. He heard his daughter laugh again. Then he saw the silhouette of the strange man's head through his yellowed lace curtains.

Travis pointed the gun at the strange figure.

"Arial," Travis croaked through his parched throat. "Who's on my property?"

"Daddy!" Arial shouted.

Arial burst through the door as fast her pregnant body could move. She pushed the gun away and she embraced him. The pleasure of feeling his daughter again almost outweighed the pain of her squeezing his bruises as she hugged him.

“Who is this man?” Travis asked as he gestured with the gun toward the stranger who was now in his home next to Captain Moore. The man was only an inch taller than the Captain, although he was a little bit older and stockier like a fireplug, with skin the shade of a loblolly pine. He wore old, worn overalls and a t-shirt, but his boots were Army issue.

“Daddy, that’s Lieutenant Orr.” Ariel said. “He walked all the way from West Virginia to tend to you.”

“Water,” Travis said.

“I’ll get it,” Captain Moore said as he rushed out the door.

Lieutenant Orr approached. He offered his hand.

“Mr. Lewis, it’s good to see you back on your feet,” Lieutenant Orr said. “I walked for three days when I got the call from Captain Moore. You’re a real hero up and down Appalachia.”

Travis eyed the black man. Like most residents of Appalachia, he didn’t exactly consider himself racist. He just preferred that races stayed with their own kind. But anyone who would walk three days to tend to a man he had never met was worthy of respect.

Travis shook the man’s hand.

Captain Moore arrived with a battered metal bucket of well water. Travis lifted the entire bucket to his lips. He drank and drank and drank until his belly was filled to bursting. He handed the bucket back to Captain Moore.

“Lemme walk,” Travis said as he pulled away from his daughter.

Travis pushed passed the men. He went out onto his porch and sat down in his favorite chair. The two soldiers joined him a moment later. Travis noticed that there were two battered camp chairs and a stool outside on the porch.

"You'ns didn't sits in my chair, now ja?" Travis asked.

"No sir," Captain Moore said. "It's just as you left it."

The two soldiers sat down in camp chairs.

"Sir," Lieutenant Orr said. "You've sustained -"

"I don't give a damn about me," Travis cut him off. "Captain, what's the butcher's bill?"

"Henry, Harry, Clarence and the Herman twins are dead." Captain Moore said.

"Elmer McCue lost an arm. John Abner and Ben Baker made it. So did Butchie. We got everybody back to their families. We divided up what was left on the trucks around the holler. Worked out to about thirty pounds of rice and flour per family."

Travis heard Ariel inside making eggs on the wood stove. The smell hit him and he suddenly realized that he was hungry.

"Where's Vernon?" Travis asked.

"Checking the rabbit snares," Captain Moore said. "You have a fine boy. He stepped up to be the man of the house while you were under."

"I never had me any doubts about Vernon," Travis said. He looked at Lieutenant Orr. "What about you, boy? You been tendin' to the folks in the holler?"

Lieutenant Orr wisely overlooked Travis's use of "boy." The backhanded question didn't even trigger a twitch of his mouth. *Teachers and diplomats.*

"I did what I could for the wounded, Mr. Lewis." Lieutenant Orr said. "I also got Ben Butler's horse vaccinated and gave your goat a CTD."

"You a damned veterinarian?" Travis asked.

"No sir," Lieutenant Orr said. "I'm a doctor. But I'm trained in dentistry and veterinary care." Lieutenant Orr paused. "I cut hair too."

Travis chuckled.

"Yeah, a mess a you'ns people cut hair. Not being racist, just pointing out the obvious. You ain't gonna have no problems with me," Travis said. "How long I been in out?"

"About five days now," Captain Moore said. "About everybody in the holler came by to check up on you."

"Should be me checkin' up on them," Travis said. "Once I get some food in my gut I'm fixin' to ride out and pay my respects."

Captain Moore looked like he was about to protest, but he wisely kept his mouth shut.

"You don't think I can?" Travis asked.

Captain Moore weighed his words.

"You're a hard man, Travis." Captain Moore said. "I know I'm a guest here and I am... truly indebted to your hospitality."

Ariel walked outside with a plate of scrambled eggs, a fork, and another glass of water. She set the eggs down on a small homemade table next to Travis's favorite chair. The eggs had what looked like chunks of meat in them. Had Vernon caught a

rabbit? Travis could have eaten the eggs down in one bite but he waited for a moment. He wanted to make sure two soldiers knew how strong he was.

Ariel lit a joint.

“Lieutenant Orr packed in some ham from West Virginia,” Ariel said.

Ariel passed the joint to Lieutenant Orr who took a long, slow toke. Travis picked up his eggs and began to eat. The chunks of ham were salty and he gulped down water with every bite.

Lieutenant Orr passed the joint to Captain Moore. Captain Moore took a hit. He held it in his hand as he spoke.

“I need you well,” Captain Moore said. “I know you’ve got to check on your men, but I got a brief over the radio. Something’s coming. I don’t know what yet, they don’t tell me everything, but it’s big. It’s big enough to maybe end the war and you and your Owsley County Boys are gonna play a pretty important part.”

Travis finished his eggs and set the plate down on his lap. Travis motioned for the joint. He took a long, languid hit. The weed spread through his body, helping dull the pain in his head a bit.

“I reckon the medical care wadn’t out of Christian charity now was it?”

“You’re an important man, Travis.” Lieutenant Orr said.

“Yeah, I recon’.” Travis said. He held the plate out to Lieutenant Orr. “Now how’s about you git this important man some more ham, boy?”

Hill Air Force Base, Utah. USA.

Private Akers stood outside the female barracks. Although women had been integrated into combat units for as long as he had been in the National Guard, there was always a suspicion in the air when men hung around the stairs to the barracks. Female soldiers leaving the barracks would give him a long stare as they pulled their hats tight over their sock buns. Every pair of female soldiers let him know with a glance that he didn't need to be there.

An African American soldier stood at the bottom of the step with a notebook, giving a briefing to an African American female sergeant. None of the females entering or leaving the building paid those two any mind.

Private Akers pulled out his pocket notebook. He tapped the notebook as he waited. The next pair of female soldiers leaving the building ignored him. Private Akers couldn't believe that it had worked. Holding a notebook suddenly made you seem less like a stalker and more like an impatient soldier who was there for a reason.

Private Smith finally came through the doors, her rifle banging against her hip as she skipped down the stairs and pulled on her beret.

"We're gonna miss the movie," Private Akers said as he put away the notepad.

"First twenty minutes are always previews," Private Smith said. "And I don't like foreign films anyway."

She was right. Most of America's movie and TV production was now done out of Disney Studios in Orlando which put out about six movies a year. Anything else on screen came out of France, Canada or was some kind of Hong Kong action flick. This afternoon's movie would be *Only in Miami*, an Anna Kendrick / James Garfield postwar

romantic comedy where a refugee publicist from New York now working as a hotel maid in Miami falls for an engaged Englishman whose book she once helped published. Private Akers wasn't much for rom-coms but it was in English and it was a way to kill time in air conditioning until dinner chow.

The past couple of days had been rough on Private Akers and the rest of the battalion. They had picked up all of their equipment from Camp Williams and moved 60 miles north to Hill Air Force Base to do... well he didn't know exactly what. His platoon was living in tents in the desert, pooping in buckets and showering out of canteen cups all while helping the engineers build something out in the desert, west of the Great Salt Lake. Nobody would say what it was for, but it was backbreaking work. They were even building a runway out there using some kind of steel matting.

Private Akers didn't really care much about what they were building. A day off was a day off. It had come unexpected and he wasn't planning on wasting it playing on his phone in barracks that weren't even air-conditioned.

"That shower felt so good," Private Smith said as she walked. "I was funk-a-fied."

The pair saluted an officer as they walked up E Street toward the post theater. It was hot and there wasn't a cloud in the sky. The air conditioning in the theater was going to feel amazing.

10,000 Feet Above Sacramento, California. Republic of Gilead.

In the time before, the airship was known as *Wingfoot Two*, although most people just called it by the name on the side: "The Goodyear Blimp."

The blimp had sat dormant for years inside a hanger in Carson, California. But when Aerial Outcomes, B.V. had stumbled upon its remains, they knew they had a weapon that would be unmatched in the modern world - a quiet, somewhat stealthy platform that could carry 20,000 pounds and be militarized with a few changes.

The crew knew that the American missile radars in the mountains around Reno were trying to get a fix on the airship - in fact the blimp crew counted on this. Getting discovered at exactly the right time was not just inevitable, it was essential to the mission. The soft, wet-suit like neoprene skin of the blimp excelled at absorbing incoming radar. At a distance of over 100 miles, the only reflective part of the balloon was the gondola, and on radar that looked about as small as a rolling carry-on suitcase. The Americans back in Reno were essentially trying to find a black bowling ball on a golf course at night, using only pen lights. Of course it would be easier to turn on the fairway night lights to more efficiently search, but the radar operators in Reno were professionals. They knew the target wasn't a jet or a propeller plane, so the target was studied and analyzed using low-power emissions and the operators waited.

The blimp moved east, drifting over the still, blue waters of Folsom Lake. It was at this point that someone in Reno panicked - maybe the blimp was a threat after all? It would be in missile range soon and nothing good could come from this thing getting too close to Nevada.

The AN/MPQ-53 missile control radar at the Patriot missile battery in Reno went to full power. Inside the blimp cockpit above California, an indicator lamp made from the

bones of an old police radar detector suddenly wailed bloody murder. Now it was time for the next phase of the plan. The blimp pilot gave the order and men pushed two heavy, silver bundles out of a window that used to hold TV cameras in the time before. The bundles fell and trailed a long section of nylon cord. The cord went taught. This pulled a pin on a helium tank that inflated the bright silver bundles until they were roughly the same size as the blimp. The two new decoy blimps floated upwards. Their shiny mylar skin didn't look that much different than a grocery-store style birthday balloon a person could have bought at a supermarket in the time before. This massive mylar balloon acted as a huge reflective surface that the Patriot battery couldn't ignore.

The search radar focused on the two rapidly ascending pieces of shiny metal which directed massive amounts of radiofrequency energy into the sky. The blimp pilot flipped a bolt-on switch in the gondola, activating two AMG-88 HARM missiles that were hung off the sides of the blimp in welded-on, drop-out pylons. The missiles reacted to the Patriot battery's UHF search radar the way a hungry man reacts to the smell of meat cooking over a fire. The HARM missile's only purpose in its short and brutal life would be to find the source of that radar and explode a warhead in the antenna dish.

The HARMs didn't have long to wait for their meal. The Patriot battery switched to X-Band radar as the fire command was given.

90 miles away in Reno, two Patriot anti-aircraft missiles exploded out of their box-launchers on a trailer that had a beautiful view of Truckee River below. The missiles arched up at four times the speed of sound on a suicide course with the blimp's dazzling silver decoys.

In the cockpit of the blimp, the lock-on tones from the HARM missiles wailed in frustration as they devoured the delicious scent of the Patriot battery's X-Band radar signal and begged to be released. The pilot hit the launch button, sending one HARM scurrying away. The pilot waited ten seconds and fired the second missile.

The two HARMs rocketed away from the blimp gondola traveling east, reaching 1400 miles per hour in only seconds. The two Patriots traveling west crossed over the two HARMs at roughly above the spot where the Donner Party had spent the winter in 1846. Each pair of missiles ignored each other on their way to their own separate destinations.

The scene inside the Patriot launch trailer was pure pandemonium. Their radar saw the two HARMs arching toward their position, but unlike the blimp floating 90 miles above California, the Patriot launch site had no decoys to draw the attention of the killer anti-radar missiles that were now less than two minutes away. So the launch crew did the only sensible thing to do: They shut down their powerful ground-based guidance radar in the hope that the incoming missiles would forget where they were.

The two HARMs noted that the enticing scent of the X-Band radar was gone. If the missiles had been programmed with a sense of humor, they would have found it funny. Both missiles had already noted the location of the radar antenna and they would fly straight toward its memory like soda through a straw.

The two Patriots made their final approach using onboard terminal guidance and impacted harmlessly into the decoy balloons 10,000 feet above the blimp. The blimp pilot directed his crew to reel in the HARM launchers and reload with AMRAAMs. The crew pulled the pylons back into the airship with lengths of chain. They lifted the long,

sleek AIM-120 AMRAAM anti-aircraft missiles onto the pylons, connected the launch cables, and threw the pylons back out over the side again.

The HARMs were now in their final approach to the radar site. The missiles had the capability to send images back to whoever launched them and a camera in the nose of both HARMs clicked on. In the last few seconds of the first missile's life, it sent a grainy black and white picture of the anti-aircraft site's large, boxy radar antenna and a few doomed crewmen who had backed up a truck to the mobile radar unit in a futile attempt to move it out of the way.

The second missile's final picture came ten seconds later. It showed a ruined antenna, a flaming truck and the body parts of its gallant crew strewn across the mountainside.

The pilot of the blimp looked at that final image on a screen that had once belonged to a Chromebook. He punched a message into KAMS, directing it back toward Travis Air Force Base.

RDR KLL OK

GO MISSION

Travis Air Force Base, California. Republic of Gilead.

Beatrix "Puddles" Blok sat in her F-16 wearing a pre-war disposable adult diaper. The package of diapers had cost her an ounce of gold on the black market- roughly \$1,800

in pre-war American dollars. Gilead's passion for sustainability had made disposable adult diapers almost impossible to find, but she was determined to earn her “Duckling” call sign back on this mission. If she pissed her pants again, nobody would know but her. The cost was definitely worth it.

The KAMS system chirped a message.

GO MISSION

PRES OK

Puddles howled with joy. She would make some money today. She keyed her radio mike.

“All units go for mission,” Puddles said.

Puddle’s ragtag strike force consisted of exactly five planes. Her F-16 would be accompanied by Mongo and Santa in their F-16’s. Bringing up the rear on anti-runway duty would be the Korean pilot and weapons officer, call signs “Belly” and “Rat Boy,” in an F-15E Strike Eagle. Watching over all of them would be “Top Hat”, a Turkish F-35 pilot, and the only other female pilot in the Aerial Outcomes squadron.

Top Hat’s F-35 rolled down the runway first. The sleek, angular, stealthy plane was the newest in the strike force and carried only two air-to-air missiles for self-defense. It’s real weapon was its advanced sensor suite that was needed to provide early warning and mission control. Once airborne, Top Hat rocketed her plane up to 30,000 feet.

“TOP HAT IS SUNUP,” Top Hat said when she reached cruising altitude. She activated her onboard sensors and data links. Her plane’s software searched the skies for friendly aircraft. It found a friendly system in a bolt-on computer aboard *Wingfoot Two* as the blimp hovered over Folsom Lake. The two computers in each respective aircraft connected and the Top Hat’s F-35 fed the blimp data from its onboard computers. The blimp was now a floating air-to-air missile carrier that could be controlled by Top Hat’s F-35 from miles away. The skies were clear and the blimp had no targets for its air-to-air missiles.

Puddles throttled up her F-16. Her aircraft was laden with four cluster bombs and two cigar-like extra fuel tanks along with its normal complement of two short-range defensive missiles. This extra weight made the plane fly with the handling capability of a minivan weighed down with a load of play sand. Her group would be in big trouble if they encountered any American fighters, but her project manager had assured her that enemy fighters wouldn’t be a problem. Spies around Nevada and Arizona had reported that most of America’s remaining fighters had been moved in the past few days, although nobody knew where.

Puddles and her strike force lifted into the air. She vectored the group directly toward the newly gaping hole in Reno’s air defenses.

“Top Hat,” Puddles said. “Any bogies?”

“NEGATIVE, PUDDLES.” Top Hat responded. “THE SKIES ARE CLEAR.”

Puddles did the math. F-16s on loan from the Arizona National Guard near Las Vegas should have already been in the air. Where were they? Were American forces

even aware that the radar system in Reno was now a flaming wreck? Why weren't fighters rising up to challenge them?

It took 15 minutes to cross the 170 miles from San Francisco to Reno. They were now out of range of the blimp's air defenses and officially in the badlands and on their own, rocketing toward Utah at 600 miles per hour.

Hill Theater, Hill Air Force Base, Utah. USA.

Private Akers sat in the movie theater chair wondering if this comedy of errors could get any more absurd. On screen, Anna Kendrick's character quietly lay in her underwear beneath a hotel bed. She covered her mouth with her hands in an expression of delusional horror as the legs of James Garfield and Jessica Chastain's characters intertwined through her field of vision at the edge of the bed. In a moment of manufactured brilliance, Anna Kendrick used her cell phone to call James Garfield's phone. James Garfield apologized to Jessica Chastain with an "It might be my editor" excuse which allowed Anna Kendrick to sneak off to the bathroom. There, in the bathroom, Anna Kendrick got dressed in her maid's outfit, grabbed some towels and left the bathroom, pretending to be oblivious to the guests in the hotel room. When discovered by Jessica Chastain's character, Anna Kendrick broke into an offensively false Mexican accent. Jessica Chastain then attempted to communicate with Anna Kendrick in actual, grammatically correct Spanish, so Anna Kendrick threw the towels over her head and ran from the room.

Most of the soldiers in the theater laughed. Private Akers rolled his eyes. He couldn't believe how stupid this was.

"You know," Private Akers whispered to Private Smith. "If Anna Kendrick just joined the Army, she wouldn't have to be a hotel maid."

"If she just joined the Army," Private Smith said, "There won't be a movie."

"Yeah, there would." Private Akers said. "It would just have a different story."

The movie projection stopped and the lights came on.

The theater groaned in frustration. The theater fire alarm sounded. Soldiers collected their weapons and dutifully filed out into the midday sun. There, the soldiers milled around the theater, unsure of what to do. Nobody saw any smoke coming from the theater and there were no fire truck sirens in the distance.

Then came a sound the Privates Akers and had never heard before. The noise sounded like the ringing of an old-style cell phone or computer modem coming through the post loudspeakers.

A civilian came running out of the theater. He was obviously the theater manager but he moved with a sense of complete panic as he yelled.

"Everybody move away from the building and get down!"

1000 Feet above Thurston Peak, Utah. USA

Puddles watched the mountains of Thurston Peak disappear under her plane. Hill Air Force base came into view. The concrete runway of the base glistened with heat in the

desert. The strike team had to be careful. The town of Layton lay directly below the Air Force Base and the town of Syracuse was to the west. Any ordinance that missed would go right into people's homes. Puddles wasn't necessarily concerned for the possible loss of life - but her bonus didn't depend on killing civilians.

"Tally," Puddles said over the radio.

"TALLY." Mongo said.

"TALLY," Santa said.

"TALLY," Belly said.

"NAILS. NAILS. NAILS." Top Hat said. "I'VE GOT AVENGER X-BAND RADAR SPIKING US. BEARING 330."

Somewhere down below, a U.S. Army short range Avenger anti-aircraft launcher noticed four decidedly un-stealthy strike aircraft pop up from behind the Thurston Peak. The firing system swiveled and tracked the incoming targets automatically while Top Hat's F-35 remained invisible 30,000 feet above.

"Gimmie music," Puddles said.

"COPY, MUSIC ON THE AVENGER." Top Hat replied.

Top Hat activated the F-35's electronic countermeasure system. This flooded the X-band receiver on the Avenger with thousands of false positives. The Avenger's radar computer was designed for a few short range threats and it couldn't possibly handle that many new targets, so ultimately, the system hit its max tracking number and reset back to zero. The system started counting again, hit its max number again and reset again. This process continued in an endless loop on the Avenger as Top Hat began preparations for the attack run. The crew slammed the launcher's emergency stop

button, disconnecting the computer from the fire control system. Something was out there, it was coming fast, and they were going to have to fire manually. But the incoming aircraft were moving way too fast.

“LASER ON,” Top Hat said.

Puddles looked at her weapons console screen. The fuzzy black and white image on screen displayed 15 large C-130 transports all lined up on the tarmac like they were waiting for a parade. Bright flashing dots lit up each plane. There was one C-130 that was not targeted. It was a single plane that was on the runway taxiing for take off, oblivious to the carnage that was only seconds away.

“Sparkle,” Puddles said into her radio as she assigned each one of her four cluster bombs its own laser dotted-aircraft as a target.

“SPARKLE,” Mongo said as he did the same.

“SPARKLE,” Santa said.

Puddles saw white blobs of heat sprint from the darker black cylinders of the aircraft. Those white blobs were crewmen and they saw what was coming. Only the fast would live through what happened next.

Puddles flew over the tarmac directly in line with the slumbering row of parked C-130's.

“Standby,” Puddles said. “Standby. Standby. Pickle! Pull!” Puddles released her bombs. She pulled up and away from the coming maelstrom. The other two F-16's did the same.

The bombs released from the F-16s were CBU-105 cluster munitions. All 12 of the weapons that were released from the fighters followed Top Hat's laser pointer until

they were directly above their targets. The bombs then opened up like clam shells, each bomb releasing ten smaller canisters that were about the size of fire extinguishers. The canisters each deployed their own parachutes which stabilized them for a moment. Anyone watching would have been treated to the strange sight of what looked like large, green rigatoni pasta slowly descending by parachute. This didn't last long. Several small rockets ignited on the canisters, spinning the containers around as each released four hockey-puck like bomblets. Centrifugal force flung the bomblets away from their containers and each bomblet began its own suicide search. Infrared detectors on the warhead looked at the baking concrete, the cool grass median and the heat glistening from the aluminum C-130's. Every bomblet chose an individual part of their doomed prey - a wing, a tail fin, a piece of fuselage. In some cases, a refueling truck or forklift that had been unlucky enough to be on the tarmac was selected for destruction instead. A few of Santa's bomblets locked onto the engine heat of fire trucks that had emerged from their bunker at the end of the runway under the belief that the air raid was actually an emergency landing. The firemen had only seconds to contemplate their mistake before the first bomblets landed.

Hill Theater. Hill Air Force Base, Utah. USA.

Many years ago, when Private Akers had been a child, his father had let him buy fireworks during the small July 2nd to July 5th window when they were legal in Utah.

One of Private Akers' favorites was the string of black cat firecrackers which exploded with a rapid, almost machine gun-like staccato sound.

The sound that came from the cluster bombs took Private Akers back to his youth for a moment, until the air was punctuated by booming individual explosions as parked aircraft went up in fireballs.

Private Akers looked to see a C-130 practically cartwheel into the air amid an orange fireball. Three F-16s headed east, out of sight. Why weren't they being blasted from the sky?

A moment later, an F-15 flew directly down the main runway. Every 500 meters a long, thin bomb about the size of a street lamp pole dropped from the fighter as it passed over the runway. Parachutes emerged from the bombs. The parachutes slowed the bombs until they dangled vertically, then a rocket drove the bomb deep into the concrete of the runway.

Nobody was in charge. Nobody was telling them what to do. Private Aker's first instinct was to find somebody who outranked him and ask them what to do, but almost everyone on the ground around the theater were privates like him. But they had to do something.

"We need to get back to the company area," Private Akers said to Private Smith.

"No," Private Smith said. "We need to head to the airfield and help who we can."

Private Akers had to concede that Private Smith was right.

Just as Privates Akers and Smith rose to put their plan into action, the pair saw massive slabs of runway concrete vault into the air every 500 meters where the long,

thin bombs had penetrated the concrete. The blast reverberated through the earth and the sound hit them a millisecond later.

Private Akers and Smith ran toward the airfield, imploring whoever they found to come with them.

Chapter 5 : The Sting

Chicago Pocket, Contested Chicago, Illinois. USA.

It wasn't a knock. It was a full fisted hammering.

Heather awoke to the sound of frantic pounding on her apartment door. Had she missed duty? She looked at her watch. No. It was two in the afternoon. If it was the cops, they would already be in her apartment, so what the heck was going on?

Heather normally kept her apartment artificially dark for daytime sleeping. While she had a flashlight for emergencies and tallow candles for nighttime use, she didn't want to waste batteries or a precious match. Instead, she reached across her bed and tugged the air raid curtain open just enough for a small stream of light to cascade into her room.

She took a moment to adjust to the light as it illuminated her meager bedroom.

Heather rolled out of bed. She shoved her feet into an old pair of flip-flops and threw on a ragged robe. She shuffled toward her apartment door.

She took a peek into the peep hole, but it was just as dark outside as it was inside. She picked up a baseball bat that she kept near the door.

"Who is it?" Heather asked.

"Marquis," a male voice said from beyond the door. "I'm Juvante's driver. They got Juvante."

Heather unlocked and opened the door while keeping the bat at the ready.

Marquis stood in her doorway holding a small pen-light flashlight. With batteries at such a premium, even he had switched the light off once he found her apartment to save the battery.

“Why are you here?” Heather asked. “I don’t come on shift until -”

“Juvante ordered an attack across the canal,” Marquis said, “for revenge against them breaking The Barter. Everyone who went across - they’re hanging them in Horner Park. I need you to get some clothes on and come with me.”

“Why?” Heather asked. “What do you want me to do about that? You want me to support some crazy rescue mission? I don’t even have any ammunition.”

“Yeah,” Marquis said. “But you got a scope. You can help see if he’s there. They got hoods on all of the bodies, but ... I know how tall he was. I know his shoes.”

“Why me?” Heather asked. “You got twelve snipers attached to your-”

“They all went with him,” Marquis said. “He didn’t tell you about the attack because he didn’t want you to come.”

Heather swallowed a dry lump in her throat.

“Let me get my kit on,” Heather said.

“I’ll be outside,” Marquis said. “I got my golf cart out there and I don’t want no one to jack it.”

Heather closed the door. She returned to her bedroom and opened the curtains to let in a little more light. She slid off her robe and pulled on her old, dusty jeans and a worn denim shirt. She tied a red armband around her arm. She put on her boots and grabbed her backpack and rifle.

She left her apartment and navigated her way down her darkened apartment building stairwell by touch.

Marquis sat in his golf cart outside the building on North Sheridan Road. As she approached, she saw something she hadn't noticed in the darkness. Marquis had been crying.

Heather got into the golf cart. The day was already one of those humid summers where the air barely moved off Lake Michigan. In the time before on a day like this, she would have been doing all of the housework she had put off during the school year, or checking on curriculum progress. Instead, she rode in a golf cart along the deserted streets of Uptown to overwatch a mass execution.

They passed through a Black Christian checkpoint and turned onto Irving Park Road. The Doctors without Borders were still smoking across the street from Thorek Memorial Hospital. Malnourished children still roamed the sidewalks. Further on, they approached the old checkpoint by the El station and nobody challenged them. The entire checkpoint was abandoned.

"Was this raid authorized by the Army?" Heather asked.

Marquis didn't answer.

"Who went?" Heather asked.

"Everyone," Marquis said.

"Who's left?" Heather asked.

Marquis looked at her for a moment. Heather got the sinking feeling that the center of the Chicago Pocket was now exposed and guarded only by a dimwitted driver and a middle aged woman with no cartridges for her rifle.

Marquis stopped the golf cart on a side street near an old three story office building. He took his backpack from the back of the golf cart.

"This has the best view," Marquis said.

"How do you know?" Heather asked.

"Cause I been up here since last night watching," Marquis said.

"Fair enough," Heather said as she got out of the golf cart. "Take me to the hide site."

Maquis led Heather inside an old, shot-up brick office building. They climbed up three floors before Marquis took her into a room that faced west. Heather saw a raggedy blanket on the floor next to a window that looked west, over the park. The blanket was surrounded by a few plastic bottles that were obviously filled with urine, old HA wrappers, and pieces of notebook paper. A rat the size of a small dog dug its nose around inside a foil HA packet, oblivious to their presence.

Heather and Marquis were so used to rats that the sight didn't even phase them. Marquis made a movement as if he were about to catch the rat, but Heather grabbed his arm first.

"The window," Heather said. "Look at the sun. Let the rat go."

Natural light from the sun cascaded in through the window. Right now, they were in the shadows of the room. Anyone looking at the building from across the river would have seen Marquis profiled in the light if he had walked directly toward the rat.

Heather looked around the room. She spotted an old office desk.

"Help me move this to the back of the room," Heather said.

The pair moved the table, careful to avoid profiling themselves in the window. The rat looked up at them quizzically and then returned to finishing whatever was in the HA bag.

Marquis crawled on his hands and knees toward the blanket. He pulled the blanket away from the window and handed the blanket to Heather. Heather draped the blanket over the table as padding. The rat pulled its head out of the HA bag and wandered out of the room.

Heather looked at the sunlight on the floor. She made a mental calculation - they had about 30 minutes before the light from the window illuminated her position. After that, they would have to move, leave, or risk getting blown up.

Heather climbed onto the table and shouldered her rifle. She scanned the scene across the river. The park contained two strangely perpendicular rows of dead bodies that stretched for about 100 yards. Each of the bodies had a burlap bag covering its face with some kind of green paint sprayed on the bag. An old forklift sat to one side of the line of bodies. About fifty bound prisoners kneeled in a neat row at the base of the forklift. The few guardians who weren't guarding the prisoners stood in a circle around the forklift smoking cigarettes and talking. Some drank water out of old Army canteens or munched on what looked like homemade bread.

"Lord, Jesus," Heather said. "They're taking a break."

A commander wandered over to the gaggle of guardians around the forklift. The commander pointed at his left wrist. The guardians stubbed out their cigarettes and put away their canteens. Four guardians walked over to the group of prisoners. They grabbed two prisoners out of the group and half marched, half dragged the prisoners

toward the forklift. Once at the fork lift, each of the prisoners was hooded with a burlap bag. One guardian sprayed a green “C” across the bag as another guardian draped a metal cable around the neck of the condemned and attached it to a fork on the forklift. The commander gave a signal and the forklift raised the men into the air as they kicked and shook and finally fell slack. The forklift operator let the dead men down. Four more guardians carried the newly dead prisoners to the side of the forklift and started a new line.

Heather swiveled her rifle toward the group of prisoners. Some of the men were crying. Others looked on with stoic resignation. One of the prisoners was a boy from the Muslim district checkpoint that she remembered seeing a few weeks before, but none of the remaining prisoners was Juvante.

Two more prisoners were taken to the forklift.

“Marquis,” Heather said as she surveyed the scene. “I don’t see Juvante. But if you got any 5.56 I can plug that commander. You got any... or can you get me some? Marquis?”

Heather looked around the room for Marquis. She spotted him on the floor holding an old iPhone in one hand and a satellite phone in the other.

“Marquis!” Heather shouted. “What are you doing?”

“The world’s got to know they’re killing Muslims,” Marquis said. “I just uploaded this to YouTube.”

Heather was suddenly seized with dread.

“How long have you had that satellite phone on?” Heather asked.

“Couple of minutes,” Marquis said. “It had to warm up to connect to the satellites. Why?”

Heather never answered. She grabbed her rifle and rolled off the table in one smooth motion. She was halfway down the hallway when the first artillery shells obliterated her along with the entire building.

Ferguson's Pub, Honolulu, Hawaii. USA.

Ferguson's Pub had once been one of those Hawaiian institutions that seemed to exist for tourists who had tired of tiki bars and just wanted something safe and familiar - an Irish pub with bar food and no-nonsense drinks.

But that was before the war. Now the bar was filled to the brim with wealthy, ration-spurning, pot bellied gay men in their 50's along with some scattered state workers starting their pau hana drinks two hours early. A TV in the corner of the bar had footage on repeat of the bombing of Hill Air Force Base in Utah.

The same grainy security camera footage played over and over as C-130's were ripped to pieces under the soaking rain of cluster bombs. The footage was occasionally interspersed with footage of local Utah residents responding to the airbase to help tend to the wounded and rebuild the runway. Civilian volunteers using their own tools and construction equipment worked side-by-side with Air Force engineers to repair the base's runway and move the destroyed planes. Locals who couldn't work brought sandwiches and lemonade to the workers. Hill Air Force Base's main runway reopened

for business less than 48 hours later, mainly due to the influx of Mormon volunteers who had converged on the crippled airfield. One Pulitzer-worthy picture shown in heavy rotation was of two young Utah National Guard soldiers - one male and one female - carrying a crewman from a burning plane. The female soldier had a nasty spider-shaped scar on her left cheek and the male soldier's face was caught in the grimace of yelling for help.

Marty Wolf sat in the back of the restaurant portion of the bar with his back to the wall, surveying the scene and taking glances at the news footage on TV. The occasional middle-aged gay man gave him a nod - most likely of recognition than of invitation. If these men were wealthy enough to still be overweight and drinking, odds are they had the money to pay for a much younger rent boy than Marty. They probably thought he was one of them.

Marty took a drink from a glass that was more ice than rum. Where the hell was his contact? Did the guy blow him off? Did he get spooked?

A muscular man with a shaved head entered the bar. The man was in his mid-fifties and wore a simple olive cotton t-shirt tucked in under his worn Aloha tunic - definitely a fashion faux pas, but one born of practicality. Marty knew the man was armed with a pistol. The inner shirt protected the man's skin from chafing against the gun. The outer Aloha shirt broke up the outline of the pistol that was most likely being illegally carried. The man locked eyes with Marty. He approached Marty's table.

"Boker Tov." The man said in Hebrew. *"Ma Ko-ray?"*

"I'm fine, thanks." Marty responded in English. "Great, actually."

Marty passed a piece of paper across the table. The man studied the paper for a moment.

"It's going to be expensive," The man said in a thick Israeli accent.

"So you can do it?" Marty asked.

The man bobbed his head. It looked as if he were already forming a plan.

"Getting in is easy my friend," The man said. "Getting out is harder. But this Parris Island is on the coast. That helps a bit and the SoJ Coast Guard is for shit. Are you sure he wants to come?"

Marty thought about that for a moment.

"Why wouldn't he?" Marty asked.

"Stockholm syndrome," the man replied. "Say something enough to a boy and they'll start to believe it. I just don't want my men getting shot for some kid who doesn't want to get out of Gilead."

The man paused for a moment.

"Hell of a *fudua*," The man said as he jerked his thumb at the TV. "That raid in Utah. Someone's going to get fired for that."

The man looked at the TV. Then he looked back at Marty as he rubbed his fingers together.

Marty took this as a signal. He reached below the table and slid a small rolling suitcase toward the man's legs.

"Do I need to count it?" The man asked.

“I wouldn’t do that here unless you want Honolulu’s finest here asking questions,” Marty said. “I know you know who I am. And I’m sure you know you aren’t the only hired gun on this island. So I think it’s best that we both remain on the up and up.”

The man smiled.

“So to be clear.” The man said. “How much is in the suitcase?”

“Like we agreed,” Marty said. “250 ounces of gold now. You’ll get the other half after you get my son out of Gilead.”

“Just so there’s no confusion,” The man said. “You’re giving me 500 ounces of gold to smuggle your son out of Gilead. Is that correct?”

“Yeah. What? Why are you asking me that? Didn’t we talk about this over the phone?” Marty asked.

The man sat back in his chair. He rolled the suitcase over to his chair and gave Marty a sheepish grin.

Now what? This guy wasn’t leaving. Marty had dealt with smugglers before and usually they wanted to get out of sight as soon as possible. This asshole was just sitting there with a stupid grin on his face.

Marty’s phone rang. That was odd. Nobody called him anymore. The man didn’t seem spooked by this which was a little odd as well.

Marty took his phone out of his pocket. The incoming call read “Alana.” That was strange. She hated talking to him and preferred to communicate exclusively over Slack.

Marty held up a finger.

“Excuse me. I have to take this,” Marty said to the man as he jabbed the green answer icon. “What is it, Alana?”

“The FBI is here,” Alana said. “They have a warrant.”

Marty rolled his eyes.

“Jesus. Well what the hell are you calling me for? Have Jess show them the 2257’s and I’ll be back in 20 minutes.”

“Marty, you asshole.” Alana said. “I have the warrant in my hand right now. It’s a search warrant for the computers. What did you do? I need this job, Marty!”

Marty closed his eyes and thought back to the mother and daughter team who was in his office just a few weeks before. He had paid for their hotel room until the end of the month and they screwed him anyway.

Marty looked at the bald man across the table. The man now had a Honolulu police badge draped over his neck on a chain. Marty briefly thought of offering the man a bribe, but he had enough gold to fight whatever case was brought against him and anything he said was probably being recorded. If Jeffrey Greenberg could survive the crap Reality Kings went through back in 2011, he could survive this.

Marty stabbed the end call button on his phone.

“So how are we doing this?” Marty asked. “What about my car? Tesla’s don’t exactly grow on trees these days. Someone will load it on a flatbed if I leave it out in the parking lot.”

The man no longer had an Israeli accent when he spoke.

“Well, brah.” The man said. “Your car is the least of your problems. I’m gonna take you outside and the FBI’s gonna arrest you. You’re going to be booked and

charged with espionage. If you cooperate, you'll probably be out in twelve hours and can pick up your car tonight."

"Wait, what?" Marty said. "I thought this was a 2257 raid?"

"Na, brah." The man said as he held up the piece of paper that Marty had previously slid across the table. "We want to know where you got this."

Breathitt County, Kentucky. Contested Appalachia.

Travis never liked Breathitt County. The place stank of coal dust, meth and corruption. A hundred years ago, political disputes were settled with bullets rather than ballots. Breathitt feuds still lingered and some had used the revolution as an excuse to settle scores that had started a hundred years before. If he hadn't needed to see the Robinson boys, he would have stayed far away back in Owsley with his own kin.

Travis was in pain from the walk, but he didn't let on. He carried his rifle and his aching body through the ancient woods with Ben, John, Captain Moore and Lieutenant Orr without a single complaint. His head still hurt, but that was to be expected after his concussion.

"We close?" Captain Moore asked.

"You'll know," Ben said.

"How will we know?" Captain Moore asked.

A child's unseen voice came from beyond the trees.

"You'ns better stop right there," The voice said. "You done come far enough."

Travis didn't recognize the voice, but he assumed the voice came from Robinson kin.

"Now don't do nuthin' hasty," Travis said. "My name's Travis Lewis. These boys here are with me. Ernie and Cole been expecting us."

"Who's the bootlips with you?" The child's voice asked.

Travis looked back at Lieutenant Orr.

"I haven't heard that one yet," Lieutenant Orr said. "You got some creative racists down here."

"Sorry about that," Travis said to Lieutenant Orr. Travis faced the direction of the voice again. "That there black man is Lieutenant Orr of the US Army Special Forces. He's a doctor and a dentist and a vet too. He's with me. He's plumb okay with me."

A short, skinny man appeared from the brush about fifty yards away. He wore ratty blue jeans, a dirty white tank top and carried an M4 rifle that bristled with attachments and devices the purpose of which Travis could only guess. The man wore Army-issue boots and was missing a few fingers on his left hand.

"Andrew, is that you?" The man said as he approached Captain Moore.

Captain Moore moved toward the man.

"Hey, Carl." Captain Moore said. "How'd you hurt your paw? You didn't tell me."

"Had a little accident and I had to cut them off. I'll be okay."

"Well we got a doctor with us," Captain Moore said as he pointed to Lieutenant Orr. "Maybe he can take a look?"

"We'll see," The man said.

Captain Moore gestured to Travis. "This is Travis Lewis. He's the local militia leader. That's John Abner, Ben Baker and you know Lieutenant Orr. Travis has been kind enough to let me stay with him. Travis, this is Master Sergeant Cayhill. He's an engineer."

"I blow shit up," Master Sergeant Cayhill said as he held up the three remaining fingers on his left hand.

Travis approached the man and shook his right hand.

"Travis Lewis," Travis said. "You boys from the same unit?"

"Same group, different teams." Master Sergeant Cayhill said. "We were all hand picked because of our size. The smaller we are, the more supplies we can fit in the Aerolift. Jason told me a lot about you over the radio. You're a real hero. "

"All the damn heroes I know are dead," Travis said.

Master Sergeant Cayhill pursed his lips and grimaced.

"Well, maybe we can help avenge them? Are you ready to see the shop?"

"I recon," Travis said. "Let's see what toys you done bring me.

A shirtless boy in his early teens emerged from the woods carrying an M-16 that was almost as long as him.

"Hold up now," The boy said. "I need to see payment."

Lieutenant Orr dropped to a knee. He took off his medical backpack and rummaged inside. He came out with four blister packs of Sudafed. He held the packs out to the boy.

The boy approached. He took the blister packs and inspected them. He nodded.

"Ok, Mister Cayhill." The boy said. "They can come on back."

The boy took off into the forest. The men followed.

Travis walked. He passed by a blackberry bush. The berries were ripe from the July heat, but he didn't pick any. This wasn't his land and he wouldn't take any liberties with another family's forage. A half hour passed. Travis smelled the odor of urine and rotten eggs and he knew they were close.

They came upon an old tumbledown stone barn that seemed to sprout from the floor of the forest like it had been there forever. A generator chugged away on one corner of the barn.

"You runnin' that on liquor?" Travis asked Master Sergeant Cayhill.

"Yeah," Master Sergeant Cayhill responded as if it were an afterthought. "Just have to find a genset with as little aluminum as possible. It's hell on the seals, though. Corrodes them faster than I can replace them."

Master Sergeant Cayhill stopped. He held up his two remaining fingers.

"Don't touch anything," Cayhill said.

The men entered the barn.

The inside space was lit by a few bare bulbs. Cables and wires lead everywhere. A homemade forge lay in the corner. On one homemade table was a Panasonic Toughbook hooked up to a military radio.

"Where's the Robinson boys?" Travis asked.

"I'm it," the boy said. "My brothers done died."

Travis looked at the boy. It took him a moment, but he finally recognized him.

"Wendell?" Travis said. "Why the last time I saw you, you was-" Travis held his hand about knee high. "This big. Your ma ought to be plumb proud of you."

“She is, Mr. Lewis.” Wendell said. “You want to see what we done cooked up?”

Master Sergeant Cayhill led the group over to a table, on which were 24 inverted copper bowls about the size of billiard balls. Some of the copper disks had what looked like a thick coating of peanut butter drying on the convex side. The table smelled like moth balls.

“This is a shape charge,” Master Sergeant Cayhill said as he pointed at the table. “You take copper and form it in a bowl. You put explosives on the outside curve and when you detonate the explosives it melts the bowl and turns it inside out into a molten slug of copper. These will go through about six inches of homogeneous steel armor.”

“How you know that?” Travis asked.

Master Sergeant Cayhill held up his damaged fingers. His point made, he continued.

“I got the copper from spent brass shell casings. The pre-war stuff is better. It’s about 80% copper, 20% zinc. The crap the guardians are pumping out of Lake City is about 70% copper. So I let it melt in the furnace and since zinc is lighter on the periodic table, I just scrape it off the top. I got a whole pile of Zinc if you want any. It’s supposed to help produce testosterone.”

“I’m good,” Travis said.

“Yeah,” Lieutenant Orr said. “Maybe after the war when we celebrate.”

Master Sergeant Cayhill moved the group to a second table. Several three foot long lengths of pipe sat on the table.

“We load them into these,” Master Sergeant Cayhill said. “Now there’s no triggers on these. I made the fuses out of toilet paper and match heads, so we gotta

keep them dry. Each fuse is about six seconds, so once you light it, you better be damn sure you're ready to fire it. I made the rocket motor out of some of the sugar you boys got from the convoy."

Travis fixed Captain Moore with a dirty look.

"You didn't say nuthin about no captured sugar," Travis said.

"There wasn't really enough left to mention after we gave the Master Sergeant what he needed," Captain Moore said. "I gave the rest out to the families. It came to about a half a cup each."

Travis let the matter drop.

"What's the range on these things?" Travis asked.

"Thirty yards," Master Sergeant Cayhill said.

"Thirty yards?" Travis asked. "My men are gonna get cut down like wheat."

Master Sergeant Cayhill spread out his hands.

"I'm not exactly Raytheon here. I'm making anti-tank rockets out of sugar and mothballs inside a hillbilly meth lab. No disrespect, Wendell."

"It's alright, Mr. Cayhill." Wendell said.

Travis noticed that Wendell was finishing up crushing the Sudafed tablets in an old mortar and pestle. The boy dumped the mixture out into a tray and added some acetone.

"Son," Travis said to Wendell. "I know I ain't your pa, but that stuff's gonna kill you."

"Don't matter none," the boy said as he extracted the ephedrine from the slurry of diluted pills. "We's all gonna be dead next week nohow."

McConnell Air Force Base, Kansas. Republic of Gilead.

Puddles lay nude on a cot under the Kansas sun.

Neither Puddles nor Top Hat thought about bringing a bikini with them on their raid and Gilead's only poolside fashions were whatever you were wearing before they threw you in the deep end for adultery. It wasn't like they could buy swimsuits in Kansas on the economy so the compromise was climbing a rickety metal ladder to the flat roof of the squadron ready room with an Army cot and sunning themselves in their birthday suits.

Kansas was boring. Everything was flat. There was no beach, no nightlife, nothing but wheat and SoJ soldiers who were apoplectic at the site of female contractors. Not that her situation bothered her that much - she was richer now than they would ever be. The bounty on the C-130's she destroyed during her part in the raid had netted her 500 ounces of gold or about \$600,000 in prewar dollars. It was a lot. She didn't have internet access here, but once she got back to California, she would talk with her wife and they would make a decision together - maybe she could finally quit the job and come home.

Getting back to California was the hard part. The plan had called for her strike group to fly straight through to Kansas to prevent any American aircraft from intercepting them over Nevada or retaliating while they were vulnerable and landing in Colorado. But now Puddles was stuck on a disused runway with no project manager

from Arial Outcomes, no phone, no internet, no change of underwear and no orders on what to do next. One of the local commanders - a small minded, balding, little weevil of a man - had declared Puddle's strike package under his jurisdiction now. Such was Gilead - finders keepers. The airfield had once been a mid-air refueling tanker base and was now mostly home to grazing cattle and the occasional SoJ executive transport. The local Kansas district commander needed jet fighters about as much as he needed a submarine, but he wasn't letting them go without a fight. To make matters worse, he refused to talk to Puddles because she was a woman and a raging gender traitor. So her go-between became Mongo since Santa spent his day drunk on local whisky and the Koreans spoke laughably bad English.

Puddles heard the aluminum ladder groan and shimmy under some kind of weight.

"Puddles," Mongo called out. "You up here?"

"Ja," Puddles said.

Mongo popped over the ladder. He immediately ducked back down once he saw the nude forms of Puddles and Top Hat reclining in their cots.

"Why are you two naked?" Mongo asked from behind the top of the wall.

"They don't sunbathe in Turkey?" Puddles asked Top Hat.

"The men prefer the baths," Top Hat replied as she held two fingers up and pantomimed two penises sword fighting.

Mongo stood up and balanced himself on the ladder. He covered his eyes with his left hand and threw a cloth laundry bag onto the roof with his right.

Puddles slipped on a pair of men's shower shoes that were way too big for her feet. She shuffled over to the bag and pulled out two pairs of rough, white, matronly Made in the Republic of Gilead panties.

"What the hell are these?" Puddles asked.

"It's all they had," Mongo said.

Puddles lay back down on her cot as she handed a pair of underwear to Top Hat.

"Well, thank you. I appreciate you hunting them down. What did the commander say?" Puddles asked.

"I think we're wearing out our welcome," Mongo said. "He won't give us back our sidearms. His men ripped the KAMS systems out of all of our planes so we can't contact home. Between Santa's drinking and your... woman-ness we're not making any friends. I got the ground crew to fill up the planes with fuel but these idiots aren't even military. They're econopeople and they don't know shit about aircraft."

"Any luck on ordnance?" Puddles asked. "If we have to fight our way back to California, I'd like to have more than two Sidewinders per plane."

Mongo shook his head slowly so he wouldn't lose balance with his eyes covered and averted.

"They wouldn't let me explore," Mongo said. "Every time I leave the squadron area I'm escorted by guardians. The local commander let me use the phone and I got in touch with corporate, but it's after six in Amsterdam so I left a message with someone on the mid shift. I think we're stuck here until corporate finds a way to get us out or the commander back in San Francisco wins whatever pissing contest this is."

"What's a pissing contest?" Puddles asked.

“Er...” Mongo said. “It’s an English idiom. Like a match to see who can... I actually don’t understand it but it means a fight to see who has more influence.”

Puddles looked at Top Hat. Top Hat shrugged. She had never heard the phrase either.

“Like who can piss more or who can piss the furthest?” Top Hat asked.

“Either one maybe,” Mongo said. “And... one more thing. I know you don’t want to hear this, but the local commander suggested that if you and Top Hat want to remain on base, you are going to have to work in the kitchen with the Marthas.”

Puddles and Top Hat snorted.

“And...” Mongo continued. “If you engage in any gender treachery while you are here, you will be hanged.”

Puddles looked at Top Hat.

“Good thing you’re not my type,” Puddles said.

Top Hat snapped her fingers in mock disappointment.

“Mongo,” Puddles said. “I want you to go back to the commander and tell him that under no circumstances are Top Hat and I working in a kitchen. He is to return our sidearms and ammunition to us as they are Aerial Outcomes property. Then inform him that the company told you that If he chooses not to let us leave, he will be issued a demurrage charge of 100 ounces of gold per plane, per day to offset the cost of California being unable to use our planes. Tell him the cost of the jet fuel we took on will be deducted from his bill. This will be backdated to the day we landed. Write up an invoice and hand it to him.”

“A demurrage... A what charge?” Mongo asked.

“Demurrage,” Puddles said. “D-e-m-u-r-r-a-g-e. I know big English words too. It’s like a fee for keeping a ship in port too long.”

“How do you know that word?” Mongo asked. “But not the pissing contest?”

“Because the Dutch were trading with ships around the world back when you Turks were bugging each other in the baths,” Puddles said. She looked at Top Hat. “No offense.”

“Doesn’t bother me,” Top Hat shrugged. “I’ve never bugged anyone.”

“What a sheltered life,” Puddles said. She spoke up. “You got that, Mongo?”

“I understand,” Mongo said as he crept back down the aluminum ladder.

Puddles lay back on her cot and started to form a plan. None of the planes in the strike package had any remaining air-to-ground weapons except for cannons, but 20mm explosive shells could still do plenty of damage. If she were forced to work like a common Martha, she had no doubt that Mongo would show the local commander the folly of his ways at 6000 rounds per minute.

Prince Kuhio Federal Building, Honolulu, Hawaii. USA.

Marty sat in an interrogation room that could have come straight out of the set department on *Law and Order*. His hands were cuffed to a metal ring on the table. He sat on a government-issued plastic chair that was molded in the shape of nobody’s ass. A second chair lay at the other side of the table.

Marty wasn't sure how long he had been there - it was almost definitely past the "few hours" that was promised to him when he had been arrested. He resigned himself to knowing that his Tesla was probably resting in the garage of some wealthy gay man who would eventually use it to pluck rent boys off the Honolulu streets like grapes. Marty hadn't even been arraigned yet and had no way of contacting a lawyer. The FBI men who took him to the bathroom and brought him crummy cheese sandwiches didn't even answer his questions. So Marty sat in his chair silently, going over all of the possible charges in his head.

The interrogation room door opened. In walked a tall, thin Asian woman who looked to be in her mid 50's. She wore a mumu that was too big for her and her face was nothing but sharp angles that had definitely been chiseled from a SNAP ration card. The woman carried a chunky brown folder that was closed with a length of string.

Prince Kuhio Federal Building, Honolulu, Hawaii. USA.

Sasha studied Marty Wolf the way a child might study a gorilla in the zoo. He was unshaven, and like most of Hawaii's wealthy, had a gut that even his Aloha shirt couldn't hide. He looked like the type of man you would have seen at the beach pre-war with a woman half his age and 1/3rd his body weight.

So this was the man who might save America?

"Hi. Don't get up," Sasha said with a smirk.

"Are you my lawyer?" Marty asked.

Sasha laughed.

“No,” Sasha said. “But trust me, I’m much better than a lawyer.”

“Lawyer,” Marty said in a monotone.

“Oh?” Sasha said as she held up a finger. “We’re doing this? We’re really doing this?”

“Lawyer,” Marty said.

“Guess this is going to be a one-sided conversation,” Sasha said. “Okay. So. My name is Sasha. I’m not a lawyer. I’m a project manager and I work for Booz Allen Hamilton. I work in intelligence.”

Marty looked like he was about to respond with the word “lawyer,” but a quizzical look came over his face.

Sasha sat down in the chair at the far end of the table.

She placed the packet of papers on the table and theatrically untied the string. She opened the folder and leafed through the pages. She didn’t actually read anything, but she leafed through the dossier with feigned interest.

“Jesus, you had twelve grams of cocaine in your house,” Sasha said. “That’s a felony four times over in Hawaii.”

“Lawyer,” Marty said.

“Well,” Sasha said. “You’re cleared on one thing. That girl who turned you in is over eighteen. It’s still a 2257 violation because her ID was bad. So you’re looking at some time there.”

“Lawyer,” Marty said.

“Okay,” Sasha said. “We’re gonna try this again. My name is Sasha. I’m a contractor for the government. I don’t give a shit about any of those charges.” Sasha held up a piece of paper. “But this...This hostname record with the Gilead air defense computer info on it. This has me really interested. I want to know how you got this. We found the motherload of intelligence on your computer and the fate of this entire country rests on how you know what you know.”

Marty stared at her.

“How about,” Sasha said. “How about I uncuff you? If I uncuff you, you aren’t going to do anything stupid, are you?”

“You’re not my type.” Marty said.

Sasha gave Marty a forced grin. She pulled a handcuff key from the inside of the brown folder. She stood and leaned over to unlock Marty’s handcuffs, fumbling as she did it.

“Sorry,” Sasha said. “I haven’t done this before.”

Marty snorted. “You never had to unlock handcuffs? That’s a shame. I feel sorry for your husband. You must be a real firecracker in the sack.”

Sasha again gave Marty the forced grin. She removed the handcuffs and placed them locked on her side of the table.

“My husband’s dead,” Sasha said. “Or maybe he’s alive. I don’t know. I got out of DC. He didn’t. Listen, I don’t have time for bullshit, so I’m going to level with you. I’ve had a really... really bad week. I need to know how you got into Gilead’s KAMS system when none of their computers are connected to the internet.”

“I don’t even know what that is,” Marty said. “KAMS? Am I saying that right?”

Sasha studied the man. He seemed like he was being honest.

“You... you’ve been looking for you son.” Sasha said. “I know that from the undercover Honolulu cop you contacted and from the records on your computer. His name is Jason Wolf and he’s training to be a Guardian Marine at Parris Island. You found him using SoJ records that aren’t on the Internet and I can’t figure out how. Several of the computers in this log file are part of a secure communication system that Gilead uses to direct all air traffic with text messaging because they are terrified of using voice comms from ground to air. They call it KAMS - Keyed Air Messaging System. How did you get into that system? Because if you tell me and you can help me, I am prepared to offer you a full pardon. The cocaine, the 2257, the espionage, the wire fraud, the black market meat. Everything.”

“Can I see it in writing?” Marty asked.

Sasha slid a piece of paper from the folder across the table. Marty looked at the paper.

“Do you have a pen?” Marty asked.

“I’ll give you the pen when you tell me how you did it.”

“Porn,” Marty said. “Possession of the stuff is punishable by blinding in one eye in Gilead. But they love the stuff. Especially pregnancy porn, which is sort of my specialty.”

“Go on,” Sasha said.

“My company wrote a special kind of video file. This video file is encrypted and needs a special video player to unlock. The video player is really a computer virus. It takes a look at whatever computer system it’s on for files of interest. Then it takes

those files and embedded them in porn videos. It's pretty neat. No loss of quality.

When the system is activated, it searches the network for other video players and syncs all of the files. Then when the system finds a computer that's connected to the internet, the files are uploaded to my servers. I take the data and I look through it."

"For your son," Sasha said.

"For my son," Marty said. "And I found him and now I have to hire a new mercenary to get him out."

"How did you get the video player onto Gilead's computers?" Sasha asked.

"Thumb drives," Marty said. "Nobody owns a computer anymore in Gilead unless you're pretty high ranking, so I pay a few people in Chicago and Florida to be... I guess the Johnny Appleseed of porn. They meet with guardians and trade them USB drives for cigarettes or whatever - I actually don't care what they trade for as long as the guardians keep coming back for new stuff. Guardians plug them into military computers and watch the videos. Eventually the thumb drives make it to a machine that still has internet access and I get all of the collected files."

"So someone plugged one of your thumb drives into a KAMS computer," Sasha said. She took a breath. This was it. "Could you alter the data that is sent out with KAMS? Like... could you force false or misleading text messages to be sent?"

Marty shrugged.

"We'd have to write a program," Marty said. "Then I'd have to get it over the border. Honestly, that's the easiest part. It will spread automatically to every other thumb drive on the network after someone plugs it in. Sometimes it's as short as an hour once I drop something new. I don't have access in real time, but everything is

timestamped in logs. But, yeah. My guess is that it will be in their system within a day. This KAMS system... do they run it from Air Traffic Control Towers?"

"We think so," Sasha said.

Marty nodded.

"It's dark in an air traffic control tower... what would you do if you were a sexually frustrated guy sitting alone in a tower at night with access to porn in one of the most repressed countries on the planet? It will get into the control towers within hours. Trust me."

Sasha produced a pen from the folder and an American hero signed his pardon.

Chapter 6: Coding Chaos

Islamabad, Pakistan.

The one secret to viral videos is that they have to produce emotion. That emotion is usually laughter or amazement, but on occasion a viral video will produce anger of the most raw and visceral kind.

The video of the mass execution of Muslims in Chicago was uploaded with the hashtag #ChicagoPocket. The video was first watched by a history professor in England who had an alert set up for anything coming out of the Chicago Pocket due to his keen interest in modern day sieges from Stalingrad to Sarajevo. He shared the video with some colleagues who in turn shared the video on Facebook with their students. One of those students was a Pakistani teenager, living in England, whose brother happened to be Dr. Drizzle - the most popular rapper in Pakistan.

Dr. Drizzle posted the video on Twitter for all of his 4.1 million followers to watch in abject rage as Muslim after Muslim was hanged with an efficiency that was so casual, the Sons of Jacob actually stopped to take a smoke break. The hashtag #killtheunbelievers started trending in the Islamic world. The video spread through Pakistan, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Iraq. It was discussed on talk shows and commented on by Youtube personalities.

Within a few days, Iraq had pledged to send troops and aircraft to the United States. Not to be outdone, Saudi Arabia volunteered its impressive Air Force. Pakistan offered troops and satellite support. Religious Muslim college students deferred starting

their fall semesters to travel to Canada in the hopes they could cross Lake Michigan and fight in Chicago. When Canada shut down their borders to stem the tide of angry young men, Muslim Jihadists flooded to into Palm Beach, Florida where a local Iranian-American businessman had started his own Islamic Militia.

The Republic of Gilead wasn't too concerned. After all, they had God on their side and a nuclear submarine with missiles that could still reach Mecca from port.

Bonneville Salt Flats, Utah. USA.

The Bonneville Salt Flats were mostly known in the time before among the racing community as a place to break land speed records. The Pontiac Bonneville had been named after the place. Its bleak, whited-out landscape had set the background to shows such as the intro to Knight Rider and even a Star Wars film.

Now, a metal, prefabricated runway stretched for at least two miles across an old racecourse. Soldiers stood dotted every 50 yards on the runway, baking in the 120 degree heat. One of those soldiers was Private Akers.

The loss of the transports at Hill Air Force Base had necessitated some creative changes to training. Instead of parachuting onto the runway, an Army truck dropped them off, and then drove down the runway again. Each time it passed a soldier, the soldier simulated like he had just landed. It was a good five minutes before the truck passed Private Akers again.

Private Akers ambled over to Private Smith.

“Are you hurt?” Private Akers asked.

“Only my pride,” Private Smith said. “This is stupid.”

“Play the game,” Private Akers said.

“OW! OW! OW!” Specialist Castro said as he hopped over. “I think I broke my femur, on that PLF, yo. I think I hit a bird too. Look, man. I got a feather.”

Specialist Castro held up a ragged bird feather that he had either found on the ground or had kept in his pocket for days waiting for this opportunity to surface.

“Hey,” Private Smith said as she played along. “Is that a white-bellied cockle-headed salt piper?”

“Yeah, man.” Specialist Castro said. “It flew into my mouth when we jumped and I ate it.”

“Well, you better throw it up,” Private Smith said. “It’s endangered.”

“Okay, but I think to force it up I need the hind-lick maneuver-” Specialist Castro bent over just as Sergeant Hale approached.

“Quit screwing around,” Sergeant Hale said. “Take this serious. Everybody green?”

“Green, green, green.” the soldiers replied in unison.

“Alright, Bravo Team,” Sergeant Hale said. “Move out.”

The fire team set out at a jog down the runway. A mile and a half away lay a large two-story square building made out of plywood. Their company’s mission was to capture the building. What happened after that, nobody knew. Whoever was planning this mission kept tight lipped about what they were actually training for.

The team moved past the edge of the runway. They caught up with the rest of Company A and took a moment to reorganize. During the pause, Private Akers watched a Humvee tow a strange looking trailer down the runway. The trailer had a short, thick, pipe-like arm that jutted up from the trailer bed pointing forward at 45 degrees.

“What’s that?” Private Akers asked.

“It’s a MICLIC,” Sergeant Hale said, pronouncing it like “Mick-Lick.”

“Is that like an Irish lesbian?” Specialist Castro said.

“No, not like a -” Sergeant Hale scrunched up his face. “You know, Jesus Christ is a personal friend of mine and I don’t think he would appreciate you talking like that. It’s a mine clearing vehicle. It shoots out an explosive line to help clear minefields. Mine Clearing Line Charge. MICLIC.”

“Who the heck are we rescuing that lives in a minefield?” Private Akers asked.

“Maybe they’re putting those handmaids behind them so they don’t escape?” Private Smith said.

The unit pushed forward, toward the plywood building. This was just a walk-through, so they weren’t firing live rounds, but as the unit got closer to the plywood building, they assaulted and cleared several fake bunkers. They paused after clearing the bunkers. The MICLIC was brought up. Some engineers pretended to fire the MICLIC at the building. Then the engineers ran across the no-man’s land with engineer tape, creating a safe path roughly the size of a double-car driveway through the fake minefield.

Company A took up perimeter duty. Private Akers and his team did their part - one small cog in a massive wheel of maneuver as they faced east and prepared for counterattack. Company B assaulted the building. Company C secured the rest of the airstrip to the north as Company D used their Hummers to speed down the safe path through the minefield. The vehicles returned, loaded with what looked like bricks.

"If this is a rescue mission," Private Akers said, "what the heck are we rescuing?"

"I don't know," Specialist Castro said. "But she's built like a brick shithouse."

Downtown Honolulu, Hawaii. USA.

Programming was never Marty Wolf's forte. He had been self-taught back in the 90's when anyone with a little bit of knowledge could throw up a website and start selling things online. Back then Marty had been a two-bit pornographer - heir to his father's fading dynasty of adult theaters and adult novelty stores that were spread around Georgia and Florida.

Marty spent his middle school years book keeping and purchasing in the scummy, smoke-filled backroom of one of his father's larger establishments. By high school, Marty was driving from theater to theater collecting greasy dollars from peep show booths. When the late 80's rolled around, Marty realized that the adult store would soon be an anachronism. Although adult theaters provided instant gratification, they were no longer the only game in town. People could order a wider or more specific selection of porn through the mail, and the mail order distributors could operate at much

lower margins. Mail order VHS tapes would destroy the family-owned adult theater and Marty didn't see a way out.

College introduced Marty to all the amazing things computers could do with accounting - but the real excitement came from the BBS or college bulletin board service. These early online public forums pre-dated the public internet. Marty used a computer and agonizingly slow modem to dial another computer - the host of the bulletin board. Most of the posts and responses on the BBS were classified ads from people leaving campus and getting rid of their stuff. Other posts centered around Dungeons and Dragons scenarios. But a few posts were "binaries" - meaning that someone had taken a picture, digitized it, and uploaded it to the BBS to share. It took Marty a few weeks of reading and experimenting, but he finally built a program that could show these pictures in all of their 256 colors of glory. Although the first picture he viewed was relatively tame compared to what he had witnessed in his father's shops, the feeling of accomplishment he got from solving the riddle was greater than anything he had felt before. He could bend bits to his will and quite possibly, make money from the creation and delivery of porn right to a subscriber's computer instantaneously. The peep show could come home and Marty Wolf would hold the coin box.

Now, as Marty and Alana sat in his office, surrounded by FBI agents, Marty realized that he was writing the most important program of his life.

The software code gleaned from the KAMS system had been decompiled back into human-readable instructions. Unfortunately, the language Gilead used to write the software was C++, so the decompiled code was barely readable in its decompiled form. Marty and Alana studied the code while sitting next to each other, trying to decipher its

meaning as the FBI agents in the room returned with Tetrapaks of cold Coke. One of them even brought back a cheeseless pineapple and ham pizza - God knows how with the wheat ration so small these days.

“Any progress?” One of the senior agents asked as Marty bit into his pizza.

Marty chewed a bit. Alana answered for him.

“If I told you, would you even understand?” Alana asked.

“Try me,” The agent said. “Explain it to me like your freedom was at stake.”

Marty pointed at the computer screen.

“This is an array,” Marty said. “Think of an array as like... a train pulling box cars. Each box car can contain data. C++ uses something called zero-based arrays, so if you discount the train analogy for a moment and forget about the engine, the first boxcar car is referenced as 0. The second box car is referenced as 1 and so on down the length of the train. What I see here is that the most frequently referenced array nodes are 0, 1, and 2. The array has a max length of 157.”

“So,” Alana chimed in. “Part of good programming practice is to put the most frequently-accessed items at the front of the array. This way if you are ever searching through the array, you won’t have to search the whole thing.”

“It’s like,” Marty interrupted. “Those old recipe card boxes. Let’s say you’re a grandmother. You might put recipes you use a lot at the front of the box to save time looking for them. So if you were a programmer designing an air traffic control system, what types of messages would you put at the front of the array?”

The FBI agent thought for a moment.

“Takeoff?” The agent said. “Land?”

“No.” Marty said. “This is why my programmer here said you wouldn’t understand what we’re doing. A plane is probably only going to take off once and land once. So you might only send those messages twice during a flight. But you might send messages like *OK* or *Acknowledge* or *Cancel* several times during a flight. If you put those commands at the front of the array, you would save milliseconds searching. It may not seem like you are saving much time, but it’s good programming practice to do this.”

“And,” Alana continued. “As your program expands, people are going to want more codes, so the array is going to grow as people think of stuff to add. We call it ‘scope creep.’ But your old commands of *Ok*, *Acknowledge* and *Cancel* are still in the same place, no matter how much your scope creeps. So you don’t have to reprogram everything just because someone wanted to add a new command.”

“So what does this mean?” The agent asked.

“It means,” Marty said. “We can alter the code so that no matter what code is intended, KAMS always sends whatever is in array 0, or array 1 or in whatever array we want. We could even change the code so that if you send out one message, KAMS will randomly pick a different array item and send that instead.”

“So chaos?” The FBI agent said. “The control tower sends a message to take off, but the planes receive a message to land.”

“That’s what we think,” Marty said. “It’s what you wanted, right? We won’t know for sure unless you have a Gilead jet fighter lying around. But 157 array locations is such a strange number, it has to be the messaging array. Most programmers allocate memory in chunks: 256, 512, 1024, 2048. This is just too weird to pass up. Why are

we doing this anyway? This is a lot of trouble just to screw with their Air Force and once they figure it out, they are just going to delete the program and load from backup.”

The FBI agent smiled.

“Like you said - chaos.”

SOGS Maryland. Naval Submarine Base King’s Bay, Georgia. Republic of Gilead.

Commander Faircloth wrinkled his nose as he entered the Captain's quarters. Smoking had been banned on US Navy Submarines since 2009, but everyone in Gilead seemed to smoke these days. After banning most sports, pornography, and The Internet, the common people needed some kind of vice and at least Gilead cigarettes were all-natural, additive-free and could be grown in North Carolina.

Officially, The Republic of Gilead Navy allowed commander’s discretion when it came to smoking on vessels. Although the Commander was in charge of the entire Navy, the Captain was still in charge of the boat.

The Captain stood when the commander entered the room. A lit cigarette simmered in an ashtray on the commander’s table. The captain saluted and the commander returned the salute.

“Commander,” The Captain said. “May I present to you a gift?”

The Captain motioned to a shoebox-sized lump on his desk that was covered with a towel.

The Commander removed the towel. Underneath was a block of what looked like grey putty in the shape of a hexagon with a slight concave depression. Commander Faircloth smiled.

“You did it?” Commander Faircloth asked.

The Captain nodded as he spoke.

“We had teams at Lawrence Livermore and Savannah River working around the clock. We were able to refresh the tritium and manufacture new explosive triggers. We’ll have one missile on-line by tomorrow. The rest within a month.”

Gilead was a nuclear power again.

Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, Republic of Gilead

They called it The Crucible. In the final phase of boot camp, Guardian Marines spent 54 hours with little sleep, constant marching and only one meal a day.

To Jason Wolf, surviving The Crucible was easy compared to living as an orphan during the revolution, but the end was near. His exhausted platoon had marched all night and soon they were on main post, marching toward the Camp Lejeune replica of the Marine Corps Iwo Jima monument. The Gilead flag - a golden eye in a sunburst on a blue background - fluttered on the pole as six bronze Marines in World War Two dress stood trapped in the act of raising the flag of God over Mount Suribachi.

The company of trainees formed up into ranks in front of the statue. Their Drill Instructors ordered them to drop their packs and stack their rifles. A boom box began to

play the Marine Corps Hymn. Some of the recruits cried. Others stood tall as a commander went up to each man, shook their hand, and handed them an Eagle, Eye and Anchor pin that officially made them Marines.

Jason took his pin and held it with care. As long as he was a Marine, he would never be hungry again.

McConnell Air Force Base, Kansas. Republic of Gilead.

It had been a long few weeks. Puddles and Top Hat could only get so tan before the risked skin cancer, so they had taken to the only activity that the local commander allowed them to do: lounge in the flight ready room in their flight suits and knit.

Puddles was pretty adept at knitting. Top Hat had never knitted before, but fighter pilots tended to be good at whatever they decided to do. So they stayed in the ready room with their yarn and their needles and turned yarn into projects.

Puddles had started Top Hat off with a garter stitch for a dishcloth. Top Hat took to it with the same dedication that she devoted to flying and she finished it within a day. She started on a second dishcloth, this one in a checkerboard pattern.

“Do you think,” Top Hat asked. “We could knit bikinis?”

“I don’t know if you’d want to,” Puddles said. “We can’t exactly go into the water with them. I guess if you wanted to sunbathe with them we could. You’d get a weird pattern on you, though.”

“How would I start?” Top Hat asked.

Puddles thought for a moment.

"I guess it would all be a series of triangles. You would have to think about the rows you would need for each region on the bottom. You could perhaps tie it on the side. Do you want a top?"

"Sure," Top Hat said.

"Then two triangles for each breast then maybe a braided string over the shoulder." Puddles pointed at Top Hat's boobs as she spoke. She traced a line from her breasts up and over her shoulders.

Mongo interrupted the pair as he walked into the flight ready room. "What are you doing?"

"Knitting," Puddles said. "Any news?"

"Well," Mongo said. "I just got off the phone. They came to an agreement and the project manager's on his way." He's flying here on a C-130 with spare parts, missiles and a real ground crew. I was just out on the flight line this morning. After sitting out there for two weeks, there's so much water in the B System Accumulator that we'll have to bleed out the A System and refill both."

"But we can leave once the PM gets here?" Puddles asked.

Mongo nodded.

"We still haven't been given back our pistols yet," Mongo said. "Maybe when the PM gets here?"

"The company can always get me a new one," Puddles said. "As long as we can get out of this place. You want to sit down and knit with us?"

Mongo shook his head.

“Turkish men don’t knit. It’s woman’s work.”

“Kind of like how flying a fighter is men’s work?” Top Hat asked.

Mongo considered the dichotomy. Fighter pilots never turned down a challenge. He sat down and picked up a knitting needle.

“Okay then,” Mongo said. “How do you start?”

Owsley County Kentucky, Contested Appalachia.

The earliest settlers of Appalachia left their graves unmarked lest Indians find, disinter and desecrate the bodies. This was important since the deceased body would need to be whole when the last judgement came.

As the threat of Indians diminished under the guns, plows and unrelenting flow of Scotch-Irish settlers, the dead were buried with simple wood crosses. There was rarely an epitaph because few people knew how to read. As time passed, the wood gave way to flagstone, which was abundant in the mountains. Commercially produced stonecut headstones were still a rarity in these parts - nobody had the money or the desire to lug a piece of marble into the foothills when more than likely a perfectly good rock was nearby. So that’s how Rhonda Lewis’s grave was marked - with a simple piece of sandstone and a pair of initials that Travis had carved himself.

Travis stood above the grave with a bouquet of sisyrinchium flowers he had picked on his way there. His wife’s grave was at the top of a hill with a beautiful view of the valley below. Travis didn’t come here much. He stopped by to drop off flowers on

birthdays and their anniversary and once every month or so to keep the grass around the grave trimmed.

She had been dead for nearly 5 years now. None of the diabetics had survived the first year. Travis prided himself on being independent. He had built his house and grown his own food, but he couldn't synthesize insulin. But he believed in heaven and he knew that he was going to spend eternity with his wife, so what was a couple more years of waiting? Maybe the next few days would speed things along to the conclusion?

Travis laid the flowers down next to the headstone. He turned around. Captain Moore and Lieutenant Orr stood a respectful distance away.

"When I die," Travis said. "You boys bury me right here next to my wife."

The special forces soldiers said nothing, but their faces betrayed a look of resignation. Their outcomes didn't look too good either.

Travis picked up his rifle. He walked past the soldiers, down the hill, and into the forest. The soldiers followed. Travis reached the bottom after a five minute walk. About 30 men from Owsley County were collected at the base of the hill. All of them carried backpacks that burst at the seams with food and ammunition - each pack weighed at least 50 pounds and was topped off with one homemade rocket for each man. The ambush site on Interstate 75 was a few days walk away with that load and not that far from the lake where they hid Captain Moore's Aerolift just a few weeks before.

Travis hefted his rucksack onto his body. Captain Moore lifted on his pack. Lieutenant Orr threw on his backpack and added his medical bag to the weight.

Travis scanned each of his men. It was a much larger force than the one that had attacked the convoy a few weeks before. They had the luxury of time to prepare, so more men had turned out for this one. Elmer McCue was there, minus one arm. Butchie stood there with his gigantic machine gun, ammo belts crisscrossing his chest like Rambo if Rambo had been half-starved and smoking a joint. John Abner cradled his hunting rifle like it was a child. Travis's brother-in-law, Cole MacIntosh, had finally shown up to join the fight after sitting out the ambush of the truck convoy a few weeks back. Wendell Robinson, the last remaining Robinson boy stood ready with a backpack and most likely some methamphetamine too. Ben Baker was the only one of them on horseback. He would ride forward and scout the ambush site. Most of the remaining militiamen were teenagers - men who had grown up hard. They didn't look scared, but Travis knew that would change.

Travis spoke.

"You'ns all know why we're here. That there captain done said something big's going on a west a here. And when the government men find out about it, they gonna send every tank they got up I-75. Well, we ain't gonna let that happen. The captain says might-could this the beginning of the end. Well, I don't recon it is or it ain't. But there's killing needs to be done and I'm a fixin to do it. Some a you'ns ain't never killed nobody before. You'ns gonna' find out it's easier than you think. If any you'ns got second thoughts, you free to go. I ain't gonna hold it against no man if you back out now. But if you come, you better bring all your hate with you, cause by-God you gonna need it."

None of the men turned away and Travis wondered how many of them were going to wish they had.

Nuuanu-Punchbowl, Hawaii. USA.

One of the things Sasha missed the most from the time before was the sound of her keys hitting the table by door at her house in Alexandria.

Back in the times before, once the Metro train stopped at Braddock Road station she was only a few minutes from home. She would always walk with her keys in her hands - not that Alexandria was dangerous, but more out of the knowledge that familiarity breeds complacency. Her office key, her two house keys and her car key made a nice tight pair of brass knuckles.

Now that she lived in Hawaii, she didn't own a car and her office door didn't even have a lock. She was denied that simple pleasure, that final metallic *Clunk* of her keys hitting the table and announcing to the house that she was home.

Instead, she placed her lone house key back in her purse and left her purse on the entryway table.

Sasha smelled the pungent odor of marijuana wafting into the house from outside. Her brother was probably on the hammock getting high again. She went to the kitchen and rummaged through the junk drawer for a flat-head screwdriver. She found the screw driver and went to the master bedroom where she kneeled down in front of a wall outlet. Sasha used the screwdriver to unscrew and remove the outlet. She

reached inside and pulled out her engagement ring. She held the ring in her hand for a moment. She hoped that she would feel some kind of emotion, but after five years of war she had nothing left. Her husband was dead and this gold wasn't doing any good in a wall outlet. She put it on her finger one last time... nothing.

She pulled her wedding ring off her finger. She rose and went outside to see her brother.

Her brother lounged in the hammock. The joint had burned out and he was browsing Facebook on his phone.

"Hey," he said when he noticed her. "How's work? You know I made um... what do you call it? Food. It's in the oven."

"Thank you," Sasha said. She sat down on the hammock. "Can we talk?"

"What?" Her brother asked.

She pushed the gold ring into his hands.

"I need you to take Emily and go to the big island. I need you to go tomorrow and I need you to stay there. Whatever you do, the two of you can't come back to Oahu. At least not until after next week."

Her brother looked more confused than he normally did.

"Why?" He asked. "What's going on?"

ISI Headquarters, Islamabad, Pakistan

“That is a problem,” Colonel Minhas said as he looked over the satellite photographs of the SOGS Maryland. “It looks like they took the tarps down.”

Colonel Minhas looked across his desk at the intelligence analyst who had brought him the photographs. The analyst was a mousy man who had obviously gotten to this position by tradecraft instead of field work. The geeks were taking over the world.

“What’s the range of those missiles from King’s Bay?” Colonel Minhas asked.

“About 4000 nautical miles,” The man answered. Enough to hit the American Hawaiian Islands, Anchorage, Toronto, and London.”

“But not here,” Colonel Minhas said. “Not Islamabad. Not Mecca.”

“No,” the man said. “But as I’m sure you could surmise, if the submarine were to be put to sea, they could exact revenge on us for supporting the Americans.”

“I thought you said that they couldn’t make it out of port?”

“Forgive me, sir, but the Americans never were forthcoming on the state of their nuclear arsenal. They might not even know. That ship’s been in Gilead’s hands for five years, who knows if it works anymore? But if it does... once it submerges, we won’t be able to kill it.”

“So we need to destroy it,” Colonel Minhas said. “And we need to do it before we undertake this joint operation the American’s have been talking about. It will cost us. The airspace above that submarine is the most heavily defended in the world. We’ll lose a lot of pilots.”

The analyst sat back in his chair. He held up his hand and pointed his finger at the sky.

Colonel Minas shook his head.

“That cost us a quarter billion dollars.”

“I didn’t say we’d do it for free,” the analysis said. “We’re helping the Americans rob a bank. It’s only fair that we get a cut.”

Chapter 7: The Finger of God.

Interstate 75, Laurel County, Kentucky. Contested Appalachia.

This was a spot as good as any for an ambush. I-75 cut through a canon about four miles northwest of East Bernstadt. The walls formed stone ridges on each side were about 20 feet high and impossible to climb. The distance from one side of the road to the other was about 125 feet.

On the south side of the road, the ridge sloped away toward Wood Creek Lake, so it would be impossible to flank them from the south. The north side of the ridge sloped down to Wood Creek, which would be the source of water for the men if the fighting went on for more than a couple of days. If the Gilead forces tried to flank them north along Route 25, the ambush team could pick up and move a half mile and set up the same ambush facing north.

Now came the hard part. The leadership cell of Travis, Captain Moore, Lieutenant Orr, Master Sergeant Cayhill, and Travis's Brother in law, Cole, needed to come up with a plan. Travis knew that he was nominally in charge, but he had no experience fighting tanks or armored personnel carriers - which was what was most likely what would come up I-75. So he let Captain Moore do his thing. He had to admit that the man knew what he was doing.

The Captain's first order of business was to inspect the road, the guardrails and the surrounding area for any "deadspace" or areas that couldn't be hit with direct fire. The deadspace was covered with sharp sticks that would hopefully impale any

dismounted soldiers and at the least give others second thoughts about hiding there. Any vehicles coming down the road would get hit with rockets and hopefully create a blocked road and channelized kill zone filled with lead from the ambushers. This would only work once but when it was done, the road would be blocked unless the Sons of Jacob could move up heavy equipment and wreckers. If they tried that, the guardians would have to move burning vehicles off the road while under concentrated heavy fire. This would hopefully make them shit to Route 25, where Travis's men could then set up a second ambush.

Travis ordered Cole, Master Sergeant Cayhill and a small team of two men to hide near Route 25 to monitor their northern flank. Master Sergeant Cayhill would take two rockets and his radio. Ben Butler would ride his horse the half mile between their two positions if the radios failed. If they were flanked, it would take at least 20 minutes through the forest to get to Route 25 and the men needed as much warning as possible to prevent being overrun.

It was a solid plan. And now that the orders were issued, Captain Moore finally told the Owsley County Boys why they were so important.

Hill Air Force Base Dining Facility, Utah. USA.

Private Akers was shocked when he entered the mess hall. The rows of tables were covered in table cloths. Each table had baskets of bread and bowls of candy. There was even a civilian contractor by a freezer that looked like it contained ice cream.

“What the F?” Private Smith said.

“We are so screwed,” Specialist Castro said.

Private Akers moved forward in the chow line and he got a glimpse of what they were serving - steak and shrimp.

“Heavenly Father, protect me.” Private Akers said.

“Well,” Private Smith said. “At least we know we’re done training.”

The whole battalion had been told to pack their gear for three days, drop their gear in the company area, report to the chow hall and leave their cell phones behind. They had even been frisked for phones by two smiling male and female master sergeants before going inside. Now Private Akers knew why they had frisked him for a phone as the 500 paratrooper-strong battalion filed into the dining facility.

Private Akers received a limp, rubbery six ounce steak, five small shrimp, an entire foil-wrapped baked potato and a heaping of mixed vegetables. This was more food than he had ever seen since the time before.

The three of them sat down at a table. Surprisingly, Sergeant Hale sat with them instead of separately at a different table with the other sergeants.

Sergeant Hale bowed his head. Surprisingly, Specialist Castro did the same.

“Heavenly Father,” Sergeant Hale prayed. “We thank thee for this day, and thank thee for the moisture we have received. Please bless the refreshments, that they will nourish and strengthen our bodies.”

“Amen,” Specialist Castro said as he made the Catholic sign of the cross.

“What?” Private Smith said. “No sarcastic comment?”

“I’ll save it until after we get back from whatever we’re going to do.” Specialist Castro said.

They ate in silence. The candy on the table was individually-wrapped Hershey Minis, something Private Akers hadn’t seen in years. When he finished his meal, Private Akers got up and stood in line for ice cream. Some of the smarter soldiers had stood in line for ice cream before they even started their meal, so there were no more cones and only strawberry left, but Private Akers ate his share out of a bowl and savored each bite.

The battalion commander, a graying man who looked about fifty years old and built entirely of cat muscle, walked into the center of the room. Their battalion sergeant major and chaplain joined him.

The battalion commander stood on a chair and addressed the dining facility.

“Paratroopers of the Nauvoo Legion,” The commander began. “I know I’ve asked a lot of you these past couple of months and now I’m going to ask for a little more. Many of you in this room are descended from brave pioneers. Men and women who took up arms to defend their way of life. Men and women who fought for their god and their ideals. For the past five years, we’ve been fighting a great evil. The men we fight claim that their way is the way of salvation, but they believe in all manners of darkness. We’ve been fighting men who follow empty talk and hollow words and as we’ve seen in our rescues at the red centers, hypocrisy. But this evil was cunning enough to steal away our brothers, our parents, and our country. But their lies have a cost, and their faith is bought.

“Tonight, these deceivers will receive a reckoning. Soon, we will drop onto Fort Knox and take back every bar, every coin, every ounce of gold and deliver it safely back into U.S. hands in Florida. Without this hard currency, the Sons of Jacob will have no way of paying their debts or feeding their armies. Even the faith of the hardest heart will be tested when the gold runs out. For those of you who believe, Judas betrayed Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. That was the price for the head of the greatest man who ever lived - that’s about \$600 in today’s money. Think about that and then think about how long it will take for a guardian to betray his country.

“No matter your lineage or your roots, we are all pioneers tonight on the journey to death. If you are delivered from this world in the next few days, go with a happy heart that you have earned eternity with the greatest of noble souls. And if I do not join you on this journey then wait for me.”

The commander stepped off the stool.

“I never thought of that,” Private Smith whispered. “Judas betrayed Jesus for \$600.”

“I think I saw that on World’s Dumbest Criminals,” Specialist Castro said. “It was like a special on the greatest betrayals in history. They did Brutus, Cassius and Easy-E.”

“Castro,” Sergeant Hale said. “How can you make jokes right now?”

Specialist Castro picked the remaining candy and dumped the entire bowl into one of his cargo pockets. Then he stuffed some bread rolls into this other pocket.

“How could you not?” Specialist Castro said. “Behind enemy lines for... who knows how long? If one of us gets wounded what do you think they’re going to assign

priority to us or a brick of gold? I'll tell you one thing, I'm damn sure not going to die hungry."

Private Akers thought about this for a moment and then he stuffed some bread in his cargo pockets too.

20 Miles South of Grand Junction, Colorado. Republic of Gilead.

The faces of the men in the launch trailer looked surprised when Crazy Bear entered. He carried a knife made of stone - it wouldn't have been this first choice, but his ancestors had fought the Spanish and the Mormons with such weapons and they worked just as well. A knife of stone could sink into flesh just as easily as a knife of steel.

Crazy Bear wasted no time. He slaughtered each guardian quickly and methodically, going for their throats and ignoring their cries for mercy as he waded into the gore. When he finished, he caught his breath for a moment. He drank from a still steaming cup of coffee that remained untouched on the launch console. It was best not to let it go to waste.

Crazy Bear checked each of the guardians to make sure they were dead. He opened the door of the launch trailer to the outside. There, the rest of his tribe was lining up and executing guardians who had survived their silent assault on the Patriot missile site. Little Yarrow, one of the younger women in the tribe, seemed to relish her task, moving from guardian to guardian, slitting each throat as she had been instructed

earlier in the evening. She wore her hair short as she was still in mourning for her husband.

Crazy Bear returned to the launch trailer. He closed the door and sat down at a monitoring console. The door opened. He didn't turn around. He knew who it was - Master Sergeant Richardson - his Utah Special Forces advisor.

"You know," Master Sergeant Richardson said. "You don't have to do this."

Crazy Bear didn't speak.

Master Sergeant Richardson pulled a large, 1980's era floppy disk from his backpack. He placed the disk in the console drive and hit a few commands on the console keyboard.

"Ok, we're good." Master Sergeant Richardson said. "This will feed clear airspace into the air defense computer." Master Sergeant Richardson looked at his watch. "Now in 13 minutes, you're gonna get a radio check. Just pick up that mic over there and say 'Roger out.' That's all you have to say. They're gonna call you every hour. Just repeat the same thing."

Master Sergeant Richardson reached into his pack again. He pulled out a Claymore directional mine and set it up pointing at the door of the trailer. He handed the detonator to Crazy Bear.

"Shift change is at 8," Master Sergeant Richardson said. "When the relief crew come through that door, just three clicks on the detonator and that's it." Master Sergeant Richardson offered his hand to Crazy Bear. "It's a long walk back to the caves. Been good working with you. You know we can just leave. You sure you want to do this?"

Crazy Bear nodded as he shook the soldier's hand. He knew he would be the first man to die that day, but he also knew he wouldn't be the last.

A few hundred miles to the southeast, ten Boeing 787s from Qatar Airways began their final approach to Hill Air Force Base to pick up their load of paratroopers.

USS Cheyenne, 500 feet under the Pacific Ocean. 92 miles west of Los Angeles.

She was the last of her kind in more ways than one. The USS Cheyenne had been built in the mid 1990's - the last of the 1980's era 686i Los Angeles class attack submarines. At the start of the revolution, the US sent its nuclear submarines racing toward Pearl Harbor or Clyde Naval Base in Scotland. Any submarines that ignored this order were assumed to be on the side of the Sons of Jacob, or even worse, waiting for a clear victor so they could take a side. So the remaining subs were hunted down and destroyed by NATO ships without mercy. The boats and crews that entered Scotland were forcibly interred. England wasn't taking sides in the conflict - not when they didn't know whose fingers were on the nuclear button.

To help clear this up, remaining U.S. nuclear submarines had salvoed their Trident missiles at ICBM and bomber bases in the Midwest. Air Force missile crews loyal to the U.S. and crews loyal to Gilead all died in the same flash of light that didn't pick sides. This turned a good swath of the American Midwest into radioactive dust, but it was a small price to pay to get the world to choose team USA.

As the war dragged on, submarines became less and less important, especially the older, less useful Los Angeles class attack submarines. The US Navy submarine fleet had dwindled to just one submarine in each ocean. After this sortie and the return to Pearl Harbor, the USS Cheyenne's reactor would be spent, so the crew was determined to make this one last mission count.

Newer Los Angeles Class submarines were a little different than the attack submarines that came earlier in the class. In the mid 1980's, engineers at General Dynamics had figured out that they could cut the submarine in half, weld in a section of cruise missiles, and weld the two parts back together to create a Frankenstein's monster of a submarine which could not only attack other ships, but land targets as well. Each improved Los Angeles class submarine carried 12 Tomahawk cruise missiles, each with a range of about 1000 miles.

Some of the missiles aboard the USS Cheyenne had been altered. Eight of the missiles had their warheads removed for the mission at hand. Explosives were precious and for this mission, they weren't going to need them anyway.

The submarine came to a hover in the choppy waters of the Pacific. It opened its vertical launch tubes and fired.

The first Tomahawk Cruise Missile to break the surface of the water was unarmed. A rocket booster motor kicked the missile into the sky. Free of the water, the booster fell away into the ocean and the missile's jet propulsion system fired, arching the missile toward the horizon. Stubby wings popped out from the sides of the missile like a Buzz Lightyear action figure and the Tomahawk headed east. A second missile appeared from the water. It followed its unarmed brother east toward Los Angeles.

Four more missiles emerged from the water. A minute passed and then six more missiles rocked into the night sky.

500 feet below the pacific ocean, the USS Cheyenne turned west for its final voyage home.

El Segundo Beach, East Los Angeles, Republic of Gilead.

Officially, the Sons of Jacob had no opinion on surfing. Most recreational sports in the republic had melted away due to the pressing needs of the war or lack of sports equipment. Some commanders held local baseball or basketball competitions, pitting one military unit against another like college teams. Running was still a thing. So was cycling and in some circles tennis for the elite commanders.

But surfing... had Gilead thought much about it, they probably would have banned it. Surfing brought people so close to ecstasy that it gave God some serious competition. So just to be safe, men and women, econopeople and Marthas, commanders and guardians all woke up early, retrieved their surfboards from hidden closets in abandoned buildings and came down to the beach at night. California was still California and for a few hours there was no Gilead, no war, no hunger - just people of different classes all bobbing in the ocean hoping to catch a wave before daylight - just as it had been for years.

There were about forty surfers on El Segundo beach when they heard the sound of the first Tomahawk missile approach. Most of them looked skyward. It was strange

to hear a jet engine, especially since such little traffic came or went from LAX these days. The missile looked like a flying ball-point pen with stubby wings when they saw it silhouetted against the moon. As the missile crossed the breakers, it was shot down by something that rocketed out of the airport.

The missile cartwheeled into the water reclamation plant at the west end of town, but oddly, the missile's explosion seemed muted. A second cruise missile followed the first and this too was blotted out of the sky by an air defense system.

The surfers paddled toward shore. It wasn't just that they knew their country was under attack - none of them wanted to be caught surfing and all made a mad dash toward the beach.

Four more cruise missiles rocketed overhead. Nothing rose from LAX to counter these incoming kamikaze killers. Each of the four warheads banked left and plowed into the fuel tanks at LAX, sending a fireball 1000 feet into the air. Six more cruise missiles arrived from the sea, gaining a little altitude and flying in lazy circles around the airfield like sharks waiting patiently for their dinner.

Moments later, six Marine V-22 Ospreys thundered over the beach, scattering the surfers as they flew overhead. The Ospreys landed, disgorged their Marine infantrymen, and lifted off again, shutting back to the amphibious assault ship that lay just over the horizon for even more Marines.

McConnell Air Force Base, Kansas. Republic of Gilead.

Puddles was pulled from sleep by incessant knocking at her door. She stumbled from her cot and pulled on an old men's bathrobe one of the pilots had found in the men's locker room. The thing still smelled of sweat and Axe body spray.

"Slechts een minutt," Puddles said, her brain still half asleep and speaking Dutch. She corrected herself a second later as she shuffled toward the door. "Just a minute."

Puddles opened the door to see her project manager. He was in his bathrobe as well.

"We got a mission," he said. "Los Angeles is under attack. They've landed a battalion of Marines at the airport."

"*Wat?*" Puddles asked. "That's" ... she did the math... "Fourteen-hundred miles away. We still have to ferry around Utah."

"Doesn't matter," the project manager said. "Gilead wants every plane in the air and heading toward California."

"Wait, wait, wait." Puddles said. "You said a battalion of Marines."

"That's what they're estimating, yes." The project manager said.

"Well, what's a battalion of Marines going to do?"

"That's not our business," the project manager said. "Our business is to fly fighters and right now our bosses want everything in California."

Puddles shook her head.

"This isn't right," Puddles said. "This is a feint. There's just a battalion and they are just sitting there without reinforcements?"

"That's all the information I have," The project manager said.

“No,” Puddles said. “The Americans are doing something else and we need to be in that place, not in California. They’re luring us there because they are planning an attack somewhere else.”

“Then go to the ready room,” the project manager said. “I have a laptop in there with corporate network access. The password is on a post-it note. Make up a plan for California and make one up for wherever you think we need to be. We have another eight hours until the planes are airworthy then we’re in this fight either way.”

“I will. Don’t wake up the others,” Puddles said. “They need their sleep. I’ll get a plan together.”

Puddles closed the door. She turned on her barracks room light and squinted at the sudden, intrusive brightness. She hung up her robe and racked her brain as she dressed. Why would the US Marines land just a small battalion at LAX? They were sure to be overrun in just a couple of hours even with offshore artillery support.

Why would the US try to lure every plane in Gilead to the west coast?

Hickam Air Force Base, Honolulu, Hawaii. USA.

Despite her thirty years in the intelligence community, Sasha never particularly liked military men. She never felt belittled or disrespected as a woman - at least not since the terrorist attacks of 9/11. The slights she felt were more subtle - these were men who valued her input but at the same time humored her because she wore the badge of a contractor rather than the uniform of a soldier.

She could see it in the faces of high-ranking officers as they listened to her with their mouths shut tight and their lips upturned as if they were sucking on a flavor of Lifesaver that they didn't particularly like.

The feint in California was underway and the air defense network in Colorado had been sabotaged. Reports from the Marine Corps F-35's operating off of Los Angeles showed that Marty Wolf's KAMS virus was working. The F-35's reported that SoJ fighters would scramble, only to land minutes later when they got the recall message over their KAMS system. Gilead's air defense network was so full of holes that the Airborne Battalion from Utah had already reached Florida undetected. The plan was working... but she still had no idea what they were going to do about that damn ballistic missile submarine in Georgia.

Sasha briefed the generals on the situation giving her last, final analysis before the start of the paratrooper operation. She again restated that her biggest fear was nuclear annihilation from the apparently re-activated Trident missiles in the SOGS Maryland. If Gilead struck back, it would only take a few seconds for the shockwave above Honolulu to reach the command center at Hickam Air Force Base. Would she die in the heat of the blast, the shockwave or the ensuing firestorms?

The grey-haired Admiral from USPACOM listened and nodded along as she spoke. So did the rest of the men around the conference table. Sasha knew he was humoring her, but she finished her nuclear threat briefing anyway. She closed with a strong suggestion to divert air assets for a strike on the submarine before the paratroopers left Florida.

“Mrs. Zang,” The Admiral said. “You may have been out of the loop on this. There’s been some backchannel coordination between our two militaries and the Pakistanis are going to take care of that submarine for us, and it only cost us eight tons of gold. In fact, they’re going to fly it out themselves.”

“The Pakistanis are going to take out the SOGS Maryland for us?” Sasha asked.

“Correct,” said the admiral.

“But how?” Sasha asked.

500 Miles Above the Sea of Japan, Low Earth Orbit.

The Pakistani Space and Upper Atmosphere Research Commission or SUPARCO, called the satellite “*Oonglee ka Khuda*.” The name roughly translated to “*The Finger of God*.”

The satellite had been launched just a few years before in partnership with the Chinese, who were curious about the technology but like most Chinese ventures, preferred to steal the technology from their partners rather than invent their own.

From the outside, the *Finger of God* looked like any other research satellite. It orbited at 500 miles above the Earth and stayed at a respectful distance away from other satellites. The satellite was a weapon, of course, but one unlike any ever seen on earth. The weapon that was contained inside the satellite had no warhead, guidance system or explosive - it was simply a long, tungsten rod about the size of a telephone pole. The pole weighed a little over 14 tons, which accounted for the astronomical,

quarter billion dollar cost of getting the weapon into orbit. Pakistan sat in a very dangerous corner of the world, surrounded on one side by enemies and on two others by ambivalent friends. The project was designed to provide a last-ditch strike in the event that terrorists ever took control of one of Pakistan's nuclear facilities. If the terrorists attempted war with India, using the *Finger of God* on its own people was preferable to nuclear annihilation by its greatest foe.

Pakistan had set the price for the strike at eight tons of US gold - roughly one billion dollars or four times the original cost of the weapon. The US would get its Gilead nuclear problem solved and Pakistan would make a tidy profit.

The rod was ejected from the satellite roughly over the Sea of Japan. Retro-rockets fired, slowing the rod's descent until the periapsis fell directly over King's Bay, Georgia. The rockets cut out and the rod began to build up speed again.

The rod was going two times the speed of a bullet when it first hit the atmosphere 62 miles above the earth. The attached retro motors, that were no longer needed anyway, glowed orange, then red, and then melted away. The tip of the rod, which was shaped like a knitting needle, grew red with heat but stayed together.

The velocity of the rod increased to roughly five times the speed of sound as it pierced through the first layer of clouds in the stratosphere. At this point, the entire rod was a white-hot mass of plasma as the upper surface of the tungsten melted away in 3000 degree heat. The rod wouldn't hold together much longer at this temperature, but it didn't have to. The rod pierced the earth about a kilometer from the SOGS Maryland directly over top of what had once been the navy base thrift shop.

The rod hit with the force of 7000 pounds of TNT - roughly half the power of the atomic bomb that had been dropped on Hiroshima in 1945. The earth turned to liquid and rippled out from the point of impact in waves like a stone dropped into a pond, tossing vehicles, buildings and houses skyward like a tantruming child throwing his toys in rage. The seismic shockwave reached the SOGS Maryland three seconds after impact, snapping its mooring lines like threads and lifting the boat out of the water and 200 feet into the air. The boat fell back onto the shore where it shattered like a gallon of milk dropped from a kitchen counter.

Interstate 75, Laurel County, Kentucky. Contested Appalachia.

The sound came from the southeast. To Travis, the noise sounded like a garbage truck had just picked up a dumpster and then dropped the empty metal container back on the concrete a little too hard. His men stopped building their fighting positions and perked up at the sound as he looked around for the source.

Travis saw Captain Moore glance at his watch. Then Captain Moore dropped to a knee. He took his satellite phone out of his backpack.

Travis ambled over to the captain.

"You know somethin' I don't? Travis asked the Captain.

Captain Moore looked up at Travis.

“I don’t know. I was told that there would be a big explosion from the southeast and to call it up when I heard it and give them the time. I expect it has something to do with our mission, but I don’t ask questions.”

Butchie walked over. His shirtless body glistened with sweat.

“Meybee it’s a nuke? Meybee we all got radiation?”

“Well,” Captain Moore said. “I wouldn’t worry about that too much. Unless we saw a flash, we’re okay.” Captain Moore looked back at Travis. “Tell everyone to keep digging. The war’s coming this way.”

McConnell Air Force Base, Kansas. Republic of Gilead.

All pilots know that one of two days that will eventually come. The first possible day is when the pilot walks out to his plane, knowing that it is his last flight. The second possible day is when a pilot walks out to his plane, not knowing that it will be his last flight. But Puddles was far too busy to dwell on such things. She had a mission to plan.

The ready room buzzed with anticipation. All of the pilots were there in their flight suits and ready to go. Puddles worked the computer, calculating a route through the radioactive Midwest and around Colorado and Utah. This would put them just at the limits of their range. Gilead had no available mid-air refueling assets, so they would have to land and refuel at Travis Air Force Base in California before moving on to fight the invasion force in Southern California. This would take time. That was the bad news.

The good news was that the project manager had brought 32 AIM-7 Sparrow missiles with him on the transport plane. The Sparrows were an older missile from the 1970's that weren't self-guided like the AMRAMM. Instead, the missile relied on the launching plane's radar to paint the enemy target and guide it during its terminal phase. This made the missile harder to jam, but it also meant that you had to keep your nose pointed at an enemy plane who knew you were coming because their radar threat receivers directed that guidance beam straight back to you.

"Top Hat," Puddles called out. Top Hat came over to the workstation as she sipped on a cup of real Turkish coffee - yet another perk brought by the project manager.

"You can't fire the Sparrow, right?" Puddles asked.

Top Hat shook her head.

"The F-35 doesn't have the software," Top Hat said.

"Can your radar paint a target at 9.35 gigahertz, continuous wave?" Puddles asked.

"Yeah..." Top Hat said, as she started to get what Puddles implied. "I'm stealthy enough to get close, I can paint each of the targets with my radar, and then you launch from outside the American's radar envelope. I point, you shoot. The Sparrow will go where I'm pointing."

"It's better than nothing." Puddles said. "We have a plan. You tell the project manager and have him start getting the birds prepped with Sparrows."

A few minutes later, the project manager handed out the pistols that had been confiscated when the flight first landed in Kansas. The men in the flight got their pistols back, Top Hat and Puddles didn't.

"This is bullshit," Puddles said. "I want my pistol."

The project manager shrugged.

"You're lucky the local commander is letting you fly out of here at all. I'll give you your pistol back when we're on the flight line. If he sees you with a gun he's going to flip his shit. *Begrijp jij mij?*

Puddles nodded that she understood. She just didn't have to like it.

The ride out to the flight line took about ten minutes. The three F-16's, one F-15 and one solitary F-35 stood there surrounded by guardians who oversaw the Aerial Outcomes ground crew as they fueled and armed the fighters.

Puddles ignored the looks from the guardians as their eyes fixated on her. She would be in the air and out of their gaze soon enough. She climbed into her F-16's cockpit and eased into her favorite chair. Her hands moved with rote memory, but she took pleasure in touching every surface and control she had missed for the past couple of weeks. Main Battery Power ON. Master Fuel Switch ON. Engine Feed Knob ON. Air source knob to NORMAL. JFS switch to START. The engine RPM's started winding up.

She saw the project manager run to her plane. He climbed up the ladder on the side. He looked worried.

"Change of mission. You're not going to California," The project manager said. "Someone just nuked Kings Bay, Georgia. When you get up in the air, turn to a bearing

of 119 degrees. We need you to recon what's left of Kings Bay. Take pictures if you can then get back here. Top Hat can do a radiological survey."

"The Americans nuked it?" Puddles gasped.

"We don't know!" the project manager screamed over the sound of the engines. "They saw the flash as far away as Atlanta. What the hell else could it be? Right now, we got no eyes on because something is screwing with the KAMS system. Every time a plane goes up, it gets ordered back down or gets sent conflicting orders."

"Yeah," Puddles said. "The commander here had ours ripped out so we couldn't call you."

"It's fine - at least you won't get told anything other than I'm telling you. Recon Kings Bay, then head back here and report."

"What about my pistol?" Puddles asked.

The project manager looked perplexed.

"I'm sorry. I forgot. I'll give it to you when you get back."

The project manager gave a thumbs up. Then he slid down the access ladder to go talk to the next pilot. Puddles closed the aircraft's canopy and set her radio to the flight channel. The net was full of squadron traffic from the pilots who had already gotten the word.

"Clear the net," Puddles said. "All units radio check in sequence."

"TOP HAT ROGER OUT."

"MONGO ROGER OUT."

"SANTA ROGER OUT."

"BELLY ROGER OUT."

“Ok,” Puddles said. “Since we got no KAMS or ATC, here’s how I want it to go. Top Hat, proceed to the taxiway. Climb to angels 30 bearing 119 and keep radar off. I’ll go next followed by MONGO, SANTA AND BELLY. Get your radar warm, but don’t turn it to emit. Passive only right now. Top Hat, you’re our eyes and ears.”

“ROGER,” Top Hat said. Her F-35 taxied down the apron to the runway. Puddles closed her canopy and followed. She watched the ass-end of Top Hat’s F-35 blossom in fire as it lifted off into the sky. Puddles lowered her flaps for takeoff and fired up the throttle.

Orlando International Airport, Florida. USA.

Private Akers had never seen a ballet, but he assumed that it would look something like what was going on at Orlando International Airport. The tarmac was a hive of activity. Soldiers were gathering equipment and assembling. Military transports idled on the flight line. Fighters took off into the night heading north. For the first time in his life, Private Akers realized that he was one small cog in a gigantic death machine.

The paratroopers in his company exited the Qatar Airways 787 down a staircase. An Air Force airman directed the company to a giant holding area outside of what had once been gates 101-125. The apron outside the terminal had been turned into a gigantic supply depot.

First, the company was shuttled to a holding area where they waited. Squad leaders were called forward for some kind of meeting. They returned a few minutes

later with instructions. Staff Sergeant Kimball gathered his squad around and briefed them.

“Okay,” Staff Sergeant Kimball said. “We’re going to be out for at least two days. Everybody takes ten magazines each. SAW gunners, take five drums. Akers, you qualified on the Javelin, right?”

Private Akers was taken aback. Javelin? Did they expect to hit enemy armor?

“Roger, sergeant.” Private Akers said. “In a simulator.”

“Well,” Staff Sergeant Kimball said. Draw two missiles and one CLU. Give one of your missiles to Alpha Team. You keep the CLU. Everybody else draw one AT-4 each. One more thing. We are dropping from 300 feet.”

Nobody spoke.

“Sergeant, uh...” Sergeant Hale spoke up. “At 300 feet if something goes wrong we won’t have time to deploy our reserve chutes.”

“We’re not getting reserve chutes,” Staff Sergeant Kimball said.

Private Akers did the math in his head. If his chute got tangled like it had in his last jump, there wouldn’t be enough time to make corrections at 300 feet. He would have about 5 seconds to live and hit the ground at 160 miles per hour.

“Okay” Staff Sergeant Kimball said. “The war can’t wait on us.”

The squad moved with their company to the first specialized holding area. The company picked up their parachutes at one station, ammunition, grenades and anti-tank rockets at a second station, rations at a third station and then they were shuttled to a tram which drove them down a long line of C-130 cargo aircraft that were parked on the tarmac. With the addition of the Javelin anti-tank missile and its launcher, Private Akers

was now carrying over 200 lbs. of equipment. He stooped like an old man under this burden.

It was still dark outside, but the paint and markings on the aircraft were clearly visible.

“Iraqi Air Force,” Private Smith said as she read the side of one plane.

“That one’s Pakistani,” Specialist Castro said. “There’s one from Saudi Arabia.”

“I guess we’re a coalition now,” Sergeant Hale said. “That YouTube video must have teed off the Arab world mighty fiercely.”

The tram stopped at an Egyptian C-130. The paratroopers were guided off the tram and into the gaping interior ramp of the transport aircraft. As each paratrooper stepped onboard, they walked under a Koran that was held aloft by a crewman.

“A-ozu billahi mena shaitaan Arrajeem,” the crewman said as Private Akers waddled under the Koran. The Muslim aircraft crewman repeated the phrase as each paratrooper passed under the book.

“What do you think that means?” Private Aikens asked as he sat down in the jump seat along the outboard wall of the aircraft.

“I think,” Specialist Castro said. “He’s said the credit card reader’s busted so this trip is cash only.”

And the first time in Private Akers’ memory, Sergeant Hale actually laughed at one of Castro’s jokes.

30,000 Feet Above Birmingham Alabama, Republic of Gilead.

It would be morning soon. The sun was just peeking over the horizon which would put their time on target at just after 7AM.

Four of the five fighters flew in a loose formation at 30,000 feet. This was just the optimum altitude where the atmosphere was thin enough for wind resistance to be minimized, but there was still enough air to feed the engines. Top Hat's F-35 flew a bit higher - passively using her sensor suite to bird-dog at 35,000 feet. Top Hat called out over the radio as they passed over Talladega National Forest.

"BOGIE, BOGIE. BEARING 125, ANGELS 35, 120 MILES. LOOKS LIKE... ONE... TWO... TWELVE BIRDS. MULTI ENGINE. HEADING 344."

"What do they look like?" Puddles asked.

"VIDEO'S KIND OF GRAINY FROM THIS FAR OUT. C-17'S MAYBE. C-130'S. CAN'T TELL WHO'S SIDE. DEFINITELY MULTI-ENGINE."

Patches thought for a moment. It wasn't possible to have an American flight of C-130's so deep in Gilead territory. But at the same time, she wasn't sure if there were that many C-17's left flying in Gilead's inventory. And if they were, she would know about it because they would be flown by Aerial Outcomes pilots. This didn't smell right.

"Belly, is your camera system up?" Puddles asked.

"WAIT ONE," Belly responded. "CAMERA IS UP."

"What's your fuel?"

"THIRTY THOUSAND POUNDS," Belly said.

"Santa, what's your fuel?" Puddles asked.

"TEN THOUSAND," Santa said.

Puddles did some mental calculations. The F-15 held enough fuel to intercept those bogies and make it back to the flight to check out Kings Bay, but Santa's F-16 didn't. It was a cardinal sin for a leader to send an aircraft alone into combat, but if she sent Santa with Belly, Santa would have to return to McConnell Air Force Base and she would reduce her combat power by half. She erred on the side of leadership.

"Belly and Santa, intercept those bogies. If they are hostile, shoot them down. If they're not, Santa you RTB and Belly you meet up with us over Kings Bay. Belly you're the leader."

"ROGER, PUDDLES. PEELING OFF."

Puddles watched Belly's F-15 and Santa's F-16 accelerate and bank slightly left to intercept.

"Top Hat, can you track them through optical?" Puddles asked.

"ALREADY ON IT." Top Hat replied.

They cruised in silence for fifteen minutes until Belly broke coms in his thick Korean accent.

"BANDIT BANDIT! I HAVE TWELVE SMALL RADAR CONTACTS AND TWELVE LARGE RADAR CONTACTS. ENGAGING FIGHTERS FIRST."

Puddles did the math. Belly and Santa were closing in on what was obviously a strike force that was flying over Atlanta with twelve large transports and an additional twelve escort fighters. The transports couldn't fight back, but that was the whole purpose of the escorts. The fight was two on twelve and Puddles knew she had to even the odds.

“Mongo.” Puddles said. “Turn to heading 45. Prepare for intercept. Go to burner. Top Hat, hang back to paint for us.”

“ROGER,” Mongo said.

“ROGER,” Top Hat said. “GOOD HUNTING.”

Puddles slammed her throttle forward, igniting her afterburner. This dumped raw fuel into the F-16’s engine. Puddles and Mongo rocketed to 1500 miles per hour in just a few seconds at the cost of using up a good portion of their gas.

King’s Bay would have to wait.

Puddles couldn’t see what was going on 100 miles away over Atlanta, but Top Hat called the play by play with her plane’s powerful sensors.

“I’M PICKING UP AESA RADAR COMING FROM OVER ATLANTA.” Top Hat said. “MULTIPLE CONTACTS. SIX JUST SPLIT FROM THE MAIN BODY.”

Puddles couldn’t remember what AESA radar stood for and she didn’t want to look stupid, but she didn’t get to where she was in life by being proud. They were still one minute from missile range.

“What is AESA, Top Hat?” Puddles asked.

“ACTIVE ELECTRONICALLY SCANNED ARRAY. IT’S DEFINITELY AN/APG-80. IT’S F-16 EXPORT RADAR. THE ONE THEY SELL TO IRAQ AND QATAR. WE GOT...TWELVE SIGNATURES TOTAL. TWELVE FIGHTERS. SIX SPLIT OFF. SIX ARE REMAINING WITH THE TRANSPORTS. I GOT THERMAL BLOOM. BELLY AND SANTA ARE ENGAGING.”

Now it was clear. Gilead was under attack. Belly and Santa were firing their Sparrows at the six fighters that had peeled off and turned around to meet them over Atlanta.

“Okay,” Puddles said. “Targets...What’s the speed on the formation that’s still headed north”

“THERE ARE SIX FIGHTERS REMAINING WITH THE TRANSPORTS. THEY’RE MOVING AT 300 KNOTS.”

Puddles did some more math. She would be within missile range in about twenty seconds at this speed. Top Hat would need some time to lock onto the targets. Hopefully just the act of firing missiles out of nowhere would drive the bad guys would go absolutely nuts. Maybe it would take some pressure off Santa and Belly - if they lived that long.

“Back off to 400 knots,” Puddles commanded.

“ROGER,” Mongo responded.

Split among her and Mongo, her little fighter group had a total of 8 AIM-7s Sparrows, four Sidewinder air to air missiles and about 1000 rounds of cannon. Top Hat’s F-35 had two AMRAMM missiles and 120 rounds of cannon, but her plane was far too precious to be wasted dogfighting. Top Hat would hang back and use the AMRAMMs in self-defense to escape if she needed to.

The odds didn’t look good. The AIM-7 Sparrow was built back in the 1970’s to destroy big, slow Russian bombers, not twisting and turning nimble fighters. As the US learned disastrously during Vietnam, the Sparrow hit probability was about 16% against fighters. The missile performed so badly that they were normally launched in pairs to

increase the odds of a hit. That meant Belly and Santa could hope to destroy maybe one fighter of the six that split off. The one thing Belly and Santa had going for them was years of dogfighting experience but sooner or later their luck would run out.

The radio chatter from Belly and Santa streamed in from forty miles away. They had shot down just one of the six Iraqi planes and were now engaged in a fight for their lives. At this range, Puddles had no idea which fighters were hers and which were the enemy. She would have to rely on Top Hat's keen eye and advanced cameras. Belly and Santa just had to hold on for a few more seconds.

"Top Hat," Puddles said.

"TALK TO ME," Top Hat replied.

"On my mark, I want you to start painting the fast movers. Let's see if we can scare them off."

"ROGER," Top Hat said.

"Okay," Puddles said. "Execute,"

It took about twenty seconds for Top Hat to manually identify and designate each target with her optical sensors. The F-35's computer automatically tracked each target and fed that information to Puddle's and Mongo's F-16's.

"DATA," Top Hat said.

Puddles checked the data light on her plane's slave computer. The LED light went from flashing red... to steady yellow... to green.

"Handshake," Puddles said.

"HANDSHAKE," Mongo said as his light turned green as well.

The eight Sparrows on each F-16 were now data linked to Top Hat's F-35. Top Hat could now fire Puddle's missiles and the shots would look like they had come from out of nowhere.

"TOP HAT FOX ONE MULTIPLE."

Puddles felt her plane lose some weight as 3600 pounds of ordnance slithered off her launch rails. She kept the plane steady. Another missile fired as directed by Top Hat. Then a third, then a fourth. One hundred yards to the left, Mongo's F-16 launched its ordnance. With their own radar off and the missiles being guided by Top Hat's stealthy F-35, the incoming missiles simply appeared out of thin air on the enemy aircraft's threat sensors.

Top Hat laughed over the radio.

"THEY'RE PISSING THEIR PANTS. THEY DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO. THEY'RE KICKING OUT COUNTERMEASURES. SPLASH ONE. SPLASH TWO. SPLASH THREE. THEY'RE DISENGAGING."

Three more of the six fighters that had split off to go after Santa and Belly were now raining down in flames over the northern Atlanta suburbs.

"THANKS FOR THE HELP," Santa said. "THEY'RE BUGGING OUT. LET'S GO AFTER THEM!"

Top Hat chimed in.

"THE TWO THAT SPLIT OFF ARE ON BURNER HEADED BACK TO THE FORMATION."

Now it was four on eight. Once the fighters were finished off, they could deal with the defenseless slow-moving transports at their leisure. The only problem was that

they had fired over two thirds of their offensive missiles. The next fight would be mostly fought at close range with guns.

Puddles and Mongo finally caught up with Belly and Santa. Puddles spread the formation out as she figured out her next move. Unfortunately, the enemy made the decision for her.

“ALL EIGHT FIGHTERS ARE BREAKING OFF FROM THE TRANSPORTS,” Top Hat warned.

Puddle’s threat detector suddenly came alive with a shriek. Eight, angry, vengeful radars sought her, Mongo, Santa and Belly as Top Hat watched invisibly from above.

“EIGHT BANDITS,” Top Hat said. “EIGHT BANDITS BEARING 45, ANGELS 35 30 MILES. HEADING 315. THEY’RE ON BURNER COMING STRAIGHT FOR US.”

This was unexpected. Eight of the escort fighters were headed straight toward her on afterburner, beating the bush with their radar. Puddles wet her flight suit for the second time this deployment.

“Gimmie music,” Puddles said.

Top Hat activated her jammers. This would only work for so long. The enemy aircraft would be within thermal range soon and you couldn't jam heat.

“MUSIC ON THE BANDITS,” Top Hat said. “WE SHOULD GET OUT OF HERE! THEY’RE BURNING THROUGH!”

Puddle’s threat detector screamed again with the indicator that an AMRAMMs’s seeker was chomping at the bit to blow her out of the sky. Her threat detector indicated a launch.

“NO! NO! NO!” Puddles screamed. She slammed her throttle to the firewall and pulled up on the stick, climbing her plane to 80 degrees vertical and 45 degrees to her right. She grunted as her g-suit tightened on her legs as it tried to prevent her from blacking out.

Most missiles burnt off all of their fuel in the first few seconds of launch, traveling to such high speeds that any course adjustments by the target could cause the missile to miss simply because the target was slower and could out-turn the incoming threat. If the enemy pilots she had engaged earlier had any combat experience, they would have known to do this and they wouldn't have killed four of them. She hoped it would work for her flight this time.

“CHAFF. CHAFF.” The computerized voice of Bitchin' Betty said. Her plane's computer automatically ejected canisters of mylar foil that exploded behind her plane. If any of the missiles impacted on the chaff, she was going too fast to hear it. Puddles banked left and an F-16 with Iraqi round markings shot by her plane. The overshoot was a rookie mistake. These pilots had never flown against people who were trying to kill them. She pulled right, following the enemy bird and lining it up in her gunsights. She pulled the trigger and 100 rounds of 20mm shells spat from her plane's cannon. She watched long enough to see the Iraqi's left wing disintegrate. He ejected.

“Puddles splash one!” Puddles said into the radio. She had no idea if Mongo was still alive but she damn sure was and she wasn't giving up without a fight.

The morning sky above Atlanta came alive with twisting, turning jets as Puddles, Mongo, Belly and Santa fought for their lives against the seven remaining fighters. The fight was made more difficult by the fact that these foreign planes were also F-16's.

Each plane had to be visually identified before it was engaged. Belly's twin-tailed F-15 stood out like a sore thumb. It was felled with a lucky shot from an Iraqi F-16's cannon. Puddles didn't see any parachutes. Now it was three on seven.

Two of the Iraqi F-16's split to the right of Puddles' plane. Another two planes blew past her on the left. Now she understood why pilots - real pilots- didn't call air combat "dogfighting." Real pilots called it "knife fighting." This was close range and bloody.

"MONGO FOX TWO!" Mongo called out over the radio letting her know he had released a Sidewinder heat-seeking missile. His plane only held two of them and there were still seven Iraqis out there.

"MONGO SPLASH ONE!"

Now there were six.

Over the radio, Santa called out "FOX TWO... DAMNIT." He had missed, but Puddles had her own concerns.

Puddles focused on the two Iraqi F-16's that had broken right. She armed one of her Sidewinders and heard the low warble of lock on as the missile's heat seeker drank in the delicious heat signature of the Iraqi F-16's engine,

"Puddles Fox Two!!" She yelled as she released the weapon. The Sidewinder missile slithered off her right wing and went straight for the rightmost Iraqi plane.

"PUDDLES BREAK LEFT!" She heard Top Hat call over the radio.

Puddles didn't hesitate. She whipped her fighter 90 degrees to the left just as a bright line of Iraqi cannon fire zoomed over her right shoulder.

"TOP HAT FOX THREE." Top Hat called.

The Iraqis still hadn't noticed Top Hat's stealthy F-35 and now she was using one of her precious self-defense missiles to save her comrades.

"TOP HAT SPLASH ONE!" Top Hat said a moment later.

Now there were five.

"YOU GOT HIM! SPLASH TWO, PUDDLES." Top Hat said.

Puddle's Sidewinder must have hit. Now there were four.

Puddles pulled left again, frantically searching for another target.

"TOP HAT FOX THREE!" Top Hat said as she launched her sole remaining AMRAMM. Now she was down to guns.

Puddles saw two F-16's twisting and turning in a spiral.

"Mongo," Puddles said. "Are you in front or behind that furball?"

"BEHIND!" Mongo grunted through the g-forces.

Puddles kept turning. Mongo didn't need any help.

"TOP HAT SPLASH TWO!" Top Hat called out that her AMRAMM had hit.

Three Iraqi planes remained.

Puddles noticed two of the Iraqis escaping to the north. Could they be running back to the transports for a last-ditch defense or had Top Hat had scared them away with her missiles from out of nowhere? Maybe they were getting some distance from the threat so they could turn around and launch long range AMRAMMs?

That meant there was one fighter in the sky somewhere that wasn't being chased by Mongo and Santa.

Unfortunately, that was the one that got her. Her plane suddenly felt like a giant had kicked it in the ass. Every single alarm light on the instrument panel illuminated red and the world cartwheeled end over end... sky...earth...sky...earth.

“EJECT. EJECT.” Bitchin Betty said.

She didn’t have to say it twice. Puddles reached behind her and pulled the ejection handle just as she blacked out.

Hickam Air Force Base, Honolulu, Hawaii. USA.

The worst part of any operation was waiting. Sasha had watched the air battle over north Atlanta on the big board from the cavernous operations room until the losses made her sick. Soldiers and Airmen sat behind their computers with their fingers crossed as they watched the large map screen. Some soldiers gasped whenever an Iraqi plane stopped transmitting. Others cheered when one of the Gilead fighters was downed. But the Gilead fighters weren’t dying fast enough.

Sasha was a wreck. She had to leave the room. She ended up in the break room pouring some coffee and eyeing some sugar-coated malasadas that someone had brought from Leonard’s Bakery. The little, round Portuguese donut looked delicious and Sasha was hungry. Somebody must have pooled their flour and sugar ration and then placed a special order just for this occasion, although nobody was around to ask. Her first thought wasn’t to snatch one up for herself, but how to bring one home for her

daughter. It was a moment before she realized that her daughter was on the big island with her brother and the delicious malasada would just be eaten by someone else.

Sasha ate the malasada and felt shameful almost immediately. This was a reflex. She had gone without food for so long to make sure that her daughter ate that she couldn't even enjoy a donut without feeling guilty. She looked around the break room. Nobody was there so she ate a second one and it was just as delicious as the first.

She returned to the operations room while carrying her coffee. The big board showed all twelve transports over Daniel Boone National Forest. Two remaining Iraqi fighter planes were stuck over Atlanta battling it out with two fighters from Gilead.

How long had they been dogfighting? It must have been at least over fifteen minutes. Both sides were probably down to guns and low on fuel. But each second the Iraqis spent dogfighting gave the transports one more second to reach their objective.

Sasha realized that the Iraqi pilots were dead men. Even if they survived the encounter, there was no way they would have enough fuel to get back to Florida. They would have to eject and come down in the middle of a hostile country where escape and evasion would be impossible.

One of the Air Force crewmen in the room called out from behind their battle console.

"The two remaining Iraqi F-16's are Winchester," The Air Force officer said.

Sasha was a planner, not a warrior, but she knew enough to understand that "Winchester" meant "out of ordnance."

"They're engaging the targets kinetically now," The Air Force office said.

“What does that mean?” Sasha asked.

“They’re trying to ram them.”

Roswell, Georgia. Republic of Gilead.

Puddles awoke to a young girl in a grey dress poking her with a stick.

“*Hou Op!*” Puddles yelled in Dutch. The girl leapt back a few feet but she still held the stick.

It took a moment for Puddles to realize that she was lying in a grassy field. She felt sore, but nothing seemed broken. A ten-foot long nylon cord snaked out between her legs and she knew that it must be the lanyard for her ejection-seat survival kit. She considered pulling on the cord but she didn’t want to make any sudden movements with the girl pointing that stick at her. Puddles opened her mouth to speak. English. She remembered. She had to speak English.

“Where am I?” Puddles asked the girl.

The girl backed up a few paces but she still held the stick toward her like a weapon. Puddles placed her age at ten or so. The girl looked frightened.

Puddles scanned her surroundings. She realized that her parachute was still attached. If a breeze came by, she could get dragged across the ground. She sat up and released her parachute straps. Then she removed her oxygen mask from her face.

“Do you have any water?” Puddles asked. “Water.”

The girl stared at her. Puddles sighed. She pointed at the nylon cord. The girl stared at her with no emotion. Puddles pulled on the nylon cord, dragging her survival kit across the grass.

“I need to reach in here,” Puddles said. “You aren’t going to hurt me are you?”

The girl said nothing. Puddles reached to open the survival kit and then thought better of it. There was a large knife in the kit and she didn’t need to give the girl any reason to attack her. Instead, Puddles slowly reached into her flight suit pocket. She pulled out her “Blood Chit,” a serialized plastic coated notecard that provided a written promise of reward for help. Puddles read the notecard to the girl.

“I am a pilot with Aerial Outcomes, B.V. and do not speak your language very well. I will not harm you. I bear no malice toward your people. My friend, please provide me food, shelter, water and necessary medical attention. Also, please provide safe passage to the nearest friendly forces of any country supporting Gilead and their allies. You will be rewarded for assisting me when you present this number to Gilead authorities.”

Puddles flipped the notecard over. Maybe she needed to read the blood chit in Spanish?

Puddles unstrapped and pulled off her helmet.

The girl darted away.

Puddles stood. She watched the girl run across the field toward what looked like a farmhouse. Why had she run away?

It took Puddles a moment to realize... it had been her hair. She was a woman in a place where women weren’t pilots.

Puddles reached for the pistol holster on her flight suit... and felt nothing.

Shit!

Her pistol was still back at the base.

Puddles bent down and opened the survival kit. She activated the beacon on her emergency radio and took a quick look back at the farmhouse.

She grabbed the survival kit and threw it on her back. She scanned her surroundings. There was a tree line about 100 meters away to the west. Puddles dashed toward the safety of the woods. She looked back at the farmhouse and saw nothing.

Puddles tramped through the woods. She considered pausing to try the radio, but she knew she had to put some distance between her and that little girl first. She reached a neighborhood cul-de-sac that by the looks of the lawns hadn't been used in years. The street was lined with decaying McMansions. This could work. She needed a place to rest and take inventory.

She paused for a moment and viewed her surroundings. All of the houses looked abandoned. Some of them even had doors that were open. She would avoid those homes. After years of war and starvation, any home with an open door probably contained at least one wild animal that she didn't want to deal with.

Maybe resting in a backyard tool shed would be a better solution?

Puddles crossed the street. She waded through the grass of the first house until she reached a stone walkway that led to a low fence. She peeked over the fence and sure enough there was a shed in the backyard. She scanned for any signs of animals,

looking for claw marks or piles of feces. Puddles didn't see anything out of the ordinary so she clambered over the fence.

The shed didn't even have a lock, just a simple deadbolt. Puddles reached for the handle but she stopped. Simple things could get her killed now. She had to think. She walked around the shed to make sure there were no holes in the wall. Everything looked sound.

Puddles rattled the deadbolt. She listened and heard nothing. She pulled the door open.

The shed was dark in the early morning light, but there was enough illumination to see that the shed was neatly arranged with hand tools, old cans of oil, jars of screws, a few old bikes and a lawnmower. There was enough room for Puddles to sit down. She opened her survival pack and pulled out a small, four ounce plastic pouch of drinking water. She drank the water down quickly. Once the pouch was finished, Puddles activated her radio and set the frequency to the emergency guard channel.

"Mayday, mayday, mayday. Any station this net, any station this net, this is Puddles AOBV transmitting in the blind on guard. I have been shot down over north Atlanta. Over."

Puddles' radio crackled to life.

"PUDDLES THIS IS TOP HAT, OVER."

Puddles grinned. She keyed her radio mike.

"Top Hat, I am alive and unhurt. What's our status?"

"MONGO AND SANTA ARE DOWN. THE FUCKING IRAQI PILOTS JUST KAMIKASIED INTO THEM. I DIDN'T SEE ANY CHUTES. I AM ABOUT TWO

MINUTES FROM BINGO FUEL, BUT I HAVE YOUR POS FROM YOUR BEACON. I WILL RADIO FOR AN AOBV RESCUE. THERE IS AN ABANDONED GOLF COURSE ONE KILOMETER NORTHWEST. THERE IS A LAKE THERE FOR WATER. SIT TIGHT THERE. IT MAY BE AWHILE BEFORE RESCUE.”

“Copy that, Top Hat.” Puddles said.

“ONE MORE THING,” Top Hat said. “YOU’RE AN ACE NOW.”

Puddles hadn’t realized that she had shot down her fifth plane in the sky above Atlanta. Technically, this made her the first ever flying ace from The Netherlands. She should have been beaming with pride, but it was tempered with the knowledge that four pilots from her squadron were dead.

Mongo... Mongo was dead. Was it quick? Did he burn up in the air or die when he hit the ground? It didn’t matter. She was alive. She would have plenty of time to mourn the dead later... if he could stay alive herself. There were guardians who were probably hunting for her at that moment, not knowing or caring that she was on their side.

“Get me out of here,” Puddles said. “So we can drink to our victories together.”

“COPY THAT. I AM BINGO FUEL AND RTB.”

The radio went silent and Puddles had never felt more alone.

300 Feet over Ft. Knox, Kentucky. Republic of Gilead.

Private Akers was only in the air for twelve seconds, but it was enough time to get a good view of Goodman Army Airfield and the troops from the first wave that had already spread across the runway. Discarded parachutes lay strewn across the airfield like candy wrappers in the morning light.

Private Akers pulled the friction harness on his rucksack. Two hundred pounds of gear fell and stopped abruptly, dangling in space on its retention strap for a few seconds before Private Akers hit the runway with the best parachute landing fall he had ever executed.

Sergeant Hale was already up and running toward his team.

“Get it on! Get it on!” Sergeant Hale yelled. “Another stick is coming in!”

Private Akers grabbed his rucksack and Javelin system. He ran to the long, tall grass of the runway safety area just as another C-130 approached the runway.

Bravo Team formed with Staff Sergeant Kimball and the rest of their squad as more paratroopers fell from the sky. There was surprisingly no firing coming from around the airfield. This made sense. For Knox was nestled in the middle of Gilead, not on the border with America. Soldiers didn’t typically walk around post with weapons unless there was a training event going on. The only constantly armed soldiers on post would be military police or civilian contractors. The attack had come with such surprise that there was nobody who could mount an effective counterattack.

“All right,” Staff Sergeant Kimball said. “Listen up. We’re going to pick up and move southeast toward the golf course. Keep your head on a swivel. If we hit contact, drop your packs before we engage.”

Private Akers stood. His back strained against the load.

“You okay, there Akers?” Private Smith asked as he struggled to stand.

“I can’t do this,” Akers said.

“My people must be tried in all things, that they may be prepared to receive the glory that I have for them,” Smith said.

“Yeah, Doctrine and Covenants 136:31.” Private Akers said. “I just wish the Heavenly Father didn’t have so much faith in me.”

Step by step, Private Akers moved through the grass with his squad.

Another C-130 flew over the runway. Instead of paratroopers, several plastic-wrapped pallets were kicked out of the back of the plane on parachutes that sprouted from the cargo pallets like a hot-rod dragster. The pallets hit the ground with the kind of sound that a dump truck would have made had it fallen from the sky.

If the supply pallets were coming down, that meant all of the paratroopers were on the ground. Now each company had to execute their individual missions. Private Akers knew the mission by heart. There were four companies in his battalion, along with a headquarters company. Alpha Company would secure the airfield. Bravo Company, his unit, would push southeast and secure the bullion repository. Charley Company and the headquarters company would clean up the airfield and prepare it for air traffic and casualties. Delta Company would act as the reserves in case of counterattack. The second battalion of paratroopers would arrive in less than an hour, although they were landing, not jumping. The tiny American foothold would only grow bigger.

Private Akers and his company moved toward the southeast edge of the runway. A figure came into view - a teenage girl in a long, grey dress stood guard over what

looked like a thousand sheep. Private Akers was shocked that the sheep hadn't been scared off by the low-flying C-130's, but he was even more shocked by the shepherd girl who stood passively watching this company of soldiers march toward her.

"Why ain't that girl running?" Specialist Castro asked.

"I don't know," Sergeant Hale said. "She looks young. Like thirteen. The way she grew up she probably doesn't even know who we are. She probably doesn't even know about America."

"Yeah," Private Smith said. "She probably sees men with guns all the time. We're just in different uniforms."

The girl smiled at each soldier in the company as they passed.

"Blessed be the fruit," the girl kept repeating.

"Hey," Private Smith said to the girl. "You know where Utah is?"

"I'm sorry," The girl said. "I don't, but I can fetch my father and perhaps he knows?"

"You should clear out of here and go back home," Sergeant Hale said. "Take your sheep with you. A whole mess of trouble is coming behind us."

Charlotte, North Carolina, Republic of Gilead

It would be an understatement to say that guardian marine life after graduation had been a letdown. The food was good and Guardians got fed well. But the duty... the duty was not that the new guardian had expected. Instead of fighting in central Florida

or training to take on the unbelievers in Utah, Jason Wolf's Marine infantry unit spent time weeding.

Like generations of conscripted soldiers before him, Jason Wolf and the 150 other Marines in his company were used as unskilled agricultural labor on organic farms. It was backbreaking, repetitive work that made his hands and knees ache like an old man. Some weeds, like quack grass were resistant to hoeing. Using a tool just broke the weed up into more pieces that regrew. So without pesticides, which Gilead didn't use and couldn't manufacture anyway if they wanted to, the only solution was to walk down each row, bend over, and pull the weed out by hand. At this rate, one man could do about 200 yards of weeding a day.

Jason didn't have much schooling past the fifth grade. Once the war started, he had spent the majority of his time just staying alive. But Jason understood the concept of calories. He knew that it didn't make any sense for hundreds of men to manually weed crops. They were burning more calories weeding than the food they grew would provide. The only thing Jason could think of was that conscription provided Gilead with a sort of safety valve for young men of fighting age. Instead of risk keeping young men at home, jobless and thinking about the girls they couldn't have, working them day and night as farm labor acted as a sort of exhaustion castration. At the end of the day you were too tired to even think about sex.

The lunch bell rang in the distance. None of the Marines had a watch. Even a pre-war watch was a luxury none of them could afford even if they could find a battery. But the timing seemed off. The bell seemed early.

"Is it lunchtime?" one of the marines in Jason's row asked. It was Zweimer, a boy who was their age, but was built much smaller from malnutrition.

"I'm hungry," another marine said. That was Quackenboss, who was a lot bigger than the other boys and by that nature, the leader.

"You're always hungry, Quackenboss." Zweimer said.

"Well," Quackenboss said. "Let's go get us some lunch."

Jason and the rest of the guardians hefted their weeding bags. They pulled off their gloves and made their way through the crops toward the sound of the bell. It was a long walk - at least a half mile back to lunch.

"There's trucks there," Quackenboss said. "They look like seven ton trucks. There's four of them just parked there."

That was odd. Every morning, a senior guardian had marched them out from their field camp. Nobody had ever offered them a ride back.

The Marines heard yelling as they got closer to the trucks.

"Double time! Double time!" Someone yelled from the truck.

Jason's body ached with fatigue, but he feared punishment more than he feared a little additional soreness. He broke into a trot. The rest of the Marines did too.

The company of Marines arrived at the trucks. They were winded, but curious at this change in the pace of the day.

"Drop your sacks and get on the trucks, Marines!" The guardian who stood in the bed of the first truck yelled. "We're under attack!"

A murmur went up among the Marines that slowly turned into bloodlust.

“May the Lord open,” Quackenboss yelled as his eyes went wide with excitement.

Jason piled onto the first truck with the rest of his squad. The fit was tight. Each seven ton truck could fit about 25 Marines, although the old joke was that the capacity of a seven ton truck was “one more.” So they crammed into the trucks. When the seats were full, more Marines piled onto the floor. Jason was wedged between Zweimer and Quackenboss.

The trucks started up when all of the Marines were aboard.

“Where do you think we’re going?” Zweimer asked.

“I don’t know, man.” Quackenboss said. “Maybe Florida?”

The truck rattled its way down the farm’s dirt road. Their neatly-laid out camp came into view. The camp was buzzing with activity. A few more seven ton trucks were there along with a few old Humvees and some open-sided supply tents. One of the tents covered racks of rifles. Jason noticed that two of the parked trucks had diamond-shaped orange signs that read “1.4 Explosive” in black lettering. A single black Mercedes Benz SUV was packed nearby and only one kind of person rode in those vehicles.

“There’s a commander here,” Jason said. “Something’s up.”

Normal marines never even saw commanders, and the high-ranking ones that rode in those black SUVs were especially rare.

“Something big’s going down,” Quackenboss said. “I’m in a killin’ mood. I’m gonna kill me some unbelievers today.”

The trucks stopped.

“Get out!” A Marine yelled. “Fall in!”

The Marines piled out of the trucks and formed up by platoon. Once the men were formed up, older guardians had the men split off in single file. The Marines were marched over to a supply tent where two econopeople civilian contractors handed them one rifle and one 30 round magazine. The magazine felt strangely light.

“We only got ten rounds,” Quackenboss said when they fell back into formation. I wonder what we’re doing?”

“Maybe we’re going to go zero our rifles?” Zweimer said with a whisper. “They wouldn’t send us nowhere without zeroing our rifles, right?”

The last of the Marines got their rifles and fell back into formation. The company waited.

The commander got out of his Mercedes. He was an older man with greying hair. He didn’t wear a normal suit and tie of a commander or the all-black outfit of a guardian Marine. Instead, he wore boots and a uniform that looked like an old mottled green, tan and black US Army camouflage uniform - the kind of uniform Jason had only seen in movies when he was young. The commander was armed with some sort of pistol in an ancient leather holster that he wore in an old-style gun belt.

The commander approached the company.

“At ease Marines,” the commander said. “Two battalions of airborne troops have dropped into our heartland in a cowardly sneak attack. From what we gather, they’re unbelievers. The followers of a false god. The morons of Moroni. You boys should be able to sweep them aside without too much trouble.”

Jason's body flooded with fear. For weeks he had thought that the Marine Corps had been feeding him for free and now he realized that the bill would have to be paid for in blood.

Chapter 8 : They Came in The Same Old Way

Interstate 75, Laurel County, Kentucky. Contested Appalachia.

Travis sat up against a tree watching Interstate 75. He could see about a mile down the road - plenty of warning for anything coming this way.

The Owsley County Boys had spent all morning setting up defenses on the cliffs around the road. Now everybody was tuckered out from their labors and the noonday Kentucky sun was just getting started. The men lay listless in the grass. Most of them were shirtless. Some smoked pot. Others tried to catch some sleep in the shade.

“Suppose we can do some fishin’, Travis?” Ben Baker asked as he knelt down next to Travis.

“Wit what?” Travis asked.

“I brought a pole and some lures,” Ben said. “They’re on my horse. There’s bass and rainbow trout in Wood Creek Lake. Maybe catch some lunch?”

Travis looked over his right shoulder at the lake. It looked calm and peaceful. It was hard to believe a war was coming this way.

“Take a man with you,” Travis said.

Ben stood. He motioned to Butchie, who lay shirtless on the grass next to his machine gun. Butchie jumped up with the speed of a black-tailed jackrabbit.

“Not Butchie,” Travis said. “We need that machine gun.”

Butchie sat back down with a scowl.

“Take Cole,” Travis said. “And don’t give him no liquor. My brother-in-law needs all the sense he can git right now.”

Ben stood. He walked off to find Travis’s brother in law for the short trip to the lake.

Fresh fish would be welcome on a day like today. Back before if it were a nice day, he would head to the South Fork Kentucky River for some small mouth bass or maybe some catfish even though his wife hated it.

Travis let his mind wander to thoughts of his wife. What was she going to look like in heaven? Would she be young? Old? Middle-aged? All three at once? Would they still live in the same house and still grow their own food? He hoped heaven looked like Kentucky and honestly on some glorious God-blessed days it was hard to believe it wouldn’t. Travis knew he wasn’t supposed to survive this day and he sincerely looked forward to his demise, but his death sure as hell was taking its damn time.

Hell, Travis thought. If I’m going to spend eternity in heaven with my wife I suppose I can wait a few more hours.

Some time passed. Travis rolled and smoked a joint. He wondered how Ben and Cole were coming along at the lake and if any fish were biting.

“Got a car!” John Abner called out from the sniper’s nest he had built on top of a rock outcropping.

“What is it?” Travis asked, not even bothering to look down the road. John Abner was a deadeye with that hunting rifle and Travis knew he would be able to see far more clearly.

“Police car,” John Abner said. “Looks like an old state police Dodge Charger. He’s in a hurry. Lights are on God knows why. Ain’t no other traffic out here.”

Captain Moore, who had been off checking on everything for the tenth time appeared as if by magic next to Travis.

“What’s your call?” Captain Moore asked.

“I’m thinkin’...” Travis said. “See I’m fixin to let them go through. But it might be useful to blood some of the boys and I want to see how well those rockets work. Only thing is if we shoot up that car it could blow up and then how we gonna move it to keep it hid?”

“If you’re asking me,” Captain Moore said. “I think you should let him through. Exposing our position for one car may not be the best play here.”

“Yeah, but I want to see one of those rockets,” Travis said.

“The rockets aren’t explosive warheads,” Captain Moore said. “They’re shape charges designed to punch through armor.”

“So it won’t do nothin to the car?” Travis asked.

“It will punch a hole,” Captain Moore said. “Maybe it will start a fire inside. These warheads are designed to punch through tanks and set fires. It won’t make the car explode unless it hits the gas tank.”

Travis took in the information. Then he stood and stretched as if he were about to go for a walk.

“Wendell!” Travis called out for the young boy who’s barn had been used for the construction of the homemade rockets.

The boy came running up to Travis. An absurdly large M-16 rested on the kid's shoulder and an equally large homemade rocket was tied to his back with rope. A Home Depot apron that had been colored black with a marker carried the boy's rifle magazines.

"Yes, Mr. Lewis?" The boy asked.

"You reckon you can hit that there car when it comes around the bend?"

"I recon if you done slow it down first," The boy replied.

"Butchie," Travis said. "When that car comes round the bend wait until it gets 100 yards away and I want you to shoot it up. Then we gonna hit it with a rocket. I'm fixin' to see what happens."

Butchie stifled a yawn. He pulled down the bipod legs on his machine gun and loaded a belt of ammunition into the weapon.

"You'ns listen up," Travis called out to the rest of his men along the top of the hill. "I'm fixin to shoot up that car that's coming this way. Ain't nobody shoot but Butchie and Wendell unless I give the order."

The police car pulled around the bend, into view. Butchie waited until the car was about 100 yards away. He pulled the trigger on his machine gun. Yellow tracer rounds spit from Butchie's weapon. The rounds bounced off the concrete, careening down the highway where they slammed into the front grill of the police car, carving out huge chunks of metal and plastic. The car continued forward until it ran directly into the stream of bullets, which punched thumb sized holes into the hood and turned the windshield into a frosted maze of spider webs. The car pulled to the left, bounced over

the overgrown grass median and smashed slaunchwise into the cliff on the opposite side of the road about 50 yards from Travis's position. The back window of the police car was still unscathed and from that vantage point, it looked like there were four people in the car and two of the people in the back were still moving.

Travis came to the realization that the back doors of the police car couldn't open from the inside, but the injured men in their panic were trying to get out anyway.

"Wendell," Travis yelled. "You fire that missile. Pay attention, boys! I want to see what it does."

Wendell crept over the cliff on the near side of the road. He unslung his rocket. He lit the rocket fuse with a plastic Bic lighter. Travis counted. Were the fuses really six seconds as promised?

Six seconds later, the rocket burst from its launch tube and shot across the highway in the blink of an eye. The warhead made a black hole in the rear trunk of the car about the size of a quarter.

Wendell threw the spent rocket launcher behind him into the grass to hide it. It couldn't be reloaded and would just weigh him down. Wendel unslung his M-16. He looked over at Travis.

"You want me to shoot em through the glass, Mr. Lewis?" The boy asked.

"Not yet," Travis said.

The men in the back of the car started to scream as the paint on the trunk of the old, grey police cruiser began to bubble up. Flames licked up through the cracks in the hood of the trunk. Black smoke rose up. The air filled with the smell of burning rubber, plastic and eventually flesh. The men in the car stopped screaming.

“Hey, Travis!” Travis heard the voice of Ben Butler call out.

Travis turned to see Ben and Cole cresting the west side of the rise on the far side of the road. They had a few rainbow trout between them.

“Why didn’t you stop fishin when you heard Butchie open up?” Travis yelled back.

“I did,” Ben said as he approached. “But then he stopped so I figured it won’t no worry.”

Ben made a show of smelling the air.

“Hell, I would a hurried back if I’d a know you’ns making barbeque.”

300 meters west of the Bullion Repository. Ft. Knox, Kentucky. Republic of Gilead.

The Bullion Depository lay southeast in a clearing about 300 yards away, just beyond a grove of trees. The imposing two-story granite exterior had a rampart after the first floor and two stone guard towers at each side. A small chain-linked razor-wire fence lay about 50 yards from the building. Everybody knew the area between the fence and the building was mined.

The movement through the golf course had been uneventful. Gilead had repurposed it into a strawberry field that was trampled under by the company as they moved across the makeshift farm. Now the entire company was told to set up an assembly area in the sparse forest outside the Bullion Depository and wait. The company formed into a wide triangle inside the tree grove, with each platoon

responsible for one side. Private Aker's platoon was placed at the base of the triangle pointing toward the Bullion Depository with each soldier's backpack placed in front of them to use as cover. Every medium machine gun in the company also faced the building on that side of the triangle. The paratroopers stayed prone, their weapons pointed outward, eyes open and their heads down. Private Aker's Javelin missile tube lay across his back. The Javelin's bulky tracker unit lay in a large satchel to his side. He halfheartedly hoped that Gilead would send some tanks at them just so he could fire the missile and not have to carry the blasted thing anymore.

A Humvee that had arrived with the second load of airborne troops towed a MICLIC on a trailer through the patch of woods. It stopped at the edge of the trees to the right of the infantry company. Private Akers watched the engineers as they prepped the MICLIC.

"Hey, keep your darn eyes on the building." Sergeant Hale said. "Let them engineers do their job. You just watch the building."

The company commander of Bravo Company had set up his command post in the center of the triangle formed by his company. Private Akers was close enough to hear the commander on the radio.

"FDC this is Basher Black Six Actual," the commander said. "Adjust fire. Over."

A moment later, a tinny voice replied over the radio.

"BASHER BLACK SIX THIS IS FDC, ADJUST FIRE. OVER."

The commander keyed his mike.

"Grid victor bravo 090933. Masonry building with troops on roof. Over."

"COPY BASHER BLACK SIX. WAIT OUT."

The *plunk* sound of a mortar shot came from the northeast by the airfield. The commander's radio came to life.

"SHOT. OVER."

"Shot. Out," the commander said. He lowered the hand mike and yelled to his company. "Heads down!"

Twenty seconds passed. The radio came to life.

"SPLASH. OVER."

"Splash. Out." The commander replied.

The mortar round detonated directly on top of the building, exploding in a ball of flame that was quickly engulfed by grey bits of masonry. The sound of the explosion rippled over the soldiers of Bravo Company a second later. The shapes of a few guardians in black scurried around the rooftop as they sought cover from what they knew was coming next.

"FDC this is Basher Black Six. Target. Fire for effect. Over."

"COPY BASHER BLACK SIX. WAIT."

A moment passed.

"SHOT, OVER."

"Shot. Out." The commander replied.

The sound that came from the airfield was a *stattico*, constant beat as each of the mortar tubes fired three rounds. The last round was in the air before the first one impacted on the building.

"SPLASH. OVER." The radio crackled.

"Splash. Out."

The explosions came in a wave that beat the ground like the Heavenly Father himself was smashing the earth like a giant drum. Private Akers felt the impacts in his chest through the soil. The Bullion Depository disappeared in a haze of smoke and pulverized grey concrete. Nothing could be left alive on that roof.

“Record as target. Top of the building was destroyed. End of mission. Out.” The commander said into his radio mic.

“Heavy hand!” The commander yelled. Then he blew a long blast into a whistle.

The six machine guns at the front of the line opened up, firing short, controlled bursts at the smoking rampart. Yellow traces flew at the roof, knocking off chunks of granite and kicking up white clouds of dust. The machine guns weren’t selecting individual targets. The intent was to scare anyone who was still left alive to keep their heads down as the next phase of the operation began.

The commander spoke into his radio and the Humvee pulled forward. It broke out of the woodline and moved through the field towing the MICLIC along with it.

The stones on those engineers. Private Akers thought. Although his next thought was whether *stones* was a curse word. Whether it was or not, those engineers deserved the description.

Nobody shot at the Humvee as it crossed the field.

The Humvee pulled a U-turn 200 yards from the building. An engineer got out of the vehicle and ran to the MICLIC trailer. He released the trailer’s coupling from the vehicle and then hopped back into the Humvee.

A beat passed. MICLIC fired a rocket that trailed a thick white cord behind it. The rocket flew up and over the fence where it crashed into the stone building. The thick

white cord descended slowly to earth, draping over the chain-link fence. A yellow tunnel of fire exploded out from the cord sending dirt and debris flying to the sides. A huge chunk of the fence was gone, replaced by a 100 yard long, eight yard wide path of blackened earth. The Humvee zoomed back toward the treeline, leaving its trailer sitting in the middle of the field.

“First Platoon! Breech! Breech! Breech!” The commander yelled over the sound of the machine guns.

“Get up!” Sergeant Hale yelled. “When we cross the field, stay on the burnt earth until we hit concrete! Anything on either side of that path is mined.”

Private Akers stood. The Javelin tube smacked against his helmet as he ran and the tracker bag slammed against his thigh with every step, but he managed to keep up. His platoon moved across the field, collapsing into a column when they approached the spent MICLIC trailer.

The machine guns continued to rake the building, but fell silent as the first soldier passed the spent MICLIC. The guns must have done their job because nobody fired at them from the building as they moved onto the soft, chewed up blackened earth.

Private Aker’s squad passed through the fence. He knew that the MICLIC had blown up every possible mine in the blacked path, but Murphy’s Law always had a way of popping up when you least expected it. Luckily, Murphy was late to the party. The entire platoon reached the wide concrete road that surrounded the Bullion Depository. The road was strewn with debris that had been blown from the rampart, creating a warren of ankle-turning gravel. The unit moved a little slower through this unexpected hazard but they were soon at the rear loading dock of the building. The roll-up loading

bay doors were shut, but there was a side door that looked like every reinforced metal side door on every other government building.

The door opened a crack.

A broom handle with a white piece of paper taped to the bristles stuck out the door.

“Please don’t shoot us!” A voice said from behind the door.

“How many of you are in there?” Staff Sergeant Kimball yelled.

“There’s ten of us,” said the man behind the door. “A few of us are injured. All of the guardians who ain’t dead fled out the front door.”

“If I see a weapon,” Staff Sergeant Kimball said. “Every one of you is going to die. Come out with your hands up.”

An elderly African American wearing grey pants and a grey work shirt pushed his way through the door. He held the broom handle as high as he could at his age.

“Get on your knees!” Staff Sergeant Kimball ordered.

“Son,” the man said. “If I get down on my knees I ain’t getting up again. None of us are armed. We work here. I done worked here since 1969. Just take what you want and go.”

Staff Sergeant Kimbal pointed at the wall by the roll-up door.

“Get up against the wall!”

The old man doddered over to the long stone wall that separated the access door from the roll up door. Nine more men - mostly older workers in the same grey outfit filed through the door. Those that were able to do so held their hands above their heads.

Some of the men's ears were bleeding one of the men had one hand in the air although his other arm hung limp at his side.

"Castro," Sergeant Kimball said. "Hand off your weapon and search those men. Alpha team, watch that door."

Specialist Castro gave his SAW to Specialist Smith. He searched the man with the broom first. Castro yanked the stick from the man's hand and threw it off the loading dock. There wasn't much of the man to search. The grey uniforms had no pockets - not even on the pants.

"Can I turn around, son?" The old man asked when Specialist Castro moved to the next man in line.

"You can turn around," Staff Sergeant Kimball said.

"My name's Henry," the man said. "I'm the maintenance supervisor. All the guardians are dead, or dying or all gone on the front door. Some of my men need medical attention. One of my men has a broken arm. Do you have a medic with you?"

"We do," Staff Sergeant Kimball said. "But sir, nobody is seeing anyone until you've all been searched."

"Son," Henry said. "Do we look like a threat to you? Not everybody in Gilead is a guardian. We're civilians. We work here."

"Can you get us into the vault?" Staff Sergeant Kimball asked.

"Praise be sure can."

Roswell, Georgia. Republic of Gilead.

Puddles looked at her watch. She had been hiding in the shed for a little over two hours. She had already gone through her survival kit... twice. She had also performed a thorough search of the shed. She found a hatchet, a jar of screws, a wheelbarrow and some gasoline. The hatchet could be useful as a weapon, but the gas had probably been sitting in the can for at least six years. It wouldn't be able to run a car, but it could still start a fire if needed.

She kept the distress beacon on, but kept the radio off. There was no point in transmitting. Nothing was up there looking for her. The closest Aerial Outcomes search and rescue craft would be out of Robins Air Force Base and they wouldn't fly until nightfall. Based on what Top Hat said, Puddles would have to make it to the golf course if she wanted to get rescued.

Top Hat. Puddles could barely remember Top Hat's real name. Pilots called each other by their call signs exclusively.

Asya, Puddles remembered. Top Hat's real name was Asya. Puddles searched her memory of the story of how Top Hat's call sign came to be. It took her a moment to remember the numerous conversations as they had been told to her through whispers and half-memories of other pilots, Top Hat had been serving in the Turkish Air Force. She had just come back from a flight in her notoriously finicky F-35 when her front landing gear simply collapsed and her plane hit the ground and crumpled in like an old, collapsible top hat.

Puddles smiled at the memory. What was Top Hat doing now? Was she back at McConnell Air Force Base? Or could she have been blown to smithereens? What was even happening in the skies right now?

Someone knocked on the shed door.

Puddles froze.

"Are you in there?" asked the voice of a girl.

Puddles reached for the hatchet. She held it in her hand, ready to strike as she decided on what to do. It took her a moment to realize that if there was anyone on the other side of that door who wanted to do her harm, they wouldn't have knocked.

"Come in," Puddles said as she put the hatchet down but kept it within reach.

The shed door creaked open. The girl who had threatened Puddles with the stick a few hours earlier stood in the doorway. She wore a simple grey dress and hooded cloak. The girl carried a pre-war red plastic Igloo beverage thermos in one hand and a large hunk of homemade bread in the other.

"Blessed be the fruit. Are you an angel?" The girl asked.

The girl placed the thermos on the floor of the shed. She put the bread on top of the thermos.

"May the lord open," Puddles responded. "No. I'm not an angel. I'm a pilot. I'm a contractor with Aerial Outcomes."

"How did you fall from heaven?" The girl asked.

"I'm a pilot," Puddles said. "I fly... I flew a plane. An F-16."

The girl looked confused.

"What's your name?" Puddles asked.

“Anna.”

“Anna, my name is Beatrix.”

Anna smiled.

“You talk funny,” Anna said.

“I’m from The Netherlands. Do you know where that is?”

“Heaven?” The girl asked.

Sometimes it is, Puddles thought. *Especially in the springtime when all the flowers bloom*. She wondered what her wife and daughter were doing.

“I’m not from heaven,” Puddles said. “I’m from a place far away.”

“With the unbelievers?” Anna asked.

“No,” Puddles quickly corrected. “I suppose... I suppose I am a Christian. In my country we say *gezegend zij de vrucht*. That’s how you say ‘blessed be the fruit’ in my country. But we don’t say that there.”

“How are you not from here?” The girl asked.

What did that even mean? It struck Puddles that the girl might not even understand that there were other countries besides her own.

“I’m a pilot,” Puddles said. “I fly airplanes.”

“You’re not an angel?” The girl asked. “But you’re a woman?”

“Yes,” Puddles said. “I’m a woman and a pilot.”

“But how can a woman fly a plane?” Anna asked.

Puddles snorted. Her answer was almost reflexive.

“A woman can do anything a man can do -”

“Unbeliever!” Anna yelled.

The girl dashed away. Puddles jumped up from the floor of the shed to run after her. The girl jumped the fence in one practiced vault. Puddles reached the fence and began her climb. The girl was already gone by the time Puddles' head cleared the fence.

Shit.

Asheville, North Carolina. Republic of Gilead.

The back of the truck reminded Jason Wolf of the time his father had taken him to an Atlanta Hawks game. The drive from Marietta to State Farm Arena was only a half hour trip by car, but Jason was eight years old and obsessed with trains. He begged his father to take him on his first ride. Marty didn't want to give up his post-game cigar, but he relented after a week of pestering and some intervening by his mother. They had parked at the MARTA Arts Center Station, bought two MARTA Breeze cards and they took a beautiful refurbished CQ312 car into the city. Jason was over the moon.

Everything fell apart on the way back. The rail car was packed with a mass of humanity as people of all shapes and sizes crammed into the car.

The back of the seven ton truck was just like that ride back from Atlanta, but with the added discomfort of smells that ranged from pungent onions to sweat to bad breath to farts that lingered in the stale air underneath the truck canvas.

The truck jerked to a stop. Guardians Marines grunted as the inertia from the soldiers in the back of the truck pushed against the hapless soldiers in the front of the

truck near the cab. Jason, who was somewhere in the middle, got the pushing from both ends. Soldiers grunted in frustration, but nobody cursed. Anyone cursing would have been discovered immediately in such close confines and faced punishment that would have ranged from extra duty to whipping.

The back tailgate slammed down. Light stabbed into the truck as the rearmost troop cover was pulled aside.

“Ten minutes, Marines.” A voice said from the rear of the truck.

Groans went up among the Marines. There were so many bodies packed on the truck that it would almost take ten minutes just to unload it.

Marines scrambled off the back and the pressure on Jason’s chest released a little as the forest of bodies gave way to the daylight. Jason finally jumped down into the sunshine.

They were on a highway. Jason didn’t know which highway, although it looked like they were headed west. There was an old, faded billboard for a Cracker Barrel restaurant at the edge of the overgrown grass on the shoulder of the highway. Jason wondered why it hadn’t been torn down yet.

Fifty marines were lined up on the side of the road, urinating in unison. All of them looked straight ahead for fear of being labeled a gender traitor. Jason took one man’s place when a Marine left the line.

Jason sighed with relief as two hours of accumulated pee flowed out of him. When he finished, he left the line and ambled back over to the truck. His truck was third in a line of eight troop carrier trucks. Interspersed among the trucks was an occasional military Humvee or a black-painted pickup-truck with a jury-rigged machine gun. The

commander's Mercedes SUV was in the middle of the formation. The commander stood outside his vehicle smoking a cigar as he watched his driver change a tire. That explained why the formation had stopped. The highway was cracked and pockmarked - the victim of six years of freezing and thawing with little to no maintenance.

Guardian Marine Zweimer ambled up to Jason.

"Isn't Florida south of us?" Zweimer asked.

"Yeah," Jason said. "I grew up in Georgia. Florida was south."

"So why are we going west?" Zweimer asked.

"I don't know," Jason responded.

"You think they'll feed us soon?" Zweimer said.

Jason hadn't realized that he was hungry, which was odd since so much of his life centered around eating.

Where on earth were they going with ten rounds per man and unzeroed rifles?

The command came to load up the trucks and the Marines continued their journey west.

Bullion Repository. Ft. Knox, Kentucky. Republic of Gilead.

Private Akers panted as he climbed up what seemed like an endless flight of stairs.

This was only the third time Private Akers had jumped into Gilead and he was now understanding that nothing actually worked here - including the elevators.

If you weren't a Christian, you died. It hadn't mattered if you knew how to fix an elevator. If you didn't repent, you were an unbeliever and were killed. The revolution hadn't been quite as indiscriminate as the killing fields in Cambodia, but an advanced society needed technicians, engineers, mechanics and a supply chain to keep up with the demand in spare parts. In Gilead, when an elevator broke it just stayed broke.

Now Private Akers and the rest of his fire team were the final recipients of Gilead's proxism of religious madness as they tramped up the stairwell to the roof of the Bullion Depository to set up an observation post.

Henry, the maintenance manager, led the way. He moved at a brisk pace considering his age. He reached the top of the stairwell and stood at the landing. Light filtered in through slices in the roof access door that had been made from artillery shrapnel. The wall opposite the door was pockmarked and a few pieces of granite and metal debris lay on the floor.

"This leads out to the first roof," Henry said. "I've got to get back downstairs to help get the vault open."

The four members of Bravo Team halted at the landing to catch their breath. Sergeant Hale placed his hand on Henry.

"Why are you helping us?" Sergeant Hale asked.

Henry shrugged.

"What choice do I have?" Henry said. "If you don't kill me, they will. At least this way maybe if you are doing what I think you're doing, my family will have a better life."

Henry pushed past the soldiers on his way downstairs.

The team took a moment to catch their breath after the walk up the stairs.

“Castro,” Sergeant Hale said. “You’re first through the door. Then me, then Smith, then you, Akers.”

“Roger,” all of the soldiers affirmed.

Specialist Castro pushed on the metal door with one hand while the other held his SAW ready for action. He immediately recoiled back into the stairwell.

“Oh dios mio no puedo!” Specialist Castro said as he held his hand to his mouth.

“Castro, move!” Sergeant Hale said.

“There’s a...” Specialist Castro shook his head. “Give me a minute, please.”

“Darn it, Castro,” Sergeant Hale said as he pushed open the door instead. He peeked outside. He only spent a moment surveying the roof before he too backed into the stairwell. Sergeant Hale looked like a changed man. He took a moment to collect himself. Finally, Sergeant Hale spoke.

“There’s a couple of Dingbat bodies out there,” Sergeant Hale said. “Some of them don’t look too good. But we have to set up an OP on the roof facing toward the interchange. Their trials are over now. Come on.”

Sergeant Hale went through the door. Private Smith did as well. Specialist Castro breathed deeply before he went through. Private Akers had no idea what he was in for, but he followed his team.

The smell of shit and copper hit Private Akers before the visuals kicked in. Bodies were so torn apart that their bowels had been ripped open and scattered across the roof. Stains of black feces, red blood, meat, bone and offal were strewn across the stone and second story inner walls like a hellish Jackson Pollock painting. Any bodies

that were somewhat whole had no eyes in their sockets. One body had its two eyeballs hanging down out of its skull like runny eggs.

The team headed to the south end of the rampart. There was only one body on the southern end of the rampart compared to the charnel house on the northeast side. This particular body was bloody, headless and sitting against the low wall like it had fallen asleep there.

"We'll set up here," Sergeant Hale said. "Akers get that Javelin up and watch the highway. Castro and Smith... get rid of that body."

"Heads or tails?" Specialist Castro asked Private Smith.

"I'll take the legs," Private Smith said.

The pair walked over to the body. Specialist Castro grabbed the dead guardian's wrists to maneuver the body and the man's left forearm snapped off in Castro's hand. Castro's rearward momentum made him lose balance for a moment. Castro steadied himself. He held up the severed left forearm for all to see.

"Hey Akers," Specialist Castro said while waving the dead man's severed forearm. "Do you need a hand with that Javelin?"

Private Smith tried to stifle a laugh, but the morbid moment got the best of her and she snorted while dragging the dead body back by the legs.

"Castro!" Sergeant Hale yelled.

"What?" Castro said. "That was a good joke. Gimme a high-five."

Private Smith fell to her knees with laughter.

"Get rid of it!" Sergeant Hale yelled.

Specialist Castro threw the arm over the wall where it tumbled in the air until it fell out of sight. The three of them looked at Private Smith, who's laughter had dissolved into a sort of half-laugh, half-cry. She knelt down and buried her head in her arms until the laughing turned into shrieking sobs. Private Smith doubled over on her knees. She cradled her weapon as she half wept and half laughed.

Someone had to do something.

Sergeant Hale stood and walked over to Private Smith.

"Castro, just move the body." Sergeant Hale said as he knelt down next to Private Smith.

Private Akers tried to ignore Private Smith's crying as he knelt down by the low granite wall that surrounded the top of the building. He inserted the battery inside the Javelin's tracking unit and checked to make sure it turned on. He looked back at Sergeant Hale and Private Smith. The two were quietly praying together.

Private Akers snapped the tracker onto the missile tube. He hefted the unit onto his shoulder and surveyed the interchange, first with the unit's optical site and then with the thermal site. Everything seemed to be working.

Private Akers turned the tracking system off to save the battery. He placed the launcher on the roof. Private Smith knelt down next to him by the wall.

"Are you ok?" Private Akers asked.

"Yeah," Private Smith said. "I just needed some help from the Heavenly Father. That's all. I'm ready."

Castro returned to the rampart. He peeked over the side as if he were looking for the arm he had thrown. The south end of the building faced a wide grass lawn and

highway cloverleaf that was about 500 yards away. This was the most likely avenue of approach for any reinforcements since it connected with Highway 31. The east side of the building faced the main vault access road. This road crossed a four lane highway about 300 yards to the east and continued on for about 600 yards until the road curved to the left and disappeared into the woods. This was another likely avenue of approach, but would probably only be used by local security forces.

The team was joined a few minutes later by Alpha Team and Staff Sergeant Kimball. One of the men from Alpha dropped a second Javelin missile tube next to Private Akers. Staff Sergeant Kimball moved Alpha Team to the east side facing straight down the vault access road. Now there were nine soldiers on the roof.

A long line of C-130's appeared as dots in the sky from the south. The next phase of the operation was underway. Staff Sergeant Kimball's radio crackled to life.

"ALL ELEMENTS. ALL ELEMENTS. THIS IS ONE-SIX. HEAVEN'S GATE. HEAVEN'S GATE. WE ARE OPEN."

"The vault's open," Staff Sergeant Kimball said.

Fifty yards underground, the first gold bricks were being loaded onto hand carts for the trip upstairs. Private Akers hoped that the bullion freight elevator still worked or they would be there for a while.

How long would it take for Gilead to mount a counter attack? A few hours? A few days?

"Machine guns coming up!" Staff Sergeant Kimball yelled.

Two machine gun teams emerged onto the roof. Staff Sergeant Kimball placed one gun team facing south and one facing east.

Specialist Castro pulled a dinner roll from his pants cargo pocket. The roll was crushed from the jostling in his pocket, but he bit into it.

"It's still good," Specialist Castro said. He offered a piece of the roll to Private Akers. Private Akers eyed the roll suspiciously. Castro had been handling a dead body only a few minutes before, but Private Akers was hungry.

Oh, what the H. Why not?

Private Akers took the roll. He broke it in half and offered the other half to Private Smith.

The three chewed on their tiny pieces of dinner roll. Specialist Castro spoke as he watched the road.

"Why does a woman wear white when she gets married?" Specialist Castro asked.

"Is this a joke?" Sergeant Hale asked.

"Yeah," Specialist Castro said. "Why?"

"I don't know," Sergeant Hale said. "But this better not be a sex joke."

"It's so she matches the refrigerator and the stove," Specialist Castro said.

Private Smith snorted.

"You know, Castro." Private Smith said. "You can put me in the kitchen, but that's where all the knives are kept."

"I'm gonna start calling you Bobbitt," Specialist Castro replied. "Hey, Sergeant Hale. Can you tell me a joke? You've got to know at least one joke."

"I don't know any sex jokes," Sergeant Hale said.

"Just a regular joke."

Sergeant Hale looked pensive as he gathered his thoughts.

“Fine. Who was the smartest man in the bible?”

All of Bravo Team shrugged.

“Abraham,” Sergeant Hale said. “Because he knew a Lot.”

Privates Smith and Akers chuckled. Specialist Castro shook his head.

“That is one salty joke, sergeant.” Specialist Castro said.

The team groaned at the pun.

“Hey!” Someone yelled out from Alpha Team. “Contact! Six hundred meters!

Four o’clock! Troops moving through the woods north of the road!”

“How many?” Staff Sergeant Kimball said as he moved to the wall

Sergeant Hale glassed the woodline with a pair of binoculars.

“We got...” Sergeant Hale grimaced. “Oh, Heavenly Father help me. Just when I think I’ve seen the worst they surprise me. We got a skirmish line of Dingbats - maybe a light platoon’s worth moving toward us. Looks like they’ve got a line of civilians at bayonet point in front of them.

Private Akers looked through the magnification sight on his Javelin. Sure enough, about twenty to twenty five guardians were formed in a long line. Men - and only men - in the grey dress of the econopeople walked in front of the guardians as human shields. There were roughly double the number of econopeople for each guardian. Even at this distance, the paratroopers saw that the human shields were not doing this voluntarily.

“How do they expect to take back this building with just twenty guys?” Private Castro asked.

“They might not know our composition and disposition,” Sergeant Hale said. “Or maybe they just got bad intel? Or maybe they’re just all suicidal. Most likely, none of these guardians have ever seen combat before - at least not against people who can fight back.”

“This is crazy,” Specialist Castro said. “How do they expect to breach the minefield?”

“That’s why they have twice the number of econopeople,” Staff Sergeant Kimball said. “That’s their mine clearers.”

“Son of a bishop, what is wrong with these people?” Staff Sergeant Kimball took a long breath. “Anybody here feel confident shooting out to five hundred meters surgically?”

One soldier from Alpha Team raised his hand.

“All right,” Staff Sergeant Kimball said. “Fire about ten meters in front of their formation. We’ll try to scare them back Warning shot! Warning shot! Warning shot!”

Private Akers watched through his Javelin sight. Two shots were fired from the roof. It took a few seconds for the rounds to travel the distance, but both rounds landed about ten meters away from the human shield. A few of the econopeople pushed back against the guardians. One of the guardians leveled his rifle at an econoperson and fired at full automatic. A few of the guardians panicked and they started to fire as well. The econopeople sprinted in all directions and the guardians cut them down in seconds. A few of the guardians even took their time to fire fatal shots into fallen, wounded econopeople.

It took a moment for the guardians to realize they were now out in the open without cover.

The airborne squad took in the horror of the moment.

“Poop on a biscuit,” Staff Sergeant Kimball said. “Wipe those flippers out.”

Roswell, Georgia. Republic of Gilead.

Commander Fontaine looked down at the little girl in his office. The girl looked terrified. Her parents didn't look that thrilled to be there either.

“Anna,” The Commander said. “Do you know what a lie is?”

The girl looked at the floor.

“Anna, I'm serious.” The commander said. “Your parents said that you found a lady who fell from the sky.”

“I did,” Anna whispered. “I swear to God. She said she was a lady pilot from far away.”

“Anna,” Commander Fontaine said. “Ladies can't be pilots. Ladies are mommies. Can your mommy fly a plane?”

Anna shook her head. A tear fell from her eye and hit the linoleum floor. This excited the commander, but he didn't let it show.

Anna's father spoke up.

“Commander,” Anna's father said. “My daughter doesn't have the words to describe what she saw. She doesn't know what a parachute is. But there's an ejection seat in the middle of my farm. I saw it with my own eyes and I don't think my daughter would lie to me.”

Commander Fontaine weighed this information. It was impossible for a U.S. or NATO pilot to be this far inside Gilead. But if there was a pilot on the loose in the county he or she couldn't have gotten far. And there had been that strange rumbling to the east that morning...

"Anna, do you remember where the pilot was?" The commander asked.

Anna nodded.

"In a shed northwest of our farm."

"I think I know the house she's talking about," The father said. "It's a subdivision at the northwest end of my farm. I can take you there."

"Very well," Commander Fontaine said. "Mother. You take Anna home. Your Daddy and I are going to check out this house. You're been a good girl, Anna. Would you like a toy?"

Anna looked up at the commander. She looked confused, but she nodded.

Commander Fontaine walked over to a metal file cabinet in his office. He pulled the bottom most cabinet open, revealing a drawl full of cheap plastic toys. He had gotten the toys from the treasure chest of a dentist office. The original owner of the toys was a dentist whose body was decaying in a mass grave under the local high school football field. So of course, the dead man no longer needed them. The toys were useful as little rewards for children who had turned in their parents for whatever crimes were in vogue by the Sons of Jacob.

Anna crept over to the drawer. Her eyes had never seen such treasures.

"I can have one?" Anna asked.

"One can have *one*," Commander Fontaine said.

Anna picked out a small plastic toy plane.

Commander Fontaine smiled.

“Not that one,” Commander Fontaine said. “You’re a lady and ladies are mommies not pilots.”

Anna shook her head.

“But this lady is.”

Roswell, Georgia. Republic of Gilead.

Puddles knew she didn’t have much time. She could make a run for the golf course, but if the guardians were smart and they believed the little girl, they would know that a downed pilot would certainly make way for an open area with a water source. No, she had to dissuade them from coming after her.

Odds were that they would only send a small squad. Fuel was a precious resource in Gilead. They would only send a car or two with a single commander in charge. She would need to set a trap.

Puddles’ eyes fell on the container of gasoline in the shed. Most people didn’t understand that a gallon of gasoline had enough energy to move a two ton car thirty miles down a road. Puddles grabbed the hatchet. She was going into that house no matter what critters may lurk inside.

Puddles made her way across the overgrown back lawn to the house’s back door. The window was covered with dirt and grime and she couldn’t see inside. She

tried the door handle and the door opened easily into a pre-war kitchen. She paused. She didn't hear any animals and the floor was free of droppings. The interior smelled musty. Some black mold crept along the interior wall of the open concept kitchen, eating away at the pictures of the happy family that had lived there in the time before. Puddles thought of her wife and child back home in The Netherlands for a moment, but she pushed the thought aside.

Maybe the previous owners had a gun that hadn't been confiscated when the Sons of Jacob took over? She weighed this option. A gun would be a force multiplier, but if she wanted to execute her plan, it would take time away from the task at hand. She decided to try her plan out first.

She knew enough about American culture that every home had a junk drawer - something where you put batteries and twine and little odds and ends that you might need in the future. She began opening drawers - silverware, dishtowels. She found her prize in the third drawer she opened. She laid down the hatchet on the dusty granite countertop and rummaged through the drawer. She took a pair of needle-nosed pliers, a few books of matches and a roll of electrical tape but the only batteries she found were D-cells. She did find a cheap plastic flashlight which amazingly worked. Good, she would need that later. She put the flashlight and masking tape inside her flight suit. What else?

She looked up at the ceiling. There was a smoke detector up there, but the vaulted ceiling made it too high to reach. She opened the door to the garage and took a quick look around with her new flashlight. She saw a small kitchen step-stool and a long, orange extension cord. She grabbed the stool and extension cord. She took a

final look around the garage and didn't see anything of value. She went back inside to the kitchen. She dropped the extension cord on the counter but kept the stool. She picked up her hatchet in her other hand. Now she just needed a battery.

Puddles navigated her way through the house to the stairs. She noticed that the front door had been jimmied open at some point. The house must have been searched for a firearm years ago and she almost certainly wouldn't find anything now. Clothes littered the landing at the top of the stairs. She took a quick peek inside the master bedroom. The place was a shambles. Drawers had been opened and tossed about. If the house had a gun it had been found and confiscated long ago. But that wasn't a problem. The gun was just a bonus.

Puddles set the small kitchen stool up under the top landing's smoke alarm. She climbed the ladder and pulled the smoke alarm from the ceiling. She pulled out the 9-volt battery and placed her tongue on the contacts.

She felt the spark of electricity. So far so good.

She dropped the smoke alarm and pocketed the battery in her flight suit. Now she was ready.

Puddles cut the ends off the extension cord with her hatchet and stripped the ends with her pliers. She pulled one of the matchbooks from her flight suit and taped it to one end of the extension cord. She took the nine volt battery and carefully touched the ends of the wire to the two contacts on the battery. The matches burst into flame on the counter. This was perfect.

Puddles left the house with the extension cord and hurried back to the shed where she knew there was a jar of screws, a wheelbarrow and a can of gasoline that might come in handy after all.

Bullion Repository. Ft. Knox, Kentucky. Republic of Gilead.

Two hours had passed since the human shield attack and Private Akers and his squad had seen no action. The sun was getting hot and the paratroopers were hungry. The paratroopers took turns on watch with one team eating or catching some sleep as the other team watched the intersection and the field.

No massive counterattack had come. Either Gilead was a hollow force or the attack had come with such surprise that nobody was prepared. That was fine with everybody. They had seen enough combat for one day. Every few minutes another pallet of gold left the building. C-130's and C-17's came in one after the other, landing, loading up the gold and lumbering down the runway again without even turning their engines off.

Private Akers handed off his Javelin to a member of Alpha team. He sat with his back against the rampart wall. The time was good enough as any to eat.

He pulled an MRE ration out of his cargo pocket.

"What did you get?" Specialist Castro asked as he opened his own MRE.

Private Akers looked down at the tan plastic bag that held his ration. He wasn't even sure. He hadn't looked. He turned the MRE over in his hand.

“Pork rib,” Private Akers said.

Specialist Castro held his MRE up.

“Dog shit with sauce,” Specialist Castro said.

“Language,” Sergeant Hale said.

“This expired in 2008,” Specialist Castro said as he opened his MRE. He pulled out plastic packets of food, placing each one between his legs. “Expired cheese spread. Expired cookies. Think there’s some expired E5 rank in here?”

The fire team chuckled.

The team heard the sound of propeller engines droning overhead. One of the US Marine Corps V-22 Osprey Mongoose planes did lazy circles waiting to support the soldiers below if Gilead was foolish enough to counter attack.

Staff Sergeant Kimball was dead asleep when his radio buzzed with an incoming message. Sergeant Hale crawled over to Staff Sergeant Kimbal’s sleeping body and gently pulled the handset away.

“Say again, over.” Sergeant Hale whispered. He listened to the message and whispered. “Copy, out.”

Sergeant Hale crawled back over to his team.

“Hey, guys. We’re making better time than we thought due to the civilians helping us. We may be out of here by tomorrow morning.

Corbin, Kentucky. Republic of Gilead.

Jason Wolf was jolted awake when the truck stopped again.

“Thirty minutes!” A voice shouted from outside the truck. Again the canvas tarp of the truck opened, shedding light into the vehicle. Again, weary Marines tumbled off the truck into the sunlight.

Jason crawled to the back of the truck and jumped off. They were in some kind of highway truck stop service plaza - at least it had once been before the war. Now it was an assembly area. Green tents had sprung up in the parking lot. Some of the tents had tables set up. Jason smelled food.

“Chow’s over there, Marines.” Someone said. “Eat it and get back on.”

Jason’s buddy Quackenboss took off at a dead run toward the chow tents. Zweimer followed him like a puppy and Jason wasn’t far behind. He had to pee, but that could wait. The tents all had young girls in grey dresses supervised by their parents. It looked like they were serving stew.

Jason fell in line. It felt like an eternity, but when he hit the front of the line, a young girl in a grey dress handed him a plastic bowl. He moved forward and another girl served him some kind of thin barley soup. One hunk of some kind of meat floated alone in a sea of sparse grains and broth. Another girl handed him a small hunk of bread.

“Drink it down and get back on the truck,” a senior guardian said. “Hurry up!” Jason drank down the broth - it was tepid and tasteless. A girl took the plastic bowl from his hands. He watched her bring the bowl back to the front of the line to be used again without even washing it first.

“I want more,” Quackenboss said.

“We better get back on the trucks,” Zweimer said with his mouth full of bread.

Jason nibbled on the bread to make it last. He had to pee, but where could he do that out of sight of these women? He walked back over to the other side of his truck and saw a number of Marines urinating on the rear tires out of sight of the chow line. Jason waited his turn. As he waited, he noticed two strange eight-wheeled turreted armored vehicles in the parking lot.

“What are those?” Jason asked out loud, hoping that someone had the answer.

“LAV-25’s” someone responded. “They’re probably escorting us wherever we are going.”

The cannons on those LAVs looked menacing. He wondered what on earth they were going to fight that needed that much firepower.

Roswell, Georgia. Republic of Gilead.

Commander Fontaine was annoyed. He had insisted that he see this ejection seat personally before he went on any wild goose chase for a downed pilot. Now his SUV was caked with soil and his boots were muddy. But that was definitely an ejection seat laying in a furrow on its side in the soil.

The commander was unsure of what to say.

“That’s an ejection seat,” The farmer helped.

“Of course it is, you idiot.” The commander said.

He yelled for his driver and his two guardians to come over.

The three men left the Mercedes SUV and tramped across the mud.

“Turn it right side up,” The commander ordered the men.

The men grunted and strained and they pulled the ejection seat right side up from where it had dug a hole in the earth.

“Take off your shirt,” The commander ordered his driver.

“Why...” the driver asked.

“Take off your damn shirt!”

The driver unbuttoned his black uniform blouse, stripping down to his undershirt.

“Wipe that mud away,” the commander ordered as he pointed at a spot on the seat that looked like a data plate.

The driver wiped the mud away with his shirt. The commander knelt down and read the plate.

“Collins Aerospace,” the commander read aloud.

Commander Fontaine stood. He was unsure of what he was supposed to do next. Back in the time before, he managed an Olive Garden restaurant. His current position had been based on loyalty and piety, not military prowess.

“You think it’s ours or theirs?” The farmer asked.

“They don’t have any planes left,” the commander said. “We swept them from the skies years ago.”

The commander knew this was untrue, but it was what the Sons of Jacob claimed, so he kept to the party line. After all, that’s how he ended up in charge.

The commander put on a brave face.

“Load the seat into the back and take me to this house.”

The guardians and the driver grunted and strained as they hauled the awkward, heavy seat back to the commander's Mercedes.

Commander Fontaine approached his vehicle. He opened the passenger-side door and knocked the mud from his boots. His men and the farmer piled back into the SUV. The farmer directed the driver to the northwest.

The SUV bounced over fields and down a small ravine. They pushed through the high grass of an abandoned subdivision. Commander Fontaine remembered this neighborhood; he had liquidated it of its decadent inhabitants years ago. What an amazing day that had been! It was full of glory and righteous anger - weeping mothers and terrified children and helpless men reduced to begging for their lives. The revolution had been so much fun before it had given way to the tedium of ruling.

"This is the house she described," The farmer said. "My daughter said the pilot was in the shed out back."

The driver stopped the SUV.

"Wait in here," the commander said to the farmer. He motioned to his driver and the guardians. "Come with me."

Commander Fontine drew his pistol as he exited his SUV. He wondered if he should remain silent, but he realized that if there was a downed pilot in the shed, he - because it had to be a he, of course - would have already heard the Mercedes approach. Most likely the pilot was long gone, so Commander Fontaine decided to put on a brave show to impress his men.

“I know you’re in there,” Commander Fontaine said as he approached the house’s back fence. The overgrown grass here in front of the gate was trampled and matted in a semicircle from the swinging of the gate.

“We’re not going to hurt you,” the commander said. “The Republic of Gilead is a signatory of the Geneva Convention. Rule 42, Article 12 states that a pilot in distress must be given adequate medical care and guaranteed access to the Red Cross.”

Commander Fontaine had no idea if this were true, but he had once read an article about the Geneva Convention, and it sounded true. The pilot probably didn’t have a copy handy either. If there really was a downed pilot, he was worth much more politically alive than dead anyway, so he intended to fill his half of the bargain.

Commander Fontaine looked behind him. His three guardians had fanned out a couple of yards behind him in a loose wedge formation. They were alert for any movement.

The commander opened the gate.

Beyond the gate was an overgrown backyard. A straight path of crushed grass led from the gate to the door of a wooden shed. A smaller path of crushed grass led from the shed to the rear door of the house.

Commander Fontaine turned around and pointed at his driver. He then pointed at the rear door of the house. The driver understood. He took up a position at the rear of the house covering the back door.

The commander approached the shed and his two remaining guardians followed close behind.

“I’m going to open the door now,” The commander said. “We won’t hurt you.”

The commander reached for the shed's slide lock. He opened the latch and pulled the door open. He didn't see a pilot. Instead he noticed a wheelbarrow on its side with the bed of the barrow pointing directly at him. Inside the bed of the barrow was a gasoline can. Nails were taped around the can like rhinestones. Before the commander could react to this odd sight, the metal hinge of the door touched a copper wire that had been carefully positioned to connect only when the door was open.

Commander Fontaine barely had time to register the flames from the gas can before the back of the wheelbarrow directed the explosion and its associated nails directly at the commander and his two bodyguards. The fire finished what the nails started.

A quarter mile to the northwest, a pilot who couldn't possibly have been a lady, heard the explosion and knew she had bought herself some more time.

Interstate 75, Laurel County, Kentucky. Contested Appalachia.

Travis surveyed Interstate 75 for the hundredth time. It was going to be dark soon and there was still no sign of counterattack. No government men. No armored vehicles. No final battle that would reunite him with his wife.

The car that they had shot up earlier in the day had burnt out but it was still too hot to touch. It would have to stay there. He admitted that Captain Moore had been right. A burnt out car would be a sure sign of an ambush waiting, but at this rate, it

didn't seem like anybody else was coming. So Travis did what soldiers had done since time immemorial - he waited.

Travis's brother-in-law, Cole, sat down in the grass a few feet away. Cole carried two tin cups. He handed one to Travis. Travis took the cup. It was full of pieces of cornbread.

"Thank you kindly," Travis said. He ate the cornbread out of the cup with his fingers.

Cole motioned to the burnt-out vehicle.

"We gonna have to lick your calf over we don't git rid a that burnt-out car."

"I know," Travis said. "I just wanted to see what would happen with that ugly missile."

"I got vehicles!" John Abner yelled from his sniper's nest.

"What kind?" Travis yelled back.

"I dunno," John replied. "Couple of regular Army trucks and a tank but with wheels."

Captain Moore climbed up to the sniper hide. He took a look at the incoming vehicles with a pair of binoculars.

"This is it you guys," Captain Moore said. "We got two Marine Corps LAV-25's and about five trucks."

A few of the men looked at each other greedily. In the past, trucks had meant loot.

Travis handed his cup back to Cole. He kept one wedge of cornbread with him as he climbed up to John Abner's sniper position, nibbling on it all the way.

Captain Moore handed Cole the binoculars when he reached the position.

“You see that?” Captain Moore said. “That vehicle with the eight wheels and the gun. That’s a Marine Corps LAV-25. It’s got two machine guns and one 25mm cannon on it. We need to hit those LAV’s first or we’ll have a problem. The good news is that their turrets can’t elevate more than 25 degrees, so we’re safe from fire up here on the cliffs above the road. Our rockets should penetrate that armor without much trouble.”

“Think those trucks got supplies or troops?” Travis asked.

“I think they got troops,” Captain Moore said. “The two LAVs are up at the front. If they were protecting cargo, I think one LAV would be in the back of the convoy. They’re expecting to hit heavy contact from the front not highwaymen-”

“Like us,” Travis said. “Highwaymen like us? Is it my fault if God put the good stuff where the hillbillies can’t have any?”

“Travis,” The Captain said. “We’re both gonna be dead in a few minutes so let’s come up with a plan. I think we should let the LAVs go through to the edge of the kill zone. Hit the first LAV. Then hit the last truck. Everybody should be bottled up after that. Butchie sweeps the trucks in the middle forward to back with machine guns and we open up with everything else. I wouldn’t worry too much about the second LAV. It’s gun can’t elevate high enough to hit us up here. Once we take out the grunts in the back, then we can deal with the second LAV. I’ll go with the missile team on the first LAV if you stay with Butchie on the machine gun.”

Travis considered the situation.

“This might only be the first wave,” Travis said. “But we have over a mess a rockets. I think we should take out both of those ‘ell-aay-vees’ at once. If that second one escapes I don’t want him going down the road and getting the drop on us.”

“All right,” Captain Moore said. “We’ll take out both. I’ll initiate the ambush. Does that work?”

“Hate to think I couldn’t,” Travis said in agreement.

Travis called his men forward and briefed them on the plan. There was no bravado or posturing. The men knew what they had to do to survive the night.

Travis settled down in his fighting position next to Butchie and Cole. The trio watched the vehicles get closer. There were a total of eight vehicles in the convoy - five troop trucks, one Mercedes SUV in the middle and two LAV-25’s at the front end. The Mercedes SUV was especially interesting - the commander in charge would be in that vehicle. Travis knew his men would target it without having to tell them.

None of the LAVs paused or moved their turrets as they approached Owsley County Boys. The men were well hidden and disciplined as the LAVs passed through the kill zone of the ambush.

Four rockets whooshed out from the top of the cliffside. All of the rockets were aimed at the first LAV. One rocket glanced off the LAV’s turret, but the other three rockets hit the thin armor at the top of the hull. The LAV drifted as its inertia took it forward a few yards, but explosions always took the path of least resistance and the two top hatches blew open, flaming like a rocket engine on takeoff.

The remaining LAV was too close to stop in time. It rammed into the burning LAV, stopping cold. Four more missiles reached out and exploded the second LAV as the driver frantically tried to untangle himself from the first vehicle.

The Owsley County Boys at the east end of the ambush took the cue from Captain Moore. Two rockets flew out toward the rearmost truck. One rocket ripped through the troop canvass where it embedded itself inside an unlucky government man who had happened to be sitting in the wrong place at the wrong time. Another rocket hit the cab, splattering molten copper on the driver and assistant driver, sending the truck cutting right and flipping over on its side.

“OK, Butchie,” Travis yelled over the cacophony of explosions. “Fire up that black car.”

Butchie opened up with his machine gun, targeting the Mercedes SUV first, raking it with fire for a good ten seconds. The Mercedes slowed and caught on fire. The rest of the Owsley County Boys opened up, pouring fire into the remaining troop trucks.

It was almost too easy.

Interstate 75, Laurel County, Kentucky. Contested Appalachia.

It all happened so fast. One moment, Guardian Jason Wolf was asleep sitting up in the troop truck. The next, he was underneath a pile of bodies and in the dark. Men screamed in terror. Was he dead? Was this hell? Darkness and torture forever?

“Come on!” Quackenboss yelled. “We need to get out of here and fight! If you're alive, crawl out and fight! Come to my light!”

Jason tried to search for the light, but he couldn't see anything through the forest of writhing limbs. He heard gunfire and the occasional bullet would tear through the canvass of the truck. Jason felt sticky wetness drip down onto his neck.

Jason took stock of his situation. He had to be in an ambush. The truck must have crashed and it was now on its side. The bodies that were crushing him were also protecting him from incoming fire. Occasional rounds made wet slaps into the bodies above him. Paradoxically, the safest place he could possibly be was right where he was... unless the truck caught on fire. He would have to play this carefully.

“Wolf!” Quackenboss yelled. “Are you in there?”

Jason weighed his options. If he called out, Quackenboss might pull him free and into whatever malstrom was going on outside the truck. But if he stayed put, he might never push through the forest of bodies and could die crushed at the bottom of the pile.

The pace of fire from the initial ambush was slacking and this might give them a fighting chance.

“Yeah, Quack.” Jason called out. “I’m here.”

“Keep talking!” Quackenboss said. “I’ll find you.”

“Who’s left alive?” Jason asked.

“I can’t find Zweimer,” Quackenboss said. “I pulled out two guys - Vandelaro and Carlson. They’re pulling security on the south side of the truck. I think Carlson’s arm is broken. Keep talking. What did you used to like to do before the revolution?”

Quackenboss' voice sounded closer. Jason didn't hear any more shots being fired.

"Minecraft," Jason said. "I used to play Minecraft... survival mode. My dad bought me a computer."

"Keep talking."

"And I used to go to get Krispy Kreme with my dad on the weekends."

"What else Jason?" Quackenboss said. "Tell me about your parents."

"My dad owned some theaters. My mom was an actress."

"Like a movie actress?"

Quackenboss' voice was directly above him.

"I think so," Jason said.

Jason felt the weight on his chest lighten. Quackenboss grunted as he moved the bodies. Jason finally saw a light and he extended his hand.

"Are you hurt?" Quackenboss asked.

"I don't think so," Jason responded.

Quackenboss pulled Jason free from the tangle of bodies.

"Praise be you're alive." Quackenboss said.

"I lost my rifle," Jason replied.

"Pick one up," Quackenboss motioned around the overturned truck. "It's not like any of them are zeroed."

It was getting darker, but there was still light cascading through the rectangular opening of the truck canvass. Streaks of light from bullet holes shown through what

was now the side of the truck. Jason grabbed a rifle from a dead man as he crawled over the bodies toward the tailgate.

“Over here,” someone whispered as he crept his way out. Jason looked to see Vandelaro, who had taken cover on the south side of the truck. “Get over here.” Vandelaro said as he motioned to the back of the truck. “They’re all up on the rise above us.”

Jason hurried over to the back of the truck. There he saw Carlson squatting and holding his rifle with one hand. The man’s left arm was cocked at a strange angle.

Quackenboss appeared from around the side of the truck. He took a knee in the center of his small formation.

“Ok, guys,” Quackenboss whispered. “I don’t know what just happened but the next thing they’re going to do is assault through. I think they hit us from the north on that cliff up there. We need to move south.”

“Then what?” Jason asked. “Where were we even going?”

“There’s got to be someone in charge left alive,” Quackenboss said. “But we need to leave now.”

Jason surveyed his surroundings. They were at the tail end of the convoy right where the road cut started to cut through the mountain. They were about 100 yards from some scrub forest on the south side of the road. They could make it... and then do what? They didn’t even know where they were.

Their ambushers made the decision for them.

The four Marines were suddenly surrounded by thin, haggard rebels, all of whom yelled at the guardians to drop their weapons and raise their hands.

Jason and the rest of the Marines complied. Quackenboss's bravado instantly slipped away with this twist of fate.

Carlson tried his best to raise his wounded arm and when he couldn't, one of the gaunt looking rebels shot him dead.

"You monsters! Unbelievers! He had a broken arm!" Quackenboss screamed.

"Shut yer mouth less you wanna be next wit a bullet in yer haid?" One of the rebels said. "No. Ait nobody got somethin' to say? Come on then, walk. Keeper hands up."

The three Marines were escorted away from the overturned truck. They were stopped and forced to kneel with their hands on their head in the center of the road. Fires licked from the remaining trucks. Jason smelled burning rubber and strangely... barbeque. The concrete of the highway dug into Jason's knees. He was afraid, but the situation in front of him strangely felt like it was happening to someone else.

Jason saw three men approach. One was an older man who looked to be in his sixties. Following him were two well-fed but surprisingly short younger men. One of those men was black.

"Any of you boys wounded?" The black man asked.

None of the Marines spoke.

"My name is Lieutenant Orr of the U.S. Army," the black man said. "You can talk. We're not going to hurt you."

"We're hungry," Jason said.

The other short, well-fed man spoke.

"Where were you headed?" The man asked.

"We don't know," Jason said. "We don't even know where we are."

One of the thin rebels chimed in:

"Shoot, they don't know nothin."

The old man spoke up.

"You in Laurel County," The old man said. "And all your friends is dead so you best not walk before folks."

Jason didn't know what that meant, but the old man got his point across. The old man pulled the short, white, well fed man aside. The two appeared to argue quietly for a moment. The younger white man gave up. He turned around and approached the pair.

"Look, guys," The young man said. "I can't do much about what's going to happen next, but if you have any family, I can try to get word back to them. What are your names?"

"What's gonna happen?" Jason asked.

The man shook his head.

"I'm sorry," The man said. "I'll make sure it's quick and it won't hurt."

Vandelaro and Quackenboss began to pray aloud.

"Can you give me something to eat before you do it?" Jason asked.

Jason had faced death so many times before, what was one more?

"I'm not gonna do it," the man said. "They are. But if you have family-"

"Can I have some food?" Jason asked again.

"I have some cornbread," The man said as he reached into a cargo pocket on his black uniform pants. The man held out the cornbread. Jason hesitated removing his hands from his head.

"It's okay," the man said.

Jason took the cornbread. He ate. It was crumbled, but fluffy and golden and sweet. It tasted like heaven.

The black man who called himself Lieutenant Orr approached. He took the well-fed white man by the arm and whispered something into his ear.

"I'm not going to be a part of this," Lieutenant Orr said. "I can't."

The black man stormed away.

A shot rang out. Quackenboss suddenly stopped praying. Vandelaro prayed even louder.

Jason looked at the well-fed man in front of him.

"Thank you," Jason said. "For my food. I think my dad's still alive. My dad. He was in Hawaii, but -"

Another shot.

The noise of Vandelaro's body hitting the ground sounded like someone had dropped a large steak on a kitchen floor.

"You might wanna back a ways from him there, Captain." A voice said from behind Jason.

"Give me a minute, Travis." The man said as he took out a notepad. "What's his name?"

"Marty Wolf," Jason said. "My name's Jason."

“Jason?” the man said. “My name is Captain Andrew Moore. I’ll get word to your dad. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Jason said. “I’m not hungry anymore.”

Chapter 9 : Danger Close

Roswell, Georgia. Republic of Gilead.

It had taken hours, but Puddles had finally made it to the golf course. She set up a small nest sight within eyesight of a brackish pond. Oddly enough, the golf course had not been converted to farmland, so its tall weeds made an excellent hiding place. Puddles figured she could make some snares and catch rabbits if she had to be there awhile.

Puddles knew that her stunt at the shed probably bought her some time. Anyone who wanted to come after her now would also know that they were facing a very dangerous adversary. She hoped that the guardians and commanders sent her way would whistle past the graveyard and keep far away from the most obvious place she would be.

Puddles tried her radio.

“Mayday, mayday, mayday. Any station this net, any station this net, this is Puddles AOBV transmitting in the blind on guard.”

Puddles released the transmit key. With nightfall, the Search and Rescue craft would definitely be out looking for her. She wondered if she could find a nearby tree and set up some kind of antenna to increase the range of her signal.

She tried the radio again.

“Mayday, mayday, mayday. Any station this net, any station this net, this is Puddles AOBV transmitting in the blind on guard.”

A sound came from the speaker on the radio. Puddle's heart leapt.

"LAST CALLING STATION SAY AGAIN OVER."

The voice on the other end didn't have a Dutch accent, but the man on the radio could very well be one of the few American contractors who had crossed enemy lines as mercenaries. But she would trade histories later. She keyed her radio mic.

"This is Puddles AOBV transmitting in the blind on guard. I was shot down northwest over Roswell, Georgia. Over."

"COPY PUDDLES. THIS IS REDEMPTION 64. WAIT. OUT."

Puddles looked at the radio. Wait? She wanted to get back on the radio and demand that they get her the fuck out of there, but they were probably checking with flight operations to verify her location. She knew she was right when the radio sounded again.

"PUDDLES THIS IS REDEMPTION 64. AUTHENTICATOR."

"Dividend. Velvet." Puddles responded.

"COPY DIVIDEND VELVET. WHERE DID YOU GO TO COLLEGE?"

"Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences. Over."

"COPY. WHAT IS YOUR MOTHER'S MAIDEN NAME?"

"Van Munster," Puddles replied.

"WAIT OUT."

Puddles waited for what seemed like an eternity.

"COPY. PUDDLES. WHAT IS YOUR LOCATION? OVER."

“I don’t have an exact coordinate. Break.” Puddles released the handset. She resumed talking. “I am near the pond of an old golf course. To my south there is a six-lane highway. I crossed over a two lane road on my way here. Over.”

“CAN YOU FIRE A FLARE, OVER?”

Puddles didn’t want to fire off a flare until the rescue bird was close enough to pick her up. But there was another way to get bearings on the helicopter.

“Negative,” Puddles said. “The locals are a little restless. Can you pop? Over.”

“WAIT. OUT.”

Puddles waited.

“PUDDLES. WE’RE CLIMBING TO ANGLES 2. WILL FIRE FLARES.”

Puddles saw two yellow flares blossom a few miles northeast of her position. She immediately keyed her radio.

“Redemption 64. I see flares northeast of my pos. Turn to heading 225.”

“ROGER. 225.”

Puddles heard the sound of rotors approaching. Her heart leapt in her flight suit. This would all be over soon.

“Firing red flair,” Puddles said into her radio.

“ROGER RED FLAIR.”

Puddle pulled an emergency flare from her survival kit. She removed the safety cap and fired the flare straight up.

“COPY RED FLAIR. DO YOU HAVE ANY WHITE ILLUMINATORS?”

“Roger,” Puddles said.

“ANY OBSTACLES ON THE LZ?”

“There’s some houses to my west. No power lines.”

“COPY. FIRE THE WHITE ILLUMINATOR.”

Puddles fired a white parachute flare. This would illuminate the landing zone for forty seconds, but she only had one. If anyone from Gilead was waiting to attack, now would be the time they would start shooting.

The parachute flare took some time to get up to altitude. When it exploded, the golf course was bathed in an eerie flickering white light. She saw that the rescue helicopter that was now swooping into land was an Osprey. That was strange. She didn’t recall AOBV flying Ospreys. Maybe it was a captured one put to use by Gilead?

The Osprey turned around and touched down about 100 yards from her position. Puddles stood and made the dash of her life for the rear ramp of the aircraft.

Puddles watched a crewman exit the ramp with a rifle. The crewman pointed the rifle at her.

“Halt!” The crewman yelled when Puddles was about 20 feet away from freedom. The man held up a hand. Another crewman exited the ramp. The second crewman approached her carefully.

“Do you have any weapons?” The second crewman asked in perfect English.

How odd. Did everybody on this flight go to school in American before the war?

“No weapons,” Puddles answered. She had left her hatchet and survival knife back with her rescue kit.

“I have to check you,” the man said. “Put your arms out.”

The crewman ran his hands along her arms, legs and torso. Satisfied, the man yelled.

“Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

Puddles ran with him toward the waiting ramp of the Osprey. She gasped as her boots hit the hard metal. The ramp was going up and the bird started lifting off as soon as she climbed aboard.

Puddle’s eyes adjusted to the green interior light of the Osprey’s cabin. She collapsed into a nylon jump seat and got her bearings. The crewman who had searched her was still at her side.

It was then that Puddles noticed the crewman was wearing an American flag on his flight suit.

Wel verdomme?

The crewman held up a pair of flexible handcuffs.

“Do I need to put these on you?” The crewman asked. “Or are you going to play nice?”

Puddles shook her head.

“I won’t fight you,” She said. “How did you know my authenticator?”

“We didn’t,” The crewman said. “We just wanted to make sure you were really a shot-down pilot so we followed all the steps.”

Puddles looked around the cabin. She saw what looked to her like a middle-eastern man with a moustache being tended to by medics. The man looked at her and gave her a big grin as he mouthed the words: “I got you.”

Bullion Repository. Ft. Knox, Kentucky. Republic of Gilead.

The paratroopers of the 1st Nauvoo Airborne Battalion had spent the night in a fitful sleep. The grand counter-attack from the Sons of Jacob had never arrived, but with the morning came a new challenge. Hundreds of econopeople had surrounded the bullion repository. They carried old rolling suitcases or duffle bags. They lined the fence surrounding the compound and begged to be evacuated.

Something had to be done.

Private Josh Akers watched the growing crowd with growing concern. Mothers held up babies and toddlers, begging the soldiers from two football fields away to at least take their children with them. The pressure against the fence was growing. Sooner or later, the econopeople would push the fence down and break into the compound. This would lead the mass of refugees straight into the minefield that surrounded the building. Sergeant Hale was called up to a platoon meeting to discuss what to do, leaving Specialist Castro in charge of the Bravo team.

“How many do you think that is?” Private Smith asked as she looked at the crowd.

More econopeople were arriving every few minutes, adding to the swarm.

“I learned about this in riot control training back before,” Specialist Castro said. In a dense crowd, each person occupies about 4.5 square feet. The fence line is about 700 feet. They’re taking up half of that. The crowd is about 10 feet deep. If I round it up to five, that’s about 500 to 700 people out there. More, since some of them are carrying kids.”

“How are we going to evacuate that many people?” Private Smith asked, “That would take like... 10 planes.”

“We’re not...” Specialist Castro said. “We’re not going to save them. Well, maybe we’ll take a few kids but we’re not going to save all of them. But we can’t let them know that. That’s probably what Sergeant Hale is talking about right now.”

“So what are we going to do?” Private Akers asked.

“I don’t know,” Specialist Castro said. “I think it’s too late to tell them to go back to their homes.”

Sergeant Hale returned from his meeting. The paratroopers of Bravo Team looked at him expectantly.

“Ok, guys.” Sergeant Hale said. “The CO just put it out. Now that we’ve got that Osprey Mongoose overhead we’ll be able to see a counterattack coming. Our squad’s gonna egress this location. We’re gonna go down to the fence line and try to get those people in a line along Bullion Boulevard. Battalion is going to try to find busses or something to take these people to the flight line. If the Ospreys see contact, we’re gonna beat feet back up here. We’re not playing favorites. Battalion says they have enough lift for everybody.”

“How is that possible?” Specialist Castro asked.

“That’s what I was told,” Sergeant Hale said. “Police up your stuff.”

Private Akers looked at the Javelin missile tube that was now leaning against the parapet. He sighed as he picked up the heavy launcher tube. He would have to carry the darn thing around again. The squad took one quick look around the roof of the building, for anything that could have been left behind. Finding nothing, they followed

Sergeant Hale back into the bullion repository stairwell where they linked up with their squad. Now the troopers began the long walk down the stairs to the bullion repository lobby. They got a glimpse of the operation as they passed the loading dock doors - a mix of engineers and civilian employees guided forklifts to trucks. Each forklift pallet was only stacked five rows high.

“Why don’t they bring out more at a time?” Private Akers asked his team.

“Imagine that’s a bar of lead,” Sergeant Hale responded. “Gold’s heavy. This is why it’s taking so long.”

The operation was a finely tuned machine. Gold was loaded into trucks, driven out to the airfield, and every 20 minutes another C-130 or C-17 landed, loaded up and took off. The workers were obviously exhausted from laboring all night. As the squad of paratroopers passed through the doors outside, the soldiers saw a small group of families with luggage waiting in the shade next to the loading dock.

Private Akers assumed the small group of econopeople were the families of the workers. Maybe some people were going to be saved after all?

“Don’t step off the concrete,” Staff Sergeant Kimball yelled. “There’s still mines!”

The platoon crept around the side of the building, picking their way through shards of blasted concrete and in some cases bodies and parts of bodies. The squad moved southeast down the access road toward a small group of soldiers who had blocked the main entrance behind the chain-link gate with a dump truck that had probably come from the airfield. Throngs of desperate grey-outfitted econopeople stood on the other side of the gate.

A soldier at the gate handed Staff Sergeant Kimball a megaphone.

“My name is Staff Sergeant Kimball of the Utah National Guard. We’re going to save all of you, but you have to back up to the road. Back up to Bullion Boulevard and get in a line. We have busses coming to pick you up.”

Nobody moved.

“Hale, Check that truck,” Staff Sergeant Kimball said. “Maybe they’ve got a reflective vest inside.”

Sergeant Hale looked confused, but he climbed into the cab of the truck. Hale searched around for a moment and emerged with two yellow safety vests.

“I got two of them,” Sergeant Hale said.

“Put one on,” Staff Sergeant Kimball said. “And give me the other. Climb up on top of the cab.”

The two climbed up on top of the dump truck’s engine cover. They pulled on the yellow fluorescent vests over their body armor. Staff Sergeant Kimball addressed the crowd through the megaphone again.

“Attention! Attention! We will evacuate you! Follow me!”

Staff Sergeant Kimball handed off the megaphone to Sergeant Hale.

“Keep telling them to follow me,” Staff Sergeant Kimball said and he climbed down from the dump truck. Staff Sergeant Kimball motioned back to the rest of his paratroopers. “Follow me! Let’s get this crowd toward the road.”

Sergeant Hale took up the announcement. Staff Sergeant Hale unlatched the gate and surprisingly, the crowd followed him up the access road toward Bullion Boulevard. Private Akers and the rest of the paratroopers followed, corralling the

econopeople toward the road as Sergeant Hale kept announcing from the top of the dump truck.

Staff Sergeant Kimball reached Bullion Boulevard. He then turned left and the crowd followed. Now Private Akers understood what was going on. A building that had probably once been a visitors center lay about 300 yards to the northeast. The access roads around the visitor's center would provide an easy turnaround point for any busses or trucks.

The econopeople moved slowly under the burden of exhausted children. Occasionally, people dropped their luggage, making little islands in the sea of people moving toward the visitor's center.

When they reached the visitor's center, the squad organized the mob into orderly rows of 60 people each. This process took time, but the econopeople were used to waiting in line and following instructions. Most of the econopeople sat on the ground. Many of them had brought food and they shared it with others who had none. The few children in the group looked exhausted.

Sergeant Hale finally caught up with the rest of the platoon. He pulled his fire team aside once the econopeople were organized.

"We just got to keep them here for another hour or so," Sergeant Hale said to his paratroopers. "They're loading the last of the gold now."

"Are they coming with us?" Private Akers asked.

Sergeant Hale looked back at the orderly lines of econopeople. He shrugged.

"I don't know. I guess they have a plan."

"Are we gonna leave them here?" Private Smith asked.

“All I know is we had to get them away from the building,” Sergeant Hale said.

“Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord,” Private Smith said. “Proverbs. 12:22.”

“Private,” Sergeant Hale said. “I don’t know what’s going to happen. All I know is if we leave them here, they may die. But if we try to take them with us, they’ll all most certainly die because it’s going to take longer to get them out. There’s probably units with armor heading here at this very moment. We’ve got to pick up and go. With this gold, we win the war and we set them free. But I don’t know. Smarter people than me thought of this plan. The captain told us to organize them in groups of 60 so my guess is they have a passenger bus coming here right now.”

“If we don’t,” Specialist Castro said. “*Dios los ayude.*”

Castro wandered back over to the econopeople. He reached into his pockets and pulled out some of the candies that he had taken from the mess hall a few days before. He gave out the candies to inquisitive children, some of whom had never tasted chocolate before. Some of the other paratroopers in his squad did the same.

Private Akers suddenly felt ashamed.

“What’s wrong,” Private Smith asked.

“We’re lying to them,” Private Akers said. “This is wicked. We’re giving them candy and we’re just going to leave them here. When I die, I want to be in the place of exaltation. This is just... cruel. We’re giving them hope.”

“Look,” Private Smith said while pointing to the south. “Hope.”

An aging grey government bus trundled down Bullion Boulevard from the north. The bus pulled into the visitor’s center. A paratrooper with a shotgun got off the bus and

motioned the first group aboard while a second paratrooper remained behind the wheel. A second bus followed close behind.

Private Akers recognized the paratrooper with the shotgun as a master sergeant from the Nauvoo battalion's headquarters company. The man waved the first group of people onto the bus. Staff Sergeant Kimball walked over to speak with the man.

"This is going easier than I thought," the master sergeant said. "Good job with this Paul. What's with the vest? Are you doing some PT?"

"Thought it would be easier for them to follow me," Staff Sergeant Kimball responded.

Staff Sergeant Kimball's radio beeped with a message.

"ONE-TWO. ONE-TWO THIS IS ONE-SIX. OVER."

Staff Sergeant Kimball keyed the radio handset that was attached to his gear.

"This is one-two. Over." Staff Sergeant Kimball said.

"FAST MOVERS SPOTTED A LIGHT COMPANY OF ENEMY ARMOUR MOVING NORTH UP ROUTE 31 WEST. BREAK. TWO TANKS. EIGHT APCs. SET UP AN AMBUSH AT THE CLOVERLEAF. THEY ARE ABOUT THREE ZERO MIKES OUT."

"Gosh darn it," Staff Sergeant Kimball out loud. He keyed the radio mic. "Copy. We got Air? Over?"

"WE'RE SENDING A JTAC OUT TO THE CLOVERLEAF RIGHT NOW."

"Copy. En route. Out." Staff Sergeant Kimball released his handset.

"You better take that bright yellow vest off, Paul." The master sergeant suggested.

“You know, I was just thinking that,” Staff Sergeant Kimball said as he shimmied out of the yellow vest, letting it drop to the pavement. He turned around to address his paratroopers.

“Okay, FRAGO. We got Dingbat armor headed up Route 31. Two tanks and eight APCs. We need to head down to the cloverleaf and set up an ambush. They’ll be here in 30 mikes.”

The squad let out a collective groan. Each paratrooper carried one AT-4 short range anti-tank rocket and the squad had Private Aker’s medium range Javelin system with two rounds. Paratroopers were hard to scare, but fighting enemy tanks wasn’t their strong suit.

“Did you ever see a Mexican speed bump?” Specialist Castro said as he held up his hands and pointed his fingers at himself.

“Well, the good news is we got air coming,” Staff Sergeant Kimball said.

“Need help?” The master sergeant asked.

“No. Master sergeant. We got it. Can you stay here and handle the evac?”

The master sergeant nodded.

“Let’s go,” Staff Sergeant Kimball said as he trotted south down Bullion Boulevard. Private Akers took a breath and jogged after him. The Javelin tube smashed against his back with every step.

The squad was teetering on the edge of exhaustion, but they did as all soldiers did when they had no choice. They dug deep and kept moving.

“You know,” Specialist Castro gasped as he jogged. “I always intended to die at the ripe old age of 95 after being shot by an *esposo celoso*.”

“It’s good to have goals,” Sergeant Hale wheezed.

It took ten minutes to reach the cloverleaf intersection. When they reached the intersection, all of the soldiers gulped down water from canteens or Camelbaks as Staff Sergeant Kimball surveyed the area. A concrete railroad overpass lay across the road and the west side of the highway had some dense forest. The highway bent to the right about 200 yards down the road, which would provide a perfect spot to ambush.

“That’s our cover,” Staff Sergeant Kimball said as he pointed to the spot on the west side of the highway where the concrete railroad overpass sprouted from the earth. “We’ll initiate the ambush here. Akers, you go for the tanks first. Everyone else, fire your AT-4s at the APCs. Then we can maneuver through the woods to the west if we have to break contact. Everybody got it?”

The squad nodded.

“Team leads,” Staff Sergeant Kimball said. “If I send up a red star cluster, it means things have gone to heck. Break contact west through the woods. Cross the far road and head north to the airfield.”

Staff Sergeant Kimball finally took a long drink from his canteen.

“Okay. Follow me.”

The squad crossed the highway and climbed the small knoll at the far side of the railroad bridge. Staff Sergeant Kimball set the squad up with Bravo Team on his left and Alpha Team on the right with Private Akers directly next to him.

Private Akers opened the carrying case for the Javelin’s Command Launch Unit or “CLU.” He inserted a battery into the CLU and attached the CLU to his missile tube. He ran through the weapon through a self test. A soldier from Alpha team dropped off a

second missile. Private Akers disconnected the CLU and repeated the process with the second missile tube.

“Everything good? Staff Sergeant Kimball asked.

“No faults on the CLU.”

“I mean are you okay?” Staff Sergeant Kimball asked.

Private Akers thought about this for a moment. He wasn’t scared anymore. After seeing the mangled bodies on the Bullion Repository roof and the slaughter of innocent econopeople, this just seemed like another trial to endure. Private Akers didn’t feel good or bad. He didn’t feel frightened or euphoric. He felt ambivalent.

“You know, sergeant.” Private Akers said. “I had a science teacher who told us that Einstein thought that time was a series of boxes. So the past, present and future all exist at once. It’s like a movie file. The whole movie file exists at once. You can fast forward or you can reverse. But the ending of the movie already exists and has always existed. So Einstein thought that what we do doesn’t matter because the ending has already happened.”

“You don’t really believe that, do you?” Staff Sergeant Kimball said. “That sounds contrary to the teachings of the church. That means no free will.”

“I’m not sure what I believe right now,” Private Akers said. “But I believe in the Heavenly Father and I believe that men are accountable for their acts.”

“He sent his Son to walk with men on earth, that we may know,” Staff Sergeant Kimball said. “Right now you need to believe in that Javelin. So let’s see how this movie ends together.”

“Vehicle from the rear,” Sergeant Hale broke into the conversation.

An ancient yellow airport service pickup truck crossed over the clover leaf from the north. It stopped for a moment. Sergeant Hale waved. The vehicle sped back up and drove directly to the rail bridge where it stopped again. A man in Air Force camouflage got out of the truck with a large radio and a rifle.

“Are you guys One-Two Bravo Company?” The man yelled from the road.

“Yeah,” Staff Sergeant Kimball said.

“I’m Technical Sergeant Kearnan. I’ll be your air controller today. Are we setting up here?”

“It’s the best ambush point,” Staff Sergeant Kimball replied.

“For you, maybe.” Technical Sergeant Kearnan said. He slapped the door and the pickup truck made a u-turn and headed back up north. Technical Sergeant Kearnan walked up the embankment toward the squad. He offered his hand to Staff Sergeant Kimball.

“Hi. I’m Todd,” He said.

Staff Sergeant Kimball shook the hand.

“Sergeant Kimball.”

The JTAC stood up and looked south. He pointed at some buildings about 300 yards away.

“I got two F-16s with six Mark 84’s loitering up there. I figure I got a straight shot down that road if you can give me a security element to move to that cluster of buildings.”

“You can’t do it from here?” Staff Sergeant Kimball asked.

“With all due respect to your pointy sticks,” Technical Sergeant Kearnan said as he gestured at Private Aker’s Javelin. “I can drop 12,000 pounds of freedom on those tanks. From that cluster of buildings over there I can see a mile down the road. If I do my job you won’t need that bottle rocket there.”

“Okay... Todd.” Staff Sergeant Kimball said. “You can take my Alpha Team with you.” Staff Sergeant Kimball addressed the Alpha Team. “Alpha, leave two of your AT-4s here and head over to those buildings with the JTAC. If the Dingbats get any closer than 500 meters, break contact back here. If you see a yellow star cluster, break contact back here. If you see a red star cluster, break contact back to the airfield. That hasn’t changed. If you hit contact on your way over, break contact back here. If we hit contact, which probably won’t happen, I’ll fire a red star cluster and you guys break contact back to the airfield. Any questions?”

The Alpha Team shook their heads.

“If something doesn’t feel right, you head back here. Let me know when you get there.”

The Alpha Team and the JTAC took off south.

Private Akers watched them go.

A passenger aircraft appeared in the distance, escorted by two F-16s. As it approached from the south, the team noticed that the plane was a small JetBlue commuter plane. The two F-16s peeled away from the jet and circled lazily above as the passenger jet came in to land at the airfield.

“Looks like our ride home is here,” Private Smith said. “It looks real small.”

“They probably can’t use a large civilian bird since the runway’s so short,” Sergeant Hale said. “Hey, look forward, not back. We gotta worry about what’s coming down that road, not what’s landing at that airport.”

The JTAC and the Alpha Team reported that they were set, but there was still no sign of the convoy.

A second civilian plane flew overhead toward the airport.

Staff Sergeant Kimball’s radio crackled with a message from the Alpha Team.

“ONE-TWO THIS IS ONE-TWO ALPHA. OVER.”

“Send it,” Staff Sergeant Kimball said.

“WE HAVE TWO TANKS, EIGHT APCS, FOUR HUMVEE GUN TRUCKS AND FOUR SOFT SKIN TRUCKS APPROACHING UP THE HIGHWAY. BREAK. THE TANKS LOOK LIKE OLD M-60S AND THE APCS ARE 113S. BREAK. JTAC IS CALLING IN AIR NOW.”

The tanks and personnel carrier vehicles described by Alpha Team were vintage army equipment from the 1970’s and were a lot older than what was being used on the front lines of Florida and Utah. Private Akers wondered if it was all they could get running, or if the Dingbats were throwing up old equipment first to eat up ammunition before finishing the paratroopers off with a killing blow from more modern weapons.

The air reverberated with the sound of a fighter jet engine. An F-16 flew low, down the highway then it pulled straight up. Six plumes of dust rose into the air. Five seconds later, the rumble of bomb detonations thundered through the sky. A second F-16 followed and it added its bombs to the carnage.

“ONE-TWO THIS IS ONE-TWO ALPHA. OVER.”

Staff Sergeant Kimball keyed his radio mic to respond to the message.

“Send it. Alpha.”

“BDA FOLLOWS. BREAK. ONE TANK DESTROYED. TWO APCs ARE HIT AND ON FIRE. TWO OR THREE SOFT SKIN TRUCKS DESTROYED. THE F-16S ARE WINCHESTER AND RTB.”

“Copy Alpha,” Staff Sergeant Kimball said. “Fall back.”

“ROGER. MOVING. OUT.”

The Alpha Team and Technical Sergeant Kearnan sprinted back to the railroad bridge.

“What do we do now?” The JTAC asked in a panic when he arrived with Alpha Team. “They ain’t stopping for shit!”

“Watch your language,” Staff Sergeant Kimball said. “Do you have any more air? Anything else?”

“I’ve got a Mongoose refueling at the airfield,” Technical Sergeant Kearnan said. “But they won’t launch for another 30 minutes at least. We need to get out of here!”

“You can go,” Staff Sergeant Kimball said as he pointed north. “The airfield’s that way. If you want to go, do it now while you can still cross the highway. We’re staying here. But if you stay, you fight.”

The JTAC looked up the road toward the cloverleaf as he made the mental calculation, weighing whether he could make it across the road before the murderous convoy arrived. He hesitated.

“What do I do?” Technical Sergeant Kearnan asked.

“Stay with the Alpha Team,” Staff Sergeant Kimball said. “When they start shooting, just shoot in the same direction. Maybe try to raise that Mongoose and get them in the air a little faster.”

The JTAC nodded. He pulled out his radio and began to work his magic.

Private Akers could hear the convoy now. A slow, steady growl came from the south. They would turn past the bend of the road any second now.

When the Dingbat M-60 tank rolled into view, Private Akers was struck with the notion that the vehicle looked like a potato on tracks. That model vehicle was decades behind the modern, angular M1A1 tanks that dueled each other in the deserts of Utah. Had Gilead moved all of the working tanks to combat zones? Was this ancient, 1970's monster the only thing they could get working?

“Backblast area clear!” Private Akers yelled.

Private Akers lined the tank up in the tracking gates of his Javelin. He fired.

The missile popped out of the tube with a noticeable “thunk.” The missile hung in the air a few yards in front of the launcher for a moment before the main engine fired. The missile bounded skyward immediately, hit its apogee and dove down onto the tank like an eagle pouncing on a rabbit.

The missile hit the tank with a puff of dust and the tank kept rolling. Private Akers disconnected the CLU from the launch tube and was in the process of connecting the second shot when the tank exploded with such force that the turret of the vehicle popped off the hull. The 17 ton turret flew about ten yards into the air, before falling onto the tank again where it rolled off the vehicle and came to rest upside down on the

highway. The sound of a gigantic frying pan hitting the kitchen floor reverberated up the road.

An armored Humvee with a bug-like remote weapons station was about fifty yards behind the tank. The Humvee stopped. The remote weapons station made tiny movements as it searched for Private Akers and his squad.

The squad was supposed to have fired their light AT-4 rockets at any other vehicles in range on the road, but everyone was dumbstruck watching the burning tank and flaming turret that was now upside down and rocking from side to side from the inertia of the fall.

“What are you waiting for?” Staff Sergeant Kimbal yelled. “Light him up!”

Private Smith and Sergeant Hale came to a knee and fired their rockets at the Humvee. The two rockets made the 200 meter trip in seconds. One rocket bounced off the highway and ricocheted into a guardrail. The other rocket slammed directly into the engine of the vehicle in a cloud of dust and flame. The Humvee didn’t explode. The driver’s side door opened up and a guardian tumbled out, crawling away from the vehicle. Another soldier exited the rear, left passenger side and ran around in circles.

Specialist Castro opened up on the cluster of men with his SAW. Yellow traces reached out of his light machine gun, stabbing at the man on the ground, who simply stopped moving. The other guardian continued to run in circles until Specialist Castro’s tracers ended his race to nowhere.

“Oh, you don’t like that, *pendejo*?” Specialist Castro said. “Ain’t so tough when we shootin’ back.”

No other vehicles appeared from around the bend of the highway, but from the sound of running engines, there had to be a few vehicles left.

Private Akers connected his CLU onto his remaining Javelin tube. Sergeant Kimball took inventory. They had exactly two AT-4 anti-tank rockets and one Javelin left and if the math was right, there were still six APCs, three gun trucks and a few wheeled cargo trucks that carried an unknown number of troops out there. Everyone in the squad came to the realization that they should have waited until more of the vehicles were in the kill zone. Now the SoJ troops and vehicles were 300 yards ahead of him and behind a hill where they could possibly fire and maneuver against his tiny squad.

“How’s that air coming?” Staff Sergeant Kimball asked the JTAC.

Technical Sergeant Kearnan had his radio mic plastered up against his ear. He shook his head.

“Okay,” Staff Sergeant Kimball said. “We’re going to fall back 100 meters south into the woods. But first, I want the grenadiers to fire three rounds of HE into that deadspace 300 meters away.”

Private Smith and her counterpart in Alpha Team took a knee. They fired their M203 grenade launchers blindly, relying on their sights and instinct to lob them over the small draw 300 yards away. The round exploded in dark clouds of dust that drifted over the hill. No secondary explosions came.

Suddenly, four box-like armored personnel carriers crested the small hill, gunning their engines like mad. Each of the vehicles had an unstabilized .50 caliber machine gun that the vehicle gunners fired wildly. Troops swarmed over the hill behind them, moving like black ants. Some of the guardians fired their weapons at the hip, hitting

nothing, but aiding in psyching themselves up. Most of the rounds went wild, flying over the heads of the squad.

Private Akers hugged the ground. He was comparatively safe behind the concrete railroad trestle bed, but if the Dingbats were rushing their position, that safety wouldn't last long.

Sergeant Hale pounded on Private Akers' Back.

"They're flanking us!" Sergeant Hale yelled. "Two Humvees up the road!"

Private Akers peaked his head above the concrete. Sure enough, two Humvees with large, angry heavy machine guns were picking their way through the debris of the two wrecked vehicles.

"Dang it!" Private Akers yelled.

"You go lead, I'll go trail!" Sergeant Hale said. "Make sure that thing is in direct attack!"

Private Akers took a knee and raised the Javelin to his eye. The lead Humvee was almost within minimum range. He selected the "direct attack mode" for the Javelin and fired as soon as the target was within the track gates.

Sergeant Hale fired his AT-4 at the trailing vehicle. The AT-4 reached the target first, but only hit a wheel, jerking the Humvee to the right and exposing the armored doors to the squad. The lead Humvee was obliterated in a ball of smoke and fire when it was hit by the Javelin.

Private Akers dropped the Javelin system, letting \$126,000 worth of pre-war equipment clatter to the ground. He grabbed his M-4 rifle. Sergeant Hale already has

his rifle in his hands and was firing at lame Humvee as he attempted to keep the crew from escaping the vehicle.

Someone from Alpha team fired their last remaining rocket, hitting one of the bounding armored personnel carriers. The carrier was enveloped in dust. It jerked left, running over some of the guardians that ran alongside it. Yellow flicks of flame erupted from the vehicle. There were still three of those monsters left and what seemed like hundreds of men now 200 yards from Private Akers' position.

The squad poured fire into the oncoming men. Some men were cut down, but nothing was stopping this tide.

"Alpha Team! Fall back into the woods!" Staff Sergeant Kimball yelled. "Bravo Team, cover!"

Private Akers fired his rifle like a madman at the oncoming wave as Alpha team and the JTAC made a mad dash for the woods a few meters away. All five of them made it, most likely due to the untrained fire from the Dingbats who were still closing in on them.

Staff Sergeant Kimball pulled a smoke grenade from a pouch on his armored vest.

"Popping smoke!" Staff Sergeant Kimball yelled. "I'll cover. Bravo Team move to the woodline!"

Staff Sergeant Kimball threw the smoke grenade at the gap between the woodline and the rail trestle. The grenade sparked and billowed out heavy white smoke.

"Move!" Sergeant Hale yelled.

Private Akers and his team picked up and dashed toward the woodline as bullets cracked around them.

“What about Sergeant Kimball?” Private Akers asked when they reached the woodline.

“He knows what he’s doing,” Sergeant Hale said.

The team moved about ten meters into the cover of the woods where they linked up with the Alpha team. The JTAC was yelling into his radio.

“Hey!” Technical Sergeant Kearnan yelled. “We got air.”

The sound of a Marine Osprey Mongoose gunship thundered overhead as the JTAC yelled into his radio.

“Grid Echo Golf 912924,” The JTAC yelled. “Immediate suppression. Troops and tanks in the open. Danger fucking close!”

Private Akers took a knee and faced the direction from where he came. Staff Sergeant Kimball was still kneeling by the concrete railroad bridge, firing his rifle at targets over the rise.

“We can’t leave him,” Private Smith yelled.

“We’re not!” Sergeant Hale replied.

The *crump crump crump* sound of the Mongoose’s side-firing 25mm cannon reverberated through the air followed by the heavy *berrrrrrr* of its Gatling guns carving up the open field. A single black-dressed guardian crested the hill, just feet from Staff Sergeant Kimball. The guardian raised his rifle at Staff Sergeant Kimball and fired. Staff Sergeant Kimball tumbled away from his position, rolling down the embankment. Several more guardians appeared at the top of the hill.

“Fire them up!” Sergeant Hale yelled.

Private Akers and the rest of his team raised their weapons and cut the guardians down.

“Push toward the hill!” Sergeant Hale yelled. “Alpha you cover!”

They were going back into that? Private Akers immediately felt guilt. Just a few minutes before he had resigned himself to death. Now he wanted nothing more than to live. But his team moved forward, led by Sergeant Hale, and Private Akers followed.

“Smith on Sergeant Kimball!” Sergeant Hale shouted. “Everyone else back up the hill.”

Private Smith jinked left toward the body of Staff Sergeant Kimball. Sergeant Hale, Specialist Castro and Private Akers moved back up the slope of the railroad bridge. Three guardians appeared at the top of the hill. All of them were weaponless and running like madmen. Specialist Castro gunned down two of them with his SAW. Private Akers shot the third one by reflex before he even realized the guardian didn’t have a weapon.

Why didn’t they have weapons?

The team reached the crest of the hill and hit the dirt. The sight beyond was complete carnage. Now Private Akers understood why the guardians had thrown away their weapons. The field was a mass of dead and wounded bodies in black uniforms. Four armored personnel carriers lay burning. The men who remained were all running back toward the highway. The Osprey Mongoose gunship flew high above making lazy left-hand circles above the battlefield. Three long guns protruded from the left side of the plane - two 7.62mm chain guns and one massive 25mm cannon. The chain guns

raked the retreating soldiers. Yellow traces flew in an almost continuous line like a laser beam toward the ground. Men exploded like their bodies had been made from balloons whenever one of the laser beams touched them. The aircraft's 25mm gun occasionally fired a three round burst into groups of soldiers, blowing bodies and parts of bodies high into the air. Some soldiers tried to play dead, only to be blown apart by the Mongoose when they rose to make a run for what they thought might be safety.

"Those who remain filthy go into everlasting torment," Sergeant Hale said as he watched the carnage unfold in front of him.

"Second Book of Nephi," Private Akers said.

"Austin 3:16 says I just whooped your ass," Specialist Castro replied. He waited for a rebuke from Sergeant Hale. "What? Nothing to say, Sergeant?"

"No... No, I think that time it's appropriate." Sergeant Hale said. He looked over his shoulder at Private Smith. "How's he doing?"

Specialist Smith knelt next to Staff Sergeant Kimball's body. She was surrounded by the detritus of sterile wrappers and first aid dressings.

"We need an evac," Private Smith said. "He's out cold. His right arm's messed up. Right leg too. He's bleeding from somewhere else, I can't find it."

"Akers go help her," Sergeant Hale said.

Akers trotted back down the hill to Staff Sergeant Kimball's lifeless body. The sergeant's skin was white. Private Smith had cut away the right sleeve and right pant leg of the sergeant's uniform. His right bicep had a huge chunk of flesh missing and Private Akers could see down to the bone. Private Smith had already placed a tourniquet around the arm and the blood had slowed to a trickle. Staff Sergeant

Kimbal's right leg looked a little better. Smith had just placed a pressure dressing over one bullet wound.

"How is he?" Private Akers asked.

"I... I don't know." Private Smith said. "Bullet wound in his arm. His leg too. I can't find any other wounds but he's bleeding from somewhere. Help me turn him over."

Private Akers scrambled to the side of the body. He pulled Staff Sergeant Kimball on his left side as Private Smith inspected the sergeant's back.

"I got nothing!" Private Smith said.

Private Akers noticed blood cascade down over Staff Sergeant Kimball's face as if someone had poured it from a bowl.

"His helmet," Private Akers said.

There was a tiny hole in the helmet by the right temple.

"Should we take it off?" Private Smith asked.

"I don't know," Private Akers said. "It could be holding in his brain. He's still breathing. Head wounds always look worse than they seem so..."

"Roll him back down," Private Smith said. She placed her ear over his mouth. "Yeah he's still breathing."

Private Smith wet a cravat with some canteen water. She cleaned the blood off of Staff Sergeant Kimball's face.

"What's going on?" Sergeant Hale called from the rail trestle.

"He's hit in the arm, leg and head," Private Smith yelled. "I can't take off his helmet. We need an evac now."

The JTAC and Alpha Team came out of the woodline.

“Yeah, about that.” Technical Sergeant Kearnan. “The last plane left about ten minutes ago.”

“We’re stuck here!” Private Smith screamed.

“No,” Technical Sergeant Kearnan said. “The Marines in the Mongoose said they would take us, but they won’t land until we sanitize the field. They don’t want anyone playing dead and shooting a missile at them.”

“Missile?” Private Akers said. “Half these guys didn’t even have weapons!”

“He’s gonna die if we don’t get him out of here soon,” Private Smith said.

“Then I’ll stay with him,” Technical Sergeant Kearnan said. “You guys need to walk across that field and shoot everybody who’s left alive.”

“That’s a war crime,” Sergeant Hale said. “And anyway that’s 300 yards across. It will take us all day! How much fuel they got? Enough to hang around all day?”

“You just shot three unarmed guys a minute ago. What’s a couple more?”

“That was reflex!” Sergeant Hale yelled. “If they had their hands up we wouldn’t have done it!”

“Well, figure something out,” The JTAC said. “Those pilots are responsible for a \$72 million dollar bird.”

“How about instead of all those Dingbats out there, I just shoot you?” Sergeant Hale said.

“They have the same weapons as us,” Specialist Castro said. “Lots of crazy shit happens in a firefight. Friendly fire happens all the time.”

“Get on that radio,” Sergeant Hale said. “And you tell them to pick us up. They can land at that cloverleaf. Tell them like your life depends on it.”

The JTAC studied Sergeant Hale for any sign that he wasn't serious. Finding none, he keyed his radio mic.

"Mongoose 34, this is JTAC. Be advised, we have wounded and we cannot move with them or leave a man behind. Over."

It was a clever move - an appeal to heartstrings. Marines never left their dead or wounded.

Technical Sergeant Kearnan cocked his head as a response message came over the radio.

"They're going to land at the cloverleaf," The JTAC said. "The inside of that thing is mostly ammo. It's going to be tight."

"We're airborne. We're used to it."

Private Smith walked over to one of the dead guardians that had fallen from the hill. She removed the guardian's boots and his uniform shirt. She cut shirts from two more guardians and returned to Staff Sergeant Kimball's body. She placed the boots around Staff Sergeant Kimball's head in a homemade neck brace, securing them with strips of cloth cut from the black uniform top. Then she fed some of the uniform tops under Staff Sergeant Kimball's body so they would act as a sort of flexible stretcher.

Private Akers assisted her. He noticed that the boots from the Guardian were so worn down that the heel was practically gone and the ball of the foot had a hole.

"How are they still hanging on?" Private Akers asked.

"They're not hanging on," Private Smith said. "They just don't know they're licked yet."

The Osprey Mongoose swiveled its rotors vertically as it landed on the cloverleaf intersection. The rear ramp dropped down, exposing a box launcher of weapons the purpose of which Private Akers could only guess.

Private Akers and his team grabbed the sides of the homemade stretcher and the team made their way toward the Osprey

Chapter 10: Golden Arches

Camp Delta, Guantanamo Bay Naval Base, Cuba.

Puddles' world had collapsed to an 8 by 10 foot beige prison cell. She had a low bunk with a thin mattress and a green wool Army blanket. She had a north-facing window that she couldn't open and her sink and toilet were in one self-contained stainless steel unit. She had one pair of orange mesh sandals, one pair of panties and one brown sports bra.

A guard pushed a tray of food through a slot in the wall three times a day and she ate whatever was provided with a white plastic spork. The food was palatable and it had a slight middle-eastern flair to it.

All things considered, she had slept in worse places.

She knew that she was at a prison in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. The interrogators who battered her with questions when she was first captured made it clear that there was no leaving without cooperation and The Netherlands government wasn't helping. She had kept her mouth shut during the questioning, only giving the interrogators her name, her company and her employee ID. There was no torture or physical harm. Just endless questions about the state of Gilead's military readiness which she didn't answer.

Someone wrapped on the door with a fist three times. She knew what that meant and knew the drill.

“Sta op en steek uw handen door de sleuf,” said a woman’s voice behind the door.

“Wie ben je?” Puddles asked. She switched to English. “Who are you?”

“Sta op en steek uw handen door de sleuf,” The voice repeated.

Puddles stood. She walked to the door and turned around. She placed her hands into a waist-high slot and felt handcuffs clasp around her wrists.

“We gaan de deur openen en een kap over je hoofd zetten.” The voice said.

The door opened. A hood was placed over Puddles’ head.

“Wandelen.” The voice said. Walk.

A soft hand was placed on the right shoulder of Puddles’ orange jumpsuit. The hand guided her down a noiseless hallway. They made a few turns left and right until Puddles was guided into a room.

“Zitten.” The voice said.

Puddles sat and with relief she was guided down into a chair. It was uncomfortable with her hands behind her back, but not horribly so.

The hood was removed from Puddles’ head. She blinked and looked around. She was obviously in an interrogation room complete with a mirror, small table and two government chairs. A small female American soldier who had removed the hood had the word “TRANSLATOR” on her uniform where her name tape should have been.

The interrogation room door opened behind Puddles. Puddles tried to turn in her chair, but the man quickly entered the room. He looked to be in his forties and wore a dress shirt with jeans and a knit tie. He was in shape and wore glasses with a sort of

hipster beard. He looked like a community college professor. He even carried a battered leather briefcase.

“Hi,” The man said. “My name’s Greg. I’ll be your attorney. Uh... do we need her?”

Greg pointed at the female translator.

“I speak English,” Puddles said.

“You can... you can,” Greg pointed at the door. The translator left the room.

Greg took some papers from his briefcase. He spread them on the table in front of him.

“Beatrix?” Greg asked. “Am I pronouncing that right? Beatrix Blok. Like a child’s block?”

Puddles nodded.

“You work for Aerial Outcomes. You like working for them?”

Puddles shrugged.

“So, today...” Greg said. “You’re going to have your initial appearance in front of a military tribunal. Let me know if you don’t understand anything I’m saying. So in America, we have an initial appearance. Then a preliminary hearing. At that point charges may be added or dismissed. Then we have pre-trial activities. This is where we’ll perform discovery and look at any evidence. Then you give your plea. We have trial if you plead not guilty and then you are either sentenced or let go. Sound Good?”

“Okay. So, I can tell you that the prosecutor will be seeking the death penalty. Don’t get too upset about that, this is just standard procedure in terrorism cases, okay?”

We can probably plead this down to life plus thirty years. So... let's read through these charges and we'll see if there's anything I can work with here."

The lawyer leafed through a few documents.

"They mostly have you under 18 U.S. Code § 2332a. There's thirty charges here. Do you want me to read these or..."

Puddles nodded.

"Okay... Count one - Conspiracy to use a weapon of mass destruction, resulting in death. Count two. Use of a weapon of mass destruction resulting in death; and aiding and abetting. Count three Possession and use of a firearm during and in relation to a crime of violence, resulting in death; and aiding and abetting."

"Wait," Puddles said. "I never used a firearm. I didn't even have a gun on me when I was captured."

"Really?" Greg said. He looked at the papers and made a few notes. "That's good. That's good. You had nothing when you were captured? Not even a flare gun?"

"Nothing," Puddles said. "My survival kit was left on the ground when they picked me up. I couldn't run with it. And my pistol never left the base in Kansas. When I landed there; the local commander confiscated all of our weapons and held us prisoner."

"That's good. That's good. That should give the prosecutor heartburn. Okay that eliminates a bunch of these charges."

"Can I just ask," Puddles said. "Who's paying for you? I didn't hire you. Did my wife hire you? Did the company?"

"I'm court appointed," Greg said. "Your company was only willing to verify employment, but they won't confirm or deny your place of work. Aerial Outcomes hasn't

sent anyone. I can try to get a message to them if you want, but based on recent events, I think they are pulling out of the Americas.”

“What do you mean by recent events?” Puddles asked.

Greg grimaced.

“I guess you haven’t been told...”

Prince Kuhio Federal Building, Honolulu, Hawaii. USA.

Sasha Zang read the reports that came out of Gilead with a mixture of curiosity and smugness. Intelligence resources indicated that hundreds of commanders had been hanged and now open fighting had broken out among Sons of Jacob factions in Washington, D.C. and California. US stock futures for what few companies were left on the S&P 500 were up and a motley mix of Muslim armies from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Indonesia were flooding into Florida for a planned offensive. Sasha knew that some of it was due to jihad, and some of it was due to the \$1,800 in gold per soldier per month that had been offered to the Arab armies as “reimbursement” for deployment expenses.

One curious intelligence report came from a small team of special forces who had worked with local partisans in Appalachia as a blocking force for reinforcements during the recent operation. The senior team leader detailed the summary execution of a prisoner named Jason Wolf - a boy of roughly 16 years old.

Sasha wrote down the intelligence report file number on a post-it note. She picked up her desk phone and dialed her Booz Allen Hamilton security manager. The man picked up on the first ring.”

“Hey Scott, it’s Sasha,” Sasha said.

“Hey, Sasha.” Scott said. “Looks like you won the war. What can I do for you?”

“I need you to take a look at a document. I’m forwarding it to you now. Can you give it a declassification exemption under 25X8? The guy who helped us take down the SoJ KAMS system... Well the boy described in this report is his son and I think the father would like some closure. You got a pen?”

“Yeah.”

“CPS-0002394639.”

“Hold on, let me look.”

Sasha waited as Scott read the document. The man whistled after a minute.

“Hell of a thing they did to that kid. What didn’t the captain try to stop it?”

“Things happen when you’re dealing with locals,” Sasha said. “That captain was embedded with a bunch of rednecks who were out for blood. Not a lot he could do.”

“Yeah... Yeah. Gimme some time to run it through Maggie. This isn’t even a 25X8. Those green berets are probably long gone by now. I’ll have an answer for you by COB today.”

“Thanks Scott,” Sasha said. “If you can’t, you can’t. The guy’s a two bit pornographer piece of shit so no big deal if you can’t.”

Sasha hung up and resumed her reading.

Owsley County, Kentucky. Contested Appalachia.

“So what are you gonna do now, Captain?” Travis asked.

Captain Moore stood with Lieutenant Orr and Master Sergeant Cayhill. The three men were overloaded with supplies on their backpacks as they stood in Travis’s front yard.

“Walk south,” Captain Moore said. “It’s about 800 miles to Florida. Hopefully we can cut some distance off if the front pushes up from the panhandle. Then I guess they’ll send us someplace else after that. I just do as I’m told.”

Travis offered his hand to the captain. The captain took it, although there was a moment of reluctance on the captain’s part.

“You’re still sore at me for what I did to that boy.” Travis said.

“I’m not anything,” Captain Moore said. “It was your operation. I was just an advisor. We succeeded and now I’m going somewhere else.”

Travis knew that Captain Moore was lying but he let the matter drop. The three soldiers turned and walked south down the bare dirt trail. Travis lit a joint and set off to collect some flowers for his wife’s grave.

Waialae - Kahala, Hawaii.

Marty Wolf used to joke that when it came to cocaine, he could take it or leave it. But his problem was that he took it more often than he left it. In fact, he couldn't recall a time when he didn't do it if it was offered or available.

The U.S. Marshals who had wrecked his house must have brought dogs because every gram of cocaine he had was missing. He was a free man, but that didn't mean the government had given him his drugs back. It had taken him hours calling around to find a dealer willing to sell to him. When he finally found one, he couldn't drive to him because as Marty had predicted days before, someone had hacked and stolen his Tesla.

Now Marty Wolf found himself in the back of a Toyota Prius with an Uber driver who wouldn't shut up. The driver's one-sided conversation mainly centered on the recent attack on Fort Knox and the likelihood that the war was at a turning point. Marty said nothing to the driver other than the occasional "yeah." Oahu was a small island and he wasn't going to violate the terms of his release by chiming in about his role in the attack. At least not before he got what he needed to do what had to be done.

Marty occasionally stole glances at a piece of paper that he held between his index finger and his thumb. The description of the death of his son didn't change no matter how many times he read it.

The car rolled up Kalaniana'ole Highway toward Waimanalo Beach. The road was free of traffic, although the sides of the road held the occasional native Hawaiian vendor selling lilikoi or pineapple.

The car pulled into an address that was right across from Blanche Pope Elementary School. Marty got out of the car.

“Can you stay here, please? I’m only going to be a minute.” Marty handed the driver a gold coin. The driver’s face flushed with greed.

The house was a green, low-slung bungalow that was surrounded by a decorative concrete block wall. Marty approached the gate and gave the front yard a quick look. There were no kids toys or bikes. The house looked neatly kept. He had gotten the dealer’s number from a friend of a friend but the place didn’t look shady. Marty approached the front door. He noticed that he stood on a doormat that read “Be sweet and wipe your feet.”

Marty knocked.

A bespectacled 50ish gay man with a grey pony tail answered the door. Marty held out a gold coin.

“Thirty grams,” Marty said. “And an easy way out.”

The man palmed the coin. He closed the door. He returned with a paper bag which he handed to Marty without a word. Then he shut the door. Marty took a quick look in the paper bag. The bag was filled with thirty bindles of cocaine and one slightly larger clear plastic baggie which, oddly enough, was labeled “easy way out.” Marty knew that bag contained pure fentanyl.

Marty returned to his Uber. He sat back in his seat.

“Take me back home, please. Do I have to do it through the app?”

“Is there more gold in it for me?” The driver asked.

“Don’t be greedy,” Marty said. “Just take me back.”

There were few GPS satellites remaining in space since the war had neglected their monitoring and maintenance. So Marty made a phone call while the driver punched Marty's return address back into the app.

"What?" Alana's voice asked when she picked up the phone.

"Hey, Alana." Marty said. "I know you've always hated me, but I want you to know that you've always been a good employee. I signed some legal papers this morning. Ready to Drop Entertainment is yours in the event of my death. Try not to fuck up what I built."

"What?" Alana said. "I didn't ask to -"

Marty hung up on her. She tried calling back, but Marty let the phone go to voicemail. He had made his plan and his peace. His employees would be protected.

"Uh, sir." The Uber driver said.

Marty was shocked out of his daydream by the flashing lights of a police car.

A plainclothes officer walked up to the side window of the car. Marty noticed that it was the same officer that had arrested him a few weeks before in the bar.

"Did you get a demotion to vice?" Marty asked through the window.

"Did you fail to notice you're in a drug-free school zone?" The officer responded.

"That's a mandatory two year minimum."

"We had a deal," Marty said.

"Yes," the officer said. "We *had* a deal. This is a new charge. And don't bother trying to take the easy way out. That's fake. But the cocaine is definitely felony grade. Why don't you step out of the car and keep your hands where I can see them."

Orlando Regional Medical Center, Orlando, Florida. USA

Private Akers and Private Smith had been right not to remove Staff Sergeant Kimball's helmet. Their bet paid off and Staff Sergeant Kimball had somehow lived through the 700 mile trip in a buffeting aircraft. The Marine pilots had expertly landed their plane on the helicopter pad at Orlando Regional Medical Center, dropped off the squad, and then flown back to wherever they were based. Civilian doctors at the hospital worked tirelessly to save Staff Sergeant Kimball, eventually removing most of his skull and keeping him in a coma while he recovered.

Sergeant Hale had reached out to Camp Williams in Utah for advice on what to do. While Technical Sergeant Kiernan was from the Florida Air National Guard, the rest of Second Squad needed to get back to Camp Williams in Utah. Unfortunately, nobody in the Nauvoo Legion back in Utah knew how to make that happen. The soldiers were told to stand by and check in by phone every day.

The hospital administrators had let the squad stay together in a spare room and allowed the paratroopers to eat for free in the hospital cafeteria, but Sergeant Hale and the Alpha Team leader were very cognizant of overstaying their welcome. One option was to go to MacDill Air Force base and just report in with the U.S. Special Operation Command, which was the nearest Army unit. Unfortunately, there was nobody to drive them. Another option was just to head north and link up with whatever units that were fighting on the Florida-Georgia line, but nobody was ready to go back into combat and none of them wanted to do it with non-airborne infantry.

Meanwhile, images being snuck out of Gilead on the TV news showed a country that was deteriorating rapidly. There was open fighting in Washington D.C. and Los Angeles. Guardians were reportedly abandoning their posts or taking to the hills as brigands and highwaymen.

After a week of tiptoeing around the hospital, a local reporter discovered the news of the lost squad's heroic plight and their fame began to grow. A Florida businessman saw the news story and offered the squad an all-expenses paid trip to Disneyworld until the Army could figure out how to get them home.

The squad donned donated civilian clothing and entered the park surrounded by news cameras and flanked by curious European and Asian tourists.

"What do you want to do first?" Specialist Smith asked Private Akers.

Private Akers held a paper map of the park in his hand. He grabbed Private Smith's hand with the other. He led her through the park until they reached his destination.

Private Akers and Private Smith stood in front of a McDonalds. The pair had some pocket money - a gift from the Florida businessman. But neither of them had ever ordered in a restaurant and had no idea what to do first. A McDonald's cashier asked them if they needed help and for the first time in their lives, Private Akers and Private Smith ate a chicken McNugget.

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I had a successful cartoon strip for about four years. I can tell you this - the difference between writing a cartoon and writing a novel is almost as great as the difference between golfing and powerlifting. Both are hard to do well, but take completely different skills.

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About the Author

Ryan McBeth wrote *#MyRADGirlfriend* for Auntminnie.com from August 2016 till September 2020 - a story that came out of a five-month relationship with a radiologist who was smarter than he will ever be.

Ryan retired from the military after 20 years and four deployments, the last of which was as an Infantryman in Iraq. He has a background in software development, engineering management and cybersecurity.

Ryan is an avid runner, triathlete and Washington D.C. Sports fan. He lives in Silver Spring, Maryland even though his hometown of Philadelphia is never far from his thoughts.

Ryan is currently at work on *The Win Machine*: a novel about a hedge fund manager who invents a stock-picking artificial intelligence that predicts a war with China.



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